

PLACES I'VE BEEN

SEAN A. SCAPELLATO


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by

Sean A. Scapellato

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I am submitting herewith a Thesis written by Sean A. Scapellato entitled *Places I've Been*. I have examined the final copy of this paper for form and content, and I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Masters of Arts, with a major in English.



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Dean of the Graduate School

Places I've Been

A Creative Thesis

Presented to the

Graduate and Research Council of

Austin Peay State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Masters of Arts

by

Sean A. Scapellato

August 1996

Abstract

The poems and short stories within these pages reflect the places I have been, the people I have known, and the way my mind has filtered the experiences of my life. I do not pursue the truth in the telling of these events. Some of them happened; some did not. Some of these people are people I know; some are figments of my mind. The line between truth and fiction has been drawn and re-drawn so many times, I am not sure where the truth lies anymore.

My purpose in writing these stories and poems arose out of a desire to explore the gamut of human emotion: the entire range from extreme grief, say, in the death of a child, to pure contentment between a father and a son on a morning jog. I wanted to know what a person does when he has lost something precious to him or gained something thought unattainable. Most of all, I wanted to isolate the moment of change, the exact moment when a person's life changes irrevocably, and find out how he deals with it before and immediately following that change. I have tested the resiliency of the human spirit in my characters and within these pages tried to discover something about myself, tried to find the thoughts which, according to Wordsworth, lay "too deep for tears." This, to me, represented a realm well worth exploring because it stripped away all the surface matter that people carry around in their minds on a daily basis. Too much of life is spent dealing with superficialities: schedules, appointments, deadlines, appearances. I wanted to explore what lies deeper.

Contrary to the Realists of the late nineteenth century and even some Modernists of the twentieth, I do not find human destiny beyond human control, and I do not think that the state of man is essentially reduced to misery. The characters in my stories and poems experience failure, loss, and tragedy; yet, I find overwhelmingly their attitudes to be positive, their outlooks geared toward finding the redemptive values in their experience. As a reader, I hope you will be moved to lose yourself in their stories, and at the same time find the redemption they find. I hope you discover the empathy in yourself, and maybe even smile a little, not because it is funny, but because you feel comforted inside. If I accomplish this, I have succeeded.

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Signature Sean Scipellato

Date 8/27/96

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Charleston

In that twilight
place where
dreams meet sleep

I see
her lights,
her breathing,
of marsh air
and sea grass—

confluence of brackish
rivers:
Ashley, Cooper,
then
ocean—

streets bathed
in history
the breaths
of men long dead
swimming like cast-
over shadows
in the veined streets
of macadam
and cobblestone.

Steepled city,
Land by the water,
Kiss of another time:

Why does your
horizon
lie
just beyond
my
finger
tips?

Evening Train, Knoxville, Tennessee

Ramble on outside my window—
From the 12th floor, I can see you
bolting through town
no car crossings
no horns
only a continuous hum
of metal rolling over alloy.

I count the cars—reds, blues, maroons, purples
like a child's crayons laid out end for end—
But you move like a star across the dusk sky
around
the bend
across
the bridge
and then you disappear
like a
dream
into the paling
pine trees.

The Pain of Reflections

Sometimes
I peer out my window
by the kitchen table.

Sometimes
I see the winter
skeleton of a desolate oak tree

Sometimes
I can only see myself.

The Spirit of Memorial

“There sure are a lot of squirrels,” you say.
 I steal a last look at Lincoln’s marbled shrine
 and walk to The Wall—names of another era.
 A nod of agreement and we pass
 the statue of camaraderie
 in three good men
 their silence looming like the
 distance between our words.

The quietude
 an unspoken respect
 as we walk along the names
 of thousands
 each a singular story
 in our past
 all a compressed chapter
 called “*Vietnam*.”
 The park rangers know the numbers.
 The green jacketed veterans
 blowing into frozen hands,
 know the stories.

In a singular gesture you reach
 out, touching the
 heart of silence,
 the core of service,
 the spirit of memorial.
 Green marbled letters like flesh,
 the sun reflecting blood
 in a setting Asian sky—
 I try to imagine death
 in the name of freedom.
 I imagine the sad face of Maya Ying Ling
 and touch her drawing of this history.

Grasping your hand, I reply,
 “Yeah, you were right,” and
 we go to feed the squirrels.

Between Farms

Biting rain on a country summer night,
the forest comes alive
light then sound
glimpses into darkness—
A small boy, alone,
walking through the crowded wood,
looks around him,
darting, frantic eyes,
danger in the angry spaces of black.

His feet
thoughtlessly trudge
a pattern of empty paces.
Lightning burns, ionized,
close to the cheek—he feels the heat,
hears the growling thunder
the bones of God breaking.
And in the quick silences
his frightened voice cries,
cries for home and the sound of Mother humming
in the kitchen, the dryness and warmth of her voice.

Suddenly, a hand reaches out—he is not sure from where—
touches him on the shoulder
and a body stands high as the trees
rifle slung over his shoulder
the boy's name burning in his throat
tears and rain on his cheek.
“Son,” the voice says.
And the boy answers.

The Garden

Grandma used to walk us through her rose garden.

She talked to us in that nostalgic, feverish voice
about the pink ladies of spring,

the yellow and red glow of passionate blooms in summer,

the innocent white flowers of a June wedding—

We were intoxicated by her voice in the garden; We knew the language
of singing birds,

and thirsty bees,

and women who still dream . . .

And we were happy.

But Grandma never told us about the thorns.

When we would come wailing to her with barbs in our hands,
spears in our hearts,

she would smile and whisper into our ears,

her voice like new silk,

her words the color of roses,

and she would hold us until the crying stopped,

until the bleeding stopped,

until we were ready to go back

into the garden

again.

A Thought for George

The discordant hum of
finches in early evening
a child laughing across the street
burning leaves—cedar
like an afterthought—
ice settles in my glass
and
on the front porch
of your house
I chew the
remaining cuticle
of my thumb and
wonder where you are.

Your watch says 6:37 p.m.

Undercurrents

"Remembering is a dream that comes in waves."

Helga Sandburg

I measure myself against
God and sand as the car crosses

Alligator River. The Bodie Island Lighthouse
winks across the sound—the air blows

my hair back in a warm blast of
Carolina air. I am different this time.

Ten years of return, and I recognize the mile-posts,
the sand and water: distance and time remain constant.

Also, Nature understands herself—
waves roll and ebb with their lunar counterpart;

gulls dive like kamikazes after shallow fish;
and colors streak the dusk sky,

a child's fingerprints: bruised purple, yellow,
amber, emblazoned red, stringing on toward night.

Yet my stretched glance into the rearview mirror
reveals eyes fresh with happiness—anticipation reflecting

like a yellow moon off metallic water. The hum of tires
wheels me on, sleepy, hypnotized, and I

imagine the ocean foam licking at my feet,
sand like grit between my fingers,

the walk I will take tomorrow:
two miles down to the old pier

just a battered heap of barnacled logs
stretching out to sea like a memory. . .

I am different this time.

Running Places

—*For Dad*

I.

During the years when
my father and I had little to say to each other
we still had morning runs and the
rhythm of breath
in common
To relive a slice of our own history
we returned to Milam Park
one gray Labor Day
still a whisper of what we remembered
the tennis courts still
cracked down the center
the old sign still painted red
antiquated tennis rules
still promoting wooden rackets and good rubber-soled shoes
The old neighborhood no longer ours
like interlopers we started
at the courts
and jogged the bike route
noticing the changes in the neighborhood
new stores
new jogging path adorned with azaleas and mulch
(went all the way to Stone Mountain, Dad guessed)
new paint jobs and color schemes
which still made no sense
We were desperate to run every
street gridded into our memory
tried to pass every house
every yard
every corner
we could remember
Betrayed only by our burning lungs
and rubbery legs
we stopped just short of four miles
breathing
dripping sweat
staring into
the empty swimming pool

II.

When George died,
it was a surprise to wake
in his chair the next morning

after driving sixteen hours
I had collapsed into the blue recliner the only place left to sleep
and dreamed of Arizona plains and the sound of his voice

That morning Grandma was crying in the kitchen
trying to make the coffee
trying to think nothing was different

After a quiet breakfast Dad and I
laced up our shoes and stretched in the misty rain
the double-death on Good Friday

weighing like water in our clothes weights in our pockets
We ran down the myriad islands of
black road patches

smoothed a hundred times over by
orange-vested City of Pittsburgh workers
trying to beat the cracks

of winter which inched imperceptibly
toward the curbs I wondered
how could fate pull us so quickly to such a moment

Dad talked of George's death,
as the rain beaded into pinheads
on our glasses

This second image of water focusing before my eyes
reminded me of those who
would hurt the most . . . Dad would carry the pain for Mom

and I listened to our breathing
synchronous with the rhythm of our feet
and the hiss of tires treading through the rain

My shoes sounded like sponges

early morning sun filters in
orange slices of light a magnetism which
pulls me from the bed
coffee in a strange
white cup saucer missing
waits on the counter
and I find him waiting
on the front porch
shoes tied
shirtless
black nike shorts his favorite pair with the faded purple logo
he's working on his second pot
reading the newspaper
with feverous caffeinated turns of the page
you ready
he says in his gravelly morning voice
and I go back for my shoes

the Nagshead surf hums of promises
of sun and novels and
multicolored chair backs
close to the sand
a day of vacation and family
that magic elixir of happiness and renewal
of card games and dinners
the circle of love
that always comes back on itself
when families are reunited

and I think how
when we used to run together
I would leave him behind it was a contest then
but now we match strides
like two people with the
middle leg tied together
each driveway we pass on the beach road
throwing us one increment back
in years and the memories of
our usual ritual
flooding
like light through stained-glass windows
each a new color from the
shelves of our memory
by milepost 18 the end of the first mile
we are talking of
the old Sans Souci route

the hill at Grove Park

D.C.

and of the people who gave us reason to run
to talk to remember

we talk of my writing

the novel we've created

the articles about family friends

and the art of good living

I am married now and I listen

already thinking of this tribute I will write

one day

I can tell you like that

IV.

ten years have passed since that

gray morning I woke to toast and

I had my first cup of coffee

that nervous excitement jogging

through my veins like a drug

new shoes laced up slow to enjoy the

feeling of new shoes against my feet

months of beating the street arriving now

at that moment new race shoes pink five-digit race number

The Peachtree Road Race

and we were ready

toned muscles firm belly standing tall in

new Tiger Asics told me so

the mist rose from the

black streets

the sun fought the dawn cloud cover

of another Fourth of July

as we stood at the corner

and wondered

where the bus was

it was our first Peachtree Road Race together

6.2 miles and four years later we would still

awaken at 5:30 on the Fourth of July

and go through the ritual of pre-race

ablutions: coffee, toast, stretching at the busstop

you got your quarters?

and the race became an event not a race

a bond thick as the fog lifting on black streets

V.

hundreds of runs we would take
 through old city blocks
 through new conversation
 about old friends long gone
 new goals made
 old habits changed
 as your older feet carried my mind to new places

even now
 the cities
 become a litany of words
 a catalogue of conversations
 where heart and mind merge
 where suddenly words and
 blood and breath breathe a
 circle of love
 uniting a father and son
 who haven't always known how to love completely
 but try anyway

the real reasons they know
 are love and rhythms:

Clarkston

Atlanta

Stone Mountain

Asheville

Pittsburgh

Washington

Topsail

Nagshead

Charleston

Clarksville. . .

feet and hearts running places . . .

