

The Palimpsest Review

Vol. 7

The



Palimpsest

Review

The Palimpsest Review
is a publication of
the Pennsylvania State University
—an equal opportunity university.

The Palimpsest Review

No. 7 1999

The Palimpsest Review is the student literary publication for the Pennsylvania State University campuses outside the University Park main campus. All the short stories and poems published herein are the products of students enrolled on those campuses during the academic year prior to the semester of publication.

The Palimpsest Review wishes to offer its thanks to the Office of Campus Student Affairs on the Hazleton campus, where the publications offices are located, most notably to Cy Falatko for his assistance in administering the program; to the Dean of the Commonwealth College, Dr. Joseph C. Strasser, for his assistance at the college level and work he has performed in coordinating matters with the other college deans; to Dr. Monica Gregory, Director of Academic Affairs on the Hazleton campus for her continued support; and to Chris Ritzko for his technical assistance in all matters electronic.

The Palimpsest Review, The Pennsylvania State University, Jim manis, Editor-in-Chief, Hazleton, PA 18201-1291, is a non-profit publication of the Pennsylvania State University, published once each year. Poetry and short story manuscripts should be submitted during the spring semester of each year, with proper S.A.S.E. Only work by students enrolled on one of the Pennsylvania State University campuses, excluding the main campus, will be considered.

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The Palimpsest Review

No. 7 1999

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From the Editor's Desk

WELCOME TO THE SEVENTH EDITION of *The Palimpsest Review*. Every year seems more hectic than the last, and this year was no exception. Fortunately, you believe in our mission to bring Penn State student writing to the reading public. We began receiving manuscripts for the eighth edition this summer and continue to receive them on a regular basis.

In addition, we received our first request from a faculty member to work as an editor for *Palimpsest*. That is, some one asked us rather than we having to ask them. Folks are starting to feel that it is an honor to be a part of this publication (though they sometimes have problems with that old rascal, the chief). Annabelle Clippinger of the Beaver campus joined us late this fall as our new Editor. Annabelle, an excellent writer, will have an important influence on the magazine's future.

Palimpsest onLine!, our electronic sybling, has also created something of a stir. We have received submissions from as far away as Athens, Greece, and India. Unfortunately we haven't been able to accept any at this point, but we expect that to change in the future.

Penn State's Electronic Classics Series, the publication of classic and contemporary works in Portable Document File format from our Web site has been perhaps the most impressive publication of all. We recently received our first submission of a book length manuscript that has simultaneously been accepted by a traditional publisher, and we are currently in discussions with the hard copy publisher for the rights to publish the book on-line from our Web site.

Of Special Note: This edition marks the first in which we published a student writer from Behrend. We hope to bring more of the fine work produced from our sister campus to our readers in the future.

A Note on Submissions:

We are soliciting short stories of 5000 words or less and up to six poems of 100 lines or less and short drama/screen plays of 30 minutes or less, each from all Pennsylvania State University campuses, except University Park, for the eighth edition of *The Palimpsest Review*.

Prose should be double spaced. The author should submit a brief cover letter, identifying his or her campus affiliation at the time of submission. Make sure an S.A.S.E. is enclosed.

Submit all manuscripts to:

Jim Manis
Editor in Chief
The Palimpsest Review
Penn State University
Hazleton, PA 18201-1291

Campus creative writing instructors are encouraged to assist student writers with manuscript format and the submission process.

A Message to Those Whose Work Was Not Accepted:

There is simply no way to express the importance of work submitted for publication when that work is not accepted, but believe me, it is. You make the magazine better because you tried. And if you are really serious about writing, you won't let our judgement about the relative merits of the work you sent us impede you from trying again. I, for one, truly do value your contributions, regardless of how intangible they may seem.

And Finally:

Congratulations to **Alexa James** (Hazleton) for winning our poetry prize, and to **Keith Bergstrom** (Berks) for winning our short story prize. Nothing pleases an editor more than to be able to turn a check over to a writer; we only wish we could do that for all of you.

Jeff Worley (Poetry Judge)

Tapping the Wellspring of Language

WHEN I TOOK my first creative writing class in poetry, several hundred years ago or so, we were given no guidance at all as far as how to write a poem. We had an anthology, titled *Naked Poetry*, which featured dozens of wonderful, memorable poems; the unspoken implication was we were to find some poets we liked there and in our own way imitate what they were doing. But there was no talk of how to get started, how to proceed, how to become companionable with the language once you sat alone with the pure and intimidating blank sheet of paper.

Perhaps the most important thing I can say to young poets about the writing process comes from William Stafford, my fellow Kansan, who gave a lot of thought to how the poem happens on the page. In his famous essay “A Way of Writing,” Stafford says,

A writer is not so much someone who has something to say as he is someone who has found a process that will bring about new things he would not have thought of if he had not started to say them. One implication is the importance of just plain receptivity. To get started I will accept anything that occurs to me.”

He goes on to talk about the importance of getting something down on the page, anything really, a process which starts a chain reaction of words, line to line:

These things, odd or trivial as they may be, are somehow connected. After I let them string out, surprising things will happen. A strange bonus happens. At times, without my insisting on it, my writings become coherent; the successive elements that occur to me are clearly related. They lead by themselves to new connections. Sometimes the language, even the syllables that happen along, may start a trend. Sometimes the materials alert me to something waiting in my mind, ready for sustained

attention. I know that the indulgence of my impulses will bring recurrent patterns and meanings again.

So Stafford celebrates the importance of letting language loose on the page, letting it accumulate, without judging its “goodness” as it takes you along. Only at the end of this process, he says, should you unmuffle the critic in your head. You know who I mean: the voice that says, “But this isn’t *any good*.” We all know that voice. It’s only business is to assign value to what we write. Although there is a time to pay attention to what’s “working” in the poem and what isn’t, that time is in successive drafts of the poem you write, not during the initial writing session.

When I first started writing poems, I wouldn’t begin until I had “pre-formulated” the poem in my head: I already knew the subject, the tone, a few images, perhaps, sometimes even the ending—before I’d written one word down!

This, I believe now, is a terrible way to go about writing poems. Perhaps the most magical and pleasing thing about writing is surprising yourself on the page, which you can’t do if you pre-think the poem. “No surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader,” Frost says. The most interesting poems are those which surprise you in their progression, in the various imagistic and syntactic and thematic connections and leaps they make as the language gambols on. Or to think of it another way, any previously chosen subject matter, as William Matthews says, is literally a pre-text for writing the poem.

I also believe it’s important, as a poet, to habitually keep your eyes and ears open—for images and for interesting tidbits of language. This is why, among writers, there are so many practiced bar sneaks. I was once in a local tavern, sipping lemonade, etc., when a guy none of us had ever seen came in, sat down next to a lovely RN we all knew named Donna, and said, loud enough for all of us to hear, “My name’s Richie. I been in the Kentucky pen for the past eleven years. Would you mine me sayin’, darlin’, that I dig your ass?”

I couldn’t uncap my ballpoint fast enough! I took this serendipitous exclamation home with me on a cocktail napkin and used it later during my writing time to trigger a poem (titled, eventually, “Happy Hour at the Two Keys Tavern”). I once overheard on a bench in front of a small-town courthouse in Eastern Kentucky two old duffers talking. A three-

legged dog with a blue bandanna around its neck galloped by. "I use to had a dog like that," one of the gents said to the other. Write it down, take it home, and use it if you can to fire off a poem.

One mistake a lot of young poets make is believing they haven't "lived enough," haven't had enough life experiences to use as fodder for their writing. I think it was Hemingway (I could be wrong here) who said that by age twelve, everyone has a lifetime of material to draw from. And to get back to Stafford, what's interesting about his approach is that an uncritical rush of language on the page allows for all sorts of memories and images to well up from the writer. Things you thought you'd forgotten rise to the surface and, in the service of the poem, volunteer themselves.

One other advantage of getting a line or two down right away (start with anything!) when you sit in front of the blank sheet of paper: you never have to worry about writer's block again.

Jeff Worley teaches at the University of Kentucky. His work has appeared in such distinguished journals as College English, Three Rivers Poetry Journal, Tendril, The Threepenny Review, Poetry Northwest, Black Warrior Review, Prairie Schonner, The Literary Review, Southern Poetry Review, Boulevard, Harvard Review, The New Quarterly, New England Review, Shenandoah, New Virginia Review, Double Take, American Literary Review, The Southern Review, Green Mountains Review, and Yankee.

The Only Time There Is (1995) won the Mid-List Press First-Book Poetry Prize. His chapbook, A Simple Human Motion, is forthcoming in January 2000 from Larkspur Press.

Ethan Elliott

Send Your Film in This Envelope

(Written in the old black notebook no longer used.)

Everything real sounds borrowed or trite.

Disjointed stanzas mix,

or are pieced together with duct tape.

Nothing is long enough to fill the void of paper; so I make up deskfulls
of nothing.

All too bulky, in no way concise, its most sad that this clutter IS my head.

Trying so hard, concentrating on that nothing

offers another chapter of deeply disturbed thoughts.

Where is the floor?

If I could only find that box, where is it?

Oh, we used it to pack her things when she left.

Damnit, just as I feel confident that I'd written something with a new taste,
she comes in.

She'll always be here haunting me won't she?

Stacy Clemmer

Angel's Awakening

Angel looks at herself in the mirror, and barely recognizes the image that is reflected back to her. She begins to think about the person she has become. Glancing down to her tarnished silver bracelet, she is reminded of when her bracelet was once shiny and vibrant. Just like her soul used to be, but now it too is tarnished. As her lonesome eyes begin trickling tears, she sees no pleasure in those eyes, only pain. She wonders how she has become what she is. Without awaiting an answer, she knows now is the time to change. To change not to please others, but for her own self. Hoping that this reformation will bring some happiness into her dismal world.

Craig McNeese

Sitting alongside the fire, facing the river

We talked
and we also sat silently
staring into a dream
symbolized by the brightness of that fire.

focusing on the Ohio river
I could see
the quiet sounding rippled stillness
beginning to tell me a story
about myself
wanting to emulate water.

we could hear the river
moving in our minds
we could feel the heat
glazing on our skin

we were laughing at life
and remembering that
the last summer of the century
is about to exist

Time is more than an idea
it is
a feeling.

us
not knowing time

us
living for that
and only
that moment

us
forgetting the words
tomorrow
yesterday,
now, and
Then.

us
forgetting any worry
of time.

It is time
that forgets about us.

Tara Howitt

Sirens' Song

Three sisters
perched on rock;
pleasing temptresses,
they beckon to sailors
with enchanted song.
Distracted men dream,
and their drifting vessels
wreck the land.

Terri Lynn Mohl

Not Quite Black

Gray
the large void of middle ground
between a definite black and white
lost between slate, fog, off white,
and almost black.

Lost in limbo,
all other colors
seeming to have direction
a definite brightness.
Every other color
prancing around,
taunting me.

Reds surrounding me with love
I don't feel.
Whites so pure and kind
they make me feel guilty
for hating them.

And the beautiful mysterious
erotic blacks
that I long to be
and almost am
but ...
not quite.

Nicolette Milholin

The Lone Wolves

Cool mud flows slowly over
jagged cliffs of steel blue
rocks into a murky pool which serves
as home to a family of horny-
toad frogs. Behind the thick falls,
a pair of eyes peer at the foul

liquid bruising the leathery surface
of a wavering haven for a ghouls
hopping food. He is only seen by girls
who curve away from the perfect,
white flowers and pressed dresses
to follow the tamarack's sweet scent

the swings like a cloud in whipping wind.
Beguiled by the ghouls, the enchanted girls whine
while cutting their knees on sharp steel
trying to climb toward the eyes that leer
at the failure of kissing frogs into princes
and the loneliness of walking away.

Karon Rehrig

Break Up

Just like a rigid river rock,
Inside of my sore, red throat,
It cuts through my dark insides
Like the metal zipper
Of your new leather coat.
You bruise me sharp.

My belief, you say,
It's tough, in your cool voice.
You bite my throat, ferociously,
And the dripping blood is hot.
I see a floating cloud;
I kiss the sweet sky,

Jumping for joy like a frog,
No longer held captive under your spell,
Croaking in my beautiful voice,
Feel my webbed foot
As I hop away
Finally free from you.

Brenda Berrick

Queen for a Day

The hot rock paid tearless homage
To the cool queen. Her tough eye
Surprised the crowd gathered to kiss
The diva good night. Mud
Bit rock in a desperate attempt
To hide the flower cowering against the cleft.

Time cut her throat in a red
Slash of victory. She swung
Into the fierce love anyway, piercing
The tarmac with her hot tongue.
Flavorful bits of forgotten flesh
Crashed like glass upon the heads of the dogs.

They yelped their thanks amid banks
Of cut daisies, searching the haze
For her approval. Her hand raised
In a flaccid salute to human idols
Before the queen departed, knee-deep
In painful dominion over sleep.

Joe McGlone

The Crack of Dawn

The crack of dawn
creeps up on the house
like a familiar plague.
The aching in my knees
reminds me of yesterday's work
as I raise myself out of bed,
basking in the first rays of sun.

My body, a stiff board
sliding into cold overalls,
slowly loosens itself
as I make my way down creaky stairs.
My debilitated mind fills itself with work
as callused hands grasp keys,
unlocking the barn doors
of endless labor.

Kelly Golub

View from My Window

Black birds scattered under gray-blue skies.
Snow dusts the trees of this small town.
My girls skate, holding hands.
My boys play ice hockey.
Betty pulls Paula on a make-shift sled.
She falls but eagerly gets back on.
The church bells chime four times.
They ring through everyone's ears,
reminding them that dinner will soon be served.
The McGuire's horse and buggy trot by loudly.
The sun will be setting in a short time.

Wild dogs are heard from the hills.
Smoke drifts slowly, smoothly over the valley.
Kids get back in the house
the Packston townsmen are back to destroy.
destroy this small town.

Karen Lacki

Blue

Wrapped up in a ratty old light blue blanket,
Draped in it, wearing it like the Madonna's blue robes—
Over the head, cascading down the body,
Flowing like a waterfall,
Standing in the December snow,
Glittering with silver blue moonlight,
Moon surrounded by midnight blue sky,
Speckled with blue-hot stars,
Blue-in-the-face with cold,
With the coolness of numbness, unfeeling,
The intensity of sadness, madness,
Choking on iced tears
Frozen, frosty over the veins under the skin of
The eyes—
Grey, Baby, Royal, and Periwinkle,
Washed out with heavy eyeshadow, mascara, and eyeliner
That stand out like a blue neon sign—
Glass windows to the soul,
The ghost that glows in the dark,
Glowing the same blue that
Flashes through the sky when lightning bolts, strikes,
Heats up a pot on the stove that
Has the blue reflection of dark metals,
Iron and steel.

Jennifer Schwartz

My Own Wonderland

I once dreamt I was Alice in my own wonderland,
Blonde and petite with a cute little smile.
I spotted the rabbit, but he chased me away.
I ran down the hole with him at my heels.
Then I fell in with the Cheshire cat.
I thought he was my friend, but what a mistake I had made.
He shoved me into a pot with a bat.
While boiling away, I heard the rabbit say,
What a peculiar girl was that.
As they ate me all up, they chatted away;
No one will miss little Alice anyway.

Amy Leeking

A Young Boy

plays on a lazy May afternoon.
Barefoot,
running through freshly cut grass,
he comes to his favorite place,
the stream,
clear, flowing over stones and pebbles
Little water spiders dart here and there.
He sees something that sparks interest.
Squatting—he reaches.
The buzz of bees is somewhere near,
but he is intent on his prize.
Tiny, dirty hands grab for the minnow,
but he's left with a handful of pebbles.

La Keisha Thorpe

The Fair Lady Objects

I could try to be better,
but by whose standards?
If I conform to fit
your needs
am I still me?
Am I so difficult
to love this way?
Well, then don't
love me. I could try to be
better, but you haven't
said what's wrong with
me.

Oh, I see I'm not
perfect, I'm not the
way you pictured me to
be or the way society
says someone should be.
Well then, don't look
at me, who said you
had to?
I would be better,
but has it ever occurred
to you that I'm
happy with me?
Maybe I like me this
way
or should I change
myself and everyone
else that doesn't
fit that perfect mold
that the sick twisted people made with you in mind.
Well, then screw you
all.
I would be better,
but I need to get rid
of you first.
After that then I'll be
better,
better for not being anywhere
near you.

Alexa James

Player

Go ahead and go around.
What's the big deal?
But you better watch the dealer.

Shuffled up the deck.
Didn't mix 'em well enough,
So I ended up face to face with you.

Must have been the haze of a little too much freedom.
Could have been a little too much risk,
Just a friendly wager,
But you deal 'em from the bottom.
Bet me we could make a winning pair.

Full house, full cup, music, mingle, matching wits.
Thought that I could read those light blue eyes.
I gave away my hearts
Should have folded, but I stayed.
Didn't know that it was nothing but a bluff.

Lay 'em down, spread 'em out, then collect the winnings.
It's a gamble and one seldom ever wins.
Truth is you've got a queen of hearts hidden up your sleeve.
Truth is the truth has never been your friend.

I know when I should walk away;
You know when you should hold me.
We know this is much more than just a game,
So you deal 'em out.
I place a bet.
Win some
 Lose some,
 Try to learn some.
One of these days I'm gonna throw away this deck.

Erik Heidecker

Reflections of Me

Sometimes I look
long into a mirror,
and if I look hard enough,
I don't recognize
the person looking back.

It can't be me,
I don't recognize him.
His face is unfamiliar.

And then as I look harder,
I realize
the mirror is broken.

Prudence Grimes (Fiction Judge)

Writing My Father's Stories

MY FIRST MEMORIES are stories. Here's an early one: I'm in the bathrom, standing on the toilet seat lid and watching my dad shave. I'm saying, Dad, tell me one more time about the swimming hole.

Stroking a clean path of skin through the lather, he says, I woke up early, before anyone else in the house, and I sneaked down to the swimming hole, where I was never supposed to go by myself. It'd been raining, so I was certain the water would be deep. I just stripped down and dived in.

I'm shaking now remembering it, writing it down, just the way I surely did at three or four. Then what, Dad?

My head got stuck in the mud.

It wasn't as deep as you thought.

No, it was quite shallow. But I couldn't see that because it was so muddy.

And no one was awake but you.

Well, so I thought.

And you tried to get out.

I pushed my hands down into the mud, to try and free my head, but then my hands got stuck as well.

And you would have drowned.

Yes, I would have. But your Uncle Leonard had seen me get up and had followed down to the swimming hole—

And he saw your legs kicking around like crazy.

He saw my legs and pulled me free.

If he hadn't you'd be dead today.

Yes, I'd be dead, and you never would have been born.

Now that was a prickly concept. I'd have never been born. Secretly, I reasoned that my mom probably would have met someone else, married someone else, and with that man she would have made half of me. I didn't tell my dad that; I didn't want to hurt his feelings. By the time I reasoned this all out, I was older, seven or eight. But the memory folds together into my own family mythology.

