Snapshots

Christopher Fielding Porter

The University of Montana

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Snapshots

By

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B.A. Roanoke College, Salem Virginia, 1998

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

The University of Montana

May 2002

Approved by:

Chairperson

Dean, Graduate School

Date
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We long for paradise and we long to escape from loneliness. We seek to do so by seeking a great love, or else we blunder from one person to another in the hope that someone will at last take notice of us, will long to meet us or at least to talk to us. Some write poetry for this reason, or go on protest marches, cheer some figure, make friends with the heroes of television serials, believe in gods or in revolutionary comradeship, turn into informers to ensure they are sympathetically received at least at some police department, or they strangle someone. Even murder is an encounter between one man and another.

Ivan Klima, *Love and Garbage*
Adda Lee (I)

In the summer we rode our bikes back from the bars where death stuck in our clothes and the next morning we woke to the scent of it, our hair full of smoke. We lived at the edge of the mountain and at night the deer would come off of the mountain to eat the dead leaves and the twigs outside our black windows, they were so hungry. Adda Lee talked to strangers in the bars, and told them stories about who we were, and what we were doing, and the stories were not true, the lies so sweet we believed. A man bought Adda Lee a drink and lifted his shirt to reveal eight knife wounds, and some of the wounds were stitched, and some of the wounds were plugged by clots. It was a dry summer, and the grass on the hills was gold, and at night, when we rode our bikes back from the bars the gold grass on the hills reflected the city lights and on the hills you could see the brush and the trees and above the hills the black sky and the stars whose constellations we did not know the names of.
Prelude To a Seduction

Tell her to meet you at a restaurant at seven. Make it something unusual, something she’s unfamiliar with – Thai, or Greek, or Indian. Say Indian.

Show up ten minutes late.

Walk in and seem hurried, frantic. Be certain she can see you, but do not see her. Not yet. This is dramatic tension. Search the faces one by one, and seem increasingly worried as you look about the room, and now, yes, see her. Smile. Do not run. Walk, briskly. Clasp one of her hands in both of yours, but do not kiss it.

The apology. Tell her a story: traffic, an accident on the freeway, a phone call, a meeting with a new client, a big one, distribution across the Midwest, whatever it is, the time, it got away from you, you didn’t realize. Say this as you remove your coat. Drop into your chair. Take a deep breath and exhale loudly. Pause. Look about the restaurant at the tacky, velvet Vishnu, then tell her you are glad to be here, really, and that you are sorry, truly sorry.

It’s o.k., she’ll say. She will smile. No big deal. I just got here myself.
Order a round of drinks. Take time to read the menu.

She's never eaten Indian before. She studies the menu as if it were in Hebrew and says she doesn't know where to begin.

There's the Tandoori chicken, you should say, but everybody always orders the Tandoori chicken. Don't say this as though it were insulting. Say this as though everybody was everybody but you and her, and while Tandoori chicken is perfectly all right, you find it incredibly sad and disappointing. You say: I know this might be a little old fashioned – acknowledge this – but perhaps you would allow me to order for the both of us. We could share. After all, where is the adventure in chicken?

Order the food, something mild for her, something spicy for yourself.

Have another drink. Now observe the nervous fidget of her hands. Observe her smile as she tells you about her quaint childhood in rural Kansas, or Nebraska, about her grandfather the farmer, or her grandfather the town dentist, the smell of hay in the barn, or why she has such perfect teeth. Her grandmother was a storyteller and she loved to sit at the kitchen table and listen to the stories of people long forgotten.

You might have fallen for a woman like her, in another life, in another place. She is unremarkable. She is kind. Naïve. Unexpected. She lives in a small house, in a new development on the south-side of the Kansas-half of Kansas City. She has all the essentials – a nice car, good credit, and a savings account. Everyday she drives a half-hour into work, a telephone operator, or a telemarketer. Eight hours later she drives the same route back. Her mother and father are dead. Her brother and sister lived outside the state; they have their own families now and she only sees them every few years. She was married once, briefly. No children. Her husband ran off to California, or Oregon, or
Washington. They always go West, untangling themselves from an identity that by 29, 30, 31 they are ready to leave as a ghost in the East.

You could have fallen for her, but you won't. You cannot. You met her in a lounge at the Holiday Inn two Fridays before. You were on your way from Tulsa to Des Moines, from your visit with Wife #1, to your visit with Wife #2. She sat at the bar and stared into her drink. Alone. Isolated within a pack of Friday romances. You bought her a drink. You made a joke about the ensuing disasters surrounding you. As you got up to leave, you told her that you would be through town soon, that maybe the two of you could have dinner. You got her phone number.

This is how it begins. A man with no past save the one you create for yourself. A man of many presents. A man forever embracing the future.

This is not about sex. Never that.

Three drinks and the waiter brings the food.

She asks, so you tell her about the life of a traveling salesman. It is the story that fits the moment.

Every day a different town. Every night a different hotel room. The days, you say, they stretch out, blend one into another. Oklahoma City is just the same as St. Louis, as far as you're concerned. T for Texas, T for Tennessee.

The steam rises off your untouched plate.

Stare at your hands as though they are all that you recognize as your own. Say that you like to travel. Why else would you do it? And it's only sometimes that it happens, usually when you've been out everyday for two weeks, or maybe when you've had an unusually bad day. What ever it is, you're not sure. But it's night. You wake up in a
hotel somewhere; they’re all the same: the soft pastel colors, the beige walls, the bathroom with a heat lamp. HBO. Cinemax. Sometimes, you say, you wake up thirsty, and as you stumble to the bathroom, you think briefly that you don’t know where you are. You’re not even sure who you are anymore. This is the only true thing you will tell her in the next two-and-a-half-years.

Look up to see her staring. You must break the silence. Here you say, spooning some of your food onto her plate, this is getting cold.

Oh, she’ll say. It’s hot, she’ll say. She will go for the water.

Wait, you say, reaching for her hand. I know a good trick.

Open a packet of sugar. Watch the sweat bead on her forehead. Here, you say, and lean in, reaching the packet toward her pink tongue, the small black hole of her mouth. Placing two fingers under her chin, pour the sugar on her tongue, like this --
Adda Lee ( II )

And sometimes in the mornings it would rain and Adda Lee and I would wake and listen to the drops as they needled the roof. We would lie and listen to the rain and watch the window and wait for the sky to lighten into the gray we knew it to be. Before the window turned from black to gray we would tangle our legs and lie and listen to the only sound there was which was the sound of the rain on the roof and on the windows and we would whisper the names of our children though we had no children. If our child was a girl we would name her Manhattan. If our child was a boy we would name him Orlando. If our child was a girl but meek and did not cry we would name her Santa Rosa. If our child was a boy whose cries were more song than threat we would come to call him Memphis. And it was in this way that we passed the fall.
Kept Women

On a regular morning I would have hung off the door as my father crept the milk truck along the streets. I would have hopped on and off. I would have sprinted to the porches, grabbed the empties, and sprinted back. On a regular morning, my father would have gunned the truck on the open stretches, and the air would have been filled with the pop and report of the old engine and the clank of bottles. But that morning was different. That morning, my father put the truck in neutral, edged it down the hills. He drank beer, one after another, and smoked cigarettes, and did not offer me any.

His pack of Luckies sat on the dash, wedged between it and the windshield. I leaned in the truck and grabbed it, shook myself a smoke.

“Got a match?” I asked. My father dug around in his shirt pocket and threw the matchbook on the dash. I struck one. It filled the truck with a quick burst of light. I didn’t look at my father, or his face. I lit my cigarette and shook out the match before I could do that.
“I’m sorry about earlier,” I said, then. “I got scared.”

There was a pause. “It’s all right,” my father said. “I was scared too.”

My father had come in drunk the night before and had gotten in a fight with my mother. He’d punched her, broken her nose, and I’d called the sheriff from the neighbor’s house, where I’d left my brother and two sisters. At two that morning, a half-hour before we started the route, I’d bailed him out of jail with the twenty dollars my mother had given me.

The truck’s engine groaned as we went up Grunyon Avenue. My father popped it in second and we lurched forward. At the top of the hill he put it in neutral and we cruised down and I leaned my head out the window to feel the wind on my face and feel it racing cold over my scalp. It was October, 1954, Flemingsburg, Kentucky, at the foothills of the Appalachia, and the mornings were cold. I was sixteen. I got a lungful off the cigarette and exhaled and let the smoke blow up and around my face. The sky that morning was crystal clear, deep and black, the moon a sickle in the sky, and the stars glinted like broken glass. I couldn’t get it out of my head, the image of my father sitting on the bed, a mason jar of corn-whiskey in his hands, my mother yelling at him, then her sitting on the floor, nose bleeding, and him standing there looking down at her.

“Is it true?” I asked him. We’d come down the hill, through the stop light, turned right, and were heading for Culpepper Street, the colored part of town. My mother had accused him of keeping a woman on that side of town, and when he’d denied it, she’d called him a nigger-lover. I think that’s why he’d hit her; he’d never done that kind of thing before. My father was a lot of things, but he was not that sort of man.
"Is what true?" my father asked. He wedged a beer between his thighs. He reached up and grabbed the pack of cigarettes off the dash. He motioned for me to give him a light.

"What Mamma and Gerald were saying about you." Gerald was the sheriff and he'd had a thing or two to say to my father before he let him out. I'd been at the jail, unseen, and I saw that Gerald was going to strike my father. I heard his accusations, and I heard the defiance, the dumb pride in my father's voice. I saw Gerald reach back with the pistol, the barrel in his palm. The muscles in my calves and my neck and in my arms clinched in anticipation. I held my breath, my chest tight. He struck my father, and my father let out a deflated groan, like he'd been punched in the stomach. He crumpled onto the floor, and part of me cringed, but there was another part, a larger part of me that felt satisfied, vindicated. I'd seen it coming, and I'd let it happen. I'd let it happen because I'd wanted it. I struck the match for my father and leaned over to light his cigarette.

"I'm your father, Bobby," he said over the match. "You can love me, or hate me, or both. It don't really matter. I'm all the father you got, and ain't a thing in this world you can do about that." He looked at me, and in the small circle of light from the match his features seemed even more grotesque than they had at the jail. His face was split open; he had a deep gash running from his left eye down his cheek. But I was still Cyrus Tolliver's boy, his spitting image - tall and lanky, we had enormous wide-set eyes. Our gaunt cheeks cut down our faces and fell into out necks. We did not have chins to speak of. He inhaled deeply, got his cigarette lit, then blew out the match.

By five-thirty, we were finishing our route. We always drove to the edge of town and delivered to Culpepper Street last. The houses were shotgun shacks, all long and warped
and painted off-colors. They were mysterious to me. I studied them as I ran up to the porches and back, trying to make something out in the dark of their windows.

We had finished all but one of the deliveries. My father killed the truck in front of a pea-green shack. The paint flecked off the slats. The house leaned down and to the left, following the slope of the street. I don’t remember ever having noticed the house before, though after that morning, it stood out like a moon in the evening sky before dark. A long, tall woman in a pink floral-patterned house dress sat on the porch, under the porch light, smoking. When we stopped, she stood and walked to the truck. She leaned in through my father’s window and gasped. She reached a hand to his face, but didn’t touch it. Her hair was pulled tightly back, revealing a wide forehead, smooth and brown, and her lips were pink and full, fuller than any woman’s lips I had ever seen before. Her fingers were naked of rings.

“Oh my, Cyrus,” she said to my father.

“Hello,” my father said back. A girl my age walked out of the house and onto the porch. The neighborhood was quiet. I could hear the crackle of fallen, dry leaves as a breeze picked them up and pushed them down the street.

“Bobby,” my father said to me. “This is Paula Creeley. Paula, this is my son, Bobby.” I nodded my head to her.

“Hello Bobby,” she said and smiled. “Come on Cyrus, let’s get you inside.” She touched my father’s arm, turned, and walked back to the house.

“Go on, and get her two racks,” my father said. He kept his eyes on Paula, watched as she mounted the steps, said something to the girl, and went in the house. “If we have extras, give her three. I’ll be inside.”
He climbed out of the truck. He wore clunky, black shoes with thick soles. He’d had polio as a child and continued to limp. I watched him hobble to the porch and disappear inside the door. The girl followed.

I stepped off the truck and went to the back. Why had my father taken me to Paula Creeley’s house that morning? I can’t say for certain. Maybe it was to show me the truth of my mother’s accusations, or maybe to show me a side of himself he never showed at home. It might have been his way of saying who he’d choose in a pinch, or simply, finally, it might have been to cast himself in such an odd light it would take me years to unravel the mystery he was to become to me.

We had a lot of extra milk that morning. The bottles were sweating, but still cold. They lined the inside of the truck in white uniformity. The three racks were heavy in my arms.

The front door was cracked and a sliver of light fell onto the porch. I nudged the door open with my knee and peeked my head inside. It was a small kitchen, pained an eggshell blue. It smelled of coffee and bacon fat. On the stove in the corner was a coffee pot and a cast-iron skillet. A bare bulb hung down from a long wire above the table, where a pint of whiskey sat, half-empty.

“You can come in anytime,” the girl said. “We don’t bite.” She sat at the table, flipping through an old *Lexington Leader*. I slipped into the kitchen. My father’s coat lay draped over a chair, its shoulders filled by the chair-back. It wasn’t much different than our kitchen at home, smaller maybe, but not by much. I don’t know why I was so surprised by this, but I was. The girl was studying me, and I felt naked in her kitchen, entirely too visible.
"Where you want this milk?" I asked her.

"Ice box," she said. "Here." She took one of the racks, and I followed her down the hallway to where an old ice box stood against the wall. I could see my father and Paula through the bathroom doorway. He sat on the toilet seat, his head in her hands, and she was busy cleaning the cuts on his face. A blue tin bowl of water was propped on the sink, steaming.

"You sure you want me to stitch it?" Paula asked.

"I'm not going to the hospital," my father said. He drank whiskey from his coffee mug. Their voices were private voices, soft, calm, tender. It was strange to hear my father speak to someone that way.

"Are you ready?" Paula asked him. She threaded a large silver sewing needle with red string. He nodded. "This is going to hurt," she said.

"My name's Juniper," the girl said to me. She rested on her haunches and stacked the milk in the box. "People around here like to call me June."

"I'm Bobby," I said.

