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Some kind of permanent record| Stories

Francis G. Davis

The University of Montana

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SOME KIND OF PERMANENT RECORD
STORIES

By

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B.A., Temple University, 1989

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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“Then Creole stepped forward to remind them that what they were playing was the blues. He hit something in all of them, he hit something in me, myself, and the music tightened and deepened, apprehension began to beat the air. Creole began to tell us what the blues were all about. They were not about anything new. He and his boys were keeping it new at the risk of ruin, destruction, madness, and death, in order to find new ways to make us listen. For while the tale of how we suffer, and how we are delighted, and how we may triumph is never new, it always must be heard. There isn’t any other tale to tell, it’s the only light we’ve got in all this darkness.”  James Baldwin, “Sonny’s Blues”
### Some Kind of Permanent Record

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Once, when I was young and living in Montana, still growing up though I was well into my twenties, my friends and I played a type of Russian Roulette with a .357 Magnum. I say type because the gun didn’t hold live bullets, but only the spent steel plated castings left from the wild shots we’d just taken at some empty Coors cans set along a flaky trash heap of a log about twenty yards away from where we stood laughing and finishing our beers. Of course, we were drinking. This was in the mountains, a few years ago - Miles, Johnny Boy, Taco, Lana - my usual crowd.

Miles had the gun, a .357 he bought for 200 cash plus an old nickel plated .22. Earlier that afternoon we’d been drinking beer in Lana’s basement when Miles proposed a road trip up to the Bitterroot to test his new toy. In the dankness of the basement the open air and light seemed inviting; the thought of firing off a few shots into the wide trees and fat mountains, fun. When we got there, I was first to shoot. I tore into two of the cans, sending them spinning - ripping the aluminum into strange, shredded half-smiles. I passed the gun to Lana and she shot, followed by Johnny, then Taco, and finally, Miles. Everyone was feeling good; our laughs echoed with the sharp slaps of the shots snapping off the surrounding buttes. The game was four shots each, pass the gun to your left; leaving everyone to their own shucking and loading.

When the gun came my way again, I was somehow suddenly bored, disenchanted, so I raised the .357 dramatically out in front of me, parallel to the ground, and spun the cylinder. My friends looked at me - a bit freaked. I’d counted Miles’s four shots. I’d heard the four echoes. The chamber was surely empty - it was all show. I placed the muzzle to my temple and with a neat smile pulled the trigger. The empty click was a delicious red thrill. No one said anything. No one moved. A lone, gray bark came from far back, while tires crunched the gravel road curling the mountain towards us - but still no
one moved. We stood on a flattened peak, surrounded by higher mountains, all lumbering towards the sky. Spotted out among the slanting evergreens were patches of trenches turning yellow with the coming winter.

Lana took the gun adding a twist by loading, then rapid firing four shots, one of which caught a can dead. She placed the muzzle to her head, spun the cylinder, and waited for the dull click. Johnny followed, then Taco - the game losing its energy, though we all knew, as Taco bent down to take a sip of his beer between his second and third shots, that it would not be impossible for him to lose count somehow and end up dead, or more grueling, with the front of his lobe ripped open - all of us rushing to the hospital, screaming some kind of green obscenities. (Excited beneath it all still.) But nothing happened - the gun clicked and he handed it to Miles.

The rest of us stood in a silent semicircle behind Miles. He was a doomed man negotiating a plank as behind us the sun moved low and shoved our shadows out in front of him. Miles waited, tapping the muzzle lightly against his thigh. It was all empty. Fall snow capped the top of a few distant mountains.

Miles began to whistle - a tune entitled “Land Over Sea,” a song he wrote while heading a band recently broken when in a fit of inspiration he’d accidentally sliced the bass players playing triceps muscle with the bottom of a sharded whiskey bottle. This whistling was pure Miles. It allowed him to appropriate the scene by dismissing our crude attempt at nihilism and replacing it with a lone, smooth gesture of cool. Pure Miles: Wholly original, but then again, typical, almost mundane. We stood and listened to his whistling; suddenly everything wind. Stopping our game we turned naturally away from the cans and started walking to the truck. Behind us, Miles said, “Let’s go. Let us just go.”

The truck, a 1987 Vanilla colored Chevy Blazer, was parked on an incline. A row of baby evergreens, replacement shrubs from a recent fire, lined the gravel road.

Miles settled himself behind the wheel, putting the gun beneath the seat. Taco came jogging toward the truck. He had lagged behind - jutting off the road to take a piss. As he crouched into the front seat across from Miles, Miles started his talk. “That kind of shit is
plain dumb and dull. It’s the kind of shit you do in high school, not at our age. Not me.”

Lana, who was sitting between Johnny and me in the back seat, leaned forward and ran her fingers through the back of Miles’s hair.

She said, “Miles, Miles you serious boy. Serious, serious all the time. Question: why?”

Miles didn’t say anything. Taco turned up the music, a popular song leftover from summer, while the sky showed itself milky blue with a tint of rose. It would only get better with the ride back into town which would split the dusk in two.

Behind Miles, I sat staring at his bright red hair which hung to his neck in thick dreads. I despised the notion of hanging with a white guy who wore dreads. Taco’s head, which was cleanly shaved and wrapped in a Muscovite scarf, began to dip and drag with the music. Taco didn’t talk much. He was plainly, wildly stupid - prone to say the wrong thing at the wrong time - somehow surviving on his nickname and easy manner. He was dark and smooth - beautiful, but empty to the core.

I should have known better in those days. There was something pushing me towards oblivion, obvious in the fact I’d fallen in with the likes of Taco, Miles, Johnny, and Lana. Everyone of us, considering the work we were doing - janitors, clerks, waiters - were on the wrong side of our twenties. Lana was an Assistant at the KilPatrick Home for the Disabled and Aged. It was part-time, weekend nothing work. She pushed around trays of food, wiped asses - took temperatures. She would sometimes head into work during the midst of an evening out, managing to find a few pills from corner crowds even more fringe than ours. Lana kept us in line though, offering the biting comment when one of us went a little too far, the touch when down. Each of us boys might have loved and desired her more than any other girl we knew.

Johnny was caught up in the excitement of what we’d just done, the gun. He was waving his hands out in front of him and talking his usually high strung trash. “To me, and I’m not asking for any discussion here. I’m asking only to be heard. I see all of us, each fucking one of us as brilliant - fucking brilliant in our youth - unwilling to fade. Like
those bullets. Something holy. I mean the Greeks, they had an oratory for us - the young, the brilliant, going out to die at their peak. Pericles, he knew the shit.”

We were dimly, halfway educated folks, who’d done a bit of reading, sat in on some college classes and thus had a few things to say on most subjects. Someone usually had a misty worn nugget of wisdom to handoff to the next person. Occasionally, these slim mixtures of innuendo, puns, gossip, trivia would spin upward, beyond themselves; somehow stupid talk transformed into a type of wisdom. Not that day.

Lana: Johnny you’re a fucking janitor for the school district. You’re the guy we wondered about when we were in high school. I mean, who is he? Why is he here? He cleans, I mean, toilets. Like, ugh.

Johnny: You don’t see me. First, I got plans. I’m with the district now, yes. Two years guaranteed - I’m scrubbing floors at the U. I’m free riding night classes - getting a degree. Or maybe not. Maybe I get lazy. Maybe, I fall in love and get married. I keep this job. The pension? I’ve seen the pension. I know a guy at Curley’s worked nights at the school. Most of the time, he’s over his gig two, three hours flat. We’re talking he’s standing there smoking cigarettes, jerking to porno mags for the rest of the evening. Life. The point - no boss. Point two - free tuition for the kids. My kids go to college. My kids become.

Taco: (Laughing) Yea. I heard you were passing grass to those high school kids.

No words. We all knew this was true, but only Taco would have mentioned it. Miles reached over and gently slapped the back of Taco’s head and said, “Man, fucking rumors are the downfall of friendships. Remember, you hear that stuff, you forget it. Remember, you fuck your friends you have no friends.” He looked in the rearview mirror at Johnny, whose energy was gone, sitting slumped, looking at the window.
Taco: It’s something I heard is all.

Excepting myself, everyone in the truck knew each other since grade school. I was from the east, getting away as they say, cutting corners with some money left me by my grandfather. I’d started in with this crowd because of Lana, who owned a soft confidence, an icy beauty, but mostly, a gentle laugh pointing outward against herself and allowing others in. I felt she was moving through a life similar to mine.

She reached over and snuck her hand under Johnny’s, who gripped it, but never looked from the side window. Miles gunned the car. Their touch wasn’t sexual. If anyone else but Taco had said those words there might have been a fight. It wasn’t inconceivable that the gun would have made an appearance.

Outside, the road dipped and turned - the land spread clean towards the back mountains which held the light of the fading sun in a blue, lush-green gloam. My friends had grown up in the middle of luxurious beauty and it touched the way they talked.

Miles said, “I believe death exists as a color. Heaven as a brilliant cross between orange and blue, while hell is a type of absence, just white. Purgatory - gray out your ass.”

Lana said, “So heaven is yellow. Max, what do you think? I mean, you started this whole thing with that gun business back there.”

It was my turn to say something.

Instead of a line, came memory. -- The five of us. A different five. Back East. My best friend Danny Boyle, the lackey Larry, the crazy kid we called Speedy, and Rock, who lived downtown but whom we liked anyway because of the stories he told. We sat around and talked more than normal boys our age. The teachers thought something was wrong with us. The other kids were scared of us and kept their distance. Rock told us, “Melissa, I think, like, she wants it. I hear from Belinda she talks about it all the time. I think she does it all the time. They say she has these thoughts, you know like daydreams and she rocks and she says she feels stuff down there like maybe she had a cock. It doesn’t make sense.”
I said, “There’s a theory of color.” I went into detail describing how a Colorologist determines the mood of a patient by what they have chosen to wear to that day’s session. “Each social situation beckons not a style of dress - either formal or informal, but only a mood, and the single greatest perceptual factor in determining our mood are the colors we see...”

Miles interrupted me, “Max, now that’s bullshit and you know it because I’m seeing heaven as all inclusive, swallowing everything else. Maybe it’s not blue and orange, maybe..” He leaned his head back. He had perfected the Jim Jones pose.

“Watch the road.” I said.
“Maybe, black,” Lana said.
“Black,” Miles said.
“Watch the road,” I said.

They had cornered this girl in a closet. The teachers, everyone else, was in the school yard. Before it had begun, I left. I never told anyone. I never heard anything about it. I don’t think about it.

These conversations went somewhere, mainly through their own reckless force. No one in that truck knew who they were, or even less, of anything of the outside world. It made for comforting company. Where I’m from, people are smart and quick and seem to reference Sarte or Kant so as not to say anything of what they actually think or feel; it being obvious an idea reveals little of any mind which has come to hold it. Back East, no one was trying to figure anything out. Things were predetermined, handed down. People were ready and willing to embrace the outlines of lives offered. It was about ease. It was about privilege, but for me it was mostly about boredom. In that truck, things were different. I loved the dull, long look on Taco’s face as he unabashedly considered the words around him. Our talk was important because there was always a possibility, no matter how small, that something said could hit one of us deep enough to jar us from our lives, which in slow times, when we were alone or with our parents, we knew were headed nowhere.
There was more talk. Miles said, "Did I ever tell you the time I went to a chiropractor. My old girlfriend was big on it. For weeks telling me it was the thing to do. I mean, I’d hurt my back helping her move her own motherfucking desk to her father’s. She was moving home, her own space and all that shit. She was saying what’s a degree and I agree, but still there’s something about the notion of just anyone getting into the medical profession. I mean, I know people. Finally, I went. Just to shut her up really. But, this woman’s hands - unbelievable. They became part of my back. There were certain points of the body she’d hit - my left instep, the spot between by sixth and seventh vertebra - Kundalini life force, my ass, but I was high for weeks..."

Happily, I thought of nothing and settled back into the lumpy, vinyl seat. This was the way I’d arrived in town two years previous. At the time a girl was planning to come with me, but one day she told me she was pregnant. She couldn’t make the move. She said, "What a time, hey." I was for keeping the baby, indifferent towards abortion - I just wanted a child. I told her I had some money from my grandfather. I told her I could lay down a lot of what was foolish in me for a kid. I thought, and still do, if there is one thing deserving respect in this world it’s the aching innocence of a child. I remember the day my little brother came home from the hospital. I was five, amazed at the size of his fingers. His whole hand seemed like it could fit on the top of a pin. The thing that happened with the closet and the girl didn’t change any of that.

The sun was getting lower and a yellow haze caught the top half of the distant mountains and, momentarily, sent a glare into the car, blinding us all, except Taco, who had a pair of Ray Bans hanging from his neck at all times.

I heard him say, "Will you look at that? Who needs flowers in this world?" When Miles took a bend and the glare vanished, it felt a little like we’d just come up from water. On our right, about ten feet ahead, was a brown Chevrolet pickup truck. A man wearing an orange hunting cap was behind the wheel. I was in a smoked mood and the word Chevrolet hit me as some kind of mantra. I took to considering how some esoteric, singular vision of the world might lie behind its tight-lipped repetition. Taco was going on
about the man in the truck.

Taco: That’s my brother-in-law, Wayne. But he’s in Whitefish looking for some work.

Miles quickly proposed we follow this guy and see what kind of game he was playing. “He shouldn’t just get away with things.” What things? We were close to town and pulled into the right lane keeping a clean ten feet from the rear of the truck. The look on Taco’s face, the sudden energy of Miles - I didn’t like any of it. I started repeating to myself, “Chevrolet, Chevrolet, Chevrolet.” The word felt concrete, continuous, and whole.

We drove straight toward the sunset. For a second, the sun became a fluorescent orange-blue spark, a thin line of electricity, a struck match, as it bit down into the mountain then slid behind it fading away from our part of the world. I saw wooden nickels dropped heedlessly into keno machines. I understood the sun as this type of token - worthless and benign - when torn from the spinning three-framed face of its world.

Taco: My sister has this baby now. Wayne is looking for work in Whitefish is all.

Johnny: It looks like Wayne has found something here in Campion, but I don’t know about work.

Taco: What do you mean by that?

Miles: Shut the fuck up, Johnny.

We followed the brown truck through a couple of downtown lights. It took a left off of Beattie and then another quick right onto Turner. We were still right behind it, headed, I knew, for the back part of town.

The truck pulled up in front of a one level wood framed house. Trailer homes and
squat bungalows sat from one another at odd angles creating an intricate series of alleys and small, unpaved roads. Across the street a field of dirt and gravel was scratched and dotted with white paste and square foam pads. A three foot high chain linked fence surrounded it. Two kids high-arched a softball back and forth as lights mounted on poles as thin as willow trees blinked on, then off, then finally on again. Behind the house was a weak hill, bumpy and loose, riding almost straight up to the freeway. The air smelled of baked bread, fish, and baby lotion - plus the fumes from a paint manufacturer three blocks down. We watched Taco's brother-in-law, hatless, rise from the car and stiffly rearrange his pants. He was a little guy, not much more than five feet. I'm sure as a kid he told jokes to keep the others from beating on him. He reached into the truck, pulling out a bright red package the size of a shoe box and a cowboy hat, which he arranged on his head at a suspicious angle.

“A Stetson man,” Johnny said, laughing.

Holding the red box close to his body, the man walked in an absurdly straight and honest gait along the brick walk leading to the door of the house. The walk seemed a parody of itself. We should have left - gone from that place, anywhere. The man in the hat rapped on the door, once, hard. It was more like a punch and he stepped back as if waiting for the house to fall. You could tell from the way he leaned, the way he displaced his full weight onto his left leg that he was having no moral problems with his situation. The house was dark and still, but the man stood as if he would wait all night for the door to open. He knew something.

“What is fucking up with the Lone Ranger here? A little la de da on the side?” said Johnny. Taco didn’t say anything. The side of his face was narrowed down into a scowl. He was trying to look like he could hurt someone. With the engine off, our breathing was audible. The man rapped again, then settled back into his slouch.

Miles: Now this man - this man is a problem. He's a problem for us.

Lana: We don't know yet what. Right?
Miles: What he’s doing? Obvious. Can I say obvious?
Johnny: Obvious.
Lana: Johnny! Now why? Why?
Johnny: Lana, get off your dick.
Miles: People, please. Let’s watch.

Finally, a small woman in a white dress let the man in. A few moments later the door opened once more and a boy with a misshapen dog was let from the house. The light on the stoop snapped on and the kid sat down on the step, looking left, then right. He noticed our truck. He saw us watching him, but he couldn’t put us together with the scene he’d just left.

Miles thrived on these kind of situations and I heard the excitement in his voice as he turned to the back seat and said, “Anyone got a cigarette. This could take awhile.” I felt like smacking him. Not out of anger though, but a type of love.

Taco stared down at the boy, who sat motionless holding the dog, a collie, on a short nylon leash. The collie sprung forward, apparently, towards the motion of the ball across the street, but the boy tugged back viciously and the dog settled quiet on the ground. It was good to see something so well trained. The mongrel put its face down onto its paws. Johnny found a cigarette and handed it to Miles.

Miles: I mean look at that kid. He’s maybe ten and seeing this. This is him.
Lana: But you don’t know yet what’s going on.
Miles: I know. Hello. Look. He’s sitting on the steps with his dog.
Johnny: There are only so many things it could be.
Lana: Guys, still...
Taco: Remember the time I had all of you over for dinner?

The line shocked me and I looked at Taco, remembering at once everything about
that dinner. We all were there. Taco’s mother, Ira, was a small woman and she kept her hair wrapped in a tie-dyed scarf. She was amazed by Taco’s beauty and constantly fluttered about her son patting his shoulders or smoothing his hair, all the while clicking her tongue against the roof of her mouth with approval.

That night, Ira assumed Lana was there because of Taco, and perhaps wondered exactly how the rest of us related to the situation. She told stories of when Taco was a baby. At one point she reached over and grabbed his thigh saying, “These legs, yes? He always had strong legs. He had these legs when he was thirteen. I never saw a boy become a man so quickly.” Taco sat square shouldered and proud the entire time his mother doted over him.

Taco’s sister, the wife of the man in the orange hat, who was now in the small wood framed house, apparently fucking the mother of the boy with the dog, was older by a year than Taco, and obviously a great disappointment to the mother. This disappointment did not spread as far as her husband, however, who had a trade and asked for the sister’s hand before he’d gotten her pregnant. Wayne was going to save Elisa from disgrace. “You get a good man, you got something,” the mother said. “Always something to fall back on, yes?” She looked at Lana, who smiled right back.