Every culture in the world deals in story. Stories pass down rules and mores for a collection of people; they pass down history so that we can benefit from the mistakes of our ancestors. (I have never dived headfirst into cloudy water. Never will.) Maybe most importantly of all, they pass down what we value, what we see as beauty, what we cherish and love.

Last year I was teaching a readings course, and one of the books I was using was *China Men* by Maxine Hong Kingston. She paid a visit to my university, and I was lucky enough to spend some time with her. The thing I remember most about her visit was how she urged writers to become the myth gatherers of our own societies, to take the stories we heard as children within our families, and as adults within our own particular groups, and make them relevant to the lives of people today, take those stories from childhood and make them mean something, make sense from them.

Years before meeting her, I had written a story entitled “Sacrifice” in which I tried to make sense of my father’s stories. I tried to lay them out and discern exactly what they meant to me. After listening to Maxine talk, I began looking further into my store of childhood memories. I went back to a fairy tale by Hans Christian Andersen that I always found horrifying, and I tried to think about what that story was supposed to get across to children. Once I figured that out, I realized that I didn’t like what it was trying to tell children, and so I told it over in a way that reversed Andersen’s point, and in doing so made my point. I turned it into a story about how I believe society should behave towards young girls.

That’s important work. Whether or not it’s work a writer thinks about consciously as she sits down to write isn’t important. It’s the act of taking your memories, your family’s history, the things you found frightening or wonderful as a child and making them relevant for who you are and where you live today. That’s what writing is all about.

In working from family stories, or childhood memories, it’s easy to become distracted by what actually happened and what didn’t. I don’t worry about actual historical fact. I worry about capturing the essence of the moment, capturing what it felt like to be in that steamy aqua bathroom, watching my dad shave, as he told me stories that chilled me to the bone: the horse that got stuck in the mud of the creek bank in

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early spring and almost drowned, but grandfather hitched the town horses to her and pulled her free. I was right there, sinking to my ankles in that cold gray mud, watching a horse I loved struggle for her life. As a fiction writer, I'll do anything I need to in order to make you feel it too. I'm not tied to what actually happened. I'll happily change things around so that you too are there in the slick clay mud, watching that chestnut mare flag and slow in her struggle.

As fiction writers, that's the work we do. We take stories we've heard, scraps of stories that have stuck in our minds, and try to figure out why they're important enough to be remembered. Even when we sit with just the glimmer of an idea of where to begin in our heads, just the scrap of a character, or the shred of a plot, we're attempting to make sense of our world, and in the beginning, we may be doing it for ourselves, but later on in the process, we're struggling to take our vision of the world, of what we see as sad, or beautiful, or horrible, and pass that vision on in a way that resonates and says something about the world around us. The truth of that vision is what all of us struggle towards. Be fearless in your quest.

Prudence Grimes has had stories published in journals like The North American Review, Fiction International, Third Coast, and Other Voices. She was a recipient of a 1999 residency at Virginia Center for the Creative Arts. Currently she divides her time between working on her second novel and teaching writing at the University of Pittsburg.

Mary Kirby

Cabin Fever

PERSONALLY, I BLAME THE BABY BOOMERS. Their miserly self-absorption and arrogant self-pity scrapes across my nerves. God, I hate them. I hate their overexposure in the media. As if anyone could really believe that America is interested in how the Boomers handle aging. How they cope with hair loss. How they deal with cholesterol.

This is all their fault.

I'll accept my share of the responsibility. I'm not like them, after all. I can deal with reality. Maybe I went over the edge a little. My lawyer, a middle aged pudgy man with hair plugs, tries to assure me that the charges can be dismissed. Not guilty by reason of insanity and all that. After all, who can hate the Baby Boomers? The generation of Peace and Love? But I keep telling him no. I'm not crazy. I was provoked. Anybody could see that I was forced into my role—even though I still acted of my own volition. I did it.

But it's all their fault.

I didn't go into the woods on the afternoon of the eighteenth with any violent intentions. I, and my girlfriend Amy, believed we were only on a simple trip to visit my parents at their hunting camp in the Alleghenies. I hadn't seen my parents since that messy incident a few years back, which, as it involved both Amy and the upstairs shower while we stayed with them during a short vacation, concluded painfully on all counts and convinced everyone that another visit wouldn't be wise for some time.

We chose to stop by, however, largely due to the influence of my brother, Tate. I have always suspected that our mother's decision to name him "Tate" has scarred him psychologically in ways too numerous and horrible to mention. He must, really, accept some part of the blame. But he, at least, was probably acting out of madness. He's always resented our parents for making him wear bell-bottoms in high school. He'd invited us to the cabin, since he and his wife Erica would be there—and we might find some strength in numbers. Amy, surprisingly, talked me into it—she's always wanted to make amends to my parents for the shower incident—and it was settled. Phrases like "time to mend some fences" and "never too late to start over" were spouted in abundance.

At any rate, it was a beautiful autumn afternoon, and we actually enjoyed the two-hour drive immensely. The domes of forested mountains fell around us like a carelessly spilled package of gigantic gumdrops. Certainly, there was something sugary in the air that lent us both a great deal of childish hyperactivity. The sort of energy that prompts full-grown adult people to stop the car and photograph a hill where we caught a fleeting glimpse of a deer's departing butt. The fervor that makes a person excitedly point out cows. Look! Cows!

The cabin squatted in the midst of several acres of replanted pines. The bristly, ugly trees blancketed the ground with a dense layer of shed needles, and stretched out in uniform lines that were disturbing in the midst of the wilderness. The bright blue outhouse had inspired the camp's unfortunate name—*The Blue Moon*. It was not, all in all, a pleasant spot to visit. And my parents failed to make it any better.

My mother rushed out to greet us, and passionately embraced us both at the same time.

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My mother may be the only woman alive who is actually large enough to do this successfully. Her arms could encompass third-world countries and leave enough room to squeeze in a couple of minor city-states. My father, more dignified, stepped onto the porch and spit.

“Hi,” I said, in that cheery tone of voice one only uses when greeting parents. “Are Tate and Erica here?”

“Tate?” Mother looked at me as if I had suddenly become a large and inexplicable talking fish. “Oh, honey, Tate won’t be here until tomorrow.” She laughed then, a high nervous sound, which should be subject to stiff fines, and led us toward the cabin. Where, she promised, we would find some lovely pickled eggs from Aunt Peg. My father didn’t move from his spot on the porch, or speak as we passed by him. His one concession to the occasion was to spit when Amy said hello.

Tate, naturally enough, had lied to me. Tricked me into spending quality time with Mom and Dad. He had, of course, made me promise to come on the eighteenth, to coincide exactly with his visit. Not a day later, he’d insisted. I should have known not to trust Tate—he had, after all, once fed me live bees. Mother informed us that Tate might not come at all—the poor dear had so much work to do—but he promised he’d try to get away.

We were left to my mother’s desperate hospitality—we were offered food that was instantly taken away again, as mother discovered something better in the pantry. Pickled eggs? Oh, wait, there’s still some crab dip. How about some of our Aunt Genie’s pumpkin bread? She chattered continually about a variety of subjects ranging from Uncle Herb’s psoriasis to the sad state of Rwanda. Amy nodded sympathetically throughout the wandering monologue, while I stared, catatonic, at the stuffed moose head hanging on the wall by the plastic marlin. *Please get me out of this place*, the moose head seemed to say. And, looking at the cheap plastic fish hanging beside it, I joined in the sentiment wholeheartedly.

My father came back inside then, spit into an empty beer can, and asked if he should start the grill. Mother instantly dove into a new hurried monologue, detailing her calculations of exactly how many hamburgers each of us was likely to consume, and exactly how many minutes per burger the grill would have to be on, and whether or not it seemed likely that anybody would want corn on the cob. Amy managed to quietly excuse herself during this, and grabbed my hand, pulling me outside towards the relative freedom of the porch.

“They are driving me freakin’ nuts, Amy,” I said, slowly and calmly like my therapist recommends. “I can’t stay here another minute.” Dr. Dave—he likes to be called that, for some reason, probably because his last name is Berkowicz—insists that I *process* whatever I’m feeling. So I can really feel it and get it over with.

“Kyle,” she sighed, looking at me sadly, “just try, okay? You can make it twenty-four hours until your brother gets here, I’m sure.” She sat on a plastic folding chair and gazed off into the driveway. “Why don’t we go for a walk?” She rose and took my hand, prepared to drag me in her wake, if necessary.

Fortunately, the area surrounding the camp is beautiful and sparsely populated. Somehow, my parents managed to get their hands on some of the only ugly property for miles. Amy and I headed down towards Broken Straws Creek, admiring the scenery while she picked wild Tiger Lilies from the ditch. We saw the retreating backsides of several more deer, and I started feeling pretty good. Amy had stuck an orange lily in her curly dark hair, and wove the rest into some sort of garland, which she dropped over my head. *This can’t possibly be all bad*, I thought. And that, of course, is when things started to get really bad.

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When we reached the creek, we discovered that the Sumpters, the nearest neighbors to *The Blue Moon*, had beaten us there. Now, for some reason, my parents and the Sumpters have never gotten along—something to do with their days at Pembroke College together. They were all sort of hippies, or beatniks, or some other lame empowerment thing back then. I guess somebody had slept with somebody else, and nobody wound up happy, but they all did a lot of drugs and forgot about it—in theory. In fact, a mild state of war has existed between them for as long as I can recall. So we really should have known just to wave, and pretend we were headed elsewhere. We didn't.

"Well, well. If it isn't the young Valimont boy," Harold Sumpter called to his wife by way of greeting. "Look, Marie, we have company."

Marie, a thin disappointed-looking woman with orange hair, shaded her eyes with her left hand while fanning herself with the large sunhat clenched in her right. She sat on top of a large pile of Frisbees. "Well, now," she said. "Carl, isn't it?"

"Kyle," I corrected. My father's name is Carl. "And this is Amy Davis." Amy flashed them a dazzling smile and then promptly escaped downstream. I would have followed her joyfully, but had to make some miserable conversation first.

"Kyle, huh? Well, haven't you grown. It's been ages since we've seen you, honey." She looked me over critically. "You certainly have a lot of hair, growing it out?"

"Too much hair," Harold announced as he aimed and fired a pump action ten-gauge shotgun at a Frisbee thrown on cue by Marie. The kick from the gun sent visible ripples through his paunch. "Young men shouldn't have so much hair. At your age, son, it should be falling out respectably." He scratched his own shiny scalp with a narrowed expression that clearly stated, *I just don't trust those kids with hair*. Not, I'm sure, that he was at all bitter. He laughed, though, as if he meant it as a joke.

"Yeah." I looked desperately after Amy. "Well, if you'll excuse me, Mr. and Mrs. Sumpter, I'd better catch up with Amy." I tried, then, to walk away, but Marie caught my arm in her claw-like hand.

"Honey, you tell your mom and dad that we said hello, okay? Tell them we're having a barbecue tonight, and want them to come. We won't take no for an answer. You tell them, okay, honey?" She smiled, showing her crumbling off-white caps, and I nodded, stammered something incoherent, and hurried away.

Amy was sitting on a large rock, dangling her feet in the stream.

"Thank you so much," I said, "for leaving me with them. There's just nothing I enjoy more than having those two all to myself." I had tried to sound sarcastic, but my voice landed more in the whiney range, and I decided to shut up for a while.

"Kyle." Amy patted the spot beside her on the rock. "Relax, okay?"

Amy and I have been together for about two-and-a-half years now, and though I'm fairly sure I love her, she can occasionally be a serious pain in the ass. She has this tendency to abandon me in the middle of any unpleasant situation—especially those she's dragged me into. But I let it pass. I really didn't need to start anything with Amy—not when she was my only ally.

I took off my shoes and socks and joined her on the rock. The water was very clear, very cold, and contained many small fish that nibbled experimentally on our toes.

"Kyle! Amy! Are you down there?" The strident voice which scattered the fish and probably made the rocks wince could only have belonged to my mother. "Where are you?"

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“Down here, Mrs. Valimont.” Amy called before I had the chance to silence her. She stood up, waving her arms over her head. “Over here.”

“Oh.” Mother wheezed like a car with a gas tank full of sugar. “There you are. Honey, call me Barb, okay? None of this, ‘Mrs. Valimont’ stuff.” She patted Amy’s shoulder and gave me a mock-stern look. “What are you doing, dragging Amy off right before supper? Kyle, honestly. You’re getting as bad as Tate—no common sense at all. Your father’s grilled us some burgers, and we still have those lovely pickled eggs of your Aunt Peg’s, and Kyle, goodness, you should know not to wade in this creek, what with all the leeches. If you wanted to go somewhere, you should have walked up to the spring, show Amy the spring, why I’m sure she’s never seen one before, what with living in town and all. It’s such a shame that the spring’s all but dried up now, just a damp little puddle, really, but what do you expect when so many people are sinking wells around here and sucking up all the water. Next thing you know, we’ll all have to lug in bottled water, and I just don’t trust that stuff. They *say* it’s all from Canadian springs and such, but you’d never be able to check, now would you? And what about all the acid rain up there in Canada? Those foreigners, bottling up all that poison water with the dead fish, and sending it back to us...” She turned and led us back up the road toward the cabin, prattling on about the ozone layer, and I successfully tuned her out. The Sumpters had already left.

“Be strong,” Amy muttered, squeezing my arm.

The promised burgers were all gone when we reached the camp. My father spit into a beer can and said, “They were getting cold,” in answer to mother’s scolding questions. Stewart, my father’s geriatric beagle, lolled by the fireplace with a very smug look on his saliva-coated face.

“That’s okay,” I interrupted mother’s tirade somewhat unwillingly. “The Sumpters invited us all to a barbecue at their place tonight.”

I probably shouldn’t have said anything, as my mother’s immediate response was a stricken look. The look, however, was accompanied by a full minute of blessed silence.

“Well,” she sniffed in the tone of voice of a woman preparing to do battle with an angry mob. “I suppose I’ll just get changed. It wouldn’t do to disappoint *dear Marie*. Now would it, Carl?” The look she shot my father would have left a hole in anyone less gristly.

The Sumpters’ camp, *Piniñ Away*, sat among some more replanted pines about two miles from *The Blue Moon*. I’m sure it was the only place in fifty miles at least that had plastic figurines of the seven dwarves in the front yard. Marie treated them as if they were children and sometimes could be heard cooing and scolding them. The reminded me of an acid trip gone terribly wrong. Sleepy had been knocked over and chewed on by raccoons, and was missing half his face as a result.

“Welcome!” Marie shrieked, waving her arms. “Look, Harold, the Valimonts are here! And you said they wouldn’t come.” She came over to my mother, took the proffered platter of pickled eggs, and looped her arm through mother’s. “Oh, Barb, it’s just been *ages* since we’ve seen you. Hasn’t it, Harold? Oh, we have so much to catch up on.” Marie Sumpter’s thick mascara barely hid the villainous glitter in her eyes as she led my stony-faced mother into the cabin. Harold and my father stood together on the porch where Harold was grilling miscellaneous parcels of meat. Mr. Sumpter spoke in an accusatory monotone about the weather and the fishing, and my father occasionally leaned over the edge of the porch to spit into the empty hole in Sleepy’s head.

“What have I done?” I muttered to myself as Amy and I followed the ladies into the cabin.

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Amy patted my arm reassuringly.

The dinner did not go well. I suspect the large quantities of alcohol drunk by everyone may have had something to do with this. Halfway through dinner, Marie decided to stagger down memory lane and revive the rather painful history of her affair with my father during their sophomore year at Pembroke. My mother's only response to this was to refill her glass of tequila. My father, of course, only drank beer, and spat into the cans. Some of which were not empty at the time and many of which belonged to Harold Sumpter. Actually, now that I think of it, my father quit chewing tobacco a couple of years before. Amy excused herself to go to the bathroom, and didn't come out again for quite a while.

Marie Sumpter, sweating so much gin that flies around her were dropping to the floor, started screaming passionately at my mother for having stolen the only man she'd ever loved. She then grabbed my shirt and collapsed, weeping, out of her chair, nearly dragging me down with her. She kept calling me "Carl,"—which I repeated, was not my name—and tried to kiss me.

"Get your hands off my wife!" Harold roared to his feet then, and promptly fell over as he tripped over his wife's sprawled legs. After he got his legs back under him, my father casually punched him in the eye.

"You vicious old whore!" Mother shrieked, and fell on Marie, clawing at her with blood colored Lee Press-on nails. Marie recovered herself enough to grab a fistful of mother's hair and tried to pull her across the room.

I thought over all the advice my therapist has given me about dealing with my parents as I stepped over the various combatants on my way to the couch where Harold's shotgun waited to be cleaned and put away. I suffered a brief surge of respect for Harold when I discovered that he had, in deviance of the law, removed the plug: the gun could hold five shots before it would need reloading. Fortunately, he'd left a box of shells on the table beside it; as it was, sadly, not loaded.

It took me a few moments to recall how to load the gun—I hadn't handled one in years, after all. Then, I took careful aim, and blew all the bastards away, one after another. I did have to pause briefly to reload, but that didn't hinder me much—after all none of them were especially mobile. The sound of shotgun pellets raining down among the shattered bodies left me feeling at peace with the world—I really think it's a sound that could be recorded and marketed for stress-relief. I set the butt of the shotgun down and leaned on its length, admiring my work.

Amy came out of the bathroom when the noise stopped. She stared at me, gaped at the carnage, and tried to wrestle the shotgun away. When Marie stumbled out of the cabin and saw what I had done to her precious set of dwarves, she fainted dead away; and that was very nearly as enjoyable as the crime.

Until the trial settles things, I'm staying here at Happy Valley Hospital, where I play ping-pong with a heavyset man named Otto. My parents, along with my therapist, convinced me it would be best. Amy occasionally stops by to tell me how things are going in the outside world, and gives me info on new and promising treatments available for my disease. I smile and nod. I tell her I'll look into it.

In group, Dr. Faulkner tells me that I'm just not trying hard enough. This is not quite true. I'm not, actually, trying at all. I rather like it here. Most of the patients are my own age, the food isn't bad, and best of all, the hospital has very strict guidelines for visitors.

My parents are forbidden to come.

Russ States

The Story

HE HEARD THE TELEPHONE RINGING as soon as he opened the car door. He ran to answer it.

“Hold on,” he muttered impatiently as he fumbled with the back door key. The December cold made his fingers feel as thick as tree stumps.

He finally managed to unlock the door and rushed across the tiled kitchen floor without brushing the snow from his shoes. Small pools of water marked every step he took. The breakfast dishes were still on the table, and a pan clattered to the floor as he brushed past.

Out of breath from running, he picked up the receiver and finally managed a hoarse “Hello.”

“Hey,” said the voice on the other end, “the boys just got back from hunting. They said they hit that ten-point buck out on the triangle. Would you go and check it out? I have to take Linda to work now, or I’d go myself.”

“Yeah, I guess so.” He recognized the voice as his neighbor’s and although he had other plans, he found it hard to say no. It was the first week of deer season, and he knew that a ten-point would be a trophy that anyone would be proud of.

