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LUCKY HUMAN

A COLLECTION OF STORIES

by

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Lucky Human

Last Thursday I hot glued twenty-four plastic dinosaurs to the inside of the hollow belly of a Brigitte maternity-mannequin. I bought the dinosaurs, spiky little things, greens and browns, on my way to work, at the dollar store up the block from Schneitz.

On the first half of my lunch break I went back to the dollar store and bought one vine of fake green ivy and a charm bracelet from a spinny-rack next to the register. The bracelet was cheap metal, the same quality jewelry my mom used to give me for birthdays, and inexplicably dangling from its loops were tiny charms made to look like tiny bones: a femur, a skull, a rib. Those tiny bones were perfect for my project in Brigitte’s belly. They were necessary. They were necessary even if the old bitch behind the counter crazy-eyed me when I placed the bracelet on my pile.

After that I stopped at the sandbox in Rosebud Park and poured about half the sand out of some kid’s little red pail into my plastic dollar store bag. Seriously eighty percent or better of the landmarks and streets in Pasadena have rose somewhere in the title. Hell, that’s about all I knew about Pasadena before I got here—the Rose Parade.

When I was little, back in Terry, Montana, I used to watch it on TV. I didn’t give a crap about the football game, but those floats: man those things are something. Every inch of them, whether they’re moving or cartoon characters or whatnot, all of them has to be plant-life. Doesn’t matter if it’s wheat or seaweed, it has to be something that was
growing. Last year, for days after the parade, I could still smell all of that in the air. Almost like a greenhouse, earthy, but maybe a little rotten.

I made it back to Schneitz with thirty-six minutes remaining on my break. Schneitz, the whole place, smells like rubber cement. Like the thickest, strongest smelling rubber cement from the back of the art room in gradeschool. That’s the fiberglass. And all over the floor are the fiberglass trimmings, thin and wispy, like sparkling hay. I crunched through them to my station, and put the bag in my bottom drawer. Then I ate most of an ice-cream sandwich from the Good Humor machine in the break room before Mitzy, the head sales rep, motioned me to the supply closet. Inside, she pressed her back to a thin space of wall between high shelves of pink, vaguely shaped heads still in need of detail work. She pulled me to her, shoved my hand up under her businessy black skirt. This is Mitzy’s idea of exhibitionism: doing it in front of half-formed mannequin heads.

She also has ideas about what she should say. What I should say.

That day she said, all breathy, her face in my neck. “Oh, gawd, Lauren. Do we even have enough time?”

“I think so,” I said, as she yanked at my t-shirt. It got stuck on my ears and I had to finish the job while she undid my bra.

“Oh, we’re so bad!” She squealed like a thirties chorus-girl, like her name. She ran her tongue to my belly button and then back up. She fluttered her eyelids when I moved my fingers. I could just see them flit, in the dark of the closet. I could feel them on my face. I found the right rhythm with my hand, the right speed and pressure, and let her tongue flick at the ground up ice-cream sandwich bits in my molars while I thought of
what was left to do in Brigitte’s stomach. Mitzy doesn’t squeal when she comes, she whimper.

When she’s like that, beneath my hand or mouth, it’s the only time I’m not at all afraid of her.

Mitzy left the closet first—she always does. Those kinds of details, arrangements, those are what do it for her. She smoothed at her skirt and licked my cheek, called me kiddo, and clip-clopped her boots up the stairs, to the executive offices.

I went back to my station. And there, behind three metal partitions, on my worktable with its drawers of metal instruments and tools, I finished impregnating Brigitte with a diorama of Klauson’s Dinosaur Ranch.

A white mask elasticized over my mouth, I spray-glued the sand between the dinosaurs, cursing that I, in my excitement, had already attached them that morning. I clustered clumps of ivy, stuck them down like range-bushes—Juniper or Current. I shredded some of the leaves, dipped them in grey-blue tint number 4, and turned them into sagebrush. Finally, I broke the bones from the bracelet, they came easily, and glued them, half buried, amongst the bushes and sand. I did all of this in memory of my childhood war with Irene Klauson.

Irene’s parents had a big cattle ranch near Terry. Mr. and Mrs. Klauson were perpetually wind-whipped and rugged. If you can call people scratchy, like burlap, that’s how I’d put it. They sometimes bought beef jerky or laundry detergent at my mom’s store: Parish Street Grocery.

Irene and I tied for top grades in first thru sixth. On the Presidential Fitness Tests she beat me at chin-ups and the long-jump and I killed her on push-ups, sit-ups, and the fifty-yard dash.
She dared me to dive from the old Milwaukee Railroad bridge. I did, and split my head against a car engine sunk into the black mud of the river. I dared her to saw down the Yield sign from Mason Street—one of the last signs with a wooden base. She did. Then she had to let me keep it. Because there was no way of getting it back to her ranch and I lived in town, in a little green house behind our store. Once, up in her hayloft, she dared me to kiss her. I did, and even pushed her to her back, climbed on top of her there in the sweet stink of hay. Maybe Irene saw it as just another dare—something to beat me at. I didn’t see it that way. On second thought, I don’t think Irene saw it that way, either.

Irene Klauson won our war in the spring of sixth grade. She came to school with the kind of smile you see kids wearing in peanut-butter commercials. She and her dad had been out building on their new coral and branding area. Irene said she was the one working the shovel when they first found it. A bone. A fossil. Something big. Within weeks *Jurassic Park* type scientists, “paleontologists,” Irene would remind us, sounding like our fucking science book, had swarmed all over the Klauson’s Cattle Ranch. The paper called it, “A hot bed for specimen recovery.” “A gold mine.” “A treasure trove.”

Before her newly-refined parents sent her to Saybrook Academy in Connecticut, Irene had me out to her place one last time. There were white tents set-up everywhere, a circus of scientists and also some earthy, dirty, long-haired types, pick, pick, picking in giant trenches, treating the dirt as if it was fragile, like it wasn’t the same dirt Irene and I used to kick at, spit on, pee on behind the barn.

Irene talked like the movies. “They’ve never found a hadrosaur in this area before. Not one this complete.”
“Wow.” I said. I wanted to ask her to race me to the head-scientist’s monstrous motor-home and then to sneak inside, pretend to be explorers. Motor homes were cool. But I sensed that Irene wouldn’t think that kind of activity was okay, anymore. Not in hadrosaur country. So I didn’t.

“My parents are building a visitor’s center and museum. And a gift shop.” She actually swept her hand out over the land. “Can you believe that? They might even name something after me.”

“The Ireneosaur?” I was doubtful.

“They’ll make it sound more professional than that, Lauren. You don’t really understand any of this.”

I only saw Irene once after that. When I was a junior. She was home from her prep-school for Christmas break. I had been sneaking off with Haley Green during study hall—up to the top row of the auditorium, sometimes to the control room, if somebody had left it open. Irene had come to talk to the earth science classes about things she was apparently now an expert on. Haley and I were headed back to class, our faces flushed, skin sticky. We rounded a corner and I actually ran into Irene, chest to chest. She was taller, but so was I. She wore courderoys and a polo shirt, a sweater honest-to-god tied around her neck, little soft-brown loafers that even looked expensive. I was in a t-shirt from the previous year’s state track meet and my warm-up pants.

I allowed her one half-smile, superior, smug, shiny pink lip-gloss, and while she was folding her arms across her chest, preparing to orate, I grabbed Haley Green and frenched her in the hallway, right across from the attendance office. Then I took her hand and pulled us from Irene, never looking to her face. Haley Green jerked away from me
by the time we rounded the corner, and were thankfully out of Irene’s sight. And Haley Green was pissed at me for the rest of the year. I’m pretty sure she’s the one who got some of the FFA boys to nominate me for King of Rodeo Days. But it was worth it to have that moment. Sometimes I wonder if Irene Klauson is now the big scientist with the big motor-home.

While the stomach scene dried, I did my real work, my paycheck-earning work. Mitzy had me promoted a couple of months ago. Right after she’d started letting me make her outside the factory—though it doesn’t thrill her in the same way. They moved me from working with Roger on hands and feet to my own station in maternity. Now I’m not just running errands or attaching fingers to palms. Now I’m in charge of the full assembly and initial two fiberglass sprayings of one Brigitte per day. Every morning the metal bins next to my station hold hands and feet, arms and legs, a head and neck, back and butt, and a busty chest on down to one huge, pregnant, half-hollow belly. It’s up to me to make this a whole person before the end of my eight-hour shift. And I’m good at Brigitte. Good enough so that I always have time to spare. So now I’ve started filling all those pregnant bellies. Resting on the navel, they look like halves of malformed plastic Easter eggs, waiting to be filled.

I hooked on my plastic, vampire-type-cloak. I assembled the various parts of Brigitte into a whole. My fingers making tiny adjustments, attaching the interlocking pieces just so. One of the attachments forces me to spend a lot of time with my hands in Brigitte’s crotch—and I marvel at the amount of time I spend at work, in general, with my hand in that area. Even with the dinosaurs, I completed my mannequin before two
other maternity-stations. Within a couple days Brigitte would be on her way to some fancy store, all knocked up with my childhood drama.

I wasn’t always filling stomachs. I didn’t even have the opportunity when I first started at Schenitz’s, working with Roger. Back then I had just been slipping notes inside the fingers. I block printed messages on tiny paper scrolls and shoved them in before the hands were assembled and sealed with fiberglass. When dried, one hard snap could crack the finger at the knuckle, and there would be my scroll, just like in a fortune cookie. Difference is, nobody was finishing a greasy meal of lo mein for my notes, and Confucious I’m not. I wrote stuff like: **HELP! TRAPPED IN LOWER INTESTINE. SEND PRETZELS.** And, **I WOULDN’T MOVE IF I WERE YOU. YOU HAVE NOW TRIGGERED THE LASER IN THE MANNEQUIN’S RIGHT EYE AND IT HAS ZER0ED IN ON YOUR NOSE-TIP.** I wrote that one after Mitzy rented some spy vs spy movie that I only saw glimpses of when she would stop sucking my ears or riding my pelvis bone long enough to slurp straight Grand Marnier from the last clean glass in her house: one of her son’s sippy cups. But I caught the laser part.

If I were working at Lucky Human, or one of those other big mannequin factories in China, I wouldn’t have been able to stuff fingers at all. Those places pop out bodies on assembly lines just like they’re Happy Meal Toys. Or Jappy Meal Toys, like my brother Josh called them last time I saw him—even after I’d reminded him that China and Japan aren’t the same place.

He was home on leave and I was still in Montana, still clocking hours at the store, at our church. I’d confessed to him how I’d been e-mailing this guy I met online, on QTR, “Quuer Teen Rerources.” How this guy, whose online name was Pappa-Pink,
but who turned out to be just Roger, had said he felt sorry for me—for my situation—for trying to be a queer all the way out there in Montana. How he had told me that if I could just get myself to Pasadena he could hook me up with a job—a job in a mannequin factory, of all places.

Josh didn’t think I would ever do it. He thought Papa-Pink was probably some twelve year-old fucking around, and that nothing was ever so simple as running away to Pasadena. “If you need somewhere to go you could always sign up for Uncle Sam, Lauren,” he’d told me. “If you could just keep your mouth shut about being a goddam dyke. Most of those military chicks are, anyway.” He’d said goddam, but like he was proud. Like I’d accomplished something since he’d gone away. When I got down here I sent him a postcard—one with a picture of a bunch of tanned old naked people on it—but I haven’t heard back from him yet.

Hands are just one of the ways to spot a cheap mannequin. Usually there’s a thumb jutting out and the rest of the fingers are formed together, only slight ridges to distinguish them: a mit of digits. There’s no sculpting, no art, coming from a big place like Lucky Human. Fiberglass is poured into molds, sanded, painted, and off to your local shit-box discount clothing store at $249 a pop. Places like where I shop for jeans and sweatshirts and I won’t buy anything if it’s displayed on one of those imposters.

At Schneitz we make our mannequins for all the big stores up in Hollywood or in New York. The yellow shipping labels on the crates read Rodeo Drive and Fifth Ave in curly script. Our girls start at $1000, for a Sasha, with an included rod and stand, and
work all the way up to Brigitte, who appears seven-months pregnant, can be adjusted to a sitting position, and costs three of my paychecks, or $2700.

I once left a note in the index finger of a Brigitte that read: I'VE DECIDED TO KEEP MY BABY, THOUGH I STILL DON'T KNOW WHO THE FATHER IS. We sent a poseable Rex to the same store, Rex-with-the-pecs, I call him, and he had the answer in his thumb. I'M THE FATHER. BUT IT WAS ALL A DRUNKEN MISTAKE. I'M IN LOVE WITH BEAU. Beau is the mannequin stores use for displaying jockey-briefs; and, as Roger says, he doesn’t need any extra padding.

Mitzy likes to remind me just how lucky I am that Roger wasn’t some twelve year old fucking around, or worse yet, some fifty-two year-old breeder hoping to fuck around. Roger the rainbow-covered-hero. Before leaving Chubbuck I arranged to meet him at the bar he suggested: Aunt Judy’s. He explained to me all about Aunt Judy Garland once I arrived. That I’d only seen The Wizard of Oz twice was viewed as a sacrilege. I had been off the Greyhound for all of six hours. Had rented my little studio from Mrs. Mei, paid for three months right up front, with the money I’d stolen from the cash register in mom’s store. I took all the money. I even emptied out the pennies. And then I left mom up on the roof.

She was changing the words on the big, light-up sign—a new Bible verse, a new message from God in plastic red and black mismatched letters. “Corinthians 6:9-10: "Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do NOT be deceived!” I kicked out the ladder she’d used to climb up there and drove her blue station wagon to the bus station.
While I’m spraying fiberglass, my heady woozy with the chemicals, I like to think of her up by that sign, in the August blaze, the cheap black roofing melting into tar pits all around her. I like to think of how her face stretched into a mask when she heard the metal ladder crash down against the cement of the parking lot. How she’d peered over the edge at me, her wide frame in polka dots spotting out the sun. How she’d raised her fist to the sky, to God, to shout my sins out across the town, as I calmly rolled down the window, and drove away slowly, savoring the moment.

At Aunt Judy’s, that first night in Pasadena, I heard Roger yoo-hoo me over to his corner booth before my eyes had even adjusted to the smoky dark: all of it blueish and thick. At first I couldn’t even make out what he looked like, but I could tell there was someone with him, the outline of another head in his booth. Somebody was playing Linda Ronstadt on the jukebox, and I thought about that as I made my way to them. Here I was in my first real live gay bar and this album my mom played again and again is the soundtrack.

Roger, who was just what he’d said he would be—silver haired, chiseled jaw, tallish—popped from the booth, kissed both of my cheeks, and then took my hand and pulled me back to the red vinyl seat with him. “I knew it was you,” he said, still holding my hand. “We’ve been watching the door. I called it the minute you walked in. You’re much too wholesome for lower California. She’s very Jodie Foster in Nell, right Mitzy?”

The woman with him, Mitzy, nodded, “Very Jodie Foster,” she said. She was all black business suit and the sunglasses perched on her head were gigantic, like some sort of cap.
I was conscious of my long legs in jeans, my worn sneakers: all of me awkward and gangly. I became less conscious the more drinks Mitzy bought me, drinks I’d never heard of: Mojitos, Alabama Slammers, Stoli-Van-Gingers. While Roger asked the usual questions about my trip, Mitzy smiled like a panther and swirled her finger in her drink and sucked at it. I now recognize this action as Mitzy’s strained portrayal of “sexy.” But her red lipstick made her lips bloody and I thought of her as gnawing on her finger bone, on flesh. Her eyes would not leave my face. I was embarrassed. I didn’t know what to do with her attention. How to maneuver within it.

Thankfully Roger didn’t leave much open air for me to fill with conversation—he only asked questions that vindicated him as my savior. He is the first textbook queer I’d ever met. Then I met his friends: all fifty-something men with chiseled faces, silver hair, a vaguely-accented manner of speech—the words sound European, old-Hollywood, gay. He is at once bored by, and well versed in, every topic. He started designing mannequins with the original Mr. Schneitz in the late-sixties, when Twiggy was the scene. He owns a good chunk of the company, but he stays in his booth, crafting flawless hands and feet.

Roger cooed as I painted my monstrous mother for them: the forced interventions, the forced four-hour church sessions, my mother’s slip showing as she rolled and jerked in the aisle next to our pew. All those arranged dates with horny boys after the service finally let out, the last sugar cookie eaten, the coffee urns cleaned and stacked in the church kitchen. Roger cheered, actually clapped, when I recounted my escape just one day previous—my roof-bound mother.

It was then that he pushed his palms onto the table top. The matter settled. “Well you’ll start tomorrow, sweetie, it’s all arranged. You’ll come and work with us, it’ll be a
gas. You’ll be my little apprentice.” He yoo-hooed Mitzy, who still had me in her eye-
grip. “We’re all set to make that happen, Mitz. Yes?”

“Of course,” she said in a voice so assured I didn’t question any of it. She then
led me to the dance floor, a move I hadn’t anticipated, and we remained there, or pressed
together near the bathroom, Mitzy all tongue, until closing.

As promised, I started my job at Schenitz the next day. Mitzy met me at the gate,
did all my paperwork, she even took the picture for my ID badge. She was as cool and
pressed as the night before and I was rumpled, my clothes in the shape of my duffel bag,
my head throbbing the effects of my second hangover ever. That lunch was our first in
the supply closet. After fumbling with all those steak-fed Montana girls with freckled
arms and raspberry lip-gloss, I decided I could need someone like Mitzy for awhile. I
decided I could be used by someone like Mitzy for awhile.

Dinosaur Brigitte stood glistening with her next to final coating. Rocco on the
night shift would spray her once more, and then trim her, dry her, and crate her. I thought
of her future as I cleaned up my station. Maybe they would fit her in some maternity-
evening-dress for society wives. Maybe Irene Klauson would buy a dress displayed on
her—a strappy thing to accentuate the non-pregnant parts: a bony clavicle, slender wrists,
legs sprouting from heels. Maybe Irene’s husband would buy it for her, because certainly
Irene got married to a man. They would need the dress for a fundraiser’s dinner or some
research award ceremony. Maybe Mister Irene Klauson would wait patiently in the little
boutique, his pregnant wife struggling in the dressing room. He would stand right next to
Dinosaur-Brigitte and glance over the outline of her hard belly, a mound beneath the
dress, and never guess what was inside, wouldn’t understand it even if he leaned too hard on the stand and pushed the whole thing over and the stomach smashed open on the cool stone tile of the little boutique, and the dinosaurs spilled around him.

My station organized, the extra sand stuffed into my backpack, I headed to the exit to sign-out. At the guard booth the guy on duty, a new guy, his white shirt tight over his chest, told me I was to report to Ms. Krieg’s office before leaving the premises. He said premises like a cop-show rerun.

Ms. Mitzy Krieg has two walls of windows in her corner office. Her desk is cluttered with pictures of baby Jack—all of them professionally shot, or extremely professional looking. Mitzy and Roger had Jack as a kind of “social experiment.”

Roger had told me about it that very first night at Aunt Judy’s. “We did it the old fashioned way. I actually banged Mitzy. I’m the only guy that can say that. And I don’t say it very often, cause Mitzy’s the one likes to do the banging.”

They share Jack, every other week. He is a handsome baby, handsome and distinguished in a way I’ve never seen a baby look before. His features are suited for old black and white movies. I have heard him cry only twice. He wears baby designer clothing Mitzy gets for free, from clients. At one he was using sign language. Now, at two and a half, he speaks a little Italian, a little Yiddish, a lot of English.

Mitzy’s brushed-metal door was shut, typical Mitzy, so I rapped lightly with the tops of my knuckles. I was tired. I wanted to go to my little one-room and eat Chinese food from the place downstairs and watch videos from my youth, like The Goonies. I did not want to do it on Mitzy’s desk, like we had a couple of times before, a spilled canister of paperclips indenting my right butt-cheek. I did not want to change into something
she’d bought me, black pants, a tight shirt of stretchy material, and go out to dinner at a
trendy West-Hollywood restaurant. Mitzy showing me off and smiling with too many
teeth.

But Mitzy didn’t open the door in her breathy, flushed-for-sex way. She was
business-Mitzy. She asked me to sit down in one of the big red chairs that faced her
desk. Roger was already seated in the other. He looked highly amused: his eyebrows
raised, a smirk hidden only partially behind his hand.

Mitzy waited for me to sit and then walked behind her desk to her massive, high-
backed swivel chair. She pushed her elbows to her desk top and clasped her hands
together, an arm teepee in front of her. “Let’s get to it, Lauren. This morning I had an
interesting conversation with a sales rep from Lucky Human. In Shenzhen. China.”
She shook her head at Roger. “These guys speak impeccable English. It’s absurd how
good their language skills are and I’m struggling to even pronounce his name.”

She turned back to me. “Anyway, you know we’ve purchased a piece of their
factory—it’s a kind of partnership. We’re looking to get in on the high-end mannequin
market in China. All of Asia, really. The Italians are hoarding it now.” She clicked her
tongue against the roof of her mouth. “So we’re teaching these guys how to do it with
some art, not like Barbie Dolls.”

She lowered the arm teepee, pushed her palms into her desktop, like Roger
that first night at Aunt Judy’s. “The point is, Lauren, we’ve sent over one of each of our
categories—for them to study and whatnot. And a few weeks ago we sent over a Brigitte,
one of your Brigitte’s. And they took it apart, to study it, and this guy, today on the
phone, Mr. Li-Go or whatever, said there was all sorts of crap glued to the inside of her
stomach. Just, I don’t know, he said pages from the Bible and quotes all high-lighted and he said mini-bottles of liquor; just all kinds of shit in there.”

It was my first knock-up—I called her Bible Brigitte. It was for my mother, for her beliefs, however misguided, however I’d muddled her unwavering faith into the evil with which I now view it. My mother, who had had me on her own, when my father had left her pregnant with me, little Josh at her feet, while he ran off with a traveling ministry, called by the word. And she had turned, of all things, to the same word, to her faith, for guidance. She had tried, and failed, in the eyes of our church, to instill in me the same faith. I put one quote in Brigitte’s stomach on top of all of the others, I printed it in large letters and then painted them, layer after layer, until those words were raised up, 3-D:

Proverbs, Chapter 22, verse 6, “Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it.”

That was just one of the passages that had failed my mother, just as I’d failed her. Had failed her when she caught me in my room with Haley Green, then Amber Arkiss. Had failed her when I wouldn’t dress in the long skirts she’d sewed for me, when I wouldn’t re-stock the Christian pamphlets she kept in a spinny-rack by the counter. Amongst the verse I’d glued the evidence of my sinful life—liquor bottles, a book of matches from Aunt Judy’s, a cotton ball smeared with pink, leftover from when I’d wiped clean Mitzy’s toenail polish, a smattering of dried petals from my very first Rose Parade.

Mitzy was waiting for my answer. Again she asked, “So what’s all this about, Lauren? I mean I cleared it up on the phone, I think, but what’s going on here? Have you been filling all our Brigitte’s with Bible verses? Is this a cry for help?” She chuckled at this, and looked to Roger to join her.
He didn’t. He patted the arm of my chair, still smiling—hoping to get in on the joke. “C’mon, kiddo. What’s the big secret?” he asked.

I wedged my lower lip between my teeth and fixed Mitzy in my stare. In that moment I hated Mitzy even more than I feared her. I hated her more than I wanted so desperately to understand her—her big L.A-lesbian existence. “You said the guy from Lucky Human called this morning?” I asked.

“Yes, first thing.” She was waiting for the point, the big conclusion.

