

A New Dressing

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Damon S. Murrah
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DEDICATION

To my family

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ABSTRACT

In *A New Dressing* Damon Murrah presents a collection of short stories where characters find the dramatic amongst the ordinary. The everyday situations and conflicts of these characters' lives offer no formula, but rather inspect the complexities of the overlooked and ignored.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
1. “Rave On”.....	11
2. “Dry Cleaning”.....	26
3. “Furniture”.....	37
4. “Top-Lot”.....	47
5. “A New Dressing”.....	60
Works Cited.....	74
Vita.....	76

INTRODUCTION

There are certain elements of fiction that must be followed in order for it to function as expression and communication. The basics can be defined as utilization of voice, plot, characterization, and/or theme—each in varying degrees. The conventions of contemporary fiction are a good place to start, but never linger. Widely recognized ideas such as: show, don't tell; arrive in a scene late, leave early; sense of resolution, conflict, plot, characterization, attention to detail, etc., all make perfect sense and are definitely part of what constitutes 'good' fiction. But these are only the parts of a whole. There are no conventions or individual rules that can be universally applied. Once the basic concepts are learned and understood, they need to be forgotten when writing. Consider composition in relation to music theory: one has to know the names of notes and where they fall on the keyboard (the structure), but composing a piece of music guided strictly by theory works against intuition and feel (the materials). So contemporary fictional conventions are necessary to instruct and generate a functional knowledge, but not to be the sole guide. Otherwise, the writer is writing to a script and following a prescribed formula that interferes with the communication, entertainment, and emotional honesty of the piece. In the end, even following such a formula offers no guarantees of clarity or success.

Raymond Carver stressed that “writers don't need tricks or gimmicks or even necessarily need to be the smartest fellows on the block” (Carver 729). Traditional ideas of conflict—and how it relates to plot, can be particularly restrictive. The application of writing conflicts as 'problems' within a story; of something in need of being solved through a series of steps or formulae. There is ample opportunity for writers to write in

an honest way, playing to their personal strengths and vision, while not being hemmed in by 'rules.' Granted, a complete disregard of fictional conventions would be disastrous for the writer and readers alike. In keeping with the basic functions of fiction, the writer can explore and emphasize different basic elements without writing according to prescription. Writers like Raymond Carver and Frederick Barthelme attenuation (or amplification) of certain narrative elements defy rigid narrative prescriptions and produce richly rewarding narratives.

Raymond Carver's "Neighbors" avoids the conventional conflict/resolution formula within plot structure. Bill and Arlene Miller are asked to look after their neighbor's (the Stones) apartment when they go on vacation. Carver outlines the narrative by quickly introducing conflict in the first paragraph: "It seemed to the Millers that the Stones lived a fuller and brighter life" (Carver 8). Carver dispenses with constructing some typical 'problem' that needs to be fixed, or source of conflict that feels typical. However, the conflict(s) initially introduced, as in many of Carver's stories, is addressed by a 'resolution' incredibly complex and diffuse. With each visit to check on the Stones' apartment, Bill and Arlene are drawn closer together in sex or conversation. They are so fascinated with their perception of the Stones' life, they sneak drinks from their liquor cabinet, take their pills, try on their clothes. Their attempts to absorb the Stones' "fuller [lives]" through their belongings highlight the void in Bill and Arlene's lives. Beyond the small doses of inspiration they experience in the Stones' apartment, there is no indication of a specific (or perceived) problem in their own lives. Rather, the tension and gaps in their lives point to greater complications.

Convention would dictate that some major sense of resolution be employed, but Carver's choices heighten the tension and drama which cannot be answered by a singular solution. Carver's plot points follow a traditional narrative arc with each successive visit to the Stones' apartment increasing tension. However, none of these points dictate or prescribe specific remedies to the initial conflict. In the final scene, Arlene remarks that "Maybe they won't come back." Bill tells her "It could happen...anything could happen" (Carver 13). Arlene realizes she left the key and they are locked out of the apartment. Forgetting the key inside is the emotional zenith of Carver's story, but hardly provides a typical resolution of the initial conflict. Instead, the story ends with Bill and Arlene embracing outside the apartment door. "They stayed there. They held each other. They leaned into the door as if against a wind, and braced themselves" (Carver 13). With Carver not demanding typical conflict/resolutions in the plot, the reader is left with multiple interpretations to take away from the story. It is precisely Carver's willful silence of presented issues that allow readers various interpretations of the story. This should not be interpreted as withholding anything from the reader, but rather reveals something closer to reality and maximum dramatic tension. Put another way, this is the space between the notes which is equally part of the composition.

In his essay "On Writing," Carver notes that "what creates tension in a piece of fiction is partly the way the concrete words are linked together to make up the visible action of the story. But it's also the things that are left out, that are implied, the landscape just under the smooth (but sometimes broken and unsettled) surface of things" (Carver

732). Tension is not always entirely constructed by what items or situations are purposely set up or presented, but can equally be attained by things that are left out.

In Carver's "What's in Alaska?" Carl leaves work for the afternoon and buys a pair of shoes on the way home. When he arrives home, he shows off his new shoes to his wife, Mary. She remarks: "I don't like the color, but I'll bet they're comfortable. You needed new shoes" (Carver 60). This is the first dose of tension between Mary and Carl that drive the narrative, but is not the only one. The tension is complicated when Mary abruptly announces she's been offered a job in Alaska. Carl's interest and curiosity at her revelation is mild and matter of fact. Carver creates a compelling conflict between Carl and Mary where, had he followed convention, by story's end he would have answered either in respect to Carl's shoes or Mary's offer. However, these are merely the surface issues that signal something deeper and more threatening. Their conversation continues while Carl takes a bath. Symbolically, Carver has submerged their surface-level issues so that they permeate the story and are not static. After the bath and dinner, Carl and Mary visit their friends, Jack and Helen, where this previous submersion begins to threaten the surface of the story. Since Carl and Mary's problem(s) is not attached to one specific issue, Carver creates a pestering, agitating tension that works in every scene thereafter. The cracks in Carl and Mary's relationship become more wholly sensed in the verbal-jabs and unguarded chatter while they visit with Helen and Jack. Mary accuses Carl of "being on a bummer," showing no discretion or tact in front of their friends. Carl's consistent denial of the accusation coincides with his persistent refocusing on his new shoes—the story's starting point. Mary's subtle cruelty becomes more overt until reaching a crisis.

She goes to the kitchen with Jack to get some snacks when Carl sees her “move against Jack from behind and put her arms around his waist” (Carver 66). Up to now, there has been no suggestion that Carl and Mary’s conflict is because of possible infidelity. Instead, it is another choice Carver gives to readers a glimpse, a passing tone. It is made more compelling because this possibility is noted, then moves on. Mary continues to harass and be insulting to Carl especially when he decides it’s time for them to go home. The anchor of Carl’s shoes ends the story when, lying in bed, he sees a small pair of eyes in the dark. He holds the shoe in his hand, prepared to throw it.

There is no typical resolution in regards to Mary’s job offer, or their relationship. Whatever conflicts have been introduced, it would be overly simplistic to suggest any *one* solution. Additionally, for Carver to suggest a resolution(s) for the problem(s) disturbs the complication and dramatic tension created. Ultimately, to point the reader to a specific place by employing a fictional algorithm would be cheating the reader and feel dull.

Yet, even this technique of the submersion of simplistic conflict/resolution in a plot device is not universally applied. If it were, it would also feel formulaic and less dynamic. Carver’s specific, but non-directive style also employs traditional structures in stories such as “Cathedral,” and “So Much Water So Close to Home.” Still, there are those *glimpses*—working at the sentence-level—that offer multiple possibilities. Carver defines the job of the short story writer as “to invest the glimpse with all that is in his power. He’ll bring his intelligence and literary skill to bear (his talent), his sense of proportion and sense of the fitness of things: of how things out there really are and how

he sees those things—like no one else sees them” (Carver 732). It’s important to note the word, ‘proportion.’ For every story contain various amounts of these conventions in greater or lesser amounts.

Frederick Barthelme’s “Shopgirls” operates in similar violation by inverting Carver’s submersion of tension by being brazenly upfront and literal with conflict/tension with respect to plot. The second-person perspective of this story situates the reader in a position of narrator where tension is amplified through diffusion and complication. The narrator (you) stalks various sales women in a department store. The conflict of the narrator’s desire/threat of being exposed is brought to the fore immediately when he is caught staring and, “you are embarrassed” (Barthelme 23). Instead of disgust, repulsion or avoidance, the sales girl, Andrea, kindly invites him to lunch with her co-workers he’s been watching. The seeming answer to the narrator’s desires are amplified in each succeeding scene, as he is drawn in closer, finally being invited to Andrea’s apartment to have dinner with the sales girls. Instead of being confronted with fear and accusations, the narrator is met with—and matched—by the girls’ flirtations. As the narrator moves closer into a realization of his desires (or fantasy) with these women, the initial conflict of being exposed is subverted as he is openly exposed time and time again. At the height of tension, and the possibility of the narrator’s fantasies being gratified, his desires are upended. Andrea’s face “looks wrong suddenly, almost deformed” (Barthelme 35). Instead of ending here, the story finishes with the narrator picking up where he left off, beginning a new trend of stalking shop girls. He returns to the mall and same department store, simply marking out different territory: “[You] spend two hours in Housewares on

the second floor. You do not remember ever having been on the second floor before. Kitchen equipment is exquisite, you believe. You buy a wood-handled spatula from a lovely girl with clean short hair” (Barthelme 35).

The only detectable change found in the narrator is a brief change of mind. There is no denouement, no definable change in the narrator from the beginning to the end with the exception of a minor adjustment of tactic. Though it could be argued that the narrator has changed floors and strategy, this would not satisfy conventional conflict/resolution standards. It is subtle, a reconsideration, a recalibration of the psyche. Like Carver, Barthelme has not sounded the expected notes of the scale, but has left strategic spaces and given them to the reader. The result of these techniques is not an abandonment of narrative function, but enhancement. With the attenuation of certain narrative elements, there is an amplification of others: character, tension, scene, and possibilities for the reader. There is no obfuscation of intent, clarity, or even meaning. Whereas a strict following of conflict, rising action/falling action, resolution would have a profoundly different effect, these techniques have allowed for the narratives to sound different tones.

