

STORIES

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Charles Booth

# Stories

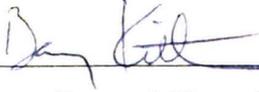
by

Charles Booth

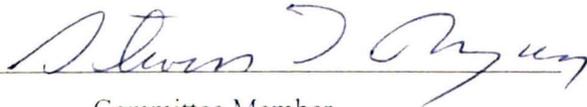
December, 2010

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For Danica,  
my first editor, my best friend, and my loving wife.

## ABSTRACT

CHARLES BOOTH. Stories (under the direction of Barry Kitterman, MFA)

These six stories, with the exception of “Acadiana,” were written over the last two years and represent the literary influences that have inspired me. “The First Day of Spring” owes a great debt and pays homage to J.D. Salinger’s short story “Uncle Wiggily in Connecticut.” “Medjugorje” and “Priests” were shaped from my reading of Philip Roth’s “Goodbye Columbus” and Bernard Malamud’s “The Magic Barrel.” “A Good Book,” the longest piece in this collection and the one I spent the least amount of time on, was conceived and developed while I read Doris Lessing’s “To Room Nineteen.” “Final Thoughts” was originally intended as the first chapter of a novel, which was to be an absurd retelling of Albert Camus’ “The Plague.” Which brings us back to “Acadiana.” I wrote that story in 2002, after studying several Jewish-American authors such as Roth, Malamud, Saul Bellow, and Abraham Cahan. It was the work of these writers in particular, and their devotion to the age-old craft of storytelling, that originally inspired me to move forward with my long held hobby of writing. I honestly don’t know what the future holds for fiction, specifically short fiction, but I hope these stories represent a small continuation of that tradition they fought to maintain.

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“Time wounds all heals.”

– *John Lennon*

## Acadiana

It was six a.m. and not that hot yet, but L.J. popped open a beer anyway. The morning sun broke through the trees and glittered across the murky water as he chugged down his first few gulps of the Miller High Life. He sat down in the pirogue and supported the beer can between his knees. Puddles of brown water and clumps of dead leaves covered the bottom of the boat and swished across his boots while he rowed out into the swamp.

He'd bought an outboard motor years ago, but it wasn't worth using in this part of the Atchafalaya. It took forever with the motor to navigate around the tree trunks and dead limbs poking up out of the muck. Rowing into the swamp with a paddle was faster, and he was in a hurry today. Jenny was coming. Her letter said she'd be there around one p.m., but it didn't say why she was coming. It was the first time he'd heard from her in about fifty years. He hadn't slept much since the letter arrived in his mailbox. He'd burned it the other night before he went to bed, but he knew she was still coming.

Sweat rolled down L.J.'s cheeks when he reached the first trap. His head glistened from the perspiration, and it matted down the few gray hairs he had left. He took a long sip from his beer and then pulled the trap out of the water. The crawfish tried to free themselves from the wire net. L.J. took another sip of beer and watched their bodies wiggle. They reminded him of the flames consuming Jenny's letter.

When L.J. was six years old, Mr. and Mrs. Arnold moved into the small, white house across the street. L.J. sat in a tree in his yard one Saturday and watched the new neighbors carry their meager belongings into the house. They didn't have any children with them, so L.J. stopped paying attention. He heard later that they came from Houston, Texas, and that Mr. Arnold won

the house in a poker game. But Mr. Arnold was a quiet man who didn't seem interested in talking about his good fortune.

Not that L.J. would have understood him. The Arnolds spoke English. He only spoke Cajun French. L.J. didn't understand the nuns at his school either. They weren't from St. Martin's Parish, and they yelled at the children as if they were animals. In class, the nuns asked L.J. questions, and he had no idea what their English words meant. The tall nun with the bony face drew a circle on the chalkboard and made L.J. stick his nose in it until he understood. When he still didn't learn English, she took to slapping his hands with a wooden ruler. The pain stinging through his palms eventually helped him pick up the new language. The first words he remembered understanding from the tall nun were "You stupid coonass." Mr. Arnold called him a stupid Cajun, and L.J. quickly realized that the words were synonyms.

Why was she coming to visit now? At his truck, an old Ford pickup with brown paint peeling off the hood, L.J. loaded bags of crawfish into the bed. He wiped the sweat from his head and pulled the last Miller High Life from the cold water in the ice chest. He knew he didn't have any waiting for him in the refrigerator back home. The cold beer numbed his hand, and he thought about saving it until he really needed it. The humid air grew thick, making it hard to inhale. After a few difficult breaths, L.J. popped open the beer and took a big swig. He would buy some more after he sold the crawfish.

L.J. drove down the dirt road next to the swamp, kicking up clouds of dust behind him. At the end of the road, he turned onto Jackson Street and his truck bounced over potholes and cracks in the pavement. A few drops of beer spilled onto his thin, blue shirt with the metal snaps instead of buttons. He pulled the truck off onto a patch of grass near the grocery store and

downed the rest of his beer. L.J. threw the can onto the floorboard with the others and then went out to sit in the sun with his crawfish.

He licked his dry mouth while sweat stung his eyes. He thought about going into the grocery after making his first sale to pick up a six-pack. A Chevy pickup pulled up next to his truck, and the young driver leaned out the window. He had long brown hair, a mustache and no shirt.

“How much?” he yelled.

“A dolla’ a pound,” L.J. said.

“There’s a guy by the Laundromat selling for fifty cents a pound.”

“Caw! Get outta here! I know he ain’t sellin’ for dat.”

“I saw it. Fifty cents.”

“Mais, dis is de cheapest you gonna find. Dat fella probably sellin’ for \$2.50 a pound.”

“I guess I’ll go buy from him then.”

“Mais, go ahead. You ain’t doin me no favor.”

“Fucking coonass!”

The Chevy drove away. L.J. knew he was lying. No one could afford to sell crawfish for fifty cents a pound these days. The whole country was crawfish crazy. So many people were out in the swamps that the traps usually weren’t half full when he pulled them out of the water. One guy threatened to shoot L.J. because he thought he was messing with his traps. A dollar a pound for fresh, Louisiana crawfish was the best deal anyone was going to get, and L.J. knew the Chevy would drive up again.

But the morning stretched on and the truck didn’t come back. At eleven a.m., L.J. reached into the ice chest for another beer, and the mild water reminded him there were none

left. He still didn't have enough money for a six-pack. Maybe he overlooked one at home, he thought. Home! Jenny was coming in two hours. He needed to get home.

L.J. drove back down the bumpy, paved road and then turned off onto a rougher, dirt road. His truck bounced down the dusty, narrow strip that took him deep into the swamp. The road ended in front of a shack made of rotting, gray wood and resting three feet above the ground on brick pillars.

L.J. grabbed a sack of crawfish and emptied it into a tall, metal pot filled with water. He put the pot on a propane burner to boil up some lunch. He went inside the shack to grab the big ice chest, some salt and the cayenne pepper. The flimsy building only had two rooms – a kitchen and a bedroom. The kitchen was nothing more than a sink, a table and two chairs, and an old refrigerator with rounded edges. The floor and the walls were made of the same rotting wood as the exterior. The other room contained a brass, double bed with a toilet and a bathtub sitting in plain view next to it like furniture. His nephew visited once, and the boy spent the entire time staring with an open mouth at the toilet sitting out in the middle of the bedroom. A crucifix decorated the wall behind the toilet, and L.J. averted his eyes from it every time he walked into the room.

In the kitchen, he checked the fridge but found no beer. He looked around the room for an old beer can or maybe some loose change, and in doing so spotted the burnt remains of Jenny's letter in the ashtray on the table.

Jenny Arnold was born two weeks after L.J.'s tenth birthday. As soon as she could walk, she started making the journey across the road to the Babineaux farm. She had long, blond hair and long eyelashes, and she smelled sweet from her mother's perfume. She brought L.J. pictures

she drew of her farm – colorful drawings with bright green fields and deep blue skies that he hung on his bedroom walls. She gave him her crayons once to draw his own picture. All the other boys in the parish lived miles away, except for Blue and Harris, the fat twins who told their mother everything, so L.J. spent most of his time with Jenny. He taught her to play basketball, and they spent many afternoons dribbling on the dirt court and shooting at the crooked, homemade backboard and rim. Jenny never made a shot, even when L.J. lifted her toward the rim on his shoulders.

When they weren't playing, he helped her with her chores. Jenny's father would put the seven-year-old girl on the tractor while he and L.J. picked cabbage. She'd hang from the steering wheel, unable to see but driving in a perfect line over the rows of crops. L.J. and her father followed, plucking cabbages from the earth and tossing them into the back of the dusty trailer that rattled behind the tractor. Every few minutes, L.J. would run, jump on the tractor and turn it for her to lead them over another row of cabbages.

He took her to the fair in Lafayette once. He was seventeen and she was seven. He had saved his money to take her, and reminded her about it days ahead of time. When they arrived, it was full of teenagers, and he finally realized how young she really was. Jenny smiled and held his limp hand. When she went to the bathroom, he stood with a group of boys, hoping she wouldn't find him.

“Hey, what's your name?” the short, redheaded boy asked.

“Dey call me L.J.”

“Dey? Y'all hear how he talks? What's 'dey' mean?” the boy asked.

The other boys laughed.

“Wha?” L.J. asked.

“Listen to this coonass. Can’t you speak English?”

“Mais, I am.”

“May, you ain’t. Look, he’s gonna cry.”

“Caw! I ain’t.”

L.J. bit his lip, but that didn’t stop his eyes from watering. The boys laughed louder and called him names like “cry-baby.”

“Stop it!” a voice screamed behind him. Jenny’s cheeks were red, and her little hands were balled into fists.

“He’s got to have a little girl to protect him,” the redheaded boy laughed.

“Leave him alone!” Jenny yelled.

“Shut up, bitch,” the boy said.

She froze while the others laughed. L.J. walked away, and when she woke from her daze, Jenny ran after him. She grabbed his hand, and her fingers were sticky, but warm, and for a moment he thought about squeezing that little palm. Instead, he jerked his hand away and said nothing.

The phone rang in the kitchen, and L.J. stopped squeezing his hand into a fist. He picked up the receiver.

“Yeah?”

“Lawrence? Lawrence Babineaux?” the voice asked.

“Yeah. Who dis?”

“It’s Chas Hartley again.”

“You da newspaper man?”

“Yes, with ‘The New York Times.’”

“Yeah?”

“I’d still really like to talk to you about Korea.”

L.J. said nothing, and the reporter on the other end of the phone did nothing to stop the silence.

“Korea?” L.J. finally said.

“July 1950. I want you to know I...”

L.J. hung up the phone. Then he took it off the hook. His phone service was about to be disconnected anyway. He went outside and drained the crawfish from the water and tossed the steaming pile into the big ice chest. He poured salt and cayenne pepper over them and shook the ice chest to mix in the seasonings. L.J. scooped out a bowl of crawfish and went inside where he dumped them onto the newspapers covering the table. He pulled a plate of sausage from the fridge and looked one last time for a beer. Still nothing. He slammed the refrigerator door shut.

L.J. sat at the table and pulled off the tail of a large, red crawfish. He broke the top two links of shell from the tail and pulled the small meat free. He ate it, licking his fingers as he did. He stood to get a beer, but quickly sat back down.

Drops of sweat reappeared on his forehead. L.J. wiped them off with the back of his hand, leaving a smear of crawfish juice by his eyebrow. He slouched at the table and watched the sun outside beat down through the trees onto a rusty, folding chair. In the distance was the swamp. He wiped the sweat off again.

“Dis fuckin’ place,” he said. The heat followed him, no matter where he hid. It seeped indoors and under shade to find him. It stalked him all his life, draining the energy from his body.

And who lives in a swamp, he thought. He heard stories about Cajuns living in Canada before the British kicked them out. Canada. Not some sweltering swamp, but a solid place where he could have a brick home on a snow-covered hill. A place where he could have a wife and children, and no longer eat by himself in a dilapidated shack. His life was decided for him 200 years ago by the British, and he believed this made all his sins their fault.

But Canada was just a dream. Louisiana, with its inescapable heat, was his reality. He spent his entire life covered in sweat.

The heat had followed L.J. all the way to Korea. Like that day in July when he stood near a stone bridge in his thick, green fatigues, carrying his rifle. Sweat rolled down his body while he talked to his buddies about some soldier named Maltin. Rumor had it, a 13-year-old boy disguised as a refugee shot Maltin. They heard stories every day of these infiltrators from the north.

L.J. stood with the other soldiers while hundreds of refugees marched up the dirt road toward them. Their clothes were nothing but rags, covered in filth. Their bodies, even those of the young, looked old and tired. L.J. watched them stumble forward. They were weak. They were poor. They were ignorant. They were coonasses, he thought. They smelled rotten, and they drug their feet lazily across the hard ground just like a fucking coonass. Infiltrators? Some hid their faces. Some cried. One boy laughed. He was frail, this boy. His bare, mosquito-bitten legs, peaking out of his tattered pants, looked like brittle sticks. Not flesh and muscle and bone. His head was misshapen, with either a tumor or a welt swelling from his brow, closing one of his eyes. The boy had an overbite and kept his mouth wide open like a fool. When he saw L.J. he laughed, baying like a hyena. The woman with him tried to calm the boy down, but his one good

eye stared wildly at the soldier and he laughed, wheezing and gulping for air as he did so. He laughed like a coonass, L.J. thought as he pulled the trigger. The bullet from his rifle ripped through the boy's little chest, and before his body hit the ground, a lieutenant ordered the others to open fire on the refugees.

Cries were heard through the gunfire. An old man grabbed his stomach. Blood poured down a little girl's face. A mother fell, crushing the baby she carried. Screams. They ran under the bridge and L.J. pulled the trigger, praying for the bullets to come out faster. For days they shot at the refugees under the bridge, leaving hundreds of bloody bodies stacked on top of each other. And after everyone else stopped, L.J. kept shooting the corpses and beating them with his rifle until they sent him home.

They put him on a military transport plane that took him over the Pacific Ocean for eighteen hours. He sat in the back with all the boxes. He knew what was in them. His friend Clint might have been inside one. The plane bounced, shaking the boxes. Shaking them as if whoever was inside was trying to get out. They were supposed to contain soldiers, but what if they lied? What if the refugees' bodies were inside? Or the boy? The thin fool of a boy? What if he was trying to break out? So L.J. sat for eighteen hours watching the boxes move and wanting to hold Jenny's hand again.

L.J. got on his knees and crawled around the floor looking for change. He found a few pennies that he had ignored the day before while doing the same thing. Maybe he could ask Jenny for some money, he thought. No. It wouldn't be a good visit. How could it be? Then why was she coming? What did she want? She wanted to torture him, he thought. She was already torturing him, and she hadn't even arrived yet. She was making him wait for her when he could

have been out selling his remaining sacks of crawfish to get enough money for a six-pack of Miller High Life. L.J.'s arms tightened and shook. His eyes watered. He ran out to the truck to see if there was just a sip left in one of the old cans. There was only enough to drop on his tongue and send the tears down his face.

He was drinking the day Jenny visited him after he got back from Korea. He sat alone in his parents' house, drinking a beer on the couch. The air shivered out of his lungs as he struggled to breathe normally. Sunlight entered the room through the screen door, bringing with it the humid, Louisiana air. L.J. took deep breaths and watched a shadow fall across the doorway. Jenny. She was ten years old, and her golden blond hair was tied in pigtails with white, silk ribbons. The screen door slammed behind her as she entered.

"I didn't know you was back," she said. She smiled, and L.J. couldn't remember when he last saw teeth so white.

"Pop said you got back on Friday. Why ain't you come to see me?"

The light spilled in through the screen door and landed on her smooth skin, browned by the sun. She wore some of her mother's perfume, and the smell mixed with the odor of his beer. He took his last sip and then set the empty can on the floor. Her fingers were crossed. The soft, little fingers he had dreamed of caressing while on the plane home.

"Come," he said. She didn't move from the light of the doorway. "Mais, it's been 'bout a year since I seen you. Come sit wit me."

She moved slowly into the room. Her eyes wider than he remembered. They didn't look the same, but they were still beautiful, he thought. On the couch, she looked down at her crossed fingers while he looked at her.

“What was it like?” she asked.

“Hot.”

“Did you...did you see anything bad?”

L.J.’s breaths came faster and sweat trickled down from his thick, brown hair. His foot nervously tapped against the floor. He once again heard the rumble of the airplane engines. He saw the boxes stacked before him. The plane shook, and he heard the clammy white flesh slapping against the inside of the boxes. He pushed himself back, wishing he could grab Jenny’s hand again.

“Are you OK?” she asked. She was sitting next to him on the plane. The boxes banged against each other, and he grabbed her small, white hand. He squeezed her fingers, but the boxes wouldn’t stop shaking. He pulled her close and hugged her. He kissed her cheek, hoping to drown out the sound of the dead bodies jerking in their sleep.

“Stop L.J.,” she said, but he only heard the screams of the refugees. He watched the bodies fall on top of each other, sending a river of blood gushing out from under the bridge. L.J. ripped her shirt, trying to block out the screams. Tears were in his eyes as he grabbed her breasts.

“L.J.,” she said softly. He paused. Jenny trembled beneath his hands. She’d grown taller, homelier since he last saw her. Her face was thinner. Her eyes, colder. Who was she? He looked away and then felt the strange girl squirm free. The screen door slammed behind her.

L.J. sat with his arms folded on the table and his head resting on top of them. He had heard that when Jenny turned eighteen, she went to school at Charity Hospital in New Orleans and became an X-ray technician. She married a law student from Tulane, and now they lived in Kentucky. She probably never told anybody what happened that afternoon, he thought.

Outside, a car door closed. L.J. looked up and saw her standing at the entrance to his shack. Her hair was gray and cut short. Thin wrinkles creased the once smooth skin on her face, but her eyes were wide like the last time he saw her.

“You comin’ in?” he asked.

“I need a minute,” she said.

