

Issue 5.1

Fall 2019

Cowboy Jamboree Magazine



**Henry Chinaski is a Friend of
Mine**

CONTENTS

CNF

"Rosalinda" by Mark Rogers

FICTION

"Jimmie & Lester" by Steve Lambert

"Mean and Ugly" by Dan Crawley

"The Rooster" by Ryan Barnhill

"Cowboy Rehab (Dead in a Ditch)" by Steve Passey

"Ditched" by Travis Turner

"Another Anonymous Story" by Ty Hall

"A Breathing Coffin" by A. F. Knott

"Under the Viaduct" by Robert McCarthy

"How to Ask a Stranger to Buy You a Beer" by John Waddy Bullion

"Radiator" by Jesse Salvo

"Going to Hell" by Robert Dawson

"Before Gibbs" by Mike Itaya

"Killing Orange" by Willy Carr

"Slim" by Robert Emmett Cox

"Tummy Trouble" by Sheldon Birnie

"I Killed Your Wife" by Emily Grandy

PHOTOGRAPHY

"Abandoned" by Michael Carter

ROSALINDA

by Mark Rogers

Sounds of Rosarito, Mexico.

The sea at night from our bed, drowned out by street traffic during the day.

A musical trio roaming the neighborhood—a trumpet, saxophone, and faltering snare drum; the trumpet player's teenage daughter walks by his side, her hand out for pesos.

Driving by an Alcohólicos Anónimos storefront, hearing a microphone with a guy blaring a message in Spanish, wondering how anonymous things are if the alcoholics could be heard a block away.

Lots of dogs, as though the night turns a switch on them and they bark and growl and whimper until the sun comes up.

*

My wife has a big heart. She came home and said, "Lots of people in Rosarito are starving. They don't have enough money to eat. A man tried to sell me a horse today. He can't afford to feed it—its bones are sticking out. It's going to die."

We drove over to see the horse, a brown mare. First, we stopped off at a guy's house and bought a big bag of alfalfa, like we were scoring five kilos of weed. We drove to the lot on the poor side of town where the horse was being kept. It came right over to the metal gate. I grabbed some alfalfa and the horse ate out of my hand. Its ribs were corrugated, its hoofs cracked and what looked to be hard ulcers stuck out on its forelegs. A couple of guys came over and told us the horse was ours for a \$120. We learned the mare was named Rosalinda.

One of the guys could hardly look me in the eye; his dirty feet were in flip flops and he was missing a couple of teeth. I watched the horse walk over to a water bucket and dip its muzzle down and come up dry. It was one thing to not have money to feed a horse; it was something else altogether to deny it water.

The guy who owned the horse wasn't around and we were told we'd have to come back tomorrow.

Sophy and I drove up to our lot, where we were building our house, talking about buying Rosalinda. On the dirt road leading to our building lot we saw a guy on horseback. Sophy stopped and rolled down the window and started asking the guy questions about the practicalities of buying a horse. I noticed the rider's mare was sleek and beautiful; calm and following his commands. The guy's name was Rodolfo and his mare was named Lucero and he lived in the same community where we building our house. By the end of the conversation we learned that Rodolfo was a groom. He offered

to care for our horse until our house was built. It was clear I was going to learn a lot about horses from Rodolfo.

Instead of bringing Rosalinda the ten miles by truck, Rodolfo said he would lead her over a mountain trail, with him riding Lucero.

I felt like I'd just parachuted into a Cormac McCarthy novel.

*

We returned the next day, with money in hand to buy Rosalinda. She recognized us from across the lot and whinnied and trotted over. We had brought water and more alfalfa for her. The little guy missing teeth wandered up the street and said his boss wasn't around—that he'd be by later. We learned that the boss had bought Rosalinda for his daughter but she got tired of caring for the horse. It was too much trouble. I can see the daughter now, scrolling down her text messages, complaining that she doesn't have time to take care of a horse.

We were told that in a day or two if they hadn't sold Rosalinda, they would've put a bullet in her head and sold her to a butcher. We told them we were serious about buying her.

The little guy then asked us if we could give him some money for tortillas—he hadn't eaten all day. I handed him 20 pesos and he set off at a quick walk, almost running. He ducked into a roadside store that was little more than a shack.

I said to Sophy, "That isn't the walk of a man going to get tortillas."

Sophy said, "Let's wait a minute. I want to see what he buys."

We watched the little guy come out of the shack, a bottle in his hand, the cheapest clear alcohol. He saw us and darted back inside.

"You were right," said Sophy.

I laughed and said, "The little fucker can't think straight."

Later we got a call that the boss was there and we could make the deal. We picked up Rodolfo and drove over. We were expecting to find a drug dealer type, but the boss was well-spoken with no rough edges. If he was a criminal he was a very successful one, high up on the food chain. We gave the boss \$120 and he handed over a handwritten contract and a Xerox of his driver's license. When he tore the contract out of the notebook, on the next page in I saw a penciled sketch of a naked women with torpedo tits.

Rodolfo examined Rosalinda and said, "She's too weak to make the trip by foot."

A few hours and a horse trailer ride later, Rosalinda was in Rodolfo's front yard, only a couple miles from where we were building our house.

I now own a horse and I don't know anything about horses.

*

We started building our house with only \$1,000 bucks on hand, trusting forward momentum would carry the day. We'll have fruit trees, a vegetable garden, a

bougainvillea-draped fence, a horse stall, and a hen house. Our dogs will run free. We'll get a cat; maybe even some pygmy goats. We'll have our own water tank (maybe a well down the line) and operate as much as we can on solar power. We're not trying to get off the grid, but we are trying to be as self-sufficient as possible.

*

I don't know what it is about Mexico. You look around and you see that everyone's hungry, their rent isn't paid, there's no gas for the stove, and the water bill is overdue. They're all looking for work but once they find a job they exhale and do the bare minimum. Like Rodolfo.

When we drop by he runs for the shovel and begins scooping up horseshit. I had to give water to Rosalinda myself. Rodolfo's chickens are on Rosalinda's bale of alfalfa, pecking away. For a guy who purports to know his way around horses, Rodolfo seems awfully scared of Rosalinda.

Rodolfo's wife is sweet and he has a cute three-year-old girl. We're paying him \$20 a week to care for Rosalinda. You'd think he'd just do the job—its easy money for Mexico. But doing the bare minimum is a way of life here.

Rodolfo is so broke he tried to sell us his puppy. Then he pointed to his other dog, chained in the middle of the yard, in the sun, and said, "He's a strong dog." Without coming out and saying it, he was telling me his dog was for sale.

He asked me if I liked guns and then produced a pellet rifle and fired it at a Styrofoam cup on the ground. Then he asked me if I wanted to buy the gun.

This would be more poignant if there wasn't a heap of Tecate beer cans by the side of his house.

I don't think I'm going to learn very much about horses from Rodolfo: He was brushing Rosalinda with a two-inch brush from a 99 cent store—better-suited for grooming a plush toy.

As soon as possible we'll build a fenced in area on our land and move Rosalinda.

*

I wake up in the morning—often the first person awake. I say to myself, with an imaginary slap on my back, "Wow, I'm living in Mexico."

Right.

Surrounded by criminals, liars, cheats, and cockroaches. Not imaginary cockroaches. Real ones. They crawl around the kitchen, up and down the bathroom. Little ones the size of a grain of rice and huge ones that look like wind-up toys. Wonderful, going into the bathroom at night and seeing a cockroach crawling on my toothbrush.

When I wake in the morning and turn on the water tap in the bathroom, a sewer smell rises from the sink's drain. A piercing smell, like smelling salts.

Driving around town there are blocks where the sewer smell is pervasive and predictable. Sophy and I grimace and look at each other and mutter, "Oh, my God..."

I walk our dogs three times a day, in the vacant lot across the street. I'm proud to see them run together—all three of them—Kuma, Loba, and the Chihuahua, Princessa. But the lot is strewn with trash and the dogs can't resist chewing on the dead rooster the neighbor threw into the weeds

Loba comes over when I call her, a gray feather sticking out of her mouth.

The worst was when Loba came running over with a dead puppy in her mouth.

But I live in Mexico and Mexico is wonderful.

*

We bought Rosalinda to save her from starvation. Instead, we'd moved her under the care of Rodolfo, who was only marginally better than the drunks and crooks that had her before. After seeing Rosalinda without water, without food and surrounded by mounds of her own shit, it was time to make a move.

We hired a guy to make a simple corral next to the house we were building. It was built in one day. The corral had a partial roof that would shade Rosalinda from the sun and a water trough so she could drink as much as she could hold.

The next problem was to move her the two miles from Rodolfo's to the new corral. It was going to be up to me to lead Rosalinda down the road. She had a habit of being skittish and aggressive, probably out of fear and memory of bad treatment. The proposition made me nervous, but it was something I felt I should do. I wanted to be the one to lead Rosalinda to her new home.

The night before I surfed the internet and Wikipedia to learn the basics of leading a horse. The articles I read stressed the element of danger and warned me not to let the lead get wrapped around my hand. I had visions of Rosalinda bolting and running away, disappearing over the hillside. It would be a bitch getting her back.

Sophy and I drove to Rodolfo's in the morning. He was gone; his wife was home. A Mexican laborer stopped by the side of the road and asked Sophy a few questions. She told him we were moving our horse. He offered to help. Part of me was disappointed but I was smart enough to welcome an experienced hand.

The laborer unhitched Rosalinda but he couldn't get her to move. He pulled hard on her lead but she planted her hooves and wouldn't budge.

I gestured for the lead and said, "Let me try."

I gave a firm tug and said, "Let's go." I started walking and Rosalinda followed. It was a good moment, setting off on the dirt road with Rosalinda clopping behind me. Sophy followed in the car as Rosalinda and I walked along, up a couple of steep hills, both of us sweating. I talked to her as we walked and kept a firm hold on the lead. I could see she was favoring her left hind leg and any fears I had of her running over the hill disappeared—she was going to arrive more tired than me.

There were a couple of times Rosalinda showed fright—when dogs growled from behind fences, but she kept it together. One time she stopped dead in her tracks. A strong pull on her lead and she started walking again.

By the time we reached our land and Rosalinda was safe in her corral, I was feeling proud. I'd been nervous and maybe afraid, but I'd done it without fobbing it off on someone else.

We watched Rosalinda eat fresh hay and drink deeply under the shaded part of the corral.

Sophy said, "Now it's time to spoil her."

*

Around sundown there's a commotion outside our door in the dirt street—a bedraggled kitten is hissing at our three dogs. The kitten is soaking wet and its tail is solid mud.

I scoop up the kitten and calm down the dogs.

Sophy says, "Poor thing. Someone must have thrown water on her."

I say, "Maybe someone tried to drown her."

I sit the kitten down on top of a trash can and use a rag to wash the mud off her. Maybe our dogs would have killed the kitten, maybe not. We decide to adopt her on the spot. I was pretty sure that once the dogs realized the kitten was part of our family, they'd leave her be.

We gave her a flea bath—she was infested with fleas.

Sophy named her Bella and the kitten spent the evening sitting on my lap as I binge watched Homeland. We made a box for her and she slept peacefully through the night; not in the box, but in my office chair.

I love cats and said to Sophy, "This is how it should be, adopting a cat—saving it from being killed. I don't think it would've lasted another night on the streets." In the morning Sophy and I drove out to buy cat food and kitty litter. I was filling the kitty litter box when Sophy came in and said, "Bella has an owner."

When it comes to animals, Mexico is a very strange place. It turns out Bella the kitten belongs to our neighbors across the street. We returned the kitten and our neighbors told us they had given the kitten a bath—that's why it was wet. When it ran away across the street and was cornered by our dogs, the neighbors figured the dogs had killed the kitten.

They didn't bother crossing the street to find out for sure.

There's a pervasive fatalism in Mexico about many things, including animals.

There are three feral dogs that run around our property where we're building our house. They're covered with fleas and they like to sleep under our house's foundation. We tried to give them flea shots but they run away when we approach. They belong to our neighbors, but even they can't catch the dogs. The neighbors put out scraps of food for the dogs but if they get too close the dogs run for the hills. The three dogs are small and ugly and run barking after our car when we drive off.

Our contractor Antonio said, "I can shoot them for you if you want."

Never mind that they aren't our dogs.

I wonder how far this Mexican fatalism about animals extends to people.

Antonio says, "I really want to be a father. I want to have children to fill my life."

Later he reveals he has four children by four different women; four children he's never seen and doesn't support.

*

Saving a horse from starvation was one thing. Caring for a horse was a burden we weren't prepared to accept. We sold Rosalinda to a Mexican who specializes in nurturing sick horses back to health.

When we got Rosalinda I read "The Man Who Listens to Horses," the story of Monty Roberts, a real-life horse whisperer. One of the things the book mentioned was that horses were social animals. Rosalinda's now with five other horses and is happy. The Mexican who bought her said, "Whoooh. This girl is old. But I think she has one more foal in her."

Six months later we move into our new home. We meet one of our neighbors, a deported Mexican who looks like Captain Crunch. He tells us he's seen Rosalinda. She's sleek and the bones don't show through her sides. Just like the new owner predicted, she has a foal.

*

In the morning, I was lying on my back in bed, just barely awake, when I heard Sophy laughing.

I opened my eyes and Sophy said, "It was so funny—you were smiling as you were sleeping."

END

JIMMIE & LESTER

by Steve Lambert

Jimmie sitting on an overturned bucket with her knees apart and I can see up her shorts. It's been a good long while for me. But I know what the answer is. No need to ask. Been in the high nineties for a week straight. We ain't bathed for days. I decide to take a quick dip in the retention pond next to the strip mall on the other side of the woods we sitting in. We strip and run in, rub down and scratch the filth loose, run back into the woods. Jimmie giggles the whole time. She's got lots of laughter in her. I keep looking. I get the feeling somebody seen us. We dry off and get dressed. After setting quiet for a while we gather up our shit and walk to a deeper clearing in the woods to be safe. We put our blankets down on the ground and sit down. I been doing this almost all my life. Not Jimmie though.

I'm nearly dry, except for my hair. Jimmie sleeping on her blanket, her damp hair up in a towel like a mom or a wife. It starts to sprinkle. Your usual Florida summer afternoon shower. But I don't feel any of the raindrops. It gets to where it's raining hard, and I can hear it hissing and thumping onto the tops of the trees, but I don't feel a single drop, and the sound of it overhead makes the woods feel busy and alive. It calms me. I lie down and close my eyes and listen. I could be lulled to sleep this way. But I don't really sleep. I haven't had a good hard sleep in years. Finally I open my eyes and sit up.

"Jim," I say. I walk over to her and look at her face. She looks at peace. But she's hanging out of her top. I wonder how she can sleep like that. It's strange how a person can get used to things being wrong or a little off. I want to touch it. I think about putting my mouth on it. I bend down and reach my hand out.

"What are you doing?" she says. She don't move. Her light blue eyes is on me.

"It's raining," I say.

She cups her breast back into her shirt. She pulls back her scaggily brown hair and makes a harsh sound in her throat and spits something compact and heavy off into the woods.

I walk back to the bucket I been sitting on.

"I don't know how many times we've been over this." She stands up and stretches.

I shift my weight on the bucket, rock it back and forth.

"We're too close." She rifles through her army bag, looking for something. Homeless folks is always looking for shit that ain't there anymore, shit that's long gone.

"We're best friends. I care about you too much." She pauses, looks up from the bag.

"I care about you too. That's all the more reason. It's like you teasing me, lying around half-exposed."

"How about Anita? She likes you. She'll do it for free." She pulls a tiny empty bottle from her bag.

"Anita?"

"What's wrong with Anita?"

"Well, she could use a trip to the dentist, for starters. Plus she's always scratching at herself."

"Anita doesn't have anything—communicable." She pulls another small bottle from her bag and drinks what little bit is inside of it, throws it into some nearby underbrush.

"I know she don't. I just ain't interested in Anita."

"Quiet," says Jimmie. "You hear that?"

I hear voices coming from the part of the woods next to the retention pond. We gather up our things and run off in the opposite direction. Once we figure we're at a safe distance we stop and sit down in a hollow and stay quiet for a while.

I don't know exactly how Jimmie ended up like this, but I've pieced some things together over the years. No one out here knows her better than me. She used to teach—at a high school, I believe. She was married. Sometimes she says, "He was a very decent man," or "He was a devoted husband and a good father." She never says nothing about love or that he was handsome or nothing like that, and she never uses his name around me. And I know she has grown-up kids. She sends postcards and letters to "Dearest Christina" and "Dearest Richard." That's all I know for sure. But it seems to me if everything was all right she wouldn't be out here with me. Where are Dearest Christina and Dearest Richard? Wouldn't they come help their mother if they knowed she was out here? Do they know she out here? Something bad musta happened. The way she talks about them, the tone in her voice—something went wrong. She feels guilt. Maybe she cheated. Maybe he cheated, and she responded harshly. But that can't be it. That can't be the only thing. That's not enough to make a woman homeless.

I wake up and Jimmie gone, and her blanket and bag gone too. I figure she off going. "I'm going to potty," she'll say, which is something only moms say. Nobody says "potty" unless they raised children. I stand up and stretch and smell myself under the arms. Then I hear something. I think it's probably Jimmie coming back from going, but it ain't.

I say, "Jimmie," just louder than a whisper, but she don't answer. I hear some laughter a ways off and walk in that direction. I hear underbrush being disturbed and some more laughing, and I start to see something other than the greens and browns of the woods. I see reds and blues and flesh. I move behind a tree. I see some boys, four boys. They on their knees, huddled up around something like around a campfire, but

the one in front of me has his pants down around his knees, and he is leaned over, holding up the top of his body with his bare arms, and I see two long skinny legs sticking out to the sides of the boy's body, coming out from under him, and I can tell they Jimmie's legs.

I don't know what to do, but when I watch the boy in front of me get up and pull his pants back on, and the boy to his left get up and take down his pants and get down on his knees, where the first boy was, I know I need to do something. But I don't. I can't move. I ain't scared, and I ain't interested in watching. I'm just stuck somehow. My body won't move.

The second boy slaps hands with the boy to his right and he howls. I look around and see a club-sized stick on the ground about six feet from me. I could pick it up and run over there and clobber the shit out of one of them and the rest of them would probably scatter. Hell, the sight of me alone would probably be enough to make them run. Still, I don't move.

"Turn over, turn over!" says the one in front of me, and I can't believe it, because she does. She turns right goddamn over. She ain't even putting up a fight. For a second, I get mad at Jimmie, then I shake that thought off.

I crawl over and grab the stick. One of the boys say he hears something and they all stop and glance around for a moment, but I don't move. The third one gets up and starts undoing his pants, and I get up too, and once he has his pants down, I come at them, yelling.

He turns around and looks at me and I can see his eyes, and they're frightened and maybe humiliated. The other boys run off into the woods, and I bring that stick down on his head, straight down, and he falls, stays there for a few seconds and then gets up, tugging at his pants and trying to run and crying all at once. Jimmie just lay there with her bare ass up in the air.

"Jimmie," I say. She don't answer, but her eyes is wide open, and I watch her blink a couple times. And her eyes look like they staring at something inward. I sit down next to her head. I pick up a twig and twirl it with my finger and thumb.

After a moment, she curls up like a little girl and I get up and get her ratty pink blanket and put it over her.

"Thanks," she whispers.

"You're welcome," I say, but I hate that she said that. I hate that she thought she needed to thank me.

I think about asking her if she all right or if I can get her something, but I don't, because she ain't all right and there ain't nothing I can get her. I figure the best thing I can do is just sit here and keep an eye on her, make her feel safe. After a while she closes her eyes and goes to sleep.

I think about them boys. They just boys, after all. They got mamas and dads and maybe even sisters. It's not hard to imagine. They might sit at a dinner table tonight

and eat tuna casserole and green beans and drink a glass of milk. One might watch a baseball game with his dad. One might say good night to his mama or kiss his little sister on the head. And what will they think of this terrible thing they did? What will they think of Jimmie? They will carry this with them for the rest of their lives. They could be ruined by it. A part of me hopes they will be.

I don't know what Jimmie did to end up out here. She might tell me someday, but whatever she did, she don't deserve this. She don't deserve to be okay with what her life has become. Some people out here don't, they really don't, but she does. I want her to have a better life.

I walk back to where our things is and gather it all up and bring it over to where Jimmie is. I lay out my blanket next to her and sit down on it. I get the beef jerky out of my bag and sit there chewing, watching Jimmie sleep, and soon it starts to rain again. I can hear the rain drops hitting the roof of the wood, that nice hissing sound. But, again, I don't feel a single drop. Not one drop hits me the whole time I sit there with Jimmie. Except for that hissing sound on top of the trees, it's like it ain't even happening.

MEAN AND UGLY

by Dan Crawley

One of Bonhart's online advisees, Mary Amerson, accuses him of using *childish and unprofessional sarcasm* in his previous e-mail to her. This charge is detailed in her reply e-mail, along with many other examples of his *complete moronicness*, and cc'd to the Chair of the Business Department at Senstein University.

Bonhart stares at the screen, reading over Mary Amerson's e-mail again. She attacks his credentials. She notices from the Faculty and Staff page that Bonhart has an *MA in English not Business!* She wonders if her advisor *has any clue about business ethics or the Stock Market?* She wonders if he *knows what it means to be a single mother of four trying to get ahead in this crappy world without people like you getting in my way?* And: *If I weren't 1000 miles away I bet you wouldn't be pushing all your power around! I bet if I was in your face there in Chandler AZ you wouldn't be acting like such a jerk and would let me do what I wanted so I can get this degree done already!*

Bonhart hates this job. He wants to stand up and walk out the glass door on the other side of his cubicle. But his wife is going to school full-time, after being the main breadwinner for three years while he finished his graduate degree. Now it is her turn, she keeps reminding him. And this was the only full-time position Bonhart could land in higher education that had benefits and wasn't temporary.

Then there is this line in Mary's latest: *Sarcasm is anger in disguise!*

The Business Chair saunters into the opening of Bonhart's cubicle. He is a professor emeritus at Arizona State, with a constant perplexed expression of a wizened chimp.

"I just perused Mary's e-mail," the Chair says in his lackadaisical way.

"She has issues with my moronicness," Bonhart says.

"At this moment, you are a convenient target for her stress. Don't take it personal."

"You've read my reply, right?" Bonhart scrolls up to the previous e-mail sent to Mary Amerson. "And I challenge you to point out even a letter of sarcasm. Listen now. Ready?"

The Chair holds up an open palm. "No sarcasm there."

"Okay. Just hear this one line, 'You are a people-person, so you should transact with people at a brick-and-mortar institution, outside the complicated restrictions of the online educational world.'" Bonhart smiles proudly. "Look. Transact. I used a business word."

The Chair smirks as if a stickpin moves deeper into his left eye. "Hopefully our illustrious leader, President Senstein, will never read that particular piece of advice. We need all the online bodies we can get."

"She is such a people-person," Bonhart says, taking off his glasses and tossing them across the narrow gray Formica counter, his desk.

"Just know that I appreciate the generous supplement I'm receiving from this fine institution and would like to keep the doors open. Let's leave Mary alone."

"Are you sure?" Bonhart holds up both of his palms. "I can whip up another reply."

"If she e-mails again," the Chair calls out, already turning back to his spacious cubicle, "forward it to me."

"Can I forward you every e-mail for the rest of the day?" Bonhart calls to the ceiling. "For the rest of the year?"

"Such ire-filled sarcasm drifting over my walls."

Mary Amerson sends another e-mail while Bonhart visits the restroom. This one contains only one line. *At least answer the phone because I keep getting thrown into your voicemail!* Bonhart clicks the forward button and types, *For the record, I'm not throwing anyone anywhere* before sending it on to the Chair.

Bonhart stares at the phone on the narrow counter. The voicemail button blinks red.

He calls his wife, Becca, and now he is thrown into her cell phone's voicemail. He figures she might have class today. "Hello, Beccarino. I'm calling to make fun of one of my advisees who wants to sue me for 'emotional distress and aggravating her lower back spasms due to stress.' Call me when you can."

It is not even a minute when the phone buzzes its annoying ringtone, its nagging need-need, need-need.

Bonhart picks up the receiver and quickly hangs up. Probably Mary. After a few minutes, he calls Becca again, in case it was her.

"Hello?" Becca says brightly. "Yes, hello?"

"Hey, what's going down, Beccadoodle?"

"Oh, you finally call back."

"Yes, I'm returning your call, you see," Bonhart says, leaning back in his chair.

"You heard my messages?" Becca sounds tired now.

"They are so mesmerizing." Bonhart shifts forward in the chair, clicks quickly on a new e-mail. A question about tuition and payment plans from a prospective student. He forwards it to Admissions. "The admission counselor here is useless," he says to his wife. "I know nothing about payment plans. Oh, I was thinking about this earlier: can you imagine if all of my students e-mailed me at once? I'd jump off my desk. Though, I'd probably only break a shoulder, knowing my luck."

"Lucky, yes, that's you. So my last voice message finally piqued your interest?"

"I could've done without all the vulgarity." Bonhart laughs at that one.

Becca chuckles at that one, too. "Well, yes, you know. Trying times."

"Okay, I haven't check any messages on this phone or my cell," he says, leaning back again, pivoting the chair a little one way and then the other. "I've been consumed with work all morning. I think my back is in a spasm."

"I'm doing that to you?"

"No, it's these students—this one student and all her rants on my e-mails and voicemail. I'm not cut out for needy people."

"Then I should hang up now."

"Are you mad?"

"Like I said...it's a trying moment." Becca clears her throat.

"Tell him to leave," Bonhart says dramatically. "And this time make sure he doesn't rip off any of my unmentionables. Tell your Scandinavian lover to buy his own long johns." He laughs again, but Becca is quiet for a moment.

"Yes, I have so many gentlemen callers coming and going while you're at work," Becca says with a tinge of a Southern accent. "Especially today. I've had to miss my class; it has been so busy around here. But, who really needs a graduate degree? I mean, a girl is obligated to fully service her many—"

"Becca, what's going on?"

"Please, don't let me disturb your work day. I know how much you love what you do."

"Is the apartment burning down?"

"Pretty much the opposite."

"What do you mean?"

"Let's see." Becca hums something. "Maybe I should hang up and let you eavesdrop on all my vulgar rants on your voicemail and your cell phone messages."

"I'd rather hear the live version."

"Yes, I see your point. Remember that wall in our dining room-slash-breakfast nook, the one with the print of *Starry Night* hanging in the middle of it? Well, the poor psychotic print has been replaced by this huge gaping hole."

"What hole? Did you put a hole in the wall?"

"Ha!" Next Becca snorts. "That is quite rich coming from you. You're the only hole-puncher in this family, sweetie."

"I did not punch a hole in the dining room-slash-breakfast nook wall this morning," Bonhart says defensively. "I haven't punched any doors or walls in a long, long time."

"Perhaps I should interpose some back story."

"That would be nice."

"Earlier this morning, I'm startled out of my slumber by our apartment complex's maintenance man, entering our apartment, calling out. Better than any alarm clock, you know...so soothing. So I came out and met him in the dining room-slash-breakfast nook, noticing that he removed the van Gogh and was in the process of

stabbing the wall with his screwdriver. He informed me that the apartment below had an enormous water stain on the ceiling of their dining room-slash-breakfast nook. Next he punched his fists into the wall and ripped away chunks of the wall, saying all this time that he was probing for the leak."

"I hate that apartment," Bonhart says. "So he tore up our wall?"

"Apparently that is how one probes for a water leak these days."

"Becca, is our apartment flooded?"

"No, but let us take a moment of silence for the dining room-slash-breakfast nook's ceiling downstairs. I went to check on the poor elderly couple earlier and—"

"So where's the leak? Just tell me." Another e-mail from Mary Amerson shows up in his inbox. Bonhart glimpses the subject line. *Do your job you jerk or I'll get you fired!*

"Inside of the wall. Aren't you listening?" Becca sighs. "The wood is pretty damp. But not to worry, our friendly neighborhood maintenance man says he'll bring back a blower thingy that'll dry up the wall."

"He fixed the leak?"

"Thankfully. About an hour ago. Although, it was like Niagara before, cascading spectacularly down the inside of the wall. That is when I started phoning my extremely supportive husband."

"I bet the carpet is wet, too."

"Gee, thanks for asking. I'm okay now," Becca says. "Your soothing voice makes everything so—"

"We can't live there," Bonhart shouts. "The property manager has to move us to another apartment. What does the wood inside the wall look like? Is there mold?"

"Calm down, let me get a closer...yes, it appears to be...wet wood."

"Is there mold?"

"Mold. Does it grow in such a desert locale? Hmmm. It is pretty dark looking, now that you mentioned it. Maybe a little fuzzy."

"Call the property manager, Becca. They have to move us into another apartment if there is mold. That is the law."

"Now it all makes sense...yes, mold spores, yes." Becca whistles and blurts, "Ha." Now her words come very slowly, "That is why you've been so chipper lately: you are mold-infested. That is why you've been such a delight to live—"

"You need to do what I say."

"The maintenance man says when it all dries out, he'll fix the wall as good as new."

"I'm not living in a mold-infested apartment. I'm coming home right now."