"I know," she said. "Momma told me that already." I heard my father curse and stomp his feet on the bathroom floor. The first stitch made, the needle dangled from my father's face, bouncing as he shook.

"Hush now," Paula said. "I told you it would hurt." She caressed his hair, then bent down and kissed him on the mouth. I thought about my mother, asleep in bed. I tried to remember if I had ever seen them kiss before, or her touch him like that, or him her, but I couldn't. Surely they had. I think now that my mother must have loved my father something fierce. She forgave him, as she had before for different things, but she was
never really the same after that night. And when he left eight months later, my mother became silent, and her silence grew with the graying of her hair. She left words behind, retreating first into gestures, then into herself, then nothing, middle age, old age, until one day she was simply gone.

The door to the ice box clicked shut and I looked at Juniper. I put my hand on her arm, bent, and helped her up. My hands were cold from the milk and Juniper’s arm was warm. I could feel her skin and her muscles tighten beneath my palm.

“Thank you,” she said. She was a pretty girl. Her skin was smooth, as black as new tires. A white sliver of her bra strap showed against her shoulder where her dress had slipped down. She smiled, adjusted it. She had high cheek bones and a falling rain drop for a nose. Her lips were full like her mother’s. I stared at them, then looked up. She had a piece of sleep in her right eye. I brought my pinky to her face.

“Hold still,” I said, and wiped the sleep from her eye, tracing the outline of her nose.

“Bobby,” my father called to me. “Bobby, go in the kitchen and get me that whiskey.”

I did. He did not even bother with the coffee mug. Juniper and I stood outside the doorway and stared in at them – Paula angling my father’s face to the light, the needle and thread in her other hand, and my father looking up at her, his eyes wide and brown, full of anticipation and fear, a sort of pleading. I could feel Juniper’s warm breath on the back of my neck. It gave me the goose flesh. Paula continued with the needle. Tears welled in my father’s eyes and slipped down his gaunt cheeks. Juniper opened the box and took out a pint of milk.
“Come on,” she said, grabbing me by the hand and leading me toward the kitchen. We stepped out onto the porch and sat down on the steps. Juniper opened the bottle and took a drink. She handed it to me.

“Where’d your mother learn to do that?” I asked her.

“New York,” she said. “She trained to be a nurse during the war.”

“You’re not from here?” I asked.

“Just moved down six months ago.”

“Why?” I could not imagine anyone wanting, let alone choosing, to move here. In Flemingsburg success and failure were often measured by who’d made it out and who hadn’t.

“My grandmother,” Juniper said. “She was from here, and she wanted to come back before she died. She never did like the city.”

“What’s it like, the city?” I asked her after a few moments. “I heard the buildings are as tall as mountains.”

“No,” Juniper said. She turned to me, and her face was drawn, sad, almost like she was disappointed in me. “It’s just another place, Bobby, bigger than here and with more people.”

“Where’s your grandmother?” I asked. “She doesn’t live here?”

“No,” Juniper said. She leaned forward, hugged her knees to her chest and stared down the street. “She passed on a month or so after we moved down.” Juniper’s feet were bare, and she picked at her toes, running her fingers in between them. “Momma says we’re to move to Detroit; her brother lives up there. She says Kentucky’s no place for a black woman to live. But I don’t know about Detroit.”
We sat silent, and passed the bottle until it was empty. Juniper kept her knees to her chest, rocked back and forth, and began to hum a song I didn’t know.

“You want more milk?” I asked. She nodded yes and got up, but I grabbed her arm.

“I know where it’s at,” I told her. I went back to the ice box and got another pint. In the bathroom Paula was pulling the last stitch through my father’s face. His cheek was swollen and starting to turn blue. Paula took the pint from my father and drank the last of it.

“Come on,” she said to him. “I’ll fix you some breakfast.”

I shut the ice box and walked back through the kitchen. My father’s jacket hung off the back of the chair, and looked almost like his ghost: angry, tight shoulders barely filling out the dark blue material of the coat. My father lived his life on a string, always taking chances; usually he lost. It was the rest of us who paid his debts. There are always consequences, whether you acknowledge them or not, and I have spent my life picking up the pieces of the broken lives he left behind. I heard the offbeat of my father’s feet, and his voice, and I wanted to get away. I grabbed my his jacket off the back of the chair.

At the door I stood and studied Juniper. She was shivering in the morning’s light. It was near six o’clock and the white of early dawn was flooding the porch. But the sky was indecisive, cleaved in two: the sun rose on one end of the street, while on the other, the sickle of moon could still be seen.

“You cold?” I asked. Juniper turned and nodded, and I slipped the jacket over her shoulders.
She took the bottle of milk. I reached inside my father’s coat pocket and found his pack of cigarettes and his matches. My hand brushed against her thigh, but she did not flinch. I kept it there a second, my knuckles, the haunch of her thigh through the pocket of the coat. She turned and looked me and there was something grave in her expression. It wasn’t a longing, or an invitation. It wasn’t disgust. It was a kind of tiredness, and if tired, then willing. But the son is not necessarily the father, though if he isn’t, what then does he become? I took the cigarettes from the pocket and sat down beside Juniper. She let out a deep breath, and her body relaxed.

“What goes on when my father comes here?” I asked her. I could hear the low voices of their talk in the kitchen, could hear Paula moving about and the sound of bacon frying, the sound of eggs sizzling as they hit the skillet.

“It’s no big mystery,” Juniper said, glancing over her shoulder. “They just do the things that people do.”

She took a pull off the milk and her throat wiggled and danced. A drop escaped her mouth and ran down her cheek, down to the edge of her jaw. I reached my hand to her face, and pressed my thumb to the drop, wiped it away. A neighbor stepped out onto the porch across the street, an old man. He stood and stared at us, at me I suppose, though Juniper was just as much an outsider as I was. No. I did not belong there, on that porch, in that house, but at that moment, I had no where else to be.

The sun was a pink sliver in the sky and crept over the rooftops of the houses down the street. I gave Juniper a cigarette and struck a match for her.

We drank the milk. We watched the sky. We leaned back against the steps and inhaled.
Painters

Blood on the floor, hers, drops in a trail from the bed to the bathroom. Seven beer cans, crushed on a side, speckled by a black smear from yesterday's grounds. Three condoms, bloody and used, one broken, a reprieve not granted. Blood on the sheet. Blood on my hands, on my crotch a dull red streak halfway up my stomach that came off in the bath. We laughed, as the bath filled with water, that if we were painters it would make a beautiful red. But we are not painters. Later that day they gave me the front seat of her car. Sam and El in each other's lap, Sean staring at the back of my head. We drove down Simmons, on the way to the theater. "What's that spot on your hands? Have you been painting?" "What spot?" I asked her. "Where?" I turned them over again and again, scoured the fingernails. "They're clean," I said. "My hands are clean."
Talking Shit

Like I should gotta deal with shit like this to get my money. This kid, I can’t fucking believe this kid. Vinny. Comes by my place. Knocks on my door. Talks to my fucking wife. And then—Yeah. Talks to her. I’m on the john. Man can’t even pinch a loaf without somebody named Vinny gotta come by and fuck with his shit. Seriously.

I been real constipated. Like three days, no shit. This is real. So I’m on the john, and I can feel it, and it’s like yeah, like oh yeah, like the time me and Gary gave it to that Carl kid. Like man, I’m talking satisfaction. Humming, things are humming. And then the knock. Rosa goes, I got it, and then she gets it. Who is it, I yell. Voices, all soft and shit. Thinking it must be Gloria, or that new chick from 7-C come by to make nice. You seen her? You know the one I’m talking about? With the hair and the face? And the boom-boom? Un-fucking-real. You’re telling me. They don’t quit man. Just keep going like that fucking bunny on the t.v. Jesus.

I crack the door an inch. Fucking Vinny, standing in my living room, whispering to my wife. The pink cuff of her sleeve? Right there in his fingers. Her ear? Right in his
goddamned mouth. I shut the door. Little plop in the water. Little goat pellet, and the shows over. Fucking-A.

I haven’t seen Vinny in like forever. Not since we busted Carl. Like a month or something. Last time I seen Vinny, I’m walking down the block, and he sees me. Crosses the street. Starts walking in the other direction. He’s wearing this blue, nylon, piece-a-shit jump suit. Looks like he got it off a fucking crack-head. Me? I yell at him. I see you Vinny. I’ll be seeing you. He takes off running. You can hear that nylon swish all the way down the block. And this afternoon? Standing in my living-room with like a five-hundred-dollar leather jacket on. Amazing.

Then Rosa says, too-loud like, Yeah, I think he’s in the bathroom. You in the bathroom, Tommy?

Yeah, who is it? I yell.

Vinny from down the block, she says.

I gotta talk to you, he says.

’Bout what?

’Bout Carl, he says to me. Got something to show you. His voice is very distinct, like he’s standing right outside the door. Jesus Rosa, I’m thinking. I know we had our differences, but this? You gonna let some fucking jamoche ice me right here on my own toilet? It’s too much.

What d’ya got, I yell through the door. Huh? What you gonna fucking do, Vinny? I mean of all the people. I should keep a pistol in the water tank.

Come down to the street, he says. I got something I think you’re gonna like. I’ll be waiting for you.
You fucking Vinny or something? I ask Rosa in the living-room.

Don’t mess with me, asshole, she says. So this is great, right? Getting fucked by my own wife? I mean this is it. I’m ready to kill someone. I go down, talking shit and getting myself all worked up, and when I get outside, there’s Vinny, standing next to this white, Toyota Camry. Strapped to the hood of the car, a shark. No shit. Like Jaws or something. Gray, with dead eyes, and its tail hangs over the rear window. Never seen nothing like it. Unreal.

Get in, he says. Let’s go for a ride.

You sniffing glue or something? I ask him.

Get in the car, he says.

Where’s my fucking money? That’s what I want to know.

Strapped to the hood, he says.

I’ll fucking strap you to the hood, fucking jerk-off.

We drive down the street. The looks. We get them. You should see.

When I hit forty-five, the mouth opens, Vinny says. He foots the gas. He opens his mouth. He rolls his head around on his neck like some kind of bobble-doll. But he isn’t kidding. We pull alongside this semi. I see our reflection in the middle of the hubcap, shark’s mouth all the way open. Tail beats against the rear window.

Been driving around like this two days, he says and laughs.

 Fucking lunatic, Vinny, I say.

Yeah, he says.
We go down to Chinatown. Pull in this dark alley, rats and shit scurrying through the trash. Stop in back of this market. A tan little fellow walks out. Got this heavy gray apron on, blood running all down the front.

This is Wei, Vinny says to me. Wei, Tommy, yadda yadda.

Out of the car, and I shake the man’s hand. Five other guys come out of the door. We untie the shark. Heavy, it takes five of us. We carry the shark inside and drop it on the ground. They tie a rope to its tail and hoist it up. A few drops of water fall out of the shark’s mouth. Ones got a knife and he slits the belly open. Blood and shit, it’s everywhere. What came out of that shark’s stomach, my God, you don’t even know. I’m talking fish. I’m talking fishing line. I’m talking mufflers and fleshy shit, hunks of metal like I don’t even know what. And the smell. I puke.

Wei gives Vinny like a thousand bucks. We get back in the car. Here, Vinny says and give me the 750 he owes.

What you gonna do with the rest of that money? I ask. You wanna come by and party or something?

We’re square, Vinny says. Gives me this sharks tooth, right? Size of my thumb-nail and sharp. Little chips in it from what, the muffler? Who knows. Pokes right through my thumb when I push it. A drop of blood I wipe on my tongue.

Me and Carl, Vinny says. Don’t bother us no more.

Me, I say. Fuck me, Vinny. What do I know? I am all talk.
The Man Sits in His Car and Eats a Pear

The man sits in his car, outside the bank, waiting for his wife on a Sunday morning. What can be said about this man? He tries too hard and is too little cared for. Or perhaps that is what he says about himself. We are not privy to such information. Nor do we care. It is said of the man and his wife, who have been married one year, that she made a mistake and knows it, that he does not, and that he will be lucky to hold onto her for another year. The man sits in his car, outside the bank, waiting for his wife on a Sunday morning. His wife has come to the bank to check the balance of her account. It is a personal account. We are told, by various sources, that she has, in this account, eight hundred dollars, or three thousand, or ten thousand, enough, we have been assured, that she may purchase a ticket to someplace else and start over again. We are not certain. Of this, however, we are certain: the man and his wife will drive to a Chinese restaurant that is tucked into the corner of a dilapidated strip mall. Yes. You are correct. This is that restaurant. The food is overpriced and overcooked. We have eaten there. We know. The man will order Seszechuan shrimp. His wife will order an egg-roll. They will not speak, as is their custom, though his wife will stare at him as he slurps his hot-and-sour soup, sips loudly from his tea-cup, and tosses the shrimp into his mouth, relishing their greasy pop when he bites into them. His wife will eat half her egg-roll. Of this we are certain, but for now. The man sits in his car, outside the bank, waiting for his wife on a Sunday morning. He looks down at the floorboard and discovers the pear, which we promised you, and which freed itself from a grocery sack the week before. The pear is ripe, almost too ripe. Its skin is loose and papery. The man holds the pear in two hands and takes a bite. The pear is cold and the flesh is fermented. Yes. We know that you are clever and that you will see something in the shape of this pear and in the man’s eating of it. We hesitate to think what you would think if the pear was a banana. The man chews and chews, works his way from the bottleneck to the hour glass. When he gets near the center, he finds it frozen. He bites once. Twice. Then he rolls his window down and discards the core. The man sucks on his fingertips and wishes he had not bothered with the pear. His wife has finished checking her statement and looks up with a frown. The man sits in his car, outside the bank, waiting for his wife on a Sunday morning.
The coming Sunday was the first day they both had off in eight months. They had two days off, and they were going to the shore, to Brookings, south of Eugene, just north of California. Bess was excited. Peter was willing. For a week, Bess made plans, bought food, wine, film for the camera. Peter mapped the drive, figured the time, five hours, four if they were lucky. Bess watched the weather reports. Peter said it wouldn't be good. Bess said probably, but you never knew. Peter said to expect rain.

