To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Matthew L.H. Forsythe entitled "Loop Trails: Stories." I have examined the final 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.

Allen Wier, Major Professor

We have read this thesis
and recommend its acceptance:

Accepted for the Council:

Associate Vice Chancellor and
Dean of the Graduate School

Loop Trails
Stories

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

Matthew L.H. Forsythe
May 1999

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Dedication

This thesis
is dedicated to

Michelle and Julianna,

my first fans.

Acknowledgements

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Finally, my sisters, grandparents, and parents deserve more gratitude than I can express for their love, prayers, encouragement, and unconditional support.

Abstract

The pages that follow comprise a collection of the stories this author has written and revised during his two-year term of study as a candidate for the Master's degree in English at the University of Tennessee. The stories articulate the author's explorations of a number of characters and subjects, especially the nature of journeys. These stories are accompanied by an introduction explaining the author's concept of his fiction aesthetic, including the connections between elements of theory and their realization in his writing.

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And I saw Sisyphus too, bound to his own torture,
grappling his monstrous boulder with both arms working,
heaving, hands struggling, legs driving, he kept on
thrusting the rock uphill toward the brink, but just
as it teetered, set to topple over--
time and again
the immense weight of the thing would wheel it back and
the ruthless boulder would bound and tumble down to the plain again--
so once again he would heave, would struggle to thrust it up,
sweat drenching his body, dust swirling above his head.

Homer
The Odyssey

I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave. . . .

Paul
I Corinthians

One must imagine Sisyphus happy.

Albert Camus
The Myth of Sisyphus

Loop Trails

Among my earliest memories--my first memory that occurs in narrative form, in fact--is a walk to a weathered stone bridge, a journey I often took as a child from my family's house on Rectory Close to a stream outside the village of Wendlebury, England. I'd drag along anyone willing to chaperon me, but my favorite co-hiker was always my grandfather from Ohio. We listened for the sound of the creek as we walked, then he waited at the bridge while I scouted the many possible paths from the lane to the stream. I could become an explorer, a soldier, a sea captain--all in the course of a half hour. But I always returned to my grandfather, and before we left for home, we played Pooh sticks together as I recounted my adventures in minute detail.

My family returned to the States when I was four, and by the time I entered high school, the creeks I followed ran through wooded gorges in southern Ohio. There I taught my sisters to dam streams with rocks, and friends of my parents sent vanloads of their children hiking and climbing with me. As we discovered new worlds together, I told them stories, and I listened to the stories they told me.

Writers are storytellers, so I invoke these memories because they hint at the stories I want to tell. Katherine Paterson says that she writes stories "to connect to the part of the child that's hidden" (148), and poet Mark Jarman

searches for the moments in his life "[w]here things began to happen," moments he identifies as "ground swell[s]" (13-14). My most vivid memories and "ground swells" stem from journeys, and my "hidden" child happens to be an explorer. Hence my writing attempts to convey the essence of people and places I've discovered during sundry excursions.

The machinery of fiction adds invention to the process, of course, so my stories aren't mere facsimiles of past events. On the contrary, they're creations that possess a life of their own, a vital character that's independent of situations that may or may not have supplied the initial inspiration for words on the page. I side with Richard Bausch, who notes in his humorous but insightful author's foreword to *Rare and Endangered Species,*

> concerning the characters in these stories, any resemblance to such [sociological and political] constructions is entirely coincidental, and all resemblances to actual persons--that is, to recognizable, complicated human beings caught in their time and place--are exactly, wholly, and lovingly intended, even though I have imagined them all.

The human beings I tend to imagine at this point in my writing career are people who take journeys, and I attempt to capture my characters en route.

I've milked and exaggerated my walk to the bridge outside Wendlebury for two decades, ever since first explaining my imagined

adventures to my grandfather, so I'm sure the original events have been replaced in my memory by my re-telling of them, the story I've based on their foundation. I no longer recall the "actual" bridge, and I don't want to remember it, for the bridge I now picture is far more interesting. It may not be as "real," but it's certainly just as "true."

Imagination takes the ordinary and makes it extraordinary, crafting the mundane into something interesting--something larger-than-life. A storyteller weaves truth via myth, a process C.S. Lewis discusses in "On Stories" and demonstrates in his novel *Til We Have Faces: A Myth Retold.* None of the stories I've included in *Loop Trails* aim at a specific "moral" or "lesson." But whenever they're faithful witnesses to the journeys they follow, then I believe they also lead to understandings that can be described in terms used when discussing "truth."

Annie Dillard opens *The Writing Life* by asserting, "When you write, you lay out a line of words. The line of words is a miner's pick. . . . You wield it, and it digs a path you follow" (549-50). I like this analogy, not only because it compares writing to following a trail, but also because it hints at the investigative nature of the writing process. I often begin stories by placing characters in a setting and starting them in motion, launching them on excursions so I can observe the places they examine en route. Sometimes I know the destination when I start writing, so the invention occurs as my

characters improvise ways to reach it, and sometimes they alter my initial plans. But somehow we team to create a path that readers can (hopefully) follow.

This implies, of course, that I have a responsibility to my readers. Their time with me is limited, as are their attention spans, so I can't expect them to be fascinated by every detail of the route I'm following. Perhaps I have the leisure and motivation to explore every nuance of a trail, but readers don't have the investment in the material that I do, so I need to convince them that our time together is worth an investment on their part. My readers expect to reach a destination, so I try to push the story, relating only information that's critical--the real, the important.

Each story in *Loop Trails* follows a character on a journey, often a journey down a trail. I'm interested in watching characters react to their settings, and placing them in nature often reveals interesting details about their unique human predicaments. I'm far more interested in the physical realities of these individual excursions than in their possibilities as metaphors, although the idea of life as a passage certainly colors most of the pieces, and in this sense they combine the dramatic with the philosophic.

A number of the stories are connected by more than their journey motifs, however. Some are linked thematically. For example, "Snow Men" and "The Neighbor's Wife Is Sometimes Your Sister" both focus on the

relationship between siblings, an issue I also plan to examine in *Damascus*--a novel-in-progress represented in *Loop Trails* by "The Legend of Taco Mike," an early excerpt from the project. The first-person narrators of "Home on the Range" and "The Legend of Taco Mike" each encounter a slightly absurd character, and "Snow Men" and "The Tower" explore ways that layers of the past often collapse into a physical space. Other connections among the stories involve setting: "The Legend of Taco Mike" and "The Neighbor's Wife Is Sometimes Your Sister" both take place in the western Smokies (as does "The Tower," though the story doesn't specify the fact). And all of the pieces involve either a storm or some form of hostile yet beautiful landscape.

Despite these substantial links, I don't think the stories overlap in a harmful manner, because each is also distinct from the others. "Home on the Range" is the only story with an urban backdrop, for instance, while "The Tower" is the only piece written in third-person. "Snow Men" takes place in the Midwest, not Appalachia, and its sibling jealousy and the lust in "The Neighbor's Wife Is Sometimes Your Sister" are related but also entirely separate. And "The Legend of Taco Mike," of course, employs a larger backdrop than any of the others because of its excerpt status.

As the title I've given the thesis suggests, each of these stories is a "loop trail" of sorts, a trail that begins and ends in the same place. This doesn't imply a lack of progress, however. At the end of a loop trail, a hiker's physical

location hasn't changed, but his or her location in time has certainly advanced. Hikers trade segments of their lives for the experience of moving along the trail--they barter that where they've "been is good and gone / all [they] keep's the getting there" (Cowboy Junkies). The same is true of characters throughout *Loop Trails*. Yes, their individual destinations are important, and the stories couldn't exist without the focus an end point supplies in a hiking piece, but many of the characters' journeys are also circular and futile, whether they realize it or not. Like Sisyphus, they toil and toil and toil, only to discover that nothing has changed. They fall into traps that Paul seeks to avoid in I Corinthians, as they aimlessly beat the air despite their efforts to bring their bodies under control. As Camus notes, however, something makes Sisyphus continue his struggle--likewise, my characters are encouraged by moments of contentment or happiness they discover along the way. They may be doomed to walk loop trails forever, but that doesn't imply their journeys have to be unpleasant.

Working with circular material about journeys involves a number of risks, of course. For example, it's very easy for me to slip into either the intentional or imitative fallacy. In *A Primer of the Novel: For Readers and Writers*, David Madden claims that the "*imitation fallacy* assumes that life and art are synonymous" (107), while the "*it-really-happened*" and the "*it-really-happened-to-ME*" fallacies suffocate imagination by concentrating too intently on the "real" nature of events or circumstances (106). I often

encounter this when describing a trail or hiking experience with which I'm familiar--sometimes I forget that details I find fascinating don't always make good literature, for they don't truly engage readers unfamiliar with the situations I'm describing.

To combat this tendency, I try to move my principal characters toward encounters with other, often more "fanciful" individuals, so the human interaction can lend the story interest. This technique drives both "Home on the Range" and "The Legend of Taco Mike." I also attempt to heighten readers' investment in a story by complicating the predicaments of the characters they're following. As Lewis notes in "On Stories," the critical quality here is "surprisingness," not "surprise" (16). A good story may surprise its readers the first time they encounter it, but it's the second reading that will determine the piece's true effect. In other words, do readers enjoy anticipating events they know to be coming as much as they enjoyed confronting them the first time? Edith Wharton's "Roman Fever" does this with tremendous success, and though I'm not imitating her, I think that "The Tower" and "Snow Men" both thwart their drift toward the intentional fallacy via a similar mix of surprise and surprisingness.

At this point it seems productive for me to consider the stories that comprise *Loop Trails* as individual pieces, to mention the inspiration for each story's creation and point out some of the strengths and weaknesses I sense in

them:

Home on the Range

This story began as a character--Eddie, who is an invention derived from a man I encountered while hitching a ride down Kingston Pike. I added a slightly caustic first-person narrator* to the story, a narrator whose scientific view of life slows the story's pace until Eddie appears. I've worked to focus the piece on their interaction, and several revisions into the story's development, the overtone of "Pharisee meets Good Samaritan" emerged.

*I've never determined why I tend toward first-person rather than third-person narratives, though I suspect it may be a lingering by-product of my earliest attempts at "serious" writing as an undergraduate, attempts that all took the form of plays (the essence of a dramatic monologue, of course, is its first-person speaker).

The Tower

"The Tower" started when I accidently stepped on a trapdoor in the fire tower atop Shuckstack mountain last October. I managed to unjam it, but I imagined a man stuck in a beautiful setting against his will. That image merged with Stephen Crane's poem "A Man Said to the Universe" and prompted early drafts bogged with excess symbolism. I've substituted a little

magic realism into the story and attempted to cut all unnecessary images, though I'm still trying to speed Rick's trip toward the tower.

Snow Men

I wanted to capture the experience of cross-country skiing at night, specifically my memory of both a Michigan field that I'm convinced is haunted and a nearby pasture that looks like the edge of the world when its snow-covered dales are under a full moon. Early drafts of the story didn't specify that the skiers are brothers, though I like the comparison to Cain and Abel that their relationship now invites. The story's title, of course, owes its existence to Wallace Stevens's poem "The Snow Man," which--along with Robert Frost's "Desert Places"--also influenced the narrative's descriptive tone.

Your Neighbor's Wife Is Sometimes Your Sister

This is the most recent and disturbing (to me, at least) story that I've decided to include in the collection. It began when I was reading a survival guide that recommended assisting a hiker suffering from hypothermia by climbing into the same sleeping bag as him/her. The image of a character able to justify the act of wrapping himself about a helpless and incapacitated individual fascinated me, and it developed into a piece that considers a brother who lusts after his sister.

The story itself still deserves several re-writes, in my opinion, as well as a little research on my part, because I'm not sure that I've given enough motivation to Britt's desire for Rachel. I'm also trying to determine which is most powerful--the physical desire to possess another's body, or the emotional desire to control his/her existence. I imagine that future drafts of the story will tend to emphasize the latter.

The Legend of Taco Mike

This piece is an excerpt from a novel-in-progress that I've tentatively titled *Damascus*. The overall project concerns an April week in the Smokies, a week seen through the perspectives of Kendra and Jared, two hikers hardy enough to survive for an entire week but soft when compared to the thru-hikers and long-time denizens of the mountains who they encounter on their respective journeys. Lately I've thought of the novel as an odd combination of *Alice-in-Wonderland* and *Deliverance*.

The driving metaphor of the project stems from the town of Damascus, Virginia, a town a thru-hiker named Slider described to me several years ago. He claimed that once he reached Damascus, he knew he could get to Maine, because once he'd already hiked that far, he might as well finish. I like the idea of establishing a point in life from which an individual knows he or she can complete the journey, so Slider's comments have stuck with me.

The project will also emphasize the history of the mountains, ways

that the past often intrudes on the present. Horace Kephart's *Our Southern Highlanders* has influenced my perception of the region a great deal, as has Kenneth Wise's descriptions of the area's trails.

At the moment I've designated "The Legend of Taco Mike" as the second chapter of the novel. The first chapter will involve a morning conversation at the Spence Field shelter between Kendra and a thru-hiker named Mousetrap, then "The Legend of Taco Mike" (Chapter Two) will jump to her afternoon excursion toward Rocky Top. So the more overt explication included in "The Legend of Taco Mike" may eventually spread over several chapters.

Hopefully it's apparent that I'm working with more than "just" journey motifs. The characters and their situations come first when I write, and any larger themes that surface are welcome but not crucial. As I recall Dr. Art Smith observing in a poetry workshop, it's important to master the single entendre before attempting the double.

Katherine Paterson notes that she tries to find "beauty" as she writes, then clarifies that her notion of beauty in writing stems from "simplicity, harmony, and brilliance," the same properties that physicists seek when they construct theories (152). They're properties I seek to develop in my writing as well. I want my stories to be simple: "complete in [themselves]--direct and without superfluous words," which will counter my tendency toward the

imitative fallacy. I want to find harmony in my work, to let the components of my stories, their characters, settings, and plots--their journeys--"gracefully conform to one another and the language of the whole." For example, John Updike doesn't always describe attractive things, but the grace with which he crafts his prose often gives his descriptions a harmony and poise that's certainly beautiful. And I want to seek brilliance, which isn't "about intellectual cleverness but about clarity--about the light that the [writing] sheds not only on itself but beyond itself, to other stories and other lives." I relate to my writing as Paul thinks of his body--I don't want to write "aimlessly . . . beating the air." On the contrary, I intend to bring it under control, to discover its purpose and grace.

The title story of George Garrett's collection *An Evening Performance* hints at the purpose I envision in these stories. In "An Evening Performance," Garrett describes a spectacular daredevil stunt that electrifies a small town for a single night. That's what I'd like the stories that comprise *Loop Trails* to be--high-wire acts that last for a moment but linger in readers' memories.

Several years ago I was hiking with Jimmy Whalen, a precocious third grader who couldn't climb the rocks his older brothers scaled with me. We turned a corner on a trail, and he ran to a small boulder, one I wouldn't have noticed. "Look, Matt," Jimmy said, "it's a rock." Then he paused, re-assessing

the situation in light of the fact that the stone only reached my waist. "Well," he said, "it's not a very big rock--but it's still a rock."

The stories in *Loop Trails* are not the stories I hope to one day create--I'm still looking for simplicity, harmony, and brilliance, and there's a great deal about writing that I need to learn and experience. But--as Jimmy noted about rocks--the selections in *Loop Trails* are still stories, my attempts to capture real characters on real journeys. And I'm pleased with them--I understand where they've taken me, and the trail ahead looks exciting as well.

Stories

Home on the Range

I

I stick out my arms as I walk: Christ on the cross, or a kid riding a bicycle with no hands. The wind ripples across my flesh, soothing the remainder of a sunburn. I am so happy.

It's this change in the weather--last night a front pushed through Knoxville, shoving aside August temperatures in the mid-90s. Now there's a layer of clouds between me and the sun, a landscape that hangs in the sky. Light grey bands mingle among turbid swatches that hide mysteries. Even darker rolls congregate ahead in the west, swelling, a shadow of the second storm predicted to sweep past this evening.

I love days like this. They remind me of fall afternoons back home. It's still too warm, even after the temperature drop. But the sky's perfect.

Ginny might not agree, but she grew up in Jackson, Mississippi--not Jackson, Michigan, as I did--and thrives on heat, anything akin to her childhood summers in that pressure cooker. My girlfriend describes Knoxville (K-town, we call it) as a transplant, a Northern culture diluted by cross-breeding with the good people of Appalachia, but I disagree with her. A city whistles Dixie when it closes schools for two inches of snow.

Today's hike to Goodyear seems pointless, what with the weather changing and all. Damn station wagon doesn't need to be in the shop--I only wanted the AC fixed. Ginny tells me to stop whining, that I should learn to roll down the windows. But you can't drive fast enough in this city to cool down, not with its stop-and-go traffic, the big-ass trucks that cut you off every quarter mile.

Bump-and-grind gridlock changed my view of the Golf Range, the student apartments where Ginny and I live, when last month's construction along Kingston Pike slowed me enough for an outsider's look at the GR, a corner-of-the-eye glance at a Third World war zone I couldn't recognize. The apartment units stood in rows like fading brick dominos--motionless, waiting for the signal to fall. Discarded tires outnumbered trees in the neighboring woods, and most of the broken-down autos in the complex lots were held together by duct tape.

This vision of the Range ruined my memory of the previous night, when Ginny rolled softly on top of me and whispered an impish wisecrack about our minuscule but endearing "palace." Later I'd fallen asleep to unwise, childish dreams of castles and princesses--childish because of their content, unwise because of the ugly light they cast on reality.

But the Range isn't a war zone. It's the hidden world behind the fake set of a Hollywood studio, an outlaw town where dreams mature into burn-out in back of the whitewashed storefronts lining the Pike.

Ginny loves me--I know that much--but she mocks my inability to handle the heat. She forgets, though, the way she bitched about the broken heater in my Pinto at Michigan State. When I applied to grad schools, she found a map and drew a red line through Cincinnati, right along the Ohio, and claimed I'd get nothing but snowshoes for company north of there. That's her in a nutshell--quiet, but with a stubborn streak wider than the river marking her self-imposed frontier.

She usually gets her way, too. After all, we're in Big Orange Country, aren't we? Knoxvegas, Tennessee--the city whose latest catchphrase for tourists brags, "Knoxville, Naturally!" . . . whatever the hell that means. Naturally, my ass--every sewer in town drains toward a stream.

The two of us are waiting for life to begin. I'm wandering toward my PhD in Chemistry, and we both manage our one-bedroom hovel at the Range. It's not a bad existence--it's cheap, but there's contentment in it. I worry about Ginny, though. She's a good kid, but she's left by herself a lot, alone on the evenings and weekends that I'm sequestered in the labs under the U.T. Hill.

There's stress. She tries to hide it, but it surfaces in the hell she unleashes when I leave lab reports stacked in the living room. I understand her need for a home, not an office. But there's not enough space in the Range for both an academic career and domestic tranquility.

