


TRANSITIONS

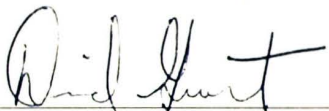
DAVID R. PIKE

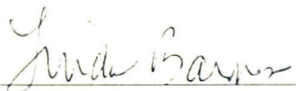
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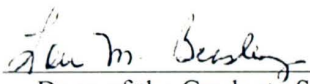

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Transitions

A Thesis

Presented for the

Master of Arts

Degree

Austin Peay State University

David R. Pike

May 2003

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Roger and Elaine Pike.
My appreciation for the world and the kindness I aspire to show every day
would not be possible without their patience, support, and endless love.

ABSTRACT

Transitions is a collection of first-person short stories, one fiction and five nonfiction. Each story focuses on a point in the narrator's life when his perception of a relationship is transformed. The bonds built between people can be fragile and these short stories comment on the realization that the link between two people can be shattered from the most minor of pressure or built stronger through communication and an appreciation of the human condition. Throughout, the narrator of the stories explores not just his place in his world, but his place in the world of others.

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The Demise of Arrowette

My fingers edged down the slender, red, hunting bow leaned against my house. I plucked the taut string a few times, feeling the texture of the twined, nylon threads. It reverberated against my skin and hummed like an insect in the night. Sitting on a five-gallon bucket, I watched my cousin Brian tear an old t-shirt into ten, long, thin strips. I was twelve and though Brian was a year younger, he was six inches taller and his shadow towered over me.

“Are you sure this will work?” I whispered.

“Why wouldn’t it?” he said. Picking up a small plastic container filled with kerosene, Brian slid a piece through the brown liquid until it disappeared into the marinade.

“What if we wake my parents up?”

“We aren’t going to. They’ve been asleep for hours.” He held out his hand. I uncapped our homemade quiver, concocted of a mailing tube and a length of phone cord hot-glued to both ends, and pulled out the first arrow. The slender shaft smoothly slid along my skin until the plastic imitation feathers rustled on my palm. Brian laid the arrow across his lap before removing the soaked strip of cotton. He wound it around the arrow’s head, looping it over and under, back and forth, finally tying it into a neat knot.

“I don’t think this is such a good idea.”

“It was your idea,” Brian said, taking another arrow from me, coating the tip in the same manner.

I couldn’t deny it. The idea was mine in all of its genius. Glorious comic books showed me the way, like a lighthouse shining its brilliance across the black ocean of

boredom known as childhood. My door of reality slammed shut when the cover of an *Action Comics* or *Amazing Spider-Man* opened. I felt love and jealousy turning every page, savoring the exaggerated world where millionaires dressed as giant bats swung from rooftop to rooftop. Bill Gates might wish he were so lucky. In *their world*, radioactivity didn't give you cancer. It gave you power to turn into a giant green behemoth, strong enough to move mountains, but it left you destined to forever speak confusing grammar. *Me am Hulk. Me will smash. Me look like giant watermelon on steroids.*

Comic books taught me a lot about the world. I learned good guys didn't hit women. It was a lesson I could have learned from my father, if only it wasn't so much more realistic coming from an alien who disguised himself with a pair of non-prescription eyeglasses and changed clothes in a phone booth. Yes, even if they hit you first. But, in the comic book world, who could blame women if they slapped you around every now and then? Wives and girlfriends were bound to jump to conclusions. *Yes honey. I know I was out all night (fighting Catwoman). I don't know how those claw marks got down my back.* I also learned you helped other people if they needed and deserved it, no matter their race, sex or religion. Most heroes helped if you didn't deserve it, but I learned to set boundaries. I paced myself when doing good deeds, keeping it from growing tedious.

These books gave me dreams to chase, hopes to pursue and the ability to wish for a better life even if it never came. The point of hope is to strive for something unattainable. I will never scale the Empire State Building in red and blue pajamas, but I dreamed it was possible. Who wouldn't rather soar through clouds faster than a speeding bullet instead of leaping over people in the unemployment line in a single bound? Not only did comic books teach me these fine lessons, but also how a flaming arrow was one kick-ass toy. We derived

inspiration from Green Arrow, a rich playboy dressed like Robin Hood, who used a similar arrow to light his way in the dark, set off bombs and fight your average water-based villains. He had other trick arrows as well. The fastest villain in the world couldn't outrace the *Muhammad Ali-oop arrow*. We looked, but couldn't find a boxing glove to hook on the end of a shaft for long-range. In the end, the idea was left in the blueprint stage of my mind. Probably best. We would have shot each other, testing the effectiveness, and nothing good could have come of the experiment. Besides, I didn't think it would have fit in the quiver.

Brian wasn't the superhero spectator I was. While my mind watched men swing between buildings on man-made webs, Brian's thoughts were planted firmly on the ground. Since his reality was far worse than mine, I thought he would share my appreciation of Superman saving Lois Lane from another Lex Luthor world domination scheme. Brian never shared my escape. His parents fought considerably more than mine, and not over petty problems like who put the toilet paper on the dispenser backwards. Issues in his house centered on rent money lost gambling, drunken brawls and a father absent for days at a time. If anyone needed dreams, hopes, a sense reality could change, it was Brian, but reality had a strangle hold on his childhood he couldn't break. This small diversion into a realm of larger-than-life heroes was my doing, my ambition to share part of my fantasy with him, but he couldn't see it the way I did. For me, it was a chance to stand tall, if only for a moment, like Green Arrow, the emerald archer, a force of freedom and a battler of evil. To smirk at all evil-doers and their petty desires. To become a beacon of what's right in this world, of what you can be if you try hard enough. For a moment, I was no longer the twelve-year old who would look like a fat Vienna sausage wrapped in green cellophane if I had obtained the

required spandex costume to go with the weapon. For Brian, it was just a chance to shoot a flaming arrow into the sky.

The idea we perfected contained a minor margin of acceptable risk. At least, as much to be expected from a sharp projectile with a flammable piece of fabric tied and ignited on its end. I was also breaking my own private oath that I would never again place a bow and arrow in Brian's hands. Two years before, if you had asked me if having a few layers of skin grazed off my neck would have been excruciatingly painful, I would have winced and replied yes. However, Brian did not leave the question to my imagination while playing shoot-the-abandoned-car-tire. The pain wasn't all that bad, but I can at least tell my children some day to not shoot arrows at their cousins. Hindsight is not only twenty/twenty, it comes in many forms, such as the gouge created in my neck by a whizzing arrow gone awry. I like thinking that most decisions are made on logic alone but human thought doesn't work that way. We need proof. We need our sense of sight to validate it. Although he *accidentally* shot me, the bow still remained in our possession. I guess even my parents had issues with seeing potential danger even after such an incident. Watching Brian work with the kerosene and arrows, my eyes fluttered with anticipation, all past transgression forgiven and forgotten.

The process of coating the arrows lasted until all were treated. My neck ached, not just from the long since healed wound reminding me of Brian's bad aim, but also from looking over my shoulder, peering into the kitchen window, through the dark house and at the closed door of my parents' room. Taking the arrows from Brian, I worked them back into the quiver. They fit tighter this time due to the added bulkiness. In the light of the moon, I watched a small wet spot at the bottom of the cardboard tube, about the size of a quarter, grow wider and wider, spreading across the quiver.

“It’ll be fine. We’re not going that far,” he said.

We stood from our buckets, Brian slinging the bow over his shoulder and me slinging the quiver across mine. We walked across the back yard to the distant tree line and climbed the fence just beyond the trees, vaulting into the field on the other side. Superheroes operate from the rooftops of skyscrapers, but in Springfield, like most small southern towns, the tallest building was no higher than three stories. And to my dismay, most of those didn’t have fire escapes like buildings in movies. I would have to take Sherwood Forest over Gotham City. My house was small in the distance, and the smell of kerosene seeping through the cardboard intoxicated my senses with flammable glee. Brian reached for the quiver and tugged one of the arrows until it freed from the others. The head made a sloppy wet popping noise as it moved past the plastic feathers of the others.

“You go first.” Brian pushed the bow and the freshly soaked arrow at me.

“You can go.” I pushed them back.

“Come on. It was your idea,” he said, holding them at arm’s length.

A moment of silence passed between us. My thoughts were a jumble of voices, none of them persuasively professing the benefits of safety. Most just repeated how great an idea it was, how it was my right as the inventor to go first, to take the bow and be Green Arrow.

“Okay, but you light it for me,” I said, thinking that Green Arrow never needed his ward, dressed in spandex, walking around behind him, igniting arrows at his request. *Hydro-man is getting away. Quick Speedy, my Zippo lighter of Justice. And make haste.* With both of our hands soaked in kerosene, I wasn’t sure if I had made the right decision. If Brian ended up gauze-wrapped in a cold hospital bed with first-degree burns, I would be left with the responsibility of explaining what happened. Decisions, decisions.

I notched the arrow and guided the string slowly back. Slowly, not due to the difficulty, but because I wanted to savor the gliding of the shaft along the bow's grip where the arrow would rest. This wasn't a wimpy compound bow, with special pulleys and physics to make up for the shooter's inadequacies. This was the real deal, the kind of bow Robin Hood carried through Sherwood Forest and used to free Maid Marian from the clutches of the dastardly Prince John. I was sure our fiberglass bow was a popular substitute for a sugar maple back then.

The lighter clicked and sputtered in Brian's hands, tiny sparks erupting from the flint and falling in a brief shower, burning out long before hitting the ground. Green Arrow never would have put up with such an inadequate lackey. If I had been able to grow a Green Arrow goatee, I would have casually stroked it while glaring at my sidekick with a raised disdainful eyebrow. *That's why you're my ward. You aren't worth adopting. You can't work a lighter. I should have named you Arrowette, instead.*

"It won't light," Brian said. His strokes on the lighter became more frantic. *Sidekicks nowadays. Good help, trained in pyrotechnics, is hard to find.*

Feelings of nervousness brewed within me. A main road was visible from the field although not close enough to be of consequence. Why would a signal arrow shot thirty feet into the air, blazing bright red against a black, cloudy sky, attract attention?

Brian and I both jumped when fluid and sparks mixed and a flame released from the lighter, crossed the small distance of air, and ignited the treated fabric in a bright burst of dancing red and orange. The sudden birth of the flame surprised me. My hand instinctively jerked up to shield my eyes, releasing the arrow, sending it shooting closely past Brian and into the dirt. It ignited the dry autumn grass.

