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The University of Southern Mississippi

COMPANIONSHIP THROUGH STANDARD QUESTION AND ANSWER
ROUTINES

by

Ryan Saxon Davidson

Abstract of a Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate Studies Office
of The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

May 2009

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2009

The University of Southern Mississippi

COMPANIONSHIP THROUGH STANDARD QUESTION AND ANSWER

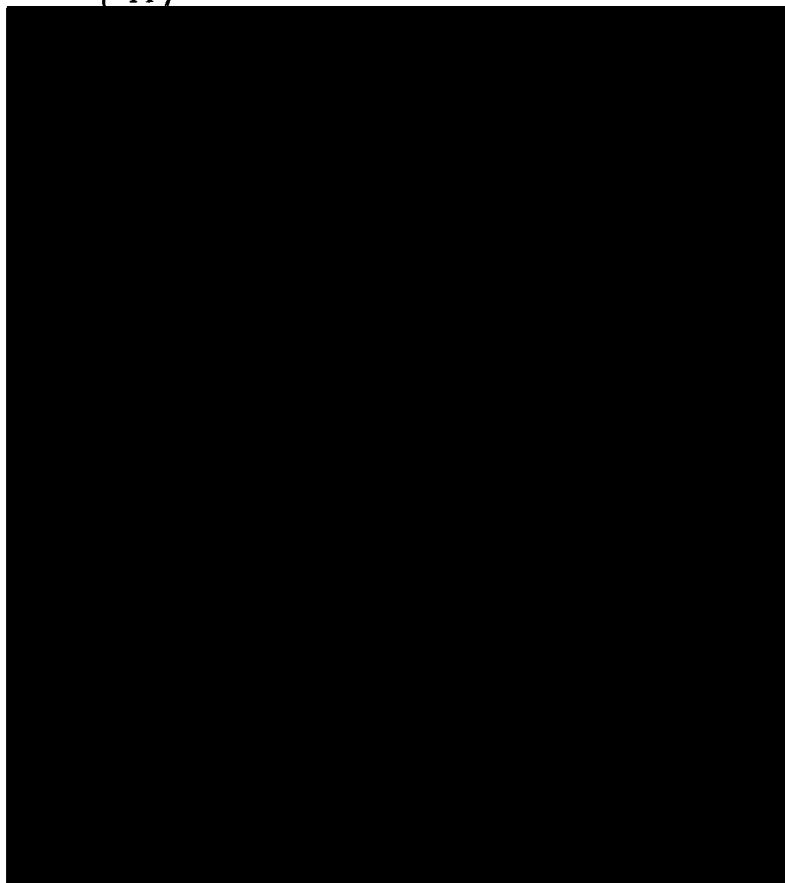
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ABSTRACT

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by Ryan Saxon Davidson

May 2009

Companionship through Standard Question and Answer Routines is a collection of short stories and short shorts dealing with the nature of human relationships and the ways in which people get to know each other.

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I would also like to extensively thank Rie Fortenberry who has answered far too many emails beginning with, "I know this is a stupid question, but" and has done so with a patience and expertise that is beyond what I could have expected. My great appreciation also goes out to the entire University of Southern Mississippi English Department staff and faculty for all of their guidance, tutelage and instruction. In particular Julia Johnson, Monika Gehlawat, Martina Sciolino, Phillip Kolin, and Linda Pierce have all been of tremendous assistance in a variety of ways. And last, but certainly not least, to Sefi Atta, my first writing instructor at Southern Miss and to Angela Ball, who helped salvage several very poor things in a very short summer.

INTRODUCTION

The first story I ever tried to write was about a time traveling dinosaur named Mr. Maggots. This was twenty four years ago. My parents were my only audience. They were both pleased. I had decided that Mr. Maggots should only speak in rhyming punctuation. I couldn't explain to them why I thought this necessary or exactly how it was possible. Although, I had plotted out on a separate chart (modeled after the basic food groups pyramid) some basic ideas. The semi-colon appeared at the top because it contained both the comma and the period. This, I seemed to feel was the point of clear divergence into one of two separate schools. Down one side of the pyramid I had all period related punctuation and down the other all having relations to the comma. In the center I placed dashes and parenthesis. Ultimately all I could surmise was that despite both containing a period-like dot, the question mark and exclamation mark were sworn enemies (which became my second story). The chart and the idea behind it always intrigued me more than Mr. Maggots who looked like one of my toys, except with a hat like Sherlock Holmes. Later that year, after seeing someone twist the bottom of their handwritten number two like an uppercase q, I created a cursive number system. This gesture, too, was based in the idea that I was doing something new and special and grown-up.

Perhaps my initial struggles with fiction can all be traced back to these two simple things when I was seven. I've always seemed to find the idea more compelling than the character. I've overestimated my originality.

It was my intention, when I began three years ago, to be different. Not a writer in the traditional sense who dealt with character, plot, setting, and themes, but a writer who

did things not even the brightest minds had considered. I thought this possible because I really had no idea what had been done before. Different, to me, equaled better, unequivocally. I was enraptured with the idea of Ben Marcus attacking the literary establishment and that by choosing to disregard the things I had been taught I would somehow become instantly a figure in this movement. Unfortunately this is a task that is much more difficult than I assumed and one that had been going on for much longer than I had originally thought.

So, I fell back to trying to rhyme punctuation. This led to a Great White and Komodo dragon battle royale, delicate ruminations over the bathroom habits of the domesticated Sasquatch, a poignant song by a sad Mogwai, a restaurant named Carnivore that specialized in gourmet hobos with fancy sounding sauces, and a mercenary with a penchant for fantastically colored unicorn portraits. None of which, in any shape or absurd form have been included here.

I began all of those stories with ideas that were more important to me than anything contained directly in the stories. They were cartoons with overwritten sentences. But the stories were helpful in that they made me realize I had to reconsider my goals. I started by reading more obscure texts. Names I had never heard of before or had limited access to but were mentioned in workshop in ways such as, “this reminds me of a poor man’s Pynchon” or “you should really read ‘Lost in the Funhouse’.” I read Rudolph Wurlitzer’s *Nog* and imagined the possibilities of traveling Octopus. Raymond Federman’s *Take It or Leave It* convinced me that I was not the first to imagine the post-structural novel.

During my undergraduate career at the University of Texas I had my first real exposure to contemporary fiction in a classroom setting. My favorite of the stories was Mark Costello's "Murphy's Xmas." It was poetic and elegant and the language moved on the page in a way that seemed to challenge what I thought was possible in fiction. I hated "The Indian Uprising" because I couldn't understand it and I did not want to take the time to try. What I took from this initial exposure was that you could do just about anything in contemporary fiction but I never took the time to go further than a brief overview.

Consequently, I had no theory behind what I was doing. More than anything I was pleased to put something on the page that I believed no one had conceived of before. In this way I assumed that people would want to read it. As Donald Barthelme explains in "Not-Knowing", "The not-knowing is crucial to art, is what permits art to be made. Without the scanning process engendered by not-knowing, without the possibility of having the mind move in unanticipated directions, there would be no invention" (12). This is Donald Barthelme taking an idea from Samuel Beckett and expounding on it and the concept in both instances is brilliant. However, that brilliance is limited when the writer is unaware of the process. My stories were unanticipated by myself and others. My problem was that at the end of a story I had no idea of what I had done.

I was working sentence by sentence and spiraling out of control in terms of the overall text. I did however in the process help to refine my voice and my sentence level diction. I cared ultimately about the sentence and in this way my sentences improved. I learned William Gass thought this same way about fiction - that it could be created sentence by sentence and without each sentence the next would not function. A simple

concept and yet one that became much more complicated once I began to read his fiction and realized that his sentences were robust and beautiful and complex. In particular, “The Pederson Kid” is probably the story that has had the most profound influence on my writing and on my ideas about the entire writing process. It does everything a traditional story should do and yet by the end the reader is gripped by the intensity of the sentence level writing and the uncertainty of everything which has just been read.

The first story I work-shopped at The Center for Writers was entitled “NatureFights.” It began, “Luck is for leprechauns and jockeys changing horseshoes and I’m not short.” It ended a George Saunders knock-off in which characters, plot, and the writing itself were all in a state of constantly trying to one-up themselves. The one-upmanship was my idea for the story, that this thread alone could sustain the entire piece and that readers would read on to see what could possibly happen next and eventually make ties to their own outside existence in which good was never good enough. Admittedly, this was a weak premise so I included zombie squirrels, the smell of wolverine guts, and the free fall of a worker into the midst of a “seething liquid tank of vengeance” to as I saw it, balance things out.

Here the influence of others began to become a detriment as I looked to their work as direct models of what I should be doing instead of what had already been done. So my voice became at varying times impersonations of George Saunders, Donald Barthelme, John Barth, Robert Coover, David Foster Wallace, and William H. Gass. Actually they were more impersonations of an idea of these authors in the same way that for a time people had impressions of Bob Dole. They weren’t made by watching and

studying Bob Dole, they were done by imitating the comedians on Saturday Night Live imitating Bob Dole.

There are stories that follow, in this collection, that invoke the natural order, the balance of nature and mankind, the joy that is found in the comfort of animals. The confusion of it, the human manipulation of it, the slap happy way in which animal cruelty is shown as a way to judge human nature. "NatureFights" was supposed to engage that on some level as well, but it worked the other way and became part of a process in which the cruelty was glorified instead of attacked.

I tried again. I hit someone with a car. It was explained like this:

People are afraid of small boys on interstate highways. This goes beyond their diminutive size and speaks to certain insecurities of the community at large. Maybe it is the exaggerated climate of the situation, the heavy pant of the city's breath rolling in both directions, the predictability of drive time radio moving back and forth in a steady purr of motors and overworked air conditioners that drives people to this conclusion. Or perhaps it is further evidence of a lack of proper faith in the strength of more vigilant youth initiatives.

Of all of the mess Charlie Munger remembers nothing. Not the howl of horns and smoke screech tires. Not his shoes dancing off the pavement, one two, flip slide bounce. No recollection of a tightly bound woman vomiting in her cupped hands or the smell of his singed arm hair. He is unsure of the sound his leg makes when the bone pops through the skin, but he figures it plays like a sledgehammer to a walnut in a slim bag of water.

When he emerges, bandages still solid crisp, the doctor tells him that sometimes its better we don't remember. It's the body's way of telling us we're not ready. Later he overhears the good pastor and the doctor speak outside his room.

"That boy must be destined for great things yet," says the doctor.

"He ain't ever gonna be right again," says the pastor.

He thinks it will soon come rushing up like an advancing army over an enemy hill

at daybreak: Clarity.

Charlie Munger was at one time a small boy laying in the middle of an interstate traffic jam caused by his lack of speed in conjunction with the seeming force and power of a gassed up, fully loaded Hyundai in a sudden and spectacular spider webbed windshield crack. Not many people have this opportunity. To lie down on the warm moving highway, to have the city stop itself; he took a deep breath that lasted until they pumped him twice.

The phrase “it plays like a sledgehammer to a walnut in a slim bag of water” is particularly telling. If characters may be reduced to one moment that defines them, then too, perhaps this writing may be as well. I wasn’t sure what that meant when I wrote it and I’m not exactly sure why I thought it sounded good either. “She reminded him of a cantaloupe in the rain,” was another choice bit of high fiction. This, I finally realized, was not going to take my writing where it needed to go. Not knowing in the process is interesting and entertaining and pushes towards the text creating itself on the page and through the author. What I was doing instead was manufacturing absurdities and trying to sell them as truths that I had no basis for and no real knowledge of.

So I moved on. John Hawkes famously listed among his many enemies plot and character. I read this quote before I ever read John Hawkes and assumed his writing would invoke some sort of abstract idea of the world. Instead I found that his writing was brilliant and the form and structure of his work informed the work in much the same way that other authors would use plot. He hadn’t subtracted wholly the idea of the traditional story; instead he had replaced one device for another and used it in a fashion that challenged perceived notions about the novel.

I stand by the idea that character cannot be replaced as easily as plot. But I also acknowledge that my understanding of character is based on the idea that people can sometimes be broken down into one sentence. One scene can describe an entire existence, a worth to the outside world. A daily existence seems to me more related to short shorts and tiny incidents than the traditional arcs of short stories. Perhaps on some level that is why I have incorporated so many of the smaller pieces within this collection. I am interested in the human responses to the self, to the need for others, in the cycles of

improvement and self-defeating behavior. What we know and what we pretend to know. How we move through the world with questions unasked and things left unsaid and how quickly this all seems to occur.

Initially, the title of this collection was “Of Things Left Unsaid” because I thought it realized a certain sadness in human existence. The regret of having not said the things you wanted and the anguish of not hearing the things you expected. Ultimately though it came down to the questions and answers given and the inherent idea that most of what is answered is unsaid. The gestures and postures of people as they move through their interactions, gaining friends and lovers and sidekicks and enemies all the while not entirely sure of what they are doing. There are no interviews here or stories here that are direct question or answer responses. Instead the characters themselves are moving to ask and answer questions in a way that allows them to pretend that they are merely moving throughout the world.

I was told recently that as you age it becomes much more difficult to find friends. It isn't like when you were five and you simply just asked. Grown-ups have a responsibility to be stringent in their circle, to choose wisely their company. Inherent in this idea is a system of judgment which isn't entirely different from the series of judgments in elementary school. The opportunities are much rarer though. We began with something as simple as would you like to play. We've ended up with a complex system in which we are unable to give away too much while balancing what we need in terms of companionship.

Several structures reoccur throughout this collection. There are questions and answers and companionship as the title suggests. There are also lists and segmentation

and the use of numbers as way to try and understand the world. Animals are mentioned, killed, saved. People redeemed, lost, cared about, and disregarded. They move quickly like the responses of questions and answers and in their limits I hope they are able to accomplish at least some sort of brief truth. I also acknowledge a fondness for the dumb joke. An appreciation for some childish things that despite many, many edits still find their way into a few moments within these stories.

I have also become increasingly enamored with the possibilities of brevity. In the foreword to *Lost in the Funhouse*, John Barth writes, "Short fiction is not my long suit. Writers tend by temperament to be either sprinters or marathoners, and I learned early that the long haul was my stride". I've taken to sprinting lately. Perhaps because I like to imagine people in specific moments that can categorize them and not in long extended arcs where they squirm and shift and end up as something I didn't expect. These characters and these plots could not be sustained over a long race. They are built, created, and trained to be maintained in a short distance world where their reaction to a perceived wrong is much more important than the history of their town, a dead body they found in the third grade, or the way their hair shimmers. In this way I am still a seven year old who is concerned with an idea, but I have learned that there are things perhaps more intriguing than rhyming punctuation and cursive numbers.

THE WAYS IN WHICH WE KNOW THEM

He also wasn't white. This was the second clue that the baby was probably stolen. The first was that Lance had never mentioned a child in his many abbreviated talks with his mother. Or if he had, she neglected to tell me and she told me everything. (After all I was her Charles). The third was there was no mother for said child. The fourth was that he introduced it to me as Victor and later to a couple passing by as Vince. He was a beautiful little black baby that could not have come from Lance. It seemed I was the only one who cared.