Sunday came and Peter woke first, at six. He slipped out of bed, bent to the floor and picked up his t-shirt, pulling it over his head as he made his way to the kitchen. He started a pot of coffee. Bess wouldn't wake before eight, and as the smell of coffee filled the kitchen, Peter relished the time he'd have to browse the paper, reading whole articles
instead of just first paragraphs and headlines. Then maybe breakfast – fried eggs, toast and hash browns, a last cup of coffee, and then to the shore.

He walked downstairs to get the paper. Outside, the sky was cloudy, a uniform blanket of gray. Spring in Eugene was like meeting a friend you could do without at a restaurant you held no opinion of: clouds, rain, clouds, rain. Peter heard the first drops as they sporadically fell, then quickened. The trip was Bess’ idea; she’d made all the plans, had arranged everything. They’d gone down to Brookings eight months ago, right after moving into the apartment, and they’d had a good time. But that was summer, when the days were hot and clear, the nights cool; shops were open and people were out. Now it would be cold, gray, and deserted. Peter dreaded the trip.

*Governor To Recommend Actions To Be Taken Against Tri-Line,* read the front page. Peter folded the paper and tapped it against his thigh. Across the street from their apartment loomed the remains of a house that had been gutted by fire. The police declared it arson, and for a while the owner was a suspect. But he was an old man, seventy-three, and didn’t have insurance, so after a few weeks they dropped him from the investigation.

It had happened the week before Peter and Bess moved in, and you could still smell the smoke in the air. The windows had all been boarded. Black smudges framed the plywood and reached upward from under the eaves toward the roof. Shards of glass from where the windows exploded had covered the yard closest to the house. Melted glass-fixtures, blackened sofa cushions, and rugs with immense holes in their middle lay neatly stacked against the fence. In the center of the yard lay a singed and blackened mattress. The mattress was white with blue roses. Along one side was a slash, and the springs had
been pulled from inside. The springs lay in a tangled heap atop the empty mattress. The coils swelled in two humps, and looked to Peter like a man taking a woman from behind, leaning over, coming, whispering something loving or cruel. “What are you doing?” Bess had asked. She stood by the door with a box of books in her arms. “Stop fucking around and come help me.”

The mattress was gone now, though most of the windows were still boarded up. One window on the ground floor, which looked onto the front room, was open and Peter could see blackened beams and supports. The roof had begun to cave-in in two places, and piles of wood and shingles littered the floor. To the right of the house, a blue dumpster sat empty. The old man didn’t have the money to repair the damage right away, and for a while, in the papers, there was talk, mostly from the city, that the home should be demolished. In the end, the old man decided to fix it as he had the money, little by little. Bess knew the old man, had introduced herself to him, and she and Peter had argued about what should be done with the house. It’s a recipe for disaster, Peter had said. It’s the house where he grew up, Bess had countered. He can’t just tear it down. Peter didn’t see the point. Why hold onto it? he’d asked. Tear it down, sell the land and move on. Besides, it’ll cave-in on itself before he ever gets the money.

Peter turned, and before heading upstairs, peeked into the front apartment where their neighbor Phyllis lived. Phyllis was thirty-eight or thirty-nine, but attractive in a professional, executive way. She kept her hair short and styled, wore smart, gray business suits, and had a tight, Gold’s Gym body. She worked for a book company, traveling to conferences and book-fairs all over the country. When she was home,
different men stayed over. She was free, wealthy enough, and happy, or so it seemed to Peter. She took what she wanted from life, and that too made her attractive.

Her living-room that morning was empty. On the coffee table, in front of the long blue sofa, sat an empty wine glass and two beer cans. An ashtray sat between the cans and the glass, and Peter could see five cigarette-butts ground down and bent.

One night, while Bess had been at work, Phyllis had invited Peter in for a drink and he’d declined. Now whenever he ran into her on the porch, when she was coming in from work, or checking her mail, she gave him a mysterious smile before turning and going inside.

At one end of her couch, sat pair of sneakers. Draped over the armrest was a denim jacket. Peter imagined going in for a drink, his shoes at the sofa’s edge, his jacket thrown over a chair. A gust of wind whipped the pine trees next to the house, sending down branches and blowing water onto the porch. Peter turned, opened the front door, and headed up the stairs to read the paper.

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Bess stretched her legs out, reaching her toes down into the coolness of the sheets at the foot of the bed. She listened to the rain hitting the window. The smell of Peter’s coffee filled the room and Bess took a big breath, reached her arms out and felt the indentation Peter’s body left on the mattress. She rolled over on her side and ran her palm along the outline. There was no reason to distress that Peter had risen early and gotten out of bed, even though it was the first morning they’d had in so long where they didn’t have to bustle around each other in the kitchen and the bathroom, exercising their quiet, extreme, and studied routines of polite efficiency. Maybe they would that night in
Brookings. Maybe it was just the weather, the monotony of it, Eugene, the schedules, the stress of bills and work and the energy that took from you.

The window in their bedroom was at the head of the bed. Bess rolled onto her back and stared up to the gray sky, the drops of rain. The branches of the pine trees outside the window jumped from the falling rain, the water collected on the pine cones, which were new, green and gold, unopened, and from which the rain fell in rhythmic drops. Bess could hear the low murmur of the radio, and the occasional rustle of newspaper as Peter turned a page, or folded the paper in half, then quarters.

She’d hoped for that rare day of sun you sometimes got in March, but what could be done? Right after they’d moved in to the apartment, in August, they’d driven down to Brookings and stayed two nights. From the window of their hotel, you could see the ocean. The man who owned the hotel was Indian, or Pakistani, Bess wasn’t sure which, but he’d looked at them sternly enough that Peter had lied while registering, and said they were husband and wife. Those two days, they’d hung out, read, went to the beach, shopped, and ate seafood every meal but breakfast. At night they smoked pot, drank wine from the plastic hotel cups, made love in both beds, and stayed up late, drinking more wine and watching old black-and-white movies on the television. Then they’d come back to Eugene. Peter took a second job and things had changed almost immediately – he was always tired, or wanted to be left alone. At night, he’d sit for hours, listening to talk radio.

Mr. Zero, her cat, hopped onto the bed and tiptoed tentatively over the down-comforter. He lowered his head and rammed it lightly into her waiting hand. He hopped onto the window-sill. Bess propped herself on one elbow and scratched Mr. Zero’s back.
Through the window she saw the burned-out house across the street, all of its windows boarded except for the one, which looked like an enormous gaping mouth. Two nights earlier, when she’d returned home from work, there were five police cars and one ambulance parked in front of the house. Bess had paused on the street and watched. Mr Gregory, the elderly man who owned the house, stood next to one of the police officers. It was raining. The water stood an inch on the street, and could be heard going down the sewer-drain. Bess approached Mr. Gregory, touching him lightly on the elbow. He turned and looked at her. On his head, he wore a floppy hat with a wide circular brim, and the water slid off it in long dripping strands.

“Bessie,” Mr. Gregory said. The police officer turned and looked at her briefly, then returned his attention to the house.

“Mr. Gregory. Hello. My God, what’s going on?” The deeply embedded wrinkles on his face seemed deeper, troubled, especially in the blue-and-red strobe of the police lights. His glasses were spotted with water and his face was wet. Bess had met him one morning on her way to work. Often she’d seen him standing in front of the house in the early morning, either with inspectors, contractors, or just by himself. Whenever she’d seen him after that, she stopped to say hello and chat for a few minutes. That night he didn’t say anything, and turned back toward the scene unfolding in front of them.

A group of paramedics and police officers stood at one corner of the house. Two of them had crowbars and saws, and they were carefully dismantling the porch.

“Some kids beat a man to an inch of his life, then stuffed him under the porch and left him for dead. Mr. Gregory found him this evening,” said the officer standing next to Mr. Gregory.
“How long has he been there?”

“Two days. Three. We don’t know for sure.”

“And he’s still alive?” Bess had asked.

“Barely,” the officer had said. “He’s critical. Probably in shock.” The paramedics and police lifted the man up on a stretcher and carried him to the ambulance. An oxygen mask covered the man’s nose and mouth. Blotches of deep purple and yellow covered the man’s face and neck and arms. He only had on a t-shirt and a pair of white boxers; the kids had taken his clothes. The skin around his eyes was swollen and bruised, but Bess could see the panicked darting in the whites of his eyes, the rain falling into his open sockets.

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Peter cracked two eggs and lifted the shells high. Two scribbles of egg-white sizzled and hissed in the hot pan. He lifted the lid from the hash browns, shook the cast-iron skillet, and tossed in another pat of butter. Mr. Zero padded into the kitchen and wound himself through Peter’s legs.

“Good morning, Mr. Zero,” Peter said. “Are you hungry, sir?” Mr. Zero purred; he was a true gentleman: discreet, clean. He kept to himself, and only begged attention when he sensed he was welcome. In short, Peter and Mr. Zero had an understanding. Often, in the evenings, as Peter sat in his chair and read, or listened to the radio, Mr. Zero would climb into his lap and curl into a little black ball. Before he got up for bed, Peter would pet the cat and they would have their nightly conversations.

--Tell me Peter, how was your day? Peter was certain that Mr. Zero’s voice would be that of the English gentry: crisp, refined, and full of poignant wit.
--Well, Mr. Zero. It was fine, fine indeed. And you, sir?

--It began with great promise Peter, but shortly rather fell flat on its face.

--How so?

--Why, I found a mouse this morning. I even had it between my paws. And do you
know that the telephone rang, frightening me, and the mouse, alas, escaped.

--A shame, sir.

--A damn shame. Indeed.

Peter went to the cupboard. Behind the stacks and stacks of board games and
newspapers to be recycled, he kept a small, secret supply of tuna fish. Bess forbade Mr.
Zero such luxuries, forbade Peter from indulging him, and yet, there was something
irresistible in watching the unmitigated pleasure of the cat devouring the fish. Peter used
a hand-crank can-opener, quickly scooping the tuna into Mr. Zero’s bowl. He took the
can and was careful to bury it deep in the trash, beneath the week’s junk-mail, flyers from
the Safeway and one from Les Schwaab, advertising a quantity of free beef with any
purchase of new tires.

Breakfast was ready. With spatula, Peter lifted the eggs from the pan, scooped hash-
browns onto his plate. He snatched the two pieces of toast as they popped up from the
toaster. He refilled his coffee cup. On the way into the sitting area, he peeked into the
bedroom and saw that Bess was still asleep, her straight blond hair fanned over the
pillow, her arm draped over her eyes like some damsel in distress. O woe is me. Woe
indeed.

Peter sipped his coffee and scooted closer to the radio. That morning there was a
report on the recent chemical spill in Coburg. The Tri-Line chemical company, a reporter
was saying, had been transporting hazardous materials by semi for years, unbeknownst to
the public or the drivers themselves. A week earlier, during a particularly heavy storm,
one of the semi’s hydroplaned, tipped over, and spilled its contents.

“Figures,” Peter said aloud. The remainder of the program was a round table
discussion of what the governor’s response should be, what, if any, consequences Tri-
Line should face for keeping its practices secret.

Peter cut the egg whites with the edge of his fork. He had a ritual about eating eggs.
The yolks had to be runny, and he always saved them for last, cutting into them, then
sopping it up with his toast.

Mr. Zero walked in from the kitchen and headed straight for Peter’s chair. He paused
in front of Peter and looked up at him, his golden, feline eyes closed to slits of
satisfaction. Mr. Zero licked the white fur around his mouth. Peter put his plate down
and leaned back in his chair, and Mr. Zero, as though waiting for just such a gesture,
leapt into his lap, where he began to meticulously clean himself.

--The news Peter?

--It’s not good Mr. Zero. Not good at all.

--So what’s the score now?

--Bad guys a million, good guys sixteen.

--What are they discussing?

--The chemical spill in Coburg.

“It’s morally outrageous,” one of the panelists on the radio was saying, “that a whole
community is threatened by the deceitful actions of these rich, corporate fat cats. Even
more outrageous that the governor has the audacity, the sheer audacity, to even equate penalties faced by Tri-Line with the amount of jobs potentially lost. And furthermore—"

--And furthermore Peter, don’t you think you might have better spent the morning in bed with Bess, rather than out here listening to this self-righteous ping-pong?

--What are you saying, Zero?

--I think you rather know exactly what I’m saying.

--I don’t think it’s that easy.

--Don’t be an ass, Peter. Of course it is.

--But it’s been so long, Mr. Zero.

--Exactly my point.

--So what? I should just do it then, out of some sense of duty?

--No.

--What then? What are you saying?

--Where’s your passion, Peter? Where’s your sense of romance? You know, I think the real question is what are you saying, isn’t it now?

"Just a minute Ted. And with all due respect, I think the governor has a good point —"

“A good point, Jim? A good point? How can you honestly sit here and discuss good points when people’s lives are at stake?"

“That’s not what I’m saying, Ted. The issue’s not so black-and-white. It’s not a matter of equating one’s quality of life with one and one factor only. I think the point the governor is trying to make is that if we penalize Tri-Line too heavily, they’ll respond by slashing jobs, leaving a third of Coburg unemployed. So then —"

--So then Peter. We’ve seen the way you stare at Phyllis.
--What are you talking about?

--Come now, Peter. You’re not fooling anyone. We’ve seen you – Peter, I’ve seen you, and if I’ve seen you, well, one can only assume that Bess has noticed as well. It’s killing her, Peter. You must know this.

--Why do I expect you to understand? You’ve been fixed; you don’t even have balls.

--That’s low, Peter.

--Sorry. I don’t know what it is. I look at Phyllis. She has everything, she’s achieved something. Then I look at Bess, at us. We work for wages and barely make ends meet. And Bess seems so content with it.

--Is Bess the problem here?

--In a way.

--Or is the problem with yourself, Peter? If you’re dissatisfied with your life, you can hardly blame-

“Good morning.” Bess stood smiling in the doorway of the sitting area. Mr. Zero ceased licking his groin, looked up, and bolted from Peter’s lap.

“Morning,” Peter said.

“Why’d you let me sleep so late?” Bess groaned and stretched her arms up to the ceiling. Her toes cracked as she dug them into the orange shag carpet. Her t-shirt rose above her belly button, revealing a small, pale roll of stomach.

“There’s some hash-browns on the stove, if you’re hungry,” Peter said, rocking in his chair and fixing his gaze on the radio. “Some coffee too.”

“Great weather we’re having today,” Bess said.

“We should probably take off soon,” Peter called to the kitchen.
“I have to call Dougie before we go,” Bess called back. Peter heard her open and close the cupboard, heard the small chink of ceramic against glass and then the coffee pour.

