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Building Kites

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BUILDING KITES: STORIES

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2011

BUILDING KITES: STORIES

by

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THESIS

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Preface and Explanation of Poetics

Flannery O'Connor once wrote that unless the creative writer "has gone utterly out of his mind, his aim is still communication" ("The Regional Writer" 844). Because the word "communication" suggests the kind of dry prose associated with technical writing and academic theory, creative writers rarely describe their work as communication. Communication implies sensibility and clarity, a well-defined purpose, a careful consideration of audience, and a striving for mutual understanding. By comparison, literature and creative fiction, particularly in the hands of modernists, may seem difficult and obtuse to the casual reader. Yet *communication* involves more than a simple transmission of literal meaning and succinctly packaged information. A dedicated reader knows that reading William Faulkner or T.S. Eliot in a serious way, for instance, will ultimately pay dividends far beyond an exact understanding of literal or intended meaning. The reader will come to understand deeper truths, ideas suggested but not stated, resonant meanings that cannot be expressed exactly through a literal translation or rigorous analysis, but only through the reading itself.

As fiction writer David Foster Wallace has said of the dangers of passive entertainment, "art requires you to work," suggesting that the reader plays an active part in the way in which a piece is understood and processed (qtd. in Lipsky 174). In that sense, literary fiction does not aim to communicate through the channels of least resistance. It asks the reader to engage himself, to work on some level as an active participant in the communication exchange. The creative writer aims to communicate, but the communication will be more than intellectual, and it will reflect more than a business-like transaction of useful information. It will involve stirring primal feelings of compassion and human understanding within the reader, and it will use images to suggest ideas and emotions that are not readily expressed through straightforward language. While some forms of communication may be compared to neon billboards flashing crass messages to drivers whizzing by on a freeway,

communication through creative forms more often resembles a flickering candle on the forest trail — a subtle yet sublime light that helps us to see our way as we walk tentatively in the darkness.

In general, I offer the collected stories of this thesis in the hopes that they will communicate something new and “interesting,” as Henry James famously suggested all fiction ought to do. The writer cannot concern himself in a direct sense with what might be communicated by his fiction, for it remains the reader’s job to complete a work of fiction and tell us what he has received. I do hope that readers will receive something worthwhile, I also understand, as Roland Barthes has written, “the true locus of writing is reading” (“Death of the Author” 3). As writers, we can only push the language in new directions and hope, as a result of this act of faith, that our writing will live up to the sincerity with which we pursue our art. In a text meant for students of writing fiction, Janet Burroway comments on the many different writers who have discovered that “words will never exactly capture what we mean or intend” (2). The problems of writing will always involve the limitations of language and the ways in which words can impede or even interfere with the underlying meanings and grasping for truth. As I have worked on this collection, I have done so with an awareness that learning to create interesting language for its own sake helps a writer to develop his craft, but at some point the writer must learn to listen to where the language is taking the story and to avoid imposing clever bits of “language” on stories that do not require them. To be sure, crafting serious fiction (as opposed to writing genre-driven stories) must involve a serious dedication to and attention to the possibilities of language, but this focus on language should not overtake, as Wallace Stegner and others have noted, the need for concrete imagery and insights into the human condition (7). Even as we consider the possibilities of language, we must be aware of the ways in which language can be paradoxically limiting and confining to a creative work. Language itself can be interesting, but it emerges as most interesting when it reflects on shadowy realms that might otherwise escape notice.

With these general craft considerations in mind, I will attempt to define in more specific ways my personal poetics as they are reflected in this thesis, and more precisely, to reflect on how I approach the writing of fiction and how this thesis has grown out of that approach. In doing so, I want to acknowledge the writers who have inspired my own process as well as to acknowledge an awareness that all writers by definition find themselves adding to a dialogue or discourse begun long ago, and this tradition, even as we push against it, informs and shapes our own work. Even the writers only tangentially referenced in this preface should be counted as important influences. It might also be acknowledged that this preface, a reflection on my own writing process, has been shaped by language and by the emergence of new terms, literary concepts, and psychological constructs that would have been perhaps out of reach even a century ago, and as my critical understanding of fiction and creative writing has been shaped by my education, it would be impossible to acknowledge all those sources. The craft of writing is shaped by the criticism of craft, and approaches to both craft and criticism have changed dramatically over the course of the past 100 years in the United States, especially with the growth of MFA programs in creative writing. We continue to struggle to define the parameters of fiction, and we continue to debate how fiction is best written and how it might best serve an ideal readership.

In his essay “Realism Reconsidered,” critic George Levine suggests that modern disillusionment with conventional realism in fiction has emanated in part from a tension arising from a “recognition of an apparent incompatibility between form (coherence of design) and truth (integrity of detail)” (344). In many important ways, the act of writing and the essence of a writer’s poetics can be assessed in the way in which he answers and balances these two conflicting demands. In other words, careful attention to detail must not overwhelm a work to the extent that form is lost; reality and fiction are not interchangeable and of course have different purposes. While a writer strives to induce the “vivid and continuous” dream-state of fiction espoused by John Gardner, and to “convince the reader that the

events he recounts really happened” (Gardner 22, 31), the writer’s purpose in creating fiction must rise above the faithful reproduction of reality, for such an end remains pedestrian as well as elusive. Such an approach to fiction would also have questionable value as art; as Flannery O’Connor notes, “a literature which mirrors society would be no fit guide for it” (“Some Aspects” 819). Reality can only tell us so much about truth, and a faithful rendering of reality for its own sake only serves to validate a writer’s technical ability in using language to establish verisimilitude. A writer must strive to create a narrative reality that confirms the validity of its own existence (believable within its own framework) while speaking to larger truths and deeper concerns than those that can be addressed in superficial or overly faithful renderings of reality. This challenge involves more than allowing for the “suspension of disbelief” central to the poetics of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and others, as noted by Jorge Luis Borges (75), for the writer must also discover the truths and interest in his own narrative as he attempts to convince the reader, through an implied and subtle argument, of the significance, worthiness, or inherent interest of his narrative.

In this way, the act of narrative as it is approached in this collection can be compared to an act of willful, lucid dreaming: the writer’s mind submits to the subconscious mind, but only on the condition that he maintain some degree of narrative control. In this analogy, the writer follows the wakeful dream but also dictates — in the almost semi-conscious state sometimes referred to as the writer’s “zone” — directions and areas for dream exploration. Author Margaret Atwood employs a similar analogy when she refers to writing as inducing a state of “controlled hallucinations” (Atwood 19), a more romantic characterization that brings to mind the often “feverish” state of the narrators of Edgar Allan Poe, a writer whose own motifs and fictional landscapes in turn suggest a preoccupation with dreams. The writer does not actually hope to conjure his ideas in dreams while asleep and then record those images later, although this may be of occasional assistance; rather, the writer allows subconscious connections to wield greater control in his writing as he writes in a conscious state of mind. Those who pursue lucid

dreaming learn do so by learning to recognize when they are asleep, and the writer who hopes to tap into the subconscious must learn to shut down his conscious analytical mind, as much as is actually possible, during the initial writing process.

Whatever its scientific merits or validity as a psychological tool, “lucid” dreaming retains significant possibilities as a *metaphor* for thinking about the creative-writing process. Those who work to master lucid dreaming often learn to keep a running log of “dream-signs,” which psychophysicist Stephen LaBerge defines as recurring “peculiarities” in one’s dreams, so that one will be able to recognize the dream state when it occurs and “step into” the dream with the lucidness and confidence of the conscious mind (17). This keeping of a dream journal, like any similar habit that involves putting pen to paper, can be beneficial as a writing exercise; I helped to develop my own writing skills in adolescence by keeping a record of dreams, which pushed me to write using description and sensory recall and to reconstruct narratives in a way that would make sense to a reader. But connections between the dream-state and writing run more deeply than simply offering raw material for writing exercises. Navigating the boundary between the conscious and subconscious minds represents a central task for the writer, who uses the flexibility of language to bring form to those shapeless shadows that inhabit the border zone of the subconscious. In my own writing, I attempt to identify “dream-signs,” or recurring images and ideas in the observations and thoughts of the waking mind, as possibilities for recognizing the underlying narrative that is waiting to unfold. I try to pay attention to those dream-signs and to empower them to help me see the narrative as it unfolds. The story “Girl Watching,” for instance, began with the image of a woman falling, implanted by a real news story about a young woman falling from a hotel balcony that had haunted me since I first read it. This could be said to be a “dream sign,” something that I put in the back of my mind until I decided to write a story about it. In writing the story, I tried to follow the haunting image of the woman falling to see where it would lead me, and it first led to a situation involving tourists on the sidewalk outside the hotel where the woman falls: A man watches

other women while his wife is being sketched by a sidewalk artist. The image of a woman being sketched then led to the idea of women as depicted in paintings, women peering over landscapes and simultaneously being watched by the artist, and this in turn led to other images of women falling. In as much as other stories, such as “When Airplanes Return,” involve people falling, this “dream sign” could be said to be important in a more general sense; it is the kind of image that haunts me as a writer, that lets me know I’m “dreaming,” so to speak, or thinking about writing.

Similarly, “Bicycle Built for Two” begins with the presentation of a bicycle, and the dream-like frustration of the bicycle not moving becomes the center of the relationship between the man and woman in the story. Although it is difficult to parse the process precisely as it may have unfolded, the bicycle’s lack of locomotion is released in the camera’s “motor cranking” in the next paragraph, and the bicycle’s rigid form and plastic newness give form to the overall imagery of the story, with its focus on plastic ferns, mundane suburban furniture, and tacky instant photographs. The “junkiness” of the environment also connects to the references to “junkyards” of words and, more metaphorically, the cluttered nature of the relationship. The consistency arises not by design but by a natural connectedness defined by the confluence of images and words that erupt from the story. The process of writing the story, though, began with the image of a bicycle given as a gift only to be left alone, left sitting in the corner of the living room. The observation of an unmoved and unused bicycle stuck with me at some point, and that became the “dream sign” that generated the story, especially since I was interested in how what is essentially an image of stasis or potential energy could form the center of the story. Bicycles arise in other stories in this collection as well, including “Good Meat, Great Price,” so one could assume that bicycles have some special symbolic meaning within my “dream world.” This may or may not be so, but I continue to use the bicycles, to try to explore why they show up in different forms and spaces.

In terms of narrative structure, dream-signs could be compared to Mario Vargas Llosa's explanation of binary oppositions, in which "everything is itself and its replica, at times identical, at times deformed; almost nothing exists for itself alone" (146). This tension, Llosa argues, drives the creation of "fictional reality" (146). This does not correlate with a notion of fiction as "symbolic reality," or using images to reflect on real people and situations. Rather, Llosa's concept of binary oppositions suggests that, like dream-signs, the recurrence of images and objects in various forms and guises underscores the way in which fiction rises above simply offering a "mere photograph" of reality but instead advances an "added element, the reordering of the real" (156); the writer's imagined world, as much as it might reflect reality, exists on its own terms and within its own parameters. In order to have value, fiction must differentiate itself from reality in this way. If an image or idea appears repeatedly in one's consciousness or within a specific narrative, it begins to clarify as a logical or symbolic representation of something that commands the writer's or reader's attention. In "Narrative Art and Magic," Jorge Luis Borges speaks of this notion in terms of how those images, including recurring colors and mutations of related details, can give impetus to a fictional work by creating expectations in the reader. The use of "signs" in fiction resonates more deeply than the more straightforward idea of foreshadowing, a related effect that deals more specifically with the unfolding of plot. As Borges writes, the recurrence of images helps to create a believable world that revolves around its own making, and the recurrence of certain images awakens expectations that also give energy to the fictional narrative. In describing the appearance of sirens in William Morris's *The Life and Death of Jason*, Borges writes, "A series of sweet images precedes the actual appearance of these divinities" (76). These "attentions, echoes, and affinities," Borges writes, guide the reader toward certain narrative conclusions and inevitabilities, and the "details prefigure the whole plot" (81). While Borges writes of the strange logic of magical thinking, and how narrative logic works in similar ways, his essay reinforces the ways in which "dream logic" can inform narratives, with motifs, images, and details working to build a certain

logical kind of narrative structure that may have little relation to actual logic. The conflict of such stories works in a similar way, as it involves the special, difficult-to-explain tension inherent in a dreamscape reality. It is the implied tension of conflict or memory, the tension between expectation and reality, between perception and understanding, and between the symbolic and the literal.

Just as writing is a willing act of language, it is also a willing act of lucid dream-making, directing the imagination to create story and meaning from the images and characters that make their presence known to the conscious mind. The writer suspends his conscious state of disbelief without surrendering his lucid powers of observation and selection. The writer in this way discovers the images and signs that may provide a means of communicating with the ideal or model reader as conceived by Umberto Eco (27). The dream-logic of narrative can be compared to the “secret logic” suggested by Gardner, a kind of logic that the reader at least senses before completely understanding; it can also be compared to the magical logic of Borges’s poetics, as a kind of manifestation of the symbolic connections made by the human mind based on proximity and similarity of form. The human need to draw connections and create meaning is critical to the operation of this type of poetics, and again suggesting the reader’s critical role in this process, but the writer must understand and predict, at least on the intuitive level, how the reader will draw those connections and not simply hope that the reader will fill in gaps. Thus the writer must be his own ideal reader, sensing his own logic even if he does not yet fully grasp it on a conscious level. The notion that a narrative creates its own “secret” dream-like logic is not without its perils, the chief danger being the writer’s abdication of responsibility for the sense and coherence of his own work. As journalist David Lipsky notes (in conversation with David Foster Wallace), “details matter, even in something that’s not realistic,” and the details make the difference between believable and unbelievable fiction, even fiction that steps outside of the strict logic of reality (175). Yet we look for logic where logic ends, and we create logic to serve an underlying truth. If the logic of narrative resembles the logic of magic, this resemblance might be tempered with the

caveat suggested by the poet-narrator Tom in Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*: "But I am the opposite of a stage magician. He gives you illusion that has the appearance of truth. I give you truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion" (1975). Anyone with a basic knowledge of illusion understands that magicians exploit the human tendency to "fill in" missing detail, but, as the character Tom reminds us, the deception of magic exists for its own sake. The stage magician's wand obscures truth behind a cheap cape and flimsy top hat; it is all in the name of mysterious entertainment. The magician counts on a broad suspension of disbelief, which widens depending on the type of entertainment and the expectations of the viewer in that venue. When the curtain falls and the bright lights illuminate the stage, the illusion disappears and its impression, however entertaining, quickly fades from the viewer's imagination. In writing, the illusion must have more staying power, more resonance, and it must rise above the level of an entertainer's cheap trick. Whether one compares the logic and strong imagery of imaginative writing to magic or dreams, it must be stressed that some underlying truth, understood at least subconsciously by reader and writer, provides the exigency and cohesion to any work.

Any writer who approaches fiction by tapping into subconscious and archetypal connections obviously owes a debt to Kafka, and in that sense his influence is so fundamental that it hardly needs mention in a defense of this project's poetics. Wallace, in explaining the often-undetected humor of Kafka, suggests that Kafka's fiction resonates in the same bone-deep way as humor, by playing on the subconscious and basic connections to the human psyche (62). He also notes that humor has a similar role in helping us to reflect on our humanity: "It's not for nothing that Kafka spoke of literature as 'a hatchet with which we chop at the frozen seas inside us'" (61). While some humor seems absurd on the surface, it often works by exposing certain truths that are difficult to express in other, more literal ways. While I do not mean to compare these stories to Kafka in terms of accomplishment, I do believe there is a sympathy in the spirit of my work and approach of craft. The small tools (the hatchet) become essential in exposing and examining the human condition, and we must use the tools we have. As

novelist Geoff Dyer observes, “Writers are defined, in large measure, by what they can’t do.” As a noteworthy example of this, Dyer advances Kafka, a writer “consumed by the things he couldn’t do” but whose lack of ability in one area (the coherence and design of plot, to put it crudely), became his genius. Like Dyer, I feel kinship with Kafka because I do not normally “hatch” or plan plots, and I instead try to exploit whatever other resources or strengths I might have.

While it may be counterproductive to mention it, humor plays some part in my writing, as well, although this is something I have never intended and have only really perceived based on the feedback of others. Of course, asserting the presence of humor tends to undermine that humor, and explaining it has an even more destructive effect. I mention this aspect only to suggest its role in my poetics for the purposes of critical reflection in an academic context. Wallace compares the similar “compressive” effects of jokes and short fiction; he writes, “both depend on what communications theorists sometimes call *exformation*, which is a certain quantity of vital information removed from but evoked by a communication in such a way as to cause a kind of explosion of associative connections” (61). Whatever humorous qualities exist in these stories, I believe it is humor of this nature, a kind of evocation suggested by missing information or the protagonist’s ironic unwillingness to probe his or her shortcomings. It is an “explosion” (or even an implosion) of subconscious connections and unstated associations. Two related stories, “If You Could Have Any Super-Power, What Would It Be?” and “To Be Invisible, Of Course,” depend on the willingness of the reader to accept that the narrator has little understanding of his own situation and his own failed perceptions. The ironic disconnect between the narrator’s self-image and his life circumstances provides the basic running conflict throughout the pieces, and the reader hopefully tolerates this kind of psychic conflict because it cannot be taken completely seriously. With that said, the order of the book somewhat reflects a growth out of this kind of irony and toward a more earnest understanding as one wrestles with the symbolic meaning of the entire dream, to again cite the central metaphor of lucid dreaming. Some of the stories toward the end of the

collection could be said to be more like waking dreams experienced after the dreamer thinks he has awoken, or, to push it in the other direction, they might be compared to dreams inside of dreams.

Of course, in spite of this approach that focuses on finding connections in organic and subconscious fashion, I incorporate modified versions of my own real-life experiences and borrowed from real experiences as needed. Janet Burroway rightly notes the short-comings of the “write what you know” approach (10), and I do not make this observation about my own work in order to defend any aspect of it, but even writers who know that fiction must move beyond “real life” also know that we are products of our own experiences and limited by what we in fact know or have observed. In that sense, we all must write “what we know,” but we may discover that we know more than we think, just as are sometimes surprised by the things people say or do in our dreams, even though we know these words have come from our own subconscious. Good fiction can result from rearranging and “reimaging” reality, so that people who never met in real life are suddenly lovers, or events that took place years apart are suddenly on the same day. So while some of my fiction departs from dutiful representations of reality, I do try to better understand reality by seeing it in new ways. In this way, fiction takes us away from what “really happened” to help us see more clearly what happened in a deeper sense, all that is not immediately visible through a factual reportage. Just as Borges writes of the “reordering of the real,” my own fiction writing often begins with some real elements taken from life, but I then seek to “reimagine” reality instead of being constrained by it. Characters arise as amalgams of those I have known, and the results are in turn exaggerated or smoothed out in some way. In reimagining reality, I attempt to seek a deeper truth than that which can be gleaned from the cruel vagaries and unfinished business of real life. The story “Super Giant Tetrahedron,” for instance, begins with my own childhood memory of not having ever won a trophy; the fact that such a trivial memory tugs at me becomes a clue that perhaps it can be mined for deeper truths, the kind of “dream-sign” mentioned earlier. The main character of that story, a young girl, does not represent me, but instead has been given this particular memory to deal with

along with the other complications of her family situation. The kite in that story also existed in my childhood in some form, although it was not assembled in the same way by these characters, of course, and would have been forgotten completely if the image of the kite, with its triangular shapes and imposing size, had not lodged itself in my memory, awaiting explanation. Remembered events and objects, especially, become dream-signs in the writer's practice; they tug at the writer and ask him to pay attention, to discern the narrative that falls into place around the remembered object or person.

I would also suggest that my approach to writing fiction is complicated by my interest in writing both essays and poetry. I have written and published both creative nonfiction and poetry, mostly in small or regional venues. While writing personal essays gave me a foundation and a starting point, the digressive nature of essay writing has given me some writing impulses that must be tempered when writing fiction. Writing poetry, which has been more central to my recent writing experience than has been essay writing, has probably had more of a substantial, stylistic influence on my fiction. While I would not go so far as to call this a hybrid collection, the poetic sensibility informs much of this work in terms of a certain kind of attention to language and an emphasis on small intersections of moments in time. I mostly write poems when I need to say something that cannot be said in any other way. The poet Denise Levertov writes of poetry as a "cross section, or constellation, of experiences" that "demands" the emergence of the poem ("Some Notes on Organic Form" 68). Like Levertov, I endeavor to allow my poems and stories to take shape organically, both in form and in language. As stated earlier in this preface, my approach to writing embraces this organic approach, and the idea of following subconscious cues is closely related to this philosophy of writing. In this way, I believe fiction and poetry need not be distinctly separated. As Levertov writes, writing organically means paying attention to the "intuitive interaction" between the elements of the poem ("Notes on Organic Form" 69). A few of the shorter pieces in this collection might even be called prose poems, as problematic as that term is, based on the emphasis of voice and image over the needs of narrative and character development. These shorter

pieces especially depend on their placement within the collection in order to be appreciated as part of a larger picture.

Just as my writing in other genres affects my approach to fiction, my role as a creative-writing and composition teacher also influences how I practice the craft, as may be partly revealed by the nature of the sources cited in this preface. In both my creative-writing and composition classes, I stress the importance of organic development, but teaching has shaped my writing in other important ways. Because of my study of creative-writing pedagogy and the history of creative writing in the classroom, formalized in an independent study with Jose de Pierola, I believe I have a deeper understanding of the power of revision and the creative possibilities of exercises. Several of the pieces in this collection, including “No More Kings,” “Rats,” “Good Meat, Great Price,” and “Work Space,” were expanded and revised from exercises assigned by instructors in graduate seminars. More significantly, perhaps, other stories in this collection have grown out of exercises that I invented as a way of creating stories when no immediate ideas came to mind. I say this is “more significant” because it suggests taking what one has learned in the classroom and retooling it for one’s own purposes, applying “knowledge” to new situations in the creative sense. In my view, this represents the best of what is possible in creative-writing education, giving a writer the tools to keep improving and growing beyond the confines of the classroom.

These “invented exercises” have helped me to produce raw material, of course, but they have also helped me to work out of writing about the same obsessions and passions. “Man Goes to the Store,” for instance, came out of an observation that grammar teachers often fall back on that generic and rather uninteresting sentence when explaining basic syntax and verb conjugations. I thought it might be interesting to follow the man of the sentence, to see where he goes, and to see if an interesting story could be built around such a mundane sentence. Another story, “Good Meat, Great Price,” began with the title “The Cyclist” and was written as a kind of response to questions posed by John Cheever’s “The

Swimmer,” namely, can man find adventure in the suburbs, and how do such adventures unfold? To give proper acknowledgment to sources of inspiration, I should also note the other stories in this collection that have resulted from similar exercises. The short piece “Rats” began as an imitation of sorts of Lon Otto’s “Love Poems” (59). In less direct fashion, “If You Could Have Any Super-Power, What Would It Be?” owes some of its genesis to a fondness for Larry McMurtry’s *All My Friends Are Going to Be Strangers*, and the way in which the narrator’s wry way of thinking unexpectedly gives much of the novel its energy and humor. I hope in writing all three of these stories that I have gone beyond simple imitation or mimicry of the structure or style of the other works, even if echoes of the original inspirations remain. The stories serve as starting points, and to use them in this way is to acknowledge that every writer enters into a discourse of what has come before him. Using such “exercises” to generate stories speaks to the value of actively altering one’s habits of craft and expanding one’s artistic horizons by imposing limitations and strict beginning points, which is the central paradox of writing exercises. In a broader sense, using such “exercises” simply emerges as a way to be active in one’s own development as a writer. As Burroway has noted, successful writing in the long term involves “mind-farming” and finding habits that produce ideas when none are forthcoming; some of these “seeds” will grow into stories, while others will not (Burroway 15). Writing teachers continually tout the importance of exercises in cultivating the creative-writing mind, but students often resist such exercises, or perform them perfunctorily, perhaps because they believe the best writing arrives as inspired bolts of lightning. Some of what I believe are my most successful pieces have resulted from exercises, so I have a real awareness of how forming these habits and practicing the craft of writing can help to produce inspiration when none seems to be present and can help one to write in new and challenging ways. Like physical exercises, writing exercises help us to use different muscles and get out of our comfort zone. I hope to continue to grow as a writer in this way, by learning from others and using interesting exercises to discover new narratives.

Teaching writing has also helped me to become more acutely aware of common writing pitfalls, and even when I do lapse into a poor choice on a first draft, I am more amenable to revision when the weakness is identified by myself or others. As Wallace writes when explaining the importance of “real” detail in writing, “I wouldn’t even be able to put it that clearly if I didn’t teach” (175). Teaching makes it easier for writers to explain problems of writing to others, and it can make revising one’s own work seem less painful, since the writer has been in the position of trying to explain problems to others. I have sometimes approached more critical problems of revision in terms of an exercise, reworking the story from a new angle or using a completely different technique. In revising “Release of the Butterflies,” for instance, I decided to change the point-of-view character and essentially eliminate the character who had been the protagonist. This helped me to get away from a certain voice and to see the heart of the story in a new way while creating what is hopefully a more coherent and sympathetic situation.

Other important creative outcomes can be discerned in this thesis as resulting from this particular approach to writing, a willing submission to the logic of the subconscious as well as the other important influences as described. By allowing language to control or modulate the narrative impetus, I strive to emphasize what George Levine terms “the integrity of detail” even if it means lessening what would be construed as a more transparent coherence of design. My ideal reader would intuit the coherence of design in a more instinctual, subconscious way, and in this fashion I hope my stories strive somehow to overcome the gaps created by the inherent limits of language and of strictly rendered realism. While I do not want the poetics proclaimed in this thesis to prevent me from exploring other instincts or techniques while writing fiction, I would currently describe my style as rooted in superficially conventional prose that belies a more open-minded approach as concerns narrative juxtapositions and the possibilities of imagery. Some of the stories within this collection emerge as more realistic in the traditional sense; yet even within those stories, the coherence of plot and meaningfulness of the narrative depend at least

partly on a submission to subconscious logic and the ways in which we grasp to make sense of or find meaning in strange or even mundane sensations even in our waking life. Whether the story ends up being more or less realistic, it still comes out of that writing zone that borders on the notion of lucid dreaming; the narrative arises not out complete consciousness or from a lack of consciousness, but instead from that hazy zone in between, a coming into consciousness or clarity from a state of subconscious thinking.

Situated aesthetically if not always materially in 20th- and 21st-century America, and often in the explicit milieu of middle-class suburbia, the stories in this thesis explore and meditate on thematic concerns central to that existence. I am interested in discovering the deeper truths and mining the peculiarities of the suburbs, a world Cheever describes as a “moving display of nostalgia, vision, and love, none of it more than 30 years old” (“Why I Write Short Stories”). Problems and themes central to, but not exclusive to, American suburban existence include cultural displacement, spiritual malaise, marital and relationship communication breakdowns, and the heightened awareness or “hyperreflexivity” of mental illness as described by Louis Sass (8). In some fashion, these stories also examine the potentially redemptive qualities of violence and physicality as posited by critic Richard Slotkin and previously employed in more dramatic ways by such suburban-situated writers as James Dickey. In compiling and reviewing these stories collectively, I have taken note of some specific patterns as well as common motifs. The motifs, in particular the recurring appearances of photography, alcohol, bicycles, and psychotherapy, reflect my own interests and personal obsessions, in some cases demons, but these human activities also represent important ways in which we strive to understand or define ourselves. As a photographer, for instance, I have become aware of the ironically distancing effect of “seeing” through the lens; so that even as excellence in photography depends on having a good eye for subject matter and composition, it also essentially involves a medium that separates the artist from the subject. Photographs in turn become ways of defining reality and the act of photography takes

on this self-conscious awareness, taking the photographer out of the moment as he considers the permanence of the image. In what ways do photographers mediate our reality, and do cameras perhaps interest us because they allow us to interact with others through the use of this technological medium? (Julio Cortázar employs photography as a central motif in his story “Blow-Up” with similar questions of how photography alters our perceptions of time, space, and memory.) These questions perhaps reveal why photography, as an example of one motif, resurfaces in different situations as different characters consider its implications.

