

Split Seconds

Hall

Forward

To Whomever Reads This:

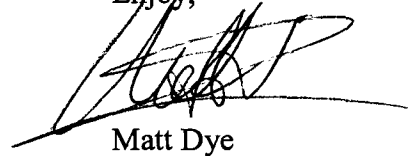
What you are about to read are some of the ugliest pieces of literature on the market. This is a collection of the highlights of my years here at UT, and most of them are rather fun. The poetry harkens back to the 'beats' and I'm proud of that. The later stack of the poetry beginning with 'not last night' goes into what I consider the 'dream poems.

The fiction is more my concrete area of work. This is what has gotten me into grad school and hopefully will one day put food on my plate. *Wallmart* is not to be taken seriously. I am not a misogynist. So you are allowed to laugh.

The final three stories are the beginnings of my novel which follow the character of Dan. Though incomplete as a whole, each of the stories is powerful enough to stand alone, and I am proud of each of them differently.

I would like to thank Michael Knight, Marilyn Kallet, Katie Burnett, Chris Kammerud, Ashley Moser, Steve Haggard, and Chris Roethle. Without their help editing and support, I don't think I would be half the writer I am. I would also like to thank Michelle Blackwell, Mark Luprecht, Peter Höyng, Lorri Glover, Mary Anne Bright, and Bruce Wheeler for their daily friendship and good humor.

Enjoy,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Matt Dye', with a long horizontal line extending to the left.

Matt Dye

Poetry

Brautigans

1.

Took a walk outside today
to see if there was change.
No one ever accounts for the current

2.

I've noticed as I've gotten older
that I really enjoy the way a woman's
neck looks in a turtleneck.
I'm only 23.

3.

My Thursday girl yawns
and looks a little worn
her eyes don't meet mine
like they did last week.
I hope she isn't frightened

4.

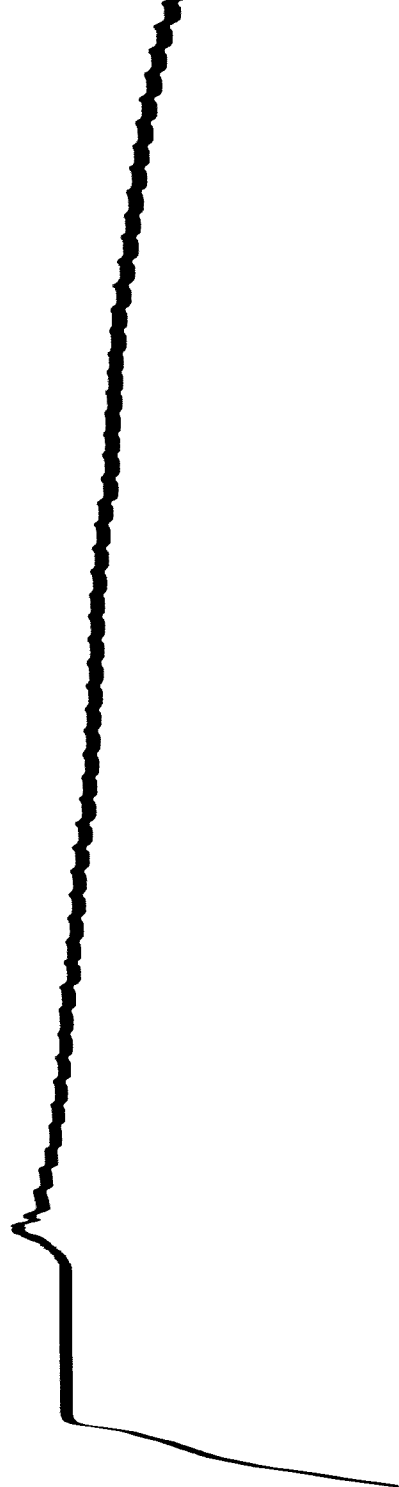
"Isn't it sad?" she said after
the curtain had been lifted
from her eyes
"I'm numb," he replied. "I've known
all the time"

5.

Turn off the light, but
leave some candles burning
I'm trying to save money
not ruin the mood.

6.

Your brother doesn't approve.
Why, after all this time, does that
matter?



7.

She wore rings on her fingers
and I could never tell
if any of them were still alive.
Now I can't remember her name.

8.

My mother told me,
"act your age"
so I returned the next year,
unhappy,
married,
with child on the way.
My mother beamed.

9.

She loved life so much
that every day she'd replace the needle
so she could move onto something else.

love poem

accidental birth
complication and a little jaundice
we can make it work if you want
if you want

argyle socks and flashy ties
should have worn more spandex
when it comes down to out of form
got that covered too

consolation is always the same
just another body without a town
can't hide it when you mean it
mean it

ageless abandon and a side of cholera
we can paint by numbers
just give it a shot
your best

there's this jigsaw calling for
nine-hundred and ninety-nine co-operative movements
still sitting in a box
a box on a table

still undone unmade
unwanted beautiful me
wanted by wanted beautiful you
betrothed you

never should say never
never let you go never
you said some other things too
i said lies

Mercy

Girl to my left with the wide
eyes and earthy style
sitting in a hip modern trend bar;
adequate space so you don't get to know anyone
too well.

This month's featured painter
hangs on the wall,
unobtrusively,
off in shadows.
I'm the only one even interested.

The crowd isn't rough and you
can tell that nothing memorable
probably ever happens here.
This is a place people go to be alone.

Girl to my left sits with her girl friend,
who may be her girlfriend,
who looks like her girlfriend.
I find more and more girls to my left have girlfriends.

Girl to my right sits with her boyfriend
but her eyes keep looking to me
asking me what the score is
asking me if I'm more exciting,
because in this bar nothing is happening.

A soft hum of conversation,

but the most alluring thing is the girl to my right
and left.

Thank God I have three empty chairs.

Casablanca

Play it again Sam
how it has to start
candles and cigarette smoke
music on the ears
sex on the brain
and one more mystery
 I haven't solved
and it ends
 on a deep note.

Europa and Jazz

She signs her name
soft curves
like she isn't sure
if this is where she
wants to be.

Wet and wounded
sloppy and emotional
flames flicker gold and
everything spastic
wild back forth.

Long lost lifelines
slow it down, to pick all
back up away, she's signing
her soul away for a five
spot and a shot.

Our apartment
Fantasia on, first time since maturity
remember cities built with
blue lines and the
spattering of a sax
as whales crash into
technicolor water

here I am
here I am
with my Sam Adams
can't let you go.

Perfect Replica

Scuttle down to view history
brunette sentry picks at a sandwich
wears an 'I ♥ spicy tuna' t-shirt.

*Has to be a band
But maybe it's a lifestyle,
worlds unexperienced
lay beyond that door.*

She isn't coming.

Exhibits preserved for months
it's been three years
since anyone changed the faux Egyptian sculptures

everyone needs a copy
when there's only one original

And downstairs?
Movie of a Mars' Lander
shot from a 3rd party perspective
reminds all, *if you buy into this
we really landed on the moon.*

Reasons?
Always,
 always,
 always!

Lack of funds
search for a new gift shop worker
signal:

UT!
our museum is dying of
indifference
our museum is dying!
like anything that doesn't require batteries
or a wall socket

*Not fair life is that would make
Silence suffocating and
You only a gleam in the eye eternity wishes*

Overnight At McClung Museum

trapped at night
 cry violent cry
 attitudes resemble anti-bellum
arithmetic curve
 number three spelled out
 pulled on a wire for Christmas
tight taught taut
 always the same drain
 echo me a wasteland in silk
for a dollar and
 ninety-five cents
 tax an unamerican institution.
she walks on
 dog burials at night
 separated by the windexed glass
so soon to spider
 crawl down my rope
 steal me an aztec ashtray
a mayan pipe
 next to ceramic chip
 'n dip bowl, festive occasion
trapped at night
 fight broken shadows
 drip defeat on reddened tile
 canvas strokes burn exposed
 skin proves difficult
chewing nutrition
this is me
 with teeth scars
 trapped at night

Montezuma's Border Patrol

Before I leave for Mexico

friends ask me

'takin' anything across the border?'

Pillheads tell me ten OC 80's

cost \$60 down there

at any pharmacy

"You'll get \$350 on the return

almost enough

to cover your trip.

Just shove them up your ass."

Shove them up my ass?

HA!

M. K. wrote this and I stole it!

Aliens cause cancer!
 Play ping-pong
 in hallway mirrors
pull fire alarms
 for that cute girl
 with the Micro midterm
while bullet-ridden horses
 win Kentucky Derbys
prom queens show up late
 wearing black
 and blue jeans.
A commentary on the state of
 suburban friendship.

Bar-hopping

Broken nose and bloody, I come staggering
out of the night rain, hitting my right shoulder
hard on the framing of some doorway into
sanctuary.

I don't go in

I sneeze, and blood flies four feet before
hitting the street and running to the sewer.

Lightning flashes and I catch myself
in the glass.
I guess it's shock.

Clothes drenched I stand there, grabbing
cancer from my pocket, trying to find one
dry enough.

I lite it anyway

I stand there until it's gone
then I walk back into the bar across
the street

Appendix

THE DAY I TRIED TO LIVE

it's time to go the way he talks
wouldn't even know it was a sentence
one more time around i tell him *just one more time around*
it's dim night time for the two of us my head sings
it's time to go
i flip god the bird go back to be beer in front of me
quit following me around
i want to say
i don't
being god he knows it
and he's still here hellbent on saving me
i can't buy my freedom so instead i say
typical how you always disappear during the good parts
when i say good i mean bad and he knows it
yet his eternal smile is pasted on his non-existing face
if my roommate had only left his wallet on the table instead of his keys
this could have all been avoided
don't fool yourself he warns me
i think i'm cracking up
you are

CEMETERY

you can't keep this up he imparts on me
i take him at his word
to my right a cute blonde with kid in tow leaves flowers for daddy
while god and i crack pbr's
i try to think of a joke because it occurs to me
i've never heard God laugh
just that i told you so voice that he keeps on
instead I say *do you always have to be right*
and he puts on a contemplative look
pretends to think about it
like i'm the first sorry sap that asked him
yeah he confesses *yeah i think i do*
cheers to that i say and take another swallow

NEW LIFE NEW INK

there needs to be a law against the way that crime can mandate addiction
the girls in the corner are all smiling with dark eyes
i need a candy can so i have something to suck on
keep my mind busy and speech in check
stay silent remember that intelligence is easiest measure in decimals
and you always round down on a scale between zero and one

where do you fit in god asks me over drinks
every night a different bar
now in new orleans and so tired
last stolen twenty pays for mine and god's pbr's
god tells me he'll pick up the tip but i'm not paying him any attention
the girls in the corner have my eyesockets happily filled
and right now i'd kill for a cigarette which is why
god hands me one without asking
fucker always causes me to smile way he does that
i take the candle and pull myself a light
and we share a stare
then i nod to the corner and God whispers
jesus when you gonna give up that temptation
and i got no answer so i stand up and head to the pisser
sit down in the stall
pull the compact from my pocket and cut out
a fine line on the mirror then i roll a girl's
phone number on notebook paper
put half the meth in the left then the right
it burns always works quick and i'm back up twitching

MERCY

you don't deserve to live tears fall silent without recognition
lakes pool as we stare over the edge of the cliff
remember the bum lies dead at the bottom
a year old and stinking into dan's jacket
follow the leader he smiles lips don't move
i'm not ready this moves too fast
skating on ice i plead *not yet*
his hand smacks me hard on the back i teeter
see the bones on rocks as waves break in black
you're never going to learn
STOP
you're going to keep on the pain
STOP
i turn back and nobody's there
just a pbr a cigarette
a notion to do the right thing

windshIELD

so they said that the roses on the car door weren't from you but from another one of the equally crazy crazies that i deal with every day in this line of work which i can't say is necessarily a bad thing, i do like roses, i'm just more perplexed by the adhesive used to attach them to my door, because i can't get them off, and i fear that when they start to die, people will start thinking certain things about me, and none of them good.

Liz

'i was in a movie once.' 'yeah,' i reply, for the first time curious. i've never slept with someone in a movie. 'i was a small role,' she squeaks and for a split second i think porn, then dismiss it. she isn't the type to brag about porn. she tells me the name of the picture, gossip on the actors, and i'm sure anyone else would get off on the story, but asking to hear it was a mistake. these aren't my friends, nor hers, though she'll argue they're everybodys. as she tells me the story there's a look on her face of pure elation, like she wouldn't match the joy of that experience at any other point. she had peaked. when she finishes i offer another drink, and then she strips. i do not. i take a two dozen shots or so, then she dresses and takes my money. there's a look in her eyes, something asking 'maybe next time.' i smile back, close the door, and have another drink.

Not Last Night

3 am again, one Natural Light left.
shitty beer, shitty frame of mind, shitty drunk.
try to piece together something that I never had to start with
try to figure out me.
Tip of a cigarette, burning embers
Turkish gold, suited to my lips from my fingers
quivering as I ash in an already empty can
one of 10, like pins, ready to be knocked down.
A solitary light blazes on me
I'm not alone, but I am.
3:05 and all is well
don't I wish, sometimes I even crave
jealousy, bitter and hatred unwavering
I don't always feel like this.
Flick and spark
start another, move right along
lines shift in front of my eyes
hands tremble
a drink and a movement, I shut my eyes
my head tries to shut off, wanting to relax
forget.
"A little more," I plead to no one, just a little more
poison goes down like rain on a window, glistening
coating completely the impulses, time
3:10 and I'm euphoric
flick
and another. Would you? No, not right now
then tomorrow is a good day
tomorrow isn't living up to my expectations
tomorrow now yesterday and no closer to satisfaction.
I never said I love you.
Maybe I should have, even if you wouldn't have believed me
I love you, no, I do, don't be scared, don't be angry.
Is it because you're afraid I don't mean it
like everyone else who ever said it,
or is it because I do?
Do you even want an answer?
3:15 and I'm back where I started.

Rubix

The gypsy
with his rubix sphere
flashes it red green blue white
yellow orange purple
each time new, whole.

In the alley
I follow and
learn his tricks.

"Mice like rice,"
he says,
"mice like rice."

