Short stories

Robert D. Kane

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SHORT STORIES

By
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Wesley Young got hired to teach history at an East Boston high school and had six weeks until he was to start. He moved to Natick, a forty-five minute commute, but even that seemed glamorous. He was excited to teach city kids for a change. He had taught a year in Vermont and it was time to relocate. His family were all still there, except his mom who had died six months earlier, complications from a long bout with MS. He was pretty sure his dad lived with his sister up north in Waitsfield. Or was she even further north now, somewhere near the Canadian border.

He had been comfortable teaching in Vermont and loved the ten-acre cabin he had rented. There was an aesthetic quality he was giving up with moving, but he thought it a small sacrifice. When he moved into his Natick duplex he looked at the resplendent appliances and glossy cheap furnishings and felt he was getting closer. Self-completion, he thought, required searching. He visualized the missing part as being the size of a molecule. He was getting warmer, he thought. He was that close. In the meantime, he had an apartment that was shiny and clean and included all utilities, but most of all he had his dog, his hundred pound mutt, Dioji.

Wes’s new neighbors were Fred and Becky Carey and their two kids, Kelly and Lester. They were a young family. The day Wes moved in, Fred invited him over for a barbecue. Wes found his cheeseburger over-seasoned. The meat was flanked by slices of
rye bread and this amused him. He enjoyed the microbrews Fred gave him but found the labels pretentious. Fred invited Wes a second time, but Wes declined the offer, and every one subsequent, until Fred stopped. Wes didn’t want to foster any tension. He’d enough of that in Vermont, though in retrospect, it had been therapeutic because it put him at a comfortable distance from his brother Jake, and, to a lesser degree, from his dad, and all his lingering friends. He had an agenda for himself now. He wanted to make intelligent friends and involve himself in the city dynamic. But he just wasn’t going to click with these neighbors, he thought.

The Careys lived on the other side of Wes’s thin walls, and he could hear the young family in continuous and oppressive operation. He should have known better than to settle for a duplex. The sounds of nurturing and its resistance practically beat him down. The daily production of meals, all the day’s requests, chants, and sing-songs, the excessive praising of the children’s slightest accomplishments – all of it felt like a giant drill-bit marauding through his head. After a few days, he missed his old privacy and after a few weeks he was miserable. His dog needed to be tied-up all the time or left inside because those were apartment rules. The dog wasn’t adapting well. He tore the heels off Fred’s swimming flippers and ate them. Late at night he was restless. Back in Vermont the skinny pack of coyotes would be roaming the woods around the old cabin. Lounging outside in Vermont, the dog used to eat clumsy June bugs, but inside in Massachusetts, the bugs’ collisions with screened windows sounded like intruders and he
got wary. There was a nightly ruckus from the automatic ice maker. The dog stalked and engaged the odd things around him, and Wes suffered with abbreviated and grumpy sleep. When Wes tied him up outside, the dog barked incessantly. He often looked psychologically wounded, uncharacteristically nervous, scared.

Wes imagined that the reason Fred didn’t bother keeping his apartment more quiet was because he thought Dioji’s barking cancelled out the offense. After a lifetime of running free, the dog was a confused prisoner. That Fred showed no signs of sympathy was enraging. To treat equally the noise of a tormented animal and the noise of his over-privileged and excessively loved family proved that Fred was clueless and beneath Wes. It further bothered Wes that they were roughly the same age. Fred was twenty-nine and Wes was twenty-seven. There was an unsettling significance to it that made Wes want to be younger, or Fred to be older.

It became unbearable. Fred’s relationship with his kids was absurd. The apartments shared the yard, and it was summer. The family was always outside. It seemed incredibly unfair to Wes that Dioji had to settle for the suffocating inside of an assembly-line apartment, or the twenty feet of leash that he’d exhaust a yard from Kelly Carey’s straw-spitted watermelon seeds, while the family had its little picnics. He imagined a colossal stadium, where the whole world had gathered to applaud Fred’s little tricks and clever dialogue with his children. Kelly was the daughter; she was five and blonde. When she was loud or roughhousing her little brother, Fred employed a
theatrical, throat-slashing arm-gesture to communicate that she shut-up or release
Lester’s ankles so the poor kid could crawl. Lester was two. The manner in which Fred
spoke to his kids made Wes pace around his apartment, even if the voices were barely
audible and could be drowned by louder TV, or simply ignored. But Wes hadn’t that
ability. He had to listen and he had to pace. He would think about going for a jog or
doing push-ups to burn off his anxiety, but instead he just brooded. When Fred asked
Kelly, as he often did, “Who’s better than me?” Kelly screamed, “Me!” Fred often said
to Kelly “I am, are you?” and she said “Couldn’t be true.” To anything spilt, dropped,
lost, or gone unloved, she said, “That ain’t right.” If Fred asked, for no reason, “Kelly,
doll, where’s the peanut butter at?” she would invariably reply “Respect the jelly.”

Wes couldn’t fathom the age five. It seemed impossible. He couldn’t even be
sure that he’d known that five year olds were old enough to talk.

The one time Wes was actually inside Fred’s apartment, Kelly had announced her
need to poop, then casually put on her head a ridiculously oversized and colorful
sombrero, which Fred explained was her “pooping sombrero.” She don’t poop without it.
he said with a straight face.

When Lester fell asleep, Kelly screamed, “That’s a wrap.”

Wes wondered if Fred’s wife was good for anything other than her useless cheers
and obsessive hugging. The faces of Kelly and Lester adorned large magnets on the
refrigerator.
On the first of August Wes began looking for a new place. He was ready to eat the three thousand he spent to move in. His new teaching assignment started on the thirtieth and sometimes this excited him. He usually loved looking forward to an important date.

The next day he went to the grocery store, leaving Dioji outside to bark and disturb. When he got home six people were gathered on his lawn. He walked from his parking space towards the duplex with plastic grocery bags hanging from his fingers. He wondered if the people were involved in some game. Then he looked at the sky for some component that he might be missing, but there was nothing. On the lawn were two teenagers and a pair of older couples he figured were other neighbors. They all raised their heads and looked at Wes as he labored across the front yard. When he got closer he saw that they were hating him and then, around the corner of the house, he saw Fred Carey beating Dioji with a steel shovel.

When he ran towards Fred he passed the people and saw, on the ground in front of them, Kelly Carey bleeding badly into her mother’s devouring hug. The connection between his dog getting beat and the bleeding child was made and forgotten in a single stride. His world was nothing but plastic grocery bags twisted around his fingers and the violent interruption of Fred following through with that back-swing. When Wes chucked the bags, the groceries tumbled, but one bag was too twisted to release and followed Wes’ punches to Fred’s face. Fred dropped and covered, and Wes kicked and punched
and a glass bottle of Italian dressing got smashed, and when Wes picked up the shovel, he tasted the dressing’s tart flavor and one of his busted molars lanced his tongue and then he stood clueless and still. Dioji circled Fred and barked, the long leash dragging between his legs. Wes just stood there. Becky pleaded for her husband, and the spectators listlessly stared. Becky sobbed and Wes thought he might be dreaming. When Kelly looked up from her mother’s shoulder the blood was dark and thick. It covered Becky’s blouse and Kelly’s hair which was matted on one side from hugging. Wes saw a loose flap of skin hanging under her left eye and the jelly-like surface above the base of the tear. Then her face dropped and all Wes saw then was a tired blue eye. Fred was gathering to a knee. Wes oriented himself, grabbed his dog, and ran to his truck. He slammed the passenger door on Dioji’s leash. He accelerated over speed bumps and floored it around the sharp contours of the apartment complex’s narrow road, Dioji’s steel leash whipping parked caravans and SUV’s and kicking up little stones.

He drove north on Interstate 93 and stopped at a Super 8 motel across the New Hampshire border.

An old woman with a Red Sox cap sat behind the counter. She said, “Try again, mister.”

“What was that,” Wes said, taking a credit card out of his wallet.

“Read the sign,” she said, pointing to the door Wes had just walked through.

“Get to the fucking point,” he said.
“Put on a goddam shirt.” she said.

There was a pause as Wes accounted for his surprising shirtless state during which the old woman hit the bell that sat in front of her. It startled Wes. A moment passed as he plotted. He smiled large and proud despite swollen, freckled gums and midget teeth.

“You must be thrilled to have a vehicle of exclamation at the tips of your bony, lifeless fingers,” he said, and began walking back out the door.

He forgot he’d taken off his shirt to wipe the blood off of Dioji’s face and now he realized he had no replacement. He opened the passenger side door where the shirt lay, and appraised its condition. He saw a towel sticking out from under the seat and cursed it. He turned the shirt inside out, hoping it would look passable for a three minute transaction, but it was a white T-shirt with a shamrock on the front and red blotches all around the rest. He got back into the truck, drove past the office window, and honked to get the old woman’s attention. He gestured that he’d be right back. My fault, he seemed to say. He drove to a gas station convenience store and reminded the clerk of his wages when the clerk informed Wes of their policy on shirts. Then he purchased one as well as a twelve-pack of Corona. Then he hastened to a different motel and drank the Corona in a shirt that still had its tags on the collar and a big cartoon moose on the chest.

The bed was superior to his own. He could see a morning without backpain. A motel seemed perfect, he thought. He wondered how many people rented them to escape
their real homes for a night. Not to cheat on their spouses, but to just go away. He saw the décor of forty-dollar motel rooms serving human need. Nothing in these rooms reminded you of anything except similar motels. Wes thought that a simple, yet remarkable luxury, to be surrounded by things not yours. They could not trigger guilt or depression because of a history you shared with them. He applauded the giant air conditioner that spewed out a steady chill and conveniently doubled as a coffee table on the side of the bed he preferred. It also comforted Dioji who slept peacefully underneath it. The dog is a giant, Wes thought. His paws had bled earlier but he appeared to have taken care of it himself. Fred’s blows must have missed Dioji’s head. Apart from a limp and exhaustion, the dog seemed okay. Wes enjoyed the room for several hours, but had to figure something out about Kelly’s bleeding face.

In the morning he called the high school and left Principal Davis a message saying he had contracted a stomach flu and wasn’t able to attend that morning’s orientation seminar. He checked his messages at home. Fred Carey called and said to stop being a coward and turn in that fucking mutt so he could die a mutt’s death. He called a second time, weeping uncontrollably, and said that Kelly would forever have a scar on her face in the shape of a crescent moon, and after several seconds of sniffling, he hung up the phone screaming. An officer named Landry called to say if Dioji wasn’t turned into the station by tomorrow morning there would be an immediate warrant out for Wes’s arrest.
He took Dioji to a pond and watched him swim and chase squirrels. He hoped to remedy a mild hangover through a sports drink, only to become annoyed after discovering it was carbonated. He amused himself with the idea that the world hated him and was determined to exaggerate his misery, employing everything from the immense Dioji situation to the molecule-sized bubbles rising in his drink and representing bad decisions. He diluted all four bottles with tepid beer and pond water. He had exerted immense energy the night before in avoiding Dioji’s connection to Kelly Carey’s face. He had tried to account for the blood in ways that just weren’t possible, then, after giving up, had painstakingly complicated the only reasonable defense, decorating it with intricate and believable details: That Kelly had a history of provoking the dog. Had once tried to ride the dog like a pony and even used his ears as a pretend harness, yet the dog had showed patience, your honor, while the child, had not. Her mother, in fact, watched this and let her go unpunished, and even encouraged her.

He rented the motel another night. He ordered two pepperoni pizzas and a meatball calzone for Dioji. He watched TV. After eating, Wes vomited. Then he looked at his dog and cried. Dioji rose and attended to Wes by licking his hands, then after returning to his spot, he circled twice, and plopped down with a grunt. My boy, Wes said aloud. He saw the avenues of communication between him and his dog as far more meaningful than Fred’s orchestrated and gratuitous tricks with his daughter Kelly. It angered Wes that he lived in a world that only pretended to value human life. Men throw
battery acid in women’s faces for rejecting their advances. Murderers and rapists enjoy warm meals. Then we pat ourselves on the back for wasting a good dog. Doesn’t the problem, if indeed Dioji bit Kelly Carey, have to do with her seeing the world as an extension of one of her mother’s hugs? With the fact that she’s already at age five forever incapable of recognizing pain and suffering in others? Isn’t it a problem that she saw the dog face to face and saw only the means to imitate riding a pony?

Wes checked his messages. Various neighbors called to insult him. They identified themselves by the letters and numbers of their apartment unit. Someone threatened his life. Fred called and said that Kelly woke up from a nightmare and bit through her tongue. Everything she suffers, he said, you’re gonna get a thousand times worse.