It was one of my best evenings in Campion. Taco’s mother served salads: Mandarin Salad with brown sugar and dry mustard, Lime Jello Salad with lowfat cottage cheese, Asparagus Salad with mayonnaise and walnuts. Afterwards, Taco showed us photographs of his father, a dead soldier, before Ira ushered us from the living room to the basement where without a word of instruction Taco pushed the furniture against the walls; smiling valiantly, he took his mother’s outstretched hands and they began to dance. They danced a perfect hand-clapping, twisting, floor-slapping flamenco dance. With the last movement Ira threw off her scarf and let a line of black hair fall down the length of her back, almost to the floor. I imagined Taco on the nights he avoided us squatting behind his mother, brushing her damp hair - still wet from a plush evening bath.

My eyes drifted to the Chevrolet insignia on the back of Wayne’s truck. I allowed
it as a center: Chevrolet, Chevrolet, Chevrolet. I wondered how long Miles would have us sit there.

Lana: Miles, why don’t we go.
Miles: Why?
Lana: What good is this doing?
Miles: What good? What’s good? What the fuck is good? We’re good? People who buy into things - that’s the problem
Johnny: The bastard is in there fucking the woman, while the kid sits on the steps...
Miles: Johnny, shut up.
Johnny: I’m just saying...
Miles: Just shut the fuck up, O.K. Johnny.
Lana: Sit here. Good. I don’t care. Taco?
Miles: We will. We’ll find out some things.
Lana: Taco?
Taco: Yea.
Lana: What do you want to do?
Miles: The question is what he should do. What’s required? I mean the guy is in there.
Johnny: Exactly.
Lana: Johnny, just, just sit there. O.K. Sit there. Taco?
Taco: We should sit here for awhile, see what happens. Right, you know.
Miles: Exactly.
Johnny: Exactly.
Lana: Johnny, I’m telling you, you have problems, you don’t have a point. What is this a thrill for you? See what happens. Connect the dots. Color by number.
Johnny: (Laughing) Sure, sure, connect the dots, color by number. That’s me.

The boys with the ball came across the street and sat on the stoop with the other boy. The two boys talked, the third only nodded. After a short while, they left - laughing.

Sometime later the man came out of the house, stopping a moment to pet the dog and hold a one knee conversation with the boy. When he got back into his truck he replaced the cowboy hat with his original orange hunting cap. The women collected her child and the dog, snapping off the porch light. Johnny said, “The man has bagged something.”

“Asshole,” Lana muttered. The man ran his car to the bottom of the street where he spun it around, reversing directions. He passed us as he raised a blunt, silver lighter to a cigarette stuck straight from his mouth. Before he cupped the lighter with his other hand, leaving the steering wheel free, his head was briefly illuminated - it shone like a wicked mask. He was smiling.

“The fucker,” Miles said.

“Enough,” Lana returned, but there was something different in her voice now - an urging on. Perhaps, she too had seen the man. It was then I understood Miles planned to follow this man wherever he was going. When he stopped, we would stop. When he got out, we would get out. Eventually, we would confront him.

When the brown truck turned onto the freeway entrance Taco said, “Whitefish. He’s going to Whitefish for work for the winter, indoor work. Tourist or something. He knows a contractor.”

“Miles,” I said, “why don’t we turn around.”

“He speaks,” said Lana.

Miles said, “The dead man has risen. Come, let us rejoice.”

“Miles, I can’t go to Whitefish,” I said.

“Why?” Lana laughed. “What else do you have to do?”

I settled back once more into the seat. It felt different. Taco’s face flashed like a
lost god every three seconds or so as we passed the highway lights that lined the freeway leading away from Campion. After those lined mile you were your own, driving through the mountains in the dark. From that night on, Taco would spend more evenings brushing his mother’s hair. I like to envision those nights as soft, enveloping times with Taco behind his mother leaning close and whispering urgent, low cries into her ear.

Eventually, I left that place and those people, but on that night I settled back into the vinyl anonymity of Miles’s truck and waited for “our whatever” to happen. It turned out the man was not on his way to Whitefish but Butte. There, near exhaustion, and out of a sense of duty, we confronted him - taunting his slackened and immoral behavior. Taco stayed in the car, head down. This all happened outside a side road convenience store beneath a large neon sign missing the letter Q from its flashing, dull message. The darkness was dense, mixed through with the smell of trees and exhaust. The man held a cup of coffee, a donut (how ridiculous it all was) and as we ringed him with our shouts and threats, he laughed, thinking we were local kids, unknowns, juveniles, punks.

Miles: Now who are you to do things?
Wayne: Things?
Johnny: In the house with the woman by the road.
Wayne: I don’t know any of you people.
Miles: The point is we know you. We’ve seen what you do.
Wayne: What I do? Hey, what’s such a nice looking young woman doing with guys like this?
Miles: Don’t go down that road.
Wayne: Boy.
Miles: Fuck.
Johnny: Fuck head, fuck you.
Wayne: (Laughing) Now what do you boys want? What will you take?
Lana: Johnny, Miles - don’t?
Wayne: You want to play house or you want to go with me? And how come he doesn’t say anything? And who’s that shadow over there in your truck - the cavalry?

Miles: Him? You want to know about that guy in the car?

Lana: Miles, don’t. What’s it worth?

Wayne: So what’s it going to be Mr. Johnny and Mr. Miles? I hate to pressure you, but I’m a little behind schedule. So how goes it?

Miles: (Laughing) Friend, we’re not that kind. We don’t want you. We don’t want your business. We just saw you.

Wayne: I see. You saw me. O.K.

Eventually, after finishing his donut and coffee, he simply stepped through us and got back into his truck. He drove off, laughing like a mad prophet. I remember that moment and how I lusted after the easy way he moved from one sphere to the next. When it was over, the lot of us would turn around and head back to Campion for the remainder of the evening.

I looked at Miles who stood fanning his hair out in the neon light. Foolish, isn’t it? Johnny was in the store buying more beer. Taco still sat in the car. Lana stood between us, ready. “What do you want to say,” Miles said. “Do you have something to say now?”

I said, “I just think it’s funny to drive all this distance and....”

“And?” Miles said, holding a smile tight on his face.

“And not...He didn’t hear us. He thought we were a joke.”

“How can you tell? What do you know. Right now, he’s in his rickety ass truck thinking about what we just said.”

“What, which was what, what?”

“You don’t understand. You don’t hear.”

He walked away from me. After a moments hesitation, Lana followed him. They met Johnny coming out of the store with the beer. They sat on the curb and began to drink.
"C'mon over," Lana called to me. "Look at these stars."

I just nodded and walked back to the car, waiting with Taco for them to drink their beer and get back in the truck and drive us home to Campion.

Taco said, "I know what he was doing."

I didn't say anything. After only a beer or two the rest came back to the car, laughing. Johnny tripped Miles from behind while Lana touched his neck.

That's it. I wish there was something I could locate as the key, as a revealing moment - when I saw those people, myself, for what we were. Such insight seems the point of memory. But really, I know the time I spent in Campion as only a few years where I drifted, toying with the idea of letting my life fade away. That I didn't seems the point. This story, a clue.

It wasn't even eleven when we got back to town. In the ritualistic talk which inevitably followed such nights, our escapade with the man in the brown truck might have been explained as only the beginning, as later Johnny finally broke and accused a tall man with glasses of touching Lana. Johnny had said, "I got a gun, asshole." Miles pulled Johnny away, whispering secrets. Thinking of this now and how Lana dismissed everything with a laugh, come next morning, the man in the brown Chevrolet might not have been mentioned at all.
An article in the GOING OUT section of the LA Times cited Double Rooks as, “The hottest new spot in town.” It mentioned a sterling Friday afternoon Happy Hour bound to take the edge off, a throbbing dance floor overflowing with the young and influential, a live, maniacal DJ - hilarious door prizes and group games, including a contest matching a lucky woman with a man chosen for her by the fates. The article caught Jackie’s attention while she ate her tuna on rye and scanned the paper during the fifteen minutes she allowed herself each day for lunch. As an Account Executive for a large catering firm called, The Frog, Jackie’s time is not her own. Just before lunch, she’d gone another round with her boss, Harrington, over a customer who demanded a partial refund because three of her waiters’ tuxedos were spotty and there had been “a hell of a lot of noise coming from the kitchen.” Once again, Harrington had said, “Now Jackie, we know the customer is always right.”

That evening at the Rook, as it was known among its regulars, Jackie has decided to sit at the end of the bar and sip a Vodka Cranberry. She notes four men, each wearing a striped shirt with a white collar, walk through the front door, grinning. One of the men wears suspenders. They are asked to write their name and company on a 3 x 5 index card, and each does so, laughing dramatically, as they drop their cards into a large, tinted three-lipped mason jar. “Feeling lucky - Oh yea - It’s my night,” they say among themselves. From her perch, Jackie watches the four men walk across the diamond-patterned dance floor cut square from the middle of the room.

Later that night, unable to sleep, Jackie is not surprised when the phone rings, even though it is close to three a.m. “Hello,” says a voice, “is Jennifer there?”
Jackie asks, "Who?"

The voice repeats itself. "I’m sorry,” she says and hangs up.

She is in the kitchen pouring herself a glass of milk before she matches the voice with the hands. The back of the throat hello with the way his hands were always about his face. In a moment, the hello becomes this man, the man she met that night, laughing among his three friends.

The four men were business types. One was bald, with a sharp, sad nose. Another had nervous eyes. The third - confidence. He stood straight-legged, assured, never alternating his weight from one leg to the other. He seemed bent on showing the bar his teeth. The fourth, the man in suspenders, had the hands.

Confidence had ordered a round of gin and tonics.

Nervous Eyes said, "Look at this place. Why is this the place? I can’t see it.”

Confidence man pinched his face as if someone had blown smoke in his direction, “Give it time, my man. Give it time. There’s potential here. I can smell it. I can smell the potential.” The men worked for a Land Development corporation based in the Fairfax district.

The man in suspenders pointed his thumb over his shoulder toward the corner, where a puckered face waitress was setting up the buffet, “That’s the food Jake. That’s the food you’re smelling.”

“Food, smood,” Jake said, “That ain’t food I’m smelling. That ain’t food. That’s
potentially.” Jake turned to face the man with suspenders and went on, “Now that’s the difference between you and me, Stevens. The epitome of the difference. Where you smell food, while you’re tied to this world, I’m on another plane. I’m seeing other things, I’m seeing...”

“Smelling,” Nervous Eyes interjected. Stevens - Hands- Suspenders, was grinning, looking around - his hands running through his hair.

Jake didn’t miss a beat, “I’m smelling. I’m smelling a whole new world of potential.”

Hands smirked, sipped at his drink and said, “Epitome, hey. Potential - no contest. Well I’m hungry. I’m going to get something to eat.” He walked to the buffet and filled his plate.

Sad Nose finished his drink and excused himself citing congestion. Confidence walked in the direction of a trio of girls who seemed bent on imitating a commercial with all their smiling and shining in front of a local DJ, who was simulcasting from the bar. The DJ peered out into the crowd and said, “Double Rooks is the hottest new spot in town. We know why. So come on down and see what happens when you come to the place that is happening.” He put in a CD.

Stevens came back to the bar, his mouth full of macaroni. He looked at Nervous Eyes and mumbled, “Potential.” They both laughed.

To the right of CD player sat the three-lipped Mason jar. The jar’s opening was the size of a man’s fist. The DJ called the lovely lady from the corner of the bar to help him determine the lucky winners. “Come on, down.” The contest called for two names to be pulled from the jar. The names would dance, then sometime during the week would meet at the
expense of the radio station and report back the following Friday to tell, on air, what happened on their nearly blind date. At first Jackie, confused by the whistling and shouting, didn’t move until the DJ shouted into his mike again, “Don’t be shy young lady. Come help me out.”

Jackie walked to the DJ table and pulled her own name from the jar.

“Jackie Kahn,” the DJ screamed, grabbing the card from Jackie’s hand, “Come on, down.”

The DJ ignored Jackie at first, who had a hand over her mouth and was whispering, “That’s me. That’s me.”

Finally, the DJ managed a weak smile when he realized what was going on and yelled to the crowd, which was suddenly bored and still with the confusion, “How bout those odds people. Now, if I was a betting man.” He waved his microphone like a wand over the heads of the crowd, “But anyway, Jackie why don’t you pull another name from the jar and make sure it’s a good one because now you have a vested interest in all of this.” He winked to the crowd. A few people in the back booed, mockingly.

Jackie pulled out the name of the man with the suspenders: Hands - Stevens. They danced, beneath whirling balls of light, to the song “Kiss” by Prince. Jackie liked the man. He loosened his tie and exhibited a certain nervousness that Jackie found comforting. She had swung her hips a little too wide and he asked jokingly, “Who’s leading.” Mostly, Jackie liked how his hands did not press into the small of her back, but remained up by her shoulder blades.

Jackie finishes the milk, returns to her bedroom, but sleep won’t come. She sits up, props the pillows behind her back and lights a cigarette. She hits the play button of the phone.
machine next to the bed.

Once again, she hears her boss Harrington, “You’re losing Corestates. I’m sorry to call you at home, but if you lose Corestates we’re dead. Do you understand, Jackie. We can’t have that, Jackie. Call me when you get in.” She did not return the call.

Last week, Harrington came into her office and said, “Everything depends on the client. Corestates: our biggest. You know what I mean. You lose Corestates - I don’t know.”

Harrington is a bit overweight and has a habit of chewing gum at the wrong time.

The messages play out on her machine. She still half expects to hear the man’s voice she met tonight, asking questions, setting a time.

Her work, the Frog, recently moved from Beverly Hills to Santa Monica for cheaper rent. Their new office building was repainted tan with a teal trim. The decorator, a thin man named Lloyd whose lover had just died from AIDS said, “This color works best with the light down here. You’re centered between a decrepit house and a mom and pop rug store. Think about it. People are just going to zip right by if you don’t have something. I mean really have something.”

Jackie offered lunch. Lloyd recommended stones and rubber trees along the path to the front entrance.

The other day, Jackie got a call from a woman representing the United Negro College Fund. The woman said, “Look can I be honest with you? We don’t want anything white. Can you help us out?”
“Certainly,” Jackie said. She suggested a salmon dish with rice cakes and mixed beans.

The woman said, “No honey, that’s white.”

A party of 350 accountants wanted something zippy, but not too much, not loud, “Just keep the bar open though dinner.”

A movie producer, who wore rings on both thumbs said, “Just dazzle me,” and walked out, leaving his people behind to hash out the details. They decided on a fluorescent Caribbean theme after almost going minimal. One of the producer’s people wanted the staff to wear loincloths, which wasn’t a problem (turnover was high), but also suggested no tablecloths, no centerpiece, no silverware, nothing. Jackie dissuaded the idea by saying, “But think of splinters.”

Last year, a relative died leaving Jackie with a bit of unexpected cash. She thinks perhaps of leaving the company and traveling by rail through Europe.

She has said to friends recently, “I’ve never been to Europe.”

The other day, she walked past the sleepy desk clerk in her apartment’s chrome and glass lobby and checked her mail slot to find a pamphlet announcing her high school’s fifteen year reunion. She remembers lying with Bobby Cox under the football stands. Her jeans off - no, to the underwear - the drums banging with a type of asking. “Bobby, oh shit Bobby.” She checked to see if her company was catering the affair, throwing away the pamphlet when she saw it wasn’t.

Jackie puts out the cigarette and lies back in bed. The phone rings again.
It is the same man who called previously. He says, “Wait, don’t hang up the phone.”

He introduces himself. It is vague. Details are missing, she hears, “Your needs...”

She should hang up. Because of the heat she has cracked the bedroom window and the blue curtains billow in. She should hang up. She doesn’t hang up.

The voice says, “Let me tell you a story. I was born in a little town in New Hampshire. My parents were university people. They thought things through and then they thought things through some more. When I was a boy I had a friend named Eddie. We went to the lake one day. He told me about his mother and father. He said, his father would slap his mother, not just once, almost every day. I told him not to worry about it. I told him about the way my parents talked to each other. He wouldn’t listen so I stopped talking and instead taught him how to skip stones across the water. I dug out flat, oblong rocks from the sand and showed him how to hold them, how you form your fingers around the tip and wing. He couldn’t get the hang of it. He said he had to get home. I told him to wait - the sun was going down, we could watch it. His mother had packed us sandwiches. I broke up the bread and fed the fish. But he wanted to go. As he started to leave, as the sun fell flat and turned the green grass gray, I asked him what his father said after he did those things to his mother. But he just shook his head. He didn’t want to talk about it. He didn’t understand that I knew why. He just walked away. I could see he didn’t trust me anymore. When he was about twenty yards away, I started picking out stones and tossing them at him. I didn’t want to hurt him, just shake him up a bit, so I threw them in long, lazy arches. I was missing by a mile on purpose.”

Jackie loses herself in the story before, finally, the man on the other end of the line says his name - Lance? - and where he is calling from. Boston? He is calling from Boston or is he from Boston?
A story unfolds in her mind - It is a time ago. She forgets her age because the story comes from the ephemeral years between seven and twelve when the world is weighed with only light, color, and movement. She had told her mother she would be late for dinner. In those days, she would spy off to the woods, alone, removing her shoes, and shirt, and finally, her pants, leaving them in a neat bundle next to a specific rock or log, before slowly setting off to explore. Certain well-worn paths guaranteed a run-in with other wandering children, who usually traveled in clumps of twos and threes (for reasons she did not understand, the adults in her neighborhood never went to the woods for exercise or exploration, electing instead, the local track or the finely honed and polished geometric space of malls). So Jackie avoided the grooved paths and chose instead the barely perceptible tracks that shot at odd and twisted angles from them. Mostly on these journeys, Jackie sought the loose lushness of mud between her toes or found a clearing from which to appreciate the pink sky and the way the cool air rubbed along the length of her body. Occasionally, she would sing to herself in a low voice mimicking the singers of the day: Toni O’neal, Gladdis Knight, Elton John. Once, she saw a sparrow dip low and snatch a toad doodling a few feet from her hands. The bird then vanishing like a shot through the clearing of the trees. It was a comfort to Jackie to see such things and not be expected to talk or discuss them with friends. One day, while she was on her back observing the sky, Jackie glimpsed another soul. It was a boy with bluntly chopped hair, dressed; dressed in a windbreaker and jeans. He stood revolving in a circle holding a long stick - flattening the surrounding grass and leaves. He was counting. Five, six, seven, eight. With nine he stopped and stared at Jackie still flat on her back about twenty feet away. Ten, eleven, twelve. By thirteen, Jackie understood his eyes were closed. Hide and seek. Fourteen, fifteen, sixteen - Jackie realized the surrounding woods were crawling with his hidden friends. She ran. The last number she heard from the boy was twenty-nine, before she took up the count, deciding on a dead sprint until she reached sixty. Each of those thirty seconds Jackie expected to stumble or become exposed. Of course, by the time she
stopped running she was too busy considering her luck at remaining unspotted to be too upset when she realized she had no idea how to get back to the red rock where she had left her clothes. It took her to darkness, and a chill, before she made it home, still nude, slipping down the basement entrance and up the back stairs, into bed. Her mother questioned her the next day - she remembers the lie: it did involve a red rock, a sparrow, a game, but in it she was clothed, amidst other children and laughing.