A Half-Second of the Heart's Laughter

*"Clear blue skies...looking through my father's eyes.
Way up high...the string is drawn, fishing for dreams
up there, songs...And that's why I'm laughing.
That's why I'm laughing."*

David Wilcox

In Asheville again—
One man band
Just strings and words
among the 200 of us
crowded in the overheated, overpriced
"Be Here Now" bar—

Simple, black t-shirt, jeans, beard—
"the local look" someone said.
He didn't even get introduced
really—just another bearded, simple fellow
announcing the closing of the bar, and
"Oh, by the way, Here's Dave Wilcox."

And we cheered because we knew he could love a guitar
like few could, watched him sing
from somewhere deep down,
giving the room a soul from five tuned strings.
I could hear my heart
trembling,
like water caught behind the ears.

The last note of "That's Why I'm Laughing" faded to a
singular hum, a laser of sound,
of silence before the swelling
of emotion filled the air
like a thunderhead.

He pushed the guitar forward,
to let the final chord resonate,
to burn in our memories
like the taste of fresh honey
to a sick child.

Spring Breathing

We all came hundreds of miles to be there,
stood in that room and missed you, like a thousand
years—grief our commonality.

I slept in your recliner that night,
walked your workshop the next morning,
The house had the previous day,
had you about it:

the crusty butter dish
crumbs on the floor under your chair
your L'Amour novel on the end table
your flattened toothbrush beside the sink.

Our hands in pockets, clutching old Kleenex,
dab at the eyes, we could not hold in
a laugh when Mom said you had on your moccasins—still.

Healthy, this smile I wear
this air I breathe out—I try to hold it
could it be memory slipping away?
But anger stays in . . .

How could God have wanted you now?
I still had
great-grandchildren to set on your knee.

To A Brother Who Will Find The Art

—*For Ryan*

One of life's curveballs
a phase
so the cliché goes, but
it doesn't calm the whirling cyclone
in your mind, demolishing
like a cardhouse. Indecision wraps a-
round in funnels—flotsam of old friends
new problems, girlfriends who just can't
know you, the unbearable dredge of
high performance (A...B...C+)—
the unreachable 4.0.

We watch like museum observers
away from the glass,
wondering if Shakespeare
will become a love song or if the quadratic equation
will become black notes on a white page.
Trying to find the art can be half a life
perfecting art, the other. But storms do die;
the fog will rise, will reveal a field of golden
wheat, untouched by the swirling madness.
And you will know a new harvest,
will find the art, your art...

Delicate and hidden as a hummingbird's
ruby throat.

Dum Spiro Spero

The sea's trash becomes
 your treasure as you search the shore like
 a seagull pecking for food. "These are whelks,"
 you say, "miniature conchs. You know,
 like the ones you see in the Pacific."
 And I nod like a student

when the teacher speaks.

I watch you find razor clams,
 kelp, sand dollars, and nameless cords of grass—
 For your students, you say, filling your
 hands as your mind plans the lesson.
 Our lives intertwine at the root, yet
 I am farther away

than indeterminate future.

My silent role: to realize that
 the world gives more than just
 a beach and salt water, goes beyond
 what stops at the edge—I know so little
 of you, except the words and the
 small shell I have in my hand.

Yet I know deeper

know that burning for more:
 that Love is Patient
 Love is Kind
 that to hope is to breathe
 and to breathe to hope.
 It is a day for
 complete understanding.

London Fog

—For George

The ice is thick on the
windshield
when it's 16 degrees outside.
Swirling exhaust whips out the tailpipe
with the gray wind
as my bare hands
work at the ice with the scraper.

The coat, plaid green, lined,
to my knees,
shields from the wind
biting at anything in its path
as I lean
across to reach the far corners—
and I feel like a chrysalis inside a cocoon.

A gift from George—I think of his hands
worming through the deep pockets,
pushing the black buttons through worn holes
scraping ice off his wife's car
as his truck warms up. Like a cloud, this history
rises with the white exhaust,
and I watch my breath evaporate like words.

The Last Visit

The maintenance man
takes her right arm
just at the elbow,

leads her slow like poured honey
to the granite marker
down the path unworn.

She has given a great
effort—blue Sunday dress,
white purse to match, flower

in her hair.
He is dressed in
caretaker's blues,

red name-patch,
black, faded shoes,
dirt under the nails.

Clearing a few stray leaves
off the top, she stops
to read the words,

though she
knows them by heart,
wrote them that one

cold day long ago.
The ground winters over,
and she blinks, holding it,

cherishing it, like the spring
smell of pies in the window
and a smile blooms—

sun cutting through clouds.

The Eyes Can Not Forget

The steam rises from the coffee like a gray-white smell defying gravity, fogging my wireless round spectacles. The constant murmur of nearby conversation, glasses clinking into one another, silverware bouncing carelessly against porcelain plates, all penetrate my ear, mixing like a gas reaction in the recesses of consciousness. Short order cooks are scurrying in random directions; waitresses bark out orders in cryptic phrases, and I notice the laughing and moving mouths. But all sound fades into a cycled hum; activity reduces to a glowing state of excitement, and I return somewhere behind the eye to be alone with the pain.

She came to me on a crisp August day, August 19 to be exact. Belton High School had been awakened from its long summer slumber, and the halls reverberated with nervous giggles and macho football talk. I had just sat down with my coffee, ruminating on the speech I had made that morning to the new students in the gym when a girl in a black raincoat buttoned to her chin

appeared at my door. Linda, the Guidance Department secretary, was behind her and coursing through her "Mr. Calcovani isn't to be disturbed. If you will have a seat, I'll inform him. . ." speech. Even after three months rest, it still sounded like a recording. I nodded that it was okay and directed my visitor to the rocking chair beside my desk. She pointed to my "Unmarried and Over the Hill" cup as she sat down. "I'll have whatever you're drinking," she said.

"It's only coffee."

"Well, mind if I have a cup?" she asked, motioning with her eyes to my small coffee maker in the corner of the room.

Completely caught off guard, I said the only thing I could think of. "How do you take it?"

"No cream, no sugar, and no love, please," she said.

"Excuse me?"

"Never mind, man. It was nothing."

"You can call me Mr. Calcovani."

"Now *that's* an unusual name," she said, her eyes widening. "I'm not real sharp with names, man, so I hope you'll settle for Mr. C."

"That's fine. Now, may I inquire as to your name?" I got up from my chair and walked over to the coffee maker.

"In answer to your inquiry," she said, unnecessarily emphasizing *inquiry*, "I am Cynthia Burke Hoffmann. I'm new to the 12th grade this year."

"Oh." I was pouring her coffee into a styrofoam cup, watching her from the corner of my eye. She wore a full-length black raincoat that fell loosely around her shoulders, ending just below her knees where black tights and black

Chuck Taylors covered the rest of her thin legs. The only skin showing on her body was her face. Her opal white skin had a glow to it, but she wasn't pale. The brightness of her face contrasted with her recessed, black eyes that penetrated me with a laser-like quality.

"You like your coffee black?"

"No, I said no cream and no sugar."

Nodding, I handed her the cup of coffee—black. She raised the cup to her lips.

"Miss Burke, what may I do for you this morning?"

She blew on the hot liquid. "I listened to your speech this morning, and I felt I needed to come by and express my opinion."

"I see."

"Actually you don't see. Now, you mentioned that writing is a skill that every person from this school learns before graduating, right? You seem fairly confident of this."

"Yes. It's something we pride ourselves on," I said, removing my glasses. I started to clean them with my tie. I felt uncomfortable as she used the phrase "fairly confident," one I had used several times during my speech to the new students. Linda said I was always using oxymorons when I spoke. "Saying 'fairly confident' is like saying 'mildly burnt' or 'pretty ugly,'" she had said. But to Linda I was "darkly comic," and kept life interesting in the guidance office.

"But you can't teach writing, Mr. C," my visitor intoned. "Writing is something that comes from inside." She stood up, setting her coffee on the

edge of my desk, and opened her rain coat to reveal the other half of the black leotard behind her raincoat . I put my glasses back on my face. The dark color hid the lines of her body, but I could tell that her upper body was as gaunt and featureless as her legs.

Pressing her hands against her chest, she said, "It comes from here." Then she pointed to her head. "Goes here." Then she smirked. "And you're gonna teach me how to get it from there to the paper. I don't think so, Mr. C," she said. She half-smiled, buttoned her jacket, and sat down. "You can't teach that stuff. Sure, you can show me how to put a bunch of critical analysis B.S. on paper, but I don't consider that writing. That just stifles a person's creativity," she said, proud of her choice of words.

"Expository writing is a vital skill to master for college," I argued, proud of *my* choice of words.

"But it's not true writing. That analytical crap is for guys in lab coats and college professors. Or maybe guys like you."

I didn't respond. I searched the expression on her face for some clue that would reveal what type of person would formulate such an opinion on writing, and then take the time to lecture me about it.

She shifted her posture and glared at me. "You think I'm crazy don't you?"

"No."

"But you don't agree, do you?"

"To a point, maybe." I could feel my brief responses irritating her like dry skin.

She shifted in her chair again. "You don't say much, do you?"

"Sometimes."

She fiddled with the buttons on her raincoat again, her lips tightening and her eyes squinting at the corners, and I sensed her anger at not being able to shock me. Fifteen tumultuous years as a guidance counselor had eliminated that element from my job.

"Thanks for the coffee, sir. Have a day. You decide."

I swiveled in my chair as she walked out the door. When she was gone, I poured what was left from her coffee into my own cup, watching the brown liquid turn black. "No cream, no sugar, and no love," I repeated with a laugh. This was going to be a hell of a school year.

A woman at the check out counter is arguing with the hostess about her bill. I can only hear brief snip-its from the conversation, but apparently she was charged twice for her iced tea and is quite angry. Had it not been for her vehement display, I would have tuned out, but her histrionics are attracting most of the eyes in the place.

I drift back and can feel the intimacy of privacy, but the inappropriate sting of calmness comes over me again; it's the feeling Judas must have felt counting his silver. I reach across and try to smooth the two pages of wrinkled notes sitting under the sugar. They are her tribute, and I have crumpled them four times over two cups of coffee, thinking somehow this will chase away this diabolical calmness. But as I begin reading the pages, I feel the tears puddle under my eyes, the queasiness return like a stomach cramp. All I can do is crumple them again, and clean my glasses on the tip of my conservative red tie;

it's my reflex, the comfort of habit, a way of focusing on nothing. A waitress refills my coffee, and my eyes shift to the blurry white cup as the light brown swirls black.

I was in my office one afternoon in October, looking over applications for the Junior Honor Society when I heard a ruckus outside my office.

"Just leave me alone, damnit!"

"You cannot just—"

Cynthia burst into my office with Linda, hot, and right behind her. I swiveled in my chair to face them. "Hello, Ladies."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Calcovani. I tried to tell her to wait," Linda said, helplessly.

"It's okay, Mrs. Young," I said. "Have a seat, Cynthia."

Linda sighed in disgust. I looked at her, furrowed my eyebrows, and nodded, hoping she would understand.

"Does she have to be in here?" Cynthia asked, pointing to Linda. She was wearing a ridiculous pair of sunglasses which were so big they engulfed her face. As usual, she had donned her all-black wardrobe complete with raincoat and Chuck Taylors. I wondered if she ever wore anything else.

"She was just leaving," I said, motioning Linda out with my eyes. She muttered something I couldn't hear and slammed the door.