This is a collection of stories in which specific choices have been made to achieve specific effects, evoke certain feelings, and explore various aspects of a specific aesthetic. In *The Art of Fiction*, John Gardner notes that “The first and last rule of the creative writer, then, is that though there may be rules (formulas) for ordinary, easily publishable fiction—imitation fiction—there are no rules for real fiction”(Gardner 7). Yet even what Gardner calls “imitation” or “real” fiction is also something that cannot be systematized into a simple formula. For this also hints at some sort of *rule* as to what is ‘good’ fiction

or ‘sham’ fiction, ‘literary’ or ‘genre’ fiction. But this also is merely a convention and attempts to define something that can only be defined by the writer and readers. Gardner further suggests that:

Each writer’s prejudices, tastes, background, and experience tend to limit the kinds of characters, actions, and setting he can honestly care about, since by the nature of our mortality we care about what we know and might possibly lose (or have already lost), dislike that which threatens what we care about, and feel indifferent toward that which has no visible bearing on our safety of the people and things we love. (Gardner 42)

This is similar to Carver’s reference to ‘proportion.’ Each writer and each story will require different measures of different techniques. The general conventions are included, but cannot be the track that the narrative attaches to. It is never permissible to waste a reader’s time with nonsense, drivel, or pretense. Since stories are dynamic things, they will respond according to where pressure is applied. Submersion of certain elements will heighten others allowing infinite narrative possibilities. Moreover, it is non-prescriptive and honest. Without honesty in writing, there is no clarity in thought. If there is no clarity in thought, there will be no clarity in prose. If there is no clarity in prose, the writing is pointless.

Above all else, the only way of producing any honest work of fiction can only be achieved by a noted convention, not a prescriptive one. Or, in Gardner’s words, “literary fashion never need be taken very seriously” (45). Raymond Carver’s approach to this same idea is that “Every great or even every good writer makes the world over according

to his own specifications” (Carver 728). The elements of good fiction are all necessary, but not needed in equal measure.

I. Rave On

I needed a haircut. Man, did I need one bad. I put two fingers in the grease and glopped it onto my palms, rubbed my hands together and drug it through my hair. I had my comb on the edge of the sink — just in reach, and let it slide on in. It felt good the way it just sailed right through—like cutting these crazy slivers of hair as thin as razor blades. I pulled and patted and shaped, and flattened and poofed and jazzed and combed until the pomp was kingly. I turned to the side and trimmed a bit off my chops—some of the stray hairs that try to sneak by you. You gotta watch your hair, man.

I put on Carl Perkins', "Gone, Gone, Gone," and clicked the dial to about 5. I stepped out on the patio and fired up a smoke. I stood there and the bug light cast this crazy beam that back-lit me like it was from outer space. I was looking at my shadow, thinking it was pretty cool, and I knew that at any moment the aliens would zap me up and fret me with a bunch of questions and ask me to show them how to play guitar and explain Rock n' Roll to them. I would pacify them with some records and dazzle 'em with the old boogie-woogie, but they'd have to drop me off at home first 'cause that's where the records are. When they buzzed me down I'd just sneak out the backdoor while they were idling in the sky waiting for their records.

Or, with this light, I could be standing outside of this bar and some dolly would be pulling at my lapels and begging me to kiss her while the cops were raiding the inside of the bar, smashing bottles and shaking down the heavies. I tell her, "No. Not now!" I take a drag from my cig and tell her that we gotta shove off. "The heat's coming down; go, get in the car."

I looked at my watch, it was already 10. I was gonna blast off after a spell and head to the Domino Lounge. But, I wasn't gonna stay too late. I stepped back inside for another beer and another record to set the mood straight.

I put on Carl Perkins's, "Matchbox" and hot-dogged a few chords on the guitar and was drinking a beer and that really set me on a frenzy. I just kept pulling out the wax and had the sleeves all fanned out on the floor, stacking cut after cut and tipping the needles right into the red. Then, I was so fired up, I started looking at Eddie Cochran videos on YouTube, like "Nervous Breakdown," and "Something Else," and played along; singing right along with Eddie to those clamoring kids who were pitching over each other in the balcony and collapsing into fits of pure joy. Those kids in those videos were gone, gone, gone!

I was thinking of what it must've been like to hear such a crazy sound like that for the first time—the *very first time*. No wonder parents were afraid watching those cats sweatin' and swingin' with their shark-skin suits and hair dripping sizzling sex right there on the stage lights. That stuff just don't happen anymore; they flash like Roman candles.

I wasn't gonna burn it up like that tonight though, cause I had to start a new job tomorrow at Real World Entertainment systems. One thing I know about starting new jobs is that people are terrified of unbridled rock n' roll—just like they were back then. You don't go all pumped up and greased out like some French dauphin. You learn that double-quick. You gotta ease into your scene and wait at least 'til the boss gets used to you, prove that you aren't a louse. Then, when you're well liked, and you're well into the humdrum of clock-punching, and he knows you're an actual human being and not some

shyster in boots, *then* and only then you can pomp it up and start wearing what you want. Sure, you'll have to wade your way through all the goofy questions with the other employees trying to touch your hair and asking you questions about where you buy your clothes or what you *do*. You don't just show up to these things in your jacket and points, plop your boots down on the desk and say, "When's lunch?"

It's funny how people have these ideas about who you are and what your life is like just by your haircut and the shoes you wear. People like to act like they don't judge, but that's bullshit—they do every second of the day. Try it out for your next interview; try living your wildest dream and see how much flak you get.

I stepped out into the UFO-spotlight for another smoke.

My last job was at Book Towers, and it wasn't no towers at all but an old converted movie theatre with books and magazines and periodicals stacked up where the screen used to be. My hair was towering and gleaming in the light that first day—shining and sparkling like diamonds on a desert highway; a regular prince with rolled-up sleeves.

My boss was this old hippy named Harold Fassneimer who showed me all around and introduced me to everyone. He had these John Lennon glasses and a bald spot with this long, thin hippy-hair pulled into a pony tail with a purple rubber band. He had one of those burlap seed-bags like he was some Peruvian farmer slung around his shoulder with a Che Guevara pin stuck to it. Oh man, I shoulda known right then and there that this

would end in tears. He gives me these crazy eyes, and tells me to follow. “Let me show you around, Richard.” He grabbed his clipboard, and put some keys into his seed bag.

The checkout was where the vending kiosk used to be, a big horseshoe-counter with computers and monitors and a stack of newspapers where popcorn and sodas used to slop all over the place. You walk through the lobby into the auditorium where the books were. There were loads of them. But, the hardest thing to swallow was that the screen was still there, draped by these brocade, golden-fringed curtains which were bunched up to the sides of the walls. Two statues were on either side, all regal and delicate and I stared at that scene for a long time. I could imagine back then that they would’ve been closed before the music started then come apart and let the light of heaven shine through. I thought about all the great films that used to be played here. I bet *On the Waterfront* debuted here. Gents firing up smokes sitting in their seats holding the hands of their ladies with stoles who clutched their man’s arm, whispering and drinking out of crystal coupes. It was a shame that all those old Greek-o sculptures were now just place holders for Yoga-studio flyers.

Anyway, I was the magazine guy and I had to carry these boxes of magazines that had this amazing smell of glossy vinyl—like some miracle cleaning solution—that was just atomic: Men’s mags, Lady’s mags, kid’s mags, crossword puzzles and knitting mags. I had pulled all the old issues out and fronted the new ones. And this is no small feat, it took me most of the shift.

It was about ten minutes before closing so I wandered over around the history section and pulled down this book on General Patton and was trying to find that part

where he clocked that kid for being a sissy. Man, I was refreshed with the absence of bullshit and complications. Well, Fassneimer comes up to me and asks what I was doing and I tell him, “I’m reading.” He asks why I’m reading and I tell him that we closed in 10 minutes and that I had already stocked all the magazines. He didn’t like that one bit, so he walks away and didn’t say another word. I didn’t think about it until the next day and I show up to the Book Towers and he tells me that I don’t exhibit the type of professional attitude and attention to customer service that they required. Then he gives me this real smart-ass look and says, “Richard, this is business. This is not an audition.” Later he tells me that I didn’t really fit into their professional image.

I came back inside and put on something a bit more waltzy, something that swayed along with my sagging mood. I grabbed another beer and looked for the bottle opener on the counter. I had to move the percolator to get at it. I turned the overhead light off, lit up the old cowboy lamps, and sat on the sofa just thinking and listening and drinking my beer. Darlene bought those cowboy lamps for me.

Darlene, she was from Lubbock—just like Buddy Holly. She told me that when we first met. “I’m from Lubbock. Home of Buddy Holly.” She winked and ordered a sangria. I kissed her for the first time that night. That was something else.

Those cowboy lamps had these prairie scenes on them with cactus, horses, coyotes and a few cowboys silhouetted against a setting sun and they’d cast this sweet

amber glow so I'd just lie back in bed and drift off like an astronaut with the taste of Darlene's lipstick. And then on Saturday mornings we'd wake up and make pancakes & bacon in our underwear and listen to Buck Owens really loud, drink gallons of coffee where the steam would lift out of our cups like holy censers. After, we'd put our sticky plates in the sink, gear-up and go to yard sales or to vintage clothing shops or record stores and do the grocery shopping. Man, we'd be flying all over town with the wind blowing in our hair from every corner.

That's also where I got that percolator—that ginchy stainless steel one there—with the three starbursts on it. It was over on Dalmont Street down from those apartments that always have busted TVs on the curb. It was a cozy little yard sale, that one. We walked up and was shuffling through the smelly clothes and I was looking for a few snappy cowboy shirts and Darlene was looking for hot curlers or something for her hair, or maybe a makeup bag that had the mirror on the lid and smelled musty.

I went up to this table that had all these knickknacks: lids, rusty silverware, doilies, and awful Tupperware pieces that had stains in them. I bet you the old lady who was surveying from the porch used to store chili in them or something. I saw this painting leaning on a green vacuum cleaner. Now, I don't go much for art, but this was fantastic! It was this seascape that had a gigantic clipper ship with these waves beating the hell out of the sides of the ship, and you could see dots that were the sailors—little guys who were swinging from ropes and holding on for dear life and the waves were crashing up against them but they just stuck with it, hell and high water.

I looked at the piece of masking tape dabbed with magic marker and thought about buying it, but it was twenty-five bucks and I was flimsy on the long greens. There was this old-timer standing next to me who had one these radioactive nubuck, two-tone wing-tips with a pair of chinos and he was inspecting the old seascape painting brushing the tops and sides of the frame asking, "How about fifteen?" He was just kinda shouting it out like he didn't know who was in charge but was certain that whoever it was would answer. The old crow stepped down the porch and started haggling with him. I backed off watching the two of them work it out. I wanted his shoes.