“What the hell did you do that for?” Brian asked, stomping out the beginning of a small blaze.

“It scared me,” I said. “Why didn’t you tell me you were still trying to light it?”

“I was standing here with the lighter. What the hell did you think I was doing?”

“Fine. I’ll light it and you shoot it.” I handed him the bow and pulled out another arrow.

Since Brian wasn’t the comic book connoisseur I was and had nothing to fantasize about, he simply jerked the arrow back until the tip rested a few inches from the grip. I held the lighter at arm’s length, finding myself in the role of assistant and not liking it. *Batman never got demoted.* Sidekicks were always smaller versions of the real heroes, usually playing the comic relief role and in need of rescuing most of their lives and I hoped tonight wouldn’t require a rescue. The lighter clicked a few more times before a flame flashed into existence. I waved it beneath the kerosene wick and removed it just as fast. I took a step back, drawing my arm to my side. A smile crossed Brian’s face, the flame of the arrow reflecting off his white teeth.

“Are you ready?” he said. He knew I was.

The rag sputtered and sizzled, edges of it burning and falling away. Brian turned from side to side, hypnotizing me with a comet’s tail trailing behind the blaze with every movement. The sight was accompanied by a unique whooshing sound dating back to the first time cavemen carried newly-discovered fire through the night in search of food.

“Do it,” I said, my smile almost matching his.

In one jerky, uninspired motion, Brian raised the bow and released the string. The ascent was beautiful, the arrow making its way to Heaven. *One small step for crime fighters.*

Pleasing sounds grew more melodious with the speed and rush of the night air driving the flames to whip and crack. Bits of smoldering cotton broke free and cascaded to the ground around us. We stood together, awestruck by the sight, by the creation of what a bottle rocket would answer if asked, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" I would have cried from joy if my gender and the destructiveness of the situation hadn't prevented it.

My eyebrows wrinkled. My eyes squinted. Something was wrong. The arrow had not yet started its arc when the blaze held still and the arrow continued to move. Brian's knot was not tight enough. The rag slid down the length of the arrow. It caught in the fletching and shifted the weight to the back of the shaft. The arrow plummeted back to its origin. Brian jumped to the left. Never having been voted most likely to be graceful, I fell to the right.

The arrow crashed to the earth like a dying phoenix. This one, however, wouldn't rise from its ashes. The smell of kerosene mingled with the harsh scent of melted plastic, a sickening confirmation that its wings were forever gone. Always thinking of fire safety, we quickly extinguished the second fire with a stomping dance before it got out of control. I could have earned a Boy Scout badge that night.

"One more?" Brian asked, handing me the bow. *Hark! What question hath pierced my ear? Justice knows no defeat. The pursuit of good in this world shall not die because of one small setback. Another it shall be and by God, it shall be spectacular. Well thought out plans will prevail; our assistant in the fight for truth, justice and the American way shall be sweet, precise science.*

"Give me one of your shoe strings first." Brian kneeled down and crisscrossed the string out. Taking it, I wrapped it tightly around the arrowhead. Large drops of kerosene

rained down from the t-shirt wick. With it notched and lit, I rested the arrow within the groove on the base of the grip. Rocking it back and forth, I listened to the soothing sounds of the fire fighting the wind. I released the string, propelling the arrow away while I remained heavy and tied to the earth by mortality. The arrow, a part of me in tow, climbed brilliantly through the night sky, outshining the McDonald's, Hardee's and Piggly Wiggly signs illuminating the background.

"What do you boys think you're doing?" My attention diverted from the fiery rocket to a voice to my left. We both turned to face a silhouette, *The Shade*, who stood a foot taller than either of us. I didn't know how long he had been standing there, but my impression was quite a while. *Drat! My infrared lens in the Arrow goggles must be malfunctioning again. Damn that company. I shall contact my Tandy dealer on the morrow.*

"Nothing," Brian replied. I had a feeling that *The Shade* didn't believe us.

He turned to watch the arrow plummet after its energy expended. It lodged into the ground a short distance behind *The Shade*.

"Did you know this is private property? What's your names?" the shadow asked. I had never heard his voice before, and I was under the assumption he didn't recognize ours.

"Billy Simmons," Brian quickly replied. Believable as far as names go but he always looked like a Brian to me.

"Jake Simmons," I answered immediately after. *Thank the heavens for secret identities.* I didn't know if I looked like a David, but I was definitely not a Jake.

"What would your parents do if they knew you were out here?" He took a step closer. The moon's angle did not allow light to touch the front of his face. *Yon villain has devised a light-refracting device. Dastardly and ingenious.*

“Hey,” Brian yelled, alerting the man to a small trail of flames moving across the dry grass from the still blazing arrow. The shadow turned and began a stomping dance of his own. Brian raced across the field to the road. With bow and quiver in hand, I rushed after him. Brian weaved in and out of the darkness washing over lawns and alleys. I followed. Even though I chased after Brian, I never caught up. The distance kept getting further and further between us until I eventually lost sight of him, his childhood form dissipating into the darkness while I remained shrouded in the greenish glow of the moon.

Separation

My foot nudged a small chip of granite along the trodden grass. The rock scraped across the blades of grass, fighting against the sole of my tennis shoes above and the moist dirt below, but little came of its struggle. It spiraled down the thirty feet of open space. Murky water far beneath me swallowed the stone without remorse. Wider and wider, perfect circles spread along the top of the shimmering green and blue. The waves hit the edge of the rocky lake, rebounding upon themselves, creating a mesmerizing chaos. My older brother Ritchie stood next to me, both of us apart from the crowd. He watched only water and then glared at me with impatience. I once told my mother I wish I had my father's eyes, cold and hard. They gave the impression of control and stability. Ritchie got them instead.

We were two halves of a whole, always leaving my parents with the question, "Can you believe they are brothers?" I usually stayed huddled on my bedroom floor with a comic book on my lap while Ritchie spent his teenage years between beer mugs and women. I envied his raw image, his stories of barroom fights and car races. He stared at me then, atop the cliff over Old Hickory Lake.

"Are you going or not?" he said. He spoke in a whisper to keep his friends from hearing.

"Yeah," I said. I sacrificed another rock over the edge.

"Then hurry up and go. Everybody's watching," he said.

No one was watching. In their eyes, I was a vague ghost tethered to Ritchie by our mother. I turned from them, to Ritchie and finally back down to the water. My stomach rolled with anticipation. Not Christmas and the last day of school, but dental appointments

and starched Sunday school shirts. My life came to a halt on that cliff. Taking a step forward, I looked over the edge again. Jagged, protruding stones and tree roots jutted out of the dirt cliff wall beneath me. A few feet of shore spread out at the wall's base and then an endless expansion of lake water. Logic welled up within me.

"What if I land on something?"

"You won't," he said.

"I might. Something might float by."

"You won't, now just go."

"I might hit the rocks on the way down."

"You won't hit the damn rocks. If you're going to go, then go. We don't have all day." He looked behind us to his friends holding beer cans and talking about someone getting a DUI after leaving last night's party.

"What if I start to drown?" I said.

"I'll jump in after you."

"You'll be all the way up here," I said.

His eyes grew colder.

"Look, forget it. Just go wait in the truck. We're only going to dive a few more times, then we'll be ready to go."

"I don't want to wait in the truck," I said. I didn't want to be exiled like a child to the cab of the truck with country music tapes and the owner's manual to the Ford F150. I had read it more times than I could count, waiting for him after school while he talked to this same group of friends. I knew I could gap a spark plug to the exact millimeter. It was

knowledge I never thought I would have. Knowledge my dad would be proud I owned, but it was too late for us. He no longer asked me to help with things like working on the car.

“Hey Ritchie, come here a minute. I want to show you something.” Mitchell Jackson was shouting for Ritchie’s attention.

“I’ll be right back. Mama would kill me if something happened to you, so don’t jump until I get back. You hear me?” Ritchie said.

“Like you have to worry,” I said, staring down into rippling darkness.

Aside from Ritchie and Mitchell, I didn’t know the names of the other twelve people. I think the lack of interest was mutual. Mitchell came over to our house more than the others. He, Ritchie and my father would talk about farming. I heard them from my room, talking about cutting tobacco and hanging it in the barn. Mitchell worked the family farm after his father lost his legs in a car accident. Ritchie and my daddy helped him during the summer, but they never asked me. They made jokes of how my soft hands would most likely callous over, of how they weren’t made for work but for flipping pages in a book.

My dad still wore his All-State football ring. *Co-captain* was engraved on one side and the Springfield yellow jacket on the other. My daddy and I passed the football when I was younger, but my fingers and palms didn’t work like he wanted. I tried catching it like he told me, but it either slipped out of my grasp or I just missed it altogether. I tried and tried but my fingers, and mind, were better at drawing and reading. I listened to his instructions, even though he thought I didn’t. One day, we just didn’t go outside. I would ask, but my dad would say other things needed doing. I wasn’t any more persistent than he was.

My imitation leather tennis shoes guided the rock over the bent grass blades, around an ant hill, and poised it just on the edge of the ledge. Behind me, I could hear the sounds of

beer tops popping, girls giggling, and Ritchie's deep voice faking compliments. My eyes turned down and focused on an organized line of foraging ants. Their supply lines were straight and planned, extending as far as I could see until disappearing into the undergrowth. One line marched out from their hole. The parallel line marched in. They passed one another without a nod.

"Man, watch what you're doing. You got beer all over me," Mitchell said. A girl laughed.

My foot rose up and tipped the rock. It was a small piece torn from a greater whole, tumbling end over end, just shy of the cliff face. Water enveloped it, blinking out of my existence. Circles drifted outward across the surface in memoriam, a silent tribute to a fallen element. I looked out across the water, tiny ripples trembled across its surface. In the distance, the muddy shore crept up from the water's edge, pulling itself against the liquid, rising away from it. The earth's withered limbs turned to grassy green and dandelion yellow. Further on, past the interstate and outlet mall, cloudy mountains stood in the distance. A distance I had yet to travel. My head raised and I looked further past the protruding rocky landscape. The world disappeared into a hazy mixture of blue and green. The distance held nothing. No hope or despair, simply a space in which we all eventually travel. I saw as far as I could and then returned from the vision. Having nowhere left to go, the circles in the water ran into the shore and rebounded. What was once perfection glided back, disrupting itself. Only chaos now. Logic disappeared from me, with no one around to see it go. Such small things in such a big world, worrying mattered little. I decided and stepped one foot over the edge.