He knew he couldn’t stay another night there. No ordering out and being a perplexed recluse. He wished he had someone to talk to. Every once in a while he’d recognize that about himself. Who could give him unconditional advice? His friends in Vermont had developed into just drinking buddies and weren’t capable of dealing with anything serious. Certainly not his brother Jake or his sister Rachel. Nothing with Jake was unconditional. Jake had always recorded everything he did for others in some mental notebook, right down to the most miniscule detail, manufacturing a debt he’d convey by initiating conversations that circumvented his real agenda. Wes’s sister, Rachel, had dated a man in his forties who worked as a rep for a sunglasses company.
She had been twenty-four. The rep wore rugby shirts with starchy collars. He tossed little boxes of new sunglasses around like a charismatic peanut vendor at a ballgame and never acknowledged any thank-yous. Ever since she hooked up with the guy, Wes had seen her as a whore. He couldn’t help it. Then, last fall, Wes had bailed on Thanksgiving dinner and been caught in a lie. He couldn’t even remember what it was anymore. He had sloppily made something up and didn’t feel embarrassed when Jake called him a really sad fuck because he felt confident he could manipulate whatever Jake had told his father and make his brother look confrontational and stupid.

Wes sat on the motel bed and thought about his brother. He’d had several beers already but felt oddly alert. He knew Jake offered the only possible solution. But what would it cost, he thought. At what depths am I currently lurking?

Jake owned Dioji’s brother Shilo. They had both gone to a dairy farm in Benson a year ago to pick out puppies from a litter of Husky and German Shepherd mutts. It seemed the perfect time because their mother was in the hospital recovering from knee surgery and a staph infection and Wes was moving into the cabin in a few weeks. Jake wanted a dog that he could train to be a therapy dog. Such a dog could be active in the community. Visit nursing homes and sick children, and possibly assist Jake’s daughter, Victoria, with a burst of needed confidence. Victoria had survived an infection when she was an infant and her left eye was dead and milky and the right eye saw four fingers when you held up two.
On the drive, Jake had been agitated. He wanted to talk about their mother and not about dogs. He wanted to talk about the incident their mother had recently suffered that landed her in the hospital. Her disease had been progressing rapidly but, until the incident, she could still use her motorized wheelchair to enter the bathroom. She could still shower by herself. It was a modified bathroom for the disabled, wide enough to accommodate the wheelchair, and there was a short incline into the shower area instead of tub walls, and like the kitchen counters, the bathroom’s sink, shelves, and mirror were short and accessible. She would sit in a bolted but adjustable chair and take care of herself. One morning she felt particularly weak and couldn’t make the transition from her wheelchair to the bolted shower chair, and she fell. She didn’t have her panic button around her neck and for days afterward she wondered why. While falling she knocked the shower chair off its adjustable slide. She shivered naked for seven hours under the collapsed chair, flat on her face, capable of only a few desperate wiggles. And her arm bled from a stripped bolt or screw. She screamed as best she could but after panic set in, she could only shiver. She was dripped on. With her ear flush against the tub’s floor she could hear the house’s muffled inner tickings and thought she detected music, voices, and action from downstairs.

You were stranded for seven hours, Jake told her. Perception gets messed up.

She insisted on what she’d heard. It shouldn’t alarm you to have created illusions during a panic situation, her husband said. Ultimately, the experience defeated her. She
acquired a staph infection on her good arm and couldn't rehab her injured right knee because she couldn't move it. She reacted poorly to the medication. Heart disease had been prevalent in her family. She took a prescribed steroid and said she could hear her blood flowing within her like a freight train. She quickly became depressed. She took excessive amounts of pain killers and morphine that apparently assaulted her heart but made her feel less sad, and then she died in her sleep when she somehow turned herself over with her infected but still working arm. and when her husband lifted her head from the soft pillow and held it to his chest, the pillow was soaked with saliva and sustained the shape of her head.

It was Wes's first year of teaching at Rutland High School. He wanted to live anywhere but his hometown, in his parents' house, but he was in debt and had no other choice. His dad built an apartment in the basement. Since the future included only himself and Wes's mom, a separate apartment would be essential to recruit live-in help when things ultimately worsened, he pointed out. Meanwhile, Wes would be treated as a legitimate tenant. He had his own bathroom, a small refrigerator, cable, and could access the place through the garage, coming and going as he pleased, without having to enter the strange world of his parents, should he not want to, which he didn't. Their marriage had rejuvenated itself in the years since her sickness. Some said it was poetic, this transformation. but Wes thought the two had more or less tricked themselves. he thought,
succumbed to the disease's scary reality by feigning emotions that shrouded a deep mutual animosity.

His mother carried a button in her pocket that resembled a small garage door opener. When she needed assistance, she'd press the button, which then activated the sound of ringing bells through speakers installed in every room. The panic button around her neck was exclusively for situations when she was home alone. Wes would come upstairs to eat, do laundry, or cater to his mom after every blaring bell.

He had admired his mother's determination during much of her disease's progression. He thought it funny and a testament to her character that she referred to her right arm and leg as "ornaments." He envied her patience. She had even trained herself to be left-handed. But when the symptoms progressed Wes saw her become stubborn. When he came home from teaching once, she was trapped between the two single beds in her room, naked from the waist up, the panic button left on her dresser, her juvenile gesture of independence. Another time he had to rescue her in the snack aisle at the supermarket where she sat crying in an electric-scooter-cart that needed recharging. He had dropped her off and gone to get an oil change, and the supermarket manager had called Wes on his cellphone. Assisting with wheelchair to toilet transfers, once required only on days of extreme fatigue, became required with every trip. She had become increasingly indifferent toward her children seeing her naked. And Wes had seen it all. She'd also started dropping things constantly and had become quite faithful to the sound
of bells. At first, everybody wanted to be a hero. Once, she dropped a half-eaten Oreo down her blouse and Jake reached down to get it, and Wes thought the retrieval was a little slow, and when his father made honking noises as Jake performed the extraction the pressure to participate in the laughter was so uncomfortable Wes suddenly announced he was going to a movie.

That forgetting the panic button this time had resulted in such severe consequences, helped defeat her. That she was asked to accept the fact that she had hallucinated the sounds and voices she was sure she heard, convinced her it was time to surrender. She had been a nurse and a bridge player and she didn’t believe in ghosts. Life suddenly seemed a plank she’d like to wheel herself off.

She was in the hospital from the shower incident when they drove to pick out the puppies. Jake wanted to rehash the entire accident. Wes became fiercely annoyed, though he found this typical of Jake, this attraction to drama. Wes deflected Jake’s questions and dismal meditations and asked him if he’d thought about names for the dog. Jake said he hadn’t. He said their mother had been gaining too much weight for that flimsy shower chair and Wes told him to get a grip and think about puppies. That’s all he could say: - Jake - think - puppies. The words came out sounding trite and adolescent and Wes wished he were anywhere other than Jake’s truck.

When they met the litter it was Wes who was indifferent toward the pups. He noticed the gentle, pretentious way Jake handled each of them, as if he could tell by
looking in their eyes how good a dog each would become. To Wes, none of the pups particularly stood out. The farmer pointed to the biggest pup, who was quiet and uninterested, and said this one had all the earmarks of a serious alpha-male. Jake picked a pup who had the exact markings of the alpha, but was smaller and seemed more confident and Wes chose the big and reclusive alpha, after having barely paid it any attention. Before they left Jake told the farmer how he planned to have his new dog trained to be both therapy and companion-dog certified and spent several tedious minutes describing the virtues of working dogs, while Wes waited by the truck.

It was midnight when Wes decided to drive to Jake’s house. It was a three hour drive from Concord, New Hampshire to Shrewsbury, Vermont. If he left at four, he’d be there before Jake went to work.

When he left the parking lot of the motel he realized he’d forgotten to check out, but left anyway. Route 89 was dark and he drove ninety all the way, before exiting onto Route 4, and its narrow up and down curves through the Green Mountain National Forest. As he drove, he thought of nothing, and after a while, he suddenly became oriented. It surprised and alarmed him how far he’d driven without remembering a single mile or landmark. It was as if he’d been sleeping.

When he pulled into Jake’s driveway he saw Shilo, Dioji’s brother. He had heard about Shilo’s cancer from Richie Illiano his last weekend in Vermont. Couldn’t a
therapy dog cure himself? he’d asked Richie. Richie had only nodded Wes an aloof goodbye.

Wes didn’t know how Shilo would look, or even. these few months later. whether he would still be alive. But there he was, a slender and slight Dioji. sitting inquisitively on Jake’s front steps.

Jake appeared at the door, opened it, patted Shilo’s head. and walked down the steps. Wes grabbed Dioji from the bed of his pick-up and put him in the cab. Dioji would fight anything with four legs.


“Funny. most people would call.” Jake said. “Can I offer you anything brother o’ mine?” Wes recognized an elevated energy around Jake, which he’d expected. He saw that Jake had already processed information to his own advantage without having been told a thing. Jake had gotten heavier. and he had shaved his familiar beard.

“I heard about Shilo. Illiano told me about it at Peppino’s. He said cancer and I was like no way. Jake’s Shilo could…”

“What do you want?” Jake asked, and Wes calmed down in the silence.

“First I just want to know Shilo’s prognosis. if you don’t mind telling it.”
“Really. That’s quite large of you Wes, coming all the way out here from where? Boston now. Like you hearing about Shilo’s cancer, I hear about some new teaching gig in Boston. A couple of brothers communicating through the grapevine.”

Wes waited for an answer to his question.

“Okay Wes, I’ll play. Shilo is in fact doomed. It’s like a brain tumor with the added bonus of being a cancerous one. It bleeds into his brain. His tongue will hang out and he’ll walk into a wall or trap himself under the kitchen table. All this in the first year of his life. You’ve trumped me in puppy choices, Wes. Shilo dies, and your mutt prevails. That’s got to be satisfying for you I’m sure. No wonder you wanted to hear it in person.”

“Cut the shit,” Wes yelled. He folded and unfolded his arms.

Jake looked toward a nearby tree on whose branches a squirrel jostled and gave it a phony look of appreciation.

“I could go to jail,” Wes said.

“Cut, cut, cut, the shit,” Jake mocked.

“I could go to jail for probably a number of things Jake. A fucking whole shitload. Some cute little girl got half her face bitten off by Dioji. She tried to ride him like a pony and he lashed out.”

“She was unsupervised trying to ride Dioji like a pony?”
“Yeah. I mean how the hell do I know. I came back from shopping and there was this clusterfuck happening on my lawn.”

“So was she or wasn’t she riding the dog like a pony?” Jake spoke slowly, as if to a child.

Wes paused and breathed. “I wasn’t there, but I know he was tied up. Then something happened.”

“Something happened – okay then what happened.”

“I beat him.”

“You beat Dioji. then what?”

“No, I messed up Fred who was beating Dioji. Fred’s the father.”

“Where’s a basement when you need it, huh?” Jake said.

Wes paused and then started crying. “She’s gonna have a scar on her face like a crescent moon,” he whispered. He opened his mouth like he was going to vomit.

“Had you a basement, or say something like the NVA had in Vietnam with all those tunnels and shit, some little suburban escape.”

Several seconds passed before Wes noticed the odd turns of phrase. “What are you meaning here?” he said. Dioji barked in the truck. He was having trouble standing the way he wanted. time and again losing his footing on the front seat and falling into the dashboard.

“You must have nobody, to come all the way out here. That, brother. is sad.”
“Why are you being so fucking cruel,” Wes said. “I’m bleeding right here in front of you, Jake. They want to put Dioji down, they’re mandating it, they’ll arrest me. They’ll fry him for being confused. The girl spits watermelon seeds at him. Jake. She pulled Dioji’s ears. Help me Jake. Shilo is gonna go, right? Can’t you switch him with Dioji? Keep him alive, train him in that therapy stuff too, he’d dig it. Vicky would love him. They look so alike you probably don’t have to even tell her.”

Jake’s face tightened. He took a deep breath. When he exhaled he seemed profoundly relieved.

“Your condition is terminal Wes, like it was with mom. But mom was good, Wes, even pretended to believe all my lies, maybe even succeeded.” Jake stopped, looking drained and slightly betrayed. He flicked his cigarette that he hadn’t put to his mouth since he lit it.

Why Jake was speaking this way confused Wes. He had prepared diligently for this conversation.

“You don’t think Victoria would notice the difference?” Jake said. “Do you think she’s retarded? I don’t know whether to punch your face or hug you.”

Wes felt his breathing becoming increasingly difficult. So many conversations with Jake happened like this. He had always felt smarter than him, yet together, speaking. Wes felt constantly browbeaten. Jake spoke without inflection. His face was
always taut. His hands were behind his back, as if he stood at attention. He was up to something sneaky.