"Maybe you shouldn't," Becca says coyly. "I mean, I did need you about an hour or so ago, but now he is coming back with the blower thingy, and you would be in the way."

"You know what they say about sarcasm?"

"Am I sarcastic?"

"Sarcasm is hateful...rage in disguise. It's a coping mechanism for...for mean and ugly people."

Becca has nothing to say.

Bonhart hears his wife's shallow breathing.

Her voice returns stronger, leveled out. "Now that I am pondering this situation further, I am concerned about your health. So, yes, I think it is best if you avoid this apartment for the time being. Oh, I must go now! I need to look presentable for my gentleman caller."

"Becca, please. I—"

"There's a knock. My Mr. Maintenance Man has arrived. Good-bye!"

Bonhart lobs the phone's receiver across the narrow counter and it tumbles down onto the carpet. He clicks the reply button, not bothering to read the rest of Mary Amerson's latest e-mail, and begins furiously typing. After finishing his rant, Bonhart looks at the monitor. Over his cubicle wall, he looks through the top of the glass door at a contrail of a faraway plane slicing across a washed-out sky. Next he is outside, standing on the curb, looking at his thirteen-year-old car parked in the narrow lot. A sign-twirler on the other side of the street in front of a mattress store. An elderly woman sitting on the bus bench, a fortress of shopping bags walling her in. Now the contrail is dissipating, and soon there will be only a washed-out sky.

Back inside, Bonhart looks at the e-mail reply he hasn't sent. He deletes it all. In its place, he begins typing:

Dear Ms. Amerson,

Please, I need you to tell me what I'm supposed to do? With all sincerity, I need to know, what do I do now?

THE ROOSTER

By Ryan Barnhill

There was a big painted plaster chicken on the roadside. A sign was nailed to a tree beside it with an arrow pointing down the red clay road. The writing was crooked and nearly illegible. It said 4 SALE GOOD CHICKENS. Steve slowed the car and pulled off onto the shoulder of the road. Barbara turned and looked at him, her hand propping her head up, elbow on the windowsill.

"What? What are we doing?"

Steve pointed to the sign. "Look at that thing. We ought to go down there and get off on this guy. Might be a helluva lot of fun, don't you think?"

She read the sign then looked off at the wet, sunken road. The ditches were filled with water. She could see mosquitoes stirring above the surface in the evening light. "If you want to try it in this car, go ahead."

"You don't think we'll make it?"

"It's downhill. We might make it going in but we get stuck coming back we'll be in trouble."

"We'll make it," Steve said. He smiled at her. Barbara reached over to turn the knob on the air conditioner.

"I just hope we don't get stuck."

"We won't," he said. He pulled up and turned the station wagon down the road. They drove slowly over the uneven ground, the car dipping and rising up from potholes that had been deepened by heavy traffic. "Besides, even if we do we just call a tow. Must have been one hell of a storm they had," Steve said. "This road's a mess."

"You'd think somebody would pave it."

"I knew some people back home lived on a road like this. They all hated each other. All the neighbors. They had a road full of holes and none of them would get it paved."

"That's crazy," Barbara said. "I don't know how people can live that way. There has to be something wrong with you to act like that, to live that way."

"What way?"

"Ignoring a thing. Not fixing it. Why wouldn't they just fix it?"

"I don't know. But that's what they did. Just hick fuckers. Like this guy, probably."

The pines were thick and evergreen on either side of them, forbidding much light to pass through. There was a narrow, short building the size of a wellhouse on one side with exposed framing where the boards had fallen away. A window was cut into it and she could see a square of light falling on something furry that was nailed to the inside wall. A shirtless boy with big crooked teeth leaned in the doorway.

"Some playhouse," Barbara said.

"You think he knows the chicken guy?"

She looked at him, eyebrows raised. "You want to stop and ask him?"

He squinted and looked down the road. A corridor of trees, the terminus imperceptible. "Well, we don't know how far down it is. Or if it's still open. Places leave signs around all the time when they close down."

He stopped the car and leaned over her to roll down the window. "Hey, buddy," he said. The boy squinted and smiled and broke off a piece of dry yellow stalk and started slapping it against the boards behind him. "You know the guy selling chickens up here?"

The boy nodded.

"Well, what kind of place is it?"

The boy dropped the stalk and walked just to the edge of the road and put his hand like a visor over his eyes. "What you mean?"

"I mean does he sell live chickens or what?"

"It's a chicken farm. He got a store, too," the boy said. He pointed to a bag in the windshield in front of Barbara "What you got in that brown bag?"

"Peanuts," Barbara said.

The boy rubbed his belly. "Gimme peanut."

"Give him a peanut," Steve said.

"Why? He didn't ask."

"He asked."

"That wasn't asking. He was making a demand."

"He's not asking for your purse. Just give him a peanut already."

Barbara crossed her arms. "You want to give him a peanut then you give it to him."

"Fine," Steve said. He grabbed the bag and handed it out the window. "Here. Take it. The whole thing."

"You're going to give him my peanuts?"

"We'll get some more."

She muttered something about him having no respect for her opinion on anything. The boy ran up beside the car and snatched the bag. He opened it and looked inside and his face drew up like he'd smelled something bad. "They ain't shelled," he said. "They got shells on them. The fuck you want me to do with a bunch of peanuts with shells on em?"

Steve pointed at some downed trees. "Y'all have a big storm down here?"

The boy nodded. He still had the disgusted look on his face but he dug into the bag. Barbara watched him pull out a handful and shell them, huffing, asking why in hell they wanted to buy peanuts with shells on them when you could get good peanuts already shelled. He was shaking his head and dropping the shells on the ground at his

feet. He chewed with his mouth open and looked over the car. His sly, narrow eyes shifted after a moment and fell on Barbara and they locked eyes before his gaze moved down into her cleavage.

"I ate all your peanuts up," he said. She turned to Steve and gave him a look. He saw she was unamused.

"Can we go now?"

"Hold on," Steve said. "How far down is it?"

"How far is what?"

"The chicken place?"

Peanut shards and spit rolled out of the boy's mouth. "You could throw a rock and hit it, I guess. If you had a rock and a good arm," He said and guffawed. Then he stood on his toes and craned his neck to look down between Barbara's legs, tan there and half covered by her jean shorts. He smacked his lips. "You all got any candy in there? Or something to drink? Them peanuts left me right thirsty."

"Go, Steve," Barbara said, rolling up the window. Steve shrugged, waved to the boy and they pulled away. They drove and didn't speak and finally Steve reached over and put his hand on her thigh.

"He's just a kid," he said "Probably had to raise himself."

She didn't speak.

"What's wrong?" Steve said.

She moved his hand. "I don't want to talk about it."

"Something I did?"

"No."

"If I did something I wish you would tell me."

She spoke to him as she looked out the window at the small, overturned trees. They were piled like bodies with their roots tangled together. Some still clung to the earth, resisting the violent separation.

"Doesn't it make you angry sometimes?"

"What?" he said, tilting his head to try and look around at her face.

"When you see a kid like that."

"Not really."

"It must be nice," she said. He turned and looked out the window. Dead trees and torn ground. She turned to him, her jaw clenched.

"So, you don't think about it? Not ever?"

"I try not to. I thought that was the whole point of the trip, to get away from thinking about it."

"Well, I can't. Not just like that. It's different for me."

"We made a choice, Barbara. Together. Both of us."

"You made a choice. You did. I just went along."

"I don't feel bad about it. It was right, at the time."

"Must be nice to be so goddamn contented," she said and turned back to the window.

They came to a flat, grassless lot with a wide, short building stuck in some squatty pines. It was painted blue and was dirty white in spots where the paint had chipped away. There was a white sign with red-lettering that ran the length of the building that said CHICKEN BOB'S. On either side of the building some distance behind under the pine limbs were rows of wire and wood cages and different colored chickens running around. The screen door was open and there was a rundown gray pickup with a cracked windshield and a rusty cage in the back parked next to the building.

Steve pulled into the lot and turned off the car and stretched.

"You want to go in?"

She was still looking out the window, hand on her forehead.

"I want something to drink, I guess," she said, not looking at him.

"You want me to go in and get you something? Tell me what you want."

"No. I'll go in. I'm tired of sitting in the car," she said. There was a pile of rusty tin laid next to the building with a stained commode on top of it. She saw it and shook her head. "Just glad I don't have to use the bathroom."

Steve smiled. "Me too."

A man came and stood in the doorway. He had close cropped hair and a few murky tattoos on his forearms that neither of them could make out. He was wearing black loafers, trousers and suspenders over his dirty white undershirt. He went around to the tailgate and took hold of the rusty cage. They got out and walked toward the building. Steve said hello. The man grunted and didn't turn.

"You Chicken Bob?" Steve said.

"I'm Chicken Bob," the man said. "What do you want?"

"We saw the sign on the road. Boy down there said you had a chicken farm," Steve said.

"That's right," the man said. "Got chickens out back, you want to buy one. Got drinks and snacks inside. No gas. You got to go to up the road for gas."

"We don't need gas," Steve said. He looked at Barbara. She had put on her wide, chocolate-colored glasses. They made her face look small and frail. The man turned. His eyes rolled up from Barbara's knees to her chest and stopped. Then he looked at Steve and his eyebrows twitched as if he hadn't seen much of anything.

"You want to look around inside?" Steve said.

"I guess," Barbara said.

The man let go of the cage. "You all get what you want I'll take you out back to the chickens."

"You want to, Barbara?"

"I don't care," she said.

It was a dark, cool place with windows on three sides. They were wired and dusty. An elevated counter was against one wall with plastic jars of lighters and souvenirs, all kinds of junk. There were drink coolers and shelves filled with canned meat and bread and cheap candy. Everything was dusty. Barbara got a drink out of the cooler. The man edged himself behind the counter and stood at the register looking at Steve. She handed Steve the drink and he put it on the counter.

"Been here a long time?"

"Long enough," the man said.

"We never been out this way. Just on vacation, traveling around."

"I don't travel," the man said. "I like to stay right around here and mind my business."

"Can't get in trouble that way."

"No, you can't," the man said.

"How much?"

The man told him how much and Steve gave him the money. Steve handed Barbara the drink. She put it to her cheek for a second and then opened it and stood drinking with her hip turned out. The man dropped his gaze and glared at the soft, broad swell of her inner thigh. She noticed it and quickly put her legs together.

"You all want to go look at the chickens now?"

"Sure," Steve said.

The man turned and called a name to someone far down the counter. Steve and Barbara saw a woman sitting on a stool there in the corner, hunched and still like something hewn from stone on a cathedral ledge. She was craggy faced with gray hair and a toothless lower jaw that receded into her scrawny neck. She regarded them with her small, dark eyes and did not speak even when her husband told her to mind the store.

The man came from behind the counter and led them through to the back where there was a large screened door.

There had to be a hundred chickens. Neither of them had ever seen so many, not at once. The ground was covered in sawdust. They walked along the maze of wire fence-work where the chickens ran and darted and clambered and flapped. Some squatted or walked upon their dead, all incognizant like soldiers inured from battle, only conscious of blood and where blood was visible they pecked the wounds of the dead until great hollows were dug into the heads and breasts, where the softest meat was. Barbara walked behind Steve and Steve followed Chicken Bob.

"I got Silkies, Plymouths, Rhode Island Reds," Chick Bob said, pointing among the different cages. One big leghorn outside the cage trotted past them and flapped up and smashed into the wire next to Steve.

"That's Bluebeard."

It was proud and long necked and circled them jerking its head. It had no wattle or comb and the lack made the head look fierce and narrow, like an awl.

"He killed three hens," Chicken Bob said. "Got to keep him separate. He'll kill again I let him get with them other ones."

"Why do you keep him, then? I mean, if he's a killer?" Steve said

"That's my business," Chicken Bob said and led them on. Steve looked at Barbara. She had her hand cupped over her mouth.

"You okay?"

She pointed and took her hand away just long enough to speak. "They're eating that one," she said and cupped her mouth again. There was a chicken slumped over in one corner with two others gouging its eye socket.

Chicken Bob leaned against the cage. "They see that blood they go crazy. Look at em," he said and grinned, his teeth yellowed stubs. "Going back and forth on thatun's head like two niggers on a chain gang busting concrete."

Barbara shook her head and looked away. Steve rubbed her back.

"Y'all see one you like holler and I'll put him in a crate," Chicken Bob said, snorting and wiping his nose. "The chicks is up here."

They came to a cage with a crude wooden chicken house and a hen and five or six little chicks. They were yellow and they chirped and shit while the scuttled over the pine straw. Barbara knelt and stuck her finger through the wire. She brushed a chick's head and down its back. It chirped and moved off among the others gathered at the hen.

Chicken Bob had his hand on the cage door "You want to hold one?"

"Can I?"

"You can if you want to," he said. He went in and grabbed one of the chicks, shoving a few others back with his foot as they tried to get out. He handed the chick to her. It quivered in her palm and twitched its frail, neurotic head.

"It's warm," she said. "It's so warm."

Chicken Bob looked at Steve, eyes aslant. "Y'all want to buy one?"

Steve brushed its head with his finger. It chirped. "You want one, Barb?"

"We don't have anywhere to put it," she said.

"We could make a place, I guess."

The chick jerked its head. "No. No that's okay."

Steve touched her face. She looked up at him. "You sure?" He said. "It's okay if you want to keep it."

She handed it to Chicken Bob. "Yeah. I'm sure."

"Okay," Steve said.

Chicken Bob took the chick and tossed it back in the cage. It landed, chirped and ran out the side of the open door before he could grab it. "The hell with it," he said and shut the door.

He was leading them back up the store.

"I got some eggs, you all want to buy some," He said.

"No. We're a long way from home still," Steve said.

"Alright."

They were at the door when Bluebeard appeared and strutted behind a large crate propped against the side of the building. He flapped up and squawked and Chicken Bob walked off toward him, shaking his head and cursing. Steve opened the door and heard Barbara moan. He turned and she had vomited in the grass, then looked down the building and saw Chicken Bob with his hand around Bluebeard's neck. There was a yellow lump of bloody feathers beside the crate. The bird had dug into the chick with his spurs and pried its head off. It was hanging out of his beak. Steve put his arm around Barbara where she squatted, dry heaving.

Chicken Bob backhanded the rooster and shook it. "Goddamn, you! Let go!" he said. He threw it against the side of the building. It squawked and scrambled against the wall a moment before it slipped down and limped off toward the cages with the chick's head still in its beak. Chicken Bob wiped his brow and puffed. "They'll do it sometimes," he said. "Tear a chick's head clean off. That's why you got to keep them separate." He shook his head and spat. "He eats that he'll choke to death but goddamn him, the sonofabitch."

Steve only nodded grimly. He bent over Barbara and her ribs heaved beneath his hands. When she had calmed down she walked fast through the store and out to the car. Steve followed her. Chicken Bob stood off against the building, watching them. She was already in the car when Steve got to it. When he got in he put his hand on her shoulder. She moved away from him and put her head against the window.

"You had to come here," she said.

He watched the sun dropping into the trees. Then he started the car. They came to the hill up the road and the tires spun a moment before gaining traction. Even afterward the car labored through the mud and bog water that had lapped over onto the road. The temperature gauge bounced wildly and something beneath the hood hissed. When he pulled out onto the road the light was gone and the car was rattling. Barbara was asleep, looked asleep. If she wasn't and thought to reprimand him, she did it in silence. He hoped she was asleep. He didn't want her to wake up now. He didn't know what he would say to her if she did.

COWBOY REHAB (DEAD IN A DITCH)

By Steve Passey

They call it Cowboy Rehab when you don't drink or use while you're actually in rehab. After that, it's get back on the horse and ride, Cowboy.

Big Boy Roy phoned Wanda on his cellphone from his truck. Look at me Wanda, he said. Look at me now. If you don't take me back, I'll do it. I'll do it right here.

Wanda pulled the curtain back and looked at Big Boy Roy, parked out there in front of the house. He had a shotgun under his chin.

I'll do it, he said. I'll do it.

He was crying.

It's an awful thing when a man cries. He's either ruined or lying, just trying to avoid what he's got coming. Either is bad.

Wanda caught her breath. She could not look away.

Don't do it, she said, low into the phone. Don't do it.

Are we together then, he asked? Are we good?

He looked at her, a black shape in the window, backlit by a light from a hall unseen, her hair hanging in an aura of gold.

I can't, she said.

I love you, he said. That's the last thing I want to say to you, that I want for you to hear. I always loved you.

He rolled his shoulders forward and set the gun.

I love you too, Roy, she said. But love ain't the all of it. The jobs lost and money gone? Here's the reason: You drink because you like to drink. You struggle some? Fine. The bad hands from the old hockey fights, the bad back from throwing chain on the rigs in January when it's forty-below even with the prefabs up. You can take an Advil or eight like everyone else. I won't take the drinking, which is where it all the bad comes from, and not those other things. You never say no, Roy, because you never mean it when you say yes. Don't you say yes, Roy. Don't you nod and lie.

Big Boy Roy looked up at her, both barrels in his mouth, tears running down his cheeks like sweat. He looked ridiculous, like all men who cry with a gun in their mouth. One other thing, she said. My daddy said it was a chickenshit thing to do, what you're doing. Chicken.Shit. The only ones he said he'd give a pass to were them that done it without a note, without listing so much as a single complaint, done it quiet and alone and without calling attention to themselves. That's what my daddy said.

Wanda wasn't cruel so much as weary. Weariness is the stone that can endure the river, when everything soft has been worn away.

Big Boy Roy fired up his truck and floored it. The truck threw gravel in the air and the taillights bled red light like wild eyes and he was gone.

Next day, same time, he come back and called Wanda again, called from his cellphone, sitting in his truck.

She pulled back the curtain and stood in that same sixty-watt yellow mantle as she did the night before. She picked up the phone and said "Remember what my daddy said."

Big Boy Roy got out and stood out there on the sidewalk, underneath the streetlight, crying again. What is it they say about crying men?

Wanda, he said. I'm going to rehab. It's paid for and I'm in. I'll see you in thirty days. It'll be good like it should, be good like it was.

Wanda hung up, but she held her hand up to the window, fingertips to the glass and her palm not quite flat. He waved at her, then got back into the truck. He quit crying and drove away slow.

Thirty days Big Boy Roy sat in rehab. He sat in the group sessions with insurance salesmen, not a one of them over five feet six-inches tall, laid-off and broke pipeline welders with full-sleeve tattoos half colored in, small-town golf pros and smaller-town town drunks. They came and sat and made their confessions and it sounded like bragging, each one pretty sure he'd done worse things than the other. All the people I hurt, I hurt 'em more, they say. I was the worst. I said I would, but then I wouldn't. I said I could, but then I couldn't. Alcohol is the Devil and my dad? Dad was not all that great either. I cry for me as a child. I. me. Around and around they spun their tales. They cried, each in their turn, like Bog Boy Roy did in the truck, squeezing out tears with grimaces that looked like grins.

Only one woman came in. She left rehab after five days. She told them that she did what she did (without calling it drinking) because it made her feel like she was imposing laws upon everyone she knew, laws she knew would never apply to her. That, she said, was the best feeling a person could ever have, to be above the laws they had made themselves. When she left, she said simply that she was tired of their crying and that she was off to make some more law.

Big Boy Roy, Cowboy Roy, Country Boy Roy, all the nicknames a big man can have, keloid scars on his knuckles from banging off of helmets during forty fights a season in the minors and a heart as big as your first dog's, he heard 'em all out and never said a word beyond a nod. The small-timers, the little first-time fish, they all hung their heads and acknowledged a higher power, each more fervently than the one that preceded him, but Big Boy Roy could not see or feel it other than he thought of Wanda's fingertips pressed against that window, outlined by the last of the unseen light, and that was all he thought a higher power might be. But for those thirty days, questions of faith set aside, he never thought about bankruptcy, divorce, or drinking. He didn't want a drink.

He sat in the one-on-ones with the counsellors. I could do this forever, he told a former elementary school principal named Mark, Mark who had confessed to waking

up and finding out he'd shit his pants more than a few times, when he was really on a tear. I like you guys, Big Boy Roy said. You guys are great.

He told Mark that when he was done, he planned to get a dog. This was only embellishment he offered the whole time. Mark, who thought of himself as a good man and not really a serial pant-shitter, told him he thought it a very good idea.

After thirty days he walked out and rented a car, then spent the next two hours at a roadside bar. He had eighteen shots of premium rye whiskey, evenly spaced, until they refused to serve him anymore, then he got up and walked out the door like he was alright. Here a lot of men walk like they just got off a horse, a lot of men step carefully because they have bad backs. They all have the rye walk. Men's lives are tolled in backs, limbs, and livers. The sun had not yet set when he fired up the rental and wound it up until he was more afraid of the speed of it than he was judgement coming and he turned it hard into the ditch and rolled it. A farmer three miles away from the wreck, out smoking on his porch because his wife wouldn't let him smoke in the house, heard it when it happened. He had to finish his cigarette before he could go in and call for help and even then, he wouldn't go down and look. He told his wife when he went in for the phone that he knew from the sound that it had to be bad. They found Big Boy Roy face down in the ditch, not so big now, a hundred feet from the car. He was already sublimated to the earth as if he had fallen from the firmament. A few minutes before midnight the Highway Patrol came into town to knock on the door and give the news to Wanda because there was no one else to tell.

The End

DITCHED

by Travis Turner

The sun long set, traffic whizzed by him at 65 mph, or at least that was the posted speed limit. Most people drive faster, push the limit. The old road he knew as a child sat abandoned and overgrown behind his son's duplex cottage home. Now a six-lane highway stretched parallel out in front of the subdivision entrance as far as the eye could see.

"I need some beans. Can't make my stew without beans". He told his son this every day at lunch before he left for a 3-11 shift at the city hospital. He doesn't listen to me. The old man lost his license months ago for backing into a Ford at the bank. His son and insurance company both told him he was a liability.

He was forgetting things. Sometimes it was the time or the day, or both. Often it was what he intended to do at any given moment. What he could and could not do. He could not forget the beans. When he was fighting in the big war, they were happy to have that bean stew. He forgot his portion one week, and they never let him live it down. Stingy Stokes, sure he's good with a wrench but don't expect him to come off any of his goddamn beans.

It was an hour before sundown when he decided to make the walk. I'll do it my damn self. There was a Piggly Wiggly about a mile from the house faintly glowing in the distance across a large field. Headlights dotted the horizon. He walked by a fence down to the old half-forgotten road. He followed it until the treeline opened into a large field. The late October air blew slightly but didn't chill him; he felt energized. Cuttin' across this field and walking the side of the highway to the store should save me some time since it's getting dark. The field was once a garden, but now sat vacant and unkept.

A build-to-suit billboard with an 800 number at the bottom stood facing the highway.

The field brought back memories. Shelling purple-hull peas. Butterbeans. The sun beating down. He thought about chasing mice away, finding lizards and hookworms. Look out for snakes, last thing I need is to step on some ugly feller just looking for his dinner. He stopped dead in his tracks in the knee-high grass, unable to recall where he was and what he was doing. Snakes? Grass? Snakes? Garden? Beans! Beans! That's it. On he marched.

When he reached the shoulder of the road, he was careful not to get too close. Cars hissed by him one after one, three wide by the field. Slow down! Gonna have to go to the light to make it across. Almost there. He took a few steps away from the pavement and gingerly walked along the ditch toward the light. The step felt unbalanced immediately; he put his hands down in front of him to take the brunt of the fall away from his face but the hole was deeper than he expected. He landed upside down and broken. It was daylight when he finally woke up. The hole

was about 4 feet deep and had a few large chunks of rock thrown in it as filler to stop it from washing away any more. He couldn't wrestle a way out now both arms and a leg broken.

"Help! Help!" he screamed over and over while the roar of the highway drowned his cries. Help, help! Cars slowed and sped throughout the day, deaf to the noise. He listened as some slowed for the light, bass thumping, semi trucks jake-braking for the intersection. Help, help. Eventually the words became internalized, unable to be physically voiced from his parched throat. Day ran into night more than once and he lost track of how long he had been stuck in the hole.

He knew he would die there. He hadn't eaten in days and his throat was so dry he could not speak. A bottle tossed from a semi-truck hit him in the chest as he withered away in his final hours. Starving, he struggled to get the juice bottle open, finally finding success. He desperately shook the liquid to his lips only to be repulsed by the taste of urine. They finally found his body in the hole when the county bush-hogged the roadside 3 months later. Thousands of cars passed by him each day, drowning him in their acceleration.

ANOTHER ANONYMOUS STORY

by Ty Hall

"Hi, my name is [redacted], and I'm an alcoholic. Twelve, twenty-three, '93."

ALL: "Hi, [redacted]."

I didn't recognize [redacted]. I was coming up on my 30-day chip at the Turning Point Group; the red one. With that magic combination of words (salutation, first name, admittance, and sobriety date) anyone could enter like Ali Baba into this den of reformed thieves. This meeting would be her 25th birthday. I liked the residue of powdered doughnuts from my fingers as someone up front started to read from *The Big Book*: "Who is convinced against his will is of the same opinion still..." (p. 193, 3rd ed.) from Dick S.'s biography.

Summary: Dick's father was an alcoholic. Dick was an alcoholic. Dick's alcoholism destroyed his marriage. Dick found A.A. and made it day-by-day until the day he died.

Every addict's story (be it booze or food or sex or drugs or shopping) follows pretty much the same formula. Everyone starts doing what they do for whatever reason, and for whatever reason they find out they can't stop, do they think they hit rock bottom and quit (but they haven't really hit rock bottom) and they stub their toe or something and can't deal with the pain of it without (drinking or eating or screwing or getting high or buying stuff) and they go too far until they learn what true rock bottom feels like. And eventually—at least the ones that go to A.A. before they go to prison or the bone garden—they give themselves up to a Higher Power as they understand It and "keep coming back" because "it works if you work it" (which, for some reason, is true).

[Redacted]'s story followed the same pattern. Her accent betrayed she was transient, but it was also obvious that she wasn't homeless like many of those sitting around her. But for sure she wasn't from around here, and the way she spoke when she decided to share drew me in.

"Hi, I'm [redacted],"

ALL: "Hi, [redacted]."

"Hi, so, I guess I'll start at the beginning with you all. I was either five or six the first time I remember my father touching me. He'd just got back in town from a long business trip so our family took a day trip out to New Shoreham and he was playing with me off the beach. He'd dive under water and scoop me up and throw me into the waves. I was afraid the waves would take me too far away from him, but he always brought me back, and I'd beg him to toss me again.

"But then one time he threw me and then this time his fingers went up my swimsuit. The waves brought me back and I wanted to be thrown out again. He said

‘alright’ and picked me up and threw me out but this time his fingers went inside me. But I didn’t want him to stop playing with me. I hadn’t seen him in two weeks.

“When it started to get dark mom whistled at us from the shore to come back. I didn’t want to go but I admitted I was tired. My father picked me up and started walking toward the shore. I had my hands around his neck and he had his arm supporting my weight and we both had a long way to go. My head was barely above water when I felt him start to gently rub his supporting hand between my legs.

“I used to feel guilty admitting this when I first told people, but I like the way it made me feel. I asked him what he was doing and he said it was a special game, just between us, and I hugged him tighter.”

Now, this is the part in the story where the person who has the floor starts reaching for tissues. Not [redacted]. Her story wasn’t rehearsed, but she’d told it enough times.

“When I was nine or so,” she continued, “was the first time I told him I didn’t want to. Since then I’ve wondered if it scared him. Up until then, I’d always been a willing participant. It was the only time all of his attention was on me. He probably thought I was going to blow his cover, but odds are I just had a stomach ache or something and would’ve preferred him reading me to sleep. But he said he’d be right back and returned with what he called ‘magic water’ and said it would help because he really wanted to have our special time before he left in the morning.”

All of us at the Turning Point Group already saw what was coming. We already knew.

“It was vodka,” said [redacted]. “I drank some like he asked me to and could barely keep it down. Father insisted I have a little more and he took a gulp to show how easy it was. I didn’t want to let him down. The second sip was easier to swallow, and I started to like the way it made me feel. When he returned home three weeks later he came into my room with the vodka already poured into the juice glass. Same thing the next time. And the next time.

“I started to get excited when my father was scheduled to be home between business trips. It meant that I would have more vodka. I didn’t care if it meant my father would be inside me. I was twelve.”

[Redacted] still wasn’t crying, but most of us were: the divorcees and homeless and lawyers and the ex-felons they put away and the former cop and the car salesman and the grandmother and myself.

“While something in the back of my mind screamed that something was wrong, I didn’t care. At that point, I guess I thought this was pretty normal, and I didn’t want to lose out on time with my father or his ‘magic water.’

“So I was at my friend’s house for a sleepover. Her parents let us stay up late downstairs with the unlocked liquor cabinet. I’m sure they never considered that I would take their bottle of Absolut and brought the bottle to the pullout couch we were

sharing. She didn't want any at first but I showed her how easy it was and she had some.

"I'm not sure exactly how we got there, but we got to talking about boys and she wondered what it would feel like and I told her I knew and she said she didn't believe me so I rolled over on the pullout and I made her come. She started to cry and I told her to have more vodka. She asked me where I'd learned how to do that and I told her.