The man talking to Jackie is still saying things about Boston. Again he says his name is Lance. Boston is a large city. Have you ever been to Boston? She vaguely remembers this Lance as one of her clients. She has always liked men with beards. He was asking if she was asleep. Sorry, did I wake you? No, I was up. It’s no problem. Was she dreaming? She tried to sound up. What could be the problem at this hour? Up, she thought, up.

Jackie’s apartment is by the ocean. She likes it for the breeze and the smell of saltwater the breeze brings. As a girl, her grandmother told her stories of pirates and made her memorize certain lines from the Iliad. The light in Los Angeles shines as hard and persistent as a child. Had the man said he was from Boston?

Occasionally, certain people pick up the receiver outsides the gates of the apartment building and prank a number. Last month, a man in her building was found dead in his bed. The papers confirmed there was no link between the calls and the dead man.

The man, Mark Basil, was 38 - tan and trim. His body found at 3:00 o’clock in the afternoon had turned a bleak color of yellow. The cause of death was unknown but drugs were rumored until everyone had settled it as an overdose. A reporter interviewed Jackie. This newswoman, small, spread her eyes to the size of quarters when she thought Jackie was saying something of note. She asked Jackie in what way was she acquainted with the
dead man. “I didn’t - I wasn’t,” Jackie tried to explained. “I didn’t know the man - He just lived in the building.” The reporter wore thick-soled work boots she excused by citing her next assignment: Illegal immigration and farm work.

The man is going on. The digital clock reads 3:11. Fourteen has always been Jackie’s lucky number. The man definitely has said he is from Boston. Definitely Boston.

She is listening intently now. She swings her legs away from the bed and sits with her head hanging slightly, her knees bent to her breast. The man is asking if he can come up.

“I read about your place in the paper. I’m here to come up.”

Jackie squeezes her eyes and tries to determine the exact nature of the call.

“What are you talking about?” she says, “Who are you?”

“I’m your neighbor. I’m your father. I’m your boss. I’m the boy who cuts the grass in front of your apartment building. What does it matter? I’m a movie star.”

“You’re fucking crazy,” Jackie says, but she doesn’t hang up. She doesn’t hang up

“Crazy? Tell me crazy? Tell me about crazy? Do you read the paper, Jackie?”

“Who are you?”

“Tell me about crazy, Jackie? Tell me about Jackie?”

“Fuck you.” She doesn’t hang up.
“Jackie? About Jackie?”

“Damn you.” She doesn’t hang up.

“Don’t hang up, Jackie.”

“I won’t hang up, but I want you to tell me about crazy.”

“Jackie, I’ll tell you something. Do you read the papers? Did you read the story of Fantasy Man - the story where the guy calls up women he doesn’t know and pretends to be someone else, pretends to be their friend. The women let him up. Why don’t I just come up, Jackie.” The voice says these things as if he has been conned into a favor.

Jackie decides she can see him now. He has a beard. It is reddish and he wears no rings. She pictures flannel. His name: Robert. He corrects people if they call him Bob.

“Take off your clothes and let me up.”

The moment becomes lodged in her throat, as thick there as a button. She says, “I’m not wearing anything right now. Nothing.”

She waits, hears nothing, says again, “Nothing. Nothing at all...Bob?”

Again, nothing.

“Yes. Bob,” she says flatly, “My first husband’s name was also Bob. Are you an asshole too Bob? You are an asshole aren’t you Bob?”

Silence. Now Jackie knows the man is about to hang up.

She says, “Don’t hang up, Bob. Don’t ever hang up.” A low-ache of longing overtakes Jackie, but it is the surprises at this longing that Jackie feels more.

The man breathes heavily into the phone. He says, “Maybe, I’m another Bob. Maybe a good Bob.”


“I can do Robert,” he says.

“O.K. Anything else? What else, Robert? Anything at all?”

The voice comes back, “Let me up. Open the door, get in bed and let me up.”

“No dinner? No movie?”

“You know me,” the man lets out a laugh.

“I know you, Bob. I know all about you.”

“Robert. Robert, right?” asks the voice, agitated and sharp.
“Right. Sorry, Robert. Sorry.” Jackie lets the phone drop to the floor, thinking such is enough.

She lets the phone fall to the floor and walks from the bedroom to the living area. Her apartment is small. Expensive, but small. She unrolls the curtains which lets in the purple glow of the opposite building whose units are broken into a rectangular pattern so their windows look not unlike the small cuts in a bee hive.

Jackie moves from the window and turns on the television, keeping the voice mute. The glow of the TV catches Jackie’s back as she walks to her front door and unlocks it. She returns to the bedroom, strips the bed, gathers the sheets into a great ball and goes to the master bath, shoving the lot of it into the shower. Turning, she pauses at the bathroom door and notes the stripped bed. It looks like a ship loose at sea. Clean, she thinks; clean. She imagines how the small buttons spotted out across the top of the mattress will feel against her exposed back. She hears the elevator pop open to her floor.

--But the voice does not come. The moon is short and alone in this lack, this nothing voice. Dead air. A prank. She decides it shouldn’t be this way. Life is more. Jackie decides ---

He was not as she expected; dressed as a boy, wearing running shorts, high top sneakers and a baseball cap turned backwards.

“For you,” he offered flowers.

She wore a silk robe trimmed with orange thread.

He said, “I don’t believe we’ve been formally introduced.”
“No,” she’d said, “I believe not.”

The man asked her to dance. He joked, “Who’s leading?” Again her hips swinging too wide.

They danced till exhaustion, then they had talked.

He said, “I do this job everyday. I don’t like it.”

She said, “Almost everyday at lunchtime I get in my car and drive south. Until I reach the freeway and the traffic, I tell myself I’m going to keep going, that I won’t stop until Mexico. I imagine the border guards asking my purpose.”

He said, “When I was a boy I played beneath our kitchen table. I would watch the feet of the grown-ups. My father would always stand stock still. The only movement would be his pants riding up half an inch then down as he fingered the keys in his pocket. See, he never took his keys out of his pocket. Going to bed, he would throw his pants over a chair. Waking up - his keys would be lost. He would ask my mother, ‘Peg, where are my keys? Have you seen my keys.’ He never thought of looking on the floor for his lost keys. The thought wouldn’t have dawned on him in a thousand years.”

She said, “My mother had a laugh. When I was young she would laugh so hard, she’d start coughing. We would be eating around the table and someone would tell a funny story. She would start that laugh that would become a cough and she would have to excuse herself from the table.”

He said, “After awhile my father didn’t work. My mother had a job with a florist and my
father would spend his day drinking. Shortly before my mother was due home for work he would get up and rearrange some of the furniture; nothing major, usually just one piece - a table or a chair. He would say, ‘Your mother works with flowers. She knows to put the blue next to yellow, but she don’t know nothing about furniture.’ ”

She said, “My favorite places are malls, airports and hotel rooms.”

He said, “I like cars. Sometimes, I think I could live in a car. Driving around the freeways of California, leaving them only for fast food which I would spill and drip on my pants when I pulled back onto the freeway.”

She said, “To me, things are easy. So easy. As a girl, I would unroll maps of the U.S. and pinpoint destinations with straight lines and a ruler. Eventually, I moved towards geometric shapes: New Jersey, Minnesota, California - a triangle.”

He said, “When I travel I tell people my name is Paul. I don’t know why, but girls seem to like that name. Most of the girls I’ve slept with have thought my name was Paul.”

She said, “Tomorrow I’ll wake up, things will be different. I’ll call old friends. I’ll have coffee. I’ll write letters.”

He said, “When I’m walking along a crowded sidewalk, I think of a joke my father told over and over when I was a kid. It’s a joke about a drunk who falls three stories out of a window and lands smack on the sidewalk. A young man comes running up and says, ‘Oh my god, what happened?’ The drunk just looks up at the young man, smiles and says, ‘I don’t know - I just got here myself.’ ”

She laughed and asked, “What’s your name?”
The next day, Saturday, Jackie meets a friend, Violet, at a coffee shop and tries to explain what happened last night. She talks of her man, describing in detail his hands - the way of his laugh, or how when embarrassed he rubbed his eyes. “He’s a good listener,” she says, “but the way he talks. God, I don’t know? He says things like, ‘I knew you were the one for me because of the way we met. It was so random. I mean, I wasn’t even suppose to be in that part of town. If my mother hadn’t called that morning or if I’d slept over my friend’s house like I should have - I was dead drunk- who knows? The shape I’m in. It’s funny. Sometimes I think things can be traced back to the weather. To hell with the equations, the theories. I mean personality types? My favorite color is this and it means this? It’s not that complicated. For instance, what do you like to do on Sunday night.”

The coffee shop has ceiling fans and daisies propped in Pierre bottles in the middle of each table. These tables, glass topped, are whistled clean by a certain young girl from Kansas City with cropped hair, who harbors dreams of acting. Beneath the glass are notes, poems, random lists; scribbled on folded back pages of loose leaf, receipts, envelopes - a few cocktail napkins have found their way over from the Double Rook, which waits across the street. These napkins are slightly stained and the - Come Again - messages are crossed through with phone numbers and first names. Halfway through Jackie’s story, Violet runs out of cigarettes and has to ask a small man behind the counter for change. This man, really only a boy with tough slouch, takes his time changing the CD before turning dourly and breaking Violet’s dollar, pointing her in the direction of the cigarette machine. Violet inserts the coins, trying to decide on Lights or Mediums. She hurries back, flushed, somehow suddenly embarrassed and says, “I’m sorry, go on. It reminds me of so much of when I first met Andy. Anyway, anyway, what else did he say? How old was he? Tell me all about him. What’s his name?”
With this question it is left to Jackie to tell the truth? She looks around her: The ceiling fans are nothing but lazy, the flowers will be here tomorrow and certainly the next. The woman from Kansas City shimmies along the counter saying something towards the ear of the boy with such a preposterous slouch. He smiles. Jackie’s friend sits across from her, expecting, and Jackie thinks - is this the place to tell the truth?
THE MIDDLE OF MR. Z.

When my father retired from the IRS his plan was to open an all-night flower shop in California. He did so, taking my mother to Los Angeles where she busied herself redesigning a Victorian they bought from a bankrupt widow in the Fairfax district.

My mother said, “What a steal. The best was some of the furniture and clothing we found in the attic. It’s worth something these days - old stuff. It’s a shame about people who don’t save.”

I was in from Idaho Falls, saying things like, “I’ll just relax for a week or so. I can’t go anywhere special with the kind of money I’m making. Not that home isn’t special. You know, mom, you know - it’s just good to see you. Great to see you. Where’s dad?”

I couldn’t say I’d been fired for abusing my sick time. I couldn’t say what I said to my employers, “See, there’s this buzz in my brain I can’t seem to stop.”

Upon hearing this my boss, Mac, looked at his watch and said, “I don’t understand. You got a fever or something, a cough. O.K. But a buzz? What’s a buzz? What do the doctors think.”

The doctors thought it was psychosomatic.

I said, “The doctors don’t understand, Mac.”

“Well, I don’t know either, Frankie. I don’t know.” Mac said. “I could see with a broken leg or something - but this.” Eventually, Mac called me to his office one morning after I’d missed three consecutive shifts. “Frankie, I’m sorry, but I can’t ask you to come in anymore. We need our clerks dependable.”

I couldn’t tell any of this to my mother, so I told her I was on vacation.
My mother: Sure, son, sure. Everyone needs a vacation. Dad’s at the shop. I haven’t seen him this excited in years.

And then she said some things about brass fixtures and Neighborhood Free Zones. You see, her new neighborhood was free of everything - speed, drugs, crime - Everything, and she was happy for it.

“So here I am,” I’d said, when I walking in, moments earlier. It was a surprise, almost a lark. My parents didn’t know much about my life in Idaho or the ideas I was toying with. My mother came from the kitchen where she was caulking a window. Her hands and forearms were spotted with the white paste and she held them out in front of her, bent up at the elbow. A scream of light refracted through the window and settled somewhere in the middle of the room. My mother walked towards this light, stood in it, and noted me - my dirt encrusted Conversed presence - on her freshly glazed pine floor. She hadn’t seen me in about five years. “Honey,” she said, “you’re home.”

A visit, just a visit, I kept saying, though I knew somewhere deep I wanted more. I needed more. I’d tried long and hard to arrive at an honest truth - something I could settle my days on - it hadn’t work. I was still just clerking, drinking, and dreaming, so I figured the suburban sprawl of my parents new home would be a place where I could settle down and just see about this mid-brain buzz.

Much of the the first week I sat on their patio drinking cocktails; Mai-tais mostly, waving freely at passing cars. Occasionally, from their rear windows the smooshed faces of children would appear; all of the kids waving frantically back. I exchanged pleasantries with the neighbors. I chatted with the mailman. I got to know of his family, in particular, his wife’s brother who one morning had cracked under the pressure of a Wall Street job and the next, found himself tied to a bedpost, limp and penniless, on the wrong side of town; his state apparently born from wrong choices concerning drugs, women, and money he’d made the night before. I nodded sympathetically, saying just enough to make it
obvious I was concerned, but not intrusive; that I knew there were certain boundaries to polite discourse.

“But then again,” the mailman said the first time he told me the whole story, “he’s not my brother. He’s not blood. I mean my wife has to see him at family functions and all, but how’s it going to matter in the long run. With me I mean - outside of my wife, of course. People like that just have to decide to improve themselves.”

So, I thought I was developing ties in the neighborhood. Not exactly friends, but at least a presence that wasn’t repugnant to the surrounding folk. I knew what I wanted. I wasn’t so old that I couldn’t think about moving home and starting over, settling some childish and vaguely dangerous thing that still lurked inside me. I was thinking along the lines of a fresh start. And though my parents where ignorant of my true state, they seemed to be subtly pushing the same idea.

One day, my father, always a busy man, decided it was time for a talk. I can still see his thick eyebrows, practically connected, weighing down and dividing his face. This single blunt line of black hair seemed to keep his long, large forehead from sliding down into the rest of his face, destroying him. “What you need son is a goal. Something that inspires you, makes you want to get out of bed each day. You can’t worry much in this life, at least not during the day time hours. At night, then it’s OK to think about things. When you get into bed to rest - then you let your mind go on to tackle and sift through your worries.”

“Yea, dad. Yea, dad. Yea, dad.” But I did listen and believed somewhere in his words there was a truth I could hang onto.

Something broke though. There were rumors: I wasn’t really a son, but some kind of drifter, some lost cousin, or as ridiculous as it sounds - a paid companion for my old-lady mother. “What kind of neighborhood have you moved into,” I screeched as my mother told me of the gossip whirling around her new home. We sat in the dark, brown comfort of my father’s new den. The evening news poured forth from a woody corner. I knew my father was somewhere in the room watching the news because I could hear the
shift of his weight on his leather chair as my mother explained the situation to me. I was thinking, “Well, fuck them.” But when I read my mother’s face, heard her words - I saw it differently. She was saying: I now this is foolish son, but we to live here now. Your father and I live here and when you leave, as you eventually must, we’ll still have to live here. We deserve this. We’ve worked all our lives for this.

I couldn’t argue much. My mother thought I was only home for vacation and essentially was suggesting I only leave a few days ahead of schedule. Plus, what did I deserve? I hadn’t done much with my life - barely graduated from college - a second-rate affair, after I managed to find myself on academic probation and lost my scholarship at the Main Line school which had been my parent’s choice. After that, my father refused to pay my tuition and I was forced into a state school. He said something about never having the opportunities himself and damn if he was going to see a son of his piss his life away. I didn’t know if he was referring to my life or his being pissed away. I believe he invested my college money into a old thirty foot fishing boat he and his bother Henry were thinking about fixing up and taking down to the Caribbean in order to start a tourist business. The boat never left his garage. My mother simply ignored the investment. Thinking, I guess, that the money would’ve been lost either on the boat or myself. In any case, the boat was the final straw, the final dream, before the flower shop. I believe all my mother ever wanted was a big shell of a house to design the way she saw fit. As a boy, before the late seventies and eighties, when it became obvious everyone had to go to college, my mother would ask me if I ever considered a trade. “Something stable,” she would say, “plumbing or carpentry.”


(You may have some questions. I’m tall. I live in this small town mostly because of its mythical, proportional sound. I read books, mostly philosophy texts that I don’t understand, but whose string of words produces a nice counter hum to the buzz in the center of my brain. I was born the wrong side of three boys. I have a younger sister -
which makes me a middle, problem child. My other siblings have normal lives. People still think I’m in a stage, that, I don’t know, in the next few years figure things out, whatever those things may be, and go straight and get a job in a city and then, what, I don’t know - marry? I love to cook. I still drink entirely too much. Each night, when the sun begins to shoe off, I find my way to the kitchen and my cutting board where I decide whatever I’m eating that night will taste better sauteed in a little garlic and onion and I begin to chop.)

When I moved back here after my my mother, politely, but exactly, informed me that my presence was causing, how did she word it, some slight concern with the neighbors, and if I wasn’t planning on anything definite, perhaps it would better if, say, I moved on - I went back to clerking.

I think I was mostly bored and scared, testing efficiency to see if it provided anything other than the rather typical, alcoholic, deprived middle-age loser life I was headed for. In the least, I wanted to do things with style. It was all an experiment. Some worn over, patched together theory about a well examined life.

It worked. At my first job back, my boss, an Asian with a fat mole on his left cheek, said, “You are like a son, here. You don’t find workers like you anywhere. You - you were raised right.”

Within weeks, I got promoted. I became night manager at The Wicked Emporium, an all-night adult bookstore where girls danced behind glass in a back room, while little men drifted towards little, blunt booths to watch. The girls fanned their hands over their bodies, pretending to be in the midst of prolonged orange orgasms given to them by, I don’t know - fathers, sons, holy ghosts.

Mother called, worried she’d offended me in some way, that perhaps I’d misinterpreted her concern for my well-being. She talked of my need to get back into the swing of things. How the false comforts of home can allow one to regress. “A visit is only a visit,” she said. “I just wish we had a chance to talk more.”
“It’s alright, mom,” I said, feeling something close to the bottom of my chest give.
“I’m glad I came back early. It made me realize some things, like how much I need a better
job. I’m looking around for something else.”

