

University of Montana

ScholarWorks at University of Montana

Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, &
Professional Papers

Graduate School

2015

JP's Thesis

JP Kemmick

University of Montana - Missoula

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd>



Part of the [Literature in English, North America Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Kemmick, JP, "JP's Thesis" (2015). *Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers*. 4422.
<https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/4422>

This Professional Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.

JP'S THESIS

By

JP KEMMICK

BA in English, Pacific Lutheran University, Tacoma, WA 2007

Professional Paper
presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in Creative Writing

The University of Montana
Missoula, MT

May 2015

Approved by:

Sandy Ross, Dean of the Graduate School
Graduate School

Kevin Canty, Chair
English

David Gates, Co-Chair
English

Phil Condon
Environmental Studies

Contents

Space City
Page 3

Make A Wish
Page 19

The Breach
Page 28

Karate Chops
Page 41

The Space Explorer Crash Lands In A Children's Cemetery
Page 55

Space City

Raymond Carlyle stepped out of his truck and pressed out the wrinkles in his spacesuit. It was a pleasant fall day, red leaves from the row of maples planted outside Space City littering the ground. Raymond reached over to the passenger's side seat and grabbed his helmet. He breathed on the visor and gave it a rub with his gloved palm. He buckled a carpenter's belt, replete with nails, a tape measure and a hammer, around his waist. The suit was a little tight on Raymond, but he was just happy it still fit at all. He had acquired it working at Space City almost forty years ago, when he was just nineteen. The park went belly up only a year into its run so nobody noticed, or maybe nobody cared, when Raymond walked out still wearing the suit and drove home.

Raymond walked up the cracked cement path to the camp's entrance. An old metal gate hung partially off its hinges, a chain that once secured it long since rusted off and lying on the ground. Twin blue and yellow ceramic rockets arched over the gate in mid-flight, their paint chipped, bird shit covering the right rocket's nose. Resting on the rockets' contrails, carved metallic letters spelled out Space City, USA.

Raymond dragged the gate open, the metal screeching along the pavement, and squeezed through. Closing the gate again behind him, he clapped the rust from his gloves. He had tried to keep the suit clean over the past few months that he had been coming back to Space City, but it showed some signs of wear and tear: a splotch of green paint on one boot, grey knees, a hole in the finger of one of the gloves.

A clump of pigeons flustered out from the road as Raymond walked into the park. The entrance stroll was meant to emulate a futuristic idea of Disneyland's Main Street USA, itself only five years old when Space City opened in 1960. The small, domed buildings along the road were shaped in strange, angular fashion, like discombobulated turtle shells. Wooden signs hanging crooked by a single chain or propped up against the storefronts advertised their past futuristic wares: space candy; fortune teller;

rocket fuel; space suits. Someone had spray painted SPACE SLUTS in dripping letters on one of the buildings. Raymond had been meaning to get those signs repainted and hung again, but after all the years of neglect there was so much to fix at Space City. More than he realized when, beset by nostalgia, he first came back to the park in June, a clutch of teenage memories meeting the reality of thirty plus years of neglect.

He'd never married or had any children and had always lived simply, so when his fiftieth birthday rolled around a few years ago, he'd tried his hand at retirement. But he'd quickly gotten bored and taken a three days a week job as a mall cop at Madison Square Mall. He'd walk around the place watching the afternoon elderly and unemployed people strolling and wait for the masses of teenagers once school let out, followed by their parents running frantic errands before dinner. Occasionally a kid would end up in his office, sullenly staring at the dirty tile floor, waiting for the truancy officer or his parents.

But the youthful buzz of the mall, all those teenagers hoping to get lucky in life—with a cute boy or girl or just the capitalist dream—had created in him a certain wistfulness for his own adolescence.

A few years after the park closed he had taken the space suit back to Montana for a nephew's space-themed birthday party and forgotten it there. When his mom called in July and told him she'd found it in a box in the basement, he took it as some sort of sign. He told her to send it in the mail and the next day drove out to Space City. Even the drive there stirred up old memories.

Although Raymond was happy to have the mall job, the general fakery and obscenity of the place irritated him. It wasn't until he visited Space City again, and wandered around letting the memories flood in, that he fully understood why. In some small way Space City had cultivated the imagination, had invited in creative interpretations. Although the park had played fast and loose with scientific facts, there was a decent enough chance that kids might leave knowing an extra thing or two, or at least thirsting to visit the local library. The mall was all pre-packaged, easily digestible crap, except for the food, which was hardly digestible at all.

On a whim, he'd decided maybe he'd fix the place up some. He knew it was impractical to think he could make so much as a dent, but he was fueled by some background notion that the youth of the city should have somewhere better than the mall to visit after school.

The first time Raymond had worn the suit around Space City it had been strictly as a personal joke. But as he was repairing some rotting boards over the marshier areas of the park, he had realized how the suit felt like his own personal time capsule, how it made Space City, and his desire to fix it up, come alive for him, and so he'd kept wearing it. And maybe his costumed presence would aid the park's rehabilitation in some more philosophical way, to help it remember its once glorious character.

Raymond himself had been swept up in the park's initial buzz. Space City was going to be the future of amusement. He had moved from Havre, Montana to the park's hometown of Huntsville, Alabama at eighteen, a farm kid caught up in the space craze, thinking Space City might be his ticket to rubbing shoulders with real astronauts. The park had promised cameos from Buzz Aldrin and Neil Armstrong, who had walked on the moon the year before the park officially opened. Raymond got a job as an astronaut himself, wandering the camp tying alien balloon animals for kids, directing confused tourists to the different sections of the park: the Old South, Dinoland, Futureville. In the brochures there was mention of time travel as justification for the non-space themed stuff, but the park itself didn't put much effort into an explanation.

Raymond loved the job and he was good at it, rattling off space facts he had memorized late at night after school or a hard day's work on the farm. He did a great imitation of Armstrong's famous line, "That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind," complete with static breaks. Although he occasionally found himself wondering when Aldrin and Armstrong would make their promised personal appearances, and he wondered why some of the shops seemed a little bare seven months in, he was too enamored with being an astronaut to see the obvious. Space City closed a year in, mired in financial trouble and investor scandal.

Today Raymond was planning on working on the aging and dilapidated volcano in Dinoland. A

few days ago he had hauled in a roll of chicken wire and all the lumber, one board at a time, as the front gates proved too rusted to open wide enough to admit his truck. He'd hauled in a ladder too and hid it with the boards and fencing in a plot of overgrown weeds. He knew teenagers and college kids came out here at night to roam the grounds and he didn't want them stealing or destroying his materials. He was already dipping into his meager savings to fix up the park, which he knew was unsustainable. Maybe someday in the future, if he could get the park looking half presentable, he could convince some investors to re-open it as a throwback adventure, on a smaller scale. He couldn't be the only one still around with fond memories of the place.

Walking past the entrance to the Old South, marked by two white columns like the entrance to an old plantation mansion, Raymond stopped and stared down the street and thought of Patty Langley, who had worked in the wax museum and who, for a month when she was eighteen, had carried his child. But her parents had found out and sent her off somewhere. One of Patty's friends who worked in the gift shop told Raymond that Patty had aborted the baby, that her parents had made her do it.

Raymond hadn't been back to visit the wax museum yet. He imagined it as a horror show, all the wax melted from the mannequins and puddled at their feet. He preferred to imagine it as it was when Patty still worked there, when she would kiss him behind statues of Jefferson Davis and Jean Lafitte, his helmet rolling around at their feet, his jetpack pressed against the wall.

Some days it was hard to get anything done at the park, every boarded up storefront and attraction bringing on a new set of memories. But Raymond made himself move on. He walked down the cracked roadway to the entrance to Dinoland, marked by a brontosaurus, its long green neck creating an arch, its head ending above a pile of tall cement grass, now eclipsed by real, overgrown weeds. Raymond had painted the dinosaur in July as one of his first endeavors at the park and now its bright green stood out against the shabby park and the fading fall colors.

Raymond had liked Dinoland for its implausibility, for its lack of historical exactitude. The park owners had cared more that it was fun and less that it hued to scientific rigor. Cavemen in

Flintstone-like apparel walked the grounds, grunting out directions and bopping children on the head with their styrofoam clubs. Raymond had filled in for one of the cavemen once and it had been a nice change of pace, pretending to be dumb as rocks instead of reciting the order in which the planets orbited the sun.

In Dinoland, Raymond remembered the souvenir shops looked like mud huts and sold stone (styrofoam) wheels, leopard-print caveman shirts and battery powered, flickering plastic “flames.” Now the shoddily constructed caves had mostly collapsed in on themselves. There was a plot of overgrown weeds that had the scorched circle markings of real fire.

But the volcano was the crown jewel of Dinoland's attractions. One of the Space City engineers had visited Yellowstone National Park and been enthralled by Old Faithful, by its regularity and the tourists who flocked to it. The volcano had been engineered to pour smoke from its top all day and then, at 2:00 everyday, it erupted, raining down water on all the sweat-soaked tourists. Raymond could always tell when 2:00 was about to roll around by the tourists shuffling from Futureville into Dinoland's erupting past.

Now, Raymond stood at the base of the long-dormant volcano. The plaster had flaked off in large chunks so that he could see through it in spots. It was always a simple thing: a smoke machine, some pipes and a diesel generator. The smoke machine and the generator were long gone, but the pipes still wended their way to the volcano's top, clinging to the metal mesh structure, ready to bring the eruption spewing from the volcano's mouth.

Walking around the volcano, Raymond forged his way through the overgrown weeds in search of the wood, wire and ladder he had stowed away. He needed to bring a lawnmower out here next, he thought, make the place less appealing to vagrants. But he couldn't seem to find his supplies. He flipped the visor on his helmet up. Thinking maybe he was just mistaken about where he had left them, he wandered in a larger circle until he was certain they were in fact gone, all that lumber, fencing and his only good ladder. This was the price to pay for trying to do a good deed, he thought; you get your

stuff stolen by some thoughtless kids or passing hobos.

Raymond walked back to the volcano and stood looking at it. It had been large and impressive at its Space City zenith, but now, like the rest of the park, it just looked sad, on its last legs, a piece of history being left to rot. And then through one of the larger holes in the plaster Raymond thought he noticed something strange. He walked up to peer into the hole more closely and sure enough, there was his lumber, arrayed on the volcano's floor in a makeshift bed, the two-by-fours stacked under the plywood to create a platform. A blanket and stained pillow lay on the plywood. Widening his view, Raymond noticed a suitcase, the rolling kind, against the bed's foot.

“What the fuck?” someone said from behind him.

Raymond spun around, his helmet catching the edge of the crumbling plaster and flaking off a few extra chips. A girl stood there, in jeans and a baggy sweatshirt with Goofy on the front giving a thumbs up. She was short and a little chubby, with a single long blond braid hanging over one shoulder.

“What the fuck are you,” she said, at which point Raymond regretted dressing as an astronaut. He popped off the helmet and tucked it under his arm.

“I’m. . .the repairman,” he said.

“Seriously?”

“Yes.”

“I thought this place was, like, totally deserted.”

“Mostly.”

“Shit. But why are you wearing a spacesuit?”

“Company policy.”

The girl eyed him warily. Raymond imagined what she was seeing. He was mostly bald and a little wrinkly, obviously an unthreatening old man. Plus, he was dressed as an astronaut.

“I call bullshit,” she finally said.

“Okay.” Raymond felt he had already taken the lie further than it needed to go.

“I think you're some weird old man with a space fetish.”

Raymond decided to turn the tables.

“And who are you?”

“Jessie.”

“Jessie?”

“Jessie.”

“Are you sleeping in the volcano, Jessie?”

She was silent for a minute and then she said, “None of your fucking business.”

“It is my lumber, your bed. My fucking lumber,” he added, to sound tough, although the curse felt weird on his tongue. Anyway, he had confronted plenty of supposedly tough teenagers at the mall.

“You want it back or something?”

Raymond was about to say that he sure as hell did, that it was a hundred dollars worth of lumber, when it dawned on him that the girl was clearly homeless, that in asking for his lumber back he would be asking her to sleep on the cold ground.

“What's your deal?” he asked, softening his tone.

“You're wearing a spacesuit and asking me what my deal is?”

“Are you homeless?” Jessie didn't answer and so Raymond continued. “So you ran away from home and are living in Space City.” More silence. “Okay, we'll go with that story then.”

“Listen, just don't do anything, okay?” Jessie sounded suddenly scared, her macho facade worn away.

“Do anything?”

“Like tell the cops. I'm fine, don't worry. You can have your wood back.”

“You can keep the lumber.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. But call your parents, let them know you're okay.”

“Okay, yeah, I can do that. Um, so for reals, what's your deal. With the suit and stuff.”

“I used to work here, when I was closer to your age. I thought I'd fix the place up a little.”

Jessie turned her head to look out at Dinoland, at the collapsed caveman huts, at the scattered dinosaurs with their horns, heads or tails missing. Then she looked back at Raymond.

“It's a big job, I know,” he said.

“Good luck?”

“Thanks.”

Raymond stood there a moment and then said, “Well, stay safe, okay?”

“Yeah, okay,” Jessie said.

