

The Way of Grace
By
Mark Petterson

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Chairperson Professor Laura Moriarty

Professor Tom Lorenz

Dr. Michael Valk

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The Thesis Committee for Mark Petterson
certifies that this is the approved version of the following thesis:

The Way of Grace

Chairperson Professor Laura Moriarty

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“The nuns taught us there were two ways in the world. The way of nature and the way of grace. Grace doesn’t try to please itself. Accepts being slighted, forgotten, disliked. Accepts insults and injuries. ... Nature only wants to please itself. Get others to please it over them. To have its own way. ... The nuns taught us that no one who loves the way of grace ever comes to a bad end”

*~ Terrence Malick, *The Tree of Life**

Father's Day

So I didn't think it was going to be that big of a deal. I was relaxing at the dog track, had a couple of beers, lost track of time and by then I had spent all my cash. Larry was there, my neighbor who I'm thinking is a decent guy because he was holding out a wad of bills and saying, "Dennis, it's no problem." When he spoke, a little cloud of smoke burned my eyes from the Dominican he had dangling from his lip, and all I could see were the yellows and purples on his Hawaiian shirt.

He went on to explain how he doesn't mind lending four hundred dollars because hey, it's been rough since I lost my job and Donna made me move out and a guy deserves to relax once in a while. "Don't worry about paying it back for now," he said, and went to get another martini, a little uncertainly. I thought for a minute that maybe it was a bad idea, but I was drinking straight whiskey, so I didn't think for long. I took the money and immediately lost it all on number seven, Bob Barker's Baby, who slipped in a puddle and whined while the other dogs ran right over him.

Larry was my neighbor when I lived on Powderbrook Lane with Donna and our son Charlie, before I moved into these cheap apartments called the Redwoods, across town. I visited Charlie on the weekends, so I saw Larry regularly. I'd gotten good at dealing with cashflow issues since I got the pink slip from Grummel and Hyde Engineering, and I'd be back on my feet any day now. I figured I could pay him back with the next unemployment check. I just had to be patient. Wait for the right job to come up. Also, maybe Larry would forget about it, amid all the martinis.

On Saturday I sped through a few red lights to pick up Charlie on time. I took him to Pancake City, the diner with all-you-can-eat pancakes. We played arcade games while we waited for pancakes.

"How are things?" I said.

"Fine," said Charlie, distracted with Donkey Kong.

"Oh? You two have everything under control? Do you mow the lawn every week? Weed the driveway? How's the Audi? Still got that oil leak?"

"Nope. Larry fixed it."

"Oh," I said. "I think our pancakes are almost here."

"Sure, Dad. Just let me die."

I had hoped Charlie would take over after Donna kicked me out. The whole situation made me uncomfortable. I wondered if I should do something about it.

Over cold pancakes and stringy syrup, I asked Charlie about school. He pulled his Cubs hat down and said that he and Larry's kid, Nick, were thinking of starting a computer club. They rode bikes together and talked about it, he said. So at least he was getting good use out of his brand-new Trek 12-speed, which I bought with my Christmas

bonus last year from Grummel and Hyde. A beautiful bike—red, with flames running down the main strut. Speedometer, disc brakes, shock absorbers on both wheels. Just stunning. I had stayed up half the night on Christmas Eve putting it together, and Charlie was thrilled.

After spending the afternoon with Charlie, I didn't do much of anything. I may have cleaned my apartment Monday. I posted a few job applications. Wal-Mart called, offering me an interview for a \$10-an-hour stocking job. Maybe later, I thought. It was too soon to stoop that low. I made up some excuse and hung up. I was waiting for the big-time. I'd snagged gainful employment once – no reason that I couldn't find a mid-level management gig again. It'd go a long way towards showing Donna that I wasn't a deadbeat, I thought.

Larry called later that day and left a message asking for the money back. "Look, we were both a little blasted, but that's not shit-solid, as far as excuses go. Let's just get on with it," he said. So he hadn't forgotten. But I of course didn't have the money, so I ignored him.

Donna didn't lock the backyard shed where we kept the lawnmower, so I mowed their yard on Friday afternoon when I knew she was gone and Charlie, at school. Larry looked at me funny when he and Nick drove up, but he didn't come out to talk. He was wearing a plaid golfing outfit, which seemed to blend in with the neatly trimmed rose hedges that were all over the neighborhood. I shrugged and drank some water from the garden hose.

At home I had a message from Charlie on the answering machine.

"Dad. Nick stole my bike. You've got to do something."

Donna answered when I called back.

“I want to talk to Charlie.”

“Hold on.”

Charlie came on. “Dad?”

“Yeah, it’s me. Just got your message.”

“I left the garage open for like ten minutes while I went inside to turn off the TV.

What am I going to do, Dad?”

I bit a scab on my thumb. “What happened?” I said.

“I came home, and he was riding my bike into their garage,” he said.

That little bastard.

“I’ll fix it. I’ll fix everything,” I said.

That night I watched five or six episodes of a TV show about these guys in Alaska who risk their lives to catch crabs. They spend the entire autumn breaking ice, setting traps, and bailing water from constant storms. A deckhand hit his head on the mast in one episode and had to be helicoptered to the nearest island, or else he would have died. It fascinated me, the way that the fishermen justified the danger. “It’s just our lifestyle,” one said, into the camera over the sound of wind whipping across the deck.

The phone rang a few times, but I had drunk a few Red Dogs and didn’t feel like talking to anyone. I fell asleep on the couch, dreaming that I was a crab-boat captain, steaming home every winter to Charlie and Donna, a boat full of crab, looking weathered and heroic. They worried about me, Donna told me in the dream, and then she morphed into a video camera. “It’s just my lifestyle,” I think I said.

That night Larry left a message on my machine, which I listened to the next morning.

“Hey, Dennis. Look, I know that we’ve been a little out-of-touch lately, but it was good to see you last week at the track. We reconnected. So, anyway, I just wanted to say that I’m here for you. Like, really. If you ever need support or a friend, I’m your guy. But let’s be serious for a second. That \$400 I lent you, that’s not a small sum. Not something to sneeze at. And I thought that you’d just pay me as soon as the next, oh geez, *unemployment* check got there, but it’s been a week and I haven’t heard from you. I took things into my own hands. You have to learn sooner or later, Dennis. You’ll make it through, buddy. I believe in you.”

Asshat. Of course I drove to Powderbrook lane, after I swallowed some mouthwash and took a handful of crushed vitamins with tomato juice. When Larry opened the door to his house, the one with the new deck and three-car garage, I got straight to the point.

“Your kid took Charlie’s bike. I know he did. I can see it,” I said, nodding in the direction of his open garage.

“Yeah? So what?” Larry said. He ran a comb through his beard. “I figured it was worth a few hundred bucks. Maybe less, but that’s ok with me. Fair’s fair, Dennis. Sorry it had to come to this. You should have paid me back sooner.”

“You stole my kid’s *bicycle*. He’s only ten years old.”

“Nick took it, not me. I might have suggested it, but that’s not the point. And your son’s eleven.”

Right on all counts.

Larry turned and shuffled back into his house. He looked so content, there in his pajama pants and bathrobe, like he held the moral high ground.

I shuffled next door to my old house, Donna's house, and asked to see Charlie.

"Why?" said Donna. She stood in the doorway, one hand on a hip, holding a coffee mug. "You want to talk to him about his bike?"

"Maybe," I said.

"Well, mister," Donna said, "if you promise to do something about it, you'd better do something about it. He looks up to you."

Of course he looked up to me. Donna's eyes drifted past me, out to the street. She started doing that after Charlie was born, like my eyes weren't enough to look at anymore. It got worse when I lost my job and she had to start working full-time at the hospital again. She didn't mind the hours, she said, but I knew there was some unspoken contract that I had broken. Have a kid, and the happy-go-lucky days were over. Keep the Visa bill paid. It wasn't that she was old-fashioned. I just think that she didn't entirely trust me to keep my half of the deal. The worry was probably justified.

"Larry told me what happened," she said. "I don't think he was so wrong. You do owe him a lot of money. I don't care if you have to go live in a cardboard box under the bridge and pay Larry your rent money."

I grinded my teeth. "I'll have a job soon. A better one. They'll be knocking down my door soon."

"Yeah? I've given you more than enough time, I think," she said. "Grow up." Donna shifted her beautiful little feet and shut the door. I shouted for Charlie, but after a few minutes of staring at the closed door, I gave up and drove back to the Redwoods.

I felt disappointed in myself, but didn't know how I could make it up to Charlie. I went home and watched some more Alaskan crab-catcher TV. The main boat had hit a storm and the captain was running all over the place, making sure his crew was safe. At the end he slipped, twisted his knee on the railing and was being carried inside the boat by his son and another deckhand. Those guys were always getting hurt, it seemed, but at least they were doing something with their lives. I wondered whether you had to have any boating experience to get a job up there, in Alaska. Maybe when Charlie got older we could go together, I thought.

I fell asleep with tortilla chips on my lap, and had a dream where a giant Larry turned into Santa Claus and bit the chimney off my old house.

In the morning I decided to sneak into Larry's house and take back Charlie's bike. I didn't have the money to pay him back. I'd just take the bike. Then I'd put an industrial lock onto that bike and tell Charlie to keep the damn garage door closed. It was the only option I could think of. It's what a crab boat captain would do, I thought.

I bought some axle grease and paperclips from the hardware store, thinking I could maybe pick the lock on the garage door. Around midnight I drove to the old neighborhood and parked the car a few blocks away from Powderbrook Lane. I put on a ski mask and the axle grease on my neck.

I shined a flashlight on the side door of the garage and shook the doorknob. Locked. Then I took out the paperclip and straightened it, putting it in the keyhole and shaking it up and down. Nothing happened, except for that the motion-sensor floodlights above the door came on.

I ran like hell.

That night, the crab-catchers were facing a squall the size of Rhode Island, so they swung into Dutch Harbor for a few days and spent the time playing poker and drinking and trash-talking the other boats. They could make anything romantic, it seemed.

I called Larry's cell phone the next afternoon. It went straight to voicemail, and I didn't leave a message.

I went about my daily routine, going on long walks and reading at the library, until Saturday, when I saw Charlie again. We went to Steak-N-Shake. He ordered a triple burger and a big milkshake. I got some French fries.

Charlie didn't seem to want to talk much. "You gonna get my bike back?" He put his hands in the pockets of his jeans (new jeans, I noticed) and furrowed his brow.

"Of course, Charlie. Of course I'm going to get it back. You don't think I can't deal with that four-foot-nothing thief next door, do you?"

"You haven't yet."

"It's all in the timing," I lied. "Watch and learn, little man."

When I dropped him off, I stayed around to knock on Larry's door. Nick answered.

"Hey there, you little thief," I said. "Is your daddy home?"

"Fucktard," said Nick. He yelled upstairs for Larry. We glared at each other for a moment before he slunk off, probably to play some jack-off computer game.

Larry came downstairs dressed in a yellow track suit.

"Hey, the Denster! How's it hanging, my friend?" He held out his floppy, hairy hand.

“Shut up. Give the bike back,” I said.

I put my hands on my hips.

“What is it, buddy? You got some money to pay me? Some debt hanging over your conscience that you’d like to relieve? Because that would be great. *Just great.*”

“Not yet,” I said. I put my finger down. “But you’ve got to give my kid’s bike back.”

“I’ve told you, bud. You’ve got to learn.”

“Ok,” I said. “I can find some other way.” I meant to slam the door in his face, but just managed to step back before he shut the door on me. I heard him mutter something about getting a job as I walked away. I thought about telling him to mind his own business, but didn’t turn around.

I figured I could wait out that little shit Nick and just take the bike from him. Knock him down and take it.

It took longer than a week to wait him out. I had time.

I went to Powderbrook Lane a couple of times, parked the car a half-mile away. Nick was bound to come home before Charlie and Donna one day, so I sat on the porch behind some plants, and drank Red Dog, holding an old golf club, until I thought it was too dangerous to hang around longer. If Donna saw, it’d be all over for me. Her solution would be to pawn something to pay off Larry. Crab boat captains don’t pawn things. They take action.

Before too long it worked. It was Thursday, I think. Nick’s blonde curls came bouncing out of his mom’s minivan and into the house.

After about fifteen minutes he came out of the garage, clutching the handlebars of Charlie's Trek. He looked around before getting on the bike and riding off towards the cul-de-sac. I moved behind an evergreen bush at the border of our lawns, and waited for him to come back.

When he did, I leapt out from behind the evergreen with the 9-iron and let out a shallow growl. I put my hands over my head and tried to make a scary face. Nick skidded to a stop.

"What do you want, fuckface?" he said.

I didn't say anything. Nick shook his head like he felt sorry for me, then started to ride past me like I wasn't even standing there, holding a golf club and scowling.

When he got close enough, I took a swing and wonked the back tire with the club. It knocked the bike off balance and sent Nick sprawling onto the pavement.

"You're insane," said Nick, holding a bloody elbow. "Mom!"

"You little punk," I said, then looked towards the house. Nick's mom was indeed coming out the front door.

I threw the 9-iron into some bushes and grabbed the bike off the asphalt. I didn't know what else to do, so I got on the thing, knees pointing off to the sides, and rode off as fast as I could towards where I parked the car. I was scared, and didn't look behind me until I reached the car. They didn't chase me.

I threw the Trek into the backseat of the car and squealed the tires when I engaged the clutch. I drove straight for a minute, then panicked when I saw a minivan in the rear-view mirror.

I must have looked in the mirror for too long, because when I turned back around there was a tree in front of the car and I swung the wheel to avoid it. I clipped a branch with my mirror and swerved onto a side road, missing a row of mailboxes by inches. I slowed down and looked back in time to see the minivan pass. The white-haired woman driving slowed down and lowered her sunglasses to gape. She shook her head and kept going.

That lady may have thought it looked bad, but I had the bike. I'd give it back to Charlie and tell him how I'd won it back for him. He may not like me, but at least he might respect me a little bit more. I went home and turned on the TV. The Alaskan crab-catchers were huddled together in the wheelhouse, playing cards, and talking about when the storm would be over and they could get back out there again.

