1992

Momentary loss : stories

Craig Damrauer
Colby College

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APPROVED:

James Boylan
TUTOR JAMES BOYLAN

Pat O'Conner, Associate Chair
CHAIR, DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

Peter Harris
READER PETER HARRIS

Peter Harris
CHAIR, COMMITTEE PETER HARRIS
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Introduction

This final copy of my Senior Scholars' Project is in two parts. The first part is the stories themselves. There are seven of them, which make up the first half of the final copy. The second half, which I originally intended to leave out, is the unedited stories and bits of stories that didn't succeed, titled *The Remainder*. I include them with my final copy because I believe that they explain what went into this project and exactly how and what I learned. I think that a careful reading of *The Remainder* will show someone interested in writing how ideas are worked and reworked until they can be successfully used.

In looking back at this year-long project, and what it taught me, I would like to focus on three major things. The first, is the process of writing, which has been illuminated for me by the scope of this project. The second, is the pain and reward that is involved with the solitary act of writing. The third, is how I found the act of completion, which was governed by a time constraint rather than satisfaction with the stories as a whole. I found this project to be a learning experience far greater than anything I have ever done before. I struggled quite a bit. In the end, when I finally had to leave these stories, I felt a bit of a loss. They represent to me the successes and failures that I have had over the past year, and the tremendous growth that I experienced.

When I dived into this project I found through my struggles that writing is an evolutionary process, rather than a creational one. I started by writing on a daily basis, hoping that soon things would begin to take shape. I found as I wrote I created things that worked
and that didn’t. The things that didn’t work, I held onto instead of throwing them away in disgust. These make up The Remainder. From the parts that are contained in The Remainder I pulled ideas and scenes when putting together the stories that did work.

Recently reading through these unsuccessful parts, I noticed some interesting things. The idea for The Thursday of Our Discontent was formulated initially and then discarded. I seemed not to have found the right things to make it work, and so I set it aside. At some later point I picked it up again, and began to turn it into a story that worked. I also noticed several tries at a story that I wanted to write, about a man named Harris and a woman named Daphne. This later became a story about Harley and Marge and then ended up just being something I couldn’t make work. In the early attempt, Harris says that “fate definitely plays a role in my life.” This statement somehow left Harris’ mouth and ended up in the final copy of We’re Liars, thought by the narrator. The name Harris left that earlier man and became the name of the protagonist in Things Happen.

What I have found from all of this is the evolutionary process of writing. I hold onto themes, ideas, scenes and names so that when I am building a story, a successful one or a not so successful one, I can try these differing things out. There is a story that I tried for almost two weeks to write that is fragmentarily documented in The Remainder. This is a story that I imagined as a brotherly conflict that arises because one brother, the younger, went off to play minor league baseball. The other brother stayed at home to manage the family store. I wanted to show in this story that one of the brothers felt responsibility for the family while the other seemed to go off
and feed his own interests. I wanted to have the younger brother coming home, beaten up badly enough not to have a career in baseball anymore, and badly in need of some sort of family support. I wanted him to be a slightly heroic figure, but also one in trouble. I also wanted him to exploit the tensions that the older brother felt, and for the whole thing to somehow come to a head. I think I conceived of the idea because I imagined the younger brother pitching on his fused knee in a family reunion softball game, that made it clear that things would somehow survive.

In writing this story I met with a great deal of frustration. Some part of it bogged me down and made it impossible to continue. I remember sitting up in my room last spring agonizing over this story, writing it several times, and finally giving up. I didn't wad it up and throw it away, though. I simply put the idea aside and continued with my work. The process demanded that I stop spinning my wheels and march on. It felt like I gave the story a fair hearing and in the end couldn't bring it around. The basic idea still stayed with me, though, and ended up finding a decent place to reside in the story titled *For Me, Things Are Different*.

This sort of evolutionary process can only be manifested in long term projects such as this one. I found I was writing, for this year, for the sake of writing. I had no specific desires except to see where the process would take me. In doing this I discovered that successes are few and far between, but they nevertheless do come. It is simply a matter of patience and determination and a true love of the process of writing, not the results. This philosophy, of course, didn't come easily.
Along with this process comes a different lifestyle which, at times, can be maddening, but other times can be the greatest reward. Writing, I have found, is a completely solitary process and in taking on this project I found new definitions for that solitude.

The pleasures and pain that came from this project were, for the most part, one and the same. They came from my making the discoveries, through long periods of confusion and despair. I didn't discover the process of writing, that I discussed earlier, for a while. To me, it was just frustration. It felt like I was spinning my wheels and I was worried that nothing was going to get done.

At the beginning I labored over first drafts, trying to pin down exactly what I wanted. This caused me a tremendous amount of pain because I seemed to be losing control over what I wanted to happen or how I wanted to express it. What I found was that the initial ideas for stories are usually contained within a phrase or an idea. I wrote *The Freaky Dance*, with just the idea of a man coming to visit the kid's home wearing a button on his lapel that said 'soul.' I wrote *The Thursday of Our Discontent* with an idea for the metaphor in the story, which was the ferns overhead. I found later, when I hit dry spells and hard times, that I could write my ideas down in a free-association style. I quickly typed ideas for phrases, words, things that happen. These, I found, could then be melted together to form the first draft for the story. This is how I wrote *Travel Diary*, which appears in the first part, and *Returning Home*, one that I only included in *The Remainder*. Discovering this allowed me to enjoy writing in a whole new way. I enjoyed the initial highly creative process of imagining a story, and enjoyed the sleuthing that it
required to piece the story together. I enjoyed the formation of a
good phrase or a good sentence. Without this simple enjoyment,
much would have been lost at that point.

That wonderful discovery came some time this fall when I was
despairing because the project seemed to have lost the fire I always
desired. I felt, at that point, that I was not enjoying things and I
was concerning myself with planning the project out and making it
work. When I made that discovery it opened the project back up and
the process became fresh and interesting again. That was something
I had to discover by myself and in doing so I turned the pain back
into pleasure. The solitary act of writing, and the solitary nature of
this project allowed me to turn my despair into this sort of great
reward.

This brings me to my final point, the ending of the project. With
any sort of research project one seems to approach the ending
asymptotically. The Right answer is never obtained, but as one
spends time with it one seems to approach the Right answer. This is
true with Chemistry and it is true with Creative Writing. I spent the
last week going over these stories trying to make them as perfect as
I had hoped they would be when I started the project. In doing this, I
met with frustration because I wanted somehow for the stories to
tell me that they were done.

This never happened, though. I have decided that the end for this
project will have to be defined by the time allotted, because this is
the only true boundary. All of the stories can be changed and
improved, some more than others, and this is a process of change
that will never end. My only alternative for the ending of the project
was to find some reasonable amount of comfort with the stories and to call it a day, so to speak.

This was a painful decision for me because I started the project wanting absolute perfection in the stories, and in the end I found that this simply couldn't be reached. I like all the stories in some differing ways. I like the ideas, some of the sentences, and some of the discoveries that I made with them. I like the pathos involved and the humour that seems to hang above them. I think that they have different levels of maturity and perfection, and this seems to bother me because I would like all of them to be perfect. Giving these stories up now, I guess, is the final lesson in the long learning process that this project has afforded me. Enjoy.

Craig K. Damrauer
December 8, 1991
We're Liars

I shave and look carefully at the scar on my chin. Some days I look forward to the challenge of not cutting myself there, but today is not one of those days. I am now twenty-eight years old. My mother has been married three times, my real father has been dead for twelve years now. I have two and a half dimples on my face when I smile, if you count the one on my bottom lip, and I have to hold Terry's hand all day while we look at thousands of dollars worth of cars, dresses and suits while not planning to buy a thing.

The shower is never warm enough. I occasionally fog up the mirror, but those are usually warm days to start with. The man on the radio is explaining why Bonnie Raitt is not a man. I'm going to lie back down again.

Terry comes into my bedroom silently and then crawls into my bed slowly by untucking the sheets from the end of the bed, pulling them up and then moving inch by inch toward my head. She lays on top of me for a little bit. "Married couple day," she says.

"How did you get into the apartment?" I say.

"It was unlocked," she says. Her nose is slightly turned upward and there is a small freckle on the tip of her cheek. That was the thing I first saw, the freckle. I told myself that it would be wonderful to kiss that freckle. She was sitting across from me in a restaurant downtown, on those little wooden benches they provide their customers who are waiting for a table. I didn't know her from Adam, but there was something about her that I noticed. Her head
was at a certain angle. She was in good humor about having to wait for a table, smiling at all of the other people, who were frowning.

The apartment, in my opinion, is cramped. The landlord described it as cozy. He said that all his tenants had grown to love the place, they had hung tiny intricate paintings on the sloped ceilings and they had put bright colorful posters of Paris up in the kitchen. I move about all right in here but I can't help getting the feeling that I'm a bird trapped in a cozy birdhouse.

I notice the size of the apartment even when Terry isn't here. Sometimes I'll find myself standing below one of the sloped ceilings, stooping over. When she is here I sometimes have to put my hands on her arms and move her to the side in order to get by her. My bedroom doesn't feel right, it never has.

Terry is twenty-nine and she wants to have children. She says that she's done with dating because you can never tell if someone's straight or gay these days. She told me last week that if I wouldn't marry her soon that I could at least act like it once in a while. What on earth do you want me to do, I replied, take you out shopping for cars and homes and stuff? Yes, at least that, she said.

"I need some breakfast," I say. "Have you eaten? How about some eggs with chilies and salsa?"

"That sounds wonderful. Think of a pet name you can call me while we're in the showrooms. How about Pumpkin. I've always wanted to be a Pumpkin." Her head is eclipsing my view of the ceiling. Her warm breath on my face makes me drowsy.

I've never adjusted to the cramped feeling I get when committed to another person, the phone calls, the invisible umbilical chord. It
scares me sometimes when I realize that she is beginning to grow in my thoughts. Siamese twins connected at the heart.

"Up and out of bed Pumpkin," I say. "Breakfast time. You going to eat?"

"I'll nibble."

The eggs are setting and I am about to sprinkle the cheese on. Terry grabs me from behind, squeezing me tightly. She left that restaurant, she later told me so, with a picture of my face burned into her memory. Complete with the dimples and everything, she said.

It's funny that she mentioned it, because I left with an impression too. I recognized the freckle on the tip of her cheek the minute I saw her two weeks later; I never told her that. As we grew closer I wondered if fate was beginning to play a role in my life.

Now she and I can just sit on the sofa and talk. I hate the way she pulls little strips off of her nails with her teeth and spits them onto the floor. I love the way she jumps slightly in the air when she is excited about something. I hate the fact that she doesn't care about the government. I love her reasoning that she has better things to think about.

... 

I look at my face in the mirror one last time before we leave to go shopping for cars. This is not the face of a liar, I tell myself. I actually mouth the words. I mouth the words: Yes I think we like this car but we need some time to think about it, we'll be back. I say them several times, each time more grotesquely, tilting my head, smiling greatly. My arms will be braided with hers the whole time,
we will look each other in the eyes and pretend to be reading each other's thoughts. This bathroom really needs some artwork. Something to hang behind me that I can look at in the mirror while I am shaving in the morning.

Terry once told me that when she was little she wrote her name on everything that she owned. She took a marker and wrote her name on the white walls of her bedroom. She wrote her name on the bottoms of all her shoes. She did this on her chair, her desk and even her underwear. Her mom and dad got really mad at her when they saw the writing. This is yours, they said, you should know it. She didn't understand this, though. She needed to be able to look around while she sat in bed and see with her own eyes.

... "We are shopping for a larger type of car," she says to the salesman. "Something that will be suitable for a family." She pats her stomach. He looks at me and I smile.

"Minivans are big sellers," he says. "You can hold your whole family and then some." He holds his hands out, pretending to squeeze a large box.

"Mileage?" I say.

"Mileage is a good concern," he says, "one that even I have. If I had it all to do over I wouldn't have bought a compact like this one here, but I would have gone with a minivan. They get almost the mileage of a compact but oh the room." He squeezes the imaginary box again.

I wander off. I walk toward the luxury car that sits on the edge of the showroom. The shine of the paint is smooth and erotic. The
door opens with authority and the inside smells sweet with leather. I run my hand over the driver's seat and actually picture owning the vehicle. The price tag: twenty two thousand dollars.

I walk back to Terry and the salesman. "I had ultrasound done, just to be sure it was healthy, and the doctor told me he knew what the sex was, but I don't want to know. We've narrowed it down to Joseph if it's a boy, after my husband's father, or if it's a girl Charlotte, I just like that name," she says.

"We have to go," I say. "I can't stand this any longer."

"Here's my card," the salesman says. Terry takes it from him.

We are outside and it is a sunny day. It is warm. It is a Saturday and I have nothing to do. I don't want to be trapped in my apartment. I don't want to be trapped in a showroom. "My dad's been dead for twelve years and his name was not Joseph, it was Allen," I say. "He was a big man, it seemed to me." I look down at the ground and then back up at Terry.

"I'm sorry," she says, and then she is quiet. She takes my arm up closely in her arm and moves her body next to mine. We stop walking. "We're liars," she says.

"I know." I look her deeply in the eyes. Brown eyes seem to have a complacency about them that is unsettling. Sometimes her eyes bounce up and down as if they are trying to work their way into my head, now they just look deep and far away.

... 

Terry dabs perfume on her wrist, smells it and then puts it under my nose. "I don't think he likes it," she says to the saleslady behind the counter. "You get so that you can tell these things." There was
an evening when we were sitting in a bar, leaning our chairs against the wall, watching people go by. I felt, at that time, that I wanted to take her home and put her into a bottle and save her for a rainy day. She would be the essence that I put on just for those times when I need it. On the way home we said the same things at the same time and soon my thoughts raced toward the future.

"Why do you want a kid so much?" I say, holding her arm as we walk out of the store.

"I just do. It's time," she says. "If I were my mom I'd have had me two years ago."

"You'd be not only two years old but you'd be nursing yourself," I say.

She laughs and her eyes close lightly.

... 

She is in the dressing room trying on a two-thousand dollar suit that is made from a mix of silk and wool. It has a dull shine to it, a flashiness and tight fittedness that makes the women in the posters on the wall have real deep down dignity. Terry calls me from the dressing room. "What do you think?" she says as I open the door.

"Ooh la la," I say as I ease her into the corner.

"They could be watching us you know," she says, smiling, tapping the full length mirror she is against.

"I know." I kiss her lightly on the lips. She closes her eyes and breathes deeply inward.

This dressing room is another kind of bird house. The holes in the walls are either pinholes or pecks from the beaks of all the people who come in here. I want to live in a house in the country that has
fields all around it. I want a large oak tree, that I can sling a rope swing in so that I can push Terry around. At least I think I do. She could be gone any minute. She could meet some guy at work who is wearing a sign that says I'm straight and single, who she likes better. We could find out that our toenails dig too deeply into our legs when we lie in bed together.

"Can we go home now?" I say, imitating a child.

"No. But we can go get some lunch."

I have to admit, she outdoes the women in the posters with the two-thousand dollar suit and they even have an advantage because they carry briefcases. She is talking at a board meeting. She is presenting her acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize in Physics.

"I'll be back later to pay for this," she says, handing it to the salesman. "Wait, I have to fly to San Francisco tonight. Can you do it?"

I nod.

My mother locked herself in her walk-in closet for two days after my dad died. I pinned my ear to the door and could hear silent weeping. I heard my aunt standing outside of the closet saying, "Liz. Liz come out and get something to eat. You need something to eat Liz."

Three years after she came out of the closet she had been married and divorced. Seven years after coming out of the closet she was divorced again. Both men were sensible. Both men had large faces and took good care of her.

...
Lunch is the only thing we will pay for all day. There's no getting around this one. I order a club sandwich and a salad, she orders a turkey sub and some soup. "Fun isn't it?" she says. "You're not pulling your weight though. Try some stuff on, make a scene, feel important." She lays her hands out in the air and shrugs her shoulders.

"This isn't right," I say.

"Of course it isn't. But it's something." She holds her left hand out toward me and looks at it. "Oh." She grabs her ring finger and then looks at the ceiling. "Rings. We forgot rings for Christ's sake. I can't believe it."

I look away. I want to laugh, to roll my head back and laugh hard and loud enough so that people begin to look over at us. I smile at her.

"You don't understand," she says. "The people won't believe us without rings."

"I know but how can they believe us anyway. We don't need a minivan or lawn furniture. I have my bird house apartment with no art on the walls and a girlfriend who smiles a lot and sneaks in while I'm lying down. You have a boyfriend who you know is straight," I say.

Her face is sad and her soup looks weak. The table is small. "What else, though?" she says. "Look at me, I'm a mess."

"..."

I'm leaning over the glass case that contains the watches. Terry is down a couple of cases looking at jewelry. I pull out my wallet and yank out all of the identification cards I have with my picture on
them. One has me with long curly hair. I have a big bright smile and a twinkle in my eye in this picture. Another has me with shorter hair, a little beard growth and a sour look on my face. I could have been hung over when they took this one. Another, my driver's licence, has me with my beard. I look sharp and careful in this one. All of them are me, no one could deny that, but I'm different somehow in each one. Terry hands the woman behind the glass case some money and I think she just bought us some rings.
In the morning Harris opened the paper and saw that Peter had been hit by a car. Harris read the article slowly and when he finished he said, "Things happen," out loud. He sat back in his chair, put his hands on his stomach and looked around as if he were finally satisfied. The strangest thing happened, though: he was blown over by a wave of sorrow. Three days before, Harris had walked the three blocks to Peter's house and poured urine into the little slots in the hood of Peter's car, the ones just in front of the windshield. Peter was now in intensive care. What if he dies? Harris cut out the article and taped it to his refrigerator.

He had been told by a high school kid once that those were the air intake ducts for the car. If you pour urine in there, any time he turns on his heat or his air conditioner things smell. There's no way to get rid of the smell either. He'll have to sell the car and hope that the guy test driving it doesn't turn anything on. The high school kid smiled and crossed his arms. Harris wondered whether he had ever done it before or if he just imagined it happening.

...After taping the article to the refrigerator, Harris went upstairs and kissed his wife, Connie, goodbye. She awoke slightly and smiled at him. "Peter Makris got hit by a car last night. I think he's o.k., though," Harris said, and then he went to work.

In the car Harris listened to the radio psychologist talk about liking yourself, looking in the mirror in the morning and liking what

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you see. Harris decided that, for some reason, he didn't like himself, and Peter played a role in that.

"Holy mackerel," Connie said, later into the phone. "He really did get hit by a car. I though you were just pulling my leg this morning."

"Nope," Harris said. "I don't think I'd kid about a thing like that. Do you think they'll cancel your class tonight?"

"Of course, Who's going to teach it?"

"Well, since you don't have class do you want to go out for Chinese tonight?" Harris said.

"Sure, I guess," Connie said.

At five o'clock when the people from his office began streaming out of the front door, Harris stayed and began manipulating the office supplies that he had on the top of his desk and in his drawers. Connie was going to take the bus down and would meet him at the restaurant at five-twenty. He had twenty minutes to kill. He got up and went to the bathroom. He returned. He got up and went to get a drink of water. He returned.

Harris moved the stapler across the front of his desk, he tried to staple two paper clips together. He would never tell Connie about the urine, no matter whether Peter lived or died. He pulled the tape out of the dispenser and put a pencil through the middle of the roll. He didn't want her taking any more classes because it took her away from him. He put his thumb on the roll of tape and began spinning it on the pencil. He wished that Peter had never walked into his life.

In the restaurant Connie said, "They say that he was jogging at about dusk but that he was wearing a suit that had these little reflective stripes all over the front and back."
"It's still not too smart to be jogging at night," Harris said.
"Well, what would you know about jogging? At least he jogs."
"I'm just saying..."

"He showed me pictures of Nigeria and this beautiful lake that sits on the edge of the country," Connie said. "He also showed me pictures of the ocean and there are even a couple of small but pretty mountains. He's really been places."

"I know," Harris said.

... 

Six weeks before Harris poured the urine into Peter's car, Connie introduced the two. She was talking to Peter in Harris' living room when Harris came home from work. "This is Peter from my class. He's really intelligent," she said, tapping her forehead. Peter just nodded. He didn't even say hello, or stand up for that matter. "Peter likes to play hearts and he thought that we could go over to his house tomorrow to play some hearts with his wife and he," Connie said.

"Him and his wife," Peter said.

"I don't see why not," Harris said. He tried really hard to give the guy the benefit of the doubt, smiling when he saw Peter, shaking his hand and patting him on the shoulder when Peter decided to leave.

... 

The first night they went to play hearts, Harris rang the doorbell and shuffled from foot to foot. He looked at Connie who gripped a bottle of wine that she had purchased. Peter opened the door and grinned at them. He led them into his house and the first thing that
Harris noticed were large masks hanging on the wall. "Scary," he said, pointing to them.

"Those are from Nigeria. My wife, Meg, and I served in the Peace Corps there. That's where we met," Peter said. A woman walked into the front room. "This is Meg," Peter said. "Meg, meet Connie. Connie's one of my brightest pupils. This is Harris."

Meg smiled. "Nice to meet the both of you," she said. "Can I get you something to drink?"

Meg was statuesque and she wore a flowery print dress. She had long red hair and little circle glasses that sat on the tip of her nose. Peter wore a blazer, a tight bow tie and khaki pants. Harris had on jeans and a sweater, Connie a plain brown skirt.

Connie gave the bottle of wine to Peter. "Here. I thought maybe we could drink this while we play. It'll add to the excitement," she said.

Peter took the bottle by the neck and rolled it's label in front of his eyes. "Well," he said. "Thanks, Connie. I'd rather use this for cooking, though. We'll drink a nice Cabernet Sauvignon that I opened last night."

Connie smiled. "O.k. whatever you think is better."

They sat down at a little felt card table that was set up on the side of the living room. Peter shuffled the cards and then dealt them all out. "What is it that you do for a living Harris?" Peter said.

"I keep track of the inventory for a wholesale hardware store."

"Hmm, sounds interesting. What sort of a degree do you have?" Peter said.

"A degree in common sense," Harris said.
They played three games and each time Peter won because he got the fewest points. Connie came in second once, Meg two times, and Harris always came in last. He played his cards poorly and was willing to take the hearts up, even though he had other cards to play and didn't have to.

When they stopped playing, Peter said, "I have this ability to remember all of the cards played. I learned to play in graduate school."

"You wanted to have a bad time," Connie said to Harris as they lay in bed that night.

"Why would I want to do that?" Harris asked.

... They left the Chinese restaurant and drove home. On the way, they passed a man and woman jogging on the shoulder of the road. Harris pointed them out.

"See that. You can barely see them in the headlights," he said.

"Look how far over they are. You'd either have to be drunk or want to hit them," Connie said.

There were other things he could have done, the kid told him so. He could have put ground up limburger cheese into the air intake. He could have slid a razor blade around the edges of the windows, ruining the seal, so that when it rained it really poured. He could have poured battery acid on the paint job. He could have just slashed the tires. In the end he decided on the urine in the air intake job. It was the kind of thing that demanded that.

...
Harris sat on the edge of the bed and thought about these things while Connie read a thick book with a blue drawing on the front. Every once in a while she stopped reading, pulled a little spiral notebook onto the book and scribbled something. He watched her and wanted desperately to capture her imagination like the book was. She giggled occasionally to herself, and Harris opened up inside. He traced her face with his eyes, from her fine misty hair down over her little upturned nose to her almost nonexistent chin. Not once did she look up; she turned the pages quickly and her eyes moved from the bottom of the page right to the top of the next.

Harris leaned back across the bed and put his hand on her shoulder. He moved it slowly down her arm and she let her hand free from the edge of the book. He held her hand firmly and stroked her wrist with his thumb.

When Connie finally turned out the light she leaned over toward him and said, "I called Meg but she wasn't there. I think I'll go by the hospital tomorrow. Do you want me to wait until you get back from work?"

"No. I'll go by myself," Harris said.

"It really seems to bother you," she said. "Don't let it get to you Harris, there's nothing you could have done about it."

Harris woke early the next morning and went downstairs in his bathrobe to get the paper. He opened it and searched the headlines for more information about Peter. There was a small article on page three that said witnesses had seen a blue car swerving right about the time that Peter was hit. The police had no suspects. Harris had a blue car.
He went to the refrigerator and got down on his knees to read the article he had taped there the day before. Serious condition. The driver had left the scene of the accident. Jogging at dusk.

... 