Philosophical questions of photography also parallel issues within the writer’s craft. My interest in photography in part stems from the way in which a photograph, as Roland Barthes describes it, exists as an intersection of three “practices”: the act of the photographer, the act of being photographed, and the act of seeing the photograph (*Camera Lucida* 9). The photograph serves as a medium through which time travel becomes possible, and while the act of photographing involves a conscious act of “seeing,” just as writing involves a certain kind of seeing, the act of viewing the photograph, as Barthes suggests, approximates “a new form of hallucination: false on the level of perception, true on the level of time” (115). Just as writing involves a controlled kind of madness, tempered by the paradigms of form, viewing and taking photographs push the participants toward madness, but our societal cues allow us to “tame” the act of photography, as Barthes puts it, through a collective understanding of the medium and its aesthetic traditions (117). Photography as a motif, then, works on multiple levels as an example of a rather strange human cultural practice that can be understood in many different ways and that can change participants’ behavior and perceptions in various ways. Another motif in this collection, bicycles, reflects my interest in cycling, but more importantly, reflects how an activity like cycling, involving a special kind of movement and of seeing the world, has changed my perceptions and way of thinking. The other motifs in this collection work in similar ways, but each of course involves different

aspects of the human condition and how we use various activities in a drive to understand ourselves and to find self-affirmation and insight.

In terms of subject matter, or the more limiting notion of “themes,” readers of this collection will undoubtedly notice that many of the stories involve the difficulties of romantic relationships. In recent decades, the subject matter of love has perhaps fallen out of favor as larger concerns with cultural dynamics, political struggles, and existential identity have taken its place. Love and the struggles of the human heart, when broached at all in modern fiction, are often approached from ironic angles and filtered through a 20th-century cynical perspective. Of course, there is a danger in allowing one’s writing to slip into the sentimental or maudlin when working in this subject area, but my obsessions are my own and it’s impossible to avoid them altogether. Geoff Dyer notes of his own over-reliance on certain plots, or rather on the avoidance of plot altogether, “The best I can come up with are situations which tend, with some slight variation of locale, to be just one situation: boy meets girl.” Romantic relationships provide inherent narrative interest, of course, because of the potential for conflict and the various barriers that two unrelated individuals face in trying to understand each other as completely as possible. Our human obsession with love naturally arises out of our need to understand what makes love so difficult, and why such relationships seem to fail so often. In a larger sense, I remain fascinated by the ways in which human societies continue to put such faith in these primary relationships, hoping that they will provide familial stability even as we recognize the tendency of these relationships to be some of the most complex and difficult human relationships to maintain over the long term.

I remain convinced that one of the goals of art is to explore how humans relate to each other and seek meaning while dealing with their own inner turmoil and ghosts. The subject matter of love, and more generally the struggles of the personal self, has “relevance” in a larger sense, because how we relate to each other as individuals influences how we relate as societies and countries, and our capacity for love ultimately provides the continuing hope for peaceful human coexistence, symbolically and

otherwise. Poets like Shakespeare and Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote about love because it mattered to them, and they knew it mattered in a larger sense. These poems continue to be popular for their beautiful reflections on the subject of love, but also because love continues to frustrate and compel us. We will never figure it out completely. If we did figure it out, love would certainly lose much of what makes it interesting and mysterious.

I have provided a few comments on themes and motifs in the course of reflecting on the collective impact of the pieces. However, I emphasize that none of these motifs or themes was consciously employed as a device from the onset. As a writer (and as a teacher of writing at the community-college level), I believe stories should take form organically. As the teacher-writer Wallace Stegner points out, ideas or concepts in fiction should not constitute the initial subject matter; rather, ideas should grow out of the fiction and “haunt” it “as a ghost flits past an attic window after dark” (6). Whatever motifs or recurring imagery may be discerned in my work, I hope that the effect is more of haunting and less of dominating or imposing in some artificial fashion.

With this personal poetics and more specific thematic concerns in mind, I hope this thesis emerges as “interesting” in some way, and I hope that it somehow contributes to an understanding of human nature and relationships while implicitly and humbly acknowledging the influences of our collective literary heritage and the issues of craft that have been recognized as important and useful by those working within that literary tradition. It is difficult and challenging for new writers to contribute to the ongoing literary discourse, but with new times come the need for new voices, and language remains one of the most valuable and dynamic tool for probing the complexities of the human existence.

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Part 1: A Little Knowledge

At a Flea Market

These girls, these girls I call them because they're 18 years old and they're too gangly to be women, and they're walking just ahead of me, with me but ahead of me, and I can't remember either one of their names. I know them only in the sense that you can know someone after spending a half-hour smoking grass on a corduroy couch in the middle of an otherwise empty living room of a brick McMansion, and this after chatting up one of the girls on the Internet, which is how people connect these days, that giant collective brain, synapses firing all over the world through the channels of Ethernet and cable. On the Internet, her bad grammar and spelling, the way she typed things like, "I gots to go know," seemed charming, hallmarks of her youth and indiscretion, semaphore flags signaling her need to party with slightly older people, men from the suburbs on the other side of the city, men with cash and absolutely no idea where to buy grass anymore.

The brown-haired girl, the one from the Internet, guides us through the aisles of the Saturday flea market, her skinny blue-jeaned legs walking through the crowds of yellow t-shirts and medicated canker sores, and the grass has barely dulled the pain of seeing her face for the first time, the elongated cheekbones and crooked teeth, green eye shadow smeared above gray eyes, her hair feathered back in waves of greasy split ends. Her chubby friend walks beside her, but with her face turned away I cannot even remember her face, so vague was her ugliness, an empty figure slumped like a forgotten cloth doll on the living-room sofa, dragging on a joint and taking desperate swigs from a Diet Rite soda.

I am following these girls, these girls, through the maze of tables stacked with imitation leather purses, irregular Hawaiian shirts, and counterfeit watches, every watch ticking at a different rate, telling a different time, the wrong time, with a thousand different little faces. The Internet girl looks at a black-

neon AC/DC t-shirt, her bony fingers tearing at its fabric, and the heavysset dark man wearing a ball cap and mustache behind the table begins showing her other t-shirts, t-shirts emblazoned with the names of rock bands whose guitars stopped playing many years ago, the strings pulsating more slowly and slowly until the air around the strings had absorbed all the sound and the soundwave particles evaporated into the universe, and the guitars were packed away into cases and sold at pawn shops or shoved into the backs of blue vans driven by guys wearing mirrored sunglasses, those guys who never seem to know anyone but who are always around, buying old guitars and driving old vans and talking about how great stuff used to be.

I'm following these two girls around in the flea market, and I remember there's a Marlboro Light cigarette stuck in my mouth, not dangling romantically, but just sitting there waiting to be lit, and I don't remember putting it there and can't decide whether to light it or not. Because there's really no point in lighting this cigarette; it will just burn and then I'll have to light another one or else not smoke. Or I could keep this cigarette hanging in my mouth and not light it and keep it there forever or until it gets stale and falls apart, but I may as well light it as not light it.

And you may as well be drawn to what is good, because the alternative is to be drawn to what will devour you. You are a monkey-man in a video game, moving your joystick this way and going after the blinking yellow dots and trying to avoid the spears and Chinese stars because then the game is over. You can move that way or this way and choose to pick up that object or buy that Harley-Davidson Zippo lighter or that feathered dream catcher as you walk circles through the flea market. But you may as well not buy the Zippo lighter as buy it; the money will be gone either way and the lighter will end up who-knows-where after 20 years.

You're floating no tumbling down a stream and you can't paddle up and the faces are screaming and exploding in ecstasy and melodrama and violence and confusion because what else could they do,

except maybe not light that cigarette or hop into that van full of strangers or knock that crippled guy over the head and take his scooter for a ride and sell what he has in those baskets.

Or stop moving and stop talking and see where that gets you.

But you better find an audience and get someone to pay attention and listen to what you have to say. Or you better write a book or get busy or stay in bed all day or tell that tall girl standing by the turquoise jewelry that you want to take her to the desert. Or call your mother and tell her you love her and then call everybody else you know and tell them you love them, even your brother who chased you into the vacant lot and across the grassy field until you fell in a ditch, and your shoe got stuck in the mud, and instead of pulling you out, he just laughed and left you there, left you to watch that brown catfish poke at the sandy bottom of the creek.

But you must do something, whether it's to tell people you love them or to read the dictionary into a microphone and call it a book on tape; at least it hasn't been done before. You may as well do something because you have to do the time anyway and every word is at your disposal. All you have to do is pick them out from the stream of letters above your head. Most of all you better find someone some face some pair of eyes and a freckled nose, a face that you can put your hands on and circle around and make them see you and know you because it's the only thing you can do.

That girl, the girl with the green eye-show, turns around and looks at me, and she has put on the rock-band t-shirt and even though she is skinny, the shirt looks too tight and thin, like a second layer of skin. She looks at me, and I notice her face is freckled, but they are the wrong kind of freckles, not clustered in cute ways on cheekbones but scattered like trash on the ground, no plan or semblance of symmetry.

"Cool t-shirt, right?" she says to me.

The Man Goes to the Store

The man has gone to the store many times, riding a bicycle and carrying his groceries home in a canvas knapsack. A knapsack is a small backpack. He only buys as much as he can carry in the knapsack, which he balances on his handlebars instead of strapping to his back.

The man, who has fair skin and slight shoulders, is going to the store, and from the store he will buy groceries for dinner with his wife. He will buy two beef filets, a bottle of cabernet sauvignon, and a bag of fresh broccoli.

The 28-year-old man, who has been married for three years, considers going to the store. He could ride his bicycle to the store, he reasons, since the store sits only three blocks away. He drinks slowly from a cup of hot coffee as he considers the store, from which he can procure more coffee beans if he needs to. The man sits on a card-table chair in an empty kitchen, an empty house, a house he has just moved in to. The house is empty, except for a few odds and ends belonging to the previous owner, an old man with an Arabic name, something Ahmed or Ahmed something, who died while living in the house. The man knows the older man's name because he still receives credit-card offers in the mailbox, envelopes pleading the man to come back into existence so he can spend more money. The old man Ahmed also left an ugly ceramic lamp with an engraving of a lion and a set of drinking glasses with pictures of old newspaper car advertisements, Plymouths and Oldsmobiles racing through the dirty kitchen cabinets.

The man goes to the store, or rather he pretends to go to the store. He tells his wife goodbye and swings his leg over the bicycle before setting off in the direction of the store. He tells his wife he is just going to pick up some sweet potatoes and a bottle of wine. He names just two items so he can be sure he'll remember what he said. The man tells his wife he is going to the store, and then he rides his bike around the corner and fucks his 20-year-old girlfriend, a cashier at the grocery store.

The man goes to the store more often since meeting the cashier. He had seen the girl working at the store many times, had made playful banter with her, like when he was buying bean dip and a 12-pack of Miller High Life, and she asked if he was having a party.

“A bean-dip-and-beer party. What time do you get off? I’ll come back and pick you up.”

Haha, they laughed, and then he left with his corn chips and bean dip.

Then the man was driving in the direction of the store, driving his little MG convertible instead of riding his bicycle because he was not driving to the store but driving to work. He saw the girl walking on the sidewalk, her green grocer’s apron slung over her shoulder, and he asked her if she needed a ride, just like in the Bruce Springsteen song.

She normally didn’t take rides from strange men, of course, what woman in the city does? But she recognized the man from the store, not exactly remembering the bean-dip flirtation but recalling the longish hair that draped over his little bald spot and that he seemed nice and unthreatening in some vague way.

The man liked the way the girl smelled and the way her straight brown hair hung down, still damp from showering. He liked that she was walking to work, because this showed some kind of pluck and determination. *I’ll walk to work if I have to.*

The man became angry when he thought of the girl, Angie, working at the store. She seemed to like working the cash register, but there were other things she had to do, things she hated, like rearranging the boxes of crackers on Aisle 4 or sweeping the floors in produce. She had to do these things even though all the customers liked her smile and the way she wore her sunglasses on the top of her head and the way she would hand them their change without counting it out. She would just drop it in their hand with a nod and say, “thank you,” because she expected to be trusted.

The man goes to the store late one night to buy a six-pack of beer and a frozen pizza, a Red Baron supreme. He likes the Red Baron because of its association with World War I, romantic pilots

wearing triangular scarves and leather helmets. He thinks people should remember that war more, because that was the Great War before the other one came along. And those pilots were crazy, fighting in planes when the planes themselves barely worked.

This was before fighting wars became just pushing pencils and pushing buttons, he says at the checkout counter, his voice slurring as Angie puts the pizza in the plastic bag. They never ask if you want plastic or paper anymore, especially if you're just buying the one frozen pizza.

She won't put the six-pack in the bag, though.

"I don't think you need this," she says.

"What I don't need," the man says, looking at his wallet as if it belongs to someone else, looking for his debit card, "is for you to tell me what I don't need."

The man goes to a therapist, and the therapist tells him what he wants to hear, that anyone in a marriage who isn't happy will probably go outside that marriage to find what he wants. *You just have to decide what you want*, the therapist says.

"What if I don't know what I want?" the man asks the therapist.

"We'll just have to figure that out together," the therapist says as he strokes his beard and pulls out his appointment book and a pen.

The man goes to the store, and he leaves his bicycle outside without chaining it to the brick post like he normally does.

"Watch my bike, will you?" he tells the man selling newspapers, a black man who has been selling newspapers there for 10 years and always calls people by the wrong name. "I'll be right back."

The black man nods as he shifts a stack of newspapers. The headline on the paper, floating above a photograph of college kids celebrating the death of Osama Bin Laden, reads, "War on terror a way of life for younger generation."

The man goes into the store and asks for Angie, but instead the manager comes out of the office. The middle-aged manager is dressed just like you'd expect a middle-aged grocer to be dressed, with his short-sleeved shirt and clip-on tie, but instead of black shoes he is wearing sandals, and his toes look as if they have been crammed together for too long, toenails misshapen and broken.

The man has come looking for Angie because his wife has left him, after she followed him last Wednesday on his trip to the store. She had become suspicious because he volunteered to go the store more often, and he started looking for reasons to go the store.

"Don't we need more mustard?" he'd say. "You'd hate to not have it when you need it."

Or one time: "Don't we need toothpicks? I was looking for one and couldn't find one."

"Toothpicks?" his wife asked him.

"Do you like the round or flat ones?" he asked, although he had never understood the point of flat toothpicks.

The man goes to the store and he asks for Angie but instead he gets Phil, the manager, who tells him he needs to leave.

"Doesn't Angie work here anymore?" he asks.

"That's a personnel matter," Phil says.

"Personnel or personal?" he asks, and then he realizes that neither one is good and he holds up his hand to stop Phil from responding, even though Phil just stands there like a statue commemorating the brave work of all grocery-store managers. "Just tell her I came by."

The man doesn't go to the store anymore. He goes to the drug store instead. Even though everything's more expensive and the selection's more limited, he likes that it's smaller and there's fewer decisions to make. If you need bread, the drug store only has short loaves of white bread, and if you need peanut butter, you only have to decide crunchy or creamy. He can also pick up his shampoo and prescription anti-depressants at the same time.

Later, the man teaches English to recent immigrants. He teaches in a temporary building made of metal perched on cinder blocks behind a Methodist church. On the chalkboard he writes, “The man goes to the store.”

The man is the subject, he explains, and the verb is “goes.”

“But why does the man go to the store?” a middle-aged Hispanic woman with a round face asks. “What does he need?”

“The man’s going to the store because he needs bread,” he says. “Or he’s going to the store to get diapers for his newborn daughter named Chelsea, or he needs prune juice for his constipated grandfather, or maybe he just needs a bottle of soda, because his niece and nephew are coming for a visit and he never has sugary soda on the shelf.”

The woman looks at him, blinking, so he says, “It doesn’t matter what he gets from the store, at least not right now. What matters is when he goes to the store.”

“When does he go to the store?”

“That depends. Let me explain.”

The man continues to say that the sentence could mean that he goes to the store right now, or that he goes to the store on a regular basis. The basic English sentence structure is subject-verb-object, he explains.

“Is the store the object?” an older Vietnamese man asks. “Because is the object of his mission, of where he goes?”

The man studies the sentence on the chalkboard.

“No, it is the object of the prepositional phrase.”

The object is not what we want, he tells the class. The object is not what we desire or what we think we need. The object is what we act upon. The object is what we hit, or use, or drop, or pick up, or catch, or push away. The object is the person we kiss, the man we fire, or the woman we forgive. In

order for there to be an object, there must be an action, an active verb. We take an action that affects something else.

The object, he explains again, is not what we want. The object is what we act upon.

If you could have any super-power, what would it be?

The best method, I reasoned at the time, would be to tie one end of a rope around my neck, the other around the base of a strong tree, and then hop in my car and drive off toward the horizon, speeding into the black void of nothingness.

I'm not sure why, of all the methods listed on the "Easy Exits: Ways to Kill Yourself" website, this one appealed to me. It seemed both dramatic and, in spite of the gruesome image of popping one's head off like a champagne cork, violent enough to be paradoxically painless. I guess I also liked the vague Old West associations, as if I were somehow having my horse kicked out from under me by the sheriff at the top of some barren hill just at sundown.

The idea of researching suicide on the Internet strikes me as absurd now, as if I saw my own demise as just another trivial research question to be answered by a visit to Wikipedia. I don't remember many of the other methods listed on the site, just a few of the more original and creative ideas. The methods were categorized by the basic cause of death (asphyxiation, poisoning, etc.) and reviewed according to effectiveness, complexity, and the presumed amount of pain. One method involved drinking as much water as possible in the shortest time possible, which would throw off the body's saline balance and result in some kind of convulsive shock. This was deemed both potentially ineffective and difficult to go about; I suppose the immediate danger would be drinking too slowly and pissing one's pants.

It was the difficulty of the method that spoiled my own plan to drive off into the sunset. On one hot August evening, I sat in the driver's seat of my Chrysler convertible, fingering the end of a sisal rope that I had tied to a pecan tree behind my garage. The car was pointed toward the street as if I had just packed the trunk with an ice chest and suitcases and was ready to set out on a road trip to Disneyland. And, just as in the way someone does when leaving for an extended vacation, I had taken care of all the

details, like having the gas turned off and dropping the dog off at my sister's house.

But when it came to leave, I found I no longer needed a vacation. I sat there, twiddling the rope in my fingers until I finally threw it out the window and broke down sobbing, hiding my face in my hands in case a neighbor walked by. When I got out of the car, it was dark outside and the intense heat had subsided to a dense, dissipating warmth, like the heat from a burner after the teapot has boiled and the stove has been turned off.

Even now, I don't think it was a lack of nerves that prevented me from tying the rope to my neck and driving into oblivion. Like any research problem, once I had access to the answer, the problem seemed less insurmountable, less all-consuming. Once I stepped out of the car of death, walked back to the pecan tree, coiled the rope, and hung it on a nail in the garage, I was back in control. I knew I could do it if I needed, and that someone made doing it less urgent, if not altogether unnecessary. I had done it by not doing it.

In the end, it was just another minor failed attempt on my part to leave Houston, to get out of town once and for all. I sold the car and recarpeted the house, but I remained stuck in this town, as I had once been stuck in a marriage, and with each passing year, I paradoxically grew both more accustomed and more repulsed by my spouse of a town.

For in Houston there is no place. In Houston there is no change and there is no permanence. Everything exists as it does without a nod to previous or future movements of the clock. I am forever leaving and forever staying. There is constant movement and constant gridlock. Its freeways are its history and its cultural legacy.

It is always Thursday, always Thursday night after a week of teaching college classes and five days of meetings and sixteen hours of office appointments, and I find myself once again on Thursday evening, driving in the dirty rain in my red Toyota pickup up Highway 146, past shrimp boats and camper sales lots and permanent garage sales in the front lawns of mobile homes until I reach the

Gentleman Goose. This is where, on Thursday evenings, I eat overbattered and overcooked crispy fried Cod and french fries.

Tonight I also plan on drinking a number of martinis at the Goose. I want to take away the fuzziness, the blurriness that has been there since 1999, when I got divorced and started teaching community college.

I am not sure what to blame the fuzziness on, the incessant demands of barely literate but consumer-savvy students or the screaming horrors of the divorce, which I had been preparing for since the day of the wedding, as if inevitable and yet still was surprised at how small a part I played in it.

When we had married, I had said things like, “The reception should be fun,” and had made jokes about the “starter marriage.” I had hoped that someone would pick up on my reluctance and do something heroic to get me out of the whole thing. During the ceremony I had looked past the gazebo at the fence and wondered if it would be difficult to climb. I wondered if they really included that thing about “if anyone has any objections” in the wedding ceremony or if that was just a TV thing. It turns out it’s just a TV thing.

But after she had found the letters and read my journal and walked out after yelling at me for several weeks, I had found solace at the Goose. A British style pub on the shores of Galveston Bay, the Goose is typical of restaurants and bars in Houston, being designed to evoke feelings of being somewhere else. And somewhere else is just where I wanted to be.

The Goose sits on the shores of Clear Lake, surrounded by a potholed asphalt parking lot filled on Saturday nights with the BMWs favored by local finance officers and the classic Volvos and Jeeps of NASA engineers and astronauts. Although the place is packed during Friday happy hour and Saturday nights, it is usually close to deserted the rest of the week, which is why I started going there.

I also like the waitresses. They’re not all pretty in the clean, traditional sense of the word, and a few are actually plump, but usually one or two of them will hug me when I come in the door, like it’s the

first time they've seen me in four months, even though I'm usually there four or five times a week.

Tonight, Jennifer, a tall waitress studying to be a real estate agent, throws her arms around me and calls me baby, and for a minute I can't remember her name. It doesn't matter much, since they mostly know the customers by what they drink. For months, I was just the Stoli-dry-martini guy.

Before I can talk, Jennifer gets beckoned to a table, so it doesn't really matter that I can't remember her name.

"Go on, get you a seat at the bar and get that martini," she says.

I'm relieved to not have to remember her name, and the martini has never left my mind. The bartender Jackson sees me coming, holds up a martini glass, and shakes it in the air as he raises his eyebrows at me. I nod grimly, as if I have no choice but to accept the martini and the spinning buzz of relaxation that will soon follow. I'm glad Jackson is on duty tonight, because he always shakes the martini hard enough and with just enough wrist to leave the layer of ice crystals that effectively masks the non-taste of the vodka and makes me think of that time we went glacier-watching out of Prince William Sound.

"Here you are, Professor," he says as he puts the ice-cold cocktail in front of me.

"Thank you, sir," I say loftily, although I'm always rather annoyed when someone calls me Professor. It seems like a tongue-in-cheek gesture to call a community college instructor "Professor."

"How's school? Glad the semester's almost over?" Jackson asks as he shoves warm bottles of beer into the ice cooler.

"I'd be more glad if I knew it wasn't going to be the same next semester," I say.

Jackson laughs, and then begins to look thoughtful. He's about to tell me his latest plans. I hate it when Jackson tells me his latest plans. He's been doing this for three years. Every time I come in, he has a different plan. Bars are full of people planning their next move, only the more they drink the more they find ways to talk themselves into new plans.

“So I was thinking I should be teacher,” he starts.

“Yeah?”

“People say I’m good with kids.”

“You should probably think about then.”

“I figure even though I wouldn’t make that much, I could have the summers off, and once I get my lessons plans in order, everything would take care of itself.”

If it were anyone else, I’d feel compelled to try to dissuade someone from getting into teaching for these reasons. I’d try to convince them they were wrong about not having to change anything, and I’d tell them that summers for most teachers means painting houses or mowing lawns for extra money.

“I mean, you like having summers off, right?”

I stare at him.

“Well, sure, but I don’t have to worry about the money, not so much anyway.”

This much was true. I’d inherited some money when my mother had passed away two years ago. Still, Jackson looks at me in a puzzled way, uncertain what money had to do with it.

“What grade do you want to teach?” I ask as I plunge the olive on its stick into the disappearing vodka.

“I don’t know. I figured junior high science. I’m good with science.”

I nod and Jackson wanders off to pour some draft beer on the other side of the bar. If science included mixology, Jackson would be on his way.

When he comes back, Jackson brings me a second martini and says I look more tired and even less happy than usual. People are always telling me I’m not a happy person. Janice used to always yell at me, “Why can’t you be happier?” and then lecture me on how my depressing thoughts weren’t helping to make me happier. *That’s circular reasoning, sweetie*, I’d tell her, and she’d glower at me like she always did every time I corrected her or made some academic point. She’d give me the same look when

she would say she was making chicken *fajitas*, and I would point out that only beef *fajitas* are truly *fajitas*.

I tell Jackson I'm just OK, not any more depressed than usual, because frankly I don't want his pity. I don't need him to feel sorry for me. I have a master's degree in comparative literature and teach at one of the finest community colleges in the state.

I smile at my newfound inner confidence as I realize the second martini is kicking in, and I am beginning to feel like my old self. I am thinking of jokes and thinking of people with a superior attitude, instead of worrying what they think about me.

"Happiness is not the goal," I tell Jackson. "Peace is the goal, my friend. As Dr. Johnson said, ask if you are happy and you cease to be so."

Yeah, I was real cool.

Jackson nods because he doesn't want to ask who Dr. Johnson is and heads back to the other side of the bar. He is confused, I'm sure. It always bugs people to hear that they shouldn't be striving for happiness. They're so used to thinking that's the goal. *I'm not happy*, they say. Even worse is when they ask, by way of greeting someone, *Are you happy?*

Happy makes me think of a baby. A baby is happy, giggling and gurgling and spitting up, because it doesn't know any better. A baby is happy to have a shitless diaper and a warm bottle of milk. A baby will give you a big gummy smile just for balancing him on your knees and making faces at him as he drools all over your pants. Happiness is just a way of being stupid, of not knowing what's really going on, not thinking too much.

I once ruined a lunch with a group of women I worked with. The secretary had brought her toddler grandson along, and he was being really sweet and happy. I felt the need to explain this mysterious behavior to the women.

"You know why he's happy?" I started, and then didn't wait for an answer. "He's happy because

he has no idea what kind of pain is in store for him.”

I thought it was funny, but Karen gave me a scowl as if she were concerned about me and the kind of life I must be leading, and the rest of the women just looked at me with blank faces.

I also ruined a baby shower one time, or at least that’s what my girlfriend Sandy said. She had asked me to buy the gift, so I had bought the kid a copy of Webster’s Third International Unabridged Dictionary. I thought it was funny, because the book would be bigger than the baby, but also I thought it was a practical gift that the kid could use to write papers later on in college or something.

“You’re supposed to buy baby stuff for baby showers?” she said to me in a question that wasn’t really a question but a way of asking me if I was really that stupid. “You know, cute little clothes and diaper Genies and bath toys?”

I saw her point, but it seemed like a rather obvious way to go. I didn’t see why men should be invited to baby showers anyway. Sandy broke up with me soon after that, because I had gotten her a hardbound copy of Camus’s *The Stranger* for Valentine’s Day.

I like to buy books for presents, because at least if the present isn’t what the person wants there is no waste. They could just give the book away or put it on a shelf, and it would look nice.

The girl at the end of the bar is reading a book, and I am just buzzed enough to think that she wouldn’t mind if I introduced myself. It is a bar, after all. What kind of person tries to read at a bar?

I look over in her direction, to see if she is really reading or just trying to look like she is reading. I cannot see how she could be getting much out of the book, as she keeps glancing up, clearing her throat, and taking sips from a Starbucks coffee cup. The book is a small hardcover with a textile green cover, probably an edition of a Victorian novel designed to look old and expensive.

I decide anybody that would drink a Starbucks and read a novel in a bar was just asking to be bothered. I wonder if she knows that Starbucks is a famous name in the Nantucket area and also the name of a character in *Moby-Dick*. Maybe I should tell her.

Bicycle Built for Two

When Anna tore the red bow and blue tissue paper off the bicycle, she discovered that it was a normal bicycle with two wheels, a padded seat, and a basket attached to the front handlebars for carrying bottles of water and small wedges of cheddar cheese. She also discovered the bicycle had no pedals, and no other means to facilitate forward locomotion.

“There are no pedals,” she told Danny, who smiled with half his mouth while taking her photograph with a Polaroid camera. The motor cranked out a blank white square that he waved in the air while he continued to beam at her in that all-knowing way. It was an old Polaroid, an old camera, that is.

“You don’t need pedals,” Danny said. “Pedals are too much work. They’re for people who try too hard.”