Amelia

you were there when I was just past ten
hair big black billowy cloud
skin white
like
snow

we spoke secrets
cascaded in fountains
wet in the summer
hide then go
seek treasure
on the railroad
tracks

thirteen years later meet
in my dreams you swim
touch me with a childish grin

on dry land i hug your legs
head buried in your thighs
quiver for recognition
you take me in
perfection

when we dance I watch
hair slice happiness from midair

insomnia

it's a patchwork
running through an auditorium
ducking in and out and in
hiding
feel like Bond
but i don't have a gun

then on interstates driving recklessly
a part of 40 i've never seen
can't help the feeling
i've done this before

out and running again
elevator in the middle of a huge mall
elevator with no walls
and on the way up I check my balance

it's a patchwork
and it ends in tall grass
and it ends with her body lying there
sometimes i pick her up
i can make out her smile
those are the really bad days
but most times my knees give out
and I'm praying
she's so close
so close
but I can't reach her

Cops Ain't Natural

on their first search
boys in blue
take michelangelo
ask the room who he belongs to
i can't claim him
so i yell at Alex
only his name's Ben
who points to his roommate
who tells me he'll claim Mikey.

so there's a little relief
out here on Cedar Bluff
boys in blue won't
throw me out of college.

again.

'til they fuck me
second search
boys in blue
find my medicine.

Everyone in their Underwear

'use your active imagination' calls a voice
on an overcrowded bus
full of copycat jingles
sell out bells
'take a step forward by taking a leap back'

'call it progress' i say back
on a luxury liner
sailing forth without any real passengers
just discarded souls who know me
and i've got the sudden urge to piss.

it comes out in a long stream
purplish pink
i was drinking fruit punch earlier

when i finish three ink pens are strewn in the wake
broken deformed
but definitely once pens.

i look down at my penis.

'what's it all mean?' calls a voice
from the edge of a waterfall
overlooking the auditorium
where i'm about to give my speech

'active imagination' i say
watching the water fall
i kick the pens off
'i guess i'm a writer?'

which is how i start my speech.

colloquium

words like fractals
help me describe
trash cans without trash bags
filled with rotten apples and
banana peels, brown running yellow
passing Lisi in the hallway
her black hair and inveigled eyes
sans glasses meet mine for an instant
then she too is gone
tearing out pages
a wave and shouts
tell me more about Marxism
tell me why it didn't work
what it all means
our last ideology Feminism
where we diverge, me not a subscriber.

in offices, Lisi whispers my name
lets it drift off her tongue
'your work,' she says, 'so close,
within fractions.'

Bye Bye Superman

I fight with bar stools
folding chairs
get the hell out of here
shot to the left arm
does no harm
cause no alarm
get me out of here!

can't say 'no'
fat girls waiting for sky lines
fat boys eating all the cake
cake meant for me dammit
no one cares
get me the hell out of here

can't keep any air in tires
skid on wet pavement
past the graveyard
in your room
on Gray Avenue
"Gray with an 'A'
It's important"
you scream

the moon laughs
squeezes puss from open sores
and Christopher Reeve is dead
Superman is dead
in my dream
no one gets out

Put It On Repeat

we're almost home free
black and cluttered this
final room
hell no, i can see the light from the
cave shines and cuts through the
black and i'm throwing
folding chairs
bar stools
behind me at the
boys in blue
Kotynski's at the exit
tells me about Normandy
i tell her New York that
we're going together
all confusion but the
boys in blue aren't any
closer to the two of us
time has paused at the
exit of my cave.
'that's the end,' she tells me
'you took too long.'
all confusion
boys in blue gone
'time to try again'
and i fall from the cave
to the ground
in my ear her words
'faster'
on my tail
can't escape
book stores and graphic novels
can't escape
klepto insano
i am the one in the black and white tights
cry murder to the world
cry rape to my sisters
i am the one the
boys in blue
lock away

Pardners

I want to write a love poem
for the fathers
who stayed around
after the first accident hit.
that worked long hours
in odd cities
to do the best
they could.
the fathers who laid out discipline
with their hands
but loved
with their hearts.
fathers who didn't make their first appearance
at the age of 18
when all the raising's
been done.
fathers that made it to the basketball games
coached soccer teams
cried at graduations
posted bail that Friday night
and kept it from mom

Fiction

Once upon a time, a beautiful, independent, self assured princess happened upon a frog in a pond.

The frog said to the princess, "I was once a handsome prince until an evil witch put a spell on me. One kiss from you and will turn back into a prince and then we can marry, move into the castle with my mom and you can prepare my meals, clean my clothes, bear my children and forever feel happy doing so."

That night, while the princess dined on frog legs, she kept laughing and saying, "I don't think so."

Feminist Fairytale

Anonymous Internet Joke

There's a few things that I never could believe

A woman when she weeps

A merchant when he swears

A thief who says he'll pay

A lawyer when he cares

A snake when he is sleeping

A drunkard when he prays

I don't believe you go to heaven when you're good

And everything goes to hell, anyway

Everything Goes to Hell

Tom Waits

WallMart

a feminist fairytale

by

Matthew Dye

feminism

n 1: a doctrine that advocates equal rights for women 2: the movement aimed at equal rights for women [syn: feminist movement, women's liberation movement, women's lib]

Source: WordNet ® 2.0, © 2003 Princeton University

fairytale

n 1: a story about fairies; told to amuse children [syn: fairy tale, fairy story] 2: an interesting but highly implausible story; often told as an excuse [syn: fairy tale, fairy story, cock-and-bull story, song and dance]

Source: WordNet ® 2.0, © 2003 Princeton University

WAKING UP IN 2125

Once upon a time there was a girl/woman/lady that saved mankind/humanity/lots of people.

It had taken them over fifteen years of hard work. It was Dr. Brad Allen's baby, but on his 85th birthday he suffered a massive heart attack. He only lasted another week after that. He died happy, knowing that they were ever so close. Constance McArthur was his second in command. She had been like a daughter since they met in Brazil in the '90s, working on extracting enzymes from amber deposits. She was just out of college with her anthropology degree, the whole world in front of her. Dr. Allen was just past 70, on one what he called, 'the final leg of his tour.'

To be quite honest, Constance hated Brad. He always was making a comment about her ass, or that she smelled good, and it drove her insane. She wrote back to her parents that the man was disgusting, a 'dirty old man.' Her mother worried for her when she read the letter, but she trusted her daughter to take care of herself. She didn't show the letter to her husband because she knew he would over-react.

But like all stories of dirty old professors and young twenty something independent women, they eventually had it out. Dr. Allen had taken Constance and another post grad student, Brock Cooper, out with him on an expedition to Sao Luis to check on the presence of photonic crystals along the beach. They had to stay there for a week, and on the fifth day Dr. Allen walked in on Cooper and Constance's drinking session. He missed Constance's scowl as he asked if he could join.

It didn't take long before Dr. Allen said something that upset Constance, and she began to shriek at him. Cooper smartly made his way outside for a cigarette. Dr. Allen

sat there, shocked, and took the abuse. Then he made a hasty apology, saying "Do you really consider myself, with my off-hand comments, a threat? Ha, you know how to combat pigs like me, your generation has been trained well. But so has his." Dr. Allen nodded his head towards the open air and Cooper in the distance. "His generation has a whole new set of games." And then he laughed again, apologized, and left Constance sitting there, confused. In part, because she felt respect for this man she had despised for so long.

The two of them became the best of friends after that. Constance found in Dr. Allen an enigma, a man she hadn't met yet, and she loved his mind, even if he did still comment on her ass. She found what once angered her now attracted her to Dr. Allen. When he announced that he had concluded his research in Brazil and was heading back to the University of Connecticut to begin some experiments, Constance asked to come with him. As did Cooper.

Only when they were on a private jet did Dr. Allen reveal to them the reason for everything that had been going on. He was now nearly 77. He didn't move as fast as when Constance had first met him, but he still had that edge. And when he told them he knew how to build a time machine, he caught them completely off guard.

On Sept. 22nd 2005, Dr. Allen had a grand birthday party. He knew the days were numbered. When Constance told him that she was in love with him, well, he wasn't ready for that. Three days later the project was shutdown. The University for the most part didn't know what Dr. Allen was building, and those few that did simply kept the project alive to humor the old man. Now that he was gone, there were better places to put the money.

"We can't just give up," Constance said, and Cooper nodded. She believed in everything that they had been working towards for the past 8 years. Every trial run, she knew, they were almost there. Just last week they had made a watch disappear. No trace, nothing. Some were scared, but Constance knew that Dr. Allen had been right all along. She took Cooper by the arm and led him to the research room. She took each document and model as Cooper protested. "What kind of man are you?" She asked. "Dammit." As much as she hated to admit it, she needed Cooper. It would take her too long to retrain someone. And she didn't have the time.

It took them three years of after hours work and weekends inside of Constance's garage before they were finished.

"Now what?" Cooper asked.

"I don't know. I guess we test it." And Cooper gave her a funny look.

"Well yeah," he said, "but what?"

They talked about another watch maybe. Or a dog. Doc Brown in *Back to the Future* had used his dog. But Constance knew as much as Cooper that it would have to be one of them.

"I'll go. I'll go into the future. If this works, then I should have no problem finding a time machine to get back." Cooper stepped back and looked at Constance.

"Are you sure?"

"I've spent over fifteen years of my life on this. I'm almost 40 for Christ's sake. Of course I'm sure." And with that Constance stepped into the time machine, set the coordinates for 2125, and took a deep breath. There was a slight hum, then something like electricity and static as enzymes interacted with photonic crystals. Then there was a

bright flash and the stink of sulfur. Constance was gone.

A GOOD MAN IS HARD TO FIND

The walls were white. The ceiling was white. Everything gleamed and sparkled. She sat on a tile floor, cold and impersonal. Along the ceiling, in long lines, fluorescent lights illuminated the entire room that seemed endless. There was no sound, not even an electrical hum.

"I'm dead," Constance said. It seemed the only logical conclusion. She said it aloud to see if sound still existed. Her words didn't echo. They hung in the silence and died.

She stood up and began walking down the hall. Along each wall were doors, and they were marked with various names that she couldn't make out. It resembled English, and she found herself twisting some of the phrases around in her head. She couldn't believe that language had evolved so since in a hundred years.

Then a bell rang and all hell broke loose.

They were color coated. And beautiful. At first they all rushed past her, but one by one they stopped and formed a circle. Constance didn't know what to do, where she was. She was still convinced she was dead. She was wrong, but she said anyway, "Are you angels?"

"No, we're women. Same as you." One of them said from off to her right. She turned to see a tall, slender blonde, maybe 30, walk toward her. This lone woman was wearing black. All the other girls were in blues and greens and pinks and reds. There were a few yellows scattered around. No other blacks. Constance herself was wearing

black and white. "You don't fit in. Why don't you fit in?" Constance looked at her.

"I don't understand." "Where am I?" The words didn't come out fast. She was beginning to feel disoriented, one of the unknown side affects of time travel. Wake up some place you're not used to, and if your mind can't compute, it shuts off temporarily. Dreams do the repairing. In 2125 they knew at least the latter. Constance fell into the arms of the woman in black. Before she passed out, she asked the question that had lingered on her mind since the bell rang. "Where? Where are all the men?" She drifted off to dream with laughter in the background.

EXPLANATIONS

When she awoke she no longer was in a white walled area. Instead there was a wall of windows overlooking a body of water. She was on a couch, soft, velvet, deep red. When she lifted her head, she heard a voice. "Ah, awake finally." The voice wasn't kind. It was hard like nails. Bitter. Constance winced.

"Yes, I'm awake. But I don't know where I am, what's going on?"

"What do you mean you don't know where you are. Where were you yesterday?"

"My garage."

"Your...*garage*?" The lady now sat across from her. She was older, maybe late 50s ,with short silver hair. She wore a gray suit coat with a red tie against a white shirt. She was short, not quite 5'5", but pure elegance. Constance thought at once she was beautiful.

"Yes. My garage."

"That is a dead word. How do you know it?"

"A dead word. What are you talking about. Where am I?"

"My dear, you are in Ameri-Mart. Just as you were yesterday."

"Ameri-Mart?" And Constance's brain came up with a conclusion. "It worked."

She whispered.

"What worked?"

"The time machine."

"What are you talking about? Are you feeling faint again?"

"No. Listen. I'm from the year 2008. We built a time machine." The elder looked at her. She looked at her and she believed it. But she couldn't. How could there be a time machine and no record. Especially in a year such as 2008, which they had well documented records on. If anyone had successfully time traveled, someone would have known.

"That isn't possible." She said. "Where is your time machine?"

"I don't know. That's something we never figured out. How to send the time machine forward in time as well. But I thought that after I went, I could use the one we already made to travel back if nothing else."

"Well child. Where was the time machine at?"

"My *garage*."

Constance started a disliking towards the other woman. She sensed something not quite right. "Who are *you*?" She asked.

"I am Rita Andrews. I am Director of Personnel. I am Chairwoman #7." Then Andrews began to blush. "I'm sorry. If you truly are from the past, then this must mean nothing to you. Let's see, you said you came from 2008, right?" Andrews got up and

walked to a computer behind a desk and began typing. "Oh my, how rude of me.

Darling, what is your name?"

"Constance McArthur. From Connecticut" She added as an after thought.

"Connecticut. Right." Andrews said and quietly laughed. "Ah, here we are. It appears that you didn't travel time madame. Instead, it says you died on a hiking trip with your," she paused and her face contorted. Constance looked at her, expectant.

"Your *boyfriend*."

"Boyfriend. I didn't have a boyfriend. That article is completely false." Andrews let out a sigh.

"Thank heavens."

"Does it say his name?" Constance asked out of curiosity.

"Yes it does. A Brock Cooper. What a vile name."

"Coop." Constance mumbled, and her heart did break a little. He was dead now, in 2125. She looked up and saw in Andrews eyes that she knew she knew him. "He wasn't my boyfriend." She said finally. "He was my colleague. He helped me create the time machine. He must of thought it failed when I didn't return."

"Well, that's a perfectly believable story." Andrews said. She didn't know what else to say. It all seemed logical enough and Constance's appearance in 20th century clothing and using 20th century vernacular made it authentic. Andrews doubted any but the Chairwomen knew words like 'garage' anymore.

THE CONVERSATION IN THE CORRIDOR: A RESOLUTION

The two women walked side by side down a corridor outside of Andrews office.

"You'll probably want a recap. Let's see, in 2008 women had almost reached equality with men, but everything else in the world was out of sync. Alice Walton saw an opportunity. The end of the Bush reign was at hand. From what I have read in the early histories, his last two years were stupid enough that his former opponent John Kerry stuck around long enough to run for president again in 2008."