Raymond put the helmet back on and walked back down the path toward the vibrant green brontosaurus. Then he remembered the ladder, which he did want back, and he turned to ask Jessie where it might be, but she had already disappeared and so Raymond let it go.

That night as Raymond settled into his recliner with a TV dinner, ready to watch *Law and Order*, he thought more about Jessie, if he had done the right thing in leaving her there, to fend for herself against the very real dangers of Dinoland.

A year after Space City closed down, he had seen one of the young fry cooks, a sarcastic redhead about his age, in line for free food at a homeless shelter. The kid had recognized Raymond, had come over to shake his hand and inquire about his post-park life. Raymond had got a landscaping job, was doing alright. “Cool, great,” the kid had said, but he offered up nothing of his own life, and Raymond didn't ask.

When Raymond next went to Space City a few days later, he brought along some canned chili and soups and an old blanket he dug out from his closet. He considered leaving the suit in the closet—the

interaction with Jessie had made him feel fairly ridiculous—but then he considered how benign it made him look, that it might be good protection of a sort if he were to ever run into real trouble.

At the park he knocked on the side of the volcano as if it were the door to a girl's bedroom, but no one appeared to be inside. He peered in, thinking maybe she had moved on after he had found her, but the makeshift bed was still there, and the suitcase. He left the food on top of the blanket at the small maintenance door and went back over to Futureville to finally tackle some of those signs in the entrance walkway.

It was a chilly day and he was happy to have the suit on, as thin as it was. He dragged an old wooden ladder from his truck over to the first of the old shops, which had been a classic darts and balloons game, the darts shaped like miniature rockets, the balloons all white in imitation of the moon. Raymond remembered popping moon after moon on slow days, crackling in his staticy Armstrong impression, “That's one small dart for man, one giant rocket ship for mankind.”

The sign hanging from its sagging eaves said, “ROCKET TO THE MOON,” but the paint had long since peeled away and the wood begun to rot. Raymond climbed up a few rungs of the ladder with his power drill and unscrewed the sign from its post. As he walked down the ladder with the sign, a familiar, “Hey again,” greeted him from behind.

Raymond turned to see Jessie there, in the same outfit as before. His nice extension ladder sat next to her. “I brought your ladder back. Thanks for letting me use it,” she added, as if Raymond had given his permission at all.

“Thanks,” Raymond said, flipping up the visor of the helmet. “How's the volcano treating you?” He wasn't sure if his tone was too glib. Her situation was certainly serious.

“Fine. It's warm, on account of the lava.”

“Right.”

“So what're you doing today?”

“I was going to repaint some signs.”

“Can I help? Art class was my only A last semester.”

“Sure.”

So Raymond unscrewed the rest of the signs from their buildings and he and Jessie sat on the porch of one of the shops that had once sold space ice cream, touching up the signs.

“So you really think you can make this place new again?” Jessie asked as she dabbed her paintbrush into a puddle of blue paint.

“Oh I wouldn't go that far. I'd need a couple million dollars to do that.”

“So you're not a millionaire, huh? That was one of my first guesses, that you were, like, the guy who used to run this place but now you're crazy and wandering the park in an old space suit.”

“Now there's a hypothesis.”

“So, for serious, what's your deal? You don't seem very crazy.”

“Hey, thanks,” Raymond laughed. “It's just a hobby, that's all. I don't collect stamps or go bird watching, or whatever it is old people are supposed to do.”

“You said you used to work here?”

“I did, way back in the day. I enjoyed it, although it was short lived.”

“Didja get fired?”

“No, the park closed down a year in. Money troubles, I guess. I stole this suit on my last day. It's the only thing I've ever stolen.”

“Shit, I've stolen lots of stuff. I mean, mainly candy. A bra once.” Raymond briefly wondered if she'd ever stolen anything from the mall, but he declined to reveal his day job.

A gust of wind blew through, rattling the dry leaves and sending a plastic bag soaring into a nearby tree's empty branches. Raymond washed out his brush tip in a cup of water and then dabbed it in some red paint.

“So, Jessie, I do have to ask—”

“I ran away from my asshole parents.”

“Okay.” Raymond wasn't sure where to go from there and Jessie wasn't forthcoming with any more details, so he let it drop. After a minute she asked if he was married, if he had any kids.

“No to both,” Raymond said. Jessie nodded at this but didn't say anything more.

After another hour of sign touch-up and light conversation, Raymond rehung the signs, Jessie steadying the ladder. The rotting wood made it difficult to screw the signs back in. Jessie helped him carry the ladders and tools back to his truck.

“Thanks for letting me help,” she said. “I get bored out here.”

“Thanks for the help. And listen, if there's anything—”

“And thanks for the food and the blanket,” she said. “I'll see you around.” Then she turned and walked away. Raymond watched her go and then he took off the suit and went home.

The next night Raymond had dinner with an old friend, Michelle, at an Italian place called Mama Mia's. He told her about finding Jessie at Space City.

“That old amusement park? What were you doing out there?”

“I used to work there, when I was nineteen. It's the reason I came to Alabama in the first place.”

“No shit? And what, you were feeling nostalgic or something?”

“Basically, yeah.” Raymond decided to leave out that he had been feeling nostalgic, regularly, for the past several months, while wearing a space suit.

“So what's the girl's deal?”

“Runaway. That's all she's told me.”

“And she's just out there alone, sleeping in that volcano?”

“Seems like it.”

“God, that's gotta be rough. Poor girl.”

“I feel like I should do something, but I don't know what her story is. Maybe her parents are abusive. Maybe it's none of my business.”

“You want me to talk to her? Woman-to-woman?”

“Would you? I’m out of my depth here.”

Raymond picked Michelle up from work the next day at the supermarket and they drove out past the city limits to Space City. Apartment complexes and gated communities were springing up all over what had been pastures and farms when Space City debuted. Raymond remembered driving past cotton and peanut fields to get to work at the park, all now vanished. It was probably only a matter of time before progress reached the ruins of Space City, although the property rights were likely a nightmare.

At the park Michelle squeezed through the gate and Raymond followed her. As they walked down the main stretch, Michelle looked around at the boarded up and decrepit old buildings. Eyeing a pile of empty forties in a clump of tall weeds, she said, “This place must be a teenager's fantasy.”

“Probably not Jessie's.”

“True.”

“Although it *was* my fantasy, at nineteen.”

“You must have been a huge nerd.”

“That I was. I guess I thought this place was somehow important in the big space race picture.”

“There you go with the nostalgia again. Quit making me feel old.”

They curved along the path until the brontosaurus came into view.

“So what's a dinosaur doing at Space City anyway?”

“They were going for some time travel thing. It was never exactly clear.”

“Well at least one thing has kept its paint,” Michelle said, pointing at the bright green brontosaurus as they walked under it.

As they neared the volcano, Raymond said, “So she seems cool with me now, but maybe I should just go say hello first before I introduce you.”

So with Michelle hanging back, Raymond walked up to the volcano and gave a light knock. No response. “Jessie?” Still no response. He peered in through one of the holes in the plaster, but no one was home. He walked back to Michelle.

“Looks like she's not in presently. I guess she does have to leave, sometimes.”

“I can wait for a bit, I suppose.”

“Hey, I'll give you a tour of Dinoland.”

And so they walked around, Raymond pointing out the caves and what they had once sold. He told her of eating big chicken legs every day for lunch, of the caveman guy who only spoke in grunts and had been fired for his commitment to character. He showed her the tar pit, which was really just a number of plaster dinosaurs “stuck” in the pavement. It felt good to be showing Space City to somebody else. He'd been walking it alone, submerged in his memories. He hadn't kept in touch with any of the friends he'd made there all those years ago. He had no one to compare notes with.

When they eventually returned to the volcano there was still no sign of Jessie. Michelle left a little plastic baggie full of tampons and lotion at the maintenance door and then they left.

At the mall that Saturday Raymond found himself scanning the stores and the corridors for Jessie, as if having disappeared from Space City she might show up here, among her peers, no longer troubled, ready to bask in the neon lights of the food court. He thought he saw her at one point, walking into Spencer's Gifts. He followed her in, but when she turned around it was not Jessie, just some girl with big bangs and too much mascara, a piece of metal stuck through one eyebrow.

Raymond wondered if Jessie had had this normal life once, if she'd been an ordinary mall rat who took an argument with her parents a step too far. But what did he know about her home life? He'd gone to school with kids who's fathers beat them, who's mothers sold their food stamps for booze.

Near the end of the day he watched a group of teenagers in the arcade, twirling and stomping on the dancing game. They laughed and ate long ropes of red licorice. Was it so wrong to want this life

for Jessie? He decided he'd do something about Jessie's situation, although he had no real idea what that might be.

A few days later Raymond woke with a sore back. He lay in bed for an hour but then forced himself to get up. He thought a walk might be in order to undo whatever kink had burrowed itself in his back. He had been meaning to make a checklist out at Space City anyways, of the repairs that needed to happen next so he could buy supplies.

So he drove out to the park and walked down its cracked and broken streets with a clipboard, paper and pen, noting new ideas for nominal repairs. He had tried to get into the spacesuit that morning, but it had proven too difficult with his sore back and so he went without it, walking around Space City now in jeans and a warm winter jacket.

As he walked past the entrance to the Old South, its white columns dirty and flaking paint, he decided to enter. He had barely done any work to the Old South section of the park. It had never much interested him when he worked there. It didn't have the faux-history of Dinoland or the excitement of Futureville. Its charm was more refined and subdued, which Raymond had seen, at nineteen, as boring. He was, despite his long years in the state, still not a southerner.

Now Raymond walked down the Old South's main street. Old fashioned streetlights dotted the path on either side. The main delicacy of the Old South had been cotton candy, meant to historically invoke the region's main crop, but undoubtedly lost on the sugar-high kids. Speakers had been set up to play old timey waltzes. Spiritual hymns sung in world-weary voices, Raymond considered now, had been conspicuously absent. The only black employees Raymond remembered had been either janitors or cooks.

And then Raymond was standing in front of the wax museum. The boards sealing its front door had been pried off. Raymond stepped up the stairs, now missing a few planks, and onto its porch. He was instantly flooded with memories of Patty Langley, which somehow embarrassed him all this time

later. He hadn't seriously thought of her in years. At some point he assumed teenage memories would subside deeper below the surface.

He had actually met Patty not at Space City, but at a friend's party. She was cute, finishing her senior year of high school. He told her stories of riding horses on his grandpa's ranch, of branding cattle and calving in the spring. She thought Montana was exotic and he let her. They started hanging out, started kissing on drives out into the country in the faded blue Chevy truck Raymond had bought. She told him she was on birth control and that had been good enough for him, good enough to knock her up.

He'd told only a few people over the years about his almost-parenthood. He'd always told himself Patty had nothing to do with him not marrying and starting a family, but now, standing on the front porch of his memories, he thought maybe that was a lie, that it had shook him up more than he'd cared to admit at nineteen, or at thirty-five for that matter, when his then girlfriend had handed him a marriage ultimatum and he'd turned her down.

He'd tried to get Patty to run away to Florida with him, where they could watch real space shuttles take off, but she'd been scared and had told her parents, and Raymond never saw her again.

"Hey, Spaceman Spiff." Raymond, lost in his memories, jumped in surprise. He turned around to find Jessie in the street, glaring at him.

"Why'd you bring that social worker here?" Raymond was confused. "I can smell a social worker a mile away you know." It took Raymond a moment to realize she must be talking about Michelle.

"That was my friend Michelle. She works at Food Valu."

"I thought we were cool," Jessie said. Then she winced, as if she was in some pain, and Raymond noticed she was holding her side.

"Jessie, are you okay?"

"I'm fine," she snapped back. "So just mind your own damn business and leave me alone,

okay?” She turned around and walked off between two of the boarded up shops advertising ice cream and cotton candy.

Raymond sat down on the edge of the porch with the clipboard in his lap. His back still hurt and he felt suddenly overwhelmed. And somehow he had thought coming back to Space City, to fix it up like it was a summer rental, was going to do something for him, give him some purpose.

Then, not far from where he had seen Jessie disappear, he heard a low moaning. He got up and walked toward it. Coming around the cotton candy shack, he saw Jessie slumped against the wall of an old storage shed. She had her head against her knees and was shaking and moaning. Raymond hurried over to her and as he neared her he saw that the crotch of her pants was red with blood. Jessie looked up at him, tears streaming down her face.

“My baby,” she said.

“You're pregnant?”

Jessie nodded and then arched her back and yelled out in pain.

“But I'm not even three months,” she said through gritted teeth. “This shouldn't be happening, this can't be happening.”

“We're going to the hospital. Come on.”

Raymond bent down on one knee and put his arm under Jessie's. A shiver of pain shot through his back. But she didn't make any effort to get up, only shook her head.

“I can't, I can't,” she said, crying and gasping for breath. The blood was now spreading down her left pant leg.

“Jessie, I am not asking. We are going, right now.” He maneuvered his shoulder under her armpit and lifted up. Lightning pain fired up his back, but Jessie lifted with him, pushing off the shack. Together they hobbled out of the Old South, through Futureville's main street and to Raymond's truck, where he raced them to the hospital.