After listening to the details, he hung up. He glanced around the room and saw a note on the frig from his wife.

Brian,

Went shopping. Won’t be back until later.

Love ya!

He pulled his hunting clothes on over his slender frame, and headed out the door. There was no need to take his car; the woods were less than a half mile from his house. As he crunched through the snow, he noticed that the night coldness was already settling in.

He trudged along mechanically, lost in thought. Actually, Brian hated hunting. But even more, he hated sitting silently in the lunchroom at work while the others regaled everyone with their hunting successes. Secretly, he suspected that most of the stories weren’t true, but he couldn’t bring himself to call anyone’s bluff.

He’d moved into the area recently and found it hard to hold his end of the break-time conversations. No one wanted to discuss classical music or the story line of the Dickens’ novel he was reading. He had tried hunting before and didn’t like it, so he gave it up. He preferred books to guns. In fact, he’d rather read than breathe. He loved to sit and imagine himself in the far-off places that his books told about. Everyone laughed and called him a dreamer. “Wake up and smell the coffee,” they said to him. So he sat in the lunchroom alone with his thoughts. If only he could fit in with them; if only he had a story like theirs. Finally, he had decided to buy a license and give hunting another try. Maybe he could reach his co-workers at their level.

FINALLY, HE REACHED the State Game Lands. The triangle, where he usually hunted, was bordered on two sides by streams, and on the third by a high-tension power line. He reasoned that if he didn’t cross the streams or the electric right of way, he wouldn’t get lost.

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Not long after he entered the woods, he saw a huge set of tracks. He checked them carefully. There was blood. Not enough to indicate that the deer was badly hurt, but he figured that since a reasonable amount of time had passed since the boys shot it, and no one else was in the area, the deer would lie down to rest. If he walked quietly, he might surprise it.

By now, his feet were getting damp. He wished he'd put on his other boots. He followed the trail intently. Sometimes there were drops of blood to follow, sometimes not. Sometimes there were so many tracks that the trail was hard to follow. Although he'd learned long ago that you need to pay careful attention to where you are when tracking a deer, he felt confident that as long as he didn't cross a stream he'd be okay, and he paid little attention to his surroundings.

Deeper, deeper he went into the woods. After an hour or so he hadn't seen anything. He stopped and looked around him. Nothing looked familiar. He checked his watch. It would be time to be heading back soon.

He started walking in the direction he thought home was. Just as he was certain he was headed the right way, he came to a stream. But it was flowing in the wrong direction. It should have been flowing left to right, but it was flowing the other way. Had he crossed the stream without knowing it? He turned around and started walking back in the other direction. How had he gotten lost?

The sun was going down. He picked up the pace a little. Now his wet socks had rubbed against his feet and caused blisters to form. His feet were getting sore. He walked for what he thought was a long time. If only he could find his tracks and follow them back out.

Finally, he found a set of his tracks heading in the other direction. Eureka, he thought, and followed them. After walking for a while, he came to a stream. He looked around. It was the same stream he'd seen before. He was walking in circles!

Now, he began to feel uneasy. He tried not to panic, but night was quickly falling, and he had no idea where he was. If he walked in the wrong direction, he could walk for days!

He tried to gather his senses. He'd remembered reading that the international distress signal was three shots fired into the air. He shot and waited. He could hear car doors slamming, and engines starting. He yelled, but no one answered. He headed toward the sound of the car but, in his rush, he didn't see the embankment, and fell. His leg scraped against a jagged rock. Down, down he tumbled hitting bottom with a thud. Pain seared his right leg. He pulled up his tattered pants leg. Blood oozed from a two-inch long gash on his shin. He tied his bandana around his leg to stop the bleeding.

Where was his rifle? He fumbled around in the dark, and finally located it.

He could barely walk. With the gash on his leg and blisters on his feet, every step was painful. But, when he stopped, his wet feet got cold quickly.

He cursed his stupidity.

He fired three shots again.

He'd read that the best thing to do when lost was to stay put, so he did. He found a large rock and sat down to rest. He searched his coat pockets for his survival kit. It wasn't there. He remembered showing it to a friend the night before and realized he had forgotten to put it back.

Again, he cursed his stupidity.

As he sat there on the rock with the night closing around him like a thick fog, he thought about why he hated hunting. It had been a rite of passage for him, as it had been for his

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brothers and his father, and his father before him.

But he didn't have the heart for it. He didn't like tramping around the woods in the cold and the rain. He didn't like the endless waiting around for an animal to happen by. And he was uncomfortable with the idea of killing a helpless creature. But, when he tried to tell his father how he felt, but he could never find the right words. He was afraid that it would hurt his father's feelings if he said that he didn't want to go hunting any more.

He tried to talk about it with his brothers, but they only made fun of him and called him a sissy. He hated being called a sissy. Nearly all his life he'd been called a sissy by someone. He could feel his neck getting warm as he reran those memories over and over.

Somewhere in the distance he could hear dogs barking, but their yelps echoed through the woods, and it was hard to tell where they were. Occasionally, he would cry out for help, but was answered only by an owl.

Thoughts of death started to haunt him. He imagined the headlines in the paper, "Local Hunter Freezes to Death!"

He heard the fire siren in the distance. Maybe his wife had missed him and had called the rescue squad. But, the sound only got further away.

Then, he heard a noise coming toward him. It was a snowmobile. Occasionally, it would stop, and he would yell at the top of his lungs. Finally, it got close enough that he could see the headlight. He limped toward it as fast as he could.

At last, the snowmobile closed in on him and stopped. The driver got off and looked at him. "You lost?"

"I fell and hurt my leg." He recognized his rescuer as a coworker who lived nearby. Feeling sheepish, he didn't want anyone to know that he'd gotten lost so close to home.

"What are you doing out this way, Mike?"

"Your wife called me. She was concerned that you weren't home, and asked me to come looking for you. I remembered hearing three shots about the time it got dark, so I came out to see if it was you that shot."

The two men climbed on the snowmobile and headed for home. They rode along in silence. Brian was relieved, yet dismayed to discover that he was less than two hundred yards from the electric power line. Had he kept walking for a few more minutes, he would have been able to make it home on his own. But, he reasoned, if he had walked in the wrong direction, he could have gotten into real trouble.

When they got to his house, he thanked Mike for the ride and hobbled inside. Later, as he was soaking in a tub of hot water, he said to his wife, "Well, I guess I have a story to tell to the guys tomorrow."

Sean Ritterbeck

Close to the Heart

WHEN I FIRST HEARD we were moving to Virginia Beach, I pictured a small beach community where everyone knew each other and I would be the permanent visitor. However, by the time my first school year had ended, in 1991, “The Beach” had become as much home to me as a boy could ever know. I understood that *places* were defined by how they affect you. I was able to realize this because, that spring I heard how twenty-two years earlier a cocky southern teenager, named Jeremiah Carver, or “Scoop” as he was known by his close friends, had discovered this same truth for himself.

It was during my first few months in Virginia Beach when I was feverishly concerned with being accepted that I created a rebel persona for myself so that the kids at the school would think I was cool. Before it had become apparent to me that my peers were as eager to meet me as I was to meet them, my radical personality had earned me an underage drinking citation. Accompanying this grand award was a \$100 fine and twelve hours of community service.

The court suggested volunteering time at the Veterans of Foreign Wars center on Third Street. The duties included working in the kitchen and cleaning up after the patrons. My parents were still upset that I had to cash-in a Savings bond to pay the fine, so I quickly agreed to volunteer at the center. Two Saturdays later, I was on the last day of my sentence when the scruffy veteran waved me over to his table.

“Hey, boy,” the disabled veteran hollered to me as I wiped off the tables.

“Yes, sir,” I replied.

“Is ‘dere anymo’ hot coffee back ‘dere?’”

I unconsciously stared at the middle-aged, balding man as the words “Yes, sir” barely escaped my mouth.

“Well, whatchu gawkin’ at, boy?” he snapped.

“Oh nothing,” I said as my mind rushed back to regain control of my body, and I turned to get the coffee. For reasons I can’t recall, I turned back slowly and asked with an innocent curiosity a twelve-year-old seldom uses, “How did it happen?”

The man’s eyes shot right into mine with a look of angered disbelief. But then, suddenly and clumsily he regained his composure and sternly barked, “You go git my coffee and I’ll tell ya.”

I nervously moved toward the kitchen as the realization of my inappropriateness invaded my thoughts. But, my anxiety could not prepare me for the story that would answer my question.

In 1969, he had barely heard of a sandy-beached, tropical peninsula that was the sight of a civil conflict. For this teenage black kid from Greenville, Mississippi, this destination was a place where a gutter boy became a man defending the future of democracy, a place where the captain of the Franklin High School baseball team could find nobility and honor by defending freedom. Unfortunately, Jeremiah’s definition of this jungle nation would shortly be transformed.

As a helicopter transported him to his first base “in country,” Jeremiah looked over the jungle-covered hills of his temporary home and was taken aback by how primitive it all was.

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On the base, he excelled in the regimented life of United States Marines, and after only a week of orientation, Jeremiah and his platoon were granted a mission of liberating a remote village from the tyranny of communist soldiers.

The distance between my twelve-year-old soul and a place where communism breathed through jungle villages appeared mythically vast, but remained painfully close to Jeremiah's heart and mind. As I listened to an aged Corporal Carver recount his passage into manhood in the dining area of the Virginia Beach VFW, he stopped and noted in earnest, that the night before he left on the mission was the last time he remembered feeling true innocence.

A distant rattle of shells emptying themselves brought the squad to attention. On the journey to the village, Carver and his company found themselves behind a collection of enemy guerillas that were engaged in a standoff with American troops. The opposing forces were positioned on a hill approximately 1000 yards away from his unit and were unaware of the additional platoon's presence. After approaching the enemy from behind, Carver expected his company to surprise the enemy and force their surrender. The lieutenant gave the hand motion for everyone to get ready. Then, as if a rehearsed procedure, the lieutenant and the rest of the platoon drove rounds into the backs of the men who were uniformed in black. For fear of his own life, Carver admitted, he also participated in the slaughter. As both sides of the crossfire met over the corpses to congratulate and thank each other, Carver's Vietnam became redefined.

Now, Vietnam was a place where boys went to kill or be killed. Vietnam was the noise of your M-16 drowning out the guilt and injustice from your conscience. Vietnam was the smell of ever-present napalm, because somewhere there was a village or strip of jungle that had to be scorched. Vietnam was a man, executed while on his knees because his face looked different and his words were alien. Vietnam was a friend you hated, but embraced completely because you had no choice. Vietnam was a day on which a misplaced step meant that you would never walk again.

Today, as Jeremiah sits perpetually with the bottom of his right pant leg stapled to the top of thigh, Vietnam is mostly a memory. Vietnam, Jeremiah reflects, "is a time that is far in the past, but remains close to the heart." As I tried to figure out why none of the movies I've seen or books I've read seemed half as genuine as Jeremiah's accounts, the drained veteran excused himself, explaining that his niece would be here shortly to pick him up. We said our farewells, and I headed through the rusty screen door back into the world of preteen suburbia. Then for one reason or another, I turned for a final glance back into history, and a face, weathered far beyond its years, turned toward mine and grinned. Later in my life, I would more greatly appreciate my enlightenment about the Vietnam War; but at that time, I just felt fortunate to have glanced into "Scoop" carver's Vietnam, and was able to walk away.

William Bush

Symptoms of Youth

RICHARD HAMMOND WATCHED HIS SON fumble with his seat belt a couple of times before reaching over and buckling it for him. Ryan was eight years old and had just finished second in the sailboat regatta held by his Cub Scout troop at Twin Lakes park, just outside of Greensburg. Where his father might have expected him to feel a little let down for missing first by less than a nose, Ryan was on top of the world. He'd never even finished in the top five of anything once in his life.

The setting sun gave the whole world a reddish orange cast. The air was bathed in gold and Richard was just starting to feel the sweat solidifying on his brow and neck. It was typical of a western Pennsylvania late-summer evening, and it was perfect for celebratory ice cream. Richard turned the key of his red Ford pickup and pulled out of the lot, wanting to be happy for his son but afraid. He'd been building up the nerve to tell Ryan something all day—something that might change his young life.

THE DOCTOR LEFT A MESSAGE at the office on Friday morning and Richard took the rest of the day off to get the news in person. The message was simple, to the point—*it's about your son*.

Dr. Grady had a nice office for her private practice—white walls, wood-stained chairs, and cheap Renoir reprints in the waiting room. She had a tough secretary who was a first-class disciplinarian when it came to filling out forms. Her name was Cindy, and she was heartless. When Richard walked in cautiously, holding the open door as though he might have the wrong office, she told Mr. Hammond that he could—that he *should*—go right in. No forms. No waiting. He was to go right in, right away.

Even though Dr. Grady was normally not in her office on Fridays, there were still patients there. They'd showed up for flu shots, tetanus shots, throat swabs, or a dozen other things, hoping that the doctor would make an exception in their cases and see them. So even though Richard was called in personally and ushered through the normal patient waiting regimen, he still spent some time swinging his legs from the top of the paper-covered examination table. Like his son had a week before to get an MRI.

AFTER RYAN HIT HIS HEAD on the second baseman's cleat and was knocked out cold in a little league game, Richard had taken him to Grady's to get an MRI scan of his head. Ryan's mother, Donna, who had attended her first game since she and Richard divorced, followed in her car. Grady didn't think there would be a serious problem from this mild concussion, but wanted to make sure, just in case.

The med-tech business that did blood work and imaging was in the basement of the building that housed Dr. Grady's office. Richard had put his arm around his son's shoulders while they walked out of the waiting room of the doctor's office and through an industrial door off the main entrance that they'd never really noticed before. Richard and his wife sat in the observation area for three hours while the bored-looking technicians obtained a magnetic image of Ryan's eight-year-old brain.

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Donna was flipping out, and as much as Richard understood, he wished that she would shut the hell up.

“You’re the one that got him into that stupid game in the first place,” she said. “If it weren’t for you wanting to make a ‘macho’ man out of him, he wouldn’t have to go through this.”

He sat silent, because on a lot of levels, he thought, she was right. He didn’t want to confess though, because he wasn’t sure about that part of it. Had Ryan really wanted to play little league? Did he really want to be a Cub Scout? How much had he really wanted to steal that base, and how much of it had been to impress or appease his father?

HOW MUCH CONTROL did Ryan really have over what his hands were doing? Ryan sat in the passenger seat and stared blankly at the wooden trophy with “Second Place” on its brass plaque. He hefted its weight and turned it over in his shaking hands. Every once in a while he’d lose his grip and drop it a few inches into his lap. Richard wouldn’t have even noticed that Ryan was dropping it at all if he wasn’t watching so closely when he probably should have been keeping his eyes on the road. When the Ford started to drift off to the side of the road, Richard caught himself and steered it straight again, noticing how badly his own hands were trembling.

EVEN THOUGH IT WAS HIS DAY to be with Ryan, Richard called his ex-wife to invite her to the regatta on Saturday. He had to talk to her new live-in, Andy, before he could get to Donna. Of course when he told the boyfriend that, yes, it was important, he had to tell him, yes, it was about Ryan. By the time Donna got on the line, she was already bristling.

“What’s the matter?” she asked. “What’s wrong with my son?”

“Nothing’s wrong, Donna,” he lied. “I just wanted to ask you if you wanted to see the regatta this afternoon. It’s at Twin Lakes. You still like it there, don’t you?”

“Of course I still like it, Rich, but,” she paused, saying it gently, “it’s *your* weekend.”

“Nothing in the rules says I’ve got to spend it with only him, does it? Nothing that says you can’t join us?” he was trying his best to put a good face on it, luring her in so he wouldn’t have to tell her about the MRI results over the phone. Grimly, he added, “I really think you ought to come out today.”

She gave a heavy sigh and said, “I planned around this being your weekend, Richard.”

“I really think you ought to come out,” he said again. After that she didn’t sigh anymore and said she’d be there.

Ryan came out of the room his dad kept ready for him just then and sat down to receive the pancakes and scrambled eggs that Richard had just finished cooking. The two boys—one little and one big—ate and talked about the comics for awhile: *Bizarro*, *Beetle Bailey*, and *Fox Trot*.

“Who was on the phone, Dad?” Ryan asked his father, his eyes big and unsuspecting.

“Just your mom, Ry. Hey, you don’t mind if she comes to see you race today, do you?” He didn’t think his son would; he was a quiet kid and genuinely liked spending time with his parents.

“Nah, that’s great,” he said, smiling at first but then fading off into a nervous frown. He sat down on the couch and put his tennis shoes on. Ryan fumbled with the strings for a little bit, knotting up his brow and screwing his eyes. Richard watched his son’s distracted look and wondered if that meant something, if it was something he should be looking for and hoping

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not to see. He realized that if he didn't want to see things like that he could just not look for them—he'd gone the last five years without looking for them.

"FIVE YEARS AGO, Ryan had a bad fever," Richard told the doctor in her office on Friday, when she finally came in to see him. It had been measles, and he and Donna hadn't had any idea what to do. They'd panicked and run around with ice bags and cold drinks for an hour before getting their son to the emergency room.

"How high did his temperature get? What was it when you got to the hospital?"

Richard glanced at the floor before answering. "One-oh-six," he finally said. He'd felt like a bad parent, and for the hours they spent waiting for the doctors to check Ryan out he'd told Donna that it was all his fault. He should've known what to do, he'd said. But Ryan had been okay, and after a few weeks everyone forgave everyone else. Richard thought he was lucky, that God had given him another chance to be a good father.

"I don't think it was from the baseball game," she said. "It's not localized. In all honesty, it sounds like it was that fever when he was three. Take a look at the MRI," she went on, not giving him a chance to jump in and say anything.

He looked at the MRI and saw what he thought were tiny black spots, about five or six of them, scattered throughout Ryan's brain tissue. The almost looked like mistakes or blurry spots, but the rest of the picture was crystal clear, vibrant.

Yes, she said, they're permanent. No, we're not sure if there's going to be any noticeable effect, but keep an eye out. When he asked her what the heck he was looking at, she told him that the black spots were areas of dead tissue. Brain damage.

"What do you mean, 'they don't know'?" she said, clutching poor Andy's arm like a life preserver in a flood. "How can they not know what's going to happen to him?"

"It could be physical, or it could be emotional," Richard told his ex-wife and her boyfriend, Andy, at the regatta between heats. Ryan had just advanced to the semifinals without really realizing it and was at that moment talking with some of the other boys who weren't regular friends of his. Richard was taking the opportunity to tell his wife what the doctor had told him the day before. "The fact is, they just don't know what's going to happen, if it's going to happen. Shit, she said it probably already happened, that it's already come out in some trait he's showing now. I don't think that doctor has any idea herself."

"So, how did you tell Ryan about it?"