"My friend told her parents and her parents told the police and the police arrested my father, and my mother never really spoke to me again after that. That was back in '85.

"I ran away when I was 15. It was easy enough to find vodka or shelter or both for the night. I hung out at Joyal's Liquor and tell guys I'd blow them if they'd buy me a bottle, and I'd do more if they'd let me spend the night. Eventually, I couldn't compartmentalize and differentiate between sex and alcohol—they became interchangeable and synonymous. I began to hate both.

"I'm truly grateful that I was arrested the winter of '93 for prostitution, loitering, and public intoxication. The judge said if I could complete to satisfaction six months of probation that he would expunge the charges from my record. A stipulation of my probation was that I had to attend A.A. twice a week. The Triangle Group is where I met Let's-Call-Her-Susan.

"Let's-Call-Her-Susan was paralyzed in a car accident at the age of eleven and had no feeling from her torso down. We talked at the coffee station and the next week she declined to be my sponsor.

"'Why?'.

"'Because I think you're beautiful,' she said.

"We met for coffee a few days later. It was the first time I'd ever told anyone my story. I apologized to her for crying.

"'Why are you sorry?' she asked, and took the plastic flowers out of the bud vase on the table and brought it to my cheek to let the tears fall in. I didn't stop her. She held the vase up to the light with a couple of droplets at the bottom and said, 'Tears are just a million potential rainbows.' I love Her.

"I'm [redacted] and I'm an alcoholic."

The meeting ran a little late that afternoon. We all stood up and held hands in a circle around the room.

ALL: "Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name..."

A BREATHING COFFIN

by A.F. Knott

When I told the judge I couldn't afford the cremation, he shuffled his papers. He had no reason to shuffle them. I should have known he was a showman right then and there.

"Did you tell Mr. Marley that at the time?"

"No, your honor. But I remember what I did tell him."

I felt the need to make conversation. One of my exes said I was smart, with above average intelligence but like an exploding bug emotionally. I always assumed there actually was a species of exploding bug and had meant to look that up over the years but never did. I never could stop imagining the bug though, crawling along the top of a table, stopping then exploding.

I was ok when I had my routines, when I had purpose. I had all that during the six months before my mother died. I'd moved back to Knoxville after they kicked her out of assisted living for incontinence and calling her aides black bitches. I knew it wasn't incontinence. She pissed the floor on purpose. She'd done that when Dad was alive. Drove him crazy and was one of those things her mother did to drive her father crazy when they were living in the mines. Like handing down the Family Bible from mother to daughter. But my mother couldn't give a fuck what she said in general and that was before Alzheimer's.

We rented the place on Abermarle and I went to the bowling alleys during the day, repairing pin mechanisms and scoring circuitry. I'd managed the Jamestown Lanes in Omaha for ten years and knew how a bowling alley was put together. The hours were cut and dry, the pay not enough but my mother had her social security. I put whatever I had left over after food and her expenses into crypto. She died in the crypto bear market, deep into it, when the bear was sleeping in its cave four feet under the snow.

"So what did you ask him?"

The judge glanced over at one of the bailiffs after he said that. He'd heard the whole story of what transpired at the funeral home and I got the impression he wasn't taking the whole thing as seriously as he should have, it being the end of the afternoon, me being the last case on his docket, and everybody right down to the stenographer looked like they were already sliding down the dinosaurs tail in their heads and heading back to Bedrock.

"I asked the guy, 'what are my options?'"

The judge whipped his glasses off, and I mean whipped them off. Someone snickered. I turned but couldn't see who. When I turned back the judge was studying me. Then, the same person who snickered, started laughing. I didn't bother to look because I knew the judge must have pulled this before and it was some kind of running

joke. He was staring hard, as if trying to form an opinion. I wanted to give him one, a favorable one. I didn't want to appear distracted, in other words, so I met his gaze and cocked one eyebrow like Spock. The judge didn't look unkind, a little grandfatherly, toward the end of his career, if anything, curious. But he peered at me over the top of his bifocals like I was some kind of flagellate under a microscope.

I couldn't afford to pay any kind of fine was the thing. I had already told him I couldn't afford the cremation and I assumed he understood that that meant I couldn't afford a fine.

Taking care of her till the end, and it was a long till the end, with more and more problems developing each week, more and more supplies that needed to be ordered, railings for the bed, incontinence pads, new walker, on and on. After all that, naturally, I ended up skimp. I had to hire an aide for part of the day after she wandered outside while I was at work one day. She pushed her walker through the Wendy's drive through in her bathrobe, apparently. Ordered a Double with cheese and everything then called the woman in the booth a black bitch. She called the social worker who showed up the next day a black bitch as well even though she was Filipino.

The bottom line was, I counted on the will paying her funeral expenses and reimbursing me for some of the care. But the lawyer told me over the phone while I was standing on the funeral home's front steps there were never any provisions for that and wasn't much left in her estate anyway. I thought she had some mineral rights somewhere up in Harlan where she'd been born but he told me her mother, my grandmother, sold it to my grandfather's brother so she could buy an Oldsmobile Cutlass.

"Turns out the land was worth a lot more than that Cutlass," he said.

I didn't tell the judge anything about the conversation with the family lawyer or my expectations. I'd rather him think I had lost my shit from an emotional standpoint and what I did was part of the mourning process as well as arising out of the stress of being hard pressed for cash. But this judge had been around. I realized later he probably expected me to be lying under oath and that it was more a matter of how big my lie was as opposed to the fact I was telling one. But the longer he stared, the more folks started to laugh again, the folks who worked there. I didn't know what that meant but didn't think it was good. I had almost convinced myself, nevertheless, the judge was convinced I had acted in the heat of the moment and that I was going to be given a pass for what amounted to a minor breach of decorum.

The fact I explained my mother raised me and that we had been close, I knew that was in my favor and he believed that part because he nodded and he hadn't nodded before that. I explained most of what happened and why, but not everything. The little details I left out because they were inexplicable details, more thoughts than anything, like little curiosities.

The funeral parlor man had slid his list across the table at me, for one. I mashed my finger down on an item toward the top, the first one I could make out, as if I was interested. I couldn't see the item. I didn't have my glasses on. The funeral man didn't know I couldn't see. I should have probably looked for my glasses a little longer. They were in one of my pockets. I had just lost track which pocket and had been flustered so I gave up the search. I thought I was pressed for time but in retrospect I wasn't. The quality of my mind with no sleep while being exposed to thick hanging urine vapors the entire week before she died was equivalent to the mindset of a cow chewing its cud and chewing it slow. After a minute of patting myself down, I made the choice to pretend I could see and that I knew what I was choosing. I don't know why I did that. This was the kind of detail I didn't share with the judge. I didn't think it would weigh in my favor.

The other thing was the funeral parlor man had been wearing a black suit and kept his hands clasped in front of him the whole time, exactly what you'd might expect. This was bothersome to me: This was what you'd expect him to do. It occurred to me there probably were funeral parlors out there where the workers let their guard down and showed more of a human side, not the solemn changing of the guard at Arlington thing. I understood why they behaved like that in funeral homes but on that day though, I'm not sure I would have ended up doing what I did if the man had been more relaxed, if he had pooted in front of me, or brought out a bottle of bourbon from under the desk and swigged it. At some point, there was a crash in the back and we both heard these honking, indrawing guffaws, like someone was imitating a donkey. I figured they'd been playing with the bodies, swinging an arm around or something. I didn't care. I'd probably do that too if I worked there, but the guy didn't so much as blink. He proceeded to go over the cremation procedure then discussed the price range for urns. That was when I started to smell myself, all the sweating I'd been doing. I also smelled my mother's urine on my clothes. I hadn't showered that day.

I knew I couldn't afford the cremation let alone an urn but was sitting there with him discussing price. I also knew Marley's wasn't a store where I could browse then leave. They had her body in the back and were waiting for the go ahead. The go ahead was my payment.

"Send her to Marley's," I had told the hospital clerk. I winced when I remember how I had said it, casually, and only because the woman had big boobies. I said it knowing full well I had only twelve hundred in the bank with rent due the following week and the rest tied up in bitcoin and several altcoins. Bitcoin had dropped like a sack of shit the previous month and hadn't come back. I wasn't about to sell any of it. Bitcoin was my future and I was all in, whether that was a sensible thing or not. I told the judge about bitcoin and what it represented to me and even mentioned the term liquidity which I thought he would appreciate. I told him I had explained all that to my mother months before, what I was doing with bitcoin and she had said how proud she was and

that Bitcoin sounded complicated. She'd been supportive was what I tried to explain. I told the judge my mother wouldn't have cared. And she wouldn't have. She would have wanted me to keep the bitcoin. After I told him that, he said,

"My grandson just lost a lot of money with his bitcoin. Some are calling it a Ponzi scheme."

"Oh, it's anything but, your honor."

The judge was quiet after I said that.

There had also been the people calling me that day, before I went over to the funeral home, inquiring about the service, people I didn't know, people I hadn't spoken to in years. Upped the emotional ante. I said I'd let them know when the ceremony was going to be held knowing full well there wasn't going to be any ceremony.

They said, "You must be missing her."

I said, "Yeah, sad time."

I wasn't missing her at all. The week before I'd caught her trying to hang herself in the closet with a pair of her old scuzzy nylons. No, I was rooting for her. When she did finally go, she had this big shit eating grin on her face. I knew exactly why. She knew her time had come and was over fucking joyed. I didn't tell the judge that.

I ended up asking the man, "What if we donate her body to science?" He looked at me like I had a booger hanging out my nose. All you heard was the grandfather clock ticking. I pointed at him and said, "You know that was a joke, right?"

"I understand," he said, hands still clasped. Marley couldn't have cared less. I think at that point he got antsy and mentioned methods of payments again. They do that in hospitals too. You're having your heart attack and some lady from registration is standing there with a clipboard: Initial here, here and here.

I thought for a second then said, "You know, she had spoken to me about a breathing coffin."

He cocked his head and unclasped his hands. I explained it to him like I explained it to the judge which in retrospect was another thing I shouldn't have mentioned. My mother was from forty miles to the north, up in the mountains near the Kentucky border. Her mother, my grandmother, used to play organ at the local funeral home as well as for the First Baptist Church. Nana took all of us, her grandchildren, to the funeral services, including me. They had breathing coffins back then that were a big deal, coffins with tape recorders that played inhalation and exhalation sounds at the viewing, as if the person were still alive. People filed by and were reassured. Breathing coffins were big then and I knew Marley's didn't one. I wouldn't have gotten it anyway but mentioned it more or less to keep him optimistic.

"I want to be cremated!" my mother had yelled at me. "CREMATED! Even if you have to get a can of gas and do it yourself in the yard." Those were her words. When I told the judge how she screamed it out, he looked at the bailiff a second time. That's when I admitted that I had been stalling with the breathing coffin mention. I

thought he'd understand my remark to Mr. Marley about the breathing coffin being a reflection of just how flustered I had become, dredging up old memories and all. My testimony probably took a turn for the worse at that point as I became a little more unnecessarily honest. When I told Marley's son about the breathing coffin though, he wasn't reassured at all. He got even more fidgety and that's when I told him,

"I just like to see her one final time before I decide. My brothers and sisters are counting on me to do the right thing."

I didn't have brothers and sisters. Marley's son didn't know that and agreed. As I was following him over to their morgue, I started thinking about what my mother had said about the gas and doing it myself. I figured I'd have to first pick up a five-gallon gas container, probably at Kmart then would have to get over to a filling station to top it off. The back yard behind the little house we rented was more or less private but I thought about the black smoke that would come pouring upward and wasn't sure what kind of stink it would make or how long the whole thing would take. But that was my train of thought as we walked toward the back.

She was lying on a gurney and didn't look like my mother: Grey as Transylvania. I assume Transylvania is a grey place. It probably isn't. It's grey in Bela Lugosi movies. Her eyes were open and filmed over like fresh-water Bass eyes. I told the judge about the eyes, that seeing her eyes may have triggered something.

"May have?" he asked.

I looked at him and thought he might be prompting me to say the right thing so I added, "Did trigger something. I think that was my trigger."

He looked at the Bailiff a third time and I went on, mentioning again how I hadn't slept the night before. I thought this was one major problem, that and being more worried about the bill for her funeral expenses, maybe more than I should have been, about my rent due and about when the bitcoin bull market was going to start. I had mentioned these things a few times already.

What happened was, I had taken hold of my mother's wrists, dragged her down onto the floor of their little morgue area and yelled at Marley:

"You can kiss my ass, I'm taking her out of this goddamn hell hole. I've changed my mind!"

Even though this was a ploy, and I realized afterward not such a good one, I told the judge I had spontaneously given myself permission to act indignant like some people give themselves permission to shoot up a Walmart. I did admit the judge THAT was stupid but did mention I hadn't shot anybody. He stared at me for second and took a deep breath. He wiped his glasses. I didn't know what the deep breath meant so I said,

"Totally irresponsible, your honor."

John Law was there by the time I got her out onto Marley's front porch and everybody was standing there watching her head go down the front steps, thump,

thump, thump, like an Abbott and Costello routine. I guess I thought I was going to call a cab, I hadn't really thought it through. It didn't go according to plan. When one of the officers took out his taser, I let her go. Just like that. Cooperated. Assumed the position and what not.

Judge mentioned the fact I was an only child and that my mother had raised me in his statement then fined me for breaking some statute or other. The irony being the fine was as much as the cost of her cremation and I had to sell some of my bitcoin anyway. That was the judge's plan it turned out.

"Looks like you'll have to sell that bitcoin of yours to pay your fine and the expenses for your mother. And of course, you'll have to pay capital gains tax on that bitcoin. You realize that don't you?"

"Yessir," I said.

"See, I know a little about bitcoin, young fella. There ain't no free lunch in the real world."

He banged his gavel and walked out of the courtroom. The man who had been snickering started snickering again, clapped his hands together once and I heard him say, "precious." I didn't need to be reminded of the capital gains tax. The punishment turned out to be a lot more severe than I thought it was going to be and the judge himself turned out to be a right shit. I wasn't young was the other thing. I already knew about no free lunches. But I'm counting on the bulls to show up in the crypto market. I still have my altcoins. They had better show up and show up before April fifteenth.

UNDER THE VIADUCT

by Robert McCarthy

Carmody's been bragging since the third pitcher at the Almont how he's got a way into the Van Hesten place up on the river, but I know already because this Carmody sleeps with my sister, and she's got the mouth of a river.

"Some things you wanna know." Diane blows on her old high school ring and polishes it on her sports bra. "Some you don't." It's the ring they sent her with somebody else's birthstone so she got the money back and never took it off since.

The thing I know is that I'm outta college and sleeping on a couch Diane dragged out of her dead neighbor's basement. I knew things'd be different coming back home, only not this different. Like following a six-five ex-con over a wall into the Van Hesten estate.

I'm atop that wall and fixing the waistband of my shorts, feeling very relieved that the scariest part of the night's over. Diane put me on a mission: get Carmody's wallet before he goes in. I didn't figure I'd actually do it, but when a man that big wears pants that loose and hoists himself over a security wall, opportunity knocks. Now that old leather wallet's nice and snug inside my waistband.

I pause to see the factory skyline glitter to the south, it almost looks like a city floating over our old neighborhood. But that jumble of concrete and steel always looked to me like a deathtrap, just waiting for any sucker too dumb to—well, to saddle himself with a lifetime's debt, it would seem.

Carmody lands like a big cat on the other side of the wall, and I think of the bartender at the Almont saying in the swamps above the Van Hesten's there's panthers now eating up all the deer. "Like cockroaches," he ventured. "You see one, you know there's hundreds more you don't." I express some doubt at the aptness of his analogy, and am pretty sure I'm shortchanged on a twenty.

Diane, though, she says she could understand taking on debts so you could leave school, but not go more. The only school thing she ever liked other than that ring was ditching. I still see her winking over a shoulder while her bike coasts down the viaduct, where you were never supposed to go, down under the train tracks where the coal cars rumble into the boilers in the bellies of the factories.

But that was back when the name Carmody meant a family you didn't know but knew to keep away from. Now I'm standing behind one with a face that looks like it belongs in prison eyeing a solid steel door set into an equally solid brick wall, until all of a sudden the man's big back hunches over and he's searching his jeans, and then ripping out his pockets and muttering about lost keycodes and wallets.

I step back and peer up and down the river, like keeping lookout is what I'm all about. But at least the Van Hesten's dock is empty, so maybe they really did take the fifty-footer up the headwaters the way Carmody said they did every August, when

everybody else gets the fumes baked into their pores, and the stink of the plants dares to drift north for a week and befoul even the homes of the rich.

But boat or no boat Carmody is missing that wallet and fires a fist into the door with such thunder that splashes ripple up the mudbank as frogs leap for the safety of the river. I tug my shirt collar away from my sweating neck and look across the muddy depths of the Mississippi, whose waters promise no safe harbor for me.

As Carmody winces, wagging a hand after the punch, I say, "Problem?" but so weakly Carmody can't hear. Instead he stomps across a flowerbed where his movements trigger a security light and he drops to his haunches and gets both arms around some kind of boulder. Wrenching it out of the soil, he shuffles back to the patio with the thing balanced on his chest, where he puts it to work battering the door like his ancient forefather, the proverbial barbarian at the gate.

I'm now thinking Diane seriously should give college one more look because her grades weren't bad despite the ditching, and they'll actually cancel the debt if you die.

Meanwhile Carmody bludgeons the door, the light catching the blood glazing his knuckles and the sweat glistening down his arms--until with a ping something strikes the slate patio. And it's the steel doorknob rolling past me down the walkway to the pool.

With a very loud "Fuck!" Carmody heaves the boulder, which lands with a thud that I feel through the earth, and now I see that the thing was actually this concrete statue of a screaming eagle, only now its wings are broken with chunks gone from the beak and chest.

Carmody eyes the hole where the knob used to be and fingers the sheared metal. Another punch shudders the door, then he stalks up the patio to a stretch of glass so brightly lit with security lights that surely people on the Illinois side of the river must see us clear as day. Sure enough a half mile across the water a light illuminates what's probably somebody's private dock, so I say, "Man, we better get outta here!" except it comes out like a question not the bold and sensible suggestion I intended.

Carmody smolders at me. "We stay!" And the savagery in his voice makes me think of panthers eating up all the swamp deer. But my car's a quarter mile the other way, and with my heartbeat starting to keep very irregular time I feel the pull of the trees and cover.

"Because he can't go back to prison!" was Diane's whole argument, worrying her old class ring and qualifying that really this was more about her than him, whatever that meant, so would I just please, please, please take my Tercel instead of Carmody's truck, so at least he couldn't get at the gun he's got taped under the seat.

And here I am. Earning the credit to pay for room and board, and nights unlimited on a dead neighbor's couch.

Except now Carmody's got his eye on a sunroom that looks like the Crystal Palace, and Diane never mentioned shattering glass walls, so with my stomach wanting to empty itself into the pool I run around the back of it to a shed, and I shout "Got something!" good and loud.

In the shed the chlorine burns like tear gas, but from a post hangs a nice longhandled shovel, and as fast as I can I'm back to that door and wedging the blade into the seam along the jamb, and I'm starting some college patter about this old Greek Archimedes with his lever long enough to move the world when here comes Carmody storming toward me through the bluebells.

"Fucking thing," he says and rips it from my hands then goes straight back for the glass, gripping that shovel like a spear and taking long bouncing strides like some track and field javelin thrower, until all I see are police lights and all I hear are gavel raps and the clang of cage doors and the nightmare echoes of inmates' taunts up and down the cellblock, and I cannot help Diane.

The truth in fact is that I never could help Diane. Because Diane never wanted anybody's help. And while I may have come back home, if this is home, I'm feeling pretty far from knowing who she even is anymore.

Carmody's tipping back to throw, the shovel handle bumping the ground, when I scream, "It's right here!"

He stops long enough to glance back, his eyes so fiercely wide that I show him before I can change my mind. I yank the thing out of my pants — buckskin damp with my sweat—and I hold it up to the light: the wallet, the one Diane wanted, the one that's got the keycode inside for the Van Hesten place.

"Right here!" I shout. "Goddammit!"

Carmody stares in something like disbelief—confusion maybe—and I realize I should've lied and said I found it in the grass, but it's too late and in a panic I shout, "Is it my fault my damn sister don't want you in prison?"

At this a funny look moves into Carmody's eyes. It's not confusion though. And I realize something about those words sounds somehow funny to my ears, too. Not that this is something we're now gonna have a sit and parley over.

You don't grow up a block off the viaduct without getting hit, so I've been hit. But the way Carmody hits me it feels, as the Foreigner lyric says, like the very first time. I know it's bad, what he's done to my face, until I feel what that patio does to my skull.

I don't even notice his wallet's gone from my hand until I'm crawling off the slate and into the grass. Again his back is to me, and he's holding a scrap of what looks like a cocktail napkin up to the security light. His entire brutal face squints at it, like he's straining to make out the writing, then he bends to the console in the wall next to the door and with his giant finger starts stabbing the keys.

Then he waits.

And then he does it again.

And again he waits.

And nothing.

Again.

But no numbers light on the screen. No lock clicks. Nothing beeps.

One more time: that rifle-stock of a finger battering those keys.

Now he gives up on the key pressing, and the hands instead reshape into bloody fists, which pommel the door passionately.

I'm scootching away through the grass when Carmody's head slowly turns from the door. His lips curl back from his teeth and his nose scrunches up like he sniffs something foul. The gears grind loudly against his brainpan and the blood drips from his knuckles. And I feel a kind of relief, almost a gratitude to Diane, that he has no gun right now.

Except that Carmody right now isn't even looking at me. He's looking south. Toward the old neighborhood. Toward the haze of steam and lights. His chest rises and falls. Synapses fizzle and snap in the dark of his eyes. Heat lightning flashes, and in its glow his face looks molten, bared teeth square and hard, and with men like Carmody who needs panthers.

I speak, and my mouth spills blood, everything in my face like it's on fire, even as a cold new fear enters me like a death chill.

"The bitch," Carmody snarls through his teeth.

I spit and try again. "But cause she loves you." I can't stop wriggling away through the grass wormlike, but blood is blood, so I plead on. "Can't you see she'd rather see me dead than you in prison? You can see that, right?"

Then I just make out the words "Piece a shit." Carmody turns, the leg back like a hammer, the boot fires, and darkness happens everywhere at once.

It can't be too much later when pain rouses me back because I can hear my Tercel coughing a quarter mile down the woods. It's rattling over the gravel road along the rail bed to the viaduct, Carmody probably aching for the V8 in his truck and showing the only car I ever owned no quarter.

My pockets are hanging inside out. Everything gone, including my phone. Especially my phone. So I can't call her.

Call her.

And honestly I'd like to laugh right now, except my bloody tongue tasting broken teeth doesn't exactly inspire mirth.

Mouth of a river. Hell, like I could warn that girl of jack shit.

Again I think of her coasting down that crumbling viaduct into the forbidden dark. And I see that wink she'd flash back at me—me in the driveway scared and alone. See, you think you know your sister. Except then you think you don't. But you do.

Or at least I know her better than Carmody. Because Carmody's gone.
Carmody's horsewhipping my Tercel across the train tracks, shouting about that V8 in his Chevy and then some.

And I'm lying here in the grass.

Where I listen.

I listen for the sound of a truck. And I picture Diane's hand, the band of that class ring already sticky from the butt of a gun taped under the seat.

"Some things you wanna know," Diane said.

Meaning like, how all it takes in a key code is one number off. One scratch of ink in one little place. Wrinkled bar napkin. Who's gonna know? Carmody?

Meaning Diane's hand with a key code scribbled on it, same old schoolgirl scrawl, ballpoint pen from the Country Kitchen.

Beside me the screaming eagle screams skyward between its shattered wings. I don't smell the funk of the river any more, and I don't hear the splash of frogs. Instead I smell the chlorine of the Van Hesten pool. I hear what might be the echo of a V8 out past the treeline to the woods. Unless they're right at the Almont about panthers in the swamp.

The heat lightning flashes, and with nauseating pain I lift my head and I glimpse the factory skyline, the smokestack fires flickering like cake candles at a surprise party in hell, the steam forever tumbling over the neighborhood that made Diane, that made me, the eternal soot always drifting downward, down like some worn-out god that wants nothing but to sleep.

HOW TO ASK A STRANGER TO BUY YOU BEER

by John Waddy Bullion

Tenner in hand, approach the glum-looking woman dressed head-to-toe in grey sweats, who will be topping off the gas tank of a U-Haul parked haphazardly at pump #9 in front of the Little General convenience store. Mash Alexander Hamilton's face with your thumb to ensure that a sudden gust of cold, wet wind doesn't rip the bill from your grasp. You never know, your best friend might forget to ask for it back after this stupid idea fails for the billionth time.

Once you get about five feet away, freeze when your sweat-suited mark turns her hooded face up from the pump and barks out your name in the high, clear, barely restrained scream that people who spend their professional careers around school-aged children are able to summon up at a moment's notice. Although there will be a little more bulk around her middle, deeper parentheses around her puckered mouth, and glints of grey in the limp brown ponytail curled around one side of her neck like a nestling rodent, you will recognize your old Montessori teacher immediately.

It's been—what?—three, four years since you last laid eyes on her? Basic arithmetic will prove especially daunting at this particular moment, because you have spent this entire dreary, drizzly, day-after-Thanksgiving morning doing whip-its with your best friend, who happens to be the son of your current algebra teacher and who isn't above doing your homework for you, gaining enough A's to keep you looking good and enough B's to keep you looking honest, and as long as you return the favor by doing nice things for him—like, for instance, accosting complete strangers in convenience store parking lots and offering them ten dollars to buy beer for the two of you—your best friend will continue to painstakingly copy the answers out of his dad's teacher's edition at his family's dining table, while you help yourself to another bowl of his mom's leftover turkey, stuffing, sweet potatoes, and green bean casserole, all mashed together and microwaved within an inch of its life.

Form a quick mental picture of how you must look to your former teacher. You will be dressed against the cold in one of your father's old Christmas sweaters, the one with pixelated reindeer prancing across the front, and you will be standing with your legs together to keep from drawing attention to the spreading tear in the crotch of your ill-fitting stonewashed jeans. Your hair, an overgrown bowl cut, will be a matted mess from using one of your best friend's foam couch cushions as a pillow the night before. How on earth did your teacher recognize you so quickly? It must have been the eyes. Those big, round peepers you inherited from your father are wide-open doors offering a glimpse straight into your soul. Never lie, as your mother has grown fond of telling you since she and your dad separated, because like your father, you will never be any good at it.

So when your teacher asks how your mom's doing, tell her she's doing fine. Mention that she's dating a medical student—your mother would surely have no problem with you broadcasting this information to her former best friend. Do not mention that this medical student, whose name is Bernard, has bad skin, sunken eyes, and dimples that deepen into full-on wrinkles whenever he grimaces, which is often. Do not mention that your mother is currently out of town, spending the holiday desperately currying the favor of Bernard's family at their palatial estate in Germantown, Tennessee. Do not mention that you were not invited to accompany your mother on this trip, nor was the prospect of your coming along ever discussed. Do not mention that your mother left you no money, no emergency contact number, and no instructions apart from "please do your best not to lose our only apartment key."

Reflexively feel for the aforementioned key in your left front pocket. Sigh with relief when you detect its jagged teeth, penny-sized bow, and scored inscription reading DO NOT DUPLICATE. Both front pockets of your jeans have holes in them, but the hole in your left pocket is smaller, so it was chosen for this important task. And speaking of pockets, don't forget to tuck that ten-dollar bill into one of them, because your teacher may inquire as to why you are holding money out to her, as if in offering. She may even make a joke, something along the lines of, "What is this, a tip? Little late, no?"

In the event that this joke is made, laugh along with your teacher. Her brassy, honking chortle, you will remember, is singularly grating; you and your Montessori classmates used to imitate it out on the playground. But you won't mind her laugh, not this time. Feel the cool silver nitrous hum in the back of your throat and become suddenly, dangerously, relaxed. Say, half-jokingly, half-experimentally, "Actually, I was hoping you'd buy me a six-pack of Bud."

Play it cool as she pauses, looks you up and down, then says, "Okay. What the hell?" and yunks the ten away from you.

After your teacher disappears into the Little General, rejoin your best friend, who will be leaning against the brick wall beside the dumpster, huddled beneath the Kansas City Chiefs Starter jacket that you secretly covet, not just because you are a bigger Chiefs fan than him—the two of you have almost come to blows several times during the Rich-Gannon-versus-Elvis-Grbac quarterback controversy that has divided the team and its fans since last season—but also because your mother won't be able to buy you a serviceable coat until Bernard's parents decide they like her enough to goose his monthly allowance.

Casually mention to your best friend that you have some good news (It actually fucking worked!) and some bad.

Say that yes, you're sure it's her, as your best friend issues the same skeptical glance he gave you this time last year when you first suggested that the Chiefs needed to ride Gannon's hot hand even though Grbac's time on injured reserve was up. Thanks to his father, your best friend probably knows several teachers in town who are so

cynical they wouldn't bat an eye at buying alcohol for underaged former pupils. He also probably knows an even greater percentage who would happily pocket your money and report you to the authorities.

