Freight Stories

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Freight Stories

is a free, online, fiction-only literary quarterly featuring the best new fiction on the web (or anywhere else, for that matter). Editors Andrew Scott and Victoria Barrett constitute the full partnership and entire staff.

We are mission-driven to promote the work of contemporary authors, both established and emerging, and to offer writers the confidence of print editing practices with the exposure of web publishing. *Freight Stories* is published in March, June, September, and December.

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Freight Stories
Submission Guidelines

Freight Stories seeks to publish the finest contemporary fiction. Send us your stories, shorts, stand-alone novel excerpts, and novellas.

We do not publish work that exists solely for readers of romance, mystery, crime, erotica, or other genres you can name; we do, however, happily consider works of literary fiction that employ the tools of successful genre fiction in their exploration of rich characters.

Fiction of all lengths and styles is welcome. We wish only that your work be driven by the exploration of the lives of believable, compelling characters, and that it help to illuminate, broaden, or in some way enrich its readers' perspectives.

We ask that the work not be previously published in any form, and that you not submit more than one story at a time. Simultaneous submissions are fine, but please let us know immediately if the work is accepted elsewhere.

Submit your best work via e-mail to submissions at freightstories.com. To help us streamline our record-keeping, please include your name, contact information, and title of the work in the body of the e-mail. PDF and Word attachments (.doc, .docx, .rtf) are preferable to cut-and-paste submissions because of formatting concerns. As is the case with many literary magazines, we cannot offer payment to our authors, though we hope to in the future.

We welcome submissions year-round and hope to respond to within three months.

Freight Stories No. 2

Contents

Kyle Minor

The Navy Man

after Chekhov

Talk around the island said a new man, a Navy commander on leave, was poking around the docks, looking for a fishing boat. Genie Ratliff, who had already been two weeks on Islamorada and was beginning to fancy herself a local, kept an eye out for him. Sitting at Wahoo's, eating blackened Mahi Mahi, she saw him—*it must be him*—walking his Chinese pug out on the boardwalk and looking down toward the water, probably at the long white fish that lounged beneath the pilings.

She kept seeing him after that, once at the movie theater two islands over, twice again at Wahoo's, a few times standing on the beach with the dog. He was always alone, and although everyone was talking about him, she never saw anyone talking to him. Even standing on the beach, unobserved so far as he probably knew, he stood straighter than any man she had ever seen, his shoulders wide and his chest pushed out, out of habit she thought, which didn't make him any less handsome for it.

There was no woman with him so far as she could tell, though he did not seem lonely. He must be a man who did not mind being alone, who sought after solitude. She imagined him on the bridge of some ship at night, the captain asleep in his quarters. His would be a quiet bridge, certainly, and no one would talk of feelings.

She was fleeing talk of feelings. Her husband Leslie, a principal at a private Christian school near West Palm Beach, was always taking her emotional temperature, and then he would want to pray together about whatever he could wring out of her. She was not yet thirty but already he had made her to feel like a very old woman, and the pleasure he took from anything motherly she did for their two small children—Anna, five, and Les Jr., two—seemed as far removed from the life of the body as anything she could imagine.

She was coming into her body. She was as beautiful as she had ever been, and she was beginning to know that she was. Here, on the island, she knew she could have the men who looked her over, and it felt good to her, this knowledge. She felt like she was on the edge of something, some new kind of life that had been deprived her.

Twice, already, she had fooled around on Leslie. Once in Honolulu, on a trip like this one, working on a *Budget Travel* guidebook, with an older man she met at the hotel bar. She was not an experienced drinker—her family and Leslie's were independent Baptists from South Carolina, and so teetotalers—so even though she

was only into her third Scotch and water, and more water than Scotch, she was feeling it, the pleasant thumping of the drink throughout her. He said his name was Alvin, "But you can call me Al," he said, and his was Texas talk, big, all swagger, drawl, and gesture. She let him touch first her shoulder, then her leg, at the bar, and then, in the hotel Jacuzzi, she let him put his hands between her legs and kiss and touch her until she came, although she did not go up to his room like he wanted her to do, and she was surprised and a little frightened at how he pressed the issue. Still, upstairs in her own room and away from him, all he was was what he had been for her in the Jacuzzi, and she knew this was something she could do again.

The second time was last March in Cozumel, the hotel a cheap tourist trap that catered to college students on Spring Break, and she was pleased to know that she was wanted as soon as she set foot in the bar built to look like a Tiki hut, where the girls lay on the table, and the bartenders poured shots into their navels, and the boys leaned down into their long tan stomachs and drank. She had never known this kind of living, but now she wanted to try it, so she hoisted herself up onto the table, and watched the college boys fight over her, and found it pleasing that she could choose—"You there," she said, "the pretty one"—and then there were more of them, their faces stubbly or clean-shaven against the middle of her, a night of this, and dancing, and then the choosing—choice itself an intoxicating novelty—and the trip upstairs with lean, shapely David, and all they did there, which she had lately been replaying in her mind as often as she wanted, which was often.

And then, a Thursday evening, she went out onto the beach at dusk to walk and watch the sky turn orange, then pink, then purple, then black, and the Navy commander came out onto the beach with his dog, and surely he was Annapolis, surely well-off, money in Blue Chips, and alone here, and surely married, and surely worldly enough . . . And these were the Keys, after all, although the whole time she had been here she had heard plenty of talk about wild nights on this beach or in the hotel rooms behind her, of secret trysting places and so on, but the talk was idle so far as she could tell, it was the talk of old women whose best days were behind them, or of young women whose best material came from books and movies, because mostly not much happened in the world, or not as much as people liked to think happened to other people.

She found herself whistling, then, not at the man, but at the Chinese pug, and when the dog came over, she reached down to pet it, but it growled at her. She snapped her fingers at it.

"He doesn't bite," the Navy man said. He was holding a Ziploc bag full of dog treats.

"May I give him one?" she said, and he gave her a green one shaped like a bone, and she gave it to the dog, and heard herself say: "Have you been on the island long?"

"Three days," he said.

"Which is how long I have left to stay," she said. For awhile, they looked out at the water. "Tell you the truth, it's boring here," she said. She didn't know why she said it when it wasn't true.

"It's not," he said, but not aggressively. Softly. The sky, now, was truly amazing, the last light stopping not at the water but at the bottom of the shallows below, because of the angle of the light and the clarity of the water, and it was not hard to think that in some ways it was the edge of the world. "Forgive me," he said.

"I'm sure it's just you spend too much time around sailors," she said, as though she had known plenty of them.

"Sailors," he said, as though the word was unfamiliar on his lips—did they call themselves sailors?, or was that the word officers called the enlisted men?, or what were the words they used?, when it came to these matters, she was lost—and she admired the square of his jaw when he smiled. Leslie's face was round.

They stood quietly until the sun went down. Then they were walking. It was because of the dog, or rather it was because the dog gave them a reason. He asked her how many sailors she had known, and she asked him how many *Budget Travel* correspondents he had known, and they went on like that for awhile, asking questions and giving no answers, brightly, until he was telling her that, sure, he liked being an XO, and she said, "Anyone would," and he said not anyone, many people didn't like it, chafed at it, wanted their own ship, and that he was lucky because he had been under the command of good men, friends, really, and that he didn't itch for action like many men he knew, even though it was said to be the ticket up. "It seems you've moved up anyway," she said. He couldn't have been more than forty years old—"Thirty-six," he said—and she did not say it must be because he was tall and handsome and well-spoken, with that square jaw and that smile. Men responded to the same things women responded to, gave power to other men who were attractive in the ways he was.

And then she was telling him about her mother, who handmade the dresses she was made to wear growing up—"Hideous, really," she said, "floral prints, usually, and no shape to them at all, and never slacks, only these sack dresses, which got worse and worse the older we got"—her sisters and her, she meant, and he asked about them, and her oldest sister Flora was his favorite already, he said. He liked the way Flora sneaked around with the boys who lived on the dirt road, how she came in through the upstairs window by way of the roof, and: "How did she get up on the roof?" Genie told him about how her father had measured wrong when he was building it, didn't account for the upslope of the hill behind their house, "A happy accident," she said, "because you could sit up there in the cool of night, or if you just needed to get out of the house," and there, a vista, the farmland spreading out around them, and the red clay trenches between the rows, "so much like the ocean, I'm noticing," she said. She told him her name was Genie, and he told her his first name was Everett, "but it's not a name I like," he said. "It's not a name that suits a man, so I go by my middle name, James." If he had a wife, he did not mention her, and she did not say anything about Leslie, but only because he hadn't come up in the conversation.

That evening, in her hotel room, she thought about him—James, Everett James. No doubt she would see him again tomorrow. He would find her; she wouldn't have to look for him. She meant to

call Leslie, to check in and check on the children, but it was ten o'clock, and he liked to be asleep by eight, since he was up by four to prepare for the school day and to pray and read his Oswald Chambers and all the things she had tried to do along with him their first year of marriage, but which she couldn't, not at four o'clock, although she did remember with fondness the times she had, the dark and the quiet and the two of them holding hands the way they seldom did now, and the warmth of his body as she leaned into him . . . And of course it could be that he was awake now, waiting for her to call—that would be like him, would be the kind of thing he would do—and she wished, if he were waiting up, that he would be watching television, something late night, some comedian doing a monologue, wished that Leslie would be laughing at something that he thought he should not be laughing about, that he would feel that freedom, there and alone, without worrying about what she would think of him for laughing the way any other person would laugh.

She did not call. Instead, she turned on the television and found a comedian on a cable channel, and she listened to his monologue and knew that his jokes were funny but did not find in herself any reason to laugh at them. She thought of James and how she had felt walking alongside him, and of course he was married, and of course he had traveled the world, the XO, Annapolis, sharp in the uniform. These were not things she knew about, but what came to her mind was Lisbon, Rio de Janeiro, Dubai, Macao, Okinawa. Dots on the map, but now all of them full with James and with women of all kinds, and which kind did he prefer? She got up from the bed and stood in her underwear and looked at herself in the mirror, and admired her own shape, and remembered what it was like when she was seventeen and Leslie called to ask her to be his date to the junior-senior banquet—a banquet, because there was no dancing at their Baptist school, so no prom—and after Leslie's phone call she stood like she was standing now, in front of the mirror in her underwear, but not with the pleasure she felt now, looking at herself. That girl was fat in the wrong places, there were skin problems, moles. What did that girl look like? She couldn't remember anymore. Maybe not so different from the way she looked now as she might have thought. How much of her life had she thrown away on account of her own thoughts?

Two days passed. It was Saturday. Lunchtime he was waiting for her at Wahoo's. She got the table beside his, but then moved to his table, and he asked about her father, and she told him the received story about her father, the one that came from her mother, which was that he had loved her more than anything in the world, that when he died, when she was eight—combine accident in his own fields, foggy rural roads, her mother dragging his body across the field and somehow getting him into the back seat, the family car stuck behind a tractor on the rural road, and no way to safely use the passing lane; maybe he would've made it if they had lived near a hospital—anyway, that when he died, the last words on his lips were of her: "Tell my Genie . . ."

"But, really, my mother was a liar," she said. She never talked to Leslie this way. James lowered his head a little. The way he listened, without probing, opened things up. Genie lowered her voice a little. Why did it matter? She would never see any of the people in the restaurant again. But still she lowered her voice. "My mother had a saying: If you can't be nice, at least have the decency to be vague. And other times she lied flat out when it suited her idea of nice. I was there at the hospital when her mother died, and by then my mother hadn't been to church for ten years and never went again. But her mother said, 'Give me some peace before I go,' and my mother said, 'Jesus is the dearest thing to me, mother,' and, 'I've made my peace with God; I've prayed, and he's heard my prayer,' and she promised her straying days were over. So I don't know anything about my father, James. For all I know, he wanted a son and died of grief for having me."

"I have two daughters," James said. "No father dies of grief for having a daughter."

"Perhaps," Genie said. She was saying too much. Outside it began to drizzle.

"Did you ever think of chalking it up to compassion?" James said.

"The lies?"

"Her kindness," James said. "Her decency."

"So you have daughters," Genie said. "You're divorced?"

"I'm married," he said. "Eleven years, to Valeria."

For some reason, this thrilled her.

"You have children, too?" he said. Texas Al had not asked questions like these. David the boy, neither. And her mother was not in any way noble.

"Anna and Les," she said, leaving off the Jr., somehow knowing he wouldn't press, anyway.

The drizzle turned to rain. Briefly, she considered how easy it must be for him to say kind things. She pictured him in Rio, in Dubai, listening the way he was listening, but to some Brazilian woman, some wealthy Arab businesswoman. Surely it was cultivated. She needed to know that she knew he was practiced.

"I'm afraid of lightning," he said, and reached his right hand across the table and put it on her left. "This isn't that kind of rain, though, and would you like to take a walk under the umbrella?" She found herself rising with him, her right hand cupping his for a moment, so she was holding his hand between hers, and then she let herself look at him for a moment, stand and cup his hand and forget that there were people in the restaurant who believed they knew something about her, and now perhaps that they knew something new, and she didn't mind giving them something to talk about to whomever they talked to, the same way they had talked to her when she had first come to the island two and a half weeks ago, which seemed, now, holding his hand and looking at him, like two months ago, or two years.

He took his umbrella from the rack at the front of the restaurant and they waited for the cars to pass, then crossed the street on foot and made their way to the beach, and he suggested they

take off their shoes and walk on the wet sand in their bare feet. She thought he must be kind to his wife and not talk about the things that, anyway, surely she knew went on. They would be separated for months at a time when he was at sea, and she was learning how people made arrangements, sometimes without saying anything about them. Perhaps his wife had lovers, too.

They began to walk in their bare feet. A week earlier she had walked the same beach, in the rain, without an umbrella, she didn't mind, and the sand was the same consistency, the same wet. But now, walking with him, under the umbrella, she was aware of the skin on the bottom of her feet, her awareness heightened in a way she had not known before in her life, and she felt the cold wet rain where it hit her arms when she swung them outside the shadow of the umbrella, and she felt his skin brushing hers, his arm and her arm, and she felt her whole body, the weight of her breasts, and the muscles in her face, and between her legs. And she felt the walking, the way the blood pumped through her, and the breath in her lungs. They were walking briskly, not like lovers, but like people enjoying a brisk walk. She did not struggle to keep up with him, but if he had walked any faster she might have lost her breath. But her breaths were deep. She thought of the word oxygen, and then there were thoughts of red blood cells and arteries. A phrase from junior high life science: Capillary action.

She stopped him, then. Put a hand on his shoulder and turned him around. Leaned up and kissed him on the mouth, under the umbrella. Pressed her lips to his and kissed him hard, and he put his hand to the small of her back. "My room . . ." she said, meaning to say that it was nearby, but then he had taken her hand in his, and they were walking in the direction of her hotel. "Our shoes," she said, and hoped he would say leave the shoes, he would buy them new shoes, but then she worried he would want to retrieve them, so she said, "Let's leave the shoes. I'd like to buy you new shoes."

She wondered briefly about the dog, and asked, and learned that the dog was waiting in his room, that the room was air conditioned, that there was food, and that he left the television on children's shows, which the dog liked, and this pleased her. She unlocked her room, and they walked in barefoot, and he was careful to step over the carpet at the threshold and onto the tile of the bathroom, so he didn't track sand on the carpet.

She followed him, and turned on the water in the bathtub, and she wondered if he would take her foot in his hand and rinse her feet. She thought of Leslie, the way he would sometimes look at her when she was undressing, and how something in him sometimes seemed unable to act on whatever she stirred within him. She always had to give Leslie some signal. He would wait for her signal. And he would not come into the bathroom when she was using the toilet, even though she had no qualms about walking in on him, and even though they only had one bathroom.

She put her feet under the water and looked at James, and he sat on the edge of the bathtub next to her and put his hands on her feet without her asking him, and he rinsed away the sand from them,

and then he was facing her, her feet in his hands under the water, and one of his feet in the water next to hers, so their legs were touching.

She thought of her husband, and knew she was betraying him. This feeling had not come to her with the boy or the Texan, but the Navy man filled the room in the way they had not. Where before she had felt only excitement, now she felt like she was breaching something—she tried to push the word promises from her mind—and then she was in South Carolina, in the summer heat, beneath a tent, a gathering of all girls, and a woman—not a preacher; women were not preachers—but a woman who had been a missionary's wife in South America, whose husband had piloted a yellow plane, had been killed on the narrow strip of sand along the river where he had landed the plane while trying to bring the Gospel to a lost Amazon tribe said to be cannibals, "And purity," the missionary's wife was saying, "purity unto the Lord," amidst surprisingly frank talk about the passions men could arouse in women, talk like Genie had never known before, *My goodness, I must have been seven or eight years old!*, and then the call to purity, to "passion and purity, my beauties," all of the girls under the tent standing, then, and walking forward, crowding around the missionary's wife at the front of the tent, and she stepping down from the wooden platform, coming down to their level, and everyone holding hands together and singing, "You're my brother, you're my sister, so take me by the hand . . ."

James put a hand on her shoulder and said, "Did I lose you?," and, yes, she was defective. She considered the women of his she had been imagining. Lisbon, Rio, Dubai. His wife, Valeria, dark, certainly, with jet black hair and piercing dark brown eyes. A slightly older woman with a stomach like a washboard, who spoke three languages, who had not spent her childhood summers beneath tents in South Carolina.

How would a woman like that hold her head, her shoulders, her body? Who taught a woman to be a woman like that? What kind of life was possible for a woman like that?

