Swimming away on nerves alone

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Swimming away on nerves alone

by

Suzanne Mary Grafwallner

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in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Graduate College  
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Suzanne Mary Grafwallner  

has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University  

_________________________________  
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For the Major Program
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Using my creativity to write on a daily basis is one of the more difficult challenges I have encountered. However, this thesis project has given me the gift of living my life without simply going through the motions. Everyday, many of my activities are dictated by routine. Serving my customers at work is something I could do in my sleep, however; how often do I ask someone about his or her day and really pay attention? I have learned to stop and listen to the stories around me to see everyday people living interesting and valuable lives. The four stories in this collection depict characters stuck going through the motions in life and their desire to break away from those habits.

The title piece, *Swimming Away on Nerves Alone*, shows a mother and son who outwardly appear to be going through the normal motions of being a good housewife and kid. Their motive for this behavior is the abusive father creates so much chaos in their lives that pretending normalcy provides safety. Junior’s descent into madness shows what tragedies can happen when, through abuse, people are forced to go through life pretending everything is just fine.

In the second story, *Birds in Church*, Neenah, through her own doing, goes through the motions of judgment on an everyday basis. She is not a terrible person, but her life is at a standstill. Only when she meets Melanie, does she take
a leap of faith and understand she won’t change or find happiness overnight, but it is worth pursuing.

The third story in this collection, *A Lesson from Iowa*, is closest to me because much of it is based on reality. The two characters, Suzanne and Nick, want their lives to follow the path of school, graduation, career, marriage, and kids. What they learn instead, is, in order to achieve their goals; they can’t do it by going through the motions of life. In Iowa, challenges of living with epilepsy and experiencing an armed robbery teach them this lesson.

In the fourth story, *The Taxidermist’s Tale*, Bobby is stuck going through the motions of love and work. He cares for his girlfriend, but their relationship is not progressing towards a bigger commitment. The death of a friend, who lived life outside the box, teaches Bobby that doing what is expected isn’t always the best choice.

These stories have survived massive revisions and countless drafts. Whenever I experienced difficulty with an ending or a plot line, it was because I was going through the motions of writing and not letting my creativity shine through. I hope you, the reader enjoy these stories as much as I did writing them.
Swimming Away on Nerves Alone

1977—Anita

I sit in silence while Dr. Neal pages through Junior’s book of first words, first day of school, and the day he graduated high school.

“This is quite an artifact,” Dr. Neal tells me, rubbing the red marks on the sides of his nose. “We’ll go over some medications and he should be fine as long as he takes them.”

I’ve been here over an hour already, sitting on my hands, trying to control my fidgeting, waiting for Junior to be released from his latest hospital stay. At first, the days without him reminded me of summer vacation, but instead of no math assignments I suddenly faced no pills to remember or planning trips to the grocery store with a 31-year-old child. Still, everyday he was gone, I’d set the kitchen timer for his medication and walked into his bedroom at 3:00 to wake him from his afternoon nap.

The nurse with the long, braided hair interrupts Dr. Neal to tell us Junior is ready to go home. She’s been here with Junior before and each night she makes sure he always has a National Geographic by his bed, something the nurse before never did.

“We’ll be out in a minute, Gina,” the doctor tells her.
Gina, Gina Gina, I think, knowing next time I probably still won’t remember her name.

Junior’s blond hair is wet because they always make him shower before he leaves and he’s thinner. A red, crusty pimple is on his cheek.

He pats my back when he sees me and it’s the familiar gesture high school boys give each other, not a son to his mother. He doesn’t say anything to Dr. Neal or Nurse Gina and no one expects him to. A woman in a wheelchair, holding a baby in a pink blanket, is pushed past us out to her husband’s car.

At home, I show Junior his green book.

“Look how important you are to me,” I tell him, tucking a blanket around his shoulders.

He takes the book, staring at me for a second, and for the thousandth time I wish he had his father’s eyes. George’s brown eyes gave away every emotion, even turning black when he was angry. Not a good sign, but I always could tell what he was thinking. Junior has my blue eyes, but on him they’re pale, blending in with his doughy skin and blond hair, giving the impression that if this man wanted to disappear or even become invisible, he could.

His large pink pill and two small blue ones are next to his chair and I leave him reading while I go upstairs for a nap.
It’s 4:30 when I wake up and only Junior’s book and medication are in the house. I put the blue pills in my pocket and pop the pink one in my mouth, swallowing it whole and dry.

The green book is filled with black streaks where Junior used a marker while I was sleeping to cross out his name everywhere it appeared. The pages remind me of the letters George, Sr., sent from Europe before we got married. The military had someone go through the soldiers’ letters, using a black marker to darken the names of places and dates.

In his bold, familiar script, Junior has written on the inside cover, I don’t have a past. The extra pages I had inserted into the book over the years are shredded in tiny piles next to the chair.

I leave the paper mess on the floor, instead taking the book upstairs with me. At my old dressing table where I’ve recorded most of his life, I write, Junior’s last words, next to his black statement. The ink is barely dry on the page when I hear my husband’s car pull in the driveway.

1958—Anita

Junior swore this morning and maybe it’s because George, Sr., swears so much and Junior doesn’t, that I decide to record the event in the green book. The book is looking every inch of its twelve years, with warped corners and specks of the brown cardboard interior starting to show through the front cover.
My girlfriend Chloe gave me the baby book when I was pregnant. The book ends with a child’s fifth birthday, but I still write down stuff about his life on loose pages that I stick in with the already filled ones. I flip past lists of shower gifts and the date of his first bath and find what I’m looking for between Baby’s First Step and Baby’s First Tantrum at the Grocery Store. Most of the book’s set categories are boring and lie about the realities of childhood. I add my own, such as Baby’s First Night He Screamed His Head Off, just to have an honest account.

I penciled in Beer/Bear next to Baby’s First Word over a decade ago. When he was just staring to speak, he would grab cans of Pabst at the dinner table and say what sounded like the word beer over and over. *Beer, beer, beer, beer.*

He also had a stuffed little bear he never left anywhere, even holding it in his mouth like a dog carrying her pups when he crawled. *Bear, bear, bear, bear.*

Under Baby’s First Word, I add the heading, Junior’s First Curse Word (age 12) and next to that I write: *Get the fuck out of my room.*

1949—Anita

Junior’s full name George Meinrad Morwitz, Jr., seems too serious for such a little boy.

“My son, my name,” George said after the birth.

It’s just Junior and me alone in the house most of the time while George is working down at the factory.
I squeeze a paper cup too tight and my middle finger punches through and cold water runs down my elbow. I don’t care because it’s about one hundred degrees out and I’m tired of taming the front-yard bushes with a dull pair of hedge clippers for an hour now.

Junior, three, sitting so still in grass that comes up to his chest, blends in with the landscape, and, for a second, I think I’ve lost him. He’s staring at an anthill, squishing any bugs coming out of it. I plop down next to him and he barely glances in my direction. I’ve seen lots of kids chase after ants on the sidewalk and in the grass, but Junior is not doing this for amusement or cruelty. It’s more in the manner of a science experiment, like he’s testing to see what happens when he applies enough pressure to their bodies. After the small killing event, Junior continues to sit, staring at the ants carrying of their dead, not saying a word to me the entire time.

That night I write in his book, *Scientist (perhaps nuclear?)* under a section I’ve marked *Predictions*.

**1957—Anita**

My husband’s Navy issue coat hasn’t fit him for at least ten years, but he refuses to get rid of it. I don’t care because it comes in handy for shoveling snow. I’m almost done clearing the front sidewalk when I catch Junior, out of the corner of my eye, about a block away from the house. He looks taller and it hits me he’s carrying the neighbor boy Tommy Donovan on his shoulders. The snow is too
deep for Tommy’s five-year-old legs to carry him and his sister, June, follows behind them, carefully stepping in Junior’s footprints.

Wet dog smell fills my nose as I struggle for air, blindly clawing at whatever it is covering my face. Someone grabs my outstretched hand. 

*Thank you,* I think, until my head cracks against the bedpost.

It takes a second for my eyes to adjust, seeing George standing next to me. He throws something heavy at me and cold metal cuts my lip.

He found his Navy jacket hanging in the bathroom, still wet from the snow.

“Who said you could use my coat?” He’s speaking through his teeth, his words hissing through the darkness.

Standing up is pointless unless I want to get pushed down again. “I wore it shoveling,” I say, blood dripping down my chin from the cut on my lip.

He grabs a handful of nightgown and hauls me to my feet, pinning me against the wall.

“I never said you could touch my coat,” he screams.

His breath is hot on my neck and spittle flying out of his mouth burns the cut on my lip.

“Stupid, stupid, stupid,” he yells, slamming my head with his fists.