Just know that if you run away now, the rest of the holiday will be uneventful. You and your best friend will wander downtown to purchase more whip-its, compliments of the friendly dreadlocked head-shop clerk who had your father for British Lit. You will head back to your best friend's house and sit in the folding chair his dad had to lug in from the garage to give you a spot at their dining table, where you will eat Thanksgiving leftovers for every meal, never once tiring of them. At various points over the long weekend you will get the nagging feeling you are overstaying your welcome, and you will briefly entertain the idea of dropping by to see your father, before remembering, oh yeah, he's on research sabbatical in England this semester with his T.A., the one he left your mother for. Finally, after the Chiefs game ends on Sunday afternoon, you will hand your best friend's mom a fart-filled sleeping bag to wash and you will walk two miles home to your apartment, where you will find your own mother waiting for you outside the door with her scuffed suitcase, and once you let her inside with the key, she will ask you—in a weary voice that will signal how much of a favor you'll be doing by not posing the same question back to her—how your holiday went, and you will tell her it went fine, not mentioning that you bumped into her old buddy gassing up a U-Haul at the Little General, because thanks to all the extra nitrous you huffed, you will have forgotten the incident entirely.

Got all that?

Okay.

Now, here is what will happen if you don't run away:

Minutes later, your teacher will round the corner, carrying a large carton of Budweisers.

A twelve-pack, not a sixer.

"Two more for each of us," she will proclaim, doing the math for you.

Take note of the puzzled expression on your best friend's face. He will be thinking the same thing you are: What do you mean, "us"?

Next, your teacher will mention that she's moving out of town and ask if the two of you would like to tag along to her farewell party. As she rips a jagged hole in one end of the twelve-pack, say okay, sure. Trade an uncertain look with your best friend.

"Then let's proceed to step two," she will say, "acquire provisions."

Follow your teacher to the U-Haul, which will have a Hawaiian scene painted on the side, palm fronds and pastels blaring out in protest of the heavy grey day. When she opens the passenger door for you, scoot over to the middle of the bench-style seat, taking care that the frayed holes in your beat-up jeans don't get caught on the burst vinyl. Grip the two cans of Budweiser she hands you and pass one to your best friend—watch him perk up as he springs into the cab to palm it. Crack open your own Bud as

the U-Haul growls to life. The beer will be lukewarm, but its pleasant alcoholic fizz will sidle right up to your nitrous brain-buzz in no time.

After your teacher beaches the U-Haul in a handicapped spot near the entrance of the IGA, kill the remainder of your Bud and fish another can out of the carton. By now a light mist will have begun to spatter the windshield, but your teacher will make no move to turn on the wipers. Instead she will yank off her grey hood to reveal an unkempt nest of frizzy brown hair, a portion of which has been lassoed into a damp scrunchie. Fidget as a lull settles over the cabin. Your teacher used to let silences like this pass in her classroom. Instead of calling on one of her students for the correct answer to a question, she would stand behind her desk and wait patiently with a pleasant but vacant expression on her face, similar to the look she will be sporting now. Recall now how those silences used to terrify you, the way they left you alone with your own blank mind.

As a means of sparking conversation, ask your teacher why she's moving to Hawaii. Repeat the question if you have to, citing the tropical artwork on the side of the truck. Then redden as she unleashes her broken-accordion guffaw and proceeds to laugh for so long that the entire windshield fogs up from all the hot air she releases. Once she has composed herself, your teacher will inform you that the designs on U-Hauls have nothing whatsoever to do with where people are actually moving. Your best friend will snicker as he slurps at his beer can, his parted lips fat with the promise of a stored-up quip—am I gonna have to help you with your geography homework too?

Grimly torpedo your second beer before following your teacher into the store. Trail behind her as she ambles aimlessly through the aisles, swinging a plastic grocery basket around like a cudgel. Exchange brief wary looks with your best friend to affirm the sustained strangeness of the situation. Your teacher has always been an odd duck. Remember the time your mother picked you up from school during the lunch period for a dentist appointment, and as you were walking through the parking lot you caught sight of your teacher sitting in the driver's seat of her car, tucking a slice of cold pizza into her gaping mouth, staring off into the distance like a zombie? Or the time your teacher showed up on your front doorstep one Christmas, forcing you to sit through an entire awkward meal while she and your parents pretended that they'd invited her over and just forgotten to tell you? You're pretty sure she and your mother stayed friends for so long only because your mother felt sorry for her; the two of them stopped speaking regularly after your parents split up and the Montessori's tuition got too expensive. But don't burn through your remaining brain cells trying to guess the exact reason your mother and your teacher drifted apart. Adult friendships don't end so much as they dwindle—into ignored messages left on answering machines, into unopened pieces of mail marked RETURN TO SENDER, into sheepish conversations lobbed across shopping carts in the grocery store.

Somewhere near the bulk food bins your teacher will whip around and order the two of you to go grab whatever you want, her treat. As your best friend moseys off, notice the distinct outline of the unfinished beer can that he has for some reason shoved into the kangaroo pouch of his Starter jacket, which hangs down between his legs with all the subtlety of exposed genitals.

Nothing in the store will look the least bit appetizing. The earthy, vegetable-sweat smell wafting from the produce section, shot through with not-so-understated notes of detergent and disinfectant, will be just overwhelming enough to neutralize your taste buds. But you have to grab something, so pluck a premade sandwich out of the deli bin and rejoin your teacher in the checkout line.

"That all?" she will inquire as she unloads a can of Pringles, a giant bag of M&M's, a tray of cocktail shrimp, a tub of Neapolitan ice cream, an entire pizza, a whole rotisserie chicken, and a stack of paper plates and plasticware onto the conveyor belt.

Just then, your best friend will saunter up with a large veggie platter—broccoli, carrots, and cauliflower garlanding a pond of ranch dressing. Gape at him in abject horror.

"What?" he will demand, sneering dismissively at your sandwich.

Try to communicate the following, using only your eyes: hey, don't panic or anything, but a fucking cop just strolled into the checkout line right behind you.

The policeman will be holding a pack of frozen corn dogs and a MAD magazine, and he will smile, not unkindly, beneath a bushy black mustache that hugs the corners of his mouth. "Veggies," he will say to your white-faced friend, gesturing with his rolled-up MAD. "Yum. But, uh, don't forget to pay for the can of pop in your pocket there, too."

Can of pop—if ever a patrolman was begging to be charmed out of performing his civic duty, it is this one. The last thing Officer Friendly here wants is more paperwork on a holiday weekend. Concentrate on the back of your best friend's head, as if by telekinesis you can tell him exactly what he needs to say to coax the cop into moving along. As you do this, think back to that agonizing final Chiefs drive in the playoffs last season when, with the waning seconds bleeding off the game clock, the radio in Grbac's helmet malfunctioned, and because he couldn't hear the play call his offensive coaches were screaming into their headsets, Grbac improvised a panicked underthrown fade route to the corner of the end zone that was swatted incomplete by the Broncos' secondary.

Instead of remaining calm, your best friend—a Grbac guy to the end—will make a weird groaning sound and pull the beer can out of his pouch, displaying it for the cop as though he's just unearthed a clue. As your best friend fumbles his way through an explanation—This isn't even from here! I didn't even buy it!—detect a small, smooth flash of movement at the edge of your vision. This will be your teacher, sliding a plastic

divider in between your best friend's veggie tray and your sandwich. The cop won't notice, but your best friend will, and his wet, wobbly eye—you will only be able to see just one, because he will be looking back over his shoulder at you as the cop gently but firmly ushers him aside—begs, blames, and understands all at once. Become faintly aware of your teacher slinging the damp arm of her sweatshirt around the back of your neck, gathering you close, offering protection from this young ruffian as she coolly extracts a Discover card from her waistband and hands it to the cashier.

Kinda black out for about a minute or two.

Regain consciousness outside, as a light drizzle dusts your cheeks with moisture.

"Better get the hell out of Dodge," your teacher will be saying, her brown eyes darting anxiously as six sagging shopping bags dangle at her knees. "It's only a matter of time before your buddy back there fingers us."

For the first time in your life, fail to snicker at an accidental double entendre.

After the U-Haul fishtails out of the shopping center and settles into the meandering holiday weekend traffic, check the side-view mirror for police cruisers. Your best friend will be able to describe your getaway vehicle in vivid detail, thanks to your idiotic Hawaii question. Even if you aren't somehow officially implicated, his dad will be out for blood. He will create extra-hard exams and quizzes, just for you. He will call on you constantly, put you on the spot, humiliate you. Worst of all, you will be banned from the man's house, forever losing access to his teacher's edition, his wife's stellar home cooking, and all of the ESPNs on his cable package.

Your teacher will eventually make a looping left turn onto Winetavern Street, the town's main drag, driving half a block before wedging the U-Haul diagonally across two open parking spaces next to a squatty storefront. "We're here," she will announce. Gaze forlornly at the drab building's blinking marquee, whose curlicue neon letters spell out THE A GO GO.

Help your teacher gather up the groceries, but please, leave the beer. Dive bars are not BYOB.

Your entrance will cause a small commotion. Ignore the dozen or so pairs of bloodshot eyes that flick in your direction, squinting with irritation at the unwelcome intrusion of natural light into their dim cocoons. Like many who live in this college town, the patrons of the A Go Go all have that failed-professor look, a haunted, hangdog expression commonly found on local video-store clerks, reference librarians, and late-night public radio hosts, and they obviously have nothing better to do on the day after Thanksgiving than drink and smoke and fasten themselves to busted barstools. Slide past as they fling scowls at you, the coarse, sticky carpeting peeling away from your sneakers like masking tape as you draft behind your teacher.

Place the bags on the scuffed-up folding table at the far end of the dark and narrow room and set about winning your way into the good graces of the A Go Go's collection of all-but-dissertation drunks with a thoughtfully arranged buffet. Unseal the

Pringles can, vent the pizza box, and prop the opened bag of M&M's on its side to evoke images of a Thanksgiving cornucopia, spilling out its bountiful harvest. To help guide traffic flow, place paper plates at one end of the table, and plastic forks, knives, and spoons on the other—nobody, not even the sad-sack attendees of what promises to be the least festive farewell party of all time, should have to juggle cutlery while grabbing food.

"Nice work," your teacher will comment as she hands you a plate. "Now fill 'er up. Gotta show these goofballs it's not poisoned."

Grab a slice of pizza, a fistful of shrimp, a scoop of M&M's, a dollop of ice cream, and a thick disc of Pringles. Join your teacher at a table near a small stage, where a four-piece band sporting dark mod suits and slightly mangier versions of your unfortunate haircut will be tuning up their instruments. Take a seat across from her and rest one arm on the back of the chair next to you. Affect a pose of relaxed indifference. Then jerk to attention when the bartender, a goateed guy in a faded Joe Montana jersey, appears at your table and deposits a pitcher of beer and two pint glasses in front of you. After he leaves, fill each pint to the rim and pass one to your teacher.

Blush as she peers quizzically at the finished product.

"Let me show you something," she will tell you as she dumps your pitiful pours back into the pitcher. Pay close attention as she models the precise angle at which to hold your container, aims the pour at a midway point, and slowly rotates the glass upright. Behold the refill she passes back to you, a golden shaft topped with a half-inch of creamy foam and lively with carbonated bubbles that tickle their way down your throat as you drink.

"See?" your teacher will say. "Now you won't end up with such massive head." For the second time in your life, fail to laugh at an accidental double entendre. Start to wonder if you're coming down with something.

Top off your glass, working your way back through the steps your teacher just demonstrated. Then wince as harsh feedback comes shrieking out of the speakers at the edge of the stage. Squint at the stenciling on the bass drum, which informs you that you are about to be subjected to the stylings of SAVOY TRUFFLE – MID-MISSOURI'S BEST BEATLES COVER BAND. As the band launches into a song about—as near as you can tell—having sex in the middle of the road, turn around to check the buffet again. Observe that some of the A Go Go's patrons have now shuffled over to fill plates with food, though no one's going anywhere near that sandwich of yours. Make a mental note to slice it into portable sections when you head back for seconds.

But in order to have seconds, you must eat the firsts. Attack the ice cream, out of necessity. Realize that for all your meticulous preparation in assembling the spread, you still forgot to grab plasticware. So, scoop up the ice cream with Pringles. This combination will prove stunningly delicious. Inspired, wolf down the pizza slice and dip the crust in the shrimp's cocktail sauce. Then polish off the drumstick between bites

of M&Ms. Chase each mouthful with deep draws of beer. Flavors will collide, swirling, in your mouth, and even though you adore Thanksgiving fare—you would happily eat your best friend’s mom’s turkey, stuffing, and sweet potatoes every day for the rest of your life—you have to admit that your teacher has somehow managed to pick out the perfect food for the occasion, almost as if she bought it with you in mind.

For the first time since this morning, when you did all those whip-its with your best friend and then didn’t move from his basement sofa for a good two hours, truly relax. Lose yourself in the music, which alternates between oldies-station standards and deeper cuts, many of which you recognize by reputation rather than melody.

Listen. That’s “I am the Walrus”.

Huh.

You’re gonna need a lot more beer if this is how the Beatles actually sound.

Reach across the table for the pitcher, pausing when your teacher leans back to grab you by the wrist. Interpret the earnest expression on her face as a sign that she has something important to tell you, something urgent. Dip your head forward in order to listen.

“This was our bar,” she will yell into your ear. “Every Friday after class, me, your mom, and your dad used to come straight from the English building and park ourselves right at this exact table. Your dad would buy us round after round of drinks. Your mom and I would get up and dance like a couple of groupies. These guys were the house band. They’re legit. Check it out—the bass player even learned to play left-handed.” Picture your father in his trademark corduroy jacket, the one with the patches on the elbows, leering out from behind a curtain of smoke and shadow at your future mother and your future teacher as they boogied to Savoy Truffle. Feel pressure begin to build in your temples, the first stirrings of a headache. You really should drink more water, and not just today, either. Fortunately, this beer will taste just like water, so take another gulp and refill your glass from the new pitcher that Joe Montana just dropped off at your table. Catch his eye from across the room and raise a silent toast to his attentive service and apparently neutral position in the great Kansas City quarterback wars of ‘97-’98. Then start to fret about who’s paying for all of this. Your teacher put your sandwich on her charge card—perhaps she expects you to return the favor? This is her farewell party, after all. How much does a pitcher of beer cost, anyway? As you are well aware, the only thing weighing down your tattered pockets right now is a rusty apartment key. Maybe your teacher will accept an IOU, which you can repay down the road, when you have more funds. According to your mother, Bernard’s parents are so wealthy that he didn’t even need to take out a loan to pay for medical school.

Envision the holidays at Bernard’s family’s house: a crackling fire, a bright shimmering tree, an actual golden goose on the table. So picture-perfect that even the mere thought is enough to stress you out.

Maybe your mother did you a favor by leaving you behind. Visualize her situation as a complicated algebra equation: let x be your mother, and let y be Bernard. If x is a half-broke divorcee with a thirteen-year-old kid (u), will y 's parents be able to square x and y , with u subtracted?

Solve for u . Show your work.

But this is your mother's problem, not yours. All you need to concern yourself with right now is pounding back some cold ones with an old friend and contemplating how many lines in the Lennon-McCartney songbook scan like instructions, or orders.

Come together, right now.

Get back to where you once belonged.

Turn off your mind, relax, and float downstream.

Heed that last bit of advice. Close your eyes.

Whoa, bad idea, your head's doing somersaults. How much have you had to drink? You chugged two cans in the U-Haul, then nothing until...but this is no time for math. Lurch to your feet. Pitch forward. Easy does it, champ. One foot in front of the other. Restrooms are past the stage, down the little hallway, on your left, you can't miss 'em. Men's, women's, doesn't matter, either will suffice.

Plunge headfirst into the nearest open stall and vomit extravagantly in the general direction of the toilet. After you've emptied the contents of your stomach, dislodge several dozen paper towels from the ancient rusted dispenser mounted on the wall and sop up the mess as best you can.

Stare blearily at the cloudy mirror above the sink as you wash up, the bass guitar throbbing ominously through the walls and straight into your aching, echoing gut. Mutter, lightweight, lightweight, as you dry your trembling hands under the wheezing dryer next to the door, the one whose defaced instructions advise you to PUSH BUTT.

Yet again, fail to laugh.

Take a deep breath and head back outside.

Emergence from the restroom into an alternate reality. Everyone in the bar has now moved to the front of the stage, and they will all be bouncing around in a hobbled way, their stiff bodies grinding like teeth beneath a cheek as they dance to a rowdy number about—from what you are able to glean from the lyrics—having a good time at a birthday party. When the crowd parts, glimpse your teacher mashed-potatoing spastically in their midst, the undried moisture on her grey sweats making it appear as though she has been unduly exerting herself to perform these jerky physical maneuvers. Never in your life have you witnessed something so deeply, manifestly uncool, and yet even you have to admit that there is something undeniably beautiful about a group of adults coming together to dance this badly.

As the song's bridge hits, weave your way through the thicket of lumpen bodies and edge next to your teacher. Bob gamely along to the beat even though the rickety machinery in your stomach hasn't quite stopped turning over. To make matters worse,

many of the dancers will have come straight from the buffet table, so prepare to dodge errant M&M's, pizza crusts, and shrimp tails—but still, and don't take it personal, no sandwich—as you gyrate tentatively to the music.

The birthday song will crash-land abruptly into “Something”, and as the assembled dancers lurch clumsily into commitments with nearby partners, your teacher will be on you like an owl on a field mouse, snuggling her body to yours and leaning down to rest her head on your shoulder. As the male, you are the lead, so take care to steer her away from chairs, tables, and other dancers. Limply hold her shockingly small hand, which is so light and feathery that it will threaten to slip out of yours at points. Try not to think about how this is technically the first time you've ever danced with a girl.

When the song finally ends, the other patrons will uncouple and shower the band with a lengthy round of applause. Attempt to extricate yourself from your teacher's bear hug as she leans in, yet again, to put her mouth to your ear.

“If you wanna dance,” she will say, her breath as hot and stale as an open toolshed, “you've got to pay the fiddler.”

Jolt backward and stare at her, uncomprehending. Brace for that braying cackle. Decide that you would rather Savoy Truffle hold their instruments next to the amplifiers for three straight hours than to have to hear your teacher's drunken-donkey laugh ever again.

“We need to tip the band,” she will say, once she has recovered from this latest spasm. “My wallet's out in the U-Haul. Not sure exactly where I left it. Mind running out there and finding it for me?”

Take her keys and make a beeline for the exit. Once outside, wrench open the U-Haul's passenger door and begin your search. Open the glove compartment. Rifle through the door pockets. Lift up the floor mats. Slide your fingers in between the seat cushions.

No sign of a wallet.

There's one more place you can check, although odds are slim your teacher would leave something so important back in the U-Haul's cargo space. Still, nothing wrong with being thorough. Walk around to the back of the truck. Unhinge the heavy metal clasp and raise the sliding door slowly, using the pull strap for control. Then hoist yourself up onto the bumper and peer hopefully around the dim, completely empty cabin, as though all of your teacher's worldly possessions, which are for some reason invisible at the moment, might magically reveal themselves if you wait long enough. Take a few hesitant steps inside, wincing each time your sneakers reverberate squeakily off the bare metal walls of the truck. Maybe there's a perfectly good explanation for this. Maybe your teacher has all of her stuff packed up in boxes, ready to go, and once she's done here she'll be headed straight back to her house to load everything up. Of course! She just had to run a couple errands first—gas up the tank, buy some groceries, make an

appearance at a farewell party where none of the guests seemed to know her, and still somehow find enough time to turn one of her former students into a bonafide juvenile delinquent.

You know, all the things completely normal people do right before a big move.

Now that you've been confronted head-on with this unsubtle visual metaphor for the desolate, yawning loneliness at the heart of your teacher's existence, it is perfectly natural to want to run as far away as possible. Your apartment is less than a mile from here, a straight shot, and in her current condition your teacher probably won't notice your absence for several minutes.

But be honest: do you really think this brief glimpse into someone else's pitiful life is more than you can handle?

This is just introductory loneliness, loneliness 101, loneliness for dummies.

You'll see.

Hop down from the bumper, re-latch the U-Haul's sliding door, and head back inside the A Go Go. Locate your teacher over by the stage, staring moonily at old concert posters thumbtacked to the wall as she twirls her exhausted-looking ponytail around her index finger. Twinkle the keys into her open palm and tell her you couldn't find the wallet.

"That's okay," she will assure you, sounding unbothered. "Must've packed it up. But hey, look what I've still got."

From the waistband of her sweats, your teacher will produce a folded-up ten-dollar bill—the same one you gave her several hours ago—and tuck it into the tip-jar at the front of the stage. "Let's bail," she will then suggest, in a sotto voice, "before it gets too hideous. The toasts, the speeches, the cloying sentiment. Better to leave now, while everyone's happy. Plus, we need to get you home—your mom's probably worried sick about you. Follow me and I'll show you how to do a proper Irish goodbye."

Slink reluctantly behind your teacher as she absconds from this imaginary farewell party, breezing her way past the A Go Go's no-longer-quite-so-pathetic-seeming patrons, none of whom appear to care who she is or where she might be going—except for the bartender, whose furrowed brow and tracking, narrow-eyed gaze strongly suggest that, on top of everything else, your teacher is also about to skip out on her bar tab.

When you reach the front entrance, suddenly remember your sandwich. Glance back at the buffet table and make accidental eye contact with the bass player from Savoy Truffle as he dips a Pringle into the tub of melted ice cream, sets it on his tongue like a communion wafer, and beams you a left-handed thumbs-up from across the bar. Then decide that no sandwich would be worth having to spend another second in the A Go Go.

During the ride down Winetavern toward your apartment, balance the beer carton between your knees and cast sidelong glances at your teacher as she drives.

Search her face for hints of sadness, of creeping humiliation: a far-off glint in the eyes, a tremble in the jaw. You could pose an innocent question, the way you used to in her classroom. You could frame it in the most benign way possible, for maximum devastating impact. Hey, I opened up the cabin to look for your wallet. How come there aren't any boxes back there? Picture your teacher trying to maintain her composure as a held-back sob explodes behind her face.

At the entrance to your complex, a downtrodden ex-motel where you share a cramped studio with your mother, notice a placard that reads:

FREEZE WARNINGS
DRIP FAUCETS SLOWLY
OPEN CABINET DOORS

The leasing office puts this warning up every year, in preparation for winter. The sign is intended for residents, but is always positioned in such a way that it faces out toward the street, in full view of oncoming traffic, as though everyone could use the reminder, not just the tenants of this shithole.

Tell your teacher to drop you off by that overflowing dumpster—no, not that one, the other overflowing dumpster.

"Well," she will say as she grinds the U-Haul into park, "I guess this is where we part ways."

Say you guess so.

"Sure was an interesting afternoon," she will say.

Say yeah, it sure was.

"You can keep the beer," she will tell you.

Say thanks.

Then, as though the thought has suddenly occurred to you, ask your teacher where she's really moving to.

"Would you believe, Hawaii?" she will reply, not missing a beat. "I'm sorry I gave you so much grief earlier. I actually am moving to Honolulu. I've already shipped my car. I'm gonna drive this sucker out to California and freight all my stuff from there. There's a company in Oakland that'll send everything super cheap. Pretty cool, huh?"

As she talks, gradually realize that this cover story wasn't some miracle improvised at the last second, like a Rich Gannon comeback—from the moment she laid eyes on you at that gas pump, your teacher had begun formulating her game plan. Consider now the very real possibility that there never was a wallet—she wanted you to open up the back door of the U-Haul and bear witness to the emptiness inside, and this was all a test to see how you'd react, to see if she could teach you one last lesson about the kind of person you really are.

So, give your teacher your most open and accepting facial expression. Understand that you will probably run into her again, months down the road, maybe at the supermarket, maybe at a convenience store, maybe downtown. You will listen

patiently as she explains why Hawaii didn't work out, and why the Montessori was able to hire her back so quickly. And then you will smile at her the way you are smiling now, like you have no reason not to believe every single word she is saying.

"Will you do something for me?" your teacher will ask as you are halfway out the door, hugging the beer carton to your chest. "Will you say hi to your mom? Tell her I'm happy. Tell her I want her to be happy."

Promise your teacher you will, even though you both know that you won't. In lieu of waving goodbye—you will need both hands to hold the beer—jut your chin upward as the U-Haul scuds out of the parking lot, heaves itself down the road, and disappears around a corner. Then trudge across the glistening asphalt toward your apartment. Convince yourself that the rest of the holiday won't be a total wash. You still have beer, and even though you left your sandwich back at the bar, there are at least two, and possibly three, Lean Cuisines waiting in the freezer—as long as you spread them out, you'll be fine hunger-wise. Best of all, the Chiefs play Arizona on Sunday, on the one channel that comes in clear on your TV. And Gannon's starting.

Once you're at your door, shift the beer carton under the crook of your right arm and dig into your left front pocket for the key. Rake your fingers around until you remember that, duh, it's in the other pocket. Set the beer on the ground. Jam your hand into your right front pocket and scrape at nothing but damp lint and fuzz.

Turn out both pockets. Observe, with mounting anxiety, that each one now sports a hole just large enough for an apartment key to slip through.

Shake out your right pant leg, then your left. Take off your shoes and turn them upside down. Peel off your soaked socks and flip them inside out. Overturn the Budweiser carton, spilling the remaining cans onto the asphalt. Lift up your welcome mat. Lift up your neighbor's welcome mat.

Let out a ragged breath.

Walk back to your apartment and stand barefoot before the window pane just to the left of the door. Ball up the sleeve of your sweater and hoist your arm above your head. Cock back your fist and prepare to drive it through the glass. Then close your eyes and visualize a jagged shard opening one of your arteries from wrist to elbow. Lower your arm. Roll your shoulders into a slump as a wall of wind plows across the parking lot, activating each hidden pocket of moisture on your damp clothes and flicking angry sputters of drizzle into your face. Lean morosely against the door, then slide down into a seated position.

Wonder whether those are tears forming at the corners of your eyes, or just rain droplets pooling there.

Stare at the ground until the answer appears so suddenly, so clearly, that you will feel as if you've flipped to the back of a teacher's edition, where the solutions to every problem have been waiting to work like charms. The leasing office will have a passkey, though it will be closed today, on this most official of unofficial holidays. All you'll have

to do is stop by first thing tomorrow morning and deliver your tale of woe. Those nice people will let you back into your apartment—they have to. And come Sunday, if your mother gives you any crap about having to purchase a replacement key, just smile and tell her Dr. Bernard can pay for it.

Of course, there's still the matter of having no place to stay tonight, no roof over your head.

Don't sweat it. You've got this.

Jam your sodden socks and squishy shoes back on. Snatch a dented beer can off the ground and gently slip your index finger under the tab to let some of the pressure out. Once the hissing stops, open the can as normal and take a swig. Then, beer in hand, stroll back across the parking lot and position yourself in front of that big, dumb sign by the entrance. The rain will be coming down steadier now, fat wet sticky drops that crackle on the asphalt and burrow into your scalp, your sneakers, and your spongy sweater.

When the headlights of that first car come winking around the corner, extend your non-beer-holding arm out away from your body.

Raise your thumb proudly, confidently, like a flag of welcome.

Smile.

This world will never run out of strangers.

RADIATOR

by Jesse Salvo

I am woken with my head leaned cool against the radiator and a steady tick tick somewhere far back in the blind wallpapered recess of the room. I angle my chin up toward streamering window light and paint the insides of my eyelids blood orange. The floor is made up of small boards of darkish brown lacquered over with no rug. The nails also are painted. The stairs when you walk up them go tick tick as a clock. I angle my head down with eyes open and blink at the fingerprint whorls on the nicked floorboards and hum a little and say my sentence. The sentence that I say is *The prince evinces mincing wincings*. The radiator is not on. I press my lips against the metal, which is cool. I close my eyes again. I am locked in a kiss with the mottled radiator metal. I wish for my spit to freeze and my lips to stay like this in burning contact with the rusted metal for all God's eternity. Silly, silly. There is a heavy body on the stairs, standing on the stairs, listening to me, for some sign of me. The body with its weight on the stairs goes as a clock goes.

I am in bed again. My forehead and eye sockets are coated in sweat. My gums recede backwards away from my teeth bared at the ceiling. I click my teeth. I roll my eyeballs in their sweaty sockets and they comb the popcorn ceiling down purple walls past crown molding to the doorjamb. There are marks above the doorjamb from where we would stand with our heels straight and be measured against one another. I was always very tall even as a child.

Hello. There are three people in the room. Well-dressed and blinking. Hello I am in here.

"Doug. You're looking positively hale Doug." I loll my head back toward my eyebrows and feel the top of my head where a baby would have a fontanel pressed against the baroque carvings of fauns and cherubim etched on the headboard which we'd bought at Bed, Bath & Beyond.

Mr. Lommerzheim is in here alone now. He pulls up an ottoman to the side of the bed. There was not an ottoman in here before. Perhaps he brought the ottoman.

He says "I am going to say some things to you and you tell me what it is they make you think of." What they make me think of is: a prince evincing mincing wincings.