Harris came home one afternoon from work and Connie was sitting at the dining room table reading over the course catalogue for the adult education school. "English," she said. "I'm taking a class in English, The Modern Novel."

"Why do you want to do that?" Harris said.

"I just do," Connie said. "Why, do you think it's silly?"

"Not silly."

"Then what?"

"Well, I just don't see why you'd want to go taking classes now," Harris said.

"I want to learn something," Connie said.

"I don't know. You're too old to go to college now," he said, but then he felt sorry. "You know what I mean."

"No I don't. I just feel like I need something more here, that's all," Connie said.

He didn't understand. They were happy together, he thought, so why should anything change?

...

Kneeling in front of the refrigerator Harris thought of simpler days. He went upstairs. In the bedroom he pulled on a pair of shorts and put a sweat shirt on. Connie rolled over.

"What are you doing, darling?" she said.

"I'm going jogging, I guess," Harris said.

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"Hm. Jogging?"

"Yes, jogging."

"Now?"

"Yes, now."

Outside the air was cold and the lawns were dewy. Harris closed his front door taking special care not to let it lock. He didn't know what to do. Do I start jogging now or do I walk a block or so and start jogging then? Soon his feet began to move quickly. Soon he was jogging.

His lawn was cut well, as were most of the other lawns in the neighborhood. Papers were on the front porches still. Dogs were still in the backyards pacing back and forth. Harris looked up the row of houses, noting the stillness of the morning. Soon he was running. His heart was pounding.

... When they first moved into the house he would look forward to coming home and helping Connie unpack the boxes. They stood in the empty dining room opening boxes they had packed one month before and it felt like Christmas. Connie said, "Oh, this is a magnificent lamp, Honey. Is it really for me?"

"Of course, my dear," Harris said. "Anything for you."

He remembered those weeks on the job as special. He looked forward to everything. The boss looking over his day's work. Co-workers feeling him out, asking small personal questions. He remembered pulling the car up into the driveway and that explosive feeling that he had, like it was almost too much to wait to put the
emergency brake on before he could spring into the house and see Connie.

... When he returned from jogging he pushed open the front door slowly and smelled coffee brewing. Connie was sitting at the dining room table reading the paper.

"How was it?" she said.

Harris felt the blood moving through his neck. His pores felt open and his nose was cold. "Really nice," he said. "Relaxing." He sat down across from Connie. A bead of sweat dropped off his forehead onto his shorts.

"Isn't it cold out there?" Connie said.

"Yes, but you get used to it," Harris said. "Maybe you should come along tomorrow."

"So this is going to be a daily thing now?" she said.

"Yes."

Connie got up from the table and went into the kitchen. She poured a cup of coffee. "Do you want some coffee?" she said.

"Are you still going to go to the hospital today?" Harris said.

"Sure. You want to come?"

"I have to go to work," Harris said.

It was those moments that he missed. Those crazy moments when he would cut out of work early and come home to surprise her. In the summer she would be in the backyard in her old blue jeans, gardening. Or she would be sitting in the backyard at the round glass table with the see-through umbrella, looking through a magazine she'd bought at the store.
Harris showered and shaved and then slipped downstairs slowly. Connie was at the table reading the paper. He watched her from behind, lifting the cup of coffee and putting it to her lips. He went out to the front of the house and ran his fingers over the front bumper of his car. He pressed lightly and carefully on the right side, looking for discoloration and other signs. There was nothing.

Driving three blocks out of his way, he slowed to a stop in front of Peter's house. He got out and walked up to the front door. After ringing the doorbell, he waited.

Nobody answered the door and so Harris went to work. He wondered what he would have done if someone had answered the door. Peter in his sharp bow tie saying the thing was all an elaborate hoax. Mel, with her glasses on the tip of her nose saying that she knew what he had done to Peter's car.

They played hearts two times. The second time was two days before Harris poured the urine into the vents of Peter's car. They walked home from Peter's house that night and Connie said, "He whipped us again. By golly that guy's one smart pup."

"I don't want to go back there," Harris said. "He gives me the creeps, all those tales about South America."

"He's just trying to be educated," she said. "You know, to show a little interest in the world. Next time we'll have them over instead."

Harris pictured Connie setting the dining room table around some of her English books. Peter and Connie would sit on one side of the table with her books next to them. He would sit on the end and Meg would sit at the other end.

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Then he did it. He walked the three blocks with determination. The jar full of urine was still warm and capped tightly. He looked around him for neighbors peering out of their windows, but he never looked at Peter's house. He opened the jar and poured the urine evenly across the vents. It went in like water into a storm drain. It even made that eerie hollow sound like it was being poured into the depths of the earth. He closed the jar and walked off quickly, pulling his arms into his sleeves and wiping off the fingerprints. He chucked the jar under some bush and then walked slowly home. It was revenge alright. Revenge on Peter being Peter.

Connie called him on the phone in the afternoon. "He's regained consciousness," she said. "He's got some tubes in his mouth and his head is all fat."

"Can he talk?" Harris said.

"Yes. Did you know that they're going to cancel my class. That really bothers me because I was interested."

"Well, who's going to teach it, you know?"

"Yeah," she said.

"Want to meet me here later and go out someplace nice?" Harris said.

"Sure," Connie said.

The next morning Harris got up early again. He went downstairs and got the paper. On page two it said that a middle-aged man walked into the police station the afternoon before and confessed that he was the person who hit Peter. He said that he was too
stunned to react. He'd been at home crying for two days before he reached his senses.

Harris went upstairs, sat on the edge of the bed, and put his shoes on.

"Running again?" Connie said.

"They caught the guy who did it," Peter said.

"I knew they would," she said.

Again, he took care not to let the front door lock and again he didn't know whether to start running immediately. This time the sun was above the horizon and the light was such that the houses looked like they were waking up. More papers were gone from the fronts of the houses. Fewer dogs were pacing in the backyards. Peter will be in a body cast, or his knees will be screwed up, Harris thought as his arms swung rhythmically. Peter probably has blurred vision and will need therapy, he thought as he breathed deeply. He returned to the house sweating and weak. Connie was at the table reading the want ads. "Here's an ad for an Executive Assistant for a company that is in the same building as yours. We could car pool," she said.

"I never liked Peter," Harris said as he sat down across from Connie.

"He's a smart guy," Connie said, looking up.

"I ruined his car," Harris said.

"That was you? The urine?" Connie stood and then bent over the table, looking at Harris carefully.

Harris nodded.

"He told us in class that it was some kids down the street. I can't believe it," she said.

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"Believe it," Harris said. He sat back in his chair sweating and feeling tremendously awake.
The Little Fortunes

On Saturday Medwed woke to clean out the back closet. He looked forward to doing it all week and got up early, moving his arm slowly from underneath his wife Susan so as not to wake her. His son Tim was already up, groggily hugging his pet rabbit, Mr. Tiegs, in the backyard. Medwed and Tim built the wire and wood hutch that housed the rabbit not too long after Tim came home with Mr. Tiegs. Susan said that Tim's taking such good care of Mr. Tiegs was a good sign since most children his age don't even know the word responsibility. It was when Medwed piled the coats, complete with hangers, on the chest in the hallway that the fortune cookie fortunes fell out of Susan's coat. One said: You are with someone who loves you. Another said: You will begin to build on your personal relationships. Another said: Things are going to be going your way. Medwed concluded the obvious: he was not an eater of Chinese food.

Her other coats yielded more signs: Three plastic sword toothpicks, two more fortune cookie fortunes and what looked like a catsup stain on one of her collars. Medwed sat for a moment, looking out the window at Tim. Tim carefully corralled Mr. Tiegs with his hands while Mr. Tiegs half jumped from spot to spot, eating the grass in the backyard. Medwed watched carefully as Tim guided Mr. Tiegs on the lawn like he was a blind man. He watched it and soaked it in like it would quench his thirst. These, he felt, would be his last moments of happiness. He took the piles of coats off of the chest and hung them back in the closet one by one. The purple dress
coat he’d bought for Susan only days after their honeymoon, and had always looked so nice on her, hung differently.

Medwed closed the closet door and walked out to the back where Tim was now holding Mr. Tiegs. He sat down with Tim and watched the rabbit’s nose moving up and down while the eye he could see looked backward.

"Hi Dad," Tim said. He still had on his pyjamas, the knees and the bottoms of the plastic feet were dirty, not just from this time but from many other mornings. "I'm playing with Mr. Tiegs. I let him move around on the grass and he eats it. See?" Tim put the rabbit down on the grass. The rabbit looked around a little and hopped a bit. He began pulling grass out and eating it.

"Is that good for him?" Medwed said. "There's things down there that we can't see."

"Don't know," Tim said. "He seems to like it."

Medwed patted Tim on the top of his head and said, "I love you Tim. Do you know that?"

"Yes," Tim said. "Mr. Tiegs likes you."

Medwed went inside the house and then back inside his room. Susan still lay asleep in the bed. She was bundled up in the sheets, leaving the rest of the bed bare. Medwed took off all of his clothes and lay down on his side of the bed. Susan stirred a bit but only smacked her mouth.

The difference between this moment and an hour ago, he thought, is in the closet. Little things that we seem to overlook. Small things, that we save to remember the moment by, that don't turn out to be invisible to other eyes.
He wished that the day wasn't Saturday and that he didn't open up the closet in the first place. He began to shiver and pulled the sheets slightly from Susan's grasp. She opened her eyes and looked at him. He smiled. It was the only thing that came to him at the time.

"Good morning," Susan said.

"Morning," Medwed said.

... 

He must have fallen asleep because he felt for a moment a simple silence and looked over to find Susan gone. He got up.

Tim was dressed and running down the hall past Medwed's bedroom door to his room.

"Timothy Allen," Susan called.

Medwed walked slowly toward her voice. "Timothy Allen get back here." Medwed walked. Timothy followed. "Timothy Allen Medwed you do not leave your breakfast dishes on the table. They are to be rinsed and then placed in the dishwasher. Good morning Don."

"Good morning," Medwed said.

Tim took his plate and bowl off the table, ran water over them and then placed them in the dishwasher. "Can I go out and play?" he said.

"Of course," Susan said.

Tim left quickly.

There was silence.

"I started to clean out the back closet," Medwed said.

"Any reason?" Susan said.

"No. I just wanted to. But I stopped."
"Why?" Susan said.

Medwed looked out the kitchen window at the Hutching's dog Scotty who chased invisible things around the yard. Scotty sniffed the fence between their yards and then ran toward the apple tree in the middle of the yard. He sniffed the base of the tree, wagged his tail and then ran to the back door of the Hutching's house. Medwed smiled. "I just got tired, that's all," he said.

Susan stepped closer to Medwed and then put her arms around him. "What's so funny out there?" she said.

"The dog, Scotty. It's just crazy. It sees things that aren't there." Medwed smiled a bit and then laughed.

There were other things: a wrong number on Monday where she talked for ten minutes. Her guarded enthusiasm when he told her he would be coming home late on Tuesday. He wrote them down in his mind as he drove Tim to school in the morning on Wednesday. Tim pressed his nose to the window of the car and watched the blurry images whiz by.

"Mommy has been acting sort of strange lately hasn't she Tim?" he asked.

But there was no response save a race car humming from Tim as things went by the car.

"Do you notice it too?" Medwed said.

Tim turned from the window and looked at Medwed. He played with his hands, rubbing them together. "Yes," he said.
"What does she do?" His whole life rested on the words coming from the boy's mouth. He could be driving on clouds, off a cliff, upside down. He looked over at Tim.

"Well she kind of acts mean and I don't like it when she won't let me go outside in the front. I want Mr. Tiegs to come and live in my room too."

The day in the office was worrisome. He noticed things that he'd never noticed before. His boss sat in the chair at the end of the conference table before the morning meeting and told the younger men in the firm about the divorces he'd gone through. He always talked about them, but Medwed never took note before. His boss was a gravelly voiced man who talked about divorce as if it were a football game. He used phrases like Don't let them have an inch, Denial is the best defense, If you're on the offense you generally won't be scored against. The man was on his third divorce and frankly was beginning to get damn good at it.

There was clearly a line drawn between the married men and the others at the firm. The conversations were different. What are you and your family doing this weekend? We're planning a trip to the coast to see the grandparents. Going to the softball game, we're looking at making the playoffs? No, can't. I told her that I'd be home before six so that I could make dinner and she could stay at work a little longer.

He called Susan at her office and had to leave a message with the receptionist because she was out for most of the afternoon. It was a long day. He worked on a report and a flow sheet, that was due to
be finished no later than Friday, but found that he couldn't get the figures to come out.

At home it was Susan's turn to make dinner and Tim was outside playing with Mr. Tiegs. Medwed kissed Susan when he came home and then went outside to see Tim.

"He's especially soft right here between the ears," Tim told him, stroking the rabbit from head to foot.

Medwed put his finger between the rabbit's ears. It was a soft that he didn't expect, feather soft. The rabbit moved his nose up and down and closed his eyes. "My, it is soft," Medwed said.

"He likes it when you do that. I can tell." Tim had sandy hair that came directly from his mother. It wasn't as soft as the rabbit's but it was close. Medwed remembered running his hands through Susan's hair on the nights they spent together during college, it was soothing and cool feeling, almost lulling him to sleep. He remembered her hair coated in sweat when she screamed in pain delivering Tim early one December morning. She said later that it was a pain that she'd never felt before and would never forget.

At dinner, that evening, Tim asked if he could have Mr. Tiegs come live in his room with him. "It's cold at night and he doesn't want to be out there," Tim said.

"I don't see why not," Medwed said.

"Absolutely not," Susan said.

There was silence as their remarks soaked in and they looked at each other. Tim shovel ed beans into his mouth and looked at his plate.

"Why not?" Medwed said.
"Well the rabbit smells and he's built for the outside. Tim, honey, have you been noticing how his hair is getting thicker and thicker? Well he's getting ready for the winter. He's building up a coat so that he can stay outside," Susan said.

"But I want him to come and live in my room," Tim said.

"Susan, He loves that rabbit like a brother," Medwed said.

"I know, but the rabbit is supposed to be outside."

... 

After dinner Medwed sat on the couch thinking about the Christmas pageant that Tim's kindergarten put on last year. They went out for dinner afterward at The Boathouse and there was a festive atmosphere at their little table. Susan smiled at Medwed and Tim took his fork and his spoon and used them to reenact his scene. "I've come to bring your family food for Christmas. Oh thank you." He was clearly the best, Susan said later that night when they lay in bed holding each other. Medwed had a feeling of invincibility for his family. He had the feeling that night that he'd always longed for when he thought of marriage and kids, the sense of wholeness and pride and unadulterated love.

Susan walked by the couch twice. Each time he wanted her to sit down and he wanted to ask her if she remembered the pageant. He longed for the feeling again and wondered if they would meet there at the pageant and sit together, a wall between them, a sensation of separate pride. He thought about the length of time until Christmas, well over two months, and how long it would feel.

Then he got up. Susan was in Tim's room reading to him and Medwed could faintly hear her voice. She changed tones as she
changed characters and he heard Tim reading some specific character that he'd probably memorized. He walked down the hall until he could clearly hear their voices and then he stood, just outside the door, and listened.

"The bear was tired and a little grumpy. He didn't like being woken up in the middle of the winter especially by a frightened little rabbit," she said.

"That's not Mr. Tiegs. He's not afraid," Tim said.

"The bear said, 'What do you want? I was having a really good dream.'"

"I want you to tell me why my hole is filled with snow," Tim piped in.

"Rabbits shouldn't wake bears up in the middle of the winter. They could be mean and hungry and they might eat the little rabbit," she said.

"Not you. You're nice," Tim said.

Medwed pushed the half open door and stepped silently in. Tim sat on the edge of his bed next to Susan and he looked carefully into the book. Susan glanced slightly up at Medwed and smiled. Medwed felt his heart hang for a moment.

"I need to ask you something," Medwed said to Susan.

"Right now?"

"Yes," he said.

"Can it wait?"

"No," he said.

Susan followed Medwed to the back of the house, by the back closet, where he turned toward her and looked at her face. He looked
deeply into her eyes, as deeply as he did when they were head over heels in love and he felt like he wanted her so much to be a part of him that he wanted to take bites out of her and chew on them and swallow her up.

"I have to know," he said.

"Know what?" she said.

"The fortune cookie fortunes in your coat pockets. What are they from?"

"Can we discuss this later?" Susan bit her lip and then began to cry.

Medwed stepped back a bit and watched her, he felt like something tremendous just happened. It wasn't a good something, it was the kind of something that breaks the back and seeps in through the soul.

"It's over," she said.

Medwed didn't speak. He needed to be held now more than ever but they stood in their separate ways, facing each other. Medwed felt a fire deep within his stomach start to burn. He felt it rise to the top of his head and boil out to the edges of his skin.

"Get out of here Susan, right now," he said. His eyes burned open and his hand shook as he pointed the way to the front door. Susan turned and ran toward the back of the house. Medwed walked out the back door and around the hutch that held Mr. Tiegs. The rabbit was asleep. How could anything be asleep at this moment? Medwed thought.

He returned to an empty house. Susan took Tim, some stuff and left by the front door. Medwed walked through the house, listening
to the sound of his feet on the floor, echoing off the walls and the ceilings. Tim's light was still on. Her drawers, the top one and the bottom one, were half open. The bed was bigger.

He walked all through the house, around the basement, feeling through the tools above the work bench. He walked to the attic and along the pink carpet of insulation. He looked in all the closets, picked up the hats on the top shelves, and looked behind both toilets. Then he walked outside, out the front door and around the house, looking at the base of the hedges. He opened the gate and walked along the back fence. Scotty followed along, barking at him from the other side of the fence. Inside the house the phone was ringing, but Medwed stooped to pet Mr. Tiegs on the nose through the chicken wire that Tim held while he stapled it to the two-by-fours that they'd bought. The phone continued to ring.

When he answered she said, "We have to talk soon. I'm over at my mother's. I'm really sorry honey."

"I don't know what to say yet, Susan," he said.

"I understand," she said. "I should have told you sooner."

Medwed held the phone away from his head and looked down at his feet. His socks were black on the bottoms. He put the phone back to his ear.

"Mr. Tiegs is going to need to be fed tomorrow morning. You might want to change his water too. Please call me tomorrow," she said.

"I still love you Susan," he said.

"I love you too."

Lying in bed he could not sleep. He felt so terribly alone at that point, like he was facing a large expanse of barren landscape and a
wall at the same time. He got up from the bed and walked to the back of the house and out the door to Mr. Tiegs' hutch. Mr. Tiegs was asleep on the side of the cage, his fur pressed against the chicken wire. Medwed felt the rabbit's soft fur and his warm body for a moment and finally he felt calm. He went inside and fell asleep on the couch.

... In the morning Medwed called in to work to tell his boss why he wouldn't be coming in.

"Sue her," his boss said, "sue her right now. Get the jump on her and you might be able to keep the house and most of your possessions. Think about it Medwed, she's probably already talked to a lawyer." His boss told him the number of his attorney; he spouted the numbers straight from memory. But Medwed just let them hang in the air between the earpiece and his head. He hung up the phone and walked out the back door to the hutch to get Mr. Tiegs' bowl of food so that he could fill it with the little green pellets. Mr. Tiegs hopped around slightly when Medwed opened the little wood door that he drilled the holes for and Tim screwed in the screws. He reached in and grabbed the bowl. Mr. Tiegs felt soft and warm and smelled like a rabbit. When he closed the door Mr. Tiegs looked out at him, standing right at the opening.

Medwed returned to the house with the bowl and filled it with pellets. He peeled and washed off a small carrot, then cut it to fit inside the bowl. When he opened the back door he saw clearly that the door to the hutch was open. The rabbit was nowhere in sight.
He dropped the bowl of food, it hit the cement walk and pellets flew everywhere. He ran to the hutch and looked inside of it. No rabbit. No Mr. Tiegs. Timothy normally fed him. The latch didn't catch or something. Medwed looked around the backyard. There was no sight of the rabbit. He hoped that Mr. Tiegs would be eating the grass, waiting for the small hands to guide him around, but Mr. Tiegs was not. He walked the perimeter of the backyard, looking down at the fence, for a hole, a rabbit, something. He looked under the bushes by the house but there was no rabbit.

This was it, the final straw, he thought. Things were caving in right and left and he was finally alone. The little warm heart beating inside the hutch, in the back of the yard, was gone. His wife and son were gone. He wanted them all back, he wanted to be whole again. Medwed got down on his hands and knees to get the rabbit's point of view. He crawled, down there, looking, smelling. Mr. Tiegs had to be somewhere.

What would he tell Tim? Susan? Would they understand that the rabbit accidentally escaped? These things happen, you know. He prayed a little and looked carefully. The rabbit was white and brown? Right? It was something.

He heard Mrs. Hutching's voice next door talking loudly to Scotty. She slammed the door and Scotty immediately began to bark. She yelled through the window at Scotty, but he raced to the fence and then Medwed saw it. A flash of rabbit, running and hopping underneath the bushes by the house. Medwed's heart popped and boomed. He jumped up and ran to the bushes. He looked underneath
and saw Mr. Tiegs, wide eyed and shaking. Medwed crawled under the bush and grabbed the rabbit.

He held Mr. Tiegs closely to his chest and could feel the rabbit's heart beating quickly. He felt tired and jittery as he walked inside the house with the rabbit. Sitting down on the couch he patted Mr. Tiegs who was shaking. His ears were straight up and Medwed felt the soft soft fur in between them. Finally the ears began to sit back. The rabbit moved a bit in Medwed's lap and peed on him. Medwed walked out to the backyard with Mr. Tiegs and placed him carefully back in the hutch. The rabbit still stays outside, he thought as he latched the door twice to make sure.

There was an unmistakable calm that resonated like sleep throughout the house. Medwed felt surprisingly whole again and he knew, at that point, that everything would come back together. He knew that eventually he would forgive Susan and that they would work things out together. He knew that Tim would soon come home and feed the rabbit and maybe they could build another hutch together inside of the garage so that Tim wouldn't get too cold in the morning when he fed Mr. Tiegs. He also knew that he and Susan would clean out the back closet together, and that someday soon he might overcome his dislike and they could go out to a Chinese food restaurant together.
For Me, Things Are Different

The first thing I want to tell you is that I haven't seen my younger brother Chester for thirteen years. The second thing I want to tell you is that there are things that you find out about, or things you do, that you want to forget but know that you will never forget, no matter how many times you wake in the middle of the night and deny them out loud, or rap yourself on the forehead in the middle of traffic on the way to work, feeling as though you want to step out of your skin. It is these things I associate with Chester, and will always associate with Chester, which is why it is so easy to have him living up in Alaska without a phone, and why when he called I didn't recognize his voice.

"Ron. Guess who this is," he said, teasingly.

"I don't know." To be honest, I just wasn't in the mood for any of these games. I spent an hour each way coming and going from work, the traffic was heavy, and I just set foot in the door. I wanted nothing more than a kiss on the cheek from my wife and a fairly large drink, neither of which, it was clear, would be coming my way until I got off the phone.

"This is Chester, your brother." He said it with a long pause in the middle which clearly emphasized our relationship.

"Chester, where are you?"

"I'm at the Executive Resorts Inn on Hollyfield Road. This town sure has changed," he said.

There is another thing I want to mention. I live in our home town, about seven blocks from the house where Chester and I grew up.
took care of our mother when she was sick and I sent Chester a telegram, which I'm not sure he ever got, telling him that she passed away late one night five years ago.

"What are you doing here in town?" I said. I didn't mean it like I didn't want him here, but just that I was rather startled he'd ever made it back down to the lower forty-eight.

"I'm set to testify in court up in New York City and I thought that since it was so close I'd stop by to see you and your family and I'd hoped..."

"What is the matter, Chester. Is someone in trouble?"

"Oh no. Well not really. It's nothing anyone could go to jail for. Not for long anyway. Definitely a jail with tennis courts, if anything. I'll tell you later. I was actually calling because I want to see you and meet your family. I was thinking that I could come over for dinner tonight or tomorrow, that is if it's no real problem."

"I just walked in the door. Can I call you back in a little while?" I'm not sure if I was irritated or just taken aback. Thirteen years is a long time and how was he to know what was going on in my family. Who knows, one of my kids might be sick, or I might just be recently divorced. He has never seen my family. I've been married for eight years; I have a daughter that is six and a son that is four.

I've always treated Chester as a second class citizen, up to the point of not even telling my family about him, because for some reason the very thought of him dredges up these bad feelings about myself.