I close my eyes and try to count the seconds, think about Junior, but nothing is staying in my head. All I can hear is George’s fists hitting parts of me over and over.
The sound of dry wood splintering cracks through the darkness and George stops hitting. I can’t figure out where the sound came from until my right hand brushes the other. Even in the dark bedroom, I can see my arm is twisted at an odd angle.

The sound of the doorbell breaks our silence and George stops staring at me, startled into moving. Late night visitors mean emergency or come quickly and the fear gives him a sense of purpose.

I’d rather not answer and let whoever is standing on our porch see our dark windows, think we’re sleeping or, better yet, out of town. George goes downstairs anyway and I tiptoe towards the bathroom, not wanting people to even know I’m awake.

In the hall, I trip over something thin and tight. Running my fingers on my good hand over the rubbery surface, stretched tight, it leads me to the linen closet. Junior is inside with a towel draped like a veil over is head, clutching the telephone receiver.

“I called the police,” is all he says. He blots my face with the towel and we don’t talk anymore, only listening to the sound of the dial tone, our breathing slowing down.

1958—Junior

My earliest memory of Grandpa’s cabin on Snake Lake is Mom standing over the old iron stove boiling water, her checks shinny with sweat.
I guess for the memory to make sense, you have to know the cabin was built by my great-grandfather and nothing has changed about it since. The whole thing is knotty pine except for the tin roof. The only two rooms are a kitchen and one bedroom with two beds separated by a brown blanket. We stay seven days in this cabin every summer even though Mom says a week in the woods is six days too many.

Boiling water dates back eight years ago during our first week. Mom took one look at the mucky lake, the water pump, and the outhouse between the two and said no one was drinking a thing. She spent the whole week boiling water for everything; even brushing teeth. Her defense was something about water sickness and poor people’s diseases.

Dad says Snake Lake gets her name from her dense population of water snakes. I bet whoever named the lake saw the water thick with algae in July and thought the whole thing resembled a giant snake.

Fishing at the cabin, we keep most everything that bites. I prefer the catch and release method, only I’d never tell Dad that.

Last year he caught a nice size bass that measured half-an-inch short of keeping size. He filleted it right in the boat and with wink, said, “The Indians isn’t getting this one.”

When he tossed the carcass in the lake I swear I saw the bass, just a head, exposed organs, and tail, swim away on nerves alone.

This year is probably going to be the best one at the cabin now that I have Burt. Jay, my buddy who lives down the block, told me Burt was the ugliest mutt
he'd ever seen. Just because Burt is missing one eye and fur doesn’t seem to want
to grow in patches on his neck, doesn’t give Jay the right to insult him. When I
twisted Jay’s arm behind his back, he took it back, though.

I found Burt, who is the size of Jack Russell Terrier, a few months ago,
walking home from basketball practice. Dad was supposed to pick me up, and by
the time I figured out he had forgotten, the gym was empty. If I called Mom from
the payphone outside, she would have started a fight with Dad, which made
walking the mile home a better idea.

The halfway mark between the gym and home is Ted’s Restaurant, my
favorite place to go for butterscotch milkshakes. When I passed, the restaurant’s
garbage cans were rolling around the parking lot and half-eaten hamburgers and
dirty napkins were everywhere. About a dozen dumpster-diving raccoons were
feasting on whatever they could get their greasy paws on.

Raccoons at Snake Lake are quick-moving and sneak along the tree-tops
at night like masked robbers, quiet and alone. City raccoons are infected with
mange and are so fat their bellies drag along the pavement. The night I found
Burt, the fattest raccoon of the bunch was hissing at him near an overturned can.
Before I could find some rocks to throw, Burt growled so loud at the fat one, the
whole group ran away.

On our third morning at the cabin the sound of a car backfiring wakes me.
It takes a second to realize I’m in the cabin and the only car for miles around is
ours. A second, duller crash, tells me dad has slammed the outhouse door.
Peeking out from behind the brown curtain I see a broken wooden chair and a crumpled piece of paper on the floor.

The paper, a note from Mom, contains only a short message:

*Boys,*

*I went for a walk around the lake. I’ll be back by lunch. Good luck fishing.*

*Mom*

Even though I have to pee, I pick up the chair pieces and get the percolator going right away. The pot is empty and that might be one of the reasons why Dad broke the chair. I’ve gotten good at figuring out his routine and that way, if something is different, I can fix it right away.

Dad is still in the outhouse, so I try to pee outside in the bushes. No matter how hard I shake, only a few drops come out. I give up even though it feels like I still have to go.

Dad eats the toast I made without saying a word about Mom or the chair. He just tells me to be ready in five minutes.

My gear is ready to go by the door. I whistle for Burt and in two seconds he comes racing though the brush. We’re down by the boat dock before Dad is even out of the cabin.

“What’s he doing here?” is all he says when he finally makes it to the shore.

“I thought he could come with us again like he did yesterday,” I say. “He was good, right?”
Dad grunts and before he can say no, Burt is in the boat. Soon we’re off across the lake at a fast clip with me in the front of the boat navigating the best fishing spots and Dad in the back steering the motor. I nearly jump out of the boat when something thumps my shoulder, only it’s Dad and he doesn’t even try to speak over the sound of the wind rushing through our ears. He just points across the lake at an eagle, wings extended, swooping down on the water. The moment I think the eagle is about to plunge into the lake, she’s already climbing back up, a water snake dangling from her talons.

We’ve been fishing for three hours and I’m up one bass, three crappies, and three perch to Dad’s two perch and one sunfish. Dad remembered his beer this morning, Burt is sitting quietly, and we’ve caught enough fish for lunch and part of dinner, too. I can almost forget about Mom out here.

Another boat passes, creating a wake and the rocking brings two empty beer cans out from underneath Dad’s seat. He’s too busy casting to notice me count the eight empty cans in the open cooler plus the two that just rolled out.

The hidden cans aren’t rusted or crushed or damaged in any way to look like they’ve been left in the boat.

1974—Anita

In January, right after Junior turns 28, I stop by Dr. Neal’s office for some honest information.
Dr. Neal’s office is different from my own doctor’s office, beginning with no small examining table with metal stirrups. The walls are white and filled with his paintings, mainly seascapes where the colors of his oceans are never the same. In my favorite one, the sea is dark red with pink-tipped waves. The shore is just a few specks of black in the background.

Wooden shelves filled with old medical instruments take up the rest of the empty office space. Dr. Neal has been collecting outdated equipment since medical school and gets a kick out of showing patients tools he used when he first became a doctor that are now outdated. When Junior was little, he loved listening to the stories Dr. Neal told about his instruments.

You see this one,” he’d say, holding up a metal rod with two clamps on the end that resembles a medieval torturing device. “I remember using this one when I had to pull out the lima bean plant sprouting from Lenny Longtale’s nose. Lenny’s mother fed him lima beans everyday, but she wouldn’t let him leave the table without finishing his supper. Lenny hid those beans right up his nose only to discover one morning a green plant growing out of his left nostril.”

At this point, Junior would ask why Lenny’s mom didn’t pull the plant out.

“Didn’t know how deep the roots went,” Dr. Neal replied with a wink. “Was afraid they attached themselves to the brain and it would come out, too, if she pulled hard enough.”
One hundred years from now, if a man found my mother’s book about me, he’d know nothing about my life. Reading about one temper tantrum or the names of the kids who came to my first birthday party are mundane details that make up the fibers in the ropes that bind me and my mother together.

Hospital psych ward stays are like vacations. Joseph, my last roommate, talks in code only he understands and lit himself on fire when he was fourteen years old. Crazy, yes, but Joe did those things to himself while my parents are the ones who are setting, extinguishing, and resetting little fires all over my body.

“Looking good, Georgie!” Rocco, the old security guard at the factory calls out.

I wave, but don’t say anything. What he says isn’t true. The pink meds turn me off of food and the blue pills cause my head and neck to swell, so I’m walking around town looking like a fucking lollypop.

Rocco is Dad’s buddy and, for a second, I want to go home. Any security on duty will probably get in trouble for letting a loony like me in the building. A factory is a dangerous place for a man who can’t get away from the voices.

At the orange gate, I ask Rocco for a cigarette.

“I can’t tell you how many times me and your old man stood in this very spot, sharing a light,” he tells me. “Are you planning on working here someday? I know we got a couple fathers and sons in the union together and you’d make your old man proud doing what he does.”
“I’d love it here, Rocco. But didn’t Dad tell you? I’m going with my buddy Joe into the trampoline business. We’re going to specialize mostly in residential models.”

I extinguish the cigarette in the palm of my hand and duck under the orange gate. When I look back, Rocco is already back inside security booth talking on the phone.

Once through the doors, Glen, the desk guard, just tips his hat in my direction. He and Dad aren’t close, giving him no reason to want to talk to me. When he doesn’t demand I leave the premises, I figure he’s not the one Rocco called. I take three flights of stairs up to the office.