The stiff molded plastic chairs in the emergency waiting room gave no relief to Raymond's aching back. He had told the nurses, stupidly, for reasons he couldn't now pinpoint, that he was Jessie's father and then recanted when he couldn't tell them her last name. He told himself that had he known she was pregnant he would never have allowed her to stay at the park, that he would have right away called whoever it was you called for runaway teenage girls.

The only other person in the room was a young black woman tapping her toe to the muzak piped in through little flat speakers in the ceiling. Raymond focused on a spot on the mosaic-tiled floor that looked like a blocky rocket ship taking off. A man and a woman entered through the sliding doors and took seats opposite Raymond. The woman placed her gloved hand on the man's knee and he put his hand over it as if to hold it in place. A few more minutes passed and then Jessie walked through the swinging doorway. She looked pale and exhausted. She was still wearing the jeans, the blood caked and dry.

“Jesus, Jessie,” the man across from Raymond said and then both the man and woman were out of their chairs, hugging Jessie, the whole lot of them crying, which is when Raymond realized they were her parents.

He stood up and slowly walked toward the exit. It swooshed open and he walked out into the crisp afternoon, wondering if Jessie might call after him, unsure if he really wanted her to. And then the doors closed behind him.

Make A Wish

On the eighth day after my mother died of cancer, the fifth after her funeral, I make a wish that she were still alive and when I come home from work, there she is, sitting on my ratty couch, looking intensely perturbed. The white dress we buried her in is streaked with dirt, as is her face.

“You did this, didn't you?” she says as I stand in the doorway. I nod.

My mother stands up and I take the few steps to hug her, shocked and grateful for the opportunity. But she does not reciprocate the hug, keeping her arms rigidly at her side. For a moment I wonder if the rigor mortis has stiffened her joints, leaving her unable to return my hug, but then I take a step back and see that she is scowling.

“Mom?” I say.

“I was happy being dead,” she says. “Why did you do this? This is so selfish, Eric. So very, very selfish.”

“I missed you, Mom.”

“I'm sure you did, son. I'm sure you did.” And then she leaves the room and a minute later I hear the shower running.

I rummage through my closet and find a dress that my girlfriend, Melinda, left a few weeks back. I hang it on the doorknob of the bathroom and tell my mom through the door that I did so.

Twenty minutes later I hear the bathroom door open and close and a moment later my mother comes out wearing Melinda's dress. On Melinda, who is tall, the dress goes to her knees, but on my mother it reaches to her ankles. It is strange seeing my mother in something so fashionable, so cute, not to mention something most recently worn by my girlfriend.

“You look nice, Mom,” I say.

“I feel like crap,” she says. “And I'm also incredibly hungry.”

I make us dinner, pasta and sauce, which is an embarrassing dinner to feed your mother.

“This is an embarrassing dinner to feed your mother,” my mother says. “I hope you know that.” She is certainly more blunt in her post-death state.

“I was planning to learn to cook,” I tell her. “I made a list after you died, of things I need to learn to do.”

“Did you lose the list?” The list was drawn on a bar napkin last week and included exactly two items: Learn to cook and learn to iron.

“Mom, you've only been dead eight days.”

“Is that all? It feels like an eternity. And I thought you looked fatter.”

It's a rude comment, yes, but I suppose I too would be a little grumpy after such an emotional roller coaster.

I give her the bed and throw a pillow and a blanket on the couch for me. She crawls under the covers, still in Melinda's dress, and pulls the blankets up to her chin, even though it is late May.

“I'm cold,” she says. “Don't you have any more blankets than this?”

I replace my couch blanket with an old beach towel and give her the blanket.

“Do you need anything else?” I ask her.

“You know, heaven is a real place,” she says. “Your father was up there. We fell in love all over again and it was so wonderful.” Then she rolls over and I turn the light off and close the door.

My father died, in a car accident, when I was twenty-three. I stand outside the door for a moment, questioning whether I may have misjudged the past seventeen years of her life. She'd worked as an accountant until a few years ago. She had friends and a Monday night Bingo game. I stopped by regularly, took her out to dinner. We were close before my dad died, but his death brought us even closer. But now she's making me think she was lonelier than I'd imagined.

I go lie on the couch feeling worried and sad, wondering what else I may not have understood about my mother.

I wake up in the morning to my mother hovering over me telling me I don't have any eggs.

“It's a basic breakfast item,” she says. “Eggs.”

“I have cereal,” I say.

“When was the last time you went grocery shopping?”

“I'm sorry, I've been a little upset lately. On account of you dying.”

“In heaven they had feast after feast and you never felt bloated,” she says and goes back into the kitchen. I throw off the beach towel and follow her into the kitchen. I open a cupboard and pull out a box of Special K. At least it's not Cap'n Crunch.

“I'm sorry if I'm being a touch bitchy,” my mother says, sitting at the table. I put the cereal in front of her and grab a bowl and some milk. “I'm really upset to be alive again. I know you didn't mean to hurt me, but I wish I were still dead.”

She pours some cereal into the bowl and then says, “Your father was a much better dancer in heaven too. I asked him if he'd been taking lessons, but he wouldn't fess up to it. Just like your father to try and impress me.” Then she begins crying a little and a few tears fall into her cereal.

At work—I'm the bakery manager at a fancy restaurant—I feel crummy, having made Mom sad about Dad all over again. I burn my arm on the oven and spill a tub of powdered sugar. For some reason I think about the Make A Wish Foundation, where they give dying kids their last wish, no matter how extravagant. I wonder if there might be a reverse enterprise, that gives dead people one final wish, but I doubt there's much demand.

Melinda calls me at lunch to ask if I want to go to a movie tonight. Melinda and I met a few weeks before my mom's diagnosis. I figured when I told her, on our third date, that my mother had just been diagnosed with terminal cancer, she'd go running for the hills. She has a thirteen year old kid from another marriage and I didn't think she'd welcome any further complications into her life. But she stuck with me through the whole thing, like a champ. Sat up with me late into the night watching Bonanza re-runs when I couldn't sleep. She's the best thing that's happened to me in a long time and I'm trying not to screw it up.

“Shoot, I have plans tonight,” I tell her, screwing it up. “Just loose ends, I mean, from my mom.”

She understands, she tells me, clearly trying to give me my space to grieve. She's wonderful, really.

“But I'm taking you to dinner sometime in the next week, okay?” she says.

“Okay,” I say.

When I get home my mother is on the couch flipping through the pages of a Bible she must have dug out from a box of her things in the corner. I went grocery and clothes shopping for her and I set the bags of clothes down at her feet before going into the kitchen with the groceries.

“I'm looking for a loophole,” she calls to me. “Or maybe that's not the right word.” My mother always kept a Bible in the house despite our never having set foot inside a church.

“For what, exactly?” I ask as I put two dozen eggs in the fridge.

“Back to heaven.”

I already tried wishing her back there. I spent all day at work trying to be selfless, which has never been my strong suit. I wished, prayed, meditated and mentally projected her back toward God's kingdom, but, obviously, it didn't work. When I wished her back to life, I meant it. But I don't think my heart is really in my efforts to beam her back up to heaven. She's my mom and she's alive again. Hooray, right? Eventually, she will accept her place back amongst the living, we'll work something out, things will return to normal.

I hear the Bible close and then my mother comes into the kitchen.

“What am I going to do here?” she asks. “All my friends and family think I'm dead.”

“We could throw a party for you, an Alive Again celebration.”

She gives me a look like I am the dumbest son she's ever had, which, with my single child status, I suppose I am.

“Maybe I'll die again,” she says, cheerfully. Then, her eyes lighting up, “Hey, maybe I still have cancer. Make me an appointment.”

I take my head out of a cupboard where I am putting away groceries to look at my mother and her morbidly hopeful thinking.

“Mom, it really hurts to hear you say that.”

“I'm serious,” she says. “Call the doctor.”

I call in sick the next day and we drive to the hospital. We have to drive into the next county, to a different hospital than the one my mother spent her last few months frequenting.

“I think I have cancer,” my mother tells the doctor, barely concealing her glee.

“Well, we can run some tests,” the doctor says.

“I'm pretty sure,” she says.

I walk around the outside of the hospital while my mom gets a CT scan. They've done a great job with the landscaping. I see a few men working on it, dumping wheelbarrows full of wood chips around some shrubs.

I have a little time to kill after my walk and so I browse around the gift shop. It's smaller than the one in the hospital where my mom died. I notice a few of the same condolence cards that I have sitting at home from friends and family. I wonder if they do all their greeting card shopping in hospitals. My mother finds me flipping through the cards.

“Planning ahead for my second death?” she asks. My mother stated, more than once, despite my grimacing every time she said it, that she was ready to die. But it was a slow and painful cancer that left her short of breath and in fairly constant pain. So, in a way, it's good to hear her feeling energized and confident about something again. I just wish it weren't her death.

On the way home my mother rolls down the window and sticks her head out to let the wind blow through her grey hair. I have never seen her do anything like it.

Two days later, we're still waiting for the test results when my mother asks about the old house, her house, the one I was raised in. I tell her it's vacant now, that we're having an estate sale next week and

there's a "FOR SALE BY OWNER" sign staked in the front yard.

"You're not moving into it?" she asks, as if this was something we had ever talked about.

"No. Was I supposed to?"

"I guess I just assumed you would." My mother has always assumed I would do things I never even considered. Like get married, get out of food service.

"What would I do with all that space?"

"Start a family."

"Mother, I'm forty. That ship has long sailed."

"Hey, whatever happened to Melinda? I liked her."

"We're still together."

"We should do dinner."

"Mom, you can't. . .you're dead, remember?"

"I'd like to see the house," she says. "Take me to it."

The house is in a nice neighborhood, just a few blocks from the elementary school I attended. We pull into the driveway and I see that the for sale sign has fallen over.

"Never going to sell like that," my mother says.

I sigh and unlock the front door, looking around at the neighboring houses, already concocting a story of my mother's twin sister. Inside it is a ghost of the house I once knew, soulless and scrubbed too clean. Her old rocking chair and the big leather couch are still there, and some paintings on the walls—bright, flowery still lifes—but they look oddly purposeful without the rest of the room's clutter. Forty-two years of life in the house and all it took to erase it were a few cleaning ladies and some sudsy chemicals. It's clearly a lot for my mother to take in. She stands in the doorway for a full minute before taking her first steps into the living room. She walks across the carpet carefully, as if she's afraid she might break it, leaving small footprints in her wake.

"You're selling my rocking chair?" she says.

"That or donating it, yes."

"You know, they don't have furniture in heaven," she says.

"What do they have then? Clouds?"

"Don't perpetuate stereotypes, Eric. We hate when people do that." The way she says "we" makes it sound like she was part of a grand fraternity. Maybe she was. She walks through the living room into the kitchen and then I hear her walking down the stairs into the basement.

"Hello," I hear behind me and Sheryl May pops her head into the living room. She and her

husband Daryl were our neighbors for almost the entire time I lived in the house. Sheryl and Daryl May. They were childless and traveled a lot. It was always our joke that Sheryl and Daryl May go wherever they like.

“Hi Sheryl,” I say.

“I just saw the open door and wanted to make sure no one was burgling the place.”

“Not much to steal,” I say, gesturing to the nearly empty room. I pray my mother stays in the basement. She answers my prayer by suddenly walking into the living room. I am beginning to understand God works in mysterious ways.

Sheryl is speechless, but my mother extends her hand to greet her.

“Hi, I'm Nancy, Maud's sister.”

“Oh my lord, excuse me, but the resemblance is remarkable.”

“Irish twins.”

“For a second there I thought Maud had come back from the dead.”

“When I was young,” I say, getting in on the action, “I used to confuse the two of them at family gatherings.”

“I guess I missed you at the funeral,” Sheryl says.

“I would have given anything to have been there,” my mother says, “but, well. . .life.”

On the car ride home my mother says, “Ohhh, that was fun, with Sheryl.”

“Let's not make a habit of it though, huh?”

“To mess with her a little. I never liked her, or Daryl.”

“That's nonsense, Mom, they were two of your best friends.”

“Neighbors, Eric. It's different.”

We're silent for a block and then she says, “It's just a box, anyway. A box with a few memories inside, but just a box, still. Heaven helped me to realize that.”

“You're not mad?”

“That you're selling all my stuff? No. It's not like you knew I'd be coming back. And it's not like I'll be staying for long.”

I look over at her when she says that, but she just looks out the window, at the neighborhood she used to live in, at all the boxes her old neighbors still inhabit.

Melinda calls again that night, just to check in, see how I'm doing. I haven't seen her in over a week.

“I'm doing okay,” I tell her. “A little foggy, is all,” which isn't exactly untrue.

“Is that Melinda?” my mother calls from the other room and I cover the mouthpiece. I can't imagine having to explain to Melinda that yes, there is another woman in my apartment, but don't worry, it's just my mother, whose funeral you recently attended.

“Dinner soon?” she asks. “Patrick's at his dad's this weekend.”

“Yes,” I say. “I think so. Yes, that would be good. Saturday night should work.”

The next day at work I get a call from the hospital informing me that my mother is healthy, that there is no cancer to be found anywhere in her body. I step into the walk-in cooler and lean up against the wall. I'm still in there a few minutes later when one of my co-workers opens the door. I stand up and start rifling through a box of zucchini, still wondering how I will break the news to my mother.

“You don't have cancer,” is how I break the news to my mother. I say it immediately upon entering the door and seeing her on the couch.