Danny was always turning normal situations into obvious metaphors, turning the literal world into a junkyard of rusty non-sequitur word-piles, like when he said that glasses were for people who had no clear vision or that mouthwash was for people with dirty mouths.

So for weeks after her birthday, the bicycle sat in the middle of the living room, between the brown corduroy couch and the console television, while Anna tried to decide how she would ride it and tried to decide whether Danny would notice if she put this birthday present on the curb for heavy-trash day. Sitting on the living-room carpet like a forgotten child’s Christmas present, the bicycle blocked Danny’s view of the television, but he didn’t mind because the shows were all about sharks attacking dogs and sitcoms about buxom librarians living on distant Pacific islands. When the TV was blocked, he would watch the shows in his mind, allowing the predictable narratives to unfold as if he were spreading a newspaper out on the kitchen table.

After two weeks of waiting on the sofa, chewing a toothpick and rearranging the remote controls on the coffee table, Danny asked Anna when she planned on riding the bicycle, if ever. Anna was

chewing gum and watering a plastic fern at the time, while a Pink Floyd song with a heavy organ background played on the stereo, and when Danny asked her this question, she sighed with an upward blow of air that blew the lock of brown hair from her eyes.

“Danny, we need to talk,” she said, as the keyboards hummed into an upward crescendo, and she grabbed one of the bicycle handlebars and flicked at the price tag that still dangled from its end. “You know I hate bicycles. You know that. But you got me a bicycle for my birthday, and it’s not even a bicycle you can ride.”

In came the saxophone, spilling blue notes on to the carpet, and Anna lit a cigarette and exhaled blue smoke all over the plastic fern.

Anna had grown up in Amsterdam, where she had spent her youth pedaling a grim black bicycle, something like the old woman rode in *Wizard of Oz* before she turned into a witch. Anna rode this black bicycle over cobblestone streets and narrow alleyways between crooked townhouses and record shops. Every day she would ride the bicycle to school and then to the market for her mother to buy the family’s daily diet of black licorice and pancakes topped with cured meats and cheeses. She had ridden the bicycle nonstop, it seemed, from the age of 4 until college, when she had met a boyfriend who was a painter and had a small Yugoslavian hatchback that he used to haul his finished paintings to the sidewalk market in Rotterdam each Saturday.

It was at that point that Anna abandoned her childhood bicycle in the pile of black bicycles that was always crowded into the racks at the central train station. There were bicycles that had been lost in that pile for decades, mixing into the other bicycles around the unseen bicycle racks, like cold children huddling in the rain, waiting for their parents to pick them up after school.

“I bought you this bicycle to make you happy,” Danny said.

“But I hate bicycles,” Anna said. “Don’t you know that about me?”

“You don’t know what you like. Just try it,” Danny said. “Please.”

Anna used the watering can to fill a glass that was sitting on the coffee table next to Danny's remote control. She crushed out her cigarette, tipped the glass back, and let the cloudy plant water pour down her throat, and then she wiped her mouth with the blue bandana she had tied around her neck. If Anna was going to ride, she would need to be hydrated. Even the plastic fern needed hydration to keep it from getting dusty and dry -- even if the plant never grew, even if it never reached for the sun with its green-fingered fern leaves. It still needed water.

Danny pushed Anna's bicycle to the driveway outside their split-level house. Besides having no pedals, the bicycle was a muscular machine, not like her old anemic black bicycle. Painted fire-engine red and equipped with white-wall tires and thick fenders, its center bar was emblazoned with the words, "Think Cycle." The frame was built for strength, Danny said, as Anna lifted her leg over the center bar. Her legs were covered in black-and-white striped stockings, and Danny gave her his green Army cap to keep her hair from falling in her eyes as she rode. She couldn't blow the locks while she was riding.

"You don't understand," she said as she pulled the cap down close to her eyebrows. "Nothing ever came of it."

As Danny held on to the bicycle seat, Anna's feet hung uselessly on the sides of the bicycle, flopping like fish in the bottom of a john boat.

"Don't pedal," Danny said. "Think."

"Think about what?"

"Think about the first time you knew you loved me."

At first, Anna thought of the time Danny had taken her to the rodeo, where they had eaten Frito pies and sipped Pepsi from paper cups, and she had worn a beat-up straw cowboy hat and held his hand during the chuck-wagon races. She had never been to a rodeo before, she had told him, and just as he took her hand in his, the lights had dimmed and Ronnie Milsap had started singing a nostalgic song

about the 1950s. Ronnie Milsap was blind, Danny said, and you could tell that from the way he sentimentalized the fifties. *Ha-ha*, Anna had chuckled before taking a gulp of icy soda.

But now, as Anna sat on the bicycle waiting for her thoughts to make sense, she realized she hadn't loved Danny then, not really. So that wasn't the first time she knew she loved him. She thought of their wedding day, or rather she thought of the photograph of their wedding day that she kept in the back of her closet in a shoebox. For some reason, she couldn't remember the actual wedding day, so the memory was gone and she would instead take out the photo, which was not of the wedding but of Anna sitting at a table in at the reception, smiling at whoever took the photo. She would stare at the photo and try to remember the photographer, try to recall anything about how she felt on that day filled with cocktail shrimp and champagne.

Then Anna realized she hadn't loved Danny on that day either. Later she had grown fond of him, grown fond of the way he snored next to her in bed and the way he cracked his knuckles before dealing cards when they had their friends over for spades. But that was after their wedding day.

"Are you thinking?" Danny asked.

Then Anna remembered a moment some two weeks after they had moved into their house, and Danny had borrowed a ladder from the neighbor and climbed up on the roof to oil the attic vent fan, a rusted metal spinning ball at the peak of the roof. She watched him, a heavysset billy goat clambering his way up the steep roof, and she told him to be careful. She held the ladder for him as he climbed backward off the roof, his legs dangling in search of the top of the ladder, and when he reached the ground she hugged him and told him how much she had been worried.

"Yes, that's it," Anna whispered, and the bicycle rolled forward and out of Danny's grasp.

The bicycle didn't wobble or weave without Danny's steadying hand, even though it rolled slowly down the driveway. Without the crank of the chain and the pumping of her feet on the pedals, Anna felt nauseated and her cap felt tight around her head.

“What do I think of now?” she called after Danny.

“Now the trick is to not think at all.”

The bicycle gained speed as it left the driveway and Anna turned the bicycle’s handlebars so that the bicycle was traveling north, churning over the concrete, the wheels humming as they spun round and round, the spokes creating blurry metallic triangles of reflected sunlight.

As Anna coasted down the street toward the highway, she attempted to think of nothing. The bicycle wobbled as she thought of clear autumn skies and cold water pouring from her watering can. Nothingness was pushed out of the way by these images of sameness, these mind-pictures of clarity abstractions, and the bicycle lurched and wobbled.

Anna noticed there was nothing in the basket. She tried to focus on that empty space in the basket and tried to listen to the sound of her own breath. An image of Danny kept creeping into her mind, an image of Danny sitting on the sofa cleaning his remote controls and using the television remote to flip through the catalog of channels, buzzing his lips at each and every show he came across that was not to his liking. He would never settle on any show, but would keep flipping until Anna brought him a bowl of mac-and-cheese and told him she wanted to watch the Sunday movie.

She thought of the spare bedroom that Danny had promised to paint, which now sat half-painted, the carpet covered with a drop cloth, which was in turn weighed down with a can with dripping paint on its side and a paint roller stuck to the bottom of a caked-up rolling pan.

She thought of the bicycle that Danny had been so proud to see her open, because he always wanted her to have the freedom of a bicycle that didn’t require any physical exertion, and she thought of the way he waved that Polaroid after he took it, waiting for it to dry into a recognizable image of his wife.

As Anna approached the highway on her bicycle, it slowed down to a creep and the wheels wobbled beneath. Her head clouded with images and memories. The road was wet, so as she approached

the blacktop highway, Anna stopped the slowing bicycle with her foot and looked across the six lanes of empty traffic. She hopped off the bicycle and tried to push it across the six lanes, but the wheels wouldn't turn and Anna and the bicycle stood in the right-hand lane of the blacktop, waiting to get across.

Finally Anna abandoned the bicycle, plucked her hands off the handlebars and let the bicycle crash to the pavement. She turned around and walked toward home, stopping only when she heard the sound of a freight truck blowing its horn. She looked over her shoulder and saw the truck plow over her bicycle, leaving a shattered and warped pile of metal and rubber clattering against the pavement.

The truck didn't stop, and Anna instinctually took off her cap and threw it in the direction of the departing truck. The driver did not look back but only stuck his arm out the window and waved. A puff of smoke came out of the truck's tailpipe as the driver pulled his arm in and accelerated, and the truck moved toward that space between the horizon and the moon, the moon hanging there in the afternoon like an early party guest, waiting to be handed a drink and greeted with something other than, "Wow, what are you doing here?"

... To be invisible, of course

The woman drinking the Starbucks coffee and reading the novel tells me her name is Tammy. She's 38 years old and has just become a grandmother for the first time. This is the first time I've picked up a grandmother in a bar, or at least the first time I'm aware of, and the thought entertains me for a few moments, as I project myself into the implausible future of marrying this woman, a woman I've just met whose face crystallizes into creases and pockmarks as I move closer to her and as we move from the dim light of the bar to the sunny incandescent lamplight of my living room. I could become an instant grandfather at age 30, before I've even had kids of my own. I could join the AARP and talk about the old days when I played tuba and drove a Packard, because, *let me tell you, those were real cars.*

Maybe Tammy could take care of me. Besides the wrinkles, which are minor, she looks like she's put together pretty well. Manicured nails, colored hair, gold jewelry, all that. This is why I'm a bit confused when she tells me she manages the produce section of a grocery store.

Later, as her manicured fingers plow through my hair, I'm certain I smell oranges, bananas, grapes, and all I can think about is fruit. I'm in bed with Carmen Miranda, tasting the vague scratch-and-sniff flavors of a children's book called *Uncle Harvey's Fruit Stand*, every fruit smelling different but also like an old bottle of vanilla.

I can't stop wondering why a produce manager would have such expensive manicured nails. She must spend her days rearranging coconuts, shifting tangerines and grapefruits, her nails digging into the fibrous citrus skin and collecting evidence of her fruit-mongering, tropical scents and microscopic parasitic farm-bugs from some orchard in the Valley.

"You make better love to me than my husband," Tammy says as we lie in bed.

I know her mention of love should sound romantic against the backdrop of the thick rain drops hitting the bedroom window, but instead I feel like I've just gotten off one of those carnival rides called

the Zipper or the Neck-Snapper that spin you in three different directions at once.

“Husband,” I say.

I can’t decide if I’m more perturbed by the presence of “husband” or “love” in Tammy’s statement. Grammatically, the statement strikes me as odd — the way “make love” has been broken up by the qualifier “better” so that it sound like the name of a bad Air Supply song — *you make better love*. Weird. At any rate, the victory seems unwarranted, as if I’ve won a tennis match after just one game. I’m jumping over the net, shaking the soggy hand of this husband I’ve never met but who I’ve somehow beaten.

“Don’t worry,” she says, patting my leg with her manicured hand. “He’s 54 and an alcoholic.”

I grunt. Her husband is old enough to be my father, which means he’s old enough to be an actual grandfather and not just a fantasy-pretend one. Her description of him as a 54-year-old alcoholic makes me wonder what he drinks, where he hangs out, and by what standard he’s been judged an alcoholic, like does he wreck furniture and go to meetings or does he just sometimes put scotch in his coffee while nobody’s looking. The standard has become so loose in recent years. When you say somebody’s alcoholic it has about as much meaning as saying a family’s dysfunctional or a child is hyperactive. You used to have serious drinkers — Dean Martin types who swaggered their way through life with a cocktail glass in hand — and drunks, who were the unshaven guys with lampshades on their heads who lived in the one-dimensional worlds of *Playboy* magazine cartoons.

I’m betting Tammy’s husband is not such a bad guy, just misunderstood and unappreciated for all he’s done for his wife and family.

Tammy looks at me and buries her head in the pillow.

“He’s a nice guy, but,” she starts.

Damn, I knew he was a nice guy.

“But what?”

“But he’s not really strong in that department.”

“What department? The fruit department?”

She laughs and closes her eyes as if she means to go to sleep. *God, she’s going to sleep here.* I lean back in bed and click on the TV with the sound muted. Letterman’s yanking on the lapels of his coat, emphasizing his irony. Even funny must be ironic-funny now, not ha-ha funny but make-you-sick funny, yank-on-the-lapels funny. Every comedian has become a laughing clown in a distorted funhouse mirror.

I’m sitting up in bed, but I don’t know why. For a moment, I stare at the TV light splashing on the avocado-green wallpaper on the wall opposite the bathroom, the squarish, outdated patterns mocking me for my failures to update the house.

On the TV, a weatherman on the repeat news broadcast gestures at a churning radar storm in the Gulf, pointing to different places it might go. *Trying to guess the direction of God’s wrath.*

I swing my legs over the side of the bed. My eyes ache, but I feel pretty good. I’m not hung over yet, which means I’m either still asleep and this is one of those frustrating dreams that puts you through the dreary sensations and dull routines of normal life, or it’s still early in the morning.

There’s a knock at the back door, impatient, like a second knock. Tammy sleeps on, the sheet pulled up under her arms in perfect imitation of a woman in bed as-seen-in-the-movies.

Padding to the back door in my bare feet, I continue the line of thought started by the wallpaper and chastise myself for never replacing these cheap parquet tiles. It feels and looks like the floor of a construction trailer-office.

I peer through the curtain on the back door and see a face attached to a rather short body and concealed by the darkening outline of a gray hood. I check my watch. It’s 1:30. I click on the patio light and the figure instinctually shoots up a hand as a shield against the light, but then the hands drop and I

see the brownish, round face of Ally. Her face drips with rainwater and maybe the hot streaks of tears. She holds up her hands as if to say, “Open the fucking door.” I open the door and she brushes past me, shaking and pulling the wet hood off her head.

“Dude,” she says. “There’s a dead cat on your lawn.”

She glances toward the bedroom, the blue light from the TV casting shadows of strange lumps.

“Is there somebody here?” she asks.

I take Ally by the arm and lead her into the living room.

“It’s nobody. I was just watching TV--”

She sniffs the air and wrinkles her face.

“Man, how much have you had to drink?”

I install Ally on the couch, where she huddles like an Eskimo beneath a wool blanket. She locks my gaze with her brown eyes and doesn’t look away, until I finally snort and look out at the rain through the glass of the sliding door. She knows I will do this. “Eye contact,” she’s always telling me. Neomi, my ex-wife, used to do the same thing when we were in college and I was interviewing for jobs. She would ask a mock question, and I would begin mock-answering, and then she would begin harping, “*eye contact, eyes, remember, look at me.*” I could never look away long enough to formulate the words I wanted to say.

I can still feel Ally looking at me.

“You don’t have to bury it now, do you? I mean, it’s not going anywhere.”

“You want the TV?”

Ally nods enthusiastically like a child, so I click it on and hand her the remote. I walk toward the front door, dim the living room lights, and make a quick stop at the wine cart, which never has any wine on it, just some half-empty bottles of bourbon and vodka. In the darkness, I pick up a bottle of bourbon,

carefully pulling it out so as to avoid making any noise, and take a swig, just a belt to brave myself for the burial. The bottle clinks on the tray as I set it down.

“Can I have some?” Ally asks.

“No. Shit.”

As I’m pulling on my yellow fisherman’s rain slicker, I notice the framed *Starry Night* print hanging on the wall. It’s there all the time, of course; I just don’t notice it anymore. The view from his insane asylum window, eleven yellow stars overwhelming the sky. My ex-wife left it as one of her last presents to me. On the back, she inscribed it. I don’t have to flip it over to remember the words: “I hope you find the peace that Van Gogh never did. Remember, the view is amazing, if you look outside.”

What an annoying inscription. She was always getting me the wrong presents.

I take the painting off the wall, tuck it under my arm, and head out the door into the rain.

The cat, an old tom named Mowgli, was also a present from Neomi, or rather, something she left behind. She took the dog and said I had to take care of the cat, because it wouldn’t be practical to take him to Maine. She also said it made more sense, because the cat was male. The two males stayed, and the two females went. She was a science-minded person and liked that sort of symmetry.

With gloved hands, I pick up the cat and in the moment I touch him, I think maybe it isn’t a cat at all, but some kind of stuffed museum animal. The stiff shape is not cat-like, but hard and unpleasant, like a fur-covered football helmet. I wrap him in an old towel and tuck him under my arm, which is not exactly how I would prefer it, but I have the shovel and the painting, so what else can I do?

As I walk into the backyard, a Gothic landscaper holding a shovel in the rain, the security light clicks on, flooding the yard with white light, so I figure I may as well bury the cat in the middle of the yard.

The rain pouring down on me, I dig a hole big enough for the cat, set him — it — in the hole and place the painting on top. Then I begin shoveling dirt on top of the shallow grave — *shallow grave*, I think it just like that, because it sounds like something from a war zone. As I turn wet clumps of grassy mud back over on the grave with the blade of the shovel, its darkness unseen in the night, I think of my friend Ellie, who told me when her grandfather died the whole family took turns shoveling dirt on to the coffin. Not symbolic handfuls of dirt, but real, heavy dirt piled on the gravedigger's shovel. Ellie said she kept shoveling dirt until her cousin put her hands on her shoulders and led her away. She said it was cathartic, helping to bury her grandfather.

But this is a dead cat, not a grandfather.

I stand silent for a moment. It's not a moment of reverence or a silent prayer for the dead Mowgli, though. I'm breathing hard from the shoveling. I'm sweating beneath my impermeable rain coat and damp jeans, and I'm still half-drunk from the martinis and bourbon. The security light clicks off, and I stand above the covered grave, the dark hot streaks of water hitting my face and forming rivulets that fall to the mound of dirt on the grave. The stars of Van Gogh's painting are in the ground, and the rain falls upward out of the grave, and the world has been inverted.

I will never be --

In case you were wondering, I have been considering some things I will never be:

An only child.

A rock star with a double-necked guitar.

A wind-up alarm clock that ticks loudly in the corner of a basement bedroom.

An astronaut of any real significance.

Someone's first love.

The guy you moved to Texas for, when you were 20 and living in Maine and looking for a way out, an escape from the winters and the oppressive scrape of the shovel on the snowed-in driveway, winters relieved only by the tug of the clothesline in those washed-out flashbulb summers. I will never be that way out, your reason for leaving and living when you were 20. I will never wait in the Econoline van while you run into the gas station for a pack of menthol cigarettes and a find-a-word puzzle magazine, which you work on when you're not sleeping, circling words like "dolphin" and "mermaid" in the Sea-Fantasy-themed puzzle with a ballpoint pen as we drive over the hills of Tennessee, running from the hot ball of a sun that hovers in the rear-view mirror, running from the living ghost of your stepfather in his denim shirt and greasy beard, riding his motorcycle close behind, always riding too fast and too close, always gunning the accelerator with his right hand.

I will never be a young father or a youngish grandfather who likes to drive his old Mercury on Sundays like a mad man, with the grandkids standing in the back seat, holding on to the front seat for their lives and peering through the windshield to see where I will take them. As the Mercury rolls over blacktop hills and over wooden bridges, my granddaughter will not ask me how we met or crinkle her nose when I mention that I did not marry the first person I loved. I will never disappoint my granddaughter in this way.

I will never be an epistemologist, or an endocrinologist, or a mathematical theoretician, or the guy who can make vibrant conversation at faculty cocktail parties holding a double martini, and is never asked why he's so quiet or what he's thinking about. I will never be the guy who people wonder about when he's not around. I am just gone and they are not wondering, just making their own cocktails, stirring the ice around with a suntanned index finger, which you can only do when you have made your own drink.

There are benefits to being alone, just like there are nice things about being fat, like when I find myself floating face-up in the Caribbean ocean off the island of Cozumel, as the cold afternoon rain falls on my face, each drop exploding in a small frigid river that runs down my cheek. I float and keep my eyes closed and do not even see, just 50 yards away, the barracuda plowing through a school of tuna, the tuna clearing the path like he's the biggest movie star in the ocean. My stomach pulls me up in the ocean, keeps me floating on top of the earth and floating above this school of fish. I am the only body floating on top of the planet, at least this top of the planet. It is my top of the planet.

I will never be the guy you moved to Florida with, after spending some time serving hamburgers and pulling beers in Texas and leaving the army chaplain who didn't know what he wanted to do when he was through with the army. I will never be the guy who took you to Florida, the motorcycle mechanic with a dream of opening his own custom chopper shop, who always asked you where you were going and who you were going with, and wanted to know why you liked waitressing so much, *was it the tips or did you just like flirting with customers maybe?* I will never be that guy, whose damp-smelling collie would snarl at you, and when you asked if he would consider getting rid of it, if it were you or the dog, said no. That was it -- the dog was in and you were out.

I will never be a sailor on an America's Cup yacht or a train engineer, and I will never be Thor Heyerdahl, cruising across the Pacific in my ancient sailboat as an upturned bowl of constellations whirls above me. And I will never be that guy nestled up beside you in the hammock on your parent's porch,

waiting for the creaking door so that we can shift our bodies in a chuckle of shame and pretend we were only counting the cracks in the window frame or swatting flies off each others' arms.

I will not be standing beside you when you first discover what it means to be human, or running beside you when you complete the city marathon, and I will never hold your hand when you deliver your first-born, whom you will name Miranda and whose life you will document in an endless series of photographs and high-definition video clips, a kid in a falling diaper dancing across the tiles of the kitchen floor.

I will never look at those photos if you send them to me, because maybe I will look at the photos and see a stranger, and maybe the stranger will look back and recognize me before I close the computer folder and turn off the computer and leave for the day. Or maybe the photos will fall apart in my hands and pieces of photo-paper will fall sprinkle down on my black shoes. I will never think of you again as I walk up five flights of concrete stairs in a dank and smelly parking garage, walking to my gray Ford Ranger and discovering a note on the windshield.

The note on the windshield, written in red ink, reads, "Every time you park next to me I cannot open the door of my car."

The car is gone, so I can see that this woman, because the handwriting looks like a woman's, managed to open the car door, managed to drive away and leave this note where I would find it. She managed to open her car door without smashing her door into my car and without hurting my car in any way. She just got in and drove away, but somehow she managed to write a note first, to tell me what it was that was bothering her so much.

I will never get to answer this note, to tell her that I am sorry and that I will try to park more carefully in the future. There are so many things I will never get to do. It is as the Eastern say; you cannot live 300 lives at once, and you should not live one life 300 times. You cannot live on both sides

of the door, coming and going, pushing and falling back, letting the door latch click into place, feeling the glass on the window to see if it is hot, turning the doorknob to see if it is loose, turning the doorknob.

Girl Watching

I'm not paying attention when the girl falls.

Gloria says I never pay attention, but that's not true. It's just that I pay attention to the wrong things sometimes, like when she's talking and I'm watching the vein in her neck pulsating to the sound of her voice.

Right now I'm looking on as she has her face sketched by a sidewalk artist. It seems like a touristy thing to do, but it's impossible not to feel like a tourist in Waikiki, a glass terrarium set down between the crooked streets of Honolulu and the azure carpet of the Pacific. The millions of glass windows that crowd the towering high-rise hotels project shimmering reflections of sky and concrete, trapping the human tourist in a sphere of light, glimmer, and carefully positioned palm trees.

I'm relaxed for the first time in three days, smoking a cigarette and letting the setting sun and thick, warm air wash over my face. Just two hours before, I'd been sweating in a hotel conference room, sneaking gulps of ice water to stave off the dry-mouth as I gave a presentation on the similarities of the "girl-watching" motif found in the works of Henry James and Homer Winslow. The presentation had gone well, although only six people showed up to hear it, and two of those were the other presenters on the panel.

"It's an academic conference," my friend Walter had shrugged afterward. "Nobody comes to listen to papers. That's why the conference is in Hawai'i. Do yourself a favor and go to the beach."

Instead of heading to the beach, though, we ended up on Kalakaua Avenue, so Gloria could window-shop at Cartier and I could look for a good sushi bar. But then she spotted the artist perched on the sidewalk just outside the banyan-tree marketplace.

I was surprised she wanted to sit for a sketch, since she doesn't even like it when I photograph her. But I didn't argue, because she's been annoyed with me since that morning, when we toured the grounds of the royal palace and I said the bronze statue of Queen Liliuokalani reminded me of her.

“She’s kind of big, don’t you think?” Gloria had said, holding up her hands as if to stop me from saying anything else.

“That’s not what I mean,” I responded, reaching out to touch the fresh lei draped on the Queen’s forever-still fingers. “She’s regal. Powerful.”

At this, Gloria had rolled her eyes, or at least I imagined she had rolled her eyes behind those squarish, dark sunglasses of hers.

Now her sunglasses are perched atop her head to push the hair out of her eyes, which for some reason I’ve always found alluring. If I were poet, I would say I like the way the sunglasses open up her face like a full moon rising. But actually I think it reminds me of the lifeguard girlfriend I had in 11th grade, all tan skin and summer smiles.

“How’s it look so far?” she asks without turning her head, as if moving would cause the artist to blur the image.

The truth is the artist, a shaggy, older man who looks like a Japanese Neil Diamond, doesn’t seem to even need the model. He glances Gloria’s way every couple of minutes, but it seems to be more of a professional courtesy, so she feels like she’s participating in the fun. He’s memorized her face and focuses on the sketch, his lean hand gripping the graphite pencil like a paintbrush, pinched between forefinger and thumb, and fluttering across the easel like the hand of a student writing a timed essay.

Her face emerges effortlessly from the white space underneath the artist’s hand, the liquid Pacific air blending with the pencil to reveal the portrait hidden beneath. It’s supposed to be Gloria, of course, but her eyes are unnaturally circular, her face bizarrely symmetrical, and the clean white skin makes her look ageless, a paper doll with dark eyelids and pursed lips.

“It’s looking good,” I say.

Just over the easel, maybe 20 feet down the sidewalk, a “living statue” is setting up for his evening shift. He unfolds an aluminum pedestal and opens a suitcase. His body and clothes are painted

a thick, messy gold, and from the suitcase he pulls a golden lariat and holster with a gold pistol. A red bandana tied around his neck provides the only splash of color. It's weird to watch a statue get ready for work, sort of like hearing a mime talk to his mother on the telephone.

I put out my cigarette and swing my camera up to get a few shots of the cowboy, figuring I'll drop him a couple of bucks when the sketch is done. He's assumed a fighting position on the podium, his gun drawn and pointed into the air and his back hand bent dramatically behind him as if holding on to a horse.

In the viewfinder the cowboy looks like a cheap bauble against the backdrop of high-end shopping boutiques and rented Mercedes buzzing down Kalakaua. I snap a shot anyway, and the flash goes off, which I'm sure will ruin the final image.

I lower the camera when two girls, maybe 18 or 19, approach the cowboy and drop some money in his can. One of the girls, a dark-haired beauty wearing a long white t-shirt that just covers her shorts, aims a digital camera at the cowboy and he quickly changes poses, bringing his legs together and moving his pistol down to his hip, a silent-movie ham. The girl laughs in mock-uncontrollable fashion and takes a moment to reposition the camera. She brushes her hair out of her face and snaps the photo, and the girls start to walk off.

The cowboy breaks his pose to trot after the girls and pulls the dark-haired girl back toward the pedestal. The second girl, who wears a brown "Community Chest" t-shirt, emblazoned with a picture of a Monopoly board, takes the camera from her friend and nods wildly in encouragement.

The cowboy urges the dark-haired girl to take the pedestal, sweeping his arm dramatically to usher her onto this sidewalk stage. The girl demures, a modest Hollywood actress who cannot believe she has won this unbelievable honor. She laughs, steps back, and pats her chest in disbelief.

The girl finally climbs on to the pedestal and the cowboy hands her the gun. She looks at it, grimaces and breaks into another helpless laugh. Then she strikes a pose, kicking up one bare leg

backward and sweeping her long hair around her head. I look down at Gloria's portrait and see he's put down the pencil and is smudging a few spots with his thumb, to achieve a natural look on the cheeks, I think. Gloria's paper-doll eyes stare back at me with the same blankness from the portrait, but the slight twitching smile seems to have flattened.

I look back toward the pedestal and the girl is laughing again, unable to decide on another pose even as the statue and her friend urge her on.