They looked at each other in silence. Jenny bit her lip and walked inside. She studied the two rooms. She looked at the toilet next to the bed and the old, dirty refrigerator and nodded her head at something only she understood.

“Why you come here?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” she said. She coughed. A loud, wet cough that had her bending over before she could get it under control.

“You come from Kentucky for dis?”

“I came to see my mother.”

“She still alive?”

“I came to visit her grave.”

She coughed again and the wheezing lasted for almost a minute. She tapped her chest a few times to finally stop.

“I had to see you one last time,” she said. “I don’t know why, but I had to see what happened to you.”

“You seen. Now you can go. Go back to Kentucky.”

“I am.”

She walked out of the shack and down to her car. The sunlight aggravated her cough. She spit on the ground to stop hacking. A wet, red glob landed in the dirt.

“Goin’ to Kentucky now?” he yelled.

“Tomorrow. I’m staying with my brother tonight.”

“Wait,” he said.

L.J. walked to his truck and pulled out his remaining sacks of crawfish. He set them down in front of Jenny.

“Take dis. Get some cayenne pepper and salt and sprinkle it over dis after you boil ‘em. Y’all eat good tonight.”

Jenny’s eyes were small again, like when she was a girl. She pressed her fist against her mouth to fight back a cough. The effort made her young eyes water.

“Put it in the trunk,” she said.

L.J. put the sacks of crawfish in the trunk of her car. He heard Jenny coughing in the front seat.

She waved briefly, and then the car disappeared down the dirt road. L. J. walked back into the house, past the refrigerator and crawled into the bed. He pulled the sheets up around him and closed his eyes. A cool wind drifted in through the window and ruffled his hair as he slept.

## **The First Day of Spring**

Amy Tate arrived early to all her appointments, but on the morning of March 20, she deliberately showed up late to the coffee shop to see her old college roommate, Jess. Amy pulled into the parking lot a few minutes before ten, but she stayed inside her car until the dashboard clock said “10:20.”

To distract herself – her heart was racing – she took a magazine from her bag and finished reading the article on late bloomers. Just because she was almost thirty and had never had a poem published didn’t mean she was without talent. Mr. Gladwell, the author of the article, provided a few reassuring examples of people, such as Cezanne, who did not find success until later in life. Amy smiled, but when she caught a glimpse of her face in the rearview mirror, she thought her happiness looked insincere, and she watched as the smile turned into a sneer.

Amy finished reading the article before it was time to go into the coffee shop, so she took a pad and pen from her bag and wrote out a to-do list. The list contained the following items: pick up comforter from cleaners, vacuum, make dinners and lunches for the week, mail bills, water plants, dust, pick up gallon of milk, grade papers, work on poetry. She looked back in the rearview mirror, and after a few seconds of pulling the loose skin on her cheeks and under her jaw, she added, “go exercise” to her list.

Amy wasn’t unattractive, but she knew with a little extra effort, people might take more notice of her. A few sit-ups wouldn’t hurt. Some clothes with a little more pizzazz also. She wore a pink cardigan and khaki pants on this particular morning, and though she could find nothing wrong with the outfit, she thought it, like her haircut, was somewhat bland.

Before putting the notepad away, she made one last entry. Below “go exercise,” Amy wrote “kill my father.” She thought it’d be funny, but the phrase depressed her, so she scratched it off the list.

She smiled again into the rearview mirror, took a deep breath, and then exited the car. Jess had never been someone whose company she enjoyed. The day they first met, moving cardboard boxes and clothes into their small dorm room, Amy considered filling out all the paperwork required by University Housing to change roommates.

“For Christ’s sake Matt, help her with those boxes.”

Those were the first words she heard Jess say. The mysterious Matt, a tall, skinny kid with curly long hair and pimples on his forehead and chin, shuffled out the door. Amy thought he was going to help unload her car, but she never saw him again.

“Is that your boyfriend?” she asked.

“Matt?” Jess laughed while tucking in her shirt. “Afraid not. It’s goddamn hot in here, isn’t it?”

Jess stuck her face, sticky with sweat, in front of the fan. The strands of her long, brown hair floated back behind her ears. She moaned and seemed to enjoy the cool air on her face a little too much.

“Your parents here?” Jess asked.

Amy simply said “no” instead of explaining that her father was sick and her mother was dead.

“Mine didn’t come up either. It was a big goddamn deal convincing them to stay home. But they know I don’t believe in that sentimental bullshit anyway.”

The lesser profanity Amy could handle in small doses. It was the taking of the Lord's name in vain that really bothered her. She shuddered every time Jess uttered a "goddamn" or a "Christ" or a "Jez-zus." It took only three days for the roommates to have their first confrontation.

"I would appreciate it if you didn't talk like that," Amy said. "I think it's offensive."

"It's a free goddamn country," Jess said.

Amy stormed out of the room and went down the hall to the bathroom where she cried. It was the first time in her life that she'd ever yelled at anyone, although Jess probably wouldn't consider that being yelled at. Amy's hands shook, she was so nervous, but as she wiped away her tears, she felt strangely triumphant.

The arguments continued. Little fights between the roommates broke out about once a month. Amy didn't like it when Jess smoked in their room, even though she kept the window open. She worried the floor's resident assistant would find Jess's bottle of vodka in the freezer. Matt vanished, but different men showed up every weekend, and Amy detested waking up to the squeaking of bedsprings. And, most important of all, on the few occasions that Amy did bring a boy up to their dorm room, she didn't appreciate how Jess walked around in her bra.

"Can you please cover yourself?" she said.

"He doesn't mind, do you?" Jess asked. The boy, blushing, only stuttered.

"Just put on a shirt for crying out loud."

"I thought you said all my clothes made me look like a whore?"

"I hate you," Amy said. Her eyes watered as she pulled the dumbfounded boy by the hand to leave the room.

After that freshman year, the fighting ended. Jess married a soldier and moved off campus. Amy didn't see her much until the final semester of her senior year, when they shared a class together. They sat next to each other. They spoke in strange, reserved voices. They both tried too hard to revive some imagined friendship between them. But Amy knew all Jess's offers of "getting together sometime" were merely courtesy statements and not intended to be taken seriously.

She hadn't seen Jess since their final exam in that class. Her former roommate drifted occasionally through her memory, and a few of her dreams, but she'd given no serious thought to Jess until that March morning when Amy checked her Facebook page and found a new "friend" request awaiting her. She dragged the cursor over the "ignore" button, fully intending to click it. A moment later, without thinking, she watched herself accept the request. By noon on that same day, a message arrived inviting her to meet for coffee the next Saturday. Amy, as always, said she'd be there at ten a.m. on the dot.

She entered the coffee shop around 10:22 a.m. Jess was nowhere to be seen. Thank God. Don't smile too big. Maybe she's late. Maybe she didn't get tired of waiting and leave. Whatever the case for Jess' absence, Amy no longer thought she needed a chamomile tea to calm her racing heart. She'd get a regular coffee, even though the caffeine made her anxious. She sat at a table with her drink, wishing she'd brought her magazine inside or better yet a pad of paper to get some writing done, when she heard a familiar voice behind her.

"Hey babe. Sorry I'm late."

*Babe.* She had forgotten how much she hated that word.

Jess removed her sunglasses and put them in her purse. She'd just come from the gym, evidently, because she still wore a pair of black yoga pants and a sports bra. Her bare abs were

more defined than they'd ever been in college, and Amy thought she looked a good three or four inches taller too. Her hair was cut short, making her appear not necessarily older, but more sophisticated. Her brown eyes, however, still watched the world with the same dull, uninterested expression that Amy had tried so hard to forget.

"Hope I haven't kept you waiting too long," Jess said.

"No, no. I got here late myself."

The women hugged and then Jess ordered herself a latte and a chocolate muffin. Amy almost asked her to order her a chamomile tea. The coffee wasn't agreeing with her.

The table they sat at was next to the big window at the front of the narrow coffee shop, giving them a view of the sunny street, still wet from the morning rain. The storm had knocked white petals from the trees, and the rain had matted them against the glass and the sidewalk.

"I never thought March would get here, much less spring," Jess said. "It was a long, goddamn winter."

Her hand shook as she talked, and she balled it into a fist as if to keep it under control. Amy couldn't tell if her voice sounded angry or if it was simply the same bored monotone with which she talked about everything.

"You look great, babe. You haven't changed."

"I've gotten fat," Amy said.

"Stop it. You look beautiful."

"You look great."

"Thanks. So, you're a teacher, too?" Jess asked. "I always thought you'd be some kind of writer. Didn't you write for the school's newspaper?"

“The literary magazine. I was the poetry editor. I still write, but I went back and got my master’s in education, and I’m about to start a Ph.D.”

Amy knew she was talking too fast, trying to impress her old roommate, but she wouldn’t have been so embarrassed by this if Jess’s eyes had shown the slightest bit of interest.

“God, babe. When do you relax?”

“I don’t. I get nervous when I have too much free time.”

A brief silence arose between them, and in this pause, Jess’s fidgeting grew worse. She spilled her latte on her hand and hissed at how it burned. She picked up the muffin, looked at it and then dropped it onto its little plate without taking a bite. The plate rattled loudly against the table, causing the man reading the newspaper next to them to glance at the noise. Amy didn’t like him being so close, and she was sure that since they’d gotten his attention, he wouldn’t be able to help himself from listening to their conversation.

“How’s your dad?” Jess asked.

“Not good,” Amy said. She wanted to add, “I’m going to kill him,” but her mouth wouldn’t form the words.

“He’s gotten worse?” Jess asked.

“He’s on a feeding tube.”

Amy looked at the man with the newspaper. Go ahead and pretend to read. You won’t get anything here.

“Is that something that’s permanent?” Jess asked.

It was now Amy who was fidgeting. She swung her legs open and shut under the table. She’d said too much for the man with the newspaper, reading what must be the world’s longest damn article.

“No. I don’t think so,” Amy said. “He was upset with me for allowing them to do it.”

“Can he talk now?”

“No. But his eyes were so angry. He just stared at me.”

“Does he want to die?” Jess asked.

Amy only shrugged, but the answer was yes. Her father wanted to die. The doctors and nurses wanted him to die. Even Amy wanted him to die. They were all waiting for her to kill him. And it would be so simple – just order the feeding tube removed and let him starve.

“Let’s talk about something else. How are you?”

“I’m okay,” Jess said. “It’s this new medicine I’m on. It feels like there’s goddamn chalk in my veins.”

She pulled off a small chunk of her muffin and nibbled on it.

“How’s Mark?” Amy asked.

Mark was Jess’s husband. Her second husband. He was not the soldier she married after her freshman year in college.

“Mark’s fine,” she said. “He’s still beautiful.”

“You don’t sound happy about that,” Amy said.

“I don’t care. At least I don’t care as much as he does.”

Jess pulled another small chunk off her muffin, but she threw it down on the plate instead of eating it. The muffin piece rolled onto the floor, next to the foot of the man with the newspaper. He did a decent job of pretending not to notice.

“This medicine makes me nauseous. I can’t eat a goddamn thing anymore. You want it?”

Amy shook her head.

“It’s an anti-depressant,” Jess said bluntly.

“Oh.”

“The worst part of it is I can’t finish anymore.”

“Finish?”

“Orgasm.”

Amy saw the man with the newspaper out of the corner of her eye. Was he leaning closer? He hadn’t turned the page of the newspaper in several minutes. What was he reading?

“Can you keep your voice down?” she asked.

“Are you still worried about what people will hear, babe?”

Amy crossed her arms. She turned her head to avoid seeing their neighbor at the next table.

“Mark should be the one on the pills,” Jess continued. “He has no trouble finishing. But that’s always been the case.”

“Can we please talk about something else?”

Amy looked directly at the man with the newspaper, and Jess turned to see the stranger for the first time. He squinted, intent on whatever he was reading, even though his eyes didn’t move from left to right. A moment later, he folded the paper, coughed into his hand and then stood and walked away without looking at the two women, which took quite a bit of effort since they sat between him and the front door.

“I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable, babe.”

“Well you did. And I don’t understand why you suddenly thought we should meet if this is what you want to talk about, *babe*.”

“Very good,” Jess said. She smiled and was genuinely pleased by Amy’s spunk. “I’ve been thinking about you lately. That’s all.”

“Me? Why?”

“I don’t know. Maybe because you were the only person who showed any understanding when I started seeing Mark.”

Amy had been understanding? She didn’t remember it that way. Not only was Jess a married woman when she started seeing Mark, but her husband was off fighting a war.

“I was way too goddamn young to marry David,” she said. “I was only nineteen, for Christ’s sake. Everyone thought I was a whore for dating Mark while my husband was away, but we were separated. I’d moved into an apartment before he deployed. I couldn’t divorce David until he got back. You can’t take legal action against a soldier while he’s deployed. But the marriage was over. He knew it. I knew it. We were separated. And it’s not like I had a fling. I married Mark.”

“That’s true.” Amy finished her coffee. She remembered how she didn’t want to sit next to Jess in the class they took together their senior year. She remembered how she didn’t walk across campus with her afterwards, and how she struggled to come up with plausible lies to avoid eating lunch with her in the cafeteria.

“I never should have married David,” Jess said. Her feet tapped against the floor, as if she were in a hurry to leave. “I told him before he left for Iraq that I hoped he’d die. Isn’t that horrible? I used to be able to say the worst things to people and not even feel bad. Now, I’m paying for it. I remember it all.”

“But you didn’t mean it, right?”

“I probably did mean it then,” Jess said. “I regret it now, but I can’t honestly say I didn’t mean it. I wanted him dead.”

David had big ears. That's what Amy remembered about him. He wasn't very attractive. He had a pale complexion that turned pink instead of brown in the sun. His biceps were also kind of small, she thought, for a soldier, and he blinked often whenever he was in a group of people.

"Do you know what today is?"

The day I'm going to kill my father, Amy thought.

"The first day of spring," she said.

"It's also the day the war started," Jess said.

"In Iraq?"

"That's the one."

She was right, Amy thought. It started on a warm spring night in 2003. She watched the news on television, and then she went outside onto the balcony of her apartment and wrote an essay. She titled it, "Do Angels Carry Swords?" She'd been such a good writer back then. What had she done with that essay?

"I remember that night clearly," Jess said. Her legs stopped shaking. She slouched low in her seat, looking very much like an angry child, bored by the world. "You know what I was doing? Mark and I were driving back from dinner, and I was going down on him. Can you believe that? That's what I was doing when Bush came on the radio to say we were at war. I had my head in another man's lap while my husband was going off to possibly die. I didn't love David, but my god. I can't explain how I feel now about it. I felt so bold then."

"Do you ever hear from him," Amy asked.

"David? When he got back, we got divorced. There was no need for us to keep in touch. We didn't have any children. Nobody owed the other any money. I hadn't heard from him since we split. That was five years ago."

“I wonder if he’s still in the army. He might be married himself.”

“I googled his name last week,” Jess said. “Don’t look at me that way, babe. I wasn’t going to contact him. I wouldn’t do that to Mark. I was just curious about what happened to him.”

“Did you find anything?”

“Yeah,” Jess said. “He’s dead.”

Amy suddenly felt sick. She covered her mouth with her hand. David’s skin had been so pale, she remembered. It was so white and he looked so soft, she imagined she could mold his body like clay.

“When did he die?” she asked.

“A year ago. He’s been dead a year, and I never even knew.”

“In Iraq?”

“Afghanistan.”

“I can’t believe it,” Amy said. “I’m shocked.”

“The humvee he was riding in flipped over in a ditch. There wasn’t an explosion or anything. Just a goddamn car accident.”

“An accident?”

“He wasn’t even killed in combat.”

The two women were silent for a moment. Amy drank her coffee. It had grown cold, and its temperature brought her feelings of sadness. Jess closed her eyes. She inhaled through her nose and exhaled through her mouth.

“Did you tell Mark?” Amy asked.

“He doesn’t want to know about it.”

“He might. It might do some good to tell him.”

“Look babe, I couldn’t ever tell Mark. He’d want to know how I knew, how I found out. He’d want to know why I was googling David to begin with.”

“I can’t believe he’s dead.”

“I thought he’d die that first year because of what I said. Or because I was with Mark. I expected God to punish me for it. But then he came back, and I thought it was all over. I could just leave it in the past.”

Jess took a drink from her latte, and then slowly wiped her lips with the palm of her hand.

“I knew what he smelled like,” she said.

“What?”

“The sweat on David’s uniform. It was a sweet smell. And I washed his underwear. I tell the girls at my school, you might think you’re in love, but just wait until you have to wash his underwear. Then you’ll know if it’s love. But I didn’t mind doing it.”

Jess sighed and then rubbed her eyes. They were still dull and expressionless, as if they weren’t listening to what she was saying.

“The worst part about it, babe, is I can’t cry. I want to, but I can’t. The medicine won’t let me. It somehow blocks it. I didn’t love him, but Jesus, everyone deserves to have someone cry over them.”

“I know what you mean,” Amy said.

“If I can’t cry, I should at least be able to have a drink,” Jess said. “But Mark made me promise to take a month off from drinking. He thought we drank too much, that it made us feel crummy all the time. So not a drop until April first.”

Jess picked up her latte and chugged it back like a shot. She slammed the mug back on the table and wiped her lips with the back of her hand.

“Ahh,” she moaned. “That’s good stuff.”

She laughed, and Amy realized for the first time that her old roommate’s eyes weren’t dull, but rather so tired and sad that they’d drained themselves of all signs of life. She still didn’t like Jess, but she no longer hated her.

“I need to use the restroom,” Amy said. “I’ll be right back.”

She walked to the back of the coffee shop and into the one toilet bathroom. The tile floors had recently been mopped, and the freshly painted brown walls reminded her of the downstairs half bathroom in her condo. Amy locked the door, but she didn’t sit down or use the restroom. She sought the privacy and quiet of the small room. And leaning against the wall, chewing on her fingernails, she thought about Jess and the past that haunted her. Amy pictured her own father, and the future that haunted her. She squeezed her eyes shut, and shook as if she were crying. A low moan escaped her lips, but after a moment, she was silent and her arms dropped limply to her sides. Amy’s eyelashes were dry, and her makeup undisturbed. Her pills also blocked her from crying. So she washed her hands and went back to say goodbye to her old college roommate, Jess.