So I slinked over to the record pile and Darlene was digging through a box of lady shoes and I run my hand over her hair and she looks up and says, "You find anything?" I tell her not much and she says to tell her when I've had enough.

I spy this box of records and start thumbing through; nothing but eighties stuff like Wham! and Adam Ant. The guys on the covers looked like chicks wearing leather pants or baggy sweaters. There was also some hippy records that had these designs with pyramids looking like they were colored with a crayon and, what do you know, there's some guys on the back and they all look like old Fassneimer. There was not one Jerry Lee Lewis record in there.

That's when Darlene walks up to me with a clock and a percolator in each hand and she says, "Look! Vintage!" I lost it because my granny had a percolating coffee pot just like that and we used to go to her house on Sundays and it would always smell like burnt toast and fresh coffee and she had this house with the coldest air conditioners that would you blow you right out of your chair if you weren't holding on.

Darlene asks me if I like it and I tell her “Yeah!” Then she pulls out this clock that you have to wind up and tells me to hold it while she digs through her bag. She looks up and says, “I got a surprise you’re gonna love.” I try and ask her but she says that I have to wait. She tells me to go wait in the car, hands me the clock and the percolator and she’s off to the old crow. She comes out to the car with this box and puts it in the back seat. “Don’t look,” she says and leans over to kiss me, then pushes my face like when a teacher pushes a kid’s face to look forward and grabs a cig from my shirt- front pocket.

We went home and I washed the pot and made some coffee while she made ready my surprise. She made me close my eyes. She turned out the light and made me promise not to peek—and I didn’t either. “Anyway, how can I see anything?” I say, “It’s as black as night in here.” Then she grabs my hand and leads me into the bedroom and says, “Open ‘em!” There on both of the night stands were those cowboy lamps that had those prairie scene painted on the shade. I was hypnotized. She put the clock on her side of the bed and asks, “What do you think?” “I think it’s a miracle is what I think!” Ah, it was sweet, those lights, and to hear that tick of the clock under the moonglow of those cowboy lamps. The alarm on it was kinda sick though; it’d ring like a mad demon for about three seconds and then sort of get all choked up and sounded like it was walking down the hall.

I’m glad she left me the lamps.

I ended up drinking too many beers and fell asleep on the couch even though I was supposed to go the Domino Lounge and I got chunks of mud on my fringe pillows from my boots and there were bits of fuzz in my hair. I took a shower, shaved, primped, and checked for the stray hairs. Crisp and folded, I headed off for the job.

I think I got the gig at Real World Entertainment Systems because I knew a lot about old radios, transistors, capacitors, and tube amplification—even though I didn’t know much about home theater systems. My boss’s name was Gus Barrow. He was cool, he didn’t have any crazy rules or even look at me funny. He would even buy lunch for the whole staff once a month. I said to him one day, “Hey, Gus, your last name is the same as—” “Yeah, I know.” Real World Entertainment Systems sold small wooden radios from Denmark and stereo equipment that you had to read a manual the size of a dictionary to understand. After working in the show room a couple of weeks, Gus tells me that I would be ‘in the field’ installing home systems.

I worked with this black dude, Darnell, who had this tool bag piled to the brim with all these crazy wire-strippers and clippers and crimpers. He had this paper-thin moustache like Little Richard but wore his hair short and always wore grey shirts.

One day, we went to this house in this old neighborhood; all little bungalows—small one and two-room family homes. Darnell dialed through his iPod while keeping one eye on the road. He’d have this conversation with himself while nearly killing us, he’d just click away, saying “no...nah...hell no.” It took him forever to find something and when he finally did find something he’d straighten up in his seat and say, “This is it!”

Then, I could relax, but not because I was jazzed about his music. I hated his music. Nothing was more manufactured, plastic, or soulless than his hip-hop. Actually, modern country is worse. But, I never said nothing, I didn't have to. I was just happy to be alive.

That day, the inevitable came. I saw old Darnell looking at me at a stoplight:
“How do you do your hair like that, man? How do you get it to that?”

“Do what?”

“That Elvis thing?”

You see, it happens every time. At least he didn't try to touch it. So, I explain:
“You know, it's not rocket science or nothing. It's just like, you know, I take a comb and just use the blowdryer to kinda get it started and shaped. Sometimes it helps to blow dry it upside down for a bit, then dress it up, then I just use my hand to kind of give its shape and all.”

“Like Elvis n' shit?”

“Yeah, like Elvis n' shit.”

“Old school.”

“Exactly.”

“Keeping it real.”

“Yeah, Darnell, real. I'm keeping it real-real.”

“Real-real. I like that.”

We pulled up in front of a small bungalow white with green trim, and green stripey awnings. Darnell was filling out paper work and putting tools into his belt.

“Say, Real-real, can you get the gear order for 2015?”

I went in the back of the van, shuffled through a few boxes, grabbed a spool of speaker wire, RCAs, co-axes, and Ethernet cables.

We walked up to the house and knock. This old man answers the door wearing chinos, an A-shirt, and house shoes, and just stands there without saying a word. Darnell introduces us and says, “Mr. Bansell?” He stands there for another blank minute until he finally realizes what’s happening and invites us in.

He’s got that old person smell in his house—like old paper or attics. He’s got newspapers lying around, a cup of coffee on the side stand, stacks of mail cinched together with rubber bands. He shuffles some stuff out of the way while he searches for the remote because the TV is blaring.

“There. This is where I was thinking. This is the best place.” He points to where the old TV is. Darnell and I put the boxes down off to the side and we start unpacking.

“My son got it for me. I told him I didn’t need it, my TV’s fine.”

Darnell says, “You’re gonna love this.”

He had all these relics about his place: an old radio, VHS tapes, and a wall filled with photos. The photos filled up the living room and wrapped around the wall into the hallway. There were black and whites, colors, Army photos, pictures of people. I’m looking at all the pictures and I ask him about the Army photo.

“Did you serve?”

“Yeah. Stationed in Utah, right after Korea. I spent just enough time in the military. Came back home, got married, and became a chemist.”

“That’s really something,” I say.

“What?” Bansell says and looks at me like I’m some idiot.

Darnell was pulling out components of the box.

“Hey, Real-real, we’re missing something.”

I give Darnell a wink and a thumbs-up and he goes out to the van, looking pissed.

Darnell came back in and asked where the old man wanted the sub-woofer, the ambient speakers, and the center speakers, I was relieved. Bansell would pick a place, hem and haw, and then change his mind once we shoved it over. Finally, Darnell told him that the sound would be all goofed up if he didn’t have proper placement.

“You’ll get out of phase,” Darnell warned.

Bansell looked at me, lifts his eyebrows, and says that he doesn’t want *that*. Then, he tells us to set it up how it’s supposed to go.

“I don’t know about this stuff. Would anyone like some coffee?”

I accept, and Darnell shoots me this look. He gets up off the floor and comes over to me while Bansell shuffles off.

“Man, when we’re on the job, we’re on the job. This ain’t museum time. We have like three other stops and I don’t want to be stuck here all day.”

Bansell brings in a cup for me and I thank him. We get to work and he stands there watching us the whole time then Darnell tells him, “We’re gonna have to drill some holes in the sheet rock; make a few changes.” Bansell says for us to do whatever it is we have to do and sits on the sofa, watching us.

We started drilling holes and had out the old hacksaws and were chewing into his walls and making it snow in there. Darnell went to the van to get another set of AVI cables. I noticed above the sofa, which I didn't catch before, that seascape—that same one where the clipper ship was getting beaten by the waves. I asked the old man about it and as soon as I mentioned it—it hits me.

“I saw you at this yard sale!” I pointed at the painting. “I was looking at this too.”

“Is that right?” he says, “Yes, I like seascapes—but only ships. Not lifehouses or people wandering around on a beach. Only ships.”

So we start setting up all the components and have strings of copper speaker wire strewn all around like some bird's nest. We pull out the speakers and get everything rigged up: the reds with reds, the greens with greens, the blues with blues. I cleaned up while Darnell turned it on, adjusted the picture, and showed Bansell the menus. Bansell toyed around the remote and I picked up the pieces of wire while Darnell wrote up the invoice. Darnell hands Bansell the invoice and the manual, “You'll need this.”

On the way back to the showroom, Darnell offered to let me play my music if I wanted to, but I told him that I don't have anything on me, that my music wasn't portable. Darnell laughed.

When we walk into the showroom, Gus asks us, “What went wrong at Bansell's? He's called ten times or more. He's at his wit's end.”

I ask Gus to let me call him. The phone rings on and on until Bansell finally picks up.

“Mr. Bansell, this is Ricky with Real World Entertainment Systems. We were there earlier today.”

“I don’t understand any of this. I think it’s out of phase.”

II. Dry Cleaning

Gary didn't realize that he'd dipped his coat sleeve in something. Sheila saw it.

"What is *that*?"

"Where?"

"Right there, look."

Gary looked down at his shirt, his chin doubling-in on itself.

"I don't see anything."

She waved him to her.

He took the folded piece of paper from his pocket, put it on the table and slid it across to her. She huffed, grabbed his sleeve and pulled it towards her.

"Give it."

Gary leaned across the table, his chest pushing against the table edge. He propped up his arm for her like he wanted to arm wrestle.

She dipped two fingers in her glass of water and wet the jacket. She rubbed fast enough so it made a scratchy sound. He looked around the restaurant. The waitress with the thick eyeliner stooped at a nearby table. She tucked her hair behind an ear and looked at Gary. He smiled, then looked down at his plate. He couldn't wait to get back to the sandwich.

The waitress showed up with a bottle of sparkling water. She sat it in the center of the table, looking at Gary. "Bubbles are good for this."

Sheila grabbed the bottle and put it in front of her. She drew up a terrible smile.

"Thank you." Before the waitress could answer, Sheila followed up with a "*Very* much."

The waitress kept close, watching how things went. Sheila dumped a pool of the water

onto her bread plate. She took the napkin from her lap, and touching the edge of it into the bubbly water and dabbed the sleeve like a wound. Gary's arm was getting tired the way he had to hold it, his neck felt weird.

He was embarrassed with the waitress standing there monitoring all of this. He wanted to say something clever or funny, but couldn't figure out what. Finally, when he decided to compliment the help, the food, and what a good time they've had, she was gone. Sheila was still scrubbing away, head down and mumbling. Gary looked around and tried to see what other people were eating. The waitress was coming back and he decided he'd had enough of this fuss.

"This is ridiculous, Sheila, everything's okay. I want you to look at the plan." He tried to take back his arm, but Sheila had a two-handed grip on him. If he insisted he would have to yank his arm, which would cause even more embarrassment.