I had met Lance once before, the last time his mother was sick. He was arrested for breaking open a biohazard refuge unit with used syringes. (He said later, simply out of curiosity as to the contents). This on the very same floor his mother was stationed. I had to distract her with a rather hasty rendition of her favorite of my many poems "As the Great Mammoth Slumbers, I Weep". A brusque woman in Kermit the frog scrubs subdued him until the authorities arrived and he was led out in handcuffs. I was forced to relate to his mother that he had rather hastily traveled back to Santa Barbara on urgent business and she seemed pleased by the idea, although she knew full well she supported him completely financially. Later she was a bit more silent than usual. And by a bit, I mean only slightly, or only to her Charles who had spent so much time around her that I could tell when exactly things were only a miniscule amount off. To all others, I'm sure she seemed to be still the ever jubilant, garrulous, well-mannered Victoria.

Still, this had been some time ago. He appeared to have grown more into his face. His cheekbones not longer so jutting and off-putting, but more relegated to the normal contours of an ordinary face. In addition he seemed to have cleaned up a bit, seemed a

bit more proud of his appearance. His shirt was pressed, it had a collar. His hair appeared to have been cut by a professional and not at random, in the dark.

We had been together for nearly an hour. It may have appeared to passersby that we were a father and son reunited after a long and arduous journey. These people would have been dangerously wrong, as they are often apt to do. He arrived in a white Explorer with sharp angles along the roof. Vince was strapped in a baby carrier, facing backwards in the middle of the rear seat. Lance stepped out and opened his arms as if to hug me and I instead offered my hand as a mature and generous way of offering my greeting. I've always been uncomfortable with hugs. Yet, even more so with complicated handshakes. They make me feel like I am in some foreign place and are aged beyond recognition. There should be some planning or understanding between two people – an agreement on how it should all transpire. But, no, it doesn't work that way, instead our hands slapped together, our collected fingertips mingled and clasped and as he pulled away he snapped his fingers. I did not snap my own. I felt the fool.

I had at first, naturally, thought the car seat was empty and jumped back in fright when I saw the child.

“That’s Victor,” he said. “My son.”

“Oh. And when did this happen?”

“Not very long ago, Chuck, look how little he is.”

Things proceeded in earnest from there, but I never felt we arrived at any sort of truth. Instead he seemed eager to introduce the child (still Victor at this point) to his mother and to check on her health. I led him to the guest room. Provided him with a stack of clean towels and sent one of my coworkers out for diapers, baby food, and a few

different handbooks of varying expertise in the ways of child rearing. I also phoned Miss Victoria's lawyer and informed him of said situation on a long and discreet message in which I made sure not to incriminate either Victoria or myself in any manner except as citizens of great regard.

We could not visit her for another hour, so I suggested we get something to eat, as he must be very hungry after such a long drive from California. He agreed, and despite all my inclinations to the contrary, he felt it necessary to include the child who had woken and begun to scream as we contemplated our choices for lunch. I convinced him of the worth of a small Thai place with interesting curry dishes.

Our waitress was of dark complexion with bleached blonde hair. She spoke naturally, without accent and as Lance removed the blue towel covering the carrier she broke into an exaggerated noise of delight that I may only assume is the natural reaction to a child of immeasurable beauty.

"Boy or girl?"

"Boy"

"How old?"

"Seven and a half months"

This I know now is the common way in which people connect over small children. They delight over their overly delicate and petite features and then they address a series of queries directed at knowing this child, connecting with this child, deciding on the worth of this child as being a normal part of society. I would prefer people kept to themselves and limited their questions to the parents. How long have you two been together? Do you fight often? Love more often? This, of course, I realize as an

impossibility, people would rather know of children, because there is little to know outside of their vital information. If we could all only know each other simply in these terms, life might be a bit easier. Boy or girl? How old? Do they sleep through the night? As I contemplated these many mysteries, I unfortunately had become somewhat distracted and became aware that both the waitress and Lance were staring at me quite perplexed.

“You ready to order?”

“Yes, I believe I am, if my friend here is, that is. Whenever he is ready. I am ready.”

Lance ordered the Phad See Euw and produced a small jar of tan baby food that he placed on the table. I asked of the specials and ordered a yellow curry and soft shell crab dish that the waitress recommended. There was a long uncomfortable silence in which he proceeded to unscrew the lid to the jar and with a tiny spoon begin to place tiny portions into the child’s mouth. I took this opportunity to open up conversation and to make him feel more comfortable.

“Where is the mother?”

“The mother?”

“Of the child.”

“Oh, she’s back in Santa Barbara. She couldn’t get off work on such short notice. And she suggested I just take Victor with me, so mom could see him, you know, just in case.”

“Why didn’t you tell Victoria before?”

“As you can tell, the baby doesn’t exactly look like me. Me and the Mom weren’t on the best of terms after he was born. We weren’t on the best of terms beforehand either, I mean I didn’t even know until she was about five months along and then I just kind of went with it. I didn’t want to tell mom because you know how she gets, she would have flown right out there and been around.”

“So this child has not been abducted?”

“Chuck, you never cease to challenge everything I understand as normal in a human being.”

But you see, he never said no. Here I knew for certain that this baby was not only not his, but somewhere a heartbroken mother wept without solace. I decided to save this child and return it to the mother, whoever she may be. Her shocked and grieving bosom heaving in conjunction with the slow and tragic beat of a slowly breaking heart. In my travels I once witnessed a peacock shot with an arrow, I imagine it being something like that.

But first I needed to know more, so I went along with his lies all the while believing none of them. He for his part fed the child and then did Sudoku in a newspaper taken from a neighboring table while I fished through my curry for the separated claws and sternum of my meal. It did not satisfy me in the normal fashion. I still felt under the weight of a tremendous force that was beyond my control.

We rode together to the hospital. He drove and I sat in the back seat next to the child who had fallen asleep. Our eyes met many times in the rear view mirror. Yet, I was unsure whether or not it was simply a trick of perspective. That he had in fact been checking on traffic, when from my viewpoint it seemed he was checking on me. I have

always had this trouble with mirrors. I am never sure who exactly is looking at me and who is looking past me.

Greta was working at the desk in the center of Victoria's floor. She raised one finger as we approached as to make us aware that she was on the phone, although very clearly she was and assuredly I was not going to make that mistake again. Her desk and its many varied contents seemed too open and exposed, folders were strewn haphazardly, a small stack of prescription forms had collapsed upon itself. This did nothing to promote the sort of sophisticated secrets hospitals should encourage. I could have simply walked behind there and done as I pleased. Fouled many important records, stolen things, created general disarray. Instead we waited patiently and I pointed at the closed door of Victoria's room.

Greta hung up the phone and took a deep breath. She turned to us.

"Hello Greta, this is Lance, Victoria's son, he has come to check on her health and to show her quite a large surprise," I paused her and pointed to the child carrier. "It is alright, I suppose, to have this sort of great shock. It shouldn't actually kill her? If not, by all means, I can hold this child out here while Lance goes into to say his hellos."

"Her condition is not heart based, neither are there any reasons why I think having a nice surprise would do anything but cheer her. So go on ahead."

She seemed overly pleased with this answer as if it completed some long drawn out quest in which she had fought beasts somehow larger than even herself and traversed marshes and beaches and dove over the crests of waterfalls and arrived somehow dry and purged of everything but the righteous decision of her own worth. Greta then offered her hand to Lance who shook it without any of the complicated rigmarole connected with our

own greeting. I gave a look to imply my dismay, but she went back to her work without a glance in my direction.

While Lance had been educated at UCSB and never put his degree to use, I was self-educated, self-made (whatever the term may now be). Everything I learned was on my own and with only the heart-felt desire to indeed be a much better person. This difference in our histories is perhaps what most set us apart. Having been given it all and not wanted any of it, Charles was a figure who could not appreciate things as I could. Could not value the worth of others who had not been given anything, but were forced to take. I could see it in the way he moved, dealt with people. He approached his mother's room as if this were just another inconsequential moment in a sophisticated life. He laughed, smiled, tickled the child.

We entered together. After a brief gasping (in which I was almost tempted to call for a nurse) Victoria suggested I wait outside while she spoke with her son. I have seen Victoria at her worst and it seemed to me that Lance was moments away from getting quite a lecture, after which I was sure child services would be arriving to take the child back to its respective parents. I walked to the end of the hallway and tried to drink from the water fountain, but the pressure was too low and the stream barely moved out and away from the silver spout. Parched as I was I was not willing to take the chance of my lips grazing such a bacteria colony. The puffed cracked smacks of the diseased and their spit so vile that upon close inspection the tiny circle from which the water spewed forth appeared to be rotting into rusted decrepitude. I returned to the room. I did not pass the open rectangular window in the door, but waited at the edge of the door frame. I listened.

“Victor Vincent Marks,” he said. “We usually call him Vince, that’s Kelly’s grandfather’s name and Victor, that’s after you.”

“Um,” she said. “But he doesn’t really look like you, honey. Is it possible? Have you done the tests?”

There was something said of a grandmother and nothing of larceny. Perhaps this is what she wanted to hear, to know that things kept going, were to keep moving without her and then I heard sobbing. I walked away. I passed by Greta, told her the child was stolen, and continued through the heavy hospital doors into the staircase, outside into the open air, waiting for someone to congratulate me.

THE PROBLEM WITH VILLAINS

Marshall once dated a girl with a mustache. Her name was Heather. They were in love, or at least it seemed so, until one day it was clear she wasn't and he decided, because it made it all much easier, that he never was either. There was no way to bring it up. The thought of talking to her about the mustache intimidated him. He decided someone had to have said something and she either didn't believe them or didn't care. Or perhaps she really loved the thing. Heather was well liked and had many friends.

Once he asked if she could ever change anything about her appearance what would it be and she said she would make her eyebrows thinner. He thought about it and then asked is that all. She said well I wouldn't be so fat either. But this was a joke because Heather was a twig.

By the time things were coming to a close, the mustache was beginning to grow out of control, twist and emerge at the ends like that of a villain. But only up close where the tiny black hairs seemed to magnify as he moved closer to her lips. Mostly they did it in the dark; her choice, not his. Besides her arms, and her eyebrows, she was not very hairy. He wanted the breakup to be a large fight, so he could use the mustache against her and make her cry. Doesn't your office have a policy against facial hair? - He would have said. Instead they became friends until they started new relationships. Then they drifted apart.

Years later he saw her after a show downtown and the mustache was gone. The guy she was with was shorter than her and wore a band t-shirt over the shirt he'd obviously worn to the show. He was very affectionate and held her tight by her waist.

Marshall wondered if the short guy was the one who made her get rid of it. He wondered how he might have asked. This thought crushed him.

WHAT YOUR SUPERPOWERS SAY ABOUT YOU

She wanted to be invisible which wasn't original. It meant she was going to be a stalker or had low self-esteem. Marshall hoped it meant she wanted to be able to get away with crimes. He once read a pamphlet about God entitled: "What Your Superpowers Say about You". It listed things like Compassion and Faith and Love as superpowers. He didn't think there was anything super about them.

He made his own list. If you wanted to be psychic you were a sexual deviant and masturbated frequently in public places. Shooting things from your eyes made you prone to addiction and generally likable although confused when it came to love while anything that came out of your hands, excluding fire (an entirely different matter altogether), produced an isolation similar to those tested on marine snipers. For some of these explanations he had substantial proof; for others he simply relied on reason. Many had sexual motivations, which, looking back helped understand the likelihood of having problems with himself.

He told the girl who wanted to be invisible that he wanted the ability to make any noise.

"Like the police academy guy?" she asked.

"More like an old Kung Fu movie. I want my hands to whip."

"Not very super."

"You want to be invisible," he said. "It makes me sort of sick. Should I fly instead?"

"Everyone wants to fly."

“Could you date someone who didn’t fly? If this was all you had, this power and you could fly all around the world, wouldn’t you go with someone who could do the same? “

“What about Lois Lane?”

“He was stuck with her. I’m sure if he had the choice of a flying girl or one he had to carry around all the time he’d do the flyer every time.”

“What if he didn’t love the ones who could fly?”

“You’re not being practical.”

FOUR SHOWS

1.

You had to know someone and we didn't. This made Tracy upset. She told me over and over. You have to know someone, she said. I didn't and had no plans to change it.

December (Among the Normals) what kind of a name for a band is that, I asked. No one has heard of them she said. That is why they are so important she said. We did this dance twice, three times. I left and picked up some sandwiches and when I came back she said she had a plan.

We followed the van around for most of an afternoon. It was driven by an old man, very conscientious of turn signals, poor at parking. He liked fountain drinks from convenient stores. She said he might know how to get to the show but he didn't and he did not like us following him. He said so and watched us leave in my car.

Tracy tells me without this experience her life will be emptier than before. Before, she said, I never knew. So I could be happy without ever seeing something I never knew existed. Now this is different. We shift about on opposite sides of the bed. Once I think I feel her fingers on my side, but it is only the corner of a bed sheet that has gotten wet and dried in an obscure fashion. She leaves early and when the alarm creases the morning I am alone.

How did you find out I ask. I found out she says. This isn't what I asked. I take it nonetheless. Tomorrow, she says. Tomorrow, sometime between noon and three.

I burn one side of the eggs and they end up brown and flaky. Tracy eats them anyway. I fix a bowl of Captain Crunch. Tracy dresses in all blue. Most of it looks

new. I refuse. She says I might be sorry. I find an old denim jacket and a Kansas City Royals tee with George Brett's number on it. Tracy tells me to change.

It looks like a barn, but I don't really know much about those things. Tracy calls it a house. But the bottom floor is too open to be a home and I think it smells of horses. We are the only ones there until five when the sun begins to fall and casts strange beams through the shuttered windows up top. We've been had, she says. This is the first time I've heard her use this expression.

2.

It is colder now. I've bought a new jacket with a hood stitched down below the collar. Tracy and I were on a break. We are back now. Most of her stuff is gone from my apartment. She still keeps a toothbrush with hard bristles next to mine. Mostly she just steals my old tee-shirts and boxers to sleep in and then forgets to leave them before she leaves. She always takes the best ones and I am left with a small collection of things no one else would want. She tells me I need to do more laundry.

I had forgotten about the band until she says they are returning. We are going to go. I don't argue. She wants to hire a private detective, but I tell her no and then later, that this might anger the band. She agrees. I pay one hundred dollars to a man in a blue December tee. He draws us a map on the back of a stained cocktail napkin.

When we arrive it is dark. There are a few cars parked alongside the road. I pull in behind a green Acura. We move towards a trail of long grass bent down in rows. In the distance is what looks like a line of torches. When we get closer, I realize they are old-fashioned lanterns with tiny candles inside. At a clearing in the middle of the woods

the band has arranged a circle of metal trashcans the way bums in movies do. The fires in each breathe in and out in exaggerated waves. One looks ready to go out. Perhaps thirty people outside of the band. Most are in blue. There is one attractive girl with a flower in her hair who appears to be alone.

