The time of roses: collected stories

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The time of roses: Collected stories

by

Paul David Cockeram

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

MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English (Creative Writing)

Major Professor: Debra K. Marquart

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This is a collection of short fiction, the bulk of which was written during the author’s two years at Iowa State University. Many of the stories contain magical elements, which has resulted in many people calling them “Postmodern.” The collection begins with a nonfiction essay that catalogues the author’s transition from the working world into the academic world.
This is to certify that the Master’s thesis of

Paul David Cockeram

has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

______________________________
Major Professor

______________________________
For the Major Program

______________________________
For the Graduate College
To my parents, of course
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INTRODUCTION

I have always been intrigued by the magic of everyday life. I’m not talking about Strange Happenings, like the coincidences that television shows mystify and gleefully package for mass consumption. I’m talking about those serendipitous moments when the natural world suddenly seems to reflect what’s happening in my mind. It could be as simple as pulling my arm out of the sleeve of my coat and feeling the sting of static electricity under my fingernails, at a time when my mood is high, my brain feels like it’s singing, and the synapses are firing with the brilliance of lightning. There are other days when I’m so elated I feel like I could fly, and suddenly it seems perfectly reasonable that I should be able to fly, and I wonder why I don’t.

I’m not the only person who has these thoughts. A recent episode of National Public Radio’s popular program *This American Life* was devoted to examining superheroes. One segment featured the results of an informal poll on whether people would rather fly or have the power to become invisible at will. Within the last few years, two hit movies by writer/director M. Night Shyamalan have featured characters who had supernatural powers. Going back even further, there are the novels and stories of Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Jorge Luis Borges, which feature flying carpets and labyrinthian libraries.

Yet there is a gulf between comic books and canonized literature. Writers who include flying people or mythological animals in their stories have traditionally been relegated to the categories of Science Fiction or Fantasy, and as such they have rarely been taken seriously by the *New York Times Book Review* and the more formidable critics. The gulf has, however, been narrowing. Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* series won the Pulitzer prize (though what people had been calling “comic books” were quickly renamed “graphic novels”). Meanwhile, for the last fifteen or twenty years, another group of American writers has given rise to the “postmodern movement.” This movement plays with form and structure...
to the point that the story itself is infected with self-referentiality, contradictions that challenge the integrity of the text, even magic.

Though I have greatly enjoyed reading them, I didn’t set out to write postmodern stories. I thought I was writing magical realism, a literary movement whose champions include Garcia Marquez and Borges and whose roots extend back to Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*. Magical realism seeks to examine the relationship between the normal life and its magical elements by exaggerating some aspect of the characters to the point that this aspect becomes a special ability, completely real and acceptable within the physics of the story. In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, for example, Marquez has one of his fiercely religious characters literally rise into the heavens and disappear from the text. The other characters in the story respond like regular people would—they mourn her passing, yet remain impressed with the religious ecstasy it displayed. In my own stories I have a man who can open locked doors, a man who can fly, and another who is completely empathic. I only mean to exaggerate qualities that are already within myself (and, I think, my audience) so that I can examine these qualities, investigate the role they play in my life.

Even when my goal was to write magical realism, however, my stories often ended up being labeled postmodern. So I set out to discover what that meant. What I found is that the meaning of the word “postmodernism” is elusive. In fact, I’m afraid that the definition of postmodernism has expanded to mean so much that, practically speaking, it means nothing at all. As Umberto Eco said in his famous Postscript to *The Name of the Rose*, “I have the impression that it is applied today to anything the user of the term happens to like.”

When I was walking through the King’s College chapel in Cambridge, England, I realized that if I really could fly, I would want to explore the fan-vaulted ceilings of English cathedrals. This would not only be a perfect opportunity to see a part of the cathedral that nobody else had, but in a large, confined space I wouldn’t have to worry about flying too high.
into the sky and not being able to land safely (a long-standing concern of mine). And whenever I find myself in museums or thrift stores, I am inevitably overcome with a feeling of hot disjointedness, as if my head is packed in foam and my arms are made of rubber. I don’t know why, though having read about empathic people, I’ve considered that it’s the objects in the gallery communicating their history. I find myself making up stories about a tin soap can or a 17th century French chair. This is the motivation behind the magical elements in “One Less Miracle.”

My work is often self-referential, another quality of postmodernism. This is because I stumbled across a couple of essays by John Barth called “The Literature of Exhaustion” and “The Literature of Replenishment.” Barth wrote that he and his contemporaries inherited a literary tradition that felt used up. Everything that could be done had already been done. His solution to the problem of what to write about when you feel that everything has been written was simple: write about that. Take the dilemma of how to write something fresh and make it the story. “Strictly Solitaire” and, to a lesser extent, “Ray Carver and the Inimitable Impulse,” are my attempts at a literature of replenishment.

I have learned these and other facts about my writing by assembling this collection of stories. Looking at a large chunk of my own fiction is like looking into a mirror; I see reflected the interests and obsessions that keep returning to me, and I see that these obsessions fall into the categories of magical realism and postmodernism (to my mind, the difference between the two has become negligible). I’m gratified to be alive in a time when the limits of fiction are being pushed. If Tim O’Brien’s The Things They Carried can kill characters in one story and resurrect them for the next, surely I can have scores of ladybugs descend to aid a troubled young man.

Yet in the real world, in autumn, ladybugs really do swarm. This points to the other important lesson of magic, that it’s not so magical after all.
PROLOGUE

Mortimer

Our high school graduation was an approaching lion my friends and I could smell, could hear and finally see. And we were like sick gazelles. Everyone else was making plans for colleges, careers, families, while we made no plans whatsoever. I had scattered a few college applications across Ohio, and I was lucky enough to get a good scholarship at a small school four hours to the north, outside of Cleveland. One of my only two friends would leave for the Army when summer began. My other friend Bill had not bothered applying to college because of mediocre high school grades. His only plans involved his girlfriend Sommer, with whom things were growing steadily more serious. He wanted to stay with her, while she wanted to attend Ohio University. One night he put his problem to me this way: if not college, if not a job at one of the local factories, what would he do after she left?

The answer came during our final Christmas break in high school, when we were savoring our last months together with alcohol and pot. I was in one of my dark moods, brooding on my bed and staring at black-light posters. It was the kind of thing that had earned me the nickname “Dr. Depresso.” Bill and Sommer were lying on my parents’ kitchen floor. Years later they told me about the moment they shared in there, as they sat wondering if I would come out of my funk and rejoin the party. They were sitting in darkness, waiting for something to finish cooking in the oven, when Bill turned to Sommer and said, in answer to her suggestion that she enroll in Ohio University, “I could join the Air Force.”

There was silence then. Sommer blinked at Bill, and he tried to figure out why he had suggested it. But the idea was out there now, between them, blooming in their minds, and it could not be taken back. Now that he had said it, everything began taking shape. Because of our Army buddy we both knew the addresses of the recruiting stations. Bill even had a business card with the phone number of Technical Sargent Van Buskurk, Air Force recruiting
officer for Clark County, Ohio. While he was in the Air Force Bill would have a respectable job and a place to live, and when he got out there would be money for college. They fantasized that since Sommer’s father worked at Wright Patterson Air Force Base, Bill would also gain the approval of her parents, and they could get married. In the darkness of my parents’ kitchen, lying on the floor, all these things began falling into place. And when I finally rose from my bed and made my way back to the party, this is what Bill told me: “I’m going to join the Air Force.”

I laughed because Bill’s relationship with the armed forces, like mine, had always been ironic. We had pretended to respect the Army for the sake of our friend who enlisted, but we had spent long hours making fun of service men, their humorless gait and their constipated faces. Nevertheless, Sommer quietly prodded Bill toward the Air Force, and the June after we graduated he called Technical Sargent Van Buskurk and said, “I’ve smoked pot. Can I still join the Air Force?” Bill enlisted in the deferred enrollment program and left for basic training the January after we graduated. In the meantime, he moved into his godfather’s attic and worked at a local plastics factory.

I left for Hiram College, and everything changed. We still came together during inter-term breaks, and we filled the time with more pot and booze. But drugs make cheap glue for holding together relationships, and by the end of my first year at Hiram I could feel the distance between us. One weekend when I’d driven the four hours for a spontaneous reunion, Bill delivered more shocking news: “I was baptized at Sommer’s church,” he said. I had grown up a Methodist in the loosest sense of the word, and during late night pseudo-intellectual conversations Bill and I had always made fun of religious people. But Sommer’s parents were devout Baptists at the biggest church in Fairborn, Ohio. And as he stood in that church wearing cotton bloomers, shivering in the cool air, Bill said he had been afraid. But when the minister pushed him into the water he had a moment of religious ecstasy, and he
felt the warm hand of God.

“Bullshit,” I said. But he swore to it. He had felt something profound during that ritual. The Bill I had known in high school would have scoffed with me, but this Bill merely nodded solemnly. We walked the rest of the way in silence.

To make matters worse, if I was losing Bill I was also losing Sommer. They had spent that whole year with only each other, until they were thinking, as couples will, like a single unit. While I was a full time scholarship boy living in a separate world four hours to the north, Sommer took courses at a local community college, and Bill was making more than $1800 a month and spending all of it. I had no job, and my parents were paying for whatever I couldn’t. I was worrying about things like fitting in, and whether to major in Theatre or Math, while Bill was worried about how to take Sommer with him when the Air Force finally delivered his station assignment. From basic training Bill sent Sommer a letter asking her to marry him. But Sommer was only nineteen, and she was also the only girl in her family. Her parents warned her that if she married Bill they would refuse to pay for her college, which was the closest they could come to forbidding the marriage. Sommer, always independently minded, immediately sent Bill a letter saying that she would be happy to marry him. The ceremony was in Sommer’s parents’ church, where Bill’s strange baptism had occurred. It was the summer after my first year at Hiram.

I was the best man, which meant that the grandmothers felt safe communicating their worried disapproval through me. “Bill is a nice boy,” they said one by one, nodding and patting my arm. “But they’re just so young.” I agreed with every one of these matrons. Bill and Sommer were too young. On one hand they were my best friends, but on the other they were officially becoming an official family of their own. I wanted to tell them it was reckless but I also wanted to see if they could do it. Their honeymoon would be the cross-country trip to Las Vegas, Nevada, where Bill had been stationed at Nellis Air Force Base. They would
leave two days after the wedding in a car given by Bill’s grandparents.

Later, Bill told me discreet facts about the honeymoon. Outside a town called Moline River, he began singing songs using the town’s name. Sommer laughed at first, but his singing was relentless. He said he couldn’t stop, not even when Sommer started bawling. In Las Vegas they were given temporary military housing in a concrete room built like a bunker. It was empty except for two slim single beds separated by a night stand. To escape this tiny room Bill and Sommer ventured into the city, hoping to take in the sights of their new hometown, and they got lost trying to find their way back. They argued. Only later that night, lying in their separate beds, did Bill understand exactly what they had done, and exactly where they were. Only then was the apprehension replaced by fear. Sommer began weeping. “I miss my mother,” she said.

“Do you want me to take you home?” Bill asked. They lay in the dark then. Sommer’s weeping gradually subsided, and they were silent.

I had expected it to be hot, like Vegas was every other time I had visited—hot and dry. But by the time I stepped off the plane it was a chilly Christmas night. Bill was sprawled in an airport chair, worn out from days of packing and worrying. Though he had been working hard, the weariness in him came less from physical labor than from missing his wife and child. Their daughter Eleanor had been born during the third year of Bill’s four year term of service in the Air Force, and the family had rarely been apart. But Sommer had gone to Ohio in order to find living accommodations and a job so she could support them while Bill studied for a degree in divinity, and Bill was left to tie up loose ends, finish packing, and arrange for me to come help.

I had a chance to study Bill because he had nodded off sitting in one of the uncomfortable airport lounge chairs. The strain of the last few days was apparent in the dark
circles under his eyes and the way his arms dangled from the chair like salamis hanging in the window of a butcher’s shop. Clutching my two bags and grinning like an idiot, I waited for him to notice me.

Finally, Bill opened his eyes and jumped to his feet. His face came briefly alive with a smile of relief, and we exchanged an awkward hug before he grabbed one of my bags and began leading me down the concourse. We made small talk about the flight, about the number of people flying on Christmas day, about Las Vegas’s popularity with tourists. We were feeling each other out. After spending so many years apart, there was pressure now to reestablish the old friendship. We both knew we were different people, but we didn’t know how different. I had graduated from Hiram College with a degree in English and Theatre Arts, and for some reason I’d decided to take a year off. For lack of anything better to do, I had followed my girlfriend to Iowa State University, where she was studying for her master’s degree. I was working the night shift at a local copy store, wearing the same powder blue shirt and khaki slacks every night, until the crotch wore out and the shirt had a brown stain around the collar. I’d spent the last three months watching crowds of fraternity boys and sorority girls flock to bars, huddle in groups, even beat one another in the streets. My body was reeling from reversing my sleep schedule, so that I always felt tired. I was sending applications to various graduate programs, but I was filled with doubt about being admitted to any of them. Back when I had just graduated from college, before I really understood what I was getting into, people used to ask what my plans were, and I would tell them I planned to lie in the mud and wriggle around until I sank deeper, deeper down like the worm I was.

So as grateful as Bill tells me he is that I have come to help him move, as we leave the terminal and head to his car I tell Bill that I am more grateful for the chance to have an adventure. I am still new enough to cross-country travel that it feels adventurous, no matter how much work is involved. And there is a substantial amount of work involved in this
particular adventure. Bill has spared me the more difficult details. I know only that together, before New Year’s Eve, we will have moved everything across the continent in a Ryder truck. “Everything” consists of his chocolate Labrador named Hobbes, furniture, some wall hangings, many boxes of books, and two cats. Or maybe just one cat.

All that I know about Las Vegas I have learned from Hunter S. Thompson, who portrayed the city through a drug-soaked haze. In fact, it seems that Las Vegas has inspired an entire subgenre of literature devoted to brooding over America’s fastest growing city, the icon of greed. Although I have tried loaning them to him, Bill has never bothered to read these books. “This is my town,” he says as we maneuver through the night streets. “I’ve lived here four years now. I’ve raised a daughter here. I know where you can get a good steak, or a good shrimp cocktail.”

Yet building a life in a strange state, staying devoted to his wife Sommer, having a child with her, and supporting them while Sommer got her degree from UNLV—none of this has adequately prepared Bill for dealing with the cat. Bill’s chin is almost resting on the steering wheel with the weight of this problem. Until now, through all our small talk, we have not mentioned the cat. I have even avoided thinking about the cat, since I don’t want my judgment on this delicate matter to be too hasty. But the time has come. Bill sighs and begins speaking as if he’s picking up a conversation we’ve been having all night.

“If you don’t want to do it, I understand,” he says. “I feel awful even asking you.”

I tell Bill he’s just feeling guilty. I tell him we should go over the situation, examine it from all angles, before we decide what to do.

The cat’s name is Mortimer, but they call him Tabby. He’s a generic orange alley cat. The first time I saw Tabby was when my girlfriend and I visited Bill and Sommer in Vegas. He was peering at me over the top of his covered litter box. As soon as I approached Tabby, he spooked and became an orange blur, and disappeared. It turned into a game in which I
would hunt for Tabby and chase him until Sommer told me to stop.

Bill said that when they moved into a new apartment, and there was no furniture to hide behind, Tabby went crazy. He dashed from room to room, hunting for cover, and ended up literally climbing the walls before he found cover between Sommer’s ankles. She couldn’t walk or leave the apartment until Bill brought in a box that Tabby could hide behind. “We got him from an ad in the paper,” Bill explained. “Someone found him in the desert. I think the sun baked his brain.”

“As a kitten, he noodled,” Sommer once told me. She explained that noodling was when kittens lick your neck and knead your body. “It was cute—he would get right up in your ear and purr.” Sommer needed Tabby to help curb the fear and loneliness that began in that tiny room their first night in Las Vegas. Throughout those first months she depended on Tabby as much as he depended on her. He was their baby; they would both cuddle and talk with him, and in return he would noodle them. Eventually his affections settled on Sommer. He became her cat, and he regularly fled from Bill.

But things changed with the birth of their daughter. “Ever since Eleanor was born, Tabby has acted weird,” says Bill as we leave the highway. We cruise to a stop on the exit ramp, and Bill turns to me. “He won’t stop meowing.” There is strange gravity in Bill’s words. To illustrate his point, he spends the next few minutes, bathed in the red glow of the stoplight, meowing at me. My shoulders tighten, my hands curl into fists, but he keeps at it. It’s an eerie noise. The light turns green, but Bill does not look away. He keeps meowing. Someone behind us honks, and finally Bill falls silent, puts the car in gear, and pulls into a lane. “Imagine it—every single day, nonstop. When you’re eating dinner. At night when you’re trying to sleep.” In the pale yellow of the security lamps, Bill looks haunted. He starts meowing again, softly.

“I understand,” I say to shut him up. “But why is Tabby meowing? What does he
want?” He wants out, replies Bill. And when he’s out, Tabby wants in. When you’re outside with him he follows you, meowing.

“Tabby’s just not happy,” Bill tells me. “The only time he sleeps is in the neighbors’ shed. Isn’t that weird? They don’t mind, but I don’t think they like it, either.” Bill has begun thinking about the situation like a parent. With so much inexplicable behavior, how can he trust Tabby around his child? The cat has claws. Tabby scratched Bill once when he picked him up. For Bill, the situation has come down to a simple choice: the cat or the baby. So there’s really no choice at all. We have to return Tabby to where he came from, says Bill. We have to take him into the desert.

“Why can’t we just drop him at the pound?” I ask. Bill protests: there isn’t enough time; they’re already overburdened; they’ll just put the cat to sleep anyway, and at least he’ll have a chance in the desert. It’s this last point about someone putting Tabby to sleep that seems to bother Bill the most. Despite the fact that he can no longer stand the cat, I don’t think Bill likes imagining Tabby dead. They have that kind of relationship.

“I’ve tried everything I know to make the cat happy, but I can’t do it. It’s beyond me,” Bill confesses, slouching against the wheel. But killing the cat? Leaving Tabby to die in the desert, that’s the answer? Bill slumps further in his seat. “You’re right. We should just take him with us. Maybe he’ll be happy in Ohio,” says Bill. But I can tell he doesn’t mean it. He’s trying to overcome his ambivalence, to convince himself that Ohio will cure Tabby, but he’s not even convincing me. Bill is a good judge of things, and if he says that Tabby isn’t ever going to shut up, then Tabby won’t ever shut up.

At Muskingham, Bill will study to be a minister. He will have to learn how to navigate moral concerns much larger than how to deal with a cat. I begin to see this as a test of Bill’s powers. If he passes this test, I think, it will be proof that he has the moral faculties to serve as a spiritual guide. What I don’t know is that, to Bill, Tabby has become like our
high school graduation: Bill is aware that something must be done with Tabby, but he is incapable of deciding what. When I suggest that we could simply abandon Tabby, Bill shrugs and resigns himself to deciding what should be done when the time comes.

But I have begun involving myself in the plot. I envision climbing into the truck and driving away, watching Tabby in the rearview mirror. He is standing at the front door, his tail swishing the dry air, his mouth open in one continuous meow.

Tabby’s meowing is truly terrible. Worse than the meowing, however, is the desperation with which the animal moves. He slinks behind me as I walk around the house. Any time I go near the door, he is there, furtively eyeing me, meowing. Whenever I carry something to the truck he stands meowing on the porch, and then he follows me inside, fleeing ahead, watching me suspiciously over his shoulder, meowing, and each time the door is closed he meows until it is opened. When the door is shut, and Bill and I are resting with ice water, in the silence we hear Tabby from the front porch, meowing.

When I try to comfort him, he runs. When I offer cat treats, he watches me skeptically until he has them in his mouth, and then he runs. When I try calling his names—both Tabby and Mortimer—I speak in soothing tones until he flees. There is no doubt that Tabby wants something, but what he wants is a mystery hidden in his deranged meowing. My head spins with trying to figure out what Tabby is trying to tell us. Bill, on the other hand, has grown numb. He sips ice water and doesn’t seem to hear the meowing.

They have another cat, Tika, the one Bill wants to bring to Ohio. She is the polar opposite of Tabby. Tika has never lived in the desert—a friend gave her to Bill, and by the looks of things, she has never suffered for anything. They call her Orca after the killer whale, both because of her coloring and her immensity. Yet for all her weight, Tika is peculiarly dainty. “She has a big, beautiful body, and she struts it everywhere,” says Bill. “And she hates
being called Orca.” He’s right, too; Tika saunters away from me when I call her Orca. She pads into the backyard and lies in the grass, rolls on her back to expose her belly to the Las Vegas sun, which seems to shine just for her. Tika’s meows are rare, and they are always directed toward the same things: the sun or the grass or food. She is the essence of catness. Meanwhile, Tabby slinks through the shadow of the shed, peeks around the corner, and bolts into the neighbor’s yard. Bill’s Labrador Hobbes presides over everything with indifference. His only concern has been that we leave a blanket on the hardwood floor for him to sleep on. He has slept through all our moving. Bill and I finish our water and continue packing.

We have been working almost nonstop for two days. It’s December 27th, a Sunday. This morning Bill took me to his church and shared fond farewells with more of his friends. He says that he would like to be the reverend of such a church some day. The sermon is a good one, though it offers no insight about what to do with Tabby.

Nevertheless, meeting Bill’s friends, hearing them say goodbye, brings me closer to him. It’s a reminder of my real reasons for coming to Las Vegas, and it heartens me in a way the previous day did not. After church we have a long conversation over breakfast. I tell Bill about studying for an English degree, and he tells me about noninvasive engine diagnostics, his career for the last four years. Our conversation continues all day long, and by evening when we have broken out the ammonia and are gagging on the fumes we are able to laugh it off in the spirit of comradery. We don’t even need alcohol to feel close to each other. We decide to celebrate by having one last buffet dinner on the strip.

As we leave the house, Tabby is curiously silent. He is, in fact, nowhere to be found. Bill grabs my arm. “The cat went into the truck,” he says, pointing at the open back door of the moving truck. It is dusk, and I can’t see anything in the shadows. “Are you sure?” I ask. I’m ravenous after a full day’s work, and moreover, the moving truck has nearly as much floor space as my first apartment; if Tabby did go in there, we’re not going to find him
tonight. I imagine the buffet, waiting. “It’s dark,” I tell Bill. “You were seeing things.”

But Bill is adamant. He saw Tabby jump into the truck. “So what if he did jump in?” I demand. “We can leave the door open and go to dinner, and if Tabby is in there, he’ll come out while we’re gone.”

“What if he’s not in there, and we leave it open, and he jumps in while we’re gone?” asks Bill. He has climbed into the truck and is crawling over shelves and chairs, disappearing into the shadows. He begins calling to Tabby, but there is no response. If Tabby’s in there, he’s not giving himself up. Another ten minutes pass, in which Bill gets a flashlight and rummages behind boxes and under tables, before he finally agrees to my plan. We will go to dinner, we will leave the door open, and we will put dumb faith in the fact that, if Tabby’s in there, surely he will come out.

Bill has established a fairly loose itinerary with only one firm requirement: we leave the moment after we pass the Air Force housing inspection Monday morning and arrive in Ohio early the morning of the thirty-first, so that Bill can ring in the New Year with his family and then move to New Concorde before the start of winter term at Muskingham. December thirtieth is Wednesday, giving us roughly seventy-two hours to travel nearly two thousand miles from Las Vegas to Sommer’s parents’ house in Medway, Ohio. Our strategy is simple: stick to the southern states to avoid snow, eat very little, and spend every waking moment driving. We will do all of this, of course, after settling the matter of the cat.

We barely pass the inspection. Bill has restricted me to the lawn, beside the hitch we’ll use to tow his car behind the truck, because he’s sick of me being bossy. I’d decided that, since this move is proving emotionally difficult for Bill, he needs me to take charge and decide how things should get done. We have bickered almost constantly about where boxes should go, when the bed should be loaded, what order the house should be cleaned in. At one
point, citing a bottle of wine we forgot in the freezer and some dust on the bottom of the cupboards, the inspector begins to reschedule for the following day. Bill pleads with her, describing his wife and daughter in Ohio, his strict schedule and the pressing need for him to be in Ohio three days from now. By the time he is through with the inspector, she has picked up a sponge and is helping him scrub under the cabinet shelves. Bill has a way with people, I think when he tells me the good news—he’ll make an excellent minister.

It is then that I remember the cat, for Bill has never decided what to do about Tabby. In fact, I realize I haven’t seen Tabby all morning. I mention this to Bill, and he looks worried for a moment. “Should we wait for him?” asks Bill. Even to me it sounds preposterous, wasting time by waiting for a cat we considered abandoning in the desert. It’s better to believe that Tabby found a home, or that he sensed we were leaving and took off alone.

Thus Bill and I sit beside each other in the cab sharing weary congratulations. Framed by the dashboard and the truck’s ceiling are the barbed wire fence surrounding Nellis, the brown desert, and the Sierra Nevada Mountains, all hovering above the instrument panel. “Get used to this,” says Bill, tapping the dash. “This is our world for the next three days.” He guns the engine, and as we pull away from the curb I wish Tabby good luck.

The truck cab holds me, Bill, and his Labrador Hobbes, who has curled up on the bench between us. It’s cozy at first, and we spend the morning stroking Hobbes and telling each other how good it feels to finally be on the road. It’s not until our second stop for gas that the inevitable comes to light. Bill is standing, bored, as gas pours into the truck’s cavernous tank, and I’m listening to the gas slosh around, when I notice that Bill has his ear on the side wall. “He’s in there,” Bill says. “I can hear him meowing.”

I tell Bill that he’s imagining things. “Come here,” he says. “Listen to that.” I put my ear to the side of the truck, and I hear children shouting to each other in the gas station parking lot, the steady hum of traffic on the highway and the wind rustling through New
Mexico sage brush. I hear, beneath all these sounds, what might be a cat meowing.

“I don’t hear anything,” I say with a calculated shrug. I offer to finish pumping the gas if Bill wants to look and see that I’m right. He runs to the back and hoists up the door, and when I return from paying for the gas, I see Bill standing at the back of the truck yelling Tabby’s name. Suddenly he is silent, eyes widening. “He’s in here, Paul,” shouts Bill. “I hear him meowing. He’s trapped beneath the couch.”

“Are you sure it’s him?” I holler.

“I know what the damned cat sounds like,” Bill yells. He scrambles over to me and looks down, certainty in his eyes. “He must have crawled under the couch, and the leg gave out—the leg is always giving out on that couch. I meant to get it fixed, but I never got to it.”

Cars have pulled into the gas station. Tourists wait in line for gas, and our huge moving truck is blocking two pumps. I think quickly. “We have two options. We can pull the truck into that parking lot, unhitch the car, unload everything, rescue the cat, and then reload everything. This will take at least the rest of today,” I say. Then I breathe deep and, avoiding Bill’s eyes, I supply the second option. “Or we could just leave him there.”

Bill weighs the options. “That’s my cat, Paul. We can’t just leave him in the truck to die,” he finally says, looking me in the eye. The time has come to decide what must be done about Tabby. And I can see Bill deciding that we have to dig him out.

“You said that you need to get home by New Year’s Eve,” I remind him. I keep talking but I don’t know who I’m trying to convince. “If we rescue the cat we’ll lose at least one day of travel.” The truck will not go more than seventy miles per hour, and we’re lucky if we can nudge it above sixty. New Mexico has become a series of long, rolling hills, and the truck bogs down on most of them. We are losing time. We have already discussed, half jokingly, how New Mexico’s rolling hills might last forever, how the state might just go on and on. Suddenly this feels like a reality. I can tell that Bill is thinking about this. He’s
considering wasting a whole day rescuing the cat he once wanted to abandon. Behind me, a car politely toots its horn.

“We’ll settle this later,” he says. “For now, we’d better get going.”

It takes several hours of driving in silence before Bill turns to me and speaks what we have both been thinking. “That cat is going to die back there,” he says. There is crazy joy behind his words. For it’s clear that Bill has decided what needs to be done about Tabby. We are both fully aware of what needs to be done. We must pull over, get a hotel room, and dig him out of the truck. But it’s also clear that we have decided not to do this.

My mind spins with excuses for why we don’t. There is our schedule, and there’s the desert heat we would have to work in. Besides, it’s only an animal. People run over animals all the time—I’ve already counted two dead creatures along the roadside since we realized that the cat is back there. The cat is just one more piece of road kill.

Despite all this, we’re driving on the other side of moral correctness, and we know it because the cat is not yet dead. It’s a stupid, annoying, desperate, helpless creature back there, and it has gotten itself into trouble, and our job is to get it back out of trouble. And we’re not doing our job.

This awareness of our failure drives us both into silence. We are exceedingly polite to each other, and we take special care with Hobbes. When we stop for gas we check on Tika, riding behind us in the car we’re towing, the one given to Bill by his grandparents. We make sure Tika has plenty of food and water. We pet her and reassure her that she’ll be home soon. Throughout the rest of the day we avoid mentioning Tabby, except for the moment of relief here or there when one of us will look at the other and say, “That cat is going to die back there.” Sometimes we grin while we say it. Sometimes we say it solemnly, and sometimes we just look at each other without saying it at all. But there’s never a moment when we aren’t acutely aware of it happening right there behind us, of the lack of air or food or water, of the
heat in the southern states and the bitter cold as we head north. By evening the strain is showing. I begin to complain about the dog’s presence in the truck cab. Hobbes is lying in front of me, so that I have to stretch my legs awkwardly over him, and my back has been cramping. But Bill refuses to put the dog in the car behind us—“That’s my dog, Paul, I’m not going to leave him in the car,” he shouts. “What’s the difference? You’re leaving the damned cat to die,” I shout back. We end up pounding on the dash board. Bill avoids discussing the cat, instead rekindling this morning’s disagreements, and we argue more strenuously about them than we originally did. Soon we’re both shouting just to be shouting, trying to uncoil our jangled nerves, and we declare a truce only when we realize that we’ll have to sleep in the same room.

