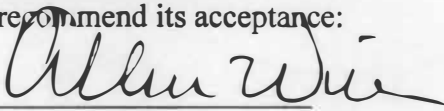


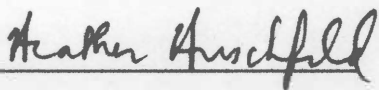
To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Brendan James O'Farrell entitled "Four Stories." I have examined the final paper copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

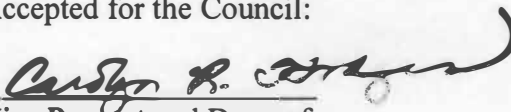

Michael Knight, Major Professor

We have read this thesis
and recommend its acceptance:





Accepted for the Council:


Vice Provost and Dean of
Graduate Students

Thesis
2007
.043

Four Stories

A Thesis
Presented for the
Master of Arts
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Brendan James O'Farrell
May 2007

Abstract

This is a collection of short stories unified by themes of family and friendship, those intransigent bonds that persist despite our best wishes. A personal essay that explains my relationship with writing and outlines my literary influences precedes the collection.

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I. Soup and Glocks, Books and Pen
(Or My Take on a Critical Introduction)

1

When I was very young, my dad used to read to me from a book called *Soup*.

Soup was the name of the main character in the collection of stories, and, if I can recall correctly, he wasn't all that different from Tom Sawyer or any other fictional adolescent who roams around his small American town looking for good, clean trouble. In the only episode I can remember, Soup and a friend wander into an apple orchard not too far from one of their backyards and it's only a matter of minutes before the boys are recklessly whipping apples over the tops of the trees. It's a good hell of a time and if you don't believe the words on the page, there are great drawings of Soup and his friend hurling the fruits with some of the biggest smiles you've ever seen.

Now knowing my dad, I assume that this story also had some kind of embedded moral. I assume one of the boys gets a little out of hand and nearly kills the other boy or, perhaps more realistically, one of the boys shatters an elderly neighbor's window. Of course, it isn't just any window. It's an enormous window—probably a bay, maybe even a stained-glass. And, more importantly, it isn't just any elderly neighbor. It's the old woman with a crumpled back and wrinkled face that every other kid in the neighborhood fears and ridicules. She's lonely and misunderstood. But Soup and his friend have to do the right thing. So they spend the next several Saturdays doing small chores at the old woman's house until they've

done enough work to pay for the window. Of course it isn't easy being around this woman, but over the course of several Saturdays, they come to see her in a new light. Her back, they learn, is crumpled because she used to be a dancer in the Moscow Circus where a big muscle man named Bruno used to throw knives between her fingertips. At one point, she rode the Siberian express clear across the continent of Asia. To be perfectly honest, she just about the most exciting person either of these two boys has ever met.

This is the type of story I remember being read as a small child.

2

When I graduated from Ridgedale Elementary, there was a debate about where I was to go to middle school. Both of my sisters were attending Catholic schools and someone, I do not recall who, perhaps a priest, suggested I should join them. This was just about the worst idea I had ever heard. The reason this idea was so bad was because I was a superstar in the fifth grade. Actually, that's an understatement. I was a *legend* in the fifth grade. In addition to being the best battle ball player in the history of battle ball, I also dated the prettiest girl in the world. Her name was Melissa Maso and she had fallen off her family's dining room table when she was a baby so her right pupil was almost two times the size of her left pupil. Absolutely beautiful. On the last day of school, she kissed me on the cheek after I won The Citizen of the Year Award. This, without a doubt, has been the crowning achievement of my life. Every day since has been downhill for me, and the truly sad

thing is that I realized this even then as Melissa's beautifully dizzy eyes reflected the giant gold star on the face of my certificate.

At the time, I thought that my decline would be less perceptible if my environment remained as stagnant as possible, so it was absolutely vital that I stay away from Catholic school. After all, the majority of my peers were going on to the public middle school, Northwest. I will not lie, Northwest was not a good learning environment. I knew this well, as several stories had leaked into Ridgedale from kids ahead of me. Yet I argued with my parents with a terrible ferocity.

No, I said, it's really not that bad. Those are just rumors. I know loads of kids who say its great. They learn a lot of important stuff—everyday—really, really important stuff.

Eventually, stupidly, my parents listened to what I was saying. Okay, they said, we want you to know that your opinion matters to us. We can give this Northwest thing a try.

3

During the 1994/95 school year, my eighth-grade year, Norwest Middle School confiscated more firearms than all of the Knox County high schools combined. My friends and I took a certain pride in this statistic. We made a point of repeating it when we were in the company of kids from other Knox County middle schools. Only we used the word "glock" rather than "firearm." We wore Starter jackets and listened to notoriously mindless hip-hop with prurient hooks and repetitive beats. Fights erupted on a daily basis. And education was simply

something that happened to occur on a good day, in an isolated classroom. More often than not, these classrooms were the domain of one of the younger teachers, someone who hadn't been in the system long enough to wallow. The older teachers, on the other hand, tended to fall into two categories: the strict disciplinarians who were more concerned with order than education and those enigmatic remainders who seemed to be walking the fine line between senility and insanity with their eyes wide shut.

My U.S. History teacher fell into the latter category. She was a gigantically fat black woman, prone to throwing books against the floor and shouting in tongues. Her name was Mrs. Edwards and she wore long black dresses with frilly edges that swayed about the floor. This, in itself, was fairly normal. Several of the older teachers dressed with a similar funereal flare, but Mrs. Edwards separated herself from these teachers by wearing a hat—not the black-matching, gaudy church hat you might imagine, but rather a bright red San Francisco 49ers *baseball cap*. Even the other teachers wondered about this when she was out of earshot.

Her teaching ability was as dubious as her fashion sense. On the first day of class, Mrs. Edwards walked to the front of the room, adjusted her Forty-Niners cap to a forty-five degree angle and wrote the name George Washington on the blackboard. “Who knows about this man?” The majority of us raised our hand. We were dumb, but we weren't that dumb. “Good,” she said. “How many letters are in his name?” My friends and I turned to look at each other. How many letters? Had we heard correctly?

"*I said*," Mrs. Edwards continued. "How many letters are in the name George Washington?"

A sickly boy with an oversized head, raised his hand and said, "Sixteen."

"That's correct," Mrs. Edwards said. "Sixteen. Sixteen doors into a world of words. Each of you will now see how many words you can devise using only the letters found within the name George Washington."

A black girl in the front row said, "How much time are we gonna get?"

"Two weeks," Mrs. Edwards said. "Maybe longer if you don't get to shouting every time I steps out the room."

I went home that night overjoyed. My passions at that time included, basketball, soccer, and *The Fresh Prince of Bell-Air* and with such a meager workload I would have plenty of time for all three. When my parents asked what I was learning, I lied and said we were going over the constitution, something I remember my sisters talking about when they were in the eighth grade. My dad nodded to this and said, "Do you think your learning as much as you should, Brendan?" I can't remember exactly what I said when he asked me this, but I'm sure it was something pathetic. I'm sure it was meant to deceive.

In the spring Mrs. Edward's history class was exchanged for Mrs. Avery's English class. Mrs. Avery was a middle-aged woman who had smart silver hair short as a man's. She fell into the strict disciplinarian role more out of necessity than personal choice. Her classroom was in one of the trailer annexes near the soccer field and because Northwest did not have the proper resources, she was required to teach

both the remedial and honors students simultaneously. I was neither an honors nor a remedial student, but I could read so I was told to sit on the “smart” side of the annex. While the remedial students dissected sentences and fumbled about the grammatical entrails, we were supposed to read a book of our choice and write about it in a black-and-white-speckled composition book.

On the first day of class, Mrs. Avery sent us to the library to pick out a book. This was not an easy task for me. I was not fond of reading. With this in mind, I decided to check out *Soup*. I told myself Soup was probably the type of kid who didn’t like reading either, and, besides, the book was at least two times smaller than any of the books my classmates were considering, books like *Huckleberry Finn* and *The Hobbit*.

Mrs. Avery had to approve the book we had chosen. We stood in a short line before her desk while the remedial students worked on a pile of dittos. When I handed her *Soup*, she considered the wispy drawing on the cover with incredulous eyes. Then she read the back cover and thumbed through a few pages. I thought she was going to send me back to the library, but I was the last student in line and the remedial kids were beginning to play rogue games of thump-knuckle.

“Do you think you’ll like this book, Brendan?”

“Oh yeah, my dad used to read it to me when I was little.”

She looked at me as a paper airplane crashed into the blackboard behind her.

“Okay, it’s your choice.”

Later that week it rained and Fresh Prince was cut short for a presidential speech. I removed *Soup* from my backpack and opened it to the first page. A picture covered its top half while an exceptionally large block font guided the text. I flipped through a few of the pages and quickly grew bored. Perhaps *Soup* hadn't been the best choice after all. I went upstairs and sulked. My parents were watching the speech and told me to go away or stay and be quiet. My sister Katie was out with friends and my sister Jenny had moved away to college. I went to her room as I occasionally did and stood before her bookshelf, a crude apparatus that consisted of four broad planks stretched across metal bolts hanging from the wall. The first plank of was filled with photo albums I had looked through at least four hundred times. The second shelf was nothing but a bunch of boring French books I couldn't understand, and the top shelf was nothing but a bunch of abandoned cassettes. That left the third shelf. A gamut of sharp-looking paperbacks lined the wood-paneled wall in a xylophone of color. I took the closest of these books off the shelf. Unlike the rest, this one happened to be a hardback and the cover was pictureless, but the title intrigued me. The book I held was Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

To be perfectly honest, I don't remember the first line of *To Kill a Mockingbird* being particularly spectacular. I imagine I read it and thought just enough of it to go on to the next line. But somehow that was enough. That was enough so that I stood there reading line after line until my legs hurt. Three nights later I remember waiting for my parents to go to bed and then shutting my door so I could finish reading Ms. Lee's novel without having to explain myself to anybody. I

sat up in bed until one, two, three in the morning, turning page after page in a mindless trance, unconcerned with anything but the power of the story. The tension of the trial gnawed at my stomach. I remember, dying, literally dying, to know what would become of Tom Robinson. I couldn't read the pages fast enough, yet part of me didn't want to turn the pages at all, because somewhere down deep inside I already knew Tom was going to be found guilty, for even though I was an ignorant teenage boy who hated nothing more than reading, I was also a human being and that was enough to recognize the momentum of truth.

When I finally closed the book, it was almost four o'clock in the morning and though I told myself I knew it was going to end the way it did, it didn't make the experience any easier for me. I felt cheated and hurt because it wasn't the simple and happy ending I was accustomed to but a muddle of injustice and pain. Yet I remember also feeling thankful for the experience because it had treated me like an adult. For my report to Mrs. Avery, I tried to explain this, but I couldn't get it out right. I wrote and rewrote my response until the number of ink-filled pages in my composition book began to rival the number of empty pages. When I got my response back from Mrs. Avery, I was surprised to see she had made only one comment: "Congratulations, Brendan, it looks like you made the right choice."

5

I suppose for other young readers in my situation this would have been a conversion experience, a rite of passage into the world of letters and the realm of endless possibility, but *To Kill a Mockingbird* was much too real to be that for me. It

had nothing too do with reading or books but only the lives of Scout and Atticus, Jem and Boo, Tom and Calpurnia. Because of this, I went back to sports and television without much thought of ever turning back. In high school, I signed up for honors courses and struggled. My classmates at West came from Webb and Bearden, two of the best middle schools in Knoxville, and they had spent their middle school days writing five-point paragraphs with thesis sentences and concluding paragraphs. They could articulate themes and motifs. When they read a work of fiction, they read for symbols and metaphors. I, on the other hand, simply stared at the pages and daydreamed.

To make up for my illiterate comments in class, I took the writing assignments quite seriously. They offered me the chance to create something perfect, something articulate that stood in stark contrast to the inarticulate and vague responses I gave in class when called upon. I was lucky in this sense, because I saw writing as a process rather than a product, a way of shaping my thoughts and emotions in a meaningful and communicable manner. I believe this is knowledge most people in the general population either never acquire or simply forget. Because I understood this aspect of writing, I was able to make good grades, but I still felt stupid in class. I could not gather enough concentration to follow the cumbersome stories of Charles Dickens or the cryptic language of Geoffrey Chaucer. Then, during my junior year, I was assigned a book report similar to those Mrs. Avery assigned to me at Northwest. The book I chose was J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*.

I realize I am not charting new waters here by mentioning the influential power of *Catcher in the Rye*. For Christmas this year, my sister Katie gave me a dubious little book called, *The Book that Changed My Life: Fifty Well-Known Authors Discuss Their Favorite Books*. *Catcher in the Rye* showed up no less than five times. Yet the impact that book had on my life is undeniable. Whereas I was caught up with *To Kill A Mockingbird's* plot, it was all Holden with *The Catcher in the Rye*. He and I had never met yet he talked exactly like I did. He even disliked reading. So I sat and listened to everything he had to say and when he was done I knew him so well I had absolutely no trouble going into class the following day and discussing his thoughts and motivations at length. For once in my life, I was an authority. I was an expert.

6

A week or so later I signed up for Mr. Ross's AP literature class. This was not an easy decision for me. I still didn't consider myself much of a reader and signing up for this class would require me to read *Crime and Punishment* and three or four other novels I can no longer remember just over the summer. Although I eventually learned to enjoy the class thoroughly, I ran into the same problem as I had in all my previous English courses. I was reading material I simply didn't understand, material which didn't speak to me on a personal level like *Catcher in the Rye* or *To Kill a Mockingbird* had. Then Mr. Ross assigned *A Death in the Family*.

As I said above, I liked *The Catcher in the Rye* because Holden thought and talked *like* me. But, as far as I was concerned, the young boy James Agee described

was me. When I moved away to college, I typed the prologue, *Knoxville: Summer of 1915*, and taped it to the back of my dormitory door. Off and on, as my studies piled up and I went on to read other writers, I would look at it and smile. It reminded me of home, but, more importantly, it reminded me of me, and eventually this simple reminder would give me the courage to try writing myself.

