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IT STARTED as charmingly as any Benjamin Byrnes could remember. He sat in a Mexico City café after lunch, trying to begin reading a novel his wife had given him for the trip. The first paragraph described how the scent of bitter almonds reminded a doctor of the fate of unrequited love. Viviana was sitting on the other side of the horseshoe counter and her yellow dress, her broad, brown face and lovely black hair, caught Benjamin’s eye. He kept glancing up. He didn’t know what almonds smelled like anyway, much less bitter ones. And although he thought he could imagine unrequited love, he had no idea what the fate of unrequited love could be.

Viviana was sitting next to an old man in an ugly green suit and she held his elbow when they got up to leave. They passed close behind Benjamin on their way to the door, so close he thought he could smell the fabric of her clothes. He turned to watch her walk away. She held a folded napkin between her fingers and she let it dangle behind her back for a step or two. Then she let it drop to the floor.

Benjamin sat still for a moment, intrigued and uncertain. Only one real look had passed between them. He waited until she and the old man had left the café and then he got off his stool to pick up the napkin. He sat down again and unfolded it. He marveled at what human beings are, how needy and conspiratorial. He thought of the sign above his boss’s door, “Customers are fur bearing animals,” and laughed to think how easily he’d been caught.

The note was to the point. Her name, Viviana Miranda Cortez. Her address. Her phone number.

That afternoon he sat on the bed in his hotel room and tried to call Guzmán again. Roberto Guzmán had a chain of family restaurants, each with orange Naugahyde booths and a big plastic sign outside that pictured a cartoon fat boy, winking. He had a reputation for being gung-ho American, anything American—
but Benjamin wasn't sure how well he spoke English. Just to be safe, Benjamin had sent him a few glossy photos showing beautifully prepared veal meals. He had hundreds more in his suitcase. The photos could slide into plastic display stands for the center of each table.

The line was still busy, so Benjamin hung up and did another set of pushups. When he finished he sat back on the bed and tried Guzmán again. A woman answered this time. He asked in Spanish if Señor Guzmán was in. He couldn't understand her answer but stayed calm. He caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror above the dresser. His black hair had been cut shorter than usual and he liked the look of it against the collar of his white pinpoint Oxford shirt. He asked again if Guzmán was in, and again he couldn't understand what she said. He knew he'd exaggerated his ability to speak Spanish in order to get this account but didn't think he was that bad.

"Do you speak English?" he finally asked. Sweat dripped from his temples and neck and down the middle of his back.

"No." She sounded angry.

If being a salesman had taught him anything it was to not take rudeness personally. Some people were just rude. They were born rude and would die rude. Unless of course they wanted something, and then they were nice. He left his name and number, said thank you in Spanish, repeated thank you in English, and then hung up.

He pushed aside Guzmán's number and looked at Viviana's note. The address meant nothing to him but dialing the number was easy enough. He traced the creases on the napkin with his own fingers and thought of hers. He thought of her face and hair and body and his stomach lifted slightly and pressed against his diaphragm. No matter how many women he slept with, they remained compelling enigmas to him. He didn't see his philandering as lust. It was curiosity. Whom a woman wanted, why she wanted, when she wanted, how she wanted—knowing these things made him feel on the inside of some great mystery.

She answered on the second ring.

"Is it you?" The voice surprised him. Her accent was American, East Coast and educated. Probably money.

"Viviana Miranda Cortez?"
There was a pause. Benjamin thought he heard her swallow. “Can we meet?” she asked.

They met in the Alameda at dusk, a large park in the center of the city. They stood together in a small crowd in front of a man with a boa constrictor wrapped around his neck. Viviana told him she was born in Mexico but moved to Connecticut when she was eight, the same year her mother divorced her father and married an American. She laughed nervously. She said she hoped Benjamin didn’t think she was cold on the phone because actually she was breathless.

The skin of her face was smooth and brown, her neck long and shoulders round under the same linen outfit she’d worn that afternoon. The shadows and growing darkness brought a chill and she shivered. Benjamin put his arm around her shoulder and she leaned against him.

“Why breathless?” Benjamin asked, teasing. “You don’t even know me.”

“No,” she said, calmly. “I don’t. But my husband sleeps in the afternoon. And again early in the evening.”

Benjamin nodded as though that explained everything. College most definitely. He’d guess Ivy League by her tone, or one of those women’s schools. He kept his eyes on the snake and the man and the way the snake wrapped around the man’s chest and waist, and partly down his leg toward a sheet spread out on the sidewalk. On the sheet were arranged clusters of herbs and corked Coke bottles filled with clear liquid.

“So what’s he got?” Benjamin said.

“Money,” she whispered.

Benjamin looked at her, confused. “What?”

“Oh.” She blushed. Then she laughed, waving her hand. “Snake oil, I guess.”

They left the crowd and began to wind their way through the park.

“I like to walk,” she said. “I can see and hear... I like to pretend I’m in a movie. Have you ever been alone for a long time?”

He had no idea what she was talking about. He felt the warmth of her skin and held her tighter and smiled understandingly. In these situations he could lie as naturally as breathing.
“Of course!” he said, but as the lighted sidewalk wound through thick trees, he suddenly got the creepy feeling he was being set up for something. He remembered how she’d held the white napkin between her red fingernails, how she’d let it dangle behind her ass, how she’d dropped it. The lonely young wife of a rich old man. And her English. Too perfect, he thought. He tried to remember if it was her impulse to walk in this exact direction, or his. He calculated how much money he carried. The sidewalk was empty in front and in back and he felt every muscle in his body tighten. They walked without talking for a while and then the sidewalk turned a corner into a small brick plaza, fairly crowded with people.

Relieved, Benjamin spotted a pay phone and excused himself. He was going to pretend to make a call, just for something to do, to give himself some distance from Viviana, but for the hell of it he tried Guzmán again. To his surprise, he got through.

Guzmán spoke English well and told Benjamin he’d got the message from his wife and wanted to see him right away, if possible. Benjamin agreed and hung up. Then he hurried back to Viviana and explained that he had some unexpected business. He said he was sorry and asked if she’d meet him tomorrow. She nodded but looked down at her feet—and when she squinted up again her eyes seemed suddenly sad and he knew she thought he was ditching her.

He took her hand to reassure her, and noticed she must have removed her ring, a gesture that amused him, and made him feel generous and lucky. She was an odd duck but probably harmless. Apparently lonely. Undeniably beautiful. He raised her hand and kissed it, but kept his eyes on her mouth. He liked her mouth, the full shape of her lips, and the slight downward turn at the corners before she smiled.

The next morning he had to reach for her note on the bedside table to convince himself he hadn’t dreamed her. He and Guzmán had gotten drunk in a bar and ended up walking down Cinco de Mayo sometime after midnight singing syrupy Spanish love songs. Benjamin cringed remembering how Guzmán stopped him under a streetlight and declared that he looked just like Tom Cruise. Flustered, Benjamin said Guzmán looked like Milwaukee Brewer pitcher Teddy Higuera.
They didn't talk business, which was okay. Benjamin could wait. Guzmán's three hundred restaurants would triple his sales, so he could afford to be patient.

He rolled out of bed and washed his face and put on his jogging shorts, shoes and a sweatshirt. His wife, Jill, had warned him against running in Mexico City because of the pollution, but Benjamin felt so hung over he had to do something. From his hotel, he ran down to the Zócalo and made two laps, which he figured to be about a mile each. He did a set of pushups in the elevator and another when he got back to his room. He sat on the bed to catch his breath and plan his day. He had three or four accounts to contact before noon, so he set those up and then dialed Guzmán just to touch base. They planned a meeting for the next day, which Benjamin didn't think was pushing it. Still, you never knew. Successful businessmen like Guzmán were hard to gauge. You never knew what they were hiding.

That evening he and Viviana crowded into an elevator and then onto the viewing area on top of the Interamericana Tower. This was Benjamin's idea. For the past two days he'd felt lost and wanted to get a better feel for the shape and geography of the city. But when he looked out from the top of the tower what he saw didn't help. Unlike Chicago or Milwaukee, or any of the cities Benjamin was familiar with, few of the streets here were either perpendicular or parallel to any other. Like a giant amoeba, the city sprawled across the valley with no comprehensible shape or end. The most distant streets and buildings simply faded behind an orange-brown smog.

Viviana leaned against him and Benjamin felt dizzy. He put one arm around her and then quickly the other. He couldn't get over the way life seemed to rise up around him, wherever he was. Which is what he loved about traveling, about his work. A few days ago he'd been in Milwaukee and this morning he'd taken a jog around a four hundred-year-old cathedral. Now he stood on the viewing deck of a skyscraper next to a beautiful and rich woman, her thick, black hair inches from his face. He could smell her strawberry shampoo and gaze across the top of a city that may as well have been on the moon. He knew nothing about the Aztecs but he knew that much of what lay below used to be a lake with an island in the middle. It was hard to imagine. A modern city hiding the site of one of the world's great civilizations!
He kissed Viviana. She let her head fall back and her mouth opened, and when the kiss ended he pulled her quickly through the crowd and got the first elevator down.

His hotel room was little and the walls painted yellow. He hadn’t noticed how little and how yellow until he watched Viviana walk toward the center of the room and lay her black purse on the bed. A strand of black hair hung down across her forehead and she used the back of her hand to push it away. It seemed a curious gesture, rough and impatient, neither tentative nor suggestive.

Again, as in the park, Benjamin felt a shock of panic that he was being set up. It started somewhere in the middle of his spine and shot up toward his skull and down the back of his legs to his heels. He quickly closed the door behind him. Viviana looked up and smiled shyly.

“This is fast,” she said.

He didn’t answer. He never claimed to be an expert on timing. In his experience all timing was was being ready when the woman was ready. If you had your own ideas, chances are you’d be accused of bad timing. He thought of how she’d dropped the note and again marveled at the things that happen in life, especially with women. He always felt disproportionately charmed when one wanted him. He thought of past lovers, some with their wild, playful joy, like the elevator woman in Chicago, her tiny fist gripping a bottle of gin, her high, goofy laugh. Others with their odd requests, like the lawyer in Baltimore, one of his wife’s old classmates, who got down on her hands and knees in the bathtub, and then asked him to stand over her and pee.

He’d been astonished, shocked. He tried to talk her out of it. He joked, even pleaded.

And then he did it!

Although he never mentioned it to another human being, much less suggested it, for a few months afterward he thought about urinating on every attractive woman he met.

How strange life was!

He took Viviana in his arms and they lay down on the bed and still more memories came to mind, women whose exaggerated noises made him feel as though he was with something mechanical: touch here, moans come out there. Others with their incessant face stroking, and still others, like his wife, who were
technicians, mouthing a steady stream of instructions and prohibitions, certain of just exactly what she wanted and how it should be done.

After a few minutes Viviana’s straining seemed to cave into quiet surrender. She didn’t move exactly. It was more a shudder. Her face looked sad and wounded, eyes like an animal’s searching his as he entered her. He had to look away.

Afterward she burst into tears.

He held her head against his neck until she pushed away and sat up. Then she quickly dressed and stood in front of the mirror and brushed her hair. Benjamin watched for a while and then grabbed an orange from the complimentary fruit basket.

“Do you realize how I’ve used you?” she said.

Benjamin began peeling the orange with his thumb. Her tears had bothered him, and now the morose whine of her voice bothered him. She’d gone to Yale—he was right about the Ivy League—and had more opportunity to stand on her own feet and make her way than ninety-nine percent of the people on this planet. But she’d married an old rich man, got lonely, and picked Benjamin out in a restaurant. She lured him with an intriguing note. Now she was acting remorseful and it was almost too pathetic for him to bear.

“It doesn’t matter,” he said.

She lowered the hairbrush and looked at him through the mirror.

He pinched off a piece of orange and ate it. “It goes both ways,” he said.

She turned and threw herself back onto the bed. He felt like he was watching a bad tv show. But still he put the orange down and stroked her hair.

“People need what they need,” he said. “There’s no use torturing yourself.”

“But you’re married,” she said, her face tormented. “I’m married. Don’t you believe in loyalty?”

He continued stroking her hair but the question irritated him. He didn’t know what to say. He’d met Jill in college and married her immediately after graduation. What actually happened was she’d made him feel like a coward for not proposing so finally he did. They had two daughters, ages 12 and 6, and after the first
was born he decided that rather than hate his wife because he didn’t love her, for the sake of a peaceful home for the children, he’d get what he needed outside the marriage. It was old fashioned but maybe that’s what he was. He’d been disloyal more times than he could count. And he would be again. So did that mean he didn’t “believe in” loyalty? He didn’t think so. It just meant he couldn’t do it very well.

He stroked Viviana’s neck and touched her cheek and said words of comfort, tender words, words he’d only used on his own daughters when they were babies.

Gradually she calmed down, and sniffed, looked up, smiled even. “I tried once with another man. An Englishman.”

“What?”

“I mean, before you.”

Benjamin shook his head. “Look, I—”

“No,” she said. She lifted herself onto her elbows and pushed her hair back off her face. “We went to dinner. I was going to do it. Cheat. But instead I went to the ladies room and I left!”

Benjamin shrugged. He wasn’t touching her anymore and he didn’t know what to do with his hands.

“Do you think I ditched him for my principles?” she asked. “For my husband? Because I got scared?”

Despite himself, Benjamin was curious. “I don’t know. Why did you ditch him?”

“I left,” she said, “because whenever he laughed he looked like a horse!”

She laughed suddenly, dropping her face into her hands. Her shoulder blades pressed out through her dress and looked delicate and fragile. Benjamin laughed too. It felt good and he couldn’t help it, and when they were done, he said, “Let’s go out. It’s still early.”

They walked down to the Alameda. The sky had turned pink and the breeze rustled the leaves on the trees and the city air carried the rare scent of flowers. They were silent for a while. Her nervousness had disappeared and a kind of quiet possession held her body still and made her movements graceful.

They made a loop through the park and then walked back to find her a cab. But she seemed in no hurry so they sat down on a bench. Evening came on, dusk and then twilight, and Ben-
jamin felt enchanted by the color of the sky, the breeze and the falling coolness, and the way even the traffic sounds seemed less harsh and more musical.

Benjamin had never considered himself a particularly good husband, or father, and he knew he was only a mediocre salesman who'd had a few lucky breaks. But he still felt good about his life. As much as anything, it was this paradox that pleased him. Happiness wasn't that hard, really.

The next day Guzmán broke his appointment and left town for his ranch in Tampico. Benjamin took care of all the minor accounts, then called the Milwaukee office for permission to wait a week for Guzmán.

He and Viviana spent every possible moment together, evenings and some afternoons. They walked in the park or took excursions to beautiful places in the country, where water fell through pine forests, or where Aztecs built pyramids a thousand years ago. As the week went on, they both began to feel as though their lives had changed, had entered a previously unexplored territory. But to Benjamin this wasn't a new feeling. Nor was it real. It was part of the fun, part of what being with a woman sometimes helped him feel.

As his departure approached, first five days away, then four, the end lent an enjoyable urgency to their every touch and word.

After four days Guzmán came back and invited Benjamin home with him to his three-story penthouse, complete with a mural of the Spanish conquest and a marble fountain. And despite requiring that Benjamin stay half the night while a group of men who called themselves the Federal District Men's Swim Team, obviously a gay bunch, partied hard in the pool—and probably because none of this bothered Benjamin in the least—Guzmán proved an eager buyer.