I skirted the face of the cliff. Its hard, rocky fingers reached for my back. Thirty feet seems like more when you walk it. Air had little time to fill my lungs before the water enveloped me too, memoriam already spreading out above me. My sight dimmed, light giving way to depths eyes could not break. I traveled through temperatures: warm then cool then cold, suspending me within the void. My eyes opened to swirling black. I lost myself, if only for a moment. I rose from the embrace of nothing, light fighting to find me. It grew brighter and pulled me out.

“How was it?” Ritchie said from the cliff’s edge.

I fought to stay above the water, trying to keep the waves crashing back from the shore from sliding past my lips.

“It was great,” I said. It wasn’t. It was lonely. “How do I get back up?”

“You have to climb,” he said, pointing to the cliff face. “Hurry up, someone else is about to go.”

Ritchie walked away from the edge. I could no longer see anyone. Standing at the top of the cliff and looking down created one world while staring up from below changed my perception completely. I knew until then that how you looked at something depended on where you were looking from. The lip of the cliff facing where I once stood was far away and climbing back felt an impossible task. The water bobbed me up and down. I wanted to stay and let it take me, but there was nowhere left to go.

I swam to the shoreline. My body ached with every kick of my legs. I pulled up and thanked myself for wearing shoes. Mud and rocks caked the soles. I reached up and grasped a tree root sticking out of the expressionless earth. My mind drifted to courageous characters dwelling within me. I envisioned myself cloaked in gray and black, a huge bat on my chest,

my expression brooding and my personality solitary. I swung cautiously from root to stone, inching myself higher toward freedom. My imagination pulled me up. I couldn't have reached the top carried only by me. A splash erupted beneath me and Mitchell emerged from the water with a beer can in hand. I turned my head upward. My soft fingers dug into the mud. It oozed between my knuckles and dirt filled beneath my fingernails. I stopped midway up and looked over my shoulder. Both the water and the land were level with my eyes. One touched the other like giant puzzle pieces. I thought of Huck Finn's adventures on the river then reached for another handful of earth. Reaching the ledge, I grasped grass and, with a lunge, I tumbled myself into the horizontal. Ritchie ran past me and disappeared over the edge.

My body was covered in red clay and dirt fell from my clothes with every step back to the truck. I carefully stepped over the ants. They never noticed my shadow covering them. They continued to forage forever. All looked alike. I stared down at their lines and wondered if they had moved at all. Closer to the truck, I passed by a girl reaching into one of Ritchie's coolers. She was pretty with long curly blond hair, wet and tangled, pulled back into a pony tail and stuck loosely out of a ball cap. Her wet t-shirt lay glued to her curves, barely covering her bikini bottom.

"Hey, you're Ritchie's little brother aren't you?" she said. Her smile was genuine. The popping sound of the beer top scraped my insides.

"Yeah."

"You want a beer?" she said.

I wasn't Ritchie's little brother. I never was, but she wouldn't know. We were too different for me to be his little anything.

“No, but thanks anyway.”

I crossed the gravel lot to the truck and slid into the cab. Ritchie emerged from the cliff's edge, turned and prepared to jump again. I never saw him disappear, my eyes already lowered to page 37 of the manual. They were words. They were order. I waited to return home, wet and clay-covered on the outside with one more road marked from my map I would never travel.

Shattered

When I found the dog hidden in Brian's room, I brought her out to the kitchen and waited for Brian to come home. The dog sat by the door and whined a little, looking up at my unfamiliar face every few minutes. My foot tapped continuously on the kitchen linoleum and my hands smoothed out the already flat tablecloth. Through the window of the kitchen door, I saw Brian reach the walkway, staring back at me through the glass. When he entered the door, the dog jumped up and wrapped her front legs around his waist. Her tongue lapped up against his clothes from one side of her mouth then the other.

"Where have you been?" I said.

"I was going to cook, but we were out of salt." He grabbed the dog by her front paws and dropped her to the floor. He removed his backpack and dropped it as well. It grazed the dog's ear and narrowly missed her snout.

"I thought you didn't have any money," I said. I stood up and paced around the sink, reaching to wash dishes that weren't there.

"I don't. I went into Kentucky Fried Chicken, looked at the menu for a minute, then swiped salt and pepper shakers off one of the tables." A grin spread across his lips but I returned nothing.

"You can't keep doing things like that. You're just begging to go to jail."

"They didn't need them. They probably have plenty in the back," he said. Walking around the dog, never looking at her, he sat down at the table. Reaching into his backpack, he pulled out four shakers and a pack of napkins.

"We have napkins," I said.

“A few more couldn’t hurt.”

“I don’t like you stealing, especially when you bring it here. And I don’t like you lying, you knew you should have told me about the dog,” I said, drying some already dry silverware and putting it away in a drawer.

“Can I keep her?” Brian asked.

“Where did she come from?” I said. Sunlight streamed through the thin layer of dirt crusting the glass panes and shimmered across the bristly black hair of the Labrador. Her eyes jumped from the stove to the cabinets to the refrigerator. She looked back to Brian seeking approval for being there. I looked out the window at the fenced in backyard. There was plenty of room to race after birds or to tree any cats brave enough to wander within.

“She’ll keep me company while I’m here alone all day.”

“I asked where you found her?”

“She just followed me home from Piggly Wiggly.” Brian’s words were accompanied by a ‘we both know I’m lying’ smile and I decided the answer might be more disturbing than how he obtained the salt shakers.

Brian had lived there for three weeks before the dog appeared. I made sure he knew that his arrangement, as well as hers, was temporary, just until he found a job and an apartment. I felt guilty for treating him that way, but this Brian wasn’t the same person who left years before. I felt closer to my cousin Brian than my own brother when we were growing up. Deep down, I always knew he hated Springfield. His feelings didn’t just stem from Springfield being another small southern town. The problem was more than that. He felt tied down by the town’s smallness and by the life his parents gave him. The intimacy wouldn’t let him get lost in the population or forget where he came from. Brian was too

crowded. I suppose he felt he had to go. With only a semester left, he dropped out of high school and moved to Nashville to pursue a career as a drummer and a heroin addict. His needle dried out seven years later due to his lack of funds. With nowhere else to go and no one else willing to take him, he came back to me. The shell was the same Brian, but I could no longer see what was inside.

Tension had built between us since his arrival. He stayed locked in his room and I came in from work and went to mine. He told me he went looking for jobs during the day, but if so, he was always home when I arrived. I tried talking to him a number of times, but he spoke only of the successful schemes he accomplished looking for money to support his habit. He lifted items from unlocked cars in the Vanderbilt University parking lot. He would say, if they wanted to keep their stuff badly enough, they should have locked their doors. He swore he never once broke a window or jimmied a lock, but I found this less than convincing. His thefts consisted of crimes acceptable to his value system. Stealing from Home Depot and walking from the exit door to the entrance for a refund fell into the “they are a big corporation, and I don’t have anything, so it’s fair” column. I tired of hearing the narrow escapes from the law and the violent drug dealers. The stories were like Robin Hood except they weren’t fantasy and they accomplished nothing but a quick, smoking high and a criminal record. I grew tired of the responsibility of having him in my house, tired of wondering when I would come home to a pawn slip sitting in my entertainment center instead of my television. He swore he would never steal from me; he just wanted a place to stay to get clean.

A week after the Lab became another non-paying renter, I arrived home late from work to the phone’s ring echoing through the kitchen and across the yard to my car. The

night sky, although peaceful in sound, was in turmoil. Clouds scattered across the black night, swirling purples and blues smothering out the infinite sugary specks of granulated lights. The air was saturated with smells of autumn, high school football, and nostalgia, of county fairs and homecoming parades, cotton candy and bonfires.

I broke from my dreamy daze of remembering and ran to the house for the phone. The black lab, shivering with the night chill, followed me within the fence, the negligence of her master not enough to remove the happy twinkle in her eyes.

I reached the phone and heard sobbing on the other end.

“Hello?” I said.

“It’s.....it’s Lisa.” Lisa was my cousin and Brian’s sister. She was a proclaimed lesbian with heterosexual tendencies. I found her annoying at times, not because she was supposedly gay, but more due to her constant announcing of her gender preference and renouncing it in her actions. Her voice crackled and hesitated, fighting to release the sobs caught in her throat.

“What’s wrong?”

“Brian. You have to stop him.”

“Stop him from what? Where is he?”

“He’s there. I think. I don’t know. He just called a few minutes ago.”

In the small portion of the house that I could see, there was no sign of him. My attention turned to the end table where the phone rested. Plastic, travel-sized liquor bottles and unlabeled prescription containers littered the table’s top.

“He called me, wanting a ride to Nashville, to see his girlfriend. I told him I wouldn’t take him. He said he’d drive himself and hung up.” Her crying became louder.

"I'll call you back." I heard his slow and unsteady footsteps before he emerged from the shadows. Brian stumbled from the washroom, a knapsack flung on his shoulder. His head hung low as if I wouldn't see him if we didn't make eye contact.

Hanging up the phone, my hand brushed along the trash on the table, turning bottles on their sides and sending the hollow plastic rolling off and onto the carpet.

"Where are you going?" He didn't look up. I stepped in front of him.

"To see Carrie." Carrie was his drug companion girlfriend.

"Maybe you should wait a little while."

"Was that Lisa on the phone?" His head lifted, revealing the bloody lines that spiderwebbed across the whites of his pupils. "I told that bitch I didn't need her to take me any damn where." He took another step. Our chests brushed.

"She's worried. Why don't you wait here awhile until you feel better. Then go."

"Gotta see Carrie." He sidestepped me and walked into the kitchen. Words dripped from his lips like caulk, slow, thick and sticky. His movements mirrored his speech.

"I can't let you go, Brian."

His eyes raised in an attempt to meet mine, but they drifted over my left shoulder and failed to focus. Without a word, he worked away from me, pinballed into the doorframe, then dropped down onto the couch. Darkness momentarily enveloped him until I heard the crackle of cellophane and a lighter ignited against the end of a cigarette. I settled into the recliner next to him, pushed the rest of the bottles to the floor and placed an ashtray down.

"Why do you need to see Carrie?"

"Just want to see her." He looked as lost in the darkness as he did in the clothes he wore. The camouflage jacket had been with him since high school. It fit well once,

accenting his athletic frame, but now hung from his shoulders like drapes along a thin curtain rod. He crushed the butt of the barely smoked cigarette. "I hate these." Laying the knapsack down, he pulled car keys from his pocket and rose from the couch.