7

My first work, predictably, was a gross imitation of Agee's prologue, a mood piece about a young boy meditating on the nature of fireflies while his family sits quietly nearby. A couple of years later, this knock-off would win me a hundred dollars at Sydney University when I submitted it to their annual fiction contest, and later, when they printed it in the student magazine *Honi Soit*, it would be the first time I ever saw my work on the printed page. Classmates of mine would tell me that they had read it and liked it very much, and that, quite simply, was one of the best experiences of my life since that day in fifth grade when Melissa Maso had kissed me on the cheek. I began to write more and as I did so I continued to read more and more work that affected me in a similar manner. I read *Bastard Out of Carolina* by Dorothy Allison, *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison, *The Dharma Bums* by Jack Kerouac *The God of Small Things* by Arundati Roy, *A Confederacy of Dunces* by John Kennedy Toole and *Black Boy* by Richard Wright to name only a few. After reading those, I returned to my original heroes. I couldn't find anything by Harper Lee so I skipped ahead to J.D. Salinger. I read *Franny and Zoey*, *Nine Stories*, and *Catcher in the Rye* a second time for good measure. After I won that short story

contest in Australia, I ran to the library and checked out *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and sent emails across the globe urging all of my friends to read it as well.

When I returned to the United States, I became obsessed with the short story. I fell in love with Raymond Carver, Richard Russo, and Truman Capote, but more than any one author I fell in love with the genre of the short story itself and quickly moved to buy as many anthologies as possible: *The O'Henry Prizes*, *The Best American Short Stories*, *Penguin's Book of International Short Stories*, and *Stories of the Modern South*. Soon I was making "top ten" lists of my favorite short stories, which I continue to monitor to this day, though my list has swelled to well over a hundred. Here are the ten that pop into mind at the moment:

- 1) "Trilobites" by Breece D'J Pancake
- 2) "Children on Their Birthdays" by Truman Capote
- 3) "Cathedral" by Raymond Carver
- 4) "The Communist" by Richard Ford
- 5) "Nilda" by Junot Diaz
- 6) "Space" by Kevin Brokmeier
- 7) "The Third and Final Continent" by Jhumpa Lahiri
- 8) "Babylon Revisited" by F. Scott Fitzgerald
- 9) "What You Pawn I Will Redeem" by Sherman Alexie
- 10)

I usually make a point of leaving this tenth spot open, a symbolic gesture that accounts for all those stories I've yet to read or simply forgotten. Ten, after all, really

is a small, small number. As soon as I finished each of these stories, I felt indebted. I felt as though I had to begin writing immediately, that I had a duty to share similar stories with anybody who was willing to listen. Thus, I sat down and wrote, wrote, wrote. As I did so, my style became more sophisticated. Rather than copying only James Agee, I was now mixing and matching styles and techniques from an array of authors. I attempted to produce character-driven stories with voice, feeling plot, mood, and setting would grow organically from the relationships of my characters and their unique interactions. This is what I continue to do today: I *attempt*. Rarely does it work out. For every ten stories I start, I probably only finish one. This is something I grapple with. Part of me feels that if I start something, I should finish it. But more often than not, I cannot find a coherent middle or end to match my beginnings. To be perfectly honest, this is something that plagues me. I do not like wrestling with something and losing. I do not like walking away from a story feeling that I have failed.

8

So there you have it. That is my general and circuitous introduction before going on to the specifics of my thesis, an analysis of the four stories that follow. It might seem odd to start with books I enjoyed reading as a kid, but I believe these books shaped me as a writer long before I ever thought of myself as such. And now that I look back, the influence of these books are quite obvious. The fact that all of my stories walk the line between fact and fiction, for example, is actually quite predictable considering the authors I've listed above. James Agee, Richard Wright,

and Truman Capote, in particular, all have been credited with the birth of “creative non-fiction” in some form or fashion, for each of them sought to transform their own life, or the actual lives of others, into the enduring realm of art. Whether we label the product fact or fiction, memoir or novel, is really, I believe, nothing more than a matter of convention.¹

Although some of my stories are more fictional than others, the kernel of every story begins with real events and real people, incidents and lives I’ve culled from *my* daily life. I emphasize the word “my” for a specific reason. In my final workshop at UT, Allen Wier brought in the work of William Goyen. In addition to two stories, he handed out an essay entitled “Recovering,” in which Goyen discusses his work in a curious manner:

Everything is autobiography for me. Long ago I knew that another could not give me my life, only help to find it. I could only know life through myself, or recover it myself. I continue to be astonished by my own history. My own experience keeps justifying living. Others’ experience in history has supported and inspirited me; but finally my own has got me through. The most I have been able to offer others and can now is this self-consciousness, ferocious protection of *personal feeling*.

In class this quote brought up a discussion of narcissism. This was not entirely unexpected. In the same essay, after all, Goyen also writes, “More than anyone else,

¹ Of course, I realize conventions *do* matter. Our culture, like every culture before ours, constructs the parameters of protocol for specific purposes, and if we ever forget this, we need not worry, we will have Oprah Winfrey there to smack the back of our hands and pillory us on national TV.

I am most curious about myself, my own hidden behavior, the secret services of my mind.” Yet this sentiment never struck me as particularly arrogant or narcissistic. Though I wasn’t familiar with the work of Goyen, I quickly assumed that he was speaking as much for all persons as he was himself. I assumed he would expect all of us to look at our lives and see just as much wonder and mystery as he saw in his own. This is not a mental framework I was born with, but rather one I believe I learned through the likes of James Agee, Richard Wright, and Dorothy Allison, and, of course, my own experiences, my family and my life.

Another literary hero of mine who wears the “creative non-fiction” badge is Jo Ann Beard. In fact, she is perhaps more entrenched in this enigmatic genre than any of my other influences. The copyright page found within her collection of essays *The Boys of My Youth* states, “The events described in these stories are real. Some characters are composites and some have been given fictitious names and identifying characteristics in order to protect their anonymity.” I find this first sentence quite revealing because even though the book is marketed as a non-fiction collection of essays, it makes a point of calling the essays “stories” and, similarly, it does not say, “the events in these stories are real” but rather “the events *described* in these stories are real,” which, of course, taking everything else into consideration, only suggests the fictional artifice of language itself.

In an interview with Michael Gardner, Jo Ann Beard discusses this issue of genre candidly:

My job as a memoirist, a nonfiction writer, a fiction writer, and an essayist all rolled into one, is my job to make sense out of something - not to make things up, but to make sense out of experience, which for me sometimes requires drawing from all different quarters (i.e. making things up). Sometimes I have to say, 'Okay, these things happened. How can I make this into something that should matter for a reader who doesn't know me?

I include this quote because I believe it openly addresses the conventionality of genre, the fine line between fact and fiction, and because I believe it reaffirms Goyon's "narcissism," as well as my own. Although the stories collected in *Four Stories* are thematically aligned through the intransigent bonds of family and friendship, ultimately, each story is my attempt to make sense out of my own personal experience.

9

I'll discuss my story "A Rain Space" first because, in terms of content, it is the most unique. While all the other stories, in my collection deal with familial relationships, "A Rain Space" is firmly grounded in a non-familial relationship. The narrator and other main character, Billy, I suppose, are ultimately wedded through a bond of friendship, though the narrator never fully realizes the extent of this bond, rather he is left pondering Billy's quick entrance and exit as though one might a shooting star. Ultimately, however, I think (or I should say hope) the story works because the reader enjoys a more objective vantage point. She recognizes that Billy has had a profound impact on the narrator in spite of its ephemeral nature and that

both characters are ultimately aligned in an unspoken brotherhood, Billy shaping the narrator just as an absent father might shape the life of a young boy.

I suppose it's also appropriate that I discuss "A Rain Space" first because it's the oldest story in my collection. Although I've been editing and reediting different lines and paragraphs until just last semester, the bulk of the story is actually several years old. Consequently, I believe if one looks closely, she will be able to see the literary fingerprints of my influences more prominently than she might in my other stories. In particular, the emotional impetus for "A Rain Space" came to me only after I read Truman Capote's "Children on Their Birthdays" and Raymond Carver's "Cathedral." Ironically enough, the few people who've read the story and made a point of comparison have only pointed to *Catcher in the Rye*. To be perfectly clear about what I mean here, no one has ever suggested I write like J.D. Salinger (I'm still waiting for that), but only that the narrator of "A Rain Space" ponders the whereabouts of some ducks much like Holden Caulfield does. It was not until somebody first pointed this out to me that I realized it was true.

10

My story "Naysaying Vanilla" follows "A Rain Space." Although it is clearly a father/son piece, firmly rooted in the domestic milieu of family, it stands out from the other stories in my collection because it is the least fictional. In fact, if I have to categorize it, I would probably call it non-fiction, though, like Jo Ann Beard, I constantly waffle between the labels "essay" and "story." Although I consider the work to be a meditation on choice—a subject I find myself pondering constantly—

describing it as such seems reductive. Ultimately, it is a story of inherited faith and the parallels I see between religion and love. Some aspects of the essay have been re-imagined, but the people and events are real. As the title suggests, there is a fair amount of reluctance within the narrator, reluctance to accept his Catholic heritage and reluctance to accept his father's blind notion of love. Both Catholicism and an ambivalent father/son tension also play vital roles in the final two stories of my collection.

"I Am Your Father You Are My Son" is based on my roommate and good friend Alex Kobulsky. In this story, the reluctance of family is pushed to an extreme. I feel a quote from Jonathan Safran Foer's novel *Everything is Illuminated* gets to the heart of the matter: "You will learn to do that which you hate. This is what it means to be family." In the case of my story, this declaration holds true for both the father Miloš and the son Danny. Miloš is forced into the heavy role of father before he is ready and Danny is forced to live with his father's immature, often cruel, manner of living. Despite these set backs their relationship endures.

In October, *Nimrod* flew me to the University of Tulsa to read "I Am Your Father You Are My Son" at a conference they were sponsoring. The experience was both invigorating and surreal. I had never been to a conference of any kind, never even envisioned myself attending one, and then, just like that, I found myself participating in a panel discussion with the likes of Gina Ochsner, Mya Goldberg, B.H. Fairchild, and Colleen McElroy. Of course, I felt incredibly awkward, young, and most definitely out of place, and the fact that two hundred people had gathered to

hear us talk only made matters worse. I sweated profusely and twiddled my thumbs.

I foresaw my voice trembling. Then National-Book-Award-winner Rilla Askew leaned into the microphone and said, “Brendan, what about you, what are your thoughts on time and place?”

I coughed once then rambled blindly. I started with a panegyric upon southern porches and southern hospitality, then quickly moved to a vacuous comparison of description and character. After that, for no reason whatsoever, I decided I would try to crack a joke, something about not being an Indian. The audience looked at me confusedly, but didn’t laugh. Against my best judgment, I rambled further. I talked about my old roommate Alex and the bathrooms of Tulsa International Airport, which my current roommate Robbie had wrongly described as “the nicest bathrooms in the world,” and threw a pair of scare quotes in the air to emphasize the point. When Rilla Askew finally jumped back in and saved me, I believe I was arguing the superiority of Krystals over White Castle.

Later that evening, for reasons I cannot comprehend, I was asked to read my story. Again, an audience of two hundred people congregated. This time there was a dinner to follow. All the men wore dark suits while the women wore long dinner gowns. I stood before them in a thin black sweater and a pair of pants I had bought at Smart Cents, a thrift store near my old stomping grounds of Northwest Middle. Needless to say, I was terrified. The other three prizewinners were all tenured professors with several publications under their belt. No doubt they had been in this situation a thousand times. At my lowest point, just as I walked to the podium and

adjusted the microphone, I imagined one of them pointing behind my back and snickering.

When I finally began reading aloud, I heard the words exiting my mouth but was much too nervous to comprehend their meaning and follow along with the story. I wasn't breathing enough, it dawned on me, and, of course, I was reading much too fast. A few people in the audience began to chuckle. As I pushed forward, one or two people began to laugh particularly loudly. But it wasn't until I finished the first section and looked up that I realized they weren't laughing at me but at the humor within the story. I took a deep breath and smiled. As I continued the laughing grew louder and as I came to a different section, the moment Danny learns his mother is dying, I heard a gray-haired woman sigh aloud. I looked up and saw that she was crying. If I could have, I would have stopped the reading right there kissed this woman. If I knew how, I would have channeled Mrs. Edwards and spoken in tongues.

11

If this weren't a critical introduction, I would have ended with that last line and felt pretty good about myself. But as long as I'm being honest, I should say writing is not always so much fun. Currently I'm struggling with the fourth and final story of this collection, "A Story of Love and Theft," which is another father/son story featuring Miloš and Daniel Brinarsky. I workshopped it in Allen's class a few weeks ago and received good feedback: good characters, good scenes, but you're missing, my classmates said, a solid ending and it's not clear what's at stake. These

comments were spot on, but they haven't helped me yet. Since the workshop, I've struggled with about five or six "second-drafts." They are messy and confused. The clutter my desktop like spent cigarettes. Gina Oschner told me to be patient and embrace these moments. Think of them as a time to grow. William Goyen says, "embrace the problem and say the same that Jacob said: 'I will not let thee go [angel], except thou bless me.'" Although these words are the wisdom of veterans I admire and a truth I feel I am on the verge of understanding, my own struggle with writing must be fought alone. And that is a difficult fact to swallow. I mentioned earlier that for every ten stories I begin, I am lucky to finish one. I also suggested that I do not like failing but feel, when it comes to writing, that I fail on a regular basis. After brief moments of success, I almost always feel gutted and depressed. I will write three pages in the middle of the night, thinking they are the three best pages I have ever written, then I'll wake up the next morning and decide they are crap. This usually leads to pangs of self-loathing, then the simple realization that I will never be as brilliant as I dream.

Since I've returned from Tulsa, I've been having particular trouble. I feel I'm incapable of finishing anything. I sit at my computer and say, no, no, no, this isn't any good before I've even written anything at all. Sometimes I fear I'll never publish anything again. But occasionally I'll feel like I do just now: after an hour or so of typing, I will forget that I am typing and I will forget about publishing. I will forget about everything except the mystery unfolding before me.