The sale meant tons of veal a week—and return trips every couple of months. But Benjamin didn't say anything to Viviana. He had a rule with women, no more than three times, which he'd already exceeded. And although he liked Viviana, who knew what he'd feel two months from now? By the evening of his departure, the urgency between them had even grown tiresome. She went with him to the airport and held his hand the entire way.
He could feel her staring at the side of his face and wanted to say something mean, like the movie was over. But when he turned and looked at her brown eyes he felt guilty for leaving, and for not telling her he’d be back. And when he looked at her mouth he wanted to stay.

In Milwaukee it was winter already and the gray of the bay stretched all the way to the horizon, where it met with the gray of the sky. Jill met him at the airport and they talked pleasantly about the girls on the way back to their suburban home under maple and oak and hickory trees, bare now, leafless. As he unloaded his suitcase from the trunk he said how tired he was, and Jill said how he must be, and how she hoped the trip went well, and he said it did. The Mexicans went whole hog for veal, he said, and Jill laughed. The sound of it irritated him.

Nevertheless when she slipped into bed with him, he made love to her, slowly and quietly. It seemed to him that she mistook his slowness for tenderness, and his tenderness for passion. The thought made him sad—but only for a moment. He quickly fell into a deep and dreamless sleep.

He woke the next day, cheerful and full of energy. The first snow had fallen during the night and he loved the way the world had transformed. He opened the window in his bedroom and smelled the cold, felt its harkening back to his northwoods childhood, while all the tropical urges and memories of his trip began to fade.

In the weeks that followed, he threw himself with renewed enthusiasm into his work. Catapulted forward by his success in Mexico, he began to outline sales plans for all of Latin America, and eventually Asia. In his ambitious moments, he foresaw himself spearheading the company’s international growth. He and Jill lived mostly separate lives. She went to bar association meetings, continuing education seminars, and served on the board of The Women’s Health Alternative. He played poker with his friends, went to sales conventions in Detroit and Tulsa, and worked out at the Y.

When he left Mexico, he thought that within a month he’d forget Viviana Miranda Cortez even existed as a real person. She’d fade into the ranks of erotic memories like the attorney in Balti-
more, the woman in Denver. But as November passed into December, his memories of her became even more vivid and alive, and less erotic. In a meeting, or on a plane, or at home eating dinner with his family, the voices he heard around him easily became hers, and he'd drift off and then come back disoriented, wondering where he was and what had been said and whether he'd answered.

Before he could sleep at night he'd have to go downstairs and have a drink. He sat in the quiet, dark house and remembered Viviana on the shore of a lake, kissing her in the wind. He remembered the smell of her hair across his face, the feel of her fingers grasping his shoulders. Her memory filled him with longing. She became even more beautiful in his mind, more noble and good, and he became better, too: honest and supportive, decent and kind. He began to see himself as trapped in a terribly unjust situation, and the way he'd acted in Mexico was him acting at his best, his most heroic and noble. When he saw beautiful women in Milwaukee, in restaurants, or on the sidewalk, he tried to meet their eyes, tried to find the spark he'd found with Viviana.

But when they looked up, if they noticed his stare and stared back, he'd feel instantly ashamed, like a fraud, dishonest and pathetic, as though they could see right through him to the unhappy, middle-aged man he was.

He carried that sadness just under the surface of his skin, it seemed, and sometimes in the car on his way to work, listening to the morning concert, it threatened to well up in his eyes as tears.

One evening before dinner he read a news story about recently reunited lovers who'd met in France during World War II. "They were apart for forty years!" he said to Jill, strangely exhilarated. "And they never forgot! Can you imagine?"

She looked up at him as if he'd suddenly burst into French himself, her head cocked and her hand on her hip. There was a weariness in her eyes that unnerved him.

"And since when are you so interested in romance?" she asked.

That night he fantasized inviting all of his former lovers home to meet her. He'd line them up in the living room and into the front hall, around the stairs and through the kitchen and then back into the living room again. He'd introduce her to each one,
remembering all their names. Then she'd really know me, he thought.

His next trip to Mexico was fast approaching and he counted the days. But at work his ambition began to slip. He distracted himself during long meetings by looking around the room at all the fresh faces, the groomed look of his colleagues, and imagining them as babies in diapers, bawling and shitting and pulling each other's hair, spilling water, eating paper.

He began to want to talk to somebody about Viviana, something he'd never done about any woman he'd been with. He'd been careful in the past, and as far as he knew, his friends considered his marriage a good one, which only intensified his loneliness. One day on his way out of the Y with Bill Carn, an old friend and investment banker, he said, "I met the most amazing woman in Mexico."

Carn squashed a Russian hat down over his bald head and said, "Mexico? That's great. I guess NAFTA's opened everything up."

Benjamin felt sick to his stomach. He watched Cam's shiny leather shoes step ahead of him down the sidewalk and suddenly his life felt empty. He remembered Viviana's question about loyalty and wondered what he did believe in. At a dinner party recently, during a discussion about the school lunch program, he'd watched his wife slam her slender fist onto the table and say, "But I believe in healthy foods!"

He arrived in Mexico City in the evening and by the time he got through customs and into his hotel it was almost eleven o'clock. He took out Viviana's note and thought about calling her—but after having no contact for seven weeks, he was afraid. What if she wouldn't talk to him? At this hour he'd go out of his mind.

He looked at her address and marveled at how he didn't even know where that was, or what it looked like. He suddenly felt ashamed of his ignorance. When he was with her he'd hardly asked a question. He only knew what she volunteered, and he hadn't been particularly interested in that. He assumed she had no children, but he didn't even know.

He showered and lay down and listened to the faint traffic noise nineteen stories below. Just before he might have slept, a couple entered the room next door and began a vigorous con-
conversation in Spanish, followed by vigorous sex. He tried watching a big fat clown and a puppet on television, but he couldn't understand the Spanish and the canned hysterics depressed him.

He called the front desk for a cab. He dressed and pocketed the note and took the elevator down to the lobby.

The Mexico City streets, so congested during the day, were quiet and almost empty. He felt nervous in the cab, but the ride was hypnotic and pleasurable. The driver took a series of left turns, followed a boulevard for miles without bothering to stop at the lights, and the city rose up around them, tall buildings and billboards of every shape, the streetlights making the pavement orange and silver.

Benjamin leaned his forehead against the window and watched the dark buildings pass. He marveled at how every single person on earth had to sleep once a day. It seemed a miracle somehow. Everyone—good guys, bad guys, rich, poor—everyone had to find a warm, comfortable place, turn off the lights, and sleep!

Eventually the cab arrived in a hilly neighborhood. Wrought-iron fences and stone walls topped with shards of broken glass surrounded each home. Tall trees lined the sidewalks. Shaped shrubbery and manicured lawn filled the boulevards. When they got to Viviana's address the cab stopped and Benjamin stared through the gate up the driveway to the shadow of her home.

A dog barked.

The driver asked if Benjamin was getting out and he said no, he only wanted to see. He sat in the cab and tried to imagine Viviana coming home by herself after the nights they'd spent together, having to get out here, open the gate by herself, or have some trusted guard open it for her. He thought of the dog barking incessantly and he thought of her walking up the dark driveway and shivering in the chilly air. He thought of her saying, "Have you ever been alone for a long time?" and how glibly he'd responded. He thought of her face and wanted to hold it between his hands, but suddenly felt ashamed of his selfishness, and scared. He knew she didn't deserve the trouble he was about to bring.

"Okay," he said to the cabbie. "Take me back."

In the morning he called her. When she heard his voice she whispered, "Oh my god" and hung up.
His stomach felt light with vertigo, his feet not quite on the ground. He braced himself against the textured wall of his room and called back immediately.

"I need to see you," he said.

There was another pause. He tried to picture her in his mind but couldn't quite.

"You're here?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Please," she said. Her voice was pinched.

"What?" He waited through the silence that followed. He expected at any moment to hear her hang up.

Benjamin came back to Mexico City every six weeks, and he and Viviana spent every moment they could together.

His work went well, and on each visit he spent at least part of a day and one evening with Guzmán, whom he'd come to consider his friend. They'd have dinner and drinks together. Guzmán was the only person in the world he told about Viviana. It felt good to talk—and with Guzmán, an openly gay man, married to a woman, anything and everything was not only possible but acceptable.

When Benjamin described in one sentence his love for Viviana, his need for his children, and how despite feeling no passion for Jill, he respected her and wanted to stay married to her, Guzmán didn't laugh and say, that's absurd! Instead he rested his elbows on the table and his chin on thick, intertwined fingers, and one moment he smiled and nodded and the next his eyes misted freely.

When he spoke, it was often philosophically. Always the big picture.

"One hundred years from now," he said one evening, smiling as if he knew a secret, "who will remember?"

As spring moved into summer, Viviana began to lose weight and broad blue lines formed under her eyes. Benjamin urged her to see a doctor and she said she had, but there was nothing wrong. Still she didn't get better. She seemed wounded somehow and looked exhausted. She told him things had been going poorly at home—and he should never, under any circumstances, call her there again.
So on each visit he’d plan the next, and she’d collapse into his
arms when he’d greet her in his room, and sometimes she’d stay
all night long. She’d say her husband was out of town and he
didn’t doubt her. Or she wouldn’t say anything. He’d hold her as
though he were giving her sanctuary, as though it were she who’d
traveled from far away. He’d rest each of his fingers on a rib, and
feel her heart beating in her chest, and think this must be what
it’s like to be home.

He arranged with his office to go to Mexico every four
weeks—and then, lying about difficulties with Guzmán, every
two.

One morning, almost a year to the day since he’d first met
Viviana, Benjamin sat in the kitchen of his Milwaukee home and
held his youngest daughter, Brittany, on his lap. She asked about
the size of his nose, and was it true it kept growing forever, like
Mom said, and would hers get as big as his someday, and if a
person lived to be a thousand would that person have a nose like
an elephant?

He told her that he’d never seen a person with a nose like an
elephant but people were living longer and getting older every
year, so who really knew.

“ ‘Weird,” Brittany said.

Benjamin looked at her captivated little face and thought how
that afternoon he was going to fly to Mexico, how he was going
to meet a woman he loved, and how if Brittany knew she’d feel
terrible.

His oldest daughter, Emily, did a cartwheel in the kitchen and
grabbed her lunch off the counter. He flinched when she kissed
his forehead. She smiled and practiced her Spanish, “Adiós, Papá.”

Benjamin drove Brittany to grade school. When he dropped
her off out front, he noticed the many other parents doing the
same thing, and the scrubbed and pleasant looks on their faces
depressed him. He felt as though he could see through all of
their pretension. He wondered how many were off to see a
lover, how many had been recently cruel to their spouses or chil-
dren, how many were stealing from their companies or doing
other hidden things. They did what they needed to do in secret,
and they convinced themselves it was better that way.

And who could argue? Look at all those kids, standing in line
dressed for school, lunch boxes bright with prints of superhe-
roes, little faces shiny with hope!
Indeed, he thought, the world would certainly fall apart if there were no secrets.

The next day, Benjamin found himself sitting in a sidewalk café listening to a conversation at the table next to him. Viviana hadn’t come to his hotel, nor had she left a message. Guzmán had left on one of his spur of the moment trips to Tampico, and Benjamin had spent a morose afternoon in the city by himself. He wandered the streets in the old part of town, and he thought of little else but Viviana, and Jill. Just before he’d left Milwaukee, on the way to the airport, he almost stopped to call Jill and tell her. Just the memory of his impulse made him cringe. Thank god he’d kept driving. The truth was never easy to tell and to try to tell it now seemed suddenly foolish.

A man at the next table spoke in accented English to another man, who was taking notes. In order to distract himself, Benjamin leaned over to listen. The man said he lost many friends in the Malvinas. He said there was many terror in Argentina. He said some people disappear—suddenly be gone!

“And we pretend we do not notice,” he said. “We read newspaper. We dip bread in coffee and smile at our wives and children.”

Benjamin glanced over. The man, about his age, but slighter, grayer, hunched over a soft drink, occasionally sipping through a straw. He wore a sport coat and cotton slacks and running shoes. He looked quite ordinary except for his green eyes, watery and suspicious. He noticed Benjamin’s glance immediately so Benjamin quickly looked past him, to a young waiter in a white coat who’d cornered a mouse against the building and now tried unsuccessfully to stomp it.

The man with the soft drink closed his mouth tight and covered it with his hand. He laughed.

“It is dangerous even to burp!” he said.

This was the second visit in a row that Viviana hadn’t shown up. Two weeks ago she’d left a message, at least: her sister-in-law was visiting and she couldn’t break away. Benjamin needed to see her. He felt desperate. He’d never been addicted to drugs or alcohol, or even cigarettes, but suddenly felt a wave a compassion for those who were. This is how they must feel, he thought,
this tingling, this unease. This meaninglessness, this boredom, this misery.

He called Viviana’s house from the hotel but nobody answered. He tried again, and still no answer. It was late and he knew he was begging trouble but he tried a third time. He let the phone ring and ring and ring.

Still no answer.

He sat down on his bed and called the front desk and asked the clerk if there’d been any new messages. None. He lay back but couldn’t sleep. He felt angry at Viviana—how could she abandon him? He did some pushups but they didn’t help. He lay down again and watched the light and shadows play across the ceiling of his room.

He sat up and dialed. This time somebody answered. A man. Benjamin paused and then asked in Spanish for Viviana. The man said something grouchy that Benjamin couldn’t understand. He asked again and still couldn’t understand the response. He thought maybe he’d gotten the wrong number so he said fuck you and hung up and dialed again.

The same man answered. Benjamin hung up without speaking.

At dawn he dressed and took a cab to her house. He hadn’t been there since the first night he came back and the beauty of the neighborhood astonished him, the bougainvillea crawling up and over the white walls, purple and red, the violet trees and shrubs with orange blossoms. The cab parked out front and he got out and knocked on the gate.

A maid approached from around the corner of the house. She was young, fifteen, maybe, and wore an apron.

He asked if the Señora was in. The maid shook her head and looked confused. She had a huge mole on the corner of her lip.

He asked again, and the maid did the same thing.


The maid shook her head slowly. Sleepy-seeds clung to the corners of her eyes. “She’s gone,” she said.

Benjamin smiled. “Where?”

The maid shrugged. Behind her a gardener crossed the lawn, dropping pieces of bread in the grass. A squirrel bounced along behind him.
“No,” Benjamin said. “I mean, when will she be back?”

The maid looked at Benjamin as though suddenly she knew just who he was.

“Doña Viviana is gone,” she said. “She doesn’t live here anymore.”

Benjamin tried to catch his breath. He held the gate with both hands.

“What? Since when?”

The maid pursed her lips and looked up. “Five months? Four?”

Benjamin squeezed the bars on the gate. “Where did she go?”

The maid looked back over her shoulder to the gardener. “Where did Doña Viviana go?”

The gardener approached slowly. He stood right behind the maid and creased his brow and pretended to think. “Downtown?” he said.

“Downtown?” Benjamin said, his voice rising with the blood that filled his face and throat. “There are fifteen million people downtown!” He stopped shouting when he noticed the maid had taken a step back. His own face had begun to quiver. He let go of the gate and spoke quietly again. “Where?”

The maid shook her head and looked at her feet. The gardener shrugged and dropped another piece of bread for the squirrel.