Mom had had to come and get me with Natalie from Syracuse. In the winter there, the snow is piled beside the footpaths up to your shoulders and everybody stays inside and works on their projects. My project was: stress-test various steel compounds for 10x their load-bearing capacity. We had a great warehouse half the size of an airplane hanger where people walked around in goggles dragging shattered objects and strange machines they'd invented. It was like the beginning of a movie.

I am at the radiator with my knees drawn tight up on my chest where they make friends with my chin and the rolled pouch of my belly. My lungs are compressed and I breathe shallow sweet chuffs like I am underwater. Concrete in spite of its popular reputation is remarkably brittle. Our 410 Design Implementation Professor made a show of breaking a block of solid concrete in half with his forehead. Beforehand he'd said very drolly "Please don't try this at home or I will get sued." If you know an object's fracture toughness you will never be caught unawares by it. All objects subjected to certain conditions will evince mincing wincings. The figure on the staircase has not moved. I crane my head to try and see. I say "Dad."

When Mom came up to get me from Syracuse she brought Natalie with her. My apartment there had heaps of steel samples piled together pell-mell blocking all the windows like an indoor scrapyard. I'd cut my foot on one of the steel samples and the toe got infected so I had to limp around the couch in order to run away from Mom and Natalie who were only trying to help. They tackled me in the doorway of the kitchenette and everybody started crying. My cheek was pressed against the floor and there was a hideously deformed hummus container that'd gotten lodged under the fridge at some point, only about an inch from my nose, and I was crying looking at it.

Natalie wouldn't have been able to tackle me except that my toe was infected and threw off my sense of balance, plus she had Mom on her side. Usually I would be able to stiff arm them both and vault over the couch into my bedroom to barricade the door on account of I am so very tall but on this regrettable occasion I was brought low and made to lie shamefully face to face with the crumpled hummus container of my own making because women do not fight fair. There is a difference between compressive failure and tensile failure. You have to test for both.

When I was seventeen and Natalie fourteen our Father brought us and Mom to his office Christmas party, where he told everybody where I was going to college. Then he went into his office and began kissing his secretary and all of us saw. He looked really embarrassed and excused himself and went and fell asleep in the passenger seat of our car. He'd accidentally locked the keys inside with him before he dozed off and so Mom and Natalie and I had to share a taxi home, and since Mom's purse was locked in our car, I used the money from my summer job to pay for the cab. Mom was crying and it was all really embarrassing. So then we all had to sit down and get a divorce.

Mr. Lommerzheim says "We're essentially trying to figure out to what extent we need to change things up here."

He says: "I don't want you to feel alienated from the process at all." He pats my knee above the bedcover like an old town parson.

I nod off and wake up sitting pretzel style on the floor. I am chained to the radiator by my wrist. I am pretty sure that a contextless observer would look at me and think *How barbaric* where actually Mom is doing her best under fraught circumstances.

Natalie was always jealous of me because I was so much taller than her and could reach the things on the higher shelves. She must have relished the opportunity to cut me down to size and rub my face in that mangled hummus container with whatever unholy bacterial cultures were growing inside. Still she is essentially a good kid. One time she stole ten dollars from me, then returned it a day later with a note, explaining how guilty she'd felt. On the floor of my apartment I remember crying and saying "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." There were these crazy steel scraps everywhere and if you had held one up in front of my nose at that moment I could have told you its exact point of fracture. I stopped leaving my apartment when I realized that the moment I crossed the threshold of my front door my internal organs would spill out of my body and I would die kneeling there on the porch in a bloody splash of anguish. I started ordering grocery delivery and using a mop-handle with a hook I'd constructed to fetch the delivered groceries from the front of my porch. When my mother tried to pull me toward the front door I started screaming and begging her not to because I knew what she did not, namely: that my interior organs would go exploding out in every direction in a ghastly spray of viscera and she would watch in horror as I perished from the planet.

The room is blue with white edges. I have a blanket around my shoulders. It is impossible to see out the window into the lawn. I sense some movement and lean backwards and raise my hands into fists, ducking my head and swiveling on the butt of my pajama bottoms on the floor until I am almost completely turned around. The figure that is next to me is crouched down low and there is a sweet stench on its breath coming off its tongue like aquavelva. It looms large, my elbows are half-cocked above my temples.

"Dad."

"Tell me something." Says the dark crouched figure with face partially obscured in the window's blue light.

"The prince evinces mincing winces." I say.

Mom had called two burly cigarette smoking E.M.T.'s to remove me from my apartment rather than risk me flailing and hitting her or Natalie. She'd said "I don't know Doug it's going to be expensive." It's very strange to have logistical conversations while everybody is crying and your face is mashed in a hummus jar and some certain part of you is absolutely *certain* that leaving the apartment will cause your spleen to go, like, rocketing out of your body at Mach 2 and hit the mailbox. It's very strange to see your father kiss someone who is not your mother but the mind adjusts.

The figure is on the balls of its clawed feet hunkered down soaking me in gaseous clouds of aquavelva. It's possible this is just the same as the thing with my internal organs and that all I'm doing is communing with my own brain, right now. It will be weeks before some new cocktail takes up residency in my blood and blankets my nerves.

"Go away." I say or don't say.

"Tell me."

"I wish you had not come back."

"Buddy boy, tell me. Are you proud of yourself? Are you proud of what this is doing to your mother?"

"Cylinder axial stress is equal your internal pressure times inside diameter over four-times the wall thickness in meters."

"Do you imagine you appear smart or impressive to me in this moment?"

"Inside diameter is also in meters, I should have mentioned."

The figure draws up until it is stretched toward the ceiling I twist back around with my shoulders hunched forward toward my new kissing partner the radiator, I imagine that the figure behind me keeps growing past all reasonable stopping points up through the ceiling through the cobwebbed attic we never open on past the moon and the stars to some cosmic ceiling and then begins shrinking again back into this room where it stands watch over me pursing its lips mightily, tasting the aquavelva on its own warmish tongue.

"Dad." I say.

"You were not exactly what we intended."

The figure walks out and I lean my head forward against the radiator pause a second and drive my forehead down against the edge of it. My face is warm. I drive my head forward again and the cartilage on my nose explodes and twin rivers slicken down my forelip. I can hear people in the house beginning to stir. I am hollering like a religious ecstatic. I yank my skull along my neck like a leash and feel the skin of my hairline gape open wide. I feel a tooth chip and a porcelain shard travels back toward my tonsil and I spit it out onto the brown floor. My whole face is a salted drench and I am shouting and there are arms around my waist.

There is sunlight in the doorway now and I flex toes underneath the covers. I am rested on my back and purse my lips and give quiet considered answers touch aesthetic limbs together and don't say sorry anymore. There is an aching in my throat that does not pass with the days.

Mr. Lommerzheim leaves, more or less satisfied.

I take slow steps down the bathroom hall repeating a sentence.

My body is not a cage. It is the theater where I wage my silent wars.

GOING TO HELL

by Robert Dawson

They waited in the parking lot for Bella to come back, smoking cigarettes impatiently. Josh sat with his head in his hand, the smoke curling around him, thinking about what the guidance counselor, Mrs. Critchet, had told him; "Have you considered working in the mills? Or the food industry? We have a lot of good restaurants coming into town. The world needs burger flippers just as much as it needs doctors and lawyers."

Cramped in behind the bench-seat was Neil who kept shaking his head to get the hair out of his eyes. Tyler sat on the passenger side, watching the electric doors of the drugstore intently with his Arian hair and pale blue eyes.

"Damn, she's taking forever," Neil said, putting his chin down on the back of the seat so that his face stuck out between Josh and Tyler.

"It won't be long," Tyler said, without taking his gaze from the doors. Josh wondered if he was more worried about his girlfriend or the drugs.

"What's she doin' in there?"

"She's got to get the right ones, otherwise we'll all just go to sleep. And she's got to do it when no one's watchin', 'less you wan'er to get caught."

Josh looked down the parking lot toward the road.

"The right one?" Neil asked. "Ain't Sudafed just Sudafed?"

"Hell no. It's gotta have dextromethorphan and be non-drowsy. Otherwise we won't trip, we'll just pass out."

Josh's attention was finally caught, he looked over at them. "The what?"

"Dextro. Methorphan. DXM, man," he said as if talking to children.

"Fuckin' A, I can't remember all that."

"Good thing you got me then," Tyler laughed.

When Josh looked back toward the road a sheriff's car was pulling into the parking lot, rolling slowly. "Oh shit, po po," he said. He slouched down in his seat.

"It's alright. Calm down. He don't know what we're doin' here. If he asks we're just waitin' on my old lady and her tampons."

All Josh could think about was that cop stopping and arresting them all. That was all he needed now, wasn't it bad enough he had no future? Still he didn't want to spend that future in jail. The cop slowly moved toward them, his speed seeming to decrease as he approached them. Josh could see his head swiveling back and forth like the Terminator, narrow eyes glaring out towards them, assessing everything with computer precision. Did the car just stop, Josh wondered. It seemed like the cop was getting out, knowing their intentions, reading their souls with his infrared vision. Josh could

already feel the handcuffs tightening around his wrists. I should have stayed home and done my homework, he thought. He wanted to run. He couldn't go to jail, his parents would disown him. But the car kept moving and the head swiveled back the other way.

Shortly after the sheriff's car disappeared behind the building, the doors opened and Bella came through, her straight brown hair blowing a little in the wind. Tyler got out to let her in. Josh started the car and pulled out, shifting gears between her legs, careful not to touch her. Once out on the road she lifted her butt up with her shoulders against the seat and her legs firm on the floor as she dug around in the front of her pants, her shirt inching its way up her flat stomach. Josh tried to keep his eyes on the road but couldn't help a glance here and there at the tan skin and Carolina blue panties. After she pulled out the four plastic sleeves he wondered if it had really taken that long to find them in her pants, there wasn't that much space in there.

"Why didn't you just grab the whole box?" Josh asked. "Wouldn't that have been quicker?"

"Because most places put security tags on them. It's best to only take the pills."

She handed out the sleeves and the cab became full of crunching plastic and the popping of pills through the backing. Josh dropped his sleeve onto his lap, he didn't want to hassle with it while he was driving.

"May as well go ahead and eat 'em, Josh," Tyler said. "They won't kick in till after we get back."

"Uh..."

"Here, I'll open 'em for you," Bella said.

At first Josh didn't know if she meant to hit his dick, but then she left her hand there a moment before sliding down the thickening shaft with enough pressure against his jeans for him to know she meant to do it. He looked over at her and she winked at him before looking away quickly. He glanced at Tyler but he was busy with his pills.

"Open up," she said.

She poured a handful of red circles into his mouth.

"They taste sweet."

"That's the coating. Swallow quick. They taste like shit once it's gone."

She was right, they were growing bitter. He swallowed.

"How many was that?"

"Only eight. You still have half of your pack."

"How many are y'all doing?"

"I'm only taking eight. You probably should too, Neil."

"I'm taking all of mine," Tyler said.

"Eight is good," she said. "After you do them a couple times you build a tolerance. I *still* get fucked up off eight."

"How long does it take?" Neil asked.

"Not long."

"Should be feeling it about the time we back to my house," Tyler said.

On the long curvy road to Tyler's house Josh started to feel sick, his stomach churned like he was going to vomit, but he fought it back. The lines on the road started to move, overlapping and wrapping around each other. He hoped he was still driving okay, no one said anything so he assumed he was. The driveway was in sight but he didn't remember so many curves on that stretch. He slowed way down.

"You al'ight over there?" Tyler asked.

"Yeah. I think I'm starting to feel it."

Tyler laughed. "I know I am. By the way, that sick feeling is normal. I forgot to mention that."

"Oh thank God," Neil said. "I was too afraid to say anything. I felt like I was going to puke"

"Hahaha. You might. But you'll trip balls if you do."

Everyone started climbing out of the cab once they were parked in the driveway. Josh's movements felt strange, short and jerky. The world seemed to be changing around him. Almost as if there were suddenly lines everywhere where there hadn't been lines before, like the world was made of Legos.

"I feel like I'm walking like a robot," Neil said.

"Hahaha. Robo-tripping," Tyler said.

"Is that why they call it that?" Josh asked.

"Hahahaha! No, You get the same feeling from chugging a bottle of Robitussin, but it fits. And you *will* puke off that the first time."

Tyler's dad was sitting at the kitchen table drinking on a half gallon of whiskey when they walked in. "Y'all just go to my room," Tyler said. Bella led them as Tyler stopped and talked to his dad.

In the room Josh fell to sitting Indian-style on the carpet and leaned back against the wall to steady the constant feel of movement, even though he wasn't moving at all. He looked around at the new world before him. Things had begun to move that he knew weren't moving, like the bed-rails which snaked along their paths. Colors became brighter. Not just existing colors but a whole array of colors seemed to come out of the cream colored carpet. Dark splotches of purple that he thought was dirt at first grew and changed shades at their fringes.

"Oh shit," Neil said, laughing. "You're sitting on a fucking rainbow."

Josh looked around him and indeed the white wall and the cream colored carpet with growing purple splotches had all morphed into a flowing river of colors. He looked up at Neil on the bed and over at Bella in the center of the floor. "We're all sitting on a rainbow."

Bang! Clak! Josh jumped, but it was just Tyler coming in through the door, he had nearly forgotten all about Tyler. "Why y'all got the lights on?"

He didn't turn the lights off but instead hunched down in front of Josh and inspected his eyes like an optometrist would, though Josh couldn't remember the word optometrist, he just smiled dumbly. "You're tripping, hahaha," Tyler said. He did the same to Neil and Bella.

"My pupils dilated?" he asked her. She nodded grinning. Josh asked him why he couldn't stop smiling. "It's perma-smile," he said. "Just like the first time you smoked weed." He got up and walked to the light switch. "Prepare to be mesmerized."

The bright light went out but there were red and green lights that lined the ceiling and floor and went up and down the corners of the walls. The world seemed to suddenly burst forth into a kaleidoscope red and green, all turning and spinning and colliding and exploding and birthing new colors. Josh sat open mouthed and staring off into the strangeness.

Someone lit a cigarette, even in this other world Josh knew what that sound was and he suddenly craved one himself so he fought to get his pack out. And every spark of the lighter changed the colors of the world until he finally got it lit. It didn't feel like he was smoking even though he could see the end light up with every drag. Everything beyond the burning ember became darkness. In that dark he saw two cherries appear beyond his own, slowly dancing, leaving soft tails behind them that grew brighter and thicker as they sped up, twirling, spinning circles that interconnected, crossed, separated, making images that seemed to burn into the very air. He forgot they were cigarettes. Forgot he was tripping or that he was even alive. He just watched the elaborate tracers, like red shooting stars dancing impossibly. "Whoa," he heard himself say and the red lights must have heard him too, because they came closer, dancing only for him in grand designs that seemed to almost touch him.

Collision. Sparks flew out and down in slow spiraling streams. There was a collective, disappointed, yet pleased, "Aw." His brain sent up a flag, but there was a misfire somewhere, he was still enveloped by the falling red lights. Not until an ember burned through his shirt to his chest did the flag register and he sat up to brush the little fires off of him. For a moment he seemed to be back in reality, but the lines and colors were all still there and he quickly slipped back out. He puffed on his own cigarette but it had burned out.

"Sorry about that," Tyler said. "But it was cool though, right?"

"Hell yeah," Josh said.

Every breath felt like a deep sigh.

"Anyone want to go to hell?"

"No," Josh and Neil said at the same time.

"Hahahaha."

"I do," Bella said.

"Once you guys see this shit you're gonna wanna do it, trust me."

Bella lay face down on the floor with her arms stretched out over her head. Tyler let her lie there a few seconds, then crouched down quietly and took her wrists and lifted her slowly up so that her entire torso was off the floor to her hips. He held her like that for a long time it seemed, her back arched and head hanging limp, then gently eased her back down. She lay still a while after and Josh began to wonder if she was okay. Then her head rose up, her eyes and mouth wide with wonder.

"Oh man," she said. "It gets better every time."

"I want to go, I want to go," Neil said like a child talking about Disney World.

Tyler did the same thing to Neil and it ended with that same expression on his face that Bella had.

"Come on, Josh. Your turn. And keep your eyes closed and just hang loose." Had Tyler given Neil that same speech, he wondered, but couldn't remember.

As he lie on the floor the seconds stretched out. The carpet was rough on his face. The kaleidoscope affect was even stronger against the back of his eyelids. He wondered if Tyler had forgotten about him, then he felt the hands take hold and lift him. It didn't feel as though he'd been held up as long as Bella or Neil but he was being lowered already. Soon he'd be flat on the floor again. Surely the floor was coming. But he just kept going down. A tingling sensation ran through his entire body, like riding a roller coaster. He couldn't feel Tyler's grip anymore, he had let him go, let him fall through nothingness. The colors grew fainter and led into darkness. Then, there in the dark a red glow formed that grew and grew as he fell towards it and it turned into a giant land of flames and burning coal mountains, where he finally touched ground. He was there, it was hell. The devil would find him soon. *The devil will find me soon!* he realized and he tried to get up, tried to run, but he couldn't move. With all his might he struggled. How could his friends have just let him go like that? He pushed and shoved and finally his head rose to see Tyler smiling at him.

"Oh my God," Josh said with a sigh of relief. "You sent me to hell." He rolled onto his back. "That was fucking amazing."

#

In between classes one day Tyler caught up to Josh in the hall and asked him if he wanted to go get some weed. Josh explained that he didn't have any money, he'd put it all in gas. Shaking his head Tyler told him it wouldn't cost either of them a thing, he had a plan, but he wouldn't explain it there. They waited till the bell rang and all the teachers had gone into their classrooms before walking out to the parking lot. Tyler still wouldn't explain the plan, only assured him it was fool proof. It was a warm sunny day in the middle of October and Josh was glad to have a reason to get out of school to enjoy it, particularly with Mrs. Crichton's voice still ringing in his ears.

After they were down the highway Tyler told him to pull onto a dirt road. He asked what was down it. "You'll see," Tyler said grinning the way he had after Josh returned from hell.

The road was lined with green trees that would soon be changing their colors. A few driveways snaked off the road through the foliage. Tyler pointed to a vacant looking trailer and told him to park there. Josh asked what they were doing as he parked.

"Come on," Tyler said.

They got out and Tyler looked around at the next trailer over. It didn't look to Josh as if anyone were there, there was no car parked in the scant gravel, but it did look lived in. Tyler didn't look long before he started off toward the back of the home. Josh followed him across the yard of dried red clay and weeds, littered with random junk like beer cans and car parts. He thought it looked like a wasteland, he was beginning to think of all Three Rivers as a wasteland in the middle of a forest. But it wasn't a natural wasteland, like a desert, it was man's wasteland, cut into God's garden. The back of the trailer wasn't much better than the front, the panels were splattered with red mud from rain and whatnot. Tyler crouched and picked up a metal spoon out of the clay and went to work trying to get the glass loose. He quit working the frame and jammed the handle into the corner of the glass. It broke and he pulled the shards out, breaking more until there was none left.

"You first?"

"Why me? This was your idea."

"Because you've never done this before."

"Well, what if he's in there?"

"Then I'll come over the top and..." he crashed his right fist into his left palm with a loud pop. "But there's no one here, so you don't have to worry. Trust me."

For a moment Josh hesitated, wondering if he should just get back in his truck, but then he may lose a friend. The metal frame was cold as he lifted himself through into the strange living room. Everything had a brownish tint to it, like the carpet and wood paneling he saw in old pictures from the '70's. A stale sweat smell hung in the air. Tyler started pulling himself through the window as Josh looked around. There were no pictures on the walls. The place was dusty and it looked like something had long ago been spilled across the kitchen floor and counters but had never been cleaned up. Barely any furniture either, a kitchen table with two chairs, a couch, and an end table, all the same shit brown color.

"You sure there's no one here," he whispered.

"There ain't no one here, man," but he was whispering too.

"This ain't right."

"Oh don't pus out on me now."

"I'm just sayin'."

"Look. You want to smoke some weed, don't you?" Josh nodded. "Then shut up and help me look. His bedroom is at the end of that hallway."

Josh eased down the dark hallway. At first he went to open the first door he came to on the left, Tyler said it was just the bathroom. The bedroom door was cracked

open. Josh didn't just rush in, he pushed the door a little and stepped back in case someone was in there ready to swing on him or something. There was no one. They ransacked the room. The closet, under the bed, and all the drawers in the dresser and night table, there was no stash.

"There's a bunch of knives in here," Josh said, holding open the top drawer.

"Take 'em. I got this." He held out a snub nosed pistol. "He must be out of shit. We hit him on the wrong day."

There was a hollow thud and the sound of a toilet flushing. They looked at each other. The fear in Tyler's eyes only made Josh more terrified. "What do we do now?"

"Run!"

Josh turned the corner just as the bathroom door opened, a heavy set man stood in the frame. Instinct took hold of him and with all his might he shoved the man back and then took off down the hall. When he cut the corner he leapt straight through the window as if he could fly and came down hard onto the shoulder, knocking the wind out of him, but he rolled up onto his feet and kept moving fast as he could to the truck, not even trying to catch his breath until he was twisting the key in the ignition. As it fired to life he looked up to see Tyler running toward him with the gun in his hand, yelling "GO! GO! GO!" The tires spun in the dust a moment before the truck began to move back. Tyler fumbled at the handle a few times before getting it open and jumping in just as the tires began spinning forward, kicking up dust and gravel. Tyler watched out the back window for the man all the way until they had skidded back onto the highway.

"Son of a bitch," Josh said.

"Hahaha HA! That was close. He wasn't supposed to be there. I guess the lazy son of a bitch laid out of work...or lost his job--but we made it."

"Without finding the stash."

"You got the knives right?" Josh nodded. "Well with those knives and this gun we'll be able to get something. Hell we might get more than what he would have had."

They drove to Blackwater where Tyler said he knew some people that would be interested in a gun and some knives. He told Josh to stay in the truck as he went inside. There were several cars parked on the road and in the yard. Josh smoked cigarettes and waited, not daring turn on the radio in case that man or a cop or someone tried to sneak up on him. Mrs. Critchet snuck into his mind as he sat there waiting and he wondered what she would have thought of that, telling him he wasn't worth anything but a laborer or a burger flipper. Could a burger flipper have had the gumption to do that? Then he figured maybe they would and that he'd just proven her point for her. At least he had friends and some excitement in his life. Finally Tyler came back out, walking and talking to another guy. The guy got into an old Buick as Tyler climbed in the truck and told Josh to follow him because he wanted to take a look at the knives.

They followed him back out of Blackwater to the corner of a couple country roads where there wasn't anything but trees, the asphalt and road sign. The guy got out of his car and walked around to the passenger side. Tyler joined him and they talked a little before he called Josh out to join them. He asked him to see the knives so they laid them out on the hood, as they did it, Josh saw the guy was holding a little metal tube about three or four inches long and only about a half inch thick. The guy was loading something into the end of it. Then the guy put a flame to the end of the tube a couple quick times before stepping over to look at the loot. There was a switchblade, two butterfly knives, several pocket knives and a sleeve of throwing knives. He asked what they wanted for them and Tyler countered asking what the guy would pay for them. They both stood quiet a moment.

The guy put the end of the tube in his mouth and held a lighter to the end he'd loaded and burned, sucking in as hard as he could for a long time and then held in whatever it was he'd just smoked for just as long. Then the guy loaded it again and offered it to Tyler, he took it quick and smoked it the same way. After Tyler handed it back the guy asked if Josh wanted to hit it. "I don't know. What is it?"

"Whoa, hell yeah he wants to hit it," Tyler said, throwing up his hands. He put an arm around Josh's shoulders so he could whisper. "You ask questions like that he's gonna think you're a cop. So just shut up and hit it."

"But what is it?"

"It's better than weed. Just hit it."

Josh took the tube, it was still warm. He put the flame to it and started to pull. Tyler told him to keep the flame on it and keep hitting until he couldn't anymore. It seemed to tighten his throat so he took the flame away, but Tyler put his own to it and told him to keep going. Keep going. When he just couldn't take anymore he pulled the tube away and turned his head, Tyler's voice telling him to hold it in as long as he could. He did, until his face started to tingle from lack of oxygen. The release of the exhale almost felt like his soul was being blown out of his lungs. All the pain and anger and anxiety felt like it was balled up in that cloud of smoke. It left a funky, plastic taste in his mouth.

Tyler slapped his back. "How'd your like your first crack rock?" Josh's face went pale, he'd done coke but crack was a different story. Crack was bad.

"How about I break y'all off a chunk of this for the knives?"

Tyler emphatically agreed. As the guy broke off a chunk and handed it to him, Tyler brought up the gun and asked if he'd like to see that. The guy seemed hesitant at first. After an assurance from Tyler that it wasn't stolen he started thinking it over, but just then something caught his eye. "Cops," he shouted and jumped into his old Buick and took off.

Josh and Tyler jumped into the truck, Josh was about to jump out of his skin with fright. But when it came up over the hill it was just a white Toyota. "That damn paranoid crackhead. Follow him."

So they followed him down the road a piece and then flashed their lights until he pulled over again. They were heading farther out into the cut in this direction. Nothing but farmhouses, hills, and trees out there. Tyler got out quick and talked the man out of the car. "Come on, Josh," he shouted. "We gonna go in the woods a minute."

Josh suddenly felt sick. Why did they need to go in the woods, he wondered. But he didn't say anything, he'd never done this kind of thing before. Maybe Tyler just didn't want the guy getting spooked by cars coming down the road. Out in the trees Josh felt more comfortable. He reached out to one of the larger trunks and felt it's rough bark. He wondered how old the tree was, how much it had seen, and whether or not it remembered the things it had witnessed. Tyler's voice cut through his thoughts, "We're gonna test this thing out."

With one hand Tyler held out the gun and pointed it towards a tree several yards away and fired. Josh had never heard a gunshot in real life before, only movies, and the crack seemed to echo back off of every tree and deafen him. He winced and cupped his ears, but it was too late, the sound just kept echoing around inside his head. The guy laughed and started talking about how he thought the gun was mighty powerful, but he didn't have much left of his crack and didn't know if he wanted to part with it. Then, as if it had been the plan the whole time, Tyler turned to the guy, pointed the gun straight at his face and fired. The man's face flung back and he collapsed. A cloud of red mist hung in the air where he had stood. Tyler didn't even wait for the mist to fade before he had the guy's pockets emptied. He had Josh drive the car as far as I could into the woods so that no one could see it from the road. It was doubtful, he explained, that anyone would find it out there. Not many people hunted around there, he didn't suspect.

After they had stopped at a dozen or so drug dealers' spots and smoked all the rock they'd gotten and were jittery as hell, Tyler finally convinced someone to take the gun for a twenty bag of weed. "Damn," Tyler complained. "That gun was worth more'n that. But at least we got somethin'. And now we ain't got it no more if ever they come lookin' for it."

"You think they will?" Josh asked.

"No. Drug dealers don't call the cops and even if someone does find that crackhead, cops don't investigate crackhead murders. Drug deal gone bad. That's all they'll say."
#

School was more boring than ever and his thoughts always seemed to return to that poor crackhead out in the woods and he just wanted to get out of there, but he had to keep going and he had to at least pass or his parents would kick him out. Tyler had stopped going entirely, which helped keep Josh from skipping or thinking about that evil thing they'd done, but when Neil wasn't stuck up Todd's ass he would want Josh to skip with him. That day Josh wanted to stay the whole day, so he hid out in the library for lunch and played on the computer. He didn't have a computer at home so it was

nice to be able to use one for something other than schoolwork for once. He was looking for new movies to watch and saw an advertisement for film school at the top of the page. It piqued his interest so he searched film schools in the browser. There were dozens of pages of results. He sat looking over them all, his mouth agape. Why had not one teacher ever mentioned this? Why hadn't Mrs. Critchet? He closed out the tabs and logged off, suddenly filled with new hope. He ran to the counselor's office.

Mrs. Critchet sat at the computer, typing, in the cluttered office. Her big plastic glasses sat perched on the tip of her nose, the long chain dangling next to her cheeks.

Josh slid in through the cracked door. "Mrs. Critchet?"

She jerked in surprise. "Oh. Hello, Josh. What brings you here?"

"I wanted to talk to you about something I saw on the internet." He slipped into the uncomfortable chair she had for students. She looked frightened at his comment, so he quickly clarified. "When we talked about colleges I wasn't entirely honest."

"Really? What exactly were you untruthful about?"

"Well, ma'am, I didn't know they had schools for film."

Her head seemed to involuntarily jerk, the chain twitched and her loose old skin shook with the movement. "You want to be an actor? You've never shown any interest in drama." She began clicking around on her computer with the mouse.

"No, ma'am. I'd like to write movies and maybe direct them."

"Ahhhh. I see."

They both sat quiet for a moment.

"I didn't realize that they had colleges for that, ma'am."

"I see. Not very academic is it?"

"I don't know ma'am. But that's what I want to do."

"Film school is not an easy way out, Josh. And there's virtually no money to help you through it. Most people, even those who can get through the program don't make it a profession. You'll have a lot of debt after--"

"I'm not most people."