The waitress went to Sheila's side, handing her a fresh towel. He straightened his neck, the waitress winked and smiled at him. He was unsure how to react at first, but winked back. For a second, he forgot Sheila was bent over his arm, scrubbing on his clothes.

"This isn't working."

Sheila finally set the napkin down and held the fabric with both hands now, pushing into it with her thumbs. She studied it, sighed, and let go. She took a drink from her iced tea. A thin shimmer of sweat on her forehead and lip. She moved food around on her plate without really eating.

Gary reminded her of the paper, “There it is.” She took it up, unfolded and looked at it. Her eyes were moving too fast to understand it. She flitted the edge with her finger while Gary explained the concept in between bites of his roast beef sandwich. After his last bite, he sucked his teeth, then reached for the dessert menu.

“Really, Gary?”

She used this as an excuse to stop pretending to look at his plan, folding it and setting it near her glass. Of course, he wouldn’t order anything, but would look at the menu just to spite her. He flipped the pages and nodded like everything was under consideration.

She straightened back into her chair, pulled out lipstick and mirror from her purse. Gary watched her put it on—he’d always liked that. The precision of lip to lip to smack to blot; he never got tired of it. Sheila’s arm was marked from being pressed against the tablecloth, like folds of an envelope. The same marks on her body when she slept on a crease. She untwisted the lipstick, capped it, clamped her mirror shut and dropped them into her bag.

“Do what you want.”

Gary pulled his paper away from her glass. “Okay then,” he mumbled, folding it and putting it in his jacket pocket.

He could deal with things: blood, heights, needles, small spaces, crowds. He had built the deck in the backyard last summer all on his own. He was working on a project that would eclipse everything else he had ever done—the seven-level garage complex he nicknamed “Seven Heaven.” He didn’t even tell his co-workers what he called it; they

would find out soon enough. He knew that whenever he submitted his final design, they would drink champagne and eat cake in the office.

Previous designs had been tinged with some faulty idea. Overall, yes, they were good, but they had to be modified and corrected so that it was someone else's name that got inked on the plans.

“Why can't you keep clean?”

He clinched his teeth and leaned over as if to whisper in her ear, but spoke to her eyeballs.

“Let it go.”

She smirked and swooped her arm through the air for the check.

The waitress came with the check, Gary already had his card held between his two nubby fingers like a flag. Sheila pretended to be looking for something in her purse.

Gary was generous. He didn't shy away from buying meals. Even after this, she knew he would come home and disappear into his study again. He would sit under the light drawing lines, then erasing them, then drawing them again. He would do this over and over, then would slink into bed smelling like Scotch and pencils. She kept her eyes closed until she fell asleep.

In the morning, she'd hear him shower. He'd leave his towel wadded on the vanity, leave his whiskers in the sink. He'd choose a belt and leave the room. He'd go to the kitchen and clank his way through the drawers, forgetting where the spoons or spatulas were. She could not sit at the table if he was barefoot.

On weekends, she made plans and he consented. If she wanted to have dinner with friends, he'd go. She had to remind him to be sociable. So it didn't make too much difference if she wanted to be alone. Even though he worked around the house tending to important matters, she knew he didn't feel anything about them. He blindly changed light bulbs, snaked drains. He washed the car. But it wasn't just those things, it was the details. The stains.

"Can you not wear it?" she said.

"You can't be serious," Gary said. He laughed and looked around the restaurant.

"Do you think these people really care?" He raised his voice.

Sheila grabbed her purse and walked out. He signed the check and left twenty percent. It said: "Thanks, Julie" with a smiley face underneath the name. "Julie," he said quietly.

Sheila unlocked the doors to the car and saw Gary in the rearview ambling across the parking lot, hiking up his belt. He carried his jacket under his arm like a helmet.

The heat inside the car wiped across their faces and backs. They sat with the doors open. Sheila started the car and turned the AC to its highest setting. Gary set the jacket in the back seat, and left one leg to rest on the pavement. They waited for minutes, silent, trying to find their breath in the dense heat.

"Give it a minute."

Gary cocked his head sideways to look at her. They sat in their seats like lovers parked at night. She let her head drop and wiped the back of her neck with her hand, her

eyes closed. If they were lovers parked at night, then —right now— would have been the moment to kiss. That split-second moment when everything screams that it is the perfect moment. You're never really sure about those moments, but Gary was.

Gary stood at the counter of Eagle Dry Cleaners, tearing the plastic wrap off his jacket. He was eager to see the results. The clerk, Doris, waited.

The fabric, rough and knobby like a cheap sofa, was as good as new. Doris pulled her glasses onto her head and looked at the spot Gary studied.

“Unbelievable. I don't even know how it happened.”

Behind him, the door opened.

Doris pulled a tab from his hanger, put her glasses back down and keyed in some figures, “You usually don't.” The register chirped. “Good thing you didn't wait too long.”

A voice behind him said, “Hiya, Doris.”

Doris waved and smiled. Gary turned around to see a man in jeans and a dirty shirt. Gary didn't know what to say, but he felt like he should say something.

“Amazing—it came right out.” Gary pointed to the sleeve and rubbed the fabric.

Doris lifted the part of the counter that swings down and let the guy pass through. “The box is on the other side.” Doris pointed to the carousel. He could tell Doris was wanting to deal with the man, so Gary paid. His engine was still running, anyway.

He opened the back door of his sedan, hanging the jacket on the hook. He heard a woman's voice behind him.

“Did it come out?”

He turned around he saw the waitress from the restaurant with the thick eyeliner. She had a pile of aprons in her hand.

He was surprised. She walked towards him.

“Julie, right? I was there with—I got a stain on my jacket.”

“Right. Things work out?”

“Perfectly.”

“Glad to hear it.”

“Well,” Gary took a breath. “Thank you.”

She smiled and went inside.

Gary sat in his car. He liked the song playing on the radio and even considered not going back to work. He felt a renewed belief in his Seven Heaven idea and decided to look at it again. He shuffled through his papers, unfolded it, spreading it out over the steering column.

Julie came back out with a hangers of white shirts hooked around her finger, thrown over her shoulder. She beeped her car alarm. Gary looked up.

He set his hand on top of the roof. “I’d like to thank you again for all your help.”

Julie pulled a pair of sunglasses from her visor.

“Can I buy you a cup of coffee?” He shouldn’t have said this, but told himself that it was a kind gesture. There was nothing in his heart—no bad intent, but a perfectly innocent, kindness for kindness, paying it forward-gesture.

It was her day off.

Gary knew a café nearby. Used to be an old bike shop. Young crowd, popular with the gays and artsy types. It wasn’t because he had issues with anyone, but felt like older people shouldn’t be there.

The café was more than a diner, but not as streamlined as Starbucks. The machine on the counter was one of the Italian ones that they have in good restaurants—brass and stainless steel with bright red paint. Two young guys with beards and sweaters worked the counter. They moved at half speed—taking orders, frothing milk.

“Those cakes look outrageous.” Julie pointed at the cake stand. A lofty cake stacked three levels high and crammed with brown frosting. Thick between the layers, whipped up, and smoothed out in tracks like forest paths.

“And a slice of that cake,” Gary told the bearded guy. Julie made her eyes big.

“How do you know it’s for you?”

The beard guy lifted the lid of the cake stand and sliced off a chunk. He did it carelessly—with a dry knife, so he had to saw through it. It wavered when he moved it away from the cake stand and began to lower it. It irritated Gary at first, but he forgot all about it when he saw it was plated perfectly.

They sat at a small, wooden table lacquered over old French magazine ads. Light streamed in giant windows that had cranks to open them. Gary twisted one of the handles

just to crack the window. Julie sat across from him, thanked him again for the coffee.

Gary slid the cake in front of her.

“Absolutely. It’s all you.”

“Just my job.”

“You didn’t even charge us.”

Julie poured packs of sugar into her coffee that sat on top of the foam. She let the sugar sink before she stirred. She told him how long she’d been a waitress, where she went to school, how she wanted to move to California one day.

As a general rule, Gary didn’t think anyone should move to California. But, she was beautiful, smart, and had nerve. She could do whatever she wanted and be okay.

She acted natural, calm. He told himself not to look at her too deeply, or too long. But he didn’t want to seem nervous or edgy. He was distracted by everything.

A kid with dirty, bare feet wandered between tables. Small sweater, little corduroy pants, no shoes, curly blond hair. Gary couldn’t tell if it was a boy or girl. Every few minutes, the father scooped the kid up and brought it back. The mother remained in her seat.

“Shame,” he said.

Julie turned. “Those people?”

“Shouldn’t let kids run wild.”

Julie agreed, looking at him over her cup.

Gary reminded himself to just keep things simple, light. He felt somewhat guilty, panicky. He was only halfway through his coffee.

Julie asked what he did for work. He told her about his garage plan, that day at the restaurant.

“Was that your wife?”

He thought how Sheila had spoken to him. How she reached across the table, made a situation.

“I met her downtown—” he said. This made Julie laugh and he understood how it sounded.

“Downtown, at my first job.” He laughed, too and sipped. He puts his cup back in the saucer. “I came in as management. I set up everyone in teams with five or six. And she had come in from the outside. At that time, I mean. She’d worked for this other company we contracted with. I had absolutely no idea, you know. At any rate, there was a presentation, see—”

He saw how Julie looked at him, now. He could put the pieces in place. He appreciated the feeling of being able to topple his entire life over in that moment. It gave him a sense of strange and exhilarating power. Here she was, a beautiful young woman who was just waiting for Gary to do this, say that.

III. Furniture

Travis would have to make the trip down to the dumpster because the chute was out of order. Last night, it was too early to take the trash out. Now, the cereal box and empty milk carton wouldn't fit in the bag. He took one of the folded paper grocery sacks from under the kitchen sink and put in the extras. He cinched the bag and set it aside. He'd dump it while he waited for Paul—a sub-sub-contractor he knew from his last job. Paul had offered him work after he'd blown a joint and failed the screening.

He pushed the button and looked at his watch. The elevator creaked and whined, its window smudged. The door stuttered open, it smelled like sweat. He'd take the stairs again. The bag tore on something; trash liquid made a trail behind him. He swore to make enough money, call Sheryl and get it right.

When he'd signed the application for Chamonix Towers he'd told her it would be for just a few months. "Don't get comfortable. I'm gonna get us a house," he said. After the paperwork cleared, they made trip after trip—back and forth from the old place to here, up and down, until he lost count how many times. Their car squeaked under the burden. But when work got slim, Sheryl got uptight. They fought. She threw her stuff in trash bags, padlocked the storage space in the basement, and moved in with her mom after just three months.