"Don’t help then, Jake. You’re being weird and I don’t get it.” Wes stopped. He looked down at the gravel, the smoke rising from Jake’s tossed Marlboro between them. He shook his head.

"Tell me what your plan is first,” Jake said. “I can tell you have one. I’ve known you your whole life and you’re up to something. I’ll listen. I guess I know the gist of it already, but what else?’”

They went inside. Someone was taking a shower upstairs. On the shelf above the hearth was a picture of Jake and Shilo, the dog wearing a loose green vest with a button on the front proclaiming, “I AM A THERAPY DOG.” There were other people and dogs in the background. Some dogs had the same green vests. Barbecue smoke hovered above Jake and Shilo. A bald child was finishing the last of a hot dog. Wes thought of the big black guy in the parking lot of Pizzeria Uno, who had pulled Dioji away from a kid with an aluminum cane whose lurching gait had startled the dog.

Jake called his work and said that he’d be late. Jake made a pot of coffee. They talked briefly about their dad.

Then Jake agreed to the switch. He said he wanted it done quickly, before his wife and daughter came downstairs.
Outside Jake cried quietly into Shilo's chest. The dog whimpered and pawed.

"Shilo's got to eat salty wild rice. He needs salt on his food and water constantly."

"I'll give it to him." Wes wondered exactly what kind of rice that was. He wondered if it registered with Jake that Shilo would likely be dead in the morning. Why would he want to discuss Shilo's diet?

"He gets big eye boogers and you got give him Visine-A. Wait till he's sleepy and then give two drops, each eye."


In the cab of his truck, Wes said his goodbye to Dioji. Then the brothers did the exchange. Jake told Wes to wait one moment. He forgot something of Shilo's.

Dioji sniffed around outside the garage. Wes paced in front of his truck, loathing the looming parting words. Dioji approached Wes and sat, leaning against his leg.

Jake came back outside carrying a rubber cone-shaped "dong." Wes saw someone look out an upstairs window. The "dong" had dried peanut butter flaking off its rim. Then they said goodbye.

Wes started the engine.

"This is all on one condition." Jake said, through the window.

"Anything." Wes said. "You name it." He would not look at Jake.
“Admit you were there when mom fell. That you were downstairs and heard her.”

Dioji barked at an oscillating bird feeder that hung from Jake’s apple tree. “That riff she heard in that tub. That fucking song she heard.”

Jake hummed a guitar riff. “She had the chorus in her head. It was vague but ultimately I got it. You were always following that tune with your guitar that you suck at. She could hear you shuffling down there. She had her head against the tub. She heard you slithering away. Our own mom.”

Wes put the truck into gear.

Jake punched Wes in the face. Shilo barked and Wes floored the gas.

When he approached the highway he pulled over and stopped. Jake’s words had debilitated him. He wondered if there was any truth to them. He could barely remember his short stint at learning guitar. That alone scared him. Then he imagined his mother’s guttural screams.

He could see the basement. There’s the makeshift fiberboard square of his apartment, the carpet remnants, the stand-up shower. There’s Wes smoking butts, and Wes hearing a crash and the phony bells ringing after it. There’s Wes turning off the music and amplifier. Now he wanted badly to be able to turn around and switch the dogs again, but drove south instead. He recognized a small country store that he passed. He recognized an old windmill on a field of alfalfa and the name of the town. Moscow, written on a sign saying forty-nine miles. He wished for a long peaceful sleep. He felt he
should be thinking about Dioji but Jake's daughter, Victoria, would intrude and then he'd hear that stutter of hers, visualize the accessories that made possible her convoluted gait. Did she also have a lisp, he wondered? Moments would pass when nothing burdened him more than that.

It was still early morning. He drove below the speed limit and wondered where that next good sleep would be and when would he again be able to take it for granted. As he drove he appreciated the passing landscape. He wondered if that farm near here that he and his family frequented when he was a kid still served pizza on the weekends, if the meat and vegetables were still butchered and picked on the premises, if people waited outside by the bonfire for tables to open, if in fact, that farm was even near here at all.
You wake up after a dismal night’s sleep and hear your dad snoring and the pipes rattling and through tiny gaps in the boarded-up windows, slivers of sunlight conduct manic geometry on the walls. Come six this evening you will know if you made the basketball team. It’s cut-down day. You consider yourself on the bubble because you’re a transfer student, but think your ability warrants selection. You hate the suspense. Can’t stomach your corn flakes or the idea of toothpaste.

Half-way through practice things look promising. The coach is impressed with your hustle. Your jump-shot has arc, the cross-over dribble sheds would-be defenders. You’re shining. your future as big as the basket seems. During a shooting drill you make five consecutive shots and one of your teammates yells, “Let it rain.”

Then your janitor dad enters the gymnasium, which makes you nervous. You stand there fidgeting, ball cradled under your right arm, your body language so awkward and guilty a complete stranger might think you stole the damn thing.

He starts dustmopping the periphery of the court, a steaming mop bucket waiting near the double doors.

Practice has to end before he can mop, but practices don’t always end at the same time. He has the weight room to clean afterwards and then the showers. If practice extends past schedule, your dad can do nothing but watch. When he watches, you feel a
conflicting sense of shame because you can't comfortably hate him, even though janitor
dads are antithetic to acquiring pussy, making hoop teams, and riding shotgun.

Especially at a school like this. From the beginning, you demanded that he never
acknowledge you as his son, and more importantly, that he never act like your father.
The consequence of your demand is guilt, the weight of it huge.

You feel like a candidate for spontaneous combustion but without that fear. you
reason, you'd be a candidate for trade school.

You are fast, fluid, and alert during practices, but when your dad arrives early you
wade in a swamp. Your breath accelerates and you get heart palpitations. You over-
analyze Coach's instructions, subscribe to the outrageous idea that your dad's presence
makes the air heavier because he radiates depression.

You are hardly known here at the Academy, a senior transfer from Mt. Holly,
fifty miles away, hoping that graduating from the Academy will score you a generous
financial aid package in college so that you can live without the old man, live normally.

It's been hard to concentrate so far this school year, under these ridiculous
conditions. Your living arrangement is absurd. There's implicit suffering in living like a
bum, as you and your father do, living illegally in the shady, abandoned, fire-hazard
section of this school that you attend. Combine that with being the new kid who's not
very outgoing, who feels destined to experience the world of girlfriend-having as a
spectator. Who has on four occasions wandered every coal-dark hallway in the dead of
night to inspect the girls’ bathroom stalls for his written name.

You perform admirably at practices despite janitor jokes geared toward to your
father’s stub some might call a right arm.

In the beginning of all this, you said, “Listen Dad, you don’t know me.” And he
doesn’t as best he can.

Sister Shirley, the principal, negotiated the generous tuition deal with your dad on
account of him working here. He took this janitor job last July after losing a job at
Creed’s ice factory. Sister Shirley was more than generous. She shook your hand and his
and pledged her secrecy to what you requested. It’s no one else’s business, she said. She
said kids can be cruel. There was no discussion of living upstairs rent-free and illegally.
There’s betrayal in this, you feel, to the benevolent nun, that you’ve stored next to asking
your dad not to know you.

This situation is bizarre, risky, and delicate, but has succeeded so far without a
 glitch. No one knows you live upstairs and, until recently, your dad pretended you were
a stranger.

St. Joseph Academy is huge, but enrollment is small. The hallways are wide and
long. Back in the day it was the most populated high school in the county. Now there
are five lockers for every one student. When your dad walks down the hallway, he looks menacing in the emptiness.

   It was November when your dad got weird. When he became careless and stupid, and seemed on the verge of betraying you every second. Third period Trigonometry a couple weeks ago, he was meandering outside your class when the bell rang and when everyone exited into the hallway, he was leaning against the lockers engaged in the simplest of yo-yo tricks. He looked at you, smiled, and nodded. You asked yourself in horror, what the fuck was up with that?

   At lunch last week he walked to where you sat talking to some almost-friends and tossed you an ice-cream bar. He paused and smiled. “I got it free from the lunch lady,” he said. What could have prepared you for this? “Stubby’s gay for ya,” Brian Stanley whispered as your dad walked away and then Brian laughed, followed first by your own laughing. then by everyone else’s and despite the softball in your throat you obeyed the laughing will of the group to exhaustion.

   “If you don’t want it,” David Tavoli said, “I’ll take it,” and then David Tavoli ate the ice-cream sandwich in two giant bites.

   You don’t want to admit to the latest incident because you didn’t actually see him do it, but you know he did. The Sisters of St. Joseph reside in the building adjacent to the school. They loiter on the school grounds or walk the square block around the old building. Your dad particularly hates two of these nuns. Sister Maria and her sidekick,
Sister Devon, who constantly walk together with a tiny white dog named Amen, collecting cans and scouring the concrete for coins. This past Monday a piercing, foul scream from outside interrupted English class and within minutes Sister Shirley’s angry voice came over the loudspeaker to warn whoever was responsible for burning Sister Maria’s hands that serious punishment loomed large. After the announcement you requested a bathroom pass, hustled to the school’s basement, and began your secret route to the building’s wasteland sixth floor, your home. When it was safe to run you did, running the basement floor, locking and unlocking padlocked doors, and climbing the flights of stairs homeward. Upon entering there was an unrecognizable smell that makes you think of factories. A pair of metal tongs, a jar of quarters, and his plugged-in welder lay suspiciously in front of the only window in your apartment that is boarded with a negotiable sheet that allows a hand to reach outside should one want to. The entire sequence of events is now as clear as if you were reading from a script: his timing of Sister Maria’s walk around the building, the torching of the quarters with his welder, your dad tossing them outside on the street and sidewalk below, baiting the silly nun, who first sees just one quarter and then yells jackpot when she sees the rest, picks one up that sizzles into her hand.

It’s an ancient school and an impoverished gym, with rusty gang showers the players often piss in. You shower after each practice but don’t piss, because you’re dad
has to clean them. You avoid the rest of the fleeing players at all costs because otherwise they’d wonder why you’re always the last to leave if you have a forty-mile drive ahead.

You make the team. You’re even spared the suspense because Coach calls your name first. Afterwards in the showers you join the others in a team piss. All of you holler and yell. The players that have been cut leave without showering. You watch the collected streams disappear down the drain, feeling great, only to feel horrible when your dad peers in from the weight room to witness a moment of your joy and you feel your bliss like your piss, leaving your body. There’s no expression to his face, all individual features without the networking needed to convey. He quickly turns and exits and already you retrieve the image of him you just saw and try to derive from it a consequence, but all you see is some sort of Nothing-Man. You realize a contract is broken. You have asked him to pretend he doesn’t know you and realize now you were spared the burden of being asked why. You acknowledge his unselfishness and understanding in not asking, but fear what this breach will mean. You’re angry at yourself for not treating this request like a clearly forged contract. No one accepts someone else’s terms without personal gain or at least the means with which to take away yours. His recent stunts suddenly seem like hints or warnings. At the bare minimum, in exchange for not knowing his own son’s face, the most implied courtesy your dad likely expects from you is to not degrade him or make his job any harder. A crucial battle has been lost. You briefly consider the possibility that among the array of cocks and streams
of piss, you were lost in a sort of crowd. You couldn't tell for certain whether he accounted for your dick too, but then you conclude that must have.

You escape to the cafeteria after you get dressed. You smell the grease that fries the chicken burgers and potatoes and you try to think about girls and what it takes to land one but there's no escaping what just happened in the shower. You are weighted down by an image and a feeling. The image is simply your dad cleaning the showers. The feeling is murky and complicated, something about your essence being left behind to watch him clean: The lingering odor of urine attaching to rising shower steam, sweating from the ceiling and walls, so part of you drips and drops, while part of you floats among the steam, entering him as oxygen, clogging his pores, watering his eyes, leaving a nasty taste in his mouth.

It is taxing to think everything through to a borderline hallucination. If you can't stop making yourself suffer by visualizing him cleaning, allow yourself to see him in another light. Couldn't he look like some kind of chemical-cleaner Terminator with all those spray bottles hanging from his stacked toolbelt? Man, if you could only laugh.

You finally begin to realize that since the loss of your mother and sister, communication with your dad is physical, executed through gestures, attitude, the placing of things in the apartment. Like that time you cleaned the living room and found, later that night, a dozen chocolate chip cookies leftover from the AA meeting downstairs that your dad cleans up after. The cookies were him thanking you.
You blew the only opportunity for sustained normalcy. You made the team and could have celebrated with the old man, pumped him up, then carefully reminded him of the importance of keeping a low profile until graduation: no ice-cream bars or knowing glances, total incognito, and he'd be happy the Franchino legacy includes someone who he helped create, he wouldn't even get the chance to be offended.

