Watching the sun bake| Short stories

Alexander Shapiro

The University of Montana

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WATCHING THE SUN BAKE

short stories by

Alexander Shapiro

B.A., Union College, 1995

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

The University of Montana

May 2004

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Date
WATCHING THE SUN BAKE

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When the World Stands Still

It happens very rarely. The earth’s axis screeches and comes to a stop. Everything stands still then: storms, ships and clouds grazing in the valleys. Everything. Even horses in a meadow become immobile as if in an unfinished game of chess.

And after a while the world moves on. The ocean swallows and regurgitates, valleys send off steam and the horses pass from the black field into the white field. There is also heard the resounding clash of air against air.

-- Zbigniew Herbert
from Selected Poems
Half an hour before our descent into Logan, the flight attendants got hostile. They wanted me to return to my seat. There's a new federal regulation, said one attendant. Or maybe there always was this regulation, like the other attendant said, and they were just now starting to enforce it. Either way, they could not seem to listen for just one second to me and maybe try to understand a bit about my condition -- about what I, Eli Sugarman, a paying customer, was going through at the moment. Yes, perhaps I did look like a loon pacing the aisles, but what could I do? This was akinesia, I told them, a panicky form of motion sickness wherein the sufferer has trouble sitting still in moving objects. Think of vertigo, I said. Or think about being afraid you'll jump. If I could just roam freely about the cabin for a few more minutes, I would try my best to remain coolly strapped into my assigned seat for the last five or even ten. They then presented me with two choices: sit down, or they would sit me down and have me arrested at the gate. I sat. They gave me an enormous green pill to keep me calm, but I hid it under my tongue for later, as I was about
to see my family for the first time in a long time. My little sister Carol had gotten engaged.

When the attendants were gone, I undid my seatbelt and the top button of my pants and began breathing deeply. Of course, Dapper Dan sitting next to me in his pressed khakis and his navy blazer immediately put down his Wall Street Journal and went for the help button to rat me out.

"Relax," I said, my hand on his arm. "Please."

"Who are you telling me to relax?" he asked. It didn’t feel confrontational, though, or condescending. By the loose skin around his sort of shrunken looking skull, I’d say he was pushing seventy, but his tone was strong and sure. He coughed into a fancy handkerchief.

I was worrying myself, the way I was acting. The old-timer had been reading about biotechnology. Which came first, I wanted to ask him, the confidence or the money?

"Sorry guy," I said. "I’m just a little tense today. Little unsteady. Got a lot going on."

"Little unsteady," the man repeated, tucking the kerchief in his chest pocket like a crazy rose. "Lot going on," he continued. "Believe it or not, I’ve got a trick for that. It’s an old sailor’s trick my father taught me. If you’re ever feeling seasick, or unnerved, or whatever it is you’re feeling now, try staring at a fixed point on land. Really put yourself into staring at this fixed point, don’t even blink if you can help it, and eventually you’ll forget all about the boat. May sound far-
fetched, but it’s a matter of what’s called ‘perceived equilibrium.’”

What the hell, I figured. I looked out the window, ignoring the wing, through a wispy layer of cloud, and locked my eyes on what I determined in the distance to be a nice waterside cemetery. I focused and concentrated all I had into seeing it as clearly as possible. Waves crashed into the rocks. Fish were jumping, birds were singing and then sure enough I was there, sitting on a hill with my toes in the grass, salt air in my nose, cooler full of ice, twelve-pack of beer and who else by my side but my old high-school buddy, Tommy Sullivan. Sully.

There wasn’t much sun, but the day was warm. I cracked a beer, sipped the froth from the top. A seagull came by and dropped a crab on the rocks, then swooped down to eat the meat. As the bird feasted, a plane flew idly by, leaving a pencil-thin line of exhaust. “That’s you, Sully,” I said, pointing to the crab under attack. “That’s you.” What was strange, though, was that Sully didn’t look like Sully. Not as I remembered him. He was all grown up and professional looking in a tweed suit, smoking a pipe like Michael Douglas in Wonder Boys. And he wasn’t reacting to me.

I took a long pull of my beer and could actually feel the coldness run down my throat into my stomach and tingle through my fingertips. The seagull was really going to town on that crab. Blood and guts everywhere. It was disgusting. “That, sir,” I said a little louder, “is you.”
I felt the wheels of the plane dropping out from under me. Dapper Dan chirped up again.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"I wasn't talking to you," I replied.

I had to take a bus and a train just to get to the bus that went to Marblehead, then walk a couple miles from the fire-station where the bus dropped me off, so I was a little late to Carol's engagement party. A little late, and a little disgruntled. Not that I'd expected balloons, but it's an eight hour flight from Montana -- a ride home would have been nice. Once I got settled, though, and had a couple glasses of champagne, it was very pleasant. The bubbly flowed, there were doilies and toothpicks everywhere, trays of lobster rolls and bowls of green olives -- the whole affair was very sophisticated.

Carol was out of her mind with happiness, pale as ever, but polished. She looked like she'd been treating herself right. Her friends looked like supermodels. I suspected from the way they avoided me they'd been forewarned. Carol got a BS in psychology from Brandeis and discovered some strange things about herself along the way that she somehow blamed on me. I was the big bad brother. Beware. Hey, she turned out fine. She'd found love.

Dad was out on the deck talking business with some colleagues, mom was busy fussing over everything, and basically I was just standing there in the corner of the living room, beginning to wonder why I'd been invited at all, when Carol's fiancée strolled
over and introduced himself. Rick was a big guy with iguana eyes and very small hands for such a powerful handshake. Was he making a point? Or making up for something? I didn’t want to rock the boat, so I just congratulated him on his good taste in women.

“I’m jealous of you,” Rick said. “I was in Montana a few years back visiting a college buddy. Caught a big-mouth bass on Seeley lake, fly-fishing. It was like a religious experience. Always dreamed of going back. Tried to convince Carol to go there for our honeymoon -- Glacier, as a matter of fact -- but she had her heart set on Iceland.”

“See that?” I said. “Life’s funny. I haven’t really gotten into the Big Sky fly-fishing thing, but I’ve always wanted to go to Iceland. They’ve got the three B’s, I heard: beers, babes and barbeque. Or maybe it’s bonfires. Beers, babes and bonfires?”

“But no big-mouth bass,” Rick said.

I liked this guy. He was quick. I could see us being friends. I knew from talking to my mom that Rick was a lawyer of some kind. Lawyers make good friends, I bet, because they’re quick and they know there’s always two sides to a story.

“You want to play a fun game?” I asked him.

“What’s the alternative?” he said.

“It’s called ‘That’s you,’” I said. “You look around the room and find funny things going on, then you say ‘That’s you,’ to the other person and it’s a good time.”
An older woman I guessed was Carol’s boss started a coughing fit across the room and I seized the moment. “That’s you right there,” I said.

“That’s my mother,” Rick said. “She’s not well.”

“Yep,” I said. “That’s you, bud.”

“That’s not funny,” Rick said.

“I’m sorry your mom is not well,” I said. “But that’s how you play the game. It’s all or nothing. No holds barred.”

“Okay,” Rick said. “I guess I’d rather not play right now.”

“What was Carol like as a little sister?” he asked me.

“The best,” I said. “Allergic to a lot of things, and a little slow on the uptake when it came to jokes or fun games, but that never stopped her from enjoying herself.”

“Says you didn’t pay much attention to her,” he said.

“Hey,” I said, “that’s her memory and I’m sure it’s true for her. I wasn’t paying much attention to anything back then, Rick, to tell you the truth. It’s a matter of perceived equilibrium, I believe.” I grabbed one of the li’l smokies my mother was carrying around in a crock pot. “She was a real gassy kid, I recall. Pineapple was the culprit, we thought. She still gassy?”

“What do you do in Montana?” he asked. Apparently Rick didn’t like to talk about gas.

“Biotech,” I said. “It’s good stuff.”

“I saw that in the Journal today,” he said. “ Didn’t know they had biotech in Montana.”

I saw his game. He knew I was lying. I could tell by his eyebrows. Guy like this probably hates liars, I thought. I hate liars too. If he didn’t ask such intrusive questions, I wanted to tell him, I wouldn’t have lied.

“Carol told me you disappeared for a while,” he said. “No-one knew where you were.”

“Again,” I said, “that was her experience and I’m not here to disagree. Sounds a little magical, though, ‘disappearing.’ For the most part, I was just moving around.” Rick checked his nails. He was dismissing me, I thought. I was losing him. “You’re lucky,” I said. “Lawyer’s a good gig. I keep trying to put something together like that -- write something, start a little business -- but nothing ever pans out. It’s like the things I think are getting done aren’t anything at all, and sometimes a couple years go down the drain before I realize how messed up and wasted my efforts are. I don’t ‘disappear,’ though. I always know where I am.”

Another li’l smokie for emphasis, then Rick’s mom started coughing again and he excused himself to look after her.

Mom and a hired helper made a massive broiled cod dinner dripping with butter and homemade bread crumbs for the families, and dad was singing and dancing around and going on about what a momentous occasion it was and how great it was to have a lawyer joining the clan. Rick’s extremely ill mother told a few kitschy jokes, we all laughed quite a bit and I squeezed lemon on my fish and felt human.
That night the house creaked and I couldn’t sleep. It was strange
to be home in my old room, like a trespasser, an intruder, like
the kid who really lived there was going to come home and find a
walrus sweating in his bed. I scrambled through my old boxes of
crap and found Sully’s number in a little blue book with a
seagull-shaped blotch on the cover. It occurred to me that one
a.m. was a late time to call, but I’d already dialed, the phone
was ringing and I didn’t want to be rude and hang up. His wife
answered. I was happy to hear her voice, it felt familiar.
Unfortunately, I couldn’t remember her name for my life and she
didn’t seem to remember me at all. She seemed bothered.

“Try the Bunghole,” she said. Then it sounded like something
shattered in the background, and kids were screaming and she was
swearing and I just hung up.

The Bunghole is a bar in Salem, Massachusetts, about fifteen
miles north of Marblehead, the worst bar ever in the history of
bars. Burnouts, thieves, junkies, animal abusers, over-the-hill
prostitutes, that was the clientele. Legend had it that a kid
named Hubert Pallhuber went in the Bunghole once on a scavenger
hunt and lost a testicle to a blind dude with a fork strapped to
his cane. Sometimes the story went that the blind dude ate the
testicle and laughed maniacally. Sometimes Hubert rushed with his
severed ball to the hospital and had it sewn back in. It wasn’t a
place you called to inquire after an old friend.
I walked around town the next day thinking I’d revisit the old haunts. But I didn’t really have any old haunts, except for Big Tony’s Pizzeria, and Big Tony’s was gone. Some jerk took a torch to it, according to an old lady I stopped and asked. She said the whole town smelled like burnt cheese for a week.

I ended up sitting on a bench down by the docks, breathing in the harsh ocean air, throwing left over bread-crumbs to the seagulls and hoping none of the stupid ungrateful bastards would defecate on me. I was thinking about Carol and the time I went into Big Tony’s and she was sitting there with Sully chatting away all excitedly, and how after that she asked me about him all the time. She always pretended she didn’t remember his name. She called him “your friend with peanut-butter breath.” I was thinking, too, about how Big Tony used to spin dough on his finger like a Harlem Globe Trotter, and how it really sucked I’d never get to see that again, not to mention the loss to future generations, when “Fabulous” Fredric McNulty came out of nowhere and sat next to me.

“What’s up, dub?” he asked.

“Nothing much,” I said. “You?”

“Just hanging out.”

We nodded and looked out at the harbor.

Senior year of high school, our football team had five co-captains: Paolo Buckmaster, Keith Ketterer, Mick and Roger Beecroft and “Fabulous” Fredric McNulty. Somehow, this was the crew I hung out with. They called each other “captain.” They
called Sully and me "dubs," because even as seniors we were part of the mostly freshman and sophomore "dub squad" on which the varsity guys used to practice their cross-field tackles. McNulty hadn’t changed much. He looked real healthy. Big smile. Shiny, expensive looking sunglasses. Turtleneck sweater and gray slacks straight out of a Banana Republic catalogue. Somehow he’d even managed to make a receding hairline look cool.

“You still in Missouri?” he asked.

“Montana,” I said. “Just in town a few days for a family thing.”

“Everything okay?” he asked.

“Everything’s cool,” I said. “Carol got engaged.”

“Hey,” McNulty said. “Congratulations. Who’s the lucky guy?”

“Some lawyer named Rick.”

“Not Rick Soloway?”

“Yeah, that’s his name. You know him?”

“Yeah,” McNulty looked excited now, “If it’s the Rick Soloway I’m thinking, we played lacrosse at BU, then he went off to law school and I never saw him again. I actually got a message at the office two weeks ago from him, but my secretary didn’t get any contact info. Rick Soloway is a good man. Good to hear things are going his way.”

More nodding. Then McNulty started tapping his foot like there was music playing and I could see his mind remembering how hard they used to pound on me at practice and that picture of me in the yearbook where I’m being dunked headfirst into a garbage can.
“How is it,” he asked, “living out in the middle of nowhere?”

“It’s pretty good,” I said. “Get a lot of thinking done.”

“I bet,” he said. “I bet... Like what?”

“Like what what?” I asked.

“Like what kind of thinking? You going Kazinski?”

Kazinski? I thought of socking him in his pretty throat and seeing what he thought of that, but instead I laughed it off and did what I could to make a save: “You know what McNulty?” I said. “Did I say thinking? I meant drinking. Drinking, not thinking, you know? Get a lot of drinking done in the middle of nowhere. Not thinking. Drinkin’ like a fish. Fishing a lot, too. Hunting. Fishing. Hiking. Got a horse. Big cabin out there with a whole basement full of guns and ammo and meth I make myself. Drinkin’ and dinkin’, I should say. Got a little farmer’s daughter action, traded Old MacDonald a cow and a dozen chickens, that’s the equivalent of like $300 dollars American, and that little darling’s got a yin-yang tighter than a paper cut. Me and her out there, captain, I shit you not. That’s me. Drinkin’ and dinkin’. No time for thinkin’.”

McNulty laughed in a cool sort of way. I wished he’d go away.

“I’ll call the guys,” he said. “See what’s going on tonight. Maybe grab a few beers.”

He drew a little silver phone from its holster on his urban utility belt and walked away so I couldn’t really hear what he was saying. I caught something about “too much Buffalo,” and
"tweetie-bird" along with a laugh that made me wish I was wearing a hat.

"How's ten o'clock tonight for you?" McNulty asked me.

"Fine," I said. "Who's that?"

"Ten is cool," he said to the phone. "Call around, okay?"

He hung up and came back to me. "Ketterer says 'What's up'?"

We decided to meet at The Landing, a bar with candles instead of light-bulbs. I got there a little late and found them at the "Admiral’s Table," a great thick slab of oak with yellowed charts pasted under the glass and a big old-fashioned compass poking out the middle.

Paolo was the first to see me walk in.

"Sugarman!" he yelled. "Holy crap! Is that you?"

"Correct," I said.

"You look like hell," Ketterer said. "You get laid in Montana looking like that?"

I laughed and filled a glass from their pitcher.

"Well," I said, but McNulty jumped.

"Forget laid," he said, leaning in toward my face. "When was the last time you cleaned the wax from you ears? It’s insane, man. Can you even hear me?"

It was going to be a long night.

"What can I say?" I said.

Somebody brought up kids and the photos started flying from all directions. Buckmaster was married with two, a boy and a
girl. Ketterer’s wife had recently passed away after spending a year in a coma, leaving him three, two girls and a boy with bad asthma and huge ears. His wife got nailed by a drunk driver going 105 the wrong way down 93 and Ketterer was organizing a big anniversary fund-raiser to raise awareness. McNulty turned out to be a homosexual in a committed relationship. Everyone was begging him to come “queer-eye” their houses and asking what his “gay-dar” said about Red Sox second-baser Todd Walker. Mick and Roger Beecroft had taken over their father’s Audi dealership on 128. They both had serious tans. They smelled like coconuts and said they kept too busy skiing, sailing and “screwing little hotties left and right” to settle down.