## Medjugorje

In the summer of 1988, when Jake Asher was twelve, his mother traveled all the way to Yugoslavia to meet the Virgin Mary. She returned a week later, heartbroken. The Mother of God was nowhere to be found, only tourists and peddlers of holy relics.

Mrs. Asher had been filled with a giddy, child-like joy when she arranged to visit the small town of Medjugorje, where the Virgin Mary was said to be vacationing in those days. It was as if the dark spell cast by her husband's suicide a year earlier had finally lifted, and young Jake ignored all those people who called the grieving widow foolish.

"I've been praying so long for this, Jake," she said, holding his hands to her chest. It surprised him how fast her heart was beating. "It'll be wonderful. Just wonderful."

But when she returned, all the pain of the last twelve months fell heavier upon her shoulders, causing Mrs. Asher to slouch as she shuffled up to her bedroom. Jake's grandmother, who stayed with him during that week, kept her own head down as she packed her suitcase. She left without a word, hesitating only briefly at the front door before getting in her car and driving the 12 hours back to her home in Louisiana.

That night, Jake tucked his mother into bed, noticing as he brought the sheet up to her chin a few bald spots in her normally long, blond hair. Her face looked older, thinner, than when she'd left, her voice deeper, but the strangest change came when Jake tried to hand her the rosary for her nightly prayers.

"No," she said, turning over and groaning. "Not tonight."

She had said a rosary every night since his father died, and when she finished, she fingered the beads dreamily and whispered how nice it would be to meet the Virgin Mary, like those lucky children in Fatima years ago. But the night she returned from Medjugorje, she asked

Jake to leave her alone. When he shut the door, he heard it lock behind him. She stayed in her bedroom for a week. Sometimes at night, Jake heard her walking the through the house scavenging food or crying out to Mary to please come save her, but during the day, everything was silent.

This being late July and the middle of summer break from school, no one suspected the depths of neglect Jake was experiencing. The boy had always been a well-behaved child – maybe a little too shy and a little too dependent on his mother – but his big, sad blue eyes were enough for most people to ignore his personal flaws. In that week inside the house without his mother’s presence, he stopped bathing and stopped brushing his teeth. He didn’t eat nearly enough, and those sad eyes gnawed their way deeper into his skull, so that they hid in little, shadowy caverns in his face.

He watched television, searched the cabinets for food and tiptoed into his father’s long-closed home office to catch a faint wisp of the lingering Brut deodorant in the air. But on most mornings and afternoons, Jake simply hid under the dining room table and, listening to the ticking of the grandfather clock, let his boredom guide his hand into his underwear.

On a muggy Friday night, after he finished touching himself, Jake heard footsteps and the rustling of cloth approaching the dining room table. Expecting to see his mother, he hurried to wipe his belly dry with the elastic band of his underwear. He stood, his back aching from where he’d been hunched over, and, smoothing down his thick, oily hair, was surprised to find someone other than Mrs. Asher standing before him.

It was a girl, also about twelve years old, with brown eyes and freckles scattered across her chubby, prepubescent cheeks. She wore a white robe with a blue shawl wrapped around her

head. Jake blinked his eyes tight and then squinted, trying to figure out if the Virgin Mary was really standing only a few feet from him. She didn't waver or disappear. She remained close to him, like a statue, but it wasn't until he smelled the sweat on her body, the dried dirt on her feet, that he realized she was real. Small pinpricks of fear tingled up his sides, and he felt as if a block of ice had lodged itself inside his chest.

Jake took a step back and pointed down the hall.

"She's down there." Immediately, he regretted saying this. In his terror, he confused the Virgin Mary for the Grim Reaper, and he believed he'd condemned his mother to death.

The girl took a step closer, and, before he turned his head away, he thought he saw her roll her eyes.

"I'm not here to see her," she said.

The Virgin led him to his room, and she sat heavy on his bed, causing the springs to squeak. Her fingers carefully removed the shawl from her head, and she shook out the brown hair that fell to her shoulders.

"God, it's burning up in here," she said. "Why don't you shut that window and turn on some AC?"

Jake swallowed. He kept his eyes to the ground and strained to keep his legs from shaking. His fear wasn't from seeing a ghost, or possibly the touch of death she must possess, but rather from being so close to a girl his own age. He blushed, and when he chanced a glance in her direction, he found that he was unable to speak. The Virgin Mary, in her attempt to cool off, had removed her robe and sat on his bed in her white panties and a white tank top. Her back was to him, and he saw her spine bulging down the middle of her shirt.

“Mom says we can’t afford it,” he said. “My dad didn’t take care of us like he should have, so we can’t waste money.”

The Virgin Mary turned to face him and laughed a mean, deep laugh that frightened Jake.

“*Mom says.*” She mocked his high-pitched voice. “You’re such a momma’s boy.”

Her pronouncement stunned Jake. He felt the accusation against his nose, and the pain throbbed up into his eyes. But he didn’t cry. He flushed, balled his hands into fists.

“No I’m not.”

But even he didn’t believe what he said. There was no conviction in his words, and the Virgin Mary laughed again.

“You’re helpless Jake,” she said. She bit her fingernails as she talked and spit them on the floor. Jake watched her stand and roam around his room, picking up rosary beads and baseball gloves and tossing them aside without any care or thought about their worth.

“What’s this?” she said. She stood by the battered dresser, covered in baseball cards, and picked up a plastic toy snake. “What’s this doing here?”

“My dad bought me that.” Jake didn’t like her touching it. He wanted to grab it from her hands, but he stayed put.

“Really?” She smiled. “Where?”

“Last summer before he...last summer, he took me to Atlanta. We went to a Braves game and to the zoo. He bought it for me at the zoo.”

“I like it,” she said. She put the snake gently back on top of the baseball cards. “It’s the only thing in this house with any character.”

She went back to the bed and sat down. She kicked her legs, and didn’t try in the least to hide her boredom.

“So, what do you do now?” she asked.

“What do you mean?”

“What do you normally do at night?”

“I go to sleep.”

Jake laughed, but stopped short because of the look she gave him.

“You mean you go to sleep with your mom,” the Virgin Mary said. “I know. I watch you.”

Jake again felt the little pinpricks of fear across his body. He didn't like being watched and not knowing it. He thought about all the time he spent under the dining room table, listening to the ticking of the grandfather clock.

“You lay in bed together and she rubs your hair and sometimes you draw on each other's backs with your fingers,” she said.

Jake swallowed.

“That part looked like fun,” she said.

He chanced another glance at her, and was relieved to see a slightly happy glint in her eyes. It was surrounded by the sharpness of her personality, but it was there, a small, patient and loving glow.

“I want to do that,” she said. “Let's draw on each other's backs. I'll go first.”

She patted the open space in the bed next to her. Jake didn't know how to feel. His heart beat fast. It seemed wrong to be so close, to touch so intimately the Mother of God. There was also guilt. His mother was the real disciple of the Virgin Mary. Shouldn't she at least get to meet her? But, in spite of all his trepidation, he knew he'd slide into bed next to her and draw on her back. He wanted it more than anything he could recall in his life. He craved to be close to her, to

smell her sweaty, dirty skin, to touch her soft body. It was wrong, he knew, and that knowledge, along with his desire, caused his chest to burn as he got into bed.

“Take off your shirt,” she said, and he obeyed. Jake lay, bare-chested, face down on his bed with his arms stretched over his head. He closed his eyes and felt the tip of her finger graze across his back. In his blindness, he saw that fingertip as a bright light, something like a lightning bug, forming shapes in the fading white trail it left behind. He almost fell asleep, and could have slept for years, Jake believed, but the light went black and a voice whispered, “Guess what it is?”

He had no idea, and told her so.

“You’re no fun,” the Virgin Mary said. She pushed him and then collapsed on her stomach, and said, “I drew the snake on your dresser. What else could it be? Anyway, it’s my turn now.”

She rolled up her shirt, revealing a thin, pale torso that rose and fell slowly with each breath.

“Make it something elaborate,” she said.

Her voice was heavy with sleep. Jake knew she’d fall asleep soon after he started, so he didn’t bother to think up a picture. He merely drew circles around a mole on her lower back and then connected it with a line to the three freckles clustered around her right shoulder blade. He kept telling himself he shouldn’t be drawing, but her skin felt so warm and soft. A few times she moaned, and he was thrilled by her delight.

“Do you think,” the Virgin Mary said while yawning, “do you think your mom might have killed your dad?”

Jake stopped. His body felt hollow, and he heard himself say in an unfamiliar voice, “No. He killed himself.”

“I know he killed himself. I saw him tie the rope and slip his head into it, and I watched him hanging there in the garage for a long time.”

She yawned again, and said, “gosh,” trying to wake herself.

“But I wonder,” she went on, “if your mother caused him to do it. You know what I mean? She wasn’t very nice to him.”

“No,” Jake’s strange new voice said.

“She yelled at him a lot. From what I saw, she tried to make him unhappy.”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“It might have been what she always wanted – him killing himself. Now, she’s just pretending to be upset so no one suspects her. She obviously never loved him.”

“No, I don’t think she did.” Jake couldn’t believe what he had just said. His mind didn’t feel as if it were working properly. It seemed altogether separate from him. He’d never once suspected that his parents didn’t love each other, but now the thought not only existed, but something in him agreed with it.

“Hey, keep going,” the Virgin Mary said. She shrugged her shoulders to get his finger moving again. Jake resumed his meaningless drawing, while trying to remember any signs of love between his mother and father. He searched hard through his memories, but found none.

After a while, he heard the Virgin Mary snoring. Her body rose and fell heavily with deep breaths.

“Hey,” Jake whispered. She didn’t react. He kept drawing, however, tracing shapes all across her back. He knew he should stop, but it felt so good to touch her, especially along her sides and across the soft edges of her budding breasts.

The next morning, when Jake woke up, the Virgin Mary was gone, her robe and shawl no longer in a pile on his floor. He worked hard to suppress any memories of what he'd done the night before, and each time one did creep into his head, he bit his finger, sometimes drawing blood, in order to keep his mind clear.

Jake tried to go on with his day as before, but knowing something might be watching kept him from his normal routine. A few times during the morning, he walked into the dining room and slowly circled the table, glancing underneath it and, his face flushed, considered risking all danger and indulging himself. But he held back. And so the morning progressed slowly, and by lunch, when the familiar hunger pains loudly attacked his stomach, Jake went upstairs and knocked for the first time in a week on his mother's door.

No response came from within the room. Jake tried the doorknob and was surprised to find it unlocked. The door creaked open. All was dark inside the bedroom. The blinds were shut. Jake had to squint to see anything.

"Who told you to come in?" his mother said. Her voice was raspy, and the mere sound of it caused the boy to feel thirsty.

"I'm hungry," he said.

"Then go eat."

"There's no food left." He'd finished off the jar of maraschino cherries for breakfast.

"There's got to be something. You just don't want to eat what there is."

"There isn't anything. I looked."

His mother sighed. In the dark, he could see movements but not details, and in the direction from where her voice originated, something moved frantically. A soft scraping noise accompanied the movement.

“Call your father then,” Mrs. Asher said. “Ask him to stop by the grocery store on the way home.”

“But dad’s dead,” Jake said.

“What?”

She turned on a lamp next to the bed, and the dim, dirty yellow light briefly blinded Jake.

“Who’s dead?” his mother asked.

Jake recovered his vision but was unable to answer. He didn’t recognize the woman in the bed. Was this his mother or some demon impersonating her? If it was a devil, he had donned a poor disguise. The emaciated, yellow-fleshed creature in the bed looked nothing like his mother. It looked more like a vulture, the way it craned its thin neck and looked at him with one eye shut and one eye wide open.

“Dad’s dead,” Jake said. “You found him in the garage, remember?”

“Oh. Oh, I forgot,” she said.

She closed her eye, and rested her head back against the pillow. The scraping sound Jake heard earlier resumed, and he saw his mother scratching violently at the scabs on her hands. Before visiting Yugoslavia, Father Bill had invited Mrs. Asher to come to his office and discuss her trip. She had left the house elated that morning, expecting the priest to give her advice on how to receive the holy mother. But that evening, she had returned home with her hands bandaged. When Jake asked her what happened, she only said, “I broke his window.”

The wounds now bothered her, and she clawed at them, smearing thin strings of blood across her hands.

“What else do you want?” she asked. “You look like you want to say something.”

Her eyes remained closed, but she turned her head towards him as if she were looking at him. Jake did want to say more. He saw the blood under her fingernails and her frantic scratching, and he wanted to tell her about the previous night's visitor. He wanted to say, "The Virgin Mary was here, in this house, Mom. She was here." But then, he'd have to explain how she spent the night with him. And his mother would easily read on his face that he did something wrong, that he behaved poorly, that he defiled the one thing she held sacred. He couldn't tell her, even though the knowledge of this mysterious presence might ease his mother's suffering.

"Can I stay in here with you?" he asked.

"What?"

"Can we take a nap like we used to?"

"We did?"

She opened one eye slowly and looked at him. It was red and yellow, this eyeball, and Jake swallowed when he saw it gazing at him.

"Fine," she said. "You can sleep in here. But not in the bed. I can't breathe with you on top of me."

Jake wanted to lay under the covers with her, maybe draw on each other's backs like they once did. He settled for curling up in a ball in a corner of the room with an old, musty smelling blanket and pillow from the hall closet.

They slept all day, until it was dark outside, and Jake didn't know he was awake until his mom turned on the lamp and he realized his eyes had been open for some time. He yawned and patted down the hair sticking up on the back of his head. His clothes were wet from sweat, his cheeks pink.

“How’d you sleep, sha?” his mother asked. That was her nickname for him. It meant “dear” in Cajun French, but she hadn’t used that word since she had returned from Medjugorje. Jake blinked at his mother and noticed she was staring at him with both eyes – not just one. She licked the bad taste of sleep from her mouth and gave him a somewhat weak smile. It was safe, he realized, to ask her what he’d been thinking about before he’d knocked on her door that morning.

“Did you love Dad?” he asked.

Her smile faded, but she didn’t seem mad or sad. Only annoyed.

“What kind of question is that?” she asked. “I just woke up. Of course I loved him. You should ask if he loved us, considering what he did.”

Jake, still on the floor, wrapped his arms around his legs and rested his chin on his knees. He watched his mom lick the dried blood off her hands, while the pangs of hunger again rippled in his stomach.

“How’d you and dad meet?” he asked.

“Why do you want to know this now?”

“I don’t know.”

He asked the question without having considered it before, without ever caring, but now he needed to know. When she said, “I can’t remember,” he pressed her until she closed her eyes and, rubbing her forehead, recalled the last night of 1969.

“It was a New Year’s Eve party,” she said. “We lived in New Orleans, and I was dating a boy named Carl. He wanted to marry me, but...” She didn’t know how to express her distaste for Carl other than shivering, as if someone had touched her bare back with a cube of ice.

“Your father and his roommate were throwing the party. I think Carl knew the roommate. I can’t remember. Anyway, your father came up to Carl before midnight and asked if he could kiss me.”

The voice shed its raspy tone like a dead skin, and the new sound emerged soft and shiny, tickling Jake’s ears as if the words were being whispered to him.

“Your father’s date just stood there with her arms crossed. Carl didn’t know what to say, so your father kissed me.”

She laughed, and then rubbed her fingers across her lips.

“The girl with her arms crossed said, ‘Oh come on, Henry. You can do better than that.’ So, your father kissed me again.”

“He kissed you twice?” Jake asked.

“He did. And he did a better job the second time.”

Mrs. Asher allowed herself, for the first time in months, to laugh freely. But she must have lowered her guard during this burst of happiness and let the long suppressed image of her husband’s hanging body re-emerge in her mind, because she stopped suddenly, punctuating the end of her gaiety with an abrupt, “Hmmm.”

“He was never a happy man,” she said. “And he knew I wasn’t happy either. I guess we both should have found people who could have helped us be happy, but he argued against it. He said we both had suffered, and only people who truly suffered, who felt some agony in life, those were the ones who truly knew how to love. They understood loneliness and despair. You could feel it in their hugs and kisses, he said. Happy people take it for granted. They don’t know how to love. But because we were so miserable, we’d have the greatest love of all, he said. And then

he thought we could end..." She stopped herself. She looked as if she wanted to say more, but she watched her son and decided to remain quiet.

"What about the Virgin Mary?" Jake asked. "Is that why you loved her? Because she suffered?"

"She watched her son die, didn't she? But I was silly. I was silly for going and thinking she could help me."

"Maybe she still can."

"No." Mrs. Asher inhaled deep. "They've all abandoned me."

Jake decided to tell her about his visitor. He closed his eyes and prepared himself to simply rush through the words building behind his lips, tell her everything.

"I'm tired, Jake," she said. "I'm going back to sleep."

"Can I stay here with you?"

"I want to be alone. Can't you just leave me alone?"

"What about food?"

"Jake!" she snapped. She pointed a bony finger toward the door, and she didn't drop her hand until her son closed it behind him.

Jake's hunger turned to nausea. The thought of food sickened him, and he was glad for this new sensation since there was nothing to eat in the house. He belched, and the taste of whatever spoiled morsel remained in his stomach almost caused him to vomit. He had to breathe deeply for several minutes to feel normal again.

But he didn't feel normal. He was so tired that when he grabbed the sheets to cover himself in his bed, his hands shook. It was such a strange feeling. He lifted his hands in front of his face and watched the involuntary trembles.

"What are you doing?"

Jake jumped at the question. He thought he was alone in his room, but there, lying right next to him in bed, was the freckled face of the Virgin Mary. She wore her mean sneer of a smile and absent-mindedly stroked the plastic toy snake in her hands. Jake swallowed when he saw her holding it.

"Where'd you come from?"