“So you knew all this before you had me work you off in the supply closet? I just want to be clear.” I pressed down into the arms of my chair and raised myself to my feet.

Roger choked a laugh, tried to swallow it, and then let it out anyway.

Mitzy didn’t respond until I was already at the big metal door, gripping the handle. “Those are separate issues, Lauren. They don’t have a thing to do with one another.”

“Okay. I just wanted to get the timing down,” I said, opening the door, the thick smell of fiberglass wafting over me.

“We need to talk more about this. I smoothed it over for now, but this crap can’t continue. I know lots of good shrinks. There’s one on every corner in this town. I’ll pick you up later. We’ll go to dinner and talk.” She was already poking at her Palm Pilot, one hand scratching the back of her head, always in control. I wanted to say something, anything, to make her feel differently.

“I’m just glad you didn’t send them the one I did for you.” I was now partway in the hallway.
Mitzy stopped scratching the back of her head—paused with her hand still there. “What? Lauren, what did you do about me?” Her little organizer was beeping at her, but she wasn’t looking at it. She was fixed steady on me.

“Don’t worry,” I told her, letting the door close partway, until I was looking at her through this little frame. “I’m sure that one got shipped somewhere else. It was in a Brigitte and you only sent them one Brigitte, right? The one they called about, that one was for my mother. Actually, yours is much better, I think. It took me a very long time to find miniature handcuffs—but I lined the whole thing in control top pantyhose, which I thought was a nice touch.”

Roger actually chortled at that.

All of it was a lie. I’d never devoted one of my pregnancies to Mitzy. But she didn’t know that, sitting behind her big desk, this little half-smile on her face. Was I kidding? What if I wasn’t? Who might have happened upon all her crazy little Mitzyisms by now? She looked to Roger, to me, back to Roger. I liked her confusion.

“But we’ll talk more at dinner,” I said, though I knew she’d be at my apartment well before dinner. The thing is, she couldn’t meet me if I wasn’t there.

It was payday and on my way home I could have cashed my check and transferred to the nine bus to the Greyhound Station and caught a ride to anywhere. Not even have packed up my stuff. I could have gone anywhere and Mitzy would have driven up in her little silver Mercedes to find me not waiting for her—to find me gone. Mitzy just pounding and pounding on my apartment door. Mitzy somehow like my mom stuck on the roof, stuck in her life, and me already gone and inventing a new one. But right then I wasn’t feeling too optimistic about my prospects since some guy in Shenzhen, China had
just busted open a whole pile of shit from my past, stuff I had already run away from once. I thought I had.

I liked the sound of Mitzy’s office door as it finally clicked in the latch, just a sweet little click, despite its size and weight. At the base of the stairs, back on the factory floor, I had to again crunch over the fiberglass to the door. The sound was like fall leaves in the churchyard back in Terry.
Amish Bigfoot

**Amish** (am'ish, am'-, Dm'-) n. pl. [after Jacob Ammann (or Amen), the founder] A Christian sect that separated from the Mennonites in the 17th cent.: in the U.S. since the 18th cent., the Amish favor plain dress and plain living, with little reliance on modern conveniences, in a chiefly agrarian society cut off from the modern-world.

**Big'foot** (big'foot) n. (also b-) SASQUATCH sas'quatch (sas'kwach') n. [Salish saskehavas, wild men] (also S-) a huge, hairy, humanlike creature with long arms, reputed to live in the Mountains of North America and preferring no contact with humans

I was out hunting Bigfoot in the Kipschin forest of Northeastern PA when my car broke down and a school bus filled with Amish kids pulled over next to me. It was my first time hunting alone, without my father, some six months after his death, and the map was wrong, or probably I was just reading it wrong. The night before the tent had leaked, and the audio-recorder, it had been my dad’s, and expensive, sat for hours in a puddle of rainwater: it wouldn’t even turn on. And now this business with the car.

I was at the engine, fiddling with a wire here, a knob there, hoping that maybe if I just poked at my hunk ‘o junk Civic long enough it might respond positively—when all the other guys were in shop class my junior year I did an independent study with the Earth Science teacher—but when I craned my head toward an oncoming noise I saw the yellow front of a bus, its lights on, splooshing ‘round a corner and spraying an arc of muddy water in my direction. By that point it had been raining for hours.
The driver, Eunice something or other, I came to find out, pulled the lever and the big metal bus door swung open to reveal her.

She snapped the end of a thick red licorice rope from her mouth to speak. The rest of it dangled into her lap. “You didn’t pick the best place for car trouble. Right round the corner like that, I near as hit you as stopped.” She gnashed off a chunk of the rope and ground away at it back in her molars, on the right side of her mouth, like chewing tobacco.

“I’ll remember that for next time.” I offered, letting the hood of my car thunk into place and waving my cell-phone in the air. “I can’t get a signal on this thing. Do you have a phone that works?”

She shook her head and grinned. “You’re not gonna get service for another thirty, forty miles. If you want, you can come on with me. It’s another fifteen minutes to the Amish Schoolhouse, ten more to the public school, and then I can drop you at the Potterville General Store and you can call from there.” She rolled the chewed up ball of red mush from the right to the left side of her mouth. “If you want. Or you can keep waiting here. You’ve got to make up your mind, though, or I’m gonna make all these kids late for their lessons.”

It was then that I actually looked at the noses pressed to the rows of windows behind her, the black, peering little sets of eyes. What I had thought to be your average elementary school gang, the kids who were supposed to be there, fresh-scrubbed, brightly-clothed little munchkins with grape jelly stuck between their fingers and cartoon characters smiling from their lunch boxes, those kids were replaced by the entire cast from Children of the Corn. In the window directly before me two girls in black bonnets,
maybe 10 year olds, placed their palms in front of their mouths and talked, then giggled, while staring at me. In my head, I repeated a line from a PBS documentary, “The Amish are a secret-people” and grabbed my backpack and video camera from the Civic, locked it, and climbed aboard.

“Thanks for stopping.”

“You betcha. You look pretty soaked through.” She pulled out onto the road and I had to steady myself by gripping the back of her seat. The bus was humid and it stank of corn chips and feet, a sharp contrast from the earthy spring-smells outside. It had to be a school bus that stopped. Of course it did.

There have been a variety of names given to wild, mannish or apelike beasts said to roam various parts of North America either as unclassified species, or, as some believe, evil demons and monsters. A few: Skunk Ape (Florida), Oh-mah (California), Momo (Missouri), Wookie (Louisiana), Grassman (Ohio), Tokussi (Oregon), Woods Devil (New Hampshire), Windigo (Quebec), Arulataq (Alaska), Nuk-luk, Nakani (North West Territories) or simply Bushman.

According to John A. Hostetler, author of Amish Society, the most common family names among the Amish in Lancaster county are: Stoltzfus, King, Fisher, Beiler, and Lapp. The most common first names for males are: John, Amos, Samuel, Daniel, and David, and for females: Mary, Rebecca, Sarah, Katie, and Annie.

I hunted with my father from the age of eight—we piled into our station wagon no more than twenty-five minutes after the last guest had left my pirate-themed backyard birthday party; the hunt my dad’s gift to me that year, though as an eight year old I would have preferred the roller skates I’d asked for—well into my adulthood. I was twenty-eight on our last trip, the weekend before my father was admitted to the hospital, never to
leave. Over the years we saw glimpses that kept us going, glimpses that convinced us we were on the right track—they especially convinced my father. Shadowy figures spotted across fields or through dense leaves and thick branches, a furry outline too large for a bear, upright, mannish. Footprints that featured the same arch, toes, the same outline that a human would make, but that were too large even for the biggest of NBA players. We took casts of those—Ultracel 30 being our preferred plaster of choice. It sets in thirty-minutes, has almost no expansion or contraction when setting, and is cheap, about twenty-bucks for the hundred pound bag we kept in the trunk—hauled it out in red plastic beach buckets and carried it to our tent.

All of this was important to my father, meaningful. *We’re just on the cusp of it, Eric*, he would say, and I humored him. But after the newness of it wore off, after elementary school, when it was no longer cool to brag about our trips, our weekends as monster hunters, when I, too, began to doubt my father’s sanity, came the sighting that changed everything: inspired the “Foot-Fever” that turned his hobby into his life’s quest and played a large part in my mother divorcing him.

I was fifteen and thoroughly exhausted of the weekend trips into remote forests, canned chili and saltines, damp sleeping bags, damp tents, damp everything. We had been out all night. Any real enthusiast will tell you your best shot for a sighting is at night, which I know seems unlikely what with, you know, the cover of night and all, but that’s when the creatures are less guarded and more likely to wander. We’d recorded some vocal activity, followed a rustling here and there (could have easily been deer), and by five am, at the first silvery rays of sunlight waking on the horizon, I was ready for a nap. I had two porn-mags pushed down in the bottom of my sleeping bag and I planned a
quick jerk, a couple of the chocolate chip cookies my mother had packed for us, maybe a
cigar, (something my dad allowed only on these outings) and sleep.

We dropped off our gear at the tents and walked toward a little green lake, furry
with algae, our washcloths and soap in hand and my father’s camera around his neck—*If
you don’t always have it with you, you won’t have it when you need it.* While dad,
always a few steps ahead, whistled a shrill Souza march, I mentally formed my argument
as to why I’d go on no more trips for a while, no hunts. I wanted to get a weekend job,
maybe bagging groceries with a few guys I knew from Key Club. When someone asked
me what was on for the up-coming Saturday I didn’t want to shrug “Sasquatch,” and then
laugh along with them, shaking my head at my crazy old pa. I quickened my pace to my
father’s stride, a purposeful gait, long and sure, and had just managed “Hey dad. I think
I’m gonna...” when he shushed me and crouched low, his knees and torso planted into a
picker-bush. He motioned for me to do the same.

This was not new behavior. My father, the unassuming orthodontist, became
Safari-Steve on our hunts. His weekday precision with braces-alignment or mouth-
moldings became his weekend attention to sounds of the forest, markings on trees, his
unnatural ability to crouch absolutely still and hold his breath for minutes at a time.
Rarely did anything come of all this, but, still, I knelt, and looked in the general
direction his head was pointed.

There, in the shimmery half-light of morning, maybe twenty-five yards in front of
us, right at the emerald edge of the lake, stood Bigfoot. It had to be. Even today I have
no other way of explaining it. In the distance the then pink sun was beginning its climb
up and over the water, which, in that moment, was glowing like a traffic light on GO.
And admiring it all, suspended in the middle of this world of light and color, stood a great, hulking creature, maybe ten feet tall, with its head cocked to one side, watching.

His back was to us, but each movement he made was captivating, amplified by his size. Each pull of breath seemed to inflate his great, sloping shoulders. The fingers on his right hand, dangling at his side—and they were fingers, long and black—twitched and gripped around something: a silver fish, a breakfast of trout? He craned his head up toward the sky and the muscles in his long neck rippled beneath his mottled, reddish brown hair—it didn’t look so much like fur, the books get it wrong there; it was more like hair.

My father glanced back at me, the look on his face; I’m still not sure the words. Enraptured? Overwhelmed? Any I’ve tried fall short. I caught his eyes. They sparkled, they actually sparkled with excitement, and we looked back together, my father through the long, sharp focus of his Nikon35, as Bigfoot shifted the contents of his right hand, the fish, to his left, and then bent his great, hairy frame toward the ground and ruffled the rocky bank with those long, black fingers. He was searching for something, his movements as obvious as a man bent scanning the concrete of a parking garage; Bigfoot’s dropped his keys.

As he pinched a rock, I gauged, and plucked it into his palm, the rapid-fire of the camera clicked out into the stillness, the sound like a typewriter hooked to a snare drum. I crouched on the balls of my feet, ready to spring and sprint. *The keys are under the sun visor, Eric, always there, just in case*. But Bigfoot didn’t turn. He didn’t stop his movements and freeze, tense those shoulders. Instead, as the camera pictured on—maybe when it wasn’t right next to you it was just the flutter of a hummingbird, an insect.
in the distance—Bigfoot drew back his hairy log of a right arm and frisbeed the stone out across the lake where it hit once, hit twice, and jumped a final third time, before plopping beneath the surface, the water ringed with wavy green. He looked out after it, one second, two, then turned and walked, great, purposeful strides, into a thick line of cedars.

The clicking had stopped with the toss, but only now did my father lower the camera, slowly, an act of purpose, his stare still fixed on the lake. He spoke in a voice reserved for the moments after a first kiss, a brand-new father in the delivery room, the words themselves, each syllable, somehow puffed with magic—“Did Bigfoot just skip that rock?”

I nodded, afraid to crush the moment with the wrong phrasing, afraid my voice with break and falter and somehow erase what we had seen.

For several minutes we stayed crouched, eyes locked forward, almost in prayer, in reverence. I waited to see if a family of Sasquatches would emerge from the trees, if the Lochness Monster might suddenly charge his scaly neck from the surface of the lake. Why not?

My father was the first to move, it seemed his right, and he stood slowly, kicked out his cramped legs, walked two steps, and embraced me. His four-day beard scratched my neck and his flannel shirt smelled like sweat and Old Spice. He was crying, unashamed, and as his eyelids dampened the collar of my shirt I knew that we would be back out there the following weekend, that I would be back out there, and what’s more, it’s where I belonged. If two minutes of chance could illuminate so much wonder, mystery—a breathing, walking myth before my eyes—I couldn’t imagine, then, what a lifetime of searching might reveal.
The documentary Sasquatch: Legend Meets Science, features three clips of alleged Bigfoot sightings, and though two are from the nineteen-nineties, neither is more impressive, nor controversial, than the original, 1967, 16-second Patterson footage. According to the Bigfoot Field Researchers Organization (BFRO), despite many well-funded attempts to disprove its validity, all scientists who have ever viewed the footage state either that "it shows a real, unclassified species, or that a conclusion cannot be made." The clip depicts what appears to be a female Bigfoot, covered in dark hair, muscles bulging as she walks quickly away from the camera. This footage, however brief, has been a sticking point for Sasquatch-devotees, proving beyond a shadow of a doubt, they say, that the mysterious animal is very much a reality.

In Lucy Walker's 2002 documentary, Devil's Playground, a myriad of once-sheltered Amish teens smoke cigarettes, shop at WalMart, and even dance to hip-hop, drinks in hand, as the bass pounds the shaky rafters of a barn converted, for the evening, to club-scene. According to reviewer Kimberly Heinrichs, "In the Amish vernacular, "Devil's Playground" refers to the "English" or outside world. The protected teens are suddenly thrust into this world upon their 16th birthday as they begin "Rumspringa," a period during which they decide whether to join the church." Lucy Walker was, in fact, the third director hired to make the movie, as the first two were unable to adapt to working within the confines of the Amish community.

I stood, one hand on licorice-Eunice's seat, and one on the silver floor to ceiling pole attached to the divider between the stairs and the seat above them, and looked down the aisle the way I had seen so many camp counselors and band directors and speech and drama coaches do. Boys sat in pairs and girls sat in pairs. Pretty much how I remembered it from my own school bus trips.

However, several of the kids, four or five, weren't wearing any shoes, and their pink toes poked through clumps of grass and dirt like lines of worms. Not how I remembered it from my schooldays, but it explained half of the smell. Most of the boys had on black straw hats, black vests, and dark shirts in deep purple or green, but a few had their hats in their laps, and their brown, flat, bowl haircuts and red cheeks reminded me oddly of sixties mod-kids, Beatles groupies. The girls wore long skirts, their pink cheeks framed by the tufts of hair that sprouted out from their bonnets' sides. Scattered amongst the Amish sat public school kids in jeans and bright rain jackets. The effect was
something like a dress rehearsal for *The Crucible* where half of the actors forgot their costumes.

The younger kids in the front seats, and they were cute, the way we tend to think all little kids who dress like grown-ups look cute, but the older boys, maybe sixth and seventh graders, were clustered in the back of the bus. They appeared solemn and thoughtful, words I’d never pair with the school bus experiences of my youth and boys of the same age.

Boys like Tommy Racine, a.k.a., “The Fish.” When it rained, he picked up the waterlogged earthworms, plump and juicy, from the puddles on the playground and popped them into his mouth like gumdrops, sucking them down without chewing. On the bus he and Brian Nanes sat together, two sixth-grade Vikings pillaging lunches in search of Twinkies and cupcakes, snapping Andrea Jensen’s bra-strap and making cracks about “getting some of that.”

I used to sit at the front of the bus, usually with a book on rock collecting or monsters and legends. When they noticed me, I appeased them by impersonating our gym teacher, or rattling off recently reported sightings of Nessy (the Lochness Monster) or Bigfoot, stuff my dad had read me from his monthly BFRO newsletters.

On a good day, Tom and Brian listened quietly, maybe six minutes of peace, as I mimicked the strange gruntings and beastly moans my dad said he’d heard on some of our hunts, when I was asleep, he said, zonked out like the dead. They rolled their eyes at each other, jabbed with their elbows, but I’d launch into a description of the plaster casts of tracks we had at home: huge feet, just like our feet, like humans, but the size only a monster could leave behind, an actual, honest-to-goodness, real-life monster hiding in the
woods. We also had bags with samples of reddish brown hair, a fossil of a strange legbone my dad bought of a Susquehannock for forty dollars, and, best of all, a reel of film: a copy of the groundbreaking 1967 Patterson Bigfoot footage. *Come over and see it if you don’t believe me. My dad has a whole room of this stuff. Just come and check it out, and then try to argue.* They never took me up on the offer, but it was enough to peak their interest. “Pretty cool, if it’s even true” Brian had offered, once, grudgingly. I was a freak, a science-geek at the front of the bus, but my dad’s obsession bought me moments of reprieve.

Knowing all of this, the layout of the bus—where the tough kids sat, I would have preferred a seat behind Eunice, even if these Amish kids didn’t look the part. But it was slim pickings, the front of the bus mostly full. It would have to be the back. I spotted one, next to a tall broom-pole of an Amish boy, his hat planted on his head; little Benjamin Franklin wire spectacles perched on his nose. This would be the guy. I set my pack on the floor, crushed my legs in behind it, and left the camera on my lap.

I’d barely gotten settled when Eunice eased the bus to a stop and two hulking boys with crew cuts and the same wash of freckles, climbed on. They were brothers, I was sure, maybe twelve and thirteen, and their blue eyes glinted with the metallic look all bullies can cultivate. A look I knew well. Their bright sneakers and printed t-shirts and jeans made them seem grossly American, especially surrounded by all these Amish. They swaggered down the aisle toward me and I felt my throat tighten a little; I popped my jaw. As they approached they glanced over, and I tipped back my head, trying to look cool and macho, shades of sixth grade, as they slid into the seat across the aisle from me.
This was trouble. These were the exact kind of boys I imagined made a game of taunting the Amish, mocking their clothing, their bare feet. I watched, but neither group seemed particularly concerned with the other. In fact, one of the bully-brothers pulled a blue backpack onto his lap, unzipped it just at the top, and he and the other peered down into its contents, occasionally shoving a hand deep into the bag to shift something around.

I looked up to see if Eunice was aware, perhaps checking to make sure I was safe back there, and I caught her glance in the big bus driver spy-mirror in front of her. Placed strategically above the windshield and just before the ceiling, it allows for optimal viewing of spitball fights and other such bus-induced tomfoolery. She grinned and yanked a chew on her rope, eyes back on the road. I managed what I hoped to be a careful look across the aisle. The brothers were still engrossed in whatever was in the backpack, whispering.

My sweatshirt was soaked and dripping on the camera. Shifting to avoid cramping little Benjamin Franklin next to me I pulled it over my head and yanked down my t-shirt. It, too, was wet, and it clung to my chest and stomach, the image across it a Patterson-still: a side view of Bigfoot golden-red in the sun against a backdrop of green leaves. I pulled out the bottom of the thin cotton, and Bigfoot stretched in size as I gathered the cloth into a tight clump between my hands, twisting and wringing. A little puddle formed on the floor.

"Hey." The kid next to me pushed up his classes and peered, obviously, at my shirt.

"Hi. You like Bigfoot?"
“Yeah, but I like Albawitches better. They’re smaller, only four feet, but they’re sneaky and fast.” His voice was as light and thin as he was, a slight accent, a lilt of some kind, German, Dutch. You know, the way the Amish are supposed to sound. He paused and pushed the glasses again, but didn’t wait for me to comment. “It used to be apple-snitch.”

His little face was all courtroom and I smiled at his sincerity. “What’s that?”

“They called them apple snitches because they used to steal apples from picknickers and then they’d throw them at them from up in the trees. But in books they refer to them as Albawitches.” He jammed his hands under his spaghetti-legs and waited.

“Yeah, I’ve heard of them, actually. My dad thought that they were probably just smaller Sasquatches—little kid Sasquatches. You know anything about that?” I asked.

“I know that he’s thought, maybe, to be a descendant of prehistoric giant wood apes. Gigantopithecus Blacki. There could be some of that species around here; it would make sense that an ape could easily get up into a tree to steal an apple.” He wasn’t showing off, just sharing.

Had I still been in sixth grade this kid could have been my Amish-twin. “Yeah, the Gigantos. How do you know all this?”

“He read it in his “B” Encyclopedia, which you still owe me something for, Daniel.” This came from one of the brothers across the aisle, the one with the pack on his lap. He sounded the way I thought he might, slightly hoarse, like his voice had
a sunburn, or like he’d been yelling at a football game the night previous—entirely possible.

“Actually, I read it in the “S,” for Sasquatch, and I already gave you cookies, two kinds.” The kid next to me stood firm. Or sat firm. You’re not supposed to stand on the bus while it’s moving. He purposefully pushed the glasses up his nose.

“Yeah, but you owe him some more. That was the deal.” Backpack’s brother joined in, but before the negotiations, as they were, could finish, someone tapped me on the shoulder from behind.

“Do you have anything?” I rotated around and was inches from the flat nose of one of the oldest boys with the bowl-cut, the Beatles’ groupie. The boy next to him slouched back against the seat as he surveyed what he could see of me over the seatback, a dividing wall, and then scratched his pimply chin, moving his nails rapidly over the little red eruptions.

I wasn’t sure how to answer. “Do I have anything for what?”

“To trade.” Flat-nose’s face was a scowly question mark. “Like this.” The Backpack brother pulled a stack of CDs and a couple issues of Playboy from the bag and shoved them across the older boys and his seatmate, all the time watching the big mirror at the front.

“Did you bring the Tupac CD?” Flat-nose asked, thumbing through the discs; the boy next to him already turned to that month’s centerfold, eyes pawing the page.
“Yeah, it’s in there. But if you want all of that stuff we’re talking two jars. So hand it over.” Backpacker brother kept his eyes to the mirror but held open the lips of the backpack.

“You said one last time.” The Amish with the *Playboy* lazed his head toward the brothers, the centerfold spread at arms-length behind the seat, away from Eunice’s glance.

“Yeah, but I had to get those from under my dad’s side of the bed. And he’s probably gonna notice, and I’m gonna get it. So now we want two.” He shook the empty backpack. “Hand ‘em over or give the *Playboys* back.

“Just give it to him, Faron.” The pimply-kid was now thumbing through the magazine, delicately, like it was an ancient document, the Magna Carta.

Flat-nose, Faron apparently, reached down behind the seat and pulled out two canning jars of deep purple and red liquid. He checked the mirror, and handed one, then the other, across the aisle and into the blue backpack.

“What is that?” I asked the kid next to me.

“It’s wine, current and blueberry. Our uncle makes it and Faron steals it from his barn.”