Then something goes wrong. The cowboy grabs the girl's arm as if to brace her or protect her from falling off the pedestal. The girl's hand covers her mouth and she looks to her friend for some kind of assurance. She takes her hand down and I can see her mouth the words, "What was that?"

Then I realize the artist has stopped sketching and Gloria has turned around to grab my leg in a tight grip. The shoppers and pedestrians, too, have slowed, their voices broken into strange whispers and gasps. Many of them have turned their heads and raised their hands to shade their eyes, looking for something in the hotel balconies that fill the westward view of the sky.

"Did you see that girl?" Gloria asks breathlessly.

"Girl?"

"Oh my god. You didn't see it," Gloria says, gripping her chest. "A girl, a woman just fell from somewhere. One of the hotel rooms, I think."

"What?"

"I don't think she had any clothes on," the artist says in an even tone, tapping his brush on the easel and rubbing the back of his neck.

"She was naked?" I ask.

Gloria doesn't answer this. The artist offers to finish the sketch for free, but Gloria just wants to leave, so he gives us what he's done, rolling the sketch up in a cardboard tube. He won't accept any money.

“Just tip the cowboy,” he says to me, not winking or smiling.

We can hear the sirens moving in a few blocks away, and Gloria decides we should go for a drink in downtown Honolulu, somewhere dark and smoky where they won’t push the mai-tais. I drop a \$20 bill in the statue’s can, and he nods a thank you without looking at me. He’s standing on the pedestal now, no longer in cowboy character, trying to get a view of the commotion down the street.

The dark-haired girl is gone. I don’t know why, but I look down the avenue both ways to see if I can see them walking away, but they’re nowhere in sight. People are still looking skyward, questioning each other in hopes of finding out the real story.

The real story, as we found out later, is this: a drunk college girl fell from a 10th story balcony of the Waikiki Marriott, and nobody is quite sure why she was naked. They tried pinning it on the older guy whose room she fell from, but there just wasn’t enough evidence of foul play. The hotel management issued a statement to the press saying that while the accident was regrettable, they wanted to reassure the public that the hotel balconies were secure and the railings of appropriate height to prevent falling.

The travel guide books always say to get your film developed on the islands, because the processing guys are more familiar with Hawaii’s colors and will take care to get the best possible images. So on the day before we leave Honolulu, I take the film to the World Wide Camera place on Kalakaua, and the clerk, a grim overweight man, tells me it will be ready in two hours.

I pick up the fat envelope of prints while Gloria is getting a massage. I buy a cup of coffee and sit on a bench near a banyan tree to look at the photos. In the single image of the statue, the gold cowboy shines in the light of the electronic flash, a golden space alien divorced from scene and context, floating in the darkness of space as he points his pistol into the sky. The girls on the sidewalk are invisible, lost in the blackness created by the perimeters of the flash.

That night I dream of the girl falling from the hotel balcony, her naked body arched backward and letting go of thin air, her fingers grasping at nothingness. I dream of other women falling, girls falling from ladders and stages, from moving cars, from cartoon airplanes and sketchy cumulus clouds. A Victorian girl, her white fingers clutching a parasol and gripping the folds of her dress, falls forward from the perch of a cliff into a rocky ocean, not leaping but falling without hesitation and without flailing or shaking, closing her eyes and falling forward with a full trust in God's providence. I dream of Alice falling down the rabbit hole, spinning into an imaginary dreamland of where clocks move forward and backward, and I dream of Gloria slipping off a steep gabled roof. She's staring at me with pleading, fearful eyes but there's nothing I can do.

Letter, with suggestions

I have been looking over your letter, the one you sent me to tell me it was over, and I have noticed a few things I thought you should know. The first sentence reads, “This letter is very hard for me to write, I thought you should know that.” This is a comma splice, which is considered a major sentence error. The comma should properly be replaced by a semicolon, or you should insert a conjunction like “and” or “so” after the comma. I think you also could have thought of a more precise adjective rather than falling back on the weak adverbial construction, “very hard.” You could have written something more powerful, like instead of “very hard,” you could have written “a real bitch.” In the second sentence, you write, “hopefully, we will always be friends.” I appreciate the sentiment, but hopefully is correctly used as an adverb, as in, “We hopefully opened our Christmas presents.” I think what you meant to write was, “I hope we will always be friends.” It’s sort of a cliché anyway, don’t you think? The next sentence is mostly correct, although I have always disliked the phrase, “face reality.” The next error arises out of lack of documentation and inappropriate tone rather than incorrect usage or poor diction. You claim that “all of our friends” have told you to try to think about life without me, yet you provide no citation for that so-called information. I would think at least an explanatory footnote would be in order.

Good Meat, Great Price

So infrequent were uninvited visitors in the suburbs that Richard and Linda did not at first recognize the knock at the front door.

“Did you hear that?” Linda said.

“Maybe the rat’s back,” Richard said.

Both they both tensed up, Richard ready to jump to the door and Linda raising her head from her the sofa, where her body morphed into the cushions in the heat of the Saturday morning.

“Don’t say that,” Linda said, just before they both realized it was in fact a knock, something they realized just before the knock came again, a certain and deliberate rapping as if someone with an important delivery or urgent message.

“God, don’t answer it,” Linda said before covering her face with her arm and easing back into the sofa.

“It’s probably a kid selling something.” Although nobody saw real door-to-door salesmen anymore, old men carrying mops and carpet brushes, children had taken their place as the new salesmen of the suburbs. They wandered the streets like poor beggars, selling Christmas ornaments and chocolate bars to raise money for the band or dance club. Sometimes they didn’t even know what they were selling; they just giggled nervously and looked expectantly at the parent who had come with them. The sales pitch had become a formality, just as buying these items had become a guilty obligation for anyone unlucky enough to answer the door.

Richard peered through the front-door window and saw a short man wearing a painter’s cap and a holding a clipboard. Sweat drenched the sides of his cheap polo shirt, emblazoned with a company logo. Clipboards meant poll takers or petition gatherers, but this man did not have the self-satisfied look of a political worker.

Richard opened the door and the man immediately offered his hand.

“I’m Sal.”

“Richard.”

“Hot out here, ain’t it, Richard?”

Damn, Richard realized, he had fallen for that old salesman’s trick, and the guy was already using his first name.

The man nodded his head toward the house next door.

“You a friend of Beth’s, Richard?”

“Well, we’re neighbors ... you know Beth?”

“I know what you mean. Good friends, good neighbors, two different things. You like meat?”

It wasn’t until he asked this question that Richard noticed the company logo said, “Logan’s Fine Meats.”

Richard looked over at Linda, who did not lift herself from the couch but extended an arm in the air with a palm outstretched as if to sign “what the hell?”

“We eat meat, but you know, it’s just the two of us.”

“I hear, I hear you. I was hoping you could do me a favor, though. I got six extra boxes of prime cuts, and I was hoping to unload it on this side of town. I’m oversupplied, so my loss is your gain. It’s good meat, good cuts.”

“That sounds like a lot of meat.”

“It’ll keep in the freezer. Good meat, great price. Won’t hurt to look, right?”

“No, I guess not, but ...”

“Just give me a second.”

At this, Sal turned around, jogged down to the curb, and waved at a white pickup down the street. With this direction, the pickup pulled to a stop in front of Richard’s house.

A heavy-set black man with big hands clambered into the back of the truck, handed a dolly down to Sal, and started handing him large cardboard boxes. As Sal stacked the boxes on the dolly, Richard walked to the curb and put his hands up.

“I really don’t want to waste your time. I doubt I’m going to want to buy this much meat.”

“Don’t hurt to look, though, does it, Richard? I don’t mind wasting my time if you don’t mind taking a look. You’ve got to see these cuts to believe them.”

Sal pushed the dolly up the sidewalk, and Richard followed him, his hands in his pockets. He noticed the grass had grown more than usual in the past week because of the heavy rains.

“Just tell me where I can put these,” Sal said as he pushed open the front door and pulled the dolly up behind him.

“Wait, I think I can just look at them out here.”

“How about on this table here?” Sal said as Richard entered the foyer.

Linda had bolted up on the couch now, covering herself with the blanket. Sal nodded in her direction.

“Don’t mind me, ma’am. I don’t bite.”

“OK, fine, on the table.” Richard said as he cleared a stack of bills and a pizza box off the table in the dining room, which was just behind the living room.

“You won’t be needing to order pizza after you see these steaks, man, I’ll tell you that.”

Sal set the top box open and cut the top open with a pocketknife he fished from his front pocket. The box was filled with neat rows of frozen pressed hamburger patties.

“Top sirloin burgers. That’s just a bonus,” Sal said as he pushed aside the box and picked up another one.

Sal pointed at a framed sketch of a two-story house surrounded by palm trees that hung on the dining-room wall.

“Nice house. Looks like a little bit of paradise.”

“It’s Hemingway’s,” Richard said. He and Linda had visited the house in Key West five or six years ago, and had bought the sketch in the gift shop. Hemingway had bought the house with his wife’s money, he remembered the tour guide saying, and his wife lived there for another 10 years after Hemingway left.

Sal slit open the next box to reveal 10 steaks vacuum-sealed in plastic wrap.

“Now, this here is the real deal. You get two boxes like this, plus the hamburgers, the sausage, and the chicken.”

Sal put his hand down on the stack of boxes.

“What do you say, can you take them off my hands for \$200? My loss, your gain.”

Richard put his hand to his chin.

“I don’t think so. Not today.”

“Too much meat or too much money?”

“A little of both, really. Like I said, it’s just the two of us.”

Sal sucked in a loud breath and shook his head.”

“Tell you what. I’ll give you the whole thing for \$125 plus a \$50 tip for my helper out there.”

Richard paused to consider the equation and wondered how it mattered to him where the extra \$50 was going. He waited until he saw Sal fold his pocketknife until he shook his head again.

“No, not today. I’m sorry. It’s good meat. I’m sure you’ll have no trouble finding a buyer.”

Sal looked at Richard, pulled his cap down over brow and started packing up the boxes as quickly as he had unpacked them.

“Fair enough. Fair enough.”

He paused at the doorway and touched his cap.

“Ya’ll have a nice day, now.”

Richard watched Sal wheel the dolly down the walkway before he closed the front door and locked the deadbolt.

“I hope he wasn’t casing the joint.”

As Richard plodded back into the living room, Linda glared at him.

“What was I supposed to do?”

“Tell him to leave? It’s your house.”

“I didn’t want to be rude.”

Richard threw up his hands and went to the kitchen to heat up a cup of water in the microwave for instant coffee, brushing the foam off the top of the lukewarm beverage with his finger. He went back into the living room and stood behind the sofa, watching Linda flip through the TV channels in search of an old movie.

“God, that coffee smells like burnt popcorn,” Linda said. “Why don’t you make a real pot, or better yet, go to the coffee shop and bring me back a mocha?”

Richard grunted as a way of neutral acknowledgement. Linda liked the pinched murmur of the old movies, which always put her to sleep whenever she watched them while lying down. For some reason, the TV lulled her to sleep and didn’t annoy her like his own snoring. Several times a night, she would push and prod him in annoyance, before rolling back to her own side and grumbling that she would never get any rest in this house.

“How is that better than my snoring?” Richard asked. “You’re going to be asleep in twenty minutes. How come that doesn’t keep you up?”

“It’s just different,” she said, still clicking. “I can’t say *how*. Everybody knows it’s different.”

That was her way of ending these minor arguments, by suggesting that if he were normal he would understand such a thing without explanation.

On the TV, a young woman in a black dress and pearl necklace stood before a judge, her pigeon-eyed lawyer patting her arm lightly in a show of support. The woman swooned when the judge sentenced her to three years in the state penitentiary, and then recovered herself and hugged her lawyer when the judge announced he was suspending the sentence. Richard was sure the man playing the judge was Lionel Barrymore.

Richard sat on the recliner in the corner of the living room and began to slip on his grass-stained sneakers.

“I’m going to mow the grass.”

The morning sunlight illuminated soft shafts of dust in the relative emptiness of the garage, where Richard only kept a few tools, boxes of Christmas decorations, the lawn mower, and his bicycle. He rolled open the garage door and wobbled the mower out on the driveway. Although only a few minutes after 8:30, the Houston heat had begun to close in on itself, heating and reheating until any cooling relief was impossible, like the baking interior of a closed car abandoned in a hot parking lot.

Stepping on the mower with his left foot, he pulled on the rope cord. The mower started, chugged for a few seconds, then sputtered out. He pulled it again, a little harder this time, and again it wheezed and coughed on itself before dying out. Richard kicked the mower half-heartedly, like he was kicking a mangy dog to push him away, and then stepped back to check the choke switch and the throttle cord. He unscrewed the gas-tank lid and checked the fuel level, taking a moment to sniff in the aluminum-campfire fumes of the gasoline.

Richard stepped on the mower deck again and pulled the cord as hard as he could. He heard a snap, felt the rope give way and stumbled back, the plastic handle and half the cord dangling uselessly from his fingers. The other half of the cord ripped back into the silent mower with a ringing clang.

Richard shoved his palm against the mower handle hard enough to send it wheeling down the driveway until it wedged with a thud underneath the front bumper of his wife's car.

Maybe he could borrow Harve's mower later, but it was too early to knock on his door now. Richard yanked the mower from underneath the bumper, snapping and scratching the plastic in the process, and then rolled the mower into the garage.

He needed about an hour, maybe a little more, before he could bother Harve. It occurred to him that a bicycle ride out to the water tank, at the end of Miller's trail, would take about an hour if he circled the outer perimeter of the neighborhood first and jumped on the trail where it met up with the parking lot behind the swimming pool clubhouse.

Swinging his leg over the bicycle, Richard pumped the pedals twice and coasted out of the garage and down the driveway as easily as a canoe floating down a set of gentle rapids. Once he had turned off his own cul-de-sac on to Pebblebrook Drive, the main neighborhood thoroughfare, he began increasing speed until the downward pumps of his feet coincided with the beat of his heart. He turned down each side street, whipping around the cul-de-sac of each street and shooting himself back out on the Pebblebrook thoroughfare, pointing himself again downstream on his journey toward the community pool.

Within five minutes of riding at this pace, a steady 14 miles per hour judged by the speedometer mounted on his handlebars, Richard no longer breathed heavily, no longer noticed his breathing or the tightening pain of his calf muscles. He legs pumped evenly and automatically, the tires grabbing the hot concrete to create a glove-like traction, and he spun through the windless neighborhood silently, floating past each mailbox as his right foot pumped downward, reaching deep with his paddle into the concrete stream. His body glowed with its own internally combusted heat.

No need to go much faster than this, Richard mused, thinking about his friend Bill, who had warned him against buying a hybrid bicycle.

Hybrids are for people who can't make up their minds, Bill had said. It doesn't know what kind of bicycle it is. It's like the futon of bicycles, too heavy for racing and not strong enough for rugged terrain. It's for people who don't know where they want to ride, people without the courage of their convictions.

Bill was always putting things in dramatic terms. But Richard liked the sturdy frame and thick tires of the hybrid, the way it seemed to match his own heavy build and the way it allowed him to ride upright so he could view the passing scenery instead of forcing his face downward into the racer's cramped pose and snakelike forward gaze.

As he passed each faux-style house — faux-Tudor, faux-Spanish, faux-colonial, and back again, until the mix of styles blurred into a monotonous repeating pattern, the differences failing to be different — Richard remembered when his older brother first taught him to ride a bicycle. Richard didn't have his own bicycle, so he rode his mother blue step-through Schwinn instead. He liked the soft-rubber feel of the pedals, but the bike was too large for him, and each time his brother ran with him down the driveway, gaining speed until he finally let go of his grip on the handlebars, Richard would wobble for a few yards before tumbling downward. He usually managed to steer the bicycle to the right before going down, landing the bike in a controlled crash in the soft grass of the yard. Then finally his brother told him, *If you can steer it on to the grass, you can keep steering onto the street, you goof. Just keep turning it both ways, one way and then the other*

In this way he learned to ride.

Just before Pebblebrook diverged out of the neighborhood and on to FM 1980, it crossed a small street named Lodge Creek that dead-ended at the community pool and clubhouse. *Everything in the suburbs is named for what used to be there*, he remembered one of his architecture professors joked. But there had been no creeks or brooks in Forest Lake Estates, only grassy prairies and thick groves of weed-choked bottomland forest. The creeks and brooks were only phantom images of a dreamland past.

As he rounded the corner and spotted the Lodge Creek turnoff, Richard realized it was going to be impassable. A line of a dozen young girls blocked the entrance to the street that ran to the swimming pool. They sat cross-legged in a row, towels draped across their legs or wrapped around the shoulders of their dry bathing suits, their arms and hands interlocked to form a human chain, a barrier of uncertain purpose and doubtful strength.

They were waiting for swim-team practice, Richard thought, waiting for the coach to come and unlock the gates. There was a game arising from summer boredom, a pointless yet strangely symbolic act of sisters united against would-be intruders, determined to block access to anyone not possessing the right secret password or else willing to pay the no-doubt humiliating toll.

They shouldn't be sitting in the street, Richard thought. Maybe I should stop and tell them, order them even, to get out of the road immediately. Isn't that what adults are supposed to do, to take charge and assert the unpopular position, to break up these forbidden games? He wondered if it was his duty.

But he knew he wouldn't stop and warn them. He didn't think he could simply ride toward the barricade, either, in hopes they would drop their arms at the last minute, surrendering the game of chicken at the sight of his towering bicycle and disapproving adult stare. He would have to stop, or slow down anyway, and ask them to let him through. Surely they would not turn down a reasonable request to allow him passage on a public road.

At the last minute, though, Richard rode past the line of girls, feeling their synchronized stares follow him as he coasted silently past the turnoff. He avoided looking at them but saw out of the corner of his eye the girls' heads turn together, their arms remaining locked, their human-flesh barrier untested and unbroken.

When he was well past the girls and about to turn on to the farm-to-market road, he heard one of the girls yell behind him.

"Loser!" she called out after him.

He turned back and saw one girl, a blonde wearing a one-piece black swimsuit, standing defiantly with her feet spread and hands on her hips. Another girl pulled down on her arm when she saw Richard looking back.

Instead of feeling stung by this barb, Richard found himself smiling. He shook his head and dug into the pedals as he pointed the bike to the western shoulder of FM 1980.

The cross-wind bore down on him the instant he left the neighborhood and ramped his bike on to the black-asphalt shoulder of FM 1980. Richard geared down and ducked his head against the strength of the wind, but his speed still dropped down to 12, then 10 miles per hour, the steady gust of wind from nowhere pushing him back toward the safety of the neighborhood.

The static noise of the wind, the hissing white noise of a pelting rain or a hundred television sets, filled Richard's ears even as he ducked under the air streams. Cars and pick-up trucks whizzed by him at well over the speed limit, each car bringing an additional blast of uncertain air along with the mental image of being plowed into from behind by some oversized Ford pickup, its bumper clearing Richard's bicycle seat entirely and snapping his back in two in a blinding accident from which he would remember nothing, just an instant jump into blackness before he was able to feel pain or imagine fear.

He could not really hear above the steady hiss of the wind, but Richard imagined voices floating from the cars, drivers yelling profanities at him and urging him to get off the road, to find another place to ride his bicycle where he would not interfere with the urgent flow of commuter traffic, drivers anxious not so much to arrive at their destinations, but anxious to keep moving, to not be stuck in one place for too long.

The hike-and-bike trail turned off FM 1980 just a mile north of Pebblebrook, and Richard was relieved to arrive at the trail head and escape the punishing flow of wind and traffic. His bike coasted down a small hill on to the crushed-gravel trail that dropped into a wooded reserve of Spanish oak and pecan trees. Richard had seen the area on a map, and he knew it was really only a narrow stretch of

parkland, a strip of so-called protected nature reserve surrounded by the farm road, two neighborhood developments, and a few mini-ranches. Still, compared to the noisy confusion of the two-lane farm road, the quiet of the nature reserve fell like a thick blanket on Richard and his spinning bicycle. Soon all he could hear was the smooth crank of his sprocket and chain.

The cycle rolled more slowly over the damp gravel trail, the tires kicking up bits of mud and rocks into the spokes and splattering on Richard's socks and shoes. A few cigarette packages and faded cardboard beer packages littered the ground near the trailhead, where the dense stands of trees concealed a humid den of teenage passion. Once beyond the trailhead, though, the trail emerged as a clean passage through an unlikely suburban wilderness, and the swaths of forest on either side were deep enough, the trees tops thick and tall enough, to block the views and much of the light from above, creating the illusion of being lost in a dim forest. Although drops of sunlight trickled through the branches and the leaves remained green almost year-round, a faint scent of death hung in the forest air, drafting up from empty armadillo shells and rotting pecan branches covered with fuzzy green lichen.

On the section of trail that led to the water tower, the forest illusion was broken only once, where a small ranch-access road intersected the trail. Old yellow "No Trespassing" signs were posted where the dirt road crossed, to discourage cyclists from leaving the trail to explore beyond the gate, which stood unlocked just a few yards down the road. A newer sign, posted by the parks department for the benefit of the drivers who used the road, read, "Do not block hike-and-bike trail."

Richard had come across a van parked here before, a tan Chevy with a bubble window in the back and a custom paint job with a brownish silver silhouette of a coyote howling at the moon and the words "Desert Caravan" emblazoned in mock-cursive lettering. Richard couldn't imagine this particular van being useful in the desert, or why such a van was parked on this road, which provided access to one of the area's small ranches, a 10-acre plot on which, Richard imagined, sat a large brick house and fishing pond stocked with channel cats and bluegills.

The van had been blocking the bike path that day, and Richard had to hop off his bike and walk it through a tangle of vines and trees to get around the van. By the time he had emerged from the woods on the other side, his socks and shoes were wet and covered in cockleburrs.

But the van wasn't parked there today, and Richard coasted over the access drive and rode the final mile to the water tower, which stood in a clearing at the end of the trail, surrounded by a sparkling chain-link fence broken only by a locked gate on the far side, a gate that looked as if it had never been opened or closed. The gate led to an asphalt drive on the other side, marked off by "Keep Out" and "City Property" warning signs.

The blue water tower hovered in the cloudless sky as a monument to suburban progress, its globe metal almost disappearing in the equally blue-blue of the sky, the words "Lake Forest Estates" proclaiming the triumph of civilization over this small patch of wilderness. From the blue tower flowed a constant flood of chlorine-shocked water, filling toilets and propelling the blades of dishwashers to sprinkle water on wine glasses and Ginsu steak knives.

After meandering around the trail that looped around the water-fence, allowing his leg muscles to slacken and his lungs to take in deep breaths of warm air, Richard started pedaling homeward, his legs again pumping in regular beats and building to heartbeat pace.

He let his mind drift and his eyes wander, probing the shadows of the surrounding trees, looking deep into the dimness for watching eyes, for decaying magazines, for discarded items of clothing, for naked, rotting corpses waiting to be discovered by innocent, bicycle-riding citizens who just happened to be passing by and could not believe their eyes because after all they rode this trail all the time and it's just a quiet neighborhood after all, a place where people go to escape this sort of thing.

The bicycle was stopped by a wall of some kind, and Richard felt the side of his face smack against an unmovable curtain of steel before he went down, the bicycle wheel spinning uselessly nearby,

his unfocused eyes seeing looming trees and swaying branches, his head reeling from dizziness and confusion.

He remembered these bicycle-wreck sensations from long ago, the disorientation, the confusion of molecules that have been shaken in the wrong direction, when entropy takes over and smooth, forward-moving action turns into head-pounding confusion and nauseating unbalance, and you can only lie in the dirt and wait for the pain. He remembered the sound of a spinning bicycle wheel, too, from when he had turned his mother's bicycle upside down on its seat and handlebars and cranked the pedal with his hand just to see the wheel spin and the spokes blur into a metal blurry disc. Sometimes he would stick the tip of his finger into the spokes and let the metal wires whack against his fingernail, just to feel the pain.

“You dented my van!”

Richard sat up on the trail, rubbing his head and stretching his eyes until they brought into focus the tan van parked on the access drive, the opaque rear bubble window glaring at him like some serpent eye.

A man in his 50s, tall and gaunt and wearing squarish glasses, a mop of greasy hair flopping on his head, stood huffing near the passenger door. The gate behind him had been swung open, but the van's engine had been turned off.

Richard dusted the gravel and bits of leaves from his forearms and surveyed the bright red rashes of red on his knees and elbows. Blood dripped from his temple, and his head was beginning to throb.

“What?” he looked up at the tall man, his lips twisted into the shape of a comma, a stain of tobacco dripping out of the side of his mouth.

The tall man shook his finger at the side of the van.

“Don't you see the dent? Why don't you watch where you're going?”

Richard cradled his throbbing temples in his hands and turned his head slowly, trying to shake loose some of the pain before it arrived in full force.

“That’s about \$300 worth of damage.”

For some reason, this brought to Richard’s lips a half-remembered line from a movie, a daring response from a vest-wearing Burt Reynolds to a backwoods con-man in a bargaining exchange for driving services.

“Three hundred like hell,” Richard said clearly as he looked up at the man, and he imagined the words hanging in the air like a movie line. His reached for solid ground to push himself up, and his right hand fell on half-rotten pine log.

“What? You think I’m gonna—?”

Richard stood with pine log in hand and lurched toward the tall man. He swung the log toward the ground, a batter’s warm-up swing, and then brought it back up above shoulder.

“*What?* What now?” Richard hissed. “Didn’t you read the goddamn sign?”

The tall man backed up, his hands reaching behind him to feel for the front of the van.

“Sign? What sign?”

“That’s the problem. You don’t read the signs. You block my way and then you blame me for running into your van. People like got no—“

He swung at the man but hit the passenger-side mirror instead, and it popped and dangled against the side of the van as bits of glass fell to the ground. Richard advanced again, and the man stumbled around the front of the van.

“Aw,” the tall man said, regaining his step and waving Richard off. “Forget you. Just forget it.”

Richard stood frozen with the log and watched the man trot to the driver’s side of the van and open the door.

The tall man shook his finger at Richard just as he closed the door and yelled at him through the window.

“You’re crazy!”

The man turned the key but the motor churned and didn’t start. He cranked it again, and smoke puffed out the rear end, but still the engine died.

Richard bent to pick up his bike but then water came to the inner walls of his cheeks, and the sky spun above him, trees and blue sky blurring together.

He sat down next to his bicycle, watching the van and listening to the sickening sound of the cranking starter, the engine grinding without hope.

When Richard woke up, the van was gone, and the gate was shut again and secured with a loose bit of chain. His bicycle was propped up against a nearby tree, waiting for him like a trusty steed.

The afternoon sun beat down in the clearing of the intersection. Richard’s mouth stung from dryness and his head ached softly, a lingering ghost of pain searching for a way out. He touched the side of his head gently with one finger, feeling for the scab on his temple. He looked at his fingertip and saw no blood. He looked closely at the tip of his finger and realized he could see the lines of his fingerprint more clearly than he ever had before, his pink skin illuminated by the light of the afternoon.

The bicycle had only been scratched, and besides his dry mouth and lingering head-pain, Richard felt strong, so he mounted the bicycle and started for home.

On the way back, he took the fork in the trail that led back to the poolhouse, aiming to avoid the noise and confusion of the farm road. It was a short length of trail that emerged onto a back corner of the parking lot behind the swimming pool, which by this time was filled with black Camrys and SUVs of every make and color.

Team practice was over, and throngs of children of all ages jumped in and out of the pool, swimming in zig-zag motions across the surface and dipping underwater to avoid collisions with each

other. Adults lay around on the plastic chaise lounges, reading paperback novels and allowing their pale, barrel-shaped and wrinkled bodies to tan beneath the cloudless sky.

The human barrier of girls was gone, of course, and Richard pedaled swiftly through the intersection, down Pebblebrook and through the neighborhood, this time not digressing down cul-de-sac lanes, and not bothering to take in the blurred scenery of square lawns and brick houses that had surrendered to the dead silence of the afternoon, with curtains drawn and blinds shuttered against the heat.

Richard pedaled toward home without wondering how he was going to fix the mower or clean the gutters or explain his cuts and bruises to his waiting wife. He focused instead on the light click of the sprocket as his right foot struck downward, that pinching of metal or rubbing of chain that marked the seconds of his progress as he pedaled forward.

