



1999

We are not who we are

Patrick Bishop
Colby College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/seniorscholars>

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Colby College theses are protected by copyright. They may be viewed or downloaded from this site for the purposes of research and scholarship. Reproduction or distribution for commercial purposes is prohibited without written permission of the author.

Recommended Citation

Bishop, Patrick, "We are not who we are" (1999). *Senior Scholar Papers*. Paper 29.
<https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/seniorscholars/29>

This Senior Scholars Paper (Open Access) is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Research at Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Scholar Papers by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Colby.

WE ARE NOT WHO WE ARE

By

J. PATRICK BISHOP

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the
Senior Scholars Program

COLBY COLLEGE
1999

APPROVED:

Monica Wood
(your TUTOR)

Elisa Naranjo Arnt
(your first READER)

Pamela Thoma
(your second READER)

Servando Guadalupe
CHAIR, INDEPENDENT STUDY COMMITTEE

CONTENTS

The Pause Before I Say My Name	1
A Slow Way to Die	15
The Gambler's Brother, or What About the Rabbits	30
What This Isn't	41
American Roulette	48
Exposures	59
Easy Like Drinking Water	64

The Pause Before I Say My Name

Shortly after lunch my Dad put me on the northbound bus leaving Hartford. Before I stepped into the vehicle he stood there coughing into his hand. "Well, Paul. Call us after you get settled in," he said. And then, as if it were an afterthought, he handed me a crisp five dollar bill. "For lunch."

Moving up I-95 I watched the land unfurl, begin to vary in character and population. When I got off the bus in Portland, my friend Luke embraced me, claspings his arms around mine. I stood still like that for a little while, with the stub of my baggage ticket in my right hand. As Luke grabbed my duffel bag and began to cross the street to the parking lot I remembered a billboard I had seen on the ride. "Maine," I started, quickening my pace to cross the street before the lights changed, "the way life should be."

Luke gave a fast, thin smile, and looked away as if he had forgotten something. "I've got a surprise at the house," he said. "Hey, *our* house." We drove the next twenty minutes to our place with that between us.

Jessica and Amanda came out to meet us at the door. I had met Jessica while Luke and I were still in school. Amanda, I had never seen before. Both girls wore their hair long and were easy to look at.

Luke brought me through the house, starting with the room he and Jessica shared, and ending with my own empty one. We put my bags down on the hardwood floor. He took me into the kitchen, displayed the contents of the refrigerator, showed me the utensils, where the bread was. He paused in the living room and pointed to the fireplace we wouldn't need for months. While we were there Jessica called to us from the porch. "Herbs, herbs, herbs," she chirped, like a primary school teacher.

So, Luke and I went to the porch. And in our lawn chairs we smoked Luke's surprise twice. As the pot started to settle in, Luke's and my voice rose in volume. Jessica and Amanda had turned to each other and were sharing a cigarette. They took turns

holding it in their hands and speaking in between drags. Our porch looked onto a field which stretched about a hundred yards before reaching a thick line of trees. Dusk diffused through the sky like smoke. It wasn't long before we were talking in the dark, with the furtive motions of a cigarette's ember as the only point of light.

Amanda stood up. "Paul," she said, ducking her head so that we were on the same level. "Jess and I are going to make dinner. Stay here. Talk." She walked into the darkened house turning the lights on as she went. Jessica paused for a second, watching her leave, before stubbing out a cigarette and following. On her way out she touched Luke on the shoulder and turned to us. "Want anything?"

I asked her for one of the beers I had noticed in the refrigerator. "Make it two," Luke said. She brought them back to us opened and returned inside.

Something about the way Luke said "make it two" got us laughing. When we stopped we both started to lean back in our lawn chairs, and the sound of the aluminum creaking in unison started us off again.

Luke lit a citronella candle. He brought the marijuana out from a mason jar kept by his chair. He then held it close to the light, encouraging me to look at it, even smell it. It's odor was spicy. We passed the glass pipe between us, and when we were done Luke gave me the number.

"Seven hundred and fifty dollars. That's one ounce," he said. "I got this stuff *this* morning, a guy I know around here, who left for Vermont this afternoon. Goin' to do something for the University. The thing is, he's got more." Luke rubbed his fingers through his beard, and the next words came out as an exhalation, a sigh. "But he's got to do it this weekend. Don't ask me why, man, I don't know why." He lit a cigarette.

"What's the ounce for?"

"Us. People I know. It's good money, easy to make."

By this time the high was a cloudy and electric thing, something I decided to temper with the beer I'd forgotten. Inside, I heard the girls making the house bustle and jive with

sound: the muffled timbre of their voices, the delicate haunts their feet made on the hardwood floor, the hushed, lowered tones that meant secrets were being told. Outside, Luke and I drank cold beers from long, sweating bottles.

"Well, think about it now," Luke said. "This is Friday. If we're serious about this...I mean, if this is something we want to get into, we should leave tomorrow."

"I'm thinking." I leaned my head back in the lawn chair and stared at what was in front of me. In the darkness, the divisions that separated the land from the trees and the trees from the sky had lost their integrity, blended in different shades of blue and black. You could forget about everything you saw.

I took another sip of my beer and began to do the breathing exercises my mother had taught me the night before. Breathing in through my nose with the tip of my tongue on the roof of my mouth I imagined a blue gas entering my body. Breathing out through my mouth, with the tip of my tongue on the ridge of my gums and lower teeth, I imagined a red steam being released and whispering its way to space. I closed my eyes, drank some more beer, breathed deeply, and after a while began to feel a stir and itch in my palms. I assumed this sensation to be the accumulation of my life force, or what my mother called *Q'ih*, the Korean pronunciation of the Chinese word *Ch'ih*.

My mother taught me that word in that way because that's how it was taught to her when she was a young girl in Kwang-Ju. But if my mother had to give that feeling to words now, she'd probably use something like the word "God," because that's what it is for her: God reaching his fingers through her nose and moving a pulse through her body. In her eyes God is the perfect houseguest living upstairs. He appears infrequently, and pays the rent by making something good happen, or letting you see a piece of your life that's extraordinary.

My father believes in character. He's got a quotation framed at the gas station he owns outside of Hartford that says "Character is fate." It's something by a man named Heraclitus, a philosopher he read in high school, before he went to fight in the war our

country lost, before he transferred to Korea after his tour, before he met my mother. It's a good thought in a cheap frame behind the register at the station. I think it's there to keep the employees for stealing.

It was my father who told me to leave home after graduation. When he said it I felt a strange lightness. I knew that this was his way of showing me that my transgression was beyond the scope of his punishment and forgiveness, and that in this respect I was finally an adult. I thought about Jason, and felt the weight of this effort sink through me like a cold stone.

I carried that feeling with me when I stepped on the bus, and wondered if it was a thing that would become a part of me if I carried it long enough. I wondered if I would miss letting it go. These were my thoughts at the time: I had come north to a new place, needing a job, and having to pay rent next Tuesday. Things were confused. That's easy to understand.

But there on the porch, I began to breathe deeper. Inside I could hear the music the girls had chosen, and then the sounds of their feet approaching on the hardwood floor. Their coming was a sort of awareness. They called us in, and we divided the stir-fry equally between the four of us before returning to the porch. Sitting in our respective lawn chairs, we began and finished our meals. The food was colorful and vaguely bland, but I came away from it feeling virtuous and light.

Jessica brought out a cigarette, tucked her hair behind her back, and lit it. "Shit, Paul. Has Luke talked to you?"

"Yeah. I'm thinking."

She took a few puffs, smoking languorously, down to the filter. "It would be nice to have that boost before the rent's due. I mean, that's how we feel."

I asked Luke to get the the bottle of rum I'd noticed resting in the freezer and we all took drinks. Jessica wrinkled her nose after each sip. We smoked another pipe, and Luke began to tell a story about one of the funny things that had happened to us while we were

drinking. Luke gives each one a title. The Time You Bit a Dog. The Time We Took You to the Hospital. The Time You Passed Out in the Shower. When he tells these stories they're interesting because they seem like they happened to someone else. We sat there and listened. Eventually, Jessica started to shuffle cards and I told her to deal me out.

Something about the smell of the booze made me remember Sunday mornings. As children Jason and I cooked brunch for our parents after Mass on Sunday morning. Once we were both in college, we repeated the ritual on vacations and breaks. But, by that time the give and take of our teamwork had been busted: Jason cooked, I would lie on the linoleum floor, or run cold water over my face, the hangover making my blood feel like cement.

When we brought the food to our parents my mother would notice me, look for my eyes. In those moments she'd stare out our window to the small grove of trees, the darkest place in the yard.

My mother is like wind at Jason's back. And in most respects he has done everything to please her. Class president, a genius on the soccer field, undergrad and business school in Cambridge.... Things she told her friends about at the Hartford Korean Womens' Society with something like triumph.

Sarah, his fiancée, was his only transgression. Our mother believed that they were too young to want to be married. Get serious when you have money, she reasoned. That way you can have any girl you want. But she gave in. I think that she even began to like Sarah. Sometimes I even think she liked her for the ways in which they were different. Sarah's torn jeans and wrinkled on purpose shirts from India, the ease of her speech that my mother, even after twenty five years in this country, could never impersonate.

When my mother was Sarah's age, she was a college woman in Korea who spoke English, which was something extraordinary back then. She had a name in a language I can't speak. And then her father died, and she got a job as an interpreter with the eighth army in Seoul. She married a G.I. and chose a new name he could pronounce. Christine.

Then she came here, had two children, and in the shopping malls and department stores she knew that the other mothers in the aisles or the boys behind the registers didn't see the student. And maybe sometimes, catching herself in the mirror with a load of laundry, or while driving her children to school, she saw what they saw: a woman with almond eyes and a family. A woman named Christine. Sometimes if you listen closely you can hear that in the way my mother says her own name, a short pause before the words come out, as if she's thinking.

My mother taught me how to cook omelets and pancakes. And while I cooked for my housemates I wished I had seen her before Dad drove me to the bus station. She stayed in the kitchen, still in her bathrobe. Thinking of her I felt the fatigue of traveling, a tightness in the cords of muscle running parallel to my spine. I left the eggs in the pan, and turned the oven off. I moved back to the porch. My housemates were playing cards by the light of a candle. As I watched them, I figured that saving my money was one way of staying here, but that spending it was another way of staying.

"Luke, I'm in," I said.

He nodded, and turned back to his cards. He started to smile. And then the fatigue was gone. The effort of eating and breathing and everything being so difficult between my brother and me seemed to move into a corner somewhere, and I felt a distancing, or a forgetting of Sarah's mother dying in a hospital, my father asking me to leave, the long bus ride here. I sat there, feeling myself moving in the present tense, pouring a short one from the bottle, waiting, forgetting. Watch me, I thought. C'mon. Watch.

*

I woke up in the lawn chair half an hour before sunrise. The porch was littered with cigarettes, the table strewn with plates and glasses.

The misting fields gave the morning an edge and a fineness.

I thought about Sarah, and I said a prayer for her and her mother, as I have every day since the funeral. In my prayer, I asked that Sarah's mother find a long green day,

something that didn't remind her of the cancer that killed her over six years. I also prayed that Sarah would find an easy way to go through this. I didn't feel strange making these prayers, as they were for others. God may not listen to what you want for yourself, but probably pays attention to what you ask for other people. That's why I said nothing for my brother, although he probably needed one. But I figured anything that I would ask for him--that he would find peace--would require him to forgive me, and in this respect all prayers for him were acts of self-interest.

I went to the fridge and fished for a leftover beer. After that was done I smoked some pot. By this time the sun was up, entering the windows horizontally. But the drugs were taking the edge off the morning. Something about the quality of the sunlight reminded me of standing with Sarah at the funeral. We stood on a piece of the green earth, under a wide, low tree. I remembered watching cars pull away on the asphalt, and felt as if all the moments we'd spent together conspiring against us, leading to us and that tree and her voice on that day, asking "Where's your brother?"

But by the time Luke and Jessica woke up I had remembered and forgotten. There were suddenly other voices in the house and a direction to go in. Jessica gave me seven hundred and fifty dollars in twenties and tens. I wrapped the money in a rubber band I keep around my ponytail and put it in my front pocket. As we loaded into the car, Amanda joined Jessica on the porch in her pajamas. Jessica waved to us from the door, giving us a thumbs up sign. While we were starting up I rolled down the window and said to her, "When we return, everything will be different." Then we drove away.

We headed south on I-95, waiting to catch the turnpike that would take us up to Burlington. All the way to Massachusetts Luke and I kept the conversation banal. Movies. Things we'd seen on T.V. or read in the newspaper. After we'd started back up north, Luke turned to me. "So what went on?"

I thought about telling him, but didn't know where to begin. It seemed to be a story whose story spiraled backwards into infinity, past me, past my mother and my father and the people who had raised them. "Just some family shit. You know."

"I hear that." He kept his hands on the wheel. "Must have been serious."

As we drove into Vermont, Luke said. "A land like none other," he said. And, on some level, he was right. There were the hills, rolling like waves caught in stop-time, tawny shades of hay, dairy cows grazing. There were those things, but there was also us, our car, and the things inside it, moving on, cutting through. I'd come up here with my family as a child. That time, my parents were fighting. Eventually, my mother threw the map out the window. "Jesus, Christine," my father said as I turned around and watched the map disappear down the road.

I told this story to Luke and he laughed. "Ain't parents always doing some sort of shit?" I laughed with him, and then stopped. I felt the restlessness again which came as a pulse traveling through my nose, into my hands, then going somewhere deeper, the quiet place where we tell secrets and confess.