The alley I'm walking emerges from the back corner of the GR--it's an alternate route to the Pike that won't stay alternate for long, not with the massive Bi-Lo growing next to it. Soon the lane will be named, given an entrance to a maze of Minivans and SUVs filling cavernous bellys with paper and plastic. The damn megastore's going to be fifty yards from the apartments, but it's going to face Kingston, leaving the Range with a scenic view of the building's ass.

But that's the future. The alley's still unnamed, and the Bi-Lo remains unfinished. There's not much construction activity at the moment, just a bulldozer pushing dirt into one corner of the lot.

I watch the driver, though I need to move on, to get going. I'm fascinated by him. He's a worker--like me--a brother in arms. I fill beakers--he moves the earth. I chart ph--he builds piles of dirt.

It's good to see the results of your work, satisfying to know you've achieved something tangible at the end of each day. Return home to a land of spare ribs and sitcoms, an evening of boasts and tales--the stuff of legends. Describe the heaps of mud in marvelous detail--contents, consistency, the hidden chunks of rock that threatened the machine. Gather children and tell of the dirt pushed in a single hour, the tons of ground flattened so they might one day purchase fudgecicles and cheez whiz in peace.

I want to be like him. I am like him.

He sees me staring and nods. I nod back--we acknowledge one another.

He knows I'm a worker ant, just like him. I feel his camaraderie, the joy of our labor.

I pass him, pressing forward but still swollen with pride from our joint duty. I'll remember him tonight, though I won't tell Ginny--she wouldn't understand.

You're a idiot, she'd say. Brilliant idiot, but still an idiot--you two have nothing in common. He plows dirt. You discover things.

Yes, I'd say, I discover things--I make them.

No, you discover them.

Discovery is creation. I make knowledge--I push aside confusion and create paths for others, just like my friend.

He's not your friend. You spotted him from the road.

He's my brother.

You're an idiot.

No, Ginny wouldn't understand.

She doesn't understand a number of things, so I don't bother with futile explanations. She worries too much, frets that I'm shagging some female chemist. That's a joke--the fluorescent lighting in labs isn't flattering, and most of my co-workers need all the help they can get.

Still, there are some I appreciate more than others. And it's hard to justify the professional contacts I'm expected to make, the connections I need to maintain. The long hours in the lab, special reasons they exist--pressures, false moves.

Cat-and-mouse games we play with raw elements, forces beyond our feeble control or understanding--basic properties, instincts.

The chance of explosion.

The fact that most reactions only require a small catalyst.

The breeze builds, pushing bangs off my forehead as it toys with the windbreaker about my waist. The second front's moving faster than I anticipated.

Oh, well--that's okay, I suppose. Goodyear's less than a mile away, and a little rain never hurt me before. Besides, I don't have a choice--Ginny wants to use the car tonight, so there's no time to wait for the storm to pass. If the sky really explodes, I can pop into McKay's for a second, take a look at some used CDs.

Shit. That was a raindrop. I put on my windbreaker as the sky darkens. More drops tap a sporadic patter on the road.

The maroon sign for McKay's is a quarter mile ahead. I pick up my tempo, but the rain keeps pace. It slants, slapping my face. My jacket sticks to

my skin, any protection it once gave now vanished. I'm going to get wet--very wet--and the air conditioning in McKay's will be cold. But it's the closest shelter.

A single streak of lightning rips through the dark sky in the west. Its end splits, branches across the horizon, and the entire scene lights for an instant. I sense the thunder coming, and when it cracks, the sky erupts. Rain falls in sheets, torrents that knock me about the road.

"Hey, buddy!" The voice is muffled, its soundwaves split by streams in the air. A blurred figure stands at the driver's side of a parked car. "Want a ride?" he shouts in the rain, pointing across the hood of his rusty brown vehicle.

It's a haven, and I'm drenched. I don't really want to get in his car, but the physical takes over--besides, I can't think of an excuse. So I dash toward him, yell "Thanks" as I open the passenger door, and collapse onto the seat.

II

My eyes are closed--off-line, like most of my senses at the moment. The feeling's remarkably peaceful. I forget who I am, where I've been, what

I'm doing. . . . All I know: I'm happy.

Cigarettes and sweat socks blend an aroma that wafts toward my nasal cavity, and the noxious mix of chemical with the organic interrupts my reverie. I open my eyes to a cracked tan dashboard, a glove compartment stuffed with papers and spark plugs. A half dozen cigarette butts cram the ash tray on the console, and the downpour that drove me into this mess pounds the windshield, its deluge streaming down the glass. It veils the outside world, and I'm stuck in a cave behind a waterfall.

A door slams, and a creature dumps itself into the driver's seat. Water splashes onto my already-wet body. My legs stick to the greasy seat, and I lift them, peel my skin off the vinyl, then attempt to sit without touching anything.

"Some downpour, huh?" the mass beside me asks. A crooked gap between its front teeth highlights the unshaven but smiling face topped by a mess of wet brown hair. Two or three prominent blood vessels redden the corneas of pale blue eyes.

A hand waves in front of me. I hesitate, then shake it; the fingers are meaty but calloused, the grip unreasonably confident. Its owner is heavyset--180, 185 on a frame that's under 6 feet--and the orange lettering on his gray Tennessee t-shirt clashes with brown sweatpants. He introduces himself: "Eddie. Eddie Briggs."

"Trent Dean." Dammit--why give my real name?

"Pleased to meet you, Ted," Eddie says.

God, I'm lucky. "Thanks--for the ride, I mean."

"Don't mention it. Where you going?"

"Goodyear . . . to pick up my car."

"I'll take you," he says, a little too enthusiastically.

"No, that's ok. The rain might ease up in a second." We both know it won't.

"It's no problem, really. I saw you stuck in the rain and thought, 'Now that's a man who could use a lift.'"

"Well, thanks." He's nice enough, but I'm on guard. I check the lock, the handle on the passenger door. I don't see any weapons on Eddie, but there's a small bracelet on his wrist, one of those WWJD things. So he might be a Christian. That's okay, I guess--I can tune out his proselytizing, and I doubt he's imagining either robbery or anal rape. All in all, he looks harmless enough.

We're not going anywhere--Eddie's keys dangle in the ignition.

I look at him, raise my eyebrows as if to say "Well?"

Our bodies warm the interior of the car while the storm lowers the outside temperature, and a layer of steam condenses inside the windshield. The back seat of the hatchback is empty, but the floor is covered with jumper

cables, a crushed Hardee's cup, two or three crumpled bags from Mrs. Winner's Chicken & Biscuits, and an empty can of Icehouse.

Eddie pulls the sleeve of his sweatshirt over his hand and wipes the glass. The rain's abated, enough to reveal a brick structure with a large front window. A striped barbershop pole is painted on the glass next to ornate lettering: *Phil's International House of Hair Design*. The doorway is propped open, and a lanky man with a lopsided beard leans against the frame. He watches the storm but also eyes Eddie's car.

Eddie waves, and the man nods. He turns inside the shop and grabs a light jacket, but he doesn't join us; instead, he returns to his post, folding his arms and focusing in my direction.

I stare back, uncomfortable. The man's eyes ask why I'm here; I wish I could tell him.

"That's Phil," Eddie says. "He owns the place."

"Oh."

"I've got to give him some money before we leave."

"Ok." Eddie's tousled hair is greasy and uneven.

"This is his car," Eddie says.

"Phil's?" I'm confused.

"Yeah--three of us use it."

Phil's still staring at me--he can't figure me out. He doesn't know me, but he understands that I don't belong in his car. Maybe he thinks I know

Eddie, figures I've got the money Eddie owes him. Maybe he wonders if I'm a ghost, a figment of his imagination--maybe I am.

Eddie's getting restless. He's aware of his responsibility for me. I'm a busy man, a man with places to go--places he needs to take me. "Ok--" he says with a decided air, as if the time to act has arrived, "let's do it." He turns the key, and the engine rumbles to life. It's noisy--Phil's car has a fearsome need for a new muffler.

Eddie puts the car in reverse. The rain increases, and I notice that Phil's car has no wiper blades, just the stems of the wipers themselves--stems that end in jagged metal prongs.

"Eddie. . . ."

"This isn't the car we're going to take," he says. "No wipers."

This sure as hell seems like the car backing out of its parking space, the car about to pull onto the street, the car whose front window is so covered with falling water that I can't see a damn thing.

Eddie cracks his window and presses his face into the opening, steering with a field of vision two inches wide. We nudge onto the road, which resembles a swift-moving stream in the Smokies, not a side route leading to Kingston Pike; we move forward at five miles an hour, blind as crayfish swimming in an underground stream.

We clear the barbershop's parking lot but turn into the adjacent gravel

field of a condemned body shop. Eddie stops Phil's car next to a yellow station wagon. "We're going to take that one," he says. "But let's wait until the rain eases up--then we can make a break for it."

"Ok." I might make a break of my own. Something holds me back, though--politeness, perhaps, a screwy compulsion to grant Eddie the gift of transporting me across K-town. Maybe I'm enjoying myself--no, not that. I'm curious, that's it. I want to know what Eddie's going to do next, how many cars he plans to use during the coming mile.

On the other hand, I've already been with him for five minutes, and we haven't gotten very far. I can't spend all day cavorting with Eddie. The lack of conversation's starting to get awkward, and Eddie smells worse than his car.

"Ready?" Eddie says.

"Sure--whatever you say."

"Let me go first. I'll unlock your door, then you come."

"Sounds good to me."

"I'm gone." Eddie pauses, then opens his door and throws his body into the storm. A second later he's back in his seat. "Damn, it's wet out there. Cats and dogs, boy--cats and dogs." He reaches toward my lap, and I jerk. "Cool down, man," Eddie says. "I ain't reaching for your jewels." He gropes about the glove compartment. "I've got my own set down here," he says,

patting his lap, "nice little arrangement, too--well, not little, if you know what I mean." Something in the glovebox jingles, and Eddie yanks out a second ring of keys. "Just forgot to get these."

New keys firmly in hand, he dashes into the rain a second time. Embarrassed, tense, I try to relax. I grimace, knowing more about my new acquaintance than I needed.

Eddie fumbles outside the passenger door of the other vehicle. He's getting drenched. But he finds the right key and unlocks the door. He flashes me a thumbs-up, then races around the front of the wagon.

Time to go--I force my door open, and the rain that regressed to an intangible drumbeat turns real again. Its cold drive is biting, and I shield my eyes as I rush to the other car. The door doesn't budge, but Eddie's inside, and he reaches over to push it open. For the second time in ten minutes, I collapse into a strange automobile.

"Yeeeeesss!" Eddie exclaims with a throaty scream, wide-eyed and triumphant--energized by battle with the elements. I'm not as thrilled; I want to reach Goodyear really, really soon.

Our new vehicle, an old Ford, seems remarkably similar to the previous one, though its wipers actually possess blades. The trash, the feel, the smell--everything else is pretty much the same, but with an earthy edge. It's biological rather than chemical, an organic sensation--agricultural, and more contaminated than a laboratory odor.

A 20-pound bag of potatoes occupies a large portion of the back seat, and similar bags lay scattered about the back of the wagon. But I can't verify that they hold additional potatoes, and my inability to label my co-riders irks me.

Eddie's staring again. I want to tell him to keep his eyes to himself, but I don't because I'm afraid he'll refuse to unravel the secret of the potatoes if I offend him. But the mystery remains unsolved, for Eddie keeps gazing, still thrilled by his dash through the rain, his scamper beneath the thunder gods--a mongrel dog anticipating a treat after a brisk walk. "Ready for take two?" he asks.

I shrug. "Sure. Let's go."

"I love adventures."

So do I, but jumping between cars in the rain isn't adventurous in my book. Hitching a ride down Kingston Pike with a menacing stranger might qualify, but Eddie seems more like a goofy cartoon than a danger. He's a few cards short of a full deck, but he's not threatening. He's innocent--predictably unpredictable.

Eddie turns the key, and the starter responds with the sound of a heavy desk being yanked across a tile floor. He screws his mouth and tries a second time, an armchair driver who assumes concentration will prompt the engine to life.

But the engine still doesn't start; Eddie rests his hands on top of the

wheel and slouches forward, his head resting on a horn that doesn't sound. "Well. . . ." he says.

A knot forms in my stomach. For the first time this afternoon, I seriously doubt I'm going to reach Goodyear. Eddie's frustration will wear down the shell of politeness protecting me from the beast lurking behind the masquerade.

The wallet in my shorts bulges--I doubt I've got the cash Eddie's going to demand. Some local strip mine will hold my body tonight. My heart races, and I'm hot despite a cold sweat. I crack the window, trying to get fresh air without alerting Eddie to my rash panic. I must be schizophrenic--one minute I think Eddie's a kindhearted goon, the next I'm confident I'm never going to see Ginny again.

I decide to make a dash for freedom, but as I start to go, Eddie whispers, "Please," and the engine sputters to a reluctant start.

Eddie's happy once more. "Attagirl," he says, and pats the dash with a strong but tender caress: "Attagirl."

We're on the road again, waiting to turn right onto Kingston. The rain's coming down hard, and traffic on the Pike's moving slower than normal. Plus, it's almost rush hour.

"Look at that loony," Eddie says. "He's gonna get soaked."

An African-American male in a white dress shirt and grey slacks waits

to cross Kingston, apparently to get to the neighborhood Kroger store. He faces away from us, his head shielded by an umbrella, but I'm pretty sure he lives in the same apartment unit as Ginny and me. I scrunch low in the seat, so he won't see me if he happens to turn my way. He's always seemed classy, respectable--even now, wet and weary, he's able to carry himself with grace. I don't want him to know his neighbor's too frail to walk in the rain, that I stoop to bumming rides off trash like Eddie.

The light changes, and the man crosses the street. We pull onto Kingston.

The sun visor on the passenger side is down, a small, dirty mirror loosely attached to it. My god, I'm a wreck. My hair's disheveled, hanging in strands over my pasty forehead; my eyes are bloodshot and watering, irritated by the smoky atmosphere in the wagon. Eddie looks more vigorous and healthy than I do. He's overweight, but at least he's got a bit of color--he isn't pale with fear.

"Ted," Eddie says, "where are you heading again?"

God, he doesn't even remember that. "Goodyear. It's right ahead--on the left."

"Yeah, I know where it's at--not far at all."

"Really close," I say. He should focus on driving.

"So, Ted--where do you live?"

"The Golf Range apartments--know where they're at?" I'm praying he

doesn't.

"Sure--aren't they down the road from Phil's shop?"

Damn--don't give him the number. "Mm."

"So you're with the university?"

"I am."

"What do you do there?"

"I'm in the Chemistry department."

"Chemistry, eh? I used to love that crap. I had this little set with bottles of colored stuff--different elements, I guess. I'd mix them together to make bubble juice, sticky shit--junk like that."

"Oh?" Yes, Eddie--I'm writing my dissertation on Play-doh.

"Yeah--I used it for a science fair in junior high. Got an Excellent, too."

"Good for you."

"Course, it's in Mom's attic now, boxed with the rest of my old stuff. I should get it down one of these days, see if the thing still works."

"Why not?"

"I work at Bi-Lo--you know, the one by West Towne Mall. But I'll move next to you when the new store opens. Then we'll be neighbors."

"That's great." I'll keep shopping at Kroger.

"What year are you?" Eddie asks.

"Excuse me?"

"You know--sophomore, junior, what year in school?"

"I'm a graduate student." I try to sound official. I want Eddie to be impressed, to know I'm not some peon--because I'm not. Ginny could tell you that.

"Oh," Eddie says, looking me over for a second. He shrugs, unimpressed. "I've got a buddy at Bi-Lo who's going to grad school," he says.

"Really?" I say, feigning interest. "What department?"

"Um. English, I think."

"Good for him."

Eddie's quiet for a few moments, then says, "I guess I could do that, but I don't think I'd like it. See, Ted--I'm more like you."

"Like me?"

"Yeah. Real thing-oriented. You know us--we like explosions, stuff we can touch and make."

"And blow up?"

"Exactly. You read my mind, dude. See what I mean--you and me, Teddy, Tedster--you and me are one of a kind."

I beg to differ, but a quiet "I guess" keeps Eddie pacified. We're really as different as they come--I'm Steve Martin in *Planes, Trains, and Automobiles*, bumming a ride off Eddie's John Candy.

"Hey, Teddy--" Eddie says.

"What?"

"Know what this is like?"

"No--what?"

"Ever seen *Planes, Trains, and Automobiles?*"

Damn, talk about ESP. "With John Candy and Steve Martin?" I ask.

"Yeah."

"Candy gives Martin the lift?"

"Uh-huh," Eddie says, "except you're Candy and I'm Martin."

"Oh--you are, are you?"

"Yeah. Just don't wake me by shoving a hand up my ass, okay?"

"Okay. We shouldn't have to worry about that."

"Yeah--I hope not."

Me too.

We've barely gone a quarter-mile in the back-up on the Pike. The wagon lurches along--past McKay's, a Hardee's--jerking and sputtering each time Eddie taps the brakes or presses the accelerator.

"See that?" Eddie asks, thumbing across the street toward a large thrift store.

"What? The Goodwill?"

"Yeah--ever shop there?"

"Once or twice," I lie.

"Me too. Me and my nigger friend, we go there a lot. They've got good stuff--nice prices, too."

I nod, stuck on the notion of Eddie's "nigger friend." I've got friends in Michigan (K-town, too) who'd knock the shit out of him for using that word, but Eddie's oblivious. He slammed two incompatible terms together like nobody's business. Does he call his friend that face-to-face?

Once again I'm thankful my neighbor didn't spot me, that he didn't see the racist driving me about town.

Eddie's turned on the junkyard radio. The contraption jerry-rigged next to the glove compartment is so old that it still uses a floating orange bar to dial stations. There's more static than music, but that doesn't stop Eddie from singing at the top of his lungs, butchering an AC/DC classic: ". . . fast machine . . . kept her motor clean . . . the best damn woman that I'd ever seen."

Good song. I remember when I actually liked it. I still do, just not when Eddie's singing it.

"Tellin' me no lies . . . knockin' me out with those American thighs. . . . Hey, Ted--"

"Huh?"

"Ever been to Toddy's?"

"Where?"

"Toddy's." He points to the right.

"Oh. The liquor store--yeah, I have."

"No--the bar, too."

"Haven't tried it yet." A redneck feel emanates from pick-ups already congregating about Toddy's back door.

"You need to, man--you need to. Say, you and me should have a drink there sometime."

I don't answer.

"It's where the UT cheerleaders hang out. You should see 'em, Tedster. Eh?" He elbows me in the ribs, and I look at him. He bounces open palms in front of his stomach like a juggler with a few potatoes in each hand. "Not the boys, Teddy--the girlies, the ones with serious jugs."

