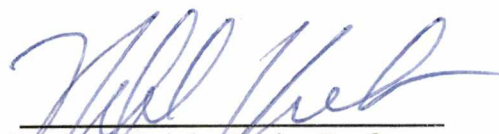
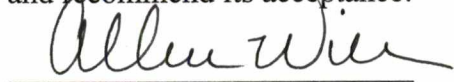


To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Milton O'Neal Walsh, Jr. entitled "Canned Animal Sketches: and Other 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.


Michael Knight, Major Professor

We have read this thesis
and recommend its acceptance:



Accepted for the Council:


Interim Vice Provost and
Dean of the Graduate School

Canned Animal Sketches
and other stories

A thesis presented for the Master of Arts Degree
University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Milton O'Neal Walsh, Jr.

August 2001

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Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge Kathryn Elizabeth Walsh
(who taps the top of doorframes) and Matt Clark, the only
two people who really seem to “get me.”

Abstract

This thesis is compiled of stories written and revised while the author was a Master's candidate at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Among other subjects, these stories consider human beings and their relationship with images, the crisis of reference, and love. Accompanying these stories is a brief introduction in which the author discusses some of his aesthetic principles as well as various themes that link these works together.

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Introduction

As far as I can tell, speaking only of this moment of “myself as a young writer,” there are machines, and there are animals. Everything existing in between these two things seems negotiable, but machines and animals, they are real.

Perhaps the only other “constant” I trust is the worn but true concept that writing is a failing, a failing on numerous levels. What we do as scholars, authors, and persons is rate the degree to which something fails. Some writers fail beautifully, but they all fail.

So what is it that I am doing? Why write when it offers only failure?

Whenever I think of beauty, or what beauty really is, the humongous concept that is beauty, I think of Remedios, Garcia Marquez’s pearl.

I am a person just like the rest. I’ve been punched in the face and humiliated. I’ve coursed through hallucinations, watched automobile accidents involving myself, felt up cheerleaders by the bleachers in high school, lost faith in God, and smoked cigarettes under floodlights on cold winter nights. All of this beauty, and yet I think of Remedios, too magical for the world, swept up by the wind in a single, merciful gust.

This is why I write. Garcia Marquez, to me, actually created when he wrote her into existence, he *truly* made something, more tangible to me even than any of my own life experiences.

Once I noticed this power, this potential, all I have wanted to do is write. Gabriel Garcia Marquez was, of course, merely the starting point. Once a person takes on the task of writing, he/she/it must see, first hand, how it’s done. This opens the floodgates for inexhaustible influence and ideas. After reading *One Hundred Years of Solitude* I

began jumping from writer to writer, telling my friends how (fill in the blank) was the “greatest to ever pick up a pen.” It was Faulkner, Pynchon, Tolstoy, DeLillo, Barth, and if you asked me now, Joyce.

The first monumental moment in my “writerly” life however was that moment when I realized that I would never be one of those people, no matter how skillfully I could rip them off. But nonetheless, I’m going to write.

I feel that I grow with each consecutive story. I’m becoming more comfortable with the page and less satisfied with the result, my fiction teetering the line between the botched and the brilliant. Botched meaning botched to the core, haphazard, derivative and pedantic. Brilliant perhaps, if people can see in it the striking things that I do.

This growth is the foundation, or the driving principle, behind this collection of short fiction, which I have given the title, *Canned Animal Sketches*. With each consecutive story, I see notable progressions, realizations and experimentation that, I hope, illustrate the writer that I’ve been, am, and will become.

The opening piece, “Bleeker and Third”, was conceived in my college days and then critiqued and published during graduate school at the University of Tennessee. Somewhat to my ire, this story has gotten the most consistently positive criticism of all my work. The reason these positive reactions bother me to a degree is that they are often aimed at the style of the narrative, which is dependant upon tricks and melodrama.

In actuality, I wrote this story as exercise in metaphor, not narrative. Metaphor, to me, seemed the natural place to begin writing. I wanted to see it from the inside out, as an enormous thing. Metaphor needs to be seen as an ant sees the sole of a stomping shoe.

I constructed "Bleeker and Third" to echo this effect in the best way I knew how, with Christopher, of course, being the ant. The discontinuity of the narrative is a condition of metaphor, not a source for it. This is why I am skeptical of those who praise this story's narrative technique and plot, since I feel that they are reading a different story.

This creepy love/disdain relationship with *Bleeker and Third* led me to my next piece, *Seven-Thirty at Whispering Pines*, a good, old-fashioned love story.

I have re-written *Seven-Thirty at Whispering Pines* more than any other story in this collection and I now feel like old friends with all of the characters. I knew, even at this early stage, that I needed to be able to represent reality, fleshy and linear, if I was going to be able to continue writing. In other words, I needed a complete and functioning story without smoke and mirrors. This story was plot-conceived; the characters drink cheap beer, drive Honda Accords, and watch television. This story, I think, was a huge step for me and my relationship to a 'real' world, a complete and linear narrative.

Most importantly, with regards to my body of work as a whole, "Whispering Pines" introduces the theme that comes to dominate my fiction; the human relationship to the image, inspired by and dependant upon Jean Baudrillard's notion of the simulacrum.

The people of Whispering Pines make love to their television favorites, and they know it. Although the ending suggests an end to this cycle, this is done primarily to reinforce the tone that I was looking for, the gravity of the situation. If you asked me to write about the next several years in the Whispering Pines trailer park, I would need only to add one line to the ending, it would read: *Then things went back to normal.*

However, if I were to add that line, I don't think Billy and Sandy would ever forgive me since it would seem to belittle everything they feel for life, and for one another.

After *Seven Thirty at Whispering Pines*, I realized that I didn't have any troubling characters. All of the people walking in my fictional world were good and genuine. This realization signaled the beginning of the next story, *My Date With Francis*. I wanted a character that straddled the line between antagonist and protagonist. A character who is flawed and with whom I would have no desire to socialize. Out of this came the bothersome character of Hogson, not that I find him despicable or even to blame really, but he is just so incredibly pathetic.

The driving principle behind the story was that of a joke, or more specifically, the joke and the punch line. The endnotes are the most 'textual' example of this, the moment of anticipation from the number to the actual note at the bottom of the page. Of course, in Hogson's case, the endnotes are in his mind, and they are not original or funny. But jokes abound in this story: from the endnotes to the notation, from Hogson's tortured past to his self-afflicted present inadequacies, from Francis's beauty in her picture to her flatulence and odor in reality and of course, to the 'mouse joke' itself.

I can hope only that readers are as aggravated by Hogson and his immaturity as I am. If this is the case, I feel that the story is successful. It is also of note that *My Date With Francis* introduces the character of Nowell, who later begins to slowly take over my fiction.

The next piece is the short-short *Gleaming*. This was primarily an exercise in technique, and has gotten a rather lackluster reception by readers. Nevertheless I revise it constantly and feel that it is only a few sentences away from being gut wrenching, or perhaps a few years away from being utterly bad.

This marks the period in my life when I became intoxicated by Literary Theory and James Joyce. These two things together had, and continue to have, the largest influence on my work.

The story *Penny Pitching* was the first to crawl out from this period and is the first story I've written that I feel is complete and untouchable. *Penny Pitching* is obsessed with theory, metaphor and cliché (the confrontation and dismissal of it). When people ask me what this story is about, I tell them without hesitation that it is about "stasis and art," because that is exactly what I wrote it about. I did not write it about Carl or New Orleans, they just happened, it was stasis and art that made me pick up the pen.

I favor this piece above the rest (right at this second) primarily for the delicate balance it seems to strike. This story has reached a point in which it cannot be touched or altered without losing something vital. As Chekov might say, this story would bleed if you cut it.

Nearly all of the criticism, or "advice," this story receives would completely defeat the purpose of it. This became evident when I gave a reading of *Penny Pitching* at the 20th Century Literature Conference in Louisville, Kentucky. Since I had to read the story by myself, I was forced to edit the play dialogue and add narrative dialogue tags instead of play dialogue. This, in effect, killed the characters in the park and negated the

artifice that is at the heart of the piece. This story must be seen textually. I will never read *Penny Pitching* aloud again.

The next story, *Oil*, came hot on the heels of *Penny Pitching* and is also very concerned with theory and the simulacrum; however, this story turns towards a more character-based involvement with these theoretical issues. In fact, I feel this to be the best balance between character and high theory that I've yet achieved. The problem, however, that *Oil* brought to the surface was the question of audience, i.e., who am I writing for?

It is a fact that *Oil* is aimed at a very small audience, minutely small even. I wouldn't expect to have a congruent conversation about the meaning of this story with anyone who wasn't versed in Baudrillard. *Oil* is my attempt to dramatize the next phase of the simulacrum: images without reference, beginning to have weight and shuffling against the ground.

The aforementioned balance of character and theory should now expose how highly I think of the unnamed narrator of *Oil* (who is, for all intents and purposes, Nowell, who is, for all intents and purposes, Fetch, in the inevitable *A Billion Years Or So*). This character has come to dominate my writerly intentions, as there is a longer work in progress that he is the center of as well.

Nowell, "Fetch" as a child, is a man drawn to the *ubermensch*, or 'overman'. I am speaking of Nietzsche, but only in the most simplistic way, defining the 'overman' as the fearless person. The person that seems to be exempt from everything, except his or her own raw, animalistic impulse. Joby and Greg Jr. Jonesy are the clearest examples of this

in this collection. Nowell is the first complete character I hope to bring in to the world, one that loves Joby, Clo and Jonesy.

Apart from the characterization, I have to admit that *Oil* intrigues me on the purely visual level as well. The juxtaposition of roots, dirt and animal hair with genuine flickering images and space age polymers seem to tie together many of the themes of my fiction, as purposefully tenuous as they are.

While work-shopping *Oil* at the University of Tennessee, I thought it quite possible that I may be the only person to ever enjoy, or appreciate this story. However, after re-reading some Barthelme, I can only imagine what he thought about his own young manuscripts.

So, with the completion of *Oil*, I felt as if I had really begun to write. The many lessons and slogans from various professors and colleagues had begun sinking in and it became necessary for me to deal with a number of issues. These issues being: narrative power and narrative stamina (all of my previous stories seemingly unable to crack the twenty page mark), Louisiana (a place that haunts you, whether you like it or not), and a turtle with a handprint on it. All of these issues constitute why I consider *A Billion Years or So* to be my 'inevitable' story.

Although it is not autobiographical at it's heart, I did catch a snapping turtle, and I have floated on the brown waters of Lake Veret. However, this story is not an attempt to 'ground' my fiction in Louisiana, but merely to realize that "writing what you know" is of the first order. It seemed to me that if I could not breathe life into that which know, how could I ever give life to my imagination?

Luckily, this project turned out to be *A Billion Years or So*, what I would consider (at this moment) to be my most successful story. I feel that it rumbles and glides just like the machines the characters adore. Fetch, during this rumbling, is in flux and is grasping at everything, looking for meaning and symbol, finding out (as most of my characters do) that these two things are tenuous and tangential at best.

But enough of prescriptive interpretation (I don't want to ruin the joy of reading), the primary cause for celebration is that I feel that *A Billion Years or So* successfully handles the ambitions it set out to accomplish. I feel it achieves power through characterization, stamina through dialogue and anecdote, depicts Louisiana as 'the changing thing' (so beautiful and tragic that one can't quite figure out what to make of it) and incorporates a turtle with a handprint as functioning theoretical symbol in fiction (echoing both Baudrillard's and my own vision of life as we know it).

After *A Billion Years or So*, the title story of this collection may seem a bit like a denouement to some readers since it doesn't necessarily cater to narrative lust. However, this is the method of writing that I find the most intoxicating right now. I see it almost like pointillism, but distinguished from the structure of *Bleeker and Third* because of the aforementioned lack of narrative lust, in other words, all of the canned animal sketches do not necessarily involve the same plot.

Canned Animal Sketches draws power from spontaneity, tenuous connection and conjecture, which I am learning can only be achieved (somewhat paradoxically) through revision. This piece and its style have occupied my thoughts for some time now, and the vignettes collected here should be seen more as illustrations of what I am trying to

achieve with my writing right now, as it is being written at this moment, while you are reading this. It is not a complete thing, and much of this type of writing is in notebooks and stray pages, not ready for inclusion in this collection. The important projects of the *Canned Animal Sketches* can be simplified as follows: continued focus on simulacra and the crisis of reference, the use of parology as humor and inevitable argument, and our random and suspect connections to the world we think we inhabit.

Although *Canned Animal Sketches* can easily be construed as futuristic, it should be noted that to think of it as "science fiction" is to miss the underlying principle of the entire work. That is that there is no science fiction anymore since science itself has shifted from being our fantasy to becoming our reference, the smart blood that pumps our manufactured, mechanical hearts.

This story also seemed worthy of claiming the title of the entire collection since it fits a rather convenient allegorical connection to my aesthetic principles. As stated in the first paragraph, there are machines, animals, and I am a young writer, which very nicely mirrors the notions of the canned, animal, sketches.

I am very grateful to those that have criticized my writing and very skeptical of those who flatter it. However, I know for sure that my pen and I would not be were we are today without the aid of friends and colleagues. In addition, I feel, as a writer, extremely young and extremely alive, and also, very thrilled that this failing is not over.

Then everything went back to normal.

Bleeker and Third

...tuesday...

It seems like a wicked, organic Matisse, flying past my window. My hands grip the wheel, my jaw grinding away the landscape of my teeth. Hot, unnatural tears trickle down my cheeks, to my chin, to drop like rain. Eyelids for wipers. Driving automatically

...may...

I am quitting smoking because I think I can feel the cancer, my lungs like sponges of hay. And also because there is no longer anyone to smoke with. Now it is me, a shaky hand, a foul stench and a pervasive feeling of pollution.

...june...

I'm swinging on a swing as she floats back to me. My hands wrapped loosely around thick ropes that seem to go up and up, having no end.

"How have you been?" I ask her, my feet blazing magnificent trails on each sweeping pass.

She doesn't quite look like herself, the wind blowing her hair from shoulder to shoulder. She has long hair now and the sky is tie dyed, expanding endlessly outwards and upwards as I lean my head back to increase my swing. I shiver each time I descend, the universe tunneling through the chasm that is now my body. So fast and so high on my gigantic swing. I let go of the ropes and soar, up and up. And here and there. Falling down and around. Landing softly in a patch of fine, whispering sand.

"Christopher," the voice of my Christina echoes back to me. "I have something for you." she says, sliding her hand deep into a leather bag. "I can't take this from you. I held it so close that it came with me but now I have to find it and give it back to you."

Searching purposefully through her sack, she removes a baseball, no. A rubber duck, not it. A tin star, a message in a bottle, no, no. A telephone.

She holds the phone in her hand, extending it towards me. It is ringing and ringing and I am talking in my sleep. Saying hello without waking to pick up the receiver.

...july...

I am Christopher and I am hurting. Deep inside of my body, there is an emptiness. In my joints, there is an ache.

"What seems to be the problem, young man?" Dr. Weatherly asks me as soon as he steps in the door, his eyes focused on my chart.

"Having a problem with your eyes?"

Eyes? No. I am squinting severely though, the fluorescent lights in the examination room hurting my pupils.

"Eyes? No, not my eyes. But, is it really bright in here?"

"If it is, I'm probably immune to it by now." he says, still studying my history, trying to decipher what the real cause of my visit is. I open my eyes, as much as nature permits, and tell him about the ache.

"I have this dull pain in my joints, a constant ache. Do you think I might have arthritis or rheumatitis or something? It's killing me. I saw a commercial for some sort of pharmaceutical with this lady whose joints were aching like this. You think that is what I have? Arthritis? That's probably it, huh. Arthritis."

Dr. Weatherly looks at me for the first time, peering above his bifocals, as if noting the frantic tone of my voice. I smile and roll my head on my shoulders. My hands are back and forth, rubbing sore knees.

"Arthritis is rather uncommon in men of your age with no prior history. It's not impossible, but unlikely since yours came on so recently. When did you say it started? April?"

Tuesday.

I nod my head in agreement, electing not to tell him the whole story. Swinging my legs back and forth underneath the table, the only sound being the clear crackling of the paper beneath me and the hum of fluorescent light above me, both so clear.

I scan the room, waiting for his diagnosis. Stethoscope, Gauze, Ointments, *Sports Illustrated*, *Hunting and Fishing*, *TIME*. *TIME* having a menacing picture of the latest bombing on the cover. The faces of the terrorists superimposed on the burning skyline in the background.

I imagine the flames ravishing the buildings' insides, glass exploding out as death scampers to the roof. Blue hot fire, thicker than liquid, pursuing men and women up stairs and fingering their feet to tease them. Licking and swallowing them whole to digest each floor. Elevator chords melt and snap, releasing boxes full of people.

Trapped in a box of flame, I'm unable to wipe it away. Furiously trying to push it to the side. Feeling a fireflood pour down into my lungs as I take one last gasp for oxygen.

"Is it hot in here?" I am sweating, my legs now sticking to the paper and my hands sliding off of my knees.

"Christopher, I'm sorry, but I just don't see anything serious enough to be concerned about. The X-rays are fine. Maybe you should just take some painkillers and monitor the situation. Get some rest and call me if things don't get better."

...march...

Our hands lock.

onestar.

"Never leave me."

"Never leave me."

We promise like prayers.

...august...