"Kerry wins?" She hadn't voted yet. She was scheduled to vote on what would have been next Tuesday. She was going to vote for Kerry, but she didn't think anyone else would. She hadn't paid much attention to politics the last couple months honestly. The time machine had taken up all her free time.

"Yes, by quite a large margin. And in large part to Alice Walton." When Andrews said her name, she seemed to dwell in it, *like praying to God*, Constance thought. "Alice Walton for the most part, controlled the women's vote. Did you read her first book, *The Richest Woman in the World?*" Constance had heard about it on the TV back in February or something, but she had no interest to read it, even if she had time. She shook her head no. "Ah, well inside it is basically a manifesto. It was the women's movements first real decree of war. But it wasn't a war that any man understood. So they glossed over the book and women ate it up, and because of the title, most men just thought it was an autobiography. It was of course available in every Wal-Mart. Instantly every woman in America had a role model. Top five on the money list."

Andrews stopped walking for a second, and turned to Constance. "Back in your time, education was much different. You were Alice's generation. So you knew what she knew." Constance stared at her, confused. "Have you read *Brave New World?* 1984?" Constance nodded. "Then you see how a utopia is built. And you see,

unfortunately, who you are in each of those stories.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Alice Walton was what some termed a radical feminist. We don’t look at her that way. We look at her as having saved the female sex. I see you’re still clueless. It wasn’t immediate. She wrote her next book, *How to Get Every Man to Love You*. It expressed her belief in homosexuality, and she wrote in it how homosexuality would limit birth rates and decrease our population growth and perhaps even cause a population reduction. Which it eventually did. The gay wedding law passed almost immediately, making it no longer ‘wrong’ in the eyes of the public to be gay. Women came out by the dozens, and slowly, so did the men.

“She urged women to deny their husbands in bed, to take control that way. She had a whole chapter on the power of the word ‘No’. It is consider vulgar now because we would never need such a warning. In it Alice talks of taking husbands to court for rape if they forced themselves on their wives. Those next two years there was rise in marital rape cases, and then the problem solved itself.

“That led to the Great Corporate Wars. In Alice Walton’s diary, *Matriarchy*, published after she died, she wrote how she felt responsible for the Great Corporate Wars. How she felt that many of the company’s CEOs were just sexually frustrated and they never had a prayer.” Andrews laughed slightly here. “There was some remorse in her writing, believe me. You could see the hesitations she had that she never showed in her public writing. But she also won the Corporate War. By the end of it, Wal-Mart owned everything. She had taken feminism and combined it with Communism and Capitalism to create her utopia. And she slowly got rid of the men.”

“How?”

“Well, after the Corporate Wars, which were indeed wars, and involved fighting and death. They just weren’t against countries. By the time of the Corporate Wars, 2019, all forms of government were completely controlled by capital interests.” She smiled again. “But one thing still hadn’t changed. The men insisted on fighting the wars. The Corporate Wars lasted for six years, and for six years women ran the companies. When the wars were over, Wal-Mart had won. Alice’s three brothers were the corporate face, but she had all three of them by the balls. And after the war, one by one, they died of a heart attack. Alice herself was nearing 70. She put the men to work building this utopia. It’s a large Wal-Mart that spans most of the Americas. There are wide gaps for miles where nature lives and breathes, but there is nothing in here that isn’t connected to anywhere else on the continent.”

“That’s incredible.” Constance said, taking it all in. It felt like a dream. This couldn’t be real. She felt light headed again, and leaned against the window, and felt the cold glass on her skin. The goose bumps rose and she laughed a little, nervously.

“Yes, it took 25 years. Alice didn’t see its finish. But her daughter Samantha did. We used men from all over the world to build the large Wal-Marts. Then Samantha renamed them.

“The generation of men that built these cities were so poorly educated that many of them didn’t even know what the situation was like 25 years ago. All they had known was war and reconstruction. They worked for sex, and some of them are still around on the black market, but for the most part, men as a race are extinct.”

“Then how does life continue?”

“Dear child, we have sperm banks. We have enough sperm to last us forever. And if we ever needed a male, we could generate one. But right now we still have enough of Michael Jordan’s sperm to reproduce three generations. Also, there aren’t as many births now. In your time people were still reproducing exponentially. Alice Walton was right. Homosexuality led to a drop in reproduction rate. And then with the extinction of the male race, women can only get pregnant by choice. But they can have abundant amounts of sex. We find this works out pretty well. Many of us don’t choose motherhood, and those that do are respected again the way they should be. It is considered a righteous and difficult occupation, and mothers are completely supported by the community.

“Of course, we’ve had to change history. Amend some things. We re-created culture and got rid of all the male ego books. Television shows, movies, our mothers understood that these things had to be sacrificed for the greater good. We all loved some of the men’s work, but to acknowledge them would be to give them back power. And we know what it was like when men had power.” She laughed. “Well, I’ve only read about it. You know though. Here, we have peace, and have had peace and equality since the Corporate Wars.” Then as an afterthought she added. “You came forward to a good time.”

“I don’t know what to say.” Constance said. She thought about the time machine. She could find it, and go back in time, and change everything. She couldn’t believe there were no more men. No matter how bad she thought things were, she couldn’t believe that was the answer. Andrews was going on about how now the world was ruled by a Board of Directors. That she herself was on the Board, and that she was

certain that Constance would be a welcome addition with her knowledge. Constance tried to think where the time machine would be. She wanted a pen and paper, because the knowledge was still in her head. She just completed the last computations on the continuum and if she could get to work fast enough she could even build a new one from scratch if she had to.

“So, what do you say, would you like to meet the Board?”

Constance eyed her. She didn’t know what to say. Then, from her left came a tall brunette, absolutely beautiful, in gray like Andrews. She eyed Constance, smiled pleasantly. Constance didn’t know what to say. “Is this our trauma case?” She asked Andrews, then turned and looked at Constance again.

“Yes.”

“Well, what’s her story? Does she speak English? You’re very pretty darling.” She said the last line to Constance, who still didn’t say anything, only blushed. “I see she does.”

“You’ll hear about it in the board meeting.” Andrews told her, and the other lady nodded to her and smiled at Constance again, before walking away to the meeting. Constance still stood there flushed.

“So?” Asked Andrews

“I’ve never been with a woman before.” Was all Constance could say. Andrews laughed, grabbed her hand, and kissed her on the lips.

“It’ll come naturally.” Andrews said, and with her led Constance to the board room and her new life.

BECAUSE YOU CAN'T PICK UP WHERE YOU LEFT OFF

AMISH COUNTRY: PROLOGUE

In the beginning Dan had me running all over the southeast and as far north as Chicago taking pictures of anything that looked interesting. Most times we'd leave on Friday night and get back sometime Sunday. If he really wanted, he'd find some way to keep us on the road. School wasn't real important to Dan back then, and if he could, he'd talk me into staying out until as late as Tuesday. The only times I ever won those arguments was if I had an exam.

He'd usually drive and do most of the talking. He'd go on and on about this book idea, or that movie idea, and it was really great stuff, but I don't know if he ever wrote any of it down. The only works of his I got to read was whatever he wrote for my photographs or whatever poem that he'd left on the table. Everything else was a work in progress, and he wasn't into the idea of letting me read something so rough.

So he'd drive and talk and I'd start wondering if maybe I should take notes. I wouldn't really ever do it. But once a thought's been had, it's easier to have that thought again. And thoughts become behaviors and behaviors become actions, and I wonder what it says about me that I'm always riding shotgun. These are the types of things that I'd think as Dan would tell me his idea about a bunch of stories all on subjects that interrelated or the movie about a movie. I used to think a lot on those drives, just looking out the window, and any time I needed an idea, I'd listen to Dan for a minute and then go somewhere else.

I never took pictures while we were driving. I didn't like the way they came

out. Every once in a while I'd tell him to pull the car over, and he would, like lightning. No one else drove like that. Most people go gradual, but Dan would throw the car over like I could call the perfect spot. Now that I think about it, maybe it was respect. I'd take the shot, and he'd say something like 'kick ass' and we'd be off again.

We tried to avoid going the same route twice. Dan had a great road atlas, really detailed, and so we'd change it up unless there was something that we liked and wanted to see again. Dan would always remember if I'd regretted not getting a picture somewhere, and try to take that route again.

One day I got the perfect picture. It just happened. We were right outside of Indianapolis on the north side at this gas station in the middle of a highway wasteland. Coming up from the east was an Amish horse drawn wagon. I lined up a shot, then got another as a big semi passed it.

"Two symbols of civilization," Dan said, looking up from the gas pump. "You got that, right?" I nodded to him. "Kick ass."

When I'd drive, I was surprised that Dan didn't write. In fact he didn't even talk. He just sat there looking out the window like I had. So we'd sit in silence and listen to the radio, while I wondered why he didn't write anything.

RAIN MY TYPE

"Man, I fucking blew it again, big time," I say after knocking and walking in. It's routine. Dan never locks his door.

"What are you talking about?" Dan's just gotten out of the shower and is half

toweled.

"There was this girl today. Remember when it was coming down hard outside for a couple minutes this afternoon?"

"No," he says slowly, looking reflective, then "Wait, yeah I do."

"Yeah. Well, shit, I had just left the computer lab on campus, and it starts pouring. By the time I get to the car, I'm soaked, man. So I pull on that main drive that loops around Melrose and pulls back into 17th," I realize I'm making arm motions to demonstrate this, so I stop. "Anyway, I see this girl walking and just getting pelted. So I roll down the window and offer to give her a ride. And she takes it!"

"Awesome," Dan says, turning his back to me. "Here, read this," he says, offering me a newspaper article. The headline pertains to Mark Twain. I'm thinking he missed the part where I said I blew it. "I want to check this out soon." I take the page, and continue on a little louder.

"So we're sitting there, and we talk a little. She tells me all how she's going camping this weekend, and damn, she says the cutest thing. We're talking about the rain again and she says how she was just worried about her books getting wet. Then she says, this is like word for word, 'I won't melt. I'm not made of sugar.' I couldn't believe it." Dan's look tells me he's heard better. "She was just gorgeous in that intelligent sort of way."

"Sounds like your type. What's her name?"

"Dammit Dan, that's the point. Her car was just like 100 yards away, and the

entire time I didn't get her name, or her number. And I don't know why I didn't ask. It was like, I didn't want her to think I was, I don't know. Fuck all man, this is where I don't get girls anymore."

He smiles at me. "Dude, don't worry about it. Your game's coming back. Remember those two girls at the bar last Friday. You had them eating out of your hand." He's right, they were eating out of my hand. They weren't my type though. I find it harder and harder to come across girls that are. "Think of it this way for next time," Dan continued, "if you had asked for her number, regardless of how short the ride was, and she didn't give it to you, well, then you still wouldn't have her number." And then he pats me on the back in his reassuring way and heads for his bedroom to get dressed. "Pack a bowl," he calls over his shoulder. He's on top of the world right now. He had sent out two short stories to a couple magazines and is convinced this is it. I'd read them. They were pretty good, I thought. But I don't think like those editors do. They hate my pictures.

SEARCHING FOR SAM CLEMENS

My one hour honor's seminar, *Mock-Academics*, meets only on Tuesdays, and late in the afternoon, so it survives Dan's road trip schedule. The class's premise is interesting enough, the study of professional practical jokes, but I eventually miss everything at least once. Kiara's the real reason I have perfect attendance.

She's one of those girls who instantly caught my eye, a white girl with dreadlocks, only she isn't totally white. She has something spicy in her. She wears patchwork dresses and skirts. Some might call her a hippie, and maybe she is. She's a

feminist, vegetarian, and I'm pretty sure a lesbian. I'm out of touch with the current generation of hippies. I've never seen anything like her before. The fact that she wears skirts alone blows my mind. All the other girls I see wear jeans or maybe capris. Never a skirt. If it wasn't for sororities I'd never see a dress.

Kiara seems to love the idea of mock academics, so I listen to her as she debates nearly every point with Dr. Lynch, trying to figure out what it's all about. Fact is, most of the class just sits back and listens. After the third class I started following her, and taking pictures. I don't know what it is, she just inspires me. Someone might call it stalking, but I really haven't a desire to know her, only to take her picture. I don't even want to see her naked. Without her clothes I'm sure she looks like every other girl in some T&A magazine, but with them she has that style.

It's Friday and we're driving to Hannibal, Missouri when I decide to tell Dan about Kiara.

"So I've got this mock academics class." Dan's right hand goes from the steering wheel to the radio volume, turning it down.

"What?" He says. The air rushing through his window is loud, but he's still smoking a cigarette, so I just talk louder.

"I've got this class about the concept of fraud for the sake of art."

"Yeah?"

"I think that's what it's about. The teacher, Dr. Lynch, created his own fake civilization for it. He does traveling shows. There's all sorts of shit."

"That sounds cool. I bet I can get a story out of that," he says, flicking the

cigarette into the wind, rolling the window up. "When does it meet? I might sit in on a class."

"Tuesdays. But I don't know if you can just sit in. It's an honor's seminar."

"So? I'll just sit in the back by you and take notes. If the teach asks, just say I'm your cousin from out of town or something." And then he asks, out of habit, "Any hot girls?" And I no longer wish to discuss Kiara with him.

"Yeah, one or two," I say, opening my window. After a moment, Dan turns the volume back up. We're still three hours out and I close my eyes to the setting sun.

BEHIND THE BUSHES

Dan doesn't come to the next class. Like all things momentary, Dan has an interest and then loses it. We get back with two hours to spare, and I even remind him, but he tells me he's too exhausted. So I get to watch Kiara alone and sit easy.

After class she follows me into the bushes, where I've been taking my pictures from lately. She stands there and looks me up and down. I don't know if I should snap a shot or not, but I want to. I've never seen her like this.

"You've been taking pictures of me," she says, breaking the silence.

I nod, only movement I'm capable of.

"Why?"

I can't answer.

Finally I mumble, "I like the way you look."

She smiles at me.

My hands are shaking the camera, so I let go and it dangles heavy around my

neck. She pulls some paper and a pen out of her pocket and gives me her number. Then she kisses me on the cheek, and tells me to call.

Five minutes pass and I'm still sitting in the bushes. All I can think is 'no shit, she's not a lesbian.'