II. I Am Your Father You Are My Son

I was conceived on a Sunday morning in early winter on a couch my mother found on the street. She saw a wealthy couple dumping it on the corner in front of her apartment and called my dad over to carry it up. As he was lifting it to his back, the wealthy couple exited the big house across the street and laughed.

“Oh, how funny,” they said. “We just put that there an hour ago. It’s a great couch. Nothing wrong with it whatsoever.” The man then patted my dad on the back and said, “Don’t worry, guy. We won’t look down on you. It really is a good couch.”

Dad dropped the couch on the street. “What,” he said. “You try joke about couch. Watch. I show you funny joke.” Then stepping around the man, winking at the woman, he said, “You know in *Slovensko* we say woman with open couch mean woman open with love. Maybe you saw Miloš earlier and told hubby here to drop couch, yes?”

The woman’s mouth fell open in disbelief and the man, feeling uncomfortable now, grabbed the woman by the arm and hastily led her away. An hour later, my mother had a plaid couch in the middle of her apartment. “Look!” she said. “Now I have a kitchen *and* a living room.”

My dad showered and came back into the room with a small white towel wrapped around his waist. Dvorak’s Opus 46 came on the public radio station and my dad, feeling rather celebratory, began to dance a two-step.

As the crescendo waxed, he swung the towel over his naked body. “Look, Mary, Miloš woo you like American cowboy.”

“You’re going to slip,” she said.

“It is impossible.”

“Your feet are wet.”

“No matter, Mary, I am wooing.”

She began laughing as he sat down beside her on the couch. She couldn’t help herself. She had only taught him the word “woo” yesterday. And they were happy together. They kissed each other, then—something I’d rather not imagine—they christened the couch and brought me into the world.

Six weeks later when he heard the news, my father became Catholic again. He walked straight to the church down the street, crossed himself with holy water, and began praying. As her stomach grew and I began to kick more and more playfully, my dad stepped it up a notch. He began to recite Our Fathers and Hail Marys night and day. He was praying for a miracle. If that were asking too much, a simple miscarriage would work just fine. In the end, he didn’t get either. And why should he have? He had been praying at Immaculate Conception.

If you’re wondering how I know this story, my father, much to my dismay, has told it many times. When they were getting divorced, he said, “Don’t be a *hlupak*, I never wanted you to begin with. You’ll be much better off with you mother.” Since then, I, and as many as three thousand other people, have heard the

story somewhere during the ungodly hour of 4:30 to 5:30am on his weekly radio show, *Viva Pribina, Viva Slovakia!* On the show, he routinely covers the week's portending weather, then plays several traditional folk or dance songs, occasionally something new and electronic out of Bratislava or Košice. In between, he talks about his pigeons or tells old family stories *ad nauseum*, the story of my conception being just one of many.

Such a radio program, you might be surprised to learn, actually does pretty well. Northern Ohio has its fair share of Slovaks, which is understandable considering both places are cold and miserable. When my father came to this country, he was one of the few who found a job that didn't require manual labor. He was trained as a civil engineer in Slovakia, but found a job as a contractor here in Youngstown—a stroke of luck he claims he was fated for. “What can I say, Danny. I am born potent like *v/k*.”

Looking at his life, it seems to me fate played a rather minor role. He was born in Nitra, one of Slovakia's bigger cities, where he spent his youth throwing stones at stray cats and picking potatoes from his grandmother's garden. When he hit puberty—again, this is information that has come to me against my will—he learned, as he says, why God put him on Earth. “Yes, to be great in general. But also to be great with the women.” To this end, he sold his grandmother's potato pancakes at the market on Saturday mornings. He took the money he made with him to the back alleys of the market in search of Mr. Slovak—apparently, a rather patriotic man—who never did business in the same spot. The man was a legendary figure in the

black market of Nitra. Up front, he feigned the appearance of an upright businessman by sprinkling his table with gold pocket watches and American Hot Wheels. But below the table, behind a paisley, grease-stained tablecloth with ragged frills, Mr. Slovak kept a briefcase full of “provocative” and “empowering” magazines. My dad, though reliability is most definitely an issue here, says he realized that the “provocative” magazines were both a waste of his time and money, and consequently only used his potato money to procure the “empowering” periodicals. From what I gather, these were like any bodybuilding magazine you can find today sitting on the rack at Wal-Mart, tan men flexing and bowing in G-string bikini bottoms, their genitals shrunken behind the protruding mass of their over-pumped, oil-slicked bodies.

“Greatness and women comes, Danny, to man who make his arms like rock, like legs of *vlk*.”

I shake my head. “Wolves don’t have big legs, Dad. In fact, their legs are quite small.”

“Yes, but they have big in heart. They have potent!”

I look at my dad, standing in his underwear and tube socks, the lingering patches of hair matted black against his lumpy head, his pectoral muscles now a droopy mess.

“I know what you think, Danny. You thinking Miloš’s breasts unfirm. But tell me this. Why is it I’m fifty-two and my breasts muscles look like yours, and you are only eighteen?”

“Seventeen.”

“Even worse, then. Look. They hang like mother to ten.”

I refuse to respond to this. Despite my age, my chest does look like my father’s, and I know for a fact his chest looked nothing like this when he was my age. He keeps a picture of himself on the mantle in his room, a tawny seventeen year old with taut skin and chiseled veins. It’s faded with years, sunlight and thumbprints, a frayed left corner, but there’s no denying it’s my father. He’s looking off in the distance, purposely evading eye contact with the photographer, thoughts of greatness, destiny, and America swirling above his incipiently balding head.

To achieve the look in the photograph, my dad began to lift weights at the age of thirteen. He rode his bike to the community center near the central farm and followed whatever “empowering” techniques Mr. Slovak’s magazines had to offer. There was talk among the elders that he might become famous one day and go to the Olympics, but this, of course, never happened. When the Communists tightened their grip, the central farm faltered and the community center was closed to make room for new government offices, and because it was said to promote Western-style individualism, bodybuilding was banned.

Mr. Slovak's pornographic magazines became less contraband and more profitable with each passing day. Before long, he quit selling the bodybuilding magazines altogether. My dad cherished the few magazines he had like rare jewels—surreptitiously enjoying them in the privacy of his room, never speaking of them at school or flaunting them in the market—but it was never the same. His source of information had been cut dry. Still, in his heart of hearts, he dreamed of being great with the women and decided that a grotesque amount of muscle tissue was the key. On moonless nights, he dug the heaviest rocks he could find from his grandmother's potato field, and made do the best he could. Although the result was impressive, the Olympics were out of the question. Whether or not my dad succeeded in capturing the hearts of innumerable women, as he suggests, remains questionable.

When he turned fifteen, his school told him he would never take a literature or history class again. His area of focus was to be science and engineering. This, of course, just like the sanction against bodybuilding, was all predestined. Miloš, like Prince Pribina, was born to be great.

My mother, asserting no agency in his ascendancy whatsoever, was working on a paralegal degree at a community college when he moved to Youngstown. Before lunch one day, she saw him struggling to read the vo-tech bulletin board in the student center and took him under her wing. He was happy to get help with applications and she was happy to replace her belligerent father with a European man who smiled frequently and wanted little else besides fried potatoes and sausages for

dinner. The little English he spoke, she found adorable. The English he didn't speak, she later lamented, is that which she wishes she could have understood then.

When they divorced I was young enough not to ask too many questions, so I'm not sure what the last straw was, but I have no doubt that it was my dad's doing. Within a week, he had his own place and a new girlfriend he met at the Slovak community center there—a small, cinderblock building next to some soccer fields in the middle of nowhere. This is also when he launched his radio career. I was nine.

I missed him greatly when he moved out and woke up early on Monday mornings so I could listen to *Viva Pribina, Viva Slovakia!* He spent most of his airtime playing music as I said, but he also talked a great deal about the never-ending snow, warning the people of Youngstown about the next possible blizzard and the pernicious doings of the local Democratic Party. Frequently, he took a moment or two at the program's closing to herald the progress of his fleet of racing pigeons—then, swelling somewhere between twenty-five to thirty-five—and he usually ended the show by debating the probability of their success in the spring regionals. More often than not, he ventured a seventy-five to one hundred percent chance of success. “What can Miloš say, Youngstown? Miloš's pigeons make great fly, just like Miloš make great lover.”

Later that year, he invited his girlfriend Myrna, a dark-haired girl five years his junior who was working at the KenJo gas station, to come onto the show. He played a traditional folk song for her about love and rejuvenation from the Hungarian

border and danced on the wooden floor. When it was over, he confessed his love to her, pulled a ring from his back pocket, and proposed to her. A short moment of silence followed by a high-pitched peel of laughter came over the microphone, and for a brief moment, it was difficult to determine whether it was the laughter of joy or the laughter of embarrassment. But the answer became clear, when Myrna stood up and walked out of the studio and my dad hurriedly threw on a static-riddled polka. I was so ecstatic I yelled. I ran to my mother's room and said, "Wake up, Mom! Wake up! Dad's just made a fool of himself on the radio. Everyone will know he's a fool."

When the polka finished, we heard the needle run off the record, then the sound of my dad laughing hysterically. "See there, Ohio, Miloš do comedy too! Maybe we have drama now. Yes, yes, it's comedy. Myrna, everybody—a great actress! Very funny. Very potent. We have good joke on air for you."

My mother, groggy-eyed and saturnine, tucked her hair behind her ears. "What was the joke, Daniel?"

I tried to explain that it wasn't a joke, that Dad had just been brutally rejected and humiliated for everyone to hear, but she didn't get it. She started crying. I tried to cheer her up by making breakfast—two bowls of cereal with apple juice and toast—but it didn't help. She was heartbroken.

After that, I stopped getting up on Mondays to listen to the radio show, and Myrna quickly found another man. One night, Dad showed up for dinner as though he were still living with us. It was the start of a tradition, which continued, three to

four times a week, until the day my mother died. At first, he said he needed to make sure we were doing okay without him. But as soon as he came in, he would send me outside to shovel snow as though he didn't care about me at all. When it was too dark to see, I would come in and see my mom frying potatoes and onions in her robe. It was clear that she spent a good deal of time crying whenever I was outside shoveling, but she never said anything about it. In the adjacent room, Dad sat in front of the television, a small glass of cheap vodka sitting on the table beside him, more there for him to pick up and hold than to drink.

During all of these visits, there was only one time I can remember him falling asleep and staying the night in the bedroom with Mom. I woke up and saw his car in the driveway and ran back to her room to make sure I had things right, but they had locked the door. When they woke up, we ate waffles together in the kitchen and listened to Dad talk about his pigeons. I was eleven years old.

As I grew older, Miloš continued to come over and eat, but he quit telling me to shovel the snow. He came in and went straight to the couch in front of the TV, and Mom quit crying so much. When dinner was over, he went straight back to the couch. When he ate too much and fell asleep, he stayed the night on the couch, and I made a point of making sure Mom went to bed without checking on him before she went. Despite my efforts, I often woke in the middle of the night to see him curled beneath a blanket and pillow that she, no doubt, brought to him at some later point.

When I was thirteen, he began dating another Slovak woman named Anna. Like Myrna, she was much younger than my father and new to the country. She was also tall and thin and had very large breasts as so many women from Slovakia do, but she had an unfortunate case of psoriasis that left her skin chapped and flaky. She cleaned houses for a living. I met her several times, and, by all accounts, she was a very nice woman, but when Miloš brought her to our house for dinner, I lost it. I confronted them in the driveway with a handful of stones I had retrieved from the flowerbed and made a point of doing business. Mom came out and tried to stop me, but I was irate and wanted nothing to do with it. I threw the stones as hard as I could. Anna screamed. Miloš yelled. Then, ducking behind the car door, he shouted, “No worry, Mary. We come back later when Danny screw his brain on right and feeling small potency.”

The next time he came back, he came alone and things went fine. While we were eating dinner, he told me I was going to go to Slovakia with him in the summer. I wasn't entirely excited, but I didn't have a choice. “Don't make Miloš hit you like unfirm boy, Danny. It's Homeland.”

Despite all my protests, it was much better than I had anticipated. Beer was cheaper than water, and no one, not even a fourteen-year-old boy, was asked to present an ID. Dad, feeling rather patriotic, encouraged me to drink as much as I could. “You are in *Slovensko* now, Danny. Ill-formed body is no matter.”

I had two beers at lunch that day and threw up an hour later on the street in front of a group of pale-faced girls. Dad patted me on the back and said, "It's okay, Danny. They suffer beers here with most potency in all Europe. I am proud of you."

That night, we met Uncle Joseph, a distant cousin I had never heard of, and he took us back to his house for dinner. He was a tall man with dark skin and a peppered mustache that held the crumbs of previous meals like ornaments in a tree. When we met, he pulled my head against his chest and said, "*Malý* Brinarsky!" His breath smelled of raw mushrooms and vodka. For dinner, he cooked us potato pancakes and sauerkraut. Then Dad told me they were going out for the night, and I was to stay in and rest.

When the sunlight came through the window in the morning, I heard Dad vomiting in the bathroom and Uncle Joseph peeing in the bathtub. We did nothing for the rest of that day. But the day after that, Dad showed me the city square where he had spent his Saturdays as a kid. We ate at a McDonald's there. Then we rode bikes out to his elementary school, but it had been demolished earlier. I asked Miloš if he cared, but he said no. "Don't worry, Danny. Miloš have very special trip planned."

As it turned out, "very special trip" meant a three-day bus ride to Rome with fifty elders who wore wool clothes and no deodorant. Apparently Dad arranged for the two of us to go on a pilgrimage to see the Pope so we spent most of our time praying. We stopped twice a day, once in the morning and once in the evening, to attend mass. As soon as we stepped back on the bus, we began praying again. From

what I could gather, we were praying the rosary over and over again, but I stopped paying attention after the first day. When I thought I was going to kill myself, Miloš said, “I can fathom this not more, Danny!” Then he grabbed my collar and dragged me to the back of the bus and handed me a cigarette.

“Here, we need break now.”

As he was looking for his lighter, one of the old ladies turned around and frowned at me. “Maybe I shouldn’t Dad.”