HE HADN'T TOLD HIM, yet, as they drove to the Dairy Queen on the way back from Twin Lakes to celebrate the near miss at first place. He thought he had to, that it was the only fair thing to do. It was Ryan's life. The doctor told him it could happen at any time, or not at all, but it would most likely happen within the next couple of years if it did. It might manifest as a physical tic or an emotional impairment. For all they knew, it might have already manifested itself in some personality quirk or awkward tendency he already had and that his parents had overlooked, written off as a symptom of youth.

The only thing Richard could think of to say way, "That kid—what's his name, anyway, the one who edged you out in that last race?"

"George. George Sanders, Dad." He was still funbling with the trophy, looking at it in total awe.

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“He was cheating, that whole race. I couldn’t believe it, he was touching his boat with his hand. Must’ve done it five times.” Really it had been about three. “I wish I would’ve said something.”

The Cub Scouts of troop 416 were supposed to keep their hands clasped behind their backs while they blew their little balsa-wood boats down the two fifteen-foot plastic gutters. The sails were made of plastic and caught the boys’ breath for propulsion. Ryan’s had to have been the most stable craft there—Richard had taken great pains to shape the bottom of the wooden block and help his son mount the keel firmly in place. He probably shouldn’t have done as much of the carving himself as he did, but he couldn’t help himself; he wanted his son to have the best boat in the show. The other boy in the final heat didn’t have as steady a boat as Ryan, and at least three times when it tipped over and touched the side of the gutter, he’d shot a hand out and bumped it back up straight, righting it. Richard had watched the whole race like a hawk—the two gutters weren’t more than two feet away from each other. Ryan had kept his hands tightly to keep his long, even breaths aimed at the center of his plastic sail.

“I know, Dad. I saw him do it a couple of times,” Ryan said in the truck as they pulled into the Dairy Queen parking lot.

Richard got out of the truck before his son could see the tears starting to well up around his eyes. He patted them dry with the cuff of his shirt and ran around to the passenger’s side to let his son out.

“Ryan,” he said as he helped his son out of his seatbelt, “there’s something I want to tell you. Something you should know.”

“What’s that, Dad?” Ryan asked as his father hoisted him up out of the seat and planted him on his broad shoulders.

“You did a real good job today. I’m proud of you. You want a banana split, my treat?”

Ryan laughed and said that sounded great, hugging the first trophy he’d ever won in his life.

Jennifer Zane

Family Pride

HENRY AND ELEANOR GRIMES lived on a farm in the small town of Red River Falls. The farm was located on twenty-three acres of land about twenty miles out of town. Henry Grimes was a dairy farmer and his cows supplied the town with most of their dairy products. He was well respected for that reason, but people still found him rather strange. He had this twitch that he would do almost constantly, and because of an accident that happened on the farm, he walked with a limp. He was a good man though, and he loved his wife Eleanor with all of his heart.

Henry and Eleanor knew each other almost their entire lives. They first met in kindergarten and immediately became best pals. On the night of their senior prom they were supposed to double date. When Henry and his date arrived at Eleanor's house they expected her and her date to be ready. Unfortunately, her date hadn't shown up yet. They waited for a while until it became painfully clear he wasn't showing up. Eleanor was trying not to show her disappointment, but Henry knew his best friend was devastated, and he told his date to take the car and have a good time but he needed to be with Eleanor now. That night they watched TV on the couch stuffing their faces with popcorn until they fell asleep in each other's arms. Henry always said that was a night he would never forget, the night he fell madly in love with his best friend. They were married shortly after, and everyone said it wouldn't last because they were too young, but it had been thirty-eight years, and the fire was still there.

About fifteen years ago that fire was burning at its brightest, which would explain why Eleanor became pregnant at forty-two. Needless to say it was an unexpected but much anticipated pregnancy. Eleanor and Henry had always wanted children, but her physician said she was unable to get pregnant. It was a great disappointment, but they wouldn't take no for an answer. They dismissed the doctor's words and tried anyway with no success, so you can imagine their surprise when after they had virtually given up hope they got their wish. Eleanor was especially concerned about her age and even if she could carry the baby to full term. If she wasn't at the doctor's office then she was on the phone with them asking every possible question she could think of. She wasn't going to let anything jeopardize her baby. After nine long and stressful months Eleanor gave birth to a little baby girl. Henry and Eleanor were the proudest parents you'd ever seen. They named her Emma in memory of Henry's mother. Henry would say, "My little girl is gonna grow up to be a beautiful strong young woman just like my momma, I'll make sure of that." Henry's father left his mother before Henry was born, and he never knew his daddy. History would definitely not be repeating itself because Emma was daddy's little girl.

Emma was kind of a tomboy. She loved riding on the tractor with Daddy and swinging on the old tire that he hung from the big oak tree in the backyard. Once a month they would walk down to Red River to see if they could catch some fish to take home for Momma to cook. One day as they were walking home they noticed something lying on the side of the road. It was some sort of animal, and it was moving a little so they knew it was still alive. As they got a little closer it became clear they had come upon a skunk that had been hit by a car. Henry pulled his daughter away, scared it might let off its scent. Henry went to find a big rock

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that he could hit it over the head with to put it out of its misery, but Emma said, no. "I bet Doc Hutchinson could fix him up real good, Daddy."

Reluctantly and with as much distance between them as possible, Henry picked up the skunk and shoved him in the pail they brought for the fish that they didn't catch. He stuck it in the bed of the truck, and they were off to the local vet. Doc Hutchinson did fix the little skunk and took care of that odor problem as well, so there was no reason for Henry to say no when Emma asked if she could keep him. Stinky became the beloved family pet and Emma's new best friend.

Emma never really gave much thought to how old her parents were. It wasn't until she started school that she even realized the difference between her parents and the other kid's parents. Before school Emma rarely even went into town unless she was accompanying her mother to the grocery store or Daddy to Farm and Fleet. She had noticed people looking at Daddy funny, but she never understood why. People would make little snickers about the way he walked or his trademark twitch as he walked by, but she never gave it a second thought. Throughout grade school Emma was not one of the popular kids. She wore clothes that her momma would get at local yard sales and smelled a little too much like the farm from her morning chores. The worst was when her parents would come to the school. For days after they would visit, the kids would make fun of how old they were and called her daddy a "retard." Every night Emma would come home crying, but she never told her parents why. She didn't want to hurt their feelings. She loved her parents very much and was very hurt by what the kids were saying. This continued on through her entire school experience, but she never felt shame or embarrassment where her parents were concerned. At least not until her sophomore year in high school.

A new boy moved into Red River Falls that year and began attending high school with Emma. His name was Jonathon, and he was very handsome. The girls at school were always betting on whom he would ask out first. That was a waste of time because Jonathon was a very quiet young man and rarely socialized with any of the other students. He mostly stuck to the books. He and Emma were in several classes together, and she could have sworn she caught him staring at her a time or two. At first she thought he was thinking what a geek she was or wondering if there was something wrong with her. One day after chemistry she noticed Jonathon walking toward her. "Oh, my god, he's coming over here. What am I going to do?" she thought. She took a deep breath and braced herself for some good old-fashioned ridicule and humiliation, but to her surprise, he simply asked, "Your name is Emma, right?" She shyly answered yes, and Jonathon went about describing his problem. He told Emma he was having trouble in this class and noticed she seemed pretty good. He asked if she would consider tutoring him at her house after school. Emma would rather die than take anyone, especially a boy, to her house. "What if he met my parents?" she thought. "No, I've had enough humiliation for one lifetime. I'll just meet him in the library." Emma reluctantly said yes, but insisted they meet at the library. Jonathon kindly agreed.

Emma had been at the library since seven o'clock, which was the time they were supposed to meet. However, it was almost eight and Jonathon was nowhere to be found. "I knew it," thought Emma. "It was a set up the whole time. I should have known better by now." Just as she was getting up to leave Jonathon came racing in and immediately started apologizing for being late. He mumbled something about car trouble and asked if she would please stay and help him. They were at the library for hours. The librarian had to kick them out so she could go home. Jonathon thanked Emma for her help and said he would see her in school the next day. Emma raced home to find two worried parents.

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“Where have you been young lady?” her father demanded.

“I told you I was going to the library, Daddy,” she replied.

As they argued about how late it was and why she didn't call, her mother was quietly rocking in her chair trying to tune them out. Emma ended up crying and hibernated in her room for the rest of the night. Before Eleanor went to bed she knocked on her daughter's door to see if she was all right. Emma was just lying on her bed with Stinky staring into space.

“What's the matter dear, surely you're not still mad at your father?” asked Eleanor.

Almost as if she didn't hear the question, Emma asked her mom an unexpected question.

“How old were you when you had your first boyfriend, Momma?”

Her mother was startled but remained steady and answered her by asking some questions of her own.

“Why, my goodness, that was so long ago. What on Earth has put such thoughts in your head? Is this about the young man you were tutoring tonight?”

Emma explained to her mother how polite he was and how handsome. She mentioned the fact that she saw him looking at her sometimes and even thinks he might like her too.

“What should I do, Momma?” she asked.

“Well,” her mother replied. “Perhaps you should invite him to dinner.”

Emma didn't like that idea at all and faked a yawn telling her mother she was too tired to talk about it anymore. Eleanor turned out the light and told Emma goodnight. As she lay in the bed she wished things were different. She wished she didn't live on an old stinky farm with old parents that weren't wound up quite right. If only she had a normal life, maybe she would invite Jonathon over, but now she feared she would never have a boyfriend.

The next day at school Jonathon wasn't there. Emma thought he might be ill and started asking people if they knew why he didn't come to school. None of the kids knew because Jonathon didn't really talk to anyone. As Emma was passing the counselor's office she overheard him talking on the phone to someone he called Jonathon. In a compassionate tone the counselor said, “Nonsense, don't you worry about a thing. Whatever you miss we'll make sure you catch up, you just take good care of your mother.” Emma thought, “Could that have been my Jonathon on the phone? I wonder what could be wrong with his mother?”

After doing a little investigating Emma got her hands on Jonathon's phone number and called him as soon as she got home from school. Jonathon answered the phone. She would have recognized his voice anywhere. Emma asked Jonathon why he wasn't in school today, and he made up something about having a headache. Without sounding too nosy she inquired further. She asked if his parents had taken him to the doctor. After a while she got him to break, and he confessed he had stayed home to take care of his mother.

“What's the matter with her?” asked Emma. Jonathon explained that his mother and father had been in a car accident three years before that took his father's life and left his mother paralyzed from the waist down. Usually they had someone come into the house to care for her but they couldn't make it that day so he had to stay with her. Emma told Jonathon how sorry she was for intruding and she wouldn't ever call back if he didn't want her to.

“On the contrary,” Jonathon said. “I was just about to ask you to go to the movies. Emma cheerfully said yes, but on one condition.

“You have to pick me up at my house. I want you to meet my parents.” Emma figured if he was confident enough to share that with her then a couple of over the hill, eccentric parents and a pet skunk should be no problem. She thought of how selfish she was being and Emma

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really did love her parents more than anything and she knew they would love Jonathon. She just hoped Daddy wouldn't mind another man in her life.

Judge's Choice – Best Short Story

Keith Bergstrom

Dance of the Snake

ELATED. WE WERE ELATED at the rare dash of freedom our parents had given us. I was thirteen and alone in the woods with Cassidy and Neal, my two best friends.

Our parents had already left the campsite, so we were finally alone. They had decided to take the easy path to the next campsite. We had needled away at their resolve until they finally allowed us to take another path and meet them at the camp no later than three p.m.

“Come on, Cody!” Cassidy cried from the edge of the clearing. She and Neal were already packed up and anxious to get going.

“Hold up a sec,” I replied as I poured some water on the fire pit to make sure it was out. “Just following Smokey’s advice,” I quipped in order to make them forget that I was keeping them up.

I made my way over to them and looked back at the camp. “Let’s get out of here. I want to beat our parents up to the camp.” The path we chose followed a steeper, yet much more direct route than the one our parents had conservatively selected.

“Before we go, one thing,” Neal said as he pulled out a beat up pack of Camels from his light spring jacket pocket. I looked down the path, where our parents had started down a few moments earlier, to make sure they were truly out of sight. I smiled at the rare treat, which he handed over to me.

“How the hell did you get these, Neal?”

“I snaked them from Dean.” Dean was Neal’s older brother. He had graduated from high school the year before and was now working in a gas station. We were all vaguely afraid of this man, who seemed to awaken at night, usually after all of us had to be in bed, but I suspected that Cassidy was attracted to his tough show.

It took several strikes before my unskilled hands could light a match. Cassidy lit her cigarette with ease and smiled as she took her first drag. Neal also took a deep drag. As I took mine, I struggled to repress the urge to cough, which welled up in my lungs. I refused to look stupid in front of Cassidy.

We started up the path quietly, enjoying the secret grown-up pleasure of smoking. I felt myself becoming light headed. *Abh, this is why people smoke.* A few more drags on the cigarette and I wasn’t one hundred percent sure that I would be able to keep walking. I started to get a slightly nauseous feeling in my stomach that sometimes happened when I smoked.

“Oh, look at the rainbow,” Cassidy said as she pointed at a small waterfall coming down into a picturesque Appalachian pool of water.

Gratified for the chance to stop I replied, “It is pretty. A sign of good luck. I bet there is a pot of gold at the bottom of the pond. Cassidy laughed sweetly at my mention of the old fairy tale. Neal, always looking for an adventure, sat down and took off his shoes.

“What are you doing?” asked Cassidy.

Neal looked up startled. “Why, I’m going to go look for the pot of gold.” He stood up, pulled off his shirt and dove into the crystal waters.

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Cassidy and I exchanged puzzled glances and shrugged. I kicked off my own shoes, threw my shirt on top of Neal's and waded into the pond after my friend. The water was bitterly cold. Well, I had gone this far. I might as well finish it. I dunked my head under the water. I felt fish swimming around my ankles.

"You guys are nuts," Cassidy said, seated on a rock by the shore. Neal was captivated by trying to catch the fish, which swam by his feet.

"Come on in, the water is freezing!" I yelled up to her. She was already taking off her shoes. I watched her as she stripped off her shirt and gracefully dove into the water.

"Dear god! This is cold!"

"I warned you," I reminded her, as I began to splash over to where she stood.

"You guys going to help me look for this gold, or what?" Neal said in a serious voice, now beneath the waterfall. "Come on, we have to find it so that we can get going up towards the campsite."

I laughed and started to swim over to him. Cassidy quickly caught up to me. "Race you?" she challenged. I pounded the water furiously trying to get to the waterfall before she did. She continued with a quick agile stroke, and quickly out distanced me.

Reaching Neal, I dove beneath the surface to search for the gold I knew wasn't there. Neal had the ability to make games so real that you almost forgot that you were playing.

Surfacing, I revealed my inability to find any pots, much less ones filled with treasures. Neal wondered if we were looking on the wrong end of the rainbow. He began to scale the slippery rocks toward the top of the waterfall.

"Be careful," warned Cassidy as he made his way nimbly to the top of the rocks.

"Nothing up here either," Neal said. "Guess we are too late, someone got here first." The game was over. Neal could always find the perfect way to end a game. We climbed ashore and began to climb the path again. The rising morning sun quickly dried us. Talking along the way, we discussed the latest rumors from school and our past adventures. As the path began to get steeper, our conversation slowly died.

I could see that Neal was starting to feel tired as he climbed the path. I too was growing tired, but in a spirit of competition, neither of us suggested a rest. At last as noon approached, Cassidy spoke up, "I'm out of breath. I need another cigarette. How about we stop for lunch?"

Neal and I collapsed in a clearing, and he pulled out his stolen cigarettes. Lighting up, we sat back and relaxed, enjoying the view. We could see down the mountains and into the surrounding hills. The sight was breathtaking. We could see spring bringing life back from the cold hand of winter.

From my pack, I took out the sandwiches we had brought for lunch, and a thermos of cold water. I tossed Neal his sandwich and passed the thermos and a sandwich to Cassidy.

A snake slithered quickly into the clearing. The sun glinted off his cool green scales. He moved with quickness and life. I sat for a moment staring at the snake. He looked back. He seemed to be telling us that it was all right for us to use his clearing.

Cassidy then saw him. "Snake!" she cried, shuffling away.

Neal quickly came to the rescue. He grabbed a stick. I was paralyzed. "Don't," I wanted to say. "He won't hurt anyone." I was too slow. Neal hit it. Why? Its eyes asked me. The snake started to slither away, but Neal hit it again. Now the snake was hurt. Cassidy overcame her initial reaction and picked up a stick to join Neal.

Suddenly I realized that I must look afraid. I couldn't just sit there. Not with Cassidy and

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Neal both attacking the snake. I stood up. Feeling the pressure, I grabbed a fallen sign. “No Hunting: Violators will be prosecuted,” the sign warned. It hit me as funny as I brought the sign down on the snake’s head.

I lost my feelings toward the snake as we hit it. Down went the sign. The snake barely moved now. Cassidy struck it, then Neal, then me. A vicious circle, we moved around the snake. We moved faster and faster as we brought our weapons down on its head. Around and around we went. The snake didn’t move at all anymore, but we refused to stop. Down again and again went the sign.

At last, my arms tired. I dropped the sign. We turned and sat back on the rocks. Grabbing another cigarette from Neal’s pack, I looked at the snake. It was dead. Its vibrant green seemed to look dull. Its eyes, which had greeted me moments before, now coldly bore into me. A gaping hole had been beaten into its neck.

“We better get going if we want to beat our parents up to camp,” Neal said finally. We started to continue up the trail.

“Wait,” I said. I looked down at the snake. I couldn’t leave it like that. Picking up the snake, I noticed the body was already cold. I hung him over a tree branch for others to see. I crushed out my cigarette and led our way forward.

Joe Stanton

Friends?

THE WIND OUTSIDE the tent was howling, and I had never felt so alone. Although I was only fourteen years old at the time, I found a deep sense of honor in being a Boy Scout. But when I got scared and cowered in the bottom of my thick, down sleeping bag, I was quickly reminded that I was only a boy. I had been hiking the Appalachian Trail this day with the fourteen other members of my motley crew of a patrol. We called ourselves the scorpion patrol. Although we were nothing like scorpions, we all agreed that the patch would look really cool on our uniforms.

Ten miles away from our destination, as the sun was ducking behind the mountain across the valley, the wind began to howl and the first drops of rain fell. It was raining far too hard to think about climbing out of my warm, down sleeping bag to go outside and cook chicken noodle soup over the sterno stove. The musty, wet, canvas smell that filled the tent was no stranger to me, and in some strange way it made me feel almost at home. Well, if not at home, at least safe and familiar.

My best friend, James, was turned away from me in his sleeping bag and appeared to be asleep, but nonetheless, I asked, "James, you awake?"

"No," he replied in a mumbled tone as though his mouth were pressed into the floor of the tent.

"Oh, well this is some storm we're having," I said in an effort to start a conversation, but James seemed only to want to be left alone, as usual. He was the first friend I made when I moved to Brenburg at the age of nine, and we had been friends ever since. Sometimes, though, James had these weird mood swings when it seemed he didn't want to be near me, or anyone. At those times, I just left him alone, knowing that as soon as he came out of it, he would be my best friend again. I never really minded, but then again, I was always the sort of person to take whatever people dished to me. As the evening turned into night and the other guys were in their tents too, the rhythmic pattern of the raindrops on the canvas tent and the smell of fresh, moist air around me put me to sleep.