It could be an easy thing, I thought. Find a church in Burlington. Walk down the long hall to the confessional. Sit down. Talk to the man behind the screen. Tell him that sometimes we end up being the people we think we are. Tell him that we carry our lives the same way we carry our sins. And hearing these things he would know them to be what they are: the firmest words of my belief, the only ones I have that are sacred.

And then with this behind me, I would sit back and take a breath. I would listen to the measured breaths of the priest, and I'd feel someone watching me, someone further up near the windows, or down the aisles of pews, and I'd speak again. I'd say that Sarah's mother died on a Thursday and I did an easy thing. I skipped my weekly counseling meeting in town, skipped the people sitting in chairs saying their names, talking about how booze had ruined their lives, and how they wished they could find God. I got into my car and drove north to find Jason, to bring him home. I stood outside the door in his

dormroom waiting, and then I stood outside his dorm, and then I walked into Cambridge and looked for his face in the crowds that moved in and out of theatres, the people ascending and descending to the T station. I imagined that my brother was one of these people without a name and I felt something inside me threaten to tear. So I went back to his dorm, spent the night in a lounge, and waited the rest of the morning before coming back. Sarah's mother was buried on a Saturday and Jason wasn't there. Later, on the phone, he told he didn't come because he didn't know what to say. But at the funeral, he was absent. And after the wooden box was covered with cool ground, after the mourners in their dark suits and darker veils had moved towards the hill, I stood next to Sarah's kneeling shape. "I want you to drive me somewhere," she said.

I took her to the high soccer field and I loosened my tie and shook out my pony tail as she played with a blade of grass. "I remember," she started, "your mother told me that when her father died, there was a whole process of bowing and cooking and lighting incense." She coughed. "I wish there was a ritual I had to follow."

And to tell the next part to the priest, I would take it slowly. I would make him understand that when I drove and bought the bottle of bourbon I did it not because I thought it was a smart thing to do, and not because I thought it would make the space inside of her fold over and close up, but because I thought I could give her a rhythm, and because that bottle was the only process, the only motions I had to give her--and in this respect it was the best of my good intentions.

And the rest would be easy, because a priest hears a lot. Driving back to Sarah's house, the windows darkened, her father in bed. Her fumbling with the key, so I go to help, taking the key from her hand. She faces me and tucks a loose strand of hair behind my ear before resting her hand on my shoulder, and I'm watching the key, and working the key, and it's all I want to be concentrating on because I know I'm lost when I stop. But every motion has to end, and I turn and face Sarah and put my hand on her rib, tuck it under the inside of her left arm. And we walk like that, slow-motion tango, upstairs into

her room. There's a thin ribbon of silk tied around her neck and I wonder what her hands do when she takes it off, and even after we are done, starting in languor and breaking into something drunken and rabid, even after that and she's fallen asleep, I feel the urge to take it off. I feel my sex below me, emptied and slick, and putting my hand on her hip I nuzzle my lips against her neck, feeling the clean line between her skin and the fabric, feeling loose and athletic.

Then Sarah mumbles something small. Consonants mostly. But I consider the distance in those words, the immeasurable spaces between me and her nocturnal timbre, her dream talk. I take a deep breath. And even though I know that our bodies are like weapons, that mistakes always end the way they're scripted—even though I know this, I lie to myself, give into the feeling that makes one moment seem like it could be every moment, and I want her, and imagine that I deserve her. And of all the ways I've misfired, of all the flaws in my character, I know this one to be my greatest.

These were things I did. Things I could have talked about. And sitting there, in the car, pulling into Burlington, I wanted to talk so badly that it was almost as if I had already done it. It seemed possible.

But then I considered the things I called my life: our house in Maine, this road, the money in my pocket and the willingness to spend it. It was the willingness that was important. Chance can bring absolution. Luke's friend could be gone. We could crash the car on the way there, never make it. But there's circumstance, and there's intention. People go into confession Sunday mornings and come out looking like their suits have been freshly pressed. That seems strange to me, considering that you only confess the sins you commit instead of the ones you were ready to commit were the circumstances a little different.

Luke's friend Brock was living in a fraternity house at the University, about fifteen minutes walk from where we parked. On the walk up, Luke and I came up with a code. If anything seemed wrong we would cross our fingers. Not that we were in any danger, but

we just wanted to keep things manageable. "Just have to watch each other's hands," he said.

The lawn was strewn with furniture. The letters ZBT were painted on the dark brick in white. We walked past a pool table to a door on the first floor. The floor was wood, reminding me of the floor of the cabin I slept in when I went to camp. After a few knocks, we were in. There were some loud exclamations from the two of them, and a lot of shaking hands.

Brock, a tall, heavy man with dreadlocks, was living "the life." As he explained to Luke, offering us seats on the couch near the TV, he was doing a study for the University which required him to smoke cigarettes, and take these pharmaceutical pills so they could measure his heartbeat, for which the University was paying him fourteen hundred dollars. "The life," he said. "Just smoking butts, and selling herb."

Brock rummaged through a drawer and brought out a large ziplock bag, placing it gingerly on the coffee table. It was the wrong pot. There was a moment of pause as we looked at the bag, before Luke reached for it, with his eyes narrowed. This pot had been bricked down, maybe even bleached. Luke asked how much Brock wanted. It was the right price for the wrong stuff. Seven hundred and fifty dollars—something we couldn't make back even if we were breaking this into dimes and selling to high schoolers.

"This isn't exactly what we were expecting," Luke said.

"It wasn't what I was expecting either. Look, Luke." Brock lit a cigarette. "I get screwed too."

"No, this is great. You think maybe we could just buy something smaller?"

"Well. You could. But I *got* this for you." Brock's hands were in the air, with his palms facing the ceiling. "I'm not fucking you over any more than I got fucked over."

I looked at Luke. I knew the contents of my wallet. I knew that if we just walked away from this, I would be able to scrape by with rent. I could find a job. I could do things that didn't cost money, visit libraries and parks. I could pretend it was day one, the

first day in Maine, the new day. But it would mean that we were going to have to come home with nothing changed, same roads, same car, same nothing. And even as Luke crossed his index finger over his middle I felt myself pull away, bring out the money. In my mind it was like we had already spent it.

On the walk down, Luke's lips were pursed and white. I had the purchase in a backpack. We went to a diner on Church Street. Outside the sunlight was warm on my back. Inside, I liked the closeness of the diner, the small-handed efficiency of our waitress who was only beautiful when she smiled. I ordered a hamburger. Luke went to make a phone call. I thought of numbers and the money I needed. I looked outside, and saw the sky, a line which stretched from where we were and touched the other side of the world. Depending upon where you stand, the horizon touches everywhere.

Luke came back and ordered coffee without speaking to me until he was halfway through his first cup. "It's one thing if you were in this alone," he started, looking towards the bottom of his drink. "But we were in this too. That was seven hundred and fifty dollars you threw away..."

"We got something in return."

"You throw it away if you can't break even." His voice was soft but fast. "Christ, Paul, we were together on this one."

I stood up and went to the pay phone. Inside the booth I muted the sounds of the restaurant and even though the glass was clear, I felt that no one was watching me. It was four in the afternoon. I called collect. She answered in Korean.

"Mom, it's me."

She said my name and accepted the charges. "Are you at your house?"

"Mom, there's a problem." I spoke quickly and with dread because I wanted to incite the instincts that no mother lets go of. I wanted her to be scared. I wanted her to want to be my mother, and I wanted my voice to be enough for that.

When I told my mother I needed cash, she asked if I'd found a job.

"No. Christ, I just got here, Mom."

"What happened to the money you brought?"

"Mom, can you give it to me?"

There was a short pause. "Call your brother. Ask him for the money."

I sat there a moment. "He doesn't have that sort of money to spend."

"That's why you should ask him."

And before I could answer she was speaking fast. She said life was different in Korea, that family is the rock you build shelter on. She said my great grandfather had been a poet and a statesman, and our line was strong. Listening to my mother, I felt the weight of the blood in my heart. I figured that you come to a moment in your life where the things you do appear to you as the things you were meant to do. Mom was destined to leave her country, Jason was destined to lose his fiancée, I was destined to leave home. And I wanted to beat against that, put off that moment until I was doing something else. I put my head against the glass and rested it there. And she was ready to tell me more, but I hung up the phone.

After eating we started the drive down small winding roads to the interstate. On our way there, Luke hit a speed trap, a state trooper waiting by a speed limit sign whose lights spun blue and red in the rearview mirror. "Shit. Shit. Shit," Luke said quickly, putting on the brakes.

As I saw the officer approach I began to breathe in through my nose and out through my mouth. Focusing. It was dusk, not dark enough for a flashlight, but he carried one. At this moment, I wished I had called my brother. It would be the first time we would have spoken since the day of the funeral when I'd picked up the ringing phone after leaving Sarah's house and coming to our own. "Paul, I'm in Hartford," he said. "I made it that far." And he told me that he had hidden from me in his room. "I don't know why I did it," he said. "I was driving, and I was wondering what to say to her." I could

hear his voice gathering weight, unfastening, falling. "I had nothing to say. That's what it was."

And as the cop checked the registration, and we sat, I kept breathing, and began to feel myself lift. I would call my brother from Maine. I would tell him that the days were warm but the nights were still cool. I would tell him what it was like to sit on the porch and drink a beer as the land became blue and a candle burned a hole in the buzzing darkness. And even after the cop gave us the ticket and let us go, I kept with that thought. I figured that I would tell him all the things I've spent my life either trying to figure out or forget: like what it means to want things, or how my mother has two names and I have one and it is Paul. It is Paul. And he would give me a smile like the word YES, which would be him believing, because our blood is light and fast like mercury. And we would sit there, facing each other in our lawn chairs, breathing deeply as if it were our only chance.

A Slow Way to Die

1

Crystal snow dusted the streetlamps, fogging their incandescence. In the car, stopped outside his mother's house, Drake turned to his daughter, Sylvia. "Sylvia, hon? If Grandmother asks about Daddy smoking cigarettes... Remember what we talked about? Just say that you don't know, okay." While saying this, he leaned in close to her, as if telling her a secret, as if this motion was its own form of intimacy.

Sylvia nodded, chewing gum, teeth snapping, strands of hair fallen from her barettes.

They stepped onto the driveway. The small evergreen beside the front door--half shrub, half tree--was backlit from the porch light behind it. The brightness was tawny, detailed with shadows.

Drake's mother opened the door, gave Sylvia a hug, then turned to him and did the same. As she pulled away she squinted her eyes to the shapes of almonds. "You should stop smoking, Drake." Sylvia laughed and bounded inside.

Drake gave her a hard look. "Christ, Mom. Not now."

He moved inside. The house smelled like it always did, although it was noticeably cleaner since his father's death.

Drake moved into the kitchen and sat down on a stool. The counter was cluttered with spices and oils from the Korean grocery store his mother shopped at. Labels in a different language, contents unrecognizable. There, with the meat brewing in its own stew and the rice steaming quietly, he felt stillness. He rubbed his hands along the cords in his neck and wanted a cigarette. From the living room he heard his mother telling Sylvia a story. Their voices struck him as a secret confidence of sorts. This went on for twenty minutes while Drake tended the pots.

His mother returned with slow steps, a sadly beatific look on her face. She turned off the oven, picked up a flat, wooden spoon, and began to transfer the cooked food onto plates.

"She is so smart," she said in motion. "She reminds me of my mother. My mother was always the smartest girl from her village."

"You're saying that she reminds you of yourself."

"Did I say that?" She let out a sigh. "When she's old enough you should send her to a private school. She can go to Harvard."

"Then you'd have your wish, right, Mom?"

"Drake." She smacked the spoon against the edge of the pot. "Watch your voice. I know that this is hard. Now that your wife is gone. But if you feel so bad, you should go and stay with her. Don't give me that sour voice. Don't squint your eye."

"Christ, you spend nine years telling me I shouldn't have married her then you tell me I should chase on after her. Look, Mom. It's not always the way you think it is. Do you think it's always the way you think it is? Alison's down in Virginia. She took a job there. We're figuring things out."

"And when is Sylvia going down there?"

Drake paused. Some quality of the diamond patterned linoleum fixed his eyes on the floor. "Two weeks."

"And when are you going?"

"I don't know if I want to leave my job here. That's all."

"What are you going to do? Divorce?"

"That's all, Mom."

Drake's mother closed her mouth as if she'd swallowed a fly. She considered her son before curtly going about the business of preparing dinner. Drake's mother sustained herself upon detail. Despite the small party, the table was fully set, chopsticks and spoons resting on porcelain stands, an extra fork bedded on a napkin by Sylvia's plate. She gave

every motion a curtness, rapping her spoon as she placed the marinated beef upon a bed of lettuce, bumping the jars as she organized the different pickled appetizers and snacks in small porcelain bowls--as if the contents of these bowls were responsible for her quickness, her angered hand.

"All right, Mom," Drake began. "You've got something to say, some story you read in *Reader's Digest* or something about someone just like me." His mother glared at him. "Go on, Mom."

"Drake. My sister, when she was first married was so happy. She was my younger sister, and my father wouldn't allow her to marry before I did, because they were worried that I would never marry. That's how it was when I was growing up. But I could see how happy my sister was. So I begged my father to let her marry this man. And she did. Two weeks later, he slapped her on the face. He hit her so that she had to go to the hospital. In Korea, man can do anything."

"I'm sorry."

"Shh. Why do you always apologize? It's not your fault. That's not what I'm saying. My father heard about this. He went to their door in the middle of the night, he banged all night, screaming. He was saying that this man wasn't a man, he was more like a dog, that he was going to kill this man and then kill himself. That was the kind of man your grandfather was."