Based on my impression of Toddy's, I doubt that any cheerleaders have been hanging about the bar recently.

"You a UT fan, Ted?" Eddie asks, not waiting for me to answer. "Of course you are--me too." He points to his sweatshirt. "All Vol here." I'd rather he was all hands-on-the-wheel. "This is the year, Ted. Mark it down, baby: Tee and Jamal could . . . go . . . all . . . the . . . waaaaaay. . . . Start shakin. . . . The earth was quakin'. . . . And you (pause) shook me aaaall niiiight long. Da da da--da, da, da dee dum. You (pause) shook me aaaall niiiight long. Da. . . ."

I'm contemplating a counterattack--"It's the end of the world as I know it." And I'm going to be really sick, really soon.

The traffic drags at a snail's pace; we can't be moving faster than ten miles an hour. Eddie's switched radio stations, though it's still static; he's moved--regressed--to an outdated children's gospel hour. "I am a promise," Eddie shouts, "I am a pos-is-bi-li-ty. I am a promise (pause)--with a capital P. I am a great big bundle of . . . Po-ten-tia-li-ty."

Can aural circumstances induce nausea?

Eddie stops singing. "Ted--" His voice quivers.

"What's up?" From the change in Eddie's tone, I'd actually like to know for once.

"Do you know the Savior?"

Damn--he hasn't been this earnest the entire trip.

"I mean--do you know Jesus?"

God, I don't need to discuss my warped view of religion with Eddie. "Yeah, Eddie. Jesus and I, we're friends--buddies." It's the same thing I told Ginny's niece, a cute little brat who's still fascinated by picture books with Bible stories in them.

Eddie locks eyes with me. At first I'm stunned by the severity of his gaze--it reads straight through my analytic sarcasm. But his look softens, and the edges of his mouth curl. "That's okay, Ted--that's ok. He'll be there when you're ready. See, he doesn't care how you come. We're all misfits, broken parts--little children, Ted, kids--he puts us together. And you don't have to find him, 'cause he's coming for you."

We're both silent for at least a minute, the longest Eddie's been quiet since we turned onto Kingston. Then, in little more than a whisper, Eddie sings, "Happiness is (pause) to know the Savior, living a life (pause) within his favor, having a change (pause) in my behavior. . . ." Eddie looks directly at me and--in a low, firm voice--says, "Happiness is the Lord."

Whatever you say, Edster.

Goodyear's yellow-and-blue sign glows in the distance. I'm about to announce the fact, actually, when Eddie unleashes a yell that startles me: "My girlfriend is fucking my balls off!"

I can say nothing in response, so Eddie takes the next line: "You got a girlfriend, Ted?"

"I do."

"She live with you?"

For a second I waffle, but I opt for the truth. "She does."

"Lucky man, Tedster--you're a lucky man."

"Oh?"

"You've got a lady in town. Mine lives over in Charlotte."

"North Carolina?"

"That's the one."

I wonder how she fucks him from there, imagining that she must be very, very good; I try to picture the girl who'd fuck Eddie, conclude that he's

got a girlfriend in Charlotte laying some other guy at the moment. Poor Edster. He's fucked, all right.

"We got together over the Internet," he says, "and went to this psychic convention up in New York. Well, you know I don't really believe most of that crap, but--shit--some of the things they told us were right on the money: my job, her job, stuff about us as a couple. So I guess I believe in it, after all. Anyway, it's made me get in touch with my spirit voices. Debbie--that's my girlfriend--she's really good at it; we stayed together for four nights there--damn." And in case I didn't catch the insinuation, in case I missed the point and wasn't sufficiently impressed with his manhood, Eddie repeats his judgement: "Damn."

Eddie slams on his brakes, and we narrowly avoid a Blazer. God, all I need is an accident now. We're close--so close. The window on my side drops four inches.

"Don't worry about that," Eddie says. "You won't be able to close it."

He's right.

"I'll fix it when we stop," Eddie says.

Our next stop had better be Goodyear. "Ok," I say, "you do that."

"I will."

I chuckle. For the first time since the sky exploded, I'm beginning to appreciate the inanity of my situation. A man--me--a pleasant man, a man

who is happy, a man who wants nothing more than to walk to Goodyear on a gorgeous day and retrieve his automobile--this man gets trapped with--in the possession of, almost?--a completely impossible being: an unwitting racist who views women as objects; a clunker-hopping hauler of random vegetables; a Bi-Lo peon who equates his job bagging groceries to the rigors of graduate school chemistry; a psychic fundamentalist whose girlfriend in Charlotte may or may not be "fucking his balls off." I can't help but savor the utter nonsense of my ordeal. I want to escape, to race home and share my extraordinary experience with my lover, to explain the ravaging desire I suddenly feel for her. But--at the same time--I don't want the ride to end, don't want to return to the banal and ordinary, my blasé acquaintances whose lives seem trite and meaningless when compared to the incredible nature of the stranger's existence, an existence with a mass of contradictions that feels far more--and also far less--"real" than anything I've previously encountered and, I fear, am likely to encounter again.

Rain comes through the open window, sprinkling my face. I shake my head but make no effort to avoid the spray. I hitched a ride to get out of the rain, yet here I am, soaked, waiting with Eddie in a line of traffic that's moving slower than I typically walk.

We're sitting in the far right of the lanes, which isn't a bad place to be, except that Goodyear's less than one hundred yards away on the left side of

the Pike.

"Eddie."

"Uh-huh."

"We need to get over." The line of cars beside us is solid.

"Yeah, I know," Eddie says, though his tone implies he doesn't. He doesn't check the traffic to his left or flick on a turn signal; he keeps driving straight ahead.

"We're going to pass it."

"No, we're not."

"It's right over there--see it?"

"I know where it is."

"Look--"

"Trust me, Ted. Ted, do you trust me?"

Not really. On the other hand, he's gotten me this far. "Why not?"

"Good," Eddie says, "because I know a shortcut."

A shortcut? From one lane to the other?

"Watch this." Eddie swings the wheel to his right, and the wagon climbs up a driveway. It's the parking lot of a Krystal.

"Eddie, this is. . . ."

"I know--a Krystal. It's also a shortcut."

But we don't take a back route; we pull around the rear of the Krystal--no more than a few yards outside the drive-thru--and re-approach Kingston;

Eddie puts on his signal, waiting to turn right--right into the lane we swung out of. . . .

"Eddie," I say.

"I know. It didn't work."

No one's going to let us in, but Eddie keeps inching ahead. He rolls down his window and waves at the traffic. "He'll let us in. . . . She will. . . . He will. . . . They will. . . ." Finally, the nose of the wagon's far enough into the flow that a sedan stops to avoid hitting us. Eddie gives the car a thumbs-up; I'm surprised he doesn't get the bird in return--the other driver looks pretty displeased. But I don't try to disappear, don't shrink into the seat. I shrug toward the other driver, toward Eddie, myself, the traffic, the rain.

We're still not in the left-hand lane, though we're already at the light, five or six cars back of the actual intersection. I resign myself to the fact that we won't turn into Goodyear's lot on this pass. Maybe Eddie's done this on purpose; my silly fears about him are long gone, but a new thought surfaces: perhaps he's enjoying our little drive together--it's given him something to do. Maybe I'm a blessing to him, not a burden, and he doesn't want to let me go. What if he doesn't want it to end, like a child in a pet store who's picked up a puppy and is no longer willing to leave it behind?

Eddie swings the car to the right once again, yanking us into the

parking lot of a Revco pharmacy. An outlet from the lot connects to a road perpendicular to Kingston, a road that dumps into Goodyear. Eddie found his shortcut after all.

But we don't drive toward that exit. Instead, Eddie pulls the wagon straight ahead and brings it to a full stop, parking in the first non-handicapped space to the right of the front door.

I have no clue what's about to happen. For an instant I feel a surge of my old panic, a confidence that something terrible's coming. But the moment passes.

"I need to go inside," Eddie says, "then I'll drive you across to the shop."

"Well. . . ."

Eddie opens his door, says, "I need to buy a potted plant." He disappears into the storm. This is my chance--I get out, and Eddie turns when I slam the door shut.

"I'll run across from here," I say. The rain's coming down harder again--damn cloud can't make up its mind.

"Are you sure?" Eddie yells. We're both getting our asses pounded by the tempest.

"Yeah--I'll be fine."

"Ok."

"Thanks for the ride."

"No problem." It's an awkward end to an awkward ride.

I race across the lot toward the intersection, turning to look over my shoulder as Eddie walks through the automatic doors into Revco. His shoulders are slightly hunched, and he moves quickly, with purpose, a man on a quest for a potted plant.

A man on a quest for a potted plant. I stop my sprint toward Goodyear, slipping and skidding through large pools that leak into my shoes and soak my feet.

Eddie's inside, but the wagon waits for him in the parking lot, an old wreck hidden in a shadow beyond the reach of ill-placed security lights. A flash of lightning irradiates the scene for a second, a high-powered flash bulb imprinting my mind.

I reflect on Eddie, wonder if I'll forget him after I re-enter the world of Goodyear--my life of bills, chemistry, Ginny. He's more complex than I first imagined, but he's also simpler as well.

He's not a mass of contradictions, a completely improbable being. On the contrary, he's a man looking for a potted plant--no more, no less. Like me. Like everyone. A potted plant, a savior--maybe the two are one and the same.

I wish him luck.

The sky darkens beyond its rainy gray. Thunder peals in the distance. I'm completely, absolutely, finally, one hundred percent drenched.

Raising my arms, I let falling water puddle in my hands; it overflows, running down my forearms, under the cuffs of my windbreaker, my t-shirt, down into my armpits and against the sides of my chest. It chills me, but the shiver's worth the ember it wakes.

I cross the street at the light, waving at the kind drivers pausing for a poor pilgrim boy in the rain. I run, splashing in the water and sending its spray in all directions--delirious. Adrenaline pumping, I laugh, jump, leap from one puddle to another.

The workers at Goodyear stare out the windows, wondering at the lunatic in the storm; they're afraid he might be coming their way, or I imagine they are--I'm devoting full concentration to devouring each puddle.

I'll enter the shop in a little bit, turn over the cash and re-claim my own wagon, then drive home to my work, my lover.

But I've still got puddles to claim.

I am so happy.

III

The main storm subsides, and when I drive my car home--windows rolled down, the new air conditioner turned off--there's only a light drizzle. Along the alley next to the future Bi-Lo, I pass a stranger struggling with several overflowing plastic bags from Kroger, so I hit the brakes. "Hey, buddy!" I yell out the passenger window. "Want a Ride?"

The stranger ignores me at first, but when I reach out and open the door, he climbs aboard, hauling his mess of groceries with him.

"Going to the Golf Range?" I ask.

"Yes--Apartment B. I'd have waited for the rain to stop, but I've got ice cream," he says. His accent's from somewhere in eastern Europe. He sounds apologetic, helpless.

"I live on the opposite side," I say.

"Well, you don't have to take me all the way."

"It's no problem, really. I saw you stuck in the rain and thought, 'Now that's a man who could use a lift.'"

He grimaces slightly, as if already regretting his decision to come with me. I don't give him the opportunity to change his mind, hitting the gas and kicking up water as we press toward the GR.

He offers to get out two or three times before we reach his building; when we finally arrive, he exits the car quickly, then--safe at last--says, "Thanks. Thank you very much."

"Hey--" I say, a jolt of inspiration shooting through me.

"Yes?"

"Do you know the Savior?"

"What? Who?"

"Do you know Eddie?"

"No. I don't know what you're talking about."

"You will. He's buying a potted plant."

I reach over and shut the door before he can respond, then leave my bewildered passenger in the middle of the wet parking lot. He'll understand one day.

I take the steps to our second floor pad two at a time. Then, standing on the front balcony/porch, I look about the beautiful Range and survey my kingdom.

For the first time in two years, someone's changed the gas prices at the Shell station on Sutherland Avenue. I order the new figures to stay constant, and they obey my command.

I am the master of my domain.

I know what's coming: slamming open our door without knocking, I'll enter and smother Ginny's mouth with mine before she can ask about the car or comment on the fact that I'm drenched. I'll take her hand and lead her into the bedroom.

Twenty seconds later, our clothes will lay scattered about the floor. Naked, I'll remain silent; Ginny will be confused, lost. . . . But she'll understand soon, though.

She'll understand soon.

After she fucks my balls off, I'll tell her about the Savior.

The Tower

The two left early on summer mornings, climbing slowly, singing songs and telling knock-knock jokes. Ricky usually carried the light backpack for a half hour, the first mile, then handed it over to Papa, his grandfather. They stopped frequently, and Papa told stories of Indians and bears, brave pioneers and a secret waterfall.

At the tip of the mountain was an old fire tower, a steel monster topped by an observation room. They climbed its wobbly stairs to a trapdoor, an entrance to the small chamber that contained nothing but an old desk. No chair, but abandoned on the desktop, a broken radio and an open notebook with crusty, yellowed pages. The writing on them had blurred beyond recognition, and their edges were ripped and torn--the work of birds, Papa suggested.

Some of the windows held cracked glass; others were open panes. They framed valleys and mountains in all directions, ranges that skied and watersheds that dug deep grooves in the acres of surrounding forest. Papa lifted Ricky by the waist, and Ricky asked Papa to name the mountains. Sometimes Papa recited the real names, but he also invented new ones--once he called Mount Russell and its neighbors Snow White and the Four Dwarfs. When Ricky said that Sneezy looked taller than Snow White, Papa claimed that several dwarfs had grown quite a bit since their last movie. Some of

them could even be called giants.

In a corner of the room's ceiling was the tower's secret, a ladder that extended through a mysterious hole in the roof. Its rungs seemed endless, though Papa said they stopped right past the edge of the hole, that a person could use the ladder to climb out of the tower and stand on the roof of the world. But Ricky didn't believe Papa. Ricky thought the ladder stretched to heaven, or someplace else that took forever to reach.

Papa always offered to poke Ricky's head through the hole, to show him the remarkable view from the very top. Papa promised to hold Ricky's legs, to yank him back if the wind gushed or an eagle or griffin swooped down in search of a snack.

But Ricky always said, no, he didn't want to look. Once a person climbed through the hole, he thought, the person might never return. So he squirmed and pushed until Papa loosened his grip and set Ricky down.

They poked about the chamber a little more, then pulled open the trap door and descended to the mountaintop. Sitting in a small clearing--a bald, Papa called it--they ate crackers and cheese, apples, sticks of beef jerky. Papa talked about the men who once lived at the base of the tower, men who stayed in a shelter whose only remains were a concrete platform and a crumbling brick chimney. The men watched the forest from the tower, looking for smoke and directing firefighting teams with the old radio, but they no longer used the post, Papa said. Now they flew airplanes, soared into

distant valleys that even the tower couldn't spot. The only people who still climbed the tower were hikers like him and Ricky.

Sometimes Papa brought a small checkerboard and the two played a few games. Or they lay on their backs and looked at the clouds, each drawing an imaginary line in the air and guessing which puffs would cross the finish first. Papa invented stories about the animals and people he saw in the sky, and the two compared them to animals and people they met on the ground.

Papa called those afternoons in the clearing their mountaintop experiences. Ricky thought Grandma said that mountaintop experiences had to happen at church, or in a big tent with lots of shouting people, or sometimes at a campfire where teenagers sang songs and a leader played guitar. But Papa always laughed at those ideas; he asked Ricky what felt more like a real mountaintop.

Papa laughed at a lot of things the rest of the family said. And the rest of the family smiled when Ricky told them Papa's stories about the mountain--none of them ever hiked with Ricky and Papa, though Papa claimed Ricky's Mom climbed the tower as a teenage girl. Now she and Grandma shopped while Ricky and Papa hiked. Ricky's Dad worked during the week--plus, he said hiking on weekends or vacations wasn't his idea of taking a break.

So Ricky and Papa hiked on their own--sometimes they saw other hikers, but not often. Papa said most people had forgotten the mountain and

its tower. Ricky said he'd never forget, and Papa smiled. He reached inside a pocket on his jacket one day and pulled out a strip of red cloth with two holes cut into it. He gave it to Ricky and said it was a superhero mask, that Ricky could wear it whenever he needed to remember what it felt like to stand on top of the world. Papa claimed it was important to remember the mountain, and he asked Ricky whether he understood. Ricky nodded, though he thought he could always climb the mountain if he needed to remember it.

The last time Ricky and Papa scaled the mountain together, Papa climbed the ladder by himself and disappeared through the roof, leaving Ricky alone in the tower room. Ricky panicked: Papa had left--he wasn't coming back, and Ricky would be stuck on the mountain forever. He started to cry, and Papa's feet instantly emerged through the hole.

But Papa was too late. By the time he returned, Ricky was shaking uncontrollably. And he'd wet himself.

When they were back on the ground, Papa let Ricky take off his jeans and undershorts. They set them on a rock to dry, and Ricky ran around the clearing in nothing but his t-shirt and mask. Papa joked about finding some poison ivy in the area.

A doe walked into the clearing and ignored the pale cheeks that shone above Ricky's suntanned legs. Ricky was embarrassed, however, and ran to put on his damp pants. Papa said the doe didn't care, but Ricky insisted on

wearing them. He walked down the mountain in uncomfortable jeans.

* * *

That was almost twenty-five years ago--Papa's dead, and Rick's now a man. He has a son of his own, a son who is too young to climb the mountain.

No younger than you were, the mountain says.

True, he admits, but Papa was nuts to haul me here.

Besides, Papa knew what to do in emergencies, and Rick doesn't--or he doesn't remember. He now knows many things, far more than Ricky knew existed, but few of them tell him what to do on the mountain.

The mountain is pounding the hell out of Rick. He reels, searches for a fallen tree--some type of seat. He bends, hands pressing his lower thighs. His arms brace like pylons, strain under the heaves of a red flannel torso. Flesh rumples over his kneecaps.

His hiking shorts stretch beneath his wrists until the fabric is taut, and falling beads of sweat rebound off the khaki trampoline. More drops collect near a receding hairline and stream down forehead, over lips--his tongue flicks, then retreats, startled by the saltiness.

A throb pounds Rick's eye sockets, and he squeezes lids shut. Pale

green spots flicker and dance on dark ceilings. The throb intensifies--heart beats in his throat. He imagines the end, wonders why he sees lime lights and not a summary of his life, visions of past happiness--the last picture show.

Rick gropes the air for the ground. He finds it, touches leaves, twigs, and dirt, then mutes them with his palm. Bones sand themselves on one another as he inches downward, dropping slowly at first, then faster, collapsing on a bunk of earth.

Half-leafed trees line the trail, but Rick can't glimpse the crest of the mountain; clouds float across the aquamarine backdrop of an Autumn sky. He'd flown over the first mile, covering its faint incline in less than twenty minutes. But the trail grew steeper, and two hours later it still pushed higher, breaking his firm strides into shallow steps, and forced him to scramble over fallen trees littering the uneven path.