In the cafeteria you are dressed and clean and after exhausting all possibilities about your residual essence in the locker room showers, you allow your brain to begin the familiar avoidance pattern of fussing about your hair and wishing for your non-virginity. You wish your hair could look as cool all the time as it does wet, when it shines, falls effortlessly into a flattering part and appears neither fretted over nor neglected. But in the mornings one side is always flat against your head and the other side sticks straight up. That dude Jenkins once said that you looked like third generation white trash, cross-bred with barn fowl, which made you for the remainder of that day think about how a permanent moisture could be maintained. Your dad has already been reprimanded once for not locking the locker rooms, hence no more morning showers for you.

Your school's enrollment's has decreased drastically through the decades, because while tuition kept rising, factory grunts' wages mostly didn't, and even though the hard-working ancestors of your town built this school in accordance with their morals and faith, few of their namesake attend now. Family names like Cioffi, Illiano, Ricci, Sabataso, and Zingale, once appearing in dozens on classroom rosters, appear only on
plaques now, displayed in cabinets on trophies or under black and white team photos.

The days of championships and pep rallies, bonfires and war. Most of this older
generation now lives elsewhere, the ones who stayed often working where their fathers
did, in some cases still right beside their fathers, but they can’t afford private school
tuition for their kids. The ones that stayed and actually made money still send their kids
here, but they have fewer of them and they hardly carry on any legacy. For instance, Paul
Muscatello is a fag. Susan Quinn (her mother’s maiden name, Ricci) dresses Goth and
gives passing cars the finger as she blows smoke rings.

You even try the bathroom faucets to wet your hair but the relic pipes exert little
pressure and your hair becomes super kinky and Jenkins tells everyone you paid a
hundred plus for your jackass perm.

You completed college applications a month ago. You bounced names of schools
off your dad. He enjoyed being included in the process. He gave you a hundred dollars
for application fees. By transferring to this Academy you’ve increased your chances of
admission to many schools, even though you will graduate having attended only a year.
Several Catholic colleges in New England have a long-standing relationship with your
high school and look favorably upon its graduates. You kicked ass on the essay sections
of the applications. You grinned, sad but true, you grinned when you wrote them.

You’re a good student. nothing extraordinary, but you’re in a league of your own with the
intangibles. You wrote about a dead mom and sister. You wrote about a janitor dad.
You wrote about a poorly funded rural public high school with a high percentage of students who drop out or take over family farms or go on to technical and trade schools. You wrote about the faculty there, fostering mediocrity. You wrote about a half of an arm and the nickname "Stubby." You wrote about sacrifice and your bullshit commute forty miles to school. The beautiful feeling of carrying on a family legacy at the Academy, though it took your father's employment as janitor to make it happen. You represented yourself excellently. There were diamonds in your story. Admission committees would feel enriched by the privilege of knowing it.

A week after you sent them your dad said he'd heard there was "good livin'" in Amherst. Good living in Ithaca and Andover too. "But," he said, "the livin' ain't finer than in the town of St. Michael's." He said he heard great things about the town of St. Michael's. Talked to someone about it just the other day. Good work there, good-lookin' woman, he'd heard, good Italian food. You asked him what he knew about the town of Colchester. He said he hadn't heard of it. You hated him then. You wanted him to die unexpected and painfully in front of you. You didn't ask the names of the Italian restaurants. You didn't tell him St. Michael's wasn't a town but the name of a college you were interested in. You didn't tell him the St. Michael's campus was in a town called Colchester. You didn't say anything. Now you're sitting in this cafeteria feeling stupid for not understanding what he was trying to tell you, which was that you are all he has in his life and would love to relocate with you wherever you go to school because he
also wants to start over. But you didn’t catch it and clearly the recent stunts he’s pulled
like the ice cream sandwich is him expressing his sad disappointment. That you now
have pissed in the shower he has to clean daily, is you, whether you meant to or not,
telling your father to, “Fuck off.” You still don’t know what to think about him burning
Sister Maria though.

So you wait in the cafeteria for the others to leave and you feel like shit for
pissing in the showers. You’re beat and you slowly doze off. At some point your dad
knocks on the cafeteria door. Door-knocking and feet-stomping communicate things in
your world, the way fur rising on dogs’ backs communicate things in theirs. Your dad’s
quick double knock simply means the coast is clear.

But the dark is disorienting and you incorporate the knock into your dream.
When you wake in the cafeteria a couple hours later you remember your dad has
promised pizza tonight.

You rise and make your way by pen-light to the fire-exit steps in the abandoned
half of the school. The door feigns being bolted shut by an elaborate set of hardware but
you know the special way it opens because your dad’s the janitor.

You go up the stairs to floor six, walk by penlight down the long corridor, and
wonder if pizza was cancelled when your piss flowed down the rusty drain. You rattle
the lockers and your fingers get dusty.
Of course you could articulate to him that you meant no disrespect, that you were just trying to fit in, would be glad, even, to clean the shower yourself. But that's a little scary. Having to admit the deed is scary enough because you know he won't bring it up. And then there are the other things. The lingering discomfort of simply having been naked and urinating in front of him, an event which, when discussed, will undoubtedly conjure in both of you images of your cock. You fear him saying "what would your mother think?" There's the fear of breaking down and crying in front of him, but even worse, the possibility of him forgiving you, and worse than that, the response that would be expected of you if you were forgiven.

Like at practice, your heart races and you feel you may pass out, but you keep walking homeward.

You suffer from everyone knowing you're the son of Stubby the janitor without their even knowing yet, but keep walking homeward.

Some classroom doors are open and some are shut but it doesn't matter because no one comes up here except the fire Marshall, Doherty. And you and your dad know exactly when he comes each month because your dad has the keys that let Doherty in.

The worst of the winter is still yet to come but only your walks through the corridors are cold. Your pen-light makes your breath visible in the halls, but at night you sleep in warmth and comfort.
You enter the old lecture room, which smells like damp wood: a podium still stands in its center. You pause and wonder how to confront your father. You’re almost home. Maybe he didn’t even see you pissing.

Your dad erased the memory of three adjacent classrooms by extending walls and lockers between their doorways. He made possible the flowing of undetected electricity into appliances carefully stashed there before you moved in last August.

You watch movies on an expensive projector system he stole from AV. Couches, beds, recliners, bought, or taken from someone’s garbage and repaired, were lugged to floor six in the middle of summer nights.

He made tables out of old wooden desks. He polished and enameled them. Good enough to eat off of while preserving a past generation’s profanity and sentiment: their “fucks” and their “shits” and their pictures of dicks and their pictures of tits. Slant-eyed stick figures getting their brains blown out by cartoon-sized revolvers, with cartoon-sized bullets, bigger than the figures themselves.

Your home is decorated with student election posters that date back to the twenties. You have cable television and a collection of old Coca-Cola prints that someone some day will pay good money for. There is so much room he’s built three Ping-Pong tables.

Silly little luxuries, you think, for an illegal dwelling. You’d trade all of them for some peace. Not inner peace - since you don’t know that from a decent haircut - just
peace from the sounds of an old building. Sadly your thoughts and dreams are owned by the aching wail of pipes and the building’s creaks and burps, interruptions you long ago surrendered to, so now when you trail off to sleep you do it with their aid and wake by their summon and remember nothing of your unconscious except those hopeless sounds. You often feel like you haven’t even slept. Space heaters sit around the periphery of your home and on cold nights you’re surrounded by a communal orange glow suggesting ritual sacrifice. The heaters have a sound too. As do your dad’s obsessive games of Ping-Pong. At the table against the wall your dad will play against himself for hours, replenishing balls from a barrel filled with them, your one-armed dad, the smooth calm toss of a fresh ball, the impatient slam, the floor a sea of white hopeless heads, you thinking this is what a Birdseye view of a nautical disaster might look like. He plays as if against an enemy who has inflicted on him an insurmountable pain.

You stand in the old lecture hall wondering, then walk to the storage room in back. There are two entrances to your home in this lecture room. One is near the middle of the room but you choose the lecture hall’s storage room entrance because where it drops you into your apartment is a close shuffle to your makeshift bedroom and privacy. The storage room is mostly a pile of broken chairs begging for a dose of gasoline and a strong wooden match. You climb the nailed slabs of wood on the wall. At the ceiling, penlight in mouth, you loosen the ceiling panel. You hike yourself up into the innards of this building and see twenty feet away a similar light to the one in your mouth. He’s
leaving the apartment to clean and lock the AA meeting room and exiting through the other option. You exchange greetings there like a couple of rats. The two lights joust one another. You can make out his face and body and the potentially dangerous wires, shingles, pipes, and panels above his head. The timing in uncanny.

Nobody prepares for car accidents that take the lives of the only two women you can ever pretend to have known. You didn’t know, that all along, your mother served as some interpreter between you and your dad. It wasn’t your decision to live here like a bum, to carry furniture up six flights of stairs in the middle of hot summer nights. You’ve had no say in anything until now. You look at the bearded face of the first big decision in your life and he appears to be waiting for an answer, question, and apology at the same time. The opportunity is there to settle the dilemma of your pissing but might also be a door to settling other things. To this opportunity, you say ‘no thanks,’ and to him you say you’re tired and need to read a little history before bed, so good night. You decide to leave him. That come graduation you will not see him ever again. You decide to not apologize, not answer his questions or solicit the ones he’s afraid to ask and you feel quite comfortable about the whole thing. And next November when you’re away at college and you learn about the fire at St. Joseph Academy there will be a brief period of guilt after the funeral. There’s a big agenda out there waiting for you. Too many things you want to do. But before you can do any of them, you still need to slither a few more feet, remove another ceiling panel, and carefully drop inside to your home.
Pavement

Reddy sat at the bar of The Double Godfrey, still confident that the woman who sold flowers here the past two Fridays might appear a third. She had arrived at midnight both times. He promised himself that he would make her acquaintance tonight. He wouldn’t allow himself the comfort of home and bed if he didn’t. He’d sleep under the River Street Bridge as a reminder of who he was during the week he had, in fact, slept there. He’d been at The Double Godfrey for hours now, having arrived early to dull his nerves with drink, to scrutinize his prepared introductions. He modified some and discarded others and, in the last hour, settled on three keepers.

The bar was crowded now and its energy filled Reddy with doubts and apprehension. He placed a five dollar bill on the counter and finished his drink, hoping its emptiness might speak for itself. He was drinking Tanqueray and tonics. Amos was busy tending bar alone tonight, and Reddy desired for transactions that continued without words. As he waited, he analyzed his position on the stool. He’d read an article claiming the human subconscious forms instant opinions about strangers based on their posture, but he couldn’t access the article’s helpful tips, though he had studied them. He checked his watch. Midnight was one drink away.
Reddy found the woman mysterious. He'd yet to even hear her voice. He watched her the past two Fridays present her flowers to people the way a caterer might a platter of sliced meats. She smiled after a sale, her thank-you, and shaking her head meant that, No, the flowers weren't free. She displayed prices with her fingers. Reddy thought all this amazing. She refused to make a sound. She had brought her son here too, who looked about eight or nine, who waited for her by the door and ate candy. To him she didn't speak either. The boy encouraged Reddy. A boy in a bar at midnight suggested the absence of a father. It was encouraging, too, that in one of Reddy's dreams the boy referred to him as *The Scroll*, a tribute, Reddy thought, to his wisdom.

Reddy had consumed only half of his first drink of the evening, as was his pattern, sliding the glass in front of the only adjacent stool, where it still stood with a sunken lime in liquid made murky from its pulp. He kept an extra ashtray there, too, and often provided it a lit cigarette. Amos passed Reddy several times without serving him. He hoped Amos wouldn't take the half-full glass or make an imaginary friend joke. People danced and stood in drink lines. There was a line at the juke box too. The door constantly opened and closed and there was a continuous crunching from trampled bar snacks.

Reddy had to order verbally and fumbled the pronunciation of the gin.

"My friend, you have passed the finish line." Amos said, grabbing both of Reddy's glasses and wiping the counter in quick, dismissive strokes.
“What am I?” Reddy said with confusion.

“Done for the evening,” Amos said. Then somewhere at Reddy’s back a man’s voice announced, “The igloo has been eighty-sixed.” Reddy immediately stiffened. He didn’t recognize the voice, and for minutes he dared only look straight ahead.

A mirror advertising Popov Vodka hung behind the bar and through it Reddy watched her enter and carry a bundle of red, purple, and yellow roses hastily towards the billiard room in back, her kid left moping about the door. Reddy turned and caught the last strides of her slender legs before they vanished in the crowd. He loved the way they operated under her wide swaying hips.

