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## **The Tree Poachers**

Norwood lets the digger warm up in the backyard. He's never taken it up the mountain, doubts whether it can handle the elevation. Still, once everything is secure- the tool box padlocked, the hydraulic lines bungeed, the four spades on the back collapsed into one another like a giant steel artichoke- he eases the green beast off the lawn, over the curb, each wheel an elephant foot thundering into the quiet. The client had told him, "Be as discreet as possible." Right.

The kid, hung-over or not, better be ready because Norwood isn't fucking around today. Four in the morning. Too old for this shit. Four goddamn hours of sleep. Coffee and a cigarette for breakfast. When he reaches Easy's apartment, Norwood can't bring himself to lay on the horn. Too quiet out. The sort of quiet that makes you feel guilty even when you aren't doing anything.

The client called, asked him to do a job, and that was that. Norwood isn't exactly sure about the legal fine print and he wants to keep it that way. Easy comes to the door, same clothes as last night, holding a mug of smoking coffee, smiling like he's going off to camp or something. Behind him there's a

girl climbing into a pair of jeans, long t-shirt on, her back to Norwood. Lucky little bastard. Probably wasn't a word mentioned about babies last night. Nothing like his night, hearing about ticking clocks, about shitting or getting off the goddamn pot.

"You ready?"

"Yes, sir."

"My ass. Just hurry it up."

They make an unlikely pair, what with Norwood having said goodbye to forty a few years back and Easy just now squeaking past twenty. There's something about the kid though. A cockiness, or optimism, maybe a combination of the two. The privileges of youth, the ability to see adventure in nothing more than the inconvenience of paying rent. Norwood waits and when Easy climbs into the cab, it's dark except for the light coming from the dash.

It's a thirty-minute ride to the mountain in a car, but in the digger it takes upwards of an hour, at least. If Norwood gets her up past forty, the washing-machine like feel of the ride turns to mechanical bull.

"You find her at the 'Mo?" he asks, pushing it to forty-five just to poke at Easy's hangover.

"Not bad, huh," Easy says, his face pale, swaying over a mug of coffee. "I also took twenty off Uncle Pat. Big guy scratched on the eight."

"Uh-huh," Norwood says, and pulls out a Lucky Strike.

They play softball with Uncle Pat, who isn't anybody's uncle as far as Norwood knows. The Alamo is the only bar in town with a pulse, however slight. Norwood still goes about as much as Easy, though he had his last drink over nine years ago, just before he moved to Gunnison. Somewhere after that he'd let himself become a local.

"So what's the plan? A transplant, right?"

Norwood's used to this, the stacking up of questions, makes it a rule to only answer the last one asked. "Pretty much," he says.

"Light'll be here soon enough," Easy says and sits back. He's right. The light is coming, and even if Norwood can't see it yet, he can feel it. Like a mood coming on.

The digger labors up winding roads, past elk masquerading as junipers, or maybe dabs of burnt umber. No radio in the truck and even if there was, Norwood wouldn't have it on. The truck's already loud enough with the constant symphony of gears and rust.

"Uncle Pat actually pay you?" Norwood asks.

"Yeah. Told him I'd send you after him if he didn't."

Not many others make fun of Norwood, because of his size, his over-blown reputation which is based largely upon the time he escorted a rancher out of the Alamo by his ear after he insulted Deana. It wasn't that big a deal, but it still went down in Gunny-lore.

"You eat yet?" Easy asks.

"Nope," and for a second he thinks of asking if Easy did, but he already knows the answer to that. It's nothing short of a miracle the kid's awake at all. "The W after?"

"You buying?"

"We'll see."

Norwood's about to add, "If we don't end up in jail, I'll buy you anything you want," but there's no need to excite the kid.

Ten miles to Crested Butte, the ski resort another three miles up from there, but thank Christ they don't have to go that far.

"We going straight into crusty butt," Easy says, a little less pasty-looking now.

"Yep."

"Whose home is it?"

"Not a home. Restaurant."

He can see Easy looking at him sideways, then turning away, deciding not to pursue it. Good kid. He's learning. Let things unfold. No need to worry until you have to. And maybe not even then.

Still dark out, like somebody hit pause on the sunrise. Norwood barely recognizes himself in the rearview. Thick and solid, not handsome, just solid, a shovel-full of brown hair tamped down under a trucker's hat, caterpillar moustache. His

arms on the steering wheel are meaty, veins like worms burrowed into clay. Strong, not scrawny like the kid. Still, he can't keep up with the girls Easy rakes in, a different one every week, all of them young, pretty. Norwood's only got Deana now.