“Don’t be baby woman. You are fifteen!”

“Fourteen.”

“Jesus *Slovensko!* Just put in mouth, Danny.”

This time several of the elders turned around and frowned.

Dad said, “Fine, Fine!” and threw our cigarettes out the window. “I just focus on fumes of engine. You like that!”

When the elders resumed their prayers, he began singing “Mambo Number Five” in English, Slovak, and Russian at the top of his lungs and I thought I was going to shoot myself. Just when I thought I might go to the front of the bus and start praying again, we saw a sign for Rome, and Miloš slapped me on the back and stopped singing. “See, Danny, these are not all bad. See?”

“Yes, Dad, I see.”

We went to seventeen churches before entering St. Peter’s, which I assumed would have been ample preparation for anyone, but I was wrong. When the Pope appeared for his weekly announcements, the elders almost died from cardiac arrest.

All the women began moaning and crying, and all the men gasped and removed their hats. The man standing next to my dad fell to the ground and began crying like the women. Miloš nudged me in the rib and said, “Danny, I shoot you when you cry like old boy here.”

“If, Dad.”

“What?”

“*If* I cry, you *will* shoot me.”

“What! You think you’re great smart now, is that it? Is that what you say?”

“No.”

“Good, I think not.”

“Good.”

When we came home at the end of the summer, we found Mom sitting on a lawn chair in the back yard watching the sunset. She looked up and smiled at us. “Yay! My boys are home.” Dad and I sat down beside her and laughed. Then we began telling her about everything we had seen and done in the past week except for the beer drinking, which Miloš made me swear I would never mention. When we were finished talking, I looked up and saw that the sky was marbled mandarin and plum. Mom stood up then and told me she was going to die. I didn’t hear her correctly. I looked to Miloš then back to her.

“What did you say?”

“I have cancer. I’m going to die.”

I still didn't hear her. I looked at Miloš.

"Did you hear what she said?"

"Yes."

"What did she say?"

"She suffers the cancer. She will soon die."

"Did you know this?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Why do you think Miloš pray so much, Danny? I think it most potent act I knew, but I must have failed it."



She was never beautiful, my mother. She had a meaty body that hung thick over thick bones and her face was shapeless—a flat, broad canvas that she chose to hide behind long brown hair and a pair of pearl colored glasses. As far as I know, she never wore makeup in her life. I do, however, remember her wearing a yellow dress. It was my thirteenth birthday. I remember it clearly because my father had been detained in Chicago because he tried to smuggle pigeons into the country from Prague. At some point—was it in the customs line? or perhaps later after they had taken him to an interrogation room?—it became clear to him that he wouldn't make it home in time for my birthday. He later said that he had tried to call, but the police wouldn't allow it. Mom, in her yellow dress, didn't bat an eyelash. She ordered me

into the car and took me to a famous steakhouse on the lake and told me I should order whatever I wanted.

After deliberating for a short while, I decided on prime rib and prawns, an expense Miloš never would have allowed. I actually prevented myself from eating any more than half of it because I wanted to make it last as long as possible. I wanted to take it home with me in a box and have it at school the next day for all the kids in my class to see. At the very least, I wanted Dad to see what he missed, what Mom had done for me. When the waiter asked about dessert, I was much too full to eat anything else, but Mom insisted that I order something in place of a cake. After a little prodding, I asked the waiter for a fudge brownie with a slab of vanilla ice cream, at which point my mom said she had to go the bathroom. When she came back, a small group of staff members were trailing behind her, all of them clapping and singing. Although I knew it was coming all along, I acted surprised and genuinely enjoyed all the strangers who stopped what they were doing to look at me. When the clapping and singing ceased and everyone had gone away and a coil of smoke rose from the candle, Mom leaned over the table and said, “Promise me, Daniel, that you’ll grow up to make your own decisions in life. Because”—she stopped to brush her bangs from her face—“it would kill me if I ever saw you settle into a life of convenience simply for convenience’s sake. Do you understand what I mean?”

I didn’t, of course. I doubt she expected me to either. Looking back, it’s clear she was talking to herself as much as to me. After all, she was wearing a dress

at an expensive restaurant on the lake, and my father, for once in his life, wasn't there to ruin it for her. I suspect, on some level, she put on that dress thinking she was doing exactly what she preached, and I suppose if I hadn't been there, she just might have succeeded.

"Are you talking about, Dad?"

"No," she said, "I'm talking about you."

Between that birthday and the day she died, I grew up quite a bit. I didn't pick up stones, for instance, when Dad showed up at the funeral with Anna on his arm. Except for one or two comments, I said nothing at all about his moving back in with me, and what I did say, was of no consequence anyway, for he ignored every word.

"Don't be a *hlupak*. I am your father. You are my son. We *have* to live together, Danny."

Not long after he said that, I awoke in the middle of the night to find Anna's toothbrush and makeup in the bathroom. The door to the master bedroom was shut just as it had been that night so long ago when my mother was alive and dumb enough to love my father. If she were still here somehow, I doubt she would make a great fuss about it. She would say something selfless and absolutely false like, "Don't worry about it, Daniel. It makes more sense this way." But of course she isn't here, so she says nothing at all, and the door to her room remains shut throughout the night.

Anna, just as my mom said she would, has been kind to me. She makes Miloš and me dinner and does the week's laundry without anybody's asking. And, like I said, she respects me enough to keep the door shut when she stays the night. Each morning, I find it disturbs me less. If I should happen to walk past my mother's door sometime in the future and find it wide open and see Anna and Miloš, two bodies wrapped in sleep, I feel confident that I will have the courage to keep on walking as though I had seen nothing at all. In fact, I found myself sitting alone with Anna just last week. We were in the living room watching TV, and she asked me about my plans for the future.

"You could be engineer like your dad, Danny. But I don't think this is what you want, yes?"

I flipped the channel.

"No," I said, "it isn't."

She persisted.

"No, I could see not. What is it then? What do you want to be in future?"

I flipped the channel again and sighed.

"I don't know, Anna."

"You are so young. You have all choices in world sitting in your lap."

As she said this, she made a sweeping gesture with her pink, psoriasis-chafed hand to the house before us, the house she began cleaning, as though it had become her own.

"Such a life," she said. "It is like home that needs no cleaning."

I laughed at the analogy. Freedom and janitorial work have never merged in my mind's eye, and hearing it from her, the woman who waited on Miloš hand and foot, struck me rather comically.

“Yes,” I said. “I feel heavy with potency, heavy like *v/k*. ”

Anna began laughing along with me then, and, for a brief moment, before Miloš walked into the room in his boxers and white tube socks and told me it was time for me to go outside and shovel snow, I forgot who I was and why I was laughing.

III. A Rain Space

Just yesterday I heard that an acquaintance of mine was killed. He was driving his rain space up to Canada when he hit an embankment and that was that. I'm not sure what I can say about it. I had only known the guy for a couple of months. But I did like him. For one thing, he was like nobody I had ever met before. He wore a pair of suede bowling shoes and a red leather bracelet from Lima, Peru. And his name, because I know you are wondering by now, was Billy. I met him in a writing class at Wakapatha Community College.

That was almost two years ago during the hottest summer I can remember. The magnolias were blotched brown with sunspots and dust came out of the ground and hung in the sky like smoke. And Mr. Edwards, the guy who drives the ice cream truck along Main Street, quit until a week after Thunderclap—the South's biggest fireworks show during the month of September.

Anyway, I was still with my girlfriend Cara back then and she had a habit of complaining. She said I was lazy and that I never wanted to do anything on my own or try anything new. So I decided I was going to learn how to write books. Cara crinkled her nose and laughed when I told her about it. "That's funny," she said. "You don't even read. Now you think you're going to write." I didn't let that bother me. I signed up for that class at Wakapatha, and Billy—this kid I'm talking about—he was in it.

At that time, it hadn't rained in almost three weeks so the duck pond on campus cracked into a million little dirt cakes and grew so shallow in the middle. It got to be so bad the ducks got fed up and flew away. I suppose they couldn't have gone too far though. They fly away every year, whenever it gets too hot or too cold, but they always come back. Billy pointed it out. He grabbed me by the arm and said, "That's fucked up, buddy. I mean, that's *really* fucked up."

"What's that?"

"They track the ducks with tags *and* paint. Now tell me what's the point of that?"

"Maybe they'll leave for good this year."

Billy laughed. "Don't get your hopes up, buddy."

That was the week before it got *really* hot and they all flew away. We had been in class two—maybe three weeks. And already I could feel myself beginning to see things differently. It had been going on since the first day of class. That's when Billy walked in with his suede bowling shoes and red leather bracelet. He had a mouth on him too. It was all our teacher could do to keep him quiet. But she tried hard because she liked to talk herself. She didn't say anything on that first day for a good two minutes. She just stood there staring at Billy. But he kept on talking because we didn't realize she was the teacher. She was awfully short and she carried a backpack like a student. But eventually she rolled her eyes and winked at one of the girls sitting in front.

“I’m A.B. Stellar,” she said. “I’m sure most of you have heard of me, but very few of you, I fear, have actually read my work.”

Up until then, I just thought she was going to be a normal, everyday teacher. But as it turned out, she was a pretty big deal. She had written three books and been on TV more times than she could count. Billy raised his hand and asked her what program, but she just winked and said, “You know, here and there.” After that, she got one of her books and read some of it out loud. It was about a war. I’m not sure which one, but it was really horrible. Blood, guts, and ugly dead babies. After a while, this young widow starts to fall in love with one of the enemy soldiers, but I lost track of what happened after that. Billy was making a paper plane out of his Lucky Strike cigarette box. I thought he was going to throw it at A.B. Stellar right while she was reading, but he didn’t. He just laughed and said, “I wish, buddy. I wish.”

A.B. Stellar shut her book and said, “That was the opening of my first novel—*The Road to Acheron*. Does anyone have questions?”

This fat girl in front raised her hand, but A.B. Stellar didn’t call on her. She looked out the window instead. “I know,” she sighed. “My work often has that effect.” After she gave herself a moment to recuperate, she turned the book over to its back.

“Well,” she said. “This is what the critics had to say about it.”

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Billy skipped the following week of classes, but came back the Monday after that and said, “Boy, I got it; I’m telling you, I really got it.” A lot of the class scoffed. They rolled their eyes and mocked him, “Yeah, right. Yeah, right.” The fat girl in front stared at him like a cow. And the girl sitting next to me leaned over to Samma—the only halfway decent looking girl in the whole class—and said, “Look at this crackhead. The only thing he’s got is a crack problem.” Samma didn’t laugh, though. She said, “Yeah, I know.” But she didn’t laugh. A.B. Stellar walked in then and nothing much else happened that day.

You should have seen Billy, though. He was always wearing these crazy *guayeverra* shirts and a pair of leopard-spotted glasses. He also drove this old Chevrolet pickup. It was all dented up and the tailgate was missing. He had a naked baby doll duct-taped to the grill. It had black smudges from its bellybutton to its neck and it was short a right eye. The only thing that looked worse was the hood. It was riddled with rust and cracked straight through the center. He claimed a midget-bitch had jumped out of a tree and dented it in the middle of the night.

“No joke, buddy. I was just driving along minding my business and then bam! This crazy little midget-bitch comes out of nowhere. You should keep your eyes peeled, the same thing could happen to you.”

He was always giving advice like that. I don’t know where he came up with it. I don’t even know what a midget-bitch is. I doubt he did either. He was always making stuff up, saying he was going to drive his truck to a Renaissance festival dressed like Chewbacca or Captain Kirk, or stage a one-man pillow fight on the

corner of Main Street. Walking to class at Wakapatha, he waved whenever a car honked. It didn't matter if he knew the person or not. It didn't even matter if he was waving at the right car.

He got it though.

About two weeks later, he walked into class about fifteen minutes late and said, "Boy, I really got it this time. No more bullshit. I got it right here." But A.B. Stellar wasn't impressed. She started each class talking about her week—how many books she'd sold, how many readings she'd given, even how many autographs she'd signed—and she didn't like Billy walking in late interrupting her. So she raised her voice, but there was no stopping Billy. He started handing his story out right then. But A.B. Stellar said, "Now wait just a minute. We each have a turn, there's an order to this class."

Billy said, "I know. Today's my turn."

Because A.B. Stellar was a little late, the next class began in silence. Everybody was looking around and waiting, thinking about Billy's story. The girl sitting next to me said, "Well, I couldn't finish it. It was just *too* much." She swatted at a fly. "All of those descriptions—I'm betting you he was on crack when he wrote it."

But the story was good. I mean really good. It was about this deaf boy who goes through life looking and thinking. The actual events of the story aren't that remarkable. Just a day in the life of a deaf boy. But by the time the story's over, you

realize this deaf boy— this boy who can't hear or talk or anything—you realize he gets more out of life than you do. If I really got to thinking about it, I probably would've gotten pretty low. But I never did. The descriptions were just too good. Like this one part, where the deaf boy walks out of his apartment and sees a little girl eating ice cream. Before long she drops her scoop on the street and walks away. The deaf boy doesn't move. He sits there and watches it melt. He looks up to the sky and he gets to thinking. He thinks about its blueness. He thinks about this blue dress his mom used to wear when he was little and low to the ground. Then he looks back to the melting ice cream and thinks: *blue is not the color of the sky. Blue is not the color of my mother's dress. Blue is not blue. Today, blue is the color of that girl dropping ice cream.*

I'm not sure what's to be said about that line. Most people in the class loved it, but A.B Stellar said it didn't make any sense. And she's got a point because Billy makes it clear that the ice cream is strawberry. But I didn't care. When I was reading it, it made sense, and the strawberry's being blue didn't matter.

I told Billy. After class that day, I said, "I liked your piece, Billy. I didn't care about it being strawberry, not one way or the other."

He laughed. "Thanks, buddy. Tell you what, whatdya say we go look at my rain space? Smoke us a biddy, get real high, and see what happens."

I hadn't ever smoked a biddy and I didn't know what he meant by "rain space," but I thought it sounded like something I should know about if I was going to write books, so I said okay.