James took one of the towels from the rack above the toilet and laid it on the floor, and then he took another, and swung her legs out over the floor, and dried her calves and her feet with the towel. He was crouching down now, not kneeling, but crouching, the weight of his body balanced on the balls of his feet. He was looking up at her, not smiling exactly. Expectant might be a better word for what it was, and not expectant in the way she might expect from Leslie, who carried his worries with him wherever he went, including their bed. This James was fully present. She considered that he did not hold any thought in his head at the moment except for her. Perhaps it was not true, but whether it was or was not, the way he crouched at her feet, drying her legs with the hotel towel, looking up at her, he made her feel as though he did not hold anything but her.

Perhaps this was how to be true to whatever person you were with, in whatever moment you were with them—to put aside anything but the present, and to know enough to enjoy it, and this, she decided, was how she would live her next few moments, with this man who made her feel as though, in the here and now, she was all there was.

The next day they sat on stools in a cabana bar open to the water, the Chinese pug at their feet, and she said, "It's good that I'm leaving," and he did not say anything, which she took as his way of disagreeing, or at least she wanted to believe that he disagreed.

It occurred to her that she had not met up the next day with the boy or the Texan. She had nothing to say to them, and though she did not have anything in particular to say to James, she felt as though there was much that had passed between them, and that there was no need to give words to any of it, that sitting next to him was enough.

They sat until it grew dark, their legs touching, and then he put his arms around her, and she pushed her bar stool next to his, and he turned his body so that she could lean the weight of her body back against him. He held her for awhile and kissed her neck and put his face in her hair, and she was sure to hold the moment close and hold other moments from the past and future away from her.

At home in West Palm Beach, Leslie rose early and went to work early and came home early to cook dinner and spend time with the children, and then he went to bed early. When he asked her, now, how she was doing—how she was *really* doing—she said she was really fine, she thanked him, she kissed him on the cheek, she helped him chop the vegetables and put them into the Crockpot with the roast and the sickly smell of it filled the kitchen.

Sometimes, standing with him in the kitchen when the children were already asleep, in the hour before he went to bed, his hands in the dishwater and hers on the dishtowel, drying the plates and the silverware, she found that she really was fine, that she could allow him to be the man with his hands in the dishwater rather than the man who rose at four in the morning to pray and read Oswald Chambers, and that she could herself be the woman who helped him chop the vegetables rather than the woman whose father built the house with the roof you could climb upon, or the sister who worried the eyes of God watched her keep secret Flora's nightly escapes, or the daughter at the tent meeting giving herself to the words of the missionary's wife who lost her husband near the yellow plane.

She began to do things for Leslie that Leslie had mostly done for her without her noticing. Often before she woke, he would run their clothes through the washer and put them in the dryer and then take them out later in the evening when he arrived home from the school, and press the dress shirts and put it all away. Other women she knew complained about their husbands, that they did not help with the laundry or dusting or vacuuming. Perhaps they grilled steaks. Leslie did not grill steaks. One Thursday morning she took the children to the day care, then bought two choice cuts of filet mignon, and marinated them in the afternoon, and grilled them so they were ready to eat when he walked in the door.

The minister who married them required six premarital counseling sessions of them, and she remembered that he told her that the feeling of love would fade, that it was chemical, that this was the natural way of things. When the feeling of love fades, he said, service is the pathway to rekindling it. Certainly Leslie was responding to the things she was doing for him. In the evenings, after

the children were asleep, he wanted to make love more often rather than going to bed early. He left notes for her around the house, handwritten notes thanking her for all sorts of favors real and perceived, and pledging undying love and all the sorts of things she knew should move her heart with love toward him.

In time, she thought, the Navy man would recede in her memory, and perhaps he would only come to her half-formed in dreams, the way her grandparents sometimes did, or old boyfriends, or people she must have known when she was very young, in kindergarten or the first grade. She joined the women's group at the church and participated in things she had avoided her entire adult life, such as making pies for auctions to send high schoolers to third world countries, or canned food drives, or something called the Angel Tree, meant to make Christmas merry for the children of prison inmates by filling their stocking with possessions.

But another month passed, and Cmdr. Everett James was as clear in her memory as if he had held her in the cabana bar only the day before. If possible, he drew into sharper focus than he had even in the days she had spent with him in the Keys. When she heard the voices of her children crying for her or for Leslie in the night, or when she saw a Soviet or Chinese military procession on the television, or felt the wind off the Atlantic when she took the trash to the curbside, he would rise up in memory: their feet wet and sandy, his hands on her legs in the bathtub, the Chinese pug watching children's television shows in his hotel room. The thought of him would fill her, and gradually she began to allow herself to believe that what had happened was not simply an episode from the past, not simply a dalliance, but instead a harbinger, an omen, an opening out onto possibility. She would see a tall, fit man in the grocery store picking apples, and for a moment she would allow herself to think it could be him.

She wanted to talk about him, but to whom could she speak of him? Not to Leslie, certainly, nor to the people she knew from his work and their church, the people they called their friends. What would she say, anyway, if she was able? Had she been in love, on Islamorada? And if not love, what then? Was there anything learned, anything that she could take from those days and bring back to her old life?

She thought of her mother when she found herself speaking in vague terms about love, about men and women, about the flash and flower of romance, and Leslie, for his part, took her to mean that she was talking about him and her. She found that he was standing straighter, slumping less often in his chair, speaking more about himself at the dinner table. Perhaps there were things old women knew that young women needed to grow into knowledge of, and perhaps James was right to say that her mother was kind rather than selfish and petty, her lies and her omissions.

One night after a planning meeting for the Angel Tree, she leaned over to Doris Jones, wife of the man who coached the soccer team at Leslie's school—it was late, and they had been joking as coarsely as any of the church women ever joked, about the prisoners and the hunger they must feel for women, and anyway she was tired,

and Doris had used the word "dreamy," but only in the abstract, not about any particular prisoner—and Genie said, "If you only could have seen this Navy commander I met in the Keys."

It was as if Doris didn't hear what she said, but of course she heard, because she walked away, briskly, as though a man were following her in a parking lot, and got into her Plymouth Horizon, and started it, and drove away without saying another word.

What if, Genie wondered, *I got into my own car and drove away?*

He had sent a courier to deliver his letter, a young man in white bell bottoms who stood straight as he did. When she answered the door, the young man said her name, and she answered to it, and he handed her the letter. She said, "What is this?" and the young man said, "I don't know, ma'am," and then he turned and marched toward the street and stepped into a Lincoln Town Car that could not possibly have been his own, and drove away.

Dear Genie, it said, and her blood raced at what came next. He was no longer to sea. He would be stateside, administrative from now on, and he didn't mind. He wanted it. He had asked for it. He wanted her if she wanted him, and here was how. The phone number of a travel agent who could make the arrangements. An airport Hilton in the District of Columbia. His home address, *but please, love . . .* And of course, when he gave her his address, he meant it as a trust, and of course she would no more visit him there than he would send a letter by post, where Leslie could intercept it. And that word: Love.

She called the travel agent and made the arrangements, and told Leslie about trouble at *Budget Travel*. The D.C. job that ought to have been hers. "Someone's cousin," she said, "always someone's cousin, or someone who went to school with someone," and this, of course, was how she had come into the assignments she had, too. There was trouble to be straightened out, fact checking, certainly trips to the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian Museum.

"The Hope Diamond," Leslie said. "Friendship Seven. The Lunar Module . . ."

When he said it, some part of her wanted to offer to take him with her. She found that when she thought the words she needed to say to convince him to take a few days away from the school, she could see herself at the museum with him, walking the halls with him, holding his hand as if he were her child, and she could see him rushing ahead, skipping almost, the way he did when they went to see the Atlanta Braves play a Spring Training game against the St. Louis Cardinals at Municipal Stadium, and they were late, and he was afraid he might miss an inning of Jim Kaat. But she also could see him at the Fat Man and Little Boy exhibit, see him lecturing some Japanese tourists about how it was necessary to drop the bombs at Hiroshima and Nagasaki to avoid the land invasion, how it was not just American lives that were saved, but Japanese lives, too, if you considered the projected net casualties.

" . . . the originals," he was saying, "were sure enough carried in the party of Lewis and Clark." And certainly he had vacation days. She could not recall that he had ever used a vacation day. She could

go with him and forget about the Navy man, take some of the money she had squirreled away from her work, and, to keep up the appearance of working, slip away here and there on pretense of writing things down . . . And still Leslie was yammering dumbly. She watched him talk and hoped to see something new in him, but everything was the same as it always had been.

On the appointed day, Leslie drove her to the airport at six in the morning, and kissed her on the forehead and said, "Are you all right?" The truth was that there was no way for her to gauge what the truth was, and she said, "Fine," and started out the passenger door.

He grabbed her by the arm—not roughly, but it was still grabbing—and he said, "Something is wrong, Genie. I should see you off at the terminal. Maybe we can talk there. Talk for a few minutes before the flight leaves. Or anything. I want to listen to you."

He let go of her arm and waited. She patted him on the knee. She felt the pillow of air between her tongue and the roof of her mouth. She went out and took her things and did not look back at him before she went through the sliding doors and into the terminal.

James met her at the airport in his dress uniform and greeted her by her last name and carried her bags as though the admiral had sent him, and she looked down at herself, at her pantsuit, and him in his dress uniform, and wondered that any charade were necessary at all, that anyone would look at him and look at her and believe that there could be anything between them, on account of their clothes.

In the Lincoln Town Car, though, he took her face in his hands and kissed her fiercely, and took her directly to the elevator at the airport Hilton, and there in the room he was the lover home from five years at war, and never before had she thought such a thing, and never before had she considered thinking about such a thing—certainly never when she returned home to Leslie.

He presented her with a new dress, charcoal gray, and cut an inch above the knees. It was late in the evening, then, too late for restaurants to be open, and he had arranged for a room in the closed dining room downstairs, and wine and soft lighting and soft music. She had never owned a dress so fine. He poured her a glass of wine, and poured one for himself and drained it quickly, without toasting, and his face flushed, and he poured another. She looked down at herself and the dress, and then across the table from him, and she said, "We are beautiful."

Now he was leaned back in his chair a little, this posture new on her. "You," he said, and now he raised his glass, and she raised hers, and they clinked them together and both of them drank. There were children to think about, and she did think about them.

"My father worked for the railroad," he said. "He would leave for three days and come back with packets of orange marmalade."

She began to cry. He was slow to reach across the table, and then he moved his chair around the table and beside her and held her.

"How?" she said. "How? How?"

Never before had she known options, though she felt like what was left to do had been marked on her before she was born.

Gina Ochsner

Wanting

A summer of hot winds and fiery tempers. The sharks stopped biting and irregular tides left jellyfish washed up on shore, lingering just long enough to get a last sting in before dying. No rain: just that ceaseless wind cracking paint, turning doorknobs, and unpeeling the wallpaper. The old salters, veteran fishers and crabbers, cursed the moon. They gnashed their teeth and ate sand that ground the lining of their stomachs and intestines. Later a few of them crapped little chunks of glass that some mistook for diamonds. The rest of us prayed for rain.

Each day my wife, Lena, and I thought it might come: dark greenish clouds bunched across the horizon, and we watched the crop-dusters seed the afternoon clouds. You could tell that the birds wheeling overhead were optimistic about it, too, fluting the edges of the kingfisher sky until the wind wore them out and shouldered them away. Still, we eyed the sky with a strange mixture of suspicion and hope, our breaths crimped tight at our ribs. We prayed that those clouds would stay just for once, that the terrible wind pushing everything from us would stop. But the rain still didn't come and our pleas went sailing on that wind to the small timber towns deep in the hills where loggers shook their heads in unbounded wonderment at the abundance of their rainfall.

Perhaps it takes a desert to produce a mirage. Perhaps we were driven mad by the sand and the heat. But we didn't give up. We knew the rain would come. And we were right.

It started first in our fractured sleep. Clouds gathered, rusting over our salt scorched sky and we could smell ozone of an approaching lightning storm. I dreamed of slugmullion and thought I tasted rain in my soup, under my tongue. Corky, our next-door neighbor, said he felt a quickening in his blood. Lena said it was more like a whistling behind the eardrum. But we all agreed that we felt it dropping down, falling upon the soft palette of our dreams, fat drops of water falling so fast and in such volume that within minutes we feared our trailers would upend and float on a flash flood constructed entirely in the imaginations of our night-time dreaming.

After seven days and nights, an eerie calm settled over the sea. That's how we knew it was really coming, at last, not only in our dreams, but here, now. We awoke rumpled, in our dirty clothes, wiping the salt from the corners of our eyes, feeling a sudden and colossal thirst. Overhead the sky was the color of a fresh bruise that would take weeks to heal. I could feel the air reaching saturation, equal parts air and water, uniformly wet. Lena noticed it first; the wind had stopped. She tipped her head to one side and pounded her

ear with a flattened palm. That's when it came: On the tongue and in the hand, falling lightly and with the grace of the petals of flush cherry blooms, each drop a perfect blossom of translucence. Rain drops as round as coins began to fall and suddenly we were millionaires with jewel-studded skin. We lay in massive puddles, backstroking. We drank water from our cupped palms and shoes. We took off our clothes and felt no shame. I watched the rain tamp down the sand and for the first time in months, I felt good, the water working on my heart, allowing it to expand, growing large enough for anything.

It rained like this for a week, then two. Church attendance swelled and an atmosphere of goodwill prevailed. The sharks started biting again and at last, we thought we had what we wanted. Then the sewers backed up and drainage ditches overflowed. Sandbag crews were dispatched, but too late. After the third week of rain, street signs and tombstones, the very caskets from the graves, lifted from the mud and bumped along a flood river to the sea. Garbage, the hulks of abandoned vehicles, crab pots, and bones of our grandmothers and grandfathers jammed the beach, bucking gently on the tides, awaiting passage to another shore. We thought it was water we wanted, thought it was like looking at the hand of God untying the corset stays of the heavens. We saw then that we were wrong and we began to curse that deep deep need for something more, for miracles here under this ungoverned sky, cursing the part of us that always wants.

People are complaining, so much water within and without. They want the wind back to push this water away. Who can blame them? But I know what will happen next. I can see it unraveling before my eyes: first the heat, then the salt. With lips cracked and flaking, we'll wish for water once again. But it'll be wind, unstitching us bit by bit, a crossbow humming an ancient tune, the dark wind muscling through us. Then us, waiting for rain, sure it is rain we need to fill us, we who are still only partially complete, partially not, the wind having carried the best parts of us away.

Rus Bradburd

Scene & Dialogue

Leonard Redmond
English 200
Writing in the Humanities
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"Event Essay: Scene & Dialogue"

The event I have chosen to write about most people have hopefully never had to go through. I was arrested for selling a controlled substance, meaning weed, after my freshman year here at State. This occurred in the Englewood neighborhood on Chicago's Southside, and caused my mother or should I say me many problems.

This event lead to me being dragged away from home, and some dialogue from my mother that I'd never heard from her before, although I'd heard other people say those things. As I was being cuffed and read my rights, she started screaming, saying "No good motherfucker," and went completely out of control, at which time I realized that she was yelling at me and not the cops. They were reading my Miranda warning, and she began slapping, and so then they had to restrain her. So this was another event that most people will hopefully never have to put themselves through—hearing their own mothers say motherfucker, and then the cops responding by laughing, as if I was not humiliated enough.

But the ripple effect that we talk about in class, what happened after the event, was even more interesting, and what I have really chosen to pursue in this paper and even write a scene about. While I was gone that afternoon, my mother had to call the coaches here at State and tell them the details of what happened. Everybody knows lots of players smoke weed, which is why the NBA doesn't even test for it anymore, don't ask me why the colleges do.

This was after my freshman year (I am now a senior, don't ask me why it took so long to take this class) when I was named the league's Freshman of the Year, the trophy of which my mom tried to hit me with too, while I was in handcuffs. I had to calm everyone down and tell my mom to put my damn trophy back on the TV where it still sits, chip and all. But I bailed out thanks to Red, an old partner of mine, and didn't even have to spend the night, which I was thankful for.

No sooner had I got home than the phone was ringing, and it was my coaches, who already knew what had happened, thanks to my mom's sense of panic, thank god she's not my coach, right?

So I had to explain everything to Coach Pytel, and each time I said something, Pytel repeated it to Coach Hood, who probably thought he'd get polluted talking to a drug dealer. And I was damn near in tears, for real, because I thought that they'd take my scholarship. Until Coach Pytel said this: "Did you talk to any reporters?"

So I said, "This Chicago. Getting popped for weed happens every day."

And I heard Pytel say something to Coach Hood, who he always has to answer to. Pytel would get very twitchy when Coach Hood was around. One time I noticed, when Pytel was doing an internet search, with Coach Hood standing right behind him. Pytel would click like five times when he just needed to double click on something. Anyway, then Pytel came back on the phone and said, "Do you think there's a chance it will stay out of the papers?"

These guys never had any experience with Chicago cops, not that I had a whole lot, so I told Pytel that, "If I go to trial and get convicted it would have a bigger chance to make the paper."

See, I was what the coaches call a "Sleeper," meaning nobody ever paid any attention to me and realized that I was destined to be a great player. But in a funny way, I could tell. When I was in high school, I started seeing plays develop and I'd make my move—but it was like my body wouldn't listen to me yet. Meaning that I'd miss the steal or the blocked shot, but I knew I should have had it, and in my mind I did make the play.

Once I got to State as a freshman I guess my body started to catch up with my mind. And the plays that I used to just miss, now I was making them easy. Plus I gained about ten pounds eating in the cafeteria, which my mother was mad about, since she's a better cook.

The next day—I mean really, the next day—Pytel called me again, but this time he was at the Midway airport, and said to stay home because he was coming to visit.