She looked at the computer screen then back at Josh. "You're GPA leaves much to be desired. Maybe you should consider working in one of the mills? It is kind of like a film studio...in a mill."

"Most of the mills are gone."

"There's still Whitney...and King...and we have dozens of lumber yards."

"I don't want to work in a fucking mill."

Her head shook violently, he couldn't tell if it was voluntary or not. "What did you just say?"

"You heard me. This is ridiculous. I would have a good GPA if I had known film school was an option, but you people didn't even mention that. You make it sound like there is only the four disciplines and no other choice but to work in the *fucking* mill."

"If you don't watch your language I will have to report you to the principals office."

"Fine. Report me. You're the one that has to live with the fact that you ruin people's lives."

"How have I ruined anyone's life? How dare you come in my office and talk to me this way?"

"How dare you tell people they're stuck in this hell?"

"That's it! Get out of my office, Joshua Faulkner!" He opened his mouth to say something else but she cut him off. "You ungrateful and disrespectful boy. You would never make it at *any* university, film school or academic. I give you the options I give you because they are your only options. Now, *get out!*"

Josh ran out of her office, down the hall, past his classroom and out the back doors to his truck. He had meant to stay the whole day, but really, what was the fucking point?

#

The next day Josh went to Tyler's instead of school and smoked weed with him and Bella all day. Tyler's father wanted some booze and beer so Josh took him on the condition that he could have some. They all four got drunk and smoked the last of the weed, so Tyler called Neil to take him to get some more in his new car, leaving Bella and his drunk father in Josh's hands. As the three of them drank more they talked and even though Tyler's father was an alcoholic, he gave some rather wise advice, Josh thought.

"Fuck those teachers at school. You want to write movies and go to school for movies you gotta finish high school first. If you don't get that diploma you're only fucking yourself. And actually write a movie, that might help." Josh didn't really know how much of this advice he should take as the man sat with one eye closed, his face all red and rocking back and forth, but it seemed sound to him, especially that last part.

They talked about fighting. Josh had been in a few fights but not many. The old man told him if he was ever in a fight again he should do whatever it takes to win. "If we was to fight right now I'd grab a leg off this table. I ain't above using weapons. Gotta do whatever you can to win."

At some point though, something changed in the old man, his smile became more like a snarl and everything seemed to get quiet. Josh was thinking about movies and being a celebrity and the dead crackhead, when all of a sudden the old man grabbed hold of Bella by the waist and pulled her into his lap, groping her all over and telling her how he wanted to fuck her pretty little ass. She writhed and wretched and broke away but he got her shirt, stretching it out, and reached a hand up it. Josh didn't know what to do. He sat frozen, watching. He took another shot and chugged some of the beer to chase it as Tyler's father kept going after Bella. This kind of shit is the reason no one thinks anyone from Three Rivers is going anywhere, he thought. This is the kind of shit that leads to dead crackheads forgotten in the woods.

"Come on gimme some o' that pussy," he said to her grinning that gap toothed grin, with his bald scalp and scraggly long hair hanging down on the sides like the Crypt Keeper. "I know you want some more o' this."

"No," she said trying to pull away.

"Don't be shy just because he's here. Come on gimme some o' that."

"No! No! No!"

"Y'all fool around?" Josh asked.

"Hell yeah," said the old man, snarling that nearly toothless grin. "She loves it."

"No. No. No."

"What about Tyler?"

"Awe, he's my son. We share everything."

"No. No. No. No."

He kept tugging away at her, pulling her shirt down, stretching it out, nearly ripping it. Josh watched half enjoying seeing the skin, but it nearly made him sick to think he liked it and he finally just turned away. He thought he should do something. He wished he had that gun back, or the knives they'd forgotten in the crackhead's car.

After a while the old man finally gave up and passed out on the table. Bella chugged a bunch of the whiskey and wound up puking. She was still sitting at the toilet when Tyler and Neil got back. They said it took so long because they were checking out Neil's new car.

Bella came stumbling out of the bathroom, her shirt all loose and hanging down around her breast. "Josh tried to fuck me," she said. Tyler didn't even flinch. "He tried to fuck me!" He took hold of her and started walking her to his room.

"The hell I did," Josh said.

"Yes you did, don't lie."

"Stop, Bella," Tyler said. "No he didn't."

#

Josh and Todd, Neil's best friend and a scrawny kid but stout southern boy like Tyler, stopped at Neil's after school one day. Neil had skipped, which he did a lot more since he got his new car. As they pulled up to the end of the driveway Josh saw Tyler sitting on the back porch with Neil looking glum.

"Oh shit," Todd said, when he saw Tyler. He hated Tyler. Said he was "fucking shady."

"I've got to talk to you," Tyler said.

Todd rolled his eyes. He liked to smoke weed, drink, or snort some rails, just as much as the next guy, but he didn't like all that other shit Tyler was in to. Josh always just kept his mouth shut about all that other shit. He ignored Todd's expression and asked what was up.

Tyler sighed as he sat back in the chair. He looked like someone who's dog had just died. "That house we broke into--guy called the cops on us." Josh's face went white. "He ID'd me."

"What the fuck," Josh said, falling into one of the chairs. "So what do we do?"

"Well, you're good, man. He only ID'd me. Said the getaway car was a green Datsun. That fucking dumbass." He laughed nervously. "The thing is, man. With everything piling up I'm going to juvy for sure unless you testify. Say I was with you that day."

Todd started shaking his head, Josh ignored him. "What? Go to court and say I skipped school?"

"Well...yeah."

"Don't do it, dude," Todd said.

"What if he ID's *mein* court?"

"He won't. He's a fucking dumbass. He said your truck was a Datsun."

"You said he wouldn't be there either, but he was."

"He wasn't supposed to be."

"You said he wouldn't call the cops."

"He won't ID you, man, I swear. You don't drive a fucking Datsun."

"But my truck doesn't look that much different than one."

"So you won't do it then?"

"I don't see how I can, he looked me right in the face."

"He can't ID you, man. Can you tell what *he* looked like? No."

"I bet he remembers me. We were in *his* fucking house."

"So you're just going to let me go to juvy?"

"I don't want to, man, but what other choice do I have? I got school and shit, I can't risk it. I'll be done for sure if he ID's me."

"He won't. All you have to say is we skipped school and went to your house or something."

"What if they ask what kind of car I drive?"

"They won't. They can't."

"Don't do it, dude," Todd said again.

"What do you think?" Josh asked Neil.

"I don't know," he said, looking down.

Josh looked around at nothing, thinking hard. "Okay. I'm risking my entire life for this. Are you positive about it?"

"I swear, man. Trust me. He won't ID you."

Weeks passed. Josh explained it all to his parents, all except the dead crackhead and drugs, they were furious. He thought his father was going to rip his hair out of his head and then shove his horn-rimmed glasses down his throat. But he didn't. Instead they just informed him that they were very disappointed in him. They said they had failed as parents. Josh tried to explain it to them, that it had nothing to do with them, it was just this damn town, it was hell. He kept going to school, hoping that Tyler was right and this wouldn't change anything. Walking down the hall Neil called to him and told him to wait.

"You heard about Tyler?" Josh told him he hadn't heard from him. "He tried to kill himself, man. Couple days ago. Ate a whole bottle of pills in a graveyard."

"You're fucking with me."

"Nah, man. They're saying this proves his guilt and shit. They're shipping him off once the hospital releases him. I guess that pretty much means you're off the hook though, right?"

Josh shook his head. "I guess so. We'll see."

#

Things had changed. It was only weeks away from graduation and all funding and help from his parents for film school was lost. Telling them about Tyler's suicide attempt didn't help matters at all. "Not only did you skip school, not only did you break into someone's house, but you almost got one of your friends killed. Get out of my sight. I can't look at you," his father had said.

He and Neil went into the grocery store one day, just horsing around, and saw Tyler's mother. She dropped the bag of chips she was holding, it crunched on the floor, and she walked up to him. "I know it was you," she said. "He didn't say a word but everyone knows he wasn't alone. He almost died because of you. Because you wouldn't even stick up for him. And here you are free and laughing while my son almost died and is locked up in a damn penitentiary. I should turn you in right now." Josh just looked at her terrified. "He didn't say not one word to them about you. That's what a good man does. But not you. You're a worthless piece of shit." She walked off leaving her cart of food.

"Don't listen to her," Neil said. "She's crazy. You did all you could do. You were going to testify."

"I don't know," Josh said. "Maybe she's right."

After graduation Josh's parents helped him pack and sent him to Charlotte to live with his older brother, Carl. He bussed tables to pay rent and researched film schools. In the end he just signed up for a community college with plans to transfer. One day he got a call from Tyler, he was out of juvy and wanted to come see him. Carl was out of town for work so he told him to come up. He rode up with Neil and they stole Sudafed from one of the thousands of drugstores in the city, just like old times.

It had been a long time since he'd done it before but he still took thirty-two pills. He'd never taken that much. As they waited for them to kick in they decided to go stock up on cigarettes. By the time they got back the drugs were kicking in hard. Josh enjoyed revisiting the old rainbow land, but soon he surpassed that and went on to the next phase. He was sitting on the couch and he closed his eyes only to find that he was in some other realm, a passage way, that reminded him a lot of that hall in *Beetlejuice*. It was long and frightening and there this doorway that he knew was for lost souls. The guide that walked with him suddenly disappeared as Josh looked into

the doorway and saw Bella naked and swirling in a lascivious dance against a backdrop of infinite darkness. As he watched her he realized that the guide wasn't a guide at all but the crackhead in the woods. The crackhead had slipped behind him and started pushing Josh through the door. He grabbed onto the door frames and held on as tightly as he could. He felt if he went any further he'd be lost forever.

Terrified he jerked himself back and his head rose up and his eyes opened. He was back in the Carl's house. He looked over at Neil and Tyler. Neil's face had been smashed in with a pipe or something. His eyeball hung out onto his cheek and the bone around the socket was gone. Tyler's throat had been cut and the top of his head smashed with something blunt. There was blood everywhere. He felt pressure against his back again, steadily moving him through himself. This couldn't really be happening. He was back in the hallway again, almost shoved all the way through the door, half desiring to join the spectral Bella, but he fought. He would fight until there was nothing left. Every time he got his eyes open in the struggle, Neil and Tyler were still dead, blood was still everywhere, and then he'd be shoved back into the hallway, back into the doorframe with the beauty tempting him, shoved toward her ever farther by that dead crackhead. He didn't want to be in hell anymore. Just as he thought he was going to die he heard Neil's voice.

"Man. I'm tripping hard. I deserved this."

Josh tried not to run screaming from the hallucination. As he watched Neil's eyeball bounce from side to side against his cheek, he forced the words, "Yeah, me too, I guess."

BEFORE GIBBS

by Mike Itaya

A man on my street died. I didn't see it. Margoline, a dyspeptic lifer two houses away, told me the tale. Dude named Barry Gibbs (not Bee Gee Barry Gibb, but CPA and cycling-enthusiast Barry Gibbs) bit it off. Hit an elevated curb straight up, went ass to ears over the handlebars and vaulted out of the equation and into eternity.

What an *asshole*. I don't want to sound disrespectful of the dead, but sometimes they're pretty hard to be respectful of. His next of kin had the pocket to put up a marker on the street. Our street. He christened our dismal dead-end the "Barry Gibbs Memorial Lane." The sign memorialized Barry Gibbs in death. Margoline remembers him in life.

"What a *dickbag*," Margoline says.

The two of us stand smoking in her driveway, 10:12am on a Wednesday. Garbage day.

"Always tearing down the road with Hades on his back. Molesting the commonwealth and scaring the womenfolk," she says. "Shot him the bird every day of my life."

I first met Barry and Margoline a few months after moving to the neighborhood. My school, where I was a fourth grade marm, was done with me. My live in boyfriend had crapped out. Days ahead promised little more than microwave meals and maxi pads, and I caught the dreads in a bad way. Worry suffused my brain until it became my personality. Mail didn't help. Coupons, car deals, and loans cluttered the countertop until the sight of a postal truck made me bitter in the mouth. When I slept, I didn't dream. Each morning my alarm brought me out of a flat nothing and I would lie in bed repeating my name, "Jan, Jan, Jan," until it felt like the word belonged to me again.

One day my mailbox housed a porno mag called, *Men of the Gentry*, addressed to Margoline Cork. I didn't look through the magazine, it seemed too much like poking around in a stranger's refrigerator. Nosy, not interesting, probably nasty.

I walked it down, intending to anonymously deposit the mag in the correct box, when an older woman came out the front door. The woman looked at me and then looked at the magazine. I looked at the magazine and then looked at her. I was rescued from wretched awkwardness by a man on a bicycle who wheeled to a stop beside us. His attire spoke before he did. Black socks, white Rockports, and a Hawaiian shirt, his clothes were loud enough to perforate an eardrum.

"Hello, ladies," the deviant announced.

Between his clothes, beige helmet, and discolored grin, it took some self-command to not ralf right there on the rosebushes. This prick leered at us like he was Don Juan and the sidewalk was a singles bar.

The woman haymakered. "Barry Gibbs, get the fuck off my lawn, you Mongoloid motherfucker. I swear to Christ I will burn your life down and bury you in places wild animals won't find you." Barry pedaled away, and the woman turned to me. "I'm Margoline, give me my porn."

Barry is dead now, but still Margoline calls the good old days, "B.G.," or "Before Gibbs." This is what we do. We talk bad voodoo on a dead man, mid-morning, middle of the week. A pair of catty bitches, some might say. Maybe the bad weather causes us to misbehave.

On the other hand, I had been what the British call "sent down" or "rusticated," which to my mind sounded better than shitcanned. The dean of students informed me that my "liquor-fueled episode" involved plagiarism, corruption of an underclassman, and a plastic pink flamingo. My moral compass had officially been called into question. The dean made a face when I asked to use him as a reference.

These days I work afternoons cleaning parks around the city. I don't mind it. Outdoors and unsupervised I roll to work bevv'd up and proceed to smoke like a paper mill. Truth be told, I probably littered more cigarette butts than I ever picked up.

Margoline and I don't really hang at my house. The first and only time Margoline went in my house, she said, "It smells like someone died mid-turd in here. Like a murder a done in a tacky kitchen, by a shrew-faced spinister, with a TV dinner." Margoline looked at me suspiciously. "What happened to that geek of a boyfriend? Bet he shitsphyxiated himself with a soggy brownie in his mouth."

Good Samaritans, Margoline and I were not. Still, we were in rare form this particular morning.

"Feeling rough?" I suggest.

"I could fit this hangover inside a dollhouse," Margoline brags before returning to her barrage of Barry slander. "The croaker would write a fucking check for a popsicle. Not for free cartons of stogs would I get in line behind that gelatinous bastard."

I should mention Margoline may not be grandparent material.

Martha Donalsby, a widow from two streets over, cruises by in an ancient Subaru and waves. I start to return the wave, but Margoline slaps away my hand.

"What's gotten into you?" she demands. "Old bitch driving her trash can on wheels. Should've tossed my beer can in her window."

The city truck stops at the end of the driveway. The auto arm struggles with Margoline's crammed can before emptying it and placing it jutting into the road. Margoline is steamed today, so I offer her an olive branch. I give her an opening to rip on Barry's amateur trombone playing. Barry practicing made her livid. She used to call him, "the hornblower."

"The man did own a 'Home Is Where the Horn Is' rug," I offer.

"That too," she spits. "What tongue-chewing tool wants to hear solo music for trombone?" she asks. "Tooting in his garage, sounding like a linebacker farting into a gramophone. It's too much. Give me death and deviant burial. Hide me in a pile of potatoes bound for the New World."

"This is the New World," I correct.

"If it's new, why the old *Seinfeld* reruns? And *Boy Meets World*? Who the fuck names their kid Topanga?"

Margoline's theories on culture are complicated, her beliefs both numerous and bizarre. According to her, *The Boxcar Children* were into heroin in a big way ("Benny freebased out of that cracked cup and the rest of them broke bad in the caboose car, cooking glass for cash."). And *Space Jam* belonged in the Western canon, though copies of *The Scarlet Letter* should be shot out of an artillery cannon. And Monet went through a lesser-known sock puppet phase.

She opposes gentrification out of paranoid self-interest ("They'll raze this whack shack, and I'll end up bathing and shooting up in the Hobby Lobby bathroom."), and buys toiletries in multiples of three ("It just feels luckier.").

Margoline's ideas also extend to youth culture. "Hoodlums today, with their fanny packs," she says.

"So, people don't really wear those anymore." I interject.

"Clamoring to see Nude Kids on the Block," she continues.

"*New Kids on the Block.*"

"What are you babbling about?" she asks.

We are out of our depth here, wading through a modern life that was not particularly modern. Sometimes I think a smartphone would straighten us out, but then again we don't really know where to buy one or what one is. People say computers are the future, but Margoline only uses her Apple II to play "Frogger." She gets wicked pissed when the snake gets her. But nothing could compare to how pissed she was about the neighborhood mixer. In fact, the reason Margoline hated Barry was the neighborhood mixer.

"You know, the reason I hated Barry was the neighborhood mixer," she says, confirming my inner dialogue.

Two years ago, Barry hosted "an informal holiday gathering." Margoline still bristles.

So we went to the party.

Neighbors and family are milling about. Mannheim Steamroller, "Deck the Halls" pollutes from a boombox. Margoline surveys the room. "What fresh hell is this? Who planned this party—Hans Gruber?"

Several people have on ugly holiday sweaters. Margoline is wearing her Tim Curry sweatshirt. Barry stands a few feet from a table laden with finger foods and beverages, talking with two of our neighbors.

"Look at her," Margoline says cuttingly. "Donalsby's two wine coolers from clinging to Barry's leg like a remora fish. Casting about for the death-grope. Smells like fermenting desperation." she says.

"I smell jalapeño poppers," I say.

Margoline looks down at the food. "Tofu tiramisu? Looks like a ghost shit on a plate."

We skip the food and convert our liquid lunch into a liquid dinner.

"You can't spell 'class,' with charades, Easy Cheese, and box wine," Margoline says. "Caste, maybe," she adds.

I am kind of enjoying the mixer. Even with Margoline's typical vitriol, I detect a mood of bonhomie amongst the denizens of our otherwise lonesome neighborhood.

"Barry has the balls to play at high society, and then try to deal middlebrow like an ace of spades?" Margoline howls.

"Margoline, you've drunk a lot," Barry says.

"Top me off, you Burgandy-drinking bastard."

"Margoline, maybe you should ease off a bit," Barry offers.

"One of us is leaving here in a body bag," Margoline promises.

We left soon after that.

Both Margoline and Barry survived the party. It wasn't until two years later that one of them would croak. Turns out it was Barry. They dumped him in a family plot, "a gathering of dick micks" according to Margoline. And Margoline reveled in her privileged victory. She wanted to literally dance on his grave, but I convinced her not to. "You're right," she concluded. "Better to hold onto the moral high ground," she said before ripping a deafening fart.

I haven't seen Margoline for a few days, so I walk down to her house. Her long-immobilized Plymouth sits buried underneath layers of leaves and bird poop, like an automotive monster with squatting rights. I knock on her door and hear only lonely reverberations of the rhythms. I try the handle, and find the door is unlocked.

Inside the foyer, a stillness descends. A TV chatters softly from one of the rooms. Originally I had Margoline pegged for a hoarder, but her house is in fact orderly to almost the point of asceticism. I walk towards the sound of the TV. The muted natural light throughout her spartan rooms make Margoline's house feel like a property long on the real estate market. In one of the back rooms, I find Margoline slumped in a worn armchair. *Judge Judy* is on her old RCA.

"Margoline," I say trying to rouse her. "Margoline."

A week later, her service is held at Bethesda Baptist. A few other neighbors and relatives attend. Margoline had been a lifetime resident, and the pastor officiating the ceremony knew her personally, though he did not know her well. In the eulogy, the Pastor says Margoline had been happily married at one time, but experienced hardship when her husband's health rapidly declined, leaving her a widow at twenty-two. Near

the altar, there is an old photograph of Margoline. She looks young, and surprisingly striking, and in love with the photographer.

The pastor concludes the remembrance by playing music specified in Margoline's will. She had chosen, "Stayin' Alive," by the Bee Gees. I see a few people blanch and stiffen in the second pew. Margoline, an ass even in death. Checkmate.

Afterwards, I stand on the steps smoking. Nothing will be easier with my friend gone. Last night, waiting for dreamless sleep, I thought about Margoline's nocturnal state. Did she dream? Did she dream about her younger self? If Margoline dreamed, and if she dreamed of the past, how then did waking life seem, to pull her from a past that had been real, waking up alone in a house where she would die by herself?

Days before, from the Taco Bell drive through, I saw a man eating dinner alone inside. My future unrolled before me like a churlish rug. I grind my cigarette into the church steps. It is not yet evening and there is still plenty of daylight left, but I have never felt so alone in my life.

KILLING ORANGE

by Willie Carr

"That orange face motherfucker must die." Buell gestured toward the TV. The TV newsman with the serious face and a non-threatening but very expensive suit replied to Buell saying he'd be right back after some important messages. Lloyd looked up from his book.

"You see, that's exactly why I don't watch the news. If you watch, you end up hollering at the screen. And they can't hear you and even if they could, they wouldn't care anyhow."

Lloyd sat on the couch he hated but that's where the light was best. The couch was covered with a thick, scratchy horse-blanket to hide the torn-up parts that a feral cat made when Buell brought it in last winter because it looked cold. The ungrateful cat not only carefully ripped each cushion, it also marked the entire surface with its own special scent that probably came from a diet of field mice, frogs, and dead things. Buell's solution to the odor problem was to douse the entire couch with a bottle of Brut cologne which he'd got for Christmas a few years ago from his estranged daughter, Indica. The ensuing bouquet was a pungent concoction that took a while to get used to but Lloyd adapted because that's where the light was the best.

Buell muted the sound so now, four men and one woman sat around a huge desk shaking their heads and mouthing what could only be harsh opinions when it was their turn to speak. He didn't need to hear what he already knew, the bastard that leads the country had become a tin-pot dictator.

"Somebody has got to stop him" he declared.

Lloyd looked up from his book and sighed. "Who, you? You said the same thing about the last one, and the one before him. You think they're all power-mad because that's what they are. Why do you think they run? Why don't you just stop watching the news since all it does is get you all fired up." Lloyd picked up his book and blew his breath out hard to show his frustration with Buell.

Buell looked at Lloyd who had returned to be hiding behind his book. He'd hoped for Lloyd's backing, but it wasn't forthcoming. He drew himself up to his full five-foot-six inches and said, "I'm going to the bar."

"Good," Lloyd replied. "Don't come back until you're shitfaced."

The Glory Hole was not the kind of place you would go to have a good time. But if you wanted a dark dive with cheap beer and old men who perched on wobbly barstools to while away their remaining years without excessive conversation, this was your spot. Still, you could always get a shout out when you were recognized.

"Hey, Buell."

"Hey."

The barman opened a Bud Light and pushed it toward Buell without another word. Buell drew a long sip from the bottle, set it down on the bar and began to slowly scrape the label off. This was a ritual when he entered his thoughts or when he had no thoughts. The thoughts he had now were of a long time ago in Viet Nam.

In 1965, Buell and his mother stood before the judge, a former shyster lawyer who developed a talent for getting elected over and over to his high post.

"Well," said the magistrate, "I always believed there was no such thing as a "bad" boy but you have challenged my beliefs. Let's see, destruction of property, auto theft, resisting arrest, assault, possession of a narcotic, and general mayhem." He looked down at Buell over his glasses. "Anything I forget?"

"It was just a joint" Buell replied.

The judge gave a stern smile. "I'm going to offer you a choice. You can either spend the next three years in one of this state's fine corrective institutions or you can serve our country as a member of the armed forces and come out of it as a good citizen."

Buell started to tell the judge that it seemed pretty much like the same thing but his mother interrupted.

"He wants to be a soldier," she said.

"Okay, I'll give this little hell-raiser a suspended sentence contingent on his reporting to the Army recruiter tomorrow morning. If he doesn't show, I know of a maximum-security unit where the boys would be delighted to welcome him."

The judge pulled off his glasses and raised one eyebrow as he looked at Buell. "Got it, compadre?" Buell nodded his acknowledgment.

Buell didn't know why but when he saw the poster of a slim, virile-looking Marine in his dress blues, he thought, just for a second, it could be a picture of himself. The poster promised that The Marine corps builds men. Two weeks later at the Marine basic training camp in California, Buell realized he had made a big mistake. The Marine Corp might build what it thought of as men, but to do so it destroyed the man that already was. Buell realized that he was pretty happy with what he was. The Marine Corps thought he had a bad attitude and went out of the way to correct his glaring faults. Buell spent many a night on fire watch while the others in his barracks slept then joined them in hard days of physical training and psychological abuse, all designed to break down the person that was.

"Do you think your special, private?" The red-faced noncommissioned officer stood no more than two inches from Buell's face.

Buell was supposed to look straight ahead and answer, "No. No sergeant" but hell, he always felt a little special.

"Yes, I do, I think all thinking men are special." The drillmaster shoved Buell backward and commanded him to "give him fifty" which could have been the end of it

had Buell not suddenly decided he was never going to be that man on the poster and pushed back.

There was little chance that Buell would win the fight and when he awoke in the camp hospital covered in bruises and his arm in a cast, all things pointed out that it was the correct assumption.

Buell wondered whether if, when they threw him out of the Marines, they would tell the judge who got him into this mess, and he'd be hustled off to prison.

"Did you think jumping off a moving truck could get you out if it?" A stern-looking doctor with a major's eagle embroidered on his white smock poked at him. "No young buck, you're going to 'Nam with the rest of your company. The only thing is you will have missed a vital week of training so you'll probably be the first one killed. Either that or your own buddies will take you out for being a coward. Anyway, you're out of here." The doctor turned toward the nurse and said, "Get rid of him."

"Hey Doc," Buell said to the doctor's back, "I ain't a coward but I ain't a robot neither."

"Enjoy your trip," the medic replied.

Vietnam was a place Buell liked despite the brutal heat, the punishing humidity, the unrelenting atmosphere of fear and hate, and the fact that while almost no soldier wanted to be there, almost no one wanted the soldiers to be there either. What Buell liked the most was that there were drugs everywhere: marijuana, hash, cocaine, heroin, morphine, opium, lsd, uppers, downers - pretty much all the things Buell loved. Plus, there were whores, thieves, and almost any other kind of debauchery a body could wish for. Maybe being a soldier was okay after all. What wasn't okay for Buell was the soldiering part.

A few hours before daybreak, Buell lay on his belly in a muddy clump of tall weeds alongside a tiny footpath just beyond a rice field outside of Hue. His fellow squad members were hidden in similar nests nearby. Their job was to intercept supplies being carried to Viet Cong irregulars. Buell and his team had been in the same area for fourteen hours without break.

In the back of a camouflaged four by four truck on its way to their outposts, the squad leader made a little speech about what it meant to be in combat as a Marine. "When you kill a man, there is always a moment, just before it happens, a moment when you doubt you can do it, a moment where you stand in the other man's shoes. That is the moment military training erases. That's when you pull the trigger. That's when you become a Marine."

Buell felt them before he heard them, a force pushing the air, moving silently and quickly, right toward him. His body stiffened and he raised his M-16 and pressed the trigger. In two seconds, twenty rounds of 5.62 mm bullets flew into the darkness.

The flash from the first round made him night blind and the other rounds made his ears ring. The rest of the squad responded with their own barrages of blind fire.

When the shooting stopped, Buell could only hear a high-pitched scream over the constant ring. A large man, the sergeant of the squad, was standing over Buell's body. He took hold of Buell's rifle and tried to pull it from his tightly clenched hands.

"Buell, shut the fuck up. Stop screaming." He pulled on the rifle again before kicking Buell in the stomach. Buell dropped his grip on the weapon and stared at the man through unseeing eyes.

"Get this guy out of here," the sergeant yelled to the corpsman. The medic guided Buell away from the trail. The noncom walked to the two bodies on the path. Both were tiny old men, clad in black pajamas. The bags of rice they carried had scattered in the dirt. The sergeant kicked the grains to spread them even more before leaving the scene.

"Let's boogie," he said to his men.

Buell drank beer number two and three in rapid order. He stood, pulled up his belt, and nodded to the barman.

"Later," he said and headed to his pickup parked just outside the door. He drove slowly south on highway 20, parallel to the Rio Grande and the huge wall alongside it, toward Fabens. staying close to the shoulder. The lights from oncoming traffic hurt his eyes. His eyes, like most of his seventy-year-old body, were starting to let him down.

At Fabens, he turned east and drove into the rugged Davis Mountains. It is a barren country, no cars on the road and no radio reception. Buell sang Rolling Stones tunes to himself to keep awake. After an hour, he turned off the highway onto a dusty dirt road and bounced along a rutted path until he saw the high adobe walls topped with razor wire that signaled the end of his destination.

He parked outside and made a single hoot on the horn. The night was shattered by a bank of high-powered lights and a loudspeaker which instructed him to get out of the vehicle and put his hands behind his head.

Buell had no problem complying. He stared straight ahead into the lights and shouted at the top of his lungs, "Hey Sarge. It's me. Buell. You remember me, right?"