My mother was excited with the lie and I felt good for her. “What field? What
field?” she said.

My degree was in communications. “I don’t know - maybe something in radio or
television. Of course, I’d have to start as an apprentice.

“You know, that’s funny, your father and I were just talking about that. About
how your field is so different than your brothers’ or sister’s field. That you may have to
take something on a lower scale to start out.”

I nodded, my mind blank of words. When I asked her how the remodeling was
going she gave a very long answer.

One day, a small man with a thin brimmed hat approached me. He looked like a
squat Jimmy Stewart who figured his best bet was James Cagney. He had a deal. “Take
the money and run,” he said, laughing, “and return it by morning.”

“How much you got,” he went on.

I feigned ignorance, reaching for my portable Nietzsche, remembering my favorite
line, “Rechristen what is evil in you as what is best.”

“I mean,” he was going on, “if you even have half as much as I think you do, we
could have ourselves an arrangement. I know people who can do something with what
you got. What do you got?”

“Sir,” I said, “booth number two is now open.”

It was true, the little red dot above the number two on the monitor beneath my desk
was lit, indicating the room was empty. The bottom half of this monitor consisted of a
small screen on which I could watch each room or even the girls in the center of the circle
of rooms if I was so inclined, but I never activated the overhead cameras. I wasn’t that
kind of guy.

He said, “Look friend. We’re not communicating here. You know, I’m not here for the booths. I’m here to offer. Offer you something. What do you want to do, work here for the rest of your life?”

The line disappointed me. My boss had warned me of types. His word exactly. Types. Types, he said, would come in and try to make deals. I didn’t know what he’d meant, but recently, I figured it was the sad men looking for a free session, offering to bring the money around tomorrow, or worse, the same men thinking I could turn them onto something more serious then women behind glass. I would usually only have to shake my head sadly and go back to my book for these men to get the hint that I wasn’t their type of man, but this guy was different.

“I don’t think I got your name,” I said.

“Yea, right,” he smiled, offering me an amazingly long and thick cigar.

“When can we talk? Like, when is your break?”

It was about midnight. I told him I worked straight through the night.

“I know this,” he said. “What time tomorrow? Maybe after you sleep.” He put his hands into the deep pockets of his ridiculous gangster trench coat that reached almost to his ankles.

We set a time for twelve the next day. He was late. I sat waiting in an old diner, stationed atop an intricate series of bricks and planks aside the flat brown river which cut along the rim of town. The diner was set in a clearing surrounded by black-eyed birch and stoic, thoughtful elms. An old, unnamed gravel road ran up to the diner, which was known simply as, “The Diner.” Inside, everything was gleaming formica, polished chrome, and red, red vinyl. Typical, exact, and beautiful. There was a spinning pie rack and daily specials advertised on a board above the front counter. One of the regulars at my shop was in the back, alone, reading the menu. When I saw an older woman, probably his wife, walk up and sit down silently across from him, I didn’t know what was more
depressing, the man alone reading the paper or the same man with a soggy faced woman
with flint for eyes sitting across from him asking the waitress if she had any Equal.

"Honey, you got any equal."

The man with the deal finally showed up, wearing the same outfit from the previous
night. I was into my meal. He ordered a Western Omelet without the meat.

"Like, a Vegetarian Western Omelet," the waitress said coyly.

He looked up quick and said, "Like, yea."

He looked at me, his eyes laughing. I saw he was younger than I first thought;
maybe only a few years older than me.

She said, "So like a omelet with green peppers, onion, and mushroom."

He said, "But that's a dollar extra with the third filling. I'll just take what I ordered
first, O.K. hon." He looked at her, his hat still on his head and said, "A Western Omelet
without the meat."

She was young. Someone like myself, passing her twenties in the anonymity of a
gray outfit and the station of life it offered. She walked away without a word, but brought
my man, who didn't remove his hat during the meal, his coffee promptly and with a smile.
She had a lilting, restless quality. When she had a spare moment she stood squeezed in
between the pie rack and the register, moving her lips silently. I guess it was right then,
when I saw her singing a song to herself, that I decided I'd give her a good tip and, maybe
further, come back some other other day when all this foolishness was over and ask her
out.

The man was all business. He thought he could double the money over an eight
hour period a couple nights a week. He said a month, maybe six weeks at the most. By
that time we would each have five, six thousand. The plan was this: I was to give him a
certain amount of money at the start of my shift, say five hundred. (As the night clerk, I
was the only one accountable for the money during my shift.) By eight, he would return
the five hundred and we would split the money earned off it. I didn't ask him how he
would double it. I didn't want to know.
“What do you do skip from place to place? Is this your job?” I said.

“You don’t worry about that. This is easy work. You only get caught when you do something stupid, greedy,” he said.

I nodded, agreeing. He got up to leave, “Think it over,” he said. “I’ll get back to you in a couple of days.”

“It’ll work, kid,” he said, walking away. He tipped his hat as he passed our waitress and I caught sight of a circle of his bare scalp.

The waitress appeared, “I guess you want this on one check.” Her name tag read Roxanne.

I said, “That’s not your name, is it?”

I could see her filling out the application, putting down anything but the fact where it asked for her first name. If questioned, she’d excuse the discrepancy with her social security number by citing a nick-name. She would tell a long story about her parents; how they were killed when she was twelve or how they lived happily in the valley, but how they didn’t send money, the cheap bastards, and how she was justified in using a different first name. The cheap bastards. Now, she just stood holding a cheap Bic, bouncing it off her order pad.

“Roxanne?” I said, shaking my head. No response. No movement. A small smile?

She repeated, “I guess you want this on one check?”

I looked out into the lot. My man was gone. I chided myself for not getting the make of the car, his license number.

“Yea, yea,” I said. “I’m treating my friend. He just got a promotion at work.”

She smiled and said, “They always come like that, don’t they?”

“What?” I asked.

“The good times,” she said. “In disguise.” She winked and walked away, taking my money.

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Mother called telling me father was a different man because of the flower shop. She explained, “He always was so efficient before, but now he’s managing to let things go. To open up to other venues of expression and experience.”

She asked how the job hunt was going.

“A few leads. A few leads. A few leads” I told her.

I decided to go for the man’s deal. It went well for the first couple of weeks. Everything worked as planned. The money was good. I didn’t know what to do with it though, so I did the normal things: Bought a CD player, a television, and moved into a bigger apartment.

When mother called again, I told her I was working some overtime - I’d be moving into a bigger place.

Work became different. Clerking for me had simply always been a job, but after my deal, I began feeling involved in everything that was happening at The Wicked Emporium. I felt responsible. I’d never really taken note of the women who worked the booths, probably because I collectively thought of them as aging beauty queens, who one day found themselves with a kid or no employable skills and turned to what had always worked for them in the past: their bodies. I imagined them sitting in their glass enclosures seeing no one who watched, but watching instead, the five one-way mirrors that circled their nightly eight hour universe, broken only by three fifteen minute breaks and a hour lunch or dinner, or whatever you call a meal at three or four a.m. I imagined the women watched their reflections with an earnest interest they may have paid themselves at some earlier, more pure time. What exact manipulations they performed in their circle was up to them. They called what they did in the booth their walk. Mostly, it was them dancing or sitting on a stool, their mouths open, mock-moaning a joy. What they knew was this: Their names were advertised at the door of each booth. There were always two or three
women performing simultaneously in various booths. A nightly tally of customers was kept. They were paid on commission. Each month the girl with the lowest tally was dropped and a new girl hired. So it goes. Because of this, they cared who watched.  

But when I got to know the women. They weren’t as I imagined. They were interesting, determined women bent on using any angle that worked for them.  

There was Trixie. (I only knew their stage names.) A woman in her mid-twenties who had a leather look about her; her lips were painted fiercely and a few body parts pierced. She told me she had a boyfriend who did things right. I didn’t know what that meant. She explained - he didn’t mind what she did. She said, he says, no one but me ever touches you. She agreed, laughing with her head back, before leaning in close for a light. She began spending most of her breaks smoking and talking with me, telling me things like I was the type of guy women wanted to marry. She would say these things then laugh. In fact, she laughed after almost everyone of her sentences. I suppose it was her way to talk about the sadness.  

There was Leona, a lovely Mexican woman, who did her walk in a perfectly peaceful, almost mechanical way - a flat, understanding smile never leaving her face. She didn’t say much, but she always had the highest total at the end of each month.  

And then there was a woman who went by the name of Prize. She was quite beautiful with strawberry hair and a rough, small body. Apparently, she would viscously attack the mirrors in her cubicle, challenging her own image and the eyes behind it. Prize told me horrible stories of her youth. Her mother always had a new friend and when she was a girl, three of them had touched her while she slept. The only thing she remembers about each of these men is the smell of whiskey mixed with the smell of her mother that lingered in her room after they left.  

“IT’s why I can’t go work in a club, stripping. I tried it once and almost fainted when the first guy leaned up to give me his tip and I got a whiff of his breath. The glass is important.” Prize also had a boyfriend and a pedestrian plan: marriage and kids. It has always been that way with the wildest people I met - they had the most sedate goals and
desires. For me, it’s always been the ones with the wild dreams of success and fame who usually did little but watch black and white videos and read thick, obscure anthologies.

The women became friends and the job almost normal, except for the men. I’d become part of the women’s world and began seeing the men as the woman saw them, not really immoral, but immodest, as if they were the creatures who chose the center of a loop of booths to display their bodies and false passions. Before, I’d never noticed them. They were men who came in, gave me some money and I, them the program. As a rule, small talk was avoided. I didn’t know what or who was worse, the men who left looking satisfied or the others who left as they came: Broken, small creatures. It made me want to hurt someone, but for the first time in awhile this someone was not myself. I’d finally found a place where I could feel superior. I decided to will myself into the universe of some of those sad creatures. I was still reading Nietzsche. I was still taking in a extra $1000.00 dollars a week. I could do a lot. I decided to follow a few of them, see what their lives were about. See what they deserved.

On the phone, my mother described the change in my father’s personality. “He brings me flowers everyday and I know he works in a flower shop, but that’s not the point.”

“What’s the point, mother?” I said, staring at my big screen TV.

“The point is there is nothing as beautiful as a flower.”

“Right, mother. Right.”

The first man I chose to follow was a particularly pathetic creature. He was shaped like a fig with opaque eyes and soft, downy cheeks. He usually came by the shop at least twice a week, wearing large, black leather shoes that slapped flat and hard against the cheap linoleum tile that lined the front part of our store.

I had no plan. I would follow these random men and see what they did with their free time. It was easy enough because some of the men paid with checks and credit cards.
and I would ask for their licenses for verification. I had their addresses. I would go to their houses and wait outside in my little, black beetle; smoking and thinking blue Humphrey Bogart thoughts.

The first night out I almost cried when I discovered the fat man’s plans for the evening. He left his house, really just an apartment with its own entrance, and walked to a nearby convenience store. I pulled slowly behind him - my headlights off, before realizing this would attract more attention then if I flicked them on. He was just a short little thing, badly dressed in Wrangler jeans and a sports shirt from the seventies. I could tell he got most of his clothes as presents. He wasn’t wearing his typical shoes, but funny brown ones that made a clapping sound. It took me a moment before I realized they were clogs. Clogs? He came out of the convenience store unwrapping a pack of Basic cigarettes, letting the cellophane drop to the ground. Was littering the offense I sought to amend? He walked along the side streets smoking and breathing in our small town air. People walked right on by. At O’Malley, he took a right. My stomach sank. He was headed toward my shop. The fact that some of my men visited the store when I wasn’t working depressed me in an ultimate, unexplainable way. I was amazed at how easy I could be penciled-in then airbrushed from such a sad, small equation. I forgot about him as soon as I saw him heading for the store. I knew where he was going and hence everything about him. Though I saw him often after that night, he became invisible to me.

The next man was the man. I chose him because he usually paid with a Gold Visa and his middle initial was Z. I considered what Z could represent. Zachary? Zavier with a Z? I knew people who spelled it like that. What else - Zanzibar? No, he was too old to have hippy parents, besides, I liked to think the mystery at the center of him, the reason why he chose to ramble away some of his nights at the Wicked Emporium and rent such tapes as “Eight Guys and One Girl” and “Anal Retreat” had everything to do with this middle, inexplicable initial. He had to be proud of it to put it on his credit card, thinking, I’m sure, it looked prestigious. I imagined him at work, on the phone, his feet propped on
his desk. “Yes, yes. Give me two dozen of those. Yes, yes. But of course, of course.”

Z lived in a house with a kept lawn and a wire fence. A small dog ran along the perimeter of the property, barking like it had a baby balloon squeezed up its ass. When I saw the animal, I thought I’d misjudged things. Perhaps Z wasn’t a mystery. Perhaps Z meant nothing. Or maybe, his mystery was as simple as that dog and its amazingly annoying and insistent bark. I know people who have gone crazy from less. (I’m this kind of a guy with my observations: Compulsive, obsessive, prone to label mistakes as learning experiences, and willing to see the world only in primary, almost fake colors.) I decided to make a project of Z; not only to follow him, on occasion, but almost daily, and further, to keep records, photographs.

Occasionally, I would enter a shop he’d just left, giving up following him for the day, and immerse myself in the world that only moments ago had held his interest. I would always linger in the small shops that sold simple, unimportant things. Things the world would soon forget if they were ever removed from its pernicious grasp - designer t-shirts, Third World crafts, specialty rugs. In those forgotten shops, I’d talk to the proprietors, handling their items while asking absurd questions of origin and use.

One old man told me he had dreamed, forever, of working in a shop that sold crafts from around the world. “Me,” he said, “when I worked real - I did building. This is just retirement. I built much, but I always wanted something else. I ordered videos and tried to make these things,” he picked up a vase from Nigeria, “but I don’t have it in here.” He placed one hand on his enormous stomach. It took me a moment to notice his other hand - a lone finger pointing to his heart.

Another old woman ran an exotic rug store called The Palace. Out in front of her shop a giant sign proclaimed, “Just say No to Drugs, and Yes to Rugs.” She laughed and laughed over that sign and told me of how, one day, her granddaughter had sung the line while watching a Barney cartoon. “You don’t know about this world,” she said, “until you’ve seen too much of it. Until you don’t want to look at anymore. Now, my daughter thought it was great her little girl was getting the right message and all. Blah. What
message? It's funny. But I don't know. It doesn't seem right, but it sells. What harm can it do?"

Z never went to the Emporium on the days I followed him. He worked as an architect and had a routine. One afternoon, I disguised myself as a delivery boy and delivered an order of Chinese take-out to his secretary.

"Mr. Gables didn't say anything about lunch."

"This is a free lunch," I said. "Mr. Gables won a prize off a coupon he sent in."

"Really, he's always so lucky."

"I know," I said. 'I know."

The next lie I told my mother was extravagant. "I've taken a job on with an architect. I know it's far from my field, but I met someone who is prepared to take me under his wing. I'll be doing drafting for awhile, but I can move up. Perhaps, I'll even go back to night school."

Once, I talked to Gables for a half an hour as I shared his table during a busy lunch hour at the Hamburger Hamlet. I wore sunglasses and a bad wig so he wouldn't recognize me. He was a nice guy. We talked of sports and the quality of hamburgers at the various fastfood spots around town. He baffled me because of his utter banality. It didn't seem to fit with his life; what he did for a living, the small shops he visited, the way he dressed.

In the midst of all this craziness, while I followed Z and gave money two times a week to the trench coat man, a woman applied for an open position in the back. I was taking better note of the women who came into my shop, but still it took me a second to place her. She smiled embarrassingly, "I need a job."

I looked at her. She was bouncing around on the balls of her feet and she wore a floppy, flowered yellow hat. "What do you want to do?"
She gave me the ad my boss ran continuously in the local classifieds.

"Girls wanted. Demonstrable. In love with themselves. No men in sight, but you know they are there." I often asked my boss why he advertised in such an artsy fashion. I'm an artsy guy, he would say laughing; his buck teeth, harmless, but looming. "Nah, seriously, it's the artsy ones who work well here. You have to be able to imagine to do this kind of work."

"Do I know you?" I said.

She smiled a smile that had seen better days and said, "Do I know you?"

It was Roxanne from the diner and it was the first time I noted her habit of repeating, verbatim, a question or comment directed at her which she'd found annoying.

"Sorta," I said. "We've talked before."

"The Diner. Must be The Diner. Everyone knows The Diner"

"Waitresses are heroes." I announced suddenly. "There's nothing harder to become than a contented waitperson."

She looked at me suspiciously, "About the job?"

"We're always taking applications," I smiled and handed her an application.

She began to fill it.

"Just out of curiosity, do you remember me?"

She didn't look up. "Came in with a small fellow in a trench coat who wanted his Western Omelet without the meat."

When she left, I saw from her application she was 24. She was small with red hair. I put her application at the top of the stack, cut the stack in half, threw the bottom half away and placed the rest on my boss's desk. She was hired the following week.

At first, there were complaints. They said she had no style. That she hardly moved in the booth, that she would sit on her stool as if she was posing.

I was intensely curious about Roxanne, inexplicably drawn to her, but I never put
on the overhead camera, and continued monitoring the back rooms only by the little red bulbs that flashed above the number of each empty booth. However, I did note that Roxanne’s lights never remained lit for long.

She came to me one day looking like she had a problem. Her face was drawn tight, giving her the appearance of a lost doll. I thought she must have had some relative dying. Perhaps, her life was the tragedy I was waiting to follow around and make mine. For instance, her brother, a brilliant kid, who never had an opportunity, was dying before his time; or her mother, a lifelong alcoholic, had finally quit the booze but then a CAT scan had revealed a brain tumor. I was certain the news was of this nature when Roxanne, taking her cue from the other girls shimmered up to my booth during her cigarette breaks to talk.

“Hey. How you doing?” she asked.
“Hey.”
She pulled a cigarette from her purse.
“How do you like it?”
“How do I like it?”
If you waited long enough she would take your question as a sincere one and answer it. “It’s different.”
But I was wrong, she had no problems that day.
“Why did you quit waitressing?”
“I didn’t like the attitudes of the customers. The job wasn’t as invisible as I wanted it to be.”
I could see the giggle in her eyes.
“I mean, I care what you think about me. I care what my mother thinks of me, but how far do you extend that.”

Z came into the shop one day while I was covering for the day clerk. He was still in his work clothes. I was shocked to see him and might’ve offered too much eye contact
because he paused a moment after he gave me a ten and I gave him a handful of tokens for the back room. I could see he was trying to decide if he remembered me. I knew, even if he did place my face within the bearded, bifocaled, fellow hamburger enthusiast, he wouldn't say a word, not now anyway; not until he had time to think of the repercussions and determine exactly what was going on would he speak. He was a deliberate fellow.