When we are settled in our hotel room, I turn my back to Bill and jam the covers up to my neck. Our first long day of travel ends with us never having reached the other side of New Mexico.

The next day we eat breakfast at a Denny’s where a hunched man sits in a wheelchair. He holds a cup and a sign that describes why he is in the wheelchair, and Bill and I each drop in a wadded dollar bill. Back in the truck cab, we awkwardly apologize to each other. We talk about the man in Denny’s, and how it’s good to give charity to people who really need it. We become satisfied with ourselves in a way that we could not yesterday. It’s a simplistic trick of cognitive dissonance, making up for the sin of the cat with some pocket change for a cripple, but we are already road-weary enough that it works. We become two old friends again, crossing the country together, talking amiably and getting reacquainted.

The cat still matters, but it has also become our private joke. Throughout the day, whenever I think about the cat, I find myself laughing. I keep saying, “Hey Bill. That cat is dead back there.” Then we both laugh. Our mood further brightens when we leave New Mexico and enter Texas. We discuss Texas’s anti-littering slogan—“Don’t mess with
Texas”—in terms of rhyme, meter, and balls-out toughness. When Bill’s throat begins getting sore, this too becomes a joke. Bill buys wild cherry cough drops and in our delirium the phrase “wild cherry” is enough to keep us laughing across seventy miles of Texas. Because of Bill’s cold, he drinks bottle after bottle of water, and since we are resolved to stop for nothing but gas, I hold the steering wheel while Bill pisses into a one-liter Mountain Dew bottle. In this way we pass through Texas and Oklahoma, finally coming to rest somewhere outside a town called Joplin, and every time we pour the Mountain Dew bottle out the window, we declare, “Texas, we love you so much we’re giving you this golden shower. Mess with that.”

We have been charmed by the road, by making jokes and telling stories and dumping our piss out the window because something about traveling across the country on an honest to God road trip seems to demand sacrifices like pissing in plastic bottles and eating the last clump of fried okra under some gas station heating lamps in Oklahoma because you’ve finally settled into that driving rhythm, and you’ll be damned if you’re going to break the rhythm to stop at another Denny’s or Waffle House. The fraternity party atmosphere in the truck endures the whole day, and by night we pull into the next hotel, drunk on becoming friends again.

In the morning we decide to unhitch the car so we can drive somewhere for breakfast. But we are back in the northern states now, with just Missouri, Illinois, Indiana, and a sliver of Ohio between us and home. It is bitter cold. Snow dusts the parking lot, and people are piled deep within their winter clothes. Bill’s thin blood, accustomed to the heat of the desert, leaves him shivering helplessly, and his cold has him hacking. And his car’s desert battery has died.

The man who helps us jump the car turns out to work for the hotel. He shovels the parking lot and makes sure the yellow lines are clearly visible. He seems to like talking with us about Bill’s exotic license plates and his time in the Air Force. When Bill tells the man
that he’s going to Ohio to study divinity at Muskingham College, the man seems deeply pleased. He jumps the car battery, vigorously shakes our hands, and asks God’s blessing for us. Bill asks God’s blessing for the man, and when we have finally returned from eating breakfast, re-hitched the car to the truck, and we are pulling out of the parking lot, the man, warming up in his own car, honks and waves.

Throughout our journey we meet other people like this: the group of bearded men who help us maneuver the enormous moving truck when we make a wrong turn and jackknife the car trailer behind their fire station; the old couple who chat with Bill one evening when we stop for dinner; the hotel clerk who gave us a reduced rate last night and overlooked Hobbes. Bill is the source of all this good cheer, for he is by all appearances a wholesome American, a service man returning home to study to become a minister.

I wonder what any of them would say if they knew about the cat.

I hear them clucking disapproval. Each of them would surely arrive at the same moral prerogative we did: we should save the cat. I can’t think of a single excuse for why we don’t that wouldn’t make us sound like assholes. All I could do is agree, and shrug, and get back in the truck and drive.

For today the question of the cat is academic. We turn our attention outward, watching the drab day slide by. The gray sheet of clouds is new for Bill, as is the snow, and the spindly arms of the maple and elm trees. After yesterday it feels like we have nothing left to say. We listen to the radio, to the wind whistling by the truck, and we only chuckle when we give golden showers to Missouri, Illinois, and Indiana. Toward evening we discuss a novel we decide we’ll write together some day.

We enter the state of Illinois in silence, as the sun sets on a day it never really rose for. Behind us, sharing our silence, is our private Skinner box, an experiment whose conclusion we are both afraid to know—a death sentence for our past, carried out on an innocent, stupid
creature whose only crime was desperately wanting something he couldn’t quite make clear.

We manage to get home just under the wire, in terms of Bill’s itinerary. At two in the
morning on December 31st, 1998, I hug Bill goodnight when he drops me off near my
parents’ house. Just before we part, as he is about to drive on to see his wife and daughter, I
tell Bill to let me know what happens with the cat. He promises he will.

From what Bill told me during that phone call, and subsequent conversations with Sommer, I
have worked out the following details. Bill drove to Sommer’s parents’ house after dropping
me off. He woke Sommer up and told her everything about the cat, in vivid detail. The one
thing he kept repeating was that Tabby was surely dead in there. As far as Bill could tell, the
cat had crawled into the moving truck Sunday evening before we went to dinner. He had
remained in there, without nourishment or protection from the elements, for more than three
days. If he hadn’t starved or frozen to death, some piece of furniture had probably crushed
him. The smell was going to be terrible.

Sommer opened the back door of the truck anyway, and she started calling Tabby’s
name. Only she used his real name. “Mortimer,” she called. And barreling out of the darkness
came Tabby, his body slamming into Sommer’s. She said he was frantic. She said he sat in
the litter box for at least five minutes. She said he ate and drank for another ten minutes. She
said he hadn’t pooped or peed in the truck at all.

I guess this shouldn’t be much of a surprise. Tabby was back there only four days,
from December 27th until the 31st. It occurred to me at some point that he might survive
without food or water for four days. I’ve heard of humans lasting two weeks without water.
But in the cab of that moving truck, time felt different from how it usually does. Those four
days were a sort of epoch. Tabby could have died during any one of those days, and decayed
during the next. I wouldn’t have been surprised to find a mound of powder back there.
I got into graduate school, and Bill is at the top of his class. He plans to eventually attend the University of Chicago for philosophy. We have kept in touch. In fact, every New Year’s Eve since that night we have gotten together. There is usually liquor, but first there is conversation.

That first New Year’s Eve on the night Bill and I returned, we all gathered at a local restaurant. Our high school friend who had enlisted in the Army was there. He had been home for a year and was working night security at a local Honda factory. All he said about the Army was that he was happy to be out. He was quiet now. He laughed at the same jokes, but he seemed to be laughing out of obligation. Bill and I toasted Tabby with cheap sangria and tried to tell everyone the story. They laughed, which was part of the reaction we were looking for. But the other part of the story they seemed to completely miss. Our Army friend left dinner early. He hasn’t joined us for any New Year’s celebrations since then.

Bill moved to Muskingham and started classes a few days after that. They left Tabby on the farm with Sommer’s parents, where he became a barn cat and, for once, could come and go as he pleased. Tabby still spooked whenever strangers came around, but in two weeks Sommer’s parents said that he was warming up. He actually approached them meowing to be petted. Then, two weeks after that, when Bill’s classes were well under way and I was back in Iowa working at the copy center, Tabby disappeared altogether. No body was found.

Though we don’t talk about Tabby anymore, I’m sure we still think of him sometimes. I know I do. And once in a while Sommer mentions that part of her wishes they had brought Tabby to New Concorde. Then Tika would have someone to play with besides the baby, who pulls her tail and insults her with nicknames like Little Symba. But I don’t think Tabby is coming back. If he’s out there, he’s probably just at the periphery of people’s vision. He’s stalking along the edges of everything, and I suppose if I’m listening, and it’s
otherwise very quiet, and I’m in just the right frame of mind, I might hear what could be a cat meowing. I do not, however, do this. I stay inside. I turn on the lights and make some noise. And if I catch the orange blur in the corner of my eye, I think my best choice is to ignore it. It will endure without my attention, despite my plans, and if it is out there now, it will very probably be out there forever.
THE STORIES
Ray Carver and the Inimitable Impulse

Sometime during the summer is when things finally started coming for Ray Carver. He would never have suspected summer as the culprit of his fortune, since summer had so long acted as the culprit of his misfortune. But here he was, with the letter in his hand, and there was no denying. This was a moment, all right. This moment resonated with such a low frequency that when it rattled the windows, only dogs could hear. The ripples began spreading into the world with the first sound the envelope made as his fingers tore it apart, and those ripples are still singing in the bones and blood of us all. The moment rightfully belonged to everyone, and had he known what would happen in the years that followed, he would have been perfectly willing to share it. But there was nobody in the house that afternoon, his children having been sent to the backyard, and so he gobbled the moment alone.

The house was hot. Sweat pooled on his forehead and dripped in great splotches all over the letter, and he waited for the ink to run, waited for the letter to be soaked in his sweat and for all the ink to bleed away and for life to return to what it had been before the mailman brought this unbelievable letter, with its unbelievable fantasy.

To Ray Carver, from Esquire. “We love it. We’re going to publish it. We’ll call with details. Gordon Lish, Fiction Editor.” The handwriting was a series of pinched loops and long stalks, nearly unreadable. He read it five times before he understood everything that it meant.

In the mind of Teague Holloway, lying on his couch this and every other afternoon, that’s how he imagined the scene. Ray Carver lying deadlocked on his own couch, waiting for the mailman to deliver that letter, that moment, which changed the down and out writer’s life forever. One second Ray Carver was just another nobody, and the next he was on his way to glory. Teague could understand Carver’s hunger for that moment. Teague could relate. The
television going in the background, Carver’s mind dulled by the noise as he waited, and
waited, watching soap opera men and women with no more pressing worries than who was
cheating on whom. Whenever Teague thought about the people who wrote that crap, he felt
contempt rise like bile in his throat. In silent protest now he tried not to watch.

Rather, he paid most of his attention to the mailman. Teague and the mailman had
developed a relationship, a kind of romance gone sour with age. He sat whole afternoons like
this, draped across his couch in the dim pool of afternoon sunlight, waiting. He considered in
turn each piece of old furniture, the steamer trunk serving as a coffee stand, the television
teetering on a card table, the drooping hibiscus glowering from the window sill. He sighed
and shifted uncomfortably at the power of his body’s stink. He resolved to shower as soon as
the mailman came. After that he might look for another job. Teague peeked through the
curtains and glared at the empty street. “You’re late,” he said to the window. Just like every
other afternoon.

Maybe today is my day, he thought anyway. And still he couldn’t move.

When the mailman finally trod up the porch steps, Teague pretended not to notice. He
wouldn’t give that bastard the satisfaction. He drew shut the drapes and stared at the
television. “You’re usually here by three but it’s nearly four,” he mumbled without moving
his lips. “Who have you been with?” Outside on the porch the mailman shuffled through his
mailbag, oblivious of Teague.

Whether in sunshine or storms, the mailman wore a safari pith helmet. Teague
supposed it kept off all kinds of weather, but still, a pith helmet was a strange thing to wear in
the suburbs. It seemed a little indecent. Teague wondered whether he should say something
about the pith helmet today. He had been hitting bourbon since noon, so that the children
would have smelled it on him and would have known to drift to the backyard and stay there,
if Teague had had children. By four he was ready to say something to the mailman because
the bastard was late again, and the cocky son of a bitch wore a pith helmet for god’s sake, as if the neighborhood poodles were stalking him through the shrubbery and he needed protection. He intended to ask whether the mailman planned to start carrying a machete. But there wasn’t time for any of that when he saw the envelope among the stack of mail that the mailman was shoving through the slot in the door because something about the envelope caught his eye.

It was necessary to think of it this way, as the envelope catching his eye, even though there was nothing extraordinary about the envelope itself. It was white like the others, with a few brown smudges where someone—probably Mailman the Explorer—had stepped on it, and it could easily have held another bill, like the others stacked with it. Visa, cable, electric. But when the slot in his front door opened, and the mailman pushed in the stack of four envelopes and the Fingerhut catalogue, and the catalogue slopped to the floor while the four envelopes fluttered after it, something about that particular white one with the smudge, a perfect rectangle compared to the misshapen envelopes full of bills he usually received, with a crease down the middle where it had been folded, caught his eye. Teague grabbed it and quickly returned to the couch.

The handwriting on the envelope’s face was his own. He had affixed that stamp himself, on this very couch, six months before. He thought there was something exciting about having sent this envelope into the world and having it return to him, well traveled, a little more worldly. Proof that there really was a world outside his dingy apartment, with real people doing real jobs, and real magazine headquarters. In the corner he had written Esquire, which was Teague’s code indicating that this was the self-addressed, stamped envelope he’d included with his submission to that magazine. Teague’s hands were tingling. His fingers were numb. He clawed open the envelope, careful not to tear the letter inside, and began to read. He was shaking. His heart thumped in his chest.
To Teague Holloway, from Esquire. “We thought it was okay. Not what we’re looking for right now. Keep trying. Adrienne Miller, Literary Editor.” The handwriting was scrawled across the white rectangle of paper, a little messy but eminently readable. Jotted quickly, large enough alone to fill the top half of the page, leaving the bottom half empty except for the closing, the signature.

Of course the story was rejected. Teague’s mind began spinning through the details. It had been some nonsense about his first girlfriend from college and their manipulative relationship. That was the problem—people were sick of reading about relationships. In fact, people didn’t really have relationships anymore. The modern world was made of solitary individuals, and Teague’s writing had better start reflecting that if it was ever going to be published.

He realized that he was pacing, and though his heart was thumping in his chest, Teague’s fingers suddenly felt cold instead of numb. He collapsed onto the couch and tucked his fingers under his legs for warmth, moved them to his armpits. He lay back and stared at the ceiling. His one indulgence: he began to cry.

He cried when he submitted something to a magazine or journal. He cried weeks after he had submitted, when he awoke terrified with the knowledge that he had mistyped his address, had forgotten the SASE, had left out the last page of the story. He cried when he finished typing a story. He cried in the middle of typing. Sometimes, he cried because he was crying.

Teague gripped the edges of the couch and stared at the ceiling. He was in the middle of the ocean, his couch a raft, and the storm was just ending. All he wanted was to stay there, keep balanced and afloat. Outside it had gotten dark. A draft blowing from the window made him shiver, but he dare not move to grab the blanket, lest his raft tip. Besides, he was too exhausted from crying to move.
Just then the phone rang. Teague shrank into himself, listening to it squall three more times before the answering machine clicked to life. He relaxed until he heard his brother’s voice. “I got your message, Teague. What’s this about you visiting for a while? Call me back.” Teague huddled on the couch, imagining his brother frowning into the telephone and then dropping it on the receiver. His brother standing in his home in the Pittsburgh suburbs, the children taking their places at the dinner table, his wife spooning food onto everyone’s plate. With equal dread Teague recalled the three-hour drive to Pennsylvania.

Just two days later the sky was sparkling blue, not faded or dusty or cloud-hazed like it had been all week. The sun shone brightly into his living room, and Teague drew back the curtains and threw open the windows. The summer breeze washed across his chest, and he breathed deeply of new-mown grass with a tang of car exhaust, and it smelled wonderful. He was invincible. His brain was filled with electricity, it surged through his head at dizzying speeds, synapses firing like lightning bolts. There was no problem that he couldn’t solve.

It had been two days since his brother had called asking whether Teague really intended to visit. He remembered the panicky phone call he had placed weeks before. He had babbled into his brother’s machine about losing his job as janitor of the night school, running out of money, crashing and burning and being evicted because he just couldn’t afford the rent anymore. What nonsense. Teague would have felt ashamed of himself for such an outburst, of course, if he didn’t feel so utterly right with the world. He would explain things to his brother, casually mention it when he called to wish his sister-in-law happy birthday. What, my earlier phone call? That was nothing, he’d say. I’m surprised you even took that seriously.

It had also been two days since the letter from Esquire, and Teague could only laugh at how badly he’d bungled that. Sure it was a rejection, but the important thing to remember was that it was a handwritten rejection. This was no form letter. Someone had taken a whole
minute, maybe several, to physically pick up a pen and write his name, and then the message, and then the signature. It meant one thing: they knew his name, they were watching him. Hell, they probably loved his work in general, but that particular story he’d submitted was the problem. There were too many love stories about college in the world. But the style—they had loved the style. This man has talent, this man can write. Let him down gently, in a way that says, Not this time buddy, but we know your name, we’ve got our eye on you.

Teague sat at his desk, pen in hand, and began scribbling notes for his next story. *Esquire* was going to love it. Hell, they were probably watching the mail right now, waiting to snatch up the next submission from Teague Holloway.

He reread the note, latching onto the name Adrienne Miller. It sounded continental yet domestic, French with a New England heart. He imagined she had fiery red hair, hard green eyes, and she read, when she enjoyed what she was reading, with a pencil eraser in the corner of her mouth, as she would read this piece. Teague considered including a pencil with the submission, to help get things going. Or maybe he should tease her a little, as she had teased him, tricky girl, holding the mail so long, making him wait five months (or more!) without an answer. Give them a taste of their own medicine. He would finish the piece next week, but wait a little while. Let Adrienne Miller squirm.

But of course, before he could really work on the story Teague would need a look at this Adrienne Miller. He would post her picture over his desk, perhaps next to the picture of Ray Carver, and watch it as he wrote. He was, after all, writing to her. He had this advantage over Carver: he knew to whom he was writing. Gordon Lish had been an accident, lucky to be sure, but nevertheless an accident in the life of Ray Carver. Adrienne Miller was no accident.

Teague flipped through his issues of *Esquire*, hunting for a picture of Adrienne Miller. There was none to be found. Surely, though, she was as he’d imagined. Fiery hair,
hard green eyes. He must have seen a picture of her, for this image in his mind was much too sharp to be an invention. So he would find another fiery-haired, green-eyed woman, tough, firm, and it would be close enough. He grabbed more magazines and started flipping.

He found her in an advertisement for coffee, sitting in an outdoor café, staring hard at a waiter who tried to offer her the house blend while she clutched her preferred flavor, Blue Hawaiian, in her left fist. This was the woman. Teague tore out the page and hunted for a pair of scissors. There were none in the kitchen where he kept the scissors, none in his bedroom, or on the coffee table. He opened the junk drawer and pulled out the familiar odds and ends: a green action figure with red eyes, a bag of foreign coins his grandmother had given him, some half-used Scotch tape dispensers, key chains, green coasters emblazoned with a winking Santa Clause, a Led Zeppelin tape, an old map of a local water park with expired coupons in the border. No fucking scissors. No problem. He was invincible, he could handle anything, everything. He would just drive to the drug store and pick some up.

This was Teague’s favorite solution for when he lost something. In this way he had accumulated five toenail clippers, three half-used containers of deodorant, and two copies of *The White Album* on cd. No problem at all. When he opened his front door, fishing around in his pockets for the car keys and—finding none—deciding to walk, only then did he notice the piece of paper taped to the door, with big red letters at the top: NOTICE OF EVICTION.

Teague knew that the first time Raymond Carver had declared bankruptcy, he needed to sell his car. Carver later wrote this story, and a host of others about that time in his life, and published each one in books with titles like *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* and *Will you Please Be Quiet, Please*. People struggling with bankruptcies, depression, down and out with something to say and no way of saying it. The kind of people referred to as “white trash.” These were Carver’s heroes not because he thought they should be, but
because he understood them best. He was one of them. Teague guessed that this fact must have hit him hardest the second time he declared bankruptcy.

And Gordon Lish, from his plush office at *Esquire* magazine, saw the opportunity to take the literary world slumming. Teague could respect Lish only this far; Lish had seen something new, an open field. The cosmopolitan elite hadn’t read about these kinds of people before. The literati were used to reading about one another. But what Lish knew was that they were also sick of reading about one another. Teague could understand that, too. He felt drenched in the same old scenery.

It was this *something new* that broke through the wall. Ray Carver, bankrupt twice over, married at nineteen, two children by twenty, the year 1958, working steadily, in short bursts, until Lish noticed him in 1977. Teague could do the math, and it worked out to nineteen years of suffering. Nineteen years of drinking hard, of lying on the couch, babysitting, waiting in laundromats for a drier to open up, working sawmill jobs, janitor jobs, delivery man jobs, service station jobs, stockroom boy jobs, but not a single writing job. Not until Lish, and 1977.

But Carver had had children and a wife to deal with, whereas Teague was alone. So without those obstacles, maybe he could shave off some years. Maybe he could even do it in half the time. Say, ten years.

Teague was running over all this in his mind as he pulled into the driveway of his brother’s house. It was what he would say when his brother delivered the inevitable question, eyeing the car packed full of boxes and clothing: “How long do you plan to stay?” Teague would talk about how he was working hard, as hard as Carver had worked, and he just needed a room for a little while, long enough to get back on his feet. Another job, like the janitorial stint he had quit before being evicted from his Cleveland apartment. Except he had told his brother he’d been fired from that job. The truth was he couldn’t bear working there anymore.
The last straw had been his boss, with the wheeze and the lazy eye, shoving a plunger at him, saying every toilet in the women’s bathroom was plugged, and then laughing over his shoulder at Teague as he left. He could have sworn he’d heard the boss mumble “Crybaby” just before the door slammed shut.

Of course it was wrong to quit, of course he had needed the money, but at least, he had thought, he would have more time to write. Teague hadn’t counted on getting evicted. The only place he could think to go was his brother’s. It wouldn’t be so bad this time. He would put away some money, would eventually be able to move back into his own place and continue scraping by until he hit big.

Everything would be okay. After all, Carver had bottomed out twice—his brother would laugh in disbelief at this, breaking the ice between them—declared bankruptcy twice before he finally made it. And boy, did Carver ever make it. Guggenheim fellowship, two grants from the NEA, and in 1983 the Strauss Living Award, which consisted of a $35,000 per year tax free stipend if he gave up all employment except writing. “He was actually forced to write for a living,” Teague would say. “How much more of a writer could you be?” They would both laugh, nodding agreeably. How much more of a writer indeed?

Ringing the doorbell, however, brought sudden constriction to Teague’s throat. Dry tongue, wet palms. He thought, this house with manicured lawns, this giant oak door with etched glass, this bell that sounds like silver chimes, these mark my brother’s success. He was on the verge of turning around when his sister-in-law’s severe face appeared at the door, momentarily softened by surprise. “Teague—what are you doing here?” He flapped his mouth at her, coughed, gestured at his car filled with boxes.

“Happy birthday,” he choked at last.

She frowned at the car, then glanced at him. “You’re a little late,” she said. “The party was last weekend.”
Teague nodded and stared at his feet. He began to cry. His sister-in-law stood a
moment, one hand over her throat, before stepping forward to hold him in a stiff, polite way,
a hug without elbows. “Are you all right?”

“What’s with the tie?” asked his brother. Teague glanced at the tie he’d thrown on in an
effort to impress. A man wearing a tie was together, he could handle setbacks. A man with a
tie would not be out of work for long.

“Aunt May gave it to me. It’s a Salvador Dali painting,” said Teague, sitting straight
in his chair. He felt like he was interviewing for a job. He crossed one leg. “It’s called The
Persistence of Memory.”

“What’s it mean? Why are the clocks melting?” asked his brother, taking a sip of
whisky. It was always Crown Royal, always with two ice cubes and a dash of filtered water.

“It’s about the unreliability of memory,” replied Teague. “How you can never
remember things precisely the way they were.”

His brother nodded, sipping. As soon as dinner was finished, Frank’s wife had
disappeared into the kitchen, where Teague could hear dishes clattering and water running.
The children had fled to the living room, from which came the drone of television
commercials. Teague shifted uncomfortably on his chair. He wondered how such thin,
gracefully carved legs didn’t snap under his weight. Everything in the living room was like
this—thin and graceful—except the massive mahogany table buffed to perfection, in which
Teague could see his brother’s reflection. The reflection absently ran its fingers through its
thinning hair and looked at Teague.

“Dali painted it during the Modernist era,” Teague went on. “After Einstein’s
revelation about the theory of relativity. So it’s also about how nothing is absolute anymore,
not even time. That’s why the clocks are melting.”
“Will there be a pop quiz?” asked his brother. Teague laughed, the noise of it hanging like a cloud around him. His brother blinked, unsmiling.

Teague saw the situation slipping. Frantic to get his brother to smile, to show them both that they could still relate to each other, he leaned forward and said, “In interviews Dali claimed the clocks were drooping because he couldn’t get it up.” Teague dangled a finger, grinning. His brother stiffened and glanced at the door into the other room, where the TV was going and Teague’s nephews were watching. He heard a cough from the doorway into the kitchen, saw his sister-in-law standing with crossed arms. “Sorry, Francis,” he said.

“Frank,” said his brother. “I’m Frank, not Francis. And watch your mouth around my children.”

Teague apologized again. Frank drummed his fingers on the table, considered his cuticles, took another sip from his dwindling glass. He drew his lips back from his teeth, closing his eyes in a moment of visible appreciation. “You want a whiskey?” he finally asked. Teague said he would love one.

He watched his brother rise and walk soundlessly across the plush carpeting to the oak liquor cabinet. On the cabinet was a set of stainless steel tools that appeared to be designed for torture. They sat next to a gleaming cocktail shaker and a glowing ice bucket.

“You can stay a month, maybe two,” Frank announced as he found another crystal highball. “I’m busy at work right now so I won’t be around much. We have a lot of projects coming due since it’s nearing the end of the quarter. I also have an interview at Wright State University coming up. Do you take ice?” Teague said he did, and cubes clattered into both glasses. He watched Frank add the dash of water without saying he hated whisky that way. “You could look over my assignment sheet, come to think of it. Check it for grammar and spelling.”

“What assignment sheet?” Teague asked, taking a sip of whisky and wincing at its
blandness. Carver was a notorious alcoholic, though he died of lung cancer. Teague didn’t smoke.

“They’ve asked me to design an assignment for a basic level engineering class. I’ll have to teach a couple sections if I get the job. It’s mostly a makeup course for students whose high schools didn’t have a good science department.”

Teague said, “I’d be happy to look it over.” He realized he could work off his room this way. Do chores, help his brother get the teaching job. Everyone would be better off for his presence. He would even keep the children entertained. This was going to work out fine.

They sipped their whisky in silence. Exaggerated springing and bonging noises came from the cartoons in the other room. Bugs Bunny’s nasal voice rang out. A shotgun blast followed, and then a moment of ironic music. Frank’s children laughed at the punchline.

“You can start looking for work tomorrow,” Frank said. He was slouched in his chair, his own tie loosened at the collar and dribbling down his chest.

“Sure. I have this story to finish up and send to Esquire, and I thought I’d really throw myself into finding a job after I get done with that.”

Frank glared at him. “You start looking tomorrow. You can write your stories after you’ve started making some money.”

Teague stiffened. He met his brother’s stare and squared his shoulders and said, firmly, “All right, sure.”

By day Teague delivered flower arrangements for a gaudy retailer called Flowerama. By night he avoided the dour looks of his nephews, who had been moved into a single room to accommodate him, and who would probably never forgive him. He didn’t need to avoid his sister-in-law’s looks, as she usually hovered in the doorway to the next room, watching him, skirting away when he glanced at her, or if caught, asking whether he wanted a coffee. That’s
how she said it: “A coffee.” Sometimes, in the evening, he sat typing at his computer. Mostly he lay on his oldest nephew’s bed, staring at the wallpaper’s repeating pattern of football players locked in a variety of collisions. He dangled one hand in his metal lock box, into which he had been dumping his weekly paychecks. The entire bottom of the box was covered by cash, even when he jiggled the bills to scatter them. A healthy sediment of money after only one month. Another month, and he might be able to fill the box enough to leave.

At work he drove the company van, which was huge and white and emblazoned with red roses. The boss was impressed with his spotless driving record, which Teague considered his only marketable skill. He could drive a truck all day without hitting anyone, or being hit. He listened to the radio and thought about his story. Great ideas occurred to him, exciting and fresh directions he should go with the plot, great insights about the characters. Yet by the time he got to his brother’s house at night, Teague had usually forgotten everything. He took to jotting down his ideas in the van, but when he sat down to write them into the story, he found that he couldn’t remember why they had seemed so compelling in the first place.

One night he finally taped the photo of Adrienne Miller over the bed. He knew that it wasn’t really Adrienne Miller, but he had never found a picture of her. It didn’t matter anyway. This was how she looked. Staring right at him, ignoring the waiter, red hair spilling down her shoulders, but her hard green eyes demanding he avert his attention from her hair, demanding he look her straight in the eye and tell her why he hadn’t sent the story. The guilt she inspired in Teague was thick and bracing. He hammered at his computer for an hour and a half straight, despite the noise of his brother’s family watching television. To celebrate, he decided to watch some television with the family.

When Teague walked into the room, Frank was holding one of the nephews over his head and wagging his tongue while he made monster noises. The boy giggled hysterically while his brother jumped up and down. “He’s gonna get you, Alec. Daddy’s gonna eat you
alive!” Alec shrieked and began squirming in Frank’s arms. Frank dropped him softly to the carpet and lumbered after the other nephew. The boy fled toward Teague and hid behind his legs. Frank stopped short and grinned at Teague, panting.

“How was work today?” he asked.

Teague stood, completely immobile, afraid to step on the boy clutching his knees. “It was fine,” he said. “It’s a pretty good job.”

Frank nodded. “Yeah. Must be nice to just drive around all day,” he said. He began batting at the boy behind Teague, and the boy shrieked. Alec approached Frank from behind and smacked him hard on the leg. Teague stared at the television, wondering when one of them would start crying. To him it seemed inevitable that any child would eventually start crying.

“Still, you can’t be making much money. Why don’t you look for something better?” asked Frank. He reached behind himself and grabbed Alec, who immediately began struggling to get away. The boy behind Teague started drumming on his back, but Teague tried to ignore it. “You could look in the classifieds for some kind of technical writing position. I could even see if there are any openings at my firm.”