"Where are you going?" I stood with him. "I said you didn't need to drive."

"To the truck to get my can of Buglers." Brian usually rolled his own cigarettes instead of smoking store bought. They left an acrid taste on my tongue, mingling the flavors of tobacco, a tin can, and dirt.

He edged against the wall, the stove, the refrigerator and out the door.

"David, I'm not going anywhere, I swear."

I followed despite his reassurances. His truck sat beneath the carport. It was an ugly little mini pick-up. The truck had seen better days and probably better owners. A hubcap was missing and its body was coated in two colors. The original black hid behind some areas of sprayed primer to cover rust spots. A large crack slithered across the windshield and the bed strewn with trash. The door creaked as it opened. He rummaged through a pile of junk resting on the passenger side of the seat. The black Lab ran up and down the fencerow, following our every movement. Her tongue happily swayed back and forth in rhythm with her tail. I was startled to hear the truck door slam shut.

"Brian, open the door!" Brian locked the door before my hand grasped the handle.

"Open the damn door, Brian." He mouthed "I'm sorry" through the cheap purple tint.

The back-up lights glowed white and the transmission whined into reverse. "Brian! Stop!" Beating on the glass of the door had no effect. Rushing around to the back of the truck, naively thinking he wouldn't continue, I pushed my body against the tailgate. The

truck slowly descended down the driveway. My feet dug ruts into the gravel. Rocks pooled up around my ankles. For the first time that I could remember, Brian scared me.

I grabbed the tailgate and vaulted into the bed of the truck. The moving truck disrupted my balance. I fell into the deep pool of Styrofoam and fast food wrapper filth. Brian glared at me through the tint, but the truck didn't cease its movement.

"Stop the goddamn truck!" I said.

He hit the brakes, giving me time to jump out. I grasped the edge of the truck bed and pulled myself up. I beat my fists on the top of the cab and continued yelling. He pressed the gas harder and I slammed forward against the truck's cab. Rage erupted inside me for allowing it to get this far. I despised everyone else in my family for electing me his keeper. Adrenaline filled my veins. My quickening pulse beat incessantly in my head. I sifted through the garbage-filled truck bed, tossing newspapers and liquor bottles into a whirlwind. I grasped for anything heavy and threatening. My fingers tightened around the truck's jack hidden beneath the refuse. I struck the center of the back windshield. The vibration hummed through my fingers, across my hands, up the length of my arms and throughout my body. I raised the chunk of metal over my head for another blow. At eleven at night, the only sound heard was the metal-on-glass chime piercing the air like a tuning fork.

The dog's barking mingled with the sound of the jack. She jumped up and down against the fence, pawing ferociously at her cage, unable to break out. My fence held her tight.

"David! Stop!" His voice was muffled, yelling through the glass, begging me, giving the impression he was willing to negotiate. I wouldn't be gullible.

The truck continued to move and I didn't wait to hear his pleas again. I brought the jack down. It struck the glass and reverberated in my hands. My knuckles strained and shaded white. The jack fractured the pane. Thousands of minuscule beads of glass erupted across my body. The glass hornets stung my cheeks and blew through my hair. Purple tint ripped into translucent slivers, sending a shower of glass pebbles through the interior of the cab, coating the seat, the floorboard and rolling across the dash. The truck lurched to a stop. Clouds of chalky gravel dust burst up from beneath. Dropping the jack into the seat, I struck my elbow against his face, sending his head into the door. I jerked the key from the ignition and the truck's engine wheezed and sputtered, finally gagging into submission.

No longer fueled by aggression, I felt sanity seep back into my body. A calming euphoria replaced adrenalin. My head was overcome with dizziness, my knees weak and unsteady beneath me. I slowly hoisted myself over the edge of the bed and into the driveway. Once ragged and unsteady, my breath slipped from my lungs in slow, steady streams. The chill of the night air washed over me and I could not stop shivering.

"What the fuck?" Turning, I saw Brian standing with his back to me, staring in disbelief into the truck. The excitement of the moment drove some of the drug-induced lethargy from his mind. Glass shimmered in the light of the moon, a field of beautiful crystals born of violence.

"What the fuck did you do that for?" he said. Twirling on his heels, he cocked his fist to his shoulder and lashed out. His hand grazed my ear, causing him to fumble forward with the force of the attempted blow. His body pushed into mine. Grasping his jacket's collar, I stepped to the side and thrust him to the ground. I stared down at him, huddled at my feet. Disgust pooled in my stomach, and without a word, I deposited the keys into my jeans.

pocket, made my way up the short distance of the driveway and walked into the house.

Nausea rose in my stomach and I could hardly stand myself. Before closing the door, I reached over the fence and combed my fingers along the soot-black fur of the dog. Her eyes looked confused and her barking had ceased, replaced with a soft whine. I heard the sound of crying from the driveway, but my soul had turned black to Brian. There remained no need for me to care. The love would not be returned.

The next day, we made an agreement. If he stayed in a drug treatment program for the required six weeks, he could come back. I called numerous clinics, made appointments for interviews and carried him there once we found a place with an opening. Throughout, I was pained looking at him. I realized days of bows and arrows and drawing together were gone.

The drive to the treatment center was filled with silence. I did not even turn on the radio in fear it would give us some subject to discuss.

He left Murfreesboro's Guidance Center two days before completing the program. The dog was in my custody. I knew she eventually would be. She became a better tenant than he ever was, but she was always his dog. An adopted child always has biological parents. I was her appointed uncle, if only for a brief time. Months later, she left. I found where she worked a loose piece of fencing away from the post at the gate. The wire was held tight by three horseshoe nails, but she fought hard enough that it eventually gave away.

Walking down my street at six that morning, the sunlight wasn't as warm to my skin as the day I found her in Brian's bedroom. It warmed her body even less. She lay limp on the sidewalk two blocks from my house, her escape cut short by a passing car.

When I first saw her with her tail lashing cheerfully across the linoleum, Brian's fingers rustling her fur, bristling it up against the grain, I asked her name.

"Miss," Brian replied.

"Why Miss?"

"That's short for Misery," Brian said.

"That's even worse."

"Misery loves company. Understand?" Brian looked proud of himself for the name.

I felt like she was no more to him than the salt and pepper shakers. He had taken an innocent and branded her. For him, it was not just a word, but also finality, the destiny of his life, and he was determined not to be the only one to share it.

Ocean Spirits

I hated how Millisa had never fixed the shocks on the front end of her car. Each bump on the sandy asphalt jostled the steak and beer in my stomach into bubbling, acidic heartburn. The Fort Myers street design did not assist in soothing my nausea. A repetitive pattern of light pole then palm tree, light pole then palm tree, flew past me. With a background of twinkling neon signs on buildings painted sea-foam blue, my vision blurred and for a moment, I was nine again, riding the morning school bus. Sunlight beaming through the trees as we rode down country roads always produced a similar reaction. The constant flashes of light against my eyes made my head swim. The dizziness trickled down through my throat and into my boiling stomach. I looked over at Millisa whose shots of tequila and medium rare lump of meat only fueled her energy higher. Her arm lay in her lap with only her thumb guiding the steering wheel while her other hand banged fervently to the music of Janis Joplin. One of her slender legs hung out the window, her foot tapping against the mirror on the door. The Florida wind swept through her sandaled toes. She was no longer the same girl sitting across from me on the school bus. At only twenty-six, small thin wrinkles, barely noticeable, already crept from the corners of her eyes. Her pupils still glistened with childish innocence, but the strange catlike yellow had dulled from the years. Those eyes made her memorable.

"Where are we going now?" I asked, praying the answer would be her apartment. Since getting off the plane, we had traveled from one club to the next in uptown Fort Myers. My hand was covered with so many pale colored bar stamps, my skin looked like an advertisement for cheap prison tattoos. I knew she enjoyed going out, those same activities on our regular itinerary when I was in town, but tonight we barely had time to discuss our

most recent disappointments with life.

"I've got a surprise for you," she said. She turned and smiled. A small gap separated her front two teeth, more attractive than not. The wind twirled her Florida sun-bleached hair across her face. I only got a glimpse before she turned her eyes back to the road. She reached down and turned the music louder. I leaned back out the window. Our cigarettes created a musty vacuum within the vehicle, sucking out all of the fresh air. The high-pitched voices of Janis Joplin and Millisa echoed through the car, their words whining to the Lord about a Mercedes Benz. I started to say something, but I could no longer hear myself.

After seventh grade, Millisa's parents moved from Tennessee to Florida when her father lost his job. Family was there and he took a job working for his brother. Millisa didn't mind, already dreading the coming years of high school. With her parents poor and her clothes ragged, the other children were less than kind. Various hospitalizations due to behavior issues didn't help her prom queen chances either. The castaways always found each other bobbing aimlessly in a social sea. We formed a friendship two years before her leaving. When my mind eventually forgot to think about her every day, a letter arrived. She was the reason for my first trip on an airplane. She was the reason for a number of my firsts.

I never thought of myself as her type of guy, all of her others preferring fists to express their undying love. I shuddered when thinking of the scars the broken glass had created across her tiny midsection when one ex locked her out of the house and she had to climb in through the bedroom window. Still, the puffy, jagged lines never stopped her from wearing a bikini to the beach. She walked with pride, always with a hippy stride and a fling of her hair. I knew she preferred men with a strong chest and a full head of hair. I was

deficient in both. I wore my shirt and ball cap to the beach, my midsection as white as freshly sifted flour from lack of exposure. When she decided we were incompatible, we only looked at each other as friends.

She pulled her '84 *Buick* into a parking lot behind a small cinder block building. The car bounced a few times on the broken suspension before finally vibrating to a halt. I turned and looked out the back window. Neon pink and blue glass tubes twined around each other to illuminate the words "The Miami Strip." White-wash covered the exterior and wooden planks blocked the spaces in the windowpanes where glass once stood. The dirty gray bricks already showed through the cheap paint.

"Why are we stopping here?" I said. Millisa quickly got out of the car, turned to smile, then made her way across the parking lot. Her small frame flowed across the asphalt and through the immense amount of parked cars. I watched as she disappeared around the corner. Hesitantly, I followed.

"'Bout time," she said. I almost ran over her when I rounded the corner. She stood slyly with two tickets grasped between her fingers like she had just performed a magic trick. "I wanted to show you where I used to work."