For instance, last week, I’d followed him into a photo store. It was odd what happened there, out of a movie or something. As I stood in the corner fingering postcards, he picked up his prints and opened them. Immediately, his face changed and it was obvious there was something wrong with the pictures. A lady, attractive, but plastic-looking, almost like she could be wearing a wig herself, stood at Z’s elbow, leafing through her prints. She started laughing. Flat-out laughing. It was obvious there been a mix-up, but Z drifted toward the door. I was wearing a wig, ski cap, and round John Lennon shades. The woman grabbed Z’s shoulder from behind, “Hey,” she said.

She was a big woman and her hair, or the wig, was a grassy-blond color. “Hey, I think there was some confusion.”

There was a quick, good natured exchange. I followed Z out, but not before seeing the woman go to the front desk, smiling; wanting to say something to someone about the screw-up, about what she had seen in those pictures.

And he was in that type of reflective zone again, as he stood in front of me touching his tokens, and though I was familiar with the wide-way of his public persona; for instance, the way he talked for a bit to the soft pretzel man outside his office every lunch hour, rain or shine, laughing and smiling like the man was his long lost friend telling him the secrets of life; I knew little of his inner life, of what made him tick, or even if he had a wife or kids or a live-in love. I never saw him with anyone. All he had was the job and the pretty secretary. He seemed to have an interest in art, but it was random. Mostly, he wandered about on his days off as if trying to pick up the scent of a life. I knew one way into his inner life was those photographs.

In any case, whatever he was thinking, Z turned from me that day at the Emporium,
deciding he didn’t recognize me. Leona, his usual favorite, was on her break. She sauntered up to the counter smiling, asking for a light. I knew his choices were Prize or Roxanne, who had kept the name she used on her application, giving credence to my belief it wasn’t the real thing. Would Z choose Roxanne? The thought bothered me, and for the first time I had the desire to flick on the overhead camera and watch.

Leona sat down next to me, blowing out smoke in tight, small puffs.

She said, “The way this thing works,” shaking her head.

Fifteen minutes later, when Z came out of the back room and left the shop, Leona was still at my side, talking and smoking. I knew if Leona wasn’t there I would have flicked on the overhead camera for the first time and watched; watched Roxanne - watched what Z was watching.

“I hate seeing their faces,” Leona said. “Who needs to know what they look like?”

It was unusual for any of the girls to offer me any intimate feelings about their walk, especially unusual for Leona with her incredible, persistently flat smile. I also avoided such talk, afraid it would lead to some type of recognition. But for the moment, I wanted the distraction of a conversation as I spotted Z’s light-blue Escort float by on the black street outside. The red tint of the window gave his car a purplish glow and I thought it important that I knew such was an illusion, that in fact, Z drove a simple, puffy-blue American car.

“What do you do - imagine yourself alone when you’re doing that?” I asked turning, flushed, back to Leona.

Leona looked at me, her smile back in place, “Alone? Now why would anyone imagine themselves alone with ten pair of nasty, wanna-be eyes glued to their bodies. Honey, I’m thinking of every pair of loving eyes I know.” She laughed. “Ain’t nothing like being alone with your fear, honey -nothing.”

I nodded, not knowing what she was talking about, and asked her to cover the register, saying, “I need a smoke.”
Outside, under a blank white sky, I decided on two things: First, I would tell my mother to send me the blueprints of the new house and I’d have Z look at them. Second, and I saw the two points connected, I needed to see Z’s pictures. I imagined them on a coffee table or atop his console color T.V. The point was that the real Z had lead me nowhere and I wanted to see what the captured image could do for me. Perhaps, it was the vinegar-white sky that pushed me towards such thinking. I don’t know. Usually during my regular shift, I never stepped outside to smoke. And if I did - it was only dark.

Mother’s blueprints arrived in the mail with a note attached, “Your father and I are proud. Keep up the good work. On the house front - my main concern is the new bay window in your father’s den. I find it excessive, in terms of light, and ill-placed, in terms of square footage. Shouldn’t a den be dark and dense and practically square. Your father doesn’t really care, but I know he’ll be up in arms if everything isn’t just right after all the work is done. Love, Mother.”

Because I wasn’t sure if anyone lived with Z, I would knock on his door and pose as a salesperson. If someone didn’t answer I would proceed inward. My plan was to have Hamilton, the day clerk, cover for me on one of Z’s regular days.

The back half of my plan, getting the blueprints into Z’s hands for an opinion of my father’s den, was my stab at the intimate, of getting inside Z’s professional life. I would be one of his clients. We would have a regular lunch and discussion. Perhaps this combined with the pictures would tell me something.

Of course, I couldn’t plainly walk into Z’s office as myself. It would embarrass both of us and might scare him from my life completely. I would assume a subtle disguise. First, I would slightly alter my appearance at work. Perhaps on one of the days he was due, planning on a three day growth of beard and a pair of glasses, after which, I could visit Z’s office with a tight, crisp haircut and a pair of absurdly bright-blue contact lenses to cover my normal brown eyes. A bit of make-up around the cheeks would conclude my
appearance. He’d never know the difference. I’d consult one of the girls.

While this was going on, the small trench coat man sent a postcard to my attention at work. It was a print of the Mona Lisa. On the back, the card’s message explained that the Mona Lisa was presently going through an extensive period of restoration employing the latest laser technology along with a century-old oil on canvas enhancement method passed down from the Middle Ages. The little man, whose name I was never able to ascertain, had typed a two line cryptic message, “Time wears all things, even the perfect. Moving on. Later.” There was no return address, no way of tracing my little man. I imagined him handling the post card print in a pair of stretched, black leather gloves. He was gone. I was considering how his disappearance would affect any of my plans, decided it didn’t, that I would only have to move back to a cheaper apartment after a couple months, when Roxanne walked from the back.

“What you got there?” she asked perkily.

“A note from a friend.” I handed it to her and she studied the front, before flipping it over and reading the message.

What harm could it do to tell her, not about the particulars of course, but that this was a note from my friend, the little man I had breakfast with the first time I met her.

“Time wears all things perfectly,” she said. “That would make more sense.”

“You remember the little man I had breakfast with?”

She nodded and chirped, “Cheap. Cheap. Cheap.”

“What one time he doesn’t leave a tip and he’s cheap.”

“One time? That guy was in there every week.”

I didn’t believe her. “What about the witty remarks on the omelet? A regular wouldn’t speak like that.”

“That was his deal. He liked to do that stuff, occasionally. He thought he was ironic or something. He couldn’t or wouldn’t talk about himself.”

“Ironic? What’s his name?” I asked.
“Don’t know that. I only know he came there every Tuesday.”

“But you don’t know his name?”

“Waitresses are like priests and bartenders - you only know what the customer wants to tell. It’s about tips. You push someone too far, they’re not going leave you any money. Rule number one, never ask their name. They don’t mention it. You don’t know it.” Roxanne blew out a stream of smoke.

“Was he always alone?”

She shook her head, smiling.

“What?”

“No.”

“What?”

“Well, he was usually with a young guy like yourself.”

“So?”

“So, we all thought he was a pimp and, you know, you guys male prostitutes.”

I laughed, hurt, and decided to lie. “Oh, you know, he’s a customer here.”

“Here? He comes here. That guy may be watching me?”

“Anyone may be watching you.”

“Oh fuck, gross.”

“Well, he won’t be in for while anyway. He’s in France. This is his little hello.”

She put out her cigarette and grabbed the card from my hand. “The postmark’s local.”

“He does that. He buys cards of the place he’s headed to and mails them out before he leaves. It allows him more time to enjoy the actual visit.”

“So he’s a friend and you don’t know his name.”

“Oh, he goes by Ron, but no one knows if that’s his real name. He’s a weird guy. This place isn’t much different from a bar or a restaurant or a church.”

Roxanne smiled. We knew each other.

“So you like coffee, eggs?” she asked.
“What?”

“How? I said, do you like coffee and do you like eggs.”

“Yea,” I said.

She waited, smiling. “Well, would you like to have some eggs and coffee with me?”

“Eggs and coffee?” I asked.

She laughed, “Think about it. I gotta get back to work.”

The next time my mother called she asked about the blueprints. I still hadn’t gone to Z’s office and, again, to stall her, I was forced to lie. I told her I’d met a girl at work and was dating.

“Oh, that’s wonderful. What does she do?”

“The same as me,” I told mother. “An apprentice to an architect. She wants to spend her life building things.”

I finally worked up the nerve to visit Z’s office. I’d cut my hair severely short, dabbled on some rouge, and bought a pair of insanely blue contact lenses. I also put on a suit and shoes with inserts. Normally, I stand six-foot-four. With the inserts I was close to six-foot-seven.

“Do you have an appointment?” the secretary asked when I arrived, wobbling, at Z’s office.

I clutched the blueprints to my side. Feeling suddenly exposed, I assumed a vague Eastern European accent. “Need no appointment.”

This confused the young woman and she flipped through a large white leather book and wrote something down. She looked back up at me and said, “I’m sorry but what did you say?”

“I will only need to see Mr. Gables a short time. A consultation. Big money.”
She looked at me closely, “Name?” she asked.


“OK, Mr. Simmons. Have a sit and I’ll see if Mr. Gables will take you.”

I bowed slightly and shuffled toward the rear of the room.

A second later the young woman reappeared. “He’ll see you, Mr. Simmons,” she said, sitting down.

“Thank you.”

Gables’s professional manner was one of ease and disinterest. I realized I could have slid by with a much simpler disguise because he barely looked at me when I handed over the blueprints and explained my mother’s concern about my father’s den. For much of the conversation, he angled his chair to the left and either gazed out the windows that backed him from ceiling to floor, or at a small desk ornament he held softly in his left hand.

I was vastly disappointed.

Outside of the business details, he asked me only one question, as I was leaving, “That a Slavic accent, Mr. Simmons?”

“Yes,” I said, “Russian.” He looked me in the eye for the first time.

“And Simmons is your given name.”

I felt like confessing. “My wife’s, I explained. I took her name. Legally that is. Of course, I’ll always consider myself a Pushkin.”

“Yes,” he said, standing and offering me his hand. “I have people from there. I hear it’s nice country. I would love to visit it someday.”

“Well,” I said, “you would certainly be most welcome.”

I took up Roxanne’s offer but we didn’t go for coffee and eggs. We settled on Thai. I called her at home.

“I like spicy,” she said over the phone.

I said, “You know, the Thai have the most beautiful smiles in the world.”
That night, in bed, during sex, both of us wet with tears and passion, she said, “Tell me all about it, boy,” and I just about did and feel in love with her. Afterward, she brought up the beautiful smiles of the Thai people who’d served us that evening. “Yes,” she agreed, “they’ve the most beautiful smiles I’ve ever seen.”

I had Hamilton cover my shift on Thursday night, Z’s regular night, and waited outside his house until I saw him leave. His house was dark and remained so for the full hour I waited before I approached it. I carried a suitcase full of new argyles, ready to become a sock salesman if anyone, a wife or a lover, answered Z’s door. But, of course, he lived alone and, further, I was not surprised when I found the door unlocked, actually, slightly ajar. The front room of his house was spartan - mainly black and white with metal framed bookcases lining the walls. Long, heavy curtains which appeared cut from denim dominated the room. Two video’s, “The Postman Always Rings Twice,” and “Some Like It Hot” sat atop the console T.V. Next to the videos, the photographs. I sat on his leather couch and focused the lamp, which I recognized as an Ikea piece, and paged through the pictures quickly, greedily.

Of course, they were of the women at my shop in their booths - he must have smuggled in a camera, occasionally. The last five showed Roxanne icily spread on her stool. A fake Yin and Yang tattoo she must have applied only when she worked hung tight to her upper, right thigh. Her fingers were deep inside herself. I left, taking the photographs, before turning back and placing them where I’d found them.

My mother called, asking me what my boss thought of her problem with the den. “I’m meeting with him tomorrow,” I said. “Tomorrow.” It was then she told me her news. She and father were coming for a visit. They were very much interested in seeing my new place and meeting the new girl in my life.

“Yes, great, mother, great. I can hardly wait to see you.”
Regretfully, I donned the same outfit I worn initially when I visited Z’s office for the second and final time. I wanted to go in my regular outfit, as myself, but I knew this would cause more trouble than it was worth. Since the pictures, I was having trouble seeing Roxanne and understanding how she’d become a lightning, quick necessity in my life. In sex, I found myself searching for the spot on her inner thigh where she put the removable tattoo each time she worked. I usually found it through taste. The sticky adhesive on my tongue was a type of purification. I wasn’t so far away from asking her to wear the tattoo when she was with me. If I did that I knew it would be over between us.

Did Z know anything during my last visit? Again, he sat absorbed into himself, alternating his gaze from the window to his desk weight. The blues were stretched out on a cart in the corner of the room. He’d marked them extensively and explained his marks from his desk, while I stood in the corner looking down at them. He said, “I understand your mother’s concern for your father’s den. It could've been a problem.”

We were strictly professional. In the end, he again looked at me only once - when he shook my hand and told me I could leave the check with the receptionist. My final words to him: “Russia will always be expecting you.”

“And I, it, Mr. Simmons,” he returned. “And I, it.” I left realizing it was no longer important to consider if he knew who I really was.

Mom and Dad were coming. I had to tell Roxanne the truth about everything and I did, leaving out only Z’s pictures. Believe it or not, she thought it was mostly funny and, again, I knew I’d found love. My parents were due to arrive at 5:30 in the evening. “You can pick us up after work,” my mother told me. “And bring along Roxanne, dear.”

Roxanne finally agreed to the idea of waiting at terminal gate X decked in a blouse and skirt, while I stood next to her in a pair of sturdy chinos and an oxford with the sleeves rolled up above my work-wearied elbows. A badly fashioned tie was loosen from my
collar. A nice pair of rubber-soled L.L. Beans grounded me firmly on the floor. When mom and dad spotted us, I wanted to be sure they understood about Roxanne and I - that we were believers, architects-in-training, that she and I were busy constructing. Just that morning, I’d licked the inside of Roxanne’s thigh, tasting the adhesive. I let the glue lay on my tongue for a moment, before deciding it was the last time I would seek out the spots where Roxanne placed her tattoos.
When my father turned fifty, he quit his civil service job, bought a motorcycle and headed for the Rocky Mountains leaving behind, forever, the East and our family. I was not sorry to see him go. He'd been away from my mother and me a long time by then and all I could think as I danced on our front lawn, skirting the sprinklers we ran almost continuously in those days and watched him ride away, was yes, father, this act is long past due. I was fifteen and hating everything; bitterly amused at my father's choice of bike - a Harley Z750, and how he'd done right by the accessories: The patent leather jacket, the Doc Martin boots (exactly like the kind I had in my closet upstairs) and the wraparound aviator glasses. He'd spurned the helmet, I believe, so the neighbors could see who exactly was disturbing our suburban street with the stupid, unnecessary roar of a motorcycle.

We heard hardly a word from Dad for five years. I moved to LA. Still, it was no surprise when mother called one brilliant June day as I lay in bed with someone who knew me as Chad, and told me my father had left again. This time he'd gone from the young woman, the cherry, my mother always called her, who he'd left my mother for five years previous. The stick, the point, was that this woman, this cherry, had actually phoned mother shortly after he drove away from her on his new Honda CXR 1250. Number one, I knew my mother had extracted the make of the bike from the young woman as one of the few essential details of the story; and number two, like my mother, I wondered what had happened to the old Harley.

My mother, who I sometimes called Dawn, said, "He's gone from her too. It figures. And then she calls me. I wanted to spit at the phone when I heard her voice, you know me. But then something came over me. Maybe it was her tone. I realized she was just like me - loving a fool and paying for it. We've decided to keep in touch."

I sat up in bed and Bill, my client, put his hand on my shoulder. "Mother," I said.
Bill took his hand away with the word mother. “Can I call you back in five minutes.”

My mind was reeling. All I saw was my father on his new Honda, his razor cut hair grown long, blowing out in the wind as he slung the bike low with the curve of a mountain road. In the way memories of people are anchored to particular places and things, my initial memory of my father was linked with an open, anonymous mountain road. Lately however, my father had been eliminated from this picture - somehow airbrushed away and his memory had become the open the road itself; a mountain road, deadly accessible in its stretch to the other side. Mother’s news suddenly put dad back on this road.

She was still talking. I interrupted her, “Mother can I call you back.”

She went on, “Consider the bike. I don’t know a lot about them, but I never heard of a Honda CXR 1250. It’s different than the one he left us on.” Father had always left us, not just mother.

Bill reached over the side of the bed for his pants. Everything I did was up front, so I knew he wasn’t looking for his wallet, but dressing and getting ready to leave.

“Dawn,” I said. Bill was out of the bed by this time and walking towards the bathroom, his plump ass wiggling, “I’ll call you back in five minutes.”

“Sure,” she said. “A Honda. Can you believe it. It figures he wouldn’t do it right.” Finally, she stopped talking and I hung up.

My mother’s fascination with the bike stemmed from her belief that public acts, social acts, ultimately fell into two categories - those done right and those done wrong. Right, consisted in following the rules of decorum so closely it appeared you invented them; wrong, simply was leaving behind anything others could talk about. Her categorizations ignored untidy factors such as ethics or emotion, but for mother it brought the world into a clean, well-lit perspective.

Bill came out of the bathroom. I had picked up his socks by mistake.

“They’re mine,” he said.

“Umph?” I looked up. My mind on father.
“Here are yours.” Bill handed me my pair of worn argyles. “I didn’t think anyone wore those kind anymore.”

I didn’t respond, but just slipped out of his calf-length stretch nylons and handed them to him.

He bent down to kiss me. “Everything alright at home?”

Bill had fine blonde hair and was slightly balding on top. His body was dumpy, but he took pleasure from it, so so did I. He straightened up, knowing it was none of his business, or simply not our business.

“Sure, Bill. No problems. It was good.” Bill was one of the better clients. I was sorry he had to go. Sometimes, it was only afterwards that I felt like a whore, when I wanted to talk and the jon didn’t or when the jon wanted to talk and I didn’t; during the sex I forgot who I was and nothing mattered.

Bill went to the mirror. “You sure everything alright?” He was tightening his tie, looking at me in the reflection.

“Sure,” I said. “You know, family.”

When he was gone, I counted the money he left on the bureau. There was an extra twenty. A pity tip. I took it from the five others and quickly burnt it, considering briefly doing away with the remaining five, before I caught sight of myself in the mirror.