We got in his truck and took off. He put a tape in the deck and music came out. I didn't know what it was, but I acted like I did. Billy asked me if I liked it and I said, "Yeah, I love this album." Cara used to hate me for that. She was always complaining that I didn't like anything of my own. But I did. I liked her and I liked the colorful pattern her videos made on my bookshelf. The way she left her earrings scattered around the top of that bookshelf and the picture she kept of us in the middle.

I looked out the window as Billy drove. All the tobacco fields were blighted and brown, and I could hardly see the foothills on account of all the dust. Eventually we passed a gas station and pulled into a parking lot. It was this little self-storage facility just south of the airfield. Billy kept his rain space in one of the sheds there. To me, his rain space looked like a cage made from scrap metal. And I guess it basically was. He had welded twelve aluminum rods together—each about six feet long—and out of that he made the frame of a cube. He was still working on it, but as far as I could tell, that was it.

I didn't get anything out of it until we started tugging on those biddies. After that, I started looking at it differently. It reminded me of the way my bed frame looked the day Cara threw my stuff all over the front lawn. She surprised me when she did that. I could see her kicking me out, but I wouldn't have expected her to take the time to separate the mattress from the frame. I remember seeing it there empty under the dogwoods like a pet-less cage.

But anyway, that's all it looked like. A frame about the size and shape of a big bunk bed. Billy talked it up though. He called it a rain space and said he was going to wrap it in Styrofoam floats, attach it to a trailer, and drive it to Canada on an international tour.

"Art's dead, buddy. It's all stuffed up and pinned down in those money-banking museums—galleries aren't any better. That's why I'm making this rain space."

I flipped over the garbage can in the corner and took a seat. Billy took a tug from the biddy and began to talk. He said he wanted to take art away from the museums and move it to the people. Said he wanted to take the rain space to every lake between here and Winnipeg and let it float for the people to swim out to. He said the experience would happen when the person began to look out on the lake from inside the created rain space, from inside a different perspective altogether. I didn't really get it. I figure a lake's a lake. But I nodded all the same.

Midget-bitches and a rain space.

Before we left, Billy lit up another biddy and my head got to feeling like it had a hundred balloons tied to it. I started to laugh so hard I cried. Billy said, "Jesus, buddy, I think you like the rain space just fine."



After Billy brought his story to class, Billy and Stellar began to rub each other even worse. I think he felt like he could write better than she could, and, to be

honest, he probably could. The Monday before the ducks flew away, A.B. Stellar told us that we should never end a sentence with a preposition. Billy scoffed.

He said, "That might be correct in general, in terms of proper grammar and all, but in terms of telling a story, that's just plain stupid."

A.B. Stellar wasn't thrilled. She said she was making a distinction between a polished sentence and rough equivalent, and in the end, that's what mattered. That's what the critics would remember.

Billy didn't agree. He pushed his leopard-spotted glasses up on top of his head and said, "You, A.B. Stellar, are a midget-bitch."

A.B. Stellar blinked. "Did you just call me a *midget-bitch*?"

"Does a kitty have climbing gear?"

It took me a second to get the implication, but I started cracking up as soon as I did. The girl sitting next to me leaned back in her chair and said, "My God, my God, he just called *A.B. Stellar* some kind a little whore." Samma didn't say anything; she just sat there with her mouth hanging wide open. The rest of the class was equally quiet. Some took notes. Some stared at their shoes. A.B. Stellar was furious, though. She started to scream, but Billy ignored her, stood up, and walked out. She followed him into the hallway and screamed louder, but Billy just kept on walking.

A.B. Stellar was red-faced and winded when she came back into the room. She apologized for the outburst, and then, after a moment of awkward rambling, she pulled a picture of her and some man I recognized from TV from her backpack and

said, “Well, our lesson plan is pretty much shot for the day. I want each of you to write about this photo instead.”

I couldn’t come up with anything. I sat for a few minutes trying to think of something good, but eventually I gave up. I looked out the window and saw Billy driving away in his beat-up truck. The baby doll’s yellow hair danced against the grill as he passed the duck pond, and, after that, he was little more than a pinhole on the horizon. It was the last time I ever saw him.



It was just yesterday afternoon that the fat girl from that class came into the gas station I’ve been working at. There was a line of customers so I didn’t have much time to talk, but she told me all about it anyway.

“Hey, did you hear what happened to that Billy kid from our writing class?”

I shook my head.

“Well,” she said. “He died.”

“Died?”

“Yeah, car wreck. I read it in the paper. He was driving some sort of unstable trailer up to Canada and his truck flipped. He died instantly.”

“Jesus.”

“Yeah, he was probably on something. That kid could write, but there’s no denying the fact he was a crackhead. I’ll let you go. Looks like you got some customers waiting.”

There were about five or six people, waiting to buy Icees and bread, candy bars and gas. I helped all of them until everyone was gone. Then I stole a jalapeño-cheese corn dog for myself and watched the clock. I stood there like that doing nothing until the new guy came in for the night shift. Then I clocked out. I thought about driving over to campus because it's getting hotter by the day and it will be summer again soon and the ducks will fly away just like they did when I was in that class. But then I thought of Billy and decided against it.

When I got home I picked up the paper and saw that it was exactly like that girl said. Billy was killed just south of Winnipeg. There was a little black and white picture of him standing in front of his goofy-looking rain space, all smiles and leopard-spotted glasses, waving like someone was laying on their horn. There was a little caption above: "Student Dies Premature Death."

It made me think about that time I rode in his truck. After we left his storage garage that day, he took me out to an abandoned parking lot just beyond the airfield. We laid our backs down on the concrete and faced our heads away from the runway.

"Sometimes," he said. "The movies actually get it right. I got this idea from an Icelandic rip-off of *Midnight Cowboy*."

I had no idea what he was talking about, but I attribute that to the biddies we had smoked. By that point, it felt like I had a *thousand* balloons tied to my head. I was looking at broken beer bottles when the first plane started taking off. I could hear its roars and rumbles speeding closer and closer, but I couldn't see anything but shards of glass green-brown. Then it got so loud I thought I was going to die. My

body started shaking and the broken bottle bits started dancing against the concrete. My ears hurt and the wind of it blew across my face and my stomach and my hands. Then it happened. The plane lifted up into the sky and flew away. I wanted to talk, but nothing came. I looked over to Billy and he smiled. I looked back up to the sky and waited.

After the third one, I started smelling dead skunk. Billy had put another biddy in his mouth. I watched the smoke unravel its pink tip. Then I watched him hand it over to me. I was still laid over on my back and that made me cough real good. Billy started cracking up. So I passed the biddy back over to him and said I didn't want anymore. He didn't care one way or the other. We went back to watching planes and I asked him if he had tried any other drugs.

"I've pretty much tried everything under the sun," he said.

I asked him what all was under the sun and what it all felt like. He said it felt good. It all felt really good. "Coke makes you feel like Bruce Lee and shrooms make you see everything pretty. Heroin just makes you feel warm and fuzzy."

Bruce Lee never seemed that cool to me. I've never even been in a fight. And I stopped seeing everything beautiful quite some time ago. I suppose that's why I wanted to learn how to write in the first place. I thought about being warm and decided that wouldn't be so bad because that was the way I used to feel when Cara breathed sleep on me.

“But I’ll tell you what, buddy. For every up, there’s a down. And the downs are always worse. But I won’t go into all that. Who wants to hear about the bends when you’re watching planes?”

He was right. I didn’t want to hear about all that. I just wanted to be high and watch the metal birds fly away. I didn’t last too long, though. I fell asleep and started to drool right there on the glass-strewn pavement. When I woke up, it was completely dark out. No moon. No stars. Just black. Billy was still wide-eyed and awake. I got the feeling he could watch those planes forever.

Out in the distance, I could see a giant cloud moving in. And I could tell by the anvil-shape of it that it was bringing rain and thunder. My wrist began to hurt as it moved closer. I couldn’t see any lighting bolts, but I could see vague flashes of light moving against the face of distant clouds. After a minute or two, we heard thunder. At first it was just dull, rolling thuds. Then it got louder and louder until it began to snap and crack.

On the way back to campus, we stopped at Ike’s and got coffee and corn dogs. I was going to get a regular one, but Billy stopped me.

“You gotta get the jalapeño-cheese combo when you’re high, buddy. Regular just doesn’t cut it.”

My heart jumped. We were standing right in front of the clerk and the lights were really bright on me. And there was a cop standing by the Coke machine. But Billy was right. The warmth of the cheese spread through my mouth and down my

stomach, and the spice of the jalapeño shot through my entire body just as the storm started to come down. We stood there and finished eating as we watched the cop run to his car in the rain. Then we ordered two more.

When we got in the truck, Billy put in another tape. He asked me something about it, but I didn't hear what he said. I was too busy eating and looking at the rain. I tried to think of something to say because I hadn't said much of anything since I tugged on that first biddy. I couldn't talk though. It felt like someone came by and popped every one of those balloons I had tied to my head. I had all these ideas swirling through my brain, but I couldn't pick which one to say. I looked over to Billy and tried to see him without making eye contact. He was fumbling around with little mustard packets and the music deck. My heart began to hurt. The interstate was black and gray with rain and I wasn't buckled in. My belt was right there, but I didn't put it on. I don't know why. I guess I felt like if we were going to wreck, then we were going to wreck. And if we didn't wreck, well, there was no part I had in that either.

Then Billy said, "Look!"

I didn't want to talk or look, but Billy motioned his hand toward the car in front of us. A lit cigarette flew from the driver's window and shot toward us like a star. Right before we got to it, it fell to the ground and exploded a million orange.

Billy smacked the dashboard. "God, I love that! Did you see that, buddy?"

I said yes and smacked the dashboard just like he did. Then we drove over the cigarette, but I didn't say anything else after that. I just sat there. And when I turned to look out the back window, there wasn't anything left to see except the interstate and the heavy downpour of rain.

#### IV. Naysaying Vanilla

My dad grew up eating sugar sandwiches and playing stickball in the street. He lived in a generic, gray house that was so far into Chicago's South Side he could see the halo of Comiskey by night. This was fortunate because my dad loved the White Sox as much as any boy could. He listened to them religiously on the radio with his father and older brother Jimmy or, if it was better for him to stay outside, he simply watched the glow of the stadium from the stoop in front of his house—dreaming, he says, of the day he would step up to the World Series mound and single-handedly destroy the Cubs.

But the views were not always so great. When his mother killed herself, for example, he had to watch his big sister Joyce assume middle age at seventeen. He had to watch Jimmy pick up a bottle and assume alcoholism at fifteen. And, of course, I'm sure he had to watch his little sister Dianne sit in the corner of the kitchen with a dime-store lollypop that couldn't stop the crying anymore than it could the questions. But eventually he stopped watching. He quit eating sugar sandwiches on the front stoop and he quit dreaming of playing baseball for the White Sox. Six months before his fifteenth birthday, he rebelled.

Instead of going to high school like everybody else, he packed his bags and went to a seminary in Niagara. From what I hear, Niagara's even colder than Chicago and there's a lot less to do. So my dad prayed a lot—a whole lot. He also drank a lot of coffee to keep himself warm. With the exception of Saturdays, this is

all he did. He drank a lot of coffee and said a lot of Hail Marys. Saturdays were a little different though. On Saturdays, he and his classmates were allowed to play basketball for two hours. “A *whole* two hours,” he boasts. They played right after lunch, which was nice because they weren’t allowed to talk while they ate. So every Saturday, from noon until two, my dad ran live-wild around the gymnasium yelling his head off.

During one of these games of basketball, my dad had an epiphany. He sank a difficult shot, the clock hit two p.m., and, just like that, he came of age. He decided the priesthood wasn’t for him. He decided he wanted to get married and have a house full of kids. He decided he wanted to be part of a family again. So he packed his bags and moved away once more. This time he moved to Marquette University where he studied Education and Developmental Psychology, and, eventually, he met my mother. On their second date, he asked her to marry him, but she said no. No way in hell.

Half a year later, my mother changed her mind.

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On their 30th wedding anniversary, I asked my parents if their love was fake, something they made up to pass the time. We were eating ice cream when all this came about. Earlier in the day, I had scribbled something down on a Hallmark about how I respected the fact that I had never heard either one of them yell at the other. Then I took them out for ice cream.

“First of all,” I said. “You had never dated another girl in your entire life. And second of all, there’s no way you, or *anybody*, can get to know a person in just two dates. There’s just no way.”

My dad reached for a napkin and wiped his mouth. “I knew it could work.”

“How?”

“I don’t know. I just did. Those kinds of things come with time.”

That’s it. That’s all he had to say for himself—“those kinds of things”—and my mom didn’t have much to say either. They both just sat there licking their ice cream, two scoops of vanilla in two regular cones.

I took them to a parlor with over 50 flavors, and they both chose vanilla. I, on the other hand, chose a double-fudge/rum-raisin sundae with four toppings, and a maraschino cherry, to which my dad said, “You should try some of this vanilla, Bren. You’re really missing out.” My mom lost it. She started laughing her head off and then my dad joined in laughing even harder. I took a bite of my sundae and looked out the window.

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When my dad left the seminary, he was resolute. He had been studying Carmelite theology for four years and he was ready to move on. This is not to say he was ready to give up his faith, only that he wanted to take it with him outside the stone cloisters of Niagara. At Marquette, he attended Mass every Sunday—something that eventually attracted my mom. Although she came from an army family based out of Huntsville, Alabama, she was just as Catholic, and this made for

an easy wedding and a better marriage. Together, they received the sacraments, attended holy day services, and even went so far as to fast long past the forty days of Lent. When my sisters and I came onto the stage, we were required to follow my parents' lead even when I didn't want to. When I was seven or eight, I woke up on a Sunday morning with a stomachache and assumed I wouldn't have to go to church because if I ever felt like this on a weekday, I wasn't made to go to school. But when I told my dad I was feeling ill, he said, "You know, Brendan, it's not like school. You should only miss Mass if you really have to." He furrowed his brow and knocked on the doorframe like he was looking for luck or preparing to emphasize something very important, but, in the end, he said only, "It's your decision."