He made the dumpster and pitched the bag on top of the pile. White on white, like a stack of lumpy pillows. He stood at the turnaround underneath the canopy. He looked out at the streetlights and saw Dale walking up. This is what Travis was trying to avoid—people. Hopefully, Dale was on his way inside and wouldn't stop to talk. Travis hated talking when he didn't want to talk. Dale stood next to him without saying a word. Both

looked straight ahead in silence—like standing at a urinal. Travis was about to say something when Dale asked in his slow talk, “You going to work?”

Travis straightened himself and rubbed his hands together, like he was excited. Travis knew Dale wasn’t looking at him because he never looked at you when he talked to you. This bothered Travis, so he purposely looked at Dale to show him how regular people talked, “Yep.” Travis stared at Dale’s face. It was like yellowed paper, his black whiskers like dots of ink. Sprigs of black hair popped out of his ears, his neck, his forehead.

Travis *was* excited. He wanted to work now—every day. He wanted to work until he fell down dead and his blue body had to be wheeled away with sirens blaring. But he wasn’t going to die here. No, people would scoot out their chairs from their tables, get up out of lounge chairs, or quit the picnic tables and follow him with nosy eyes.

“You got a job, Dale?”

Dale’s eyes skittered back and forth, and his neck twisted, “Nope. On disability.”

Of course he didn’t work. He hung out in the parking lot, the commons area, the laundry room. He saw him on the lawn talking to whoever’s around. He never went anywhere. But, Travis didn’t blame him.

Dale fished through his breast pocket. It was lined from seam to seam with pens and filled with business cards, scraps of paper and a pack of unfiltered cigarettes. It hung from his shirt like a broken jaw. He pulled out a cigarette and lit it, “I help Mr. Chas sometimes.”

It was beginning to mist. Travis felt cold. He searched the parking lot for Paul's car. The streetlamps were still on; nothing moved.

"Help with what? What's this Mr. Chas got you doing?"

"Woodwork, furniture stuff. He can do rabbit notches, tongue and groove, dovetail joints. He teaches me some cuts, said he'd help me build something sometime. He has a dog, Rolf."

Travis saw headlights. "Nice."

Dale held onto the dog biscuits in his pants pocket. They were red and green and shaped like bones. Twice a week he went to Mr. Chas's house down the block and took the biscuits with him. When Mr. Chas had somewhere to go, Dale waited on the porch and kept an eye on Rolf. Rolf paced the fence line in the front yard until Mr. Chas got back. When Dale lobbed a biscuit on the grass, Rolf stopped barking and ate it.

"I got a notice from the authorities," Dale said. "I have to move."

Travis was puzzled. "What authorities? Move where?" Dale didn't answer. Travis waited, then repeated the question, "Where to, Dale? Where you moving to? What authorities?"

Dale scratched the corner of his nose, "Don't want to though."

Travis saw that Dale was confused and serious. Travis remembered meeting Dale the first time. Sheryl padlocked the storage unit when she left so Travis was trying to break in. He was trying to shim the lock with a cut-up beer can. He didn't know Dale watched him, but he claimed he could crack the combination without any tools. This, Travis had to see, so he let Dale loose on it. It took maybe a minute—Dale sailed the dial

counterclockwise in some formula. He mumbled and chewed the side of his lip. The lock clicked opened and Dale left it hanging there. Impressive.

Travis tried to understand. “You mean management?”

“No. Inspector says I got fire hazards.”

Travis looked for Paul. He didn’t know what to say. He couldn’t wait to get in a warm car and go to work. He saw headlights coming down the street. When the car came towards the turnaround, Travis pulled his hands out of his pocket to shake Dale’s hand. He knew it was Paul and he didn’t know what to say or do. Dale reached into his pocket, pulled out a strip of paper as thin as a blade, and handed it to Travis. It took some time for Travis to get through the bends and folds. He looked it over and saw the date. He recognized the official letterhead, the signatures, the stamp. He thought for a second, and held a finger up to Paul. Confused as what to do, he handed it back to Dale. He waited a few seconds, pointed to Paul and said, “I best be going.” And he got in the car and left.

The car wasn’t as warm Travis hoped it would be. Paul lit a cigarette and clinched it in his teeth, “Friend of yours?” and rolled the window up. Travis looked in his mirror at Dale pacing on the sidewalk.

“No, barely know the guy. I was just waiting for you.”

Paul said, “Got some demo today.” He reached behind the seat, pulled out a pair of brown gloves and flopped them into Travis’s lap. When they got to the house, Paul brought out his paint-splattered radio and looked for an outlet. He plugged it in, tuned to

the rock station while Travis took a look around. When Travis came back into the living room, Paul said what they had to do.

Travis set to tearing out the cabinets with a crowbar and hauled the pieces to the curb while Paul pulled wires and handled the broken pieces of glass. Travis knocked down sheetrock in the utility room before they took a break for lunch. Paul came back with tacos, they ate them sitting on empty paint cans. The dull smell of the house wouldn't let Travis enjoy the taste of his tacos. His hands were dry and blistered and he couldn't wash them because the water was already cut.

Travis watched Paul open the orange wrapper of his third taco and asked, "What are these people having done?"

"I have no clue." Paul wiped his lip. "I suppose they just want a new kitchen and a re-do. I betcha Don and his crew gets the bid."

"What makes you say?"

"You seen that truck of his? You don't get that unless you got the jobs."

Travis agreed. He knew Don too. He stuffed wads of his taco wrappers into an empty spackling tub. Paul opened the lid of his cup and chewed a piece of ice. The last thing they did was take down some framing and gut a wall.

When they pulled up to the Chamonix, Travis gave back Paul his gloves. He walked to the supermarket to buy some rice and beans and a six-pack.

Having eaten and showered, Travis sat on his patio looking out at the parking lot. He felt good about the day, and Paul had promised to another job the following Monday. If things kept up like this, he thought. He sat with his feet on the railing. Traffic looked

different at night. He watched a shape walking through the parking lot. He knew it was Dale. Travis remembered the storage space. He took a quick sip of beer and went down to catch him.

Dale opened the door to a fifty-degree angle and slipped inside. The door wouldn't open any farther when Travis pushed on it, so he slipped in just like Dale did. The hallway was lined with towers of stuff, the pillars of some temple. The boxes, bags, papers, papers-in bags, clothes, and piles of magazines were not strange, but it was seeing them all at once. Travis stood, trying to understand this system of things. The air was small and musty like his old school, which made him feel serious. "Is this all yours?"

Dale said it was family stuff.

To his right, fluorescent light glowed blue from the kitchen, reflecting off wires and old doorknobs crammed in milk crates. Travis' shoulders brushed against stacks of paper when he moved. He halted and felt a bit panicky. He thought to just walk sideways the rest of the way. Some files jutted out, plastic bags dripped from between things.

Dale stopped and said something, but Travis couldn't make it out because of the blank sound. Dale turned around by points, until he finally was face to face with Travis. Dale said, "I need this." Travis backed up. Dale chose one of the stacks of papers and flicked his fingers along the edge—like someone shuffling cards. Since he couldn't squat, Dale had to bend down, so Travis let both hands guide him farther back. Dale made a

sound when he found what he wanted. Travis was afraid Dale would topple the stack, but he pulled the paper out—quick and careful. Travis was glad he didn't say anything. Dale turned around and walked into the kitchen with the paper.

When Travis got to the threshold, Dale was digging in the refrigerator. There were stacks of soup cans, boxes of macaroni, and cases of generic soda stacked like gold bricks. Everything was organized, color-coded. Travis leaned on an empty space, picked up a can of soup and twisted it in his hand. It was three years old. Dale came up out of the refrigerator with a can of cola. Good Lord, thought Travis, and sat the soup can down.

“How long have you lived here, Dale?”

Dale moved towards him so he had to step back again. He felt himself lean into something. “Ten years.” Travis allowed Dale to pass into the hallway, following him to the living room.

Partial light came through the windows, never touching the floor. The carpet-rug was a patchwork of 3'x3' showroom samples in colors not fit for homes or offices. There was a sofa, with a fold of blankets and a pillow. At the head of the sofa was a TV on a pressboard console with four identical VCRS underneath—their clocks synched together. Columns of videotapes protected the back and sides of the TV.

A length of dull drape hung onto something at the back of the room near the window. Beside it was a wooden bench that had empty packaging, tools, and a gooseneck lamp. There were radios, screw cabinets, a wire collar with a soldering iron, and some manuals. The edge of the bench jutted into a dark doorway. There was a pile of clothes

and two pair of shoes underneath. There were boxes of all shapes and sizes. Travis wanted to sit and looked for a chair.

“So, Dale...” Travis tried to be strategic.

Dale was trying to move a five-gallon water jug that was filled with coins so he could get to the back of the room. He was grunting rocking it back and forth with his hands, then tried to push it with his feet. He wobbled the jug out of its spot, but didn’t make it but a foot or so. Travis waited to see how far Dale would move it, but he was getting nowhere.

“Need help?” Travis asked.

Dale straightened up, left the jug a few inches from where he’d started. “Heavier than it looks.” He pushed the pillow out of the way, planted a fist in the sofa cushion and let it guide him down. He fished in the droopy pocket, pulled out a cigarette and lit it.

“Chair’s over there.” Dale pointed.

Travis saw nothing.

“It’s okay. I’m good.”

The coffee table between them had crossword puzzles, envelopes, an empty bowl, a shoebox filled with pens and markers. Underneath the sofa, Travis saw more shoeboxes. Dale blew the smoke through his nose. Travis wondered what to do. He watched as Dale went to stub out his cigarette. The ashtray was too full to accept another, but Dale buried it, nothing moved—not a fleck.

“Where’s this trouble then, Dale?”

Dale rubbed his smoking fingers together and pointed behind to the covering behind him. He leaned on his fist again to stand up, “There. I was trying to move them coins and make a path to get to it.”

Travis and Dale moved the jug of coins and cleared a path. Dale stepped behind the sofa, inching his feet through the opening. He went as far as he could, put his hand on the back of the sofa, and reached for the covering. He grabbed a fistful of cloth and yanked. The covering slid down and across like an egg in your hand. Travis couldn’t believe it. It was a table, with legs that had to have been a foot square, all in normal height. It was solid and pale. White, thick pine. Travis eyed the table from side to side, up and down. He made the calculations—sizes of doorframes, hallways, ceiling clearance. He thought of the elevator, the stairs, the basement ceiling. He laughed and walked closer to feel it—not a bump, smooth as cloth.