It felt like I had only been sleeping for twenty minutes or so when our troop leader, Mr. Stansbury, began to clang the big metal dinner pot with his ladle to wake us up.

"Rise and shine, campers," he exclaimed as though he had been up for hours and was already set to begin the day.

"James . . .," I mumbled with a mouth which had not yet woken up.

"One of these days I'm gonna ram that damn ladle down his throat," he replied with the half of his mouth that was awake. "Just because he gets up at the crack of dawn doesn't mean we should have to."

That was another thing about James. You couldn't even begin to talk to him before he had had his coffee, which was all too bizarre for a fourteen-year-old. But, nonetheless, he was my friend and knowing the little things about him like that was a part of getting along.

"We have to get the tent rolled up so we can get back to the hike," I told him. "We still have ten miles to do today."

I figured that was probably the worst possible thing to say, but I hated getting in trouble

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for being the last one ready to go. Knowing Mr. “Happy Morning” Stansbury, it would not be long before we would be hiking again.

Two hours later, the fourteen of us and our fearless leader were ready to get on the trail. We always hiked in single file and the fastest kids got to walk in front. They were allowed to go ahead as long as they stayed on the trail while the laggards were stuck behind, listening to Mr. Stansbury’s stories of when he was a scout. Maybe that’s why James always walked in the front. I was never as fast as James, but I was never as slow as Matt Stanowski, who we called “Fat Matt” until Stansbury made us stop. James loved finishing the hike before me and would gloat about it all night long. He would always tell me stories of all the bad things he and the other fast kids would do at the campsite before Stansbury and Fat Matt got there.

I had been hiking for three hours when I finally met up with James and the other three kids who had pulled ahead. They were standing next to a sign that read “Rest Stop #2.” I got there half-way between the time when James and the fast kids got there and the time when the rest of the group showed up.

James was proud to have beat me and asked, “What took you so long? We’ve been here for half an hour.”

“I was, well, uh . . . I was collecting leaves along the trail for my forestry merit badge,” I told him, in a perfectly believable spur-of-the-moment lie.

“Oh, yeah, well where are they, huh?” he asked, knowing all too well I was lying.

“They’re in my bag, I’ll show you later,” I replied, hoping he would soon forget about it.

The truth was that I was not lying any more than James when he told me they had been waiting thirty minutes. He always exaggerated the truth to make himself seem more like an adult and less like the fourteen-year-old he was. By this time, I was accustomed to his stories and just brushed this one off without questioning it.

“Well, I’m not gonna stand here and wait for Stansbury to push Fat Matt up the trail,” James exclaimed as though he was training for the Ironman Triathlon. “I’m going on ahead without them.”

“James, it’s not a good idea to keep going until Stansbury gets to this checkpoint,” one of the other guys said.

“Too bad, we’ll be here till next week if we have to wait for Fat Matt to make it this far,” he said. “I’m going, anyone wanna go with me?”

We were all too scared of Stansbury’s wrath to join James on his little excursion, so we all replied “No” in unison. Unfortunately, though, I knew he would walk clear to Georgia if no one stopped him, so I finally broke down and decided to go after him. I always felt responsible for my friends, no matter what the situation, and I was not about to let James get himself in over his head. So I continued on the trail alone, periodically looking over my shoulder at the four other guys just sitting on the ground and hoping that at least one of them would follow me. No such luck, though. I hated being in the woods alone, but I had to catch up to James.

I walked alone for over forty minutes and the mid-afternoon sun was taking its toll on me. I remembered in our meeting before the hike that Mr. Stansbury had told us that we should drink a little bit of water every fifteen minutes. So I did, but I soon started to run out of water, and the sun seemed to keep getting hotter and hotter.

I walked for another five minutes or so until I heard a faint cry for help in the distance. I ran ahead to see who it was, suspecting I already knew the answer. As I neared the sound, I began

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to recognize the voice and, upon approaching the scene, I saw James's Nike Airs sticking out from under a fallen tree.

"Oh, my God, James! What happened?" I asked hysterically.

"I sat down to take a break and leaned against this stupid tree when, before I knew it, I heard a cracking noise, and it came down on me full-force," he whimpered.

Blood dripped from his nose, and I could see a nauseating, deep flesh wound from where one of the branches had cut his leg. He was pinned under the heavy tree and couldn't move. The fear began to creep over me as I realized how far behind me the rest of the campers were. I knew the most important thing to do was to calm James down.

"Okay, James, you're gonna be fine, just lie still and let me help you," I tried to reassure him.

The truth was, I had no idea what to do, but it was obvious I would have to figure it out. We had tons of training in first aid; unfortunately, real blood seemed to scare the stuff I had learned out of me. I unbuckled my pack and struggled to find the straps to James's pack. I couldn't get them free, so I got out my knife and cut it free. Before I tried to move him, I decided I had better cover up the wound on his leg to prevent infection. I took off my shirt and cut it into pieces, which I used as bandages to stop the bleeding. I took a small piece of the shirt and gently placed it in his nostril to stop the bleeding there as well. I then elevated his head and put my pack beneath it to make him more comfortable while I washed away the blood with the last of my canteen. I kept telling him he would be fine and continued to reassure him in a calm voice. I then told him to lie still while I used my pack saw to cut the heavy tree into smaller pieces I could move.

Half an hour later, the rest of the group caught up and helped me lift the last piece of wood off James's other leg. Feeling bad for James in his condition, I told Mr. Stansbury it was my fault and that I was the one who pushed on ahead. We all took turns carrying James for the last five miles of the trip on a makeshift backboard we had made. It took the rest of the day to walk that five miles, and Mr. Stansbury spent the entire time lecturing me about following rules and waiting for others. My punishment would be extra duties like cleaning dishes and pitching tents on the next trip we took. Stansbury used his cell phone to call the ambulance, and it was waiting for us by the time we made it to the road. James was quickly loaded in, and they sped away without giving me a chance to talk to him.

One week later, James called me from the hospital. Everyone at school had been asking me how he was doing, and I couldn't answer, so I was glad that he called. As it turned out, he had a broken leg, four broken ribs, a collapsed lung, and minor head trauma.

"Why'd you do that?" he asked. "I mean, I heard what you told them. I know I got knocked on the head, but that's not the way I remember it."

"Well," I hesitated, "we're best friends aren't we?"

"You can say that again," he replied.

About a month later, when James had come back to school, I overheard him talking to some of his other friends at his locker.

"Oh, yeah, blood was everywhere," he said. "But I just took out my pack saw, cut the tree apart and used my shirt as a bandage. I had everything taken care of by the time the others showed up."

I couldn't believe it. After I had helped him and then taken the blame for it, he pretended I hadn't even been there. As I rounded the corner, James quickly ended his conversation and greeted me as if I was his best friend. When I confronted him about it later, he just wrote it off

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as his way of saving face. It was then that I realized what James was really all about. He wasn't my friend, and that was not what friendship was about. I had to stop letting people treat me like dirt, and I would start with James. He tried to talk to me on a few other occasions, but I refused to talk to him again until he apologized without being asked. If he could manage to do that, I could find it in my heart to forgive him. Weeks passed, and still no apology. We began to grow apart, and, although I missed our friendship, I realized I was better off without James and his attitude. Maybe friendship wasn't what I really thought it was.

Brenda Berriker

Grandmother's Cake

THE WOMAN HELD the box containing five rings set with various colored stones: brown, lavender, gray, red, and orange. They were cheap rings, bought on the streets of Nassau, but the child didn't know that. All she could see was the lavender stone with its sprinkles of deep purple and veins of gray, polished and smoothed to perfection. It was the most beautiful ring the eight-year-old had ever seen. "We bought these for you girls on our vacation," the grandmother said to her. "Pick one out!"

The child's fingers closed around the lavender treasure. "Oh, not that one! That's for Mallory," said the grandmother.

Marguerite's fingers lingered on the stone, as if by touching she could possess. She dropped it back into the box and wondered why her cousin, Mallory, always got the best of everything.

"How about this one?" the grandmother suggested as she lifted the brown ring from its bed of cotton.

"Thank you." Marguerite dutifully took the ring from her grandmother and placed it on her finger as Grandmother smiled approvingly. She had thought of Marguerite when she saw the brown ring that day in Nassau.

Later, when Mallory came to collect her gift, Grandmother would think to herself how beautiful her granddaughter was, and how Mallory and the lavender ring were a perfect match.

MARGUERITE STEPPED ACROSS the threshold of her cousin's doorway, careful to first knock the snow from her boots onto the doormat. Her overnight bag banged the door open.

"Come in! Come in!" Aunt Lois helped her with her coat and boots. Marguerite removed her knit hat and brushed from her eyes her short, brown hair, which now stood out from her broad forehead like a bristle brush. "Mallory's in her room, if you'd like to go up. Don't run!" she said as Marguerite raced across the expansive foyer and up the stairs. She opened the door to Mallory's room.

"Skeeter!" Mallory used the name Marguerite's father had started calling her when she was two. Marguerite's gaze took in the entire room: pink, lacy curtains, a deeper pink rug, and the most beautiful white canopy bed she had ever seen. Marguerite, whose tastes ran to the more practical, never ceased to be amazed whenever she entered this room. She looked at her cousin and thought she looked like a fairy princess as she sprawled on her bed, her wavy blonde hair sliding across her shoulders. Mallory was surrounded with drawing tablets and crayons. "You want to make a picture?"

Marguerite chose some crayons—brown, green, and blue—and proceeded to create a drawing of a horse grazing in a pasture surrounded by blue sky. It was a very realistic representation.

THE GIRLS WENT through their bedtime routine of brushing teeth and racing to get into their pajamas. Mallory's nightgown slipped over her head and fell into place as Marguerite struggled

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to put one leg and then the other into her pajamas. The girls giggled and screamed as they pounced onto the bed and crawled beneath the covers, curling into protective little balls against the cold of the sheets. Aunt Lois came by to tuck them in.

“Good night, you two,” she said as she kissed her daughter and patted her niece’s head. “Sleep tight!”

“And don’t let the bedbugs bite!” the girls chimed in unison with more shrieks of laughter, and Aunt Lois smiled and returned downstairs to Uncle Henry.

The girls finally settled down and drifted towards sleep. Marguerite found it hard to sleep in her cousin’s bed. The unfamiliar sounds of the house’s creaking and settling and the image of the tree swaying at the window led her mind down paths filled with monsters and robbers and kidnappers who like little girls. She curled around her stuffed bunny. Mallory breathed rhythmically beside her, dreaming about sliding down a monstrous hill at top speed, and seeing a large pair of arms at the bottom to catch her before she smashed into the fence.

Marguerite jumped at the sound of a crash below. The pounding of her heart in her ears almost overshadowed the voices that filtered up the staircase.

“How dare you! Who do you think you are?”

“Get over here or I’ll . . .” Marguerite recognized her aunt’s and uncle’s voices as snatches of their rage invaded the room with the canopy bed. Her cousin lay motionless beside her as bodies and unknown objects crashed into the walls below them.

“Mallory!” Marguerite’s voice shook as she longed for the protection of her parents’ bed. Mallory curled herself into a tight ball with her back against her cousin. Marguerite’s arm reached across the child’s body protectively, and she inched herself closer to Mallory. The girls’ bodies became a question mark as Marguerite pulled firmly against her.

WORDLESSLY, THE GIRLS descended the stairs the next morning. Marguerite desperately wanted to call her parents. She noticed Mallory’s eyes searching the coat rack for her father’s missing jacket. Marguerite led the way down the hall to the kitchen where Aunt Lois sat at the table, coffee cup in hand, staring out the window as the snow blew from the roof and sparkled in the morning sun.

“Good morning, Mommy,” Mallory said as she kissed her mother’s cheek. The mother’s tired eyes met her daughter’s, and she pressed her lips to the child’s cheek longer than usual.

“Did you sleep okay, girls?”

The cousins nodded and poured cereal into their bowls. The doorbell rang, and Mallory raced to unlock the door. Grandmother and a cold blast of winter air moved into the kitchen. She read the room and opened her arms to Mallory.

“How’s my girl? I haven’t seen you in a whole week! And Marguerite’s here, too. Did you show her the new outfit we found at Strawbridge’s last week?” Grandmother chatted with the girls, but mostly with Mallory, as her daughter rose deliberately and slowly climbed the stairs to her bedroom, closing the door behind her.

“How would you girls like to come home with me today? We’ll bake a cake!” The cousins didn’t need much prompting. Grandmother made the best cakes in the whole world. They were ready by the time Grandmother had spoken privately to her daughter in her room.

THEY CHOSE A RED devil’s food cake with cream cheese frosting and assembled the ingredients on the kitchen counter. Flour, sugar, baking soda, eggs, chocolate. The ingredients spread

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down the counter, in order of their appearance in the recipe, as Grandmother set up the electric mixer and the girls watched with respect. Grandmother was efficient.

Mallory and Marguerite took turns adding each ingredient to the batter under Grandmother's watchful eye, and the cake was ready for the oven. They slid the heart-shaped pans, which the girls had insisted on using, into the oven and set the timer for thirty-five minutes.

Grandmother flopped onto the couch and the girls jumped on either side of her. Her arms cradled each child, and the children snuggled against her ample breasts as the aroma of baking chocolate caressed their senses.

"I am very blessed," she said as her right hand smoothed Mallory's hair and her left hand stroked Marguerite's arm. Mallory looked relaxed, and Marguerite finally felt she had become a member of their club.

"Grandmother, I get scared sometimes," Mallory whispered.

"It was loud and scary last night," Marguerite said, her reddish freckles standing out against her pale skin.

"We won't let that happen again, now, will we?" Grandmother pulled them closer. She stared out the picture window as the icicles dripped in measured rhythms onto the melting snow below.

The oven timer insinuated itself into the moment.

"Cake's done!" Grandmother and the girls jumped to their feet. She showed the children how to test for doneness, and Marguerite placed the toothpick in the center of the cake, pulled it out, and declared the cake to be ready. It was set out to cool, and the trio began whipping the icing to creamy perfection.

Later, Grandmother spread the icing on the top and sides of the cooled creation. The girls stood by silently watching Grandmother transform the plain, brown cake into a mass of white curlicues and swirls. They both waited for the crowning touch.

"Marguerite, how about if Mallory puts the cherry on top?"

Marguerite met her grandmother's gaze. She handed the jar of cherries to her cousin.

"Help me," Mallory said, and two sets of strong, small fingers placed the cherry in its rightful place.

Karen Lacki

Meet Me at the Motel Deska

SURPRISINGLY ENOUGH, this is a real place. I've passed by it many times on Route 422. It's shaggy and small, but it gets business because of its big neon sign planted right next to the road, drawing in weary travelers. It's the only hotel on Route 422 for miles.

I opened my front door as I was going out to get the mail, and lo and behold!, there was a note taped to it that read, "MEET ME AT THE MOTEL DESKA." I studied the handwriting; unfamiliar to me. Such a strange coincidence that this little scrap of paper ended up on my door after I'd just returned from a vacation with my idols and came home to find out my boyfriend was—how can I put this delicately?—fucking my best friend. Maybe she wrote it and meant "Meet me on Jerry Springer." I crumpled up the nasty little note and threw it on the floor. I retrieved the mail from the yellow-jacket guarded mailbox and returned to my central air-cooled haven. When I closed the door, I stopped and stared at the paper ball. It beckoned me to pick it up and read it over and over and over. So I did. I didn't have the heart to throw it out; it seemed cute and helpless.

I.

SO I STUFFED THE NOTE in my pants pocket, got my wallet and keys, and left for the motel. I hoped I didn't need reservations. *If I was going to Maine, I'd need reservations*, I thought as I nervously bit my nails and drove my white '87 Ford Taurus. Ten minutes later, I cautiously pulled into the parking lot and parked next to the only car in the lot—a white '98 Mercedes minivan with the license plate that read DESKA. *Man*, I thought, *if this person isn't here I'm gonna shoot myself. Comin' here, like a fool. I should have called first. This is so stupid; I can't believe I'm doing this.* I went into the office., which was a dark little room with a counter along the back wall. A door on my right was labeled Restrooms, and a snack machine and a soda machine stood to my left. An old guy with a white beard and thick glasses sat behind the counter reading the *Reading Eagle Times*. I stepped up to the counter and waited for him to acknowledge my presence. He still sat reading. I waited. He still sat reading. I rang the little bell on the counter. I rang the little bell on the counter harder. He still sat reading.

"Excuse me!" For once in my life, I became assertive.

The old guy slowly looked up and was stunned to see someone standing there.

"Hello, what can I do you for?"

"I think I was supposed to meet someone here."

"Oh, really?" the old guy said with a stupid big grin on his face.

"Yeah," I nodded, trying to get information out of him. He nodded in sync with me. "Look, is there anybody here waiting for someone?"

"Oh, yes," his "s" whistled. "I believe there is. In room five. She said she just wanted to talk. Here's a key for ya'." He turned around and picked any old key off the key rack on the wall. He handed it to me. "Be good little girls now."

I took the key and walked quickly out the door to room five. The key said, "RM1," but it fit in the lock anyway. I opened the door. No one was in the room. No trace of human life

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except for a leather jacket flung over the desk chair to my right and keys sprawled on the desk. I strolled quietly to the desk beyond the dresser and examined the collection of key chains. It was my ex-best-friend's. One of the key chains was a small square photo of the two of us at Dorney Park; my half was now defaced with pen marks lacking creativity—I now had horns and a mustache. And pointed eyebrows. I frowned. *Bitch*, I thought about her. *I'll teach her to steal my boyfriend.*

I heard a toilet flush, then water running followed by a pause, then the bathroom door opened. Courtney emerged, saw me, and smiled with sly victory, throwing her long blonde hair over her shoulder. I shrank in fear. God, help me, my nerves cried out. She still wore the other half of the Friends Forever heart necklace we bought at the mall. She wore it like a diamond, flaunting its faux golden brilliance. Mine was hidden under my shirt.

"So," she stalked up to me like the cat that she was and pulled the half heart on the chain out of my shirt neck. "I see you have a broken heart."

I handled her necklace and cunningly raised an eyebrow. "So do you. Did Jason, my ex-boyfriend, break up with you, too?" I pouted.

"No." She smiled triumphantly. "In fact, I'm going to see him after I get done with you."

"Is that right?" She nodded. "Well, give him my regards of defeat and my regret for destroying your pretty, pretty face."

I ripped her chain off her neck and pushed her away. Before she had a chance to raise her stiletto-heeled shoe, I kicked her in the stomach with my mom's 1978 heeled leather boot. She fell to the floor crying. I ripped my necklace off and threw it at her, and it hit her in the eye. I finally defeated her at something. "That'll teach you to steal my boyfriend," I yelled and quickly ran from the room.

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"Look, is there anybody here waiting for someone?"