Gentleman's Game

The summer I was fifteen, Kurt's mom took off with a Mexican country-western singer and left Kurt with his uncle, Dave. His father had died a few years before in an accident at an oil rig in Wyoming. Dave said that he would keep Kurt and his sister, Emily, out of trouble until she got back, but mostly he just watched reruns of The Three Stooges and drank the day away.

Kurt had been my best friend since fourth grade, and I didn't have any siblings, so we spent most of the summer together. Some nights after Dave fell asleep, numbed by Budweiser and sleeping pills, we would sneak into the stone cellar out back and drag out his grandfather's Army-issue canvas tent. We took a half-full gallon of gasoline and some rotting two-by-fours from the shed.

We trudged a quarter-mile up the hill behind his house to set up camp, through the mulberry grove to the clearing, an old soybean field that hadn't been used in decades. It was quiet up there, and the dirt was always moist, not like the chalky fields across the highway.

“Race you up there,” said Kurt. I took off, but he had me easily beat. Kurt had significantly longer strides than me, the by-product of a growth spurt the previous year.

“Not fair,” I said when we got to the top.

“Nothing’s fair. Get used to it.”

We snapped dry twigs from the mulberry trees and collected some leaves from the big oak trees surrounding his backyard. We set these under the bigger pieces of wood Kurt found in the cellar, and I poured some gasoline on a lit strike-anywhere match to start the fire. We took turns poking at the embers and re-arranging the main blocks until our crackling inferno could survive on its own. I made sure to scoop a dirt barrier around the fire, although most of that field was empty of any vegetation anyway.

We made some hot dogs and talked about girls at school, how we might miss the idea of them, but then, maybe not. They mostly ignored us, anyway.

“But you’ll get to see Emily every day at school next year. Bet you’re looking forward to that, huh?” Kurt said and smirked. He took a stick out of the fire and tried to poke me. I hit it away and threw a clod of mud at him.

“Will you give it up? She’s not ugly, just not my type.”

I really did have a crush on Emily, but hid it as best I could.

Kurt got tired of teasing me and changed the subject. We talked about the rumors of highway expansion into our neighborhood, and Dave.

“He’s not one of those weird, wobbly drunk people, is he?” I said. “I don’t really like how he just sits there all day. Creeps me out.”

“Dave’s harmless,” Kurt said. “I can take care of myself.” He put another hot dog on a stick and looked up at the sky for a few minutes, not saying anything.

Kurt had to convince me to set the soccer ball on fire. He'd found it down by the nearly-dry creek bed in the woods beyond the field, and figured that it would burn for a while since it was so torn up by the raccoons. "Sure, it'll be fine. Fire-soccer! Fire-volleyball! Hell, we can play whatever we want to when the ball is on fire."

"What if something else catches on fire? This summer's been real dry," I said. It was dark outside the ring of dancing light created by the bonfire.

"Look around you. There's nothing that will burn. Stop being such a wimp."

So Kurt doused the thing with the rest of the gas in the tank and lit it. A perfectly round spinning ball of flame.

We kicked the ball around some, watching it bounce among the rivulets and rocks in the field, losing control of it then running to get it back. Kurt kicked it up above his head and lunged at it, the ball spiking off his forehead into the darkness. I looked at his forehead for damage, but he popped up and dusted the soot off, grinning.

When we were worn out and bored, we let the ball burn out. Kurt turned on his MagLight and surveyed the scene. There were black pockmarks everywhere on the dirt, little bits of leaves burnt, and even a little hole in the corner of the tent where the ball had come too close.

"Sure Emily won't care that we're doing this without her? What if she's jealous and tells your mom?" Emily was at debate camp, and would be back in a week, and sometimes when she was home she came up there with us.

"She won't. I'm sure," Kurt said. "Look at this!" He spun the ball on his middle finger, like the way we saw Michael Jordan do with a basketball on TV.

Then he took out the matches and lit the ball again.

“It’s like a UFO or something,” he said as he threw up the ball above his head. It looked like some misshapen sun a few feet above us, against the cloudless night.

When it came down, I was still looking at the sky. Dozens of shooting stars came all at once, in a mad rush to be the first to disintegrate. I thought that we were lucky to be out there, that Kurt felt safe, at least for the moment. He didn’t seem to trust a lot of people anymore. We stared at the show for a few minutes and after, kicked the ball into the bonfire to see if it would melt. It didn’t.

We talked for a little longer. I asked Kurt again if we should be worried about Dave.

“The only thing you should be worrying about, my friend, is when Emily finally gets a boyfriend and you didn’t do anything about it.”

“Shut up.” I kicked a coal into the middle of the fire. We ate what was left of the hot dogs, cold, and fell asleep on blankets in the open air.

This was Greentree, Kansas, just a few miles west of the encroaching ticky-tacky box home developments popping up along the K-10 highway corridor from Kansas City to Lawrence. I lived close to the highway in a newer house, and usually rode my Huffly a mile down the frontage road to Kurt’s house, like I’d done ever since we were in elementary school together.

“Have fun, be safe,” my mother would say, without fail, every time I left the house. I don’t think she was genuinely worried about me, and she cared about Kurt (she told him this), but wanted to keep us from doing anything stupid. “They mean well,” I

overheard her say to my father, “but there’s something missing in a teenage boy’s brain, I think. The part that tells you which actions might have consequences.”

“You can’t tell a kid how the world works. Have to let them make their own mistakes,” my father said. He had spent time in prison for petty drugs, before he’d met my mother. If they could convince us, they’d be happy to spend the evenings with Kurt and I, watching TV or playing cards. But they were smart and, I think, compassionate enough, to know the futility of that tact. So we were on our own.

Kurt lived on the other side of the highway in a faded blue, 1950’s split-level job on a gravel road lined with old, thickened oak trees. Every year the scene changed. New gas stations were appearing, a Save-A-Lot was being framed, and there was even talk of paving Kurt’s road so the country people could get to the highway quicker, without so much dust. Last winter they had begun clearing land for a golf course, over the ridge behind Kurt’s house.

There were rumors they’d have to raze the woods beyond the field and fill in the creek bed to build it. Kurt and I had grown up around those woods, shooting b.b. guns at raccoons and running and boxing with each other late at night. We’d used the creek bed as a base for war games, a sledding chute during ice storms, and a wild respite when Emily’s friends came over for sleepovers. We had forts in six different trees, trails that only we knew about, and we knew every patch of poison oak by heart.

One hot afternoon at the end of July, Kurt, Emily and I snuck onto the golf course to see what the construction looked like. We tramped up the hill, through the clearing and past the small copse of trees hugging the riverbed, oaks and sycamores and mulberries,

only a smattering of what was left from before they started construction of the course. Emily kept up with us easily, jogging through the brush with her long, thin legs. There was a small lake between the trees and the edge of the nearest fairway, so we held out a little hope that we would have a few trees left when they were finished building the course. The bulk of our woods were gone, though.

We slid down the embankment then skirted the pond before finding ourselves in the 7th hole tee box. Kurt feigned a practice swing and grinned at us. “Wish I’d brought my baseball bat,” he said. “How far you think I could hit a golf ball with a baseball bat?”

“You couldn’t hit a golf ball with a semi-truck,” Emily said, looking around and deciding to go forward with the expedition. She was wearing a blue, lacey tank top, one that I didn’t remember seeing before.

I followed her down the fairway. It opened up into a perfectly manicured park with oval fairways, where carpeted greens and stiff brown rough complemented each other like jigsaw puzzles. There were sprinklers going off and on, click-clack.

“Think you guys will get some sort of discount or something on club membership, because you live in the neighborhood?” I asked.

“I hate golf,” Kurt said.

Emily continued to scan the horizon. Every now and then she would point out a patch of natural prairie grass amid the shorn Kentucky Bluegrass and mutter something about faking it. She’d been big into 4-H, raising goats and chickens, until last year, and knew more about the woods than both of us. Kurt was still a few yards behind us, skipping from side to side and looking all around. Emily looked at me, smiled, and pointed out a tree trunk.

“That used to be a sycamore. Old, too. You can tell by counting the rings,” she said. “Look.”

“I know that,” I said, but the defense of my biology knowledge was interrupted.

“Hey Thom!” Kurt yelled. “Come over here!”

He was standing on the crest of a round hill, past a couple young sycamores and a wooden bench, waving like he’d found buried treasure.

Emily and I made our way over, and saw that Kurt was only looking at a twenty-foot by twenty-foot patch of flat sand. Emily rolled her eyes.

There were little ridges running lengthwise in the sand, like it had been plowed by a tiny tractor. It was mostly solid to the touch, but Kurt put his finger in it and began carving his name and the name of the street he lived on.

“What do you think this is?” I asked.

“It’s seed for a green. They’ll put the hole in there,” Emily said, pointing to an indentation in almost the exact center of the area.

“It looks like a clean sandbox,” I said. I heard something that sounded like a lawnmower, and looked up. A groundskeeper was coming towards us.

Kurt was too absorbed in his new find, a goofy grin on his face, to notice the maintenance man barreling towards us in his green Gator ATV until he was nearly on top of us.

“What are you kids doing? This is private property,” he said.

“What does it look like we’re doing?” said Emily. She put her hands on her hips.

“Trespassing, that’s what.” He looked at Kurt’s handiwork. “Which one of you is Kurt?”

Kurt raised his hand, his middle finger extended.

“Don’t you get glib with me, boy. I ought to call the police. I could have you put on diversion. Don’t mess with these greens. They’re expensive. You want to know how much seed costs for just one of these greens? I ought to...”

Emily cut him off. “Hey mister, can I ask you a question?”

“Well, I guess you can,” said the maintenance man. He scratched at the cords of skin beneath his chin, puckered with grey whiskers. “What do you want to know?”

She narrowed her eyes. “And what I wanted to ask was, are you going to have to cut down those trees” she pointed at the river bed beyond the ridge, “to finish the golf course?”

He didn’t miss a beat. “Yep,” he said. Then he put his foot down on the gas and sputtered off in the Gator, said something about not letting him catch us there again.

Kurt and I settled for riding our bikes into Olathe to buy baseball cards and to try to buy cigarettes at the gas station. The gravel turned into asphalt and the hills into razed, level streets at right angles to one another.

The Indian guy behind the counter didn’t believe we were eighteen, so we just bought Slurpees, downing them much too quickly as we sat on the hot concrete outside the 7-Eleven. The baseball card shop was closed when we got there, and it was getting late, so we called my mom to give us a ride home. She picked us up and wouldn’t let Kurt leave our house until he’d had dinner.

During the first week of August, I woke up in a puddle of sweat to the phone ringing at seven in the morning. My mom came cheerfully into my room and held out the cordless. It was Kurt.

“Wake up, Thom. Dave’s making me go hunting with him today. You have to come. Otherwise I think I might kill him or something.”

Dave drove us in his old Scout pickup truck up to the Flint Hills, past Clinton Lake, to hunt pheasant in the prairie. He brought his own pristine 22-gauge shotgun and two ancient rifles, inherited from his grandpa, for Kurt and me. He threw these into the truckbed and told us, in a toothy smile, that he’d only brought a small flask of rye, “so don’t look so worried.”

I wasn’t exactly sure what rye was, but Kurt didn’t seem concerned. “I ain’t worried about that, Dave,” he said. “If I were you, I’d be worried about how two kids are gonna kill a big ten-point buck and show up your ass.”

Dave chuckled and took a swig from the flask.

“We’ll just see about that.”

Dave pulled the truck up to a grove of trees and parked it under the overhanging leaves. He pulled a long, army-green tarp from the back and flung it over the cab.

“Why is he camouflaging the truck?” I whispered to Kurt. “Is this illegal or something?”

Dave must have heard me. “Those permit people just want to rip you off, son. Now help me stake this thing down.”

The morning was unbearably boring and hot. There weren't many trees except the grove where we parked the truck, so we didn't want to leave.

"Have it your way," he said. "Ain't no ten-point bucks gonna come around those trees, Kurt."

Kurt flipped him off when he turned around.

For the next few hours Dave crouched around the tall bluestem grass a ways away while Kurt and I lolled near the truck, smoking Dave's unfiltered cigarettes and eating the turkey sandwiches we were supposed to save for lunch.

"He looks like a crippled mountain lion or something," Kurt said.

"What does that look like?" I said.

"Slow and slouchy. Like Dave."

When the sun was almost directly above us, Dave called to us from across the field.

"Boys! Get yourselves over here." He wanted us to join him in a little blind he had discovered underneath an earthen overhang a half-mile away. He hadn't shot at anything yet. We hadn't even seen any birds all morning. We walked toward him, across the field, telling ourselves it was because we were too bored to stick around the truck any longer.

The prairie was filled with ridges and rocks, scattered with patches of sharp witchgrass, so it took us a half-hour to make our way to where Dave was hanging out like an imbecile. We took off our shirts and wrapped them around our necks to keep the sun off our necks as we hiked through the limestone and nettles. I asked if Kurt had talked to

his mom lately. She was still in Arizona, he said, with the Mexican musician. He didn't say much more about them.

"She'll be surprised when she gets back, though," Kurt said. "The neighborhood isn't even recognizable anymore. It's all shit. I don't want to live next to a stupid country club. No one's going to drive out there to play golf anyway." He stubbed his toe on a jutting rock and yelped.

We could see Dave now, sitting on a boulder. He didn't move towards us but must have heard us coming because he put his flask down and sighted the gun over the empty prairie.

When we got there, he tried to join in our conversation.

"Golf's a gentleman's game. Sissy men. We ain't no family of sissies. Now take hunting. There's a sport for real men."

"Like you?" Kurt said under his breath.

I wanted to know more about the golf course. "Do you think they know what they're doing, putting in all that new stuff so far from the highway?" I said.

"Hell no," said Dave. "They're just a pack of idiots. To cut down all our trees and put in a golf course. A golf course! What a bonehead move."

After fifteen minutes or so of silence, Dave jumped up and said he was going to go try to flush out some birds. He ran like a lame deer over the ridge and into the prairie. Kurt and I stood up, watching him go.

When Dave got a few hundred yards away, Kurt aimed the rifle in his direction and said, "Think I can hit him from this far away?"

“Stop it,” I said. I grabbed the barrel and pulled the gun down. “Don’t be an idiot.”

“Oh, calm down, you wimp. I’m not going to shoot Dave. Who’d take care of us then? I just want to scare him a little.” He grinned and raised the rifle again, pointing it high into the sky, and pulled the trigger.