"I've been here the whole time, honey."

She lifted the snake to her face and stared into its red eyes. Moved by whatever she saw, the Virgin Mary tilted her head like a curious dog, and parted her dry lips. Then, waking from her daydream, she blinked and turned to Jake. She caught him looking at her shoulders and how the tank top hung loose around her neck. Her smile caused him no small amount of shame. He should not be looking at such things. Not on her.

"So," she said, letting the word hang there seductively. The hissing sound it made tickled his side. "What'd your mom say? She admit she didn't like your dad?"

"No," Jake said. "She said she loved him, but that he might not have loved us. Because he killed himself."

"Bullshit."

The word, only heard in movies, excited Jake. He looked around the bedroom and saw for the first time that nothing prevented him from saying it.

"Why is it bullshit?" he whispered.

“She’s blaming your father when it’s her fault. That’s not right. What else did she say?”

“She told me how they met.”

“At the New Year’s Eve party?”

“Yeah.”

“Sounds like he sure liked her to me.”

“Yeah.”

It was as if Jake was hearing again the conversation he’d had with his mother. Now, he was picking up words and phrases that had somehow eluded him before. His father did sound as if he loved his mother. Why else would he have been so bold at the party? How had Jake missed that?

“I don’t think I’d believe a word your mom says,” the Virgin Mary told him.

“You don’t?”

“Hell no. The only reason you do is because you’re still a momma’s boy.”

“I’m not a momma’s boy.”

“*I’m not a momma’s boy.* You know what you should do? You should put this snake in her bed. It’d give her a nice, good scare and prove you weren’t so in love with her.”

The suggestion surprised Jake because he had just been thinking that same thing. When she called him a momma’s boy, he had looked down at the snake in her hands and thought, with a red flush of anger, “I’ll stick that in her bed and show you who’s a momma’s boy.” But now that the thought was real, now that it belonged to her and was presented as a challenge, he became nervous. Did he really want to frighten his mother? She looked so weak, so fragile, when he saw her earlier that day. It would hurt her, and the pain that had permanently settled as a grimace on her skeletal face would only tighten its hold, making her near impossible to look at.

Jake hesitated, and in this silence, the Virgin Mary reached her hand to him and lightly grazed her fingers across his forearm. Her voice, for the first time since their meeting, turned soft.

“When you come back, we’ll draw on each other’s backs. I’ll draw on yours last so you can fall asleep.”

He tried to ignore the suggestion, but he knew the moment she said it he’d leave that room and go place the toy snake in his mother’s bed. He didn’t wait a full minute, his desire so strong for their little drawing games, to depart with the snake. Jake tiptoed down the hall, found her door still unlocked and, navigating carefully through the darkness of her bedroom, placed the snake under the sheets. He didn’t once disturb her snoring, and when he returned, Jake marveled at how easy it was to play this prank.

The Virgin Mary and he then began to draw on each other’s backs, their fingers sneaking beyond the normal boundaries of the flesh canvases, and each infraction was met with a coy glance or a muted smile, inviting more boldness to enter the activity. They only stopped themselves from going farther in order to crane their necks, to strain their ears and hear the faint screams of Mrs. Asher.

The Virgin Mary covered her mouth as she laughed, and Jake, looking at her, felt that he loved her more than anything on earth. He laughed too, and though deep in his chest a small fire smoldered, his headache and nausea and hunger were overridden by his joy. He laughed loud and hard, rolling onto his back, resting his hands on his chest and not stopping until he was out of breath and dripping tears.

\* \* \*

The next morning, Jake woke up in a bad mood. It started with the return of his headache. The pain pushed his forehead down over the tops of his eyes, giving the world a low-hanging ceiling that caused him to feel claustrophobic. He stood, trying to find an open, freeing space, only to discover as he walked that the joints in his knees ached. Jake stretched the stiff legs, but that only increased the hot shivers up his spine. Sweat slid down his temples and he gnashed his teeth when the first twinge of hunger returned. The urge to yell came upon him. Not an animal cry of pain. That would only send his suffering straight up, allowing it to float back down and settle on his shoulders. His screams needed to be directed at someone. His mouth aimed at another person so that he could shoot them with his pain, relinquishing his ownership of it to them. He turned to the bed to yell something at the Virgin Mary (he didn't know what), but when he saw only the crease in the sheets where her body had lain, he paused, allowing loneliness to overtake his anger. This respite lasted only a moment – long enough for him to inhale and exhale. The seething rage flared up again, and, ignoring his aching knees, Jake marched down the hall, flung open his mother's bedroom door and switched on the light.

The sudden brightness invading her cocoon frightened Mrs. Asher. Her yellow, pasty hands gripped the bed sheet, pulling it up for protection, and she scooted as close to the wall as she could. Both eyes were squeezed shut.

"Is it you?" she asked, gasping for breath. "Now you've come?"

"Yes, it's me," Jake shouted.

It wasn't the response she was expecting. The wilted woman dropped the sheets and opened that one yellow and red eye.

"Jake?" she said, sounding both relieved and annoyed.

His nausea returned, but he knew it had nothing to do with his hunger. He covered his mouth with his fist for a moment and then, once he suppressed the urge to throw up, he shouted, "You killed him, didn't you? You never loved him and you blame him for what happened."

As he yelled, Jake was aware that his speech sounded unnatural, like a bad actor delivering dramatic lines. His mother, on the other hand, was a pro at playing her part, and he quickly succumbed to a state of awe at her ability.

"He wanted an abortion," she said. "He wanted to kill you, but I stopped him, Jake. I saved you. No one else. He wanted you dead and I said no."

She beat her chest with more strength than he thought was in those bony arms. The pain in his legs vanished. So did his sickness. The world's low-hanging ceiling lifted, revealing a vast, cold and empty desert plain. Its desolation stretched for miles, Jake saw, and his first sight of it, lingering as it did behind everything, sent goose pimples across his arms and legs.

"But abortion is a sin," he said. The sentence barely registered as a whisper.

"He wanted me to," Mrs. Asher said. "He knew we were both doomed, and we'd only pass it on to you. He said it was out of love. To spare you from our misery. To finally end our two damned family lines. We were to be the end. The last."

Her voice softened with the memories of her dead husband. Jake watched as her love for him inflated her frail body. Her scratching at the scabs on her hands turned into a gentle rubbing.

"He did love you, Jake. He didn't want you to be like us. It took me a while to understand, but once I held you and loved you, I got it. I understood."

"That you loved me?"

"I almost drowned you in the bath several times. If you'd cried, I would have done it. But you never did. You were so well behaved. Even when I held your head underwater, you looked

up at me. You trusted me. I was weak. But I did love you. I should have known you couldn't hide from your blood. I should have drowned you. I should have aborted you. I'm so sorry."

For some reason he never understood, Jake told her it was okay. Then, exhausted, sick, aching, he shuffled along that desert plain back to his bedroom.

A warm, golden orb, like a miniature sun, rose from his chest into his throat. Its light forced his mouth to curve open, and it shone through his eyes, bathing everything before him in a bright, dreamy haze. He didn't know where this joy came from, or why it suddenly chose to arise in him just after midnight, but he knew he must hold onto it. And to do that, he couldn't grab it or cling to it. He had to let the orb float freely inside him.

"What are you grinning about?" the Virgin Mary asked. She was tucked against his side in the fetal position, her head on his shoulder and her cold feet on his leg.

"Nothing," he said.

"It doesn't look like nothing. What is it?"

He didn't answer. Instead, he ran his hands through her hair and then kissed her forehead.

"You're strange," she said. But she moved closer, wrapped her arm around his torso and held him tighter. The orb in his throat grew, and after a moment, he heard the Virgin gasp.

"We're flying."

Jake looked down and saw they were both floating above his unmade bed. He tried to speak but only laughed. The sound propelled him through the air, which tickled his face with a coolness he hadn't felt in weeks.

"Come on," he said. His fingers interlocked with the Virgin's, and they glided through the house, arms spread out like airplane wings. The rushing sensation tingled his heart and the

two spun and flipped and moved freely through the rooms, touching nothing but each other. They moved by laughing, and occasionally they met, lips touching lips, hands grabbing flesh, only to break apart and twirl and dance unlike any dance ever before performed.

He knew he shouldn't clutch at this moment, but the desire to prolong the power of that glowing orb overtook him. He could have laughed all night and into the day, but he didn't want to chance it, to risk letting this happiness fade.

"Let's go," he said. He grabbed her hand tight and the two flew down the hall.

"Where are we going?" the Virgin Mary asked as they approached his mother's door.

He felt her tug at his hand, like a trout struggling with a hook in its mouth.

"Stop. I don't want to see her, Jake."

He overpowered the Virgin, pulling her into the bedroom with him.

"Who's there?" a soft voice called out in the darkness. The bright light had gone out in his eyes.

"Jake, let me go," the Virgin called. She struggled to free herself. She thrashed in the air, but he would not let her go.

"Who's there?" the voice called again.

Mrs. Asher turned on the lamp next to her bed and with her yellow and red eye, gazed up at the two small bodies hovering above her. She opened her mouth to scream, but only air came out in a rushing, hollow sound.

"Look who it is," Jake yelled. He held up the hand of the Virgin Mary. The girl floating next to him covered her eyes with her forearm. "Look who's here? She's been here the whole time, Mom. She didn't want to see you! She wanted me!"

The air seeping out of his mother's mouth gathered enough force to emit a low moan. It sounded like a cross between a "lo" and a "no," but it lacked the structure of an actual word, settling more for a wild, age-old expression for fear and pain.

"Please let me go," the Virgin Mary whispered. The sadness in her voice struck Jake, but he also realized that the golden orb had left his throat. He needed to laugh, or he would plummet to the ground.

"Look, Mom," he said. He let go of the girl's hand and flew to the dresser, where a porcelain statue of the Virgin Mary rested, bought from a peddler in Medjugorje. He picked up the small, white sculpture and, laughed so loud it hurt his throat.

"She looks nothing like this," he shouted.

He held up the statue and turned to compare it with the girl, but she was gone.

"Jake," his mother yelled.

At the sound of his name, he lost his magic. He fell hard, crashing against her vanity, crushing her makeup, her hair spray, her fingernail polish. He moaned, still holding the statue, and stumbled from the wreckage to the door, looking for the Virgin Mary. She was gone.

"Jake," his mother again yelled.

She sat up in bed in time to see him hurl the statue at her. The white porcelain souvenir struck Mrs. Asher in the forehead, cutting a deep gash above her eyebrow that sent a thin trickle of blood down over her lashes and stinging into her iris.

A week after the school year started, the police kicked down the door of the Asher house, and removed Mrs. Asher's body on a stretcher. The neighbors gathered to watch in the middle of a quiet, August afternoon, as four officers wrestled with a thin, feral child, screaming for the

Virgin Mary. The neighbors remembered how devout his mother had been, going all the way to Medjugorje for a miracle, and they shook their heads, wishing there existed the slightest bit of hope for that boy.

## Priests

My grandmother told me she was blind, but I didn't believe her. She once spotted a coin on the other side of the room – a corroded, green penny I had to kneel on the floor to find. I picked it up and handed it to her, but she only stared at me with her small, pale eyes, as if she were looking through me at something on the back wall.

“Here you go, Mamom,” I said. My voice startled her. Her body flinched, but her eyes remained vacant.

“Mamom can't see,” she whispered.

I pocketed the coin, but I watched her closely. Her body was wearing down after 96 years in the Louisiana sun. Her hands and head trembled. Sometimes she said she had Parkinson's. Sometimes she said she didn't. It was the same with the stories about her first husband. I heard her say he died of yellow fever, and I heard her say he drank himself to death. She loved telling stories, but you never knew what was a lie and what was the truth. It seemed reasonable to us that she might be blind. Her eyelids twitched, and a thin, white haze clouded over her irises. The morning her husband died, we gathered in the hallway outside her room and hoped she really was unable to see.

“Pop didn't look good,” my cousin Karen said. “He lost so much weight the last few months.”

“Do you think she can't see anything?” I asked.

Karen shrugged.

“What time is Father James coming?” I asked.

“He should be on his way.”

“Well, this ought to be fun. God I hope she is blind.”

Father James was the new pastor of St. Francis Regis Catholic Church. He was a middle-aged priest, I assume. His true age was difficult to determine. He looked neither young nor old. He had a plain face with no wrinkles, thinning dark hair, and a few extra pounds around his waist. He was unspectacular in every way, except his voice. It was the powerful voice of a natural orator. The word people used most often to describe him was "articulate." But that wasn't enough for them to like him. Most people in the church didn't care for Father James. A few families even decided to drive all the way to St. Rose of Lima or St. Catherine's to attend Sunday Mass. The priest didn't seem to mind his unpopularity. I don't know how he reacted privately, but during communion, he held his head up and he looked every person in the eye, as if they were intimate friends.

He visited our grandmother that afternoon in the nursing home. We didn't say much to him. Our eyes were focused on Mamom, as we wondered if her eyes were focused on anything at all. Father James looked around the small room, and since no invitation was extended, he took it upon himself to sit on the edge of her bed. Mamom sat in a chair by the window, where the warm sunlight warmed her cheeks.

"Mrs. Martin," he said. The situation dictated that he speak softly, and he did. When she didn't respond, he raised his voice. "Mrs. Martin." She remained still. He tried again and again, speaking louder each time, and he only succeeded in getting her attention by shaking her arm and shouting, "Mrs. Martin!"

"Eh?" she said.

"It's Father James."

"Who?"

"Father James!"

A nurse passing through the hallway stopped by our door and whispered, "Is everything OK? Why is he shouting?"

"Father James!" the priest yelled again. Mamom shook her head.

"I don't see or hear so good," she said. "Who is it?"

Father James clasped his hands together in prayer, but instead of praying, he pressed his face to his fingers and exhaled. I noticed sweat on his temples. He held that pose for about a minute, inhaling and exhaling into his palms.

"I'm sorry about your loss," he finally said.

"My what?"

"Your loss. The loss of your husband."

"My husband? I'm sorry but my husband is dead. You'll have to come back."

I leaned over to Karen and asked if Mamom was deaf, too. Her hearing had always been so sharp. That's why we left the room to talk about her. Karen agreed it was probably one of the old lady's lies.

"That's why I'm here," Father James said. He looked back at us. He didn't seem comfortable speaking in such a loud voice. We only smiled, so he stood and leaned against the window to be closer to Mamom. He blocked the sunlight, and his figure cast a long shadow over the room.

"I didn't know Bruno," he said. He spoke in a softer voice, but it was still louder than he would have liked. "But I heard he was a good man, went to Mass every Sunday."

"No," she said. "He wasn't too good. But he was my husband."

Father James placed a hand on her shoulder.

"We all have our faults," he said.

“He had faults,” she said, nodding her head. “Thank you, Father.”

“Not just Bruno. All of us. We all have lots of faults.”

“Yes,” she said. “He had a lot of faults. Thank you, Father.”

“But he possessed many virtues, I’m sure.”

“Yes, he hated Jews too,” she said. “Thank you, Father.”

“Virtues!”

“Yes, he hated them too.”

Father James looked up at us. His expression begged us for help. We said nothing.

“He may be in Hell, Father, but he was my husband.”

The priest took a deep breath. This didn’t calm him. He bent close to Mamom’s ear and whispered something the rest of us could not hear.

“I don’t think she’s blind,” I told Karen.

“I don’t think she’s deaf,” she said.

The priest ended his whispering by making the sign of the cross.

“Thank you, Father,” Mamom said.

He nodded. At the door, Father James shook all our hands and offered us condolences.

The sweat was gone from his temples. He walked slowly down the hallway, and I saw his chest rising and falling from several deep breaths.

“What did you think of Father James?” Karen asked Mamom. The old lady shrugged.

“He’s too loud,” she said. “He talks too loud.”

“He’s pretty young,” I said.

“I couldn’t tell.”

“You couldn’t see him?”

“You know I can’t see anything.”

We sat in silence for a moment. Then Mamom spoke up.

“We had a young priest once. A long time ago. They said he was only a boy, but we liked him.”

She told us the story of Father Mario. He arrived in the Parish in 1928, a year after her first husband died either of yellow fever or from drinking himself to death. Mamom was only nineteen. She helped clean the church on Tuesdays, and when she first met the priest, she thought he was a mischievous boy from another town trying to play a trick on her. He had the face of a child – a slender, delicate nose, long eyelashes and smooth, whiskerless cheeks. He was short, too. About five foot four, but he was strong. The sleeves of his shirt were rolled up to his elbows, and she told us she would never forget seeing those muscular forearms because it unsettled her to blush the way she did in front of a priest.

Mamom didn’t remember Father Mario’s last name. It was a long, Polish name that began with a “w” and rhymed with “What-a-shame.” That’s what the teenage girls called him – “Father What-a-shame.” They didn’t mind his baby face. They found it handsome, the way they found the acne-scarred faces of the high school boys handsome.

On Saturday afternoons, these girls sat at the edge of the baseball field to watch Father What-a-shame play shortstop. He didn’t seem any older than the other boys, Mamom said, except in his baseball skills. He dove into the dirt to stop a ground ball, and then he hurled it towards first base where the ball slapped into a leather mitt. When he stepped up to home plate, he dug his feet into the dirt, stuck his rear-end in the air and, with his hands choked up high on the bat, waited for that perfect pitch. If he hadn’t been so damn talented, he would have looked

like a fool. Mamom said. And sure enough, when the ball came over the plate, Father What-a-shame launched it deep into centerfield. He kicked up dust as he ran around the bases, and what should have been a double turned into a triple or even a home run because of his speed.

As Mamom told us the story, I pictured her sitting in the grass, a beautiful girl with milk-white skin. Like my grandmother, I have a tendency to exaggerate. I doubt she was beautiful. I've never seen a picture of her from when she was young, but beauty is not something that runs in our family. We have big noses and short, squat bodies with meaty legs and narrow torsos. No Martin is that attractive. Maybe all this comes from our grandfather?