"I want to be transferred right away," she said, flinging her black book bag onto the floor.

"To prison?"

"No, from Mrs. Woods's English class." She shook her head. "You know,

you really should get some new jokes. Your sense of humor is not that funny.”

“Why don’t you tell me what happened today?”

“Well, let’s see. I got up this morning and got dressed.”

“About Mrs. Woods’s class?”

“I walked in, sat in the back, adjusted my raincoat.” She was facing me with two mirrored eyes and an expressionless face, as if she were being cross examined.

“Cynthia, what happened?”

“You’re getting angry aren’t you?” she said with a slight smile.

“I am not getting angry. I just—”

“Could you please refer to me as Cynthia Burke? I’d like to be called by that name from now on.”

“Okay, Cynthia Burke. Why don’t you tell me what happened in English class today,” I said, starting over again.

“You’re mad. I can tell. I can always tell when someone is mad.”

“Cynthia Burke. Is there a reason why you’re wearing sunglasses?”

“Mighty bright today, Mr. C.”

I glanced out my window into the overcast sky. “Blinding.”

“I’m really sick of your little dry comments,” she said. “I find them particularly rude and—”

“Why do you want to be transferred out of Mrs. Woods’s class?” I abruptly asked, tired of the game we were playing.

“She and I are not educationally compatible,” she said flatly.

“Educationally compatible?”

"She can't teach and I can't learn from her."

"Specific examples, please," I said, trying not to sigh.

"There you go again. You're acting angry. I bet you have a bad temper. Do you have a bad temper, Mr. C?"

"I would rather not discuss my temper right now. I was hoping we'd discuss Mrs. Woods's class."

"How about a quick quid pro quo?"

"Excuse me?"

"A quid pro quo. I tell you something. You tell me something. It's Latin. Something for something."

I didn't respond.

"Haven't you ever seen *Silence of the Lambs*? Hannibal the Cannibal? Quid pro quo?"

"I missed that one. Now, I would like to discuss what happened in English today and nothing more. I really have work I should be doing."

"Okay, but you really should talk more. I find you interesting most of the time, except when you're cracking those dry, unfunny jokes."

"Thank you," I said quickly. "What happened in English?"

"Mrs. Woods asked us to keep a personal journal for her class."

"And?"

"Well, I already have a personal journal."

"Well, then what's the problem?"

"She says she's going to take up the journals every three weeks. I told her I don't let anyone read my journal. It's personal. And she told me I would

get a zero if I didn't turn it in, so that's when I walked out."

"You walked out of her class?"

"I shouldn't have to put up with such a totalitarian attitude. This isn't a communist society. And besides," she said, fiddling with a button on her raincoat, "she doesn't have any right to see what I write in there. It's none of her fu—, excuse me, none of her business."

"You had no right to walk out of her classroom, Cynthia. I find that behavior really disrespectful."

She stood up. "Disrespectful? Disrespectful? What about you? The way you sit there and make those little. . . ." She didn't finish.

"We aren't talking about me, Cynthia," I said calmly, but I could feel the tension in my voice.

She thought for a moment, all the while fiddling with the second button of her raincoat. Finally, as if she sensed her limit with me, she conceded quietly. "All right. I won't walk out of her class anymore."

"Good," I replied, sensing we were making progress. "I'll talk to Mrs. Woods about the journal, and we'll work something out. Maybe you could keep a separate one. One journal for class, and another to log your personal items into."

"Why should I have to keep two separate journals?"

"Cynthia, will—"

"Cynthia Burke please," she said, dryly.

"Cynthia Burke, will you try it?"

She thought for a moment and then sighed. "Yeah, I'll try it, but I think

it's stupid." She leaned down to pick her book bag off the floor when her glasses fell off. I had been smiling because she had finally seen something my way, but the smile quickly disappeared. Her left eye was black and almost swollen shut.

"What happened to your eye!" I leaned forward in my chair to look more closely. She didn't attempt to put the glasses back on; she didn't attempt to leave. She didn't even divert her eyes. She sat back into the chair meekly, her neck tilted down just enough so that she had to look up to see me, her eyes looking right back into mine with an uncanny emptiness about them. Then her face contorted into a crooked look of indignation, like a defiant child who has just been slapped.

"Cynthia, who did this to you?"

Standing up suddenly, she grabbed her bag, squinted, and looked just past my shoulder. "You know, your walls are just like Jerry's. If you squint, they look purple. Do you know what purple is symbolic of?"

I shook my head in disbelief. "Cynthia, I—"

"It represents fidelity, Mr. C. Your walls should be red. Have a day."

And in a black blur, she was gone.

Linda immediately came to my door. "Why do you let her just waltz right on in here without knocking, without checking with me? What makes her so special?"

I was standing now in the middle of the floor with my mouth slightly open. I turned and faced the wall, ignoring her question.

"Walter, are you okay?" she said.

"Linda, what color do you think these walls are?"

"My God, you're just as weird as she is," she said and slammed the door.

I am watching a couple across the crowded room who are sitting by the large glass window. "Our booth," I say to myself. They hold hands across the table as coffee steam rises from the cups sitting below their faces. His eyes focus on hers. Hers on his. He tries to say something difficult, and she keeps nodding her head like a puppet on repeat. Finally, giving up, he smiles, looks out the window, then back at her, out the window, and then down into his coffee cup. She puts her other hand on top of his, and they both laugh in a nervous release.

"Walter?"

I look up. It's Art Young, my good friend and principal of Belton High School. "Good morning," I say, sipping my coffee and looking over towards the young couple again.

"Well, it's morning," he responds, sliding into the booth.

"I'm glad you could make it," I say.

"You know, I've always wanted to try this place."

"Great coffee here," I mutter.

"You guys used to come here, didn't you?"

I nod.

"I'm very sorry for you, Walter,"

With a stiff lip I look up into my boss's eyes. "Me too."

I walked into Jerry's cafe ten minutes early. I sat in a booth near the window and looked up into the autumn sky on the freak chance that I might catch a glimpse of a shooting star. The stars stared down on me like millions of little eyes, the eyes of angels and lost friends. They seemed nonjudgmental yet

omnipresent, seeing everything, but reacting to nothing.

“You know, coffee is no basis for a lasting relationship.”

I looked up into the eyes of a gaunt girl in a black raincoat and tights. She was smiling and holding her bookbag in her left hand. The bruise around her eye was barely noticeable. Cynthia and I hadn’t talked since that day in my office.

“Hello, Cynthia.”

“How’s it going, Walter. I can call you Walter, can’t I—you know since we’re not in school and all.”

I made no expression as if I hadn’t heard her.

“Okay, I won’t call you Walter.”

“I would just prefer you call me Mr. Calcovani,” I said, dryly.

“Well, Mr. C, I would prefer you call me Cynthia Burke. Especially since we’re operating on a professional level here.”

A roundfaced, pudgy waitress approached our table, and Cynthia Burke and I ordered two cups of French Roast coffee. She said the same line about no cream, no sugar, and no love, but the waitress didn’t catch it.

“Why do you say that?” I asked her.

“I like my coffee without cream and sugar. I can see my reflection in it that way.”

“Why do you say that thing about no love?”

“I don’t believe in love.”

“Why?”

“People don’t understand it. It’s the greatest misconception of this

century.”

“I don’t follow.”

“Let’s just say you have your preconceptions about it and I have mine,” she said defensively.

“Why are we here?”

“I’m sorry for calling you at home. I hope your wife doesn’t mind.”

“I’m not married,” I said matter-of-factly.

“Oh?” she said as if such a thought surprised her.

I shook my head.

“No, really. Please continue. I’d like to know more.”

“Just tell me why you called me.”

“Why aren’t you married? Were you married?”

“Yes.”

“Divorced?”

I nod.

“See, my point exactly. Love is an illusion.”

“Well, that’s nice, but I can see this is going nowhere, so I’ll just—”

“Please,” she said, grabbing my hand as I was getting out of the booth.

Her voice had urgency in it, and it surprised me. My lips tightened and then parted, but I didn’t speak. “Look,” she said. “I know you’re mad at me for calling you. I was just. . . Well, I just was thirsty. That’s all. At least try the coffee.”

Reluctantly, I sat back down. The waitress brought our coffee, and Cynthia watched as I put a dash of cream and two packets of sugar into the

black, steaming liquid.

"You know, I had a boyfriend once, and he loved coffee. We would come here all the time, too. He's the one who thought these walls looked purple."

"Cynthia Burke," I said, trying to remain patient. "Why did you call me down here tonight?"

"I don't know. I thought it would be nice if we could have our little quid pro quo like we were talking about." She took a long sip of her coffee and then murmured, "I also wanted to apologize for acting so strange a few weeks ago in your office."

"You haven't been by in several weeks," I said. "I thought you might have really transferred."

"Very funny."

"Your eye's better," I said, gazing casually out the window.

She looked away towards the kitchen.

"Where did you get it?" I knew I was pressing, but I also knew she didn't ask me to meet her just so we could trade stories about our pasts.

She took another long sip of her coffee. Finally she said, "I got it at a blue-light special. Why do you want to know?"

"Who hit you?"

"Nobody."

I sighed in frustration. "Okay. I'll be seeing you in school tomorrow. Here's a dollar for the coffee. Why don't you go home now. It's getting late." I got up, grabbed my coat and had walked about four steps when she said, "Please, Please Mr. C—" her voice choked. "Don't leave me yet."

I noticed that it was 11:04 when I pulled beside a red pick-up truck in front of Cynthia's house. Two men drinking beer, one in jeans and a ragged sweatshirt, the other in an old pair of sweats and a mismatched jacket, leaned against the hood of the truck. The box of what I assumed was an empty twelve-pack sat on the hood behind them.

"Shit," I heard Cynthia mutter under her breath. We had been talking for hours, oblivious to our tiring bodies as caffeine coursed through our veins. Cynthia only lived up the hill from Jerry's, but I had insisted on bringing her home, despite her objections.

"You won't be in trouble for me bringing you home so late, will you?" I asked.

Her father was already walking over as Cynthia got out of the car. He stopped just short of the front end of my car, peered over the headlights at me, and then turned to her.

I heard him say in a southern accent, "What the hell are you doing out so late?" The voice was high-pitched and hateful.

I got out of the car to explain. I knew immediately that I'd made a serious judgment error. "Mr. Hoffmann, I am Walter Calcovani, and she was with me down the hill at the coffee shop. I'm sorry we're so—"

"Dad, we were talking and didn't notice the time," she interrupted.

He squared me up, squinting at me with his recessed, burning eyes, then looked at his daughter accusingly. Cynthia had told me he was a union worker at the zinc plant down by the river, and he looked exactly how I'd pictured him.

He set his beer on the ground beside my car, and I stepped back.

"Well, I'll be go-to-hell. I didn't know that my own daughter was a whore." I could see an uncertainty, a dangerous uncertainty, in his sunken eyes as the headlights gave them a strange glow. "How much of a discount did she give you for the ride home?" he said menacingly.

"Dad, I told you. We were just talking."

"Shut-up. When I wanna hear from you, I'll ask. Now get your slutty ass inside and put on some real goddamn clothes." He took two steps toward me. I stepped back. Even from this distance I could smell the acrid beer on his breath, and from his speech I knew he was drunk. His friend watched with a placid amusement from the front bumper of the pick-up truck.

Cynthia tried to grab at his sweatshirt and pull him away, but he grabbed her roughly by the arm and yanked her like a rag doll to his side. "Tell me somethin', Mister. Is my daughter good?" He was pointing at her like he was going to put a hole right through her forehead.