"Grab me that," Norwood says, pointing to a scrap of paper on the floor.

Easy turns on the dome light, picks it up, reads, "Carol's Crepes?" pronouncing it 'creeps' and hands him the paper before putting them back into darkness.

"Don't ask me. French or something."

Norwood learned long ago to dumb down his vocabulary. You hear somebody use a word like 'crepe' in Gunnison and it's grounds for suspicion. He once used the word 'redolent' when referring to the stink of the bar and got looked at funny the rest of the night.

"I need to do anything special once we get there?" Easy says, scrunching down, putting his boots on the dash, his knees cradling his chin.

"Watch the cables. Keep 'em clear. Fill the hole after."

"That it?"

"And keep quiet. The less people know about this the better."

"Why? What's the big deal?" Easy seems interested, but not very.

"Let's just say I don't think this guy exactly owns the tree."

"You're shitting me?"

Now he's interested. If Easy were a dog his ears would be perked, his ass wagging. He likes this sort of crap. Adventure.

"No, I'm not *shitting* you."

"So we could, like, get busted for this?"

"Just act like you belong and we'll be fine."

"Can do." Easy hugs his knees, shivers like he's cold though the heat is blasting. "Hey, I just work here, right?"

"Yup."

"So what's the story? Who hired us?"

"Her husband. Or ex-husband, not sure which."



"We're poaching this Carol's tree?"

"And planting it in her husband's front yard."

"And where might that be?"

"Outskirts. South Butt somewheres."

"Killer," Easy says, and Norwood knows what's coming next.

"I get paid extra for this?"

"Nope."

"Norwood."

"You'll get an extra foot up your ass if you fuck up."

"I don't fuck up."

"Not yet you don't," he says, the town coming into view, something made of cardboard, a stage set maybe, held in the palm of the surrounding mountains. It's beautiful from a distance, like all towns, cities, people. Beautiful and comical. "Sure Easy," he adds after a bit, long enough to throw the kid off. "There'll be something extra."

It takes a good twenty minutes to get the digger positioned properly, Easy signaling uselessly in the morning fog behind the truck, an apparition, Christ raising his hands to the heavens, beseeching. The wheels grunt up over the curb, then lurch down, sink into the grass. It's only once Norwood turns the engine off that the quiet begins to assert itself.

The weight of the digger leaves two trenches half a foot deep, the grass beyond fucked. Evidence. Easy is busy clearing away the area around the base of the tree, tossing bricks somebody put in as a sort of retainer wall.

"Stack them, will you?" Norwood says, and Easy stops tossing them in front of the restaurant, though his smirk is at full throttle. "Thank you," Norwood says, wanting to clip him in the back of the head with a stray brick.

There needs to be a large enough berth to work in the spades. The sidewalk's going to suffer, no getting around that. Collateral damage, but he's already warned the husband. And the telephone wires, that's going to be tricky. Nothing Norwood can do but hope the branches snap before bringing the current down. He stands to the side of the digger where the controls are, yanks on the hydraulic lines dangling like tentacles from the

arm of the digger, and motions Easy to stop with the bricks, to man the lines and keep them from snagging. The digger's similar to one of those crane machines with the stuffed animals, only more intricate. Easy keeps after him to teach him, but it's not like the kid's going to make a career out of landscaping. Once summer's over, he'll be back snowboarding full-time.

Norwood pulls a lever, watches as the first spade retracts. It's loud, louder than he remembers it being. People have to be waking up, though there's only the one light on across the street. Too bad, he thinks, deal with it. The second spade clangs, wobbles back and forth before settling itself alongside the other. Three and four follow suit, each taking an agonizingly long time. He thinks of them as fingers, fingers with long, retractable nails. It reminds him of something out of the X-men, like those steel blades of Wolverine's.

Once all four spades are in position, Norwood sways the giant arm toward the white birch, overshoots it, then brings it shuddering back. He pushes another lever and the hand snaps open like it's going to tear the tree out of the ground and slash it to ribbons.

"Grab the axe," Norwood says. "I can watch the lines."

Easy stands behind the thirteen-foot birch, hands resting on top of a long-handled axe, turning his head every now and then, watching the street. He couldn't look more suspicious.

Norwood eases the arm forward, closes the spades around the bole of the tree, the trunk squarely in the middle. He walks over, checks to make sure things are aligned, then swings a latch shut, locking them in. He returns to the truck, paws down one of the levers and the circle of drawn spades lowers to the ground.