When it was my turn, everyone turned to listen like they cared. I gave them the biotech spiel. I had to.

“Seriously,” Ketterer said. “What’s up Sugarman?”

“Come on, Sugar,” McNulty said. “Where you been? I heard you were dating some chick with a prehensile tail.”

“Seriously,” I said. “Okay. Short story long: I traveled a bit and then I got this job doing biotech in Montana and I met this great girl there, Jody, a grad student, and no, she did not have a tail. We had a kid and got married. Yes, in that order. So, Katy’s the kid’s name. She’s five, but I don’t have pictures because of various reasons. Sorry you guys didn’t get invites to the wedding, but it was a long time ago, and it was real small. Plus, it was in Africa. Big jungle safari thing. Got married right next to a giraffe. Jody’s an anthropologist, always off
digging up dinosaur bones, and I went back after the honeymoon to Montana with Katy. I was doing the biotech thing, like I said, losing my mind, of course, because I never saw my wife. Loneliness is so bad, man. I don’t know how people live alone their whole lives. It’s really hard. I didn’t handle it well. I can’t even tell you what really happened, because I honestly don’t remember. Let’s just call her ‘the biggest mistake of my life.’ Then Jody swooped back through and took Katy off to someplace and they write every now and then, but mostly it’s over. I miss them. I really do. Just to forget about things I took off and worked on a fishing boat in Alaska for a summer and ended up making a shit-load of cash. If you’re ever up for a good time, take a trip out to Alaska. Those mind-blowing northern lights? I rest my case. It’s really dangerous work, though, fishing. The advantage being, you don’t do it alone. Tell you what, too: when you’re totally weeded and knee deep in fish guts and slop, it’s like you’re too busy getting beat up to be worried about anything else. Just don’t eat the bacon. Food’s bad, man. You get on that ship, do not eat the bacon. It’ll rip you a new one. I made it, though, barely. Then it was back to Montana for more biotech. Add it all up and you get me. That’s what I’ve been up to, more or less.”

Buckmaster had gotten up to get another pitcher and take a leak about half-way through my story. He got back just as I finished.

“What jungle’d you say you got married in?” he asked.
“Borneo,” I said. “Crazy monkeys there. Lemurs.”

Finally, thank god, McNulty coughed “bullshit,” they all laughed, and we moved on to the life of Sully.

Last Ketterer heard Sully was working on a tugboat. I tried to imagine Sully on a tugboat, off at sea for months on end tugging tankers around, writing coordinates in a log. Sully wasn’t even strong. He was weak. And he hated the smell of sea water. McNulty said he heard Sully had changed his name to some strange Indian type deal, kidnapped and killed a little girl and either got sent to jail or was somehow released for some random reason. “But I may have dreamed that,” he confessed. Buckmaster confirmed the rumor, adding that it actually made a lot of sense, because he’d heard Sully was adopted and his real dad killed some guy in Maine. I remembered hearing about the Maine thing once myself, way back when, but I’d shrugged it off as a lie. I mentioned Sully’s wife said I could find him at the Bunghole.

“Ex-wife,” Ketterer corrected me. “Alyssa, right? Total nutbag, it turned out. Absolutely toasted. Out of respect for Sully and the kids, I’m not even going to say what I’ve heard about her.”

There was no way to know what was what without going to the Bunghole and seeing for ourselves, which none of us were willing to consider. “Sully wasn’t a great looking guy,” Roger said, “and he smelled like an overripe banana, but he could pound beers with the best of us. Poor bastard caught some bad knocks. That’s the long of it and the short of it.”
Around midnight, the guys started answering their phones and talking about boats, golden parachutes and 401(k). I started feeling a little panicky, like something was wrong with my spine. I still had the enormous green chill-pill from the plane, so I chugged that down with the end of my beer and went outside to get some air and maybe try that perceived equilibrium trick again. A taxi was idling there, which is extremely rare for Marblehead, so I decided to go home. I ended up in the bathroom at the Bunghole.

It smelled like someone killed a goat in there and then splashed not enough lemon Clorox around to clean it up, and there was no light except whatever glow made it through a few holes in the wall from outside, so it took a minute for my eyes to adjust enough and figure out where to aim. I was just getting started as the door slammed open and a guy staggered up next to me at the trough.

I can’t really relax enough to keep it flowing when there’s someone standing next to me, but this guy didn’t share that problem. He leaned against the wall with one hand and let loose right away with a loud, splashing piss.

“Hells bells, this place smells,” he said.

I recognized the voice immediately. How could I not? He was bald but for a patch above each ear, and slightly shorter than I remembered, and maybe it was the patchy light and the shadows, or the pill, but he was wearing short sleeves and I could have sworn
his thick arms were covered in flames and curse-words, skeletons and swastikas, dice and demons.

"Hey Sully," I said.

"Hey," he replied. "How's it hangin', buddy?" He smiled in my general direction, but I couldn't tell if he knew who I was.

"Like an anchor," I said, hoping he wouldn't notice that I was just standing there holding my willie with nothing coming out.

"Too bad about Big Tony's," I said.

"That place sucked," he said. He slapped me on the back and surprised me by walking over to the sink and pumping soap onto his hands. He flicked a light on above the mirror and laughed. "I tried to get a job there and that big fat Tony wouldn't even give me an application. How that guy even is still alive is a mystery to me."

With the water running, my flow resumed.

"You know what I'm saying?" Sully continued. "How many slices does a man have to eat?"

"You certainly had your share," I replied.

"I certainly did, pal," he said, wiping his hands. "Seems like I've been alive for ever. Nobody ever kills me. They piss in my cornflakes every morning, but they don't ever kill me. It just keeps rolling."

He was staring at me now, and his face looked mean. His brow was worried. His nostrils flared out with every breath. His eyes were set deep in his skull and inflamed, the skin underneath purple and lumpy.
I wondered if my old voice lived in his head like his did in mine. Constantly comparing, taunting, teasing, tormenting, gaming around. That’s you. That’s you. That’s you.

“Hey Sully,” I said, pointing at his slack face in the mirror.

“Yeah?”

I still couldn’t even tell if he knew who I was. What if I said it -- two little words -- and he didn’t even know what I was talking about?

“Good bumping into you,” I said.

“Always a pleasure,” he said.

I was doing up my zipper when Sully turned back from the door and swung at my face like he was going to knock my block off. The breeze from the punch alone almost knocked me down. He could have ended my life there, and maybe I’d have deserved it for some sick reason in his mind. Or maybe he wouldn’t have knocked me out. Maybe I would have taken the punch standing and then torn him limb from limb in that dark bathroom. Hard to know what will happen in such situations. But his fist stopped five inches from my eye and then dropped.

“Hey Sugarman,” he said. “Don’t let your meat loaf.”

There was a good one I could have said about chickens and eggs, involving a cock and the break of day, but I was thinking about the punch. I never was as quick as Sully.

“I won’t,” I said, but he was gone.

I washed my hands and ran cold water on my wrists to relax. I was afraid to look in the mirror -- the things inside it were
moving fast -- but I did it anyway. I had a strong urge to see my eyes. They looked spooked, and I looked like hell, as expected, but even with the spin and chaos of the Bunghole, it was a familiar spook. A little shiver went through me. It was a warm shiver instead of a cold shiver, though, and I felt almost good. Sully was Sully. Home was home. "That's you," I told the door, staring hard. That's it. That's all.
Myth Making

Around 2am this morning, Jody convinced me she was born with a tail. She claimed to have told me this before, too, and that we’d even discussed it at length. She went so far as to invite me to check the area for a scar, which I did. Then she laughed and confessed. I laughed too, but what I’m trying to figure out now – two-and-a-half hours later, three hours later, four hours later -- is what I would have felt had it been true.

For the few moments I believed, I raced down several emotional corridors. At first, I was frightened: Am I dating a monster? Then I thought, as so often I do in vulnerable situations: If she was going to kill me, she’d have done it long ago. Fear gave way to desire. Sort of kinky, I guess. Not that I consider myself kinky, because I’m not. Not kinky, then. Freaky. Like Jody was spawned, rather than born. The offspring of a supernatural being and Jody’s mom, Margaret. Stranger things have happened. I could be dating a half-mythic creature. An incubus? A succubus? I have often thought Jody to be psychic, this could have something to do
with that. And what would this mean for the kids, were we to have kids?

Then this strange practical side of me took over. This part of me was concerned about the physical ramifications. I asked myself: Had the tail been long? Longer than my thumb? Had it been bushy? And what if she still had it? I don’t think I’d like that, aesthetically. What if it grew back? Could I deal with it? How committed am I to this relationship? I might have trouble getting excited in bed with a girl who had a tail. It would be too much like sleeping with an animal, a beast. No, it probably wouldn’t just regenerate itself like that, or else what doctor would snip it in the first place? Dogs’ tails don’t grow back. It occurred to me on this path that I was lucky she got snipped early, because she’d probably be too “natural” to do it now. She doesn’t even shave her legs.

It was only then, at the end, thinking about the tail in a purely size-and-shape type of way and actually going down to see the scar, that I experienced what I can identify now as a feeling of loss. Loss, yes, of the idea that I could be dating a semi-succubus. And that maybe now our kids, assuming that’s even something we’re considering, will never be admitted to that super-freak school in that cool movie and take care of us as we age. But mostly loss over the idea that a moment in time would come when a couple of my old friends -- like Mick and Roger Beecroft -- would be sitting around back where I’m from in Massachusetts, drinking cold beers together, blankly watching the
planet’s strangest animals paw each other on television, and one of those guys would turn to the other and say something like, “You hear that Al’s girlfriend has a tail?”

And of course the other guy would have heard the rumors. The rumors would have been confirmed somehow by somebody, too. Whoever’s turn it was to respond wouldn’t even turn from the TV.

“That’s true,” he’d say. “Where’s that numb-nut at these days, anyway?”

“this own-lee”

That little sip of hot coffee you took, you’re still half-wondering whether it will go better with champagne than toothpaste goes with orange juice, but you can’t put too much thought into it now. It’s almost a non-issue, really, as the raw meat of your proposal has barely reached this soft Sunday morning in bed -- “Jody, my delicate, sexy, flower love, I’m moving to Alaska for work this summer and I want to know, I want to ask you if...” -- when the easy post-coital whispers from your red nibbled lips meet such a hush, such cold swells of silence perversely born of your argument for peace, pleasure, truth and kindness, that they shrivel your love, freeze the sheets, mute the pillows, blanket even the eggshell walls around you. Time is on pause, trapped pulsing behind sweet Jody’s sharp eyes like wind in a hollow rock. The pause grows, looms in your wake before the deluge which soon enough will come tossing, crashing, howling down upon your head with first the ache and guilt, then the wrath
and venom of this absolute beauty, this keeper, this ultra-
literate sex & drink machine with the accent of your dreams and
the buttocks off which your friends agree it would be ideal to
eat turtle sundaes, she who roused senses invisible to science
all night long, night after night for a fortnight prior to the
strange, ecstatic rhythms of Sasha and Digweed -- "this own-lee,"
she insisted, handing you the CD -- her rain washing all the soot
and scum from every room in your mind, drenching your body,
impregnating your soul with thoughts of five-carat solitaire
boulders, nestling her own shiny silver hook into your gut, where
you know -- you've known all along, you depraved pretender, you
cheap marauder -- that you should have told her before now,
before you made your decision, before she made a cuckold of her
boyfriend, before you blinked and that mangy squirrel on your
windowsill winked back, before telling your roommate Jeremiah,
his blabbermouth manager who has entered the bathroom beside your
thin wall singing Edith Piaf in French, bursting into a long,
loud piss, breaking the spell so that you might laugh, then
flushing when there seemed nothing left to drown this thing, this
insufficient lure, this hopeless invitation that you're about
eleven seconds into and three-quarters of the way through.

She will say no and you will wish to begin again. Close one
eye. Inhale. Hold it. Exhale. It's possible your ear may "pop,"
feel itchy or blocked. Hop on one leg until you feel better. Keep
your arms loose. Your wish is granted, wasted, a joke on you.
To Begin

[5:00AM] Home from the exchange, belly’s full. Cardboard box on the steps. A package, for me? Box itself smells clean as supermarket cake. Fifteen pounds, give or take five. Thick white string wrapped around and then in a bow, with a note. No postage evident. Too early for the mailman, anyway. Note’s from you, of course. Says: “A gift.” [5:05AM] Never, never my love, have I been so shaken and nearly overcome as upon undoing the butcher’s string this cold mid-summer morning. Shiny and slick black, wobbling on the kitchen table, suffusing the apartment with its tremulous ripe and furry tang, the severed head of a goat. But how provoking, this trill bouquet (devastation, waste, death). The smell I’ve encountered once before, waking under mildew-laden rugs, the swaying stink of saltwater, vomit and ten thousand unwashed feet in that rockbound barn by the sea. Here, though, hints of fresh straw and sweet hay, to where the breeze bleats between my teeth, gin-soaked baby onions shaggy on their way up, almost out, then sour going down. And the strange head, disengaged, yet violent and wild like a giant stripper banging in a tiny chicken wire pen, creeching high above a bar or ballroom choked with musk incense and clove cigarettes, mustached hunters with pool sticks paining each other’s mouths, broken fingers dancing through the smoke, brushing wet sod for perhaps one day valuable keepsake teeth. I hesitate to reposition the head because the eyes are still alive, the way they look: wet and reflective like lemons bursting with thick Brazilian coffee:
strong as the devil, hot as hell, sweet as love. Lifting monsieur goat by the narrow tuft of his chin, a clear spot of something non-tame wets my hand. I lick it, but not off, into my tongue, and a new strength arises, confirming itself within me. You can’t see this, but up from the sides of my head twirl thick grayish horns. [5:15AM] To the roof, the humped moon, the lightly mottled clouds, three pigeons, myself and the city. It’s the end, Oklahoma, beginning here. Thank you. So much.
Taking Aim

Certain things felt familiar: dull pain on the backside of his eyes, dry throat, fat tongue, hungry nausea, the lights, the confusion, the pinch of a needle and thread lacing through his anaesthetized face. Yes, he’d been here before. But it was different this time. Nothing was soft or smelled even remotely like freshly peeled oranges. No one was pacing the waiting room carpet, praying, moaning, getting ready. Nobody would be waiting outside with a car. He tried to get up, but couldn’t seem to move. He tried to speak, but nothing came out. Maybe I’m done, Burkard thought to himself. Just as well.

“Stop wiggling,” the surgeon said, clearly bothered.

Not done, then. More to come. Burkard’s fingers came back into his control and he opened his eyes. It was too soon, though, like looking through a broken kaleidoscope.

“Close your eyes, sir,” the surgeon said. “Remain still.”

“Sorry,” Burkard replied.

There was a time in his life when “It’s only money, you should be thankful to be alive,” would have been an appropriate
response. That time had passed. No, he did not feel thankful, lying there in wet socks and a blue plastic smock, running his tongue over what felt like chipped teeth. He felt stupid, and broke. He began adding up the cost. There had been an ambulance ride, to begin. And those don’t come cheap.

When the stitching was done, the surgeon -- a pocket-sized man with single malt skin and heavy, hooded eyes -- removed his operating mask and washed his hands.

“What’s the damage?” Burkard asked.

“You’ve lost some blood,” said the surgeon. “And you’re going to have a tough looking scar there on your forehead. The good news is: The EKG says there’s no brain damage.”

“Brain damage?” Burkard asked.

“Right,” the surgeon replied. “No brain damage. Just a little shook up, that’s all. Whether or not you choose to see a plastic surgeon about the scar is your decision, of course. Unless you’re on the nightly news, I wouldn’t worry about it. You’ll look tough, like a gangster.”

There’s a new one, Burkard thought. Brain damage. A mite excessive, he thought, for a night on the town.

“I meant money damage,” Burkard said. “How much is this going to cost?”

“They’ll have a bill at the front desk,” the surgeon replied, packing his bag.

“So, we’re done?”
"We are, yes. The stitches will dissolve on their own when the wound is healed. If there’s any real excessive bleeding, or if you find the wound turns a reddish-plummy color, you should come back in for a check up. Make sure and wear extra sun-block on the scar, though, for a few years at least."