“Did you make this, Dale?”

“Sure did.”

“Did you do this with Mr. Chas?”

“No. Just me.”

Travis knew carpentry, and he knew craftsmanship. He let his hands rest on the table and looked around the room. The table couldn’t have been that heavy.

“It’s more than this, you know,” Travis said. He thought of all the dimensions again. There was nothing that could move.

IV. Top-Lot

Kay says she's worried about Jim, tells me he's ripe to do something stupid. She wants me to go look after him. Kay gets worked up with stuff like this.

"He's up against a lot right now," she says.

I hate it when she talks like I'm a kid.

"Exactly," I say.

I drive by Paula's Lounge on the way just to see if his truck's there. If Jim's gonna jump ship, he'd stop there first. But his truck ain't there. There's no reason to rush this whole deal—I'll take my time. I'm gonna eat first.

I stop by Burger King for a croissanwich. I'm short about eighty cents and the girl at the drive thru looks at me while I dig through a Styrofoam cup I keep change in. I hand her a pile of fuzzy, sticky pennies.

"Sorry." But I'm glad to get rid of them.

The girl takes them in her hands and looks at me in disbelief. She makes a point of letting them clank on the metal counter of the window and counts them out by pulling them towards her one at a time. Her other hand catches the coins she's already counted. I got all day, I don't care.

They give me a sausage biscuit instead. The only difference is the bread, I tell myself. It's okay. But, the longer I'm sitting there eating, the more pissed off and confused I get. I don't even know what the hell I'm doing. What Kay doesn't understand about these situations is that you have to let people work things out themselves. It's like she thinks I'll find Jim about to knock over a gas station and have to pull him back to his truck, or teetering on the top rung of a ladder and call him down.

“What the hell you doing up there, Jim?”

“She’s gone Floyd. It’s my fault.”

“Come on Jim. Let’s have a beer and talk this through. It’s gonna be okay.”

He comes down, I hand him a beer and we talk. He tells me Dot’s been slipping around. Wants to kill the son of a bitch, but don’t know who it is. He opens his beer,

“She’s right, you know. But, still—”

I don’t know what to say to that.

Jim always has stuff going on. He’s a contractor. I suppose he just shows up and tells people what to do. Signs some papers, collects the paycheck, then goes back to doing whatever he wants to do. So I don’t worry too much about it.

I imagine I’ll find him working out back, listening to the radio. I’ll act like I was just driving by, or ask him to borrow his wheel ramps. I’ll make some conversation and, if he brings Dot up, I’ll just make sure he’s thinking straight. I certainly don’t wanna have to talk him down. I ain’t a therapist.

Out on the highway, I head north to Jim’s place. I pass this grey Mercury driving slow in the passing lane. Kay’s been in touch with Dot. All Dot has to do is cry and moan about how *he’s done this* or *he’s done that* or *he’s no good to me* and Kay believes her automatically, true or not.

I realize Jim’s not immune to being full of shit. I’ve heard his stories—but at least I realize that it’s a possibility. Possibility is something Kay won’t bother with at all. I could care less what Dot thinks. I feel like the odds are stacked against Jim and I think Kay just wants everyone to be happy and I don’t want trouble.

Jim's truck ain't in front, so I drive around back. Lots of times he's back there working. Dried ruts of mud knock and scrape underneath my car. Sometimes he parks under the tent with the Keebler cookie logo. The truck ain't there, so I get out and look around.

Underneath the tent is a metal picnic table with a frying pan full of rainwater and a Folger's can topped with cigarette butts.

I didn't want to go in the first place. These are Kay's friends mostly. We sat at the table under the tent waiting for the food to be ready. Dot and Kay were talking. Dot worked the label on her beer bottle while they gossiped, slowly curling it into a small scroll.

"How was Florida?" Dot looks at us both for an answer. "Floyd, wasn't this your first time at the beach?"

The flame of a citronella candle in a little pail trailed off these black wisps that looked like snakes floating in mid-air. Worked for shit though, everybody was slapping themselves.

"Rained almost every day," I said.

Kay looked at me angry and felt she had to recover for my honesty.

"We had a great time. We went to this neat little place called the Florabama."

Kay was right about this one. Florabama was the highlight of the trip. I got a bad sunburn and alternated between heavy chills and screaming under the shower head for three days. She was mad as hell, and the Florabama was her way of getting me out of the hotel. Kay made sure to talk about this.

“Aw, sounds nice, though.” Dot says

Kay said something back.

Dot says she has to check on something. When she’s gone, Kay nudges me.

“Can’t you have fun?”

I imagined us going home and kicking our shoes off at the front door. We’d sit at the kitchen table drinking something, or I’d stand in the doorway while she put away the dishes. We’d talk a while, then I’d cut out the light and crawl into bed. There was no reason for me to imagine this, but I did.

I told her I’m getting a beer. I wanted to leave. I open the cooler and grab one from the bottom. My hand stings with cold. I ask who needs one and Jim calls out.

Smoke poured out of the grill. Everyone was laughing, slapping mosquitoes. I went over to Jim and saw him try to pinch Dot’s ass with the tongs. She’d moved just at the right time, spun around and said something sharp to him, then storms into the house.

He snaps the lid of the grill shut, waving smoke from his face. He pulls the koozie off his old one and slipped the new one in. I decided to ask Jim about the tent.

“They sell those at the Home Depot?” I pointed.

“What? No,” he said. He laughed.

“Somebody Dot knows. But this—” and he taps the grill with the tongs. “Is a combo grill-smoker.” It was black and chrome with fancy switches.

“It’s even got a water basin so your meat don’t dry out.” He points to the bottom of the grill, but I couldn’t see what he was talking about. I acted like I saw it. “Best top-down grill there is. No flare ups, either.”

“Set you back a bit?”

Jim huffed and nodded. He lifted the lid and shifted burgers from the front to the back. “Keep an eye on this for a minute.” He goes inside.

He came back, lifts the lid, and it seems to put him in a mood. He started listing off the things he wanted to fix around the house. Of course, this got me thinking about our own place.

I’m okay with small stuff, minor repairs. But when it comes to wiring, gas, major plumbing—no way. I just don’t have the know-how, much less the tools. I’d rather call somebody out. Tried it before and it ended up costing me more than it would’ve if I’d just called somebody.

Everyone piled food on ‘til their plates sagged and bent. We sat at the picnic table talking and laughing and everybody seemed happy. Mosquitoes were biting pretty fierce and folks stood up to move around. I dumped my plate, grabbed another beer and found my way to a lawn chair.

I could see Dot inside the house from where I was. She was standing in the hallway with the phone cord following her along the floor, around the corner. I saw Kay

go inside. Maybe ten minutes later she comes out and across the lawn. She leans down and says, “We need to go.”

I tell her, “In a minute. I wanna finish this.” I was relaxing, now.

Kay gave me one of those looks and just stood there, waiting. And the principle side of me—the side that was finally having a good time, wasn’t ready to go. But I knew if I said no it’d ruin everything. Something was wrong, and even if she was just making it all up in her head, it wasn’t like I could say no. What I did or didn’t know didn’t matter.

I took a big swig and stood myself up. “All right.” It didn’t bother me none. I got a chair at home I can sit in and look around.

I bang on the front door a few times, nobody answers. I call out his name. There’s bugs fluttering around the porch light. “Ain’t it late for you?” I ask them. Dead ones crusted on the lip of the glass. I get tired of banging so I dump a puddle of water out of one of the metal porch chairs and sit down.

I don’t see at first, but in the chair next to me is a folded change of men’s clothes. They’re clean and neat, waiting to be put on or put away.

I walk around back again and try banging on the door. No answer. The window is cracked so I push my lips into between the slats of glass, “Jim. Jimbo you there?”

I pull my mouth out from the slats and put my ear in its place. A TV’s going in the background. I walk around the dog-beaten track to the front where a sock is pitched

up on a bit of grass. The weight of the sock bends the blades. I grab the sock and there's a mashed down bit of scrub grass that looks like one of those mystery crop circles. There's a set of keys on the ground—heavy and dangly-looking like a jailer's. I pick them up and go back to the door.

Jim has no neighbors to speak of, but I just picture someone watching me from a window somewhere with a phone in her hand. Seeing me fiddling around the house, she'll panic and call the cops. Then I'll have to explain that it's my girlfriend's cousin's house. I'll explain that she's asked me to check on him because she's worried.

I have to make my way through a good number of keys before I find one that fits, but even if it fits don't mean it'll work. Sometimes, I get one to go in, but it won't turn the latch so I turn it upside down and I maybe get a wiggle out of it. Finally, I find a bronze one that gets the door open and walk in through the laundry room. “Jim?”

It smells mildew. A dryer hose pokes out from the wall like a robot's arm. The top of the dryer has small piles of lint & change on the lid. Above the washer & dryer is a wood shelf with mason jars filled with metal pieces. I walk through the kitchen and to the sound of the TV in the front room.

I walk through the hall, Yellow lines outlines missing pictures.

I check the living room. The drapes closed, TV on. There's a plate with a corner of bread on the coffee table. A crumpled blanket at the foot of the couch. I know Jim wasn't in the bedroom, but I holler back anyway. It feels I ain't supposed to be here, but I ain't doing nothing wrong. And I start siding with Kay the more I look around and the

place. One day is the same as all the others until it changes right underneath you. I look at the TV and tell myself I'll leave at the next commercial. It's some guy talking about pills.

I lock the back door behind me and put the keys in my pocket. I walk around front when Jim's truck comes barreling down the drive.

He rolls down the window.

"Say, Floyd?"

"You hear from anybody? Kay find you?"

"Been busy. Couldn't get to it."

Then he says he needs my help. He looks so tired and sweaty. He says, "Come on, get in," and leans over and opens the door. I get in and the cab smells like gasoline, cigarettes, hot vinyl. It's quiet except for the radio. I don't know the songs, and I don't know what to say, either. Jim takes slugs of coffee from a giant plastic mug. He sets it on the seat between us and it bobbles and sways. At every turn and stop I get ready to reach for the mug, but it miraculously tips back into place. We go on for awhile until I can't take it anymore and I ask where we're going.

"Just wait," he tells me and takes another drink. I try to talk about his truck, ask him things to make him talk. Kay's gonna ask me every word, I make sure not to ask anything about Dot. I know this road we're on, but it feels strange not knowing where we're going.

We pull off into this clearing near Huff's Ferry. We sit there a minute before Jim turns down the radio. I guess he was finishing a song. He gives me a nod and motions me out of the truck. I go around back where he pulls down the tailgate, drags out two bags.