"Cigarette time?" Easy says.

"No."

A lot depends on the first spade; if it slides in unhindered, the others might too. Norwood holds the lever down and it starts off decent enough, there's that clean, damp sound that means the soil is good, the roots pliable. Easy gives him a thumbs-up, probably hoping for a good-sized root so he'll get a chance to swing the axe. Sure enough, with the second spade, there's the bad sound, a jigger sound where the whole arm begins to rattle like a jack hammer. Either Norwood's hit a rock, or worse, a conduit of some sort, which could knock the electricity

out for the whole town. Wouldn't be too hard to figure out who was to blame. He pushes the lever up, eases the blade out, the black mud clinging like frosting, and walks over to see.

"I'm on it," Easy says. "Just say when."

Norwood squats, uses his Zippo to inspect the three-inch root, its skin scraped so only the white bone shows. It teems with frantic insects. Flatheads. Borers. Malignant, but treatable if sprayed with *Malathion*, the infected trunk wrapped in burlap. Might have a chance if they left it alone, but moving it's a sure death sentence.

Norwood takes the axe from Easy, notches one of the roots so Easy knows where to cut. "Got it?"

Easy takes the axe, says, "Got it, Dad" and starts hacking away.

Dad. Norwood taps his shirt pocket, pulls out another Lucky, smiles when Easy gives him a dirty look. Dad. Every time he goes to the grocery store with Deana lately she stops and points out the kids' clothes to him, the little bonnets or whatever they are, the footsies with the white rubbery soles on them that he remembers wearing as a child. Not once in a while,

but every time now. "Oh, aren't these cute!" Nod. Grunt. Get me the holy fuck out of here.

Easy finally hacks through, the root hanging, amputated. Norwood sets the blade down again, works it in slowly this time without resistance, the smaller roots snapping like guitar strings. He maneuvers the tree by moving the arm back and forth, leaves falling, branches snapping, so that it finally loosens its grip on the soil.

Two down, two to go. This is the tricky one. He'll have to come down right through the cement sidewalk, get a clean break so only the one section gets messed up.

"Want me to start it?" Easy says, hefting the axe over his shoulder. Norwood says nothing and Easy shrugs, sets the axe down, leans against the side of the restaurant to watch.

The spade raises and lowers, stabbing at the concrete, chipping away until there's a crack and the blade sinks through to the dirt. Minimal damage. Good. Almost home free and then they can get into the truck, turn up the heat and shrug off the creepy chill Norwood's had since they got here. Still, it's not as dark out now, like somebody's been quietly unraveling a light

bulb wrapped in toilet paper. A few cars are out, people emerging from their homes, zombie-like, on their way to work. Norwood nods a friendly hello to a man passing by as the last spade slices through. The tree pulls free of the earth, hangs suspended a few feet above the asteroid-sized hole they've created.

"Start shovelin'. When you're done, we'll get."

"Yes'm, boss," Easy says and swaps out the axe for a shovel.

Norwood tosses a gunnysack into the truck. No point. The insects are already entrenched. Swaddling. That's what burlap is for a tree. Fucking swaddling. Deana's really gotten into his head lately. Sees it everywhere now. Other people's babies popping out of the scenery, glowing, so that he can't miss them. He wraps a nylon rope around the top of the tree, ties a knot, feels for a second like he's strangling the thing, but it has to be secure.

Easy pats the dirt down around the hole while Norwood goes about tilting the tree over the top of the truck so that it's leaning out over the windshield. It's taller than he thought;

they'll be lucky to clear the power lines on the way out. He bows it down, ties it tight to the bumper. Hard to see, but they'll manage.

"All set?" Norwood says, firing up the engine.

"You see the way people are looking at us?"

"Was hoping it was just my imagination."

Easy gets in, tosses his gloves on the bench seat. The digger lumbers away, Norwood craning his neck under the windshield, watching the power lines, but they make it.

"Why do I feel like we just kidnapped a giraffe?" Easy says, then pats Norwood's pocket, grabs the pack of *Luckys* without asking.

Norwood's about to answer when he spots a woman on the sidewalk, jeans and a yellow ski jacket, long blonde hair, healthy. Like Deana used to look before she went all roly-poly on him. Normally he wouldn't have looked twice at the woman, stock footage around here, but the woman stops only a few feet away from them and her face, which had probably been smiling only seconds before, is now severe, panicked almost.



"Shit," Norwood says. "Guess who?"