The band checks the generators. They hum their own music. One picks up a guitar, another a trombone, drumsticks, etc. There are ten in all. The lead singer appears to be either Filipino or Malaysian. I am unsure if I completely know the difference. He nods to several people. Looks at Tracy and I, smiles uncomfortably, then more welcoming as if realizing his thoughts were too transparent through his teeth.

They begin to play. People nod their heads; shake their right foot, gyrate, jump up and down. Tracy is overcome with glee. Ten minutes pass without a word just a collection of guitars, drums, and brass moving up against and around each other and an oddly placed set of wind chimes that are strummed every few minutes by a bald man in a plaid shirt.

Finally he says, we are all just blue. And I don't know what to do.

I am like the ocean he says. Wash me away. Ride me away. Let me crash onto your rocky shore. ...

There are tears on Tracy's cheek. They reflect the light of the fires and suggest that perhaps I have missed something, everything. I am overcome with the idea that I can no longer enjoy things that make other people happy. Or be touched with universal sadness. This is the feeling of being grownup among the elderly. It is strange to be satisfied in being alone.

3.

People always prefer honesty until the truth is no longer happy. So I lie over and over and we end up more content that way. Happy hours and dinner parties where Tracy raves, complicates, tells them all what great fun it was. She says we're definitely going again, as soon as we hear. I say once is enough for me, enough to last a lifetime. She lets them know I am just kidding. Wish you all could go too, but you know it is very exclusive.

She hears from a friend that a show has passed without our knowing. In a warehouse early one morning while we sipped coffee and moved our fingers across keyboards and re-read memos and fidgeted in our separate offices, in our swiveling chairs, they mesmerized some distant crowd. I knew of this, beforehand, heard it from James. He is the same one who told her she missed it. He does not let her know that he let me know. This is how I know he does not want her. Yet, we are still not close friends and do not pretend to be.

Why wait until they come back, she asks. We can go find them. If only we knew how I say.

Another month passes. Tracy realizes she is pregnant. We decide to keep. The doctors suggest we don't have to tell anyone until a certain point has passed when we can be sure she won't lose it. We keep our mouths shut. Move about the world as if absolutely nothing has been altered.

December (Among the Normals) makes the news. One fan dies and two others are injured when a tree collapses into the crowd, trapping the three between the cracked bark and a lightly dusted snow bank. The band, it seemed, continued to play and the fans

continued to be excited. It was not until the instruments stopped that help was called and emergency personnel arrived. One of the injured says he would have done the same thing. All immediate shows have been cancelled. An investigation is ongoing.

4.

I wear my blue December tee twice a week now. Sometimes Tuesdays and Fridays, other weeks Mondays and Saturdays. I am stopped on the street by strangers who want to know all about it. I tell them everything. How great it was. How I felt like I was part of something new and just and breathtaking. Sometimes I tell them that I was once part of the band, but I moved on as they moved on, both in our separate directions towards a common goal. When they ask what I did I tell them I sung, but that was before I ruined my voice.

We tell everyone the news about the baby. It becomes more real, daunting now that it has been opened. They ask us all sorts of questions to which we have no answers. Mostly I say things that I hope are more correct than not. We are happy.

One day Tracy says I want to see them once before everything changes, before I am too big, before we are too much with responsibilities, before we have transformed into different people. I tell her I will find them but I won't because I know they will make her happier than I ever could.

PHOENIX

The first thing they told me: Scorpions. They crawl into your shoes, they said, and then they prick your toes. So make sure to upturn your shoes. I remember wondering if prick was the right word. You already know about the heat, they said, everyone does. And there are no gutters either because it doesn't rain enough to fill a boot.

Ed was the first to mention coyotes because he didn't want me to think he was late to a bar without reason. Carlos was in the back cutting fruit. He had told me that I could walk back and get Ed a beer and a shot when he arrived. We were the only ones there, but I didn't feel comfortable doing it, so I didn't mention it. Instead I said thanks a lot asshole, been sitting here by myself for an hour which like a lot of what I said at the time was a lie based in a truth I needed others to believe.

"They took Laurene's poodle," he said, "While she seasoned burgers on the grill."

Ed cleaned pools. Phoenix had lots of pools. Even the poor had them, but Ed only worked for the rich. When other pool cleaners went out of business or retired he would buy their customer routes if he had the money. The Scottsdale women liked him because he wasn't Mexican. The Retirees liked him because he showed them pictures of his daughter in her Halloween costume. I liked him because he bought me liquor and gave me high grade pain medication he lifted from some of the homes.

"Little bastard jumped the metal fence, had the dog in its jaws and was back over before she could even drop the Lowry's and I'm just kind of standing there like what in the heck am I supposed to do. I was just trying to bullshit a little bit maybe try to sneak

out with a burger to go and now she starts wailing like a freaking banshee and runs towards the fence with the spatula raised like it's a machete or a battle axe or something."

Carlos slid a Budweiser bottle and a shot of Jack across the bar. Ed stopped the story long enough to breath in and grit his teeth a bit. He looked down at the space in front of me and nodded in a way that meant another shot. I had learned by this point I could only hang out with Ed on nights when the mornings wouldn't be important.

"So, anyways, I go running after her scared there's like a whole freaking pack of these things waiting for her. Is pack the right word?"

"I think that's for wolves."

"Well, shit Raul, I know that's for wolves, but does it work for coyotes too?"

"Hell if I know. Maybe if you gave me that job you're always talking about I might be able to afford the discovery channel. Maybe some internet action too. Then I'll tell you all you want to know about bats and whales and javelinas."

"Carlos you know what a pack of coyotes is called? Actually not a pack, well maybe it is a pack, but whatever that is when a group of coyotes runs around together. Is that a pack? Or is it something different?"

"I think it's a pack, but shit if I know."

"Well, god-damn, it doesn't really matter either way. It was just. Look, alright, so I chase after her and try to grab her but she breaks free and is about to leap the fence when she stops. So I look out past the white bars of the fence and this coyote is just staring her down with the poodle in its jaws. I can't tell exactly but it looks like the poor thing is still sort of alive. It's not fighting or anything just sort of hanging there. And then the coyote just turns and sprints off. Laurene drops down and starts bawling.

Understandably. So, of course I have to stick around. I can't exactly just get up and say sorry about the doggie lady and thanks for the money and all but I got an ice cold Budweiser waiting on me and ain't shit going to hold me away from that."

"You took all that time to tell me why you were late? You could have just said you were sorry or said traffic."

"Traffic wasn't the truth. That was. If you don't like my stories I won't tell any more of them jerk," he stopped and smiled and nodded towards Carlos and pointed two fingers between the two of us.

Ed talked a lot when he drank. When he got really drunk he spoke of Veronica. Here's the quick version from what he has told me over many late nights and the long ride back from Prescott after I bailed him out: They were in love. He more than her. She left. Then she left him with hope that there still was hope. Then she crushed that too. The End.

This is probably how he would tell me to tell it (minus about five thousand extra words and questions to me about what the little gear thing is called on a ten-speed or what was the name of that guy who used to work at the Quiktrip with the funny ear and that kind of crap):

Ed hadn't seen Veronica in several years. He still received text messages from her, sporadically, and without reason. Almost all were mistakes, except for a few times when she asked if he had some old friend's number or sent something along like: *What was the name of that ninja movie on Cnemax, night u had the poison oak? something with fury in title?* Most were meant for other people, people he had never met, part of the life that began after he had ceased to be a part of hers. He was never sure if she was

mocking him or enticing him. Ed would show me these things when they got to him too much. I never saw one when he was sober.

Veronica lived in Prescott, now, an hour and a half north. Ed couldn't understand what was so hard about using a telephone, some difficulty she just couldn't master. Veronica had a degree in organic chemistry, never used, except in conversation, when she said things like, "I don't know how I ever made it through, I can't even remember what I did with my keys." That, he thought, must have something to do with it, she's just flighty, uncomposed, isn't that a sign of genius? Like bad handwriting? I told him I thought she was probably just like most women.

After the first dozen or so times it happened, he quit texting back, but he still always considered it, you could tell by the look on his face. Wouldn't even have to say a thing. He would just look at his phone and put it back in his pocket. About a minute or two later, shots on the way. Jack is what he normally drinks but when he wants to get real ripped forget his parents' names he drinks Scotch. Sometimes he started a message, erased it, restarted, and closed his phone, only to start typing a few minutes later, before stopping again. His most common response: *Don't think this was meant 4 me*. And then a smiley face. Sometimes sterner, more direct, usually if it was meant for a guy: *This is Ed, not _____*. He'd asked how she was a few times, off hand: *Don't think you meant to do this... everything cool w u?* She never answered those parts. Just wrote back: *Sorry... stupid phone or Shouldnt txt while drvng!* At first, part of him hoped that she was doing it on purpose, testing things out again. This wasn't rational, he knew, but he caught himself thinking about it more and more and convincing himself that of course anything was possible. He let me in on the whole business after I pissed his couch. I just

didn't wake up and I went. It's pretty regular occurrence from what I hear, but anyways, I guess he felt he could trust me after that because he had a secret on me.

But back to reality. I can't drive, so Ed takes me home. We can't find my house so I end up on his couch again. Ed lives in North Scottsdale with Lisa. A blocked complex with palm tree views, covered parking and an old black security guard named Nate. It was the first place he had lived with furniture that wasn't meant to be used. Ed's mother called Lisa a blessing. Proof that good people find each other in the end. She didn't actually know Lisa that well, and lived across the country in Boston, but she liked to believe what she said, that everything had finally worked out for her only son.

Lisa had inherited her father's pool cleaning route, although the two had spent little time together before his passing and some pointed to the route as one not conceived in earnest love, but rather for spite. But despite this, Lisa thrived with her father's old customers who had grown tired of watching him shirtless, smoking, sagging, dripping across their carefully landscaped backyards. Lisa bought uniforms for her men, clarified the business as aquatic maintenance and her workers as AME's (aquatic maintenance engineers), began to market, raised the route to 158 customers, raised her prices, relaxed. While her AME's worked, she chatted with her customers, got to know their names, problems, drank bad coffee, good coffee, had omelets prepared for her. Then she met Ed and decided to split it with him.

At the time Ed owned his own window cleaning service. Which was easy, because as he put it, anyone with a spray bottle and a rag could have their own business. But this was a modest assessment and he had refined his business, built a lengthy

clientele, necessary due to how little people needed to have their windows professionally cleaned. He made a decent living, paid his bills on time and put enough away to sneak off on a few trips a year. But there wasn't much else.

This is where we met. I sweated my ass off with him for about five months squeegeeing the fuck out of the sand and dust covered windows. Somehow I managed to work with him during the only months of the year in Phoenix where the weather isn't perfect. Then he fired me after one of his customers complained about some missing codeine pills. It wasn't really my fault, I just didn't know that Ed had taken a handful before I got to them and so after I took some more it was too noticeable. Most of these oldtimers don't really even need the stuff. They have these huge bottles of high grade deathbed burned to bits house fell on you too kind of stuff. Knock you on your ass, I mean we were probably doing them a favor. Plus it was so easy, they're always in the bathroom and no rich person ever denies you the use of their bathroom while you're working on the house because they're so scared you'll just screw things up on purpose. Which is probably the case anyway. Shit, now I am starting to sound like Ed. Back to another brief history lesson and then a real story in real time.

After Ed and Lisa had been together for three months she told him he could have part of the route. He'd be in charge, do all the work and only have to give her ten percent. The one problem with this setup was that whenever they fought, which was on average a few really large times a month, Lisa would take the credit cards, the keys to the truck and tell him to leave. She never directly threatened to take the business back from him, but of course it was there, known, waiting. He had walked away from his own

business, Dayco, windows, walls and doors and he knew none of his customers would be there were he forced to go back. Yet, he continued to nitpick Lisa over small things she did. Not refolding the newspaper when she was done with it. Leaving her razor in the shower.

The next message comes while we are all having lunch together. Ed looks at his phone, puts it back in his pocket. *Wish me luck. Someone stole my kickass bike last night & left me a rusty kid bike. I'm getting it back. I triple heart that bike!* Ed had bought Veronica the bike. They went riding together on long trips when he was still trying to get back into shape. He didn't know she still had it, hadn't thought about it since she left. He figures humor, pop reference, detached best way to go. *Got great image of you - too tall Jones riding kid bike... kinda like opening scene of goonies*

She texts back: *No! But I've implement phase 1 of my plan. Shame. I painted a huge sign and draped it over the crap bike. I'll get it back. Erase goonies image immediately*

He responds: *Hope there's a phase 2 to that plan.* Which he means, because he doesn't think much of the idea, trust in the shame of bike thieves, but after sending it, realizes that sarcasm may not have been what she was looking for. He checks his phone after ten minutes, an hour, two hours. Lisa watches him this whole time. I guess he uses me as an excuse sometimes, but he couldn't since I was right there. Couldn't exactly be texting him at the table, but I guess you knew what I meant by that anyways. A weekend passes where Lisa accuses him of ripping apart ads in her magazines, drawing mustaches

on the pictures. Something he doesn't remember, but can give no other explanation for. (I did one mustache, I'll admit that).

Early Monday morning, while adjusting the levels in Dr. Ellison's pool, he receives: *Why must you always piss in my coco puffs???* This, he reasons, is Veronica realizing her plan will not work and blaming him for realizing it first.

"You got a lot of energy today," Raul says. (See what I'm doing here? This is me, but Ed telling the story you know?) He is already several Sambucas invested in the process, beginning to think Knob Creek, then dismiss it before he considers it again. Raul had given up that Ed was going to show (no coyote excuse this time). Usually he was here for the start of dusty hour, especially on Mondays, which Ed claimed was the best drinking day of the week.

"Any lemonade today?" Raul asks. This was the first question he usually asked. A long while had passed since the first time they had the drunken conversation about it, but they had little else to discuss and seemed to enjoy the appearance of friends who were connected over more than just cold beer, were involved in each other's well being.

"Still no lemonade, amigo."

"Shit man, you're killing me, tomorrow, probably then"

Raul was a damn fine looking man. He was smart as a razor too. People always seemed to ask for his advice. fixed escalators, made good money, told Ed, ever needed; he could get him on there, thirty-plus an hour and basic medical.

They called it dusty hour on account of, as Liddell, the owner, put it, "All the dusty fucks that end up in here and leave their pig pen trails back out to pasture." Past noon was nearly impossible to work outside, until around five or so when the sun began to fade again. When Ed still worked windows the solution would evaporate before he had time to squeegee it away. The day filled with construction workers, painters, and contractors. Some passed out in the long leather booths with stained caps propped over scruffed faces. Most drank enough to drown out the sun.