Each new detour and negotiation slowed him--each cut-back in the trail weakened his will, caused him to despair whenever he trudged a hundred yards to gain ten feet of elevation. The trail twisted, turning back on itself again and again as it snaked its way up the mountainside.

It's early afternoon, and the end still waits for Rick. He hopes his heart can cover the remaining distance.

The knot in the small of his back is a daypack. He removes it, opens the top, then fingers a folded piece of cloth but takes out a flask of water and a faded map instead. He sips the water, runs his tongue across the spouting round hole, caressing it with the same tip he slides across Cindy's lips before gently slipping his tongue into his wife's mouth. He blocks the spout, and the water presses forward. He backs his tongue out, and the water gushes, frothing at the corners of his mouth.

The mountain air is brisk, and the splash of lukewarm water makes him shiver. He unfolds his map, then follows the trail's thin dash up the topography, across three, four, five lines--each streak a five hundred foot vertical jump. If he's over the five thousand mark, under point six miles of trail remain.

Rick closes his eyes and tries to remember the past. The mountain feels larger than the last time he hiked it. Perhaps it's grown--like the dwarfs. Or perhaps this isn't the right trail. Maybe he took a wrong turn, and he's headed for a peak with no tower, an impossible summit--some broken rock with knife ledges, drops into nothingness.

He needs to know. Hiking isn't enough--he's hiking this trail on purpose. He needs to see the tower again, to climb once more to its top. To settle the question of the roof--to see whether the ladder leads to heaven or not.

There's no turning back, not after he's gone this far. If this is the wrong

trail, he'll find out soon enough, but there's no time to retrace his steps. The last intersection's nearly two miles back, and rehiking the uphill grind isn't an option. Besides, he's probably on the right track--the trail must seem longer because he's not used to hiking this much.

He's on the right trail: instinct says so. And Rick usually relies on instinct; it works for him at the brokerage, and at home with Cindy and their son David. He's no longer connected to the mountain--not the way he used to be, at least--but he remembers its pull from long ago.

Lately, however, instinct's gotten Rick into trouble. The market's become unpredictable, making it easier for him to get lost, to lose things. He speculates and gambles, though seldom with his own money. Clients worry about returns, not the techniques Rick uses to get them--trading can be a gray world. Some vigilantes want to keep it black-and-white, of course, and they prey on risk-takers like Rick. Once he concealed his tracks with ease, but cover's grown harder and harder to find.

Rick's boss hasn't discovered his latest mess, but she will, and there could be trouble--unless, of course, she offers to help. She's followed Rick's trails in the past and covered them, demanding nothing but loyalty in return. Recently she's hinted at more, though, suggesting mid-week rendezvouses to discuss their business strategies over drinks and open-minded conversation. She wants them to attend an out-of-state conference together next month, and she gave him this free day to think about it. Instinct often turns basic.

The tower needs to be standing--it's part of the magic, and the hike doesn't work without it. If it's fallen . . . burned down . . . disappeared, then all's for nothing. Rick has done everything else--everything anybody's ever asked of him, and everything he's demanded of himself. But the tower still haunts him.

So Rick stands, stretches his muscles. He takes one step--his quad tenses, relaxes.

The trail reels past Rick like a film in slow motion. He rounds a boulder and slams into the front ledge of a hundred yard scramble up a rocky incline. Normally its sudden emergence would destroy him, but he's comforted by the sight, for he remembers its place in his memory--this is the correct trail, after all. His instincts are justified.

This stretch of hell is the beginning of the end. It's deceiving, for the path doubles back on itself, and the summit now visible is actually the halfway mark. But Rick is pleased, for he remembers this detail from speeches Papa used to give him when they reached the final leg of their ascent.

Papa said to never trust the trail, that it's dangerous to assume the end's ever in sight. The end, Papa said, is often another beginning--whenever a hiker thinks it's time to rest, he'd better be prepared to keep walking.

Papa loved the mountain. He also hated it--said a man couldn't do one

without doing the other.

Rick starts this last climb, driving hands into thighs to encourage movement; he sprouts extra limbs that grab hold of rocks, roots, branches. He hikes, scales, pulls, scrambles.

So does Papa. His steady breathing and confident strides follow Rick, push him up the mountain. Rick is ashamed of his own shallow pants--he tries to deepen them, to lengthen his own weak strides.

After what seems like forever but is probably four or five minutes, the two reach the cut-back. Rick's heart races, and he doubts that he'll make the top. But Papa's anxious to keep moving, and in the distance tan grass fills a small clearing. Despite Papa's warning, Rick knows the true end is in sight. Encouraged, he moves forward.

The peak is an elevated meadow, not a jagged apex, its rocky crag eroded to a gentle nub thousands of years ago. As holes in the forest open, stalks and brush filling the clearing become more defined. So do concrete ruins and a crumbling stack of bricks. Rick picks up his pace--rushing, lest the apparition disappear. But it doesn't fade; it grows more distinct with every step he takes.

On the far side of the summit, a cluster of spruce invades the clearing, indicating that both Rick and the slopes have climbed above the deciduous

zone. Metal rods and staggered wood planks appear among the trees. The planks, still distant, are crooked and worn--unevenly spaced, with deviations in their horizontal alignment. Some of the steel poles are vertical, while others set at forty-five degrees cross one another and form Xs. None sparkle, though their steel surfaces once shone like mirrors. Years of exposure have stripped the gleam, and rust reflects none of the day's sunlight. The corroded bars reach up, up, up, above the tips of the pines, past the land's grasp, and terminate in the observation post--the holy of hollies. Rick's final goal.

Upon reaching the clearing, Rick strips off his pack and walks over to the primitive chimney. Next to it a table of concrete rises two, two-and-a-half feet off the ground. Papa avoided the platform, said a hiker too prissy for the ground had too much skirt to be on a mountaintop. But Rick's exhausted and sore--the site's irresistible. So he sits on its ledge and spreads his lunch on the rough countertop: bagel . . . block of mild cheddar . . . apple . . . cluster of white grapes . . . trail mix.

He looks for Papa, wants to share the meal with him. But Papa is gone. David now races about the clearing. Rick waves, calls his boy to come eat. But David doesn't want to eat--he wants to take off his shirt.

No, says Rick. Come and eat.

I don't want to eat, David says. I want to play.

No, Rick says. Eat. He shakes his head--his son never listens to him.

No, David says. Play. He removes his shirt.

The trees that ring the clearing are scattered, and their punctured line offers little defense to the wind that blasts one side of the mountain. Rick's sweat evaporates, and he chills. The sun takes over, and skin warms. Rick slices cheese into strips with a small knife and places them on bagel. He chews his feast methodically, religiously, sliding his tongue between masticating teeth.

A collapsed hole mars one corner of the concrete, punctures the once-solid tabletop. Papa guessed that the platform covered an old cellar with an entrance swallowed by the mountain. The gap opens into a dark pit that spreads beneath the entire slab, a black cave lurking under the table of the feast.

Rick squints toward the bottom of the cavity. The drop's eight or nine feet, though the soda cans littering the bottom could rest on semi-solid muck, not the actual floor. Chunks of dark matter float in its soupy mire, the holding tank for a portable toilet. Rick is repulsed but also attracted, drawn by the pit's secrets--the parasites it conceals. It reminds him of work, and he smirks at the wry observation.

A cry rises from its swamp, and Rick sees David trapped in the waste. Rick lies on his stomach and reaches toward his boy, but they cannot touch. And Rick left his rope at home, unwilling to haul it up the mountain--he

curses his foolishness.

Papa said a hiker should carry a rope at all times--his law of the wilderness held backpackers responsible for their own safety. A hiker, Papa said, should be able to pull himself from any mess he created.

The pit swallows his son, and Rick remembers his pack and shirt--they could have become lifelines. But his instincts were slow, his response late. Rick pictures his son's bones. Archaeologists will excavate the bog in the future, long after Rick's present has become the past, and discover the skeleton of his offspring.

Rick's not ready for the final ascent, held back by the same awkward mix of excitement and fear that made him hesitate as a teen, dialing and redialing the first digits of a girl's phone number but never completing the call. The concrete roof of the pit is warm, comfortable. He lies on his back, calves hanging off the edge, and closes his eyes.

A hand slides along his thigh. The fingers are soft enough to be David's, but they're also long and slender. A metal band circles one of the digits.

Rick opens his eyes to his wife's face. Cindy is young, with her long blonde hair pulled back into a ribboned pony-tail. She smiles, the same mix of lipstick and teeth that she first flashed him years ago. She hasn't aged.

Her hand moves beneath his shorts, surprising him with her

forwardness--she's forgotten last night's quarrel about David. Rick rolls on top of her. Does she also embrace the past--does she see boy or man?

Cracks appear in his wife's face. Imperceptible at first, they splinter into deep crevices before Rick can cry out. Her skin shrivels, melts into bones that collapse to dust under his weight and blow into the pit.

Rick shakes without moving, dreams without sleeping. He climbs to the top of the tower, then waits at the bottom of an endless ladder that leads to the roof of the world.

He steps onto the first rung--his feet tingle. He steps onto the second rung--legs. Third rung--torso. Fourth--head, which breaks the plane between room and sky. But the new view is murky, dark and ill-lit. The tingle becomes stickiness, a swill that surrounds his body. His arms and legs are nothing but bones, his chest the air trapped by a rib cage. Skeleton teeth chatter.

Light comes from a square hole that hangs in a corner of the black sky. Rick attempts to touch it, but his finger bones crumble into dust, and he disintegrates. Before he disappears, grasping and straining, he spots a blue sky, a tower in the distance.

Rick gathers his trash but drops the empty bag of trail mix into the hole on a whim; it floats down, drawn to the floor of the pit. Rick wishes the bag

was within reach, but it rests at the bottom of the cavity, a silent monument to Rick--his legacy.

The grass beneath the tower's first flight of stairs rustles. An adolescent buck with two prongs on each antler rises and steps toward Rick; it lowers its underdeveloped but barbed rack. Accused and guilty, Rick braces. But the buck turns, and the sounds of its crashing flight down the mountain fade into the wind.

Rick rubs clammy palms together at the base of the tower. He'd wash them but doesn't have water to spare. Perhaps he wants them clammy--he thinks he ought to be nervous, so he is. He wants a grand homecoming.

But no shiver of recognition races along his spine. It's the same tower, though it welcomes him back with nonchalance, indifference: "Oh--you again. . . . Come on up if you'd like." Old memories fail to flood Rick with warmth--there's no assurance everything's going to be all right. He sees no cover for sins, no relief--no reason to endure.

So Rick views the tower with bitterness, as if here stood the foundation of the pain in his life. Papa would add that this includes most of the joy as well. But Rick has trouble seeing the joy. He tends to view his personal life in black-and-white, and the roof of the tower is definitely black, the heart of darkness. Papa'd say that pain and joy walk hand-in-hand, crumbling into one another like a collapsing wall between wrong and right, that they are

closer than anyone imagines. But Papa's not here. He's disappeared, along with Cindy and David.

Rick is not alone, however. His boss watches him, evaluates his moves--she's waiting for him to slip. When he stumbles, she'll be there--ready to judge. And judgement requires payment--her salvation comes with a price. The tower's his only escape.

Rick's legs ache as he ascends, but the knowledge that this is the end makes the strain tolerable. It's all downhill after the tower. He keeps to the inside of the stairwell, avoiding the open sides where a slight misstep could easily lead to a few seconds of flight and a hard impact with earth.

Cindy returns and joins his boss. Two ladies drive him forward--one he loves, the other he pays. Two flights behind, they are directly under him. He can't see them, but he senses them step when he does. They don't need to close the gap--they only need to push.

A third figure locks arms with the other two. It's a woman in her mid-20s. Rick doesn't know her name, just that their eyes met two weeks ago when he took a new route from work to the deli where he eats lunch. He's never seen her chestnut locks and slender waist a second time, though the new route's become permanent. Rick's glad to see her, though she complicates the climb. He nicknames her Janet, the name of a girl he met at summer camp during junior high, the first girl to ever hold his hand.

After ten or twelve flights, Rick reaches the landing beneath the

trapdoor. He hesitates, afraid the door will be stuck, the chamber locked. But the door swings upward, its hinges straining from infrequent use. He pushes into the room.

The space is smaller than Rick remembers; he feels claustrophobic, especially once he sets the trapdoor back into the floor, sealing the room and shutting himself inside. Dust covers the floor, the window ledges and panes, the desk that's still in the same corner after two decades of waiting. The notebook and radio are both gone, but a crude heart is now carved into the desktop. It inscribes the message "PAUL loves TERESA forever '84." Everything else is the same.

That includes the hole in the roof, though the ladder looks steadier than before; it's also less mysterious. He can see the last of its rungs, knows that it ends on the roof. It doesn't lead to heaven, though he'll test it in a second, anyway--it's the right thing to do. He stares out the windows, tries to remember which mountain is Sneezy and gazes at other places he and Papa hiked once upon a time.

The room is hot and crowded. David runs from window to window--he can't see and wants to be lifted. Rick's boss tells him to name the mountains, while his wife stands in a corner--she doesn't demand anything, but her eyes expect him to act. Papa sits on the desk next to Janet. Everyone

wants a piece of him--everyone's waiting for him to choose.

It's too many people for the small room. Rick closes his eyes, tries to squeeze the ghosts from his mind. They disappear.

A buzz approaches Rick, and he swats at it. A wasp lands on one of the unbroken panes, then walks in circles, madly swinging its cylindrical body right and left as it explores with feet, feelers. Two more sit on the desk, while others surround the outside of the tower.

Rick's not allergic to wasps or bees; he's been stung a number of times--it hurts, but not for long. The insects make him anxious, though, and he doesn't like to be around them. They can't be controlled. They're not rational or predictable, and their spontaneity unnerves him. Despite his physical advantage, the giant is intimidated.

But flying stingers won't keep Rick from his goal. He came to see the roof of the world, to discover where the ladder ends--to confirm that it doesn't touch heaven. And it's paradise that's he's going to reach.

Rick takes a small piece of red fabric out of his pack, then sets the sack and its remaining contents--the map, liter of water, a few leftover grapes--on the desk. The strip of cloth is long but not wide, with two thin eyeholes and a nose slit. It's a mask, the superhero mask Papa made for Ricky years ago. A relic of innocence, or ignorance, that Rick hasn't let go.

Rick steps onto the first rung of the ladder: nothing happens. Second rung--nothing. No chill shoots through his body when his face breaks the plane of the ceiling. No vision of glory falls from above. A strong wind rushes and whistles; it beats his face. The sunlight is bright and piercing, and Rick squints as he pulls himself onto the roof.

Terrified, Rick screams. Grandpa was right--this is the roof of the world. And the roof of the world is a very unsafe place. Its floor is weather-beaten astroturf, faded green carpet that extends to the rim, then abruptly ends before a seventy, eighty, ninety foot drop. The only thing between Rick and death is a foot of the slick turf and a metal rail that circumscribes the periphery. The rail's only about a foot-and-a-half high--a stumbling block, not a protective barrier. It couldn't secure a toddler.

Rick stands next to an electronic box with a large solar panel and a number of antennas. It's some kind of generator, perhaps, or a reservoir for weather data. Rays of sunlight bounce off its mirrored surface and warm Rick, but it offers no protection from either the wind or a fall.

Rick considers jumping but he lies down instead, spreading his body on the carpet, and lets gravity pull on the greatest possible surface area. It tugs him into the turf.

Rolling onto his stomach, he snakes his way across the carpet and sticks his head under the safety railing. His stomach turns. The clearing's tiny, a

infinitesimal patch of grass beset by legions of trees. The tower's even higher from this perspective; it reaches toward the earth, steel and wood scaffolding hundreds and thousands of feet down from his perch.

He scoots back from the edge and sits, struggling to digest the wonderland. Mountains stretch away from the tower in every direction; some are soft and balding, others jagged--rugged and defiant. Valleys run among the heights like veins on a leaf, merging and collecting into rivers and lakes. White patches in the distance indicate cities, towns--the presence of humanity.

There's no lasting impression, no single view, for it changes each time Rick swivels a single degree. He sees everything that ever was, everything that will ever be. This is his holy place, the seat of the entire earth. It belongs to him, and he simply belongs.

Rick unlaces one boot, then the other. He removes them and drops them into the room one at a time. An angry buzz pauses him, but it soon quiets. He takes off his socks as well, and wind picks away balls of lints from his sweaty toes. Soon his feet are dry, and he nuzzles them against one another. They are lovers, a mirror-image couple exploring one another's flesh.

He strips off his flannel shirt, the thermal beneath it, and his hiking shorts. All drop down the hole. He takes off his briefs and stands. He is

naked, plain--vulnerable, open. Himself, and no one else.

Rick unsnarls the crumpled mask he's been holding. He wraps it around his face, but its slot and holes won't align with his nose and eyes--his head's too big. So he pulls the mask onto his eyebrows, then ties it in the back, knighting himself. He raises his arms in victory. He screams, no longer afraid.

Rick stands firm. He looks down at his body, wonders if he'll shrivel because of the chill wind. But he's rising instead, gorged with blood--swelling.

For a second he's shy, tentative--he looks over his shoulder and checks that no one is watching. It's an intimate moment, one that he doesn't want disturbed. But his hesitation is replaced by dignity, a sense of self-respect. He doesn't care who's looking--he hasn't been this strong in years, this larger-than-life.

His wife would be proud of him. Rick wishes Cindy were here--no, he doesn't. This is a moment for him alone.

Rick turns in a circle, imagines a movie camera panning around his body in a dramatic arc. The scene would be more effective if a thunderstorm could erupt about him; the tempest of redemptive rainfall would bulge with symbolism, washing away his past, his trials, his sins. But the clouds remain

puffy and white. He'll have to make do with sun and wind.

Sun and wind--not a bad combination, when he considers it. Some of the clouds roll directly toward him, but most pass to his side or over his head. One or two low-fliers actually skirt beneath his perch. Once he felt like a mite in the hand of the universe, but not anymore. This is his throne, his rock that can never be shaken.

* * *

Rick is silent. His throat is hoarse . . . sore from overuse. He remembers shouting, but he can't recall what was said--something addressed to the world, himself, God. A declaration of war, perhaps, or a treaty of peace. A creed.

He's been standing for an indefinite length of time: an hour or more, based on the movement of the sun. And the movement of his body--still larger-than-life, though not as rigid. Gravity takes its toll.

Rick sways in the wind for a few more minutes, then legs buckle, and he collapses, exhausted from his triumph, the euphoria of a proclamation from the roof of the world. His only movement is the rise and fall of his chest, the expansion and contraction of lungs sweeping Oxygen into his bloodstream.

Eventually he opens his eyes and blinks. He raises his head, which

aches, then slides into a sitting position. His exposed skin is burnt. Warm, it traps the sun's heat inside his body. He is sore from the hard fall onto unforgiving astroturf, but otherwise he is fine.