At a bar in the city that evening, Benjamin stood with Guzmán explaining how he’d find her. He’d start right here, he said, and walk a circle. Then he’d walk a bigger one. It wouldn’t be hard. Or maybe it would be. But he’d walk a bigger and a bigger one. It was how he’d learned to find the next blood drop in the woods when he bow-hunted as a boy. He didn’t like leaving wounded animals and could follow a trail all night long. Blood shines off dull leaves in the beam of a flashlight. He could walk circles until he’d covered the entire globe.

“You’re mad,” Guzmán said.

“I’m not mad,” Benjamin said. He pulled out his wallet. “I’ll buy a round.”

There was a long pause while he waited to order and then for the bartender to bring the drinks.
"I have a beautiful ranch in Tampico," Guzmán said. "Trees and grass and sea! You can come up there and hunt."

"You're drunk," Benjamin said.

"I am drunk," Guzmán said. But he smiled and snapped his fingers. "She's a legend! Viviana, _la leyenda_! But feel this." He dropped his hand onto Benjamin's shoulder. "I am real."

Benjamin looked at his face, his sad squint, tired and drawn. They were the same age but Guzmán looked ten years older.

"I used to think you were a happy man, Roberto."

Guzmán laughed out loud. Benjamin laughed, too, then turned and walked toward the open door of the barroom and stepped out onto the sidewalk. He stood still for a moment, sober but wobbling with vertigo. He wondered dispassionately about his daughters, how long they'd hate him, and he wondered about Viviana. She was somewhere in the city. Why didn't she tell him she'd left her husband? Had she been waiting for him to leave his wife? He felt momentarily betrayed. Maybe everything she'd told him had been a lie.

But then he began to walk. Traffic had thinned and a string of pearl-colored streetlights stretched both ways as far as he could see. A brief rain had stopped but left the streets washed and the air so clean his heart ached all the way to his throat. What did it matter, really, if she'd lied, if she hadn't told him everything? She was just like anybody else, sick and tired and lost and scared. He turned right at the first corner, onto a darker street, and imagined himself from above, a mouse in a maze that filled the valley. He had no idea where he was going but it didn't seem to matter. He was walking now, pulled by something bigger than anything he'd ever known before. He felt strangely exuberant, and he wanted to tell her.
THE STONE LETTERS

AS I CAUGHT MYSELF SLIPPING (SEACLIFF TO THE SEA)

To Pygmalion, Master Sculptor, Court of Catherine:

If there the studio fire should blue
up the marble like a slant of weather
your chisel passes through—
the dust, bits of porphyry, early air
fogging the gold, a furred mallet for a softer. . .
That you might press an iris
into a map of Siberian rainfall, some flush
worthy of spearing a holiday. Some register.
That you may arrange the remains
of last night's delicacy in the freshened snow.

Nightly, bangingly, moths into the hanging pans' light.
Am the gifted mimic, stalled above
seahorses, their beds of finecrush ice.
My blank palms leave such glassy distaste!
If shells should feel themselves interior,
that wine-dark, that glit-glittery—
if seasalt should flour the body's case,
hands roused, the eyes windlashed, tinned—
what have you seen, who keeps you? Still bell
in custody to the velvet rope little noted
by a distant boudoir. Did it stir? Are you summoned?
That I do not simply die (what see you), that I
do not slip (her high rooms),
that I do not (the edge of my inwardness),
that I—

some pharmaceutical tea, a seagaze.
Soon after, noon devolves.
DEPARTURE

Galatea,

In answer to your answer: Yes, blindly so. At first light the silver service, eggcups in the pose of swans. Wafers with jam. Some sugared things, then the fine-particled studio air, the slab's volcanic light and Russia full of scarlatines, stork-waisted, wanting themselves marble. They drag their foot scarves through tool dust. They drop their ermine trains with such performed privacy! Night is when Ivan the Terrible whistles through his teeth for Posnik Yakovlev. In question to your question: perhaps the wind perceives most clear because unexpected? Think of bulbed churches foiled gold, faded in the wind's fits. A counterfeit flicker so seems to say St. Basil's when near, its nine cupolas' bright applause hiding the city's fever, so that peasant women, their minds turned pure sail, open whatever they feel and who can argue, who can tell them? They move on unmoored and fade among the market canopies, voices, a voice paling in my slow-schooled ear: your name, continent-sounding.

Pygmalion

*Posnik Yakovlev - architect of the St. Basil's Cathedral in the Kremlin. Ivan IV allegedly had Yakovlev's eyes removed so that he would not create another as beautiful.
Pygmalion,

Today a Blue, throat and fluke in the dock hoist. 
A pose, flash smoke, and the wharfhands mill

about the planks, caps askew and slapping backs
until I watch no more, spyglass to the outermost

house beneath the sweep of the lighthouse,
the breakers, evening's mirror as the grunion

beach in silver sheets and further, darker,
groupers play the angles undetected. Before a field

clear and shifting, before a krillstorm, those overlit
soirees of annoyed hips and swallowtail waiters,

where anemone bloom like amnesia.
My shutter, my shutter, the compass needles for an iceberg,

as the sea pulls the boys, tan and full of mackerel,
the boys drifting for my window with their handfuls

of pebbles. And through a window at evening, distant and
finnish,
at last reaching you, the swing of scythes.

On blacker dreams, on unending autobiographies,
those appropriate ghosts tacking through ballrooms

untouched, I give nothing, take not a thing,
the deaf spyglass obsessing on the tense
and slack of slipknots at the boatslip, a boat slipping beneath the telescope’s sail. So few choose

their finder, having a rage famous for its quiet—
my sailor’s poor scrimshaw, my hoop frame unskirted,

by my soap and dim light I leave my Beast, arced like a lover to the hull.

Galatea
YOUR NAME IS THE BOAT

His name is the boat ...
—Mira Bai
I laze in a boat, my way in the wind’s hands.
—Wang Wei

your name is the boat and I am saying your name into the wind’s hands
your hands are a boat and my skin is the wind filling up your sail
I laze in the boat of your body my way in your breath’s hands
our windy hands push our boat across our names written on water
I am the boat and lazing in my hull you are my way to lose my name
my name is the boat and you are in me and you are rowing us across
you are rowing me rowing me rowing me across to you
you are the oar and I am the water you row
your name floats on my slippery skin and disappears deep in my waters
IN LOVE WITH ELEANOR RIGBY

THE MEETING

This young lady seems pretty concerned about how she looks so I say she has “very pretty eyes.” She told me her name is Tabitha Merriweather. I saw her here in this bookstore for the first time, beautiful, and felt alone and driven by underpinnings perhaps only understood by me. Perhaps, this is why I am alone. Perhaps, it’s why I’ve met her. Only I realize what is real to me. Some fortune. Some gift. It’s what makes me who I am. It’s what makes my mind click like a metronome in perfect rhythm with this awareness and yet isolated forever in the zone. She hovers like God, like an angel, like imagination when one sees only clear skies and endless blue, and I often float there alone in this euphoria. It all begins in a bookstore.

I am searching for the latest Salinger novel or a response from God, whichever comes first, and am beginning to have an anxiety attack because this new Salinger novel is nowhere to be found and a response from God isn’t exactly forthcoming either and my pulse feels like it’s doing 140 and I may be sweating and people might be looking at me funny like and I could be drooling and it’s possible that I might very well be speaking in tongues. It seems like I might be. Salinger has that affect on me. So does Updike. And those Taco Bell commercials with the Chihuahua. And Heidegger’s Being and Time. And the beer section at Winn Dixie. And drive-thru speakers. And exercise. And tying my shoes sometimes, when it’s really, really hot.

The lady in charge of my substance abuse treatment class, Pam, says it’s because I over-intellectualize, which she says is a form of denial and so I admitted that I was so far in denial that I was in Sudan, which she said was just another form of denial and then sort of stared at me like I was an idiot and/or a reprobate, which I’m not necessarily convinced I’m not but like this roofer named Demetrius said, “That’s funny, man. Sudan. Funny, man.”
And so here I am, alone, without a response from God and a Salinger novel circa 1951 in hand, in this bookstore, when I see her. Imagine. She is hovering over copies of *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, and *Harper's* reading the same story told three different ways by three different writers from three different Ivy League programs.

“How do you do,” I say to her.

“Hi,” she says.

She wears a green, felt hat with a round brim, and it has a big, sunny flower on it. Her eyes are as blue as the center of the ocean. She wears a cheerful yellow sundress with blue paisley prints on it. She smells fresh and sweet like fruit, like papaya and mangoes.

“*Harper’s*,” I say motioning toward her magazine. “That’s good stuff. Do you like it?”

“Oh, this story is very good.”

“Yes.”

“It’s about this guy and this girl,” she says.

“Pretty original then.”

She smiles. “Well, yes, it’s about this guy and this girl and they meet in this bookstore and the guy, see, is sort of this metaphor for the contemporary writer and the girl, she’s sort of this angelic kind of metaphor for God. She hovers, see. And she like changes form and they go to this beach place where she changes form and becomes the beach or the sand or maybe the dunes, and I think the author was implying that the narrator was a fish or maybe the water and that the two were different and yet connected. He makes the beginning the end of it all—sort of like life, you know.”

I laugh. She smiles.

“He was changing form, too, with her,” she says. “And content.”

I look at her. There’s a genuine sparkle of wit in her eyes.

“Form and content,” I say. “I like that.”

She looks at me for a moment, and smiles.

“How about this one,” I say motioning to, “*The New Yorker*. That’s top-of-the-line stuff. Elite. Best writers in the world.”

“Yes, well, this story’s different, though. It’s got its own style.”

“How so?”
"Well, it's about this guy and this girl that meet at a café overlooking the Rhône in Arles, you know. The guy is a writer, an American sort of Hunter S. Thompson type, and he meets this Arlesienne waitress twenty-years his junior and she speaks like several languages, which the author weaves as a sort of metaphor that the one language this Hunter S. Thompson-esque American writer and this Arlesienne waitress connect with is the language of desire and passion, but the waitress ultimately leaves him though the author is really, really subtle about this and never actually says she leaves him. She becomes words in this letter the author writes to a former lover."

"I see," I say. "Language as metaphor—that's pretty smart stuff. And original, too."

She looks at me for a moment. "So what do you like?"

I say, "I'm a big Dr. Seuss fan myself."

"Oh, yes."

"Yes, if I'd the money required for a college education I'd do something really important like write a thesis on the metaphysics elementary to *Horton Hears a Who*. Something to get the intellectual community really thinking. There's more worthwhile philosophy in that book than the complete oeuvres of Camus and Sartre combined. And the semantics—the atomic parallels—it's like Wittgenstein on ecstasy."

She laughs. And I smile. She gladly admits she doesn't know who or what "Wittgenstein" is. I say he and Dr. Seuss were best friends. "They used to share a cab to AA meetings," I say. I tell her my name is Joe Smith.

"My name is Joe Smith," I say.

"Colorful," she says. "Unique."

"Well, in my more rebellious days I thought about changing it to something radical and far-out like John Smith," I say. "But I've got three aunts named John, so I decided I'd live with what my parents gave me."

She laughs again and tells me she likes coming to this place. She says she likes meeting "unusual" people. She is a milliner, she tells me, a hat maker—and she owns a boutique, Blue Grass, in the uptown area. She tells me her name is Tabitha Merriweather.

And so I say "if you'd like to join me for a cup of coffee, Tabitha Merriweather, I'd love to have you."

She says, "Okay." And comes with me to the coffee counter.
We ask for two coffees and then take a table together. We talk for quite a while about things I say I don't understand. She says I am "very coy." I say she is "very intelligent." She laughs with me. And I smile more than a few times. She says she thoroughly enjoys my company. And I say, "I like who you are."

**DIALING**

I realize, calling her three evenings later, that three evenings is the absolute perfect number of evenings to wait before calling someone who's given you their phone number outside a bookstore after you've talked with them for like several hours about everything from ice-cream to metaphysics, and that three evenings is the perfect balance between too eager and too nonchalant for calling someone who said "Yes" to the question of whether they'd like you to call them and actually wrote their number on a napkin from the coffee counter of said bookstore's Coffee Kiosque. I realize anything less than three evenings might be received as too anxious—desperate even—and but anything more than three evenings might be received as too indifferent—reserved even. I realize how systematic this love thing is; it's like clockwork or a mathematic equation, I realize, and three nights is the Pythagorean Theorem of dating. It's like coolness squared.

"How could you wait three nights to call me," Tabitha says. "That's so deliberate. So self-conscious. Do you have low self-esteem?"

"Low self-esteem?" I say.

"I've long since learned that any guy that waits three days—exactly three days," she says, "to call me back—must have low self-esteem."

"I didn't want to seem desperate," I say. "Or too nonchalant."

"And but so you did consciously wait exactly three days," Tabitha says, "like that would be cool or something. Do you know how phony you seem?"

"I don't mean to seem phony," I say.

"You don't mean to seem phony," she says. "Do you know how phony that sounds?"

Bewilderment would best describe my feelings at this moment. The phone line is silent for a while. I am speechless, I realize.
“What is love to you,” she says. “A game?”

“No,” I say.

“A mathematical equation or something,” she says. “Plug the right numbers in and ka-ching you get what you want.”

“I don’t think that at all,” I say. “Mathematics is the farthest thing from my mind when I think of love.”

“You probably lie about your true feelings, too,” she says. “What is honesty to you?”

I am bewildered, I say. That is honest.

So your ignorance is honesty, she says.

I know that I don’t know a lot of things.


We are silent for some time. I am thinking of exactly what I want to say. It’s as though my life depends upon it. Because I realize eloquence is the ticket to the show in this town and if you ain’t eloquent you ain’t getting into the show.

“I’d like to share some chocolate chip cookie dough ice-cream with you,” I say.

“Some what?” She asks.

“Chocolate chip cookie dough ice-cream,” I say. “You said at the bookstore it was your favorite flavor. I would like to share some chocolate chip cookie dough ice-cream with you.”

“And just what is that supposed to mean,” she says.

SLOW MOTION

Her lips are moist and warm and come together with mine like a pair of lonely bumper cars bumping head-on into one another—it’s quite romantic. I’m sure sparks fly. It’s been three weeks since we met at the bookstore. Up close Tabitha’s her hair smells like papaya-scented shampoo and is soft and smooth like silk or satin or like well shampooed hair that’s been shampooed with papaya-scented shampoo. If I were eloquent I’d say something like it was “redolent of those summers on Glen Cove when we were young and knew we were so much older.” Our noses collide—I may be in love.

We’re on this sidewalk, see, in twinkling midtown Charlotte. The night is peaceful. And it is the first time we’ve been together like this: i.e., it’s the first time I’ve opted for physical contact. I enjoy listening to her—her voice is calm and soothing on any subject. It is pleasant but not without spine. She has dimples.
She is lively. She is quite possibly the most extraordinary woman I will ever meet.

We’ve come together here like six or seven times in the three weeks since we met at the bookstore—pretty good for two people who prior to meeting one another had not been on a date in a combined fourteen months. There are these sidewalk cafés that serve fresh coffee until like ten or eleven o’clock, and we’ve spent the evening tonight under the stars and the clear sky amidst the shiny glass buildings of midtown, listening and talking with one another. The sidewalk lamplights here along Market Street gleam in the night, and traffic moves along casually.