“What do you mean I don't have cancer? Of course I have cancer. I had cancer last week, why wouldn't I have cancer now?”

“The hospital called. Your tests came back negative.”

“Fuck,” she says, which is only the second time I have ever heard my mother use the word, the other time being in the recitation of a dirty joke one New Year's Eve. “Fuckity fuck fuck fuck,” she says, tripling the count.

“Mom?”

“I earned my death, Eric.”

“I know, Mom.”

“I put up with so much shit in my life.”

“I know, Mom.”

“Your father dying right when I needed him most. And you, you were no easy handful. And I know I failed you, Eric. I don't know how, but I know I did.”

“There's not even a grain of truth in that.”

“I'm leaving,” she says and she puts on the shoes and the light jacket I bought her and then she walks past me out the door. I consider stopping her, or offering up some protestation, but she's a grown woman, and my mother, and I've probably already done enough harm.

When she comes home a few hours later, I am sitting at the dining room table. I have made a good dinner, of wild rice and steamed vegetables with a cream sauce, hoping it will be a sort of apology, but she walks straight through the kitchen and into the bedroom, where she loudly closes the

door.

My mother doesn't even leave my bedroom the next day. Maybe she's on a hunger strike. I run errands and then, around six o'clock, I pick up Melinda for dinner at our favorite Italian restaurant. She's wearing jeans and a ruffly, peach colored top, her hair pulled across her forehead and held in place with a clip.

“You look nice,” I say, and she smiles.

At dinner, she tells me about her son Patrick's baseball team, which is last in the league.

“Poor kids couldn't hit it off a tee,” she says. “And the idea of catching, forget about it.”

“I struck out in tee ball once. When I was little. After the game some dad came up to us in the parking lot and tried to give my dad some pointers to pass on to me. I'm not sure my dad ever forgave me that one.”

“Ouch.”

“Yeah. You know, this will sound weird, but when he died, later, I mean, a while after the funeral, I had this moment of huge relief, thinking I wouldn't ever have to try and impress him again.”

“I can understand that.”

“I never felt that way with my mom,” I say, which I realize is true as I'm saying it. That I never tried for that extra mile, never strived for her respect. I always assumed it was a given and only now am I realizing that maybe I was very, very wrong. This is what my mother meant when she said she had failed me and really, it's the exact opposite.

“I'm thinking of moving into her house, into my childhood home,” I say, to my complete and utter surprise. “It's a lot of room though.”

The waiter shows up then and we clear space for the dishes. As he is setting them down, I say over his arm, “Would you maybe want to move in with me?”

The waiter sits Melinda's plate in front of her and then steps away. Melinda reaches across the table and puts her hand on mine.

“Are you sure?” she asks. I nod, the steam from my pasta rising up into my face. “Yes,” she says. “I would like that very much.”

When we pull up in front of her place, Melinda invites me in, but I tell her I have a packed day tomorrow.

“I'm an asshole, I'm sorry,” I say.

“You're no asshole, Eric,” she says and then leans across the seat to kiss me. She gets out of the

car and walks up to her door and then, in a giddy fit of exuberance, I jump out of the car and bound up the steps after her and kiss her again.

“I’m really excited about this house thing,” I tell her.

“Me too,” she says and we kiss again, there on her stoop, like kids.

For the first time in a long time, I feel like I am going somewhere. All it took was my mother's death and revival. And in return I have given her more of the life she worked so hard to escape, a life I am only beginning to realize may not have been as peaceful or contented as I'd imagined. All I have done is take her away from her dancing husband, her never ending feasts, the beautiful dream of heaven.

When I come home I find my mother still in bed. The light is off, but the blinds are drawn up and the moon is full and bright. She is small under the covers, her legs tucked up. Her hair in the moonlight is silvery.

I walk around to the other side of the bed and pick up the spare pillow. I hold it up in front of me and press my face into it.

“Do it,” my mother whispers. “Please.”

I look down. Her eyes are still closed, but she has turned slightly so that she is lying face up. Her bony hands are resting on each side of her, the white sheet pulled up to her chin. She looks remarkably the same as she did in her casket.

I lean over her with the pillow and then slowly press it into her face. My hands tremble slightly. She does not struggle.

“I’m sorry. I love you,” I say. “I’m sorry I loved you so much.”

The Breach

I hear rumors of sightings, reports of infiltration, but it is not until one morning on my way to work that I see a woman firsthand, boarding my bus. I have vague memories of women from when I was barely out of diapers, but they float in my mind like apparitions, disappearing when I turn toward them. The woman on the bus is, as an individual, unfamiliar to me, but as she climbs onto the bus, it is clear, from what knowledge has been passed down, that she has the air of all women: a rigid self-possession, an essence of withheld knowledge, an aim to get the world under her thumb and keep it there.

She is wearing a red dress certain to inflame any bull within charging distance. She rests one finger on the overhead railing as if it were an afterthought, as if her perfect balance against the bus' abrupt stops and starts was never in question. Her skin is pale, her cheeks scooped, her nose like a long, narrow ski jump. She has great quantities of dark hair and it hangs half tucked into her collar, half trailing down against her red dress like a river parting a sunset.

In short, she is disgusting. The chatter of the rest of the men on the bus—trading stock tips, baseball scores, world news and steak grilling advice—abruptly dies. There is a palpable imbalance, a shifting of the poles of the world we believed ourselves to live in. We are strong men, in body and spirit, but something about the woman seems to sap us of our conviction. It is infuriating, this powerlessness in the face of such a flagrant infiltration. Where are our security forces to sweep her away? How has she made it this far in the first place, wearing a dress like the reddest center of a target?

I get off at the next stop and walk the remainder of my way to work, which is no short distance.

We know the danger the women pose. There are the diseases, for one, transmittable in their kisses and other, more forbidden acts. The drain on bank accounts. The disturbing outbursts following the impossibility of predicting their shifting needs. The many imposed rules on the very things which

make us men. We all learned about those as children, in school and from our fathers, that first generation of men who worked hard to make our country what it is: free of women, a proud nation of men. It is our fathers' vision we fight to uphold.

And then there is the distraction, the turning away from the values—self sufficiency, strength, sporting endeavor, wealth, general good times—that we, as a culture, hold dear.

It is no mystery why the women would want to sneak back into our country. It is a great nation, with proud citizens living full, happy lives. The women want what we have, what we have labored intently to attain, what they have done nothing to help create. They want to leech, to suck the blood straight from our land.

Need I even mention Cindy Long, the girl who on my first day of kindergarten nearly blinded me with a rock, so enraged was she at my natural superiority on the playground? How this is an apt metaphor for what the women were doing to our entire nation, with ever more accurate throws?

After work I take my dog, Chance, for an hours-long walk deep into the woods. I am upset to see no border control vehicles in the gravel parking lot. As we walk, I throw a stick for Chance into the trees and somehow, despite the myriad sticks littering the forest floor, he always comes back with the one I threw. He is a good dog.

We walk until we come to the tree-less line hacked through the forest: the border of our country. The cleanly cut line extends as far as I can see in either direction, a clear demarcation. And every hundred yards there is a large sign incontestably stating, in many languages, **NO WOMEN ALLOWED**. Similar signs were erected at all our borders, stuck into the sand, drilled into the rock, floating on buoys on wide rivers and where our country meets the ocean. There can be no confusion about their meaning. They have, clearly, been ignored. It is impossibly frustrating. Our councilmen put many sleepless nights into the debate about wording, color, font size and style. We put so much

work into our signage.

I walk to the nearest one and run my fingers over the slight rise in the letters. I shake the post it is on and it is solid. I wipe a little dried bird shit off the illustrated picture of a woman with a large, red “X” across her figure. Then Chance suddenly goes on alert at my heels and stretches his neck out toward the other side of the border. I follow his snout and something seems to move in the trees, to retreat. I think I see a wisp of fine, blond hair, but I can't be sure. I keep scanning the forest, but nothing else stirs or catches my attention. I run my hand along Chance's head and assure him everything is okay, although I don't believe it myself. He seems to sense my insincerity and stays tense until I finally turn and call him after me.

On the way back to the car I almost step in a fresh fire pit, the ash still fine, a charred log propped against a stone. And there, in the center of it, is a partially burned woman's *thing*, a curl of dark blood still visible.

The law states, “There shall be none of the female species in these lands which have been reserved solely for the purpose of man and his pursuits.” That means no women. It's the law. And it is obviously being broken with utter, repulsive impunity.

In the grocery store a few days later I see the same woman from the bus. She is wearing a skirt that barely touches her knees. She picks up a red apple and, holding it at eye-level, considers it for any possible defects. She tilts her head slightly back and tucks a few loose strands of dark hair behind one ear. The hand she holds the apple with has fingernails painted the same color as the apple so that her hand almost seems to melt into it. Lifting her left foot she rakes it along the calf of her other leg, leaving faint white scratches. She brings the apple closer to her face—to what degree can an apple even be scrutinized?—and opens her mouth to expose her white teeth, which seem to number in the millions like the baleen of a whale, through which she could strain the intricacies of our world, through which she could let past only those things which nourish her.

This was how my mother shopped for groceries, with a care she reserved for no other activity. I remember little about our trips to the grocery store except that she would spend hours picking out the perfect head of lettuce and then deny me, when I would reach for a package of cookies, even the slightest reward for my patience. In the same way she never rewarded my father for his infinite calm endurance, for his years of putting up with her emotional seesawing, her crying jags which only let up when he would come home with some new skirt or necklace he could little afford.

I expect the woman to bite into the apple but she only breathes upon it and then rubs it against her purple blouse before dropping it in her basket, which dangles from her thin wrist.

I leave my shopping cart in the middle of the aisle and head toward the nearest exit. I make a note to boycott this store, which has clearly given up on the maintenance of our nation's laws, on our national identity. It has to stop. It must stop.

The night of the grocery store incident, I attend a local council meeting. There had been talk of walls along our borders before the simpler signage was adopted and such talk flares up again upon the breaching. The council members first address the issue of those things we openly welcome into our land. The animals we hunt, the boats and trucks from other similarly aligned nations bringing us beer, meat, rifles, sporting goods and power tools.

Next, the council considers what the walls might look like and what women-repelling material they might be constructed from. An esteemed scientist makes a presentation on certain elements known to rebuff women. A local contractor volunteers his time and energy to help. It is a good showing of support and makes me feel better about the efforts of my countrymen.

In the end, for the immediate future, the council agree to be more vigilant, to inspect all incoming shipments, to double check the papers of any especially effeminate looking individuals. All week, boats are stuck in the harbors for days longer, their sailors cursing our paranoid inefficiency. Trucks are stopped at checkpoints, their contents gone over, their boxes opened, the angry truck drivers

complaining about deadlines while they lean against their doors and smoke.

Later that week I go to visit my father at his home. It is his eightieth birthday and it feels a fitting time to celebrate his accomplishments for our country. He was one of the writers of our constitution, an early council member, a founding father with good, strong leadership for our young nation.

He opens the door, leaning heavily on his cane, and then shuffles back down the hall.

We eat dinner, a venison stew I made. When I was growing up, my father was often busy and he frequently left me prepared dinners in the fridge, so it feels good now to be able to cook for him.

Before she was deported, my mother was usually the sole voice of dinner, speaking in her high, manic voice about whatever gossip she had heard that day or about something she had seen on TV. With her gone, our dinners were quiet, and we were allowed to enjoy them for the simple pleasure they provided. This has not changed, and aside from a few remarks about the hunting season this year, we eat quietly, savoring the stew.

After dinner I present my father with his gift, a beautiful plaque I had made, signed by all the still-living authors of our constitution, thanking my father for his inspiring work. But he seems non-plussed.

“That's everyone but Frank and Howard,” I tell him about the signatures. “May they rest in peace.”

My father sighs and scoots his chair back from the table. He grabs his cane and walks into the living room. I hold the plaque to the overhead kitchen light to see if there is something wrong with it that I missed.

“Should I have left Gordon off?” I say as I walk into the living room. “I know you two butted heads sometimes.”

My father is standing at the fireplace with his back turned to me. On the mantle is a face-down picture frame, its back removed. I peer over his shoulder and in his old, liver-spotted hands, there is a

picture of a young woman. Her hair is a light brown, her eyes pinched against the sun, and she is laughing. In her smile I see my own, a slightly crooked, unsure thing.

“Your mother,” my father says.

“Why do you still have this picture?”

“I kept it. I don't know why.” He places it against the mantle and tilts his head back for a better view. “Maybe I miss her.”

When my mother left, I too thought I missed her. I even told my father this, in a confused sobbing fit. When he asked me why, I was hard-pressed for specifics. I had only some sense of missing a certain “woman-ness” about the house, which, as my father helped me to see, was an irrational notion. Our household grew calmer with her gone, more stable, prosperous and healthy. I feel I owe my father some debt now, that as he guided my unsure, young self, I must now steady him in his old age.

He picks up the face-down picture frame. It is a picture of him and me on my high school graduation day, twelve years after we rid ourselves of the women.

“No,” he says. “I do miss her. I'm sorry, but I do.” It is his seeming sincerity as he says this that leaves me tongue-tied and uncertain of what council I might offer.

I leave his house sick with worry. If my father, a man of undeniable fortitude, can be so easily swayed, what of the rest of the nation?