A few years back, part of Dad’s promotion was moving from the big office that all the shift managers shared, to his very own private cubicle the size of a closet. Mom was so proud of him that I stole the key and he couldn’t get in for a week.

My father looks like a fat man in a little coat when he sits inside his ridiculous office. It has a desk and that’s it. His filing cabinet and coat rack are down the hall in the old office. His desk is piled with papers and carbon copied order forms. His ashtray should be emptied, but the garbage can is also down the hall.

I knock and open the door at the same time just to see if I’m right about Rocco’s phone call. I must be, because Dad holds out a cigarette pack towards me and continues writing with the other hand, not looking up once.
The brass canon he keeps on his desk that doubles as a paper weight and lighter feels heavy in my hand.

“Don’t touch that, son,” he tells me when I pick it up to light my smoke.

For weeks I’ve pictured this moment in my head. I thought I would say:  

*Remember the summer when Mom was painting the house and you thought it would be funny to pull the ladder out from under her? Even better yet: I can’t stop thinking about the time you got pissed at my dog for barking in the fishing boat and held him underwater right in front of me until he stopped moving. We always had great trips.*

“We were going to talk about all those things today,” I say out loud. “Just to see if you had anything to say for yourself. You never could tell us when you were sad or angry or frustrated with life in general. The worst of it, Dad, is you never allowed me to say anything either.”

The brass canon drops from my hand and I touch his leg, brushing his knee with my hand, almost ticking it, a part of him still intact.
Neenah dropped her hymnal when the bird inside St. Peter’s Church swooped from the front crucifix to the back choir loft. The unfortunate bird’s adventure had begun when the ushers, having discovered the broken air conditioner, decided to keep the doors open during mass for air circulation. A good idea except the Milwaukee July air was so thick with moisture, it was like walking through hot pea soup. The two hundred who came to mass for the air conditioning in the first place perked up considerably halfway through the first Old Testament reading when the misguided bird flew in through the church’s wooden doors.

Back and forth it swooped, closer each time to the parishioners’ heads and chirping louder with each agonizingly hot minute. Father John, the usually jovial priest with a stomach large enough to rest a plate of hosts on while standing (something the teachers at St. Peter’s school asked him to stop doing because it made the children laugh during mass) decided to ignore the bird. From his chair, he watched his parishioners pay more attention to the bird than to what was being read to them.

Neenah occupied the same pew, ten rows from the back, right next to Station Six of the Cross, every Sunday morning. The father of the family sitting behind her bet his son five dollars that the bird would fly into a window instead of
out the front door. While praying for the bird to poop on the man’s head, Neenah heard a dull thwack followed by added weight on her straw hat’s brim.

The window glass above Neenah’s head was stained red and the boy who just lost five dollars to his father said, “Scuse me Ma’m, but the bird’s on your hat.”

Without thinking, Neenah swatted at her hat and it, along with the bird, somersaulted through the air and landed about seven rows up, smacking a little girl in the back of her head.

Parishioners who had been watching the bird’s unfortunate demise and subsequent journey were suddenly overtaken with fits of coughing as they tried holding back laughter.

Neenah slipped out of the pew like retrieving her hat from the floor was something she did every Sunday. A woman wearing a brown dress with a white yoke color that only broadened her shoulders, did the same, and reached the hat before Neenah.

“Thank you,” Neenah whispered.

“Sr. Melanie Stanford,” the woman whispered back. She held out her hand for Neenah to shake. “You have fantastic aim.”

“Neenah,” her boss Kent called as soon as she walked by his open office door the next day. Kent’s back was to her as he looked out his 14th floor window at Lake Michigan off in the distance.
The sight of Kent, dressed in his usual pressed dress pants and dark blue button-down shirt, made Neenah aware that her blouse was still damp after her walk from the parking lot and the linen skirt she ironed last night was now creased in all the wrong places.

Neenah took notes on Kent’s demands about canceling meetings, setting up lunch dates, and contacting sources for a story. Kent produced the WZTV local news in Milwaukee and Neenah was recently promoted from the secretary pool downstairs to be his personal assistant.

Neenah shifted slightly in one of Kent’s office chairs, causing the backs of her sweaty knees to emit a loud squelching sound as they rubbed against the leather seat.

Kent ignored the noise and continued with his morning requests

The older secretaries were confident and enjoyed the power they presumed they had, anticipating a boss’ needs before he even realized them. Like Neenah, these women worked years at the network, their boxy suites and costume jewelry dating them the ten, fifteen, or twenty years previous that they first started the job. Their efficiency, unattractiveness and willingness to run to the grocery store for cocktail shrimp the night of an office dinner party also made them a hit with the wives.

The newer office girls were sleeker, sexier, and worked to impress the top executives in hopes of promotions and relationships. The seasoned secretaries
liked the younger women’s willingness to bum cigarettes and, in turn, the newer secretaries reveled in the gossip the older ones provided.

The gossip centered on company relationships and the only time the secretarial pool ever rippled was when one of them was sleeping with a boss. Neenah had heard multiple variations of the same secretarial urban legend about a nameless executive running off with his 20, 30, 40 year old secretary to New York, Aspen, Hawaii, or Jamaica. Neenah understood true or not, the point of the story was that IT could happen to any of them and that was all a girl needed to keep the hope for a relationship alive.

During lunch, Neenah barely listened to the new girl’s story. Despite Bridget’s round checks and the touch of baby-fat on her stomach, she favored her collection of clingy, cotton V-neck shirts to work in. Yesterday she wore a red one that, with her rosy cheeks, made her resemble an apple. Today, Neenah thought Bridget looked more like a pumpkin in her orange shirt and black skirt.

Bridget’s story included her boss’ request for the latest quarterly ratings and ended with him lightly fingering her bra strap through her shirt.

While other secretaries freely offered advice to Bridget, Neenah’s thoughts wandered back to the embarrassing bird incident. She was so lost in thought she almost missed hearing her name called. Expecting it to be a co-worker, it took Neenah a second to realize the woman waving to her two booths over was the nun from the day before.
The secretaries were still debating Bridget’s predicament and only a few noticed Neenah excuse herself and carry her chicken salad plate to a different booth.

Sr. Melanie looked as conservative as she did yesterday, just a bit more casual in a pair of blue jeans and a plain red t-shirt.

“You know, this restaurant isn’t that far from Mrs. Gull’s house,” Melanie said after a few minutes of small talk. “I bet you know who she is.”

Neenah didn’t.

“She’s an elderly woman from church I’m helping out around the house before school starts. She’s got a huge front yard that needs a lot of cleaning. Are you up for it?”

Neenah gave a slight nod to the nun’s request, thinking back to all the flyers she’d thrown out over the years from St. Pete’s, encouraging parishioners to participate in certain food drives or clothing collections.

“What brought you to St. Pete’s?” Neenah asked instead.

“I was at St. Joe’s on the south side for a few years, but before that, I worked as a missionary for St. Cecelia’s in Guatemala.”

“I bet it was beautiful over there,” Neenah said, chewing her chicken salad. She pictured a clay mission house, and Melanie, in a billowy, white cotton skirt, teaching silent dark-haired students the alphabet.

“Yeah, beautiful when there was no fighting going on. I was there not long after the fighting officially stopped.” Melanie, brandishing her fork like a dagger, made air quotes when she said *officially.*
“Really?” Neenah nodded and tried opening her eyes a little wider, putting the same impressed look on her face that she gave Kent because she had no idea what kind of fighting Melanie was talking about.

“People all over the place were being ripped from their homes by the government and the children would get left behind to starve in the streets. So many came to St. Cecelia’s for the food, if nothing else.”

“Being an orphan is terrible,” Neenah said.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Bridget signal to the waitress for the check, but before she could join them, Melanie asked “Did you loose your parents at a young age?”

Melanie’s blue eyes, which up until this point, Neenah thought were too pale and a little watery, locked on Neenah’s face. Neenah felt her checks turning red, not from the way the nun was looking at her; instead how the expression seemed so genuine.

“No, you misunderstood. I’m not an orphan. I just sympathized with the kids you helped and everything,” Neenah explained, her stomach suddenly rumbling. Strange the chicken salad isn’t agreeing with me, she thought.

Before she could excuse herself to the bathroom, Bridget wobbled over to the table on her four-inch heels.

“You coming, Neenah?” she asked between snaps of her gum.

“Before you go, you didn’t answer my question about helping me at Mrs. Gull’s house,” Melanie said.
“Here.” Neenah scribbled her phone number on a napkin. “This is where you can reach me. Call and I’ll check my schedule.”

Neenah thought about how easy throwing away flyers was compared to phone rejection while she waited for Sr. Melanie. They agreed to meet in the St. Pete’s parking lot, which seemed so much larger to Neenah without all the Sunday morning traffic. Without the SUVs, the life-size Mary statue on the edge of the lot dominated the area.