Of course, I went to Mass that day. Whether it was out of obedience or guilt, or some combination of the two, I'm not entirely sure, but whatever it was, it would continue to plague me through my adolescence. When it was time for me to get confirmed, I told myself, "You might as well, otherwise it'll just be more work for you later if you happen to decide you *do* believe." And when my friends told their parents that they wouldn't be going to church anymore, I grew even more reluctant. On Sunday mornings, I began hitting my snoozer, feigning grogginess, and muttering cynical critiques under my breath (Did you know, Mom, that the H.I.V./AIDs rate is higher among priests than it is in the general population?), but ultimately, at the very last second possible, I would roll out of bed and catch my dad and the rest of the family just before they pulled out of the driveway.



When I was a freshman in high school, my appendix ruptured in Algebra class. The girl sitting next to me offered me a Midol when I described my symptoms, and I gladly took two. Because the pain only got worse as the day went on, I assumed I had the flu and went home early. By the next day, my fever had jumped to well over a hundred and the pain—as the gangrene began to spread through my stomach—became all but unbearable. I am proud to say I never cried, not once. The crying—highly dramatic, highly embarrassing, all-encompassing sobs—came the day after the surgery when my mother leaned over the hospital bed to adjust my pillows and unwittingly placed the palm of her hand, along with a substantial portion of her body weight, directly on my suture. It was the most excruciating pain of my life.

When we finished crying—me out of sheer pain and my mother out of an extraordinary, albeit unwarranted, sense of guilt—she said, “You can thank God, we don’t remember pain the way we experience it.”

If my Aunt Joyce had been with us in the hospital, I suppose she might have made a counterpoint. When you’re seventeen and your mother kills herself with pills, I imagine choices fade and the pain only grows. You can’t wake up your younger siblings. They’ve got school in the morning. You can’t wake up your dad. He’s out drunk, getting drunker. Somebody’s got to call the ambulance. Somebody’s got to stay up and make breakfast. Somebody’s got to start going to work, or everybody in the house will be eating sugar sandwiches.

My dad was luckier on this front. He was young when the world fell apart. He didn’t understand that his mother *chose* to put herself to sleep. He didn’t have to,

he was only twelve. By the time he woke up, his big sister was waiting with breakfast, and the pills and vomit were no longer there, and the yellow linoleum floor shone like Comiskey by night. He wouldn't have noticed the fine, red lines spreading through the white of Joyce's eyes as she answered yet another question with yet another lie: "No, Dad's picking up another shift at the firehouse. He'll be back soon." He was too young for that kind of worry. When he was hungry and the cupboard was empty, sugar sandwiches were the sweetest snack in the world.



There is only one photograph of my grandmother in my parents' house. It stands in a dark-cherry frame atop a bookshelf in the computer room. As far as I know, this is the only picture my dad has of his mother. But it's a good one. She looks like a young Judy Garland, no more than twenty-one or twenty-two, and she is beautiful in every sense of the word. She's wearing a lovely mil-fleur dress with a modest, V shaped décolletage. She has delicate fingers clasped before her chest, a well-defined face (only slightly tilted toward the camera), and she is smiling like a young child.

I have only heard my dad say two things about this woman, his mother. The first came when I was young and stupid enough to ask, "Why did your mom kill herself?" Young and stupid enough not to understand his response as he patted me on the back, "Well, Bren, I don't know—she never told me. But, from what I can gather, she must have been terribly sad."

The second thing he said about his mother came out of thin air and started as baseball. I walked into my parents' room and he was sitting on the bed by himself. "You know," he said. "When I was six, Phil Masi was catching for the Sox, and all I wanted in the world was a catcher's mitt like the one I saw in the newspaper. I asked for that mitt all year, but I never got it. I'm sure my parents would have loved to have given it to me. But they didn't have the money." He looked up at me and smiled. "So I began saving every penny I had under my mattress, and, by the following Christmas, I had enough to buy the mitt, but not enough to buy the mitt and still get everyone a gift."—he was actually laughing now—"Know what I did?"

"What?"

"I wrapped the mitt and gave it to my mom."

"As *her* present?"

"Yep. And you know what she said? She said, 'Thank you, lamb chop.' It's the best gift I've ever gotten."

He stood up then and left me to consider the room, the poster hanging on his side of the closet. It's a simple image of Mt. Rainier. One snow-capped peak rising over a green forest, an open field frosted in juniper and lamplight, and a pristine lake, which is almost see-through, save the reflection of that one mountain, rising, rising, rising, kissing the cerulean heaven above. At the bottom, in a neat, rather wispy cursive reminiscent of the 1970's, the poster reads: "You have only to open your eyes to see the hand of God."

For several years—as early as middle school, as late as college—I spent many hours pondering the significance of that statement, waffling from sardonic pessimism to mystical optimism. The brooding inspired several poems. Some cynical, some stoic or Zen-like, some merely descriptive. All of them, however, alluded to the incongruent world looming before me.

The summer before my freshman year of high school, Trocan Shell, a boy I played basketball with in middle school, was shot to death in a parking lot. Seven bullets. Three in the stomach, two in the back, and at least one through the bookends of his skull. His older brother had been murdered in the same manner four years earlier, and, just like that, his parents were left childless. The newspaper read, “Boy Shot like Animal.”

I was not as upset as you might imagine. Yes, I felt badly for Trocan’s parents, but Trocan himself I did not miss. By the time he was murdered, we had long gone our separate ways, and, in all honesty, we were never really friends. He was merely the star on my middle school basketball team—a boy I could only say I once knew. But all the same, his death made a mockery of my father’s poster. For how could one “open his eyes” and see anything beyond death and sorrow? How could my father not see his mother putting herself to sleep one pill at a time?



As I was moving into my freshman dorm at Georgetown University, I saw a girl moving in down the hall, and, much like my father, I fell in love instantly. She carried a box into her room, said something to somebody I couldn’t see, and, a

moment later, reappeared empty-handed. When she walked by me, I actually had the sense to ask her the time—a cheap trick to buy a minute in her presence—and it worked. She smiled, told me the time, and walked away. Eventually, I learned her name, Rachel—Rachel Marie Burke—and we actually became close, the best of friends in fact, but she never loved me.

Rachel came to school already in love. He was a boy she had grown up with. A boy she loved—as she regularly told me—with all her bloody heart. His name was Allister, and he was still living in her hometown of Tuscaloosa, Alabama as a musician. He was unconcerned with the self-absorbed artificiality of the Georgetown scene, or really any scene for that matter, and he made the best mix CDs I have ever heard. Rachel burned me copies of them frequently and, some nights, we listened to them together in my sock-cluttered room.

“This is amazing,” I would say.

And she would say, “No, *he* is amazing. Allister is amazing.”

When *he* came to visit, I was as good as I could possibly be. I shook his hand and wished him well. I even asked him and Rachel to go to a party with me, but they declined and chose to spend the night alone in his hotel. I saw very little of Rachel for the rest of the week. I went to parties alone and volunteered my services on the pump of heavy, silver kegs, talking disinterestedly with other freshman girls until, finally, Allister went home.

When Rachel returned, I pushed her away and said cruel things. I began dating the prettiest girl in our dorm, a very innocent, silver spoon, South African girl

who wanted nothing more than to fall in love and remain innocent forever. I broke this girl's heart slowly. I pressured her into doing things she didn't want to do, and when she would go no further, I pretended I didn't know her. Then I plowed through other girls like they were ice cream. I played sad songs on my stereo and talked about writing (though I hardly ever wrote), and a surprising majority of the girls fell for the act. When I woke up in the morning, they were there yapping like the birds, making my headache worse than it already was, and all the while I continued to see Rachel from afar: adjusting an earring as she left the dorm, talking in the dining hall with new friends I didn't know, and, occasionally, daydreaming, laughing out loud, as she walked across Healy Lawn and out of my life.

I went home and ate ice cream with my parents. When I returned to school, I watched the semester dwindle away. Then I watched the summer pass and a new year begin. Because Rachel once told me she dreamed of going to Australia, I signed up to study abroad in Sydney. But two days before I was scheduled to leave, I learned she was going to Edinburgh, Scotland. I went on to Sydney and plowed through more women: Asian, Australian, South American, and European. It didn't matter so long as they were new.

When the Twin Towers collapsed, it was close to 11pm in Sydney and I was watching TV in my friend's apartment. The movie we were watching stopped and there it was. A plane impaling a building. We didn't understand that it was real. To us, it looked like a poorly-made-for-TV-movie. We flipped the channel and laughed. When we came back around and saw that nothing had changed, that the made-for-

TV-movie wasn't a movie at all, but a newscast, live and real, we sat and listened. And that, the complete and staggering inarticulacy of the talking head, is what stunned me more than anything else. *Is this real?*, he asked. *Are we still one the air?* *I'm not sure... Wait. What? My God, this is... Now? Ladies and Gentlemen, you, that is... Tower Number Two you see falling on your screen.*

I went to my classes the next day and sat—the lone American—as though it were any other day. I could feel everybody staring, waiting for me to say something or stand up and leave, but very few people actually spoke to me.

When they said, “My God, I’m sorry. That was terrible, wasn’t it?”

I said, “Yes, terrible.”

But deep down, there was something ugly inside of me that I couldn’t explain, something that kept me glued to the TV that night crossing my fingers, waiting, even hoping, that I might see something more, another sky, another plane, and, yes, another building. The Empire State, Trans-America, or, better yet, Sears. This, after all, is what comes of little boys who fear the word “love.”

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According to my dad, prayer can take many forms. It can be a spoken recitation, a hummed song, a feeling without words. Perhaps, he would say, a single decision—vanilla rather than strawberry, vanilla in place of chocolate. So I made a decision of my own. By the start of my late-December *summer* vacation in Australia, international airfare had dropped ridiculously low because of the attacks on 9-11. I rejoiced and took the opportunity to fly to Edinburgh.

When I got there, Rachel was wonderful. She took me out for drinks, cooked me dinner, and put me up in her flat. But she was not interested in me as a lover. She was with Allister again. They had broken up and gotten back together before she left America, and though things weren't perfect (they were three thousand miles apart and she suspected he was losing a relatively new battle with drugs, though she wasn't yet sure which drugs), she was still in love. The walls of her flat were covered with photographs—current as well as thumb-smudged, corner-bent, yellow shots from childhood—her and Allister riding bikes in their Halloween costumes, her and Allister standing in the cafeteria together, laughing amongst a group of awkward, middle-school peers, and, finally, her and Allister holding hands, kissing one another, here and there, throughout high school and the first two years of college.

We were celebrating New Years at the time. In Edinburgh, this means Hogmanay, a four-day festival of Scotch, kilts, and neon-lit Ferris Wheels. We drank and walked the cobblestone streets until the sun set and the sky bled a dark, purple and orange. At midnight, we looked up and fireworks exploded in the sky. Then Rachel and I kissed each other on the lips, politely, as is the custom. The next day, we ate a groggy breakfast with some of her neighbors who wouldn't shut up about how much fun they had had the night before. "Didn't you just love it?" they asked.

"Yes," I said. "It was incredible."

An hour or so later, it was time for me to go. Rachel wished me well and gave me directions to the train station. If she had offered to walk me to the train

station, I told myself I would have overcome my fear and told her how I felt, but she never made this offer. So I left without saying anything and gave up once again.

After I returned to Sydney, I got a call from my mom who told me, in a rather pained manner, about two boys my dad was working with at his school. The first was a six-year old boy who would no longer smile because he had begun pulling his teeth out with his hands. And, while that was bad, the kid *did* want to smile; he was embarrassed about what he was doing and wanted help. The second boy was only a few years older—ten years old—but his outlook was not as bright. Unlike the boy who pulled his teeth, this boy came to the conclusion that he was beyond help. So he hung himself in his bedroom on a Monday night.

My dad was devastated and, of course, my mom was just as devastated from having to see him in so much pain. As for me, I had been studying Psychology, toying with the idea of becoming a clinical psychologist. But, by that point, I had lost my interest. One of my professors, a young instructor in the Philosophy of Psychology at Sydney, said to the class, “I want you to ask yourselves—and really think about it—is there a mental disorder out there that doesn’t come down to a breakdown in basic human relationships.”

I shut my book and realized I didn’t want to know the answer.

When I came back to America, I was eating lunch with my dad when he told me he was going to an Alfred Adler-inspired conference entitled “Learning to Build Positive Mental Frames.”

Thinking it would lead to a discussion of Psychology, I asked him what made him want to go. “God suggested it,” he said. “While I was praying, God told me it would be a good thing to do.”

What do you say in such a situation? What do you say to the man munching on pretzels who proclaims, straight-faced and sober, that God has spoken to him?

“Oh,” was my solution. A brief second of eye contact, then an “Oh” riddled with nervous laughter.

A couple of weeks later, I woke to my parents praying aloud in the living room. It was six o’clock. To them, I suppose, this seemed like a perfectly reasonable time. Because there they were, going through a list of neighbors and relatives, even people I had not seen or heard of in years. They prayed for the health and safety of these people, their happiness as well as their survival, and, after they finished that list, they prayed for the dead. Then they moved on to countries and regions: Northern Ireland, Palestine and Israel, East Timor, Indonesia, the Congo, Sudan, Iraq and the rest of the Middle East, the big cities that made the news that week as well as little-known places I had never heard of, on and on and on, until I was forced to get up and shut the door to my room.

I watched my senior year pass in a daze. Then I graduated and my chance with Rachel was gone. I moved back in with my parents in Knoxville and delivered

pizzas as I did in high school. In the store, I fraternized with gangly teenagers who sculpted phallic oblongs from powdery scraps of dough. In the car, I listened to books on tape and forever turned into the driveway of the wrong house. When I went out at night, I drank prodigious quantities of alcohol and shook the hands of people I had known in high school. I made jokes about delivering pizzas. "Hey," I said. "I could tape my Georgetown diploma to the back of my Toyota." They usually laughed but then stopped themselves, unable to get a firm grip on my tone. I went home late at night and woke to the sound of my parents praying. What had been an occasional routine was now a daily ritual. Their list of countries expanded to twice its length while new names like "Trocan Shell" filtered through the vent of the room and exacerbated my hangover.