"Oh no. I'd rather know now. I'm only in town for two days, tonight and tomorrow, and this is really important."
"I walked in the door and the phone was ringing, Chester. I don't even know if my wife is here," I said. "Why don't we go get a beer?" I thought that this was safe. I could decide then whether or not I wanted him to come home and meet my family.

"Sounds like a deal to me," Chester said.

I suggested a place that Barbara and I go occasionally after the kids are asleep. We just get a beer and look into each other's eyes. We pretend sometimes that we are still dating and all the responsibilities are somehow erased. He'd never heard of the place but knew about where it was, and so we agreed to meet there at seven.

At six-forty-five I drove over. I decided that Chester was going to be late and so I sat out on the trunk of my car waiting for him to show up. For some reason I thought that my being outside would lessen the awkwardness of the moment because I wouldn't have to decide whether to get up out of the booth to greet him, or just to stay seated. I wasn't altogether happy about seeing Chester and I thought, when I was sitting there on my trunk, that it was almost better that we stayed apart from each other. Still, it is interesting how when you practice being around someone it makes it all the more easy when they come around.

I thought about the last time I saw Chester and how symbolic it was of our future relationship. I was leaving for college on the west coast and I saw Chester disappear downstairs to the basement where he had a little workroom. He knew I was going because mother told him twice and he even helped carry out a trunk or two to the car. Mother was taking me to the train station, she had the car
started and I stood in the doorway to the basement for a couple of seconds and then left. I went out to the car, got in and told my mother that we should go.

... Chester drove up in a red sports car which he parked right next to my car. He got out of it and then smiled. "It's wonderful to see you, you look just the same," he said. I knew this was a lie because when I turned twenty-four, having been married for a little over a year, I noticed that more and more hair was stuck in between the teeth of the comb each morning. By the time I was twenty-eight there wasn't much to comb.

I stood up from the trunk of my car and shook Chester's hand. I don't think that I wanted to hug him, it would have been the appropriate gesture at the time, but I just didn't feel like it was right. It was a long handshake and Chester kept pulling me closer and patting my shoulder with his free hand. He seemed like an expert at this.

As far as I could tell he hadn't aged all that much. His hair was still intact, combed neatly to the side. His face was still smooth and a little bony. He had those little boy sloped shoulders, the kind that would have trouble holding up a vest, and they were quite evident through the little windbreaker he was wearing. I sort of admired him at that moment because it looked to me that he sidestepped time in some way.

"Long time no see," I said.

"So what's your story?" he said, releasing my hand.
"My story?" This question baffled me because it made my life seem like it should be so much more than it really was. "I have a wife and two kids," I said.

"Wonderful. Those things amaze me," he said.

"What? Kids?" I said.

"Oh no. Just the changes in someone's life that take place over a period of ten or so years."

"Thirteen," I said.

"Thirteen," he said.

"So Chester, tell me about yourself," I said.

"Well there's not much to tell. I live in Alaska and I own some land," he said.

"Do you have a job?"

"Can we go inside and maybe sit down?" he said.

There's another thing that I should explain. Chester, when we were small, had this extraordinary talent for building models of things. He'd carve out of balsa wood these large buildings, ships, and planes. My mother used to display them prominently all over the house. People would come over and she would point to them and say that Chester made them. She always said that he would grow up to become a famous architect someday. Well, one day when I was fifteen, my mother and Chester were out running some sort of errand, I went around the house picking up the models and smashing them to the ground. After I finished I simply went outside and played with my friends. I've always wanted that day back.

I sort of stood there in the middle of the parking lot, looking at Chester. We were both silent for a moment and I started to think
about how life is a series of possibilities and choices. It seems that the little changes we make early on in our lives multiply and multiply. They take us down different avenues, and place us where we are today. These sorts of choices still happen, though. It occurred to me, standing there, that in thirty years we will be in even more different circumstances as a result of the things that are happening right now.

"So?" Chester said.

"So what?" I said.

"So are we going to go inside?"

... When Chester and I sat down he looked all around the place. His eyes moved from table to table and then along the back wall. He finally looked at me and said, "After this, can we go back to your house so I can meet your family?"

"I don't know. I'm not so sure I want to do that," I said. "Besides Barbara doesn't know you exist."

"You're kidding me. You didn't even tell your wife that you have a brother. I've told my girlfriends about you."

"And what do you say?"

"I say that I have a brother back home."

"And?"

"And that we don't see each other that often."

"Well that's the reason that I don't want them to get involved," I said.
"You're kidding me. We're related by blood. Doesn't that count for anything? Don't you owe me just that much?" Chester always had a point. Chester was always the victim.

"You're not being fair to me here Chester. You walked into my life less than three hours ago." One of the best ways to win an argument with a sibling, especially a younger one, is to morally judge them. They have the advantage of size and pity but you have the advantage of making them feel guilty.

"You're right Ron. I just have a lot on my mind here," he said. He looked down at the table and ran his fingers across it's surface.

"Chester," I said. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Shoot," he said.

"Why are you going to court?"

"Ron, it's a long story and I don't want to bore you," he said.

"I just want to know if there's any way I can help," I said. This was a lie, and I don't feel guilty about it because of what he said about my looking the same.

"Okay, but you must remember one thing: in Alaska things are a lot different from here. We don't act the same and we don't feel the same. It's mainly a survival thing and it's dark and cold up there, but it sure is beautiful."

"Go on," I said.

"Well up in Alaska land isn't so expensive and so in the past couple of years I've acquired quite a bit of it. Most of it I bought to drill for oil because I thought that any day now we would see a boom and a real change in everything." He looked past me.
"Keep going," I said. There was something in his voice that sounded slightly like an apology.

"After drilling for two summers without any luck it finally struck me that there was no oil on my land to be had. This man approached me and told me that there were other ways of getting the ground to give you money. He said there were plenty of men in New York City who would pay thousands of dollars for property that looked like it had oil on it. So anyway, we sent brochures out and gave tours of the land. I rigged up the oil wells so that they spouted oil out the top, like in the movies. I really didn't know what I was getting into, Ron."

"So in other words you broke the law," I said.

Chester looked at me. "It's not that simple, Ron. It never is."

"No. There's a line which is the law and when you cross it you have broken it." I said this like I was teaching my four-year-old son.

"Well that may be so here, for you, with a life all defined. But for me, things are different. It's dark all winter and light all summer. There's more wilderness than you can even imagine. People just don't act the same. That line is hard to see most of the time."

"Things aren't that different that you couldn't call once every six months. I don't think that's asking too much, do you?" I said.

"No it's not," Chester said.

"Mother missed you."

"I missed her."

At this point I stopped talking. Chester stopped talking too. He slumped down in his seat and slung his two hands on top of the table around his beer.
We looked at varying things in the bar until Chester finally said,
"I don't know why, but I kind of missed you too."

I looked at my watch in disbelief, it was nine-thirty. I had a hard
time figuring out where all the time went. Chester asked me if we
could go see mother's grave.

We decided to take his car instead of mine because it was more
fun to drive.

"Explain to me where you got this fantastic car," I said.

"It's a renter. I like them because you can abuse them." He drove
like a maniac, accelerating like a racecar driver and stopping with a
screech.

I haven't been to my mother's grave in a long long time and I
wasn't sure I'd be able to find it. I wanted Chester to just stop the
car and I would walk right over to it. Just to the left of Mr. Johnson
and up one from Anne Dearborn. I wanted to do this because it would
show Chester that it wasn't alright for him to be up there in Alaska
with no telephone while my mother was aging. It would show
Chester that people have children in part so that they will have
someone to take care of them when they are old and it is only right
that we do this for them. But when Chester parked the car at the
cemetery I was disoriented by the sameness of the monuments.

We got out and walked in silence. I pretended that I knew where I
was going and Chester followed along. I read the stones and hoped
that one might spark some sort of memory.

After ten minutes of wandering, Chester stepped alongside of me.
"You don't know where you're going, do you?" he said.
"I don't. I think that it's somewhere around here, though." By then it was dark enough that it was hard to see much more than two gravestones away.

"What did it look like?" he said.

"What did what look like?"

"The stone? Was it your typical rounded at the top stone or did it have a cross and some fancy roses carved into it?"

"It was plain. It had her name and the dates on it," I said.

"Graveyards have an eerie regularity to them, don't you think? We might never find it. They also never let you live down your place in life, do they? The rich guys have real big stones with pillars and things and the poor guys just have stones."

"Did you ever get that telegram I sent you. I'm just curious," I said. I was, too. It is something that I've always sort of wondered about.

"Yes. I still have it. I even brought it with me in case they send me to jail."

"Well?" I said.

"Well what?" Chester said.

"Well did it make you think, even for a moment, that you should come down here and pay your respects."

"No. Not here, anyway. I did have a little ceremony out in back of the house I was living at. My girlfriend at the time and I stood out there, in the freezing cold, and said things about her. She didn't know mom but she still said some nice things. I was touched."

"It's partly your fault that we can't find her grave, you know," I said.
"How so?"

"If you'd been here you'd know where it was."

"Just go back to the car and wait. If you don't want to wait then drive home and I'll take a cab back," he said.

I walked back to the car and waited for him in the silence. I watched his form moving from stone to stone until he stopped and, what looked like kneeled down. I wondered what he was thinking about at the time and began to get this picture in my mind of Chester kneeling there crying over my mother's gravestone. The thought of him having, at that time, more remorse for her death than I did gave me a very bad feeling in the back of my head. It was me that deserved the right to determine the level of grief for my mother. I earned it. I got out of the car and started over to where Chester was, but noticed that he was walking back.

"I didn't find it," he said.

"Well what were you doing then?" I said.

"I just picked out one that might look the same and pretended. Emile Rose Carpenter 1921-1978. I even pretended that the roses on the grave were mine," he said.

"You can't do that," I said. I was offended. Grief is not transferable.

"Sure I can. What difference is it going to make in the long run?" He had me there, on a technicality.

... On the way home from the cemetery it was quiet until Chester finally spoke. "Do you know what it is really like living in Alaska?"

"No," I said.
"It's like nowhere else in the world, as far as I can tell. I just went up there to get away from everything. This town, mom, you. And I wanted it to some way be me being a martyr, freezing to death on some large cold mountain. But in the end I found that I liked it, Ron. The people up there don't really think like people down here do and god knows I'm not a rule-person."

When we stopped the car in front of the house I invited Chester in. The kids were probably in bed and Barbara was probably lying on the sofa, asleep underneath a book, waiting for me to come home. I thought that maybe we could look in the kids' rooms and he could see them, little lumps underneath the covers, silently breathing while the light from the hall pours into their rooms.

The house is a small one that has all the rooms on one level. You can basically hear everything that goes on from each room but that doesn't bother me. It gives the house character. Barbara was up and making some tea in the kitchen when we walked in. "Ron, you're home," she said. She looked from my face, behind me to Chester's.

"Barbara, I'd like you to meet Chester," I said.

Chester bowed at Barbara and when she offered her hand, he leaned over and kissed it lightly. "It's finally a pleasure to meet you Barbara," he said.

"Oh. Well it is a pleasure to meet you too Chester," Barbara said.

Sometimes I am extremely proud of Barbara, proud to the point that I want to take her up in my arms and squeeze her around the waist. This was one of those times. She smiled at Chester and followed as we walked slowly toward the back of the house.
"I'm just going to show Chester the kids' rooms before he leaves," I said.

We opened the door to my son's room and he was there curled up around a stuffed bear I gave him a couple of months ago. Chester stepped lightly into the room, right up next to my son's bed and he looked down. He put his hand on my son's cheek and then withdrew it quickly. My son rolled over and Chester came back out into the hall.

My daughter was asleep in her pyjamas with a book ready to fall out of her hands. It was a book that I'd heard Barbara read to her many nights and I remember lying out in the livingroom listening to the low hum of her voice and thinking about all the good that has come to my family. Chester walked into her room, took the book out of her hands and set it over on the night-table next to the bed. He came out into the hall and I closed the door.

"God. I can't even imagine what it is like to have a family. Things are just so different for me up there in Alaska. It must be wonderful," he whispered.

I nodded at first and then I said, "Yes, it is." I was all of a sudden overcome with this wave of guilt. I felt like I never have before around him, like I was dangling something in front of him too big and too complex for him to even begin to comprehend. "Let's go outside, Chester."

We walked out to the curb in front of his car and we stood there for a bit. "Ron, I don't want to go to jail," he said.

"Do you think you will?"

"Yes. I do."
I shook my head and looked at the ground. In another time and place I might feel a little bit of I told you so, but right then I wanted to hug him.

"You've got yourself a mighty nice family," he said.

"Thank you, Chester. Thanks a lot. I don't know why, but that means so much coming from you right now," I said.

"Well I'm glad to say it," he said.

When he left me I walked up my little walkway and into the house. The whole time I kept thinking about Barbara and my kids and how they were going to be there when I stepped inside the door.
Travel Diary

On Wednesday morning I got a letter from a friend who wanted me to move to California to work for him doing some programming. I read the letter twice and then began to have dreams of the beach and palm trees. I showed the letter to Ann that night. She read it, looked at the ground and said, "I don't want to go to California."

"You don't have to," I said. Then I added, "I'll scope it out and if this looks for real you can move out later."

Thursday morning I woke early. I had been tossing and turning all night. I was thinking of things like surfing and sand between the toes. Every time I rolled over I looked at Ann. Her eyes were open most of the time, there was that much light in the room. I usually smacked my lips and muttered something unintelligible and closed my eyes again.

In the morning Ann woke seconds after I did. She sat up in bed and I moved my hands up and down her back.

"I didn't sleep so well. You?" I said.

"No," she said.

"I was dreaming of the sunny beach," I said.

"I wasn't," she said.

"I was thinking about what it would be like for us to live there," I said.

"I wasn't," she said.

This established, I got out of bed. I spent most of my time watching the coffee drip down from the filter into the pot. The
shower ran and then turned off. I was eating toast when she walked into the kitchen.

"Let's take Friday off and spend the weekend in Albuquerque. We could visit my aunt and uncle," she said. "We could use the rest."

"Ok. We'll leave early on Friday and drive all the way there. How far is it? Three hundred?"

"I'll look at a map."

I walked past her and into the bathroom. This trip sounded like a good idea to me. An adventure. I like driving, it's in my nature. I must have been some sort of wolf in a past life.

That was Thursday. I got home late and Ann was already in bed. "We still going?" I said, when I crawled in next to her.

"I was going to ask you the same thing?" she said. "I went to bed early because I thought we were getting up early."

"That sounds like a deal to me. Sorry I'm late. Some of the guys wanted to get a beer," I said.

Ann rolled over and fiddled with the clock-radio.

"What time do you want to get up?" I said.

"Five. We'll be on the road by six," she said.

In the morning Ann was ready and packed before the alarm went off. I got up and packed slowly, counting off the days and sets of underwear on my fingers. We both called in sick and then sat down for a bite to eat.

Ann dripped jelly on the map she had underneath her plate. She moved her finger from Denver on down, and she chewed. I watched her eyes, deep round browns, moving over the specks of green and the
red lines. She seemed excited, full of the possibility. To her, this was a trip of distraction.

"It looks like four hundred thirty," she said.

"That's do-able. It's about eight hours," I said.

I had dreamt again of the California coast. This time it was rocky and the road was curvy. The surf beat heavily against the land and we travelled the road, looking down at the water.

I packed the car while Ann shoved food alternately in the big blue cooler and in a brown Safeway bag. She had two overnight bags and I had a duffle that used to belong to my father from his days in the Army. Packing the car is the most critical of times in any trip. It means getting off on the right foot which is determined by all parties involved staying their distance. Disagreements in packing end up being translated into silent disgust that becomes the undercurrent of the entire journey. Ann knew this and so did I.

Around five forty-five that Friday morning we left. The car was silent for a little bit. I turned on the radio to listen for the weather, sunny and breezy, some clouds, while Ann looked through the Safeway bag for something more to eat.

When we got onto the highway Ann began to talk. "When I was a little girl I used to want to live in one of those sand floored adobe houses with the stick ladders that lead to the upper stories. I would look at them in the picture books and imagine what it was like. I think I might have even wanted to be an Indian. I'm so glad we're getting out of here. I, for one, need a break. Now we can just relax for a little bit and think things over."

She leaned over and clipped the radio off.
She continued. "We don't even have to go and see my aunt and uncle. We could just find some decent little motel and hunker down for the weekend. I'd like to spend a little time looking around the land. It's been so long since I've gotten to New Mexico."

I leaned over toward her and looked inside of the Safeway bag.

"Do you want a cookie or something? How about some crackers?" she said.

"No. It's too early in the morning for sweet things or salty things. I was just wondering what was in there," I said.

"Look," she said, "I just want this to be something kind of special."

Ann looked across my chest at the sun. It was coming up over the plains, cutting through the chillier funk.

"We'll have some fun," I said.

"Good," she said.

I reached over toward Ann and put my hand on her thigh. I rubbed it with my thumb and she put her hand on my hand. I squeezed her thigh and she squeezed my hand.

"I've done this drive before," I said. "My grandparents had a mobile home and took me down through the Southwest after Christmas when I was really little. I remember it was Christmas morning and it was snowing hard. My mother got up and told my grandfather that she didn't think it was a good idea for them to leave. I remember him clapping me on the shoulder and saying that I was a trooper and smiling that big Army smile at my mother. He said not to worry."

"Did you leave?" Ann said.
"Yes. We pulled out of the driveway, I looked back at my mother through the window and she just stood there in the doorway in a t-shirt and slippers with her hands crossed, the snow beating its way into our little hallway. I think she was mad that we left her all alone for Christmas," I said.

"She was probably a little worried too," Ann said.

"Yeah, come to think of it, I guess she was," I said.

"She probably didn't want you leaving her, either," Ann said.

"In a sense she was right," I said. "I mean sort of right. It was snowing pretty hard. Down somewhere near Four Corners my grandfather drove the mobile home into a snow bank and we got stuck. My grandmother was a knitter, and I remember her just knitting and knitting while my grandfather pushed his shoulder on the aluminium door to try to get us out."

I looked down at the speedometer and then at the gas. It was getting low.

"What's the moral of the story?" Ann said.

"The moral is that we had a really good time. My grandfather and grandmother both came back in the back of the mobile home and we sat around the little Formica table playing cards. My grandfather smoked on his pipe and smiled that crack faced ever tanned retired person's smile. All the while we waited for the sun to come out or for the police to find us," I said.

"I read about some old couple in North Dakota who crashed their car into a snow bank and all they had was a Bible and two Chapstiks. They ate the Chapstiks a little each day and just prayed. Finally,
they found them dead but they'd written a note saying that it was alright and they were with the Lord now," Ann said.

"There's an unmistakable calm about old people when it comes to things like that," I said. "I think that they get kind of tired of fighting it."

Driving is an acquired skill. Alone, it takes several hours to really acclimate yourself and get in the groove of travelling down the road. With another person, it's a little different. You need to get used to each other.

We pulled into the gas station and I stopped the car. I got out. Ann got out and walked quickly toward the store, stopping briefly to look over her shoulder and ask me if I wanted anything. "Little doughnuts," I yelled, "Please."

After I'd paid for the gas, I came out of the store and Ann was sitting on the hood of the car. "Want me to drive?" she said.

I moved up close to her and gave her a little kiss. "Naa, I'm not tired yet."

"I'm glad we're doing this," she said.

"Me too," I said.

"I feel like we're really getting somewhere," she said.

"So do I," I said. There was a good joke to be made here but I didn't make it. I would have said something like, Yes, a hundred and fifty miles.

In the car again Ann leaned a little forward to see the sun. It was not quite up there where it would make much of a temperature difference. It did look kind of nice, though, hanging there in the sky waiting to really get down to business.

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Ann was silent for a moment. I opened the little box of chocolate covered doughnuts and ate one in two bites.

"What do you want with California," she said. "It's too hot there and smoggy. It's so far away."

"Nothing," I said. It's just a thought. Only a thought."

"It really is far away," she said.

"I'm just looking into the possibility," I said. I pulled out another doughnut and ate it in one bite. "Want one?"

"No. I like them, but only sometimes," she said.

It was quiet then, but just for a second. Ann rolled down her window all the way and the wind roared its way inside the car. I looked over at her. She put her hand out like an airplane wing and moved it up and down, tilting her wrist to get it to move in the wind.

I rolled down my window and did the same. "Flap," I said. I began to flap my arm up and down, up and down.

Ann did the same.

"Flap harder. We'll fly there," I said. I moved my arm faster.

Ann kept up.

Then I began to weave the car back and forth inside of the lane. I'm not sure what this was supposed to do, but it seemed appropriate.

"We're flying," Ann said. "We're up over the road."

"Look, you can see everything," I said. I pointed with my other hand, letting the steering wheel go for a moment.

This is an important point in long drives. It is the moment where you realize that you're in for the long haul and the drive becomes more than a trip. Shorter drives are simply the step between home
and the place you want to be. Longer drives have to encompass the drive itself. You have to realize that part of the fun is in the going there.

Ann rolled up her window and smiled at me.

I smiled back. I rolled up my window and ate another doughnut. I pretended that it was a real sized doughnut and ate it in several bites.

Ann turned toward me and put her leg partly on the seat. "I really don't want you going out to California," she said. The smile was gone.

"Listen. I told you it's just an idea. I don't know how realistic it is, and I haven't made any calls or anything," I said.

"But you will, won't you?" she said.

"I don't know. Maybe I'll just wad up the paper and throw it away," I said.

"Promise?" she said.

"No."

"But you just said."

"No I didn't. Listen, can we just drop the subject altogether?" I said.

Ann turned straight again. She leaned out on her lap and looked up at the sun. It was beginning to do its work and I was proud of that.

"My aunt and uncle are a little on the kooky side," she said. "She's been working on her doctorate for almost twenty years and so has he. They were kind of the black sheep of the family, moving out here, getting married. Nobody really talks to them anymore."

"What do they do?" I said.
"I don't know. I think she's a potter but I don't know what he does. They have two kids, I think," she said.

"Do you really want to see them?" I said.

"I don't think so. I'm not sure what I'd say, I mean it's been so long," she said.

"We'll look them up if we get there," I said. "I'm kind of in the mood to see what they are all about." I glanced down at the gas. We needed some at some point soon.

Ann reached for a doughnut and so did I. I licked it a little, just so I could see the brownish cake under the chocolate, then I ate it whole.

"Do you ever think they'll make solar cars?" Ann said.

"Well I guess that when the oil runs out they'll have to. Carter wanted to, but that got shot down," I said.

"I mean what would it be like. Will we be able to drive when it rains? Will we have to pull over to the side of the road and just wait? No. What about nuclear cars. We could buzz around at serious speeds forever. No pollution either. Unless, of course, we get into a crash. Do you think we'll live that long?" she said.

"Cut it out," I said. "You don't need to talk the whole way. I'm not going to die if I have to listen to the radio a little bit."

Silence.

More silence.

"Sometimes I really don't like you," Ann said.

There was one doughnut left. I grabbed for it and chewed it slowly.

"I hope they have radio out in California," she said.
Something told me that we would never make it to Albuquerque and we wouldn't see Ann's aunt and uncle. Something else told me that I didn't want to.

"I was just trying to help keep you awake," Ann said. "I didn't mean any harm in it."

"I know, I'm sorry for snapping," I said.

I pulled into the gas station, in front of the unleaded pump and looked over at Ann.

"I'll be back in a sec," she said.

I stayed in the car for a minute, noticing the stillness and silence, and I watched her disappear into the store. Each step she took was heavy and her purse hung from her hand, swinging back and forth ever so slightly.

I waited for her before I pumped the gas. She came out and stood near the front of the car.

"Listen. I'm really sorry. It just sort of came out of my mouth," I said.

Ann looked at me. "Don't let it happen again," she said.

I nodded and began to pump the gas.

Another thing to look for when driving far distances are the little sex trinkets they sell in the men's rooms of these gas stations. You generally have to pull up a metal plate to see the selections and they usually cost fifty cents. What they're doing there I'll never know. When you're driving across the countryside I don't know where you'd find the opportunity to use them.
When we got on the road again I noticed a large bird of prey floating in the wind over our heads. "Look," I said. I pointed.

"That is beautiful," Ann said. "So graceful."

"The one animal I admire is the hawk. They float in the wind, tilting their wings just so, gliding sideways and around and around," I said.

"Yeah, me too. They seem to know how to live it just right," she said.

We watched the bird move further away until it was just a little bit. I didn't want to take my eyes off of it for fear of losing it.