Alcohol, tobacco and perspiration crept into my nostrils, coating my passages with a gritty film. At the door, a bouncer puffed up his arms, straining the black sleeves of his t-shirt. I instinctively looked down at my own biceps loosely hanging from my bones as we made our way past him. Walking out of the ply-board lobby covered in similar whitewash, I watched a girl in a g-string parade down a stage level with my waist. Cheap speakers blared Prince through the room. Millisa grabbed my hand and guided me toward two empty seats at the end of the stage.

"Wait here. I'll be right back," she said. I watched her sift through the crowd until disappearing. The woman on stage suspended herself in midair on one of the poles running up to the ceiling. Twirling slowly in a circle, she finally rested on the lacquerless hardwood.

I wondered how she kept from getting splinters.

She quickly turned on her knees and lowered into a split in front of four Hispanic boys across from me. I heard them giggle to each other while sliding dollar bills into the thin string of her waistband. Not one in the group could have been over twenty. My eyes shot through the woman driving her hips against the brass pole to the other side of the bar. A few steps led up to a second level filled with couches and upholstered chairs. Men and women sat spread out as dancers grinded against them. Bouncers and waitresses continued walking paths through the dinky platform with trays balanced on their outstretched palms. Except for the naked bodies and alcohol, the strip club could have been a Denny's.

A redheaded waitress sat beside me in Millisa's empty seat. She pointed down to the pack of Marlboro's on the lip of the stage.

"Do you mind?" she said. I handed her one then lit it. Her tray of empty bottles and glasses remained balanced on her hand. "You aren't here alone, are you?"

"I'm with someone," I said.

"Cute accent. Never been here before, I bet." Her auburn locks curled down her cheeks with lips painted to match. She asked with a genuine smile and strong eyes. I wondered if she was a doctor or maybe a lawyer during daylight hours and perhaps waitressing paid the student loans.

"Nope," I said, "first time."

From across the room, the bartender waved for her. "Well, I'll try to make sure you and your friend have a good time. Ask for Nikki if you need anything." She turned and hurried off through toward the bar.

Before this visit, Millisa wrote to me and, over much internal debate, informed me of her love. She broke the implied friendship dam, tore a gaping hole in its side and sent new water into an empty, unsuspecting riverbed. I drowned in anticipation only to run into another wall of alcohol and strippers. Admittedly, most of my visits resulted in nights spent in bars and clubs, taking turns creating drawings on bar napkins, sipping beers until we were both sick half the next day, but at least we talked and laughed over those six hours spent getting slowly wasted. It was like hanging out with the guys back home, except I had no guys back home and I was too plain to spend my time in such surroundings. In Florida, I was someone else. I was someone who did not have to care if his actions contradicted the nice-guy image twenty-five years in the making.

As quickly as Nikki left, Millisa materialized with two beers and two stacks of dollar bills. "Consider this a present," she said.

"So you used to work here?" I took little notice of the dollar bills, knowing they were recycled from a stranger's underwear.

"Two years ago," she said. She looked for a reaction then slid a pinky into each side of her mouth. A shrill whistle emitted from her lips in appreciation for the dancer exiting the stage.

"For how long?" I said. The music momentarily stopped and my voice lowered accordingly.

"Why? Does it bother you?"

"No," I said. And it didn't. "I just thought that since you brought it up, you might have a reason."

"No reason." Another high-pitched shrill left her lips to cheer the next woman to step on stage. "Like a Virgin," grated the air and a dancer dressed like a bride walked onto the stage. She tossed her bouquet across the room and into the lap of a middle-aged man on the second tier. Cheering, he gave it to the woman sitting next to him who stuck the bundle of imitation flowers between her legs and clapped to the beat of the music.

The dancer stripped off her veil in mid twirl. Red locks fell from the bobby pins. I still thought she could be a lawyer or doctor during the day but my hopes for her alternate career choices diminished a little more. As she approached us, she gave Millisa a wink and her sheer cupped white bra floated down to the stage. Nikki then looked to me and frowned, kneeling down to rake her fingernails gently across my cheek.

"Smile baby. You're here to have a good time." I was being lectured to by a stripper concerning my inability to have a good time. Under different circumstances, I would have been embarrassed and dropped her a ten. Everything was wrong since the time I stepped off the plane. On my second visit, Millisa met me at the gate dressed in a chauffeur outfit, short skirt and long heels, but this time, she was an hour late and I felt the tension from the beginning.

After I inserted a few dollar bills, the stripper's concern for my entertainment quickly passed, sending her down to the next group.

"What's wrong with you?" Millisa said, "I thought you'd enjoy this."

I looked around the room filled with lonely men sprawled out on sticky vinyl cushions, and drunken groups of barely legal teenagers, a beer in one hand and a cigarette in the other. I looked down at myself for a moment and got up to leave.

"Stay as long as you want. I'll be at the car," I said. I dropped my stack of dollar bills onto hers and walked out.

The parking lot was even more crowded than before. Cars lined the side street all the way down to the next intersection. With the beer and steak finally digested, my stomach rumbled. It hurt like never before, twisting and turning deep within me. I barely restrained myself from doubling over. The second hand of my watch slowly stumbled by. After thirty minutes, Millisa emerged from the side door, her steps wavering more than when she went in.

"You drive," she said, tossing the keys across the roof of the car.

"Back to your house?"

"Go to the beach," she said. Her tone was flat and the sentence curt. The rumbling of my stomach ceased to a higher emptiness.

We spoke very little during the fifteen-minute drive; our only words consisted of her giving me directions. I parked the car, took off my shoes and walked out to the beach.

Blackness rolled on and off the shore with loud crashing sounds.

"You know what your problem is? You're an intellectual snob." Millisa was still a short distance behind me when she spoke. Neither of us turned to look at the other.

"Give me an example," I said.

"What about at the club? Too good to be there?" she said. I could hear her kick at the sand repeatedly. "You just always act like you're better than everyone else."

“Why did you take me?” I said. I turned away from the ocean to look at her, but she was staring at the long line of hotels behind us. A few people loitered on the balconies above, some watching, some passed out.

“I wanted you to have a good time.” Her voice was a whisper as she spoke.

“No, you didn’t.”

“Well, you’re always right, so you tell me,” she said, kicking more sand across her toes. The lights from the hotel glittered off the two toe rings she wore.

“Look, two months ago, I probably wouldn’t have minded. Hell, I might have had a good time. But it’s different now,” I said.

“Why is it different now? It shouldn’t be. Just because I said I might be in love with you?”

“You might be? You didn’t say ‘might be’ in the letter. You said ‘were,’” I said, feeling foolish with myself.

“I didn’t mean it like that.” She squatted down, digging her index finger into the wet sand, twisting a symbol into the grains of which only she knew the meaning.

“Yes, you did and might is a long way from where you thought you were. Why wait until now to tell me you were a stripper?” I said.

“It wasn’t any of your business until now.”

“I know why you took me,” I said, “you can quit hiding it.”

“Hiding what? I was trying to be honest with you.” She spread her fingers wide and raked the symbol away.

“No you weren’t. You took me because you don’t know how to act when someone cares about you.” I sat down on the ground, spreading my arms out behind me, my eyes

wandering the horizon, trying to see where sky and water met. "You wanted to push me away."

"That's not it," she said. Her protest was half-hearted and her voice trembled. "I just haven't figured out what you want from me yet."

"I don't want anything." The ocean reached out for the shore, stretching over it, joining for a moment and then finally receding back where it belonged.

"Everyone wants something," she said.

"Why?"

"Because that's the way my world works." She stopped speaking for a moment. The wind picked up her straw-colored hair and whipped it around her face, thin strands sticking to the new wet spots on her cheek. "That's the way it's always worked. You don't get anything for free."

"That's a lie," I said. I turned back to face the ocean. Although I couldn't see it through the cloudy night sky, the sounds of its depths were undeniable.

"The hell it is. Ask my last boyfriend. Ask all my friends."

"God, has your world really been that bad?" I said. I hated myself for the sarcasm entering my voice.

"Yeah. It's really been that bad." Each wave drove up the shore, closer with every burst but never reaching us. Its sound roared across the packed sand but in spite of nature's raw power, it fell on deaf ears. Millisa stood silent, wrapping her arms around her chest for warmth. Waiting

"What do you want me to say?" I said.

She continued to stare down at her feet, her knuckles a shade of unnatural white as her fingers dug deeper into her shoulders.

"What do you need to hear?" I said.

I felt her looking down at me.

"I don't care what you've done. If you want to take something back, take it," I said, turning my gaze back to the ocean. "If it's too hard to trust someone, then say so." I grasped a handful of sand and held it tight. Each grain squeezed through the bottom of my fist and fell to the shore.

"I know you well enough," she said. "I've never met someone like you before, but you're still a man." The sand crunched beneath her feet as she made her way to the car. "I'd rather see hurt coming," she said. I didn't turn to look.

Finally the waves found me and ran across my bare feet. I heard her climb up onto the hood of her car, waiting to take me back. I imagined her hair spread behind her head like dull starlight. I thought of the life I was vacationing from and the one I had here. My carefree attitude slipped, filling with thoughts of work awaiting me. The sky darkened more than I thought possible and the water thundered across the beach. I watched the ocean for a final time, the waves the same no matter what shore they washed over. The grains of sand slipped one by one from my hand, disappearing into the ocean's water before being sucked back into its depths.

Gator Tails and Ice Cream

Jamie and I pulled into the rundown restaurant after midnight. Our choices were the Waffle House, the all-night interstate sanctuary for those craving scattered, smothered, or splattered, or the little restaurant on the other side of the off ramp. We knew the gastric perils of the 'House, so we braved the unknown. Pulling into the gravel parking lot, the loud raking sound emitting from somewhere beneath my car echoed off the gray, cinder block building.

"Have you got the map?" I said. I stepped out of the car and twisted my neck from one side, then the other. My ear touched my shoulder when the joints finally gave away to the pressure with a resulting crack.

"What is wrong with you?" Jamie said. "That's about the eighth time you've popped your neck since we've been on the road."

"Probably because I've been driving for five hours straight."

"I offered to drive, so I don't want to hear it," Jamie said.

"Well, I was in a zone. Besides, I wanted to beat my last record of how long I could go without stopping at a bathroom."

"You beat that thirty minutes into the trip. I've been on the road with you before. Remember Savannah? Your bladder must be the size of a dime." Jamie pulled the map from the back seat and laid it across the trunk of the car. The wind picked up the edges and ruffled them across her slender fingers.

"How much farther?" I said.