The traditional Anglican Mary, a replica, Neenah knew, was displayed in churches around the world. Mary’s face was turned down to the right—even the Mother of God couldn’t look people in the face—arms outstretched, traditional robe and veil chiseled around her body. Her mouth had been carved into a frown and worry lines crawled across her forehead.

“Today, doctors could Botox those lines away,” Neenah said to the statue while rummaging through her purse for the paper with the time she needed to meet Melanie on it. “I think that’s the very least we could do for you, considering people claim your face appears to them in oatmeal.”

At that moment, a hot gust of wind ripped the paper from her hand. The yellow Post-It landed near the statue’s base and, grabbing it, her hand brushed against something smooth in the grass.

Staring with unblinking eyes, head raised, ready to strike, was a large, green snake. Neenah leapt backwards and tripped over her own feet.
She heard laughter behind her and her purse, which she must have thrown in her haste, appeared over her shoulder.

“Are you always so jumpy this early in the morning?” Melanie asked.

“Not really,” Neenah said, examining the scuff on her elbow. “I saw a snake.”

“You mean this one?” Melanie tapped her foot in the grass.

The snake was actually stone, an extension of the replicated statue that Neenah had long forgotten about.

“It was my idea to paint it,” Melanie said. “Snakes are hidden everywhere. I like to think it teaches us vigilance.”

Mrs. Gull’s house was one of five in a row of small bungalows. Hers had a brick front porch running the entire width of the house and had probably been a place where neighbors had once gathered for drinks and conversation during warm summer nights. Now, the porch’s stoop was cracked in so many places, it appeared to be falling away from the house.

Mrs. Skull, Neenah thought when Mrs. Gull answered the door. The old woman’s face resembled a piece of cheesecloth, porous and loose. Her skin seemed to be falling down, away from her eye sockets and cheek bones, causing her eyes to bug out like a toad’s. Her lean body indicated she had probably always been thin, but now, she seemed void of any muscle or fat. Mrs. Gull’s white arms had the texture of rice paper and when she lifted her cane, Neenah feared the old woman’s elbow would pierce right through her own skin.
Neenah was so thankful they only stayed inside the dark house for a moment that she didn’t mind being outside, raking sticks and leaves brought down by a recent thunderstorm. Sr. Melanie, across the yard, tried to continue the conversation they had had in the restaurant about Guatemala. Neenah couldn’t hear everything the nun was saying over the snapping of the hedge clippers and the new blister between her thumb and forefinger was stinging.

“I almost became a nun once,” Neenah blurted out after her blister finally popped. “I never went to school, but I thought about,” she continued when Sr. Melanie didn’t say anything back.

Another half-hour passed and the sweat dripping down Neenah’s back was staring to make her skin itch. Her raking fell into the rhythmic pattern: long, long, short, to which she chanted yard work sucks over and over.

“I asked why you didn’t pursue it.”

“What?” Neenah, in her chanting daze, didn’t know Sr. Melanie had asked her this question twice already. “Ok, well, it’s like when a young man decides to become a priest and all good Catholic women say, ‘No, so-and-so is too handsome for the priesthood. He’ll drive all the women in his parish wild.’ I think they say that just to add some illicitness to the bleak future of celibacy.”

“That’s funny you mention that because my brother is a priest and everyone said that about him. But, now that I think about it, no one ever told me I was too pretty to be a nun.”
“A celibate man is different from a celibate woman. With a nun, her romance and allure is in her piousness and selflessness. It doesn’t matter what she looks like.”

“You still haven’t answered why you decided not to be a nun.”

“I’m not pious and I’m probably as selfish as everyone else.” *If I were her, I would judge me*, Neenah thought to herself.

“Those are choices you make, not traits you’re born with.”

Melanie and Neenah talked only about other, smaller, matters the rest of the afternoon until Mrs. Gull came outside wearing a knit shawl that covered her like a shroud, inviting them to stay for dinner. Melanie accepted the invitation for both of them.

Neenah blinked a few times, trying to get her eyes to adjust to the living room’s darkness after having been outside in the bright sun all day. As her vision focused, the décor of Mr. Gull’s house made her wish they could sit on the old front porch.

The couch and two chairs in the room were all upholstered in the same tweed burlap material. The fabric, however, had a shiny, oily feel to it that only comes from years of sweaty behinds sitting on it. There was a small television, but no cable hookup or VCR. A chipped TV tray, holding a brass plated lamp, was the only other table besides the plastic television cart.

While Sr. Melanie helped Mrs. Gull make some iced tea, Neenah counted two Jesus and one Mary picture hanging on the walls, in addition to a six-inch St.
Francis cardboard cutout. One 5x7 showed Jesus wearing short robe with visibly defined arm muscles, a square jaw, and long hair that seemed to caught in the wind. *I should ask Mrs. Scull what she does when she’s alone with her sexy Jesus pictures,* Neenah thought to herself.

“Do Shake n’ Bake pork chops sound good to you, dear?” Mrs. Gull asked, returning from the kitchen with Melanie, who was carrying the iced tea tray.

“Just delicious,” Neenah replied.

“I propose a toast,” Sr. Melanie said once everyone had a glass of tea. “A toast to friends,” she said.

Neenah thought she caught Melanie winking at her. Mrs. Gull didn’t say anything

“Friends and choices,” Neenah finished the toast. She tipped her tea glass towards the couch where the other women sat.

After the dinner, the three returned to the living room. This time, Mrs. Gull produced from the back of her kitchen closet a dusty bottle of White Zinfandel. She unscrewed the cap and poured small amounts into three juice glasses.

“I don’t have wine glasses,” she said apologetically.

Sexy Jesus’ face began to look a little less sexy and a little sadder to Neenah, the couch’s fabric scratching the backs of her legs.
“Tell us how you joined the church, dear,” Mrs. Gull said to Sr. Melanie.

“You’ve been kind to me; I can only imagine you’ve been this way all along.”

“A year before high school ended, I had a dream,” Melanie said.

“Dreaming about becoming a nun is definitely a calling,” Mrs. Gull said.

“In the dream I had a family,”

“I thought you said you were a nun,” Neenah interrupted.

“No, I wasn’t a nun in my dream. Instead, I was with a man who I think was my husband and two children that were ours together. The four of us were walking towards a church.”

Melanie paused for a moment and Neenah caught her smiling in the direction of the Sexy Jesus picture, but her blue eyes seemed to be unfocused.

“We were almost to the church door when another woman suddenly appeared. She took my hand and pulled me away from the others. My family went inside and I was alone with the woman. The church steps that we were standing on cracked, and weeds grew through the open spaces.”

*What did she say about vigilance back at the statue?* Neenah wondered, thinking back to her behavior in parking lot and the front yard. To her, Melanie’s dream sound like a nightmare.

“The vines began to wrap themselves around my ankles. I struggled so hard for what felt like an eternity against those vines, but their grip only grew stronger.”

“God’s grip,” Neenah whispered.
“Not at all,” Melanie said to her. “You’re forgetting the woman. Just when I thought I’d die by those vines, she touched my face and kissed me. At once the church was like new, no cracks anywhere, and the vines withered up like they had never taken hold of me.”

Mrs. Gull, who had already finished her glass of wine, appeared to have dozed off momentarily in her chair, her heavy breathing, making the moment anticlimactic, was the only noise in the room.

Neenah plucked the empty juice glass from Mrs. Gull’s limp hand. She rolled the glass between her palms, its cool smoothness soothing her sore calluses.

Still rolling the glass between her hands, Neenah crossed the room to where Melanie sat.

“Do you think this is a weird picture?” she asked Melanie. “When I see this, I think, ‘How strange is this woman to have a ‘Sexy Jesus’ picture in her house.’ But I never think how strange I am to really care about what pictures she has in her own home in the first place.”

Neenah touched Sr. Melanie’s face the same way she imagined the woman from the dream did. The nun’s skin was warm and firm. The kiss that followed was fast and soft. *Maybe like the kind of kiss two sisters would give each other,* Neenah imagined.

If Mrs. Gull’s skin was like cheesecloth and poor Mary was stuck with the granite or oatmeal or mud or whatever else people chose to see her in, Neenah decided, than Melanie’s was like pine. Soft woods change shaped easily and
different expressions, ideas, and feeling were always reflected in Sr. Melanie’s face. However, there was a solidness to her that was unbending, even in the strongest storm.

It wasn’t until Mrs. Gull’s funeral a month later that Neenah really got a chance to talk to Melanie. Neenah had seen Melanie at church and each of the few times that happened, the nervous butterflies in Neenah’s stomach she had been experiencing since leaving her job would stop.

“I’m quitting,” she told Kent two weeks ago and despite the fact that brand-new Bridget was promoted to her old job a few days later, Neenah liked to think Kent, maybe a little bit, missed that she was never a distraction.