"Dad, you're hurting me," she said. She tried to pry herself free from her father's crushing grip.

"Shut up, damnit!" he yelled, and with one swift pop he broke her nose with his open hand.

The man leaning against the pick-up truck reacted faster than I did. "Whoah there, Robert. Easy now." He had grabbed him in a head lock and walked him slowly towards the house.

I ran over to Cynthia who was slumped over the hood of the pick-up truck, blood flowing freely from her nose, blending with the red paint of the

truck. She was crying and cursing her father, and she swung at me as I tried to help her.

"Cynthia, please let me look at it."

"Just go away."

"No. I want to help you. Please let me help you." Then, a small woman came out of the house with ice cubes and an old green dishtowel. She was wearing an old apron with a "Home is where the heart is" inscription across the front. The skin hung loosely from her face, giving her a tired, worn look, and I could tell she'd been crying. I opened my mouth and started to say something, but she spoke first.

"Mister, thank you for bringing Cynthia home. We'd appreciate it if you would just leave now. I will take care of this."

She leaned over her daughter with the ice cubes and applied them gently to Cynthia's face, and I noticed the chemistry between them, a tacit alliance that had formed long ago to battle the fearsome temper of the man of the house.

Slowly, unseen and unnoticed, I walked to my car, which was still running, and I drove off with the feeling that everything that had just happened was undoubtedly my fault.

"You look tired, Walter. Are you all right?" Art Young pours sugar into a cup of hot tea.

"I'm okay."

"This whole thing has been terribly hard on everyone. Her mother is pressing charges against him. He beat both of them, you know."

"Yeah," I say. We drink in silence. Fifteen years as friends and colleagues had attuned me with his nuances, and I know his prepared statement is coming. He is married to Linda, my secretary, and she always maintained Art is as predictable as the weather after she washes her car.

"You and I go way back, Walt. And I want you to know that you're my good friend, and I know she was close to you. But you can't blame yourself. It wasn't your fault."

"I just can't believe that, Art. I feel like I could have stopped her."

"You were there for her, man. You met her at this damn diner practically every night of the week. You talked with her in your office daily. Jesus, Walter, you violated every ethical code a teacher could violate in terms of professionalism. No one but God could have stopped what happened that night. It was a choice she made all by herself. There was nothing we could have done."

"Then maybe you can understand why I feel so bad," I snap. "She was my friend, Art."

The last time I saw Cynthia alive was in late December. Belton had hosted The Terrill Mill School's basketball team. We'd won 67-56, and I was on my way to the dollar movies. Students were constantly chiding me for going to the theater alone on Friday nights, but I was a self-proclaimed movie buff and unashamed to admit it.

I was driving down River Avenue, engaged in this slightly humorous thought when about twenty-five yards ahead, I saw a girl and two guys running across the street. I wouldn't have paid them any attention, but I recognized one of the girls as Jordanna Higgins. This also wouldn't have concerned me

much, but she was sprinting, and as I got closer I could see a visible terror on her face as she glanced back over her shoulder toward the road and the park.

Out of curiosity and partially out of worry that something was wrong, I pulled into Riverside Park. The park consisted of a small parking lot adjacent to the river with fifteen picnic tables along a narrow strip of grass by the river bank. The railroad trestle and its steel vertebrae crossed the river twenty yards to the left. The park was a teenage hangout on the weekends, especially for Belton kids after a basketball game. As I pulled in, I recognized many of the students' cars from parking-lot duty.

Suddenly, Mary Anne Cohn came running up to my car. She started banging on my window until I rolled it down. Kids were sprinting from their cars, pointing towards something in the darkness. A small group had amassed on the bank by the river.

"Mr. C. You've got to help us. It's Cynthia—"

"Whoa, Mary. Slow down." I put the car in park and got out. Two other students sprinted over to me.

"Mr. Calcovani, it's Cynthia, that new girl. Jordanna Higgins said she's going to jump off the bridge tonight."

"What?"

He turned and pointed toward the bridge. It was too dark to see, but people had gathered along the bank and were staring and pointing like they were searching for constellations in the sky. I ran over to the river bank for a better look; they followed. I forgot that my car was still running.

I pushed up to the front of the group, the students hardly acknowledging

my presence as being out of place. "My God, Mr. C. Do you think she's really up there?" I heard someone say from the middle of the crowd. I didn't answer, but I could feel my hands shaking out of fear.

We stood helpless on the bank, unsure if it was all a hoax, scared that in the quiet night we might hear a splash, confirming our worst fears. I was silently hoping that Cynthia was just acting weird and trying to get attention. Our eyes strained in the darkness, our blindness compensated by an acute sense of hearing able to detect every ripple of disturbance in the glass-like river. The acoustics of the park afforded near silence as it sat ten feet below the level of the street, the steady hum from cars on the main road drifting over our heads like a breeze through winter tree tops.

Ten minutes later, a police helicopter with a search light approached from the southeast. We watched as the craft's tremendous eye panned the bridge. A police car arrived with Jordanna and two guys whom I didn't know. I approached the cop, identified myself, and realized it was Billy Crossman, an old student of mine.

"Hi, Mr. C.," he said. Even after eight years, he still addressed me formally, but his tone was detached barely recognizing our past relationship.

"Hello, Billy. What do you think? Is this for real?"

"She's been talking about killing herself for weeks," Jordanna said, almost in tears. "I think she's finally flipped. She's not kidding. She'll do it." Jordanna looked at me, and I could tell by the sadness in her eyes that she knew about Cynthia's father. I nodded.

I looked at the Billy, and he shrugged his shoulders. He was obviously

bothered about being pulled away from his patrol to witness what had been a practical joke countless other times. But there was burned-out look in his eyes, like he had seen too much sadness and death in his short career.

Suddenly a gasp went up from the small crowd by the bank.

I looked to the bridge. A shudder wisped up my spine like a gas-baited flame. She was standing with her feet on two trusses, looking down at the black water. The helicopter was hovering just over the top of the bridge with the spotlight shining directly down over her. The wind blew her black hair, and the hood of her rain coat jerked in random directions like a windsock in a cyclone. I ran over to the edge of the water, trying to see her more clearly, and balanced myself on the rocks which lined the shore.

We watched with horror, and I felt my forehead to make sure I wasn't dreaming. I didn't realize it at first, but I was shaking my head and repeating the words, "No—no, don't you do it, don't you do it." The kids yelled for someone to do something, but we were helpless. The only way to the bridge was a ladder from the road or a long walk across Myrick's field from the other side.

Billy was on his radio yelling something to the dispatcher. I heard him say that this was not a joke and to get someone on that bridge immediately. He anxiously strode over with a pair of binoculars and let me look through them. Her face was white under the bright light, giving her the semblance of some ethereal figure; she was dressed in all black, her raincoat buttoned tightly around her. The white light on her face gave it a brilliant opal-glow, her eyes the only noticeable patch of shadow on her face.

I tensed with fear, afraid that if I moved, she would fall. "Please, God.

Don't let this happen," I said. Several girls around me were crying; most of the guys were silent, unsure of the proper adolescent thing to say. Billy, feeling the tension escalate, ran back to his radio and began yelling again at the dispatcher, telling her to wave off the helicopter.

"That damn thing's gonna make her jump. Tell Mark to back off! I've got witnesses who are saying she gonna go." He had lost his composure. Then, I heard him say something about a diver. I angrily glared back at him in reproach, but he didn't notice me. Sirens were converging on this scene from both sides of the city, and two patrol cars were parked directly under the bridge and had blocked off traffic. The officers were both standing on the hood of their cars, also trying to wave off the helicopter.

I saw Cynthia look up at the helicopter for several seconds. She then looked down at the water again. Slowly she unbuttoned the clasps of her raincoat and carefully took it off, as if it were all part of some mysterious ritual. She had a plain white t-shirt on, and it was the first time I'd ever seen her in a color other than black. She folded the raincoat and threw it into the darkness; the crowd gasped, some girls screaming out in fright. The light of the helicopter followed the jacket to the water with the spotlight. Cynthia pulled her hands and arms close to her chest, like a child shivering from the cold, and I remembered our night at Jerry's with his purple walls and French Roast coffee as she held her hands close, trying to purge herself of an abysmal, immutable pain. I looked back to the black waters, realizing that I was watching the grotesque liturgy of a last rite.

Billy, too nervous to stand idly and watch, screeched off in his patrol car

and roared down River Avenue to join the rescue squad which had just arrived at the base of the bridge where it crossed above the road. More sirens echoed from across town as they sped toward the scene.

Summoning all my courage to look through the binoculars again, I watched her eyes close, and I noticed the glisten of tears as they rolled down her face. My brain was trying to process the microscopic--her closed eyes, her expressions, the clothes--and the macroscopic: police cars, helicopters, bridges. The confusion swirled in my brain, a dream-reality I could not interpret. Then, with a slow raising of her head into the brightness, Cynthia Burke Hoffmann spread her arms like an angel flying home and submitted to the laws of God.

The last thing I remember about that night was the sound of Billy's binoculars smashing against the rocks of the river bank. I had dropped them when she hit the water.

Art pays for my coffee, and we stand up from the booth together. I put my black sport coat on, feeling an icy draft from outside as a customer walks through the door. It's snowing now, I hear Art say. He puts his hand on my shoulder, and I look at him just as a tear escapes down my right cheek.

"Let's go, Walt. We're going to be late," he says.

"Yeah, we were too late." I button my coat, avoiding his eyes.

He squeezes my arm affectionately. "Walt, don't forgot these." He hands me my crumpled eulogy notes. I smooth them out on the table and put them inside my jacket pocket.

I had promised her mother.

Looking at the blue walls, I squint and manage a weak smile. "Thanks."

I take one last sip of coffee, glance over at the young couple, and walk with my friend out into the cold.

Special

In the frenzy to save the dying girl our voices shoot across the drab-tiled room the text-book language sticks like sterile bandages to clean wounds—the poetry of technicians the black prayer of gods granting miracles out of habit i cut the clothes and begin my silent ritual . . . HAIL MARY FULL OF GRACE THE LORD IS WITH THEE . . . blood and perfume mix in my nostrils i wince try to concentrate deliberately avoid her face cut is the only thought cut is the only thought the scoop neck blouse peels away the denim skirt soaked in blood lifts like a wet towel the next wave of orders come and i search the arm for a rising vein squeeze hard with the right hand to seal the circulation no time for the tourniquet the vein rises as if on command and i push the needle in without the usual care red fluid floods the tube warm glowing in my fingers as i silently shout to the spirit live live the inside skin of her arm like new silk i wonder her age fifteen or sixteen at most nearly my own task complete i step back a stranger to my own fraternity my own code my reflex in the face of death

BLESSED ART THOU AMONG WOMEN but in this moment i can not know her . . .

Six inches of snow had fallen in a six hour period—a new record, I thought. I stepped off the Marta bus onto Peachtree Street at 7:30 a.m., three hours late. The snow crunched under my feet as I trudged down the unshoveled, unblemished sidewalk, and I marveled at the contrast of the oak tree's dark branches laced with the brilliance of white snow. It all felt like the discord of a strange dream: the rare silence of downtown Atlanta on a rush-hour morning, the sound of my feet absorbed by a quilt of powdery white, the solitude of knowing that no one besides myself had walked down this sidewalk since the previous day. Suddenly, I became the pioneer, the pathfinder, and I turned around to survey this once-traveled path before entering the sliding doors of the hospital. I breathed deep the sharp air, its mysterious non-smell registering something of remembrance on my brain. I didn't acknowledge the memory, suspecting—no, knowing—that pain lay just below the numbness. Today had been exactly one year. An ambulance announced its turn from Collier road onto Peachtree, its emergency lights flaring, siren knifing the air. Instead of taking off at high speed, however, it crawled at a careful pace, slipped into the tire ruts of the bus and the tracks of a few bravehearts who had attempted to drive into work.