The room’s activity suddenly cooled with a voice from the doorway to the kitchen. “Frank, you shouldn’t get the boys riled up right before bedtime. You’re putting them down for the night, not me,” said Teague’s sister-in-law. Frank grabbed a boy in each arm and lumbered down the hallway, growling about how he would enjoy eating their livers. Teague’s sister-in-law watched them go, frowning.

“That man has no mind for bedtimes,” she told Teague.

“The boys seem to like him,” he replied.

She said, “Yeah. It’s a relief, too, because I can’t keep up with them. Boys have so much energy.” They stood through a moment of silence before she followed Frank’s path
down the hallway.

Teague sank into an overstuffed recliner and watched the television. It was a mystery show about an aging novelist who went around her New England town solving murders. Half way through, Teague’s sister-in-law poked her head back into the room and said, “We’re all going to bed now.” She looked pointedly at the television until Teague nodded and switched it off.

Frank walked in dressed in sweat pants and a Steelers t-shirt. He was carrying a stack of papers, which he handed to Teague. “See what you can do with these,” he said. “G’night.”

Frank paused on the verge of the hallway. Teague glanced at his back and then began shuffling through the papers. Eventually Frank half turned and said over his shoulder, “Why do you do it, Teague?”

“Do what?” asked Teague, distracted by the papers.

Frank turned to face him. “Why do you keep going broke while you write those stories? You’re nearly twenty five and you haven’t saved any money for your future. You keep losing your apartments, and you can never pay your bills.”

Teague kept his eyes focused on the papers. He felt his cheeks getting hot.

“It doesn’t make any sense,” Frank said at last. When it looked like he wasn’t going to leave until he got an answer, Teague started speaking, though he continued staring at the papers.

“I don’t know, Frank. I could tell you why but the words wouldn’t mean anything to you.” Frank seemed to consider this. Teague looked at him and said, “It’s a little like having a booger stuck in your nose.”

Frank made a face and said, “Come on, Teague. Jesus.”

“Like it’s way up there, and it’s so big and hard that it hurts to touch the bridge of your nose. So you blow and you blow, and nothing comes out. You keep blowing, first into
tissues, then handkerchiefs, then straight into your hand. And suddenly it comes out, and it's this enormous, bloody booger, and the pressure is gone and you can breathe again, and you know it's gross but part of you wants to save the booger because you put so much work into getting it out. Part of you thinks other people would like to see it."

Frank was staring at Teague. “Oo-kay,” he said at last. He dug a toe into the carpeting and suddenly yawned. “That’s disgusting, Teague.”

“Ray Carver declared bankruptcy twice before he died,” Teague said.

“Who?” asked Frank.

“Ray Carver. The greatest short story writer of the twentieth century.”

“I’ve never heard of him. Is he any good?” Frank’s eyes were half closed, and Teague suddenly felt tired himself. He realized what an enormous effort it would take to stand in the living room and summarize Ray Carver’s legacy to his brother. He said, “Never mind. I’ll tell you about him later.”

Frank yawned and waved. “See you tomorrow. Don’t blow your nose all over my assignment packet, okay?” He disappeared into the dark hallway.

Teague sat down at the dining room table and reorganized the disorderly stack of papers. The sheet on top outlined the assignment criteria.

_Engineering Physics_

**“BRIDGE BUILDING” PROJECT**

**OBJECTIVE:**
To design and draft “blueprints” of a bridge; to also construct a bridge that has the qualities of strength, and creative, aesthetic design, your primary material being, balsa wood.

**SPECIFICATIONS:**
Each bridge must meet the following specifications:

1) It is recommended that one “test bridge” be built and tested, prior to the final “competition bridge.” Only the materials provided, may be used to construct the two bridges. No coatings of the wood including glue, are permitted.

2) The model must span between two supports placed 23.0 cm apart. The supports provide only upward vertical forces, no horizontal forces.
3) The length of the bridge must be 25.0 cm. The maximum width of the bridge is 5.0 cm. The maximum vertical height of the bridge, highest point to lowest, is 10.0 cm.

The sheet went on like this, a series of numbers and badly constructed sentences. Teague yawned again and then shook his head to clear it. He struggled on with the list.

4) The bridge must have a horizontal deck, along its entire length. There must be a minimum 4.0 cm wide by 4.0 cm high, open area above the entire length of the deck. The top of the deck can be a maximum of 0.8 cm above the test apparatus supports.

5) The bridge will be tested by applying a downward force on the horizontal deck at the center of the span over an area of 3.5 cm by 7.0 cm. A 1.0 cm x 1.0 cm hole must be in the deck to allow for the testing apparatus.

6) Design and construction must be done entirely by yourself. This document contains several pages of information for your use; history, references, suggestions, examples.

7) You must draft and submit “blueprints” of your bridge, which will be judged. They must be drawn to scale on the forms provided and show 4 views: side, end, top, and bottom.

Teague sat down at the dining room table and read through everything. By the time he finished he was remembering one Christmas break when he’d arrived home from college, and everyone was watching football in their parents’ living room. Teague had been reading an interview with Ray Carver, rehearsing his own replies to the questions, when his mother had asked him to help their father put together some shelves. Since it was either that or help her wash the dinner dishes, Teague chose the shelves.

He found his father and Frank watching the game downstairs, the shelves in a pile on the floor between them. Teague sat down to work, and it wasn’t long before Frank was looking over his shoulder. “Uh-oh, it’s time for the artist to put something together. Can he do it?” Frank had asked, slurping egg nog. His breath was thick with rum.

“I can,” Teague had replied. He’d picked up the assembly instructions and began going over them. But rather than think about which posts fit into which holes, or even what kind of screwdriver he would need, Teague could think of nothing except himself, through
Frank’s eyes, looking at the instructions. At first he saw a confident young college student, casually considering the best place to begin. Before long, however, he saw a confused, pathetic artist, lost in the world of mechanics, possessor of no practical knowledge whatsoever.

“Need some help?” Frank had asked.

“No, I can handle things fine,” Teague had replied through clenched teeth. But soon he was pushing the wrong screw into the wrong hole and cursing under his breath. When Teague had thrown the board down in disgust, Frank had picked up a screwdriver and started working on it.

“Why don’t you go read your books or something, and let the engineer handle this?” Frank had said.

“Why don’t you fuck off?” Teague had muttered, too loud.

“What did you say to me?” asked Frank. “I can’t believe you said that.” It was at this point that Frank’s wife and the rest of the family had come down the stairs, just in time to watch Frank’s face redden and listen to his voice rise. “Why are you giving me crap?” he’d asked. “I’m the one that builds things. You only read books, and then you become a teacher and force your students to read the same books. What good do you people do?” Teague had narrowed his eyes, trying madly to bring an answer to his lips. “You people don’t do anything,” Frank had said.

“What good do you do?” Teague had asked. “So you know how to put shelves together. Congratulations.”

“I do more than put shelves together. I’m out there building things. Real, tangible things that people can use, like bridges. You can’t do anything with a book. I build bridges. What do you do?” Frank shook his head and took another drink of egg nog. Before Frank could talk again, Teague’s sister-in-law had come to his rescue. She had shut Frank up by
smearing spinach dip and a cracker against his mouth, then dropping the cracker in his lap with a smirk.

“Who do you think writes all those fantasy novels you’re always reading?” she had demanded. “You read those every single night before you go to bed. Teague is going to write books like that, so you can keep reading them.” She had glanced at him, winking her solidarity.

Though he had wanted to protest, to swear he would never write trash like that, Teague was suddenly weak with gratitude. Frank could understand fantasy novels. Teague nodded and said to Frank, “Yeah. I won’t write stories quite like those, but yeah.” Frank had wiped his mouth with a napkin and let the argument drop, preferring to yell at his wife for getting dip all over him.

Teague replaced the assignment sheet on the stack of papers. He took the decanter of Royal Crown and poured a glass straight, no ice. He gulped it and bit back the sting. His eyes watered so he drank another. Ray Carver drank—why be coy—like a damned fish. Even after he became a successful writer the reputation for drink and craziness lingered with him. One of his friends had written of him, even after seeing him read a wonderful story in Iowa City, “Inviting him to your writers’ festival, to teach at your college, to borrow your car, to house-sit your apartment, to walk your dog around the block would be dicey business.”

Teague could understand why Carver did it. He grabbed the stack of papers and walked down the hall to his oldest nephew’s bedroom. He realized he had brought the bottle with him. He toasted Carver with another drink and began correcting the assignment sheet.

**SPECIFICATIONS:** Each bridge must meet these specifications:

1) It is recommended that one “test bridge” be built and tested prior to the final “competition bridge.” However, you can only use the materials provided to make these two bridges. And you’re not permitted to coat the wood with anything—this includes glue.

2) The model must span between two supports. The supports must be at least
23.0 cm apart. Distance is important to consider here, since the further things
get from each other, the harder it is to support anything between them. And
beware, objects that provide support only provide upward vertical forces,
always pushing you in a particular direction—even if it’s not the direction you
want to go—and only rarely horizontal forces. Or the supports will just mock
whatever direction you choose.

3) The length of the bridge must be 25.0 cm. The maximum width of the bridge
is 5.0 cm. A good sense of proportion is really, really important. Proportion is
something I keep forgetting, and anyway I guess I’m not very good at
maintaining it.

4) The bridge must have a horizontal deck along its entire length. There must be
a minimum 4.0 cm square area above the entire length of the deck in which
miniature people could move freely, should miniature people desire to use
your bridge. After all, miniature people can be finicky. For starters, they pretty
much have the run of the place because they’re so small, so they can live
anywhere they want, really. Doll houses, Lego fortresses, that kind of thing.
And then there are the safety concerns—they don’t like to leave the house if
they can help it. A cat sees them, or someone sneezes, and it’s all over. The
top of the deck can be a maximum of 0.8 cm above the test apparatus.

5) The bridge will be tested by applying a downward force on the horizontal deck
at the center of the span over a 3.5 cm by 7.0 cm area until the bridge breaks in
half. Be sure to make a 1.0 cm x 1.0 cm hole in the deck to allow room for
testing apparatus, as testing your bridge to the breaking point is the whole
reason for doing this. That’s right, you’re only making this bridge so we can
break it.

Teague felt good. He had hit his rhythm. He took another sip of whiskey and continued
making changes. Finally, he sat down at the computer and typed a new assignment sheet from
scratch, making sure to incorporate everything.

6) Design and construction must be done entirely by yourself. Try to get used to
working alone, since most of the time you’ll be alone. And when you’re with
someone else, you’ll probably end up wishing you were alone. This document
contains history, references, suggestions, examples.

7) You must draft and submit “blueprints” of your bridge, which, like everything
else, will be judged. Get used to being judged, too.

8) In case you haven’t figured it out yet, a lot of the text here is metaphorical.
(Except that part about little people—that was just for fun. Or maybe it
wasn’t. Who can say for sure? That’s the trouble with metaphors.) As
engineering students you might not understand what it means, even though
bridges are really among the most tired metaphors there are. Think about two
objects, and between them is a vast distance. People can be a lot like that
when they grow apart. Family, too. If one person wants to get to the other, then a stable means of traversing the distance must be established. Hence a bridge. Go over this sheet again if you have to.

“What the hell did you do to my assignment sheet?” demanded Frank, jostling the bed.

Teague shielded his eyes from the intense sunlight and propped himself on one arm.

“What?”

“My assignment sheet. I just wanted you to fix the grammar and punctuation. What the hell is this?” He dropped the stack of papers on Teague. They spilled across the bed.

“I only changed the top one,” Teague replied. He began gathering the pages together.

“What was wrong with it?” He had trouble remembering what specifically he had changed, though when he looked at the sheet he recalled the gleeful, drunken abandon with which he had typed.

“You know damned well what’s wrong with it. I’ll print a fresh copy and put it on your desk this evening. When you return from work, I want you to just correct the punctuation and grammar. Got it?” Frank jostled the bed again for emphasis. “This is something you need to do, Teague.”

“Just punctuation and grammar,” repeated Teague. He had skimmed over half the assignment. He wanted to smile, and he felt sick.

Frank turned and stalked out of the room, pulling the door shut behind him. Teague listened to Frank run water in the bathroom, then open and close drawers in his bedroom. Just as Teague began drifting back to sleep, there was a knock. Frank walked in and shut the door behind him. He stood there frowning at Teague.

“Teague, what are you doing with your life?” They both stared at the floor for a while, listening to the children knocking around in the bathroom. “Look, I’m not sure how much longer this is going to work,” Frank said. “The boys have been fighting a lot lately. I think
they need their own space.”

Teague nodded. “No, you’ve been more than kind letting me stay here. You’re absolutely right. I almost have enough money to get my own place again. I’ll be out of here before you know it.” Frank nodded. He rocked back on his heels, then opened his mouth to speak. Teague could see he was struggling with his words.

“Why don’t you just get a good job for a while?” Frank finally asked. “Something with enough money. I think there are some proofreading positions opening at my firm.” Frank looked directly into Teague’s eyes. “And don’t hand me any crap about boogers this time. I mean, you could still write after work. Or on vacations.”

Teague picked at some lint on his pyjamas. He saw himself through Frank’s eyes, squirming there on the bed, a man come to nothing in the three years since he’d graduated college. By the time Frank had graduated college, he had lined up a Master’s program, and then a Ph.D., and somehow, between classes, he found time to get married and have children.

But then, Ray Carver had never even finished college. He was already married with children at age nineteen, desperate to steal four hours on a Sunday to write. Always feeling like the chair was on the verge of being pulled out from under him. Even after Gordon Lish started accepting his stories, Carver had felt like he’d bottomed out. Like he would never be able to write again. That’s probably why he allowed Lish to gut the stories and virtually rewrite them, deleting almost half of “A Small, Good Thing” and renaming it “The Bath.” Carver had written a panicky letter to Lish, on the verge of the publication of his second collection of short stories, saying “Maybe if I were alone, by myself, and no one had ever seen these stories, maybe then, knowing that your versions are better than some of the ones I sent, maybe I could get into this and go with it.” Carver was sick at the prospect of someone discovering that he hadn’t written the endings of more than three quarters of the stories in that collection. He went on to Lish, “I feel it, that if the book were to be published as it is in
its present edited form, I may never write another story.”

Frank checked his watch and shook his head. Teague realized the silence between them had gone on for several minutes. He suddenly wanted to tell Frank everything about Raymond Carver. He thought it would help Frank understand. He thought Frank might relate. But Frank said, “I’m going to be late. I’ll give you another copy of the assignment packet. Would you please just check the grammar this time?”

Teague nodded. Frank stood another moment. Then he said, “I mean, the kids will probably be okay a little while longer.” He glanced over his shoulder at the closed door. “Not a long, long time. But a little while.” Frank coughed into his fist, then turned and left.

That evening, true to his word, Frank had placed a fresh printout of the whole packet on Teague’s oldest nephew’s desk. Teague leafed through the forty page document, read detailed descriptions of various types of bridges, the history of bridge building, some tips and strategies for building bridges out of balsa wood. He corrected the grammar, he corrected the punctuation.

The next morning Teague caught Frank climbing into his car. “Here it is, just like you wanted,” he said, holding out the packet. Frank nodded and threw the packet onto the passenger seat, then climbed in after it. He turned around to pull the car out. “My story is nearly finished,” said Teague. Frank glanced at him. “It’s about a couple of brothers.”

Frank nodded. He backed out then, turning away from Teague to make sure there were no oncoming cars. On the street he continued to avoid Teague’s eyes as he shifted into gear and drove away.

Teague lay on his oldest nephew’s bed thinking he should get up, be sociable, at least try to talk with his brother’s family. But it seemed unimaginable. He dozed off, he woke up. He wished he could watch television, but the family looked at him whenever he sat down in the
living room. Or they didn’t look at him. He rolled against the wall and hugged a pillow to his chest. He felt heavy on the bed, the cool night breeze blowing through the window, ruffling his hair. It smelled like old leaves after a storm. It smelled like autumn. He realized that he had laid there against the wall every night for a week, unable to move, wishing for the television.

Teague awoke to the dark and silent house. Pinned to the bed, hearing and seeing nothing, not even smelling the breeze, he began to see the coming weeks stretch before him. They would be spent on this bed, driving around this city, trying to figure out how to tell his brother Frank he didn’t quite have the money yet. They would be spent chatting about how much Frank hoped for the Wright State position, even if it meant taking a pay cut, because he hated his job at the firm. He never used that word, never actually said “I hate work,” but Teague could see it in the way his brother sucked the whisky, a little less water each night.

Or the weeks would be spent hiding behind the locked door, flipping through classified sections and trying to decide where to go next. Wondering when his time here would be up. Teague rolled over and dropped his feet onto the floor.

He saw an envelope someone had slid under the door. Teague picked it up and flipped on the light, squinting until his eyes adjusted. He tore open the letter. To Teague Holloway, Care of Frank Holloway, From Alcoa Engineering. “We have reviewed your application materials for a proofreading position, including third party original and corrected materials. We are pleased to offer you a job as Proofreader in our publishing sector. Starting pay is $10.00 per hour. Yours, Harold Brent, Dept. of Human Resources.”

Teague refolded the letter and dropped it onto the floor. In the hallway he could hear the heavy, staggered rhythm of his nephews’ breathing. He crept into the dining room and poured a double shot of Crown. On the hall table was a stack of outgoing mail, and in the faint light from the street Teague could make out the address on the thick manilla envelope
sitting on top. Chair of the Hiring Committee, Wright State University Department of Engineering, Fairborn, Ohio. Teague poured the whisky into his open mouth and added some more to the glass. When he finished that too, he crept back down the hallway to his oldest nephew’s room. He printed a copy of his story.

While the story was printing, he addressed one of his manilla envelopes to *Esquire* magazine. Then he carefully, quietly packed his things into his car, pausing whenever the breathing of his nephews was disrupted. When Teague was finished he wanted to wake up his brother. He wanted to say something important. Instead, he put a pot of water on the stove.

He drank some orange juice, then made coffee and poured it into a thermos. His head normally felt thick at this early hour, his brain sluggish. But just now he felt remarkably clear. He opened the kitchen window wide and spread his arms to the wind blowing through. He stood there, grinning, until he heard something burbling on the stove. The water. Teague grabbed his brother’s thick manilla envelope off the table and held it over the steam. When the steam had melted the glue, he pulled the flaps apart and took out his brother’s assignment sheet and the stack of papers with it.

Then he picked up his story and scrawled these words on the cover page:

> "Bridge Building Project"
> 1. *Try to be patient.*
> 2. *Try to be persistent.*
> 3. *Be prepared to fail. A lot. Be prepared to live off desperation like it’s cigarettes and root beer, and it’s the only thing you can afford.*
> 4. *Run like hell. Some bridges are better built with balsa wood.*

Teague dropped the story he had written into his brother’s envelope, the one addressed to Wright State University. Then he took the assignment sheet and its stack of papers and dropped them into the envelope addressed to *Esquire* magazine. He sealed both.

Outside the night was chilly. Teague sat shivering in his car, waiting for the heater to begin working. He pulled the picture of Adrienne Miller from his pocket and pinned it to the
sun visor. For a moment she seemed startled at the sight of him. What do you think you’re doing, she seemed to ask. Teague began trying to explain that he didn’t really know where he was going, that he only knew he was leaving. That for the moment it seemed like enough to just be leaving. But he realized Adrienne Miller’s attention was back on the waiter in front of her, and on the coffee clutched in her left hand. She didn’t seem concerned with Teague at all.
Donny has writer’s block, meaning he is having trouble writing the story he is supposed to write. It isn’t that Donny has to write the story, so much as Donny thinks he has to write the story. Donny thinks he’s a writer. He thinks that people are waiting to read his story. Poor Donny. To punish himself for his inability to write, Donny sits in front of his computer until he has either finished the story or he needs to pee. He pees a lot.

Instead of writing the story as he sits in front of his computer, Donny plays games. Freecell can be a good time, but the statistical record it keeps of his wins and losses is intimidating. Hearts would be fun, except that it reminds him of euchre, which reminds him of a particular game of strip euchre he tried to get going in college, since he didn’t know how to play poker but he still wanted to see Julia Forsyth naked, even though she was two years behind him and lived on the other side of campus. People made fun of him for wanting to play strip euchre, and someone papered his door with a deck of cards and some pictures from Playboy magazine. Minesweeper just pisses Donny off.

Solitaire is Donny’s game. Every session of solitaire is punctuated by guilt that he is not writing. He sits in front of his two thousand dollar computer, slouched in his expensive office chair, dragging digital cards around his four hundred dollar monitor. The bills go past due. Donny plays solitaire. He’s getting very good.

Do you get the feeling that Donny might triumph? That Donny is going to pull through, is going to fight off this ennui and force a brilliant story through his fingertips? Or perhaps you get the feeling that Donny will fail. Maybe you’re afraid that Donny will turn out to be a flat character, unchanged by the events of this story.

Or maybe there’s going to be another ending, one you hadn’t thought of. Wouldn’t
that be nice? To be surprised by the way a story ends, for once? Donny thinks he would like to be surprised for once. When he slides the final card into place, the king of spades on the queen of spades, and each of the four piles of cards begins flinging apart, signaling that Donny has won solitaire one more time, the computer speaks to Donny. “Good game,” says the mechanical voice.

Do you want to play again? Click one: Yes No.

Donny picks up his mouse, squeezes it white-knuckled, and drops it back onto his two hundred dollar computer desk. He is snarling. He thinks bitterly about some force that has abandoned him, some muse who has allowed him to delude himself. A keyboard and a computer, a mouse and a monitor, he thinks. A pen, notebook, and a deck of cards, he thinks. Despair tastes like morning mouth after binge drinking. Bitterness tastes like a parking lot after the rain.

The rain blowing into the window of Donny’s studio apartment travels on a chilly wind. The rain splatters through the window screen, fanning water over Donny’s fifty dollar couch and the dirty dishes stacked on top of it. Donny considers the dried sauces from baked beans and frozen dinners that are glued to those plates and bowls. He thinks about squeezing dish soap onto the plates and letting the rain wash them. Donny feels guilty for living like a slob, and he is thankful that he lives alone. Nobody should be subjected to this filth. In the five months since he graduated college, Donny has done the dishes four times. He has cleaned his apartment once. Whenever Donny tries to clean, he gives up because he can’t think of a place to put the clutter. He ends up moving clutter from one corner of the room to another. What the damn? When did he get so much shit? When did his apartment get so small? Then he gives up and plays some solitaire.

Donny calls up his word processor and glowers at the field of white. He fills it with a line of A’s, and then the alphabet. Then he thinks, when you have no more ideas to write
down, when all the good ideas have already been taken, what do you write about? Then Donny’s snarl evens out. He sits up in his chair and takes a deep breath. You write about that, says Donny. Let them chew on that.

By “them,” Donny means you, of course. He begins to write.

It had just started to rain. That cold, annoying rain that drives through your coat and chills your skin. I hate that rain. I know, you’re not supposed to begin a story with a weather report. It shows you’re an amateur before you’ve even gotten started. I know all that, and I don’t care. It was raining. That’s the fact, so that’s how my story starts.

So I was trying to find a place to step out of this annoying rain—any place still open at three a.m. where it didn’t look like I’d be leaving in a body bag. But it was a body bag kind of neighborhood. Cloudy glass in front of humming neon signs; standing puddles in the gutters where people sat wearing rags, their hands held permanently forward for handouts; movie marquees reading “CLO ED.” My suit was soaked, and my skin was so cold from the rain that it was starting to feel hot. In the end, desperation took over, and I stepped into the next place that had a reasonable amount of lighting.

You never really imagine a place like this until you see it. I mean, you’re always thinking, in the back of your mind, that a place like this should exist. But it stays there in the back of your mind. You never flesh it out with rich blue velvet-covered walls, or brass railings, or diamond-checkered carpeting. Or the wiry man with the snake-charmer’s grin and the pencil mustache who welcomes you with a voice like melting butter. And suddenly, before you even realize where you are, you’re there, in that place you always dreamt of.

* *
This is good, thinks Donny. This is going somewhere. Donny briefly wonders about this narrator he has suddenly created. Who is he? A desperate man, someone nearing the end of his rope. Lost his religion, as Donny’s grandma would say. A man who walks in the rain because he has nowhere else to be. Have you ever walked in the rain like that? Go ahead and remember it. Donny will be here when you’re finished. So will his story.

The snake-charm grinner straightened his red, crushed velvet smoking jacket when he saw me. I must have looked a mess, soaked to the bone, teeth chattering out of my head. Even so, the guy glided right over to me, his footsteps noiseless on that carpeting, and welcomed me in. He clapped his hands and barked an order for a hot drink. Someone brought Irish coffee, and the guy put it into my hands and someone else slipped a warm jacket onto my shoulders, and I thought, how can this be real? Because I was there, I was looking at the sign above the bar, a sign whose neon letters had the slim curves of a ballerina: “Solitaire Casino,” it said.

When you’ve played as much solitaire as I have, those words are magic. I am—was—practically obsessed with the game, for a while there. Not anymore, though. And not at first. In the beginning, I played casually. An occasional game at the office when things were slow. I found it helped relieve stress—something to occupy my mind when I’d done too much thinking. Then things got more intense, and my job performance started flagging. They wanted me to go back to school, but I wasn’t up for that. And then the wife starts nagging about children, and my mother joins in, telling me she’d like to see some grandchildren before she dies. Jesus.

The stress made me start smoking again, which only angered my wife. She said it tempted her to smoke, and there was no way she was going to smoke with a child inside her. I said she should go ahead and smoke up, because there wouldn’t be
any children inside her anytime soon. Not if I could help it. I started staying late at the office, just so I wouldn’t have to go home. And when it’s seven o’clock, and there’s nobody to talk to but the cleaning people, what else can you do but play solitaire?

I started with the standard three-card draw, infinite turnovers. It was amazing how quickly three hours could pass. The wife started to think I was cheating on her. I told her to call the office to check up on me if she was so worried. She actually did call, for a while. Eventually she got bored of listening to my breathing and stopped calling. She said if I wanted to meet my hussies at the office, that was fine with her. I think she knew better, though; she didn’t really believe I was seeing someone else. She interrogated the office maids. I was just sitting at my computer, they said, clicking the mouse. Eventually, she accused me of surfing the internet for porn.

But it was strictly solitaire for me. And I was getting good, too. I could win at least one out of five games. Eventually, I wasn’t missing a single play, and whether I won depended solely on how the deck was stacked.

Then, I discovered Vegas style. That changed everything.

Something doesn’t feel right to Donny. He stares at the words on the screen and listens to the rain and balls his hands into fists. This narrator is bullshit, that’s what isn’t right. For starters, this guy does not have a wife. He can’t. But a wife is what Donny needs the narrator to have. A wife drives the story, moves the plot forward. A wife will amp up the tension when money gets tight, when the narrator feels the world’s demands cinching tighter around his neck. However, none of this changes the fact that the narrator doesn’t have a wife.

Donny decides that the narrator sits in the office so long, playing so much solitaire, precisely because there isn’t a wife. The narrator has nobody to go home to, so the narrator doesn’t bother leaving work. He plays solitaire instead. Pleased, Donny deletes the wife.
Who is the narrator telling this story to, Donny wonders. He isn’t quite aware of you, doesn’t quite see you out there. He thinks he should just leave this dilemma for later, but in the end he can’t bring himself to put it off. He has to solve this problem right now. He moves the mouse, double clicks, and begins a fresh hand of solitaire. You know, to help him think.

Eventually, Donny gets up to pee. Then he lies down on the floor beside the couch and falls asleep. Lying in the dark room, inside the darkness of his eyelids Donny can see the jack of diamonds sliding to cover the queen of clubs. He thinks, I’m looking for a black ten.

With Vegas rules it wasn’t about points anymore, or even about winning. It was about money. Something I could understand, something tangible and real. A point is just a number that determines a player’s rank in the game. But since there’s only one player in solitaire a point seems pretty worthless, doesn’t it? Maybe some guys play against themselves, see if they can’t beat their old scores or something. Guys like that are the real losers. They’re the ones who are obsessed.

Not me. I played for money. Each game costs fifty two dollars. Each card you send to an ace is worth five dollars. So you can see that you could make a profit without winning the game, right? My whole strategy had to change. Suddenly, it wasn’t about getting all the cards to the aces as soon as you could. If you had a black five showing, and you could send it up to an ace, but you turned over a red four, you had to decide whether to take the five dollars for sending up that black five, or leave it there and gamble on getting the cards so you could send up that red four, so you could make even more money. Heady stuff I know, but it’s easy once you catch on.

The strategy was what I thought about from then on. Some nights, I would go home from the office two thousand dollars richer. So what if it wasn’t real money? I was in a damned good mood when I got home. It felt like I’d accomplished
something. The wife even noticed my good humor, and our relationship started to get a little better. I could sit at home and think strategy as easily as I could sit in the office, so I spent more time with the wife. I actually started to enjoy spending time with her again; at home, alone. It was about this time that I started getting lonely.

Meanwhile, I continued to get better. I beat the office high score and held it three months running. Marvin from accounting was jealous. A lot of guys laughed at him because solitaire wasn’t anything he should get worked up about. But Marvin was different from those guys. Marvin was maybe a little more like me. Those other guys will tell you solitaire is the lonely man’s game—it’s what nerds play Friday nights when they can’t get a date. But I don’t see it that way. What’s wrong with being good? Who doesn’t want to be good at something? And man, I was good. I don’t mean there weren’t nights when I went home five thousand in the red. But I got to thinking that, if you added up everything I’d won and lost from all the nights I’d played, I’d still come out pretty far ahead. And I imagined if the money the computer said I was winning was real, I could have taken the wife on a pretty fine vacation, or something. I even got to thinking I could have made a living playing solitaire.

Donny is beginning to doubt more than the wife. He doubts that the narrator is talking to anyone at all. Maybe the narrator is crazy. But this seems like a copout to Donny. The narrator isn’t crazy. Donny deletes the person the narrator is talking to. It doesn’t occur to Donny, as it may have occurred to you, that the person the narrator is talking to is Donny.

While he’s at it, Donny deletes all that business about solitaire. It’s surely not very interesting to read. Action is what drives a story. People are interested in characters, true, but the main thing is to keep those characters acting.