Neenah’s nervousness came from her decision to take a temporary job as the church’s groundskeeper. She still liked yard work about as much as she did when she helped at Mrs. Gull’s, but nothing else had turned up or sparked her interest. She also had a feeling Sr. Melanie put in a good word for her to the priest since Mr. Anderson, another parishioner who owned his own greenhouse for six years, didn’t get the job.

Mrs. Gull’s funeral, held only two days before she was to start her new job, was a brief, quiet affair.

“Who do you think was secretly in love with her?” Melanie whispered to Neenah during the memorial service.

Although Neenah and Melanie were the two youngest people there, single, mainly widowed women, made up the rest of the group.
“Over there in the corner,” Neenah pointed. “You see that man in the bowler cap? Now take off the hat and give him long hair and a bit more muscle in the arms and legs. He’s the exact image of Sexy Jesus.”

Neenah was barely able to finish the sentence when, once again, a bird swooped into the church, this time through an open window.
A Lesson from Iowa

Three years ago Nick waited for me at the San Antonio airport. He had arrived early and brought me flowers, a dozen multi-colored carnations, even though I think carnations are the kind of flowers people give their grandmothers. It was all he could afford and even half-wilted flowers from the Pick-N-Save flower department are romantic in an airport.

Nick was student teaching in Texas that semester and with each phone conversation between the two of us, he talked more and more about living down there permanently. At that time, Texas to me symbolized the worst in conservative politics, pollution from gas guzzling SUVs, concealed weapons, and above all, dust. Dust sounds crazy and maybe I’ve seen too many Westerns, but every time I pictured myself in Texas, my mouth would dry up and my skin would literally feel gritty.

Based on my stereotypes, you’d think my ideal home would be someplace quiet and seasonal, like Oregon with its progressive views on education, or the quiet New England atmosphere of Maine. Beautiful places, yes, but while Nick talked about Texas, I painted Iowa as the ideal scene for domestic tranquility.

Graduate school at Iowa State was really my only reason for wanting to move, but in order for Nick to move with me, I needed to convince him that Iowa’s teaching recession wouldn’t hinder his chances of landing a job.
Nick found out I was going to Ames, Iowa instead of a Texas school at the San Antonio airport because, after months of not seeing me, I knew that was the best time to convince him to come. Of course he agreed.

The only significant event in our lives that occurred during the summer before we moved into our first apartment together was that Nick had applied to fifty different Iowa school districts and had not gotten a single job interview.

My mother teaches emotionally disturbed children in one of the poorest school districts in Wisconsin. Everyday she comes home fulfilled and more in love with her job even though she is confronted with child abuse, neglect, mentally unstable parents, and children as young as ten with schizophrenia.

Teaching to me seems impossibly hard and meant only for those with infinite patience. I have so little patience that when I read a book, more often than not, I skip ahead to the last few pages to see how the story ends. Only when I know the ending, can I finish reading the middle part.

To be fair, ISU was never aware that I had no patience, but while Nick was worried about finding a teaching job, I had scored one of my own nearly six months earlier. For the next two years, I would be in charge of demonstrating public speaking skills to 60-65 students per semester. I felt as prepared as anyone would be who had no teaching experience, two weeks training for the job, and virtually no practice talking in front of groups larger than twenty.

At the beginning of September, I had my own classroom and Nick found a part-time teaching job for Prosperity Learning Center, a company in the business
of education. Everyday students would come from sitting seven hours in a classroom to sitting an additional 2-3 hours with Nick and silently complete worksheet packets for a few hours while parents paid upwards of $50.00.

Five years ago, while walking to a friend’s house, Nick simply stopped moving. It was so sudden and quiet I didn’t even know he wasn’t next to me anymore until I was about ten feet ahead of him.

Nick’s arm was bent at the elbow and felt exactly like a dead bass I once touched. No matter how hard I yanked on his elbow, it stayed bent at a ninety degree angle. Drool dripped down his chin and his eyes blinked in double time.

This moment reminds me of Saved by the Bell, a television show about high school kids I watched when I was thirteen. On the show, Zack, the hero, would yell, “Time Out!” when he couldn’t talk himself out of situation. All other characters would freeze except for Zack, who would confide with the TV audience about his next move. When ready to confront the situation, he’d call, “Time In!” and the characters would resume exactly what they were doing with no knowledge that time had stopped.

Nick’s frozen state lasted maybe thirty seconds and when he became unfrozen, he started walking the same pace he had been and didn’t question the drool on his face. Like the characters on Saved by the Bell who came to life during “Time In”, Nick, as an epileptic, had no idea what happened when time stood still for him.
Nick’s prescription anti-seizure medication was $120.00 a month for the uninsured. PLC didn’t offer any health plans for employees, so until a full-time teaching job came along, Nick applied to gas stations just to get the benefits.

The manager at the Slip In n’ Out Gas Station wore a white undershirt that was visible through a yellow dress shirt. Nick and the manager made small talk for a minute and the conversation would have seemed sincere if the man had once looked up from the pile of other applications in front of him.

“Yes sir, I’m always on time and I’ve never had a problem with lateness.”

“Staying late? You can count on me to work overnight shifts.”

“Experience? Well, I have a degree in education, so I’m used to dealing with authority and I’ve never had a problem listening to bosses.”

“Excellent,” said the manager. “Cashier responsibilities include cleaning toilets and making sure teenagers don’t loiter in the parking lot. You’re over-qualified to work here, but I’m willing to give you a chance.”

“Thank you, sir,” Nick replied, a little too loudly, before leaving the store.

Whenever the foliage changed on campus, my students became scholars. Hands shoved deep in the pockets of their blue, gray, or red wool coats, collars turned up to block the wind, they suddenly moved quickly and with a sense of purpose. The smell of nutmeg and chocolate would draw them to coffee houses where they formed study groups and caught up on back chapters from the first weeks of school when it was too sunny outside to study.
Football games became the perfect remedy for overworked students and each weekend, they temporarily lost themselves to the crowds, the beer, and university patriotism.

Wisconsin has a law that requires two people to work at gas stations at night. Iowa doesn’t have this law, but during our first ISU Homecoming, Nick’s manager scheduled two people to work at the gas station because the store was bound to be hectic.

Nick and his coworker Joel were busy their entire shift, mainly ringing up cigarettes, beer, and lottery tickets. They made frequent money drops in the safe and never had more than $100.00 in the register at one time.

Shortly after 9:00, a college-age man in a gold t-shirt with an ISU logo bought a pack of Camel Lights with a five-dollar bill. As soon as Nick opened the register to make change, the man lunged over the counter, pushed Nick against the cigarette locker, and grabbed handfuls of cash out of the open register.

The man ran out the door and up busy Lincoln Ave., still clutching the money and, like Hansel and Gretel leaving behind bread crumbs, dropping the occasional ten dollar bill. By the time the man turned onto Hayward Ave, both were in a full-out runs, slowed only by large groups of college students heading to parties and the bars. It was one of these student groups that forced Nick to run on someone’s front lawn. Unfortunately, the grass was wet and Nick slipped, loosing sight of which way the man went.

Some women are turned on at the thought of their boyfriends chasing down criminals and tackling the bad guys. I only imagined a masked man hiding
behind bushes, money in one hand, knife in the other, waiting to stab Nick in the dark.

One month after the robbery was a perfect Sunday. Every window in our apartment was open to let in the smell of dried corn fields that I associate with Iowa fall. We wrapped ourselves in quilts and lounged on the couch watching television and drinking coffee until Nick had to go to work at 3:00.

Other vivid details about that day are stuck in my mind. I’ve talked to my friend Natalie on the phone hundreds of times over the years and I can’t distinguish one conversation from the next. That day, though, we talked about the fresh strawberries she was going to have on her wedding cake and that she was going to buy her fiancé cross-country skis for Christmas.

Natalie’s phone call lasted almost two hours and when I hung up around 8:00, Nick came home, four hours before his shift should have ended.

“Why are you home?” I asked.

“I’m quitting my job,” was all he said.

He wasn’t wearing his coat and I was almost positive he had one with him when he left the apartment that afternoon. There was also a hole in his navy blue work pants that seemed fresh.

“A man held a gun to my head and robbed the store.”

At that moment, the only things I knew about gas station robberies was what I’d seen in movies. Sometimes they were comical, like when Louise robbed the tiny gas station in Thelma and Louise. Gina Davis even had a funny line she
said when she held up the place. I still can’t remember that line, but I know I laughed when she burst into the store waving a gun.

Nick took two sips of a beer from our fridge and threw it as hard as he could against the wall above the sink. It exploded in a flash of brown glass and foam, shards were everywhere.

“I have to cut my hair,” he told me. “The guy who did it knows me and now that the police have him, his friends will be looking for me.”

We left the broken glass on the floor for the rest of the night.