I entered the main building, turned left through the lobby, past the elevators and Radiology, past C.A.T. scan and the blood bank, and turned left again into the laboratory. I encountered no one except Bobby Watkins, the

night phlebotomist; he was rounding the corner, coming back from the Emergency Room. Normally, people were running into each other by 7:30, but today, the halls were desolate.

I waved. "Hey, Bob. What happened? Did God give the world a day off or something?"

"Hey, Pat. Nobody's here yet, and the E.R.'s packing them in. It's like it's free day over there. Every bum, druggie in Atlanta, plus ninety-seven car accidents. I'm getting slammed."

"We Southerners aren't quite as good as you Northerners at driving in snow," I said, pronouncing *Southerners* as if it had no "r's" in it.

He didn't laugh and walked through the private door to the lab. He started to say something, but I only got the words "You're three. . ." in his thick New Jersey accent. The door quickly shut behind him. He always walked off in mid-sentence whenever we had a conversation, and I would be forced to fill in the second half. Must be a Hackensack thing, I thought.

I walked back past the waiting room and Pathology and hung my coat and gloves on a hook beside my boss's office. Mary Jane lived in a studio apartment two blocks from the hospital and judging by the cacophony from the collection area, I surmised she had made it in to work. Her porcelain-edged voice echoed back through the narrow caverns of the lab, and I could tell she was engaged in a heated discussion with a doctor. When I entered the lab area, she was pacing the floor and gesturing wildly. After a few seconds, she hung up the phone, rolled her eyes, and raised her middle finger at the phone.

"Pat," she said as if nothing had happened, "glad you could make it.

Hope that dusting of snow didn't slow you down too much." Sarcasm was the language of choice with most of the phlebotomists in the lab, most notably Mary Jane. She was twenty-four years old, a day supervisor, and possessed a wit that, according to most doctors in the hospital, was comparable to Shakespeare. She claimed that when your job was spent inflicting pain with needles on helpless people, you learned to be quick with your tongue.

"I took a sled in," I replied, trying to match her. "Fortunately, I live at the top of a very large hill."

"Not bad. Not bad considering you don't speak to anyone before ten." She yanked a stat request off the computer and pushed a strand of sandy blond hair behind her ear with her free hand. "Emergency Room, Bob," she called.

"I guess that was a doctor wondering where his charts are this morning," I said. I motioned to the two-foot high computer printout on the counter.

"I told him you were sledding in." She started walking toward the back in search of Bob, giving me a friendly, though somewhat devious, smile. Even in the midst of chaos, she was cooler than the morgue.

"I'll get on it." I watched her disappear around the corner.

"Thank you, sweetie," she said over her shoulder.

Mary Jane didn't look like a day supervisor in a hospital laboratory, but more like a L'oréal model. Her face was sharply defined with prominent cheekbones, tourmaline colored eyes, an electrifying smile, all of which was subtly accented with natural shades of make-up. Perhaps it was just my adolescent infatuation, but she fit incongruously with most of the personnel in

the lab. The phlebotomists were mostly black and young and extroverted. The medical technologists were mostly white females who looked like they smoked a pack a day, stealing away at every chance to get their nicotine rush for the next half hour. There was a desiccated and angry look on most of their faces, like they had spent the majority of their adult lives shoved in back rooms with microscopes. Mary Jane, on the other hand, was young, beautiful, and had a master's degree in psychology. Not only was she excellent at drawing blood herself, but she was exceptional at supervising our wayward crew of phlebotomists.

My job entailed arriving at the hospital at 4:30 a.m., separating all the day's lab reports for the entire hospital according to patient and location, and placing the new reports on each patient's chart. The whole process took me three hours. So, by 7:30—the unspoken magical arrival time for most doctors—all 500 patients had their most current lab work listed on their charts. At 8:00, I went for breakfast, and then finished up the morning drawing the outpatient blood work. I was home by 2:00, generally. The downside to the job was my 9:30 bed time, but my determination never wavered. In one year, I would be able to pay for my first year of college.

On this day, I finished getting the charts out by 10:00. Mary Jane beeped me twice and sent me running to two different floors to appease irate doctors, but other than their sour dispositions, the morning was incident-free. The men in the maintenance department had been sent out in trucks to pick up nurses who could not get themselves to work. Nurses from the night shift had stayed over to help until the day shift could get in. By the time I made it

back to the lab, all but three of the seven day-shift phlebotomists had arrived. The hospital was operating on a skeleton crew, but we were getting the day's work done. Even Mary Jane had thrown on her lab coat and had gone on the morning blood routes through the intensive care units.

Some time after breakfast, I was walking some tubes of blood back to the Serology department when I heard a woman at the front desk berating Lucy, our receptionist. I immediately turned and headed for the rescue.

"I certainly hope someone in this department can draw some blood from my daughter. They've tried four times in Dr. Fowler's office, and the only thing they've gotten from her is tears. Now, why don't you call your supervisor and—"

"Ma'am, if you'll just have a seat, I will take care of this," Lucy replied in her small half-whisper of a voice. She was sixty-two years old and had long ago realized that there is little in life worth raising your voice over.

"I don't want to have a seat. This damn snow has made me late for everything as it is. I want to get her tests run and get to work, if you don't mind. The name is Blackly, Jessie Blackly."

"Mrs. Blackly—"

"It's Miss Blackly, *Miss* Blackly," she said, her voice rising. "I'm not married."

I walked into the waiting room, feeling like I was entering a demilitarized zone. "Hello," I said in my most congenial voice, "why don't you two come on back to the collecting room."

"I certainly hope this isn't the one who's going to be drawing her blood."

She looked at me the way a judge looks at a guilty criminal. "He barely looks old enough to be in high school."

As was typical, a sarcastic rejoinder like "thanks" or "I'm not" froze on my lips, and I smiled my game-show host grin—my best Wink Martindale. "Just come on back, and we can figure out what orders you have."

"Pat is one of our very best phlebotomists," Lucy intoned. "I'm sure he will do a fine job." Her voice was shaking in anger, but still remained at her characteristic half-whisper.

I mouthed the words "Thank you" to Lucy as they passed.

"It's from Dr. Fowler's office," Lucy said, angrily snapping the note toward me. I nodded in familiar recognition. We often got oncology patients from his office. People with cancer were difficult to draw blood from because their veins hardened with scar tissue after chemotherapy. So if the nurses couldn't find a good vein, they sent them down to me. After all, the blood came through here, regardless.

I looked at the sequence of letters and numbers—CBC, SMA 18, PTT—grabbed a purple top, a red top, and a blue topped tube, and returned to the collecting room. Jessie was already in the chair, sleeve rolled up, and smiling. She was eleven years old, thin as a utility pole, and couldn't have been an inch over four feet tall. Her feet dangled from the chair like a small child in church. Her brown eyes immediately met mine and locked.

"Excuse me, sir, but I would say you're at least college age." She sounded like someone in her twenties.

"Right on," I said. I set the tubes on the green towel beside her chair and

pulled up a stool in front of her. "I'm starting college next fall."

"Why are you here then?" She kept smiling.

"Earning my way. My parents are divorced and they—"

"If you don't mind, young man," Jessie's mother interrupted, "I really need to be getting to work. Can you do anything to hurry?" Just then a beeper went off, and both she and I instinctively checked our hips. It was hers, and I pointed the direction to the nearest phone without turning around.

"My mom's an attorney," Jessie said after she left. "She works real hard."

"She must be important," I said, sarcastically, but I don't think Jessie got it. I handed her a band-aid. "Here, peel this open for me." While her attention was diverted, I grabbed a special needle and screwed it to the tip of a pink vacutainer. Then I inserted the tube onto the opposite end of the double-sided needle. The process worked like a vacuum. When the needle was in a vein, the vacuumed air in the tube drew the blood out. I removed the band-aid on her arm from Dr. Fowler's office, then took the tourniquet and wrapped it around her arm. "It looks like a giant noodle, doesn't it?" I said.

"Yes, I've often thought that," she said as if I had proposed a constitutional amendment; then her voice returned to its childish tone. "Hey, do you know what the word *effervescent* means?"

I felt the heavy scar tissue at the crook of her arm. A blue vein protruded easily, but to get blood from it would be tricky. "I don't. I never listened much in school."

"My doctor used that word to describe me." She was quiet a moment.

"How old are you?"

"Eighteen. And my name is Pat if that was your next question."

"I read it on your name tag, silly."

I switched needles for a special thinner gauge called a butterfly. I knew it would probably get through the scar tissue better than a regular gauge. Jessie closed her eyes and jumped when I stuck her. I thought I had missed at first and didn't realize I was holding my breath until the blood came shooting into the tube and I exhaled. She opened her eyes.

"I don't believe it. You are the first person to ever get my blood on the first time. I have bad veins because of my leukemia, you know."

"Jessie!" a voice from behind me said. "How many times have I told you never to discuss your medical condition with strangers!" Her mother was perched against the door jamb, looking desperately for something in her purse. She appeared more irritated than when she left.

"I was only talking."

"I don't care. It's just not anyone's business." Something in her voice, the way she said *just*, made it sound like she had the disease, too.

"He got me on the first try, Mom. Isn't that amazing?" I held up the tubes behind my head as if they were trophies. The anger was percolating in my veins, and I was doing my best to remain detached, yet cordial.

Her tone of voice changed. "Well, that certainly is unusual," she conceded.

Feeling the air turn slightly more amiable, I spun around on the stool as I labeled the tubes. Mrs. Blackly was dressed in a blue conservative business

suit with a white blouse. The lace of a camisole showed beneath. Her hair was pulled back tight with a neutral black clip in back, and her face was heavily made-up. The lines crawling from her eyes and the weathered look of her face made me think she was a smoker. She had her purse propped on her knee and was still digging.

"Honey, have you seen Mommy's cellular phone?"

"It's in the car, Mom. Right where you left it on the gear shifter."

"Oh." She stopped searching and returned to her stiff pose. "Come on, Honey, I'm going to take you over to Kim's for the day. Mom's got to go to work."

Jessie buttoned the sleeve on her yellow Oxford, hopped down from the chair, and officially presented her hand to me. I shook it and smiled.

"Thanks, Pat. You sure are good. I hope you get into college soon. Just be sure to listen this time."

I started to say something, but could only cock my head in a really stupid way to one side. That was weird, I thought. She really had listened to me.

Ms. Blackly gave a perfunctory smile and led her daughter out of the room with a small touch to the shoulder. She hesitated a moment as if she were going to say something to me but instead turned and left. I watched them walk down the now bustling hall—the likeness of mother and daughter humorously evident in their pigeon-toed gaits.

*... got another one just like her in the next room the paramedic says
looked like they were going somewhere nice the thought starts to register but the*

harsh staccato of the heart monitor flutters and lapses to a drone our hands work harder furious a hanging feeling in the air like a book about to fall from a shelf the once calm voices cry in frustration wrappers and spent supplies are tossed carelessly about a doctor throws a towel against the wall in anger i witness a draining a fading of red to pink to gray as the young spirit tries to overcome the damage to the body the tubes glow warm in my hand i squeeze tighter as if it might help but the voices eventually calm when nothing more can be done when the last page of the medical text book turns to reveal a black cover.