Stricken would not be an exaggeration. I decided it was time for a vacation. I’d been in L.A. for a year, mostly trying to break into acting, but settling instead on whoring, another bit of acting entirely.

I chose to vacate to Montana because of the memory of my father. I had no inclination to find or talk to him, but I still wanted to know him in a way I imagined I’d want any son of mine to know me; it seemed a right or a privilege was involved and for some reason Montana fit perfectly within the whitewashed memory of my father. My choice of Montana had nothing to do with recreation: I had no interest in hiking, biking, rafting, or climbing, but when I arrived in Missoula on June 28, 1995, I was stunned at how natural these activities fit with the long all-day sun and the clean, unbroken line of the
As if crazed with lust, I attacked the outdoors, pounding the back trails of the Rattlesnake wilderness with my Univega Performa and then turning wild-eyed to the three rivers in town, renting first a tube, then a kayak, then a raft; one day almost killing myself on a pack of rocks that hung quick around a quick bend.

By the forth day, I was spent and passed the day driving. I drove Highway 90 to Butte, then turned around and drove back to Missoula, stopping only for cigarettes, coffee, and gas. I noted how the surrounding red raped hills of that old mining town seemed to suggest it’s history of gambling and prostitution.

Back in Missoula, bored, I changed hotels. I took a Single King Smoking at the Deer Lodge Best Western and put the “Do Not Disturb” sign on the door. I planned to sleep in. Around 4 am. I got a call from the front desk, “Good morning, this is your wake up call.”

“Wrong room,” I said and put down the phone.

When I got up, I went to the lobby, not to complain, but to make sure it didn’t happen again. Behind the front desk, a fat girl with acne was chewing gum, waiting.

“I think,” I said trying to sound good natured, “There’s some confusion about a wake-up call.” I paused, people are polite in the Northwest and as mother said, you always do as the people do. “It’s no problem, I just wanted to make sure it doesn’t happen again. I’m in room 204 and got a call at 4:00 am.” I laughed a bit, trying to suggest how we all make mistakes.

The girl turned to an archaic looking clock with thin toothpick arms sticking from each of its twelve digits. She bent close to peer at a sheet of paper next to the clock. “Oh,” she said, as if she found proof that I wasn’t lying, that I wasn’t just a weird, annoying city person. “Sorry, there’s a a new guy working the graveyard shift. I think he meant to call 304.”

“No problem,” I said again, remembering the young dark haired kid who checked me in last night.
On the fifth day, I again avoided the wilderness and wandered instead through the small town streets of Missoula and shopped. I bought a few pairs of slacks, a t-shirt that said, “Forgive me. I’m from California,” and half-a-dozen postcards. Around 10 p.m. I was writing cute notes to my clients (always thinking of business) when I got another call. It was the kid who checked me in, apologizing.

“No problem,” I said for the third time, even though it was beginning to be one. It’s tough getting along with politeness when you’ve done without it for years. I was on my back in bed, deciding if I appreciated the pattern of the wallpaper that had been smoothed over the ceiling, ready to get off the phone, when the kid surprised me by asking, “What are you doing tonight?”

There was something in his voice that I liked.

I said, “Well I’m about to step into the shower and after that, I don’t know.” I paused, he didn’t say anything, “You got any ideas,” I added.

“A few,” the kid said.

I knew then, and asked him up.

He hesitated. It was late. I said, “You have a ‘Please Wait. I’ll Be Back In A Minute,’ sign don’t you?”

Afterward, he lay with his leg half off the large, square bed that dominated the room. We hadn’t gotten under the streets. He insisted I swallow. I said, “Well that’ll cost you extra.”

The kid laughed. I believed the whole time he thought I was playing the whore - a young man on vacation dealing himself a fantasy.

A chest of drawers with a cheap television on top was to the right of the bed. Behind us, to our left, was the bathroom and the full sized mirror that had been plaguing me since I checked in - apparently there is something about the LA sun which, perversely, hides all scars, perhaps because of the sweat and the burn.
The kid told me his name was Joyner. I’d told him about the money before anything started. He had a why-not attitude and unsnapped his jeans.

“Boxers,” I’d smiled, hooking the front of them with a finger.

He smoked a cigarette, as we directed our attention to the muted TV. I was feeling good. Such things should happen on a vacation. He surprised me by telling me he had some money to spare. “There’s about a thousand dollars in the safe downstairs that’s mine to eight o’clock. You ever think what you could with a thousand dollars overnight.”

I didn’t say anything. I certainly didn’t tell him that once I made double that in one night. I realized I’d underestimated the kid. He was short, built square to the ground with a thick middle and strong nearly hairless thighs that tapered down into ridiculously skinny calves and tiny, humble feet. If he’d been athlete, which I’m sure at one point he had been, the bones in his feet would’ve split in two when he tried to run fast and long, placing all that neat, compact weight where it just couldn’t go.

Joyner said, “I know one guy. I need a middle man.”

I thought about LA. and how I had no auditions lately. I inherited the desire to act from my mother, who for years complained to my father, “Why don’t we ever just do something? Anything.”

My father, who really was never anything but a weary clerk, wouldn’t answer. My mother - forever, “Max, Max, just don’t sit there. Why don’t we ever do anything.”

Eventually, she would say to me, “David, why don’t you just run down and rent a movie for your mother.”

I waited for those words because for me the video store has always held a ripe, snappy sense of potential and relief. I would draw out the selection, eventually turning to the classics. Mother’s favorite was Bette Davis. Occasionally, I went towards Hitchcock. She loved, “The Birds.”

In those days, mother was also a devout Catholic who prayed nightly. She had a small, white prayer book that sported a tiny, red cross on its cover. She inherited the book
from her own mother, who went crazy when she was eighty and sliced her husband to death one night as he slept. My mother read her prayers in a low whisper as the films rolled and father slept off another day upstairs. Somehow, this holy mumbling, amid the contrived celluloid action that some find thrilling and worthy, while others simply dismal and wasteful; this absurd mingling of faith, suspense, murder, desire - all came to define LA. for me. And so I went.

"Who’s the guy?” I asked. Joyner had thin, feathery eyelashes. The last third of his eyebrows were painted on so they dropped lazily out over the end of his eyes. I could see Joyner dancing, eyes closed, head back - imagining somewhere, anywhere, where danger might visit.

I said, “I’m not taking any chances. I’m just on vacation here.”

He didn’t say anything. I went down his body to his feet, which I held and kissed, slightly sucking on his toes. He was quite beautiful, but somehow wrong: His feet summing this up. However, I couldn’t imagine anything sinister happening in sleepy, old Missoula.

“Who’s the guy?” I asked still holding his feet, knowing I would do whatever he asked.

He laughed and reached down for me. “Why do you care?” he said.

I dropped his foot and pulled away from his touch - faking an instinct.

He raised a long eyebrow, “Hey,” he said.

“It’s just that I’m on vacation,” I said.

“Sure, I’m just telling you because it’s easy, but if you don’t want it that’s fine.

But, I mean, why peddle if you’re not interested in a few easy dollars.”

“Who said anything about easy?” I reached again for his feet.

He laughed, “Look, if you want it is all I’m saying. Sure, I need someone. You would be perfect. We have this commonality.” The word surprised me. “But if you don’t want it - no problem. I’ll find someone else. Maybe I’ll get a woman. Now that would be
I smiled. He was good. He went on. I was actually beginning to like him. “It’s just good money. We’re talking doubling a grand and I’ll give you a third.”

“Half?” It was a game we both knew.

He shook his head no.

“Why not?” I said.

“That’s what I’m telling you,” he said.

“OK.” We kissed. A deal done.

All I had to do was take the cash to the Ox, a local bar and grill. A man would be waiting for me wearing a San Francisco Giants baseball cap, backwards. I was instructed to sit down next to him and wait for him to lean towards me and say, “The Giants win the pennant. The Giants win the pennant.”

I’d laugh and we’d exchange some small talk. I’d leave the small bag on the floor beneath my bar stool, proceeding straight back to my motel room.

“That’s it,” Joyner said. “Eight o’clock the next morning you’ll have 333 dollars.”

“And 33 cents,” I said. But it wasn’t about the money.

I didn’t ask how the money was going to be doubled, but when I walked into the Ox, I understood. There was a gambling room and an all-night strip show in the back. The front half of the place was divided between a diner and a bar. A running bingo game with its spinning cage of balls and the low anticipatory breathing of the players charged the front half of the OX with a rooted energy that especially paled with the back half, where men with true blue cowboy hats, string ties, and leather boots sat around felt gambling tables with green and red chips stacked as high as their drinks, gambling all night long. The other room in the back was curtained off with a swinging door. There, different types of cowboys stumbled to and fro - the red music following them briefly before the door swung shut, doubling it back into the room.

I figured the man with the cap would gamble the money till he doubled it.
I sat down and ordered a beer. The man was late. I was well into my second beer, bent on leaving after I finished, when a man came up to me and said, “How bout those Giants.”

I turned and saw a man with a face as round and red as a cherry. His teeth were small and uneven. He was wearing a Giants cap. The bill, however, was to the front. He sat down next to me. I didn’t know much about baseball, but I struggled out a few sentences.

“It’s their year,” I said.

The man nodded and ordered up a beer and whiskey.

“And one for my friend,” he said, nodding again. He took off the cap and placed it on the bar, the bill facing the bartender - the back of the hat to us.

Had I misunderstood the directions of the hat? Things had seemed so simple. What are the chances of a man coming up to you, saying almost what you expect to hear, while following closely the rules of the hat, but not exactly? I’m sure you would believe him. I did. I figured the small discrepancies between Joyner’s directions and this man’s actions could be ignored; attributed to the beer, the whiskey --- Montana and its wide open spaces. I threw back my shot, knowing this was my man.

I thanked him and stood to go, but he shot a hand to my shoulder, touching the back of my neck and said in a friendly tone. “Not so fast. It’s not often you meet a fellow San Francisco fan in this part of town.”

I figured the least I could do was return his favor and order him a drink.

“What’s your flavor,” I said a bit too loud.

The man smiled. “Wild Turkey, if you don’t mind.”

And then, to my horror, he proceeded to talk more baseball. The money was on the floor in a brown paper bag. I reached down with my foot and shoved it a bit further under my own stool. A man on my right noticed and said loud, “What you got there, son - your lunch?”

I froze at the recognition of the bag. This man on my right had a head that looked
liked a hallowed out half of a peanut shell stuffed with clay; the eyes, mouth and nose pinched on - grade school style.

I said, “Ah, we’re just talking baseball. You know.” I remembered the name Barry Bonds. “What’s Bond’s hitting this year?”

The peanut man didn’t say anything at first, so I looked back at the first man who shrugged his shoulders. Then, I heard the peanut man say, “Fuck Bonds. He’s just an overpaid, lazy nigger.”

I stood to go. Again, the first man grabbed my shoulder. “What’s your hurry,” he said.

I laughed, letting his hand guide me back to my seat. He called to the bartender, “Hey, Harry how about another round here.”

I noticed the hat on the bar was gone and as the bartender came with our drinks, I saw he had it on, backwards. He finally said the words, “The Giants win the pennant. The Giants win the pennant.” Indeed, I had met my man.

The peanut man leaned down close to me and whispered in my ear, “I’ve always been partial to the Brooklyn Dodgers myself.” Things were not as I planned.

At first, I thought they were cops. But soon, I knew this wasn’t true because I wasn’t in a precinct, but in a room the size of a closet in the back of the Ox. In fact, I think it was a closet, a janitor’s close, because I could smell the strong odor of disinfectant and feel the dampness of a nearby mop and bucket. The first man I’d met, Mr. Cherry, and Mr. Peanut, the Bonds-hating, Brooklyn Dodgers fan, were in there with me. They weren’t wearing caps and there was no sign of Harry, the bartender, so I took this to mean he was in control and that these two guys were his goons - the ones who did his dirty work. I couldn’t recall how I’d gotten from the bar stool to the closet, but I figured it had something to do with Harry’s drinks. My head was stoned.

“What the fuck ?” I said, deciding to play it tough. I was in a chair, my hands
bound behind me, the two men standing above me.

“You better tell Harry this ain’t flush.” I yelled. The Brooklyn fan smacked me.

“I’m from fucking L.A., man,” I said. The Brooklyn fan smacked me again. My nose began to bleed. Obviously, tough wasn’t going to work with these guys.

The first man spotted the blood. He hadn’t touched me and he had a soft look in his eye. He said, “You better watch it Danny. This is one of those Californians.”

This stopped the Brooklyn man completely. He backed up an inch or two and I heard the scuttle of bucket and mop as he scraped them with his foot across the floor.

“You’re kidding me.” He stood frozen. “Fucking Harry thinks he can play that on me.” He kicked the bucket, and the mop fell with a clang.

“Fuck it, man,” he said. “Harry didn’t say anything about this to me. He said it was straight stuff, maybe a little dope.”

The first man shrugged his shoulders. He pulled out a cigarette and a lighter and when he lit it, I saw the Brooklyn man was almost panting. He turned to me and raised a mock back hand, “What the fuck you looking at you fucking faggit.”

I thought about spitting, but smiled instead. I knew his weakness.

“A Brooklyn fan, hey,” I said. I didn’t know what that meant and either did he. He opened the door.

“I’m out of here. I don’t even know why I come down to Missoula. Fucking city gives me the creeps.” I decided to push him, since the door was open and maybe someone would hear us. I could hear the murmur of men as they filed from the strip show to the bathroom next to us.

“Come on Brooklyn, it ain’t that bad,” I said. The first man laughed low and Brooklyn reached into the back of his jeans and pulled out a small pistol. He put the gun to my head and bent down next to me. The door was still ajar. I thought about screaming, but the first man coolly kicked the door shut behind us and took out his own gun and put it to the kneeling man’s head.

“Look Danny. There’s no reason to be acting like this. Every job is different. Put
the gun away. There ain’t a bit difference between one gunshot or two.”

The Brooklyn fan was looking at me hard. I could see he was scared. I would have licked my lips but I knew he was more scared of me than the gun to his head.

“All faggits die,” he said enunciating every syllable. I nodded no and he put the gun away and got to his feet. The first man still held his gun in one hand, the cigarette in the other.

“Leave now Danny. Maybe, maybe, you’ll get your money if you leave right now.”

Danny looked confused. Danny turned to the other man. “I’ll get my money.”

The first man didn’t move. Danny left, leaving the door ajar again, but again the first man kicked it shut.

“Sorry,” he said as he threw down the cigarette and grounded it out.

“Sorry?” I said.

The man told me what they wanted of me. They had me for robbery. When I looked at his gun sticking from the top of his pants, he told me Harry knew the police. Harry was the police. He said, “See, we have the kid too. Don’t feel bad with him. He’s only doing his job. What we want of you is six months service. It ain’t bad. You get 40% of what you take in, after that you’re a free man. You say no to us and you go to jail for five to ten and you’re taking it for free. Montana’s tough. Remember, the kid is with us. He’ll say what we want him to say - like, you took the money.”

I laughed. I mean, I was just a whore from LA.

He said, “You know you have the tendencies anyway. It happens a lot. You go to another town, you’re free to play. You wanted to play with the kid - think about it. Plus, it’s clean around here. We do only ranchers, farmers, cowboys. People with wives. You don’t have to worry about getting sick or anything. And 40% of what you take in? That’s good money.”

I didn’t say a word.

“You go home. No one knows. You call your girlfriend, your job, whatever.
You tell them you have business in Missoula. You leave, we catch you. The hotel has all your vital information - your credit card number, your address, your license. We know you.”

“You’re crazy. I’m from LA. I do this. I go home. Tell this place. What then?”

He paused, like he hadn’t considered this.

“Well, that usually doesn’t happen under the circumstances.” He took out his gun.

“We know people in LA.”

I knew there was a chance they might know my man, Johnny. If not, they would know him soon enough when I called him and told him I was staying in Missoula. I owed things to Johnny and he wasn’t just going to let me slip away into a Montana sinkhole. I decided to keep quiet.

“Fine, Fine,” I said, “Just untie my hands.”

He looked at me and said, “Good. Good. Now, just consider things slow, cowboy.”

When I smiled and shrugged my shoulders, he bent down and untied my hands. He put the gun on a high shelf and then turned to me, unzipping his pants.

“That’s good, cowboy. Real slow. Now, let’s see your stock. Let’s just say I’m customer number one.”

Afterwards, I took a deep breath as he backed away and zipped his pants. Laughing, he said, “How bout those Giants.” Still smiling, he took his gun off the shelf and left the room, turning to say, “Now you just wait here.”

I waited. I knew in a short while there would be another man who would want to come from the back room where girls took off all their clothes, but could do little else, and be sucked in the dark of a janitor’s closet, no questions asked. As I waited, I reached down to the right of the bucket and found the disinfectant. I took a small amount into my mouth, swirled it around, and spat down into the bucket. As I did so, the door opened and
a man walked in. I didn’t say anything, nor did he, as he fumbled with the front of his jeans.
Two weeks after his brother killed himself in a downtown Dallas motel room, my best friend, Jules, called and told me he bought a gun. Jules was always a level headed guy and he gave me this news in the plain, unadorned voice I had known, loved, and expected for at least the last twenty years. There seemed to be no menace behind the purchase. Nothing that hinted at what was to come. It was only Jules, a friend since I was fourteen, buying a gun to protect himself because he lived in a crazy part of LA where it seemed anything could happen at anytime and often did.

Jules explained the purchase, “I was smoking a cigar on my patio overlooking the street when I saw a bent-up Ford pull up next to my neighbor’s 94 Accord. Two guys get out. Latinos. They stick a thin slab of metal between the hinges of the driver’s side door and pop it open. Both guys get in. The first car, the Ford, drives off - one of its brake lights out. A guy in the Accord disappears under the steering column. A few seconds later the headlights snap on. They’re gone.”

Jules said he felt sick about the whole thing. He didn’t get the license number. Two Latinos is all he knows. He stood wedged in behind the patio door afraid of being seen. I didn’t know what he was telling me. He said he bought the gun because they would break into his house. Jules had been robbed twice at gunpoint. Each time the thieves put him spread-eagled on the sidewalk, face first, and patted him down.

“They shoot you and then they leave,” he said. “They don’t have a problem with it.”

At the time, he was in LA working as a nurse and I was in Campion, Montana with my second wife trying to work out a middle class life. Our conversations had slowed a bit the way they will when old friends who haven’t seen each other for awhile talk only on the phone. The other, who at some point in your life seemed like your left side, suddenly
bores or distracts; because of the distance, a perspective can’t be found and you end up saying things you don’t mean and listening to things you don’t really understand. Before his brother Wayne killed himself, I thought Jules and I were just going through one of these periods. Of course later, I would find out the problem between us ran much deeper, but then, I just thought Jules was hung up on his problems - the main one being the lack of a woman in his life. That, and his work was all he talked about.