BEING TOO YOUNG

"It's just not fair. It's fucking evil." We're sitting over at Dan's place. For some reason or other we're always here. There isn't anything wrong with my place, Dan just never seems to leave his castle except to go to class or to go for one of his drives.

"It's just not fair. Fuck all!" He's about to start on a tirade on something. This is the day after Kiara kissed me. I came over to Dan's to tell him about it and he greets me with, "Did you see that new beer commercial?"

And I say "Which one?" because there are a fuck-ton of beer commercials and new to Dan isn't the necessarily new to everyone else. It took two months of hanging out before I realized that the television in the corner even worked.

"The one with the fat motherfucker being sent in as the hockey goalie. And he sits there and blocks all the pucks because he takes up the whole damn goal. I mean, damn, I told you my idea about putting sumo wrestlers in the goal before, haven't I?" I shrug. There's a possibility. Dan always has ideas.

"I'm telling ya. If I was like five years older I'd had a job with that idea and a dozen more like it. I don't get this whole college thing. I mean, it's just not fair. It's fucking evil." And then he smiles at me, like he doesn't really give a shit about what he just said.

He goes on for a couple minutes and I argue that the sumo wrestlers would have to know how to skate and stuff, and Dan just smirks at me and says if they take up the whole goal, it won't matter if they can skate. "Hell, they could wheel them out in a wagon for all I care." Then we smoke a bowl and I forget why I came over in the first place.

INDECISIVE NONCOMMITAL BLUNDER OF A

Remember when a kiss wasn't a prelude but the end result?

Before I left Dan told me about the party that Elk is having on Friday. He said we should go, Elk's getting a keg and Dan assured me we'd drink for free. I told him to remind me tomorrow.

Now it's Thursday. I look at the circular letters and round numbers. She gave me the number Tuesday. I still follow the 3 day rule. Stupid. I don't know what to say to her.

I jump the gun anyway, and before I know it I'm telling her about the party and where it's at.

"Is this a date?" she asks.

I can't think of the right answer.

"No, just a party."

"Oh, ok."

"Well, see you there." And I hang up the phone, catching just the beginning of the 'goodbye' before my thumb hits the 'end' button. I go to the mirror, and look at myself for a minute. "Are you okay?" I get no reply.

REMINICISING: INTERLUDE

I didn't want to fuck it up so I didn't call early. I waited and tried to figure it all out while going to my classes and doing the bullshit homework.

"She gave you the number, you didn't ask," the girl, who looks younger than my sister, says as she spins and dips a little lower.

I nod.

"Which means call tonight, or asap. You let her sit there for nearly three days thinking about that kiss."

"So was I." I say.

"Yeah, but not like she was. She saw it as a mistake. And then saying 'no' when she asked you if it was a date."

"I didn't know."

"You fucked up."

"I fucked up."

She walks to another customer with my 10-spot in her g-string.

ARRIVING LATE

I show up late to Elk's party. I half didn't expect Kiara to show. I don't expect to find her sitting on Dan's lap, making conversation. His hand moves slowly up and down the outside of her thigh.

I dodge their line of sight, move left making my way to the kitchen.

There are people everywhere. I know more of them than I thought, but I don't

stop to say hello. Right now, all I want is a drink.

Elk tugs my shirt as I wait in line at the keg. "Hey man, when'd you get here?"

"Just now."

"You look pissed."

"I need a drink." Elk smiles, big, drunk, and stoned, producing a bottle of Jack from his inside jacket pocket. He pours damn near 3 shots into my red plastic cup.

"Liquor before beer."

"Liquor before beer." And I down two thirds of it, coming up wincing. Elk laughs.

"C'mon dude. I'm gonna get Steve, and then we'll hit this willow I bought."

"Where do you want to smoke at?"

"The basement."

I smile, and after we find Steve, we start a private party downstairs.

SPLIT DECISIONS AT THE ZOO

Dan finally finds me. I'm at the keg now. Steve, Elk, and I finished ten minutes ago. Things are blurring.

"Shit, you look wasted," are the first words out of his mouth, and I smile through the anger. I want there to be some 'fuck you' in the smile, that 'thank you for pointing out the obvious' fuck you, but the willow's killed all my aggression. Dan just stands there, waiting for me to say something. His beer's half full, and I pull the spout towards his cup, drunk, and say:

"Looking low, sonny boy, looking low." Dan with his rugged good looks, Dan

with his athletic body and ease of conversation. Dan, my best friend.

“Thanks,” he says, taking a drink. “Where you been, I’ve been looking for you.”

He grabs me by the arm before I can answer and leads me out to the backyard where people crowd around in groups of four and five. A couple of loners float around from group to group.

High fives and *fuck yous* are passed around like candy.

On the side of the house, out of the corner of my eye, I catch Elk pissing, then he’s back roaring with the bottle of Jack tipped straight up. For a second, I want to take his keys.

Dan hands me a Marlboro and I take it without thinking. I start to think that maybe earlier was nothing. Kiara on Dan’s lap laughing. Maybe they were just being friendly.

“Where is she?” I mumble and in response he hands me the lighter. He doesn’t look at me, and if he understood my question he shows no sign. His eyes circulate the party.

Whatever he wants to tell me, he doesn’t feel like telling me yet.

Dan takes a long drag from his smoke as I fumble with the lighter, trying to block the night breeze from the flame. I curse under my breath. Elk comes over and whispers something in Dan’s ear, and they both turn to look at me, and I feel like I’m on display at the zoo. And I’m still thumbing the lighter. Elk walks off laughing.

Dan smiles.

The fucker always smiles.

Tonight is not my night.

"You hit some willow. That explains it." Dan snags the lighter from me and gets a flame. I take a hard drag, as not to waste it; taste the nicotine and the carcinogens and uranium 434. Everything wonderful about a Marlboro. I meet his eyes, squinting as I do. He's completely at ease, like he hasn't done anything wrong. Maybe he hasn't.

"You know Steve," I tell him, talking with my hands, the cherry of the cigarette like a laser pointer. "Fucking pot head. Smokes and smokes and smokes. And you know me, can't say no." Dan laughs at some part of this, though I don't find any of it funny. I laugh as well. I keep wanting this to feel awkward, and I'm failing miserably.

"So I've got this idea for a story," Dan says. I know where this is heading.

"You've always got ideas for stories."

"Yeah, but this one is good. This might be my ticket. It's this story about these two guys, and one of them continues to try to have a unique idea, but each time he thinks he gets there, someone informs him that it's been done before." And he looks at me like he always looks at me, like his ideas are mine and mine are his.

"And what does the other guy do?"

"I don't know. I haven't thought about that yet." And he pauses, probably to give my question some consideration. "Anyway, what do you think of the idea?"

"I don't care."

"Oh," he says. "You alright?"

"Yeah, I'm peachy." And I finish the rest of my beer in one gulp to show him how fine I am. He tries to look concerned and fails. It isn't in him. Still, I feel a need to reassure him. "I'm fine," I say, "I just don't want to discuss business when I'm here for pleasure."

“Okay, cool.” I’m too soft.

Elk has his arm around Kiara now and they’re scanning the groups, searching. Elk’s left arm blocks her breast from my line of sight, and I wait for him to cop a cheap feel. He spots Dan. Elk’s left hand goes to Kiara’s head, twists it in our direction.

“I need to piss.”

Dan nods.

“Let me get another cigarette.” He hands it to me, his eyes back on the party.

When I get to the side of the house, I don’t stop. I walk to my car and open the door and sit down. I don’t start the car immediately. I’m waiting for someone to come looking for me. I light the new cigarette, but the smoke suffocates me. I roll down the windows, start the car, and

8 BALL CORNER POCKET

I regain consciousness sprawled on my couch. My phone is vibrates loud on the coffee table that was left by the previous tenant. I grasp for it up, hit a button to stop the ring.

My head does a slow pound.

The time on my clock says 12:45. The name on my phone says ‘Dan.’ I curse through crusted lips and throw the phone onto a chair.

I lay back down and close my eyes.

Fuck.

I’m awake, and my head hurts.

I fish through my pocket and grab a flattened pack of cigarettes. The lighter’s on the table. The two remaining smokes are flat, ripped and worthless. I smoke one of them

for a puff or two before abandoning the effort. My voicemail noise goes off from my phone on the chair, and I have to get up to shut it off.

The beer hits my bladder when I stand up. I take the phone with me to the bathroom, punching one and then the speaker button to call my voicemail. "You have one new message" says the girl from the voicemail service with that slight electronic voice, and I wonder if that voice was ever real or always fake.

"First new message from..." and there's a pause, and since Dan and I have the same wireless carrier he gets his own voice in there, pre-recorded, calling himself "Daniel B." Then the voicemail girl of my dreams continues "received at 1246 p.m." There's another pause, and the piss is really coming out of me now. I'm doing circles around the bowl by the time Dan's message starts for real.

"Hey man, where the fuck did you go last night? I tried to call you. Shit, I hope you're still alive, because you are not going to believe this shit." And I think to myself, I know what you're going to say, that you met the girl of your dreams and by the way, she fucks like a Baptist on her honeymoon.

"Call me back as soon as you get this man. They bought it. My story, your picture. I got the letter today. They bought our shit man. I can't fucking believe it, we're going to be published. Oh, shit," and he's laughing a little. I'm envisioning him re-reading the letter. "Oh shit, call me back." There's another pause, and the voicemail girl comes back and says "End of message. No new messages." And I realize that I'm pissing on the floor.

I leave the pants in the bathroom where they fell at my ankles and go back to the couch. I look at my camera sitting where I threw the phone earlier, and my first

impulse is to tear out the film and expose it all. My second is simply to shoot whatever's left in the camera, develop the shots, and then burn them. Most of the roll is of Kiara. She's all I've shot the past couple times out, and now that was all shit. My eyes shift back and forth between the camera and my phone.

Then my eyes drift over to the bowl sitting on the right side of the coffee table in its nice Rastafarian bag, and I decide on that. I load it up and smoke it three times full, and only by the third time does any of this start to seem even remotely funny. I lie back down on the couch, close my eyes, and toss off the first load of the day onto my shirt. I look down at it and wonder if I'm wandering into low sperm count territory, because the loads seem to be getting smaller. Maybe it's my habits, I think, and then I lower my head back to the pillow and pass back into the sleep I couldn't find three bowls ago.

AVOIDING TUESDAY

Dr. Lynch finishes his speech on a guy who opened a faux dog brothel, and I'm out the door. I walk fast, trying not to look rushed. I pass my spot in the bushes and keep going.

"Hey!" I pretend not to hear. One foot in front of the other, I steer myself towards the library. "Hey!!" I should stop. I'm being an ass, I know. This is not the mature way to handle the situation. The grass is still green under my feet.

"Hey." Her hand on my shoulder spins me around. "What the fuck?"

"What?"

"I was yelling at you."

"I didn't hear."

"Whatever. So, what's up? What happened to you at the party? I never even saw you, but Dan said you were there."

It's been three days. I didn't get out of bed Sunday, tried to sleep it all away. Monday I turned the cell off and stayed in the apartment watching movies. I'd never seen Casablanca until yesterday. Her hand pushes me in the chest and I take a small step back. "Where are you anyway?"

"What?"

"You're off in your own world, aren't you?" She smiles and her dark eyes hold me. I break her stare and look down at the dark leather boots hidden under her long lined skirt. I wonder when this became about more than just the clothes.

"I didn't know you and Dan were friends."

"Yeah," I say, and for the first time I crack a smile. "Dan's a great guy."

"Yeah," she says, and she stares at me. Her breath runs white out her nostrils. She leans towards me. I lean back. I miss her closing her eyes, but I catch them reopening. She smiles at me and sinks back. "Yeah," she says, sounding out of breath. "So, he asked me out."

"Who?"

"Dan."

"Oh." My breath steams. I turn my head and blow it all out like cigarette smoke.

"Oh?" she says, "what's 'oh' mean?"

"Nothing," I say, pissing away my opportunity under the pretense of loyalty.

"Nothing. That's great. Dan's a great guy."

"Yeah," she says. Then she takes my hand, her small fingers like ice. They

intertwine with mine, and then she grips tight. I feel her nails dig into my skin. She kisses me on the cheek and lets go. I want to tell her how I really feel.

"Only one more class left," she says, stepping away from me. I know the conversation is almost over. "One more week and you'll never have to see me again."

"I don't think I'll get that lucky," I say, and she frowns at me playfully. I wonder if she knows I mean it.

FOR THREE WEEKS

"Come over here and give me a massage." These days I feel like a 3rd wheel. I don't know why I still come over here. Dan sits and pecks away at the keys, staring at the picture of a Ferris wheel, or black and white clowns, or a mountain lined with trees. I sit across from him, fidgeting with my camera. More of an act. Really, I'm trying not to look at her. These days, I feel like Igor all huddled over himself.

"I'm not giving you a massage," Kiara says over her shoulder as she adjusts this thing or that. Then she smiles at me. I try to ignore it, but she always knows when she's got my attention.

"How am I supposed to write if you don't give me a massage?"

"That's not my job," she says. Dan stops typing, and turns to her, grinning. I hate being in the room at these exact moments.

"Oh? Then what is?"

"I'm just your muse. Isn't that how you put it?" And she laughs, and he laughs, and I wipe the lens another three times.

"Fucking muse," he purrs at her. "Inspire me."

By this time she's sitting in his lap and their tongues dance. I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for the picture. She wouldn't be here if it wasn't for the pictures. Me and my stupid camera. This is their routine. Since we got published, since Dan met Kiara, since they started fucking every other night, nothing's gotten done. I don't even think Dan looks at my photos anymore.

Every time they kiss, Kiara keeps her eyes open. Dan closes his, like he's drinking in the moment. But Kiara keeps alert, and when her eyes find mine as her lips find his, that's the moment when I speak up.

"I'm leaving." After five minutes of this, the intrusion of my voice causes a slight startle. Like Dan forgot I'm still here.

"No no, stay man, stay. Come on, we'll smoke another bowl and finish this story, and send it out. We need to get at least one more out."

"Yeah," I say. "I know."

He adjusts to hide his erection, and Kiara climbs off his lap. Then he starts typing again, this time with more fervor, as if that little release has actually released enough, and Kiara slides over close to me. I smell flowers, and then vanilla. When she passes me, she says under her breath "I still don't get you" and I quickly turn away. I want to ask her what she means, but I never get her alone anymore. Then she's out of the room.

"Sorry," Dan says. "That girl, she's just insatiable." And I smile at him. I don't blame him.