Tabitha wears this aqua velour hat, which tapers back like a fin. “It’s Ohrbach’s Oval,” she says. I don’t know what that means, I say, but I tell her that I like it. It’s a pretty hat, I say. I’d like to see more of your hats. They’re very nice, I say. I don’t think I’ve ever seen a hat quite like that one, I say. It’s pretty unique. If I were a head, I say, I’d be happy with that hat. She laughs at me. We stand there for a moment in the lambent light coming from the main floor lobby of Sharon Tower. The night is peaceful and clear and warm and I see the traffic light at the corner turn from red to green. And I say, I like you, Tabitha Merriweather. I feel completely comfortable with you, you know. And she looks at me for a moment. And I look at her. And then suddenly I lean forward, sort of off-balance, and she watches me. And her lips come together and her dimples rise and she smiles the absolute most incredibly, pretty smile I have ever seen in my entire life and but I’m standing there sort of leaning, right, my lips aiming to kiss her lips and she realizes I must feel pretty awkward in this particular position and I realize this is why she is smiling at me. And then she sort of leans forward kind of off-balance, too, and she whispers that she really likes me, too. And I sort of whisper, “No kidding—yeah?” And she says, yeah. And we do this thing. We kiss.

A THIRST

We’ve come together here for lunch some fourteen days and ten street blocks from where Tabitha and I first kissed. Midtown Charlotte. We’re at a sidewalk table in front of the joint and the sky is clear blue. A breeze blows coolly, ruffling the tablecloth. Traffic passes casually along up the street.

Spring 2001
She seems to enjoy this joint, Kildaire's, an Irish tavern and eatery, where we're having lunch for what I'd bet is the seventh time in seven days. She enjoys the gourmet beers, she says, and I must confess I've maybe glanced a time or two at the tall, cylindrical, crystalline glass filled lushly with a deep, rich, amber malt, a beautiful wisp of white foam looking somewhat like freshly driven snow atop what I'm sure is the thickest, purest blend of barley and hops ever brewed in the history of Irish beer manufacturing.

I'm managing through an unsweetened iced tea. And some sort of sandwich. I count the bubbles, rising inside her beer, which Tabitha uses to wash down a toasted, crisp, vegetable pita overflowing with juicy tomatoes, green peppers, sauerkraut, and melted Swiss, Colby, and Monterey Jack cheeses. My sandwich looks cold, white, and flat. I watch her raise the glass to her perfect, round lips and gracefully, sensuously sips the McGentry's freshly tapped, aged and malted beer. I read here on the menu that they roast the barley and hops over a cedar smoked fire, and the kegs are made of hickory "In Ye Olde Irish Style," in which the secret McGentry family recipe ferments for no less than seven months before being broken open by a swivel, steel tap as it has been done by "generation after generation of McGentrys for over eight hundred years." My hand twitches as I reach for the bitter ice tea. It is cold.

There is a green awning over the front door, and there are trees and plants here along the sidewalk. There are a dozen round tables like ours here in front of the joint. It's noon, and the owner is sweeping up in front of the place. He wipes his hands on a white apron and looks in our direction. He has a shock of red hair, green eyes, and an aged and amiable face. His eyes crinkle when he smiles. He smiles. Tabitha waves to him. He waves and then goes inside. Tabitha is so cool, I realize, precisely because she doesn't try to be cool. She knows people. And her boutique is a few blocks over at the corner of 7th and Trade.

"How's your sandwich," she says.

"It's cold, white, and flat," I say.

The tables are shaded by large green umbrellas that match the awning. A few buildings rise over sixty stories towards the sky along Market and Main. Traffic moves steadily here on Parkwood amidst the tall buildings. It is shaded and cool. Two
ladies sit at a nearby table speaking French or German. Tabitha looks at me.

“I thought it was a good idea,” Tabitha says. “But I wanted to ask you first.”

“Beer,” I say.

“Well, it’s no rush, but I thought maybe the week of the twelfth.”


“Yes, I told her you did carpentry. And she’d let us have the place free for the week. You’d just have to assemble this furniture. No problem, right. It’s right on the beach, Joe.”

“Delicious.”

“And this lady has money. She owns like major stock in Anheuser-Busch. I’m sure the place is fantastic. It’s probably stocked with—”

I let out a groan from deep within my belly.


I look at the yellow lemon on the rim of the glass frowning, taunting me. And I try not to grimace.

HONESTLY!

I should tell her. We’ve dated for over two months, and I’ve kept this alcohol thing from her. I’ve managed to keep the treatment program from her, too, though she’s begun asking rather casually the past week or two where it is I go every Tuesday and Thursday night from 6:00 PM until 8:00 PM. I tell her I’ve work to do or errands to run. And thus far I think she’s at most mildly suspicious. She’s giving me my space, I realize, but I don’t know how long I can continue not telling her. Most important, though, I realize it’s not fair to her. It’s better to be up front with people. My concern is that she’ll think I’m an alcoholic. And while I may very well be—by not telling her, it’s not an outright lie. It’s a sort of omission of the facts. Yes, that’s what it is.

THREE YEARS

“Tonight I’d like to talk about the various forms of lying,” Pam says. “First though, I should say that any form of lying about an alcohol or substance problem is the worst form of denial.”
I look around the room wishing to be anywhere other than here. There’s a confrontation with truth stirring in the air tonight. A dozen of us are here this evening, including Pam. The room is well lighted, and the air conditioner is on. It is cool. We sit on the sofas and chairs and have formed a horseshoe shape with Pam and her easel before us. Pam is dressed in a pretty, blue, ankle-length dress and a white button-up blouse. She pushes her oval lensed glasses up on her nose, but they keep slipping back down. Her hair is shoulder-length and curly brown. I’d guess she’s in her early thirties.

We meet twice weekly on Tuesday and Thursday evenings for two hours in the recreation room at the brick-walled, well-windowed mental health building at Mecklenburg County Hospital. There’s a skylight ceiling in the main lobby. Here, in the recreation room there’s a kitchenette which gives onto the session area with sofas and lounge chairs for us. There are green plants spaced evenly around the room, and there’s a magazine rack against one wall, and the session area opens onto a backdoor patio where the smokers smoke during break. I’ve a serious preoccupation with death and dying and as such don’t smoke, but I like to stand out there on the patio and listen to the conversation.

There’s a fellow who joins us on the patio: Cochran. He’s been in the program as long as any of us and is good at putting us at ease and/or making us laugh. He’s one of those rare people whose personality is an odd mixture of a wholesome good natured quality, blended with a warped sense of reality. I.e., his very personality is ironic. And he can make people laugh just by the way in which he walks into a room. One can only imagine how different his parents must be. There’s this genuine sincerity about him which is touching and affecting, but when the invisible line that marks the boundary between sincerity and sentimentality is breached, he is capable of towing in with innocence and wit. He has a way with people. He gets us to talk.

We’d this one fellow who never said anything in group and during the break he’d just sit in there by himself tapping his foot nervously pretending to read a magazine. One night, we were all hanging out there on the patio talking about him sitting in there alone, and Cochran stands up real casual like and goes in there and sits right next to the guy. We watched him stretch out his legs
and lean back in the chair and saw him exhale a deep sigh, looking totally at ease. And then we saw him start up talking with this guy, and though we couldn’t hear what they were saying, we could see they were talking. And after a couple minutes, we saw this guy laugh at something Cochran said. I’d never seen this guy so much as smile in the four weeks prior to that night.

They sat in there for the remainder of the break and I don’t know what Cochran said to the guy, but about ten minutes into the second half of session that night this guy opens up and says he hadn’t planned on saying anything the entire time he was there. His name is Dave, he says. And he says that he wanted to tell us that though he didn’t say much, he always listened to what we all said. He appreciated it, he said. Then, he looks around at all of us—Dave, this guy who hasn’t said a word in four weeks, who never joined us during break, and who always left silently at the end of the evening without saying a word to anyone—and he looks at us, Dave does, and he says he was hooked on heroin for eight years. And we’re all like “damn, man,” and we’re all also listening to Dave more thoughtfully, more attentively, perhaps than any other moment of listening that I’ve ever witnessed because this guy is being like crystalline sincere and honest. Dave said he almost died—he “wanted to die,” he said—but something kept him from doing it. Some part of his mind refused to let him end his own life. And he quit the heroin, he said, cold turkey—no methadone, no hospitalization—and that quitting it was the most agonizing thing he’d ever done but that he knew it was what he had to do. “It was painful like no other pain imaginable,” Dave said. And we’re all like listening to him in a way like no other moment I’ve ever witnessed, right, and he sensed how involved we were. Dave did. And he said, “but it was either live or die, man. I realized that. And that’s what it all comes down to ultimately.” It was then that I realized how much it helps to talk.

“How many of us can admit to lying,” Pam says raising her hand.

I raise my hand. There are a few others raised around the room.

“Would you like to elaborate, Joe,” she says.

“Well, I lie about everything,” I say. “Even this confession is a lie. I lie about lying. And even when I try to place myself outside of it honestly, with sincerity, I realize that my honesty is
exactly that—my honesty—and as such is subjective. What is true to me could very well be false to you. And what I realize is so frightening is that there really is no right or wrong other than what we choose for ourselves.”

“Wouldn’t you say driving with a point-two-four blood alcohol level is wrong,” she says.

“It depends on your definition of wrong,” I say. “I know the consequence is that I am here.”

“What is your definition of wrong, Joe,” she says.

“There is no universal, concrete definition of wrong. Moral absolutes are like talking about what is God. And even if we agree on what is right or wrong—even if every human being in this room could point at something and say ‘that is right’—is it then truly ‘right’? Do we humans have the authority to designate right and wrong?”

“Over-intellectualizing,” Pam says pointing to the chart on the easel beside her, “was form eight of denial, Joe. You’re evading the truth.”

“Tell me how to look the truth square on and I’ll do it,” I say.

“I want nothing more than to tell the truth. Is love truth? Is death? Is there any truth to my being here speaking these words? It’s all a bunch of fucking fictional words strung together.”

“I sense avoidance,” she says.

I look around the room and several of the guys roll their eyes at me. Cochran sits on the sofa taking all this in. He is listening.

“I can relate, man,” he says. “Truth. Love. Men and women—well, those are the riddles that’ve puzzled us all for ages aren’t they.”

“What do you mean,” I say.

He looks around the room at each of the guys individually. He connects with his eyes, and then he looks directly at me and makes me feel as though I’m there—that I matter.

“I’ve been with this woman for three years now. She is beautiful, man. Though for the past eight months we’ve been broken up. My mistake—the mistake that got me in this program is what made her move to Richmond. And up there, she met a Marine and she began a relationship with this kid. Only, like a month later he gets shipped off to Japan—no shit. And within a week she calls me and says she needs to come back to Charlotte. And so I let her have the bed and I sleep on the sofa because she has
like several things she needs to do in town to complete her move to Richmond. Only, we’ve shared like three years of our lives together. And though she loves me and I love her. She doesn’t want to love me. This is what she told me, man. After we’d turned the lights out and she’s in there on the bed talking to me through the doorway to the living room—to the sofa I’m on. And the house is silent except for our two voices talking to each other in separate rooms—this woman and I—we’ve shared three years of our lives together. She doesn’t want to love me, she tells me through the silence of the house. The house where we shared the better part of two years of our lives together, where we slept in the same bed together every night. Where we cooked each other meals and respected each other’s space and shared a television—talk about compatibility. She put up with me watching The Andy Griffith Show. Now, that’s love, man. A Northerner that puts up with Andy Griffith. It was love. And that’s the thing—we both love each other. There’s no way to erase the three years we had. And she’s seen me commit to sobriety now for nine months, while most guys my age are still out there having a good time, doing the bar scene, playing the field. She realizes I’ve matured.”

No one says anything for a moment. I can hear the rattle of the central AC, muffled voices outside in the hallway, the shuffle of a foot on the carpet, someone lightly clearing his throat. I look at him: Cochran. He is staring at the carpet, deep in thought.

“So what happened,” I find myself saying. “You and her?”

He looks up at me for a moment, catches my line of vision. He realizes I’m listening, that I’m interested.

“I don’t know, man,” he says. “I don’t know. I’d give everything I have to be with her. I’d like to think that I’m earning her love. I’d like to believe that is true.”

There’s a pause where I think everyone wants to say something reassuring but it’s the kind of thing that really can’t be reassured—at least not with words. And that’s what the moment calls for: a silence that means the world. It sounds absurd. But it is appropriate, I realize. This silence.

“She can’t trust me,” he says after several moments. “I broke a trust with her that I’ll probably never earn back, no matter how honest I am from here forward. . . She doesn’t want to love me, this is what she says. And I’ve no right to blame her.”

We are all silent.
A REASON

There's an understated quality to Tabitha's boutique here among these other shops and salons with names like Vidoré and Augustes. The sign above the place reads BLUE GRASS MILLINERY and there are two windows on either side of the single, front door. I didn't sleep well last night. It was what Cochran said: his words stayed with me. So I resolved at like 5:00 AM that, today, I would tell Tabitha the truth.

A bell jingles as I enter. There are a few customers browsing over various styles, looking at themselves in mirrors. A college girl works the counter, and Tabitha stands with a customer before a mirror. The lady she is helping is gray-haired and pleasant looking. She looks from the hat in her hand to Tabitha, to the mirror, then places the hat on her head and regards it closely.

"Oh, I like this," the elderly lady says.

She has a soft, clear voice. She wears an olive colored dress with white flower prints on it and a matching white shawl. A white handbag rests neatly at her side.

"This is our woven straw topper," Tabitha says.

She looks and sees me, smiles, and concentrates on the elderly lady. All I can think is: I'm an alcoholic. I'm an alcoholic. Tabitha, I have something I need to tell you: I'm a stinking drunk.

"This is such a nice hat," the elderly lady says.

I've been in a treatment program since before I met you. I've kept this from you the entire time we've dated.

"Oh, dear," the elderly lady says. "Do you think it a bit much for a church hat?"

Tabitha looks at her.

"Why, I think it'd be perfect for church," she says. "It looks very lovely."

Tabitha smiles politely, sincerely.

"You don't think it's too risqué," the elderly woman says. "I mean is it proper for church?"

I'm a drunkard and a louse, as was my father and his father, and his father before him. I come from a long line of drunks and louses. We've a distinction for being wonderful louses.

"It makes a statement," Tabitha says; she smiles at the lady. "But, Miss Pauline, it's a statement that's very becoming for you."
Miss Pauline looks at me standing there ten feet away. I am browsing over several really cool looking hats. “Excuse me, young man.”

“Me,” I say.

“Yes, may I have your opinion on this hat,” she asks. “Do you think it proper?”

“Proper?”

“Yes, appropriate for church, you know?”

“Well, I’m no expert on that subject,” I say.

“Well, do you like it?”

I look at the hat. It’s a nice looking hat.

“Sure, I like it,” I say. “It’s a nice looking hat.”

Miss Pauline walks over toward me. She regards me circumspectly, her eyes sizing me up. They’re a very light shade of green, her pupils are narrowed. I feel as though I’m being judged. It is odd, I know, but I feel as though she’s looking me over for flaws.

“Very nice,” I say.

“Do you think so,” she says. “Really?”

“Yes, ma’am,” I say. “And it matches the green of your eyes beautifully.”

She looks at Tabitha, then back to me, amused.

“Now, this is a charming young man,” she says. “So thoughtful and sincere.”

I’m an alcoholic. I’ve lied for two months. I’m evil. I’m a male.

“Yes, I’m quite sure of it,” Miss Pauline says turning her eyes back to me. “You’ve eyes that would never lie. I’m sure some young lady must be quite lucky.”