When June rolled around, my parents celebrated yet another anniversary. This time they went to a bed-and-breakfast in Asheville, North Carolina and nobody ate ice cream. Instead, I delivered pizzas and returned to an empty house. When I came home that night, I lay down in my parents' bed and considered the room anew.

It appears to be nothing fancy. Light green walls and a little white cloth draped around the window. The bed sits in the middle with a chest of drawers on either side. The closet, where the poster of Mt. Rainier hangs, is in the left wall with cheap wooden doors that slide off the tracks if you aren't careful. If you weren't paying attention, this is all you would see, but if you look above the bed, on the rough-plastered ceiling, you would see the universe hanging in a white linen sheet. My sister made it when she was eleven or twelve. She took a perfectly good bed

sheet and covered it with cheap glow-in-the-dark stars that fade out as the night goes on. Then she thumbtacked it to my parents' ceiling one day when they weren't looking, right above their bed. Its drapery—more complex than a simple sheet, less ornate than a rose—hangs at different lengths in hope of creating a sense of three-dimensionality. For more than twenty-three hours of the day, it hangs down like the tacky sheet it is. But for a brief window of time, right before you close your eyes and fall asleep, some of the stars glow closer than all the rest, and then it does look 3-D.

You have only to open your eyes.

The following morning, I woke to a house full of silence and took the opportunity to write Rachel a letter, short and to the point. When, two days later, I still hadn't heard anything from Rachel I began to panic. I checked the mailbox, three, four times a day in a terrible heart-pounding frenzy and my pizza delivering skills grew even more atrocious than they had been before. Where I had once missed the given houses' driveways, I was now missing entire streets. I drove in a daze two miles past my turns, clipped well-lit curbs, and drove through red lights as I wondered compulsively about silly things, such as whether or not I had used a stamp. By the time another two days had passed, I could no longer sleep. I was supposed to be painting my parents' house, but I spent most of my time simply sitting on the scaffolding, staring unconsciously at the infinite and reticular design of dried paint chips. When my mom finally, came to me a day or two later and said, "You've got a letter here from Rachel. Do you want to open it now or wait until you come down?" I tried, as casually as possible, to explain "now" would be just fine.

In the letter, Rachel told me that she would be moving to Japan in less than a month, some worthless place called *Kurume*. But towards the end, she also told me that she and Allister had broken up. By no means did she admit to having any feelings for me, but she did invite me to visit her before she left for Japan, and I figured that was good enough. The rest would come with time.

I threw some clothes in a bag and hopped in my Camry. A few minutes later, I found myself on the interstate, averaging ninety plus, slapping the roof of the car, praying it would make it to Tuscaloosa. Almost as soon as I got there, I tried to kiss Rachel a shameless three times, but she rejected me. It wasn't that she didn't want to kiss me, she said, but we were in a bar, and Allister might walk in at any moment, and by this point, he had lost his battle completely. He was addicted to heroin, and would, quite literally, self-destruct if he happened to walk in and see us holding hands or sharing our first kiss.

When I left Tuscaloosa, nothing had been solidified. I was better off than I ever had been before, there was no doubt about that. I actually convinced Rachel to kiss me once or twice before I left. And the week before she left for Japan, she came to visit me in Knoxville. On the first night, we sat down to dinner with my parents who adeptly added Rachel into their prayer before eating. Then, on the second night, when Rachel and I went out to a bar in the Old City, I finished two beers and told her I that was in love with her.

She looked down and blushed. Twirled a strand of hair around her finger. Looked out the window and sighed. "I could say the same."

Like Rachel's relationship with Allister, there is still a lot about my dad's life that I don't know. His mother killed herself. I am positive of this. But how she actually did it remains a mystery to me. Whether it was with pills as I have written, or some other way, possibly much more grotesque, I simply don't know. My dad does not tell these things. Nor does he tell me that he feels he will die soon. Yet he does. Given the young death of both his parents, he feels his time is rapidly approaching. This has come to me from my mother—the source for so many of the things I have come to know about my father. But what follows here is a story he told me himself:

When my Uncle Jimmy turned sixteen, he began to rebel. He began to drink too much, skip school too often, and, worst of all, he began to cheer for the Cubs. This, in particular, infuriated my grandfather, but Jimmy didn't care. He was sixteen now and he could drive anywhere he wanted.

"He would beat me up sometimes, but he was the best big brother a boy could have."

"Why's that?"

"Well, I usually asked for it, there was this one time—"

"No, I mean, why was he the 'best' big brother?"

"Oh," my dad said. "Just what I was saying. He could've taken his friends with him to Wrigley, or gone by himself, but he always took me."

"Yeah, but you hated the Cubs."

“You’re right, at least at first. But the Cubbies had Watt Moryn and Ernie Banks and those are two players that are hard not to like. Besides, I liked being with Jimmy. Within a year or two, I came to love the Cubs much more than I ever had the White Sox.”

We were on our way to the Great Smoky Mountains for a late fall/early winter hike when he told me this story, and I was a little annoyed because it killed my metaphor. Changing teams halfway through life does not work as well as an obstinate allegiance to vanilla. My meditation on choice becomes rather muddy. Faith, after all, is not meant to be whimsical. But my dad, I have come to realize, does not place his faith in the *things* of this world but the people, the relationships that take us beyond ourselves, and bridge us to that place where dead mothers stand smiling like young Judy Garlands.

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When Rachel and I were still young in our relationship, I would grow lonely because she would fall asleep—as she continues to do today—quite easily. Her sister, in fact, has been diagnosed with a mild sleeping disorder, and I suspect, though she thinks otherwise, that Rachel suffers from this same malady. At any rate, it’s been a long time since Rachel and I have watched a movie without her falling asleep. That’s not to say she doesn’t like movies; they’re actually one of her favorite pastimes. She revels in buying big tubs of popcorn and giant cups of Coke—monstrosities, even by the American standard—which she attacks in a joyous, wispy-haired, pre-adolescent manner through the duration of the trailers. Just before the

movie starts, she sighs and gives up. She sets the remainder—practically the same amount she began with—on the floor next to me and smiles.

Yes it's entertaining, even cute. But the problem begins about halfway through the movie, when her eyes grow heavy and she shifts her weight. She fights the inevitable in a valiant manner—a ridiculous head bob, a sudden tremor, and, if I'm lucky, a muffled snort—but, in the end, it's all for naught because, eventually, she will sigh and succumb (God, love her) with her mouth hanging wide open.

Loneliness often prompted me to poke, even tap, my finger against her two front teeth and whisper, "Flies, Rachel. You're catching flies." But this went over as you might imagine. She would snarl, curse me under her breath, and make it painfully obvious that I would soon come to regret that decision in the worst way. On more than one occasion, she actually tried to bite my finger.

Although I'm tempted otherwise, I generally grant her peace and watch the movie by myself. I've come to accept this small dose of loneliness, just like my father chose to accept the events of his childhood. I've come to accept the fact that there are certain things I will never need to know.

## V. A Story of Love and Theft

Since I started college almost four months ago, my father lost his job and wrecked his car. He says he fights with my stepmother Anna even more frequently than he did over the summer, though this is a claim I have trouble believing. The full extent of this information came to me exactly one month ago, shortly after the arrival of a medium-sized manila envelope. The CPO had called me down early on a Monday morning and explained that they needed me to come pick up a package from Youngstown, Ohio at my first possible convenience. Their tone, I noticed, wandered somewhere between professional politeness and baffled annoyance. When I got to their office, the work-study student behind the counter studied me carefully and repeated my name in an exacerbad manner.

“Yes,” I confirmed. “That’s me.”

“Okay, then, *Brinarsky*, give me just a second.”

While I waited on him to return, some girls I knew from my psychology class walked by on their way to breakfast. I smiled and waved but they didn’t see me. The work-study clerk returned a moment later carrying the medium-sized envelope far in front of him like one might a bucket of slop.

“I think you’ve got some kind of food in here,” he said. “It’s been leaking on everyone’s mail. If you could just sign for it and clean up any mess you make on the way back to your room, that would be great.”

I considered the envelope. Its middle section was bulged and greasy and no longer an off shade of yellow but sickly translucent. Occasionally, a glob of fatty liquid would dribble from the bottom right corner and release a salty, meat-like odor. I signed my name apologetically and carried the package back to my room much as the work-study student had brought it out to me—cautious and at a distance. When I finally sat down at my desk and opened it, I found a two-pound slab of bacon and three post-it-notes wrapped in Seran Wrap—my father’s take on a care package. The first post-it-note said, “It is true, Danny. I have lost my job. I have lost my car.” The second post-it-note said, “I have sent bacon. Cook for girl on floor with most prodigious chest. If you are lucky, she will become potent and immodest.” This yellow square also featured two intertwined stick figures. The third post-it-note simply said, “You are coming home.”

I picked up the phone and dialed home, but neither my dad nor Anna was there. A few hours later, Anna called back and confirmed the fact that Miloš had indeed lost his job. She also informed me that he had moved out of their room and begun sleeping in the small garage at the far end of the house. When I suggested this was highly improbable, considering the garage had nothing in it except a sprawling pile of firewood, she breathed into the phone and said, no, this was not the case, Miloš had taken the bed from my room and placed it beneath the cluttered workbench opposite the firewood. She went on to explain that he had taken several items from my room. My chest of drawers sat beside the recycling bin. The accompanying light—something I could barely remember now—apparently sat there on top, beside

a stack of yellowing newspapers. When I asked her what she knew about the third post-it-note, the one that informed me that I was “coming home,” Anna continued with a description of the garage.

“And your wrinkled *plagát* of Alicia Silverstone, Danny, this now covers only window.”

“But, Anna, what did he mean when he said I was coming home?”

“Here, Miloš is with me now. I will let him explicate this to you in fully.”

As she handed the phone to my dad, I heard them arguing with one another, though what exactly they were arguing about remained unclear. I heard a few insults, followed by a few threats, then a muffled and fragmented version of Anna’s voice coming through the receiver from a distance: *No, Miloš, it is your pevnost’... ..you...please.... not be zbabelý.* Eventually, Miloš picked up the phone and shouted into my ear. “I only use Alicia poster to block sun, Danny. It is much brighter in garage and sleep is important for me now. I am looking for new job.”

I had the urge to throw the phone against the iron heater below the window but overcame it. “What are you talking about, Dad?”

“Your poster, I place it over window in garage.”

“I mean, what’s this crap about me coming home.”

“I do not understand.”

“You sent me a yellow post-it-note with a package full of greasy bacon.”

“Yes, yes, this is true. Braminir, do you remember Braminir, Danny?”

“Yes, I remember Braminir.”

“Good. He is like uncle to you.”

“Yes, I know. Why are we talking about him?”

“When in *Slovensko* Center last Wednesday, Braminir give me premium deal on large meats. Two pounds for—”

“Dad!”

“Yes?”

“What did you mean about me coming home?”

“It is surprise. I have bought you ticket. You will come home in two weeks!”

I laughed at myself for getting so worked up. “You mean for Christmas?”

“No, no”—he paused as if he had misunderstood me, then changed his answer—“Yes, this is correct. I buy you ticket for Christmas! It is good surprise, yes?” This time I couldn’t hear anything but the ebb and flow of a vacuum in the background. Apparently, Anna had begun had begun cleaning the house. “Okay, Danny, I must go now. But I am proud of you. I love you very much.”

I was a little surprised to hear him say this. I knew it was more or less true, but, still, it wasn’t like him to talk so openly. The only other time I could remember him saying he loved me was the day after my mother died.



Because he’s got plenty of time on his hands, it was easy for Miloš to pick me up at the airport. He arrived in Anna’s station wagon with two cans of beer stuffed in the glove compartment, another four rolling freely among the cleaning supplies in the middle seat. The warmth of the aluminum did not bother him. He tossed me my first

can in the parking garage, just before tossing me Anna's keys. "To my son's return," he said. "My son who studies like *vlk*."

Once we got on the interstate, he reached into the middle seat and opened his second beer. When I suggested that maybe I should wait until we get home before I had any more, he said, "Yes, I think it is better this way. To drink in big city, this is not so potent an idea. There are many police on street. Besides you are eighteen."

"Seventeen."

"Yes, seventeen. This is what I said. We will stop and trade places when we get more near to Youngstown."

As it turned out, "more near to Youngstown" meant stopping to buy Anna a Christmas tree at the Home Depot five minutes from our house. But before we did this, Miloš had me park in the farthest corner of the parking lot, a remote and abandoned section where employees had shoveled the season's excess snow. The majority of it sat black, messy, and monolithic beside a rain-stained motor home with two flat tires. Miloš got out of the car, walked around the front, and opened my door. "I am thinking," he said, his black halo of hair rippling in the wind. "That you are more ugly than last time I remember."

I sighed. "You're fat and old. What do you want?"

"What do you mean? I say earlier that I will give you chance to drink once we escape Cleveland."

"Well, we're only five minutes from the house now. I'll just wait."

Miloš furrowed his brow and squinted as though I were small and very far away. “No, I think it is better if you drink now. You are young and in college. This is what you do for fun, yes?”

I laughed. “Yeah, I guess so.”

“Good. It is settling then.”

He got in my side and pushed me over the parking break. I looked in the back seat and found the last two cans of beer beneath Anna’s mop. They were even warmer than the others had been, but I went ahead and popped one open. I had just gone through finals and beer felt good—even if it was lukewarm. To my surprise, Miloš refused to drink the last can, arguing that it wouldn’t be fair for me to have only two of the six, that he had intended for us to split the six pack evenly all along. Although I would come to see this offering in quite a different light soon enough, at that moment, as we were sitting in the car watching the sun set behind the abandoned motor home in full shades of yellow, orange, and pink, I simply shrugged and accepted it as an unusual gesture of kindness.