Pop played baseball on those afternoons with Father What-a-shame. Mamom said her heart stopped beating every time the priest hit the ball into centerfield. That's where Pop stood. She wasn't anxious because she secretly loved this boy who would become my grandfather. She knew by the way he squinted up at the sky and wobbled back and forth on his feet, what was about to happen. The ball would either bounce off the ground and roll away from him, or it would thud against his skull, knocking him onto his bottom. She said our grandfather was hit in the head almost every time he played baseball – sometimes the ball bounced off his skull twice in one game. That's why he was such a mean son-of-a-bitch.

But the confidence Father What-a-shame felt embarrassing our grandfather on Saturday afternoons didn't carry over to Mass on Sundays. He was, after all, only a boy. Even though he was well into his 30s, there was something boyish and innocent and unrespectable in those blue eyes. He stuttered during his homily. His cheeks turned crimson when he read the Gospel aloud because every time his voice cracked, laughter rose and then hushed from the pews. The front of his robe had small, purple stains on it from where his trembling hands spilled the communion wine. The boys in town, led by Pop, began mocking the priest. They'd walk behind him and

pretend to pat the back of their heads nervously, the way Father What-a-shame did during Mass to keep his cowlick down.

During his first year in town, the priest developed a habit of hiding. No one was sure where he went. They saw him at Mass or on the baseball field. The rectory was empty. The church was empty. At least that's what Mamom thought when she came to clean on Tuesday afternoons. She swept in between the pews. It was a large church, and to get up all that dust and dirt took hours. The constant sound of the broom's bristles scratching the floor was enough to empty out a person's soul, she said, even in such a holy place. So she sang. She whispered out the words of church songs while sweeping the first few pews. By the time she reached the back of the church, she let the full power of her voice echo off the high walls and arched ceiling. She could have been a professional singer, she told us. She should have been, instead of marrying Pop. But when you're poor, you don't have the luxury of doing what you want.

One afternoon in October, when she finished singing, someone clapped. She looked around, but saw only the empty church. The sound of hands slapping together rose from the middle of the pews. It was difficult to tell where the noise came from. She looked hard – her eyes were strong then, she said – and wondered briefly if it was God himself applauding her. But as soon as this miraculous idea came to her mind, young Father What-a-shame sat up from where he'd been lying in one of the pews. He leaned forward and placed a forearm on the seat in front of him, and then rested his chin on that arm. Mamom was impeccable with the details she was able to recall, and we never knew if they were accurate, exaggerations or simply the inventions of a feeble mind.

"You have a beautiful voice," the priest said. "I've been listening to you for months."

He stood and approached Mamom.

“Have you been hiding in here the whole time?” she said.

“I’ll say yes if you promise not to tell on me.”

He smiled and didn’t seem like a priest at all. Just another boy who made her nervous in a way that caused her such happiness.

“If you’ve been here, how come I haven’t seen you?” she asked.

“I stay ahead of you,” he said. He blushed. “When I hear you a few rows in front, I watch to see when you move to the far end, and then I crawl back to another pew.”

“You crawl? On your hands and knees? But you’re a priest. Aren’t you ashamed?”

“Only when I’m caught,” he said. “You’re the first person to catch me.”

She deliberately said nothing in response. She only smiled. He also said nothing, and a great silence rose in the small space between their bodies. Mamom told us she knew she’d end up kissing him. The urge to put her lips to someone was never so strong. It was stronger than her fears of eternal damnation, which is what she assumed would result from kissing a priest. The urge was so strong, she thought she might do it without really controlling herself, as if a spirit possessed her and pushed her forward. At the moment when she felt herself surrendering to this spirit, the heavy front door of the church opened, sending in a bright sliver of the hot afternoon sunlight. By the time the door slammed shut, Mamom was back to sweeping and Father What-a-shame was shaking a pew, pretending to check its sturdiness.

“This seems a little loose,” he said to himself.

“There you are,” a voice called from the narthex. “I’ve been looking all over for you. We have to talk.”

It was Mrs. Stelly. She was a large woman, in her forties, who walked so that everyone within a certain radius heard the determined clapping of her high heels. Mamom said the woman

never smiled, but that occasionally a certain perverse joy sparkled in her eyes. Her husband owned the grocery store next to the church, and he always appeared out of breath and his hair a mess, as if he'd just woken up from an unsettling dream. When he was around his wife, people who didn't know him might mistake Mr. Stelly for mute. He didn't enjoy talking. The couple seemed ill matched, except for their natural ugliness, but even their ugliness clashed. He was a pale, tiny man whose weak-looking body evoked pity. Mrs. Stelly was large and strong, and though very unattractive, men enjoyed her plumpness. The Stellys did not fit, Mamom said, but they did have the good sense not to reproduce, forcing the world to gaze upon some hideous child.

"Let's talk in private," Mrs. Stelly said. She grabbed the priest by the hand and led him to the confessional. He glanced back at Mamom, and he looked like a little boy being pulled by his mother. When he was gone, my grandmother sat on the nearest pew. Her heart was racing, and she thought she might cry. It was the first time she ever felt broken hearted, she told me.

In the weeks that followed, Father What-a-shame stopped playing baseball. He was seen more often in public. He visited the Stelly home every day for lunch, and was spotted walking with Mrs. Stelly down by the bayou. Mamom said the whole town knew the priest was sleeping with her, but no one minded. Father What-a-shame stopped stuttering during Mass. He didn't spill wine or tremble with the communion wafer in his hands. Even his cowlick straightened itself flat against his scalp. The priest's eyes lost that boyish sparkle that somehow made everything he said sound childish. He spoke loud, with a voice as powerful as his forearms, and the older women in the church joined the girls in calling him "Father What-a-shame."

"What about Mr. Stelly?" I asked.

“He thought it was good luck for his wife to be sleeping with a priest,” Mamom said. “When she finally became pregnant after all those years, he even named the baby Mario.”

She turned toward me, and the way her eyes fixed on mine, she sure didn’t seem blind. The three of us talked in low voices that afternoon, so I doubt she was deaf either.

“He was a good priest,” she said. She closed her eyes, and as her body trembled, maybe from Parkinson’s, maybe not, I wondered if she might be crying.

Two days later, we spent most of the afternoon at the funeral home for the visitation. Pop didn’t look good. The body in that coffin was small and weak, with a strange orange, chalky complexion. He didn’t resemble the strong, old farmer I once admired. I wanted hands big like his, with hair and scabs on the knuckles. Those same hands now looked deflated, resting the way they did on his stomach. Again, I hoped Mamom was blind. I didn’t want her to see her husband that way. Her vision seemed to have returned over the last few days. She sat hunched forward in a wheel chair next to the coffin, and a line of mourners approached her and, one by one, offered their condolences. She looked them each in the face and sometimes said their name, sometimes asked if they still lived on so-and-so street, if they were going to run for sheriff again, if Pop ever paid them for fixing his television ten years ago.

“She’s amazing,” Karen whispered to me. “Sharp as a tack.”

The line of mourners moved fast, as if it were a living entity with its own drive, its own ambition to flow past the old widow. But after Mr. Herbert, Mamom and Pop’s neighbor at the nursing home, said he was sorry and shuffled on his way, everything came to a halt. Father James stood next in line. I don’t know if I swore out loud or in my head. It didn’t matter.

Everyone in the funeral home focused on Mamom. The priest approached my grandmother and bent and took her hand.

“How are you holding up, Mrs. Martin?” he asked. The room was so quiet everyone heard the question.

“What?” Mamom shouted. “Who is it?”

Father James looked at me and laughed. It was a good-natured laugh that seemed to say, *I'm not falling for this again*. I only stared back at him.

“I can't see or hear you,” Mamom said. “Who is it? Who?”

Her voice sounded angry. She swatted at the air in front of her, as if she wanted to feel who was holding her hand. The speed and fury with which she swung her palm led me to believe her true intention was to slap Father James. But the priest was fast, and he quickly leaned back, avoiding that old hand.

“May Christ's peace be with you,” he said.

He nodded to me, and then turned to go.

“Is that you Father?” Mamom said. Her voice was much too loud for a funeral home. A few people came in from the lounge, where there was coffee, to see why she was shouting.

“I'm here,” Father James said. He stood closer, but still beyond her arms reach.

“Where?” she said. “I can't see you.”

He was very good at disguising his sigh, but I noticed the way he exhaled as he moved closer.

“I can't see or hear,” she said. “I was in a car wreck years ago. It killed my baby girl, Julia, and I never saw or heard much after that.”

"I'm sorry," Father James said. He leaned closer and Mamom's hand reached out and slapped the side of his cheek. His glasses came loose and hung awkwardly on his face.

"Is that you, Father?" she said.

"You got me good."

"Did I, Father? I have no feeling in my hands any more. Not since the car wreck. I lost almost all my senses."

To prove she had lost the sensation of feeling in her hands, she swung at him again. She missed. Like I said, he moved fast.

"I was in a car wreck, Father. That's how I lost my legs."

"I see," he said. He adjusted the glasses back on his face. He didn't look down. He, like everyone else, knew she still had her legs ñ two swollen, purple legs that no longer had the strength to carry her body.

"Do you think she's crazy?" Karen whispered.

"No," I said. "She can see alright. It'll be worse tomorrow."

Mamom tried to coax Father James to look closer at her legs. They were prosthetics, she said, but they looked real. The priest, like the rest of us, knew that if he bent any closer, the old lady would kick him. So instead, he apologized for not being able to stay, nodded to me again, and then hurried out of the funeral home. Mamom yelled after him, craning her neck and watching him leave. Father James did not return.

Everyone in the funeral home remained silent for a minute or two. Then, the line of mourners came back to life, slithering past the old widow.

\* \* \*

We buried Pop on a terribly hot day in July. It rained earlier that morning, making the afternoon air nice and humid under the bright sun. I wore my black suit, and before we reached the funeral home, my undershirt was soaked through with sweat. It was too hot to talk, almost too hot to mourn. The air-conditioning in the car was turned on high, and we listened to the cold air blowing out of the vents. We enjoyed the sound. We enjoyed it like music. But the air didn't cool us down. The day was too hot for that. We simply liked the idea of being a little colder. It took our thoughts away from death and our own mortality.

Mamom sat in the front passenger seat, next to my mother. The old woman looked wilted. Was it the heat? Was it the loss of her husband? She didn't watch the trees pass by her window, didn't seem to enjoy the droning of the air conditioner, and so I thought, maybe she is blind. Maybe she is deaf.

It was a long drive from the nursing home to the funeral home, and I was content to say nothing, but Mamom mumbled something. Both my mother and I leaned forward to hear what she said.

"If Father Lockwood says Mass, make sure he hasn't been drinking," she said.

"Mom, Father James is saying Mass," my mother said. "Father Lockwood died years ago."

"Oh, that's right," the old lady said.

My mother's mentioning of Father James so carelessly set my heart to racing. I watched my grandmother and could tell the name troubled her too.

"Who was this other priest?" I asked. I wanted to change the subject. Mamom lifted her head, and filling her lungs with the car's cool air, she told us the story of Father Lockwood.

He should have been a fat man, she said. He ate all the time, and he seemed incapable of satisfying his appetite. He often had bits of food stuck in his teeth and gravy stains on the cuffs of his shirts. But he was skinny. The food didn't affect him. His narrow wrists looked as if they could be snapped like rotten limbs, and his face, covered in gray whiskers, showed the horrific outlines of his skull.

He drank even more than he ate, Mamom said. Father Lockwood might pick the food out of his teeth once in a while, and he was known to change into clean shirts without gravy stains, but no one ever approached him without getting a whiff of his hot breath. In the early afternoon, he'd put on his crumpled hat and walk the two miles to Mamom's and Pop's farm. He set the bottles of wine on the kitchen table and waited for his hosts to come in from the fields. My aunt Julia, only four years old at the time, would sit on his lap and sing with him. Father Lockwood had a beautiful singing voice, Mamom said. He could have become a professional singer, she said, instead of a priest.

When my grandparents finally returned from the fields, the priest would set Julia back on the floor, and kiss her cheek.

"Now remember," he'd say, "I'm going to marry you some day."

"Priests can't marry," she'd say.

"Then I'll have to stop being a priest."

He tickled little squeals out of her, but once she ran out of the room, the serious business of drinking would commence. Pop considered it merely a hobby before Father Lockwood came to St. Francis Regis. The priest taught him how to do it professionally. He taught Pop how to fight through the spinning, how to let the heat rise from his chest to his cheeks, how to vomit properly and continue again until sunrise. And both men learned how to fight like animals, how

to pull down a fat farmer or slap and scratch a skinny priest, how to twist and writhe on the floor, legs and arms flailing, two bodies squirming in awkward positions until they were both out of breath and ready for more wine.

The priest occasionally had the foresight to sober up before Mass, but that wasn't always the case. It was easy to tell when he was drunk in church. He couldn't speak. It was as if his entire vocabulary, all the words in his head, cowered in some deep recess of his mind. So Father Lockwood barked and spit and clawed at the air. His inability to talk to his flock enraged him, and he stood before the church, his face red, sweat on his neck, and shouted, trying to form any word possible, "Met...dit...mar...dar!" He made absolutely no sense, Mamom said. He would spend 20 minutes trying to speak before finally giving up and sitting down.

One autumn afternoon, after just such a Mass, Father Stelly stumbled down the church steps and found himself swept up in a crowd running towards the bayou. They gathered along the edge of the murky brown water, and watched two men lift something up onto the grass. It was limp and pale, like the underbelly of a fish, and Father Lockwood pushed away the tangled, dark blonde hair to see the face of little Julia.

I asked Mamom if she was there when they found the body because she gave so many details in her story. She said she couldn't remember. I didn't bother to remind her how she told Father James that Julia died in a car wreck. And I didn't care if this story was true or not because I knew she enjoyed telling it.

Father Lockwood blamed the people of the town for the young girl's death. He cried more than Mamom and Pop the day they found the body. Someone heard him whisper something about his bride. He cried and then he raged against everyone. Surely, someone saw the girl. Why

didn't they try and stop her? Why didn't they tell her not to go near the water? Was she thrown in? Who here was guilty of murder? Who?

After the funeral, the priest, Mamom and Pop sat silently at the kitchen table and commenced drinking. They drank throughout the day, into the night and again into the day. Mamom and Pop cried over their dead daughter. They held hands for the first time in years. They held each other. They kissed. They fell on the floor, embracing each other and moaning until they fell asleep.

Father Lockwood was horribly drunk when he left them, but he wasn't ready to go off to sleep. He took the remaining wine and walked the two miles back to town. The bottle was empty when he reached Stelly's store, and the priest smashed it on the sidewalk. The noise brought a few people into the street, and they watched the priest struggle for words. His tongue was too big for his mouth, and in his ire, he couldn't form even the simplest animal sounds to curse the town. His trembling hands gripped his face, pulled at his clothes and then came to rest on his belt. Suddenly, Father Lockwood's eyes flamed to life, and he quickly unbuckled his belt, pulled down his pants and underwear and pointed his bare rear-end at those gathered before him. He stood in that position for hours, Mamom said, mooning the town. People arrived from all over to see the spectacle of the bare-assed priest. Some chuckled. Others booed. Stelly threw an apple at Father Lockwood's backside, but he missed.

By sunset, a reverential silence overtook the crowd. The wind picked up, flapping the weary priest's shirt and the pants around his ankles. A red glow from the west fell across his backside, lighting it like a candle. People bowed their heads. Young Mario Stelly made the sign of the cross. When the sun finally set, Father Lockwood silently pulled up his pants and buckled

his belt. The crowd parted, allowing him to walk away with his head held high. Many argued it was the best homily he ever delivered.

The story had to be another lie, I thought. But Mamom spoke so lovingly of the priest publicly exposing himself, I assumed it must be true.

“Father Lockwood was a good priest,” she said. “I hope he says something nice for Pop’s funeral.”

After the funeral, I finally shook Father James’ hand. I told him he was very articulate, which I thought was a compliment. He only nodded. It was too hot for much talk anyway. We both wiped the sweat from our palms before shaking hands, and we each let go quickly, so as not to absorb the other man’s body heat.

I honestly don’t know whether he said anything nice about Pop or not. I spent most of the funeral watching Mamom. She sat in her wheelchair with her head bowed. She might have been blind or deaf and unable to witness any of her husband’s funeral.

We wheeled her into the church’s reception hall, which was next to the cemetery. She didn’t seem to notice anything. She sat there with her eyes unfocused. Everyone ate inside the reception hall. The noise was loud, and people, both family and friends, were in good spirits. Death had passed us by, and we were out of the heat. But Mamom sat alone, by the front table. I watched her again, and I couldn’t tell if her cheeks were wet from sweat or tears. I went and sat next to her and said it was a beautiful service. That’s when I realized they were tears.

“The priest was a nigger,” she said.

When she said that word, she cried harder. I apologized and told her we tried to find another priest. Father James was the only one available.

“He did a good job, I think,” I said.

She shook her head.

“The priest was a nigger,” she said again.

It broke her heart, and I didn't know how to comfort her.

## A Good Book

If Matt Anderson had one major flaw, it was that he took things too literally. He believed what he was told, even if it was meant as a joke. Back in college, an English professor twice made a fool of Matt because of the young man's gullibility. Both times, however, were mere accidents on the professor's part.

Dr. Kael, a man of thirty-eight with thick brown hair and bushy, wild eyebrows, said in an aside to the class that he was in his mid-70s and that was why he knew so much about literature. He read the classics when they were all new. Matt was speechless. For weeks he struggled to figure out how someone that old could look so young. Dr. Kael was by no means attractive. Eternal youth, Matt realized, was commonly misinterpreted as eternal beauty. The ape-like professor, with dark hair on his knuckles and peeking out of the rolled up sleeves of his Oxford shirt, had somehow tricked time and retained a youthful body in his old age. Was it his diet? Did he drink a glass of wine a day? If so, what type of wine? Maybe he did some strange exercises or meditation? Or was it simply the gift of good genes?