He would say, “I need a wife Simmons. Damn it, I can’t tell you how much I need one.”

Jules was well past thirty and had never been married. He worked too hard, I told him. I knew he thought I didn’t work hard enough, even though I was going crazy with my forty hour gig of unloading trucks. I also knew, or I thought I knew, he found me lucky. I was three years into my second marriage and had come to Campion to get away from my first. What he didn’t know and what for some reason I couldn’t say, was I was beginning to feel those familiar pangs of desperation that had ultimately driven me from the east and my first wife.

I was working forty hours steady, coming home to an every night six pack, maybe a shot or two to level things off before dropping into bed. My wife, I knew, was beginning to look pass me. She’d found her own job and had a network of friends we didn’t talk about. But I didn’t care. I saw nothing but my job which had taken a turn for the worse in the weather. I was working for a meat distributor, moving crates of ribs, t-bones, and porter houses from a truck to a fridge. I’d started that summer when the work was good. You heated up outside, working a sweat, keeping the beer fat off and then you were in the freezer for just a moment - cooling things down, working it perfect. There was still light after work. You started to feel some things. Maybe a thought like moving from Minnesota to Dallas goes through your head, but that’s ahead of the story.

In the summer, work has always been work for me. It feels honest and you want to do it. In the winter though, it’s pitch gray when you get off shift. All day you’re moving and you can’t get warm. You can’t get loose in your clothing. You either keep
your gloves on and fumble with the crates, slow down the line, or freeze your fucking hands off and the boss loves you. I started giving lip, complaining on the management. They came to me and asked for a meeting; a talk is what they called it. They told me if I didn’t like my work I could walk. There were plenty of people who needed work in Campion. It was that night, after their talk, that Jules called and told me of his brother Wayne’s suicide.

Wayne was younger than Jules by only a year. They called him the dreamer because as Jules told it, Wayne was a precocious kid who got into things, asked too many questions, and told little lies about himself to keep his life from being like the those around him. I always knew Jules had trouble with his brother Wayne simply because Wayne was different than him and Jules couldn’t figure out why. They had the same parents; they had the same opportunities. Jules told me his brother swallowed two dozen codeine pills and three-quarter of a bottle of Jack Daniel’s before just lying back and dying. Those were his exact words, “Lying back and dying.”

Jules told me the cap on the quarter-filled whiskey bottle was in place when Wayne was found. Somehow, Jules knew this and couldn’t get away from it because it seemed to explain his brother or maybe because it was a perfect example of why he couldn’t explain his brother.

Jules told it in a question, “Who kills himself with a bottle of whiskey and replaces the cap before he’s done?”

I saw it differently. I saw Wayne popping the pills one by one, somehow enjoying the way he went out, until finally, he knew what time it was and twisted the cap back on the bottle and just lay down. Jules’s family always had a problem with Wayne.

Jules said, “He dropped out of high school and moved to Minnesota,” as if to say a man who does that, a man who cuts his options too thin is bound to end up where he did. It took nerve to move to Minnesota without the approval of the family, but Jules only saw it as another of Wayne’s half-baked schemes.

Eventually, I found out the full story of Wayne’s suicide. He wanted to move his
family from Minnesota to Dallas. The plan was for Wayne to go down to Dallas and land a job, set things up and then for his wife and family to follow.

He landed a job quickly, but the problem began when he called his wife with the news.

"Start packing," I imagine him saying.

The woman would have said after a long pause, "Wayne, honey. Wayne. I don't know anything about Dallas. I don't want to move to Dallas."

And then nothing. I imagine nothing on the line. No response. So she keeps talking. Wayne's wife tells him the credit card companies are calling. It's serious this time. It comes out after Wayne's death that he had somehow convinced his wife to use her recently dead father's name on a credit card application. Apparently, it takes six months for a dead person's social security number to fizzle out with the credit card folks and it's not unheard of for a dead man to buy a new pair of shoes or a nice, big Sony Trinitron to catch up on the news of the day. But things catch up with you, and when Wayne's wife in Minnesota said, "It's serious this time," I see Wayne hanging up the phone without saying goodbye. He buys a pint of Jack Daniel's, gets a handful of codeine pills, and checks out; popping the codeine slowly over the Jack because he wrote three letters before he was done - one to his wife, one to his mother, and one to Jules. I never asked Jules about the letters and for a long while I thought it was because they were too personal, but now, I understand it must have been because of the way Jules told me of his brother's death. Of all the voices available for Jules to express his grief: the stricken, the sad, the shocked, the confused, the embittered; he chose, perhaps as some bizarre effort toward self-preservation, a combination of them all - the deadpan. He told jokes about the old Mexican maid who found the body.

He would say, "I got to get going, Simmons. I got a meeting with Jack Daniel's at two."

They weren't funny, but I laughed and he'd start talking about his own life again. The whole, I need a wife whine. The next time I heard from him was in two weeks and
he’d bought the gun.

The day after Jules called explaining the car jacking, I went into work and there was this new guy named James on the line. I didn’t know if that was his last name or his first. I didn’t stick around long enough to find out. What I know is he was short and ugly with bad breath. His body leaned to one side as if one of his legs was shorter than the other. He didn’t have the body for the work we did, so I knew someone, an uncle or cousin had got him in. That didn’t bother me so much as the fact that this guy came up to me at lunch the very first day he was there and asked me if I needed this or that; he was fucking dealing on the line. Some of the others liked this idea - they got pumped on some cheap crank and started feeling those boxes, started loving moving those crates in that changing Montana air. Most of the other guys didn’t give a shit one way or the other. Me, I knew someone had got James in the door and most likely this someone knew James would bring junk onto the line. It became a matter respect. I knew they didn’t care. We were just like laboratory rats - like maybe bring in a little special juice to keep the rats moving or to dull their pain. I didn’t say anything. I didn’t make a scene. I only thought, fuck who they think I am - I’m not that, and walked out; punched my card at 12:37 p.m. and walked home.

When I got home my wife, Maryann, was watching cartoons, talking on the phone, and painting her toenails. She worked nights, and she thought this gave her the right to lay around all day eating potato chips and bullshitting on the phone. She raised her left eyebrow at me and continued with what she was doing. The eyebrow was a sign, it said: You are not usually home at this hour and I note this. You mostly likely have forgotten something, but I am sure I do not know where it is. Simply look for it - remember the last time you saw it - find it, then go back to work before your lunch break is over. The toenails on her left foot were a fluorescent yellow color. She was about to begin on her right when she saw that I was still standing there. She hung up quickly and began to blow on her toes.

“What’s up, honey?” she asked.
I had no real plan until that moment when I said, “I’m going to LA. for awhile to visit Jules. You know with the gun and everything. I’m worried. I haven’t seen him for awhile.”

Again, I could see her thinking: Do you have enough time at work or have you quit another job, but she just continued to blow on her toes.

I said, “What the fuck kind of color is that. It reminds me of when I would get into my dad’s paints, mixing orange with green, and he would kick my ass.”

It’s true, my dad was a painter, a house painter, and I got into his paints, but he never hit me. In fact, he encouraged it and cleared a section of the interior garage wall that was mine. I would paint and repaint that little cube of wall every other week and my dad would just nod and say, maybe we have an artist here.

Maryann droned, “What about the job, Simmons?” But it was not a question. She knew I’d quit another job, so she just picked up her other foot and began to paint those nails.

“Fuck you,” I said. “Fuck you and your understanding.”

I picked up the phone and dialed my brother, who lived in Colorado. He’s a surgeon and in those days I would call him when I needed money. We would bullshit for a few moments before he would eventually ask how I was doing and I would say fine, just fine. There would be a pause and he’d say, “Well, why don’t I send you a little bit to help you out.”

My brother was an ass about this money because he would judge where it went, but he was a little bit less than an ass than my other brother who was a stockbroker in New York, and who I’d already hit up for money earlier that year before I landed the job at Macy’s Meats. My rich brothers were an old story between Maryann and me, and a deep part of me felt it was the only reason she was still with me.

The first night I met her I told her over the the third drink, drunk, “I got lineage. I got two brothers - a stockbroker and a surgeon. Me, I just didn’t get any breaks. But, I’m
happy with my work. I’m happy with work where I can use my hands.”

I remember she smiled and dropped her straw down into her drink and said, “Surgeons use their hands.”

When I got off the phone she was in the bathroom. The shower was going, but I knew she could hear me, so I told her Darren was sending me money, that I told him we were considering a move to LA to liven up our prospects. I was going to go ahead and check things out and hopefully land something. I was taking my old portfolio along. Darren was thrilled. (For years, my brother had tried to convince me to send my work out. Once, I drew pictures on the side and Darren always thought a career in graphic art was my ticket to a different life.) I told all this to Maryann through the door of our bathroom, but she didn’t respond. She came out of the bathroom wrapped in a towel. I looked at her toes.

She laughed and said, “Quick dry.” I pulled the towel away from her; at once her body sudden and beautiful before my eyes.

“How much?” she said.

“How much what?” I said, though I knew exactly what she was asking.

“How much?” she repeated.

“A thousand,” I said, and I saw a thin smile start on her lips before she turned and walked to our bedroom. I followed, slipping off my big work shoes. When I reached her she whispered in my ear, “You know you really are a thief and a liar and a roach for leaving your job.”

I looked at her eyes, stopped, amazed that I could feel anything for her, but she laughed, so I laughed and held up my hands, a continuation of the game we always played after the loans. If it had been my other brother, Darby, the stockbroker, I’d have been wearing the one pair of thin, black business socks that I owned.

Maryann said beneath me, “Doctor, what could be wrong with us.” I didn’t answer.
The next morning I called Jules and told him I was coming out to see him. He paused taking the news in. For a moment, I thought I would have to tell him the same lie I told my brother, until he said, “Great, you’re due for a vacation.”

“Exactly,” I said. “We can catch up. Talk.”

Jules laughed, “Yea sure, talk. Just book your flight and get out here. It’ll be good to see you.”

I’d never been to L.A. before and was taken with the way the white light lightened everything. It spread evenly over the street side bum to the plastic lady behind the wheel of a Rolls. Jules saw none of these things and talked only of his work at the hospital. Back then, I knew nothing of grief and could make little sense of the story he told, as we drove from the airport to his apartment, about a man who came into the ER one night with a six-inch carving knife jammed into the base of his neck. Jules said there was no blood, just a thick inch of swelling bubbling out from where the knife penetrated the skin. Jules had on a pair of wraparound shades so I couldn’t see his eyes, but every once in awhile he would turn to me and talk from the corner of his mouth exposing his small teeth and thick gums. He said only the special whacked out cases could bypass the paperwork, so the guy with the knife in his neck still had to sign a release form before they could touch him. The guy did so gingerly and, finally, Jules was able to get him to a curtained off area, but when Jules angled the blade up, preparing to take it out, the man screamed, his eyes fluttering with the pain. They had to numb it. Jules lay the guy on his side and held an ice pack around the wound for about ten minutes, the whole time the guy begging for drugs for the pain. Right before he took the knife out the guy began pounding the table, screaming, “C’mon Doc, get this fucking thing out.”

Jules said, “I’m no doctor,” and yanked the knife crisply out of the man. Two separate streams of blood sprayed out perfectly onto the curtain, missing Jules completely, leaving his face clean. The guy immediately passed out and Jules covered the wound after disinfecting it. I was still waiting for the point, thinking maybe it was the fact he had stayed clear of the blood when Jules said low, almost to himself.
“At those moments, when the floor is in chaos - the other nurses running to the doctors, and patients curled up in the corners vomiting bad crank while some poor fucker is laid out in front of me waiting for something that I can do - I don’t know, I feel something,” he held two fingers about an inch apart, “something of what I think should be feeling.”

And then he laughed and took a corner where the LA. light angled into the car, occupying it like a third passenger and nearly blinding us. Before I could say a word, Jules pulled up to the curb and said, “We’re home.”

I looked around, my head dizzy with the light and Jules’s words. Jules was already out of the car walking to his front door.

From the moment I walked into Jules’s place I wanted to see the gun, but there were a lot of things I wanted to do like talk to Jules about his brother, but Jules’s work schedule threw everything off. He worked nights and we settled into a routine for the first week I was there. I’d told him I was staying for two weeks, but I had no real plans. I thought if at the end of those two weeks nothing had happened between me and Jules that I would let him take me to the airport where I would only pretend to leave and instead, turn around and with my brother’s money walk back into the brilliant light of LA. What exactly I thought would happen between us, I didn’t know. All I knew was I trusted the fact that at one point in our lives Jules and I knew and loved each other like brothers and if a little bit of that surfaced in my two weeks there I would return to Campion somehow different, stronger, and perhaps set on some purpose. But in the first week, nothing happened. In the morning he slept late, usually getting up around two, and we would do something in the afternoon. Mostly, we’d drive down to the beach or get something to eat. He couldn’t drink if got too close to his shift. We talked about his work and his desire for a wife. I listened a lot, nodding often, thinking this is a man whose brother just committed suicide and maybe that gives him the right to talk around things for a bit.

Late one evening while Jules was at work, I finally tired of his 500 cable channels and walked to a corner bar called, Murph’s. Inside, it was fake Irish with exposed brick walls
and a gleaming brass railing running along the top and bottom of the Mahogany bar that took up the center of the room. It was a Monday night and the place was filled mostly with working guys; probably contractors, electricians; a few women sat among them and a group of college kids had one of the few tables in the far corner. A game was on TV and I settled into a few drafts. I remember I was telling the bartender I was from the Northwest when the two women walked in. He gave them a nod before turning back to me with a big smile, saying, “Oh yea, I have a brother up there. I hear they don’t care for Californians.”

“Not much,” I said to the bartenders back as he walked to the far end of the bar where one of the two women who had just come in waited. She had blonde hair done up the way an older woman does her hair and wore an expensive black dress with pearls. She spoke over her shoulder to the woman, she’d come with, obviously her daughter. The young girl wore a leather skirt and a white frilly blouse. The mother gave the bartender a bill and took a pitcher of beer to their table.

Neither of them looked around. The young girl seemed a little sad, maybe because she was in a bar with her mother. The older woman was animated, doing most of the talking. I turned back to the bartender, but there was a change between my third and fourth draft. I offered some more small talk. He let out a huff of a laugh. This bar was one of those places where the bartender notes how much you’re drinking versus the time of day and the company you’ve brought. He was having an opinion about it. Who needed it? I’d finish my draft and head home to Jules’s place. I wasn’t feeling so hot. Nothing was happening. I tipped the bartender and started towards the door, but a second before I reached it, I decided what the hell, and walked up to the women’s table and introduced myself.

The girl reached for a cigarette, not even looking at me, but the mother smiled and asked where I was from.

“Is it that obvious?” I said.

The girl blew some smoke in my direction, nodding her head yes. The mother shrugged. I was still standing there looming, feeling stupid, so I said, “How bout another
round?”

The mother waved me away, “We have plenty,” she said, “but sit down.”

I sat. “I’m Simmons,” I said, “Simmons Clark.”

The girl looked at me for the first time and said, “That’s good. That’s very good.”

The mother frowned, “Don’t pay any attention to her. I’m Anastasia.”

I smiled and turned to the girl who finally said, “Brenda, pleasure,” offering a hand.

Anastasia asked me what I did and I told her I was between things, visiting a friend of mine, a Dr. Jules. I said I was exploring opportunities. I might have mentioned software or computers.

That got the girl’s attention and I asked, “What do you two do?”

“We’re hookers,” the girl said, looking me dead in the eye for a full second before her mother broke things with a wide smile and said, “We’re actresses. Actually, she’s an actress. I’m retired.”

“Really?” I said, feigning surprise. For some reason, I was sure she was lying, but not because I thought the girl told the truth. I just assumed the woman was a bored surgeon’s wife corrupting her daughter with a night at the local bar. “What did you do?” I asked.

The girl broke in again, “Mother was Miss U.S.A. 1962. She met J.F.K. She did commercials and still gets royalties for a season of Bonanzas.”

“Whoa,” I said, genuinely surprised.

However, the older woman was shaking her head, “But we have higher hopes for Brenda.”

“Daytime TV,” the girl said flatly, who I noticed couldn’t be more than eighteen.

“The soaps?” I asked still excited.

“No,” the mother said sounding a little bored, “TV talk. Maybe cable. We’re talking to the people who set up that new girl. What’s her name? The one who used to be fat.”
“Rickie Lake,” the girl said flatly.
I took a sip of my drink and the bartender called Anastasia, saying someone was on the line.
“Shit,” the woman said getting up, “I should carry my beeper.” Then she turned to her daughter and said, “This could be it.”
We both watched Anastasia go to the phone and begin a rapid fire conversation.
“Are you old enough to drink?” I asked the girl.
“I hope so,” she said, “What are you really doing here?” she asked.
“I’m lying I guess.” I said.

“No,” the girl said. “We’re lying and you’re telling the truth.”
I let that go and said, “I’m out here visiting a friend. He’s a nurse though, not a doctor - over at Central. My wife and I don’t get along anymore. We’ll divorce. I’ll have to find someone else.”

Anastasia was back at our table before Brenda could respond. Her face was different, more serious. It took me a few seconds to realize it was not about me but the phone call. She started putting things into her purse. The young girl stretched her arms and arched her back, burping suddenly, then laughing.

“Excuse me.”
“It was really nice meeting you, Mr. Clark,” the mother said. “If I’m ever in,” she paused.

I said, “Campion, Montana.”
Without missing a beat she added, “Really, there must be some interesting talk show material up there.”

“I’ll never tell,” I said, throwing up my hands. The girl got up, Anastasia said goodbye and they walked out the door.

I felt strangely satisfied as if something had finally happened. I took their empty pitcher back to the bar and left another five dollar tip.
The bartender was wiping at something beneath the bar. “Thanks,” I offered. He didn’t look up and began to half-sing, “There she is, Miss America.” I didn’t move from the bar, my hand tight around the brass rail. He straightened, smiling, and said, “The funny thing is, it’s all true - 1962. J.F.K. Bonanza. The woman is a true life American hero.”

“How about the commercials,” I said, playing along. He winked, “Yea sure, the commercials.” He picked up a rag and continued his work, whistling.

I walked the three blocks back to Jules’s place in high spirits. The fall night was purple. The sky hung low and tight off the last of the buildings near the horizon. A group of Latinos passed me laughing. The street was full of restored classic cars, interrupted by the occasional biker - his hair in the wind, blonde. It suddenly felt like a vacation.