Tears stream from his eyes--no, he's not fine. He's more than fine, sucked into an emotion vague adjectives cannot quantify. He imagines a little girl on Christmas morning, a rescue team that's found a missing survivor, a man in bed with his lover. He has finished his race.

He wishes he could stay. It would be good, right for him to remain on his throne . . . in his glory. But he must go--it's his duty.

Rick descends from the roof of the world.

It's silent at first, since the incessant wind's no longer slamming his eardrums. But the buzz of the wasps returns. Negligible at first, the noise refuses to fade; soon it pierces without growing louder. The small room's stuffy, and Rick feels stifled, boxed. He misses his throne, already needs to escape once more. But time is short.

Picking up his scattered clothes, he puts himself together. His boots are last. He pulls on the first, then balances on one foot as he tries to slide his foot into the other. But his heel's stuck. Rick bounces around the room, trying to yank the mouth of the shoe past his heel. One of the wasps, startled by this sudden motion, performs a mid-leap fly-by. Rick hops out of the way, landing hard on the trapdoor with one foot. The force smashes the groaning

door deeper into its groove; wood crunches as it jams into wood, as the door rams itself into the depressed notch that frames it.

For an instant Rick does nothing--the wasp keeps its distance, curious but wary. Then Rick drops to his knees and tries to lift the door--it doesn't budge. He attacks the small notches cut to give leverage from within the tower, slots for yanking the door open. But the trapdoor's smashed a half-inch lower than the deepest grove.

He crams his fingers into the crack surrounding the door, tries to force them into the minuscule break between exit and floor.

But it's no use. They don't fit. He can't get them in. . . .

The door's not going anywhere. Neither is he.

* * *

Rick sits on the floor of the room, slouched against the wall. His head is down, chin resting on his chest. His hands are limp in his lap, their fingers sliced open--nails bruised black and blue--stained with red but no longer bleeding.

One leg of the desk lays next to him, its end splintered and cracked, as is the section of floor he attempted to pry with it.

But no signs of success--the trapdoor hasn't budged.

Rick is drenched with sweat--hot for now, but that will end soon. The sun will set in a few hours, and though the tower will see the rays longer than anywhere else in the area, it too will grow dark and cold.

The night's going to be long.

His wife and son will worry tonight. Perhaps they'll even notify somebody who can do something. But who? And what? He's never brought any of them to the tower, never told them of its existence. They wouldn't even know where to start looking.

Perhaps some weekend hikers will pass the clearing, climb the tower out of curiosity. They should be able to ram the door open from the outside. But no weekend hikers will arrive for over thirty-six hours.

There are other ways down, of course. He could attempt to descend from the outside, for instance. Getting off the roof would be tricky, however, and he has no rope. It's too dangerous--he's not ready to risk it.

An even faster route crosses his mind, a leap of faith. But he's not ready for that, either--not yet, at least.

One of the wasps has found the grapes in the discarded fanny sack, and another flies toward Rick in search of additional sweetness. The insect gets

too close for comfort, and Rick swings an arm in a half-hearted arc, swatting in the wasp's general direction. It jerks through the air to the other side of the room, patiently waiting for Rick's wrath to subside.

Wary, the wasp draws near a second time--daring and defiant, it refuses to stop investigating Rick, to cease pestering the man stranded on top of the world.

Snow Men

Left leg, right leg: slide, slide.

Left leg and right pole, right leg and left pole: slide, slide.

Don't cross your tips.

Don't cross the tips of your skis. That's the only thing I remember about cross-country skiing--don't cross your damn tips. Parallel lines: you're fine. An "X": you're screwed.

Left leg, right leg: slide, slide.

My tips cross.

Face down, I open my eyes to white. The snow is warm, and I burrow into it. My tongue flicks out, and ice crystals soften, melt against my lips. Reluctantly, I roll out of the cushioned drift and onto a trail. Here the snow is packed, pounded into the ground: ten inches of powder beat to three. Six or seven stars dot the deep gray night sky. Even fewer will be visible in a couple of hours, their dim specks outshined by a fast-rising full moon.

Skis scrape toward me. A gliding figure--black against the white trail--slows to a stop. "Down already?" Rich asks.

"Shut up." I try to stand but cannot.

"Your back," says Rich.

I turn onto my back and lift both legs. They join leafless trees, black trunks jutting from white into gray.

"Now unhook your--"

"I know." I separate the caught skis and realign them. Rolling sideways, I push myself to my feet. "I do it often enough."

"Hey," says Rich, "you made it at least--oh, a quarter mile or so this time. Ready?" Not waiting for me to answer, he moves smoothly along the path.

I used to be better than him. After all, I taught him to ski in the first place. I was eleven; he was eight. We were both skin and bones, toothpicks on skids--he still is.

We'd visit Uncle Greg and Aunt Sandy's farm, a few miles down the road from our own house, and ski across the frozen pastures. Back then I could ski all day without falling. Not anymore. Rich used to spend half the time with his face in the snow, but he skis a lot now--every weekend between Thanksgiving and Easter, in fact. Sometimes more. During thaws he comes home disappointed and covered in mud, mom says; she washes his clothes two or three times to turn them tan.

She ought to make him wash his own clothes, I tell her. After all, he's in college now.

Just down the road, she says, at Community--not like you at State. But she'll wash my clothes, too, if that's what I want.

I don't want her to wash my clothes. I want Rich to grow up. Like I did.

The scratch of his slide fades. I gather my poles and follow.

Poles--I hate the sharp pikes in my hands because they terrify me. Someday I'll trip, poke out my eyes, and stumble about the woods til I freeze.

Bodies lay under me, and I ski over them. They line the trail on their backs, fiberglass poles crossed on their torsos. Blinded and frozen, resting.

Buck Creek Game Preserve slips past. The increasing glow of the moon illuminates the snow like a black light. As fluorescent ground and naked forest blend to a zebra static, I settle into rhythm.

The dark woods are still, deep in winter hibernation. Except for the sound Rich and I generate, the night is completely silent. And it's cold--thirteen degrees when we left my truck at eleven.

I've never skied here before--Rich discovered it on his own last February. Mom says he talked all year about getting me here, about bringing me when I came home during Christmas break. So here I am, stumbling along while he shows off.

I like skiing, I really do--especially at night. Rich and I used to plot

together about night skiing--we scoped out woods to invade, then waited impatiently for the next full moon. My senior year of high school, we hopped old man Jenkins's barbed wire fence and made a night run through the ravine on his land. He chased us away with a twenty-two.

I'd never felt so alive before.

But that was the last time I got out. I never have time at State, where there are more important things to do than night skiing.

Two years ago Rich called to say he'd just done Jenkins's ravine naked. The old man nearly put a slug in Rich's ass. I tried to act interested.

Left leg, right leg: slide, slide.

It's more tiring than I remember, perhaps because of the extra twenty pounds I carry from three-and-a-half years of cafeteria slop. And I'm much colder than I used to be.

Details in the ghostly landscape haunt me. A gnarled stump, uprooted, juts from a drift. The path curves outside its reach.

The gurgling of Buck Creek breaks the preserve's silence. Rich and I ski beside it for several minutes, then come to a small bridge. It spans the black water, the frigid flow kept unfrozen by motion.

A man with a crew cut waits beside the stream. The winter is colder than normal--even the creek grows ice. The man stamps his feet. After a

while, he sits by the water and pokes at its surface with the butt of his rifle.

I cross after Rich. He yells something I can't understand--earmuffs and a thick wool touk keep out more than the cold. He and I ski together in separate worlds.

I used to be like him--full of innocence, a martyr. But the world preys on idealism. You've got to be practical sometimes.

Dad's proud of me; he says I'm being sensible--one more semester at State, then law school.

Rich thinks I'm soft, that school's knocked the spirit out of me. He wants to hike the Appalachian Trail and save whales--environmental shit. But you can't fight big industry with slogans spray-painted on bedsheets; you've got to have people like me on your side, people with power. Rich says I'm policy, but he's action.

Rich breaks off the main path, weaving among trees, and cuts across the shallow slope of a ravine. I attempt to follow his tracks.

Branches scratch me, catch my poles. I pick up speed, and my eyes water; I search for soft, shallow mounds of snow.

Rich's tracks swerve to avoid a large tree. I can't make the sharp turn, so I bail, half-falling, half-rolling to my right as I force my poles away from my

face. Several feet and a mouthful of snow later, I rise from a drift and re-locate Rich's grooves.

After two more planned tumbles, I burst through a layer of underbrush and enter a broad clearing. Rich waits, a solitary figure several yards into the field. I slow, wobbling but not falling, and pull next to him.

"You're the noisiest thing for miles," he says. "How many times did you bite it coming through that last cut?"

"Just once."

"Mm."

"So. Is this it?" I ask. My thighs and shoulders ache.

"Almost. Why? Tired already?"

"No. I just wondered." We stand together in silence; I try not to pant.

Once we stop, the cold attacks twice as hard. Layers--layers are my friends. They slow the cold's march toward my skin, insulating me from this icy world. Long underwear. Socks--two pairs. Tee-shirts: one long-sleeved, one short-sleeved. Sweat pants--cotton and nylon. Sweatshirt, scarf. Goose-down coat. Gloves.

Rich mocks my layers. He claims they force me to sweat, chilling me. But he can't see his steaming head.

Beads of hot breath condense, then freeze on my scarf. "It's nice," I say.

"It is." Rich pushes one foot, then the other, slipping into rhythm; he slices across the field.

The clearing is almost a quarter mile wide and at least twice as long. Dead stalks of long grasses poke through the crust of snow, and four or five random trees mark the stretch, which is pocketed by animal tracks--mostly the shallow prints of squirrels and chipmunks, but also the deeper tread of deer and an occasional fox. Tonight the field is motionless--only Rich violates its stillness.

A few old, fading ski tracks, broken in spaces by blown powder, cross the field. But Rich's fresh cuts are clear. I slip into his trenches--marking the field further would be crass--and move slowly, careful not to disturb the landscape or wake it with vulgar movement.

Halfway across the clearing, I pass the crumbled remains of a long-abandoned hearth.

A bearded man in overalls stands next to a woman wearing a patched apron. Two children, a young girl in a calico dress and her twin brother, splash in the ocean of prairie grass surrounding them.

Several yards beyond the hearth is a broken circle of stones too symmetrical not to be planned. They are large rocks--several stand erect, almost waist high, while others have tipped over and barely break the snow's surface.

Men draped in animal skins crouch next to a fire. The light from its flames illustrates their painted faces and throws their shadows onto the ring of boulders surrounding them. They are silent, and the crackle of splintering wood is drowned by a roaring wind.

The animal tracks have thinned.

At the end of the clearing, the moonlight recasts a slope I assumed was a shallow rise as two mounds, each about ten feet high. They run the width of the field. Rich's tracks split them. I follow his path, the sole blemish on the smooth whiteness, and move between the mounds--except for a blanket of snow, they are bare.

An icy draft trails me through the gap, and I fight the urge to look over my shoulder. A second clearing opens. Rich waits at the edge of a flat, round table of snow.

I stop next to him, but he doesn't turn. "What is it?" I ask. "A lake?"

"Yes."

I gesture to the mounds behind us. "What about those?"

"Burial mounds."

"Oh." I glance back at the two sentinels, then again at Rich, who gazes across the frozen water. In the center of the lake, a cluster of pines clings to a rocky knoll. The knoll itself sits in the center of a blank page. It floats, adrift in a vast cloud--an unreachable sanctuary.

Rich's sweatshirt hits the ground next to me. "Wake up," he says. He faces me, poles in hands and naked from the waist up.

"What's this about?" I ask.

"Time to head out--you can take off your coat, if you'd like," he says.

"Why would I want to do that?"

Rich shrugs.

I point to the island. "You're going out there?"

"Sure. It's safe--there's eight inches of ice on that lake. Minimum."

"There aren't any tracks."

"First grooves in virgin snow are lucky."

"I don't know."

"Suit yourself," Rich says. He starts onto the ice.

"Wait."

"What?"

"Let's head back."

"She's calling us."

"It's cold."

"Only if you think about it," says Rich. "I'll be back in twenty minutes." He turns toward the island. Parallel tracks follow behind him, cutting through the smooth sheet.

His fresh path bothers me. I kneel beside the lake and try to smooth the surface, to erase Rich's grooves. But I can't wipe his slate clean.

Halfway to the island, Rich stops, then moves forward after a moment, leaving behind a small, dark heap. The boy still hasn't learned to wear clothes, always trying to assault "Mother Nature" on her own terms.

He reaches the shore of the island, then scrambles onto a boulder and disappears.

I wait at the edge of the snow-covered ice. The moon is directly overhead, and the entire landscape glows except the two, grim cuts across the lake. They tie the island down, anchoring it to the earth.

I slip my skis into the tracks for a moment. My legs tremble as I move onto the lake.

Left leg, right leg: slide, stop.

No--I can't. I back toward the shore. I back out of the grooves--I abhor them.

I turn away from the lake--away from the tracks--and face the mounds behind me. They are silent.

Cold works through my layers. Below twenty, the temperature's all the same. It moves slowly but incessantly, numbing me as it enters my bloodstream.

I approach the nearest mound and remove my skis. Kneeling in the nook where its slope meets the ground, I scoop a rut in the snow, then lay

myself in it. I close my eyes and slow my breath.

I listen to my heart. It races at first, then it slows as well.

Left, right: open, close.

I hear them all: crew cut, overalls, calico dress. Their hearts beat with mine. Warriors in skins, skiers with fiberglass poles--we all rest in the snow. The cold eats us, and we join it.

Maybe he didn't go, after all. Maybe he's resting a few inches away, and there are no tracks to the island. Maybe he's one of us.

But a howl carries from his island to my own. I sit up and look for the tracks. They haven't disappeared.

A figure scampers off the island and onto the lake. It defies the surface with its action. It denies the cold despite its nakedness.

It is not one of us.

It reaches its discarded clothes, puts them on, and continues toward me. I shiver. It moves faster, a courier from the island.

An ancient chief sits atop the nearest mound. He points at me, then at the figure.

I protest: I didn't send him--I didn't make him go. I did nothing. Look

at the proof--there's only one set of tracks. But it follows alongside--not in--Rich's tracks. Four grooves stretch from the shore to the island.

Still, it is not me. And I am not my brother's keeper.

It's now on the shore, claiming Rich's sweatshirt and coat.

"Cold yet?" it asks.

"A bit."

"You can't imagine what it's like out there."

"No?"

"No."

"Ready?" I ask.

"Ready. You lead."

I lead.

I lead, my back to the island. I block the lake from my thoughts.

As I pass between the mounds, they shudder--or I do, afraid that I've woken them. But the tombs are silent; their frozen insides sleep, snowmen in their bellies reduced to nothing years ago.

I pass the stone circle, but the wind doesn't howl.

I pass the abandoned hearth, expecting it to blaze with life. It doesn't.

I cross the face of the clearing, the body behind me.

I am not alone, however.

It follows me, trailing my every move. I lead it through ravines,

cluttered underbrush. It mirrors my evasions.

I will not look at it. I'll never acknowledge who--or what--it is.

My tips cross, and I fall. It moves closer.

I hate my skis and poles. I throw them at it, hoping to gain time, to separate myself from it. I run as it slows.

I distance myself, yet it continues after me. The tracks I follow remind me of nothing but the lake they approach, the desecration I now flee.

Buck Creek runs beside me.

I trip on a buried stump and plunge into a drift. It is nearly upon me. Struggling to stand, I face it, though I will not look at its face.

It draws near, and I brace, then spring, throwing my body against it. We roll together in the snow. It forces itself away from me. Panting, we face each other once more. It is yelling, but I can only hear the distant cracking of ice. We are both covered with powder, marked--snow men.

I throw myself into it a second time and drag it toward the creek. It struggles, but I refuse to let go as I lean toward the black current.

The shock only lasts an instant. The movement of the creek surrounds me, washing my body, and I know the snow is gone. I am moving, swept along. Numbness is replaced by a fire, a burning that races through me.

The Neighbor's Wife Is Sometimes Your Sister

Damn, Rachel's ass has gotten tight. Below the khaki hem of her hiking shorts, tanned flesh splits into aerodynamic thighs. Goose bumps form on the athletic calves that disappear into Pinnacle Creek. But her kneecaps are still scraped white, I've noticed--some things never change.

Despite her thirty-pound pack, Rachel swivels and looks at me. "Are you following me, Britt?" my sister asks. "Or do you just plan to watch?" Her eyes, as always, are daggers of light, each tan iris splashed with a pale green that glows as it absorbs. They dance with life, murdering me.

Her gaze first cut me in two the summer before I entered eighth grade. I'd slept late one morning but woken after a wet dream, and I was about to get out of bed to change undershorts when our collie Trig came tearing into my bedroom and jumped onto the bed, performing "Go Wake Britt," the one trick Rachel managed to teach him. Rachel ran into the room and hopped between me and Trig, shaking my body from side to side. She hit my stomach and told me to get out of bed and go with her to the park.

She smiled at me, and her eyes shone. She was a little girl about to start middle school, but for that one instant she was also an angel, and I wanted her to stay that way forever. I was the best person in her life, and she was mine. But I felt the stickiness in my shorts, and I knew she'd change, too.

One day she'd belong to someone else, a person who could never be me.

"Well. . . ." Rachel says. Her eyes still shine.

"I'm waiting," I say.

"For what?"

"You."

"Me?"

"To get across," I say.

Rachel is four or five yards into the creek, with another twenty feet of current between her and the far bank. "I see," she says, "the rookie's expendable, so you send her across first. Thanks."

"No, I want to keep an eye on you." She's been in the frigid water for over a minute. "Just make sure you don't kill yourself."

"Please. Mom and Kevin want me coming home in his car, not a body bag."

"I'm sure." Damn, why does she ruin every good moment by mentioning Kevin? Even here--completely isolated--the bastard manages to butt his way between us. "So watch that current, and don't step on anything slick."

"Easy to say from the shore."

"Shut up."

"Come out here and make me."

"I will, girl."

"Ooh, those are big words for a little boy," she says. "And you think I'm an actor. . . ."

"Get halfway across, then I'm coming," I say.

"Hey, don't rush me--you'll cramp my style."

"What style? Nobody's watching."

"You are," she says.

"I don't count."

"Sure, you do." Rachel braces herself with two sticks she found yesterday. Each is chest high, and she moves them one at a time, working forward but touching the creekbed with three legs at all times. Her tripod gives her stability, the strength found in triangles.

"Don't push too hard on those sticks," I say. "If either snaps, you'll get an icy bath."

"I'm being careful. Besides, I could use a rinse--I can already smell myself, and we've got . . . what? . . . five days until our next showers."

"Something like that."

"Why don't you join me? The water's fine."

"I will--liar."

"You're just scared it's not safe," Rachel says.