Donny stands and walks to the couch. He stares at the dishes stacked on the cushions,
at the gooey crust that drips from bowls and plates. He looks through a few fast food bags for some spare fries. People shouldn’t have to live in such filth, this much is obvious. Donny grabs his jacket and leaves.

He has taken many walks around the campus of his old college. This is because Donny lives only two blocks from the campus. It’s a small campus in a tiny village. The nearest city is Kent, Ohio, which has a lot of bars and some liquor stores but none of that interests Donny. Besides, it’s a half hour drive. Donny walks to the one bar in the tiny village every Thursday and drinks three beers. He eats pretzels and listens to the bartender talk about the Browns for a while, and then he goes home. That’s enough for Donny.

Donny hadn’t realized that school is back in session. He hadn’t realized that the students had already moved in, or that he still knew some of them. Donny makes his way over to the cafeteria, where he used to complain about the food. Someone Donny met at a party once sees him lingering outside the cafeteria. Donny can’t remember the guy’s name, but the guy remembers Donny. Hey Donny, says the guy. Want me to swipe you in? You still a student here, or what? Donny follows him inside, watches him swipe his card twice. Donny says thanks, and he begins to follow the guy until the guy shouts to some friends and hurries away. Donny gets the impression that the guy didn’t want to sit with him.

It doesn’t matter, though, because Donny is inside now, and he can eat. Also, as he looks around he realizes that there are a lot of people he still knows. If they see him, they’ll ask questions, like What are you doing these days? and Why are you still hanging around this place? and Donny suddenly understands that he has no answers. So he shuffles through the line, gets a lump of brown meat and some soggy potatoes, and he sits next to the windows, alone, sort of behind a support column. Donny is remembering all the meals he has eaten alone in this cafeteria. The faces around him are all bright. Their eyes are wide, and they smile at one another. They nod and shout and laugh too loud. The noise bothers Donny.
When he has eaten two bites of the meat and a few globs of potato, Donny realizes that he is no longer hungry. He carries his tray to the disposal bin and then lingers by the dessert cart. There are piles of chocolate chip cookies. While Donny is stuffing cookies into his pockets, he notices Julia Forsyth in a group near the door. A napkin covers the plate in front of her, and she sits with her hands in her lap. She watches the guy who swiped Danny in. The guy is telling a story about getting drunk over the summer and chasing some Canadian Geese, and since the last thing Donny wants to hear is a story, he grabs a few more cookies and heads for the back door. Approaching Julia Forsyth, Donny tries not to stare at her or catch her eye. He has always suspected that someone told her about his wanting to see her naked.

Just before Donny steps through the back door, Julia Forsyth glances at him. Since he has been staring at her, she catches Donny’s eye. He stops, one foot through the door, one foot still inside. Hello Julia, he says. She smiles in recognition. Hi Donny, she says. I didn’t know you were still a student. I thought you graduated. Donny shrugs. He grins as the door closes on his shin. I’m just visiting, he says. He tries to pull his leg back inside, but his pants get caught on the door. I’m living in the Orchid Ponds apartments now, just outside of town. Julia nods, as if she knows the place. You could stop over sometime, Donny says. His face feels very hot by now, however, so Donny stops talking and grins some more, and Julia Forsyth grins a little, too.

Sure, I know where that is, she says. I could stop by sometime.

Donny nods some more and there is silence at the table, so he raises a hand goodbye and steps through the door.

At his apartment, Donny stands in the middle of the room and looks around. This won’t do at all, he mumbles. Nobody should live in this filth. He takes the plates to the sink, collects the fast food bags in the trash can. He goes over the carpet with his dust buster. He
even dusts the coffee table and, because he doesn’t have any magazines, lays out a few catalogues. The room is certainly presentable. Next, Donny showers and shaves. He wipes off the sink, really puts his shoulder into scrubbing away dried toothpaste and soap scum. He likes the way the whiteness of the sink shines in the bathroom light. Life is in order now. Donny sits at his computer and calls up the word processor.

Action is definitely the thing. Donny cuts everything he has written after the narrator entered the Solitaire Casino. Nothing was happening. The important thing is action.

When you’ve played as much solitaire as I have, those words are magic. I am practically obsessed with the game, for a while there. If there was money to be made at solitaire, then I was going to leave here a rich man.

I cashed in everything I had in my wallet and took out a three hundred dollar credit. The snake-charm grinner took me into the back room and sat me in front of a computer terminal. It was a lot like the system I usually played on, so I just smiled and sat back as the guy straightened his smoking jacket and explained rules I already knew. Fifty two dollars for each deck. Each card sent to an ace was worth five bucks. Winning the game yielded a six hundred dollar bonus. I knew all this, and I knew how to manipulate the rules. I clapped my hands together and got started.

There were only two other fellas in the room, and they each gave me a dirty look because of my clap. Then they returned to their games. Suddenly I recognized that one of them was Marvin from accounting, but if he recognized me, Marvin didn’t let on. He was still mad because I’d beat his high score at the office.

I just laughed to myself and moved cards around the screen. I lost a little money on that first game, and I broke even on the second. The third game I won outright, and the snake-charm grinner slapped me on the shoulder and congratulated
me. He said he hoped I’d keep playing, and I told him I would.

After a while I started to wonder how this place stayed in business. I mean; solitaire isn’t like those other casino games. It’s a fairly easy game to win if you know what you’re doing. And with guys like me on the prowl, I doubt this place goes a whole day without a dozen wins. Sure, that The third guy grabbed his coat and stormed out of the room. I could hear him arguing about his credit with the snake-charm grinner. That guy was pure amateur. But Marvin and I were left; and I know that Marvin is a fine player. He was probably cleaning up as much as me. How did this place make money?

I was thinking about all of this when noise suddenly filled the room. I looked up and saw the answer to my questions. What I had thought was felt covering the wall was actually a curtain, and it had raised to reveal a stage. “Please enjoy the show, gentlemen,” said the snake-charm grinner. “It’s on the house, of course.”

This was their strategy—to distract the players from the game with theatre. The game requires focus, attention to detail. Once you play long enough, you enter a zen-like state of mind where you no longer miss any plays, but this state requires time to reach and does not last long. Worse, you can lose this state of mind and begin making mistakes again without even realizing. I turned my head away from the stage and focused on the screen. I would not allow myself to be suckered by a little spectacle. I was above such tactics.

When I won another game, I glanced at Marvin from accounting. He had turned away from his screen and was staring at the stage. I had a moment of pity for the weak bastard before I turned back to my game. I was over a thousand dollars up, I realized giddily. Then the snake-charm grinner’s hand was on my shoulder.

“Congratulations again, sir. You’re truly an excellent player. Perhaps you’d like to
rest from the game a moment by enjoying our complimentary drama.”

I turned to the stage. There were a couple of actors up there prancing around in a cardboard forest. I couldn’t see the woman because she was blocked by a guy in tights who was going on about how he wasn’t attracted to her—it sounded like Shakespeare. There was glitter floating around in the lights, and that was pretty to look at. The glitter drifted down from above the stage and floated in a cloud around the woman. The guy in tights finally moved out of the way, and I got a good look at the woman. She was kneeling on the stage, looking up at the guy with these big eyes. She looked all right at first, with the glitter sparkling on her cheeks and this look on her face like the only thing that mattered in the whole world was that guy. The more I watched this woman, the more I noticed about her. Like how white her skin was, or how her chest heaved when she spoke, or how strong her voice was when she told the guy that she was hot for him.

Donny shakes his head at the narrator. The woman shouldn’t be described that way. For starters, she isn’t hot for anyone. She loves the man on the stage, and her love is sincere even though she’s doomed by Shakespeare to love out of elven magic. And her chest wouldn’t be heaving. It seemed a little indecent to notice her chest at all.

The more I looked, the more I noticed about her. Like how white her skin was, or how her chest heaved she breathed with desire when she spoke, or how strong her voice was when she told the guy that she was hot for him. As she stood, I realized that her gown was gossamer, and I could see her smooth stomach and thighs beneath the thin fabric. This woman was something else.

I realized I had started another hand of solitaire and was halfway through the
deck. I focused on the cards for a while and managed to send up a few, so I only lost about forty bucks. The woman on stage was telling the man about how her love was more powerful than time and space, that she would find him wherever he fled, and I wondered if that was really in the Shakespeare, and I wondered why the woman loved the man so much anyway if he didn’t really seem to want her. The woman was looking straight out at the audience, and I could see that Marvin had gone back to his game, so the woman was essentially looking at me, looking right in my eyes while she talked about how her love would endure through the ages. Her chest was heaving again, and I couldn’t take my eyes away from her. I wanted to go up there and tell her to give up that guy, that he wasn’t any good for her. I wanted to tell her how much better I could be to her. I wanted to peel away those layers of gossamer and watch the glitter shine all over her body.

The snake-charm grinner put a hand on my shoulder again and leaned in close. “Is the lady not truly exquisite,” he said right in my ear, his breath reeking of peppermint. I hated the way that breath slid up my shoulder, and I hated how the guy was sitting right there, telling me what to think, so I shook off his arm and turned away from the lady, and from him, and from everything but the game. The game was the main thing.

I burned through some more decks before I had my focus back. I finally broke even, and then made a few bucks on the next round. Pretty soon I won another hand, which put me about eight hundred ahead. The whole time actors had been walking around up there, babbling on, and I had ignored them. So of course the snake-charm grinner couldn’t let me be. He waddled right back over and reached for my shoulder, but I spun on him before he could touch me.

“Get back,” I told him. “I don’t wanna watch your stupid show, I just came to
play.” He stopped short of me, but his grin didn’t change.

“But sir,” said the guy, voice like margarine sliding over a hot skillet, “This is the best part.” He swept his hand across the room, and I noticed the woman was on stage again. Her gown was thinner now, so I could almost see right through it, and her body seemed to glow. Her arms were outstretched and she was speaking right out to the audience again. “I can tell you think the madame is beautiful, sir,” said the snake-charm grinner. “I could arrange for you to meet with her after the show.”

I looked at the guy like, what are you talking about? And he said again, “Wouldn’t you like to meet her?” But the word “meet” came out kind of funny, like there was more to it than just introductions. I started to get this funny idea then. Maybe this wasn’t a solitaire casino after all. Maybe this was some kind of whorehouse. I looked at the guy, but he was just grinning up at the stage. I followed his gaze to the stage, and the woman had her arms crossed over her chest. She was looking up at the ceiling, her face angled into the light and the glitter trickling down. I guessed I wanted to meet her, after all.

What the hell is happening here, wonders Donny. This isn’t a whorehouse, it’s a solitaire casino. Furthermore, this woman would never work in a whorehouse. She’s an actor, an artist. Even if they let her act she would never work there. This is getting absurd. Donny thinks that he needs to regain control.

The snake-charm grinner put his hand on my shoulder and said I could meet the woman directly after the show, in her dressing room. Sure I wanted to meet the woman, but I didn’t like some slippery guy in a velvet smoking jacket telling me how I should meet her, or when, or where. I shook off his hand and didn’t even look at
him. I walked to the stage.

“Do you want to be up there?” I asked the woman. She looked surprised when she turned to face me. She glanced around the room, then grinned like she was embarrassed.

“I’m sorry to interrupt,” I told her. “It’s obvious that you like acting and all. I just doubt that you like acting in a whorehouse.”

The woman was just looking at me, like what I was saying didn’t make sense to her. She had a look on her face like I didn’t belong there at the foot of the stage, talking with her. But that didn’t make sense to me. Where else did I belong if not right there? I put out my hand. “Come on down from there. Let’s go get something to eat,” I said to her.

This isn’t right at all, says Donny to his empty apartment. This man can’t leave with her. Donny leans forward and stares with intensity at the words on the screen. He stares like a jealous lover, completely still with tense shoulders. Only his fingers move.

The only other man in the room—Marvin from accounting.

The snake-charm grinner was behind me in a second, saying that I would have to wait until after the show to meet the woman. He was tapping my shoulder, and it was really starting to piss me off, but I ignored him and waved my hand to the woman. I could see her looking at my hand, and I could see her thinking about it. Her gown was very thin, though, and I remembered the cold rain, so I turned to the snake-charm grinner and pulled off his jacket. He looked really mean for a second, like he was thinking about killing me, and then he was grinning again and tapping my shoulder and saying, “Sir, really, you’ll have to wait.”
“What the hell are you doing,” said Marvin from accounting. He stood up in a pool of light, like some avenging angel. I had never heard him say that many words in a row. “Get away from that fair woman.” He actually said that: “fair woman.” I couldn’t help but laugh. “Sit down, Marvin. This isn’t your business.” But Marvin wouldn’t sit. He rolled up his shirt sleeves while he walked toward me. “I said step away from the lady,” he said.

“Marvin, are we going to mix it up here? Are we going to fight?” Marvin finished with his sleeves and glared at me, inches from my own face. “Do you feel that I’m dishonoring this woman or something?” Marvin nodded.

This mouse was too much. I saw him starting to take a swing probably before he knew he was taking it. I was a boxer in school, which Marvin unfortunately didn’t know. He punched at me a few times but I dodged. The snake-charm grinner started clucking like a mother hen, and the woman on stage let out a little shriek. This was getting out of hand. I dodged another couple blows from Marvin and then clocked his chin. It was just a tap, really, but he went down and stayed there. Probably more from embarrassment than pain. I’ve been there.

The woman on stage was looking from Marvin to me. I wanted to tell her I was sorry, but I figured she had seen the whole thing. I held the snake-charm grinner’s jacket up to her and I said, “I know a great place with hot soup.”

* * *

She said, Sure, I know where that is. She said, I could stop by sometime.

* * *

The woman took the jacket and put it over her shoulders. She leapt off the stage like a dancer, and though I’d like to say she leapt into my arms, the truth is that she just stood beside me and smiled a little. “I only wanted to act,” she said. She told me she
would like some hot soup, and I realized I wanted hot soup, too, since I had no place else to go.

Donny hears voices outside his apartment. It’s two people walking down the hall. He stands and walks to his door, presses his ear against the wood because he thinks he has heard Julia Forsyth’s voice. When the people move closer to his door, Donny realizes that it really is Julia’s voice. He walks to the middle of the room, checking to make sure that everything has been prepared. He hears a knock echo in the hallway.

Donny opens his door and steps into the hall. Julia Forsyth stands a few doors down, next to the guy who had swiped him into the dining hall. Both of them look surprised to see Donny. He smiles and tries to look casual, like he’s just taking out the trash. He wishes he had a bag of trash to show them.

The guy who had swiped Donny in nods to him, and Julia waves. Hey Donny, says the guy. There’s going to be a pretty cool party here tonight. You should stop down once things get going. Julia nods and tells Donny that it’s going be a blast. He should come to the party because he’ll probably be listening to it all night, anyway.

Donny nods and tells Julia sure, he’ll probably come down. Then he turns and walks back into his room. If you were in that room with Donny, you would see that outside the rain has begun falling again. It’s falling soft and even on the roof and the trees and pavement. The wind is picking up slowly. If you were there, you would see Donny watching all this through his window. But you aren’t in that room with Donny anymore, because he’s alone in there. He’s sitting in front of the computer and looking at the words on the screen, thinking something is very wrong, the story doesn’t make sense, the narrator isn’t right. Donny is thinking he will have to start over with the story. He will have to start from the beginning.
You want me to tell you a story?" Harold asked the man sitting across from him. The man wore a black turtleneck sweater with bright orange pants, which didn’t at all match Harold’s traditional tweed jacket with brown slacks. When they had both boarded the train in London, Harold had noticed the man’s garish pants but had said nothing, had simply taken a seat in the dining car until the man had plopped down across from him, since that was the only empty seat. Immediately the man had started talking, and Harold had shuttered to discover the man was a fellow American. Harold hadn’t looked up from his copy of *The Canterbury Tales*, but the man’s enthusiasm for talking remained unquenched. Finally Harold had given up and chatted in what he hoped was an abrupt, off-putting way. Soon it was revealed that they were both headed to Canterbury, and the man had immediately announced that they both must tell a story in honor of Chaucer. Now the man was nodding, holding onto his smile. “A story?” repeated Harold.

It’s not that Harold was unsympathetic—he grew restless and bored on trains, too. But he didn’t like telling stories. The man put out his hand to touch Harold’s arm, but Harold flinched away. “Don’t,” he hissed. The man looked wounded for a moment, and Harold was immediately ashamed. “I’m sorry—I don’t like to be touched, either.”

“Why not?” asked the man, frowning now. His face held the frown the same way it had held his smile. Harold noted, like a scientist jotting observations, that he was pretty. His cheeks were flushed and dusted with black stubble, and though his eyes were unremarkable because they blended with his black hair, the play of wrinkles on his forehead was more expressive than most people’s eyes.

“What’s your name?” asked Harold.

“Darin. Nice to meet you,” he said, holding out his hand, his forehead creasing into a polite greeting. Harold sat back, glancing warily at the hand, and told Darin his own name.
The moment was awkward until Darin took back his hand, apologizing. He repeated his question about Harold not wanting to be touched. “If you don’t mind me asking,” he said.

Harold squared his shoulders and looked Darin in the eye. “All right. Have you ever tried to walk through the grocery store without touching anything?” he asked. Darin shook his head. “It’s not as easy as it sounds. People try not to touch you, sure, it’s that way all over, and I’m thankful. But I’m talking about the nudges, or the bumps. People are careless, and they knock into you, and what can you do but say ‘excuse me?’ Even a nudge will do it, anyway. Even a bump.”

“Do what?” asked Darin. Harold glanced through the window at the fields rolling past, each lined by walls of stone, with fluffs of white sheep floating across them. What people called a charming view.

“I’m trying to tell you,” he said. “I was having a particularly terrible day. It had happened so many times—more than ever before. The bus ride home was especially terrible. I may as well give up when I have to take the bus during rush hour. It’s nearly as bad as the subway.”

Darin frowned. He seemed about to ask a question, so Harold hurried on. “After such a day I went to the store for the gloves. I needed rubber gloves.” He glanced at his hands resting on the table. Despite the warm air in the dining car, he was wearing a pair of thin leather driving gloves. “I hadn’t bought these yet. I got them in London. They’re wonderful. I hate rubber gloves. They make your hands feel chalky, and people always give you looks when you wear rubber gloves. But I was aching to have some insulation between my hands and the world, so I made my way to the first aid aisle, or maybe it was the healthcare aisle. Standing there was the oldest woman I have ever seen. She had a potted plant clutched against her chest, and she was stooped over it. Her lips were curled as if she had just spit. She was scrutinizing the cotton balls. And she was directly in front of the gloves.”
Darin laughed, startling Harold out of his reverie. “You look haunted,” said Darin.

Harold nodded. “I couldn’t go through another day like that one. So I said to her, ‘Excuse me, madam, please,’ but she didn’t move except to lick her curled lips. I kept saying it, she kept ignoring me. I had no choice but to touch her,” he said. His arm was reaching across the table toward Darin, just as it had reached toward the old woman in the grocery store. He felt dizzy. He slammed his arm down on the table and kept it there. He went on talking.

“It happened right then. The worst it’s ever been. My hand fused to her arm, and there was this rush of her life. I went blind from it—I’d never gone blind before. There was a man in military uniform, and she was young and kissing him with joy. He had just returned from World War II. He had one less eye and he was quiet now, but all she could think was, ‘he has returned.’” Harold looked at Darin, wondering if he understood. But Darin was frowning, so Harold went on. “She cooked him dinners he didn’t eat, made beds he didn’t sleep in. She canned preserves he didn’t even notice, preserves he gave to his buddies with pride, saying ‘My wife made these, Dale.’ She found him hanging from the ceiling of the garage.”

Darin’s eyes widened. “Did she tell you all this?” he asked. “Right there in the store?”

“No, she didn’t say anything,” replied Harold. “I told you, that’s what happens when I touch people. I see things like that.”

“Every time?”

“Yes. When she found him, there was an open picture album in front of him, and what she remembered most wasn’t the color of the slacks he was wearing, or even the look on his face when she finally pulled him down, but the photographs on the open page of a tall, beautiful cathedral. She hugged his legs, and probably there were tears running down her cheeks, but she only stared at the enormous stone buttresses stretching to the sky. What’s so strange is that I never before saw actual visions. I only ever felt raw, stupid emotions. But this
image was so clear, I even recognized the cathedral. Canterbury.”

“Is that why you came here? Because you saw that picture?” Darin asked.

“Not just that. You see, before it only happened when I touched people. Now it happens when I touch objects, too. Anything that people touched while they were feeling something strongly. I feel what they were feeling. And it gets worse each time.”

Harold leaned close to Darin. “I’ve often thought, what if I touched someone who was feeling such strong emotion that this thing inside me, whatever it is, got overloaded? Shorted out, like a television dropped in a bathtub. Then I wouldn’t have to wear these anymore.” He flexed his hand inside the leather glove and sighed. “But I could never find someone who was feeling something that strong. Anyway, they probably wouldn’t want me touching them. But now that it happens when I touch things, too.”

“Thomas Beckett,” said Darin, nodding. “You’re going to touch where he was killed.”

“Yes. When he refused to leave the cathedral, fully aware that he was probably about to be attacked, and just knelt and prayed, he must have felt extraordinarily strong emotions. And then him dying on the same spot. All I have to do is find that spot.” Harold was grinning.

Darin frowned. “Aren’t there other places like that, though, all over the world? Why come all the way to Canterbury?”

Harold froze, the grin stuck to his face. His eyes moved from Darin to the table between them. The whole time he had been arranging this trip, stretching his bank accounts thinner and thinner, Harold had been gripped by an overwhelming sense of purpose. He’d been completely convinced that it would work. When Darin suggested he could have gone somewhere close to home, the whole trip suddenly seemed arbitrary. He might as well have picked the hotel room where Elvis had died. It was a stupid idea, and it would never work. “I hadn’t thought of it like that,” he said at last.
Darin nodded and, in a slow-moving second that Harold watched without remark, without foreboding, Darin reassuringly patted his arm. The air between his arm and Darin’s hand sizzled, and then the muscles in his body locked hard from his arm through his spine, and he was laughing and crying, he felt everything at once, and in this glorious rush, the world became so light, and he became so light in the world, that things near him floated, napkins, forks, spoons, and he floated, too, and it was entirely sweet.

Just before the feeling left Harold, a wash of heat flowed from Darin’s hand, warmth like the sun on his cheeks, like opening the oven, but it all soaked into his skin, nothing escaped. And then Darin was apologizing, clutching his empty hands above the table, trying not to touch anything. He stuffed his hands into his lap and leaned forward, catching Harold’s eye. “Jesus, sorry,” he said. “I’m sorry, I forgot.”

Harold’s head banged against the cool window, and he let it rest there while he recovered his breath. “Is it like that every time?” asked Darin. Harold nodded. “Maybe the cathedral will work for you after all,” said Darin. Harold shrugged and remained silent as Darin ordered two cups of coffee.

They traveled the rest of the way together. Darin followed Harold every time the train stopped, helping to keep people from touching him. They arrived in Canterbury late at night and stayed in the same hostel in the same room. The next day Darin convinced Harold to tour the city instead of going straight to the cathedral. “Won’t it be nice seeing everything with another American?” he asked. Harold agreed. He was surprised to find that, being so startlingly close to what he had traveled so far to see, he was reluctant to actually go to the cathedral.

As they walked through the city, Harold found himself repeatedly glancing to the northeast, where he occasionally glimpsed the cathedral’s spires above the shops and
restaurants. Finally Darin stopped. “That’s it,” he said, crossing off a line in his guidebook. “The cathedral is the only place left on my list.”

“I can’t go any further without some coffee,” Harold replied. He veered into the nearest restaurant and sat in a plastic booth. A few minutes later, Darin followed.

“Okay. One cup of coffee, but then we go to the cathedral,” he said.

“One cup is all I can afford,” replied Harold. He didn’t have much left besides his return ticket home and his Britrail pass, which expired in two days, meaning he would have to leave Canterbury tomorrow. Meaning he would have to see the cathedral today, before it closed. He shut his eyes and rubbed his temples.

Darin began fingering the sugar packets and from time to time glancing out the window by their booth. Harold scowled at the packets crumpling between Darin’s fingers.

“You’re mangling them,” he said. “Stop mangling them.”

“Tell me another story, Harold.” Darin dropped a sugar packet, paper and all, into his mouth. He sat back, closing his eyes, and fished in his pocket for change to buy a Coke. Apparently there wasn’t enough. Harold was glad.

“I have no more stories to tell.” Harold brought the coffee mug to his mouth, but Darin had put in too much sugar. “You shouldn’t eat the whole packet like that. It’s gross,” he said.

Darin opened his eyes and stared out the window for a while, a smile lingering on his half open lips. Harold knew he was looking at the cathedral spires that reached over the stores across the way. As Darin stared, the coffee cup, which Harold had replaced on the table, began drifting toward the ceiling. Harold was searching his pockets for change to pay for the coffee, so he didn’t notice the cup until it floated past his face. Embarrassed, he put his hand firmly over the mug and pushed it back to the table. He eyed Darin suspiciously.

“You have stories,” Darin said, turning away from the window. He glanced at Harold.
“You have plenty of stories. I know you do. When we went into that museum hospital, in minutes you were sweating stories right through your pores. You couldn’t stand it more than ten minutes. You were in a panic. It was the stories, wasn’t it?” said Darin.

“It wasn’t stories you saw on that train from London,” said Harold, gritting his teeth. “It’s never stories. It’s just emotions. Senseless, wordless feelings.”

“You told me it was getting worse. You said you saw images.” Darin was trying to catch his eye. He started talking as Harold shifted uncomfortably in the booth. “Fine. I’ll go next. There was a young man at the theatre where I worked. The young man talked all the time about being an actor when he grew up. He was good with math and science, too, but his real love was acting. His name was Jonathan.”

Harold was staring at three silver coins and a ball of lint he’d pulled from his pocket. He felt sweat run down his forehead. No more stories, he thought. Please.

“Jonathan’s father was a tax attorney,” Darin continued. “He was always on Jonathan to study his math and science, so Jonathan could be an accountant or something, make lots of money. Jonathan always told his dad that he needed to pursue his dreams, but his dad just shook his head and treated it like a phase that would pass.”

“I’ve heard this story before, Darin,” said Harold. “There’s nothing new here, and I don’t want to sit through it again. I can tell you exactly where it’s going. There are two possible endings, each with its own cliches.”

Darin went on as if he hadn’t heard. “Jonathan got a part in one of the plays at my theatre, and he worked hard. He played Guildenstern, or Rosencrantz, I can’t remember which. There was a particular monologue he did very well. It was about a group of people that sees a unicorn, but they end up convincing one another that it was only a horse with an arrow through its forehead.”

“Intertextuality cannot save you, Darin. This story is too thin from too much
overworking. Ending one: Jonathan pursues his dream, risking everything by running away to New York City. Of course he will go to New York, where real artists go, because in this version he is a real artist. He learns grim realities about the homeless, poverty, the squalor of life. He takes these lessons to a cattle call audition, and in a moment of heated genius he wins the heart of the director. Later, he breathes into an interviewer’s camera that the secret is to never give up.” Harold choked down the dregs in the coffee mug, then fumbled for the water glass when he nearly gagged.

As Darin continued talking, the water glass rose out of Harold’s hand. He cursed and grabbed the glass out of the air.

“Jonathan was brilliant in this monologue,” said Darin. “The director understood this, and he sort of took Jonathan under his wing. I found out later that the director had summoned a talent scout from one of the big theatre schools. Opening night would be Jonathan’s moment to shine.”

“Ending two,” said Harold, putting both hands on the water glass and resting his chin on them to hold it down. “The director’s plot is revealed. The scout shows up to find Jonathan a nervous wreck. He stumbles through his lines, managing a mediocre performance. The scout acknowledges that Jonathan might have talent, but it is undeveloped, crude. Jonathan sets out for Hollywood, because Hollywood is where hopeless dreamers go. The memory of his failure as Rosencrantz haunts him at every audition. One night, desperate, Jonathan turns a trick and is strangled by his John, a filthy, overweight man with a limp and a wheeze. A demure, almost angelic glow fades from Jonathan’s face, and the man feels a moment of regret.”

Darin said, “Opening night, there was a problem. One of the lights wouldn’t turn on. The bulb was broken. It was an ellipsoidal reflector, hanging in the middle of the house. It was the light that spotted Jonathan during his monologue. Half an hour to open house, and it
just blinked out.” Darin tapped his palms on the tabletop. “Died,” he said, tapping.

“Jonathan pretended not to worry, but I knew that inside he was sick. I stood under that light, thinking, if I could just do something. There wasn’t time to roll out the scaffolding. There wasn’t time to rehang and refocus a lamp—it was a small theatre, and they didn’t have any extra lamps anyway. Changing the blocking wouldn’t help. They were going to cut the monologue.” Darin had closed his eyes, his arms tense and held at his sides, hands balled into fists. He continued to speak, intent on that moment. “I ran for a replacement light bulb and just stood there, under that lamp, thinking that it was impossible—ridiculous, really—that such a small thing should destroy this kid’s chance. And it wasn’t so far up to that lamp. Sixty or seventy feet, maybe. And then I was up at the light,” said Darin. “I was flying.” He began floating out of his seat.

Harold glanced at the waitress, but she didn’t notice Darin, so Harold only turned back to him and waited. “I took out the old light and put in the new one. But I didn’t know any better, and I touched the bulb. I got my skin oil all over it. When you do that, the oil gets so hot it melts the glass. Right in the middle of the play, on the very first line of Jonathan’s monologue, the bulb burst in this spectacular flash, and then all the lights died. I think they short circuited.”

“What happened to Jonathan?” asked Harold.

“He finally gave up acting and went into real estate. He always wondered why that bulb started working again, only to quit like that during the show.” Darin opened his eyes and shrugged at Harold. “His father was pleased.”

“That was miraculous, anyway,” said Harold. “Your flying up to that light.”

“But it didn’t do anything,” replied Darin. “No good came of it.”