..

I had not expected that day or anything about it to remain with me.

During the second week of April, spring announced its arrival in full regal spread: azaleas lined the sidewalks in front; the small lawn of daffodils bloomed in the ICU courtyard; dogwoods bloomed in various white and pink splotches across the hospital grounds. Even the dead-looking oak tree by the front entrance sprouted its new found leaves and spread its pollen over everything. The hospital made a direct switch from heat to air conditioning in one day, and for me it only meant that I would be colder now. Mary Jane aptly referred to the lab as the meat locker because for some inexplicable reason, it stayed ten degrees cooler than any other place in the hospital, regardless of the thermostat reading.

I was about to go home one afternoon when Mary Jane called to me from across the lab. "Pat, I got something for you." She waved a piece of paper in the air and set it on the counter where all standing orders were placed.

When I looked and saw "Emergency Department" scrawled across the

top, I walked over to Mary Jane, shaking my head. "I don't do the E.R. Remember?"

"Come on, Pat, we're in the weeds, everyone's out on the floors, and there's no outpatients for you to stick right now," she said without turning around. She was pulling more orders off the computer.

"There *aren't* any outpatients," Willie Sanders corrected as he passed by.

"I could go home. That's what I could do," I suggested.

"Willie, you wouldn't know sand if you fell off a camel," she snapped. "Stop being all high and mighty and grammatically correct all the time."

"I was just kidding." Willie was a tall, articulate black guy who loved taunting anyone within taunting distance, and he and Mary Jane shared an especially acerbic relationship.

"Its all right, Willie, she's not thinking straight today," I said.

"I am thinking straight today, and I want you to get this run to the E.R."

"You know I'm bad luck over there," I said. "They always die when I show up."

"Please, Pat. I'll owe you big time if you just do me this one favor." She had switched tactics.

"Okay, I'll do it. For you, I'll do it. I just don't like to go over there, and you know that." I felt something shift in my tone mid-sentence.

"Pat, that was a long time ago," she said. "Besides, it might be good for you." By the timbre of her voice, I knew she had read the undertones perfectly. My defenses had dropped, revealing a long-standing wound: open and bleeding.

She faced me and looked me in the eye. "It won't kill you. How about I buy you a sandwich at McNeely's on Friday after work? We'll talk." Her words were quiet, and I knew they were meant only for me.

"Okay, deal," I said without thinking.

The Emergency Room was in its usual state of panic. The frenetic pace—doctors, nurses, technicians of every kind, running in random directions—enervated me. I didn't like coming here; it only reminded me of loss and pain, and I could feel the lost prayers welling in me as I recalled the litany of names—the people we did not save.

I checked the name board for Mr. Simpson and walked back to room nine. He was a pleasant old man who had once been a physics professor at Georgia Tech. He had thin arms and blood vessels so protrusive I could see his brachial pulse. His blood came easily, and I was in and out in four minutes. As I was leaving through a side door beside the lounge, I heard a voice from room four call my name. I stopped, leaned back into the doorway, and flushed in recognition. Jessie Blackly's fragile body lay concealed under a sheet, and her mother sat vigil in a plastic blue chair beside the stretcher.

"Remember me?" she asked, the familiar grin spreading across her face.

"Sure, how could I forget?" When I crossed the threshold of the door, the discomfort welled up in my stomach like a stony mass. I dropped the tubes of blood into the pocket of my lab coat. Miss Blackly sat, legs crossed, expressionless.

"Say, do you know what the word *prolific* means?"

"Jessie, don't bother this young man with all of your big words."

"I actually know this one," I said proudly. "It's used to describe a person who's done a lot in a short amount of time. A special person."

"I didn't know that," she said. She pretended to mull over the meaning of the word and then mustered her most erudite voice. "I never did find out about that other word, though." She was testing my memory

"Yeah, it was that one that started with E."

"Effervescent." She reached back behind her head, trying to reach something. "Mom, will you hand me my backpack?" Miss Blackly pulled a motley colored bag from behind the stretcher. I could see a half-amused look on her face, and I figured she was enjoying my discomfort. Jessie pulled a blue, leather-covered dictionary out and handed it to me.

"I got this for my birthday last month. It's from my Aunt Veronica."

"I like it. It's got a nice cover." I took a step toward Jessie, and I could feel Miss Blackly recross her legs as I did. It seemed to be a warning not to step closer. I was at the foot of the stretcher, and I set the book on the bed and turned to the E's. I could feel my fingers shaking. Miss Blackly's sterile appraisal seemed to be burning through my back, and I felt like turning around and screaming, "What?!" I eventually found the definition and passed Jessie the book, trying not to appear uncomfortable. Jessie laughed when she saw "bubbly" as one of the definitions. She said it reminded her of the times she used to blow bubbles and watch her dog try to eat them as they fell to the ground. For the first time since I had walked into the room, I smiled. And it was the most superficial smile I had ever smiled; I felt like I had a plastic face.

"Mom, do you think that Dr. Fowler was right about me being

effervescent?”

“I would say so,” she replied.

“Mom, I want some juice now. It’s been three hours, like Dr. Fowler said.”

“I’ll check with the nurse,” Miss Blackly replied. She stood and straightened the tips of her vest and gave a quick brush to her business skirt. I acted like I was leaving, too, and followed her out.

“Pat?” Jessie called. Miss Blackly kept walking. “Pat, if I need to have any blood drawn, will you come and do it?”

“Sure,” I said. “But I don’t like the Emergency Room much.”

“Why? You work in a hospital. You have to like the E.R.” She said *E.R.* like she had been in one many times—smooth and without a hitch in the jargon.

“No, I really don’t like the sight of blood.”

“But you . . .” She didn’t finish, and a baffled look came over her face.

“Jessie, I’m just kidding.” I held up Mr. Simpson’s tubes of blood and gave a good Dracula laugh.

“Pat Carter, I do not understand you. You’re a nice guy, but you have a weird sense of humor, and you don’t smile much for wanting to be so funny.”

“As to the compliment, I accept it gratefully. As to this blood, it’s clotting, which means I’m going to be in big trouble if I don’t get back.”

“My mom likes you, you know.”

“No, Jessie, your mother thinks I’m a moron.” I bent over and picked up my lab tray.

"No, she thinks you care a lot about your job."

"Dr. Fowler was right. You are effervescent." I was reaching for that good, clean cut-off, an easy exit. I winked at her and turned to go. "Oh, tell your mom thanks."

"I'm going to find a word to describe you, Pat. For such a nice guy, you really should smile more."

Jessie was admitted to the hospital because she had not eaten in three days and had collapsed at school as she was walking back from recess. She was admitted for two days, pumped full of fluids, and sent home. It turned out that she did need blood drawn, and I was personally requested to do the job. Mary Jane had groaned when the call came from a nurse on 6 Center. "Oh, please. What is the world coming to? Oh Romeo," she called, "Wherefore art thou Romeo?"

Willie Sanders happened to be dropping off some blood in Chemistry and smirked. "Mary Jane, *wherefore* is the old word for *why*, not *where*."

"Shut-up, Willie. Just shut-up. No one likes a smart-ass."

He pretended to cower in fear. "Hark, fair Juliet speaks," he said with a mocking shiver in his voice.

"Pat," she called, "Why is some eleven-year-old girl on six requesting you for a CBC and a Prothrombin? This isn't some five-star restaurant like *The Coach and Six* where you just walk in and say, 'I'll have him for my waiter.'"

"It must be my inimitable charm," I replied as dryly as I could.

"Willie, stop teaching Pat all these big words. He's getting a big head."

"Yeah, the world's only phlebotomist with a polysyllabic vocabulary," he

quickly replied. Allegiances suddenly had shifted.

“Speaking of polysyllabic,” I said bending over, “you both can kiss my effervescent ass.” She tried to kick me there, but I moved. Willie started to tell me I had incorrectly used the word, but I left.

Mary Jane graciously covered the in-patient load while I went to the sixth floor to see Jessie. Once again I got her blood with a butterfly needle on the first try, and even though her mother didn’t say anything, I could tell by her raised eyebrows and deliberate stare out the window that she was impressed.

Before returning downstairs to the lab, I stopped by the nurse’s station. A young nurse named Missy was taking care of Jessie, and I asked her how Jessie was doing.

“Fine,” she muttered in passing. I could tell she was trying to look busy just so she could appear upset that I had bothered her.

“What about long term prognosis?”

She stopped and turned around, facing me. Her look clearly asked, “What’s it to you?”

“Oh, I’m a friend of the family,” I said, as if I had just remembered the password.

Her face grew sad in a falsely conciliatory way, and she shook her head.

“Translation?” I asked.

She walked over to the desk, picked up Jessie’s chart. “Come here,” she snapped.

I looked where her manicured red fingernail pointed. Typed in neat black letters were the words “Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia.”

“What does Fowler say?”

“He said if this episode doesn’t get her, the next one will. She was in remission until this winter.” Her voice was a whisper, and it made the hair on my neck stand up.

“Jesus.” My face flushed with hot blood and adrenaline.

... all is still i watch her no breath no heart beat and i watch the stresslines go out of her face out of dignity i cover her body and wonder silently when the spirit goes back to GOD the voices resign several go next door to help but the emergency quiets and i think it has come to a similar end i am motionless as death all becomes a memory now as a nurse flips the heart monitor off and the flatline flashes to a bead that fades like a flash in the eye my job to sweep the remnants of our work into small piles plasticpaperneedles don't look at her face plasticpaperneedles don't look at her face so pretty i wonder if we would have been friends but loss is the only thought a trickle of blood from her forehead slips down her face onto her neck like a tear i wipe it the skin feels like the cheek of an infant warm not even cool yet ... HAIL MARY FULL OF GRACE THE LORD IS WITH THEE ...

Summer came like a whisper. The temperature increased almost imperceptibly throughout June, and by the end of the month, I was driving home in high nineties in the early afternoon. Jessie came into the lab every three weeks. Dr. Fowler’s nurses started having her come to me first for her lab work because Miss Blackly had refused to let anyone in Dr. Fowler’s office stick her. I had seen her three times since she was last in the hospital.

Knowing she was dying awakened the black shadow of an old memory. It chipped away at my emotions like an ice pick, and I struggled to keep my distance. Jessie's face reminded me of Heather's, and I used humor to lace the pain inside. But when you work in a hospital, your emotions rule your well-being. It makes you walk a line of joy so great you could weep and pain so visceral it takes the breath clean from your lungs. With Jessie, I loved her innocence, admired her unconventional attitude on life; but because I liked her so damn much, her impending surrender to cancer made me feel like I was dying, too. Emotionally, I never knew when she would throw me in the opposite direction: from happiness to grief, from misery to delight. I lived within this spectrum between the two, bumping back and forth. Some days I would see her and never want her to leave. I had so much to tell her, and she liked my rambling soliloquies on life. But some days I couldn't wait for her to go. I would listen to her problems, her life, and it was overwhelming to think she would not live to see her twelfth birthday. I told myself I did my job better by not getting too attached, and I played the part of the distant friend, aloof yet concerned. I liked this role, this defense mechanism; it suggested depth and experience: someone who has been hurt before but has learned to accept it with a cold, mysterious detachment. In my wild mood swings, though, I discovered the paradox that exists for every person working in the medical profession: you detach yourself in order to care—so as not to care too much. And I played this role well with one exception; I was getting attached anyway.