“That’s right, you little fucker, and you’d better shut up about it, too.” I wasn’t prepared for the Amish to be swearing. It sounded unnatural, a vegetarian biting into a crisp leg of fried chicken.

We were stopped again, and just one girl, in pink and pigtails, got on.

“Last stop before school. Finally.” This from Daniel next to me.
“Yeah, cause he knows all the answers.” Faron leaned down over the seat.

“Faron, sit down.” Licorice Eunice snapped clear to the back of the bus with all the authority of a bus driver

“So you have anything to trade?” Faron asked as he sat back down, but now leaned around the seat and hung his face at my right shoulder.

“I don’t have any Tupac.”

He waited.

“I don’t have any porn, either.”

“Well what do you have in that big pack?” He wasn’t giving up.

“What’s on the table from you?” I was half serious—homemade wine wouldn’t have been too bad an offer, but it appeared he’d given all that he had to the brothers, who were surely in greater need of it than I.

“I don’t know. You like Bigfoot? What about that skull you found, Daniel?” He craned further round to face the boy next to me.

“No, Faron. We don’t even know what that is.” Again he pushed the glasses up his nose.

“Yeah, but it could be something. This guy might want to check it out.” He nodded at me, what seemed like in my ear, and made squinty eyes at his brother.

“You might want to see this thing. We found it outside the school-house and—.”

Daniel tugged my sleeve. “I found it.”
“He found it, out a little ways into the forest. We have it on a shelf in the back of the classroom. Our teacher hadn’t ever seen one like it.”

“Is it a bear, maybe?” I felt a gurgle in my stomach, and in a second it fizzled up into my chest. What if?

“Nah. I’ve seen a bear skull. This one looks more like a chimpanzee. But what would that be doing out here, right?” He knew he had me, this Amish car-salesman.

“You want to see it?”

“Sure. What kind of trade are we talking about?”

“What do you have?” He was grinning now, his two front teeth stained a rusty-brown from the well water, I guessed.

I swung my legs to the side, out into the aisle, and opened the pockets and flaps of my pack. After displaying several treasures, Faron decided on a nice, fairly new Swiss Army pocketknife with compass and corkscrew, several candy bars and two bags of jerky, and my portable CD player. But it was Daniel’s skull, and he only agreed to give it up if two books of Bigfoot facts and my Polaroid camera were thrown into the deal, and even then he seemed unsure. It was a lot of loot, but I knew if the skull proved authentic, well, then it was a pile of crap compared to that.

The plan was for me to get my car fixed, meet them back at the school at three-thirty, and make the exchange. Eunice picked up at the public school first, and we would have about fifteen minutes before they had to ride home. We had it all worked out, but as the bus approached their schoolhouse, a little white building, like a church, almost, with a big metal bell out front, Daniel voiced his protest.
“But I’m not even sure it’s still at the school. I think I might have taken it home.” He gathered his black metal lunch pail, one most fitting for a coal miner.

“You didn’t, Daniel. It’s still there. He’ll see for himself.” Faron said, as he nudged Daniel forward, off of the bus.

Once outside, Faron motioned from the lawn as to where we should meet, a little inlet of trees, shady and covered.

After Eunice made her stop at the public school—the jars in the brothers’ blue backpack sloshing down the aisle—as promised, she dropped me at the Potterville General Store, a faded green building that was squashed with age and wear, and left with a wave and a honk. (After coming inside and re-stocking with three more licorice ropes.)

The Bigfoot Field Researchers Organization (BFRO) has a section on their website (www bfro net) with tips for photographing and submitted photos of tracks is in determining the actual dimensions of said tracks. According to the website, actual photographs of Sasquatches are rare, and those that are available usually of poor quality, because most sightings are accidental and the tourist, camper, hiker, is not prepared, or too frightened, to take a picture.

Old Order Amish forbid photography of their people. Their objection is based on the second commandment, Exodus 20:4: “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.” Not to be deterred, several non-Amish photographers in and around Lancaster, Pennsylvania, earn their living selling tourists photographs of the Amish at work and at play.

After our sighting (in our excitement we never made it to that green lake to clean up) my father and I cast several foot-molds, packed the tent and equipment, and with his camera around his neck, dad drove a steady 67 to home. On the way he shared our story
with 2 gas station attendants, most of the staff of a small diner, and quickly, one bald-headed tollbooth operator who probably thought “Nice weekend?” was a yes or no question. With each telling dad’s gestures grew more animated—his voice hushed in suspense, his eyes still twinkly, the camera hanging majestic with soon-to-be proof.

It would be too easy if the pictures had been perfect. Too simple if I could just pull out a couple of wallet-sized photos every time I told this story. The shots, ready that afternoon, were filled with the backdrop of the ever-rising sun: Bigfoot’s in shadow, a monstrous dark something by a shiny lake. Each picture could be Bigfoot, we knew it to be, but it could also be someone in a gorilla suit, a bear on its hind legs, not enough to make a believer out of a skeptic, and barely enough for a grainy reprint in that year’s June BFRO newsletter.

But it didn’t crush my father. Didn’t send him reeling the way I thought it would, his life’s work unfinished. He didn’t swear or cry, drop to his knees at the injustice of it all. Not as good as we were hoping for, huh, Eric. That was it. That was all I got, for the whole sun-distorted roll.

I exploded, right in the photo shop, disgusted with the pictures, with my father. 
“You can’t even tell what this is. We were right there and we have nothing. Nobody’s gonna believe these, and you don’t even seem like you care.”

My father stopped me at that, put the prints on the glass counter, pushed forward his hand. “I don’t.”

I shook my head, sneered. “Are you kidding?”

“The pictures aren’t the big deal, Eric. They wouldn’t prove anything. Look at Patterson—he had film, sixteen seconds of a female Sasquatch walking away from the
camera, in color, with the sound of crunching grass, and people all over the world are convinced it’s a hoax. Some people just don’t have the capacity to believe. He pointed his chin down, leveled his eyes to mine. “The big deal is what we saw. Do you know what we saw?”

I didn’t want to answer, I wanted to stay mad, wanted the irrefutable proof of perfect pictures in my hand.

He waited. Asked again. “Do you?”

I folded my arms and nodded.

“Okay. So do I.” He let his eyes betray his eventual grin. “And we just might see him again.

We searched at least two weekends a month until I finished high school. And then, I came home, often, from college, or he came out east, to New York, and we searched new territory, though he preferred the forests of Oregon. He was connected to them. I was connected to them, too, I suppose.

Over the years our equipment improved, we joined a couple of organized hunts, though we always liked it best just the two of us. When my dad was first diagnosed with stage IV colon cancer we left the hospital after a round of radiation therapy, picked up some snacks, and were in the woods by sundown—all his idea, and against his doctor’s advice. Every chance we should take it. But we didn’t ever see Bigfoot again. Maybe you only get one of those moments, if you’re lucky enough even for that.

At the hospital, during his last days, we relived our moment again and again. He told it to me, me to him, and when he tired of that he made a couple of the nurses, who
had heard it probably twenty times, tell it back to the both of us. Eventually he was wired to so many machines, feeding him, helping him urinate, one long one down his throat so he could breathe, that he looked a little like Frankenstein: his favorite movie after *Harry and the Hendersons*.

Before the ventilator went in, the tube that ballooned at the base of his throat and pressed against his voice-box, silencing him, before that, he spoke of our sighting with such reverence, such awe, that now, when I return to it in my mind, it couples with this memory I have of a Sunday school class right before Christmas, and the story of Mary and Joseph. Our peppermint-smelling old-woman teacher talking about the shepherds when they saw the Angel from heaven come down to them, their wonder and amazement: my father’s wonder and amazement.

President Theodore Roosevelt related a Bigfoot tale in his 1890 book *The Wilderness Hunter*, telling of a Northwest trapper named Bauman, and the night his partner was slain by a huge man-beast.

“At midnight Bauman was awakened by some noise, and sat up in his blankets. As he did so his nostrils were struck by a strong, wild-beast odor, and he caught the loom of a great body in the darkness at the mouth of the lean-to.”

President George Walker Bush met privately with a group of Old Order Amish during his 2004 presidential campaign. When one Amish gentleman revealed that not all Amish vote, but that they would pray for him, Bush answered, “I trust God speaks through me. Without that, I couldn't do my job.”

AAA sent a cab to pick me up at the store, towed my car to a garage, and had it fixed and running, all before noon—something with the radiator. In the restroom at Nan’s Pit Stop I scrubbed my armpits with slimy pink soap and changed my t-shirt for a slightly less-damp version from my bag. After a BLT thick with mayonnaise and
bacon, and a wedge of coconut-cream pie like something out a 1950’s Betty Crocker Cookbook, I fumbled away the afternoon until three, when I found the road over to the Amish schoolhouse. My elbows kept itching, then my thighs and knees, and I looked up at the sky as if a big cloud shaped like my dad would be hovering over the exchange. It was not.

My watch said 3:22pm when I parked the car, grabbed a plastic sack with the requested items, and climbed a little knoll studded with crocuses toward the grove of maples and pines, the place Faron had pointed to. I waited. 3:25, 3:29, 3:32—no one came, but then the brown front door opened, the one door to the school, and a couple of girls in white bonnets strolled out. Older girls. Then a few boys, younger, and then a couple more. I saw the Playboy reader chatting up the white bonnets, but no Faron and Michael. I waited, questioning what I was really even doing there, how much I believed. The bus would come and that would be that. I knew we couldn’t make the exchange in front of Eunice; these Amish kids weren’t supposed to have CD players and Polaroid cameras. I was corrupting them. If they didn’t come out now, that would be it.

3:37 and that same yellow bus sloped over a crest in the distance. I stepped back, farther into the inlet, glad that I’d parked my car out of immediate view. The bus slowed, and just as kids started toward it, I glimpsed someone bolt out of the front of the school and come tearing across the yard in my direction. It was Faron, and he was carrying something under the crook of his arm, like a football. As he reached me Daniel sprang out of the door and tore after him, yelling his name.

“You have the stuff?” Faron’s face was red, his breath heavy.
“Yeah.” I thrust the bag to him and he nabbed it, at the same time tossing the bundle under his arms to me. It was the right size, I supposed, but wrapped in some sort of cloth, and I couldn’t get an immediate look at it.

“Thanks.” He ran back toward the bus, gripping his brother’s elbow and attempting to stop him before he could get to me, but Daniel tore away and sprinted forward, slipping on the wet grass and plowing into my chest to stop. Faron looked back, hesitated, but then surged on, up the stairs and onboard the bus, safely out of sight.

Daniel spoke in shortened puffs. “I’ve seen stuff. I have; in the woods by my grandparents. Tracks, too.” Nervous, he glanced back at the bus, every student now on board. “And I have some things I’ve found, at home, in our barn.” He gestured to the bundle. “That’s not a Bigfoot skull. Faron lied about it. Go on and look.”

I unwound the dark cloth, what I later learned to be quilt bunting (apparently Amish girls quilt quite a bit at school) slowly, carefully, and stepped from the inlet into better light. It was heavy plastic and plaster, the bone-white skull of a science-class mannequin, not even human, but a damn good replica. Of course it was.

Eunice honked the horn, three steady blasts, as an Amish man, maybe in his early twenties, brown chin beard, dark black suit, stepped from the door of the schoolhouse and started toward us, a purposeful gait, long and sure.

My temples throbbed and I squinted into the sun and tried to think what my dad would do, what he would say. I held up the skull. “I think your teacher wants this back.”
Daniel turned. The man was no more than twenty-five yards from us now, his arms swinging with his strides.

I felt sure of my words. “You’d better book it to that bus and tell Eunice to slam on the gas.”

“What about your stuff?” Daniel asked, unsure, the horn blasting once again—this blast somehow angrier.

“You’d better read every damn word in those books. Go!”

He didn’t wait for another reason, but dodged to the right, the teacher calling to him, and zig-zagged his way to the bus and up the stairs.

The Amish man stood in front of me, half in the shade of the inlet, half in the sun.

He didn’t speak. I held out the skull and he brought both hands forward, palms up, and received my offering. The skull smiled up at me. I didn’t say anything. He didn’t say anything.

Then I said, “They told me it was Bigfoot.” It didn’t sound as stupid as it had in my head before I said it.

“They’re too old to believe in Bigfoot.” Now he and the skull were both smiling.
The Candidate’s Wife

12 Weeks Before the Election

It may have been Bea Gladstone’s finest event to date, which is truly saying something. First someone commented on the wine, noted the label, that it was from the Rivendale winery in New York, and this was important, because why bother with an area wine if it went unnoticed that it was local; that she had taken the time to find a decent local wine. And Hal, her husband, was election-year charming. He did not tell old jokes, he did not slosh the local wine over the arm of the couch, and he did use his cocktail napkin to wipe at his chin, so this party, unlike the last party, he whisked away the chunk of blue cheese and chive smeared below his lip instead of letting in it dry and crust there for several hours. But best of all, Bea thought, weaving among the crowd to gather glasses and used hors d’oeuvre plates, best of all was Sarah Lawson: the doctor’s wife, the candidate’s wife.

“Isn’t she just lovely?” Bea said, kneeling to pluck cracker bits from the hardwood floor. (At least it was stepped on just shy of the oriental carpet. At least that.)

“Who?” Nancy Mitchell leaned toward her, head cocked like a hunting dog waiting for a command.

“Oh I was just thinking aloud.”

“Okay. But who’s so lovely, anyway?” Nancy Mitchell never dropped anything until she was sure it wasn’t part of some loop she might later be left out of. Especially a Bea Gladstone loop.

“Mrs. Lawson.”
“The competition?” Nancy seemed genuinely surprised, and nobody ever used the word genuine when speaking about Nancy.

“This isn’t the high school playoffs, Nancy. They’re not the visiting team.” Bea smoothed the right thigh of her skirt. (Which was not wrinkled and did not need smoothing.)

“Oh, now seriously, Bea, I just meant that her husband is running against Hal. I chatted with the both of them on the patio, they seem friendly. Very west coast, you know, she’s a photographer, and so tan, with all that turquoise jewelry...” Nancy sensed that she had very nearly overused her allotted “speaking with the host” time, the way game-show contestants sometimes do when asked to “tell us about” themselves. She snapped her words to a finish. “Well anyway, it was good of you to invite them.”

“They live on the block. When Hal’s run before we’ve always invited everyone on the block.”

Nancy leaned in further, nearly bending at the waist. “But no one who lives on the block has ever run against Hal before.”

“All the more reason, then.” She scanned the crowd and located Dr. Lawson planted between several members of the garden club. His teeth were too white and too straight, orthodontist art, like her own children’s, and when they’d spoken earlier that evening she found his dishwater-blonde beard and natural fiber pants unsettling, as though she were speaking with a mountain bike salesman or a health food store clerk and not a well respected doctor running for mayor. But it wasn’t just his earthiness that bothered her; it was the weakness she sensed in him. She thought him to be the kind of man who cried after sex. Maybe during sex. She scanned again but did not see Mrs.
Lawson. “Nancy, I’m just going to take these things to the kitchen. Your artichoke dip was wonderful, as always.”

“Oh thanks, Bea. Hey, I meant to tell you. Your column was just a riot yesterday. That part about the secretary they fired over at the high school because of that business with the students. I showed that part to Jack and we laughed and laughed.”

Bea wrote a small weekly column in the *New Canaan Register*, a societal thing, local-gossip. She took it just seriously enough to be good at it.

When both of her hands were stemmed with wine glasses, tops up, like tulips sprouting between each finger, Bea shouldered the kitchen door so it swung inward and found Mrs. Lawson, back to her, washing dishes at the sink. She did not whip her head round to see who had entered, though the noise from the party, the squawks of conversation and the hum of background music breezed in and filled the room until the door swung shut again. But Mrs. Lawson finished rinsing and then drying a glass pie plate, laying it gently on a pink dish-cloth spread out next to the sink, before turning around. Bea liked that. Liked her dedication to the task at hand.

“So this is where you disappeared to. Did you see the garden club approaching and make a break for it, or do you just have a thing for dirty dishes?”

“I know, I’m terrible, aren’t I? Hiding in the kitchen.”

Sarah laughed then, without effort, it came with her smile, and Bea thought her absolutely beautiful. Breathtaking, maybe, a word she usually reserved for paintings and sunsets at their beach house. What was Nancy talking about, “all that turquoise?” It was one necklace, one lovely necklace offsetting the dark of her tan and the crisp white of her collared shirt. Perfect. And turquoise was so in again that summer. She felt herself
staring too long, inappropriately, she supposed, it was tacky, so she busied herself putting crackers into a basket while Sarah turned again to the sink.

She had had little crushes like these, always for women, in the past. When she was younger they were more involved, girls from her boarding school, teenage experimentation. None of it serious, they would all grow up to marry men, successful men, mind you. And since Hal, and the kids, it was just harmless little flirtations, really. Halley, her tennis instructor at the club—how common, a tennis instructor, and that was ages ago. Jane, a teller at the bank, soft hands. Most recently it was Denise. She had done some landscaping for them two summers before, and Bea had actually kissed her once or twice, in the tool-shed, felt her up, the kids would say; how ridiculous that terminology. Denise ended, fling and landscaping, when Bea discovered that she really was a lesbian, which is to say, that Denise lived with a woman, had always been with women. Bea did not approve of that lifestyle. She made a very clear distinction, in her own mind, at least, it was very clear. A fling, a little soiree, of sorts, now and then, just between us girls, that was one thing. Lesbianism was something else entirely. Even the word itself, lesbian, it was vile, really: these hulking he-women in hiking boots and buzz cuts. Absurd.

But this girl, Sarah, was gorgeous and feminine and best of all, married. Happily married, she supposed. And yet, Bea sensed in her the same tingle she felt with all the others, you could call it a tingle, maybe, or just something in her mannerisms, her tone. Maybe it was time to go a little further. She had been considering it for a while, waiting for someone to stir her interest. And Sarah had done that. But she would have to make the first step, she always did. These girls, at first so timid and then so predictably willing.
She glanced at Sarah, still busy with her dishes, and took the crackers out into the main room. Most of the party was now clustered in the sun porch, a few hovering about the hors d’oeuvres. Both Hal and Sarah’s husband were surrounded. She scooped a few dirty plates from the end tables and again made her way to the kitchen, stopping right behind Sarah, at the sink, and reaching around her to ease those dishes into the soapy water, brushing against her more slowly than necessary.

She used her gracious hostess tone. “Well, you have done just about enough. I certainly appreciate the help, but I think your husband could use you in the other room.” Bea would have sent any other partygoer straight back to the living room in just the same manner. Guests did not belong in the kitchen.

“I’m begging you, please don’t send me back out there. I’ll do all the pans. Besides, Dan isn’t gonna win any votes here tonight. We both know that.” Sarah turned to face Bea, to smile, plead her case, and then turned back to the dishes.

“I hope it doesn’t seem crass to have invited you. Hal and I talked about it, you know, we weren’t sure how you would take it.”

“No, not at all. Dan was thrilled. He loves a challenge. I know people say that to sound strong or something, and don’t mean it, but he really does. Mr. Opportunity.”

“But not you?” Bea liked watching her from behind. Her neck, slim and long, her hair pulled up in a messy bunch, her arms, sleeveless from the shoulder, thin and sinewy, but soft, somehow.

“I just don’t know how you do it. And, don’t get me wrong, you do it very well. This party and the food—how everything coordinates. It’s exactly how it should be, you
know? And I just cannot even imagine hosting it.” She shook her head and shrugged her shoulders, somehow resolved.

Bea picked that moment. Maybe it was what Sarah had just said, her worry over hosting parties, or it could have been the turquoise necklace on that dark neck, the white shirt, or even the last shred of late summer sunlight filtering in through the window and framing her as she washed dishes. Whatever the trigger, she did not wait for another opportunity, for the kitchen door to open and for them to be interrupted, for Sarah to smile at her again. Bea walked to her, placed her right hand on the curve of her shoulder, and when Sarah turned her head to look, Bea kissed her. It was clumsy and unexpected, Sarah’s hands still plunged down in the hot water and bubbles, her fist clenching and unclenching the dishrag, a reflex. But Bea kept on, turning Sarah toward her, placing a hand at the small of her back and pulling her in. She wanted to consume her. She smelled like cucumbers at the farmer’s market in the spring. Hal smelled like Old Spice and Vaseline (sometimes his tennis shorts gave him diaper rash) and bourbon, all mixed with the stale cigar smoke that clung to his suits and polo shirts, to his bathrobe, to whatever he wore. Bea wanted to keep kissing her, to go further, right then, to lead her, push her toward the screen door, out into the yard and onto her back in the damp grass beneath the sprinkler. Sarah would go with her, she believed that. Felt the way she gave in her arms, wanted to be led. But Bea was hosting a party. She was the mayor’s wife and she was hosting a re-election party for her husband. And that was the task at hand. So she let go of her. Had to pull her mouth away, turn her head, or Sarah might have kept on.
Bea took two steps back. One, two. She smoothed at her skirt and formulated the right words. They should be regretful, make it an accident, but one that she wanted to happen. “I might apologize. I should, really, for doing that here. The timing is entirely inappropriate.” She paused, Sarah’s face lovely, confused, not unhappy. Bea looked at her hands to say the next words, appropriately muted, she thought. “I have been wanting to do it, though.”

Sarah tried to laugh—fake and empty. She pushed at her hair. “What does that mean? Why would you do that?” She bit at her bottom lip, let it roll against her top teeth and fall back to place.

“I don’t know if it has to be anything more than that I thought you might like it if I did. I knew I would, and I did. Did you?”

Sarah blushed, a schoolgirl. “You couldn’t tell.”

“I could.” Bea started another thought but was cut short when Nancy Mitchell, of course it was Nancy, appeared at the kitchen door and called out in her signature squeal. “Well there you two are. Good grief, I thought we weren’t supposed to hover in here. C’mon, Hal’s promised to do his Nixon impression.”

Bea formed her hostess face, smiled back at Nancy. “Is he that drunk already? It’s just that the dishes pile up and it’s such a load to do all at once. Sarah was helping me with a head start. But we’re coming.” She took Sarah’s hand and pulled her toward the door. “Why don’t we finish talking tomorrow. You can come for lunch. I’ll tell you all the gossip on this block.”

Nancy Mitchell laughed. “Don’t kid yourself, Bea. Sarah, she’ll tell you all the gossip statewide.”
When Dr and Mrs. Lawson left the party an hour later, Hal shook their hands at the door and boomed something about “good, friendly competition and the competitive spirit—may the best man win.” Something very Hal, Bea thought. She waved from over by the piano, where Nancy Mitchell was again admiring her collection of authentic Cracker Jack prizes from the 1930’s and 40’s. She was afraid to get too close to Sarah again that evening. Afraid it would show all over her, on her face and skin, what they had just done in the kitchen. What she had done. What she hoped they would do.

9 1/2 Weeks Before the Election

They met every day, even Sundays, so long as Hal was golfing. Dan Lawson was home sometimes when Sarah left for Bea’s house.

He had wondered aloud about their newfound friendship—made little teasing comments about Sarah’s hidden-waspiness. “Hey, I don’t mind you fraternizing with the enemy. I don’t get it, but I don’t mind. I just can’t figure out what you and Bea Gladstone have in common. She bakes pies, writes her little society page. Did you know that she’s a Daughter of the American Revolution? Your work has been in Life and she’s a Daughter of the Revolution, or great-granddaughter, however that works. What, you take pictures of starving kids in Sarajevo and then she sponsors them for just 49 cents a day? Is that it?”