Harold was disappointed. He sat quietly for a moment, thinking, and then he squinted at Darin. “Let me get this straight,” he said. “You flew up there for nothing? Now you can
fly, and all these cups float every time you get happy, and it was all for nothing? I mean, there are only so many miracles to go around, and this one gets wasted?" Harold was nearly shouting.

Darin shrugged. "There's more to the story. But shouldn't we get to the cathedral before it closes?" he asked.

Harold was mauling his napkin into a tattered, damp ball. "All right," he said.

They paid the admission in a squat brown kiosk just outside the main entrance.

Harold was staring at the massive doors of the cathedral, tracing with his eyes the patterns of the grain. He held his hand inches from the wood. Even through his gloves, he could feel a faint sizzle, could see faint impressions.

"So many people have come through here," said Harold.

Darin stood behind him. "It's as if the sky melted and dripped like candle wax over God," said Darin. "As if this place is the shell where God was hunched over the land, watching the people, when the wax hardened."

A small crowd began forming behind them, and Harold stepped quickly through when a man held the door for him. Several people in the crowd gasped as they turned to face the long hall of the cathedral. Dripping down from the ceiling were massive columns, each curve of which was carved with such delicacy, such grace, that Harold understood in a moment the attention that had gone into each chip of each chisel. He reached out his hand and brushed the gloved fingertips against the bricks. The man who had carved this brick had worked carefully, desperate to impress someone so that he could gain some valuable prize. Love, maybe, or glory.

"There's so much space," said Darin from behind him. "I never realized that the world had so much space in it."

Harold dropped his hand to his side. Emotions were pressing against his skin, all over,
seeping in like a chill, and he began shaking. A man fleeing, hoofbeats behind him, and braying dogs maybe, and the fear was thick and hot and clogging his throat, melting into his stomach. The man’s fingertips barely touched the door into the cathedral, and his dread began churning into joy which filled his lungs and prepared to roar through his mouth in triumphant declaration, “Sanctuary!” Pain thunking through his back, an arrow, its tip just touching his pounding heart, life draining away. Harold’s legs went woozy, and he stumbled toward a chair, modern and covered in vinyl, and collapsed. He felt nothing from the chair and gratefully closed his eyes.

But from the floor, through his feet, the chill rose. A line of people extending around the nave, people shuffling past a great gold case that glowed fiercely in the morning light pouring through the stained glass. Pilgrims supplicating, crawling down the stairs and around and back up, the line through the door extending back out to Canterbury, a line reaching back through time, flowing into the cathedral past the body of Thomas Beckett, through the south transept and the chancel, back to the north transept, out into the courtyard, and somewhere distant, Harold felt the end of the line meeting the beginning. The distance crushed him.

Harold stood and stumbled toward the nave, sweat running down his forehead. He shut his eyes and imagined blackness instead of the shadowy faces. This isn’t right, he told himself. It’s just my imagination. These people never existed. It was Harold’s mind filling in the blanks. He’d always been imaginative. This was all in his head. He collapsed against one of the columns.

“How did they get so much stone so high?” Darin was suddenly kneeling by Harold’s side. “Did you notice the ceiling?” he asked. “It’s all original stonework. A real fan-vaulted ceiling. Imagine carving that stone and then lifting the whole thing up there.” He looked at Harold. “And why doesn’t it fall? It must be magic.”

“Tell me what happened to Jonathan,” said Harold. He wanted to forget the ghosts
that filled his mind.

Darin frowned. “It’s happening again, isn’t it?” Harold nodded, waiting. “Jonathan
got sick of numbers one day. He became an inventor. His father was disgraced, and he
abandoned Jonathan, but Jonathan didn’t care. He invented a machine that made people’s
dreams seem more real than reality itself. Imagine, everyone being able to live each other’s
dreams.”

“It sounds horrible,” shuttered Harold, sweat running down his temple.

“Jonathan sold the machine cheap, but so many people bought it that Jonathan ended
up being the wealthiest man in the world. In fact, he had so much money that money stopped
mattering anymore. People just locked themselves into their dreams.”

“Absolutely horrible,” said Harold, eyes wide.

“You know, come to think of it, Jonathan became miserable after that.”

Harold pulled himself to his feet. “That didn’t really happen, Darin. What really
happened?” Darin was staring at the ceiling. “Please,” hissed Harold.

“Jonathan invested wisely, retired from real estate a rich man, and watched television
the rest of his life.” Darin shrugged. “How should I know? I never saw him again.” He
walked away, gawking at the ceiling.

Harold rose and shuffled toward the stone stairs. Down the middle of each a deep
groove had been worn. With every step, new shocks of emotion jolted up through Harold’s
feet. A man who had brought his wife, and the wife who spent the rest of her days with the
glow of the jewels and gold of Thomas Beckett’s shrine burned into her eyes. The monk who
snuck into the nave in the middle of the night, just before vespers, and touched the withered
piece of Thomas Beckett’s skull, the broken end of the sword that had struck that bone from
Beckett’s head. Harold clenched his hands into fists and stumbled down the stairs, squeezing
shut his eyes and trying to focus all his attention on the simple act of walking.
When he opened his eyes, Harold gasped. He had entered the north transept, where a blackened iron sculpture was bolted to the wall. Beneath the sculpture was a simple gray marble bench supported by white stone, and a plaque announcing that this was the spot where Thomas Beckett was killed by the four knights, who had responded to Henry II’s offhand entreaty that someone rid him of the archbishop.

Harold shuffled forward, drawn to the harsh, gleaming lines of the sculpture. Even in its melodrama, he thought, it is beautiful. His hand drifted toward the wall, his feet toward the bench covering the spot where Thomas had been kneeling. His stomach burned and rolled, his muscles twitched, but he would not stop walking forward. As his gloved finger brushed the bench, his spine stiffened, the blood locking in his muscles, chill biting into the warmth that had inhabited him since Darin’s touch on the train.

Thomas was kneeling, wounded three times and bleeding, enraged by the invasion of the four knights into the house of God, in the midst of vespers, kneeling and afraid and bleeding, yet anger seething through him, when the final blow carried away the top of his skull, the sword breaking against the wall. Harold jolted, years flashing by, and Thomas’s tomb was built. King Henry II, filled with wonder at the power his words had carried, even that one remark, intended as a joke until he found his words ringing in the sudden silence, and the solemn looks on the faces around him, and Henry’s realization that his frustration was real indeed, but not this real, not to have called for this slaughter. Henry’s bare feet, bloody and aching, sprawled behind him as the church officials shuffled past in a long line, one after the other, each delivering a tap or a thump of penance upon the King of England, himself, Henry II supplicating, tears in his eyes, grief in his heart, yet even so, part of him merely waiting impatiently for the thing to be done.

And even, yes, emerging from everything was the lonely-eyed soldier standing on this spot, fingering a pocketful of bullets, swaying on exhausted feet, staring at the spot where
Thomas had knelt and missing the people he had watched die. Harold saw the man clearly, shared his quiet knowledge that nothing would be the same after the war, when he returned home.

There were miracles enough in the world for Darin to fly to a theatre’s ceiling to change a light bulb, but not enough to save Thomas Beckett’s head from being split, or the soldier from hanging. It was intolerable. Harold collapsed, his head rolling aside.

Opening his eyes, he saw Darin flying to the cathedral’s ceiling. A group of tourists and priests had gathered beneath him, clucking nervously. “Won’t he damage the ceiling?” worried a tourist. “Come down from there, please, sir,” hollered a priest. “This is most unusual.” Someone snapped a photo of Darin, but she was quickly admonished for taking pictures inside the cathedral. The others merely watched.

Darin’s face beamed pure joy. “The ceiling is wonderful, Harold,” he called. Harold could see Darin rubbing the stone. The stone was cold and impossibly smooth, riddled with tiny pores. “It’s never been touched,” yelled Darin. Harold’s heart ached at the thought of touching the stone, rubbing the smooth coolness of a ceiling that had been touched by so few hands. There would be no visions. There would only be the stone itself, its smoothness and shocking cold.

Harold pulled off the thin leather glove, pushed up his sleeve, and placed his naked palm on the smooth, cool stone where Thomas Beckett had knelt. Here is a miracle, he thought, to end miracles. His body arced, and he screamed once. The man running desperately for the sanctuary knocker, the monk touching Thomas Beckett’s skull, the infinite line of pilgrims, blurred and were gone. Harold’s mind was calm, empty of pulse or jolt. He sat up, rubbing his temple, and it was true—the emotions were gone. He felt absolutely nothing. He didn’t laugh, nor smile. Whatever it had always been, whatever it was, it was gone. “It’s gone!” he yelled, his voice echoing toward the ceiling. “I feel nothing.”
The crowd of tourists looked at Harold. A concerned priest opened his mouth, but before he could speak, while the silence was still pure, Harold heard the loud thud of Darin’s body hitting the cathedral floor, empty of its own miracle, too.
It seemed that rose petals fell from Royce's fingertips. During this time of roses, the sun felt like a lover’s touch on his arms, and the breeze in his hair felt like a father’s kind hand. Nothing was too much, nor too little. It was as if every day was designed to fit together perfectly, down to the songs the sparrows were singing.

During the time of roses Royce accidentally opened doors that should have been locked. His girlfriend Chloe was in the bathroom, and he jiggled the door knob and the door just swung open. She stood at the sink brushing her teeth. She frowned at him in the mirror and said, “I locked that door. How did you get in here?” Royce shrugged. He couldn’t figure it out either.

Or there was the time he went to the bank on a Wednesday afternoon. Breathing in the sweet air of the warm day, Royce gently pulled the door open. A group of tellers was huddled over a pile of money behind the counter, and they all looked up from their work and gaped at him. One of them blinked and said, “Sir, we’re closed. How did you get in here? That door was supposed to be locked.” She frowned and glared at one of the other tellers, who was shifting uncomfortably from one foot the other. “You locked that door, Jim, didn’t you?” she asked. Jim nodded and jingled the keys in his pocket. She looked back at Royce and said, “We locked that door, sir. This is a bank. You’ll have to leave.” Royce shrugged and walked back into the day, where even the raucous calls of the ravens were a kind of music, and he didn’t mind that the bank had closed early, that he wouldn’t be able to withdraw money to buy Chloe some flowers. There would be some other way to show Chloe he was serious about finding a job.

Royce drove across town anyway. He opened the door to the flower shop just as a man overburdened with a bundle of scraggly plants was coming out. Royce held the door for the man, who nodded appreciatively. “Thank you, sir,” he grunted. But then the man
stumbled and his plants began a gradual cascade from his arms. Royce dipped to one knee
and snatched them out of the air. Rose petals drifted around his feet. “Thanks again,” said the
man, looking impressed with the grace of Royce’s movement. “Tell you what, if you need
some plants, you can have these. I’m through with them.” Royce nodded and, without further
word, took the bundle to his car. Among the otherwise wilted scraps was a dozen roses, white
and red and yellow. Royce drove home and set them in a vase for Chloe, who cooed and told
him the roses were beautiful. Though it was autumn, a breeze fresh as spring rain floated
through the window. They made love in the breeze.

All of this seemed perfectly natural to Royce. He felt that he was finally getting his
due. After he had graduated from college there had been the time of panic, during which he’d
held six different jobs in three months. The worst was waiting tables at a tourist trap
restaurant in the desert, where everybody held their vacation dollars tightly and tips were
meager. Then Chloe had gotten a job offer in northern Ohio reporting for one of the papers.
Royce was glad to leave the snowbirds and the heat of Arizona. And when they had arrived in
the cooling Ohio summer, the leaves already beginning to turn in late August and the ground
thick with green grass, almost immediately Royce had known it was the right choice. The
time of roses had begun. He had walked through the neighborhoods basking in the fineness of
everything, the weather and the birds and the new city. He stayed up later, sometimes going
to bed when Chloe was getting up for work and then waking up when she got home.

Chloe watched Royce do this for a few weeks, and then she began hinting that he
should get a job. He promised he would find a job within the week. Something simple, so
that he could continue enjoying his newfound love for everything. Eventually something
would happen—a career, more schooling. Money might fall into his lap. Royce surprised
himself thinking this way. He had never depended on luck, had always been a meticulous
planner until the time of panic had scrambled his mind. But now the panic was gone, and he
still felt no need to plan. The days were designed to fit together perfectly. He had the vase full of roses to prove it.

The next morning Royce wandered downtown looking for a job. There were Help Wanted signs in all the restaurant windows, but he was tired of greasy food and sweating. He walked into the first non-restaurant he found, which turned out to be a tiny computer store.

“I’m here about the Help Wanted sign,” said Royce.

The manager wore an oxford shirt tight at the neck and rolled to his biceps. There was a tiny coffee stain on his tie. When he spoke, his breath stunk of cigarettes. “There’s no sign in the window,” he said.

“But you’re hiring, aren’t you?” It was more of a statement, really. Royce was completely calm. Of course the man was hiring.

“Of course I’m hiring,” blurted the manager. “Classes are about to start at the university, and I just got an account with Omni-Core.” The manager narrowed his eyes at Royce. “How much do you know about computers?”

The truth was that Royce didn’t know anything about computers. But he was confident this wouldn’t be a problem. “I know more than most people,” he said.

“My dog knows more than most people,” retorted the manager. He was squeezing his biceps. His face was bright red. “Fix this machine and you’re hired,” he growled, pointing to a dissected computer on a worktable behind the counter.

“What’s wrong with it?” asked Royce. The manager shot him a look, and Royce smiled like he was kidding. He stepped up to the machine and looked things over. Royce experienced a pang of panic about failing—*what the hell was he thinking?*—before the manager walked away to help a customer, and Royce found the calm again. The days were perfectly designed. He pulled out a circuit card and blew on the connections. He pushed the card back into its slot and switched the machine on. The computer whirred to life, clicking
and beeping through startup. When the manager finally returned, Royce said, “I got it.”

The manager grabbed the mouse in his fist and clicked on the screen. “Well, shit. What did you do?” he asked.

Royce shrugged. “Do I get the job?”

The manager furiously clicked icons and stared at the results. He glanced at Royce and said, “Looks that way.”

Royce started work the following Monday. There were no machines to repair, so he spent most of the day helping customers and watching the manager clutch his hair and shout into the telephone around mugs of coffee. Royce was pleased to find he could answer most of the customers’ questions. Whenever someone asked for a part that Royce didn’t recognize, he nodded calmly and asked the manager where the part was kept. Nobody saw through the calm or suspected Royce was lost, and he realized that in the first four hours he had learned enough to basically handle things. At noon the manager said, “While I’m at lunch will you flash the bios on those A-Bit BP-6 motherboards in back? I’m getting a shipment of Celeron II’s in and I want them ready to sell as a package. You know how good the BP-6 is for Celerons.”

Royce nodded enthusiastically. “You don’t have to tell me,” he said. Then he sat down at the display computer and searched the internet for the definition of “bios” and some instructions on how to flash it. Finally, browsing through some message board he couldn’t really follow, just as Royce was losing hope he stumbled upon the right information—the A-Bit BP-6 motherboard wouldn’t support Celeron II chips. When he told the manager this news, the man looked irritated. “I should have known,” he said. Royce sighed in relief as he listened to the man launch into a complex explanation of why he should have known that the A-Bit BP-6 doesn’t support Celeron II chips. Eventually the manager’s explanation forewent words in favor of long series of letters and numbers. Royce kept nodding until it was time to go home. He decided he might have to quit this job soon, after all. But even quitting another
job would be all right—something else would surely come along.

The next day at work he met Dan. “Hello,” said Dan, holding out his hand for Royce to shake. Royce shook the hand, and then Dan went right to work. They didn’t speak again for three days. In the meantime Royce managed to learn about computers by watching Dan. He learned that grounding oneself on the computer’s case before touching anything inside was absolutely vital, because the tiny electrical components inside could be overloaded by a charge as insignificant as static electricity from walking across the carpeting. This fascinated Royce. He told Chloe all about it. She said, “Why are you working in a computer store? You don’t know anything about computers.”

To prove her wrong, Royce launched into detailed explanations of what he had learned. He discovered that the more he talked about work, the glossier became the glaze over Chloe’s eyes. He invented a game where he interjected strange messages between sentences about a wrecked system Dan had fixed that day. “It turned out the power source was fried. So Dan went out for beer, and when he got back he replaced the power source right there. Then we called in some strippers to share the beer. Isn’t Dan amazing?” Royce would say. “Uh-huh,” Chloe would reply, nodding.

The next time Dan and Royce spoke was when Royce was attempting his first independent repair. Usually he had called Dan over and explained that he wanted to see how Dan would approach the problem. Dan would wordlessly set about fixing the machine while Royce watched, nodding and grunting to himself. Royce was just about to try pulling all the hardware out except the video card when Dan interrupted him. “Can you take this customer?” he asked.

“Well, I was just about to fix this system, but sure,” said Royce, trying to appear reluctant.

Dan smirked. “Right. I’ll fix the system. You just help the customer.”
Royce went to the counter. A wizened man stood clutching an ancient-looking computer to his chest. Even Royce could tell the machine was old, by computer standards. When he saw Royce the man dropped the computer onto the counter and rubbed his hands together like he was wiping away dirt.

“How can I help you today, sir?” asked Royce.

“My computer is, well, it’s broken,” said the man, hitching up his faded blue jeans.

“What’s the problem?” Royce put a hand on the computer, which felt warm from being hugged against the man’s flannel shirt.

“Well,” said the man. He paused and removed a green John Deere hat, rubbing his forehead with the back of his big hand. He said, “It’s possessed.”

“Possessed,” repeated Royce.

“By the devil.” The man’s eyes narrowed. “Well, some kind of demon, anyhow.”

“What gives you the idea that your computer is possessed by a demon?” asked Royce.

The man said that he had read a book about how Satan could possess any computer manufactured after 1985. “On account of the hard drive being big enough,” said the man. “Mine’s a 1995. The book said I should either see a priest or bring the computer to a dealer. I don’t truck with Catholics, so I came here. I’d like you to replace the hard drive, please.”

“Well, sir, a lot of computers have been made since 1985, and this is the first time we’ve seen this particular problem.” Royce couldn’t wait to tell Chloe about this. Finally her eyes wouldn’t glaze over. She would love it.

“I know that,” said the man, crossing his arms over his broad chest. “But all the signs are there. My wife, bless her heart, she starts cussing when she gets into them chat rooms. Just like the book said people will when the computer is possessed.”

“You think that’s because of a demon?” Royce asked. Chloe would laugh like hell.

“My wife ain’t that kind of woman, if that’s what you’re saying,” muttered the man.
Royce immediately straightened up.

“No, I didn’t mean to imply anything, sir. Sorry. We’ll replace the hard drive and give you a call when it’s done. Just fill out this form, please.” Royce slid a work order to the man and watched him ball his fist around a pen. When the man left, Royce took the computer to the work table and set it down carefully.

“Been a while since I saw one of these,” mumbled Dan.

“Me too,” replied Royce. Dan smirked again. Royce said, “You know what that man thinks? He thinks his computer is possessed by a demon.”


“Yeah, that’s right,” laughed Royce. “That’s a good one.” But Dan wasn’t laughing.


Royce sat down. “You mean someone has written a whole book about demons possessing computers?” He shook his head.

“Oh, yeah. Peasboro says that perfectly upstanding women will spew foul language in chat rooms, and men will find themselves looking at filth they would ordinarily never tolerate.”

Royce thought of the huge protest signs beside an adult bookstore on the edge of town. Real Men Don’t Need Porn, they read. God is Always Watching You.

Dan was screwing together the case of the machine he’d been working on. He finished and pointed the screwdriver at Royce. “Look, I’m on to you,” he said.

“What do you mean?” asked Royce, still thinking about the signs. Jesus’s Mother was a Woman, and So Was Yours.

Dan walked around the table and started unscrewing the machine in front of Royce.
“You don’t know how to fix computers. The manager told me about hiring you, how you figured out how to fix that machine?” Dan met Royce’s eyes. Dan’s eyes were cold blue. “I fixed that machine. He’d been working on it for a couple days, so I fixed it without telling him. I wanted him to think he’d done it.”

Royce blinked at Dan, then folded his hands in his lap. Dan said, “Hey, don’t sweat it. I’ll teach you how to do this stuff. You don’t need to know much to work here.”

“Why would you do that?” Royce asked his lap.

“It’s nice having someone to help the customers,” Dan replied. “The manager hasn’t been around much since he got that contract at Omni-Corp. They’re not only having him build all their computers, but they want him to network their system, too. He’s been talking about how much he’d love a network administration job. He hates handling customers.” Dan winked at Royce. “Me, too. You handle the customers, and I’ll train you. That’s the deal.”

Royce nodded. “It’s a deal,” he said. Royce could handle customers. He could be charming when he wanted to. People seemed at ease with his calm, especially since the time of roses had started. Royce shook Dan’s hand. “How come you haven’t said more than three words to me since I got here, and now all this?” asked Royce.

“I liked watching you sweat,” replied Dan.

Royce frowned. Had he been sweating?

This is how it began: Royce’s first lesson would be replacing the possessed hard drive. But before they removed the old one, suggested Dan, they should see exactly what was wrong with it. Dan attached a monitor, mouse, and keyboard, and he turned on the system. He snooped around some of the files while Royce straightened up the shop and sold a printer cable to a man in a business suit. Then Dan called Royce into the back room. Royce looked over Dan’s shoulder and gasped. On the screen was a picture of a naked woman bending over
a yellow sports car, a man behind her, their faces tight with the pleasure of coitus.

“Here’s your demon,” said Dan. He grinned as he opened other files, other pictures of men and women in various positions, sometimes half clothed, sometimes fully clothed with the strategic articles pushed aside, all of them fucking. Dan kept clicking, his breath slow and steady. Royce heard cars going by on the street outside. He watched every single image.

“Well,” said Dan when it was all finished. “Nothing illegal at least.”

Royce wiped his forehead. “You’ve found illegal pictures before?” he asked.

“Yeah. Nothing too bad. Some S&M stuff that I think is illegal in this town. No kiddie porn or anything like that.” Dan chuckled. “Of course, you know that anything but missionary is illegal in Ohio, right?”

Royce shook his head. The fact seemed quaint. He imagined police listening outside people’s doors, then breaking through into the middle of some unfortunate couple’s oral sex.

“I think everything goes in Arizona,” he said. “I grew up in Arizona.”

“Lucky you weren’t in Utah with the Mormons.” Dan looked at his watch. “We can finish this tomorrow,” he said. “The manager is working on that network, so he won’t be in for the rest of the week. That means you open.” Dan dropped a bundle of keys into Royce’s lap. “I’ll be in at noon. Lock up on your way out,” he said over his shoulder as he shrugged into a windbreaker.

On his way home Royce thought about the pictures. He couldn’t remember details very well, except that most of the women had flashed large breasts. Chloe’s breasts were fairly big, but nothing like that. His legs felt spongy in a way he hadn’t known since he was thirteen and flipping through his dad’s *Playboy* magazines. He’d seen pictures since then, and movies, too. There had been a weekly “study group” in college where everyone got together each week in the name of critically analyzing new porn. There were always about seven guys in the room, each of them making comments. Everyone was expected to laugh at the music.
Royce had thought it was all pretty funny, had tried not to be aroused by anything. There had been one guy who only showed up a few times and sat closest to the screen. “This is some hot shit,” the guy had said. Everyone told him to cut it out, but he became indignant. “What’s your problem? We’re here to watch some pussy, right? What are you guys, a bunch of queers?” The other guys told him to shut the fuck up and gave him the cold shoulder, so eventually he didn’t come back.

But nothing from college could compare to Royce’s first *Playboy* from his father’s dresser drawers. Royce had felt like he’d discovered a chest full of gold under that pile of rarely worn sweaters, like he’d figured out one of the major secrets of the universe. The magazines were in an ancient brown paper bag that smelled of mold like a dusty library. Royce had flipped the pages in reverent silence that first time. Everything from his hips down had burned. Something inside him wanted to leap, wanted to move, wanted *action*. Later he heard that word associated with the act and he thought it sounded vulgar but also appropriate.

Royce was thinking about all this as he pulled up to his apartment. Chloe met him at the door. He pictured her wearing a negligee, one hand caressing her hip. But she only wore sweat pants and a bulky sweatshirt. She said, “You’re home a little early, aren’t you?” He grabbed her and pulled her up the stairs into the bedroom. She said, “What are you doing?” Then she wriggled out of his arms and went to the bathroom, locking the door behind her. Royce could hear her brushing her teeth and washing her face. He lay on the bed and thought about his father’s *Playboys* some more. Then he thought about the pictures on that screen. People said you could find all sorts of things on the internet. Royce had timidly clicked around one time at a computer lab in school, but the lab monitor had thrown him out. Royce had spent the rest of that day hot with shame, and he had never tried it again. Although he and Chloe had a computer, they didn’t have an internet connection, so he hadn’t surfed for porn much at all. It seemed like a whole new world was suddenly opening to him.
Chloe came into the bedroom, her cheeks looking freshly scrubbed, her hair pulled into a pony tail. Royce remembered that one of the women in the pictures had worn a pony tail. But that woman had worn a black lace thong, whereas Chloe had on her usual green satiny bra and panties. Royce considered buying a black lace thong for Chloe. Then they made love.

Royce awoke the next morning to find ladybugs crowding the window sill. The time of insects had arrived. He counted ten ladybugs in the bedroom window, and twenty more downstairs. Chloe was as surprised as he was.

“Should we call an exterminator?” Royce asked.

“No, I think ladybugs are okay. I think they’re good bugs,” she said. Chloe held her hand on the window sill and two ladybugs crawled onto it. Royce moved in close and stared at them. He was ready to believe that these red and orange creatures were good. Their stubby bodies were like tiny Volkswagens. Royce smiled when one of them unfolded its back, revealing surprisingly large wings, and flew away.

Since Royce had to go to work so early, Chloe gave him a ride. She waved as he got out, and when she drove off without another word it seemed that she was flying away. Inside the store were more ladybugs. Royce thought they must have been there before, only he hadn’t noticed them. Surely there had never been this many. He counted twelve on the ceiling and fourteen more on the window sill.

After an hour with no customers, Royce sat down at the display computer and opened an internet browser. A thrill went up his spine as he remembered that the store had a high speed connection. Royce craned his neck to look at the front entrance, but seeing nobody, he turned back to the monitor and went to a search engine. Royce typed the word “Sex” and pressed enter. There were more than nine million hits with that word in them. He saw
Playboy dot com near the top, followed by sites with names like “Johan’s Guide to Aphrodisiacs” and “The All-Purpose How-To QUEER SEX GUIDE.” Royce was impressed that a lot of these sites were educational. Still, he managed to find several web sites with more pictures like the ones he and Dan had looked at yesterday. Most of them required payment to see the pictures but they had free samples available. More women sprawled on bearskin rugs in front of fireplaces, or straddling a kitchen table, or perched on hands and knees atop an office desk. The men’s heads were typically absent from the pictures, or their faces were blocked by the women’s enormous breasts, which made it easier for Royce to imagine that the men’s bodies were really his own, that he was them and all those women were his. At the top and bottoms of these pages Royce noticed several links advertising “Hot Fresh Lolitas” and “Barely Legal Teens.” Eventually he clicked one of them.

Just as the page sprang open, displaying rows of uniformly young women, a clamorous bell chimed. A customer! Royce’s arms locked into his shoulders, and a shard of cold stabbed through his stomach. He moved to close the web browser, but when he did more windows suddenly popped open. The Web’s Hottest Women! on top of Luscious Young Twats. Royce was shaking as he closed these pop-up windows, but for a panicky moment they opened faster than he could close them. Finally he had them all shut, and he turned and jumped to his feet when he saw Dan standing behind him, smirking.

“Hey, Royce,” said Dan. He walked behind the counter and slid out of his windbreaker.

“Wow, hi Dan. Is it noon already?” asked Royce, worried at the tremor in his voice.

Dan was rolling up his shirtsleeves and staring at his own waist as he said, “Yup. You might wanna watch what you look at on that computer. The manager can view a log of all the web pages you visit.”

Royce nodded and stared at the floor. He felt his cheeks burning. He was nauseous.
Dan said, “Of course, I can always show you where that log is so you can delete it. I used to surf the web here after hours, too.” He checked his watch and slid his hands into his trouser pockets. “After hours,” he repeated. Royce nodded.

Dan showed him how to remove the possessed hard drive and where to find a replacement in the back room. They decided to use one with the same capacity as the original, which had a meager 1.2 gigabytes though Dan said this was considerable when the computer was new. Dan had to dig through a pile of older hardware before he found one small enough, and even then it was 2.2 gigabytes. “This should do,” he said. “I don’t think this one will be possessed.”

Royce laughed at the joke. He felt a little better about being caught looking at porn, especially since Dad didn’t mention it again. After a while Royce even found he could laugh about it to himself. Watching Dan handle the old hard drive, Royce said, “Hey, if there isn’t anything wrong with this hard drive, should we really be replacing it?”

Dan shrugged. “He wanted us to replace it, so we’re going to replace it.”

“But is that ethical?” Royce picked up the old hard drive. He tried to imagine a demon crouching in there. The monster in the machine.

“I don’t think it’s a matter of ethics,” said Dan. “Listen, nine times out of ten we don’t sell customers anything more than peace of mind. People don’t understand computers. They just want someone to tell them it will be okay.”

Royce nodded. He could understand that perfectly. After he had graduated college, during the time of panic, he had needed Chloe to tell him everything would be okay.

Dan had picked up the new hard drive and was preparing to install it. “Could you hold these wires out of the way?” he asked.

Royce grabbed a bundle of yellow and red and white wires. “Who do you think put all those pictures on the old man’s hard drive?” he asked.
Dan shrugged. “Probably the old man himself.”

“But why would he want to buy a new hard drive and lose all of his pictures?”

“Maybe he has some hidden stuff on here he wants to get rid of. You can get in a lot of trouble for having the wrong pictures on your hard drive. You know, kiddy porn, stuff like that. Bondage and torture pics are even illegal in some communities. It depends on their decency standards.” Dan bit the corner of his lower lip as he worked on maneuvering the hard drive into its bay. “See how you have to angle it in here? Every case is different. It’s just a matter of finding the internal drive bay.”