The surgeon stepped out of the operating curtain.

"Hey!" Burkard yelled after him. "You gonna unstrap me?"

"Not me," the surgeon said, gone.

This mishap wasn’t the simple result of a night on the town. Burkard knew that very well. Something had been disrupting his balance for some time. He’d been a man of science, tenure tracked, until a series of mistakes -- transpired in varying states of rigidity and control -- stripped him of that pride, along with such niceties as friends and close colleagues. Gone too was his wife of seven years, a long-limbed, brown-eyed woman who picked her lip and thought she understood him. Well, he’d thought he understood himself, too.

He kept trying to ignore the disturbance, but feared he was inadvertently feeding it every day, in every way. He tried to squelch it with Scotch and beer; that just seemed to loosen the restraints. Whatever it was kept growing, devouring his life, now chucking him to the ground, face first.

But this wasn’t the right place to lose heart. If he broke down in the hospital, they’d never unstrap him. Body over mind, he thought, expecting to lose his fear, if not himself, in the pain his injuries. Between pain and suffering, Burkard chose pain
ten times out of ten. Apart from the dull headache, though, he was still relatively numb from the anesthetics. Instead of pain, he found pressure. He had to piss.

“Hey!” he yelled. “Hey! I’m still here!”

A tall woman in white entered the room. She had a tray in one hand, a bundle of his clothing in the other.

“You’ve certainly calmed down,” the woman said. She had dark brown hair pulled up in a French braid and was wearing gold hoop earrings with little feathers dangling off them, which Burkard found oddly stylish for the operating room. She looked at him. “It took them half an hour to clean up the mess you made this morning.”

There was an accent there that he couldn’t place. Southern, maybe. Or Californian. Someplace warm. Or maybe it was just kindness, as opposed to all the hurtful voices he’d been subject to of late. “Sorry,” he replied. “Were you there?”

“I was,” she said. “Don’t you remember? You called me a cunning stunt. That’s very clever for a drunk.”

“My head,” he explained.

“I know,” she said. “We have some nutrients here for you.” She looked at his chart and laughed a quick squeal, regaining her professional tension immediately. “Last night you said your name was Wild Bull,” she said.

“I don’t know about that,” he said, looking down his chest at his strapped down body. “Sounds like I was having fun, anyway.”
“Too much fun,” she replied, hanging an IV bag on a high stand and affixing a long needle to the tube. She tapped the needle and some liquid trickled out. “Just like mamma used to make.”

“What I really need is to take a piss,” he said.

“So piss yourself,” she said, smiling.

It occurred to Burkard that maybe something was wrong with this woman. She was taking altogether too much pleasure in his discomfort.

“Please, Miss,” Burkard said. “Unstrap me.”

“I can’t do that,” she said. “Hospital rules.”

“Aim it somewhere for me, then?” he asked.

Allergic to Latex

Carol spent her days as a small-cap fund advisor, volunteering every other Saturday night to assist the catering crew at Mass General. She’d been a student of the French Renaissance in college, a true believer in “work hard, play hard,” but already at 27 her once challenging work in finance had become a (hefty) senseless paycheck she was too busy working to spend in any kind of really interesting way. She found herself fantasizing about bodily debits and credits -- anonymous relations, prostitution, bukkake -- and the analyst in her was afraid that she might act on these impulses. Meanwhile, all the guys she met were porn-addicted schmucks who indulged their perversities behind computer screens, then went screaming at the first sight of anything real and risqué. She consulted a therapist who diagnosed mounting
dysphoria (an unpleasant state of mind marked by malaise, depression, or anxiety) and suggested Carol volunteer at the hospital to “get her hands dirty, in a safe way.”

At 6:00 a.m. her second week in, her last charge was Henry “Wild Bull” Burkard.

The curtain pulled and the tray rested, she donned her white safety gloves, took hold and aimed him into a large wide-mouthed cotton-swab container. There were only a few Q-tips left in there, and Carol figured they’d absorb liquid just fine. She held him like that for some time with no result. After all that fuss, Burkard had stage fright.

“I’m allergic to latex,” he protested. “Maybe if you tug on it a little?”

She removed her gloves. What struck her the hardest as this man laid there so early that morning with his shiny blue eyes — as she tugged, her elbow like a fiddler’s in his face — was the grace of his vulgarity. He wasn’t smiling, but he was clearly taking some pleasure in being this messed up. In this messed up situation. Was this broken-winged cherub she beheld — he of the blood-crusted eyebrows and the bullish drinking problem, he more foul than fair in the odor department — to be her devil, her deliverance? What was it Montaigne said? “The strength of any plan depends on timing.”

After some time, the man relaxed enough and peed. He was in the midst of doing so when Johanna, Carol’s supervisor, came in.
“Nice work,” Johanna said, referring to the nearly full container of urine.

“I’m almost done in here,” Carol replied, suddenly hungry.

“See me when you are,” Joanna said, leaving. “We still have some paperwork to do.”

“I’m usually much bigger than this,” Burkard said.

Carol smiled. What was it Montaigne said, again? “Only good things can be abused.”

Who’s Wild Bull?

Outside of the hospital, as the cold reached through the plastic stitches in Burkard’s head to embrace his brain, it was clear: He was going to get his act together. He had to. He’d see a shrink. He’d kick the drinking. A program, maybe, with steps and such. Regain some balance. He’d do yoga if he had to. Be up on one arm by next year this time. There could be no more falling down.

The thing to start off would be nutrients, some food. Whatever the anesthetic they’d given him to numb his face was wearing off and his jaw ached, so he tried to think of something that wouldn’t require much in the way of chewing. As he stood there, contemplating the best softest thing, Carol snuck up from behind and lightly placed her hand on his shoulder.

“You need a ride, Usually Bigger?” she asked.

“I’m not sure,” he replied. “I need something to eat.”
"You need a ride," she said. She raised a finger and set off a screeching noise from the corner cab stand. She let him get in first, then followed and gave the cabbie an address.

"You need someone to look after you," she said, laying her head in his lap.

"Or a helmet," he replied, unfastening her braids. Her long brown hair spilled over his legs and he gently ran his fingers through it.

"Have you ever seen the movie Legally Blonde?" she asked.

"Well, no," he said. But it was a lie. He couldn’t admit to a stranger that he loved that movie, never mind that he used to own it on DVD. He’d bought it for his wife, but really it had been for himself. He’d even enjoyed Legally Blonde II, which nobody liked.

"It’s the story of my life," she said. "So is Patton."

She sat up and took a lick of the dried blood on his cheek.

His stomach growled.

"Still hungry?" she asked.

"Yes," he replied. "I am."

"I’m trying to seduce you, Mr. Burkard," she said. "Is that so wrong? Don’t you like me?"

"I’m a married man," Burkard replied. "Let’s get some pancakes first."

"IHOP," he told the cabbie, who was pretending not to listen.

"Where’s your wife, then?" Carol asked.

"Hey, driver," Burkard repeated, "IHOP, okay?"
"Forget IHOP," Carol said. "We don’t have to go anywhere. We’ll take a nice ride."

Burkard tried to remember, but wasn’t sure if he ever knew this woman’s name. On the one hand, he was happy and thankful to be in the back of a cab with this gorgeous young woman who’d seen him laid so low and still decided for some reason she liked him. If she had a big bed with fluffy pillows and fresh sheets, he thought, that would enough. On the other hand, she might torture and kill him. Either seemed entirely feasible. Despite his fears, something about this girl made him feel a little taller. She looked at him like he knew something. He felt a soft attraction toward this stranger.

Five or ten minutes of quiet time passed between them in the cab, during which Burkard rested his eyes and ran his fingers again threw the girl’s hair. It was probably seven-thirty in the morning. Somewhere in America, he thought, a man in slippers who’s done everything right is retrieving the Sunday paper from a green grass yard.

She unhinged his belt and spit on him for starters. It seemed to take forever -- thousands of enormously gratifying moments adding up again after such a drought, her head under his hand zigging and zagging, heavenly retching and farting noises marking every pothole and bump -- and he paid off like an electrified convict. Soon after, when an elbow slammed into his stomach and the blood rushed back to his teeth, Burkard opened his eyes to an
entirely unfamiliar landscape: brick warehouses, clouds of smoke, shopping carts.

"Pay the man," Carol said, handing Burkard a hundred dollar bill. How long had it been, in that taxi? He got $65 back in change, however long that meant.

Burkard caught bright glimpses of other peoples’ lives through the cracks as they rode a freight elevator up to her apartment in what she told him was an old rum distillery. No-one was allowed to live there, by law, she said. But everyone did. He felt he could hear the people breathing, though the roar of the lift was deafening.

His brain scrambled to remember the last time he’d been invited up to a girl’s apartment. His stomach went a little crazy. Settle, he thought. Settle down.

"Do you play Scrabble?" he asked.

"Not usually," she replied.

The doors opened to a wall-sized mural of The Banquet of the Officers of the St George Militia Company and a vast loft-space which smelled sweetly of beeswax. A rainbow of parrots flew in and out of a wrought-iron bird cage chained to a whitewashed water pipe, raving.

"Do me," squawked one bird.

"Harder," squawked another.

"My ex used to watch a lot of porn," Carol explained.

"Sounds like quite a guy," Burkard said.

"He’s dead," she said.
“I’m sorry,” Burkard replied.

“I’m not,” she said. “He’s not really dead. Just dead to me.”

In the middle of the room, beneath a dimly lit chandelier, Burkard made out a red-clothed table set with piles of fruit and vegetables. A pear might be soft, he thought, but not the one he picked up, which was made of porcelain.

“Art,” Carol whispered, taking his hand.

She walked them over to the wall where the mural was and unleashed a rope from its stay. A gauzy curtain fell to the ground, revealing her carnival of a bed.

Watching himself in the row of rear-view mirrors sewn into Carol’s giant rococo leather headboard, Burkard raised his thumbs to his temples and waved his fingers for a full Bullwinkle, his old signature move. He pinned credit for his virility on the mirrors, which seemed calibrated somehow so that his distance from the headboard varied depending on where his eye rested. The effect of this, while disorienting and slightly dizzying to the brain, distracted his mind and enhanced the execution of this fortunate act. Credit for his force belonged to her friction and feverish velocity.

This lasted quite a while, until she flipped him underneath her and swiveled into reverse cowgirl. It felt great, but Burkard wished he could see her face.

He was about to scream when whatever bodily device regulates temperature and perspiration seemed to melt and the sweat streamed out profusely and all over, and the new rip in his
forehead started tingling. The bandage flew away as if blasted by a trumpet from within his skull, and they were face-to-face again. In the vision he saw both of them from both sides: she biting her lip and cursing, he clean-shaven and civilized again with a peaceful yet determined look in his eye. A low groan rumbled from deep in the kiln of his abdomen, calling him back, and the applause between their bodies grew more fitful.

She bucked, raising a pillow above her head, and with a feral whelp tore it cleanly in two, and the feathers like snow and the cloudburst of slick cyprene came from her center, soaking Burkard from bellybutton to low-knee.

Burkard whelped too and burst, then felt between his legs as the feathers began floating down around them.

The Ocean

Carol put her ear to Burkard’s head and heard the ocean. This man shouldn’t be in her life, she thought, nevermind in her bed, but she felt content. This was love at its thorniest, and ripped through her senses in all the wrong ways, through all the wrong holes. He was indeed to be her deliverance from dysphoric malaise, and a hot mania rushed through her blood which demanded another helping, more, more of everything. She recalled a line from a prose poem that she’d read once in French, though it had been written in Swedish, something about a path that grows over after every step, and swore not to let that happen with Burkard. Stay like this, she warned herself, still quivering.
He led her hand between his legs and it took a second to register what was different before she either fainted or died. From the confusion had emerged a new, extra weight in his scrotum. What felt like a third ball.

When she came to, Burkard was picking feathers from his hair. He proposed they shower and order some Chinese food, his hand on her thigh, his old wedding ring in his palm, and a reverberation bubbled up in Carol so that she could barely function without spasm. She was picturing a giant tongue, pink, so pink, lapping the back of her head, wetting her hair.

"No," she said, shuddering. "Not Chinese."

"What’s wrong with Chinese?" Burkard asked.

"Look in the freezer," Carol replied.

Equal and Opposite

Burkard looked again at the inedible smorgasbord beneath the chandelier. He recalled a joke that he’d heard about two bulls on a hill looking down on a field of cows -- Can we run down there and fuck one of those cows? the son asked. No, son, the father said. We’ll walk down, and fuck them all -- and recognized the magnificent experience he and Carol had just come through together. The sex, yes, but something else, too. Something more. His dignity was coming back. He could feel it swelling. He could feel the razor shaving his face, smell the aftershave. He had scraped the bottom, now he was going up. Burkard the man. Burkard the goddamn Bull God.
In addition to a monstrous purple dildo in the freezer -- which Burkard thought might be useful if his age ever caught back up with him, or, as he suspected was the case, his brain had really regained its equilibrium and he would soon end up preparing new syllabi and spending real time back at the lab -- there were also some frozen waffles.

He popped a few Eggo’s in the toaster oven and searched the fridge for butter, or syrup, then watched Carol feed the birds and put a canvas sheet over the cage so that they could get some sleep. I could possibly love this woman, he thought. She joined him before the toaster.

“What are we going to do about this new guy?” she asked him, one hand around his waist, her other gently cupping his ball-bag.

It took Burkard a moment to answer. He foresaw very odd trials and tribulations with this woman, whose name he still did not know. And he anticipated even odder times with this extra weight in his scrotum, the nature of which he had no idea. He also knew an incredible blessing had been given to them, that this third ball, if that’s what it was, was somehow equated with the burden of love, and he was grateful. He would figure this out. Maybe they’d stay together forever. Maybe just until he got back on his feet. Maybe just another night. He wouldn’t force anything. As best he could, though, and for as long as he could, he was going to work hard to honor this blessing.

“That’s not the real question,” Burkard finally replied.
I’m sitting here, perched on the edge of the cooler display in the prepared sandwich section of Publix Supermarket in Bal Harbour, Florida at 12:30pm on a Tuesday, it’s a teeny bikini mob scene and I’m lonely. The only difference between this here and Satan’s setup at the tree of life maybe being that Publix has AC. And I’m munching on a foot-long ham and cheese calzone, drinking extra-pulpy fresh squeezed orange juice through a long straw. And I’m mortal, so I can die. And so can the teeny bikinis. Other than that, it’s about the same.

Got almost half a gallon of OJ in me and three quarters of the calzone when this tall, blinky-eyed, Dippity-doo haired dude in a lime green Publix vest steps up. “Hey buddy,” he says, “When you’re done talking to that sandwich, you’re gonna need to pay for that.”

Behind him, a gaggle of pregnant onlookers pretending not to care.

“I’m eating inside because it’s too hot to eat outside,” I announce. “And I’m not talking to the sandwich. I’m a reporter.
I’m filing a report. This watch is a digital recorder. It takes pictures, too.”

“Are you baked?” Dippity asks. “You’re freaking out.”

“This is harassment,” I say. “Get lost, ye foot-licking pignut.”

“You know what,” he says, “Screw it. Go ahead. I hate this job.”

Ha. I win.

I look pretty good on the outside -- I’ve got the black hair, the blue eyes, the naturally high metabolism and I drink plenty of water -- but I’m not a happy guy. In fact, I’ve put a lot of thought into it and I’m about to shed this earthly coil. Seen everything I care to see and plenty of stuff I didn’t care to see and it’s all a bunch of bullshit anyway and I’m ready to be done. Twenty-nine years and eleven months old, I’d prefer not to turn thirty.

I keep almost doing it. I was going to do it the other day, had my Dad’s old .38 all bulleted up, but the phone rang and I ended up talking with this depressed sounding telemarketer girl. Laquisha, from Georgia. Selling credit cards.

“Today’s your lucky day,” I told her. “Go ahead and load me up. What the hell? Give me two in every color.”

She thought I was messing with her.

“Seriously,” I said. “If it makes you look good, give me one under Al Sugarman, one for Alex Sugarman, and one for Alexander
Sugarman. Send me magazines. Dirty movies. Change my phone company. Do it all. And rush it through.”