Sarah relied on a stock-answer that seemed easy enough. “We live on the same block and both of our husbands happen to be running for mayor. What more do we need in common?”
Bea, for her part, asked herself the same question Dr. Lawson asked his wife: What was she doing spending all this time with Sarah? Especially when she didn’t even have it to spend? Not really.

It wasn’t like the last two times Hal had run. Everything seemed so locked-up then, assured, just red, white, and blue helium balloons and victory banners. Even his first race, against an incumbent, she knew he would win. Everyone said so. And he did, and he kept winning, and she became the mayor’s wife.

But now she heard people talking, at her meetings, her charities. What’s more, she heard them stop talking when she entered the room; they looked at her, nodded to each other, as she made her way to a folding chair, or arranged the mid-meeting snack: orange slices and brownies. People liked the doctor, the pediatrician from California who had published all those articles, who saved some celebrity’s son, maybe Dennis Quaid’s, from a tumor or a shark bite or something. And here he was in Connecticut, doing house calls, like the grand old days of medicine, she’d heard him say, when doctors cared about their patients. Riding that stupid red bicycle all over town.

Maybe it was something in her that had changed. Maybe what she had found with Sarah, whatever that was. Afternoons in her bedroom, Hal’s bathrobe stuffed in the trunk at the end of the bed, not hanging on the back of the door, where he liked it. Sarah’s skin, dark, soft, and even. Hal had liver spots on the backs of his hands, the skin from his upper arms to his elbows was rough, strewn with hard little bumps, “chicken skin” he called it. Said it ran in his family.

That first time with Sarah she was not nervous, she was relaxed, felt in control though she had never been in control in the bedroom with Hal. Her first time with Hal,
and he had been her first man, her only man, she was worried about her hair, (a bee-hive, just set) that it would flatten at the back, get mashed into the pillow, and that she would look ridiculous when she got up from the bed. That, and he wouldn’t stop fiddling with her breasts. Turning them like radio dials, trying to tune into the best station. She didn’t worry about that with Sarah, her hair, even her age.

She felt so sure of herself with Sarah. Of her role, Bea the seducer, something out of *Madame Bovary*. After that first lunch together, when she took Sarah by the hand, asked if using she and Hal’s bedroom would be too personal, she led her confidently up the stairs and only then realized a step or two from the top, that she was going to be with a woman, really be with one, in she and Hal’s bed. And what’s more, she was fine with it.

Once inside the room, the requisite closing of the curtains, of course, there was that, and then—it was really all so simple. Sarah responded, in kind, to every touch, every kiss. Bea knew how unhook a woman’s bra, so thanks heavens there was no awkward fumbling with that. She judged the right places to touch, the right amount of touching, by the response of her own body. It all seemed sort of soft and silly, and really so uncomplicated. No fuss, none at all. It seemed that way right from the start. What’s more, it was good; it all felt so delicious and maybe a little naughty, but still somehow very sweet.

What surprised Bea, right from the start, was Sarah’s immediate willingness, more than that, somehow a kind of experience. She may have been led to the bedroom, but she knew her own way from there.

“I don’t suppose this is the first time you’ve been with a woman?”
Sarah laughed her easy laugh. Bea thought she seemed ready with her answer, as if she’d prepared it beforehand on 3X5 note cards. It was the exact sort of answer she expected.

It seemed there had been a girl, Carly, a fellow photographer Sarah kept bumping into in the dark room at college. They smoked pot, they talked about things they thought were, “intense,” they started sleeping together.

Sarah had raised herself up on her elbow and looked at Bea. “We got in all kinds of trouble. She was trouble, but of course that’s exactly why I liked her. My junior year the college started planting all these ridiculous statues around the campus—big metal modern art pieces that were placed strategically to impress parents dropping off their little freshman. Carly had this great idea, brilliant, we thought, to do this whole series of pictures with nude models posed as famous sculptures from the Renaissance, with these monstrous metal things in the background. So we got really high and went off to do this thing, but predictably, all our brilliant artist friends were running late and campus police caught us making out, totally naked, and high.” She ran a finger along the top of Bea’s ear. “Carly had a joint tucked behind one ear. I used to think that was so sexy. I have no idea why.”

“So what happened?” Bea was imagining her own daughter. The shame.

“Oh, you know, the usual. We were arrested and fingerprinted and had to call our parents. The whole deal.” Bea didn’t give her a reaction, so Sarah continued. “And all of that because one day in my dorm room this girl Carly just started kissing me, and I liked it, and there you go. Can you imagine?”

“I can imagine.”
“And so what about you? Don’t tell me I’m your first, you’re too practiced.”

Bea was embarrassed by the question and her embarrassment caught her off guard. She didn’t like to seem the type, even if only to Sarah, to have “done this sort of thing before.” To be so practiced, as Sarah put it.

“Just a few girls at boarding school, really. Nothing serious, of course. Just silly little flings, really.”

Bea felt that was a mostly honest answer. That’s all it ever had been. They weren’t relationships. She really was very good at being married to Hal. And there were her children; her daughter Mary was in college at Sarah Lawrence, and Jeremy graduated NYU two years prior, was working with a senator in Washington. Things had settled themselves out for the best.

“So in five years you’ll lump me with all the rest of them—tell some other woman about Sarah, this silly little fling you had.” Sarah’s eyes betrayed the stern look she was attempting.

Bea smiled. “Well I won’t refer to you by name.” She ended that discussion by pushing Sarah onto her back and kissing her mouth, then her neck, the birthmark on her stomach.

She believed that, Sarah as a silly little fling, until she saw her in the grocery store. It was entirely by chance. They had left each other only a few hours previous, but then there she was by the frozen vegetables, her back to her like that first night in the kitchen. The door to the freezer open, cold air swirling around her, she was reaching for a frozen brick of something, corn, peas. Bea had to grip the red plastic handle of her shopping cart, grip and lean into it and steer it down another aisle, quickly, before she
was seen. If she hadn’t she was certain she would have gone to her then, as she did in the kitchen, and press her up against the frozen vegetables and kiss her. She felt in herself the possibility of those actions. She was certain of them, and that certainty made her uneasy.

Eight Weeks Before the Election

Bea missed a campaign meeting. She was supposed to have met Hal, at his office, with the tablecloths and plastic-ware, they were to pick up some snacks on the way. She knew she was supposed to do this. She bought the tablecloths at a party store the week before, had been keeping them in the trunk of the car. But she spent the afternoon with Sarah. They made love. Sarah showed her pictures she was particularly proud of. They ate ice cream from the container. They made love again. Sarah had gone by the time of the meeting. It wasn’t that. But she had drawn Bea a bath before she left. It was a romantic gesture, of course, and somewhat overdone, but Bea had taken the bath. She stayed in it for close to an hour. Draining the cold water, running the hot. She took a nap after that, read some of a book that Sarah had recommended. She kept the phone off upstairs, and didn’t see the blinking light on the answering machine, Hal’s four messages, his confusion, until she ventured down sometime around six.

It had all been forgotten, of course. It was fine. She had called him on his cell phone, complained of a migraine, apologized again and again. He told her not to worry about it, that she had never missed a campaign meeting before. It was about time. Hal moved it to a bar. They had cocktails and fried things; they loved it, he promised, when he came home that evening, four kinds of pain relievers in hand.
But there was more. She thought about Sarah at night, in bed with Hal. She hadn’t her other crushes. And she felt that she wanted to know her, much more than she knew now. What kind of shampoo she used. Where she got the little scar behind her right kneecap.

Instead of planning her week around the campaign, it was, after all, nearing the end of Hal’s campaign for heaven’s sake; or planning it around her charity events, her gardening, she planned it around afternoons with Sarah, late breakfasts with Sarah, a quick Saturday tryst with Sarah, and she looked forward to these events only. She muddled through the others. She didn’t even harvest a late batch of tomatoes on time and they molded on the vine. Disgraceful gardening, really, a wasteful mistake. And she had never missed a campaign meeting before this year. So despite Hal’s reassurances, it did mean something. If it had been a migraine, that would have been one thing. But she missed because she chose this woman, Sarah, over her husband. That was it, really. Maybe a bit more complicated, but that was the idea. This was not part of the deal, Bea decided. Sarah was to be in addition to, not instead of. She could not carry on this way.

Seven Weeks and Five Days Before the Election

Sarah gave Bea a Cracker Jack prize she did not have; a rare one. It was a fortune telling dial, tin—white, blue, and red, about the size of a fifty-cent piece. Around the perimeter it read “Jack The Sailor Boy Says To Spell Your Name And Read Your Fortune.” Jack and his dog stood on the front, next to the little slot where a fortune spun into view with the final letter of your name.
“The dial works.” Sarah said. She was proud to have found it. She had been hunting antique stores for days. “Most of the ones they have are plastic, they aren’t that old, even. And the ones that were old you already have. But I hadn’t seen this one in your collection.”

She gave it to her in a ring-box with a little red bow on it, and when she first glimpsed that box, Sarah pulling it from her bag, Bea panicked. What was she doing? This woman standing in her bra and underwear, in the kitchen, her hair wet from a shower they had taken, together. Even after Bea opened it, saw that it wasn’t a ring, or some other symbol, something significant, even after that she couldn’t shake-loose the feeling that this thing with Sarah, whatever it was, was destructive, chipping away at her life. She thought of the windowsill in the guest room she had repainted the previous year, flakes of paint curled and peeled, layers and layers until the wood underneath was exposed, unprotected—susceptible to the rain and the cold when it blew in through the screen.

“So come on, spell your name, get your fortune. I already did mine. I’m sassy. Not sure how that’s a fortune, but there isn’t a lot of room on that slot for details.”

Bea said she was late dropping off her column; that she needed to stop by the hospital, the Jergens’ had a baby.

“Scared of the future, huh? I’ll do it. It takes three seconds.” Sarah took the dial and spelled out the letters, B-E-A—true. “Ooh, true.” She pondered this for half a second. “Nice. And true.” She smiled, but Bea was already on her way up the stairs to her bedroom, to change.
Five Weeks and Three Days Before the Election

They had never done buttons before; it seemed such a waste for a local campaign. But this election things were different. “Every opportunity to get the upper-hand.” Hal said. So here they were, come in the mail, six cardboard boxes. Bea put them on the dining room table so Hal would see them the minute he got home. She took one out and pinned it to the front of her sweater. HAL-elujah—FOUR MORE YEARS!

She was always so clever with little slogans and whatnot. Good for the title of a term paper, or the right wording for an obituary. Sometimes the paper had her help with those, especially when the person who died was a prominent New Canaan, someone she and Hal had known. And she always got the words right in her column. She made the gossip cheery, the local embezzlers and adulterers, occasionally even a drunk driver—they all seemed somehow farcical and small, good for a laugh. And it was all in fun. She was clear about that part, sometimes poking a jab at one of Hal’s partners, or even the garden club. Nothing to take offense at, it’s not serious.

The buzz around the Westport bridal shops is that a local newlywed is making the rounds in a desperate attempt to sell back her $7,500 wedding gown. It seems the honeymoon cost more than expected and she could use some spending money, her new “allowance” not quite what she was accustomed to from mom and dad. When told that these boutiques don’t deal in “new-to-you” fashions, the bargain-bride reportedly complained to one saleswoman, “But it’s only been worn just the one time—and my husband had it off right after the reception.”

Bea picked up that particular tidbit from the bride’s mother, who just happened to be the garden club’s secretary. She added a few details, left off the names, and set the
whole incident a couple of towns over, in Westport. Her column was filled with these
little half-truths, and so far as she knew, or cared to know, they never really hurt anyone.

“You’re a muckraker. You know that, right? You’re the Liz Smith of New
Canaan.” Sarah tossed the paper at her one day while Bea was washing a corner of
Sarah’s shirt, by hand, in the big metal sink in the laundry room. She knew she didn’t
have to do that. Sarah had asked her not to. But it was Bea who spilled the tea on her,
who let it splash out from her big green clay mug (the ones she got out in September—
with the start of fall) when Sarah had come up behind her, kissed her neck, and startled
her. Made her jump. She hadn’t heard her come in, she used the back door, and no one,
that Bea could remember, had ever surprised her that way before. She did the surprising.

That was a few days after the Cracker Jack toy, and now Sarah was in Brazil
photographing a tribe indigenous to the rain forest. Of course she was. She was in some
sweaty, foreign country with half-naked natives and her tripod. The whole thing, when
Bea really thought about it, just seemed so ridiculous. That she had been having sex with
this semi-bohemian photographer in the same bed that she shared with Hal. Her husband.
The mayor. Bea couldn’t get her mind around it, get past the scandalous soap-opera
quality, how the neighbors, the whole town, might react. Would react. But then there
was the fact that she missed her. When the postcards arrived, three of them, landscapes
of thick, green vegetation and waterfalls, magenta flowers, tourists at the ocean—Bea
smelled them, hoping for a whiff of cucumber. She ran her fingertips over the crisp,
black letters, all capitals, the way she knew Sarah’s writing would look, even before
seeing it. She even pondered the stamps, bright orange, some fat king or God, and she
marveled that Sarah, in Brazil, with the natives, had licked the back of them and pasted
them on these cards, for her. The image made her shudder a little, blush for no one to see. And then she was immediately embarrassed at even having thought of such a thing. She put them down the trash disposal with three stalks of limp celery and some bread starter gone bad.

Four Weeks Before the Election

Bea loved autumn. She loved it the way we think all women of a certain age, and a certain tax-bracket, living on a street lined with sugar maples on the East Coast, must love autumn. But she did it better. She really meant it.

By September’s end she had tied corn stalks and bunches of dried wheat to the pillars and railings on her front porch. In October she went to the apple orchards, twice, and made pies, dipped them in caramel and nuts, even pressed her own cider and delivered it to the neighbors in mason jars which she nestled in baskets with other treats. (She took one to the Lawson’s when she knew Dr. Dan would be home, and then chatted with him about his practice, his red bicycle, the underground sprinkler system he’d just had installed—but not about the campaign, and certainly not about his wife, due back from Brazil the following weekend.)

The day after Sarah returned, her skin even darker, her lips chapped and heels worn and calloused from the sandals she’d hiked in, bathed in, slept in, she found Bea in her kitchen, amid dozens of pumpkins on the floor and the counters. She was standing at the massive oak island in the middle of the room, carving HAL FOR MAYOR in block letters into a round, smooth pumpkin twice the size of a basketball and just as orange—the pots hanging from a rack above her head reflecting her careful incisions on their shiny
copper bottoms. This time Bea was not startled, she’d heard her come in, but chose to continue with what she was doing. The task at hand.

“The lesson I’m going to take from all this mess is that it’s never too early for campaign-themed jack-o-lanterns.” Sarah stood on the side of the island opposite Bea, palms pressed downward.

“That’s a good lesson to learn.” Bea kept carving.

“I knew that you’d think so. Did you get my postcards?”

“I did. They were lovely, thank you.” Still carving.

“Hey, I don’t know if you noticed, but the neighbor girl you’ve been sleeping with has returned from the wilds of the jungle and she’s standing in your kitchen. It’s all very exotic.” Sarah moved toward her, around the right side of the island, and Bea flinched, jabbed the knife through the hole in the top of the pumpkin and planted it inside, in the thick, soft, pulp, handle up.

She looked at Sarah. “Why is Dan running for mayor?”

“What?”

“Why? Is it something for him to do? One more accomplishment checked off his list?” An image flashed in Bea’s mind as she asked this—her hands on her hips in their kitchen six years before, her daughter before her, Bea demanding to know why she has missed her curfew. The image felt ugly there—but somehow in the right place.

Sarah stepped back and answered quietly. “I don’t know, Bea. He has all these ideas. He thinks he could do a good job, I guess. What does it matter?”

“He thinks he would be better at it than Hal.”

“I don’t know if that’s it. Maybe. Can’t they both be good at the same job?”

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“Not if only one of them can win. And what about you? You don’t even want to be the Mayor’s wife. All the silly social obligations, the parties.”

“They’re not silly, Bea, they just aren’t me. But maybe I could grow into them.”

She stepped to her, put one hand on each of Bea’s shoulders and locked her stare. “You think I think that you’re silly?”

“Maybe you do. I would think I do seem a little ridiculous to you, all my parties and my duties. But I don’t think my life is silly, Sarah.” Bea tried to turn back to her pumpkin but Sarah held her in place.

“I don’t either. I spent most of the plane ride home wondering how to best get away from Dan so I could come running across the street to kiss you. And give you the picture I took for you.”

Bea let Sarah move her hands from her shoulders to around her waist. She let Sarah kiss her, and she kissed back. She no longer smelled the cucumbers on her, but something else, all of Brazil, she guessed, a smell sweet and slightly rotten, the scent of the aging barrels at the winery.

Sarah pulled a small, black frame, a rectangle, from the waistband at her back. “I like to travel light.” She gave it to Bea. “The magazine wanted this one to go with the article and I told them it was already spoken for.”

The picture was a clearing in thick foliage, a packed, red-dirt ground, and a well. Three native children, mostly naked, were pulling at the well’s bucket, straining against its rope and weight. Their faces were of joy.

“This is beautiful.” Bea meant it.
“I had the translator ask them if it was a wishing well and they wondered at that, for a minute, and then said the bucket brought back water every time, and that was their only wish for that well.”

“It was that simple.”

“Yeah. For them it was. I thought you could put it on that bookshelf in the den. It would go with the other pictures there.”

Bea had already decided that’s where she would put it. That is exactly where it belonged. Hal would never think of it. Where to put a picture. Where it belonged. They took it to the den together, placed it on the shelf, a little ceremony. Bea took Sarah’s hand and led her up the stairs, to the bedroom. She hadn’t the chance to put Hal’s bathrobe away and it embarrassed her that Sarah saw it.

Two Weeks Before the Election

Bea wrote the column. Typed it out. Printed it. Put it down the trash disposal. Did it all again.

The candidates gave their speeches the night before. First those running for school board, then city council, then Dr. Dan and Hal. Hal looked the part, Bea thought, his navy suit and red tie. He sounded the part. He shook hands like the mayor was supposed to. But Dr. Lawson was so likable. He was self-effacing, made fun of his red bicycle and his hippie-beard. He told shark-bite celebrity kid story. He thanked his beautiful wife Sarah for all her support, her patience with him. Bea looked at Sarah, then, across the crowd gathered in the high school auditorium. She really was lovely.
They had not been alone since the afternoon with the picture. Bea was busy with the campaign, her committees, the fall. Sarah stopped calling. She stopped coming by.

Bea had to get the wording just right. It was all in fun. Silly gossip. Hearsay in print.

*My bloodhound’s been rummaging police records, again, faithful readers, and it’s amazing just what can turn up. It seems a prominent local photographer, a beauty, was quite the scandalous schoolgirl. While enrolled at Wesleyan she and a certain female “companion” (apparently this college student had all sorts of companions) were arrested for possession of a narcotic and indecent exposure, after staging a lurid photo shoot behind one of the dorms. Back then, the arrest bothered neither of the young ladies, as they were “stoned out of their gourds and very passionate,” one officer remembers. One must wonder if it bothers her now...*

**One Day After The Election**

She couldn’t be sure that it was her column. Hal was a popular mayor; people liked him. And besides, no one took her weekly gossip to heart. They read it in the bathroom, chuckled, tossed it aside. No one changed his vote, her vote, on account of *Bea’s Buzz.*

He won by almost two hundred. That was something. That wasn’t due to a newspaper column that no one paid the slightest attention to. And even if they had paid attention, she didn’t use names. And even if they had known it was Sarah, why would that make anyone change their vote for mayor? It was ridiculous, really. The two things had nothing to do with each other.
Bea had so much to do. The garden club was coming over for tea in half an hour. She still hadn’t finished planting the mums along the driveway, and she’d left the potting soil out on the lawn. She’d have to move that before the ladies arrived. Everyone would be home for Thanksgiving, and that was just a month away, and then Christmas. My God, Christmas. And the victory celebration. Hal’s party. That was next week. On Thursday.

She went to the kitchen for her notepad, to make a list, so she wouldn’t forget anything. But the light coming in the window caught her eye, held it. Red maple leaves rained down on a gust of wind. They looked like cellophane cut outs, the light passing through them. Sarah had once stood beneath that window, washing dishes without being asked, and placing them on a pink dishcloth. The right one. The exact one Bea used for that job. She was lovely, in her turquoise necklace, back when she was just the candidate’s wife.

Bea wondered if she should bother with the local wine this time. Probably. Yes, she’d better.
The day Leroy Leatherberry pooped his pants in Mr. Wilkerson’s fifth grade class was the same day that his grandfather, and ride home from school, Old Al Leatherberry, drove his big blue Edsel through the lilac hedge and onto the lawn of the courthouse where he crashed into the marble steps and was arrested. What those of us in Leroy’s class later figured out, collectively, was that the pooping and the arrest must’ve happened at about the same time. Which is to say, right before lunch.

Maybe if someone else from the class were telling this it would be all gag-reel and fart-jokes—I mean the part in the classroom with Leroy, especially because it was Leroy Leatherberry and he had a stutter and all that. But I don’t remember it that way. What I remember is Mr. Wilkerson, his back turned, pulling down the big, billowy map of the United States, the one with the states done up in chunks of color representing the forces of the Civil War, and the battle sites and all that.

And as he’s fiddling with that, and there’s no good way to say this, but this smell wafted up to me, the kind of smell you never want to smell when you’re babysitting and on diaper-duty—when strained peas and beets and grayish beef stew come out the other end. I was in the third row from the front and Leroy sat just behind me to the left. But this smell didn’t shrink off into the corners of the room where our book bags and coats hung in a sloppy row; this one grew stronger and trooped all the way up to the red Confederate States.

Mr. Wilkerson turned, inching his nose up and down as he squinted at us. Then he made an electric can-opener type noise at the back of his throat and said, “Does
someone need to excuse him or herself, ladies and gentlemen? Because I think we’re all old enough to know when to excuse ourselves without being asked.”

Nobody spoke or raised their hands, so Wilkerson stood with his hand shoved into his pants pocket, jingling what must have been a dozen pieces of loose change. All the kids said that Mr. Wilkerson played pocket pool but I didn’t know what that meant until Shaylee Harren explained it to me last year. Before, I imagined an actual game with maybe a tube of Chapstick and a marble, but it turned out to be much worse, which is just like when Shaylee told me “Mary Bales, you blow goats.” And I thought for a long time, maybe a year, that blowing somehow meant farting because she was always saying I had really bad gas, and I did, once, at a sleepover she had, but again, it turned out to be much worse than that.

So it makes sense, I guess, that Shaylee was the one who finally put her hand up and said, “Mr. Wilkerson, I think Leroy Leatherberry pooped his pants.”

And Leroy shouted out, well, it wasn’t much of a shout, but because he hardly ever said anything, on account of the stutter, and because he was now the focus of our immediate attention, it sounded pretty loud: “I think I need to be excused now, Mr. Wilkerson.”

It was one of those moments, when, even in fifth grade, you realize something about what it means to be a poor, stuttering boy who has just pooped his pants in the middle of his classroom. You don’t dwell on it or anything, but it hits you, especially when Brian Woods says, “Swamp Stink-Leroy” loud enough for everybody to hear and laugh at.
Mr. Wilkerson made the can-opener noise again, but this time it was like it got stuck on a dent in the lid and hung there until he cleared his throat and coughed a few times and said, “Okay, then, Leroy.” Jingle, jingle went the coins. “Why don’t you excuse yourself to the bathroom and we’ll see what we need to take care of.” Jingle, jingle, jingle.