"Mrs. Creep?"

Norwood speeds up a little while Easy scrunches down in his seat, blows smoke out through the top of the cracked window, most of it billowing back into the cab.

"Way to be inconspicuous," Norwood says.

"She's kind of hot, huh? I wouldn't mind giving her a taste of my baguette." Easy smiles, lowers the window to let some of the smoke out.

"French fry more like."

They pass the woman and Easy turns around in his seat, watches her. "It's just a fucking tree, lady. Re-fucking-lax already."

Norwood checks the rearview. The woman looks confused, her body cringing, clutching itself. They come to a stop sign, turn right, and head out of town.

\*

When they reach the husband's house, four miles from the "scene of the crime" as Easy is now calling it, it's almost six in the morning.

"Where is the guy?" Easy says, holding the tree upright as Norwood orchestrates the levers, begins digging the new home, grave, whatever.

"He won't be here."

"Coward mother fucker," Easy says and spits on the ground like he's got something to be offended about.

"*Judicious* mother fucker."

"Huh?"

"No point in his being here."

"Still think it's lame."

This is the better part of the job, digging a fresh, clean hole. He told the husband that the tree, considering its age and the time of year, had about an eighty percent chance of surviving. With the flatheads, that chance has dwindled to zero. Maybe less. So much for the bonus, an extra two hundred if the

tree survived. No big deal. Norwood might be gone next summer anyway. Long fucking gone. Maybe back to Texas.

The last spade slips in and Norwood pulls the load up, dirt slipping through the digger's fingers. He watches as Easy leans the tree against the truck, then hops into the hole, digs out the remaining chunks of dirt.

"All set, chief!" Easy says and hops out.

Norwood takes the shovel and drops a few more loads of dirt in. Need to keep the tree above ground a bit so it can breathe afterward. He surveys it once more before motioning for Easy to slide the tree over. They lower it in together, let it rest on the bottom as Norwood dumps in his "loam-roids": an organic cocktail of peat moss, leaf mulch, and decayed manure. After that, all that's left is to kick in the left-over mound of dirt. Norwood does all the particulars, makes sure the tree is aligned correctly, stamps the dirt down until it's solid while Easy uses the shovel to scrape the remnants in.

"Grab the hose. Just get it damp now. Not too much."

Norwood cleans up, knocking the chunks of dirt off the spades, securing the shovel, locking the toolbox. The tree looks

good where it's at, but then, it looked good at the restaurant, too. Best not to stick your nose in other people's business. No point in taking sides, who knows what she did to piss him off. Better a tree than a kid stuck in a fight this nasty. There's that anyway. Besides, soon they'll be back in Gunny scarfing down eggs, hash-browns, bacon, sausage, weak coffee. Norwood will know the name of the waitress and it'll almost feel like he belongs.

"Hop in," Norwood says, and climbs into the cab, knocking the mud from his boots on the runner.

"Will do, mildew."

The digger backs out of the front yard, the tread marks not half as bad as at the restaurant. That's when Norwood spots her. A woman driving something like a Geo Metro, some white little bug that stops on the gravel drive about half way up. It's the same lady from before. The blonde.

"Find out what she wants," Norwood says as they creep toward the car, stop a few feet in front of her. He reaches for his pack of cigarettes, changes his mind and rolls down his

window. Norwood gives the woman a meek wave, but can't see her face behind the glare coming off her windshield.

"Got it," Easy says, and opens his door to get out.

"Eric."

"Norwood," the kid says back, mimicking the sternness in Norwood's voice. "Relax, Dad. I can handle it." Easy jumps down from the truck, heads for the car.

The kid places one hand on the hood, leans down so that he can talk to the woman. He looks like a cop, like he's going to write her a ticket. Easy's smiling now, that's good, the kid's got a good smile. Good heart too, when he wants or cares to use it. No telling what line of bull he's feeding her, motioning toward the digger, toward Norwood, his arm extended, palm up, the little con-artist blaming it on him probably. Just as well, make her feel better. Good cop, bad cop.

What would happen if he just floored it? Would the digger climb up over the car like in those monster-truck shows, or would he end up pushing her out into the road? The tires aren't big enough, not monster enough. God that would be fun, with the woman safely out of the car of course, maybe resting against the

tree, eating an apple or something. He drums his fingers on the steering wheel. It's wrapped in one of those rubber covers, all Nascar-like. Deana got it for him. She'd be a good mother. It's not her fault she's had a rough life. Especially that last boyfriend of hers. Norwood should have put him in the hospital for what he did to her. Norwood looks down, notices his belly pushing toward the wheel. Hell, he's getting roly-poly, too.