Part of the problem was Ed Day never had a lemonade moment. At least, he figured, this had something to do with it. Perhaps he had begun to watch too much soft core porn. Making the fantasy seem too real, expected, and without the moment he wasn't much of a pool man or a man in general. These women are lonely, he thought. Very lonely and I am so very open. He felt this way about a lot of things, on the brink of someone realizing themselves in him, completing a belief in him as a way to become better, pure. It seemed that way with others before, Veronica, until she was gone, and Lisa, still sometimes Lisa, but not enough, not often enough. Soon, it seemed that this moment was always on the verge of happening and each morning on the way to start his route, there was a certain giddiness of not knowing what to expect. Lately this excitement had waned and he became almost frustrated with the thought of going to work at all. He was immersed in July, noon temperatures above 110 and rising upwards. If he was out of the house by six he could be at the dark, cool, air conditioned bar by 11:30, but lately he hit the snooze more often, found himself watching early morning talk shows he didn't care about and waiting longer and longer to watch a guest he had only a remote

interest in. We smoked a lot more pot together too. Mostly swag I nicked from my brother's drawer or something I picked up from one of the other busboys.

He found it strange that in his fantasies it was always an older plump woman who brought him inside and seduced him. She wasn't necessarily obese, but she wasn't model skinny either and when she leaned into him she didn't know exactly what to do so he had to show her, do things to her that had never been done before. She had never been with a man like him, so skilled, confident, and deft with his hands.

At least this is what he told Raul. Ed liked to think that Raul was interested in the possibility of that cougar of a woman offering lemonade and then pouncing because he was jealous and a bit envious of that sort of situation. But, Ed reasoned, it was also very possible that Raul felt sorry for him. (More the jealousy, if I have to be honest, but only if it actually happened).

In the past days, Ed had begun to picture Veronica purring her way out of the house instead of these women, but instead of having a history, they were strangers again and new. She usually needed help with something inside and never offered lemonade. In one, while fixing a sink, his arm is stuck behind a pipe. He can't move, all he can see are her legs, the bottom of her black skirt. The skirt shimmies a bit, drops. She says, "Too bad you can't get me." He struggles, still can't move. She asks, "Need some help?"

There was also Lisa, another problem, much larger, long lasting. The first time she met Raul she introduced herself in Spanish. They all shot Patron; Lisa licked salt off Ed's neck. She kissed Raul long and passionate between the sucking of limes. Raul said, "You got to keep on to that one." But there would always be Lisa, as long as

business was involved, and Ed wasn't sure if that is what growing old was supposed to be. She didn't really kiss me. But you could tell she really wanted to.

The lemonade fantasy had become a major distraction. He began to think about it while working and despite the heavy material of his denim shorts there were several occasions when he had to turn his back to the house to ensure if the mistress of the house were to come out she not be greeted with the raging erection struggling against his zipper and the pack of Menthols in his pocket. Not good for business, he thought, especially if there were children inside. I know this sounds weird coming from me, but it was he told me almost verbatim and not anything I witnessed, wanted to witness or anything at all like that.

Tuesday, 118 Fahrenheit. His phone vibrates on the way to the Morris house. *Entering phase 2. Increasing public shame. Renting French racing bike. Need one of those tour de france swoopy helmets.* To the open window he says, "What in the fuck good is that going to do?" He texts back: *Sounds like a good plan, best of luck.*

Veronica: this time, just arrived back from a long ride, leans the bike on the side of the house, dripping sweat, but not red and blotchy like after a workout, cleanly damp as a freshly toweled starlet. Heading for the pool pulling her shirt above her head as she goes, not remembering that today was maintenance day, that Ed is on the other side of the gazebo emptying his bucket... Another: a dark attic, trying to find a screwdriver to fix the washing machine. They have to feel their way around, neither can find the light

switch. Bump into each other, she holds onto his shoulders, her hands move their way down to his belt, a thumb slid into the crease of where his stomach touches his jeans...

“How’s it going out here, Eddie?” Mrs. Morris yells from behind him.

He jumps into the pool with all of his clothes on. It is a very quick move.

“Well look at you, you’re all wet,” she says. This makes things worse and for a moment he is forced to turn slightly sideways to talk to her.

“There was a bee,” he says, “A couple of them, almost stung me, had to jump in.”

“I was wondering why you’d jump in with all your clothes on.” He waits for why don’t you come in and get out of those wet clothes. Has to turn slightly again.

“Didn’t seem very smart to me, but I guess if there were bees, can’t do much against bees.” She pauses, looks back towards the house. “Thought maybe you were scared of me, jumped right in when I came out here.”

“How could anybody be afraid of you? No ma’am I’m pretty allegeric, you know, to bees, so I didn’t want to take the chance.”

She nods, “Can’t be too careful.” Turns, seems to smile a bit, shakes her head a few times and slides the glass door open. Ed stands his shorts heavy with water and sloshes to the edge of the pool. He empties his pockets: a wet pack of cigarettes, wallet, receipt from Java Jive, seventeen cents, and keys. Opens his phone, dead black screen, shakes it, removes the battery, and wraps it in the one of only cleaning towels from his bag.

One lemonade indoors, he thinks, could have made it, made the whole enterprise a bit sturdier, more rewarding, and lent a bit of hope towards that blank tomorrow. The

closest had been Margarine McKenzie asking him to zip up her dress, and even though she was a rather large and fairly unattractive woman he likes to think that had the opportunity arisen he would have taken it, if for nothing else, than to say it happened. Actually none of the women on his route were incredibly unattractive, most, in that upper Scottsdale fashion, had upgraded their breasts to sturdier, plumper, more tightly controlled balls that stretched to fill whatever bikini ensemble they strutted around in. For the most part they were in great shape to be in their forties or fifties with several kids. Although Lisa without a doubt was much more attractive, younger, wilder he desperately wanted one of these older plumper baggier women if for nothing else than to feel like he was the prize, like he was slumming it.

4.

Ed's phone is broken and has to be replaced. The thought that no one can get a hold of him pleases him at first, makes him take a deep long breath like someone might on a mountaintop. Then he thinks of Veronica, the possibility of another text. Drives to the Nextel store, still wet, wrapped in a stained towel used for scrubbing.

He pays with the company card. All of his phone numbers have been erased and they tell him, anything that came through while the phone is dead he won't be able to get back. Ed wonders how much he could have missed in a few hours, drives to the bar.

Raul's eyes are beginning to spread further apart, redden, become glossy and dull at the same time. "You know what an escandato francesco is?" he asks.

Ed doesn't know where he is going with this. "Um, nope, sure don't."

Sometimes I like to make up words in Spanish, or that sound like they should be, and tell them to Ed hoping that he'll try to use them in conversation.

He takes three long gulps of his beer. Finishes it, whistles at the bartender, holds up two fingers then points them downwards, back and forth over the beer and empty shot glass. "You know what?"

"What?" Ed says.

"I've had people applaud when they see them," he stops here and looks Ed directly in the eye. Puts one hand on his shoulder. "No shit man I am telling you the truth. Broke out in applause, when those beasts starting rolling again, like I was hero of the week or something. People... shit man."

Ed figures Raul won't remember this anyway, so he begins in with Veronica. He lays it all out, things he had never even told her. Bastard was pretty spot on with that one.

At the end Raul says, "Man that's fucked up." Leans back, puffs out his chest, and then crosses his arms. He starts to say something, thinks better of it. Whistles at the bartender, yells, "Two Knob Creeks, my man here needs a shot."

They toast to women and Raul's head droops a bit afterwards. He continues to stare down, doesn't look in Ed's direction, and says, "I think you should just get her another bike, that's what I would do. Chicks like it when you make things better."

Wednesday, early morning rain. People stay inside, off the roads. Ed cancels his appointments, fields calls for the next day. Another text message: *I now have 3 bikes...*

None is the stolen one! I'm afraid to post a sign that my dog got lost last night. I'll be a stolen weenie dog depot. When did she get a dog? he wonders. Then: Who leaves a bike for a stranger?

He had considered it, for a while, driving to Prescott with a bike strapped down in the bed of his truck. At least he wasn't a stranger.

There couldn't be that many Veronica Lazzaro's in Prescott. He could find her.

Show up; leave the bike wrapped with a bright, red bow in the night.

Show up; give her the bike in person, a hug, some flowers? One flower?

Show up, give her the bike, say, "sounded like you might need this," turn, walk away, not looking back.

He could find her dog, if he knew what kind it was.

The road from Phoenix to Prescott is two lanes total: one going each way, up or down, through curves stretching over deeply dropped edges. No shoulder except for large sectioned off patches of dirt where the guardrails have been pushed back to the edge of the embankment. Veronica called these fuck spots because if you ended up there it was for one of two reasons: either you were pulling off to fuck or your car broke down and you were fucked.

By the time he makes up his mind, and fights through traffic out of town, the sun is beginning to set, come down across the tops of the red rocks in blinding bursts that sneak below his visor and force him to raise one hand like a shield.

She went by Nica now. He used to be the only one who called her that. A point of pride, they never fought, they discussed in loud voices, bold movements. Moved through things logically and with caution like great empires in negotiation. Historical calm. Even when he accidentally threw one of her pink crystals away and lied about it, she seemed to understand. Had that look for a second, but then gone, passed.

They chose their words carefully, even scripted them beforehand, Veronica insisted it was a key to having successful communication in the relationship. You go outside and write it all down and I'll stay here and then we'll come back. He thought that in one of these notes it might have been easier had she told him why exactly she left. Dear John and such, or even I'm gone, you've been a real dick. It's not you, it's me, but instead she left one day without a fight, without anything except a box full of her crystals, a few pairs of jeans and some vintage shirts. I'm not going to try and pretend that she is hotter than Lisa because I don't think anyone would really contest that at all. But there's always something. He told me once there's two types of women: the kind that get prettier every time you see and the kind that get uglier. I asked him what about his sister and he said that didn't count though.

Ed bought her the bike for her twenty third birthday. Five years? Six years gone? A Schwinn SuperNova XL. Ed liked the name because it spoke in science fiction terms, a language Veronica belittled as often as possible. In loud discussions he was a dork and she a gypsy. She lost faith in the power of the auto, the engine, gas fueled anything and told him she wasn't going to do it any longer. Strangely she cared little for nature or the environment, just didn't like cars.

Weird, he thought, this is the second bike I have bought for her. How many people can say that? Even stranger, he thought, why would I take pride in such a thing?

He spends most of the night searching for her. She is unlisted in the phone book, so he decides to just drive until he sees a large sign and group of bikes. He gets anxious, anticipates that around some corner may be a house with a line of men and bikes patiently waiting their turn to roll them into the yard. Veronica inside watching, a part of a great game. A lawn covered in bikes of all shapes and sizes, a tricycle launched on to the roof, some mustached man with a two seated bike that offers a ride - but not her bike, one that he bought her. So he's just another guy waiting in line, but there's no house to wait at and no way to find her.

So then he gets drunk, punches some guy out who's on a bike that wasn't even red. I have to pick him up from the police station. And that's the story of why he hired me back.

THE LETTER J.

He did not want to shave his chest but he decided he would have to. It wasn't as though he was Burt Reynolds. Instead his chest looked like one of those preschool art project snowmen where the kids throw globs of glue on a paper and then mush cotton balls on top except it was his chest. It was very random, the places where hair was and wasn't. Nothing else on his body was that random except for a strange long black hair that appeared on his right bicep every few months. There was also one exception which caused him to feel the need to shave: on the right side, a hairy growth, in the shape of the letter J.

Marshall had begun to date a girl named Jasmine a few weeks before. Toby said it might be a sign that she was a witch and had cast a spell across his heart. His mother said it could be fate telling him some great truth. Marshall was worried Jasmine would see it and think he had done it on purpose, shaved a J into his chest, in her honor. This would be weird for her, he thought, weird enough to run very fast. Once he dated a girl who had shaved a lightning bolt into her pubic hair and he thought that was pretty awesome, but this, this was different.

So he shaved the J, except for the hairs around his nipples, the shaving of which scared him because they were so close and it would hurt so bad and there was that time he watched *The Wall* and sort of freaked out over the whole thing. When he was done his chest itched for three days and there were tiny bumps that looked dangerous. He avoided her until they went away.

She asked about it the next time they were together and she was tucked neatly under his arm and her fingers moved slowly up and down him. Why, she asked, did you

decide to shave your chest and he told her that he never did what was she talking about anyway? She didn't bring it up again.

ESCALATORS

Escalators frighten me: broken ones, cold and still with shiny steel teeth. When I tell this to Gladys she laughs at me, says what a man you are and takes the cigarette firmly out of my fingers, sucks once, flicks it into traffic. Perhaps this comes from childhood, it seems most things point that direction nowadays (not enough love, too much love). I do not remember my first time on an escalator, but prefer to imagine going up instead of down. I do not remember when I began to fear them.

Perhaps too many adolescent rumors of someone's distant cousin, friend of two friends twice removed, that kid from fifth period who just disappeared, all sucked down into the metallic abyss. The parted steps rolling back like a tongue into the toothed metal comb of a mouth, somehow snatching the end of a forgotten shoelace. And then the struggle – step – by – step – like – a – large – man – reeling – in – a – rusted – Toyota – from – the – bottom – of – the – ocean. It must be terrific to see.

So I told her about the broken escalators. Gladys said, "You know what I'm most afraid of," she paused here for dramatic effect, folded her arms across her chest, blinked a few times, then a few times more, "I'm afraid that this is the best you have in you." There's really not a whole lot you can say about that.

Escalators, like most moving things, break down. My Crown Vic, for instance, which pants and shakes in a very peculiar fashion. Soon it will die. Whether in my driveway or draped awkwardly across the shoulder of a scarcely lit highway. Being "broken" the car cannot be used. When a broken escalator isn't moving, it still functions. It becomes stairs.

Walking on a broken escalator is not like walking on stairs. I have never been afraid of stairs. I am somehow scared of escalators. Especially broken ones. This makes little sense, yet I like to think I am not the only one. Gladys says I am. Especially among the men, she keeps pointing out Damon or Ruiz as examples, but I know better she is thinking of Guadalupe. She says I am a mannequin of a man, plastic and still.

Gladys blames the breakdown, any breakdown, on the economic need for repair experts. Her argument goes that we have the technology for more sound, unbreakable machines, but using it, of course would eliminate the need for extra maintenance parts and people. If car brakes were to last for the entire life of a car brake specialists would go belly up. She says it's just like that movie *Tucker*, just different.

I tend to think that machines, much like living beings are prone to have things go wrong because people are afraid of what might happen if they didn't. Not because it isn't possible. I've had the same alarm clock since I was five. If living beings are mortal, shouldn't machines be faced with this same dilemma? Perhaps it is our need to be able to fix things. To bring things back from the dead. To know that someone out there is just the expert we need to solve our problem. And then? Happiness.

I do not want an escalator to start working again. Especially when I am on it. When I am under the impression that the escalator I am on is broken (and hence stairs) I do not want it to turn back into an escalator. That is the last thing I want and although it has never happened or I have never heard of it happening, I assume that it does, it has, and it will. If ordinary flights of stairs began to turn into escalators this would be quite terrifying as well. Gladys says I am being too cute. Really, she says, it isn't cute at all; you just like to pretend it is.