"Look, you want to hear a story? How about this one? A bear and rabbit are crapping in the woods..." Drake's mother clucked with disappointment. "C'mon, Mom. Hear me through. So the bear turns to the rabbit and says 'you have a problem with crap sticking to your fur?' Rabbit says no. So the bear wipes his butt with the rabbit."

"That's a joke. Not a story."

"My story was funny."

"Mine had a moral."

"And what was that?"

"Family stays with family." With that she moved into the dining room. She let that brew in him. At dinner, Drake ate ravenously, the way he imagined bulemics to do, with a frantic craving, relentless and unrecognizable. At three different points in the night he almost stepped outside for a cigarette, but resisted. So he had a bowl of cereal after the meal. Tried to watch some television while his mother and daughter played checkers.

By the time Sylvia and he were in the car his need for a cigarette had metabolized into a feeling of urgency, like urination or moving your bowels. No sooner than they had made the corner of the street he reached for his pack on the dashboard and lit one up.

Sylvia gave him a stange, knowing look, as if some wrong was being done that she couldn't locate. "Mrs. Sheldon says that smoking is bad, that we should tell our parents to quit." Drake nodded. "Grandmother says you should quit. Will you please quit, Daddy?"

"Christ, not you too now. Look, my mother... You should watch what you believe when you talk to her. Don't listen to her."

Sylvia had turned away. He noticed the back of her head and her trembling thigh. He felt an apology in his throat, and decided to keep it there. It was after all, the truth. She'd done things like that before. When his older brother Steven's wife had an abortion, she'd poisoned the family against him with her tongue and her moods, to the point that they didn't even keep contact with Steven anymore. He remembered the Thanksgiving his mother turned Steven away. He remembered listening to them argue at the door, sitting in the kitchen. He told himself that the kitchen was Switzerland, a neutral place, but eventually went into the living room and stood behind his mother. So he kept that apology in his throat.

2

Two months later, Drake's mother moved in.

"I don't know if this is going to work out," he told her over the phone.

"Quiet. You never answer the phone, and I need your help."

"What do you need?"

"I need to you to talk to the bank, and the real-estate, and I want to sell my car. I want to sell everything."

"Mom... What is it that you can't do?"

"Look, your father used to handle all this. I'm coming."

Drake considered telling his mother in his calmest voice that while she was not a native to this country, she had lived here for more than thirty years and could easily do those things on her own. Then, he decided to clean.

He started with the dishes. He rinsed the dishes that had been soaking for days in water that was now cold. After he rinsed the dishes, he let the cold water out of the drain. There was a ring of grease and soap demarking where the water level used to be. The scraps of food left behind on the sink made a strange mosaic.

Then he went on to the clothes. Putting what would fit in the washer, putting what was left in the basket. He didn't sort for colors. There would be time for that later. He took the sheets off his bed, and while removing the pillowcase smelled for a trace of Alison's hair. He imagined that there was still a taste of the shampoo she used locked in the fiber, and after he imagined it he wondered why he had just done it. In the first month after she had gone, the time you expect such a thing to occur, he had been busy with the routines of managing Sylvia's life. Making her breakfast, taking her to school, arranging babysitters. After she left, he spent a week or two in what he assumed to be a sort of self-indulgent grief. He'd leave the radio on all night. He'd cook lavish dinners, and get a little drunk. But after two weeks he decided to work against that temptation.

He imagined that he did it for his father. His father had buried a brother and a best friend by the time he was sixteen. Then he fought in a war. He was like no one that Drake would ever meet again. He said that he'd gotten through all that because of his willingness to leave things behind. Drake believed him, and turned off the radios, stopped seeing movies, didn't open any bottles of wine. He didn't smell the pillowcases.

Drake's mother arrived with a car loaded with belongings. She marshalled Drake's energies and had him place her things where she thought they would do the most good: the iron skillet in the kitchen, her cedar shoe horn in the closet, the copies of *Reader's Digest* on the coffee table. While arranging them in a fan pattern, she gestured at them with her chin. "You should read these. If you don't like my stories, they have jokes."

She instructed Drake to empty his ashtrays. "I'm not going to touch those dirty things," she said. "Your father dies of cancer, and still you learn nothing."

Drake avoided the full bloom of his mother's rage by returning to the car for another load. The only thing left was a large trunk. He wondered how his mother had gotten it from the basement to the car as he hefted it up the porch and in through the door.

"Christ Mom, what the hell is in here?"

"Be careful with that. Those are my things from Korea."

"Yeah?" Drake's eyebrows perked up. "Like what?"

"My diploma, letters from my sister. Pictures of your grandparents..."

"Why don't you show me some of this business."

"Look yourself, I have to clean this place up. I thought I taught you to be clean. You know, when things aren't clean you get germs and get sick."

Drake maneuvered the box to the center of the living room.

"How long are you planning to stay here?" he said, fumbling with the clasps.

"I need you to sell the house for me."

"Thinking of moving to a smaller place?"

She started to hum to herself.

The contents of the box smelled like what Drake assumed to be Korea. He imagined the same smell in his mother's fishing village, at the airport his father landed in after two years in Vietnam, landed there because he wasn't ready to go home. Regardless, having never been to Korea, he had no genuine frame of reference and he was conscious

of this. He brought out a piece of rice paper with characters on it. They looked like hieroglyphs, a piece of the rosetta stone.

"What's this?" he said, holding it in the air.

His mother, 409 in hand, squinted. "A poem I wrote in high school. It won an award."

"No way." He raised his eyebrows. "What's it about."

"About how peasants should also have the right to eat. It was political."

He leafed through some photographs and made her identify each relative. Grandfather. Grandmother. Cousin. Aunt. At a particularly faded one, she stopped her scrubbing. "That one is of your great uncles. His name was Sungmin. He was a freedom fighter on the island my parents lived on, against the Japanese. He was famous in the village, because when the Japanese searched for him, he was able to hide for months."

"Was he caught?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"I think he made some mistakes."

"Tough luck. Was he ever rich?"

"No. After the Japanese left, he was hunted by the police because he was a communist."

"How about that."

"It's a story that makes our family proud."

Drake considered the picture for a few moments before he closed the trunk. He looked around, at his mother's order slowly imposing itself, as natural as cell division. He took a long breath and went into the shower.

When he was out, she was mincing garlic. She glanced at the tattoos on his arm. "If you would get those off," she said, motioning with a wooden spoon, "your chances of success would be higher."

"Mom. I am successful. Insurance runs the world. I sell it."

"You don't listen."

"Listen to what, Mom?"

"The story I just told you. It has a point."

"You want a story? How about this one. Buddha grows up a rich boy, spends his days in ignorance. Boozes, runs with women, starves himself. Finds peace under a tree. How's that?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"That good things happen to rich people."

"Ridiculous. Besides, you get the story wrong. It's too short. You always do that."

"There is no point to the story. People just look at it in certain ways. Like me. I'm successful."

"Then why are you here?"

Drake paused and felt his ears get hot. He turned hard away from her and hard back. He felt something hard inside. He wondered what she was so proud about. She was the one whose first son didn't speak to her. The one whose in-laws considered quiet and dainty, like a good maid. She was the one who'd left her country for that. What about that? What authority did that give her?

"Don't talk to me about family," he spat at her.

"That's what we are."

"Not with Dad gone. Not with Steven gone."

"Dad had to die. That happens to people. That happens to families. Then they're supposed to be strong together. Their wives aren't supposed to leave them for no reason. They're supposed to keep their children close. There have to be reasons."

Drake considered hurting his mother with the truth. It would hurt her to know the things he'd done, the locked doors, the motel rooms, friends' wives in their houses and

beds. It would hurt her pride, and he didn't want to know what it felt like to hear himself saying it. He'd never even said it to Alison, although by the time she'd left it didn't matter anyway. Some things you just know about. Even when they're secrets. Drake clenched his jaw.

"What about Steven?"

She stared at her son. Then to the cutting board. "Don't I cook well for you?"

"What's this about?"

"When you were young, didn't I spend all my time cooking for you? Aren't the vegetables always fresh, and the kimchee not sour? When your father and I were first married I'd never seen a supermarket. Every day when he went to work I'd cook a grape pie with homemade crust. From a gourmet cooking book." Drake listened to her. She was right. Her foods were always fresh. Her kitchen was always clean.

"I pushed you and Steven through school, tried to make you better than me because you were sons and you could do anything."

"Steven, Mom."

"What he did was wrong. When you have a belief, you have to believe it."

"Christ..."

"And stop saying that. It's against my belief."

Drake stopped and figured there was no argument that could change her mind, or that if there was he was too tired to find it. He reached for a wine glass from the cupboard and poured from the box in the refrigerator. He hadn't cleaned the dishes as well as he thought and there was a thin film of soap on the wine. He drank it anyway. Soap never hurt anyone.

His mother was sauteeing garlic, while dipping slices of fish into a flour and egg batter with chopsticks.

"I'm not talking about Steven being happy. This isn't about that," she said. She was cautious that none of the batter landed on the counter

"What isn't?"

"Me moving in."

"Moving in?" Drake said the words aloud, testing them for volatility.

"It's about you being happy. I want you to be happy when you help me sell the house."

"Why do you want to sell the house?"

"I'm going back to Korea. I want you to be happy when I sell the house."

"What're you talking about?"

Drake didn't listen to anything new his mother said. After eating he turned on the television, not to have a voice, but to drown this new one out. After prime-time he walked out the door without ceremony and got into the car. He mumbled to himself on the way to the supermarket and didn't stop until he'd reached the fifteen feet of refrigerated beer by the frozen foods. He picked up a six-pack. Who's not happy, he said to himself standing in the line, caught by a sudden fugitive desire, and pocketed four candy bars from the checkout aisle.

3

Three months later Drake sold the house. It was in a neighborhood his father had worked his whole life to live in, so it sold fast. They sold all the belongings she couldn't carry with her, trashed the ones they couldn't sell, placed the valuables in Drake's suddenly cluttered home.

Sylvia had been up for the last week. School was out, and she wanted to see her grandmother before she left. She arrived with new bracelets from summer camp, and three new pen pals with whom she kept a regular correspondence.

Two days before his mother left the three of them drove to his father's grave. It stood underneath a wide, low tree. The sky was darkening, darker hues of grey blossoming across the milky dome above. Drake looked to the sky and wondered if God lived there, like his mother believed. When the slow drizzle began, Drake's mother

brought a garbage bag from her purse, laid it on the grass in front of the grey stone and kneeled upon it so as not to get her stockings wet. With a small handkerchief she wiped the stone, paying special attention to the right angles where dirt collects. Then she did something Drake didn't expect. She put her right hand over her left, and placed the joined couple on the ground with her palms touching the earth. She leaned low and touched her forehead to her palms.

Drake watched his mother, then looked away. He listened to the many voiced report of rain falling on different surfaces, the collision of wind against leaves and grass. He felt a thrill of sadness, like a bird in his mouth.

Over dinner the night before she left she cooked a large dinner. With the promise of leftovers.

Drake decided to use this occasion to discuss the forthcoming divorce, the forthcoming legal procedure. Alison and he had been settling on the terms of their separation. They were amicable. Even with custody.

Sylvia started the dinner, playing with her chopsticks.

"Sylvia." Her grandmother said quickly. "Drake, stop her."

"Honey. Use the fork."

"Daddy. I'm like a ninja." She brandished the chopsticks like small swords.

"Honey, just put them down."

She gave a high squeal and thrust a chopstick in his direction.

"Sylvia. Down." He was surprised at his voice. "Sylvia. Mommy and Daddy..."

She turned up, and he saw her eyes flashing like the blade on a knife. She started up with the chopstick again. Giggling, jumping up and down. Drake spent the next five minutes chasing her around the living room before sending her upstairs.

Drake was up early the next morning. He walked downstairs and made coffee. Minutes later his mother came down. She acted surprised to see him so early, but something in the quality of her voice convinced him that she wasn't.

They went over the logistical matters once again. Numbers to call in case something should go wrong, vague promises of Christmas together. Then Drake went to bring her things into the car. She'd fit the last thirty years into two bags which took one trip. By that time Sylvia was awake and on her way to the shower at her grandmother's chiding.

Drake was scrambling eggs when his mother came back downstairs. She stood next to him at the stove. "She knows, Drake. You have to tell her. She's so young."

"Okay. Let's just get you out of here today. Let's worry about that before we worry about anything else."

She paused, brought the pepper from the spice rack and sprinkled it on the eggs. "Is that what you think this is about?"

"Mom. You're leaving. That's okay. But don't talk to me about family sticks together. Okay. Just not now. I'm not trying to be an asshole. Sorry."

"Don't apologize. Let's eat."

They drove to Logan, checked her bags through to Seoul. Stood at the metal detectors. They stayed there for a while. Drake's mother picked up Sylvia, brought their foreheads together. Drake noticed they had the same hair, dark and coarse and straight. His mother whispered something about private school into Sylvia's ear. Remember what we talked about.

She put Sylvia down. "Sylvia. Grandmother wants to take a picture of you, but you need to wash your face." She pointed to a bathroom. "Go wash up and come out."

Sylvia walked off.

"Drake. Please talk to Alison. This is the last time I can tell you."

"Mom..."

"Listen. You think I'm leaving to leave. No. I'm leaving because maybe this will bring you back together. I think maybe if I go, my families will come back together. You and Alison and Sylvia and Steven and his wife and the children they should have. And you can all be together. I have another family, many."