On the news and in the papers, they report mass deportations of women. They fill trucks with them, drive to the farthest reaches of our borders and unload them. And yet still, every day, onto our streets and oozing into other corners of our lives, come the women, mincing along on their delicate heels, the wind catching the edges of their skirts and flaring them up to expose red ankles of a shameful nature. It is shocking to see a banished thing walking down our streets, boarding our buses, sitting at our favorites cafes; it is as if a termite showed up to a gathering of trees.

Despite the reports of deportations and crack downs, I never personally witness any such actions. I never see even one of the women I encounter picked up off the street, thrown into a truck, and driven away. They must be sensing our weakening state. They certainly seem to have a list of the shop owners and restauranteurs too cowardly to throw them out. The women are tenacious in their desire to destroy our way of life, and they reappear, daily, in ever greater numbers. In their dress and their actions, the women are clearly demanding our full attention, but I refuse to give them even a sliver.

At night though, I dream of an encroaching dark shadow.

One morning there comes news of a man who had been sighted at a late hour attempting to smuggle a woman into his apartment. The woman is deported, the man arrested and quarantined. It sends a shockwave of abhorrence through me, the thought of so much weakness, of such a purposeful abetting. It sickens me to consider the all too easy giving in to primitive below-the-belt stirrings, of acknowledging the women's power we so long ago shook from our loins like the archaic force it is.

Cindy Long, the kindergarten rock thrower, showed me her underwear once during nap time. Just pulled down her pants and thrust a hip in my direction. White with little faded red hearts. God only knows what strange things were going on in that girl's home. But I knew better. I told her to pull her pants back up. Within months, Cindy, her mother, my mother, a number of my smothering teachers, were all gone.

Now, all these years of progress and then one pitiful man ruins it all. In the days and weeks after this singular man's transgression, national morale begins to flag. Nothing seems to be getting done. Our nation appears to be in the midst of a slow-motion crumble.

It is obvious that the bureaucrats, those who had decided against walls in the first place, will take years to come to any kind of decision to the immediate problem. This indecisiveness is one of our problems.

When my father and his compatriots helped found this nation, they were decisive, quick, determined—everything our modern state isn't.

I have always shied from the work of my father, perfectly happy to blaze my own trail in the country he helped create. But now, in the same vein as my father, I decide to take the matter into my own hands. I knock on the doors of my neighbors and make my case. I use word-pairings like, “shameful disregard,” and “mindful, deliberate disrespect.” I come armed with statistics and charts. My neighbors nod enthusiastically: agreed, agreed, agreed. They take the signs I made to post up at their workplaces, their coffee shops; they take the petitions to circulate among friends and co-workers.

But at one door I notice a hint of lipstick on a shirt collar. At another, a single pink slipper pokes out from a closet. When we deported the women, some men, sorry sympathizers, actually left with them. But now I see that some of them might have stayed, that they may have been working to corrupt us from the inside all along. I worry. Oh, how I worry.

It is the following week the posters go up for the benefit show, to support a sick neighbor. It goes against our code, the very grain of our society. It is sure to be a humiliation for the sick man, the implication that he is unable to take care of himself, that he needs sympathy and pity.

I show up late to find the community center surprisingly packed. I assure myself it is filled with other men in my curious position, here to right a wrong, to set us back on our individual tracks, free of the suggestion of social charity.

A band takes the stage and they are loud and heavy. Their volume comforts me, comforts us all. It is as it should be, men gathered to throw their heads back, to raise fists, to howl and growl. I feel the old desire to headbutt someone or something.

But then comes the moment when a man walks on stage with a bucket and he asks us, looking at his shoes, mumbling, if we might pass around the bucket, to collect money for our sick “brother-in-arms.” The term comes off his tongue like a roller-coaster losing its breaks, fast and frightened.

When the bucket comes to me, full of small bills, I pass it on without a contribution. The bucket smells of pickles. The money smells of pity.

Soon after, I leave into the dark night. The moon is full and from my vantage it looks to almost sit atop the knob of a flagpole. If only we could be so isolated as the moon.

As I walk past the alleyway behind the building I see two women there leaning up against the hall's rear door, smoking, of all things. The moonlight disappears in a bank of clouds and then the women open the door and go back inside, where, I now see, they have been all along, demanding our charity.

Then comes the Friday night poker game. The cigar smoke is thick and the shuffling of chips across the felt of Gary's table sounds like the soft whisperings of wealth. There are potato chips. There is dip. There is Louie talking about his baseball team's recent attainment of the regional championship.

And then Gary goes into the kitchen and through the swinging door I catch the unmistakable figure of a woman, standing in the corner, holding up a vegetable tray. In the brief sighting I can see that she is plump, that her blond hair is cut short like two parentheses holding her round face in place. I hear Gary whispering and then he comes back through the door holding up the veggie tray. He sets it down on the snack table: red pepper slices, cherry tomatoes, broccoli and baby carrots ringed a center of ranch.

“You trying to make us healthy or something?” Bill says. Gary shrugs.

“Good to change things up sometimes, right?” he says and dips a carrot in the ranch and pops it into his mouth.

I don't know what to do. Gary is my friend, but there will clearly be consequences. There are reports to be filed, comments to the proper authorities to be made.

“Gary, can I talk to you for a minute?” I ask, and scoot my chair out and head for the door.

Gary follows, a slice of red pepper in his fingers.

Outside, under the yellow porch light, Gary looks fearful. It is clear he knows his guilt.

“What're you doing?” I ask him. “A woman, in your home?” He looks down at his shoes and stirs a few fallen leaves. “Do I need to remind you what our fathers fought for, what our country was founded upon? What we hold as our sacred values?”

Then Gary suddenly jerks his head up. A strange, new, defiant energy burns in his eyes.

“Who's this 'we', Phil?” Gary spits.

I look at him and then, gesturing wide to encompass the whole neighborhood, our entire world, I say, “Us. The whole damn country of our fellow men.”

“You should try getting laid, man,” Gary says.

At that, I brush past Gary and back inside. I gather the few measly dollars I have accumulated, grab my coat, and I leave. The eyes of my former friends remain on their cards, unable to look at me. I do not need to be associating with lovers of women, no matter how many years we have gathered around the same worn felt table. I am beginning to think I am the only sane one left.

I call my father, hoping he may offer some reassurance. We talk about the coming fall weather, the first hint of chill in the air, the neighbor boy he has hired to rake his leaves.

“Ten dollars and I'm telling you,” he says, “he leaves the yard spotless.”

“You never paid me a nickel.”

“I paid you room and board for eighteen years.”

Eventually I get around to telling him about Gary, about the charity event, my worries about his life's work falling apart.

“Should probably report Gary,” he says, but it's clear his heart's not in the idea.

“Are you feeling better?” I ask him. “You seemed a little lost on your birthday.”

He's quiet a moment and then he says, “Don't grow up to be me. An old man who wishes he hadn't been such a bitter, young man.”

“You were a great dad,” I say.

“And a terrible husband.”

“But mom was—”

“I’m sorry, son, but I’ll stop you there.” He holds the phone away from his mouth and coughs.

“You don’t really know the first thing about your mother.”

It is not a good week for me. Everywhere I look I see our defenses lowered, I see men cavorting with women, sometimes even touching their shoulders or elbows in public. I see one man sitting in the park on a blanket, feeding strawberries to a woman while the ever-encouraging sun shines brightly upon them. I feel consistently nauseous. I keep my eyes lowered and am repeatedly almost run over by cars.

On the television they have switched tracks and they now talk about amendments, about our nation’s strength lying in its flexibility and adaptability. Since when does strength lie in weakness? Courage in cowardice? I go to a council meeting and there, sitting in a front row chair, her legs crossed, a single finger curling her hair, is a fucking woman.

The next day I come home from work to a stuffed envelope in my mailbox, with my father’s return address. I open it and pour out a collection of letters and pictures. The back of one of the pictures has my birth date on it and when I flip it over, I see it is my mother holding me in the hospital bed, her hair frizzy, her face red, her smile weary but large.

I unfold one of the letters. It is addressed to my father and reads:

Dear Howie,

I hope this letter finds you well. I miss you terribly. Know that this is not an easy letter for me to write. I know that our son was unexpected and that you were not yet ready to be a father.

But if you could just see him, spend a little time with him, I think you would fall in love with

him as I have. He is such a beautiful little boy. And he needs his daddy, Howie. To teach him

how to be a man. I can't do this alone. Please come, if only for a visit.

I don't look at any more of the pictures or read any more of the letters. My father's reluctance to accept fatherhood is news to me, and I'm mildly insulted that he chose to tell me this way, but it doesn't change the fact that he did what my mother clearly could not have: raised me alone; raised me to be strong, independent. The pathetic, whiney nature of the letter repulses me.

I doubt this is why my father sent the package, but I am reluctant to explain his intent. I would rather not tarnish his reputation any further than he already has.

The next morning on the bus, there she is again, that first woman. She is wearing a white dress shirt and a pale blue skirt with black tights and flat black shoes. I watch her sway from her tip-toes to her heels in rhythm with the bus. She has cut her hair so that two long strands curve down in front of her ears and bounce around her chin. Golden earrings hang from each lobe and catch the alternating light as it finds its way through the tall buildings of downtown.

Oh how she angers me. Frustrates and confounds me. When my stop arrives, I do not get off. I watch as she stands up straight and turns to allow departing passengers past her, how her body runs through its curves. She smiles and some of the idiots smile back.

How did she arrive here? How many waves did she battle, how many desert miles did she hike to arrive in this city of men? What could she possibly want from us, save everything?

One of the strands of her dark hair swings near her perfect teeth and she bites at it and misses, like a lazy animal who knows food will come if it just waits. Sheer arrogance.

When she gets off at the next stop, I follow. If no one else will speak up, then I will. I again hear my father's accusation, that I don't know my mother. But I know women. And I will tell this particular woman what I know, and I am certain that in her response she will justify our nation's once-proud abhorrence of her kind.

I walk behind her down the street and when she stops at a crosswalk to wait for the light, I reach

out to tap her shoulder, to tell her what I think.

Karate Chops

My father died when I was eleven years old. He was a minor celebrity in town for his role as a karate crime fighter on a show called *Karate Chop Cop* in the 80's and there were a lot of people at his funeral who I didn't know. Some of them I vaguely recognized from the show, which I had watched many, many times on VHS, although they were older and flabbier. A bunch of the bartenders my mom worked with were there and so was her sister, my aunt, from Colorado, and a few of my cousins, who were squirming and pulling at their clothes. When they came into town the night before they brought a box full of hand-me-downs, but they were all sports shirts with sporty sayings and I told my mom I refused to wear them. She said we didn't have any money left and she wasn't about to send me to school in burlap, whatever that was.

We were broke because it took my dad so long to die, almost six months, which was expensive. I knew it was expensive because the hospital had a lot of expensive-looking machines. My dad had something wrong with his blood that I didn't understand and because blood was in all of your body it made his whole body sick. I didn't want to be there in the room when my dad died because he looked so awful, his skin thin and yellowish, his cheeks sunken. I cried and shouted at the hospital and my mom told me I was embarrassing and hurting her. So at the funeral, I was being good and not crying or anything.

A number of my dad's karate students, some of whom were old with big mustaches and some of whom were young, like me, were also at the funeral, but they just sat still like the pictures of meditating monks my dad had around his dojo.

I was sitting up front with my mom and in the pew behind me was my best friend Lindy. She was wearing a black dress, which looked strange on her. She was usually in an old t-shirt and jeans and so was I. But for the funeral my mom bought me a suit, which I knew cost too much, but I didn't say anything. It was tight over my belly and in my crotch. In my pocket was a twelve-sided die and it dug

into my thigh against the too-small pants.

My mom cried for most of the service. She dabbed at her face with a tissue but it disintegrated quickly and when she grabbed my hand little pieces of it stuck to my fingers.

The church was so dark that when we finally went outside to the cemetery I flinched at the sunlight, even though it was late October and not very sunny.

Some of the guys from the dojo lowered my dad into the grave and then they all bowed around the hole. Then my mom handed me a shovel and I threw a scoop of dirt onto the casket which felt, somehow, like I had done my father wrong. I dropped the shovel and buried my face in my mom's stomach, even though I was long past the age when clinging to your mother was socially acceptable.

Back inside the church my mom and I stood forever as people hugged us and shook our hands. Some of the guys from the TV show, who I didn't even really know, got down on a knee and told me how tough my dad was. I wanted to ask them if he was so tough then why was he dead, but I just nodded and said thanks.

Lindy stood next to me for all the hugs and handshakes but she didn't offer either because she was my best friend and she knew how much I hated it all.

Later when my mother was still inside talking to my aunt, Lindy and I went behind the church. Leaning against the wall with me, Lindy said, "I liked your dad."

I don't think Lindy liked my dad. When she and I played D&D, he would make fun of our characters. "Karate Chop Cop could take any of them in a fair fight," he'd say, although what a fair fight against a mage or barbarian was was not clear to me. Then he'd ask Lindy if there wasn't a princess she could play instead of a barbarian. So I was fairly sure she did not like my dad, but I thought it was nice of her to say anyway.