“Sure,” Peter said. He rose, went into the bedroom and pulled out a pair of jeans, a t-shirt, a button down, then walked to the bathroom to get his shower and start his day.

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Steam rolled out of the bathroom when Bess opened the door. It felt like a sauna. The mirror was fogged over. Bess pulled her pajama-bottoms down and sat on the toilet.

“Did you feed Mr. Zero this morning?” she asked. No answer. Bess wasn’t sure if Peter was ignoring her, or if he just couldn’t hear over the rush of water.

“Hey. Quite jerking off with my shampoo a minute,” she said louder.

“What?” Peter asked.

“Did you feed Mr. Zero yet?”

“No. He didn’t seem all that hungry this morning.”

Bess wiped, dropped the tissue in the water and pulled up her pants. “Flush,” she yelled, then flushed the toilet and walked out of the bathroom.

In the kitchen, Bess picked up the cordless and punched Dougie’s number. Bess got hooked up with Dougie through her best friend Laura. Dougie was twenty-two, six years younger than Laura, seven younger than Bess and Peter. He worked at a convenient store and sold pot on the side. When Bess had told Laura her troubles with Peter, Laura had suggested that Bess “take Dougie for a ride.” They’d been eating at the Morning Star Café, a vegetarian restaurant run by dread-locked hippies in long skirts and overalls. The
walls were decorated by paintings of the moon, the sun, the stars, and various abstract designs Bess had never been able to figure out.

"Are you kidding?"

"No," Laura had said. "Do you think I'm serious about him? I mean, Jesus, look at him Bess, he's a piece of meat." Laura took a bite out of her tempeh Rueben, and wiped a dab of thousand-island from the corner of her mouth.

"It's a little strange," Bess said.

"I don't care one way or the other, if that's what you're worried about," Laura said. "There's no strings attached. And Bess. Dougie's, well, Dougie's packing." Then she'd giggled. She held an oversized coffee mug in both hands, and just the flirtatious dart of her eyes was visible above the ellipse of the brim. "Have some fun, Bess. For God's sake. What Peter doesn't know...

The phone rang a fifth time before someone picked it up. Dougie's voice came across, low and casual, as though utterly disinterested in who could possibly be on the other line.

"Hey Dougie." Bess pulled down a box of dried cat food from the cupboard.

"Who's this?" Dougie asked.

"Bess."

"Bess who?"

"Bess, Laura's friend. You know?"

"Oh yeah. Right."

"God Dougie," and Bess let out a laugh. The dried cat food rattled as it filled Mr. Zero's bowl. A week after having lunch with Laura, Dougie had stopped by to sell Bess a bag. Bess wondered what of the conversation, if anything, Laura had shared with
Dougie. She'd discarded the idea outright, but was still embarrassed that he might know about the offer.

"Think you could stop by in a bit?" Bess asked him over the phone. "I need to make a transaction."

"Give me an hour," Dougie said and hung up.

That first day he'd stopped over, Dougie wore an overly large pair of khaki pants and plain, white Nike’s with a navy-blue stripe. He cocked his hat-brim to the side of his head, and it slightly covered his right eye.

"So what you need, girl?" Beneath Dougie’s open black hoodie, Bess could see a green Celtics jersey with the number double-zero across the chest. A silver rope-chain had encircled the thick cord of his neck.

Mr. Zero wouldn’t eat. He sniffed at the dried cat food, turned, and walked away, flicking his tail in the air. "Cool, Mr. Zero," Bess said. "Glad to know I’m needed. Thanks." Bess poured herself another cup of coffee.

On the counter next to the coffee pot, Bess kept a cookie jar full of candy – Sweet Tarts, Blow Pops, Tootsie Rolls, and gum. She opened the lid and reached her hand inside, rooting around until she found what she was looking for – a plastic Easter egg. Inside the egg was a bag full of pills.

"Check this out," Dougie had said. He’d been weighing out Bess’ eighth on a pair of small, silver scales, and had stopped. "Are you into these?" he’d asked, and pulled out the bag of pills. "Ten bucks."

"Nice Dougie." Bess had said. The bag was probably worth seventy-five to a hundred dollars. Maybe more.
“Dougie comes through,” he’d said. “Dougie hooks you up.”

Bess removed two valium from the plastic bag. She could hear the shower water running through the pipes in the wall. She popped the valium and swallowed them with a drink of coffee. She bundled the pills and put them in the egg, then re-buried it at the bottom of the cookie jar. Peter didn’t mind the pot smoking too much, but the pills would be another story. She had a history with them, a history she’d shared with Peter.

It was what you did when you began a relationship, confessing your transgressions, your fuck-ups, your disappointments, wearing them like all the tough scars you’d overcome on the way to being who you were at that moment with that person. Bess had done the same with Peter when they became serious two years before, had done so without the foresight to think the confessions might return.

Bess took her cup of coffee and went into the living room. On the radio they replayed the statement the PR man from Tri-Line had made the day after the spill. The apologetic was weak, almost insulting:

“In no way did Tri-Line intend to threaten the community of Coburg,” the man said. “And never, despite how we might be portrayed in the media, never did we once place our own interests above those of the people in our community.”

For awhile, Bess had slept in the nude, but Peter hadn’t noticed, or taken an interest. She’d slide her leg in between his, or rub her feet on his feet, or on his calves. Once she took his hand and placed it on her bare hip. He began to spend a few nights on the couch. When he did sleep in the bed, his back was always to her, and Bess spent the greater part of her nights staring up at the ceiling. The pills helped her to sleep, and initially she only took them at night. That she’d started taking them during the day was a problem, she
knew, but when Peter was around, it was the only thing that alleviated the dull, gnawing sense of doom that sat inside her stomach.

Bess picked up the front page of the paper and glanced over it. The valium were starting to work. Bess felt a slow drift, an easing, as though falling back through herself.

At the bottom of the page, was an article about the man they'd pulled from under the porch. His name was Byron Sparks. He was thirty-eight, single, and worked as a manager for a pool hall in the Whitaker District. He'd died the night before.

They ran a picture of him taken two weeks before the beating. The photo had been cropped, so you couldn't tell where it had been taken. He had a reserved smile on his face, a small sort of confidence, though not smug. One week you managed a pool hall, Bess thought, the next, you lay beaten beneath a porch, half-naked in the rain.

The article went on. The police were still looking for suspects. There was a number to call if you had an anonymous tip. No reward was being offered. At the end of the article, there was a quote from Mr. Gregory. He'd agreed with the city's wishes, and had scheduled to have the house demolished the next month. He would sell the lot, and use the money to cover the costs of demolition and clean up.

Bess let the paper fall to her lap, and leaned back in her chair. She could feel sleep returning. She turned to look out the window, and stared at the house next door. On the neighbor's roof, Bess saw something move. It was a cat, a small gray kitten. It was still raining heavily, and the kitten was soaked. It edged its way down to the gutter, peered over, then walked back up. It was stuck. Then it slipped, caught itself, and scrambled half-way up.
The bathroom door opened and steam rolled out. Peter emerged, his brown hair damp, his bangs plastered across his forehead. He’d wrapped a white towel around his waste and the water dripped down his face, his neck, sliding down his chest and back, collecting in dark spots on the towel.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Peter,” Bess said. She could feel the inappropriate strain of the muscles in her face, her expression contorted and awkward. “A kitten,” Bess managed. She was on the verge of tears. “On the roof. There’s a kitten on the roof and it’s stuck.”

“Where?” Peter asked, and walked over to her chair. But when she looked again, there was nothing there, and the two of them stared out, shoulders touching, but saw nothing, save the neighbor’s roof and the rain, and the rain fell on the roof in sheets.

II.

By one, they were leaving Eugene. Bess was driving. They sat at an intersection on Eleventh Avenue, which went out of town and ran all the way to the Florence. At the corner of the intersection, a patch of land was being cleared for a new Wal-Mart. Yellow bull-dozers and backhoes sat motionless in the rain. The shovel on one of the backhoes was frozen, poised mid-air, as though about to dig into the ground. Water dripped off the shovel’s tines, and in the corner of the lot limbs from the trees and scrub were stacked in six-foot piles. The mud on the lot was yellow, and tan, murky water filled the ruts dug by the backhoe’s tread. Peter thought about how dead it would look in the summer, the dirt baked and cracked in the heat.
“O.K.,” Bess said. “If you could be any animal in the world, what would you be?”

The light turned green and the car lurched forward. Bess always asked these ridiculous questions, and what annoyed Peter most was the way she always seemed to place so much significance on how he answered them.

“A cat,” Peter said finally.

“A cat?” Bess said. “That’s it? Of any animal, you’d be a cat?” Bess took a long drag off the joint, held the smoke in her lungs, and blew it out the small crack in the window. Water came in through the crack and small drops collected on Bess’ face. “I have to say, Peter, your imagination isn’t working overtime. Maybe you should hit this.” Bess held the joint out to him. The smoke curled in front of his face, thick, sweet, and made his eyes water.

“You know how I get,” he said, pushing her hand away.

“I know, I know. Lighten up.” Bess took another hit and stubbed out the roach. When she exhaled, she let the smoke out from the bottom of her mouth and drew it in again through her nose. She drummed her fingers on the steering wheel and bobbed her head to an imagined song. “Pick out some music or something,” she said. “Silence sucks.”

“Is that a fucking hearse?” Peter asked. He pointed to the left lane, two cars ahead of them. The lower half of the car looked like an Oldsmobile station-wagon, the top half the unmistakable box and deathly curtain of a hearse.

“I don’t know.” As they drew closer, Peter could see a thick scar encircling the car’s middle, a shoddy weld job. The car was approaching an intersection. They drove alongside the back-half of the car. Inside was a coffin.
“Is that,” Bess asked, “like a fucking dead person ten feet away from us?” The light turned red but the hearse rolled through the intersection. Then Peter felt the sudden lurch of the car and heard the engine as it opened, reaching full throttle. Bess straight-armed the steering-wheel, sniffed once, and swung the car into the left lane. A horn blared, and an orange VW Bus swerved, just missing their bumper. A sallow-faced man with a scrawny beard, long, blond dreadlocks, and a yellow and green tam, gestured wildly with his hands and yelled something at them. “Fucking hippies,” Bess said. “Did you pick out some music yet or what?”

“I’m on it,” Peter said, gripping the tape-case in his hands and keeping his gaze on the windshield.

“Make it rock, Peter,” Bess said. “None of this limp-dick shit.” A blue Pontiac pulled between them and the hearse. Bess swung back into the right lane and paused next to the Pontiac. “Look at those people,” she said. “Just taking up space and waiting to die.” An elderly couple sat in the front seat of the car, their eyes forward. “I see you,” she said. “Hello. I see you.” The couple didn’t look over or speak, but Peter thought he could see them tense, thought that they sensed the blond woman in the adjacent car, yelling at them, trying to get them to look over. “Fuck you then,” Bess said and sped past them.

Peter picked a cassette and popped it in the tape player. “What’s the idea here?” he gestured to the hearse. She pulled in behind it.

“I want to know what’s in that car.” The distorted chords of a Black Flag song opened, shredding the silence inside the car.

“It’s a coffin,” Peter said. “That’s what’s in the car.”
“Oh, fuck yeah,” Bess said, and turned the volume up on the stereo. “I haven’t listened to this in forever – I’m about to have a nervous breakdown, my head really hurts,” she sang, imitating the snotty pose of the singer’s voice. “If I don’t find a way out of here, I’m gonna go berserk.” She looked at Peter as she sang the last bit, nodding her head to the rhythm, her blond bangs curling in over her eyes.

“I can’t believe you’re still into this shit.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, you’re twenty-eight, not sixteen, you know? Grow up.”


“That’s not what I mean.” It annoyed Peter the way Bess held onto the past, annoyed him that she was so comfortable carrying forward the weight of all the people she had been. It was like this trip. Yes, they’d had a good time last summer. But Bess insisted on going back, trying to recapture something that didn’t exist anymore.

“Do you want me to drop you off at the Co-op?” she asked him. “You know, you could eat some mushrooms, stock some bulgur wheat, meet a kind vegan sister and trade her some patchouli for some incense.”

“Nothing ever changes for you,” Peter snapped.

“Is that a no?”

“For Christ’s sake. Look at you: You’re almost thirty. You dress like a high school kid. You listen to all this, this angsty shit,” Peter waved his hand at the stereo, at the music, at nothing. Ahead of them the hearse pulled into the left turn lane and Bess followed. “You smoke pot like it was your job. You work at a Hallmark for eight-fifty
an hour, Bess. A fucking Hallmark. You’ve got a college education. You could do
anything, anything at all, but all you care about is getting high, having sex, and asking me
stupid questions – “What kind of animal do you want to be?” Peter stopped. They
pulled in behind the hearse. Rain throttled the car’s roof and sounded like a bag of
marbles had been dropped from a great height. The windshield wipers jumped back and
forth, back and forth, but couldn’t seem to move fast enough to keep the rain off. The
music from the stereo continued to blare: “I was a hippy, I was a burnout, I was a
dropout I was out of my head.”

Bess began to cry. The light turned green, the hearse turned left, and Bess followed.

“Did you know that when a baby Giant Panda is born it only weighs four ounces?”
she asked Peter.

“What?”

“Yeah. Four ounces. The size of a peanut. It fits in the palm of your hand. Can you
imagine?”

Peter couldn’t imagine. He stared out the window, looking at the world through the
raindrops – a thousand shifting lenses, changing it and changing it, making it seem bigger
or smaller, intensifying the color or blurring it.

The music went on.

“My life,” Bess said, “would be so much better now if I was a giant panda.”

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The man’s name, the driver of the hearse, was Oz.

“Like the wizard?” Peter asked.

“No,” Oz said.
“Like the singer then?”

“No. Like Oz. Like me. O. Z.”

Peter was uncomfortable, of this Bess was certain. He and Oz sat at a card table in the middle of Oz’s kitchen. A bare, seventy-five watt bulb hung above them. Every few seconds a drop of water slid down the long black cord, sizzled briefly on the bulb, and plopped into a tin bowl sitting in the middle of the table. Peter cleared his throat.