The manager gave Nick two weeks paid leave after the robbery and, his first night back on the job, he worked alone. Nick learned even though he had been paid for his time off, the store had counted him at two weeks of zero hours. That messed up his 32 hours/week/month average that he needed for three months to receive insurance benefits. To qualify, he had to start another three-month cycle from the beginning.

By the time a friend of mine was nineteen, her debts caught up to her and she owed $15,000 to credit card companies with current interest rates on course to double that amount.

“I know I’ll be in debt my whole life,” she once told me. “But nothing can beat the instant satisfaction I got from spending that money.”

When Nick was dropped from his insurance, he wasn’t even going to pursue the matter, because, at that moment, he was satisfied his epilepsy was under control. In twenty-five years, red credit flags will still unexpectedly disrupt
my friend’s life, just as seizures and hospitalizations will continue to happen to Nick.

Nick’s epilepsy and health care situations were like two speeding trains headed towards each other on the same track. The collision was caused by Christopher St. John, a businessman from Des Moines. St. John owned the Ames Slip n’ Out and came to the store about once a month. His main responsibilities were telling employees to tuck in their shirts and teach them how to cut corners.

“Use a quarter-cup bleach to clean both the bathrooms,” he’d say to the closing shift. “Using more would be like stealing from me and my children.”

Anything from having too many lights on in the parking lot to changing garbage bags before they were filled to the brim was considered stealing from St. John and his children.

Ironically, the armed robber, Darren Fetzer, the only person who ever did steal directly from St. John, went straight to prison without ever hearing that phrase. If the Kum n’ Go was the Cadillac of gas stations in Ames, the Slip In n’ Out was the Ford Escort. The store, usually dirty with a broken toilet, was reliable enough to support a family. If people got the impression Slip In n’ Out was easy to rob for a good amount of cash, the place could turn into a lemon.

After three weeks of consideration, St. John decided Nick, in addition to Fetzer, was also responsible for the robbery. Store policy dictates no more than forty dollars in the register and police found about three times that amount on Fetzer.
“I don’t think he realizes who I am,” Nick said to me about St. John. “He has never called or mentioned one thing to me about the robbery.”

Shortly after, the manager, following St. John’s orders, fired Nick, who the next day, had his first seizure in two and a half years. He had a headache the morning leading up to the episode, a sign of an oncoming seizure for epileptics doctor’s now say.

I was reading on the couch and Nick was wondering restlessly around the apartment. First he was up bouncing a basketball in the kitchen, next he was trying to read a magazine, until finally he decided to eat a frozen pizza.

Our old freezer always made a loud humming noise when the door was open for more than five seconds. Already irritated by the basketball bouncing, I screamed from my spot on the couch that he left the freezer door open when the buzzing became too loud to tolerate.

In fact, both the freezer and refrigerator doors were open and Nick was frozen in front of them. It looked like the whole appliance had turned evil and cast a spell that didn’t allow his muscles to move. Less than a minute after I found him, it was over, but the entire seizure probably lasted closer to three.

Extreme fatigue sets in after most of Nick’s seizures and while he slept, I raged. I stood at the free throw line on the basketball hoop behind our apartment, throwing wild shots at the backboard just to hear the satisfying dunk of the ball against wood. Over and over I threw the ball, until my neck and arm muscles were hot with pain, and still I raged inside.
Once again, Daryl leaves me in charge to run the front counter of the store. This makes him nervous because our usual deal keeps him up front while I handle the duties of eye-guy in the back. In these parts, eye-guy is nothing to be ashamed of. People from all over Marinette County know me for my craft. From my collection of over two thousand glass animal eyes, I have the gift to make deer, loons, muskies, and even once a small rat terrier named Martini come alive again. I wish I were placing eyes in the empty sockets of Hank Schmidt’s 7-point buck right now as Simon McCall stands in front of me, baseball cap in hand, saying he wants his mother stuffed.

The two of us stare at each other after Simon voices his request. I know it’s my turn to say something, but I can’t get Daryl’s last words before he left to go fishing out of my head: *Bobby, don’t fuck up.*

I lean over the counter and lower my voice even though we’re the only two in the store. “Where’d you stash her body?”

“She’s tied to the top of my truck,” is all he says.

Through the window I just see Simon’s old green Ford with nothing on the top. “Maybe she fell off,” I think, picturing Caroline McCall on the ground somewhere back on County Road X.
“Woooooeeeee!” Simon shouts, throwing his baseball cap in the air. “I sure had you going!”

“If anyone’s going anywhere, it’s you straight to hell for joking about your own mother dying.”

“You should’ve seen the look on your face,” Simon says. “If she died, do you think I’d bring her out in this heat? She’d burst open like a skunk on the side of the road.”

“So what are you doing here anyway? Who’s covering your shift?”

Simon works for the Peshtigo Logging Company and the guys there always take turns ditching out while someone else punches in time cards.

“Danny’s covering for me because I gotta talk to Daryl.”

“Too bad he’s fishing this week.”

Simon points at Daryl’s deer head collection on the wall like he’s lining a live one up in the sights.

“You want a hundred bucks?” he asks, still aiming at the deer heads, now wiggling his thumb back and forth.

“I’d be nutty as a fruitcake getting involved with one of your scams.”

“Screw Daryl. This ain’t no scam. It’s a job I need someone to do for me because Pork Boy, who was going to do the job, busted up his leg a couple days ago.”

Pork Boy is actually Reginald Jones, but he has gone by Pork Boy since he hit the 150-pound mark at ten-years old.
“I need someone to take care of Joey when I’m with Mama visiting Aunt Bette in Florida. You ain’t as big as Pork Boy, but it shouldn’t be a problem.”

Simon’s has a Holstein bull he rents out for breeding purposes to local dairy farmers. Joey, who won 2nd place at the State Fair three years ago, is more like a pet instead of livestock. As a calf, Simon let Joey sleep in his empty spare bedroom and by the time the animal reached 2,600 pounds, he still ate from Simon’s hands. Joey’s gentleness even got him a four-minute spot on *Good Morning America* last spring. Not only did the TV coverage put Peshtigo on the map, but I won ten bucks when I bet Daryl that not even Diane Sawyer would ask Simon the last time he’d had a date.

“Simon, you know that bull will charge the minute I get within thirty feet of the house.”

“You’re the one that convinced Daryl to send you to the cattle show a few months back. I’m sure you picked up enough info about bull-handling there.”

Before I remind Simon I only went to the show to get farmers to remember D&B Taxidermy for their cattle-stuffing needs, he tells me Joey will stay penned in the back pasture.

“All you have to do is give him regular feed once before noon and then some protein-rich grains that make his coat shinny and swimmers strong, if you know what I mean?”

Simon attempts a wink when he says this, a stupid enough gesture being that Joey’s only role in life is to hump cows, but Simon winking actually looks
like a person having a fit of some sort. He thinks one of his eyes is shut when he’s actually just blinking fast.

“Fine, I’ll do it. Just write out where everything is and what needs to get done.”

Before I can even say good-bye, Simon’s already out the door, peeling away from the curb. That’s when I see the Out with the NRA bumper sticker he’s managed to stick right above the door knob.

“I’d better stop by for those instructions before Simon leaves, just to make sure their not written on a bright red cloth,” I tell the head of Hank Schmidt’s buck while I touch up its face.

I dip my smallest brush in a jar of black paint and outline the rim of the buck’s eye. Painting the eyelids is the hardest part of the job because if one eye ends up too thick, the eyes come out uneven.

The bell above the door chimes telling me it’s after three. My girlfriend Lacey stops by almost everyday at this time and, sure enough, when she pokes her head in the office, I see she’s forgotten to take her hairnet off again.

My own mother would go outside with curlers in her hair but even she drew the line at being seen in public wearing a hairnet. “They make a person look bald,” she’d say.

Lacey likes hers on after she’s done with her cafeteria lady shift at Peshtigo Elementary School because it keeps her already short hair off her face.
Without a word, she sits on my lap and kisses me. I drop my paintbrush and it leaves a black mark on her jeans. I’ve known Lacey my entire life and we’ve been going out for about a year.

“I hear you’ll be making the big bucks soon,” she says, breaking the kiss.

“I take it you ran into Simon.”

“I saw him at Walgreen’s. Here, I got you a Coke,” she says, pulling a soda can out of her apron pocket. “Now are you gonna buy me something nice?”

“He’s only giving me, like, twenty bucks,” I lie.

Hearing this, she pushes out her lower lip and slides off my lap. I notice she’s wearing the socks I got her for Christmas—the ones with the little sunny-side up eggs stitched up the sides.

Lacey is a tiny girl, skinny, no curves, and I’ve heard folks say she looks like a boy. What they don’t know is there’s nothing manly about her feet. Once, I stuffed a robin for a display and while the bird was light, I was amazed that the creature’s delicate feet could carry its own weight on a branch. Lacey’s feet are tiny and narrow with smooth, soft skin. But when she runs barefoot across a room, I can see every bone, muscle, and tendon running through them.