The gun backfired. Gunpowder and bits of the bullet flew backwards at Kurt, taking off a chunk of his right ear and leaving bleeding gashes in his cheek and neck. The rifles were old and not very well maintained, not very safe to begin with. We probably should have known better.

Kurt spent a week in the hospital. He would be OK, the doctors said, but the scars would be there for a long time. The cuts and bruises zigzagged across one side of his face, and I wondered how much they would fade. Kurt thought that the scars were the neatest thing in the world, and he told me so. The hospital was a bright place, and the children’s ward where Kurt’s room was had video game systems hooked up to the bed. It still smelled funny, though, like someone had sprayed vegetables with bleach and left them out of the refrigerator for too long.

Dave spent every night with Kurt in the hospital, and I came to visit when I could. Kurt’s mom called him a couple of times, and said she’d try to be home by the first of September, which was only two weeks away.

“Your friend here’s real lucky, you know,” Dave told me at the hospital while Kurt was asleep. I thought I smelled alcohol on him. “Could have been a lot worse.”

I thought it was strange to call Kurt *my* friend, since he was Dave’s nephew, but I didn’t know then about some adults and how they could see the world differently.

“Yeah, maybe,” I said. “Those rifles were too old to be hunting with.”

“You bet they were. Kurt shouldn’t have been shooting. Kid doesn’t know how to shoot a goddamned rifle.”

“But you let us bring them,” I said. Right after I regretted saying that. I looked past Dave and hoped he wasn’t angry.

“It don’t matter who brought the rifles. Thing is, he shouldn’t have been shooting ‘em. Just what was he aiming for, anyway?”

I paused. “I think he saw a pheasant,” I said.

Kurt came home on a Friday afternoon. School started on Monday. I went over to his house and we played ping-pong and video games for a couple hours until it got dark enough to go start a bonfire on the hill. He acted the same as always, but I noticed that he didn’t talk as fast, or as loudly.

It was hot and muggy, even after the sun went down. We started to sweat right away and our shirts clung to our skin. We brought out the old tent from the cellar and the can of gasoline from the shed, not caring this time whether Dave heard us. He’d be gone soon, Kurt said, when his mom came back. We had found a mostly-full liter of Evan Williams bourbon behind the refrigerator that afternoon, and we brought that up with the franks and marshmallows. If Dave missed it, he didn’t say.

After dragging our gear up past the mulberry trees, we pitched the tent and started the fire with some dead buffalo grass that floated around the empty field. We stoked the flames with aluminum baseball bats and roasted the hot dogs with sticks Kurt had sharpened to a point with his knife. The charred ball we had set on fire was sitting still in

the field, chewed up by raccoons but still somehow heavy with air. We kicked the ball around a little then sat down on some stumps around the fire to open up the whiskey. Emily came out around midnight to drink with us and smoke Dave's unfiltered she had poached from his jacket pocket. He was asleep by now, she said.

"Hey Emily, are you going to get a boyfriend this year?" Kurt said. "Thom wants to know."

I reached over and kicked him in the shin.

"Grow up, Kurt," Emily said. "Keep talking if you want another scar for that face of yours."

Kurt laughed and Emily looked at me, rolling her eyes as if to tell me that she knew Kurt was just being an ass and everything was ok. I smiled.

It was getting a little chilly by now, and the wind picked up from the north as a cold front rolled in, the first sign of autumn. Emily put on a sweater she had brought and asked if I was warm enough.

"I'm fine," I said. And it was true. The liquor was smooth and warmed me probably more than the fire.

"Here's to golf!" Kurt said and lifted the bourbon above his head. He put the bottle to his lips and swallowed, his eyes rolling back into his head and then settling once again on the leaping embers.

"And to Dave," Emily said, although not with so much enthusiasm.

I sat back and smiled, thinking that maybe Kurt was feeling better. Emily smiled at me from across the fire and I shrugged my shoulders. We both looked at Kurt, who had

a wild stare in his eyes. It almost seemed that they were glowing red. Emily shot me a worried look and searched the grass around her for the liquor bottle.

She spotted it after a second, but it was too late. Kurt had grabbed the last of the whiskey and was pouring it out savagely onto the fire, like some sort of pagan priest offering a sacrifice. The bonfire leapt and we fell back off the tree stumps, startled.

Then he went for the gasoline. Emily reached out her hand as if to tell him to stop, but he wasn't looking at her. His eyes were on the ball now, sitting a few feet from the tent, waiting like a cannonball to be rolled into the flames.

“How far do you think I can kick this?”

It looked like a meteor had just landed and set everything ablaze. After arriving in the creek bed, the fireball consumed the trees first, the ones that cut across the ridge separating the field and the golf course. All those dry twigs and dying oak saplings underneath the canopy were perfect for combustion. The fire circled the pond and, after it reached the first sand trap, high winds caused the flames to jump the barrier and crackle across the green. Then it hit the 7th hole tee box, and the vegetation around it. The young sycamores were no match for the fire. They went up like kindling and advanced the fire in a direct line towards the main compound, spreading out like orange dominoes across the whole development. We watched until the sun came up, then took down the tent and stowed it away in the cellar for next summer.

On the news the next morning we saw pictures of the burnt-out shell of the clubhouse, the last smoldering embers of what once was our summer, when we were fifteen.

We didn't know much about the world, then. But the mystery was unraveling. Things got better. Kurt's scars faded and we all survived high school. But it was that summer, those hot and humid months of Kurt, Dave, and Emily that I realized that the world didn't owe us much, that some people would always get the short end of things. And I think Kurt, though he'll only talk about that summer with energetic nostalgia, realized those things too.

The night before he left for boot camp, years later, we all went out for one last drink. I bought a round of bourbon and told Kurt it was his toast.

He grinned, looked me in the eye, and said, "To golf."

"And to Dave," I said. We all drank our whiskey and remembered that summer, when we grew up.

Our Nature

“It’ll be great,” Rick said, “we can hunt and fish and won’t have to work and we’ll get paid for it. We’ll sit in an enormous tower in the forest and drink beers all summer.”

We were pretty high at that point, sitting on his back deck, waiting for the pizza guy to get there, so this is a paraphrase.

“Alaska...” Rick said, and sat back in his Ikea knock-off chair, taking a short, choking puff on the last of the joint. He passed me a bright green brochure with a photo of a tall wooden tower in the midst of pristine wilderness, unbroken except by a river and grey snowcapped peaks in the background.

“How long is the gig?”

“All summer. Won’t have to worry about a thing. I think they pay pretty good too. You’ve got to go, Robert man.”

The brochure was pretty convincing. It looked real professional.

SAVE OUR LAST NATURAL BEAUTIES

YOUR CHILDREN WILL THANK YOU WHEN THEY, TOO, CAN ENJOY
AMERICA'S UNBRIDLED FORESTS

It didn't mention anything about having to dodge raging forest fires, but the lookout tower and job description "Incendiary Patrolman" pretty much implied as much.

"I picked it up at the library," he said. "They must be really desperate for spotters."

"So when do we have to sign up?" I said.

"We? Who said anything about me?"

"You did. Just a second ago."

"Oh," said Rick. "It was just a figure of speech. You're the one who needs a new start, Robert. I've got some big gigs coming up, some serious opportunities for cash money." He probably meant some small-time drug deals, which was most of his income.

I said I needed time to think about it. Sleep on it, I said. It's a big decision.

"The deadline isn't till next week," he said.

I thought about it that night. It would mean being away from my son, Jack, for a while. But then, maybe that was a good thing. Absence and fondness and all that. Or maybe it was all a lunatic idea.

The next day, I went to the public library and signed up on the internet. They called me the next day. A desperate-sounding, nasally, disembodied voice said that they didn't really have requirements. Just warm bodies. He really said that. And then he said we (as if he was an Incendiary Patrolman also) just needed good eyesight, or glasses. I told him my glasses were fine, but didn't mention that the prescription was five or six years old.

I wondered what Jack would think. I knew my ex, Mia, didn't want anything to do with me since the divorce, but Jack? He was a fifteen-year-old wild card. If I could do this, come back as a mountain-trying adventurer, would he respect me? He wanted to be a fireman when he was little, and he used to beg me to go on trail hikes together, although I'd almost always carry him on my back. I'd tell him half-baked strategies for surviving in the wilderness, and he ate it up. His interest in the outdoors petered off around the time Mia and I started to have problems, some five years ago. Maybe this could make him remember, I thought.

I left a note in Mia's mailbox telling her and Jack that I would be gone for a few months. I wanted to see Jack, to tell him that I was doing this only because I couldn't break through to him, that I felt like this was my way of showing him I was worth his respect. But he wasn't there. I resolved to call him later and explain things. I didn't know how I would, but I would.

When Jack was still in grade school, Mia had asked me whether I imagined twenty years ago that I would be married and a father.

"Not really," I said. "But then, I suppose I really didn't think much further than the weekend, back then. I'm loving every minute of it, though." I kissed her cheek.

"I'm glad. Growing up, I always thought that I'd be some high-powered doctor, inventing new surgeries and curing fatal diseases. And you know, I'm not one to buy into that whole female domesticity crap, but I, too, am loving it. And I love you."

That's what she said, that she was loving our life together. Where did it go wrong? Was it my fault? Probably. Or, more likely, it was both of us. I'd screwed up, she'd retaliated. It goes that way. And I thought, now, that maybe I had a chance to win back the one person that I still had some claim to a relationship with: Jack.

The government didn't want to pay to fly me to Alaska, so I would have to drive. It was a three-day drive, if only I had a car. I looked up the busses, which took too long, and the trains, which cost a fortune.

I called Rick.

"Goddamned Amtrak," he said.

"Guess this means I'm not going."

"Hey shit-for-brains, of course you're going. I'll drive you. My business meetings sort of, you know, fell through."

"Think your car will make it?"

"Maybe."

So Rick showed up at my apartment on Thursday night, and I left a note with a couple hundred dollars in the rent deposit box, hoping the management company would either be satisfied with that or at least too lazy to track me down. I'd be in the middle of God's country, after all, cut off from all human contact, off the grid. Who's harder to find than that? Even Osama didn't stay off the grid, and they didn't find him for ten fucking years.

Rick scrunched up his nose and scratched a few days worth of beard while he took a rag to the engine. He wasn't much of a car guy, but he did make a good showing

of wiping down dipsticks, shaking fluid reservoirs, and then slamming the hood of his twenty-year-old pickup with a confident bang.

I said I guess we should go, then.

“You got a GPS or something?” Rick said.

I didn’t, of course.

“We’ll just head west, I guess. They have signs for Alaska, right?”

They did have signs, but like anything really, you have to cobble together the arrows and mileages and interstates. Drive through Montana, south of Glacier, and then on to Bozeman, across the little tip of Idaho, and through the long emptiness of Washington that no one really talks about. We had a Rand McNally from the 1980’s, which helped but wasn’t perfect. It took us four days, sleeping in the car, sometimes in the rain, and sometimes waking up like a potato in a microwave, sweating our nuts off.

Rick didn’t like to stop for anything unnecessary, so we peed in bottles and ate gas station hot dogs. It got colder as we drove, and the landscape contained sharper lines. There were few cities, but gas stations never seemed more than forty miles apart. I thought that this might be how they opened up the West – give them fuel, and they will come. We showed up to the Anchorage Forestry Service office two hours before I was supposed to be there, at 8 a.m. Monday morning. There was a dense fog, and a smell of pine that overpowered most of the senses.

“Well, buddy, here’s to one last toke before we start our new life, saving the forest.”

He lit up what I could have sworn was the hundredth joint of the trip.

“What’s this about we?”

“Well I’m coming with you. To the tower. Decided just now.” Rick showed his teeth in a lopsided grin.

By this time, after a few days of thinking about it, I had been almost looking forward to the solitude, some respite from the suburban depression. I thought about Jack, tried to call him from Anchorage. He didn’t pick up, so I sent him a postcard. I wrote something like this: “How about your old man, out in the wilderness up here? Pretty cool, huh?” That’s what he’d tell his friends, that his dad was cool. So I hoped.

Maybe if I could just think long enough about it, I could figure out what he wanted, how I could change myself in his eyes. Make him remember the way things were.

But solitude and soul-searching were just wishful thinking, now. Rick was horning in on the summer he planned for me. But I couldn’t really stop him.

Rick ambled up to the cedar-shingled building after we had smoked and sat on the front porch. Next door was a payday loan store and a pizza parlor, but beyond them, the harbor. I thought it a strange sight, as if the city had a duty to keep business a certain distance from the waterfront.

“Guess I’m gonna make myself a good summer after all.”

“How come you changed your mind?”

“Sure thing, Robert, man, I couldn’t let you have all the fun. And,” he paused, “things went a little sour back home. Business and all. Better to get away for a while.”

“So basically you’re telling me that a drug cartel may or may not show up on our cabin doorstep demanding you pay up?”

“Just a little misplaced crank. Don’t worry, Robert. You worry too much. They won’t follow us up here. You think they sell beer in this town?” he said and popped open a pack of Manitoba cigarettes. I told Rick that liquor stores probably wouldn’t be open yet, but he went looking anyway, said he’d be back before the Forest Service office opened up, and I walked down along the pier to take in the view of the sound. The waves were wild and violent, as the tide must have been coming in. They crashed against the wooden barriers and slithered up along the concrete boardwalk.

I wondered if Rick would actually stay for the whole summer.

We did a little paperwork, drank a pot of burnt coffee while we waited for everyone to show up. Then they loaded us onto a prison-issue bus and drove us out of town to a big ranger station where they fed us bagels and set us up in dorms for the next few days of orientation. It was like a camp, really, cabins and lodges and I could smell a fire somewhere. A summer camp for grown-ups.

We started the week of orientation with some basic survival training, radio primers, and history.

In class, they told us the whole story of the lookouts, how they began in the 1910’s after forest fires destroyed nearly half of Idaho and Montana. Thousands of little cabins and towers sprung up, and the lookouts were the pride of the forest service. Jack Kerouac was a fire lookout once, some guy in the back said.

Since Kerouac's time, though, the number of towers in the U.S. dwindled to only about 300, replaced by satellites and spotter planes.