I have fantasies about escalators. Not those, exactly, although once I dreamt of Gladys, dress caught, and ripped from her tanned body. This was by a talking tree, but of course it could be substituted, anything can. I've imagined several scenarios in which an escalator breaks. (I can imagine that tree breaking too) Knowing that in the course of events for an escalator to be broken, there must be a breaking point. Most of these may be categorized as being overly dramatic. A Ferris wheel like jolt at the top of the climb, small children clinging to their mother's pant legs, a collective gasp from below. Perhaps one or two flung down to a hasty death. Blood slowly spilling from cracked jaws the same way I've seen house pets smashed into the gravel of suburban streets. I know this is not the case. It is more likely a wind-up toy staggering to finish a routine. The reality of the situation is always sadder than the film.

Jesse W. Reno first patented an inclined conveyor belt March 15, 1892. Charles D. Seeberger added steps later within the same year. It remains to be seen whether or not early versions were indeed called "seebergers." This seems to me just as reasonable as "escalator". No mention is made of the Reno/Seeberger relationship although I do not imagine them being close.

Why do they fix escalators? It occurs to me, this question pertains to people too.

My relationship with escalators is ordinary. They take me where I want to go, either up or down, and I, for my part, let them take me. It seems that these are roles for which we are both fit. Should it ever be decided that we were to switch I would decline. It would not make sense, of course, to switch places. I could not move an escalator anywhere, although I do like to jiggle that black rubber handrail back and forth like I'm rocking a tiny boat. For its part I assume the escalator enjoys moving bodies. Children

jumping off at the end, frantic travelers at airports, new mothers back pedaling their strollers. Mannequins, although filling the same space, would be insufficient.

HAIRCUT

Marshall hadn't been out of the house for several days and he smelled. He felt sorry for himself and then he began to feel stupid and finally he felt as though he needed a tremendous change in a brief moment but found himself unable to figure out how to bring about this change. He decided on a new haircut.

There was a Sportsclips not far from his apartment. At one time he went every other Monday at noon and always saw Mona. Recently he went to the same salon that B went to because fifteen dollar haircuts were not for grownups. Mona was precise. Once she trimmed his nose hairs when she noticed they were a bit out of control. He didn't expect it and she held his head back like a dog she was forcing to swallow a pill, but ultimately he decided that he liked it and appreciated how she took charge. She cut all the military guys' hair. He knew because she told him. He never asked if she trimmed the hair in their noses. Mona told him all about herself and she never asked much of him. Marshall liked this about her. But it had been a while since he had been to see her and he was worried if she might not remember him. He had always tipped well enough and he was pleasant. Marshall worried a lot about being remembered by strangers. It seemed to him that this was a sign of some sort of greatness.

He needed something drastic like a Mohawk striped in gold and blue or the sign for anarchy shaved into the left side of his skull. But he wasn't a punker or political and he worried that he might get his ass kicked so he figured he would look through the hair magazines they had and point to some amazing hair that Mona might make for him.

Of course, she wasn't there. Marshall began to feel as though nothing would ever go his way. There were two women and one guy cutting hair. He told the teenage girl at

the desk he would take the next available hair person. She asked if she just wanted the normal haircut or if he wanted the MVP. Mona had tried to sell him on the MVP before, but Marshall was not one to give into offers he thought were scams. He figured this made him streetwise in a way that refusing to give a bum change to buy drugs couldn't. This time he told the girl sure, he would try it. And he didn't feel too bad for having given in.

He sat in a hard plastic chair and pretended to look through a copy of *Men's Fitness* while he sized them all up. The guy talked a little too much about sports which Marshall generally liked but this guy seemed to get all of his facts wrong and Marshall was inclined to correct people when they were wrong and he was worried about correcting someone dealing with his hair. One of the women moved too quickly and seemed impatient with the entire process. The other was very fat and he didn't want her touching him although he would never admit it openly and felt like less of a person for even thinking it. He also knew that she would be the one to get him because he had even thought it.

He was wrong and the fast moving lady finished first with a small blond boy and told him to get good grades before his mother paid and they went on their way. Marshall sat down in the chair and asked for something different, anything that might make him look at the world differently, be a different person, but either she didn't care or understand or maybe she just thought he was kidding because she began to cut it exactly the way it was before. He wasn't entirely sure at first but as she moved on towards the top he realized that it was exactly the same that he was exactly the same.

“Do you want to keep the sideburns?”

Something about the question got to him more than the fact she ignored him, there was something too ordinary and dismissive about it all.

“No. You can get rid of them.”

And then she put the clippers to the side of his head. He waited a half second, then bobbed first down and back up, all the while keeping his head in contact with the clippers. A long streak of his scalp showed through and the stylist jumped back and the teenager girl put someone on hold and he smiled faintly at the fat woman and felt like he should tell her he was sorry for something she was never aware of while he heard the others move around him and the customers still strapped under their necked frocks looked at him with fear and he smiled like everything was it was always intended.

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF CYRIL BYRD

Ben went to the park to see two children fight. He thought it would make him feel better. It was his day off. The walk was cold because he did not think to wear a jacket even though there were several slung across the back of his couch. He brought his dog Charlie. Charlie was a black cocker spaniel who liked to bite in jest.

There was a crowd by the fountain where people made wishes with coins. Ben saw his neighbor's kid, Felipe, who had told him he should come watch. They nodded at each other. His phone vibrated in the pocket of his jeans. His mother again. She had been calling all day. Ben hadn't answered, but knew she must have found out that Samantha had moved out and wanted to talk about it. Wanting to tell him that she would still love him no matter if he ended up forever alone, but all the while knowing how disappointed she was despite the fact she never really cared for Samantha.

In the center were two small boys that he couldn't tell apart. One cupped a handful of water and tried to throw it on the other but only managed to get it on the pavement. The other one called that one a stupid bitch and then they began to wrestle. It was sloppily done. They made their way onto the grass. Charlie began to bark. Ben tied the leash to a tree. One took a handful of grass and dirt and tried to force it into the closed lips of the other. He missed, mostly. The other still wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and spit when he got up. Then he pulled a sock out of his pocket. It was large and dangled with weight from his closed grip. There was something heavy inside. When he smiled there were specks of green in his teeth. He swung the sock once and missed. Then it connected across the left cheek and burst into quarters that spewed

across the grass. A few clinked when they made it onto the pavement and one rolled until it ran into the base of the fountain. The boy ran and so did most of the crowd.

Ben went to check on the injured boy. It looked like he had lost at least one tooth. He probably should have stopped it, he realized, but then of course it was already too late so he walked home. When he got there he realized he left Charlie and ran back to get him. The boy was gone and it was like it never happened. His phone rang again. She would keep calling until he talked to her. He answered with the idea that maybe he could distract her with the story of the boy, how he stumbled in upon the whole thing, how cruel children could be, how vicious, she would be touched enough that he could then interrupt with some emergency and tell her he would call her back as soon as possible. This plan would give him at least three days and in that time it was possible he could convince himself that everything was exactly the way it should be.

“Hello”

“Ben, its Mom.”

“Hey, you will not believe the craziest, saddest thing I just saw.”

“Cyril is missing.”

“What?”

“Cyril, my husband, your stepfather, is gone. He left this morning sometime, without a car.”

They had married a little over three years before. Ben was the only one of her children that came to that wedding. He didn't like to refer to him as his stepfather since they married when he was thirty years old. He had this conversation many times with his mother. It would have been different he said if you would have married right after Dad

died and he would have helped raise us, but he didn't. So he's just the guy that married my mom. A jogger passed and Charlie lunged at him. Ben started walking back home.

"Maybe one of his friends picked him up or something, went to the studio."

"He left a note too and his cell phone on top of that."

"What did the note say?"

"A lot of it didn't make any sense. You know how it's been and it's gotten even worse lately. But it ended with 'You made me forget myself, I thought I was someone else, someone good'"

"That's pretty deep."

"It's a line from a Lou Reed song, 'A Perfect Day'. It's the song he wanted me to play at his funeral."

"So you think he went to kill himself?"

"He didn't have a whole lot of time left. I think he went off to suffer and die alone somewhere in the woods or by a lake. He talked to me about that once. About just leaving in the night and never returning. It made me cry and he never brought it up again."

"So why don't you let him? I mean maybe he's doing it for you. So you won't have to see him go. Who wants to see somebody they love die? Wouldn't it be better to just think that he's out there somewhere still living his life?"

"I guess I'm selfish then. I want him back, no matter if I have to watch him die and the thought of it keeps me miserable for the entirety of my existence. I need you to come out here and help me look for him."

“Mom that’s eight hours away and I’ve got work and a lot of important stuff going on.

“You’re a bartender. Get your shift covered.”

“Did you call the police yet?”

“Yes. They wouldn’t come out at first until I told them that I thought he might have been kidnapped.”

“Mom, you know you can get in a lot of trouble for lying to the police.”

“I don’t care Ben. And how do they know what I thought? That’s why they’re thoughts because they are your own and no one else knows exactly what someone is thinking. I really need you here now. You remember how it was when your father died.”

“I’ll head up to work and see what I can do.”

“Please try and do whatever you can. Tell people I’ll pay them if I need to. Whatever you can do.”

“I’ll give you a call later when I know for sure.”

“Love you.”

“Love you too.”

“And Ben. Ben? You still there?”

“Yeah mom, I’m here.”

“You can bring Samantha too. She would be great help I’m sure.”

“I’m pretty sure both of us won’t both be able to get off with such short notice. I’ll try though.”

“I can pay someone for her shifts too.”

“Okay mom. I’ll try. Talk to you later.”

He had been standing on his front porch because he couldn't figure out how to manipulate the phone, the leash, and keys all at once. Charlie was overly excited and kept jumping up his legs. Inside he turned on the television and took off Charlie's leash. A reminder for *Trading Spouses* came on. Samantha set the cable box full of reminders for all of her favorite shows and he couldn't figure out how to erase them.

Day Two

He drove through the night. At one point he started to fall asleep and hung his head out the window until a bug hit him in the eye. He almost crashed. He thought if he had that Samantha would be ruined and would be by his bedside when he woke up. After almost losing him forever she would have to realize certain things. Then they would be okay again. Later this thought made him angry and he decided that if he had to almost kill himself to get her to notice then it probably wasn't worth it anyway. Then he realized that she did say she would be there if he needed her and this made him happy.

He arrived in time for early morning traffic. It frustrated him. His car sat unmoving on the highway. He listened to sports talk radio then decided to pull into a Waffle House and wait until everyone was at work and the roads were clear. Sitting alone in a restaurant always made him feel like a creep so he bought a newspaper from the machine outside. Three pages in, he found a story about Cyril with a picture of him from the early seventies. He had a beard like a wizard and a shaved head. There was anger in his eyes. Ben could hardly recognize him.

He read the title out loud, *The Disappearance of Cyril Byrd*. The waitress walked up. She was once very pretty. This was obvious to Ben. He ordered a cup of coffee and

told her to keep them coming. People at the bar said that to him all the time and he never liked it. He wasn't sure why he said it to her.

The reluctant singer/songwriter, best known for his early animal ballads and erratic behavior, was reported missing yesterday from his Atlanta home. At this time, foul play has not been ruled out, but police insist that it is unlikely. His car was still parked in the driveway when his wife of three years, Annie, returned home from work yesterday morning. A note left on the table implied to her that he was not mentally aware and she feared for his safety, so she contacted police. Volunteers and canine units have begun to search the woods surrounding their home. One unexpected difficulty is finding a recent photograph of Byrd, who was notoriously camera shy.

Cyril Byrd first gained notoriety as the lead singer of The Growlers in the late sixties. After a messy breakup with the band, Fudge went solo, recording his best-selling album *Bearsong* in 1973. Universally panned by critics (Richard Lucas described it "as beyond the mental capacities of only small toddlers and the mentally retarded") it was embraced first in the United States and then in the Netherlands where Cyril Byrd continues to be a household name. After an appearance on the Tonight Show in which he threatened Ed McMahon, Byrd checked into a rehab facility. His most critically acclaimed album *That Doesn't Look Like Me* followed soon after. The title track referred to his distaste for photography, especially pictures of himself, whom he complained "never seemed to me any closer to myself" but become a staple in rehab clinics and AA meetings. Seven months ago, after being diagnosed with Alzheimer's, he recorded what he publicly stated as his last album, *Flimsy*. It has achieved some unlikely success due to the single "The Absence of Green" used in a commercial for the new hybrid Kia.

Any information on Mr. Byrd's whereabouts should be directed to the Atlanta Police department. Since his mental capacities may be impaired, law enforcement officials suggest keeping distance until the proper authorities are reached.

Ben folded the paper in half at a point where he could see the picture of Cyril while he ate. He wondered if he was already dead. Then he wondered if he wasn't and Samantha found out, how pissed would she be. He probably shouldn't have lied to her. Ben couldn't decide whether or not he wanted him dead, especially if he was already going to die. This thought bothered him immensely.

When the waitress brought the check she picked up the paper from the table.

"I saw this last night on the news. This Byrd guy. I guess he went crazy or something, huh?" She put the paper back down.

"I guess so. Maybe not. Maybe he just wanted to live out his last days by himself. You know elephants do that. Just walk away and die alone. There's some dignity in that."

"Not me. No way. I want to be surrounded by everyone I love and spend every last minute with them. And then some really badass last words. Something really cool that my granddaughter will remember when she tells stories about me."

Ben was surprised that she said "badass". It made her less pretty to him. He paid and she started to walk away and then turned around.

"You know that song, about the monkey staying up all night that he did? My first son loved that song he used to go jumping around on all the couches listening to it. When the record got scratched we had to take him to McDonalds to get him to stop crying."

“Huh. Don’t think I ever heard that one.”

“If you get a chance, check it out, it’s a lot of fun. Did you need change?”

“That’s all yours. Thanks.”

He got lost trying to find their home. Every street name seemed to have something to do with a peach and he was tired. He finally found Peachwood Dunwoody and followed it towards their house. There was a news van parked at the end of the cul-de-sac and a man cleaning something red off the side of it with a rag. In their driveway were three cars he had never seen before. The door was wide open. His mother vacuumed the living room with her back to him.

“Mom.” He raised his voice and tried again. “Mom.”

She turned. She moved quickly to him. While they hugged he was sure she cried, but couldn’t tell when he looked at her face afterwards.

“I didn’t think you were going to be here until tonight. When did you leave?”

“Last night. I just drove all the way through.”

“You didn’t have to do that.”

“Yeah I did. Any word from the police?”

“Nothing worthwhile. They still can’t believe I don’t have a picture of him, of us together. They think I’m making it up or something. Like I hid this giant stash of photos in the basement.”

“I thought I remembered a photographer at the wedding”

“No. I wanted one, but Cyril didn’t and you know it was both of our wedding. It bothered him more than it bothered me, so I gave in.”