"It's things like that that make me humble," I said. "I just watch them circle and I know that they feel the power." I looked over at Ann. "I don't remember much but there was one time I was with my father and we were driving somewhere in Texas. These three hawks, I could see their hooked beaks and everything, were just gliding and soaring over our heads. My father pointed them out and I watched them from my seat next to him. I leaned out the window and looked at them above us. I think they knew we were there and they were putting on a special show for us. I remember that as being a really special time."

Ann looked over at me. "You know, when I went into that gas station back there, I went up to the counter and asked the guy how I could get back to Denver from here. I wanted to know if there was any way I could catch a bus or something. The guy said that my best bet was to hitchhike. That's what stopped me from leaving just then, the hitchhiking," she said. "I don't want you to go to California."
"We have to stop talking about it Ann," I said.

I looked for the sun. It was almost there at the top of the sky, doing its work.

"I don't want it to be a question," she said.

"That's my point." I looked over at her. The only thing between us was an empty box of doughnuts.

"I'm not sure I get it," she said. "You can't have it both ways."

"Let's just make it to Albuquerque and then have some fun. Let's look around, spend some time there and Sunday morning we'll drive home," I said. "That was your idea, wasn't it?"

"Yes, but I just don't know why it bothers me so much," she said.

When we got across the New Mexico border we stopped for lunch. It was a small place with marble and wood toys at each table that we could purchase at the counter for six dollars. The idea was to jump marbles and take them away until there was only one left. I tried it and then slid it over to Ann.

"These games always remind me how stupid I am," she said. She toyed with it for a little while. The waitress took our order. Ann toyed with it a little more.

Our food came and we ate in relative silence, only commenting on how good it was to be out of the car. I watched a little girl spinning the postcard rack, not apparently looking for anything. This amused me. These sixty cent images floated past her eyes, and she was only doing it for pleasure in the mechanical spinning action. I smiled.

"Look over at that little girl by the counter," I said. I pointed with my fork. "Isn't that funny. She's just doing that to spin the metal thing, not to look at the postcards."
Ann turned and looked over her shoulder. She watched as the little girl's mother turned from paying the check and led the little girl out of the restaurant by the hand. "Kids are great," she said.

"Yeah," I said. "I was just thinking that postcards are a strange representation of things because they tell us what is important. That one with the two arches makes those two arches the most important arches in the whole National Park. But the little girl doesn't care about that, all she cares about is the rotating sensation."

"They seem to know what is important and what it not," she said.

I looked at Ann and wondered whether she understood what I was taking about.

... We made it to Albuquerque just before the sun went down. Ann didn't want to call her aunt and uncle and so we looked around for a cheap but clean motel. These aren't hard things to find anymore. Our room had a television with cable and a remote control that was bolted to the bedside table. Ann slipped off the paper loop that certified that the toilet was clean and wore it over her shoulder like Miss America.

"So what's there to do in these here parts?" I said.

"I don't know," Ann said. "We should look around the city a little bit, take in the sights."

"Maybe we could do a little shopping. Is there anything that you think you need?" I said.

"Yeah lots," she said.

"Like what?" I said.

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"We'll see tomorrow," Ann said.

That was Friday night and again I had dreams all night about California. I had pictures of swimming with the seals, of walking by the ocean on warm nights. I even think I saw the desert. I woke with this adventurous feeling that there was exploration to do in California and I wanted to do it. There was some sense of invigoration, but another sense of letdown because I was only dreaming.

Ann woke too. She lay there on her back looking up at the ceiling.

I sat up and tried to catch her eye and give her a smile, but she never took the bait.

"Let's get up and look around the city," I said. "Who knows, maybe we'll even run into your wacky aunt and uncle."

We showered, paid the bill and drove around the city. We stopped at a western wear store and Ann bought a pair of black cowboy boots. She looked good in them, sort of like she owned the world. She left the boots on her feet and stuck her sneakers in the big cardboard box that the boots came in. The salesman, this old man who's face looked about as tanned as some of the boots, gave her a tin of mink oil and told her to take care of them. Boots are an investment, he said.

Ann didn't know how to walk in the boots just yet. She seemed to be throwing her weight a little too far forward, which made her look like she was skiing. I laughed a little bit and patted her on the back. "You look suave," I said.

"I do, really?" she said. She turned toward me by planting her heels and swiveling on them. "They're pretty fun."
I wished I had a pair but I was thinking of California when she was trying hers on. I was thinking that they were too hot to be worn on the beach and they just don't go that well with shorts.

I smiled at Ann. There was something that I wanted to tell her at that point but I was having trouble making sense of it. Her happiness wasn't mine any longer.

Ann looked at her watch. "Let's eat some lunch and then go home," she said.

"Why? Aren't you having any fun? Don't you want to look at some other things?" I said.

"It's not that," she said. "Just this isn't what I'd expected it to be, that's all."

"Well what did you expect?" I said.

"I don't know. Something different," she said.

"Is there any way to change it?" I said.

"No. Not really," she said.

We ate lunch in a Mexican restaurant that claimed to have the greatest chimichangas in all of New Mexico, it said so on the sign. I ordered the chimichangas and Ann ordered bean burritos. Hers were better than mine.

After that we got back in the car, found the highway and began to drive home. When we got on the other side of the Colorado border the sun went down and we were swiftly swept into darkness. The car hummed quietly to itself, the radio was off and Ann stared out her window as if it were light out. The car in front of us opened it's window and flung a cigarette out. It hit the ground like a spark, a firework, silently swirling around. I watched the orange bits of
light until our car drove over them. They were as miraculous as a shooting star and just as precious. I recognized at that point the loss of the moment. I couldn't tap Ann on the shoulder and begin to tell her about the cigarette, what I just saw. The description wouldn't justify it. Saying that you've seen a shooting star doesn't put one in the mind of the listener, it has to be seen. It has to electrify the imagination, streak across the eye. It's one of those things best left unsaid.

I knew right then that the space between us would continue to grow and I would end up in California a month later living out of the car looking for an apartment and a job.
The Freaky Dance

For a moment when I was ten it looked like everything would change. My dad and I had been on our own for almost four years. Still, he brought home a little man who wore a button on the lapel of his coat. It was a little black button that had red letters cut out of tape that read 'soul' right across the middle of it. I sat on the front steps looking at the man when he walked up to me and held out two fists, palms down, without speaking. "Go on Joe, pick one," my dad said from behind him. He was holding the man's suitcase. The little man nodded and so I pointed to the one on the right. He made his hands flutter like a butterfly and out popped a quarter. His smile was ear to ear but his neck was tight.

I took the quarter and looked at it in my palm. It felt like a little miracle. The man held out his hand for a shake and said, "The name's Emerson Fitzhugh. I've heard a lot about you Joe and so I'm glad to make your acquaintance." My dad still stood behind him hugging his suitcase like he was dancing with it. He shuffled from foot to foot and smiled this strange smile at me.

"Where'd you come from Mister Fitzhugh?" I said, "And are you staying overnight?"

My dad stopped smiling and looked at the back of Mister Fitzhugh's head.

"Don't know the answer to the last one," Mister Fitzhugh said. "If you'll have me, Joe, I guess." He stopped speaking a moment and turned to look at my dad.
My dad looked back at him, a long soft look, like he was worried about Mister Fitzhugh's health. "Well," he said, "we've got to get inside and get some dinner going." They walked past me into the house and I followed.

My dad set down the suitcase upstairs in the hall outside of his bedroom. The suitcase had deep scaly ridges and I'd never seen anything like it before. It looked like it could breathe. I ran my hands up and down the sides of the case, over and over. I could hear the clanging of pots and plates downstairs in the kitchen and for a moment I felt like I was hiding from something deep within my own house. My dad hadn't picked me up by my shoulders and kissed me when he came home. He hadn't asked me whether I missed him either. He simply walked by me with Mister Fitzhugh's case in his arms like this was something I was supposed to understand.

I sat there upstairs feeling the bumpy leather of the suitcase. I wanted to understand what it was about it that made me feel so different. I wanted to know why my dad hugged the suitcase and why Mister Fitzhugh couldn't carry it himself. The leather was soft and scratched and had the air of having been places, far away places, places I'd probably never get to see. I wanted to lift the suitcase, by the handle, and slip downstairs and put it outside, off the porch. But all I seemed to be able to do was to crouch there in front of the suitcase, in front of dad's room, and run my fingers up and down the bumpy, soft leather. My dad's hand on my shoulder made me start.

He appeared silently, out of nowhere. "You see, Joe," my dad said, "Emerson is in that play downtown at the theatre that came into town a week ago. He travels from city to city, but wants to quit. He
wants to stay here." My dad had a particular light in his eye, at that moment, that I'd never seen before. It must have been a light of longing and understanding that lit up his whole face. I think it was then that I knew why sometimes mom used to sit up on the kitchen counters crying when we were home alone at night.

"Why does he want to stay here?" I said. I was half turned away from the suitcase, looking up at my dad, but one of my hands still remained on it.

"He wants to stay here because he likes it here. I think it would be good for you to have another adult around," he said.

"But I have you," I said.

"I know. And I have you. It's just that..." My dad stopped speaking and slapped his hand down on his leg. "It's hard. That's all."

I stood up at that moment and put my hands around his waist. He cradled my head and rocked from side to side for a couple of minutes. I trusted him then, but I still didn't want to let him go.

My dad stopped moving, patted me on the head and said, "You be a big boy now."

And then he went downstairs to the kitchen.

I stayed there, sitting on the top step, listening to their voices from the kitchen mingle with the sounds of making dinner. My dad and Mister Fitzhugh laughed loudly and I knew I didn't want to be a big boy, I didn't like it.

Sitting there I remembered my dad taking me to the play the year before, and my feeling of a strange loss. The costumes were bright and colorful. People skipped across the stage waving poles with long red ribbons tied to the ends. They shouted things, funny things, things I didn't understand, at the audience and people laughed. He
bought me a large box of popcorn and we sat in the very middle, so close that I could see the spit coming from the actor's mouths. I could see the sweat coming down their foreheads and taking with it in colorful streams the makeup from their faces. Their eyes were wide with surprise and they looked right through the back of the audience.

My dad roared with laughter at some of the points. He leaned way back in his chair and when I looked over I could see every one of his teeth, and I wanted to leave. After the play was done he told me to stand in the front of the building while he went around the side to talk to someone. I didn't want to stand there alone. People were coming out with big smiles and all I could remember was the warped faces of the actors.

When he returned he held a balloon that he had gotten from one of the actors in the show. It was a big yellow balloon that floated hard against the string he held. We walked all the way home, my dad held the string tightly, along with my hand.

I remember the air that night was still and a little chilly. I walked home with my eye on the ground and occasionally, when my dad squeezed my hand, I looked up and saw him staring off in the distance. I was frightened by the show, the bulging faces of the actors, their forced laughter. They seemed like monsters and I was happy to be going home to the safety of our house and the protection of my dad.

Mister Fitzhugh suddenly stood on the bottom step. He looked up at me with a big smile. "Joe," he said. He began waving his hands delicately on either side of his body. He looked like a swan, a
feather fan, the wind. He danced lightly up each step, toward me; it looked like he was floating. "Joe," he said, "I'm really sorry to intrude on you and your father. I hope that somehow we can work things out and we can become friends." He was on the step below me. His hands moved up and down, waving like the ocean. His neck moved sideways, detaching his head. He stopped. "You like baseball? I'll take you to a game. I'll tell you of the time I caught a home run right in that there suitcase." He pointed to the suitcase behind me. "I want to show you the world, Joe. I want to take you to my play before it leaves. I want to take you backstage to see the makeup and the costumes come off, the real people stepping out of the characters they play." His hands began to flutter and fly around. "A quick story about a lonely old man..." He made a fist with one hand. "...and the rainbow of happiness." He pulled a scarf out of his pocket with the other. "Now this old man waited everyday outside his cabin in the woods. See, he lived in the woods. He sat in his chair and told himself that someday happiness would come right up to him." He held his fist still, next to his chest. "And then one day, sitting in his chair, he saw the rainbow of happiness appear on the edge of the forest." Mister Fitzhugh waved the scarf up and down, holding onto one end. "And he sat there, waiting and waiting. He said out loud, 'Rainbow of Happiness, come to me and make me happy.' But the rainbow didn't come. This happened for many days and finally, one morning, the man got out of his chair and began walking toward the rainbow. When he found it, he grabbed hold of the rainbow for dear life." Mister Fitzhugh stuffed the scarf into his fist, rubbed his fist, and then opened it. The scarf disappeared. "And the rainbow ended
up inside the man, making him happy forever," he said, smiling. "Now let's go eat."

I followed him down the stairs and watched him. He jumped lightly from step to step in a practiced way. I didn't know what I wanted but I wanted it to change, whatever it was.

At dinner Mister Fitzhugh and my Dad talked quickly. Mister Fitzhugh's eyes were grey and moved back and forth, they seemed to touch me on the face when they landed on me. He called my Dad by his first name. I don't even remember my mom doing that. "Larry," he said, "we've got to come to some sort of decision soon. It's leaving in a month."

My dad shook his head. He was a tall man with long arms that drooped down his long body. His hair was sandy and straight. After my mom started drinking like she did and spending those long periods of time away from the house, he stood at the doorway, his hand stretched over mine, and he said again and again, "Rose, it's over. You must leave." I remember it well because he said it like he was commanding a dog and each time he said it, he squeezed my hand and I would blink. After she'd left he closed the front door softly and walked over to the sofa where he fell and sobbed with his arm folded over his face. I stood there not knowing what to do with my hands so I twirled his sandy hair in my fingers.

My dad didn't respond for a little bit. He looked from Mister Fitzhugh to me and then back again. "Why now?" he said. "Can't we decide later?"

Mister Fitzhugh looked over at me. "Joe, what do you think? Do you want me moving in. Do you?"
My dad leaned over the table.

"Leave him out of this," he said. "You hear?"

Mister Fitzhugh put his hands up in the air slightly. "I'm sorry," he said, "I though maybe Joe might have an opinion. He's a big boy, you know." He had wine colored hair and reminded me of a magical mouse, with his pointed smile and tiny eyes.

... 

Mister Fitzhugh was doing the dishes and whistling in this way that reminded me of a small songbird. He made the sounds and wove them into a song which he whistled for a bit and then eased right back into the bird sounds. It made me feel like I was in a forest and I sat in the hall outside of the kitchen listening with my eyes closed.

"He's a talented man," my dad said, sliding down the wall and sitting next to me.

When the dishes were done Mister Fitzhugh and my dad went out on the front porch and sat on the top step, looking out at the sky hanging above. I followed and sat on the porch swing, my feet barely scraping the ground, watching the side of Mister Fitzhugh's face and wondering what it would be like to have him here. He talked quietly to my dad. He crunched up his jaw muscles and rested his chin on a balled up fist.

"Sometimes," he said, "I begin to think that this crazy life of ours is just a big dance. There's people all over the place dancing up a storm, doing dips and whirls and everything. There's others just hanging out there by the wall." He pointed up toward the sky. "Then there's always those of us who dance with one person for awhile and we like it, we like the way the hips feel or how our hand rests in the
shoulder blades, or we like the way they clap so lightly in between the songs. And somehow, though we want it to work out, it never does. We end up dancing off with another partner and dancing off with another after that. We look over and see all the old partners dancing alongside of us and we try to convince ourselves that this will be the one."

My dad looked over at Mister Fitzhugh, then at me and closed his eyes. "Things are complicated. I just didn't realize how much," he said, opening his eyes. He waved me away but I stayed. I felt like I was standing on the side of the stage, just out of view from the audience.

"No, Larry," Mister Fitzhugh said, "you either want it or you don't. We are freaks dancing the freaky dance." Mister Fitzhugh stood up and looked out over the porch, out beyond the little neighborhood, right out into the beginning of the sky. "And we dance all night and we dance and dance even though our feet are too big for our shoes and it hurts us deeply, right down to the soul, to be doing the dance."

Of the two times I'd seen my dad cry, this was the one that seemed like he was feeling the pain of the world right there in his chest. He looked over at Mister Fitzhugh and held out his fists, palms down, and tears ran down his cheeks. He said, "Look at Joe. Look at him."

Mister Fitzhugh did. His head snapped back and his little eyes landed right on me. "Joe. Joe, my friend. I've been here before. A play came through here last year about this time. Your father and I spent some beautiful time together. So beautiful that I never forgot, even when we were in cities ten times the size of this one."
"Stop it Emerson," my dad said. "Stop it now."

But Mister Fitzhugh took a few steps forward, off the porch. He stood on the little walk in much the same spot mom stood when my dad told her that it was over. "I'm telling you Joe. I could be here forever. I could do it and it doesn't take a bunch of magic to do that."

He looked over at my dad.

My dad stood. He towered over Mister Fitzhugh and he hadn't released his fists from before, he just turned them a little sideways. "You leave Joe out of this. He's mine."

Mister Fitzhugh looked over at me from the walk and he looked like a little man with little hands. I wanted him to pull something out of his pocket and wave it around, turn it into money, or make it fly away. I wanted him to somehow make everything turn out right again. He balled up his fists, turned them over and said, "What's it going to be Joe? The right or the left, you never know, they might just both have quarters in them."


But my dad swung. It was a big rounded swing, carrying all of his weight, that started from the very back of his body. It went right above and over Mister Fitzhugh's head, lifting his wine colored hair a little. "I just can't take this," my dad yelled. "Not now, not ever."

Mister Fitzhugh seemed to go limp. He released his hands and looked up at my dad with the softest of looks. "We want what we want," he said, "because it's what we think will make us happy. Sometimes that has to take the front burner."

My dad stepped down off the step and held Mister Fitzhugh in his arms. They kissed for a moment and, before I knew it, Mister
Fitzhugh was walking off the front steps with his suitcase and coat under his arm. The little button on the lapel of his coat flashed in the setting sun a radiant red. He reached the end of the walkway, turned down the sidewalk and soon faded into the distance.
The Thursday Of Our Discontent

My ex-wife is sitting across from me, I'm watching her mouth move and I'm wondering exactly why it is that she has asked me to meet her in this restaurant for lunch. There are ferns in green pots hanging by long pieces of twine over our heads and I wonder whether anyone has ever thought about what a danger the ferns pose. The twine probably ages and weakens and the owner, watering them with long-necked squeeze bottles, worries more about their dying than their falling. My ex-wife's name is Sharon and her tone is almost scared and almost sweet. Her tones are calculable, even now, nine years after our divorce: she wants something from me. This is far different from the last time we spoke, four years ago, when she told me that she was going to marry Ray and she didn't want us to have contact ever again. "Carl," she said, "I'm going to have another go at it and this time we're going to have a real family." Her tone was full of conviction and she said that I might not know it now but it was all for the best.

She married Ray, the owner of a hardware store. I've never actually met him but he's a man with thick skin and thick hands and he's the type who would sit up all night worrying about having to expand into selling lawn furnishings in order to fight the dwindling economy. I imagine him sitting on the edge of the bed while Sharon is lying down reading a book. His big hands are on his chin, and he is telling her that he doesn't want to be selling lawn furnishings in his hardware store. "Not in my store," he says, "no way." She places her hand on his back but continues to read the book.
Our son Nathan has been adopted by Ray and I have given up all my rights as his father. To Sharon I am essentially the man who created Nathan, the planter of the seed and the bringer of life, nothing else. She told me that she didn't want me to play a role anymore because I had done enough already and that she wanted a fresh start. I didn't like this because after all I was his father and I deserved to at least see him, but I sadly agreed. I thought it probably was for the best.

I imagine her and Ray walking along the road with our Nathan angling along behind. He is, and has always been a child with skin pulled too tightly across his cheeks and hair that is too smooth and soft for this rough world. I worry about him in that way. He has, in his newly deepened voice, been calling me during the day over the past two weeks and he has been asking me personal questions anonymously. "Mr. Jacobs," he says, "how would you rate yourself as a lover on a scale from one to ten?" Or, "Mr. Jacobs, How much of a man would you consider yourself."

I want to say hello there Nathan, I know it is you and I just want to say that I love you. I want to tell him that even though his mother has forbid him to ever see me again that it would be nice for him to meet me, just once, in the park so that we could sit on a bench and talk to each other. I don't know what it is exactly that I would say to him, I'd probably ask him about how his life is treating him and whether or not he is hopeful for the future. I look at Sharon and try to concentrate on her words. She seems to get a little older each time I see her. Those little lines in the sides of her face seem to get a little darker and deeper yet she retains that round face that has always attracted me.
"Carl, he hasn't been going to school for two weeks. Mrs. Pearson, his teacher, called me yesterday afternoon to see if it was some sort of sickness," Sharon says.

"Sickness?" I say.

"You know, the measles or something along that lines. I said I didn't have any idea what she was talking about and then she got really serious on me. She said that he hadn't been in her class for two weeks and she just assumed that he was sick." Sharon is a believer in the happy family. According to her it is owed each and every one of us a happy family. What about me, I told her once, and she smiled and said that she really didn't know about me. You may have just used up your chance, she said.

Sometimes I wonder what it would be like to have a Ray around; someone who bears the responsibility of parenting with seriousness and care. He's not the world's greatest man, but he may fill that void in Nathan's life that the loss of his real father caused. I tell myself that just knowing Nathan is alive will fill the same void in my life, but I doubt that is true. I just want a little more contact with the boy because I find an inability to heal the wounds in my life that Sharon has tried so hard to patch up in hers.

"You don't think that he should see someone, do you?" she says.

"No," I say, "he's just skipping school."

"Well what on earth do I do?" she says. "Where could he be going? What is so wrong with school?"

"What does Ray think?" I say.

"He doesn't know. I'm afraid to tell him because he would be so disappointed," she says. "He loves Nathan."
"I know," I say. I want to tell her that I do too.

I go into Ray's store occasionally and browse. I look at the white tubed plumbing supplies that he sells, the shiny fixtures, the saws. I dig my hands deep into the nail bins, feeling the sharp points all around. I look up to the front counter and see Ray helping somebody pay him for drill bits or a new flashlight. "This is a fine hammer you have picked out, Mrs. Jones," he says, "it will last you a lifetime."

I stand there in front of little nuts and bolts, all arranged in plastic boxes according to size, looking at Ray. He's not the type to notice this sort of thing and I don't think that he would be upset if he did. His smile comes easily and yet when they leave, hammer upside down in a small paper bag, his smile fades. He could be thinking of the dwindling sales in the past couple of years, or his step-son's performance in school. He could be adding up little figures in his head, how much he will have to save over the next four years so that he can pay for Nathan's college. Nathan doesn't look anything like Ray and I wonder if anyone but me notices this.

"Carl, I'm just wondering what this all means for him," Sharon says.

"I don't really know what you mean," I say, but I do. When Nathan was three I touched him. I went into his room while he was asleep, pulled down his pants and touched him. It was like I was in a dream; I got up from my bed and I went into his room. At some point I snapped out of it, but it was too late. Sharon was gone at the time and when she returned she found me curled underneath the covers crying. She shook me, cuddled me and asked me what was the
matter. I told her and she screamed. She screamed so loudly that it woke Nathan and he began to cry.

"You know, in terms of his behavior, what this all means, him not going to school."

"He's at that age, you know," I say. I think daily about Nathan and yet I can't help thinking that I'm out of practice in parenting. I look at families walking down the street, little kids wandering in every direction with their parents, and I think that things must be going right for all of them. I think that Sharon would be proud of these families because they have met her criteria. Trouble somehow seems to be left at home, the child's face reflecting only joy at the world. I wonder, if things had happened differently, whether I would be the type of father that Nathan would look for when he goes up on the podium to receive his diploma.

The first call he made to me consisted of two questions: At what age had I first had sexual relations? The question seemed strange, the voice familiar. I answered and then realized it was Nathan calling. The second question was how would I rate my first sexual encounter on a scale from one to ten. These are very personal questions, sir, I said. I know, he replied and then he hung up.

"You're not helping, mister, not at all." Sharon's face flattens. She's no longer looking at the table but at me, into me. She's done this before, the night nine years ago that she decided we couldn't stay together anymore. Nathan was four and a half and it couldn't be stopped from falling apart. I was racked with guilt and when I looked at Sharon's face I saw the same. The only thing we could come up with at the time was for me to leave. I want to try and
make this work for his sake, she said, whispering and pointing at Nathan's room, but I know we can't.

"I know, but I'm not his father anymore," I say. I allowed her to shove me out of Nathan's life and then I helped her cut all the strings. I don't, and didn't, want this but I can still see so very plainly the guilt across her face from that night ten and half years ago when Nathan was three.

"That's not what I wanted to hear," she says.