Frustrated at another episode of futile fumbblings with myself, I collapse onto my sofa, trying to recall what love felt like. Wanting so badly to recapture that things that made me work. I think about movie stars, the girl at the grocery, anything and everything, but there is nothing.

I wonder if Christina appears in my dreams to give my essence back. Reaching in to that leather sack to give me potency. But pathetically stretched out naked on the sofa, I know that's not the reason.

...february...

She rolls on top of me, straddling my waist and looking me straight in the eye.

"Where are you going?" I ask. "Are you leaving me?"

"Yes. I am leaving you. I'm going to that far off land called, the kitchen. Toast anyone?"

I pur like a cat as she leans closer to give me a farewell kiss.

"I will miss you with every pixel of my soul." she says.

Pixel of my soul.

I watch her skip out of the room, naked and smiling, tapping the top of the door frame as she leaves. Pixel of my soul.

I turn over and smile, curling and waiting for great toast.

...september...

I am losing weight and getting taller. I'm a tall string bean, sitting on my floor, peeling off skin. I got a severe sunburn on my walk home from work last week. The sun was shining high, bouncing off of the concrete pavement. Perhaps it's getting more powerful, with the ozone layer widening, sucking us out and pulling the sun in.

My chest and legs are becoming more sensitive each day, forcing me to apply sun block under my suit before work and at lunch. If this doesn't stop, it should at least provide me with a legitimate excuse to see Weatherly again. The aspirin he advised me to take have, in no way, been the cure.

Sitting on the floor of my room, listening to a mixed tape Christina made, the notes of each of song ring dissonant, like church bells. I remember making tapes like this.

Taking the tape out, I put one of her C.D.'s in the stereo. Lying down and resting the old cassette on my chest, I watch it rise up and down slowly until she picks it up and puts it in her leather sack.

"What are you doing? I love that tape, it is our tape."

"I am so sorry. Here, I have something for you. I need to give it back to you. I just have to find it." She begins grabbing my photos and placing them in her bag. "You need this."

I watch her closely, her movements overlapping each other, displaying a beautiful disdain for physics.

Sitting up, I see an ocean behind her, waves crashing furiously, the sky painted in day-glo. I sit on this beach, a giant. Stretching along the sand, painted in long, single strokes. A human stick-bug with bones and joints that pop and crack each time I move.

She cups her hair behind her ear and continues searching through the sack. A tiny strand of blonde falls, curving to the crescent moon. She's wearing a long dress that flows over her lap as she sits Indian style on the sand.

"Angel? Angel why don't you come here? Hold me. I haven't held you in forever." I reach my long arm out to her, continuing to grow and spread. I just want to touch that strand of hair. Although she doesn't move and continues shuffling through her sack, I can't reach her. As I slide closer, I get distance.

A seagull flies overhead. It glides through the air and I'm listening to wind rush through feathers, the ability to deny gravity and become part of the atmosphere.

I watch the bird as Christina slides a soft, spectral hand into my body, removing more of my insides to put in her leather sack, which has grown no bigger.

I relax my long body on the sand and gaze intently into the sky. Circling and soaring, flying fast and never leaving my sight, the bird emits trails of purple in a pulsating sky. I want so desperately to spread my huge limbs in release, ending the pain in my joints. Shedding my skin and flying, flying like an eagle. Let my spirit carry me.

Fly like an eagle,

Let my spirit carry me.

Fly like an eagle

Let my spirit carry me.

Fly like an eagle

I open my eyes to see my low hanging, white ceiling. My fan spinning around, attempting to take off if someone would just remove the screws and place them in a

leather sack. Hoisting myself up on my elbows, I see the counter on the CD player skipping back and forth, making me 'fly like an eagle' time and time again. I press the button to eject the scratched disc and yawn, rubbing my sore shoulders and knees.

...tuesday...

until I arrive at home to a flashing red light and a series of beeps on my answering machine.

Without the slightest desire to relive what I know is going to be on it, I unplug the machine and throw it in the garbage. Walking into our room and lying face down on our bed, I begin screaming. Releasing and releasing without any ability to absorb.

Now it is just my room, my huge bed.

I feel pain, its head biting its tail, expanding endlessly like the ether.

Never before this moment have I believed so strongly in a God, and never have I so deeply doubted its intentions.

Today, the word 'accident' has become, to me, the definition of ambiguity. There was no accident in the creation of the soul. No mixing of molecules in my body that caused a mutation from a single cell to a spirit cell.

Yet, today there was an 'accident'. I heard at least a dozen people tell me that, today, Tuesday, there was an 'accident'. It was unfortunate, it was tragic, it was shocking, it was on the corner of Bleeker and Third.

...october...

"I haven't gone anywhere out of the ordinary. Just back and forth from work. Walks around the park every once in a while, with clothes on, of course."

"Well, I have never seen anyone get a second degree burn through a three piece suit," he says with a chuckle. I think he is attempting a play on numbers and I wonder if

the fluorescence of this bulb has finally gotten to him as he scrapes a Q-tip along my chest, popping several of the blisters.

"They seem to be normal water blisters" he says, "no infection." He hands me some cream and ointment and leaves to go get the new X-rays I asked him to take.

Looking down at my arms, rubbing the stretch marks around my elbows, I think about smoking for the first time since I quit, wanting anything to fill my body.

Dr. Weatherly walks back into the room and mumbles, "Well, this actually is rather irregular."

He continues to tell me, pointing at black spots on the X-rays, that it looks as if my bones are moving away from each other, causing the pain in my joints. He sends me away with a bottle of anti-inflammatories, an excuse for a few days off of work, another appointment, and knowing nothing that I hadn't already figured out for myself that Tuesday.

Walking home, I feel nearly weightless. I concentrate on my feet touching the concrete, one after the other.

I quit my job entirely and can no longer leave the house. Dreams and schemes keep me here, at home, ducking under door frames.

...january...

"What are you thinking?"

"Just pull over and don't ask me anymore questions." She says, slightly bouncing up and down in the car seat, "Please hurry."

"All right, whatever you say, freak."

She smiles and crinkles her nose at me as I pull over to the shoulder of the road.

"Now you, Mister Christopher, cannot look. Close those baby blues."

"Browns."

"Whatever."

I close my eyes and lean back in the seat, buzzing with the possibilities of what is to come. Her door opens and shuts.

Keeping my eyes closed I move my hand over to her seat to see if she is there, playing a trick on me.

I roll down the window and yell, "Hey! Are you peeing?" Hoping that she is squatting on the side of the car, I start honking the horn, trying to embarrass her. I picture her laughing.

Meanwhile her door opens and closes again.

"Alright open your eyes."

I stop honking and pull my head back in the car, somewhat embarrassed for myself.

"Open them?"

"Yes, here ." I open my eyes to see her holding out a gigantic sunflower. Alive, vibrant, and paling in comparison to the person holding it.

"It looks like you." she says.

Inhaling the scent deep into my body, I lean over and kiss her on the mouth.

...november...

I have given up. My joints are racked with the ache and the sky pulls relentlessly on my hands and feet. Christina visits me nightly now, removing the glue of my insides, placing it in her sack and then searching for the one thing that she knows I need.

I spend my days aching over where she is when I'm awake. Wondering also, where I am when I'm not sleeping.

...december...

My limbs spill over the edges of my bed, holding onto the ground. I sleep with books on my chest, anchoring my floppy arms underneath me.

Today, however, I will let go.

Rolling painfully to my side, I grab onto the carpet with both hands and pull myself down. As I crawl, the clicking and popping begins. It's the noise of a million men popping a million knuckles.

I just need to make it outside.

Struggling and crying, I pull myself through the hall, biting carpet and pressing against walls.

As I get closer to the door, my toes lose their grip and my legs sling to the ceiling.

Screaming and laughing, I strain my neck to see a blue sky through the windows of a day-glo door.

I can see leather sacks on hilltops. All things naked and smiling.

Reaching the doorknob, my fingertips clasp, noisily turning and pulling, I am immediately sucked out, unraveled by the torque of the universe.

Leaving nothing, I disperse into joy. Intermingling with the pixels of my soul.

Seven-Thirty At Whispering Pines

They usually talk about the cleft in his chin, or his impeccable suits and inflappable personality. I once even heard mention of the way he holds his hands together in front of him, rather than by his sides, when he talks. Janine Beaumont said that she saw him driving a Chrysler LeBaron when she was visiting her cousin in Los Angeles. She said Pat Sajak looks even better in person than on television, and that, of course, really sealed the deal. I've always thought that a Chrysler LeBaron was a strange choice for Pat, and sometimes I wonder what he does with all that money.

It was usually right around seven-twenty when I'd be sitting out on my little four foot porch, watching Marvin Dawson scratch himself and yell for his dog to come home.

"Puddles!...Puddles, god damn it!"

"How you doing there Marv'?" I would yell across the yard, or parking lot, depending on how you want to see it.

"Same shit." he used to always say, raising his beer to toast the hour.

Never a 'different day', always 'same shit'. I just nod and mumble, "I hear you."

"Puddles! Get yer ass in the house boy!"

During my walk towards Marv's trailer that day, his dog Puddles came sprinting out of the woods, hurdling over the tricycles and lawn chairs strewn across his path. He darted past Marvin and shot right through the door. This is the daily routine. No one blames Puddles for not sticking around the park though, Marv isn't too much to look at. There's really nothing much to look at, just the trailers, chunks of grass, and cars in various stages of decay. Puddles probably gets a hold of something exciting in the

woods, fox holes and creeks. They'd probably never see him again if he didn't have to come home for food and shelter.

"Damn dog, I got better things to do than sit out here and scream your god damn name." Marvin said, scratching and disheveling his way to the front of his four foot porch, placing his hand on the rail.

Enveloped by the dim rays of the setting sun and the blue light of the bug zapper, Marvin began staring out into the distance. There was something profound and dramatic in the way he looked to me that day. I'm not sure what it was but I just watched him, imagining background music slowly fading, accentuating his emotions, clueing me in to things that he never says. He raised the beer to his lips, tilted his head back and guzzled the remains. The carbonation began watering his eyes as he squeezed the railing, blinked heavily, and belched. Not one of his best efforts, by any means, but still impressive.

"I'll see you later then, Billy." Marvin always said to me as he tossed his can in the direction of the garbage can.

"Have a good one." I always replied.

The 'tossing of the can' meant that it was almost seven thirty and time to go in. I paused for a second and took a deep breath. The old, wooden, Whispering Pines trailer park sign began to glow from thirty-two television sets being turned on together. Such an incredible radiation. I don't think I know of anything more alluring than the blue buzz of a television, flickering in a window. This used to be my favorite part of the night.

Everybody who lives in the park used to watch The Wheel Of Fortune at seven thirty. Everybody, everyday. Except Saturday and Sunday, of course, when the reruns come on at eleven.

I took a deep breath and enjoyed the magic of seven twenty-eight for the last time.

Seven thirty at Whispering Pines, life was good. Click on the tube. All right, Pat, Vanna. Let's go.

So, we've got a "person, place or thing," three words, lots of fabulous prizes, Vanna in sequins and Pat with...

I peered out of my window to see how everyone was handling this. Half way out of my chair, poking my fingers through the blinds, everything appeared to be normal. The trailers of Whispering Pines were still burning comfortably in the glow of game show watches and perfect teeth.

I figured I was wrong, settled back in my Lay Z Boy and popped open a can of Budweiser. The first puzzle got underway.

"Are there any 'R's, Pat?" I said. I always guessed "R" first, or "S" maybe, if it's a short phrase.

Then, as the camera shot a close up of Pat's face, I saw it again, clear as day, and the seed was planted. And from where I stand now, I'd have to say that just about everything I know about people grew out of that seed.

"What in the hell is that?" I said in a whisper. I just couldn't stop staring at the screen, feeling guilty, like I was seeing something I wasn't supposed to.

I got out of my chair and examined the TV screen, making sure there wasn't anything on the outside. Nope. Not a fly, not food, nothing on the screen. At this close range, it was obvious. But how could it be? Mr. Perfect himself, Pat Sajak. The studio audience probably couldn't see it, but the face shots completely gave it away. Shouldn't he have a handkerchief, or at least a handkerchief person?

The telephone rang.

"Hello." I answered, my eyes still glued to the set.

"Every cloud has a silver lining." the voice said. It was Sandy. I love Sandy. She lives on the other side of Whispering Pines, what Marv' calls, 'uppity-ville'. She's the

only other person my age in the whole park. We both go to the community college up the road and ended up here, renting trailers.

The day I met Sandy was undoubtedly the most spectacular moment in time that I've ever been a part of. I was helping L.T. paint what we call, "The Green Giant." It's an old pick up truck that has not moved farther than thirty feet in the entire time I've lived here. I was crossing the street towards the truck when I saw Sandy's blue Honda Accord driving towards us across the gravel. I later found out that the exit on her side of the park was closed and she was forced to drive out on our side. As far as I know it's the only time that she's ever done that. As she drove by, we looked at each other through her driver's side window like people looking at snakes in the zoo. Wide-eyed, terrified, and amazed, wanting to tap the glass and see if it's real or not. Our eyes then met in her rearview mirror after she passed, she pressed her brakes for a second before turning slowly out of the park.

I couldn't believe what I had seen. She had her hair twisted back on her head with a pencil or something and even though I only saw her in passing I knew she was my age and that she was beautiful.

"Who's that?" I asked L.T., walking right through the dust her car had stirred. L.T. had just opened the first can of latex paint and looked back up at the exit of the park.

"Blue Accord?" he said.

"Yeah."

"She lives over there on the other side, Lot C. Yeah, Jackie met her a couple of months ago at the pharmacy. Says she's real nice and all, here going to school, like you."

"She goes to school? L.T. she was incredible. Why didn't you ever say anything about her? Did you see how good looking she was?"

"I hadn't ever seen her, Jackie just told me she drove a blue Accord, and that's the only one in the park that I know of."

I couldn't get over the fact that there was a girl my age in the park, going to school. Everyone here is twice my age and married. She told Jackie that she was single.

L.T. and I had bought two full cases of beer earlier that day and made several proclamations that we would drink every last drop of it. L.T. is known just as much for these proclamations as he is for "The Green Giant." Anytime there is any sort of occasion, whether it be painting the truck or working on someone's storm drains, L.T. will often show up with way more beer than necessary and swear that it won't be enough. Of course, he's always passed out after about five of them, so everybody gets a kick out of watching him talk it up.

He's a mechanic, and they say he makes pretty good money at the dealership. His wife Jackie is usually either inside the trailer or at the hospital. I'm still not sure exactly what it is she has but Marv once told me that it's best not to even bring it up.

Despite the fact that L.T. is a mechanic, he hasn't gotten this truck running in the five months that I've lived here, and I've never even seen him even work on it. He always says that after working on cars all day, the last thing he wants to do is work on cars when he gets home. So instead, he just decided to give a fresh paint job so it wouldn't look so bad in the yard.

We had managed to paint the entire Giant and get six or seven beers into us when the sun started setting and the Blue Accord came rolling back into the park. L.T nudged me on the shoulder and went out into the street to flag her down. I had the hardest time deciding whether to go over there or stay where I was and just watch. By the time I decided to go introduce myself, she drove away and L.T. turned back around with a glassy grin.

"I'm telling you Billy, how you ever gonna get any if you don't even say hey?" he said, laughing at me.

I sat on his ice chest and cursed myself.

"It's all right boy, she's coming over here to have a beer. She's just parking her car and walking."

L.T. stayed for one beer with me and Sandy and then said he was going inside to 'use the can', but never came back out. Sandy and I made love that night in the back of L.T.'s truck. It wasn't anything either of us would normally do, but for some reason we couldn't bear to leave that spot, not even to go back to one of our trailers. We had finished all of the beer in the ice chest and talked inexhaustibly about things that made sense and things that didn't.

She was on top of me the entire time and I couldn't get over how incredible the back of her thighs felt against my hips. Sandy looked me in the eye constantly, except for when she closed her eyes and gripped me with her hands.

Her dark brown hair was lit by the bug lights and her sundress was pulled up around her waist. She came in shuddering waves and told me how good I felt.

The only drawback to the evening was that the back of my clothes and my bare butt were painted solid green since L.T. used house paint on his truck instead of car paint. It may have been cheaper but it ended up taking two days to dry on the metal truck. I had to sneak back to L.T.'s early the next morning and paint over the two circles my butt print had made in the bed of the truck. I couldn't stop laughing and probably looked completely crazy, painting L.T.'s old truck at four a.m..

Sandy and I haven't made love since then and we don't trust ourselves to be alone. There is an understanding between us that everything in our lives right now is temporary, community college, The Wheel of Fortune, Whispering Pines. We don't want to ruin what we could be in another place and time, so we leave each other alone. If we are going to be together, it won't be here. Nothing here stays real. I sometimes have a hard time just believing how beautiful she is.

However, since that night she always calls me during The Wheel and tells me what the answer to the puzzle is. Sometimes I call her, of course, depending on who gets it first. 'Every cloud has a silver lining,' she had said. I looked at the puzzle. Of course. The only letters missing are the "L"'s.

"Are you watching this?" I asked her, still in shock about what I had seen on Pat's face.

"Of course I am, dummy. Every cloud has a silver lining."

"Yeah, but did you see it? Pat's got a..."

"No you idiot. Don't buy a vowel. She just bought a vowel, Billy. What did you say?"

I smiled on the phone and said, "Look at Pat's face."

Meanwhile, the camera was showing Vanna flip over all of the "L"'s, and Earl Winston, a bus driver from Flowermound, Texas, apparently hadn't bought a vowel, and was now 20,000 dollars richer.