It had taken until the third of July for Mary Jane to make good on her promise to me to buy me dinner at McNeeley's. We had walked over to the

cafe after our shift on Friday; I had to do a twelve hour shift, but since it was a holiday weekend, I didn't mind. Time and a half and the thought of my next paycheck had made it pass quickly. City workers were setting up a water station for the Peachtree Road Race which would be run in the morning for the twenty-fifth year in a row. It was the most popular 10K race in the world, with over 40,000 runners.

"Are you going to run this year?" I asked.

"Huh," she said, walking ahead. "I'd rather sandpaper a tiger's butt in a phone booth."

I caught up with her quick pace. "I thought you ran all the time."

"I do, but three's a crowd if you ask me, much less forty-thousand."

We walked up the stairs and took a seat on the balcony outside and watched the traffic hum by on Peachtree Street. A small breeze whispered against my cheek, and I turned my face into it. Mary Jane pushed her hair back over her ears and smiled at me.

"It took me long enough, but I'm good on all my promises," she said, leaning back in her chair, enjoying the dying light of the day.

"I thought you were just trying to schmooze me into going to the E.R. After all, you have no real reason for wanting to be seen with me."

"Why, because you're eighteen, and I'm twenty-four?"

"Well—"

"Well, nothing. I'd be pretty shallow if some arbitrary number were the basis for who I was seen with. Besides, it's no secret—everyone knows you have a crush on me."

I opened my mouth to protest, and she laughed. "You should have never admitted it to Willie. You'd do better just to post it in the main lobby."

My cheeks flushed, and I suddenly didn't know what to do with my hands, so I ran one through my hair and the other down my face. I struggled for something to say, something to break the silence. "I've been betrayed."

"No, just discovered. Don't be embarrassed. I'm actually flattered, although I don't know exactly why you'd want to be seen with me. I'm just an old grouch most of the time."

"Well," I finally spoke, "at the risk of sounding like an after-school special, you were there for me once when I needed it."

"Yeah, I would have been messed up over that. You needed someone." She rearranged the silverware in front of her. "And I would be there for you again."

"Thanks."

"You seem to have taken it all pretty well."

"I guess. I still wish I had been in that damn room."

"You would have been useless, Pat." She said it like cold fact.

I adjusted nervously in my chair. "I just wish I could have been there . . . to hold her hand. I never held her hand," I said as an afterthought.

"I told you then, and I'll tell you now, you cannot go through life beating yourself up over this. I really believe these things happen for a reason. You can't explain why they happen, they just happen. It's fate or something."

"Yeah, fate, the argument that can explain anything."

Neither of us spoke for a minute. A girl with six earrings in one ear took

our drink order—a Miller light for Mary Jane, Pepsi for me. After she left, Mary Jane reached across and squeezed my hand. It felt as soft as new silk. “I think you’re an amazing person, Pat.”

“And I think you’re beautiful,” I said as honestly as I could, hoping it might change the subject and make her laugh again.

“I don’t think I could have walked in that room and did what you did. I would have died right there along with her.”

I nodded and looked into her eyes. “Part of me did.”

. . . pretty isn't she a voice says from the door she enters and the door thuds shut i unfold the trash bag and begin picking up the plastic wrappers needle caps ekg pads plastic molds for catheters iv's a purple topped blood tube her bloody yellow blouse brassiere underneath a pair of Keds once white but now dried a brownish copper (these i save for the family) and i feel how incongruous my thoughts are random and personal and private i am holding the intimate passwords of a life a beautiful girl with a family who loves her i look again at her face and finally the peace is evident the powdery white image burns itself on the backs of my eyes and i am quite sure this will never get easier the nurse leaves to tend to the next emergency the next story i pick up my bag and continue cleaning the floor there by the back brake of the stretcher is a small gold chain with half of a best friends pendant attached i pick it up and learn the truth

her name is SHERRI

her best friend is . . . and recognition sets in like fear got another in the next room just like her the words say again the voices of her parents desperate in the

hall confirms what the pit of my stomach knows is true HAIL MARY FULL OF GRACE . . .

Jessie started rounds of chemotherapy the second week of July, and she was admitted to the hospital soon after. A typed letter on official letterhead was waiting for me one morning from her mother requesting that I be the one to draw Jessie's blood every morning. Monique ran the morning routes on Jessie's floor, and was quite able to draw her, so I crumpled the letter and threw it in the trash. She didn't need me, and it was ridiculous for her mother to make such a demanding request—like I could just quit right in the middle of getting all the day's lab work out and draw her blood and take it back to the lab and then finally get back to the charts.

It was Wednesday. I had gone to the snack bar for my daily breakfast. I enjoyed this part of my day because I liked to watch people, and I could see everyone who walked by from this vantage point. In the basement of the hospital, a different world lived. Walking through these halls was like looking into the gears of a well-worn machine. The hospital ran well because the people in the basement made it. Dietary, Laundry, Central Service, Housekeeping, Storeroom, Receiving, and Pharmacy all operated out of the basement, and the people who worked in these departments were some of the kindest, most trustworthy people I knew. "You not one of them snobbies who work upstairs," Gerald from Central Service often told me. "Refusing to talk to us like we some kind of virus." These people were the life-blood of the hospital, and I liked every one of them.

I waved to the Laundry supervisor, and then a few minutes later, I saw Miss Blackly emerge from the snack bar. She had a doughnut and a cup of coffee in her hand. I started to pretend like I didn't see her, but she looked directly at me, so I waved to her and motioned her over.

"Hi, Miss Blackly," I said.

"Hi, Pat," she said, and it sounded remarkably informal.

"What brings you down here at this time of day?" I asked. She was dressed in her usual attorney clothes, and I figured she was on her way to work.

She looked at her watch. "I'm just checking in on Jessie." She took a sip of her coffee, and I watched her attention and detail in this simple activity. Every movement of hers looked like it was the result of careful evaluation and rehearsal—like she had tried it a hundred different ways before settling on this one. She took a knife and fork and cut a small bite from her doughnut.

"How is she? I haven't seen her since the last time you were in for labwork."

"She's fine," she replied rather abruptly. "Haven't seen you around, though." I could feel the heat of an intrusive stare.

I stared down at my Cheerios and tried to think of something clever to say. "You know the lab. They keep us busier than termites in a pencil factory up there." I had heard Mary Jane use the phrase before and had always thought it was a stupid phrase. But here I was saying it and shifting in my seat like a guilty first-grader in the principal's office.

"Yeah, well, I had my secretary draft a letter asking that you be the one to take her blood every morning. The person they send doesn't seem like she's

too comfortable with a needle.”

“Monique is quite good, actually,” I said. “She’s especially good with oncology patients, you know, ones with hard veins.” I knew that proficiency and talent were important to Miss Blackly, and I thought this would mollify her. I was suddenly filled with the thought that she was probably an exceptional lawyer. I saw where Jessie got her uncanny perceptiveness.

“You’re better,” she said matter-of-factly and took another calculated sip of her coffee.

I stood and put my styrofoam bowl in the trash can beside our booth. I knew I should have said thank you or something, but I needed a way out—I knew what was coming next: an interrogation about her request. “I need to be getting back. Tell Jessie I said hello, okay?” I put on my lab coat and grabbed my beeper off the table.

“I’ll tell her I saw you. You can tell her hello when you see her.” She cut another bite off her doughnut and didn’t even look up as I left.

I had avoided trying to infer anything about Jessie’s condition from her mother’s appearance, but by the circles under Miss Blackly’s eyes and the strangeness in her tone, I knew things couldn’t be well. When I got back to the lab, I checked the computer and saw that Jessie had been moved to the intensive care unit overnight. The conflict swirled in eddies behind each temple, and I knew I had to face her. But the questions kept coming at me in rapid fire: What would I say? How would she look? How would she act? You stupid idiot, I thought. What about *her*? my mind seemed to scream at me. Didn’t she have feelings? Didn’t she feel alone? This isn’t about you, I told myself.

A few minutes later, Mary Jane walked up to me in the hall outside her office, pretending to read a badly wrinkled letter. She turned it around so I could see it. When the recognition crossed my face, she crumpled it up again.

"Where did you—"

"There's a patient over in ICU Blue who needs a PT, PTT and CBC. Monique forgot it this morning, and Dr. Fowler just called. Do you think you could get it for me?"

I knew what she was doing. How did she ever find the note? I wondered. "No, I've got major heart surgery scheduled in ten minutes."

"Pat, come on, I'm being serious. I know how you feel about this girl. I've watched you with her when she's been in here."

"Just quit it, Mary Jane," I said, my voice betraying a shard of anger. "Monique got her this morning, and I'm sure that—"

"Just go," she said. "I'll take care of the outpatients in here."

"Really," I stammered. "You don't need to help me. I know what I'm doing."

She leaned forward like she was going to kiss me on the cheek. "Here's your chance, Pat. Here's the chance to be there." I didn't understand what she meant. Everything in the whole conversation felt double-sided, and I was on the wrong side.

"Go to her," she said close to my ear. "Don't miss this chance. You missed it once before—"

"Mary Jane—"

She straightened up, and the familiar indignation she usually reserved

for doctors crossed her face. "Go to the goddamn ICU, Pat. It's not a request." She threw the note in the trash and walked off. "You *never* get the point, do you?" she said to the ceiling.

I angrily grabbed my tray and left.

. . . the room is dark like a sanctuary i walk inside quietly as if i might wake her i do not want to look but i have to i keep telling myself no she said she wasn't feeling well she might not go she might stay home tonight this isn't her it's someone else a singular light shines against the wall DOA i hear one of the doctors say tried a transfusion and CPR but the head wounds were just too massive massive the sheet is red where her face is i walk over and stand quietly beside the stretcher and my heartbeat sounds like the ocean through a shell i start to pull it back but i know everything already a hand reaches around me her touch is gentle and strong blood and death are rich in the air but fade with the mild scent of sweet perfume crawling up her wrist don't look the voice whispers warmly in my ear i turn she leads me out of the room she is crying holding me walking me we go to the oak tree and sit for what seems like hours minutes i don't know except that i wasn't there where was i WHERE WAS I?

My footsteps echoed down the corridor of the unit. When I entered, the rooms spread out and around like a flower from a stem. I scanned the circular unit for her name. I recognized the room first. It was the one with cards taped to every spare inch of glass on the door and window. Inside was a virtual

botanical garden of flowers and multi-colored balloons. I pretended like I was on official business and walked casually into the room without knocking.

I had been expecting the worst: plastic tubes, wires, respirators, a lifeless mass beneath it all, struggling for each breath. I saw it nearly every day. However, what greeted my eyes was the last thing I could have possibly predicted.

Jessie sat on the edge of the bed, her hospital gown pulled down into her lap, her hands cupping her plum-sized breasts. She looked down at them as if they didn't belong to her. I heard her say "Amazing" before the sound of the door startled her, and she jerked her gown up.

"I can come back," I said, pretending I had seen nothing.

She blushed. "No, come in, Pat. I was just . . . thinking."

"Yeah, kind of amazing when they come in," I said. I casually nodded at her chest. "My sister was the same way." She had lost more weight. Her ribs were visible even through the gown as she lay back in bed, and it was hard to believe she had enough fat on her body to have breasts. She was wearing a Mickey Mouse handkerchief around her head, and above her ears I could see enough to know that she had lost her hair. I set my tray on the bedside table and pulled a chair up to the bed. Her cheeks were still flushed, and she avoided my gaze.