There was a trailer park behind the church and we watched some little kids playing basketball, having trouble getting the ball as high as the hoop. Then Lindy leaned over and kissed me on the lips, her wiry blond hair brushing against my neck. I turned to her and shoved her so she fell down in the

dust.

“Don't do that,” I said.

She looked scared and really close to crying. She got up and ran away around the corner of the church. There was dirt on her nice black dress. I didn't know what to do, so I slumped against the wall and rammed both my elbows into the side of the church over and over, which hurt plenty.

My mom took two days off from work at the bar and let me take two days off of school too. I played Super Nintendo all day, both days, and my mom didn't say anything. She let me eat Lucky Charms for dinner too. But on the third day she woke me up by throwing my backpack onto my bed.

At school everyone acted weird. When my desk neighbor, Hao Xiu, asked if he could borrow a pencil, he said, “May I please.” Lucy Sharpe gave me a card and on the inside it said, in cursive, “I am sorry for your loss.”

At recess I sat on the swings but I didn't swing. Lindy was in the other sixth grade class, but at recess I could see her across the blacktop, hanging out on the edge of a group of girls she never hung out with. I wanted to tell her I was sorry for pushing her but then I remembered I was also mad about her kissing me, so I didn't say anything. Before my dad got sick we used to stand over by the backstop and decide which D&D characters our classmates were. Sam Lakley was an ogre because he was big and mean. Mitch Henderson showed us a card trick one time so he was a mage. Pointy-eared Sally Bennett was an elf.

Near the end of recess Hao came over and sat on the swing next to me.

“Are you sad because of your dad?” he asked and I started to swing because I didn't know what else to do and I wanted him to go away.

When I was coming back in from recess, my teacher, Ms. Zilowsky, stopped me and said, real quiet, “If you need to talk to me or to the counselor, about anything, we're here, okay?” Down the hallway I saw Lindy hanging her jacket up and she looked at me and started to wave, but I turned and

went into class without acknowledging her or Ms. Zilowsky.

At lunch recess I camped out behind the chokecherry bushes until the lunch ladies blew their whistles and even then I waited until all the kids were filing back into school before I wiped the snot from my runny nose and followed the last stragglers in.

When school let out, I grabbed my coat, hat and backpack and booked it out of there. I was hurrying to beat Lindy outside in case she thought we'd be walking home together like normal. A few blocks in, as I neared the empty irrigation ditch, I thought I heard her footsteps crunching in the dry leaves behind me. I ran down the sandy slope and ducked into the ditch tunnel under the road. I was breathing heavy, but I tried to keep it quiet.

Sometimes on our walks home Lindy and I would warm up for a game of D&D by getting into character. I would walk stealthily, shooting off arrows and casting spells, while she did her best impression of a barbarian, stomping slow and bow-legged, sometimes drooling and swinging a club at squirrels chattering up tree trunks. I listened above for those heavy footsteps, as if Lindy might be transforming into a barbarian on the bridge, trying to lure me out, but aside from the rumble of the passing cars, the bridge seemed quiet and barbarian free.

Old plastic bags were half buried in the sandy bottom of the empty ditch. A pink Barbie car jutted out from one bank as if it got stuck trying to tunnel through. Spidery webs of dust, dirt and stringy plant life hung from the cement girders above me. Old swallow nests were caked onto the beams, feathers sticking out from their holes. I stayed there until I felt safe, which took a long time.

When I got home I grabbed the mail from the mailbox. There were the usual envelopes addressed to my mom and dad, but at the bottom of the pile was an irregular sized envelope. I brought the pile inside and sat down at the kitchen table. The strange envelope had shaky ballpoint pictures on the back of my father as Karate Chop Cop and a return address for someone in Seattle who I had never heard of.

I could tell it was fan mail, which showed up from die-hards a few times a year, from *Karate Chop Cop* cultists who knew every line my dad had ever uttered, the name of every villain he had ever round-house kicked. My dad always brushed them off as “wackos” but one time when I looked in his cramped, little office at the dojo I saw all the letters pinned to a bulletin board.

I took the envelope downstairs to the garage with me, intent on getting in some video game time before my mom came home and asked about homework. The garage, with its steep, plunging driveway, was only reachable from the main floor of the house by a long set of stairs. My dad had been working on converting the garage into a rec room when he got sick so it was still only half finished. Insulation hung from between two-by-fours like tongues and a big stack of dusty sheet rock sat in one corner. He wanted it to be just a home gym but my mom told him he had to share it with me. The result was a strange mix of both our stuff.

In one corner was a punching bag, some dumbbells and a weight bench, with posters of Bruce Lee and Chuck Norris on the walls, as well as a framed poster of my father. His fists were raised and his bare feet planted, a red headband drooping from his forehead, his chest slick with sweat and the red-slashed, handcuff-framed *Karate Chop Cop* logo above him. The weight bench had a thick covering of dust.

Against the opposite wall was my area. There was a couch, a piece of orange shag carpeting, an old wood paneled TV, the VCR and my Super Nintendo. I'd hung a single poster, of a slobbering, club-wielding orc, on a bent nail protruding from the exposed wall. I hid the fan mail under one of the pillows on the couch, knowing that my mom didn't need to see it, not sure that I did either.

There was also a card table down there, strewn with hand-drawn maps, books and character sheets, where Lindy and I plotted our exploits. It was only the two of us so we took turns being the Dungeon Master, deciding the fate of each other's characters, deciding how far away the dragons were and which blades could pierce their armor-plated sides. When my dad was sick, we killed hordes and hordes of the beasts and Lindy never told me my character was too weak.

I picked up the dice and rolled a few times. It was tricky enough playing with two people. It was impossible with one. I picked up one of the maps we made. It was my artwork, because I was good at drawing, but Lindy's fancy words labeled the pieces of the world we'd been creating for the past year, based on the world we knew. There was The Academy (school), Iceland (the Dairy Queen), Homeland (my house) and Training Grounds (the dojo). Between it all there were haunted forests, winding rivers and vast plains.

I grabbed a pencil and in one of the still open places I drew a cemetery, a cluster of tightly packed headstones and a few caskets scattered around for good measure. Doing my best to mimic Lindy's fancy letters, I wrote, Ancient Burial Grounds, but the words didn't look the same. I tried to erase it and I ripped the paper.

There was more casserole for dinner, given to us by friends and family, which it seemed like I would be eating forever. My mom was at work so I microwaved the casserole and separated out all the various ingredients with the tines of my fork to find the edible cheese and noodle parts. After I ate I went back downstairs to the garage.

Eventually my mom came home from work and found me asleep on the couch under an old quilt, Mega-Man X paused on the TV. She woke me up and guided me to my bed, where she kissed me on the forehead and called me a warrior, a thing she had never done before.

The next day was Saturday and I spent it in the garage playing video games while my mother ran errands. She called them "loose ends."

When I got bored of trying to beat the same boss over and over, I put in a tape of *Karate Chop Cop*, season two. The credits started with my dad flying through the air toward a man's head. He was shirtless and buff, with long, blond hair. Then there was an explosion and my dad walking coolly away from it while a guitar solo wailed. It was pretty awesome. But then I got that weird feeling in my

stomach and throat that I knew meant I was going to start crying so I hit eject on the VCR and the tape popped out.

I didn't know what to do with myself. Usually on Saturdays Lindy and I played D&D or her parents took us to a movie, but she had made stuff weird when she kissed me. I didn't know if we could play D&D anymore if she was just going to be sitting there wanting to kiss me when we were supposed to be questing.

My mom had the night off and she stayed home and made us dinner, corn on the cob and instant mashed potatoes. She was not a good cook—the corn was rubbery, the potatoes still chalky—but it wasn't casserole and I was grateful for that.

She looked tired. Her dark red hair hung in a single messy braid. There were blue rings under her eyes. I thought about things that might make her smile, but I came up empty-handed and so we ate without talking. I remembered to chew with my mouth closed.

On the kitchen counter, photos of my dad were splayed out in a collapsed tower; they'd been like that for weeks, neither me nor my mom gathering them up, putting them back in the shoebox they came from. A few weeks before he died, we brought the pictures to the hospital and my dad dug out one of himself as a baby, a toy hammer in his hand. He said forget about *Karate Chop Cop*, this was how he wanted to be remembered: industrious and diapered. Even that made my mom cry.

“Hey, buddy,” my mom said, breaking the silence. “I've got something to tell you.” I looked at her anxiously, chewing exaggeratedly with my mouth closed. “I'm going to be selling the dojo to Mike.”

“Okay,” I said, swallowing.

“You know Mike. He was the other main instructor. I mean, he was no karate chop cop, but . . .” I nodded. I remembered Mike. He was the one doing all the classes when my dad was in the hospital.

“Your father and I talked about it before he died and we decided it made the most sense this way. Can you imagine me trying to run the place?” She pretended to karate chop the butter in the center of the table, which made me smile.

I shook my head to say she probably couldn't run the dojo. Once or twice in our living room my father goaded my mother into following his stances, his hands slowly chopping at the air, his feet sliding across the carpet, his foot flicking at the far wall. But she looked awkward and eventually lost focus to her giggling, tackling my father onto the couch where she leveled a number of soft thwacks to his chest.

Most of my time in the dojo I spent drawing in my notebook, listening to my dad as he told his students what to do and how to move. My dad had tried to get me into karate when I was younger, but I was terrible. I liked karate and I wished I was better at it, but I wasn't at all athletic. I tried lifting weights in the garage once when my dad was gone but I couldn't even budge the bar. I could tell my dad was disappointed that I was so bad. He'd have me sit to the side while the rest of the kids did their routines. My mom told him once to give me a break, that maybe I would grow into it, but I didn't and then he died. I was good at D&D, but my dad didn't like D&D. I tried to tell him once about how to create characters, thinking he'd had to create his character on *Karate Chop Cop*, but he didn't get it.

“I know it'll be a change to not have the dojo in our lives,” my mom said, “but, well, I guess things are changing, huh?”

I knew how important the dojo was to dad. That was what he had spent his TV money on. I looked down at my plate until my mom reached across the table and ruffled my hair.

“Yeah, okay,” she said.

When dinner was over my mom got in the shower and I went downstairs to the garage. On the map of my world, I crossed out the Training Grounds. For just a moment I wondered if I should be consulting Lindy before I so drastically altered the world we had created, but it felt like she had forfeited her role with the kiss. She was a barbarian and I was a mage and barbarians did not kiss

images.

We'd left off two weeks before with Lindy ready to take on a whole phalanx of guards outside a holy temple. Inside was rumored to be a weapon of vast power. I looked at her character sheet, at her abilities, and tried to figure out if she might succeed, but it was hard to say. She was tough, but since we were both Dungeon Masters, it wasn't my place to decide her fate; that was a decision we would have to make together. But if it were up to just me, I would have given her the benefit of the doubt because I had seen her accomplish incredible things before.

Sometimes, when my dad would join us in the room to lift weights or kick the punching bag, his energy would seem to flow into Lindy's character and she would be unstoppable. It was the closest my father ever came to encouraging us.

I sat down on the couch and saw, poking out from under the pillow, the piece of fan mail I had hid there the day before. My curiosity suddenly got the best of me and I snatched the letter and tore it open. Inside was a piece of torn-out notebook paper. In the top, unlined space there was a hand drawn version of the *Karate Chop Cop* logo. Below that was a neat, handwritten message. It started right in, not bothering with a, Dear Daryl, my father's name, or, Dear Karate Chop Cop, the usual greeting.

"I was going to write you a long letter about how much of a badass Karate Chop Cop was, but then I thought to myself, that's not what the Karate Chop Cop was all about. He was about kicking ass and taking names. So whatever you're doing now, I hope you're still kicking ass."

Sincerely your big fan,

Jake Hanover,

Seattle, WA

I realized then that to a certain group of people my dad was still alive, that he would always be alive as Karate Chop Cop. I wondered how long it would take for us to quit getting his fan mail, for the outside world to learn that my father, the real man, was dead.

When I eventually went back upstairs, close to an hour later, my mom was still in the shower,

which I knew, from the time I put my ear to the door the week before, meant she was crying. I waited outside the door, thinking I would comfort her when she came out, but then I started to cry and so I went to the living room couch and put a pillow on my face.

My mother found me like that, her hair wet and stuck to her neck. She sat next to me and cradled my head in her lap and we cried together.

My mother was working Sunday night and so I sat in the garage playing Doom II on low volume in the dark until the sounds of the buzzing chainsaws and howls of the pixelated demons left me thoroughly terrified. I decided I needed to leave the house before I worked myself into a frenzied state of heart-stopping fear.

I opened the garage door and my bike, which I'd forgotten was resting against the door, fell over. The night air was cold, but no way was I going into the house for a coat, where God only knew what was waiting to jump out and eat my brains. I shut the door behind me and pushed my bike up the steep driveway.

I started pedaling down the street, unsure of where I was going, aiming myself from one streetlight to the next. The air smelled like campfires and I could see people walking around in their homes. At one point my bike tire got caught between the sidewalk and someone's edged lawn and I almost fell over. Eventually I arrived at a busy intersection and realized that across the street was the bar where my mom worked.