Drake felt something hard inside him warp. He wondered when it is that you would rather be a sister than a mother.

"And I have to leave now," his mother said.

"What about the picture?"

"I never wanted to let you see me cry. I don't want her to remember me as an old woman who was crying." She said that and Drake knew she was telling the truth, knew that all the times he'd left for camp, for college, later for his new house, that he'd never seen her cry. Why start now, he figured as she made her way to the metal detectors. She kissed him on the cheek and moved quiet and fast like a thief.

"What am I going to tell her?" He spoke to her receding form.

She turned around. "Make up a story?"

"You want me to lie to her?"

She shrugged.

Sylvia found him and he lied to her. Told her that grandmother's flight was leaving early. Maybe children believe things like that, he figured.

"Daddy," she said, with small hiccups. "Are you and mommy getting a divorce?"

"Where'd you hear that word?"

She started to run. Dodge and weave through the crowds of travellers. He chased her, bumping into women and men. His heart beating in its cage. He feared that he would lose sight of her, felt the fear in his mouth like biting rusty tin. His breath was short as he wove through human traffic. He caught her near the USAir counter, picked her up so she wouldn't move, felt her knees kicking against his stomach, then felt them slacken, felt her heart pounding, delivering oxygen--a small, live thing.

Drake held his daughter and imagined his mother sitting on the plane, sitting and flying. Thought about her crossing oceans, being on one side of the water while the sun's out, and knowing that somewhere else, it's already night. And he knew what he would say to his daughter, knew that he would have to make it up as he went along, but knew the necessity of it.

He knew it would begin with his voice. He knew it would start like this:

Sungmin spent his nights in the forest protected by the ghost of his father. He'd been running through the swordgrass, under the trees for a little more than a week, ever since his cousin Qu'ul had told him that the Japanese were looking for him. He had a pistol, and understood that to use it meant someone had to die. He understood that the running would eventually lead to the gun in his hand and a decision to make.

He'd heard of Captain Yamamoto. Yamamoto had promised a slow way to die for those caught assisting the outlaw, and an even slower one for the outlaw himself. In the days, Sungmin hid and moved slowly through the trees. He remembered his wife, two years dead from childbirth. He remembered the songs his father taught him. The songs whose cadence matched the work of bringing in the fishing nets, or the hauling of a sail. He remembered singing these songs before his father was killed in the first stage of the Japanese occupation, before Sungmin was a man who ran with a gun. He sang them now.

Every night, before sleeping, he would make a silent prayer to the Buddha, the most holy one. Then, after a week of this, while dreaming, he heard footsteps moving through the broad leaves and the swordgrass. In his dream, he expected the most holy one to approach him, and was surprised when he turned and his father stood before him. His hair was black and he looked like a young man. "I spent my whole life teaching you," he started. "And now all you do is sleep, wait for them to catch you? Get up. Run."

Sungmin awoke, senses loaded and reeling. He heard sounds of a trail being broken, vegetation trampled underfoot. He turned his head to his left and saw a small grey rabbit. The rabbit started to move, stopped, turned, and watched Sungmin. The next time

it moved, Sungmin followed it. After an hour of running, he had eluded Yamamoto, and fallen asleep underneath a persimmon tree.

For another three months this continued. Always he went to sleep thinking of the Buddha, always he was met by his father's ghost. Soon he began to pray to the ghost. In chance encounters with farmers he boasted. He told them that the ghost of his father was protecting him, that he would never be caught.

Word of this came to Yamamoto. He stood in the headquarters. Outside, the Japanese flag waved its red eye. He lit a cigarette and found his six strongest men. He took them to Sungmin's father's grave and instructed them to dig it up. The men paused, made their silent apologies and put their spades in the ground.

Later that night, the men moved through the forest like a knife. They found Sungmin sleeping under a tree. And as he awoke to their footsteps Yamamoto watched this man reach for his pistol, before stopping. This man, their new prisoner, spent a moment in reflection, maybe considering what had brought him here, before putting his weapon on the ground, and touching the earth with his right hand. The thing to understand, Sylvia, is that there was no way to know why he put the weapon down. No way to know how he had run so long. No way to know that this man's nephews would later send the Japanese off the island, that a girl would be born, that she would cross an ocean, following the sun from east to west, and then cross it again in reverse, that her son would hold his daughter in his hands in Logan Airport, begin to cry and imagine backwards to the moment of decision when Sungmin put his gun on the grass and touched the earth with his right hand, waiting for it all to begin. Sylvia. Child. Isn't that a nice thing to think about, honey? Isn't that a nice thing to know?

The Gambler's Brother, or What About the Rabbits?

Trevor was notified of his expulsion from Bryce Academy while his parents were in France. When Trevor was thirteen, his father--a physician for a professional football team--developed a new technique of reconstructive shoulder surgery. He had spent the last three years on an international lecture tour, speaking to rooms of doctors in ties. In the basement of his dormitory, Trevor sat on a stool reading graffiti with a pay phone's receiver to his ear, waiting for the international operator to transfer his call to his father's hotel suite.

Trevor told himself that this was better. And even after he'd gotten connected to his father, after he'd thought of him across the ocean where it was already morning, after he'd cried on the phone, he told himself that this was better. Better than what was before: boys in dress code drinking bottles of booze in their rooms after lights out, his roommate Brad telling stories about laying it on the girls back home in Texas when everyone knew that all he'd really done was unclasp a bra once and masturbate thinking about it. Better than the rich boys, whose fathers were from Boston, or the coach's boys whose letter jackets were red felt and white sleeves. Better than the offense that had brought him to this basement: a bottle of vodka and a dime bag of marijuana bought from a townie, one blanket, and Laura Fieldson, a Catholic girl who never went to service. He'd walked with her across the footbridge past the gym to a playground, he'd put the blanket on the earth and they took off their tops without ceremony. He felt October on his nipples, and thought of the condoms in his pocket, wondering how he could work the night so that by the end of it his pockets would be empty. Worked his hands under her belt, moved his fingers through the tangle of hair, worked them inside and she'd made a noise that sounded like a wince. The police found them that way. A routine part of their beat. A surprise. And Trevor stood next to the car as they went through his backpack, fingered the dime bag, considered the vodka, and he wondered what his fingers smelled like. He wondered whether they'd smell how

the boys always said they'd smell, an earthy funk, and he thought for a moment that in his gropings that was what he'd been looking for. The scent, or the idea of the scent, something that's talked about with boys in dress code drinking booze at midnight, tucked and locked in their dorm rooms.

This is a better thing, he thought as he heard some form of resignation in his father's voice, gathering like a fist. "Trevor, this is something we'll talk about in one week. I'll be back in the country. I'm calling your brother." Trevor leaned against painted cinder blocks. "He'll be there tomorrow."

This is a better thing, he said, hanging up the phone, holding on to that thought like a lucky penny, or a means of moving past the worse things, a means to wait for his brother to arrive, a means to be still and pack his bags.

Trevor's brother, Steven, and his fiancée arrived at dusk the next day in a sportscar. Shelby was the third in a distinguished line of fiancée's for Steven. Trevor took her in. Willowy lines, sharp nose, dark hair. He noticed that her breasts pushed against her sweater, and wished he hadn't.

Steven bounded out of the car in a suit Trevor had seen in a catalog. He gave him a large hug which surprised Trevor, but made something inside him bend and bruise. "Are you all right? Trev? Here, meet Shelby, shake her hand or something." He looked up at the dormitory. "Well, those bastards expelled us both, Trev. Of course, for me, it was in the eighties, and it was harder to get away with stuff. Here, meet Shelby."

Steven smoothed out the wrinkles and adjusted the tab collar on his shirt while Shelby and Steven shook hands. "Trevor, I feel like we've already met. I'm sorry," she brought her fingers up to her mouth, "that's a cliché. Isn't it?"

Steven was speaking about the breaking point when they hit the deer. He was saying that in real life, it's a matter of how far you can go, what you're willing to do, before you realize you can't go any further. "That's when you're beat. You've got to

move that point somewhere into the distance. Look at me," he said. Trevor was in the back of the sportscar, sharing the seat with his laundry bag. He was watching Shelby smoke a cigarette, when there was a flash of fur in the headlights, a brightness and moment of collision, and the misplaced lucidity of his thoughts as he realized the car was turning around, wheeling onto the shoulder of the road so that the headlights were trained on the inert blotch of fur.

"Are you okay? Shelby? Trevor?" Shelby nodded, and let out a small gasp. Steven unbuckled his seat belt and leaned into her. He brought her head into his chest. "It's okay, Shelb. Just a deer." For a moment no one moved. "Trevor, go and check it out."

Trevor stepped outside and walked slowly to the wounded animal. In the headlights he saw it's chest moving up and down. He returned to the car and tapped on the window. Trevor and Shelby were facing each other smoking cigarettes.

"It's a deer. It's still sort of alive."

Shelby rested her head on the steering wheel. "What should we do?"

Steven lowered his window and threw his cigarette onto the pavement. "Shelby, were you watching the road? How did..."

"Trevor, we should kill it."

"Excuse me."

"You should kill it." Trevor watched her face. "It's hurting. Please, go do it."

Trevor took a deep breath. He walked back to the animal, saw its mouth gaping like a fish brought out of water. He considered how to kill it, considered the pocketknife in his pants and dismissed the thought. It turned out that he watched the animal die, and that in fifteen minutes they had driven away from it, and were on the interstate driving north from New Hampshire to Maine.

The goal was to reach Shelby's family's condominium near Sugarloaf, in Maine. Steven had moved in there since breaking up with his last fiancée Amanda, who Trevor remembered as a tall blond with a generous nose.

When they reached Portland, Shelby took the exit. "Let's eat something. I don't want to drive right now."

By the time they were seated Steven ordered a drink and had begun to talk again.

"That was crazy. I don't think the car's too bad off, though."

"Steve, baby, don't talk. It makes me sad."

"I think that we can talk about it. We have to talk about things like this. What do you think, Trev?"

"I guess so. What's there to say?"

"What's there to say? He's asking what there is to say." The waitress arrived with Steven's drink. Amber fluid and ice. "Brother, we just saw something die. Shelby, we just saw something die, and he's asking what there is to say. My brother."

"I think I need a drink." Shelby lit a cigarette. Trevor watched her cheeks hollow with the first drag.

"How about this." Steven took a large gulp from his glass. "Have you ever seen something die?"

Trevor considered the question. "There were the rabbits."

"The rabbits?" Shelby exhaled a smoke sigh. "What's that?"

"When Trevor was young he had some rabbits. But you never saw them die, Trev." The waitress arrived and took their orders. Steven ordered another drink.

"You're going to get drunk, hon."

"Hon, considering. I don't think it's such a bad thing."

"Okay. All right. I was just talking."

Trevor sipped from his water and turned to Shelby.

"How about you?"

"Me? I don't know if I've seen anything die. I've seen dead things. Been to funerals. The funny thing is that they never look real. Like when my mother died... I'm sorry, I'm not trying to make you uncomfortable. I'm fine talking if you're fine listening. I am."

"I'm fine listening. Trev?"

"Fine."

"All right. Okay. There's really not much to tell." She began to rub at something on the table then stopped. "Just that when my mother died, and this was when I was a kid. It looked like someone else. I used to believe that my mother was alive, but hiding somewhere, watching me. Maybe running away from something."

All of the sudden something reminded Shelby of the cigarette she was holding. She took a drag. "But I've never seen anything die. What about the rabbits?"

"What about them?" Trevor said.

"What's the story. Hold on. Tell it to me."

"Steven. You tell it."

"Okay. Trevor's allergic to cats and dogs. So one day our mom gets him two rabbits, two lab rabbits from the college. This was when I was in prep school. Anyway. He builds them a cage. A nice one."

"Real nice."

"Yeah. Like I said. Nice. And so he lets them out in our big yard, they play around. Real nice. So, the weekend I was kicked out from Bryce, and Trevor's still about nine, I come home. Dad was traveling with the team, and mom was up with Grandmother coming home the next day. And they're pissed. So, I throw a party with some of my friends who still went to the public school."

"You threw a party?" She said.

"Yeah. And we let the rabbits out, just to let them get around. It was all safe. But anyway, we've got these big rocks in our yard. And one of the rabbits falls off the rock and dies."

Shelby brought her fingers to her mouth. Trevor liked the way she did that.

"So, Steven wakes me up." Trevor began. "Tells me everything. I explain to the other rabbit what's happened while I'm putting it back in its cage and I go back to bed. And the next morning Steven tells me that the other rabbit's dead. That it had choked itself on the cage I'd made it."

"Oh. God."

"Yeah. The funny thing is that I don't even remember their names or what I called them. All I remember is how they died."

Steven finished his drink and put it down on the table with a flourish. "But brother. You never saw them die."

Shelby turned to the windows. She looked like she had misplaced her car keys or purse. "Maybe I will have a drink."

By the time Shelby had gone and returned from the bathroom Steven had moved through two more drinks. The blues growled over the restaurant's speakers. They had moved through the main course into dessert and coffee.

"Trevor, back to the breaking point," Steven began.

"The what?"

"We were talking about it in the car. But I want you to know that this thing at Bryce... Well, look at me. It wasn't the end for me. Although people will tell you otherwise. Maybe that's why I threw that party that night. Because I needed to prove to someone--maybe even myself--that I was going to get past this." He cleared his throat.

"God, that was eight years ago."

"Wow," Trevor said.

"Hard to believe that. What are you, sixteen?"

"Yeah."

"Sixteen. Hard to believe. It's hard to be sixteen."

"Why do you say that?"