Part 2: Lutefisk and Other Bicycles

The Pain of Tattoo Removal

The scab on Maryann's knee had healed into a purple oval of fermented skin, like a frozen pond of volcanic lava. She had injured it during a track meet in Fort Worth, when she fell while heading down the slightest of grassy inclines. The three-second delay caused her to lose the relay for the team, and her father had said she called herself "stupid" in the car all the way home.

Although the scab was beginning to heal, the itch that came with the healing proved unbearable, and Maryann picked at it with her fingernail while she fiddled with the radio dial, searching for anything besides evangelical talk radio or stations featuring the country hits of the 1960s.

"There's nothing out here," she said. "Don't you have satellite in this car, Uncle Rodney?"

Rodney shook his head and looked at Maryann's fingers mindlessly pulling at the strawberry patch of skin.

"You should probably quit picking at that. A picked scab never heals. You'll get a scar."

"Really?" she nodded as if she had just heard a song for the first time. "Yeah. A scar would be cool. Especially since my parents won't let me get a tattoo."

They passed a temporary highway sign that said, "Burn Watch," and Rodney craned his neck to look at the sky through the windshield. Dark clouds covered the twilight sky, and cool air seeped in from the cracked window on Rodney's side of the car. It felt like rain, but he was too superstitious to even say it. It hadn't rained in the eastern part of the state for more than three months.

"You know, when I was young, tattoos were only for sailors and prisoners."

Rodney hated when he began sentences with phrases like "when I was young," because he knew nothing made you sound older. It was akin to saying, "As I always say." In truth, Rodney remembered tattoos from his youth as being associated with drug dealers and girls who smoked cigarettes in front of

the 7-Eleven. His mother had warned him, “If you get a tattoo, the only way to get it off is with surgery. And it’s painful.”

He was only 12 when his mother told him this, and he hadn’t been thinking about getting a tattoo at all. He only asked his mother how they got the colors to stay under the skin. All his mother could come up with was various statements about pain, the pain involved in getting a tattoo, being stuck under the skin with dirty needles, and the pain of having the tattoo removed, when one inevitably realized that a tattoo was incompatible with living a decent life. As his mother spoke, Rodney imagined writhing in agony as a fat doctor scraped his tattoo off with a cheese grater, a pile of colored skin flakes falling into a wooden salad bowl.

Maryann settled on an AM classic-rock station out of Dallas, tilting her head and snapping her fingers at the blended strains of a chugging electric guitar and pulsing organ as a reedy-throated singer screamed about life on the bayou.

“Uncle Rodney, do you like it when I call you uncle? I know you’re not really my uncle. I mean, it doesn’t make you feel old, does it?”

Rodney chuckled before he was interrupted by the breaking static of the walkie-talkie. The voice of Maryann’s father, Tom, came in over the static.

“OK, I’m going to be turning left off the highway in about two miles, right before the Little Chief gas station,” Tom said. “You guys hear me?”

The radio clicked into silence and Rodney and Maryann stared straight ahead at the disappearing path of blacktop highway. Maryann twirled her brown hair in her right hand and turned her head to face the blur of pine forest passing on the passenger side of the car.

“Tell him we’re OK. Wait. Tell him ‘10-4, we copy you good buddy.’”

Maryann grinned at the vague recognition of the CB radio talk she had probably only heard on a late-night TV commercial for a K-Tel record collection.

“Wow, you really know your lingo, Uncle Rodney.”

Rodney smiled without looking at Maryann, and he wondered if perhaps CB radio talk was like a second language to him, a pidgin language he had somehow absorbed as a preteen in the 1970s.

His dad, always late in making entrée into these cultural trends, bought a CB radio in 1979 from Radio Shack just as people were beginning to rip their CB radios out of their cars and pack them into boxes in the garage. Rodney’s father proudly announced that the radio had 40 channels and squelch control as he attached the four-foot antennae to the trunk of Chevy Nova with a heavyweight magnetic disc.

Maryann held the walkie-talkie close to her mouth.

“Tell him we should watch out for *smokey*,” Rodney suggested.

Maryann pressed the button of the walkie-talkie with her thumb.

“Looks like we got ourselves a convoy, good buddy. We better watch out for smokey. Ten-four over and out, roger that.”

Tom’s voice exploded back over the radio.

“Quit playing with the radio, Maryann. We need to save the batteries.”

Maryann rolled her eyes and dropped the radio in her lap.

“Now you’ve done it,” Rodney said as he smiled at Maryann, but when she didn’t smile back, he added, “Don’t worry. I’ll tell him later it was all my idea.”

“It doesn’t matter. He’s always mad at me.”

She folded her arms and stared out the window at the passing pastures scattered with cows, including some longhorn cattle.

“Why do all the cows have their heads down? Is that all they do is eat?” she said. “So disgusting. Just like Sidney.”

Sidney, Maryann's younger brother, ate only things like chicken tenders and hot dogs with mayonnaise, and refused to eat broiled chicken, steak, and most vegetables. Sidney insisted on being called Bruce, although that wasn't even his middle name, just a name he thought sounded more masculine. Maryann had called him *Cindy* when he was a toddler, as a way of teasing him for not being able to say his own name. Then when Sidney got placed in the advanced reading classes, and then the advanced math classes, and after teachers started using words like "gifted," Sidney returned the teasing by calling Maryann "stupid" and laughing at her struggles to understand geometry.

"She probably doesn't even know the difference between a sphere and a circle," Sidney had cackled as he threw himself down on the ottoman to watch a rerun of "The Simpsons," most episodes of which he knew by heart. He would watch the episode and say the lines before the characters could say them, annoying everyone but his father, who thought it was a manifestation of the boy's genius and shouldn't be discouraged.

Ever since Sidney had been born, Rodney had had a recurring dream in which he found Sidney's body floating in a swimming pool. No matter how old Sid got, he was always just a two- or three-year-old in the dream, and when Rodney pulled him out of the pool his body felt like a cold, raw turkey, its pasty skin dimpled and dripping water from being washed. The dream varied, and sometimes Rodney would pull Sid out of the water and try to rescue him. Other times he would just stand on the side of the pool, regarding the small white body suspended underwater as if it were floating peacefully in space millions of miles away. One time when he had the dream, he had taken the long aluminum cleaning pole and poked the body, watching Sid spin in the water as he tried to force him to the surface.

Of course, he had never told Tom or Tom's wife about the recurring dream. He was sure the dream had just grown out of his own anxiety about owning a pool, just like people who own Mercedes have dreams in which they helplessly watch the car roll over a cliff. He had moved out of the house with the swimming pool after his wife had divorced him, and the buyers of the house said they would be

filling in the old pool with dirt. He had no pool now, the pool did not even exist, and yet continued to have the dream, continued to see Sidney's blue lips, white skin, and glassy eyes bobbing just beneath the surface of his backyard pool.

Tom's minivan crawled to a stop ahead of them, its front wheels turned toward the entrance of a dirt road surrounded by deep thicket on both sides. Rodney stopped his car right behind Tom's.

Rodney reached toward the radio in Maryann's lap, and then stopped himself as Maryann's hand went up instinctually to block his. He avoided her glance as he stopped the car behind the minivan.

"Hey, let me see the radio, would you?"

"Why don't you just get out? We're right—"

"You know your dad likes the radios."

She handed him the walkie-talkie and Rodney put the radio to his face and clicked the talk button, feeling like an 8-year-old and a state trooper at the same time.

"Where are you going?"

"I think this is the road to the camp."

"What makes you say that? Over."

"It's got to be one of these roads. I just have a feeling."

The two cars bounced along the dirt road, with Tom's minivan leading the way. Sidney rode in the back of the minivan, his arms swinging over the back seat as he stared at Maryann and made monkey faces, sticking out his tongue at Maryann.

"What a retard," Maryann said.

Maryann had asked to ride with Rodney after they all had met at the gas station in Rusk, and the way Maryann had said his car was cool and complimented his haircut, he thought maybe she had developed a little crush. But riding in Rodney's car was the easiest way to avoid riding with the impish

Sid, to avoid the quiz games he liked to play in the car as a way of proving his superior intelligence. Usually, he would phrase the questions in such a way that he could embarrass Maryann both in terms of her vocabulary and her ignorance of the subject, asking her questions like, “Do you know why a pterodactyl isn’t a dinosaur?”

The dirt road ended at locked gate in barbed wire fence, and there was just enough room for the two cars to turn around without getting stuck in the mud.

“This is a bit like the beginning of *Deliverance*,” Rodney said into the walkie-talkie.

“Just a minor diversion,” Tom said. Then he strained his voice in an attempt to sound like an injured Burt Reynolds. “Now ... you get to play the game.”

“What is he talking about?” Maryann said.

Rodney pulled the car to the side of the road and they watched Tom back the SUV into a little ditch as he turned it around.

“Probably your dad wouldn’t want me to tell you about that movie.”

Maryann let out a loud grunt and hit her thigh with a fist.

“God, he’s the one talking about it. He treats me like a baby.”

A rumble of thunder rolled across the sky, and the cold air coming in from the window suddenly felt electrified. Rodney clicked the button to roll up his window.

“Maryann, you have your seatbelt on, right?” came Tom’s voice over the radio.

The disembodied father-voice was beginning to remind Rodney of some kind of bad situation comedy, a father from beyond the grave who continues to harangue his children.

“It’s on,” Rodney said, while gesturing to Maryann to put her seatbelt on. She buckled the belt but left the shoulder loop under the arm, as some kind of rebellious teenage gesture.

Again Maryann fiddled with the radio buttons, scanning the stations over and over again, creating a pastiche of random sound-bites, parts of words and sentences uttered by varying human frequencies, as well as staccato samplings of violins, accordions, and guitars.

“I’m going to turn back left here at main road,” Tom sighed over the radio. “I’m sure we must have missed the turnoff.”

The rain began to fall in big, heavy cold drops, splashing on the windshield and creating instant puddles on the dry earth, which had become too dry, too parched and brittle, to accept the vital gift of water. The earth had become a sickly starved child.

Rodney flicked on the windshield wipers and then his hand moved toward Maryann’s. He couldn’t see the SUV in front of them, the rain had started to come down so hard, and the constant changing of radio stations was distracting him. She was scanning the radio waves, looking for intelligent life, a futile search.

As he reached into the peripheral space of the car to gently push Maryann’s hand away from the radio to stop the annoying radio chatter, her fingers grabbed his. It was the type of hand-grabbing tangle that he had not felt for some time, these light fingers pulling on his own, the spontaneous sort of grasping of adolescents, desperate for a connection to the flesh.

“Uncle Rodney. Nooo. I want to find some music.”

As she gripped his fingers and pulled them away from the radio without letting go, he felt a pang of guilt and began to analyze, to rationalize, how he could explain such hand-holding to his oldest friend. It was just an innocent holding of hands, not much different from square dancing in elementary school, when the PE teacher would insist that you take the hands and arms of girls who were neither your friends or allies. And there was always that one girl, the perfect girl wearing Jordache jeans and white clips in her hair, who would insist on putting a handkerchief in her hand before she would dare touch your filthy boy hands.

As they pulled off of the dirt road, the rain had turned into a grayish curtain, streaks of water dampening the little light still coming from the setting sun. Maryann's fingers still tugged on Rodney's right hand, even as his left hand struggled to find autonomy, struggled to balance the steering wheel in the midst of the darkening rain.

"Which way did they turn? Left?" Rodney asked as he tried to make sense of the dancing dots of damp red lights and beaming white lights against the wet blacktop highway. He let go of Maryann's hand so that he could grasp the steering wheel with both hands and guide it through a left-hand turn into the far lane.

In the violence of the crash, Maryann's body jolted toward Rodney's side of the car like a skeleton in a fun-house.

The sounds of crushing metal and shattering glass gave way to lights. Stuck red lights and flashing blue lights, headlights turned against the canopy of treetops, flashlights bobbing in the darkness, carried by the flat cut-out figures of policemen in rain parkas.

Rodney had let go of Maryann's hand, yet he still drove the car into some horrible vortex of colliding atoms, some negative channel of existence not meant for 14-year-old teenagers. Whether he had turned toward the camp or not, he had made a wrong turn, had put the car into harm way's when only moments before they had been safe and secure.

In the hospital waiting room, Rodney sat staring straight ahead, his elbows perched on his knees and his folded hands cupping his face in a prayer-like gesture. Even if he had wanted to, he couldn't have read a magazine or drank a cup of vending-machine coffee. He felt guilty even fantasizing about picking up a copy of *Field and Stream* and thumbing through the advertisements for brass-plated fishing reels and motorcycle tours through the Arizona desert.

People always said you remembered car accidents in slow motion, as if you could see yourself flying through the windshield and landing on the concrete, as if the whole thing took hours instead of

seconds. Yet Rodney remembered the accident barely at all. It reminded him of the time he had had surgery, and he had woken up to his wife's face. Before he could feel the gauze bandage or the soreness in his throat, he had asked his wife when they were going to start the surgery. It wasn't like waking from normal sleep and having a vague understanding that you have in fact been asleep. In the fog of anesthesia, time had ceased to pass in a normal manner, and he had had no dreams, just a static unchanging screen like the test pattern on a television. At the time, he had wondered if this was what death was like, an eternal test pattern with no sense of time or space.

Yet the reality of the accident, like the soreness in his throat from the surgery, eventually took hold as he felt the pain in his side and against his collarbone, caused by the pressure of the seatbelt, and as he began to see the figures outside in the wet darkness, poking around the car and trying to put together the pieces back into a sensible reality.

Rodney leaned back in his hard plastic chair and interlaced his fingers to keep them from running through his hair or rubbing together nervously. Across the space of the small carpeted waiting room, Tom sat with his family. While Tom's wife dug through her purse, looking for change for the vending machine to give to the boy, who hung on her arm and opened his mouth as if he were dying of thirst, Tom sat up straight, his arms crossed and his eyes trained on the exit sign above the door. Rodney looked at him, but Tom avoided his gaze, and Rodney thought of the first time they had ever known each other as friends.

They had worked together at the newspaper for several years, Tom writing financial news and Rodney writing headlines for the sports section, but they had never had any sort of conversation. With his pressed suits and expensive haircuts, Tom seemed to Rodney like a strange sort of modern-day dandy, a hopelessly out-of-place figure in the dirty, ink-stained world of newspaper publishing. Then after a workplace happy hour, they had been left sitting alone together at the bar, Tom finishing a gin-and-tonic and Rodney drinking a dark beer.

Rodney had raised his beer, looked up at Tom and said, in that drunken way that makes everything seem like a revelation or significant thought, “Hell, I don’t even know you.”

Tom had raised his eyebrows and said, “I don’t know you either.”

After that, after getting drunk together, they had become best friends and while Rodney had gotten divorced and moved through a string of bad relationships, he had watched Tom and his wife have kids, had watched the kids grow up through a series of family barbecues, camping trips, and birthday parties. And it seemed to Rodney that friendship was like knowledge, because to admit you knew nothing was to begin to learn, and to admit that you don’t know someone was the beginning of getting to know them, of beginning to see past their self-projected cartoon images.

Rodney thought of Maryann sitting next to him in the car, playing with the radio and nursing her teenage anger, and he realized he had seen her grow up but that he still didn’t know her, didn’t know what she dreamed of or how she saw the world. He looked at Tom and wanted to say he was sorry but wanted even more to tell him that everything was going to be OK, but all he could was keep staring into the blank emptiness of the waiting room.

The rain continued to beat down on the glass of waiting room windows, and Rodney pictured the ground becoming saturated, the puddles subsiding and allowing the channels of water to trickle down deep into the earth, turning the dry, hard-caked dirt into a black, rich, nutritious soil, from which would spring clovers and patches of tough weeds. He imagined his own lawn becoming thick and healthy, until he would push his mower over the grass, forming neat rows of freshly cut turf and trimming the edges so that there were no unsightly clumps of grass hanging over the curb, just a rectangle of green grass that as far as anyone could tell, had always been just this neat and perfect.

When Airplanes Return

I used to watch Gretchen's unconscious body lying beside me, as she slept underneath the morning light broken up by the slats of the mini-blind, and I would think how different she was when she wasn't talking.

When Gretchen was awake, her mouth was always moving, her tortoise-frame glasses slipping down on her nose and her belly jiggling between her low-rise jeans and a shirt that was too short for her, this cheap costume of a coffeehouse know-it-all. She would light one cigarette after another, clenching each one in her teeth at a jaunty angle like FDR. I told her this one time and she didn't know what I was talking about, didn't know that FDR had smoked. She even challenged me on it.

"Wasn't he crippled?" she said. "I don't think he would smoke."

She would blow smoke into the dim lights of the bar while responding to my observations with rejoinders like "Tell me something I don't know," or "If you say so, Captain Obvious."

Even when I couldn't hear her, when I saw Gretchen talking to someone across the space of the tavern, for instance, I always imagined her talking loudly. I could see her throw her head back to laugh in that exaggerated way. She even looked at me loudly, bugging her eyes out and shaking her head when she couldn't believe what I had just said.

She somehow managed to be loud in email messages, too. Of course, there was one message she sent me that it seemed justified to be extra-loud, and that's what she did, typing the message in all capital letters.

"A PLANE just CRASHED INTO THE WORLD TRADE CENTER!"

Other messages followed, all from Gretchen, and all typed in capital letters with exclamation points. After "SECOND TOWER HAS BEEN STRUCK," I don't really remember which messages she sent me and which I got from other sources. They all run together in my memory, a string of all-capital telegraphic messages, screaming the incoming news of the day: Bodies are falling from the sky, the

north tower has collapsed, a third plane falling from the sky into a grassy field, other planes possibly headed for White House, the Empire State Building, the Sears Tower in Chicago. The president will address the nation. Endless TV images and messages.

If she hadn't sent that email, maybe the others wouldn't have come, maybe the plane wouldn't have hit. Maybe I would have never heard about anything unusual happening that day, and the Twin Towers would have stayed the most prominent feature in the Manhattan skyline, instead of just becoming ghostly figures in all those movies like *Working Girl* from the seventies and eighties. I blamed her. Child logic, I suppose, like the way Vardaman blames the doctor for killing his mother in *As I Lay Dying*, then chases the doctor's horses off by beating them with a stick.

I wanted to chase her horses off, this girlfriend of two months, with her pierced tongue and frame glasses, with that tattoo across the small of her back.

A couple of months after the email messages, her other question came, asked aloud in lower-case letters but urgent nonetheless, with its neediness and implied accusations.

"Do you love me?"

When she asked the question, I was lying in bed with my back turned toward her, and I kept staring at the empty wall in front of me, letting her question bounce off the blank eggshell wall I had meant to decorate with something six months ago when I had moved in, but then didn't because I kept thinking I would move again.

She was on to me, and she wanted that commitment, just like the engagements that had been featured on the news, people committing and renewing their vows after all this carnage and wreckage, creating a unified symbolic front against the twisted metal and falling bodies.

I kept staring at the wall. It was a wall without pictures, just a slab of blank drywall in a cheap apartment that could never be anyone's home. They say J.D. Salinger never put pictures up on his walls, maybe because he preferred the nothingness or never wanted to think of anywhere as permanent.

Hours before she had asked the question, I had awakened to the sound of an airplane overhead. She told me I had jolted up in bed, like a character in a movie when they are frightened by a bad dream or a noise in the night, gasping for breath in the dark and leaving viewers wondering what the hell just happened.

The skies had been silent for weeks, or so it seemed, until I heard the distant-thunder jet sound of this plane, probably a commuter jet flying in from Atlanta or Miami or some other city without twin towers, just some city with barbecue joints and bowling alleys, just a plane droning its way to yet another safe landing.

I jolted up in bed, and then, maybe 30 minutes later, she asked the question as we lay naked under the old green sheets I had gotten from my grandfather's house when he passed away, sheets I had taken from his closet to wrap up his old Epiphone electric guitar, the only item he had put my name on, "Christopher" written in a piece of masking tape stuck to the back of the guitar.

"Do you love me?"

She asked the question, and I pulled my arm over my eyes.

"Do you love me?" she repeated as she tugged the sheet up under her chin and pushed her glasses up on her nose.

"I mean, are we together or what?"

She asked the question, and I kept staring at the white wall, with my cheek against the pillow, and said, "It's funny, but I don't think I've ever thought about how airplanes sound before. It's like the sound of one of those shells you put up to your ear. The sound of the ocean, but much louder. It's like the sound of the ocean being echoed in the sky."

I didn't turn around but I could sense her eyes bugging out and her head shaking at me, and soon I heard the soft sound of the bedroom door closing behind her.

Credits Roll

The first time Ria had suggested they go to the movies, Evan thought maybe she was hoping to kiss in the darkness, like two teenagers hiding from their parents and the nasty rumors of friends. He figured “movies” was a young person’s code for something else.

She *was* younger than he was, had just turned 23, but she took movies seriously, and she had insisted they drive into town to see an independent thriller, a movie about a tough girl living in the backwoods of Kentucky who must unravel the mystery of her junkie father’s violent death. As she twirled her dark hair on her finger, pulling it downward, she told Evan she liked movies like this, but what she really liked was the Old Egyptian Theatre itself, an old art-deco moviehouse that had almost been demolished last year to make way for a new electronics store, but had been granted a new lease after the landowner had received a wave of protest letters.

“I spent two days writing that damn letter,” Ria told him, laughing even though she had said nothing funny. “I kept looking up new words in the thesaurus. I wanted him to take me seriously, you know?”

Evan nodded as he paid for the tickets, and he was silently relieved that they hadn’t asked for her ID because of the “R” rating.

The cavernous theater must have had four hundred seats, in huge rows without breaks and not constructed in the steep, hill-like way of new movie theaters — just rows and rows of uncomfortable, folding cloth movie chairs arranged like a lecture hall. A low platform stage sat at the front of the theater, where maybe in the old days the theater manager, a fat guy in a blue suit and skinny black tie, had strolled out to talk about the film, or a magician had performed tricks before the show, pulling rabbits out of a hat. As they picked two seats in the back, underneath the balcony, he noticed the seat covers were worn and greasy from years of spilled soda and popcorn butter. Cheap plastic drink holders

had been hung on the seats in front of them, since the wooden arms between the chairs were too narrow, and the theater was bathed in the garish light from the red and blue track lights that burned above the stage.

They should have torn it down, he thought.

“Isn’t it beautiful?” she said, laughing again, as she touched his arm and gestured toward the entire space of the theater. “I love it.”

The screen and the stage in front of it were guarded by two tall white, faux-marble statues on the side. The two thin figures had man-like bodies and the heads of what Evan thought were dogs or jackals, maybe, and each wore gold armor and held a spear pointed toward the ceiling.

“Interesting statues,” he said. “You think they’re really Egyptian?”

She punched his arm and giggled in the way that she did when she didn’t really think it was funny but knew that he had said it for a laugh. At one point, just after they had met, Ria told him his sense of humor was strange and that it wasn’t “ha ha” funny.

“What’s ha-ha funny?” he had asked. “Like the ending of *Romeo and Juliet*?”

The theater now was empty except for one old man sitting in the middle of the center row, with both his arms draped around the backs of the seats on either side. As the lights dimmed and the screen lit up with the flicker of the projector, the old man began clapping, taking his long arms from the seats and putting his hands together over his head loudly and methodically.

“What’s he clapping for?” Evan asked. “What a weirdo.”

“Aw, he’s excited,” Ria said. “He probably loves the movies. It’s the only time he doesn’t have to feel alone.”

“Please. The guy’s probably a sex offender.”

She giggled in that way again.

When the movie ended, they sat in the darkness, waiting and watching the credits crawl up the screen. Evan saw that the old man had left the theater at some point, so they were alone in the huge empty space.

Ria's legs bounced up and down on her toes, so he lay his hand down flat on her knee, which was covered in the dark hose she had bought last week as part of her plan to look older. Her hand automatically moved to push his away, but then she stopped herself and let her fingers lay lightly on top of his wrist.

"What do you like about me?" she asked, not looking at him but studying the names of the movie's songs and original recording artists scroll up the screen.

Her leg was still beneath his hand, and he thought of the way his ex-girlfriend would get annoyed when he tapped his foot or bounced his leg while they were watching television. She would turn around and look at him until he stopped, until one day, when they were watching a marathon of *Magnum P.I.* reruns. Magnum was doing that thing where he looks at the camera, right at the viewer, flashing his Honolulu-after-dark mustache grin before jumping into his red Ferrari, and Marissa had smiled before turning around to glare at Evan and his bouncing leg.

"Would you stop, please?"

"What?" he had said, quickening the bounce of his leg ever so slightly. "For Magnum?"

"You're doing it again."

"What?"

"Bouncing your leg. It's vibrating the whole floor, and it's going to make me throw up."

But he kept bouncing it, bouncing his leg without explaining to Marissa why he wouldn't listen to her, because he had read somewhere in a self-help book that adults don't have to explain their actions to other adults, so he wasn't about to explain anything. He wasn't going to explain why he started

bouncing his leg, why he liked it, or why he wasn't going to stop. She would just have to figure that out for herself.

The next day, Marissa had taken the dog, the toaster oven, and her collection of collectible Barbie dolls, still in their original packages, which she kept in a plastic foot locker on a shelf at the back of the closet, and had loaded it all up into her Datsun hatchback. She left a note stuck to the refrigerator that said, "It doesn't matter what I say. You never listen, anyway."

The note was funny to Evan, because it rhymed and Marissa hated poetry. He wondered if she had unintentionally stolen the lines from a song, and for two weeks he had danced around the kitchen, singing the lines to different tunes while drinking beer and bouncing his leg in various spots around the house.

They waited and watched the credits roll, and Evan turned his hand over and let her fingers dance on his palm.

"You know what I like about you? I like the way you think it's important to stay for the movie credits, because those people worked hard on the film and it's not fair that everybody gets up to run to the restroom or beat the crowd to the parking lot," he said.

She brushed a bit of lint off his jacket.

"And I like the way you brush lint of my shoulders."

"Is that all?"

He looked at the toes of her right foot, which had started to wiggle, as if struggling to get free of the leather strap of her sandal.

"I like the way you say 'damn it.'"

She turned her face from the credits and squinted at him.

“You say it like one word, like *bullet* or *hammer*,” Evan said, shifting in his seat. “And you sing it, like you’re still happy even when you’re trying to curse.”

The credits rolled until the last few lines, which said something about thanking the good people of Bedford, Iowa, and also thanking the Iowa state highway patrol, and then the last frame stopped on the paragraph that read, “The events depicted in this film are entirely fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons or events is strictly coincidental and unintentional.”

Every legal disclaimer is a lie, Evan thought, designed to shift blame from those who really deserve it. When he had had surgery on his hand, he signed a disclaimer saying he might die from the anesthesia, and when he went skydiving, he signed another form saying that he knew he might smack into the ground at a hundred and eighty miles per hour. “Skydiving is inherently dangerous,” the form said, as if to say, if the chute doesn’t open, maybe you should have expected such a thing.

Maybe this movie is completely fictitious, but it seems more likely that these events had happened somewhere, sometime, or were bound to happen sooner or later, in roughly the same sequence.

So he tapped his foot as they sat in the darkness, waiting for that moment when the movie stopped and the house lights came on in a sudden flood of light, filling the theater with bright stillness and revealing a concrete floor covered with popcorn and sticky spots from old candy and soda.

They were the last two people in the theater, and Evan hesitated before taking his hand off her knee and getting up to leave. He hesitated because he knew when they walked out into the parking lot, a concrete prairie dotted with SUVs and fenced in by chain restaurants and freeways, it would be hot, and the summer heat would surround and suffocate them, and his shirt would be soaked with sweat in a way that would make it impossible to be comfortable for the rest of the day.

Dark Ride, Suspended

“At first his companions trusted him implicitly, and so great were the delights of flying that they wasted time circling round church spires or any other tall objects on the way that took their fancy.”

— J. M. Barrie, *Peter and Wendy*

The boy and his older brother slid onto the vinyl seat of the amusement-park carriage, a little wooden ship with a fake striped sail, and as soon as the lap-bar was pushed down, they felt themselves sailing forward, invisible cables pulling the car like the hand of God balancing a cup of coffee on his fingertips. The little car kept climbing and going upward until there was a groan and a snap; then the little boat tipped forward through an open window and fell into the midnight-blue sky.