What I’m not going to dwell on is his desk chair or the way the seat of his tan corduroys looked as he made his way out the door with the stupid wooden bathroom pass Mr. Wilkerson made him take. If you ask Brian Woods or Joel Nansel, even today, they could probably tell you every color and what pattern was smooshed to his butt, but not me. The bathroom was right across the hall from our room, so at least Leroy was lucky in that.

There wasn’t any point in going on with the lesson because you could hear the first-graders already lining up for hot lunch, and most of the class, not me, but just about everybody else, had their desk lids up and were shoving around their books and folders, talking and wisecracking beneath the big, wooden roofs.

I was staring straight ahead and focusing and refocusing on the outline of Louisiana, willing myself not to turn and look at Leroy’s seat when I happened to lock eyes with Mr. Wilkerson and he motioned me up to the front, with just his head, the way teachers sometimes can when they want to.

“Mary, would you please go knock on the door of the janitor’s closet and tell Carl what happened?” He asked.

He always picked me for little errands like that, or to be room monitor, because everyone had said for as long as I could remember: “Mary Bales is just so mature for her
age.” But let me tell you, being mature means you miss out on a lot of the good stuff. You know, what they call the formative stuff, stuff that you’re supposed to giggle about under your desk lid. But I went, with the stupid laminated hall-pass in my hand.

I sort of stalled at the boys’ bathroom for a second or two, but Leroy didn’t come out and I didn’t really expect him to. What was he gonna do in there? He didn’t have any other clothes to change into. I decided that if it were me I would first take off my underwear and just wad them up and throw them out deep at the bottom of the garbage can with a lot of paper towels on top. That seemed like a good start, but from there I wasn’t so sure.

Carl was watching an old black and white TV in the way back of the closet behind a metal shelf of cleaning products and rusty pipes, light bulbs, creepy janitor stuff. When I told him why I’d come he muttered something like “For shit’s sake,” which I found quite appropriate, and gave me a spray bottle of that nasty, industrial, blue disinfectant and a stack of scratchy, brown paper towels and told me he’d be up in a second.

The halls smelled like hot lunch, all turkey gravy and lima beans, so I squirted out a little of the blue stuff in front of me and stepped into it like perfume. I did this all the way back to just outside room 210 when the lunch bell rang.

The first thing my mother asked when I got in the car was, “Why do you smell like disinfectant, Mary?” I told her about Leroy and tried to sound pretty upset about it, which I sort of was, and then told her about my trip to get the spray bottle, because I was so mature, and in the midst of all of that she forgot that none of it answered her question. We were on our way to get me new tennis shoes, which is what my mother called them.
even though I was playing fifth grade girls’ volleyball. I also wanted a sports bra which my mother said she didn’t see a real need for, but I’d overheard some of the girls talking, Shaylee Harren, of course, but others too, and volleyball seemed to be a pretty bouncy sport, if you catch my drift.

My mother was rushed because we had to do all this during my lunch hour and she didn’t see why I couldn’t just wear my old tennis shoes for one practice. But that morning I had stood firm. She and my father had a big meeting at the church that night, so we couldn’t get the shoes then. And my little sister had a dance recital the next night, so we couldn’t go then. And pretty soon it would be a whole week of practice and I would have no shoes and no sports bra. So we went during lunch, in a hurry, and ate soggy tuna sandwiches in the car.

In between bites my mother said, “That’s terrible about Leroy. I hope he’s okay this afternoon. You make sure you say something nice to him. That’s just awful.” Various things like that. She knew the Leatherberrys from our church. It really is our church because my dad is the Reverend Michael Bales, Jr. of the First Presbyterian. Think better-dressed Lutherans and you’re on the right track. Protestants are Protestants so long as they aren’t Baptists, my dad says.

The Leatherberrys didn’t fit in with the rest of the congregation anymore, but they’d been members of the church forever, joining back when the great-grandparents had a big cattle ranch and were one of the first families at the country club.

By the time I knew them, the great grandparents were long gone and so was their money, spent by Leroy’s grandpa Al “like it was going out of style” I heard someone say once, in the church reception room. People tried to be polite and churchy, you know how
they do on Sundays and especially after service, but you could see them gawk as the Leatherberrys loaded Styrofoam plates with donuts and sticky-buns and then piled into the gigantic boat-car to drive the twenty miles back to the ranch. Those same ladies who stared the longest and nastiest were the ones who would tell me, beaming, how tall I was getting, or how nice I kept my hair, and, of course, how mature I was for my age.

Anyway, because of all that my mother made me partner-up with Leroy in Sunday school and together we would answer questions from the “Son-lights” Bible Study packets or circle the Ten Commandments and the names of the Disciples on a Xeroxed word search. Leroy was good at those. Sometimes, if it was just the two of us hunched over our paper in the corner of one of the classrooms, sharing those rock hard iced oatmeal cookies two for a dollar in the purple cellophane packages, then he wouldn’t stutter as much. And I thought he had nice brown eyes and a sweet smile. Not super-sexy-hot, like Shaylee would say about Brian, but just nice. And he always smelled like yellow Dial soap.

But that was Sunday school. It was different because it was in the church and on Sunday and it was school about Jesus and God. At regular school, I didn’t throw things at him or run up to him on the playground and tell him I wanted to have his baby and then run back to where Brian Woods was and laugh and laugh, the way you-know-who did. But I didn’t stick up for him, either. And I knew, even as my mother told me to be extra kind to him that afternoon, I knew I wouldn’t be. Even I wasn’t that mature and I wished everyone else could see that and stop expecting me to be.

There’s only one main street in Forsyth, and the courthouse is right up the block from the sporting goods store, so we drove directly past the tow-truck backed up on the
sidewalk and the three cop cars with flashing lights, and a photographer from the local paper, of course, and the big car itself, like Babe the Big Blue Ox, I thought, surrounded on the courthouse lawn where it shouldn’t have been.

“What in the world happened here?” My mother asked, turning her head toward the mess.

“That’s Leroy’s grandpa’s car.” I said it almost like a question even though I knew that car because it was the only one I’d ever seen and my dad said probably one of the only Edsels I ever would see.

My mother’s head snapped back to the front, as if she just remembered who her passenger was, and that she had to be a mom and not just some gawker on the street.

“We don’t know that for sure, Mary, and it’s none of your business, anyway. Let me just get this car parked and then we need to hurry and get what you need.” She hated to parallel park and she made a big to-do of getting it right and being too involved to talk about what I was sure was going to be a really big deal in class for awhile. And I had seen it, which I knew was key, because I was downtown for lunch when everyone else was either at school or home. Having a secret in fifth grade is as powerful as being president. Probably my mother knew this and she hurried me into Red Rock Sporting Goods before I could get a longer look at the craziness.

It wasn’t too hard to put my curiosity aside for new Nikes. I knew exactly the ones I wanted, teal and pink laces, size eight, already, on account of my water-ski feet. The sports bras were more difficult because they were all too big, but I finally narrowed it down to the two smallest in plain gray and black and yellow. I held one in each hand
and stared until my mother said, “Mary, you need to make a decision because you’re not getting both.” She knew exactly what I was hoping for.

At the counter we were behind some man my mom knew well enough to say hello to, but who could have been anybody, and while the salesman rang up his fishing tackle and beef jerky they talked about Al Leatherberry being “blitzed out of his gourd,” and how he was such “a heller.”

My mother gave me the keys and told me to wait in the car. She didn’t actually say little pitchers have big ears, but it echoed all around me. I craned my head to look out the back window but it was hard to tell exactly what was going on. She caught me like this, all turned in my seat, and she threw the bag with my things onto my lap and told me to put on my seatbelt.

At the bank the teller gave me a cherry Dum-Dum, and when we finally passed the courthouse again everything seemed pretty much back to normal except for the chunk of missing hedge and the torn spots in the lawn. I must have been smiling too much, I’m sure, with my sucker-stick poking out like a cigarette and a bag of my new things on my lap and my head full of the best kind of gossip, which also happens to be the best kind of cookie—hot and fresh. (Unless it’s a Girl’s Scout Cookie, because those are always good and I happened to be the troop-best-seller that year—seventy-eight boxes with Thin Mints being everyone’s obvious favorite.)

My mother pulled up to the school and I had my door open and “Thanks mom, g’bye” already on my tongue when she grabbed my left arm.
“Mary, I’m sure I don’t need to tell you this, but what you heard in the store and saw at the courthouse isn’t any of your business. Leroy Leatherberry has been through enough today without you contributing to it. Don’t you think?”

“Everybody’s gonna know tomorrow, anyway, Mom. The guy from The Star was there taking pictures.” I said.

“Then they can talk about it tomorrow. And I know you’ll be mature enough not to join them. Okay, so I’ll see you after practice. Have fun.”

I hated that “have fun,” all church-choir and popsicles in July. We couldn’t have candy on the playground and I ripped the sucker from my mouth and tossed it onto the floor of the car before slamming the door.

I made it to the foursquare court before Shaylee Harren wanted to know what was in the bag and when I showed her she told me that she had the same shoes but with the purple and orange laces, which she liked better. I didn’t let her glimpse the bra.

“Did you see what Leroy is wearing?” She asked, pointing like a statue of Lewis and Clark, arm straight, finger straight, out across the playground to the swing set. Leroy had it all to himself.

He still wore his red and blue flannel shirt, tucked in, and brown cowboy boots, and somehow he got his belt to stay around his waist, the oval bronze belt-buckle gleaming, but it was as tight as he could possibly make it because there were no belt loops on the gold sweat pants he was wearing. The lost and found box must have been pretty picked over. The sweats weren’t too long, maybe they were girls’, but they looked big in the waist and butt; even where his belt cinched them up they looked baggy.
Leroy glanced in our direction, and as I turned away, ashamed, I noticed the faces of the girls on the monkey bars, the boys on the tetherball court, everyone, it seemed, was looking at Leroy. Laughing at him or looking at us, at Shaylee pointing him out like that. Why did he have to put the belt back on? Why did he always have to make everything that much harder and that much dorkier? He should have just asked to stay inside after lunch, in the room; they would have let him. But no, there he was, center of the playground on the swing set. I clenched the plastic bag in my hand and flashed on the tow-truck and his grandfather’s car and that morning in class and what my mom had just said and right away came that kind of pressure behind my eyes, it made me squint up into the sun and grit my teeth as I tried to get my back to Shaylee. She didn’t even notice for a few seconds because she was still staring at Leroy and giving me the play-by-play of the tortures he’d endured since lunch.

“Brian said he was going to keep a bunch of diapers in his backpack and leave one in Leroy’s desk every day. I hope he does. And—What’s wrong, Mary? Are you crying? Why are you crying?” She was speaking loud enough to attract the attention of the girls jumping rope near us, just what she wanted.

“I’m not crying.” I kept looking into the sky.

Loud: “Are you crying about Leroy?” Even louder: “Do you like him or something?”

I dropped my bag and slapped Shaylee Harren across the cheek. The sound was beautiful, crisp and sharp and solid. It didn’t echo out over the monkey bars and to the tetherball pole; it popped once and was gone like one of those little red Black Cat
firecrackers. My hand stung. Shaylee’s cheek was white for a flash, with my fingerprints, and then a brilliant, burning red.

My parents did not spank. I don’t think I had ever given them cause too, even if they did, but they didn’t. I had never felt a bare hand strike bare flesh; I’d never been the hand or the face. I savored all of that for five seconds before I became the face.

Shaylee’s scream was primal and she lunged with something of a slap-punch, knocking me to my butt. She followed me down but wasn’t there for longer than it took to grab a handful of my hair, when the playground monitor, the librarian, Ms. Leslie Larson, pulled Shaylee off and helped me up, holding us each at arm’s length as she brought us inside.

Leslie the Lesbrarian, Shaylee had named her in September. She smelled like books and my dad’s Old Spice and wore her spiky hair like a professional rugby player. Maybe even better than slapping her was watching as Shaylee winced at the librarian’s touch. You have to admire that, even on her way to the principal’s office, some serious discipline on her horizon, Shaylee turned her head to the clusters of students paused in their playground activities, their jump ropes hanging limp, freeze tag momentarily frozen, all looking in our direction, to make gagging faces and mouth, “Gross and Puke” in reference to her close proximity to the lesbrarian of her making.

Before my parents arrived at school—they were called, of course, right away, by Principal Nesbit himself—but after the incident, Shaylee and I were not allowed to go back to our classroom. Juvenile delinquents were always treated like rock stars in the hours after their misbehavior and our class was still reeling from that morning’s memorable main attraction with Leroy. I’m not sure where Shaylee was sent, but I got a
table to myself in a corner of the library where I was to spend the afternoon composing an apology as well as a few paragraphs on how to handle anger without resorting to violence. It took half an hour and after Ms. Larson looked it over and announced it “well-written with serious reflection,” she told me I could read until the dismissal bell and even gave me a piece of bubble gum.

When I returned from wandering the stacks of books, plucking one and then another, skimming the back before re-shelving it, reveling in having the whole library to myself, Leroy Leatherberry was seated across from my spot at the table, his head bent, eyes closed, hands folded together on top of his red notebook, praying.

I eased myself into my chair, not wanting to disturb him. I didn’t. He stayed that way a good five minutes longer, an eternity, and I had to pretend to read my book that whole time. Finally he looked right at me so long I shifted my eyes from the sentence I’d read and re-read forty times and watched as he blew a giant, pink bubble half the size of his head and very round and let it burst almost elegantly and shrivel back into his mouth. It was the single coolest thing I’d ever seen him do.

“Ms. Larson gave me gum.” He didn’t stutter at all.

I let mine poke out through my teeth. “Me too. Were you praying?”

He nodded. “My grandpa had a car accident downtown. Principal Nesbit just came and told me ‘cause they’re not sure who’s gonna get me after school.” He stuttered a little.

“Is your grandpa okay?” I asked.

“Principal Nesbit said he’s not hurt, but he still can’t come and get me today.”
This was just the break I needed. “My parents have to come for me anyway.” I said. “They can probably give you a ride.” It would take some attention from me, Leroy in the car with us. It was perfect.

Leroy didn’t buy it. “I saw you slap Shaylee Harren.” He said. “You’re gonna be in big trouble when your parents get here.”

His newfound poise threw me off. “So. What else are you gonna do?”

He waited. I saw him forming his words. “Could you help me pray? You probably do it better than me.”

It wasn’t at all what I expected and I blushed at his confidence in my close personal relationship with God. “Sure. Are we praying for your grandpa or for a ride home for you?” I asked.

“Both.”

So we did. In silence, eyes closed, hands folded, though I peeked through my lashes at him once or twice. I asked God to take care of his grandfather and to find him a ride, or better yet, to make my parents take him. Then I asked if I could still play volleyball (because I sensed that one coming, and of course, I was right, that was a no—and the new shoes and sports bra went back to the store) and I asked that I would be allowed to go to Chrissy Grossman’s birthday party the coming weekend (I wasn’t) and finally that people would soon forget about Leroy’s poop-incident (they didn’t.)

When I opened my eyes for real I saw two police officers, one chubby, one not, at the door of the library, talking to Principal Nesbit and Ms. Larson. Leroy’s eyes were still closed.
I managed “Hey. The police are here.” But wondered if they were for me or for him. I’d never slapped anyone before. It could be pretty serious. Leroy turned to see them striding over, both smiling like jack o’-lanterns.

The chubby one crouched next to him. “Hi Leroy. I’m Officer Nesbit, Principal Nesbit’s brother. Officer Ellis and I are going to give you a ride home.”

“Do you know where I live? It’s all the way out past Rosebud.” He was all in stutters.

“We’ll figure it out. Are you ready now?” Ellis had already grabbed Leroy’s backpack and jacket.

Leroy looked at the Principal, tall and important, who nodded. They wanted to get him out of there before the dismissal bell.

He pushed away from the table slowly. When he stood up we could see the gold sweats, the buckle. He said, “I don’t have my pants.”

Nesbit handed him a plastic grocery sack, the handles tied together at the top.

Leroy pushed in his chair. I was terrified, police were scary, but he said, assured, “It’s because we prayed, Mary. Thanks.”

“I don’t think it works that quick.” I said.

“It might. Probably because it was both of us. And because you know what you’re doing.” He said, and led the officers out.

His departure wasn’t as stealthy as they might have hoped for. Brian Woods happened to be at the pencil sharpener, fastened along the row of windows, when the cop car had pulled up in front of the building. In fact, in every classroom on that side of the school students saw the cops walk in alone and walk out with Leroy.
“Crap your bum, the cops’11 come” was a popular slogan for a couple of years. But there’s also real status in leaving the school between two officers, even if you’re wearing yellow sweatpants and cowboy boots when you do it.

I mean, it wasn’t enough status to make the whole thing blow over. Memories are long in small towns, small classes. Barry Fitzgerald got an erection at Annemarie Meyer’s pool party in eighth grade. When we were seniors, one of the yearbook editors, dumped just before the prom by Mr. Fitzgerald himself, put “Boner Barry” under his photo-caption. It made the final printing.

All that aside, sometimes, for the rest of fifth grade, I would catch Leroy with his eyes closed, still in his desk, praying. I’d never seen him do it before that day in the library, but here he was: hands folded, head bowed. I don’t know what he prayed for. We never talked about it, but it made him more mysterious than before, this newly acquired faith—the real kind, not just for Sundays. Other classmates must have noticed, too, but nobody much teased him about it. Not about that. Leroy had a secret. Secrets mean power in fifth grade. Secrets mean power out of fifth grade. Especially for a kid like Leroy Leatherberry, and even for a kid like me.
Several years ago a delivery truck flipped over on Interstate 95 in Connecticut, between exits 15 and 16. The truck was filled with exotic birds and the crash loosened the cages, smashed open the door at the back of the truck; the birds flew. Many were accounted for, coaxed down from the trees alongside the highway. Quite a few were dead or wounded, their red and green feathers fluttering amongst the fast food wrappings and bottles clumped along the road's shoulder. But some of the birds flew far.

By the 90watt glare of his porch light Noah Oaksea worked quietly, contentedly, and barefoot in the wet grass of his backyard. It needed to be mowed, but there was no time for that now; no time for any of life's periphery. His blue striped pajama bottoms were soaked to mid-leg and each trip across the lawn, from scrap pile to workshop to the model of the ark built some three weeks before, was mildly painful, uncomfortable at best, the cold blades of grass poking up under his pants.

There had been a break in the temperature, a sudden cold snap, this the second week of September. The red line on the thermometer by the garage dove from the mid-eighties to the high fifties, unusual for Kansas this time of year. But Noah, bare-chested, no shoes—outside for the last several hours after waking from a shallow sleep, an unnecessary sleep, thought Noah, for who had time for that now—he didn't notice the cold, didn't feel it. Three nails poked out jaggedly from between his lips, clenched, for the moment, by his strong white teeth. He studied the model, walked around it, studied more, and then pulled one of those nails from his mouth and placed it into position, gripped his hammer, and tap-tap-tapped, lightly, for it was late, and everyone else was asleep.
Noah's wife, Karen, watched him from the dark of the kitchen. It was easier to see out the window if she didn't put on the light. That's what she told herself, anyway, as she shivered in her cotton nightgown, now worn even thinner than its original summer lightness. She shrugged her head and neck down into her shoulders, her arms crossed against her chest, each hand clenching the opposite arm's bicep. He promised he would just go to sleep. He promised, when they were already in bed, after they'd made love, twice (twice!), because he now wanted so much for a third child, a child that was only an idea, a maybe-sort-of future possibility, a month before. Now a third child was part of the plan, part of God's plan. "We'll have one more son," he'd told her. "One more and that will be three. That will be right."

And he wasn't the way he'd always been, in bed, making love. There were no sweet whisperings, little kisses along her spine: he jammed and thrusted like the machine they'd used to aerate the lawn the summer before.

Afterward, she pulled down her nightgown and pushed the little button on the yellow lamp on her bed-stand. His breathing was heavy. The breaths themselves seemed to be satisfied by a job well done, and it was then that she made him promise not to go into the backyard. He would sleep, he needed to sleep, grey and purple rings beneath the swimming pool blue of his eyes. But when she woke up thirsty, her neck cramped, the red letters on the alarm clock piercing 2:38 into the dark, she knew, without turning, that he wasn't next to her. He hadn't been next to her since their return from vacation.

Now she watched him from the little window above the sink—he carried boards here and there, studied angles, tapped his hammer. As she watched she filled a glass with
water, one of the boy’s cups from the Mystic Aquarium: two dolphins swimming up and down in the sparkly blue fluid trapped between the cup’s clear plastic binding. Her purse was on the counter and she removed from it a thin paper sack, folded, small, it smelled like the inside of her bag, leather and spearmint gum. From the sack she pulled a foil pouch of birth control pills. Lacey from work got them for her, from her own prescription, gave them to her twelve pills ago, twelve days. She swallowed the thirteenth while he dragged a long board, longer than Noah’s own six feet, to his workstation. The board looked familiar. She pressed her face to the window. It was from their fence, the fence around the backyard. *He’s tearing apart the fence now?* She couldn’t know this, then, in the dark of the kitchen, unnoticed, but by the next afternoon all but the gate posts would be in his wood pile, part of God’s plan.

*Sherwood State Park is exit 17 off of Interstate 95. One year after the truck accident, scientists and researchers from the Connecticut University System set up camp in the park, which consists of a smallish cluster of trees along rolling beach dunes at an inlet of the Atlantic. They were investigating claims made by Westport locals, and two reports written by park officials, that tropical birds, parrots, were living in those trees.*

Noah had the dream twice before they went on vacation. But it was only in Connecticut that he began to see the signs, to really pay attention to what God was telling him. At Karen’s brother Greg’s house, in Stamford, while the boys and their cousins played in the backyard, he rested in the guest room, a warm breeze drifting the scent of tar from construction on the street across the windowsill and over to the bed. He read a few pages in his worn Bible-workbook, then from Leviticus, Romans, Corinthians.
After Bible study Thursday night (they caught their plane to JFK early the next morning) Noah had insisted to Father Ryan that he would follow this reading regiment devoutly during his entire vacation, though the preacher had not asked him to.

“Take a break, Noah. Relax. On vacation even I’m known to read a Grisham novel.” The preacher had then winked, conspiratorially, and patted Noah on the back, like a frat-brother.

But Noah could not be dissuaded. Lately he’d been in attendance at both Tuesday and Thursday night studies, Saturday church softball with the boys, then Sunday service and youth-ministry, where he volunteered. It was easier to feel close to God, to forget his sinful thoughts, his secret urgings, if he stayed close to the church, to other Christians. He was worried about this vacation, Karen’s brother’s influence on his family. Greg the gay divorcée—the tri-athlete investment banker with two kids from a marriage he now referred to as “a production to please my parents, though the ex and I racked up some nice wedding gifts out of the deal.” After the initial drama the ex-wife was surprisingly understanding, made jokes about Greg having better fashion sense than she did, and Greg had his daughters on the weekends, some holidays, and two months out of every summer.

Noah had objected to their visits to Greg’s before, always relenting because Karen so loved her brother, but this summer he had pleaded with her, their suitcases spread out across their bed, as Karen moved from dresser to closet to bathroom, sorting and folding t-shirts and swimming suits.

“It’s not too late,” he had said, watching her from the doorway. “We could go camping. We could drive over to your parents, surprise them—they’d love that.”
Karen had dumped a baggie of toothbrushes and sunscreen into the mix, talked with her back to him, shaking her head the whole time. “It is too late. We have our plane tickets. He’s expecting us. And that’s not even the point, Noah. David and Matty love Uncle Greg’s.”