"I can't believe Dr. Kael is seventy-six," Matt whispered to the girl next to him one afternoon as they packed up to leave class.

"What are you talking about?"

"Don't you remember him saying that a few weeks ago? The man is almost eighty. It's unreal."

"I think he was joking," the girl said.

"No, I don't think so," Matt said, and he honestly didn't think so. Dr. Kael had showed no signs of joking when he told the class he was an old man. No smile. No wink. No shaking of

his head. It was simply beyond Matt's mental comprehension that a person would say something in all seriousness and not mean it.

"By the way, Mr. Anderson," Dr. Kael said at the end of the following class period. "I'm afraid I'm not really in my seventies. I'm only thirty-eight, but thank you."

Matt was embarrassed by the laughter of his classmates, but lesson learned, right? Afraid not. Only a week later, Dr. Kael stood before the class with a stack of papers in his hand.

"After reading your essays," the professor said, "I have to tell you, you guys have filthy minds. I didn't pick up all the sexual references in the poem that you all found, but I guess since I've never had sex, I don't understand such things."

Never had sex? This news didn't simply surprise Matt, it broke his heart. Sure, Dr. Kael was an unattractive and extremely hairy man, but even ugly people stumble into some form of love or human contact at least once in their lives. What was the cause of such a lonely fate? Was he disabled, impotent, hyper-religious, shy? Was he afraid to take his clothes off in front of a woman? Was it too hairy between his legs? Matt thought about this for days, until the next class meeting when the professor off-handedly mentioned his wife. Matt glanced up for the first time at his teacher's left hand and, sure enough, there was a gold ring.

"You're married and a virgin," he blurted out.

"Excuse me," Dr. Kael said.

"It's just that last time you said you hadn't ever had sex, but you're married..."

The professor exhaled, removed his glasses, and with his meaty, hairy fingers, massaged the corners of his eyes.

"Mr. Anderson, I wasn't serious. I guess I'll have to watch what I say from now on."

It wasn't what he said, Matt thought, but how he said it – serious. Dr. Kael's tone and demeanor surely confused others, even though Matt's classmates, laughing as they were, seemed all to have understood the joke.

Many people, however, mistook Matt Anderson's literal nature for a dry sense of humor. That's what first attracted Alice Lahue, a petite blond-haired member of the Alpha Delta Pi sorority, to the young college student.

"I never can tell when you're serious or joking," she said.

He rarely joked, but Alice was pretty, loyal, from a good family, and with just enough of a Memphis accent to make her fit for a wife, so every so often he pretended he was joking. They married on a rainy Saturday in June, a year after they graduated, and their families consoled them during the downpour that it was actually good luck to have rain on your wedding day.

Matt believed everyone who said they'd have a long, happy marriage, and their predictions seemed to come true. The first year, which was said to be the most difficult, went by remarkably easy. Alice was an early riser, and Matt woke up late in the morning with his coffee and breakfast waiting for him. They usually showered together, lathering each other with soap, then helping the water wash the white suds off their bodies. Alice packed his lunch, ironed his clothes and had dinner awaiting him when he returned. In that first year, she grew to need his body close to hers. She wrapped her arm around him on walks. At night, she laid his head in her lap and brushed her fingers through his hair. Sometimes, for no reason at all, she threw her arms around his neck and hugged him tight. This closeness led to more lovemaking, and for the first time since he was eleven, Matt made it an entire month without masturbating.

By the end of their second year of marriage, Alice was pregnant. She gave birth to their son Dylan in June, and three years later, Emma joined the family. Alice, to many people's

surprise, lost the weight of her pregnancies rather quickly. She often ran three to six miles before Matt woke up. He worked out in the evenings at the Y, improving his physique, particularly his biceps, since his college days. They made a beautiful family, especially in the Christmas card photos they took on the front porch of their 2,000-square-foot, red brick home in the tony subdivision of Avalon.

Matt's happiness, however, wasn't limited to his personal life. His matter-of-factness suited him well as an insurance agent. His name was printed on magnet calendars and in big letters on the sign out front of his office. He worked in the same small town he grew up in, and many former schoolmates were his clients. He joined the Kiwanis Club and attended most of their weekly lunches at the First Baptist Church. He donated to the local Republican Party, considered running for alderman, and was on good terms with the local newspaper's business reporter, who often called Matt to get a quote for a story.

In the summer, he wore khaki pants and polo shirts, and in the winter, he changed into solid-colored Oxford shirts with the sleeves rolled up. Matt Anderson was a happy, ordinary man who led a happy, ordinary life. No bumps or cracks threatened what should have been a perfectly lovely existence. The only deviation from normalcy ever to affect his life occurred years before, when his grandparents' 110-year-old Greek Revival house, located one block from the courthouse, mysteriously burned to the ground. Nana Anderson, his grandmother, died in the flames – her body charred so badly the casket remained closed for the funeral. Papa, his grandfather, survived the ordeal, but his eyebrows never grew back, and the fire wrinkled the skin on his cheeks, turning it a pinkish white color. It was difficult to look at him, and he never spoke again, so Matt didn't feel guilty about not visiting.

"You look so much like your grandfather," people often told Matt.

He never knew his grandfather without those horrible burns, and all the old photos of him were in black and white, making it impossible to tell if he had the same ginger hair and reddish complexion.

“It’s remarkable,” they said. “You really favor him.”

Matt didn’t see it, but so many people told him this, he assumed it was true. When Papa Anderson finally died, Matt spent a good deal of time staring into the casket, trying to find something familiar in that still face.

“Do you think I look like him,” he asked Alice. She stood behind her husband, rubbing his back.

“Not really,” she said.

“Then why does everyone say I do?”

“I don’t know. Maybe you had similar personalities.”

They both gazed at the dead man, wondering how that face moved when it was happy – did the corner of the mouth turn up, like a sneer, the way it did for Matt? When he was sad, did the lips press together tight, and the man exhale through his nose? But they learned nothing, were given no hint, and after he was buried, the grandfather was forgotten.

The family members didn’t even give Papa Anderson much thought the day after his funeral as they cleaned out his bedroom looking for anything of value. Nothing much there to call a life. Most of the memories and mementos during his time on earth had gone up in flames years ago. A few shirts and khaki pants hung in the bedroom closet, but they were stuffed in a bag to give to Goodwill. Matt’s father kept the old man’s cane and the “Cumberland Hardware” cap he sometimes wore. The inside of the hat still smelled of Old Spice. A few papers were scattered around the room – junk mail mainly – and they were quickly thrown away.

“What’s this?” Alice asked. She sat on the dead man’s bed, and her right foot swung back, hitting something beneath the mattress. A metallic thump echoed through the room. She leaned over and pulled out a small, grayish-green lock box.

“Does anyone know the combination?” she asked.

“Try 1-2-3,” Matt’s father said.

He wasn’t joking. Papa and Nana Anderson were married on January 23, and they used that date for most of their codes and combinations. Alice turned the three dials to read “1-2-3,” and she gasped when the lid creaked open. A sulfur-like odor rose from the box, and Matt swore he saw a wisp of yellow smoke. Alice coughed and then looked down to see the ragged remains of a book. The cover and title page were missing, and from the blackened edges that remained, everyone assumed the book had survived the house fire.

“What book is it?” Alice asked. She picked it up, but Matt took it from her hands. He turned it over and carefully flipped through the yellow, brittle pages.

“I don’t know,” he said. “It doesn’t have a title or author. Those pages are gone.”

The book, they learned by reading the first page, was a novel. It began with the opening line, “Once upon a time, a boy and girl met and fell in love.” This puzzled everyone in the family even more. They never, *never*, saw Papa Anderson so much as pick up a book. He didn’t care for reading, even before the fire. And he had a serious, matter-of-fact type of personality that had no use for works of fiction.

“It must have meant something to him,” Alice said.

Matt weighed the book in his hand. It was heavier than it looked, and this weight caused him to think of it as something of value.

“You mind if I keep it?” he asked his parents.

“Go ahead.”

Matt hadn't read a work of fiction since Dr. Kael's class many years ago. But this charred, heavy book, hidden so long by his grandfather, had piqued his interest in reading. The tragic events of Papa's life served as the best marketing tool for this mysterious novel.

It took him a few weeks, however, to get started. The novel accumulated dust on his nightstand, and he was only reminded of it early in the morning or late at night. Besides, life was flowing so well on its own, as it had been for years, so why interrupt it by picking up a book?

Little had changed over the years in this happy home. Matt continued to wake up with his coffee and breakfast waiting, though Alice no longer had time for their morning showers. She had to get Dylan and Emma ready and off to school and, because they enjoyed such a large, well-decorated house in the Avalon subdivision, she was now working as a nurse for a small family practice near the hospital. Alice still packed her husband's lunch and had dinner ready when he got home. After doing the dishes and clearing up the mess made by the children, she slumped onto the couch. Instead of rubbing Matt's head or moving so close that they invariably went off to make love, she simply fell asleep with the television on.

This new routine freed up some extra time for Matt in the evenings. At first, he wasn't sure what to do with himself. The children were in bed. Alice snored on the couch. He tried watching television, but the shows didn't appeal to him. After a week, he paced the house, trying to find something to occupy him. That's when he stumbled across the charred, coverless novel on his nightstand. Why not, he thought, and, lying on the couch in the den, away from the noise of the television in the living room, he started reading.

Matt stayed up late that first night, and he could have read until morning if he hadn't had an 8 a.m. tee time he needed to be rested for. But he wasn't rested. His mind kept imagining the characters from the book after he went to bed. Nothing much had happened plot-wise, but he enjoyed the people and their lives so much, he kept turning over in his mind the sentences he'd just read. The book was quite simple, and shouldn't have been so entertaining. Matt didn't mention it to Alice at breakfast or to his golfing foursome. He dreaded the inevitable question, "What's it about?" It wasn't about anything. At least, not yet. A young couple falls in love and gets married. They have a nice house and two children and, whoever the author was, he or she had a real talent for depicting life's pleasant, quite moments – sitting on the front porch on a spring night or taking your coffee with you in the morning to get the newspaper out of the driveway. Slight, minor details in life, but put into print, he saw them anew in his own life.

"What are you smiling at?" Alice asked one morning.

Matt sat at the kitchen table with his coffee. The steam rose from the mug, warming his face.

"I'm just enjoying the moment," he said. She didn't hear him. She was out the door, taking the kids to school.

Matt left for work an hour later, and at lunch he pulled out his book and continued reading. The wife character was beautiful and loving and she did things, such as come up behind her husband and wrap her arms around him, which reminded Matt of Alice. Matt loved his wife, but in reading this book, he felt he loved her more. He saw her differently. He witnessed more easily the kind gestures she did for him – making his coffee, his breakfast, his lunch. He saw all the work she put into the house because of all the work the wife in the book put into her house.

Matt soon realized that reading aroused him. The wife character gave herself so willingly to the husband character. In chapter three, she handed him a Valentine's Day present – a coupon book for sexual favors. Hadn't Alice given him the same thing secretly for his birthday last year? Matt put down his book and went into his home office, next to the laundry room. In the top drawer of his desk, he found the coupon book Alice had made with construction paper. The coupons included the following favors: sex, no foreplay; sex in a public place; blowjob; tie me up; tie you up; and a night with whip cream. There were three coupons for each act. Matt had already used up all the "sex, no foreplay" vouchers.

"Don't you want to use one of your coupons?" Alice had asked a few months ago.

He had flipped through the construction paper booklet and then said, "Honestly, I love this idea, but next time, just make a book that only has 'sex, no foreplay' coupons. I don't know when I'll use these other ones."

Now, he thought as he sat in his office. I want to use these coupons now. He tore off "tie you up," pulled a couple of old neckties out of his closet and set them and the coupon on his sleeping wife's chest. He turned off the television in the living room, bent close to kiss her, and when she blinked her eyes open, he grinned and whispered, "follow me."

Matt meant to read more of his book later that evening, but the lovemaking had been fierce. Tying up Alice had turned him on more than he expected, and as she loosened the ties from her sore wrists, he fell into a gentle sleep. That night, he dreamt of a happy, blissful life, and when he woke up the next morning, he wasn't sure if he'd been dreaming his own life or the one in the novel he was reading.

After his coffee and breakfast, Matt took his book to the couch in the den, determined to read a few pages before work. The house was quiet – Alice had taken the children to school. It

was a warm, spring day, and enough sunlight poured in through the large front window that he didn't turn on a lamp or the overhead light. It should have been a perfect morning for reading, but at around page 100, something strange happened that caused Matt to suddenly close the book. He waited a moment before opening it back up to see if he'd read correctly. Sure enough, on page 100, in mid-sentence, the novel that had been written in third person suddenly shifted to a first-person narrator. Even to a non-reader like Matt, this seemed an inexcusable, sloppy mistake. That "I" sitting there on the page without quotation marks surrounding it stuck out like a pimple on an otherwise clear face. He closed the book again. Was this error enough to ruin the whole novel for him? He said "no" aloud, but in his mind, he knew it was over. There would be no finishing the book.

His day dragged on. Matt didn't realize how much he'd looked forward to his free moments when he could read. Without the book, he felt empty. Is this all there is, he thought. Day after day of this. He swept the paperwork off his desk, and the United Way plaque with his name on it crashed to the floor. Laurie, his assistant, didn't come see what caused the noise. She was hiding from her boss. He'd grumbled at her a few times that morning, even yelling at her at lunch when she asked if he'd finished his book.

On the way home, he thought he was suffocating, so he rolled down the car's window. "I hope this doesn't mess up my hair," he said aloud. And by uttering the letter "I," a thought occurred to him. Who was now the narrator of that book? Was it the husband or the wife? He'd only read that one sentence. It gave him no clues as to who the speaker might be.

When Matt arrived home, he hurried into the den and picked the book up off the coffee table. He flipped through the pages to find where he'd stopped that morning.

“Dinner’s almost ready,” Alice said. She stood in the doorway watching him, but Matt didn’t look up.

“I’ll be there in a minute,” he said. He waved his hand, brushing her away, and her shadow quickly retreated out of the room.

There it was, on page 100. The sentence changed from third to first person, and as he read on to page 101, he realized the “I” in the story was the young wife. He thought about putting the book down again, but he read a paragraph, and then another, and each time he told himself he’d reached a stopping point, he pushed on to another page.

“Matt,” Alice called from the kitchen. “It’s getting cold.”

“I’m coming.” But he didn’t go to her. He read faster, trying to get as far as he could without being too late for dinner. He read and he read, just a few minutes more he said to himself, even as he heard Alice putting the dinner and dishes away, even as he heard her tuck the children into bed. He felt her shadow falling from the doorway into the den, but he didn’t look up. Just one more paragraph, one more sentence. The shadow disappeared and when he finally put the book down, his eyes tired, he was surprised to see that it was past 1 a.m.

But he didn’t go upstairs to sleep next to Alice. He remained in the den, scratching the back of his head and trying to comprehend what he’d just read. The tone of the book had changed. The wife character narrated the simple events of her day, but the joy in the language was gone. She spoke simply, bluntly even, describing her day in minute detail. Lingered behind these words was a feeling of boredom and dread. Matt tried to explain to himself why he thought this, but he couldn’t. The wife character didn’t say anything outright that indicated these emotions. Everything he read that evening seemed to hint at a great unhappiness that was too out of place in this story.

The next morning, Matt woke up on the couch with a headache. When he stood and stretched, he realized this pain extended throughout his entire body. His muscles were sore. It was difficult to breathe. The aching in his back teeth was the final straw, and he sat at the table, ready to yell at the first person who displeased him. It should have been Alice. She set his coffee mug down so hard, he flinched at the noise. The black liquid spilled down the side of the mug and onto the table, but she didn't clean it up. She returned to the stove to finish cooking his breakfast – cheesy grits.

Matt wiped the coffee up with his fist and then cleaned his fist with a napkin. She seems angry, he thought, and it occurred to him that he had never really seen his wife angry. Or sad. Or at all unhappy. He had planned to yell at her to be more careful, but he hesitated, and in that pause he looked at her closely. She had gained weight. She no longer had time to run in the mornings and her thighs and bottom and the underside of her arms had grown plump. She was still beautiful, but less so than a few years earlier. Wrinkles had set in around her eyes and the corners of her mouth, and the way she wore her hair, pulled back tight into a ponytail, gave her entire face a weary, harsh appearance.

Alice didn't look at him as she cooked. She stirred the grits and, as she rolled her neck, she sighed. It was a clear, loud noise, and Matt understood it was directed at him. It had to be. Why else sigh at all? He tightened his grip around his mug. So she was tired of making him breakfast and coffee in the morning, was she? Well who asked her to? Certainly not him. Was it Matt's fault she was an early riser and he was not? Sleeping in did not constitute a moral failing. And so what if he got up later? Never, since the day they were married, had he asked her to make his coffee or breakfast. If she was to be upset with anyone, it should be herself. But here she was,

sighing at him for forcing her into these chores. He knew how to make coffee. He knew how to make breakfast. He got along just fine before they were married, and he could surely do it again.

"I'm not hungry," he said. He stood abruptly and, with coffee in hand, returned to the den. Matt picked up his book and resumed reading. The narrator was distraught. She was exhausted. She felt an emptiness inside her that was growing each day, and it terrified her because she saw no way of stopping it.

Matt closed the book and went to work, but all he could think about was making it to lunch so he could resume reading.

"Are you feeling alright, Mr. Anderson?" Laurie asked. Her voice trembled, and she rocked on the balls of her feet, as if ready to run for her life if need be.

"I'm fine. Why do you ask?"

"No reason."

"There has to be a reason, Laurie."

"I noticed you hadn't shaved in a few days..."

"Maybe I'm growing a beard." Maybe he was, he thought. "Is there anything wrong with that?"

"No sir."

"Well what is it? There must be a reason for asking me if I'm feeling alright?"

Laurie looked behind her at her desk, and then at the door. She must want so badly to escape.

"You look tired, that's all."

"I look tired?"