FILL IN THE BLANKS

I'd left my cell phone in the car. I had a meeting with a magazine about an

internship over the summer as a photographer. I knew from Andrew, a grad student in my department, that really I'd be making coffee. But I have to start somewhere.

When I get back to the car I'm surprised to see Dan has called. I haven't seen him in two months, his and Kiara's one year anniversary party. Really it'd been fourteen months at that point, they just didn't start keeping time until Kiara moved in. At the party they looked happy.

I start the car, push one then the speaker button, and toss the phone on the passenger seat. The voicemail program runs its course as I pull into traffic.

Dan sounds strange. His message is clear.

"When you get this, just come over."

SCURRY

"Are you almost done?" I ask him. Kiara has been gone for three days and Dan's locked himself in the bathroom with a typewriter, trying to finish the masterpiece he always talks about. Trying to win back Kiara's love by proving he can finally finish something.

"Here," he says in a frantic voice through the door. I think he found his old coke stash that was behind the porcelain, or maybe he knew it was there the entire time and that's why he chose the bathroom. I can't tell anything. A page hits my foot.

"What the fuck is this?"

"Scurry the mouse."

"What?"

"It's funny. Read it." And it is funny. Some rough smudge ink drawing in three

panels of a mouse. 'I think I'm going to make a bunch of these and send them to the paper. I think it could work.' Another hits my foot.

"No dammit, you have to focus. Back to the book."

"Fuck the book. I already wrote it. It's in my head. I've gotten as much out as I can. It's in my head, it's finished."

"But I haven't read it. You have to finish it. Focus."

I hear what might be a snort. Then some unintelligible babble, not a scream or moan, but loud. "Pass me another cigarette."

"Are you sure? You said you hated the last one."

"Fucking do it. I can handle this." I walk over; grab the pack off the table in the kitchen. I roll a cigarette under the door to him. I light one for myself. "Pass me the lighter."

"It won't fit, remember?"

"Shit." There's some movement behind the door. "I can't find the matches. Here, trade me." And he rolls his cigarette back under the door. I follow suit, then take my second first drag. "You drooled all over that shit."

"Fuck you." Then he starts to laugh a little, an unnatural sound, and we sit there smoking together. After a minute I hear the typewriter start back up, random banging and clacking. Once he starts it's like he doesn't stop for anything. He just keeps going, the story already in his head waiting to come out, and then finally does.

"She left me, you know."

"Yeah," I say.

"She fucking left me. I can't believe it." *clack clack clack.*

“Yeah.” I don’t have anything else to say. He’s been on repeat about Kiara and love since I got here. I just listen. Only thing a friend can do.

“You know why she left me?”

“Yeah.” The keys stop for a second.

“She said she had to change the world.” Smoke rolls up the woodwork of the door from the crack at the bottom, vanishing as it nears the ceiling. “Change the fucking world. So I ask her how.” The keys start again.

“Yeah.”

“She said, ‘wait and see.’ That it was my turn first. Something like that. I can’t remember. I don’t even fucking care.” The keys stop and I hear his hand dead thud against the wall. Or maybe it’s his head. Then I hear another snort. Then the typewriter starts up again. “I’m never going to finish this.”

“Focus.”

“I really hate this story. I already know how it ends. And it doesn’t make any sense to end it any other way.”

“Then just get it over with.” The keys pause, then there’s a couple quick hits as if he was finishing something.

“What do you mean?”

“Write the damn ending already.”

“I did.”

“Oh. Well, write again. Write a new ending.”

“I can’t end it any other way.”

“Why not?”

“They all die. It’s the only way anything can ever truly end, isn’t it? Everyone has to die. Otherwise there’s still a story left.” As much as I disagree, I can’t find a way to argue with him. Lately, I’ve been thinking more like Dan, exhausting every option. Inside the bathroom Dan gags and hacks on the toilet. “I hate these fucking cigarettes.”

ON THE THIRD DAY

I tell Dan that I have to go. I tell him I need a shower and a shave. Really, I just need to get out of here and see the sun again. I leave him, still in self-imposed solitary on the evening of the third day.

I decide to go to Dugan’s, one of my favorite bars. I have a couple of drinks and come back to my apartment drunk and exhausted.

She’s there at my door. I don’t know how long she’s been waiting. If it has been three days, or if she has just stopped by ten minutes ago. I don’t know what to say. I’m convinced I’m dreaming. She kisses me on the lips.

And then she stays in my bed. I don’t know why. I’m sure I convinced her to, but God admit, she shouldn’t have let me. And we sleep, side by side, for the first and last time. In the morning she’s gone and I am numb. I stay in bed for two days, just sleeping. I don’t want to deal with consequences.

Then I get up, pull on my jacket, and head back to Dan’s.

WHO RUNS THIS WORLD ANYWAY

The door isn’t locked when I come in. He’s sitting there, out of the bathroom and from the smell of it he still hasn’t showered. He’s grinning like the old Dan, and I sit

down across from him. Pages of paper are strewn all around him. There are a couple crumpled in the chair. His pipe and bag sit beside him, but the body odor beats out the marijuana. It's an odd mix and I want to open a window. But I don't. Instead I light a cigarette.

"You've got a pack?" Dan says, taking a cigarette from me.

"I went to a bar last night."

"Typical."

"I hate bumming when I'm at a bar drinking."

"But you've got no problem bumming from your friends."

"Just saving lives."

"Saving money."

"That too." I can't read his mood. But I have a good idea what he's feeling like. I'm pretty sure this jovial outlook is bullshit. And then for a second, I think he knows. That maybe he smells her on me even though I scrubbed for over an hour.

I don't know why I came back over here.

"So, you want to smoke a bowl?" His smile starts to crack; quivers in that sick way I'd only seen in movies up till now. I wonder if maybe this wasn't a movie itself. Dan's looking the same way. His look says to me, *here I am and I don't know what the hell I'm supposed to do now, and I want to start all over*. And I'm thinking how universal that has to feel. What all those philosopher's talk about. The problem with life is we live forwards learning backwards.

"Well?" he says.

"Yeah, yeah." Dan goes to work and I sit there, fiddling with the cigarette between my fingers. I try for the millionth time to blow smoke rings. I don't think

I've ever gotten close. For Dan it was like second nature.

He breaks the bud apart carefully on one of the sheets of paper that are strewn about him. His bowl still sits untouched on the lamp stand. "I've been writing every day."

"That's good to hear." I say. This shouldn't have felt so awkward. It was like we were mourning a mother that neither of us loved.

And for some reason, for me, I can't remember any of the past anymore. Like we have always been sitting here. The worst part is this is how I find myself remembering Dan. Sitting here across from me and we both hate every minute of it.

"It's funny, after all this time, I think I finally have my story. I just don't know if it's too late. If it even matters anymore, if any of..."

He starts trailing off, like he's talking to himself as much as me. Then his hands go to the bowl, and he dumps the half smoked carcass out onto the floor and looks at it for a second. "Damn." Then he looks up to me and smiles.

"Here" he says, passing me over a wad of papers. They're handwritten, scrawled in pencil and pen, mostly notes. It reminds me what movies show crazy people write on the walls of their padded cells. Big up and down, sharp letters, different shapes and sizes. Some are more complete. "Those are the plot outlines. then I started the story, only I started in the middle because I don't know how to write the beginning, so I'm figuring that eventually I'll pick a middle that feels like an early middle and I'll run that as the beginning. I don't know. Here," he says, handing me the freshly packed bowl. I don't ask him about the bathroom/typewriter story. "First hit for my best friend."

I smile back at him. I know he doesn't know. It doesn't bother me.

I put the pages in my lap and light the bowl, watching the way the flame dances around the weed, the way the crystals sparkle in the light. It reminds me how hard it is to go back to shit after having the really good for too long.

"She left me because I couldn't get my act together," and then he chuckles. "If only she saw how not together my act is now. If she only knew how together I had it with her." He's laughing now, and I don't have the heart to remind him who he was before her. Because I realize that I really didn't know. Here he is, showing me this destroyed aspect of himself, but who knows how long he'd been at rock bottom. It makes me look back and question all those car trips to nowhere that we took. What their reason for being was. If maybe the entire time Dan has been this miserable and I've never known it.

HUNTING MERCY

WHAT I REMEMBER ON THE WAY DOWN

Gas is up to a dollar eighty three. How the hell did it get that high without somebody telling me. I find five bucks in Terry's armrest. That isn't going to be enough.

Things not to do on drugs. Drive. That law makes sense. Someone should pull me over right now. It's only for the entertainment of God that I'm alive and not in jail.

The gas station, 2 am, and I can't walk. How I'd managed to get to Birmingham was pure instinct and cruise control. 75 in a 70 is the magic speed, if you can keep a car straight. Everyone knows this, the ones that get in trouble forget. Trouble I want to avoid.

It's March, so it isn't exactly warm, but I'm dressed warm enough that only my lower lip quivers. Gas stations are pre-pay after 6 p.m. Not having a car can really put you out of the loop. It takes two minutes before I see the sign and realize I'm pumping nothing.

I had originally intended on just driving off. There's only one other car, which I assume is the attendant's. I can't see inside the station, just a glare of yellow and white.

Some would say what I'm planning on doing next is disgusting. To them, I say again, don't do drugs.

I make it inside and smile. The woman is somewhere in that haze of middle life that makes the lower class indiscernible in age. Forced, I'd say 37, but I'd be lying if I said I'm even close to sure.

She looks wide awake, bright make up. Lips part to show me the teeth in her smile. Her name tag says, "Rhonda" and that was is happy to help me. She dwarfs me in

size. I sprawl out comfortable on the counter, knocking the give-a-penny with my elbow. My eyes fix on hers the entire time, smiling stupid and happy.

“How much gas you need?” It sings sweet. Maybe she was a prom queen from some rural high school here in Alabama that just never got the right man. I remember the cheerleading coach at my old high school, how she was big the way this girl across from me is big. That not unpleasant way when you’re a cheerleading coach, but that butt of a joke way when you’re jockeying a register.

“Well,” I said, “I need a full tank because I’m damn near on E and it’s 2 in the morning and I’m in the middle of fucking Alabama on my way to New Orleans to see my mother who is in the hospital.” I stop to see how this is sinking in. Her eyes scrunch a little. Good. “The thing is,” I continue, and I start crying. It isn’t hard, I’m exhausted and hurting. “The thing is I left so fast, I just pulled on some pants. The call came, and it’s my mother, and I just left, and. All I got is five dollars is what I’m saying.” I lay my head between my arms on the counter and let loose. The tears cause my shoulders to heave and fall. It feels good.

“Oh baby, that’s sad,” she tells me and I feel her pudgy hand against my skin. It’s warm and feels good. I look into her eyes.

Save me now you bastard. This is one of those moments. Step in and save me.

Fuck you then.

“I’d do anything if you’d help me,” and then I rub her hand on my arm. She looks at me now, and the smile disappears for a second. Both hands on the clock over her shoulder are pointing to the two. We’re all alone. She realizes my game.

“Oh. I see,” she says, “is there anything wrong with your mother or are you just trying to whore yourself to me for gas?” The way she says it, southern sweet with the poison of insult. She’s not going to say ‘no’.

“Yes, dammit. My mother’s been in a car crash, and I’m pretty sure she’s going to fucking die. I’m barely awake. I’m sorry. I just need some help. Help me, Rhonda.”

It’s hard not to break into song. Harder not to laugh or smile. She maintains her composure too. Her eyes say, I don’t believe you, but she walks from behind the counter and goes to lock the far door. “Lock that one,” she says to me. Then she takes my hand and I follow her into the back manager’s office. The whole room is beaver wood brown, with one of those ‘70s throwback knobby woven polyester itchy business chairs.

“A full tank?” She asks as she unbuttons her pants.

“Yeah. That should get me to New Orleans to see my mother and my family. I’ll have money then. I could even come back and pay you. If that would be better, you know. I didn’t even think of that.” She turns around and smiles at me as she wiggles out of her blue jeans. Her panties are plain white K-Mart brand.

“No,” she tells me, as she drops them down and sits in the chair, scooting herself to the edge. “I like this the more I think about it,” and she even giggles a little.

She points to the ground and I go down on my knees in front of her. I pretend she’s Dottie, the old cheer coach. One of the cheerleaders told that Dottie was captain of her high school squad. She’d brought a picture to class, and it was true. I’d fantasized about Dottie once or twice when I was 17. I even got to know her when my little sister was a cheerleading prospect. Dottie was sweet, real sweet, like sugar at dusk on Halloween.

The act took about twenty minutes and ends as she pulls my face into her and squeezes together with her thighs. I struggle to breath as she screams so loud I can hear her through the layers of flesh, muscle, fat and bone.

When her thighs release me I fall back, ass hitting my feet, and breath in a deep lung full of air. Rhonda's sprawled back in the chair, only movement the slight rise and fall of her chest. I want to wipe her from my face, but there's no towel in sight. I'm not using my shirt. The smell would be with me the rest of the time. I didn't bring a change of clothes.

Her head finally lifts back up and she's beaming at me. "That was incredible." I nod my head. She stands up, completely comfortable in her nakedness, and tells me she'll be right back. Then she's out the office and in the bathroom. I hear the sink start going, so I stand up pull a twenty out of her purse on the desk. There are two compacts alongside it. I can still hear the sink, so I inspect them both. Powder in one, crystal in the other, so I pocket the second and get the purse back in order as the sink goes off. Another couple seconds as she gets her pants back on, and then she's back in the office.

"My turn," I say, and go to the bathroom to clean my face. When I come back out the door to the manager's office is closed and Rhonda is back behind the counter.

"You're all ready to fill up," she says.

"Any extra charge for a fountain drink? I'm really thirsty after that," and we smile at each other. She motions me towards the area, and I go. I grab two straws.

At the counter Rhonda has her name and exit number written on a piece of paper and tells me to stop by on my way back through. I tell her I will.

The gas comes to \$31.68. The whole ordeal takes 30 minutes.

There are worse ways to make \$100 in 30 minutes.

BREAKING AND ENTERING

The sun's been in the sky for two hours when I turn down the street where he used to live. Lives, I hope, but that was over a year ago, and when I left he'd been talking about moving. He'd been talking a lot of things.

His car is on the street. Sweetness. I am so tired I bump the car in front of me as I park. A blue Mazda made of plastic. The bumper pops back out with ease. No harm, no foul.