He stuffs one with a notepad, a few thin books, and bottles of water. He puts more water bottles and a map into the other bag and hands it to me.

“Yours got snacks in it.”

“Why do I need snacks?”

He doesn’t answer, but turns up a flap on the tarp, reaches in and pulls out a long, rolled up blanket.

“Shit, Jim, them rifles?”

I don’t know what to think, but with him being tired and sweaty looking I don’t want to piss him off. Jim starts unwrapping the blanket and doesn’t talk. He pulls out his pocketknife and splits the ring of tape around the blanket. He cuts and peels through the layers of blanket and tape very precise—like he’s skinning game. He goes through layer after layer until he yanks it open and there’s two metal detectors sitting there.

“I lost the cases,” he tells me.

He takes the bigger one and hands me the other. He sees me standing there while he’s putting his bag across his shoulder and I’m completely lost what to do. He’s zipping up his jacket, checking his pockets.

“Last week at the Relic Club dinner I heard Chuck Leamus talking about getting some top-lot finds around here,” he says.

Right then I know I’m signing on for something really awful. I grab my bag, put it over my shoulder, and think how to make the best of it.

“What if Chuck already scooped everything up?”

“No way,” he says. “No way in hell. That’s impossible. He said two weeks ago he pulled up some Minie-balls and a CSA button.”

Jim don’t care about Minie-balls or buttons. He has jars and drawers of junk, boxes of stuff in the garage, relics above his washer & dryer.

“So why not bring Chuck?”

“Because,” he says, “this is about what Chuck *doesn’t* know.” He taps his temple. “Why do you think Chuck only pulls up Minie-balls?”

I shrug.

“Because he’s a moron. He doesn’t research anything. He just hears talk and starts swinging. This,” he points a finger towards the water like a tour guide, “is where Longstreet crossed the Tennessee. And if we do this right, we’ll pull up some real juice...maybe a bayonet or something.”

I look at the face of the thing. “How do I work it?”

“Here,” he points at the dial, “It’s kinda delicate. You tweak this it until you get a hot-spot, right? Then you narrow your horizontal focus. Bring it in, bring it in...” He narrows the sweep of his hand, “discriminate out anything you don’t want to stop for: dimes, quarters, or pieces of tin foil—shit like that.” He turns the dial on panel, then moves his hand up and down. “Then you find your vertical. That’s when you can pinpoint.” His hands go slow and stop. “Then you drop & dig. Easy.”

“Do you have to go horizontal first?”

Jim huffs. “Look, this is the way you do it—you go from horizontal to vertical.”

We grab our bags and walk toward the bank when Jim says, “You got to find your own ground, Floyd,” and he pushes in his earpiece.

I make back towards the tree line and try and think of the possibilities. I stomp through the grass and put in my earpiece too. I switch it on, twist the knob to see if it makes any noise. I’m standing still and listening closely. Jim sees me standing there and I hear this, “Just keep swinging,” coming from behind. I hold up my hand and wave.

I walk and listen and swing for I don’t know how long. I go through two bottles of water. I sit on the ground, look at the map and eat the peanuts Jim put in my bag. I try to figure out where we’d come in, where we are now. I try to find where I live on the map. I look around and can’t see the truck anymore. I’m hot and bored. I feel like one of those old sunburned guys walking along the beach with this detector.

I brush salt from my hands, and put back in my earpiece—bugs and birds in one ear, bleeps in the other. But the bleeps get all crazy when I get to this one place. I start to tweak the knob like a shortwave radio—slow turns hitch the signal. The dirt is soft, sand-like, and I get all squawks. I work the dial careful and push it past ‘nickel,’ and I’m still getting noises. I’m making these tiny motions with the wand in one hand with my other hand reaching on the dial. My arms are getting tired, but I keep on. I get it narrowed down and start working on my vertical muddle. I don’t know what’s under that dirt, but can’t help thinking it was something good. I get a focused spot and the detector is going crazy so I shift the dirt with my foot to make a spot. I kneel, sliding my hand down the

detector next to me like some conquistador. I pull out the little spade from my bag. I think about those sunburned guys doing this on the beach and change my mind. Before I dig, I look around for Jim, but don't see him. I start digging. I have a nice little hole going. I'm digging away and I hear,

“You won't do much good that way.”

I look up and Jim's standing there. He points to the spot, but I can't keep going with him standing there like some boss. He gets on his knees next to me, pulls out his own spade and a small brush.

“You can't just jab at it like that. If it's glass or softer metal, you'll bash it to pieces the way you're after it.”

He keeps at it until he clinks on something. I watch how careful and methodical he is. He taps the object lightly and starts brushing away. He shapes around the sides and starts to uncover a bottle. He nudges it free from a clump of dirt. It's squat and round, almost a perfect cylinder with a small rolled neck. He knocks off bits of mud, looks at it and smiles. Jim doesn't need my help.

“Maybe an old medicine bottle.” He hands it to me.

“Is it worth any money?” I sit there holding the cold glass.

“Meh.” He starts to cover the hole with the dirt. “Lead-based glazing maybe,” he says. He stands up and brushes his jeans, “Always fill in where you dig up.”

I hear Kay's voice and know we'll be back again.

V. A New Dressing

Royce swayed, his arms confused. Waves ripped through his head in a heavy chop. Blood dripped on his shirt. He held his eyes tight hearing the hum of the big warehouse fans. Tracy took him by the elbow, slow-walked him across the room and set him against an I-beam. He leaned back. By his feet sat a smallish box. She disappeared and came back with a wad of paper towels, a beige carnation she stuffed in his hands.

“Hold this,” she said.

She sat next to him, took his hand and guided it to the spot.

“You okay?”

He nodded and grimaced. “Bless it—”

Royce didn’t see it happen. Co-workers started circling, their mumbling cut through the hum in his ears. A few pitched stupid questions, suggested remedies. Others were making up their minds that he needed a stretcher or helicopter. Nobody was quite sure. Tracy asked everyone to stand back, so they cordoned themselves into gawking position. Leon pushed aside the box of Raybestos brake pads, came forward, and angled Royce’s head.

“Lemme see, now.”

As a Little League umpire, Leon had seen people in the dirt, crying, spitting out pink teeth. He’d seen emergencies in the field and the stands, parents getting in dust-ups with parents from the other team while the kids yelled through the fence, but this was a nice-sized gash—maybe three inches, meaty and swollen up egg-shape. Royce’s left eye

was fogged, but he blinked it and looked around. He shifted and swept his feet. Leon had emergency numbers in his phone.

“Is it bad?”

“You’ll be fine.”

Leon straightened up and looked at Tracy. He reached for his phone-holster, but she stopped him.

“Ricardo went to get Sam, he’ll deal with it.”

She turned back to Royce and stroked his arm. Royce felt a streak of wet run off his head and click on the cement. Air crisscrossed his head, and he wondered how long this would put him out.

Leon turned to Royce, waving a hand.

“How many fingers, Bud?”

“Three.”

Leon nodded, seemed satisfied and calm. He breathed in deep and thought a minute. He looked at Royce again, then Tracy. “Now, if it were really, *really* serious, then he’d been konked-out cold. And most certainly he couldn’t count fingers.”

Royce was glad that he wasn’t killed outright, sputtering around on the concrete floor with everybody staring. And how would they make the necessary calls and how would they figure it? Besides Leon, nobody knew where he lived.

Royce did wonder, however, if something might be out of whack. Something might’ve gotten knocked loose. He might need help doing simple things like tying his shoes. No way of knowing right away. He’d heard of situations where weeks go by and

then you pee your pants or start drooling or can't walk. This scared him. He felt a cool-burn, could hear his heart, but not like before. All in all, he felt okay. Just to double-check he had his wits, he recited the alphabet to himself, then states and their capitals. He started with Arizona.

Sam was sitting at his desk working through tomorrow's shipping manifests. Ricardo came to the door talking such a line that Sam didn't catch anything but the word 'accident.' He came out from behind the desk. The printer kept spitting out paper.

Ricardo explained as they walked.

"Something hit him in the head."

"How is he?"

"There's blood."

Coming in, Sam saw the line still running. Boxes bounced on the track, making laps around the warehouse. This made him livid. "Hit the line. Hit the line." It seemed like no one heard, so he screamed until veins bulged on his neck.

Leon ran to the wall and punched the button. The belts jittered to a stop and the track wheels spun down like a hundred coins spinning on a countertop. A radio played Norteno music. Sam pushed through the gawkers, stepped over the box, and knelt as Royce named Santa Fe.

"What's happened here, Chief?"

"Don't know. I turned and felt something and then all went white. Felt it in my head like waves. Then I knew I was bleeding and Tracy sat me down and everybody

came over. That box of brake pads right there did it.” He pointed. “But, it’s just a little ding and I gotta—” Royce tried standing.

“Whoa, whoa,” Sam pulled him down. “Let me see.”

Royce lifted off the soppy paper towels like he was taking off a hat. His shirt was streaked blood-brown. He held a steady eye on Sam. Steady and serene. Sam looked from floor to ceiling like there were clues on the metal shelves, in the rafters. Then his pudgy hands tilted Royce’s head with a strange grace. Everybody hushed like Sam was about to do a magic trick.

“He’s going to need sutures,” Leon said.

Sam turned, “Thanks, Dr. Bittle,” and went back to Royce. “You see okay? Anything blurry?”

“I see fine.”

Royce did see fine. He wasn’t passed out, and he’d made it through the Southwestern states. This would cost him—if he had to miss work, maybe not just two or three days. Maybe a week. Good grief, that was more dreadful than thinking what his scalp looked like.

Sam, as a manager, had taken the CPR class where he’d revived a dummy. He had to drag it around and put it on a stretcher and blow on it. Its joints pinched you if you didn’t hold it right. There was a procedure, steps to go through. But that wasn’t applicable now. He didn’t think it was necessary for the First-Aid kit, either, because Royce wasn’t bleeding so much. Royce seemed okay. But Sam couldn’t leave him sitting here.

“I don’t need no ambulance, Sam.”

“Well, you can’t just sit there, either.” Everybody laughed. Even Royce.

Sam had to make a decision. Royce was coherent; maybe it was everyone else who was in shock. Someone said, “Call 911.” And others chimed in and vouched which made Sam take to his feet.

“Let’s just—” he held up his hands like a traffic cop. “Everybody just calm down.” Sam glared until everyone got silent.

“Everybody get back to work.”