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“Oh, yeah, there is, actually. One person waiting for, er, Tori Chamberlain. He says he just wants to talk, to talk.” He wheezed, then began to violently cough. I didn’t want to interrupt, but he kept waving at me. I couldn’t tell whether he wanted me to go away or talk to me. A young girl came out of the door behind the counter and handed him a glass of water. He drank it, and I watched the top of her head bounce up and down as she walked back through the door. He turned to me and said, “He’s awaitin’ for ya, woman. Room five. Go ahead.”

I nodded in suspicious concern and made my way to the door. *Room five, huh? All the way down at the end. If it’s Jason, I’ll shoot the bastard,* I thought. *He has no right to talk to me after what he did, the egotistical, sexist, dorky, sex-crazed maniac. I’ll take out me gun and shoot’m dead, I will. Oh, God, he makes me so mad I could scream. I can’t believe he has the nerve to drag me here and try to make up for what he’s done, leaving me for Courtney, the whore, leaving me stranded at the Reading airport, making Billy and Yelena drive me home and miss their flight back to Chicago because he was taking Courtney to some stupid party that I was invited and went to and found them naked in her bed.*

And why can’t I get this door open?!!

I finally got the door open and stepped inside. My hand was still on the doorknob when I felt the assassin’s bullet seer through me. I stood stunned, everything began to blur and spin. The black-clad figure with the silenced pistol lunged forward . . .

III.

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“Hello, what can I do you for?”

“I think I was supposed to meet someone here.”

“You think? You don’t know?”

“I don’t know for sure. I found this note posted on my front door.” I took the paper out of my pocket and showed it to him.

He typed something on the keyboard of the new computer on the counter. “Are you Chamberlin, Tori?”

“Yes.”

“You have a room reserved for today.”

“I do?”

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"Yep. Room five is the only one left available. Here's your key." He took a key at random from the key rack behind him. I thanked him. "If you ask me," he added. "It sounds a little suspicious."

"Yep, it does," I agreed and headed to room five.

Room five was dark like the office. Dark and cold, as if someone had died. There was a distinct odor to the place, like disinfectant and Pledge wood polish. Dust particles revealed themselves in the beam of cloudy light sifting through the breaks and holes of the curtained windows. Where one ray of light hit the wall, I noticed a carpenter ant crawling upward, seeking shelter beneath a sliver of wallpaper. The atmosphere here was certainly the eeriest I had ever encountered, as if I was on a set of an *X-Files* episode.

There was a firm knock on the door. I turned on the switch near the door. No lights came on.

"Who is it?" I asked cautiously, standing away from the door.

"FBI, Miss Chamberlin. We need to ask you a few questions."

I recognize that voice, I thought. It was the FBI. *I should open the door. I shouldn't mess around with these people.* I opened the door slowly.

When I saw who it was I gaped at them. *Wow!* I felt like crying out as I let them push their way into the room.

"I suggest you sit down. You look a little tired. I'm Agent Mulder. This is Agent Scully. We're here to investigate a murder, and we have reason to believe you have vital information about it."

"You're David Duchovny. And you're Gillian Anderson," I was in awe. I was on the *X-Files*. But where were the cameras?

"I'm afraid you are mistaken, Miss Chamberlin. May we call you *Tori*? David Duchovny and Gillian Anderson are actors sadly portraying us. We need to ask you some questions," Agent Mulder corrected me and sat on the desk. He put his foot on the chair and rested his elbow on his knee. Agent Scully glanced at him and frowned, turning back to me.

"He's had a rough day," she apologized for him. "*Tori*, we brought you here because we thought you might be able to help us with a case. Recently, a woman was murdered here by this man." She handed me a picture of Jason.

"Oh, my God," I said, unbelieving at the crime scene photo. He was sprawled in the floor with blood all over him.

"Do you know this person?" Scully asked.

"This is my ex-boyfriend."

Scully and Mulder glanced at each other.

"Who did he kill?" I asked.

"Who he killed is not important, but who killed him?" Mulder explained.

"Autopsy reports show that he was indeed murdered after he killed his victim," Scully added. "However, no one has been able to find any evidence of his assassin. Not even Mulder."

"Hmph."

"Maybe it was a ghost," I laughingly suggested. "Maybe his victim wanted revenge after her death and killed him. Like that movie, *Ghost*."

Mulder became active. He jumped off the desk and grabbed the picture from me. His black overcoat lunging toward me gave me flashbacks ...

IT WAS NIGHT. The sun had gone down long before and still he hadn't shown. Billy had left a message on my answering machine, confirming the note he'd left on my door. I lay on the bed, day dreaming of different scenarios between us. Our little fling out in Colorado last week ended unnoticed by Yelena and Jon, my new best friends whom I'd met while staying there. Billy and I certainly had some unfinished business.

At nine-thirty, according to my watch, he finally arrived, opening the door with his own universal hotel door key. He tried switching on the light, but it didn't turn on. He didn't notice I was there until I called his name. He turned to face me; I was now standing behind the bed. The moonbeams through the worn curtains shadowed the far side of his boyish face, light sparkling his blue eyes. His six-foot-four hunched frame towered over me, even at a distance.

He settled his leather jacket over the desk chair and took a step forward. "I really only came here to talk." His nasally tenor voice cracked with weariness. "That seemed to be our strongest bond."

"Yeah," I agreed. "Sit down. Talk."

He sat down slowly on the end of the bed. He turned and waved me to him. I pulled the desk chair up to him and sat down.

"When we got back to Chicago, I told Yelena about us. I couldn't keep it from her. If she found out any other way, later on, she would've shot me. I couldn't have that rut between us. I couldn't even think about marrying her with a guilty chip on my shoulder. Not that I didn't enjoy our time together, Lily." (He always called me that.) "You know, I loved her too much to let last week slide."

"What happened when you told her?"

"She dumped me. Understandably, of course. All this week I've been trying and trying to apologize and get her to at least hear me out, and she is so stubborn—"

"Billy, she isn't stubborn. She's mad as hell. I was too when I came back and found my ex-boyfriend sleeping with my ex-best friend."

Billy looked up and glared at me. "Did you tell either of them?"

"Yeah, after I saw that, I did, just to get back at him. I'm mad as hell, too, but Yelena didn't catch us in bed together. I saw them, sprawled all over, nothing covering them up. And they didn't even care that I was standing in the room, watching." I started to choke up. Tears began welling up in my eyes. "They wanted me to join in. 'Come on in,' they said, all nasty and naked together. He didn't even have the gall to come out of her when I said something 'cause he was too damn drunk—"

Billy reached out and pulled me to him. His large hand pressed my cheek to his as I cried.

"God, the luck I have with men."

"We can empathize with each other, now. I'm sorry, Lily. I wish I could go back and change all of this."

"I didn't like him, anyway. Not since I met you and Jon. Jason became the dorkiest bastard in the world after I met you. And I lost him to my worst fear in a relationship—losing someone to a prettier, skinnier, taller someone else."

"Lily, stop it. You are pretty, hone. We got what was coming for us. We're paying for our sins, if you will."

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I stopped crying and backed away from him. “You came her to talk. So talk.”

He frowned. “I brought you here so I could see you again. I didn’t want Yelena finding us, though I doubt she would come here looking for me. No doubt, I’ll keep searching for her, but if I don’t I’m retiring and moving into a log cabin, far far away from everyone. Every serious relationship I’ve had with a woman was destroyed somehow. I guess I just came looking for sympathy. I wouldn’t have been satisfied talking with anyone else; they all have their own lives and they’d just lecture me about cruelty and cheating, blah, blah, blah. I’ve heard it all already. They don’t listen, just ramble. And you’re a wreck, anyway,” he smiled slightly.

“Thanks.” I rolled my eyes, then they landed on his. We stared at each other for a while, until he finally grabbed me and kissed me . . .

V.

I MET JON, my newest best friend, confidante, migraine reliever and soul mate in the parking lot. He leaned on his beat up old car with his arms folded, looking suave. I hate suave guys. Jason was suave. Suave sucks. But I liked Jon anyway. I was relieved to see him there. I hadn’t seen him in what felt like ages—five days. I parked my ’87 Ford Taurus and joined him. We hugged in greeting. He was a good hugger. I liked Jon.

He kissed my cheek as he pulled away. We stood at the same height, eye level with each other. He had dark brown eyes; I had green.

“Hi, Tori. I’m glad you came. How has your week gone?”

“Don’t ask. I missed you.”

“I missed you, too. I’m going into New York tonight, and I had some time to kill. Want to come with me?”

“Sure. What are you doing there?”

“Partying. I need a date.”

“I said I’ll come.”

“Good. So what do you want to do?” He examined the hotel behind me with a mischievous smile.

“Sleep. So we can stay up and party all night.”

“That sounds like a great idea. I’ll go check in. If all goes well, we can skip New York.”

The phone rang, that stupid, annoying phone. I crumpled up the paper again and carried it to the phone.

“Hello?” I answered.

“Hi, Tori. It’s Jon.”

I blushed. What a coincidence, I thought. “Oh, hi! I was just thinking about you.”

“Good. Then you got my note?”

“What note?”

“Meet me at the Motel Deska?”

I glanced stunned at the paper in my hand. He’s psychic, I thought.

“Uh, yeah. I have it right here. When should I be there?”

“Tori, I didn’t mean it literally. You were complaining that you couldn’t think of anything to write for your creative writing class. I was giving you an idea. I’m no writer, but I thought it would be a cool title. You could write about my incident with Jenn this afternoon. She

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asked me to meet her there. I said no, of course, but—”

“Jon, you’re a genius!” Ideas for a story immediately began popping in my head. I went to the garbage can to throw it out.

“And, Tori, don’t forget to recycle.”

La Keisha Thorpe

The Green Family Mystery

LAURYN GREEN DREADED THIS APPOINTMENT. I hate this, she thought as she walked up the front steps of the Fifty-third Precinct to discuss what her town of Lakewater had begun to call *The Green Family Mystery*. She just called it Hell.

As she reached Detective Leonard's Department, Lauryn began to get an awful knot in the pit of her stomach. It wasn't a knot of fright or even nervousness. It was a knot of pure anger. She was sick of repeating this story all the time.

Detective George Leonard had his notes ready. He was determined to get something worth while out of Lauryn today. Leonard's office had walls of glass so that he could keep an eye on his department. So he saw Lauryn coming out of the elevator, and he was ready for her. Leonard had come across some of the most baffling cases in his day. He had seen everything from homicide, to stalkings, to massacres. And yet nothing baffled him more than the Green Family mystery, case number 625. It had come so close to his heart that he was obsessed with finding the killer.

"Good morning, Detective Leonard," Lauryn said in the best voice she could muster.

"Ah, Lauryn, good morning to you as well. Please, won't you have a seat."

"Thanks," Lauryn said. She had learned to just keep her cool with George Leonard. He over-interpreted everything that anyone said. He was always looking for clues, but that's something that he had done for as long as Lauryn could remember.

"Lauryn, the last time we met we ended with the culprit standing over you while you called out for help. Let's start with that today."

Lauryn took a deep breath. She knew exactly what he was up to. She had told him several times that she had blocked out the face of the culprits. She couldn't even remember their voices. She could barely remember her own voice begging for her life.

"That's when I told them to leave," she said slowly, despite her rage, determined to remain calm, "begged for my life, and then blacked out. It's really pretty simple. It's not like you haven't heard it before."

How many times would she have to repeat herself, over and over and over? I had become routine. She tried not to think about the horror, she didn't want to think about it everyday. There were so many other things to be concerned about—her music, her job, her friends. Why couldn't she just move on? They would've wanted it that way.

"Do I have to continuously go over this, Detective Leonard?" she said, torn between boredom and disgust.

"Ms. Green, it is imperative that we collect as many clues as possible. Don't you want these people caught? They have to pay for the horrible crimes that they have committed against you and your family."

What was left of them, Lauryn thought. What if she didn't want to talk about it? She figured she had nothing to worry about, and she would do what was necessary when the time came. All Detective Leonard wanted was for her to be safe.

"Lauryn, I'm speaking to you now as, not only a detective, but as your uncle, and completely off the record."

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Uncle George Leonard wasn't really her uncle, not by blood anyway. He was a close friend of the family, what was left of them to be a friend to. He had been especially close to her father. There were pictures of him and Charlie Green going all the way back to their high school years. But even with all that friendship, there were still things that Lauryn knew Uncle George could never understand.

"Completely off the record, Uncle George, I can't stand talking about this any more. I've got to go to work soon, and I'm just sick of this shit in general." Damn, she thought. She had done exactly what she didn't want to do, she had lost her cool. She hadn't meant to do it, but it happened. She was disappointed in herself. She knew that she could behave better than that.

She quickly gathered her things together. As she rose to leave, her eyes focused on a picture of the last Green Family picnic. Perfect, she thought, and then she began to sob. Uncle George moved to her side.

"Please don't pity me," she began in a soft firm voice, "and don't hold me. I don't want to hear the words 'Poor Lauryn' either. I simply can't stand it anymore. Everyone in this town wants to treat me like a poor homeless little girl, and I can't take it anymore."

George could see the look in Lauryn's eyes. He'd seen it there before, and he could see that her tears were real. He'd seen that look before in her father's eyes. That look of determination, fear, and rage all rolled into one. He missed seeing that look in Charlie's eyes. He also knew that look meant business and not to argue with Lauryn.

"Okay, Lauryn, we can be finished for now. But, sweetheart, you can't just lock this all up inside. The events that have taken place are horrible and hard to discuss, but we've got to work together on this."

Deep down inside, Lauryn knew that Uncle George was right. But he didn't know everything. He wouldn't understand everything. She just wanted to put it all to rest, but he wouldn't let her. Every time she thought about it, it was like it was happening all over again. She could leave it in the past, but it was the re-telling and re-living that she could no longer deal with. It was time to do what needed to be done. First she had to take care of Uncle George.

"I know," she said as she steadied herself, "and I want to catch them too. Just as much as anyone else. But right now I've got to go. I have to practice and then go to work. We'll get together and really talk about everything, I promise, Uncle George."

Reluctantly George agreed, and they exchanged good-byes. He knew that something was wrong, but he couldn't figure it out. Naturally Lauryn had a right to be upset. She had nothing left to rely on. The Green family had been no stranger to hardships. Lauryn's mother had committed suicide when Lauryn was just a small child. That was when Charlie decided that the big city was no place to raise his children and moved back to Lakewater. George could fondly remember Charlie giving his children everything that they needed. They had all become so gifted. Dave, the oldest, was going to Lakewater University on a football scholarship. But then everything changed. Clowie was only a year younger than Lauryn and never even got a chance to know their mother. Clowie had just signed a modeling contract and was on her way. And then it all just went wrong. Lauryn was going to be a concert pianist, and still could be one. That's when Charlie was stabbed, forty-seven times. This confused everyone because the first stab wound killed him. The rest were just for pleasure.

George just couldn't understand why someone would want to hurt them all, all by Lauryn. She had been left unharmed to suffer. It was as if she was being punished; but why? "Baf-

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fling,” George said aloud. Well, that was enough lamenting. He had work to do, but he promised himself that he’d go to check on her later that day.

Lauryn also had some work to do. She had a few errands to run. She had already taken care of work; she wasn’t going back there again, not since everything had started up again. There was no way. She had stopped taking her medication, but what difference did that make.

As she pulled into the hospital parking lot she knew that it would be her last time there. She had got to put an end to all of this, she thought.

She went to the burn unit first. Clowie was blind and deaf in one ear, but she still always knew when Lauryn was there.

“Lauryn?” She asked in a scratchy voice. The acid that had eaten her face away had gotten inside her ear and hit her throat. Her beautiful looks were gone.

“Lauryn, I know that it’s you. I feel your fear and your anger. I know that you couldn’t help us, it wasn’t your fault.” Clowie’s voice trailed in and out making her difficult to understand. Lauryn just thought that she sounded dumb. Shut up, shut up was all that Lauryn heard playing over and over in her mind.

“Lauryn, talk to me, where’s Daddy and Dave?”

They hadn’t told her yet. This puzzled and delighted Lauryn.

“Ruined,” Lauryn said.

“Like me?” Clowie whispered.

“No, but ruined just the same,” Lauryn answered nonchalantly.

“I don’t blame you, Lauryn, please believe me.”

Lauryn almost laughed aloud.

“It doesn’t matter either way, Clowie,” she said indifferently. “Well, good-bye now.”

She could clearly hear Clowie calling after her, but she was trying so hard to ignore the other voices that Clowie’s just blended in.

Next Lauryn went to the Prosthetics Ward. Dave’s left leg and right arm had both been partially severed with a chain saw. He did blame Lauryn. He hates me, she thought with delight.

“Hello, Dave,” she greeted him.

“You bitch, get out!” he sneered.

“Hush, don’t worry. I’m not going to hurt you here. I wanted to say good-bye because I’m trying to leave later.”

“So what?” he snapped. “Lauryn, why do you come here. I hate you and you must hate me because you let this happen.”

She stood quietly awhile, and then she gently smiled and said, “Maybe you hate me, Dave, but I could never hate you. All I wanted was love, but you all hated me.”

She moved closer, which seemed to make him uneasy. He attempted to reach for his call button, and she moved it from his reach. He looked her in the eye, and his face gave away the fact that he no longer recognized her. It was as if he were seeing another person.

“You should have gotten the acid,” she whispered into his ear. Before that moment he had claimed that he couldn’t remember the face connected with the chain saw that swung down over his left leg. It made sense. The two of them had never gotten along, but not too many people knew that. Now it was clear he could, and he was sobbing at the realization.

Lauryn had one more stop to make before going home. She went to visit Charlie Green, her father. He wasn’t in the hospital, oh, no.

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“Hello, Daddy. I’m sorry about everything. Even about Dave. I didn’t mean to do any of it. It just happened. And you said that you were going to tell Uncle George the truth. But you won’t now, will you, Daddy? It’s my truth to tell. Well, I must go, but I’ll be back. Good-bye.” As Lauryn left the cemetery she cried and smiled to herself. If only the clozaril would’ve worked. But it didn’t. Lauryn’s medication was a failure. Its side effect was a low white blood cell count, which would make her sick and eventually kill her. So she had to discontinue its use. Because of it, her schizophrenia returned. No one could possibly understand what it was like to be normal and then go crazy again. Dave, Clowie and Daddy couldn’t understand it. But her mother would have. So she tried to send them all to hell so that her mother could tell them. But they wouldn’t all go. Now she would.

She wrote a note for Uncle George, explaining herself. As she tied the rope she remembered the good times. The happy memories that she had shared with her family. She jumped off the upstairs banister. As the rope closed tightly around her neck and the weight of her body forced her neck to break, Uncle George walked in. Case number 625 was solved.