Bess had followed the hearse all the way back to the house and, after a brief greeting, an apology, an explanation, all friendly, Oz had opened the back of the hearse (which he’d built), and then opened the coffin (which he’d also built). The inside of the coffin was crowded with stacks and stacks of photos and negatives. This was a man who clearly had a vision, though what that vision was, Bess could not fathom until she stepped inside his house.

“How long have you been doing this?” Peter asked. By this he meant the photos. The walls of the kitchen, of the whole house, Bess assumed, were covered from ceiling to floor with photos, all of them framed. They were mostly thirty-five millimeter, three-inch and four-inch prints, though there were a few Polaroids and some panoramics.

“Ten years, fifteen,” Oz said. “I don’t know. Twenty.” Oz had long, thick hair that was probably once brown or black but was now shot through with gray. His round glasses were thick, and the lenses accentuated the unsteadiness of his eyes. An acid casualty, Bess thought, burned out and paranoid.

All the photos in the kitchen were of people eating. A photo from the 70’s of shaggy haired men with moustaches and dark sunglasses, the women trying to look their best Farrah Fawcet, all of them at a park somewhere drinking beer and eating steaks. Another
photo was of a wedding. The bride shoved cake into the groom’s face and the groom did not look happy. Family reunions, company picnics, bar-b-ques. One photo of a woman in a green bathrobe frying chicken with a cigarette in one hand, the other hand waving the photographer away.

Bess moved from the kitchen to the tiny T.V. room. She was amazed at the randomness of people’s lives, these odd little moments captured on film for no other reason than somebody had a camera and was there.

She and Peter didn’t take many photos. They had one taken of them in front of the house when they’d first moved in. Their downstairs neighbor Phyllis had shot it. They stood on the porch. It was summer. They were well tanned. Their expressions were hopeful, happy. Peter had his arm around Bess’s waist and was pulling her to him. She had both arms around his stomach, her head on his chest, her hair falling in her eyes. She remembered that day, and thought now about how odd it was that Mr. Gregory’s burned out house looked back at them from across the street, even more odd to her that she thought nothing of it, that in the picture, their faces did not express it.

The pictures in Oz’s living-room were different. A small red-haired child in Superman pajamas asleep, on the ground, in front of a fire place and the fire was raging. One wall was devoted to pictures of people and their pets – cats and dogs asleep in chairs, or posed in front of the Christmas tree with the kids. There was one of a hamster running in a wheel. The hamster’s cage sat on a dresser, the dresser had a mirror behind it, and the flash from the bulb reflected back into the picture, partly obscuring it. On another wall there were pictures of men in front of the television, eating pizza, men jumping up and down, hi-fiving, yelling, their team apparently victorious.
All the pictures Bess had of Peter were of the back of his head. Peter at the coast, sitting on a rock, looking away from the camera to the sea. Peter pondering a tree. Peter staring down a length of river. Bess could have her own show: the infamous back of Peter Carlysle’s head. She laughed. She could hear the occasional plunk of water in the tin pan in the kitchen, the low tones of Peter’s voice asking a question and Oz’s clipped answer.

And here was the saddest picture of them all: a young woman, a beautiful young woman, black, her features perfect, her cheeks round, her lips full. Her hair had been done for the occasion. The woman wore a long, blue dress that hugged her bust and her hips. A rose sat across her lap. Who took this picture? A parent? A sibling? Unlikely, Bess thought. The woman’s expression was tired, as though she had pleaded not have the picture taken, but was now resigned to its inevitability. Her lover, perhaps he’d taken it. They were supposed to have had dinner, Bess imagined, an anniversary dinner, and her lover was late, or forgot, hence the apology of the single rose. And now she was sitting under the undesired, cruel and passionless gaze of the camera, as though her lover had tried to make up for his mistake by capturing her effort on film. And it is when? Ten at night? Eleven? When was it too late? The woman cannot be robbed of her beauty, though worn down from the waiting, from having her heart hollowed out. And it was really in her eyes, deep and brown, unsurprised by the way the night’s events had unfolded, a but puffy from crying, but also that look of forgiveness that is already there, that she will try again and do whatever it takes, again and again, until she can no longer feel the disappointment, the anger, the hurt. Her shoulders are slumped. Her head looks too heavy for her head.
What a moment. Bess thought about that picture, all of those pictures. How would it be to find one of herself? Some forgotten moment, discarded, literally as well as in the mind? Or some moment changed by memory then rediscovered here, a stranger’s house, where the instant had been catalogued, framed, juxtaposed against other strangers, taken out of its context and reintroduced to you, where you would have to confront the picture with however you remembered it.

Bess slowly grew conscious of the silence in the kitchen.

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This was just like Bess, to get him involved with a stranger, then wander off and abandon him. Oz sat across the table and fingered his moustache. He wouldn’t stop staring at Peter. The gutters outside his kitchen window were clogged, and water poured loudly onto the concrete. The rain drummed the roof. The light-bulb hissed every few minutes.

“This is pretty amazing, what you’ve done here” Peter said. He stood, the legs of his chair scraping the linoleum floor. He walked to the wall to study the pictures. “Where do you get these?”

“Some are from the garbage,” Oz said. “Though mostly I get them from developers. Every few months, I drive around, buy the photos nobody picks up from the photo mats. After a year or so, they just throw them out. Rather sell them to me for a few bucks than get nothing for them. It’s amazing what people leave behind.”

“All these are of people eating,” Peter said. Oz turned to look at him. Peter laughed. “So what, all the one’s in your bedroom are of people having sex?”

“Yeah.”
“Really?” Peter stopped laughing.

“Yeah,” Oz said. “But you can’t see those.”

Peter expected there to be photos in the bathroom, and he expected them to be of people urinating, shitting, throwing up in toilets. It surprised him to find that all of the pictures in the bathroom were of the ocean. There wasn’t a person in any of them, though one was a close-up of a pair of sneakers on a rock, the sea stretching out gray and wide in the background.

It was getting late, but Bess would still want to go to Brookings. By the time they reached it, it would be eight or nine at night. They’d be lucky to find anything to eat. But after blowing up in the car, Peter knew they’d have to go. He owed it to Bess.

“It’s amazing what people leave behind.” Peter thought about that. He hadn’t felt alive since returning from the coast in August. He remembered how he’d lied to the hotel owner, by telling him that he and Bess were married. During their two days there, it had become a joke between them, whenever the owner referred to them as Mr. and Mrs. Carlyle.

Peter looked at all the pictures of the ocean. Gray skies and gray water, meeting at a gray, barely perceptible horizon. He and Bess had gone to Brookings eight months earlier and there was still a momentum between them. They had come back, and it was gone. Now they were returning to try and reclaim some part of it. Oz was right, it was amazing what people left behind, but Peter was entirely unsure that it would still be there if you went back.

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Bess thanked Oz and they left. Peter drove. It was almost three and they discussed whether or not they should even bother with the drive to Brookings.

“IT’ll be dark by the time we get there,” Peter said.

“But tomorrow might be nice,” Bess said. “We could have tomorrow.” Peter frowned but nodded his head. Bess turned on the car stereo and leaned against the window. On the radio the governor was giving a speech. “We can recover,” he was saying. “And we can do it by walking the middle ground.” Peter and Bess sat in silence. They were almost out of town, past the warehouses and the industrial parks. “We can save jobs, save lives, save this community.” Peter sped along as the road began to curve. They were driving into the coastal range, into the Siuslaw National Forest. Bess looked up as they reached a clearing, and saw the brown patches of clear-cut dotting the green hills. It was getting dark in the shadows of the mountains, under the cover of the trees. The rain continued to fall on the windshield. “We can make this work, we can pull ourselves out of this,” the governor said. “But we have to look at the bigger picture. In the end, we have to be willing to compromise.” The crowd burst into applause. Bess listened with her head against the window, as beneath her feet, she could feel the hum of the engine, and the tires on the road, carrying them forward to a place they’d been before.
On My Knees in a New Orleans Bathroom

On my knees in a New Orleans bathroom, I was nineteen, a virgin, cupping her ankle in my palm. Outside the bathroom door, we heard an old man cough. I used Colgate foam and an old razor, the guard worn, the blade chewed with old whisker. She was drunk, sitting on the toilet, curled over me with a smile. The bathroom was at the end of the hall in the back of the Hummingbird. The old drunk banged on the door. The razor jerked. A line of blood wandered down Susan's shin, collecting in drops at her heel. She pulled my face to hers and kissed me. She spent the next morning on my lap, on a wooden beam looking out at the brown gulf we later discovered was the Mississippi. We were sitting in a bar some blocks off Bourbon. "No," the bar tender said. "that wasn't the Gulf. You got to drive a ways out for that." We had ducked into the bar to escape a squall. The water stood two inches on the street. Susan drank Corona and stared at the rain, The Days of Our Lives on the television, lighting the room with John Black kissing Marlena. "Do you like living here?" I asked the bar tender. "This isn't my home," she said. "I ain't even from here."
Snapshot

There are two photographs of my father and me from that day; my mother is in neither of them. The pictures were taken on a dock in Cayman Kai, and we were just back from an afternoon of deep-sea fishing. My father and I beam back at the camera, our faces chestnut, our white teeth brilliant. A month before we’d left for that vacation in the Cayman Islands, my father had had the front bridge in his mouth replaced, and his teeth were, in fact, too white. Absurdly so. In the photo, my father’s arm rests along my shoulders, pulling me to him, a gesture the frequency of which I could count on one hand, a gesture reserved for photos. I have the barracuda. It is the length of my leg and it hangs from a steel chain, the rusted hook deep in one gill. You cannot see the bulge where the hired man, Georgie, clubbed the fish once he’d brought it aboard, nor the eye which burst from that socket. The barracuda flashes like a bulb going off, a uniformly shining object, turning in the late afternoon sun.
The other photograph was taken before the first and is very different. I have the barracuda, as before, but in this picture, it is cradled in my arms, its teeth bared, its mouth snarling, fierce. Initially, my father had posed beside me in the at-ease position, legs apart, hands clasped behind his back. Mr. Devin, the man who owned and operated the boat, and whom my father had asked to take the picture, motioned the two of us together. If you look closely, you will see Mr. Devin’s long shadow stretching toward us, falling at our feet. It was then that my father put his arm around my shoulder, and drew me to him, and then that Mr. Devin snapped the shot. In this picture, my father is smiling, his teeth again unnaturally white. But I am looking up at him, my face pinched by uncertainty, the barracuda nestled inside the crook of my tanned arms.

My parent’s were in love with the Cayman Islands – the people were friendly, and you never saw the poverty common to the Bahamas and Jamaica. It was their paradise, and they often daydreamed about having a place there, though the truth was that we could barely afford the few trips we were able to make. The day before the photos were taken we’d spent driving around the island and looking at time-shares. We followed slender, overly-tanned women in and out of empty rooms. My mother ran her burgundy fingernails along the walls, peeked in cabinets, gave my father looks only he knew how to decipher. He asked the women pointed questions. The women ran their hands through their frosted hair, fingered the gold chains at their throats, smoothed their palms down their loose, flowing skirts. They responded. My mother’s sandaled feet sank into the new beige carpet. We saw their views of the ocean. We sat poolside. We ate the free lunches promised us for looking at the time-shares. “Order something expensive,” my
father told me. We were a family. We were tourists. We drove back to the
condominium.

"We could do it," my mother said to my father as he navigated the small Toyota rental
through the traffic on Georgetown Road. "If we cut back on luxuries, set aside five-
hundred a month. We could manage five-hundred."

"I don't know," my father said. I sat in the backseat and watched them. My father's
face tightened like it always did when money was mentioned. My mother looked out the
windows. A small stack of one-sheets sat in her lap—pictures of the condos, dimensions,
prices and terms. It was hot and muggy that day, the car had no air conditioning, and
though the windows were down, there wasn't much of a breeze. The one-sheets curled
beneath my mother's wet fingerprints.

"Think of it," she said. "A week here every summer. It would be perfect."

"Yeah," my father said. "It would be different if it were ours. But we have to share it
with strangers, people we don't even know."

The parking lot was full. My father let us out and told us to wait while he parked the
car. The traffic on Georgetown was heavy. We stood and watched as my father eased
the car out and was swallowed by the traffic, watched him as he slowly inched away.

"What's taking him so long?" I asked. We'd been standing by the parking entrance
for fifteen minutes. Sweat was pouring down my mother's face, and she began to fan
herself with the one-sheets. We waited five minutes more.

"Come on," my mother said. "He knows where we are." We headed for our room.

"What took you so long?" my mother asked when my father walked in. He'd been
gone for forty-five minutes. My mother sat in one of the wicker chairs. Her brown hair
was at her shoulders, and her legs were tucked beneath her. She was reading a *People Magazine*. I was writing a letter to a girl named Carol Anne Higby. It was the fourth letter I’d written that week and I knew I’d never send any of them.

“Where did you go?” my father asked. His voice wobbled, and he looked scared. When my father got scared, he got angry, and he was then very angry: his hands, his arms, his whole body trembled. “I’ve been driving around for an hour.” He walked toward us.

“Calm down,” my mother said. “You’re all worked up.” And he was, but he could not help himself when he became this upset. I was sitting on the couch. My mother stood up.

“I could have been killed,” my father said. “Anything could have happened to me, and what would you have cared?”

“You’re being ridiculous, Craig,” my mother said.

Their voices grew louder. The air quivered with their accusations. My father accused us of abandoning him. My mother told him to grow up and stop acting like a child. He smacked her. This all happened in the common-area.

Everything went silent. I could hear the speed boats on the water, the sounds of distant laughter. My mother stood speechless, mouth open. She brought a hand to her lips. The sapphire and emerald rings on her fingers glinted in the light that sifted in from outside. The light fell in thick yellow bars on the ground. She turned, right before the tears started, and ran into their bedroom. To my knowledge, my father had never hit her before, and I don’t think he ever did again. He was shaking. The wisps of his fine, silver
hair, usually well groomed, fell in loose strands across his forehead. He turned to me, before he chased after my mother, and said, “Look at what you’ve made me do.”

I said to myself that I had not done anything, and I believed myself, and to this day I still do. But I felt guilty. I was the underlying current of most of my parent’s arguments, though I did not realize it then. My mother generally took my side of things, and because of this, my father often felt alienated and cornered. In my mind, that moment in the common area marks a turning point for our family. I was sixteen and just starting to think for myself, and the next two years, until I graduated from high school, would be defined by our constant bickering. Once, a year after all of this, my father and I sat at the dinner table arguing politics. At one point, he stood, and threw his glass of iced tea across the kitchen. My mother put her head in her hands and began to cry. My father stomped out of the house yelling, “To hell with the both of you.” Slivers of glass lay next to the pieces of ice, and the ice melted leaving puddles.