Noah stepped between Karen and the dresser. “This is what I’m talking about. Matt and David are already convinced Greg’s some sort of celebrity. We don’t need to reinforce that lifestyle—that’s how it starts, us telling them it’s okay. Then Matt comes home in a couple of years and tells us he’s got himself a boyfriend, just like his cool Uncle Greg, and aren’t we so happy for him, cause being gay is okay.”

Karen had stopped then. She took Noah’s hands in hers, searched his face. “Where is this coming from, huh? I seem to remember you having a pretty good time last year yourself. If you want to stay here then I’ll take the boys, but we’re going.” She dropped his hands, tiptoed up to kiss his cheek, and headed into the bathroom, still talking. “I love my brother. He’s a good person and a good father, and he’s not gonna turn our sons gay or anything else.”

Noah had left her rummaging in the medicine cabinet while grabbed his Bible from the kitchen table and settled into a rusted lawn chair in the backyard. He read until it was too dark to see the tiny print, even with the porch light. And then he had prayed and prayed for strength.

In the quiet of the guest bedroom in Connecticut, the memory of that conversation troubled him, but the warm breeze fluttered his eyes, brought with it a cloud of sleep. In his dream Noah stands in his backyard in a long grey tunic, sandals. The yard is bigger,
lusher, the grass the same color green as the pictures of Eden in his son Matthew’s illustrated Bible for kids. He is patient, waiting, sucking great mouthfuls of the fresh air, his eyes bright with oxygen, and when God speaks, and he knows it to be the voice of God, righteous, pure and strong, it comes from all around him: the picnic table, the grass, the roof of their house. The words are of no consequence, their meaning is immediate, he can feel it, God’s righteousness, his call to duty, pulsing in his fingertips, in his bones, light across his tongue. He understands. He is Noah, “Grace in the eyes of the LORD. And GOD said unto Noah, The end of all flesh is come before me; for the earth is filled with violence through them; and, behold, I will destroy them with the earth.” He must build the ark for GOD.

A dream is just a dream. Noah understood that. But when he awoke, the voice of God still an echo along his spine, he reached for his Bible only to find that it was open, and not to John, where he had left it, had left his laminated bookmark of the Ten Commandments, but it was open to Genesis, Chapters 6-9, the story of Noah. The story of he.

For three weeks the scientists gathered evidence, took hundreds of photos, collected samples, and came to a consensus: A resounding yes. Tropical birds, two species of parrot, in fact, were thriving at Sherwood State Park. A conclusive answer as to how they had survived the winter, a fairly mild one but by no means tropical, was not determined at that time. It is still not.

Karen parked in the driveway and was retrieving her gym bag and a sack of groceries from the hatchback of their station wagon—just some stuff for dinner, pasta and sauce, things she’d grabbed a few minutes before, on her way home from work—when
her son Matt thumped down the front steps and slumped his way to her, dejected for show.

He took the groceries, always helpful, and she ruffled his soft brown hair, warm from the sun, as she shut the car door. “What’s the matter, kiddo?”

He shrugged his shoulders like an actor playing a kid onstage, then stared at the ground and said, “There are 350,000 named species of beetle. There are 24,000 in just the USA and Canada.”

“Are you studying beetles in school?” Karen asked, following him up the steps, into the house, the thunder of hammering from the backyard now accepted background music.

“No. Dad hauled out the A thru C encyclopedias from the garage. He’s making me help him list species of animal and insect. David was helping, too. Sort of.”

Karen wasn’t surprised by this revelation, and that is what bothered her most. She put things away, tried to sound light-hearted with her answer. “Well that’s not too torturous, is it Matt? Sounds kind of fun.” She handed him lettuce, carrots, a chopping board.

Matt told things in his own time, it was something he’d learned from Noah, and he waited to speak again until she had the water boiling and the sauce started.

“Besides the encyclopedias he’s been out there all day. He didn’t even change out of his bathrobe and he smells. When’s he going back to work?”

This was, in fact, the third full day of work he’d missed. Monday he went to the office in the morning but was home by one, out in the backyard, building through the night. Only stopping once, for sex, an apple. When Karen saw, on Tuesday, while
getting the kids ready for school, herself for work, that he was still out there, that he had no intention of heading into the office, the office where he had worked so hard to be promoted to district sales manager, she had asked him what she should tell them when she called for him.

Noah had looked up from his sawing then, looked up at her as though she was testing him, as though she didn’t believe in his purpose and wanted him to create a disguise for God’s work.

“Tell them I’m never coming in again,” he had told her. “Tell them Noah was just a man and perfect in his generations, and Noah walked with God.”

She told his secretary that he had mono, had gotten it from one of the kids’ friends, shared cake at a birthday party, and that he would certainly be out for the rest of the week. Now there was a monstrous fruit and cheese basket on the kitchen table, a get-well card fastened to the top of the cellophane. And there was Matt, still chopping carrots, waiting for his answer.

“I don’t know, Matt. Your dad is going through a rough time right now. He’s trying to figure some things out. But he loves you very much, you know.” It was an answer that said nothing, revealed nothing, the kind that Matt hated, that Noah hated. But what could she say?

“Yeah, but today he tore down the tree fort. He ruined the whole thing, even the platform, and you already said I could have a sleepover on Saturday.” Matt paused, waited for his mother to make a statement, some excuse, and then continued on, a litany of sins. “And he keeps quoting the Bible. He told David and I that we could skip our homework and just read Genesis. He said he’s gonna quiz us.”
Karen sighed. “He’s not going to quiz you.” She had willed herself not to look out the kitchen window, to view the day’s progress. She wanted just to keep with the schedule, make dinner, help with homework, a little TV, and then get the kids to bed. Tomorrow breakfast and lunches and work and then home. Maybe if they could just get to the weekend, she could reason with Noah, sit down with he and Father Ryan, talk this thing out.

Now, she stopped setting the table and turned to the window—the once landscaped backyard hardly recognizable. Without the fence their lawn hit a strip of dirt and then nothing, space: rocks and short yellow weeds into a pinkish Kansas sunset. To the right and left of their house were neighbors, but behind this fairly recent development, the houses sat on acres of brown land, wasted space, one of the many reasons Noah had used to try and convince her of his purpose: all this unused land for building his ark. Flat land that would flood and flood with water.

And he was building right out into that land. The boards he’d nailed together, a base, she supposed, ran the length of the backyard and out into the field, far out into the field. At least the length of a football field, maybe, this platform of boards nailed together. In the mix of lumber, now one solid mass, she recognized the blue and red paint of the tree house, and when she looked to the branches of the silver poplar, where it first broke to a ‘v’, she glimpsed a few remnants still nailed to the bark, broken branches, and the tire-swing hanging lonely, empty.

Their other son, David, was rollerblading the length of the wooden base, out into the field, back into the yard, and out again, delighted by this new plaything. Noah was in the corner of the yard in his dirty grey bathrobe, two weeks of splotchy brown beard
(rough on her skin during their now ritualistic twice nightly sex) and brown sandals she’d bought for him on their honeymoon, in Barbados, twelve years before, and that he’d never worn since. He was hacking away at what used to be their picnic table, great violent swoops with a hatchet. Karen didn’t recognize him, this man she had known since college. He looked like someone she might give money to in the grocery store parking lot, a Vietnam Vet, a drug addict in a bathrobe roaming the city park. She turned off the stove, both burners, and looked at her son. Sound calm.

“Why don’t you go and grab David and we’ll pack up some things and go and visit grandma and grandpa?” Her parents lived in Denver. They wouldn’t make it tonight but they could find a motel a few hundred miles down the road, a few hundred miles away from Noah’s backyard.

Matt arched his eyebrows, looked a little like the old Noah. “But we have school tomorrow.”

“It won’t kill you to miss one day, will it? C’mon, it’ll be an adventure.”

Matt knew the answer but paused at the back door and asked, “Is dad coming?”

“No, honey I don’t think so.” Her eyes followed him out across the lawn. They watched as he chased down David. Noah didn’t even look up. She decided she would leave him a note, upstairs, in the bedroom. He wouldn’t venture there until he thought she was in bed, waiting for him, for her part in God’s plan. They would be hours away by then.

Since the study conducted by the University of Connecticut, no other extensive research has been done into the phenomenon of tropical parrots inhabiting Sherwood Island, though National Geographic mentioned the birds on a recent program entitled “Nature’s Unexpected Resilience.”
In his truck, on the way home from the building supply store, Noah thought about their vacation, the four of them on the beach, how happy they seemed to be in those moments. He’d found Karen’s note when he went to change into pants, a shirt, something more suitable for a public outing than his robe. “But I’ll wear what I want on the ark. I’ll be the public.”

The note was short, simple: she was leaving, taking the kids and wouldn’t return until he could “get his act together.” She didn’t say to where, but Noah knew, he didn’t have to guess. God supplied him with all answers. They were headed to her parents’ house in Denver. I love you so much, Noah. I want you to get better. Go and speak with Father Ryan, please. Talk to him about all of this. He can help you. That part had made Noah smile, for he had spoken with Father Ryan that very afternoon. He had invited the good preacher to view his progress, his ark for God, and Father Ryan couldn’t understand it. He stood sweating in the backyard, hands on his hips, a fake little smile on his face, worry lines creased the perspiration on his brow.

He had to moisten his lips to speak, tug at the collar of his navy blue polo shirt, Papa Ryan embroidered over the left chest, Noah’s idea, a present from the youth group last Christmas. “Noah, I’m not sure that I understand all of this, but I think maybe you should come inside, have something to eat, and we’ll talk. You look tired, Noah, and you look thin, have you been eating?”

Noah knew, then, what a waste it had been to call him. What a joke. He picked up his tools and carried on, let the father see his own way out. He couldn’t trust him to understand this, how could he? It was Noah who was called upon, he who must do God’s
bidding. Father Ryan was jealous; he would never know this sacred call but would be killed in the crush of water, drowned in forty days and nights of rain.

The preacher hadn’t moved, so Noah locked eyes with him and raised his hammer. He spoke quietly, firmly; he tried to mimic the Charlton Heston movies. “And it repenteth the LORD that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved Him in His heart.” Noah struck the blow, hammer to nail.

Father Ryan had stepped back, clasped his hands together in front of his chest, almost like praying. “Noah, we’re friends. Karen is worried about you. I’m worried about you. Won’t you come and talk to me awhile?”

Noah had swung the hammer back and forth in front of him, a wide and slashing arc. He stepped toward the preacher, crescendoing and decrescendoing to match his swings. “And it repenteth the LORD that he had made man in the earth, and it grieved Him in His heart.”

And Father Ryan, fearing his might, cowering, had left the yard through the space where the fence gate used to swing.

Noah turned the truck, its bed piled high with boards and supplies, two thousand dollars on his credit card, the limit, and continued on toward his house. He’d had a rough time in the store; the men in the lumber department wanted measurements.

“What are you building, sir? I can better assist you if I can understand your project.” This from some insignificant twenty-year-old in an orange apron. As if he could ever understand the magnitude of Noah’s project.

Noah didn’t bother to quote the Good Book, the truth: *The length of the ark shall be three hundred cubits, the breadth of it fifty cubits, and the height of it thirty cubits.*
Instead, he had said to this pimple-faced kid, this sinner with chew in his lip, “And understanding in the mind of man is but foolishness in the eyes of God.” Then Noah continued stacking reams and reams of lumber, piling them carefully.

While in the checkout line he saw the same pimple-face boy standing with a girl the same age, too much makeup, a harlot, both of them leaning on the paint counter. The boy was imitating him, big hand gestures, TV preacher speak. They made their mockery open and obvious, to Noah and to all. Before leaving, after he had shoved his credit card back into his wallet, he cast his eyes to them, and nodded his head, boomed his voice out across the tiled floor to where they stood. “And GOD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was evil continually.” The harlot put her hand to her mouth and then the two of them folded into laughter, leaning on each other with hysterics.

Noah had then tipped his head to the older woman at the cash register, the golden glint of a cross necklace hanging against the black of her skin, where her collared shirt opened to reveal it. Then he pushed his monstrous cart out into the parking lot. How could they see when they were drowning? Now drowning in their sins, soon in God’s water. He would drop off his supplies, work a little, and then go for Karen. They had time. The first Noah took years and years to build his ark. There was time. First he would make Karen see, take her by force, if he had to, for God would help him. He would need her, and the boys, his family chosen through him.

Noah rubbed his right hand, swollen red from his work that afternoon. He had never been particularly handy. In school, in shop class, his spice rack and end table were both average, C+ kind of material. But with God’s hands guiding his every movement,
he felt secure, empowered. The pain was good; it felt true. He’d fallen from the tree while ripping boards from the fort, thwacking his hand against the trunk as he fell. A monkey would sure have helped get that fort down. He chuckled, thinking how they would have monkeys, and apes, gorillas, all on the Ark. Were apes and gorillas the same? He’d have to find out. They would have to make lists, be organized. It would take time.

Noah fiddled with the radio, then left it off, preferring to repeat the lines he’d now memorized, most of them, anyway. He didn’t repeat them in order. He picked his favorites, one in particular:

“And GOD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was evil continually.”

That was the line that had helped him, the truth that had saved him, and given him his great purpose unto God.

Skeptics say that while the birds may have lasted one season, they have most certainly died out by now, and they sight the lack of evidence proving otherwise. However, locals and regular beach goers insist that the parrots do, indeed, continue to survive and breed on Sherwood Island, and that every so often a lucky sunbather will glimpse a streak of red or green in the trees or overhead, the squawky call of the jungle, a faraway place.

At the beach, in Connecticut, Noah had watched his family from his seat on a towel pushed back by the trees, but his mind was on his dream from the afternoon previous, the open Bible, God’s voice. One day removed and it seemed like a dream—not the way it felt right after, as if God still was with him, pushing him to act. The sun had made him squint, he was drowsy, maybe he would dream it again.
Down the shore, fuzzy in the sun, were Karen and the boys, in the surf, collecting shells. The breeze wafted barbeque from further up the shore, by the pavilion, and that smell mixed with the salty, slightly fishy drift off the ocean. Noah licked the salt from his lips and then a shadow blocked the sun-glare, and Greg was next to him, pulling him up off the towel, leading him by the hand deep into the trees, the splotches of sun between leaves, shadows, his bare feet gouged by the undergrowth. But he followed willingly, ran his hand, again and again, along the top of Greg’s back, his skin hot and smelling of coconut, the grit of sand in his molars, in their rough kiss.

They’d done this before, even when Greg was married, some attraction, some sin, pushed them together. But now, as Greg worked at the string on Noah’s swim trunks, garish, yellow and orange, the rough bark of the tree they were against digging into his back—scratching it enough so that Karen later noticed, rubbed ointment on it, told him to be more careful when he dove for Frisbees in the sand—now, with Greg’s hand on him, his mouth, all of it sinful and urgent, he looked up into the branches and saw the birds: parrots, two red ones, perched together.

Greg kept on, his mouth, his hot, sandy tongue, but Noah arched his neck, to be sure, it was no sun-glare or heat-stroke, there were two of them, where they had no right to be, two parrots, and they flew from the branch together, overhead, Noah watching their trail like a red comet beneath the green canopy. It was then that he’d again heard the voice of God—heard it all around, from the trees, the parrots— And GOD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was evil continually. I will destroy man, whom I have created, from the face if
the earth; both man and beast, and the creeping things, and the fowls in the air; for it repenteth me that I have made them. But Noah found grace in the eyes of the LORD.

And Noah had stopped Greg, slapped at his face and shamed him, made him cough and choke on his shame, though Noah was not shamed, because God had chosen him, despite his sin. He saw that Noah was pure of heart, devoted, and He had called to him and offered signs, and from that moment, Noah knew what he had been called to do. And he would do it.

In the backseat of the station wagon the boys played hand-held video games, paused their screens only long enough to eat fistfuls of cheese-doodles and swig orange pop from plastic bottles: treats to pacify them. Karen used the cruise control. Noah hated cruise control, never let her turn it on; he almost always drove on long trips, anyway. She eyed the rearview as part of a constant pattern: watch the road, eye the rearview, watch the road, eye the rearview, watch the road… She didn’t really expect to see his green truck lumbering up behind her, but it wouldn’t have come as a surprise, either.

They’d only been driving half an hour or so when the first plink of rain hit the windshield, then another, and another, then several at once, faster and faster like a children’s song poked out on an old piano—the player increasing his speed as he remembered the tune. It was hard to make out the heavy clouds in the dark sky, all of it a black tarp stretched overhead.
Karen flicked on the windshield wipers and slowed her driving, the rain thick and loud on the roof. The boys paused their games. Matt then shut his off, and David followed.

“Should we pull over?” Matt asked, leaning forward between the front seatbacks and using his grownup voice.

Karen made her own voice steady. “No, hunny. It’s just a cloudburst. We’ll drive out of it pretty soon I bet.”

But just as she finished saying this they heard the squawking and flapping: birds. It was dark, and then there was the rain, the wipers, but they were birds, crows, maybe, huge and black, flying this way and that in front of the car, alongside the car. David shrieked in the backseat, then Matt. Then they were screaming with the birds squawking, and the pounding of the rain, all of it in her head. The birds were all around them, like the rain itself, as if they had driven into a whole flock of them, and maybe they had.

All Karen could think as she put on her flashers, spoke softly to the boys, eased off the gas, was that she couldn’t remember ever having seen a bird in the rain, though she must have. She must have seen a bird in the rain before, outside, it’s feathers wet and oily. But she couldn’t recall it. They were slowing, the speed 45, then 40, 35, and then thunk, like a black trash bag half-filled with potatoes thrown up against the windshield. They all screamed in unison. They had hit one. Right in the center of the windshield—it had cracked it, even. Karen jerked her hands from the wheel as the bird thudded off the wipers and away into the dark. But in the squawking the screaming and the rain, she found the wheel again, and coasted the car to the side of the road.
In his backyard, his new supplies stacked and ready for his return, Noah surveyed his progress while he stretched his back and shoulders. He was walking to the house, to throw some things in a bag, to call ahead to Karen’s parents, to prepare them, when he noticed the first few drops of rain on his bare arms. Then more: on his face, the top of his head, his sandaled feet. It thundered down quickly and he was drenched in only minutes. And he tipped his head back and stood in the yard and stretched his arms out wide, palms up, receiving the rain; and he smiled at things to come.

“Thus did Noah; according to all that God commanded.”
That summer with Sally it was the kind of hot that the sagging ranchers still talk
about while they’re having coffee out at the Conoco. It was already cracking eighty by
the time you got up, got to moving, even if you were my dad and were puttering around
our camper by ten after six—rocking the thing with every step. Terry is about four dusty
strips of houses, storefronts, and one little park with burnt grass, in the mass of ranchland
and prairie that is Eastern Montana. It’s just there—cropped up—like it coulda been
blown to where it is by the dry gusts of wind that scatter everything else. Terry bakes in
the summer like a pie in the oven. That summer was no different, but maybe just a little
worse—like the piecrust woulda come out black.

I was workin’ three afternoons a week for Sally. We arranged the whole thing
right after school let out—my junior year stitched to a close. Dad and I had the produce
stand set up out there by the Conoco, our camper behind it, and the little yellow fireworks
booth was clumped over to the right—but the State wouldn’t allow us to open that ‘til 15
days prior to the fourth. We only lived in the camper from the middle of May thru
September. Sometimes in December we’d haul it out behind the Christmas tree stand—
but only as a warming shack. We had an apartment downtown—just a two bedroom with
shrieking radiators up over the Rexall Drugstore. But it used to be I couldn’t wait to get
outta that apartment and back into the camper—even if it did smell like two guys had
been living in it all the summer before. I couldn’t wait.

Sally’d been a regular for as long as I could remember. Always zipping up in her
’65, 225 powder blue Ford Mustang—MSTNGSL on the vanity plate. She’d pull right in
front of the stand, not even a parking spot, really—a cloud of dust wafting over to us, to our stacks of fruit.

Our first day open and my hands were blue and red because I’d been repainting some of the signs: “Local Melons.” “Real Idaho Potatoes.” When I handed her back her change, a few limp bills, some of the paint smeared onto a five. She took the money in her right hand, which was partially enclosed in a wrist brace.

I looked at her. At the money. At her brace. I waited for the lecture. Sally had spoken at school once or twice. She was the first woman, but still Republican, ever elected to State Senate from District 39. She went back to the senate three times more after that. I was pretty sure she wasn’t going to like the red swipe across Lincoln.

She noticed. Held up the bills and looked right at them, then folded them all once, twice, and shoved them into a little silver coin purse.

“Is your father around, Horace? She asked, unwrapping a stick of Doublemint then offering the pack over to me.

“He’s back in the camper,” I told her. “I think he’s taking a nap.” It was kind of a lie. I knew he was taking a nap. That or he was stretched out on his bunk, working on a sixth or seventh can of Coke, and reading a book on space travel. He loved books on space travel. In the summer he checked them out a couple of times a month at the library in Miles City.

Sally took the Doublemint casing back—there were no more sticks. As she spoke she folded the waxy package carefully—like origami. “Well I was gonna ask him, but I might as well you. I have some things I need done around the house. ‘Spose you’ve already heard about my osteoporosis. Broke my wrist in March, still hasn’t healed right.”
She held up the brace as proof. "Dr. Stickney says it’s as crippling as cancer. That’s exactly what he said, the old loon."

"I’m sorry." I told her as a reflex.

"My daughter Dorothy thinks I need to move out to Tampa so I can go to every goddamn dance recital my granddaughter puts on a tutu for. And so she can take care of me." Sally snorted. "What I really need my air conditioners hauled down from the attic, need ‘em put in, too. There’s a whole pile of stuff I want cleared out of the shed, stuff in the basement. I want to at least last out this summer." She waited, chewed her gum a few times, real purposeful. I could see tiny little clumps of her face powder in the cracks by her mouth—where it had gotten wet. She had the kind of eyebrows that were all teased off and then drawn back in. But her eyes were still young, sort of. Cool and blue, big and wide, like that song from elementary school.

"Sound like anything you might be interested in, Horace?" She asked.

"Well I’d need to check with my dad, cause we’re out here pretty much—"

She cut me off, then, like it was already settled. "I’ll pay you eight dollars an hour." She put her little origami clump in her change purse, put her change purse in the sack of fruits I’d given her, tied up the handles at the top. "Do you have work gloves?" She was at her car door, slid down in the leather seat before I could answer.

"Yeah I think so."

She nodded. "Good."

That summer I had this thing about wearing this leather jacket of my dad’s. This ratty job he’d had in high school, a big eagle spread wide across the back. I’ve seen
pictures of him in it, black and whites of he and some guys leaned up against a metal building, jeans rolled, and he really did look sort of cool. His face in those pictures wasn’t the same one I knew, all squashed like a cigarette butt—the promise tapped out.

It was too hot for that jacket—a leather jacket. It was too hot for shorts and a tank-top, bare feet. But I’d sometimes wear that thing over to Sally’s and then just feel my arms and chest start to raisin in it, like I’d put myself in a food dehydrator. But even that doesn’t quite cover it cause I’d be sweating, too. I’d be out in the shed pulling through piles of brittle Life magazines and boxes of Christmas decorations, and I might even have the jacket buttoned up. Just ‘til I couldn’t stand it. Then I’d pull open the snaps and tear it off and my arms would look all pale and shrunken—like I’d just gotten a cast off. My t-shirt would be stuck to me, pasted down.

Sally caught me, my second week, right as I was breaking free from the jacket, tearing it off and tossing it away. She was in the doorway to the shed, a glass of sun tea in her hand, and I didn’t see her until I turned to carry a box out to the trash. The box was big, moldy, soft cardboard and hard to manage, and when I saw her like that, hovering, an audience for my weird little striptease, I lost my grip and tumbled the whole thing to the concrete floor.