Reddy remained seated in mild disbelief. Over and over he replayed the exchange with Amos. This had never happened before. He knew that being cut-off meant he had to leave but after waiting expectantly for so many hours he couldn’t just yet. Had he entirely misunderstood Amos? All his settled-upon introductions included buying her a drink and he cursed himself for conceiving three options all vulnerable to a single common denominator. Buying the gal a drink was so completely unimaginative, he thought, sad even, that he allowed it to be his only life-line. And now it had been stolen. Abducted, he then said to himself. The word seemed a better fit. She came here to work and not drink. That should have been obvious. Why all this clarity now? The question troubled him. He began feeling he’d been given a pop quiz, administered by the promise itself. Failing his promise came with so many consequences and though he mandated
these himself, he felt profoundly separate from it now, as if the pledge existed on its own
and monitored him from a secret vantage, gauging his sincerity in making it when
subjected to a curveball. Remaining seated, he reasoned, meant the promise wasn’t yet
broken. He was still here, as was she, which made him available for a miracle. He was
afraid to move anyway. To his left was the service station and its long line, and the
empty stool to his right had attracted a line of its own. He felt suffocated. Amos was in
front of him, and behind, somewhere, was the person who said igloo.

Until now the evening had passed slowly and the quickened pace perplexed him.
The bar seemed fevered and hostile. Reddy was supposed to be healing. Meeting her
would make him healthy. Reddy had many theories. He believed in spiritual energy that,
when healthy, attracted love, trust, and friendship. It also fostered success. If wounded,
the same energy repelled all these things. His was wounded, he thought, but repairable.
In his mind he pictured rust spots. Perhaps there was even a hole. Since being fired from
Creed’s Ice Factory, he had begun pondering if failure was predetermined in him, the
same way being left-handed was. If so, spiritual energy and the I Ching were a farce. He
had begun having violent dreams. He would fearlessly assault someone only to exhaust
himself because his blows landed like dust and hurt nobody. He’d fire a shotgun in other
dreams, but after pulling the trigger the barrel would always fall limp and the bullet drop
and echo down a manhole. He was close to accepting disappointment as the foundation
from which his life would operate. Then after seeing her, he began dreaming of her, and
the dreams seemed to promise their togetherness. He dreamt of her often and waking
he’d collect and organize the details of their relationship’s latest chapter. It didn’t bother
him that this was fiction. Dreaming was real enough. They were becoming intimate at a
slow, meaningful pace, as it should be.

Why this had been thwarted tonight, a night with so much at stake, was a question
he needed answered. Why did Amos ask what I was drinking? he thought. He served me
the same booze all night. He considered the possibility that Amos did it out of jealousy,
but that meant Amos knew his intentions. He didn’t think he had told anyone about her.
but suddenly wasn’t sure. Unemployed, the days passed without memory. Amos was
good looking, single, and women loved his many tattoos. He concluded he had nothing
that would inspire jealousy in Amos, which seemed a good thing. The flower woman
was more sophisticated than Amos. Maybe they were casually fucking though. But she
was wasn’t that type. She had a kid to think about and sought a man for love who also
would be an excellent father figure. Reddy looked toward the billiard room, but she was
still out of sight. He couldn’t quite remember if she started her flower selling in the
billiard room the other times. That she had practically sprinted back there troubled him.
And her kid wasn’t eating candy either. Reddy began to fear that people might be
reading his thoughts because of their intensity. Years earlier he had attended a mind-
reading performance. The audience was asked to visualize an object or recount a past
experience for thirty seconds. The mind-reader asked the person who was thinking about
skinned rabbits to stand and identify himself and that someone shrieked in disbelief and the audience pointed and laughed. The mind-reader named someone’s siblings and the bones broken in the lifetime of someone else, and all the while, Reddy had shrunk into his seat and focused as best he could on nothing.

Amos whacked a copper bell with a ball-peen hammer which startled Reddy so much that his whole body jolted and someone intercepted his backward-falling stool, pushing it and Reddy back to stability, then patting him on the back. People laughed. Someone said something but Reddy saw only moving lips. Amos announced that the C02 tank needed changing and the crowd made a path for him as he hustled away and after the laughter dwindled, Reddy returned to analyzing the evening, in particular the timing of his being cut-off. It seemed too coincidental. Mere minutes before her arriving and hustling off to the billiard room. She could have passed a dozen willing customers on the way there, he thought. Some might even be leaving the bar right now. That her error in judgment could be costing her money made Reddy restless. A single mom. He saw a handful of people begin leaving and wished he had the ability to stop them. He felt a sudden keen awareness of the people tonight at The Double Godfrey. How everyone seemed to know Amos. How Amos always said something incredibly satisfying after hand-shakes and the many quick stories or updates they so willingly provided him. They applauded the speed of his service. Thinking back, Reddy determined that Amos frequently undercharged other customers. while he paid three-seventy-five and a tip with
every drink. He’s making a fortune off me, Reddy thought. Blaming Amos was comforting, but Reddy couldn’t decide what he was blaming him for?

It struck him, as he watched Amos resume service, that perhaps it was she, the flower woman herself, who ordered Amos to do this. She wouldn’t have sprinted to the billiard room for no reason. Was I supposed to be gone? The thought swam erratically in his head, as if negotiating a complex maze, bumping around and idling. Several minutes passed and then he figured it out. The theory graduated from possibility to cold fact and it happened, he thought, like this: The flower woman pops in at the beginning of Amos’s shift to make the request that at her arrival Reddy be elsewhere. Amos reluctantly accepts the request because he has a responsibility, as bartender, to make people feel unthreatened, women in particular. Evening arrives and Amos is busy, the only bartender on a Friday night. He does his best to keep up with orders while remaining cordial to his many acquaintances. He is indifferent to the women’s peculiar request and slightly annoyed that it’s at the expense of a faithful tipping regular. With reservations Amos cuts him off, but fails to account for the minutes it takes for Reddy to actually depart The Double Godfrey, this being an emphasized detail of the request. To Reddy this explained her surly entrance and everything else. Does she think I’m some stalker? he thought. He giggled. In his mind, he apologized to Amos. So she’d rather sell roses without me appreciating her existence, he thought. He relaxed a little. His self-consciousness abated. Even if Amos had shared this information with others in the bar, it was to make a
joke out of her and not him. At this, he felt better. He’d confide in Amos about all of it when he had a moment.

He lit a cigarette. He hadn’t felt such relief in a while. He took extended drags and purposely blew the smoke upwards and into the faces that waited in line because their incidental bumping irritated him. Slowly, the victory of solving this riddle gave way to disappointment. How could he have been so wrong about the flower woman? Someone in line bumped him. Reddy saw himself stand and shove. He realized he was becoming angry. He welcomed it. He felt he didn’t get angry enough, too busy obsessing over intrusive thoughts. It was tiring. It was a horrible characteristic about himself. to interfere with the natural advancing of emotions. wavering instead at some non-committal point of the emotional spectrum like a needle skipping on scratched vinyl.

Just get mad, he thought and then said aloud, “I should be.” It invigorated him to speak, though it was just quietly and to no one.

“Tanqueray. Tanqueray. Tanqueray.” Reddy said with a smile. Amos appeared not to hear, but Reddy suspected he did. Then Amos turned and gave Reddy a prolonged dirty look as he filled a pitcher with beer, which confused Reddy. Reddy averted his eyes, looked about the bar, and saw her working her way back, appearing to sell few, if any, flowers. He imagined himself breaking her heart through a clever onslaught of words, and recalled for inspiration. his favorite scene in “One Flew Over the Cooko’s
Nest,” when Jack Nicholson announced the drama of a baseball game when there was none.

Her son started protesting the cigarette smoke. “It gets stuck right here,” he chanted, saluting his chest. People jeered and blew smoke rings. “It has no where to go.” the kid said. More smoke rings. Reddy watched her glare at her kid. He saw a life of pain and want in her face, then declared the observation a stupid romantic sympathy. But it was sincere and undeniable. He hated what she’d done to him and felt he should hate her doing it. It frustrated him that he could not. He felt himself retreating to the familiar terrain of introspection. Soon he’d be powerless before the inertia of his thoughts. He knew exactly how he operated. The confident anger he’d deemed as healthy soon would be a memory. He wished he could reverse the affection, make her the admirer of him, subject her to his disappointment. The kid was right about the smoke. It was fog thick and Reddy imagined it forming into his physical approximation as Amos escorted him outside. He imagined, then, his facsimile claiming his now vacant stool. puffs of smoke darting out as it adjusted into Reddy’s own skewed posture. If I do nothing, Reddy thought, this is my soul.

The kid took off his shirt and started fanning smoke out the door. People threw peanuts at him and he stopped, nodding, as if to say, “well done.” Then he approached the tables of his perpetrators and tipped over their ashtrays. Reddy fidgeted with anticipation as the kid, now fleeing his mother, ran out the door. As she passed Reddy.
he abruptly strangled the bulk of her flowers, removing several colorful heads, leaving a bundle of fractured stems still clutched in her arms. She stopped and studied the damage. Reddy raised his arms triumphantly, his fists clenched, his plan, created just seconds earlier, now being executed, he thought, to perfection. Rose petals peeked out from between his knuckles. He paused and then opened his fists and the petals fell to the floor in small bloody clumps. Some remained stuck between his fingers. They were supposed to flutter down delicately and symbolize the pieces of her broken heart. People started applauding. As Reddy gazed at his hands, unconvinced they were his, a sound of screeching tires blared through the bar. When he looked up, she was gone and a path of ruined flowers led out the door and then Amos quickly escorted Reddy to the billiard room and out the back exit.

He started walking home. It took this movement for him to realize how drunk he was. He always enjoyed his walks home. Walking invigorated him. Though he only walked to get somewhere, he felt a welcome verve every time he did. Now he felt very shaky. He took inventory of the last hour. Everything already seemed to happen a long time ago. One moment he was proud of killing her flowers, the next confused, and the next disappointed, but Reddy thought he should be morbidly sad about it. Like anger, he fell somewhere short of ever feeling sad too. He couldn’t ever remember crying. The last woman he shared a bed with had cried the last day he saw her. She cried, then composed herself, and then giggled. She said that crying released endorphins and in two-
point-five seconds she'd be alright. That had been one of their games, giving time needless fractions. Reddy had felt jealous, not of her really, but of anyone with a resource to make them feel better. Ever since, when he thought about this shortcoming, he visualized himself in a cartoon chasing the emotion sadness across silly landscapes. He was chasing sadness' dust and pebbles because sadness was fast.

Reddy began crossing Cinema Plaza's parking lot. The plaza was once just a K-Mart, an arcade, and a Chinese restaurant called, Chef Lou's, whose owner had torched the day after wagering it on a single, luckless hand, which resulted in the torching of everything. Now it was Cinema Plaza and featured a twelve screen theatre that beamed a neon hue and a colossal supermarket that employed greeters and troubleshooters to assist the weary. The K-Mart was now Wal-Mart, and the arcade an elaborate indoor playground, and arcade.

Blacktop and white parking lines extended for acres. Neglected shopping carts sat in bunches. The windshields of scattered vehicles reflected under powerful lights and Reddy walked home.

Reddy's apartment was on the first floor of a small six-unit building. Next to him lived a single, middle-aged and glossy-faced man, who read his newspapers after he came home from work. Until then, the papers remained neatly rubber-banded in front of his door. Reddy used to take them to the park and return them before his neighbor came home. Then he started returning only some, and soon none. Reddy didn't know his
neighbor's first name, his last name was Blichartz, and Blichartz started marking the papers with a red check or circle. "I know you've been stealing my papers, I've been marking them with red," Blichartz said on the day he waited outside for Reddy. "You're a damn fuckin fool." "I just don't know, I just don't," Reddy said. "Did you read the headline?" Blichartz said. Reddy peered down at the paper and noticed the gesture, clearly drawn in red, and when he looked back up, there was Blichartz extending his own middle finger, then turning around, Blichartz went back inside laughing.

Reddy had felt defeated every morning since. They were daily reminders about things he wished he wasn't. Falling for the red-marker trap had been pathetic. His inability to speak during the confrontation wounded him considerably. That Blichartz was fearless of him, though smaller by three inches and fifty pounds, made Reddy wish he was small. He hadn't been laid in a year and hadn't worked in four months. He had a cavity and several painful hangnails.

In the morning the smell of booze and cigarettes made Reddy nervous. He felt horrible. He tried to ignore his scabby hands. He spent the morning interpreting his many aches and cramps to be symptoms of some terminal disease when he wasn't trying to penetrate the meaning of another dream. In the dream, he was walking through Cinema Plaza's parking lot, as he'd done the night before, everything empty and expansive and the same. In the dream he came to a shopping cart with a woman inside it whose head had been nearly blown off entirely by a powerful gun. She was in no way
identifiable. Clutched in her hand was a small pink water-pistol. There wasn't a real gun anywhere. Reddy was standing, contemplating the discovery, growing increasingly anxious. He detected little splashes under his feet. He was standing in the middle of a kiddy-pool of red. Reddy could recall the intense pressure to do something during this part of the dream. But all he did was take the pistol gently in his hand, which seemed to powerfully commit him to it. He couldn’t let go, so he began pulling, but was met with surprising resistance. Instinctually he pulled harder, and then he had the gun pointed at his own chest, which triggered the horrible possibility, that either he, or she, might just blow him away. He yanked as hard as he could and then the gun was all his, and this was all Reddy could remember.