The worst, meaning, I suppose, the lowest point, was the night my father and I got into a fist fight. This took place in our family-room, and my mother sat and watched. I was eighteen then and acted every brash year of it. I had come in past my curfew and when my father asked where I’d been, I told him to go fuck himself, and he’d come at me. My arms were weighted with books. I remember that I stacked them on the ground two at a time, and I remember my father’s fists as he clubbed my back and my head, and his voice, so choked with rage. I turned and punched him. He fell to the ground. You don’t hit your father, my mother said, and that would be all she said. It had been a hard two years and she had become numb to our eruptions. She sat in her chair, and watched us
both, red-faced and panting, her legs tucked beneath her, her face expressionless, as though watching a television show she was interested in only slightly more than usual.

I should say now that my father was not especially abusive. Nor was he a drunk. Nor was he unnecessarily mean and cruel, at least no more than anyone else. Those years were difficult years, and I know now, though I could not accept it then, that my father managed as best he could, and often that wasn’t very well. My father was a decent man. He worked as a claims adjuster for Aetna Life Insurance, and he never missed a day of work until he had the stroke. I was nineteen when he died, a college freshman.

Through the walls and cooling vents of the condominium that afternoon, I could hear my father’s voice as he pleaded with my mother. I rose from the wicker couch with my letter to Carol Anne and walked out of the room, out to the beach to sit and watch the ocean. The sand at Seven Mile Beach is white and the water is as clear as pool water; only as the shelf floor descends does it give the illusion of being blue. I sat down on a lounge chair and stared out toward the horizon, and thought about what I wanted to say in my letter.

Carol Anne Higby was the first girl I’d ever fallen for. She was eighteen and I’d met her while doing a school production of *Brighton Beach Memoirs*. She’d recently graduated and was on her way north at summer’s end to Vassar or Smith, or some other pseudo-Ivy League school for women. We used to sit in front of my house, in her car, and talk for hours. We confessed everything to each other, all that we had to confess anyway. She told me about getting raped and how her mother had molested her as a child, and I told her what an asshole I thought my father was. I wanted our experiences
to link up, but I don’t think they ever did, and I have sometimes wondered whether it was her or her tragedies that I loved.

The parasailing interrupted my view of the ocean that afternoon. A white speedboat chopped through the water, a rainbow-colored parachute opened and two, sometimes three people, seated on a white bench, rose slowly into the air behind the boat. They were tethered to the boat by a fifty-foot-long rope and from my seat, I would occasionally catch the groans of the motor and the screams of the people as they were lifted high above the ocean.

A girl roughly my age sat down in the lounge chair next to mine. She was blond and tall, and had blue eyes and pale white skin. My father had pointed her out to me on our first day at the beach, but I’d been too nervous and shy to approach her. She was at the condominium with her mother and younger brother. They stuck close together; rarely was the girl by herself. My father said he thought that she was lonely and that I should stop my moping about Carol Anne and go talk to the girl and get on with my life. He did have a certain practicality about him, at times too much so. One afternoon, I was swimming in the pool, rinsing away the salt water, when she jumped in and began to swim laps. We were alone. I said the word hello to myself a thousand different ways, trying to imagine how it would come out, but in the end, it never did, and I walked to the ladder and lifted myself out of the water. My father said I was a fool, that the girl had put herself in proximity to me on purpose, and that it was up to me to take the next step. But I had observed something in her face, as she swam back and forth in front of me, her long legs kicking rhythmically, her toes pointed, and the arch of her foot a long, extended
curve. I sensed a sadness in her expression, an intense isolation, and it was something that I understood, or felt I did.

On the beach that afternoon, I looked over to her, and did not smile, and nodded my head in greeting. She did the same. It was as if we had reached a quiet understanding, where we acknowledged our need for a companion, yet agreed that we did not wish to be disturbed. She lay back in her lounge chair. Water dripped off her long body, darkening the sand below her. Her skin dried in the sun. We sat there in silence for the longest time, and watched the ocean, the speedboat, and the parasailors rising into the sky on a length of a rope.

I did not hear my mother approach.

"Samuel," she said, placing a hand on my shoulder, walking around and sitting on the edge of my chair. She turned briefly to the girl, smiled and said hello. The girl returned her greeting and we made eye-contact, and I saw something in her eyes, an anticipation I had not seen before, and I knew that my father had been right.

My mother's face was newly washed. She wore sunglasses, but I could see that she'd been crying, could see the puffy skin beneath the dark lenses. She wore no make-up and the gin-blossoms on her cheeks were visible.

"We'll be going to dinner soon. You need to come back and start getting ready," my mother said to me. And perhaps she caught me looking at the girl, or caught the unsteadiness of my expression, and wanted to assure me that everything was fine, because she said, "Maybe your friend would like to join us for dinner," and she turned, and extended her hand. "My name is Deliah. Deliah Roberts. I'm Samuel's mother."
Would you care to join us for dinner tonight?” The girl said that she would have to talk to her mother, but that it would probably be o.k.

“Seven-thirty?” my mother asked. “Is that too late?”

The girl said that would be fine. Pink blossomed on her pale white cheeks. The sun was strong on her face, and she brought a hand up to shade her eyes. She said her name was Tasha.

“I’ll see you soon.” And she sprang from her lounge chair.

“We’re in number 14,” my mother called after her. Tasha turned and smiled brightly in my direction.

When I returned to the condo, my parents were seated on the screened-in porch. My father was sipping a glass of bourbon. My mother held a vodka-tonic in her hand and stared out the screen. On the table between them sat the stack of one-sheets from that morning.

“Fix yourself a drink and come here,” my father said as I passed in front of the porch-screen. We had some beer in the refrigerator. I grabbed one and walked out to the porch and sat in one of the cushioned deck-chairs.

“Your mother tells me that you’ve made a friend. What’s her name?” my father asked. I looked to my mother. She picked up a one-sheet and began reading it. She was wearing sunglasses, and a white visor bunched her brown hair on the top of her head.

“Tasha,” I said.

“Tasha,” my father repeated. “That’s a nice name. And she’ll be coming to dinner?”

I said that she would. I still had the unfinished letter to Carol Anne in my hand, and I folded it in two, placing it on the table beneath the beer bottle.
My father teased me about Tasha, advising me to wear a tie to dinner that night.

“You’ll want to look sharp so you can make a good impression,” he said.

“Don’t forget the good news,” my mother said. She placed the one-sheet back in the stack.

My father sipped from his bourbon, and became excited. He told me that he’d arranged for us to go deep-sea fishing the following day. “That’s something that you’ve always wanted to do isn’t it?”

I said that it was, though the idea had never really occurred to me.

“Well aren’t you excited?” my father asked. “Don’t you think it will be fun?” I said that I did. My mother didn’t say anything. She smiled wanly, and turned the glass of vodka in her hand and stared at the ocean. She’d removed all the rings from her fingers, all save her wedding band. That finger she tapped absentmindedly against the bottom of her glass.

I picked up my beer and drank. The bottle was sweating and left a gray ring on the letter to Carol Anne. I think now that I knew as much about why I was still writing letters to Carol Anne, and what I hoped they would achieve, as I did about where exactly things stood between my parents, and what would happen next. My parents had a way of asserting postures of normalcy when things were bad between them, and often, if the situation worsened, their fronts only seemed to grow stronger. Though I think I saw through the roles they played, I still allowed myself to believe in them, and did so for the same reasons I wrote letters to a girl I would never speak to again, because when something was wrong an effort had to be made, and a gesture, even though futile, was better than no gesture at all.
As the afternoon slipped into evening, the temperature cooled. To the northwest, thunderheads were growing on the horizon. A breeze blew onto the porch, ruffling my father’s hair and sending the one-sheets and my letter swirling about the enclosure of the porch. My father and I jumped to retrieve them. My mother remained seated. She sipped her vodka. She removed the visor from her head and shook her hair down.

“Now,” my father said, handing me the papers he’d gathered, “go inside and clean up. Put on something decent and make sure to wear your loafers. Tonight we’re going someplace nice.”

Tasha showed up to our condo a little before seven-thirty. She wore a long, light-blue dress, which hung off her pale shoulders. A simple gold chain encircled her throat. Her hair was pulled into a tight bun. She didn’t wear make-up and she didn’t need to. My mother introduced her to my father.

My mother was dark complected, and always tanned well. Her hair was down that night, and she had returned the rings to her fingers. She wore gold when she was tan, and it always made her look stunning. Her face was light, relaxed, and she was beautiful.

“Are we ready?” my father asked. The thunderheads broke into a heavy rain before we left, and we had to run to the car, all of us laughing on the way as though we had all known each other a long time and were the best of friends.

Someplace nice that night was Benjamin’s Roof, a small, open air restaurant a few miles from our condominium, downtown in the wharf district. It sat atop a three-story building, and was my parent’s favorite restaurant. The dining area was covered by sheets of tin, and the rain drumming the roof that night sealed our conversation in an envelope of sound.
My parent’s had had three drinks apiece before we arrived at the restaurant, and they ordered more once seated.

My father ordered me a Heineken. I will not forget how handsome he was that night, in his blue, oxford button-down and yellow silk tie, his sleeves rolled to the elbows of his well-tanned arms. He was already drunk.

"Would you like a drink, sweetie," my mother asked Tasha. She leaned over and placed one of her hands over Tasha’s. "They make wonderful pina colodas here," she said. "Have you ever had a pina coloda?"

Tasha shook her head no and declined the drink.

"She’s a nice girl, Craig," my mother said to my father. "Are you a nice girl, Tasha?"

"Of course she’s a nice girl," my father said. "Tasha. A nice girl for our nice boy Samuel." They were drunk and they were only playing, having fun at how uncomfortable I always became when they talked like this, though Tasha had no idea.

"Yes," my mother added. "Samuel’s a nice boy. Very nice."

"A little too sensitive," my father said.

"Which is good," my mother returned. "For a girl who’s nice." I tried to smile at Tasha to let her know this was o.k., but she was watching my parents, a look of befuddlement on her face.

My father motioned to the waiter and ordered another round.

"Craig," my mother said.

"Relax. We’ll call a cab after dinner. Besides, I feel like getting a little drunk tonight. Don’t you Samuel?"
Though it was my father's custom to enjoy a drink or two before dinner every night, I had never before seen him drunk. In fact, I would only see him drunk one other time, two years later, at a dinner party my mother threw for me the night before I was to leave for college, which was the year before he died. I have a fondness for my memories of both these instances, as I am still, in an admittedly more disturbing way, attached to the incident that occurred earlier that afternoon. My father hardly, if ever, varied from the script of what he thought a father was supposed to be. He believed, and maintained, even until he died, a certain distance between his inner life and how he allowed himself to behave toward me. I am attached to these moments when my father escaped from himself precisely because they are the moments which prove that he was human, prove that he was other than what he pretended to be: perfect.

“So,” my mother said, turning to Tasha. “Tell us about your family.”

The tension slowly eased from Tasha's face as she began to talk about her mother and brother. “My dad doesn’t live with us,” she said.

“Oh,” my mother said.

“Divorced?” my father asked.

“Yes,” Tasha said. She looked down into her lap where she was fidgeting with her napkin. My parent's were from the school of thought which said that you stayed married unless there was no other way. That's the way they were, the way there friends were. It was the world they wanted to inhabit.

“A long time?” my mother asked.

“Right after my brother was born,” Tasha replied. “So ten years.”

“I'm sorry,” my mother said and sipped her vodka.
"It's not that bad." Tasha looked up from her lap. "You get used to it."

My mother was about to ask another question, but my father cleared his throat and cut her a hard look.

"O.K. already," my mother snapped. "I'm just curious. Tasha's our guest, and I'm curious about her is all. There's no harm, is there Tasha?"

"Why don't you let it drop," my father said. "Can't you see that she doesn't want to talk about it?"

"I'm sorry." My mother leaned back and let one arm hang off the chair-back. In her left hand she held the tumbler of vodka and gestured with it as she spoke. "It's just that I can tell you're a nice girl."

"Deliah," my father hissed.

"Please, Craig," she said defiantly. I remember worrying that a scene like the one that afternoon might repeat itself in the restaurant, though looking back now, it seems like the last thing that would have happened. "Tasha's a nice girl," my mother continued. "I was a nice girl once. So we have something in common."

"Fine," my father said. "You were a nice girl. Let's just talk about something else."

When the food arrived, we ate as though it were our last meal. Appetizers, salads, soup, entrée, and dessert with coffee. We ate pickled conch and, for the main course, my father ordered turtle. We passed it around the table, as was our custom when, at a meal out, one of us ventured into the exotic or unknown. The meat was chewy and almost dry, and had a rich taste about it, the flavor somewhat sour, though in a pleasant way. Tasha passed, despite my parent's imprecations otherwise.
It was a roller-coaster of a meal. My parent’s were smashed and acted it. I drank beer after beer, and wished that I was anyplace else other than Benjamin’s Roof. Tasha had grown deathly silent, but my parent’s hadn’t noticed, and continued on. After dessert, my mother even smoked, which was something that she rarely did. It was an old pleasure from her college days, before she met my father, and something which she still enjoyed doing, though my father disapproved. She asked our waiter if he smoked, and he gave her two cigarettes. She leaned back in her chair and inhaled deeply. She blew the smoke at the tin roof and told stories about a few of the men she’d dated in college. My father had also continued to drink, and he soon fell in with my mother, adding commentaries and elaborating on the stories she told.

After dinner, we took a cab home. My mother sat in the front seat and directed the driver. I sat in the back between Tasha and my father. While we stood waiting for the cab that night, he’d removed his shoes and socks and rolled up the cuffs of his pants to reveal his ankles and his shins, which were hairless because of the socks he wore to work everyday. Once in the cab, my father lay back against me, put his head in my lap, and dangled his feet out the window. Tasha was disgusted, and I should have been embarrassed, but wasn’t. Who was Tasha to me? I was drunk. I still had all the letters in the world to write. And more importantly, I knew, at that moment, where we stood as a family, knew the roles we would play, and I took a great comfort in this. In the morning when we woke, we would pretend that everything was normal again, our emotions and our fears tucked neatly away.