“I’ll take you out tonight,” I promise her. “Maybe someplace nice.”

I know she’s upset about the money, but I’m not ready to admit Simon is giving me more than twenty bucks. Lately, if either of us mentions a substantial amount of money, Lacey wants to talk about weddings and us living together in her apartment. The only relief I have is she doesn’t want to live with me bad enough to suggest her moving to my apartment above the B&D Taxidermy.
“It’s just like Simon to get cheap on us,” she says, still pouting.

“Forget about him,” I tell her. “I’ll take you to the Chit-Chat Lounge tonight. All drinks on me.”

“I’ll let you buy me all the drinks I want if you put this on me first,” Lacey says, producing a black pencil about the same size as the paint brush I use on my animal’s eyes.

I move Hank’s deer head out of the way and pull Lacey’s chair closer to the table light. She tilts her head back and closes her eyes.

“You’re eyes should be open,” I say, straightening her head.

My face is only inches from her, but I can barely see her eyelashes. They, along with her eyebrows, are so light that her blue eyes are the only spots of color on her pale face.

She watches me twist the pencil tip between my fingers (to define the point) and draw a test line on the back of my hand. The make-up color is gray instead of black like I thought it would be.

“No, you should close your eyes,” I tell her because I don’t want her staring at me. “At least while I do the top part.”

Bunches of tiny blue veins are visible through her eyelids. I don’t want to poke her eye out, so I barely touch her. I quick flick the pencil left and it doesn’t even leave a mark on the lid.

I place my right hand on top of her head, careful not to get my fingers tangled in the hairnet, and my left hand holds the pencil just below her eye. My wrist is covering her mouth and her breath feels warm. I begin in the corner near
her nose and slowly draw outward, tracing the lid just above her lash line.

Finishing, I hold her chin and close one eye to see if the lines I’ve drawn are even.

The Chit-Chat Lounge is one of three Peshtigo bars, and because it’s the only one with two pool tables, it’s the busiest. As far as bars go, the Chit-Chat isn’t any different from other small town drinking establishment located up and down the Peshtigo River. The stools are so patched with tape, they’re mostly silver instead of black, and the musky stench of cigarettes and stale beer always lingers, no matter how long the doors and windows are open.

It’s only Wednesday and the bar is full. I went to high school with the first five people I see inside the door.

“Bobby, over here,” Simon yells to me and Lacey before we even have a chance to buy a drink.

He’s sitting with Pork Boy who is taking up two sides of the table—one for his massive size and the other for his leg that’s wrapped in a cast resting on the adjacent chair.

Simon nudges an empty pitcher in my direction and I know Lacey is glaring at me even though I’m looking down at the table. Whenever we hang out with Simon, she gets pissed because she thinks I buy too many rounds.

I try not to drink much and end up holding the glass on my lap to stop Simon from filling it each time he sees it empty. We take off before last call, mainly to avoid the hassle of helping get a passed-out Pork Boy home.
Our destination is Lacey’s little apartment above Kramer insurance, located about a block from the bar. The street is quiet and I wish we had stayed in the bar a little longer, at least until the some of the crowd could have filled the street.

Lacey’s looking at the cakes in the window of Puff’s Bakery when I put her in a headlock just to see how she’ll react. She scratches my arm hard enough to leave faint red lines. In retaliation, I pick her up by the waist, flipping her upside down. Her feet dangle over my shoulder and she kicks the air, trying to get free, not realizing if I let go, she’ll land headfirst on the sidewalk.

I don’t even see her knee, but it smacks me right in the nose with the force of a fast ball. My eyes instantly water and we hit the ground.

“Get up,” she says, rubbing her elbow. “You’re drunk.”

I laugh at the fact she doesn’t know she hit me in the nose. Already it feels like the size and shape of rotting plum and I imagine by tomorrow, it’ll be the same color, too.

She grabs my arm and pulls me to my feet. “Shit, did you know your nose is bleeding?”

Lacey’s one-room place is so small that the bed is next to the refrigerator. Inside, she forgets about my nosebleed when a jar of peanuts left open on the counter catches her attention. She holds the container to her mouth like it’s a glass and tips it back too far. Peanuts fill her mouth and some spill out the sides onto the floor.
I lie back on her twin-size bed, which I hate because my feet hang off the end. A spider crawls across her ceiling. Bugs never bother me, but I know she can’t stand spiders because she read during the course of one lifetime, the average human swallows seven spiders while sleeping.

“Watcha looking at?” she asks as she flops down on her stomach next to me, still chewing peanuts.

She’ll make me kill the spider if she sees it. I kiss her so she won’t look up and a salty taste fills my mouth. After a second she breaks away and sweeps her finger around the inside of her mouth, loosening the peanut mash caught in her gums.

Even though brown goo is still on her teeth, I, craving salt, kiss her again. Without breaking away, she reaches over and turns off the lamp next to the bed. In the dark, I imagine the spider coming down on a thread, hanging only inches above us. I roll over on top of her so it will land on me first.

My stomach flops when I wake up because it takes me a second to realize where I am. My pounding head feels twice the size as it did yesterday, but, when I touch my face, my nose is the only thing that is swollen. I see Lacey is already awake, dressed, and for some reason, wearing her hairnet.

I pull my left arm across my chest, trying to stretch out a muscle cramp. Waking up in Lacey’s bed is like waking up after sleeping on rocks.

“Aren’t you tired?” I cover my head with the blanket to block out the sunlight streaming in from the window.
“When I got up to go to the bathroom I stepped on all the peanuts you dropped and there was a spider on the wall. I’ve spent the morning cleaning my infested apartment.”

I don’t have enough energy to tell her the spider was there before the peanuts fell on the floor or even that she was the one who spilled food everywhere.

“Do you got a Coke or anything like that,” I ask instead. “I’m real thirsty and my nose hurts.”

“Too bad I’m running late for work. There’s tomato juice in the fridge if you want. Lock the door behind you when you leave.”

Usually when I act pitiful, Lacey does whatever I ask. At least she’s gone and I can sleep longer. Taxidermy hours are flexible and I probably won’t even go in to the store today except to check the messages on the machine. Daryl will probably call just to make sure I’m not doing exactly what I plan on doing.

The two of us started taxidermy young and our first projects, a doe for me and a buck for Daryl, are still hanging in the store.

During my first hunting trip the November I was ten years old, Daryl called me Becky the whole time because he said I whined like a girl about the cold. He wouldn’t let up and finally after two days, I pushed him out of the tree stand. He hit the ground with a crack that, at the time, reminded me of the sound an acorn makes when you step on it.

After getting back from the hospital, Pop took me outside and used his brown belt to thrash me across the back of my legs. After it was over he sat me
down on Mama’s old rocking chair, the one on the porch she sat on to shell the beans when she was still alive.

“Bobby,” he said, “you didn’t cry.”

“No sir,” was all I could manage to say. The tears were there, like hundreds of bees swarming behind my eyes and, if I said more, they’d have been sure to fly out.

“From now on after school you’re to come straight to the store. It’s not punishment,” he added, “because it’s your future. You and Daryl got to get along because the store will be both of yours someday.”

For a whole year I worked cleaning the shed where we skinned the animals that hunters and farmers brought us. By the next November, I was the first to line a doe up in the sights, the only deer any of us got that trip. Even though three other boys in my class shot animals that week, I got to stuff mine, too.

Pop mounted the doe head right on the store wall and she was there for a long time until Daryl made me move her to the eye room because he said she was bad for business. There is a lumpy patch on her neck where my measurement for the mold was off and she’s a bit bug-eyed because I went a size or two larger on the glass eyes than I should have.

The one thing I have to do today is stop by Simon’s farm to get Joey’s care instructions. Even though Simon works for the Peshtigo Logging Company, his ancestors were farmers by trade. Simon’s dad was the last of the family
farmers, but even he had to take outside work when, after selling off some land, the property was down to fifty acres. After Carter McCall’s death, his widow Caroline sold the rest of the farmable land, keeping the property’s Big House, the foreman’s house, the barn, and back pasture.

Eight miles down County Road X takes me to McCall Lane. Around here, most of the dirt roads shooting off county roads bear the names of the farmers who owned the property sixty years back or more.

Even though Simon doesn’t have a farm, at least he still lives on some family land. About ten years ago, when Eli Smith lost everything and was forced to take a logging job, he hung himself from the old Smith Road sign. Not only was it Peshtigo’s first suicide in fifteen years, Smith did it in February when the snow drifts were over ten feet high. Nothing was getting through the roads and it wasn’t until two days later that the sheriff found what remained of his body after the coyotes and other animals got at it.

When I pull up to the Big House, as the McCall’s main house is called, Simon storms out the front door. He lives in the old foreman’s house, Caroline in the Big House, and even separate residencies on four acres of land isn’t enough space to keep them from annoying the piss out of each other.