“That’s one word for it,” I say.

“Yes, I’m sure some young lady must be,” Tabitha says.

At this moment, I believe Miss Pauline realizes Tabitha and I know each other, but if she does she gives no hint of it. She returns to the mirror and checks the hat. Tabitha gives me a pretty smile.

“I’ll take it,” Miss Pauline says. “Much in part to the honest opinion of this young man.”

Miss Pauline gives me a keen, confidential glance. She’s very perceptive, I realize. She knows.

“Well, the management of Blue Grass Millinery certainly thank

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him.” Tabitha smiles at me. And walks with Miss Pauline to the counter.

Tabitha comes to me a few moments later. She wears a silk blouse and the fabric rises like crests and waves shimmering with her movement. Her deep blue eyes look pleasantly surprised to see me. And her sandy blonde hair is soft and tousled. She is the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. And I am compelled to speak beyond my own will. It’s hard to breathe.

“Tabitha, I’ve something I need to tell you.”

She looks at me as though a cold wind just blew over her face.

“What is it, Joe?”

I look around the store at the other customers. They stand in pretty frock coats or sweaters. They carry handbags and drift around the store like timber atop a sea.

“Do you have somewhere we can go,” I say. “This is important.”

“Sure, Joe.” She looks at me, her brow furrowing, and then calls to the college girl behind the register that she’ll be stepping out for a few minutes.

Outside on the sidewalk along Trade Street, the air has turned cool and crisp. The sun is shining. Leaves have begun turning red and orange and yellow in the trees that line the sidewalk. The sky is blue. A breeze stirs Tabitha’s hair. She is beautiful, and for a moment sunlight glances off her and I realize time has shifted into a lower gear, and she turns her head as though in slow motion to look one way up the street then the other. Her face is soft and there are light freckles on her cheeks and over the bridge of her nose. Her eyes are eyes that I could look at the day I die, and I’d feel as though life was worth living. They’re as close to looking at the ocean as anything else I’ve ever seen.

We step inside a joint several blocks up: The Station Pier, a trendy joint with upscale midtown Charlotte professionals. The lighting is turned low. There’s a bar stretching along the right side of the place and a large mirror behind the bar. There are tables to our left. It’s the kind of place where one could easily blend into the coral walls at one of the tables or booths. There are a good number of folks here and true blues music plays softly over the speakers.
I look up and a woman bumps into me. She has a bottle of beer in her hand.

"Excuse me," she says.

I manage a smile. And turn and bump into another person—a large fellow in a silk suit. He has a tumbler of bourbon and ice in his hand and a shiny gold wristwatch on his wrist.

"Excuse me there, buddy," he says.

"Excuse me," I say.

I turn and see Tabitha has gained a few feet on me and is at a table. A group of ladies on their lunch break suddenly come from nowhere and I am caught amidst them. One has a margarita, another a Heineken, and another a German import.

"Pardon me, excuse me, pardon me," I say.

"Watch it, buddy," one of them says.

I look across at Tabitha who has reached a table.

"Look out!" This guy shouts at me. "Coming through!"

He nearly runs me down with a large silver keg of beer on a dolly cart. He's moving at a good clip. I dive out of the way and bump into a waitress floating along with a tray of drinks.

"Watch where you're going, pal," she says.

She adjusts the tray, and I stand there for a moment drifting and then I realize I'm in her way. "If you don't mind," she says, motioning for me to get the hell out of her way.

I swirl out of her way adrift on the current, and I see Tabitha waving at me from the table. I return the wave, and she motions over to the bar. She wants me to get her a drink. And so I make my way to the bar. There's a suited crowd around the bar and I swim through them and reach the bar.


The bartender nods. I look one way up the bar and then the other. Everyone seems to be having a good time. I look up at the mirror behind the bar and I see a beach and me lying there alone in the sand looking up at the clear blue sky, an occasional wave reaching me. The water feels warm over my feet and legs. I might just die there. I might.

"Five bucks," the bartender says.

I hand him a ten and swim back through the crowd. Tabitha's over there like a beacon, like a buoy. And she waves me in.

She says, "Thank you."
I look into her deep, blue eyes and realize I'd give everything that I am to have this moment captured in words.

"I almost died twice last year," I say.

Her eyebrows furrow with concern.

"It's something I've been keeping from you," I say. "Both times I was drinking—so much I don't even remember what happened. I woke in the hospital—the first time—my neck in a brace, my body in traction, alone. I'd been dating a girl for three years, Tabitha, and this was finally it. She'd finally had enough of a boy saying he loved her and yet trying to kill himself. She was a good woman. A fine, fine woman. And I hurt her. I broke a trust. I was supposed to be her security, and I was so goddamned insecure it nearly killed me. It's the most precious gift on all this earth—this trust between two people. I've hurt so many people, my entire life, partly out of fear, partly out of ignorance, mostly because I was young and didn't know any better... I drew into a shell for seven months because I was tired—tired of hurting other people, tired of hurting myself, tired of all of this, goddammit. I just want to do the right thing from here forward, the rest of my life, and I swear to God I'll try my goddamndest to be the best person I can be. I'll walk that line. And if I don't—if I can't—then I will be utterly lost. And all this will be done."

She looks at me. And I realize she understands.

"People make mistakes," she says.

"When you're completely alone you realize how meaningless life is," I say. "I need someone else to the point that it means a reason for living."

Tabitha tries smiling, but it's an awkward, uncomfortable smile. And I realize why people spend their lives avoiding the truth.

"What happened," she asks.

"I became sober," I say. "And I began to hope."

She looks at me. We are silent for some time.

"It's tough," I say. "Life. But we do it. We're here. We do what we do. Sometimes we laugh. Sometimes we hurt like there isn't a hurt that could hurt any worse."

We look at each other. And I realize just how terrifying this liberation is.

"It's like a ship," I say. "It's like a ship on the sea. You're forever moving forward—moving ahead, you know? And you're
forever asking yourself if all this feels right. Is it the right direction—you know? And yet you’re forever moving forward, forever moving away from the only places you’ve ever known. The places you think feel safe.”

I look into her eyes.

“Do you feel this way,” she says. “That all this is right? Do you see it that way?”

I look at her as naked as a man can be. “It’s the only way I know how to feel. Right or wrong. I am here. And I make decisions. I swear to God, I hope they’re the right decisions.”

We are at this place for some time. People move by us. There is noise: conversations, orders being taken, laughter. We look at each other.

TOTAL

She came by my workshop today. It’s been three days since I told her the truth. I’ve put myself completely into my work so as not to think about how all of this makes me feel. I was working on a chiffonier. It was very hot because the air conditioner had gone out, and summer has been stealing days back from fall. I had not expected to see her.

She said, “Hi.”

We stood there for a while. Sweat was beaded on my forehead. She looked at me. I felt awkward. I realized she was either thinking about a) how she could let me go without hurting me any worse than I’d already hurt myself; b) whether I was maybe worth further effort; and/or c) the ramifications of what my telling her something as crucial as I had meant about my general trustworthiness skills and my capabilities for behaving responsibly in terms of any sort of long term commitment with her.

“Tabitha, I’m not perfect,” I said.

“Nobody’s asking you to be,” she said. “Joe, you take life way too seriously.”

“I do,” I said. “But I am happy when I know I can believe in someone. When they can believe in me. When we trust one another. I enjoy life more than anyone else alive, when I’ve someone I can share this with. It just seems like every time I put myself on the line, I say to hell with it, I’m gonna put myself out there anyway, even though rejection is always part of the equa-
tion—a major part of life—pretty much all my life consists of—and I don’t let the possibility of rejection stop me from getting involved with people, with being true to myself. You know? It just seems like I have to keep going to the plate even though every woman I’ve met like in the past seven years of my life is so much more skilled at this, life, than me. You know?”

She just stared at me the way so many people stare at me; it’s as if they’re asking themselves “Is this guy for real?” Then she looked at what I was working on.

“Nice looking chiffonier,” she said.

“Oh, yeah. You like it?”

“What do people need a chiffonier for anyway?”

“Well, they keep stuff in it.”

“They keep stuff in it.”

“And I’m putting a mirror on here.”

“But wouldn’t a dresser be better? I mean a chiffonier is so narrow.”

“It’s taller.”

“But you could store more stuff in a dresser.”

“This one is going to come with a dresser,” I said. “They wanted both, the couple that’s paying me to build it for them. And they wanted two night stands, too. But what the hell does anyone need a night stand for, right?”

“No, a night stand I can see. You need a night stand. You gotta have someplace to put your barrettes and your glasses and earrings and stuff before you go to sleep. But a chiffonier seems superfluous. Extra. Overconfident even.”

I said, “Well, they must have superfluous, extra, overconfident money, then.”

I stood there for quite a long while. She looked at me.

“Listen,” she finally said. “I don’t know about all of this. I mean I’ve been really trying. I want to love you, Joe. I just don’t know if all this feels right.”

“I’m willing to earn your love,” I said. “You’re the only person I’ve ever known that it does feel right. When we’re alone. When it’s you and me, when we decide on one another, you know it feels like the most right thing you’ve ever felt in your entire life. That’s the cosmic. That’s the mystical. That’s the only part of this existence that I can truly say I have some kind of spiritual
faith in—you and I. The moments that come together with complete and total perfection. You know it. You feel it.”

“I don't know,” she said. “I just don't know.”

She looked at me for a while. I felt she was judging me. I felt she was deciding my fate. I realized, standing there before her, that I must have looked strange. I realized that I loved her.

“Alone,” she said after some time. “I feel that way—that kind of perfection—when I'm alone. It's kind of ironic, I realize. You and I.”

We stood together for some time. We looked into each other's eyes. Eventually, she said she had to go. She told me that it wasn't over. She told me that she needed time to think. She told me that she would call: “I'll call you.” Those were her words.

And I've been turning over the things that I said to her, this evening, and wondering if maybe I should have done things differently. I did it as I did it. Knowing this, realizing my ignorance, makes me feel sort of empty and like nauseous, too. I change through the channels on the TV and avoid looking at the telephone. There's not much on the TV that interests me except for an advertisement for New and Improved Total, a beautiful young woman deciding the fate of a cereal.

SEARS

Tabitha doesn't call me for five days. My phone only rings twice during this period and both times I answer it before like the first ring is even done and but both times it's somebody trying to sell me long distance phone service with another phone company. Only a few times in my life have I struggled with self-control the way I have these past five days. But she said she would call me; that was the way she would prefer it. That is what she said: “I'll call you.” Only, it seems like every time I turn my head, there's a telephone staring at me. And I'm like all I have to do is call her and tell her how much I love her and how much I think we're meant for one another and how in this life we don't get many chances at happiness with another person but I think she is the one person with whom I've felt completely right and that there have been moments of total perfection shared between us that can only be a consequence of something beyond words or thought or anything that is knowable by our rational senses.
I was in Sears buying a new shirt yesterday and this guy was browsing the tie rack with a cellular phone in his hand. And I’m like staring at that phone thinking I should call Tabitha. And then I like turn around and there’s this other guy with a cellular phone talking to someone and then I go over to the checkout clerk and he’s on the phone at the check-out station and I have to stand there waiting for him to finish his phone call with what must be his girlfriend before he can ring up my shirt. And but he doesn’t even bother. He just goes on talking with her and sort of tucks the phone down a little bit and mouths “Cash or Credit?” and so I show him the twenty I plan to buy my Quality Hane’s Sport Shirt with and he keeps right on talking with her in this low, soft nice voice and pushes a button on the register and rings me up and takes my money and doesn’t break stride with his conversation there on the phone.

And so like I turn around and there’s this woman pushing a shopping cart up the isle and she’s talking with someone on a cellular phone. And she’s got a little girl in the shopping cart who has a plastic toy phone and is apparently talking with someone herself. And like I have the incredible urge to run to the nearest phone and/or get the hell out of this Sears, and so I start hurrying out of there, and I turn the corner there inside Sears, and there’s like fifty phones staring up at me from the electronics department and they’re all shiny and clean and brand new, and then all of a sudden they all ring and I just about faint, but I look up and see that the associates are working on a display, and so I focus on the door of Sears because I gotta get out of there, and this guy walks in with a briefcase and is talking away on his phone. And at the doorway of Sears there’s a row of pay phones staring at me and by the time I’m in the parking lot I’m like in full stride and three or four more people have passed me with cellular phones all gabbing away having great conversations.

And so I’m fumbling with the keys to unlock my ’74 Chevy Nova and go, and I was almost in my car when I hear another phone ring in the car parked beside me and I look in there and this phone is sitting there ringing away in some guy’s car who gets so many phone calls he leaves his damn cellular phone in the car.
Hooked

Tabitha comes by my place seven days later. It is dusky outside, and traffic moves along Independence Blvd. at the head of my apartment complex. I stand there in the doorway looking at her. Her eyes are like the ocean and as endless as a shoreline. She looks at me earnestly for a moment and then for some reason she smiles. I see the lights around the clubhouse and pool have come on and are twinkling, and the grass looks fresh and green and wet. The sky is clear, and the colors of sunset blend smoothly into those of evening.

"Come inside," I say.

It's been twelve days since she said she'd call and she never called, but I know she was doing what was right. I put my faith in her.

I was writing this story, when she knocked on the door. I'd gotten the idea for writing this story the first time I met her at the bookstore and she said she'd been reading a story in The New Yorker about this Hunter S. Thompson-esque guy who falls in love with this Arlesienne waitress but ultimately she ends up leaving him though the author is really, really subtle about this fact, and never actually says she leaves him but that she becomes words in a letter that he's writing to a former lover.

Well, that's the idea. See, this story is kind of like a letter I'm writing to a past love, telling her how much I love her and how she is the only woman with whom I've ever felt completely comfortable and that I'd give everything that I have just to have her back because loneliness is like death, and I really, really don't want to die just yet.

She has a kit of shiny, fishing lures with her. And I notice the contours of her breasts through the thin fabric of her dress.

"They're for surf fishing," she says.

"Surf fishing?"

"Yes, the guy in the sporting goods department told me mackerel really love these things."

"Mackerel?" I say.

She moves around my place like a ripple on top of water, and so I pour her a glass there in the kitchen watching the graceful crests of her body beneath the cotton fabric of her dress as it sways gently back and forth. It's an ocean blue sundress. I hand her the water and she takes it rather casually and says "thank
you” and I’m standing there looking at her present and I think I’m mesmerized and sort of under a spell, and I realize by her gift she’s telling me either: a) that she’d like me to come with her to the beach as she’d originally asked; or b) there are other fish in the sea and that I should get over her and move on; or c) neither of these, which would mean 1) I read far too much into everything; or d) maybe both, which would mean 2) I read perfectly fine but she would like me to earn her love and realize that her not only wanting to love me but that needing to love me may very well be about the most frightening thing she’s ever done. It is the various possibilities that concern me.

“They’re supposed to be spawning this time of year,” she says.

“Spawning?” I say.

“The mackerel.”

“Yes?”

“And these came with a lifetime guarantee,” she says. “See, here.”

She points to something on the package, but my eyes haven’t left hers since I gave her the water. She hands me the kit.

“I bought them for you,” she says.

I take them.

“They’re beautiful,” I say without once losing sight of her.

I stand there looking at her. She looks at me with eyes that I absolutely realize I could look at for the rest of my life. It is a kind of horizon, like the ocean meeting the sky. And then in a moment of time I will never forget, she looks at me with those eyes and I feel her smile. I feel her smile inside.