"Of course, it's safe. I wouldn't send you ahead if it wasn't."

"Sure, you would."

"Nope." Despite my confidence, March is a nasty time of the year to wade through creeks in the Smokies. But my high school and Rachel's UNC-Charlotte are both on break. And Rachel couldn't wait until summer.

The winter was mild, so snow's already melting on the slopes of Thunderhead, Squires, Siler's Bald--all the giants lining the Tennessee-North Carolina border. Run-off gorges the creeks draining their southern faces, creeks that include Pinnacle. The Pinnacle Creek Trail itself is smooth, with nothing more than a shallow grade, and a mat of needles and decaying leaves cushions much of the path, though recent sleet and rain have transformed parts into a muddy trough. Our boots are covered with muck, extra weight that each wade across Pinnacle will rinse clean.

The trail eventually crosses and re-crosses the stream more than a dozen times, disappearing into the water and resurfacing several yards upstream on the opposite bank. I remember this from a hike I took last fall, the first time I scouted the trail. Then, Pinnacle flowed below the tops of the stones strewn in its path--I rock-hopped at each crossing, kept my feet dry the entire afternoon. That's not going to happen in March, however, when all but the largest boulders lay several inches beneath the flooded creek. The rocks I used as springboards now rest several miles downstream, shoved toward Lake Fontana by Pinnacle's surge. We'll have to wade at each crossing.

Rachel slips but catches her balance by lunging forward with both sticks; my heart clogs my throat. "Rach. . . ."

Rachel laughs. "I'm fine. And awake. Worry about yourself for a change."

"I'm not the one playing Slip-and-Slide."

"Shut up and get your feet wet, you wuss."

I obey. Anticipating the cold is nearly as bad as the contact itself. It takes three or four seconds for the stream to work into my boots, soak a double layer of fleece and wool socks, and drown my feet. I've hiked through scores of frigid creeks--still, I'm never prepared for the instant cramping they produce, the muscle spasms that shoot through each leg. The violence used to trigger a second, warmer stream, but I've learned to control that response. "Oh, damn," I say as the water mates with my skin.

Rachel doesn't turn. "Ah, you're in at last," she says.

"Uh-huh. What was I thinking?"

"You tell me."

"I don't know, kid. I don't know."

Every experienced hiker has peculiar advice regarding creeks. Most agree it's essential to keep the inside of boots dry, that hiking for hours with wet feet only creates trouble, especially on a multi-day expedition. Rock-

hopping, of course, is always more desirable than wading. But if the stream is shallow, then a nice pair of waterproofed boots should keep feet dry, provided the boots' mouths are cloaked by a set of gaiters, synthetic sheaths that cover ankle to mid-calf.

If the creek's flooded, however, then hopping's no longer an option, and the current's going to be too high for gaiters. In that case, some die-hards wade streams like Pinnacle barefoot, while others change into "creeking" shoes, packing the extra weight in exchange for dry feet. More self-righteous hikers advocate better planning, set alternate routes to circumvent risky crossings.

Rachel and I are following none of these plans. Changing footwear means removing packs on each bank, losing a good fifteen minutes at each crossing. We can't waste an extra two hours and make Campsite 84 by nightfall. Neither of us own gaiters, and our hastily waterproofed boots are too old and worn to resist wetness. After this first crossing, our feet will be soaked all afternoon. We can dry our boots by the fire tonight, so they won't freeze before morning.

By the time I finish the crossing, Rachel is sitting on a rock, removing one of her boots.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"Changing my socks."

"You don't have enough," I say.

"I brought eight pairs," she says, "and I can re-use yesterday's once I dry them." Two days into the expedition, and most of our gear is already wet.

"This isn't the only crossing."

"It isn't?"

"No."

"We've got to do that again?" she asks.

"Seven or eight times."

"Fuck."

"I agree. But, hey--it wasn't that bad."

"Really? Why are you shivering?"

I ignore her. "Tell you what--you can change socks at lunchtime."

"Thanks for the permission."

"No problem."

"By the way," Rachel says, "when is lunchtime? Now would be nice."

"Another half-mile, ok?" I want to roll most of the miles early, especially the ones that include wading.

"I guess. Are all the crossings going to be like that?"

"Like what?"

"Where we've got to wade."

"Afraid so."

"Damn." Rachel thinks for a moment, relaces her boot. I sit down

beside her. "So why'd that first creek have a bridge?" she asks.

"Which one? Eagle?"

"I forget the name."

"Eagle's a bigger creek, in the first place. Pinnacle--this one--flows into it."

"Oh."

"Eagle would have knocked us off our feet."

"Speak for yourself--it takes quite a bit to floor me."

"And Eagle's a more important trail."

"Huh?"

"More people use the Eagle Creek Trail than this one--especially fishermen."

"So. . . ."

"So that's why it gets a bridge."

"No--so I give you my entire break," Rachel says, "and you take me down a second-rate trail." She smiles.

"Not second-rate. Less traveled."

"Same thing."

"No, it's not. I want to show you. . . ."

"You want to show me a good time, and you are. Don't worry about it. Relax." She leans back, sighs. "Know what?"

"What?"

"It's crazy, I know, but this feels really good."

"I agree."

"I mean, I can't believe we're actually doing this."

"Me neither." And I can't. Rachel's offer arrived out of nowhere, surprising but pleasing me. We hiked together quite a bit as teenagers--she was more personable in the woods than my high school buddies. Once I started UNC-Chapel Hill, however, we spent less time together. Those initial summers were pleasant reunions, and the woods dotting the Carolina Piedmont called us as before. But Rachel grew older in my absence. I'd known she would--still, I'd hoped the changes would be subtle.

She developed an interest in theater, performed all spring and summer in community musicals that families gathered to watch "under the stars." Practices swallowed her free time, free time she and I once shared as we explored together. She talked about acting incessantly, her childhood dreams of becoming either a nurse or a baseball player long forgotten.

I don't mind that Rachel changed her plans about life--after all, I left for Chapel Hill intent on becoming a lawyer, only to discover that I hated the politics and loved psychology, social work, education--fields which I believed made a difference. So her idealism doesn't bother me at all. But her naivete does. Still enthralled by the applause of local audiences--as well as the encouragement of a few professors at UNC-Charlotte, where she's now a

theater major--she's been lucky, landing roles in everything for which she auditions. What's going to happen when her luck runs out, I've asked, though she doesn't listen to me. She's found her calling, she claims, and knows what she's doing with her life. We've agreed to disagree, an arrangement which has encouraged us to grow apart.

Rachel's got talent--I'll admit that, though not to her face. Most people don't notice her when she passes them on the street--they can't tell she's my angel. But when she puts on a costume and floats onto the stage, a transformation takes place--she occupies the space, sliding through it with polish and ease. She becomes a presence, an event, and opens the eyes of the audience members, reveals the seraphic radiance I recognize whenever she enters a room. She teases and charms them to death without trying. That's why I'm jealous--no one else should see her magic or feel her witchcraft. I want it all.

I learned to hate the sprawl and vigor of my hometown when I moved back after graduation, so I fled across the state as soon as the opportunity presented itself. I immersed myself in a new job as a guidance counselor for a private high school in Asheville, and whenever that grew tiresome, I faded into the landscape of western Carolina. There I discovered quiet places, haunts where my lack of companionship seemed less obvious.

My lack of communication with Rachel matured into a deliberate

silence, especially once she met Kevin the fall after I moved. He played Claudio to Rachel's Hero in a 20s adaptation of Much Ado About Nothing, and the pair continued to act long after their last curtain call. Kevin was a junior, a year behind Rachel though he'd started school at least two years before her. Their charade made me sick.

I nearly killed the bastard at Thanksgiving. Kevin joked the entire dinner, usually at my expense. And what's worse, the rest of the family loved it. Mom clearly favored Kevin, even offered him one of the turkey legs that belonged to me and Dad. And Dad didn't oil his shotgun the entire weekend, though every night it was obvious that Kevin snuck out of the guest bedroom and into Rachel's as soon as he thought the rest of us were asleep.

That was the worst moment. I'd wanted to ask Rachel a question, planned to use the opportunity as a peace offering, a chance to re-open the sibling-to-sibling chats on which we once thrived. I opened her bedroom door at the same time that I knocked, the way I always did in the afternoon, but instead of finding Rachel curled in a corner with a book, I discovered her curled around Kevin in bed. She didn't see me, but the bastard beneath her did.

Rachel tried to talk to me, of course, but I refused to listen, not with Kevin in the house. Returning to Asheville was a relief, and I spent the next three weekends in the woods. When Christmas arrived, I allotted an awkward three days to Charlotte and its inhabitants.

"Hey," Rachel says, "I thought we needed to keep moving."

"I was thinking."

"So--think while you walk."

"I will."

The next half mile includes at least a half dozen crossings, none alike but all time-consuming, exhausting. Some are direct--straight shots across two feet of a slow but powerful surge--while others take a lax approach, entering ankle-deep rapids and following the creekbed for ten, twenty, thirty yards before the underbrush on the opposite bank parts and the dry path resumes. When not immersed in the creek, the trail dives into thickets of large-limbed rhododendron that swallow the path, dropping spider legs of branch and leaf that rain on us as we push them aside. At first Rachel and I make a game of it, blessing one another with impromptu showers. But that grows tiresome. Each hundred yards of ducking and muck and wading eat five to ten minutes and consume our waning energy.

I'd hoped, when Rachel scheduled our walk in the woods, that she'd dumped her fucker, that she'd seen the light and discovered who really loved her. That isn't the case, of course. She and Kevin are still paired, her infatuation with him stronger than ever.

But we get an entire week without his influence, at least. And a lot can happen in the course of a week.

We danced around difficult topics for the first day-and-a-half. But we're talking again, and it feels good--really good. My spirit has warmed, thawing some of the bitterness I harbor.

Still, I'm determined to change Rachel's mind regarding Kevin. This week, I realize, might be my last opportunity. It doesn't have to happen at once--we can ease into the topic over the next four days. But it needs to be resolved--Kevin needs to be history--by the time Rachel and I emerge from the Smokies.

After an especially tricky crossing several yards downstream from a one-story waterfall, Rachel says, "That's enough," and collapses amid a strand of second-growth pine trees that flank the trail.

"What?"

"Lunchtime," she says.

"Oh, really?"

"Yep. That or mutiny."

"You couldn't," I say, "I've got the only map."

"Hell, I'm hungry enough to sniff my way out. There's got to be a burger joint within a hundred miles of here."

"Probably . . . next to ice cream stands, and a Waffle House, and pizza

joints. . . ."

"Shut up. Let's eat."

For supper I plan to fix both mac-and-cheese and cup-'o-soups, a feast by backpacking standards. Lunch, on the other hand, is meager but functional--granola bars, trail mix, and a little bit of peanut butter smeared across pita bread. We devour the carbo-intense snacks, pausing only for sloppy draws on the flasks of water we carry. Afterwards, Rachel rests, and I purify streamwater with iodine tablets. Once I stop moving, I realize how cold I actually am. The temperature lingers in the upper 40s, though the drizzle hanging in the air seemed humid when we were sweating. The temperature will dip below freezing overnight. But that doesn't matter, not once our tent is set. The shelter will keep us dry, and our down sleeping bags can warm far colder nights--once sealed we're safe.

Rachel's eyes are closed, her head leaned against her pack at an awkward angle that thrusts her chin and neck forward. It's a teasing position, one that excites me, though it doesn't drive me insane like her habit of leaning over and hitching her pack onto the table of her back as she re-adjusts its weight. "Britt," she says.

"Yeah?"

"How much?"

"What? Farther?"

"Uh-huh. When do we stop for good? You know--to sleep."

"Take a nap now, if that's what you want."

"No. You'd never get me moving."

"I could."

"You didn't answer my question."

"Miles to go, my dear--we've got miles to go before we sleep."

"Ok, Shakespeare. But how many?"

"Frost," I say.

"How many, you literary ass?"

"Another mile of crossings, then we reach a small campsite."

"And stop?"

"No, then the trail moves through a low gap, and it's three, four miles to the next site."

"Four more? Fuck that--can't we stop at the first site?"

"We'll get behind schedule," I say. "Don't you want to see your lover again?"

"As much as you'd like to hear otherwise--yes, I would. But I'd also like to retain use of my limbs."

"It'll get easier once we move above Pinnacle," I say.

"Why didn't we move above it two hours ago? The Great Smokies are mountains, not valleys."

"Can't have one without the other."

"So why aren't we on the other?"

"Most of the highest ridge trails are still covered with two, three feet of snow," I say, "and if you thought you were wet and cold now. . . ."

"Honey," Rachel says, "you're a great tour guide and all, so I hate to disappoint you. . . . But I can't get any wetter than this. . . ." She sits and takes off her boots and socks. Her feet are white, and she massages them with her fingers, leaving purple splotches on the wrinkled skin.

I wish she'd let me massage them. I'd rub them softly, with care. But I need to focus on something else--I shouldn't to obsess like this, I know. It just happens. Rachel taunts me, though I don't think she realizes it--she can't know, or she wouldn't do it. She's not a coquette--she's an angel.

"I can't feel a damn thing," Rachel says, "except in my hands--and now they're getting cold. You can't get frostbite without frost, can you?"

"No. Of course not." I'm not sure. "So," I say, "you're trying out for a new play, I hear." I want her mind off the pain.

"Nope."

"Really? I thought--"

"Not anymore."

"Why not? The show always goes on, I thought."

"Oh, the show's going on . . . just without me."

"Really?"

"I didn't audition, decided to deal with personal issues instead this spring." She laughs: "God, that sounds forced--like I scheduled them or

something."

"Maybe you did."

"Maybe."

I wonder if she and Kevin have been in an argument. Perhaps they'll spar, then split. Play it cool, I tell myself. Let her come to you. "Can I help?"

"I guess. You're one of the issues."

Damn. "I see--the only one?" I fish, bait her into revealing her relationship woes.

"No. God, this feels so forced--you don't make it easy. Do you know that?" She cocks her head to the side--flirtatious. I say nothing. "It's not bad, really--the opposite, in fact. So why do I sound like I'm apologizing?"

"I don't know," I say. "But you do."

"I'm happy, happier than I've been in a long time."

"Oh?"

"Britt," she says, her voice serious but seductive, "I know you don't like Kevin."

"Oh, really--I don't?"

"I'm being serious, dammit."

"Me too," I say.

"He's a great guy, whether you believe it or not."

"And I don't." I switch to defense, stalling her.

"He loves me. And I love him."

"Mm." It's not the conversation I planned.

"Britt, we love each other, and we want to be together forever. We're getting married. . . . There, it's out. Dammit."

"I see." The news isn't a shock, really. On the contrary, I'm relieved to finally hear the words I've been dreading for months. I stand and walk past my sister.

"It's not like you're my ex-, Britt. Why act like I'm rejecting you?"

"Well. . . ."

"Because I'm not--you and Dad are the most important men in my life besides Kevin."

"Besides Kevin," I say.

"If you actually gave a shit anymore, Britt," Rachel says, "if you actually opened your eyes for once, dammit, you'd realize that's a pretty damn special position. . . ."

Rachel's eyes are wet. The moisture enhances their brilliance.

I squat next to her, reach to wipe a tear from her cheek. She turns her head. "Rachel."

"I took this trip to tell you," she says, "to see if we could patch our relationship. You and I used to be close--don't you remember?"

"I do, and I--"

"I want to. . . ."

"Ask my permission?"

"I don't need your permission, Britt. Kevin asked Dad's, but we didn't need his, either."

"You're not wearing a ring," I say. I need something tangible.

"I left it with Kevin. I didn't want to lose it, and I didn't want you to guess before I thought we were ready to talk. I should have waited a few more days, I suppose, but I was too excited about telling you . . . and scared--I want you to be happy for me. "

"Me too. . . . I want to be happy for you, Rachel, I really do. . . . But I just don't see. . . ."

"Then be happy for me, dammit--no 'but's. That's your only job. Love me, encourage me, but don't second-guess me. Not when I'm this sure. . . . Please, Britt. I'm not your baby sister anymo. . . ."

"But you are, Rachel." You're my angel.

"But I'm not a kid. And you've got to trust me for once, just like I'm trusting you on this trip."

"That's different."

"No," she says. "It's not."

"Ok." I'm not going to convince her otherwise--not now, at least.

"Really?"

"Yes."

"Hug?"

"Sure." I rock onto my knees and lean into her. She reaches forward

and wraps her arms about my neck. I smell her sweat, feel her wet hair press into my cheek. "Rachel," I say. Her chest collapses into mine--I sense her heart beat, attempt to align mine with hers.

"Britt."

"I just want what's best for you, kid."

"What's best for me, Britt, is for you to trust my decisions . . . for you to support me in everything I do, no matter how stupid it seems."

"I know, but it's hard."

"Can you do that, Britt?"

"I don't know--I want to. Yes."

She squeezes my neck, then releases herself. I linger, and she stands. "I need a Kleenex," she says.

"Look in my pack," I say.

"Wait. Britt, there's something else."

"What?" I stand and slowly circle her.

"I'm pregnant, Britt."

I picture a house of cards. . . . It shakes. . . .

"I'm going to have a baby," she says. "You're going to be an uncle."

Shakes. . . .

"Uncle Britt."

Falls.

"Is. . . . Is it Kevin's?" I ask.

"Of course, it is. . . ." Rachel loses her hesitation, replaces it with fire. "Dammit. Fuck you, Britt--you are such an asshole."

"No, no--I didn't mean it that way." And I didn't--I don't know what I meant. It's hard to think and drown at the same time. "I mean, he didn't do it on purpose, did he?"

"What?"

"You know--to get you to marry him?"

"Britt, don't do this. . . ."

"Well?"

"No--no, he didn't. We've been engaged for months, Britt--since right after Christmas . . . December."

"December?"

"I waited to tell you in person; the news about the baby only came two weeks ago. That's why you and I had to hike now, not during the summer. We just found out, Britt. . . . No one knows but you and Mom and Dad."

"And Kevin."

"Yes, of course. Britt. I'm excited--we're excited. We're happy."

"I--" They'd outmaneuvered me. A wedding might be canceled, but this. . . . No, it can't--Kevin's stake, his claim to my family, to my angel: it's permanent.

"We want you to be happy, too."

"I am--it's great. Really, it is. . . . It's just a lot to hear at once."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"No, don't be. I just. . . ." I search for a quick excuse. "I thought I'd be the first."

"Me too, Britt--me too. That's not how it happened, though."

"I know. And I'm happy--I am. Excited."

"Really?"

"Yes. Yes, I think so." And I try to believe myself, but I can't.

"Good. Thank you, Britt. It means a lot to me."

We look at each other, both smiling. For a moment we seem happy together. "Well," I say.

"Well?"

"Ready to keep moving?"

"I suppose," she says.

"No more surprises?"

"None." She laughs. "None that I know, at least--you've got a few, I imagine."