The next day Jules was up when I got up. He told me he was taking the next few days off so we could do some stuff. He was already drinking a Bloody Mary. I picked up a donut.

“I met Miss America last night,” I said.

“Murph’s. 1960. J.F.K. Bonanza,” he said in his perfect deadpan that was beginning to bother me.

“You got it,” I said.

“Not yet,” he answered.

And I thought we were going to have a good day. The previous night had started things rolling and, finally, Jules and I would have some time together. But it didn’t happen. What happened was Jules started talking about work. He told me he’d become obsessed - that after his shift he’d eat and stay up late into the afternoon writing reports on how to improve E.R. operations. That word - E.R. operations - dominated the morning.

Jules had become one of those guys who anywhere and at anytime may start talking about his work. Earlier that week we had caught a matinee before Jules’s shift and while we were munching on some popcorn, watching the trailers, Jules leaned over to me and said, “Last night we had a guy come in about 35, nicely dressed, who said he’d swallowed a whole bag full of his kid’s marbles. Wong and I look at the guy and I think - good luck there’s nothing we can do for you here, just go home and start shitting marbles; when he tells us he topped it off with a bottle of Tylenol. I figure this guy is conning us, but Wong is a sucker and takes the guy back and does his pulse, pressure, and temperature and comes back with a Blue saying the guy is dying on the table in the back. But we don’t know what to do because if we give him a stomach pump and he really has swallowed a bag full of marbles, he’s dead when one of them catch his esophagus, in the very least they’ll tear up his pipes on the way out. Wong is for bringing in a surgeon and I tell her, go ahead find someone who’ll take the chances of getting paid without getting sued by cutting open some nut who swallows a bag full of marbles and then tops it off with some Tylenol. When I said the words I realized how ridiculous it sounded, so we just hooked the guy up to an IV and begin the procedure - stomach pump - no questions. If he dies we never heard of the marbles. But shit if when we start, there doesn’t fly up out of this guy a marble about the size a pea, maybe a little bigger. They all just come right out, no problem. Afterwards, we wheeled the guy to post and I picked up one of the marbles and asked Wong if she ever saw anything like that. But she thinks I’m talking about the guy swallowing the marbles and just shakes her head, but I was talking about the size of the marbles. When we were kids they were at least twice the size of what he’d swallowed.” By the time he finished the story, the movie had started and people were telling us to quiet down.

That morning, I asked him why he just didn’t ask one of the women at work for a
date, maybe forget about those E.R. reports for awhile, but he just grimaced and said they were only interested in the doctors. He said he was thinking about his Masters and maybe getting into the administrative end of his field. “Six figures, easy,” he said. And I’m ashamed to admit it, but the first thing I thought of was how in the future I could hit Jules up for a few bucks.

After the fourth Bloody Mary and when Jules was all talked out about his work, and before he could ask me about my work, I asked him about the gun. He thought I wanted see it and went to his bedroom and in few seconds came back holding a little nickel plated .22.

It looked like toy. I started to laugh. “What the fuck is that,” I said.

He held the gun, muzzle to the ground and looked at me strange as if he were hurt by my laughter. “What do you mean,” he said. “It’s my gun. I keep it next to my bed.”

“Is it loaded?” I asked.

“Jesus, no,” Jules answered. “Here are the bullets.” He held up a small clip, which he quickly loaded into the gun, turned, and took dead aim at the toaster.

“Pow, sucker,” he said. “You picked the wrong house this time.” He then quickly reversed his movements until he stood again innocently before me, the gun in his left hand and the bullet clip in his right. I wasn’t laughing anymore.

He said, “I wouldn’t keep it loaded. But you keep the bullets close.”

“Yea,” I said. I’d never been much of a gun man so I didn’t have any small talk to offer about caliber or size and I didn’t want Jules to start talking about the E.R. and The Exploding Bullet, so I turned to his other favorite - women, and asked about a doctor named Elizabeth who Jules had mentioned a few times in the past. She was from Kansas, where her parents were farmers.

He put the gun down on the kitchen table at the mention of her name and absently began to spin the big spoon sticking out of our pitcher of morning Bloody Marys.

“She married some guy in administration,” he began. “It was a small affair. I
didn't stay long. Mostly doctors. They can be a drag.”

The air was out of the morning suddenly. Because I couldn’t imagine things getting any more depressing I asked about his brother.

“How’s Wayne’s wife. I mean it sucks.” It’s the first time I mentioned his brother since I’d been there.

“Stupid fucker,” Jules said picking up the pitcher of Bloody Marys and walking out of the kitchen. “Let’s sit on the balcony awhile and then head downtown. I know a place we can get a good lunch.”

“Sure,” I said a bit too loudly, “as long as they serve Bloody Marys. I think this is going be a Bloody Mary kinda day.”

Jules laughed from the balcony and called in, “Hey, bring that little baby out here. I want to show you something.”

I looked at the .22 laying there, the clip beside it, and had an instant revelation that the gun was mine. Though Jules bought and owned it, I felt by some right it was mine. It was a strange feeling, but one I’ve had before like when I saw my first wife’s wedding ring in the display case at the jewelers or when I saw my father’s paints lined neatly along the chipped brick back wall of our garage. I picked the gun up, loaded it and walked out to the balcony where Jules sat looking like a movie producer. He had on his wraparound shades and was smoking a cigar. His bath robe was open to below his belly button and I could see the ridge of his pubic hair.

“Hey,” he said, “let me see that thing.”

I gave him the gun and sat down.

“Simmons you have to keep this safety on,” he said, sitting up and gathering his robe closer to his body. I didn’t say anything. I knew he was going start in on the story about the car jacking.

“I was sitting right here when I saw those punks drive up. I think of my rights if I had had the gun.” He stopped talking and leveled the gun down at the street.
“What the fuck Jules,” I said, “are you Rambo all of sudden? It wasn’t your car.”

“Shit,” he said. “That’s the problem with people, you start talking about solutions and they want to talk about the next problem. Yea, I’m sure shooting those kids would have gotten me in trouble. I’m not sure what kind - maybe my conscience would have bothered me, maybe the law would have bothered me, but I do know one problem would have been solved and that’s Miller’s.”

I said, “Jules, I didn’t say that.” But he cut me off and went on, gesturing in the direction of the apartment next door.

“My neighbor would still have a car. I mean what if he has an emergency. In fact, his wife is pregnant. What if on the night his car got stolen his wife had gone into labor. It’s his first child. They’ve taken all the birthing courses together. He gets her situated on the couch. Tells her to breathe, breathe, breathe and he goes out to get the car. Now, I mean, it’s bad enough that he should even have to worry about his safety at a time like that, but what happens when he finds out his car is gone. He can’t tell his wife. How’s that news going to affect her breathing. It’s a brand new car. He makes up an excuse. A flat. He calls a cab. Breathe, breathe, breathe. The cab is late. His wife gets nervous. Her sister just lost a baby or maybe her mother had two miscarriages. I don’t know, but she gets scared on something. The cab is still not there. They don’t call me, they don’t know me. They don’t know their neighbors. Breathe, breathe, breathe. She starts to deliver the baby right there on their sofa in their living room, the TV still on, fucking Melrose Place or something in the background. She starts howling. He’s got tears in the corner of his eyes because his wife is digging her nails into his hand, and all this poor sap can say is breathe, breathe, breathe. The baby starts coming, the baby starts coming and then.... complications.”

I was on the edge of my seat. “Jesus, Jules what are you talking about. These fucking stories, they don’t do any good.” I stood up and looked down into the street.

“My point, my friend,” Jules said, still holding the gun, “Is that a problem always offers its own solution. The solution is always part of the problem. All it takes, you
know, is a little guts."

I looked sharply back at him.

Jules said, "I mean I’m not saying you’re anything. If anything, I’m saying I’m something."

I still hadn’t moved and he could feel it. Jules stopped, "Oh, what difference does it make."

“What?” I asked.

Jules took off the shades and put down the gun. He knew he had gone too far.

“Nothing, nothing,” he said.

I sat back down and sipped at my drink. We were quiet. What else was there to say? After awhile I said, "Well you got the gun now."

Jules nodded and said, "Yea, I got the gun now."

He looked at me and laughed and then I was laughing, neither of us sure at what.

Jules went in to fix another pitcher of Bloody Marys and, half into our cups, we finally talked a little bit about his brother, Wayne.

Wayne was a man who always thought the best thing in life would be the next thing. I met him a few times. He was fun to be around, but afterwards I always wondered how he got by day to day - just getting up and going to work or hanging his clothes on the line or going to the bank. Of course, the eventual truth was he could do hardly any of these pedestrian things and found himself out of options one night in Texas or at least that was how Jules settled it in his mind.

Maybe because he wasn’t my brother, I found myself considering a certain long ago labor day when the three us - Jules, his brother, and I sat up all night and talked. It was at least fifteen years ago. Wayne had already dropped out of high school and moved to Minnesota where he was working as a carpenter’s apprentice. He was newly married and they were considering a new house and perhaps a baby. Jules and I were fresh out of high school and were riding around the country on motorcycles. We were camping mostly
and hadn’t seen a shower in days when we drove up to Wayne’s place. It was late, but we
knew Wayne was having a party and headed around back where we found Wayne and his
wife Melody. The other guests had left. Melody was on his lap, facing him, kissing him.
There was faint bit of amber light coming from the barbecue pit, but it showed enough of
the young couple for us to get the idea that perhaps morning would be a better time for a
surprise visit. But we were young and had driven a long while, so Jules said loudly,
“Well look at my little brother.” The young lovers jumped apart.

Jules didn’t miss a beat, “Hi,” he said. “I think you know Simmons. We’ve just
driven over five hundred miles and we’re crusty, tired, and thirsty.”

Wayne whooped and jumped up to bear hug his brother, while Melody made a
quick get away into the house. It was clear night and Wayne’s small back yard was
cluttered with lawn furniture, spent beer cans, and plastic plates. Melody’s perfume
lingered in the air. “Looks like you have something started here little brother,” Jules said,
laughing.

Wayne just smiled goofy and didn’t say a word. Jules talked almost nonstop. His
head full of everything we had seen in the past few weeks and I could see he was weighing
it somehow against what Wayne had right there in that small backyard. But Wayne was
hearing something different because when Jules asked about his wife he looked off to the
side and said quick, “Melody, yea, she’s great,” but then went on to talk about the house
he was interested in buying. He was sure they could improve on it for two years and then
buy up if he could just convince his boss to take on more work. The problem with the
man, he said, the man who was teaching him everything he knew, was lack of balls,
ambition. The two brothers sat across from one another, measuring each other, nodding,
smiling; each approved and desired a bit of what the other man had. It’s fact that
everything Wayne talked about that night he eventually did, or tried to do - some of it just
turned out better than other parts. Finally, I got up and stretched and the party broke up.
The next day we were back on the road.

I’m sure Jules remembered the night, but I didn’t say anything about it. Jules
talked about how his brother never thought things through.

As we finished the second pitcher of Bloody Marys, Jules stood, gathering his robe about him and said, “Let’s get out of here. I’ll get dressed.”

And somehow, with those words I realized I was going to leave my second wife. But it was not this truth that startled me. What startled me was that I was not in L.A. to figure out the state of my marriage, nor even really to see my friend. I realized what brought me to L.A. as we were leaving, as my friend paused by the front door and, for a moment, looked at himself in a mirror hung there above a small table. Absently, he took the gun, which I guess he had stuck in the front of his jeans while dressing, and placed it on the table. He looked at me then, again, maybe checking something. I nodded, picked up the gun and said, “Why don’t we take this along. You never know.”

Jules eyes were full of either approval or fear, maybe both. I don’t know. “O.K., he said, “but watch it. The safety is on, but it’s loaded.”

I put the gun in my pocket and we walked out the door.

Outside, the sunlight plus the morning pitcher of Bloody Marys made me feel punch drunk. I was leaning with one hand on the hood of Jules’s small, white Subaru sedan waiting for him to get in the driver’s side and open my door.

“Ah fuck,” Jules said to me across the roof of the car, “that place I was thinking of for lunch is closed. It burnt down last month when.....”

“No problem.” I said quickly, not wanting to hear another story, “We can just drive around. Whatever. Pick up a six pack and come back here. It doesn’t matter to me. Let’s just get in the car.”

Jules disappeared into the car. When I got in he was still holding the keys in his hand.

“I’m sorry Simmons if this hasn’t been the best of vacations. You know, I don’t do much normally but work.”

“Jules, Jesus, lighten up. It’s a vacation. We don’t have to do anything. Let’s just
Jules started the car and soon we were on Sunset Boulevard. An African man with a small, tight Afro had outlined a two by four foot space of the sidewalk with bottles of ointments and incense he was selling. I’d stuck the gun down the front of my jeans. The small cube shaped handle felt like a baby’s hand against my belly.

We passed a strip club, reminding me of the night, nearly fifteen years ago before Jules went off to college, leaving the east for good. I’d just met Cathy, a woman who I would love for a year before she left me and I met my first wife. I had decided to get a job and stay put. I knew Jules thought it was the wrong thing for me to do and that last night he felt the need to tell me so. We went to a strip club on the edge of town that I’d never seen before. Jules peppered me with questions as women stood above us smiling and dropping their clothes. - What’s next? How’s Cathy? Where do you see yourself in ten, fifteen years? - I knew what he was telling me and I resented it. I told him, everything I wanted was in that town. He looked up at the woman above us and then back at me with raised eyebrows as if to say, here? He left the next morning, as I would, close to ten years later after my marriage had fallen apart, but I never forget that night and what he tried to tell me.

Everything was becoming too much. I decided I would be happy with Murph’s, maybe seeing those women again, but Jules was taking turns quick until we reached the freeway.

I asked him, “Jules, do you remember what we did the night before you left the east?”

He thought for a moment, but I knew he remembered. “Yea, little Mo’s right off of I-95. Why do you want to go strip club?”

“No,” I said. “I was just thinking of Cathy.”

“Cathy?” he said.

“You remember Cathy?”

“No, describe her?” he said.
“Small, funny, red hair.”

“Small, funny, red hair,” he repeated in perfect deadpan.

I ignored the insult, returning it, “And you went off to college...and here you are.”

We hit a line of traffic. He turned to me and said, “And here I am.”

I turned away. About fifty yards ahead of us an old man, wearing what looked to be bath towels or long strips of brightly colored rags loosely draped around his body, was standing in the grass median between the two lines of opposing traffic. A pink left shoulder peeked from between his rags. You could see his calves. He wore sandals with socks. The old man was hitching a ride, alternating his efforts between the speeding west lane and the dead-stalled east.

We both laughed at the man. “Look at that fucker,” Jules said, “and I thought I was in bad shape.” As we rolled up along side the man, I knew what Jules was going to do, but I was still surprised when he did it.

“Where you headed?” he asked the man.

The man didn’t bother answering but just reached for the back door which Jules leaned back and opened for him. The man brought in a smell and I saw it was sheets he had twisted about his body. Among the sheets, a small, green bag somehow attached itself to his body. He sat in the backseat quiet looking like he could nod off when Jules began asking questions. -Where are you from? What’s it like on the road?- The old man quickly realized the price for the ride was entertainment, a story or two. He told of his travels.

It turned out he was an original Californian, that he fought in W.W. II and used his G.I money to got a degree in Geology from Oregon State. He opened the green sack and took out two stones exactly alike in color and size.

“See these?” the man asked. Jules and I shrugged.

He turned to me. “Hold out your hands there.” I did and he gave me the stones, one was as light as a corn flake, the other turned my wrist downward with its weight.

“Whoa,” I said. Jules didn’t believe it. The traffic had cleared a bit and we were
moving at a good pace, so I had to take the wheel when I gave Jules the stones.

He didn’t say anything and gave the stones back to the old man.

“What are those?” I asked the old man.

Instead of answering, the old man explained why he was hitching both sides of the road, “I’ve found I can go either way on any given day. I can go to the desert and hunt rocks or towards town to get drunk.”


I shrugged why not. The man settled back into his seat as the last remnants of LA. dropped away while the great desert that surrounds it stretched out before us, shiny and yellow. We drove for about five minutes in silence until the man said, “Here’s good.”

Jules took the first exit off the freeway, finding a small side road that drove deep down into the desert.

“Here’s good,” the man said again.

“We’re going to join you, pops,” Jules said.

“Sure,” the man said, “just rocks, though. I mean if you’re thirsty - maybe town?”

We drove farther in. “Looks good here. Real good,” the old man said.

Jules stopped the car, got out and popped the trunk. The old man followed.

Before I got out of the car, I took the gun out of my pants and put it in the glove compartment. I sat there for a second, hearing the old man and Jules talking in low tones in the back of the car. I only saw the flat back of the trunk in the rear view mirror. They were talking about the tools Jules had: A hammer, spade and shovel.

“Sure, bring them along,” the old man said over his shoulder as he started to walk off.

“Let’s go.” Jules yelled to me. “Simmons. Let’s go.”

The old man was almost thirty yards away from us. He didn’t slow nor look back. I took the gun from the glove compartment, put it back into the front of my jeans and got out of the car. Jules handed me the spade. He took up the hammer and the shovel.
Jules looked at me and said in that same deadpan, “I’ve always enjoyed rocks. Maybe we can find some of those trick ones.”

Jules called out to the old man who had broken into a quick trot about a hundred yards away from us. The old man slowed, looked back, walked on.

“Let’s go,” Jules said, starting to run, before losing the grip of the shovel.

I didn’t move. The old man started to run again. His brightly colored sheets were but a speck, then black, then gone into the hazy, gray-white heat of the desert. Jules was about twenty yards in front of the car, picking up the shovel.

“Simmons, let’s go,” he said again, but when he saw I was not going to move, he threw down the shovel in disgust, coming back towards me holding only the hammer. I took the gun from my jeans. He dropped the hammer. I turned towards the car and fired five shots in the air before leaving the last one in the tire.

“Jesus, fuck. What are you doing Simmons,” he said.

I was laughing. “I just wanted to see if this thing worked.”

Jules came and took the gun from my hand and said, “It works. It works.”

“You got a spare, don’t you?” I said.

Jules didn’t say anything, but placed the emptied gun to his temple and clicked the trigger. He took the gun from his head and handed the gun to me.

“Be a man,” I said, placing the barrel of the gun in my mouth and clicking down hard one, two, three times.

Jules went to the trunk, bringing back the spare and jack. I gathered the shovel, spade, and hammer, and put them away, putting the gun there also. Without any words, we changed the tire. Afterwards, we slumped down into the shade of the car, hot and sweaty from the work. Neither of us mentioned the old man.