The voice in the speakers told him to stand perfectly still. Buell could hear a large diesel engine start behind the walls.

The heavy steel gates of the compound opened. "Walk through the gates. Keep your hands in the air."

It was hard to see where to walk, the lights were painfully bright and the ground uneven.

"Stop."

Buell stood statue-like. The only sound was the idling of a piece of machinery. After a minute, Buell said, "Do you think you might turn off those lights? They kinda hurt my eyes."

A loud click plunged the compound back into darkness. The gates closed with a clang.

"Can I put down my arms?"

No reply.

"Hello. Hellooo."

No reply.

"Shoot me if you want, I'm putting my arms down."

A loud laugh came from the darkness.

"Where the hell are you?" Buell asked.

A small light came on from the driver's seat of a large Caterpillar earth mover. A grey-haired giant stood behind a machine gun mounted on the tractor.

"Let me hear you scream, Buell," he said. The big man fired a salvo of shots from the mounted gun.

Buell fell to the ground with his hands cupping his head.

"Get up you idjut, you ain't shot. I'm just screwing with you. You're far too pretty to kill." The man jumped down from the Cat and knelt at Buell's side.

"How you doin'?" he said and extended a hand to the prone man. "Come on. Let's go inside and have a drink."

The interior of the house was clean and neat, floors swept and dishes in cabinets. The only unusual features were the metal plates that covered every window and automatic weapons set beside them.

"Sorry, I got no ice." Buell took the tall glass of tequila. The big man raised his glass of the same and toasted, "Semper Fi" before downing its contents in one long swallow.

"Drink up," he said, pouring another and sitting down in a large brown Lazy Boy.

After a half-hour and most of the bottle, Buell began to speak. "Sarge, I heard you are in the armament business."

"Who says?" came a quick reply. The ex-marine pulled a Browning .380 automatic pistol from his belt and pointed it at Buell.

"Easy, easy" Buell said putting his hands protectively over his face. "Nobody says. It was just an old rumor. I haven't talked to anybody about it. Never."

Sarge considered the rather thin logic of Buell's words before lowering his weapon.

"And if I was, so what?"

"I want to buy a gun. A good one. A long-range one. Like a sniper rifle."

"I don't recall you being much of a hunter. What do you want it for?"

Buell finished his drink before replying. "For an assassination."

The big marine poured the last of the tequila into their glasses. "Just who did you have in mind?"

"Can I trust you?" Buell asked.

"Let me think. Can you trust me? Well, you can either trust me or you can haul your butt down to Walmart and see what assassin's weapons they have on the shelf. I'm wondering, can I trust you?"

"Fair enough," Buell said. "I'm going to shoot the President."

"The President. I voted for the son of a bitch. I thought he was a man of the people, not a politician. I thought he was going to make America great again."

"How'd that work out?"

"It worked out that he is a rich man's tool and possibly a traitor to the country. I know he sold my ass out to help his fat cat buddies. I should probably kill him myself."

Sarge reached to the shelf behind and took another bottle of Mexico's finest. He unscrewed the cap and took a gulp straight from the bottle. "We're gonna have to do some deep thinking about that."

Morning found Buell folded on to a too-short couch with his neck bent in an unnatural way. He snorted and tried to rise to a sitting position only to discover the freight train rumbling through his head in his head made it far too heavy for him to assume an upright pose. He coughed then coughed again which cleared his air passages but also brought up the flavor of dead skunk to his mouth.

"Bout time you got up."

Buell crossed his arm over his eyes but didn't make any move to rise. "What time is it?"

"Well after seven. Let's go."

Buell realized how much he hated Sarge, his up-and-at-'em attitude and his lack of a hangover. Sarge pushed through the outside door and stood on the porch to relieve himself.

"Come on if you're coming but get off my couch even if you're not."

Buell wrestled himself up to a sitting position then to a wobbly upright stance. He walked unsteadily to the porch before throwing up down to his toenails on the desert dirt. He held onto the porch post as if it was his last hope and waited for his nausea to pass.

The roar of a large diesel engine interrupted his reverie. Buell saw Sarge gun the big tractor. A cloud of heavy black smoke spewed from the exhaust and brought Buell's nausea to a new level. He emptied the remaining fluids in his stomach with one huge gush.

"Are you going to puke all day or are you going get a popgun?" Sarge put an unlit cigar into his mouth and smiled as Buell slowly moved toward the Caterpillar.

Sarge shifted into gear and drove forward. As he did, an attached chain pulled a large steel plate open under the tractor. The ex-marine hopped down and signaled for Buell to follow him into an underground bunker made from welded together shipping containers.

"Welcome to my little store," Sarge said.

The first container was filled with M-16s, AK47's, assorted short-barreled automatic weapons and boxes of ammunition. They walked into the second container which contained more specialized weapons.

"This is what you might be interested in." He pulled a long rifle from the racks and rubbed his hand across it.

"The number one sniper's choice, the Barrett 82, .50 caliber, deadly accurate and made in the USA. He walked next to the rifles identifying their country of origin and special features most of which meant little to Buell. He took down two other rifles and stacked them alongside the Barrett. "Let's try these out."

They drove less than a mile to the spot where he tested guns. A series of silhouette targets resembling human bodies were set against a rise in the desert floor. "We'll set up at two hundred yards to make it easy," he said. "Grab that Barrett."

Buell was surprised at the weight of the weapon.

Sarge saw him struggle with it. "Yeah, it weights over thirty pounds but you don't have to carry it far for what you want to do." He instructed Buell to lay on the ground with the weapon on its tripod before him.

"You're probably are only going to have one shot, so that's what you should plan on. Take aim at that target on the left and squeeze one off."

Buell was not sure that he would be able to focus enough to sight in the target but the NCO talked him through it.

"Take a breath, hold it, then slowly squeeze off a round." Buell did as he was instructed.

"Damn," said Sarge as he used his binoculars to check the bullet strike. "You missed by at least four feet. Do it again."

Buell squeezed off another round.

"Even worse." Sarge picked up a British sniper rifle with a multi-shot magazine attached to the bottom. Despite firing many more rounds, the results didn't improve. Nor did they when switching to the Russian-made Dragunov rifle.

"Maybe you should rethink this," Sarge said as they got back into the jeep.

Sarge cleaned and replaced the rifles into the racks. Buell sat on a bench watching with a heavy load of shame at being a lousy shot joining his hangover.

"Of course." Sarge began to pace up and down. "I should have thought of this before. You don't need a sniper rifle. You couldn't hit the side of a barn with one. What you need is something to knock down the whole damn barn. Come with me."

He flipped on the light switch in the third container. "There it is. Help me carry it."

They strained to lift the two-hundred-and-thirty-pound gun onto a dolly. It was big. It was ugly. It had six barrels, a long ammunition belt, and an electric motor.

"You remember this?" Sarge asked.

Buell didn't remember.

"It's a Gatlin gun. An M134 minigun. They used to have them in helicopters in 'Nam. Fires four thousand rounds a minute. Scared the crap out of Charlie when they opened up on him."

He pushed the dolly forward. "We're going to mount his bad boy on your truck."

It took only a few hours to set the gun into the truck bed, drive to the range and test fire it. The truck rocked from side to side as the barrage of bullets let go.

"Whooooee," said Sarge as he looked through the binoculars. "You not only destroyed your target but also took out the ones on both sides of it. We have a winner."

They were covering the gun with a tarp when Sarge stopped. "So, this little shooter is 10,000 dollars. How did you plan to pay for it?"

Buell didn't know.

"You have any insurance? 'Cause if you do, you can have someone pay me out of that. Chances are you aren't coming back. And if by some quirky luck you survive, you never knew me. But you will still owe me. Got that soldier?"

Buell nodded and started the truck for the drive home. He drove slowly, holding close to the road shoulder.

#

Lloyd pulled at the old plastic tarp he used to provide shade for his tomato plants. The desert sun would make short work of them if left unchecked. Each year, Lloyd went to Walmart and bought healthy-looking tomato plants in plastic six-packs only to watch them wither and die over the summer.

The crunch of Buell's truck on the gravel drive made him look up. "You look like death warmed over," Lloyd said.

"I feel about half that good," Buell replied as he walked toward the house. "I'm going to take a nap. Wake me up if I'm not up by tomorrow afternoon."

In the morning, Buell entered the kitchen as Lloyd was cooking his breakfast. "I can whip you up some eggs if you're hungry."

"Thanks just the same, but I don't think I could hold them down right now. Just coffee."

Lloyd put his breakfast on the table and poured Buell a cup of black coffee. "What's under the tarp on your truck?"

"You don't want to know," Buell said and rose from the table carrying his coffee outside.

After Lloyd finished his meal and rinsed his dish, he joined Buell on the porch. "Just put in some tomatoes," he said.

Buell acknowledgment him with a single grunt.

"I'm going to the doctor's this afternoon," Buell said. "I'm going need to borrow your truck." Lloyd's pickup was newer than Buell's but in worse shape.

"If you think it'll make it, you can." Lloyd took a Marlboro from his shirt pocket and smelled it before putting it back in the pack. It was his way of being able to quit, always knowing it was there.

"For your eyes?"

"Yeah," Buell said. He didn't tell him about the excruciating headaches he'd been having.

"Do you want me to go with you?" Lloyd asked.

"There's no point in you having to sit in two hours of traffic at the border," Buell said. Buell, like most every old person in El Paso, went across the border for health care since their Medicare had been cut to nothing and the wait to see the few doctors who still took it often took months.

"Okay," Lloyd said and went to look at the vegetables he had planted yesterday.

#

"Boo-yeah, Boo-yeah?" the nurse called out to the room full of patients waiting for their doctor's visit.

"Boo-yeah Martin," she called.

"That's Buell ma'am. Buell."

"Boo-yeah," she replied.

The Mexican doctor pointed to a chair beside the exam table. "Sit, please. We have the results of your tests."

Doctor Fortino Flores held a paper eye level and reviewed it. "I don't believe in hiding bad news, and yours is not good. The reason you are having vision problems and headaches is because of a growth near your optic nerve." He paused and waited for Buell to react but Buell just sat speechlessly.

"These growths, tumors, can either be benign or malignant. Normally further tests and biopsy would determine which kind it is and the appropriate treatment would begin. After the removal of the tumor, survival rates are good. However, there is no need for further testing in your case."

Again, he paused and again Buell didn't react.

"Are you familiar with the word, metastasis?"

Buell shook his head 'no'.

"It refers to when cancer spreads to other areas of the body. Yours has taken an unfortunate turn. There is evidence of its growth on your spine, your liver, and adrenal glands. We may try to slow these growths with radiation and chemotherapy, but frankly, there is no stopping them."

Buell swallowed hard. "How long have I got doc?"

"With radiation and chemotherapy, it could be a year, maybe more or maybe a lot less. I can offer you medications to ease your pain but not much more."

"I am very sorry," the physician said extending a handshake to Buell.

Buell absently took his hand and held it until the doctor pulled free and left him sitting alone in the examination room.

It wasn't that Buell thought he would live forever. It was just he had never thought someone would give him an expiration date like you'd find on yogurt in the back of the refrigerator. He wasn't scared, just shocked.

The nurse tapped on the door before entering. She handed him a prescription and told him he could fill it downstairs. "There is a chapel next to the pharmacy," she said as he left.

Buell immediately thought of the old phrase, something about 'religion being the last resort of the scoundrel' or was it patriotism that held that honor? He started to tell the nurse that God wasn't likely to save him but only muttered, "thank you".

He drove through Juarez without seeing traffic and only became aware of worldly contact when he found himself parked outside of one of his favorite restaurants on calle 16 de septiembre. Buell sat and gave the table a wipe with the back of his hand to remove some crumbs and salsa left on its surface by a previous diner. The waitress placed a plastic-coated menu over the remaining crumbs. Buell didn't need it. He knew what he wanted.

"Bring me a big bowl of menudo." He figured if it could cure his hangover, it might be able to cure his cancer. Later as Buell waited in traffic to cross back over the bridge, tears wet his cheeks. It was as good a place as any to feel sorry for himself.

#

The sun had started to slide behind the Franklin Mountains by the time Buell drove in. Lloyd was leaning back in his chair, legs up on the porch railing, with a beer in his hand watching the sky change color.

"Took you a while," he said to greet his friend. "Truck run okay?"

Buell wagged his head to let Lloyd know that his truck was okay and thanks for the loan. A lot of things go without verbalization between old friends.

Lloyd sat upright and pushed the small cooler of beer with his foot. "Grab a chair and enjoy the show," he said raising his chin a bit toward the sky. Buell took a beer and then sat on the cooler.

When it was near dark, Lloyd rose and gathered his empties. In the old days, he'd toss the cans into the front yard and wait for the desert winds to pile them up against the fence as some kind of old-time Texas ritual, but now he dropped them into the blue recycling bin like everyone else. He opened the front door screen and Buell rose to follow him in.

Lloyd stuck his head into the 'fridge to see if there was something he could eat that didn't need cooking but closed it without taking anything. The pantry was a little better. He found a can of Rotel tomatoes with green chiles and a small box of Velveta.

"Chili con queso" he announced as he opened a drawer and took out an opened bag of stale tortilla chips. He put the processed cheese and tomato sauce into a bowl and plopped them into the microwave for a few minutes. "How'd the doctor go?" he said after placing the lava hot mixture on the table.

Buell took a chip and waited until the cheese stopped burning the roof of his mouth before replying, "Not so good. It seems I've got the big C. And I shouldn't be making a lot of long-term plans."

Lloyd sat down.

"But the good news is they gave me all kinds of kick-ass drugs which I plan to abuse as soon as possible." Buell said.

"Holy shit," said Lloyd. "I was going to bust your butt for that big ugly gun in the back of your truck, but you topped anything I could say. I thought all they were going to do was to give you some new glasses. Cancer. Damn," Lloyd stammered. "What kind. There are all kinds of cancer they can fix up when you get 'em"

"Not this kind. It's spread all over."

"Are you going to get chemo? That works," Lloyd said.

"Not likely. My hair is too pretty and my ticket is already punched. I'm okay with it. Really, I am."

Lloyd tried to wipe the shock from his face with his hand, to come up with something reassuring for his old friend. "Fuck," was all he could come up with.

Later that evening, Lloyd asked Buell what he could do for him, a cup of tea or a glass of water, did he need a blanket?

"Well, here's what you can do," said Buell, "Bring me a beer, turn on the TV and stop hovering."

Buell fell asleep on the couch and Lloyd covered him with a blanket from the bed. He sat in a chair alongside the couch and watched Buell sleep until he, too, couldn't keep his eyes open.

When Lloyd woke with a start shortly before six a.m., Buell had already left the couch. Lloyd walked to look in the bathroom and the kitchen before realizing that the sound that woke him was from Buell's old truck.

Buell was parking the truck under a big mesquite tree out just beyond the falling-down old barn they called 'the workshop.' "What are you doing?" Lloyd hollered out.

Buell rolled down the side window and replied "Huh?" since he was beyond the range where he could make out whatever the damn fool was saying.

Lloyd waited until he approached the truck before asking again.

"I'm moving out of view of the neighbors."

Lloyd looked to the sides of their property to check if he accomplished his goal. The closest neighbors were an unoccupied adobe bracero house more than a half-acre away on one side and a big lot used as a storage area for nonworking cement trucks and odd contractor parts on the other. There was only empty desert behind them and their own house blocked any view from the street.

"Seems good," Lloyd said.

"Help me with this tarp," Buell said starting to unfold a tattered roof tarp over the entire truck.

As they worked, Lloyd said, "You wanna tell me just why you brought a cannon home?"

"I already did. Somebody's got to do something. "

"You damn fool. You're gonna get yourself killed," Lloyd said in a forced whisper.

"How does that make any difference?" Buell replied. "When I'm gone, people will come around the house with casseroles and say, 'Poor ole Buell, we'll sure miss him.' But in fact, they will forget about me once the lottery reaches five hundred million and takes their attention. I don't begrudge them. I would too. But I want to be remembered for something. Even something bad."

"The evil that men do lives after them; the good is oft interred with their bones," said Lloyd.

"That's pretty good. Did you write that?" Buell said.

#

Lloyd duck-walked from the kitchen carrying the pan of dishwater for his tomatoes, unsuccessfully trying not to spill the greasy water on his jeans. He watered them every day but still, they looked wilted.

"It's just too hot," he said to himself and poured the liquid into the basin surrounding the healthiest looking one.

Buell sat inside at the kitchen table with the El Paso Times spread across the surface. Normally he didn't read the paper, preferring to get his news quick and shallow on the TV but, there it was on the business page. The headline read 'President's golf empire to expand' and went on to tell that a new exclusive club was opening up in Midland, right in the heart of the oil-rich Permian Basin.

Lloyd heard him yelling from his garden and moved to check on him. "You okay?" he asked through the screen door.

"Better than okay. He's going to be in Midland and that's only three hundred miles away."

Lloyd came inside and read the article. "It doesn't say he's going to be there."

"Oh, he'll be there all right. It's got his name on the club and he loves to see his name and he loves the smell of money. We gotta get ready."

"What do you mean we? I don't have any plans to either get killed or spend my golden years in La Tuna Federal," Lloyd said.

"You're kidding. You'd get three meals a day and health care. What more could you want?"

That night, at their dinner of frozen French fries and pan-fried round steak, Buell started to outline his plan. "The Apache was a successful warrior for several reasons. He was relentless. He would lie behind a bush for days if that is what it took to ambush his enemies. They never saw him. He became indistinguishable from the bush."

"Where are you going with this, Buell? You know they lost, right?"

Buell shook his head. "What I saying is, to get close to your enemy, you have to become part of the landscape. You can't stand out. You've got to be what he expects to see."

"And?"

"And we are going to become the biggest right-wing, God-fearing, red hat-wearing crackers that you've ever seen. We're going to cheer for the wall and hate the difference in people. And we're going to chant shallow phrases on cue. In other words, four more years, four more years."

In the morning, they started the plan with Buell's truck. "This looks like a fine redneck truck, but it needs several things. First, I might have some difficulty driving around with a weapon of mass destruction in the bed, so I'll need a covering of some sort," Buell said while looking across the yard at Lloyd's pickup. "Say," Buell said, "Do you get a lot of use out of your camper shell?"

"Aw, Buell," Lloyd said with a whine in his voice, "I just bought that to use when I go fishing."

"You won't get to do a lot of angling when you're in prison," Buell said.

The camper shell barely cleared the gun in the truck bed. Lloyd looked at it with a handyman's eye. "I can fix that," he said and went to get his tools. In two hours,

he had rebuilt the camper shell as a cover which completely fell away with the undoing of two simple hasps leaving the gun capable of a two hundred seventy-degree area of fire.

He proudly stepped back to let Buell admire it alongside him.

"Nope," said Buell. "It ain't right. We need to make it more American. I'll need to borrow your truck again."

Buell got back from the Home Depot in less than an hour and carrying buckets of paint with him. Just about sunset, Buell called Lloyd to his side. "Now that's what I call a patriot wagon."

The camper shell was painted like a giant flag in red and white stripes. The cab of the truck had been painted dark blue with white stars randomly scattered over it. It all looked crudely hand made. A small U.S. flag flew stiffly from the antenna.

"Let's go online and buy some bumper stickers," Buell said and slapped Lloyd on the shoulder.

Summer is hot in El Paso, to no one's surprise. By August 12th, the temperature had topped 105 degrees for six straight days.

"Global warming," said Lloyd as he tended to the green tomatoes on the two surviving plants. He spritzed them with a fine mist of water.

"You probably shouldn't do that," said Buell. "You're just going to cause them to boil."

"Just read your papers," Lloyd dismissed him.

Buell had added a mail subscription to the Midland Reporter Times to his reading list.

"What'll you learn from that anyway?" Lloyd asked.

"Well," Buell said turning the pages, "there's an article about six new debutantes at the Petroleum Club, a report on the number of oil rigs operating, and best of all, a story about the President going to make a statement on American energy production at the opening of his new country club, Mar d' Lucre, in three weeks. And I can guarantee you; I plan to be there for that."

Lloyd had hoped Buell would have forgotten about that by now. Buell liked to drive around town in his garish "patriot wagon", waving at folks who honked to show their approval of his message. He would smile at them and nod never showing his raised middle finger in his lap. Political stickers covering both bumpers, around the wheel wales, door panels and the top three inches of the windshield was his finest touch. The truck now called out for support of the police, the military, the prisoners-of-war, God, the constitution, the Bible and of course, the President. It also demanded immigrants to go home, for a wall to be extended, for various Supreme Court justices to be jailed and vowed that freedom wasn't free.

A police car pulled him over once and caused him to have rapid heart palpitations before the officer handed him a new bumper sticker for his collection which urged the incarceration of the former President and Secretary of State and ironically, considering his cargo, one that said No to Gun Control.

But lately Buell didn't drive much, his vision was getting worse. "I think I'll go in and see if I can nap through this heat," Buell said.

Lloyd nodded and watched him move slowly, like each step hurt, toward the house. He decided he should call Indica and tell her about her father's condition.

"Hello old man," she said to wake him up.

Buell turned his head to his daughter and said her name. His mind flooded with things he should say. They had been on the outs for such a long time. He didn't exactly remember the content of their last conversation, only that it was about his relationship with her mother and that it had ended in a heavy bout of screaming and tears.

Indica dropped Buell's dirty clothes from the only chair in the room and sat. She had gained sixty-five pounds and her wild wiry hair had flecked with grey since he had last seen her.

Indica spoke first after a minute. "I see you've screwed up your truck. What's that crap all over it?" She didn't expect a reply.

"I'm sorry..." Buell said and let the words trail off with a weak drop of his hand.

"Sorry for what? Sorry for the way you treated my mother? Sorry for not being there when I might have needed a father? Sorry for the succession of sleaze ball men she took up with who thought I was part of the package? Sorry for making me grow up dirt poor so's I was embarrassed to go to school? Or sorry that you're dying. Yeah, that's the kind of sorry you are. Sorry for yourself."

She rose to leave.

"I'm sorry for all that," Buell said. "But I just wanted to tell you I was sorry I couldn't tell you that I loved you and sorry I failed you."

Indica welled up with tears before she left the room.

Buell rummaged through his medications until he found the one labeled morphine. He swallowed the pill dry.

After she drove away, Lloyd walked back to the bedside. "That went well," he said.

#

"I can't see so good anymore, Buell announced as they carried their bags of clothes and food to the truck. "Maybe you ought to drive us."

Lloyd nodded his head. He had planned on driving anyway. Now it was an argument they didn't need to have. "You got your pills?" he asked.

Buell rattled a bag to show him.

Lloyd sat behind the wheel. He said what he always said when they drove anyplace, "As my Uncle Irwin always said, 'Let's getta going.'" They drove east on US 10.

"Do you think they put barbwire along the highways to keep people out or to keep the scrub brush and mesquite from escaping?" Lloyd asked trying to beat boredom. There was little else to see except for the imaginary oases that preceded them on the asphalt. Buell said nothing. Lloyd wondered whether he was still drugged or lost in thought.

They pulled into a roadside motel near Toyah for the evening even though the sun wouldn't be down for more than three hours. The sign outside the motel offered "clean quiet rooms with air conditioning" which sounded good to both of them.

Lloyd thought Buell might be tired and he also wanted to give a little more time for him to think over what he planned. "Murder is a serious business," Lloyd said wiping off the water from a Bud Light out of the cooler. "Just be sure of what might happen."

"Well," Buell said taking a swallow, "what might happen is the world might be a better place if I get him, and it would be no worse off if I don't."

"But you'll likely get killed."

"Like I said, 'no worse off.'"

The next morning, Buell was up earlier than Lloyd. He seemed energized. "Come on. Remember what your Uncle always said. We want to get a good parking spot before they're all gone."

The Mar d' Lucre Golf Course and Country Club was a cool swath of green set against the dry desert dirt. High granite walls and heavy iron gates kept those not of the right breeding from entering unless, of course, they were there as servants for the members. To be a member was an expensive bonbon, but if you're wealthy in a two-bit town, what else can you do with your money? Besides, only the best people would be there.

Lloyd drove right up as if they belonged.

"Can I help you?" the gate guard in the grey uniform inquired. He flicked the video camera attached to his shoulder to 'on' and shifted the HK Mp5 Machine pistol from his back to his side. A white Jeep with two similarly attired gentlemen appeared on the road behind him.

"We came to see the President," Buell said.

The guard smiled and said so his buddies in the Jeep could hear, "Does he expect you? 'Cause if he doesn't, it doesn't seem likely you can barge in. Besides, he

isn't even here 'til tomorrow. So, I'd suggest you go stand along the highway and wave as he goes by. That's about as close as you'll get."

As Buell and Lloyd backed away from the gate, the guard said, "Did you hear those old fools?"

"We've got no chance there," Lloyd advised as they turned east onto highway 20 toward the airport.

Midland International Air and Space Port isn't as impressive as its name. First, it's one of those places where you have to walk across the runway to get on or get off the plane no matter the summer heat or winter cold. The runways themselves were designed for the oilmen's private jets and probably wouldn't be able to service a plane like Air Force One.

"What kind of space vehicles do you figure land here? Maybe the ones with the little green men, but not their best green men," Lloyd said.

"Damn," said Buell, ignoring him as he looked at a Texas road map. "He's probably going to land in San Angelo and helicopter in. Maybe we can get a shot at them from the highway."

Midessa Oil Patch RV park, as the sign said was, 'Conveniently located between Midland and Odessa, along the highway close to the airport.

"How long ya in for?" the balding fat man behind the counter asked as they walked in. Bob Bigelow had put his life savings and the money he got from the oilfield accident, which left him dragging a heavy left leg, into buying this broke-down, half-filled recreational vehicle park. Most of his guests were either retired folks living on the cheap or itinerant roughnecks from the oil rigs. Between the two, he preferred the old people since they made less noise and left fewer empty liquor bottles on the ground.

"Just came in to see the President," Buell said. "Do you have any place along the road where maybe we can also see the airport?"

"I've got a spot down by the end of the row that might fit your needs."

"Sounds great, we'll take it."

Bob Bigelow looked out at the flag-painted truck. "It's good to see we still have patriots in our country. You gentlemen have a good day," he said.

By dusk, their camp was set. Lloyd could just make out the hangars at the airport in the fading light but the view of the highway was unobstructed. Buell sat on a camp cot had unloaded from the truck while Lloyd busied himself staking out a tarp as cover from the sun. It was too hot to even think about a tent.

"Can you bring my drug bag?" Buell asked. He rummaged through the pill bottles until he thought he'd found the one he was looking for. He held it up in the air for Lloyd.

"What does that say? My vision is shit."

"It says oxycodone 20 mg. Take one as needed for pain."

"Great," said Buell and he took four. "Bring me a beer. These make my mouth dry as dust."

"How many did you take?" Lloyd asked.

"Probably not enough. My back hurts like hell. Take a look at it for me." Buell lifted his shirt. The cancer along his spine had brought up puffy red sores and ulcers to his skin. Lloyd pulled the shirt down.

"Looks a little red is all," Lloyd said.

"I think I'm going to take a little nap," Buell said as he stretched out on the cot.

"I'll go grab us some supper while you do," Lloyd replied.

A little bell rang when Lloyd pushed the RV park office door open.

"Howdy" said Bob Bigelow, "what can I do you for?"

"Do you know where there might be a KFC or a BBQ joint nearby?"

"Sure enough. Head out right on I-20 to County 112 west and you'll find a bunch of stuff." He pointed his finger to emphasize each significant direction."

Lloyd nodded and started to leave.

"Say," Bob Bigelow said, "Your friend don't look none too good He has that look my mom had before she passed. Cancer you know."

"He'll be all right," Lloyd said instead of telling him to mind his own beeswax.

"If you say so. I know it's not easy to watch a friend die."

Lloyd drove back with a red and white striped bucket of chicken adding its aroma to pungent gas and gun oil from smells already in the cab. Buell was awake, sitting on the cot.

"You feeling better?"

"I feel everything but I don't if better is one of them. I woke up because I remembered Che. You remember Che?"

Lloyd took out a chicken leg and held it a few inches from his mouth. "Hell yes," he said. "We thought we were leading the revolution. We thought we were Che. Running around wearing starred berets and mustaches, spouting out slogans to impress the girls because we knew that those commie girls laid down easy if they thought you were serious. Only, there really wasn't any revolution. We weren't in Havana or Kinshasa, it was Austin."

He took a bite and spoke with his mouth full, "' Course we did drive ole Lyndon outta office, so that's something. Although we ended up with that fascist Nixon, so I don't know what we accomplished in the end."

"But what about it? Why are you bringing up Che now?"

"I was wondering if, in fifty years, someone might remember my name. I want to be remembered. I want to be remembered as important." Buell reached for the chicken bucket but changed his mind. Food had lost its luster.

"You're still planning on going through with this?" Lloyd said, more as a statement than a question.

"Yeah, but I have a problem. What if I can't physically do it? I'm going to need some help," Buell said.

"I've already helped. Got you here and I'll get you away after. What else can I do? You already ruined my camper shell and set me up so's I'll spend the rest of my life on some federal prison farm."