Alexa James

Reflections

SLOWLY, I DRIFT into wakefulness. Already I can feel that my stomach is not in good shape. I think it will be quite some time before my voice wakes up, and there's a slight but yet too perceivable sting behind my eyes. Oh God, another Monday, but this day covets no risky promise of parties to come, no chance to see that amazing girl, the one that makes me marvel at her every action. Nope, this day is waiting to dish out a take home exam. It's due tomorrow, and the pressure of its importance is ever growing in my thoughts. I'm dead broke, having spent my last \$1.92 on an order of cheese fries at C.C. Peppers. They'd been good but had only teased my appetite, leaving me wanting more but now bankrupt and even hungrier.

That's the way it goes with this girl, Julie, too. Last week, when I saw her at a party, she'd made me her man, and trust me, I was honored. Throughout the night I'd kept her cup filled, the tapped brew empty of any dangerous extras, and in return she had made it a point to say bye to me as she vanished out the apartment door. "Thanks, beer man, see ya later—probably next week!" That's what she'd said, so I'd been waiting all week. Call me pathetic, but I even went to the gym last Tuesday and Thursday, not because of her. I just figured it couldn't hurt to pump a little iron. Maybe I'd get back to my routine again. The one I'd followed faithfully throughout the course of my senior year, the plan that I swear won me the gold medal in the 165-pound weight class at Hershey last year. Maybe there were other things to be won now.

There was no prize to be earned last night though. I think Julie danced with everyone but me at the party, moving her sculptured body to rhythms in the music I'd never heard before. She drew others into those rhythms too. I don't dance.

Sprawled out on my too short, too narrow cot that the university refers to as a bed, I turn my head to the right. Big surprise, Chad never came home last night, might as well not even have a roommate. Wait, someone is here, not Chad, but someone else. He's just staring at me, looking me directly in the eye, and he's giving me this "What the hell!" kind of stare. Who is this guy, and why is he eyeing me so skeptically? This is my room, y'know. He looks so familiar, yet I sense that I've never really seen him till this very moment. I'm positive I don't know this guy. Jesus Christ, am I still drunk?

"Do I know you?" he crackles. God, he sounds like he just got railed by a fifth wheeler. His voice is groggy; his question breaks and cuts out sporadically like the stations I pick up in my shitty Dodge Shadow. He's definitely a smoker and not just Newports. I can tell. I can always tell.

"That's not good for your health, buddy."

"Who the hell are you?" I think to myself. Now this lunatic is telling me not to smoke? He doesn't even know me. How's he know I smoke anyway? Besides, it's just till finals are over. Then I'll quit. It won't be a problem.

By this time I'm out of bed. I've thrown back my layers of sweaty thermal blankets and am now standing in my boxers, the Calvin Klein ones I'd specially selected for last night, staring at this stranger blocking my closed dorm room door. Okay, now I'm getting freaked. Why is this guy in my room to begin with? Obviously Chad is not here, but this retard friend of his

just waltzed right in. He even shut the door. This cannot be good. All right, enough is enough. I can take him. Granted, he's got broad shoulders and a wide chest, but what once may have been muscle mass now looks like baby fat, and would you get a load of that gut. Does this guy do anything but drink?

Now don't get me wrong, I drink too, but I drink socially, ya know, at parties and stuff. This guy, on the other hand, I get the impression doesn't exactly have a surplus of friends. I mean, look at him. His dirty blond sideburns have grown out of control, not to mention the scraggly stubble on his chin and upper lip. A haircut would definitely be beneficial, or maybe just a little shampoo or conditioner. There's an idea. Oh my God, now that I think about it, this guy needs a shower! He's made my whole room smell like ass! For the love of God, take a shower man, a few swipes with a deodorant stick at least. I've never understood how so many kids come to school and just totally let themselves go. Then they wonder why their social life sucks. I mean, last Monday when I went to my nine o'clock philosophy class, there were like seven girls wearing their pajamas. Yep, just those baggy plaid pants they all wear, topped off with a grungy sweatshirt and sandals. Jesus Christ, if they wake up that late, why don't they just skip class. That's what I do. You can always make up the work later.

"I don't know who you are, asshole, but you've got five seconds to get the hell out before I wipe that cocky sneer off your face!" the stranger screams.

No way, this is my room. You get out. Great. This cannot be happening to me. I'm being harassed. Now I've been threatened. What if this psychotic visitor decides to attack? Should I call security? Yeah, right, I don't have a clue who to call in a situation like this. I'm not exactly in the position to dig out the phone book and flip open to the emergency page.

Frantically, my eyes scan the room. Hey I bet there's someone I can call on that complimentary magnet every student received the first day of school.

Okay, me and the freak are currently at a standoff, both frozen in place like statues. My gaze is focused directly on his pupils, and he's scowling right back. For the first time in my life, I've met my match in a staring contest.

Let's see, if I could just work my way over to the fridge without the intruder pouncing, I could see the phone number of ahh . . . food services? . . . housing office? . . . umm, residence life? . . . yah, that's it! . . . crisis intervention. Wait a minute, what am I gonna say? "Yes, hello. I've got a stranger in my room, and he won't leave. No, he hasn't harmed me in any way, just told me to stop smoking and to get out." No way! They would never buy that. Forty thousand students attend this campus, and I'm just one out of approximately 2,000 pranks per week.

Maybe if I just pretend I've got someone to call, maybe then this asshole will hit the road. I reach for the once ivory colored, now greasy brown, receiver of the phone when suddenly, *Bring*, it rings. Making a totally embarrassing sort of gasp, I practically jump out of my skin. God, this dick's got me all tense and jumpy, and he knows it too. I lift the grimy receiver to my ear as I slowly turn my back to the stranger. It's most likely my mother. She likes to call Sunday afternoons after church and her timing is always impeccable. I've been through this conversation a hundred times. First, she'll ask me about classes. Umm, yah Mom, I'm going for a 4.0. Then she'll fill me in on the latest neighborhood gossip, like I really give a shit. The Waltmans got a new car, a silver Honda Accord, just like the one my mom has been trying to get my dad to buy for the last three years. Good luck, Mom. Dad likes his Dodges. I've been trying to convince my dad to buy me a new car all my life. "No, sir," he always said. "That

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Dodge Shadow, she's a good car, real reliable, just right for a college boy like you."

I just know this is gonna be Mom and she's gonna start in with the personal survey. "Have I been eating my vegetables? Do you have enough underwear?" for God's sake, how many pairs does one person need? I mean two a week is plenty, but now I'm constantly receiving care packages consisting of package after package of Fruit of the Looms. God, I hate them. Brownies and briefs, that's all I get. How 'bout some cash for a change? The bars, the smokes, it all adds up. Oh, God, here we go, and she'll wrap up the whole one-sided conversation with, "So, Kevin, is there a pretty new face in your life now? You had to fight them off all through high school. I can't imagine what Penn State must be like. I hope you're not breaking too many innocent hearts, sweetie." Okay, Mom, I'll try not to.

I don't tell her that all the hot chicks in college want older, more "sophisticated" and "sensitive" men. Ya know, pre-law, pre-med guys with their beamers from Daddy. Either that or they go for the football players. Give me a break, those guys aren't even human. The football team sucks anyway. Oh, and what is it with the lacrosse guys? Hello? What the hell kind of sport is that? Wrestling, now that's athletic competition at its finest. Too bad the coach here's a dumb ass. I may be red-shirted this year, but next year they'll all be sorry. I'm gonna start training again next semester, or over the summer. Yeah, I'll focus primarily on my grades next semester. This semester was for "adjusting," so of course, it won't be my best. The girls here are all bitches.

"Hi, is Kevin there?"

Holy shit! It's her! It's Julie! I'd recognize that sweet, smooth voice anywhere. It's so rich, like honey. I can't believe she's calling. Maybe she missed me this weekend. Maybe she wants to get together sometime. I'll take her out. Sure, I can scrape up some cash. I've got a little stuff left to sell, and Chad will never miss a few bucks from his bottom desk drawer. Hell, he's never here to notice. Wait, what if she needs a tutor in philosophy. I told her once two weeks ago that I thought the class was cake. That's why I never go. Wait, Julie wouldn't need a tutor. She's brilliant, you can tell. She must want a date. My heart is racing. My hands are trembling. This is the best day of my life. My troubles are over.

"Julie, is that you?"

Freeze. I just freeze and slowly, ever so slowly, turn around. I did not just hear that. Sure enough, the stranger is still standing in my room, still staring at me, and now, come to find out, he knows Julie? He can't possibly know her. How could he know her? This mangy, overweight, dope-faced, loser in front of me cannot possibly know an angel like her. I didn't even know she was going to call me. How could he guess?

Wait a minute, maybe he knows something I don't know. That's it. He knows how much Julie likes me. She's fallen for me, and now he's jealous. Oh my god, this is too funny. Just look at his face, the patches of clear skin in-between all those pimples is now beat red too. For God's sake, maybe she's his ex-girlfriend! "Julie, I just want to say you looked amazing at the party last night."

"Thanks, you looked pretty fine yourself," the perfect feminine voice answers.

Oh no, this is too much. This is not happening. This son of a bitch is not going to do this to me. Not now, I've waited too long for this moment.

"I'm sort of busy right now, Julie, but I'll give you a call later. Maybe we can get together tonight."

That's it! This is my conversation, not yours. Dropping the phone, my fingers quickly roll

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into a thick, tight fist. I'm ready. He's clenching his fists too. As I feel the blood rushing to my face, I try to stay loose, but all the while his eyes are gleaming with raw hatred. It's gonna be me or him. "Stop staring!" he suddenly shrieks.

I can't take this anymore! I don't know who this bastard is or what the fuck he's doing here, but he's the one that waltzed into my room, told me to get out, butted into my phone conversation, and now screamed for me to stop staring at *him*. "Get out now!" he bellows.

NO! I will not leave, but this little fucker is leaving as of right now. I just snap. I lunge forward with the force of a freight train, roaring my most horrific growl as I dive toward him. He hollers and lunges toward me. Instantly, I strike out with my fist, aiming to pound my knuckles deep into that mass of lard only to find myself on the floor surrounded by a hundred mirrored fragments of the man I hate, the man I could not recognize.

Bill Reilly

The Scam

MIKE AND JOE were hanging out watching a movie on an average Saturday, late in March. After the movie ended they decided to go to the convenience store about two miles down the road. On the way, Joe was saying how dumb the guys were in the movie for robbing a bank. “Anyone who robs a bank is gonna get caught, you know?”

“Yeah,” Mike agreed, “but you have to admit, it was a great story.”

“I guess so.”

After they arrived back at Mike’s apartment, Joe brought up again how dumb the guys were in the movie. “Shut the hell up about the movie!” Mike snapped. “It was a good flick.”

“I know it was. But don’t you think if they didn’t take so long in the bank, they would not have been caught?”

“Of course! That was why they got caught, it took longer than they anticipated.”

“Exactly,” Joe said, nodding his head.

“Exactly what?” Mike asked.

“They anticipated that it would take only a minute and a half, but it took about five. When I went in to get cigarettes today, it took exactly 45 seconds.”

Mike looked at him with one eyebrow raised and asked, “So what do you want to do? Knock off the convenience store?”

“Maybe,” Joe answered.

“You’re crazy, you’ll never do it!”

“Why not? Just think about it,” Joe said as he lit up a cigarette. “You go in and ask for a pack of smokes. It will come out to about \$2.36. You give a twenty. While the cashier is getting the change, in comes me with a ski mask on, pointing a gun at his head. The cashier won’t have time to even think about hitting the alarm, and I’ll hold out a bag, tell him to put all the money into it, and that’s that.”

“Sounds great,” Mike said sarcastically, “but what am I supposed to do then? I just can’t walk out with you.”

“I know, I thought of that too. But all you have to do is wait for the cops, tell them what happened, and then they’ll let you go.”

“Screw that! You want me to wait for the cops to come! No way. In fact, I can’t even believe we’re talking about this! Why do you want to do this anyway? We’re not hurting for money that bad. And to risk going to jail for a couple hundred bucks doesn’t seem possible.”

“Come on, man. It’s a foolproof plan. I know waiting for the cops sounds crazy, but they’ll never know, in any way, that you are involved. And maybe you’re not hurting for cash, but I am. My job sucks. I need this money for my bills. My rent’s two months overdue.”

“Jesus Christ, Joe. I can’t believe you’re serious about this. I mean what if something goes wrong? What if someone sees you driving away? What if the cops don’t believe me?”

“Don’t worry. No one pays any attention in this city. And as for the cops, they have no reason not to believe you. I’m telling you man, it is foolproof.”

“Okay, say that I do agree to do this. You have to promise me that this will be a one time deal, no exceptions.”

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"You have my word, it's a once and done thing. So, does this mean you're in?"

"Alright, I'm in."

So they agreed the best time to pull off the robbery would be sometime Friday.

Although Mike did agree to help out Joe with his plan, he had big doubts. Mike had never broken the law, except when he was sixteen and was cited for underage drinking. But this was different, this was armed robbery. Mike could not decide what to do, so he thought he had better see what his older brother, Bryan, thought of the whole deal. Bryan was six years older than Mike, had a good job as an accountant, and always treated Mike with the utmost respect, no matter what Mike did.

"Wow, Mikey, I can't believe you're going to do this," Bryan said calmly. "I mean, I know Joe is your best friend, but you have to think about what will happen if you get caught."

"I know, I know, I thought about that. But don't you think it's a good plan?"

"Yeah, it seems like it would work, but something could go wrong, you never know. I'm not going to tell you what you should do. I think you already know that, but just think if it's worth it."

"Okay," Mike replied. "I'll think about it."

Mike knew his brother thought it was a terrible thing to do, but he had already told Joe that he would help him out. Mike never went back on his word; he was a good friend to have. So Mike made up his mind. Even though he was quite skeptical about the whole idea, he would be Joe's accomplice.

Friday came up fast for Mike. Around 6:30 p.m. Joe came over to Mike's apartment. Joe was wearing blue jeans and a dark sweatshirt. He also had his semi-automatic 9mm pistol, and his black ski mask.

"Well, you ready to do this tonight?" Joe asked.

"I guess so," Mike replied softly.

"You don't sound like you want to do this. If we want to pull this off, you have to have your head in it."

"I know. I was just thinking if we should really do this."

"Come on, Mike. There's no turning back now."

"Okay, I know. I'm in. I'm definitely in. So, what time do you want to do this tonight?"

"I was thinking around oneish. By then the store should be empty, and there should be plenty of cash in the drawer. Now, you have to remember to act like some shmuck bystander. You don't need the cops being suspicious and holding you longer than they have to."

"I know, I know, don't worry about it," Mike said.

"Okay, man. I just want this to work," Joe quickly responded.

"Let's go watch TV for now, okay?" Mike said quietly.

"Whatever, Mike. Go watch TV."

Mike left the kitchen and headed for the living room. He really began to think about what was going to happen that night. Smoking cigarette after cigarette, he could not think of one good thing that could come of robbing a convenience store.

"Why can't Joe get another job or something?" Mike wondered. "I mean what a ridiculous idea. Being a friend is one thing, robbing a store is another."

"You ready to get going, Mike?" Joe said from Mike's bedroom. No response. "Hey, Mike! You awake in there?" Joe yelled. There was still no response, so he looked into the living room and found Mike asleep on the couch. "What the hell. Wake up man!" he said as he pushed on

Mike's shoulder's.

"Wha, wha, what?" Mike barely said as he awoke.

"It's time. C'mon, man, wake the hell up," Joe said in an agitated voice.

"Alright, alright. I'm up, I'm up," Mike said with a much clearer voice this time. "Just give me a few minutes to wake up a little."

"Okay, but hurry it up. I don't wanna get back too late."

Mike got off the couch and went into the bathroom to wash his face off. As he washed the water away from his eyes, he stared directly into the mirror. He thought, "Man, I can't do this.

"I'll be waiting in the car," Mike heard Joe from the other side of the door.

"Alright, man, I'll be out in a minute," he yelled back.

Mike dried off his face, put on his jacket, and shut his apartment door. As he opened his car door and sat in the driver's seat, he could see Joe's serious face. He pulled away from his place and headed for the convenience store.

About a block away from his apartment, Mike took the last cigarette from his pack and made his stand. "Listen, Joe," he said. "I've been thinking about this all week, and I decided that I am not going to be involved in this scam. I'm your best friend, and I'll do anything to help you out, but not this. I'm not gonna break the law. If you need the money, I'll loan it to you. And if I don't have it, I'll ask my brother for it. But I will not do this."

"Fuck you, Mike! You said you would help me out with this. I need the money, you know that!"

"Listen, Joe. I don't care what you say. I have made up my mind, and that's it. I will not do it." As he finished his sentence, he pulled into the convenience store parking lot.

"Whatever, Mike. We won't do it, but I can't believe you went back on your word like that. That's screwed up, and you know it."

"Shut the hell up. You might have the balls to do something like this, but I don't."

"Yeah, I can see that now, you asshole."

"Just shut up. Look, you can get money another way. This just isn't right." There was a slight uncomfortable pause, and then he said, "I'm going to get a pack of smokes, you need anything?"

"No, I'm alright." Joe's voice was flat.

Mike shook his head at Joe and then got out of his car. As he walked toward the door someone came out of the store. The man held the door for Mike and asked, "Excuse me, but you wouldn't know what time it is, do you?"

"Sure," Mike replied. "It's ten after one, on the dot."

"Thanks a lot, buddy."

"No problem."

Mike walked into the store and went up to the cashier. "Can I get a pack of Marlboro Reds, please?"

"Hard pack or soft?" the clerk asked.

"Hard, please."

"That'll be \$2.46."

Mike pulled a twenty-dollar bill from his pocket and gave it to the cashier. As the man began to get the change, Mike heard the door open behind him. Just as he turned around he heard a familiar voice, "Alright, motherfucker, put the money into this bag here, and no one gets hurt!"

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Mike stepped away from the masked gunman in shock. He knew it was Joe. There was no doubt about it. As Mike stepped away, Joe handed the bag to the clerk and ordered him to hurry up. Joe's eyes were fixed on the cashier putting the money in the bag. Mike's eyes were staring at Joe's. At first Joe did not notice, then, for a split second, Joe's eye's looked directly into Mike's, and there was an extremely loud noise. Joe's gun flew from his hand as he fell to the floor. Blood began to pour out of his shoulder uncontrollably.

"You son of a bitch! You think you could get away with this?" the cashier screamed as he pointed a gun at Joe. "Guess what now, punk! You're gonna die!"

"No he's not, you crazy bastard! Put the goddamn gun down now!" Mike yelled at the top of his lungs. He had picked up Joe's 9mm and pointed it at the cashier.

"Yes he is," said the cashier and he pulled the trigger and shot Joe in the chest.

"Fuck you!" Mike yelled as he fired five rounds into the cashier.

Everything was silent. "What happened?" Mike asked out loud. "What the hell happened?"

Someone was coming toward the store through flashing red and blue lights. "Shit," he said. He looked down at the gun in his hands and then at his watch. "Forty-five seconds, forty-five seconds."

Erik Heidecker

Code of a Knight

IT WAS AN OVERCAST DAY. The clouds blocked the sun. But Sir Drummel could not see the sky through the thick branches of the forest canopy anyway. He half-guided his mare over the forest floor. She was good mount and required little guidance from her rider. All that Sir Drummel could hear was the clopping of his horse over stones, the chinking of his own armor, and the sounds one hears in a forest. The creaking of old branches, the chirping of birds, and the babble of a nearby brook.