The funny thing was that I said that and she still insisted on going all the way through with her sad little rap. So, it seems I have credit cards on the way and for every $500 worth of stuff I charge I get a coupon for a free pint of Ben & Jerry’s. I wonder what Laquisha gets out of the deal. I even wonder a little bit about what she wants, though I suspect I know.

After talking to Laquisha, I don’t know why, but I felt exceedingly horny.

As soon as those credit cards get here, I’m calling an escort service. I keep hitting the bars in search of some pig for a final roll in the hay -- I’ve still got credit at The Quencher out on Surf Rider Lane from back when I was with the bank -- but I can’t seem to seal the deal, so I end up wasted, and I’m not about to off myself drunk. Blow off my face and then they’d clean me up and put me in a ward with Nurse Ratchet. Minus a face. It’s also against the law to commit suicide in Florida. I don’t care about the law -- as long as I’m dead they can play marbles with my nuts -- but I’d prefer not to get skull-boned by some Nazi skinhead jail gang because I messed up calling it quits.

I’d just as soon chow down the rest of this ham and cheese rollup, chug this carton of orange juice, strut straight past the cashiers like I didn’t find anything I was interested in purchasing today and get this thing over with. Except I messed up.
First, due to some residual paranoid concern over Mr. Dippity, and because I’m so broke at the moment I can’t even pay attention, I’ll have to have words with Publix customer service regarding the unsatisfactory quality of their products.

Then there’s the more dire matter of my sister. I got this postman at my door today with a certified letter from Carol, my little psych major sister; she’s coming to visit from Boston. She’s worried about me. Some things never change. When I was a kid and I wouldn’t come out of my room for dinner, my mom would send little Carol up to talk to me. Carol was maybe nine and I was about twelve and she’d pull down the covers from over my head, run her hands through my hair like I was a Cabbage Patch doll and tell me everything was going to be okay. And then it sort of was for a while.

So I owe her at least my breathing self when she arrives, though I get nervous she’s around. For good reason. Last time Carol came she decided I was acting funny, set off the loony alarms and the result was a year on zombie pills. I was so zombied out I didn’t even think to worry about it. Got a job at the bank. Just went A to B, A to B, A to B and that was okay in my book. Oh yeah, not to mention, a year of my life without an erection or even a faint desire to have one. Not that I need a bone for any progeny reasons -- even if I wasn’t going to send my own life out of this world I wouldn’t want to bring another one into it -- but it feels good.
Point being, if Carol saw what I was thinking now, if she got a whiff of my plans, I’d end up strapped down in the hospital with an orange rubber ball in my mouth before supper. I’ve been carefully screening my calls for weeks so as not to talk to her, so she sends me a letter. Why can’t certain people just leave me alone?

Outside the Publix, I realize that I forgot to file my complaint with customer service. No-one seems to be chasing me down though, which is good, because my sneakers are basically sticking to the pavement it’s so freaking hot. Plus, I ate too fast, so now I’m too full to run. And also, on top of that, I’m cooking up like Alex cordon bleu with all this ham and cheese in me. If I didn’t hate the taste of vomit so much, I’d puke. If the world weren’t so ridiculously hot and slippery all the time, things would stack up instead of sliding off each other. You’d have your vertical gains, instead of your endless horizontal, your A to B. Always getting from A to B. As soon as I get there to B, turns out it’s A all over again and I’m off to the new B.

It should build. As in, I should be able to stop for a breath at B and then climb up to C. And then when I’m ninety-nine years and fifty weeks old I’d finally make it to Z. I’d linger there, in bliss, for a couple of weeks. Then, with one minute left of day 36,400, my mind would jam down to A and then bolt it’s way back to the top at lightning speed, and if my life had meant anything then my head would pop off and my soul would fly away. Something beautiful like that. Or even a warm feeling. I wouldn’t
have to endure the shame of male pattern balding just to suffer some kind of unintentional injury and then get testicular cancer in a wheelchair and die like a freaking mutt. Maybe I’d laugh.

But no. That’s not life. Get out of bed. Shower. Put on some clothing. Most people would go to work or school or for a swim at that point. I do whatever. I don’t even get off of point A anymore. I just do whatever. Someone else might punch some buttons. Buy a sandwich. E-mail. Make some demands. Meet some demands. Make some calls. Shift-F7. A to B. A to B. Twenty-seven, twenty-eight, twenty-nine... Here I am. Kaput.

As I walk home across the sun-cracked highway, sweat bubbling from every inch of me, my right middle finger extended for honking cars, I wonder how hard it would be to find out where Mr. Dippity lives. I’ve been thinking about terrorizing some folks prior to my own departure. Nobody specific yet. I don’t have any scores to settle or outstanding vendettas to avenge. But it’s on my mind. It’s something that’s on my mind. I’m on the lookout.

"Use the cross-walk," some loudmouth old man in a Buick Skylark yells at me.

"Control yourself!" I yell back.

The Skylark pulls to the breakdown lane and starts following me. I can see that the old man is talking excitedly on his mobile phone, so I scramble up the embankment and take the long way home.

When I get back to my apartment complex, dripping, there’s a basket of yellow and blue flowers in front of my door and it
sounds like someone’s having a luau. There are about thirty bees swarming the basket, but I manage to extract the card before flipping the basket over and running inside. A gift, says the card, from the family of my newly deceased neighbor.

Truth is: I killed my neighbor. I went over there to kill her cat and throw it away because I hate cats, I’m allergic to them even through walls, plus this one wouldn’t stop meowing, but the lady came home just as I was crawling in her window. The lady, my neighbor, she had a heart attack or something. She fell and flopped around taking deep labored breaths in, but no breaths out. It was over in a minute. The whole place reeked of vinegar, fur covered blankets and cutesy pillows everywhere, but I couldn’t find the cat. Little furball was hiding from me. Figures. I called the ambulance. Told them I went over to borrow some sugar, the door was open and she was on the floor. They seemed satisfied with that explanation. It happens. She was old. That was yesterday. Now it’s today.

In my apartment I find that I’ve left Margaritaville on repeat. I’ve been listening to a lot of uplifting music lately. Bands I haven’t cared for since Junior High, but figured I could give one last shot. Plus, they’re the only CD’s left that don’t skip. Jimmy Buffett’s nibblin’ on sponge cake, watchin’ the sun bake. All of those tourists, covered in oil.

 Barely have I closed the door behind me and changed into my sarong when the doorbell rings. Some chubby mini-minister looking kid in a black suit, white shirt, a little black bowtie too tight
around his thick neck. I'm here half naked with my hairy chest, Buffet's all "Son Of A Son Of A Sailor" on the radio and my gun's all in parts on the kitchen table because I'm planning on cleaning it good, and the kid looks straight down at my feet and goes, "I just wanted you to know that I love you and that Jesus loves you." His hair is so clean-cut I can smell the witch-hazel. His friend who he's walking around with -- a tall, sun burnt, sloe-eyed kid with a peach fuzz mustache -- sort of nods in agreement, as if to say, "Me too, man."

It feels like a commercial for beer, so I offer the kids one. They say no, but that if I have any questions, Jesus has answers. That I am welcome to come down on Sunday to such-and-such a church and check it out.

"I'm Jewish," I tell the mini-minister.

"That's no problem," he says. "You can still come."

Awkward silence ensues, so I slowly close the door and procure myself a cold beer.

My gun has a silencer, as all guns that belong to people who plan on using them should, so I practice shooting on the birds and squirrels outside my window. Once the sun goes down, though, it all gets so blurry. I had two twelve-packs in the fridge. And then there was one. And I know who drank them. Because it was me. These things are not mysteries. Life is not such a big mystery as some people need to believe. I'll take that muzzle off when it's my turn. I want to hear it. I want it to go "boom!" I want the last sound I ever hear to be the loudest sound I've ever heard.
Usually I read and listen to music at night, but those beers kicked my ass so I turn on the tube. I used to have a satellite setup with a special pirate-card so I got every channel in the universe, free, but the company figured it out somehow and fried my connection. I saw a thing on the news about how they’re trying to hunt people like me down now and prosecute us to the fullest.

I finally tweak the rabbit ears around to get that one lucky station when the doorbell starts up again.

“Jesus Christ,” I yell. “Who is it?”

The bell rings again. Apparently I’m not enunciating clearly enough.

“Who the hell is it?” I say, my mouth a nose below the peephole.

It’s the sloe-eyed Jesus kid with the peach fuzz. “My name’s Charlie,” he says. “I’ll take you up on that beer now.”

There’s this wicked blonde pharmacist on TV named Rachel who likes shopping, volleyball and volunteering, and she’s in a hot tub trying to seduce this rich bachelor guy who looks like he has sex hourly. He asks her why she’s ready to get married. “I have graduated from college and am ready to settle down,” she says. Which differs from Penny’s reasoning because Penny is a raven-haired account executive for a photography company and says -- in her beguiling British accent -- she’s enjoyed herself “immensely” and has done “so many” things that she’s always wanted to do, and now she’s ready to take that next step and share her life with someone. They leave us with a picture of the bachelor, flying
through the woods on a ninety-foot tall giraffe, smiling like a maniac.

"That could be you, man," I say to the kid.

"The bachelor is a homo," the kid says. "He bottoms out for the producer and the chicks are all actresses. Rachel was in some movie where she crushed bugs with her bare feet and shit."

"Did you see the movie?" I ask him.

"It was in the paper, man," he says, clearly annoyed. "That's the whole point of this show, watching these weirdoes pretend to be normal. You live under a rock?"

He goes to the fridge for another beer, but we are all out. He stands there, thinking.

"If I give you ten bucks, will you buy us a bottle of JD?" he asks me.

"Who's us?" I ask. "You got a frog in your pocket?"

"The hell are you talking about?" he says. "Us, man. You and me."

We call a delivery service and the booze is there in no time. We do a few shots each, then I fall over a few times trying to flip and Charlie grabs his bottle and hits the bricks.

The day of Carol's arrival coincides with the arrival of the credit cards Laquisha sent me, so I hire a limousine. When Carol gets in, she looks a little surprised to see me. She rubs my head, less and less cabbage in the patch every day. Looks me up and down real quick and says, "You look good." Says, "I love
you.” Looks at my eyes, looking for something. I give her nothing. Most people don’t know how to fake a smile with their eyes. They’re so used to lying out of their mouths that they smile with their mouths and completely leave the rest of their faces looking sad. I am not most people. I own this game.

“Nice limo,” Carol says. “What have you been doing for work?”


“Is that why mom called you at the bank last week and they said you don’t work there anymore?” she asks.

“I love you too, Sis,” I say.

“Busted,” she says.

Break it up, I’m thinking. Break it up and switch it around, quick. “Bust this,” I reply, pointing at my lap.

“You are so busted it’s not even funny,” she says, laughing.

“I got a new job,” I say.

“So busted,” she replies.

Carol is not usually so peppy. It’s an overtired sort of pep, which makes sense with the dark bags under her eyes. Confusing, scary. It’s a test, maybe. If I go along, if I admit that things aren’t all peaches and cream, if I join in the laughter, it’s orange rubber ball in the mouth time for Alex.

I’d decided prior to picking Carol up that I wouldn’t lie unless confronted directly with a question that left me no wiggle room. But I am allowed to love. There is no contradiction there. I do love my sister. I feel a funny dynamic at play: a balance between maintaining my dignity and the dignity of my decision to
check out and not wanting to get locked up and not be able to pursue my goals. I have to work with the system in order to beat it. This is acceptable.

"What happened to your car?" she asks.

"I'm simplifying my life," I tell her.

"Me too," she says, drawing out each vowel in such a way that makes me incredibly uncomfortable. Everything about Carol now seems like it's in slow motion. She looks out the window at the palm trees whipping by and lays a finger gently to the glass. She yawns. Traffic -- for whatever reason -- slows to a halt.

I am considering jumping out of the car right there on 95 and running away, but I'm not sure how that could work out in my favor, since I'd still end up having to go home for my gun and by that time the alarms will be going off everywhere, so instead I'm biting the skin from the corners of my thumbs and checking out the driver's medallion when Carol snaps out of her reverie, grabs the back of my head, presses her face to mine and looks again at my eyes. "Let's simplify together," she says.

An immediate response is required, so I laugh. It's all I can do. A full, booming, ha-ha-ha, you're a funny one laugh that gets her out of my face. A crunching thing is going on in my stomach and my mouth feels dry, dry, dry. "You're acting strange," I say, and just as soon regret having said it.

"Am I?" she asks. Her stare is killing me.

"Are you what?"

"Acting strange?"
"That’s what I’m trying to figure out," I say. Keep it rolling, I figure. Talk your way out, Big Al. "I read somewhere about how they’ve got those cabins pressurized funny and it can affect your brain chemistry and people can flip out, but that might just be on really long flights. Let’s change the subject. For how long, may I ask, do I have the pleasure of your company?"

Carol returns her gaze to outside the window.

“How old am I?” she asks.

“You were born in 76, however old that makes you,” I say. “I know your birthday. When’s mine?”

“What did I get you for your birthday last year?” she asks.

“That set of dishes?”

“A fountain pen. And what did you get me?”

“I don’t know,” I say. “Probably a CD you wanted.”

She harrumphs. “What’s for dinner?”

“Steaks? It’s on me.” I say, figuring a hearty appetite is usually one of those signs that scream: Healthy! Wealthy! Happy! The sky’s the limit.

Carol nods yes. She is holding her head.

“Are you crying?” I ask her.

“You smell like a goat,” she says. “Do you have any weed?”

“To the Palm,” I tell the driver.

“Think it’d be faster if we walked?” Carol asks.

“It’ll clear up after the exit,” the driver says. And it does.
Carol and I spend a little time together at the bar waiting for our table, she rehydrating from the flight, myself enjoying a bird-bath martini, talking about our crazy mother and how much like her we are, and I actually get her to laugh telling her about Mr. Dippity at Publix and my quick thinking with the digital recorder business. I pull the maître d’ aside on the way to the table and ask him to please allow the sommelier to pair our wines, because I don’t want to deal with it. Between Carol and I, all the conversation is on the level and about something else. We’re mostly going on about how freaking dumb the world is, but without being nasty, until about midway through the meal when I notice she’s barely talking and the waiter asks if we’d like another bottle of wine when Carol doesn’t appear to have taken so much as a sip of hers.

I’m done, I’m thinking. I’m sunk. It’s over. She knows. She can tell. I’m going to have to do a whole lot of life-affirming bullshit with her now just to get her to go away. I’m thinking, I don’t know, jet-skis? The zoo?

“Are you not pleased with the wine?” I ask her.

“I’m here to say good-bye,” she says.

Some dickhead, it turns out. Really hurt her feelings. Didn’t respect her. Did her wrong. Now there’s a baby growing in her -- “the bump,” she calls it -- and she needs to get it out. Of course it’s too late for whatever reason to do legally, and can I help and, finally, where is Dad’s gun? She’s “checking out,” she says. And can I not tell Mom? Prime aged porterhouse on my fork
and creamy spinach crawling down my throat, and I’m hearing this and it’s a travesty. Why does she think like this? Why is she always so dramatic? So black and white. This “woe is me,” all-or-nothing mentality is desperate and stupid. You don’t kill yourself over some dickhead. Or for any of the millions of wrong reasons. I know that we all end up in the same place, but I think, at least in Carol’s case, that it should be thought through. Thoroughly.

“I don’t know any doctors like that,” I say.

“We’ll find one,” she says.

After dinner, I give Carol my bed and sleep on the couch.

In the morning, I call in sick to a random phone number. I tell a complete stranger that my sister is in town unexpectedly on an emergency and that I’m going to need a day to sort things through. We relax at the pool drinking rumless pina coladas, because I’m still worried about appearances.

“Marco,” she says.

“Polo,” I reply.

I’m having a real hard time being honest with Carol.