Pytel hadn't been to our apartment since he came that one time, by himself, for his recruiting trip. He said that day, "All we are offering you is a chance, there are no guarantees about playing time," so that day was different. Because, one, he was the only coach from a major college to show up, since my grades were a mess. The junior college coaches said I'd be a big star, but my mom liked that Pytel was more realistic she said. Me, I wanted to be a star, but I also wanted to play at a major school, so when I made my SAT test score, that was it. I signed at State.

The day after my arrest, I met a different Coach Pytel. Here's why. Now that I was already State's best player, he talked to me the way I wished he had the year before.

"You're our hope," he said. "We've never had a guy named Freshman of the Year. So we're going to do our damnedest to help you here." And he just generally made a fuss over me, saying it would be a shame if my career ended over this, and that he'd already spoken to the Public Defender.

So I said, "But ya'll kicked Joe Robinson off the team last year for just smoking weed." I was still trying to understand what the

difference was, I mean here I was selling. Then Pytel repeated Joe Robinson's name, in a way that I got the idea. Joe Robinson wasn't shit. I was dunking on Joe Robinson while I was still homesick my first week.

The next week, a miracle happened. My PD discovered that the warrant that the cops used had the wrong address, it said 932 W 67th. But our apartment building is 934. And 932 doesn't even exist. And they spelled my last name Readman, which isn't right either. So the whole case was thrown out, and the cops would have to find someone else, because that side job career was now over for me.

"I hope you learned your lesson," my mom said, I suppose like most moms say all the time.

Except I did learn a lesson, another besides don't sell weed: the coaches had begun to sweat me, all worried about my life and my career and my grades. So one day in August I called Pytel to say the whole case had been dropped and they could stop fretting, then Pytel asked if he could put me on hold. He had to excuse himself from a meeting with the school's president.

And I thought, and I'm being real here, when will this shit ever happen again? Meaning, I didn't want the coaches to stop sweating me and treating me special.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," Pytel said. "I had to tell the president it was an emergency. What's the latest?"

"No news," I said. But it was like I *heard* me saying it. Because at the same instant, I was thinking, "Why are you lying to Pytel, Leonard Redmond? Why not just come out and tell the coaches that the charges were dropped?" That was the first lie I told to the coaches.

And that was when Pytel told me the plan that he and Coach Hood had cooked. They were going to put me in the easy classes, meaning Criminal Justice and the like. And I was going to just play through the year and then when my trial came, I'd have a bunch of "A's" to show the judge.

"Did you talk to Rothstein?" I asked.

He was that Public Defender. If Pytel talked to him, he'd know the whole case had been dropped like a bad habit. But Pytel hadn't talked to the PD since the first time, and I told him that Mr. Rothstein had said it was better from now on if none of the coaches called ever again. Which was the second lie I told, and leads me to the real conflict of this essay (not getting arrested for drugs, which would be a more sentimental and cliché conflict that as writers we are to avoid).

Instead, it was telling a lie to help myself and improve my status, even though being known by the coaches to be a drug dealer most people wouldn't think is too helpful. So, it's ironic, which means better.

That Fall of my sophomore year I was signed up for Intro to Criminal Justice. And also Jazz to Rock. And Marriage and the Family. And two others, but not this English class (smile) so I had a very relaxed

time. Here I was, supposed to be sweating this upcoming trial, and what am I going to say to the Judge on my own behalf.

And instead it was Coach Pytel and Coach Hood that were worried, always doting on me the way my mom did the time I had my tonsils taken out. Pytel would ask did I need anything? and had I talked to Mr. Rothstein at the Public Defender's office? Then it was extra Nikes and sweatsuits and sometimes even single rooms on road trips. And I began to wonder if I should tell the coaches a third lie: that there had been a continuance in the trial and that the whole case might take another year, and to keep those Nikes coming.

Now I know that I pushed the whole thing too far, or I realized it one morning when I was over at this Nigerian guy's house, another guy on the team who I call Jungle Boogie. He's serious for real. It was a Monday morning, and Pytel was coming by the school apartments as usual, pretending it was something important, like where did I think the team should eat pre-game meal, but really it was to make sure that I got to class. I didn't mind because who wouldn't like being chauffeured to class three days a week?

So Jungle Boogie said, "Coach Pytel is here to get you. I heard him beep his horn." He went to the window and pulled the drapes back.

But I didn't move. "Let him come up and get me," I said. There were some cinnamon Pop Tarts that I had just put down in the toaster.

Jungle Boogie got that look on his face he gets when he's talking about Marcus Garvey and Malcolm X. He started talking about the over-dependence on the white man, and the cycle of poverty that I was now party to.

"Party nothing," I said. "I'd be doing this even if Pytel was black."

But Jungle Boogie said that wasn't the point; the point was that Pytel and Jack Hood had made a colony out of me, and now I was part of this system just by playing along. And maybe he had a point, although he once made the same statement when I was waiting for this fine girl from La Jolla to swing by the apartment and get me. What Malcolm X and Coach Pytel and some slim goodie from California have in common I still don't get.

Although Jungle Boogie didn't know anything about my court case, let alone the whole thing being dropped, I started to think he was right. There was only two weeks left in the Spring semester, and they thought my trial was coming up soon. It wasn't, but still I figured maybe now it was time for me to change.

So, just as Pytel started to come up to get me—he slammed his car door in disgust—I was coming down from Jungle Boogie's apartment.

"I'll get to class on my own," I said to Pytel. Then I could see that Jungle Boogie was right. Pytel needed me more than I needed him. Pytel had the radio cranked up to my station, Hot 103, which I know he never listened to if I wasn't in the car, but I had programmed his radio.

"It's over a mile," he said. "You don't want to be late."

And I said, "I got legs."

Darlin' Neal

Three Shorts

Weave

The old truck was rusted. Its cab round. The whole thing full of soft edges, sitting in the weave of long dried grass. No place for a key inside—a button someone pushed long ago, before they went somewhere over the grass then fresh with cows ambling through and gnawing it close. A boy kissed a girl on the new leather. Someone called him a punk though no one knew then about the punks we are now—how that word came to mean toughness turned to mutilation, for some, then commodified and back round again. The toll we pay to feel anything, for feeling too much.

Back then there was just a boy kissing a girl who would leave him one day because he was poor and she more educated and these things come to matter more than kisses and getting lost in touch. As unbelievable as that can be. A boy who went out to that field and stole a watermelon that rode in the back of the truck with them, waiting for later, while they watched *East of Eden* at a Drive-In.

They beat him that night, for being with her, for what he stole that she gave. For what they suspected. He'd dropped her off and walked her to the door of her beautiful house. He got away from the beating like a fast sly animal and hid beneath bushes, not breathing, branches breaking around him, until they were gone. Bleeding he made it through that night and married her anyway and they had a child, a brother I never met.

A String of Catfish

When I saw the dough I thought she was making pancakes, but it was too white and I realized, biscuits, of course, not even homemade anymore but from a can she'd popped open. I remembered the blackberries in the freezer. I cooked them with sugar. We ate and she told stories suspicious about why I'd come back after so many years, but it was just for those stories, to hear how I'd come flying out of the chicken coop backwards after sneaking inside, trying to fetch an egg, to remember the taste of fresh milk, a kitten catching milk from a stream in the air, to see the place I lived when I was first born, the house with those lace curtains, the woods where my father played and all my life had told me stories about. His brother threw a pitch fork and caught him in the thigh. I remembered the sting of piss ants clinging to my toes. I used a poker in the fireplace to make the warmth brighter. I loved the flying ashes. I held my daughter a little and rocked even though she was really too big to hold like that. My uncle came to the house and I was looking through a box of pictures. As a child I looked so tough holding a string of catfish above my head standing in a chair while that string reached to the floor. I asked but he wouldn't let me take them and make copies. Maybe he'd figure something out. He didn't want to lose the pictures. I helped him rake the leaves and he spoke in Bible verses and reminded me that so had my grandfather. I told him I didn't know if I could live in Mississippi again but I was missing home, and he told me, no, that the way I thought, a white girl who would march for MLK, who didn't believe in a gender for God, it wouldn't be the whites that would kill me but the blacks. I was remembering being....

I was remembering being four beside a pond, not knowing the difference between me and the little black boy who waved from the other side, my uncle teaching me how to hook a worm and toss the line out just so. I was watching my grandmother listen to the magnolia leaves and blossoms in the wind. I was realizing all the ways I'd never look my uncle in the eyes again.

Fumble

She was thinking of beauty, sitting out there on her steps with the stars illuminating the desert world silver all the way to the mountains. Yucca, mesquite, rocks and barbed-wired fences sparkled beneath that light. If you stared, you could see inside the shadows. Her son, head hung beneath that blue cap and cigarette dangling, had gone home crying. She'd sent him, promised: tomorrow I'll start calling doctors. He'd come over with her granddaughter who'd left before he did, one home close enough to another to walk. The child had been dressed as a lamb, with grand coal eyelashes and a tail with a fuzzy end, for a play at school. She, the grandmother, hadn't been invited. Watching the child leave she'd thought of sheep in The Bible, how some believed blind following was the way to God. The world was heaven—that's what her own mother had believed. On earth we get our heaven. On earth we get our hell.

On TV someone was yelling about a fumble. Usually she cared but the dark of the house was nice, the remote next to her hand. She pushed the button and it was so quiet she could hear telephone wires buzzing from pole to pole, carrying messages.

She thought of calling her children. One son's wife had a beeper she didn't need. A little grown dog who fit in a teacup and used the litter box like a cat.

The son who'd left crying was her oldest, a man who drank too much but worked hard and was successful. Everyone had been worried about his liver for a long time. Out there in the desert she remembered his horrified face when she'd asked him to touch her. "Feel," she had said, guiding his hand to the soft cotton of her blouse, beneath to her breast. The horror had deepened with what followed. You haven't told Dad? Bigger than a golf ball, not as big as an orange. Flicking ashes out into the desert, he'd recited references that meant nothing, really, to either of them. She knew important measurements would be discussed in terms of stages. Stages used to be such innocent things, steps taken, needs no longer needs.

She closed her eyes against the memory of his crying and opened them to the starlight turning the desert to a heaven of light and shapes.

Victoria Sprow

Rachel's Story

There's Rachel again, making faces outside my window. "Hey Matty, you Italian Stallion," she laughs. "Are you gonna let me in or what?" When I shake my head, she pouts, and I turn away. I look back, and she is gone.

She comes to my window almost every night, fingers tapping on the glass. *Click click click. Let me in*. She is always laughing. *Matty, you stud, open the window*. It is dark but her eyes are blue and bright as lanterns. I want to tell her to stop doing this, it can't be good. But somehow I can't bring myself to say it. I'd hate for her to go. If she goes now, she'll never make it back again. I'm certain of that.

She graduated in a white gown with her arms full of irises, me on her right and Bobby on her left. We had the same last name, all three of us, which was unexceptional only in that our shared name was Russo. There were four other Russos in our graduating class at Rutgers, all full-blooded Italians. We met during registration fall of freshman year, under the violent lights of a damp, custard-colored classroom.

Rachel was not beautiful. But she smelled like someone beautiful; sweat like wet grass and firewood, reminding you of summer camp, of sitting by the lake at night with your arm around some girl. She was fresh, bohemian—part of the earth and the natural state of things. After I came to know her, it seemed I could not remember a time in my life when Rachel had *not* been there somewhere—she was the girl at the checkout; she was the dentist's assistant; she was the woman I passed in the street. She was part of every memory, always in the background, telling me, *I'm here, Matty*.

She often wore leggings and bright patterned dresses. She'd throw her arms around my elbow and rest her pink face on my shoulder. "You're a cutie, but I'm glad we'll never date. I like you too much."

She laughed when she said this, but senior year at Rutgers she asked Bobby out for coffee and they began to date exclusively. I suspect she'd been in love with him from the start. He had tragic Bob Dylan eyes and a jaw heavy as wood. But with his thick black hair he was more handsome than she was pretty, and I could tell she felt

fortunate to be with him—chosen, almost—like the oboist asked to prom by the quarterback.

Rachel was slender, not even five feet tall. Sometimes she got little spots of acne on her forehead. From her mother she'd inherited a thin, humpbacked beak of a nose. But she also had eyes the color of smoke, haunting a gray-blue, and long hair so blonde it was white. She flaunted a petite, interesting kind of pretty, like the starlet's spunky best friend, a Frenchy or Marty or someone like that. In films, these kind of girls are absolutely necessary, but only for comparison. They are meant to make the better looking ones even more stunning. Usually no one cares much about the Martys and the Frenchys; if it weren't for the Sandys, we wouldn't know them at all.

I don't know why Bobby decided to date her. He'd been with plenty of girls over the years. Perhaps being with Rachel was just *easier*—she was sweet, and comfortable, and she loved him. They laughed together.

But who knows? I'm not going to say that's *all* there was to it. I like to think that some part of him recognized the same thing about Rachel that I did—although he couldn't put his finger on it—something neither of us would ever find again.

After graduation we rented a U-Haul and moved west to L.A., where Bobby and I rented a ground-floor apartment off of San Fernando Road, and Rachel moved into her cousin's house three blocks away. The building where Bobby and I lived was shabby and small, located at an intersection. At night the headlights of left-turning cars fluttered across our living room like fairies. Rachel desperately wanted to live with us. The possibility of cohabitation—of graduating into a "grown-up" relationship with Bobby—thrilled her. But Bobby never asked, and she never pursued the issue.

Rachel found a job in a bakery that made mostly wedding cakes, but its counters were always full of chocolates stacked in large glass jars sealed with cork. Rachel took orders and gave out cake samples in paper cups. Bobby and I worked nights as wait staff in the pizzeria next door, and before our shift we would come into the bakery to see Rachel and talk about that day's auditions. We both fantasized about being in the movies, and Rachel would listen patiently as we reenacted every detail of the casting—what shoes we wore; how we said, *Please, Marie, don't go*; the director's expressions. While we talked, she sneaked us candy out of the glass jars.

The thing was, Rachel was just about the only person in Hollywood who *didn't* want to be an actor. She dreamt all along about moving to New York, becoming a photographer. But she wasn't perfect; she was afraid. Avoiding a dream isn't the same thing as succeeding, but it certainly isn't failing.

So we'd been together four years, Bobby and Rachel and me. But let's say it started the summer after we moved to Hollywood, when we were driving from L.A. to Anaheim in the brown Ford Bobby had bought from Rachel's cousin. The way I remember it, Bobby was at the wheel. We were speeding south down Interstate 5

with the windows open. Rachel was snapping photos from the front seat with her Pentax ZX.

So right there, that's Rachel in the front next to Bobby, and me in the backseat behind her. She's got a big hardbound book on her lap, full of black and white portraits of celebrities. That's because we're doing this thing we always used to do on road trips to pass the time, taking turns reading to each other. We also took turns choosing the book, and we'd gone through three of the *Harry Potter* books this way, and one volume of Langston Hughes poems, and after a while it got to be a superstition, like if we *didn't* read in the car we'd all be doomed, so that eventually we started reading everywhere, even for a ten-minute drive.

But on this particular afternoon Rachel pulls out this picture book, and it doesn't take long for Bobby and I to realize there's not a single word in that book past the copyright page.

Bobby leans over. "Fuck, is that what you brought? How are you gonna read from that?"

"I dunno." Rachel shrugs. "I liked it. I'll just make up the story to go with the pictures."

I press my face to the window. "Is there a bookstore around here? Bobby, stop when you see a bookstore, will you?"

"Does it look like there's a bookstore around here?"

"Well then just stop on the side. We can leave Rachel there."

Rachel reaches behind her and swings her bag at me.

We all laugh, but neither Bobby nor I want to admit that we are genuinely worried that she has brought catastrophe upon us. Bobby's hands tighten around the steering wheel. He speeds up.

"Hey, pull over," I say. I'm thinking fast, trying to act cool. "I've gotta piss."

But Bobby only presses the gas harder.

"Come on, turn off here, what are you doing?"

Rachel grabs his leg. "Come on, slow down."

He looks over at her then, and back at me. Seeing our faces, so serious and afraid, he opens his mouth and begins to howl with laughter. The sounds roll out in waves, like rocks skipping fast over a lake. "Guys, guys," he says finally, "I'm kidding." He moves his foot from the gas to the brake. From my seat, I can see his foot searching for the pedal.

But he's still looking at Rachel, and suddenly the car in front of us brakes too, fast and hard. Rachel cries out, she grabs the wheel and yanks it toward her, and Bobby flings his hands in the air. Our car spins off the highway, through the guardrail, down the hill, and we are rolling and Rachel is screaming, I can hear her but I can't do anything but close my eyes and sink into a dream of parachutes and clouds sliding like pucks across the sky.

When I wake up the car is destroyed, and red siren lights spin quietly like pinwheels above my head. Rachel and Bobby are sitting on the grass next to me.

"Oh, he's awake!" Rachel reaches out to touch me, but someone else is there and blocks her hand. "Don't touch," they say.

I blink at her.

"They had to pull apart the car to get you out." Her eyelids are heavy and black, which means she's been crying. "But it's okay now," she assures me. "You're okay."

I try to sit up but am forced back down again. "Let me up," I say. "I feel fine."

"They're gonna take you to the hospital. But you're fine, so it's okay. I called my cousin to take Bobby and me home. So we'll see you soon, all right? Like, a couple hours."

Bobby puts his arm around Rachel. "Stay strong, my man. I'll call your mom for you, okay?"

"Tell her not to come. If she comes, I'll never forgive her." I struggle to sit up. I don't see why I have to go the hospital, strapped onto a cot like an invalid.

As they lift my stretcher into the ambulance, I see Rachel and Bobby bent toward each other, their foreheads touching. They are totally absorbed in each other now. They are absorbed in the beauty of their survival, this new life they have been given together. This second chance.