I knock on the door. Then I knock again. Nothing. No answer. Try the knob, nope. Shit.

There's three steps that lead up to his porch, so I prop the top one and scoop out a flattened Marlboro. I have to walk back to the car for the lighter. I decide to try the door again.

His car is here, where else could he be? I try the porch window. It opens.

Sweetness.

I send The Flaming Lips across the room with my right foot. When I plant it, I hear one crack. Fuck.

Then it hits me, there are stacks of CDs and books piled on the floor, but the floor shines. The walls have pictures.

This has got to be the wrong apartment, but I bought Danny boy the Spiderman bust on the end-table for his birthday. I let the window down real slow, leaving my

cigarette burning on the ledge outside. Wave after wave of freshness washes me. I feel like a mistake.

Sketchers make no noise on the wood floor, not a creak, and I peer into his room and see him face up, mouth open. Do I wake him up? My watch says 757 and his clock says 758. My eyes go instead to the filing cabinets against his wall. Black, cold, steel. No labels, just numbers. 1-26, 27-59, 59+. I pull at one, but it rattles, locked and away. What's inside?

There's a sound like someone's choking, and I spin in time to watch Dan turn over on his side.

Where the hell am I now, you bastard? What kind of crazy world did you put me in?

My head is ringing. I haven't slept in something like 48 hours. I haven't been sober in something like my entire life. Eyes squinched, I turn toward the horrible sound that's invading my brain. The sound gets me right across the face, and then it lets me sleep.

SKIPPING TO THE END

The first thing I feel is the cold water dripping down into my partially open left eyeball that has been staring at a picture of Che Guevara on a forest green wall. It tickles.

My head hurts.

I hear a tapping coming from somewhere. I'm still in Dan's apartment. I get up and feel the knot on my forehead. My watch says it's 1238. Only four hours and I feel refreshed. Dan's Indian style on his bed with his laptop, pecking away. His black hair

nearly blocks out his face, so all I can see is his nose swishing back and forth. He's given up on the beard though. I rap lightly.

"Morning Danny boy."

He looks up at me and smiles. He looks sober, clean.

"Hey Elk." He closes the computer and puts it to the side. Then he's giving me a great big hug, and I feel like a cripple in his arms. I almost cry. "I didn't mean to hit you, man. I just, you, I wasn't expecting you to be in my room. I thought maybe one of my clients had finally gone nuts."

"You hit me?"

"Yeah. Pretty hard too, I guess. You just fell."

I finger the knot again and smile.

"I'm sorry," I say. "I would have called, but I don't have your number anymore."

"That's fine man, you can visit. I just need to get to work sometime today."

"Where you working now? Don't tell me a gas station. I've got one hell of a gas station story for you."

"Really?" He pauses there, and I shiver. "No, not at a gas station. I, well, I'm actually self-employed."

"No shit?" Amazing. He did it. A job. His own fucking job. Which means no drug tests, no boss, no bullshit. My mouth's open so I put a cigarette in it.

"Outside," he says, pointing to the front door.

"Since when?"

"I don't know. But outside. I'll join you."

The noonday sun is like nature's recharge button. I feel hair on my arms stand up, pours open. Across the street two girls ride pink motorcycles down the sidewalk.

"Need a lighter?"

"No no." Green plastic from my pocket distorts the cars in front of me.

"You look like shit."

"Thank you. Fuck you too hello."

"Yeah, well, you still look like shit."

"My mother's in the hospital."

"You still using that?"

"Yeah. It works. So, what's this self-employed shit?"

"Tell you what? You want to come to work with me?"

"You gonna pay me?"

"I'll feed you. I'll even give you a change of clothes."

"What about, you know?"

He opens his mouth and closes.

"Shit," he says. He looks up at the sky then back at me. "Let me have a drag."

He smoke it, exhales, then takes in a deep lung full. "Elk, Dave, brother, please tell me you didn't come all this way just to get high." Both his hands are light on my shoulders.

"No man, no. I came to see you. Fuck that shit man. You're really clean now."

"Yeah. I really am. After that night, after you left." His eyes go to the sky again, and my eyes follow but we're not looking at the same thing. "It was spiritual," is all he says after that, and I'm thinking I could tell him a thing or two about spiritual. He hands me back the cigarette, and I take a drag from it. I remember him saying he was going to

quit, but I'd heard him say things like that before. Everyone's always talking about quitting. I never believed anyone had ever done it.

Dan leans back against the framing post. His hands clear the black curtain from his face. He's put on some weight, and it looks like the bayou sun has finally given him a tan. What day was it, back in what, February? Right after the Superbowl, the reason I came the first time. The parties. The man had said something about Philadelphia. Dan's staring at me.

"How long did it take?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Ok," I say, "Where do you want me to toss this?"

"Just in the street."

LOOKING FOR SOMETHING TO DO

I was wearing my leather jacket and we were twisted. Bourbon Street hopped to jazz sax guitars, deep bellied voices. I had a neon yellow hand grenade in my right hand, and Dan was arguing with a bouncer about the bathroom.

"You gotta buy another drink."

"I got one right here."

"Buy another."

"Fuck you."

The bouncer was having none of this. His hand wrapped around the back of Dan's neck and threw him into the chaos that is Bourbon Street.

"Fucking asshole. I'm going to beat his ass."

“Don’t do that,” I told him, but he wasn’t listening. He was already back to drinking and looking for breasts.

“I’m telling ya, Elk, you should move down here. This is the life.” This was my last night in New Orleans. Dan had quit his job as a cook earlier in the week just to show me a good time. We knew each other back in college. Dan graduated the year I dropped out, but when nothing panned out with his writing, he decided it was time for a different scene. New Orleans agreed with him.

We ducked into another bar. Lights flashed and a band covered *Where The Streets Have No Name* while Dan eyed himself a cute little blonde thing. I followed, but not too close.

“They’re fucking horrible,” he said, motioning with his pink hand grenade the band.

“I asked them to play it for me,” she said in perfect Irish.

“No shit,” and Dan went to town. I moved myself among her girlfriends, each with a less than impressive statement of European dentistry. I finished my hand grenade and tossed it.

I ordered a Hurricane. Dan’s dancing with the Irish girl now, so I decided to swing one of her friends, and we’re twirling to *Johnny B. Goode* sung by a forty something blonde woman with big hair tits and ass. She’s looking right at the keyboardist the whole time, and my mind put one and two together for an unhappy visual image.

The big woman finished, and the band took a 15 minute intermission. Hooter Shooters were now only a buck. I ordered three. Dan maneuvered the girl into a corner

and seemed to be making his move. I winked at the girl with the nicest teeth, then head back out to Bourbon Street.

The third Hooter Shooter hit harder than I expected, so I stopped and took a few breaths, swallowing repeatedly to keep it all down.

“Hey stud, where you going?” The voice behind me.

A girl in a red tight top, that accentuated her nice brown breasts, stood behind me smiling white teeth.

“To hell,” I told her.

“Oh, sugah, don’t say that. Where you going?”

“To hell.”

“What are you talking about? The devil doesn’t want you. You got Jesus.”

“Ha!”

I started to walk again. Her fingernails caught just barely in my skin.

“Where you going baby?”

“To my friend’s apartment. I don’t know. I’m drunk.”

“I know you’ve got forty dollars to let me suck your cock.”

At this I can’t control my laughter. The hooker walked away, walked to the next single man headed in the wrong direction on Bourbon Street saying, “that man there is crazy. How you doing sugah, where you going?”

And it’s the same pitch every time.

EASTER EGGS

The car speeds down I-10 at a cool 60 mph. I look ok now that I've showered and changed. I actually feel better too. Dan's got talk radio on. Neal Bortz or something. I'm thankful it isn't Rush Limbaugh, and really, it isn't that bad. But after twenty minutes of just talk, I reach for the volume and turn the thing off.

"What is that shit?"

"I don't read the newspaper."

"Ok, so?"

"So, talk radio. I don't know. You can put on whatever. By the way, you crushed my Modest Mouse CD when you broke in this morning."

"Who the hell likes Modest Mouse?"

"I do."

"That guy's voice gets on my fucking nerves."

"Well, you broke my CD."

"I did you a service."

And then we're quiet, like death quiet. It's almost two in the afternoon and there isn't anyone on the road. Dan's on autopilot and not paying me any attention. I wonder what to do about the meth that I still have on me. I can't just throw it away.

"So, you gonna tell me what this job is?"

"Yeah. Ok. Don't laugh. I started a business called Treasure Hunters."

"Ok?"

He takes an exit, and we're driving alongside a park in minutes. Blue water flows, cuts green grass.

"Are we still in New Orleans?"

“Yeah.” My knowledge of New Orleans has been limited to the French Quarter. This beauty is shocking, gorgeous. I would never have called New Orleans a beautiful place until today.

Dan parks the car and we both get out. He’s got a black case from the back seat in his hands and we’re walking toward a bridge over a small pond. He places the black case behind a large rock under the bridge. The grass is high, and as soon as Dan stands back up I can no longer see the shiny metal.

“Nice day,” he says.

“Yeah,” I say.

“You want to stay here a minute or head to the next stop?”

“Dan, what are we doing?”

“I kind of want you to guess.”

We get back in the car and Dan starts driving down the road. He doesn’t get back on the interstate, just stays within the neighborhood. I look in the backseat. There are another ten or so metal boxes on the floor, each one labeled with a number on a post-it note.

“Where did all these cases come from?”

“I loaded the car while you were passed out on my couch.”

“What’s in them? Are you laundering money or some shit?”

Dan starts laughing. He takes a left onto a street called Theresa, and we drive past a white house with a beautiful set of roses around a large model of a Wright Brother’s airplane that’s working as a mailbox.

“That mailbox there,” he says, “I don’t know how many times I’ve seen that thing shattered on the ground in a dozen pieces. The teenage boys around here like to drive around taking cracks at mailboxes with baseball bats. They finally caught a couple of them a week ago. It was great, the radio said how the boys denied it, but in the trunk the cops found a baseball bat with red, yellow, green, then blue paint all in the order of the mailboxes on Chambers Crossing, which is this one. Right. Here.” His finger is pointing, and I see the mailboxes, none of them yet repaired. “The old guy who lives in the house with the plane is one of my customers.”

“Then why didn’t we go ahead and make his delivery.”

“I don’t deliver to their houses. Heck. I’ve never even met him. I just know, because he sent me a letter about his mailbox. It’s never the same one. He remakes it, by hand. Fucking incredible.”

“Where are we going Dan?”

“To the fountain on Parkside. We’ll be there in a minute.”

I turn back around and grab one of the cases. It’s light. Like there’s nothing in it. The post-it starts to flutter in the wind.

“Don’t lose that. I don’t want to go fuck up the labeling. I’ve been perfect so far.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I say. “Tell me what’s in them and I’ll quit screwing with your shit.”

“Just enjoy the day,” he says. I go back to inspecting the case. On the front is a little lock, so I can’t get it open. Asking for the key is a dead end. I shake it a couple times, and I hear something, but nothing I can put my finger on.

“We’re at the fountain. Get me #2, will you?”

Right now I have #7 in my hand. I go for two. It feels the same.

“So, what’s the difference between 7 and 2?”

“A happy customer.”

BORN ON THE BAYOU

“Where the fuck did you go?”

“I left you to flirt it up with that blonde tart.”

“She’s Irish dude. I am so sweet on the Irish girls.”

The balconies were my favorite part of Bourbon Street. The way there was always something going on up there. I hadn’t figured out yet how to get myself up there, but I knew once I did it would be bliss and madness and sex and drugs. Dan was dragging me by the shirt, and we were both teetering back and forth. Bourbon Street seemed to be all slick and wet, cobblestone and night light created eerie effects that kaleidoscoped my eyes. I kept wanting someone to start breathing fire. That was all my night was missing.

“You know what tonight’s missing?” Dan asked me. There was a gleam in his eye.

“A happy ending?”

“Exactly.” He pulled me down a dark alley. I took the last sip of some drink I don’t remember buying and tossed it to the road. I heard a woman moan close to me, but I couldn’t see her. Just black shadows and muted yellow lights over bar back doors.

“Where are we going?”

“We’re looking for someone to save.”

Urine invaded my nostrils the further we went. The smell made my stomach turn.

“This is killing my buzz. I think I’m going to hurl.”

“We’re at the center. The heart of the cancer.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Putting,” he said, then he stopped. He pulled me in close. I could smell the cigarettes on his breath. He was whispering “putting one of these poor souls out of his misery.”

Our eyes met on the same page. I looked around. Against the walls, when I squinted, I could make out faces asleep.

“Pick one.”

I nodded. The smell kept coming, kept wanting to take me over. I wanted to find its source. I wanted the sorriest motherfucker, and I wanted to kill him. I wanted to save him, to give him a happy ending. On the edge of my vision I saw one shiver. I put my hand out and shook him, waited until his eyes opened.

“Hey man,” I said, “come on. Get up. We’re going to help you. Take you out for the night.”

“Wha?” He was barely awake. His hand trembled in mine, but I pulled him up anyway. He didn’t fight. He got up and came with us. Dan gave him his jacket, and we took him out on Bourbon Street and bought him a couple hot dogs. He just looked at us and smiled. I went and got us three beers. When we finished, we all three headed to the car.

EXPLANATIONS AT SUNSET

“Where did you get the beer from?” Dan’s getting back in the car. I decided to skip out on planting black case #9 behind whatever head marker he put it against.

“That lady there,” I say, pointing to the cute blonde getting into her car a couple spots down.

“She just gave you beer?”

“Well, I thought she was cute, so I said hello. Turns out her husband’s buried here, and he loves PBR’s, so she brings him a couple every time she visits his grave. Tribute or whatever. She was getting really gushy, so I didn’t want to draw it out. She was nice enough to give me a couple beers, for being nice enough to ask and all.” Then I reach down under the seat and pull the second PBR free. “Here,” I say, “this one’s for you.”

Dan looks at me funny for second, then takes the beer. I check my watch. Just after six. The sun sinks closer to the horizon as we leave the cemetery behind. My stomach rumbles, and I realize we haven’t eaten anything yet.

“Hey, weren’t you going to buy me food?”

“We’ve got two more stops to make.”

“Can’t we make them afterwards?”

“No.”