"None here--let's go."

We talk as we hike. In ways it's the past revisited--me and Rachel, together again. But our conversation is shallow, trivial. We discuss inane topics--the future, Kevin's job prospects, girls Rachel wishes I could meet, names for the baby ("Britt" isn't an option). Our physical trek hints at a

destination, but our conversation is aimless.

The next crossing isn't difficult, and I lead. Preoccupied with Rachel and Kevin and weddings and babies and uncles and babies and sex, I don't notice the half-foot drop into the stream's main channel until my foot passes the level I'd expected to find the creekbed. I keep myself from pitching forward, but my counterbalance is too vigorous, abrupt, and I sit in the creek. The clothes in the bottom of my pack cushion the drop, but they absorb a great deal of water in the few dazed moments I'm in the creek.

"Sucks to be you," Rachel says.

I stand. "You don't know the half of it."

"I can guess--looked funny, though--like you suddenly decided to take a break and did." She wants to laugh, I can tell. "You okay?"

"I suppose. A little wet, that's all. Most of my clothes are soaked, I bet."

"Can we dry them?"

"Over the fire."

"Fun."

"Yep. It's my fault--I wasn't paying attention."

"You should have let me lead."

"I know."

I defer to Rachel's lead at the next crossing, though I suggest the route. Upstream, a foot of water lurches among large boulders, while downstream,

Pinnacle collects under an overhang--tree roots dip into a murky pool of backwater that looks waist-deep, deeper. Streams in the Smokies can bottom out without warning, filling sinkholes ten, twenty feet deep; the underwater caverns hide old grandpa bass, snapping turtles, the foot-long salamanders the region nurtures.

Between the rapids and sink, the creek flows over a large sheet of flat rock that extends the entire width of the creek. Three or four inches of water move across the sheet, then slide down its side into the basin.

"Try that way," I suggest.

"The rock?--okay."

The platform is sturdy but slick with algae. "Watch the bottom," I say, "the footing's pretty slippery. . . ."

"What?" Rachel turns, but she doesn't stop. The surface provides no nook for her hiking sticks, so they slip into the air as her feet slide forward. For a moment Rachel sits in the water, like me, but her pack rests on the rock's slope, and she stares blankly at me as the creek backs her down the glossy slide into the pool.

She disappears, and I imagine the added weight of her pack dragging her to the bottom of the well. I take my own pack from my back, then stand it in the current. I prepare to dive, but Rachel's pack, head, back surface before sinking a second time. I slide down the rock after her, keep my feet first, and prepare to strip my boots. But my feet hit the creekbed, and I stand in waist-

deep water. The bottom is shifty, sandy. Rachel still flounders--disoriented by the plunge, she imagines the water is over her head. People drown in bathtubs, I remind myself, and go after her. I grab the back of her pack, the closest handle I can find, and pull her to her feet. She stops thrashing, pants for breath, spits brown creekwater. "Br. . . Britt . . . Drown, Britt . . . I'm drowning."

"You're safe," I say. "Safe. I move her through the pool, up the opposite bank. Her legs buckle, and I lower her to the ground before retrieving my still-standing pack.

Rachel is completely soaked. I search my pack, find a dry towel, and help her wipe a little of the water from her face. All of my clothes are wet from my first fall, and her pack is dripping with water. Even her sleeping bag is useless, I think.

"Britt."

"Rachel?"

"Am I okay?"

"Yeah . . . you're going to be fine."

"The baby?"

"It's . . . it's fine, too."

"I'm cold."

"I know. We need to get you some dry clothes."

"I don't want to hike any more, Britt."

"I know. But we have to. . . ."

"I want to go home."

"Can't do that, kid--you know that. The next site's got to be soon."

"Can you go ahead and set up?"

"Nope--I need your help." Leaving her alone on the trail isn't an option.

"But. . . ."

"Come on--" I yank her to her feet, and push, pull, prod, lead her from one step to the next. We have to keep moving--we can't stop, or she'll go into shock.

The death march is nothing but fragments of pain. I decide to shorten the hike, of course, to stop at the first campsite we reach. None appear. Instead, we cross the damn creek dozens, hundreds of times. I half-carry Rachel over the first post-fall wade, but soon she takes them with zombie precision, hollow eyes clouding and sinking into her skull with every mechanical step.

I need to shove her into that sleeping bag, to give her a haven where her damaged body can recuperate. I consider pitching the text in the middle of the trail, but the ground's highly uneven, muddy and wet. The shelter's useless if the inside doesn't stay dry. Besides, I keep telling myself, that damn

site's around the corner.

I'm fighting battles of my own--battles I'm slowly losing. Granted, I'm not as wet as Rachel, so I can't imagine her situation. Still, my entire body aches. My feet sting--they're numb at first, but they soon fill with fire. Hands search for dry pockets but find none; chills rack arms and chest. A cut on my leg slowly bleeds. And my groin--my dick feels like the wet and cold have yanked it inside-out. But I keep walking, talking, focusing on Rachel. If she gets out of this mess, I think, then I will, too. I review ways to treat hypothermia but can't remember most.

I try to forget that the sun will set in a few hours. The day hasn't moved beyond overcast--still, the cold will increase with night.

After forty minutes or four hours, a wooden stake engraved with a triangle and an "88" appears next to a side path. We follow it to a small, flat clearing covered with dull red leaves and pocketed by two or three circles of stones.

Rachel wanders toward one of the fire pits and squats, rubbing her hands together over a charred log that no longer emits heat. Meanwhile, I find the driest piece of ground. I work haphazardly, tossing gear about the clearing in a rush to set up the tent. Its fabric, stored in an extra sack, is dry, thank God, but most of the other gear in the lower compartment of my pack is wet. One sweatshirt's just faintly damp, so I set it inside the tent for Rachel.

Tarp, poles, tent, and cover take less than five minutes to assemble, and I call Rachel. I unroll my sleeping pad and my bag, since hers are soaked and useless.

Rachel's muttering at the log, her eyes glazed. "Fire's warm, Kevin--warm. And Britt's a good brother, takes care of me and the baby." I lift her by the shoulders, point her in the direction of the tent. She moves toward it, staggering but not hunched. She weaves an ethereal beauty--half-spirit, half-girl, a nymph of the forest. I almost follow my maiden, capture her in the cave. I burn, but I still need to start the fire.

Leaving Rachel to get into the bag, I climb a nearby ridge to look for kindling. Most of the fallen branches that litter the forest floor are damp, useless. Stepping over a fallen birch, I casually test it with a foot, then stand on it until it snaps. Its outside layers are wet, but its two or three core inches are tan, prime for burning. I hack at the trunk with my hunting knife.

The early evening air is colder than before, and sometime during the past hour the lingering drizzle changed to sleet. It collects on stumps and rocks, powdering the ground. Lighting the fire will be tricky but possible. I move faster, since I note the chill when I pause, panting and shivering, to check my progress. As my sweat cools, my body steams. I nick my left hand, and blood smears with mud and bark as it dries, turns my skin a ruddy brown.

I don't have enough wood, but I need to check on Rachel, so I stumble

down the decomposing embankment to the campsite. Rachel isn't outside--I open the tent's flap. My sister lies in a fetal position on top of the sleeping bag, rocking and sucking her thumb. She's removed her wet jacket but not her sports bra, and the sweatshirt I gave her is heaped on the floor.

"Rach--" I say, "you need to get in the bag. I touch her shoulder, and she whimpers, vibrates with a constant, violent shiver. Hypothermia, I think.

I slip outside the tent and gather a pot and burner. I heat a liter of water as fast as possible, then dip a towel into it. Taking the hot, wet cloth into the tent, I wrap it about Rachel's feet of ice, which I rub until their shaking slows and Rachel whispers, "Britt."

"Come on, kid, you need to get into that bag. Here," I say, "let me help--it'll be warm." I pull her into a seated position and unzip the bag. Once enclosed, Rachel's body heat will blanket her. But she needs to take off those wet clothes. I help her raise her arms, then--head turned--I try to pull her sports bra over her head but get nowhere--I'm just shaking her like a doll. "Hell, Rachel," I say, "I've bathed with you--I can see you naked." She says nothing, her head rolling to one side. As I strip her chest of the bra, I try to ignore the goosebumps plastered across her white skin. Her breasts surprise me at first--they're matured since we last bathed together, growing from pinpricks into supple mounds projecting from her chest. I don't think I like the change.

The bag works best when its occupant is naked--the down lining acts as a second skin. But I'll have to face Rachel when she wakes, so I help her pull on the sweatshirt.

"Up," I say, and she obeys. "Your shorts." They're easier to remove, as are her wet panties, and I quickly supply a pair of quick-to-dry nylon trunks I find among my wet clothes. I help my sister into the bag and close it.

Outside the tent, the sleet is steady. Disoriented, I remove my wet shirt, then my pants and the soaked undershorts that cling to my skin. My sack hangs shriveled and lifeless, aged fifty years in the course of a few hours; my prick has shrunk from the icewater and cold air, "playing turtle"--a nub two inches long that has backed its head into the remnants of its foreskin, undoing its own circumcision. It hurts. I cup my hands about it for warmth, then slowly pull the skin back, painfully uncovering the pale tip.

I peak into the tent--the bag is motionless.

The easiest way to warm a freezing partner is to lend your body heat. I collect our gear and stash it inside the tent, then brush sleet off its outside covering. "If you don't fall asleep," I tell myself, "you can climb out before she wakes--you don't have a choice." I look down at my penis--it's still undersized. I'm a little boy. "We're kids," I say.

I step into the tent, and my world shrinks to a five-by-eight dome. I unzip the sleeping bag--Rachel's shaking again, her teeth chattering. I lie next to her body, then pull the drawstring at the top of the mummy sack, leaving

only a two-inch airhole. Sealed in the cave, I wrap my arms around Rachel, a child clutching his teddy bear, and I pray I won't harden.

The Legend of Taco Mike

I'm twenty years old--that's too young to be bitter.

I want to be happy and carefree, to race barefoot across beaches as I laugh at the stormclouds in the distance. I'm being silly, I know, but I want to be a little girl again--KD, not Kendra Duncan--to sit with my brother Michael beside the pond on Grandpa and Grandma's land in Wear Valley, Tennessee, and listen to bullfrogs hiding among the cattails.

Back then, everything seemed to make sense. I knew I was loved, and I knew I could love in return.

Now, I'm not sure.

***

My main pack's at Spence Field, suspended by a rope in the shelter so the mice that ran across my sleeping bag during the night won't bother the gear and food. My hundred and thirty pounds seem light without thirty-five extra hitching a ride on my back.

I need to ration my strength--I'm still sore after yesterday's six mile climb from Cades Cove to the main ridgeline, and tomorrow I'll wander south through the western Smokies. But today I'm aiming for the top--Thunderhead, the highest peak in the area. The incline's steep but not impossible--a hiker needs patience and endurance, the physical and mental ability to take a long, uphill walk. And despite yesterday's workout, I'm ready

for the climb--my body's ready, at least.

I like my body. It's a strong body--a survivor's body.

***

The day's gorgeous: mid-60s and sunny, with a blue sky specked by occasional clouds. I could have slept all afternoon in the grassy bald at Spence Field, the clearing where the southern hillside melted into valleys and a distant lake--Fontana, I assume. Behind that, mountain after mountain stood layered and artificial, exquisite cardboard cut-outs stacked for miles.

But I felt lazy, and that bothered me. Most of the thru-hikers sleeping at the shelter were awake at dawn, I suspect, because everyone but the old-timers not racing for Maine had disappeared by the time I crawled out of my bag. As the only female and the thirteenth hiker to arrive at the twelve-person shelter, I caused quite a stir around sunset yesterday evening. No one mentioned that the shelter was already full, that it was obvious I hadn't reserved a space. Grateful, I chose not to mention that it was obvious my bunkmates hadn't bathed in several days.

I'd planned to sleep at the Derrick Knob shelter, five miles east of Thunderhead on the Appalachian Trail, the AT. But ascending Derrick Knob meant connecting to the ridgeline via the Middle Prong Trail, and I hadn't hiked that ex-railroad grade for eleven-and-a-half years, when Grandpa and I followed it along the Little River into old logging country on the cold, rainy day that a young, anonymous angler carried me back to the parking lot while

rangers searched for Grandpa.

I thought I could handle the trail and its memories. So I spent Saturday night at Grandpa and Grandma's farmhouse, which my cousin Jay maintains despite lucrative offers from businessmen in Pigeon Forge, and I drove into Great Smoky Mountains National Park yesterday morning, following the dirt road that runs south from the Treemont Ranger Station to the Middle Prong trailhead. But I couldn't force myself out of my pick-up, over the footbridge and onto the trail, so I skipped the Middle Prong and shortened my excursion by seven or eight miles--an entire day.

Eventually, of course, I'll need to face the Middle Prong, to visit the trail along the rhododendron-lined creekbed that swallowed Grandpa and began draining the men from my life. But that can wait until Michael collects me at Fontana Dam on Saturday and drives me back to my truck.

I don't think Michael's pleased that I asked him to drive from Atlanta to rural North Carolina and find me. He thinks I'm crazy, hiking by myself like this. But he didn't want to come with me, claimed he couldn't spare the week--not with another kid on the way, he said.

***

The trail beneath my boots winds through laurel bushes crowding spruces and firs off the ridgeline. I picture my size eight feet--they want to escape their shells, to breath real air, not the stale crap filtered through waterproofed leather and two layers of sweaty socks. I want to wrap my toes

around rocks, to feel stiff grass prick the soft wedge of skin sandwiched between the calloused ball and heel of each foot.

The Appalachian Trail's little more than a deep groove at the moment, a rut dug into Thunderhead's side by years of hikers and precipitation. The trough's a half-foot wide and almost as deep. I expected more in the renowned path--still, the bitch stretches from Georgia to Maine, and I respect the fools who hike the whole damn thing. The thru-hikers I met last night--Boxcar and Mousetrap, among others--had covered almost two hundred miles, a tenth of the way. They'd been hiking for three-and-a-half weeks and looked tired. I'll probably meet more characters like them as I head south--they're all migrating north, chasing winter out of the Appalachian highlands.

I can't imagine two thousand miles at once--today's climb is enough for me. Running and walking beside lazy Ohio rivers with my retriever JD can't compare to the inclines and scrambles I've faced during this first day-and-a-half. Fortunately, the AT drops more than it climbs on its way to Fontana.

JD's spending the week with Jay, but if that mutt were here, he'd drag me down the trail's rut, racing after boots tracks, I guess--whatever the hell's down there. The rut scares me. I worry that I'll twist something when I drop my legs into the narrow slot, so I move off-trail and stomp on the grass beside it. Sometimes thick bushes cram the path, forcing me through a turnstile of vegetation--still, I avoid the rut.

Underbrush claws at my legs. My socks deflect some of the branches,

but I'm collecting battle wounds, light scratches that aren't deep but sting like hell when I sweat--glisten, whatever girls are supposed to do.

Up here, I sweat. And I'm not ashamed of it, either. I lick at the salty moisture on my upper lip, which is chapped by sun and wind. Playing with it's not going to ease the pain.

***

A briar pokes through one of my socks, and the thorn tugs at my calf. I stop to extract it, then reach behind me and swing a fanny pack about my waist. I sift through its contents--a ring of keys, an Ohio driver's license rubberbanded to credit and insurance cards, my camera, fifty dollars in cash, and a bag of Cheez balls--then find a bottle of water and squirt my forehead. When I lean my head back, my eyes sting from the diluted sweat, but the trickle that weaves down the nape of my neck and behind my dirty blonde ponytail makes the burning worthwhile.

Inspired, I squeeze the bottle again, aiming directly at my neck. But the gush doesn't tantalize like the trickle. It soaks my t-shirt, and the wet cotton that sticks to my skin is cold in the April air.

I could strip the shirt and dry it on a rock--after all, I'm wearing a sports bra. But the thought of meeting a sweaty, middle-aged hiker who hasn't had sex in months dissuades me.

The top's not in sight, though the bushes about the trail have thinned. I've covered at least a mile, so it can't be much farther. It's hard to gauge

distance on a climb, but I'm anticipating a drop--smack on my ass with my head on a rock and my bootless, sockless feet high in the air, warmed by the sunlight and tickled by the breeze.

***

Light gray boulders dot the grassy clearings between thickets. The trail moves out of its groove, broadens, and I follow it between two patches of brush, then step onto a layered heath strewn with large stones. A crackle--a quiet static--drifts toward me from above. As the summit materializes, the source of the noise remains hidden, but the back of a head appears. A bushy mop leads to a pink neck, which merges with even redder shoulders. I climb until the stark contrast of a white back is visible, then stop, wary of exposing more than I want to see. While paused, I fill in the rest of the masculine figure. It's broad but not especially muscular--a few inches under six feet, maybe a hundred and seventy pounds.

I scuff a boot into the ground to announce my presence. The figure jerks, then turns. "Hey there, camper." A band of flesh rolls over the straining button of cut-off jeans that reveal too much thigh. A green camouflaged bandanna from the 80s--rolled Flashdance-style--keeps his curly mane of hair from falling onto his forehead, though nothing restrains the bush leading down from his navel. He's thirty, maybe a few years younger, and looks like he spends most of his non-hiking time buried in a lazy-boy recliner, a beer in one hand, remote in the other, and a plate of nachos in his

lap. He's probably a big fan of car racing.

The stranger's sunglasses reflect my own disheveled image. He scopes me out and waits for a response.

"Oh," I say, "hi."

He thumbs over his shoulder. "Nice view, huh?"

"It is." I can't see it with him in the way.

"Worth the climb?"

"I suppose." I spot the source of the crackle--a small black radio rests on a pillar of rock almost a yard high. I gesture toward it. "Yours?" I ask.

"Yep--you like ham radio?" He sounds hopeful.

"Never really thought about it."

"That's too bad."

For whom, I wonder.

"Want a better look?" he asks, then points past the radio to other boulders.

"I guess." I scramble onto one of the rocks, and he chooses a perch next to mine. I pretend he's not there and stare at the valleys unfolding before me, the mountains looming behind them. But I can smell him. Tacos. He smells like tacos. I climbed all afternoon to reach an overlook with a gorgeous view, a view that's overshadowed by the fact that I'm standing downwind from a damn Taco Bell.

It's not that I dislike tacos. On the contrary, I enjoy a quality Mexican

dinner as much as anyone. Especially burritos--bean burritos with extra onion and guacamole, the ones Grandpa said tasted like old newspapers dipped in slime.

"Know what peak this is?" Tacos asks.

"Thunderhead, isn't it?"

"Part of her--one peak, at least. It's Rocky Top."

"Really? The Rocky Top? Like the song?"