"Which is where you come in," the instructor said. "There are only a few spots left on God's green earth that even our long-range aircraft can't monitor often enough. That's where we're sending you."

I looked at Rick.

"What about the closer ones?" he said.

"We rent those to tourists," said the ranger. "You've probably seen the brochures."

We got our assignments at the end of the week. It was supposed to be random, but Rick had "arranged it" with the clerks, he said, and got paired with me at a station called "Little Dead Elk." We tossed our packs into an old Cessna and strapped in for the three-hour trip up to Little Dead Elk. Our pilot, a serious-looking contractor sporting sideburns the size of strip steaks, didn't speak the whole time, but Rick kept a running commentary of the landscape.

"Look at that forest, Robert man! I bet there's a million trees down there, and they all smell like Christmas. I can't wait to just go walking forever down there, in our own private wilderness. You and me, Robert, we're going to have a soul-searching summer. You and me and the binoculars and the elk and the rabbits."

"The dead elk?"

"Oh, I'm sure there are a lot more out there. It's just a name, anyway. Hey, want a doobie? This would be very relaxing, with all this scenery."

The air was thick and fog cut down on the visibility, but I could see clouds of what looked like birds, or maybe mosquitoes, over a lake. I'd heard the mosquitoes were that big here.

"Look! Trees! Conifers!" said Rick.

The pilot looked in the rear-view mirror but didn't say anything.

Rick reached into his pocket and straightened out a rolled joint. The pilot reached back without speaking, took the joint from Rick's hand and proceeded to smoke it.

"Hey!" said Rick.

Our pilot didn't say anything, just tossed it out the window when he was through. I asked him if he would take a picture of me that I could send to my son.

"Sorry, boss, I'm a little busy flying the plane," he said.

"I'll do it!" said Rick, and grabbed the camera from me. I let him take the picture, resigning myself to yet another unfocused photograph.

We landed on a strip of gravel, and barely had time to grab our bags before the Cessna turned around and took off. The pilot told us simply to "call if you need anything," but I wasn't sure if he meant it. I felt the sting of pebbles on my back as the props kicked up dirt and thousand-year-old dust. The mosquitoes were indeed massive.

"We're really here," Rick said, looking wide-eyed.

I wondered what Jack was doing, and wished I could have talked to him. It was too late now. Maybe I would send him a letter, I thought. Maybe a couple, telling him all about my job in the wild forests of Alaska.

The first few weeks were uneventful. Rick smoked and sang badly to an out-of-tune mandolin someone had left up in the lookout. He was supposed to have the night watch, but I didn't stay up to check if he really wasn't actually just sleeping.

I spent most of the day glued to the telescope, which was ratcheted down to a spinning seat on our front porch. The days were mild and long, and I wrote long letters to Mia, which I had no intention of sending. I wrote a note to Jack. It said:

“Dear son,

I'm in Alaska. Watching for fires is nice. The mosquitoes are huge, and I haven't seen any bears yet. If I saw one, remember what to do? Make yourself as big as possible. I miss you. Hope your summer is going well.

Love, Dad.”

When we were in the middle of the divorce, we had agreed that Jack would make up his mind about whom he wanted to spend time with. Mia was nothing except gracious about that part. Jack was just starting high school, and although even I could remember the hormonal typhoon that those years entailed, I thought I would have a decent chance of keeping him. I was his father, and he owed me somehow. At least that was my thinking. I really couldn't have been more wrong.

“No, thanks,” was all he said. “I'm fine here with mom.” If a friend asked, I would sometimes blame Mia for turning Jack against me. But that was untrue. Jack had made his decision. I wondered if he still had all the survival skills books that I had bought him, if he was thinking about me, out there.

Our tower felt like the exact middle of all the desperate wilderness in the world. The lookout itself was deteriorating, but felt safe enough with the reinforced steel girders that the Forest Service had installed a few years ago. The paint was mostly all gone, but the inside was clean enough, even if furniture and appliances were straight out of a 1950's Sears catalog. The panorama was spectacular. I could see mountains all around us, and a lake in a little valley filled with smooth rocks of all colors. The trees were all conifers, green in every direction, like coat of fur on the mountain. A few treeless hills vaguely surrounded us a few hundred yards away, and I wondered if they'd been burned in the last few years, either in an uncontrolled fire or as a natural barrier for the Little Dead Elk tower.

I was scrupulous about calling back to base.

“This is Little Dead Elk tower, checking in. All clear here. It's Tuesday, one o'clock. Over.”

“Will you shut up? It's only been an hour since you called in,” Rick would say. Dispatch would inevitably say the same thing, in a nicer tone. Still, I wanted to be the best lookout I could be. I thought maybe they'd give out awards at the end of the year or something.

So that's how it went. Breakfast, watching, thinking, lunch, watching, getting secondhand high as Rick had brought enough weed to supply Woodstock, dinner, watching, and to bed.

Sometimes it felt, although we were so far away from everything, that there could be a city and people just over the hills, hiding behind the Douglas Firs, waiting to surprise me and bring everything back to reality. They would come out and tell me that I was a terrible father, that my son would still hate me when I returned, that I should just give up and go home.

But that never happened. The wind rocking the tower woke me up every morning, coming over the northern mountains when the sun heated the air. I watched for fires with an intensity those first weeks that surprised even myself, ignoring everything else, hoping that I could figure out a way to make him like me, or at least come to terms with my situation. Even the thunderstorms, with hundreds of lightning strikes a minute, had a calming majesty. I scanned the forest particularly hard after every storm, but never with any luck.

I did breathing exercises and read “parenting with teenagers” how-to books that I bought in Anchorage. It was peaceful up there.

Until Rick lit the whole damn thing up.

While I was Zen-ing out and watching for a fire that wasn't going to come, he was on the forest floor, collecting pine needles. Little Dead Elk had an evergreen canopy so close it nearly touched the tower, and Rick was under there almost every day.

I asked him what he was doing down there, what he needed the pine needles for.

“You'll see,” was all he said.

He brought piles of needles up to the tower and dumped them on the kitchen counter. That night he boiled a massive pot of water and let the needles soak for a few

days. Then he took the pot down to the forest, added more needles, and left it under the tower for a few more days. He went to check on it occasionally, and sometimes brought it up to boil for a while.

I was calling in to dispatch with the all-clear when he came bounding up the stairs with the pot of pine-water.

“Taste this!” he said.

I did, and although the brown liquid burned my throat and tasted like death, I had to admire his commitment. Not many people would be resourceful enough to distill moonshine from pine needles in the middle of nowhere.

We sat out on the porch all night, drinking and smoking. It started with Rick telling me about the revolution that was coming. He had some vague notion that the workingman was going to rise up against his oppressors, with the help of Harvard-trained lawyers, and sue the corporations out of business.

I let him ramble. The alcohol was making my head spin, and although I shouldn't have smoked so much, it made me feel like I could jump out of the tower and land in some soft tree branches. I took another drink to guard against the idea.

Jack still crept back into my mind every once in a while. I thought that if I screwed up with this task, I may lose my chance with Jack forever. I didn't talk about it to Rick, though. He was a professional Rambler.

“Did you know that the average man thinks about sex once every seven seconds?” Rick said, despite the fact that there wasn't a woman for hundreds of miles. “Think about *that*. Think how we could use that against the government. They're just a bunch of horny kids, those politicians up there in Washington. We could distract them so easily.”

I wasn't sure where this was going. Nowhere, most likely. "What about the women? Wouldn't they be immune?"

"We'd get them into bed," he said, and chuckled. "I volunteer for that job."

I didn't want to think about it. Mia was the only woman I could think of, and even then, I could only think about how I didn't do enough to keep it together. When we were younger, she used to say that I could never lose her love. That we'd be together forever. I realized too late that everyone says those sorts of things when they are young.

Rick lit up what seemed like the tenth joint of the evening and took a long pull. His eyes twisted and rolled, like his brain was changing subjects, re-gearing for another verbal barrage.

"Hey Robert, if we ran out of food out here, would you eat me to survive?"

"You wouldn't taste any good," I said.

"And what about Mia? Tell me, Robert, man, if you were out here with your bitch of an ex-wife, and you didn't have nothing to eat, would you eat her? You wouldn't have to kill her, I mean, if she was already dead and you knew help was coming. You just had to survive."

"You're an idiot," I said, and turned to look at a heat-lightning storm in the distance. Some light was creeping over the northern mountains and I suspected dawn was coming.

"No, man, really. I mean, seriously Robert. What would you do? It's not like she's done anything for you. Just treated you like shit. Now you've got the chance to make her sustain you. Quite the quandary, huh."

“Shut up,” I said, without turning around. I didn’t want to think about Mia. It was all Jack, with his dirty yellow hair and those eyes that everyone said looked exactly like mine. The way he used to call me at work and tell me that he learned how to ride a bike, or finished a video game. It was the little things.

“Well you don’t have to be like that,” Rick said.

I reached around the back of my chair to grab the bucket of moonshine. But between my hand and the bucket was Rick’s leg. He had scooted forward and was staring intently at the back of my head. He had the look of someone who had lost the conversation, had lost the ability to gauge other people’s feelings, like he was autistic or something.

I wheeled the chair around and without thinking, balled my fist and punched him in the ear.

It took him a few seconds to respond.

“Fuck,” he said quietly and put his hand up to the side of his head. I could see something dark trickling from inside his ear. I must have hit him harder than I meant to. I had only wanted to shut him up. “Why’d you do that? God damn.”

I didn’t respond immediately. The lightning was moving away from us, lighting up the near side of the mountains while the rising sun was reflecting off the far face of the southern bounding mountains.

He whimpered for a little while and I took a swig of moonshine. “I’m sorry,” I said. “Here, have something to drink.”

He took the bucket, almost cheerfully, and took a long drink that made him throw up all over the porch. When he finished emptying his guts, I thought to take the joint away from him, but he wasn't holding it.

“Where's the roach, Rick? I don't think you should have any more.”

He looked at his hands, as if he couldn't tell whether he had it or not. “I must have dropped it.”

Satisfied that he couldn't do much more harm to himself, I went inside and fell asleep. The last thing I remember was thinking what time it was back home, and if Jack was keeping track of what time it was in Alaska, if he was wondering how I was surviving.

The uneven heat was what woke me up in the morning. Instead of the sun burning its way through the windows, it was the floor that was superheated and making the cot feel like an electric blanket. I wiped my eyes and stood up. Rick was out on the balcony, passed out on the floor of the porch with the bucket of moonshine next to him.

I smelled something familiar, reminding me of the time that I broke Mia's scented candle trying to heat the wax through the glass on the stovetop. Then I saw the flames licking up past the porch railing.

I thought briefly about strangling Rick and throwing his body off the edge, into the fire, which was now up past the tower edge, for starting this whole thing. But that passed and I ran out to wake him up.

He was mostly unresponsive until I threw the remains of the hot liquor on him. He stood up quickly and started to throw up again before he realized that his hair was starting to burn. He tried to scream but the dryness of his mouth stopped the sound in his throat.

I hugged him and rolled him inside. The water still worked, and although the pipes were hot, I managed to put out his smoldering hair.

“Am I going to die, Robert?” he said calmly, as if resigned to his fate already.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Let’s try to get out of here.”

We put on our boots, fast, grabbed the radios, and hopped down the stairs. The fire, which had now started to burn the tops of the trees around us, hadn’t had enough oxygen under the tower to destroy the steel staircase.

Rick didn’t say anything as we ran down and into the clearing next to the tower, the only real space free from smoke. He had a blank look on his face for a few minutes while we ducked and hovered, me trying to figure out what to do next. The radios were only getting static, but surely they had already seen the fire. It looked massive, miles wide, from where we crouched under the tower. It looked big, but who knew?

After fifteen minutes, or an hour, it was so hard to tell, the tower began to crack and fall. The steel girders held, but burning planks started sailing above us. I started to dodge them, which wasn’t hard because they seemed to hover, gliding slowly down on the heavy breeze. It was like a game, almost.

Rick reacted differently. The first crack sent him into a shaking fit, and then he ran into the forest. So there I was now, alone and waiting for the fire to come fry me like a fucking enchilada. Up shit creek without so much as a stick of goddamn bamboo to paddle.

But the fire only ran for a few more hours before most of the fuel had been consumed. I was right about the natural barriers of the hills around us. I dodged the falling tower wood for an hour or so, until the water pipe burst under the pressure and smothered the fire for a few feet around it. It was lucky, and I felt lucky. I sat there, the only safe spot in the forest, for the rest of the day and into the night, trying the radio whenever I thought of it. I wondered whether the Forest Service would see the whole thing as a fuck-up and send me home with a reprimand. I imagined ways to turn around the story, wrote entire monologues in my mind where I defended myself, where it was a heroic deed to just survive. I could be featured on one of those real-life survival shows. Jack could watch it, say “that’s my dad,” when all his friends heard. Or maybe I would just get ignominiously discounted. Jack would never see me on any TV show. But at least maybe I could survive.

I must have dozed a couple of times, because when the sun came up again I could remember Mia being there, just standing over me, arms crossed, looking disappointed.

I thought about Rick the whole night, too, and what had made him run. Probably the same instinct that had led us here in the first place. He had always been so impetuous. I imagined Kerouac, how he might have thought that this was all just a grand adventure, something to write about later. And I thought it was all just bullshit. Jack didn’t know about all this, everything I was going through. The adventure, the danger. Mia might just think I was being immature. But I cared more about what Jack would think. I wondered if there would be an official report, a record of my heroism, or just my mistakes.

In the morning a helicopter came to check on the damage. I took off my burnt shirt and waved it around until they saw me and landed a few hundred yards away, in a blackened field where the tower used to be.

They had already found Rick. Shaking, huddled near a cave, they said, only a half-mile away.

The pilot glared at me, was silent the whole flight. I was just a fuck-up, albeit one who managed to get out alive. Rick had too.

When I got back to the main camp, Rick came out to meet me. He was smiling, and I wondered whether I should be smiling too. We were alive.

“Hey Robert man. Some show, huh? We almost got it good!” He smiled widely and clapped me on the shoulder. I thought I smelled booze on his breath.

“We almost died,” I said.

“Don’t look at it that way.