"I love you," she whispers.

"I love you too," he says. It is the first time he has ever said this to her, I know. He puts his hand on her cheek.

Bobby keeps his word when my mother checks in that afternoon, and tells her I'm working late at the restaurant. Rachel comes to pick me up in her cousin's cherry red car, her hair pinned back with bobby pins. When she throws her arms around me she holds the back of my head with her palm. "I knew they wouldn't find anything wrong with you! Didn't I tell you?"

The floor of the car is littered with cigarette stubs. "Don't look at them," Rachel sighs, searching her purse for the keys. "She's a mess."

"I'm glad you're all right," I tell her. "We were lucky, weren't we?"

"You know, Matty," she says, "it's really just like a dream, this whole thing. Just like a dream." She reaches toward me. For a second I think she's going to hold my hand. But instead she dips her fingers into the console, where her lipstick is buried under a compact and a pack of tissues. She glances in the mirror as she puts it on. "I can't believe it even happened. And with Bobby and me, it's like, I think this has given him a new view on things. He was a mess when we got home this afternoon. He *cried*, if you can believe it." She smiles to check for lipstick on her teeth. "He's taking me out tonight. We're going to some club."

I try to imagine what I will do tonight, on the night of my own rebirth, while Rachel and Bobby are spinning eights over the dance floor.

"You're still in shock, aren't you?" Rachel says. "I can see it in your face." Then she really does take my hand. "It's okay to be scared," she tells me softly. "I'm here. It's only me."

When we arrive at the apartment the sun has gone down. Outside cars pass frantically. Bobby is watching basketball in the living room.

"Ta da!" Rachel throws open the door. "And so he arrives, The Great Mateo!" She bows down at me.

Bobby comes over and takes my elbow, clasping my back with his right hand. "Christ, I'm glad you're okay. What a day."

I laugh. "Yeah, I know. Well, what doesn't kill you makes you stronger, right?"

"Right, totally right."

I can see Rachel out of the corner of my eye, fussing with a hair clip that's just fallen out. "So," I say. "I hear you guys are goin' out tonight?"

Bobby looks at Rachel. "Can I talk to you for a sec?"

"Oh," she says, surprised. "Okay." He leads her into the kitchen and closes the door.

Waiting on the sofa, I can see them as clearly as if I were inside that yellow kitchen with them. He is telling her, I know, that he can't take her out tonight. There's that audition tomorrow morning, and he's decided to go. Seize the day, you know? Every minute counts.

But you promised, she is saying, close to tears. How can you go to an audition? We almost died together.

Yes, but we didn't, did we? We lived so that we could go on with our lives. This is a sign. I'm meant to do this. It's only a matter of time.

When she doesn't respond he pulls her closer, moves his hand through her hair. Hey, hey, he tells her. We'll do it tomorrow night, okay? Same plan. Just tomorrow.

Tomorrow is too late, she says. It won't feel the same tomorrow. It's like magic, this day is *magic*.

When they emerge Rachel, holding her bottom lip between her teeth, sees me staring, then smiles and flops down on the couch across from me. Bobby sits down next to her and puts his arm around her. We sit there quietly engrossed in our private thoughts.

Rachel breaks the silence. "You know," she says brightly, picking at a thread on the throw pillow. "I think we should buy a puppy."

"Jesus, Rachel." Bobby rolls his eyes. "What does that have to do with anything?"

She shrugs. "I was thinking about it while I was driving Matty home. We saw somebody walking that lab down the street. Remember, Matty?"

I put my hands in the air. "Leave me out of this."

I've offended her, though. "You don't have to say it like *that*," she says. "It could be your dog too. You live here, you'd have to help with it."

"But *you* don't live here," Bobby says. "How would we work something like that?"

"We could share him. Like, you get him on weekends. Or something like that. It doesn't matter anyway. I'm here all the time."

"Like a divorced couple splitting the kid?" says Bobby.

"Well, I could move in here," she suggests.

Bobby stands up then and kisses her on the forehead. "Let's talk about this later, okay? I'm gonna go down the street and get us some food."

"Don't worry about him," I tell her when he's gone. "He's just freaked out by what happened. He wants to get back to his normal routine, try to forget the accident, you know? He feels guilty."

"I don't want to forget it," she says, but won't look at me. She's groping around her purse, and goes into the bathroom. I hear her cutting lines on the lid of the toilet bowl. A moment later, though—too quickly—she emerges. She stands in the doorway.

"Forget it," she says, and I'm not sure she's talking to me. "What a fucking waste of my time."

October: still no puppy, no moving boxes stacked on our living room floor. Rachel, though—to her credit—has changed a great deal since the accident. Her cousin has moved back east, and she's between roommates. Alone more often now, she is quieter, more thoughtful than she used to be. Though she still drinks once in a while, she has given up drugs and cigarettes. She takes art classes on the weekends and has rediscovered the Catholicism of her childhood. I see her praying in the kitchen on the mornings when she has spent the night here, bent over the counter with the early light drenching her hair. She counts her beads, and her face is pearlized.

This is Rachel, waiting for Bobby to wake up one morning and tell her how he's been a fool, how all along *she* was the answer to his problems. Once, on one of those rare occasions when I go to her house without him, I find a tattered copy of *Modern Bride* stuffed between her toilet and the bathtub. She wants me to tell Bobby. She is using me as a messenger.

They've been together over a year, it's only natural; girls inevitably start thinking about wedding bells. But when I return I say, "So, Martha, what's for dinner?" and pretend I never saw it. I have no intention of informing Bobby. I am certain this discovery will unhinge him. If they split up, Rachel will move back to New Jersey, and this means I will lose her.

Sometimes when we all get drunk together and Bobby's at the bar or in the bathroom, I think about saying to her, "Did you ever wonder about going away together, you and me? For good? We could go anywhere, Miami, Bali. Anywhere at all."

I feel light as paper, and the music is pounding, her face strobelit. I'm certain she'll say yes. And then we could just blow away, Rachel and me. I could gather her up and we would float away, easy as pie, out of the purple light of the club, away from the painted faces and the stink of booze and the ice sizzling in our glasses, and into the night.

But then Bobby returns, and she nuzzles his shoulder gently with her nose. And Bobby turns and looks at her with such tenderness that for a second I can see how it is she loves him. I see how it is that these moments, these pebbles of mutual affection, have grown over time into a castle, a golden palace where she can live and wait for him to return to her.

This is the last day. Wednesday, the day before Thanksgiving. We have decided to stay in L.A., and are planning a barbecue in Rachel's backyard.

Here are Bobby and I, sitting by the pool, the sun ignited. "Fuckin' beautiful California!" we marvel, every day that week. "November and warm as shit!" But Rachel doesn't seem as thrilled by the weather, unsettled by the warmth. It is the first Thanksgiving she will have spent this way—among the palm trees instead of the snow; a chipped red picnic table; paper plates for a dining room setting.

That night is the first that she doesn't come over; she's been cooking all day, and calls Bobby at eight to tell him she's falling asleep. From my bedroom, I hear the murmurs of their good night.

Later Bobby and I drink beer together and watch reruns of *Home Improvement*.

"Does Rachel seem upset to you?" I ask. The liquid fizzes like mouthwash over my thumb as I undo the tab.

Bobby purses his lips. "She's still getting adjusted here. She'll be fine."

"You think we should go over there?"

"Naw." He shakes his head. "She's sleeping." He pauses. "She's a cool girl," he says, as if to assure himself he has done all right with her. "She's good."

Then we change the subject, and as the moon climbs we're getting pretty loud and rowdy. But Bobby has more than I do, and before long he's so drunk he's doing the Tim Allen *har-har-har* all around the apartment—and then, bam!, he falls to onto the couch, passed out.

I take off his shoes and cover him with a blanket. Then I turn off all the lights and creep into my bedroom.

That night I am awakened at midnight by sound of glass shattering in our living room. At first I think it is Bobby, stumbling his way to bed, until I hear a voice I don't recognize.

Someone has broken into our apartment, I am sure. Cell phone in hand, I grab the first heavy item I can find—my desk lamp—and sneak into the hallway. If it doesn't go well, I can still call the police.

But then I see Bobby, upright on the sofa. In front of him, amid the remnants of our glass coffee table, is Diana, one of the waitresses from the pizzeria. She's drunk, swaying dangerously, hundreds of tiny glistening shards waiting to break her fall.

"Bobby!" I shout at him from the doorway. He turns his head toward me slowly, confused, too far gone to understand what is happening.

Then Diana topples fast. As she collapses I find myself sliding underneath her, arms tight around her waist. She barely touches the ground, although my own knees throb with the pain of a thousand different knives. "Jesus Christ, Bobby! Why didn't you *do* something?"

He is still sitting on the sofa, immobile.

Diana looks over at me, grinning. "Matt? Is that you? Heeey!"

Bobby shakes his head hard, like a pony, and blinks. "Sorry…sorry…" he says. "Dude. I'm fucking wasted."

Diana moves off me and falls onto the couch next to Bobby.

"What the hell is going on?" I try to stand. The skin over my calves is shredded, glass jutting like quills from the wounds. A few of them are in deep.

Diana waves at me to come closer, and when I do she leans toward me. "I walked. Here," she slurs. "From the bar. At the corner. I came to see. Bobby." She presses her mouth against my ear. "I have a *crush* on him," she whispers, louder than she means to, and laughs hysterically.

At a different time, in a different place, I might have laughed about it too. Bobby, always the charmer, his peaceful drunken dreams interrupted by a secret admirer hoping for a booty call.

Maybe I should have helped them. Gotten them water, made them eat pretzels and swallow Tylenol. Called a taxi to take Diana home. But I am dizzy from the pain in my legs, and there is blood on the carpet, and I won't say I'm not a little jealous. And before I can make up my mind, they are both fast asleep on the sofa, drunk and dreamstruck. Their faces swollen as pumpkins from the alcohol. It is all I can do just to lock the front door, wrap gauze around my legs and crash into my own trembling sleep, leave them passed out there together.

And when Rachel arrives at my window later that night—*Matty, can you let me in? The front door is locked*—I do not shake my head and tell her to go. I do not put my hand to my forehead as I should and say, "Oh no, Rach, we drank way too much tonight. He's not in good shape."

But instead, when I open my eyes and see her standing on the lawn outside my bedroom, tapping, I stumble over in my boxers and open the window.

She climbs inside.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry! I couldn't sleep, I got lonely, I don't know why. I tried to call Bobby but he's not answering his phone. Is he in his room?"

I shake my head.

"Where is he?"

That's when I open my bedroom door. I hold out my forefinger and I point toward Bobby and Diana, their bodies woven together on the couch.

Rachel gasps. She stares at them for a long time. Then she turns to me, tears streaming down her face. "How could you not tell me?"

Her pain startles me. I meant to hurt Bobby, not her. I search, desperately, for the part of me that truly believes she has fallen out of love with him, believes there is still time for her to turn back to me and say, "It should have been you, Matty. From the start it should have been you." So we can leave this place together.

But instead, Rachel is weak, sick with the sorrow of what she has lost.

And before I can explain, she climbs out the window again to disappear into the night.

The next morning she was gone, her cell phone service discontinued. She left nothing behind but one of Bobby's t-shirts and a couple of empty journals. Bobby never learned what had happened that night. He walked around for days in a twilit haze, asking me if I'd heard from her. Some days he was furious, offended. Others, he was worried. He said what if something bad had happened to her. I had to tell him, she's taken all her things with her, obviously she's just left. He was constantly sweating, glistening. For a flickering moment, he was undone.

Not long afterward, though, he landed a spot on a television pilot. The pilot was picked up for the season, and he started spending more time at the clubs with the cast members. One day I came home from work and another roommate had moved into my bedroom. That's when I left.

The same day Bobby started on the pilot, I got a letter from Rachel in the mail. It was printed on stationery that said Holiday Inn, Santa Fe. Enclosed was a photo of her with her arm around a huge white Samoyed dog. They had the same blue-gray eyes. She looked happy.

Wrapped around the photo, her note said simply, *He's not mine. I borrowed him for the picture. Miss you. R.*

In this way, she forgave me. Over the next few years she sent me postcards every month or so. Some were sad, others full of hope. She grew up in those cards. But she drifted further away with each one: Savanna, Sicily, Barcelona. She said she found a job working for an American newspaper in Europe, and sometimes she glued her photos to the back of the card instead of a note. Eventually the postcards stopped coming. When there'd been no word for a while, I'll admit, I was angry with her. I gave up on acting and eventually found a job doing special events in Atlantic City. Over the years I imagined what I'd say to Rachel if I ever saw her again. "So you got too big for your friends, huh? Too important. What did I ever do but love you?"

Then last year I started seeing her outside my window at night. She wouldn't leave me alone. *Matty,* she'd say. *Let me in.* It got so bad I went to the doctor and asked for pills.

The first night I downed two of them with a glass of water. Five minutes later I was drifting into sleep. But just as I'd crossed over—the voices from my radio faraway and swooning; birds in long Vs gliding on the other side, old friends waving—my cell phone rang.

I clutched it hard. A New Jersey number. I figured it was my mother, calling from her sister's house outside the city.

But when I answered there was a different voice on the other end of the line, a slight Secaucus twang I hadn't heard in years.

"Matt," she said. "It's Rachel's mom."

That's when I knew.

She said it right off the bat. Just like that. "I thought," she told me, "you would like to hear it from me."

This was how I learned that Rachel was gone.

It happened in the embassy bombing in Dar es Salaam, she said, earlier that week. It happened at 12:45 a.m. my time, when eight simultaneous car bombs were detonated outside the building. She was standing beside one of them. She didn't suffer. There would be a memorial service. There was no body. They found her bracelet.

"You were always her favorite," Rachel's mother said. "Rachel always told me so."

There was so much I wanted to ask her. I had the sense there had always been two Rachels—the first one, the one I knew; and the unborn one, who she later became. I wanted to say, Fae, tell me—had she dyed her hair or started smoking again or gotten married? Did she ever get that stupid puppy?

I wanted to ask her did she know I had killed her daughter.

In some ways, until she died, I had always been living with Rachel. I lived in knowing she was out there somewhere, in the possibility of similar routines—eating egg rolls on Thursdays; chewing peppermints after breakfast; jogging under the moon. Did she truly still do these things without me?

But then the phone fell onto the floor, and my eyes were closing although I fought them, and the pills overtook me. Sometime after that, Rachel's mom hung up.

I wanted to tell her, *I would have sat there with you. I would have said, Oh, Rachel, it's like magic, it's like being reborn. There is nothing scary about it. I would have held your hand, and walked you across the road.*

That night and the next, by the window, I waited for her. I wanted to tell her. But Rachel never came.

Nathan Graziano

Sasquatch

While doing sixty on a packed dirt road, Dad mashed a raccoon with his front tire and didn't flinch. He took a cold glance in the rearview mirror at the pile of pelt and guts then snarled.

"You're gonna roll her if you don't slow down," said Hemi, who was sandwiched between me and Dad in the cab of the pickup.

"Who are you, my wife?" Dad said. "Next, you're gonna tell me to clean the fucking garage."

Hemi glared at Dad. Although he's not a big guy like Dad and me—Hemi is built like a crow bar, long and thin and solid—he's no slouch with his fists. When I was twelve, I watched Hemi bust a guy's nose at a backyard barbeque. Blood spouted from this poor bastard's nostrils as if shot from a hose, and Hemi continued to pound his face like raw meat. Dad later told me it was about a girl.

"This whole thing is stupid, Wayne."

"What are you talking about?"

"This whole thing," Hemi said. "Just call the cops. She's only your stepdaughter. Let the cops deal with Mr. War Hero."

Dad's eyes widened. "Only my stepdaughter? She's Darla's girl, and this is a matter of principles." Dad slammed his palms into the steering wheel. "And you don't know me from Jesus H. Christ if you think I'll let this punk make a whore out of that girl."

"We're going to end up in the clink," Hemi said under his breath. Then he turned to me. "I hope you got enough money for bail, D.J., because your old man and me are gonna end up in the clink. Stuffed and cuffed. Mark my word, boy. Stuffed and cuffed."

I told Hemi I only had a five spot, a couple of singles, and nothing in the bank. I blew almost all my cash subscribing to a porn site earlier that week. This all happened over a year ago, and Dad and I have been through hell and back since, but to this day, I haven't told Dad about subscribing to that site. I don't suppose I ever will.

As we zipped past a dairy farm, I stared out the window at the motionless cows in the tall grass, a full moon stamped in the night sky behind them. Everything outside the truck was still, like objects in a picture. Sometimes, when the night is like that, still and quiet, I don't want to move. I want to fade into the background, disappear in the trees.

Dad slowed as we approached the intersection at Folger Road, where the dirt meets the pavement of Route 106 in Loudon. He blew the stop sign, then barreled left toward Concord.

I'm going to fess up, since everything that night at the movie theaters was—in an offhand way—my fault. Not that I did anything personally to Jenny. Not really. However, I told Dad about the website with her on it—three days after I subscribed—and set this mess in motion.

But I had to tell him. If I hadn't, none of this would've happened, and Jenny would never have left New Hampshire and vanished. But I had to tell him. I had no choice.

When Dad got home that Friday afternoon, Jenny was on the couch, her hand wrapped in a dishtowel packed with ice. She'd been crying on the couch, off and on, for almost a week. At first, Dad and I figured it was because Darla was back in the hospital, which was understandable, and had to be on Jenny's mind. The cancer had returned and spread to Darla's stomach and lungs. We started to realize that, as hard as Darla was fighting, she wasn't going to win the battle. The doctors gave her six months, but she didn't make it that long.