She looked around the room.

“I was trying to clean up a bit before you got here. Things have been kind of hectic. People in, people out. Lots of coffee and I went and got a bunch of cheese trays too to show thanks. Let me make you breakfast.”

“I just ate.”

“Well you can eat again. This is the first day I haven’t cooked breakfast for someone in a very long time. There are little things that make it worse.”

Cyril was lactose intolerant so there wasn’t any milk. Ben opened a Mountain Dew and sat at the table. He watched his mother work. She made scrambled eggs and a full plate of bacon. He wondered how many times he had seen this, from how many different viewpoints, in how many different homes.

He didn’t wake up until after dinner had been cleared and most of the volunteers had returned to the woods. His mother told him that she knew he was tired and they had enough people looking. He could help tomorrow and then she added but they’ll probably find him tonight.

“We can go driving around together if you want. You know looking around the city.” Ben said.

“I’ve got to stay here. There are more people coming over in a bit. You can go if you want. I know you’re worried too. You just keep it inside better than I do.”

Ben stopped at a gas station and bought a map because he was sure he was going to get lost in the dark. He drove around for an hour and then stopped at a Best Buy that was closing up. He told them he would be quick and went back to the music section. They even had a label with his name on it. He thought about buying them all, but instead got *Bearsong* and *Flimsy*. The first and the last. It took him a while to get the plastic off

the covers because he didn't like any part of the sticker label remaining and it kept separating in odd places. He put on what he assumed was the monkey song, entitled, "In the Trees until Dawn". He really wanted to like it, but couldn't.

When he arrived back at his mother's house she was asleep at the kitchen table. Ben picked her up and carried her into her room. He wasn't sure if taking her shoes off would wake her, so he left them on. He closed the door and went back to the kitchen. Cyril's letter was folded into thirds up on top of a stack of mail. Ben went to his mother's room. She was lightly snoring. He returned and opened it.

My dear Annie,

The tanks are closing in... You are better at this than I am. Leaving a party has never been easy for me. I always seem to have something else to do, another joke to tell, a song to play, something that I leave behind in all that noise that I can't smell again, like a fresh flower. Who will feed the goats when I am gone? Will they fend for themselves? Or eat cans as they are accustomed to do? This saddens me, despite knowing that they probably enjoy cans.

There are many things I will miss about you but breakfast more than the rest. It is us alongside each other before the day happens and the mystery of it is all gone. I still like Cheerios best, no matter your protestations. You make me forget myself. I thought I was someone else. Someone Good.

I Love you heartbreakingly until then.

Cyril

Ben folded the note back up and put it on top of the mail. He took his phone from his pocket. He had changed her name to Don't Text Samantha because he didn't have the heart yet to delete it even though he told himself that it would probably be helpful and he was scared that he would send her something outrageous after he was drunk. He sent: I fucked up. I didn't leave extra food out for Charlie. Could you please? I would really appreciate it. At first he added "I miss you" to the end then erased it and added "and great news Cyril isn't dead yet" and then erased that too. He figured she was still at work, closing down. He watched Cops for a bit and then went to bed.

His phone vibrated on the night stand beside the bed. It was from Don't Text Samantha. It said: K. He couldn't sleep for a while after that, hoping that maybe she was waiting until she was away from people to send him the longer message. The real one in which she cared about what was going on and where she felt at home when he entered their house and fed their dog and missed it all so much that it was unbearable.

Day Three

He woke to the smell of sausage and heard grease popping in a pan. Ben went to the kitchen. She had gone to the store and gotten real milk for him. It was on the table.

"I was just about to wake you up."

"Everything smelled so good. I had to get up."

"Today is going to be a great day. I can feel it. You know how sometimes you just know it's going to be a great day. We are going to find him. He is going to be okay. We are going to be okay."

“I think so too, mom. Thanks for getting real milk; I don’t think I could drink that Lactaid crap.”

“You know that is the first time in about two and half years that we have had that in this house. It’s strange how quickly you can get used to the absence of something and not even realize it until it’s returned.”

“Are you talking about milk?”

She put a plate in front of him. Turned around and grabbed a fork.

“Of course I am.” She paused, took a long breath. “I had this dream last night with Cyril in a misty field. It was dark, but I could see him walking away from me. My view was fixed like I was looking out through a window. I could only see this little section and couldn’t move. Then I heard wolves coming. Howling, running. I felt one brush my leg. But I couldn’t see any in the tiny window I had. Then Cyril was gone and I woke up. ”

“You think that means he’s coming back?”

“I think it was just a dream.”

Ben looked at her, smiled, and released. “Samantha and I are done. She left me. I know you liked her a lot. I didn’t want to tell you when you already had so much going on. But I figured you wanted to know from me.”

His mother continued to scrub the pan. Grabbed the Dawn and squirted some more. “To be honest, I never really liked her.”

They checked all the record stores in the city. Several people said they were sorry. Others asked to help. It was mid-afternoon by the time they returned. Ben stumbled over Cyril’s boots when he walked in the door. Cyril was on the couch with a

small white kitten. He had written Annie on one side of it with a blue marker that was on the couch next to him with the cap still off.

“I come bearing gifts young man.”

His mother heard his voice from outside and knocked Ben down as she ran in. He wasn't sure if he had ever seen her as happy and it made him jealous because he had known her much longer than him. Cyril seemed confused by all of the attention.

“Where have you been?”

“I've just been gone a little bit. I went to get you a gift.”

“You've been gone three days.”

“No I haven't. I just left not long ago. I left you a note too.”

“I don't even care where you've been. I'm just glad you're back and you're okay.”

“I got you this”

Cyril handed her a coffee mug.

“I made it at the mall.”

There was a picture of Cyril on the side. He was smiling uncomfortably and wearing a bowtie. He gave a thumbs up to the camera. Ben left the room and went to pack his bag.

The mug broke into four pieces when it hit the floor. The largest was still connected to the handle. He let the cat out of the house hoping that it too might disappear completely.

CHANGE

Nancy wanted to pay so he let her. The bar was full and smelled of sweat. Marshall tried to stay close to her side. Instead, as the crowd pulsed towards the bar, he kept shifting. She had ordered two beers for him and a glass of wine for herself. The bartender had spiked hair. He called out at them sixteen fifty. Marshall tried to figure how much everything cost. He sometimes did this. The beers could be five dollars a piece and the wine six fifty. Maybe there was a special on beer and the wine was ten. He was compelled to ask, but figured since he wasn't paying that it wasn't any of his business. Nancy handed the bartender a fifty dollar bill and turned to the side so someone could edge in behind her.

The bartender put three one dollar bills and two quarters on the bar and started to take more orders. He moved quickly and pointed to those whose order he wanted to take. Everyone seemed to understand the process except for a very thin girl who kept waving a five dollar bill in his direction every time he passed.

"Didn't you give him a fifty?" he asked.

"Did I?"

"I'm pretty sure. Don't you remember?"

"I cashed a check today. It's possible."

"You don't know whether or not you had a fifty dollar bill? I didn't know you had it like that."

"I don't. You know I don't."

"Why don't you look in your wallet?"

A kid with sweaty bangs moved between them. Marshall moved around him.

"It was," she says. It had to be. There isn't one in here."

"I'll tell him."

"No. Don't. It isn't a big deal."

"It's fifty dollars."

"It isn't worth it."

"So you'd rather lose it then confront him? People make mistakes. It happens."

"He's too busy. We would have to stand here and get his attention and get him to go look and then maybe he gives the money to us and maybe he doesn't believe us and maybe he has security escort us here and no matter what happens it's just fifty. Not even that. After the drinks and tip. Not even that.

"You still tipped him?"

"No. I mean. Yeah I guess I tipped him thirty dollars."

"All right. I guess as long as you didn't tip him. It's your money anyways, you know."

Marshall did not like people who made him lose his anger. Sometimes, he thought, it was the bravest part of himself.

SOCKS

Marshall did not want the socks because they did not fit his feet. He did not want to give them to Elizabeth because he was unsure if they were hers or some girl from long before. They were white ankle socks with HANES written in pink letters. He was faithful to her, always had been. Marshall threw them in the trash but did not cover them up. She found them and threw a fit.

“Whose are these?”

“Aren’t they yours?”

“If you thought they were mine why did you throw them away?”

The problem with lying was that it always felt like the most honest thing to do.

ONE HUNDRED

They were the good type of sweaty. She still had her shirt on; he, his socks. Things had developed and ended quickly. The LSU blanket twisted between and around them. When Marshall tugged at it, all that happened was that Kaitlan said stop it. So they lay on the couch exposed. He was more concerned that his shirt was off than his pants. Marshall had quit running as much since they'd been together. He figured that was the way it always went.

He entertained a thought of saying he had to piss so he could get up and around and at least put his shirt on. Instead he tucked himself into her and closed his eyes. When he opened them the TV was off and Kaitlan was watching him, propped on one elbow. She had taken the brown comforter from her room and it was covering them.

"That was one hundred," she said.

He didn't respond because it didn't really know if it was a question or a statement and either way he thought he missed something, or should have known something, or remember something that he no longer did or never had. Perhaps if he let it linger it might evaporate like steam from a bathroom after a shower.

"One hundred," she said again, "That was the one hundredth time we have consummated our love."

"Shouldn't there be balloons and a siren?" he would have asked, if he were not slightly confused. "Well, of course, I knew that," he would have said if he felt like lying. Instead he smiled because he was uneasy and unsure of what else to do. She smiled back and kissed him long once on the lips and then on the forehead.

“Let’s get some lunch, k?” She got up from the couch and picked up her jeans, fishing out the thong that had fallen into one of the crumpled legs as she moved back towards her room.

Marshall pulled his clothes on. She didn’t have cable, so he switched on the radio. It was an all eighties weekend. Bananarama’s “Cruel Summer” played. He considered things differently. He wondered if she kept a tally on the wall like prisoners in some old French jail. Did the time in the car when he came and kept going count as one or two? Was it based on her orgasms or his? Then he thought this was arrogant and wondered if he was really a good lover or just enough to get by. Was it based on duration? Satisfaction? Could he be around someone who used the phrase consummate our love?

She came out and asked, “So where do you want to go?”

He decided on Taco Bell because it was quick and easy and cheap.

MARKET PRICE

Once, there was a Mormon War. This is the way I tell it to Lewis. It happened in Missouri, at first not far from Liberty, and then into Liberty, sometime in the 1800s. Joseph Smith believed Jackson County the legitimate Garden of Eden. I'm not sure why. Plenty of others disagreed, strongly. Nineteen died. One guy had his arm ripped off by a horse and another got burned alive in his home after it collapsed on him. All of which amounts to being the second most interesting bit of trivia about Liberty. But this is the first thing that comes to mind when Lewis asks how the city is.

He doesn't ask how my brother is doing which is what he really wants to ask. Not sure why he doesn't just do it, he's got a real problem with that. It must be in some management handbook for beginners – how to milk a conversation to get information without ever asking for it. But he never asks about Brady or when I'm coming back. He just wants to hear more about the city.

“So any ladies up there?”

“Sure,” I tell him. “But they're not nearly as interesting as the Mormons.”

“I doubt that.”

“The James Brothers are from here too you know.”

I tell him about Jesse James until I hear Christine come into his office and he says he'll talk to me next week. Had he asked I would have told him that Brady was acting okay, like nothing happened, but really I thought I needed to do something to help him get over it, that he couldn't do it on his own. Not sure if that's all true, but that's what he needs to hear: That the hero will be fine.

The Mormon War was probably Interesting History A #1 until Jesse and Frank James showed up a few years later and robbed the bank there. They only killed one guy, a student at William Jewell (the university on the hill in the center of town). They either did it to prove a point or because he got mouthy. I haven't read anything where it says either way. There's a museum now to commiserate it. (The bank robbing not the student). They promote it as: "The first official job in peacetime during the day". A pretty big deal for some I suppose.

I actually get Brady up and out of the house and we head over there. Some poor kids from the bad side of Troost are there with a teacher who looks like she is fifteen. She knows Brady and leans down into his chair to give him this extended hug where he is stuck looking across her shoulder at me.

"Thanks for saving me."

"I thought you might be into that kiddie stuff and all. You know you being a teacher her looking like that. I was just trying to help you out."

"Like you helped out with Tamara Watkins in eighth grade?"

Brady is a real son of a bitch sometimes and he likes to bring up the fact that he stole the girl I wanted even though he was two grades below us. It was on account of how he grew so fast and nothing else. The museum has a giant cardboard cutout where you stick your head through these holes where Frank and Jesse's heads should be and one of the kids just up and kicks a hole in either Frank or Jesse. You couldn't tell which because they don't have faces, but the kid kicks it just out of nowhere and says real quietly, "Koom-bi-yah Motherfucker." I don't know why, must have seen it on a movie somewhere. I like him immediately. I offer to buy him a hotdog from the giftshop but he

gets real weird and runs off. We laugh pretty hard about that and then get a postcard for our mom that we will probably never send and one for Elizabeth that I write "Koom-bi-yah Baby. Thinking of you" on and sent to her parents' house. She won't mention it even if she gets it and I'll worry about it, but I decide that I'm definitely going to send it anyways..

Brady is the reason I am in Liberty. Most of his right leg is gone. Which I thought was weird at first, because the kid shot him in the ankle. Eventually they had to amputate his foot. Then it got more infected and they had to keep going higher and higher and chopping more off so it wouldn't kill him. I was in the room when they told him they had to go above the knee. Which is a really big deal, he said after the doctor left, because then it limits what kind of prosthetics you can get. He was rational about the whole thing, like he was picking out a car and found out what he wanted didn't have power windows. He's got one now, a fake leg, but he doesn't like it. I've only seen him wear it twice. Mostly he just uses the chair, although he gets sort of irritated if you try to push for him except for once when it started raining out of the blue.

Lewis told me I could take as much time as I needed. Paid, too, which is a big deal obviously and with no real timetable I'm expected to just stay up here until Lewis gets fed up with the whole thing. Or Brady, but I've never really seen him pissed at anybody or anything so I think I'm probably okay there. I'm at that level in Human Resources where mostly I'm just stuck dealing with workman's comp issues, severance buyouts and assorted claims of harassment or discrimination. Frankly I'm glad not to hear complaints for a while and it doesn't take much to do what I do, I just make everyone think that it is really hard.

Actually, I lied. Last week I saw Brady get mad, but I'm not sure if anyone could tell it but me and afterwards he lied and said that he was fine. We were at this café that had been there for a hundred years although it had burned twice. He ordered the lobster that was listed as market price. Turned out it was like forty bucks and he asked the waitress about it. She told him that market price meant that if he had to ask he couldn't afford it. Brady went on and on about how indeterminate it all was, how value needed to be fixed, how something couldn't change according to whims and fancies. He asked the waitress who determined market price but she didn't have an answer.