"Yes, mam'n. Wish that I was on ol' Rocky Top, down in the Tennessee hills"--his singing isn't great, but it's enthusiastic--"ain't no smoggy smoke on Rocky Top, ain't no telephone bills. Once I had a girl on Rocky Top, half bear, other half cat"--Tacos points at me--"wild as a mink, but sweet as soda pop, I still dream about that"--and explodes at the chorus: "Rocky Top, you'll always be--home, sweet home to me; good ol' Rocky Top--Rocky Top, Tennessee." He pauses, and I hope he's done, but he's not: "Once two strangers climbed ol' Rocky Top. . . ."

"Thanks," I say, "I've heard it."

"But the second verse is the best," Tacos says, "all about moonshine." He gets off his boulder and rubs the rocky ground. "See, too rocky for corn--you've gotta get it from a jar."

"I know--it's not my favorite."

"What? Moonshine?"

"Song."

"But it's all about us, kid--two strangers meeting on a mountaintop. You look half bear, half cat to me."

That's a compliment, I imagine. "I don't know about that."

"You've got to be, to get up here."

"Hm."

"I love that song," Tacos says. "Orange blood runs in my veins, girl--I'm one hundred percent All Vol."

"I see." I suppose I should be impressed.

"What about you? You look like a student--do you go to UT?"

"No," I say, "I'm visiting from Ohio."

"Ohio," he says, "round on the ends and high in the middle."

I smile--my friends and I stopped telling the joke in middle school.

"Near Dayton, by any chance?" Tacos asks.

"Yes, actually--Yellow Springs."

"Never heard of it, but I go to Dayton every year for the Hamvention, this show for Ham Radio out at Hara Arena."

"I know the arena but not the Ham thing."

"Hamvention."

"Nope."

"So--you're from Buckeye country," Tacos says. "Hey--what kind of school names its mascot after a nut, anyway?"

"I don't know."

I expect a joke, but Tacos delivers no punchline. "Me neither," he says. "Maybe the students at OSU are a little--I don't know . . . Ohio dumb, I guess." Tacos snorts. "Yeah, Ohio dumb--I like that. You know, Tennessee spanked the Buckeyes real good a few years back in the Citrus Bowl--real good."

"Did they?" I ask.

"We did," Tacos says, as if he broke open his own personal can of whup-ass to smear on the boys in scarlet-and-gray. "Your basketball team might have danced to the Final Four this year, but you can't touch us in football."

"Oh?"

"I should know--I never missed a game when I was at UT. But I'm graduated now, live over in Nashville." He thumbs over his shoulder.

I look without thinking, half expecting the city to materialize on the next mountaintop. "Nashville?"

"Yep--land of big hair and loud preachers. I've been there for three years--I'm an environmental engineer, try to keep the city clean."

Tacos's non-stop commentary on his life irritates me, but I respect his job, at least. "Oh. Are you on business here, then?" I ask.

"No, no--I wish my job brought me places like this. This is just R&R for me--I drove over for the weekend. Business normally means sending cameras down sewer holes, or--if I'm really lucky--standing thigh deep in liquid shit."

"That's pretty disgusting." I try to connect his job to the taco smell.

"Hey, it's my job--don't knock it. Besides, they hose me down after I take the measurements."

"That's good." I'd hose him down, too.

"What do you do?" he asks.

"Me?"

"No--Peyton Manning. Yes, you--are you a student?"

"Sometimes," I say. "I'm taking a little time for myself at the moment."

"That's a nice luxury. How old are you, anyway? Twenty-one?"

He's pretty good. "Twenty-three."

"Twenty-three? No shit?"

"No shit."

"I swear, you don't look a day over twenty-one."

"Twenty-three--" I say, "my final offer."

"I'd take it." He grins--his teeth are a little yellow, but they're straight.

"No sale--bad credit, and no references."

Tacos laughs half-heartedly. "I could radio a friend. . . ." He's nice--sweaty, but nice. I'm not interested, though--I'm here to relax, not mate. I trace the AT into thickets on my left that dip along the ridgeline, then move to the next peak, which is about a half-mile away and slightly higher than I am.

"That's Thunderhead's main peak," Tacos says.

"How high is it?" I ask.

"About fifty-five hundred feet--maybe a little more. After that, the AT drops a bit--down through a couple of gaps."

"Derrick Knob?"

"Yeah--" Tacos raises his eyebrows and thrusts his lower lip forward, impressed that I know a site on the trail. "Then over Siler's Bald and Clingman's Dome--see the shiny speck out there, the spot that looks like a mirror." He walks next to me and points toward the highest peak I can see. "That's the parking lot near the Dome--the shine's the reflection of sunlight off the car windshields." Tacos is excited--his voice speeds, and he gestures randomly to the valleys in front of us. "All that--that's the Hazel Creek watershed, moving down to Fontana in the south." He points to our right. "Past Hazel are Welch Ridge and the High Rocks--lots of rattlesnakes in the summer." Turns around. "Back to the west, that grassy space is Spence Field, an old grazing pasture. You probably came from there."

I nod, confused but fascinated that Tacos knows his geography so well. He could invent half of it, of course, and I wouldn't catch him. But I take him at his word.

"Then Eagle Creek down the slopes to the south, and Shuckstack and its fire tower. And in the distance to the north," he waves his right arm, "that's Cades Cove."

"That's where I started," I say.

"Really?" Tacos asks. "This morning?"

"No--yesterday. I spent the night at the Spence Field shelter."

"Full pack?"

"Yep."

Tacos raises an eyebrow, then looks me over. The growing respect's sweet, but the gaze isn't. "By yourself?" he asks.

"No," I say, "some friends came with me--they . . . stayed at the field this afternoon."

"Oh--their loss." Tacos sounds disappointed, but not for them. "Will you be there tonight?"

"Yeah."

"Hey--me, too."

"Oh?" Shit.

"You'll have to introduce me to your friends. Hey--what's your name, anyway?"

"Jessica," I lie.

"Pleased to meet you, Jessica. I'm Mike."

"Hi, Mike." Goodbye.

"So, Jessica. . . . Why are you hiking alone these days?"

"Oh, I. . . . Hey--I'm not. Like I said, my friends are at the shelter."

Tacos shakes his head. "You'll need a better story than that, kid. Place

them behind you, at least--following. . . ."

I don't say anything. Tacos can make the next move.

"Don't worry, I won't let your secret slip," Tacos says. "I'm impressed you're here--not many girls are confident enough to hike on their own."

"Really?"

"No."

"It's a little stupid, I suppose."

"A little, but keep your confidence, and you'll be fine."

"Thanks." I mean it.

"So what's your real name? And don't say Jessica."

I shake my head.

"Don't trust me, huh?"

"Not that much."

"I'm not hitting on you--I'm just being friendly. Isn't that allowed?"

I shake my head a second time, but I smile.

"Hey," Tacos says, "we'll find you a good trail name tonight at the shelter--so you can be anonymous but not rude."

I nod in agreement, then wander about Rocky Top, explore my own little world. The sky's still deep blue, but more clouds have rolled in, white and billowy--harmless. One looks like a dinosaur. I wish it were a chariot . . . or a jet plane, like in that folk song. Something fast, spectacular--something to take me away.

A breeze builds, moves across Rocky Top. I wish it would storm. I want thunder and lightning and hail. I want to rant and shriek at the fury, sounding my own barbaric cry.

The radio continues to emit static. Taco Mike fools with one of its dials, talks to me over his shoulder. "You sure you don't like ham radio, hiker-girl-who-calls-herself Jessica?"

"I'm sure."

"See--that's too bad. It's a lot of fun, really. I mean, you meet people around the world, even above the world--astronauts, for instance."

"So if I ever want to patch through to Mir. . . ."

"Yeah, though that might be hard. Or friends and family. Or 9-1-1: you can report emergencies, forest fires. Amateur radio's not a hobby--it's a service."

"I see."

"Now, you could start with a Novice License--I got mine in third grade, and now I'm Advanced with only one level to go." Taco Mike's showing off. He keeps getting friendlier, more casual--he knows too much about me, and I haven't told him any of it. It's time to move. Tacos senses this, asks, "Going to the main peak before you head back?"

"How do you know I'm heading back?"

"Look who's jumpy--your pack's at the shelter, I thought. With your friends."

"Oh--yeah, it is. Sorry. . . . No, wait--they're not at the shelter. They're a couple miles behind me."

"Too far," Tacos says, "that's over an hour of hiking."

"Ok--a quarter mile."

"Better. So?"

"So what?" I ask.

"Are you heading to the tip of Thunderhead?"

"That's right. Yes, I was thinking of it, at least."

"There's no great bald--the rhododendron have taken over. But there's a rock that's got the elevation marked with a metal plate--kind of a furniture tag for the mountain, so don't mess with it. Anyway, you can stand on it and pop your head through the tops of the bushes. I like here better, but it's pretty neat there, too--it feels like you're riding an ocean wave of bushes."

I turn down the trail.

"Wait a second," Taco Mike says, "I might as well come along."

But I don't want him along--I want to see at least one mountaintop on my own.

I look over my shoulder--he's still fooling with the radio. "You should check out my web site," he says. "It's pretty neat, just go to. . . . Jessica? Hey, wait a second--I'm coming."

But I'm out of sight, and I break into a jog, either playing a cruel game of cat-and-mouse or truly running away--a little of both, most likely.

* * *

I don't want Tacos to catch me, but I need to double back to Spence Field. An especially large rhododendron thicket appears several yards to my right, and--spontaneously--I dash into it.

At first the branches are dense, but they open and yield space, a small, interior room much like the inside of a circular clothing rack at a department store, where a child willing to brave the initial rush of fabric has no trouble hiding from Mom. I wait, listening for Tacos to pass--I try to be quiet, to refrain from chuckling at my sleuth-like behavior.

I am silent. I am one with the bush. I am full of shit.

After a minute or two, I hear someone moving along the main trail. Footsteps stop near the point I entered the bush, then move toward me.

Crap--I must have broken some branches or trampled the underbrush.

". . . sides"--Taco Mike's voice grows distinct--"she smelled funny." He laughs. "No way she's twenty-three."

I hear raindrops, though I can't imagine where they started, and I fret that Taco Mike will jump into the thicket for cover. But it's a trickle, the sound of a small stream slapping the rhododendron leaves. My god, I realize, he's pissing on my hiding place. And he's kept himself hydrated, for the stream keeps coming and coming. Drops collect into rivulets and fall from leaf to leaf, then form tiny puddles on the sloping dirt beneath the bush. The viscus on each puddle grows and strains, then breaks and streams like a

deflating balloon releases air. I adjust my position, allow the piss to flow past me.

I try to face away from Tacos without moving the bush. He can't know I'm here--he's vulnerable, his solitude violated, and my position seems unfair to both of us. I could burst from hiding and expose him, or I could shake the branches like an animal and try to scare him away. But I'd rather he left on his own. He deserves that privacy, at least.

Some late drops spatter wildly across the front of the bush as Taco Mike shakes himself dry. "All finished, big guy?" Tacos asks.

A few years ago I'd have peeked at the big guy, but today I've no desire to sneak a glimpse. He must be done, however, for Taco Mike stomps back to the trail. The closest trickle stops a few feet from me, then the ground absorbs it. I can smell where it stopped, though--even the man's piss reeks of tacos.

Taco Mike's urine washes the allure from my hide-out, so I force through the back of the thicket, crawling into a patch of tall grass. Michael would laugh if he saw me--he'd claim I was the only person who could climb a mountain determined to get some answers but end up hiding in a bush that a crazy hiker uses as a urinal. That's what the old Michael would think, at least. Now the new Michael's in charge, and he doesn't enjoy life like the old Michael did.

The old Michael didn't die when my brother started his "born-again" phase, nor did his fun identity disappear when he married Holly. It was a

gradual but definite transition I watched from a distance, a move into a world of obligations that clouded his once sage vision.

Now he's in Atlanta, while I bounce about southern Ohio. Dad crosses the country in his rig, surfacing every now and then but disappearing soon after he arrives. Jay heads a small remnant of cousins in east Tennessee, but the rest of my family's either scattered or dead, and sometimes I think I'm both.

Back on the trail, I look both ways for Tacos, but he's gone. I laugh at the thought of him. Do all men feel the need to mark their territory at inopportune times, I wonder? What instinct prompts them to whip out their tools and start spraying? Maybe he sensed me subconsciously, and I triggered the release.

Mom used to say that Michael would pee out the bedroom window when she changed him--I guess the projectile spray hit Mr. Ward, our neighbor, at least once when he was mowing his lawn.

If Matthew had lived, his arcs would have outdistanced Michael's.

* * *

I return to Rocky Top, which is uninhabited, and climb onto the rock pillar that supported Taco Mike's radio earlier in the day. The view is spectacular, but I can't remember any of the names for the valleys and hills. Speckles of purple and white mingle in the watersheds among the light and dark green of the treetops, and shadows in the distance climb the walls of

deep glens. A hawk drifts among them, riding a current hundreds of feet in the air--it stares me straight in the eye.

I take a few snapshots, then step off the pillar and place my camera on top of it. I peer through the viewhole and center its aim on another rock several yards away. I strip my shirt but not the navy blue sports bra beneath it. I'd like to find a good hiking stick, but all I see are rocks and bushes. So I hit the automatic timer, then run to the spot at which I aimed. I hook my thumbs in the back pocket of my shorts and grin--the camera clicks, advances the film.

I bunch my t-shirt into a pillow on a low, broad rock that's hidden from the trail by a little underbrush. I sit next to it, then unlace double knots and pry the boots from my feet. They pop like corks. I remove my socks as well, and my white feet glare in the sunlight.

My calf itches where the thorn slashed it, and a red slice stands out from the swarm of dark specks crawling out of my pale skin. I scratch at the cut, then run my hand across the leg, just to feel the rough sensation of the emerging bristles. It's been over a year since I let them grow for an entire week--the end of '97, when I was pregnant with Matthew.

I wish I was holding my son, not hiking in these damn mountains. But Matthew's stay with me was short--he came on Christmas Eve and left the next day. I like to think that he "returned home," whatever that might mean. Michael assures me that God has a special place by his throne for little

children, that Matthew's in the tender care of his "Heavenly Father." But I don't know--I've got issues with any "Father" who kills to be kind, and I don't understand why Matthew's "home" can't be with me.

I hope he's got someone looking out for him--he wouldn't have had a father if he lived, for I doubt Steve's new wife would have let him acknowledge the connection to me. But I'd have been a decent mother, I think--I'd have tried, at least, and that's all anyone can ask of a parent, isn't it? Maybe Matthew knew what I did to his older sibling, the one a scared little girl asked a doctor to abort. I named Matthew after his brother, though nobody knows that but me. It would have been a boy: I've no proof--I just know.

The scratch continues to itch. I should have purchased a set of those leg covers Michael recommended--gaiters, I think he called them. But I was already over budget--getting "basic" requires a lot of expensive gear. Besides, I doubt anything short of full body armor could stop some of the thorns on those branches.

And what does Michael know, anyway? He hasn't taken a serious hike in over six years. Oh, I'm sure that he and his wife Holly take my five-year-old nephew Brian to resort lodges or the company condo on the beach, but they don't go anywhere dangerous, anywhere real--anywhere like this. They walk groomed paths, gravel trails with handrails for the five degree inclines, or they climb stairs leading to an observation deck that promises a view of

seven states--a panorama that's not free, of course, that's hazy unless seen through the ancient telescopes that look like aliens with protruding eye sockets, the anti-aircraft guns Michael always said were more fun to aim at other families of tourists than they were to look through.

I can picture Michael now, tidily clad in a green or blue polo shirt and a pair of khaki shorts with pleats--soon a baby carrier will be strapped to his back. He's showing Brian the view of Alabama through the telescope; he looks at Holly, quips that the number of states you can see from a lookout in the Midwest is one.

But I don't want to imagine what Michael's doing at the moment--we can talk face-to-face on Saturday. My heels scrape against the rough ground, and a slight breeze blows across the softer skin covering my instep. I break two long stalks of grass and place one next to each of my big toes. Then I lie on my pillow and raise my feet in the air. I see nothing but leg and feet and grass and sky. I can't reach my camera, but if I could, I'd take a snapshot of my naked feet--the beautiful, naked calloused feet that carried me to Rocky Top. I'm not going to worry about their next destination. I'm just going to think about now, about leg and feet and grass and sky--about nothing. I lower my legs. The clouds have disappeared, and I see nothing but blue. I close my eyes and dream about nothing but blue.

* * *

A low whistle breaks my reverie, and I open my eyes. The grass

around me is dark and cool, and its random imprint is tattooed on my forearms. At first, I think it's already dusk, that I've slept until evening, and I worry about racing the sun to Spence Field. But I notice the edge of the thicket's shadow--the sun's only moved to its west side.

I hear the whistle a second time--it's a single note, low and resonant, that works toward me like a sonar ping. I remain motionless and silent, and the whistler imitates me. A few minutes pass before he speaks--his voice is old and rough but also gentle, like Grandpa sounds in my dreams. "Playin' possum, eh?" the whistler asks. "I can respect that, I suppose." And the whistler is gone.

The shadow is chilly, so I risk the clearing. It's deserted. In the distance, however, someone's whistling a song to the world. If it wasn't so absurd, I'd swear it was the theme to *Gilligan's Island.*

* * *

As I descend Rocky Top, I wonder whether I'll be the lone girl at the shelter tonight. Funny, I came to the mountains for a break from the men in my life--I smile at the irony.

The sun won't officially set for over an hour, but the sky in the west is already burning. Bands of brilliant orange gash the swatches of lavender and light blue changing hue with each step I take.

I hope Taco Mike's at the shelter, though I don't want to bunk next to him--his bag probably stinks. If he's there, I'll need to explain why I ran. No, I

won't--I don't need to explain anything to anyone. I'm taking a break from half-assed excuses for a change.

I'll tell him my name--that's what I'll do. I'm Kendra, I'll say. Not Jessica--Kendra . . . Kendra Duncan . . . KD. I'm here for my trail name.

My trail name--a new name for a new week. I try to guess possibilities. Taco K, maybe--K for Kendra, but it's also for strikeout, isn't it? Taco Mike's strikeout--that's good. I laugh, and a tree root trips me. But I keep my balance--I'm still standing.

The sun drops another notch toward the horizon, tints the orange with a flush of rose that moves across the sky. Lingering rays heat my face, and I squint toward the fire in the west.

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Vita

Matthew Forsythe was born on Shaw Air Force Base in Sumter, South Carolina on July 10, 1975, then migrated through England, Maryland, and northern Ohio until arriving in Dayton, Ohio in 1985. He graduated from Dayton Christian High School in May 1993. Matt attended Calvin College, where he received a Bachelor of Arts in English degree with a minor in mathematics, from August 1993 to May 1997. He entered the Master's program in English with a Writing concentration at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, in August 1997, and he will receive his degree in May 1999.

After graduation Matthew plans to travel across the country and work at a summer camp in Pennsylvania. In the fall he will either return to teach at the University of Tennessee or move to Dayton and teach at his former high school.