"There's all these things you can't do. Can't vote. Can't drink. Can't smoke.

You can't get what's yours." Steven put down his drink and looked around. He saw Shelby watching him. "Take, for example, those old bonds grandfather gave you when you were born."

"Steven," Shelby cooed softly, putting her hand on top of his.

"C'mon now, Shelb. We're just talking. All I'm saying is that, for example, how big are those bonds. How much are they worth now?"

"I'm not quite sure. I think Dad checked a couple of years ago. Said it was something like eleven thousand, or something like that."

Steven raised his eyebrows and let out a soft whistle. "Well, for example. Let's say you got into some sort of trouble. Or needed to do something with that money."

"Like what, Steven?" Shelby asked, her eyebrows wrinkling. "What would he need that kind of money for. Baby, just drop it."

"Look, *baby*, we're just talking." He gave her a quick grin, exposing his teeth. "It's just an example. I'm just wondering whether or not, *hypothetically* speaking, if there was a problem of some sort, whether Trevor could get a hand on that money."

"I can't until I'm eighteen."

"Eighteen, huh." Steven coughed into his hand. "Eighteen. Jesus. Like I said. You can't get anything that's yours when you're sixteen."

"Let's talk about something else," Shelby started. "What about the rabbits?"

"Yeah. You know, I'd forgotten about the rabbits." Trevor said.

"Yeah, not me. I think about sometimes. Sometimes I think that they were lucky."

Steven answered.

"How's that?"

"Because they had something to die for. It wasn't like they were losing anything by dying."

Shelby took a sip from her cup. "It's such a sad love story."

"What is?" Steven said quickly.

"The second rabbit, being so lonely for its friend. It's *soul* mate. Sometimes I wonder if you're happy like that. Sometimes I really wonder about it. I mean, that's love."

Steven stared at her with something dark. "That wasn't a love story."

"Oh, but it was..."

"That wasn't a love story. That was a story about how to die. Do you want to hear a love story?"

"Hon, maybe you've had too much to drink."

"I know my limits. I know my breaking point. Do you want to hear a love story, a real one?" Steven took several deep breaths through his nose. He stretched his hand across the table and touched hers. "Do you, babe?"

"Sure."

"The best thing about this one is that it's true. It's about a guy who falls in love with someone younger than him. He meets her after he's gone in and out of college, when he's feeling old. They meet at a fraternity party during an alumni weekend, and because she's the drunkest girl at the party, he takes her home..."

"Steven..." Shelby held him in a steady gaze while nodding in Trevor's direction. "Maybe this isn't a good..."

Steven kept his eyes on hers. His face remained unchanged except for a certain narrowing of his eyes, a certain concentration that appeared more as instinct than decision.

"This guy, well he figures out that maybe he didn't love her when they first met, and he was wondering what he would have to do to get in bed with her. But then he wakes

up and decides that it feels all right to be a twenty-four year old who can sleep with a nineteen year old girl, and suddenly he's in love with her. It's a decision."

Steven finished the last sip of his drink.

"That was a love story?" Trevor asked.

"I never said it was a good one."

Shelby stood up suddenly. Her legs jostled the table, spilling Trevor's mug of coffee. "I'm going to drive. I don't think you should be driving, Steven. No sir. I'm going to drive."

Trevor waited outside with his collar turned up. Through the glass doors that entered the restaurant, he could see his brother and Shelby speaking to each other, like actors in a silent movie. He saw her reach for his brother's arm, as he turned back inside towards the restroom. Shelby stepped outside, passed Trevor, and began down the sidewalk.

"Shelby."

She stopped and turned, examined him. She lit a cigarette with her silver lighter. "Your brother wants us to pull up the car. Come on."

Trevor matched her pace to the parking lot. The sounds of their shoes falling in and out of rhythm kept him moving forward. He almost wished that the sound didn't have to end as they opened the car door and stepped inside.

"Steven got a little fucked up, huh?"

Shelby eyes squinted. "Trevor, you swear like your brother." She eased the car out of the parking lot and turned away from the restaurant.

"Shelby..."

"Don't worry, these roads are tricky." She paused. "I want you to know that I've never met anyone like your brother. I consider him special. A genius even. It doesn't matter to me that he's at a down spot in his life."

They were driving past a park. The walkways were lined with streetlights, spreading cones of whiteness below them. "Shelby, maybe we took the wrong road. This might be a good time to turn around."

"The thing is that I wonder about him, about how he feels. Sometimes I think that we're together because I've got money, or I'm willing to let him say anything he wants. I always let him say what he wants. At first I thought I was special because I let him do that. Now, I wonder. What do you think, Trevor. You know your brother."

"I think my brother's waiting for us. I think he wants us back."

"Listen to me, this is important." She eased her foot on the accelerator. "That story he told. It was about another fiancée, isn't it? Isn't it."

Trevor felt something inside stiffen. "He's my brother, okay. I don't know. I don't say anything."

"Goddammit, Trevor. You think your brother has it together, that you're on the same side. You think that you and him can gang up on me. Well, let me tell you something you don't know. The money your brother asked you about, the bonds, there was a reason."

"What are you saying."

"Your brother is a gambler, he's four thousand dollars in debt."

"Why wouldn't he ask you, rich girl?"

"He will." She lit another cigarette. "There's something you don't know."

"I've got something too. Something you don't know."

"What's that."

"You might as well turn this car around and pick Steven up now, or keep driving and not stop until you hit Canada, because my brother will never love you. So you've got to make a decision."

Trevor regretted his words, his gifts of anger. And as Shelby's lips buckled and her breath stuttered, he sunk himself deeper into his seat. He watched the yellow lines on

the highway, the thin barriers against collision, and he felt the long, dying day somewhere behind him.

As Shelby turned the car around so that it headed back to town, he remembered the start of the evening, remembered standing in front of the fallen deer. Remembered its pelt, remarkably clean, only the pavement below it spackled with blood. He remembered standing in front of the animal, with the headlights behind him, wondering what it was about the lights that made insects wild enough to crash their bodies against its heat, or make a deer stop dead in its tracks and approach. Remembers feeling this way then, and even after then, years later, years after Steven married a girl who wasn't Shelby, after he himself had been in and out of marriage, after he had forgotten what it was like to want to be a father. Remembers being in front of the animal staring at its mouth, wondering if there were words there, and whose ears were good enough to hear what it was saying.

What This Isn't

All when I was growing up in Florida I knew Frank. This was before my dad and I moved to Maine, the state that I later finished high school and went to college in. Also the state I recently married and divorced in, all in the span of three months. Imagine that. But I was talking about Frank. He was the kid who got invited to parties by mothers. "Just do it," I can remember my own mother saying. "It won't kill you to do something nice for that boy."

This is one thing I can say about Frank.

When we started going to junior high Frank asked Gina Summers to the first dance. She was a girl with glasses and long teeth. But then again, Frank was no prize. His face was pocked with acne and he had one of those creamy bodies that look like white clay.

At this dance, Frank went to the bathroom where a couple of eighth graders ripped off his shirt and twisted his nipples. They called him fat boy, and told him to shut up. They threw his shirt in the toilet and one of them pissed on it. When Frank came out, his chest was red and doughy rolls of fat drooped over his belt. A few of us laughed at him. No one went to help him find a shirt, or talk to him. Not even me. He ran out of the gym and left Gina there, holding the night in her small hands, the way you hold a dancing partner. I called Frank that night when I got home. I don't know what I meant to say to him. But I guess it doesn't really matter anyway, since I hung up when he answered the phone.

That's one thing about Frank. Here's another.

Frank and his mother lived alone. No one spoke about what had happened to his father. But once, during recess, Frank told me that Dad left in a sportscar. That's when his mother started to work in the house. Telemarketing or something like that. We must have been about ten.

When I was fifteen I went to Frank's place for the first time. It was Sunday, and, at home, my parents were speaking at each other with narrowed eyes, so they looked like cats. I knew, even then, that things between them were coming to a head, that the rhythms of their arguments were approaching some sort of climax. So, this afternoon, instead of sitting around and listening, I decided to go to Frank's place to buy some dope. At the time, he was the only person I knew that ever had any.

But this isn't a story about Frank's dope. This is a story about the guy in the wheelchair.

That was what was on TV when I came in; some sort of documentary about this guy who had never had legs. *I bet he'd love to walk* was the first thing I thought. I remembered how once we had one of those para-olympians come to our school and speak to us. Real inspirational stuff. But sad too. He told us that people can never quite know what they're capable of.

Frank walked me into the den and asked if I wanted a Pepsi. I said sure. Then he told me to grab a seat anywhere. There were some chairs and a comfortable-looking couch all close to the television. You could watch the screen from any one of the seats. It was a large, large TV. Big screen, I guess you would call it. The blinds latticed the room with light, splaying golden strips over the furniture and wooden floor. You could see dust motes billow through the blocks of afternoon sun. In the center of the room was a glass table with two separate piles of magazines and newspapers on either end. The surface was ringed on the spots where bowls and mugs had stood.

Frank came back with my Pepsi and sat down in a chair across from me and asked if I had cable. I told him that I didn't and he started flipping through the different channels, showing off just a little bit.

After about ten minutes or so of this I brought up the question of dope. "Oh, yeah. That's right," he told me. "Well, the problem is that I don't have enough to sell, but I've got enough to smoke. If that's cool."

I figured, what the hell, and told him it was fine with me.

We watched the television and didn't budge. Frank flipped the channel to Cindy Lauper on MTV.

I heard a toilet flush from another part of the house. Frank got up and walked down the hall. I heard a door open, some muffled voices, then two pairs of footsteps on the wood. Frank came back into the room with a woman in a floral print dress. She had beautifully brushed brown hair, and a little make-up on her cheeks.

She was also terrifically fat. I could see the fat move on her arms as she offered me her hand, which was the color of cheesecake.

"You must be Patrick. This is nice. You know, I think I've met your mother... Monica is it? Anyway, I'm Frank's mother. But call me Jessica." She told me to sit back down and sat next to me. Her stomach pressed against her dress. She put a pillow over her midsection to cover the bulge when she sat, then rested her hands on the pillow.

"What happened to the show I was watching?" she asked.

"Oh, we changed it, Mom."

"Well change it back. It was educational. A story about how people can overcome their disabilities. People who say television doesn't have something educational to offer should see this. Make them reconsider."

Frank consented and turned back the channel. The guy on television was learning how to drive a car using levers instead of pedals. Jessica reached for a little box on the end table. She brought out a roachstone, and a lighter. She lit what was in the stone and passed it to me. Its surface was smooth, like porcelain, and I brought it to my lips.

"Thank you, Jessica," I told her, using the voice my mother taught me to speak with on the phone. My phone voice.

I watched Jessica exhale, and smoke wove through the interruptions of light and shadow. I passed the stone to Frank and the three of us watched the television. Driving lessons had progressed to the point of highway driving. There was an acoustic guitar

playing in the background, against shots of this guy making lane changes, and working the steering wheel. On the screen he was smiling. Maybe it was for the camera, maybe not. Who knew? Anyway, when the stone made its way back to Jessica she re-filled it and brought it to her lips.

But this isn't a story about marijuana. This is a story about the dishes.

"The what?" Frank asked her.

"The dishes, honey. You promised me that you would do them yesterday." She had her eyes glued to the set. Everything seemed to be taking a very long time.

"Mom, not now. We have a guest."

"I know, but it won't take long, honey. While you're gone I'll roll a joint. Think about how much better it'll be once you have that behind you."

"Come on, Mom."

"I'm not being so unreasonable..."

"Please, Mom. Not now."

"Frank, you have to understand that it's not such a big thing."

"Mom, please don't be a bitch." Frank was getting frantic, and his voice was getting louder and higher. Then I was up. I was leading him into the kitchen, telling him that it wouldn't take long with the both of us.

"Thank you, Patrick." Frank's mother said. As we left she was lighting incense. She was on her knees in front of the television, blowing on the smoking stick, getting it going.

Dishes had erupted from the sink. They were everywhere, over the counters, on the table, on top of the toaster oven. I wondered what had brought me here. These dishes would take me a long time, and I felt lazy, a strange lazy, like when you spend Saturdays in bed because you don't want to go anywhere new, and don't expect anything special or good from Saturday anyway. Like when your wife of two weeks starts to cry and you go

to a bar, to be with men and women who aren't your wife. Like when you have letters to write to people you haven't seen since the day they left you. Not your usual brand of lazy.

But I worked against that. I turned on the water, got it hot. Between two plates I found a tomato, furry with mold. I almost gagged, but instead brought the plate under the water and scraped it off with my bare hands.

Jessica came in and saw us working. She gave us both little hugs. "What fine young men." She touched Frank's hair with her smooth, chubby fingers. "I'm so happy you've come over, Patrick. It's so nice to have a young guest." She seemed overcome. "What would my two men say to some cookies?"

We both nodded.

"That would be great," Frank said.

"Incredible," I said.

"They're the instant kind, out of the tube, but they'll still be good." She reached into the refrigerator.

So while we washed, she cut circles of dough from the tube, put them on the baking sheet, and slid them into the oven. She finished just a little before us. She wiped the extra dough off the knife with her index finger and licked it clean, showing her teeth.

The three of us walked back to the room and sat in front of the television. She lit a joint and passed it to us. We smoked and passed it back. She passed it to me. I passed it to him. He passed it to her. In this fashion it was finished.