Liberty actually isn't that bad a place. I expected much worse. There is a World Fitness which gave me a free three month membership just for being Brady's brother and a place called Uncle Ramos Home-style Kitchen that serves smoked sausage breakfast biscuits. The city is about thirty minutes north of Kansas City, up I-35, past the Harrah's and the Ameristar riverboats. I've only been down the boats once since I've been here. I lost a hundred bucks in three hands at blackjack, doubling down on elevens and pulling an ace and then a hand later, with the same 8 and 3, a four. There are a few trendy new bars in Kansas City that I've been to and a couple of restaurants too. Brady tells me how to get to these places, but he doesn't ever go. He'll tell me he has plans that can't be broken and then when I get home he's there asleep on the couch with Sportscenter on or playing poker online.

He tells me this is what he does every summer when he isn't teaching. Taking it easy, he says. No problems, just easy days. I don't believe him though. Last summer he took this other teacher he was seeing to Switzerland and they have all these pictures with them rappelling down cliffs and paragliding with the Swiss Alps in the background and

all. When I ask him about it, he says it was about the company, not the place. He says it's always about the company. Brady dumped her though, so she couldn't have been that great.

The father of Frank and Jesse James helped establish the Baptist University in Liberty, William Jewell. (Imagine that: your sons kill one of your students and they get famous for it). He was a minister of some sort or another. It's not very big, but it's ranked consistently as one of the better liberal arts schools around. A couple years back they said some bad stuff about gays and some not so bright stuff about evolution, but now I guess its all okay. After the shooting, the university asked Brady to give a special guest lecture and they offered to pay him like over a thousand dollars but he turned it down. He pretty much turned down everything though, except Larry King and I think the only reason he did that was because Charlize Theron was going to be on there too on account of her starring in some movie coming out about Columbine.

I get home today and Brady's strapping up his leg. Since he doesn't do it very much, he's pretty clumsy with it and it doesn't look like it's going to go on right, but I know not to try and help him and instead pop open two Coors from the fridge. He's only in boxers and the open flap in the center keeps coming dangerously close to exposing himself to me as he rocks back and forth on the couch.

"Big date tonight?" I hand him one of the cans.

"Not really a date, meeting some other teachers from school. It makes it easier on them if there's something there you know?"

“It’s not like they don’t know what happened, right? I mean most of them were probably there.”

“All the same.” This is my brother’s favorite expression or some variation of it. All things being the same or weighing everything out. “I’d rather not make people uncomfortable if I don’t have to.”

“You want me to come along? Probably a couple of hotties you’re keeping from me, huh?”

He laughs. “Sorry, not too many hotties in my crew. You should go by the elementary. One of them made the Chiefs cheerleading squad.”

“If I tell her I’m your brother will she jump my bones right then and there?”

“Probably not. Especially if you still have that diseased rat covering half of your face.”

“This is vacation. I’m not expected to shave. A good beard takes time.”

“I don’t think time is going to help that. You look like an exaggerated vagrant. Anyways, you’d just be bored. You know bunch of teachers sitting around talking shop.” He stops fumbling with the leg and reaches over and picks up a restaurant review cut out of the newspaper. “Saw this, this morning, thought you might want to check it out. Four stars. Give you something to do tonight.”

People are supposed to go through extensive physical therapy to learn how to walk again and move and all. I don’t think he’s been going to his appointments or it could just be really hard because he still can’t do much but swing that thing around and use it for balance. But he pulls a pair of sweat pants on, makes it up off the couch and calls somebody named Jim and tells them he’s ready.

“I could give you a ride someplace you know. I can do that.”

“Didn’t want to bother you and Jim leaves like four blocks away so it’s no problem.”

Brady sways and shimmies towards the garage and I hear the extended mechanical roll of the door being cranked open. The front door is right there and they just finished putting in a special ramp, so it doesn’t make sense to go out the garage, but I don’t want it to seem like I’m spying on him but I do want to spy on him and want to know exactly what he’s doing so I move towards the front of the house and wait behind the white curtains where I can still sort of see the street but not really. I’m thinking that “Jim” is really some girl he’s been seeing that he just doesn’t want to tell me about but about two minutes later this maroon mini Cooper pulls up and out pops a thin gray-haired guy in blue jeans and a denim vest with rhinestones on the shoulders.

He walks towards the garage, but from my angle I can’t see what is going on. When he returns into sight he’s carrying a large black bag shaped like a guitar. He pops the trunk and puts it in and then the garage door begins to move again. Jim goes back to the garage and when he comes back into sight, Brady is using his shoulders for support and they’re moving towards the car. I watch them pull away and then go back to the couch, turn on the television and finish the rest of my beer.

The newspaper clipping is still on the couch. It’s for some roadhouse and after reading it they really didn’t like much about it except for the ribs which they say are the only reason they gave it the four stars. I’ve never been much of a ribs or wings kind of person. There’s something too distracting about eating them in public and knowing that people are watching you. I feel like a little kid or a caveman depending on how fast I go

through them. But I figure it's at least something to do, I'll have a few beers and get them to go.

The directions from MapQuest are confusing and I end up downtown on 18th street, instead of in Westport where the restaurant is. There's a strip of old Jazz clubs, long shut down, but still with the marquees perched out front. At the end of the street is the Negro Leagues Museum, which I had never even heard of. Beyond that it stretches into poverty and the reality that this place has somehow been lost.

At the stoplight in front of the museum a couple of black guys approach the car and I lock the doors, but they don't even look in my direction, just pass in front of the car and keep going. I feel like a racist and somehow going into the museum seems like it makes it all better. But it doesn't. Instead I spend twenty minutes trying to figure out how big Josh Gibson actually was by the size of his Grays jersey. I buy a postcard of Jackie Robinson for our mother, that I figure I can get Brady to sign too.

By now it's dark out. The matinees don't light though, like I expected, some large neon extravagance. Instead most are only lit by streetlamps that hang long and tall over the curb. I have the only car parked on the street, although people are passing every few minutes on foot. I ask an older couple as they pass if they know where The Peanut is, but they don't. They tell me there's a good place down the street, with live jazz and authentic Kansas City barbeque. They say, go for the pulled pork.

I can hear a trumpet playing from outside the club. It isn't the place the couple suggested because either they gave me the wrong directions or I missed it. I saw this place as I passed and turned around once I gave up on the barbeque. It looks fairly small from the outside, but at the front I see it opens up deep and wide and towards the back the

stage is raised. A young girl is behind a counter and what looks like a spittoon with a handwriting note on it: Donations Welcome.

“How much do people usually give?” I ask.

“Oh anything really, it’s whatever you want. Most of the time, just like five bucks or something. Really rich people give more. It’s for a good cause. We don’t take profits and the bands don’t either.”

I point towards the stage. “Is he the only guy playing tonight?”

She points to the placard. *A Celebration of the Grand Demise of SillyBus. Now totally revamped into Extraordinary Revisions of Minor Histories.* “They’re all teachers,” she says.

“Interesting. Are they any good?”

“A lot of people always show up.”

“That’s not the same thing.”

“Sure it is.”

I pull out four ones and hand them to her instead of putting them in the spittoon. Inside I don’t see any waitresses so I head to the bar and sit down. I order a Budweiser because they don’t carry Coors and some Chicken Quesadillas, which end up being very flat and microwaved.

I’m disappointed when Jim doesn’t bring in a large black bag; his studded rhinestones twinkling as he moves through the people. Or that Brady isn’t there, that the crowd doesn’t open up and swallow him. *Extraordinary Revisions of Minor Histories* is two fat white guys and a Hispanic guy with a goatee. One on the bass, one on the saxophone and the last on drums. I talk to a guy at the bar that tells me there used to be a

trumpet player and a vocalist too, but something happened and they quit. I ask if it was the guy that was playing when I came in and he tells me he doesn't know, probably. The girl was right though; by about ten minutes into their set the place is almost full. The band isn't especially good. The drummer is probably the best of all them and he isn't really doing anything challenging besides trying to keep the other two in line.

I'm not big into fate or destiny or any of that, and I ashamed to admit it, but I thought they would be there. Jim and Brady playing on that dimly lit stage with a few others. As soon as she said teachers, I knew it, and I knew how surprised Brady would be to see me there, to think I had somehow figured out his secret, and become a part of his secret life. This is stupid, I know. I've never even seen Brady play an instrument, except for maybe the recorder when we were in elementary school and he butchered "Mary Had a Little Lamb". But I want to believe that I ended up here for a reason, that this wasn't just a series of wrong turns and bad directions, it was about finding my brother at his most vulnerable playing an instrument in front of a crowd that could care less about the music than about him. That he needs this or they need it. One must be true, must explain it all at least to the audience. But it embarrasses me to know they know he isn't very good and they're still cheering. He doesn't need their help and maybe they don't know. Maybe I can be inspired too, but the music isn't very good so I leave.

He is asleep on the couch when I get home. His prosthetic is propped up like a rifle against the wall. The remote and a half finished glass of wine are on the coffee table. A western is on that I don't recognize. One cowboy with an eye patch says to another you killed my Roscoe and the other asks what in the hell are you going to do

about it. I crack a beer and head into the garage. I look around for the bag but don't see it, instead I find some old Penthouse hidden in the drawers of a cabinet.

There is some gunfire from the other room and someone yells. I hear the channel change to Sportscenter and a couple of muted coughs from Brady. I bring the stack of magazines in underneath my arm and place them on the coffee table.

"Now I know why you've been staying home every night."

"Funny. There's a girl in there that looks just like Elizabeth."

"Even funnier. Shit I've barely talked to her since I've been here. Out of sight, out of mind kind of thing. Probably not a good sign.

"Probably not."

"You have a good night?"

"Not bad. Saw this crappy band downtown. How about you? You and Jim out dancing the night away?"

I realize immediately that this is an asshole thing to say, but I didn't mean it that way. Brady is quiet and starts to say something then turns back to the TV and changes channels again. It is back on the Western and the guy with the eye patch is limping through the doors of a saloon. They put a bottle of whiskey in front of him and ask him if it's all over.

"You know, Phillip, Phillip Davis Newman, the kid that shot me? He apologized after he hit me. Told me I just wanted to make you dance. To make you have to do what I wanted for a change. I thought you'd look foolish. Said he chose me because he actually liked me and if it was someone else he might be tempted to do something worse. Funny how things work out, you know?"

Brady sits up and takes the glass of wine from the table. I begin to talk about the Mormon War for some reason. I don't know much and Brady used to teach history so I start to make things up: characters, bombings, clandestine meetings, spies, ninjas, nuclear threats, grave decisions at the break of dawn, catapulting marauders, kidnapped nieces, revenge.. And at the end Joseph Smith finds his Eden covered in flaming bodies but he still wants it because he still believes it to be the truth. Brady tells me that he feels sorry for me and then that I must be crazy. Then he asks me if I want to play cards because that is the only thing outside of a footrace that I have a chance of ever beating him at.

SIGNS

Marshall left his popcorn bag on the floor and his drink in the holder even though Amy carried hers out and he knew that leaving it there upset her. She worked in a movie theater once, or at least it seemed that way to him. He wasn't sure why he felt like being an asshole or being petty but there were times when it just came over him and he felt justified and pleased to be doing something just for the doing.

"That was pretty good, don't you think?" she asked.

"I mean I guess that alien part was pretty cool, you know when it first walks across on the news show. But the ending was pretty awful."

"How else could it have ended? They won. And what she said when she was dying. That saved them. It was the sign they needed."

"I got it. I mean I understood what happened."

"Why didn't you like it? It wasn't the best thing I've ever seen. But it was something. It was entertaining. It was better than sitting on the couch while you check fantasy baseball scores and I grade papers."

"I didn't say I didn't like it."

He could give a little and meet somewhere undecided in the middle where everything was still okay or it could shift into something that had nothing to do with movies or opinions and began a descent into something radically different and unrecognizable by the end. He could tell her that it didn't make sense that an entire race of intelligent aliens whose only weakness was water would travel to a planet that was mostly nearly all water or ask why you needed a loved mother to die in order to tell someone with a bat to swing away when you were holding a bat and an alien was holding

your child. He knew this. He knew how it would end if he said those things and he knew she would say that he didn't appreciate her opinion and he would tell her that maybe if she had an opinion that was worthwhile he might and then the movie would be forgotten and everything that came after would be all there was. He knew this, but he also knew he needed to be right and he needed her to know it.

Prosperity

1.

Katie has short choppy hair like her mother. When boys tease her she punches them in the lip. Called one of them a hairy little faggot. That is why she is home instead of third period physical science. Her teacher, Miss Morris told me she lacks discipline, real discipline, something that comes from the parents and is squeezed into the child until they are filled, filled to the brim with it. I thought instead of toothpaste.

“Daddy,” Katie says, “Did you hear? Love is in the air.”

She watches too much television. It’s beginning to show in the way she listens to the world. She isn’t surprised by loud dogs or plates thrown against the wall and when we speak to her she lets us pass like commercials for products out of her price range.

Katie used to make lists like her mother. Things she should do. Things she needed to do. Things that would make her better. There was rationality about it. A way to approach the world that was her mother’s – precise and with a plan behind it, but done by an eight year old. One of the lists I’ve kept has number four as: I will give Mr. Phil Peters two hugs today - One after breakfast and number two will be a surprise.

We sit on opposite sides of the couch. There is a bowl of broken Doritos between us. Her fingers are orange, mine are not because I lick them. Sponge Bob, trained by a perky squirrel, is sick and tired of working out and buys inflatable arms from a shark.

“You think the squirrel’s his girlfriend or just his friend friend?” she asks.

The cable company has shifted tactics. Used to be, they left something on your door when you were delinquent. Now they take away channels one by one hoping you’ll call and complain and then they’ll stick you with the bill and a whole bunch of questions.

So we just tough it out, Katie and I, until something more lucrative than donating plasma comes along.

“I think they’re just friends sweetie.”

“But Daddieeee what kinda friends?”

Sue left early this morning with a palm full of necklaces that weren’t her own. To me she said I’ll be back soon. To Katie: don’t answer the phone unless you recognize the number. Katie already knows that. I will not question her when she gets back home, despite the fact I will tell myself I will.

Right before the anchor toss competition, where Sponge Bob will undoubtedly be found out, she turns to me and says, “Daddy, its time, we gotta change it.”

Katie started calling me Daddy instead of Phil when she started really getting in trouble. Like when she poisoned Sprinkles. Whenever I tell her no she says well thanks a lot Phil, thanks for nothing.

They must have some sort of monitoring system because if you watch something for long enough it’s gone. Katie figured this out, so we have to switch channels every five minutes or so and get caught watching the news a bunch because there doesn’t seem to be a time limit on that.

“When is mommy coming back?” She asks.

“She’s probably on her way now,” I tell her.

The leading story comes on. Love is in the Air.

“I told you,” Katie says.

A nationwide increase in romance is blamed on the emerging preference for bran flakes. This information is provided by the Kellogg Company and shows two illustrated frogs smooching. I cover her eyes.

She says, "What a bunch of poop."