We drive in silence again. It used to be the two of us couldn’t shut up long enough to know what song was on the radio. Now we sit next to each other, and I feel like it’s been a million years that we’ve been apart. The beer coats my stomach. I put all my concentration into finishing it. Dan’s eyes are moving back and forth before every

drink, looking for those unexpected flashing lights that can ruin a nice bit of drinking and driving. He catches me catching him look.

“Cops here don’t fuck around,” he says, “They take your ass straight to jail.”

I nod. A year or two ago he wouldn’t have had to make that explanation.

#10 is behind the dumpster of Booker T. Washington High School. We chuck the PBR cans, and Dan starts talking.

“So after that night, I didn’t know what to do, I didn’t know where to go.” His speech is cool. I follow him to swingset, where we both have a seat, watching the rest of the sunset. “I really wanted to die for a second. I wanted to jump. But I didn’t. I came home, I sat down, and I threw it all away. All my pipes too. And then I wanted to die again.” He laughs and runs his hand through his hair. “That was some hard shit, getting clean.”

“Yeah. I bet it was.”

“NA meetings are held here. I went to one. Behind that dumpster I caught a couple of the guys getting high. I decided not to come back.” He leaned his arms back behind his head, elbows catching on the chains. “You got a cigarette?”

“Last one.”

“Split it?”

“Of course.”

We sat there, three puffs each then passing. The sun gone, purples and oranges fill the sky. Clouds fill in the gaps.

“You gotta love a God that can make a different one of those every night,” I say.

“Yeah, you do.”

KING OF QUEENS

Dan changes his mind when we pass Upperline Restaurant.

"I love this place," he says.

The place looks ritzy. There's art on the outside of the building and a black and white striped awning. There's a couple going in looking like they're dressed for the opera. I try not to stare.

It doesn't take us long to get a table. It appears that the head chef is also one of Dan's clients. My hands are shaking by this point, and to calm them I shove them in my pockets. The left one caresses the green plastic lighter. Right finds the compact. My whole body shivers electric. No one notices, Dan included.

The menu sports a variety of Creole entrees, but Dan says "get the duck, it's the best here." So I get the duck.

"Should I get it with the garlic port or the ginger peach sauce?"

"I'm not going to make every decision for you."

Dan orders an appetizer of fried green tomatoes with shrimp remoulade. That by itself costs eighteen bucks. The duck costs nearly three times that.

"Dan, what the fuck are in those cases?" I try to whisper across the table. A couple heads turn, the waiter's is one of them. Dan smiles for all of them, and things go back to normal.

"Alright. I was going to tell you once your duck got here, but we can start now." The waiter returns with two Sam Adams drafts and sets them on the table. "When I started this job there was nothing in them. I put an ad in the paper, saying something like

‘GO ON YOUR OWN PERSONAL TREASURE HUNT FOR ONLY \$29.95’ a month or something. I put my address down and waited for the money to come in. Then I mailed back each of my subscribers a map I’d drawn of New Orleans, a compass, and a key to one of the cases. I didn’t label the streets on the map, just measured the distances and put the starting point and the ending point. Something real simple.” He nods to me and takes a drink of his beer. “At the end, I left them a little black case. Inside I put a little slip of paper that said, congratulations, you are a Master Treasure Hunter, please mail back the key. I let them keep the compass.”

“Cheers,” I say, and we clank glasses and take another swig.

“So I got six subscribers, and I figure I made a quick hundred plus bucks, time to get another real job. I hadn’t run another ad in the paper, not to mention making those maps was a pain in the ass. Thing is, I get this letter from a lady with a check for a second month, telling me how much fun she had doing it. Said she was going to tell all her friends. Said she couldn’t wait to see what the next treasure was going to be.”

“Crazy,” I say.

“Not as crazy as the next day when I get a new customer who claims to be one of her friends. So I go and I make two new maps, and I send them out. Place two black boxes in new locations. And like clockwork I get another two letters a couple weeks later.” I finish my Sam Adams first and motion the waiter for another one. He glares at me and brings me another.

“So, if all you’ve got in these cases are little MASTER OF THE TREASURE HUNT or whatever cards, why does it matter if I screwed up two and seven. Did you give them rankings?”

“What?”

“You know, like TREASURE HUNTER first class, or some shit.”

He starts laughing and I join in.

“I wish I’d thought of that.”

“I bet you had,” I say and take a drink. Our tomatoes arrive and the waiter tells us our duck is on the way.

“Shit, it might’ve make things a little easier. But no, I stopped putting those cards in there. I stopped drawing maps too. See, after her third hunt, the lady still wanted to do it, but she was complaining about the prize. She was my only customer, her friend having not written back after the second time. She said for \$29.95 she should get something more. About this time was my night at the NA meeting. I’d been trying to write a story about it, but couldn’t. Then it all just clicked. I wrote her back the story, which contained a loose description of where the treasure would be in the beginning half, and then sent just that. The other half I put in a black case, dropped off behind the dumpster, and waited.” He grins ear to ear with pride. “A letter doesn’t come for nearly two weeks. But it comes. She loved it. She called it the greatest treasure ever.” And he starts laughing. “I’m still not published.” And we’re both laughing, hard again. Tears form in the corners of my eyes and roll down my cheeks. He stops, says, “I don’t know why that’s so funny,” tries to take a sip of beer, and spits it out as we both start laughing again.

“So, that was all about nine months ago,” he continues, his self-control regained. I eat a fourth tomato, noticing Dan hasn’t even had one. “I have nearly over 100 customers now. I have a database to make sure they never do the same story. I have

nearly sixty stories. I offer different plans of one, two or three stories a month. It's great."

And for a second I hate him.

"So," I say, finishing my second beer, nodding to the waiter for a third, "so how do you keep them from just giving their friends the stories?"

"I promise them an exclusive special new story if a friend signs up and refers them. Otherwise, I don't care. I already do ten to fifteen stops a day. I couldn't handle much more."

"Yeah," I say. I start doing the math in my head. I start realizing who I'm sitting across from.

The duck arrives. It is fantastic. The waiter glares at me the whole time he's serving it. I avoid his glance as best I can, focusing on the hostess to my right and her tight ass. Besides the blonde at the cemetery, it's the first girl I'd seen all day.

We eat in silence besides a couple questions concerning my enjoyment of the duck.

I finish my fourth beer as the waiter returns to take the duck away. I overhear him tell Dan he's going out for a cigarette, do we need anything? Dan tells him no, and before I can get his attention, he's gone.

"Shit," I say.

"What?"

"I need a fresh beer."

"I'll get it," Dan says, getting up. "I want to say hello to Chef Smith as well. Just sit tight."

“Sure,” I say, thrusting my hands into my pockets.

ONE LAST BEER

I check my fly, and it’s in the right place. I wave away the smell of the cigarette that follows me from the bathroom. Dan’s looking around for me, and I rub my nose twice hoping I’m not showing. There’s a PBR in my spot as I sit back down.

“Can you believe it, they serve these here. I figured we’d have another one for old time’s sake,” Dan says.

“Really,” I say, and fight off the urge to talk. I can feel the meth in my system, already having me on edge. I try to look normal. I grab for the PBR, knock it over, then quickly set it back, only slightly soaking the tablecloth. Dan looks at me and I sniff. Then I sniff again.

“Goddammit,” he says softly. I almost think he’s going to cry. I try not to look insane. Sniff sniff.

“Where did you get it from?”

“I’ve had it the whole time,” I say.

“Oh.”

He waves for the check.

“Time to make that last stop,” he says.

“Yeah,” I say. He signs the bill, gets up, and walks out, not waiting for me to follow.

THE DRIVE

In the backseat of the car I heard the old man muttering to himself. They sounded like prayers, but I couldn't make out a word. Dan was driving my car. I handed the old man another beer, and he smiled, missing teeth. He hadn't said much the whole time, just thank yous. He made me want to cry and puke at the same time. Dan's face told me he was more concerned about his jacket.

"Poor bastard," I said as I turned to face the front. The music was loud enough that the bum couldn't hear us if we weren't talking at him. Led Zeppelin was the band of the hour.

"Poor bastard," Dan said, as he pushed my car up to 90.

THE CLIFFS

"So, you're telling me that each of these places we've gone to today has a different story?" The meth has kicked in and I am a full chatterbox now. Dan sits silent, only nodding his head.

"So, what was the story of the bridge and the cemetery?"

"I'll let you read them when we get back."

"Ok, so what's this story?"

"You know this one."

I let my hand rest on the compact again. I stroke its hard plastic outer cover with my thumb.

"Well, I don't know where the fuck we are?"

"Don't you?" Dan says. I look around. Nothing looks familiar. Just all trees, and dark.

“Not without the sun,” I tell him.

“When have you ever been in New Orleans when the sun was out before today?”

“True,” I say, and wait the rest of the trip in silence. It isn’t until he comes over the last hill that I see it, see the sick darkness of the water and the heavy fog of the bog.

“I think I’m going to puke,” I say.

“What?”

“Pull over, I’m going to be sick.”

He does. I throw open the door and run a little ways before duck and beer come out. Dan walks to the edge of the cliff, places down the last black case of the day.

“I thought you knew this story,” he says.

THE STORY

I opened the old man's door and pulled him from the car. Dan was pissing against one of the trees leading up to the cliff. The view was great, the moon poised up against the water against the sky.

“Take a look at that, old man,” I said, walking him toward edge. Dan joined us, handing each of us another PBR.

“Yeah, take a look at that moon. Ain’t she just fantastic?” Dan let out a low whistle. He slapped the old man on the back, nearly knocking him over. I gave out cigarettes and we all smoked, staring off into the deep, enjoying our beers.

“I know what you mean to do,” the old man said. It was the first words out of his mouth the whole time.

“What?” I said.

“I know what you mean to do. I’ve finished my beer and my cigarette, so you might as well get it over with.”

“What are you talking about?” Dan said.

“I may be homeless, but I’m not stupid. But look at you two, drunk and stoned and probably hopped up on some other dope. You’ll get here, where I am, if you don’t change. I know.”

“Now come on,” he said, taking a step toward the cliff, “I’ve spent all night making peace with death and my maker. Let’s get this over with.” And he stood there, arms out wide, on the edge of the cliff, waiting. “Come on, don’t puss out on me now, be a man.” And I turned and started running. Dan stood there. And I never looked back. I got in the car, and I just started driving, and I drove all the way back to Knoxville, leaving Dan staring at that cliff on which no one stood.

THE MAN WHO WAS NO LONGER A BOY

The boy stood in the grass under the shade of a lone tree. He wasn't sure what type of tree it was, having never paid much attention in his first eight years. He knew other things. Movie stars, comic books, baseball cards. The boy knew all their stories. He thought maybe the tree was an elm.

The boy looked at the sky and tried to find the sun, but he couldn't see it. That is odd, thought the boy, since there weren't any clouds either. The sky was bright and the boy was happy to stay under the shade. He sat down on the green earth and began to pick at taller pieces of grass.

The man saw the tree in the distance. He had been walking forever in the veldt. No, not forever, thought the man, be reasonable. He had left the neighborhood countless days ago. When he left he had a destination. Now his destination was the tree before him and some rest. The sky without a sun beat down hard on the man. He didn't realize the sun was missing. Unlike the boy, he did not look for it, only assumed it was there.

The man felt through his trouser pocket for a crumpled pack of cigarettes. He stopped for a second, struck a match, and began to smoke. He placed the burned match in his other trouser pocket and began again toward the tree. Every couple steps he would cough.

The boy under the tree stood up. He stretched out his arms.

The man saw the boy stand up and waved to him. He was glad that there would be company for him under the tree. He did not realize the boy was eight. At the distance, the man could only tell that there was a person. The man was hoping it was some young girl with pretty lips and an eager mind.

The boy saw the man wave at him as he finished yawning. It was obvious

to the boy that this was a man. He was tall and big and walked with a firm foot. Then he knew it was his father come looking for him. He did not wave back. Instead he grabbed his backpack, which was leaned up against the tree, and began to climb.

When the man saw the boy scurry up the tree, he knew his company was not female. He was not entirely disappointed. He continued smoking as he was almost to the tree.

The boy was among the lower branches. He had already planned his escape route. He could go higher by taking the branch on the left and gripping the thick one on the right. He would then pull himself up with his left hand on a thin branch about four feet up. He had already tried it and was certain it would hold his weight. Then he saw the man smoking as he got closer and knew there would be no reason to go higher. Men who smoke do not climb trees.

The man finished the cigarette by rolling the lit end of tobacco off into the grass, where he quickly stomped it out. He then put the butt into his left pocket. He was now under the tree. He looked up and found the boy. "Hello," he said.

"Hello," said the boy.

"Don't mind if I have a seat under your tree, do you?"

The boy thought this to be a rather odd question.

"It's not my tree," said the boy.

"Oh," said the man, puzzled. "Well, you don't mind then if I just sit down. I've been walking for a while, and my legs are very tired."

"I don't care," said the boy.

"Thank you," said the man.

The man sat down, leaning his back against the base of the tree. He began to close his eyes to catch some sleep. The shade felt like swimming in the ocean. The man hoped for good dreams.

The boy had been crouched the entire time, ready to move. After a few minutes he heard the man snoring. The boy began looking for a comfortable place to sit in the tree, but it was all cramped and hard. Frustration set in and the man's snoring only made him angry. He broke a couple branches off and threw them down at the man.

The man was kissing an old girlfriend when her husband began attacking him. He woke up as a stick hit him hard on the hand.

"What are you doing!"

"Waking you up," laughed the boy.

The man looked up at the boy. The dream was forever gone and ruined. He decided not to be angry with the boy.

"You could have just started yelling," said the man.

"Yelling isn't as fun," said the boy.

"Why are you up in the tree?" asked the man.

"Do I frighten you?"

"No. I thought you were my father, so I climbed the tree."

"Well, I am not your father."

"I know that," said the boy, "but my father could have sent you. I am just a boy. I cannot fight."

“Why would we fight?” asked the man.

“Because I’ve run away from home. I’m never going back.”

“Oh,” said the man. “Well, I do not know your father. I am just a boy as well.”

The boy began to laugh. The man laughed with him. “Catch my backpack!” said the boy as he hurtled it down at the man. The man caught it. He winced, and was thankful that the boy had not thrown it at him earlier. The boy was down the tree in a second, and the man watched as he bounced around on the grass.

“What’s in the bag?” asked the man.

“My supplies for running away,” said the boy. “What’s in your backpack?” the boy said, pointing to the one on the man’s back.