“What do you think,” she says.

“What do I think,” I say.

“About the surf,” she says. “About you and I together at the surf.”

There’s a moment where I think her name, “Tabitha,” and I think the word “heaven,” and I think the word “life,” and she’s looking at me and I’m looking at her and I think we both realize this connection together. I think we both realize that we have the most profound gift ever given. I feel her realize that it is right, and the moment comes together with complete and total perfection. She leans forward as to place her arms around me, and we look into each other’s eyes.
MISERICORDIAE

In the land of name days, each one stands as straight as the line is drawn that makes it. Each one casts a narrow shadow. Sleet, sleet. I am looking for my gift. I cannot believe they dared to hide it here. I feel much like the first hitchhiker. The smell of gas comes from a shedding palm, and I worry that something will explode. Someone I knew once wrote, "The opaque blue of the winter sky," and upon writing those words, he became the empty saucepan I see on the horizon, speechless, while I was granted infinite licence. In a place where gratitude is too strong a word, I feel I may already have stayed too long, may be walking downwards, downwards, into the water that turns the wheel, turns the wheel that powers the windmill, powers the mill that lights the lamp, lights the lamp that lights the page, the page of he who writes me through another season, another season lost, so lost, so blue.
Luminous in starlight, the granite ledge hovers over the canyon. I look back up the trail where yellow windows flicker through pines. We left plates on the table, bread crusts and salmon bones, whiskey glasses by the fireplace, and a cowboy whining on the radio who’d rather be in pine box on a slow train back to Georgia.

The Great Bear steps from the horizon. A satellite cuts Orion’s knees, and the red and green lights of a plane skate through western stars. You knock my knee with the Cuervo. I swallow and in my chest, a white crow opens its fiery wings. No moon, you say, and flick on the flashlight. When you point it down over the edge it burns a rod of silver—detached—illuminating nothing. It can’t reach the cliffs across the canyon or the trees waving their arms in the dark hundreds of feet below. You spit, take a drink from the bottle, set it down on the rock, stand up, and say, Don’t fall off the goddamn cliff.

I lie back in a crevice of the rock, and wrap my coat around me, like the Colonel
who lay in the snow at Antietam, wrapped
the flap of a dead man's coat over him,
rested his head on the leg of another,
and slept soundly through the night.
WE'RE ENTERTAINMENT

HANNAH STANDS on the threshold looking in at We're Entertainment's office. Stacks of paper, empty candy wrappers, and cheap plastic toys surround the desk where her boss Diane sits, eating French fries in front of a dusty air conditioner. Muddy paw prints cover the carpet and it smells like a kennel in there, wet fur and dog piss.

"Come in," Diane grunts.

For a moment, Hannah wants to turn around and walk straight back to her car.

"Are you deaf?" Diane shouts. "You're letting out cold air! That's dollar bills flying away. Come inside!"

Hannah closes the door behind her and tries to smile. "It's too hot to think," she says. "I'm sorry."

"Never too hot to work." Diane hands her a folder. "Here are the directions. Robert is already here. He was on time." She shoves some more fries in her mouth, scratches the flea bites on her leg, and leans back in her chair.

In the costume room, big animal heads grin at Hannah from shelves along the walls. There's a cat head, a bird head with a blue beak, and a purple Barney. The costumes hanging on their racks are enormous fake furs in red and yellow. There are wizard cloaks and gaudy dresses, feathery shirts and Indian wigs. Most of the costumes have been mended many times or are just barely held together with safety pins.

Robert is over by the prop box, holding a dirty white glove between his long fingers. He's tall and slender, with a smooth, light brown face. His glossy black hair is shaped in tiny, undulating waves. "Hey girl," he says. He puts the glove in front of his nose, sniffs it, and throws it with the rest of his things on the floor. "We're doing a Winnie the Pooh and Power Ranger party today and since I got here first, I get to be the Power Ranger." He picks up his costume and walks out to the bathroom. "See you after my magical change."
“Sure.” Hannah hauls down Winnie the Pooh’s heavy head from one of the shelves. She puts it with the furry suit and slippers in a black trash bag and carries it outside. Diane doesn’t look up as Hannah passes her. She’s sitting in her chair with her eyes closed, breathing heavily through her nose. She still has some white clown make-up at the base of her neck and Hannah shudders, thinking of what Diane looks like when she’s all fixed up. A two-hundred-pound clown with an orange tutu, striped stockings, a braided wig, and a painted grin under the round clown nose. Diane lives in the back of the house, but the border between office and private area is blurred. Sometimes a dirty bra shows up in the bathroom and occasionally, Hannah has to look for a wand or some talcum powder in Diane’s kitchen.

Hannah lets the screen door fall shut behind her as quietly as she can. The bag with the costume goes into the trunk of her old Volvo, and she crouches down in the shade next to the car and waits for Robert.

Perhaps it’s just the weather, she thinks. Perhaps it’s just the heat that makes everything here look so ugly. The banana trees with their fringed leaves hanging limp in the burning sunlight. The humid air which makes all clothes stick and itch against your skin. Even the houses seem to be leaning helplessly against each other; their railings tilted, the paint on the facades peeling off like sun-burnt skin.

Robert comes scrambling out on the porch dressed in a tight red Spandex suit. He wears a pair of boots several sizes too big and carries his bag and a Power Ranger helmet. There are two dark spots under his arms. He fans himself desperately with a silly Chinese paper fan. “Let’s get out of here,” he says and tugs at the locked car door. Hannah lets him in and then she climbs into the driver’s seat. Robert has sprayed on some kind of cologne with a strong, sweet smell and Hannah coughs. When she starts the engine, Diane opens the door and sticks out her head. “Never stand still!” she hollers to them. “Makes you look like a dead stuffed animal. Move around!”

“We know!” Robert screams back through the open window.

They drive out of New Orleans on the interstate east and pass one suburb after the other, malls and supermarkets that sell everything from bathtubs and computers to wedding cakes. A
smell of stale grease comes from the fast food places along the road.

“I hate that smell,” Robert says. He digs through his bag for more cologne.

“Please, no more scents,” Hannah says. “Do you mind if I turn on the radio?”

“No, but I brought a tape. I think you’ll like it.” He puts the cassette in the tape player and a nasal voice fills the car. “It’s Erasure doing Abba,” Robert says, and sings along with the lyrics: Take a chance on me, honey I’m still free.

Hannah glances at his shining eyes and bobbing head. He snaps his fingers and moves in his seat. Robert is five years older than she and still hasn’t finished his theater degree. He wants to become a professional actor and goes to auditions all the time. So far, he’s only been cast once, as a dancer in a crappy French Quarter production of Le Cage Aux Folles.

Hannah remembers with embarrassment how she dressed up for the interview when she applied for the job. She had thought We’re Entertainment was a real agency with a receptionist, computers, and pictures of happy children that parents sent in to the company. She practiced answering questions about why she wanted to work with children and thought about how the job might help her become a teacher in the future. She curled her hair and put on her nice burgundy suit.

A barking mutt greeted her by the gate. Sitting in front of Diane for the first time, Hannah tried to ignore the scary clown posters on the walls, the sour smell of mold, and the exercise bike which Diane obviously wasn’t using. Hannah stared at Diane, dressed as a Halloween witch with fake warts on her nose, and forced herself to smile. She needed the money. If she got the job, she told herself, it would just be for a little while.

The last suburb and the motels around it disappear behind Hannah and Robert. They pass meadows and marshes and a corral with a mule standing in the shade of a pecan tree. There are few cars on the road and the air above the asphalt is so hot that it vibrates and distorts Hannah’s view. The cane fields seem to be bulging and swaying even though they are perfectly still. For miles and miles, endless rows of growing, dripping sugar cane line the narrow road.

“We could drive for days and never get out of this,” Hannah
says to Robert, who sits slumped against the window. “Aren’t you supposed to read the map? I have no idea where we are.”

“Well, excuse me, where is it?”

“On the floor, by your feet.”

Robert bends down and picks up the papers. “If these people could just learn how to write a proper description. Look at this.”

Hannah takes a quick look at the map. It’s handmade, with the names of towns written in pencil. The roads look like thick snakes made with a red felt pen. “I think I saw a sign that said thirty miles to Houma,” she says.

“Thirty miles. So we’re not even halfway there yet. Great.”

The vegetation next to the road gets darker and thicker, an impenetrable wall of entangled roots, branches, and leaves. Vines crawl out from the swamp and the water in the bayou is covered with light green slime.

Hannah tries not to hit the potholes which dot the road as far as she can see, but sometimes she can’t avoid them and Robert sighs loudly as he bounces up and down in his seat. “I think you should have made a left back there,” he says.

“Back where? There was no road.”

“It’s probably a small road. Come on, turn around.”

Hannah drives back a mile and slows down while Robert looks for the road. “There it is,” he says, and points at a small dirt road leading in between the trees.

“Are you sure?”

“What do you mean? You think I’ve been here before?” Robert squints and compares the address to the numbers on a mailbox almost buried by shrubs. “I think this is it.”

They follow the road into the woods. The house is a low gray building without a porch, hidden in the middle of the swamp. There are no curtains in the windows and the only sign of children living there is a wooden swing hanging motionless on its ropes. An old truck with a window missing sits in a ditch.

“Cozy,” Robert says.

Hannah laughs and backs up out of view of the house. Robert puts on his gloves. “What are you waiting for?” he says. “It’s already ten to three.”

Hannah steps out among the weeds. Milky clouds cover the sun but she starts to sweat before she has put her costume on. Robert helps her with the zipper on the back of the stained yel-
low fur and then he places Winnie the Pooh’s head over hers. The mask stinks of sweat after having been used at hundreds of parties. Diane’s way of cleaning things is by spraying them with Lysol every month. Through the small net openings in the head, Hannah watches Robert put on his helmet. He reaches out for her and hand in hand, like two giant, half-blind toys, they pad up the path toward the silent house.

“What’s the birthday boy’s name?” Hannah whispers as they walk up the stairs.

“I don’t remember,” Robert says, and raises his hand to knock on the door. A happy shout comes from inside the house and a small girl with an upturned nose appears in the door frame. She stares at them in astonishment.

“Hey there,” Hannah mumbles in her deepest bear voice.

“Dad! Heather! It’s Winnie the Pooh!” The girl takes Hannah’s paw and pulls her into the house.

“Winnie the Pooh, I love you!”

A big man with thinning hair and a taller girl, perhaps eleven, in a dress with a flower pattern, join them in the dark hallway.

“Casey, shut up,” the older girl says, and pinches her sister’s arm.


“Thank you very much!” Robert stumbles forward and pretends to look for something. “We came to wish someone a happy birthday!”

“I’ll show you, Avery’s out here.” Casey pushes Hannah and Robert into a room where the only furniture is a mustard-colored plush couch, a television on a stool, and a low, beat-up wooden table. A boy who looks about twelve sits on the couch with his knees pulled up against his chest. His bangs cover his face and he doesn’t lift his head when Robert greets him with the Power Ranger salute.

“Look who’s here, Avery,” Casey says. She jumps around Hannah and laughs. “Avery, look!”

Jake sits down on the couch and maneuvers Avery up on his lap. The boy’s arms and legs are thin and the way he sits perched in his father’s arms makes him look like a scrawny baby bird.

“Avery’s fourteen today,” Jake says. “A big boy.”

“Happy birthday!” Hannah says.
“So, anyone for some games?” Robert asks cheerily.

“Me, me,” Casey says. Heather sits down on the edge of the table and starts picking her nose. Robert leads Casey in Simon Says and she imitates him and giggles as if she has known him forever.

Hannah shuffles back and forth in front of the couch trying to get Avery’s attention. She tells him about her friend Piglet, hums a tune, and pokes his arm, but the boy doesn’t seem to notice. Hannah kneels next to the couch. Under her mask, stinging drops of sweat stream down her forehead into her eyes and down her cheeks. She touches Avery’s hand and he doesn’t pull it away. The boy has a soft face and would be kind of pretty if it weren’t for his eyes, distant and bottomless. She squeezes his loose hand.

“He’s happy you’re here,” Jake says. He scratches his neck. “I know he is.”

Robert comes up to the couch. “Winnie the Pooh and I are going to sing some songs for you, Avery.” He pulls Hannah up against him and takes her arm. They prance around the room singing “Old MacDonald Had a Farm” while Casey claps her hands. They have to sing loudly to be heard through the masks. Hannah’s voice breaks with exhaustion. Jake goes out to the kitchen and returns with an angel food cake covered with whipped cream. There are fourteen unlit candles on it. “I think it’s time we sing Happy Birthday!” he says. He puts the cake on the table and lifts up Avery in his arms. Everyone gathers around the table. This is the smallest party Hannah has ever done. Usually there are relatives, neighbors, friends.

Heather gets out a box of matches and lights the candles. They sing the birthday song, cheer, and then Jake bends down over the table holding his son close.

“Blow them out Avery!” Casey says.

“He can’t, dummy,” Heather says.


Casey leans over the cake. Her hair brushes the whipped cream. She takes a deep breath, blows out the candles, and stands up slowly. “I made a wish for Avery,” she says to Hannah. “But I can’t tell you what it is because then it won’t happen.”

“Happy birthday!” Robert says. “Winnie the Pooh and I had a great time!”
“Are you leaving already?” Casey jumps up into his arms. He hugs her and sets her down on the floor. “I’m afraid so,” he says.

Jake puts Avery down on the couch. He immediately curls up and puts his arms around his knees.

“Wait here,” Jake says. “I’ll be right back.” He walks out to the hallway.

Heather stands leaning against a wall, studying Hannah and Robert. She walks over to Avery and sits down next to him. She lifts up his hand and waves it to Hannah and Robert. “Say good bye to Pooh and the Power Ranger,” she says.

“Bye, happy birthday.” Hannah follows Robert, backing out of the room. Casey clings to her leg. Hannah sways against a wall, pictures herself kicking the child off.

“Casey, let go,” Jake says. He stands by the door with a bunch of money in his hand. “Pooh has to go back to his friends. Say goodbye and go to your sister.”

“I love you Winnie!” Casey says.

“I love you too,” Hannah says limply.

Robert has already gone outside when the father hands Hannah the money. It’s eighty dollars in crumpled bills. “You were great,” he says. “Thanks for coming.”

Hannah almost falls down the stairs on her way out and Robert has to lead her to the car, where she tears off Winnie the Pooh’s head. The light hurts her eyes. Her face is hot and her hair feels pasted to her head.

Robert takes off his helmet, peels down the upper part of his suit, and stands there half naked and glistening from sweat. “Girl, you look terrible,” he frowns.

“Thanks, you look like a movie star. Help me out of this thing.”

He unzips her and she lets the fur fall to the ground. She squats down holding her folded arms on her knees to rest her head. Mosquitoes are buzzing in her ears and spiders as big as her clenched fists sit in shimmering webs between the tree branches. Hannah opens her hand and looks at the money. “I have some water in the car,” she says.

Robert tosses their things into the back seat, gets out the bottle, and takes a sip before he gives it to her.

The water is warm, as if it’s already been in someone’s
mouth, but she drinks it and pours some of it over her head.  
"Those people," Robert says. "And you jumping around in front of that vegetable."

"Shut up. You think you're so smart, always coming early to grab the best costume. You know what? I'm sick of it."

Robert widens his eyes. "I don't know what you're talking about. Last weekend it was ninety five degrees in Metaire and I was the Lion King." He slaps a mosquito on his leg. "Listen, I think we did pretty good."