"What about it?" Sandy asked.

So fast. They cut to commercial.

"Shit! They didn't show it. When the camera does a close up, look at Pat's nose, real close."

"Whatever, Billy. There's nothing wrong with his nose."

There was a slightly metallic tone to her voice and sure enough, when he returned from the commercial break, Pat was once again, hygienic and suave. It was as if it never happened.

Peeking through the window again after I got off the phone, I examined all of the other trailers carefully. They had to have seen it. It was right there, in the whole world's face. Clear as day and perfectly pixeled, flying through the air right into the eyes of America. They had to have seen it.

"Puddles! Puddles! Get yer ass in here!" Seven-twenty.

"How you doin' there Marv?" I said.

"Same shit." He said.

But that day actually was a different day. L.T. was out there with him, sucking on a beer. Marv didn't yell for Puddles again, and he and L.T. weren't really even talking, just taking their time, or stalling perhaps. Marvin looked nervous and L.T. had his eyes to the ground, lightly kicking at some weeds. I got out of my chair and began walking towards them. As I got closer, Marvin stared down at his beer can, pretending to read the label.

"Say, Marv, L.T'. You guys watch The Wheel last night?"

"Yeah. Pretty good one." Marv said. His eyes swinging towards me, heavy and slow, "Why you asking?"

"Just curious, that's all," and there was a pause. Marv looked at L.T., L.T. looked at me and then back at the ground.

"Ya'll see that lady buy a vowel?" I asked. A pause.

"Chicks," Marv said and rolled his eyes away from me.

I couldn't stand the torture any longer. I had to ask.

"Say, Marv, L.T.? Did you guys notice anything different about Pat last night?"

L.T. let out a long sigh and after a slow, deliberate swig of his beer, Marvin looked over at me and wagged his finger, summoning me closer. L.T. casually turned his back to us and looked around, whistling softly like a lookout. I got to the first step of the porch and Marvin grabbed my neck, pulling my ear close to his mouth.

"Listen, Billy." He whispered. "I don't exactly know just *what the hell* it is you think you're doing, but I suggest you keep your mouth shut."

His hand dwarfed my neck and his breath smelled like shit, or Schlitz. Just a big, breezy, warm tunnel of horse Schlitz.

"None of the women saw," he told me. "I talked to Johnny and Dave and L.T. here today, and their wives didn't see it. And my old lady didn't see it, either. So, as far as we're concerned, it wasn't there. You understand what I'm saying?" He gave my neck an exclamation point squeeze.

"Yeah," I squeaked. "I understand."

Just as he let go of my neck, his wife Shirl appeared in the doorway. Well, the middle part of her at least, she's a hefty woman.

"You comin' in hun? The Wheel's on," she said. "Oh, hi, Billy, L.T."

"Hi Shirley. How you doin'?"

"Great. 'Bout to be better as soon as Marv gets off his duff and comes and watches our show with me."

L.T. looked at his bare wrist and said, "I guess it's that time isn't it? I better get back to the house before Jackie sends the dogs out after me. Good to see you Shirl." He turned and headed back to his trailer without even a gesture in my direction, his head still hanging low.

Marvin looked to the horizon and small things flew blindly into the bug light.

"Give me a second, Shirl," he said.

She sighed disapprovingly and waddled back into the den as Marv finished off his beer. Puddles came trotting in from the woods, and Marvin tossed the beer at the garbage can, missing short. He then looked at me, his eyes glazed, and said, "Billy, I'm just glad it wasn't Vanna."

Hunching his shoulder, he walked inside his trailer.

I broke out into a sweat during the short walk back to my place trying piece together what I had stumbled into.

Seven thirty. I sat on my Lay Z Boy and clicked on the television, vaguely hoping that it would be a rerun of the last night's show. Of course it wasn't and, of course, Pat was as dapper as ever.

I couldn't stop asking myself, "Why was Marv such an ass about the whole situation?" and "Why couldn't Shirley know?"

Vanna flipped some letters, she looked fantastic. The telephone rang.

"Survival of the fittest" Sandy said.

"Yep" I answered, and hung up.

What could be the big deal? Sure, Pat is a hero to all the people around here. But that's normal. He's an American icon, just like George Washington, or Arnold Schwarzenegger, or anybody else you can think of. He is a gentleman. He's witty, he's sexy, he's rich, and he is obviously a ladies man. The women of Whispering Pines are always found giggling at the washateria, whispering girl secrets about Pat Sajak. They love him. Pat Sajak is who every woman here wants her husband to be. He's who every woman in this park fantasizes about. And finally, abruptly, I understood.

Looking out of my window late that night, I noticed the way the trailers slightly rocked, back and forth under the moon, and I completely understood. Pat Sajak was making love to Vanna White, night after night. The image made me want to grab Sandy by the arm and have us run out of here, looking at each other's naked bodies in the light. I thought about the way she keeps mixed tapes strewn across the dashboard of her Accord, and I began loving her in pulses. I wanted to smash my television.

I called Sandy and told her about what happened, not about my newer, deeper love for her, but about my epiphanies regarding the Pat situation, and basically the whole of the human condition in the Whispering Pines trailer park. I was hoping to share this feeling with someone grounded in reality.

"Whatever, Billy," she said, sounding confused. "You're just jealous."

Before I could even respond she hung up and gave me the cold shoulder for the next three days. I couldn't believe I had lost my soul-mate to Pat Sajak. It took several messages and an apology before she would even call me again with answers to the puzzles.

Weeks went by and, sure enough, all of the men kept their mouths shut, and I sure as hell didn't bring it up again. But, during all that time, we never thought about Mildred Taylor, in Lot A.

It was Labor Day weekend and all of the men in Whispering Pines had gotten together to go fishing. Unbeknownst to us, however, the women had planned a small little gathering of their own. As it turns out, all of the ladies had been invited to dinner at Mildred's house, and the main course was a big slice of Pat.

We all knew that Mildred was a fan of The Wheel, one of the biggest. But, we apparently never truly understood the permanence of what it was we were trying to conceal. In her admiration, Mildred used to record every single episode on her V.C.R.

Those women spent that entire afternoon watching Pat without commercials and guessing at puzzles they already knew. Then, while their husbands were out by the lake swapping lies, the ladies had to discover for themselves a difficult truth. Pat Sajak, in all of his glory, did have a flaw after all. A fleeting, digital moment of imperfection burned into their collective fantasies forever.

Nothing could ever be the same for the women after that, or for anybody, really.

About two weeks after seeing the tape, Sandy called me from out of the blue. I hadn't heard or seen from her in all of that time and the sound of her voice made me want to do jumping jacks and wink at myself in the mirror.

I knew that first night, when she put her hands under my shirt and rubbed her cheek against mine in L.T.'s truck, that she loved me as much as I did her, and all this time it was just our own rules keeping us apart. Nothing here is permanent.

"Hi, Billy," she said.

"Will you marry me?" I blurted, my heart shaking my chest.

"Billy, are you crazy?"

"No, not at all. I just think it's right..."

"Will you marry me? There's no way," she said.

I sat there with my eyes wide open, staring at the wall, wishing I hadn't ever decided to go to college.

"But, Sandy. I just..."

"They're aren't even any 'R's, they tried that already. And look, 'me' doesn't end with a 'P'. I think it's Coke and Seven Up. Yeah, look, she just got the "C". Coke and Seven Up. Damn Billy, you've really lost your touch."

She giggled and hung up the phone, but I just kept it to my ear, listening to the dial tone. The operator began telling me to hang up, I picked up the remote control, turned on the television, and sure enough, Vanna was flipping over the final "U." It was as clear as could be, COKE AND SEVEN UP.

And that's where we are today. Other than that night, the park has been pretty quiet. Some people, like Sandy, still tune in at seven thirty, but most just can't stand the pain. Their yearnings jaded by ludicrous images of what the men now refer to as, "The Real Green Giant."

Mildred burned her copy of that episode, Marv began drinking on his porch well past eight and Puddles seems to be gone a little longer each day. Now, at night, as I poke my fingers through the blinds, halfway out of my chair, the trailers of Whispering Pines seem to be asleep. Situated end to end, they lay still beneath the moon.

Gleaming

They drink together on occasion. He's a proud man, proud of all the things he's collected and prone to gleam over his son.

He never slurs in front of him and there is respect there, his father's banalities and soul struck cries both attending to the same tone. *-All of that extra life-* his son suspects, makes him want to keep telling.

The boy, unlike the others, sees the heavy burden that comes with his father's constant epiphanies, so he forgives and savors them.

Remembering his son as a child with bowl-cut hair standing on countertops, the man puts his hand on his shoulder, feeling symbolic.

The particulars of the event are but random and blurred images for the boy. A sudden sports car and a hair-do, hearing his grandmother pray. Now, all these years later, the boy sees his parents as two unrelated spheres, the gods of love and money.

"Proud of you. Love you, buddy."

Truly, he *is* proud of his son, and of his own ability to feel regret in deep images. He remembers himself in sideburns, whispering into phones and hiding nearly everything. Tell her I'm with a patient.

"You are a good man," his father says. "Much better than me. I lost my parents forever," he goes on, a shredded, pitiable man. "Son, if I could take back anything in this world, it would be what I did to my parents. They've never looked at me the same since then. No one should see that, not in their own son."

The boy remembers grandparents flying in, friends and cousins, the once annual St. Patrick's Day party at the house. Green cups and Marco Polo in the pool, the boy's mother looking like gold, with hair that bounced in spirals, happily married and young. Serving guests and in-laws cookies and cocktails with a proud, unwavering smile.

"I don't know where he is," she said.

"Probably inside watching the basketball game. We'll go find him," they said, happily married and grand.

Hand to shoulder. A pointy-toothed monster.

My Date with Francis, or, Hogson's Poem

I'm the nervous type. Not sweaty palms nervous, but given to rehearsals after rehearsals. I've invented nearly every conversation that could possibly occur on a first date, especially a blind date. Asking and fielding questions to and from myself ranging from the mundane to the extraordinary. I have lists of movies, bands and television shows that I will ask her about.

I won't go to religion, but I will ask flippantly about UFOs. I won't ask her about Love, but I know what I'll say about sex, flashing a sly smile and a 'never kiss and tell' attitude, lying without words.

One must look to the future in situations such as this. The female mind is much like a V.C.R.¹, more than ready to rewind, and pause, and show you again in slow motion. Their counter operates just the same, noting the day, the time, the second and the mistake. And there you are, the man, inevitable and bumbling. This is why it's important to always be honest with women², or at least non-committal³.

Suffering through a pasty big belly, pink rashy skin, and glasses for the majority of my high school years, I have seen the workings of things. It's amazing the insight that being absurd and invisible can give a person. I've watched guys that are too dumb to remember their locker combination subtly manipulate the insecurities and desires of

¹ Playboy

² Dear Abby

³ MAXIM

women twice as bright as them. All of this, and my television set, has given me the blueprint for what to do.

Now, my last year of school, the belly is gone, and look at me in the mirror. My pink skin grown stubbly, contacts instead of glasses, and broadening shoulders. The hair on my legs covering the white thighs that used to be crammed into my school shorts, a pair of blue Dickies, always riding the crack. My pecs hardened, changing from the ones that received fleshy, agonizing titty-twisters from Chris Thompson, Buzz Hartman and Chucky Bailey.

Those fat tits of mine were enough entertainment, it seemed, for the entire gym class. *Hogson* was always my nickname. I was fat, and my last name is Hudson, it was way too easy, pink cheeks and flaring nostrils. Not that I think that this story isn't a typical one, I knew lots of fat kids. The difference is that they are still fat and I'm not. I have a date with Francis.

My mother saw her picture, thinks Francis is beautiful, and is very afraid for me. Francis *is* beautiful but my Mother shouldn't worry about me with girls just because I haven't dated. The thing is that I've never had the chance. I even know about the clitoris⁴, not only where it is but what to do with it⁵.

Francis has golden-blond hair. My friend Nowell gave me a picture of her. He's the one that set up Francis and me up tonight. He and I met in elementary school but ended up going to separate high schools, keeping in touch mainly since our parents are friends. That, too, is a typical scenario, I guess. Both of us start out the same, he goes on

⁴ *Cosmopolitan*

to smoke pot, play football, and have sex, and I go on to fade into the background, like the kid on the side looking at the people who are having their picture taken for the yearbook. But since he came over with his parents all the time, I became his anonymous source of video games, Dungeons and Dragons, and alibi's for years, and I don't mind.

Francis has golden-blond hair, like I said, a perfectly petite nose and sculpted shoulders. The way her collarbone nudges against her skin, not to be too melodramatic, fuels me. It's only her 2"x 3" graduation photo in her black, V-neck gown that I've seen, but something disastrous would have to occur below her breasts in order for her to be anything less than spectacular. Every single feature seems a bit poetic, but it's her collarbone I find myself drawn to. I'm hoping she won't be wearing a V-neck when I see her tonight, since I'm afraid I might get some sort of Pavlovian erection when I see it, like people logging on to the internet.

Her eyes seem bright and blue in the picture, but I'll search them for flecks tonight. Women like Francis want to feel unique⁶. I'm sure the blonde hair and blue eyes are a burden to her, constantly clichéd and type cast. But she's more than that tonight. I will find her witty and grey flecked. Eyes like stone, but not cold. Like marble, perhaps.

I can only hope this is the case, that there isn't a sad, shallow person behind the glowing face. On the back of the picture she wrote,



:To Nowell

From: Francis

⁵ *High Society*

It's written in pink ball point pen and smells like Trident gum if you read it right. To me, from Francis.

Francis

I'm thinking that Nowell has already fallen in and out of lust with her. I hope he picked her for me because he has absolutely no interest in her for himself. I may be a new man, a bigger and better Hudson, but I still don't look like Nowell. He's around six-foot two, a hundred ninety pounds, and good looking. He's the type that girls scribble notes about. I know they have Biology together, so, I don't want to fall victim to his 'seeing her under a new light' over a half dissected frog and deciding that he wants to nail her.

I'm supposed to pick her up at 6:30 at her parents' house. She originally suggested that I pick her up at 7:30 at her friend Kelly's house. That plan, of course, was completely unacceptable. When she told me she wanted me to go to her friend's house, I made up a story about helping my grandmother with some potted plants, placing myself in the direct vicinity of her house at 6:30 tonight. I didn't want to even allow for the possibility of peer disapproval. For all I know, her friend Kelly could have known me in grade school and remember me as *Hogson*. One awkward laugh or cruel whisper into Francis's ear could ruin my love affair before it even begins.

My Mom has loaned me the car for the night with my promise that I return it by midnight, reminding me that, "All respectable girls are home by midnight."

⁶ Jenny Jones

This is fine because I've already decided to bring her home early anyway. At 11:30, we'll be in the car at the park. There is a spot in Forrest Park where I told myself I'd 'go parking' three years ago. Of course that was freshman year, so that would be Alison Gravette. Tonight, however, it's Francis Apple, and it's actually happening.

Nowell snatched a bottle of wine from his Dad for me, saying it should, "do the trick." By 11:30, Francis and I will have had a few glasses, and I'll see the love in her eyes and smell the want⁷, but just before we kiss I'll stop and decide to take her home.

It is 6:10, I'm showered and buttoning the second-to-top button. Since my mother has bought every single piece of clothing I've ever worn up to tonight, I am especially aware of my shirt, which seems a slight too trendy. I bought myself pants that are khaki, not Dickies, and a shirt that's Gap, not WalMart.

My mother pokes her head in the door telling me, "not to be late." It's the same look of despair in her eyes she had my sophomore year, telling me that Wendy Shoemaker must just be late. "She's just running a little late, honey. Why don't you give her a call?" she kept saying, knowing she wanted to ask, "Are you sure you were really invited to the dance?"

Obviously, I *was* sure that Wendy had asked me to the Sadie Hawkins dance. I am not, after all, delusional. It just turned out that I didn't know that another girl, Mandy Frank, had gotten the flu and asked Wendy to take her date, Bobby Kincaid. Wendy then proceeded to "forget" she'd asked me to the dance and went with Bobby. It's always the

⁷ *Penthouse Forum*

guys with two first names that get the women. Their first and their last, each able to stand alone.

“I’m going, Mom, I’m going. I don’t want to be eager.”

“Punctuality is next to Godliness,” she says.

Ever since she learned that “Cleanliness was next to Godliness,” my mother has taken absolute and full poetic license over the phrase, inserting whatever qualities she sees fit. Helpfulness; Intelligence; Perseverance; they’re all next to Godliness now. There’s no need any longer to even actually rhyme the qualities with “ness.” She probably never even noticed the rhyme, *Cleanliness*, next to *Godliness*.

“I know Mom, I’m leaving. Where’s the flower?”

I lay the Star-Gazer Lily on the passenger seat. It’s important not to be predictable⁸, women need romance⁹. Romance is merely planned spontaneity¹⁰. Although a white or yellow rose would be nice, a Star-Gazer Lily goes much further. Even the name transcends convention. I seriously doubt any other guy she’s gone out with has given her one of these.

I didn’t tell Nowell about the flower, he’d say it was ‘overkill’ and to remember that, “Chicks dig assholes.” I know that girls like assholes, but they only like assholes *after* the asshole is nice initially and then suddenly *turns into* an asshole for some

⁸ *MAXIM*

⁹ *Sally Jessie*

¹⁰ *Men’s Health*

unknown reason once she wants him to be nice to her. There is a humming logic behind these things

I turn onto Bleeker street, "*which will lead all the way down to Lee which you will then make a right off of to get onto Riverside. Then just look for the house with the ugly flag out front, it's my Dad's stupid St. Patrick's Day flag.*"

I listened to that message yesterday at least ten or twelve times to make sure I got it right.