While I drank, Miloš asked me how school was going but cut me off before I could even get into it. I suppose he considered the various menial jobs he had taken on here and there to be more exciting, and to an extent, I suppose they were. In October, for example, he reversed the flow on one of Anna’s spare vacuums and walked house to house, asking to blow leaves. By late November there were no leaves left, but mucky brown stains—from where leaves had lingered and bled—muddied the driveways and sidewalks of those homeowners who had stared at him

confusedly a month before and slammed their doors. Miloš saw this as an opportunity to replace Anna's vacuum with a homemade pressure washer. This time he made a point of beginning each project *before* knocking on any front door. Occasionally, this or that person would be annoyed, but more often than not he could talk them into paying half price.

When I opened the last beer, Miloš turned the car back on and said, "Yes, Danny, this is good. Now you must finish new beer before I park again." When I asked where exactly he was planning on parking, he pointed to the other end of the parking lot.

"That's barely a hundred feet away."

"Don't be a *mačička*. You comfort first beer like flabby-breasted woman."

"Wait a minute, now. I had that other one back at the airport."

Miloš put the car into drive. "Even worse then, beer number two should always be defeated more freely than beer number one."

In the end, I had a little more time than I thought I would. The Home Depot was as busy as I had ever seen it and the spots Miloš was looking for—those spots next to the handicap spots—were predictably taken. Milos circled around once or twice but eventually gave up and took the last of the handicap spots. "It is twenty-fourth," he said, rolling our empty cans beneath the car next to ours. "To pay more than ten dollars for tree is like eating shit of bull."

"It's the twenty-third."

"What?"

“Today is the twenty-third.” I considered the Salvation Army volunteer standing at the entrance. “Christmas Eve is tomorrow.”

“Is this true?”

“Yes.”

“Fine. I will give Fifteen then, but no more.” He removed a messy concatenation of crumpled bills, mostly ones, from his wallet and dumped it on my lap. Then he removed the rather large coin holder from the middle console and poured its contents—no doubt, Anna’s—on top of the bills. Several of the coins fell into the netherworld between seats. I rolled my eyes and exhaled.

“What did you say?”

“Nothing.”

“No,” he said. “I believe you say something. Perhaps you were trying to make funny joke, yes?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“Good.” He reached across me and opened my door. “This is what I thought.”

We found the Christmas trees to the right of the main building in a small roped off section in front of the garden supplies. Concrete gnomes with round cheeks and scraggly beards guarded the entrance. Miloš laughed and handed me yet another

crumpled one-dollar bill to the precarious pile cupped in the palm of my hands.

“You will go inside and pay. I will pick most number one tree.”

Inside a pimply-faced high school kid with an orange apron stood at the cash register, picking at his fingernails. He informed me that the tree sales were separately owned and operated and that the man who usually sold them was gone to lunch.

Then he informed me that he was unable to accept checks or credit cards on behalf of the absent attendant. When I dumped the money Miloš had given me on the counter, the kid squinted at the mess as though he were at a science fair.

When I got back outside, Miloš was sitting beside one of the female gnomes, watching his breath billow. “What in hell!” His voice was shrill and high-pitched like it always is when he’s angry. “Where were you?”

“We have to come back later.”

“I gave you fifteen dollars—maybe more.” He said “fifteen” as though it were a small fortune.

“The tree guy isn’t here. We can come back later and get one.”

Miloš pushed on one of the gnomes to get himself up. “Don’t be a *kokot*. We are potent like turbines. We will succeed one now.” He ran off and I got a sick feeling in my stomach. The female gnome seemed to pity me. A minute later, Miloš was pulling around the corner, tapping at Anna’s horn in a manic and celebratory manner. I recognized the broken tune to be a poor attempt at Dvorak’s Slavic Dance No. 8 and winced. Miloš finished the crescendo, then rolled down his window and jabbed his finger toward the pool of trees behind me.

“That one!” he shouted. “Get that one!”



Before my mother died, this zany and absurd world my father inhabited was like a dream to me. Occasionally, it would enter my consciousness, cross paths with my own tamer, more controlled life, but then it would always fade away. This is primarily because Miloš left my mother and I when I was seven years old—though the word “left” isn’t entirely accurate. When they divorced he didn’t abandon us altogether, he simply moved to an apartment on the other side of town. I could go weeks without seeing him and then, just like that, I would come home and there he would be, standing in our kitchen, concocting a steroid for his racing pigeons or leading my mother in a four-step polka.

Usually these visits came just after one of my father’s break up, of which there were several. The first woman I can remember him dating after my mother was a yellow-hair lady named Ivana. She had long knobby legs and gigantic breasts, but everything she cooked tasted of ash. Then there was Marta who owned her own bakery but was muscular and flat-chested. Miloš said her hair smelled of natural gas. After her, Miloš actually went outside the Slovak community to find a nice Hungarian girl named Klara, but that only lasted a matter of weeks for obvious reasons.

Miloš met Anna shortly after my mother was diagnosed with cancer and by all standards she seemed like the perfect combination of all the previous women. She had dirty blonde hair and a thin body, and though her skin was riddled with psoriasis,

she had a voluptuous chest and an uncanny desire to serve. She was a domestic by trade, someone compelled to clean and polish *everything*, and before long she learned to cook. As my mother predicted, Anna also came to love me very much, but this happened slowly, only after my mother had passed away and she and Miloš moved in with me and took over the house as though my mother had never been. This was two years ago, just after my fifteenth birthday. I wasn't thrilled with the arrangement, but I learned to tolerate it and, with time, I came to accept it for what it was—a life better than most.

It was my changed opinion of Anna that led me to this conclusion more than anything else. Where I had once seen her as a home wrecker and thief, I eventually began to see her much as I saw myself. After all, she was ten years younger than my father, which meant that *we* were actually closer in age than they, and I had no illusions about the circumstances of their romance. Like so many of the other women, Miloš met Anna at the *Slovensko* center shortly after she had arrived from Bratislava. Her English was poor. Her wallet was empty. And she had no immediate friends or family. Yes, she was young and shapely, but she also had a severe case of psoriasis and I assume this played tricks on her mind, made her feel as though men her own age would see nothing but purple-chafed skin. Of course, she never suggested this or anything like it to me directly, but why would she? What would be the point? I could do nothing for her and, at the time, I thought she could do nothing for me.

At the beginning of my senior year, Miloš made it clear that I was to go to school in-state. The fact that this had nothing to do with what I wanted seemed to matter little. “Don’t be a *hlupak*,” he routinely said. “You are stupid and have *púšť* for brains. You will go to school near to home.”

Then, one day as I was walking home, I saw Anna staring at me from the front window, a remarkable smile stretched the length of her face. When I walked in, she actually started clapping. I looked over my shoulder, half expecting to see somebody else behind me, but Anna said, “No, Danny, I clap for you.” When I asked her what was going on, she only shook her head and pointed at Miloš, who was pacing back and forth in the kitchen. When I walked in and asked him what was going on, I noticed the bits and pieces of envelope dancing about his feet had come from the ETS. “Maybe,” he said, looking up for the first time. “I have been being wrong. While I am potent in body, you, Danny, are potent in brain.”

Anna threw her psoriasis-chafed arms around me and agreed. “Yes, Danny, you are truthful *geniálny*.”

I blushed.

“No,” she said, grabbing my SAT scores from Miloš. “It is true. See for yourself.”

I took the paper in my hands and smiled. Although I clearly wasn’t the genius Anna kept referring to me as, I actually did do pretty well. For a brief moment, I even thought I might be able to change Miloš’s mind about where I could apply, but he killed that hope before I could even get the question out. “Do not

think,” he said, while we were still standing there in the kitchen. “That you are too smart for Ohio just because you score potent on one test. In *Slovensko*, you must take such test many, many times. Only then are you truthful *geniálny*.” When I took the SAT again a month later and scored twenty points higher, Miloš cursed under his breath but gave no sign of relenting.

On the following day, when Miloš’ had left for work, Anna moved all of her belongings into the guest room and later, when he returned from work and insisted that she move everything back at once or take it all and leave, she did what she was told but refused to sleep anywhere but the floor. As far as I could tell, Anna’s effort passed in vain, but the following week Miloš’ cut the polka section of his radio show to make a familiar announcement. “Maybe Miloš has been being wrong again, Ohio. While I am potent in body. My son Danny is potent in brain.” Then, just before putting on another folk song from Nitra, he said, “Therefore, he shall succeed whichever school he chooses.”

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When we finally got home from the airport, Anna was out back feeding Miloš’ racing pigeons. Because he now has over fifty, and because pigeons have a digestive, this has become quite a drawn out chore—not to mention messy. I remembered doing it myself and wondered why Anna would have ever volunteered herself for such a job. Then Miloš came back into the room in his underwear and tubes socks, his flabby chest drooping and jiggling just as it had when I was in high school, and just like that I realized Anna didn’t have a choice.

“Yes, yes, Danny, I know. I am svelte like tank of *Slovensko*.”

I shook my head. “Slovakian tanks are large and clunky and all but rusted these days.”

He considered this while scratching at one of the last full patches of hair on his head, then changed the subject. “Do you succeed many potent girls in Washington?”

“Thousands.”

He opened a new can of beer and smiled in an approving and oblivious manner. “This is good. When I was young and most like tank, I too had many million of woman.”

“That’s good, Dad.”

He patted the arm of the couch. “Yes, it was.”

In the end, Miloš and I started decorating the Christmas tree by ourselves. I began by untangling the lights. Miloš began by assuming a managerial position on the couch. He watched for a while, then threw our box of family ornaments on the floor beside me. “Get some of that *hovno* from when you were little boy and put it where Anna can see. Also, put one or two of pictured ornaments with your mother near to top. This way Anna will recall that she is not so pure.”

Following these directions was not as easy as it should have been. Many of the bigger branches had been snapped off during our getaway and the bottom of the trunk was uneven and wobbly. While I placed the various trinkets here and there, Miloš took sips of beer and threw strands of popcorn at me from the couch. “It is

good to have you home, Danny. When you finish, you can watch Miloš put Grandma Dana's angel on top of *vianocny strom*. But you will need to gather short ladder first. It is in room—where bed used to be.”

By the time Anna came in, Miloš was passed out on the couch with his mouth open, and the box of decorations, save a single strand of bubble lights, was now empty. Anna saw me kneeling at the base of the tree and screamed, “*Malý Brinarsky!*” When I stood up she clutched me against the prodigious bulb of her chest. “*Preboha*, it is good to see you! And this!” She nodded to our tattered tree. “It is beautiful! Do you bring with you on plane?”

I scratched my head. “Well, no, I don't think I would actually be allowed to—”

“Danny!” She took a step back and placed her hand over her mouth. “What happen to you? You become *so* serious these days. Don't you realize I make joke?”

I laughed at my mistake. “Sorry, I guess I'm a little out of it.”

“Yes, yes, I see. You have been on plane, no?”

I said yes, but she didn't seem to hear me. Her attention had shifted toward Miloš who snorted once and stretch against the length of the couch. His dirty-socked feet hovered over his forgotten beer cans like two of his uglier pigeons.

“Oh, Danny,” Anna said. “What are we going to do? He still wears no shirt, and his socks, they are worn through to bottom of feet.” She unfolded the afghan on back of the couch and covered as much of him as she could. Then she picked up the

abandoned cans beneath his feet. “He is so sad since he lost job. It is terrible for him. But we can talk it later. You must be hungry, no?”

“No, I’m okay.”

I told her I wasn’t, but she wasn’t looking at me. She was still looking at Miloš. Eventually she said, “No, no, I think you are hungry now, but I can never tell. You are so different from your father. He tells the truth all the time. Sometimes, Danny, I think you lie just to be nice.”

I laughed. The idea that Miloš might be categorically truthful had never crossed my mind. “This is true, Anna, but I lie only to you.”

She furrowed her brow in a hurt manner. “You lie only to me?”

“Anna!” I raised my hand to my mouth and smiled. “What happened to you? You’ve become *so* serious. Don’t you realize I make joke?”

This time she laughed. “Yes, yes, I see. And now you make joke about my English too. You are very funny. Come I will make you something to eat—even if you are not so hungry.”

That night I slept in a sleeping bag. Minus the absence of my bed, desk, and lamp, things in my room were much as they had always been. The walls were still dull beige with a bright orange trim, a combination I had chosen in honor of my beloved Browns, and the carpet was still busy and confused like the fur of a calico cat. I chose it on my tenth birthday. It was what I wanted at the time and my mother bought it for me to make me happy. I lay staring at it, half expecting to see my father

tiptoe into Anna's room across the hall, but the disturbance actually came much later in the night, after I had already fallen asleep. I was far too groggy to hear the exchange properly, but it was heated and ended with Anna throwing something loud and heavy at Miloš's head. I know this because whatever it was smacked against the wall and woke me up properly. That's when I heard more of what they were saying:

Miloš: "*Si Boha*, Anna! You almost hit Miloš' beautiful head."

Anna: "Your head is already full of lumps. What is one more?"

Miloš: "Okay, okay. Maybe I succeed tomorrow then."

Anna: "Not until you tell him."

I woke the following morning to the sound of Chumbawamba. Miloš was singing their number one hit from the shower at the end of the hall. *I get knocked down! But I get up again; you're never gonna keep me down. I get knocked down!* He had forgotten the rest of the lyrics. I rolled over and moaned, pulled the sleeping bag over the back of my head. I woke an hour later to the smell of warm *kapustnica* and raw pirogies. Oddly enough, I found only Miloš in the kitchen. He was standing at the counter unraveling two sticks of butter with each of his hands.

"What's going on?"

"I bake pirogies this year—I decide it this morning in shower."

"Does this have to do with your fight, are you trying to get back on Anna's good side so you can stop sleeping in the garage?"

Miloš furrowed his brow. "You were awake?"

"It's not like you were whispering."

“What did you hear?”

All I could remember was the sound of something smashing against the wall, but then, just like that, as Miloš stood before me, furrowing his brow in a concerned manner, it all came back to me, including Anna’s concluding remark—*Not until you tell him*—and, though I feel stupid admitting this now, it wasn’t until that moment, as I stood in the kitchen staring at my father, butter now down to his elbows, that I realized I wasn’t going to be going back to school, that this “vacation” had been planned and orchestrated since the day Miloš lost his job.

“The remodeled garage is for me, isn’t it?”

Miloš smiled. “So you are truthful *geniálny*, after all.”

## VITA

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