Hannah closes her eyes. "I guess," she says and thinks of Avery's eyes.

"Do you want me to drive back?" Robert asks.

Hannah nods. She digs out the car keys from her pocket and throws them at Robert as hard as she can. He catches them easily.

As the car bounces down the dirt road, Robert turns on the radio to a soft soul station. Hannah looks at the cloudy sky above them. "I forgot something," she says as they reach the main road.

"You're kidding me. Where?"

"Where we parked the car, I think."

Robert winces and shakes his head when Hannah gets out. He keeps the engine running so he can stay cool inside.

Hannah walks up the road. The heat embraces her now. It pushes her forward, makes her move faster. She feels giddy. She turns around to make sure Robert can't see her, goes up to the mailbox, and puts the eighty dollars deep inside it.

"That was fast," Robert says when she gets in. He pushes the gas pedal hard, and the car swerves out on the empty road.

Hannah adjusts the vent. Cool air hits her face and she leans back in her seat.

Robert speeds through the woods, only slowing down as they go across a river on a long, low bridge. "I can't believe she sent us out here," he says.

"I know." Hannah looks out at the brown river water that surrounds them. She has shared some fun moments with Robert; she likes the fact that he can't resist dancing to a hip-hop tune even when he's dressed up as Spiderman. Once, some parents in Algiers gave them a bottle of strawberry wine after a
Pocahontas party. They drank it out of the bottle, together with a bag of Cheetos, by the side of the road.

Hannah reaches behind her seat and grabs Winnie the Pooh’s head. On the inside of it is a big strip of duct tape covering a crack in the plastic. The tape is loose and sticky.

Robert glances at her. “What are you doing?”

“Pulling tape.”

“Diane won’t like it.”

They reach the end of the bridge and Robert presses the brake. “I need to take a leak,” he says. He gets out and struggles into the bushes. His red suit flashes between the trees.

Hannah steps out with Winnie the Pooh’s head in her arms. She walks out on the old bridge and balances the mask on the molding railing. The mangrove trees around her grow out of the water and moss hangs from their branches like torn gray veils. There’s a faint breeze from the river but it’s warm, like a breath.

She holds up the mask and looks at its worn fabric, the snout falling off, its big, empty eyes.

“What are you doing?” Robert says behind her.

Hannah feels Winnie the Pooh’s head slide through her fingers as if it is pulling away from her. It falls into the water but doesn’t sink. Instead, it bobs up and down with the hole gaping toward them.

Robert leans forward but the water is too far away and the head has already started to drift.

“I dropped it,” Hannah says.

“No kidding.” Robert shakes his head. “Good luck explaining that to Diane.”

“I’m not going back.”

Robert ignores her. “Let’s get out of here,” he says, but then he doesn’t move. Instead, they stand there, quiet, and watch the mask float away with the current until they can’t see it anymore.
THE COLOR OF THUNDER

Dear Tracey: Sage is the color of thunder and your cabin dust stands hard against the inherited scrub of old-lady marrow, so we think like DPs: soap and water. With the ache of mother-talk, the dullness of unavailing fathers, we take on dirt, webs, and cracks between logs. Outside the window, swallows skip pond water, reflection of sky. Winter loiters untroubled, yet the thin green of aspen is palpable. You sweep while I stand at the window considering how to make friends with approaching rain. I find my mother's voice in the faraway resonance of sky: "stay away from windows when there's a storm." It's her fear of lightning. We laugh quickly; thunder is coming, and I tell you about the rage that cloaked my father. Another actor arrives; she is angry with what she finds: a cabin too shy with its charm to quiet her: a storm yet to saddle. Her gloom shakes you into speech. Broom scatters dust balls; you expose memories of a father who promised but never fixed shatterings of your mother's life. Now lightning chases thunder. Cleaner, the cabin still needs the soft touch of second-hand objects. We take the pass to Ennis and for the moment rain abates. An eyebrow of blue arches over the mountains. Somehow, we know, the quality of our lives is good; better than where we came from. Ennis is gentle and the Dairy Queen is enough.
Heading home, we rise above the valley, the expanse chokes us: an irretrievable gasp at something beautiful. In the cabin we wonder what our grandmothers would say; those sisters of the two standard sizes: yours large, soft; mine small and mean; both capable of roofing a house, starting a fire with a stare, sparkling at questions of yesterday. We see them in this cabin; we’ve put them there, displacing present for past, knowledge for fear. Tomorrow, rehearsals begin. You, Madame Audley, have a secret: an undeserved past capable of destroying a future filled with ambitions of wealth and status. Should we, like Madame, hide our past? Not because it threatens our future, but because it haunts our present. You laugh and the last of cabin dirt spills from the pan. Outside, thunder hunts lightning; inside you sing softly, “A woman’s touch, a woman’s touch, never underestimate a woman’s touch.” Here’s to a good performance. Mark

*Documents of turn-of-the-century immigrants were stamped DP for “Displaced People.”*
RUDY AND I WORKED the late shift at the Las Cruces City Library. He trained me on my first night, shelving books. We wheeled a loaded cart to the third floor, where Rudy began putting books on the wrong shelf.

"That's not right," I said. "This is section RN. That book goes in EL."

"This," he said, thumping the book, "is Holbrook's study of the exploitation of the Chinese during the railroad boom of the late 1800s. I'm putting it next to Elie Weisel's Night. They're related subjects."

"But that's wrong," I said. "No one will find it there."

"This library," he said, "needs reorganizing. They've got books in the wrong place. It's all wrong. That's why I took the job. They'll thank me later."

"But they have a system," I said. "The Dewey Decimal System. That's how all libraries are organized."

"Have you seen the second floor?" he said. "Of Wolves and Men is next to an encyclopedia of insects. Wolves are mammals," he said. "Not insects."

The job was temporary, so I protested no further. Instead, I pulled a book from the cart, sat on a footstool, and began flipping through the collected letters of Isak Dinesen. Before Rudy was through reorganizing the third floor, I wept for reasons I did not understand at Dinesen's description of lions sleeping on the grave of Denys Finch-Hatton.

I am prone to weeping. My chest suddenly cracks open, and for no reason at all I begin crying. A doctor in Oregon once told me there was a clinical term for my condition. He couldn't remember at the time, so he told me to make an appointment with the nurse. He would do some research, he said, and tell me the next time he saw me.
At the time, though, I was homeless. It was late autumn, too cold at night anymore to sleep on the beach, so I left town the next day, hitchhiking from a truck stop in Coos Bay with only seventy dollars, a bedroll, and a backpack filled with dirty clothes. In three days, I crossed the knuckled backbone of the Rocky Mountains and reached New Mexico. I washed and shaved in a dank and moldering restroom of a Conoco station in Las Cruces, then walked across the street to a medical clinic, where I sold my plasma for fifty dollars.

The doctor on duty told me I had low blood sugar. “Do you get dizzy spells?” she asked.

She was a big woman, as dumpy and bloodless as an unwashed potato. She had a wandering eye. Looking at both, I couldn’t figure out which one it was. She was a haggish woman, but the type, I could tell, who had transcended her ugliness and operated in the realm of near-saintliness.

“No,” I said. “But sometimes I weep for no reason at all.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” she said.

“There’s a clinical term for it,” I said. “A doctor in Oregon told me.”

“What is it?” she said. She turned her face sideways, deliberately, so I could focus on her good eye. That alone, her act of kindness despite her handicap, almost made me weep.

“I was hoping you could tell me,” I said. “He didn’t know at the time.”

“What were you doing the last time you started crying?” she said.

“I was on a street corner in Santa Fe,” I said. “The sun was setting.”

“And the time before that?” she said.

“I think it was at a bar in Provo,” I said. “Summer Wind was playing on the juke box, so that might not count.”

“The clinical term is unhappiness,” she said. “Which isn’t surprising, living the way you do. Find a wife,” she said. “Have some kids. You won’t have time anymore for unhappiness.”

“Really, Doc,” I said.

She shook her head, as if I had disappointed her. “Come back in a few days,” she said. “I might have an answer for you then.”

I thanked her and left.
The parking lot of the clinic was where I first met Rudy. He wore a grimy jean jacket, faded white at the elbows and cuffs, and oversized Levi's baggy in the seat. He was thin and broad shouldered, looking from behind like a garden rake in clothes. I had noticed him leaving the clinic as I waited in the lobby. The doctor was chastising him in a consolatory way that intimated a history between them. She told him he could come back when he was clean.

"Get help," she said. "You need it."

She watched him shuffle out of the clinic, shaking her head as if she were watching her own sorry son make his way into the world. By the time I left the clinic half an hour later, Rudy had not made it more than thirty yards from the front door. When he heard my footsteps, he turned as if he'd been expecting me.

"Looks like you sold some of the real estate," he said, pointing to the cotton bandage on my forearm.

"Yeah," I said. "You?"

"Nah," he said. "Can't. I went to the well a few times too often."

I didn't know if "well" meant blood or alcohol, and I didn't ask. I found out later, after he died, that it was neither. He was a heroin addict, and I feel at turns amazed and idiotic that I never suspected during the few weeks I knew him. I have invoked almost every memory of him and cannot remember anything strange about his behavior, possibly because almost everything Rudy did was out of the ordinary. He couldn't cross the street without mentioning that Charles Langley, the first man to climb the highest mountains in all seven continents, was struck dead by an automobile while crossing a street in London. And it's true; I looked it up.

I was thirsty for a few beers and company, so I asked Rudy the location of the nearest bar. He pointed across the street to a place called The Brick.

"I'm buying, if you're interested," I said.

"I'm a fish out of water," he said. "Been flopping on dry ground too long."

I couldn't interpret, but he followed when I walked across the street.

The Brick was a converted grain silo with a wrap-around bar
in the center. Booths skirted the outer wall. It was like sitting in a stationary merry-go-round. Or a moving one, I imagined, if you were drunk enough.

After a few pitchers of Leinenkugels, Rudy told me about the temporary job at the library, that a few extra hands were needed to move books from the old building to the newly constructed library down the street. Once all the books were transferred, he said, we would be out of a job.

"Suits me," I said. "I'm not looking for anything permanent."

"Only cowards are," he said.

"Damn straight," I said, though I had no idea what he meant. We were speaking in platitudes, the language of drunks.

We were on our fifth pitcher, when I told Rudy about my parents, how they died in a car accident when I was ten years old. I was asleep in the back seat, so I didn't see the pick-up pull out in front of our car. The force of the collision pinned me against the front seat. When I woke from the initial stupor, I found I was staring into the face of my dead mother. She had spun around in the accident, and her head hung limp over the front seat, as if she'd turned to check on me one last time before dying. I called to her for several minutes, but she never woke, so I finally clamped shut my eyes until paramedics forced the lids open to shine a flashlight into them.

Often, I can predict the severity of an impending hangover while I am still drinking. While telling Rudy my story, I felt nausea already building in my stomach and a hardening, like calcification, spreading throughout my head. Rudy listened, but he didn't say anything, except to shake his head and cluck his tongue every once in a while. I think he wanted to say something, be sympathetic, but he couldn't. That's the way with guys like us, vagabonds; you hook up with one every once in a while, but the conversation stays on the surface, like two boys trying to hide their hard-ons while looking at a girly magazine. I'm sure that's partly why I didn't know about Rudy's addiction; I didn't want to know.

The only other time I told that story was in an essay I wrote for high school English. I described my mother's eyes, how wide and vacant they seemed, as if she'd been surprised by death. She
was staring at my chest, and I remember looking down to see if there was something there. Then I noticed a drop of blood forming on the edge of her nostril. Because she was so still, so pale and vacant, the formation of that drop seemed huge and monumental. It lingered on the edge of her nostril, like an icicle in warm weather, then dropped onto my pant leg. That's when I shut my eyes. In the essay, I described the seeming force and suddenness of that drop hitting me like a jolt of electricity. Her nose continued to bleed and a dark stain blossomed on my pant leg. For months afterward, I kept scratching that spot on my leg, just above the knee, until the memory of it faded.

My English teacher pulled me aside after class and praised my writing. He said it was the best essay he'd ever read in all his years of teaching. He asked a few personal questions, which I did my best to evade, and for the rest of that semester he threw books at me: *Catcher in the Rye*, *Lord of the Flies*, *The Old Man and the Sea*, *Of Mice and Men*. I read the books, usually overnight, and returned them the next day, hoping he wouldn't hand me another. But he always did. I enjoyed most of the books, but his eagerness to befriend me made me uncomfortable, like walking in wet shoes.

I was living with my uncle at the time. He was retired, widowed, and had already raised three kids of his own, so he didn't pay much attention to me. Shortly before he died of a heart attack, I saw him through the kitchen window dancing alone in the garage to imaginary music in his head. Watching him, I felt more alone than he looked. At least he had company, even if it was imaginary. He died shortly after Christmas. I was pulled out of my Algebra class and spent the next few weeks in foster care until a relative could be found to take me in, but I ran away before they could tell me the inevitable—there was no one.

I dined often from dumpsters: discarded pizza slices seasoned with cigarette ashes; blackened bananas soft as baby food; fuzzy, green bread; a block of cheese with the shape and solidity of a bar of soap. I slept in downpours, children's tree forts, unlocked cars; beneath highway overpasses, atop desks in unlocked office buildings, inside cardboard boxes. The closest I came to having a permanent residence was the three months I lived with a woman in Omaha. She showered me with blind, suffocating love until
one day I hitched a ride with a trucker hauling frozen steaks to Colorado Springs.

I don’t remember much of the walk from the bar to Rudy’s motel room, just Rudy tripping in a parking lot. He tried to break his fall, but the parking lot was strewn with pebbles, and his hands slid from beneath him. He rolled to a sitting position and inspected his palms.

“Let’s see,” I said.

He held out his hands, palms up. There were deep gashes. Dirt and pebbles were lodged in the cuts. A shiver ran through me. I knew how painful it was to wash and clean wounds like Rudy’s. It was almost better to leave them dirty, risk infection.

“Stigmata,” Rudy said. “I knew I had a complex.”

“You’ll have to clean that,” I said.

“Watch,” he said. “Tomorrow, I’ll rise from the dead. Mark my words.”

“We almost there?” I said.

“Not sure,” he said. “Some days the walk is longer than others.”

As he struggled to his feet, I saw how thin he was. Malnourished, really. Limbs spindly, spiderlike; knees and elbows as prominent as doorknobs; hair wispy and sparse as comsilk. He stood unsteadily, wiped his hands on his pants, and gazed uncertainly around him.

“This way,” he said, pointing down a side road. “I think.”

As soon we got to his motel room, he fell face down on the bed and was asleep immediately. I grabbed an extra pillow and pulled the blanket from beneath him. He grunted, but didn’t wake. I wrapped myself in the blanket, threw the pillow on the floor, sank to my knees, then dropped. I woke up later that evening, my head buzzing and clanging, and staggered to the bathroom. Rudy was curled around the toilet, his head hanging in the bowl. I asked if he was all right, but he just mumbled, his voice husky either from bile burning his throat or the echo off the porcelain and water. I couldn’t tell which. I had to urinate badly, so I unzipped and peed in the bathroom sink.

As I was shaking off the last drops, Rudy moaned into the
toilet. I asked again if he was all right. He waved me away without lifting his head off the seat.

"Don't drown," I said.

The next day, I was working at the library.

Rudy found me weeping in the aisle. He took Dinesen's book from my hand and glanced at the cover.