The boy felt a knot in his stomach as the car leaned forward, but instead of falling, the car leveled out, and the boy found himself floating under a canopy of yellow stars. As he saw the nursery dormer windows close behind him, the boy looked over the side of the car and saw the glowing night-sky of London, darkened buildings and streets illuminated by thousands of window lights and gas streetlamps. The city blazed in that special way that towns flicker in the hours between the bedtime of young children and that of adults, when electric lights twinkle in satisfaction as grown-ups smoke pipes and eat pieces of chocolate cake, their stomachs already full with lamb and sweet potatoes. During these witching hours, the ruddy faces sigh and muse about what they would do when their children had grown up.

The brother had told the boy he would grow up some day, that he would drive a car and live in his own house, not in a house with the brother but with a wife and children of his own. *But I thought we were going to live together*, the boy told his brother. That was just silly talk, the older brother said as he crunched an aluminum can under his heel in the vacant lot behind their neighborhood. Everybody grows up and moves out on his own. It's time for you to grow up and realize that.

The boy had never been to London, until now, but floating above the city in his tiny ship, he recognized the tall tower with its roman-numeral clock and the bridge with its towers that looked like tall churches hovering over the turquoise-blue river with its perfectly straight sides. The shape and color of the tiny river reminded the boy of his family's swimming pool back home, on the days after his father had swept it and thrown powdered white chemicals on the water's surface. He imagined a river-pool that you could swim forever, without having to turn yourself around underwater by pushing your bare feet against the gunite. On both sides of the little river, the boy could see it was London by the way the townhouses crowded against each other, crooked chimneys perched on tin roofs above gables and shuttered windows with dozens of glass panes, not like the simple sliding windows of his own house.

"Look, now we're floating over the island of Neverland," said the older brother, dangling his arm over the side of the pirate ship.

The boy looked over the side but instead of seeing a green island teeming with little boys wearing loin cloths, or the smoking fires of Indian chiefs outside teepee tents, the boy saw their father, standing in the driveway of his family's home.

His father, sweating behind the black frames of his glasses, pushing his hair back with his palm, stood outside the open garage with a crescent wrench in his left hand. He shook his fist up at the pirate ship or maybe at the station wagon that was pulling out of the driveway. The boy couldn't see who was driving the station wagon, but it was always his mother, smoking a Benson and Hedges cigarette as she struggled with the giant steering wheel of the Chevy.

"It's not worth it, I'll tell you that," the father shouted at the station wagon.

His mother leaned her head out of the driver's side window, and the boy saw that half of her hair was streaked with silver coloring. She shook her head and tapped her cigarette, and a little pile of ash fell to the driveway.

"Oh, Mike, God," she said.

The brother had grabbed his arm and was tugging it, telling him to look over in his direction.

“Don’t you see the smoke coming from the campfire? And there’s Peter and Wendy.”

The boy blinked his eyes and looked again, but he didn’t see the campfire. The station wagon was gone also, and the garage door was closed and his father was gone. The driveway was cloaked in darkness, except for a sulfur-tinted light from a globe over the garage door, and the boy saw only his older sister standing in the driveway. The boy’s sister stood with her patent-leather black shoes snapped firmly together. She held the strap of a red purse that dangled neatly in front of her legs and wore a patterned skirt and a clean white shirt. Her face was buried in her hands, and a smashed plastic drinking glass lay on the driveway, surrounded by chunks of broken ice and puddles of brown liquid.

“What’s wrong with Jenny?” the boy said to his brother, but his brother, entranced by the island paradise below him, did not answer.

“I’ve never seen trees that green before,” the older brother said. “I’d like to live on an island, that’s what I think.”

The boy stretched his neck and tried to see over his brother’s arm, to see if he could see the mermaids, volcanoes, and treetops from that side of the ship, but when he looked in that direction, all he could see was the sound of his brother’s voice, his last words lingering in the air like street signs. He could see the pores on the skin of his brother’s forearm, interlocking with each other like little numerical figures, an infinite number of sixes, nines, and threes.

He peered again over his side of the gondola. The driveway had changed into another driveway at another house, not his family’s white-brick house but a brown rustic wood house with big picture windows overlooking the beach of an ocean bay. In the driveway, he saw himself, two or three years younger, sitting in a metal wheelchair. His brother pushed him in the wheelchair all around the driveway, spinning the chair in circles and tipping the chair back to do wheelies. On the porch, his now-dead grandmother sat in a different wheelchair, smiling and waving at the boys, who both ignored her.

His sister Jenny stood behind the grandmother, her hands firmly gripping the push handles of the wheelchair. She wore the same dress and the same patent-leather shoes and knee-high socks, but instead of the skirt she had on a Brownie uniform and had a little box camera hanging from her neck.

“You’re going to crash,” she said to the boys. “It’s bad luck to play in other people’s wheelchairs. You’ll catch their germs. You’re going to die.”

The boy felt himself becoming dizzy and nauseated, his cheeks watering in the same way that they did whenever his mother would spin him on the steel roundabout, which would creak and groan on its axle and he would keep spinning until the sound was gone and all he could see was the turning landscape. He would scream for his mother to stop, and when he stumbled off the merry-go-round the sky and trees and ground fell down on him in angled postcards discarded from all directions.

That’s funny, he thought, I usually only get sick on the teacups and those big wheels that turned you in one direction while the little car you were in spun in a different direction.

“I think I may be sick,” he said to his brother.

He expected his brother to tell him to shut up or maybe punch him in the arm, but his brother was no longer there, and as the gondola flew over the skull-rock projection of the green island, the boy realized he could once again see the images below the suspended dark ride.

He no longer felt nauseated, and he no longer wanted to scream out for the ride to stop, like he had that first outing to the state fair, when he eaten too much cotton candy and knew he was going to vomit, so he screamed until his stepfather made them stop the ride and picked him up out of the ride, cradling him like a wounded soldier.

The ride had returned to the nursery and the little ship was slowing down, and a blinking sign warned passengers, “Be careful when exiting.” The ship only slowed down and never stopped and soon the laptop popped up and an older man grabbed him by the arm and pulled him from the car. It was not

his grandfather but his father who had aged 20 years. His hair was white and he breathed laboriously through his nose.

“That’s enough of that crap,” his dad said.

His father said they must hurry to catch up with the brother and his mother for a family meeting at the hamburger-ice cream parlor, which always had bent-cane chairs and ceiling fans and a banjo player who took requests but seemed to always end up playing “It’s a Small World.”

“What about Jenny? Didn’t she ride? What happened to her?”

The father did not answer but only sighed and rubbed his closed right eye beneath his glasses with a single forefinger.

When they returned to the nursery, the beds had been stripped of their sheets and the mattresses stacked against the wall. The children’s rocking horse had been dismantled and put into a cardboard box, like a coffin for a victim of a crime, and all the other toys, the electric train, the rag dolls, and the red-and-blue building blocks, had been put into paper grocery sacks and lined up against the mattresses. A string of paper cut-out dolls, human figures holding hands in a never-ending boy-girl configuration, hung across the center of the room, tacked up in the corners. The boy noticed that the paper dolls were not really holding hands, because they were attached to each other without hands, a continuous bond of paper, these pulp-figures forever stuck with each other like families must be.

The boy walked to the nursery window, a modern window on a sliding-metal frame, and pushed it open. Outside it smelled wet and cool like the beginning of a rainstorm, but it hadn’t rained in a very long time. He looked up at the sky, searching for pirates ships hanging in the clouds, but he saw only a smattering of stars competing with the bright lights of the nearby city. The handful of stars, the seven sisters and the dog star and the others his father had taught him, stood twinkling against the blackness of the sky. One Christmas, his father had told him and his brother and sister that a moving star was Santa’s sleigh, but when they were older, he admitted it had only been a satellite, and when the stars twinkled,

his dad told them, it was because the light wasn't strong enough to pass through the pollution and atmosphere. The boy pulled the window shut, struggling to slide the window against its metal frame, shutting out the blackness and the weak stars beaming light from thousands of years ago.

Don't Forget To Have a Good Day

Miranda's sitting in my office, sort of bouncing in her chair and playing with the rubber Jack-in-the-Box action figure on my desk.

"What's this?" she asks, while turning the Jack in her hands. The Jack is dressed in a business suit and holding a briefcase — pretending to be something besides a hamburger clown, hiding from himself and his brazen imitation of Ronald McDonald. Mister Corporate Jack-in-the-Box.

She knows perfectly well *what* he is, but still she asks, bending the figure in her hands and paying particular attention to his crotch area, which she rubs with her thumb.

She likes having power over this clown, torturing him.

Miranda drops the Jack back on the desk and looks me square in the eyes while pushing a black bra strap under her peach-colored top and adjusting the clip that holds her honey-colored hair up in an unraveling bun. She always locks my gaze when she's about to challenge me on something.

"Have you graded our papers yet?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I haven't had the time."

"Why not?"

I shut my laptop and run my fingers through my hair to signal my weariness with her questions, my weariness with her tough-intellectual-girl act that interferes with my enjoyment of staring at those fudgesicle bare legs that stretch into oblivion underneath the front of my desk.

"I've been busy."

"Busy with what?"

"You really want to know?"

"Yes."

I rattle off a litany of the tasks that await my attention while pointing around at various stacks of papers and unopened correspondence piled around the office.

“I’m behind on my reading,” I say. “And I have the usual personal problems to figure out, just like everyone else.”

She cocks her head to the side and squints.

“What kind of personal problems?”

I lean forward in my chair and stand the Jack back up on his feet, since she has left him face-up in a position of rapture, his little black eyes wide open and staring up into the florescent sun, taking in the light of God’s grace.

Staring up at the sky in death, I tell them, this is Christ transfigured, whether it is done sincerely or with some degree of irony. But how do we know it’s Christ, they ask, how do we know that’s what the author intended?

“Didn’t you want to talk about the reading assignment?” I ask Miranda.

She sighs.

“Not anymore. Can I ask you something?”

Her tone has become less challenging, less confrontational. I ease back in my chair.

“May I see your hand?”

I’m aware of this routine as a skill the students learn in Mysticism and Fortune-Telling, part of the first-year track for Renaissance Studies, so I hold out my hand, palm upturned to the sky in a gesture of forgiveness and non-violent submission.

Miranda takes my fingers and rubs them with her own fingertips, and the softness of her smooth flesh sends electric impulses through my arms. Then she slams my wrist down on the desk, takes a felt-tip pen from the pencil can, and scrawls something in my palm. She closes my fingers around the message and squeezes my fist.

“Remember — it’s not difficult to read at all,” she says, then grabs her book bag and leaves through the glass door of the office. “I’ll be back soon to talk about the papers.”

I open my palm to reveal the smeared message, which reads, “Don’t forget to have a good day.”

Cliché. A word on the blackboard. The enemy of poetry. But you can invert a cliché and turn it into something new.

I grab my Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary and crawl out the window of my office, which leads to a back-kitchen area used to prepare pastries and sausages for the Renaissance Practicum, the mock-up fair used to train students during the sweltering summer months. The practicum is not in operation right now, but Clifton the cook is in the kitchen making blueberry biscuits topped with cream gravy.

“My specialty,” he says while holding up a mushy blueberry muffin slathered in greasy brown liquid. Clifton, who weighs more than 300 pounds — the students always emphasize “ton” when pronouncing his name — has cream gravy dripping from his mangled beard and flour on his glasses.

“Clifton, I need to borrow your bicycle,” I tell him.

He drops the muffin-biscuit on the dirt floor, picks up his rolling pin and begins crushing a handful of blueberries on the counter.

“Where’s the poetry in that?” Clifton says without looking up at me. “Everyone knows a fat man needs a motorcycle.”

I find the small motorcycle, with its big plastic seat and extra wide tires, parked outside the kitchen in the alleyway. It doesn’t look much like a real motorcycle, so I check the definition in the dictionary.

The definition of motorcycle reads: *A two-wheeled vehicle, typically found outside a kitchen in an alleyway and ridden by fat pastry chefs.*

The dictionary fits nicely between the handgrips on the handlebars, and I find the motorcycle starts easily with a quick push forward. It putters sadly, like a bicycle with a playing card stuck in the spokes, but it moves quickly enough for my purposes.

I motor through the Renaissance Practicum, past the Punch-and-Judy puppet show wagon, past the beer hall, past the joisting arena, past numerous shops selling magic potions, leather suits of armor, and pointy hats adorned with bells. Finally I see a sign that says, “No motorcycles past this point.”

I make a mental note to check on the sign and find out why it’s not printed in faux-renaissance English, as is the custom here.

I try to drive past the sign, but the motorcycle sputters and dies as soon as the rear tire crosses the line marked by the sign.

Beyond the sign, at the edge of a small grassy field, sits a veterinary clinic, and I remember that I left my golden retriever last week, to see if they could tell me why it had lost some much weight and would no longer retrieve anything. *Just because it’s not fetching doesn’t mean it’s sick*, they said. *But it’s in the name*, I replied as I pointed to the definition.

Before entering the clinic, I look at the smeared black message in my hand, and I see that most of it has sweated away, except for the two words, “good day.”

“Good day,” I whisper.

The origin of “good,” according to the dictionary, is supposed to have something to do with God, but it really depends on whether you believe in God. “Good,” the dictionary continues, “is more commonly associated with that which is eaten, fucked, or otherwise consumed. Ex: A good meal. A good lay. A good time.”

Inside the veterinary clinic waiting room, a dark-haired girl wearing tortoise-shell glasses sits behind a desk, studying the anatomical diagram of a cat. She peers over her glasses at me when I enter.

“I’m really glad you’re here,” she says. “Will you help me? Please?”

She nods quickly in answer to her own question and pats a chair next to her.

“I have a test in anatomy. A cat practicum,” she says. “I need you to help me.”

“Do you want me to quiz you?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. What do you know about cat anatomy? I just need you to sit in this chair so I’m not distracted by the emptiness of it. I’m anxious thinking about who might sit there, and you seem relatively normal, what with that dictionary and all. Are you a student too?”

“No, I’m a professor of poetic terminology.”

She traces her hand along the length of the cat, mumbling the names of different organs and parts. Her finger comes to rest on the “glans” of the cat’s reproductive organs.

“So it’s a male cat. That’s what you’ll be dissecting?”

“Hmmm,” she nods. “The glans is the head of the penis. But then what’s this down here past the glans?”

She points to something resembling a hook just past the “glans” label on the cat.

I recall a scene from 10 years ago when I saw two cats copulating, and my friend, a biology teacher, did a play-by-play commentary from the porch of my little frame house.

“It’s like this hook or barbs they have,” I tried to explain, trying to remember my friend’s words.

“It helps the male connect with the female longer, to keep her around so that insemination is successful.”

“Hmmm,” she says. “That’s adorable.”

“Actually, it’s supposed to be quite painful.”

“It’s always hard to connect with someone,” she says, tilting her head to one side. “It’s always painful. Why can’t you be happy on your own?”

She opens up a zippered pencil case and takes out a straw, which she sticks into a juice box on the desk and begins sipping. The box is labeled in French, “Jus de Raisin” – grape juice -- but smells of fermented alcohol.

“Want some?” she offers.

I take a sip and am immediately flooded with a warm sensation, something like love but prickly and annoying, the itchy-numbing flow of Demerol from an IV. Her face becomes foggy, and her voice recedes from the logical realm of coherence. My head is swimming and my eyelids weigh heavily against my face. I’ve skipped over the euphoric stage of drunkenness and gone right to borderline comatose. I want to find a place to lie down, but I can’t stand up and the walls and furniture have blurred together into one melted lump of bleeding colors.

As I start to nod off, I picture my wife with her arms folded and green eyes smoldering, staring me down, waiting for me to say something to appease her.

“Don’t you know how good you have it?”

The girl with the glasses punches me in the arm.

“You can’t sleep yet. Have some of this.”

She pushes a warm plate of pungent lutefisk in front of me. I prod the gelled codfish with a fork, but the smell nauseates me.

“Didn’t you say something about a dog?” she asks.

“No. I mean, I didn’t say that. But yes, I need to pick up my dog.”

She looks at a piece of paper underneath her cat diagram.

“I’m afraid that’s impossible. Your dog’s been euthanized. You signed this permission form.”

I look down on the form, where I see my signature scrawled under a fine-print paragraph describing the process and outcome of euthanasia.

“Euthanized,” I mutter, but the word doesn’t seem significant.

I look it up in the dictionary and read the definition aloud.

“To ease the suffering of, sometimes but not always resulting in death.”

She raises her eyebrows and stares at me over the rims of her glasses.

“I don’t think that’s right. What’s the origin of the word?”

This I know without having to look back at the dictionary. The words have clarified into concrete shapes on the chalkboard of my frontal lobe.

“A good death,” I say. “Lots of good words begin in a similar way. Euphemism, euphonium. Good sounds.”

She shakes her head and clicks her tongue.

“Yep, yep, yep,” she says. “Those start with euph, not euth. You should have known. You’re losing your touch.”

“But I didn’t know the dog was going to die.”

She nods her head but makes the same sounds, the clicking followed by a series of “yeps.”

“Sure is dead, though,” she says. “Do you want the ashes?”

“Why would I want the ashes?”

“Just to have a part of him, a piece of him to remember.”

A part for the whole. Synecdoche. I need someone to give me a hand.

The girl with glasses takes my palm and examines the message. Her fingers are soft and smooth like Miranda’s, but her fingernails are painted with the faces of Egyptian mythological figures. She rubs the ink in my palm with her thumb until it has come off clean. Then she takes a Sharpie and writes a new message, closing my fingers over the words when she’s done.

“The words shouldn’t smear this time,” she says. “But I think it’s time you got going.”

I reach out to the face of the girl and brush her hair back off her forehead. She closes her eyes before reaching up to my hand and pushing it downward. She coughs lightly and returns to studying her diagram.

Outside the veterinary office, I hail a bicycle rickshaw, driven by a student named John, a gangly young mortuary-science student whose main fault is a peculiar affinity for spouting morbid clichés.

“Any day above ground is a good day,” he says as I climb into the rickshaw.

We take the long way around, avoiding the Renaissance village and driving instead through the rainy concrete parking lot, which sits empty save for my brown Toyota Celica. The two rear tires have gone flat and somebody has broken off the radio antennae.

I open up my fist to read the message, which still reads, but this time in all capitals, “Don’t forget, to have a good day.”

The new comma doesn’t make sense, doesn’t seem to add anything – *but every choice matters* -- but the letters are clearly demarcated and in spite of the sweat in my palms, the ink hasn’t run.

“Say, John,” I say. “You’re a mortuary student. Did you know euthanasia means ‘good death’?”

John stands up on the bicycle pedals to increase his power.

“Why, yes, sir, I believe I did know that.”

“But the death part, that has to be there right?”

He sits down in the bicycle seat and wipes his forehead with a bandana.

“Well, yes, sir, I don’t know of any way around that.”

Part 3: Prime Lenses and Ideal Triangles

Work Space

Because I was late for dinner last night, and I know you were making our favorite dish — baked tuna casseroni with all-white meat — I wanted you to know why I was late.

I got detained in the office, by some problems that were beyond my control.

I would have called, as you know, but I didn't have my cell phone, and I don't know our number by heart because nobody remembers numbers anymore, because there are very few mnemonics for numbers – only more numbers and one numeral leading to the next. You can memorize 40,000 digits of Pi, but you're going to have to do the work and commit them to the brain; there are no shortcuts or special games as far as I can tell.

I didn't have the number, and the only telephone in the office, a tan rotary model caked in finger grease and dust, sat on the floor in the corner of the office, without a handset. The broken cord just lay on the linoleum, its frayed colored wires reaching helplessly out from the cut end of the springy plastic. I must remember to replace the phone.

I had a problem leaving the office because there didn't seem to be a door and at any rate it was difficult to turn around in the 12 inches of head room allotted to me in this particular office space, which nonetheless sits at the top of the building and features a view from its window-hole right next to the telephone. When I first arrived in the office, I stuck my head out of the hole and tried to determine my location and look for anyone who might be able to fix my telephone cord. I couldn't call the telephone company for the same reasons that I had trouble calling you, as you may have guessed.

From the window-hole I saw that the street below me was surrounded by towers of glass, green-blue glass reflecting blue sky and the images of other windows so that it was difficult to see the shapes

of buildings beyond the glare of the glass. I wanted to count the glass windows or at least count the buildings so I would have some idea of how to explain where I was when I called you.

When I looked down, I saw the empty street some 90 floors below and my insides lurched toward my center in a protective kind of body-tightening. I surmised that I was at the top of the building, in this dirty office-crawlspace with its impotent telephone and glassless window-hole.

As you know, I'm not afraid of heights, but I had to pull my head back into the window because I saw nobody down below on the street, no cars or pedestrians, and I became certain that the building would collapse if I continued to exert undue pressure on the southern face. I also felt my head pulling its way toward the ground, gravity pulling on my cheeks with the caress of a lover's fingers, inviting me to escape the stifling dustiness of this attic-office and experience the freedom of the billowing air beneath my body as it lowered me to the stinging face of the concrete below.

This space reminded me of our honeymoon, when we took the elevator trip to the top of the Empire State Building and you insisted we pay the extra \$10 to take the elevator ride from the observation deck to the tiny glassed-in room at the point of the 102nd story.

"That's too touristy," I had said.

"We are tourists," you answered, and so we paid the extra money, and we ended up breathless and captured in a claustrophobic six-sided chamber with its single elevator exit and entrance, swaying back and forth over the streets of Manhattan and feeling the carpet slip out from under our feet.

I don't know if I ever said thank you for talking me into that, so if not, thanks. Thank you.

But memories had to wait, because I realized there was work to be done, so I pulled my head in from the window-hole and felt around on my left side for the ledger-books and fat Rolodex with its dog-eared index cards. I tugged at the Rolodex but couldn't quite get my fingers around it because the plasticized cards kept moving and slipping through my fingers. I had never picked up a Rolodex before, so I wasn't sure how it was done. I finally managed to grip a handful of the cards in my left hand and

inched the Rolodex toward me, tugging the plastic base across the linoleum tile. Then the handful of cards in my fingers broke away from the Rolodex, so I pulled this small stack of cards into the space on the linoleum directly beneath my face.

Belly-down in the crawlspace-office I studied the cards and began my work, because I knew that somebody needed to examine and process the cards, and after being processed they would need to be put back in the Rolodex. I wasn't sure how I would properly refile the cards alphabetically, since I couldn't see the place in the Rolodex from where I had taken them.

The cards would also be difficult to alphabetize since they all contained numerical sequences without names or any other identifying information. The cards would have to be matched and paired somehow if I were going to make any progress on this project. The first few cards had telephone numbers, or sequences of seven numbers of some sort, and I reasoned that 4441376 should be matched with 7536745. I matched the cards instinctually at first, the same way you might arrange the furniture in a living room or decide on the seating arrangements at a wedding reception. But I could also explain the logic of the choices if I had to. The first number was 12 followed by 13 and 76, which is the roughly the leaps a man makes in his life, the first 12 years leading to 13, and then a long continuous unbroken string of years until 76. The second number, 7536745, represents the inverse of this idea, in that at age 75, time expands and slows in such a way that 76 may never be reached. This is something like the gun that kills its maker before he is even finished building the gun.

I briefly considered sorting numbers based on their mystical qualities, so that the three's and twelves would be lumped together in a Western stack of magical numbers, and the fours and twos would be put in another stack representing a more nature-oriented worldview. But this system seemed too aesthetic, too humanistic, and the whole idea of numbers is that they can be used to represent empirical realities and quantifiable dimensions. Threes and multiples of threes must first be simplified and reduced, if possible, and then sorted in such a way that they do not come into contact with each other

and multiply further. I took the number 9361249 and reduced it to 3123333, based on the idea that $9=3 \times 3$, three is one three, six is two threes, “one” can be reduced to a single “three,” two can become three with the addition of one, which is leftover from the previous numerical reduction, and so on. You get the idea.

Some of the other cards contained, apparently, mathematical equations without answers, arrangements of numbers in which questions were implied by the tension of the numerical juxtapositions. I assumed the answers to the must be written on different cards, and I matched the operation-cards with the answer-cards, matching “57,” which must be assumed to be $5 (+) 7$, with “12” and “45” with “9.” But then I came to a card with “60” and while I knew it would be the same answer whether it were $6 (+) 0$ or $6 (-) 0$, because adding nothingness and subtracting nothingness somehow turns out the same, but if divide by zero you end up with less than nothingness – you end up with undefined or unanswerable, the numerical equivalent of the robot with smoke coming out of its head. But I could not find a card that said “6.” I would have to find that card later, so I made a list that would help me to stay organized or to get back on task if I had to carry this work over into the next day. I scratched my list into the linoleum with my fingernail:

- *Find number 6 card

- *Find extra zeroes (because you can never have enough zeroes)

- *Reorganize rolodex

- *Replace telephone handset

- *Get film developed

- *Yes, that would have been the thing to mention

- *Replace strings on guitar and learn to play guitar; remember, you must do it before he does it.

- *Find out how many questions in an Inquisition?

When I was finished writing the list, I put it aside and resumed my work in sorting and processing the Rolodex cards. I was determined to finish processing the small stack before the end of the business day.

Of the remaining four cards, three were emblazoned with the “greater or equal than” sign and the final card read, “This is an extra card. Do not destroy.”

With the first three cards, it was obvious that I should line them up. Greater than or equal to is greater than or equal to greater than or equal to. It made sense to me. The figures added up, because there’s no other way you could place the operators and have it make any sense, unless you turned them upside down to make them lesser than, but then the equal sign would be floating above the greater sign. This would mean that equality has become the more important operator or function in the equation, or that the importance of equality had been temporarily suspended, and I wasn’t sure I could explain this change to my supervisors in a way that would avoid further scrutiny.

What I really needed was more numbers to make the equation work, so I looked to the telephone dial and saw that I had those ten numbers available, or nine numbers plus the concept of zero as we understand it, which is to say a symbol representing the absence of numerical value or the absence of presence or the figurative round displacement of space where nothingness exists, that big fat circular digit filling up the space between the integers. I need to add to my list: Find out if “zeroes” is the proper plural for zeroes, and also investigate at what point the plural of zeroes would be required. To have multiple zeroes would imply an abundance of nothingness, a digital sequence in which nothing is ever activated or fulfilled.

I could borrow those numbers, and I also noticed there were letters available, but I couldn’t really make out which letters were legible and which had been rubbed clean from their former association with the number-digits. The letters on the telephone are bastard-letters, dirty letters waiting to be associated by sequences of numbers, not creating word-words but instead creating number-words that help us to remember, because there are no number mnemonics, so throw letters on them like

chaperones or body-guards. It takes three letters for every number, and a single finger can touch all the numbers and letters if it dials often enough.

I decided I would have to sort the numbers and check my work on another day, for the sun was setting and the glare of the glass window-canyons had burnt down to an amber hue. It was dark by the time I left the office through the window-hole. It took me a couple of hours of wriggling and twisting on the gritty linoleum to turn my body around in the space and get my legs pointed toward the hole.

By the time I left, I knew you would be angry, but I still had to stop to get the film developed. I found this roll in your purse this morning, after we had that argument about whether or not our relationship was perfect and, if not, for how long it had been imperfect. There's always that moment, isn't there? If a relationship is based on lies, is the problem with the relationship or with the nature and quality of the lies?

The roll of film was wrapped in a piece of paper bound with a rubber band. On the piece of paper, in red-ink cursive handwriting, was the message, "Everything you think you want to know."

I thought you would want me to have it developed, so I took it from your purse this morning on the way to the office, and now I'm walking in the canyon of blue-glass office buildings, looking for a photo-developing drug-store, but none of the office buildings have doors. I understand this was done for reasons of architectural purity, to keep the doors from ruining the integrity of the smooth-glass appearance, and so each office building stands as a tower of divided glass, reflecting the sky and the other buildings like an uninhabited silent glass forest. I cannot find any office doors or drug stores, but I finally see a one-hour photo hut standing in the middle of an intersection, and the sign reads, "Prints from film in one hour – time may vary according to the position of the camera and viewer." I knock on the window of the photo hut, and I peer inside and see that it's empty except for an adding machine, a telephone, and a metal office chair. But there's a hole for dropping film cartridges, and the telephone has a working handset, so I assume the business is still in operation.

So I drop the film and wait an hour, not by pacing the city sidewalks or sitting on a park bench, but by flipping through the rolodex in my memory, watching the names and number go by and trying to put them in order mentally so I would be ahead of schedule the next day at work. After the film was ready, I rushed home, because I knew I was late, and I knew the casserole would be cold. When I came home, you were sitting on the sofa waiting for me to return. You said you've been sitting there for two years, and I understood why you were annoyed that I wanted you to see something before we eat, to tell me about these photos.