With Darla in the hospital, Dad had been trying to hold it together at home, but he had no idea what to do about Jenny. One night, he offered to take us to Applebee's for dinner, but Jenny didn't want to go. Then Dad went into school to get the work she missed, but Jenny didn't want it. Jenny didn't want to talk to Dad or anyone else. She just wanted to sit on the couch and cry. That afternoon, when Dad tried putting his arm around her, Jenny leaped up from the couch and bolted to her bedroom. Stunned, Dad rubbed his face like he'd been slapped with a glove. At that point, I couldn't watch it anymore. I had to tell him.

The next thing I knew, Dad was telling me to get in the truck.

I found out Tuesday at school. Jeff and I were in the back of the cafeteria, trying to ignore the chicken nuggets being launched—complete with missile sound effects—from the jock/hot chick table across from us, where Jenny sometimes sat, but she was at home on the couch, crying.

Our own chicken nuggets, watery peas, and half-frozen potato tots lay on our trays like chew toys. While lifting my brownie to my mouth, a lacrosse player with clubbed ears and a blond flattop stood and snapped a picture of me with his cell phone. "Call *The National Enquirer*. I got a picture of Sasquatch eating a brownie!"

Sasquatch. That's what they called me.

The guys laughed, and the chicks covered their mouths and pretended not to, their eyeballs popping from their sockets. It was the same damn joke, every day. True enough, I am six-eight and heavy-set, hairy as a buffalo—an easy target. And despite the fact that I was twice the size of those guys, I would sit there, still and quiet, and try to disappear. Freshman year, Coach Gallo asked me to join the football team, but I made up some lame-ass excuse about a heart condition. If I could go back and change anything, I would've gone out for the team. Then, just maybe, I would've been at the other table and not ducking nuggets. But it doesn't matter much now. I'm not in public school anymore. I'll finish my high school diploma here at the

youth detention center in a few months, right around the time I get out.

The truth is, I didn't play football because I was content to blend into the bleacher crowd at home games. Until last year, my junior year, when I first saw the white flame behind my eyes, I hadn't realized that, with my strength and size, I had the potential to be dangerous.

As Billy approached our table, he was tagged in the head with a chicken chunk. Billy is a hemophiliac, so pale you can see blood running in blue streams beneath his skin. After being hit with the nugget, he fell to a chair and clutched his head. Slowly, he turned and spit a pained look at me. "I heard something," he said. "About your stepsister."

"I know what it is, I know what it is," Jeff said with a jack-o-lantern grin. When Jeff smiles, his fat cheeks scrunch around his bucked teeth and you want to smack that look straight off his face. Jeff got a late jump on puberty and, at sixteen, he was still as hairless as a clenched fist. "I heard it, too," he said.

"What the hell are you two talking about?" I said.

Before I go any further, before I disclose everything, you have to know this: Jenny is *hot*. Smoking *hot*. Drag-my-balls-through-ten-miles-of-broken-glass-just-to-smell-the-fumes-of-the-truck-that-took-her-dirty-panties-to-the-laundramat *hot*. She was still hot when she left, nine days after everything happened, and I assume, wherever she is, she's still hot today.

Now before you go judging me, which some of you will be inclined to do, try to remember that I was sixteen, not blood-related, living in the same house with this chick. And it is not like we'd lived together all our lives, like real siblings. Jenny and Darla had moved in with Dad and me only the year before. It happened fast. Dad met Darla during my freshman year, and a few months later, they married. All of a sudden, this hot chick from school was prancing around the house in slinky tank tops and skintight shorts.

Listen, I'm not proud of this, but let's just say, I could still draw you a full-color diagram of her underwear drawer.

Jeff and Billy stared at each other, both biting their bottom lips. I'd had enough games. I saw the white flame. "Tell me what you know, or I'm going to bust open your mouths," I said.

The guys stiffened like they were bracing for a punch, then Billy coughed weakly into his sleeve. "You know that guy your stepsister has been dating," Billy said, "that Marine-guy who works at the movie theaters?"

"Mike."

Billy nodded. "Well, apparently, I heard he put some, um, videos of your stepsister on a website." When Billy blushed, his entire face and neck turned bright red, like a fresh blood stain on a hospital sheet.

My face, on the other hand, was a blank screen, all the expression disappeared. The only thing I could think about was getting to that website. I know, I know. I'm sick and perverted. But

that's what I thought. I'm being honest. "What's the name of the site?"

Billy frowned. "How should I know? It's not like I sit around looking at that stuff."

"*Black Market Sex Tapes*," said Jeff. "You have to subscribe to see the whole thing, but you can watch the trailers for free. I heard she takes it from two guys at the same time."

I didn't doubt any of it.

Although it pains me to think about him, I suppose I should tell you about Jenny's ex-boyfriend Mike, who just a couple of weeks ago, finally, got out of the hospital. The newspapers, which have been covering the story since it happened, say there's a chance he'll walk again, which is good, I guess. Mike went to the same regional high school Jenny and I attended, graduating five years before I got there. But that doesn't matter; we all know his type: the handsome, popular guy who is in all the yearbook pictures, the one who dates the chicks no one else has a chance with. You know him—the King of Cool, the big man on campus, smooth as an oil slick. He had it all until at the end of his senior year, when one of the hot chicks accused him of date rape, and the next thing you know, two other girls came forward. One was underage, so with the statutory charge tacked on, Mike was looking at forty years in the pen when, all of a sudden, the three chicks refused to testify. Without them as witnesses, the charges were thrown out.

As soon as he was cleared, Mike enlisted in the Marine Reserves and did a tour in Iraq, where he earned a Purple Heart in Fallujah for running into insurgent gunfire to save one of his buddies. When he returned, the town gave him the hero's welcome. He walked in the Fourth of July parade in his dress blues. He was, again, The King of Cool and went back to work as a manager at the movie theater. A year ago, when the newspapers were first running those articles on Mike—when he was "the local hero fighting for his life"—the date rape accusations were never mentioned, nor was the fact that he sold his sex tapes of him and his buddy tag-teaming my inebriated stepsister to a porn site. Those stories had utterly and completely vanished.

Another chicken nugget was launched at our table, but this time I reached up and caught it in the air, crushing it in my hand. The white flame flickered. I stood up with my arm cocked, ready to shove that chicken down someone's fucking throat when Mr. Nagle, the vice-principal, tapped me on the shoulder.

"What are you planning to do with that chicken nugget, Mr. Briggs?" he asked. He was this small leprechaun-type with two tufts of reddish hair and pointed ears. I could've broken him in half.

"Nothing," I said.

"Give me the nugget, son," he said and held out his hand. I dropped it in his palm. "I don't want to see any more trouble from you, you hear?"

"Yes, sir," I said. Billy and Jeff's jaws dropped like guillotines.

"Were you really going to throw that at them?" Jeff asked.

"Shut up, Jeff," I said and flicked a frozen pea at his head.

"I'm gonna feed this guy his fucking teeth," Dad said, reaching into his coat pocket and removing a pint of Southern Comfort. After a swig, he passed the bottle to Hemi. "It's been awhile since I've given a good ass-kicking."

"How long has it been since we've scrapped, Wayne?"

"A couple of years, at least. The last one I remember was in that dive bar in Manchester, when those kids with the spikes through their faces started up with us."

In the dull glow of the dashboard, Dad's lips relaxed and a small smile formed. If I could go back and freeze that night, it would be right there: Dad smiling in his truck's dashboard lights and maybe, for a second, considering turning around.

As we stopped at the light on Loudon Road where the two left lanes turn into the cinema complex, a blue sedan pulled up beside us. Inside, Jimmy Racine, the fullback for the varsity football team, was driving with his chick, Amber St. Lawrence, in the passenger seat, her arm hanging out the window with a cigarette dangling from her fingers. Jimmy turned, looked at me, then nudged her.

"It's Sasquatch," he said and pointed. Amber didn't bother to turn her head. But that didn't stop Jimmy from getting out his cell phone and snapping a picture. "Sasquatch, smile."

I rolled up the window. Behind my eyes, the white flame flickered and I ripped the pint from Hemi's hand. I wasn't used to drinking, so the liquor, as I poured a mouthful down my gullet, made me cough and gag.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Dad asked.

"Sorry."

"What did that guy call you?" Hemi jerked his thumb in the direction of the blue sedan.

"I didn't hear him."

Dad tilted his head to one side and looked at me like he was doing math. The light changed, but we didn't move. The cars behind us started honking. I stared at the floorboards, the pint still in my sweaty hand.

"Pass that bottle over here," Dad said.

As I handed him the pint, the man in the car behind us stuck his torso out the window and threw the middle finger at Dad. Without turning around, Dad launched the near-empty bottle out the window at the guy's head, missing him by a bunch as it smashed on the concrete. Dad hit the gas.

I went straight home that Tuesday. Most days, I'd stop at the Hess station after school and pick up a two-liter of Mountain Dew and a grab bag of Cool Ranch Doritos. Sometimes I'd stick around the store and flip through magazines or play some scratch tickets. They never carded me, even for beer. Before she started dating Mike, Jenny used to ask me to buy booze for her and her friends before they'd go to parties. To tell you the truth, I liked doing it. While I was putting those cases of beer and bottles of liquor in the trunks of their cars, and the girls were thanking me and brushing my arm with their bird-bone fingers, I was a part of their world. But it never lasted. Since my purpose was singular, my presence in their company

strange and slightly awkward, I'd quickly vanish from the picture. Seen for an instant then gone.

When I got home that afternoon, Jenny was lying on the couch, holding the remote control with her arm outstretched and a pile of crumpled tissues scattered like shotgun shells on the carpet. I stood in the living room, as still and dumb as a bear rug, the website's name scribbled on a torn piece of notebook paper in my pocket.

"Are you all right?" I asked Jenny.

"Let me guess. You heard." She stared straight into the television, pale and zombie-like, surfing the channels.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You wouldn't."

With my head down, I went straight to my bedroom, locking the door behind me. After booting up my computer, I went to the *Black Market Sex Tapes* website. On the homepage, in a still-frame from a grainy home video, a drunken Jenny forced a smile. My heart stammered, my erection throbbed, my breathing became labored.

I took the bankcard from my wallet.

Friday night is a big movie night for high school kids in the Concord area, and the parking lot was packed like a box of bullets. We found a spot in the back row, beneath a floodlight. Dad cut the engine.

"Let's fuck him up," he said, his voice watery. Being a large man, it takes a lot of booze to faze Dad, but he had been drinking since coming home that afternoon, even before I told him about the website.

A few parking spaces down from us, Jimmy and Amber got out of the blue sedan. When I looked over, Jimmy snapped another picture. Maybe that sip of Southern Comfort hit me harder than I realized because I slung my middle finger at Jimmy and snarled like Dad snarled when he ran over the raccoon. And wouldn't you know it—Jimmy put the cell phone in his pocket and looked the other way.

"What's that all about?" Dad asked.

"Some asshole from school."

The line to buy the tickets wrapped around the side of the building. As we walked past, a couple of guys yelled out, "Sasquatch!" and snapped pictures with their cell phones.

The white flame burned as I balled my fists.

When we got in the lobby, Dad stopped me. "What were those guys calling you?"

"Sasquatch, Dad. They call me Sasquatch."

"And you put up with it?"

I shrugged. When Dad looked at me, it was as if my skin was made of glass and he could see through me into the hollowed-out shell where my guts should've been. For the first time, it was as if he understood that he had failed to raise a man.

Hemi clamped me on the shoulder. "I'm not sure if you know this or not, D.J., but you could wipe the shit off your shoes with those guys. Crack one skull and the rest will back off."

"There's that motherfucker." Dad pointed at a muscular guy with short black hair, heavily gelled and spiked, and a tribal band tattoo on his left bicep that I recognized from the website, collecting ticket stubs from a long line of people. With Hemi and me behind him, Dad pushed through the crowd. When he arrived at the entrance to the theaters, cordoned off by a thick purple rope, he positioned himself in front of Mike, dwarfing him by at least half a foot. Dad stared down at him like a boxer receiving instructions, breathing through his nostrils.

Mike watched him as if Dad were a skinny bird flapping its wings. "Back off, big fella," Mike said.

"You don't know who I am, do you?" Dad said.

"I know who you are," said Mike.

As murmurs of a fight caught fire in the lobby, everyone's attention shifted toward Dad and Mike. That's when something started to grind inside me, waiting to explode from my skin. My legs shook. The white flame pounded behind my eyes.

"Is there a problem?" Mike asked in a flat, steady voice.

"Yeah," said Dad, bumping him with his chest, "there's a big fucking problem."

Dad pulled back and swung at Mike's head. Mike ducked it, and before anyone could blink, he had Dad's arm bent behind his back, ready to snap it. Dad screamed.

That scream was the last thing that registered.

When the cops pulled me off Mike, my fists and forearms were covered in his blood. Mike lay like a sack of sand on the ground, his spine snapped. I remember a lot of screaming and shouting. As I was being wrestled to my stomach, the cold cuffs slapped around my wrists, I looked for Dad, but couldn't find him.

"What the hell got into Sasquatch?" I heard someone say. And someone else said, "I don't know, but I think he fucking killed that guy." Then another voice said, "You had to see it coming."

I closed my eyes and made myself real still, careful not to move, then disappeared.

Megan Cummins

The Geologist

I couldn't marry the geologist. When we met, our shoulders touched, but just barely; it was school bus romance, as we drove with a guided tour around the country. In Skaftafell National Park, I broke my leg, and he helped carry me down the mountain on a stretcher. "Who needs mountain rescue when you've got geologists?" he said, and I smiled through the pain. On the way to the hospital, I feigned sleep and listened to his body rustle in his jacket as he turned to look at me, to look down at my shoulder against his own—as he would if he were turning over in bed to see me, my face glossed with a film of sleep instead of one of hurt as my body's natural pain killers wore off, the endorphins draining like the glaciers we had come to see. Even through the cracked ache, I was charmed, as he didn't move away. I opened my eyes to see his hands in his lap—taking care to stay still, not to shuffle the broken girl around. Skin flaked from his knuckles—they were cold, chapped, eroding.

We both came to Iceland on one-way tickets. At the hospital in Höfn, he asked if I wanted him to find me a ride back to Keflavik—to the airport, to the states, to home. I lied and told him I was tired of the Midwest. He told me his name, then. "Andrew," he said, and he wouldn't answer me if I called him Drew. "It's strange," he said, as I hobbled on my crutches back to the bus, unsure whether or not I had the 20,000 kronurs—how many dollars? Math wasn't in my vocabulary in that country—in my account to cover the bill. "I spent years working so I could stay in Michigan, and finish school. Now I can only think of leaving."

I had felt the same, and so had decided on a vacation someplace exotic. Now, and perhaps this was the broken bone's opinion, it seemed more foolish. What business did I have there, other than a desire for eccentricity? Or, more simply, bragging rights. In undergrad, I hadn't once gotten an MIP, and so badly wanted adventure. He was a geologist, there to walk the mid-Atlantic ridge. Even so, he was a poor one, and his love for the natural world wouldn't pay back his student loans any more than the books I read, my literary heroes, would write me a check. Still, we were young, and felt entitled to an uncapped trip to an expensive country, though each of us was drained from all those years of school, of grad school, of degrees that didn't capitalize. Mine, a certificate of accomplishment in the liberal arts. They might as well have given me a gold star. Andrew, at least, was a more legitimate human being: he could tell me about columnar basalt, about magma plumes and the Ring of

Fire. Out of principle, he dodged the recruiters from the oil companies, declined the love affair they proposed.

He said he planned to separate from the tour early to backpack, but at the first campsite after the hospital he set up his tent next to mine and stayed there. “Someone has to look out for the gimp,” he said, as though we had always known each other, as though we had cooled together from lava, columns right next to each other. We were hexagonal: we fit in the most energy efficient of ways.

So we stayed. We didn’t know where we would go when the tour ended, when the bus dropped us off in Reykjavik and drove back to its base in Selfoss. But it wasn’t important, not right away, not while he looked and I listened. Rocks: they were art to him, art and beauty and truth and history he could break apart with his hammer. He laughed when I closed my eyes just to hear: the water, the wind, the birds that made noises I didn’t know—when I first heard their calls, I thought a child was dying somewhere, or a cat. And all the beautiful words, the way the language fell like hair to the ground. It made English sound slow, weary, worn out. On the page, the Icelandic words were as full of consonants as they could be; but spoken, they had as many vowels as water. They slid. They moved as the human body does to music, slipping between all the cracks we didn’t know existed.

One night he told me about hunting in the UP and I told him about shaking goose eggs to kill the embryos in the suburbs. “We lived by a pond. There were Canada geese everywhere.”

“First of all,” he said, “I don’t believe you. Second, that’s cruel.”

It was a favorite anecdote, told to a point that had validated it in my mind, true or not. I remembered the geese, certainly, and had never been questioned about it before. I felt my face turning red. I said, “And what about hunting? That isn’t cruel?”

“Hunting is natural. Agriculture is what rapes the landscape—and people who shake goose eggs because they want the pond without the wildlife.” He smiled, was making fun of me. When he noticed the hurt look on my face, he said, “I’m sorry, I just can’t picture a little you chasing a goose from its nest. If you had a child, would you let someone shake it to death?”

I had intended the story to be funny—quirky, some common ground we could stand on, looking and laughing over the Midwest from somewhere higher up—and was startled that in his mind, and suddenly, I had turned to an animal with spawn to protect. I thought we could build a vocabulary together, words to make fun of our home while still, secretly, longing for it. But he wasn’t much for nostalgia, and he called me out on my own. “I can tell you still miss it. Michigan,” he said, even though I had tried to be as disdainful as he was. He spoke fondly of perching in trees for eight hours, waiting to pull back his bow and pierce the throat of a deer. He laughed when he told me how he once almost shot his grandfather, and yet he didn’t miss these things, as I missed my strange neighborhood, its mission to control the goose population. I couldn’t explain it to him, the way I found feeling in everything, but he would see it for himself, later,

when I pointed to the mist from Goðafoss and told him the rush of the water water reminded me of heavy traffic. Once I said it, I regretted it—not because he laughed but because he didn't say anything, because I knew then that we hadn't come from the same place. I told him my leg hurt, and hobbled back to the bus.