“If he had illegal pictures, why wouldn’t he just delete them?” asked Royce.

Dan paused long enough to smirk. “Files don’t just disappear after you delete them. Forensic programs can still dig them up. The only way to be absolutely sure you’re a hundred percent clean is to buy a new hard drive.”

“You think he’s into kiddy porn?” asked Royce. He remembered the man’s wrinkled but seemingly kind face, his rumpled John Deere hat. A pervert?

Dan shrugged. “Could be. If we suspect something we can send the old hard drive off for analysis. Do you suspect anything?”

Royce was impressed with this sudden responsibility. He was the first line of defense against perverts. He thought hard, considering every possible sign of aberrant tendencies, but finally he admitted that he just couldn’t see it in that man. The old guy’s eyes had reminded Royce of a Golden Retriever he’d had as a boy, watchful but always sad. “No, I think it’s his wife,” said Royce. “That guy is a straight shooter.”

“Could be his son,” Dan said as he stood. “Could be his wife, too, I guess. But I think more men look at that stuff than women.”

“But he said his wife was acting strangely. Like going into chat rooms and spouting obscenities. Maybe she’s the pervert.” Royce imagined a stooped woman in a plain blue
dress, a white bonnet strapped to her head as she pecked at the keyboard, letter by letter, 
come fuck me blind, hot stud.

“You never know,” replied Dan. “Now you plug this IDE cable into the motherboard’s main port. I like to put it on its own channel to avoid conflicts, though sometimes you have to slave the CD-ROM on the same channel out of necessity.” Royce nodded and tried to keep up. Before they could finish they were interrupted by customers, a sudden and steady rush that lasted until closing time. Royce realized as they shut the door and flipped the sign to “Closed” that he had worked an hour overtime without eating lunch. He was starving.

“Do you want to grab some dinner?” he asked. Dan draped his windbreaker over his shoulder and started for the door.

“No thanks,” he said. “I have plans tonight. Maybe some other time.” Dan paused by the door. “Tomorrow you’re in early again. Lock up on your way out.”

Royce walked up and down the street twice before he remembered that Chloe had driven him to work. Then he stood in front of the door looking into the darkened store for a few minutes before realizing that he’d left the keys on the desk, beside the display computer. The door was locked. Royce breathed deep, trying to once more summon the calm. The days were perfectly designed. He grasped the door and pushed, and there was a solid-sounding click, a moment when the door didn’t move, and then suddenly it swung open. Royce laughed to himself, looking up at the sky and lifting his free arm in triumph.

Inside the store he grabbed the keys and then sat down just for a minute. He opened a web browser. This time he entered the word “ropes” on the search engine. It took a while for him to realize it was bondage he was looking for, and in a moment of inspiration he typed in bondage dot com and pressed enter. He had found The Net’s Hottest Bondage Site. Fifteen free pictures per day could be downloaded from a categorized database. As he looked at the
pictures, once more Royce’s legs were spongy and burning. He could almost smell the musty paper bag that had held his father’s *Playboys*. Men were bound and gagged, were being forced to lick women’s spiked heels, red puffs of skin blooming on their asses as they crouched beneath women who held slinky black whips. Women were tied to tables and blindfolded, were having candle wax dripped on their breasts, opening their mouths wide for fingers and the stubby ends of whips and penises. Royce’s legs burned.

The phone shrieked, and Royce reflexively closed the browser window. Three more popped up. He grabbed the phone and stuttered a greeting.

“Royce, what are you doing?” It was Chloe. He suddenly remembered that he was supposed to call her when he was ready to go home, since sometimes he was ready by nine thirty, other times ten. Royce checked the clock. It was almost eleven.

He shook his head and sat down again in front of the computer. Ladybugs, attracted by the glow in the otherwise dark room, had collected on the monitor. One of them crawled across the body of a woman wearing skin-tight leather pants. “I’m not doing anything. I had to, umm, flash the bios on some of these BP-6 motherboards. But I want to come home now,” he said.

“Are you okay? Should I come pick you up?”

“Sure, I’m okay,” he replied, sitting up straight and speaking steadily. He tried closing some more browser windows, but they popped up too quickly so he just clicked for the computer to turn itself off. *Windows Explorer has caused an illegal conflict. The program will be shut down*, the computer said. Royce clicked *OK* and said, “Sure, come and pick me up now.”

When Chloe pulled up and Royce climbed in, she leaned over and kissed him briefly on the mouth. “You’ve got a ladybug on your shirt,” she said.

Royce pulled the ladybug off and discovered three more. It seemed that they covered
him, were everywhere, a part of him. He opened the car window so they could fly away.

"Do you know why they’re called ladybugs?" asked Chloe. "I researched it today at the office. I’m going to write a story about them. The editor liked the idea. He said he had never even noticed them before." Chloe was chewing her bottom lip. They stopped for a red light, though she didn’t look at Royce.

"Is the editor a good guy?" asked Royce. He was remembering their first few days in town, when Chloe had told him the editor was too gruff, almost rude. She had said his name was Bruce Springsteen but she thought it was spelled differently, and they had laughed together. "Is he nice to you now?"

"Yeah, he’s great." Chloe gave the car some gas as the light turned green.

"Does he look like the real Bruce?" he asked, so they could laugh about it again.

"Not at all. He’s this Adonis figure—you know, blond hair, square jaw."

Royce was looking out the window. The play of light on tight black leather, candle wax dripping. "Do you call him ‘The Boss?’" he said at last.

"Of course not. Anyway, these medieval farmers were struggling with their crops one year because of a massive aphid infestation. The crop was on the verge of failing when suddenly all these little insects appeared and ate the aphids. The farmers called them ‘Our Lady’s Beetles’ because they believed Mary had sent the bugs to save them. Get it? Lady beetles, and then ladybugs." They rolled to a stop in front of their apartment.

Inside, when Royce pulled his wallet from his pocket two ladybugs fell out. He grinned and held out his hand for them. He held one under his eyes and wondered what it saw when it looked at him. "Are they all women?" he asked Chloe, following her to the bedroom.

"You know, female beetles?"

"All women? I don’t think so. They can be either sex." Chloe slid into bed and pulled the covers over her. She switched off the light, and the darkness was sudden and thick.
“Hey,” said Royce.

“I need to go to sleep,” Chloe replied. “I have an early day tomorrow. You should have called earlier. Why did you have to work so late?”

Royce went to the bathroom without replying. He stared at himself in the mirror, at his greasy brown hair and the mole on his upper lip. He needed to shave. His stomach suddenly growled, ferociously rolling inside him. Women’s mouths wide open, men’s backs spattered with candle wax, the whip playfully falling again and again. Royce’s legs burned.

When Royce mentioned to Chloe that they should get an internet connection for the apartment, she just shook her head and replied that she had one at work, and if he wanted to get one he would have to pay for it. And why did he suddenly want an internet connection, anyway? Royce said forget it.

He spent the next few nights at the store after closing. Dan not only showed him how to delete the log of web sites he visited so the manager wouldn’t be suspicious, he also showed Royce how to disable the browser’s javascript so no more windows would pop up. They finished installing the new hard drive in the possessed computer, and Dan reformatted the old one.

“Listen,” said Dan. “He hasn’t asked about this all week. Usually customers are rabid to get their computers back. You’d better call him and tell him it’s ready.” Dan pulled on his windbreaker. “Then you can take off early. Friday nights are usually dead around here.”

Royce watched Dan leave, and then he locked the door and turned the sign to Closed. He picked up the phone and dialed the man’s number.

“Hello?” asked a woman’s voice.

Royce gulped, wondering if it was the wife. The simple blue dress, the white bonnet, Come fuck me. “Hello. I’m calling from Hometown Computers. Your system is all fixed and
“Yes, thank you. I’ll give my husband the message,” she replied. There was a click and then the dial tone.

Royce hadn’t counted on her voice being sexy, but it was. People called voices like that sultry. He was thinking about that voice as he took his place at the display computer. She sounded a lot younger than the middle aged man. Perhaps it was a May-December romance. She was just a lonely young woman, sprawled on the sofa all day as her husband toiled in the fields on his big John Deere tractor. She must get lonesome out there on the farm.

Royce looked at pictures of various women, wondering whether the young wife resembled any of them. Women by fireplaces, legs closed or open, discreet shadows or conspicuous lighting. Blondes, brunettes, redheads. None of them seemed to match that voice, and Royce found himself becoming bored. Even the pictures of people having sex no longer inflamed his legs. After awhile looking at the hardcore closeups felt like watching surgery on television. Finally Royce went to bondage dot com, and as he started clicking through his fifteen free pictures for the day he could feel that soft burn returning. He considered buying a membership so he could look at as many pictures as he wanted. He even had a credit card in his pocket. But it was a joint account between him and Chloe, and he couldn’t think of a way to explain the charge. He would have to get his own credit card, which, he realized, would be as easy as accepting one of the many offers he got in the mail each week. The days were still perfectly designed, after all.

Women tied to chairs, their shirts raised over pillowy breasts, looking reproachful even with their mouths taped shut. Men in chains spread-eagled on the floor, straining to touch some piece of flesh hovering just beyond their reach. Royce was swept away in these fantasies. Sometimes he was tied to the floor and sometimes he was tying someone. He could have his way with these helpless women, and he was helpless, these women having their way
with him. He could choose anyone, everyone, and he could at any time be chosen.

And then there was suddenly this picture, this freakish image that held Royce transfixed even as ladybugs tickled his face, staring at two women, hands bound behind them and rope wound tightly around their breasts, the women actually hanging by these ropes from the ceiling, hanging by their purple, painful breasts. “What the fuck?” muttered Royce. He closed the browser, batting the ladybugs away. He grabbed the keys and pushed his way out the door, walking quickly toward home.

As Royce walked, the burning in his legs was slipping into a kind of tingle, like he’d fallen asleep from the waist down. In the pictures he had been looking at people had been tied down, sure, but not really tied down. Right? There had been captions under some of the pictures, like See what happens when this runaway slut gets food for sex or I drugged and punished my husband after I found him cheating, but as far as he could tell that was part of the game. He could imagine the photographers holding up the flash bulb and saying, All right now, pretend this hurts, but it hurts so good. Yes, like that, yes.

And then those women hanging by their breasts, actually hanging off the ground, and yes, there had been a fat man in a stained t-shirt holding the winch that had raised them. The pain in those women’s eyes had surely been real. That man’s smile had been real. If anybody touched Chloe like that—suddenly there was the thought, people might touch Chloe like that—Royce felt sure he would kill. There was the sudden conviction that he had to see if she was safe.

Royce was surprised by how quickly he had walked home. He tugged and pulled at the front door, and when it didn’t open he yanked out his keys and began fumbling with the lock. Chloe tied to the bed, the fat man holding a lit candle in one hand and a knife in the other. But when Royce finally pushed through the door and jogged up the stairs, he found the bedroom dark, and Chloe asleep. Relieved, he closed the bedroom door and went downstairs.
Royce sat in front of the television for awhile. His leg was shaking like it had during the time of panic, so he got up and walked around the apartment to cool off. In the kitchen, in the faint light shining through the window from the street, he found a mess of dirty dishes. There was a pile of his dirty clothes on the counter, and a note was pinned to the shirt. Royce picked up the shirt and held the note in the pool of dim light. *It's your turn to wash everything. You haven't cleaned up this pigsty in weeks, and I'm not your maid. I have an early lunch tomorrow with Bruce to talk about my stories, and I expect this place to be spotless when I return.* Chloe. Royce felt something tickling his cheek. He batted at it, felt something fall from his cheek and heard it land on the tile at his feet. “Ladybugs,” he mumbled. In the darkness he could see more of them scattering across the counter, just black shadows moving under the microwave. They looked fat, and they ran quickly. For some reason the thought of ladybugs calmed him a little. He would clean up the apartment. He would make dinner for Chloe tomorrow. He would stop staying late after work. Everything was going to be okay.

Just as Royce was about to go up to bed, the phone rang. He lunged before the second ring could wake Chloe. “Yeah?” he barked.

“Hey buddy, it’s Dan. I tried the store but you weren’t there.”

“Right,” said Royce. He heard his heart thumping in his chest. He was surprised by how much the phone ringing had gotten to him. “What’s up?”

Dan said, “I need you to work for me tomorrow. I might be able to come in for the last couple hours, but I really need the whole time off.”

“What the hell?” replied Royce. “I was going to do some stuff tomorrow, Dan. I could use the time off.”

“Sorry. I should have asked you sooner.” He paused. Royce listened to the silence until Dan said, “So can you work for me?”
“Why do you need the day off?”

“My sister is having her baby. Her husband left her, and I’m the only family close enough to be there.” Dan sounded a little desperate.

“You’re not making this up?” asked Royce. Dan promised that he wasn’t. Royce sighed and said all right, he would work tomorrow. Dan thanked him.

“Hey,” Royce said suddenly, just before Dan was going to hang up. “You’ve looked at porn on the net, right?” Dan grunted. “I was looking at some bondage stuff.”

“Yeah?” said Dan. He sounded distracted.

“There were these pictures on there. It looked pretty bad.” Royce was rubbing the back of his neck. “There were women hanging from their tits, man.”

“Uh-huh,” said Dan.

“Wouldn’t that hurt?” Royce felt himself getting desperate. “I mean, they were being tortured, weren’t they?” he said. There was more silence. “It looked real, Dan,” said Royce. Even over the phone he could hear Dan’s smirk. “Let me get this straight. You were looking at some strange sites, getting your jollies, and then you saw something that turned your stomach. Is that right?”

“People don’t hang each other from their tits, Dan,” hissed Royce.

“Some do,” replied Dan. “Look, I can’t really talk right now. Check the store’s email tomorrow. I gotta go.” There was a click, and then the dial tone. Royce stood in the dark kitchen until a busy signal bawled from the phone. He replaced it on the hook and took off his clothes, dropping them onto the pile on the counter. He would clean everything tomorrow after work. He would still have time to make dinner for Chloe. He would stop staying late at the store.

Chloe was gone when the alarm clock woke Royce. He pushed the snooze until he finally
jumped out of bed, suddenly frantic with the realization that he would have to take the bus to work because Chloe had the car. He dove down the stairs and grabbed his work clothes off the counter. When he had pulled everything on and run through the door, backtracking to lock it, Royce turned and discovered the car sitting in the parking lot after all. Chloe had been driven to lunch. He thought for a moment that this was strange before he jumped in and drove toward the store.

He was only five minutes late but it didn’t matter since there were no customers for the first hour. The store closed early on Saturdays, so Royce only had to work four more hours. He leaned on the counter and stared straight ahead and avoided looking at the display computer until he remembered Dan telling him to check the email. Okay, just the email, and then he would arrange the inventory in back, or straighten the displays, anything but surf the internet.

There was only one message. Royce opened it and frowned when he realized it was from Dan. He leaned closer and began reading,

_I had two friends who claimed to love each other, and I believed them until the woman showed up with a black eye. She told me it was okay, that she and the male friend just liked to hurt each other. They invited me to watch one time. Things got pretty intense. The male friend pretended to break into the female friend’s home and tie her to the bed. He pretended to rape her. She screamed and told him to stop over and over, and it looked like she was going to cry, but he kept going._

_You feel a little clammy because you saw someone hanging from their breasts and you think it might have been real? Of course it was real. You can find web sites telling you that women having rape fantasies is a myth, and you can find sites written by women telling other women how to safely act out their rape fantasies. You can find pictures of rape, too. If you’re worried about whether it’s real, stop looking._

_When you leave, be sure to pull the door shut all the way after you lock up. It’s been sticking lately, so it doesn’t always close and lock. See you Monday._

Royce stood and began pacing. He was thinking about how he should reply. Who was
Dan to say things like that? Dan was quiet and meek, and he couldn’t have seen those things. That story had to be bullshit. Royce went to the computer and pulled out the seat. He was going to call Dan’s bluff, but suddenly the bell squawked, and he turned to see the farmer in his John Deere cap walking into the store.

Royce’s heart beat faster when he saw a woman walk in behind the man. She wore a brown muslin dress with white flowers embroidered on it, and as she paused for a moment in front of the plate glass windows Royce could see the outline of her body through the thin fabric. He traced her hips with his eyes. She was slim and much younger than the man. Her brown hair was pulled back in a long ponytail, though wisps of it hung around her face, and her eyes were icy blue, like Dan’s.

“I’ve come for the computer,” said the man.

Royce pulled his gaze away from the woman and nodded. He walked behind the counter and grabbed the system, talking the whole time about how they had replaced the old hard drive with a higher capacity model. “It only took a couple hours total,” he said. “We loaded your old operating system, too, I think.”

“Yep. That other fella called me for some kind of registration code,” replied the man.

Royce nodded. “So you’ll have to install your other programs when you get home. The total is a hundred and ninety five dollars, cash or charge.”

The man nodded and pulled a thin wallet from his back pocket. He took two crisp hundred dollar bills and laid them on the counter, resting a hand on the bills as he leaned close to Royce.

“Can you tell me how to put a password on this?” he asked, glancing at the woman.

Royce looked at the woman and started to speak but the words died on his lips. She was standing in front of the display computer, and she was reading the screen. Royce couldn’t remember closing the email.
“Umm, sure I could put a password on it,” he mumbled. “I can do that right now if you want to wait.” Royce spun and walked into the back. He tried not to think about the woman reading that email. He grabbed a keyboard and monitor and struggled with them to the counter. The woman was standing there when he set everything down. He glanced at her and saw she was staring right at him, grinning. She winked, and Royce felt his face burning.

As he hooked everything up and turned on the machine, though, Royce had an image of pushing the dress up to the woman’s waist, her legs wrapping around him. Her lips pressing against his, her strong hands fumbling with his pants.

“What password would you like,” asked Royce, keeping his voice steady.

The man patted his shirt pocket, then his pants. He asked, “Have you got a pen?”

The woman clasped her hands in front of her, causing her arms to push her breasts together and bunch her cleavage where she had neglected to button the dress to the top. She looked away from Royce and laughed in three short breaths.

“Yeah, I’ve got a pen,” said Royce. He fished in his pocket, where he was sure he kept a pen and a hand calculator. He could feel the calculator but not the pen, so he yanked the pocket inside out. The calculator skidded onto the counter, some pocket change and a ball of lint scattering after it, and then one of the coins came alive and crawled madly toward the cash register, only it wasn’t a coin at all but a cockroach.

Royce recoiled. He wiped his hand on his slacks, cringing when he felt a tickle up and down his legs as the cockroach disappeared under the cash register. “Oh, my god,” said the woman, staring at the counter where the roach had been. She held one strong, graceful hand over her mouth. She looked at the register, and then at Royce’s pocket which dangled limply from his slacks, and she repeated, “Oh my god.”

Royce shook his legs, hoping to dislodge whatever was tickling them. He felt his skin trying to crawl away from him. He looked from the woman to the man, wanting to say
something, wanting to pull off the pants and ball them up and throw them away, but the man
was staring at him, holding his eyes. “Have you got that pen?” asked the man.

The woman stepped forward and gingerly lay a pen on the counter. The man and the
woman looked at each other for a moment, and then the man stepped back. He gestured with
an open palm to the counter. The woman stared at the cash register as she picked up the pen
and scribbled a word on the piece of paper. She folded the paper in half and slid it toward
Royce. Then she quickly retreated and hugged her elbows. She turned her back to them.

“Here’s the password,” said the man, pressing his finger against the closed fold of the
paper and sliding it toward Royce. “Make whatever’s on this paper the password.”

“But,” said Royce, stopping when the man’s eyes hardened.

“This is the password,” the man repeated.

Royce picked up the piece of paper and held it before his face. In hurried scratches
was the word “heaven.” Royce looked from the man to the woman. She watched him over her
shoulder as he entered the password into the computer. A smile flickered across her lips.
Phil imagines he is conducting a symphony toward its climax. The piece is something like Mozart or Bach, completely predictable, totally under control. Phil foresees no surprises.

For this piece, there is a single performer. She sits opposite Phil, looking over the pizza pan, the puddle of grease congealed on the last remaining slice. She is maneuvering through the bridge, easing into the build. The trumpets are steadying themselves, the violinists' wrists loosening for the final burst.

As her speech nears completion, the crescendo fast approaching, Phil actually closes his eyes, allows his head to loll back, and begins flicking his hands through the air. For a wand he uses his butter knife.

“So I think it will be better if we remain friends,” she finally says. The drums have thundered in, the violinists flying over their strings, the trumpets blasting in full fury. Through all the commotion, Phil hears one plucky violin remain vibrating, waiting, as the other instruments fall silent. “Our friendship is too important to me,” concludes the violin.

Phil has leaned in over the table, eyes clenched, holding that violin’s notes aloft with his wand. Now that its music falls, Phil allows himself to drop the butter knife onto the table, allows his head to fall against his chest. Exhausted, he awaits thunderous applause.

“Phil, are you all right? I’m so sorry,” says the woman. Phil opens his eyes and, indeed, she is just a woman, not the orchestra he had imagined. He is once again Phil Hermann. The restaurant is silent, people glancing toward Phil’s little corner table.

Still, it was nice to imagine conducting, imagine being in control for once. Phil sits up, composes himself, and draws a deep breath. “I’m fine,” he says. “That’s fine, Bernice.”

Bernice leans forward, concern wrinkling her face. “Are you sure, Phil. You looked so pale for a minute there. Maybe you’re coming down with something?”

Phil stifles a laugh. “You’re probably the fifteenth woman to tell me she wants to be
my friend. Maybe twentieth.” He picks up the last piece of pizza and rips off a hunk with his teeth. Phil is hungry after his workout. “Did you know I dated a twenty-two year old woman when I was sixteen?” he says. “Of course, in the seven years since I haven’t dated anyone at all. Plenty of friends, though.” Phil pauses a moment to draw his lips back in a smile. “I do love having friends.”

Bernice slumps in relief and sips her water. “I’m so glad you understand, Phil. You’re so much like a brother to me, I just couldn’t bear risking that relationship.”

*Instead of singing, my father talked to himself in the shower. Specifically, he cussed. Glorious bursts of explicatives and pejoratives, enough to wilt flowers and curl the ears of innocent children. Just put the goddamned thing over there, he would say. Stupid fucking animals.*

*It terrified me when I was little, and it perplexed me until recently. That’s when I found myself standing in the shower saying, just put the goddamned guitar down. Stupid fucking animals.*

*Imagine that. Lucky I was alone.*

From the beginning of their relationship, he later determined, none of it felt to him the way the woman assumed it did. They met at a Christmas party. She played coy temptress, casting him in the role of the wide-eyed young stud who would succumb to her temptations. When he wouldn’t make the first move, she wrapped his arm around her body and stayed there all night. The morning found him exhausted and susceptible.

*Most people were leaving at six a.m., and she offered him a ride home. She drove*
them straight to her apartment\(^1\) without asking. In bed, she leaned across him to answer the phone, allowing her naked breasts to rub against his chest. On the phone was her sometimes ex-boyfriend. They discussed the party and whether she had met anyone there. She told the sometimes ex-boyfriend about him.

He had meanwhile slipped into a doze. He was startled awake when she shifted positions so her ass was inches from his hand. Since he had worried for more than twelve straight hours about this moment, rehearsing it many times in his mind, so that by now he felt obligated to get it done, because what would she think otherwise, and what would his friends think if he came all this way and didn’t do it, and since he would fall asleep if he didn’t get on with it—and if he fell asleep, he feared, it would probably never get done—he rubbed her ass, the pouch of her stomach, her breasts. She nuzzled against him, telling her sometimes ex-boyfriend that she had come home with a ripe young sixteen year old buck who was in bed with her that very moment. He wasn’t concerned about the direction of this conversation, though, since she had told him that her sometimes ex-boyfriend enjoyed hearing about her sexual escapades\(^2\), though of course he was eventually concerned that she might leave him for the sometimes ex-boyfriend. He just kept rubbing her until she hung up the phone, and then she turned her attention upon him.

Phil leaves the restaurant with the woman’s song still echoing inside his head. The melody

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\(^1\)Which he’d been to only once, on the day she gave him his first kiss, which also hadn’t felt like she assumed it did, since she’d been tickling him and let him pin her arms above her head, and then she’d made a point of looking into his eyes, so he leaned down and rubbed his sloppy lips against hers, thinking the whole time, how embarrassing. In the lingering wetness, he worried about the quality of his performance. He told his sister about it later, and she said, how romantic, so he guessed it must have been.

\(^2\)Which was after she had given him his first blow job. He had laid out blankets by his parents’ fireplace, set out potpourri and candles. When she saw the blanket and candles, she chuckled at him and commented on the eagerness of young men. The arc of his cum spanned the distance between his penis and the top of his head. It was the longest distance she’d ever seen, she said, and her sometimes ex-boyfriend was going to love that detail.
was overdone, and the lyrics were stale, but there was a raw strength in the performance. That raw strength has seeped into Phil’s blood, which is running hot in his veins. Never before has his blood run this hot.

Phil is walking toward the subway. As he shoulders through the wind off Lake Michigan, Phil hears a rumble like bass drums pounding. He assumes it is the downtown buildings tumbling away on all sides. The ground trembles under his feet as the buildings crash down. Phil suspects it’s the collapsing buildings that are stirring up all the wind.

In the subway, Phil is alone except for one woman. As he sits, the woman watches him. When Phil tries to smile at her, the woman locks her eyes on her book. Stooped under a bulbous knit cap, huddled deep in her gray wool coat, the woman is a granite mountain. She is bald stone. Phil rests his head in his hands, listens to the train roaring through the tunnel and feels heat pouring off his face. Truly, his blood has never run this hot.

An image has been plaguing Phil for months now. It began as a random thought—what would it feel like to cut off his penis? The image has since grown into a graphic sensation of holding his penis taut in his left hand and, gripping a serrated knife in his right hand, sawing the blade through his soft flesh. On a few occasions, when the vision has jumped at him in the midst of casual conversation or ringing up people’s groceries, Phil has winced in pain. Now, rocking on the subway, the image blooms before him. His penis is hot from the blood, the plastic knife handle cool and smooth. There is some resistance before the flesh gives.

“Still, shouldn’t it make some difference?” Phil yells through his fingers. He means the fact that he had fallen in love with Bernice. He looks at the woman, huddled within her coat, locked into her book. “You would think it might make some difference,” he yells at her. Then Phil laughs. At first his laugh is forced. The laugh comes because the moment—crazy talk by a crazy man, surely—seems to call for it. Then Phil is really laughing, he can’t stop.
Through the haze of tears Phil sees the mountain rise and scuttle through the connecting door into the next car.

Phil cackles, falling back in his seat, enjoying his joke on the woman. He was fooling her—Phil Hermann isn’t really crazy at all.

By the time I got to college, I was talking to myself all the time. I loved it, even though it disturbed the people around me. During my senior year my roommate told me to seek counseling. Fucking twerp. I promised I’d get a shrink and then I transferred to a single room, where I could talk to myself as much as I wanted.

I felt a connection to my father with the talking, for I finally understood who it was he had been talking to. Ghosts. I don’t mean that white-sheet bull shit, or dead relatives. I mean the ghosts that come just when you’re falling asleep, when your guard is down. All the stupid mistakes you’ve made, the stupid things you’ve said. Every time you have hurt someone. Coming at you when you least expect it, ruining your night.

Most people respond to these ghosts with guilt, and eventually reconciliation. But my father never forgave himself for the mistakes he made, so the ghosts never stopped tormenting him. In the shower, the words he should have said erupted from his mouth. Words like, I said I’m fucking sorry, God dammit. Isn’t that worth something here?

She said, you really forced me into monogamy in the first place. I never really agreed to seeing only you, she said. I wasn’t ready.

Couldn’t you have mentioned that? he asked. I wouldn’t have suggested it if I’d known you weren’t ready.

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3 Which was moments before he learned cruelty for the first time. He tried very hard to keep his anger out of his voice.
But you might not have continued seeing me, and I wanted to see you, she said. He smiled and tried to hold her hand, remembering that morning they’d spent together in her bed, and later when she took him home saying, don’t let your parents see the glow on your face, and he had wondered, am I glowing? Is this what it’s like to glow? But she pulled her hand away. She said, Maybe you’re right. Maybe I should have known, and I should have said no. That afternoon when I agreed not to see other people, when you had called me during your lunch period, I made out with Ax on my couch.

Then why did you agree to go steady, he asked. He immediately flinched at his words, go steady. What a painfully sixteen year old way to put it. She snickered and then resumed her look of sorrow.

His stomach was hot and tight. The greasy fast-food air clung inside his nostrils, coated his arms and face. I want to go home now, he said. I need to take a shower.

Are you gonna be okay, she asked. He could see that she was bored.

He remembered her saying she wanted to show him how to please women. She wanted to make him into a good, patient lover. She liked that about him, the potential, everything she could make him be. He wondered when he had lost the potential.

Admit it, she said as she stood and pulled her car keys from her pocket. You liked dating a 22 year-old woman. You bragged about it to your friends.

He remembered the first time at her apartment, when she had picked up the phone and told him to call his best friend and report the news. I’d rather you do it here where I can listen, she said. You know you’re going to do it anyway. And so he had, while she listened, and he’d continued talking into the empty receiver after his friend told him to fuck off and hung up on him. He had never mentioned her to his friends again.
At their first meeting after their first breakup, she said she would agree to come back to him. At the next meeting after that, she told him that she was surprised she wasn’t walking bow-legged after the solid fucking her sometimes ex-boyfriend had given her the night before. She hinted at her sometimes ex-boyfriend’s superior stamina and prowess in bed, saying It’s good to be having some real sex again.

By the time of their last telephone conversation, he had learned cruelty. I hate breaking up, she said, her voice wavering with emotion. She had previously claimed that he was finally teaching her to really love again. He had told her that he wasn’t sure he could trust women after watching her cheat on him so much, and there had been a note of hope in her voice when she had asked, Really, have I ruined you for other women? Now she was telling him she hated breaking up, and he shrugged and tried to say in the tone of a shrug, me too, I guess. He read the weather report while she talked.