An electronic I.V. machine called an IMED growled beside me on its tall pole as it pumped fluid into her arms. Another one stood like a sentry on the other side. Both of her arms were the color of apples which have stayed out on the counter too long. The bruises covered the insides of each arm from elbow to

wrist. I forced a smile, trying not to look at her tracked arms. She did not smile back.

"You really have a lot of admirers," I said, looking at the flowers and balloons covering the room. I tried not to let my voice shake.

"Mostly my mom's friends. But my class sent me balloons and flowers." She pointed to a Garfield balloon in the corner.

"You must have many friends."

"You're nervous," she said. "You didn't want to come see me, did you?"

"What are you talking about? Of course I wanted to see you."

"My mom said she saw you yesterday."

"Did she tell you I would be by?"

"She said you were avoiding me. She said that I shouldn't get my hopes up."

"Well, I'm here now."

She looked out the window into a small courtyard which had a flock of daffodils tossing their blond heads in the breeze. "Those are daffodils. They are actually a type of narcissus. Did you know that?"

"No, I didn't."

"Mom says a guy whose name starts with W wrote poems about them."

"How did you learn so much in eleven years? You know ten times more stuff about things than I do."

"I don't know about drawing blood," she answered. She pointed at her brownish-purple arm.

"But you're one of the most observant people I've ever met."

"I'm sick, Pat. I notice everything." The floodtide of emotion attached to such a statement startled me. Suddenly, I imagined the world through her eyes, and it was frightening. Out of reaction, like Mary Jane was always doing, I took her hand.

"You're going to be fine."

"You don't like me, do you?" she said, changing the subject again, looking accusingly at me. She withdrew her hand.

"Jessie, I think you're—"

"You don't like me because I have this awful disease. You think I'm different."

"I don't think—"

"Well, I'm not, damn it," and her voice broke, a tear slipping down her face. She wiped it away. "I was the fastest girl in my class last year, and I could throw a softball farther than half the guys in the fifth grade." She turned to me and gazed into my eyes with a deep brown stare, waiting for my response. Her brown eyes were glossed over in defiance and expectation.

"I like you," I said. I didn't know what else to say. Sometimes when you strip yourself of every pretense, all that is left is the truth.

She didn't reply. I breathed deep, let it out. "I had a friend who was killed in a car accident."

"What was her name?" she said after the statement had sunk in.

"Heather," I said. The word felt like a soft breeze.

"That's a pretty name. Were you close to her?"

I nodded. "Very." And I told her the story of how I had found the

pendant on the floor in Sherri Maxwell's room and how Heather had been next door. For the first time since it happened, I told the entire story, and I told it without emotion or sentimentality. It was an eyewitness account, the only way I could say it without my soul breaking in half.

"How did you know Heather was next door?"

"I knew she had a best friend named Sherri. When I saw Heather's parents in the hallway, I knew it was her."

"What did you do when you saw Heather in that room?"

"I never did. A good friend took me out of there. She knew it was bad and wouldn't let me see her. It would have been too painful. Her skull was crushed."

"Have you ever cried over Heather?" she asked, and I could tell this question was trying to find out what kind of person I was, not whether I cried often.

"No, not really," I said, staring at the floor. "That probably sounds bad." I felt laid open like a split piece of fruit, and at that moment, I would have told her anything.

"No, but now I understand why you always look so sad." She picked up a *Seventeen* magazine and began flipping aimlessly through it. "Will you cry when I die?" she finally said.

I thought long before I answered. I couldn't pretend like she was talking nonsense. "Yes, Jessie, I probably will. I think I am really going to miss you."

"But you haven't even been to visit me. How can you say that?"

"I was afraid, Jessie. We're taught not to get attached to the patients,

but I got attached to you. I'm afraid how much it will hurt if you die. I'll have to grieve all over again."

"I'm afraid, Pat," she said, her voice breaking on my name.

"Me too." I leaned forward, put my chin in my hands, and looked at a small needle sheath on the floor. I couldn't watch her cry. She held it in, fighting it, and silence settled once again over the room.

Suddenly, she reached over and pulled a picture out of her bookbag which was sitting on a chair on the opposite side of the bed. She wiped her eyes and took a deep breath. "See this? This is my school picture from last year. I have long hair."

I composed myself and took the picture. "You look beautiful. Like a real lady."

"Do you think so?"

"You look like your mother, professional and everything."

"Thanks," and she smiled. I smiled back.

"You have teeth! I can actually see them," she said.

"Jessie, you are a special person, you really are," I said. I stood up to go, leaned down and kissed her gently on the cheek. She smelled sweet and clean like baby powder.

She pulled out her dictionary and began flipping through the pages furiously.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm looking up that word *special*. I want to see what the dictionary has to say about it."

Everyone knew what the word meant, I thought, but I saw the excitement in her eyes as she scanned the pages. She found it quickly, announced the page and showed me: the word meant exceptional, esteemed, and distinct among other things. Jessie really liked the definition. She leaned back in the bed and laughed aloud. Her face looked like an angel who has just gotten the good news about her wings. I put the picture in her dictionary as a book mark and left because that was how I wanted to remember this moment.

One week later, on a Wednesday morning, Jessie's mother paged me to the unit. When I walked through the doors of Jessie's room, her only words were, "It's time," and I nodded and asked no questions. I sat in a chair she had already pulled to the far side of the bed for me. We each took one of her hands, hard tears streaming down our faces, and I listened to the silence in that room. It was like the silence of a rare Atlanta snowfall, an uncharacteristic, muffled noise from far off, yet something beautiful and peaceful about it. I swear I could feel Jessie's heartbeat in synchronicity with mine. We were there for an hour, and then, at fourteen minutes after ten, as if by instinct, Miss Blackly leaned over her daughter and kissed her softly on the cheek. In that minute of time and silence, Jessie died, our hands on her pulse, the beat slowing, fading into the quiet, into the mystical. The tears came easily now, and I wept.

Every day I try to take time to think. It is usually during breakfast as I people-watch, or on my rides to and from work, but I realized early on that I need solitude at points in the day so that I can turn inward, be with myself. It

is a re-grouping, a preparation, a healing, and I cherish these times more than anything.

In the month after Jessie died, I did a lot of thinking about her. At first the thoughts were angry. She would never finish growing up, never go to prom, never know what it would be like to graduate or drive a car. But I knew better. I knew that she had done more in eleven years than most had done in forty. And because of her, I found myself, slowly at first, beginning to live with purpose—my days had a deliberateness about them, my words import. I started jogging with Mary Jane on weekends, I talked more, I laughed out loud more, I knew how it felt to wake up and be ecstatic about sun shining through the window, flowers in the ground. I even coaxed Mary Jane out of the lab one afternoon at shift change and showed her the pansies growing in the courtyard between ICU units. “Why are you showing me these?” she asked. “I’ve seen them before.”

“In the spring, daffodils bloom in this courtyard. They’re part of the narcissus family. Did you know that?”

“No, Pat. I didn’t. Why are we here?”

I leaned over and kissed her on the lips. “I don’t know. I just thought they were nice,” I replied.

“Pat Carter, your monorail doesn’t go all the way to Disneyworld, does it? You just kissed me.”

“Yeah, I think that’s what they call it.”

“I’ve slapped men for less, you weasel.” She turned back to the window and the panorama of yellow flowers and purple flowers. After an awkward

moment, she smiled, the anger lessening. "I don't get you sometimes. Just when I think I've seen it all, you go and turn everything around on me. Not a bad kiss though . . . for a teenager."

She nudged me, and we kept staring at the flowers. And I felt a surge of happiness spill into my veins. I'm not sure if it was the kiss, or if it was the touch of Mary Jane's hand as she reached for mine, or if it was because I was finally beginning to understand the connection between things: life and death, joy and grief, beginnings and ends. Sometimes, in affairs of the heart, complete understanding isn't necessary—only complete faith.

One quiet afternoon in September, I was sitting at the outpatient desk, reading the latest *Reader's Digest*, when Miss Blackly appeared at the window.

She had approached quietly, and tapped on the counter with her fingers so as not to startle me. "Hello, Pat," she said softly.

I looked up. It took a moment to register her face. It had no make-up and was drawn. She had lost weight I could tell.

"Miss Blackly," I said. "I—how are you? What can I do for you?"

"Will you come out here, please? I'd like to speak with you."

I walked around into the waiting area, and I got my first full view of her in casual clothes. She had on a pair of cut-off jeans and a loose-fitting t-shirt which hung over her gaunt shoulders.

"I feel naked without shoulder pads and heels," she said, laughing. It quickly turned into tears, and I reached inside the lab window and grabbed a box of tissues.

"I feel naked without clothes," I said. It was stupid, but I couldn't think of anything else to say.

It made her laugh again for a moment. "Don't start with me," she said, pointing her finger at me. "You know how I feel about your jokes."

"Yes, you think I should stick to poking people with long needles."

"I came here because I just felt I needed to thank you for everything you did for Jessie. She loved you, Pat. She really did. I should have come sooner, but I just can't seem to get my life together these days." It was the first time she had ever spoken my name.

"I know. You need time."

"Your being there for her meant a lot to me. I was hard on you, and I just want you to know that it was only because I wanted the best for her. You cared more for her than any man in her life ever had."

I nodded. Her words were like fractures to my heart; I wanted to reach out to her so badly. But I couldn't. Something about her would always be about barriers. "Miss Blackly, don't apologize for anything."

"No, I need to. You didn't have to care about Jessie, but you did anyway. I—I appreciate that."

"I miss her. She helped me to see . . . she helped me to see a lot of things," I said barely above a whisper. I didn't mention Heather.

"I'm leaving Atlanta. Jessie's father lives in Baltimore. *He's* helped me get in a small law firm there." She referred to him like he were some pariah, some embarrassment in her past. She sniffed and balled the tissue in her hand. I focused on a small emerald ring on her index finger. The ring was

turned to the side and looked a size too big. I wondered if “he” had given it to her.

Finally, I stood and offered my hand. Instead of shaking it, she put an envelope in it. “I found this in Jessie’s dictionary, and I forgot that she had asked me to give it to you. Thank you, Pat. I’ll never forget what you did for us.” She turned and walked out of my life before I could even reply. She had not looked at me during the entire conversation.

I walked out to the bench under the oak tree that sat by the hospital’s front entrance. The sun winked through the branches, and a soft wind ruffled the leaves above my head in a hint of a coming autumn. The air felt chilly for September, and I thought how nine months previous, I had walked down this same sidewalk, a fresh blanket of powder grinding under my feet, an old memory in my brain. I sat down and took a deep breath of the late summer air as a small cardinal chattered above me.

Inside the envelope I found Jessie’s school picture that she had shown me that day in her room. On the back, written in green crayon in Jessie’s noodle-like handwriting, was the word that Jessie had found to describe me. I waited for some surge of emotion to overwhelm me—happiness, grief, something—but it did not surface. Instead a contentment filled up in my stomach, a peacefulness that I could not explain. I thought of Mary Jane’s words, the same ones that were constantly used to justify unfair death. “These things happen for a reason. You can’t explain why they happen, they just happen.” The meaning behind Heather and Jessie’s death lay only in the peace I was feeling. In this moment, I didn’t want to know any more than that.

I breathed the cool air, listened to the song of the cardinal above me, and felt the memories of my friends—like the cold air after that fresh Atlanta snow, full and mysterious, my history.

The word was *special*.