“Tasha, you must think us horrible people,” my father said. She said nothing. She wouldn’t even look at us, just stared out the window to the heavy rain. My mother was
busy talking with the cab driver in the front seat, and I’m not sure if she heard this. It was of no matter.

“It’s not always like this,” my father said. “We’re not always like this, are we, Samuel?” I said that we weren’t. “You are a nice girl, Tasha,” he said. “It’s just that you’ve just caught us at a very odd time.”

My father opened his eyes and looked up at me then, looked at me in a way I don’t remember his ever doing again, not as his child but as a person, a person capable of possessing his own emotions. And he said, “It’s really not so bad, is it Samuel? Despite everything that’s happened?”

I said that it wasn’t, and that was the truth.

We arrived back at the condominium. Tasha curtly thanked my parent’s before leaving. The three of us stood there a drunken moment, and watched her run back through the rain, before we turned and stumbled toward our own rooms and beds.

The following morning we would rise early and drive a quiet forty-five minutes across the island so that we might climb in a boat and spend the greater part of the day staring at the ocean. The trip would last six hours and we would only catch one fish, the barracuda. My mother and my father would be hungover, and when the hired man, Georgie, brought the fish aboard, rapping it twice on the head, bursting its eye and staining the deck of the boat with a quick splash of red, my mother would lean over the side and vomit for half-an-hour, while we all looked on. We would get back to shore and my mother would walk silently to the car while my father and I posed with the barracuda. After the pictures were shot, Georgie would take the fish from my hands, pull a knife from his pocket, and cut off a hunk of meat, which he would then drop to the dock. My father would have walked
back to car by that time. But I would stand next to Georgie, and we would watch to see if
the ants on the dock would eat the flesh, watch to see if the barracuda was edible. It
would not be edible, and Georgie would groan, and he would rip the hook from the gill in
frustration, and heft the carcass into the bay.

We still have the pictures from that day, my mother and I, but they're just pictures,
and really capture nothing. What I wish now is that we had a picture of the family we
were the night before, all of us drunk in a cab, in another country, my father's head in my
lap, my mother guiding the cab driver and talking with her hands, the rings on her fingers
flashing in the headlights of the on-coming traffic.
Antiques

Around seven, Maybelle strolls into the living-room with two drinks. "Bout time," Faye says. "D’you get lost?" Faye is Maybelle’s sister. Maybelle is my wife. "Beer Cliff?" Jerry asks. "Beer me, Jerry," I say. Jerry is a good enough guy, better than most, and I regret, and am woefully sorry, if you want to know the truth of it, that I’ve been sleeping with his girlfriend. That would be Faye, Maybelle’s sister, Maybelle being my wife and all, it being a Tuesday, which isn’t unusual, every week’s got one, day after Monday, day before Wednesday, Wednesday being the hump day, and that makes me think. Tuesday is Antique Road Show day. Every Tuesday night Maybelle, Faye, Jerry, and I get drunk and watch it. The idea is this: show travels around and people bring in their heirlooms, junk, detritus, bric-a-brac, and people in suits tell them how much its worth. Most times the shit people think is shit is worth a lot and the shit people think isn’t shit is shit.

"Cheers," Jerry says. "Cheers," I say, and we drink. The ice in Maybelle’s glass clicks against her teeth. "Be a dear," she says and rattles the glass.

The first item is a miniature, black, wooden coffin. "Look at that," Maybelle says. Faye says, "I wouldn’t give you fifty bucks for that piece of shit." "Don’t matter what you’d give for it," Maybelle says. The man in the suit on the television is telling the woman in a lime-green blouse with beehive hair that the coffin was handcrafted in Italy and dates from before the turn of the century. "She’s gonna clean up," Jerry says. "I love it when they clean up." "What in the hell would you put in a coffin like that?" Faye asks, and Maybelle says, "Keepsakes. Little photos. Jewelry and such." Jerry asks, "What about you Cliff? What would you put in the coffin?" "I’m with Faye," I say, and Maybelle says, "You would be." "Shit," I say. "Coffin’s for dead things." "Got to have a place for your keepsakes," Maybelle says. We sip our drinks.

When the man comes on with the Civil War saber we are all three sheets. Faye is looking good in her blue hospital scrubs. The man with the saber is looking real smug. You just know he’s going to take a fall. "Remember that sword Mom had that Grandad brought back from the war?" Faye asks Maybelle. "What happened to that sword?" Maybelle says, "Mom never had a sword," and Faye says, "Of course she did. Kept in the closet." Maybelle says, "There wasn’t no sword, Faye." The man with the saber is rocking on his heels and has his arms crossed on top of his gut. He licks his moustache from one side to the other and nods his head to what the man in the suit on the television is saying. "Call her up goddamnit," Faye says. "Calm down Faye," Jerry says, and Maybelle says, "Better listen to Jerry, little sister." I pick up the phone and dial their mother’s number. Their mother talks to Faye and Faye says, "I told you so. I knew it – I knew it. I knew it. I knew it." The man in the suit on the television is telling the man with the moustache that his saber is a replica and isn’t worth fifty bucks. "Why am I always the last to know?" Maybelle says. "That man didn’t clean up," Jerry says. "No, sir. Not one bit."
“Do you want a cigarette?” she asked.

“I don’t smoke,” he said.

“That’s not what I’m asking you,” she said. “I’m asking if you want a cigarette.”

He sat leaning on the window sill. Outside, the sky was the color of factory waste on a cold day. The building adjacent to hers was a dark red brick made darker from exhaust. The streets were black, the sidewalks gray. The tree trunks, dark and quick, raced up to where the branches shot out leafless and random. They looked dirty. Everything looked dirty. A brown oak leaf twisted and spun in the air, brushing the window on its way to the ground.

“Are you sure you don’t want one?” He felt her eyes watching him, trying to see what it was she thought he saw. “Because, you know, I really think you should have one. It might do you some good.”

“You’re drunk,” he said.
"I wish," she said. "I wish I could get drunk and stay that way forever. Everything would be lovely then, wouldn't it?"

"I suppose."

"Of course you do. You suppose everything. That way you never have to know anything, do you?"

"Don't." He walked from the window to her bed and sat down. It was the only piece of furniture in the room besides the dresser.

"Well," she declared. "I'm going to smoke. I'm having a cigarette. And I don't care whether you like it or not." She shook one from the pack on the dresser. She put it between her lips and ran a hand through her chin-length brown hair. She searched the pockets of the jeans she'd worn the night before and then began tossing things from the dresser.

"Shit," she muttered. "Do you have a light? I can't seem to find mine." The cigarette bounced up and down when she spoke.

He picked up his jacket from the floor. He tossed her a matchbook he'd taken from a bar the previous night. It fell at her feet.

"Such a gentleman," she said. She bent over to pick up the matches and her robe fell open at the top. She raised up and struck the match. With her eyes closed and the match at her mouth, she sucked in, bringing the end of the cigarette to life in a burst of orange. She shook out the match. A small line of smoke curled before her half-shut eyes. "You know it's supposed to snow today. They say we're going to get a foot-and-a-half."

"Would you put something on?" he asked.

"What's the matter? You don't like this now?" She pointed and touched her breast.
“Don’t be difficult. Just put on some clothes.”

“Maybe I like this. Maybe I like it this way.” She tugged the cord around her waist and the robe fell open.

He followed the trail of her underwear, pants, and shirt, picking them up as he walked over to her, the clothes extended in his hand. “Here,” he said.

She looked at the ground and snorted. She took the clothes in her left hand and smacked him with her right.

“Fair enough.” He ran his tongue along his bottom lip and she smacked him again.

He walked to the window and stood with his back to the room. “Just put on some clothes.” He listened as she pulled on her shirt and zipped up her pants. “Thank you.”

“Fuck you,” she said.

“It won’t snow,” he said finally, turning from the window.

“What?” she asked.

“It won’t snow,” he said. “It never does. They always say that it’s going to, and that everything will be shut down. Don’t go out, they say. Don’t drive anywhere unless you have to. Then everybody freaks out and for two days you can’t get any milk or bread at the grocery and it’s all for shit because when you wake up the next day the ground’s just the same as it was when you went to bed.”

He watched the cars speed past. The drivers kept their heads forward and both hands on the wheel, and when the traffic slowed and they came to a stop, they leaned on their horns and yelled at the drivers in front of them.

“But what if it does?” She walked over to the window and stood next to him. “I always loved when it snowed because at night you could go out walking and the cold air
would sting your face, but you wouldn’t care because everything was quiet and abandoned and it was almost as though night weren’t night at all, but a different kind of day because of the way the snow caught the city’s lights. Everything seemed brighter. I loved when it snowed because everything was so still and fresh. Don’t you ever remember and then get excited when they predict snow?”

“I remember,” he said.

“I knew you would,” she said. He turned towards her and she was smiling.

“But there’s no point in getting excited about it.” He turned back toward the window.

“When you expect something, it never turns out the way you want it.”

“Admit it.” She placed her fingers on his wrist. “You like me. You know you do.”

A man walked up to the street corner and stood waiting to catch the light. He wore a white t-shirt, stained down the front, an old pair of blue jeans, and a yellow and green plaid jacket. He was an old drunk. You saw him at the bars, always at the end of the night, and he usually got thrown out, and then, as you left, you might see him stumbling up the hill alone.

“And who knows,” she continued. “One day you might even find that you need me.”

“Don’t talk shit,” he said. The light changed and the man crossed the street, his hands jammed in his pockets, his arms close to his body. He kept his head down and moved out of sight.

“I like you,” she said. “I do.”

“What time is it?” he asked. He watched her eyes.

“Nine-thirty.”

“I have to go.”
“Promise me one thing,” she said. He walked over to the bed and sat and put on his shoes. He considered picking up the t-shirt he’d worn the night before and which he’d also used to clean up after himself. He picked up his jacket instead.

“What’s that?”

“Promise that you’ll call at least once. I don’t care if it’s only a message, or if it’s only to say that you don’t really have time to talk but that you just wanted to say hello. This was worth that.”

He sucked the inside of his bottom lip. The flesh was salty and swollen. The floor of her room lay beneath stacks of books, shirts, bras, and dirty dishes. He felt nothing about that moment. He wondered if he was even supposed to.

“Promise?” She tugged at his hand and he looked up to meet her face.

“Maybe,” he said. A few flakes corkscrewed down from the sky and blew against the window where they melted. “O.K.”

Then, taking his wrist from her hand, he turned, and made as though to leave through the door.
Points of Light

After three weeks of turning it over in her head, the girl decided. It was a clear night and cold, and the stars, to the girl, were like points of light indicating another world beyond the curtain of black sky. Do not think I am impressed by that. Others have said similar things, and have said them better, but the girl, obsessed, was then infatuated with metaphor. She met the poet at a party, though these facts are not essential. What is essential is that they met. The poet was drunk, as poets are apt to be. His third wife had recently moved out of his house; she was twenty-four. The wife spent her nights reading his books and weeping and looking at her life as if it were a priceless thing. At the party, the poet saw the girl and approached her, hoping, as poets are apt to hope, that his reputation would precede him. The girl did not know who the poet was. She worked at a grocery store as a butcher; all day she sliced hunks of meat into expensive cuts. Her hands were white and raw, eaten with bleach and industrial soap, though blood still lined the ridges of her fingerprints. The following day the girl purchased the poet’s work, and the next night she read his poems, which dealt with pain of the emotional variety, loss, and loneliness. I do not find much inherently good about these poems, but they spoke to the girl. All night she fingered the pages, leaving, by morning’s light, red thumb prints in the corners. She thought his loneliness an ice-pick, its steel point gleaning small truths before pushing through the ice and splintering it into a hundred melting shards. So, on a cold night, the girl stood at the poet’s door, nervous and willing with the gift of her body, while the poet stood alone in his kitchen, listening to Otis Redding. And outside, the stars shone, indicating something.
The Ride

Chester’s wife’s nephew, Claudelle, was getting married in two days, and Chester had volunteered to drive to Lawrence, two counties over, and pick up the keg of beer and a couple of bottles of liquor for the reception. His brother Clint owned a liquor store and Chester could get it for a good price. In the scheme of the wedding, it was a small part to play, but Claudelle wasn’t Chester’s blood-kin, so much wasn’t expected of him.

Chester swung the Cougar Mercury onto the highway and pointed the nose straight until the yellow lines ran parallel to the left front fin of the car. Claudelle’d picked a hell of a time to get married. For two solid weeks, nothing but rain, and now the culverts were full, the creeks overflowing. An old covered bridge at the Mason/Fleming line had washed downstream. The Licking River stood five feet in Sherburg, and the Limousine and Angus dotted the slope of the surrounding hill where they milled and mooed, chewed wet grass and stared down at the half-submerged town.
It was Biblical; devastation everywhere. On the evening news, Chester had watched as the governor shook hands in Whitesburg, looked grave and concerned in Harlan. Drops of water speckled his glasses and ran down the worried gullies set deep in his skin. He stood with a family in front of their trailer, all huddled beneath a yellow plastic tarp. The father: gaunt cheeked and whiskered, Adam's apple prominent, and the heavy brow beneath which his deep distant gaze stared at the rain. He wore a blue mesh hat and chewed his lip. The family's trailer was sliding down the hill toward the highway. In the front yard chickens stayed dry inside two broken dryers and a rusted-out stove. A car on blocks, of course. The governor said it was a tragedy. He called for Federal relief. He asked the people of Kentucky to say a prayer; he asked the nation. The father's pale, malnourished-looking little girls stared bleak-eyed into the camera. We parody our own people, even on the local news, Chester thought. Difference between a hurricane and a divorce in Kentucky? None. Either way you lose the trailer. The governor had put his arm around the father and then he'd taken his thumb and wiped the water from the creases in his face.