"I need you to promise that if I can't pull the trigger, you will."

Lloyd thought for a minute. "I don't have a choice, do I? You want a wing?"

Buell woke up. Two hours of sleep was about all he could get at one time now. He didn't know if it was the pain or the new noise that woke him. Lloyd was asleep on his cot with his sleeping bag covering his feet and his arm off the bed. He had worked up a solid snore. Buell swung his feet to the ground and watched a man wearing desert camouflage step down from the noisy diesel-powered Humvee that had parked next to their campsite. The man walked to the barbwire fence separating them from the highway and peed before turning his back toward the truck.

At first, Buell could only make out the shape of the man. He squinted his eyes and tried to pick out the features of his face. Then he spoke. "Hello, Sarge. What brings you here?"

A little after nine, five black Viper Attack helicopters surrounding the big Sikorsky helicopter known as Marine One were seen approaching the airport.

When they first heard them, Buell and Lloyd went to the fence to get a better view. Sarge pulled a long oblong box from the rear of his vehicle. He opened it and took what looked like a tube out and placed it next to the front bumper. "Are you guys ready?" he asked, almost like a command to get ready if you're not.

Lloyd and Buell exchanged looks before Lloyd dropped the camper shell of their patriot wagon and squeezed himself in behind the gun.

Two hundred and nine miles away at Cannon Air Force Base, outside Clovis, New Mexico, a bespectacled Specialist E-5 sat before a computer screen watching the images sent by a Reaper drone flying high above the Midland Air and Space Port. Major James Wellington Junior, known to everyone as JR walked behind him and the other four drone operators assigned to POTUS protection.

"Hold on," he said, "what's that?"

The E-5 zoomed in on the men standing beside a red, white, and blue painted truck parked next to an Army surplus Humvee.

"Just some old guys waiting to see the Pres," he said.

"Not them," the officer said, "the guy in the camos holding what looks to me like a Stinger missile."

"Oh shit," the airman replied.

“Lock and load,” JR said. “On my command.”

The Hellfire missile was silent. The explosion wasn't. The force of the blast knocked Buell thirty feet back into the roadway but otherwise left him intact but disoriented in the cloud of dust raised by the explosion. Lloyd was blown free from the burning truck and landed against the barbwire fence. His hearing was destroyed by the pressure of the blast leaving only the whine of a gigantic saw in his ears. He looked down at the tangle of intestines protruding from his belly. That shouldn't be like that, he thought before he passed out.

“Nice shot,” JR said slapping the drone operator on the back.

When the pilot of Marine One heard the chatter from the drone control center, he prepared to abort his landing. He pulled back on the controls to send the President's helicopter safely out of harm's way. The sudden change of direction caught the President mid-bite on his third McDonald's Double Cheeseburger of the morning. He gasped and grabbed his throat trying to dislodge the tasty morsel blocking his airway. His staff had all gone to the windows to see the chaos below when the leader of the free world fell to the floor. They rushed to give him the Heimlich maneuver which might have saved his life except for the deadly heart attack induced by panic.

Lloyd sagged against the fence. He wondered who would water his tomatoes.

SLIM

By Robert Emmett Cox

The little girl with a golden braid stood waiting outside the auction barn, looking down at the pant legs puddled around the killbuyer's scuffed boots. Her eyes rose slowly to the dirty rope resting loosely in the man's weathered hand. The lead hooked to a makeshift halter of orange twine and cracked leather, slack-fitted on a Belgian's massive head.

The horse's muzzle was lifted — eyes alert and hopeful, ears raked forward, attentive to rumbling diesel engines and rattling gates of stock trailers moving forward through the dust kicked up in the dimly lighted loading lot. At the chute, two men with cattle prods swore as they forced five horses into a stock trailer.

The little girl's eyes passed from the Belgian's matted mane, down its muscled neck and along its swayed back. At its jutting hipbone her eyes stopped. She looked down and moved some sawdust with her toe.

"That your horse, mister?" She looked up.

His eyes were shadowed by a battered hat brim. Under a gray mustache, he smiled. "Nope. Bought him and four more for another fella."

"What's he gonna do with them?"

"I expect he'll send them to slaughter. Down in Mexico."

"Why?"

"So people can eat them." He feigned surprise. "Just like cows."

She crossed her arms on her chest, like her Mama would, and tilted forward on her toes. "Horses aren't cows."

"They're meat," he offered. "People in other countries eat horse meat, just like you eat cow meat."

"I don't eat meat, Mister."

He pulled a pinch from a flat round can and put the tobacco in his mouth and tucked it in place with his tongue. The can clicked shut.

"How old are you, Missy?"

"Nine."

"Where's your daddy?"

"We don't know."

"Where's your momma?"

She looked back toward the sale barn. "My little brother had to pee."

She stared at him, her mouth a hard, straight line. "How old is that horse?"

"Pretty old." He reached up and lifted its lip. "Teeth pretty much gone. Scars. Collar burns." The gelding stood proudly for inspection. "He did his time. Probably pulled an Amish plow."

"Did you look at his eyes?"

The man tugged the halter. The horse lowered its head. "Nice eyes," he said.

"Like he's asking us for something, maybe."

"What's his name?"

"Don't know. He's ribby, though. Let's call him Slim." The man looked at the line of slowly advancing pickups. "Truck's almost here, Missy. Gonna have to load old Slim."

"How much for Slim, Mister?"

"I paid five seventy-five."

"I don't have 575 dollars."

"Now what would you do with him, Missy?"

"I would look in his eyes, Mister. Every day."

His fingers gathered his moustache, then spread it again.

"Hold him." He handed her the lead. Limping a little, he walked along the line to a pickup and leaned in. There were words she couldn't hear until the man backed away and yelled into the window. "I'm not taking that horse, God dammit!" He turned and strode back through the dust.

"Come with me," he said, and led Slim toward a table beside a sign that said:

Horse Rescuers

Help Us Save Horses from Slaughter

Adopt & Donate!

The man handed a piece of paper to a woman at the table. "This horse is named Slim. He's yours. You should find a way to get him into the care of this little girl.

"She likes his eyes. I do too."

He handed the lead to the little girl and winked. He walked back to the pickup, climbed in and slammed the door. The truck moved off, trailering four horses into the blackness.

TUMMY TROUBLE

by Sheldon Birnie

Chappy was a minor hockey coach, roped into the gig as a big favour to an old coach of his own. He woke up, long before dawn, mildly hung over from the six pack he'd polished off the night before and ate half a cold pizza he'd left on the coffee table overnight. Directly, he would be driving Fred Tipper and Derek Greybeard, two 14-year-old boys from the Ditch Creek Lumber Cats whose parents were too overworked or uninterested to do so themselves, to a hockey game in Energy City, 40 miles north.

"Ready to rumble?" he asked when he picked the boys up at the Ditch Creek Memorial Arena. The boys grumbled their assent as they tossed their bags and sticks in the back and climbed into the cab of Chappy's Chevy CK.

Once they were rolling in the darkness between towns, Chappy's guts began churning. Tippy, the smaller of the two boys who sat wedged in the middle of the bench seat, heard the rumbling over the CK's engine.

"Whoa, coach," the boy said. "Gotta bit a tummy trouble?"

"Fuck sakes," Chappy cursed, kneading his belly with a scarred fist. A few miles down the road, he let a wet rank bomb go. "Sorry, boys. Fuckin leftover pizza acting up on me."

"Fuck, Chappy," Tippy moaned, holding his nose. "What the crawled up your ass and died?"

Gagging, Greybeard rolled his window down. Cold winter air drew the swampy stink out into the wild as the truck raced up the road. But it was only the beginning. A mile or two later, a silent but violent one snuck out. A few miles on, another wet stinker. After another flapper ended with a distinct sinking of his bowels, Chappy cranked the wheel to the right, skidding into the shoulder.

"Oh God," Chappy prayed, fighting with his seatbelt. He slammed the transmission into park and leapt out of the cab. "No."

"Holy smokes," Tippy said, wide eyed. "Chappy's gonna shit himself!"

As he raced around the front of the truck, Chappy could feel the wet remains of the pepperoni pizza weighing heavy on his asshole. He shoved his pants down to his ankles and leaned his back up against the dirty side of the truck. Chappy's sphincter let loose, blasting a hot load splashing into the cold gravel shoulder.

In the early morning light, there on the side of Highway 97, wave after sour wave evacuated Chappy's bowels. Trucks passed from both the north and the south, tooting their horns in derision. Tippy and Greybeard looked on with a mix of disgust and rapt attention as they pounded their fists on the passenger side window, chirping like crows over the bloody corpse of a deer.

"Fuck sakes," Chappy moaned as a final spasm passed through his colon, splattering the greasy remains of last night's dinner into the steaming, chunky puddle on the roadside. He closed his eyes, burying his shame deep within.

It was then he remembered that he still had to wipe.

"Shit bugger damn," he sighed dejectedly.

The cold wind howled through the woods on either side of the highway. Above him, the passenger window squeaked open a crack.

"You alive out there Chappy?" Tippy called from the warmth of the cab.

"Napkins," he replied, voice cracking. "Get me some goddamn napkins."

"Can't find any," Tippy called a moment later. "You sure you got some in here?"

"The glovebox," he barked through chattering teeth.

"Nothing here, coach," Greybeard replied.

Eyes closed, Chappy bowed his head, defeated. Somewhere nearby, a raven squawked.

Then, like the good northern son that he was, he bent to the task at hand. A passing semi let out a triple blast of the horn as it roared by. After using the oily snow from the shoulder to the north of the truck to clean his filthy hands, Chappy buckled his jeans, and walked gingerly back to the driver's side.

When he opened the door, without a word Tippy tossed a stack of paper napkins three inches thick onto the driver's seat. For a moment, Chappy could only stare as the boys roared again in evil delight.

"You sons of bitches," Chappy finally said, climbing up behind the wheel and slamming the door behind him. "Not a fuckin word about this to the boys, OK? I swear to fuck..."

"Sure, coach," Greybeard said. "Whatever you say."

"Guys," Tippy announced 20 minutes later as they burst into the Ditch Creek Lumber Cats dressing room in the Energy City Arena. "Chappy fuckin shit his gitch!" Jeers and derisive laughter rained down on Chappy as he entered the room following Tippy and Greybeard.

"Bullshit," some of the boys called, pausing in the taping of their sticks.

"No bullshit," Greybeard countered, as he found himself a spot to sit. "We seen it. Just now."

Rather than answer, Chappy just shrugged. The boys all howled again.

Tippy and Greybeard filled in the details as they scurried into their equipment, pulling yellow socks and jerseys into place as they went. Chappy added corrections when the boys veered too far into the realm of the absurd. But nothing he said stuck. To the twelve boys in the room, he'd shit his pants and that was that. Period fuckin dot it, pal.

The Cats laughed all the way to the ice. But they weren't laughing long. The Energy City Lube Kings whooped them 5-1. For Chappy and the boys, the long, silent drive home seemed to take forever.

I KILLED YOUR WIFE

By Emily Grandy

"I killed your wife," Wayne said. This, before breakfast.

I stared at him through the open front doorway into egg-yellow morning light. "Myrtle?"

"Lord, Ray, who else? You got another wife in there we don't know about?"

"She's out back, pickin' tomatoes for the omelette."

"Well, she ain't now."

I should go check on her, I thought, but neighborly courtesy overruled, prompting me to ask, "What happened?"

"I shot her."

"What?" I dare say I'd heard him, sure enough, but hadn't understood. "Who got shot, Wayne?"

"I need to turn myself in, Ray. I need you to call the sheriff."

"Come on in, Wayne. Tell me what's going on." My neighbor followed me into the kitchen. The coffee pot wasn't ready. If I didn't know better, I'd say Myrtle was getting more forgetful than me these days.

"Lord help me," said Wayne, while I fumbled with the pot, the granules, the filter. "She's out back."

"Who is?" I asked.

"Your wife! In the garden, with a .30-caliber bullet in her skull."

I peered through the window over the sink. Sure enough, the soles of my wife's rubber boots lay cockeyed in the dirt. The tomato vines shielded most of her from view; she was always doing the darndest things out there, what with her all-natural pest control fixation. I'd warned her time and again that the neighbors might take notice of her acting oddly, down there in the dirt, and start to talking.

"God dammit, Ray! Are you listening? Your wife is dead."

"What's gotten into you, Wayne? It ain't like you to fly off the handle like this."

"She was onto me, it was just a matter of time," he said, tugging a wadded kerchief from his pocket and mopping dribbles of sweat off his weathered, dusty brow. "It was a long time coming."

For a while, we kept our respective peace while the coffee percolated. When it finished, I asked, "You take milk?" and poured two cups of black. Wayne said nothing so I joined him at the table.

"You recall that incident back in '76?" Wayne asked. "The Schultze couple?"

"Well, Christ, Wayne. How could I forget? It's about all this town's known for." The couple had been camping up near Wheeler Lake. Man was found slumped on the can with a camera strap still 'round his neck, one bullet lodged in his brain, a second

lodged in the bathroom wall. The wife, they said, was found about two hundred yards away, purse untouched, nothing stolen, just a pair of knickers gone missing. For months, hikers avoided those trails.

"That's when it all started," said Wayne.

"What did?" I asked.

"I couldn't help it, Ray. It's like something came over me, you know? I saw the two of 'em and figured I couldn't touch the one without pulling the trigger on the other. Then before you know it . . ." he petered out.

We'd been hunting together before, me and Wayne. He was a good shot and a better tracker, finding footprints near invisible to me, checking the ground for scat. "You shot that couple?"

"Myrtle, she knew it was me," he said.

My wife. Where was she, anyway? She'd gone out for tomatoes this morning, for the omelet.

"Down at the station, your Myrtle, she was in charge of that Schulze case."

Myrtle didn't talk about work much, not with me, but I had heard about some newfangled trick they had up their sleeve. "You know what she said? They been running DNA tests on them old cases. It's the darndest thing. You know, they can submit semen that's decades old to some lab all the way over in Virginia and they'll come back telling you whose pecker it belongs to. Can you believe that?"

"That's what I've been trying to tell you, Ray! Myrtle's the one sending out them samples. Then, next thing I know, they're knocking on doors over at my brother's house."

"Greg or Charlie?" I asked. I've only met Charlie once, but Greg's good people, the sort who'll wave to you from his truck. He's got five kids - I remember, because each of 'em got A's in my Geometry class, back before I retired from the local high school.

"Both of 'em. I thought about running, too. Was fixin' to leave this morning but then there was Myrtle, out there in the garden looking straight at me like she knows. I'd just set my rifle down in the truck, so I lifted it back out and," he mimed sighting up a target and firing. "Thought I might get away with it, too, but then I go back in the house for my bag, and just then, that's when Charlie calls me up saying the sheriff's been 'round already, asking for a mouth swab or some shit."

I nodded, sipped my coffee. Too strong. I'd have to have a word with Myrtle. She'd only get more and more careless otherwise, these being her late years.

"You've been a good neighbor to me, Ray. Figured I owed you the decency, telling you man to man." Then, standing suddenly, Wayne said, "I should go."

"Before you head out, Wayne, you ever get to fixin' that mower? Myrtle'll be giving me grief if I don't get the lawn cut this afternoon."

"Oh that, it's in the shed out back," he said. "I ain't finished yet. Y'all can borrow mine, if you want. I won't be needing it."

"You going camping?" I asked. Wayne spends most summers out by Wheeler Lake. Myrtle always waters his late wife's hydrangeas while he's away, though I reckon he never asked her to.

On my front stoop, Wayne lit a cigarette. "I'll be gone a while, Ray. Good luck with everything. Phone the sheriff when you get a minute, will you? If he's worth half his salt, he'll know where to find me."

Why on God's green earth would I phone up Myrtle's boss? And that's precisely what I asked. "What on earth for, Wayne?"

Head shaking, Wayne stepped off the porch and walked across the front lawn to his truck. I offered a wave, but it went unreturned. Without looking back, Ray and his truck rumbled away up 32.

~

"Ray?" A hand tapped my shoulder. "Hey, you alright?"

I opened my eyes, embarrassed to find I'd been asleep on the front porch, a sight for all the world to see. And not only that, but there's Cal standing over me - Sheriff Burns, I should say - my wife's boss.

"Ray, where's Myrtle? She didn't show up to work this morning and when we called nobody picked up. Figured it'd be easier just to check in and make sure everything's alright."

Disoriented, I sat up a little straighter. I haven't seen Cal Burns on this porch since he brought Sheldon home in the back of his cop car that one time. Shel would've been seventeen back then, a right handful, according to all who knew him, including us, his parents.

"Sorry to make you run all the way out here, Cal. Come on in. I'll put on a pot of coffee."

"I don't mean to trouble you, Ray. I'm just looking in on Myrtle. She doing alright? She's been pushing herself like a mad woman lately, says we're nearly to the end of that Schultze case, if you can believe it."

"Gosh darn it," I swore mildly, realizing the coffee pot'd been left on since this morning. Where on earth was that woman anyway? Well, that does it; no more coffee then 'til the pot's soaked and scrubbed.

"Don't worry about it," said Cal. "Really, I just wanted to check on her."

At least she remembered to do the dishes, I thought, setting the bottom-burnt pot in the sink. The last thing we need is to have her boss thinking we're two old farts who can't bother to clean up after ourselves. All of a sudden, I sensed Cal standing right behind me, indecently close, it might be said.

"Jesus!" he yelled, so loud I nearly leapt out of my shirt. He leaned forward, staring out the window at god knows what, out in the garden. "Is that Myrtle?" Then he dashed out the back door so fast he all but spun me off my feet.

What in the world? Through the glass, I spied Cal diving into the tomato patch, jostling one of Myrtle's conical stakes so aggressively it came dangerously close to toppling over. I knew better than to let him carry on like that with her prized vegetables - she sold them for a killing at the farmer's market - and decided it best I tell him so.

I met him in the garden. "Christ," he said, sitting back on his heels. I felt certain I'd come out here to tell him something, but couldn't recall what it was. "Ray, how long's she been out here?" Cal asked then, and I realized he was kneeling beside my wife who, inexplicably, was lying in the dirt.

"Good Lord in heaven." I hurried over, struggling to the ground, what with these bad knees. "Oh, God, Myrtle. Oh, sweet Jesus."

"Do you have any idea who could've done this to her, Ray?"

"Myrtle! Oh, Christ Almighty." Like entering a long dark tunnel, my peripheral vision disappeared so that all I could see was the dark red hole in my wife's forehead and the stained darkness of the earth where she'd fallen. I heard Cal talking to someone else, possibly on the phone, because I don't recall anyone being there but us. Soon there were others though, maybe five or ten police workers tromping through the house, like uninvited guests, wearing funny little plastic slippers over their boots.

I waited on the porch for them to do their business, periodically noticing a pinching weight in my stomach reminding me I hadn't had lunch. At one point, I tried going to the kitchen to make myself a sandwich, but one of the officers told me to wait on the porch. After that, I must've rode in the police vehicle down to the station because that's where I ended up. Then there was Cal again, carrying two steaming paper cups. He handed one to me.

"How you holding up, Ray?" he asked. Sitting across the table from me like he was, it felt like we were on a lunch date, for heaven's sake. Frankly, if we were gonna go that far, I'd have appreciated the meal.

"Alright," I said.

"I'm afraid I have to ask you some difficult questions."

"Alright," I said again.

"Let's just get this out of the way," he began. "Did you shoot your wife, Ray?"

"God, Cal, what're you on about?"

"Myrtle's dead, Ray. Do you have any idea who killed her?"

Myrtle's dead? The words barely registered, as if Cal were speaking in tongues, like they do in the Bible. "Maybe I didn't hear you right, Cal. Myrtle keeps telling me to get my ears checked." Really, they're fine, she just mumbles is all.

"They think she was shot early this morning," Cal said. "Did she say anything to you 'round about breakfast time? Do you recall seeing her after that?"

Our days were so routine they all blended together, and that's the truth. "I don't recall anything specific," I said, honestly.

"Did you see anyone strange out in the yard? Any neighbors?"

I thought about it for a good minute and a half, but nothing stuck out. And except for Wayne, who was a widower, we didn't have any neighbors far as you could see. "Nope, not that I recall," I said.

"Alright. Well, we got a couple guys out right now asking around, see if anybody saw anything." He asked a couple more questions, but they got all muddled up, and I can't recollect what all he said, except this last. "You got somebody you can stay with, Ray?"

"For how long?" I asked, without any particular host in mind.

"Just a couple days, just to make sure you're alright. Then we'll be out of your hair."

I thought of my sister, next county over. When she finally retired, they'd moved to a suburb, a new development where they did the mowing for you. She'd complained about how badly they trimmed the boxwood though, and even wrote a letter to the management when they butchered her Rose of Sharon. She'd had me proofread it.

"What about your boy Shel? Have you called him?"

"Sheldon?"

"That's right."

"Haven't talked to that boy in twelve years." It was the truth. After what he'd done, running out on that poor girl and leaving behind all those debts, well, it was all Myrtle and I could do to show our face around town after that.

"Ray?" Cal prompted, but I'd forgotten the question.

~

A paper plate laden with small sandwiches cut in the shape of triangles appeared in my hand. I blinked, looked up. It was Sheldon standing there, wearing a suit and tie. God, I hadn't seen Sheldon in over ten years. I swear I was struck dumb.

"How're you holding up, Dad?" he asked.

"Fine. Just fine," I said.

"Funny seeing all these folks again. Everybody in town and their cousins all turned up for the funeral, seems like."

That's right. Myrtle's funeral service had been that morning. Sheldon had given a speech. My lovely wife had passed on.

"I just can't believe it. You know, they're saying Wayne probably did it? They said he done all them other killings 'round here - it was Mom who finally pegged him with DNA evidence from that Schultze case. They think that's why he shot her."

I took a bite of one of the small sandwiches. Potato salad, not half bad.

"Now if only the police were competent enough to find him. Bastard's completely disappeared off the face of the earth is what they reckon."

"Sit down, Shel."

"I can't sit. Not while that bastard's out there someplace, wanderin' free. Speaking of, we gotta do something about this old dump. You can't stay here by yourself, Dad. Who'll look after you, what with your mind the way it is now."

"I don't appreciate you taking that tone--"

"Oh come off it, Dad. You and Mom put off the care home for years 'cause she said she could handle it. But, hell, you can't even remember she ain't here from one minute to the next."

I'd lost my train of thought, and couldn't find it again, so I stood and headed for the porch. A warm breeze carrying the scent of a coming storm, looming dark and dense in the far distance, drifted past the old house, sending every blade of overgrown grass into a flowing dance across the full expanse of lawn. I should've mowed earlier, I thought. But the doohickey on the machine was still broke, waiting in Wayne's shed for repairs. I rubbed the stubble bristling on my chin, trying to recollect exactly what he'd said. I could've sworn he'd mentioned something about us borrowing his mower till he got the other fixed up. That's right. He'd stopped by one morning to do just that, to tell us about the mower, same day he'd left on his trip. Wayne hadn't been back since, far as I could tell. We'd sat in the kitchen that morning, which was strange, thinking about it now. Wayne wasn't the type for casual chat. He'd been agitated to distraction. He'd wanted me to tell Cal . . .

Good Lord in heaven. "Myrtle!"

A minute later, my son appeared on the porch. "Dad? What is it?" He hurried over, as if to steady me on my feet.

My God. My son was standing on our family's porch; the last time I'd seen him, he'd still been a young man. "Sheldon. Son. It's so good to see you."

ABANDONED
by Michael Carter





CONTRIBUTORS

Mark Rogers is a writer and artist whose literary heroes include Charles Bukowski, Willie Vlautin, and Charles Portis. He lives most of the year in Baja California, Mexico with his Sinaloa-born wife, Sophy. His work has appeared in the New York Times, Village Voice, and other publications. His award-winning travel journalism for USA Today and other media outlets has brought him to 56 countries; these trips have provided inspiration for his novels and screenplays. His crime novel *Koreatown Blues* was published by Brash Books; his novels *Red Thread*, *Night Within Night*, *Sky Dog*, and *Plunge* are available from Endeavour Media in the UK.

Steve Lambert's work has appeared in *Broad River Review*, *Emrys Journal*, *BULL Fiction*, *Madcap Review* and *Sky Island Journal*. He has work forthcoming in *Emrys Journal* and *Northampton Poetry Review*. Steve has had three short stories nominated for the Pushcart Prize and has been a finalist (and third-place winner) in six Glimmer Train contests. His poetry collection, *Heat Seekers*, was published by Cherry Grove Collections in September of 2017. He is currently shopping around full-length fiction collection and novel manuscripts.

Dan Crawley's writing has appeared or is forthcoming in a number of journals, including *Wigleaf*, *Bending Genres*, *Journal of Compressed Creative Arts*, and *Atticus Review*. *Ad Hoc Fiction* will publish his novella-in-flash in the near future. Along with teaching creative writing workshops and literature courses, he is a fiction reader for *Little Patuxent Review*. Find him at <https://twitter.com/danbillyc>.

R.M. Barnhill is a writer living in rural North Carolina. His influences include Flannery O'Connor, Nikolai Gogol, Anton Chekhov, Raymond Carver and Cormac McCarthy.

Steve Passey is originally from Southern Alberta. He is the author of the short-story collection *"Forty-Five Minutes of Unstoppable Rock"* (Tortoise Books, 2017) and chapbook *"The Coachella Madrigals"* (Luminous Press, 2017). He is part of the Editorial Collective at *The Black Dog Review*.

Travis Turner is a fiction writer. Alabama Black Belt native. English Instructor. Lover of black cats & good storytelling. @travisturnerii

Ty Hall lives in Texas, makes up stories, and tries to be good. He has been published in multiple literary journals, and has won the "English Faculty Prize for Best Fiction" (McLennan College, "A Story"), *Swaggerfest Film's* "Best In Show" (script, "9 Words"), and an ADDY for commercial copywriting.

As well as Cowboy Jamboree, **A. F. Knott's** fiction has appeared in Shotgun Honey, Yellow Mama, Mysterical e, and Switchblade. He's done a bit of everything and works at Hekate Publishing.

Robert McCarthy has written stories published by The Paris Review, Zoetrope: All-Story, and One Story. He was born and raised in Iowa and lives there today.

John Waddy Bullion's fiction has previously appeared in the Texas Review and Five Quarterly. He holds an MFA in Fiction from Texas State University and currently works as a medical librarian in Fort Worth, Texas. Follow him on Twitter at @jonwaddy.

Jesse Salvo lives and works in Seville, Spain. Prior to that, he spent three years as a contributing writer for a number of online magazines, including Cracked and The Portalist—which he realizes are not exactly Foreign Affairs, but did produce the tangible benefit of keeping the heat in his apartment on. His short story "The Silence of Small Rooms" was published in BULL Men's Fiction. His first novel, Born Secrets, is represented by Nordlyset Literary Agency.

Robert S Dawson has published stories in Page and Spine, Junto, The Missing Slate, and The Rusty Nail. He currently resides in Lexington, North Carolina and teaches English at Rowan-Cabarrus Community College.

Mike Itaya lives in southern Alabama, where he works in a library. His work appears or is forthcoming in Oracle Fine Arts Review, The Airgonaut, Bending Genres, decomp Magazine, and Queen Mob's Teahouse.

Willie Carr grew up in Texas and still bears the scars from doing so. Additional scar tissue has been provided by the early Austin music scene, the psychedelic era, one crazy ex, and three good children. He's smoked enough weed to create a smog alert and drank enough beer to float a canoe. He has authored a number of magazine fictional stories and published one book, Loose Cannons. He currently lives with his lovely wife and two bed-hogging dogs in San Francisco.

For most of a half-century, **Robert E. Cox** was a journalist – wire service (UPI), big-city dailies (San Diego and Denver) or an owner-publisher of little-town and suburban weeklies (on the Western Slope and in Jefferson County, Colorado). Then he wised up and moved to northern New Mexico, climbed on a horse and spent two decades really enjoying life. He now lives and writes in Santa Fe.

A reporter by day, **Sheldon Birnie** is the author of *Missing Like Teeth: An oral history of Winnipeg underground rock* (Eternal Cavalier). His fiction has appeared in *Exoplanet*, *The Wicked Library*, *lichen*, and *Parallel Prairies*. He lives in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, with his wife Clara and their two young children.

Emily Grandy is an author of fiction and editor of science. Her editorial work has been contracted by various institutions, including the Cleveland Clinic and the Medical College of Wisconsin, but more than anything she is interested in exploring ecological culture at the intersections of science, art, philosophy, and spirituality. Her writing has appeared in *Chickpea*, *Entropy*, and numerous scientific journals. She currently lives in Milwaukee, WI.

Michael Carter is a short fiction and creative nonfiction writer from the Western United States. He also takes pictures from time to time. He grew up in Eastern Washington and comes from an extended family of farmers and orchardists who homesteaded in Montana. When he's not writing or pointing his camera out the window of his RV, he enjoys cast-iron cooking, fly fishing, and wandering remote areas of the Rocky Mountains. He's online at michaelcarter.ink and [@mcmichaelcarter](https://twitter.com/mcmichaelcarter).

“We don’t even ask happiness, just a little less pain.”

— **Charles Bukowski**