I think she met Ray at her noontime parkwalking club. They go every lunchtime and walk through the park for forty-five minutes and in the wintertime they go to some gym and swim in the pool. Some of the people in the club bring their sandwiches and sometimes they even spoon yogurt into their mouths while walking along. I see them occasionally when I'm sitting far away on the benches, women and men in business suits, women and men in multi-colored jogging suits, and I wonder if I would fit in. Sharon doesn't go anymore, but occasionally I see Ray. He wears a green baggy jogging suit that looks as if it is a trophy from his overweight days. He walks with determination, his head cocked slightly downward and his body a bit forward.

There are factors that we don't take into account such as humidity and just plain old time. The owner of this restaurant has never even given it a thought that the pots overhead will at some point, inevitably, fall down. She will be pissed off that the dirt has to be swept up and the plant has to be replaced. She won't give it another thought, even if the pot lands on one of the seats, that it could have actually killed someone.
I think that Ray and I could have been good friends. There's nothing outstanding about him, but he does display a common man's understanding and sympathy for the world. He, like me, is simply looking for a path to walk on that affords him the comforts and support that he deserves. What he doesn't know is that optimism occasionally blinds and the ugly truth sometimes hides.

"Does Nathan ever ask about me?" I say.

"Yes, he does. He remembers you, but only faintly. He thinks that you're larger and stronger," she says.

"Do you ever tell him the truth?"

"No. No I don't." She is still a beautiful woman, aging sort of gently. She is probably still holding onto her dreams with a death grip, too afraid to let go for fear that there will be nothing left.

"Well, what is it that I can do here? Just tell me," I say.

"I don't really know. I just thought that you might have some ideas or maybe you could tell me something that I could say to him."

"You're worried. You're worried that it might have affected him in some way."

"No. That's not what I'm worried about, Carl, it never crossed my mind," she says.

"He was asleep goddamit, he was asleep," I say loudly. People begin to turn around and look over toward our table. Sharon leans closer to me and closer to the table.

"He was your son, your own flesh and blood."

"I know, and I don't know what else to do."

"I just want him to go back to school, to be normal and to grow up. He's my only chance for anything in this world." Sharon's eyes begin
to tear. I want to look into them and to put my arm across the table onto her hand, but I don't. This isn't my position though I wish it were, and I need to remind myself of this.

"Tell Ray about it. Tell Ray and then deal with it like a family. Just like we didn't." I put my napkin and my hands on the table. I look up at the pots and the ferns, watching them slightly swinging in the air currents. They are fastened to the ceiling by little o-ring screws that probably come from a bin in the middle of Ray's store. The twine is probably less than a dollar a foot and can be cut by the customer and paid for at the front counter. Ray probably doesn't ask them what they are planning to do with all that twine and those little o-ring screws, but then he probably can't foresee the small problems that they might cause. I get up from the table and turn to walk away. "Sharon, if you can admit to Nathan that you saw me, tell him that I love him and I think of him every day. Tell him that I miss him," I say.

I walk out the front door into the sunshine, turn and walk down the street. People pass me. I walk to the nearest phone booth and dial Nathan's phone number. Ray will be at work and Sharon is in the restaurant. Nathan will answer even if he hasn't gone to school because it is after three now.

"Hello," his deep voice says. I put my eye to the little circles that I'm supposed to speak into. "Hello," he says again. I can almost see his face. "Hello," he says again. I hang up.
When mom and dad weren't home my brother Dale would just ride his motorcycle through the house to the back where his room was. He would store it in front of his bed with a plastic sheet over it so that the grease wouldn't get all over the room. "Nobody knows this except me," he told me, "but the cold and the outside is very bad for a bike." Those were the days when Dale lived at home, dad worked too hard, and mom spent most of her time in bed.

The boy is silent as he looks up at his mom. She is on the phone with the electric company.

"I sent that damn check in, check number two-hundred and twenty seven. I'm looking at the checkbook right now," she says.

The boy looks at her hands. One is twisted around the phone cord, the other is shakily holding a cigarette. He turns his back and looks to the refrigerator. It's not cold in there, he thinks.

"Listen, turn the electricity back on and I'll call my bank and have this whole thing straightened out tomorrow," she says. "But it's almost dark out."

The boy moves out of the room and into the television room. He flips on the knob and watches the blank screen for a moment. He turns to the wall and watches the dim shadows from outside the house resting before they fade away.
"Oh damn," his mother says, "damn, damn, damn." She hangs up the phone and comes into the room with the boy. "Peter, I just don't understand. Why don't they trust anyone anymore. I mean."

"You didn't pay the bill, mom."

"But I did Peter, you know I did."

Peter shakes his head. He is a smallish boy who sits in the middle row in his sixth grade class. He doesn't raise his hand even though he knows the answer and he doesn't talk to the teacher although he feels sorry that she has to be there in front of the class on those certain days.

"Just help me get some candles then," his mother says. She has more strands of grey hair then she would like. They wisp out and curl around in the front. Sometimes she stands in front of the mirror and pulls the grey hairs back and twists her old black hairs over them to see what it would look like, what it used to look like. "Peter I don't think they're going to be turning on the electricity for a good while so it looks like it's going to just be you and me."

"I know mom," Peter says. He pulls open a drawer and then opens a box of candles.

After a couple of candles have been lit Peter's mother begins to cry. Peter watches for a while and then he approaches her.

"It doesn't always have to happen this way," she says. "There can be different endings, better, more happy you know."

Peter nods his head and looks at the floor. His hands reach for his mother's hands almost automatically. "It's ok mom, I still love you." He is looking at the light dancing on her face which gives her more
age. Tomorrow his homework will not be completed and he will tell the teacher something like he has forgotten.

His mother is silent for a while. She stopped crying but Peter still holds her hand. "Just promise me that someday you won't let the electricity go out on your kids."

"I'm not going to leave you mom. Never," he says.

The next day in the afternoon Peter returns from school and he is surprised to hear his mother on the phone. Normally she would be at work for another two hours. He opens the door slowly and the sound of her voice gets louder, as if he were raising the volume. He shuts the door taking care not to allow the click to be heard by anybody but himself and then he stands by the door listening.

"It's not that simple, I have other bills to pay," she says. "I realize that. Then you'll just have to do it and there is nothing I can do, right?"

Peter steps away from the door and the floor creaks.

"Well then, thanks for the call. I have to go, my son just got home from school." Peter's mother hangs up the phone and walks to the front hallway. She leans over, puts her two hands between her legs and looks at Peter. "How was your day Pumpkin? Did everything go well?"

"Uh-huh. Who was on the phone? What are you doing home?" Peter says.

Peter's mother smiles. That was Shirly. She's sick with the flu today and wanted to talk, you know, just talk."

"No," Peter says.
"She's got a pretty high fever and I told her to take one aspirin and one Tylenol, it makes a world of difference."

"Isn't there something we can do mom," Peter says.

"What Honey?"

"I mean isn't there something we can do to fix all this. Like when you go into a restaurant and the check is more than you can afford and they make you clean the dishes for a while. Can't we do that for the electric company?"

"Oh Peter, I wish it was that simple." His mother shakes her head and smiles slightly. The tips of her mouth have begun to form small lines. Peter wants to touch them.

In his room Peter sits down to start his homework. Nothing happens when he flips the switch on the little reading lamp mounted on his desk, but that doesn't surprise him. It merely pours salt in the wounds he feels. He opens his textbook slowly and begins to read. Tears trickle down his cheeks. Soon he is sobbing. He lays his nose in the middle of the book and grabs the stiff outer covers. He closes the book on his face, still sobbing, trying to crush his bony cheeks. The light doesn't work and I can't study right, I'm behind and nothing is easy, he says to himself. He stops crying later when he falls asleep, face still in the book.

Samantha awoke again. The dream was the same. As she jumped out of the plane suddenly the parachute was gone. She pulled on the cord but even the cord was gone. Each night she woke at just this point, the sheets wet and the window open, the wind whispering the curtains up.
She thought she could control her dreams. Just go to sleep thinking of something and it will creep into your dream. Sort of like choosing which movie to go see. I am a country and western singer. I am wearing a white cowboy hat, a long red skirt, and I am singing to a large crowd. But that would be forgotten as soon as she fell into slumber and she would board the plane with her parachute strapped to her back sort of knowing that it would happen again but failing to stop it.

Case 1:

Mrs. Carson stops writing on the chalkboard in mid sentence. She clamps her eyes to mere slits and then surveys the class. Some sit up straighter, some cross their arms and hold their palms together. "Ok," she says, slowly, "who threw it? WHO THREW IT? Willy?" She looks at a little boy in the back. "Jacob?" She looks at another little boy. "Todd, Sean, Alfred, Marcie? WHO?" The room is silent.

After school the boys gather around the bus stop waiting for their bus. "She has to go," Jacob says. "That woman is a B-I-T-C-H," Sean says. "Say it Sean," Todd says. "Nobody threw nothing," Willy says. "My moms is going to hear about this," Sean says, "she's going to call the school board and get Mrs. Carson fired." "Right on," they sall say.

Mrs. Carson wanders into the teacher's lounge and pours herself a cup of coffee. She sits at the round table and stares at her hands. Lines she wouldn't have expected have grown deep into her skin. She
rubs her knuckles and lets out a sigh. Mrs. Brown walks in and pours a cup of coffee. "How was the day Mary? Any killings?"

Mrs Carson laughs and then sighs.

Seymour Billings felt the world, the streets as wide as two cars would need to pass each other, the doors just right, walkways planned to make travel so easy, was perfection. He looked through his eyes and surveyed trees, virtual mirror images underneath the ground as above, realizing that there probably wasn't a god as a body but a god as order. Seymour lived alone and the occasional pangs of loneliness he felt were covered by the realization that this was necessary to have complete order at home. He couldn't wait to move away from his parents those many years ago, though he loved them so dearly. He needed his own space in order to keep the books in alphabetical order by author's last name, and to keep the soap hair free. The presence of others would throw his world into unimaginable chaos, something he dreaded. Seymour admitted to himself that he would probably never...
The Thursday Of My Discontent

I'm eating lunch with my ex-wife and I'm looking toward the ceiling. It is a high ceiling with these ferns in pots suspended by string overhead. I'm watching the strings and wondering whether they change those strings or whether the strings break periodically and the pots with the ferns fall on a customer's head. I'm also wondering about what the chances are that the ferns will fall during business hours and what the chances are that someone will be sitting below them. My ex-wife's mouth is moving, I am nodding and I'm not hearing a single word she's saying.

She's remarried to this man named Ray who treats her well, that's about all I can ask for. He's a stocky man who has thick skin and thick hands. He runs a small hardware store and has taken to selling kitchenware in the past couple of months because business has slowed. "He makes a living," she once said, "and I'm happy." "That's good," I told her, and I generally meant it.

We are meeting in this restaurant on this afternoon to discuss our son Nathan. "Nathan hasn't been to school for two weeks straight and frankly Carl, I'm worried about him," she says to me. Neither part of this statement is news to me. He's been coming over to my apartement about the time I'd estimate school would start and he's been staying until the middle of the afternoon when I would guess school is supposed to be over. I'm there and we talk. He tells me that there is a holiday but I know that there is not, and I don't press him on the issue. He is a gentile child with almost transparent skin pressed to his cheek bones and small freckles sprinkled lightly over
his body. His hair is soft, too soft for a boy growing up in these times of ours.

I don't tell her any of this information. I just nod my head and occasionally I look up at the ferns, examining closely the strings. We had an agreement when she got married to Ray, I would no longer pay her child support and Ray would be allowed to adopt Nathan. "It just works out better," she has said on many occasions. Ray, with his thick hands and his new kitchenware departure, is my son's father. He takes care of my son, will someday pay for his college, and they are a family now.

"I think we should have him tested," she says to me.

"For what?" I say.

"I don't know, just tested. You don't suppose that he's doing drugs, do you?"

"What does Ray think?" I say.

"Ray doesn't know."

"Why? He's his father for crying out loud."

"Ray would be so disappointed. He loves Nathan."

I don't get to see Nathan but once every month on a weekend. We spend our time walking in the park or driving backroads in the hills outside of the city. I don't ask him about school or his home life in the fatherly manner, more I just ask to be friendly and interested. It took so long for me to stop thinking like his father, caring and concerned, and start thinking like a man with a fourteen year old friend. I don't have to pay child support anymore and I don't have to worry about where the money will come from. It was all part of the bargain.
With a day off from work Natalie volunteered to her mother to take her younger brother, Charles, out for the day. They sat on the patio of a restaurant, Charles too often taken to staring at the passers-by, but he was a good listener, Natalie thought. She told him that everything would be so much simpler if we all had a series of buttons on our chests and the process of getting to know each other was the process of finding out which combination of buttons made us happy and sad. "They would be different for all of us, mind you," she said. Charles pulled up his shirt at the table and looked at his small chest, Natalie smiled. They left the restaurant holding and swinging hands and when they returned home Charles immediately ran to his mother and began poking her in the chest.

My brother owned a large green convertible, a Cadillac I think, and we would take it for that long ride every summer to pick up our grandfather and bring him home. My brother was six years older than I was and he would smoke cigarettes, pulling his glasses down low on his nose, it made me want to have glasses. Grandfather sat in the back, his head tilted back, looking at the desert sky, looking at the clouds high up, the ones that wouldn't move because they were so far away. Once in a while he would lean forward, almost onto the seat and he would look closely at the side of my brother's face. Then he would turn to me and say, "Richard, I smell evil, an evil deep below the surface."

My brother told me his car came to him in a dream. He'd moved
You talk quickly sort of to explain everything that goes through your head. There are so many sides to things and all sorts of ways of thinking and dealing with things that when you start to examine them things just get muddled. 

Jayne talks quickly, as if there were only a moment in time where the communication could take place. There are so many sides to the issues and questions so she tries to get them all in. She longs and even dreams of a particular point where she could just pour out her feelings. I don't hate you and yet I sort of do. I want to say that you're a dick because you rejected me. I loved you at some point and so why not now? Have we changed all that much or did it just grow too large? I think I hate you I mean I get a bitter taste in my mouth and a bitter feeling whenever you are around, whenever you come up in the conversation. Sometimes I just look down at the ground when others speak your name and that is only to stop myself from saying something awful about you.

Down at the Philbrook Mall there was a live nativity scene. George and I went there to check it out and we were standing there in this crowd of people, Channel 10 was even there, when George says, "Why don't we come back later and steal Jesus"

"How many environmentalists does it take to screw in a lightbuld," Harry Phipps says.

"Harry that's not funny, not at all

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Mr. Farrar's dog again has his nose in my crotch and I'm wondering what the difference is from two minutes ago when he did it or the last time I visited. The dog is large and dumb, much like Mr. Farrar and when Mr. Farrar turns his back to yell something, at his wife I smack the dog, hard, on the nose. The dog shakes his head and sneezes.

The old man next door would come out of his house and stand by the road for a couple of minutes and then he would go back in. Mom and dad said that he was crazy. They said that he had been doing that for as many years as they could remember and would do that forever. Dad wanted his children to come by and put him in a home. Little Bob said that the old man had been shot in the head in the Civil War and had a big old iron plate in his head.

Rinnie has rigged up the dog with a shotgun again and Ma is yelling at him. He did it before, straping the gun on the dog's back and taping a string to the trigger so that when the dog wandered too far the gun went off. Rinnie isn't a gentile child, but he cares. He was careful to tie the gun so that it wouldn't slip back and accidentally shoot the dog.

Ma tells Rinnie that the dog runs over to the visitors and barks at them. The dog charges them until the chain chokes him and makes him step back. She tells Rinnie that what if the dog were to go charging after some visitor and the gun were to blow that visitor to hell.
Rinnie tells Ma that anyone who wouldn't run from a dog with a gun tied to its back would be just plain fool.

Willy went to a close out sale at the Tennis Schaque and picked out a nicely weighted graphite tennis racket. It was marked down forty percent to one hundred and ninety dollars. He went into the changing room with the racket and stuffed it half down his pants and half up his shirt. Then he walked out of the store with his head held high.

He spent the rest of the afternoon hitting medium sized rocks into the reservoir.

I am carrying around a bone with me and every once in a while I take it from my pocket and pick it. But never mind me because I'm just a twenty-one year old bumbling old fool, mad at the world, crazy old coot. Things haven't changed in the past couple of centuries and they probably won't change in the sixty or so years I have scheduled for the rest of my life.

So when I approach you and you say that you don't have the time to climb Everest because you will be too buzy helping the world, I wonder. I wonder why not? Why not spend the rest of my life

In the distance, a large pink object runs along the curvy edge of the street. "You know, Bev Silks seems to run by this window every single day and yet in the ten years that I've known her she hasn't lost a single pound."

"That's because jogging is just an illusion."
I push Mrs. Banks around. I lean down, touch her lightly on the shoulder so that she'll know I'm talking to her and then I yell, "MRS. BANKS, I'M GOING TO PUSH YOU OVER TO THE FRONT OF THE HOUSE SO THAT YOU'LL GET THE LATE AFTERNOON SUN."

She puts her boney slanted hand with golfball knuckles up to my cheek. "Thank you dear," she says.

Harris called Daphne from the airport. "I'm getting on"

He met Daphne when he turned twenty. She was out of college and she was taller than he was. She had dark hair and carried around shelves of knowledge in her head. That first night she went into his bedroom. He walked the hallway, sat on the couch, got up and waited. Suddenly, age was a factor. He might just be a man now

Horace lined up fifteen dixie cups and began pouring tequila into each one. "I'll tell you when I want to tell you," he growled.

"C'mon," the little boy said, jumping up and down, grabbing the edge of the table with his little hands.

"Shattup," Horace said.

There is certainly an art to life, an expression, a crafting. Form that takes on beauty or beauty that takes on form. It could be the simple wobbly strum of the guitar when one does not know how to play it. It could be the people crushing one on the bus on the way to work. These things never generally occur though. One walks on.
But on the way to the bus stop one morning the man in the box crawls out looking shaggy and unsure of his footing. He stands there for a moment and shouts, "Howl!" at the top of his lungs.

And there is a message on his desk when he gets to work. It sits there while he fills up his cup of coffee and gabs with his co-workers. He opens the message and it says, "Don't, whatever you do, look behind you." That's all it says. He turns around and there is nothing. An empty desk.

The walk from the bus stop to the office building where he works is fuzzy. The whole ride was fuzzy. He felt dizzy and lost. His pulse was normal. His temperature, registered on the digital thermometer when it beeped, was normal. The shaggy man on the corner, who is standing very still, shouts, "Howl!" at the top of his lungs when Michael approaches.

Michael enters the building and happens to get on the wrong elevator. He is on the one that goes from thirty-nine to sixty. He has to get off at the first stop and go all the way down to get on the one that goes to twenty-four.

Balance, Worried smell, pounding caps and the occasional spray of hot stuff, the blank pounding on the eardrum,

Carlos whistles the scales. Up and down, up and down. Then he repeats. He waits for the children, pounding out fractions on their half sheets of paper to finish. One by one they
Carla balances on the edge of the cement sidewall that holds the sand in the swingset area like a damn. Self pity is a disease, she thinks. A creepy disease that is resistant to orange juice. Children swing back and forth and some jump off. She put an ad in the paper asking for a job reading to people, old people, young people, it didn't matter, but ended up getting only one call the whole week the ad ran. The call was a babysitting job which she took because she needed the money.

She invisioned a service.

In the Curtan household the beds are separate and in different rooms. Mrs. Curtan has taken a part time job six full years after Mr. Curtan retired from his full time one. He waits in the kitchen, writing small two line poems on the edge of today's newspaper, occasionally pulling the small shade over the window aside to see if she comes home yet.

Mrs. Curtan awoke the week before and layed in bed for most of the morning. She got up to take two vitamin pills and to go to the bathroom. Each time she returned to the bed wondering what the use was in getting up at all. Mr. Curtan, she could tell, was up and in the kitchen looking at the stock page of the New York Times, occasionally switching on the little black and white television that has sat on the little stand by the kitchen table for the better part of a decade.

In the bathroom Mrs. Curtan was overcome with great panic.

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It was a Saturday afternoon when Harris called Daphne from the airport. "I have in my old age developed a real love of women," he said.

"You're twenty-four," Daphne said. She was sitting at the kitchen table circling items in one of her sister's catalogues. Daphne found that her sister went through the catalogues and circled the items that she wanted. Daphne would find other items, usually ones that disgusted her, circle the numbers, and lo and behold, the items would arrive by mail six weeks later.

"I've found that all women have a special part of them, something that really shines. Pudgy cheeks, freckles, straight hair, curly hair, dark skin."

"Enough Harris. Why are you calling me?" Daphne circled a see through t-shirt costing 45 dollars.

"Well I don't know. I'm going to Europe because I hear that you can wake up in the morning and go buy a freshly baked loaf of bread to eat while you read the paper. It sounds exciting and relaxing," he said.

"When will you be back," she said.

"That's the thing. I don't know but I'm wondering whether you will pick me up at the airport when I return."

"That depends on what I'm doing," Daphne said.

Harris hung up without telling her his flight number or where he was going. He did this because he hadn't purchased the ticket yet. He had thirty-three hundred dollars cash in his pocket from the sale of his car and three paintings that he owned, his only real possessions. Daphne got up from the table and looked out the window.
She watched two planes flying high in the sky and wondered whether Harris was on either of them.

On the first night they met, Harris took her back to his apartment and showed her a family portrait that he had hanging in his bathroom. "This here's me in the red standing next to my mother. That one's my father and this is my greasy greasy grandma," he said, grinning boyishly. He made her laugh, she decided this the first time she saw him. His thin neck and his pale face made her think of a walking talking Howdy Doody minus the red checked shirt and the freckles.

She wanted to make love that first night. She laid down in his bed and half closed her eyes, waiting for him to come in. Finally she fell asleep. He paced around the hallways and the kitchen all night, trying to figure out something to make for her the next morning. His only real real cooking expertise was toast that he usually burned, oatmeal, and cereal which he could actually do well. "I am a painter," he told her when they walked to his apartment. "I paint."

These were the memories that first came to her head when she looked out the window at the two planes. They were, as far as she could tell, good memories. Harris silently padding into the bedroom that morning with a tray of fresh fruit and a bowl of cereal. The initial attraction isn't always that strong, she told herself. The memories are probably a whole lot better than the real thing.

Harris turned around after hanging up the phone and eyed the different airlines. He felt pressure in making his choice, better make a good one. The balance was precarious, between an airline that he trusted and one that wasn't on the verge of bancrupcy. He
decided upon a United Airlines flight that left that evening for Paris, France. What he was going to do was step off the flight in Paris and he was going to fend for himself. He half hoped that Daphne would be at the gate grabbing him by the shirt telling him not to go.

When he was eighteen Harris told his father that he didn't want to go to college. His father's reply was calm: "Ok, well then you are cut off." Harris was taken aback by the reply. He sat up in his room all night rethinking his decision. It isn't that I don't want to go to college, just not right now, he thought. Through his window he could see the sunrise that morning. He could see the great expanse of land they owned; it seemed to go to the curve of the earth. He saw the fields that he used to play in when he was a child, the forts they built, the tire swing they had. It was a good childhood, he thought. One that, in his opinion, was mainly responsible for the person he was.

Fate deffinitely plays a role in my life, he decided when the sun finally rose. I cannot let it get away from me. He wasn't quite sure what he had decided; to go to college or not. The decision was moot, though, because two weeks later his father died and he never changed his will to cut Harris off. He didn't go to college. He rented the apartment and lived there with the idea that there was something floating around that was his.

Harris looked at his watch and saw that it was seven fifteen in the evening. He was sitting in seat 15b, looking out at the tip of the wing and if he turned his head he could see the very large engine. It was large enough to stand several men inside. He thought carefully about what he was doing. The sun was almost down, closing a
beautiful day. The evening promised to be warm, the kind of evening that he could sit out on the porch with his feet up on the railing and watch people go by in the street below. Something inside of him rose up.

Daphne told him three months before that she wanted him to leave her life for a while. She was standing at the sink washing her hands. "Harris, what do you say we break this thing off for now?" she said.

"I don't see why not," he replied. It was a long time coming. He was new at these things and didn't want to say anything before she did. He was tired, the deep down emotional tired that sleep did nothing for.

"Good," she said, turning around. "One call a week, just for starters." She stared at him carefully.

At first, when Daphne called him every day and they made plans, he thought that she might just be the thing that he was looking for. She had wisdom that was deep and mysterious. It was hard to imagine that all that knowledge could have collected itself in a woman who was just twenty-three, three years older than he was.