The next morning, I wake up at 8:00am, shit, shower and shave, put on a suit and head out for nowhere. Carol says she needs money so I give her a credit card. Alex can be a boy’s name or a girl’s name, so it should work. I’ve always imagined what it would be like to sit at Starbucks all day, drinking fancy coffee drinks and reading the paper, jotting down notes as if I were that Irish poet Benson McGillicutty -- whose tongue, they say,
was stronger and more dexterous than a trapeze monkey’s tail --
but when one of the baristas suddenly gets violently ill and has
to bolt, Jan, the manager, asks me if I know how to work an
espresso machine or a cash register, which I don’t, so they close
early. That night when I come home my apartment is filled with
electronics and honey baked hams. I say nothing.

The next night when I come back it isn’t. I get home all
tweaked out on caffeine and am in the midst of breading some
chicken when, nearly simultaneously, the doorbell goes off and
the phone starts ringing. Carol’s vegged out on the couch
incommunicado smoking clove cigarettes and doesn’t seem to be
responding to any stimuli. My hands are gross, so I ask for a
little help. “Hey, Sis,” I say. “Little help?” I can’t tell if
she’s incredibly slow or if I’m just incredibly fast, but
something’s off. She seems to cringe a little with each ring.

“What’s wrong with your TV?” she asks, not picking up the
phone.

I get the door. It’s peach fuzz Charlie.

“Hold on Charlie,” I say, picking up the telephone. “Hello?”

“Alex?” the voice asks. I have to smush the phone into my ear,
because the caller is talking very softly.

“Hold on,” I say, waving in Charlie. “Yes, this is Alex
speaking.”

“It’s Laquisha.”

“Oh, hi Laquisha.”

Carol pipes up: “Laquisha?”
I hold a stern finger to my lips. "How are you?"

Silence. In the background I hear a low reggae beat and what sounds like a baby burbling. She’s definitely not at the call center.

Charlie has helped himself to a beer from the fridge and is heading for the couch.

"I’m okay," she says. "I’m just calling to see if you got the credit card, and how that’s working out for you."

"Yeah, that’s working out great. I’m spending away. Thanks. How are you?"

As I watch, Charlie sits down and puts his arm around my sister. She seems not to mind.

"That’s great," Laquisha says. "I’m glad that’s working out for you, sir."

There is loud yell, then the line goes dead. I star-69 her. A man with a deep, angry voice picks up. I can hear the same low reggae beat behind him, but now the baby is really crying hard.

"Is Laquisha there?" I ask.

"You got the wrong number asshole," he says.

On the day of my birthday, I go for a walk, ostensibly to pick up a few cleaning products, but really just to clear my head. It is clear that I will not be killing myself today, and that’s a problem. I hadn’t planned on being around past this day, and now I have to think about what’s going on and what I need to do about it. The credit cards have been working their magic for a while, but even they have limits. When I get home, sure enough, there
are a couple of cops with note pads talking to my sister, so I scoot. When I come back an hour later, my sister is on the couch in her underthings with the gun, petting my deceased neighbor’s cat.

"Where’d you find that thing?" I ask her.

"It was screaming outside," Carol replies. She has obviously been crying.

"The gun," I say.

She’s too busy blowing her nose to reply.

"What happened?" I ask.

"There was a robbery next door," she says. "Drugs."

"Which neighbor?" I ask.

The one I sort of killed was to the right. Carol points to the left. "And, I did the dirty deed with peach-fuzz Charlie," she says.

"Oh Carol," I say. "Why?"

"He gave me a name, down in Tavernier."

"A name for…"

"A name."

"Pack your bag," I say. "Let’s go."

There is something seriously wrong with my sister, I realize. She is a creature from an entirely bizarre lagoon. She doesn’t move.

"What are you thinking?" I ask.

"We should bring the gun," she replies.

"The gun stays here," I say.

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She packs it anyway.

I call the landlord and tell him I'm taking off for a bit. Figure, cover my ass. "I'm afraid in my own home," I tell him. He understands, he says.

The drive down Route 1 is a two-lane highway surrounded on either side by clear blue ocean, and the rental car is a convertible, and Carol falls asleep, so I keep going past Tavernier. There's the sun shimmering off the water, parrots squawking in the parrot trees and the windsurfers jumping around, and for a stretch I feel like I can even see little orange and purple polka-dot fishies swimming around in the coral, though I feel like that shouldn't be possible. At the end of the line is Key West, Margaritaville herself.

There's a steel-drum band playing in Jimmy's Tiki Time Café, the margaritas are massive and coming in strong, and I can't take it anymore. I am very upset with Carol for sleeping with Charlie.

"I can't take it anymore," I say. "I can't believe you screwed Charlie."

Carol looks shocked. "I'm sorry," she replies. "It wasn't pleasant, but it was necessary." She opens her purse to reveal a cornucopia of horse-sized pills and tablets, frosted marijuana nuggets, mushrooms, blocks of hashish, little baggies of gray and brown powders and vials of shiny white rocks I can only assume are crack. "I got a doggy bag from the neighbor, though," she says. "Would you like some?"
We are carrying on rather loudly and people are gawking, so I’m not surprised when a serious looking group of parrot beaked men in Hawaiian shirts and chesty women in grass hula skirts and flower leis approach the table.

I am surprised, though, when I notice that the cheeseburger set before me has a candle in it. The crew starts singing – lettuce and tomato, Heinz 57 and French fried potato -- and then maybe the hottest woman I’ve ever seen in my life leans over, fixes me with those big beaming green eyes like a dragon and gives me a big fat kiss on the lips. She’s leggy and young with coffee skin, and she’s got the flip-flop earrings on, but most of all she just smells like a coconut.

“Make a wish,” says Carol.

“Happy Birthday,” cries the rest of the waitstaff.

When I close my eyes to make a wish, my head is spinning, but it feels good. I think of Laquisha, without whom none of this would have been possible. I wonder what color her eyes are. I think it would make her happy if she could see me right now.

But that’s not my wish.

“Think maybe you should have that baby?” I say to Carol.

“I know this is messed up,” she says, knocking big clumps of salt from the rim of my glass. Her nails look soft. “I know it isn’t right, and that I’m a bad, bad, person and I should be flogged, but I’m not fit to be a mother.”

There’s a pause in the music, and then all the stops fall out. A dozen men dressed as ninja-turtles stream into the room,
stacked up on each other’s shoulders, and start blasting away on ukuleles and plastic trumpets, heralding the coming of the International Hawaiian Tropic Parade. Dozens of perverts come flooding in from the street to witness. Chaos washes over the place. Contestants from around the world are vying for the grand crown; their job here seems to be pouring tequila down people’s throats. There’s a man, though, a long-necked, bony-headed man in the midst of this carnival, surrounded by a gaggle of fat rowdy friends, and he’s not laughing. I don’t know why he pops out at me, must be because he’s not joining in the festivities. He’s not even smiling.


“Are you?” she asks.

Miss Zimbabwe hops in front of us and raises her bottle, which is fine.

“You want some?” she asks.

“He does,” Carol says.

“She’s pregnant,” I say.

“Ah,” says Miss Zimbabwe. “Okay sir, tell me when it’s good.”

I tilt my head back and raise my finger. The booze must be watered down, because I’m nearly draining the whole bottle. Or maybe it’s not watered down, because my eyes feel like they’re about to swim out of my head. I’m fit, alright.

“It’s good,” Carol hollers. “It’s good.”
Chapter One

In early December of 199-, a non-election year, a most juicy question was for ten days hourly asked in the scandal-hungry city of Boston, and answered every hour in various ways: Who was to be the new chef at Le Bizac Rougie?

A recent dearth of reservations in the book at the city’s sole five-diamond restaurant having became a matter of dire concern to the partners, investors, and staff used to bringing home much bigger numbers -- and of equal concern to the dozens of farmers, vintners and importers on two continents who depended on the markups Le Bizac paid on lobes of fatty goose liver, hard to find mushrooms and legendary bottles of various wines and liquors -- the decision was made to put a hamburger on the menu. A slick public relations company was hired to spread the word that Le Bizac wasn’t stodgy anymore, and the buzz spread quickly, making front page news once -- "Le Bizac goes Moo!" -- and then a second time when Chef Pierrick Rougie returned to his kitchen after a celebrity chefs’ bike tour of Southern France, received his first ticket for a med-rare burger w/cheddar, no bun, chased the
responsible waiter through the dining room and lounge with a 5½-inch carbon-steel boning knife, attempted to set the men’s room on fire with cooking sherry and then fled the restaurant with a $6,000 bottle of the world’s oldest known unblended cognac: “Rougie has a Cow!”

The truth was that Chef Pierrick -- who picked up his first knife at four years of age and by six years had a full-time job dicing vegetables in his orphanage; who by 11 years was formally training as an apprentice under a chef who had studied under a very long line of chefs who had studied under a man who, legend has it, spoke with one of the three angels who, again, according to legend, created bouillabaisse for the Three Marys of the Gospel when the Marys’ ship wrecked on the Rhone by Arles -- had been deeply depressed for quite some time. Heralded less than a decade before as one of America’s best chefs, and still touted as something of a god by critics in the Northeast, while there was no way for Chef Pierrick to avoid hearing cries from the front of the house, he was confident enough in his abilities to ignore them. A resolute back of the house man, he had lost patience with his investors -- bankers, real estate men and hoteliers who’d earned their money back three-fold by now in freebies and favors -- and the fickle public in general, long before the burger incident. “Pearls before swine,” he was known to mutter as his brilliant creations left the kitchen.

Chef Pierrick had been also become increasingly abusive to his kitchen staff, who suffered that, along with dirt for pay and
inhuman hours, for the experience of being spit on occasionally by a Master Chef, so ordained by the Les Maitres Cuisiniers de France. There are only 250 or so Master Chefs in the world, and anything above washing dishes at Le Bizac Rougie was considered an honor. A formidable education. A superb reference, at the very least. For a man to make sous-chef there - seven at a time, women needed not apply - meant lucrative offers from hotels, movie stars, etc., not to mention the constant attention of the kind of women (all of them) attracted to tough men - because you'd have to be to make sous-chef - who can cook.

It was not a happy situation for Chef Pierrick. He was turning into a person he hated, and his secret fear was that this hate was poisoning his food. His intention upon returning from Southern France was to call a meeting and announce a passing of the reins to his head-saucier, his son Henri.

Henri Rougie had been essentially running the kitchen for the past year as poppa Pierrick dropped in now and then to put his finger in the sauce and grumble about food costs. Henri had, of course, been brought up in kitchens. He'd trained in France, and also in Japan, and under an Italian chef from Chicago who had his own television show now, and if anyone ever accused him of getting special treatment he'd hold his hand over a flame without flinching until the smell of his roasting flesh made them turn away. Tastes were changing, he tried to tell his father, his boss. People with undeveloped palates were getting rich quick, and they didn't know from Périgord truffles at $70 per ounce;
they wanted meat and potatoes with big, fruity wines from Napa. It might be worth it to think about these things, he said.

And while the violence at the end had been unpleasant for Henri, it was far from surprising. He had tried to divert his thoughts from the issue, but he knew well enough that poppa wouldn’t react well to seeing patties of ground sirloin next to the duck legs on his grill. And though he was torn as to whether or not to storm out after his father that night, he suffered from other considerations. A restaurant of one’s own, especially a restaurant of considerable acclaim, which is what he stood to inherit, was something to fight for, not walk away from on a basis as slippery as principle. If he would not take the initiative now, then when? Ten years ago, he would have walked. But at thirty-three, he found himself holding a wooden spoon to his mum lips, staying.

Hardly had the fire in the men’s room been extinguished and the culpable waiter been rushed to the hospital when Le Bizac’s head-saucier’s mind shifted from Béarnaise and Hollandaise to his next move. If -- and he didn’t want to think this way but the stakes were too high to get soft now -- if a week after his father’s departure no-one had said anything about anything, Henri decided he would take it upon himself to promote his protégé Omit Haeberlin to head-saucier, declare himself chef, and add a pan fried porterhouse steak with mushrooms and peas to the menu. He would call the distributors and tell them he wanted to review
prices. There would be a meeting with the sommelier to revamp the wine list. PR would be notified and the public would know.

There wasn’t much question in the kitchen at Le Bizac that Henri would assume the post of chef, if not because of his qualifications and experience, then for the mere fact that the restaurant was still called Le Bizac Rougie. Still, there was a matter of making it official by Waldebert, the general manager and spokesman for the panel of investors, partners, etc.

Henri knew where to find his father that night, at Arturo’s, a little bar by the highway with angry music and a late last call. Chef Pierrick held court there nightly, and his son was hot to taste $6,000 cognac. After closing down the kitchen, he and Omit shared a joint as they walked.

"It’s terrible, what happened," Omit said. "I’ll follow your father wherever he goes."

"It is unfortunate," agreed Henri. "But it’s not over."

Back in the Le Bizac, Abundius, the night manager, was only doing his job by berating Balcimé, his maître d’, for letting such a catastrophe occur. "You donkey, you should have tackled him!" said Abundius, of Chef Pierrick. "He had a knife," protested Balcimé. "He was mad, insane." That Abundius had been upstairs molesting pudgy Dévildée with a rolling pin in ways of which I prefer not to speak was well enough understood. Each minute passing then was fraught with grave peril, for it was another minute that they were keeping the events of the night from Waldebert, the general manager. Waldebert, who had lived in
London during WWII, assigned by Charles de Gaulle to run an unnamed restaurant for France's government-in-exile, would pop his subordinates heads like dandelions if he knew that they were stalling. Abundius appropriated Balcimé's first-hand knowledge and sent a text message to Waldebert as follows:-

Chef P a quitté.  
Conseillez svp.  
Qui est le nouveau chef?  
-A&B

"That should cover our asses," said Abundius. He and Balcimé sat down at the bar where Jacques was finishing his clean-up for the night. They drank cinnamon schnapps, as was their peculiar wont, held hands and prayed together as they imagined the words they had sent bouncing off a satellite close to Mars and locating Waldebert in the midst of his famous nightlife.

Following the message to Waldebert, such a mysterious man, as likely to be swallowing a rare bird whole in the back room of a restaurant built into a cliff and accessed only through a tunnel behind Vinny's Superette in East Somerville as he was to be whipping blindfolded midgets or studying the ancient texts of table service in search of a lost parable that might shed light on this pivotal moment in culinary history. What travails Waldebert would endure to find a new chef could only be wondered at, but never known: a meeting of the highest order would no doubt be called. Blindfolded midgets re-whipped in case they didn’t get it the first time, or until they told the truth as they knew it to exist. A provisional kitchen established. Had he discovered the second coming of Epicurus in the far caves of
Afghanistan? What new leader would soon grace their halls? What secret society would be tapped? But was the GM so engaged? Hardly: I hesitate to tell this, but tell it I must. GM Waldebert was in a way obscured from the view of the general public, he had one hand against a wall, the other holding himself, making use of Arturo's urinal as the message came beaming down from the sky. On the sink behind him was a snifter of very fine cognac. It would not be necessary to call a meeting, as the investors and partners had gathered only yesterday to celebrate what he called his 85th birthday, and also to celebrate his honorable resignation and announce his successor, Mr. Michael Weed, M.B.A., M.M.H.1. Waldebert was done and done. "In the immortal words of E.M. Statler," Weed said in his acceptance speech, "Life is service -- the one who progresses is the one who gives his fellow man a little more -- a little better service."

Upon receiving the notice from A&B, and having foreseen this event months ago, Waldebert punched Mr. Weed's number into his little machine and zapped the note forward with a shake of his head, a gnawing sensation that death might not come unwelcome, and his best regards:

Dear Mr. Weed,
Chef Pierrick has Quit.
Happy to advise,
Waldebert, ©

Waldebert was not sought as council, as dear Mr. Weed was eager to bring on a chef of his choosing, not a default chef with

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old habits. The issue of the restaurant's namesake being gone was less of a problem than anyone could have anticipated -- it was simply dropped: long live Le Bizac! Thus was our favorite saucier disregarded and stripped of his chance for the triumph of top-touque.