“You’re a little early for wrestling season, aren’t you?” She handed me the glass.

“I don’t wrestle.” I drank and drank to keep from saying more. The tea was so cold and sweet that it burned the back of my throat, froze my tonsils.

“Didn’t think so. What’s with the sauna routine if you’re not trying to make weight?” She stuck her garden-gloved hand out for the now empty glass.

“I don’t know. Just something to wear.” I bent to gather the box.
“That’s a stupid answer.” She turned and left while I was struggling to my feet with the mess.

Sally had a whole menagerie of lawn ornaments. I had to mow around them, clip around them, weed around them—then make sure they were all back where they were supposed to be. She had deer, garden gnomes, ceramic frogs, these wooden cut-outs painted to look like old people bent over in the garden—the woman’s broad backside and where her frilly white old lady underwear was showing. Plus, Sally had plastic pink flamingos—three of them clustered beneath this Catalpa tree, and one of them posed up in the tree itself. It was that one in particular that bothered me, its glossy peppercorn eyes watching from behind the big leaves—leaves bright green and soft, the size of a man’s hand—some almost the size of a baseball glove—but the little eyes still peering out.

“Did I ever tell you about that Catalpa?” She asked me, on more than one occasion.

“Yeah.” I’d say, but she’d tell me again, anyway.

“Dale swore he’d get one good and growing before he died, and he did. Even way out here in these goddam badlands. We first saw them on the golf course over in Miles City. He must have started at least six of them. Got ‘em going real well all spring, all summer. Then it’d hit about Thanksgiving and that would be it.” She would pause—hand on her hip, just sort of staring at the tree. “You’d look out here and it would be a grey pole with a few sticks poking up out of three feet of drifted snow. But this one made it. Only one in Terry.”
Dale Flemming, the now dead husband, had once been sort of a local legend. He was the guy who built and ran the drive-in and owned more shares of sugar beet land than anyone else in all of Prairie County. He bought her the Mustang the year the song became a hit for Wilson Pickett, 1966. She told us that once at a school assembly—when we were supposed to be asking these questions about politics, and all anybody wanted to know about was that car. But she sort of smiled when she told it. She didn’t seem put out.

Sally had me run the hose on that Catalpa for twenty minutes solid—three times a week. I could leave it, but not to get much done anywhere else before I’d have to come back. So usually I’d just stand there with the hose and be watched by the damned flamingo.

That summer I started buying a little weed off of this guy who drove the semi my dad bought produce off of—on the sly, just the stuff he couldn’t get local—a few apples and oranges and pears actually meant for the big grocery stores in places other than Terry. It was all a little illegal—so the pot didn’t seem like as big a deal, somehow. I only bought enough each time to light up maybe twice. I rode my bike over to Sally’s, this shit job from the WalMart, and on the way, if I took the right route, I could make one joint last almost the entire trip.

One day when I’d done just that, was feeling pretty good, it was time to water the Catalpa. Sally had left on some errand. I soaked myself with hose, first, and then stood there, dripping and watering, that flamingo in the tree just staring down at me. I could really feel it staring. So I forced my finger over the spray and shot down that flamingo in
a blast of well water. Then I sprayed it more. I let the water push it around on the
ground—kicking it while it was down, my dad woulda said. I stood right over it and
pounded it full force, and pretty soon I could see the pink fading off it a little, splotchy
patches of white, like it had some flamingo disease. I didn’t stop, then. But I was
considering stopping, when Sally pulled the Mustang right up in front of the house—like
she had seen the whole thing—the whole shoot-em-out, as she was driving down the
street.

At that point, even though I saw her there, getting out of her car, and I saw her
walking over to me, I just couldn’t stop. I kept on spraying. I kept on spraying until she
was next to me in her old lady shorts and white canvas sneakers.

“What are you doing, exactly, Horace?” She sounded like she really wanted to
know.

“I’m killing your flamingo.” I said. “I hate it.”

“What about the others?” She asked, which seemed somehow reasonable.

“Not them. I hate this one.”

Together we watched the water wear at the pink for a moment. Then she said,

“Are you high today, Horace?”

“Yes ma’am.” I said, before I could even think what that answer was going to do
to me. We watched the pink wear some more.

“I told Dorothy if I was moving to Tampa those flamingos were coming with me.
I told her I was gonna put ‘em right out along her front driveway. They live out on a golf
course. You’d think she’d soon as lose her teeth as be embarrassed in front of her
neighbors.” Sally turned to me, then. She looked right at me. “Do you have another joint?” She said it just as simple as asking for Doublemint.

That’s when I finally stopped the spray—moved my finger—let the hose droop and the cold well water splash across my bare toes. “I have one more.”

“You think we might share it? I’m in a hell of a lot of pain, today. Might be just the thing.”

We smoked together at the picnic table in the backyard. There was a crab apple next to us, it’s branches spread out like an umbrella. There was the steady buzzing of the bees in and out of that tree.

Sally choked on her first drag, so I got us both glasses of iced tea from her kitchen—which didn’t smell like old lady at all. It smelled like lemon. It smelled like mint.

When I came out she was sucking down her second round, and doing fine. On the exhale she said, “My bones have holes in them—little tunnels and hollow places.”

All I could think of was these trays of almond foam candy my mom used to bake at Christmas, before she left us. The candy cooling on the kitchen counter, tan sheets with little holes every where, the way it popped and crackled when you bit into it. I didn’t want to tell Sally about that, but I felt like she was waiting for me to tell her something, so I said, “That leather jacket was my dad’s. I like to wear it until I just about can’t breathe in it. Then when I pull it off it’s like it means something.” I took the joint to keep from saying more.
Sally nodded. She breathed deep. Then she said, “I want you to take me to the drive-in, Horace. We’ll make the early show easy.”

I had my license, but my dad barely ever let me drive his Chevy. Sliding behind the wheel of that Mustang was just like sex, I guessed, at the time—not really knowing. I think now I was about right.

On the way there Sally turned up the radio and found an AM oldies station out of Forsyth. The second song on, no shit, was Wilson Picket rambling over his “Mustang Sally.” We both shrieked in unison, like girls at a slumber party. “Drive this thing like a teenager, Horace. My God, you’re driving like Dorothy in her mini-van.”

We drove around until the song was over. When I pulled up to the ticket booth, Sally leaned past me to call out to the fat man in a red plaid shirt, “Hey there Howard. It’s Sally Flemming, come to use my lifetime free pass!” That guy, Howard, he smiled the grin of a drunk-Shriner and waved us on.

It was a double feature, the big summer alien movie and the big, summer slasher. We shared a tub of popcorn between us: popcorn so soaked in butter that Sally had me nab a metal napkin dispenser from the counter at the snack-shack. We just wiped our hands clean and tossed napkin after napkin to the floor. The root beer was crisp, had a bite to it, not too much ice, and pretty soon the stars popped on, one after another, like they too, were controlled by the flip of a switch from the movie projector booth. The sky behind the movie screen stretched blue-black and far, all the way out, Big Sky Country, and spotted with stars, and far, far in the distance, a thin rim of pink-haze.
Sinking the Lollipop King

In Utica, New York, in 1984, Ray Seakins was the Lollipop King of the World. Ray was local legend, larger than life. Jim read about him in the paper—*Lollipop Mogul Makes First Million*. Jim’s dad bought appliances from him and said “Seakins is one fat, rich, sonofabitch.” Jim’s dad liked things that rhymed. They (they being the “they” that plans these sorts of things) even had Ray come to a school assembly once and talk about how he started his business, developing the flavors, shipping the lollipops to all ends of the country, then the world.

But Jim’s friend, Cliff, knew the most about him—the best local-lore. How many hamburger steaks and sides of fries he could (and often did) put away in a single sitting at Michaelsons—six. Where he got his driver, Frankie, who was always with him, like Ray was some big mob-boss or something—they were in The Service together. What he thought of Madonna—“Can’t sing, nice tits.” Cliff knew it all. Wasn’t afraid to share it. He shared plenty, stuff Ray wouldn’t want the whole of Utica to know.

Cliff was a senior who lifeguarded at the Sheraton Inn and Convention Center. Jim, one year behind him in school, had known him since they were little, next-door neighbors; now they were on the track team together. Cliff met Ray because he swam at the Sheraton’s pool five nights a week. Well, he sort of swam; he mostly floated.

After hearing Cliff’s stories, Jim built Ray up in his mind, at night, while he waited for sleep. Without knowing Ray at all, he sculpted those stories into some creation all his own, an image he took some comfort in. Crappy little Utica had this great
man, he thought. This guy with secrets. And if he was willing to share those secrets with Cliff, then why not Jim himself? He would have to make it a point to get to know Ray.

Six of them took their guard course together in the late spring; all of them lean and muscular and happy that, once changed into their swim trunks, they each had the same track-practice farmer tan—brown skin midway up their thighs and to the tops of their shoulders, then bright strips of white, where their uniforms had covered—strips so straight and even they appeared painted on with White-Out. They huddled in one corner of the pool (it was only filled two days previous and felt like swimming in snow-cone slush) arms clenched across those white chests, heads twitching and shivering, while they learned and repeated the cross-chest carry, the hair-tow, the dreaded spinal injury with back-boarding and removal from water, and, their favorite, submerged escapes.

The course instructor, a frail woman in her sixties who painted on her eyebrows, had once trained with the Olympic Synchronized Swimming Team and regarded that as reason enough to be an authority on all things aquatic. She explained that in a real life situation the active drowning victim would be very aggressive, and would see a lifeguard’s head as a buoy and try to grab hold. Because of this, she said, it was good for the students to really challenge each other on the escapes, to be realistic victims when they acted out scenarios.

Jim was the best swimmer in the class, with crisp, smooth strokes and rescues so assured that when forced to partner with him his friends drowned ferociously, whip-kicking their legs to rise up out of the water and climb on top of him, trying to push him beneath the surface while they rode him, a human life raft. They never succeeded
because Jim liked to sink. It came naturally to him, like easy sleep after a long night. He brought them down to the pool’s bottom with him, all the way to the smooth tile base, blue and white squares flecked with silver in the darkness of the diving well, calmly waiting until their lungs first tickled, then itched, then finally demanded air; screamed for air. Always they would loosen their grip on his neck and shoulders, and launch toward the sunlight, their mouths pointed upward, leading, lips gaping and sucking as soon as they broke the surface.

Sometimes, when he was tired of proving himself each and every rescue, Jim would grab an ankle as it shot up past his nose, grab it and hold it for several seconds, right to the point where the ankle’s owner was sure he was going to pass out, and would shake and kick, unable to free himself. And then Jim would let go. He liked the feel of their muscles in his grip. But he liked best the way he felt when he loosened his grip: in control, powerful, the one who both set the trap and released it.

He fumbled away that first certified summer, mowing lawns and cleaning gutters, occasionally guarding at some neighborhood kid’s eighth birthday party. Fourteen screaming second graders in a backyard, above ground pool littered with blow-up sea lions and alligators. There would be music coming from the house, a back door left open and the living room stereo cranked up, Jim straining to hear the local rock station over the shouts from the pool, hating the sunburned kids, the stupid party balloons, all the noise that comes from too many children in a backyard pool.

He’d sit at the edge of the water, sometimes in a makeshift guard tower one of the “clever” fathers had rigged, a lawn-chair on top of four cinder blocks, something lame,
and imagine popping the head off each child, one by one, like that game with the
dandelions “Momma had a baby and it’s head popped…off!”

He had to jump in and pull out kids (always boys) every party, them coughing
and sputtering, twice puking birthday cake all over his bare chest, clumps of pink icing
stuck in the five or six hairs he’d managed to cultivate. The parents, clustered around the
lawn or patio, umbrella drinks and beers in hand, reacted according to gender. The
mothers rushed poolside and scooped up the sputtering child in an oversize beach towel,
wiping his head and face with cocktail napkins and cooing about “brave little boys.” The
fathers paused their conversations to look over, relieved that they didn’t have to jump in
themselves. Then, they frowned, somehow angry with Jim that little Seth couldn’t swim
well. And finally, they chuckled about “boys being boys,” and stooped to grab another
beer from the red cooler at their feet.

Most of the other guys from the lifeguard class applied with the City Rec
department and spent their summers guarding senior lap swims, short-course team
practice, and best of all, the open swims, where teenage girls lazed around the pool in
bikinis; oily jungle cats around a water hole.

Cliff, as you know by now, went to the Sheraton. The pool was indoor, which
sucked in the summer, the chlorinated air wet and suffocating and no hope for a tan. But,
as he told it, there were some perks. One was seeing Ray Seakins every evening, free
lollipops, fucking amazing stories. Then there was the prospect of access to hotel rooms
for weekend parties, beer-blasts, he called them. He managed to throw two: One with
just those fellow lifeguards and three or four twelve packs in a room with a seascape
picture behind the double bed, a fight on a cable channel, the Cliff alone in that bed, bored, by one am.

The second party he hosted the Saturday before most of his friends left for college. Cliff wasn’t going, he “didn’t see the point, man.” He was to keep his lifeguarding job at the Sheraton, maybe pick up some more hours, “Ya stick around long enough, and who knows, I could be a hotel manager, baby. Can’t you just see me in my fucking brown tie?"

This time in attendance were twenty or so of Cliff’s fellow graduates, the lifeguarding class, including Jim, a few other juniors from the track team, and a stripper rented from Night Owl’s dance club. For this gathering Cliff convinced the night manager to let him have the honeymoon suite, complete with a corner bar and a tiny balcony that overlooked part of the Eerie Canal.

Jim spent the first half of the evening on that balcony, watching the occasional homemade tugboat or pleasure craft glide down the green water. He and several lifeguards started out there together, drinking gallon-jug gin and HI-C, shouting and waving at the boaters. But as more people arrived the action centered around the mini-bar and the boombox inside the room. That was fine with Jim.

He sat in a white plastic chair and put his feet on the railing, finishing what was left of that bottle of gin before anyone thought to look for it. The people on the boats at this time of night were older. Families cruising the length of the Eerie for their summer vacations had long-since docked at a port and found a local motel. Maybe even the Sheraton. The people Jim watched looked a little older than his parents, probably mid-fifties. They clustered in small circles, illuminated by lanterns and tiki-torches tied to the
sides of the boats, and they were drinking and laughing, like the party in the room behind him. The difference, Jim noticed, was that the people on the boats were moving, going someplace, while he stood solid on the balcony, only watching. Even though he knew that at night the boats were limited to floating up and then back down the canal, between locks nineteen and twenty, unable to pass through after six pm. And even though he’d been on the canal before, all the way to Lake Eerie one summer with his parents, and was bored by the end of the trip, wishing to be back in Utica. Even with all of that, he was envious of the people he watched that night. He liked the idea of being the man with the boat, old enough to be sure of himself, to gather his friends and tell stories by the lamplight, everyone drinking his liquor and swatting at mosquitoes. He liked the idea of moving on the water at night, unsure what lay below the dark surface but pushing forward all the same. Jim wanted to be sure of something, to push forward past uncertainty because he was certain of his goal. That was what Ray Seakins would do, he would make up his mind and then push forward, full steam ahead. So Jim made up his mind, right there, his feet up on the railing. He wanted Cliff’s job. To get it, Cliff would have to be fired. It wouldn’t be that hard.

A breeze blew the stink of rot toward the balcony. On the other side of that small section of canal, out beyond the old towpath where mules once followed the ships, pulling them through the locks, lay pools of stagnant groundwater and rain. Sometimes a solid wind could blow the stink out over all of Utica and Jim would smell it at track practice, sprinting a corner and hit, dead on, by a wave of rot and decay. It made him falter a step or two, refocus on his rhythm. But Jim thought there was something mildly pleasant about it, something constant a reassuring about the way things decayed, bubbled
up and fermented, kept dwindling until they were liquid and they poured out into the ground. Now, from the balcony, he could see the pools and the bleached, ashen trunks of decomposing trees. Long before Jim’s time, even before the Eerie, the area had been marshland bordering a dense forest. They drained it to build the canal and this was what was left. It remained undeveloped even when Utica prospered from the great trade ships, and later from the computer factories. Something about it, the graveyard of trees, and the smell, reminded him of the song. They learned it in first grade and sang it in music class until junior high. A song could work. That might be enough, if it was loud enough, and if they all sang.

He started softly, singing out toward the water. “I’ve got a mule, her name is Sal—Fifteen miles on the Eerie Canal. She’s a good old worker, and a good old pal—Fifteen miles on the Eerie Canal.”

He stood with the second verse, voice rising, and saw people in a houseboat below him squint up and then wave, shouting back a line or two. Someone from the party in the room behind him pushed open the sliding door and people laughed, then began singing in unison, arms wrapped around each other, glasses in hand, as if it was St. Patrick’s Day and this was some Irish drinking song. It was going to work. Jim was absolutely certain of it. They just had to get louder. He sang louder. Shouting.

The stripper, a girl who graduated from their school some five years previous, knocked and knocked at the door but went unheard over the singing. A sophomore vomiting in the bathroom finally recognized the pounding and let her in. She was thin, but not attractive, her brown hair teased and frizzy, her make-up thick, like it was shellacked to her face once a month and it was nearing the time to be re-finished. She
was sure she was recognized and was embarrassed. These were not the kind of boys she hung out with in high school, and a small part of her winced at finally being invited to one of the in-crowd’s parties. But she knew how to take control of a room, especially when the crowd was drunk (and they always were) and she purposefully walked to the boombox and put in her cassette. The singing dwindled off when, one by one, the boys noticed her, their foreheads beaded with drunk-sweat, little smirks sprouting at the corners of their lips. Jim stepped in from the balcony, trying to rekindle the noise. God-damn the stripper. She adjusted the volume on the boombox and just as it started to play, Cliff stepped forward and pushed the stop button, laid his big awkward teenage hand on her shoulder, they way he thought a man would.

“We know a better song for you to dance to.” His face was flushed and he didn’t have the tan the rest of the guards had to help cover it. He set his beer on a nightstand, some sloshed down his white polo shirt, and spread his arms out like a choral director. “C’mon, everybody—Low bridge, everybody down. Low bridge, for we’re coming to a town.”

Two boys behind the bar, both with new moustaches and muscle-shirts, joined him next, their voices deep and hoarse. “And you’ll always know your neighbor. You’ll always know your pal. If you’ve ever navigated on the Eerie Canal.”

Jim smiled, a broad grin wrapping his face. Fucking Cliff, what an asshole. He’d seal his own coffin. He shouted along, stomped his feet in a tribal sort of rhythm. They started that chorus again, skipping the rest of the song, just the chorus, everyone now singing, shouting, stomping along. They sang at the stripper, poured the song out on her. She laughed, thinking they all might laugh as well, and then tried singing with them,
being part of the joke. The chorus kept on, the same four lines louder and stronger with each refrain.

“Take your clothes off.” It came from one of the boys behind the bar. They both laughed, then kept on singing.

The stripper looked at Cliff, a faltering sort of pleading look, hoping he might push play on the stereo, but he nodded and sang on. She had her shirt off and her leather skirt was at her knees, the boys circled around her, screaming “Low Bridge, everybody down!” like a rock anthem, when the hotel manager, Mr. Orsen, appeared in the doorway. Jim noticed him first. Took him fucking long enough.

He had used his access key without knocking, sure that the singing was too loud to hear him anyway. He pushed straight to the center of the room, through the now-dwindling chorus, and stood next to the stripper, who pulled up her skirt. He was half a foot taller than any boy in the room, his dark hair graying at the temples, imposing even in what Jim later thought may have been his undershirt and a pair of khaki pants.

Though he knew they were all underage, he didn’t call the police, didn’t want the publicity. Instead he called Cliff into the bathroom and fired him quickly and without any argument. (He also made him pay the stripper, who he knew from a bachelor party the hotel had recently arranged.) Then he had the night manager phone a cab company, and made the partygoers clean up the bottles and beer cans. Jim cleaned the room with his head down, avoiding eye contact with Mr. Orsen. He hoped that he hadn’t really been noticed. He guessed as much, since there were thirty or so of them there. When they were allowed to leave, Orsen watching them file out, Jim joined the middle of a group, his back to where Mr. Orsen was standing.
On Monday he took his certifications out of his dresser and applied for a job as evening lifeguard (with alternate weekend shifts) at the Sheraton. Mr. Orsen did his interview, which lasted ten minutes, and the time it took to fill out an application, and he was hired. They shook hands across his massive oak desk, Jim focusing on a strong grip, a solid arm-pump, and Orsen saying “Welcome aboard, Jim. I’m sure we’ll love having you here at the Sheraton.”

That evening he rode his ten-speed along the towpath to the hotel. As he passed the old marshland he was cloaked by the smell, embraced by it. He liked working so close to that smell, the canal. While he was chaining his bike to a bench at the back entrance of the pool, a black car pulled up, a shiny Cadillac. This was it. This had to be Ray. There was a blonde-man driving, Frankie, but it was the passenger side door that opened. As the man stepped out, the car visibly rose upward several inches. He was 5’8” maybe 5’9”, but no more, and Jim guessed him to be around 450 pounds. (Ray later told him it was closer to 480.) His suit was dark-blue and well made, tailored, and his shoes shiny. He wore a red tie, and had a red handkerchief in his pocket. Jim wouldn’t have been surprised to see a red carnation pinned to the lapel, but there was none. He carried a canvas bag, a blue and yellow beach towel sticking out the top. The car pulled away and he walked toward Jim, who stood, grabbing open the door.

“Thank you very much, son. I appreciate it.” His voice was booming, charming in one line, like an Italian Santa Clause.

Jim followed him in, the thick air and stink of chlorine on them at once. The man stopped immediately inside. “So you’re the new Cliff, huh?”
“Yeah. He got fired. He’s my friend, you know, but. Anyway, I’m getting trained tonight.”

“I heard. Must’ve been some party. I’m Ray Seakins. Suppose he told you about me.” He put out his hand and Jim took it. It was warm and soft, and massive, like a normal size hand covered in a thick, baby-skin glove.

Jim didn’t feel any pressure to live up to an expectation of what the shake should be. He just took his hand and said, “I’m Jim Adasek. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

Ray chuckled at this. “I bet you have. Everybody knows the lollipop guy. Do you want one?”

“Sure.” Jim flashed on a warning from years previous, ‘Don’t take candy from strangers.’

Ray rummaged around in the bottom of his bag, the beach towel falling out and Jim nabbing it midway to the carpet.

“Ohp. There you got it, nice catch.” He produced a white carton, about the thickness of a shoebox, but square. The side flap was sealed with a silver embossed sticker that read Ray’s Lollies. “How ‘bout I trade you for the towel.”

“Doesn’t seem like a fair trade, since it’s your towel.” Once he had the box in his hands, felt the weight of it, all those lollipops, Jim felt ridiculously greedy. It was just a box of candy. He didn’t even like lollipops that much. But something about holding it, the whole fucking box. This guy was just gonna give it to him. The whole damn box. He wanted it. “I was just gonna have one. I mean, you don’t have to give me a whole box like this.”
Ray waved him away. “Stop. If you like them, I’ve got more of these than crabs on a sailor in a whore. You heard that one before?”

“Nah. It’s a good one.” Jim felt the color rise to his cheeks. He was fucking blushing. A habit, a goddamn habit from elementary school. Hey, go say vagina to Jim, he’ll turn red like a fire engine. And he did. Every time.

Ray didn’t notice, or pretended not to notice. Instead, he tilted his head toward the parking lot. “I probably have three-dozen boxes in the trunk of the Caddy. You ever want more, just ask. I’ll see you in there.” He headed left, to the men’s changing area.