Bleeker is turning off on to Lee. I've got Star Drag, a small, bar band, in the CD player. There's something intriguing about someone who doesn't listen to popular music¹¹. Their music is a bit heavy, but melodic. I'll keep it turned low enough, though, so she can't hear the words. I'll ask her what kind of music *she* wants to listen to after we have dinner.

Lee is turning into Riverside and the flag actually is ugly. I park in front of the house and get out slowly, making sure not to take a second look in the mirror. If her father answers, I'll call him sir and if her mother answers I'll call her Mrs. Apple. If Francis answers, I'll say,

"Hi, you must be Francis."

She smiles and invites me in, even more stunning than her 2"x 3" photo. She has on a grey V-neck blouse highlighting the wonderful, round breasts that her head-shot cut off. Her skin looks like clean bedsheets. I divert my attention from her nudging

¹¹ *SPIN*

collarbone and admire the long flowing skirt she's wearing, hinting at hairless legs and an ass that Nowell once told me I "should see her in her bun-huggers at volleyball."

"How do you do sir? It's a pleasure to meet you."

Her father winks at me with an un-tucked shirt and loosened tie around his neck firmly shaking my hand. The parents continue to go smoothly, apparently relieved that I don't smell like marijuana and panties.

That will all change after I break Francis's heart for the first time and she cries to her Mom about how she "doesn't understand boys." Then they'll dislike me again after Francis asks her Mother to put her on birth control when we get back together. It is crucial that the parents dislike the boyfriend to some degree. If there is no animosity between her parents and her boyfriend lots of girls don't feel like there is substance in the relationship¹².

It's time that she suggests we get going, however. Too much time with the parents can only mean that she isn't,

"Ready to go?"

"Sounds good. It was nice meeting you Mr. And Mrs. Apple."

Walking towards the car we hear her father say, "Remember, one o'clock, no later. Have fun." I smile when I hear her one o'clock curfew, thinking how splendid it will be to have her home by midnight, sober with rejection, kissing her parents with a clean mouth and running upstairs to call her friends.

¹² *Riki Lake*

The Star Gazer Lily I left on the front seat is the success that I knew it would be. She's talking about it, holding it up and smelling it, although I don't think it has much of a smell. She begins asking me about 'who I know' at her school and 'who she knows' at my school. I try to shift the conversation since I really don't have any friends that she would know, other than Nowell, and since any name that I give her will immediately be book marked in the V.C.R. brain as a reference point and just lead to trouble.

I distract her with a sincere compliment- *beautiful eyes, soft and sun-flecked* - and reiterate the way her picture does her no justice. She blushes and begins talking of the things that delight and annoy her, poetry and pep-rally's, her teeth shining through in flashes.

We're heading downtown to eat at Rottini's, the second or third nicest restaurant in town. I thought about taking her to Griggio's, the nicest, but decided that would be a mistake. I want to throw a little cash around, but don't want to make her feel guilty about it. She laughs at a comment I make about a popular movie star.

Nowell's cousin, Kathleen, is a waitress at Rottini's and is expecting us tonight. She told Nowell that she would serve us wine and flirt with me. The best thing in the world would be for Francis to think that other women find me attractive¹³. Since we're only eighteen, she'll be impressed that I can supply her with alcohol at a place like Rottini's.

¹³ *Vogue*

We get to the restaurant at 7:15, and she's hungry. I pull the chair out for her at our corner table. Facing myself towards the corner I allow her to have the view of the restaurant. I don't want her focusing too intently on my actual face.

Kathleen arrives to take our order, and unfortunately she's quite a bit larger than Nowell described her. After we exchange niceties I begin to order tea, but then say, "Well, actually....Francis, do you like wine?" She answers yes and Kathleen is off to get their best white.

"I can't believe they didn't ask us for ID. Our waitress must have a thing for you." Francis says, placing her hands in her lap and looking at the menu, feeling safe with me. I have given her transportation, a lily, and access to liquor. I am a giver of things.

After a glass of chardonnay we decide to order. I haven't told her what I want to eat just in case she's a vegetarian, or perhaps a fruitarian. Vegetarians seem to find meat eaters unsophisticated and homely¹⁴, like smokers.

She orders the Vegetable Lasagna but also suggests Calamari for an appetizer, so I order the Fettuccini Alfredo and applaud her suggestion of Calamari.

The conversation tracks the terrible time she had with Freddy Moore at her Junior Prom to what my mother does for a living to where we each want to go to college. I see in her a person that I will be able to share a life with. Years from now, I can tell her about my previous life of insult and embarrassment and she'll understand how cruel people can be.

¹⁴ *Men's Journal*

The Calamari is a bit chewy, but tasty, and her cheeks are high and flushed from the glass and a half of chardonnay. As Kathleen approaches our table with the entrees I casually reach into my pocket for my lactose pills.

As fate would have it, I've always had problems with my digestive tract. I can't digest dairy foods without a lactose supplement.

"What are you looking for?" Francis asks me, noticing the way I'm digging in both pockets.

"I think, I left the movie tickets at home." I never got any movie tickets and I really don't have my pills. I can't believe I forgot my pills, this steaming plate of creamy Alfredo now looming large.

"Are we going to the movies? Have you seen the Meg Ryan movie?"

"That's the one I had tickets for. Well, we can just get more and save the old ones for souvenirs." I tell her. A real man doesn't panic¹⁵. I feel the hot breath on my upper lip as I take the first bite of my dinner and tell her how wonderful it is.

It is 8:45 and we just finished our wine. My sweet Francis only ate half of her lasagna just as I had hoped she would. It makes me feel good to know that she has such self-control. In the future we'll both finish our meals and give up pretense, loosening belts.

I pay the bill without even looking at it and I tip Kathleen incredibly. We have ten minutes to make it to the movie theater, which luckily, is only three blocks away.

¹⁵ *GQ*

Rather than drive, I suggest we walk and enjoy the night air. She walks next to me and leans in, telling me she's chilly. Touché Francis, touché.

We share a large Sprite and talk about how nice it would be if they served wine in the movie theatre. I still haven't told her about the bottle Nowell gave me, still waiting in the car.

Over all of the laughter and love scenes, I am in agony. The intense pressure building in my stomach is making my palms sweat and my hair follicles itch. It is amazing that there can be so much misery trapped in one stomach in one body next to hundreds of bodies in one small theatre in one small town and on and on. Through years of experience I've learned that the only two ways to alleviate this pain are either to lie on my left side and release, or sit on the toilet and sweat.

I want to lean over to Francis and whisper my unfortunate situation to her and see her caring eyes leading me to the car to where she'll drive me home and wipe beads of sweat off my forehead, telling me how much she wishes it could be her pain instead of mine. I can hear liquids and gasses at play.

The sweeping soundtrack and final kissing scene are enough to keep Francis distracted from my unease and desperation as we are both holding back tears.

As we're walking out of the theatre, I tell her I need to use the rest room and luckily, so does she. After skipping in line, I make it to the toilet and barely get my pants down before a glorious explosion. Four abominable minutes later the torrent is flushed

and I'm walking out with a burning ass, complaining to Francis about long lines at the urinals.

It's 11:00 now and she's delighted to see the bottle of red wine, corkscrew and two plastic cups. I thought if I'd have brought actual wine glasses, she would get the impression that I am trying to get down her pants. Women need to know that men want to get in their pants but are not trying to¹⁶.

I pull the car into Forrest Park, which is about ten minutes from her house and under a clear sky.

"There is a beautiful spot up here that I want you to see. Maybe we could drink the wine up there?"

"I don't know" she says, "I might try to take advantage of you." What a beautiful moment of intimate pseudo-sarcasm.

"As long as you get me drunk first," I say, grinning at my own improvisational wit, turning up the gravel road.

It is 11:28 and the stars and view are magnificent. My stomach pains have subsided and we are sitting back in the car, the hood having been too chilly for her. The wine is disappearing and Francis mentions funny jokes.

"The only ones I know are dirty ones," I say. She's drunk and giggles with her whole body. She tells me those are the kind she likes. This is typical; women like men who can make them laugh but they don't usually like funny men, i.e., Don Rickles,

¹⁶*Ask Xavier*

Woody Allen. Laughter is an aphrodisiac¹⁷. Her hair smells like magnolias and the way she sighs out of her nose to control her laughter is the stuff of angels.

“All right then , here it goes. Three mice are sitting at a bar.”

“Mice?”

“Yes, three mice are sitting at a bar, all bragging about how tough they are.”

“Tough?”

“Yes, tough, manly. They each have a shot of whisky in front of them, the first one raises his shot glass and says, ‘I’m so tough that whenever I see a mouse trap, I pick that son of a bitch up, bench press it forty or fifty times and throw it to the ground, smashing it to pieces. Then I take the hunk of cheese and eat it, leaving the mouse trap broken and empty.’ Then he takes his shot of whisky and slams it down on the bar.

She readjusts her position and takes another sip of wine, her eyes wide to show me that she is still listening.

“The second mouse says, ‘That’s not bad, but I’m so tough that whenever I see rat poison, I take it and grind it up into a fine powder and then I sprinkle it in my morning coffee for a little pick me up.’ Then he takes his shot of whisky and slams it down on the bar.”

She makes a purring noise in her throat.

“Then the third mouse” I say, “takes his shot of whisky, gets out of his barstool and says, ‘I don’t have time for this, guys. I gotta go home and fuck the cat.’”

¹⁷ *Elle*

She immediately places her hand on my thigh and erupts with laughter. Doubling over in hysterics, she releases a shot. Ripping through the air, cutting cruelly through the disguise of her perfection.

Undeniable in fact. Pungent, how she laughs, pink to brown, mocking.

Hideous whores, clowns and tumbling red down curses with two first names, turning her insides out, love crusher with the stinking of ages.

Penny Pitching

A black T-shirt on a teenage tourist reads 'No Way Out' and there's a pink electronic device on her belt. Carl sits with his elbows on his kneecaps, slouched over, sucking ice out of a clear, plastic cup. Long fingers and skinny. His light brown uniform is getting damp and dark down the middle of his the back. A stiff, brown cap lays on the table beside him.

Barges move sluggishly in the background, their towers visible behind the levee. They go one way slowly and then the other, completely absorbed into the scene. A deckhand casts a long line off the barge towards the levee, heavy with bait.

Carl's waitress stopped coming outside to his table with Coke refills, hoping he'd get the hint and leave. It's hot outside, the middle of February, and he's been sitting there, alone, for an hour and a half. His head angles down from cursing himself and his now former fiancée.

Darius, he thought, why did it have to be Darius?

D, as he's called, is bigger than Carl is, he's blacker than Carl is. He is a man with huge biceps and rough hands made to carry boxes. He's one of Carl's fellow delivery drivers and has been fucking Carl's petite fiancée for about a month. She has been fucking him.

At least once a day for a month, she confessed.

D was in their bedroom, pulling up his pants in silence when she told him that. He was still in the room, half naked. He didn't say a word to Carl and left the house in an undershirt.

Then came Denice's long, abstract attempt to justify her actions. She pined about *cold feet* and *wild oats* and Carl knew she wasn't sorry. He wonders why she had to say "at least once a day".

Carl said goodbye, told her to "fuck herself," hopped back in his truck and went back to work. He ended up driving right behind D's identical brown UPS truck on the way out of the neighborhood, both pulling carefully into traffic. That was about two hours ago, and now Carl is just sucking ice cubes, sweating, and watching people walk by.

His truck is probably still running in front of Jackson Square, nearly out of gas. It was full of packages when he left it, boxes and envelopes, money orders and computer disks and he can't remember if he locked it. He's so far behind schedule by now that he'll lose his job regardless of whether or not the cargo gets stolen. The fate of the truck and the boxes now seems more like a suspenseful narrative to him than anything else; A strange situation that he has distance from.

He's just been sitting at the Café DuMonde, about two blocks from the truck, damning his own situation and watching the lovesick street performers set up shop. Palm readers, musicians, magicians and tired mimes.

Carl is struck dumb by the weight of it all, the horror of the woman he trusted. He can do nothing but speculate sex scenes and torture himself with B-movie dialogues. He thinks of the phrase "special delivery" and can't believe that there is no love in the world.

He sees her white lips on Darius's thick skin, her small hands on his huge shoulders. It is, he thinks, a sick repetition of a typical love story.

Carl's head is clean-shaven and burning in the sun. Swirling the remaining cube around the bottom of the cup he takes a heavy breath and leans back, sliding it into his mouth. He can smell the sweat under his shirt and softly spits the cube into his palm. Looking at it closely, he moves it to his fingertips and eyes it like a diamond, trying to feel it on his skin.

A stream of cold water runs down his forearm as the ice starts melting. Leaning back in the plastic café chair and looking at the cobblestone street in front of him, Carl picks a corner stone on the far side of the street, by the park. It's large and grey. *Three-two-one*, he counts, and lobs the cube.

The pitch is magnificent, pouring sharply through the thick air, making a defined arch, well aimed, but stopping a bit too abruptly, falling on to the hot street. The cube sits on the concrete and begins twisting slightly back and forth on its own body, melting and shifting from underneath.

A few yards beyond the melting cube is a small, grassy, square park. Reclining fully, with the empty cup in hand, Carl stares deep into the park. In his mind he is a man without woman, friend or job. In the park, there is grass, an oak tree, and a mime in a box.

*(An acorn falls from the tree limb above the man, bouncing off the invisible box, not making the sound you would expect, like a pebble to glass. It's more of a rubbery sound, subtle, like tapping a balloon. **The Man Inside The Box** looks disappointed each time an acorn falls, thinking it should be a much crisper noise. He's a ruffled man, but distinguished, crouched and sitting on his shins with his white palms pressed out in front of him. He appears to be a mime without paint. He woke up in the park, in a box surrounded by shells of people, setting up tables and handmade signs. His clothes aren't dirty, but are wrinkled and stretched. His apparent rendition of "a man in a box" elicits a few nickels and quarters from the tourists, especially when he leans his back against the invisible wall. The grass in the park is thick, waxy, and smells of a recent cutting. It seems to be wet with dew but hasn't stained The Man In The Box's pants.)*

During the first few hours that the man was awake, when dawn was breaking, he screamed and pounded. He seems to realize now, however, that his situation could be worse. He still finds it peculiar of course, but he knows that New Orleans contains far less pleasant places than this grassy square. A block of green with an oak tree in it, triangulated between the smell of Café DuMonde's fried beignets and La Madeline's French bread.

It's coming upon noon and the foot traffic is picking up. More and more freaks are displaying their wares and the heat rises from the concrete in clear waves, obscuring the man's vision.

The box, as far as he knows, works in accordance with it's own rules. A woman tossed a coin at him earlier that hit the man from the side. However, any time he tries to

stand up or crawl, the walls of the box are there to block him. The acorns always bounce close enough to his head so that he can hear them.

He soon became aware that it was useless to try explaining his situation. The first man he asked for help simply thought it was part of the mime act and doled out more coins. Another adolescent girl he talked to just gave an awkward smile and backed away politely.

-A box as a symbol-, the man thought, *-is too obvious-*. He could be trapped in his life perhaps, or trapped with a wife and without love, or maybe he's trapped in capitalism.

All of these metaphors interested him for a short time, but after noticing the squirrel, perched motionlessly on the root that oak tree, they faded from his mind.

-It is just so odd-, he thinks, *-that the squirrel hasn't moved-*.

(Frequently glancing at his bare wrist, the man seems bothered without his watch, so he looks at the sun and squints, wishing he had a real skill, wanting to determine the time by the position of his shadow. The square isn't completely congested this early in the year, but there is still a lot of consumer activity; Women with sneakers and fanny packs and men with cameras and directions. Most of the people are constantly eating, walking on the cobblestone street, snapping pictures and buying postcards. Some others, however, are walking right by the tree not noticing a thing. No one yet has tried to feed that particular squirrel or pet that particular squirrel, not the one he's looking at.

*A couple of retro, hippie-looking teenagers with bare, dirty feet and rubber sandals in their hands sit on the grass to the left of **The Man Inside The Box**, "MITB". Barges silently forge down the river behind the levee and the breeze slides the smell of beignets and bitter sweat into the audience like liquid. MITB sits up erect and alert upon seeing a man, "Grady", walking close to the tree.)*

MITB- Eh, excuse me. Could you do me a favor? Hello? Please don't walk over there. *(louder)* Sir.

Grady- *(stopping and looking towards MITB)*- Me? Sorry bout that. You taking a picture?

MITB- No, just please, if you wouldn't mind.

Grady- No, sure, I was looking for a place to sit anyway. Can I sit here? Is that all right?

MITB- Yes, yes. You can do wherever, whatever, I'd just rather you not walk by the tree.

Grady- *(sitting down and taking a cellophane wrapped sandwich out of his knapsack)*- So, any particular reason, or just a rule of thumb? Don't walk by trees. It's a beauty though isn't it? So majestic looking in the middle of all the concrete, it looks like a commercial for something. Grey concrete, Green grass and The Big Grey Tree. Like A Rock, I suppose. *(he takes a bite of his sandwich, chews quietly for a moment and then turns towards MITB)* Want some of this sandwich? It's not McDonald's or anything, just butter and honey.