Maybe it wasn’t entirely my fault getting us there, but it didn’t matter, I realized - we got out. And the wind coming off the ocean smelled a little more like salt than I remembered, and the blue mountains seemed brighter in the distance. I thought about the heat from the fire, and felt cold. I wondered what Jack was doing right then. I would send him a postcard, and call him. Tell him I’d be home soon. I wouldn’t care so much what he said. I was coming back, I had survived. And he could at least respect me for that.

Cambodia

Julia was back from Asia, and set about showing Drake her affection. They drank strawberry lemonade and played gin rummy every night out on the patio furniture. He asked if she had brought back a souvenir for him, from Cambodia. She said, “all of my love.”

The weather turned bad. Winds began blowing like a motherfucker, so Drake tacked thin plywood boards to the front windows. Julia said it should be safe enough. But then an especially potent gust picked up a stop sign from down the street and hurled it, like an enormous dart, through the living room windows and through the plywood. It stopped inches from a lamp. Julia said, “That was lucky.”

Snow came as a last gasp of a Canadian system and froze Drake’s car into a solid block of dead Buick. He took the bus to work and at night, poured boiling water on the car until the ice melted. He burned his thighs, which later turned into faint, wide scars. Julia said it was karma, something else she had brought back from Cambodia.

“Karma,” said Drake. “What on earth did I do?” He scratched at his blotched, puffy sores.

Julia patted his leg. “It’s been fun to be together, hasn’t it? These past few years?”

“Yes, I suppose. Why are you saying that? You make me anxious,” he said.

“Anxiety kills,” she said, “so stop thinking about the cars and snow and start thinking about children.”

They had none. Julia had wanted two. She told Drake, when they had gotten married. “I don’t want them because I need them. But I want them,” she had said. “I want more to love. It’s in my nature.”

“Nature?” Drake said.

“Yes, darling. You’ll understand, someday.”

But since she had come back, Julia seemed unresponsive to sexual advances. “It’s just not in my nature anymore,” she had said “But I do love you. Maybe we can adopt.”

“From Cambodia?” Drake wanted to know.

“I saw an orphanage in Phnom Penh,” said Julia. “There was a lot of suffering.”

He had learned to deal with the up-and-down. She had been unpredictable even before the trip with the Optimist Club to Asia. At least they had the dog, he thought.

North Dakota was drastically cold that time of year and the dry air affected his cough so that it renovated itself from a scratchy hiss to a full guttural gasp. He upped his intake of anti-anxiety medicine.

In February, things were looking up, but only for a while. They still hadn't been intimate, but she was winking at him more. The car was back in business and his supervisor at the factory called him in for an early review. When he arrived he was handed a pink piece of paper with his termination notice on it. The dog whined when he got home.

He told her. "Why Drake, that *is* good news," Julia said. "Now you can get unemployment and we can get welfare to pay for my medication." Julia had also brought back hepatitis from Cambodia. She threw up right then.

Shortly afterwards, Drake began to feel lightheaded, and his chest throbbed with an alternating dull and sharp pain. This went on for three days before he went to the free clinic at the college down the road. A Dr. Kaddish performed an echocardiogram, furrowed his brow, and told Drake to go to the emergency room at St. Joseph Seventh-Day Adventist Hospital.

Julia took him in the Buick. In the waiting room, there was blood all over the floor from a gunshot victim. He wondered what it would be like to get shot.

After hearing his symptoms, the ER doctor said even that though Drake was only thirty, it wasn't impossible that he was having a prolonged heart attack.

Three days and thirteen tests revealed nothing. "Maybe you have acid reflux," said one of the nurses, wiping her lips.

Julia didn't come to see him much. She said hospitals made her anxious. But she sent letters, almost every day. Drake appreciated the letters, but was restless. All he could do was sit on the top floor and look out the tiny window across downtown, a dull and

insignificant city. Its many hues of gray would make for a wonderful black-and-white photograph, he thought. He also thought about how he wouldn't be able to pay the hospital. He thought he would just skip out on the payments.

Julia was in the kitchen when he returned but didn't notice until he spoke. "Julia, darling, I need all of your love," he said.

Julia's hepatitis flared and she was confined to the sofa in the living room while Drake tried to ignore the pain in his chest and a fluttering heartbeat. He bought some oil paints and canvases. He painted landscapes and portraits. He tried hard, but sometimes a nose would end up on the subject's neck, an ear on a table, or a tree would appear upside-down in the sky.

He tried to paint Julia in a field of rice, smiling, with a baby in her arms. The baby never appeared, though. Drake wondered how he had lost control.

At home the next day he asked Julia how she got the disease.

"They have poor sanitation," was all she said. "I could have gotten it from anything. A toilet, dirty linens, walking under the wrong tree."

"Oh yes, any number of things could do it," he said. "A bad orange, tight-fitting socks. A wrong turn on the astral plane." She frowned at him. "You look yellow," he added.

Drake didn't bring it up again but suspected that she might have had a liaison with some attractive but contagious monk in Cambodia. He didn't know why he thought this. Paranoia was his first thought. The Optimist Club had paid for her trip. Maybe she felt

like she owed Cambodia something, he thought. She was so sad-looking, lying there on the sofa, intensely jaundiced, reading a book by a minor lama. She had once told him that she had a thing for Buddhists.

The cold spell finally broke, but the warm air brought terrible thunderstorms and the prospect of more tornadoes than middle North Dakota had ever seen. Drake went to the hardware store and bought more plywood. Thicker this time.

Something showed itself. Julia was pregnant. Apparently it was still in her nature after all.

Drake was subdued but not dreading the idea of raising a monk-stepson. He began to teach himself to sew, and bought some orange cloth.

He went from job to job. Sometimes making sandwiches, sometimes making sales calls. At every job, he found himself imagining all the ways to die on the job. He thought about life insurance, more often than he thought was healthy.

Sometime that summer, Julia wondered aloud what to name her baby.

“If it’s a girl, I’d want to name her after a Greek goddess, I think.”

“Like Medusa?” said Drake. “If it’s a boy, we’ll name him Drake Jr. And we’ll let the monks choose his spirit-name.”

“What monks?” said Julia.

“The ones who will raise him in Cambodia. When he turns two we’re going to send him East to learn to be a mystic. Maybe even to be the next Dalai Lama.”

“That’s ridiculous,” said Julia. “Do you have a thing for Buddhists?”

Julia’s belly grew bigger. Every morning Drake drank a toxic cocktail of Swedish vodka, quinine, and fish oil with a handful of crushed Xanax. This made him half-crazy.

Driving like a madman to get a hamburger one afternoon, he ran the Buick into a steep ditch on Wild Horse Pike. Drake tried to push it out himself and hit his head on the hood. He woke up in St. Joseph Seventh-Day Adventist Hospital, with pinkish bruises all over his face. Julia did not come to see him, this time. She didn’t send letters, either.

The dog died while he was in the hospital. Julia had it put to sleep. She thought it was in too much pain. The dog would lie on its back in the middle of the floor and swing its legs in the air.

The whole welfare thing hadn’t exactly panned out. The hospital wanted its money, and Julia’s medication was getting expensive, so Drake got a job at the County Sheriff’s Office. His job was to convert handguns from manual to automatic. When he applied for the job, he thought he would be working on cars.

Her disease continued to get bad. It turned her hands and feet purple and her face a pale gold. She had a difficult time exhaling. Julia complained that she wished she was back in Cambodia. She said everything was peaceful there. Drake sat and smoked cigarettes outside with the patio furniture. He had seen pictures of Cambodia. It was peaceful, he thought, except for the kids dying all around you.

Storms rattled through town again and took shingles off the roof. Eventually a puddle of rainwater collected in the kitchen, but Julia couldn't bend over to pick up a bucket and Drake didn't care. It made the kitchen smell like feral cat, for a feral cat was forced under the foundation because of the flooding and never came out.

"Why don't you do something productive?" said Julia, as she lay prostrate on the couch with a *Glamour in Asia* magazine in her hand.

"Why don't you confess?" said Drake. He hadn't forgiven Julia. He didn't know whether she had done anything to forgive. Autumn was a gloomy season, in general.

In September Julia moved in with her sister, taking little Drake Jr. (no spirit name) with her. She said that all of her love had run out.

"I tried, Drake. Take a look at yourself," she said.

He looked at himself in the mirror, and wondered how long it would for him to starve to death. A long time, he thought. He was poor, but not Cambodia-poor. He was poor with love handles.

The year was ending and it was getting colder every week. Drake rarely left the house, ate leftover Chinese food out of leaky paper boxes, and read newspaper articles that he didn't understand.

And so it is December, and Drake is looking at the gun rack inside of a Wal-Mart. He purchases a cheap shotgun, one with a long, thin barrel. He steals a length of thick,

blue rope on his way out. He takes these things home and has Kung Pao Chicken delivered to his house for the last time.

He eats, and then looks at his new gun for a long time. He glances at the rope, and experiments with some knots.

After a while, he picks up the gun and points it in the direction of his mouth, to see what it feels like. It is cold, and he doesn't like the taste of the metal. He thinks about his son, and Julia. He thinks that maybe life deserves more time. Then he walks outside, looks at the empty street, and smokes a cigarette.

Ribbon

John H. Relden

December 4, 2009

Senior Embalming Technician

Myles Caskets and Mortuary

Johnson County, KS

Memo to:

J.W. Myles

President, Myles Caskets and Mortuary

Subject: Invoice concerns of client #082587, Stephanie Hammond

Mr. Myles,

I received the client, a 19-year-old Caucasian female, from Johnson County Morgue courier at 3 p.m. on Friday, November 28. Mr. Steven Dennehy, who had been assigned as the obsequies director, signed for the delivery. Mr. Dennehy explained to me,

in general summary, the situation of this particular client, a Miss Stephanie Hammond. The body was found naked, in an otherwise empty apartment, near a large serrated knife. There was a significant amount of blood pooled around the body (subsequently cleaned by our affiliate company, but billed to the county). I do not read the newspaper anymore, but Mr. Dennehy mentioned (though I did not ask) that there had been some history of domestic abuse between the young woman and her boyfriend.

The coroner, who completed a non-invasive autopsy, determined that the body had been deceased for over 24 hours. This information alerted me to the probability of a long and possibly difficult embalming procedure. Special concerns included unsightly lacerations to the throat, massive loss of blood, significant facial disfigurement, slight abdominal distention, moderate lividity and moderate rigor mortis.

Because family had given little instruction, Mr. Dennehy instituted Policy 4.2, so that all non-essential decisions were made at the discretion of the funeral director (Mr. Dennehy). Mr. Dennehy and I discussed the particulars of the arrangement. We agreed that a “turtleneck outfitting” would not be enough to cover the damage. We discussed the probability that the family would not be able to pay for a complete reconstruction. Mr. Dennehy proposed a closed casket ceremony, with minimal repair to the body. I agreed, and prepared to embalm the body for odor and longevity. This decision was made based on Mr. Dennehy’s knowledge of the financial situation of the family.

Mr. Dennehy left me alone with the client, after I informed him that I expected the entire process to last approximately six hours. The procedures were performed in embalming room No. 3, in the basement of our main building on Nieman Drive.

When I opened the body carrier, I was surprised at the degree of disfiguration. Mr. Dennehy's description did not render the actual condition of this particular client. Nearly no blood remained in the body. The skin was starkly pale, at points translucent, the only thing separating internal organs from the air which could cause them to burst before burial.

The lacerations, determined to be the cause of death, were more like gouges cut out of the flesh of the neck. It was not a simple jugular-vein incision. I could see, unencumbered, an entire portion of the throat, hanging lymph nodes, exposed muscles, and a small section of the brain stem.

The facial injuries were much worse than I had been led to believe as well. There were about a dozen scratches and cuts, things that a thick coat of makeup would hide, if this were to be an open-casket ceremony. But there were more, abnormal damages. The left eye socket was empty. In its place was a tag from the coroner's office that read "EYE REMOVED DUE TO DAMAGE." The skin above the left temple was split, revealing a bare skull, slightly chipped. This could mean severe trauma to the skull, or possibly a minor trauma extenuated by the very severe loss of blood due to the neck wounds. The right ear was mangled beyond recognition. The nose was black, and cut open on one side, leaving flesh across the cheek.

The coroner's office had left, frankly, a mess. Still, I was under Mr. Dennehy's orders to only minimally embalm the body. I spent an hour and a half washing the remains with antiseptic soap. I then began to massage the extremities of the body to discourage rigor mortis.

When administering the embalming fluid, I used extraordinary care, as cases such as these tend to be extremely fragile. Any unnecessary fluid or intravenous gauge could cause a tearing of the skin. This would lead to an almost impossible situation, in which I would only be able to recommend cremation. I placed a needle in each arm and leg, and a tube down the esophagus, through the open throat. I applied a 13% arterial concentrate and a humectant.

At 7:30 p.m. I estimated the completion of the procedure to be around 10 p.m. I informed Mr. Dennehy of my estimate, after which he left the office for the night. I continued to drain bodily fluids and replace them with the arterial concentrate, stopping every quarter-hour to massage the muscles. I replaced all thoracic cavity fluids with a hypodermic fluid mixed with 10% powdered preservative. I covered the facial features with non-corrosive rubber cement, and placed a standard heavy veil over the head.

At approximately 9:30 p.m., the upstairs doorbell rang. I answered promptly, and found Mrs. Jane Hammond, the mother of the client, waiting outside. She appeared very cold and was shaking violently. I invited her into the office, introduced myself, and asked how I could help her. Mrs. Hammond, although distraught, made it very clear to me that she wished to hold an open casket ceremony. I attempted to reason with Mrs. Hammond in a compassionate manner, explaining that the most appropriate way to deal with such a situation would be to hold a respectful closed-casket ceremony. Mrs. Hammond firmly disagreed. She stated that it was her intention to “see her child one last time.” I politely directed her to speak with Mr. Dennehy, or even Mr. Myles, if she had questions as to the arrangements. I explained that I was not responsible for funeral specifics, and that I only

take direction from my superiors at the mortuary. At this point Mrs. Hammond began to shudder uncontrollably. She began a long and largely unintelligible monologue about her daughter and the circumstances of her death. During the few moments I was allowed to speak, I continued to calmly explicate the situation, especially what I understood of the financial limitations in this case. Mrs. Hammond did not directly disagree with the facts this time, and seemed finally resigned to the situation.