But you gave me a mystified look when I dropped the envelope on the coffee table and color glossy prints spilled out in a fan across the tabletop. You didn't seem to recognize the photos as your own, and you said I must have taken them.

You know I gave up photography when I lost the lens cap to my Nikon, because I couldn't stop the dust or the light-pictures from coming in, and there were always too many photographs – shoeboxes and drawers full of drugstore paper envelopes that were never properly labeled or organized or even looked at.

I want you to explain these photos on the coffee table, but you can't. You just sit there, touching your elbows with your arms folded and shaking your head and crinkling your nose beneath the shelter of your wool blanket.

The first photo is of a skyscraper standing in a grassy field, like a monument, but rectangular and boxy, a giant glass-and-steel sentinel protecting the virtue of the blue-sky backdrop. The next photograph is exactly the same, and the one beneath is identical to that one. In fact, as you've already noticed, all of the photos are exactly the same image, like a deck of cards turned facedown so the values and faces remain hidden from view.

"I don't remember visiting that building. Did we visit it together? Or was this a trip on you took on your own? When was it?" I asked you.

I picked up the first photograph and rubbed the blue sky with my thumb. The blue sky in the photograph felt clean and smooth, free of dust and grime, free of the gray smudge you always find on photographs picked up from the sidewalks of the downtown streets.

“Don’t you remember visiting this building? Why do you always forget things?”

The Way I Thought It Worked

The way I thought it worked, what I had read in so many Dear Abby columns and seen in my grandparents and others in the Great Generation was this: After we'd first met in some unpredictable way, like when I broke your dad's car window with a baseball and he made me water all his plants, and you brought me lemonade or maybe a Pepsi in a tall glass bottle, *twice as much and only a nickel*, as the advertisement used to say. After that, something would come between us, an obstacle – the Atlantic ocean or a war, or a boyfriend you'd been going off and on with since sixth grade who wasn't right for you, or even just a few doubts prompted by fears of having found the right one, but then – over time— and with perseverance and my complete child's faith that the course of true love never did run smooth, I would persevere and win you over and though it might take years in the end we would laugh about it and have a great story to tell our grown children of how they almost never existed, and we would laugh about that lanky 6th grade boyfriend who almost stole you away (*what was his name? Frank, right, how could I forget*). But you would tell me, *Oh, I was just using him to make you jealous*.

I did persevere but you grew tired and annoyed with my persistence, so that instead of a valiant suitor I became a bothersome fly, not like Beelzebub but like the flies in that poem by Emily Dickinson, a fly waiting around for someone to die or give up. And instead of that great story I have an envelope, with your name on it and inside, a photo and a few offhand discouraging pink letters, handwritten on some Sunday afternoon when you were lying in a hammock and listening to jazz music on the radio.

Release of the Butterflies

Becoming a minister was as easy as going to a website, typing in my information, and hitting the “enter” button. In a few minutes, I was printing the certificate with my name and new title: *Reverend Jennifer Wicks, World Life Church*.

I called my brother in Maine to tell him it was done.

“It’s your sister, the Internet minister,” I said, waving the certificate in the air as I spoke to him. Even though my brother couldn’t see it, my boyfriend Tommy smiled and looked up from the football game he was watching on television, holding his beer can aloft in a silent toast.

“Thanks, sis,” Brad said over the phone. “You know we didn’t want to get a real minister and risk the wrath of God. Besides, you saved me three hundred bucks.”

Brad and his bride, Miranda, weren’t really religious, and neither one of them had a regular church or minister. But they didn’t want to get married at the courthouse or in front of some white-haired justice of the peace. They wanted God there, I guess, but only in some kind of half-hearted way, like the way you invite a great-uncle who spits tobacco and tells tasteless jokes, but you feel like you have to invite him or you’ll make your mother mad.

“You sure Miranda wants me to do this, perform your wedding?” I asked. “She doesn’t want something more traditional?”

I had friends who had been planning their weddings since they were 16, cutting out glossy photos from thick bridal magazines and fantasizing about who would be their bridesmaids, before they even had a serious boyfriend. I looked over at Tommy, sitting in his boxer shorts and yawning on the sofa, scratching his mop of red hair. I pictured my own wedding in a hospital room, maybe 20 years from now when one of was dying or something.

“This is better than having you as my best man, which is what I originally wanted,” Brad said with a laugh. “If she wanted something more traditional, she wouldn’t be marrying me.”

Brad was 30 years old but still worked as an office temp most of the year so that he could spend summers working at an amusement park, throwing the lever that made the roller coaster lurch forward. He said he liked to hear the little kids scream when they went up the hill and laugh when they got off the ride. Brad had loved going on roller coasters since the first time I took him on one when he was 7. I thought he would cry or maybe throw up after that first ride, but he insisted we ride it again. I was 14 years old and not about to spend the whole day with my brother, so when we got off the coaster, I left him with our dad and said I was going to the game room. For this, our dad accused me of just wanting to meet boys and called me a “selfish little bitch.”

“You’re not inviting Dad to the wedding, are you?” I asked Brad on the phone.

The telephone clicked in static silence, and then Brad said, “I don’t know, sis. I think he’d be real hurt if I didn’t. I know he’d like to see you.”

“Yeah, I bet,” I said.

When I hung up the phone, Tommy threw his head back on the sofa and let his mouth hang open as if he’d been shot.

“You are not going to the wedding, are you?” he said. “What’s the point? Just to torture yourself?”

I pushed his legs off the ottoman as I passed him and sat next to him on the sofa. I tapped a Winston out of his pack and lit it, blowing smoke over his head as a kind of response.

“If you really cared about that, you’d go with me.”

Tommy sighed, put his hand on my shoulder and began kneading the tight spot between my neck and collar bone.

“Wow, babe, you’re really tense,” he said as he looked up at me. “You can’t let your father get to you like this.”

“He’s not my father,” I said without looking at him. “He’s just some asshole.”

Tommy pulled his hand away and starting flipping through the TV channels with the remote.

“Damn commercial breaks are too long,” he said. “You shouldn’t even talk to your brother if it’s going to get you all worked up.”

As Tommy said this, he was staring at the TV, slumped on the sofa and flipping through the channels without pausing, just clicking through one image after another in hopes that something would interest him. He passed through old movies, wildlife shows showing big cats pouncing on antelopes, shopping channels with glittering fake diamonds, Archie Bunker in his chair, chomping on a cigar and staring back at the TV.

“Maybe I could use a vacation,” I said, and then I started to get up. I thought maybe Tommy would say something, pull me back and apologize, try to be nice, but he just tilted his head and studied Archie Bunker on the television as if he had never seen anything quite so interesting.

“Archie Bunker’s chair is in the Smithsonian, you know,” he said. “Is that anywhere near Maine?”

“No, not even close,” I said with a sigh as I stood and went into the kitchen to wash the dishes. For the next 20 minutes, while the TV blared in the other room, I scrubbed dried macaroni and hamburger from frying pans and plates, letting the hot water wash under my fingernails and watching the dirty gray water go down the drain, the dirt and grime spiraling into the black hole of the disposal. Although I had worked as a waitress for 20 years and hated most things about food and cooking, I still liked washing dishes, liked the idea of spraying away germs with detergent and piping hot tap water.

On the day of the wedding, the weather was unseasonably warm for October in Maine, but it was still a nice break from the windy, warm weather I left behind in Houston.

The three of us rode in the limousine, Brad and Miranda giggling and sloshing champagne like a couple of love-sick prom dates, while I studied the lines for the wedding ceremony as much as possible

during the 20-minute drive to the New Hampshire Arboretum. I had typed up a short ceremony, lines about marriage being honorable and devoid of bitterness, most of which I had taken from the Internet and from the black-cloth King James Bible Tommy gave me for Christmas last year after I told him I felt like I didn't know anything about God. I printed the ceremony in tiny neat handwriting on a little piece of paper and stuck it between the pages of the Bible so it would look sort of official.

"Come on, sis, you gotta stop studying that thing. You don't have to memorize it," Brad said as he topped of my champagne flute, barely taking his eyes off Miranda, who was sniffing and dabbing her nose with a Kleenex. "You got your cheat sheet, right?"

"So when are you and Tom going to get married?" Miranda asked, jabbing me playfully on the arm.

I took a sip of champagne and stroked the cover of the Bible.

"I don't know. I don't think ministers can get married, can they?" I laughed softly. "Besides, I'm not sure our family has such a great history with marriage."

This slipped out before I realized what I had said, so I added as I touched Miranda lightly on the arm, "Of course, I know you two will be different. I can see in the way that Brad looks at you."

Miranda threw her head back and looked as if she were going to laugh, but then she sneezed before drinking deeply from her glass.

"Oh, man, we better get this over before I really get sick," she said.

As the limo drove out of town, leaving behind townhouses and strip centers lined with dry cleaners and butcher shops, the scenery outside turned into thick walls of trees, colored varying shades of gold and yellow. I had forgotten the colors of the seasons after 10 years in Texas, forgotten the way the hues can hit your eyes like crisp air on the cheeks.

"I worked God into the ceremony the way you asked. I hope you like it."

I handed Brad the slip of paper and he fell back in his seat to read it.

“This looks good,” he said as he handed the paper to Miranda.

“As long as it doesn’t say anything about serve or obey,” she said as she read it. She shrugged and handed it back to me. “It’s pretty. Your dad will like it.”

“He’s going to be there, then? Dad?” I said as I looked down at the Bible and put the sheet back between the pages.

Brad sipped from his champagne flute and flicked a thread off his suit jacket sleeve.

“It’ll be OK, sis. I just don’t want to hear it from the guy. You know how he is. Mr. Jesus.”

Miranda groaned.

“He called last night, and he could tell I was sick,” Miranda said. “So he told me he’d pray for me. I hate that.”

Miranda looked at me and shook her head.

“Besides, we know how he is. Just accept Jesus and everything’s OK,” she said before looking at Brad. “Does his wife even know?”

“Just stop, OK?” Brad said. “He’ll be OK. Just forget it.”

I watched the blur of passing trees and thought of when dad, back before the adoption was finalized and I still called him Jerry, would take me on his old Honda motorcycle when I was a little girl. I would cry and scream as I held tightly to his mid-section, and he would purposefully gun the engine just when I thought we were slowing down. He made me promise not to tell my mother, said she wouldn’t understand how being scared can be fun. As we sat on the vinyl sofa in the basement, he would open a bottle of cola and hand it to me, take a drag from his cigarette and exhale as he said this to me, asking me again to keep quiet as he squeezed my knee.

On the seat in the limo next to Brad, tucked under his forearm, was a fine-mesh wire bucket that contained two dozen live butterflies. The plan was to release the butterflies as soon as the bride and groom had finished their vows. The butterflies would flutter off above the heads of bewildered and

bemused guests, who would marvel at the magical spectacle of tiny colored shapes flying into the sky before wandering off to the open bar and trays of food.

“How did you get the butterflies, anyway?” I asked him.

“Internet store. It’s kind of a new thing.”

“Yeah, it’s amazing what you can buy on the Internet,” Miranda said.

The Arboretum looks like an outdoor country-club restaurant, an open-air glass structure under which they had arranged tables draped in white tablecloths and decked with vases of spring flowers. Off to the side of the banquet area, on the grassy slope looking off toward the silhouetted mountain range, they have set up rows of folding wooden chairs and staked down a lattice-work arch covered with plastic garlands and braids of pale-white lace.

As the three of us get out of the car and head toward the arboretum, Brad carrying the bucket of butterflies, a tan sedan pulls in next to us, and I can see our father at the wheel. His face is thinner and he’s wearing glasses. He gets out of the car and waves at us before circling the car to help a blonde, middle-aged woman out of the passenger side.

The limo pulls away to park on the far side of the parking lot, and Jerry comes walking toward us, his wife clutching his arm as if she needs his support to keep steady.

Jerry reaches out to Brad and grabs him by the neck to pull him in for a hug.

“This is the big day, right?” he says, and Brad smiles with clenched teeth.

Jerry tries to hug Miranda, but she puts her hands on his elbows so that they end up doing an awkward sort of dance. Then Jerry turns to me, cocks his head to the side and smiles.

“Well, haven’t seen you in a while,” he says. “I hear you’re a minister now.”

He holds out his hand for a handshake, and when I put my hand in his, he grips it with his other hand and doesn’t let go.

“I told them I would ask my minister to do the honors,” Jerry says with a shrug. “A real Baptist minister. But I guess they wanted to do something different.”

He lets go of my hand and turns to his wife.

“This is my wife, Stacey,” he says to me while looking at his wife. “And this is my stepdaughter, Jennifer.”

The word “stepdaughter” hits me in the gut and lodges there, and I shake my head and give a little laugh before I can help myself.

Stacey and I shake hands, and then Brad blows his cheeks out and swings the bucket of butterflies toward the gardens as a sort of gesture.

“Yeah, OK, dad,” he says. “We’ve got to get in there now.”

As the guests file in, I stand alone behind the archway, clutching my bible and smiling, trying to look confident.

My head begins to throb at the temples, and I feel a little sick to my stomach from the two glasses of champagne.

I watch Miranda’s two young cousins, teenage boys in ill-fitting suits, usher in the guests while I stand at the front. In the front row, Miranda’s mother sits holding the bucket of butterflies.

Next to her sits Jerry’s wife, and then Jerry, who sits with his legs crossed, smiling tightly and fingering a cross that hangs on his chest.

Finally, the music starts, Pachelbel’s Canon pumped over a loudspeaker pole at the back of the seating area. Brad and Miranda stroll in together, hand in hand, smiling at the guests around them. I don’t know where Miranda’s father is or why he isn’t giving her away. I don’t even know if he’s alive. I had only talked to Miranda briefly on the phone before, and met her that one time in Houston when they were flying through on the way to the Caribbean, but I didn’t really know her at all.

They look relaxed and smile broadly. As they walk, I turn the words of the ceremony over in my head. Even in the cool autumn air, I began to feel warm in the head, and the collar of my blouse is pinching my neck. My head throbs steadily now, pounding beneath my forehead and temples and causing my neck muscles to stiffen.

As I tug at my collar, I notice Jerry smiling at me, and a bead of sweat drops into my eye. I reach up with my fingers to dab the droplet out of my eye, and I smooth the side of my skirt with the other hand. I avoid Jerry's gaze as I mouth the words of the ceremony, the biblical meditations on love and *what God has joined, let no man pull asunder* floating over the heads of the audience and out over the mountain range. Jerry adjusts his wire glasses on his face and strokes a small patch of hair across the expanse of his bald spot.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see him leaning forward and trying to catch my gaze. He looks at me squarely and raises his eyebrows.

I squint up at the afternoon sun, which bakes down on me alone under the arch, and my head pounds. *God, I think, just get me through the ceremony. Love is not time's fool. Let no man pull asunder. Let no man pull asunder.*

I remember the woman I talked to before the ceremony, a bony-fingered woman with white-dyed hair I met by the birdbath ashtray set up in the parking lot for the smokers. I had borrowed a lighter from her and stood there smoking a cigarette and nodding as she talked on about her husband, who had passed away long ago, and the weather.

"It's clear out now," she had told me, waving her cigarette at the sky and letting cigarette smoke curl out of her mouth. "But I think it's going to rain."

I force a smile as Miranda and Brad stand before me and wave my hand in front of them as a kind of gesture of blessing. They smile back at me, and as I begin to recite the vows, the words come to me from memory after all.

Jerry sits as he was before, playing with the cross on his necklace, looking up at me and stroking the knee of his wife.

The words spring out of me, but it feels different now; each word comes to me as if I had written it myself, a childhood prayer. I'm telling the bride and groom, Miranda and Brad, to love each other and to set off on the path of life with no regrets, and for a moment, I believe it. My headache's gone and I forget about Jerry, forget about his wife, forget about wild motorcycles and basement secrets.

As the bride and groom kiss, I look for the bony-fingered woman in the crowd but can't find her. Miranda's mom lifts the lid on the butterfly bucket, but the butterflies don't fly out right away.

"Shake the bucket," Tom says, shaking an invisible bucket as if to show her.

Miranda's mom shakes the bucket and the surviving butterflies flutter out in a gasp. The sky is filled with fluttering triangles of red, blue, and gold, fragile butterfly wings that first move as one large organism, a giant butterfly made of smaller butterflies, and then scatter, separating out as if the giant butterfly has exploded in one silent moment. Then the butterflies are gone, not a single one in sight, as if they have all fallen to the ground or escaped into space or hidden in the nearby woods, finding cozy spaces in which to breathe and live out their few remaining days.

Rats

He has killed a rat a day for the past two weeks. The rat traps are the standard, snapping kind; it is true what they say about the implausibility of building a better mousetrap. Each morning before leaving for work, he climbs the folding attic stairs to set a new trap, baiting it with a hunk of smelly cheese or peanut butter and nestling it in the pink pillows of loose, inefficient insulation. He says a silent prayer as he pulls the heavy trigger back and locks it in place. He has never fumbled or broken a finger.

At work he reads financial news briefs and calls clients with lukewarm stock tips. He works on a letter to his estranged wife, in which he berates her for her poor financial choices and questionable morals. He revises and edits the letter, changing the word “chagrined” to “embarrassed” and “mad as hell” to “hurt and angry.” He knows the letter would annoy her, but he never mails it. She never opens letters from him, which is one of the reasons he writes it.

When he returns from work, he drinks four bottles of Rolling Rock. When he is in a good mood, he will replace the consumed beer in one bottle with a single red rose from the narrow garden between the driveway and the house. When he is not in a good mood, he will drink more beers and throw the bottles heavily into a brown grocery sack on the hard kitchen tile.

Then he will check the trap. At first he was content to allow the noisy rats to shuffle across the attic rafters, content to believe they were only mice. Then one night he stumbled into the kitchen and caught one on the counter. They locked eyes, the hulking brown rat sizing him up and defiantly refusing to move. He knew he had to do something. It became a matter of pride.

For two weeks he has thinned the army one-by-one. Each day after drinking his beers he unfolds the attic stairs and climbs the creaking ladder. He surveys each day’s fallen soldier with disgust and pride. He examines each rat corpse as it lies on the trap, usually with its neck cleanly snapped, like a nightly tucking-in gone horribly wrong. He removes the trap, rat attached, with gloves and reuses it if it

is a clean kill. If the rat has died messily and covered the trap with matted fur and dried blood, he throws it all away. He likes his traps to be clean and efficient.

After fifteen days and fifteen rats, he leaves work and drives the seven miles to his house. He drinks his four beers and stumbles to the garden to cut a rose for his Rolling Rock vase. He sighs as he fumbles with the attic trapdoor and plods heavily up the wooden ladder. As he peers over the attic floor, he sees that the trap is empty. The cheese has not been eaten, and the trap has not been tripped. Maybe it is over, or maybe the rats will return. Maybe they are tired of fighting. He climbs down the attic ladder, walks to the kitchen, and opens another Rolling Rock. He puts a large grocery paper sack in the middle of the kitchen floor.

Anhedonia

But one Thursday on the way to Dr. Kenny's office, which sat at the top of a hill behind a Jack-in-the-Box restaurant, Charlie's car got t-boned while driving through an intersection at the bottom of the hill, an intersection where the traffic lights on all sides were blinking yellow, *yellow for caution*.

It seemed to Charlie that it was always Thursday, and that the other days of the week were just greasy shopping carts piled in a line, shoved up into Thursday so that you would have to pull hard on the last one just to see that it was a separate shopping cart and not just a handle attached to wheels.

On Thursdays, Charlie visited with his therapist Dr. Kenny, who was not really named Kenny but wore a beard and had a guitar case sitting in the corner of his office so that he reminded Charlie of the folk-rock singer Kenny Loggins. Dr. Kenny was always asking Charlie not about his feelings, which he would have preferred to talk about, but about his *needs*.

Talking about feelings was easy for Charlie. He would think of those yellow faces on the poster. He would say he was *bored*, or *lonely*, or *sad*. He would say he felt like a Christmas tree that had been left on the curb long past New Year's Day, its leaves turning brown and its tinsel falling into pieces on the street and waiting to be washed into the storm sewer by the next afternoon rain. Or he would say he felt like a folding attic ladder, always being folded out by some old lady so she could access her secret box of expired bottles of prescription pills, and then being folded away and stored out of sight, just a string hanging in the hallway to remind passers-by.

But *needs* are different, Dr. Kenny would say. *You can't argue with needs*, he would say. *Needs are needs*. When Dr. Kenny would ask Charlie about his needs, and whether they were being met, sometimes he would answer in this way if he felt like wasting his \$100: "All I need is a tall ship and a star to steer her by" or maybe "all I need is a just a little more time," or, his personal favorite, quoting *Rambo*, "What I need is for my country to love me as much as I love it." He liked this last one because it

made Dr. Kenny chortle in spite of his professional demeanor, and Charlie felt this was at least worth \$100 every now and then.

As Charlie sat in the steaming wreck of his car, the heat without the air-conditioning beginning to wrap around his head like a wool sleeping bag, it occurred to him that all traffic lights should be yellow, and nothing else. *Yield, exercise caution, slow down.* Yellow is all that is needed. The other signs were just noisy distractions.

When Charlie discovered his legs were still attached and that he could creak open his crinkled car door, he limped over to the other car, a little brown station wagon with a luggage rack, loaded down with moving boxes of record albums. At least the boxes were labeled “records,” but Charlie remembered his own mother doing that with all of their boxes when they moved, just so the movers, who must have thought they were very serious record collectors, would be more careful with their belongings. But his mother’s “records” label didn’t protect the boxes when the moving truck caught on fire, and the movers had to pull over and let the firemen spray all the boxes down with water on the side of the road. And that was where they found their boxes, soaked with water and spilling record albums and everything else all over a grassy ditch.

The station wagon reminded Charlie of his former babysitter Mrs. Milner’s old car, and, sure enough, as he approached the car he found Mrs. Milner slumped on the wheel, her head bleeding on the speedometer, covering the speeds between 30 and 60 and dripping down on the odometer so that her miles were strictly going backwards, getting smaller with each drop. Mrs. Milner was dressed in a floral housedress, her curly red hair and freckled, mottled skin hanging loosely on her head and neck around the slumpiness of her shoulders. Her forehead was stuck against the steering wheel, as if she were trying to press the horn with it, and Charlie wondered if she were dead or unconscious.

But when Charlie shook Mrs. Milner by the shoulder, he found she was not asleep and not difficult to rouse at all; she only looked up at him with her bottom lip pulled down and blood dripping

from the dented middle of her forehead. She looked at Charlie as if he were a policeman and she were wondering what she could have possibly done wrong. Her hands were perched on the wheel in supplication, at hours 10 and 2 to show proper driving intentions.

“Mrs. Milner,” Charlie said. “I was wondering if you had that \$5 you borrowed from me.”

“Five dollars?” Mrs. Milner asked, surveying the wreckage of her car. “Why, son, I babysat you. Your mother paid me for that. And now look what you’ve done.”

Charlie remembered hazy nights at Mrs. Milner’s house, when she would drift off to sleep watching a movie with men in parading around in khaki uniforms on a battleship, men who smoked pipes and cranked on machine guns and saluted each other as they went up and down the ship’s ladders. Mrs. Milner would fall asleep, her cigarette smoldering in the ashtray, and Charlie would drift in and out consciousness, his cheek sweating on the afghan blanket, until his mother picked him up at some murky hour of the night.

“The five dollars,” Charlie explained to Mrs. Milner. “The five dollars was money I lent to my mother to buy cigarettes, and then she paid you with that money.”

Mrs. Milner stared at the blood dripping down the glass covering the speedometer, and then she fiddled with the car radio dial until she found a band of pure static, and she turned the volume up so that the white noise hummed into the atmosphere and reminded Charlie of the time he woke up before his mother had arrived to pick up him at Mrs. Milner’s, and the television station had gone off the air, was broadcasting the bug show of tiny white-and-black dots scrambling across the screen, looking for cover after some kind of nuclear annihilation. Only the cockroaches survive, that was what he remembered. And when he woke up and saw the bugs crawling across the screen, Charlie had noticed that Mrs. Milner was no longer sleeping on the couch, so he wandered off to find her. He had turned into the green-carpeted hallway, cluttered with family photographs in cheap gold-leaf frames, and had seen a light coming from a crack in the bathroom door at the end of the hallway.

Charlie pushed the door open slightly and found Mrs. Milner kneeling on the bathroom tile, tearing up a piece of paper and casting the tiny bits into the toilet bowl one by one. She peered up at Charlie over the rims of her horn-rimmed reading glasses and shakes her head at him.

“Stupid, foolish boy,” she had said.

Charlie wanted to ask what she was tearing up, wanted to know what secret codes or mysterious revelations were written on the paper, but he was too shy to ask. He stared at Mrs. Milner and rubbed the heat that churned beneath the surface of his forehead.

“This is all I have left of Mr. Milner,” she said, still ripping and tossing the pieces of paper into the bowl.

“But what is it?” Charlie asked.

She handed Charlie the tattered piece of paper, and he looked at it, but the page was blank.

“You have to read between the lines,” she told him.

Charlie stared at the paper and words scrawled in blue ink began to appear: “Once the words appear, there’s nothing left to read. I am not you and you are not me.” Then the word “family” was written and crossed out ~~family~~ over and over again.

“Give me the paper back,” Mrs. Milner said to Charlie. “I can’t win if I don’t finish this.”

Charlie had left Mrs. Milner, kneeling on the bathroom floor in front of the toilet, and had drifted off to the living room and rearranged the pillows on the sofa to the noise of the television static until his mother had arrived with a bottle of aspirin and a cold can of grape soda.

Mrs. Milner told Charlie she couldn’t give him the five dollars, because the statute of limitations had run out on money borrowed by your mother for cigarettes, but she offered to give him a box of records from the top of the car.

“I hope that will serve as proper compensation for your five dollars, and for the wreck you’ve caused.”

Charlie slid the cardboard box nearest the back of the car from off the luggage rack and retied the white linen rope to secure the remaining boxes. Mrs. Milner started the station wagon and drove off without saying or waving goodbye. He looked at his watch and saw that it was 10 minutes until 4 o'clock, and he realized he would be able to make his appointment if he started walking up the blacktop road to his therapist's office. His car was still steaming and hissing its unwillingness to take him there, so he picked up the box, positioned it on one shoulder and began walking up the hill. His left leg throbbed from the pain of the accident, but he wasn't bleeding, only throbbing inside, his muscles contracting and stiffening with each step he took.

The road curved around through a blanket of mesquite trees on either side, and the grade was sometimes so steep that Charlie found himself wheezing and leaning forward on his toes as he walked, pushing against the ribbon of the road as it pulled him downward. The contents of the box shifted on his shoulder, and the box wobbled to contain its awkward cargo. The sides of the box began to tear at the corners until the box split itself apart and tumbled from Charlie's grasp. With a cardboard splat on the pavement, dozens of file folders spilled out in a jumbled pile. Charlie picked up one of the folders and saw his name written on the tab. He flipped it open and found a stack of handwritten pages that had been torn from a spiral notebook.

Charlie recognized the blue handwriting as his own, or rather the handwriting of his former self. Each page was marked with a date header and, as he read the page on top, he recognized the description of a dream he had recorded long ago, and he remembered a yellow spiral notebook he had previously used to record all his dreams. He had thrown the notebook away, stuffed it into the bottom of a metal trash can outside his college dormitory, and stuffed it beneath a cache of pornographic magazines, filled with plasticized pages of vaginas, high heels, and purple makeup.

He read the first few lines of the first dream: "I'm playing basketball in the driveway with two boys from the neighborhood. The boys are wearing gray sweat-shorts and white shirts. I try to shoot a

hoop but the balls goes crashing into the garage-door window, shattering glass all over the driveway. My father comes out of the garage carrying a long axe — one of those axes with two heads that you never see anymore — and he starts swinging the axe at me. I don't know where the other boys are but my father is yelling at me, 'This hurts me more than it hurts you.' Then my father turns into a jack-in-the-box, and the axe is sitting on the driveway and has turned into a drum major's baton. I ask my father if he's OK, and he says that actually he's been dead for more than a thousand years."