MITB-(*reticently*)- Actually, that sounds pretty damn good right now. The smell of those beignets has been driving me crazy.

Grady- Yeah, smells do that. They say it's the most memorable sense in the body, the real treasure.

MITB- What does that mean, most memorable one? Scientists say that?

Grady- (*leaning over towards the man, offering half of his sandwich*) I don't really know. I've just always thought it was an interesting fact. Factoid

MITB- (*reaches hand towards the sandwich only to have it stopped by the invisible wall*) I hate to sound rude, but can you come closer, or maybe just toss it to me, I can't reach it.

Grady- (*tossing the sandwich*) My name's Grady by the way.

MITB- Grady? I know a Charles Grady in St. Louis. But, no relation I guess. It's nice to meet you, sorry for being rude, thanks for the food and all, I'm just a bit out of sorts today. Apparently, after I went to bed last night, I lost my fucking mind. It's been a strange day, Grady.

Grady- (*looking at the assortment of coins on the stage around MITB*)- Every day is a strange day, my friend, no apologies necessary. You at least making some money? .

MITB- (*savoring the sandwich, swallowing slowly*)- What, the coins? I'm not a beggar, I'm an attorney. It's a long story about the coins. But before you go ahead and ask me anyway, I want to ask *you* a question.

Grady- Anything in the world.

MITB- Do you see the squirrel on the root of that tree?

Grady- (*looking at the variety of squirrels spiraling around the oak tree*)- Which one?

MITB- (*pointing towards the particular squirrel with the remainder of his sandwich*)- The one on the root there, the still one. Grady, I'm telling you, I've gone crazy and it's that damn squirrel's fault. I can't, for the life of me, tell if it's real or fake. Look at it. It's perfectly still. That's why I don't want you to disturb it. I've been watching the damn thing for what has to be a full hour now, and it hasn't moved an inch. Not an inch.

Grady- Maybe it's scared or just spooked. (*looking intently*) You're right though, it doesn't look like it's sleeping or dead, just being still.

MITB—That's what I thought for the first ten minutes after I saw it. Maybe it was sleeping sitting up or something. But an hour? A god damn hour that squirrel has been still. Seems like that would be eons in squirrel time, they always move so fast. I'm telling you, I can't see any reason why it should be so still.

Grady- And you didn't want me to disturb it so you can see exactly how long it can stay still. I see.

MITB- That's not really it. I don't want anyone to disturb it because I want it to move on its own. If it just responds to you invading its space, like a robot or something, that wouldn't prove anything. It could have all sorts of sensors and programs to respond to you coming towards it. Does that make any sense? It's gotta be just me and him. I should be able to tell if it's real. Sensors for stimuli, in it's fur or tail or something. I'll be

here until I can tell for sure. *(they look at each other and smile)* I assure you though Grady, this is my first day of lunacy.

Grady- *(finishing his sandwich and wiping his hands clean)*- Well, friend, I don't know if you are familiar with this area, or even the whole city, but you have to be more disturbing than that for me to get up and move after I already sat down. Besides, who cares about the squirrel, it's the lawyering part that's crazy. What kind of lawyering do you do?

MITB- *(looking intense)* Patent Law. Can I try again?

Grady- To make me leave? Sure.

MITB- Alright, are you also aware, Grady, that I'm trapped in an invisible box? Completely solid and invisible. Watch. *(he leans toward Grady and presses his forehead to the wall, flattening out the flesh and skewing his hair)* How about this Grady? Do I qualify for crazy time now?

Grady- *(studying the situation briefly)*- Yeah, I think that will do it.

MITB- Any ideas on what the deal with this is? It just happened today. I woke up here. I have no idea why.

GRADY- I think I'd probably have start by looking at the box as a symbol if I were you. But, boxes as symbols seem too easy. *(pondering the question)* But, that explains the sandwich tossing thing at least, why you wanted me to throw a sandwich at you. You can't stand up or move, can you?

MITB- No, I can't. *Hence* the sandwich tossing.

Grady- But this is kind of nice for me though, you see, I have a captive audience.
Hypothetically, I could just sit here and talk to you for hours.

MITB- *(smiling)* Hypothetically.

Grady- Well, my lunatic friend, since I know for a fact that you aren't going anywhere anytime soon, I'll get something off my chest that you might find a bit peculiar. Maybe you can relate.

MITB- *(leaning back against the invisible wall)-* Speak to me.

Grady- *(matter-of-factly)-* Seven years ago I got hit by a streetcar on St. Charles.

MITB- In your car?

Grady- No, just me.

MITB- Damn. Life flashing before your eyes type of thing?

Grady- Yeah, but that wasn't the interesting part, that was mainly like a disappointing montage of clips and soundbytes from movies and television shows I'd seen. The crazy thing about it is that, ever since then, I've been able to travel exactly one minute into the future. Sixty seconds ahead.

MITB- *(smiles and peers uncertainly at Grady, then towards the squirrel, then quickly back to Grady, in a jolt, as if startled)* - What was that? Are you cold or something?

Grady- Are you kidding? I'm sweating like an Amish mule.

MITB- I thought you just shivered, just now. *(mimicking a shiver)* Like a quick shake.

Grady- Sorry, don't think so.

MITB- *(jovially)*- Well then, my man, as soon as I get out of my invisible box here, you can go ahead and sign me up for the loony bin. Or maybe we could team up and join a freak show. Box Man and Future Man. Damn, traveling into the future, huh. We could be kings in a day. Why aren't you on some tropical island, rich from gambling winnings or the lottery or something?

Grady- Because, like I told you, one minute is all I get. You don't think I tried getting rich? You don't think I like steak and lobster better than butter and honey? For seven years I've been able to do this, and all I've learned is that it's a completely worthless talent. There's not enough time to make bets or buy lottery tickets or trade stocks or anything like that. Not enough time to save lives, change history or find true love. But it *is* real, nevertheless, I *can* do it.

MITB- Then prove it to me. I'd be interested to see it. I can prove my box, can't I? Look at me lean. If you can prove it, it's real. But hey, if you see that squirrel moving a minute from now, don't tell me, I'll wait.

Grady- I already did it, I flicked your ear just now. I have to do it quickly or else I disappear for a minute and it hurts like hell when I catch back up to myself, like an elbow to the solarplexus. *(Grady abruptly leans over and flicks MITB's ear sharply, his middle finger shooting against the cartilage.)*

MITB- Damn. Shit, Grady. That hurt. I haven't had my ears flicked since I was at Jesuit.

Grady- I told you I could do it. See, actually, I really flicked it exactly one minute ago, and now we are here in that minute. We caught up.

MITB- *(rubbing his ear, beginning to smirk)*- No offense Grady, but that's the most unconvincing, bullshit display of time travel I've ever seen, ever. Star Trek teleporters and Schwarzenegger movies at least try to seem real. All you did was lean over and flick my ear and tell me that you did it a minute ago. *(laughing)* The jury isn't buying it.

Grady- Alright then, so you see my point now. It's a worthless and empty talent. Pointless. If we had a television here, you'd believe me. I can tell you every single commercial before it comes on. That would convince you wouldn't it?

MITB- *(thinking for a moment)* - Yeah, I guess it would have to.

(Sitting in silence, both men look back at the squirrel. It seems to shutter slightly but the men can't tell if they are just inventing its movement. Frustrated, MITB picks up one of the coins and brings it to his nose, inhaling deeply. He then tosses it through the invisible wall and towards the tree in a purposeful and glimmering arch. Flying heavily, the sparkling coin falls just short of the root, dropping abruptly. The squirrel doesn't move.)

After putting his tip on the table, Carl squints at the sunlight bouncing off the change. Quarters, nickels and dimes. He's now sitting at a table of mirrors, spraying sharp beams of light at the people taking and the people making, all walking in circles around the grass square. Shivering and stopping abruptly.

He picks up a quarter and tries to find his reflection in it, searching for something to resonate back to him in deep tones. A mirror-image of deep tones. But-*a mirror as a symbol-* Carl thinks – *is too obvious*. He rolls the bright quarter up and down between his

knuckles with nowhere to go, using his thumb like a magician or a cashier. The bright silver of the coin reflects against his brown knuckles. A gentle, hot brown, like the smell of coffee.

Oil

“A cast of thousands huh?”

“Yes, you will be welcomed by a cast of thousands. The hero, the returning champion.”

“Like Lassie?”

She laughs, “Yes, like Lassie. Now, go fetch. Go fetch Joby.”

I wag my tongue like a dog, give a breathy pant, and tighten the straps on my backpack .

“All right now, Lassie” she says, “Come back in a half an hour if you don’t find him, o-kay? K boy?” I lift my hand to show her my bare wrist.

“No watch? I guess you’ll have to use those keen animal instincts then, but we really do need to start back in about an hour.”

“I’ll judge it by the movement of the sun” I tell her, smiling and lying.

“Ah, a manly man I see.”

“Indeed,” I answer, turning my back to her. Lifting my chin, I start down the trail opposite the one we came in on. I am looking for Joby. He had another one of his epiphanies last night, took off down this trail, and didn’t come back.

He is my best friend and Clo is his girlfriend. I am in love with both of them. Clo is short for Clover, which is her real name. I find that amazing.

Although he would never call her his girlfriend, and she would never call him her boyfriend, I listen to them have sex. Joby’s still pretending to go to college and I just

graduated. I am the 'smart and motivated one' according to our friends, but I can't think of anything that I know more about than Joby does. Life-wise, not book-wise.

He took off late last night, right in the middle of telling me and Clo a story, simply getting up and leaving. It was some story about Chinkateague, Virginia and people that stuff wild ponies into their station wagons. We hadn't quite figured out the point before he left.

This is not altogether unusual though. In any situation, in any state of mind, Joby is subject to just get up and leave. It doesn't matter who is there, me or Clo, he will leave, feeling an impulse and acting on it immediately. He is the only person I've ever met that really, deeply, does what he wants. There is never a discussion of pros and cons. Joby is superman.

He's called me from Cincinnati, Asheville, Richmond, Jackson, and about four times from New Orleans, and these are only the times that something goes wrong, usually meaning that he has no money or transportation.

Then there are also the times when someone I've never seen before will come up to Joby and hug him emphatically, treating him like family. When this happens at a restaurant or bar, it usually involves a lot of cheering, rounds of drinks being bought, and the telling of a 'Joby story' that I've never heard.

These stories are always the type that anyone else on the planet would brag about constantly, telling the first person they saw, and then telling anyone else that hadn't heard it after that. There are tons of these stories that he, on every single day that I've known him, has not seen reason to mention. Just two weeks ago I found out that he won a car

over a bet that somehow pertained to monkeys. That is a true story, the guy came to our apartment and handed over the keys.

These stories are always told enthusiastically by other people, right in front of Joby, so it's not even a question of gossip or legend, they are all wonderfully true. That is the most attractive quality that I have ever seen in another person. Having real stories to tell.

These are the stories he acquires when he leaves in the middle of sentences.

He doesn't do it to upset anyone. Me and Clo understand that. Once you know Joby, you realize that nothing he does has to do with you. No matter what the relationship, you are just another individual, separate from him. It is a real, but ironic, friendship between us, one in which nothing is personal.

Clo and I know he can handle himself in the woods, that's not why I am looking for him. I am looking for Joby because we need to leave sooner than we originally thought. After he took off last night, Clo remembered that she had picked up another girls shift at her work tonight. It is a variation from the original attitude we here with and Joby doesn't have a clue about it.

Our campsite is right off the Appalachian Trail, about seventeen hundred feet above the trailhead where we all parked. Although it's a quicker downhill hike, it should still take nearly all day so we need to get started.

We figure that Joby is sleeping somewhere on the trail, maybe on top of a pile of leaves or up in a tree. He does these things.

Clo and I didn't even comment when he left. We just kept sitting on the logs by the campfire, across from each other, drinking red wine. The more we drank, the more the wine made her teeth purple and I wanted to tell her she was hilarious and perfect. It's cold up here at night and she was bundled up, holding her wine cup with both hands and smiling. I also wanted to kiss her right on her purple teeth and then on her face, again and again. It would be so cathartic to kiss Joby's girl.

I am always interested in Joby. He has a mass that I don't have, a bulk. But it's not a matter of just being bigger than I am, he is also more massive in vibe. It is a radiance that women can't resist. One of the girls Joby used to hang out with once told me that he 'fucked like a hurricane'. Since then, I've always imagined him and Clo together, fucking like a hurricane, and thought that it would be spectacular to be either of them

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Next to me and Joby's apartment there is this netting. I walk over it every time I go to our mailbox. It's green and plastic and is becoming less and less noticeable as time goes by, being absorbed into the ground. Hiking trails always remind of the netting for some reason, I think it is just the idea of molded earth. Our apartment complex is relatively new and there are a number of small hills with Crepe Myrtles on them. About six months ago, the netting showed up. Bright, plastic and green, covering all of the small hills and penetrated by the young tree trunks.

Every time I pass these hills I wonder about its purpose. I imagine that it's intended to either stop erosion or somehow shape the hill, but when it first showed up, it

was just casually placed there, resting loosely on top of the soil, not even exerting any pressure.

There isn't any netting on the trails obviously, they used machines and oxen and machetes to cut these trails. Painfully cutting through the mountain while the netting can just sit there, like a blanket on a person. I always think about the process of making trails when I'm hiking, and that leads me to the netting, and also the millions of criss-crossing roots remind me of it too.

It would probably help if I didn't stare at the ground when I hiked as well. Nevermind the trees, towering everywhere. Nevermind the green of plants and ivies, poisoning and feeding. I always hold on to the straps of my pack and watch my feet hit the dirt, moving me across the trail. It's the rhythm of my footsteps I focus on. A steady thumping, the sound of progress. Every time my heels hit the ground, I feel it all the way through my body, the comfort of bass tones. I click my teeth together, to the rhythm of my feet, and make a marching band in my head. Click-clacking and thumping.

Listening to the drums I think about Clo and Joby. I can't decide if my role in their relationship is extremely typical or extremely tragic. The role of the friend. I would prefer it be tragic, the forbidden love that hovers just out of reach, tempting. I could see myself as a figure, torn between loyalty and fate, the stuff of a million stories. Scribbled on cave walls, to then be covered by dirt, then ink and then font. The universals. Hieroglyph to stick figure to star-cross'd love to me. Me, Joby, and Clo.

He is an undeniable force, tall and completely unafraid.

Click-clacking and thumping with my heels.

A rustling in the bushes beside me. The bear. Noise, hair, and movement.

Jumping off the trail, completely displaced, I begin shouting and tumbling down the leaf covered slope, steep and quick. Rolling and sliding, flattening young stalks, I try to get glimpses up the mountain as I fall, fully expecting to see the bear barreling after me. My legs are being cut, bruised and punctured until I finally hit a tree thick enough to stop me. Luckily, my back hits first and the pack softens the blow, full of trail books and snack foods.

Immediately curling into a ball, all the advice I've ever gotten about bears starts coming to me in flashes. First, don't panic. Second, move slowly away and avoid eye contact. I've been told that a million times, but instead of following that advice, I shrieked with my soul and jumped off the trail, sliding and crying out the whole way down.

Third, curl into a ball, and, so, here I am in a tight fetal position, covering my ears, huffing rapidly.

It was the lowest noise I have ever heard, the growl. Completely unexpected and random, lower and more primal than I would have ever imagined. It was a warning growl, not a roar. There probably aren't very many people who have heard that growl, that close, and lived to tell about it. The low noise, the hair and the movement. I was absolutely positive I was going to die

Brown bears are the only bears in these mountains, and supposedly don't live this high on the Appalachian Trail. And they are supposed to be docile, sweet creatures, the misunderstood victims of tourists.

In a ball with my back against the tree, I know the bear could still be coming. Here I am, with my eyes closed, fruitlessly analyzing the implications of things when my skull could be split in half by one sweeping motion.

I'm imagining hot breath on my ears, thick fur and muscle lurking around me. Before it attacks there will be a smell I've never smelled before, an abrupt realization of why things are, and then teeth ripping through my body. But, after about ten minutes of imagining my own death, there is nothing. The bear didn't follow me and I am uncurling.

Examining my scrapes and bleedings I am relatively unhurt but on a steep incline, making it impossible for me to climb back up to the trail. Even if I could, the bear is probably still there, still deranged. It must have been doing something essential when I walked past it, eating or protecting it's cubs. The Park Ranger told us yesterday that there have only been four bear attacks in the last thirty years.

I begin inching down the incline, my feet sinking into tons of fallen leaves, sticks and animals. By the time I reach a lower trail, I figure that I must be at least five hundred feet below where I started. I told Clo that I would be back in thirty minutes. That is not going to happen. For a second I worry if Joby was what the bear was feeding on. But there is no chance, even if he did come across that bear, he wouldn't have gone falling down the mountain in a fit, he would react in a much calmer, better way. He's probably gotten back to the campsite already and told Clo about the bear, and she thinks it is amazing. A real bear.

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Back at the campsite, everything is different. Joby and Clo are nowhere to be found and their tent and gear is all gone. My tent is still here, but not exactly in the same place it was before. Clo must have packed it up after I left, thinking we'd be ready to go, and then set it back up again when she realized I wasn't going to be back in time. I am about ten hours late getting back here and it's now the very end of day.

Most likely, Joby showed up right after I went looking for him, walking into the campsite as I left it, unscathed and vibrant. We all drove separate cars here, so they might have figured that I was just a little behind them, or maybe that I wanted to stay another day.