It was early morning now. Reddy had slept little. His forehead felt like moist clay. His heart palpitated. He paced. He wondered if it was the flower woman in his dream. He remembered the violent sound of skidding tires the night before, but until he recalled how the applause stopped and Amos shuffling him out the back door as everyone else, it seemed, headed inquisitively towards the front, did he free-associate the dream’s meaning. Quickly, he assembled his interpretations. That the kid was dead, struck by a car running from his mother. That his stunt with the flowers prevented her rescuing her son. That she might, in fact, kill herself using a powerful gun, but what really killed her was losing her son, which explained the absence of a real gun in the dream and the presence of a fake one, because the fake was a child’s toy, a cheap plastic water-pistol.
and when he was driven to action in the dream, the only think he could do was steal the
toy, which Reddy saw now as the child he thieved from a woman he’d been falling in
love with. And then Reddy weeped. In a span of four months he had contributed in two
catastrophes.

At Creed’s Ice Factory, the employees worked in a rotation. Everyone worked
seven one-hour shifts at a different station. Reddy dreaded the shift that followed lunch.
He dreaded it so much he often couldn’t eat and instead smoked cigarettes next to the
dumpster out back. The shift was bagging ten-pound ice blocks. This particular machine
was old, yellow, and rusty. It compressed ice shavings into blocks and burped them out,
two feet apart, down a short conveyor belt, maybe ten feet long. At the end of the
conveyor belt they dropped automatically into a plastic bag that someone would catch
and quickly seal with a sealing gadget and then place on a wood pallet. The conveyor
belt, however, never stopped. If you got behind, the ice-block fell to the floor. It was
common that everyone missed a few blocks. After a successful bagging shift there might
be four or six erroneous blocks on the floor. But Reddy was bad at it. He could never
improve either. It infuriated him that in today’s age of technology a simple pause button
didn’t come with the machine. Reddy would accumulate twenty-five to thirty fallen ice-
blocks during his shift. He could never keep up. After fumbling one, he could find a
rhythm again. Once the blocks accumulated, he’d have little room to operate. One day
someone called him the igloo and weeks later the word appeared on his time-card and on
the schedule posted in the break room and new people that were hired knew of Reddy by no other means. One day he couldn’t even bag the very first block, or the second. His shift was a minute old. He feared shattering his record and Old Man Creed slowly counting them out loud to the delight of Reddy’s co-workers. Occasionally the machine would need tinkering or require built-up ice to be chipped from its parts. This was done by the bagger’s partner who fed the machine the ice with a shovel. This day Art McPhee was Reddy’s partner when Reddy bagged. Reddy had dropped seven blocks of ice in the first three minutes of bagging and had begun to panic. He worried about the blocks on the conveyor belt, the blocks around him, the presence of fellow workers. Art caught a finger and screamed for Reddy to pull the plug, but Reddy, having calculated that he’d need to not mess up any more blocks for fifteen minutes to not alarm others of a record in progress, feared nothing more than his next error. Art screamed but Reddy heard nothing. He needed to bag and seal and stack. The blocks started coming out red and Reddy bagged them and sealed them and placed them on the pallet. He hated being the igloo. Art screamed and the blocks were red, some barely blocks at all, more like loafs of icy blood and Reddy bagged on and got fired after Old Man Creed pulled the plug.

Reddy desired to make all this official. He turned on the television, unsure if his three working channels did a day-time news segment. There were only cartoons and infomercials. When he thought about Blichartz newspapers his hands started shaking. He felt he might vomit. He opened his door and peered at the doormat where the paper
should be, but which wasn’t. It was Saturday. Blichartz didn’t work weekends. He needed to know now but was scared to leave his apartment and buy a paper of his own because the world might be awaiting to avenge a good kid’s death. He tried to concentrate. It came to him that what had happened last night was too late to have made the paper and he resumed waiting for the news. When it did, it was all national. He left the television on the whole day, fearing the end of every program and commercial and he panicked the entire night. At four in the morning he pulled a chair over to the door of his apartment. He put his ear to it and waited. On a small plate in front of him he had a small pair of scissors and a rubber band. An hours passed in this fashion before he heard footsteps in the hall and the dull thuds of bulky Sunday newspapers dropping to the floor. He waited a couple minutes, listening. Blichartz wasn’t active next door. He made himself one small promise, opened his door, and knelt before Blichartz’s paper. It was raining outside. The paper was not only rubber-banded but inside a plastic bag. He cut the bag and stuffed it in his pocket. He gently cut the rubber-band, careful not to cut the paper as well. A dead boy is headline news in small town. He felt sure of that. Reddy flattened the paper. A large picture of women celebrating in uniforms took up the top half of the front page. The Lady Hornets of Mount Anthony high school won their first Division I soccer championship in twenty years. Then Reddy flipped the paper for the bottom half. Immaculate Heart of Mary church vows to surpass last year’s Thanksgiving food drive by five thousand pounds. Some national briefs. But that was it. The kid was
fine and Reddy felt like he knew this all along. He gathered the scissors and plate and went inside. He did not re-band Blichartz's paper. He laid on his couch. It was tattered from his days of owning cats. He was exhausted. He felt relief but not satisfaction. His entire life, and the past year in particular, he was always chasing something, avoiding something else, hiding, wavering, fearful of getting caught as well as discovery. Rust-spots or holes in your soul, they were stupid ideas. As promised, in his mind's eye he saw himself collapse. He included no landscapes of interest, nothing chased him, and he did not pursue anything, just exhausted and at the end of something. There were so other options and Reddy let himself collapse and when he saw it fit for himself to begin standing, in Reddy's head he made sure to see himself dust himself off.
Thief

Ty Hines learned about the high-stake poker games at the widow Martha Baker's house on Rommell Street while playing video games and wagering pornographic magazines at the house of his friend, Rick Dane. Ty visited Rick often because Rick got him stoned and never asked for anything in return.

Four widows from the boat crash last summer getting blasted on Saturday nights. Rick explained, betting thousands of dollars and cursing their dead husbands plus the whores they burned with, crashing into that fuel dock in Vergennes.

"The sluts were rented with Local 402 union funds," Rick said. "One of their husbands was like treasurer or something. Anyway they get big-time fucked-up every Saturday night. Sinister stuff, man. These women are pissed and ill and bet a lot of money and they don't care. Martha Baker's my aunt's neighbor so it's the skinny."

"What crash?" Ty asked.

"Last summer," Rick said. "Front page of the freakin paper. Ten dead in all."

Ty was annoyed that he never heard of this accident. Stuff like this always kept him down and out. Prostitutes and fiery deaths? Where was I that day? He had recently realized the carelessness with which he'd lived his life and had decided that he needed to be in the know. Not being in the know, as his dad had said after his divorce and immediately before he moved to California, meant you were stupid and vulnerable to all the scams in the world. "You might as well tattoo the institutions that own you on your
ass. That'll be you," he said. "You, if you don't smarten up, because with your mother's
unfathomable behavior. I doubt you'll ever be able to emerge from your youth
unscathed." Being in the know didn't mean executing skilled pussy-pleasuring moves.
which Ty was informed of. he thought, just a little. Nor did it refer to any forms of
teenage street logic. Ty wasn't precisely sure what his dad meant by being in the know.
But at the very least, he decided, it meant having heard of a fiery crash that killed people
on a boat with whores on a big lake in your own small town. It also meant looking after
numero uno. Ty decided, since his dad loved saying that phrase. His dad had also said
his mom "had just dug her own grave" and Christ, Ty thought. he was right about that.
And that's why Ty wanted to be in the know, because he didn't want to be with her. She
was a good loving mother, but his dad predicted her failure so accurately Ty thought a
goal for leaving her soon was a goal that was wise. It would take a while, this dispersing,
but preparations started immediately. Ty left Rick's house disappointed that a fiery boat
crash with whores could have passed him by but exited by thoughts of Martha Baker. her
house, and the large bills in it.

He knew Martha Baker's house because it was on his paper route. He started
thinking about breaking into her house and maybe even announcing himself while doing
it. He envisioned saying something like. "What's up? How ya doing? Your most
expensive jewelry and biggest bills please. pronto before shit gets fucked up." There was
no violence in his scenarios but they all included the threat of it. which, in every instance,
would weigh heavily on these women’s minds and prompt them to dispatch their valuables ricky-tick and afterwards admire the sheer balls of the stunt, the stuntman, and maybe even feel privileged in their role as players.

She dug her own grave, his dad had said. Ty’s mom had dumped Ty’s dad for Don, who was sixteen years older than her at the time of their marriage, but seemed forty years older within a year, on account of his car crash into Otter Creek that left him with two working limbs instead of four and a damaged brain. Afterwards he referred to Ty’s mom as Lady instead of Claire because he couldn’t remember her name. He became mostly silent and indifferent but prone to lashing out and bouts of crippling depression. The resulting babysitting of Don bothered Ty immensely. He hated him before the accident because he was arrogant and made fun of Ty’s old sneakers many mornings while Ty ate his cereal. He hated him after the accident because he emerged a borderline retard and required a crane whenever he needed moving, and Ty, at least once a day, had to empty his catheter. When Ty detached the catheter, Don would half-grin, Ty thought, in a half-retard way. Things had been changing. Mornings now included a home health aide from seven to nine and the home itself included a crane, Don’s vehicle from couch to recliner, his joyride from bed to shitter. Ty had a big problem with this crane. It was weird, noisy, and needed to be cranked any time it was used. After harnessing him in Ty’s mom cranked the crane and Don elevated, looking pampered, his legs hanging beneath him like a kid’s, and there was something awful about the routine that made Ty
morbidly uncomfortable. The warehouse sound of the cranking and the tired look on his mom's face while she did it made for awkward looking labor that bore a sinister resemblance to grave-digging movements. His mom was working sixty hours per week at MetroMail, typing invoices. She had evidence of carpal-tunnel and increasing panic attacks and nausea. Ty knew that Don had left his wife as abruptly as his mother left his dad. Don's wife tested positive for cancer and then Don left her. Ty's mom moved in the day she moved out. Through grinding teeth, this first wife would lie and say she forgave her ex-husband, Don, something she had thought as good fun. His left arm worked, but not his right, same trend with the legs. He was on a religious rotation of chairs and couches, thanks to the crane, this crane he called Mr. Helper. Ty figured, like his mom. Don dug himself a grave too.

Ty lost more sleep every night leading up to Saturday, when he planned Martha Baker's theft. There were no preparations for the heist. He would work on adrenaline and wit alone. He didn't comb his hair anymore. He was anxious in bed and showered only twice that week. No one called him anymore. His social network consisted of quick stop-byes at Rick Dane's to bum weed and that was it. Lately he'd been conducting a disappearing act in school. He went daily and felt he existed less than the day before. Something lost every day during morning announcements and something else at the pep rally to beat the Titans under the lights. In his self-induced disappearing he gained and was proud of, the Weave, as he called it: Hallway surfing and defense mechanism. The
uncanny ability of space management in tight moving quarters. Predicting the motion of the masses. Touch no one, let no one touch you, be swift, fluid, graceful even, never get in the way or require a stutter step, and never be noticed. If you stutter step you lose. The Weave coiled through the lockerscape, uninterrupted, like the air breathed.

At home there was no Weave. The Weave scoffed at large moving masses but had no confidence with cranes in the house. There was a Herculean sense of Karma that foiled the Weave at home as well: Don and his mom were serving their penance in the same house Ty tried to grow up in and the house seemed weighted down with Don and his mother’s regret. Walking through it he’d often think of thick fog and feel strange pangs of regret himself.

Thousands of dollars. He once saw Don pay for a new refrigerator in cash, something like seven hundred bucks, an amount that now seemed small and sad.

Ty worried when he thought about what will happen to him if he finally robbed these old women. Karma was still a righteous foe to him even though he’s reduced things like karma and humanity to crapshoots. He felt oddly uncomfortable knowing the state of these old women, even as he planned to rob them when he delivers the Sunday paper. He’s never liked privileged information. It has never been helpful. The information on these women didn’t qualify his being in the know; it has to come from him and not from a thug like Rick Dane. He had never even seen Martha Baker before.
She only gets the Sunday paper and always leaves her money in an envelope between the screen and front doors, on it written with large red words -BOY.