I walked my bike across the street and leaned it against the bar in the red neon light reflecting from the Budweiser sign in one of the building's tiny windows. I had been there a few times before, but only very briefly with my mother, and never at night. I reached up to the door's tall handle and pulled open the door. It was smokey inside and music was playing, but not too loud. It was a slow Sunday night, but there were still a number of scattered customers at tables, a couple of older men and one woman sitting up at the bar. I saw my mom at the far end of the counter, grabbing an empty glass.

She looked younger in the bar's dim light.

I almost made it to one of the vacant stools before she looked up from pouring a drink and saw me, my hands on the red vinyl of the stool, my cheeks no doubt still red from the cold night air. She tilted her head back and took a deep breath before setting the drink on the counter in front of one of the men. Then she walked around the bar and looked down at me, my hands still resting on the stool top.

“Honey, what in God's name are you doing here?” she said. I didn't even know I was coming, so I wasn't sure how to answer. Telling her I was afraid of the dark, of pixelated devils jumping out at me, was out of the question. I could only shrug.

“You know you can't be here. You could get me fired and then where would we be?” I wanted to tell her I wasn't sure where we were *now*, but I was already in enough trouble.

“You know how you got here? Can you get back home safe?”

“Yeah,” I said, although I was less than certain.

“Okay, I need you to go home then. I'm sorry, kiddo, but you can't be here. I wish I could come home with you, but I've gotta work.”

I became aware of the eyes from the bar looking our way and so I said, “Okay,” and I went back out the door. While I waited at the crosswalk my mother yelled to me from the bar doorway to call her when I got home and I said I would. I walked my bike back across the street, but a few turns later I realized I was confused. I kept going anyway because it felt like an adventure and if I stopped it would just feel like I was lost.

I noticed the block I was on felt familiar and then I realized it was Lindy's block and that I was only two houses down from her's. I coasted to a stop in front of it. I wasn't sure what time it was, but all the lights were off. Stopped, in the quiet of the night, I felt like everything everywhere was frozen.

I laid my bike down in the yard, walked to the front door, and knocked. No one answered so I knocked again. Still no one answered and I stood on the front porch for a while, thinking maybe a light would come on inside, that I could wave through the window. But eventually it became apparent no

one was inside and I got back on my bike and pedaled the short half mile to my house.

I stood my bike up at the top of the driveway and let it crash into the garage door at the bottom. Inside, I raced around turning on every light in the house. I called the bar from the list of phone numbers taped to the wall and told my mother I was home safe. From my bed I could hear the Doom pause music faintly playing from the garage.

The next day at morning recess, Lindy walked up to me. I saw her coming from across the blacktop and I thought about running away, but she seemed so determined, like when she was heading into battle with her barbarian, that I stayed.

“Hi,” she said and it sounded weird how she said it, like she didn't know me.

“Hi,” I said and I sounded weird too.

“Hey, I want to show you something,” she said and she turned and started walking toward the school. I followed and it already felt better, as if we were back to our old ways.

Our school was shaped like a boxy U and it was built into a hill so that as we walked toward the back we ascended. Lindy ducked as she passed the rows of classroom windows and I did the same until we arrived at the back of the building.

We shuffled around the corner and into the courtyard created by the U. It felt as if we were resuming our adventures, as if we would pick up outside the holy temple with Lindy's barbarian, ready to fight. As if to strengthen this feeling, Lindy pulled from her pocket two twelve-sided dice.

“My dad is doing this clay class thing at night and he made these,” Lindy said. They were awesome, a dark reddish color, with little designs inscribed around the numbers. “I helped with the numbers,” Lindy said. I continued studying them in her palm until she said, “They're for you. Hold out your hand.”

I looked up and offered my cupped hands. She tilted her own and the dice tumbled into my palms. I thought about them rolling across the table, deciding whether or not I would conquer my

enemies, whether or not I was strong enough, smart enough, skilled enough.

Lindy placed her hands around mine and closed my hands around the dice. I could feel their rounded edges in the creases of my palms. I separated my hands, one die in each to decide what might happen next.

“Are you still a barbarian?” I asked.

The Space Explorer Crash Lands In A Children's Cemetery

The space explorer crash lands in a children's cemetery. The explorer's name is Ee'io and he knows it is a children's cemetery because he is well versed in ancient and foreign languages and reads Meadowlark Children's Cemetery on the arched entrance he has landed just inside. His ship, he reasons, was incinerated in orbit, and he has fallen to Earth with nothing but the clothes on his back. His body aches from the landing. His head, especially, which throbs something fierce.

Ee'io is very tall, with long, blond hair and unevenly chopped bangs. He looks, for all intents and purposes, more or less human, due to a complex space/time relationship involving black holes and mankind's fleeing to other parts of the universe sometime in the distant future from the point in time he has now landed. He knows this for certain, although it hurts his head to think too hard on it.

Looking about himself, Ee'io suddenly realizes he is wearing a dark purple robe, cinched at the waist with a piece of rope, which is not what he remembers putting on that morning. Perhaps there was a malfunction with his emulator. With its historical era setting. That must be it.

Ee'io is a veteran explorer of the galaxy and is not worried or afraid. He has crash landed before, in fact, but he is a proficient engineer and is confident he will be able to construct some basic apparatus to contact his home planet to send a rescue ship.

The cemetery is on a hill and in the distance Ee'io can see a city. It appears not overly large, but still sizable. Several tall buildings cluster together in its center, gleaming in the bright summer sun. An oil refinery stands on the city's western edge, a tall flame flickering from a pipe, white clouds drifting away.

Behind him, Ee'io hears a sound and he turns to see a young boy there. The boy is wearing a fine suit and a tie, his black hair slicked to one side. Knotted around his throat is a ragged red cape, which dangles in the grass at his heels. His jaw hangs funny though, and he is missing several teeth.

The boy says, "Who are you?"

“My name is Ee’iop,” Ee’iop says, making the little clicking noise needed to properly pronounce his name. “Who are you?”

“Ben,” the boy says. “I live here.”

Ee’iop looks out again onto the cemetery. It is a calm, beautiful day. A large flag hangs lifeless on a pole, its stars enveloped in its folds, which, Ee’iop thinks, is a fairly accurate depiction of space. Fresh flowers dot several of the graves. The headstones, alternating in the sun and shadow, look like unevenly brushed teeth.

Then the child, Ben, says, “I’m dead.” Ee’iop fingers the belt of his robe uncomfortably. “Are you dead?” Ben says.

“No,” Ee’iop says, with the calm experience of a seasoned explorer. “No, I am not.”

“You fell out of the sky all funny,” Ben says. “You’re funny.”

“I don’t think anyone has ever called me funny before,” Ee’iop says.

SHIP’S LOG #11232

Crash landed, after difficulties with flux engine (?). Ship lost to atmospheric entry. Appear to have landed in children’s cemetery, which is inhabited by young boy, Ben, who appears to be a ghost. Similar to apparitions witnessed on planet Xxcrly, but appears to have stronger basis in “real world.” Utterly fascinating. Reason I can perceive ghost Ben is as of yet unclear. Must return with proper equipment and analyze spectral rays. Will venture into city soon to gather supplies, but now, with my curiosity piqued, I find my pace less hurried.

Ee’iop wanders the graveyard, accompanied by Ben. The bees buzzing and birds singing in the pleasant air seem to help his head ache disappear. He is saddened by some of the headstones and plaques, which describe such tragically shortened lives. He passes one where the grass has yet to grow over the fresh dirt. Some of the headstones are cracked and faded, some newly inscribed.

“That's my girlfriend,” Ben says. He points to a headstone for a Jenny Reitz, born July 7th 1998, dead October 4th, 2010.

“Is that so?” Ee'iof says. “Is she dead too?”

“Yeah, she died from breathing too much smoke when her house burned down. They saved her before she burned, but the smoke hurt her lungs. She's the prettiest girl here.”

“She sounds very nice,” Ee'iof says.

“I'll introduce you to her,” Ben says. “You'll see how pretty she is.”

SHIP'S LOG #11233

Ben seems to be under illusion that other children are prevalent at cemetery, that he is, in fact, dating one, a girl named Jenny. I have spotted no other children and believe Ben is alone in this limbo. I choose not to point this out, as he has clearly already lost so much. Think it is better to let him have this one thing.

Ee'iof tells Ben he must visit the city and Ben says, “Okay,” and then begins walking toward the cemetery's gates. The walk into town is several miles and Ee'iof is wishing he was wearing something more comfortable than thong sandals.

At one point Ben points to a sewer grate and says, “I lost a bouncy ball down there once. I bet it's still down there. It was really bouncy and I was in the store and my mom said if I was going to bounce it I had to go outside and I did, but then it fell into the sewer.”

“I once lost my jetpack in a battle with an ice demon. Plucked it right off my back, mid-flight.”

“I bet you bounced when you hit the ground, huh? Just like my bouncy ball.”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

They walk several more blocks, Ben pointing out other memories, obviously excited to share them.

“You certainly have a lot of stories for such a young boy,” Ee’iop says.

“My mom said I talked too much.”

“It’s okay, I understand,” Ee’iop says. “I was once alone on an extensive voyage for nearly a year. I know the trials of loneliness, trust you me.”

“Being dead gets boring,” Ben says, and then a passing mini-van catches his eye and he launches into a story of the time his family drove to Vermont but it was really New Hampshire and they almost went to Florida instead.

As they navigate the streets it is clear to Ee’iop no one else can perceive Ben. When Ben rushes into traffic to illustrate some point in a story, none of the cars slow or swerve to miss him. Ee’iop, on the other hand, engenders plenty of strange looks. While they wait for a traffic light to change, two young men in baggy jeans and backward hats pass them and one of them mutters, “Fucking hippies,” which Ee’iop finds humorous. He is a space explorer with a broken emulator, is all.

Twenty minutes later he is mid-way through a recounting of the time he found a dollar bill blowing down the sidewalk, when he interrupts himself to ask, “So watcha looking for?”

“Some simple electronics with which to build a homing beacon to alert my home planet as to my whereabouts.”

“Are you an alien then?”

“Yes,” Ee’iop says, “in the technical sense of being a visitor to this place.”

“You talk like a comic book.”

“I am familiar with such literary antiquities and will take that as a compliment.”

They visit the dumpster behind an electronics store and Ee’iop finds a few items with cracked cases or broken antennas, as well as a banana peel and several bags of packaging peanuts.

“Find anything?” Ben calls to him.

“Such primitive technology,” Ee’iop says, climbing out, “but it will have to do.” He can feel a

tightness in his back from his crash landing, and the rotting smell of the dumpster threatens to re-activate his headache. As he throws one leg over the dumpster's edge, his robe catches on a rusted corner and he almost falls out headfirst. Ben throws his hands up as if to catch him, but Ee'ioip manages an awkward recovery and lands upright.

“Once, while stuck on the desert planet Pithe,” he says, as if nothing had happened, “I repaired my ship using nothing but sand.”

“I found a bird egg in a sandbox once,” Ben says, “but it was broken.”

They walk around to the front of the store, where in the window a wrestling match is playing on an over-sized television. Ben stops, transfixed. He jumps up and down with the wrestlers and spins in a circle when they fly from the ropes. He punches the air, his cape twirling around him. Ee'ioip waits for him patiently.

On the way back to the cemetery, Ee'ioip plucks an apple from a tree. He is always interested in the native foods of a new planet. He pauses to look at the apple; the significance of having picked it seems important to him, but he cannot place why. He takes a bite. It is juicy and delicious.

“I miss food,” Ben says.

“So you don't eat?” Ee'ioip says.

“Not any more. Being dead sucks sometimes.”

“How long have you been dead?”

“I dunno. A while.”

“Is the projection of time a difficult notion for you in your afterlife stage?”

“Huh?”

“Hard to say how long you've been dead?”

“Oh, yeah.”

Ee'ioip grabs another apple and puts it in his pocket.

“While in stasis on my longer voyages, I subsist intravenously on liquid nutrients.”

“Man you talk funny,” Ben says.

“Well at least I'm still alive,” Ee'ioip says, and instantly, seeing Ben's crooked jaw tremble, regrets it. “My apologies, Ben. That was uncalled for. I am just a little homesick is all.”

As they walk through a residential neighborhood back toward the cemetery, Ben says, “You wanna see my house?” and then, before Ee'ioip can even answer, Ben takes a right turn and hurries down the block. Ee'ioip runs to catch up, nearly tripping each step in his thong sandals, which are clearly not made for running.

Ee'ioip finally catches up to Ben, who has stopped in front of a white house with yellow trim, flowers blooming in window boxes, a mailbox disguised as a hat-wearing goose posted in the yard's corner.

“It was white with red parts when I lived here,” Ben says. Ee'ioip is trying to regain his breath. It is hard staying in shape in space.

“And the mailbox was just a regular mailbox. I'm not sure who lives here now.”

“I thought you said this was your home.”

“It was when I died. My parents moved, I guess. I used to come and visit and watch them and stuff, but then one day I came and they were gone. I don't know where they went.”

Ee'ioip decides, on the spot, that in all his inter-galactic exploring, this might be the saddest story he has ever heard.

“I don't even know my father,” Ee'ioip says, searching for something to say to comfort Ben.

“My dad was cool, most of the time.”

Ee'ioip reaches out and puts an arm around Ben, which feels both strange and incredibly necessary. And, after a moment, Ben leans into him, balling up Ee'ioip's robe into one of his little fists. His head almost reaches Ee'ioip's waist.