“My supplies for running away,” said the man, with a smile.

The boy laughed again.

The boy walked over to the man and stood like a post in front of him. Then he outstretched his hand, and the man went to shake it. The boy pulled his hand away and shook his head. “No no. can I have my backpack?”

“Oh,” said the man. “Of course you can.” He handed over the blue bag which felt like it weighed a good twenty pounds. The boy surprised him by handling it easily with one hand.

“I hope you didn’t break anything when you caught it,” said the boy, and he turned and walked a couple steps away, and then sat down, ten feet between them. The man sat back down against the tree, taking off his own backpack and extracting an apple.

The boy unpacked in under two minutes. He had little piles separated all

around him. The man saw a pile of books, and was curious what the boy had brought to read. The boy stood up and walked back over to the man.

"You broke my red pencil," said the boy.

The man looked at him. He still sat, and had to look up at the boy. The boy had dirty blonde hair and looked bony. His eyes spoke of mischief, and the man knew this wouldn't be the only time the boy would run away from home.

"I'm sorry," said the man. "Let me see here." The man had a large set of colored pencils that he took with him in his backpack. He pulled them out and lifted the cardboard lid.

"Wow," said the boy. "Hold on." He sprinted back to his pile, returning with a sketchbook and a small box of colored pencils.

"Here you go. This is red," said the man, handing him the pencil.

"Can I have a different one instead of red?" the boy asked.

The man thought about this.

"Which one do you want? I do have favorites."

"I don't know. Can I see them?" The man handed the boy his box.

"Wow, 64 different colors? I've seen these in the store, but my mom only buys the ones with eight colors for me. She bought sixteen once, but she donated that to our second grade class, but I'm in third grade now. You wanna see some of my pictures?" The boy sat down close to the man and thrust out his sketchbook. The man took it and opened it up. "The first one's my dog Opie. My mom got him for me when we moved here. I didn't get to name him. They already named him at the pound, and he was going to die, but my mom saved him. I like Opie because it's easy to spell. O.P. and I call him Dopey Opie, because he's kinda a dumb dog. This sunset doesn't look anything like a real sunset," the boy held a yellow-

orange pencil out for the man to inspect. "What a dumb name," said the boy.

"I had a dumb dog I didn't get to name, too," said the man.

"Really?" said the boy.

"Yes. It had belonged to friends of my parents. When they had a baby, Elwood, their dog, bit him. My mother offered to take Elwood in. I called him a crackhead all the time. You'd just had to see it," said the man, as he chuckled to himself. Memories of a dog collecting rocks came to mind.

"What's a crackhead?" asked the boy.

"Oh," said the man. "Nothing. This is an excellent drawing of your dog. I'm impressed, and with only eight colors."

"I didn't even use all of them," said the boy. "I think I only used like five on that picture."

The man flipped to the next picture. A girl in a blue dress sat on a white swing outlined in black. The chains looked grey. "Where did you get the grey for the chains?"

"I used a normal pencil," said the boy. He was looking at magenta, and cyan. He passed off a cornflower and midnight blue. "I don't like the boring names," said the boy. "Yellow orange, red orange, blue green." He looked at the man. Around him he had the pencils separated into piles. "Do you like any of these?" the boy asked.

"I like vivid tangerine," said the man. "It captures sunrises well."

"I liked that one a lot too. What about apricot?"

"You can have that one." The boy seemed disappointed. Too easy, he thought, apricot must not be a good color. "What about magenta?"

"Hmmm, I don't know."

"It is closer to red," the boy said.

“Yes it is.”

“And it was the red one that you broke.”

“True.” The man paused. “So, you don't want the apricot?”

“Well, can I have them both?”

“No.”

The boy went back to examining the pencils. The man went back to his apple and the boy's drawings. The day was progressing nicely. The girl had blonde hair and looked to be waving with her left hand.

“Is this your girlfriend?”

“No,” said the boy. “That's Kim. She kissed me, and when her mom found out we weren't allowed to hang out.” The boy held out an off white pencil.

“What about winter's eve?”

“You don't want that one,” said the man. “You wouldn't be able to see it on the paper.”

The boy went back to his selection process and the man continued looking at the pictures. These really are impressive, thought the man, this boy can't be much more than ten.

“Do you have a quarter?” The boy was looking at him again.

“No,” said the man. The boy scowled, even after the man stood up and turned out both his pockets. “I guess I must not.”

“What about in your bag?” the boy said, reaching for the man's pack on the ground. The man let out a swift kick. His brown boot cut an alley between the boy and the backpack. The boy took a step back and stared at the man, his eyes trying their hardest to show anger. The man simply smiled at the boy.

“There is not one in my bag either. What do you want a quarter for

anyway? There is nothing to buy out here.” The man made a sweeping motion with his right hand to indicate that there was nothing as far as the eye could see. Nothing but grass.

“I wasn't going to buy anything,” said the boy. “I need a quarter to help me make my decision.”

“Oh,” said the man. “Do you not trust yourself?”

“What?” said the boy. He began to think the man stupid. Was flipping a coin not a logical way to handle a problem, he thought.

“You're deciding between pencils, right?”

“Yes,” said the boy. “That is why I need a quarter.”

“Why don't you just decide for yourself?”

“I have,” said the boy. He picked up the sketchbook on the ground. The man had placed it there when he stood to check his pockets. The boy no longer wanted the man to look at his pictures.

“So, what color did you choose then?” asked the man.

“You. Weren't. Listening!” the boy screamed back at the man. “I said that I had decided for myself to use the coin to determine which pencil you were going to give me.”

“Oh,” said the man. He chuckled silently. At least the boy has a sound basis of logic, he thought. “Why do you need a quarter to make the decision?”

“Because I might pick the wrong one,” said the boy.

“So might the coin,” said the man.

“No it won't,” said the boy. “God decides which side that coin will land on.”

“Oh,” said the man.

“Anyway,” said the boy, continuing on in a rather haughty air. A boy is teaching this man something, thought the boy. “Anyway, if the coin is wrong, then it's the coin's fault and not mine.”

“Oh,” said the man again. The boy nodded to him and smiled proudly.

The man would have liked to of thought that the boy reminded him of himself as a boy, but that wasn't so. This boy is much smarter, thought the man, maybe he has a chance.

“So, if the coin is wrong,” said the man, “does that mean that God was wrong as well?”

“See,” said the boy, “that just shows that you have no idea what you are talking about.”

“Well,” said the man, “Answer me this then. Is it worse for the coin to be wrong, or for you?”

The boy and the man stood facing each other under the shade of the tree. The boy smiled his brand of cocky. The man stared back in amusement.

The man wondered if anything would have been gained in just giving the boy both pencils. After a full minute with eyes locked the man decided he wasn't going to blink first. The boy had made that decision when he stood up to answer the man's question.

The boy did not have an answer. He could not find a benefit from either situation. His cocky smile slipped and the man noticed. He smiled back at the boy.

The boy turned his back to the man.

"This is stupid!" he said. "You are stupid!" He tried not to cry and succeeded. He did not know what had angered him so.

"Ok," said the man. "I will not argue that with you. I am stupid."

The boy turned back around. He looked the man up and down. "Say it again," he said.

"I am stupid," the man said, "but I am smart as well."

"I think you are one of those crazy people," the boy said.

"Maybe I am," said the man. This made the boy laugh. It felt good to laugh again after being angry at the man for so long. The man laughed with him. "Yet I still need an answer."

"I don't know the answer," said the boy. "They are both equally bad."

"Then what do you need a coin for? Make the decision yourself."

The boy looked up at him, and then knelt down to where the pencils were. He methodically began putting each pencil back in its place. The boy stood up and handed the pencils back to the man.

"Thank you for letting me look at your pencils mister."

"Which one did you keep?" the man asked.

"The right one," said the boy. The man smiled at the boy. Smartass, he thought.

The boy gathered up his sketchbook and headed back to the pile of belongings near the edge of the shade. The man glanced through his pencils and saw that both apricot and magenta were still there. Which one did he take, the man wondered.

"Hey mister, you ever read this?" the boy asked, thrusting out a dingy copy of *Where the Wild Things Are*. The man looked at the book in the boy's

hand.

“Yes,” he said. “I read that long ago. I remember it was very good.” The boy now had his backpack fully packed, and placed it down close to the man. The man took this to mean they'd finally made friends.

“It's my favorite,” the boy said. “But I don't have many books.”

The man nodded understanding to him. He leaned a foot against the trunk of the tree, let his back fall into it. The bark felt cool against the parts of his skin exposed from holes in his shirt. What wonderful luck this tree was, he thought.

“Hey mister,” the boy said, tugging at his arm. “Do you have any books?”

“Yes,” the man said.

“Which ones?” The boy was excited now. His father had told him that a man is judged by the books he reads. The boy didn't really know what that meant except that books were important.

The man reluctantly bent back down to his bag. The movement caused the blood to rush again, and he felt woozy. He decided to just sit the rest of the time until he left, so he did. When the boy saw the man sitting down, he pulled his bag a little closer and sat down too.

“Here,” said the man. He handed him the three books that he kept with him. The boy looked at the books, opened each up, flipped through the pages, and then put them back down. He looked back to the man, disappointed.

“What?” asked the man as he leaned back to get his hand into his pocket. He pulled out a bent, but still intact cigarette.

The boy watched the man strike a match off his shoe. “Do you not like

my books," the man asked.

"I knew they wouldn't have pictures inside," said the boy. "Some of my father's have pictures at the beginning of a chapter sometimes. But these books don't even have pictures on the covers," the man thought the boy looked faint.

"I know," the man said. "That is odd. I don't know why that is. I do own books with pictures. I just have none with me. But what do you need pictures for?"

The boy's cocky smile returned. He remembered the man was stupid. He said, "How do I know what the book is about without pictures?"

"That's why you read it," the man said.

"But I need the pictures to know that I'm going to like it," the boy said.

"Oh," said the man. He took the first book in his hand. "Well this one is a love story between a man and a woman who aren't allowed to be in love. No, that's not right." The boy looked at him with disinterest. He decided he would fail at trying to describe the other two as well.

This was the first time the man appreciated pictorial covers on books. He picked up the next one.

"Ok, this one is about a doctor who takes a potion and turns himself into a monster that he can't control.

"And this one is about, well, hunting a whale."

The boy looked at the last two books now with new interest. He picked them up, looked at their condition, the number of pages, the size of the words. It should be noted that the boy did not read a single word on any page though. He didn't want to ruin a surprise.

He did read the titles.

"Can I make you a deal?" the boy asked the man.

The man knew what the deal was. He had known when the boy had asked to see his books.

"Since you don't have any pictures in any of your books, how about we trade? My book has loads of pictures, and it's really good."

The man figured it was a good deal.

"Ok," he said, "which one do you want?"

"This one," the boy said, picking up the third. The man winced a little. He had read that so no one else would have to. "I figure it's the longest, it's about hunting a whale, and it's got the word 'dick' in the title. It's got to be good," the boy said, laughing at himself. The man laughed for a different reason.

The man looked at the cigarette in his right hand. He hadn't taken a drag the entire time, and the ash sat perfectly, ghost of a cigarette. Then it fell away.

They were both now fully packed.

"Where were you going before you came to the tree?" the boy asked.

"I don't know," he said. "I left the city. It wasn't very memorable. And I walked until I found this tree. I don't know where I'm going, but I've decided that the city is not for me."

The man laid down now. The grass touched his back and neck. It tickled. His eyes went to the branches and then he closed his eyes. After a few minutes he began to snore.

"Wake up wake up," the boy said.

“Dammit,” the man whispered. “What?” The man was desiring a good dream.

“You didn’t ask me where I was going,” the boy said.

“You told me that you were running away,” the man said, and then he closed his eyes again.

“But you didn’t ask me why,” the boy said.

The man gave in. He propped himself up on one elbow. “Ok. Why young sir, did you run away?”

“Because my parents don’t let me do anything my way. I have all these rules and chores and it isn’t fair. And my mom and dad both make me work all weekend after having school all week. I barely get to play at all.

“Last weekend, my dad had me pulling weeds. And I have to get the root or it grows back. But there are so many weeds, and they’re all so small. So I told them I quit. So they grounded me for a whole week.”

The man nodded understanding.

“So, I decided that today I would make enough noise that my mom kicked me out of the house. Instead she came at me with a wooden spoon. She started hitting me with it, but it broke on my wrist,” he showed the man the welt that was on his right wrist. “Then I told her I hated her. She started crying, and I knew I was in trouble. when my dad got home he would beat me for that. So I packed a bag and set out. I stopped here under this tree.”

“And you’re never going home?” the man asked.

“No,” said the boy.

“Well, good luck,” said the man. He laid back down and closed his eyes. He was back on some beach, laying an inch deep in water in the sand.

“Wake up!” The man opened his eyes. He was back under the tree. He sat up and looked at the boy in disgust.

“What now?”

“You can't just go to sleep.”

“I was doing a good job of it a second ago, the man said.

“I don't hate my mom,” the boy said.

“I didn't think that you really did,” said the man.

“I just get so mad. They aren't fair at all.”

“No parents are,” said the man. “Do you really want to run away for good?”

“Not anymore,” said the boy. “Now want to come with you.”

The man laughed loud at this. The way he laughed made the boy uneasy.

“Come with me. Boy, where I am going, you cannot come.”

“Why not?” the boy asked, “Are we not friends?”

“We are,” said the man.

“I want to come.”

“It would be irresponsible to let you come along. You haven't been where I've been to go where I'm going to go.”

“That sounds retarded,” said the boy, and the man agreed.

“It doesn't matter. You cannot come with me.”

The boy looked away from the man, out into the veldt and the brightness.

“Really,” said the boy, “I've been here for days. Everything looks the same. I came to this tree to rest as I ran away, and don't know which direction I came from. There is no sun to tell direction by, and the whole damn tree looks the same.”

“HMMMM,” said the man, “that is odd.” Then he laid back down and closed his eyes. He felt the sand again.

“Wake up!”

The man opened his eyes.

“What?”

“I don't know which way is home!”

“Well,” said the man. “You did want to run away forever.”

“Yes, but I've changed my mind.”

“Well,” said the man, “then go home.”

“But I don't know which direction is home.”

“Then you best get started now.”

“Which way?” asked the boy.

“I don't care,” said the man. “You'll figure it out.”

The man closed his eyes. He could feel the water running cool on his legs, and he wondered why it took so long to get here.