Early in the morning for almost a week Frank woke up to find the bedsheets drenched in sweat. His heart was pounding and he was breathing hard, almost too hard. The dream went something like this: He was in a room full of candles. Candles on every side of him, hundreds and hundreds of them. He found himself in the room and as he was exploring the room he found that not only wasn't there a door but behind his back the candles were being lighted. He turned sharply around to try and figure out what it was that was lighting
the candles, but he couldn't tell. Somehow he knew that there were hands not attached to arms or bodies that were lighting the candles. Somehow he knew that each candle meant that someone on the streets was dying, dying of starvation, dying from the cold, dying of heartbreak. Somehow he knew that when all the candles were lit, the whole room would blow up and it would be an atomic blast that would level the earth. As he realized this he would go from candle to candle snuffing them out. At first they weren't being lit too quickly and so he was blowing them out. Soon they were lighting quicker and he was racing to each wall, grabbing the wicks, trying to break the candles. His flesh burned and his hands hurt. As the candles became lit more and more, he felt the oxygen in the room diminishing. Just when he was about to pass out from exhaustion, he would wake up, every night.

Once again Silly has a cold, the second this month. She sits home all day, on the floor, drawing, sniffling, blowing her nose, wadding up the used tissues and throwing them in a scattered pile next to her. Rocko comes home but Silly is not sitting by her drawings. She's nowhere to be found. He looks around and steps over, way over, the pile of tissues. He goes to their bedroom and shuts the door tightly, pressing hard until he hears the click.

Rocko feels along the center of the bed for the spiritual vibration that he thinks lies there. He presses firmly, like a doctor probing for organs. It picks up their feelings as they lay in bed and melds them into one. He never told Silly of his unhappiness. He never really knew of it himself; at least not in words. But somehow the
vibration picked it up and transferred it to her in the form of a sickness.

He lies there on the bed. It’s no use, the vibration only exists when they are both there together.

Impartiality, my father once said, is a good habit. It allows you to sit back and take in the scene, not to make judgements that are too rash. We were standing over the body of my uncle who had died during the night of a large hemorrhage in his brain. My father said this silently. I was staring at my uncle’s twisted face, but I could feel my father looking at me. My father, the man who always sat at the end of the table on Thanksgiving and always cut the turkey, began to cry.

The following Saturday we buried him. My mother and father huddled together and I just

It’s three in the morning and Baker wakes with a start and a half gasp. He turns to the window and sees the comforting blue light coming from the moon. He turns to Cinda-Lou and sees her face. It seems to get older with each passing day and he wonders where the time has gone.

It’s hot by nine A.M. when he wakes. There is sweat on his brow, Cinda-Lou is off at work, probably serving some fat trucker his breakfast by now. He tells this by the clock. Each second of the day it will get hotter and hotter until finally the sun will set.

Looking at the bed he sees the large grey oval of sweat he made. He is not a man who sweats easily. It is a torturous event, the dirty
shirts, the desire to escape from the heat. There are times when he just lays there and gives up the fight. He lets the heat take his brain and fog it in, waiting for the sun to set and a little relief.

"So long Pally," Father said, giving the dog a chuck on the bottom of his mouth. The dog whined a long whine and then layed down, his head over the top step.

Jacob's father was the

The men on the streetcorner talk to Jacob. They say, "He died for your sins," or "the Lord Jesus Christ is our savior." He walks on, looking carefully at the ground and not into their deep eyes. The eye is the outlet of life; the light that when looked into gives proof of feeling and thoughts, no matter how messed up or confused they really are.

Pally is Jacob's dog and he is a German Shephard. Pally comes up to Jacob's waist and sits on the porch, his head resting over the step, his eyes travelling constantly around looking for Jacob to come home from school.

Jacob's dad is a man of infinite sensibilities. The man said that before calling him up and giving him a plaque. Jacob's dad sits at the end of the dinner table each night, sometimes explaining to Jacob about how the silverware can be thought of as eating tools. The fork for spearing or scooping up larger chunks, generally the eating tool that is used the most often. It is precision. The spoon will get the things that the fork cannot, the sauces, the small things that slip
out from the fork. The knife, well the knife of course is obvious. Spreading butter and cutting things.

Jacob believes that the minds of the men on the corner see the world in different ways. It is entirely possible that someone could be born seeing the whole world upside down or realizing that all the people are wrong all the time. Jacob looks at himself in the mirror and imagines what he might look like, a boy leaning on manhood.

His dad says, "you stay away from those men on the corner. They'll snatch you up and suck out your brain." He leans down into Jacob's face and makes his eyes small. "Do you understand?"

Jacob doesn't understand. He walks through the field with Pally running ahead. He falls to his back and stares upward at the light blue sky, the grasses poking him hard in the back. Pally returns and sniffs at Jacob's mouth, licks his eyes. It's not a comfortable spot, that's for sure, but his energy has left him and he must stay there for the time being.

Jacob calls for Pally three times when it is time to go home but Pally does not return. He, of course, will be back by the time he should be fed. He will scratch at the door and Jacob's dad will say, "Goddamned dog, that's a real wood door you're messing up."

Upstairs in his room Jacob takes needlenose pliers and bends hangers into mobiles. The mobile is a balancing act between the freedom of the wind and the balance of each side. The roof cuts the corners of the ceiling off, he lives in a teepee with a window looking down at the driveway. A year ago his dad stopped coming through the threshold of the room and instead would talk to him from there.
Sure enough Pally is scratching at the door. Jacob runs down to let him in and discovers a beheaded squirrel in Pally's mouth. The blood running down his chin, down his neck and dripping onto the porch. Jacob falls to his knees and watches Pally wag his tail, trying to give him the squirrel. "No Pally, put it back. No," Jacob says. His dad is behind him. Jacob can feel the heat of his dad's legs on his back. He puts his hand on Jacob's shoulder.

The men on the streetcorner look at Jacob. "The blood of Jesus Christ is dripping from your hands," they say. Jacob passes them and then looks at his hands. They are shaking but they aren't bleeding

The alarm sounded and Manny awoke hearing the drip drip drip of rain dropping through the broken drainpipe. The wind blew sheets of drops in dances of snores onto the roof. His lover lay on her side facing him, her mouth open. When she awoke she would be thirsty and he wouldn't be gone. It was the fifth day of the goddamned rain and his spray crew was less in need of the time off and more in the need of a paycheck.

Something about the rain that soaked through his very existence, into his bones. The summer opened windows at night had shadows of water drops on the wooden floor and water condemned drapes hung by their nooses on the sides, twitched by the wind. He got out of bed, the daylight began to creep through the neighborhood, the sun not too far behind. It was already a hot day, hot and muggy. His underwear felt damp, the sheets felt sticky. The floor was moist on the bottoms of his bare feet. It was the simple beginnings of a long long day, long enough to sit at the little table in the kitchen for

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eternity, long enough to wait for his lover to wake up and then fight all day for so little reason other than the drumming of the rain on the roof forcing them together.

In the bathroom he pulled up his eyelids to look at the top of his whites. In the kitchen he pulled the kettle off the stove and force fed water into it until it was full. His lover yelled many times about the waste of energy used to heat a whole pot of water when you were only going to pour a cup of tea. He sat at the table and waited. His lover appeared in the doorway behind him. Her hair fell to one side, her eyes still closed to essentials. "No work," she said.

"Damn rain," Manny said. "Damn damn rain." He did not turn around.

His lover went to the little glass window in the top half of the door that looked out on their four foot porch and the flight of metal stairs that led to the street below. She steamed up the glass with her mouth and held back a loop of hair with her hand.

It's not so often that you meet someone who is the subject of a song, but Martin was just that; "Oh the crimes you have committed against me" by Melody Barnes.

When he first met her she was a woman who had a small radio by her plants that played rock and roll at a low volume twenty four hours a day. She was a woman who was so filled with a zest for life that it made even Martin jump. She was learning to play the guitar out of a book she'd bought and had the basic chords down, G, C, D, E, D-minor, but she still played slightly out of tune. "Play the alphabet
for me," he said to her when she practiced. She called it the alphabet.

They were separated for two months when his company sent him on a sales swing in the northeast. He was sitting in a motel in Bangor, Maine when he opened the package she had sent to him. It was a small package that contained a cassette recording of "oh the crimes you have committed against me" and a note that said simply "do not call me when you come home."

"I said," Melody said when she opened the door.

"You said not to call," Martin said.

"You know what I meant," she said. "Anyways come in if you have to." She was wearing a turtleneck, corderoys, and a long robe unfastened at the waste that swept out like a cape when she walked to the back of her apartment. She crossed her hands in front of her when she sat down. "Sit."

"Well"

"We're a large family and when things go wrong we stick together," my father said. My mom's shoulders heaved softly up and down and she covered her face with her hands.

My uncle always had been a small man.

Two days later we closed the store fifteen minutes early, dragged some chairs out front and watched the sun go down. It was warm enough so that my uncle pulled off his shirt. He had real muscle in his arms, the kind of muscle I wasn't used to seeing. His skin was
tight enough so that I could see a streetmap of veins pouring underneath.

My uncle went off to pitch for a minor league baseball team that played ball in the panhandle of Texas. When he came back he limped and had one tooth less in his smile. He spent most of his time chasing the girls who would come into the store instead of helping me restock the shelves and sweep behind the counter. I didn't mind doing his work because I was a teenager and he was a full grown man. He was the town hero because he got paid one hundred dollars a week to play baseball for almost a year and he had come a lot closer to anything than anyone else had. Leaning over the counter telling some young girl stories about the sunset

When I was fourteen my uncle went off to pitch for a minor league baseball team in the panhandle of Texas. He sat in the front seat along with my dad on the ride to the bus station. I sat in the back seat with my mom and my grandma and I had this strange anticipation of something good to come. My uncle had shined up shoes and a blue suit for church that he hadn't worn in a long time because his hands stuck out of it almost a foot. He had that broad smile on his face and after we saw him off, my dad said that he was too short to play in the majors. My dad was a foot and a half taller and he was right; a year later my uncle returned in that blue suit, with a limp and one tooth missing from that broad smile he had.
Almost immediately he began to work in our grocery store doing the same job that I was doing during that summer. We were supposed to keep the shelves stocked up well and we were supposed to sweep twice, and once before closing at eight. My uncle had the extra job of doing all of the ordering so that my mom and dad could be freed up to do the paperwork in the little office that they had out in the back of the store. That left just my uncle and me in the store and he let me do all of the sweeping and stocking so that he could chase all of the girls that came in to the store. I didn't mind this, really, because my uncle was a sort of celebrity in the town. He had taken our high school team to the championships and he was paid one hundred dollars a week to play baseball for a year. My dad, however, did tell me to keep an eye on him.

I was fifteen and sweeping the whole store while my uncle talked to a girl in the front. She had walked in not thirty minutes before closing and already they were close to kissing. I knocked a whole row of canned corn off of the bottom shelf because I was watching them through the front window. While I was down on my knees picking the cans of corn up, my uncle walked in, opened two beers and handed me one. "This here's a new tradition," he said. "Beers to celebrate the closing of the store each day. The ending of another day." My uncle seemed to suck the entire bottle of beer down in one swallow. I sipped mine slowly, carefully looking around to see if my parents walked in.

A week later my uncle was outside actually kissing the girl and I was inside sweeping, with a beer on the top shelf next to the
mustard. I was different somehow. I was older and a little cooler. My dad walked in from the back and I froze. "Where's Dave?" he said.

I couldn't look at him. I was suddenly buzzed and a whole lot less cool. The beer was on the top shelf. He could surely see it. "He's out there." I pointed.

My dad looked and said, "Jesus H. What the hell's he doing?"

He looked right at me but I didn't want to respond. "Kissing her, I guess," I said.

"What's that?" he said, pointing. "What has been going on here?

My dad stopped talking and looked around. He was frowning tightly. Then he walked through the front door, grabbed my uncle by the arm and pulled him right out of the arms of that girl, right through the front door and right to the front counter.

"Why'd the hell you do that, Rich," my uncle said. "Couldn't you see?"

"Listen pal," my dad said, "I set you up here. You can't be dicking around like that."

"Billy was doing the sweeping and I figured."

"You figured wrong, Dave," my dad said, and then he left.

My uncle beat me to it, he smiled that big one tooth missing smile. I felt a little guilty. He grabbed the broom out of my hands and he began to sweep. I quickly finished off my bottle of beer and then I threw it deep, to the bottom of the trash can. I gathered the trash bag up from around the sides of the can and pulled it out of the can. I carried it out toward the back of the store and just before I went out the back door, I turned to look at my uncle. He was sweeping slowly but carefully. He was looking underneath the
shelves for the balls of dust that I usually ignored. He swept and limped and swept and limped.

My uncle's limp was a side to side waddle because he never bent his right leg. He just picked it up off the ground by rocking his body to the left and swung it around to the spot where he wanted it. His knee had two huge surgery scars cut up the sides and the front of it was pocked, reddened and whiteish. He never wore shorts and one evening we had closed the store early and walked down to the pond to watch the sun go down.

My uncle and I sat there on the edge of the pond grabbing rocks from around us and throwing them in. Mine hit twenty or so feet from the shore, my uncle's went almost to the other edge of the pond. He half turned around, pulled his hand back far and hucked the rocks. Each time the motion was the same, graceful and powerful.

"My dad's going to be mad about the store, you know," I said.

"Tell him to take the time off of our checks. It'll probably save him some money. Nobody was in there." He took off his shoes and socks, rolled up his pants past his knee and stood up. "Come on, let's go in the pond."

I rolled my pants up and pulled off my shoes and socks too. The water was cold, the floor of the pond muddy. It sucked the life right back into my tired feet and the little weeds that flossed my toes, tickled.

"Here," my uncle said. "Here is an example of something that your dad and I never did. He was always too busy running the store and I was always playing baseball." He walked further out.
I stopped walking and turned back because I thought there were little animals in the mud that would start clinging to my feet. I walked out of the pond, right up on the grassy shore, and turned around to look at my uncle. His little body was still moving outward, the water beginning to touch the tops of his pants. Then he dove in. He began doing this jerky movement, his head bobbing, his arms popping outward. I ran back into the water and swam quickly out to him. I grabbed him by the arm and began to swim back to the shore. He was yelling something that I couldn't understand.

"What the hell'd you do that for?" he said, when I finally pulled him back on the grass. "I'm not much of a swimmer, but I can at least float."

I was breathing too quickly to blush. His legs were covered in weeds and my clothes were sopping wet.

In the morning Percy came downstairs and sat for a long time at the diningroom table. The sun shone in, making his back feel warm and making the paper, spread all over the table, hard to read. He got up and poured himself a cup of coffee and then returned, again feeling the warmth of the sun on his back. The feeling slowly crept up on him, he never had a chance to fight it back, the feeling that there were an infinite amount of decisions and choices that led him to the spot where he was sitting. He couldn't help but wonder whether he was being watched over by something or that it was just plain dumn luck.
The night was crisp and the sky extremely clear. The stars were bright and

She was the woman in the window of the department store that Percy walked by on his way to work one morning. He looked twice because she looked so lifelike, finally she smiled. He didn't see her for weeks after that but the smile stayed with him.

Then there was once on the bus when he thought she had gotten on. He was reading and then he looked up and there was the back of her head. It was her hair allright. Straight as anything he'd ever seen. Soft, so soft that it cascaded over itself in waves that she had to keep throwing back over her head.

Percy rang the bell and got up out of his seat to get off five stops too early just to see if it was her. His heart pounded, but it wasn't. He walked the rest of the way home making up little stories about her.

One morning on his way to the bus stop, there she was again, fixing the display in the window of the department store. She smiled again and he felt like he was being obvious. He walked around the corner and bought a couple of flowers from a man at a booth and returned to the window. Her back was turned and soon she stepped out of the display. Her hands parted the cloth backdrop and the last thing he saw disappear was her foot, a silver chain around her ankle.

He didn't know what to do. He was balding and stooped over and she was probably a college student working there for extra money. She was probably an art major with visions of grandure, art galleries, painting restoration, complex things that someone like
him would never understand. He propped the flowers against the
glass window and left. He caught his bus and went to work.

That night, standing outside of his apartment, Percy saw two
shooting stars. The first one was a small flash of light that might
have been missed had he not been looking at that very spot at that
very time. The second was a large streak, almost from horizon to
horizon. These, he felt, meant that something good was going to
happen.

It could be that Percy was the only one in the whole world who
saw the two shooting stars, but it was a question of infinite
possibilities. It might have been a sheephearder in a far off land,
sitting down on a rock who saw the shooting stars too. Someone
with different colored skin and a different culture. It might have
been a boy looking out of his window, a rich man riding in the back of
his car. These were questions that intrigued Percy but began to
cloud his brain.

He went to bed happy and awoke the next morning feeling simply
cleansed. Nothing different had happened to him, he had gone to bed
not too soon after eating his dinner, he had read a couple of pages in
his book and he had woken in the morning to the buzzing of his alarm.
Normally he would be feeling clostorphobic, the panic filled desire
for a change in his life. The shower would be moderately warm and
the day's work ahead seemed monumental. But this wasn't the case.

He woke feeling rested. He remembered his dream from the night
before and the soothing smells, the bright colors that were in it.
The shower was still only warm, but it was a warm that he didn't
mind because he only wanted to get out the door and to head for the window of the department store where she would surely be working.

He walked slowly and quickly at the same time. Every movement of his body was calculated, the swing of his arms, the steps. He glanced down at his tie several times, just to make sure the knot was centered correctly. The feeling that he was being watched was inescapable. It was a new feeling. He was the center of attention now and his head was far above his body. Scenarios raced through his mind: She would be there and he would wave. Soon she would be in his arms and soon he would forget about going to work and they would begin to spend the rest of their lives together.

She wasn't there. He stopped by the window to tie his shoe. Then his other shoe. Just in case she might be taking a break.

The stars that night were unusually bright. They were the basic ones and Percy thought about the many times he had been in the mountains at night and had seen thousands of stars. There were nights where he couldn't believe there could be anything else in the universe, things that he couldn't see on those nights. He couldn't really complain about the stars on that night, though. They were there, the sky was clear, but the others, ones that should be glistening inbetween the ones he could see, were surprisingly absent. Yet the sky was such a definitive blue that it left out the possibility of the thousands of other stars. It seemed funny how you could be tricked in that way.

Walking into his apartment, Percy realized that he had been a fool for thinking the shooting stars had meant what he thought they meant. They might have meant something good in the fact that he
didn't die that day, or that his life had sustained its mild happiness. The shooting stars might have meant that he would be allowed to afford food and an apartment for that much longer. Luck is a relative term.

On his way to the bus stop the next morning, there she was. She looked up at him through the front window and said something. He shook his head and put his hands in the air. His heart pounded deeply. She put out one hand to tell him to stop and pointed to the ground where his feet were. He looked down and could feel the swish and pulse of the blood through his neck and into his temples. She opened the front door, poked her head out and smiled again. That smile. "I just wanted to say thank you for the flowers," she said.

Percy didn't respond. Boy she is tall, he thought. "You did leave them, didn't you?" she said.

"Oh, yes I did," he said.

"Well thanks."

"Good." Percy bowed slightly. He didn't really understand why. "O.k. Well I've got to get going back to work," she said, moving her head inside the glass door slowly.

"Wait," Percy said. "Wait. I just wanted you to have them because you smiled at me."

"Oh."

"I mean your smile. Your smile stays with me."

"Well that's sweet. Maybe I'll see you again and I'll be sure and smile. Thanks again," she said.
"Oh sure," Percy said. He walked away feeling strangely stripped and still invigorated. He was agitated and bad feeling but he smiled the whole bus ride to work.

Ray takes a deep sigh. An impending sigh. A sigh of great proportions. He sits in his apartment doing an inventory, in his mind, of the things he owns. A car. A table with two chairs. A couch. A T.V. some kitchen stuff. These are things that his wife didn't file claim on. The car, too old. The rest of the stuff she must have forgotten about. Ray ages.

He wants to learn how to cook. He wants to learn how to make his own clothes. He wants to learn how to climb mountains. He wants to learn how to do woodworking. He sits in his apartment somehow waiting for the breath of life to swoop in through the half open windows and grab him by the throat.

Sometimes he gets the feeling that he is a candle, wax-anchored to the ground, burning slowly but surely. His mind is afire with hesitations. His muscles twitch with boredom.

When he was twelve through twenty-five things weren't different, but they were. His skin was newer, the presidents refreshing. He stepped off the plane of high school into college and off the plane of college into a teaching job and married, briefly. All the while the nagging contradictions, the lack of direction, focus and solidity. He never quite grew up and things never quite became as clear as they were supposed to become.

His wife certainly didn't seem, like she didn't know what she was doing. His friends never said that they were unsure of their plans in
life. But he felt it alright. He proclaimed one afternoon, it was July out, that he wasn't sure about anything anymore.

Well he should have left off the anymore. Because it is all a jumble of causes, feelings and opinions. Questions certainly aren't worth killing yourself over. But how do others deal with it?

Ray stepped off a plane for three years of his life after he quit his teaching job. He checked into motels and told companies that they wanted to buy supplies when they really didn't need them. It's ok, though. They are just companies. They aren't people, you're not tricking anyone out of their paycheck or anything.

But layoffs happened. Companies couldn't afford, first to pay Ray for the supplies, second their own employees, then it was Ray's company's turn. His wife was a nurse and she worked the second late shift or the first early shift. It depends how you look at it, she said. He got up late and looked at the paper, read the statistics, and wondered if he was responsible for anybody.

Ray takes the imaginary baseball bat and smashes it into the window. Glass shards fall all around, inside and out. Why do such a thing? he asks himself. Why not? It's only a window. A meaningless window. A box, filled with a substance that allows you to look out of but not be out of. It is only a thing that frames the world outside and brings the television images, the protected and neutral feelings, home.

Where was I at the age of eighteen, at my sexual prime? he asks. Oh, I was shy. Where was I when the sun was out and a friend had a convertable and there was a party on the beach, a cooler full of beer, a bonfire when it got dark? I was studying for the future. Where
was I when the lights went out along the eastern sea board and the children ran rampant for the night, a crazed howling night of pure blackness? I was at home, I had school.

Ray is up on his feet. Body movements take him by surprise sometimes. He finds himself at work in the morning. He finds himself walking to his car in the parking lot after the day is through. He finds himself digging through his wallet, looking at credit cards and his driver's licence, matching the description on the identification card with the way he feels.

The T.V. is off. A T.V.'s place is off. Something to do, a list: Cook dinner. Pour a drink. Call someone. Fight crime.

But what is the matter? There are people who do not have houses, who do not eat three meals a day, who do not have a job, who, it can go on forever. A practiced and worn speech that someone obviously gave and should receive credit for. We believe it, it is said. What about cheerleaders? Do they ever cry?

The Insinuation

The question took the form of a question. An implication, an insinuation. He didn't like it one bit. He was standing by the coffee machine talking to a lady friend who worked downstairs in Transcription when Jack said to Ralph, "Don't you think he is the sort of person who wraps old gifts he's received and then gives them away to others?" Sure, they could have meant someone else, but he was the type. He had recently given a copy of a dreadful book he'd bought, and tried to read, to his sister. The cover design was
perfectly inviting. The prose and the whole idea behind the novel was wretched.

It certainly could have been anyone that Jack and Ralph were talking about, but his ears pricked right up when he heard the insinuation. There were others, of course. His Aunt Jane, bless her aging heart, had sent him a tremendously thick biography of Winston Churchill last year. He had wrapped it up the very next day and taken it to a sick colleague who enjoyed it very much thank you. He even received a card six months later saying that the biography was certainly the most interesting thing the colleague had read in years.

The lady friend he was talking to at the time turned around to see what he was looking at. She smiled in confusion and then began talking again. He listened. There's certainly nothing wrong with doing that. Especially with books. They'll just sit on the shelves for years doing nothing but gathering dust. Why not give them to someone who would care? He did know, however, that his sister wasn't a big reader. Sure, she picked up the occasional thick novel with a thin plot, especially when riding on the airplane; but nothing with any serious merit. Giving her the book that was so atrocious was like giving candy to a person who's teeth are already rotting.

But it was spoken with such spite. Such spit in their voices. "He is the sort," they said, emphasizing the "sort." Like he was some sort of breed. A culturally malnourished goggle-eyed sloth. Sure, he did get drunk at the office Christmas party last year and spent the evening with Ruth from Accounts Receivable, but that was a different matter. She was lonely. He was lonely. It was Christmas. Still, he never once sold back a textbook used in college. No sir, they
still sat on the bookshelf when he went home once a month to visit his mother. He never gave her one of those recycled books. Well, just one. A detective story that seemed rather predictable within the first thirty or so pages. She did rave about it, though. "I won't tell you who did it in case you ever want to borrow it," she said.