Before she left, she handed me a small paper package. Inside I found a 5x7 framed photograph of a brightly smiling teenage girl with her arms around a horse's neck, holding up a white ribbon that read "3rd Place." She was wearing an equestrian-style flannel shirt that my own daughter would sometimes wear when she was the same age. It did appear to be a photograph of the deceased, perhaps from a few years past. (Before I left in the morning, I placed the photograph in Mr. Dennehy's office so that he could return Mrs. Hammond's property.)

I estimated that I was a half-hour from finishing the ordered embalming at this point. I would like to state that it was my sole decision to make any further preparations. The details of this case, particularly the age of the girl, and the fact that I myself had a daughter, caused me to continue with the preparations.

I continued with the anti-rigor mortis massage, and finished the drain of any leftover fluid. Next, I began with the reconstruction of the client's face. I peeled off the hardened plastic and placed the hanging muscle and flesh back inside the throat and chin cavity, securing their place with fast-drying glue. This procedure took about 30 minutes. I used a flesh-putty mix (I cannot recall which particular formula) to fill in the missing

muscle in the client's neck. I molded for about two hours, until I was satisfied with the shape of the throat and surrounding flesh. I allowed the putty to dry, and in the meantime I cut pockets of synthetic flesh grafts from the company's supply. I acknowledge that this is expensive material and significantly increased the cost of the procedure.

I stretched these grafts over the putty, and sutured it together at the back of the client's neck. This was the singlemost time-consuming procedure. The synthetic skin material broke often, and I was forced to use a new piece until I got it to hold. I stretched any available skin at the top of the skull together to close the open wound where the skull was chipped. I stapled the skin together to hold it, then slowly sewed the pieces of skin back together with fine-thread stitch. The end of this procedure was not to my satisfaction, but I moved on as time allowed. When I looked at the clock, it was 3 a.m.

The matter of the ear and nose remained. Weeks ago, while cleaning out old equipment, I had found a plastic ear, #37B if I remember correctly, in a drawer in the embalming room. I puttied this to the client's right ear, and used light putty to cohere what remained of the ear. I sutured the torn nose without incident. I placed a standard plastic eye-cap over the one intact eyeball, and inserted a special tempered-steel sphere into the opposite, empty socket to prevent collapse of the eyelid. I secured each of the client's eyelids with several stitches of durable thread.

I spent the next hour shampooing the hair, combing out tangles, cutting and styling the hair so that it covered the needle-marks on the scalp. I referred to the photograph for particulars of the hair, and although I wasn't completely satisfied with the final product, I believe I achieved a decent similarity. I used large amounts of high-quality concealing makeup to hide the blackness of the nose, and to give the skin grafts a

warmer tone. I massaged penetrating lotion into the hands and feet, as well as the entire facial-neck area. I finally set the features, arranging the eyelashes and setting the lips with a mandible septum suture to achieve a “serene” facial position. Each body area did not take much time, but the sum of it was probably three hours or so.

Mr. Dennehy had verbally authorized me to dress the remains in a standard wool black frock for the closed-casket ceremony. I did not do this. Instead I obtained a very slightly-worn outfit, a green blouse and jeans, from my own daughter’s wardrobe, which I still keep in its entirety. My wife delivered these to the office, as well as a container of fingernail polish, which she insisted on applying to the client’s hands herself (as she has done certain times before). She also brought a white prize ribbon, which was once my daughter’s as well. I placed this on the client’s lapel.

I then finished the final coat of makeup, using the picture Mrs. Hammond had left to manage the correct shades and colors. Directly I informed Mr. Dennehy, who had just arrived in the upstairs office, that the client was ready for the casket. I also asked him to communicate to Mrs. Hammond that the remains were in an acceptable condition for an open casket funeral. He expressed his surprise, and asked me if I incurred any additional expenses over the course of the procedure. I replied that I did indeed use additional, unauthorized materials, amounting to perhaps \$5000. Mr. Dennehy informed me that this incident may constitute grounds for wage garnishment or other negative consequences. He then relieved me from any further duties concerning this client.

I left a full accounting for materials and labor with Mr. Dennehy’s secretary before I left the office. I did not include any labor costs besides the original six hours I had estimated for the minimal embalming procedure. I then went home to my family.

I received a letter from Mr. Dennehy the next day, November 30th, placing me on administrative leave and requiring me to remit a full accounting of the events of November 28th and 29th. Please consider this letter my full and candid testimony. Rather than subject the company to a drawn-out and ultimately impractical investigation, I wish to tender my resignation, effective immediately.

Sincerely,

John H. Relden

Senior Embalming Technician

J.W. Myles Caskets and Mortuary

Our Lady

In the move from Kansas, Owen lost a lot of shit. A baseball glove, hookah set, two end tables, and most of a bottle of gin. The movers were shifty and unkempt, which is why he supposed they stole so much of his stuff. But he didn't lose everything.

He told me that the funeral home gave him a less-than-excessive severance. A bit of a payoff not to make a scene, although it was Owen who was smoking pot in the morgue, not his boss. Anyway, the move to the suburbs of our city wasn't so bad. He found a place close enough to The Reserve, where Janet and I just bought a new house, and we were all back together, like in college.

"It will be just like starting over," he said.

"It *is* starting over," Janet told him.

"Yeah, well this time I'm doing things differently. I'm going to stay clean, get a great job, hang out with my best friends, Janet and Mike. Who knows? Maybe I could get married. Settle down." He patted his long wavy hair and scratched his nose. Janet frowned and Owen went to the kitchen to pour a whiskey and water.

“Do you want one?” he said.

“No,” said Janet.

Janet was pregnant with Cole then. Owen really didn't know what that meant to her. I'm not really sure that I did, either. I knew that I had been happy with Janet, and if someone asked, I was overjoyed to be having a baby. But somewhere, deep in that inexpressible hind part of my brain, I was somehow uneasy about the whole thing.

Owen's newfound conviction lasted about three days. He showed up at my house at The Reserve, high as a skyscraper, begging me to drive him to Pizza Hut.

“I walked here, Mike. It must have been three miles! I'm hungry. So hungry.” His eyes were dull, and I felt sorry for him, standing on my front porch, panting.

Janet spoke from the kitchen. She wanted peanut butter and pickles, neither of which we had in the new house, and I said I'd go to the grocery store. The sun was setting and I didn't want Owen to walk home, either, and trip over a garden gnome, which were an epidemic in this neighborhood.

“You can come to the store with me and get a frozen pizza. But you have to cook it at your place. Janet's in crazy baby mood and she's not having any of anything.”

“Sure, sure, Mike. She'll get over it. Babies, man.” He stumbled a little bit off the porch and turned around. “Can I have a glass of water, before we go, at least? My mouth feels like a cotton gin.”

“No,” I said.

“Ok,” he said, and we went to the Kroger on Elswood Avenue.

The store was mostly empty, way too bright. It smelled like spilled beer and old vegetables. I bought the things to satisfy Janet's cravings, and Owen got the biggest frozen pizza I'd ever seen. A Pakistani guy named Chip was the lone cashier. He gave us a weary good-night as we left.

We drove the mile and a half to Owen's apartment complex, the Pines, where the city took an abrupt turn to blighted bungalows and leafless trees. The sun had set over the white brick buildings, and made them look like abandoned American castles. I pulled up but didn't stop the car.

"Hey Mike, man, come inside," he said through the open car window. "Just for a second."

I tried to protest, tried to think of the hell that Janet would give if I didn't get home soon.

"I want you to see something. It won't take long."

I figured I could do that, and somewhere in the back of my mind I didn't want to go back to Janet just yet, either. I loved her, sure, but a guy can only take so much moodiness. I didn't think I was neglecting her, although looking back, I may have been wrong about that.

I walked in to the tiny one bedroom place, which was predictably filthy, and smelled like a mixture of old potpourri and stale French fries. There was a clearing in the middle of the room among his junk furniture and food wrappers and beer bottles. In the middle stood a concrete statue of the Virgin Mary, four feet tall, moldy and almost black with dirt and water stains. She was dressed in folded concrete robes, looking down, as if

the halo was weighing down on her. Her hands were outstretched, holding some invisible baby. It reminded me of a Madonna without the baby.

“Where the hell did you get that?”

“Mary? She came in the moving truck.”

“You brought her from Kansas? I didn’t know you owned lawn ornaments.”

“No. I mean she showed up in the truck when I unloaded my shit.”

“Out of nowhere? Just like that?” I had a hard time not staring. It felt like the only interesting thing in the room.

“Just like that.”

Owen sat down on a crate and patted the crate next to him. He pulled a pipe from his pocket and opened two beers. “She’s beautiful, isn’t she.”

We sat there for a few hours, although it seemed much shorter.

“It looks like she’s crying. See those water marks under her eyes? Do you think she’s crying?” Owen said. “I’ve heard that sometimes they do those sorts of things.”

I looked at my watch. 11:30. “You tricked me,” I said, a little slower than I imagined. “I have to go.”

“Yeah of course, no worries, Mike.” His eyes were still transfixed on the statue.

Janet was asleep when I got home, but had left a note taped to our bedroom door. “I know I’m not being unreasonable,” it read. “Next time I ask for crazy combinations of food, please bring it back. The cravings are nature’s way of giving the baby the nutrition it needs.”

I took a shower, hoped she couldn't smell the pot or beer, and slept fitfully but dreamlessly, waking every half-hour to stare at the shapes I imagined on the ceiling, in the dark.

In the morning, she wanted to talk. Looking back now, I can see that she was trying to stop something bad before it started.

"Mike, honey..." she started as she grilled some French Toast, my favorite breakfast.

"Yes, dear?"

"I'm not so thrilled that Owen's around. Did you know that? It's just that, well, we have other things to focus on – you have other things to focus on." She patted her belly and smiled.

"Owen's just trying to settle in. He doesn't have any friends around here. He needs me."

"I need you, too," she said, and turned back to the stove.

I saw Owen again after a few days. He called me and asked if I wanted to come over and play Scrabble. It sounded like he was on a pay phone.

I told Janet where I was headed and drove over to his little apartment. She asked me to please don't be long. I said it would be fine. The concrete Virgin was still in the middle of the room, so Owen had set up the two crates in the corner, at an angle. He put out the game board on a slightly bigger crate, which was our table.

I asked him why he hadn't gotten rid of the statue yet. It was a little creepy, I thought.

“Tried, Mike. Totally tried.” He looked at the floor and kicked some lint.

“Huh? What do you mean you tried?”

“I mean I took it out to the fucking curb two days ago. The trash guys wouldn’t take it, I guess.”

“It *is* big,” I said.

“Sure, but not only that. Get this, Mike. When I woke up this morning, the thing was in my living room again!”

“You probably just brought it in and don’t remember it.”

“No way,” he said. “Think I wouldn’t remember lugging that thing back up the stairs? It weighs a fucking ton.” Owen opened a beer.

I didn’t really believe him. I remembered how drunk he could get, in college. He blacked-out easy.

I let it go and we played Scrabble for a while. I tried not to look at the statue, but it was hard. It loomed, like a Christmas tree still up, months after Christmas.

I was beating Owen by a few dozen points, and he started to get desperate. When he played the word “BUNKO” I called him on it.

“Not a word, Owen. Look it up.”

“Yeah it is. It’s a thing. Like a scheme or something. Comes from Latin.”

“No way,” I said. “And we don’t have a dictionary, anyway. If you had a computer, we could look it up. But you don’t have that either, do you.”

“Oh well. Hey, let’s go get a frozen pizza,” he said.

We drove to the Kroger, empty like before. Chip was there again, looking sad. He wheezed, asked us how our night was going. I was going to say “fine” and leave, but Owen’s head snapped up and his eyes went wide.

“Very strange, my friend. It’s going very strange. I’ve got a statue in my living room and I don’t know how to get rid of it. How about that?”

Chip nodded. “Throw it in the trash,” he said.

“I already did. It showed up in my living room again.”

“So you’re saying it’s a magic statue? You people high?”

“I don’t know,” said Owen. “It’s a statue of Mary. Like, you know, Jesus’ mom. It might have some sort of curse on it. Is that a thing? Mary has special powers and is out to get me?”

“How should I know? I’m a Muslim. You people were always just trying to kill us, not explain the details of your religion.”

“Stop saying ‘you people,’” I protested. “I’m not Catholic. I’m not even a Christian.”

“Me either,” Owen said.

“Well fuck if I know, then.”

“Yeah, well, ok.” We started to walk away but Owen turned around and said, “Hey! Question. Is ‘bunko’ a word?”

“Proper noun,” said Chip.

“Bullshit,” Owen muttered.

We got back, made the pizza and had a few beers. The statue sat there, staring at us it seemed, even though there were no pupils carved into the round eyes.

Janet and I had an ongoing argument about what to name our kid. We knew it was a boy, and I wanted to name him Timothy. Janet wanted Coleman. I thought that was a pretentious name.

“But we can call him Cole,” she said. “Isn’t that adorable? Cole Cole Cole.”

“And when the kids make fun of his name? Then he’ll hate us.”

“Why on earth would someone make fun of Cole?” she said, quite logically.

“Oh, you know kids. What about the U.S.S. Cole? Isn’t that some sort of bad juju?”

“I really don’t know what you’re talking about anymore, Mike. We’ll wait to decide, ok?”

“Ok,” I said.

Owen thought we should call him Stinker, but I didn’t relay this to Janet. I was getting on her nerves enough, she told me pretty often, without my loser friend hanging out at our house all the time. I reminded her that we were his only friends in town.

“We?” she said. “*You* are his friend. I’m a little distracted with, you know, being pregnant.” A lot of our conversations, especially about Owen, seemed to end in that general sentiment. It was weird, because she seemed to really like Owen in college. The three of us were inseparable in college. I didn’t understand how having a kid changed the way we treated our friends.

I drove over to Owen’s house, stopping at the grocery store for some beer. Chip was still there, looking morose. Only one lane was open, so I walked up with the beer and a pizza. I asked him how life was.

“My wife is cheating on me, I think. So not good.”

I said I was sorry for asking and got out of there.

The Virgin Mary was right where I left her, hands pointed at me, or up to the sky; I couldn't decide which. I mentioned to Owen that we should probably name her if she was going to be a permanent resident.

"She already has a name. Mary. Maria, Marie, Marian, whatever."