The hero, the returning champion. It is slowly becoming night and I am hoping that Joby didn't see the bear. I want that story. The story of the bear. He'll laugh and Clo will cover her mouth and open her eyes wide. I'll tell them about the low noise being a documentary growl, not a Hollywood roar. An underneath noise.

That is really the most upsetting thing about them not being here. I need to tell someone what happened to me. Someone needs to listen right now, while I'm still sweating and bleeding and rubbing my sore shoulders as I'm talking. That is the real story, the visual proof.

Every hour that goes by, the less and less my story of the bear means. By the time I get all three of us together, I'll be showered and calm. I will have driven a car since it happened, everything will be different. It will be only the image of a bear, nothing that the two of them ever feared, or truly sensed the existence of.

Sitting on a log near the remains of last night's fire, I watch a spider crawling. First on my boot, then proceeding all the way to the stones that circle the burnt-out campfire. This journey takes an extraordinarily long time. In the space of just a few feet, it moved from left to right, circled, paused, and back-tracked. Constantly having to overcome new obstacles like rocks and sticks and the wind and be aware that it could fall prey to nearly anything that chose to kill it. At this particular moment, that spider seems to me the most inefficient thing that I've ever seen. How, in the world, are there still spiders like this?

Rubbing my neck and moaning, I begin to build a new campfire. Twigs, leaves and sticks, stacked and re-stacked, and I am the only person at the campsite. Last night there were two other groups at the far side of the site. Clo and I saw their campfires burning, but they're gone and I feel particularly alone, burdened by a story to tell and no one to listen to it.

I construct a sturdy campfire, everything ordered and meaningful, meant to last all night. It burns slowly as the light disappears, lending the wilderness an altogether different tone.

The clicking of things begins, animals of all shapes and sizes calling out. Rubbing together legs, craning necks and stalking with fluorescent eyes. All around me I can sense puddles leaking into streams that flow over smoothed rocks and fallen boulders, moving quickly and with purpose.

I stoke the fire and begin taking off my punctured and blood-spotted clothes. Nearly undressed and peering down at my battered body, it looks queer to me,

complicated in a way that I have never seen it before. There is so much skin, bone and blood, so much breathing tissue. Everything is, at the same time, connected, independent, and going to die. This is why some people don't like to camp alone, it can shift your thinking.

Although it is against every rule in every park in the world, I like to let the campfire burn as I sleep, especially when I'm alone. There is something consistent about fire, like a night-light, or the blue pulse of a muted television.

I examine the tent, making sure everything is secure. It is a 'star-gazing' tent, one side of it being a thin screen, allowing me to see out and up while still guarding me from insects. But it will be my fire-gazing tent tonight since Clo angled it directly towards the campfire.

Pulling off my underwear, I stretch my body out one last time, looking at the way the veins stand out in my forearms, taking various paths and criss-crossing at the wrist.

Zippering up a tent and sliding naked into a sleeping bag is the most wonderful feeling in the world to me, being both exposed and enveloped.

My sleeping bag is made out of a new 'space-age' material that is water proof and aware of temperature, silky and cold when you originally get into it, but then able to gradually adjust to your body heat as you sleep, striking a perfect balance between outside and inside, above and underneath. It will do this in any temperature all the way down to thirty degrees below zero.

Sliding both my hands inside the bag and holding myself, I close my eyes.

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It's Ralph Kramden. It's Ralph Kramden by the campfire. Realizing who it is, I rub my eyes, piss myself, and drop my jaw, feeling just like Norton. Hey Norton.

Norton.

He's standing about three feet away from the fire, black and white and flickering in the night, a solid thing. There's a twist in my entire being, a network of emotive forces taking hold, all of the base human responses. Systems of adrenaline in action, realizing there is something in front of me, existing. Sitting upright, still enveloped in my sleeping bag, a low noise having woken me up.

The uniform, the hat, a bus driver. Pacing a bit, he circles the fire. Ralph Kramden. He looks projected, but is thick and heavy, a full image. I look around as far as the star-gazing screen will allow me, careful not to make any noise. I don't see any projectors, no controllers of things. There isn't any sort of light beam leading up to him and making him, there is no source. Taking off his hat and rubbing his forehead, Ralph Kramden is eyeing my campfire.

Being completely still, aware of the swishings my sleeping bag will make if I move, I find myself in a situation. My legs sweat heavily beneath the bag as the waterproof fabric sticks to my skin. Breathing as quietly and as quickly as possible, I become aware of my own scent, rank and hot. The smell of my body recoiling, the scent of animal reaction.

The image, grainy and overlapping, is unmistakably there. There is a weight to his walking, a shuffling. His feet press the dirt like a fat man.

The noise that woke me up is following him, not coming from fixed sources, but staying connected to the image. It's hard to decipher exactly what this noise is, although it's distinct from the soundings of the insects and animals. This noise doesn't have that same type of purpose or emotion. It is not a crying, but a constant hum. It is, I realize, the sound of an open microphone, a background noise. It is the sound a television makes in the second between a commercial and a program, the sound a stereo makes right before the song, hinting at a system of wires and chords and power and wattage, all woven together and mapped out, not yet blaring or amplifying, but buzzing and ready.

He puts his hat back on and moves a bit closer to the fire, removing his driving gloves. He hasn't once looked in my direction, and I don't think he could actually see me even if he did, although he could see the tent.

The 'star gazer' screen is only see-through when you're close to it, being of an intricate design. The farther you get from it, the more solid it looks, the same color as the tent. Sitting naked in a wet sleeping bag, I am no more than twenty yards away from Ralph Kramden.

To the moon, Alice, to the moon. He looks more comfortable and the fire seems to be warming him, reflecting off his white hands and face. He sits on a log, rocking backwards to shift his weight. It is the same log I was sitting on a few hours ago watching a spider, and it is the same log I was sitting on last night, drinking wine and loving Clo with my heart.

I know the Honeymooners through reruns and video collections. I know *Norton* and *To the moon Alice* and that's all. My hands are clinched around the fabric of my sleeping bag, my knuckles aching.

Why right now, and what would Joby do? I feel, intensely, that this situation is of consequence. Joby and Clo are gone. The three of us came into the woods together, strong, beautiful, and love sick and now I find myself alone.

The bear, the fall, and the netting. Ralph Kramden.

Slowly beginning to unzip my sleeping bag tooth by tooth, quietly cooling my drenched legs, there is a rumbling. I stop quick, cocking my head to the side and holding my breath. Like a voice, a pause, again, there it is, a distant sounding voice. Coming from Ralph, but giving the impression of being exponentially removed and filtered. Crowd noise, then an amplified voice. I can't tell what it is saying, or where it is being directed and he seems unaware of it, his gestures not matching the noise.

His elbows on his knees and slouched over, he is looking directly into the fire, too big and fat for the log I sat on last night. The voice continues and there is a cadence to it that I recognize, a rhythm. It is punctuated, starting with two strong syllables, then a triumphant ending..

Footsteps behind me, behind my tent. I want Joby here, I want Clo far away. Now, halfway out of my sleeping bag, I'm completely still. Since the fabric of the tent blocks my view, I can't see behind me or to the sides, but there are definitely footsteps. Pressing down on twigs and roots, approaching footsteps and white light. The air in the tent is suddenly too thick, too breathed.

They approach on the right and it looks like a flashlight shining at my tent, perhaps Joby or a Ranger. As the large and obscured circle of light moves casually by me, I dart my head to the left, making sure the light isn't projecting an image of myself onto the other side of the tent. Exposed on the fabric like an X-ray, wet and naked, afraid of the image.

The light continues past my tent however, not even pausing. Two more steps and I can hear it again, a humming. The same noise that Ralph is making, it is what you hear when you listen to light bulbs. Another living image, heading towards the fire.

I want clothes right now, at this instant it strikes me that I want to be layered and layered in clothes. Underwear, socks, long-johns, t-shirt, pants, sweat-shirt, coat, ski-hat, scarf, gloves and boots. Cover me.

I begin to doubt that there is any escape from this situation, any possibility of another day.

The new figure comes into my view and approaches Ralph Kramden.

James Dean is now pacing a bit, eyeing my campfire he walks coolly, stops and smokes. Another voice now coming from him. Not a single voice like Ralph's, but many voices. All in one and all laughing. An insane noise, hysterical laughter, a studio laugh track.

Back and forth at this they go, overlapping and banging at one another. Two strong syllables, then the laughter. Boisterous and faceless laughter. The two glowing men do not look at each other, only at the fire, Ralph already warm and James Dean just circling coolly and smoking. His fuzzy, multiplied laughter flying randomly at Ralph.

Convincing myself that they will soon see me, I imagine James Dean walking over to my tent with Ralph Kramden lugging behind. The leather jacket, the blue jeans. They can't see me like this, bare and inefficient, pissing myself and crying.

In a desperate move I throw off my sleeping bag and begin grabbing for my pocket-knife in the corner of the tent. Picking up the knife, I refuse to look back at the campfire. Number one, avoid eye contact and work swiftly. I picture them approaching my tent, one suave and one bumbling.

I open the knife and act out sharply, stabbing the ground and slicing open the bottom of my tent. I anticipate the sound of the tent door being unzipped from the outside, the entering buzz of the electric.

Joby would laugh and Clo would cover her mouth and open her eyes wide. 'Attacked by a bear?' they would ask in disbelief. 'Yes', I would say and cradle them both in my arms, 'The bear, the fall, and the netting.'

Touch and cover me.

I pull open the bottom of my tent, exposing the pulsing brown turf, plunging my knife down into it. Time and time again, I am loosening dirt.

One sweeping motion, hovering above me. Buried rocks and twigs cut my fingers and rip off my nails, pushing red blood against brown dirt and the green of 'space-age' fabric.

In the background, two strong syllables and hilarious laughter. Back and forth like this. Through the bottom of the tent, I uncover intricate networks of tree roots and worm tunnels, taking up with skeletons and oil.

A Billion Years Or So

“Through the hole. The tiger runs through the hole, round the tree three times, then back through the hole.”

Fetch’s small fingers tumbled over each other, the thin line disappearing and springing loose again, finally unraveling completely and sending the hook to his lap. He can’t get it.

His uncle’s truck was running smooth, a roaring machine that loved to tow. Greg must have complimented his truck, patting the dash, four or five times in the last hour.

This was the first time that Fetch had been able to touch his feet to the ground in his uncle Greg’s GMC Jimmy. He could remember climbing over the seats when he was younger, the truck always being the highlight of a visit from his uncle. The Jimmy was the biggest car that Fetch had ever seen. His parents had a huge over-sized SUV, but the Jimmy was *big*. A person could truly feel the motor pounding and spinning in that truck.

“We still have a little while until we get there.” Greg assured him. “You’ll get it.”

Fetch picked up the hook and line again, starting the process all over. He pictured the line as an airplane, doing trick loops through its own smoke, round the tree three times, and then blasting through the hole. He had a flight simulator game that did this.

But the fishing line was thin and wiry and his fingers weren’t capable of tying that type of knot. Fetch would prefer to just sit in the Jimmy and smell it.

His uncle always said the Jimmy smelled like the “outdoors,” “like a truck should smell”. Fetch thought it smelled like his uncle, mixed with sweat. It wasn’t an unpleasant smell, just an original one.

The speedometer jumped randomly up and down, from zero to eighty-five and they tried guessing their speed, Greg telling him to count the seconds that passed between mile markers. These were *the* times for Greg. He knew it was probably sad or typical to be a man like himself, but that didn’t change the way he felt. Barreling down a two-lane highway with his truck and boat, rushing between the sugar cane fields.

Greg had an unpainted canvas in Fetch, he thought. A kid who hadn’t ever been fishing. He kept picturing himself in profile, hoping he looked like he felt.

His daughter Janie, at the time, was living with her mother, and his son Greg Jr., sleeping in the back seat, had been in college for about two years. Greg Jr., prefers to be called Jonesy and is, to his father, the most peculiar thing. Of course he loves him the way fathers do, but he doesn’t necessarily like his son and it’s often as if he’s looking at a stranger.

At that point in time, it was Greg’s estimation that Fetch was about two years away from being a real, genuine, pussy. And he meant that in all sincerity, and with love. A sissy, perhaps. Or a queer. A Louisianian who didn’t know how to bait a hook.

“See those cows over there?” Greg pointed.

Holding the line carefully, trying not to lose his place in the knot, Fetch looked out the window. There were about thirty cows, all lying down in the pasture.

“We’re gonna have to fish ‘em deep today, Fetch. The pressure is high.” Greg said.

Fetch let his eyes go out of focus, looking into the cane rows that followed the pasture. He thought briefly about a commercial he’d seen with a cow that could fly and sing.

“Those cows can feel it, just like fish do.” Greg continued. “The barometric pressure pushing down on the water.”

They passed various smaller cow pastures and they all looked pretty much the same, every cow lying down.

“Are you learning that type of stuff in school yet?” he asked. “Barometric pressure and science, the air pushing down on us. It makes the cows tired, and the fish eat deeper, some days more than others. That type of thing’s important for choosing your bait.”

Picturing cartoon cloud-hands pushing down on the commercial cow, Fetch thinks he knows what his uncle is saying but his mom had warned him not to let his uncle tease him too much. She said he made her miserable when she was young, with all his joking. So don’t to take him literally, but remember that ‘he means well.’

Fetch couldn’t break his stare, lost again in the organization of the cane fields, row after row after row.

“Haven’t you seen cane fields, Fetch?” Greg asked him, noticing the deep gaze. “This is what our whole state was built on. Row after row after row of sugar cane.”

Fetch went back to his knot, thinking of possible ways that the *green* stalks he saw out the window could make *white* sugar, thinking of the machines and kitchen tools his mom used.

“What time you got there, Fetch? Jim’s clock is all screwed.” Greg said, tapping the clock on the dashboard. Fetch looked down at his oversized watch, with its bold digital face. “Damn, that’s a hell of a watch. Does it do windows too?”

It did more than that actually, having a number of options and games on it. Fetch placed the loose line and hook on his lap and pressed his forehead to the side window, skewing his hair.

Without saying anything, Greg eased the Jimmy over to the side of the road, the tires crunching against the gravel shoulder. Fetch didn’t see any sort of boat dock, or any water at all. Just rows and rows and rows of sugar cane.

“Go ahead and hop out, I want to show you something.” Greg said as he checked the rearview and opened his door.

Aside from the smell of the Jimmy, getting in and out was the most interesting part. Fetch really had to *hop* out, thinking about bruised shins and scraped knees he’d gotten during the holidays, coming and going.

Greg left the engine running and didn’t shut the door behind him, walking to the back of the truck and checking the boat before coming to Fetch’s side.

Motioning for Fetch to follow, Greg headed towards the cane, jumping over a drainage ditch.

“You like candy and stuff right? Ice cream?”

Fetch nodded.

“Well, all of that stuff you eat, basically anything sweet, anything you crave with your sweet tooth comes from this right here. This gives you energy.” Greg said as he grabbed stalk and began working on it.

Up close, Fetch thought, the cane looked completely different than it did from the road. It was much thicker, more like a tree than a weed, thick as a Coke can. He wrapped his hand around one of the stalks and looked at the color. It was a dark green, ribbed with brown circles and he imagined stabbing a villain with it. It was so hard and smooth, looking more plastic to Fetch than real. He watched an ant closely, spiraling up the stalk and then back down.

Greg released a slight groan, having given up on the first one he picked, and grabbed the one that Fetch was looking at, his hand clasping right over the ant. He shook and pulled at it.

He didn't look comfortable doing this, hunched over and pulling, stomping on parts until it finally gave. Standing up straight and taking out his pocketknife, he held the stalk out towards Fetch.

“See this here?” Greg began. “This is the real deal. Where it all comes from.” He tore at it, ripping away at the green to expose a cream colored marrow, stringy and warm in the sun.

Fetch watched his uncle's hands specifically, thick thumbs and wide nails. They worked mechanically at the cane until fully exposing an end, making it look, to Fetch, like a giant green pencil.

“Chew on it.” Greg said, holding the stalk out. Fetch rocked slightly backwards, as if afraid of the thing. “I’m gonna do it too, don’t worry. It ain’t poisonous or anything. This is how the Indians used to eat it.”

Fetch held his piece with both hands as Greg worked on another one for himself. After exposing the tip, he put it quickly into his mouth, moving it back and forth with his jaw. Fetch watched the muscles flex in his uncle’s face. The jaw-bone, forehead, and eyes, all seemed to shift, making him look entirely different.

“Chew and suck” Greg attempted to say, his words muffled by the stalk. “It tastes sweet like sugar.”

He reached out and nudged Fetch’s arm that held the cane. Thick and round, it inched closer to Fetch’s mouth until he finally began to eat it. It was like straw at first, but then began to juice. It was surprisingly warm and he began to laugh as the juice filled his mouth and ran down his chin.

“That’s it, you’ve got it.” Greg said, laughing at Fetch’s contorted face.

Fetch wasn’t quite sure what to make of any of this. It didn’t taste like he had imagined it would, but he could definitely sense sugar somewhere deep in the stalk, and it tasted good.

“That’s’ something else isn’t it?” Greg said, rubbing his head.

Fetch nodded and withdrew the stalk, looking at it, chewed and wet.

The truck horn began to blare. They looked quick to the truck, dropping their canes.

“Damn it, Jr.” Greg said in low tones.