The pool was one of those kidney-bean jobs, but larger than most hotel pools, especially indoor ones. A white line with blue buoys ran across the middle, marking the deep end, which was only 6 ½ feet. Two summers before they refinished the bottom, put in a tile mermaid, in greens and yellows, right in the center of the bean. Behind the deep end, maybe four feet away, was a crescent shaped hot tub with ledges for sitting and a steel railing to help the elderly get in and out.

The deck, which Jim would come to hose down twice nightly, was crowded with beach chairs and limp, green jungle plants, their leaves broad and rubbery, choked on chlorine fumes. To the left of the pool, up six, long, shallow steps, was the “veranda” area of the hotel’s restaurant; a black railing, eight or nine café tables, and more living plants that appeared to be plastic.

That first night, the lifeguard Jim relieved, Brad, noticed the box of lollipops first off. (Jim learned that Mr. Orsen had incorrectly been calling him Chad for some three years now. He said he’d let it go on now too long to feel comfortable correcting him.)
“So the King took a liking to you already.” Brad was seated at the rim of the shallow end, his legs submerged from the knees down.

“Yeah, I guess so. I didn’t expect a whole box. You want any?”

“Nah. Well, maybe if there’s a cherry-vanilla one. You know that guy tests all the flavors himself. Probably way too many fucking times from the size of him.”

Jim opened the box and again felt unreasonably giddy, the way he used to feel sorting his loot on Halloween, or unloading his Christmas stocking. The lollipops were beautiful, little multicolored works of modern art. Thick spheres, swirled in marbleized tones and wrapped in cellophane, atop thin, white poles. He lifted them gently, locating a white and red with Cherry/Vanilla stamped in blue on the stick, and handed it to him.

“He gave me two boxes for Christmas last year.” Brad rose, shaking his feet out over the surface before slipping them into his deck shoes. He put the lollipop in the back pocket of his shorts and hooked his thumb there. “But he doesn’t know me all that well. By the time he gets here I’m usually home eating dinner. At the end of the day you gots to get out of this place.” He pulled a black KISS t-shirt over his head and down across his gaunt frame. His skin was pale and lifeless, like the deck plants. Jim thought he could be twenty-two or thirty-two, with acne erupting across his forehead and a greenish blonde beard (the chlorine again) scraggling along his chin, moss clinging to a rock.

“So let’s get this show on the road. I have big plans tonight with my friends, Jose Cuervo and Jack Daniels. Know what I’m saying?”

“Sure. Cool. I partied with them this weekend.” He knew it was lame, trying to impress this guy, to speak his lingo.
“There you go. Right on, man. Just not on the job, you know. Cause it’s people’s lives, and that you don’t fuck with.” Brad nodded his head, agreeing with himself, and Jim wondered if this determined statement was what remained of a lecture from Orsen, a second chance after a mishap. He didn’t think Orsen the type for second chances.

Brad showed him the chemical logbook, a red binder with tally sheets for chlorine levels, PH, water temp. He showed him how to dip the testing capsule way down in the shallow end, as far as he could reach from his knees, the sleeve of his shirt getting wet. He told him to test every night, right before closing the pool. That way, if automatic chlorine feed went bezerk in the night, “his ass would be covered.”

He walked Jim to the edge of the hot tub and told him (hand in front of his mouth to protect his secrets from the man resting in the corner, eyes closed) to watch the tub carefully for heart attacks and strokes.

“One minute they’re turning on the jets, trunks puffing out in front of them. Next they’re keeled over, face down, with half of their body all twisted up. Seen it happen, man. You gots to stay on top.”

The emergency signal was three, loud whistles, and, if appropriate, yelling “I’m going in! I need back-up.” The restaurant staff was trained to listen for the whistles and call 9-1-1. Craig said that he usually just blew the whistle once, though, to tell kids to stop running on the goddamned deck.
When they were at the shallow end again, and Craig was explaining the backboard and reaching pole, Jim noticed Ray Seakins on the last step down from the restaurant.

He was the fattest man Jim had ever seen in a swimming suit. His skin was olive, Mediterranean, and looked smooth and thick, the way his hand felt, Jim supposed. Instead of letting his belly, thick, doughy rolls, hang down over the waist of his shorts, the way most men did, he had found swim trunks, or maybe had them made, that came up high over his stomach, the elastic band running just below his belly-button. The trunks were massive, each leg a tent of blue cloth with white sailboats floating across it. His beach-towel was slung over his shoulder, and his chest and legs, and sections of his back, were furry with thick, dark hair. Around his neck was a thin chain with a medallion of Saint Frances of Rome, the small gold circle glinting out from beneath the hair. Something about him, even stripped down as he was, made him seem, to Jim, put together and clean.

“Hey Ray, no cannonballs, right? Let’s not give Jimmy here a hard time his first night.” Craig clapped Jim on the back and said he was “out of there,” whistling as he crossed the deck.

“They don’t let me do them anymore. Pete Orsen had to come down to my store and talk to me about them. Pretended he was shopping for a microwave.” He threw his towel over a deck chair and thundered down to the edge of the pool. “I guess I upset some of the old biddies who come in here to do their paddling.”

Jim saw one such swimmer in the deep end. Her hair pulled up in a lavender rubber cap with roses on it. Her face stern, eyes forward, arms sculling while her legs
bicycled in the water. He imagined the wave a Seakins cannonball would throw at her, making her sputter and lose control. He liked the idea, but didn’t comment. Instead he said, “My parents got their washer and dryer at your store.”

“Oh yeah. Good for them. I took up appliances after the lollipops took off, something to do here in town. You know I put a little sweet shop in the front, right in the corner of the store. Just a little one. Have you been in?”

“No. Just my parents.”

“You come in sometime, I’ll make you a deal. That’s why I have a lifetime membership to this place, can swim any time I want. Pete Orsen bought all the televisions for the hotel from me, he and his partner did. I made them a deal.” He pressed his palms flat against the rim and lowered himself down into the water. Jim knelt and trailed his fingers in the water, noticing his shadow on the surface of the pool, how it shimmered down to the tile base. It looked imposing. He felt imposing. He was in charge, this whole room, even the locker rooms, technically. And Ray Seakins liked him. He liked him a little, already, Jim was sure. He gave him the lollipops, didn’t he? And Jim could make sure he liked him even more.

The weeks that followed went like this: Jim guarding from the pool’s edge, or a deck-chair, noticing Ray’s habits and making small talk. Ray starting out in the pool, paddling himself back and forth from the deep end to the shallow, three times. He was a barge passing through a canal lock, slow and steady, head and shoulders out of the water, legs and arms pumping below the surface. After this he climbed out of the shallow end and walked around to the hot tub, where he turned on the jets, full-blast, with back massage, and soaked for twenty minutes. About this time the restaurant would bring his
dinner down the stairs and to the pool’s edge. Sometimes the waiter would try and set it on a deck table or chair, and Ray had him move it to the tile at the side of the pool. Then he would slide back into the deep end and paddle over to the plate. The meal could be anything, roast chicken, lasagna, meatloaf. He took time to cut the portions into small bites, arrange the food carefully, and then took hold of the plate, leaning back in the water, and resting it on his belly. There he would float, sometimes with his back against the pool’s wall, eating his dinner from inside the water. He was comfortable and talkative, chatting up businessmen and the old-lady exercisers alike. Hotel guests who had never seen him stared and whispered, asking Jim “Is he allowed to eat in the pool?” But Ray won them over. Told them stories about lollipops, got them talking about their kids. He remembered names, Jim noticed. He was no Pete Orsen. He looked you in the eye, smiled a great white showgirl smile. Made you feel he was the guy to go to for whatever, whatever it was you might want. Ray was the guy.

After his meal he paddled back and forth a few more times, and then soaked, again, in the hot tub. Sometimes, when there were few people around, Jim saw him struggle furiously in the deep end, arms thrashing downward, body bobbing up and then down, his mouth underwater, then up, his nose under, his eyes. He never stayed down for more than a second.

Once, when he’d been at it for several minutes, and there was just one guy in the hot tub, Jim walked over and asked him what he was doing.

“I’m trying to touch the bottom.” Ray kept thrashing, his face red.

“You can’t reach it?”
“Nope. I used to, when I could do cannonballs. I’d thump both feet hard on the mermaid and then spring up. But I can’t even scrape a toe on the bottom, now.”

“Have you tried holding weights or something?”

“No, you have any?”

“I’ll bring some in.”

Jim did, the next evening, a pair of ten-pound ankle weights the track coach sometimes had him jog in. They wouldn’t fit around Ray’s ankles, there was a two-inch gap of skin between the straps, but Jim managed to Velcro them around the arches of his feet.

Orsen discovered them like this, Ray in the pool, with one leg, then the other, extended out, and Jim bent over the side, fastening the weights on his feet. He motioned Jim to the shallow end while Ray practiced his sinking. The weights pushed him down some, but he still couldn’t touch the bottom.

“What were you doing over there, John?” Orsen was looking at Ray, who was churning the water.

“Uh, It’s Jim, actually, sir. I’m trying to help Ray touch the bottom.”

“It’s Jim? I thought it was John. My fault. Sorry about that. Maybe if Ray lost a little weight, he could touch the bottom, huh? I’ll tell you how help him, don’t let him eat his dinner in the pool anymore. He’s been told that before, so don’t feel bad. He pulls it with every new guard we get. I thought Chad might have warned you.”

“Brad?”
Orsen didn’t look confused, he was sure. “No, Chad. He’s on before you. Listen, I’ll go over and speak with Ray myself right now. But you have to stay on top of this, John. Jim, I’m sorry.”

He walked over and knelt next to Ray at the deep end, extending his hand and waiting while Ray swam over to shake it. Jim wished he’d get pulled in. They spoke for several minutes, Orsen laughing a fake laugh, Ray smiling the whole conversation. Then Orsen made his way back around the pool and up the stairs, “We’ll see you later, Jim.”

Ray peeled the ankle weights from his feet and set them on the pool’s edge. “He gets such a kick out of catching me. Told me he’s received some complaints about my dinner floating around the pool. You see me toss my chicken bones in the shallow end?”

“Probably just one of the old ladies. So the weights didn’t work, huh?”

“They didn’t. That’s alright. I’ll get down there somehow.” He looked at Jim. I bet you go right down.”

“I sink straight to the bottom. I always have.”

At that moment, Ray wished he could have Jim’s body. And Jim could feel that. Feel it from the way he looked at him. His wiry muscles and flat stomach, even when he sat on the edge of the pool, even then, when thin people had a little roll of fat, Ray could see the outline of Jim’s abs. He didn’t remember his stomach ever being flat, even as a kid. It was always a little doughy, full of pasta and cakes. He was stocky and thick. He had always floated.

“Maybe if somebody pushed you down?” Jim thought back to his lifeguarding class.
“I tried that. Brought in my driver, Frankie.” Ray hadn’t been able to drive in over twelve years. The steering wheel pressed into his stomach even when the seat was pushed all the way back. “Frankie’s not a good swimmer, and he doesn’t float, either. Like you. So I had a hell of a time convincing him. But he came in with me last year and pushed down on my shoulders and kicked like crazy. Then he jumped off of the side of the pool, onto my back. We went under together, and maybe my big toe scraped bottom, but then we buoyed back up. Thanks to my stomach.”

“You’re not missing much, down there.” Jim said it, and knew, for most people, that it was true. But for him it was a lie. It was perfect, the area below the surface, especially in an outdoor pool or lake, the water several degrees cooler, darker. Watching the bubbles float up from his mouth and pop on top of the clear sheet above him. The sound of water moving in his ears, and the silence. He loved that.

“Yeah. I’m probably not. But I want to get down there and find out for myself.”

Something flashed across Jim’s brain; an inkling that grew into a plan; a way to endear Ray to him.

He spit out the words as they came to him. “What if you stayed late Friday night? You could come in a little later and stay until after closing. I have to set the chemicals and hose the deck. You could do all the cannonballs you wanted. Maybe we could figure out some way to get you down to the bottom for longer.”

Ray was still staring at Jim’s stomach. He lazed his head upward. “How come you want to help me so much?”

The god-damn blush spread across his face. “I don’t know. Something to do. Maybe get some lollipops outta the deal.”
Ray’s smile that of a Great White. “I’ll bring Frankie. We’ll bring some good Italian wine. Red wine. Vino. You’re a good kid, Jimmy.”

Pedaling home that night, the thick summer air, the stench of the rot-pools, Jim whistled and practiced his own shark-smile. He was in charge. He knew what he had set up. He knew exactly what to expect. Cliff had laid it all out for him, how it happened. They’d probably do it in the locker room, that’s where he and Cliff had always done it. Usually just a hand-job, Ray would give it, he didn’t receive, but Cliff said he always had a boner pup-tenting his shorts. One time it was a blow-job, and Ray was a master, but Cliff tried to let on like he was just doing it for the cash.

“Don’t want the fat fuck to think I actually get off on that shit, you know? Even though I did get off, you know? But he’s such a fat olducker.” Cliff had bragged to Jim one night after they had done the same to each other. They had been since Jim was twelve and Cliff thirteen, the kid next door with a private tree house deep in the limbs of a backyard oak. They didn’t talk about being gay. They didn’t talk much about what they were doing. It first started at a sleepover in the tree house, the two of them jerking in unison, Cliff reached over and moved Jim’s hand away, replaced it with his own. Jim allowed it, enjoyed it. Things progressed from there. They did it more when Cliff was between girls. But the night, when Cliff told Jim about Ray, the crisp hundred dollar bills, the little presents, he and Jim hadn’t been together in the tree house for months. They were only together that night because Cliff was drunk and Brandy had the flu. And they wouldn’t be together in that way again. They were older, more aware of the consequences, Cliff was popular with “the ladies”—as he put it. So Jim pressed him for details about Ray, he knew they wouldn’t speak of him again.
“How did it start?”

“I don’t know. I could just tell what he wanted. But I had to make the first move.”

“How?”

“I don’t know, Jim. Fuck-a-duck, you want to try it or something? I just said something in the locker room, touched my dick. He got the idea.”

That ended the discussion. Two minutes later Cliff had pulled up his shorts and headed for home, jumping from the fourth rung on the ladder.

But Jim knew what he needed to know. Ray was more than willing, but he wouldn’t make the first move. You had to do it. And Jim just had. He was pushing forward over the uncertain.

Two nights later, after closing, Frankie sat in a deck chair, thumbing through a *Sports Illustrated*, Jim hosed the deck, cleaned the filters, and Ray cannon-balled again and again and again. Arcs of water thrashed down on the deck, soaking Frankie, soaking Jim. Each time Ray bobbed up from the bottom with a grin bigger than the last.

When Jim was finished with his work, he jumped with him. The two of them screaming and laughing so loud the restaurant staff shouted down to them to knock it off. At Ray’s urging, Jim attempted to grab his foot and hold him under, but Ray was a helium balloon, he buoyed them both up in seconds.
Afterward they soaked in the hot tub and Frankie stripped down to his boxers and joined them. He was nervous, giggling and continuously running his right hand through his hair. “This is nice. Hot though. But nice.”

Ray seemed content, maybe that’s why he had Frankie, someone to do his worrying for him.

“What about that wine you promised?” Jim asked. He liked the idea of being a little drunk. Just enough.

“It’s out in the Cadillac.” Ray closed his eyes, slipped further beneath the water, let his head lull back against the edge. “I thought, after we’re showered, we might take a little drive somewhere. Just along the canal, maybe. Good stars tonight.” He opened one eye and winked at Jim. The smile.

This wasn’t part of Jim’s plan. They were supposed to do it in the locker room. First he would give him the cash, at least three hundred, maybe more. Then they’d do it, it would be quick. And then they would go home. But it had to happen at the pool. Where Jim was in charge. Mr. Orsen had put him in charge; said he’d do a good job. This was how it had to happen.

“I don’t know. We could just drink it here. It would be nice in the hot tub. I’ll go get it.” Jim stood and Ray touched his thigh with enough pressure to leave little white fingertip spots when he moved his hand away.

“Nah. Sit back down. We’ll go for a ride. It’ll be nice. It’s a nice car. Have you ever ridden in a Cadillac, Jim? A new Cadillac? I buy the newest model, like clockwork, every year. It just feels good drinking in a new Cadillac, someone to drive you.” He nodded at Frankie. “You and me just sitting in the back, nothing to worry about.”
Jim knew it wouldn’t be right. It had to be here, just like he’d thought about. The way he planned it out. But maybe he could think about it, here in the tub, just for a few minutes. Think about it and work it out in his head. He could picture the car. The backseat, the back of Frankie’s head in front of him. Maybe for this first time they could leave. Ray seemed sure.

“Okay. That’s cool.” They stayed soaking for another fifteen minutes or so, Jim’s eyes closed, picturing, sorting; it would work okay.

They showered with their suits on, and even though Ray had seen him in a suit dozens of times, Jim felt naked in those surroundings, conscious of the noise of the water, Frankie in the other room, tapping his foot against something metal, the fart of Ray’s shampoo when he squirted some into his hand. He rinsed off quickly and dressed back in the guard office. Waited out on the deck. Thought about just riding his bike home. Forgetting all about it. But he had to lock the pool entrance after them. He kept waiting until them emerged, Ray in tourist-type khakis and a polo shirt, Frankie in jeans and a t-shirt, nervous and fidgety. They walked out together, and then he and Ray waited while Frankie pulled the car up. Both of them stared straight ahead, Ray rocking back and forth, a tiny movement, a tremble.

Jim didn’t have a lot of room in the back, with Ray. Ray wasn’t used to sitting back there, either. He usually sat up front with Frankie. He was out of breath, wheezing, gulping back great slurps of wine like water. The air-conditioning was on, but Jim put down his window, and the car filled with the hot, wet smell of rot.

Ray leaned forward as best he could, a small movement over a large belly. “How bout you pull off right up here, at the boat-ramp. It should be quiet by now.”
Frankie nodded. Slowed the car and it wobbled back and forth over the dirt and ruts in the old tow-path. Jim hoped there might be a boat pulling in, a latecomer finally docking for the evening. Something to change their plans. They could always go back to the locker room. But he wasn’t all that surprised when they pulled under the canopy of drooping trees and found only dark space and farther out distant stars bouncing off the water.

“Okay. Well. Jimmy, how bout you and me wander down there a little ways, check out the water, see how it compares with the Sheraton. Huh? Frankie better stay with the car.” It was the first time Jim had ever heard Ray sound unsure, a little too friendly, like the weird uncle or a shopping mall Santa.

“I guess. You sure you don’t want to come, Frankie?”

“Nah. You two go on ahead. I’ll wait with the car.”

“Okay then. We’ll be right back. Honk if anyone… You know. Honk if you need to.” Ray opened his door, pushed out. Jim felt the car rise. Felt his stomach rise. Followed him out into the dark. It wasn’t going the right way.

They walked, Jim trailing a little, which was difficult, because Ray was so slow, until they were right down by the water. Ray moved into a small thick of bushes, a little more cover. Jim followed, but stopped several feet short of him. Two yardsticks. Three.

He made out Ray’s hand as it shot forward into the dark. Something in it.

“Here. This is for you.” Ray waited.

Jim gripped the bills, careful to avoid touching his hands, the baby-skin hands. Four bills, no, five. Jim couldn’t tell for sure in the dark, but they had to be hundreds. It
was too much. What did he expect? Jim wasn’t going to touch him. That wasn’t part of it.

“This is too much money. I mean, I’m not sure what you…”

Ray stepped forward, flicked sweat off his forehead. His words streaked together.

“It’s not anything like that, Jim. You just start on yourself, then I’ll touch you. That’s what you did with Cliff, right? That’s what he said you liked. It’s because I like beautiful things so much, Jim. You have a beautiful body, and I appreciate that. I want you to know that I really do. I’m not just saying that.” He kept talking, but Jim couldn’t make out the words. Cliff had told him? That’s what he said I liked. What I like? Cliff told him what I like? So Cliff knew I’d be here. Knows I’m here right now?

Again, Ray moved closer and Jim stumbled back, fell hard, his butt in wet mud, rot. He could smell the rot everywhere.

“Christ, Jim, are you okay? Here, let me help you up. I didn’t mean to startle you.” Ray was standing over him, his outline dark against the black sky, the tops of trees, his big, fat, arms straining downward.

Jim felt around on the ground. A big stick? It was too little. His right hand trailed over a rock, partially buried, bigger than his palm. He dug at it, felt the mud sink under his fingernails, scratched them against its rough surface until the tip of one nail broke off. He pried the rock free and pushed to his feet, taking the rock in both hands and smashing it down on Ray’s skull. Again. Again. The sound hard and wet, a bowling ball thwacking a cantaloupe. Ray went to his knees, to his belly. Still Jim hit him. Over and over until he was sure. He had to be sure about it. The mass on the ground didn’t move. It didn’t even twitch.
Frankie was still back at the car. Frankie couldn’t swim well. It came to him in a flash. A white flash across his brain.

He yelled to him. Yelled out his name through the dark. Ahead he could see the car door open, the light come on inside, then off again as it closed. A sound traveling toward him in the dark, Frankie’s feet running over the brush and the mud, fast and closer and closer. Jim could just make out his outline—

He lunged and hit him in the skull. Not as direct a hit as he’d hoped for. Frankie stumbled, his hands to his head, screaming. He tripped over Ray, and on the way down, Jim got him again, this time direct, right at the base of the head, a squelching thwack of a noise. The rock sunk into the skull like it had in the mud. In one motion Jim threw his body against Frankie’s and tackled him toward the water, let him fall into the shallow bank area. He waded out after him, his shoes submerged, hit again, once more, and pulled him, a guard-tow, out a ways further, into the dark, deep waters of the Canal. Then he held him under, just stood there and held him until it seemed like he might stay. For a few moments, anyway.

He trudged back. On the shore, his sneakers made the squelching wet sound with each step, a blow to the skull, a rock in the brain. He looked at his hands. He still had the rock. He turned and heaved it out into the water. A loud splash, birds scattered from the trees.

He rolled Ray. One turn. Then another. Stomach. Back. Stomach. Back. It was impossibly slow. He kept at it. Once he had enough of him in the water, it only took a little water, he grabbed both of Ray’s arms and pulled him, a tugboat. Ray moved easy on the water. Slow and steady. He got out to about where he thought he’d left Frankie.
Close enough, and tried the same tactic. He climbed on top of him and pushed. He waited. He shifted his weight. He kept waiting. It was no use. Ray wasn’t going down. Ray was a floater. Jim laughed. There, on top of Ray’s stomach, a great, flabby dock, he laughed and laughed. That was the whole joke, the whole time. That was the fucking punch line. You couldn’t sink Ray. He always floated. He floated right to the top.

But Jim could sink. He climbed off his raft. Pulled off his shoes. His shirt. It wasn’t hard. He could tread for hours. Ahead, up around a bend, he saw a party boat drifting steadily toward them. He and Ray. Ray the Lollipop King. Ray the barge. Ray the raft. Now Ray could be an iceberg.

“Here comes the Titanic, Ray. You get to be the iceberg. Make it convincing.” He said aloud before slipping beneath the surface, into the dark water. He let himself sink. He didn’t force it. Down. Down to where the water was cooler, cold, even. On the bottom Jim blew out a sigh and it floated to the surface in bubbles, exploding on top near Ray. He smiled, a broad smile that covered his face. The shark. He could understand if this was what death felt like, down below the water’s surface, silent. Jim could just stay down here. Peaceful. Easy. Like sleeping. He closed his eyes. Maybe he would stay. He could be king down here.