When they get back to the cemetery, Ben tells Ee'ioop to wait there, he'll be right back. Ee'ioop leans against an old oak tree near the cemetery's entrance and watches as Ben speedily weaves his way through the headstones. So much life for a dead boy.

The late afternoon sun is hot and Ee'ioop rolls up his sleeves. The sun on his skin feels good after so many hours spent in his temperature controlled craft, hurtling through the dark infinity of space.

Ben comes running back to Ee'ioop, fresh dirt on his knees.

“She's just really shy,” Ben says.

“Excuse me?”

“Jenny. I tried to get her to come and meet you—I told her that you're weird but cool and everything—but she's just really shy.”

“Oh, that's okay.”

“She really is awesome though. And really pretty.”

“I'm sure she is,” Ee'ioop says. “I'm sure she is.”

SHIP'S LOG #11234

Ben thinks I'm cool.

Later that day, while Ee'ioop is strolling the far grounds of the cemetery, a car pulls in through the gate. Ee'ioop decides it would be easier to hide than explain his presence, and ducks behind a small mausoleum. He watches as a woman gets out of the car and walks, with a bouquet of flowers in hand, to a nearby headstone. There she kneels and places the flowers on the grave.

After a few minutes, through the rise and fall of her shoulders, Ee'ioop can tell the woman is crying. She puts both her hands on the headstone, as if she means to pluck it from the earth, and then

rests her forehead on it.

Ben walks up behind the woman and rests a hand on her back. He rubs it consolingly and the woman sits upright and wipes at her face. She shakes her head and soon after she gets up and returns to her car.

As the woman drives away, Ee'ioop walks over to the grave.

“She comes here a lot,” Ben says. “Probably too much.”

Ee'ioop looks at the headstone. “Mary Elizabeth Allen”, it reads. “November 5th, 2013- November 7th, 2013. In our hearts, she rests eternally.”

In the evening, Ee'ioop explains to Ben what he is constructing. It will send a signal to his home planet, he says, using a complex wavelength not yet known to the people of this planet.

“Like TV,” Ben says.

“In the most rudimentary sense, yes.”

“You sound like a science teacher.”

“How many different personas can you heap on me, Ben?”

“Now you sound like my dad.”

Ee'ioop unscrews one of the transmitters he scavenged and plucks out its batteries.

“Can I help?” Ben says.

“I doubt it, but thank you all the same.”

“I built a lightbulb that turned on when the sun hit it once. For the science fair.”

“That's very impressive.”

Ee'ioop continues tinkering with the in-progress machine.

“I should have gotten a glass jar,” Ee'ioop says. “That is what I am missing.”

Ben jumps up at this and says, “Hold on.”

He runs into the graves and returns a moment later with a jar full of marbles.

“They buried me with some marbles,” he says, “cause I was really into collecting them, but I don't care about them anymore.”

“Are you sure?” Ee'ioop says.

“Ben unscrews the top and dumps the marbles out at his feet.

“Yep,” he says, handing the jar over.

Ee'ioop accepts it with a nod and fits it over one of the antennas. Ben leans over his shoulder, watching. His jaw touches Ee'ioop's shoulder and Ee'ioop can feel the unnatural looseness in it.

“What happened to your jaw, Ben?” he says.

“Broke it.”

“When you died?”

“Yeah.”

“How did you die, Ben?”

“I dunno. My heart stopped, I guess.”

“No, I mean—”

“Hey, my girlfriend and I are supposed to hang out,” Ben says. “I gotta go.”

And with that, Ben hurries over to the gravestones, his cape trailing behind him, and disappears behind a tree.

SHIP'S LOG #11235

Think I probed too hard today when asking about cause of Ben's death. Sometimes I might let my inquisitiveness overtake me. Love being a space explorer, but all those hours alone in space may have dulled my empathy receptors. Hope Ben does not take my curiosity the wrong way. Only real contact on this planet. Only friend.

That night, Ee'ioop raises the antenna and aims the transmitter at the sky, at a specific star, which, if his

calculations are correct, should bounce his message in a neat trajectory toward his home planet. It is funny, how hard he finds it to pull up a picture of his home. The fate of an explorer, he knows. He envies Ben his ability to visit his old home, but then thinks what is a home, if not the people inside it?

On the far side of the city, the sky is gray with refinery smoke. The city, with its rows of street lights and headlights, is a mirror of the night sky, of its tranquil stars occasionally loosening themselves to shoot through the dark. The moon of a lit clock tower glows near the city's center.

Ee'iof lies down in the grass and watches his device transmit, imagining the signal rippling out beyond this planet. He stretches one of his long arms out and rolls his hand across something. He picks it out of the grass and sees it is a marble, a little yellow swirl twisting through its glassy interior. It reminds him, in some obscure way, of home. He wishes Ben were there so he could explain this to him.

“That's a cat eye,” Ben says, suddenly appearing next to him.

“It's lovely.”

“So,” Ben says, motioning toward Ee'iof's creation, “that thing is sending a message into space?”

Ee'iof sits up on his elbows and peers at Ben's face, just barely discernible in the dark.

“Yes, it is.”

“What's it saying, exactly?”

“It's just a series of numbers and symbols, but to my people it will serve as a geo-locator to hone in on my exact position and to send someone to my aid.”

“Is it on?”

“Yes.”

“It's not making any noise or nuthin.”

“A good machine is a quiet machine.”

“You're not the first alive guy who's come here, you know,” Ben says.

“Is that right?”

“There was this guy last year, who came. Dressed sort of like you.”

“In these ridiculous clothes?”

“Yeah. His shoes were different though. He came and he found this girl, Mary, and he took her.”

“What do you mean, he took her?”

“I dunno. Just that he took her hand and then they went away.” Ben looks up at the sky as he says this. “She seemed happy though.”

Ee'ioop considers this information, that someone in similar garments to his has visited this planet before him and taken away a girl. But for what purpose? A scientific sample? A prize? Ee'ioop has heard of other explorers taking brides from far away places, but he always thought the practice tacky, not to mention desperate. Besides, the life of a space explorer is ill-suited for love.

Ben says, “I thought maybe that's why you were here.”

“I'm afraid not,” Ee'ioop says.

“That's a joke.”

“No, I am quite serious. I crash landed here, Ben, and will need to be getting home soon.”

“No, I mean the frayed knot. He walks into a bar. Never mind.”

The two of them lie down in the grass and watch the machine do its work. Ben balls his cape up under his head.

“Just numbers and symbols,” Ben says.

“Just like the universe.”

“Have you really explored all of space?”

“Not quite, but a good portion of it, yes.”

“Tell me a story then. A good one.”

Ee'ioop mentally runs through his greatest adventures, his most harrowing calls, and then settles

on one.

“So there I was, crash landed on the planet Huju—”

“You sure crash a lot.”

“Ben, do you want to hear the story or not?”

“Sorry, go ahead.”

“Now Huju is a hot planet, its molten surface not yet hardened like Earth's. There is very little life there, except for the lava snakes, which twist and writhe through the super-heated bubbling cauldron.”

“Cool,” Ben says.

And so Ee'ioip tells the story of his battle with the lava snakes, of the burns he suffered, but how he used the super-cooled jet fuel from his craft, whose shell was made of the universe's toughest material and could not be burnt, to freeze the snakes and then shatter them with his pummeling fists.

At some point in the story, Ben rests his head on Ee'ioip's chest and when Ee'ioip finally finishes, the boy is asleep. Ee'ioip gathers Ben's cape and lays it over his body and then he closes his eyes himself.

DREAM LOG #7761

I am on a star, it would seem. Not an accurate, scientific version, but the five-pointed one a small child might draw. Just sitting here. Waiting. Not sure for what. There are also clouds floating around my head and feet, which makes no sense. Waiting. All around me, sitting on the clouds or flying just above them, there appear to be—

“Hey, nerd.”

Ee'ioip opens his eyes to the morning sun to see a man standing above him. The man is dressed similarly to Ee'ioip, but his robe is a bright red. He is even taller than Ee'ioip, his hair is buzzed short

and he is smiling.

“Who are you?” Ee'ioop says. “What is the meaning of this?”

“Ah, shit, did you hit your head again, Phan? How many times have we gotta practice your entries before you get it right?”

“My name is Ee'ioop.”

“You are such a *geek*.” The man raises a hand to his eyes and looks around. “Where's the boy you were supposed to get? And what is this shit?” he says, nudging the transmitter with his foot. “You been dumpster-diving again?”

Then, from behind a nearby tombstone, Ee'ioop sees Ben's head pop up. Ben looks at him intently, his eyes big.

“You have got to be the weirdest angel in all the cosmos,” the man says. “You're lucky the big guy even puts up with your shit.”

Ben steps out from behind the tombstone and begins tip-toeing toward the man's back. Ee'ioop flicks his vision from Ben to the man and back, unsure of what to do.

“You remember that time,” the man says, “when I had to go rescue your ass when you thought you were the next Jules Verne or something? Where did you even get that boat, anyways? And remember how pink you were? Peeled for weeks.”

Only a few yards from the man, Ben crouches down into a pouncing position. Ee'ioop tries to silently communicate to Ben that he should retreat, that he, Ee'ioop, will handle this. But then Ben, screaming a fierce war cry, launches into a sprint and jumps onto the man's back, wrapping his skinny arms around the man's neck in an effort to bring him down. From Ee'ioop's point of view it looks like the man is wearing a wriggling red cape clasped around his neck by human hands.

The man undoes Ben's grasp from his neck and then swings him around to his front, where he holds him, dangling and kicking, mid-air.

“Relax, little dude,” he says.

“Don't take him away,” Ben says. “Let him stay.”

The man begins laughing and lets Ben drop to the ground. Ben crawls over to Ee'io and huddles up against him.

“Please,” Ben says.

“Man oh man,” the man says. Then, looking up at the morning sky, he says, “I don't need a great flood or anything, but a little help here maybe?”

A strange quiet falls over the graveyard. The birds quit singing. Out over the city, the puffs of smoke from the refinery pause mid-way from their piped exit. The cars stop. A single rose petal, fluttering on the slight breeze, freezes over Ee'io's right shoulder.

Ee'io feels a rearranging of his molecules, a new ordering to his soul. In the stillness, he finds unimpeachable clarity and rediscovers he is Phanuel, messenger of God, come down to this terrestrial sphere to—

“Ah, I see the light bulb coming on,” the man says, who Phanuel now knows is his brother, Puriel.

Ee'io, né, Phanuel, known to friends and family as simply Phan, stands up. The world again begins to move. Phanuel looks down at Ben, who is now sitting at his feet, looking up confused and worried.

“Ben, we have to go,” he says.

“Go where? To your home planet?”

“Ha!” Puriel says behind them. “We're going to Heaven, little man.”

“My home planet,” Phanuel says. “After a fashion. I'm sorry if I mislead you. I was. . . confused.”

“That's putting it mildly,” Puriel says.

“Is that why you came here?” Ben says. “Like the guy who took Mary?”

“Mary Huggins?” Puriel says. “Yeah, she's up there.”

“Can you give us a moment, brother?” Phaniel says.

Puriel rolls his eyes and mumbles something about a schedule, but he walks away and sits on a headstone.

“Ben,” Phaniel says, “I can understand if you don't want to go. To Heaven. Sometimes I'm afraid too. Sometimes, I just want to escape. But you know what?”

“What?”

“I always return. Because, in the end, Heaven is everything you could ever want.” He feels no hesitation in saying this. As he knew with certainty he was a space explorer, he now knows he is an ambassador for his Father.

“Are there space explorers like you there?”

“All kinds of explorers. Just last week I met Neil Armstrong.”

“Who's that?”

“The first man to ever walk on the moon.”

“Cool.”

“And all the great baseball players. As much ice cream as you can eat. Puppies and kittens everywhere.”

“I'm allergic,” Ben says.

“Not in Heaven,” Phaniel says.

Ben picks at the knot of the cape around his neck.

“Is my dad there?” he says.

“If he died, I'm sure he is.”

Ben looks down at the ground. He raises a hand to his jaw and partially covers his mouth.

“I don't know then,” Ben says. Which is when Phaniel realizes his mistake.

“They don't let bad men into Heaven,” he says.

“Okay,” Ben says. “I guess I have to, huh?”

“I think you'll like it, Ben, I really do.”

“And you'll be there?”

“I'll be in and out, but I'll make sure to stop by and say hi.”

“Can Jenny come?”

“In time.”

“Alright, give me one sec then.”

Ben walks back over to the headstones, past Puriel and deeper into the cemetery. Puriel looks at Phaniel and taps his wrist. Phaniel ignores him.

He watches Ben walk to an older headstone, a crack running through its center, no flowers at its base. There, he undoes his cape and drapes it over the headstone. Phaniel watches his little shoulders rise and fall and then he turns and walks back toward the angels.

“Ready?” Phaniel says to him.

“Okay,” Ben says.

“Let's get this show on the road,” Puriel says.

Phaniel holds both of Ben's hands.

“Ready for blast-off?” Phaniel says and Ben nods.

Then all three begin the ascent toward Heaven.

A ways up, Phaniel looks down and there is Ben's red cape, fluttering in the breeze underneath an old, gnarled oak tree.