The clock read 3:57 AM. Ty likened his current situation to a slump. He thought long and hard about it and slump worked. It began and can end, since that's what a slump does, at least in baseball. Wearing Boston Red Sox flannel pants. Ty decided slumps of this magnitude must be met with force and aggression. If they’re asleep, he thought, they will wake up poorer and that’s that.

He throws the newspapers with decent accuracy from his bike. Not great, decent, but the distance is there and it’s cooler to have power than finesse. He stashes his bike in a bush and approaches the door to Martha Baker’s house. He peers in through the front window and sees, despite the morning glare, sleeping bodies lying about the floor and couch and chairs, hears a ceiling fan running full blast.

He enters, door unlocked, and begins working, stealing, attempting to steal. It’s easy enough, and there’s the boy. thirteen, budding zits, unfortunate cow lick, and shit sneakers. hightailing it up the stairs, a modified Weave geared for quiet. He’s filled with purpose, turning over pillows that are supposed to have gold crucifixes underneath but don’t, looking in jewelry boxes that contain not jewelry but election buttons from 1952 and in shoeboxes that hold just shoes save one shoebox filled with pairs of bronzed baby shoes that make Ty think of dead babies. And quickly, amid the disappointment, comes a vague fear caused, as far as he can tell, by his standing there. He’s standing there and has
become scared and surprised at himself, as if consciousness just returned to him from elsewhere and sees a note tacked to his brain saying, “in process of grand larceny.” Then comes the fear of getting caught. Images of these widows with vacuum cleaner attachments.

He tiptoes down the stairs empty-handed and sees that everything is the same, a huge relief, all the same except the way the women are dressed. They’re all there, four indeed, strangely wearing men’s work uniforms, except one, who wears a softball uniform, Number “8, sponsored by a defunct bar called Clyde’s.

There’s a winner here somewhere, Ty thinks. There’s at least one winner on a drunken night of poker or bridge when there’s thousands of dollars waged, won, and lost, and here’s a woman wearing a business suit, another a maintenance outfit, and another a Coca Cola delivery uniform, the uniforms huge and dismal looking on their old bodies. He regains confidence now that these sleeping ladies in men’s clothes are clueless to his presence.

He considers the pockets of Coca Cola’s red and gray striped pants. The cuffs hang over the old woman’s feet and her waist barely exists under the tangled folds of loose fabric like a pair of clown pants. He eases his hand down her left pocket and cringes when the fleshy possibilities of his hand in her pocket assert their dirty selves in his mind. Face down, total hibernation. Coca Cola sounds like a distant yelping puppy. There’s nothing in her pockets. Loser.
It’s six in the morning. Light oozes in from the big living-room window and the old withered faces save Coca Cola furrow, frown, and twitch. With her head resting on a pink oversized purse the woman in maintenance attire sleeps on the floor, supine like she’s in a coffin. Her electrician jacket is open and her breasts, despite the biggest bra Ty has ever seen, sprawl to either side like they’re trying to abandon her with good urgent reason. Ty walks over to her and carefully checks the side pockets for money. Puts the flaps of the jacket back over her chest, and notices the name, “Russell,” written in cursive above the breast pocket that is filled with silver, tweezer-like utensils. “Local 402,” is written in white on the left shoulder.

Number 8 sleeps with her head on the kitchen table. Playing cards and peanuts are scattered on the floor next to her pink-slippered feet. Drinking glasses on the table stand in puddles of their own making. One of the chairs is broken. Hunters in picture frames hold up the heads of deer and the ceiling fan threatens to fly off its support and take off heads.

The Suit lies comfortably on a brown recliner. Her mouth is open and her lips are purple from wine, and dry. She has short bluish hair and a narrow long face with a chin that swoops down then up like a banana. A light-orange drink filled to the brim sits between her legs and condenses moisture to the crotch of her tan dress slacks. The point of her tie floats in the beverage, the wetness of which turns the blue to black.

She is unlucky. Ty thinks. And for that I won’t search her.
Ty carefully approaches Number 8. She has the thinnest hair of them all. Seems the oldest of a very old sorority here. In his semi-sleep earlier this morning he semi-dreamt of an open safe, chunks of gold and lots of cash, and that alone should have bode well despite Ty having declared gut feelings and premonitions useless. The dream should have bode well because he was in the midst of action and it was action that was missing in his life. He looks around the living room. It’s a sad scene. He senses their misery like a dog does a buried bone.

Between Number 8’s legs he sees a white plastic shopping bag. Ty takes his bag off his shoulder and gets down on his knees. He hears a cough and sniffle. He inches closer. A sniffle, a cackle. It’s filled with stuff, not money, this bag between her legs. He’s under the table now, pulling the bag gently through her fingers which open up and release, then hang between her legs, unveiling chewed fingernails and a wedding-ring-tan-lined finger.

They’re all stirring now. Ty makes his way to the door. Opens it softly. Puts the plastic bag of whatever in his newspaper bag, sees clothes, shoes, and a purple-looking heart – junk. He takes Martha Baker’s newspaper out and rests it on the top step of the stoop, front page up. The McWilliams girl is still missing, the community approaching the anniversary of her disappearance with renewed passion and verve; a high-school yearbook photo, brunette, honor student with a penchant for Greek, kidnapped on Rommell Street picking tomatoes from her mother’s garden.
Ty takes a deep breath. Next week, he thinks. I will rob you old bags next week.

He finished his route and went home. His mother and stepfather were waiting.

He was late. He tossed his newspaper bag in the closet and the plastic bag from Martha Baker’s house behind a recliner for appraisal later, the pilfered money-less prize of his efforts. Don drove his wheelchair into the Dodge Caravan and Ty secured him in the van after some confusion with straps and clamps. He was nervous and his hands shook. He was unaware his giant sighs suggested he was annoyed at the chore. They were a result of nausea and fear that accompanied his first theft.

“You think your life is fucking hard?” Don yelled. “Breathing all heavy like it’s a big chore.”

“No Don,” Ty said. “Just beat from the route.”

“Beat?” Don said.

“Yeah,” Ty said.

“Beat your fucking meat.”

That afternoon he went to the library to look at microfilm of the boat accident. It’s something they did in school a couple times, looking up historical headlines and obituaries. The librarian stood on a miniature ladder, practically giving Ty permission to kick it out from under her. They were normal thoughts for him that he never follows through with. He frequently thought of all the cruel things he could do to Don but kept it to hiding remote controls and drawing middle fingers on the TV guide.
A color photograph showed three men wheeling a stretcher in front of a crowd of onlookers. A white sheet covered someone’s body. Ty read the headline and caption:

*Boat Crash Kills 10*

*A deadly boat crash killed ten people yesterday on Lake Champlain in Vergennes. Identities have not been released. Witnesses say speeding was the cause.*

The following day’s front page (Pictured: Gray-haired man, early 70s):

*Alcohol, Escorts. Luxury Liner. Financed by Union Funds*

*Yesterday’s tragic boating accident was apparently a result of alcohol paid for by Local 402 Union funds. Union Chairman, Russell Baker, killed in the crash, financed the boat party to include five female escorts, alcohol, and lobsters. Attending the party were some of Baker’s closest friends, including Attorney, Art Millar.*

He perused the front page and read a caption about a girl named Jennifer McWilliams, who was kidnapped picking tomatoes in her mother’s garden. He folded up the paper, took note of Jennifer’s cheerful pretty face, would like to fuck her, absolutely, and promised himself to start reading the damn things, the day of and not the year after.

The houses on Rommell Street had big square yards, old oak trees, pools, and lots of bushes - meticulous in their everything: the flower gardens, pump houses, and gates. Early mornings became quite a theater for Ty. He once saw a large blond woman chase a man carrying what looked like an old typewriter. He once witnessed a man take a dump
on Dr. Petrick's lawn and saw two dogs fucking a sled. There were the few weeks of police presence after several houses were robbed of their baby pictures.

And he once saw a toddler sitting on the curb half-heartedly playing with two yellow Tonka Trucks. The boy pointed in the air toward a house. A teenager with a Mohawk had hung himself from a tree that stood directly between his house and the house of a girl he had loved ever since they won a potato-sack race together in the third grade, a girl who had loved him back, briefly. then loved another. The boy had peed on himself, an unmistakable wetness receiving no props from faded blue jeans. As Ty stared at the body the sprinkler system came on. Ty and the dead boy were peppered with rapid machine-gun water blasts and the dry toddler trotted off giggling. The sprinkler, it occurred to Ty immediately, spared this boy, even in his deadness, the further agony of having people know he'd pissed his pants. Who could differentiate between piss and water? It had settled Ty's stomach that there were forces out there beyond our power responsible for keeping humanity in respectable working order and crafty in their knowing this dead boy would not now be known as pant-pisser first and Jenny McWilliams worshipper second, by eliminating pee evidence via a properly placed sprinkler with assassin range. Unbelievable. Ty felt this boy must have done something admirable in his life to be spared this shame. He thought miracles could happen and their constituents need only be valve, washer. and hose. He thought he could follow his conscience as long as it was good-willed. Then there was a golf ball driven by drunken
Mr. Jarvis that broke the Cosgrove’s bedroom window and showered their newborn baby boy with broken glass. When Ty heard about a face pink with scars he one-eightied humanity into “a fucking crapshoot,” resurrected his dad’s parting words and wanted from then on to be in the know. Being in the know, he concluded, resists notions of Karma. Being benvolent guarantees nothing and the good things that happen happen the way one steps in a pile of dogshit. A world that lets babies grow up with scars is not a world that practices humanity. You piss your pants, dead or alive, people gonna fucking know about it ninety-nine-point-nine-nine-percent of the time.

The day after the theft Ty drew a map of Martha Baker’s house, as much of it as he could remember. The map was part strategy and battle plan, to uncover possible nooks that hid big bills through exercises in simulation.

At the same time Don looked through the bag behind the recliner and pulled out a pair of leather shoes. He pulled out a Navy-issued Purple Heart and grinned. Plucked an old train ticket from the bottom. Joliet to Chicago. The perforations were still there, this person did not get on the train in Joliet and did not arrive in Chicago some day in 1967. A little late he said to himself and laughed. He took out a Navy dress jacket, highly decorated with various citations, but couldn’t glimpse its full profile holding it with one arm. He moved the wheelchair towards the wall and threw one of the arms onto a hook while still holding the other one, and then sat there looking at the handsome jacket.
It wasn't so much a map but a really bad drawing of the house. It resulted in no hidden cranny-possibilities, and how was it supposed to? he thought. He had barely spent ten seconds upstairs before he came down only to check the pockets of Coca Cola who he decided resembled a bigger loser than The Suit, The Suit having been ignored because her tie floated in orange drink. Her drink had been full and likely was a victory drink and her pockets likely full of money, unchecked by loser A, drawn to loser B on couch instead. It was a gut feeling that had ignored The Suit and those were supposed to be a thing of the past. Next time, everyone would be searched, starting with The Suit. Already a new slump in trying to break out of an old slump, bringing back to memory the bag of clothes and the stupid purple heart on a chain.

Wednesday Ty's mom made Ty take Don to the driving range so Don could yell instructions and criticize Ty's clothes compared to those other students of the "craft." Later that night Ty surprised himself when he drew a picture of a cock in a woman's mouth on the TV guide adjacent to a picture of Ted Danson fumbling with a stethoscope. He had inadvertently drew a tear on the woman's face, a dragging of the pencil perhaps, and suddenly the picture conveyed a harsh struggle between cock and mouth that made him feel awful and evil, since he was the picture's creator and something evil must be inherent in one who pens such despicable images. He promised himself he wouldn't jerk-off for at least two days.
The following two nights Ty saw Don in his office wearing a Navy military jacket and the purple heart from the thieved bag. The purple heart was threaded through a buttonhole with a shower-curtain ring. The jacket fit well and looked natural, how he got it on was anyone’s guess, the jacket and not the purple heart since he’s a veritable street magician with that left arm. He looked ridiculously happy reading something, late that evening when he’s usually sleeping, in his wheelchair that hummed because he always forgot to shut off its power.

Saturday Ty slept well and rose early. He looked at the stupid map and laughed. He looked into the mirror and felt confident that his looks, if maintained, could acquire some *tang*. Rebecca Darby had once told him that a girl, she would not mention who, wanted to fuck him until he howled like a wounded seal. She had been laughing uncontrollably telling him this. He wasn’t interested in howling like anything, and told Rebecca Darby to tell that bitch, whoever she was, that if she wanted the howling of a wounded seal to go fuck a wounded seal and for her, the bringer of this message, to fuck off. Rebecca had frowned and stormed away. If only he had been *in the know* at that time, since then he was long away from that kind of enlightenment, he would have fucked Rebecca Darby and if there needed be the howl of a wounded seal, he’d have done it.
Ty throws the newspapers Sunday morning like a pro. Four consecutive houses have porch swings and he nails all of them and sends them into mild oscillations.