Various and sundry were the chefs the papers reported in line to lead Le Bizac into a new era of gastronomical excellence. The Messenger, a daily tabloid, indicated that the most likely forerunner was a middle-aged German woman, currently the chef at the Ritz-Carlton in Normandy, postulating that a chef with hotel experience, especially a woman, would fit best into Mr. Weed's fervor for service. The Insurgent, Boston's bi-weekly alternative newspaper, professed to possess inside scoop leaving little or no doubt but that the very line cook who had trained under Henri in Hawaii would be the one. Henri would have been very unhappy to see that little mutt take what he had come to regard as his rightful seat; that his former protégé was not the man Mr. Weed had selected was a minor relief. The Hip Hubster, a rumor mill of the lowest regard, suggested that Omit's twin brother, V'Omit, was taking over, but this was a joke someone had played on the Hubster and preposterous. Omit does not have a brother. Only Eli's Kibbles & Bits, a small-run 'zine distributed sporadically by three culinary professionals who keep their names to themselves and claim to have a man on the inside at Kinko's, known within the industry as a sure-thing, took the issue very seriously and withheld comment until they were absolutely sure.
After mocking the sorry state of the city’s food writers and gossip hounds, they unequivocally announced Le Bizac’s new man, honest Abre Ostmann of Portugal.

Chef Ostmann it was. Barely had the new year begun than Chef Ostmann was hosting a series of highly coveted press and celebrity tasting dinners. As if to sanctify Le Bizac’s new commitment to a unified front and back, a week before the new chef’s arrival, a private “chef’s table” was even installed in the kitchen.

The colossal moment of confusion Henri experienced upon witnessing Waldebert emerge from the men’s room at Arturo’s was followed all too fast by the explanation of events and a sorrowful recognition of opportunity lost. While a majority of Henri’s mind lamented this loss, the obfuscation of his earlier ungrateful thoughts toward his father was entirely welcome. Freer now was he to enjoy the bounty of his father’s explosion -- (the bottle was still half filled) -- and his body would not have to act out designs on what both he and his community would doubtlessly report and perceive, however grossly misled, as an ill-gotten chefdom.

But is a man -- Oedipus aside -- a wrongdoer who simply usurps his father’s empty chair, or spatula? Not every man is an Icarus, flaunting the sun contrary to his father’s will. The loyalty of a son to his father is not to be judged outside of the two themselves, any more than a young writer commits offense to the original when he undertakes to imitate the style of Trollope, or
carry on as Lord Byron or T. E. Lawrence, though he may be self-
dangerously foolish.

As for the hamburger which offended so, the all-American
sandwich introduced to the world in 1904 at the St. Louis
Louisiana Purchase Exposition, it must be said a contemptuous
place to draw the line in a kitchen. Pure hubris. The hamburger
is a delicious, malleable thing and can be honed with good grace
to great heights, the most recently haute example at Daniel
Boulud's Bistro Moderne in New York City being a specialité de la
maison; a daedal sirloin burger filled with braised short ribs,
foie gras and black truffles, served on a parmesan bun with
pommes soufflées. According to the account of scribe Steve Cuozzo
of The New York Post, the $29 “sin-burger... oozes bliss at every
pore.”
Sully and I kneeled down in front of Mr. Ketterer’s casket.

“That’s him alright,” I whispered.

Sully frowned. He didn’t seem to think I was funny.

“You okay?” I asked him.

He let out a curt sob, but quickly got himself back together.

“I’ll tell you later,” he said.

We went through the receiving line, saying, “I’m sorry,” “I’m so sorry,” and, “If there’s anything I can do,” to the appropriate family members. “Thank you,” the sons replied. “Thank you so much.” When I got to Keith, he was wearing a really nice new suit. He couldn’t borrow his dad’s for this one, since his dad was wearing it.

“Lookin’ sharp, brother,” I said. Keith winked at me. His eyes were wet, but he’d be okay. I’d heard several attractive women behind me in line talking about how they felt so bad for him.

I found Sully ten minutes later, pacing in the bathroom.

“I need a beer,” he said.

Outside it was cold, but bright. It was the year of the dead dads. All the guys were dressed in new suits, wearing cool
sunglasses. We were a slick looking pack of young dogs and we knew it. "We’re reconvening at the Beer Garden," Paolo told us, handing us a map.

Sully’s car was littered with soda cans, fast food wrappers and other filthy items. "So, guess what?" he said, lighting a cigarette.

"What am I sitting on?" I asked. He’d clearly spilled something on the passenger seat. I just hoped it wasn’t toxic.

"Sit on the newspaper, puss," Sully said. "Now, guess what?"

"You’re black?"

"Yeah," he said. "How’d you know?"

"Wild guess."

"I’m getting married, brother," he said. "I just asked her this morning. My parents don’t even know."

"I’m honored," I said.

Sully snorted smoke and adjusted the radio to a Led Zeppelin rock-block. We drove over a bridge, into Southie.

"And when you say ‘her,’" I said, "you mean…"

"Alyssa."

"You’re the man, Sully," I said. "Congratulations."

He snorted.

I checked my nails. The pinky one was growing a little long, so I chewed it down. Traffic was bad. There was a sale at Osco on Q-Tips. According to the sign, 300-packs were just 99¢. I remember thinking that Q-Tips would really be great right then,
but knowing that it would be entirely inappropriate to request a
pit-stop.

"I’ve gotta say I’m surprised, though," I said. "I thought she
was out."

"She’s in, Al." Sully said. "In like Flynn. The lovin’ is in
the oven."

"Aye," I said. "That’s rough."

"Just sped up the timeline a little," he said, "that’s all."

We parked across the street from the Beer Garden, basking in
Zeppelin. Sully lit a new cigarette with the end of the old one.

"Can I be the best man?" I asked, hoping he’s say no.

"We’re not having an open wedding. Just a little thing at her
family’s church. I’ll throw a ten-keg rager when the kid comes
out. Trust me. Get some gifts."

Turned out to be a real wake inside. There was a massive
picture collage of Mr. Ketterer on the wall and I recognized
several people at the bar from the funeral. Paolo and five other
guys from my grade hollered to us from the back. We acknowledged
them. The bartender brought over a couple bottles of beer and a
shot of whisky for each of us, on the house, in honor of the
departed.

"Don’t say anything to the guys," Sully said. "I don’t want to
announce this while Keith’s sitting there trying to grieve. It’s
his moment right now. Let him have it. You can grieve for me
tomorrow."
Keith and his entourage of grief stricken brothers walked in, surrounded by a bunch of desperately horny looking girls in black cocktail dresses. I slapped Keith on the back as he was walking by and handed him my beer. He nodded in thanks and winked at me again. Easier than talking, I understood. We’d talk later. I wondered what your first beer tastes like after you’ve seen your dad dead in a casket.

Then it hit me: What if reincarnation is real, and Sully and Alyssa gave birth to a little Mr. Ketterer? Imagine us kids, giving birth to each other’s fathers. I took Sully’s beer from his hand and plugged my mouth. It was all I could do to keep from laughing.

“Do Catholics believe in reincarnation?” I asked him.

“No,” he said, taking back his beer. “Heaven or hell, the basics.”

“Religion aside, though. You think it’s possible?” I asked.

“I don’t know, Al,” he said. “I don’t know.” He did his shot and looked around. “I frickin’ hope not.”
The Store

I am forever coming home from the store with the wrong things. It's far worse, and worser still to some, than if I had never gone to the store in the first place.

I will be sent out to fetch garlic-herb wraps, which, as the note in my pocket clearly articulates, are kept near the corn and flour tortillas. I will find my way easily enough, but even then and there I note that the wraps do look somehow small for their purpose. As if shrunken. A nearby freezer shudders and ceases its afore-unnoticed production of noise. In the absence, a holding-wall invariably melts in my inner ear, releasing that vicious ink-cloud of octopus doubt to trickle and unfurl throughout my minute ventricles, casting the entire endeavor dark to the point where I feel almost bottomless, falling, and after which nothing seems its intended size -- my loafers appear exceedingly far away and possibly not my own; the store is an eroding warehouse of rotting fruit and meat misery. But there is only one size of garlic-herb wrap available today, so I toss a pack in the cart even as I know that they are off beam.

Every time, it's the same. Tear open the scar. Put in the powder. Pray that she for whom I shop grants me leniency. The
store is a mean, unstable place, enough to lay the tallest man low. And I am not so tall.

The tiny light-green wraps sweat profusely in their bag.

Between two aisles I make brief, pleading eye-contact with a crouching man, a store employee slowly rotating eggs. I attempt to say hello, but emit rather a high-pitched squeak.

Oh, to be a dog. Am I alone? Is this not the goal of all men?

Alas, this hectic encounter antagonizes the egg-man. “Can I help you?” he asks, as I round the nearest corner. There is a sale on video tapes for privileged members. I take full advantage.

There is a trick to this cart. The front left wheel gets stuck and requires lifting the cart and dropping it heavily.

I weep at times in the store, grasping at myself.

I also pick up toothpicks, favoring the round ones at $1.38 a box over the flat ones that are 89-¢ for 250. The flat ones may not have sharp enough points. I try to open the boxes, but they are sealed. Everything real is sharp and hidden.

Arriving home, I find the proper key and unlock the door, resting my bag inside. But someone behind the door is jangling her own stock, pushing me back, shrieking, relocking.

If all mankind remembers are victories... Certainly, all womankind will remember are mistakes.

And all dogs remember is, what?

Kibbles, bits.

Where, pray tell, is my bowl?
One night early in July, Mother informed Father she had put down his dog. Father removed the three-pronged dinner fork from his thin mouth, pulled the napkin from his shirt-collar, set down the fork -- a gravy-laden slice of fried chicken still on there--upon the napkin, walked calmly out of the house and did not close the door behind himself. A mosquito polluted wave of nauseating Fahrenheit rolled in immediately after his departure like hot bristled honey, crashing over and enveloping those of us left behind, causing the ice in my milky tap water to pop and undoing almost all the progress Adela’s fans had made to create tolerable indoor temperature conditions for Mother. These were bad depression days in our flat hoary town -- a sinkhole had swallowed the sole employer, a novelty light-bulb factory -- and I hadn’t gotten a sizable enough dinner portion in months, so I hoped I might somehow be able to subtly capture Father’s fork before Adela cleared the table, but her hands were as quick and nimble as her eyes were blue. No, quicker. Nimbler.
Father was away the entire month of July -- the hottest, dampest most cockroach-laden July in recorded history -- during which I was made to complete many chores, not the worst of which was singing nursery rhymes for and feeding water to his fragrant rosemary bushes and wilting tomato vines with a bucket and a soup-ladle for hours a day, drenched in sweat and skinburnt from the sun. I was repeatedly bitten from head to toe by spiders whilst I ladled and played with yard rocks like toy potatoes.

Mid-August, a slight hatchet-faced man in a splendid gray linen suit came and took my babyish sister, Emily, in exchange for a mysterious crate of ropes and reins. This was followed two days later by Father's triumphant return atop a two-ton longhorned bull.

He'd won a bet, but first he'd lost two bets. Now we had a bull, but no car and we were down a family member. My feelings regarding my sister were mixed. The stranger's sartorial splendor spoke of his wealth. But now we had a massive bull with great fuzzy horns wider in span than I was tall. Hard to say which situation was more auspicious. Father resumed his care of the shrubbery and massaged the bull with bourbon every morning while engaging himself in long fitful monologues. Afternoons, he closed himself into his study to practice his homemade trumpet.

The bull was of an even temperament, but he did not seem to like women. Every time either Mother or Adela went out in the yard to say hello, Numbnut (for that was the pride swollen name we gave him) stomped and dragged his feet angrily and made a low,
grief-stricken sound. Numbnut looked black and white from a
distance, but up close his straight, slick hair was a dark
caramel brown like cola, with a convex forehead, a sloped white
face and enchanting glassy black eyes in which Father claimed
there were movies of hell.

Numbnut started losing weight after about a week. Father had
been sharing his dinners, but half of not much was not enough.
After two weeks, Numbnut had lost half of his right horn and was
showing significant slats of rib. There were, too, patches of
missing hair on Numbnut’s splayed-shoulders, as if he were
diseased.

He was too big inside, Numbnut. It takes a small man to find
glory in a small world. Scrappers and cockroaches, we keep our
forks sharp. Numbnut’s massive slow-pounding heartbeat was
visible from my window, and shaky bleats from Father’s shrill
trumpet echoed the bull’s hungry whimper and tormented moans all
throughout the night.
Regarding the Poor

I dislike poor people and I’m going to tell you why.

1. They’re far too needy -- They are always so high on drugs that they say things that make me dizzy to the point where it borders on vertigo. And then I wonder: When was the last time I ate a green vegetable? "Smile buddy," they say, "It’s not that bad. You hearin’ me? You gonna see old Floyd Soul rowin’ his solitary way across the foggy harbor soon enough..." Stuff like that is what they say. What creepy recess of their fried out brains gives birth to this business, I daren’t imagine. And then sometimes they start in on me demanding that certain criminals who I’ve never heard of named Leonard not be executed. Now, I don’t believe in the death penalty, but neither am I in any position to save someone’s hide on death row in Alabama. What? Am I supposed to help orchestrate a jail-break? Back a semi-truck up to the prison, attach a tow-line and tear down the wall? Then get shot in the head by a guard? Or should I sign the sketchy petition pad these freaks carry around to collect signatures with my name and address so that they can come over later and kill me

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and steal my stereo? Come on. That’s even assuming that I for one split-second am going to take these babbling drug-fiends’ words that their friends are innocent. My head starts spinning when they babble like that. Then I notice that they’re hanging out in front of a place that has a sign in the window advertising “Boiled Chiken Dinners,” (What’s the notation you use when you meant to spell something wrong, because that’s the way it was spelled on the sign? “sic,” right? As in “sick,” but without the “k.”) and the nausea part kicks in. I end up in the alley puking and everyone wants to know if I’m okay. Please, if you are poverty-stricken and look and smell disgusting, do your drugged-out skit somewhere other than in front of places that sell food. The combination is overwhelming. And bad for business, I have to imagine.

2. All they talk about is cheese -- There’s that saying about how when you’ve got lots of cheese, you’ve got lots of problems, but when you’ve got no cheese, you’ve just got one problem. Lots of problems make life interesting. Problems are what make the world go round. Without problems, we’d have no great books. Or great art. Or anything, really. Sneakers wouldn’t even exist if not for problems involved with playing sports barefoot. But one problem, played over and over again, is like talking to a broken record player. Stop the squawking over cheese. It was played out (long) before you were born.

3. They have horrible names -- Certain names should be reserved for people with money only. If your name is Mercedes and
you drive a shopping cart full of cans, you should change your name. If your name is Paris and you’re a single mom living with your ten Cyclops kids in a mud shack in East Podunk, Mississippi, living on government cheese, change your name. People named Paris should at least be able to afford and pronounce Brie. I’m not even being a snob here. It’s just that the contrast is so obscene. If you are too poor to change your name legally, just tell people your name is Mary. Likewise, if your parents were drunk or simply uneducated -- or both -- and misspelled your name when they put it on your birth certificate, don’t shrug it off and excuse it as a cultural thing. Paul, for instance, is spelled P-A-U-L. Not P-A-L-L. Pall Mall may have been the cigarette brand your mom was smoking throughout her pregnancy, in fact it probably was, but it’s not a person’s name. It’s a wrong name. Also, a disproportionate number of poor women seem to have men’s names. Again, this is acceptable if you’re very rich. But Frankie, Andy, Al, Billy, Bobby... Why allow another deep wrinkle of confusion in your already messed up life? It’s like a rusty copper “P” for “Penniless” sewn on your chest. Again, you can’t lose with Mary. Or Anne. But not Marianne. Your life is already too much like never-ending episode of Gilligan’s Island. And then there are what I consider the real trouble cases, the ones named after booze -- Bud, Sherry, Crow, Jim, Jack, Johnnie, José -- which, to me, is just asking for it. Poverty and alcohol should be kept as separate as possible, whenever possible, and you know I’m right. There are statistics to back this up from the gutter.

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to the moon. Of course, I’m aware that some of these names aren’t even these people’s real names. That’s even worse. They do it to themselves. What do they call that? When you do something that dooms you? A self-fulfilling prophecy.