“Give me a second. I’m not Columbus.” She traced her orange painted nail down interstate 24, following it out of Tennessee, through Georgia and finally to Jasper, Florida. “Looks like another three hours. What about the car?”

“I hope it makes it. We don’t have much of a choice at this point.” The grinding metal sound started halfway through Georgia and continued to grow louder. It scraped across me and caused my stomach to quiver and my head to throb. I have a physical attachment with my vehicle. Car felt good, I felt good. Car felt sick, I felt sick. At that moment, nausea filled my stomach, telling me how serious it sounded, but I didn’t see the need to worry Jamie.

“I need my purse out of the back,” she said, tossing the map through the passenger window.

“I didn’t know you even carried a purse,” I said. Jamie was very attractive, but a person had to look twice to see it. She was a little on the thin side and her hair shorter than I cared for, but her constant attire of collegiate tee’s and athletic pants hid her figure. But since we were platonic, we didn’t discuss each other’s fashion sense.

“I only carry one for special occasions, and I was thinking stranded with you and your car in Jasper qualified.”

Jamie reached in the car window and moved our scuba gear around. She pulled out a miniature backpack posing as a purse. I reached through the driver side window and cut the car off. My cramping neck eased a little after the car exhaled through the muffler and the grinding sounds stopped.

The sky was smothered by a quilt of blackened clouds releasing sporadic droplets of rain. The worst of the storm was still miles away where jagged lightning cut through the

blanket of night and spread its golden, electric touch across the flat landscape. Jamie watched and sighed.

The door of the diner smoothly swung open, the hinges greased with French fry and hamburger oil. All of the tables were empty except one where a couple sat scrambling their sunny-side eggs together with their forks. Huddled at the counter in front of the kitchen, four men swiveled uncomfortably on the torn vinyl barstools. All eyes were turned to a sports channel on a dirty television attached to a rusty bracket hanging from the ceiling.

"How do you think them Gators are going to do? They're playing some awful good football this year," one man said to another. A waitress walked by to refill their coffee, but stopped to watch the screen before the pot reached their cups.

"Tennessee ain't got a chance," the other man replied.

"Wish I could be down there in Gainesville. I'd give them hell," the first man said.

Jamie and I sat near the door. She tapped her bright orange fingernails on the edge of the table. "I think you should have worn gloves. That orange might not be allowed in here."

"I'm sure gloves would've been less noticeable," she said.

She picked up a menu and flipped through it. The back was covered in dried food. A few flakes fell to the tabletop.

I left mine wedged between the salt and pepper shakers and looked back outside. The rain had reached Jasper and tap-danced against the glass door.

"What are you getting?" she asked. "You haven't even looked at your menu."

"You have to get a burger at these kinds of places. No other choice. They're always fat and the grease turns the bun all mushy. Can't go wrong."

"Glad to see that diet is working for you."

The waitress walked to our table with silverware and two glasses of water in stained and scratched plastic cups. She watched the television over her shoulder, only glancing at us to make sure she didn't trip over anything. The statistics of the Southeastern Conference Collegiate Championship game scrolled across the screen. Important numbers swapped back and forth between the Tennessee and Florida columns. Eyes still across the room, the waitress lowered the glasses expertly to the table and waited for a commercial break. A few particles of sand swirled in the water.

Finally a beer commercial broke her concentration and she turned to look down on us.

"Hey boys," she said to the men at the counter, "we got us some Tennessee fans over here." She pointed her thumb at Jamie's University of Tennessee shirt.

The men turned in a synchronized chorus line. They raised two hands, slapping them together to imitate an alligator's attack and yelled "Go Gators."

"I just love that," the waitress said through a gravelly smoker's laugh.

"You don't sell alligator tails do you?" Jamie asked. "I like mine well-done."

"Nope, sure don't. That's a protected animal in this place." The waitress grinned.

After Jamie and I ordered, the waitress returned behind the counter and speared the order sheet on a wheel to the kitchen, then gave it a spin. The wheel twirled in the kitchen window until a hand emerged from inside, snatching the order and disappearing. The waitress talked to the men who then laughed and looked in our direction.

"I'm guessing that was for you and your little comment," I said.

"It was looking a little too biased in here for me," Jamie said. She parted her lips in a prideful smile to compliment herself. Her calm appearance in most situations reinforced my confidence in having her as my scuba partner, something I surely did not take lightly.

"Are you excited about the dive tomorrow?" I said. The rain pelted harder against the restaurant and I wondered if we would be able to go.

"More nervous than excited," she said. "What if I forget to breathe?"

"You won't forget to breathe. It's involuntary."

"It's unnatural is what it is. Most people breathing through tubes are in the hospital," she said.

"It's our first open-water dive. The instructor is with us the whole time."

"Like during the class, when he was more concerned with impressing his girlfriend than worrying whether our equipment was hooked up right or not," she said.

"I already told you I was sorry for hooking up the wrong hose. I didn't know the air leak would spray water everywhere once we got it in the pool."

"If you had been paying attention in class instead of drawing Aquaman on your notes, you might have noticed."

"It wasn't Aquaman. You wouldn't know him if you saw him. It was the Black Manta." I ended the narration with a geek roll of my eyes.

The solitary couple sat only a few tables away and were the only ones whose eyes weren't glued to the television. I could only see the back of the woman, and the man's head remained lowered the entire time. Grease filled the tips of his fingernails and covered the cuffs of his tattered jacket. The same black oil covered the fronts of his jeans and work boots. The name Ray was embroidered on a dirty white patch sewn on his jacket. Ray mildly scooped up pieces of egg on his fork, and even though most fell back into the plate, he slid the remaining flecks solemnly into his mouth. A wedding band feebly glittered through

the caked dirt on his hand. It was so dirty it barely caught the fluorescent light emitting from the ceiling.

“You aren’t even listening to me, are you?” Jamie said, waving her hand in front of my face.

“Yes, I am.”

“What was I saying?” she said.

“You were talking about Michael.”

“Which one?” she said.

“Your ex-boyfriend, not your brother.”

“What was I saying?”

I reached for my water. The grains of sand moved with the waves in the glass. I drank anyway. This conversation had taken up most of the driving time to this point. “You were saying how you couldn’t believe that he was off doing his army training and never even called.”

Jamie gave a suspicious glance, scrutinizing me for a moment. “Okay, so anyway...”

The woman was much more animated than Ray. She occasionally shook her fork at him and her voice raised and lowered. Though I strained, she was not quite loud enough to hear. The shaking of her silverware caused her Florida blond curls to bounce up and down along her tense neck muscles. Compared to Ray’s sun darkened arms and face, her skin was pale, especially considering the climate. Her clothes were not new, but her jeans and shirt were in better shape than Ray’s. When her voice raised the loudest, she rested her non-fork holding arm on the tabletop for support while the other hand, fork between fingers, shook so

fast, it made my joints hurt clear across the room. Ray would nod now and then, but his lips only opened for his fork.

“So what do you think I should do?” Jamie said.

“About what?” I said.

“Should I get back with Michael or not?” she said.

“I told you in the car that you shouldn’t. If he only wants you around when he wants you around, what’s the point?”

“It’s more complicated than that,” she said.

“It’s always more complicated. It was more complicated the last three times.”

The waitress walked to Ray’s table. He held his hand over his plate, so she took only the woman’s plate and replaced it with a small dish of ice cream. A few pecans were sprinkled across the top. The woman renewed her one-sided argument, only her spoon instead of her fork violently swept through the air in between bites.

“This is complicated. We’ve been together for three years. I can’t just throw that away.” Jamie’s hair bobbed around her ears as she spoke. She leaned against her chair and draped her thin arm across the back. “I guess I don’t have a choice. He pretty much made up his mind on his own.”

“Sounds like it.”

“I can’t believe he broke up with me over the phone. I don’t know if I can be without him.”

The old men pointed and laughed when a picture of the Tennessee Vols’ coach flashed on the screen. They turned to see if we noticed. Although I cared nothing for football, I felt included in the friendly rivalry. I laughed and waved out of obligation. Their

hands raised and snapped at us again. "Go Gators!" emitted from them and they turned back around.

Jaime turned up a saltshaker and a small pile of salt built up on the tabletop. She slid her finger into little patterns back and forth through the miniature desert.

"If this rain passes, tomorrow we'll be head to toe in wet suits under the Florida sun."

"If your car makes it that far," she said.

"I'm worried more about making it back. We're too close to turn around."

The waitress slid two burgers onto our table, a bottle of ketchup and a jar of mustard.

"Y'all aren't headed to the game tomorrow, are you?" she said. Her bright smile wrinkled her already wrinkled face.

"Nope," I said. I swelled up a little. "Going scuba diving."

Her face dropped and her wrinkles loosened once again. "Sounds nice," she said and returned to the counter.

"She's a little old for you to try to impress, isn't she?" Jamie said. The knife of mustard shook in her hand while she laughed.

I frowned, spreading ketchup across the inside of my hamburger bun. It was mushy and the ketchup didn't want to stick. "I wasn't trying to impress her. She asked a question."

"Why don't you tell her how you made the B honor roll in fifth grade while you're at it?" Jamie said.

Biting into the hamburger, grease and ketchup slid down my fingers and coated my nails. I put the burger down on the plate and cleaned my hands. I watched Jamie gingerly pick a piece off the bun and nibble on it. She then took a fork and broke off a larger piece. Over her shoulder, my eyes met Ray's. Clouds from the night sky held little more darkness

than his pupils. Our shared gaze was short, broken by the continued arguing of his wife. She took another spoonful of ice cream and pecans, and then the spoon dropped to the table. The sound of metal on wood rang through the room.

Ray's companion stood up and pushed the chair away. It collided with the chairs at the table behind her, sending all three crashing to the floor. The metal legs hummed like warped tuning forks. Her hand grasped her throat. A gagging cough emitted from her. Her body shook and quivered, spasms rolling over her with every gasp. She held onto the table for support with her free hand. Ray remained seated, scooping more egg onto his fork even though the table shook furiously beneath him.

The men turned on their barstools and the waitress screamed. No one moved.

Ray's wife fell to her knees and I saw her face. Life drained from her skin, leaving her complexion a ghastly pale yellow. She must have been pretty beneath the death gripping her. Drops of saliva and ice cream ran from her lips and dropped to the floor. She stopped coughing and a long, weak sound of attempted inhalation took its place.