“That woman sold my Camero!” he roars, before I’m even out of my truck. “Do you know how much money she’s flushed down the toilet now that she sold it before I finished it?”
Carter McCall bought the Camero more than twenty-five years ago. For the first few months he worked on the car religiously and, after that, it sat on cinder blocks behind the barn for so long that finch’s began nesting along the dashboard. When Carter died, Simon threw out the nests and told anyone who would listen he was restoring the car as a tribute to his father. Talking about it was as far as he got on the project.

I greet Simon with a Bud Light from the cooler left over in my truck from a day fishing last week. He chugs the warm beer in two seconds even though it’s only 10:30 in the morning.

“I’m not here for your bullshit, just your bull,” I joke.

“Don’t be lame,” Simon says. It has to be the first time Simon hasn’t laughed at one of my stupid jokes. “Joey is in the pasture and he can just stay there the whole time I’m gone.”

The pasture is a natural grass field surrounded by an old electric fence and I sincerely doubt that there’s even one volt of electricity coursing through it.

Before visiting Joey in the pasture, Simon takes me to the barn to show me the bull food. Most barns around Peshtigo are painted the traditional red and Simon’s is no exception. The paint is chipped, though, and the inside, about the size of a three-car garage, is full of metal engine parts Simon collects to fix and sell for profit.

The bull feed is near the door and it’s the only thing animal-related in here. Simon scoops feed into two three gallon plastic buckets and carries one in
each hand. Once we come in view of the pasture, Joey, sensing it’s meal-time, trots briskly over to his trough.

Joey is mostly white with a few black spots and he’s nearly as tall as I am. However, it’s the bull’s head, the shape and size of a thirty-pound ham, that scares me.

A bull’s head is virtually a battering ram, used to send men even as large as Pork Boy ten feet into the air. If you are unfortunate enough to get butted by a bull, you better hope when you come back down, you’re far enough away that the razor-sharp horns only gouge your leg instead of the stomach. The animal will gut a man like a deer, straight from groin to throat.

Simon holds one of the feed buckets at arms length, his biceps straining under the weight of the grain.

“You can just pour the food in the trough right there. And watch out for the horns,” he adds, just as Joey’s head swings over the fence and into the feed bucket.

I jerk backwards and Joey emits a cross between a loud snort and a bellow.

“Never,” Simon says without a trace of a smile, “make any sudden movements around Joey. You won’t live long enough to regret it.”

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As it turns out, feeding Joey while Simon and Mrs. McCall are gone isn’t the hassle I thought it would be. Each time I’ve filled his trough, he has stayed at the opposite end of the pasture.

I’m sitting against the barn wall waiting for Lacey to show up because I promised her so could help me feed Joey today. It’s raining and wet leaves and twigs blow through the barn door.

One of the twigs is pointed at the end like a pencil and I dip it in water to get the end wet and try to sketch an outline of Joey on the barn wall. Water isn’t great for drawing and the tip breaks off when I press on it, forcing me to step outside to scoop up some mud. Using my fingers, I try drawing faces instead of the bull.

I begin with an oval for the face shape. The twig pencil is useful for the eyes because my fingers are too stubby. I try to make my hand remember how it felt putting the make-up on Lacey. The two thick lines I’ve drawn for eyebrows appear closer than they are in real life, making the face look angry. Adding a nose only distorts the picture more. Maybe it is because I work on animals all day, but my face sketches look like they have snouts.

Between the snout and the thick eyebrows, the face is less Lacey and more caveman-like. Lacey has seen my sketches before and told me once they were dark.


She said she didn’t mean the color.

I add more lines to the middle of the nose so it appears skinnier and less snout-like when something brushes against my neck. Whatever it is, it’s light and feels like a spider crawling on me. My twig hand jumps, leaving a dark streak down my picture. I grab a chunk of what turns out to be Lacey’s windbreaker.

“Sorry I scared you,” Lacey says, her hand still touching the back of my neck.

It’s humid out from the rain and the air in the barn feels sticky even though the door is open. Lacey pulls off her wet windbreaker and water sprays the barn walls, causing my mud sketches to run together.

A car coming too fast up the gravel drive breaks our silence. Simon is behind the wheel of Caroline’s white Lincoln and she is nowhere to be seen. He sees us near the barn and drives in circles, honking the horn, yelling out the window, “Mama is staying in Florida!”

Waves of mud kick up from under the tires, soaking me and Lacey. Simon’s excitement, and the exhilaration that comes from standing in the rain covered in mud, makes us crazy. Lacey scoops up handfuls of mud and pretty soon, the Lincoln is as brown as we are. I forget about Joey and toss gallons of feed straight into the air and in falls on us like hail, sticking to our wet skin.

After we calm down, Simon loans me clothes and, since Caroline is staying in Florida for at least a month, Lacey gets free range over her closet. The dress she picks out has no waist and is shaped like a tent. Even when I tell her she looks like Old Mother Hubbard, she refuses to take it off.
“It’s so big and comfy I don’t even need underwear or a bra with it,” she says, raising her eyebrows at me like I’m supposed to be turned on by no panties and her reeking of moth balls. Simon, on the other hand, has no problem trying to lift the hem of the dress.

Simon refills the feed bucket once it stops raining and the three of us head to the pasture to visit Joey. Simon gets his wish when a strong gust of wind catches Lacey’s dress and pulls it high over her head. Her breasts are exposed and against her pale skin, her nipples look like spots of mud that she missed washing off her body in the shower. Her shrieks carry across the field and Joey, off in the distance, starts to move.

By the time we reached the fenced enclosure, Joey is pacing back and forth at the far end. The storm has flooded parts of the field and clumps of mud are stuck on Joey’s hooves, legs, and even his privates. The white of his coat is also caked with mud and every few seconds her snorts.

“He’s just clearing the water out of his nose,” Simon says. “Storms bother him.”

Joey’s trough has a couple inches water in the bottom that needs to be emptied. Simon grabs hold of the fence and climbs over the thick wires into the bull pasture. I follow and Lacey, never wanting to be left behind, does the same. The back of her dress snags a loose wire, leaving a hole the size of a dime. Once inside, Joey’s pacing quickens to a trot.

Together, Simon and I each grab a short end of the trough and dump the muddy water out. Some of it splashes on Lacey’s feet.
“Watch it!” She jumps backwards to avoid getting dirtier.

Simon ignores her and just frowns in Joey’s direction, worry lines creasing his forehead. “Get the feed,” is all he says.

I jump the fence and even though it’s just a flimsy collection of old electric wires, I release the breath I didn’t know I was holding. Only two feet into Joey’s space and it felt like the three of us were right on top of the animal.

That instant, Simon’s hand shoots over the fence and grabs me with such force that I drop the feed bucket. Over his shoulder I see, less than one hundred yards away, Joey charging right for us.

Instinct turns me towards the house and I take two steps before I remember Lacey and Simon, who are both in Joey’s path. Lacey is clinging to the fence, tangled in the fabric of Caroline’s enormous dress. Simon is standing still in front of her with his arms outstretched towards Joey.

I grab Lacey by the collar of her dress and haul her over the fence. The fabric caught on the wire tears like paper. I push her with such force away from the path of the animal that she stumbles the first few feet.

Running away, I hear what sounds like a pumpkin being smashed on the sidewalk, only fifty times louder. Simon doesn’t even scream.

Caroline McCall could have found a good buyer for Joey if she had looked outside of Peshtigo. Hearing the news of her son’s death, she ordered the sheriff to shoot the animal on the spot. Pork Boy, outraged that Caroline would execute Simon’s bull, is currently trying to raise enough money for D&B Taxidermy to
stuff Joey as a memorial. I already told Daryl if it ever comes through, that project is all his.

Days after Simon’s death, people were still calling me a hero for saving Lacey. Women I didn’t even know would walk up to me on the street and tell me their boyfriends wouldn’t get off the couch for them even if they were on fire. Each time another person reminded me of my heroics, I wanted to shout “I’m a fraud. It wasn’t heroic or a case of choosing Lacey over Simon; I just grabbed the nearest person. I don’t know if things would have turned out differently if I were standing nearer to Simon.

Lacey, after months of marriage talk, broke up with me when I told her this.

“I need a man who would be willing to lie down in front of a charging bull to save me,” is what she said.

Joey’s pasture is empty, and now that I own the remaining four acres of the McCall property, it’s my job to fill it. I’ve heard from a few farmers in the area there are some Holstein bulls are for sale. It would be nice to have a horse in the field, especially since I’ve never stuffed one. Daryl reminds me regularly that I know nothing about horses and people will say I’m going through a hero complex, trying to be like John Wayne if I go out and buy one. The thing is, I know Simon would get a kick out of seeing a colt in the spare bedroom of the old foreman’s house.