The novel sent to his sister had a shimmering blue cover with the picture of a man standing next to an obviously hand colored pink Cadillac. He looked at the cover and then pulled it off the shelf. He read the inside cover, all the raving reviews. He read the back, a story about a man who hitchhikes into the lives of several people in a small Texas town. It sounded quaint. Samuel J. Potsinger. Probably a noted author, he said to himself, nodding as if he knew Sam. Just in case someone in the bookstore could read his body movements. But it was the cover that did it. He reached and grabbed because of the cover. It was one of those little personality quirks that he would take to the grave with him and nobody would know about. The covers are always judged first.

There was a narrowing of the eyes that he detected in Jack and Ralph. He didn't actually see it. But he felt it. There were people he sometimes watched in the art museums who stood and looked at a painting for twenty seconds. At that rate one could view an artist's entire life's work in the inside of an hour. He watched those people. The gum poppers. The droopy handbag carriers. The men in cloth shoes with rope soles. He watched those people and shook his head inside. Pittying them. Those were the types. Those were the people who he would suspect, not of giving books that they recieved away, but of not reading at all.
Surely he was raised in a manner that put him above such things. The childhood spent not in the streets playing kick the can with the other children but in his room gluing together small models. They were fighter-bombers, top rated, prized possessions hanging on fishing wire from his ceiling. The lady friend from Transcription walked over to the punch bowl to refresh her drink. She began talking to Henry Alderson the old man who worked down in the basement in the Mailroom. A man who spent forty years working in that basement and never once complained about the lack of sunshine. He had white jowels and he read through filthy magazines on his lunch hour. A permanent fixture in the mailroom, he moved infuriatingly slowly. The lady friend from Transcription continued to talk to Henry Alderson.

What on this earth could she find so interesting about slots in the wall, sorting envelopes, stamping packages? She was desirable, certainly worth having his heart race while thinking about sending her flowers. It was the damn insinuation. When she turned her head to see what he was looking at, she overheard Jack and Ralph. She realized slowly, while sipping her drink, that it was him that they were talking about. Yes. In fact he noticed her beginning to drink larger and larger gulps, anticipating the trip to the punch bowl and an escape from him. It was a frame job.

He spent months working on the models in his room. The sunshine poured in the window onto his desk and he feared that the glue wouldn't set correctly due to the warmth. Everything had to be perfect. The little stringy trailers of glue had, first to be broken off, then to be filed with high-grade sandpaper just to the point of
the joint where the plastic pieces fit together. There could be no scraping of the plastic and there could be no detectable flaws. His eyes ached one afternoon and a week later he had perscription glasses.

He was a nine year old four eyes. The small flaws in the models were friction points for the air as the planes travelled at supersonic speeds. They would burn up unless perfectly constructed. The others, playing outside in the street, kicking a dented and rusty coffee can, couldn't understand the jeopardy a pilot was placed in.

She stopped talking to Henry Alderson and then moved further away, weaving her way through the crowd. If only he had just told her. It couldn't have been more than a dozen books. They just sit on the shelf and gather up dust. The spines obviously uncracked. Why not give them to someone, someone who might read them and appreciate them? His sister never understood the models, she took them down from their fishing wire displays and ran through the house making a buzzing noise through her lips. She ran outside to kick the can with the Ralphs and the Jacks of the block. The book, an unsophisticated one, brought her joy in some way. He told her he'd gotten it especially for her, that he'd read good things about it. He was doing her a favor. Bringing light, be it dim light, to her mind.

The biography of Winston Churchill. Sure he could have read it, but there were other things to think about, other books to read. The lady friend from Transcription came back. Her hair was combed differently, the part on the side of the top of her head was better defined. "I went to the bathroom," she said. He smiled. There were three books on his shelf that he might consider giving to her. One
was a large book of the work of Picasso that he already had a copy of. Another was a vegetarian cookbook that he'd bought on sale but never opened. The third was a novel with a busy wild cover showing a dog howling at what looked like a large satellite. Jack and Ralph were still talking, Jack's hands occasionally flew into the air. Jack said to Ralph, "Yes, but I do think his office is too big for the amount of work he does." Too big? He'd been at the firm ten years longer.

Well, the most recent development in my life is the movement of time.

The other day I took some time out from my life to go for a walk in the park.

Wise men

Come to think of it I have a deathly fear of many things. The occasional cough that could be the warning signs of cancer. I sit in airplanes and think about what they will say when the plane crashes. I will be a hero, I will sacrifice my life trying to get others out of the smoky hull, pointing down at the little blue lights in the aisle that lead the way to the exit.

My wife and I have separated. For the good of the children. One's seven, and one's ten. A girl and a boy. I'm not too keen on the idea, but I do understand that occasionally one has to give in on things in order to make it all work.

He remained in his mother's house after the funeral. He sat in the overstuffed arm-chair after the post burial excited runaround had
died down, and soaked in the long cold days without a sound. He tip-toed around the house in his socks and examined the little momentoes that were his youth, frozen from the old house and moved into the newer, smaller house that was to be her final one.

Blair

In the fourth month of our life together Blair found a little lump on her breast and after her mastectomy we found ourselves in the backyard of our then house having a little funeral for her bra. I remember the moment as a deep quiet time, Blair shovelling dirt onto the little frilly thing, smiling and saying goodbye. Standing a foot or two behind her I couldn't help thinking about our morbid salute to the seventies bra burnings, all the while Blair set to rest her sexuality.

They thought they had gotten it all which was for our purposes a relief, something we thought was the primary concern. We shook our heads and thanked our lucky stars that things had turned out positive for us because in the end, for better or for worse, this is just the sort of tragedy you'd read about happening to a young couple newlyweds. Still, creeping around a corner accidentally in my socks, I'd catch her glancing at herself in a mirror. I'd see, just for a brief moment, her twisting herself on her spine axis, shoulders back, examining herself. Her eyes moving up and down her body.

She didn't want to have it reconstructed which was alright with me because after all I had her, didn't I? I didn't need anything else at that time and my visions of making love after the children went
off to school, just before we went to work, one last special moment, were still there, they were just a little lopsided. Of course we didn’t have children at that time, they weren’t in our immediate plans, but they floated around in the back of our minds like all specific life dreams tend to do. We mentioned them in passing, talking but not planning, thinking and exploring the idea. We said things like, ‘someday our kids will’ or ‘I want my kids to’ or ‘we can take our children there.’ They were simple plans, made to be broken and reinvented.

And in that backyard burying her bra I remembered seeing the geese flying overhead, sweeping autumn north to south, pulling winter with them. I noticed her eyes that night looked like the stones in mood rings and I thought to myself that I had better prepare myself for winter. I knew the days were going to be getting shorter and shorter and before we knew it we were going to be coming home after work in the dark. But I also knew that sure enough winter always grinds slowly to a halt, the snow turns to rain and the sun sweeps away the chill.

I’m not saying that any one or two things add up to a sort of life’s experience but it was those moments that told me to beware. Four months of extasy cannot play itself out for the rest of our lives and we should prepare ourselves for that. I opened my eyes one morning and saw her not staring at me but staring through me. I began to have that feeling of uncomfortability and loss which made me want to take long showers and spend more time washing the dishes.

C.F.

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Of the two boys sitting on the wall we look at the taller one. He has a long face and spindly fingers. Cystic fibrosis, I say, he'll be dead before he reaches twenty. What a shame, we say together. But the moment passes.

In the blink of an eye I reached the age of twenty. It seemed like I was just created that way. Now, sometimes, I sit on the wall, with my hands in my lap, watching. I have a deathly fear of boredom. The boy's name might be Michael and he might be twelve. At any rate, he sits there twiddling his thumbs turning a small imaginary ring around and around with just the tips of his thumbs, as if the ring is attached by a belt to a cog which runs a fly-wheel that is attached to a weighted lever that bobs up and down cranking up the weights of time. He doesn't know this, of course. His eyes dart back and forth, up and around, taking in the scene.

The scene is a pickup basketball game moving from one end of the court to the other. The men have taken off their shirts and one, the guy in the yellow shorts, pointed to his watch and said, I have to go at one thirty so we'll play until then. Up and down, up and down the court. Rebound, shot, rebound, shot. We stand on the other side of the court, in the grass, our dog roots around somewhere by the fence, right under the sign that says No dogs on school property.

Basketball is a measured game. In college ball there are two twenty minute halves and five minutes of overtime, in the event of a tie. The boy on the wall is in a basketball game. He is now playing in the second half. Twenty minutes left. He would rather be hitting
at a baseball game, no time limit. The game is played out until it has reached its natural end.

The other boy is me, shorter and plumper, round face, round glasses. He looks carefully at the shots taken, the action precise. His hands are turned inward on his thighs, he is leaning over, squinting at the game. Saturday's the wonderfullest day, he would say, the clock is unhooked, its hands stand still. They point to three-twenty when school ended on Friday and start up again at seven forty-five Monday morning.

He is assembly-line machined perfectly boyish. His bones are first molded and then placed carefully together, glued with muscle and tendon. Skin is sculpted around the bones, muscle and tendons by anonymous arms of technicians who have to punch in every morning and punch out every evening. They are paid well and receive many benefits, full health insurance. They wear surgical masks and tight-fitted rubber gloves so that the product is always successful.

I blink my eyes rapidly, the basketball action stops and starts. Freeze-framed black and white movies, the old sixteen milimeters of my grandfather when he was young, visiting Yellowstone. The action was unnaturally fast, he waved to the camera, put his hand on the wall and pointed to Old Faithful. Old Faithful isn't quite as faithful, they say. It's slowly running out of steam as my grandfather finally did.

He had tight brows and black as night hawk eyes that moved under the horizon of his eyelids. Watching, always watching. Even in the end, when he could no longer speak clearly, he sat in his armchair during the day and his eye landed on my every action.
I clap to the dog and whistle. The whistle is seven sharp blasts from my lips. The dog knows it's me. He looks up. He charges toward me, working up to a sprint, tearing toward me. He cuts wide and circles my legs. This is a game that dogs play. They make you think that they are going to crash right into your legs and then cut at the last second. It's an athletic move, a beat your defender and drive to the basket type move.

Fictional Love Story

A fictional love affair, he says.

They are both in grad school, I'm not quite sure what for, yet, but it is coming to me.

She's an English student. He's studying to take the bar, he says. The other way around, she says.

She is going to the law school at the university and he is an English student.

She was in line one morning at the bagel shop across from campus. She wanted an egg bagel and a small coffee.

Actually she wanted a large, but didn't have the money. She was tired and hungry and wanted to cure them both with the dollar fifty she had in her pocket, she says.

Ok, she was in line early one morning at the bagel shop across from campus. She counted out the change in her hand and figured on getting a small coffee instead and a bagel without cream cheese.

Does she have a name? she says.
Probably, I just don't know right now, he says.

He was walking by the bagel shop at about this time in the morning and he watched her come out of the doorway eating the bagel and sipping the coffee. He followed her for a few steps and then lost himself in confusion.

This sounds a bit familiar, she says.

**Fireflies**

It was the spring of our life together and we sat on the porch-swing watching the love-beams of the fireflies flickering on and off. Those are the males, I told her, pulling her tighter to my side. They do that to find the females who have no wings and crawl along the
ground, the females then answer with a flash. She looked out in awe, as anyone in love will do when faced with the natural world's example of the feelings held inside.

Her name was Sophie. A sophisticated name for someone with such a thin, delicate face. Sophia. Sophia, Greek-Goddess strength in a name that rolls off the tongue like a strong warm summer's wind. I was in love, that day, I think. I breathed in the perfection of the calm between us. Being there, together, not talking, not looking but knowing her presence. I might have been younger the day before. I might have been in love the day before. But on that swing, after the sun set, I felt the love of a thousand years.

It's not the love that's so painful but the thought of losing the love. One wonders whether it's ever worth it, to subscribe to the joy with the understanding that at some point it might be gone. The little gifts, the moments shared might sour and turn back on us, tearing at the heart as memories of something lost. It is a thought, though, crossing the mind every once in a while. I put it out of my mind, snuffing the candle of caution with the whisper of her name in her ear as we sat on the porch-swing looking out at the fireflies in the spring of our togetherness.

I did things, now that I think about it, that made her like me. I smiled a lot and told her interesting and romantic things. I climbed to the top of trees and called down to her. Repunzle, Repunzle, throw up your hair. We walked, oh we walked, and all the time I just wanted to hold her in my arms. Kissing her. I wanted to support myself above her, hold on to her, be with her. And she was supposed
to run to me and hold me. She was supposed to draw me out and make me whole.

We got up from the porch-swing and went our separate ways. I went inside the house to do some reading. She went home to feed the cat. The moment separation is felt there is a need to walk backward, right to the spot where you left, and again the final embrace. And again. In the separation I felt the embrace, I wanted the embrace back. This is what I remember. This was a sign and I didn't know it at the time. I know now, the embrace, but I didn't then.

The fireflies still danced above the grass and we walked, hand in hand to the park. At night, lying in my bed, alone, the covers pulled over my feet so they could breathe, I thought about her. I wanted to wake her up in the wee hours, to stop by before work.

Harley

Even The Grim Reaper Comparison Shops or Emotional Negotiations

There is a spot right in front of the restaurant but it is a parallel parking spot so Harley drives on. Three blocks down he finds an end spot not fifteen feet from a fire hydrant. The spot is easy to get into and, barring a fire, will be easy to get out of. He is fifteen minutes late for his date, which doesn't surprise Marge who is looking at her watch and has had two scotches.

Harley walks into the restaurant with his usual feet too big walk. His knees come up and he leans slightly forward. Marge sees him
out of the corner of her eye but doesn't turn her head. Will I act pissed or surprised and happy? she asks herself.

"How's Tricks?" Harley says.

"What?" Marge turns her head slowly, catlike. "Oh it's you."

"Hey, sorry to disappoint you. I though I was meeting someone else here, I guess," Harley says.

"Nice. Sit down," Marge smiles, her eyes fall to cracks. "You parked..." She closes her eyes and places her hands out over the middle of the table. "You parked... I sense many miles travelled, perhaps a bus. You parked in Cleveland," she says.

"Wow, you don't even have a map in front of you. How did you know madame? Please please tell me my fortune?" Harley is smiling his thin boney smile.

Marge picks up her spoon and turns it so the round side faces her. "I see in my crystal ball a bitter end for this current relationship."

Harley sits in Marge's kitchen at the little formica topped table that sits against the wall. He looks through the want ads of the paper and yells to Marge who is in the bathroom. She is pulling the bottom of her eyelid down and trying to see the contact lense that she thinks has slipped down under her eye.

"Last night when I was watching the firemen put out the fire I discovered I love you. I wasn't so sure up until then, but I am now," Harley says.

Marge finds her contact lense and pushes on the bottom side of her eye to make it pop to the front. "God," she says, walking out of the bathroom toward the kitchen. "This has only happened to me a
couple of times. There it is and the next second I blink and everything is blurry. I'm not sure whether it has fallen out or what."

"What time is it?" Harley says. "We probably should think about going."

"I suppose you're right. The appointment is at one and it will take a half hour to get there probably."

Later, in the car on the way home from Harley's appointment with his insurance agent, who said it would not be covered, and the body shop man, who said that it would cost around one thousand dollars to sand and repaint the car, Marge says to Harley, "You're wrong you know. You didn't watch them put out the fire. You sat there watching the red hot embers fall onto your car and you decided you loved me because you knew that I was the type who would take a day off from work so that you could have your car repainted."

"Think of this as a vacation," Harley says.

"It's not. It's more time that I have to make up later this month."

"It's more time that we get to spend together," Harley says. The car is slowing gently because there is a stoplight ahead that has just turned red.

"Why oh why do you love me," Marge says when the car is finally stopped. She's looking at the light overhead and in front of them. "I abuse."

"Your dog died when you were twelve. You told me so yourself. You mother died when you were seventeen," Harley says.

"Go figure," Marge says. The light turns green but she doesn't step on the gas.
It is the afternoon and Harley is sitting at the kitchen table looking at the want ads again. Marge is lying on the sofa, her eyes three quarters of the way shut. "Marge we don't talk anymore."

"I don't want to talk," she says.

"I'm thinking of having the car painted Denver Bronco's orange and blue for you and I can't even tell you that. It's your favorite team you know."

"I do know, but I'm tired. I work and all you do is laze around all day. I come home, hoping to have a nice quiet evening and find that you have let yourself into the apartment."

"You gave me the key yourself. Do you want me to go?"

"Yes. No. Yes I want you to go. Go home and call me to find out if you can come over," Marge says. She puts her arm over her forehead.

"I don't have a car. Can you give me a ride?"

"Walk," she says.

Harley calls Marge. "I'm home. I walked for half an hour and then some guy picked me up and drove most of the rest of the way home."

"Good."

"Can I come over now?" Harley says.

"Harley, no you can't come over. You just left."

"But I love you and I want to be with you," Harley says.

"Give me one good thing that you love about me," Marge says.

"Your smile."

"Not good enough."

"Your sense of humor," Harley says.

"I don't make you laugh I only make you unhappy."

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"Your hair."
"You love my hair Harley?"
"Of course I do."

"Harley I don't understand what it is. This whole thing scares me. You are a man who doesn't have a job because you can afford not to have one. You are a man who at the age of thirty-one still cannot make left turns."

"I grew up in the city. I didn't get my licence until I was twenty-five you know. I'm getting the car painted Denver Bronco's orange and blue whether you like it or not." Harley hangs up the phone.

Harley II

Even The Grim Reaper Comparison Shops

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"I'm thinking of having the car painted Denver Bronco's orange and blue for you and I can't even tell you that. It's your favorite team you know."

"I do know, but I'm tired. I work and all you do is laze around all day. I come home, hoping to have a nice quiet evening and find that you have let yourself into the apartment."

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"You love my hair Harley?"

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"I grew up in the city. I didn't get my licence until I was twenty-five you know. I'm getting the car painted Denver Bronco's orange and blue whether you like it or not." Harley hangs up the phone.

Marge leaves work and drives home. In front of her apartment is a car painted one half bright orange and the other half bright blue. She smiles and sighs, hoping that he isn't in her apartment looking through the refrigerator. The whole thought of him always facing her when she is driving him places, the way he smiles at her even though she won't return the smile gives her this boxed in feeling. One finger, she thinks. We'll have a sign where I raise my first finger like this and he won't say another word, he'll just drop everything and go away. That is the way it will have to be.

The card on the windshield says: See, I really did it. I know what you are thinking and I am not in your apartment. I walked home. In your mailbox is a set of keys. The square one is the ignition and the oval one is for the trunk. The other one is the copy of your door key that you gave to me. Love Harley.

"I have an idea

Husband

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At the center of the conversation is a story about his mother. She was a tall woman with a severe square face. She pulled on his ear for what seemed like an eternity, as they walked along the boardwalk on a family vacation. She had to bend over to do it. He was crying because it was the last day of their vacation and it was raining in sheets. "Son," she said, in her deep, strong voice, "you must find the beauty in the rain or else you will live a life of disappointment." The story finished, his wife looks from face to face, empty, plugging into the smiles. The faces are filled with wonderment, an occasional head shakes slowly, drinking it all in. He sits back in his chair and then holds his wine glass into the air. "To my mother," he says. "To your mother," they all echo.

His wife gets up to prepare the next course. He follows. The doors to the kitchen swing shut behind him, she is at the sink washing lettuce.

"When will you remember that you were an orphan?" she says.
"It was just a story," he says.
"It was a lie."
"They won't even remember it by the time we serve dessert."
"Stop it," she says, handing him a bowl of salad.

Later, sipping on coffee, he begins to tell of the bright summer evenings when his father came home from the office and played football with him, still dressed in his suit. His father's cotton slacks were green in the knees by the end, and his mother yelled at them both, trying hard to surpress a smile. He looks sadly down at the table, slowly shaking his head. Others follow his cue. One woman softly sighs. His wife looks hard at the table. His wife
swallows and gets up. "Why don't we all go into the livingroom now?" she says. The guests gradually rise.

These are friends, dear dear friends, she says to herself in the bathroom, over and over again. Soon they hold hands and smile exhaustedly to the last of the guests filing out of the front door, snap off the porch light and close the front door. He turns to her and says, "I'm sorry. What was your name again? I know I've been introduced to you before."

"Janet." She smiles.

"Janet, if I may say this without sounding too forward. You have the most beautiful eyes I have ever seen." He puts the backs of his fingers on her cheeks and then kisses her lightly on the lips.

"What did you say your name was?" she says.

"George," he says. "I'm descended from the royal family in Britain." Her back tingles. "Stop it. Stop it, George. Please stop it. Please," she says.

"I mean it about the eyes," he says.

"Ask me how my day was. Just ask me," Janet says.

"How was your day?"

"Don't introduce yourself to me. Don't tell me that I look like your sister. Just ask me how my day was."

"How was your day?"

"Fine. Do you want to help me clean up now?" Janet says.

She turns around. She walks into the diningroom. She collects the plates, piling the silverware on the top plate. George puts his hands in his pockets and walks around the table toward her. He stops. He leans over and peeks out the window she has her back to,
parting the curtain with his hand. He puts his hand back in his pocket and walks slowly around the table the other way.

She takes the stack of dishes into the kitchen and sets them down by the sink. She rinses the top one. She rinses the next one. She rinses the third one. George walks into the kitchen, his hands still in his pockets. He opens the refrigerator and looks in it. He shakes his head and closes the refrigerator.

"I just do it," George says.

Janet puts down the dish in her hand and walks through the doors to the diningroom table. She removes the candlesticks. She stacks empty coffee cups.

"I don't mean anything by it," George says from the kitchen.

She stacks cake plates. "Why don't you hold me late at night anymore?" she says.

"I do," he says. "You just don't feel it." George holds open the doors between the two rooms.

"We're dying, you know," she says.

"Why can't we meet again? Why can't you be sitting in the window of some coffee shop and I walk by and see you? I walk into the coffee shop and we start to talk. You could be reading a book that we can discuss."

"George, we've been meeting every single day for fifteen years."


"We don't talk."

"I'll tell you that I wrote it."

"And I'll say that you are lying to me." Janet walks toward the living room.
"Janet," George says. He walks into the dining room and looks out the window, into the backyard. There would be a swing set that he built with his hands if they had kids. He would have put it near the back, between the oak and the fence.

Janet is upstairs with her back to the door when George comes into the room.

"Janet, I don't know what to say," George says.

"That's enough. That's perfect," she says, turning around.

"I feel like a little boy. I feel naked."

"You are." She faces him with her school teacher eyes.

The bed is wide enough so they sleep without touching. George crosses and uncrosses his arms during the night. He dreams of movies, of leading men. He dreams of plots foiled and secret codes that open safes. Janet dreams of one of her students. A tall boy who folds himself awkwardly into his fixed desk and chair. The boy comes into class crying for some reason but crosses his hands and shakes his head when she asks why.

When daylight has approached and he knows that his sleep cannot last much longer, George dreams of sitting down, reading the paper. He holds the paper folded out completely in front of his face. He reads calmly. The edges of the paper are slightly red and he knows that in front of him a fire rages, a calm fire, but a deadly fire. He knows this, but he can't confirm it because he will not remove the paper. When he wakes he wonders whether he wouldn't remove the paper for fear of seeing the fire or whether he wouldn't remove the paper because the fire was already confirmed in his head.

Janet is awake.
"Believe me," George says, "this is the only thing that will save us." George gets out of bed and puts on his robe. "All I have is this stupid mind."

"No George. You know that's not true."

"And you shouldn't fault me for it. But I'll stop the games," he says.

"George."

"If it will save us. We meet again and we start all over."

"We will still be lying to ourselves," she says.

"This time it will be the truth," he says.

**Metaphor**

Once, not too long ago, there was a large boat that had many different kinds of people on it. The boat travelled the oceans, by the most exotic islands. Some of the islands had large red trees, some had animals with multicolored coats. Some of the islands had volcanoes that erupted periodically and sent hot red rivers of lava flowing down steaming to the shore. As the boat travelled past these islands only certain people could see over its sides. The boat had enormous sides.

There were people on the boat who got to see over the sides. They would stand on the shoulders of others, peering over, pointing at the magnificent sights to be seen. They were people who would help their children up on the shoulders of others and show their children
the sights of the world. "Oh my," the children would say, "look at those bright pink animals, look at that deep red sunrise."