Ray broke apart a biscuit and slid one half across his plate, coating it in egg yolk. His eyes again lifted and his storm passed while the woman's eyes drained. Ray took the biscuit into his mouth. He repeated the motion with the other half.

Except for Ray and Jamie, the restaurant remained frozen in a state of confusion. The only sounds were the woman fighting to live and football announcers. Jamie broke through the spell, sprang from her chair and straddled the woman's back. Her slender arms circled the woman's chest and met in a fist beneath her. Ray mopped up egg remnants with his last biscuit. Jamie's small frame strained with every thrust of her fist against the woman's ribcage. Her jaw protruded horribly. Jaime dropped the woman to her knees, then tensed

and jerked her up once more. The woman let out a long, hoarse gag. A pecan shot from her lips, bounced off the floor, and slid like a hockey puck into the nearest baseboard.

The woman remained on her hands and knees while Jamie kneeled beside her with a napkin. She dabbed the woman's saliva-covered chin and lips. Ray looked across the table to the floor. A sneer turned his lips. Dropping a ten and a five on the table, he stood up and glanced down at his wife. His greasy hands worked the wedding band from his finger and dropped it in the ice cream bowl. The black oil on the ring slid from the gold, spread across the melting white and they mixed into an ugly gray.

Ray's eyes swept the crowd staring at him speechless.

"You can't judge me," he said. He walked across the restaurant to the door. His hand dug into his pocket for his keys. Finding them, he left.

His wife rose to her feet. Her legs trembled beneath her. She reached down into the bowl and dug out the wedding ring and then ran for the door. The people in the restaurant only watched. No one spoke. Football coverage had ended in the confusion and was replaced with the sound of golf highlights. "Can you believe how easy he makes that look?" one of the commentators said. The golf course was silent, a ball dropped into a hollow plastic cup, and then the crowd went wild.

Dropping our money on the tabletop, we left. A rusty, red truck pulled out of the gravel parking lot. Ray sat on the driver's side and his wife huddled against the passenger door.

Jamie and I got into my car. I turned to her, but she was staring out the side window.

"I don't want to talk about it," she said. Her breath spread across the inside of the window, coating it in a white mist.

"I think we should head back," I said. The edges of the storm passed across my windshield and continued north.

"I don't want to. We're close and the storm's gone. We can worry about the car later." Jamie continued to stare out the window and past the gray, cinder block restaurant. Lightning struck in the distance from the direction in which we had just traveled.

I started the car and the engine hummed. Before I pulled out of the parking lot, the grinding beneath hood began again. My neck tensed, my stomach turned queasy, and I turned the car back onto I-24 south.

Straightening the Askew

My fingers bled from the blisters until the handle of the hammer turned slick and slid from my hand. My palms were raw and pink as fresh meat. The pounding produced by the blisters felt like the veins rested on the outside of my skin. I laid the hammer down and stood up from the uncompleted frame of the deck. My father and brother worked on the opposite end, moving faster than me, nailing the beams to the cemented supports. They left me behind at the other end, thinking to eventually catch up and overtake me. I walked across a beam and into the house. My shoes were covered in mud and I left a trail across my brother's wooden floors. In the utility room, I rummaged through boxes of rags and pulled out two of the cleanest. Leaving an opposite trail of prints on the way out, I took a roll of black electrical tape from the toolbox. Ritchie and my dad never looked up and I refused to complain. I laid one rag across my right palm and I wound the tape around the back of my hand to hold it tight. Dressing my left hand was harder since the right was thick and awkward with the cotton rag bandages. Blood seeped through the white fabric in small spots. I lowered myself through the frame and took the hammer. The texture of the cotton pressed into the open sores and rubbed against the nerves. The homemade band-aids would not stop the damage from occurring again, but would slow it down. The hammer no longer slid back and forth in my hand.

"Are you about done over there?" my brother asked.

"I've got another three feet left to nail before going to the next one."

"Hurry up. It's almost one o'clock and I want to have the floor on it before you and Daddy leave today," he said.

"I'm going as fast as I can," I said, reaching up and wiping sweat away from my forehead.

"What's that on your hand?" he said. He laid his hammer down to scrutinize my nursing abilities.

"What's wrong?" my father asked.

"I had a few blisters," I said, taking up the hammer again and positioning a nail in one of the side planks.

"A blister?" my brother said. "Those college hands haven't been out here three hours and you've already got blisters?"

"They aren't bad," I said, "I just didn't want to make them worse."

"You need some gloves?" my dad asked. He talked and nailed at the same time.

"I've got a few in the basement that my wife uses to plant flowers," my brother said.

"I'm fine." Their hands were tougher than mine. Their palms were lined with tiny calluses.

"Are you sure? How about some suntan lotion?" my brother said.

I looked down at my tank top. The sweat-stained blue shirt stuck against my bare shoulders. White splotches had sprung up against the bright red of my skin. I was far past burnt.

"The longer you talk, the longer this'll take," I said.

"Just keep going," my father said, "you'll be all right." His smile was reassuring.

My father examined each beam and then held a level up against them to make sure they were straight. Only when positive of their position, he laid the level carefully down on the beam in front of him. I had never seen that level before and wondered where he had been keeping

it. He must have kept it hidden pretty well since Ritchie had lost most of his tools over the years. My father held a nail to the wood and buried it in with one blow of the hammer. "Leave him alone," I heard my father say to Ritchie. "You're lucky he came at all."

"I guess. Figures he'd show up instead of Butch. I called Butch's ass last night and he swore up and down he'd be here," Ritchie said. Butch was Ritchie's father-in-law. Even though Daddy and I were there, Ritchie needed to impress his father-in-law, even with something as simple as building a deck. He wanted to show off since Butch's money meant so much to him. Ritchie's issue with money was partly why we were there. Ritchie had been too cheap to let the builders attach a deck when they completed the house.

Ritchie's house was enormous. It was covered in a pretty brick Ritchie's wife Gina had picked out after seeing it on the Home and Garden channel. The two floors and full basement contained four bedrooms and three baths. There was plenty of space for the two of them. Each room was decorated from various magazine cover stories. A person moved from one decorating genre when walking from one room to the next with no transition or individuality. One bedroom was filled with country blues and wooden cutouts of little children with twine bows in their hair. Another consisted of Grecian columns running from the floor to the ceiling surrounded by marble-topped furniture.

The house sat on forty acres of land, thirty of which Ritchie used for farming and tending livestock. His land contained a large pond and he continuously talked of stocking it with fish when he had the time. The farm was a large toy play set costing him thousands of dollars a year. Lucky for him, Gina didn't mind. It kept him outside while she concentrated on her next decorating trend.

I reached for another nail and held it against the wood. The hammer glanced off the edge of the head and bent it down. I let it drop to the ground without a word. I had probably bent more than I had driven.

My dad and I came out earlier in the day to cement the base beams into the ground. The weather was cooler before the sun rose from the tree line and suspended high over our work area. Fair-skinned and bookish, my skin sizzled and my sweat glands gushed in the heat of the Tennessee summer.

My brother and father separated and took different rows of support beams. After another hour, we all met in the middle. Blood stains covered the complete palm of my hand, but I kept my fingers balled to hide them. We took a break and sat on the corner of the frame. Ritchie's backyard sloped, leaving our feet dangled inches above the mud and grass while the other side sat nearly flush to the ground.

"You okay?" my dad said. He patted my leg and sweat splattered from my sweat drenched shorts.

"Yep. Think we'll get the floor on today?" The cotton bandages were so drenched with blood; I could no longer feel the texture of the fabric on the open blisters. My father's shirt was drenched in sweat, and mud smeared across the legs of his pants and down the sides and bottoms of his old tennis shoes. I never saw my father with a new pair of shoes. He bought his at garage sales, not because he had to, but because he loved a bargain. When anyone asked what size he wore, he always said, "Anywhere between a nine and a twelve."

"You're going to be hurting in the morning," my brother said, pointing to the tops of my shoulders. "You should have gotten that suntan lotion."

"I think it was too late by the time you offered."

“Well, I think we did good for someone who’s never built a deck before,” my dad said. He looked over the frame tightly nailed to the house, twenty feet wide and thirty feet long. It made a pretty wooden skeleton. “I know it’s the first thing I ever made that came out square.”

“Maybe that’s because you used a level and chalk line this time,” Ritchie said.

“I should try that more often,” my dad said. He picked up his level and held it to one eye while he squinted the other. The little bubble in the center swam around until flying to the top when he lowered it to the beam next to him. The level was constructed completely of wood, except for the little glass tube holding the air bubble. I was certain I had never seen it before. My father usually used a smaller level, solidly made of stainless steel and it always looked new. The metal was hard to scratch. This level was scratched and chipped in most places. It looked ancient and made by some long ago tribe of carpenters. Just under one of the eyes, the initials S.P. were engraved.

“Who’s S.P?” I said, picking the level back up and laying it across my lap. I wanted to run my hands across it to feel the smoothness of the wood, but I was unwilling to remove my bandages.

“Your grandfather. Sim Pike. He was a brick layer. The man could tell you how many bricks it would take to build something just by looking at the frame. Never used math or nothing that I know of. He was good.”

Ritchie got up, took off his shoes and walked into the house.

“You never talked about him much.”

"No, he died before you were born," my dad said. "Most of what I know about him, I heard from other people. He was a hell of a bricklayer, I know that. And he loved to gamble, so he wasn't home much. That's about all I know."

"He sounds mean," I said. The level held the initials of a man who was once my kin. He had carved them in a simple tool, and then he was gone.

"He was. Only whipped me once. That's all it took. I never was cross with him again. One time I slept outside on the front porch all night because I didn't want to knock on the door after he'd already gone to bed."

"What time was it?" I said.

"Barely after nine. I had gotten home late from playing football. I knew better than to wake him up. That's about it," my dad said. "I knew who he was. I knew what he did for a living."

"Do you wish you had known him better?" I said.

"Sometimes. Then sometimes, I don't guess it matters. Too late to worry about it."

I could relate to my father's image of his father. It was very similar to what mine had been a few years before. I couldn't remember my father ever speaking around the house except to talk about work. When I was twelve, he and my mother separated for six months, then he came back, only different. He talked and joked; he worked around the house more and talked about his job less. I asked my mother what the difference was. She said, "I don't know about him, but I stopped trying to make him something he wasn't. I decided to let Roger be Roger."

Ritchie came out with a glass of water and a scowl. "Who the hell tracked mud all through my house?"

"I did," I said. "I had to go get some rags for my hands."