"And she's still here."

"Tried to throw her away again. Came back again. This morning." Owen patted the statue on the head. "Looks like she's here to stay. Maybe Chip was right."

"Chip wasn't right," I said. "He didn't really say anything, besides. It's just some kids or your super or someone playing a trick. It's not right, sure. But it's sure as hell not magic."

"Don't say 'hell' around her," Owen said. He rubbed the Virgin's head. "It's bad juju."

The third time I saw the statue, Owen had taken a different approach. He hadn't tried to throw it out again, he said.

"I went to church," he said.

"You did what?"

"Church. You know, mass. Catholic mumbo-jumbo and all that. God, it was at like 7:30 in the fucking morning. I know what you're thinking, Mike, but look, I'm not drinking the Kool-Aid. I went and I sat there before and after and guess what I did?"

"Counted your blessings," I said.

“No, man. I *prayed*. Like, really *prayed*. Asked the big man up there to get rid of this fucking statue. Of course, I didn’t say it like that. I was all polite and shit. But yeah, that’s my plan. I’m going to *pray* it away.”

“You’re an idiot.”

“Maybe. Did you bring me a pizza?”

Janet and I weren’t getting along, that much was for sure. I told Owen that I thought she was being overly-moody, playing up the hormone thing. I’m not sure I really believed that. I wasn’t like I knew what it’s really like to be pregnant. I do know that when Owen was dealing with his statue problem, Janet and I were at each other’s throats. We argued about everything, it seemed to me. Dinners, decorating, money, laundry. And I, being no good at relationship conflict, usually just left the scene as soon as I found an excuse.

Owen went to mass again that weekend, and kept trying to pray away the statue. He said he was liking the church less and less. The parking lot was too crowded. But when I came over that afternoon to watch football, the statue was still there, in the living room. It looked smaller, as if it was becoming a natural part of the room. Owen had put his little TV on the crate off to the side, but still the Virgin Mary no longer seemed to be intruding as much. The water stains weren’t so ugly anymore. I thought that they looked like a kind of soothing yellow, and green where the moss had been.

We watched the Panthers lose, again, ate potato chips and cheap salsa. Every time we were within scoring distance, Owen would glance at the Mary statue and cross himself.

“Just in case,” he said. “Couldn’t hurt, you know?”

“Have you memorized the Hail Mary yet?” I asked.

“The football play? Sure. You just send everyone to the end zone and throw the ball as far as you can. It’s simple.”

I decided not to correct him. We watched for a while longer, drinking sixteen-ounce beers and smoking cigarettes.

“You know, my neighbor’s got a truck,” I said after the game was too far gone to be worth paying attention to. “Big one, one of those F-3000’s or something. Tony – that’s my neighbor – was telling me it could haul a semi trailer, if he needed to.”

“That’s nice.” Owen was looking at the statue, eyes half-shut.

“I mean, I bet we could borrow it. Throw this thing in there and take it to the county dump. The kids who’ve been pranking you surely can’t find it there.”

“Uh, ok. I guess we can try that.” He didn’t seem too enthusiastic about my plan, which I thought was simple, and yet brilliant.

“Let’s do it today. Right now. What else do we have to do?”

“No. I mean, no,” he said. He scratched his neck and grimaced. “Why today? There’s no rush. Give me another day. Maybe tomorrow.”

I gave it a few days before asking Tony if I could borrow his truck. I thought that if I could get the statue problem out of the way, maybe I could fix things up with Janet.

“Why, of course, neighbor,” he said, and patted me on the back. “Just be careful with her. Isn’t she gorgeous?”

I thought he was talking about the Mary statue for a moment. But he stopped, puffed a moment on the cigar perpetually hanging from his lip, and gazed respectfully at the truck in his driveway. He was just the sort of person to talk like that. Sometimes I imagined that he belonged in Texas, in a retirement community somewhere, even though he wasn’t much older than me.

“Thanks. I’ll be careful. I just have to take a load of trash from a friend’s house to the landfill. I can put down a tarp, if that helps.”

“Sure, sure, a tarp. That’ll be fine. You headed to County?”

“County?” I said. “Like, prison?”

“The county landfill. It’s the only one within fifty miles,” he said.

“Then I guess that’s the one.”

“Bring cash,” he said. “They charge \$75 per load, and they don’t take cards. Bastards.”

Seventy-five dollars was steep, and I knew Owen wouldn’t have that kind of money lying around, so I decided we would take the statue at night, and just dump the thing near the gates. People do that sort of thing all the time, I thought. The trash company has to throw it in the landfill if we left it there. And then it would be off our hands.

I made up some excuse to Tony why I would need the truck until eleven at night, something about hauling a new bathtub to replace the one we were throwing away. Then I drove over to Owen’s.

It took us a good half hour to carry, then roll, the statue out the door, down the stairs, and to the pickup. In the truck bed, we put down an old horse blanket that Owen used for a bath towel sometimes, on laundry days. We lifted it by the hands, which were good handles, and set it gently in the truck.

“Think we should tie it down?” Owen said once we had it up there.

I said that it was heavy enough, that it wasn’t going anywhere. The Virgin just sort of lay there, on her side, looking up at us in the parking lot lights.

“It almost looks like she feels sorry for us, doesn’t it, Mike.”

“Shut up,” I said. We got into the truck and drove off.

After a few wrong turns, we ended up parked in a little grove of elm trees near the massive chain-link gates which blocked the entrance to the county landfill. I looked at Owen, wondering what to do next.

“We should put her near the gates,” he said. “Otherwise no one will find her.”

“Isn’t that the point?” I said. “She might be happy here, in the trees and shit.”

“Oh no, we can’t do that. She has to be destroyed. She *wants* to be destroyed. Don’t ask me how I know. It’s a feeling I get sometimes. I just *know*.”

I pulled the truck around and backed up next to the entrance. We got out and slid the statue out onto the gravel road.

We were about to stand her upright, for better visibility, when two floodlights hit us in the eyes from both directions.

“The jig is up,” Owen said. We put the Virgin down and put up our hands.

“They think we’re terrorists,” Owen whispered to me. The two cops had our arms spread against the trunk of a patrol car while they searched our pockets for drugs or weapons.

One of the cops must have heard him, because he snapped back, “No, we just think you’re a couple of morons.”

“What’s the charge, officer?” I said.

“You’re trespassing on government property. Maybe illegally dumping, too. Is that what I think it is?”

“Yes sir, officer,” Owen said. “The Virgin Mary. Be careful with her. She’s the mother of God, you know.”

“I’m aware,” the cop said.

They handcuffed us and sat us in the back of patrol cars while they filled out paperwork and waited for someone from the garbage company to come with a forklift. I thought that they were going to open the gates and take the statue inside, maybe ceremoniously dump it on a mountain of trash. Instead, when the sleepy forklift operator got there, he picked it up with the machine and dropped it into the back of Tony’s truck.

It wasn’t a serious enough crime to send us to jail, apparently, but they wouldn’t let us drive home. After writing up various tickets and court summonses, they called Tony, since the truck was registered to him. He came pretty quickly and we all slid in the front to go home.

On the drive back, Tony wasn’t angry. He thought it was a pretty funny thing.

“Boy, you two are a bunch of yahoos, aren’t you?” he said, and chuckled. “And Mike, if you don’t want me to tell the wifey about all this, my lips are sealed.” He looked

over at me and winked. “But just tell me one thing: what the hell *is* that in the back of my truck?”

I made up a story about an unwanted gift from Janet’s religious parents.

“How is Janet, anyway?” said Tony. “When is the baby due?”

None of your business, I thought, but I said, “Soon, hopefully. We can’t wait.”

And I thought, it was *my* business, and maybe I really was excited, if I would only stop and think about it for a minute.

We unloaded the Mary statue onto my driveway and I took Owen back to the Pines. We stopped at the Kroger to get some beer, but it was already closed and dark.

The next morning the statue wasn’t there, though. Owen called and told me it had showed up on his front porch. Like a fucking UPS package. He sounded like he was expecting this.

I almost believed Owen now when he said it was a magic, cursed statue. It was still probably some kids, or one of his friends that I didn’t know he had playing a trick on him. Janet wasn’t happy about the arrest, but she didn’t yell at me, and I told her I appreciated that. She just said she was disappointed and confused.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I really am.”

“I hope so,” she said.

At the city courthouse, we waited in line for an hour and a half before our case came up. It was a misdemeanor, the cops had told us, so we just had to plead guilty and pay the fine, maybe endure some community service.

We saw the Pakistani, Chip, while we were waiting outside the courtroom.

“Hey, Chip!” Owen said. “How’s it going, my friend? What are you doing here?”
Owen put out his hand, but Chip just stared at the wall.

“I’m here getting a divorce.”

“Oh, shit. I’m sorry,” I said. I glared at Owen. I wanted him to stop talking.

“Well, I’ll pray for you. I pray now, did you know that?” said Owen.

“I guess it couldn’t hurt,” said Chip.

The judge was in a surly mood that day. He talked at us for a while, even though there was a backlog of cases. He told us that we should grow up, respect the law and all that. He kind of growled, too, between coughing fits.

“...and the last thing I have to say, gentlemen,” he said and stopped to cough, “regards your very reason for trying to sneak onto city property. You thought it was too expensive to dump there, correct?”

I nodded. Owen opened his mouth but I kicked the back of his leg.

“I had my secretary look at the city code. It’s actually free.”

He gave us a big fine, one that I paid off eventually, and sent us out with a grumble.

Owen started to talk on the way back to his apartment, but I wasn’t really listening. I was fed up. He asked me to stay and drink some beer, but I said that I had to get back to Janet.

I didn’t call Owen for a week. Even Janet said that I should call, that I was being a bad friend.

“You’ve been there for him this whole time. Why quit now?”

“I’m getting sick of him,” I said.

Sitting around his apartment looking at the statue was the last thing that I wanted to do. Janet was very pregnant and I passed the time helping around the house. I ironed my entire closet, mowed the lawn, twice, fixed a leaking sink in the basement, and painted the spare room light blue, for when Cole got there.

Then, on a Sunday, I got a call from a local number I didn’t recognize. The man on the other end sounded upset. He asked for my name and then exhaled.

“Ok, good. It’s the fifth number I’ve tried. I’m with the Fire Department. Do you know someone named Owen?”

Shit, I thought.

“Do you know how to get to the Pines apartment complex?” he said. I dropped the phone and ran out to the car. Janet asked where I was going as I was about to shut the door.

“It’s Owen. He’s done something stupid, I think.”

“Let me come with you,” she said.

I didn’t think that was a good idea but I didn’t want to argue. I helped her into the passenger seat and drove as fast as I could conscience with a pregnant woman in the car. The whole time Janet talked about how we were going to decorate Cole’s room. She even complimented my paint job. I thought it was nice of her to try to calm me down.

There were a couple of squad cars, lights flashing, in the Pines parking lot. I saw a red SUV with a “Fire” decal in the window, so I walked over there. Janet stood by our car and looked up at the roof.

I asked the fire marshal standing by the car just what was happening.

“See up there?” he said. He was pointing at one of the flat parts of the roof. Owen was standing there, near the edge, his arms wrapped around the Virgin statue.

I looked at the fire marshal, back up at Owen, and then back at the fire marshal. The ridiculousness of the situation suddenly made me angry. “Why don’t you just go up and get him? Get a cherrypicker out here, for fuck’s sake. It’s not that complicated.”

“Sir, calm down. He has a weapon up there with him. It would be too dangerous to send someone up there,” said the cop.

“A weapon? What kind of weapon?”

“That concrete thing he has up there with him could really hurt someone.”

“The statue?” I said. “That’s not a fucking weapon. It’s a decoration. Good lord.”

“In any case,” the cop said. “all our ladder trucks are out, you know, fighting fires.” He handed me the megaphone and asked me to try to talk Owen down.

“Owen!” I said. “Owen, buddy, just come on down. We’ll talk. Have a couple beers. We’ll forget all about this.”

He looked at me blankly, then seemed to recognize me. “I’m going to jump. I’m going to end it all. No one will care. No one will even notice. All I’ve got is Mary, and she’s going down with me.” He hugged the statue tighter.

The roof was only three stories up, and there was grass below, so he wouldn’t have died if he jumped. But there would be some pretty ugly broken bones, so I stayed calm and tried another angle.

“Who’s going to pray for Chip? Remember you said you would pray for Chip. He needs you, buddy.” I turned off the megaphone and looked at the fire marshal. “How’d he get up there, anyway?”

“Fire escape. Back side of the building.”

“With the statue? God.” I turned the megaphone back on. “Come on, Owen. This is silly. Why don’t I come up there, and we’ll come down together. It’ll be fine.”

“I’ll get in trouble.” He waved at me, but kept one hand on the top of Mary’s head.

“These guys don’t care,” I said. “Do you, guys?” The cops all waited a moment, then shook their heads in unison. I recognized one of them as the cop who arrested us at the landfill. I saw Janet out of the corner of my eye. She had her hand over her mouth, and looked like she was in pain.

“Ok, then,” Owen said.

He turned around, too quickly, lost his balance and started to fall backwards. He still had one hand on the statue and, in trying to regain his balance, pushed the statue off the roof. It looked like a still little person, falling, and landed in some rosebushes. Owen’s eyes were big, and round. He stood very still for a few seconds, then turned around and ran back to the fire escape.

When he got down, we both walked over to the bushes to inspect the statue. I don’t know why. We didn’t have to say anything. We just knew that we should look. It was intact, but had a crack running along one side. She was upside down, looking up at us, hands still there, palms up.

“She’s OK,” I said.

“There’s a crack,” Owen said. The sun reflected a little in his eyes. He touched the Mary statue and crossed himself unsteadily. I smelled beer on him.

We were standing there, not speaking, when one of the cops yelled at us to come back to the lot. I thought he was just angry until I turned and saw my wife doubled over, leaning against the car. I ran over and she just looked at me and mouthed “it’s time.”

Apparently it wasn’t quite time, because we were at the hospital for two days, waiting for labor. Owen came with us and sat in the waiting area, drinking coffee and eating candy from the vending machines.