4. They all want to shake my hand -- They ask for money, and I say, “Sorry, not today,” and then they follow me insisting that “it’s cool,” “I’m the man,” and that they just want to shake my hand for some god-forsaken reason unbeknownst to me. I am certain that there are diseases transferable through handshakes, if not weird spiritual complications like the thing that happened to Jim Morrison when he saw a truck broken down on the side of the highway and an Indian jumped into his soul. That is also a matter of record: see (what’s the name of that song? Peace Frog?)

5. They have fucked up eyes and they are always staring at me -- Even the poor people on TV commercials do this. I see a kid, and he’s not even just poor, he’s impoverished, his whole country is flat-out broken, and meanwhile there’s some obese woman with blond hair asking for a cup of coffee a day out of me or some shit, but all I can think is: Blink, little black dude, you are freaking me out.

6. They are criminally minded and always dangerous -- They’re always scheming to knock over banks or pick pockets or break into my car and steal my stereo again. But this is not just petty crime. I wish. They also commit more rape and murder than anyone else. This can also be confirmed by numerous censuses. I was going to go to a homeless shelter to help serve brunch on
Mother's Day once, because I felt bad about a few mother-related things, but I ended up backing out at the last minute out of pure fear. Poor mothers are the scariest. Think about what animal mothers do in the wild. How fierce they get. I read somewhere once that it's the female lions who do all the hunting. Who can say what atrocities might have occurred had I gone through with that brunch? The thought alone sends cold needles through my ball veins.

7. Contrary to a Neil Young song and popular belief, welfare mothers do NOT make better lovers -- This point was made at a poker game I recently attended, and it was universally agreed upon based on the following logic: "Why would a fat poor person with ten kids and no life make a better lover than a woman of means who goes to the gym all the time and reads Cosmo on the treadmill for sex tips?" Also, wouldn't a wealthy person have a better bed? Who wants to have sex on a discarded motel mattress? Talk about disease. Though the idea of having sex with gunshots ringing through the neighborhood and crying children in the next room does have some certain appeal.

8. They Believe -- God is responsible for more deaths than any other person, place or thing in the universe. I once heard an atheist say that more people have lost their heads arguing over what happens after they die then in all the plagues, diseases and accidents in history, times ten. All those people out there dying in deserts, getting displaced by huge dams, wandering through cities at night and sleeping in ATM kiosks believing it's all
part of some kind of divine tragicomedy. I’m not smart enough to be an atheist. Nor would I ever be dumb enough to sit there believing that god was “testing me” by making me too poor to eat dinner or buy diapers for my kids.

9. They’re overly concerned with health-care and education -- I ran for class president in middle school once and they voted in some dickhead named Stu over me because he was more classically good looking and he came to school in a limo one day wearing a suit, and then he lied and promised chocolate milk in the cafeteria and free ice-cream on Fridays. No, I don’t believe in politics. That’s a whole other subspecies of man that I have neither the space nor the inclination to get into here. I’m just a guy who calls it likes he sees it. For thousands of years, people have gotten sick and died. Simple as can be. They’ve fallen and broken bones and then those bones have healed funny. On some rare occasions, body parts have even healed astonishingly stronger than they were originally -- like in those movies where the kid breaks his arm and then he can throw a baseball really fast. Now there’s stuff out there that can heal you better and keep death at bay for longer. But that “stuff” is not free. People work long days and sometimes don’t see their children for weeks so that science will advance and medicine and care will be available to those able to afford it. This is not a conspiracy. There is research involved, patents, training, testing, sales -- and that’s just for the medicine itself, for the pills and the potions. Then there are the doctors, the nurses, the specialists
and all of their expenses. Ambulance drivers, people there cooking nasty flavorless mush they call food, people at all the desks... All the way down to the good men and women who work hard keeping hospitals clean. Think those people are mopping the floors, scrubbing poop off of walls and disposing of all that trash for kicks? For their health? Ha! Don’t they have to eat? Point is: health-care is expensive. As in: Not free. Not even witch-doctors work for free. Snake potions costs money, too. That money’s got to come from somewhere. Why should I pay for you to defy nature? Nature says that you’re going to die, and you don’t have the cheese to say you’re not? That’s called life. Get over it. Same goes for education. I agree 110% that education is a vitally important thing in life. In fact, I’ve been in school for almost 25 of my 30 years on earth. I hope someday to become a professor. Professors are the bearers of knowledge. They study ancient texts and pass that information down from the “ivory tower” as some people call it. When I hear that Ivory Tower routine, it makes me think of White Castle burgers. Which is appropriate, because, from what I hear, the average college professor makes a little more a year than the guy flipping burgers full-time at White Castle. Do you expect White Castle to give out free burgers? How’s that guy flipping burgers there all night and then unclogging the toilets before closing time going to make rent if the restaurant isn’t bringing in any money? He won’t. Case in point. You want a free education? Go to the library. Read all the books. You’ll be a genius. Then you can
start your own college where nobody pays any money and nobody earns any money and you can be the head teacher, the janitor and the admissions officer if you’re still so concerned about the issue. But answer me this, genius: How are you going to pay the school nurse? Think she’s going to work there for free? Think again.

10. They make terrible friends -- I actually have, in my life, had several poor friends. I found them utterly useless. They could never afford to go out to dinner, or drinks, or go sky-diving, celebrate my birthday, or do anything fun. How fun is a friend who never has any money? They can go for long walks sometimes, and one guy taught me how to shoplift, but other than that they all sat around reciting shitty poetry and composing nasty long-winded letters to “evil” corporations like Nike on behalf of people too poor to write their own nasty long-winded letters. If they -- and they know who they are -- had spent half the time and energy they gave to writing those letters to cleaning themselves up and filling out applications at Foot Locker, they could have earned a little cheese for themselves like me and sent some to whoever those other people are that they’re so concerned about. Does that not make sense to everyone? It’s a direct action plan, and maybe then I’d still have my stereo, they could have gotten discounts on sneakers and we could have gone to the gym and played basketball, then went out and grabbed a few beers and hit on chicks and we’d still be friends.
On light nights, I get the door. Oak in my head, it swings open about four inches, still chained, and there she is.

A tall little girl she was, and portly, pink bunny pajamas with that furry white pot like a restaurant Buddha, oversized melon of a head nestled in a long, lop-eared hood, one tiny red-nailed thumb wrestling a handheld video game. She was calm, skilled at the game; her harmony made me more nervous than any 'roid raging Samoan ever could. In the reflection of her dilated pupils, different sized and shaped blocks sliding into place.

On a frayed square of Oriental carpeting by the girl’s little footied feet, a dog groaned and stretched. He is a damaged mutt: slope-eyed, nub-tailed, missing half his right ear, black, white and burnt orange fur, wide, frothy mouth. Something likable about him, too, this scrapper. As long as things went easy, the dog’s presence seemed to imply, he’d be cool.

The girl accepts a crisp twenty.

"Do you know Kimball?" I ask.
“E.Q. Kimball?” she replies. “The insurance man?” She looks like she’s about to laugh, but remains straight-faced.

“L.A. Kimball is my friend’s name.”

“Tall man with a dark beard?”

“A very tall man,” Tessa and I say together. Tessa was my girlfriend. A smart, beautiful woman whose hazel eyes, she said, (and I believed), saw color as smell. This was our favorite part. “A very tall man,” we said, “but he has no beard.”

A light above the door turns from orange to purple. The night is wet and unpleasantly cold, but shiny. Behind us, the city pulses between dim and dull.

There was the main room and there was a backroom. In the backroom, where they kept the beer, ten or eleven gloomy blue-collar jerkwads played cards. Three heavily perfumed ladies, deathly thin in flimsy flowered summer-dresses, smoked menthols by an empty roller-dog machine for heat. Everyone was looking at me funny out the corners of their wretched eyes. Somebody must have tried to draw a scene on the refrigerator -- you could just make out a skeleton blasting out from the sunset on a chopped hog, bottle of “XXX” in one hand and what looked to be a severed goat’s head in the other -- but it was unfinished. Inside the fridge, a dozen rows of domestic beer and a two-quart pitcher of something homemade bathed in wet, yellow light.

I threw five bucks in the honor jar for my beers and I could feel those wretches watching me. I’m just a goofball, really, or
I was[^1], but I used to wear expensive cologne, so I bet those losers thought I was a pretty boy. They probably resented my luck for having such a great smelling girlfriend, too. Tessa worked the Estée Lauder counter at Macy’s. She was designing a perfume of her own, for a contest at work, which was how we ended up at Bishop’s in the first place. To capture not the smell per se, which was spiky with noxious fluids, but the essence: what Tessa called the “extraordinary potency” of cheap after-hours hangouts.

Beers in hand, I return to the main room, a windowless space unpopulated apart from two burgundy felt pool tables and three ancient black men in suits, fedoras and sunglasses -- musicians -- sitting on a platform stage. Behind them, Tessa tunes an old wall-piano. The slow swinging paddles of a fan-lamp cast long shadows, creating the illusion of things churning. I find a comfortable chair in the back.

I’d thought through my next day up to lunch -- an atomic chorizo burrito from the cart downtown -- when a tall, skinny man with a giant oval NASCAR belt-buckle interrupted my reverie. I hadn’t noticed the guy approaching, so it took me by surprise when he spoke.

“Hey bud,” he says. “Do you roll?”

He had a tight brown beard, smoked thin cigars and spoke so softly I had to lean in just to hear.

“Just beers,” I say, enduring his sickly sweet exhaust.

“Dice,” he says. “You roll dice?”

[^1]: I don’t get to laugh anymore, doctor’s orders.
“What game?” I ask.

“Craps, Bunco, Mexican Liars...”

We agree on Mexican’s, the only dice game I know.

“Ken Crosby,” he says, placing a tray of gambling chips on the table. “Lemons.”

“TJ,” I said, accepting his bloodless hand for a shake. “Oranges.”

I released my grip, but Ken held firm. His eyes went sort of milky and appeared almost frozen for a moment. His palms felt prickly. “What do you mean, oranges?” he asked.

“Take it easy,” I said. “I was riffing on lemons.”

The blood was pulsing in the big toe of my right foot.

“I said lemons because I’m a lemon man,” said Ken. His curious gaze focused, boring a pinhole in my pupils. His voice entered my head and knocked around. “Get ‘em trucked up here every Thursday from Sunkist County, F-L-A,” he said. “You been down there, son?”

“No,” I replied, trying futilely to catch Tessa’s eye.

“Got a big cart going at Haymarket on Sundays. Lemons, son, they’re the vehicle. Big juicy shiny bastards, hup?”

“I’m in finance,” I said. “Banking.”

His grip became tighter.

“TJ?” he asked. “That French?”

The way he said “French,” it sounded like an allegation.

“No,” I said. “Polish, actually.”

Ken released his grip, but his eyes stayed fixed. He was crazy, I decided, but harmless.
“Whatcha drinking, Frenchy? I’ll buy you a drink.”

“Told you I’m Polish,” I said.

“I don’t care where you’re from,” he said. “I’m offerin’ to buy you a drink, not your granddaddy. So what’s it gonna be?”

“Whatever you’re drinking.”

“Ho there, Señor Frog. This mash’l knock yer rocks off. Better get you a beer to wash it down. How ‘bout the old lady?”

He was still staring at me, but I had no doubt he was referring to Tessa. “That’s your female there, right?”

“Yeah, of course, Tessa. She’ll take a beer.”

“She drinks? My wife was a drinker. Is, I should say. Is a drinker. Was my wife. Still my daughter’s mother, hup? Went over there, radio’s blastin’, old lady’s bendin’, can’t even hear me knockin’. Got myself in through the window and caught Maile, that’s my daughter downstairs in the bunny suit, stuck hiding in the chimney. Bitch got her ten-year-old daughter trapped in a chimney, just sittin’ on the sofa flickin’ lit matches. Maile’s screechin’ and yowlin’ like a bobcat. Nearly lost my cool for good, brother. Not even supposed to be there, me, so I ask her ‘Hup’s going on?’ and she goes, get this, she says she’s ‘cold.’”

“That ain’t right,” I said. I was glad to hear about the ex-wife, because otherwise I’d have had to wonder if this weird bearded man was hitting on me.

Ken tried to stand and failed. “‘Cold?’ I go. ‘Cold,’ she goes. Can you imagine? ‘Cold.’ Jesus, son, I’m exhausted. Mind grabbin’ those drinks?”
“You doing okay over there?” Tessa asks me at the piano.

“I’ll be fine,” I say.

“Take it easy, okay?” she says, regarding the drinks on my tray. “You’re my driver tonight.” Tessa could not handle manual transmissions.

I assured her I was fine and went back to roll dice.

“Tits in the window,” I called. “Fives.”

Ken rolled, drained his liquor, shook his head conceding a dollar defeat. Something about Ken was different then, I noticed. He smelled bitter, like burnt almonds, and I seemed to remember a shorter beard.

“I can’t lie,” he said, biting his nails.

“Better learn,” I said, raking in my chips. “It’s a liar’s game, says so right in the name.”

“Cold,” another sweet cigarillo went up. “Place was on fire when I left. Listen man, they ain’t givin’ me custody of the kid, neither. Got some priors of my own and all. Just can’t stand the idea of Maile ending up in a State place, hup? Grew up in that system myself, blame it for everything. Breeds bitterness, took away my foundation, got me to thinkin’ the world don’t care about people. Pain’s all there is, no leavin’ that behind. Come to love it, in time, you got to, hup, but kids shouldn’t know that at such a young age. Gotta find a relative. Not even supposed to be seein’ the girl, why she’s about fifty yards away with Seamus at the door. She’s kidnapped here, technically, but with love, hup?”
I nodded that yes, "hup," I did understand, though I had no clue what "hup" meant or why Ken would be telling me all this. Either he was trying to sell me something, I thought, or else that was just the way lemon salesmen always came across. I felt the keys in my jacket to make sure they were still there, rolled the dice, called a sixty-three on a fifty-three and Ken accepted, upping the stakes to five bucks.

Tessa started singing a folksy song she sang well. She sang so beautifully about sylvan scenes and fluorescent nightingales, my mood shifted from crap to not-so-crap.

Ken called "peas in the pod" and continued chewing his nails.

I called bull, taking another turn.

A couple dozen throws and several rounds of drinks later, I’d taken just about twenty bucks of Ken’s chips and was ready to go home. Ken had given up talking altogether in favor of biting his nails fanatically. His beard seemed to grow every time I turned my head. I was a little wasted and knew it, but it was nothing I couldn’t drive home on.

"Got a confession here," Ken said, voice almost completely gone. "I'm broke, son. Blew my wad on jerky, dog food, booze and booger-sugar, then you come along. Hopin' I'd take you for a couple bucks, honestly, though I shoulda known."

Thus the sob story. I was still uneasy, but largely relieved.

"It's cool, really," I said. "Get me another time, Ken."

"Except it's not cool, Frenchy," Ken said. "I still owe Shorty forty bucks in the back for the chips. Tell you what: Take the
girl, brother. Take Maile. Sounds crazy, I know, but just take
the little bunny home for a night and I’ll pick her up tomorrow.
I’ll have money by then, no problemo.”

“Forget the money,” I said. “Really, it’s fine. I’ll just
collect next time.” I doubted I’d actually ever be back, but
forty bucks wasn’t worth a hassle.

“Collect?” Ken’s eyes seemed to sink deeper in his face. He
pulled his chair up right next to mine and murmured with his
rotten breath straight into my nose. “You know, Frenchy, you and
your little girlfriend come here; we treat you like you belong,
right? Everything’s cool. No hassles. You don’t even...” cough,
“Is this such a big deal? What I’m asking is a tiny favor here.
Forget the money, okay. Have a heart, man. Let a little ten-year-
old girl grab a nap on your couch.”

“I got work in the morning,” I said. “And what about school?”

“Home-schooling, brother. Ring my own bell. Got my own
curriculum, too, call it un-schooling. Just dip into Dunkin’
Donuts or whatnot on your way to work. I’ll meet you there and
then we’ll be cool.”

Tessa winked at me and nodded her head, “No.” I loved her more
at that moment than I’d loved anyone in my life since puberty. I
winked back and pointed my index finger at her. “Don’t worry,” I
mouthed. She raised her eyebrows and bit the air.

just in a real tough spot. Let me grab you another beer.”