The people who's shoulders were being stood on would look up at the people looking over the sides and say, "But we would like to see too."

The people looking over the sides of the boat would look down to the people who's shoulders they were standing on and they would say, "But you have only recently been allowed up on the deck by your own will. Please be thankful for that and do not demand more. If you really want to be peering over the side of this boat, looking at the beautiful sights, you will."

There were people who said that their shoulders were tired and their backs had begun to ache. They said that it was possible to share the ability to see over the side and share holding the people up. In this way it would be possible for everyone to see over the sides. They were hated and feared by the people looking over the sides and they were loved by those who were not able to see. One by one these people were killed. Things fell from above and smashed their skulls in, winches, ropes, pieces of the boat itself. "It must be a privilege to see over the sides of the boat," they were told, "otherwise the sights would become boring and they would lose their beauty." There was no change. People died and people were born.

Sometimes it would happen that someone who was on the top would end up on the bottom and someone on the bottom would end up on the top. That person would look out at the blue blue water and say, "My oh my, how beautiful it really is. I wish I could have seen
this sooner." The others would look at that person and they would cry foul.

"But that is not fair. You are treating the person who's shoulderson as they had treated you. That is not fair at all." They would turn their back and tell that person that they were selfish and bad until the person thought it was true. Eventually the person would find it simpler to return to being on the bottom level.

At night, when there were no sights to be seen, the people who could see over the sides of the boat would tell stories to the whole boat. Most of the stories went like this:

There was a good man who could not see over the sides of the boat. He was a really good man who had a nice family that he took care of. Bad men took his family away from him and beat him up. He looked at the bad men and said to himself, "I am good. I deserve to be looking over the sides of the boat and I deserve to have my family at my side. Those bad men who took my family away from me have very wide shoulders and very strong backs. I will get my family back from them and I will stand on their shoulders as punishment for their taking my family away." So he did.

Many times, after the stories were told, the children would gather and talk. They would say, "My parents' shoulders are being stood on and so that must mean that my parents are bad. That must mean that I am a bad person too, for it is my destiny to have someone standing on my shoulders too."
Other times the people who could see over the sides would say, "See, it is us who can appreciate the reds and oranges of the sunsets, the orange spattered leaves on the islands they passed. We must be smarter because it is us who are allotted this privilege. Those below us have big strong backs and calloused hands, they would not be able to completely understand how beautiful it is over the sides of this boat."

This went on for many many years until it was believed that there were certain people who should see over the sides of the boat and certain people who should not. People who's shoulders were being stood on would kneel down to their children and point toward the sky, way above the mast. They would say, "See child, the beautiful clouds and the glorious sky. Be thankful that you can see something. Try and work hard, be good and be careful so that someday, when I am long since passed, you might be able to see over the sides as others do too. Until then, when you feel frustrated and sad, always look to the clouds above and feel thankful that there is something for you to see."

The people who could see over the sides would kneel down to their children and say, "Child, look at those purple animals on that island. Isn't this wonderful? We have worked very hard for the privilege of looking at those islands and I want you to realize this. Be careful to not let those who do not deserve it to see over the sides of this boat. It is a special view and only those who work hard should be able to enjoy it."

And so it went for generation after generation, around and around the world. All the islands were viewed and marvelled at. People
were born and people died. One day there was a person who could not see over the side of the boat who yelled very loudly. The person said, "Hey, I have lived for my entire life here with someone's feet on my shoulder. I am tired and I want to see over the sides of the boat too."

The people who could see shouted down, "That can't be allowed. We have worked very hard and this is our reward. You have done nothing but stand there holding someone up."

The person yelled back, "But that should be enough. I have stayed here for my entire life looking up and only seeing a bit of the sky. I would like to see more."

The people who could see were very angry. They said, "You must content yourself with that. If you have worked hard enough then you will be rewarded by being able to see over the side of the boat."

The person was mad and yelled back, "But don't you understand? You pull up your children and allow them to stand on my children's shoulders. My children grow up and then it happens again. That isn't right."

"Oh yes it is right," the people who could see shouted back. "We work hard, very hard so that our children can see too. It is only fair. Until you are determined to work hard you will never be allowed to see. Now stay where you are, with someone's feet on your shoulder, so that we can see over the sides of this boat."

The person was sad and mad at the same time. Everybody was. That night after the story was told, the person yelled again. "Hey, your story said that it is the bad people who have to stand
underneath the people who can see over the sides, but I am not a bad person. I was born this way. How can this be?"

One of the storytellers replied, "Our story doesn't imply that all people who hold us up are bad, just that some of them are. It is a good lesson."

The person replied, "But I ask my children if they are bad and they say, 'yes, I must be bad for I am holding someone else up, aren't I'"

The storytellers said, "You must tell them that it is only a story."

People awoke that morning and stood where they were supposed to, all except the one person. "I cannot hold anyone up today for during the night I slept wrong and my back seems to have an ache in it. I will walk around the deck today in hopes that it might become better tomorrow."

But the people who could see were mad. "No, that isn't allowed according to the rules. You will either stand at your position or you will have to be tied to the mast," they said.

The person said, "The mast is hard and it will hurt my back even worse. I might be disabled for life. No thank you, I would rather walk around on deck."

The person was tied to the mast anyway. All day the boat sailed from island to island and the people were happy at the sights. The sun warmed their faces and they saw birds colored like the rainbow. Everyone who could see had forgotten about the person tied to the mast except one, the person who was not being held up by the person tied to the mast. That person said, "This is not fair. I have missed out on a days worth of sights and it is not my fault. I am a hard worker and I do not deserve this."
The person tied to the mast said, "I have been thinking here on this mast and I have come to a solution. We will cut the sides of this boat down until everyone can see. Then everyone will be happy."

People began to murmur and to talk. Soon the people who could see said, "No, that is not acceptable. We deserve the ability to see over the sides of the boat because we have worked hard for it. You have not done a thing and so you deserve nothing. That is the way it shall be."

The person tied to the mast heard this and was very sad. "My proposal was a good one. It would have made everyone happy without making anyone sad. I wonder if this backache is contagious? I'll bet it is."

The next day there were three people tied to the mast and three people who could not see over the sides of the boat. The day after that there were ten. The people who could see were getting angry and so they said, "Stop this immediately. We cannot have the sides of the boat cut down and so you must stop making these terrible demands. Tomorrow, backache or not, you will stand at your position or we will be forced to kill you."

The next morning the person said, "Last night I couldn't sleep thinking about your threat and I came to the conclusion that my life would be meaningless if I was not allowed to see over the sides of the boat. I know that it is possible for all of us to see over the sides and so it is not right for only a few to be allowed this privilege. I can not, with good conscience, go back to my position. You may kill me but it is my hope that someday we will all be allowed to see over the sides of this great boat."
The person was then killed and the people who could see said, "Let this be a lesson to all of you. This is a boat and boats have rules. We cannot have the rules stripped and ignored for selfish purposes."

"I do not think it is selfish," someone said. "I don't either," someone else said. "Me neither," someone else said. "Let's stand in our position and rock this boat until it turns over," someone said. "Let's rock this boat because it would be better to have no boat at all then one where some people cannot see over the sides," someone else said. Soon the boat began to rock.

The people who could not see swayed with their feet, their hips, and their heads. Children jumped up and down and the boat rocked. Back and forth. The water crashed on the sides. The mast creaked. The boat groaned. Up and down, there was turmoil but the sky remained calm. The boat rocked more, and soon the people who could not see got glimpses of bright orange trees in purple sands on jagged islands. They saw this and began to rock the boat even harder, soon the boat began to take on water and people began to fall off of the shoulders. With the boat taking on more and more water the people who could see were frightened and let go of their handholds. They all fell down and landed hard on the deck. "See what you have done. You have ruined it for all of us," they said. "Now nobody can see and we are passing by some extraordinary island."

"But don't you understand?" the people who had rocked the boat said. "Now you realize how we have felt these many years. We must first cut the sides of the boat down so that it will be easier to save our boat from the water, then we can all enjoy the view."
Some of the people who had fallen began to cry. "We worked so hard for what we had," they said.

"Now work hard so we can all have," the people who had rocked the boat said.

First it was the children who began pounding at the nails that held the sides tight. Soon everyone began to help. Finally, saws were used to make the sides just the right height, high enough so that nobody would fall overboard but low enough so that even the smallest child could see over the sides. Then they began to scoop the water from the bottom of the boat and pour it over the sides.

Smart People Doing Stupid Things

Introducing Harriet, her husband Semus, and Will, her brother. All free-floating independently through this time and space.

The Psychiatrist

"I just keep hearing these voices when I am just about to fall asleep," Harriet says.

"Maybe you should see someone," Semus says.

"No. Too something. They're perfectly harmless."

"Do they say anything?"

"Yes they call out women's names. I can never make out the names but I know they are women's names," Harriet says.

"Are they women's voices?" Semus says.
"Of course."

The Restaurant

"Do these voices sound real, like someone is standing over you and talking, or are they clearly inside of your head?" Will says, into the phone.

"I hear them and it is like they are right outside the room. I even hear the echo in the hallway," Harriet says.

"Do you hear footsteps?"

"I don't know."

"Well check. It might be a clue," Will says.

"So, outside of your constantly worrying that I'm going out of my mind, what is new with you?" Harriet says.

"I've been going to a coming out club every Monday night at this restaurant downtown. What do you think of that?"

"Sounds pretty nice. What do you do there?"

"We shoot the shit," Will says.

Digestion

"I highly doubt that your brother's a debutante," Semus says.

"He said it, not me," Harriet says.

"Did he say anything about it?"

"No. I changed the subject and then hung up soon after."

"He's easing into it. He'll tell you flat out soon enough," Semus says.
"I'm not so sure I want to know," Harriet says.

Negotiations

"I hinted at it. I've always hinted at it," Will says into the phone.
"I know you have and I've always suspected it," Semus says.
"She doesn't get it, does she?"
"She hears voices for Christ's sake. We'll be lying there just sort of diving into that first, you know, sleep. The one where you feel like you are awake but then dreamy thoughts start coming into your head. All of a sudden she'll be sitting bolt upright looking around."
"She should see someone. I do. It makes a marvel of a difference," Will says.
"Well I don't know about that. I think that you have to tell her," Semus says.

Confessions

"Guess what?" Harriet says.
"Lady, I'm trying to read my book," the man next to her says.
"Just guess."
"You just won the lottery."
"No."
"You just got fired."
"No."
"You were supposed to get off two stops ago."
"No."
"What? What? What then? I'm not a goddamned clairvoyant," the man next to her says.

"My brother is gay," Harriet says.

"Is that all? We sit here for half an hour playing Jeopardy and that is all you have to say?"

"Also I hear women's voices when I'm going to sleep."

The Library

"Three things," Semus says.

"Good or bad?" Harriet says

"You tell me. One, I leave the office for thirty minutes to go to the library and return some books. Two, the books are overdue, obviously, and the librarian tells me to give him fifteen dollars in fines. Three, I get back to the office, not thirty minutes later, and Harley tells me that he has to write me up for leaving without notice."

"What does that mean?"

"Which number?" Semus says.

"Three," Harriet says.

"It means that I only have two more strikes and then I'm out. I've been with the company for five years. A spotless record."

"How about number two?"

"Just books. I asked the librarian to cut me a little slack and he just said no. If you can't get the library to be kind, who can you?" Semus says.

"What were the books about?" Harriet says.
"They were books. Books. I don't even remember what they were all about."

"One, you shouldn't worry about being written up. At this rate you'll be there another ten years before you finally get fired. That's a long time, you know. Two, they stamp the due date on the little card stuck to the inside of the cover so that you'll see it every time you open up the book."

Under Cover

"Hello there. My husband, Semus Brown, returned some library books yesterday. I'm wondering if you could tell me what they were," Harriet says, into the phone.

"I don't know. Just out of curiosity, why do you want to know?" the librarian says.

"Why do I want to know? Well. I had some books that I'm now missing."

"And."

"And. And I just want to know if those were them," Harriet says.

"Well they could be. How about you tell me what books you were looking for," the librarian says.

"So, in other words, you're going to be difficult about this."

"How am I supposed to tell that you really are his wife? You could be a sicko. I'm sure there is library policy about this."

"Well the books I'm looking for are books about homosexuality," Harriet says.

"Nope," the librarian says.

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"And books about the supernatural."

"Nope."

"And Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man," Harriet says.

Another Chance

"Will called again today. The message is on the machine," Semus says.

"I heard it," Harriet says.

"Well then. Why haven't you called him back? This is the second day he's called."

"I know what he's going to say and I don't want to hear it."

"What exactly don't you want to hear?" Semus says.

"This isn't a fucking quiz show," Harriet says.

"When you were twelve and he was ten he got into a fight with a bunch of bigger kids at school."

"So?"

"You jumped in and pulled him off the big kids. You had to get ten stitches in the side of your chin. Don't tell me that every time you look in a mirror you don't think of that day," Semus says.

"I think about how it would have been smarter to let Will get beat up. Less pain on my side," Harriet says.

"Baloney. You loved him and wanted to protect him."

"He was always a thin boy."

Pleading

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"The machine isn't broken," Will says into the phone.
"Nope, I heard the messages myself," Semus says.
"Well then why doesn't she call?"
"I think we both know the answer to that one."

Possibilities

"I think that's Will's voice on the machine," Harriet says.
"And all it says is 'five.' That seems oddly strange," Semus says.
"'Five,' that's it. Puzzling, isn't it?"
"Yes. It could be a crank."
"It's not. I assure you," Harriet says.
"Guess what happened at work today?" Semus says.
"You got written up again."
"No, but close. Harley wrote up Timothy Weld and Nancy Climer. The man is a madman. Something has definitely come over him."
"Maybe he's having trouble at home. Maybe it's something personal," Harriet says.
"Maybe he needs to mellow out," Semus says.

Another Possibility

"Guess what the voice said today?" Harriet says.
"I just walked in the door. Can it wait until my shoes are off?" Semus says.
"'Four.' That's it. He said, 'four.'"
"We definitely have a trend going. Don't we?"
"Yes," Harriet says.

"Tell me, do you believe these voices in your head are real? Do you think that they are ghosts or something?" Semus says.

"Yes. I mean I hear them and I wouldn't be surprised if they were something strange."

"Like what?"

"Like a child who died in this house. Or a mother or something," Harriet says.

"Hmm," Semus says.

"What's that look for?"

"Oh it's just a look that says it seems strange that you believe in things that seem impossible but you can't seem to believe in things that are likely."

"What are you getting at?" Harriet says.

"Will. You figure it out," Semus says.

Games

"I'm going to spell out a word and I want you to say it outloud," Semus says.

"The anonymous number of the day was 'three,'" Harriet says.

"G-A-Y."

"This isn't a matter for games."

"Precicely. Say it," Semus says.

"I don't want to. I don't want to play silly games," Harriet says.

"You don't want to admit it."

"That's not it at all."
"Then what is it?" Semus says.

"I don't know. I just don't like the idea of it," Harriet says.

"The idea of what?"

"Stop it."

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**More Games**

"Guess what number he said today," Harriet says.

"I'm going to go with 'two.' Am I right? Do I win a million dollars?" Semus says.

"Yes, and a trip to the moon."

"Well maybe you should call him and talk to him. Find out what the whole number thing is all about."

"How am I supposed to be sure it's him? It could be anyone, a crank," Harriet says.

"Go out on a limb. Live on the edge. When was the last time you spoke to him, anyway?" Semus says.

"Not since the coming out club business."

"A week. You haven't talked to him in a week?"

"A long week," Harriet says.

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**Countdown**

"One," Will says from the answering machine.

"Zero. Harriet, you probably figured out what number I was going
to say today. This is the last time I'm going to call you," Will says from the answering machine.

"Play it again, Harriet," Semus says.

"Zero. Harriet, you probably figured out what number I was going
to say today. This is the last time I'm going to call you."

"I don't fucking believe it," Harriet says.

"Why not?"

"I just don't. I have enough things to deal with. Voices, your job,
the library books. I can't be thinking of Will not ever calling me
again."

"Do you even understand why he won't call you again? Are you
willing to give him anything?" Semus says.

"Who's side are you on anyway? You're not even related to him for
Christ's sake," Harriet says.

"Call him."

"No."

"Call him."

"No."

"Call him."

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Final Countdown

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Returning Home

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Rusell was at the zoo alone before he got the news. He was trying to recapture some sense of the happiness that it provided for the kids and him that last weekend that counted. It was a euphoric, drug-like happiness, a present happiness filled with cotton-candy, peanuts and animals. They returned home and along with it came a silent, cold awakening that took a slow month to creep up on Rusell. It was an awakening of spirit, that caused his legs to burn with a desire to move on and out of their lives. He'd figured that his happiness lay somewhere else, under a different rock, and he looked for it by moving to an apartment of his own and having a series of tearful phone calls with his wife explaining that it wasn't her fault. He spent the next months swimming on the bottom of the murky pool with his eyes open. He went to the zoo, ate cotton candy and peanuts, and looked at the giraffes. When he returned he felt the same as before but he was distracted because his aunt called and announced that his mother had died sometime during the night.

Returning to his mother's house he felt a class reunion sense of failure because he no longer had a family to comfort him. He drove alone and parked in the back of the driveway, right in front of the closed garage door. His aunt had gone to the house for one of her daily visits and found his mother dead in her bed. She'd slipped away peacefully in the middle of her slumber and it was about as much as he could pray for.

This wasn't the house he'd grown up in and the fact gave him pause. It was smaller, a gingerbread house garnished with candy from his youth. The door opened and he stepped into a sterile kitchen, white but decorated lightly with little country knickknacks.

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Three dimensional scenes of ponds and farms made of plaster and framed by tiny simulated logs. He walked through the kitchen into the immaculate dining room. The table from his youth, a shiny red hardwood oval, with leaves that could be added in the middle, sat in the room surrounded by stately ornate chairs. It reminded him of happier times with relatives standing around, his father carving a large turkey in the center of the table. At the time Rusell's cheeks probably ached from being pinched and his sleeve was probably wet from wiping the kisses of far-away relatives.

What happened to those times? They were gobbled up like the soft blueberry smelling muffins his mother baked, cracked open, steaming on the plate, butter melting on them. The relatives grabbed them and commented, draped on chairs in the living-room eating and smiling. Inevitably they would leave, the front door shut and the porch-light turned off. His father would return to his study and his mother would begin to gather the plates up from around the house. The roar of celebration and visitation would eventually fade into the background hum of solitude.

He was told on the phone that as the only child he would have to figure out what to do with his mother's property and possessions. His childhood and memory pieced out and given away, boxed up and sent somewhere else. This was a duty that he couldn't take lightly for among those pieces of furniture, ceramic animals and windowed clocks lay a past well being that he no longer could put his hands on.

At some point in the marriage he began waking up in bed next to his wife not knowing who she was. His eyes snapped open each morning and he turned his head and focused on her sleeping form,
looking at her until he could recognize her. He felt a faraway calling, the desire to return to sleep and find whatever it was he was dreaming of that made him feel so lost during those mornings. She never noticed this and her eventual stir was a childlike opening of the eyes, a look at the sun beginning to creep into the room around the shades. He couldn't make love to her anymore and when she insisted, pulling his arms around her neck, he thought of other things, places he wanted to go, beaches from magazines, mountains.

Something terrified him during those months that didn't leave when he did. He felt the horse of normality, two kids, a wife, a house, somehow transformed itself into a monster. He was no longer satisfied by the ride on the horse for it lashed at him and writhed underneath his body, wiggling and pressing on the inside of his thighs. It followed him out of the house and into his apartment. It sat in the corner, when the lights were off late at night, snarling and grunting. He felt it even in his mother's house.

Russell walked up the stairs and into her bedroom. He wanted to know what it looked like there, after they'd removed her body. He wanted to touch the bed because her bed was always made with old fashioned perfection and he wanted to feel the childlike wonder of it again. The door was wide open and the air was still. Her perfume resonated throughout the room and it still tickled his nose. The bed was bare. He lost her.

For the first time Russell realized his loss. His mother wouldn't call him weekly, with bored pinpoint accuracy. She wouldn't send him needlepoints or clippings from the paper. He finally understood that, running his hands over the blue mattress. Her care for him was
always a warm common denominator that hovered constantly in the
back of his mind. Now she was gone. She slipped silently out of his
life.

Her bureau was the same. Tall and dark, hard wood, crafted not
made. A doily was pressed on the top underneath a piece of glass.
Her little yellow bottles of perfume stood on top like dwarfed fat
soldiers. One was a glass shell filled halfway with yellow liquid.
Another was the Eiffel tower made from frosted glass. He played
with them when he was small, pushing a chair over and climbing on
top of it to feel them, smell them. He felt the crafted innocence
involved, simply opening the tops and placing his nose near the hole.
He was a child again, standing on the chair and moving them around,
talking to them like they were alive.

Rusell was back again. The room was quiet. The bed was bare. He
looked at the little stool in front of her dresser and thought of the
many times he sat on it, staring into the mirror. What should I do
with all of this? he thought. The furniture linked him with the past
and the wood soaked up so much of what he was. To throw it away
might mean losing it forever, whatever it was. There was an
emotional barricade between his wife and him. He felt it like the
bird that knows the window is there. He had no way of getting
through it without risking his life. The bond was no longer there.
Had it ever been there? He wasn't sure.

He walked down the stairs and into the little living room. The
mantle was lined with ceramic animals. Little birds perched on tree
limbs that came magically out of plates. Mice lay curled up asleep
in baskets full of paper hay. He sat in one of her silky chairs. There
was a tremendous blank space in his mind, a black hole sucking up his emotions. He closed his eyes and imagined his wife and his kids, but felt nothing. On a wintery morning a while ago he woke from a dream with an erection and his body was covered with sweat. He started to tell his wife what he was dreaming of but stopped. There was something he couldn't remember. She sat on the edge of the bed and looked at the ground, her nightgown hung open. He looked up at the ceiling and felt the bed underneath him, pressing into his body. She turned and ran the back of her hand over his cheek, down his chest and underneath the covers but his erection was gone by then.

His mother's living room was a smaller version of the one they had at the house he grew up in. All the furniture was crammed into the logical spots, it was comfortable but not the same. Rusell longed for a touch on his shoulder, but he knew it wasn't his wife's he was looking for. Her touch was soft, her thumb lightly moving up and down his neck while her fingers held the breast bone. The room echoed with memories, but they were slight bits. They were little feelings, smells and pictures, but there wasn't enough to grab onto. He looked at the couch, white with a touch of pink. It was always cold to sit on at first but it was soft on his cheek. He looked at the marble topped end table that had claw feet. One of the feet was missing a few toes and he remembered playing down there thinking that it could breathe. He looked at the glass fronted cabinet with crystal tea cups, plates and artifacts. Inside of the cabinet was a glass box filled with little crystal ballet dancers. He got up to look.

They were from another age, those dancers. The women wore red and were posed on glass stands that held them up. The men, oh the
men stood strongly but gracefully on the flats of their feet, their arms were out holding the wind and encircling the women. Rusell opened the cabinet and took the glass box out. It was the men that caught his eye, the men that always caught his eye. He remembered staring at them for hours, imagining what it was like to be there, frozen in time in such a magnificent way. The muscles trickled up their arms and roared into their chests. Their legs, bowed slightly at the knees locked tight and strong. He remembered setting the little dancers on the carpet and moving them around while he escaped into their world. He danced with them, was held by them. He looked into their eyes and watched the light sparkle through their dainty bodies. He held them in his hands and ran his fingers over the smooth glass wishing that he could stay there.

One morning, when Rusell was young, he woke early and went downstairs. He walked to the cabinet, opened it and took out the glass box. The ballet dancers were just standing there, the music hadn't started yet. Rusell looked into the box, at the still faces. He opened the lid and they snapped to attention. The men looked up at him and smiled. Their faces were bronze and their bodies were solid. He wanted to be held. He took them out one by one and touched them. He ran his finger over their cheeks, down their tight necks, over their chests. He didn't know which one he liked the best, they were all so beautiful. A sadness overcame him like a storm billowing from the horizon. It swept him up and tumbled him around and around. He looked over at the glass box and stood the men back in it, right into their respective places. He put the box back in the cabinet and never touched it again.
Again Russell put the glass box back in the cabinet. He stood and walked out of the room, back through the dining room and through the little kitchen. He stood out on the back steps of the house and took a deep breath. His eyes were wide open and sad.