To crutch: a verb we used. We laughed as I crutched along, and it made me hopeful that we could erase the cooling we both started to feel—the same kind I always felt when I let myself fall in love with strangers, the pale dampness after the glow wears off. I followed him to the edge of mountains, into the moss growing over lava fields. "You don't see moss by the ocean because the sand is too corrosive for anything to grow," he told me, and I nodded along. I found a guide and a lover in one, and we began to ignore the voice of the driver who pointed out the things we'd already read about. The man behind the wheel of our big green bus said to call him Didi. Our flimsy American lips couldn't form his real name, couldn't even imagine it. If I hadn't followed Andrew, Didi would have left him behind more than once when we split off to see things inside out, upside down. But Didi felt sorry for my broken bone, and let the other cold tourists sit in their seats, out of the wind, until we came back. I was slow; I rarely made it as far as Andrew, and could never climb to the tops of things. Couldn't even start.

I even tried to follow to the edge of the water in Vik, to the storm in each wave of the North Atlantic. Walking on crutches in sand: it was a comparison I would use for years after to describe difficult things in my life. I made it only to a cave of columnar basalts; water ran like tears from its ceiling, and I looked up to find the source, but I had found the only darkness in the whole country. Why were the rocks crying? I wanted to ask, but Andrew would have laughed.

I leaned against the edges, let the water trickle down my neck. The columns felt like the spines of books against my back as I let myself rest, breathing heavily, as though I had walked on water and knew better than to think it easy.

In Djupivogur, on the country's eastern edge, we pitched only Andrew's tent. The ten other people whispered, and it made me think of high school once more, and I felt safe. They had bonded, those strangers: they were already exchanging e-mail addresses and phone numbers, throwing around the names of families and friends. They likely thought us snobs, although I smiled gratefully whenever someone offered to carry my jacket or hold the door. When they talked in the night's constant light, I sat to the side with Andrew: I had aligned myself with a solitary being, one who had come only for the rocks.

We touched each other awkwardly, negotiating the cast and the broken bone. When I cried out—a bent knee into my own, or a shift of his weight—he backed away from me. "This was a bad idea," he said, and it was, but I felt rejected all the same—rejected this time by my own body, my own limbs. I climbed out of the tent and surveyed the small fishing village, the swing sets that waited in the

breeze for their children. The boats were in the harbor; the people in their homes. It was the sort of place where I would want to grow up and grow old. Back in the tent, Andrew slept across the whole of its canvas floor. Alone, I couldn't set up my own, so I sat and watched my breath until morning. I thought about an old man at a museum in Skógar; he told us about weaving wool into yarn, in the winter, in the dark, in the cold. "There is no light, only feeling," he said. I loved the thick way he used English with us, as though he spoke into bread. He came from a different era, from a time when winter lasted longer and the moon took up the whole sky. When the world was less dusty. He combed the wool out for us; he closed his eyes.

On the bus, I used a blue permanent marker to chart the route we'd followed: east, up around the ring road and into the highlands, where the bus clamored over rocks and rivers, as though we were on a ship in heavy waves. Andrew watched my marker line the roads. "You like to know where you're going," he said as I drew a circle around Djupivogur. I could concentrate despite the rocky road, but his voice shook me, and the pen smeared.

"I like to know where I've been."

We were on our way to Hell. Viti crater: Didi translated the word for us. I wouldn't be able to do the hour hike through the dirty brown snow. Andrew said he would take pictures, smell the sulfur for me. "This whole country smells like sulfur," I said. "I won't be missing too much."

"But this place," he said. "This place in particular."

Then he put his hand on my shoulder and said, "Next time." The combination made me want to smile myself to sleep.

I watched from the bus as the group disappeared over the hill. I could see the fog and the storm start to descend from the sky; the whole world turned into a ghost. I could feel the ache in my own legs—the snow like quicksand, the headwind billowing my clothes. It would be my heartbeat, not my feet, that would keep me going in a place like that.

"Geologists," Didi said from the front of the bus. "They can never stay in one place."

"You drive them around all season," I said. "Enabler."

Didi smiled at me in the rearview mirror. "You're the one following." When I didn't say anything, he changed the subject, began to tell me about the crater. "It's a collapsed magma chamber, formed in the 1875 eruption. Opaque blue water. I once hiked there to find naked Swiss girls swimming."

I laughed about his Swiss girls; his stories edged along the seats, waiting empty for the warm wet bodies to return to the world of the living. I imagined the edges of the crater the pink of organs –a collapsed lung, it just breathed a little too deeply one day and settled into itself.

During all the years before or since, I have never slept well in cars, on trains or planes or buses. But, those weeks in Iceland, the rocking of the road lulled me to a light sleep, where I fell into dreams I was unable to pull myself out of, to reach back into to the bus where

geologists talked about rhyolite and tourists talked about waterfalls. I woke up one degree from the Arctic Circle, in Akureyri, a city made of ice, or glass, or both. The bricks fit together like crowded teeth and, Didi told us, breath used to freeze on pillows during the winter nights—the expulsion of dreams, crystals that fell through the bed, the floor. "Magical," I said, and Andrew laughed.

"You think that about everything. It loses its meaning."

Really, what meaning had it ever had? None, certainly, I used it as one used greetings. But I opted not to say anything.

My crutches, accustomed to gravel or sand or snow, squeaked along the solid pavement. Andrew carried my bag. He put his hand to my back and told me he was leaving the tour. He looked at me as though I had a decision to make, as though my head were bent over in contemplation instead of exhaustion from the uphill trek to Akureyri's botanical gardens. There was organization there—signs and paths and bridges over streams, an iron gate in front and color coordination.

"It's a paid ride back to Reykjavik," I said, gesturing south as though I could point the city out on the horizon.

"I've got enough money left to rent a car for a few days," he said.

"And a plane ticket home?"

He shrugged. "I can always call my parents." That surprised me. I thought he had established independence, or something like it. But it seemed so simple—the parents, in their forever homes in the Midwest, the ones we never really left. Who would, every time, fly you back.

"Gas is almost two dollars a liter," I said, and he nodded.

I closed my eyes and thought about the Canada geese. Had I dreamed the scene I told so often? I felt like a fool in a bar, telling a loud and elaborate story, only to have the quiet friend in the corner say one thing that knocks you from your cliff of alcohol and lies. I was embarrassed. I'd thought of it so many times, our heroic bike rides around the neighborhood. It was my tale of what it was like to grow up in America, and I felt somehow invalidated. My friends at home were all English majors, and, like me, knew nothing of the stubbornness of nesting geese.

In my mind, our wheels parted tracks in the soft grass when we veered from the road and plowed through the yards. The excitement when we found a nest, the way it was contagious. We split up—half of us scared away the parents, like the big bullies I imagined we were, while the other half grabbed the eggs and shook them, then placed them back where they had been before so the geese wouldn't lay more. They would think their young lived on, safe in their shells. We thought we were clever; we thought we had fooled even Nature. Four, sometimes five of us each trip. (If I doubled this, would Andrew believe it? Ten, twelve children, a swarm?) We abandoned our bikes across the grass the way only children on a mission can: corpses in a battlefield, their wheels bent like broken limbs, their handlebars stuck into the grass. We whispered, even, but who was there to hear?

Stealth: I wanted stealth in this memory. Across the pond, our homes glowed, breathed their ventilation and cooking and good housekeeping. Their unlocked midwestern doors beckoned their children. Homework and dinner waited; toothbrushes and soft blankets.

I tried to remove the layers of what I more and more worried was a lie, but, as when a neuron is stripped of its myelin sheath, I felt confused, a little electrocuted. Perhaps these geese were subdued—years of naughty children, coming too close—and we'd managed to grab an egg before running, frightened, away. Or maybe we hadn't ever come close.

My hand was on the doorknob of my old house when Andrew came into the motel and startled me back to Iceland. We had gotten a room instead of camping because he wanted to go to the bar, to dance with cute blonde girls, pale and beautiful in the way of ghosts and magnolia trees. "You're not coming?" he'd asked, and I'd shaken my head. "Drunk crutching. Not a good idea."

He whistled, something I'd never heard him do. "Here comes the sun," he sang, as he moved toward the bed. The alcohol came in friendly waves off his skin—in his breath, in his blood—and I kissed him when he sat down, just to taste it. He picked my passport up from the nightstand and opened it, looking over the numbers and facts of my life. He said, "You didn't tell me yesterday was your birthday. I would have made you Icelandic pancakes." He laughed, spun my passport like a Frisbee to the floor. I watched as he pulled out his pocketknife and flipped the blade open and shut, open and shut. "Let's take this thing off," he said, and it took me—the sober, sleepy one—a moment to realize he meant my cast.

"Stop it," I said. I tried to shove his hand away, but the knife cut my palm. He was smiling; there was a thin slit, like a coin slot, in the plaster. I pushed my hand into his face, my blood on his lips. He stopped.

"I was only trying to help," he said, flinging his knife to the floor; it landed next to my passport, although perhaps he had been aiming for it. From television and a social psychology professor, I'd developed a fear of drunken men. Andrew was only buzzed, flirtatious, but my imagination doubled, tripled his two or three beers. But at ten dollars apiece, I doubted he could have afforded more.

"Stuck in the room when you're in Europe," he continued, speaking as though he hadn't just flung a knife to the ground. He shook his head at me. "Poor you."

"I could have gone home."

"Could have," he said, "but didn't."

I was annoyed; for the first time, he seemed like the mocking stranger that he really was. "I could go home now. Should, in fact."

"I don't see you packing." He took both pillows from the bed, and put them behind his neck.

"I'm out of money." This wasn't quite true, but it seemed like the right thing to say, the contrary thing. A response was what I wanted.

"In that case," he said, "We should get married. Pool our assets."

"Funny," I said. "Really."

"Why not?" He crossed one ankle over the other, shook his foot like a bell over a door. "It's not like I'm going to find anyone worthwhile at home."

Something in the way he said it offended me deeply, because I knew he thought me one of them, just another girl from home that he happened to find outside of it. I stumbled from the bed, reaching after my fallen crutches. I went into the bathroom and locked the door, something all the women I'd known in my life had done at least once before. (My mother, roommates, an aunt.) I waited until I heard his snores.

How do you find the vocabulary of loss when you never quite spoke the same language at all? I went back to the motel in the morning, after slipping out to crutch along until I grew tired, and Andrew was still there, asleep in the bed. I couldn't tell at first; he'd drawn the blackout curtains. The Midnight sun still shone, night and day, though a few weeks had passed since the solstice and with the late hours came a hint of dusk, as though the day yawned suddenly.

"Andrew," I said. I opened the shades and started to pack my bag. He watched me from the bed.

"We have to go home," I continued. He covered his eyes with his face.

"Where's home for you?" he said finally, and I realized I'd told him I was from Michigan, too, but never where, assuming it didn't matter, not really.

"My parents' house."

He smiled a little—scoffing, I knew.

"I'll carry your bag."

It wasn't because he loved me—maybe he did, in some small, odd way, but love was not the thing that governed him. It was only because I couldn't do it myself.

I was wrong about him; he had to be a little like me, smart but a fool, to fall for a stranger with a broken leg, to get drunk and propose, in perhaps not so many words, to her. Didn't erosion make him sad? Carbon dating takes us back 40,000 years; we can map out a landslide that happened before recorded history. I wish I could have done that to him—given him a fluid and let it sink into his lungs, his blood, his muscle, let it tell me his past, where he'd been and where he might have gone next.

I was tired and quiet, and I'd managed to get a first class ticket: the front row of the plane was the only place my leg would fit. The Icelandair stewardess, in her adorable hat, had taken my crutches. I hoped she wouldn't lose them.

Over my sleeping neighbor's shoulder, I looked out the window, where the lights of Boston looked like a sneeze, or the settling of dandelion seeds, or one because of the other. It was dark. Finally, it was dark.

Maybe I was wrong about myself, not about him. “There is no light, only feeling.” Maybe I needed both. In Iceland, I had handfuls of light. I could have filled jars with it, kept it for winter. But I wanted something simple, something American. I wanted it to be light in the day and dark at night—seasons and soft wind, breath that never froze. It took me years to carve down the story of the geologist, to turn it into something knowable, break off its consonants like rocks, like the way the word Reykjavik broke my heart with its edges. I needed more of something. On the plane, I knew that, later on, it would stop being special. It had happened someplace strange, yes, somewhere that impressed people, but it was nothing more than one of life’s missed connections. It was just a simple love story, after all. It hadn’t ever been anything else.

Larry Watson

Redemption

Willis Dickey and I lived only a block apart on the north side of Harstad, Minnesota, and we went to school in each other's company from first grade through eighth. We played baseball, football, and basketball together, and if one of us was a team captain, he always made the other his first pick. We traded comic books, baseball cards, and marbles. We sledded down Brewers' Hill and skated on Lafayette Pond. We graded each other's burps, farts, and drawings of World War Two aircraft. With flashlights we hunted worms in the dew-wet grass of the local golf course, and the next day we biked out to Skyler Lake where, with our freshly caught worms for bait, we fished for perch, crappies, and bluegills. With our Daisy BB guns we hunted grackles and gophers. We slept in each other's bedrooms and backyards. Our mothers invited us to stay for supper, and our fathers asked us to help with chores. We gave each other Christmas and birthday gifts, mumps, and chicken pox. In the woods north of town we smoked our first cigarette, shared our first beer, and had our first glimpse of a girl's bare breasts when we bribed Carol Kellog to pull up her sweatshirt and t-shirt (the price: four dollars). Willis Dickey helped me with my English homework, and I helped him with Math.

If the preceding depiction of a boyhood friendship sounds too close to a Norman Rockwell *Saturday Evening Post* cover to be believed, readers should know that Willis and I grew up in the 1950's and early 60's. And while that era was not as becalmed or simple as it's often portrayed, it was a time when people, especially Midwesterners, believed that only a narrow range of options were available to them. Coke or Pepsi. NBC or CBS. Republican or Democrat. Levi's or Lee's. Converse or Keds. Catholic or Protestant. Ford or General Motors. Penney's or Sears. Mantle or Mays. Presented with choices, almost everyone, and perhaps young people especially, chose from the established, conventional, middle of the spectrum. When I was a boy I didn't have the ability or inclination to see into the dark interior of anyone's life, not my own and certainly not a nation's. Eventually, however, I would be nudged toward that vision, and there Willis Dickey was an even greater help to me than he was with diagramming sentences.

My friendship with Willis didn't abruptly end when I was fourteen, but it was curtailed when he enrolled at Harstad High School, while my education was turned over to the priests and nuns at St. Cecelia's. My matriculation at the city's Catholic high school

came as a relief to my mother; my soul, as far as she was concerned, would now be out of danger.

I was relieved myself, but for a reason that had nothing to do with my immortal soul. It was my body that would be safer if I spent less time with Willis Dickey.

By nature I was neither reckless nor bold, but with Willis Dickey's encouragement and example I climbed higher trees, dove into deeper waters. I skated on thinner ice. I sledded on steeper hills. Willis and I threw knives at targets that occasionally sent the blades ricocheting back at us. From a downtown rooftop (a height we never should have scaled) we threw snowballs at cars. We rode our bicycles down the steps of the county courthouse. We took the cartridges from his father's .38 caliber revolver, pulled the slugs out with pliers, then replaced the lead with wax from crayons. We loaded these "bullets" into the gun and fired them at targets drawn on cement walls. The colored wax allowed us to see whether we had hit what we aimed at. Of course, those wax charges might just as easily have jammed in the pistol's cylinder or barrel, with the resulting misfire exploding in our hands. Explosions not possible but real resulted from our 4th of July experiments when we used firecrackers to blow up bottles, cans, toy soldiers, constructions of stones and dirt, or anything else our imaginations conceived as combustible. Because of Willis's mouthing off, he and I got into a few fights with other boys, ran from a few more, and talked our way out of others (I was always the advocate for flight or negotiation). We stole cigarettes from Dahlquist's Drugstore and pilfered candy from McKinnell's Red Owl, but the escapade that would have landed us in the most trouble, had we been caught, was "borrowing" a car. Willis's uncle and aunt lived just outside Harstad, and when they left town they asked Willis to look after their house and yard. While they were gone, Willis and I took their DeSoto out for joyrides. This happened on more than one occasion, beginning when we were twelve years old and had no training or instruction in operating an automobile. We were lucky we didn't drive into a ditch or tree. Or ruin the transmission. The DeSoto had a stick shift, and even after we figured out the important role the clutch played in the enterprise, we still stalled the car repeatedly and shifted so clumsily that the grinding gears made almost as much noise as the gravel clattering underneath the car. As we stirred up clouds of dust racing up and down those country roads, I laughed as much as Willis did, but I was more frightened than exhilarated.

Once I was enrolled at St. Cecelia's and lost the daily contact I'd had with Willis for years, I was still able to keep track of his life. I knew, for example, the reputation of the group he hung out with. They were as wild as Willis—wilder, in fact. To keep up with them he had to rev his reckless spirit up to an even higher speed. Those boys drank, smoked, fought, raced cars, and dated girls who were supposed to be easy. Willis's new friends (and they might have been mine if I'd attended Harstad High) skipped school or flunked out altogether. The local police knew them on sight and by name.