It was Greg Jr. Jonesy, leaning up from the back seat of the Jimmy, pressing on the horn. His hair was huge. He kept his head down, having just woken up, tired and agitated.

Greg looked down at Fetch and smiled, "That just about made me poo my pants it scared me so bad."

They laughed and Greg nudged him on the shoulder again, starting towards the car. "C'mon Fetch, let's go kick his ass."

* * * * *

"All right guys, snacks and drinks. Get everything you need, last stop" Greg said, opening his door. "I'm gonna gas the boat. Get plenty of water and use the bathroom."

PETIT'S BAIT AND TACKLE SNACK SHACK was broken down and nearly gone and Fetch couldn't believe it was still an open business. Greg Jr. Jonesy quickly climbed out of the truck after his dad and headed towards the back of the store.

The parking lot was a mixture of things; gravel, grass, concrete chunks, and a breeze that snuck through the door. It was a flavorful, thick breeze, making Fetch shut his mouth and cover his nose.

"That's a good fishing smell there Fetch." Greg said, watching him through the back window then spotting himself in the reflection.

Fetch removed his hand from his mouth and tried getting out of the truck as casually as possible. The store's sign was hand-painted, red-letters on plywood. It stood on top of the flat roof of the brick block building. There were cracks and chipped paint all over the store, and a man in a camouflaged hat was walking out.

Fetch tried to slow his breathing, opening just a corner of his mouth and moving his tongue to the other side to protect his taste-buds. The man in the hat waited for him, holding the door open, nodding as he passed.

Greg watched all this from the pump, nodding back at the man in the camouflaged hat as Jonesy put fire to a joint in the bathroom, nearly gagging over the smell of dirty people and clean fish.

A rusted bell rang over the door as it shut quickly behind Fetch. The fluorescent lights flicked a bit, and he began to scan the aisles. There seemed, at first, to be nothing in there but tackle. Plastic bags and plastic boxes, filling each aisle. He recognized the different hooks and artificial worms, but everything else was foreign.

Tons of tiny bags of complex contraptions, complete with rubber shredded skirts that flared out. Neon oranges and yellows and greens connected to shiny metal hooks that connected to other things with shredded skirts that flared out. He saw one bag that contained, as far as Fetch could tell, just a baby spoon.

Fetch finally got to the snack aisle, but it wasn't nearly what he was expecting. Zero Bars, gum and Snickers were the only things he recognized. Everything else was homemade and cellophane wrapped. There were sandwiches, pork rinds and pickled things, each having a handwritten price on them. The bell clanged sharply again as Greg entered the store.

"Ms. May, if you aren't a sight for sore eyes" he said towards the old woman at the counter. She responded with a smile and something in French that made Greg whistle.

He rounded the aisle towards Fetch, digging in his pocket, "You get you something to eat?"

Fetch hadn't decided on anything yet, holding a Zero Bar in one hand and bag of chips in the other.

"We're gonna have to get some of these pork rinds," he said, "Ms. May might kill us if we don't. Best rinds in the South, ain't that right Ms. May?"

She rocked back in her stool, tipping her cup.

"You won't believe how all that sun and fishing will make you hungry, so you make sure you get enough. Get a po-boy or something. They've got those new Doritos over here, you like those?" Fetch nodded. "I'm a Frito man myself, but I guess I'll let you slide this time." He smiled.

"Go ahead and put all that stuff on the counter and go on to the bathroom."

Kneeling closer to Fetch's head he whispered, "Cause shit happens out on the boat too, if you know what I'm saying. You might want to go ahead and nip it in the bud."

Fetch dumped all the goods on the counter and got his first good look at Ms. May. Her skin was thick and wrinkled. But the wrinkles were not typical, they were deep and everywhere, covering her entire face, criss-crossing at times and running parallel. There was also virtually no space between her nose and the top of her lip. Her hair and eyebrows were a thin and scattered grey, and her ears drooped. But it was the hair on her chin that truly affected Fetch. It was thick and black and in two or three different patches.

"Gon' get you some of them bream cha?" she asked, her fingers wrapped around the steaming mug.

Fetch clinched, having no idea what she had said. She had wrinkles on her eyebrows and was beginning to laugh, the hair on her chin thick like cane. He looked down at the jug of pickled eggs by the cash register.

“Would you mind pointing him to the bathroom Ms. May?”

“I think he’s tad bit scared of Ms. May,” she said with a grin. “Watch out and don’t go swimming in that lake, cha. Gator’ll come up on you and snap that ‘lil pee-pee.” She made a gator snap gesture with her thin hand and laughed from deep inside herself.

Fetch felt his uncle’s hand on his shoulder. “You better watch out now Ms. May, this one’s a born fisherman. We’re going after some bass. If you’re not nice he ain’t gonna share.” He placed some snacks on the counter and turned to Fetch, “It’s around the back of the store. See if your cousin’s puking back there.”

Fetch shoved a dime into a gum ball dispenser that looked like a fake leg and started towards the door. The leg reminded him off a movie he had seen about Christmas.

He and Greg Jr. Jonesy ran into each other as they rounded the corner, knocking them both back, Fetch falling flat.

“That was some shit wasn’t it?” Jonesy said, feeling his wrist as if it were jammed. “You ready to kill some fish, little man?”

Fetch stood back up and dusted off his shorts. Jonesy reached out to grab his breast, attempting to pinch and pull it sharply, but Fetch backed out quick. He was prepared for that, it was the nature of their relationship.

Jonesy turned his face up at him, “Dad ask you to see if I was puking?”

Fetch nodded.

“Do I look like I’m throwing up to you? Don’t you think it would be hard for me to be talking to you right now if I were throwing up? Doesn’t the fact that vomit is not coming from my mouth prove to you that I’m not puking? Why don’t you think before you ask stupid questions? Shitpissfucker.” Jonesy said, reaching out to grab him again as Fetch darted around him to the bathroom, making an obvious jump over the pile of vomit by the concrete walk.

“All right smart lad.” Jonesy said. “You watch out. I’m gonna throw your ass in with the fishes. Just when you least expect it,” Jonesy said, Fetch having already locked the bathroom door. “I’ll get you.”

Everything that was the smell of the dead fish in the breeze was nothing in comparison to the air surrounding the toilet. It was wet, thick with pot, and smelling of sick. He built a nest of toilet paper on top of the seat, dropping some extra tissue to cover the puddle at the base of the toilet, thinking, ‘shitpissfucker.’

He closed his lips tight and tried to breathe slowly through his nose, climbing onto the seat and straining immediately, trying to relieve himself as quickly as possible and straightening his legs.

Clenching his fists on top of his thighs and urinating, Fetch caught sight of the novelty dispenser opposite the toilet. There was a faded picture of a smiling nude woman on it, the majority of her body and half of her face having been worn off. Dozens of oversized penises had been drawn on the dispenser, all pointing at her in different ways.

“Feels Like The Real Thing,” the lady was saying, a large 75 cents written in bold above her head. There were a number of other drawings and writings on the walls, the largest one reading *4junglebackdoor*.

Fetch stared deep into the woman’s picture and relieved his bowels, sighing. He began digging in his pockets even before flushing the toilet, looking for the necessary 75 cents to buy whatever was in the machine but the gum-ball machine had done him in.

He had two quarters and a dime. Looking up at the machine, each slot had a different faded sticker, the only legible one reading ‘studded for her pleasure.’ He figured he would tell Uncle Greg he needed a quarter for something, or maybe get it from Jonesy. All he needed was a dime, and a nickel.

Greg sorted out the brown grocery bags, flipping open the cooler lids and consolidating the tackle, thinking he might apologize to Greg Jr. for making him come.

Fetch and Jonesy emerged at the same time, walking back towards the Jimmy. Fetch was holding his breath, his cheeks puffed, and Jonesy was carrying a grocery bag and a case of beer.

He gestured towards Fetch with the beer, “Ready to do some killin?” His forearm flexed, his muscles straining against the skin. “If I gotta be here, I might as well enjoy it.”

“Come and hop up in the truck here, Fetch.” Greg said, watching Greg Jr. walk. “I got you something,” he told him, holding out one of the brown grocery bags. Fetch adjusted himself and opened the bag. The first thing he saw was a red and white tackle-box with a sticker on it that doubled as a ruler.

"A man's tackle-box can be like his best friend. It's all you have when you're on the water, so you have to make sure you keep up with it. I got you a couple of things."

The bottom of the bag was covered by plastic bags and boxes. Fetch took out the tackle-box and plunged his hand to the bottom of the bag, feeling the rubber worms and corks, scooping them up again and again.

"If there's anything in there that you don't understand how to use, just ask me. Everybody's gotta start somewhere, so don't let Jr. give you any lip. He was a lot dumber than you at your age."

Fetch laughed.

"Move it. I got shotgun." Jonesy said, standing by the passenger side door, "Age before dumbshit."

Fetch began climbing over the seat, carefully squeezing the bag so his tackle wouldn't fall out.

"Watch your language around the boy." Greg said, attempting to whisper.

"Watch my language? Did you hear that Fetch?" Jonesy said loud without really looking at anyone. "He thinks I should watch my language in front of you. I'm in front of you now, I guess, so I *should* watch my language."

Fetch opened and shut his new tackle-box repeatedly, inhaling the scent of untouched plastic.

"Here you go, watch this." Jonesy said, turning to the back seat and mouthing the words dramatically, "Age before dumbshit." He smiled. "Did you see that? Did you watch my language? Wasn't that amazing?"

Fetch took a second and imagined his cousin with cartoon bubbles over his head, making his actual speech unnecessary. He pictured Jonesy's bubbles to be like graffiti, with slogans and symbols like the bathroom wall.

"What are you grinning at shiteater?" Jonesy asked.

"Know what fellas?" Greg blurted, "As far as I can figure, I swear, Ms. May Petit has got to be at least ninety-eight years old. "

"That so?" Jonesy Jr. said sarcastically, "Please, tell us more." The two men stared at each other as Greg began to talk.

"Bobby Petit died, what must have been, thirty years ago. And she was old then."

"Yeah Fetch, do you know how Bobby died? Did my Dad tell you the 'real' story behind that gumball machine? "

Of course Fetch hadn't ever heard this story and truthfully wasn't that interested, one person in the story was already dead, and the other one was an old woman he'd never see again. He kept his head down towards all the new tackle, trying to figure each one out.

As the truck pulled out of Petit's parking lot, Jonesy began the story, "You see, Bob Petit was this fucked up alcoholic gambler type, who bought a bunch of paraplegic whores."

"Easy." Greg interrupted. "He was like a lot of men on the water, he just made poor judgments. He made poor decisions Fetch, but swamp people are good people."

"Alright, sorry, he was fucking a no-legged whore and gambling away all of their money while he left his wife to run a bait and tackle shop."

Jonesy relished this particular moment, mimicking his fathers voice, "Swamp people, you see, are good people."

"You weren't there Jr., you don't know what people go through. You don't know up from down so let's just say he did some bad things."

"That's right, I don't know where I got all this misinformation. Let's see, who is the only person I've ever heard the story from?" Jonesy put his finger to his chin, "There was that time that *you* told it to me. And then there was that other time that, oh wait, *you* told me. But that other time when *you* told me, that was the best. Yeah, what was I thinking?"

"Don't be such a shit, it's not even seven a.m."

Jonesy stared at his father, and silently mouthed the words, 'Watch your language'.

"Turns out that Petit, Bobby, got into too much drinking one time and took off with all of the stores' cash from the safe," Greg said. "He was gone for a few days and May didn't know what had happened and thought the store had been robbed. She took the store more seriously than him and was pissed to high hell that he wasn't there to help her replace the money and find the robbers."

"Long story short as if that were possible," Jonesy blurted in one breath, "she killed him."

"She stayed up nights in case the robbers came back," Greg continued pretending not to have heard his son, "holding her shotgun."

“So, wait a second here, *por favor*” Jonesy said, “are you trying to tell us that Bob and the no legged *whore* came back for *more*?”

Greg began to nod.

“And May was at *the door*? Probably around *four*? Angry as a *boar* that Bob and the *whore* came back for *more*?” He raised an eyebrow and smirked. “Are you *sure*?”

Fetch smiled and sucked a bit on his lower lip, putting the hooks on the bottom of the tackle-box and the rubber worms on the left. He put all spinning things and metal things in the middle and the corks had to go on the bottom because of their size. Greg gripped the wheel and began to turn towards the landing.

“Anyway, that’s pretty much it. The two of them showed up and bang bang, May killed her husband for making her think he was a burglar and for making her close the store.”

“She killed the woman too.” Greg said

“No she didn’t, that’s the fucked up part remember? She let her go but kept her legs. She made the woman crawl home with just her hands and stumps.”

Greg winked at his son, trying to hint that he was telling the G-rated version of the story.

Jonesy continued, “But after all that, she didn’t go to jail at all did she?”

“Ms. May?” Greg asked, as if it had never occurred to him. “Nah.”

Turning back towards Fetch, Jonesy began, “You hear that Fetchy? Ain’t no law in these parts”, his accent wavered from cowboy to hillbilly. “These here’s is swamp

folk. I could just throw you in the water and that's all right. Somebody'll just catch you later and use you for a gumball machine."

Jonesy was trying to be scary, but Fetch was just trying to finish organizing his bait. "You'll see." Jonesy said.

Fetch felt the gum in his mouth, chewing deliberately and savoring it.

"They say she put her other leg up Bobby's butt and dumped him in the swamp," Greg said, suddenly tagging along, "but nobody actually saw it."

"So Fetch, as you can see, what we have learned on our trip down this sick and twisted memory lane is that there is one nugget of information that can be taken from all this, to be passed down from generation to generation. No matter where you are in life," Jonesy said, taking a dramatic pause, "You now know that Bob Petit of Lake Veret, Louisiana, was, and had, an extremely big asshole. Take from that what you may."

Greg smiled and thought deeply about the fact that his son was smarter than he was. Jonesy was pleased with himself and his performance, and Fetch was too, having gotten his tackle straight.

"Alright, you fellas hop in the boat, I'm backing her in."

Jonesy struggled over the next sentence but eventually gave way, "Well, actually, if you were backing her in, the car would be moving. You really should watch your language because", Jonesy's voice trailed, "we're not actually moving."

Greg roared the engine like it was a reflection of himself and they all listened, Jr. and Fetch beginning to climb out.

The boat landing was full of pick-ups and trailers, and one luxury sedan. Long antennas and bumper stickers stuck out from most of them and Greg patted his own dash again

Fetch didn't have any boat duties until after they were in the water. He was supposed to tie it up.

While Greg backed it in, his son worked at the engine. They barked instructions and apologies at each other, the boat slowly sliding.

Fetch noticed Greg Jr. Jonesy's new face. It had been about three years since fetch had last seen him and he didn't know what to think. Greg Jr. really didn't look anything like his father. There was, literally, no resemblance. Even the texture of his skin was different. Jonesy's hair engulfed him. It was thick and confusing and made you want to grab it hard, or just lightly touch it with your hands. His dad's hair was weightless and sparse.

Everything about Jonesy was larger since Fetch last saw him, not just his hair. His eyes had become striking and dark and seemed to move with purpose. And his chin had a new way of jutting, with thick stubble on it, growing in patches.

They had always had a typical relationship, Fetch being the youngest in the entire extended family and getting the brunt of any fists or jokes. Greg Jr. had always made Fetch nervous because of his spontaneity and strength.

This moment on the boat was nice for Fetch though, being able to watch without him knowing. Jonesy was truly involved with the motor and didn't have a clue he was being stared at.

The sun began with the water, lighting things up from underneath. The engine finally cranked and Greg Jr. Jonesy turned quickly, "Tie it up Fetch. Up there on the pier."

Fetch's stomach twisted and spun, causing him to drop the rope. Jonesy rolled his eyes and motioned with his head towards the metal rod on the pier.

Being with Jonesy was much like being with a celebrity, Fetch imagined, and tied the rope as tight as he could. The pier began to shake as Greg hustled towards the boat. He had four rods in his left hand and a huge tackle-box in his right. It looked like his feet hurt when he ran.

As Greg stepped heavily into the boat, Fetch noticed some movement by the bank and saw a ripple in the water. There were three black people, two men and a woman, fishing on the bank of the lake. They were in some tall grass, but sat on top of coolers and lawn chairs. Each of them had a long pole without a reel and seemed to just be jigging them randomly. Sometimes one of them would pick up their bait, almost completely out of the water, and then drop it right back in.

Greg noticed that Fetch wasn't paying attention to him and said, "They're probably just pulling up some mud cats, that's how we used to fish. But we're gonna get us some big old bass today Fetch, none of that cane pole business on this operation."

Jonesy dug his first beer of the day from the ice chest and asked, "Fetch, do you remember us fishing with cane poles? I don't exactly remember that either, but yet somehow, that's how *we* used to fish." He paused as Greg pretended to fiddle with the engine. "That's interesting isn't it?"

Fetch didn't look at Jonesy even though he was talking to him. He kept his eyes on the people fishing with cane poles, wanting to see them bend.

"Ya'll caught anything this morning?" Jonesy asked them.

One of the men nodded his head slightly and said, "Baby cats", while the other two just watched their tips.

Greg eased the boat backwards away from the pier and studied the people on the bank, "I tell you what though, those people will fry some catfish up too, like you've never seen. They might end up eating better than us tonight if we don't catch anything."

"*Those people?*" Jonesy asked, one eye-brow high.