If her mother were home she would say you're on thin ice buster. This is Sue's favorite thing to say. Once she whispered it in my ear and slid the lobe between her teeth. Those were better times.

Frank, from the blood center, tells me they make you apologize in order to get the channels back. A new definition of delinquency centered on shame, the loss of pride, redemption through the admittance of wrong.

"Its revolutionary," he says, "Macro-Industrial Transnational Functionality. Flux Indicators of proto-Keynesian yields. Bottom up vulnerability and sadness as our means for our means."

Frank once read a big book. That's what the nurses say at least when they're making fun of him. Better watch out Frank here has read a small book or two and once a really large one without pictures. They don't say this to his face which is good because in some ways his smarts are the best thing he has going right now.

A nationwide increase in romance is blamed on weather, a cold front parading its way from Vermont to Florida to San Diego, leaving a frozen grandmother on her porch in Santé Fe and a contingency of Kentucky mountain folk in deep despair. People are staying inside, bundling up, they say with a wink. This is the sort of thing they report when tragedies don't occur.

I think of Sue. We are moving, perhaps, towards a more convenient romance. A properly scheduled list marked Necessary to Possibly Necessary with kiss to fondle ratios and a special appendix for unwanted advances and the movement of tongues. Everything bound neatly.

2.

“Today,” she says with feeling, excited the way some people get holding lit fireworks. “Perhaps, today. You’ll stop being such a lazy mess and do something about this,” she moves her arms wide, “this dump and your daughter dancing in filthy socks.”

She doesn’t bring groceries, just a handful of necklaces. “They’re costume jewelry. Worthless.”

“Perhaps is not viable. It isn’t a conceivable strategy anymore. It’s an excuse.” She tells me this when I say perhaps I will, perhaps I will find something today. I don’t point out that Katie is not my daughter and technically not my responsibility or that her socks wouldn’t be dirty if Sue had done the laundry like she said. I know it would push her over the edge and I want to believe it. In moments like this it feels like the truth because who else would carry about dirty socks?

“Maybe today is the day,” I say on my way to the door. I tell Katie she’s in charge of the remote. “I don’t want to lose any more channels,” I say and she gets very serious and nods.

“It’s cold out,” Sue says. “Make sure you stay warm.”

3.

After the interview I go back home. Sue is gone which is a relief. Katie says, "It wasn't my fault."

"What isn't your fault?"

She points to the black screen. "I was changing them every couple of minutes. You know me Daddy."

"It's alright," I say, "Not a big deal." Pick up the remote. All the channels are black. "Where's Mommy at?"

"She went to get us some money."

"She what?"

"She said I'm sick and tired of that god damn TV and this god damn peanut butter and she said I'll be back, don't burn nothing down."

I say, "Watch your mouth."

"But Daddy, that's what she said."

"Do you know where she went?"

"Somebody in a black truck came and got her."

4.

When Phlebotomist Mary has problems with her ex-husband she won't even tell you to take a deep breath she just plunges it into your arm and smiles at you like damage to you will directly affect his privates. I am not happy to see her. She makes me repeat my entire name and the last four digits of my social security number even though she knows who I am and has my folder and picture right in front of her. I put my fingernails

under the black light and she dots one of them with some special ink so I can't go all around the city draining myself.

Katie is sitting patiently in the waiting room watching TV. She points to two people embracing and seems about to say something about her mother and me.

"I'll be back out soon. You need anything let Mary know."

Mary says, "This isn't a freaking daycare."

You're only allowed to come twice a week. Twenty dollars for the first visit and forty for the second. Something about the time it takes your body to refill. Frank uses a fake id and goes downtown as Gerry Waters, but I don't tell Sue about it because I think she might make me do it.

Sue came to the center once. She's half my size so her donation time was short, but she waited until she could get a bed by the cashier. She said she wanted to see how everything worked. They gotta have thousands in there she said. Thousands paid every day. But her arm turned completely purple and her fingers swelled like microwaved sausages, so she never came back.

When they gave her twenty dollars, instead of the fifteen I told her I normally got, she was pretty pissed and called me a motherfucker. She didn't ask what I was doing with the extra money and I didn't tell her.

5.

Mary pulls me into examination room #2 and pricks my ring finger, takes my temperature, blood pressure, squeezes my finger until it fills a tiny pin sized tube, asks

me the standard questions. She doesn't even pause to hear the answers she just writes yes or no next to the blank. No one who needs the money is going to tell the truth anyway.

The first time you come they give you a physical and they tell you that if your blood tests came back bad they'll let you know. Part of me always worries when they can't find my file that they're going to pull me aside and tell me I have a horrible disease and aren't able to donate anymore. I'm not sure if I would tell Sue or infect it with it too so we could suffer together. I know this makes me bad, unfit, but I think about it.

6.

There are forty beds in four neat rows of ten. Crop columns in a human garden. A television for each row and headphones attached to every bed. They won't let you sleep because as Mary puts it, "How would we know if you were dead?" The action movie row is full like always, so I end up with the news.

Before Mary plugs me in she asks if I need to use the bathroom. This is a relatively new addition to their questions and it's all on account of Guillermo who Frank tells me isn't allowed back. They tell you the entire process takes a little over an hour, but that's for average people. If you weigh more you have to donate more to get the same money.

Frank is escorted in, says, "I thought you were going to wait for me."

I shrug.

"You're all dressed up today," Mary says.

"Gotta get me a job," he says.

"Tell me about it," a few people say at once.

“That’s what I’m supposed to be doing,” I say.

For my body type I have to give 850. I’m not exactly sure what that means but it takes eight cycles. Half the cycle they drain the blood out of you and separate the plasma. The other half they put the depleted blood back in. Sometimes you can taste it on the way back. First time in, the guy next to me said it was like trying to twist a bolt through a nut using your tongue. It tastes like you’re chewing on steel fingers.

The machine makes the same beeping sound when there’s air in the line or when your cycle is done. Which is really confusing especially at the end when you’re agitated and just want to get unstrapped, wrapped and leave. The noise itself is this annoying alarm clock wailing that can grab a phlebotomist’s attention from across the room. It’s bad stuff if they don’t get to you in time.

Katie wanders in. Looks around, spots me, and heads in my direction.

“I gotta use it,” she says.

“Well, go,” I say. “You know where it is.”

At the end they hook up a different bag with something to re-hydrate you. It mixes in and looks like cranberries and milk stirred together and when it travels down the length of your arm it feels frozen.

I’m halfway through my fourth cycle when they walk in.

“Ohh its cold out there, ain’t it,” Mary says on account of their ski masks until she sees what they’re holding and raises her arms like redemption in a church revival.

“We’re not in Kansas anymore,” I told her father once as we passed over the state line. He took his eyes from the road and started at me for a while. Then he told me he damn sure hoped we were using protection.

“Ain’t any demented monkeys, or damn crushed witches” he said, “just blue skies and cowboy lust. Sure hope that thing between your legs works about as well as that thing between your ears. Susan got enough to handle with Katie.”

Her mother said of me, “Just a different brand on the same steer, darling,” paused, wheezed a bit. “A way to tell which farm they came from, so when you’re tired of ‘em you know right where to send ‘em.”

They owned land with a lake small enough to freeze quickly. The first night I was there the temperature dropped forty degrees in a few hours. If the geese weren’t careful they’d be frozen in and the coyotes would creep down during the night. The day after, only their webbed feet still in the ice.

8.

The big one sticks his gun right on Mary’s temple and says I don’t want any funny business. The smaller one doesn’t say anything just goes towards the cashier and pushes him down on the ground. I know right away this is Sue and think finally we are saved.

The center tells you if you don’t finish for whatever reason, you don’t get the money. Not half, not nothing. I look at the needle stuck in my arm, then at the door to the bathroom. I think of Katie walking out too suddenly but know she’s safe because Sue is here.

Guillermo was a large man with almond eyes and black hair that curled down over the top of his ears. On the particular day he pulled out the needle on his own he lied considerably during the questions and squirted himself nearly dry before they covered his vein back up. I hope you've all learned a valuable lesson they said.

The big one says, "Take out your wallets and put them on your chest."

I think of the geese watching the coyotes charge down the hill, sliding across that ice, barely missing, nipping, gathering, regrouping.

Someone in the row behind me says, "Just take the money and go."

Half of the machines are beeping and people are starting to make strange noises in their beds. They walk down the aisles collecting purses and wallets. Frank pulls folded dollar bills from his wallet, hurriedly stuffs them in his sock.

Someone asks Mary how we're supposed to get paid if they take all the money and she just shrugs. "You're going to have to deal with it," she says.

I don't want to consider who the big one is, where they met, the type of things they do in closed spaces. I don't imagine her pulling the trigger. Just Sue solving us together. That she'll be there when we get home, but she never even looks in my direction and I know I am full of lies.

RATS

Worst part about the little carton they come in is this picture of a gerbil or a hamster on the outside and it's just looking at Marshall all innocent. Nobody buys mice for pets except school teachers. Jimmy, the guy behind the counter, has to know that this is lunch or a science project. The box moves a bit, every so often, just enough to remind Marshall.

Her bed is right next to the aquarium. Marshall can touch the glass from the bed. Gloria asks him if he wants to see her feed it. He's said no twice before and gone to watch television in the living room. Today he stays because the night before she called him a pussy when some guys stole their chairs at a bar. She pulls the white mouse up by its pink tail and slings him right on top of the slimy half hanging out on the other side of the pond.

The mouse flips out. Runs in circles, runs all over the place and finally backs up in the corner farthest away, shaking uncontrollably. Marshall is about to stick his hand in and save it, but Gus doesn't even seem to notice. He's doing his croc thing in the water where he sinks down so all they can see is the top of his head.

They wait, bent slightly over looking at them both. Time passes. Eventually the mouse stops shaking and takes a few steps around and Gus just stays in the water. Gloria says sometimes it takes a while.

Marshall has her shirt just about off, it's semi-stuck around her head and her arms are stuck straight up in the sleeves. He doesn't rush things. He kisses a bit on her neck and when he tries to move her hair out of the way he looks over at the tank. Gus has turned. He is staring at the mouse from the water. The mouse knows what's happening.

It is running back and forth as fast as it can along that back edge. Gloria flips the shirt over the top of her head so it's at the back of her neck and the arms are still in the sleeves. She starts dragging her nails down Marshall's back and whispering stuff like it's about to happen, just watch, watch.

Marshall figures it will be quick. But Gus takes his time, waits until the mouse just about tires itself to death, then starts to slide up out of the water towards the mouse. Gloria once told Marshall that the mouse had to be alive or it wouldn't eat them. He assumed that it would swallow them whole like a cookie. Maybe, he thought Gus liked the feeling of something moving inside of it. But that's not how it goes.

Gus bites the mouse once real quick on the side. Marshall isn't sure if this is just mean or so it can't run anymore. Blood is coming out in a semi-circle. The mouse quivering there, its eyes huge but trying not to look at the snake curling up around it like if pretending it wasn't there for long enough might just make it go away. Instead Gus pulls around him and starts squeezing until one of those pink eyes just pops right out of his head and Marshall really feels sick but Gloria is curled around him damp with excitement and he tells himself that he is snake and he can do however he pleases.

STRAIGHT, NOT FORWARD. FORWARD, NOT STRAIGHT.

Perhaps he reasoned, Jeffrey was planning an ambush. He was the one that gave them directions to the farm. He had told Whitney that it might change her life. He hadn't mentioned what it could do for Marshall, but he didn't have high expectations. Marshall didn't like that Jeffrey and Whitney were still friends even though he never suspected anything.

It was getting dark and they were lost. Whitney offered to call Jeffrey and ask him directions and Marshall told her she could if she wanted. She didn't and he realized that she knew what it might do to him and that they shared unspoken things. She knew how to hurt him and this excited him. Whitney told him to turn around. When they stopped she opened the door and dumped trash into the grass. There was a lot and he wondered if maybe they had forgotten to clean out the floorboard last time they stopped for gas.

They had a map and MapQuest directions they had printed out and when they reached an asphalt street again they realized that there were on the other side of the river and it was too dark so they continued in that direction, several states away, towards home. They would find a hotel when neither of them could keep their eyes open any longer.

"Am I supposed to turn anytime soon?" he asked.

"Not for another couple hundred miles or so. Just keep going forward."

"I'm always going forward, even when I turn."

"Well, keep going straight then."

This was an argument they'd had before and it was a joke now although neither laughed. There was more on the line for him. He knew she was better than him and hoped he might trick her into falling deeply for him before she figured out. The night before they had been out of condoms and he had pulled out too late on purpose and just left the last little bit on her stomach the edge of the bottom of her shirt. He didn't think she realized that it wasn't all there, but he didn't know how that worked. How much she could feel. He could keep her for a long time if it worked. Until then he would take her directions and move in a line as far away as he could take them.

EIGHTY SIX THOUSAND TWO HUNDRED

She tucked her shirt in funny. He never liked that about Francine. It made her look really old and out of style. She wouldn't fluff out the bottom to make it look casual; it all seemed forced at the waist like her pants were slowly consuming her sweater.

Plus, she said, he was never thankful enough. For anything really. Francine thought he should be much more thankful for everyday things like half moons and sidewalk cracks and the way a leaf falls into a gutter. Once she said, "There are eighty six thousand two hundred seconds in a day, have you stopped to use any of them for thanks. He told her no he hadn't and then he thanked her for asking.

One day at work he used the calculator on his phone to try and find out how many seconds he had wasted with her so he could send an email to her with the subject line: You're Welcome. First he calculated seconds in an hour (three thousand six hundred) and then seconds in a day (eighty six thousand four hundred) and then seconds in forty seven days (four million sixty thousand eight hundred). He figured ultimately that of those four million sixty thousand and eight hundred seconds spent together about fifty thousand or so were high-quality (sweaty, panting sex, not limpfish bobbing up and down; genuine laughs generated by their own jokes and not a film; those times in the morning when they moved around each other and he blew in her ear to tickle her) and around one million two hundred and fifty thousand were all right so-so (watching re-runs of Seinfeld, sharing popcorn, rooting for the Steelers to come from behind). The rest, according to his calculations, were garbage.

Marshall rechecked his calculations before he sent the email because he knew that she would check them and send him back some snarkyass response back like: learn to

count doofus. When he realized that she was wrong about the amount of seconds in a day he checked four times again to make sure. This, it seemed, was very important. He sent an email entitled Thankful. It said: I am Thankful that I now know that there are 86,400 seconds in a day and not 86,200. So it seems you have been missing out on over 200 seconds a day for the past six months which according to my calculations means you have missed out on approximately 36,000 seconds worth of possible thank you time. It seems you have a lot of catching up to do. And by the way you are welcome.

He felt like a true champion until she emailed back that she didn't remember ever telling him that, but that she hoped he was doing okay, he seemed a little off, and that if he needed to talk or anything to let her know. And he remembered that it was he who broke things off with her and thought that perhaps he had been very wrong about quite a few things.