He opens the door to Martha Baker’s house and finds that the scene is roughly the same as the week before. There is, however, a bag of garbage next to the door with the hunting photos on top.

Coca Cola lays on the couch, The Suit on the floor next to her. Number 8 and Local 402 must have made it to the beds, two of which were upstairs, so Ty limits himself to the downstairs. He’s there for the money. He looks in jars, feels the pockets of the two degenerate sleepers, but doesn’t go in them. Too risky. Fucking Christ, he then thinks, would if they just write checks to each other, it’s got to get confusing, these drunk exchanges of hard cash from boozer to boozer. They definitely write checks. The place feels dead and empty. He awkwardly moves about, the Weave being stifled by the stationary quality of the house and his being limited to the ground floor. He catches himself cursing out loud, the two loafing oldies probably listening. Coca Cola the sly wench maybe pushing her panic button on her necklace right now as she sucks the fart out of that cushion. Fuck. He clenches his teeth and fists and wants to yell. He almost does but sees a handgun in a leather holster on the table along with a bunch of letters, old ones, yellow and ancient. He picks them up and throws them in his bag. He picks up the gun, awestruck, his first picking up of a gun. He can hardly contain the urge to unbuckle it from its holster but yields to good reason and puts it in his bag too. There is a ring on
the table that he almost misses and he pockets that. There’s old war pictures. Why not take those too? Everything now seems worthy. He takes two cabooses from an antique train set and puts them in his bag. Cabooses, a ring, pictures, a sweet gun, stock certificates, magnets, the King and Queen from a fancy chess set, four wedding invitations, two cassette tapes, rosary beads (cheap ones), handmade Christmas ornaments, four of them. Louis XIV Cognac bottle. half drunk but the bottle’s cool as shit. The Sunday paper on the front stoop and See Ya.

He rode home burdened by the bulk of his bag. He thought he might be able to sell that gun to Rick Dane or somebody and make large cash. He thought he could sell the old pictures to antique stores because people pay through the roof for that shit. Stock certificates, he imagined, could be turned in, liquidated as they say, into money. Next time, he thought, I’ll take all the pieces to the chess set. People like chess.

He thought these things while riding down Rommell Street and, approaching an occupied car, a shitbox, parked next to the sidewalk facing the direction Ty rode. The car started angrily, abruptly turned around and then accelerated straight towards Ty, who jumped the curb and onto the sidewalk, still on the bike, and the car was filled with pissed looking kids. kept turning and then stopped in the same exact place it left but facing the opposite direction. They stared past Ty and then Ty heard footsteps coming from behind him and some kid ran past Ty towards the car only to stop and retreat two steps and punch Ty quickly and accurately in his nose. the force sending him off his bike
and crashing to the ground. There was laughter and the sound of a shitty car driving away. Ty shook his head, looked around. Did that really just happen? he thought. For a second he couldn't decide. Okay, it did. He looked in the direction his assailant came from. He appeared to come from one of the two houses that both had "For Sale" signs in their yards, and in between them there was a wreath, big and green, looked like pictures on it, a couple CD's, flowers, and a jean jacket?

There's comedy in getting your face punched for no reason, especially when the punch comes unexpected and without mutual recognition between puncher and face of punched. He told himself this. He had dropped his bike in his unkempt yard and left his bag of goods in the kitchen and made for the bathroom to stop the bleeding. He heard that a nose-punch yields uncontrollable tears and they were way right. He blotted the bleeding nose with handfuls of tissues. How absurd to be deserving of having your face punched and then getting your face punched by someone unaware of your thriving candidacy. His nose bled on his shirt and tissues, on his shorts and the blue bathroom rug. After ten minutes the pain simmered and the blood looked excessive for how he was currently feeling. He got his breath back, cleaning himself like any regular adult would after unwarranted violence, making himself right and presentable. "Just rolling with the punches." he said out loud. "Gotta fix a fucked-up nose, better fix it." He was grooving to the situation now, no need for assistance, tilting his head back and collecting blood in his throat, pulling little patches of tissue to be put up his nostrils. taking care of numero
There are no moms here fretting and calling the police. Every once in a while you get punched. No biggie. He washed his face. Decided he’s due for a shower and took a lengthy one. Masturbation had been conducted by a rewards system of late, and a successful heist of Martha Baker’s has given him the right to a jerk, and by getting punched one must be entitled to a freebee, and he took one in the shower and saved one for later.

He exited the bathroom a full hour later. Don was home but not his mom. He retrieved his bag and noticed right away that the gun was missing. And then seeing that everything was missing but the Sunday papers he had failed to deliver after the sudden violence, he casually walked to Don’s office where he was thumbing through pictures and drinking cognac, the long barreled handgun out of its holster and sitting beside the stack of pictures and letters. Don nodded knowingly at them, the pictures, like they were his. He had all of Ty’s assorted goodies lined up on his desk. Ty’s nose ached. He knew he wouldn’t have to explain why a thirteen year old carried a gun and why his newspaper bag was filled with stolen items because this was Don and Don wasn’t well. Don remembers the fragrant smells of Korea from when he fought there but not his current address. He remembers Kate, his first wife, but mostly refers to Ty’s mom as Lady. He fixates on puzzles and watches, has clocks with the current times in Tokyo, St. Petersburg, Caracas, places he went while in the Navy.
He remembers how to clean a handgun, which he did one-handed there at his desk. But forgot that Ty stood there watching him even though he had just given him a once-over. Don will remember if Ty takes the gun back. He will call him on it when they congregate for dinner, if Ty takes the gun back. He will wonder where his gun is. Ty would then have to explain why there’s all this talk about guns to his mother. The gun was gone and Ty knew it.

The week went by listlessly. Don dressed up in full Navy attire at night, gun and all. He had never surpassed the rank of Ordinary Seaman in his stint in the Navy but then, with that Purple Heart and citations, he was at least a Lieutenant and proud of it. His shelves, once empty, were occupied by old war photos, his from Korea and the stolen ones from the Second World War, along with the cabooses that sat there on one of the shelves too. Don stayed up and read the stolen letters time and again, looking them up and down as if he can’t quite place this person or that but is happy nonetheless as a Lieutenant to try.

That Saturday night Ty never left his room. No one had called him and he didn’t try either. The robberies had been a bust, even if Don hadn’t adopted his stolen goods. What would he really do with the gun? Sell it for how much? He felt good about taking care of his battered face by himself. He had told his mom the inevitable bike-accident story. But his face hurt something awful. He resisted thinking about his mom taking him out for new sneakers and a new video game, as she had offered after calming down from
the sight of his face. Ty had staunchly rejected her offer, dissing her gestures of affection, she in legitimate terror at the prospect of this happening to her only child in broad daylight, on a Sunday morning, newspaper boy and all. Ty knew her concern for him was sincere, even though they haven't been speaking much lately. He was slumping and slumping hard. Don's a Lieutenant and I'm still at nada, he thought. He decided he would rob Martha Baker's one last time. He wondered how much they were drinking right now and what positions they would sadly pass out into. As always, he envisioned taking a lot of money but the visions never included his announcing himself. He was rooted in reality and would be happy to come home with a twenty spot and a bishop or a rook.

He assembled the newspapers in his bag and took one out. There he is: the kid that had smashed his face, frowning in a school picture. He was being questioned about the disappearance of Jenny McWilliams, a whole year later. His face was hard and mean and his head shaved, a stud through his chin too. Scary. But then, for no apparent reason, he didn't seem so scary. The police were looking for him. He was last seen two weeks ago but Ty met the man's fist last week. It's juicy, no doubt. He decided to tell the police what he knew after he robbed Martha Baker's house for the last time, this time storing whatever crap in a Don-proof location.
When he got to Martha Baker's door there was an envelope with red letters spelling "BOY," and underneath, "Letter. Please Read."

Boy,

First of all you have an awkward gait. You need to address that. You looked awful shady marching through my house as you've done the last couple Sundays. You better find a shower or something. We watch you, us four, I watched you from the bedroom your brief stay with us last week when you graciously relieved us haggards of our pictures. We don't mind except for the gun which you'd better sell or get rid of immediately because we're not interested in boys your age with guns. Please notice the "For Sale" sign now in my yard. There is nothing for you to take anymore and we four sisters will move south in a week, my house sold or not. It's been interesting, our lives have been, since our husbands died, and people grieve differently. We don't want to remember these men. It will be good for us. Thank you for taking out the garbage, so to speak, since it's tough for us to stand above a garbage basket and drop our lives into it, so you've been a kind of handyman, a handyman with an awkward gait. It bears repeating, do not come in here this morning. Before last night the house was empty and last night we wagered the last of our relics so let us be today, because you don't want to see us,
you should get a girlfriend and see her in the state we see ourselves in, admittedly comical as it is, this morning, our last Sunday. Get it together.

Martha Baker

He rode back home, ignoring again the remainder of his route, spellbound and scared and completely self-conscious. He began crying, this boy on a bike. He waded gingerly in the puddles of his own wants, not sure what they are or should be, yet still scared shitless to go any deeper. The boy who had punched Ty in the face, police said, may have sought revenge for his friend who had hung himself after being denied the love of Jenny McWilliams, by kidnapping her. Ty can’t decide whether to go to the Police station or not. He felt sick and stupid. He had wanted to deliver the important news to the police and point to his swollen clump of a nose as evidence. But he had a strong gut feeling, the type of feeling he’s supposed to reject. that the boy, puncher of random innocent faces, has nothing to do with the girl’s disappearance, and that it’s all about the anniversary of the disappearance and her being still gone, now a year later. He had a suspicion that the police, much the way he had felt when he initially saw the boy’s photo, thought the boy was dangerous and scary looking. He couldn’t decide if this was a gut feeling or being in the know. He thought he might get his name in the paper or something if went to the police and that wasn’t something he could deal with. It harbored the possibility of further humiliation. He also felt it was wrong to do this but he wasn’t sure if this feeling was a result of how incredibly unconfident he felt. Going to the
police, he thought, may result in his going to jail for robbery. The old women had ridiculed the Weave and he felt he may never recuperate from that.

Ty began to feel inadequate while Don became happier. “That sum’ bitch,” Don often said while reading one of the letters taken from Martha Baker’s house. “Haven’t seen that sum’ bitch in twenty Goddamn years.” There were names associated with these “sum’ bitches,” different every time. Luke Martin, Francis Tober, Harvey Niles, in reality all strangers to Don, yet while the letters were in his hand, they were “sum’ bitches” with histories including Don and the way Don snickered while looking at them suggested these histories had a dark side.

Ty continued to wake up and deliver the news and go to school and exist less. He rode by Martha Baker’s house and one day the “For Sale” sign wasn’t there and another day some family moved in with a shaggy dog that barked every time Ty rode by. Early one morning he was finishing his route and was making his way home. He rode past a mother and father playing with a toddler on their lawn. Ty thought it worth watching and the parents’ grinned at Ty when he stopped his bike a comfortable distance away. The toddler was taking his first steps. He would let out a huge baby smile and then baby frown. He looked confused and upset when he walked but happy to have open arms waiting for him at the completion of each jaunt.

Ty rode home and helped Don into the van. Don did volunteer work at the hospital. Ty didn’t know what he could possibly do there that was helpful but he went
Monday thru Friday from ten until one in the afternoon. Ty's mom brought him back home every day and made him lunch and then went back to work herself. Ty knew this routine but had never thought about it. It was quite a load. He thought about the kid with his parents but didn't know why. He went back and forth on the matter, concerned an absence would start a habit, a natural progression from existing less in school to not existing at all. It was bad news if he didn't go but screw it, he thought. He then realized that he forgot to drop a newspaper at the house of the parents who played with their child on their lawn. It wasn't the sweet moment that made him think of the child after all, it was his irresponsibility. He went into the living room and sat down on Don's recliner. The chair was form-fitted to Don and was uncomfortable. It wasn't his forgetting the newspaper at that house either. He realized, as he looked around his own house. The crane stood a few feet in front of him. That was the boy of broken glass, he realized. Scarless and surrounded by open arms. There were TV Guides and crosswords all around Ty's feet and he picked up one of the TV Guides. Ty felt happy because the kid would grow up normal and never remember waking up in broken glass because he was too young to remember. Any future reflection on his trauma could only be accessed through its documents. Ty thumbed through the magazine but thought about old documents scribbled with a doctor's signature and then he looked up at the crane with its many moorings. He gave it an apologetic once-over and returned his attention to the magazine.