Chester felt like a little company on the drive to Lawrence, so he cut through downtown Flemingsburg and hit Eleven, driving north toward Arlis' house. Arlis was married to Lydie's niece Pam. He was the only one of Chester's wife's people that Chester felt comfortable with, and that was because they'd both married into the family. The Wolf's were the largest, most respected clan in the county; Lydie was one of twelve. And when you multiplied that by all the children and grandchildren, it was not hard to understand how the name Wolf came to be on city councils, school boards, store fronts, and in news articles.
When Lydie’s father died and she and Chester moved to Flemingsburg to take over the farm, Chester knew what it would be like. His stock as a member of the family was low; Lydie was the only one of her siblings to go childless. It was no fault of Chester’s. He’d been married before Lydie, and had a daughter in Lawrence nobody in Fleming knew about. No, it wasn’t him; Lydie was as barren as an over-worked field. But she’d asked Chester to keep it quiet, and he had, and the family just assumed it was his fault. He let them think whatever they wanted. It was his and Lydie’s secret, which was something in a family and a town where secrets were as precious as good whiskey and as hard to keep.

Chester understood secrets. He understood the power of the governor’s furrowed brow and his studied look of concern. Pull the people close and throw some money at them, at their problems, and they would turn their head while you dug the change out of their back pockets. It was the oldest story in the book. Yes. Chester knew a thing or two about secrets. Chester had a secret all his own.

Some men, for their sixtieth birthdays, buy new cars, or take elaborate fishing trips, or simply go out for a nice steak and a drink with their wives. Chester had sat with his bare legs dangling over an examination table in Doctor Black’s office in Lexington. His paunch rested in his lap. His back was cold beneath the hospital gown. Chester had stared at a poster of a carrot advising kids to eat their vegetables while Doctor Black softly spoke the words prostate and cancer. Chester listened as Doctor Black said chemotherapy. It was the second day of the rains and Chester drove back to Flemingsburg that afternoon with the radio off, the car silent save the rhythmic tic-toc of the windshield wipers clearing away the water.
Arlis and Pam lived near the Mason County line, off the highway and a hundred yards behind Collier’s Implements. Chester turned off Eleven and drove down the gravel road between the rows of tractors, combines, wheat-discs. The green-and-yellow, the red-and-black machines sat rain-slicked and silent, reflecting the day’s muted gray light.

Arlis was a sort of miracle in the family. He’d had and beat more diseases than Job – Hodgkins when he was twenty-five, shingles in his thirties. Three years ago he’d had a valve replaced in his heart. Last April the doctors removed a tumor from his stomach and he’d been on chemo ever since. They told him not to hope for much because he’d already been through it once, but after Hodgkins they’d told him he and Pam would never have kids, told him the chemo had zapped his sperm. Six years later Gracie had come out screaming just like any other baby.

The Cougar’s wheels bounced over the gravel road and kicked murky water up from the pot-holes. Chester throttled the engine. Arlis’ house sat over the next ridge and Chester watched it grow in his windshield, watched as it came in and out of focus between the swipes of the wiper-blades.

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“Doctor says I’m not supposed to, but hell,” Arlis said.

“This rain puts a chill in your bones medicine won’t take care of.” Chester handed his silver flask to Arlis. Arlis unscrewed the top and took a long pull.

“Pam won’t let me touch it,” Arlis said and had another snort. “It’s been a year, Chester. I feel like an invalid.” Arlis handed Chester the flask and Chester took a drink,
capped it. Arlis sighed and shoved his seat back. He stretched his out his long legs and eased down into the seat.

“I don’t know how you do it,” Chester said. “I look at you and I wonder what I would do if I was in the same boat. Would I be able to handle it? That’s what I ask myself, Arlis.”

“You get used to it,” Arlis said. “It’s not so bad.” Arlis was tall and stooped, no bigger than a second, but then he’d always been skinny. The chemo had coarsened his hair and thinned it into wisps, but he’d kept it. He had color in cheeks. He looked healthy. It was almost as though he wasn’t just beating the cancer, but the chemo too.

“You look good. You don’t look like you’re sick,” Chester said.

“It takes people in different ways,” Arlis replied. He stretched down further and locked his fingers behind his head. “I guess I’m lucky, is all. You take that old boy Grady. He lost every hair on his body. I mean eyebrows, knuckle hair, everything.”

“Lost all that weight too.”

“Eighty-five pounds,” Arlis said. “Saw him at Dell’s the other day. I said to him, I said, ‘Grady, goddamn if you don’t look like those doctor’s got a lawsuit on their hands.’ Grady looked at me. ‘Damn it, Arlis,’ he said. ‘I think those sumbitches took my appetite with the cancer.’ Yes sir.”

“That’s what would scare me,” Chester said. “You know? I don’t see the point of giving it all up, of going through all that if it might come to nothing.” The Cougar curved down a long slope and they approached an intersection. A yellow caution light swung from the wire, blinking on and off. The road ahead was washed out and the police had it blocked. They would have to drive west and cross the Licking River in Payne, then cut
east toward Lawrence. Chester swung left at the intersection. "I admire you Arlis. I really do."

Arlis stared out the window. The river ran parallel to the road, and they could see it below them. It was swollen and moved fast. It hadn't crested yet, but trash of all kinds lined the banks of the shore.

"I'll tell you something, Chester," Arlis said. "Chemo's not the worst of it. Not by a longshot. It's no picnic, I won't lie to you. You feel sick. You don't want to eat. You're always tired. It's like all your desire's been drained right out. You worry about dying. You get scared thinking about the world and thinking about the world without you in it. It eats at you. But even that's not too bad. You get over it. You learn to let it go." Arlis paused.

The silver flask sat between them and Arlis picked it up, took two long drinks. He held the flask in his hands and stared out the window. The river was close to the car now, brown and muddy. It swirled with eddies and rushed past, eating the bank, tearing away great saturated chunks of mud and grass as it passed. Chester saw two men with garbage bags for rain coats walking near the water, two men digging through the trash that had washed on the banks, two men looking for treasure. The rain continued to fall and the windshield wipers beat a heavy time across the glass.

"Worst of it is Pam and Gracie. And I don't mean that in a what-will-they-do-without-me way. Pam's family is here, and I've got insurance. They're taken care of."

Arlis sipped the whiskey. "But it's wild Chester," he said. "Really wild. I've got this thing growing inside me. And maybe it's dead and maybe it's not. It'll come back or it'll go away; I'll live a little while longer or I won't. Doesn't matter."
“Don’t say that, Arlis,” Chester said. “Of course it matters.” One of the men by the bank lifted something over his head. He jumped up and down with it and the other man came running over. Chester couldn’t tell what it was from the road, but it was white, bigger than the man’s head, and looked heavy by the way the man was holding it. When the two men were together, he dropped it on the ground and they stood staring down at it for the longest time.

“No,” Arlis said. “It really doesn’t. What matters is Gracie. It’s hard on Pam too, don’t get me wrong. But I’ve been sick so damn long, and she’s been through it before. It’s different for her. I thought Gracie wouldn’t get it. I thought she wasn’t old enough to know. But she knows, Chester. She might not have all the words for it, but she knows. She sees me sometimes and she gets real quiet. Sometimes it’s like I’m already gone.”

“That’s a real bitch, Arlis. I don’t know what to say.”

“Me neither,” said Arlis.

A dark, rusted iron bridge went over the Licking river and into Payne. Midway across the bridge, Chester stopped the car and he and Arlis got out. They stood by the edge of the bridge, under an umbrella, and stared down at the fast-moving water.

“Ever seen it like this?” Arlis asked.

“Just look at it,” Chester said. “My God.”

The river carried everything – beer bottles, tree limbs, Styrofoam coolers, windows and doors. It carried empty cigarette cartons and fast food wrappers. A sink floated past, a bathtub. A lawn-jockey bobbed in the water, its lantern hand rising up as it turned over and sank down. Dead cows, dead horses, dogs, muskrats, beavers, bloated animal
corpses that boomed when they popped like balloons. Arlis nudged Chester, and pointed, and they watched the roof of a car surface and sink. Chickens and hay-bales, basketballs and tennis shoes. The river grabbed it all up and carried it down, plastic bags, underwear and socks.

"Think any of it will make it to the sea?" Arlis asked.

The Mississippi went to the Gulf, the Ohio flowed into the Mississippi, but the Licking River branched off the Ohio and went south. It ran into Cave Run Lake where they'd dammed it and it never left the state, going underground fifteen miles north of Lackey.

"I reckon most of it will end up in our backyard," Chester said. He cleared his nose and spit. He watched its high, upward arc and decent.

Besides moving fast, the river was also loud. From the bridge, they could hear as it roared past. Tree trunks snapped in the water and they could feel a low vibration through the metal framework of the bridge.

Dr. Black had begun talking about scheduling surgery and Chester's first chemo session almost as soon as he'd made the diagnosis. Chester asked how long. Dr. Black said the treatments lasted six months to a year. Chester said no. Chester said how long without the treatments. Dr. Black didn't say anything for a minute. He was a young doctor with a new practice, five years out of medical school. His job was to save lives, not deliver death sentences. I don't know, he said. He scanned his charts. He looked back at Chester. The fluorescent lights hummed. Six months, he said finally. Eight tops. But we can get it out, he said. There's a good chance for recovery. Chester thanked him
for his honesty and his time. He said he had to think it over, talk with his wife. He said he’d be in touch.

“’I’m tired,” Arlis said.

They stood and watched the river run a minute more.

“Me too,” said Chester. “Come on, I’ll buy you lunch.”


By the time they made it to Lawrence and picked up the keg of Budweiser from Chester’s brother Clint, along with two bottles of bourbon, a bottle of vodka and a bottle of gin, Chester had made his decision. After Clint’s, he took Arlis over to Frannie’s for a sandwich. Chester’s daughter Trina worked there as a waitress, but they weren’t sitting in her section.

“Clint says there’s a cock fight over to Jerry’s this afternoon,” Chester said. “If you feel like it.”

“Yeah. Be fun,” Arlis said. He dipped his french-fries in ketchup and poked them in his mouth. He took a sip coffee then got up to use the restroom. A few minutes after he left, Chester motioned Trina over to the table.

“Daddy,” she said. “Haven’t seen you in a spell.”

“Been busy with the farm,” Chester chased the ice in his tea glass with a straw. Trina was twenty-five, an attractive girl. Every week Chester told Lydie he was going to Clint’s play poker, but instead he took Trina to dinner. Sometimes they’d drive to Morehead for a movie.
“Momma told me,” she said.

“Yeah,” Chester said. “Doesn’t look good.”

“You tell Lydie yet?”

“No,” Chester said. “Don’t know that I will.”

Lydie nodded. She held a pencil and a pad of paper in her hands. She bit her lip and ran a hand through her long brown hair. Chester saw Arlis come out of the bathroom, wringing his wet hands.

“Do me a quick favor,” Chester said.

“What’s that?” Trina asked.

“Bend down here and give your old man a kiss.”

“What’s gotten in to you?” Trina asked. She regarded Chester with a doubtful grin.

“I’ll explain it later,” Chester said. “Over dinner Thursday, maybe?”

“You old fart,” Trina said. She bent down and kissed Chester on the corner of his mouth. “Momma always said you was up to no good.”

Trina turned and almost bumped into Arlis. Chester slapped her on her behind. Trina jumped, then turned and made like she was going to smack Chester.

“Go on,” she said.

“See you soon,” Chester said.

“If you’re lucky,” Trina called back before she disappeared through the kitchen’s double doors.

“Chester, Chester,” Arlis said. “What have you gotten yourself into now?”
“Old as goat, spry as a rabbit,” Chester said. Arlis stared at the kitchen doors where
Trina had disappeared. Chester could already imagine him telling Pam what her crazy
uncle Chester had done now.

“Well,” Arlis said. “Like my daddy used to say, ‘If you’re going to stick you dick in
the dirt, boy, you better make mud.’”

“Come on.” Chester stood and dropped a few dollars on the table. “Let’s make that
fight.”

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The men stood in a ragged circle in Jerry Trundell’s barn. In the center of the ring,
two rooster’s circled, and went at each other. One was green feathered, the other brown.
They leapt into the air, their feathers flapping, each trying to land the sharp, silver spur on
its claws in the other’s throat or chest. Outside the barn, the rain fell in a long gray sheet
but the men ignored it. They whooped and hollered and threw down their money,
challenging each other and making bets on bets, on someone else’s bets. They chewed
cigars and the smoke hung in the damp air above them. They passed flasks of bourbon
back and forth, between yells. They leaned in, they clapped backs, they defamed their
mother’s names.

Arlis sipped from a flask and handed it to Chester. Chester took it and toasted Arlis.

“Here’s to it,” he said. The circled swayed back and forth. One man jumped up and
down. Another got on his knees and slapped the dirt floor of the barn with the palms of
his hands. Arlis was still giving Chester a funny look and for that Chester felt sorry.
He’d rather not be remembered the way he was going to be remembered, but it would come out in the end. Somebody, possibly Arlis himself, would piece it together. It wasn’t that hard to figure out. And for the moment, Chester didn’t want to think about it. He felt alive. He had a wad of dollar bills in his hand and a soggy, chewed cigar end in his mouth. He watched the birds, trying to figure which one he would throw down on. The green cock flew four feet in the air and squawked and the brown cock jumped back.

Chester took a long drink from somebody’s flask. His face was shiny and wet and he felt a pleasant tightness in his chest and head.

“Green’s gonna do it,” one of the men yelled. “That brown boy’s going down.”

“Bullshit,” somebody yelled across the circle.

“I got five on that,” someone else yelled.

“Somebody back me,” the first man said again. His face was red, sweaty, and had a desperate, pleading look to it. His hat was clenched in his right fist and his longish black hair was plastered across his forehead.

“I’ll take that action” Chester said. Jerry nodded and Chester lay down his money as the green cock jumped into the air and made ready to strike.
The light turned red. Jason handed the unlit joint to Megan. James Brown stumbled to the corner of Maxwell and South Upper. We were parked fifty feet away. The street was dark. “I can’t get this thing lit,” said Megan. “You try.” Jason’s hands were at ten and two on the steering wheel. The car was silent, poised. James Brown stood slumped, a stain against the orange light of the street lamp. The light turned green. Jason handed me a small silver lighter. It was a woman’s torso. The woman wore a bikini, but she didn’t have a head or neck or arms, and her legs were cut off at the knees. Her flat metal stomach said, “New York.” “The perfect woman,” Jason said. “Light that fucking thing.” Megan said. James Brown held onto the corner lamp, doubled over, and vomited. I ran my thumb along the woman’s breasts, the top-half slid back, and two flames, an inch high, erupted from the top of her body. The light was still green, but the intersection was vacant. “Look at that,” Jason said. “Goddamn, would you just look at that.”