And on a few occasions, I witnessed for myself who and what Willis had become.

A quarter mile track encircled the town's football field, and at Friday night games most of the students walked around and around the track rather than sit in the bleachers. The circling students were always in groups (or gangs, depending on your view of adolescent sociology). On one uncommonly cold evening, however, I sat in the stands because I had a date with Dawn Tobey, and she wanted us to sit with her parents. Out on the brightly-lit field—frost-stiffened along the sidelines, but churned to mud in the well-trod middle—fog hovered over the line of scrimmage, as the night's only heat steamed from the players and their panting breaths. When the ball was snapped, the air was filled with the collision-clatter of helmets and shoulder pads. Then the referee's whistle blew, and sound and motion abruptly stopped. Except there was another scrimmage off the field and right in front of the bleachers where Dawn and I were sitting.

A circle had formed around Willis Dickey and Virgil Lunde, a big brute of a farm kid who had two years, three inches, and thirty pounds on Willis. Because of his size and vicious reputation, Virgil was someone others usually stepped around. But on that night when Willis's group and Virgil's approached each other, neither group gave way, and Willis and Virgil bumped into each other. The confrontation might not have gone beyond shoving, but Willis, as every witness testified, had thrown a punch that caught Virgil above the eye, sent blood streaming down his face, and staggered him backward. A punch that drew that much blood would often end a fight immediately, but gore didn't faze Virgil. He charged into Willis, and the two of them tumbled to the ground, the medium where Virgil Lunde was at his most effective. He was on top of Willis in an instant and proceeded to pummel him with a series of rapid, short, carefully aimed punches, each flesh-on-flesh *splat* contrasting with the padded sounds coming from the field. Football, it was suddenly driven home to those of us watching Virgil and Willis, was a *game*.

I didn't climb down from the stands to assist Willis, and not only because he and I were no longer as close as we once had been. Willis's new friends didn't help him either. Along with Virgil's group, they gathered around the fighters and watched. The fight between Willis and Virgil Lunde was a fair fight (even if Willis was overmatched), and, unless someone's life was in jeopardy or someone sought, perhaps with a weapon, to gain unfair advantage, fair fights had to be left to the combatants.

While neither Willis's friends nor Virgil's could break up the fight, no such stricture applied to the Harstad High School teacher who pushed his way through the spectators and somehow pried Virgil off Willis. And because the fight was stopped before its conclusion—no matter that the outcome was inevitable—Willis wasn't credited with the loss. In fact, for months afterward Willis had special status because he had dared what few others had—to stand up to Virgil Lunde.

Yet anyone who saw Willis Dickey after the fight knew how badly he had fared. His lip puffed up, split open so he had to talk out of the corner of his mouth, one side of his face so badly bruised and swollen that he barely looked like himself. A month after the fight

Willis's cuts hadn't completely healed and his bruises hadn't entirely faded.

But his spirits were still high, or so I assumed. The day after Thanksgiving, six inches of heavy, wet snow fell on Harstad, and that night when a few friends and I were driving up and down Sioux Avenue, the street that the city's teenagers endlessly cruised, I saw Willis in Marcia Butler's yellow Volkswagen convertible. He was the only male in the car with four girls, and while I didn't know for sure whether they were all drunk, that was a reasonable guess. Marcia drove through the falling snow with the top down on her Volkswagen, while Willis perched high on the folded convertible top. He was shirtless, waving what looked to be a plastic sword, and shouting threats and curses at the occupants of every passing car.

Wade Jarvis, a St. Cecelia's pal, was in the car with me that night. At the sight of Willis, Wade said, "Doesn't that guy live over by you?"

I couldn't deny it.

"Was he always such a crazy fucker?"

During this time, the citizens of Harstad, youth and adults alike, were preoccupied with a matter more urgent and serious than Willis Dickey's unpredictable behavior. There had been a rash of auto thefts, and because the cars were never permanently missing—they usually turned up in a ditch within a day or two of being reported stolen—the police suspected one or more of the town's teenagers. Whoever was taking the automobiles was doing just what Willis and I had done with his uncle's DeSoto, yet it never occurred to me that Willis might be involved.

Which said more about my nature—naïve and unsuspecting—than Willis's.

On a January night, Willis Dickey and Jeff Lake were arrested when their stolen Buick skidded out of control on an icy, snow-packed city street and hit a telephone pole. Neither of them were injured, but they were brought before Judge McCutcheon, who presided over Harstad's juvenile court, and he sentenced Jeff Lake to a year in the Minnesota State Reform School in Red Wing. Willis received a year of probation, the terms of which dictated that he must observe a ten o'clock curfew and be on his best behavior or he too would be shipped to Red Wing. The reason for the discrepancy in their punishments was plain to anyone who had even a rudimentary knowledge of the town's sociology. Jeff Lake had been in and out of trouble with the law since he was in grade school, and he lived with an alcoholic mother on the wrong side of the tracks. Willis, on the other hand, had a father who was an executive with a local farm implement manufacturer and a mother who was a hard-working housewife active in their church. It was common knowledge in Harstad that anyone who came from circumstances like Willis's would not be subject to the same punishment as a poor kid, especially if that child of poverty already had a reputation as an incorrigible. Today, the walls of Red Wing, as immortalized in the words of Bob Dylan's song, are still standing, but youthful offenders are seldom

sent there. If incarceration is in order, they are likely to be shipped instead to an adult facility.

What was my reaction to Willis's arrest and conviction? I was shocked, almost to disbelief. Auto theft, even though I had once participated in a variation of it, still seemed like a crime far beyond anything that someone I knew, personally or by reputation, would commit. Those juvenile delinquents in Minneapolis, yes, but Harstad's worst—and Willis Dickey wasn't the worst—weren't that lawless.

Except Willis was.

The proof was there, and I couldn't, or didn't, do much more than shake my head at what my former friend had become. I no longer counted myself lucky that I wasn't drawn into such behavior.

Soon Willis Dickey was being gossiped about again in tones of shock and disbelief. Willis was in the hospital because he'd tried to kill himself, or so it was rumored. The story found its way to me from multiple sources, but every version agreed on these details:

For a few months, Willis Dickey had been dating Mary Milton, and that fact was more astonishing than Virgil Lunde, auto theft, and a suicide attempt combined. Mary was, first of all, a year older than us, and older girls almost never dated younger boys. Mary was a tall, flaxen-haired, somber girl, popular but also studious, and from a prominent family. In contrast to Willis and his wild ways, she had a reputation for rectitude. Maybe, *maybe*, a boy like Willis might have the nerve to ask Mary Milton out, but she would never accept.

Except she did.

Willis's unruly ways were, not surprisingly, an obstacle to the success of their relationship, but even if Mary could get past that part of his character, her parents could not. They were resolved that she not see that boy, and Mary didn't have the courage, if courage was what was required, to defy her father and mother.

On a Monday morning Rob Schwieger went out to his car to drive to Harstad High. On the way, he planned to pick up Willis Dickey. When Rob opened his car door, however, he found a note on the driver's seat, the contents of which read, "Tell Mary I love her, but I can't stand her goddamn parents. Willis." Rob drove to Willis's home, but instead of waiting in the driveway for Willis to come out, Rob went to the door and rang the bell. When Mrs. Dickey answered the door, Rob told her that they should check on Willis.

Rob and Mrs. Dickey found Willis in his bedroom, still in bed. They had difficulty waking him and soon discovered why. He had taken an overdose of sleeping pills.

Whether Rob Schwieger or Willis's mother or both of them took Willis to the hospital or if an ambulance was called, I never knew, but Willis had already been in the Good Samaritan Hospital for a day when the news reached me that my boyhood friend was a patient there. Neither did I know how close to death Willis had come. With the rumors that he had attempted suicide came the detail that his stomach had been pumped, but no one reported whether that measure saved his life or was simply precautionary.

I didn't need anyone to tell me I should visit him in the hospital, but because of the distance that had grown between us, the

prospect of seeing him again was intimidating. For all I knew, Willis might have felt that I had betrayed him. He knew I had sufficient sway with my parents that I wouldn't have had to attend a parochial school if I didn't want to, and perhaps he believed that I chose St. Cecelia's over him. Maybe there had even been a time in his recent life when our friendship would have been a help to him.

Finally, duty or residual affection or both overcame my reluctance, and on a frigid February afternoon, I walked the eight blocks from St. Cecelia's to Good Samaritan Hospital. I walked through the building's front doors, asked at a reception desk for Willis Dickey's room number, and then briskly climbed the stairs to the third floor. I didn't slow down until I arrived at the door to Willis's room, and then I was suddenly paralyzed because I couldn't think of a way to solve either of the problems that had been worrying me: How would I bring up the subject of his suicide attempt? How would I avoid the subject of his suicide attempt?

I would have turned around and left the hospital then and there if it weren't for a nurse, an older woman, tall, gaunt, and gimlet-eyed, who came walking down the hall toward me. I knew she would ask me what my business was in that corridor, and since the truth was the only available answer, I walked cautiously into Willis's room.

Willis was alone and staring out the window. His only view was of the Wilson Avenue elms. Against the tarnished silver winter sky their bare branches looked more like metal than wood.

He turned slowly toward me. "I thought you might show up," Willis said. In a hospital I suppose you become accustomed to your room being entered frequently and that may have been why my appearance didn't startle him.

But I was surprised when I saw him, and not because I was gazing at someone my age who had recently decided that life was not worth living. No, what astonished me was that Willis Dickey looked exactly like himself.

I should have mentioned earlier that Willis had distinctive looks. His face was long and rectangular, but his features tended toward circularity. His eyes bulged, his nose was small and button-like, and his narrow mouth often formed an O. Like many males of that era, his hair was cut close to his skull, but with the help of butch wax those short hairs could be trained to stand straight up. As a teenager, I had a secret ambition to be a cartoonist, so I appraised faces to see how they could be depicted with a few suggestive strokes. Willis's would have been easy: A series of four circles to suggest eyes, nose, and mouth, and those topped with six or seven short vertical lines. In spite of the unlikely setting I found him in, nothing in Willis's features struck me as unfamiliar; he was the Willis I had always known. And if he had not changed since we had once been friends that must have meant that I had not, either.

But that couldn't be. I *felt* different. Smarter. More responsible. More sophisticated. I no longer read comic books about superheroes or wanted to spear bullheads in the slow waters of Dunwood Creek. I didn't care who drove the fastest car or who could drink the most beer. I paid more attention to my grades in Geometry than to where I could get my hands on alcohol or cigarettes. It didn't

bother me that I wasn't tough or that Willis and his friends would have mocked me for worrying about where I'd go to college and what I'd do after.

Yet there I was, instantly recognizable as Tommy Hazzard, friend to Willis Dickey.

"How the hell can anyone stand to work in a hospital," I said, "with that hospital smell?"

"You get used to it after awhile. You hardly notice it."

"Yeah? Hell, maybe some of them even like it."

"Maybe that's why doctors and nurses become doctors and nurses. They love that goddamn hospital smell."

For the brief duration of that exchange we were Willis and Tommy again, but then the silence lingered and we both spent more time than necessary looking out at those branches and the gray sky beyond.

Even if I didn't want or know how to bring up the subject of why he was in the hospital, I might have said something about the recent dramatic events of his life, his fight with Virgil Lunde or his arrest for stealing cars, but suddenly no topic seemed innocuous or unrelated to the choice to live or die.

What did you have for lunch?

A ham sandwich.

And don't you want to eat a ham sandwich ever again?

Did you see *Gunsmoke* last night?

Yes.

And don't you want to see another episode of Gunsmoke*? And another and another?*

Doesn't it look as though it might snow?

Yes.

And don't you want to see another snowfall and another and another, the way the flakes sometimes fall fast like wet plaster and at other times flutter down so softly they can't even find their way to the ground? Don't you want to see the snow melt soon and then fall again next winter and the winter after that and after that and after that?

What do you say to someone who answers no to all the richness and pleasure that life offers?

I asked, "Did you notice that Purdue lost again?" Years before, Willis's father had attended a sales conference in Lafayette, Indiana, and he brought back Purdue sweatshirts for us. Since then, Willis and I had half-heartedly followed Purdue football and basketball.

"Yeah? Who to?"

"I can't remember. Michigan maybe."

"My old man will know. He pays more attention to college ball than pro."

"I'm not sure my dad even knows that colleges play sports."

"I remember that," Willis said.

"Well, he hasn't changed."

There we were, two old friends reduced to making unnecessary statements about uninteresting topics, but before

another too-long silence could fall between us again, an unlikely rescuer arrived.

Into Willis's room strode Dougie Riem. When I knew Dougie in grade school and junior high, he'd been a gap-toothed, motor-mouthed little pest, avoided by his peers and disliked by his teachers (in spite of his high scholastic achievement).

Dougie had barely said hello when he asked Willis, "Do you have to use a bedpan? What happens if you have to take a leak or a shit? What if it's a good-looking nurse who brings it in?"

"I've got my own bathroom. Right around the corner."

"How about the nurses? Any cute ones? Or candy-stripers? Some of the girls from school are candy-stripers, you know. What if Paula Niedell was a candy-striper, and she came in to give you a shot. In the ass. Do you think you'd get a hard-on?"

It probably said something about Willis's state that he couldn't even rouse himself to become annoyed with Dougie Riem. "I don't need any shots," Willis said.

"Because you had to get your stomach pumped, right? Because, what, you tried to poison yourself or something? Why the hell would you pull a stunt like that? I mean, *Jesus*."

Of course Dougie's candor shocked me, but I was also suddenly edified. *So that's how you do it.*

Sternly, Willis said, "Food poisoning. Something I ate."

"Yeah? What was it?"

Willis shrugged. "I don't know. A hot dog, maybe."

"No shit? That's what my mom thinks made me sick last summer. I ate a hot dog at the carnival and then I was puking and shitting for two days after. My dad said it was more likely the person who served me the hot dog. But I never had to go to the hospital. Not that time. Now a couple years ago when I had my appendix out—"

Just as Dougie had earlier saved me from being alone with Willis and my own timidity, so another savior now appeared, this time to rescue us from Dougie's blabbing. The nurse who had earlier scared me into Willis's room brusquely entered.

"You boys will have to scoot," she said. "Doctor's coming in."

Her command was as sharp as her glare, and Dougie and I instantly obeyed, waving farewell to Willis as we backed out of the room.

Once wound up, however, Dougie did not stop easily. He continued his monologue as we rode down in the elevator.

"That's what I was always worried about when I was in the hospital. That a nurse would come in to check my stitches and I'd get a hard-on. I mean, they just flip your gown up and get their noses right down there. Lucky all the nurses I had were ugly old bitches. But I had a plan. If a good-looking one came in I'd think about my grandma taking a shit."

"That would do it, all right."

Dougie and I left the hospital and as soon as we turned north on Wilson Avenue, the wind carved into us. "Fuck," Dougie said, shivering and hunching his shoulders. "You got a car?"

"Sorry, I'm walking."

The cold was enough to clamp even Dougie's mouth, and he said nothing for the next block or two. When we came to the intersection where we would proceed in different directions, Dougie had a final assessment to make of our visit to Willis.

"Just think," Dougie said, "the bastard tried to *kill himself*."

I had no more idea what to say than when I was alone with Willis. I thought we had all silently, gratefully, agreed to believe Willis about the food poisoning.

Dougie was still shaking his head as he walked away. I had my own question to work on as I trudged home: Was Dougie the only person who would bring up the subject of suicide in Willis's presence, or was I the only one who would not?

Although Harstad, Minnesota, was a smallish city, the town's teenagers still segregated themselves. The parking lot of Frenchy's Drive-In was Harstad High turf, whereas the lunch counter of Conroy's Pharmacy belonged to St. Cecelia's. Harstad kids partied in the woods north of the city; St. Cecelia's gathered near Skyler Lake. No antagonism went along with those territorial claims—a Harstad girl wouldn't have to worry about being harassed if she sat on a stool at Conroy's and ordered a lime phosphate, and a few of my classmates crashed Harstad keg parties without consequence. But for the most part we kept to ourselves.

That the town was divided into zones made it easier for me to tell myself that Willis Dickey was someone else's worry. I seldom saw him, not even around our neighborhood, so why not consign his welfare to his Harstad High friends?

At one location, however, both St. Cecelia's and Harstad High kids gathered and even mingled: Skipper's Lanes, a bowling alley-pool hall-bar-café on the outskirts of the city. The first time I saw Willis Dickey after visiting him in the hospital was at Skipper's on a night in March.

At Good Samaritan his unchanged appearance had surprised me, but now it was the sight of him alone that shocked. I suppose I'd developed, without having given the matter any conscious thought, a set of attempted suicide protocols, among which was the rule that after such an act you couldn't show up in a normal setting behaving normally.

Except Willis wasn't. Behaving normally, that is.

None of us bowled at Skipper's, we were too young for the bar, no one ate in the café, and only a few guys played pool, but there we were, night after night, early or late, weekend or school night. We needed nothing more than the promise of connection, a place where we might learn that Darrell Peck's parents were out of town and the party would be at his place, where we might find out who had a false i.d. and was willing to buy beer, where Johnny Maynard and Bob Holan might get into it because they both loved Sharon Howley, or where Lanny Brickbauer might take you out to the parking lot and show you how he had customized his '52 Ford. A place where Susan Layne might appear.

Susan was a slender, curvy, vivacious brunette, the youngest of the three Layne sisters, legendary beauties in Harstad, and I'd had a crush on her since the third grade when she sat in front of me in Miss Cordell's class. Susan had something brazen and knowing in her dimpled smile that probably frightened off as many males as it attracted. I belonged to both camps—too intimidated to initiate contact, but too tantalized to turn away. While it was true that I had recently broken up with Dawn Tobey, that had no bearing on my feelings for Susan. Even if Dawn were at my side, if Susan Layne had so much as crooked a finger in my direction I would have abandoned Dawn and followed Susan wherever she wanted me to go. There was little I wanted more than for her to notice me.