"That sad, huh?" he said.

"It hit home," I said.

"Social science is done," he said, pointing to the half-empty cart.

"Literature is next. That's on the fourth floor."

We transferred all the library books in less than a week, and we were out of a job. In hindsight, I should have told Rudy not to be so zealous; we could have stretched the job for another week, at least, but Rudy was asthmatic and was taking a lot of Primatene at the time. The medication made him manic about everything. Especially talking. He was a mile-a-minute talker. I became a selective listener, and learned the art of the well-placed grunt, or nod of the head, indicators that I was still listening.

We were paid at the end of the week: two checks for three hundred and fifty dollars each, which we cashed at a currency exchange. With nothing better to do, we jumped into Rudy's rust-eaten '72 Chevette and headed for the Grateful Dead concert in Taos.

Thirty minutes out of Las Cruces, I had reached saturation point from his talking. He was blathering about the Very Large Array, enormous satellite dishes in the middle of a vast scrub desert in Northern New Mexico. He said the dishes transmitted radio waves encouraging people to buy things they didn't need, like Chia pets or electric can openers.

He said, "It's a government plot to keep the economy afloat. They aren't fooling anyone."

"They fooled me," I said. "I thought they were harmless."

"That's what they want you to think," he said. "Remember when they put fluoride in the water?"

"They still do," I said.

"That's the point," he said, slapping the dashboard. "That's exactly the point."
Then it was dark, and I knew I must have fallen asleep. Rudy was gripping my shoulder. His fingers dug in like talons.

"Durango's in Colorado, right?"

"Uh-huh."

He pointed over his shoulder with his thumb. "We just passed Durango," he said. "Durango?"

I peered out the window. A thumbnail moon was racing alongside us. Mountains like hunched cats crouched in the distance. Even at nighttime, even in complete darkness, you know when you are lost.

"How did we wind up in Durango?" I said. "We're not in Durango anymore," he said. "We passed it an hour ago."

"Where are we?" I said.

"Utah."

"Utah?"

"Utah," he said, nodding his head.

"Pull over," I said.

"Why?"

"Do it."

He released the gas and sidled to the shoulder. By sheer coincidence, we came to a slow, rolling stop in front of a billboard welcoming us to Moab. Our headlights gave birth to a cartoon cowboy riding a buckin' bronco.

"How long was I asleep?"

"Two... three... four hours," he said.

"We're at least five hundred miles from Taos," I said.

"We don't want to go there anyway," he said.

"We don't?"

"Hippies," he said. "They're all wiggy. They talk the strangest shit."

We slept six hours at the threshold of Moab. I crawled into the backseat; Rudy slept in the front with his head on the armrest and his feet dangling out the passenger window. At dawn, we clambered out of the car onto the shoulder of the highway. Rudy stretched, bones popping, and yawned.

He took a few steps forward, and bent nearly double. I thought he was going to throw up until I saw something flop-
ping at his feet. As I approached, I saw it was a bird with a broken wing. Frightened by our presence, it flapped feebly, moving only in pitiful circles on the ground. Rudy stepped away into the ditch and returned carrying a large rock. He didn’t hesitate. He brought the rock straight down on the bird. I was shocked. I gazed at him curiously, marveling at his composure. He seemed the type who might cry if he stepped on a bug. He noticed me staring at him.

“It wouldn’t have survived,” he explained.

“Probably not,” I said.

“It was suffering,” he said.

“Probably,” I said.

He looked down at the dead bird. Its broken wing was visible beneath the rock. It had been a clean shot. Quick and merciful.

“I did the right thing,” he said.

“You did,” I assured him.

We walked back to the truck. He turned the engine and pulled onto the highway. We scanned the barren landscape of one of the least populated states in the lower forty-eight. The sparseness of the land plucked at chords in my solar plexus, but eeriness took hold of Rudy. He claimed he heard whispers, tendrils of voices, exhaling from the scrub. He seemed genuinely frightened. His eyes were glazed and distended, like the eyes I once saw on a golden retriever just before it went into an epileptic fit. I suggested driving to Montana, where I worked as a grocery clerk in Missoula a few years back. Rudy agreed heartily.

“I need mountains,” he said. “They watch over me.”

Ten hours later, we crossed the Continental Divide a second time near Butte. “How can we cross the Divide twice?” Rudy said. “If there’s a line dividing the country in two, how can you cross it twice going the same direction? That defies all logic,” he said.

Rudy rambled on and I adopted a role that suited both of us: I was silent. I was good at being silent.

Years later, I was watching a reporter interview a Buddhist monk on television, and the monk said something that made sense of Rudy for me; he explained the difference between big mind and little mind.
"Big mind," the monk said, "is the infant state, when nothing had a name, and when one and two could equal zero."

"How?" the reporter said.

"If you give me one apple, and I eat it," the monk said, "and if later you give me two apples and I eat them, what is left?"

Hours later, the highway spilled us into Missoula. Though I had left town only a few years back, I thought it was for good, and I was slightly unnerved to see nothing had changed in my absence. I believe most of us, when we leave a place, secretly desire that a large void be left in our wake.

"Where to?" Rudy said. "I'm Tonto here. I'm just a side-kick."

"Red's Bar," I said.

"Good idea, kimosabe. Right now, I could easily lead a horse to drink."

We drank 18-ounce Schaefers for a dollar and shot pool for about an hour before the lights winked once, twice, thrice, then went out finally with an audible click, as if great machinery had been unplugged on just the other side of the wall. The darkness was complete, and people bumped into one another until eyes adjusted.

Rudy said, "I can't see a damn thing. My hand is in front of my face, and I can't see it."

"What do you suppose happened?" I said.

"A bird sat on the wrong wire?" he said. "A car wrapped itself around a pole? Someone threw the wrong switch at the plant? Who knows?"

"Where's the door?" I said.

"Behind us."

I turned and saw a rectangle of light squeezing through the cracks around the door. It looked like a closet where they kept the stuff of stars.

"Let's go," I said.

We stumbled through the dark bar and out into a world transformed. Snow was falling thick like goose down and we made reluctant tracks through an inch of virgin snow. The cobbled road gave way to a paved street that led us into downtown Missoula. We stood at the crossroads of Foster and Main, and stared
down the long street with no lights visible and the dark shapes of people milling about. The sky was like a living thing, palpable and untamed, no longer held at bay by the lights of the city, and I knew how the first pioneers must have felt stepping tentatively into an untrammeled world. When the clouds broke momentarily overhead, I saw the stars throbbing and pulsing brightly like the great hot suns they were.

"The boom's been lowered," Rudy said. "It's the end of the world."

"Don't get melodramatic," I said.

"Who's getting melodramatic?"

Suddenly, he clutched his chest, staggered backwards, then sat in the snow.

"Are you all right?" I said.

He nodded and said, "Yeah... Sure... Fine."

Then he fell on his side.

"Get up," I said.

There was a look of serenity on his face.

"Cut it out," I said.

The words came weak and half-choked. I knew without knowing. There is a look in the eyes, like a candle flame snuffed in a darkened room that belongs only to the dead.

Suddenly, a blaze of light burst forth from a nearby coffee shop, illuminating our tragedy. My attention was diverted from Rudy momentarily as stoplights flared in succession down Main Street. There was an audible click again, just as when the lights went out, and I heard a short, muffled revving of machinery before it settled into a hum and then disappeared into a medley of other barely audible noises. The blackout was over.

When I knelt over Rudy, I saw flakes had gathered on his face. I reached out and brushed them off, but the flakes continued to gather in the heavy snowfall, clinging thickly to his eyelashes, so I grabbed him by the armpits and dragged him beneath the awning of the coffee shop. Just then, a couple walked out, and the rest happened quickly.

An ambulance arrived, its peacock lights flaring, and the paramedics moved with speed and alacrity until resuscitation was deemed impossible. Then police officers descended and produced a hypodermic needle and an empty vial from Rudy's coat.
pocket. You could tell by their faces that it explained everything
to them.

There had been signs, if I had been looking. He'd been sweaty
all day, complaining of nausea. Every once in a while, he'd throw
his arms around himself, squeeze, as if to keep his insides from
falling out of an imaginary hole in his gut.

An officer stepped forward. He was young, burly, flat-topped.
I imagined him as a linebacker breaking from the huddle.
"You knew him?" he said to me.
"No."
"People over there said you knew him." He pointed to the
coffee shop couple huddled in their coats.
"He was standing next to me," I said. "Waiting to cross the
street."
"You never met him before?"
"I don't know him," I said.

He scrutinized me. Even if I had been telling the truth, I
would have squirmed. His self-confidence withered me. There
was a thick buffer of flesh and muscle between us, all his.
"Mind if I search you?" he said.

He was going to do it anyway, I knew. If I refused, that
would make him even more suspicious. I imagined him telling
me to stay put, then walking away to consult his colleagues. They
would huddle, nod heads, look my way every once in a while to
keep me squirming, then return to tell me I was under arrest for
suspicion of something-or other. So I beat him to the punch.
"No," I said. "I have nothing to hide."

He gripped my upper arm, his fingers pinching into the un­
derbelly of my biceps, and led me to the nearest squad car.
"Hands behind your head," he said.

He searched my pockets first, then patted me down. I was
staring over the hood of the squad car, looking into a window
display of a mechanical Mickey Mouse in a red winter coat and
hat. Mickey was slowly rolling a fake snowball back and forth,
endlessly. The thought of him forever rolling that snowball, that
his snowman would never be complete, almost made me weep.
"You can put your hands down."

The police officer was standing beside me, hands on his hips.
"You knew him," he said, "didn't ya?"
I said I didn't, that I was frightened, that I just wanted to be left alone.

The officer looked down at his shoes. "I don't suppose you got I.D.," he said.

I shook my head. "My name's Christopher Browning," I said. "I suppose you don't have an address, either," he said.

"Pittsburgh," I said.

"It's almost December, Mr. Browning," the officer said. "It's going to get quite cold here soon. Too cold to be spending nights outdoors."

I nodded my head.

"I suggest you head south," he said. "California's nice this time of the year. So's Arizona and New Mexico. There's deserts out there."

"Yes, there is," I said. "I've seen them."

"Why don't you go there, then," he said.

"I will," I said. "I'll leave tonight."

Rudy's Chevette became my home for the next few years. He would have wanted me to have it. I didn't have room in me to mourn him. Instead, I fixed on the serene look as he died. It seemed a peaceful death.

I drove all over the West, migrating with the seasons. The highways became as familiar to me as the streets of my boyhood home. After a while, though, I had skipped too many court dates in most states, mainly for being an unlicensed and uninsured motorist, and I was finally confined to New Mexico, where I hadn't been discovered yet. Just south of Truth or Consequences, the Chevette finally died on me. A small oil leak turned into a gusher and the engine froze. I made sure there was nothing I could do and then left the car at the side of the road, reluctantly. I felt like I was leaving a fallen comrade behind. As I walked away, I turned several times, watching as it was consumed by heat ghosts shimmering off the pavement.

I made my way south, to Las Cruces, where Rudy and I met. I wandered the streets, the sun leaning over me, weak from hunger because I hadn't eaten in a few days. Reflected sun off the sand and pavement sliced into my narrowed eyes, making me stagger, so I lay down in an arroyo, in the shade of an acacia. I slept so deeply it could have been days later when I woke with
a jerk. Oblivion can be delicious. I woke knowing only what it meant to be alive. Then the names of things came back to me in rapid succession, like falling dominoes. Sky. Cloud. Sand. Cactus. Mountain. I felt like a child again, unpolluted by definitions and classifications. The world suddenly seemed immense, and I just a barely visible speck on its surface. I imagined the earth hurtling through the cosmos, spinning on its axis at thousands of miles per hour, and so I flattened myself against the ground beneath me for fear I might tumble off into space. This fear took on immense proportions the longer I lay there.

I struggled to my feet and staggered through the streets of Las Cruces. I made a few wrong turns, but eventually I found the library. No one seemed to notice me as I walked through the front doors to the elevator. I pushed the button for the third floor.

It was there. In section RN. Holbrook’s study of the Chinese during the railroad boom of the late 1800s. Next to Elie Wiesel’s Night. No one had discovered yet that it was misplaced. I pulled the book from the shelf, giggling like a madman. I sat on a footstool and hugged the book to my chest. I felt like I held proof of my existence.

I set the book on my knees and peeled back the cover. There were pictures inside, faded tintypes of Chinese laboring in the desert. One photograph was of an orphaned Chinese water boy. He shouldered a yoke with buckets hooked to each end. Another was of an old man, humpbacked, bent nearly double from years of hard labor. Since he was so low to the ground already, the caption said, he worked along the rails, holding spikes in place so other workers could hammer them into the ground. I flipped through the photographs, engrossed, until a tear splashed onto one of the pages.

The same doctor still worked at the clinic. I demanded that she remember me. She squinted. I had forgotten about her wandering eye; one settled on me, while the other focused beyond my shoulder. I turned abruptly, fearing that a police officer or an orderly might be standing behind me.

“I was here a few years ago,” I said. “I sold my blood.”

“This is a blood clinic,” she said, placing both hands on her hips.

“I weep,” I said. “For no reason at all. Don’t you remember?”
She cocked her head to one side. “Sinatra?” she said.
“Yes.” I shouted. I understood how lunatic I appeared, but I
couldn’t control myself.
“Of course, I remember.”
“What is it?” I said, getting ahead of myself.
“What’s what?” she said.
“Why do I cry?”
She shook her head pitifully. “Don’t you get it?” she said.
I gripped her hand in both of mine. She didn’t flinch. “Tell me,”
I implored.
“You’re unhappy,” she said, and she fixed the same expression
on me that she gave Rudy years ago. I was her own sorry son
fumbling through the world. The entire weight of my expecta-
tion deflated, and I felt myself sag, diminish.
“There is no clinical term for it,” she said.
The doctor placed a tender hand on my shoulder and bent to
look me in the eyes.
“What happened to you?” she said.
This is me crawling back, child of cold linoleum and haystacks.
By headlight, my father hurled your bales
To buy the carburetor and gas as my mother bulged.

You were never the perfect bride—
Too often you tasted of barn loft cider.
Too often your pruning lessened the seasonal gods.

I went to church every Sunday for you,
Waking to the smell of stove fire in my hair.

City where the white Ford stalled,
City of children reaching for cereal boxes from shopping carts,
City of forked roads,

There is a rental house lodged in my heart, a shepherd
On a short tether, sheets hovering over lawns of lopped
dandelions—
Their milky stalks.

In your lap I memorized the scripture of my hands
And learned to kick the dog.

You are the myth left behind:
A green suitcase, the Siamese slinking into my crib,
The .45 hidden between mattresses.

From the porch an old woman reinvents the lie to marry you off
As a girl in the distance cries behind laundry lines.
In your prodigal orchards there are no birds.

The people migrate from your acred hands
In rusted trucks headed north.
Hold us fast in your hands:
with our connections
to the underground,
the square root of water,
we'll pull you to the next life.
Fish tub. Eel trap.
Someone hid silkworm eggs
in our belly:
they slept all the way from China
to Constantinople.
Only siblings left behind
to comfort Asia.
Ladle, chopstick, flute.
Versatile, yes,
but we know
when to hold back.
We'll give you flowers—
just wait:
a hundred years or so.
Sweeping the continent
like a hungry lover.
Then we linger, slow,
drink our dusk,
while children stretch
their necks
towards the moon.
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