When the timer sounded Jessica left for the kitchen. Frank and I could hear scraping and other noises. Finally she brought the cookies out on a large plate. "They're hot," she said. "I guess we should have waited for them to cool down some, but I just couldn't." They were warm and steaming and their scent filled the room, covering everything: the television, the noise, the fading sunlight, Jessica, Frank and me. I took the cookie in my hand. It was warm and soft. It came apart in my fingers and the smell was so dense and heavy and delicious that it stuck to everything.

When the eating was done, Frank and Jessica began to play a game. It was sort of like those campfire games you play in the summer. One of them would sing the chorus of a song, and the other would have to come up with another song that started with the last word.

"Oh, now, come on, Patrick. Play along," Jessica told me. At first I didn't, I just watched them. But after one or two rounds they started getting into it, and watching them I figured, what the hell, and played along, and pretty soon I was getting into it too. We sang old songs that my parents listened to, going from "Time is on My Side," to "Is this Love," to "Feeling Groovy," or whatever that song is called. While we were singing Frank would tap on the table, and occasionally Jessica would sing the back-up. I sang in electric guitar, going low to high, buzzing feedback with my teeth and throat. We improvised a little, hummed through instrumental solos. We were all in the band, and it wasn't half bad.

Things changed when Jessica asked if I wanted to stay for dinner. "Why don't you stay for dinner?" she asked. "Frank and I usually eat something quick in front of *Jeopardy*, but I do love to cook. I could call your mother... Monica is it? Patrick?"

What changed things was that while she was talking to me, I was imagining me at the table. I imagined eating, putting food in my mouth with a fork, and while imagining it I felt that same laziness, that fatigue, and I decided that what I really wanted to do was go. That's the funny thing about imagination. Because even though we had been making noise, making music, all it took was the imagining to make me leave. Leave and not even care about it. For some reason I think that's important.

But this isn't a story about imagination. It's a story about going back home.

By the time I made it to my driveway the curtains were shut and someone had lit the table lamps. Their light was a muffled glow. I walked inside and it was easy to tell what was coming. I could tell by the three empty bottles of beer lined up on the dinner table in front of my father. That, and the way my mother stood up as she heard the screen door open.

My mother opened her mouth to talk to me, and I busted upstairs. I could hear her moving behind me, saying, "Where are you going young man, where the hell have you been?"

I moved into the bathroom and shut the door behind me. I looked in the mirror, saw my eyes, and popped open the medicine cabinet looking for Visine, some sort of remedy. Finding nothing, I closed the cabinet, while my mother knocked forcefully on the door, from the outside.

"Where have you been, Patrick." This time my mother's voice was plaintive, somehow taut. I remember that the sound of it reminded me of someone looking through a window on a rainy day. I guess I don't remember if that's how I really felt at the time, but the important thing is that I remember it that way now. And more than that, what seems more important now are the things I've had to imagine: like what she was wearing that evening, or what we did in the next weeks before she left, or that I didn't care about it; as if what I was learning that long day with Frank and Jessica wasn't only music and how to make it with your voice, but resignation.

Now that I'm older, now that I am who I am and have done my own share of leaving things behind, I wonder if it's possible that I was learning what she was feeling as she stood on the other side of the door, with her knuckles on the wood. Because I felt it on my side when I decided not to tell her about Frank, even though I knew that speaking to her, telling her the truth, would have meant she would have stayed longer. A week. A month. Longer.

I turned on the water, and put my hands over my ears. I don't remember wanting to know what she was feeling, although I do now, because maybe it was the same thing, and in that fashion we could have shared something, and this could be a story about redemption. But this isn't a story about redemption.

American Roulette

On the way to the technical college in Auburn, Marian tells me again that the toilet has been acting up, that nothing makes it down the tube without three flushes, that we need to call a plumber. Then she drops me off at the college. From the outside it looks like any of the three high schools I went to. Only after the car has receded into the distance do I feel as if I'm not being watched. I take a deep breath, turn around and take in Saturday. Blue Sky. Black ice. Tough glare that lets you know it's cold.

I make it into the waiting room, where about forty or so odd people sit listlessly, some reading paperbacks, or magazines, others just staring off at the wall. Despite the statistics upon the homogeneity of Maine's population, I find myself confronted with many faces of different hues. A man who looks Indian, or pakistani, four or five African Americans, two or three other Asians, who I sit next to, even though by the shape of their faces I can tell they aren't Korean like me. Beyond that, there are people in suits, wearing work clothes, one man in a T-Shirt that reads "Stanford Dad."

All of us have arrived here today to prove to the State of Maine, that despite previous offenses, previous mistakes, we are all eligible and capable to once again operate our respective motor vehicles. After a DWI, everyone gets start at the same place, and in this respect all become equal. As for me, three months ago, I was pulled over driving home, passed the motor tests, but halfway through the examination changed my story from drinking two beers with dinner to three beers with dinner. I guess that's all they need, because that's all it took. Funny thing.

Granted, it was a lie. The night I was caught, while driving back from Cheryl's house, I'd had about seven drinks, the last two being gin, which I drank from the bottle beside her bed, imagining Marian imagining where I was.

I check out the man on my right, one seat over. Asian, probably Chinese, my height, probably a little older than me. About twenty-five. He's working the corners and

edges of a large deck of cards, all about the size of the palm of your hand. I stare at it long enough that he catches me.

"What's your game?" I say.

"Tarot."

"Tarot?"

"Yeah, they aren't playing cards. They're tarot cards. I'm blessing them right now, you know 'cause they're new, which is why I've got to keep them with me." He spreads a thin smile. "Don't worry, I get it a lot. I'm John," he says, giving me his hand.

"Tyler Kim." As he takes my hand he holds it an extra second, as if he's inspecting something.

"Where you from, Tyler?" I wonder what I know about this guy and figure that I don't owe him the truth. For example, here's the truth: I was born in Lowell. When I was young, my mother and I moved in the middle of the night to San Francisco. We moved like that all the time, months in different states, a year here, three years there. When I was seventeen a man called our house and we drove away without our things. My mother told me that the caller was my father, and that he'd been trying to find us for years. Then she told me the things he'd done to her, other women he'd slept with, and suddenly I wasn't sorry to keep moving. A year ago she died, and I've kept moving ever since. Oregon. New Hampshire. Maine. I'm not sorry about it. So that's where I'm from, more or less, but who wants to hear that, especially after just meeting me. So, I tell John where I live now.

"Vassalboro," I say.

"Don't sound like you're from the area,"

"Just moved there."

"I got it. Your wife drive you here, Tyler?"

I nod without thinking, maybe because there was a time that Marian and I used to talk about marriage. That was in the early days, after we first met. When she'd come back

from work smelling like cut hair and dye. When I'd sleep with her and feel as if I could say my name without feeling like a liar. We didn't get married, but we could have, had someone convinced me. So, I go with it. I make Marian my wife, after all, what the hell does John care?

I take a deep breath and turn my face to the ground, as if waking from a dream. "It's been a little rough. We're newly married. She's had to drive me around and stuff like that. Just not the sort of thing you want to start something like this on. You know, John, I don't know why I'm telling you this stuff. We've..."

"We've just met. Yes. But we're in this one together. Who hasn't been inconvenienced? Anytime you need to go to work..."

"Or the store."

"Or the store, or anywhere really, you suddenly become reminded of why it is you can't drive. What you've done wrong. Tyler. I know."

I sense his compassion, his want to understand, misplaced perhaps, but still present in the timbre of his voice. For some reason it touches me, and I feel the guilt of having made small lies. It's manageable, not like the guilt that comes with the greater lies, the one you carry on your shoulders, and stomach, and muscles in the back of your neck. Lies like stealing something, or sleeping with someone you shouldn't sleep with. So, what I'm feeling, talking to John, isn't any big deal. Like I said, it's manageable. And though I still feel the guilt, I figure that if I go with it, this voice of mine, this person I've suddenly made myself into, that no real harm can come of it. Just a chance encounter.

"Tyler? What's her name? Do you mind me asking? What's your wife's name?"

"Marian."

"Marian. Good name. What does she do?"

"She's a stylist, up in Waterville. She's got a picture of Lauren Bacall above her booth. That's where we met."

"You're a pretty young guy, though. How long've you been married?"

I tell him about a year, because that's how long Marian and I've been together, and a lie is easier to keep straight if there's a piece of truth in it. But as I say this, it occurs to me that I'm lying to myself here. After all, it would be something of a stretch to say that the past three months have been characterized by togetherness. Since that night with Cheryl, Marian and I have been distant friends. We live our lives. She drives. She drives me to the printing company I work for in Oakland. I also take cabs, but sometimes it's easier to drive, and we have an agreement that she'll drive me anywhere without question. I spend my spare time watching television, especially the movie channels that show guys like Clark Gable in black and white or early technicolor. But I like to flip through the channels. They've got a channel for everything now.

Don't get me wrong. It's not that things are so bad. Fortunately we've got a small apartment, a place where no matter where you are, you can hear everything, and in this respect we share each other's lives. We've been in love, and we know secrets about each other. I know that Marian's father was a drunk and beat her. I know that Marian's mother believes in her ability to read people's futures by examining their thumbprints in the fine syrup of grounds at the bottom of every cup of coffee she serves them to drink. Something she brought over from the old country. And though she'll never say it, I know this to be one of the things Marian still believes in.

And, on some level, it works. For example, just about three days before Marian and I met, about a week after my mother died, her mother dreamed of a jackknife. In the dream it was sharp, ready for blood. And then, three months later, after we moved in together, she left a message on the answering machine about a dream in which Marian's womb was barren. Two days later, Marian came down with a urinary tract infection. So that's why I know that even though she won't say it, she's nervous after last night, after her mother called with her newest dream, in which Marian was dying.

I know that's put her on edge. I know that by the way she reached for me after waking up this morning, by the way she'd smoked three cigarettes by the time we'd gotten

in the car, by the way she looked at me as she dropped me off, the way a rabbit looks at headlights. I know by the way she turned to me and asked, "What are you doing to us, Tyler? I think that's fair to ask." I know that's true.

We hear our names.

A moustached man in flannel and khakis calls the roll. After each of us hears our name, we stand and receive our manila folders. The contents include your name, birth date, blood alcohol level at the time of arrest, date of arrest, where you went to court... You know the drill.

The class begins starts with bad jokes. The moustached guy introduces himself. "I'm Mike Grey. Mike Green. Purple, red, blue, brown." I turn to John and raise my eyebrows. It feels like high school again.

Mike Green, stands with his hands clasped behind his back. "Everyone here knows what Russian Roulette is. Now, who here knows what American Roulette is?"

I watch him scan the class. "American Roulette is when you have a couple of drinks, and you take these," he says retrieving his car keys from his pocket and jingling them in the air, "and decide to drive home."

"Who is this guy?" I whisper to John.

He then tells us how many Americans die each year of automobile accidents, and I'm surprised. Although there's always something like that, some piece of trivia you didn't know. I'd probably be pretty surprised if I knew how many people died each year from chainsaw accidents, or electrocution. I once heard that a person spends eight years of his life in line. Just standing in line. What about that? So, the number was big, but I wasn't surprised. That's the good thing about numbers.

"I don't believe that you should even have one drink and drive a car," Mike continues. "But .08 is tolerance in the state of Maine. All of you are here for the two hour

course, because you've had somewhere around a .12 at the time of arrest. Were you above .15 you'd have to take the sixteen hour course, so consider yourselves lucky."

Mike goes on to give us a quick oral syllabus. Some questionnaires, a video, some talking, then an evaluation session. Us evaluating the course that is.

Mike then starts up the movie and leaves the classroom. I don't blame him. Probably he's seen this movie a hundred times, and it's not exactly engaging. It's one of those older movies where they videotape drivers on a track when they're sober, and then later after they've whacked a couple back. You see them running over cones, veering around all crazy and whatnot. A Driver's Ed movie. While it's playing I lean over to John. Maybe I should be paying attention, but I've taken Driver's Ed. "John," I say. "You know anything about dreams?"

"Depends. I'm not an expert, but I've got some passing knowledge."

"What does it mean if you dream someone is dying?"

"Who do you think is dying?"

I pause. "I've been having dreams that my wife is dying." I take a breath. "They scare me, John."

"That's okay. Don't be afraid, Tyler. Things that scare us in dreams, aren't always bad things. The unconscious mind just expresses itself differently. Like, in your case, a dream that someone's dying usually is an indication that that person is going through a change. It's not death, it's just part of the path to being born again."

I turn back to the screen.

"How about that?" He asks.

"How about that," I say.

They give us questionnaires.

Questions like: Do you drink on a daily basis, do you drink to increase your self-esteem, after a night of drinking do you wake up with your hands shaking? That was the

kicker. Who here, who wants their license back, is going to admit to something like that? Not I, that's for sure. But the one that got to me was number six. *Do you practice what you preach?* What the hell is that supposed to mean?

John and I finish the questionnaires as fast as we can make circles on paper. Then Mike starts up another movie, this one a little more grisly. They show you pictures of accident victims, people being cut out of their cars with power saws. That sort of business. I don't watch again, not because I don't care. I do. How can you not care when it's in your face, when they show you the horrible ways that people die? But there are other things too: I used to volunteer at this hospital in Oregon, wheeling dialysis patients around. I'd like to see the statistic about how much of their lives they spend next to a machine that cleans their blood. That's a hard way to live. Then they die. Just like that. So, who's to say that I need to watch that video?

I notice John nodding off. He gives a quick slurping noise as I tap him on the shoulder.

"John. Death means change, am I getting you right?"

"You're getting me right. I used to dream that my wife was dying, and really she was pregnant. Heh, heh. Yeah, after you find out that sort of stuff, you start to dream that you're dying."

"Sorry?"