On that March night Susan Layne *was* at Skipper's, laughing and talking with four or five other Harstad High girls back by the pool tables, not far from where I was hanging out with my usual cohort of St. Cecelia's friends, all of them male.

But when I looked out across the brightly-lit emerald-green felt of three pool tables I could also see a cluster of Harstad High guys, and Willis Dickey, the only one sitting down, was at the center of that pack. Considering their rowdy reputation, they were unusually subdued, so quiet, in fact, that something surreptitious had to be going on.

Finally, someone walked away from Willis Dickey, and as he approached our side of the room, one of Susan's friends called him over. "What's the big secret over there?"

Another girl giggled and asked, "Does somebody have dirty pictures?"

I recognized him as Ferdie Moeller, a good athlete in junior high who had given up on organized sports because they interfered with the profligate life. "You wish," Ferdie said to her. "If it's something dirty you want to see, you let me know. No, he's giving shit away." Ferdie brought a Zippo lighter out of the pocket of his leather jacket and clanked it open and closed a few times.

"Who is?" the girl asked.

"Who's the looniest bastard over there? Willis Dickey."

"Like what?" Susan Layne asked, a note of urgency in her question. "What's he giving away?" Were she and I the only ones who understood what Willis's actions might portend?

"Everything he's got on him. And then some. A good-looking knife with a bone handle. A stocking cap. A watch. Gloves. I didn't see it, but somebody said he gave Harleck a gun. A fucking gun!"

"Was it a revolver?" I asked. "A .38?"

"A pistol. That's all I know. Somebody else got a bunch of silver dollars."

Ferdie put the lighter back in his pocket and strolled away. Now all of us, Susan Layne's group and my friends and I, turned our attention toward the side of the room where Willis was conducting his giveaway program.

Beside me Wade Jarvis said, "Hell, maybe I'll go over there before the goods are all gone." He stayed where he was, however.

Then, while we watched, Willis rose and pushed his way through his circle of friends. He had his keys in his hand, and it was obvious he was leaving.

On the pool tables the balls rolled silently until they clicked against another ball or plunked into a pocket. Over in the bowling lanes the balls rumbled down the alleys and clattered against the pins. All those misses and hits, planned and unplanned. . . . Am I wrong in remembering that for the briefest instant Susan Layne's gaze collided with mine in an instant of understanding?

But I know I'm right when I recall what she said, and though she might have been looking in the direction of Willis's current friends, only his oldest friend was in a position to hear her words and act upon them: "Somebody should go with him."

Others must have had a similar thought. Everyone seemed to be watching Willis Dickey walk off, and the murmurs that rose from different corners of Skipper's had the hush of concern.

"Oh, hell," I said, then hopped off the pool table where I'd been sitting and trotted after Willis. "Wait up," I called after him.

I was showing off. I know it now, and I knew it then. I wanted Susan Layne and everyone else present that night to recognize that it was Tommy Hazzard who had the courage to ride with Willis Dickey.

Willis stopped and turned toward me.

"Are you leaving?" I asked. "Can I bum a ride?"

"I guess," he said and continued toward the door.

The day had been warm enough to melt some of the season's accumulated snow, but at nightfall the temperature had dropped, turning the parking lot to patches of black ice and ridges of frozen slush. Willis slipped but caught himself before he fell. "Fuck," he said, and from that single utterance I took heart. Someone who intends to kill himself, I reasoned, wouldn't care whether he remained on his feet or fell.

The hour also encouraged me. It was not yet ten o'clock, so Willis must have been leaving in order to be home before his curfew, an effort that someone who didn't intend a tomorrow wouldn't make. Would he?

If I'd read a suicide prevention manual before climbing into Willis's car, I would have been advised that it was more important to listen than talk, but I was yammering away before we pulled out of Skipper's lot. Nervousness was not the only reason for my garrulity. As long as I was talking, Willis couldn't bring up the subject that was the reason for my being in the car. What had been my thinking—that if he couldn't mention suicide he couldn't contemplate it?

Willis sitting quietly while I talked was also a reversion to the pattern of our friendship. How often as a boy had I ground my teeth in frustration over Willis's silences? He'd come to my house or I'd go to his, and then we'd sit, just sit, watching television, demolishing a bag of potato chips, but saying nothing to each other. After years of trying to engage him, I finally gave up, resigned to the fact that time with Willis either meant furious action or leaden passivity.

Which meant that for all our years of friendship, Willis and I were never on particularly intimate terms. I don't offer that as complaint or even as a characteristic of uniqueness. I expect our

friendship was, in that regard, like others. As I've said, our youth was in the 1950's and early sixties. Perhaps Norman Rockwell had concentrated on the superficial details since so much of life at that time *was* lived on the surface. But that history, personal or national, didn't serve me well on my mission on that March night.

I knew, you see, and knew almost immediately, that I was the wrong person to be in the car with him. In the front seat of that Chevy Impala should have been someone like Dougie Riem, someone who didn't think before he spoke, someone whose first priority would have been talking Willis Dickey out of suicide rather than looking like a hero for getting into the car in the first place, someone who cared more about Willis's welfare than about impressing Susan Layne.

But I was there, and I made an effort, feeble as it was.

I lit a cigarette and offered Willis one. The car's interior smelled so strongly of Mr. Dickey's White Owl cigars and Mrs. Dickey's Old Golds that we didn't have to be concerned about our own smoking being found out. Or maybe Willis didn't care. He accepted the Marlboro I offered him and the light.

Talk of the future seemed the best strategy. Get him to commit to the future. "Are you playing Legion ball next summer?" I asked. Because of Minnesota's late, cold, often snowy springs, neither Harstad High nor St. Cecelia's had a baseball team. Those of us who wanted to keep playing baseball after Little League had to try out for the American Legion team, but since boys from both schools competed for roster spots, the team was difficult to make. Willis was good enough. I wasn't.

"Nah," he said. "I sat on the bench most of last year. The hell with that. Besides, my old man wants me to work."

"Having a little beer money wouldn't be bad," I suggested. "Or maybe even enough to buy an old beater."

"I guess."

"I don't know if you noticed but back at Skipper's someone had her eye on you. Susan Layne? You know who she is? And I heard her say something to her friends about you." The remark might have been misleading, but it wasn't untrue. What I hoped, however, was that it would impress Willis powerfully. How could it not, since it had behind it the weight of desperation and sacrifice? In all but words I was saying to Willis, See how much I care about you? For you I give up this girl.

"I know who she is. She was in my Biology class."

"What do you think? I mean, come on. She's a babe."

Did I see his indifferent shrug or just feel it through the Impala's springs?

"Or are you and Mary still an item?"

"That ain't going anywhere."

"Because of her folks?" I surprised myself with my willingness to venture in so close, but then suicide can make every other subject seem casual.

"She says she needs to concentrate on her music. Whatever the hell that means."

Mary Milton was an accomplished violinist, but I don't think either of us believed that a musical instrument could truly stand in the way of love. "You should give Susan Layne a call then. You have a shot with someone like her, man, you don't want to pass it up."

"We'll see." Had contemplating the end of his life aged Willis? His remark was exactly something an adult would say.

I hadn't wanted to climb into Willis's car in the first place, but once in, it didn't occur to me that I'd be getting out any time soon. But the distance between Skipper's and my home wasn't a journey of more than a few miles, hardly time at all to present an argument in favor of living, even one formed well in advance, and mine was not.

Willis didn't pull to the curb but stopped in the street in front of my parents' house. The front porch light was on and would remain so until I stepped inside and turned it off.

The Chevy's engine thrummed. My cigarette had burned down to the filter. I couldn't think of anything else that could keep me in the car.

But Willis had something more to say. "If anything should happen to me, there's a fifth of Scotch up in our attic, and you can have it. My old man got a couple bottles for Christmas, and I lifted one and hid it up there."

That was my opening. Did I know it then? It's hard to believe I didn't. I know it now, oh, I know it well. But I persisted with my pose of ignorance. "What do you mean if anything—?"

"Maybe I won't go home tonight. Maybe I'll just. . .I don't know. . .take off or something." Across the span of the front seat I could smell his breath, yeasty and sour like a sleeper's awakened from a long slumber.

"Really? Well, look. If you still have the car in the morning, why don't you pick me up for school?" I was still searching for a way to put a future, even one with an obligation, into his life.

And then I got out of the car and walked toward our brightly lit front porch. I turned around once, to watch which direction the Chevy's taillights took. Willis turned west, away from his home. Then I was inside. I flipped off the porch light. All the Hazzards were home safe.

Bravado had made me volunteer to ride with Willis, but once I was inside the house where I was still a child, I was sufficiently aware of how inadequate I had been to the situation and that I needed the help of adults. I woke my father and told him of my concern for Willis's welfare. I left the Scotch out of the story and substituted Willis's .22 rifle. My father phoned the Dickeys and alerted them of their son's state of mind.

At Skyler Lake cottonwoods grew close to the north shore, and in the winter months snow drifted deep between those trees and the lake's frozen edge. In one of those drifts Willis Dickey's body was found, three days after he gave me a ride home from Skipper's Lanes. If anyone saw him or spoke to him after I did, they never came forward. It wasn't clear whether he died of exposure or from an overdose; an empty bottle of sleeping pills lay next to his body. I've

always figured the pills were just a precaution, something to assure his sleep if the cold should try to shake him awake.

Few days pass when I don't think about Willis Dickey and our last hour together. I don't berate myself with the certainty that I could have said or done something to save him. But I know that I didn't, and that guilty knowledge I've lived with for thirty-five years. And will for as many years as I have left.

When you're sixteen, however, you believe that life will present many opportunities for redemption.

It won't.

Ed Herrera

Mexico Chronicles

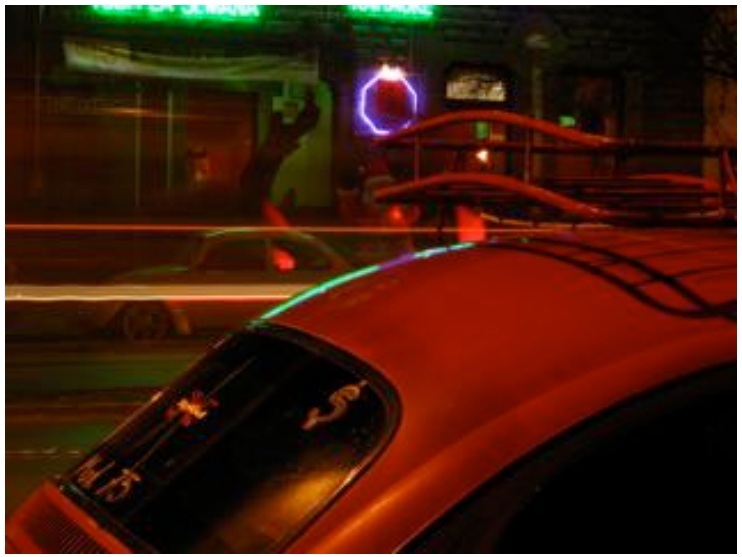
Ed Herrera is a visual artist comfortable in several media. Trained at the Joe Kubert School of Cartoon and Graphic Art, he has worked for several comic book companies, including Image Comics, Arcana Studio, Caliber Comics, and more. His projects include *GearHead*, for which he provided inked artwork, two painted covers, and logo design; the film rights have been optioned by Darius Films.

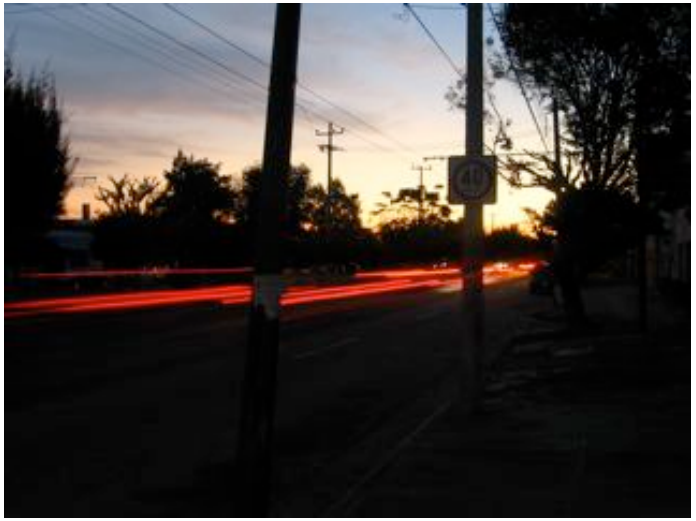
Wishing to explore his other artistic interests, Herrera spent the last half of 2007 in Mexico, the land of his ancestors, taking classes in traditional local painting techniques from the Escuela de Artes Plasticas (School of Plastic Arts) at the Universidad de Guadalajara.

While there, he also reconnected with his passion for photography. The photographs in this gallery were taken in Guadalajara, where Herrera lived, and in San Luis Potosí, a city of a million people known for its Spanish-influenced architecture.

Herrera keeps a semi-regular art blog at nuevoart.blogspot.com. He divides his time between Indiana and Mexico.

The following photos and more from Herrera's collection are in the online edition of *Freight Stories* No. 2 at freightstories.com.





Contributors

Chicago native **Rus Bradburd** coached college basketball at UTEP and New Mexico State for fourteen seasons before resigning to pursue an MFA degree in 2000. His fiction has appeared in *The Southern Review*, *Colorado Review*, *Puerto del Sol* and *Aethlon*. His essays have appeared in *SLAM Magazine*, *Bounce Magazine*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Houston Chronicle*, the *El Paso Times*, and *Heartland Journal*. Rus went to Ireland in 2002 to coach Tralee's Frosties Tigers. *Paddy on the Hardwood: A Journey in Irish Hoops* is his first book. He is an assistant professor in NMSU's English Department.

Megan Cummins is currently completing undergraduate degrees in creative writing and French at the University of Michigan. Her poetry has appeared in *Hanging Loose* and the *Albion Review*. This is her first published story. She lives in Ann Arbor.

Nathan Graziano lives in New Hampshire with his wife and two children. He is the author of *Teaching Metaphors* (sunnyoutside, 2007), *Not So Profound* (Green Bean Press, 2004), *Frostbite* (GBP, 2002) and seven chapbooks of poetry and fiction. His work has appeared in *Rattle*, *Night Train*, *The Coe Review*, *The Dublin Quarterly*, and others. For more information, visit his website: www.nathangraziano.com.

Ed Herrera is a visual artist comfortable in several media. Trained at the Joe Kubert School of Cartoon and Graphic Art, he has worked for several comic book companies, including Image Comics, Arcana Studio, Caliber Comics, and more. His projects include *GearHead*, for which he provided inked artwork, two painted covers, and logo design; the film rights have been optioned by Darius Films.

Kyle Minor is author of *In the Devil's Territory* (Dzanc Books, November 2008) and editor of *The Other Chekhov* (New American Press, 2008.) His recent work appears in *Best American Mystery Stories 2008* (Houghton Mifflin), *Twentysomething Essays by Twentysomething Writers* (Random House, 2006), *Surreal South* (Press 53, 2007), *The Southern Review*, and *The Gettysburg Review*.

Darlin' Neal's story collection, *Rattlesnakes and the Moon*, was a 2007 finalist for the GS Sharat Chandra Prize and a finalist for the New Rivers Press MVP Award. In the last two years, her work has been nominated six times for the Pushcart Prize, and appears in *The Southern Review, Shenandoah, Puerto del Sol* and numerous other magazines. Her nonfiction piece, "The House in Simi Valley," which first appeared in *storySouth*, has been selected for the forthcoming anthology, *Online Writing: The Best of The First Ten Years* and *Wigleaf* chose her short story, "Red Brick," which appeared first in *Smokelong Quarterly* as one of the top fifty short shorts on the web in 2008. She is assistant professor of creative writing in the University of Central Florida's MFA program.

Gina Ochner writes: "I live and work in Keizer, Oregon with my husband and children. When I'm not writing, I'm helping my kids at school or learning as much as I can about Russia and Latvia. Short story collections include *The Necessary Grace to Fall* and *People I Wanted to Be*. A novel entitled *The Russian Dreambook of Colour and Flight* is forthcoming from Portobello press in the UK and from Houghton-Harcourt."

Victoria Sprow graduated Summa Cum Laude from Harvard University and is currently working on her M.F.A. in Fiction at the Iowa Writers' Workshop. A U.S. Mitchell Scholar, her stories have been published in *The Greensboro Review*, *Philadelphia Stories*, and

The Stinging Fly, and she was awarded an Honorable Mention by *The Atlantic Monthly* in their 2008 Student Writing Contest.

Larry Watson was born in 1947 in Rugby, North Dakota. He is the author of the novels *In A Dark Time*, *Montana 1948*, *White Crosses*, *Laura, Orchard,* and *Sundown, Yellow Moon*; the fiction collection *Justice*; and a poetry chapbook, *Leaving Dakota*. His fiction has been published in more than a dozen foreign editions, and has received prizes and awards from Milkweed Press, Friends of American Writers, Mountain and Plains Booksellers Association, New York Public Library, Wisconsin Library Association, and Critics' Choice. *Montana 1948* was nominated for the first IMPAC Dublin international literary prize. Two of his novels have been optioned for film.

He has published short stories and poems in *Gettysburg Review*, *New England Review*, *North American Review*, *Mississippi Review*, and other journals and quarterlies. Watson taught writing and literature at the University of Wisconsin/Stevens Point for twenty-five years. He is presently a Visiting Professor of English at Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.