Was he tired? He looked at his assistant and saw her trembling. So she too thought of him as a tyrant? But wasn't she the tyrant? Couldn't a man grow a beard if he wanted? Couldn't he lose sleep once in a while? And who did she think she was? The boss or the assistant?

"Just a little tired," she said.

"I don't have time for this, Laurie," he said. "Shut the door on your way out."

At lunch, he picked up the book again, but Matt only read a few pages. The narrator was discussing personal matters, particularly her sex life with her husband, and Matt suddenly felt as if he were intruding. Reading the book now became like spying into someone's personal diary. There were thoughts and words he wasn't meant to read. His prying disturbed him, so he set the book down.

But his attitude changed by the time he returned home that evening. He was curious. What exactly did this wife character have to say about her sex life? He needed to know, but he couldn't simply read it there, in the open, in full view of Alice and the children. Opening the book was like snooping. It was like peeping. He was invading the narrator's privacy. He would only read it in private.

"Are you going to be eating with us tonight?" Alice asked. Again, she sighed for him.

"I have to get gas for the lawn mower," he said. He grabbed the car keys.

"Now? You have to do it now?"

"I need to cut the grass this weekend. You're the one who said so."

He went to the garage and took the plastic red gas can from its bed of cobwebs and grass clippings on the cement floor. The gas can was half full, and he heard and felt the liquid inside swishing around. Matt put the can in his trunk and drove to the gas station a mile from their house. He didn't park near the pumps. He stopped the car in an empty space overlooking the

river. Only a quarter of the sun peaked out from the bluff across from him. The shadows of late afternoon grew darker blue, and he needed the dirty yellow glow of the street light above in order to read.

The gas fumes floating up from the trunk forced Matt to roll down his window. It was a muggy, late spring evening, and without much air circulation, his sideburns became wet and dripped sweat. A hum from the flickering sign above the gas station, and the crickets in the grass lot next door should have been enough to distract him, but Matt read as if he were sitting comfortably on his couch in the den.

His cheeks were red, not from the heat but from the contents of the book. The wife character talked openly about her sex life with her husband. Matt's eyes opened wide, and he experienced that familiar arousal that now accompanied literature.

"She enjoys it," he said, tapping his forehead dry. This seemed out of character for the wife. All that he'd read since she took over the narration led him to expect that she'd forsaken sex too. But here, on page 148, she excites herself by reminiscing on the showers she and her husband once took. Two pages later, she goes to the bathroom after dinner and slowly rubs her fingers across her neck and brushes them gently against her breasts. At the bottom of the same page, she thinks of her husband and gently touches herself. Matt glanced up and surveyed the parking lot of the gas station to make sure no one was watching him. The station was closed. The main sign was off and the crickets grew louder. He could tell it was late because no cars drove down the road behind him. He should be getting home, but the book was just getting good again. The wife character enjoyed sex. She wanted to sleep with her husband. What a great twist, he thought. He had to keep reading.

“I know him,” the wife character said, “better than he knows himself. I know what his favorite food is. I know when he’s going to make a joke and what he’s going to say, and I know how he makes love.”

Matt reread this sentence. What does she mean by she knows how he makes love? Sex is sex. He continued on to the next page and read how the husband character made love. He’d start by rubbing her back. That was the signal for her to turn towards him. Then he’d smile, in case she didn’t know exactly what he was proposing. His lips would meet hers and for about five seconds, they’d kiss. The husband then moved down her neck until he reached her chest, focusing on each breast, on each nipple, for a moment or two. Then off came her panties and their lovemaking commenced. It was always the same. Always. No variation from this routine. Rub her back, kiss her lips, her neck, her breasts and then begin. To prove her point, the narrator described this routine over and over until it became tedious to read. For the first time since he picked up the book, Matt skipped over to the next page.

The night’s muggy heat became unbearable. Sweat stung his eyes and blurred his vision. The collar of his polo shirt was wet and he sniffed his armpit to discover, or rather confirm, that his deodorant was no longer working. But he still didn’t leave. He had to read how the wife never felt more alone than when she slept with her husband. She couldn’t imagine going to bed with anyone else, and she fantasized about the love they’d make, but once under the covers, that same old routine commenced. “Does he even need me here,” the wife character asked. “Does he even want me here?”

Matt finally drove home and found the lights all off. He tiptoed in through the garage, carrying his book. He made his way quietly up the stairs to the bedroom and removed his clothes without waking Alice. What was it about reading that aroused him so? He slid the palm of his

hand up and down his wife's back, gently at first and then with a little more pressure to wake her up. She turned and looked up at him with dazed, groggy eyes. He returned her look with a smile. He felt happy again. Happily married. Happy in life. Matt kissed Alice. Her lips were dry, her breath stale from hours of heavy sleep. He kissed her neck and then, pulling up her nightgown, he planted little kisses on her chest. His fingers grazed down her side and grabbed the edges of her panties, slowly pulling them free of her legs.

Why did she have to sigh? Why not say, "not now honey," or "I'm too tired." Why, just as he was climbing on top of her, must she exhale that way? Matt had never lost an erection before. Those little sighs she was now prone to making were enough to enrage him, but for her to do this to him.

"What's wrong?" she asked. Matt turned over and covered himself with the comforter. What's wrong, she asks. Now she's mocking me. And she sounds so pleased with herself.

"Are you OK?"

The gall! Matt jumped out of bed. He slid on a pair of underwear, picked up his book and headed toward the door.

"Where are you going?"

"To read."

"How long is it going to take you to finish one book?"

Go to hell! He let his footsteps fall hard on the floor, rattling the picture frames against the wall. The noise woke Emma, and she cried out, "Momma."

Alice tiptoed past her husband. Matt stayed in the hallway and listened to her soothe the child. "Shhh," she whispered. He could tell by the muffled sound of her voice that her mouth was resting against the top of the girl's head, simultaneously kissing her and whispering that

everything was fine. He waited for this sound to strike his chest, like a snake, but it merely fell to the ground. If it touched him, he didn't feel it.

The house remained quiet for the rest of the night, except for the occasional flipping of pages. Matt sat on the couch until dawn, reading of the bitter frustrations of the wife character. At five he covered his mouth with the open book and yawned. The old, yellow pages still smelled smoky. A few minutes later, he went into the kitchen and made a small pot of coffee. Smoke hissed up from the old coffee maker. A pale brown liquid filled the pot, accompanied by a few coffee grounds. He leaned against the sink and drank both cups. Little black specks stuck to his lips and teeth, and he licked them off and spit them into the sink.

"You made coffee," Alice said. He was deep in thought and didn't notice her until she opened the cabinet behind him.

"Hmm," she moaned. A short, abrupt sound, as irritating as her sighing. What does it mean? Hmm? It's like a bark, an animal sound made by something not intelligent enough to speak. Hmmm.

"What?" he asked. His grip tightened around the handle of the coffee mug.

"Nothing."

"No, what?"

She hesitated. In that moment, she seemed to deflate only to find a hidden reserve of audacity that inflated her chest and head well above their original size.

"You didn't make enough for me." Alice pointed with her mug to the empty pot.

"Oh, for Christ's sake, it's only coffee."

"And I make it every morning for you."

“Do I ask you? No, I don’t. I can just as well make it myself, and I did.”

“That’s the point,” she said. “I guess I think about more than just myself.”

God, he wanted to slap her. He even raised his hand to show her how serious he was. Matt expected this gesture to startle his wife, but she seemed to rise even higher, step even closer, as if challenging him to do it.

Instead, he turned and went back to the den and commenced reading. He spoke no more to Alice that morning. She got the children up, dressed them, laughed at their jokes, cleaned the milk Dylan spilled and scolded him for not being careful and then took them to school. All of this she did louder than usual, to distract him, he knew, from his “precious reading,” as she now called it. But he’d show her. Matt had no intention of going into work that morning. He’d stay on the couch and read, enjoying for the first time in years the prolonged silence of an empty house.

It was during that morning’s reading, on page 213, that the book again made a major shift. The wife character continued narrating her tale of woe, but now she realized something horrific. Her husband, the man she loved and married and fantasized about, and now hated and scorned, was not a man at all. She stood at the bedroom window one evening, hiding behind the curtains. She’d woken up after hearing her husband sneak downstairs. There he was in the backyard, naked in the moonlight, and without shoes and socks, she could see the demonic hooves where his feet should have been. The devil. She was married to the devil. The wife character shut the curtains, then used them to dry her tears.

Matt didn’t like this shift at all. He yelled out, “oh come on” when he read the word “hooves.” He never read books, but he preferred nonfiction to made up stories. He was enjoying this novel, but it wasn’t a supernatural story or, God forbid, science fiction. Turning the husband character into the devil spoiled everything, especially coming so deep into the book.

Matt put the book away, but he remained on the den couch for a long time. Something else troubled him. Hadn't he always identified with the husband character? It was more than that. They were almost identical. Early in the novel, the husband was described as having thick auburn hair, a rosy complexion, and dull brown eyes. Wasn't that exactly how Matt Anderson looked?

Dull brown eyes? He flipped back to the beginning of the book. Surely the writer had used another word because he remembered those opening pages being so joyful. But there it was, "dull brown eyes," on page two. He scanned a few more sentences, but they weren't as beautiful as he remembered. The melancholy that pervaded the book was evident even on the first few pages. How had he not noticed?

A large mirror hung above the couch in the den, and Matt stood and looked at himself. Was he the devil? It was a ridiculous thought, he knew, but what if it were true? Would a man know all his life if he was the devil, or would it be revealed suddenly, like an abrupt plot shift in a novel? The idea slowly became less strange to him. Matt went to church every Sunday, but he wasn't what you'd call religious. He spent that sacred hour looking at his watch, hoping for the service to end. He never prayed and he secretly despised those who exhibited their faith publicly. But there was more than his lack of faith. The emptiness inside him. Nothing disturbed him, nothing touched him, nothing moved him. He deplored sentimentality in all its forms. He never cried because nothing ever moved him to tears. All that he felt, Matt now realized, was hate. A dark rage growing slowly from his core and circling wider and wider through his body, expanding every day of his life and reaching what, any day now, would be its peak. He felt as if all this anger and heat turned his flesh a darker shade of red. The color didn't show up in the mirror, but, he thought without much regret, maybe he was the devil.

When Matt came to that conclusion, he didn't react with fear or anger or even sadness. Rather, his insides went numb. His consciousness receded deep into his skull, and all sensations felt as if they had to travel a great distance, down a long corridor, in order to experience the world. This was what Matt Anderson felt. He was detached from the existence. He merely floated through it now in his role as Lucifer. That was what the book said, and his literal mind interpreted this as truth.

He spent less time at work – did Satan need a job? Members of the Kiwanis Club no longer saw him every week at the First Baptist Church. The chairman of the county Republican Party left a few messages and emails, but he never heard back. The local newspaper reporter tried to get a couple of quotes from Matt for a story, but once his deadline passed, he quit making the effort.

If they had reached Matt, these people would hardly have recognized him. He didn't attempt to shape or mold his beard, and the red hair grew high up his cheeks. He smelled like a man who hadn't showered, or changed clothes, in days, and his normally trim waistline was a little wider. His catatonic eyes would probably trouble his peers the most. Those eyes looked half awake, and they were windows into an empty, passionless soul.

"He sits there all day reading that damn book," he heard Alice whisper into the phone. It was true. He kept reading though there was no longer any joy in it. He read mechanically about the sad wife and her husband, Satan. The story was now like white noise, humming along quietly in the background.

This calming rhythm in the text, however, didn't lessen his shock the day he read how the devil intended to kill his wife. Matt dog-eared the page in the book and set it on his lap.

“But isn’t this what you want?” he asked himself. “Wouldn’t it be nice if she and the children were gone?”

“No,” he said aloud, but even he didn’t believe this “no.”

What about your freedom, Matt? You can no longer relax in your own home, can you? Not with all those sighs and hmms and little subversive sounds she attacks you with, just to let you know how miserable she is. She’s torturing you Matt, and she’ll never stop. She’ll fix your coffee and breakfast without asking, and then punish you for it. You’ll never live up to the standard of love-making she wants. And don’t forget Matt, you are the devil. The book said so. What choice do you have?

But even though he took the book seriously, believed it was a true reflection of his life, Matt hesitated killing his wife and children. He didn’t believe he had the strength to do such a thing, even though it was his destiny. His entire life, according to this untitled novel, was simply a journey to the point when he’d become a murderer. But life had been so pleasant, and he’d had such great ambitions – maybe an alderman seat, maybe be elected mayor. Who would have thought it would end like this, with the death of his family and likely the taking of his own life?

In spite of the numbness inside, and the sudden spike of fear, Matt still retained hope for a happy ending. So he set about finishing the long, infernal novel. He sat on the den couch and decided he wouldn’t move until he finished.

He read quickly. He turned page after page, but seemed to make no progress. He scanned over words, gleaned the meaning of a few paragraphs. His intent was more on completion, not comprehension. The words moved fast beneath his eyes, like the current of a bloated river following a heavy rain. It swept him along until a few pencil scratchings in the margin stopped him, like a pile of sticks jutting out next to the water. Matt squinted to read the faint notes. The

pencil marks had faded too much over the years, and the penmanship was too sloppy to decipher. It was written with a trembling hand.

Matt ignored them and continued on with his journey. Every so often, he came across more jumbles of blurred, illegible words. They grew more and more frequent, and eventually the margins were completely filled with notes or ravings, or possibly another story existing simultaneously, secretly, with this narrative. Matt had no idea what these scribbles meant until he turned to the next to the last page of the book and saw, for the first time, where one of the notes had bled onto the printed text itself. The name of the wife character was scratched out. The lines had been scribbled violently over her name. Above it, in that same pencil and in that same handwriting, was written something legible. The name "Eleanor."

Matt stood up, dropping the book, and grabbed fists full of hair. He understood now. He felt sick to his stomach. Eleanor was his grandmother. Nana Anderson – the woman who died in that fire so many years ago. The book lay open at Matt's feet and the smoky, sulfuric odor lifted from its pages.

His grandfather was also a man who took things too literally. He'd read this mysterious book with its unknown author or authors and assumed it was filled with truth. The book told him who he was and how to live and he believed it all, obeyed it, followed its truth until it destroyed him. It was a book about good and evil, about the struggles of the devil and the fall of one man.

Matt picked it up from the floor, intending to toss it in the garbage. But on the last page, in giant letters, he saw his grandfather's final command – "Burn it!"

That wouldn't take much. The pages were yellow and dry. He could finish what his grandfather started. So Matt ran to the backyard just as Alice pulled up in the mini-van. Dylan

and Emma stood on the driveway, watching their father gather twigs and build a small funeral pyre.

“What are you doing?” Alice asked.

“I’m ending it. I’m ending the book.”

His eyes were wide open, and they reflected the flames that would soon be curling up from the woodpile. She watched him a moment as he placed the book on the sticks.

“Come on,” she said to the children. “Let’s go inside.”

“But I want to watch the fire,” Dylan said.

“Get!” she yelled.

The boy let out a moan of disappointment. He and his sister shuffled inside, but they soon pressed their noses to the large window in the den, as did their mother. They watched Matt pull a book of matches out of his pocket and light the book. A wisp of black smoke curled toward the sky, but they saw no flames. Matt bent down and blew on the glowing edges of the book, and then he struck another match. And then another. Alice laughed.

“I don’t think he’s going to get it going,” she said.

She watched him walk toward his car in the driveway.

“What’s he doing now,” she said.

Matt opened the trunk and removed the red, plastic gas can. He took it over to the smoking pile.

“Don’t be an idiot Matt,” she whispered.

“You think Dad’s an idiot?” Emma asked.

Alice didn’t have time to answer. A bright light flared up beyond the window. The children screamed. Alice screamed. They all stood still, unable to move.

Matt had poured gasoline on the sticks, and the flames traveled fast up the falling liquid. The fire clung to his hands like tape, and he waved his arms, trying to flick it off. It traveled across his arms and into his hair, and he ran frantically around the yard, trying to outrun the fire consuming him. He heard the screams of his family and foolishly, he knew, thought they could help him. He thought this even as he smelt the burning of his flesh and hair, as the unbearable heat turned ice cold against his body. He ran, growing brighter, into the house. The children backed into Alice, backing her into a corner. She held them, covering their eyes, closing her own eyes. Matt saw the flames from his body igniting the curtains and the couch, and the dark black smoke turned the screams into coughs. He turned toward the large window in the den, put out his arms to brace himself against the window frame and looked with a new horror at the back yard. The book. The goddamned book had fallen off the pyre and sat safely in the grass, not a flame in sight.

No one understood what caused the fire that destroyed the nice home in Avalon, killing the Anderson family. All that remained was a small, coverless book, no author or title.

## Final Thoughts

Moments before shooting himself in the head, Roy Butler suffered his last great dilemma – what should be his final thought? He knew this would be his one opportunity to give the world a proper sendoff (for in Roy's mind, it was the world that was disappearing, not him). It should be profound, this last thought of his, and somewhat poetic. A sort of tip of his hat, or a wink rather, to the existence he was leaving behind.

Unfortunately, the words "Goodbye cruel world" arose in his head as a parting joke offered up by his subconscious. Roy smiled half-heartedly, for the benefit of some imaginary audience he pretended was watching his final few moments of life. He became an actor then, nodding his head and hamming it up for, well, for no one really.

"Goodbye cruel world." The words appeared again, but this time it wasn't funny. Such a trite, melodramatic phrase could not be his last utterance. To end it thus would, he said aloud, "ruin my life." It was a matter of his reputation, which he prized more on a cosmic level since no living being, other than his dog Buckley, was bearing witness to his suicide.

"Maybe I shouldn't think or say anything at all." Roy again spoke aloud. Maybe it'd be best to simply look into a mirror, salute goodbye and then pull the trigger. There was a certain dignity in doing it this way, a personal farewell, a private adieu. But dignity or no, he just didn't like it. It was pretentious. This silent "farewell dear friend" was on par with "goodbye cruel world."