The gawkers shuffled away. They grabbed their clipboards, talked about lunch. They seemed sad as they went back to the racks and shelves. Sam turned back like he wanted to say something privately to Royce.

“Look, Sam, I can see, smell, taste—got all my wits. Ask me anything.” Royce brushed his shirt to demonstrate. “It’s just some blood, a ding. Not a big deal.” He held out his hands. Tracy tried to grab one like he was saying something crazy.

Sam paced, flapping change in his pocket. He didn’t know exactly who he was talking to, but he had to say something.

“Who’s our line-man?”

“Me.” Leon came forward. “We had people on the front and back ends. There wasn’t nothing loose when we unloaded them pallets. Just an accident.”

Just an accident, and accidents happen. Sam scooped up the box that hit Royce. Heavier than it looked, he held it in both hands like a cake and shoved it at Leon.

“Get this put away.”

Royce watched as Leon took the box to aisle E, section 5.

“I’m hungry,” Royce said.

Tracy said it was a good sign, patted his arm, and told him he could eat later.

It was nice that Tracy was here. He liked the attention. Her concern and kindness a novelty. Usually, she was yelling about how she’s not everyone’s mother and how she will *not* clean up after them. But, she’s so manic about the break-room, who else is going to clean it up? Tracy offered to drive Royce somewhere to have him looked at.

“Get him to my office,” Sam said.

The line fired back up, and the radio still played Norteno music. Sam and Tracy helped Royce to his feet. Tracy slipped an arm around his waist. With Ricardo behind, they walked him through the warehouse like a prisoner.

In the office, Tracy helped Royce into a yellow, vinyl chair. A call came for her over the PA. She rubbed his knee. “I need to get that, I’ll check on you later, okay?” She winked and left. Sam came in and Ricardo went back to the warehouse.

Sam opened a new pack of shop-rags, stacked them on the edge of the desk, picked up a wastebasket and held it out to Royce, who took from his skull his carnation— heavy in his hand—and dropped it in. It pulled slack edges of the liner tight. Sam handed him a fresh rag.

“I can finish the shift. I feel pretty good.”

“Hell you say.”

“Really, Sam. You seen for yourself, it’s not that big a deal.”

Sam hiked up the his grey pant leg and sat on the edge of his desk. It was true, there was nothing that seemed life or death about this, but it wasn’t that easy.

“You got to have that thing looked at.”

“I know.”

Sam went to his chair. He studied Royce, flicking through the stack of papers on his desk with his thumb. It was the same motion that he used on the edge of his Bible when he sat in church. The pink and white duplicates had a peppery, official smell. Things could get backed up pretty easy without Royce. Sam could have his wife, Louise, drive him. Louise could get him looked at, drop him off at his home, make sure he’s settled. He could have the bill sent direct and avoid all the hassles.

“I’ll take care of this.”

Louise gave Sam a quick kiss. She looked at Royce and went to him. “Oh, Sweetie.”

Royce dabbed a rag at his head now—he didn’t have to hold it there. Louise got so close her hair fell in his face. He smelled her perfume—lavender. She backed away and stood next to Sam. Her arms folded, she sucked her lips like something was stuck in her teeth.

“There’s an emergency care clinic not fifteen minutes away.” She clutched her keys.

“Excuse us, Royce.”

Sam grabbed Louise by the arm and barely pulled the door closed. Sam’s knuckles holding the door were white. When Sam & Louise came back into the room, Royce leaned himself out of the chair.

“Easy, pardner,” Sam said.

Even though Royce was already halfway up, they touched him like they were helping. Sam watched Louise walk Royce out of the office, then he paged Leon.

Sam pulled an accident report from the bottom drawer, put it on his desk, and stared at it. He filled in Royce’s name in the top field, put in the date and time. When he got to ‘comments,’ he couldn’t think of anything to write. He didn’t see the accident happen. He believed Royce, he was a hard worker, and Sam didn’t want to let him down.

Leon was at Sam’s door when a call came through from the owner, Silvan Gomez. “I need to get this.” He motioned Leon to sit. Sam reported the figures from the previous day to Gomez, how much reorder they’d need. While he talked, he avoided touching the report on the desk in front of him.

Royce pointed the way, following Louise up. They clanked up the metal stairs, her steps louder because of heels, the bag of take-out swinging from her hand. The way

she moved, skirt flitting back and forth, made Royce feel clumsy. He pulled himself along the railing, and when he looked up and saw a flash of skin from under her skirt.

He focused on the tops of his shoes. He didn't know exactly what he saw, but kept thinking about it, anyhow. He was ashamed how his mind, within seconds, had turned on him. It shoved thoughts at him he wasn't prepared for. Good grief, this was Sam's wife.

He didn't plan any of this. He wanted to work. He wanted to be let out at the curb, but she insisted on seeing him in. Inside his apartment would tell her things that he couldn't say: He was a man who had been exchanged for something or someone else. The evidence echoed off the walls, shone through the windows, cut marks on the floor. She would put it all together. So, he tried to distract his mind— think of what was left out, what was put away, what was clean, and what was dirty. A crumby plate sat on the counter, papers on the table. A cup in the sink.

She came in behind him. Cables from the video game console stretched across the room like trip wires. He fumbled over them and the controller crashed down. But he thought fast and reeled them in, stuffing everything under the TV stand.

She directed herself to the table. "I'm just going to set this down." She moved things out of the way and he tried to help.

"Don't fuss. Go sit down."

He went and shifted the blanket, pushed the pillows into their corners. He sat to the edge of the sofa and felt like a visitor. Louise searched the bag, crinkling plastic and Styrofoam. Now he knew what it sounded like when he wasn't here: mail dropping through the slot, muffled voices, traffic buzz. His new bandage seeped a bit.

“Here’s your chicken fingers,” she said. “I like the spicy, but I got you regular. No reason for you to eat spicy. I got plenty of sides.” She stacked the sides into two little towers, and took one to the fridge. “You can eat on the extras later.”

She talked like they knew each other. He was amazed at how she moved about like she lived here. Instinctively, she seemed opened cabinets or drawers and found what she wanted. So, it was surprise when she asked to use the bathroom. He figured, somehow, she’d know where it was. He pointed through the bedroom.

People snoop when they get the chance. She would look through his medicine cabinet, pull back the shower curtain, look under the sink. She would see his toothbrush, towel, mouthwash, bottle of expired aspirin, the hand-towels hung above the toilet. He couldn’t do anything but sit there like riding in the back seat of your own car.

The doctor had asked the questions everyone asked. He said it was a closed wound. No reason for MRIs or scans, but no beer, no aspirin, and no sleeping for the next eight hours. He was to call the clinic in the morning or in the event of headaches, blurred vision, confusion.

Louise came back. “I should get going.” Royce wondered what she was thinking. She asked again if he had everything he needed. He wanted her to stay, just watch TV or something, drink a glass of tea. She wrote down a phone number and told him to call if he needed anything.

He walked her to the door.

“Don’t go to sleep,” she reminded.

He ate his chicken fingers, threw the empty carton in the trash. He washed the coffee cup and plate he'd left on the counter and put them in the strainer. He dried his hands, water dripped onto the rubber mat. He wished there was more to wash. He looked at the clock and wondered what to do next.

The morning Royce went back to work, he watched himself in the mirror as he dressed his wound. He had to move his arms to the left—no, to the right. He got all turned around with mirror-moves. He used iodine. So, when he touched the swab to his head it blasted through his skull and down his back. He gripped the porcelain until it stopped. He pulled out a new bandage, ripped off four strips of tape, stuck them on the edge of the sink. Bandage in one hand, he put a piece of tape on each side. The stitches looked like spiders buried in his head, legs-up.

Leon honked and he finished tying his shoes. Since Royce'd left his car in the lot after the accident, Leon had to drive it over. They'd carpool.

Leon left the engine running and made for the passenger's side, but Royce told him to drive. He was glad to see Leon—even though he rode the brakes and didn't signal when he should've. Royce knew people would stare and ask questions, so he wasn't surprised that Leon did too.

“Hurt?”

“Not bad. Stings when you clean it.”

Leon came to a light and slowed.

“Looks terrible.”

Royce turned to him. “You wanna see?”

“No way.”

Leon pushed the gas, and they laughed. Leon was a terrible driver even though he acted full of concentration. Royce said he needed coffee and Leon pulled into a gas station.

Royce went in for a coffee and came back with two. He slid in the passenger seat and handed one to Leon, who pulled off the lid, put in sugar, and told Royce that they’d been scrambling to get the orders filled. Last week, they had a driver that refused a load. Leon sniggered.

“You shoulda seen Sam. He was on the phone in the warehouse bitching up a storm. Yelling and cussing. Man, he was burned up.”

“Why didn’t he just double check the order and make it right?”

The reason, was over fifty items that didn’t make it on there. After Sam got off the phone from cussing the dispatcher, the driver refused to take an incomplete load. Sam flipped his lid. And when Silvan Gomez realized somebody dropped the ball, that the orders weren’t picked up, he gave Sam a dressing down.

They pulled into the parking lot and Royce took a sip of his coffee.

“You’ve got Sam in a pinch.” Leon finished his thought over the car’s roof, “You could get something out of this.”

Royce said nothing.

“Remember what happened with that high school kid—broke his arm two summers ago? Sam had to jump through more hoops than a circus dog. Either OSHA or Gomez. It’s the same deal now. Sam’s trying to play this cool with what happened to you.”

They walked past the gate, through the double-doors and past the parts counter. Royce made stops for kisses and slaps on the back. It felt good to be missed. When he thought deeper, he kind of wished things had fallen completely apart without him. Tracy was helping a customer, but she gave him a thumbs-up.

They waited in the warehouse for Ricardo and someone turned on the radio. Ricardo waited for the printer to finish the pull sheets. Royce was paged to the office.

Sam waved for Royce to sit in the yellow chair.

“Welcome back.” Sam sat, leaned back. “How you feel?”

“Feel great. Really.”

Sam looked at the white square of gauze on Royce’s head. Tape strapped to his forehead made it look like a tic-tac-toe game. The window unit kicked on. Strands of hair missed by the tape swept over Royce’s forehead.

Sam smiled. “You’re lucky I let you come in at all.”

Royce walked down the hall to the water cooler, pulled out a paper cup, pulled the tap, and drank. The cold water made his head tingle. He put his hand on the gauze to feel if anything had seeped through. It was dry and soft. He had put a new dressing on this morning and brought a few extras just in case he might have to change mid-shift.

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VITA

Damon Murrah was born in Houston, Texas. He has a B.A. in English Literature and an M.A. in English with a concentration in creative writing from the University of Tennessee.