"No, just kidding. The point I'm trying to make is that, this is all right, Tyler. Don't worry about it. You're just sort of in a tough spot today. Who isn't? But there are other days."

"Tough to see into the future."

"Sometimes it's the future, sometimes it's the past that's hard to see into. Maybe that doesn't make any sense..."

I perk up and my heart moves to my throat. For a second I believe that he can read through the things I don't say. His knowledge seems to absolve me. "I know what you mean. Like, sometimes you don't want to see the things you've done. You know..."

"That too... I suppose. I was talking more about past lives, that sort of business. You know?"

"I know." My voice is like a wilting blossom. We were talking about different things, that's understandable. What isn't is the sudden emptiness I feel, like a drop of water in the desert. I was thinking about Cheryl, about meeting her at the bar. Dancing. Live music. Hair in a ponytail. Small, eager frame. I was thinking about who I became that night, how suddenly while dancing with Cheryl I realized that I'd stopped being the kind of man who just thought about taking a woman home, and started being the sort of man who did it. Maybe it was the lights, or maybe a mixed orbit of the planets and our moon. Or maybe it was something more definite, something that doesn't just happen once, but happens again and again, like my mother and I running. Who's to say, and who wants to say? And who wants to listen?

Marian knew. She knew after the first night. I don't understand how people can keep secrets like this forever, and still salvage their relationships. No matter what people will tell you otherwise, women know. They know when you're out of sorts. They know when something good inside you has turned into something different. They know when there's something you're not telling them. And they don't stop knowing, even if you don't tell them anything about it. But that's not tough.

What's tough is the next morning, creating a story about the incidents which led up to the DWI, and then living with that story for the next months, knowing that it stands in between you two like a veil on a face. And then wanting to leave, and close the book, but needing someone to drive you to the different areas of you inhabit in the thing you call your life. It's tough, so you give up, and you tell her, and you watch her hurt, and you agree to pack your things the day you get your license.

That's tough. What's not tough is watching people die on screen. I mean, they've got that stuff on TV now. They've got a channel for everything.

Before leaving the college, we fill out an evaluation form. The final question reads, *What did you think of this course?* I leave that one alone. I ask Mike Grey when I get my license back, and he tells me that it takes a couple of weeks for the paperwork to go through. I listen to him and feel something like a stone in my gut. This was something I didn't expect.

While waiting for our "wives" to pick us up I sit next to John in the waiting room. I wonder about what I learned at this course. Outside the wind makes a slow moan, but nothing moves. No leaves spiraling, or snow dusting to prove that the wind is there. Then I start to cry. Not for any real reason, except that I know that John's not going to tell anyone. Not anyone who matters anyway. So it's safe, and I get into it, making those heaving and gurgling noises.

John asks me what's wrong.

"I think I've got to get a divorce, John."

He makes a long sigh.

"Ride it out, Ty. Seems hard to do now, but ride it out."

"Some things, you can't own up to, and you can't ride out."

He considers the floor for a second. While he does that, I calm myself down and wipe up my face, wanting a drink.

John takes a deep breath. "How 'bout this. I'll give you a quick reading. On the cards. They're not blessed yet, but it can't hurt."

"You know. I think I'm fine. I'm trying to quit doing things for no reason."

"Come on now. Who's to say it won't work."

He hands me the deck and tells me to shuffle. As much as I want. "Okay, you read the cards in relation to what you're thinking about when you shuffle," he tells me, so I

decide to think about Marian. I cut the deck twice and give it back. He tells me that we'll pull twelve cards. Twelve cards for twelve months. "The most basic of readings," he tells me.

For the next month, for February, I pull the Knight of Swords. "Nice one," he says. "Bravery. A good month. Lucky boy."

John gives me his number, down in Portland. After his wife, a short blond who drives a Sport Utility Vehicle, picks him up I throw the paper away. Not that I don't like John, but what's the point really? I mean, how could we ever be friends after this sort of beginning? I'm not even married.

It's noon and cold when Marian pulls to the curb. She gives me a quick smile. "Graduate?" she asks.

"There's paperwork."

"So, no driving still." She sounds like someone who's gone to a movie theatre that's been sold out.

"No driving still."

"Then get in."

I nod, and take her advice.

We don't speak until we're northbound on 95.

"So, what'd you do while I was in class?"

Marian lights a cigarette and cracks the window open so that the smoke funnels outside. "I went to the doctor."

"You sick? Mornings?" I cough.

"Well, apparently not. Or at least that's what he said."

"What made you do that?"

"I don't know. I guess I just felt worried after my mother called." She takes a drag. I see her face against the backdrop of moving scenery: bogs frozen over, willow

trees bare and white like fingers; and I feel a sudden loneliness for things lost. And I smile. "Anyway," she tells me, "Doctor says, I'm not dying anytime soon. But that I should quit smoking."

"They always tell you that shit."

"Yeah. It got me thinking though, maybe we should quit. Or maybe I should quit is what I'm saying. We'd both live longer."

I catch my breath and wonder how anybody quits anything.

"You know, a dream about someone dying usually means that a person is entering a new stage in their life."

"And..."

I could tell her about February, about the Knight, about what I can share. But these are things I have to keep to myself. So, instead, I tell her that I'll call the plumber, pay the forty bucks, and fix the toilet. And saying it to her I imagine myself in our bathroom, the television on in the other room, hunched beside the porcelain in the small room with the small window and small light, filling the reservoir with water, waiting for a healthy flush.

Exposures

Exposure one.

Blue sky that makes you think twice about your decision to not believe in God. Mountains. Vermont. Although you can't see Canada, it's out there, up north, maybe twenty miles more.

Exposure two.

Kyle and Nadia standing by the water. The sun plays on its surface, like gold coins that float and jostle, transient in shape and size. Up in the right you can see a little bit of Kyle's father's cabin. Nadia is looking at Kyle as he points out over the water. Her hair is in pigtails. He's wearing a tie dye.

Exposure three.

Kyle standing on top of a picnic bench, his forefinger extended like the barrel of a gun, shooting at the camera. When you're seventeen, you feel like a cowboy. He's smiling, and in his left hand is a bottle of whiskey. On the table is an unopened case of beer, and if you look closely enough you can make out a brass pipe. This was all part of the plan. One weekend, leave school, see The Dead, take pictures. "Just like photojournalism," Kyle told us. "We're capturing what we'll never have again." Kyle's older brother supplied him with the alcohol, the car, and the keys to the cabin up in northern Vermont. We brought the pot.

Seated below him is Nadia, head lifted so that you can see the lines of her throat. She's got the beginnings of a laugh on her mouth. Some characteristic of her smile lets you know that she and Kyle used to be together. Before they met, she was a virgin. She loved him in that first way, the fumbling one that touches idolatry. I know this. She told me. And you can see that in her smile, the thin sliver of teeth behind parted lips. You can see it, even though she'd been sleeping with me for the last three months. Looking back through the photos I wonder about her smile.

Exposure four.

Linked arms. Nadia and me. Watching the sun sink and bleed upwards from behind the mountains, across the sky. I look slim. You can tell that I felt young when it was taken. I still look young for my age. People tell me that at parties. Friends' boozy wives talking about my lack of gray hair, the color in my cheeks. Sometimes I'm

convinced there's something behind words like that. Were I a different person, that's how an affair would begin. It's that easy.

These pictures were taken twenty years before Jerry Garcia died. At the time, something like that would have mattered to me. We'd forged our permission slips and left the Academy. I was sleeping with my best friend's girlfriend, and I wasn't blaming myself yet.

So we were friends. I was reading On the Road at the time. There was this line in it that I still think about. It starts out something like, "What is that feeling you have when you're staring at the golden horizon..." It goes on. Well, in the picture the feeling wasn't a question, it was just a feeling. Maybe it was because we'd left school. Maybe it was because we weren't wearing ties.

Exposures five and six.

We were worried about sending these pictures to the photomat. Might as well send a picture of three people smoking dope straight to the police. Why bother with the middle man? But when Kyle had the reel in his hand, asking me if we should develop it, life was thick and complicated. Nadia had gone home. Kyle was on his way to expulsion. We'd all talked to the deans and the police. I'd supported him with silence in those moments. Hell, I'd given him silence the whole way through. Even the hardest times. Like the time Nadia's father talked to me. When he came into my room during study hall—pinstripe suit, wide lapels, gin and tonic breath--and asked me why I wouldn't help. "What kind of kid are you? You know, you can turn this thing one way or the other," he gasped. I didn't want to see him cry, but he looked like he'd been doing some of it already. So, I gave him silence. Even when he started to push me around my room, grabbing me by the collar and knocking posters off my wall until his second wife in her designer dress gathered him back to the car.

I'd supported Kyle with silence. But when he asked me about the reel, I found that I didn't want to talk to him anymore. I didn't want to talk to anybody: not Nadia, not her father, not the deans or the police. Funny thing about silence. So, I kept it short with Kyle. "Just send them in," I said, before asking for doubles.

Exposures seven through eleven.

The kinds of pictures you take when you're drunk. Frat boy pictures. The ones where you hold the camera at arm's length, face it towards yourself, and shoot blind. In one, the three of us are hugging. Then there's one of Kyle and me with our arms around

each other's shoulders. We've got red eyes from the flash, like albinos, and you can tell by the slack in our smiles that we've been drinking.

Another one is of Nadia and Kyle. He's whispering in her ear.

Another is of Nadia and me hugging, staring at something to the left of the camera. When I think about this picture--sometimes at work, or when Mariah and I are making dinner, anytime really that a thought like that comes to your head--I sense a frailty in what we might have been staring at.

Exposure twelve.

The halfway point. Nadia took this one. We'd rolled and licked and smoked another joint. That kind of night. Nadia asked me for the camera and walked out to the porch. She said that she wanted to photograph some chairs, and she did in exposures thirteen through fifteen. Weird stuff, too. Lawn chairs and a wooden rocker. But first she took this picture of Kyle and me.

She must have waited a little while before taking it, because in the picture Kyle has his head in his hands. And I remember that it took a long time in our conversation for him to put his head in his hands and start crying. It makes sense. No one breaks into a conversation about how they're not good enough for their father without a little time. Unless they're an adolescent. Especially an adolescent at the Academy. So, I guess it's possible that Nadia didn't have to wait long to take that picture. But she had to wait a little bit, at the very least, and I always wonder what she was doing then. Maybe she was taking a drink from the bottle when she decided to take that picture, watching us through the glass, our bodies molten and contorted by a trick of refracted light.

I remember that she was barefoot, wearing shorts with an afghan wrapped around her torso. I remember it that way because that's what she's wearing in exposures eighteen and nineteen. I remember it because that's what she was wearing the next morning.

Exposure sixteen.

Nudity.

Naked Kyle. Naked Nadia. Naked Trevor, although I'm not in the picture. The flash makes their bodies white, against the greater levels of darkness and night around them. Kyle looks like he's howling. Nothing out of hand, though. Nothing they look at twice in the photomat.

Exposure seventeen.

This is a picture of my face. Not much different from all the other pictures in the stack, but remarkable to me, because this is the first picture that doesn't wear a memory when I look at it. The first picture of what the AA counselor I went to before I met Mariah would call a blackout, or missing time: when your mind's too drenched to remember what your body does. Of the lot, this is the picture that I think about the most.

I think about it because exposures eighteen and nineteen are shots of Nadia, taken by Kyle I presume.

And exposure twenty is one I took of the both of them speaking to each other.

And exposures twenty-one through twenty-four are of my brick dorm at the Academy. We shot those off just to finish the roll, after we'd talked to the deans and police, right before Kyle asked me if I thought we should develop these at the photomat.

So, this is the exposure that counts, the one I push out of my mind while making dinner with Mariah, or talking with my daughter, Lydia, about whether or not she can pierce her ears. She's thirteen now and boys are starting to call her because they want to talk, not because they forgot their homework.

I push against it, because I can't remember it. I mean, that's the point I wanted to make when I was called in to talk to the police, and the deans at the Academy. That's why I was silent. How was I to know what went on between them while I slept? Whether or not he had forced himself on her like she said he did? I wasn't even there.

And what did I know about Kyle, except that his father was a rich drunk, that he taught me how to swallow booze without coughing, that he was my best friend. And what did I know about her, except that she loved Whitman, that she was his girl, and that somewhere in between exposures eleven and sixteen, while we were drinking from the bottle, she whispered that she was in love with me.

And what did I know about myself? Except that I wasn't willing to believe her.

I didn't know why then, though sometimes I fear I do now. Fear that it was something simple, some fundamental carelessness. I wasn't willing to believe her, the morning she told me. Not even after I had awakened, after I had walked down to the hammock where she was sitting wrapped in an afghan, after I had touched her on the shoulder and made her flinch. "I just woke up," she told me. "I just remembered." And, because I hadn't heard all of it yet, hadn't heard her speak, I had this strange thought that if I told her I loved her she would stop crying.

When Lydia was born I could calm her crying by resting her body against my chest, and in those moments I had thoughts like that. They made me believe in myself. But she's getting older, and a father's love isn't the only thing. She's starting to want to be a woman. And being a woman means that you meet people like me. And what does that

mean? Except that no one can remember everything, and that now, in exposure twenty, I swear I see something in Nadia's eyes--some caged, wincing fold of the eyelashes that makes me reconsider, makes me wish I'd thought a little more that morning while I stood barefoot in the dewy grass, next to a young woman suspended in mid-air by a listless hammock.

Yesterday, the day before her birthday, as is her habit, Lydia asked me if she could open one of her presents early. Even though I figured it would do no harm, and even though I wanted to see her smile at what Mariah and I had bought her, I said no.