Phil pulls the old shoe box from his closet shelf and drops it. The bundle of papers inside spills across the floor, and he sinks to his knees and rustles through them. Phil is determined to put the letters in order, to read them from start to finish and determine exactly where he had made the fatal mistake of becoming Bernice’s friend. Beethoven’s ninth symphony rumbles from his stereo.

Instead of letters, Phil finds printouts of emails various women sent him during his college days. Thank you for helping me free myself from that bastard, says one. You can never know how special you are to me, says another. This friendship means so much to me.

Phil winces upon discovering a series of scathing emails sent to him during a course on gender studies. He wonders why he ever printed the emails out. He wonders why he has

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4Which was also his first breakup, she being his first what-could-be-called-girlfriend, and about which his sister said, hurts like hell, doesn’t it. Hurts like a sonnofabitch. He said it did.
kept them all these years. Phil stuffs everything back into the shoe box.

Hoping that methodical thinking will calm him, Phil takes a quick inventory of his apartment. One room, one bed, two books from the gender studies course, one algebra textbook, one psychology textbook, one kitchenette containing one refrigerator and a microwave oven. And a bottle of diluted vodka wrapped with a birthday bow. Phil walks into the kitchenette and grabs the bottle of diluted vodka.

*It was the babysitter who came on Tuesday and Friday afternoons. I was about six or seven. She must have been in high school because she would arrive at about three and do homework until I’d eaten my dinner. Then she would come to my room. She said she came to read me a story. She pulled down my pants, and she opened her shirt. She had very cold hands.*

*Abuse is what everyone else keeps telling me it was. Or worse, some people tell me it wasn’t abuse at all, that I must have enjoyed it since I was a boy and she was a woman. It was not entirely enjoyable. I mean, I don’t enjoy remembering it.*

*But I’m not sure the word abuse is appropriate for how it seemed at the time. That occurred later, when I was older, when I began to think about her touching me. When I could no longer convince myself it hadn’t happened. Or maybe abuse is what occurs every time I try to figure out exactly what happened, or exactly how I feel about it.*

*Did I date the older woman because of this abuse? Of course not. I don’t know, maybe. Few of the women in my high school would date me, I know that. They all wanted to be my friend, to have me listen about what bastards their boyfriends could be, but never date them. I think it was more a case of supply and demand with the older woman.*

*Okay, so our time is up. Am I cured now? Will the ghosts stay away?*

By the midterm of his first semester, his roommate had forced him to seek counseling
because of the talking to himself. The counselor was a frizzy-haired woman he swore he would never open up to. She sounded like the other cashiers did when they spoke to customers, voices dripping with the slick grease of thin sincerity. How are you? Tell me why you talk to yourself. Have a nice day. Do you hear voices?

In his gender studies course, a student with combat boots and long, beautiful hair brought in a photocopied chapter about crimes against women. She handed out a copy to each of the students. The article named sexual abuse, rape, violence of every kind. The class listened in shocked silence as she tallied the list. The professor said that if any students felt comfortable doing so, they might share encounters with abuse they had experienced or heard about. The class sat in awkward silence. Finally, the student with beautiful hair stepped forward. She told the class about her uncle, who had touched her when she was a child and threatened to beat her up if she ever told anyone. She said that was the reason she had become a lesbian. She said the other women in the class shouldn’t be afraid to step forward, since statistically seven of them had suffered similar abuse.

When he raised his hand, the class snickered and she frowned. She said she wasn’t joking, and he said that neither was he. He told the class about the baby sitter who had touched him. A few guys in the back cheered him on, but the professor frowned at them. The student with beautiful hair accused him of making up the story about the babysitter. She said that sort of thing didn’t happen, and anyway if it did, that was different.

In his dorm, the guys started asking if he wanted them to hire a babysitter. No thanks, he said, his mouth straightening more each time. Finally he cornered one of the men and said, look, I know the women on this campus. A lot of them call me their best friend, he said, and I can tell you all their secrets. The man asked why the hell he would want to know a bunch of women’s secrets, so he leaned closer and said to the man, because it’ll help you get them in the sack. The man thought about this and then said, sure, bro. Maybe I’ll tell you how to get a
woman for yourself, too.

He told them everything he knew about all the women who had come to him for advice about boyfriends and potential boyfriends, who had told him about their dream men. Since he was a good listener, he had a lot of information to share. He held back nothing. Finally, when he was finished, he asked the man how he might get a woman himself. The man looked him up and down and shrugged, as if to insinuate it was probably hopeless. Then he said, you been trying too hard to be their friend. Women don’t date friends, they date guys who don’t wanna be their friends. Then they try to make those guys their friends.

The school he went to was tiny, so it didn’t take long for the women to discover what he’d done. The student with the beautiful hair stomped into his path one morning and crossed her arms. She had shaved off all her beautiful hair. She reminded him of Sinead O Connor spitting on the Pope. Get the hell out of here, she said. I’m only going to warn you this once. Another week of having no friends, of being hated by all the women who had formerly been his friends, and of being laughed at by the men who offered to get him a babysitter, and he dropped out.

Phil is spinning the empty vodka bottle. Fourteen times in a row the bottle has landed on him. The fifteenth, Phil rises and stumbles to the closet. He escorts himself inside and stands between the thick, stuffy coats. He counts seven minutes. When the time is up, Phil falls through the closet door and lies cackling on the floor.

“Seven in heaven,” he cackles into his empty apartment. At some point he had gone back to the shoe box and rooted through the old printouts of emails. Phil grabs the nearest one and reads, I can’t believe how you could betray my trust after everything I told you. We shared so much, and you ruined it.

Phil agrees. “I ruined it,” he says to the ceiling, and cackles some more. The next
printout he grabs simply asks, Do you know what you are? Do you know what you’ve done? Phil accuses it of melodrama and stuffs the printout into his mouth. The paper is stiff until it gels into a dry mush. Phil spits the mush at the ceiling.

He crawls to the bathroom, batting aside more bottles of diluted liquor, glancing with scorn at a stray box of sleeping pills. He twists the bath tub nozzle and watches the jets of hot water squirt out. He slaps his hand over the sink, finds the cool plastic handle of the serrated steel knife. Phil throws a leg over the side of the tub, then his body, and falls heavily into the water. He worries that it’s burning him, but as it soaks through his slacks and sport coat the heat is pleasant.

For a moment, though, his tongue sticks in his mouth. His throat is dry. A looseness slides through his belly. But Phil shakes all that away. The whole situation is funny, really. Phil decides people are too uptight about these things. He grips the knife in his right hand and pulls down his zipper. Phil flinches as he discovers the water is hot, after all. He cups his penis with his left hand, protecting it from the painful heat until everything feels adjusted. The room has begun to spin, so Phil thinks he must hurry. He grips his penis in his left hand.

It doesn’t feel like he thought it would. In fact, it doesn’t feel much like anything. “I’m sorry,” he says to the woman with the beautiful hair. She is frowning, and she turns away.

\[5\] Which is the first and last time he hallucinated.
The rattle and grumble of the lawn mower being pulled along the sidewalk had been the soundtrack to Pete Picket’s childhood. He wiped sweat from his forehead and remembered those summer days of his youth, days spent under open blue skies just like this one, humidity sticking to his arms just like now, all the hours he had spent pulling the same lawn mower across the same lawns. That was, he suddenly realized, almost fourteen years ago. In fourteen years Pete Picket had not moved at all.

Yet he had moved, Pete told himself. He had gone to a liberal arts college, and he had graduated magna cum laude. That was movement. And in four years he had had three relationships with three beautiful women, although by graduation each of them was long gone. But to have loved at all, that was also movement.

Pete kept his head down as he walked so that he wouldn’t have to meet anybody’s eyes. The fact was, for all his movement Pete feared that the time had finally come when his wheels were merely spinning. As far as he could tell, there were two ways of looking at his situation: He was just another underachieving college graduate, living in his parents’ house while they were on vacation, mowing neighborhood lawns for extra money; or he was the caretaker of his parents’ home, providing a valuable service for which they had paid him a reasonable stipend that he supplemented with odd jobs. At any given moment he might see himself as either of these things. But whichever he was, deadbeat or caretaker, Pete Picket knew he was also waiting.

Pete made the mistake of glancing ahead as he was looking to cross the street to his parents’ house, and standing right there in the middle of the sidewalk was Harold Bloom.
Harold had lived across from Pete forever. His shirt was off today, exposing graying chest hair. Harold carried himself like a middle aged Adonis.

“Hello there, Pete Picket,” said Harold. He rested one hand on his hip and threw the other out for Pete to shake. “When did you get back in town?”

Pete did his best to smile. “Only two weeks ago. I’m watching my parents’ house while they cruise the Mediterranean.” Harold nodded and caught Pete’s hand in a vice-like grip. Pete gritted his teeth and kept smiling. “How have you been?” he asked.

Harold let go of Pete’s hand and gazed at the sky. “I have been just fine, thank you. I retired a few months back, you know, and it’s given me so much time to help those in need. I feel healthier now than I ever did working.” He sighed deeply and dropped his hands from his hips. “Work takes the soul out of you, Pete.” He glanced at Pete. “Well, not everybody. You know.”

Pete nodded, wondering if, once he got a job, it would take the soul out of him. He was squeezing and loosening his fingers to make sure there was still blood flowing into his hand.

“You’ve gotta love what you do,” said Harold. “So, will you be a senior next year?”

“No, I’m done,” said Pete.

Harold frowned. “Well, college isn’t right for everybody. It’s perfectly all right to drop out if that’s what—”

“I didn’t drop out,” interrupted Pete. “I graduated. With honors in economics. I’ve just begun looking for a job, but I’m thinking about taking the summer off while I find something.”
“Oh, you graduated,” repeated Harold. “Well, congratulations.” Harold pulled his wallet from the pocket of his gray athletic shorts and flipped it open. He slid out a fifty dollar bill and placed it in Pete’s hand.

“Thanks,” said Pete, blushing. He tucked the money into his jeans pocket. “If you ever need your lawn mowed, just let me know.”

“Oh, I enjoy mowing my lawn,” replied Harold. “I even mow Mr. Scrap’s lawn for him sometimes. Speaking of Mr. Scrap, have you noticed anything funny about his house since you’ve been back?”

Mr. Scrap was an old recluse who had lived next door to Pete forever. His had always been the shabbiest house on the street, perhaps the shabbiest in the whole neighborhood. While Pete was growing up the gutters collapsed, the white paint peeled in long strips from the garage door, and the lawn was regularly knee-deep and wild.

Pete turned and looked across the street at Scrap’s house. The only thing that seemed strange was that the lawn looked beautiful and everything had a fresh coat of paint. Even the ancient truck that usually sat in the driveway had been replaced with a brand new model that gleamed in the afternoon sun. “Looks fine to me,” he said.

“Well, I haven’t seen much happening over there lately,” replied Harold. “I’m afraid he might have fallen or otherwise hurt himself. You can’t be too careful with an old guy like that.”

Pete glanced at Harold’s gray tufts of chest hair. “Right,” he said. “I’ll keep an eye out and let you know if I see anything strange.”

Harold nodded. “That’s all we can do,” he said. “Good to see you, Pete. Keep in
touch. Maybe you can come over for supper one night next week.”

Pete said he would be happy to come, but he would have to make sure he had the time. “I’m awfully busy with my projects,” he said.

“All right, you just let me know.” Harold squeezed his hand again and then turned and walked toward his house. Pete watched him go, and then he considered the old tire swing hanging from the tree in Harold’s front yard. He guessed the swing was for Harold’s grandchildren, but in the two weeks Pete had been home he couldn’t remember anyone playing on it. If the swing was there for show, it wasn’t very showy—a Firestone dangling from yellow nylon rope, motionless in the thick summer heat. Pete turned and pulled the lawn mower across the street to his parents’ house.

This had not been Pete’s room when he was little. It had been his big brother’s room. Pete’s parents had knocked down a wall in the living room, turned a hallway into a walk-in closet, and suddenly Pete’s bedroom was gone. He had discovered this treachery during his junior year when he had visited for the weekend, and in some ways he believed he was still recovering. It had been the first time he’d realized this was no longer his house, a disorienting moment in which he understood he would be homeless until he bought his own home.

Now his brother’s old bedroom served as both a guest room and, as Pete had discovered when he had first opened the closet door, a storage area for his father’s old business suits. Pete peeled off his sticky tee-shirt and boxer shorts, and he raised his arms and drank in the cool air-conditioning. He dropped the dirty clothes in the pile in front of the closet and walked to the bathroom.
As he started the shower Pete thought about his conversation with Harold. Why had Harold been so worried about Mr. Scrap? Scrap had always been pretty self-sufficient, as far as Pete was concerned. He could remember when the neighborhood children routinely gathered to play hide and seek. The best spots had always been in Scrap’s yard because of the mighty lawn, where he could lie down and be lost for hours in the tall grass, and the sprawling bushes that could be climbed under and would provide unparalleled cover, and also, of course, because of the rock. The rock was enormous, which meant it was perfect for hiding behind, and because of its fringe of tulips the rock was also just challenging enough to make climbing it worthwhile. Hell, the rock alone had been enough to pull in children from all over town. They came gap-mouthed in teams to put their hands against its cool stone and tell one another stories about how long it had been there, which was since the dinosaurs, and how it had been moved there in the first place, which varied from aliens to cave men.

Always, however, at some point during these reverent meetings Scrap’s back window was thrown open and his blurry form appeared behind the screen, yelling hoarsely at the children, calling them little bastards and demanding they get the hell off his lawn. Pete had once vengefully reported the cussing to his parents, expecting parental wrath to fall upon Scrap’s foul mouth. They had told him to leave poor Mr. Scrap alone.

Given such instructions, how could Pete resist? There had come the inevitable night when everyone was playing flashlight tag. As Pete towed off, his wet body shivering in the air-conditioning, he thought back to that night. He remembered the bushes under Scrap’s windows, and he heard the other children crowding around him. The bushes had scratched his cheeks with dry twigs like old claws. The children had all dared one another to peer through
the windows and finally see what sort of hideous, deformed man lurked inside. Pete remembered volunteering or being volunteered for the task, raising his head through the bushes. The window was filled with colorful flickers, and he heard the muffled tones of television, and he saw a cloudy, stooped form seated in front of what must have been three or four televisions, all running at once, all on different channels. The cloudy form wavered a little, and suddenly a huge face was inches from Pete’s—a twisted face with a witch’s hooked nose, pale and wrinkled and full of wrath, breathing clouds of poison onto the other side of the window.

Pete had screamed. He chuckled now to think about it, pulling on his boxer shorts and a shirt. But he had been terrified in that moment, and had screamed, and the other boys had taken up his scream. In a flurry of chaos they had clawed at the bushes and dug at the earth and trampled one another in their frenzy to escape. Pete had been pushed to the ground, his fingers crushed beneath someone’s fleeing rubber sneaker and his knees digging into sharp roots. After a few loud, confusing moments, he had been left wounded in the ravaged bushes. The other boys’ stomps faded into darkness, clomped across the streets, and were gone.

Pete trudged into his brother’s old room and fell onto the bed. He pushed the piles of clean clothes and books onto the floor. Mowing those lawns had knocked him out. He realized he was out of shape and decided he should make regular workouts one of his projects. He considered setting the alarm to get up early and go jogging.

Before he set the alarm, though, Pete found himself thinking about the night, after all the boys had run away and he was left in the bushes. The noise of their retreat had deadened all the usual thrum of night, and in that eerie silence he heard the locks on Mr. Scrap’s door
grinding. The front door had flown open. The hoarse voice had shouted “Get away from my bushes, you goddamn kids!” A wounded moan followed, and then the slow shuffle of slippers on concrete. And then Pete saw a stooped form fill the night sky, eclipse the stars, block out the yellow streetlight. Its face was a shadow haloed in electric yellow. Pete tried not to breathe or move. He tried to be part of the mangled bush that the man above him was staring at so intensely. He tried to be anything but a goddamned kid. But Mr. Scrap had let out that same wounded moan, a simple noise so gentle the choruses of insects rose again, so that the peaceful thrum returned. Pete watched the man turn and shuffle away, heard the door close firmly. He heard the night’s thrum waver and die once more as he clumsily untangled himself from the bush and made his way home.

“That whole thing was just a prank,” Pete mumbled as he pulled the covers over himself. He decided he would lie in bed for a little while, and then maybe he would make some dinner. Man, mowing those lawns was killing him.

Pete awoke some time later to the dark room. His head was thick with sleep and his bladder was full. He stood and walked to the bathroom, sighed as he pissed. When he was finished he returned to the bedroom and paused by the window. Something seemed wrong with Mr. Scrap’s house. Pete tried to concentrate, but his head felt too heavy. He was sure there was something different over there, but then he wondered if it wasn’t just Harold making him paranoid. Pete climbed back into bed to think it over some more. Something about Scrap’s windows.

He awoke to the phone ringing. Before he understood what was happening he had sat up and
grabbed the handset off the bedside table. “Hello?” he asked blearily.

It was his mother asking how the house was. Pete told her it was fine, that he was keeping the lawn mowed. He told her he had even begun mowing the neighbors’ lawns to earn extra money. Between that and his many projects, Pete was keeping quite busy.

“What projects?” asked his mother.

“I’m doing a painting,” he replied. “In the basement.”

“Don’t you dare get paint on my nice carpet down there,” his mother commanded.

“Don’t worry, I laid down some plastic. I’m also writing some poetry and taking some photographs. I’m really trying to use this time to get to know my hometown, to make a record of what it’s like since I probably won’t make it back here after I get a job.” Pete’s head felt clearer now. He stood and pulled on a pair of jeans. “I might even buy some old calculus books and brush up on my math. You know, really make the most of this time off.”

“That sounds nice. Have you been sending out resumes?”

“Yeah,” he lied. “Dozens since you left.” There was a moment of silence between them, to which Pete added, “And I’ve been looking at some graduate schools.”

“Keep sending out those resumes. And let me know if you hear anything,” she said. Pete suspected his mom didn’t want him going back to school. To be honest, he didn’t want to go back himself. But for some reason he couldn’t get started sending out resumes. Every day he looked through the Classifieds, and every day he circled a few listings that sounded promising for a liberal arts graduate with an economics major, and then he turned on the television with its deluxe cable package, or he went to mow a lawn. At night when he was tired he would see the newspaper, folded open and smeared with red circles, and he would
pretend he had seen nothing. “Is there anything else going on?” asked his mother after another moment of silence.

“Have you noticed anything strange about Mr. Scrap lately?” Pete blurted. “More strange than usual, I mean.”

“You’re talking about Charlie?” said his mom. The moment she said that name, Charlie, the image of Mr. Scrap as a stooped, angry adult was replaced by a hunched man in black knee socks waving at Pete whenever he was home from college. An agreeable man who waved and spilled gasoline on his driveway, waved and smiled.

“Charlie, that’s his name,” said Pete, trying it out. “I haven’t seen him mowing lately.”

“Harold mows for him now,” replied Pete’s mom. “If you’re worried about Charlie, why don’t you go check on him?”

“Oh, no,” said Pete. He couldn’t imagine. The only time Pete had ever gone over there, besides the night he’d mangled the bushes, was when his church youth group had tried to deliver a pizza to Scrap. It was supposed to be a lesson on reaching out to the lonely. They had gone in the early afternoon, had rung the bell and pounded on the door as the youth leader looked on with an armload of pizza. The youth leader had said, “After we all eat pizza, why don’t we repaint Mr. Scrap’s garage door for him, too?” Just then Scrap had yanked open the door and stared bleary-eyed through the grungy screen. He had listened to the youth leader chirp about how the children had come to share pizza and good will with him, and without a word Scrap had slammed shut the door. There had been the scratch of many deadbolts sliding into place. The youth leader had tried to maintain her smile as she sent the
children back to the van and once again knocked on Scrap’s door. Pete had walked next door to his own house, thinking he was tired of youth group, and before he went inside he had heard Scrap’s hoarse voice yelling at the youth leader to just leave him alone.

“He’s not a very friendly man,” said Pete.

“Sure he’s friendly. Your father and I talk with him all the time. We sit in his garage and drink iced tea. He’s actually a very nice man.”

This sounded not just unlikely to Pete, but preposterous. He laughed as he looked through his blinds at Scrap’s empty windows. “You’re kidding me,” he said.

“Not at all. Go on over and knock on the door, you’ll see,” she replied. “Listen honey, your father wants to go back to the ship now. We’re having a wonderful time. I’ll see you in a few more days. Love you honey.”

Pete listened to the click, and then the dial tone. He hung up the phone and walked outside to the front porch. There was an old wooden swing, weathered and fading but otherwise presentable, which Pete slumped into. The day was already ferociously hot, and it wasn’t even June yet. Pete couldn’t bear to think about July.

He wanted to be in the moderate warmth of the Mediterranean with his parents, sitting on the observation deck of the cruise ship, looking at the islands in the distance, meeting olive-skinned natives with handsome faces and beautiful bodies. But not with his parents, he decided. He wanted to be there alone. Or at least, Pete thought, I just want to be elsewhere. I want something to happen. But not Charlie Scrap. This was suddenly clear to him—he didn’t want anything to be happening with Charlie Scrap.

Pete closed his eyes and swung slowly back and forth. The truth was, nothing was
happening anyway. His so-called painting was just lazy smears of acrylic paint on a white piece of posterboard he’d bought at the grocery store. And the poems he’d tried writing were aimless scratches and doodles in a spiral bound notebook. He hadn’t even bought film for his camera. And he was thinking of buying some calculus books? Where the hell had that come from?

There was the scrape of feet on gravel, and Pete opened his eyes to see Harold walking across the street. “Hey Pete,” he called. At least he was wearing a shirt today. “I just came by to see if you could mow Mr. Scrap’s lawn for me. I’m going to work with Habitat for Humanity this weekend, so I won’t be able to do it.” Harold’s voice was like butter melting across a hot pan.

“Umm,” said Pete. “You want me to mow Mr. Scrap’s lawn?”

“It would sure help me out if you did,” replied Harold. “And it’d be a feather in your cap, too.” Harold turned his full, chisel-jawed attention on Pete.

“Sure I’ll do Charlie’s lawn,” he said, deflating. He wondered if he should ask Harold for money, but then he remembered the fifty dollar bill from yesterday. And anyway, mowing Scrap’s lawn seemed like the sort of thing people should do for free.

“Charlie,” repeated Harold. “Yes, thank you. I’ll see you Monday.” He turned and began walking back across the street.

“Hey, I haven’t noticed anything strange over there,” yelled Pete. “Are you sure you haven’t seen Charlie around?”

Harold stopped, his back to Pete. He was still a moment before he said, over his shoulder, “About a week ago I drew a white chalk mark on his truck tire. Charlie goes out for
groceries at least every two weeks. So I guess we’ll know something in about a week.”
Harold continued across the street, and Pete watched him nudge the Firestone on his way into his house. The tire swayed lazily back and forth.

Pete used his arm to wipe sweat off his forehead and looked up and down the street for signs of life. Other than the wilted bushes and brown-spotted lawns, there were none. He sat swinging back and forth, thinking of nothing at all, really, until he saw Harold back out of his garage in a restored Corvair, adjust the rear view mirror, wave once, and drive away.

Harold was probably going far away, to sweat in the day and laugh with the other workers in the night. Pete thought about some of the students he had gone to college with. In one of his writing classes there had been a woman with a pacemaker, and a guy whose father had Alzheimer’s disease. Their essays were always the best, their poems always the most touching, for they had the rare authority to speak firsthand of life and death, of hardship and victory. “Those kinds of stories are really hot right now,” one of Pete’s writing teachers had said. The woman with the pacemaker had gotten her essay published.

“That’s the kind of thing I’m talking about,” muttered Pete. Those people had lived through something. Sure it was awful for them (the woman’s surgeries, the man’s trips to his father’s hospice), but they had learned from it. They were able to take a harrowing experience and make something beautiful, and as far as Pete was concerned, that was the main thing. They could look people in the eye and say, I survived this. What had Pete ever survived?

He sat rocking back and forth some more, mulling everything over. Finally Pete stood and turned toward Mr. Scrap’s house. He walked off the porch and across his lawn, into the high and scratchy grass of Scrap’s yard, and he stopped on the driveway beside Scrap’s
glimmering new truck. He sank to his knees and poked his head into the back wheel well, angling his neck uncomfortably as he searched all over the tires. And there, scrawled directly across the top of the black rubber, was a grainy white line. Pete imagined Harold crouching here, glancing furtively from house to house as he leaned in with his stick of chalk. He imagined the look of satisfaction on Harold’s face when he stood and considered the mark, proud of his detective work.

In the distance a weed whacker growled to life, and a dog barked frantically in response. Pete looked from the tire to the tangled mess of weeds and crabgrass in Scrap’s yard, and then the slightly shorter grass in his parents’ yard, and he realized that both of them were due for a mowing. Grass grew vigorously in this humidity. Its inevitability bothered Pete. He thought you could measure the stages of your whole life by the lawns you mowed. He decided he should stop poking around Scrap’s truck and get the mower ready.

As Pete turned, he glanced at the garage door, remembered its peeling white paint. In his mind he heard his mother say, just go up and knock. But what did he know about this kind of thing? Knocking on old men’s doors. What did Harold know?

Pete thought about Charlie stooped over his lawn mower, sloshing gasoline as he waved. All those dark nights he had spent sneaking around Charlie’s yard, scaring himself and his friends. It’s only his house, Pete thought. Go up and knock.

Pete licked his finger and, leaning down into the wheel well, he rubbed the white line away.

Pete stood on Charlie Scrap’s front porch, looking at the bushes he had wrecked as a boy. He
stepped closer and stared at the window above the bushes. Some time after Pete and his friends had peeped through this window, Charlie had pulled shut the curtains and never opened them again. Now Pete listened to the listless breeze in the trees, trains blowing horns in the distance, dogs yapping, and underneath it all, muffled, the music that started the local news. He stepped gingerly into the bushes and cupped his ear against the glass. There were voices talking about the heat wave that had settled in the Miami Valley, a woman saying they would have more on that story later.

Pete jumped out of the bushes feeling foolish. He arranged the branches he’d trampled and blinked sweat out of his eyes and at last gave up in disgust. Of course Mr. Scrap was all right, he was in there watching television as always. If Pete hadn’t seen any lights on during the night, when Scrap had always been most active, it was probably because the kitchen light had burnt out and Mr. Scrap didn’t have any more bulbs. He was probably going to buy some the next time he went out for groceries. In the meantime he was just fine in there, watching the news, like always.

More crummy detective work, thought Pete. Why don’t we leave him alone? All he really wants is to be left alone. Maybe Harold Bloom understood that and so he drew lines on Mr. Scrap’s tire instead of knocking on the door. Maybe Mr. Scrap was sick of people using him to make themselves feel better, mowing his lawn and bringing him pizzas.

Or maybe, Pete thought, his shoulders slumping, his stomach sliding around loosely inside him, he’s dead in there.

His knuckles rapping on the screen door made a sharp but hollow noise. Pete pulled open the metal frame and tapped on the wood beyond. He pressed the bell and counted seven
before he pressed it again. He could hear a commercial for a psychic hotline murmuring through the door. Pete made a fist and pounded. He cupped his throbbing hand around his mouth and leaned into the crack between the door and the jam. “Mr. Scrap,” he called, and then, “Charlie.”

The commercials yammered on, a florist, Disney world, Pepperidge Farm cookies. “Charlie, it’s your neighbor. I came to see how you’re doing!” yelled Pete. He had forgotten what he’d planned to say if Charlie answered. The truth is he hadn’t given it much thought. As he yelled and banged on the door, he heard a voice yell back.

“What are you doing?”

Pete’s heart skipped in his chest. Relief swept through him as he realized the voice must have come from inside, the high-pitched tone of a surprised old man at whose door somebody was unaccountably pounding. Pete stood straight, preparing an explanation for when Mr. Scrap opened the door.

“Why are you shouting?” Pete realized the voice didn’t sound like it was coming from the house after all, but around the yard. He shook his head and stepped off the porch. A little girl was watching him from the lawn next door.

“What?” he said.

“What are you doing over there?” asked the girl. She held a popsicle that was melting down her wrist, but all her attention was on Pete.

“I’m knocking on the door,” he said, turning back to the porch. He was picturing himself breaking down the door and running into Charlie’s living room. The light would be dim, and as his eyes adjusted he would gradually be able to make out a body slouched in the
chair. Charlie would look like he’d nodded to sleep and never woke up.

Pete stepped onto the front porch and, just as he was pulling open Charlie’s screen
door, he heard the little girl start yelling, “That’s not your house.” Pete put his hand on the
brass doorknob. He experimentally twisted the handle and the door clicked, swaying inward.
A smile bloomed on Pete’s face as he stepped forward into the house and drew breath to yell,
“Hey Charlie, you all right in here?”

Once as a child Pete had caught a fish from a little pond. He couldn’t bear to throw it
back, and he couldn’t bear to eat it, either. His father had put the fish in a bucket of water in
the backyard. A few days later Pete had found the bucket tipped over, half the fish gleaming
in the grass. He had stood over the little silver disc, staring with fascination until a peculiar
odor had reached his nose. The odor affected his body more than it did his nose, and he had
found himself backing away, hiding his face in the crook of his elbow and gagging. For hours
after that the odor had lingered with him, so that everything was tainted with it.

In his first moments inside the house, that memory filled Pete’s mind. There was only
room for the memory of that odor and this new, more terrible stench. He found himself
stumbling down the hallway, eyes watering so much he couldn’t see where he was, the stench
surrounding him. It was rotten meat, it was curdled milk. He tried plugging his nose and
breathing through his mouth but he could taste it, thick on his tongue. Pete was gagging, and
there was the crazy thought that he hadn’t vomited in more than two years, since a party at
college where he’d drank too much, but now the vomit welled up in his throat, and he clawed
along the hallway, trying to find the way he had come, stumbling into what he thought was a
bedroom, and then a bathroom, both empty as far as he could tell through his soaked eyes,
and finally into the fresh air, but the air wasn’t fresh at all, for the smell had followed him, had been soaking into his clothes. He stumbled and sprawled onto the grass, dug his nose into the roots, and the vomit came.