“Sit tight,” I said. “I’ll ask my girlfriend.”

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"And Seamus," Ken added. "Maile and that dog are inseparable."

"No," said Tessa. "We are not taking that girl. You’re crazy, drunk, and this is insane."

"You won’t have to do anything," I promised. "She’ll be in and out, and my responsibility entirely."

"Mr. Responsibility," she said, not without scorn.

On the way to the car, the booze kicked in and I stumbled. It seemed louder outside with the wind, like a stadium full of helicopters. The yard looked different too, changed from a collection of identifiable shapes -- cars, trucks, 4x4’s -- to kaleidoscopic confusion. I lobbed my beer bottle into the sky and waited for a shattering noise to clear things up.

Tessa cursed and closed her eyes. Her skin glistened like single highland malt Scotch in the starlight.

I apologized quickly, not even knowing what for. The bottle never broke. The sky kept screaming.

"Don’t apologize," she said. "This is crazy, Thomas."

"TJ," I said. "Not Thomas. TJ. Why do you always... You make me sound like an English muffin, Tess. It’s belittling. I got more nooks and crannies going on than any muffin you’ll ever see. Got a soul and such in here, too, and other stuff. Tell you what, I know you think this is stupid, but let’s be a family together. Just for a night."

"You are absolutely buggin’," Tessa said. "Give me my purse. You are insane and we are done. Good luck with the girl. We are done. I am calling a taxi cab."
"Suit yourself," I said. "Butter my own muffin."

As we sat in my car with the heat blasting waiting for Tessa’s taxi, Maile began tugging at something in her little girl mouth.

"Oh honey," Tessa said. "Don’t."

Maile held out her bloody hand with a tooth in it.

"That’s beautiful Maile," I said. "Can I have that?"

Maile nodded yes, so I got the tooth.

Tessa cleared her throat. "Honey, was it loose?"

Maile ignored her.

Everyone was quiet for five or ten minutes until the cab came.

I didn’t even turn on the radio. I knew this wasn’t the best idea in the world, but it also seemed like a golden opportunity to show Tessa how comfortable I am around children. She wasn’t registering it at that moment, maybe, because I wasn’t coming across quite clear. She would, though, I figured. Later.

"I love you," I told Tessa as she left.

"You love everybody but me," she replied.

"And you," I said. "You love nobody but yourself. We got all the bases covered, Tess. Not a man, woman, child or doggie in the universe left unloved."

She slammed the door.

"I’ll call you tomorrow," I yelled after her. "I love you!"

Children make me really happy, in a wholesome way, but living in the city and socializing mostly at restaurants and bars, I rarely got the chance to meet anyone under the age of 21. I set Maile up
on the couch with a blanket and a pillow, wrapped the tooth in toilet paper and placed it in a purple Crown Royal pouch under her pillow, then turned on the TV and watched her watch SportsCenter until her eyes closed. Her potbelly rose and fell. Seamus curled up at her feet. The Bruins beat the Flyers 3-2 in overtime that night, so I was totally content. When I turned off the TV, Maile made a weird whining noise. I turned the TV back on and left it that way.

Even after the longest days, I wasn’t tired enough to shush my brain. I’d tried Halcion, Ambien, and Sonata, but meds gave me harsh, gloomy hangovers. I searched the fridge, finding just a six-pack. Better six than none, I thought. I sat back in my recliner, called Seamus over and stroked his head to hockey highlights. Everybody was good. Maile snored lightly. I nearly cried I was so happy.

When she’d been sleeping for three beers, I found my Polaroid and took a shot. Then I dug a dollar coin from my bureau to play tooth fairy. I was pulling the Crown bag from beneath her pillow when she grabbed my wrist. Seamus moved in.

"What are you doing?" Maile asked.

"I’m the tooth-fairy," I said. "Look, I’m giving you money."

She bit the dollar and put it in her bag. Then she reached in her mouth and extracted two more teeth, one at a time, smearing the blood on the couch. "They were loose," she said.

I took the teeth and gave her two more dollars.

"Why did you take my picture?" she asked.
"I didn’t," I said.

"What are you doing with my teeth?" she asked.

"Give them to your dad, I guess."

"My dad’s dead," she said, I swear.

Kids and their imaginations, so crazy.

"I’m going to bed," I said. "You should get some sleep too. It’s been a long day. That money is yours to keep."

In the morning, Maile and I went to Dunkin’ Donuts, as planned. This particular Dunkin’ Donuts was built into the side of an old Elk’s Club and a little calmer and fancier than most, with iron tables, ceramic mugs and a nice view of the river. I tied Seamus to the fence outside by a fragrant rosemary bush.

"What are we doing here?" Maile asked.

"Waiting for your dad," I replied, blowing steam from my nutty Bronco blend.

Maile reverted to silent mode.

"People chop down trees so people can build houses and have pencils and napkins," I said in a funny Scottish accent, holding up a napkin.

She played her video game.

Sensing I couldn’t win, I read the paper. Even the Sports section was doom and gloom that day: "Triple Jumper Smashes Head, Dies," "Tyson Threatens to Eat Children," "Death of a Runner Who Tested His Limits."
When I was officially ten minutes late for work, I asked Maile if she knew her dad’s phone number. She ignored me, so I called information and asked what listings they had for “Crosby, Ken.” They had something like two hundred Crosby’s, but amazingly nothing under “K” or “Ken.” “What about your mother’s phone number?” I asked Maile, finally.

She ignored the question.

“Don’t worry,” I said. “He’ll be here.”

As if on cue, a tall, thin man in jeans and a red flannel shirt walked by outside. I folded my paper and put on my jacket. “It’s been real,” I said to Maile. “You’re a beautiful little girl and you’ll be fine.” I kissed her on the forehead. “Try not to break too many hearts, okay?” The man walked in and got in line, but he had no beard. Plus, Ken was white.

Year-end reports had to be completed and passed in that week, which meant a lot of time-consuming paperwork. I couldn’t afford to be very late. “Will you be okay if I leave you here to wait for your dad?” I asked.

She insisted on playing the mute, so I left her there with my Herald, a cup of hot cocoa and a bag of holiday Munchkins. I tried to give her a little good-bye hug, but she screamed and everyone looked.

“Fuck you,” I wanted to say, but controlled myself. “She has a hard time with good-bye,” I told the gawkers instead. “Big Mamma’s on her way.”

“Be safe,” I told Maile. “Don’t talk to strangers.”
“Don’t let your meat loaf, buddy,” I told Seamus. “And keep an eye out for the girl.”

The first two hours of work I spent printing and waiting in line at the copy-machine. My stomach hurt. It wasn’t a hangover, though. This hurt like nerves. I blamed coffee and stress and popped a couple Pepto-Bismol. Coffee and stress had become major concerns at the bank. The managers had given us all a supply of Pepto-Bismol chewables after a guy named Cahill in tech-support got dragged out of the building on a stretcher with a two-inch tear in his gastrointestinal tract. He went to take a poop one day and apparently lost nearly two pints of blood out his butt.

Within twenty minutes, the Pepto’d taken care of my stomach pain, but I still felt terrible. My veins ached. It must be guilt, I thought. I called Tessa to wish her luck on the big presentation and apologize for yelling. Her phone went straight to voicemail, so I left a message:

"Hey baby, it’s me. Real sorry about last night. You’ll be happy to know, though, that everything went just fine with the girl. She slept like a baby and her dad picked her up as planned this morning. So it’s on to the next adventure, right? Good luck today baby. I love you like crazy."

The printer jammed around noon, so I went out for my burrito.

Soon as I left the bank, something in my brain started going a little haywire. All during my walk I had the strange feeling I was being followed and laughed at maliciously. The burrito cart was out of chorizo, so I got spicy chicken instead. I was going
to drop into Macy’s and surprise Tessa, but the sax player by the entrance was way off-key. I felt dizzy. I couldn’t imagine how anyone else on the street was bearing it. Then my burrito tasted funny. When I looked inside the thing, I found the chicken was half-raw. I barely made it back to the office in time to go straight to the men’s room and heave. It was then I heard a voice. I could have sworn I heard Ken Crosby cursing at me -- “Reap what you sow, hup!” -- but it was a handicap bathroom, built for one.

I cut out of work early and got a bottle of mash, then walked passed the Dunkin’ Donuts, just to make sure that Maile had been picked up. There was a policeman out front, petting a dog that turned out to be Seamus. I didn’t have time to think twice, or else I might have run. Before I could do anything, I was next to the policeman. Seamus barked at me.

“Nice day, officer,” I said.

“Sure is,” the officer said. “This your dog?”

“Sure isn’t,” I said. “I thought maybe it was, but it’s not.”

“Shouldn’t leave your animal tied up in the city like this,” he said to me. “You’d be surprised how many people get their animals stolen.”

“It’s not my animal,” I said.

“All the same,” he said. “You’d be surprised.”

I went in to get a cup of coffee and look for Maile, but the store was deserted. I waited for the officer to be gone

I had to sneak Seamus into the apartment, because my building -- a five story walk-up built in 1930 as a rum distillery -- has a rule.

There was a message on the machine from Tessa. Her perfume had been selected, she said, and she was leaving immediately for some kind of semi-finals in Milan. She also said she thought it was best we try seeing other people and “see what happens.”

I rewound the tape and listened to it a few more times. Her voice seemed so happy, so not mad. We’d be fine, I figured. “See what happens,” though, what did that mean?

I was rewinding the tape for the fourth or fifth time when I heard sirens outside. Looked out the window and saw dozens of heavily armed cops storming the building. There was a Polaroid of Maile’s pale freckled face stuck to my corkboard, a bag of little teeth on the counter and blood from her mouth everywhere: on the couch, in my car, on last night’s clothes. Seamus was in the bedroom tearing apart a pillow. Things did not look good. Things, in fact, looked quite bad. Still, I hadn’t killed anyone. The truth would prevail. Might prevail.

I wet the couch with lemon-fresh febreze and flipped the cushions over so the bloodstains weren’t so blatant. I tore the photo from the board and tried to flush it down the toilet. It wouldn’t go, so I hid it in the tank part. Then I extracted Maile’s little teeth from the Crown bag and swallowed them. All I
could really do then was sit and wait nervously for the cops to bust in the door. I breathed deep to relax: in through my nose and out through my mouth. I thought of the questions they’d have for me. My only real eyewitness to any of this business was Tessa, and she was conveniently located in a plane, 900-miles above the Atlantic. Plus, she wouldn’t have been too happy about coming back to America to testify on my behalf. Even if she did, how much would it help? She’d have to admit that she left me with Maile in the lot. Lemon smell enveloped the room. I sat there and I sat there, breathing, paralyzed.

There’d been a simple mistake, I’d explain to the police. Poor judgment on my part, I’d admit, but nothing too criminal. Unless negligence was a big deal crime, in which case I would need a good lawyer. The girl has been missing for five years, they’ll tell me. Her family died in a fire. I must have bought her in a white slave ring out of Mexico City, they’ll say. Bunch of Floridians using lemons as the “vehicle.” A random tip. The Dunkin’ Donut guys will have testified they saw me with her. That she screamed.

I’d offer to help infiltrate the heartless slave ring. The feds would wire me up with microphones and wait outside Bishop’s in a van, I figured, but when I knocked on the garage door, nobody would answer. The cops would bust in the door and find a bunch of wretched jerkwads, but nobody of Ken’s description. They’d remember me, alright. But not a tall bearded man named Ken. Nor would this “Ken” appear at Haymarket selling lemons on
Sunday, but there would be a guy there selling lemons who remembered a guy named Ken Crosby. This guy may even have gone to Ken’s funeral five years ago. He’d have his ashes! I was going to spend the rest of my life in jail.

No I wasn’t. I was halfway through my window onto the fire escape when the cops came trooping out of the building with an old man named Sal who lived on the second floor. They shoved Sal in one car and loaded up a big duffel bag full of something that looked heavy in another car. Everybody dispersed.

I went to bed that night with a new dog and a pair of teeth in my stomach, still not feeling quite in the clear. I thought of driving out to Bishop’s with the dog, but what if Ken was there and Maile wasn’t? What if I’d really screwed this up, and Maile really was in the back of some van on its way to some filthy Mexican whorehouse? As it was, nobody knew who I was or where I lived. I imagined the useless APB Ken might put out -- TJ something or other... Pretty boy with fancy smell... French. My building manager didn’t allow dogs, but he didn’t allow criminals either, and apparently Sal had something pretty bad going on. I could say I was afraid and needed the dog for security.

The teeth posed a more complicated problem. It might be suspicious to have a doctor find three little teeth in my stomach. It seemed a 50/50 bet they’d find their own way out, but then again that could be dangerous. I made a note to look it up on the Internet at work, then I drank and watched TV in bed until I passed out.
All was well, pretty much, until I woke up in the middle of the night with a terrible distress in my stomach. It felt like a gerbil was inside my body, nibbling at my sides. I ate four Pepto-Bismol and washed them down with half a gallon of milk. The distress paused just long enough for me to fall back asleep, then woke me up again ten minutes later in the form of something I would soon describe to the emergency room doctor as "a sharp, I’m-a-dead-man sensation." So concentrated was this new pain, I was unable to move. But keeping still didn’t help, either. Every breath seemed to worsen my situation. Even blinking hurt badly. It was as if a family of squirrels had found their way into my guts, eaten the gerbil from before, and were now scratching, scraping, biting, clawing, looking for a way out, one through each orifice. One particularly vicious little bastard seemed to think my nuts were acorns. This lasted five or six seconds before settling. I was sure it was the teeth somehow, and spent the morning getting x-rayed.

The diagnosis was nervous tension. The doctor, a tall, blonde Viking of a man, suggested I start a pain journal, recording under what circumstances and to what level of severity the hurt occurred, so we could potentially isolate aggravating factors. He also recommended I try eating more healthily. "Exercise," he said. "Learn how to breathe." And, "Stop drinking so much."

"I know how to breathe," I told him.

"Maybe you need a vacation," he said.

"Write me the prescription," I said.
Work gave me two months off for "rest and relaxation," so of course I packed my bags, hopped in the car, headed West and never returned.

Nor have I recovered. I've seen several doctors since. The first thing I show them is my journal. For every day, an entry. They all recognize I'm experiencing real pain, but no one ever finds anything strange. They've got rational explanations for everything. And I can't say I know better. It's possible my liver gave out to the booze. That my stomach lining developed holes like Cahill's at work, from coffee and stress. That my intestines were genetically predisposed to rotting. That my smallest rib on the left side of my body was fragile to begin with and fractured from a fall out of bed.

But if I've moved those teeth out of my body naturally, I didn't notice. All I know for certain is that it's been two years today, I don't booze, I drink tea, not coffee, I sleep on a futon on the floor to avoid falls, I'm turning into a skeleton from this low-cal diet I'm on, I don't do anything fun anymore, really, and yet, day and night, I suffer.

I keep a separate journal for my dreams. Like I said, on light nights, I get the door. Sometimes all that's behind the oak is an innocent memory of Maile playing her video game, gnawing on her jerky. Other times, on heavier nights, the ones were I wake up covered in cold sweat, Seamus barking, biting my hands, tearing the pillow from my face, it's a more disturbing picture, wherein Maile is thrashing around upside-down, dangling on a rope by her
feet, about to get dunked into a big bubbling tank of pink rubber, fat, loveless men in sombreros essentially stoning her with lemons. Sometimes I’m one of the fat men. Sometimes I’m myself. Hard to say which is worse.

Maybe Seamus knows. He wakes up howling sometimes, too.

Then there are what I call the “visions,” the ones where I’m getting out of the shower in the morning, on my way to the health-food store, waiting in line for my stamps, and Maile’s standing two feet away, laughing her head off with no teeth in her mouth and lush torrents of blood -- cherry red and thick as fingernail polish -- spilling down her chin.

Her laugh is sweet, though, despite the gore, and not scared. It’s infectious, in fact. Impossible to resist. Almost as if I’m being forgiven for my negligent behavior. Except when I go to laugh with her, it really hurts. It kills. It tears me apart. I can’t change what I’ve done, I want to tell her. I can’t go back anymore than I can move on.