"Dammit. Now I'll have to clean that when we get finished with this," he said. He sat down on one of the beams and put his shoes back on. "I think you should have to clean it up."

"It ain't my house," I said.

"We don't have much left," my father said. "We'll be done before you know it. You'll have plenty of time to get that mud up before your wife sees it."

"It ain't got nothing to do with her. I don't like looking at it and I shouldn't have to clean it up," Ritchie said.

"Bullshit," I said. "I know you wear the apron in this house." I stood up and walked over the pile of boards to be used for flooring.

My dad reached over and drank the rest of Ritchie's water. "How come you didn't bring everybody some water?"

"You know where the kitchen is," Ritchie said. He picked up four planks and walked to the opposite end of the deck frame.

"I wouldn't want to give you more dishes to wash along with mopping the floors and doing laundry," my dad said.

I grabbed two boards and followed Ritchie. Daddy said earlier that we could only start at one end to make sure they came out straight at the other. "Couldn't just throw boards down and start nailing," he had said. After we laid out three feet of the wood, and measured and leveled, everything was ready to nail. Before the first nail was driven, we stopped to stare at a new, bright blue pickup truck pulling up into the driveway.

"Damn, there's Butch now," Ritchie said. "Figures he would show up just when the hard work was done."

A tall man in overalls got out of the truck. A shiny hammer glistened, hanging from one of the loops on his denim pants. He wore a John Deere hat and I couldn't see a single scuff on his work boots. Ritchie didn't like Butch. He said it numerous times. But whether he liked him or not was irrelevant. Butch helped finance the cows and tobacco on Ritchie's land.

Butch slowly climbed the hill of the yard, carefully choosing each step and sidestepping in areas of dirt or mud. "Well boys, how much we got left?"

"How's it going Butch?" my father said. "I haven't seen you since the wedding."

"I've been around. I'd gotten here sooner, but I had to help some of my hands take off some cows this morning." He walked around the outside frame of the deck, examining the structure, squinting one eye and then other to look up and down the beams to check their level. "You got a pretty good start here. Looks pretty near square I guess," Butch said.

My father said nothing, checked the straightness of the first board of the deck floor and hammered a nail.

Butch hoisted up onto the corner on the opposite end of the frame and put in a piece of chewing tobacco. "I built one of these for my son couple of years ago. Yep, it was probably five or six feet bigger than this one, but pretty close to the same. Each piece was straight as an arrow." He moved the wad of tobacco from one side of his cheek then the other until finally spewing a large, black glob of spit from his mouth.

Ritchie sat next to Butch and took a piece of tobacco from Butch's pouch. "We haven't done too bad," Ritchie said, surveying the work with a more scrutinizing eye than

before. The two talked of Ritchie's tobacco crop, how it was just about ready to cut and where they could find some Mexicans to cut it. My father sneered at the degrading way Butch said "Mexicans" but said nothing.

I positioned the next board and held it into place.

"Wait a minute," my father said, "did you level it?"

"Forgot," I said. I climbed out of the frame and walked down the outside to where Butch and Ritchie sat. The level lay underneath Ritchie's feet but he made no move to pick it up. They instead looked out over Ritchie's thirty acres. My dad watched them and he waited.

"You have to check every board. If just one is off, then the next one will be, until finally everything is and we'll have to start over. Every time you start something, make sure it lines up in the beginning. That way, you'll end up exactly where you planned. Now make sure."

I pressed the level against the plank. The bubble continued to move from one side to the other. I tapped my hammer on one side of the plank, then the other, barely moving it each time. Finally the bubble settled between the two lines.

"Go ahead," I said. My dad held the nail, and, again, one blow sent it straight down to the head. My father was once a carpenter, building furniture and repairing houses until he finally couldn't afford the price of enjoying his work. He took a job at a local factory. I don't think he liked it too much, using a machine all day to put brake rotors on new tractor trailers but the pay was triple his past salary. Some days he would come home, eat, and never say a word. From the dining room table to the recliner in front of the television, he would just sit, occasionally yelling at us to be quiet. When he came back after the separation,

he still worked the same job, but he enjoyed his time at home more. He began working on furniture again in his spare time, and the television was on less.

I pressed down on the board to keep it from moving while my father hammered. I moved down to the end after he was done, leaving a bloody palm print on the wood. "You know, we're about done here," my father said, "you can go ahead and go home if you want."

"I'll stay. I'd like to see it finished."

"Well, you can go inside and get some medicine and new rags."

The blood dripped from the edges of the fabric.

"No, I'm okay."

My father smiled. "I don't want to hear Ritchie whining about how you stained the wood," he said. "Go ahead; it won't take but a minute."

I took off my shoes before going in the house and found some Neosporin and new bandages for my hands.

When I came back out, Ritchie and Butch had still not moved. They remained perched on the corner of the deck frame, talking of future plans of cattle and how Butch might buy the adjoining sixty acres for Ritchie to work. My father had completed an eighth of the thirty-foot floor on his own. Without waiting to be told, I gathered four more planks and laid them on the ground next to him.

"Hey Roger," Butch said, "looks a little off right there. You might want to check it again." He pointed to a plank in the middle of the already finished section. My dad looked up with a calm expression.

"Looks straight to me," my dad said, continuing on with his nailing.

Butch lowered to the ground and walked over to my father, Ritchie followed close at his heels. Butch leaned over and squinted his eyes again. "Nope, that's plank is a little to the left too much. Give me that level a minute."

My father released a small short breath, lowered his hammer and picked up the level. Butch climbed down between the beams of the frame and held the level to the side of the board. He moved it back and forth along the eight-foot plank, checking every inch.

"You got to make sure before you lay another one," Butch said. Tobacco juice dripped down along the side of his chin and soaked into his black and gray beard.

"Butch was just telling me how he built a barn out at his place," Ritchie said. "He said a professional couldn't have done any better. It's got eight horse stalls and a huge loft."

"Must be a nice barn," my father said. He looked down at his watch, an antique Elgin he bought at a yard sale two years before. It looked to be worth quite a bit of money but he said he just needed one for telling time and didn't want to pay for a new one. Holding it to his ear, he listened to it for a moment, and then began winding it. The discount store band was covered in mud and the sewing around the edges tattered. He looked up to the sun. It was disappearing past the west corner of Ritchie's roof.

Butch stood up and pulled his hammer from the loop on the side of his overalls. "Seems to be out of square by a quarter of an inch." He tapped it a few times. "Your level must be off." He tossed the level to the ground and hit the plank again.

"I saw you check it twice," I said to daddy in between the sounds of the hammer.

"I know. Don't worry about it. It ain't our deck. If Ritchie doesn't want it done right then we'll just let him do his way."

Ritchie stood over Butch's shoulder. "Looks about right now," Ritchie said.

“No, needs a little bit more,” Butch said. He hit it a few more times with his hammer. The head showed slight signs of wear for the first time. “I think that should do it.” He held the level back up to the side of the plank. I saw the bubble bounce inside the liquid. It crossed the center line over to the left. “Yep. Roger I believe that old level of yours is off.”

After finishing, he dropped it to the ground, mud covering the leveling windows.

“We better get moving if we want to finish today,” my father said. His voice was calm and he spoke only to Ritchie.

“It’s just so damn hot out here,” Butch said. “How about me and Ritchie go grab some beer and some sandwiches?”

Ritchie looked at our father and then down at his watch. My father remained motionless. “It’ll only take about twenty minutes, then we’ll be right back,” Ritchie said.

“We’ll still be here,” my father said. He reached for his hammer. The head was old and worn and the handle had been replaced several times. It had slipped off a few times earlier in the day, so my father drove three nails into the top of the wooden handle to spread it out and keep the head tight. It still wobbled a little, but my father had little trouble out of it since.

Butch turned to climb out of the deck frame when we all heard a loud noise from beneath us. The sound was reminiscent of a tree falling beneath the heavy winds of a storm. Pieces of the level lay in the mud with its wooden frame cracked open and the glass windows busted. Green liquid seeped out of the leveling tubes and mingled with the dirt. The leveling balls rolled out of their now dry housing and disappeared beneath the mud.

“Well, shit. I’m sorry Roger, I forgot that was down there,” Butch said, staring at the broken pieces beneath his foot. He worked his way out of the frame and back to the outside ground. “I got a brand new one I can give you.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ve got another one in the truck,” my father said. He reached down and picked up the level pieces, spreading them out over the small section of the completed floor. The level was splintered across the middle.

“You sure?” Butch said.

“Don’t worry about it,” my father said.

“All right then. Come on Rich, I’m buying.”

Ritchie looked down at the level and then at our father.

“Go on,” my father said.

“We’ll be back, thirty minutes top,” Ritchie said. He raced down the hill after Butch.

My father was silent for a long time while sorting through the salvaged pieces. I reached over and touched his hand.

“Think you can fix it?” I said.

He chuckled a little and smiled. “No. It’s long past that, but it’s okay. It’s just a level.”

“I would have knocked him on his ass for that,” I said. I turned to watch the big, shiny blue truck throw gravel out of the driveway.

“No, you wouldn’t have.”

“And I hate seeing Ritchie run after him like a little puppy.”

“There’s a little bit of that in all of us. You wouldn’t be wearing rags and tape on your hands if you had went and got gloves in the first place. Why don’t you run down to the truck and grab that metal level out of the cab?” my father said.

I climbed out of the deck frame and made my way down the hill to the driveway. Rummaging through socket sets and screwdrivers, I found the metal level. It was cold and hard against my fingertips. A few spots of blood from my hands touched it, slid down its side, and left no stains on the smooth metal. I walked back up the hill, past the barbed wire fence housing a few cows and alongside the deck frame. My father still stood in the same spot, rearranging the pieces as best he could. The part where the initials of his father were carved was split in two. We worked for a three more hours, finishing with the floor with no sign of Ritchie or Butch. The sun peeked out from the faraway tree line and a purplish tint spread across the thin veil of clouds on the horizon. My father dropped the metal level a number of times, always picking it up and sliding it along his jeans to wipe away the mud. It still looked new and clean. We loaded my dad’s tools into the truck and headed down the driveway. The vinyl seat was hot on my sunburn and it ached even more. We passed Ritchie and waved when we met them on the road but my father didn’t turn around to drive back. The wooden pieces of the old level lay at my feet, tied in my father’s sweat stained shirt. My father silently reached down, picked it up and sat it in the seat between us. He held his hand across the level the whole way home, keeping it from sliding out of the seat.