"This is why I didn't write a suicide note." Roy said, scratching the side of his head with the barrel of the revolver.

He had attempted to write such a note earlier that morning, but creative inspiration eluded him. The irony was, had he been inclined to write a great opus to his mortality as he wished, had his creativity finally returned, he might have thought twice about killing himself.

"Today is my last day," he wrote, but immediately scribbled through that line. "Death has come to me." No again. Beneath that scratched out line, he wrote, "I've decided to end my life." Not bad, but where was the oomph? Where was the emotion? Just write, he told himself. Just let it flow; let it come out of your pen. But he never traveled farther than a sentence into this attempt at spontaneous prose. An entire page was filled with aborted beginnings to his ambitious suicide note, and after looking at all those scribbling, Roy opted to forgo any written testimonial on his decision to kill himself. Rather, he would save it for a final thought, which, cruelly, did not arise from the brevity he assigned this final task.

Roy had awoken early that morning with a strange tickle deep in his chest. He noticed the sensation – a tingling around the heart – shortly after opening his eyes. He felt the tickle most mornings, and he had explained to Dr. Harper that it felt strangely like sadness. Roy didn't realize he spent much of his waking life in a state of tension. He unconsciously tightened every muscle in his body, as if expecting to be jarred by some sudden impact, as he went about his life. He squeezed his hands into fists and curled his socked toes within his shoes. At night, when he slept, these muscles finally relaxed, but they pulsed from the long hours of straining. This was the root of that strange tickle in his chest that felt like sadness.

The sky was still black when he woke up. His wife, Helen, remained asleep next to him. She slept with her mouth open, causing her to both snore and begin each day with terribly stale smelling breath. Roy, careful not to wake her (or inhale through his nose), kissed the top of her head with his dry lips. He left the bed, limped to the bathroom and shut the door before turning on the light.

He was three months away from turning 65. His once black hair was now entirely gray, but it remained as thick and unmanageable as when he was a boy. Helen trimmed it, along with his eyebrows, once a month, and he told her she should shave his arms too because they were covered in curly, dark hairs. Had he been a small man, this excess of hair might have appeared unusual, but it seemed to fit, even complement his enormous body. He stood six feet, six inches tall, and he had a giant nose, which looked as if it had been cut from stone thousands of years ago. He was overweight, but he wore the extra pounds well. His belly protruded from his torso, but beneath the tucked-in T-shirt, it appeared to be a large, powerful muscle, as hard as steel.

He stood over the toilet that morning for more than a minute before he was finally able to urinate. A soft, faint trickle of pee tapped against the water.

He brushed his teeth and took a shower. Steam rose from behind the shower curtain. It fogged up the medicine cabinet mirror above the sink. Roy let the hot water beat against his chest. He hoped the pressure would suffocate the strange tickle. It didn't.

When he finally turned off the water and stepped from the shower, he took a brown, translucent pill bottle from the cabinet. He was supposed to take one Effexor each morning with food. He swallowed two of the anti-depressants, along with a handful of tap water.

Roy slipped on an old pair of jeans with a slight hole in the crotch. The hole wasn't large enough for him to retire the jeans and they fit him so well that, had he not killed himself later that morning, he would have continued to wear them until well after Helen deemed them inappropriate. Had she known he felt more comfortable in those jeans than in any other article of clothing he owned since that Oxford shirt he ruined with a glass of merlot five years earlier, she might have considered burying him in them. But, seeing as how she didn't know of this

emotional connection to the jeans, and that they would be stained with blood and some soft, red matter later that day, they were discarded and never seen again.

The plain white T-shirt he tucked into his jeans and the denim shirt he covered it with didn't really mean anything to Roy. He had no connection to these pieces of his wardrobe, except that, when slipping them on that morning and inhaling the scent of fabric softener, he, for the briefest of moments, forgot his plans for killing himself and thought about the spring, an entire season away, and the pleasant afternoons he'd spend tending the young tomato plants in his garden. He was happy, if only for a tenth of a second.

Roy went downstairs, and each step squeaked under his weight. The clean odor of fabric softener was replaced by the smell of old hardwood floors. At the bottom of the staircase, in the front foyer, bookshelves were built into the walls. The shelves were filled with old books, and their yellowed pages emitted a musty aroma. This house smelled like old people, and Roy thought of the grandparents he hadn't thought about in years. They died when he was a little boy, and his only clear memory of them was of a frail couple with yellow flesh and skeletal faces. His grandfather's hands shook as he handed him a crystal dish filled with hard candy, and he called Roy "such a pretty little girl."

"He's teasing you," Roy's mother said. "Laugh, Roy. It's funny."

She laughed so loud, it frightened the young boy. She then said, in an even louder voice, "Roy's a boy, Pop. A Boy! Roy!"

"I don't want to see them," Roy whispered aloud. He went into the kitchen and turned on the coffee maker. Helen always set it up before going to bed at night, so he only needed to press the "on" button each morning. It was an old, cheap coffee maker that sent up too much steam

when percolating. The steam was gradually stripping the veneer off the cabinet door above it. Roy rubbed his hand over the rough surface, as he did most mornings.

What if his grandparents were there to greet him? Or that asshole cousin of his, Carl? When Carl died of pancreatic cancer in 1986, Roy shook his head and said it was a damn shame, but Christ, Carl almost bankrupted the family with his debts. Even on his deathbed, the hospice workers had to be warned not to let him borrow any money. Roy said it was a damn shame, but when he thought about it, which he did now, he realized there were some people in this world you didn't mind hearing they died. Would anyone think that of him? Of course not, and he dropped the subject because, being so close to the end, he knew such a discussion wouldn't be productive. Nor did he remind himself that he seriously doubted the existence of a Heaven or Hell. These were questions for the philosophers of the world who weren't, as Roy was, standing on the very precipice above the great unknown.

It took several minutes for the old coffee maker to fill the glass pot, and each morning, Roy suspected it took a little bit longer than the day before. On the fridge, he noticed a note in his handwriting. It said, "Call Dr. Harper!!" He thought it was strange he used two exclamation points. One should have sufficed, and while waiting for his coffee, he took out a pen and paper from the drawer next to the microwave and wrote himself a new, calmer note, "Call Dr. Harper?" He put this note under a magnet on the fridge, covering the previous message.

Roy drank his coffee over the sink. He gazed out the window and watched the darkness turn red. The color felt very cold to him, and more menacing than the black that had preceded it.

The tablet of paper and the pen retrieved from the drawer were still on the counter, and here he attempted to write that ill-fated suicide note. But, as was said earlier, his heart just wasn't

into it that morning. He muttered to himself as he crumpled the note and threw it away. This is what woke Buckley.

The dog jumped off the couch in the next room. He shook his head, causing the rabies tag on his collar to rattle. His claws tapped against the hardwood floor as he approached Roy. Buckley was a mutt – part beagle and part English Springer Spaniel. He had a glossy coat of black fur and a white, spotted nose, and the vet always complained that he weighed too much. He rarely barked (even later, when startled by a gun shot and feeling clumps of his owner's brains splattering against his coat). Buckley's only bad habit, which endeared him to most people, was the way he nudged your hand with his nose when he wanted to be petted. He did that to Roy, who stopped muttering and scratched the dog behind the ears.

“You want to come with me?” he asked.

Roy set his empty mug in the sink and walked out the kitchen door into the reddening sky. Buckley followed him. The morning was cold. The grass was white with frost and Roy exhaled little steam clouds. His nose began to run and he sniffed up the loose snot.

Roy suffered from a headache that morning, though he didn't realize it. The pain, a tightening pressure against his forehead, had been with him for months. He no longer noticed it. He had forgotten what life was like without it, and he said and believed he felt fine when he really felt terrible. When he told Dr. Harper, “I don't know why I can't concentrate any more,” he never once thought to mention those unending headaches.

He walked down a hill, carefully stepped across a gully clogged with leaves, and headed up another hill. The grass crunched under his feet. Buckley followed him, but he occasionally stopped to sniff the ground or raise his leg.

“How much did you drink last night,” Roy asked.

He made this joke every morning to the dog after he peed for the third or fourth time, and the dog, recognizing the cadence of the sentence, and the same gleeful inflection in the voice, always ran up to his master when he heard it – not to receive some treat or because he worried he was in trouble, but because he knew it made Roy happy.

But the man didn't notice. He stopped at a lean-to he had built with his son and grandson five years earlier. It was a small wood structure with a metal roof and a dirt floor. In the summer, during a downpour, he liked to seek shelter underneath it. Hearing the drops beating against the roof and smelling the rain, he thought, as if he were a boy, how nice it would be to go for a run, to play in the mud or make love to a girl. He could do none of those things anymore, but on rainy days, under the lean-to, it seemed possible.

A storm last spring had pulled a couple boards off the side of this shed, and Roy hadn't gotten around to replacing them. Inside, he stored 15 tree trunks. They were large pieces of wood, some as big as three-feet in diameter. He set his foot on a hunk of oak and for several minutes he examined the wood. He became aware of his headache. He closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. The oak didn't leave his thoughts. It lingered behind the pain. What can I do with it, he asked Buckley.

The dog did not recognize this question. Roy never said such things. He normally knew what to do with a slab of wood. But this hunk of oak proved different. Whereas previously, he'd study the shape and contours of the wood until, struck with inspiration, he'd roll it into his workshop, set it up on the lathe and turn it into a bowl or vase or chalice, this one he simply agonized over, unsure what to do with it. He'd put it under the lean-to back in June and, at first, eyed it patiently, waiting for the moment when an image of what it could become formed in his brain. But his patience grew into annoyance.

“Why can't I figure it out?” he said, again not realizing that the clarity of his thoughts was being disrupted by headaches.

By September, he decided simply to put the tree trunk out of his mind. He was overthinking it, forcing himself through his frustrations to come up with something grand. What he needed was to step back and not think about it for a few weeks. So every day, when he passed the lean-to, he intentionally avoided looking at the wood or thinking about it. But during this time, he experienced the general tensing of all his muscles, which resulted in that sad, strange tickle in his chest. Roy noticed that whenever he passed the lean-to, he clenched his fists. It was odd, he thought. It's as if I'm thinking of nothing but that piece of wood, which he knew wasn't true. He hadn't thought about it in weeks, a fact he repeated to himself several times a day.

What made his creative impotence all the more painful was the fact that this was no ordinary piece of wood. It was a part of Old Rosencrantz, the 400-year-old oak tree that once stood in downtown Bethlehem. Old Rosencrantz was an enormous, gnarled old fellow who grew in the front yard of the Smith-Carter House, a 19<sup>th</sup> Century red brick home that served as a field hospital during the Civil War. Dark circles on the hardwood floors were believed to be blood stains left by dying soldiers, and the some fifteen hundred tourists that visited the house each year usually stopped to look at Old Rosencrantz, the tree where 14-year-old Nathan Smith watched and recorded in his journal the bloody Battle of Bethlehem.

Of course, as most historians knew, Nathan got the battle all wrong. The skirmish had been one of the greatest debacles of the war, of any war, and its true nature had been suppressed by Civil War enthusiasts and the town's historical commission. On that March morning in 1864, a heavy fog obscured much of the town. The Confederate army, going on bad information, surrounded Bethlehem, thinking the Union Army was camped inside. No one knows for sure

who fired the first shot, but by eight a.m., muskets and rifles and cannons were firing mercilessly into that white, impenetrable haze. All anyone could hear were the explosions, the clods of dirt raining onto the earth and the screams of the wounded. An hour later, the fog lifted and the Confederate soldiers realized they'd been fighting and slaughtering themselves. But it had been a dirty, vicious fight and the two sides, though wearing the same uniforms, were too angry to cease killing each other. For another three hours, in the clear, sunny spring day, they continued fighting with, what seemed to the Union soldiers observing in horror from high above on Winstead Hill, an unabashed cruelty and ferociousness. When the battle ended, thirty-two hundred Confederate soldiers lay dead, as did one Union officer who fell off his horse drunk while attempting to stop watching the carnage.

Nathan Smith didn't write this story. He climbed Old Rosencrantz during the fog and left, after hearing bullets whiz past his head. His journal now resided in the county archives, detailing the gallant, though obscured, fight he witnessed. The local newspaper, the Bethlehem Chronicle, published this portion of his diary over the summer when Old Rosencrantz finally toppled over. Roy had a framed copy of that article in his workshop. The newspaper also reported that the tree had been struck by lightning fifty-seven years ago, and that's what caused it to fall. It had been slowly dying and rotting on the inside for decades. Only a handful of people noticed Old Rosencrantz's slow demise. For the rest of the community, the tree's falling over came as a shock. And, as a few longtime Bethlehem residents said to the newspaper, its absence left a large, empty gap in their downtown, causing Main Street to "just not look right."

Such an important piece of wood and Roy didn't have the damndest idea what to do with it. He clinched his hands into a fist, and even the knowledge of his impending doom didn't ease his suffering, or lessen his rancor. He removed his foot from the tree trunk and headed to the

old barn that was his workshop. He whistled and Buckley stopped sniffing, lifted his head and then ran after his master into the barn.

Roy flipped the switch next to the door, and the florescent lights above flickered on. A shimmer by the lathe caught his eye. It was the small revolver he'd bought for Helen. He purchased it for her when he was still mayor of Bethlehem, and his meetings at city hall lasted until after midnight. She picked it up once. Helen said the weight of it frightened her. She never touched it again. Roy took the gun out of its lock box the day before and brought it into his workshop. He loaded it and set it beside the lathe.

He pulled out a metal stool and sat down. He didn't move for a long time. The red sky outside faded to gray. It looked like rain, or even snow.

Roy cleared his throat. He did it again. His vocal cords felt soft, and it seemed to him if he were to speak, his voice wouldn't be loud enough for someone to hear. It would tremble in its near oblivion, so he swallowed and cleared his throat a third time, coughing, trying to put more power behind it.

"Hello," he said. That was better, but still a tad weak. He cleared his throat a final time and said, in a deep, masculine voice, "Hello."

Much better. It was time to make the phone call. Roy fished the cell phone from his pocket and turned it on. A little song played while the display screen lit up. Once it was ready, he dialed 9-1-1 and hit send.

A moment passed. Longer for him than most people. Time, in those last few minutes of life, was contradictory – it moved both too fast and too slow. Someone answered.

"Yes, hi, hello. How are you?" Roy asked.

That sounded foolish. Should he call back and start fresh?

“No, this is an emergency...is. Not isn't. ..you're right, I should have said 'yes, this is an emergency, instead of 'no.' It is confusing...I don't think I mumble. No one's ever told me that before...I will work on it, but this is an emergency...My name is Roy Butler, I live at 200 West Oak Street, and I plan on shooting myself as soon as I hang up with you...I am serious...this isn't a joke...I understand it's illegal, but I intend to do it anyway...I don't know why...look, I don't want to get into an argument with you. Of course I know why. I just said it to get off the phone...because it's none of your business...I do so have a reason. Why would I do it without a reason...well that's insulting...I'm going to shoot myself...I'm holding the gun right now...be that as it may, I'm going to do it. You can come arrest my corpse if you want....” Roy stuttered, for the word had an unexpected harshness, when uttered aloud.

“Yes, I'm married,” he continued. “She'll be devastated. I understand that, but I can't help that...fair enough, I could help it ...I am not...we had a great sex life. It's been somewhat limited in these last few years, but...she will not be better off...I don't want to get into a long discussion. I'm just going to do this...because I didn't want my wife to find my body...you're being sarcastic...I don't think I'm being noble...I don't want to hurt her, but I want to do this. Maybe, in another world, I'd have better options, but right now, this is what I have to do...no, I don't think tomorrow will be a better day...Let me put it this way, of all the things I've ever wanted, this is what I want the most...I'm just exhausted...no I won't change my mind...look at it this way, you can be the last person ever to say anything nice to me...yes, that'd be nice...thank you. It's kind of you to say I don't mumble. I knew I didn't...well, I'm going to be getting to it. Please don't forget to send someone...they're on their way? Great, because I really don't want her to see this...It was nice talking to you too...thank you...goodbye.”

Roy pressed "end" on the phone and set it on his workbench. Buckley sat with perfect posture on the concrete floor, looking up at his master. Roy kept a jar of dog treats on his workbench. He fished one out with his free hand – the other hand gripped the revolver – and handed it to the dog. Buckley took the treat, walked to the corner of the workshop and lay down, sphinx-like, to chew the crumbly treat. Roy followed the dog, rubbed his black fur and then scratched behind his ears.

"I really am sorry," he said.

A siren sounded in the distance. Roy left the dog and walked to the front of his workshop. He leaned against the doorframe and suffered that last great dilemma – what should be his final thought?

He was amazed at how slow time passed. It seemed that for an hour he contemplated what his brain's final conscious thought should be. He didn't feel rushed, and so he took his time, wondering how best to say goodbye.

The siren grew louder and he saw the police car speeding up his gravel driveway. White dust floated up from the back tires. He recognized the bald head behind the steering wheel.

"Marko's on duty," he said. "I'm sorry to you, too, Marko."

Helen stepped out the side door of the house. She wiped her hands on a dishrag. She cocked her head, looking a little like Buckley as she watched the police car. Roy ducked back into his workshop before she could turn and see him.

He walked over to Buckley and looked in the mirror hanging on the wall above the dog. Roy raised the gun to the side of his head and paused. What should he say? Think damn it. This is it. He should take notice of everything around him, the sawdust on the floor, the cool October temperature, the morning sun shining through the front window. The situation needed some sort

of recognition, but he felt so rushed. He could already hear Marko yelling his name. He must be running.

Roy looked in the mirror. Think! But all he saw was the mole on his neck. A little brown mole sticking up just above the collar of his T-shirt. It looked darker and a little larger in the morning light, he thought. Marko appeared in the doorway. He yelled Roy's name and maybe "stop" or "don't." But Roy had found his final thought. He looked at the mole and said, in a somewhat concerned voice, "I need to get Dr. Harper to look at that." Then he pulled the trigger and fell dead onto the cold, concrete floor.