Janet looked almost pretty there, in the hospital bed, even wincing as sweat washed made her mascara run down her cheeks. She didn’t complain very much, and I was proud of her. The little thing that came out of her was kind of ugly, actually, but I held him and didn’t want to let go. Then he opened his eyes, looked at me, tilted his head, and blinked. I looked at Janet with wide eyes, but she was asleep, with a little bit of a smile on her lips. I put my finger down to Cole’s chest and he grabbed on with both tiny hands.

Owen came in the room, glowing like it was his kid, and I let him hold Cole, against my better judgment. He just looked so happy.

After we all went home and got settled I called Owen and asked him if the statue was still in the bushes.

“I pulled it out and put it on the front lawn. Someone must have taken it, because I haven’t seen it in a few days.”

“Are you sure it’s not in your apartment?” I said.

He laughed and said that it wasn't, but sometimes, when he had too much to drink, or was high on pot, he almost missed her. He said he prayed for Chip, too, when he remembered.

"Ever wonder if there was supposed to be a baby in her hands? It almost looked like there should have been," he said.

"I thought that, too," I said. "Maybe it was up to us to imagine the baby there."

"Maybe," he said.

I went over to the Pines a few weeks later, after asking Tony to check on Janet and Cole for me. I stopped by the Kroger on the way to get some beer for me and Owen, thinking we could just play Scrabble and drink. Chip wasn't there, though, and I decided to just get some coffee instead.

The Way of Grace

I'd tell you that the violence started with her, but that would be a lie. A convenient lie, one that would make everything a little easier. It would make sense, sure. She was the one who kept me up at night, pacing with the kid, screeching about it to her mother, calling everyone in the church, polling, gladhanding, keeping me from sleep. Sometimes I wished she would go home, across the state line. But to just say that would be to say nothing important at all.

It is a terrible thing. Liars go to hell.

I wish I could blame them, that church. That would be simple. But it would be wrong, and it was us, her and me, we were the ones living like no one had any feelings.

Sometimes I prayed some rote, memorized words to try and help us make peace, but then I also prayed when I wanted the Panthers to score a touchdown. Just one damn touchdown. Sometimes it happened, sometimes it didn't.

It was one of those days, those lazy football days, that we got into it real bad. One Sunday, after she got back from the meetings, and I was on the couch. The landline phone rang, and since it was close to the couch, I picked it up.

There weren't any pleasantries, any greeting. It went: "You and your weasel of a girlfriend - you two aren't even married and you have to make it hell for us. You have to intrude on our private lives."

The woman was angry. I tried to calm her down, which made the crazy come on in stronger doses.

"You don't know us. You moved in less than a year ago. You don't know how we work, you don't know the church. You just think it's all politics, don't you. All politics."

"I thought you people liked politics. Or at least one side of it," I said. I shouldn't have said that. By now my girlfriend was bearing down from the kitchen, a bull blowing flames from her nose, ready to lift me up by my earlobes and hang me on short gallows.

I hung up.

"Who was that?" she said. "Why were you on the phone?"

"But I'm not on the phone, dear," I paused. "Wrong number."

"That was Sally Meadows, wasn't it? She said she would make my life a living hell. Said it this morning. I just didn't know she'd get started so soon. I hope you didn't say anything stupid."

"Now wait a minute," I said. "She said *her* life was hell."

"I will not wait a minute. You refuse to get involved in the first place, and the last thing I'll be having you do is talk, without being informed, to the enemy!"

"But this is my house," I said. "That's my phone."

“It’s *our* home,” she said.

I opened another beer.

“I don’t understand. I don’t get involved, I don’t play politics, I don’t do anything. And here I am, still taking heat for all of your back-alley deals.”

“Don’t say that,” she said.

“Say what?”

“You know what. Anyway, it’s karma, *dear*.”

“That’s Buddhism.”

“I don’t care what it is. I’m not the one with an apathy problem.”

That made me angry, and offended, so I went to the couch and smoked some dope. She slammed the back door, saying she was going to her mother’s.

I honestly didn’t know why she stayed with me. She cared much more about the church, the meetings, the rituals, than she did about making it work with me. I didn’t care by that point, either way, and who kicks a woman out of his house? It works the other way, sure, but I still had an idea of classical morality. I’d let her stay if she wanted.

She’d gotten into the church when she was a teenager, and then left for a few years during college, but eventually found her way back. It was home to her, even if she did nothing but criticize the people who came to the meetings.

We’d moved from her hometown a year ago, for my job at the insurance company, where I was in charge of closing loopholes for veterans and the indigent. She made it a condition of the move that we find another group, another set of meetings, within a week of moving in. I said that I would help her look, and although I think she hoped that the

new start would somehow force me to join the church, I found ways out of the responsibility. Too much work, (not true) too tired (I was a bundle of nervous energy, usually), or that I just didn't get those people (this one was somewhat true).

And so she continued on, faithfully attending every week, sometimes for the informal sessions more often. It became our own ritual – she, to her second home with the church, me staying at the home where I never really felt comfortable in anyway. Then she tried to get change things at the church, and it all went to shit.

Even though we are constantly dying, something always wants to be born.

The kid came when we were least expecting him. He wasn't born, he wasn't my kid. But his dad left for Canada and left him at our door when she had almost forgotten about him. I know I had forgotten, anyway.

He wasn't so bad, except he cried a lot at night, and she yelled at him to quit. And she wouldn't take him to the meetings. Said he wouldn't understand.

“Of course he won't understand,” I said. “He's three.”

“So we understand each other.”

“But I don't understand why I have to take care of...you know.”

“No, I don't know. What is it exactly that you resent? A child? You're a monster.”

So on that Sunday, after she left, I went looking for the kid, around the house. I thought he was in the spare room, taking a nap, but his bed was empty. The kitchen,

living room, and closet were empty, too. I looked in the closet in my room, where he sometimes hid when he heard us fighting.

I called for him and looked under the pile of laundry, nothing. I tried calling her on her phone, but after a few rings it went straight to the answering service. I left an angry message and then went back to watching TV. Either she had taken him, and I had missed it, or he'd run away. Not that I could blame him.

When we find something to replace love, it's not easy to remember the real thing again.

I spent the rest of that Sunday trying to drink and smoke myself into a stupor, but the phone kept ringing. Each time it was another somebody from that damn church, complaining about how she had acted at the meeting that morning. She had done this, she had done that. Offended someone's convictions, mocked someone's ambition or played the holier-than-thou card. From the sound of it, she had managed to piss off most of the congregation.

That Sally Meadows called a number of times, each time with a slightly different angle. I was the enemy. I was the problem. She was the problem. One time the kid was even the problem. I stopped picking up eventually, even though my job required me to be on call for tech troubleshooting on weekends.

The game on TV had finished, and I flipped through the channels aimlessly for a little while before there was a knock on the door. I was half-lit by this time, and counted eight bottles of beer on the table as I walked to the door.

It was a cheerful-looking woman with bleached-blond hair wearing a Hillary Clinton-style pantsuit. I let her speak first.

“Hi. You must be Geoffrey.” She pronounced it Gee-off-free.

“That’s me,” I said. “Can I do something for you?”

“Oh, that’s right, you don’t know who I am.”

“Nope.”

“I’m Sally Meadows, from the church.”

I shut the door in her face.

She still tried to talk to me through the door. “I’m not here for you, Gee-off. I just need to talk to her for one moment. Straighten some things out. Get the story firsthand, you know. It won’t take a second. Think about your son, what’s best for him.”

What the hell does that mean, I thought.

“Leave him out of this. Just go away, please,” I said. I was already angry, but the cheerful voice, so completely devoid of the vitriol I had experienced over the phone, had begun to calm me down. “Just go away,” I said again.

“I’m sorry, Gee-off, I can’t do that. I really just can’t.”

No matter how nice her voice sounded, those words startled me into a robotic fear. So I opened the door.

“You’ve got five minutes to explain,” I offered.

“Oh thank you. You’re a good person, I know it. I knew I was wrong about you. It’s her.” She squeezed her slim body past mine and went to stand in the living room. She cast a corner of her eye on the beer bottles but didn’t say anything. It looked like she sniffed the air, although I couldn’t be sure.

“Now look, Gee-off, I think we should talk about this.”

“We are,” I said, “and your time is ticking.”

“Can’t we please sit down? Will you offer me a cup of coffee or something?

Something to civilize this conversation.”

This lady was crazier than my girlfriend.

“Beer?” I said.

“Oh, never mind,” she said and sat down on the recliner in the corner. Then she spoke again. “Perhaps you know what sort of, uh, things your girlfriend has been doing at the meetings. Things that a lot of people don’t really like.”

I opened another bottle of beer and tried not to look too interested. The truth was, I was almost eager to get the story of this particular group, and what had turned the woman I thought I knew into a lunatic.

We all just want someone to take the burden of belief from us.

“She told me that you two never really talked about her faith, that you were unresponsive. Is that true? No, wait, that doesn’t matter, now does it?”

She smiled sweetly at me. I cringed.

“When she came along, we all thought that she would be a perfect addition. A great candidate for leadership roles, even. You might know that we are, how should I put this, on the *traditional* side of the church. And your girlfriend was just a wonderful fit with us.”

I didn’t see why that mattered, but I let her go on.

“It seems that she had been thinking things through, a little bit, even before she started coming to our meetings. You might say that it was a match made in...”

I interrupted. “Are you sure you don’t want a beer?”

“No, thank you, really. As I was saying, she was a wonderful addition. Or at least we thought so. That is, until she started to involve herself more with the policy side of things. She was a wonderful, supportive member, one of the many on the bottom who are necessary to keep the pyramid of faith from crashing down.”

The friendliness was getting old. I was starting to worry about my girlfriend, and the kid. The kid more, probably. At least he was innocent in this big stupid mess. I got up to go to the bathroom and tried her phone again from the phone in my bedroom. Still no answer.

When I got back Sally Meadows was in mid-sentence, as if I hadn’t left.

“She pushed hard. That was ok, but she pushed things too far. Played too many games. Why, did you know she started making semi-weekly house calls to our Leader? He was not happy, to say the least. We eventually decided that she wanted him in her pocket, that she was just in it for the power, not for the spirit.”

“What was it that she wanted, exactly?” I said.

“To take us back a century, among other things.”

“I thought you people already lived in the 19th century.”

“Well, some may think so, offensive as it is. She wanted to take us back to the way things were, before the big changes. Sure, there are other people in the church who want to revert – I’m one of them, actually – but it was the way that she went about it that made her so many enemies. Now do you see why this is so concerning?”

“Not to you. I think you’re a wingnut. I’m more worried about what’s happened to her.”

“But don’t you see, Gee-off? You’re the one who pushed her to it. You’re the one who wasn’t there, the one who could have kept her in check.”

“People shouldn’t have to be held ‘in check’.”

“Maybe not, no. But people need *somebody*. Don’t you see that?”

“That was your job,” I said.

“You’ll understand someday,” she said. Then she got up, shook my hand vigorously, and left.

You’re a whole different person when you’re scared, looking for the next best thing.

Sally Meadows’ visit had thoroughly unnerved me. I hadn’t realized the power of those people before. They were more than just annoying, I realized. They were dangerous. Sally had made it clear, both by describing the people who hated my girlfriend as “enemies” and by being just plain creepy when she talked. Couldn’t she just be a normal person? Why couldn’t anyone around me be a normal person?

I went straight to the phone and called her mother. I hadn’t dialed that number in months, as she always made me feel completely unwelcome to be even in the same aural presence as her. Still, I was frightened.

“Hello? Darling girl?” her voice was almost warm.

“No, it’s me.”

“Me who?”

“Geoffrey. Who else would it be?”

“Oh, you. Why are you calling me?” she was back to cold mother-in-law mode again.

“She’s not there with you? She said she was going to your house.”

“No,” she said. “Why would she be here? And why don’t you know where she is? You’re an awful boyfriend, you know.”

I ignored her. I knew.

“I’m calling the police,” I said.

The station smelled like my grandmother’s house, like burnt coffee and chocolate, and I sat back and stared at the ceiling. The cops were on their ninth hour of searching for her and the kid. I had tried to go look in all the usual places, until I realized that I didn’t really know what “usual” might mean for her. I gave up after an hour of driving up and down the main street and went back to wait at the station.

Her mother was having fits, and I tried to talk to her about the good odds these missing persons cases usually have. I had read about it in National Geographic, I told her. Usually they just get angry and go to a hotel for a night. Sometimes they turn off their phones. I told her mother that she would be fine, and the kid too.

She stopped crying after a while, and didn’t say much. Even that woman didn’t have enough energy to berate me and worry about her daughter at the same time.

I was worried too, and the police weren't much help. They looked at me from time to time with pitying eyes, told us to go home. Said that they would call us first if they had any news. I think we would have left if we had anywhere meaningful to go.

In the morning, they began calling who they thought were her friends. I told them about the church, said she knew some people from the meetings.

They called the main office and eventually reached the Leader, who was just waking up. He said that she had stopped by the rectory, upset, earlier that night. She had wanted to talk about the church, whether or not it was right for her. She was thinking about quitting, she had told him.

I was still at the station, and could hear the conversation through the glass at the front desk. If I had slept at all the night before I might have had the energy to be angry at the Leader. That he didn't stop her. Calm her down. Convince her of something, of anything. She was desperate and needed something solid and his patience with her had already run out.

Then the cop on the phone asked about the kid. The Leader said something on the other end, and the cop nodded, jotted something down. It was easy to decipher.

They found the car that afternoon, bobbing and lolling on the waves of Lake Wilson a few miles outside of town. They pulled it in with a winch and let me go through it while they sent divers in to dredge the lake bottom. I didn't find much, a few trinkets from the church, a newsletter. No note.

They found her and the kid that night, after I had left. They quietly loaded the bodies into an ambulance and drove back to town while the moon backlit the thick clouds.

At the funeral, the Leader said some things about peace, and loving your neighbor. I couldn't focus, just heard a few words here and there, like "hope" and "grace." And I looked at her mom, sitting in the pew with tears blurring the mascara smothering her cheeks, thinking how I could never comfort her, never know if I would want to. Who would want to? Who could do that? It's not the natural way. I sat there and I thought and I thought and then it was time to sing one last song and go home.

And who knows what it's like after that. No one's ever been there and back, right? And aren't there circumstances, ugly and grey and unknowable, that are at work here? I don't know just what exactly grace looks like, but I can imagine. And that has to count for something.