When he was finished, Pete rolled over and looked up at the sky. It was pale and bloated, not a cloud anywhere. He heard the little girl asking him something, and then she started to cry. Pete sat up and looked at her.

“Get your mother,” he said. The stench was once more upon him, so Pete stumbled to his feet and made his way toward the girl. “Go get your mother,” he yelled. “Hurry, go!”

The little girl screamed and balled a fist under her nose. Tears rolled down her cheeks as she turned and ran into her own house. Pete made his way back to the front porch, pressing his shirt to his nose to block the stench, but the shirt was saturated with it. He pulled off the shirt and tied it around his face anyway, just below his eyes. Isn’t this what you came to see? asked a voice inside him. Isn’t this what you were hoping for?

Pete stood straight and walked through the door. His eyes were clear now, and he found himself standing in a dim hallway with brown and orange carpeting. He walked down the hall and turned right into the living room. There were four televisions, two small ones stacked on two larger models. Three were silent, the fourth tuned to the mid-day news. They faced an empty recliner. Pete squinted into the room, his eyes gradually adjusting, and he saw a couch below the window, on which the sunlight was filtered orange through the closed curtains, and on which lay the body of Charlie Scrap.

Pete forced himself to walk forward, forced himself to kneel in front of the couch. Isn’t this what he came to see? The couch cushions were moist with fluid, so Pete turned his
attention to Charlie Scrap’s face. The eyes were a blank, milky white, the mouth open in some kind of surprise, the cheeks pulled into a frown. Yet the face was gray, deflated, tight enough that Pete could see the bones beneath it. This was Charlie, and it wasn’t. Charlie was gone.

Pete turned away and gagged again. He stumbled back outside and collapsed on the lawn, well away from Charlie’s front door, well away from the spot where he had vomited. He tore the shirt off his face and threw it behind him. The smell was caked inside his nostrils.

“What did you do to my little girl?” demanded a voice beside him. Pete looked up to see a woman angrily crossing her arms and scowling down at him. “You made her cry.”

“I’m sorry,” Pete told the woman. He held his stomach through a wave of nausea and began rubbing his fingers through the grass.

“What did you do to her? She said you were yelling at her.” The woman was growing more uncertain than angry. Pete could see that. He tried to smile up at her.

“Would you call the police? He’s dead in there.”

“Who’s dead?” the woman asked, stepping back. Then she grunted like she’d been hit in the stomach, and Pete knew she smelled it. He watched her look from him to the front door, back to him. “Mr. Scrap?”

“Please, call the police,” Pete quietly urged.

The woman was waving a hand across her nose. “That smell,” she said, making a face. “What did you do to make that smell?”

Pete stared at the grass. He wondered why he didn’t feel frustrated with the woman, since surely he would ordinarily have started yelling at her by now. But he didn’t. He just felt
numb. He said, “Charlie’s been in there for days. Maybe weeks.”

“Dead?” asked the woman. Pete pulled up a handful of grass and spread his fingers, watching the leaves drift to his lap. “I’ll go get help,” said the woman. She turned and walked toward her house.

While she was gone, Pete continued rubbing his hands through the grass. His fingers were staining green, and when he lifted them to his nose he could smell the scent of a newly-mown lawn. He continued rubbing this smell into his hands. The wind was picking up, spreading throughout the neighborhood. As sirens began wailing in the distance and gradually drew closer, people emerged from their houses, strolling to the sidewalk and looking at Pete. One of them waved, another just stared. Some moved forward into the street. There was a certain look on each of their faces, a slack kind of wonder. This is definitely something, thought Pete, looking at their faces. And none of it belongs to these people. And not a single bit is mine.
Through the kitchen window of Joseph Younger’s house, the cliff was merely a sheet of grass that suddenly stopped about a hundred yards beyond his porch, where the green gave way to empty sky. Today Joseph could see a whole family at the edge, a mother and father and two children happily taking pictures of one another. Joseph wanted to be out there, too, because they might ask him to take a family picture. Sometimes he took ten a day.

But for now he was stuck in the kitchen, where the aromas of cinnamon and oatmeal still lingered from breakfast. As Joseph knocked his foot against the leg of the chair, his sister Elaine sloshed tomato soup around the pot. Elaine always wrestled with the soup, but today Joseph thought there was something different about the way she stirred.

“The family left,” he said. He looked at Elaine. “There’s no one out there now.”

“That’s good, Joseph,” said Elaine. “Now eat your soup.”

“I can’t,” he replied. “You haven’t given me any.” Elaine banged the spoon against the pot and glared at him. Right then he wanted to leave, but of course he couldn’t until lunch was over and he was excused.

“You’re right, sorry,” she said as she shook her head. She took a breath and tightened her lips. “Could you please stop knocking your leg on the chair?”

Joseph stopped knocking and turned back to the window. “There’s a man and a woman out there now,” he reported. “They’re leaning on the fence, hugging.”

“Why do you keep telling me who’s at the cliff?” Elaine’s voice was sharp, and it made Joseph’s neck sink into his shoulders. He hesitated because he knew that what he was going to say would anger Elaine. He was pretty sure that she already knew what he was going
to say, but he had to say it anyway. In the silence, Joseph listened to the hall clock ticking and his father splashing in the bathroom sink. He kept his body perfectly still as he said, “Because somebody’s going to jump today.”

Elaine slammed the spoon against the soup pot and glared at the wall. “I don’t want to go through this again, Joseph,” she said.

“But I know it, Elaine. Someone is going to jump.”

Elaine spun on him and asked, “How? How do you know someone’s going to jump today, of all days?”

Joseph was sullen. He wanted to tell her how he knew, but he couldn’t, not when she was glaring at him like that. She would only get angrier if he told her it was simply a gut feeling he had, how this morning he was staring at a new cluster of acne on his cheek, and then he saw his eyes in the mirror and he just knew, as certainly as he knew his name. By nightfall, someone would jump. He turned and looked at the cliff.

Elaine breathed deep and returned back to the soup. “Every year we all go through this day, Joseph,” she said. She walked to the table and slid a bowl to him. “Your talk about people jumping off that cliff doesn’t help anyone.”

He slouched in his seat. “I know I’ve said it before, Elaine. But it’s different this time. Someone is going to jump today.” Elaine’s hand flicked from the bowl to his chin. It wasn’t a hard slap, but it made a sharp noise in the little kitchen. Joseph touched his fingers to the spot on his cheek, staring at his soup. Without looking at Elaine, he lifted a spoonful to his mouth and blew on the steam.

Elaine retreated. She stood, head bowed, fists resting on the stove. The clock echoed
in the kitchen. Joseph wondered if she would apologize this time. He glanced at her, but as she straightened, opening her mouth to speak, their father walked in.

“Afternoon,” he said. Elaine smiled as he pecked her on the cheek. She handed him a bowl of soup, and he took it to the table, bending to kiss Joseph’s forehead. The smell of aftershave lingered after him. “Could you get a thermos, Elaine? I’ll have to eat this in the truck,” he said. He smiled his thanks as Elaine reached into the cupboard, and then he eyed Joseph. “What do you know, Joe?” he asked, tapping Joseph’s head with his leather work gloves.

“Nothin,” Joseph replied. He was staring out the window again.

“Hey, a big catch came in last night. There’s more than enough work in the cooling houses. You want to come pitch in? Make yourself some money?”

Joseph shook his head. “I can’t. I need to stay here today,” he said.

Their father nodded. He and Elaine exchanged looks, Elaine turning her palms to the ceiling and shrugging. They watched Joseph stare out the window. In the hallway, the clock struck one.

“That’s me, late again. I’ll be done working these weird hours soon. Then perhaps we can take a vacation, go over to Dublin for the weekend maybe,” he said.

“That would be nice,” said Elaine, bringing him the thermos. “Wouldn’t a vacation be nice, Joseph?”

“Nice,” he said, as if just learning the word. “Sure, that would be nice.” His voice was flat, his eyes trained toward the cliff, watching the seagulls hunt for scraps.

Their father briefly embraced each of them and disappeared through the door.
silence that followed, Elaine sat beside Joseph and began eating her own soup. He tried to look at her, but he quickly found himself watching the gulls again. He liked the way they flew in clouds around the edge, hopping on and off it without worry. He asked to be excused.

“Where are you going?” asked Elaine, bringing a cup of tea to her lips.

“I want to walk around,” he said.

“You’re not to leave the front yard,” she replied. “And don’t go near the edge.”

Joseph walked toward the edge of the cliff. Whenever he looked over, at the waves below, a chill went up his back. For one thing, there was the distance to the bottom, and the feeling of dizziness that his father called vertigo. For another thing, there were the rocks. Joseph didn’t even like looking at them. They were lodged in the ocean floor where the cliff had dropped them. Beaches were the place where land and water should meet. He could look down at the beaches for hours, but the rocks always gave him vertigo. They broke unspoken promises.

Joseph stopped just short of the edge. He turned and surveyed the scene. The gravel parking lot was empty, and he could not hear any cars on the access road that led to the highway. The tourists were slow today—Joseph hadn’t seen anyone in the five hours since lunch. Now even the gulls and chipmunks that the tourists were always feeding had abandoned the cliff. He felt completely alone.

In trying to decide where he should stand guard, Joseph had settled on pacing from the parking lot, to his front porch, to the lookout point, and back to the parking lot. Though he’d had a lot of time to think, and a lot of time to enjoy the cool day, he’d tried to remain vigilant. The closer day got to night, the more nervous he became. Someone was going to
jump before the day ended, and this time, if anyone died, it would be his fault. Joseph was a teenager now. He was old enough to know what was happening. He was old enough to stop it.

Joseph knew what to look for. Over the years he had watched plenty of people walk to the cliff’s edge. Some had looked like jumpers. The way they approached the cliff with the sort of slow and steady reverence usually saved for church, their eyes fixed on the line where solid ground met empty space. The jumpers would stop in front of the waist high wooden fences that stood several feet from the edge. They would stand on their tiptoes and lean over to see as far out as they could. Some would glance around furtively, to make sure nobody was watching. Others would not pause as they climbed the fence, keeping their eyes locked on the earth’s vanishing line. All of them would stop there a moment, between the fence and the edge.

He turned away from the cliff and continued his patrol toward the parking lot. The wind was gaining a chill as the sun sank toward the ocean. He huddled deeper into his coat and stuffed his hands into his pockets. The sun would set within the next hour or so.

If he closed his eyes, Joseph could see the jumper standing there at the edge. It would probably be a man. He would step closer, and a trickle of dirt would roll off in one long drift down, down. And while some jumpers watched this dirt falling and actually turned back, left the edge for good, this man wouldn’t. He would take the last step forward.

When Joseph reached the parking lot, he turned and scanned the land. A couple of chipmunks had reappeared and were chasing each other around the fenceposts. On either side of the fences, the warning signs swayed in the breeze, the red stick figures on them dancing.
as they tipped over their red cliffs, forever on the verge of falling. Joseph didn’t think the signs did much good, since people kept jumping. But his father and Elaine said they were fine.

Whenever a body was discovered on the rocks, Elaine was always the first to notify the volunteer firemen. She would wait by the cliff for them to come. She set her legs wide, standing as unmoveable as the cliff itself, and stopped anyone from approaching. Only when the volunteer firemen had arrived would Elaine unplant her feet. Fire Chief Wallace Stetson would look over the edge, then huddle in a group with the others. Finally the men would walk the half mile to the steel ladder that had been bolted into the cliff and, one by one, they would climb down to the rocks. Then Elaine would make Joseph come inside.

He could remember one time, however, when it didn’t happen that way at all.

He was running because he had heard crying, and because he suspected. He put out his arms like the seagulls as he ran, and he began yelling like the gulls. He didn’t mean to yell like the gulls, it just came out that way because he was running so fast and the wind was pushing the hair off his forehead and he couldn’t really feel his legs moving. So he was flying.

The silhouette in the distance was nothing more than a blob of white in otherwise perfect darkness. Joseph ran toward the white even though it reminded him of a ghost, even though he was afraid of ghosts and ghosts wore white and they scared him because they were dead. He ran because he knew the white was Mommy.

His bird calls must have reached her because she had turned and was facing him when Joseph barreled out of the night. He collided with the white and the two of them stumbled a
step toward the cliff’s edge, but he didn’t worry about stumbling because he could smell the heat of inside, the special heat of Mom’s bed when he crept into her room and woke her, asking if he could sleep with her, and that warmth pouring out of the covers, closing all around him with its dry adult smell. But the smell of inside was gone in a sudden wind off the ocean, and there was only the smell of salt and rain. Mommy didn’t put her hand on his head or run her fingers through his hair. When he looked up to see why, to ask what she was doing out here by the cliff in the cold at night, he saw that it wasn’t his mom he was holding at all, but some other woman, her hair a white mass blowing in the wind, her white gown flapping against her body.

It couldn’t be Mom because of the hair, but then he wasn’t sure because the hair looked brown not white, and then her face was looking down at him and it was maybe a skull but he clenched shut his eyes and screamed and when he opened them it was just an old woman’s face, his mom’s face with the soft wrinkles in the corners of her eyes and mouth. The face was blank, not smiling or sad or anything, the eyes just staring straight ahead but not looking.

Joseph wrung his hands and jumped up and down and realized he was screaming about the cold and his mom but the wind blew too hard. He couldn’t hear his own screams. Mom’s mouth moved but he couldn’t hear any sound except the roar of the wind. He closed his eyes. He felt the hum in his throat and knew he was yelling but he couldn’t hear.

When he opened his eyes there was nothing. The wind was blowing in his face and drying his tears and the cliff was empty.

He stumbled through the wind back to the house, to his bed, but no matter how long
he lay in the darkness he could not close his eyes. Joseph pulled on his coat, slipped into his shoes, and tiptoed back into the night.

At the cliff, shivering and staring down into the darkness, Joseph could see white. It might just be the waves crashing. The ladder. He walked the half mile, like he had seen the volunteer firemen do, and found the rain slick metal rails bolted to the cliff face.

Joseph sat on his front porch and rested his head in his hands, huddling deeper into his coat. He rubbed his tired eyes. He would stay here all night if he had to.

When he opened his eyes, a man was walking toward the cliff. The man’s pace was slow and determined. The man stopped a few feet back from the cliff and leaned over the fence to see as far out as he could. He hopped the fence and stood facing the edge, but before he landed Joseph was off his porch and running.

The man was standing with his back to Joseph, hands deep within the pockets of his big coat, shoulders slouched against the wind. The blood suddenly went cold in Joseph’s arms as the man kicked a foot along the dirt and took a step toward the edge. Joseph tried to scream, but he was running too hard. The man glanced over his shoulder and finally saw Joseph. He turned away from the cliff and frowned, resting one hand on the fence.

“What,” breathed Joseph as he stomped to a halt. He swallowed hard. “What are you doing here, mister?”

“The view,” said the man. He nodded at the ocean and said, “I came to enjoy the view.”

“It’s getting dark,” Joseph pointed out. “There isn’t much to see in the dark.”
The man agreed that there wasn’t much to see in the dark. They stood in silence then, Joseph shifting from foot to foot, recovering his breath and eyeing the man. Something about the man’s boots, large and made of rubber with straps dangling from the sides, nagged at Joseph’s mind. He recalled climbing down the ladder, feeling sick, his head pounding with the wind and the waves. He had walked toward the rocks, knowing they were the ones below the cliff by his house because he could see the white form splashed onto them, the ocean crashing over it and foaming against it, the particular white of her robe in rhythm with the waves. And a few hours later, after the sun had risen, there had been those boots. Fire Chief Wallace Stetson had hollered, and the volunteer firemen had turned to see Joseph crouching in a cave. He had been watching the men lift the body off the rocks and stagger under its weight toward the beach, where they had zipped it into the big black bag.

The man spoke, breaking Joseph from his recollection. “Sea gulls don’t actually live on the sea, you know,” said the man, nodding toward the birds. “Gulls live inland, mostly. Or on the coast. They go wherever the food is.”

“You’re going to jump,” blurted Joseph. The man only watched the ocean and pretended not to have heard. “You shouldn’t jump. From up here the ocean tricks people. It doesn’t seem real down there,” said Joseph. The man blinked into the wind. “People’s lives are too complicated sometimes, so they come here. They think things are simple here, like it’s just jump or don’t jump. They don’t realize it isn’t simple here at all.”

“What isn’t simple?” asked the man.

“Jumping. Everything,” said Joseph. “It’s like they’re trying to build a bridge across the ocean by dumping sand into the water. It doesn’t work. I tried it once.”
The man chuckled, and Joseph grinned a little. The man said, “Must make you kind of angry to have people in your front yard all the time.”

Joseph shrugged. Suddenly he heard his name being called, and he turned to see Elaine standing on the front porch. The wind blew away her voice, but he could tell she wanted him to come inside. Joseph held up a hand, his fingers splayed to show five. He would come inside in five minutes. Elaine tapped her wrist, turned, and went back into the house. Joseph turned back to the man. He didn’t have much time.

He stared at the man’s face, and though he could only see his left cheek and one squinted eye, Joseph remembered. “Jesus, boy, you scared me half to death,” the fire chief had said when he’d seen Joseph in the cave. The others had crowded around. “I’m Chief Wallace Stetson. What’re you doing down here?” Embarrassed to be in his pyjama shirt, Joseph had pulled his jacket closer despite the hot sun and said, “Just watching.” The men had exchanged a look, and Wallace had slogged through some tide pools with his big rubber boots. “Come out of there, boy,” he had said. He’d pulled off a yellow rubber glove and held out his naked hand to Joseph. “This ain’t no place for a child.”

“You’re that fireman, aren’t you?” Joseph asked, gripping the fence post.

The man nodded. “You were a lot younger then. Only this tall,” he said, putting his hand at his waist. He raised the hand a little, then lowered it. “This tall.” He smiled down at Joseph, then reached out and ruffled his hair.

“Well call me Wallace. How have you been?” Wallace asked. Joseph shrugged and stared at the edge. In the deepening darkness he could barely make out where the land dropped away. “Shoot,” said Wallace, turning toward the ocean. “That must be about eight years ago.”
The sky was a fan of grayish blue, the clouds spots of black. The wind died, and an eerie calm settled between them. Joseph shivered in the chilly night and asked, “Did you really just come to look at the view?”

“Why are you so worried, son?” asked Wallace. “You think I would jump off this cliff? I’ve spent too many hours down there, scraping up the bones of selfish people who never cared about anyone, to go jumping off this cliff myself.”

Joseph was shaking. Something in him pulled like the ocean making a big wave. “Why did you say that, about the people being selfish?” he asked.

Wallace stiffened and looked at Joseph. “Your mom wasn’t one of those people.”

“My sister told me Mom was in pain,” said Joseph. “That’s why she had to jump.”

“That’s right. I knew your mother, and she wouldn’t have jumped unless she had to,” said Wallace. He looked away from Joseph. “The cancer left her in terrible pain.” Wallace knelt and scooped up a handful of stones. Joseph watched him toss a few of them far out over the water.

“If we didn’t live here, she wouldn’t have jumped,” said Joseph. He kicked at the ground, digging the toe of his shoe into the grass.

Wallace shook his head. “Then the pain would have killed her. It was easier on her this way.”

“Easier on her,” repeated Joseph. He kicked harder at the grass, gouging the hole deeper. He imagined kicking hard enough to send the whole cliff crumbling into the ocean, dirt sliding over the rocks below, the house sinking into the water. But even if he could kick that hard, he guessed he wouldn’t bother to now.
Joseph said, “My father never talks about her anymore. He works a lot. Elaine will talk about it for a while, but she gets mad.”

Wallace nodded. “That’s the way with a lot of people.” Joseph watched him throw the last of his handful of stones.

They stood together in silence, listening to the distant rush of the waves and the wind whistling among the rocks. There was no sign at all of the sun—beyond the cliff was only a sheet of blackness dusted with a haze of white stars.

Joseph stooped and grabbed a stone. Just when he was about to throw it, out of the quiet rose a great screeching. Sea gulls burst from of the darkness, flapping and squealing. Wallace put a hand in front of his face. Joseph shut his eyes.

“Those stones I was throwing must have stirred them up,” Wallace said, shaking his head. He let out a nervous laugh.

Joseph didn’t answer. He was watching a single bird that had remained on the cliff. He worried for a moment that it was hurt, that it couldn’t fly with the rest. The gull’s head darted from Joseph to Wallace. It strutted calmly toward the edge. It ruffled its feathers, slouched forward, and leapt off the cliff. Joseph followed, with his eyes, as it spread its wings, leveled out, and disappeared into the night.
People are never quite sure about where they are or what they’re doing. I was a good example. “Live in the now” had always been my motto. Strive to be happy at every second of your life, and you are living in the moment. You are glutting yourself on the marrow of life.

Then one day I was in acting class and Professor Waters told us something so simple, it ended up changing my life. “People are never in the present,” he said. “You see them walking down the street, and they’re staring straight down at their feet.” Waters demonstrated, perfectly mimicking the casual pedestrian. “And what are they doing as they stare at those feet? Thinking about the past. The mistakes they made the last time they got drunk. Or the future. That hot date tomorrow.”

I was sure Waters didn’t mean me. As I said, my whole life’s philosophy was about living in the present. After class I was thinking about all the other jerks Waters had been talking about. I was remembering his perfect imitation of a casual pedestrian. I was absorbed in all this as I left the building and walked down the stairs. At the bottom of those stairs, I tripped. I cursed myself for not paying attention to where I was going. And then I realized where my mind had been—back in the classroom with Waters.

At this very moment, I am in the hospital. I am fingering the plastic button with a black arrow on it. The arrow points up. The button is cold and smooth. When I press the soft flesh of my finger against this button, the plastic lights up. I wait.

At this moment, I am waiting for the elevator.

The last time I waited for this elevator, I was rubbing my cold hands together. They
were so cold the skin was cracked and screaming. While I rubbed those hands together, I was busy worrying about Aunt Evelyn. I had come to see her.

I had gotten off the elevator on the seventh floor. Immediately, a starched nurse flashed me a polite smile. “I’m here to see Evelyn Parker,” I told her. The nurse just kept smiling. She was clicking one long nail on the lime green formica. Next to where her finger tapped was a sign:

“We’re Sorry: Only Immediate Family May See These Patients.”

At first I was relieved. That sign freed me. I could leave without having to see my Aunt Eve dying, without having to think of what to say to my cousin Rich. I couldn’t go in, I would tell my mother. The sign said so.

I was halfway to the elevator before I realized how weak it sounded. The sign said so. To have come so far, fighting downtown traffic, parking twice in the wrong place, walking by accident into the emergency ward and waiting half an hour before a nurse could give me directions. To have come so far and now to turn back because of a sign.

When I asked the starched nurse for the phone, she slid it wordlessly to me and went back to a pile of manilla folders. In my wallet, written on the back of a receipt, I had Eve’s hospital phone number. I had to get an outside line and dial in.

My cousin Rich answered, his voice thick with fatigue. He said he would be right down. Moments passed while I shifted from one leg to another and pretended interest in a stray pamphlet on various forms of terminal cancer. Then Richard Parker was beside me.

We mumbled greetings and shared a brief, loose embrace. On the way down the hallway to the visitor’s lounge, Rich asked how school was going.
What else is there to say at such a time, in such a place? “All right,” I said.

“How’s your mom?”

“My mom is all right,” I replied. “How’s your mom, Richard? How is Aunt Eve?” I was being abrupt. But even then, even three days before Professor Waters would tell me about the casual pedestrian, I knew that sometimes the present should not be wasted with pleasantries.

Rich stared out the seventh floor window for a long time. I shifted from one foot to the other and looked at the carpet. To forget where I was, I thought about all the schoolwork I had to finish that week, so I could go to Florida for spring break.

“She’s terminal,” Rich finally mumbled. His forehead thumped against the glass. “We’re all glad you could come. Your mother means a lot to mine.”

“Rich, my mom will be in next week.” I was trying to put him at ease, but my voice was shaky. He just smirked and thumped his head against the glass again. I asked him how the rest of the family was holding up. He said they were as well as could be expected.

Far back in one of the rooms, someone began moaning. I worried that it might be Aunt Eve, but Richard didn’t seem to notice. He just stood with his head against the glass, and soon his breath had fogged a circle as big as his head. The moaning stopped. I coughed to fill the silence.

“I’m going to get back in there,” said Rich, turning away from the window.

“I’ll come back with my family next week,” I replied. It just slipped out. I didn’t want to come back. I was glad Rich was going back in, because I was free to leave. But suddenly I was volunteering to return. Even though next week was spring break, and I had plans to be in
St. Augustine at a friend’s house.

It was too late. The promise was made. Rich nodded and looked relieved. He squeezed my shoulder, smiled weakly, and walked back down the hall.

At this very moment, the bell is dinging. The doors slide open. I step alone into the elevator, and I have a vision of coffin lids slamming shut.

It’s a stupid thought. I have no idea what it is to die. And the doors open again, and I can step out of the elevator and breathe the sterile, ammonia stench of this hospital. On the seventh floor it is quiet. There isn’t as much movement or bustle here. Only that same counter from last week, and the same starched nurse.

“Hello. I’m here to see Evelyn Parker.” I say this as I stare at the green Formica and its sign. I am waiting for her finger to begin its cadence on the counter top, but her hands remain in her lap. When I look at her face, the nurse’s mouth is a straight line.

“Evelyn Parker, you say?” I nod. “Well,” she murmurs, looking at her shoes, “you should just go on in.”

My stomach is knotting. “Shouldn’t you give me the phone so I can call someone to come out and speak with me?”

“There’s nobody in there right now,” she says to her shoes.

What about Aunt Eve, screams my mind, and I remember Thanksgiving.

The whole family, gathered for turkey, men intent on football, women and children gathered in the kitchen. Rich was at that awkward in-between time, strolling between the two groups,
testosterone pulling him from mommy’s side.

I believe that’s why Aunt Eve held me so much that year, when I was still young enough to unashamedly snuggle into a warm lap. And she listened to me babble about *The Oldest King*, my favorite storybook. It was about an ancient lion who, in his last months, was beat by his own son in a duel for the crown of the jungle. I was explaining the horrid injustices suffered by the poor, dethroned king, who ended up all alone on the side of a mountain, telling his story to a cave mouse. The cave mouse met with the other mice, and they all decided that the lion should rule as their king for the rest of his days.

When the table was set for Thanksgiving dinner, and my own mother was pulling me to the children’s table, I began screaming, “What about Aunt Eve?” because I couldn’t find her at either of the tables. For that horrible moment, I imagined her stranded on a mountainside somewhere, alone.

And then she stuck her head from around a corner and announced, through her grin, “I’m right here, little mouse. It’s all right.” And forever after that, I was Aunt Eve’s little mouse.

“Where are they?” I ask the nurse. She stares at the desk and shrugs.

“It’s all right, trust me. Go on in. Room 707.” The nurse’s voice echoes in the silence.

Aunt Eve’s mouse is trembling. He is an emissary from his mother, sent to see Aunt Eve for a few of her remaining moments. The little mouse is trying not to yearn for the simplicity of his cave, or the corner of a sunny beach in St. Augustine.

I feel the still air on my face as I turn from the lime green counter. I am walking on
numb feet past 703, 705. I must turn the corner to reach 707.

At this moment my hand, warmed, is squeezing a cool steel knob. The knob feels secure as it presses into the flat of my palm.

Inside there is a weak cough. The ammonia stench is filling my nose now.

The door clicks open, and there is a pale halo of light where a bed is silhouetted, where lies my Aunt Eve. She has grown thin under the white sheets. She breathes in gasps. I whisper her name into the stillness of the room.

"Is that my little mouse?" she asks. I am stunned a moment, wondering how she can know me from my whisper. How can the thin body hold the same mind that listened so closely to my favorite story? Perhaps Rich told her I would come.

"Yes. My mother can't make it because of the snow. I came instead." I try to smile. I walk to the bed and take her hand in mine. It is soft and warm, with enough strength for a light squeeze.

"Oh, I suppose you'll do." Her chest flutters with her chuckle. When I sit on the chair beside her bed, a puff of air escapes the cushion as I sink. The evening sun sparkles through a fine sheen on Eve's forehead.

"The nurse said I should just come on back." I feel like I should apologize, like I have trespassed on Aunt Eve's territory. But she squeezes my hand again to show I am welcome, and then she shuts her eyes and faces the window.

Except for the rhythmic swoosh of a machine pushing air into her body, Eve and the room are quiet. Her hand slackens in mine, and I lay it beside her on the bed. Aunt Eve is sleeping.
I stand and take off my jacket. I drop it onto the floor beside this chair, where it disappears in the shadows. I leave Aunt Eve to sleep and I walk down the hallway toward the visitor’s lounge.

Right now in Florida the sand is cooling in the evening sun. The night crowds are beginning to emerge from hotel rooms and restaurants. They carry light jackets. The men wear stylish shirts, and the women’s shoulders are naked in the evening breeze. Their tanned faces are glowing with the sun they’ve spent the day absorbing. They inhale the salt on the ocean wind, and their smiles reflect the excitement in the air.

I am in this visitor’s lounge with the gray carpeting and brown plastic couches. I stand before the window, keeping my eyes closed. For whole moments I think of nothing at all. There is nowhere in the world but this floor in this hospital, this silence. In a room around the corner, with rhythmic, mechanical breaths, my Aunt Eve is dying. And I am in the place where I should be.

I am pressing my hand against the glass. It is cold, crisp. I let my forehead drop against the glass, and below sprawls the city, people in miniature. Casual pedestrians one and all, minds sliding through the past, flowing into the future and back.

Behind me the nurse is calling. “Sir, the doctor would like to see you for a moment.”

Beyond the city are woods, and then hills. They are dark and still, the city by contrast close and bright.

“Sir?”

“Give me a moment?” I have never been through those woods, never walked through those hills. Though I stand here, if I choose I might be floating with the snow in those hills.
Sliding along the flakes from this window to the trees and back. The nurse coughs politely behind me. The snow swirls to the dirt and concrete below, where people wait for taxis and buses, their heads down, staring at their feet, under the bright lights, ignoring the hills, ignoring the snow.