I said that to her because I believe that children should learn to wait. I've waited all these years to find something new in the photographs. Something that would change things. But what are photographs? They aren't events, they're shadows of events. You could look at them and make up any story you want. You could even believe we were different people. So, children have to learn how to wait, because some things you wait for your whole life. And life is long.

Easy Like Drinking Water

Wallace was clean and freshly showered.

He adjusted the speed on the cruise control to an even sixty and stared out the window at the rows of cattails growing on the side of the turnpike. Through their tawny, rowed communities he could see New York approach from the east, a tangle of concrete and steel. He drove past the city, further north, until he couldn't wait any longer, which turned out to be Massachusetts.

In the motel they signed in under his name. It had taken a lot of talking to get her to come this weekend. Marisa was worried that her parents might find out. She was nineteen, and it was legal, but her parents paid for her to go to college, and they were old-style orthodox Christians, and that meant that it was a secret. In the two months that he'd been seeing her, starting with casual conversations at the water cooler, clandestine gropings in movie theatres, that was between them. Wallace tried to remember the quality of his fears when he was nineteen, before both his parents had passed away, but after a minute or so of that kind of thinking Wallace stopped, wondering what the point of that kind of thinking was. Instead, Wallace paid for the room. Ninety dollars that he gave to the greying blond at the front desk. As she handed him the perforated key card, Wallace imagined that she was prettier before she started working behind the desk. At twenty-nine Wallace felt he had the right to think things like that.

"There's a wedding reception in our banquet room," she said, gesticulating with her palms. "The Richards party. It's a little noisy now, but they should be all finished up around midnight. We're sorry for the inconvenience." She motioned them to the elevator with an outstretched arm. "Room 235, on the left."

Inside the elevator the sound of the party was dulled. He lifted his shoulders, hefting the wicker picnic basket and small suitcase, examining the shadow of Marisa's form on the stainless steel elevator door. When the doors opened he heard the party's

gaggle, the sound of big band, Benny Goodman. He felt something lost as he turned down the hall. He imagined highballs and frosted glasses, women in long satin dresses who told you they believed in God. He wondered what it would be to take Marisa downstairs, stand her next to him at the bar. He imagined his hand resting on her waist, her back a willowy lean. And why not imagine something like this, he figured. It wasn't like he was breaking the law.

Room 235. Three incandescent lamps, one large television facing a queen-sized bed with a nondescript landscape above it. The painting could have been of the beach or the desert.

Wallace placed their luggage on the floor as Marisa tested the mattress gently with her fingers before sitting. As Marisa chewed on her lower lip, he decided to go with the bottle of wine he'd been planning to save for tomorrow. He retrieved a bottle of white wine from the wicker picnic basket and sat down on the bed, facing the television, with it resting on his knee.

Wallace then wondered what to do. How does one...begin? He had a sudden fear that she would change her mind, want to leave. He imagined getting back in the car, driving through the night to New Jersey. He wondered what the next days would be like, whether or not he would speak to her that next Monday, as she was chewing her nails at her data entry terminal. He figured that he would speak to her either way. After all, he was a good guy. And she would be going back to college in two months. Either way, two months was short. You can do either thing for two months.

But beyond that, he wanted her to stay. Wanted to take her out to dinner at restaurants she couldn't afford. Wanted to get her drunk.

When she had first come to work at New Jersey Physicians Insurance it was evident that she didn't belong. Dressed like a belle at a southern cotillion for her first day at data entry. Wallace sat in his office with his door open and watched her in her cubicle. He watched her move to the water fountain, drink from the stream then move her face into it,

holding her curled blond hair out of the steel basin. It was summer and the water was always cold. She drank it down, her throat moved. Maybe it was the cubicle, maybe it was that she didn't belong, but Wallace wanted to believe in it, step on it, breathe it in and enjoy it.

Wallace motioned with the bottle.

"Wine, babe?" he asked.

Marisa nodded. "Mmm. Please."

Wallace used a key to tear through the plastic seal around the bottle. Confronted with the cork, he realized he didn't have a corkscrew.

Wallace grunted and considered his options. The easiest would be to call room service and ask for a corkscrew. But Wallace didn't know the exact rules in such a matter. He didn't even know if it was legal to bring your own wine into a hotel. These things had never occurred to him before. Added to this was the complication that could arise from having a waiter enter the room. He wasn't worried about what a waiter would think seeing a young woman and man ten years her elder with a corked bottle of wine--waiters get paid to see things like that. More specifically he was worried about Marisa, and the reaction that such a visit would elicit. This was Marisa's first time, he was sure of that. He'd been with two virgins before, Sarah when he was twenty, and Lisa when he was sixteen and a virgin himself. He understood that this was a delicate thing.

Wallace ended up examining his pocketknife for options. He considered the Phillips-head screwdriver, the awl, even the sharp end of the saw. He settled on the short knife and started to push the cork into the bottle. He had to twist and work the knife. The top of the cork was disintegrating into small pieces, but the cork as a whole seemed intent on remaining inert.

Wallace's hand slipped and the knife closed in on itself, catching his finger. He gasped as the pain came, standing, throwing the bottle to the ground, gripping his finger

and relishing in the heavy thud of glass on carpet. "Goddammit," he swore.

"Goddammit," he said, holding his hand.

"Babe," Marisa breathed, moving forward and grabbing his injured hand.

The pain was like a scream in Wallace's ear. "Let go, Jesus Christ, let go," he barked.

Marisa stopped and turned hard into the bathroom. She closed the door behind her with a slam.

Wallace took a deep breath. He leaned his head back with his nose facing the ceiling and exhaled. Eventually, he approached the door. "Marisa? Babe? Open the door." He waited a few seconds. "Marisa? Can you please open the door, please?" He waited and decided to try again. He made his voice steady. "Marisa, could you at least give me a towel. You don't have to let me in, just give me a towel. I'm bleeding here."

This time Wallace pressed his ear against the door. Through the locked wood he could hear her gasping like a sprinter out of breath. She seemed to be mumbling something, the actual words obscured by the sound of the reception below. Wallace gave up trying to decipher the words after a moment or two.

"Goddamn party," he mumbled. He was beginning to bleed on the carpet. He walked to the bed, removed a pillowcase and wrapped it tight around his hand. When he was satisfied with the dressing, he picked up the wine bottle and, this time using the flat of the jackknife, pried the cork into the bottle. It floated in pieces at the top. He took a sip and stopped to spit out the specks of cork that he caught on his tongue.

"All right. Relax," he told himself. He approached the door slowly, with quiet, cat steps. He squared his feet and put his palms against the door. "Marisa, honey," he started. "Marisa. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be angry. I don't know what came over me." He waited. "Marisa, where are you? I'm sorry. I know you're nervous." He waited. He could sense her beginning to soften behind the door. "I'm nervous too,

honey. I love you, babe." Even after saying this he felt the lie in his throat, like biting tinfoil.

He heard Marisa moving in the bathroom, the water running, the last complacent snuffles. He kept talking. "I love you," he said, this time leaning his forehead against the door, letting wooden coolness move through. "Do you hear me? I love you," he said again, and again, four times until she opened the door. He put his wrapped hand around her back. "Let's drink some wine. We're together now."

Her hand started as a slow tremble on his thigh. He imagined this tremble starting somewhere in her chest, and moving through the veins in her arms. It was the first time he'd seen her fully undressed, and lying next to her he felt an urge to soothe her. He could feel her muscles relax and tense and he moved his hands over them--relaxing in her arms and shoulders, tensing when he moved over her pelvis, examining the dark wires of hair. He covered her breast with his tongue, angled his hips in her direction.

She gave a stuttered breath. "Wallace. Is the door locked?"

"Yeah."

She waited for a second before speaking again. "Could you just check it?"

Wallace lifted his head and coughed. He felt himself brimming over below, the first touches of frustration moving through the inside of his thighs. He stood up and walked naked to the door. He made an extravagant display of unlocking and re-locking the door. "Okay?" he asked.

"Okay," she told him.

He slid back onto the bed next to her, moved his mouth to her stomach, traced the fine, invisible hairs with his tongue. He felt Marisa tighten when she heard the sound. "Listen," she said.

Wallace sighed, and lifted his head. Several men were yelling outside.

"What is it?" Marisa asked.

"Some people talking." He nibbled her hip.

"Talking? Sounds like more than that." She bounded off the bed and put her underwear back on. "Let's look," she said running to the window. "Turn off the light."

Wallace rolled onto his back. He felt a sudden sense of shame at her childish impulse to watch. This was not the kind of girl who leans against you in a bar. Not yet at least. He walked slowly to the light switch and shut it off. Marisa was already kneeling by the window. The sounds of arguing outside had escalated, rising in volume and pitch.

"Come on," she said, waving him over. He kneeled beside her. Only then did she draw the curtain, so that both of them could see. Down in parking lot two men in tuxedos were squared off like pugilists, voices raised, waists bent in at each other. On the right, the taller man was waving his arms, pointing at the other. The other, shorter, slimmer man appeared to be listening.

"It's like a movie," Marisa said, with something approaching wonder in her voice. "What do you think happened?"

"Just drunk people fighting. It *happens* sometimes, okay?"

Marisa snapped her neck around to face him. Even in the darkness it seemed like her ears were red. "Don't say that like I'm some fucking child. I know it *happens*. I've got brothers, I've got a father. I've watched them puke from the goddamn stuff." She pointed at the bottle. "I've taken care of all of them. I know it *happens*."

While Marisa spoke at him, Wallace muffled a swear and watched the men. The taller one pushed at the other. He pushed back, turned around, and started walking away. The tall man recovered his balance. By the way he held his body underneath the streetlamp Wallace could tell that he was considering what to do. He watched the tall man puff his chest and move towards the other. In the streetlight, his shadow loomed long and willowy, mutable stripes of darkness. He concentrated on the men and their shadows, their projected darkness. He watched the tall man's shadow reach inside its coat, bring out its arm and push it against the back of the other man's shoulder.

Then there was flash of light, the short report of gunfire igniting. Then there was the sound, a small pop almost too quiet. Wallace felt Marisa's nails dig into his thigh. He felt his sex slackening below him. The man seemed to stand for a minute before crumpling to the pavement, wailing as if singing.

"My God," Marisa whispered.

Wallace imagined a long wind blowing outside. They observed the gunman. He stood still, then slowly walked to the curb with his feet dragging before sitting on the concrete and cradling his head in his hands. Wallace turned to Marisa, whose mouth was the shape of a small zero. Her breasts were high on her chest, and she was beginning to chew on her fingernails. He remembered that when he first saw her she had been wearing barrettes.

The refrigerator from the mini-bar turned on, and looking outside Wallace imagined he could hear the sound of these men's souls escaping.

Wallace suddenly stood up, gripped by some inchoate fear. He took two quick steps to the right, turned, took two steps to the left before rushing to the bathroom. He shut the door behind him and turned on the light. It hurt his eyes. His stomach was clenched like a fist. His skull, air and vertigo.

He heard Marisa approach the door. She knocked three times. "Wallace, let me in." She knocked again.

As the nausea came, he realized he was hyperventilating and attempted to stutter his breaths. He sat on the toilet. His stomach unwound, and he relieved himself. The odor was hot and almost fruity.

"Wallace, let me in." Her voice was on an even keel. He thought of cleaning himself and opening the door, but felt a shame at his odor.

"I'm okay," he snapped, holding his stomach.

"Jesus, Wallace, I'm not worried about you. They're *still* down there. They haven't moved."

Wallace's stomach tightened up again, his voice and breath was wheezy.

"Someone will come along."

"We have to call the police. You have to call the police, you're an eyewitness."

"Someone will notice it," he said. "It's their business, not ours. We don't have to do anything. Christ, Marisa, *someone* will see it."

"Wallace, we saw it. All right? Wallace, come out here."

Wallace was lightheaded. He felt light and dying, like a child. Immersed, buried. He felt bile in the back of his throat and brought his head between his knees.

Marisa gave up and went to the phone. Wallace listened to her dial and make a report to the police. Something about the quality of her voice made him sure that her hands were steady. He wondered what had brought him here. After all, Wallace was a good guy. He'd volunteered in soup kitchens in high school, and once he'd "adopted" a refugee child from Honduras off the television. He'd kept her picture in his wallet. So, how was it now that he was here, that his wallet was empty?

Wallace thought of Marisa at the drinking fountain, and listened to her voice on the phone. What a surprise. A surprise that she made it seem easy. The words, that is. Easy like camping with his old man, back when they lived an hour's drive from the New Hampshire Whites. Easy like the Saturday nights spent when he was first in love with Lisa, Sunday mornings afterwards, the breakfasts his mother made when she was alive. Easy as her biscuits. Easy as honey. Easy like drinking water, feeling it wash through you.

The next time Wallace will hear a voice like that will be ten years later, give or take. Ten years after the next Monday, when he saw Marisa chewing on a pencil at her cubicle.

He will be driving through Utah, this time as a salesman, this time as a man who pays alimony. He'll be on his way to a conference, driving through the middle of the night. He'll flip the station and flip back, hearing the DJ's voice. His heart will catch for a split second and resume. Even though he will know that he can never be sure about it, he

will believe that voice to be hers. Something about its timbre. Fluidity. He will remember clutching himself in the bathroom, refusing be led into the next room. He will think about the river in her voice, how the river touches the sea, how the sea touches everything. And this time, he'll try again, closing his eyes languorously, leaning his skull against the headrest, his fingers steering by the sound of her voice, which broadcasts over two hundred miles of desert.