Charlie crumpled the dream-page and stuffed it in the front pocket of his jeans. He tossed the folder back on the pile and began hiking up the hill again, his calves aching with the weight of gravity and the memory of the car wreck.

Dr. Kenny's office is cool and quiet, with only the trickle of a Buddhist meditation fountain to greet Charlie as he enters the front door. He knows an electronic eye sitting on the reception desk watches him, waits for him to come in to alert Dr. Kenny, so that he can magically pop open the waiting room door as if he somehow knew with his therapist's all-knowing mind that Kenny is there and ready for analysis, the breaking down of the self into manageable parts, emotions and parts for a better understanding of that which makes us whole.

Soon Kenny does open the door, his beard dripping from a recent shower. He is barefoot and cloaked only in a white karate robe. He is holding a cup of hot coffee and he offers Charlie a cup, and they go through the usual scripted routine, even though Dr. Kenny knows all of Charlie's answers and Charlie knows the questions.

"You like it black, right?"

"Right."

Kenny shakes his head and then says, "Never could do it straight like that myself. Too strong."

As always, Charlie wonders if there is some kind of therapeutic meaning behind his preference for black coffee, whether Dr. Kenny is judging him for his unwillingness to sweeten his beverage or lighten it with milk. Maybe he thinks Charlie enjoys denying himself the simple pleasures in life; maybe he thinks Charlie doesn't understand the usefulness of sugar and milk in getting the bitter taste of life to go down more easily. Maybe Kenny thinks Charlie is incapable of enjoying himself.

Anhedonia is the clinical term for the inability to enjoy oneself. Charlie learned this word from a book about Woody Allen, or maybe he picked it up from doing crosswords in some distant past when he was used to doing the Sunday crossword in bed with his fiancée. He can't remember such a time, has never been engaged and never subscribed to a newspaper, but something about that image rings true, explains his knowledge of words like *phlegmatic* and *anhedonia*, which even Dr. Kenny had not heard of when Charlie used it casually at the beginning of their first session.

"I am weighted down by this feeling of *anhedonia*," he had said.

"What's that?" was Dr. Kenny's dull reply, and Charlie had only sighed to express his impatience and superiority.

Kenny hands Charlie a Styrofoam cup brimming with lukewarm black coffee, and they sit down opposite each other in the leather armchairs that serve as Dr. Kenny's only office furniture. His walls lack the usual diplomas, but there is one framed photograph of Zeppo Marx, the Marx Brothers' straight man. *He was actually the funniest of the Marx brothers off stage*, Dr. Kenny once told Charlie when they were talking about "getting the insides to match the outsides." *But he couldn't maintain that persona on stage. This is what therapy is all about*, Dr. Kenny said – *to be able to be the person that you think you are, to be able to project your strengths on stage as well as in real life*. Charlie wasn't an actor but he appreciated the idea of having insides matching outsides. It reminded him of the time he vomited at his sister's wedding and the food looked almost the same as when he had eaten it, green beans and bits of corn floating amidst the brown liquid.

Dr. Kenny leans back in his chair, folds his arms, and rests his hand against his cheek.

“So,” he says. “Marlene couldn’t make it today?”

“Marlene?”

Kenny holds his hands out, palms facing the sky.

“It’s a little hard to do couples counseling without both of you present,” he says. “Sort of defeats the purpose.”

Charlie sees Marlene in the laundry room, sorting the colors from the whites, pulling little bits of paper receipts and folded cigarette butts from his jeans pockets, her blonde hair twisted in a French braid, endless folding triangles of hair. He can’t remember asking her about counseling, but he can remember a futon mattress blocking the door in the living room. He can remember Marlene sitting behind a desk, shaking her head as she balanced the checkbook.

“We need more,” she had said, tapping the pen on the balance figures. “I deserve more than this.”

And he remembers a piece of junk mail he had pulled out of the mail box, addressed with the message: “Marlene, we’ve been lost without you.” It was from some entertainment-gossip magazine she had once subscribed to, and he slipped it beneath the rest of her mail that sat on the brick fire hearth.

What Charlie can’t figure out is why Dr. Kenny only has two chairs in this office, if this is a room for couples counseling. The two chairs are facing each other, ready for the confrontation of personal therapy, the attacking of emotions and the questioning of cognitive distortions. He remembers Marlene saying she didn’t believe in couples counseling. Maybe this is what she meant. How could it possibly work if there are only two chairs, only two ways of seeing, not a triangle of communication but a game of musical chairs where one is always left out, one spouse is always on the outside looking in, losing the game when the music stops?

Charlie finishes his cup of coffee and squeezes the Styrofoam in his hand. It gives easily, it would crush easily into bits and pieces, if he chose to be destructive, but instead he hands the empty cup to Dr. Kenny, to the therapist who is looking at his calendar, asking Charlie what time he will come visit next, what time is good for him, *when shall we do this again?*

Charlie knows the therapist expects him to say Thursday, because it is always Thursday, always one Thursday folding into another.

“I drove myself here today,” Charlie explains. “But I got into an accident. So I had to walk the rest of the way up the hill. Marlene couldn’t make it.”

Charlie tells the doctor he will call when he is ready to make a new appointment, and he tells him to not hold Thursday for him any longer, because he is tired of all the Thursdays folding in on one another. He wants to experience the others days without those days leading to Thursday but just existing as days on their own, 24 hours without calendar dates or birthday cake or ringing telephones on the kitchen wall.

After leaving the therapist’s office, Charlie stops on his way down the hill and picks up his manila folder of handwritten dreams. He browses through the other manila file folders and sees that they are all empty, although they have names on the tabs that doesn’t recognize. Later that evening, Charlie makes an omelet in the kitchen with a full can of canned mushrooms and a handful of diced yellow onions. He eats the omelet and drinks a can of cold grape soda while sitting on the fire hearth. When he finishes eating the omelet, he lights a fire in the gas fireplace and begins reading through each of his handwritten dreams, then crumpling each dream and tossing it on to the fire. When he no longer has any pages of dreams to burn, he takes Marlene’s mail and burns the envelopes one at a time, watching the yellow flames eat inward on each piece of slick white paper and cellophane windows, watching the letters turning brown and black and then ashen white before falling through the log holder on to the fake pile of glowing rock embers below.

No More Kings

“I want more,” she had said before closing the door behind her, the latch echoing as it clicked in the hollowness of the cheap door.

And now he found the door kicked in, dirty socks and wet books scattered on the floor, cookbooks lying open to recipes for stuffed pork chops and taco-bean soup. Cookbooks focused on how to make meals in under thirty minutes, like recipes found on the backs of soup cans, designed to make life easier and less troubling yet somehow more satisfying all at the same time.

Don't forget to breathe, the sky-diving instructor had told him, with a grin, and he had thought it was a joke until he was tumbling out of the airplane, the thin, cold air rushing around him and it seemed as if he were falling too fast to breathe and he was sure he would die of suffocation before hitting the ground below.

When he left the apartment, he had waited for the elevator that never came, watching the numbers light up on floors and then reverse itself, going the wrong direction and settling on some other number with an uncertain electric buzz. He grew tired of waiting for it to arrive like waiting for some unanswered question, and finally he had taken the stairs, lumbering down twelve flights of concrete steps under the judgment of urine-soaked fluorescent light.

As he fell out of that dank stairway into the wintry afternoon sun, reflected and magnified by the concrete streets and glass skyscrapers, her last words again bounced in his mind, “I want more.”

“I want more,” she had said on their first camping trip in the Rocky Mountains, when she had held out her tin cup for an extra serving of peach cobbler, and then on the fold-out sofa bed in his parents' basement, she had said this also, as she reached over and took hold of him in an expression of loving greediness.

As he turned the corner on 2nd street, on this second day of February, he remembered the two-dollar bill she had given him, which he kept folded in his wallet. She had given these to everyone, these two-dollar bills for good luck, she said, or just for when you needed two extra dollars. He had never remembered it when he could have used it, on the toll bridge as he scrambled for change in the ashtray, or when he was buying a pack of cigarettes and came up short. But now he remembered it, that two-dollar bill folded into thirds and tucked beneath his driver's license.

He pulled it out and held it up against the sunlight, Thomas Jefferson looking austere and hypocritical on one side, the men gathered around the Declaration of Independence on the other -- white faces in white-haired wigs and stocking-clad feet, standing dainty on black shoes with buckles, hands on hips as they stood frozen in history, basking in their importance and waiting for a chance to sign this statement of freedom, *I will no longer be controlled or dominated by you, crazy-nose-bleeding king of England.*

He took the two-dollar bill and ducked into Vintage Vic's thrift shop, which sat a few steps below street level as if beaten into a degraded state of submission. In the room at the back of the store, he let his fingers drift among the racks of wool sport coats, camel-hair jackets, fedoras and porkpie hats, until he came to rest on a dark blue-and-black striped tie with a label that said "Vicky Davis New York." He couldn't tell if it was silk or not, but it felt smooth and luxurious in his hands, and it was priced at just under two dollars.

He knotted the tie snug around his neck in a half-Windsor, and as he came out of the store, the February air felt less certain in its assault upon his cheeks. He pushed the matted hair from his forehead and let himself be swallowed up in the canyons of concrete and steel, to be carried away by the streams of faceless humans as they pushed and edged their way toward some forgotten empty space or square of unclaimed sidewalk. Finally, he remembered to breathe.

Super Giant Tetrahedron

On Macy's ninth birthday, her father cooked her favorite supper, chicken spaghetti with the cheddar cheese baked on top so that it trickled down into the noodles and made everything congeal. Her father, who was called the Professor by his adult friends, always baked it just long enough so the noodles on the side became brown and crispy and the casserole came out in clumps. Macy, her father, and her brother Michael ate scooped-out portions of casserole on paper plates in the screen room behind the house because it was an unusually mild May afternoon for the Texas coast. The Professor drank a glass of red wine, while Macy sipped cold grape juice from a large wine glass. Her father tried to show her how to hold the wine glass correctly, but her fingers were too small, so she gripped the stem tightly to avoid spilling grape juice on the canvas chair cushion.

Macy remembered the way her mother liked to drink wine on warm days in the porch room, which the Professor called the Texas room. Her mother sipped wine while her father played Bach on the guitar, or whatever new arrangement he was working on for the college ensemble, and they would sometimes drink too much. Her father would miss a note and her mother would giggle and say he was going to be fired from his position at the college. Then the Professor would laugh, pack the guitar into its case, and pull a stereo speaker from the living room into the screen room, carefully tugging on the speaker cord as he walked backward through the door. In a dramatic display of romantic inspiration, he would put on a Sinatra record, and they would dance until they were tired or dizzy. Sometimes, Macy would dance on her father's feet or in her mother's arms, and Michael would pretend to play along on the guitar, but usually when her parents were drinking wine and dancing, Macy would escape to the backyard or garage to help her brother with one of his projects while the light was still good.

For her birthday Macy had asked for a proper fielder's glove, because the one she had now was a blue first baseman's glove she had inherited from her brother when he graduated to the pony leagues. On the field, the boys called her "blue glove" and asked her why she was using a first baseman's glove in right field. Macy didn't know why, so she began saying that the glove was only temporary, that her father had ordered a new one through mail-order.

When the Professor brought out her present, a large package wrapped in purple paper, she could see it wasn't a glove. He pretended to struggle with the weight of the large box, which was large enough to obscure his face so that he looked like a giant walking package.

Her father put the package down in front of her and tousled her hair.

"It's all yours, kiddo," he said as he hugged her and pressed his cheek against hers. Macy noticed that the Professor's hair had gone completely gray in the year since her mother had passed away, and his face was often coarse with stubble.

She gingerly tore the paper back to reveal the lettering on the box: "Super Tetrahedron Mega Kite."

She pronounced the words slowly as she traced her fingers along the package's design. *Tetrahedron* reminded her of a spelling-bee word, one of those words that would cause the speller to stall, ask for a definition and a sentence, and then spell it wrong anyway. Macy had competed in the school spelling bee in the fourth grade, and she hoped it would be her chance to finally win a real trophy. Her brother had lots of trophies for little league and soccer, which were lined up against the Hardy Boys novels on the bookshelves of his room, but all of hers were for "participation," cheap imitation metal statuettes with gold-colored athletes in positions of hitting and throwing balls. When she looked at her own trophies, all the little gold athletes looked like fakes, guys pretending to be playing and winning games when really they were just participating.

She studied the word list with her mother for weeks before the spelling bee, but then had gotten nervous when speaking into the microphone and forgotten whether “across” had one “c” or two. She kept the blue ribbon for “fourth grade spelling-bee champion” next to her two trophies for baseball and bowling participation, and sometimes on rainy days she would take down the ribbon and trace her finger along the embossed letters of her name. “Across,” she whispered. “One C and two S’s.”

“What is this?” Macy asked her father, twisting her mouth up into the puzzled expression she had seen on so many episodes of “I Love Lucy.”

“This,” he said, setting his wine glass down on the wicker end table and placing his hand flat against the top of the box. “This is a super deluxe tetrahedron mega kite.”

“It doesn’t say deluxe,” Macy said.

“She’s right, dad,” said Michael from his perch on the chaise lounge, where he was finishing his second helping of spaghetti casserole, stuffing the food in his mouth as he talked and then waving his spoon for emphasis. “It doesn’t say deluxe.”

Macy’s dad wagged his finger at Michael and smiled at Macy, who slumped back in her chair and sighed.

“You two are missing the point,” he said. “This kite is the biggest kite you can buy in the stores. It’s going to win us the contest next week.”

“Contest?” Macy asked.

“The kite-flying contest, at the college picnic,” the Professor said.

Macy and Michael looked at each other, and then Macy tipped the box back to examine the picture of the kite on the box. It looked like a giant pyramid made up of smaller pyramids and even smaller triangles of plastic fabric. It looked like the mad invention of a deranged toymaker, a kite designed by someone on another planet where the rules of gravity didn’t apply. Triangles bursting out of dimensions to become pyramids and those pyramids morphing into bigger pyramids.

\ “It doesn’t even look like a kite,” Macy said.

“It doesn’t even look like a—” the Professor sighed and sat down on the lounge on the foot portion of Michael’s lounge, prompting Michael to grunt as he swung his feet out of the way. “That’s the beauty of it. You guys will see.”

Macy’s dad put his hand on Michael’s leg.

“Michael’s going to help you put it together.”

The summer before, Macy and Michael had tried to build a go-cart using an old lawn mower he had purchased for five dollars from Mr. Reed, the widower who lived at the end of the cul-de-sac. Michael told his father he planned on starting a lawn-mowing business, but the mower’s dull blade only tore at the grass, and the wheels wobbled when he tried to push it, so Michael decided to build a go-cart instead. Macy looked on with anticipation as Michael worked on the engine and handed him tools and oil when he asked for them. She often handed him the wrong screwdriver or the pliers instead of the wrench, and Michael would snap at her, but later he would apologize and try to explain the proper use and design of each tool that hung neatly on the brown pegboard on the garage wall.

“That’s a claw hammer; I need the ball peen hammer,” he once told her. “The claw hammer’s fine when you might need to pull a nail, but the ball peen hammer’s better for working on engines and metal. It has more weight and balance to it. Just pick it up and you’ll see what I mean.”

Macy picked up the hammer. It felt heavy but powerful in her hands. It made her want to swing at something.

“It looks like the hammers you see in cartoons,” she said, pounding the hammer lightly against her palm, and Michael sighed, grabbed the hammer and flicked on the transistor radio to listen to the ball game.

The go-cart was never finished — Michael managed to bang the wheels into shape and got the engine running without sputtering, but he couldn’t figure out how to put the whole thing together so that

it actually moved — and the go-cart project got pushed to the back of the garage as their father made room to sort and pack Macy's mother's clothes and shoes into cardboard boxes to be sent to the Goodwill.

The super giant tetrahedron sat in the box untouched for the next week, except for the time Michael studied the directions while eating corn flakes for breakfast, with his glasses propped on the end of his nose, but Macy's father insisted they load it into the Subaru station wagon on the day of the picnic, so Michael and Macy rearranged the ice cooler and shoved the box against the back seat until they were able to shut the back.

The Tri-County Gulf College picnic was held in a fenced-off portion of Laguna Park, a damp, marshy area a few miles from the ocean, and as soon as they pulled into the gravel parking lot, the Professor sprinted around, shaking hands with middle-aged men who wore sweaters in the heat and touching the arms of women who were mostly too skinny, their hair done up in messy ponytails. Macy noticed the Professor lingering when he talked to Mrs. Kaur, the Pakistani piano teacher who had asked Macy to play for her when she was waiting for her father to get out of a meeting with a student. Macy had only taken lessons for a few short months, but Mrs. Kaur applauded when she played the melody of "Ode to Joy." Mrs. Kaur wore gold earrings and a short black dress that hung loosely over her swollen mid-section, which she stroked as she smiled and talked to her father, her other hand dancing expressively in the air, its bright red nails flashing in the sun. As Mrs. Kaur hugged her father, bending over so her pregnant belly wouldn't be in the way, Macy wondered how anybody could play piano with long, red nails like that.

Under the big canvas tent, which was on loan from a funeral company and was emblazoned with the name "Earthman," Macy and Michael ate soggy hot dogs and drank root beer from paper cups while trying to keep track of the squares on their bingo cards as the man on the stage, a bearded man in a straw

cowboy hat and black-frame eyeglasses who her father said was the dean, shouted out numbers. They pulled dried beans from a bucket at the center of the table to cover the squares, but Macy soon grew tired of waiting for the numbers to be called out and started creating elaborate designs with the beans on her card.

“You’ll never win that way,” her brother said without looking up from an intense study of his own array of six cards.

Macy sighed and bit into one of the beans, which tasted like the pencils she chewed on during mathematics hour. In fourth grade, when she chewed on her pencil, Mrs. Jones would call her name and ask her if she was getting enough to eat at home. Mrs. Jones was always asking stupid questions. When Macy squinted for dramatic effect while looking the board, Mrs. Jones asked if she needed glasses. This year, her new teacher, Mr. Dickson, who was young and soft around the middle and had a rubbery sort of face, wouldn’t say anything, but would make a pained face and shake his head slightly, as if to say, “You don’t want to eat that, do you?”

When bingo was over — the woman who won the final round wore a big red sun dress and ran up to the front of the pavilion like she had just been called down on the “Price is Right” — the man in the cowboy hat announced that the kite-flying contest would start in one hour, just after the three-legged sack race and egg toss.

The Professor drummed the picnic table with his fingertips and pushed himself up from the bench.

“That’s it guys,” he said. “We’ve got one hour to get the Super Kite ready to go.”

“But dad,” Michael protested. “We’ve never even flown it. And Macy wants to do the egg toss.”

Macy picked up her bingo card carefully and let the beans slide off the card into the bucket. The way the beans slid off the card reminded her of when her mother chopped onions and scraped the onion pieces with the edge of the knife into the hot oil of the pan when she was making spaghetti sauce or taco

filling. One time when they were out of taco shells, Macy's mother had let them crush up corn chips on their plates instead.

"Let's put it together," Macy said.

The Super Tetrahedron Kite consisted of what seemed like to Macy hundreds of triangles that made up dozens of small pyramids, which in turn were built into four small pyramids. Those four small pyramids were snapped together to make one giant pyramid, as far as Macy's dad could tell from the directions and the picture on the box. He read the directions as Macy and Michael slipped little plastic rods into the triangular pieces of red plastic, creating triangle after triangle, then interlocking triangles to form small pyramids that then interlocked with other floating pyramids.

"The slits on the rods have to face inward," Macy's dad said. "And the creases on the plastic have to be facing downward, to decrease wind resistance."

After almost 45 minutes, they had constructed the three bottom pyramids, and Macy stood up to inspect the three red pyramids sitting on the grassy field like an architect's geometric rendering of the pyramids of Egypt. The pyramids cast a shadow across Macy's sandaled foot, and she imagined her foot as the Great Sphinx, hiding its mystery with its taciturn expression and forever-silent gaze. She tried to bend in her middle toe to simulate the sphinx's broken nose.

"What is the secret of the sphinx, dad?"

"You're such a weirdo," Michael said as he rolled his eyes.

"We've only got a few minutes," Macy's dad said, as Michael snapped the last small pyramid into place on the fourth piece.

With Macy's dad nodding and pointing, and Michael understanding most of his instructions without any words passing between them, the three of them positioned the smaller pyramids and gently bent the plastic rods into place. Macy held the final pyramid, which was as tall as Michael, and felt the

tension of the rods pulling against each other, with the wind pushing against the small plastic pieces of fabric.

“You guys got her?” the Professor asked, and that was when Macy realized that Michael had a firm grip on the other side of the pyramid, and it wasn’t the wind that was picking up the kite at all.

Her dad was tying a length of thick string on to the kite near the bottom of one of the pyramid corners.

“Looks like we’ve got some competition,” her dad said with a jut of his chin, and Macy looked around the field to see that nearly two dozen families were working on kites — traditional store-bought kites with funny faces painted on them, box kites, one long Oriental dragon kite that looked ready to devour the other kites out of the sky. Even a few homemade kites shaped like diamonds with paper sails and long, elaborate tails tied with colorful ribbons. Macy was sure none of those kites would fly. She had only ever seen a diamond-shaped kite in children’s books like *Curious George*.

She wasn’t sure about her own family’s kite either. It was the size of a small car, this super tetrahedron machine, and it seemed like something that might float in space, tied behind to the bumper of the space shuttle as a kind of diversion for bored Russian cosmonauts named Yuri and Mikael.

The man in the cowboy hat was shouting directions, saying that prizes would be awarded for kites that flew the longest time, for the best-engineered kites, for the most colorful kites, and for kites that flew the highest. Height would be determined by the judges and verified by string measurements when available, he said. The man reminded Macy of a guy she had seen auctioning cattle once on public television, as part of a special on the cowboy life of the Hawaiian islands. *In Hawai’i*, the narrator said mysteriously, *cowboys are the roving guardians of the setting sun*. The bearded man sure didn’t look like a dean, but then her own father, with his tan skin and handsome baby face, never looked like a Professor to her either.

Kites were suddenly shooting off into the sky, with children and harried mothers running with the spools of string, running away from their kites to create the kinetic energy that creates the motion and lift. Distance creates the energy needed for flight, her father told her, like the ski boat that must pull quickly away from its skier, as the skier waits helplessly to be pulled up gracefully or to be yanked into the churning white water of the wake.

This is what her father told her when they went water-skiing and Macy couldn't get up.

The family had gone water-skiing two summers ago with her Uncle Ron, her mom's younger brother, in his new fiberglass ski boat. Michael got up easily, standing up on the skis like he was getting up from the sofa, but Macy had fallen and stumbled on the tiny skis, wobbling as she was pulled up and then staggering into the wake and letting the tow rope be yanked from her tiny fingers. A young man on a jet ski had pulled alongside the boat and shouted at Uncle Ron.

"If you want to get her up, you've got to punch the speed at first. She's too light to bring her up gradually. Hit the throttle hard," he said, and with the next try, Macy had stood up on the skis and flown across the water like a mosquito, skiing long enough to feel the dry air and sun beating down on her face before crashing down into the green lake water again.

Now Macy's father motioned for her to take the kite line, and she hesitated before running to grab the spool. Her father and Michael stood on either side of the Super Tetrahedron and hoisted it like two Greek soldiers lifting a king's chariot, and Macy began to run.

"As fast as you can," Michael yelled. "Like the bogey-man's coming after you."

Toward the sun Macy ran with the line, and her father and brother ran behind her, supporting the kite for as long as it took for the wind to catch and pull it into the air. Macy ran as fast as she could, but her legs seemed hopelessly short, and the string cut into her palm painfully as the wind began to tug at the tiny pyramids of red plastic.

“It’s up,” Macy’s father yelled, and in that moment, Macy turned to look over her shoulder and saw the kite, a super giant tetrahedron of smaller red tetrahedrons, floating just above the surface of the earth, floating like a butterfly that has lost its way, hovering and wandering in its brief, flickering days of existence.

Macy turned, one foot tripped over the other, and the momentum of the kite’s journey was lost. As Macy thudded head first into the grass, her hand jerking out in front of her to take the brunt of the fall, the kite tumbled over itself, a giant pyramid tumbling in the desert wind, and the four smaller pyramids broke apart from each other, collapsing against the awkward weight of their assembled mass.

Macy thought of when her dad had made the family watch “Cosmos” on TV, and the guy with the big lips and silver hair talked about giant red suns and tiny white dwarfs, how stars would grow so large that they would eventually collapse on themselves, falling under the pressure of their own weight, victims of their own enormous success.

Macy pulled herself up in a sitting position on the grass and waited for her brother to yell at her, waited for her brother to ask her why she had turned around, why she had to always look behind her to see where she was going. It was the same impulse that caused her to miss fly balls and to get scared when she was climbing ladders. But both her brother and father stood with upturned hands, looking at their empty palms and the tangled mess of would-be pyramids and tiny plastic triangles that had scattered across the grassy field, as if wondering how the kite had gotten away from them.

While Macy washed the dirt and mashed-up grass from her hands and knees in the park concrete restroom, Michael and Macy’s dad collected the pieces of the Super Tetrahedron and piled the pieces back into the cardboard box. With all the tiny pyramids and triangles still half-assembled, the kite barely fit in the box, and to Macy it looked like a giant red squid struggling to pull itself out of its cage as her brother and father shoved it back into the cargo area of the Subaru.

On the drive home, Michael let Macy ride in the front seat, although he usually called dibs on it long before Macy could think to do it herself, and she picked on the fresh scab on her knee as she let the icy air-conditioning wash over her legs.

“I almost forgot,” her dad said as he fished a ribbon out of his front shirt pocket and handed it to Macy. “It’s your kite, so I guess it’s your prize.”

“But we didn’t even get it to fly,” Macy said as she took the ribbon.

“It’s probably for world’s crappiest kite,” Michael offered, perching his chin on the ridge of the front seat. He playfully punched Macy on the shoulder. “Or clumsiest runner.”

The ribbon was blue but wasn’t marked with “first place” or “runner-up” or even “participation.” The gold letters read, “Most Unusual Design.” Macy’s fingers traced the embossed letters and compared the lettering to her spelling prize and the feel of the ribbon to the smooth gold head of her participating baseball player.

She considered tacking the ribbon on the wall next to her spelling-bee ribbon and throwing out the participation trophies, or maybe just using the new ribbon as a bookmark for the *Casey Williams* mystery novels and the surprising-fact books she was always reading, the same books where she had learned that Napoleon had shot the nose of the Sphinx.

Instead, Macy cracked the car window and let the ribbon slip out in the space between the top of the window and the door. She held on to the string of the ribbon and felt it flutter in the moving air like a flag carried by a galloping knight on horseback. Then she let the string slip from her fingers and watched the ribbon as it danced in the air behind the car, watched as it spiraled up into the sky, carried by drafts of a warm breeze coming off the gulf.

Vita

D. Brian Anderson holds a master's degree in literature from the University of Houston-Clear Lake and a bachelor's degree in journalism from the University of Texas. He currently teaches writing and literature as a full-time instructor at College of the Mainland in Texas City, and he has previously taught in full-time and adjunct capacities at Texas Southern University, San Jacinto College, and Texas A&M University at Galveston. Before becoming a full-time teacher in 2002, he worked as a technical editor for the NASA-funded Lunar and Planetary Institute and as a copy editor for the *Houston Chronicle's* special sections. He is the author of a non-fiction reference book, *The Titanic in Print and On Screen* (McFarland & Co., 2005), which was honored as one of the best bibliographies in history for 2007 by *Reference and User Services Quarterly*. He has also contributed scholarly articles and essays to *An Encyclopedia of American Literature of the Sea and the Great Lakes* (Greenwood Press, 2000), the *Journal of Scholarly Publishing*, and *The Houston Review*. His creative essays have appeared in the *Houston Chronicle*, *Modern Drunkard*, and *Open Minds Quarterly*, and his poems have appeared in *Möbius*, *CCTE Studies*, *Rio Grande Review*, *Zygote in My Coffee*, and the *Journal of New Jersey Poets*. Earlier versions of four stories in this collection were previously published in regional or small-run literary magazines: "If You Could Have Any Super-Power, What Would It Be?" (then titled "The L Factor") and "The Way I Thought It Worked" were published in *CCTE Studies* (Fall 2008); "At a Flea Market" was published in *Marrow* (2005); and "Rats" was published in *Rio Grande Review* (Fall 2008).

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