Greg released the throttle, quieting the engine, "Yes, Jr.. *Those* people, over there, on the bank, fishing. Those three people, right there, specifically. Is that better?"

"Why are you being so defensive? I just don't want to hurt Fetch's little ears with stereotypes and slurs." Jonesy reached towards Fetch, placing a hand on his thin shoulder, "Don't listen to the old man Fetch, for he knows not the error of his ways. He knows not what lurks beneath. Now here, take this, dipshit." Jonesy handed him a hat, half mesh and oversized. It was a Tarpon Rodeo '84 cap and Fetch saw that his uncle already had one on and Jonesy had another one tucked under his arm.

Greg twisted the throttle and the boat churned the water smoothly underneath. This engine wasn't nearly the beast that the Jimmy's was, but Fetch enjoyed the way it moved the boat so easily.

"It's gonna get windy here in a second, you might want to put that cap on backwards." Greg hollered over the motor, turning his hat around.

Fetch thought about frying up baby cats.

The boat, little by little began to pick up speed. Each additional thrust making Fetch rock back, clenching his muscles and holding tight to his own shorts. He could hear Jonesy yelling something at him about 'holding on, dumbshit', but he never looked back. Fetch was at the front of the boat and the faster it went, the higher he got. The boat ride out was a simultaneous pleasure, mute and scenic.

Greg had full control of the throttle, looking far into the distance, his outboard oiled and purring. Greg Jr. Jonesy struggled over the idea of whether or not to put his cap on. It was an ugly cap, he was sure of that, but his hair was whipping his face and ears. The beer and the cool morning air, however, had settled his stomach and changed his take on things.

Fetch, like a gargoyle, stuck in his seat and watched everything. He calculated what kind of bump the upcoming waves and ripples would cause and wanted the entire boat to get airborne. Greg turned the boat hard to the right, aiming it towards a break in the tree line.

Cranes lifted up out of the water and other boats became visible under the trees. Greg shut off the motor and let them coast. The sounds of the lake emerged, the brown water slapping and moving the steel frame. They heard a nip and splash to the left and each shot their head towards it.

"We're in business." Greg said. "Let's go ahead and try 'em out here. Get our casting wrists on before heading to the spot."

Jonesy dug around for his second beer as Greg doled out the poles, "Im sure Fetch's wrist is plenty warmed up," Jonesy said, pulling his hand from the ice, moving it up and down like a stroking. Huge drops of water dripped from his fist, sparkling in the sun.

Greg handed Fetch a small, light pole with a simple, thumb-action reel.

"Let's see your line" Jonesy said, popping the top on his drink. He took it in his hand, "Give me some slack here, press the button," and pulled it towards him. Producing a small silver clasp, Jonesy said slowly, "You see this here? This is the key to a good day of fishing, cause you'll just have to tie one knot, unless your dumbass gets hung-up."

He began to work the line, looping it around and through, "Now I know you're a little slow and can't tie a good knot. And therefore I know that if I don't do this now, I'll have to listen to you whine and bitch all day. You just hook on whatever baits you want to use, artificial ones, and that's it."

Floating in open space, they casted out in all directions. Greg yanked and complained of slow action in his reel, and Greg Jr. used crickets and a cork, resting his elbows on his knees. Fetch had been pointed to a spinner in his tackle-box and told to just cast it out and reel it back in. After every few casts, Greg would compliment him and make a general comment to his son.

They fished all that they saw, even the tight canals between the trees. For the men, the day consisted of tying and untying knots, switching back and forth from bait to bait. Fetch had been given the 'coup de gras' Greg told him, the TrakinTak, and had caught the only fish of the day, a small sac-a-lait.

Two men in a boat, same as theirs with a bit larger motor, approached them from the right. "How you fella's doin' with those spinners?" one of them called out.

"Well, we caught a lot of water," Greg said, "nothing worth keeping."

The man driving the other boat nodded at Fetch and exchanged glances with Greg.

Greg Jr. Jonesy had seen the better part of his mood pass along with the day, and the beer, and the lack of fish, and never even looked at the men, keeping his eyes on his cork.

"We've even got the boy on a TrakinTak, and not much is happening for him either." Greg continued.

"Not like the commercial." the man responded, casually casting out to the side.

The TrakinTak was an impressive bait, even to Fetch. It had a tiny battery and blinking lights and, as Greg put it, 'fish catching sonar'.

"Well, not much luck here either," the man driving the boat said. "Knew the pressure was high, but they're really not biting it deep either."

Fetch perked up, remembering the cows and the sugar cane. This was a conversation about barometric pressure.

The man at the front of the boat pulled his bait from the water, holding his rod between his legs and adjusting the worm on his hook. "Those niggers by the pier probably got about a hundred mudcats by now," he said, "just using a damn cane pole."

Jonesy swung his eyes heavily towards them for the first time.

"We're out here using good bait from commercials and looking like a bunch of fools while the niggers are fishing with sticks." the man said.

He dropped his bait and picked up his pole, beginning to laugh. "Nearly scared the britches off me sitting in the tall grass that, like a bunch of baboons. Thought I was watching the damn Discovery Channel."

At this point, Jonesy took off his hat, wiped his forehead and big hair and asked in, "So, let me be clear here, you're blaming your lack of fish on the black man?"

For a long moment, there was nothing but the sound of a line being cast, the breeze moving Greg Jr. Jonesy's hair slightly forward.

"These your boys?" the man asked Greg, looking at Jonesy.

"The little one is Fetch, my nephew. And this is my boy, Greg Jr."

The man nodded at them both, repeating the names aloud. "I'm John Tate" he said, "and this is Eddie."

"I'm a nigger." Jonesy said. "I'm a nigger with a cane pole."

John Tate glanced quick at his friend Eddie. Just as Fetch did Jonesy and Greg did Fetch and Eddie did Fetch.

Everyone but Greg Jr. Jonesy was scattered, scampering to decipher exactly what had just happened. Fetch knew something complicated had been broken and felt nervous.

He watched Jonesy watch John Tate, the sweat on his skin shining brilliantly in the sun, like a nigger with a cane pole.

John Tate reeled in his line and said sternly to his friend, "Eddie."

They took off in the water, John Tate nodding solemnly at Greg.

Jonesy turned his head back towards his cork and pulled off his sweat soaked t-shirt, the boat rocking left to right in the wake.

"Damnit Jr." Greg said. "What the hell was that?"

Jonesy took a deep breath into his nose and said, "Just catching some fish and saving the world", looking at Fetch and smiling. Their eyes caught and burst Fetch's heart.

"Well I don't feel like getting in a fight with a bunch rednecks, you hear me?" Greg said.

"They aren't rednecks," Jonesy laughed "they're just assholes. He's probably a congressman or something. He said his name like it was important."

"Regardless. You heard what I said."

"Hey Fetch," Jonesy said, motioning for him to come closer. Fetch's palms slipped and sweated around the pole as he felt Jonesy on the verge of something either brilliant or breathtaking.

"Hey man," continued in a soft tone, "I just wanted to tell you something. I was thinking maybe..." Jonesy reached out quick and smart like a pounce and grabbed Fetch tight, squeezing his breast between his thumb and forefinger. Fetch became frozen and clinched, pain coursing through his body as he watched the way Jonesy's body flex, his chest tightening as he twisted, showing lines and designs under the skin. Fetch bit hard and noticed his cousin's veins bulge and pulse.

"I told you I'd get you, bitch." Jonesy said, releasing Fetch's throbbing breast, "just when you weren't expecting it."

Fetch became all flesh and reeling nerves, rubbing his sore flesh, wanting a drink of water. The men were quiet as the pain subsided and Fetch's eyes glazed. He tried reeling in his line, but was finding it nearly impossible to do.

Seeing the bend in Fetch's pole Greg jumped, "You got something, boy?"

Fetch turned the crank and it made a screeching noise, the line about to snap. "Just hold on," Greg Jr. Jonesy started, "It's probably stuck, you don't want to snap it."

"Pull it towards you" Greg said. "No, *towards* you" he repeated, gesturing with his pole. Fetch yanked it in every way he could and the pole bent dramatically.

He kept at it for a couple of minutes, determined not to have to tie a knot. The boat inched closer to his line as he pulled, and then the bait just came loose.

"Reel it in and check the hook" Greg said. "it might be bent up."

It was reeling up quickly and with ease as Fetch bent over to watch it come out of the water, looking for the approaching lights, wondering if it would be Bob Petit's enormous asshole with a foot in it.

Instead, a face stuck out. A turtle's head, the line going directly into its mouth. Fetch screamed, shocked to his core for the first time. When the turtle saw him, it pulled its head into its shell, sharply kicking its legs. Fetch dropped the pole, the large thumb action getting clicked in the fall. The line began to reel out loosely as the turtle swam away.

"Damn Fetch!" Jonesy said. "You got something?"

Fetch picked it back up and clutched the pole tightly, panicking. The line continued as both men hollered, "Reel it in! Turn the crank!" He snapped the crank, locking and tightening the line.

Fetch couldn't reel it, he couldn't even try. He had seen the line all the way in the turtle's mouth and knew he was tugging on its insides. Every jerk on the pole was hard and wrenching. Jonesy reached out and grabbed the pole and the strong breeze made Fetch's eyes water.

This was no struggle for Jonesy, the pole looking tiny in his hands as he pulled and reeled.

"Holy shit, it's a snapper!" he yelled. "A damn snapping turtle!"

Greg set his pole down and leaned over, heavily rocking the boat, picking up the turtle by its shell. "Watch out now," he said, "These are some mean sons-of-bitches."

Water poured from the animal as it knocked loudly against the bottom of the metal boat. Fetch could hear it living, wet noises and bubbling sounds, the fishing line disappearing into the shell.

"Well if that isn't the most fucked up thing," Jonesy said, all three of the men staring at it. Jonesy dropped the pole and the boat rocked, twisting in Fetch's stomach.

To Fetch, this turtle was huge, its shell thick, vibrant, and incomprehensible. The yellow and green were glistening and the patterns of stripe and design too intricate to organize, but Fetch was staring specifically at one spot.

On the turtle's back was, as far as he could tell, a handprint. Not a painted on handprint, but an actual part of the shell. Completely separate in color and context, a beige mark on it's back. It was a small hand, five fingered and simple.

"Does anyone else think that's just a little bit strange?" Jonesy asked.

Greg broke his gaze and dug in his tackle-box. "We need to cut that line" he said.

Jonesy lightly tugged at it, "Why did it eat a TrakinTak? It's all plastic and batteries. You'd think turtles would be smarter than this. Haven't they been around for like a billion years or so?"

Fetch wanted to ask, and scream and holler, about the handprint. He bent slowly towards it.

"Careful now Fetch," Greg warned, "it's a snapper."

"I doubt it'll be snapping at anything with a belly full of 'fish catching sonar'." Jonesy smirked.

"Seriously, good thing they don't sell one with 'turtle catching sonar'. People might end up catching some damn fish." Greg said, he and Greg Jr. erupting.

Fetch reached for the turtle and touched the shell, feeling it's shellness. His fingertips traced the system of cracks and caverns, finally touching the print. It felt exactly the same as the rest of the shell, and seemed to simply be a glowing design. He placed his hand on top of the print, his fingers a bit too long to match.

"Let's get it out of here," Greg said reaching over with his pliers. Greg Jr. turned the turtle around, nudging Fetch's hand out of the way.

Just as Greg snapped the line with the pliers, the turtle shot out its head and legs, snapping sharply at the air. The thin line still hung from its mouth as it lunged and turned.

Greg Jr. Jonesy lifted up his legs, screaming.

"Watch it Jr." Greg said. "We gotta get it out of the boat." He began to poke it with the handle of his fishing rod. The turtle snapped and fought briefly before ducking back into its shell. The men stared as the turtle slowly sucked the fishing line in until it disappeared completely.

"Do turtles eat fish?" Fetch asked.

"Do turtles eat fish?" Jonesy repeated, staring at the turtle. "Yeah, they eat fish. And worms and crickets I guess."

Fetch put up his pole and grinned, thinking about a 'SuperTurtle' moving swiftly underwater, complete with 'fish catching sonar' and blinking insides.

"Dump it over, Jr." Greg said, but it was Fetch who grabbed the turtle.

Nearly too fast to see, his sunburned body reacted. Lifting with his legs and back, Fetch tossed the turtle overboard, watching it sink and bubble momentarily until, with a jolt, it darted deep under water.

Jonesy and his father looked at one another, Jonesy lifting his eyebrows and Greg shrugging his shoulders, neither of them knowing how to interpret what they had just seen.

"O.K." Jonesy said, looking skeptically at Fetch, drawing out the O.

There was a long pause and they could all hear Fetch breathing.

“Well boys,” Greg said, “How about we let that little incident be a sign to us.” He began securing his hook and putting away his pole. “A sign of what exactly, I don’t know.”

Fetch shut his eyes, his mind pounding and bright.

canned animal sketches

When I think about it, you know, and I was thinking about it the other day- I don't think I've seen blood, real, actual, blood in just, what seems like, an extraordinarily long time. When we were kids, someone else's blood, or my blood, or just bleeding was all around- I was always bleeding about something. I know how blood crusts and tastes from being a kid.

Point being, I think if I actually saw blood, and could attach unique adjectives to it, like feeling its temperature, or maybe smelling it in quantity, or really anything. I can't really remember the consistency either. I'm thinking along the lines of cheap ketchup in packets, but that can't be right. Regardless, I don't think I would even recognize it.

**

"Oh, it's on."

-So Jack, where's Lenny tonight?-

Jack is incorrigible, a real funny man.

-Lenny?-Jack asks him, turning towards Lenny's room (looking through the walls)-Well he sure isn't in his room doing his repetitions!

(laughter)

-Lenny (he's incorrigible), he's always making with the no-show. Think I should track him?

-Don't even bother, by the time it takes *him* to download, it'll be supertime.

(laughter)

**

"What are you gonna stop? We'll be standing shoulder to shoulder, all over the globe. What do you think about that?"

The notions there are today are all palaver and dirty socks, she said, motioning with numbers.

"But that is where I stray from you Martha, fundamentally."

It's not even a person, why would I care?

"It is a person, talking to me, making me hard-just with her language."

It's probably another guy, playing with himself, talking in a pretty voice for you.

"Martha, I don't even care anymore. I love it."

And that's why I don't care. It's probably word processor, throwing out stock phrases based on what you ask it.

"Her name's Bella and we send each other pictures of famous people. Don't mock me."

Love and love is it? There is just words and palaver.

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If I could figure out a way to invent the guitar, that would do it. I'll need a machine of course, an inventing machine. One where I have complete control like they used to, pushing buttons and such.

I'd like to be the first one to string it up, listen to the tone shift and pluck at a string. Then, of course, I'd have to break it into octaves and chords and acronyms. It would involve years of discovery.

**

I should go to Sears. I can only give things that are fleeting anyway, like answers to puzzles.

"Alright then, I only have one thing to say."

And?

"Well, of course, I've already used it up"

**

"How do you work it?"

It kind of works itself.

"I guess that's the point huh?"

The huh?

"The point, the reason that I should give you this money."

It's a perpetual motion machine Mr. Kanell. That's the point.

Boxes and junk, mostly metal pieces that shimmer on the floor. Anything I've been able to get a hold of. Many things like shaker tops, springs and various tubes.

I've had a vision, at least, a number of times of what it looks like. Schematic visions that zoom and show it to me like an instruction manual, gridded-out visions.

"Clarence. Don't you think, is my concern, that if this could be done, it would have been?"

Well, I don't know sir. Have you ever been murdered?

"Take a look at this" -he says, turning his chair and facing his computer monitor-
"This is a computer, I'm sure you are familiar with them. From this here, I can talk instantly to people all over the world and move numbers in Switzerland, and I don't have a clue how it works. I don't even use over half of the programs on it. Hell, Clarence, I don't even know if it's plugged in. And that over there is a telephone, and my grandparents use to listen to a radio. Are you getting my point here?"

Your point?

"What I'm saying is that, don't you think that if this perpetual motion machine could be built, it would have been? Maybe before we became able to bounce signals off satellites and build microscopic robots?"

I don't understand what you are saying.

"Leave, Clarence. I'll put you on the waiting list for the money but stay away from my daughter."

Your daughter?

"It was a joke. I was just showing that you actually *do* understand what I am saying even though you said you didn't. Don't ever lie to me again. We take our applicants very literally around here."

Getting up to leave I extend my hand to say goodbye and thank him.

"I'll put in the good word for you, son. A word for non stop motion."-he says, leaning over and kissing Clarence full and long on the mouth.

I'm not gay Mr. Kanell, but, thanks for surprising me.

"Don't be ridiculous, son. I'm not gay either. Goodbye, now."

Kanell escorts him out and shuts the door behind him. Turning towards the desk, he sighs and drops his pants, stepping out of each leg, careful not to wrinkle the slacks.

Vita

I was born and raised in Baton Rouge, Louisiana and attended Louisiana State University, graduating with a B.A. in English Literature. I have always been interested in creative writing and decided to pursue that interest by attending the University of Tennessee in hopes of obtaining a Master's degree with an Emphasis in Creative Writing. The thesis to which this letter is attached is the culmination of my creative work while at the University of Tennessee. I have been fortunate enough to be published in *The Phoenix: A Literary Arts Magazine*, and to be invited to give a fiction reading for *The Writers In The Library* series in Knoxville, Tennessee. I plan to pursue fiction writing, in its many forms, throughout the remainder of my life.

Milton O'Neal Walsh, Jr.