The two continued on through the empty forest. A fine mist rose and soon Sir Drummel was covered in a layer of dew. It was the type of mist that sinks into the bones and chills one. He could have used a nice tankard of mulled wine and a fire by which to smoke his pipe, but all he could afford at the moment was to pull his woolen cloak more tightly around himself to try and keep the chill out.

It did not work. His teeth began to chatter and the rings of his mail rattled against one another as he began to shiver. His lips turned blue and his hands shook.

Then to his ears came a sound that he had not been expecting to hear. It was the clanking of sword striking sword, and as his horse carried him closer to its origin, he could occasionally catch a curse drifting across the misty air. He followed the sound until it brought him to a particularly dense row of full fur trees. The sounds were obviously emanating from the other side of the trees, but he could not see through their dense branches. He turned his mare and made to circle around the patch of trees.

It took the knight some searching before he found a suitable opening to ride through. The thick fur trees made a border between the forest and a small glade free of trees. At the end opposite himself, Sir Drummel saw a knight afoot, protecting his mount, which was a fine animal, and three brigands, each armed with a short sword, attacking the sir knight. The knight was dressed in field plate but was lacking his helm. A deep gash above one eye had bled down into his right, blinding him in that eye.

Sir Drummel dug his stirrups into the mare's sides, and she leapt into a canter. He drew his long sword and rode right up onto the man in the back. The grizzled man turned just in time to see Sir Drummel bring his blade down in a giant sweep, deep into the man's neck. A spray of blood streamed from the thick gash. The man began to sputter as blood coated his lips. Sir Drummel freed his blade, and the man clutched his neck as he stumbled away from the melee.

The other two brigands and the knight looked up at Sir Drummel in surprise, but the knight afoot was well trained and took only a moment to realize his advantage. With his own long sword, the knight afoot sank his blade into the chest of the man in front of him. The blade pierced the heart and protruded from his back. The knight afoot withdrew his sword, and the man fell to the grassy floor, dead before he landed. A pool of blood formed beneath his inert body.

Sir Drummel made another large arc with his sword and caught the third brigand in the skull. The man's eyes rolled up in his skull as though he were trying to see the sword caught in his skull. And he fell. Sir Drummel's sword was still embedded in the man's skull as he fell

dead to the earth. The sword was yanked from Sir Drummel's gauntleted hand.

Frowning, Sir Drummel dismounted and unfastened his helm. His thick black beard was saturated with sweat, as was the rest of his face. He looked to the knight afoot, who was trying to clean away the blood, which was caked in his eye, with a leather gloved hand.

"How fare thee sir knight?" Drummel called.

"Merrily, thanks to your bravery, sir knight," the knight afoot said as he sheathed his sword. Sheathing our sword first was a sign of trust among knights. "I am Sir Gaiwon the Fleet. And how may I call you, sir?"

"I am Sir Drummel the Blazen." Then he too sheathed his sword after retrieving it from his fallen foe. "Thou art skilled to defend thyself against so many brigands to come away with only that wound to show for it."

"You honor me, sir. May I ask where thou ist destined?"

"I am heading North to Danel, sir," Drummel replied.

"May I return the honor you pay me by accompanying you as far as Danel? You saved my life, and now I am bound to protect yours. It would honor me more to ride honor for you," Sir Gaiwon said as he inclined his head in a sign of respect.

"Mount, for I plan to be through these woods by nightfall," Drummel said as he mounted his own mare.

Sir Gaiwon retrieved his helm from where it had fallen and mounted his fine roan gelding. The two pulled reigns, and Sir Gaiwon followed behind Sir Drummel. The two were soon plodding along through the forest. Meandering around trees and boulders.

Before long the two knights were talking of their own exploits and the recent exploits of others, and news of the kingdom abroad. Sir Drummel was grateful for the news he received. He had not spoken to another living soul for near a moon. While the two rode on, the sky cleared and the sun shone down through the branches, giving off a green glow which mingled with the golden rays that filtered through the branches. Life returned to the forest as its inhabitants began to forage once more.

After a few hours of solid riding, the two knights came upon a shack, and not too far off they spied a weathered old man kneeling to a tree. Around the tree candles were lit, an idol could be seen, a chalice wafted off the smell of mulled wine, a plate of cakes sat next to the chalice, and a few other objects which could not be identified. The man slowly stood as he heard the two horses approach. His head was bald and his white beard reached near to his waist. He was draped in blue robes and a pentagram hung from his neck.

"Witch!" hollered Sir Drummel as he began to unsheathe his sword. "Blasphemous heathen!"

"Hold!" Sir Gaiwon said as he caught Sir Drummel's sword arm. "You would strike down a defenseless old man?"

"He is a spawn of Satan himself! He sold his soul to the Lord of Darkness!" Sir Drummel hollered back. He fought against Sir Gaiwon's hold on his arm and won, releasing his sword.

"I am no such thing!" cried the old man. "I follow the Old Religion, which does not concern *your* devil!"

"Then you are pagan. Swear now to the true God or I shall strike thee down where you stand!" Sir Drummel proclaimed in his best preacher's voice.

"Then you will have to slay me *good*, sir knight," the old man said as he planted his fists on his hips and stood waiting for death.

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Sir Drummel raised his sword to give a blow that would end the old man's life, but Sir Gaiwon caught his arm again, preventing the downward stroke.

"Why dost thou stop my hand?" Sir Drummel asked confusedly. He could not understand why Sir Gaiwon would not allow him to deal God's will.

"He is a defenseless old man who has done no wrong!" Sir Gaiwon shot back.

"He is pagan filth, which must be cleansed from God's flock!" Sir Drummel returned.

"You are no knight! What happened to the oaths you took upon receiving your sword and stirrups? We are to defend those weaker than ourselves against those who would cause them harm. We are to be chivalrous in all we do. This is not chivalrous! And you are no knight!" Sir Gaiwon spat at Sir Drummel.

"You would dare insult me so. Your words are no less than a challenge on your life. Would thou forfeit thine life for this pagan heathen?"

"He is an innocent who requires my protection. I am bound by *my* oaths as a knight of honor to protect him. If that requires my taking of arms against thee, then so be it!" Sir Gaiwon said as he too unsheathed his sword.

"You claim I have no honor, well we shall settle this honorably. Trial by combat, swords. Let God our Father judge who is just. If you yield or die, I am just and the pagan dies. If I die, do as thou wilt with the blasphemer."

The horses were hobbled behind the shack, and the field of judgement was set upon a clearing behind the shack. The two knights armoured and prepared themselves for battle. Sir Gaiwon stood near the shack with the old man.

"You should not do this. I fear there will be two dead today rather than one," the old man counseled as he fitted the helm onto sir Gaiwon. "Men like he will never see reason. They are blinded by their religious zeal. No room for both religions in their eyes, which means no room for me."

"My oaths and honor would not allow me to stand aside while he butchered you," Sir Gaiwon paused as he looked out at where sir Drummel practiced his sword forms. "I am a knight of merit. I shall prevail. Bless me elder."

"I will not bless you under your god," the old man admitted.

"It does not matter in the end," Sir Gaiwon said as he knelt before the elder.

The old man began to say a prayer in old Gaelic. An ancient prayer, forgotten by most. The Old Religion was dying out, replaced by the new Christian God. His people were being persecuted and burned and hunted down for their beliefs while all they wanted to do was live in peace with nature. The old man finished the prayer and Sir Gaiwon rose.

He took his shield and sword in each hand and made for the field.

SIR GAIWON AND SIR DRUMMEL met in the center of the small field. They saluted with their swords.

"We have come here today to settle a matter of honor, honorably. May the just prevail and may God have mercy on your soul," Sir Drummel said and the trial commenced.

Swords struck shields and the field rang with the sound.

The two knights maneuvered about one another, blocking and parrying each other's blows. Defend then attack. Retreat then attack. Charge and parry.

They both fought like true knights. Each made contact with the other only to be deflected before doing harm. Then sir Gaiwon's sword caught in the joint of Sir Drummel's left

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arm. The sword cut deep into the arm, but the blade was snapped in two as Sir Drummel twisted his arm in pain. Sir Drummel's arm hung useless at his side. The end of sir Gaiwon's blade still protruded from it. Sir Drummel had no shield, but Sir Gaiwon had no sword.

Sir Drummel swung his long sword, but Sir Gaiwon raised his shield in time. The blade struck the shield with so much force that it sent sir Gaiwon down on his arse. He lay there on the ground beneath his shield. Sir Drummel stood above him, pounding repeatedly down on Sir Gaiwon's shield, jarring him where he lay. Then he struck sir Gaiwon's helm and jarred it from its proper position. Sir Gaiwon was blinded. He could not see his attacker or his impending death.

The second blow knocked the helm from Sir Gaiwon's head. The battered helm oddly rolled away from the pair. Sir Gaiwon looked up to see sir Drummel's sword point hovering just above his face.

"Ask quarter and it shall be given. I did not save you just to kill you," Sir Drummel said in lowered tones just for the two of them to hear.

"I would sooner die than be given quarter by someone who lacks any honor!" Sir Gaiwon said through clenched teeth.

Both men shut their eyes to avoid seeing death. Sir Drummel forced his sword down into Sir Gaiwon's skull. He felt it scrape bone and pierce through the brain, then more bone and finally earth.

Sir Drummel opened his eyes to see that it was a corpse beneath him and no longer a living man. The man whom earlier he had saved and befriended was not even a man now, he was a lifeless body of flesh and bone encased in steel.

Sir Drummel stood above the body of his fellow knight and said a small prayer to his god to judge him fairly before the gates of Heaven.

"See what your religion has wrought. See where your Christian kindness has found you. Death. That is the path you follow. That is the path your god has lain at your feet," the old man said in great contempt.

Sir Drummel never said a word. He simply unsheathed his dagger and turned on the old man. With a quick pull of the dagger, blood spilled down the slit in the old man's throat. The old man began to gurgle and clutch at his throat as though he could capture his life slipping away. He fell to his knees. Still gasping for air, for help, for something. Then he was dead.

SIR DRUMMEL WATCHED as the two bodies burned on their biers. He smelled the horrid stench of burning human flesh. He watched until both were nothing but large piles of ashes. Then he mounted his own mare and tied the gelding's reins to his saddle and began his journey back through the woods. All was silent, as though every creature and plant were saying a prayer. For the souls of the two dead, or for his own soul. He could not tell.

Steven J. Migash

Hughey Man

THAT'S MY NAME. I'm moving at 75 miles per hour. On my way to Colorado on Interstate 70. Striking out on my own. The highway is my only friend. My speeding, fire-red Harley Davidson is not my friend; it is an extension of myself. The typical biker I'm not, but what's a typical biker, what's a typical anything?

White lines shoot by on my left. The sun lights my path and heats my soul. When I stop tonight, I think I might camp out. A night under the stars would be much appreciated at this point.

This moment has been coming for some time. The last straw fell, and here I am, flying down the highway on an ambiguous journey to say the least. Everything I didn't sell or pack onto the bike, I left behind. My origin is State College, Pennsylvania. My reasons for leaving are not as easily explained.

I'm 21 years old, and already the magic is gone. Life's mystery has faded away. The secret no longer plagues me in a whole new way: it doesn't, which is much worse than before. The burden of knowledge weighs down on me like an Oklahoma government building.

I said I'm not a typical biker. This is an understatement. I bought this miracle machine that I'm riding with most of the money that has accumulated in my name over the years. It's a 1960 Harley Sportster, and it cost \$4800. I bought it from some guy outside of town. He looked like an old school hippie who had out grown his younger days so he sold his bike. Things seem to work out that way; the pieces of the human puzzle fit together in just the right way that my path crossed with this old man's at just the right time.

I had about six grand saved up, plus what I made selling my computer, printer, TV, VCR, and car. This provided about \$2500 more. Thus, I have about \$3500 left. I still have my Ray Bans, Hawaiian shirts, cowboy hat and other essentials.

My last week there was probably the craziest and most fucked up week of my life. I was a junior at Penn State, when I was still enrolled. My major was philosophy with a minor in psychology. Subjects like these tend to mess with your head in a big way. Over the years I'd been learning and discovering certain aspects of reality and where I fit into it. We were having finals week for the spring semester and some hard core stress was crushing my skull. I hate to say that I couldn't handle it, that I was weak, that the world got the best of me, that this society was not meant for me, but I have to because it's the truth.

Anyway, however it came to be, it happened. I was in my apartment when it happened. I had been overly stressed, overworked, under-slept, and under-laid. I was sitting on our corduroy couch, mine and my roommate's, sort of meditating, sort of having a nervous break down. Lately, I had been thinking way too much about the meaning of life, God, the world, and the universe in general. This was the result of a personal obsession I had with trying to solve the riddles of the universe. Needless to say, a pursuit like this is bound to drive you to insanity. For insanity is indeed what lies at the end of that road. The road of the intellectual with the restless heart, the path of the seeker, the grail at the end of the quest is unadulterated

insanity. Remember this. Nietzsche found this out. So did Jim Morrison. So did all of the prophets and religion makers.

The insanity is not like that of the standard schizophrenic. It is an internal torment that eats away one's self. The tree of knowledge has no mercy on those who eat its fruit. The insanity does not manifest itself like usual craziness. It's like knowing a horror that is indescribable and living with that horror, suppressing its presence, fighting it, despising it and trying to live with it. You fool yourself into not believing the truth that you know so well.

So I was sitting on the couch and thinking about such things when I cracked. I went over the edge of the waterfall. For my journey into the downward spiral I needed a vehicle, like the people who went down Niagara Falls in barrels. I needed to find my barrel. I found it on the coffee table. The newspaper was open to the classified section, and I happened to see the ad for the motorcycle that I'm on right now. I decided to name it The Mahayana, which is a branch of Buddhism meaning Greater Vehicle. I hoped that my newly purchased motorcycle would have the power to send me to Nirvana like the true Mahayana of the Buddhists. At this point it remains to be seen.

Speeding along now I've been on the road for about ten hours. I just crossed the Indiana state line. I left in the early morning at around two. I stopped for gas and food, but that's about all. I have a motorcycle license and I know how to ride. My uncle taught me when I was sixteen. It's really a great experience to ride a motorcycle; they're so much different from cars. You're more one with the road. The power between your legs, the wind flowing all around your body, and death staring up at you from the pavement, moving by at incredible rates of speed with nothing standing in between.

What I've done is beginning to dawn on me. Reality might be setting in. What about my family and friends? Is it too late? Have I gone too far? How did I get here? Is this how to go about resonding to my revelation? Wait a minute. What the hell am I saying? Those are all the questions that started me on this journey, and damn it to hell I'm going to finish it. No more worrying. No more stress. No more debates. Just me, the road, and the horizon. That's all I need right now. I'll be like Kerouac, like *Easy Rider*, like Hunter S. Thompson. Fuck society. I gave it a try, and it leaves a hell of a lot to be desired. I'm on my way to enlightenment, I can't forget that. This journey has the virtue, which the universe can only envy. The universe is chaos. No order. No plan. Just chaos. There is no purpose or light at the end of the tunnel. This is the reason that man creates religion. Mankind knows damn well he's alone in this abyss, so he created his own purpose when he created God. Without some kind of purpose man would have no reason to leave the house, let alone reproduce. When you stare into the abyss long enough you're bound to go insane.

So there I was on the couch facing the abyss—Godless and pointless. I came to the conclusion that it was time to start making my own rules. I was sick of living out my program. I was now my own entity, and I was going to SEIZE THE DAY. "I'm 21 and in the prime of my life and here I go. Time to get the fuck out of Dodge!" I felt more alive than I ever had in my entire life. I was the master of my own destiny. When I go to my grave it'll be on my own terms, not those of some Bible thumping cock sucker. That is the only certainty in my life: I am going to die, and when I die, dead is what I'll be, just like every other clump of walking stardust that ever plodded around this blue planet. "I hereby resolve to make the most of every day that I have left. I'm going to enjoy the sunsets and the flowers and the grass and trees and everything."

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My mind reels. Moving along. I am one with the road. It's noon. I'm hungry. I want to stop and eat. I do.

I pull into a rest stop with an Arby's fast food restaurant. Interesting symbolism, I think to myself, since Arby's gimmick is western, cowboy style food, and here I am heading west against my own frontier. I order the chicken fingers meal, which is in my opinion one of the few things worth living for. Women are also quite an incentive for survival as well.

I'm feeling rather boggled and confused as I sit here eating, yet at the same time I am exhilarated. How long can I maintain this, I wonder? Is it possible that I can handle such an unprepared and dramatic lifestyle change as this. Just as I'm thinking this, I see a state police trooper pull into the rest stop. I feel slightly nervous, but I know it's quite impossible that anyone would be looking for me yet, or even worried after only ten hours. I don't think much of authority in general. I think of the weed in my pocket but am not too worried. I finish my meal and head out.

On the road again I feel like smoking a joint. I light it casually and slow down to 55 to enjoy the scenery. Slow inhales give the sunny day a new vividness. In a moment or two I'm completely at ease. I feel warm and tingly as the wind flows around my body. My leather jacket is hot from the sun, and it penetrates through me down to my soul, if in fact such a thing exists. All the tensions of my school life are vanished. No worries, as the Aborigines of Australia put it.

My high is wearing off now and the sun is descending. It's about three o'clock. I stop for gas, a drink, and some cigarettes. What will my parents think. Can I ever go back or is this to be my final hooray?

Kansas. The plains are so flat. I camped out last night. It's about four o'clock in the afternoon. I wonder what the Rockies will look like. I'm feeling pretty good. I just smoked a bowl and had a cigarette. I believe I'm enjoying existentialism. But I fear that it can't last. That which I am running away from plagues me when I fail to suppress it. My plan may just yet fail, but not until I get to the Rockies.

I'm at the Comfort Inn tonight. I should hit the Rockies tomorrow, around noon, depending on when I get up. Tomorrow is a day of great importance, but what lies after that frightens the hell out of me. My plan is bound for chaos.

I awake to the sound of a garbage truck clanging and banging as it empties the refuse of this modern facility. It reminds me of college, of cities, of modern man and his waste. On my bike now, I feel anxious and uneasy. I light cigarette after cigarette. To fight the tension I speed up to about eighty. Eighty-five. Ninety. A siren blasts from behind me. I've come this far to be deterred by this! Damn it. I decide to accelerate. One hundred. One hundred and five. One hundred and ten. I've topped out. He's gaining on me. Bastard! This is it. Do I give in or press on?

There's the Rockies! They move out of the horizon like a ghost. They are blurry because of their distance and the morning haze. They are beautiful. A pothole comes out of nowhere. I'm flying. For an instant I'm like a bird gazing down from the air. The pavement smashes into my body. I feel my head slam into the concrete.

Nothingness.





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The Palimpsest Review is a publication of the
Pennsylvania State University—
an equal opportunity university.