The kid is squatting down now, both hands resting on the door frame where the window's been rolled down. He looks like he's going to take her order. Would you like a coke with that? Maybe a shake? Maybe you'd like to move your fucking car so we can get some breakfast?

Easy is laughing, his face crinkling up like it's being vacuumed sealed. The woman hands him something and Easy pats the roof of her car, heads back to the truck. The woman's white arm extends, gives a wave as the car backs down the drive, but Norwood doesn't wave back.

When Easy climbs into the truck, still smiling, pleased with himself, Norwood says, "Why do you keep calling me Dad?"

"Why do I what?"

"Call me Dad."

"You called me Eric."

"I didn't know what you were going to do."

"Me neither, but it turns out hubby had an affair with one of the waitresses. He took the tree because she's divorcing him. Here, she gave me this to give to you."

Easy hands him a business card with pink roses all over it.

"What am I supposed to do with this?"

"She wants you to call her. Wants you to plant another tree for her. She called it a Fuck-You tree. Something to get back at her old man."

Norwood tucks the card into his shirt pocket, says nothing.

"Hey, I, um, wouldn't mind setting up the appointment if--"

"No dice."

"C'mon man, didn't you see that? She was all over me."

"That tree's going to die."

Norwood pulls the digger out onto the main road, brings the speed up to fifty, which is a waste of gas, but there's comfort

in the laboring of the engine, the bucking of the cab. It also makes conversation impossible. Once they're back in town, they eat breakfast together, Norwood's treat, and by the time he drops Easy off, it's nearly eleven. Perfect. Just enough time before Deana comes home for lunch.

Norwood stops at the store with all the baby stuff, and, after looking through what must be the world's largest selection of tiny pajamas, decides he likes the green one the best. It looks like a lizard or a dinosaur, but he's not sure which. There are ears on the hood and big white teeth where the baby's face goes. And, of course, bootsies. Footsies. Whatever they're called. He makes sure they have those.

When he gets back home, Norwood crawls into bed and places the small package on Deana's pillow. He tries to picture the whole thing, how she'll start crying, how she'll crawl into his arms, how she'll want to know what changed his mind. He thinks about the tree, about how all things want to take root, how sometimes a thing can be too fragile to be moved. But he already knows he won't mention any of that. He's not sure he even really understands it yet.



No. Instead, he'll say something about it being time, about wanting a little Norwood around the house so he can teach him to hate the same things he does. Deana will laugh at this. He knows she will. Norwood shrugs at the pillow like he's actually having a conversation with it, then turns on his side, and waits.

## WOULD YOU RATHER

Our Dad tended to be philosophical when he played 'Would you rather?'

*Thomas, would you rather be thunder or lightning? snow or fire? a question mark or a period? red or yellow?*

Mom never played. She even refused to answer easy questions like 'Would you rather kiss Robert Redford or Steve McQueen?' She'd shake her head, smile at my Dad, but always claim she just liked to listen.

Even though it's been a year since we've seen our parents, I still play my own version.

"Would you rather I kick your ass or you hurry it up?" I say, and Dustin stops to ponder this before he realizes I'm not kidding around.

"Hurry it up?"

"Move," I say, and he does. He has to. I'm all he has anymore.

It's seven a.m. and we've got four hours of water-patrol ahead of us. While Dustin gets dressed, I toss his used body-

wipe in the bin and head outside to wait. At least he's stopped asking to take showers. When Dustin comes out of the house his 'Officer of Sustainability' jacket is zipped up to his nose. The logo, a big drop of blue water wearing hand-cuffs, covers his entire eight-year-old torso.

"Let's do this," he says and struts off ahead of me, ticket-book at the ready.

Six months now and no rain. Last year the average rainfall was a whopping six inches, just enough to keep the hinges of the world oiled. Still, it's a slow day. We walk, without incident, for a solid hour before being heckled by a Leftover sitting on a cardboard box, a liter of brown-colored water at his feet.

"Hey, I think I hear somebody watering their lawn! You better go arrest them!"

Dustin has his pen out before the guy even finishes his sentence, but I grab him by the collar before he can cross the street. "Forget it."

"But that water-bottle, he's worth at least half a gallon."

"We've got plenty without him, Dustin. This isn't a game."

"But what if Mom and Dad don't come back. What if they stop giving us extra-rations. Then what?"

"Then we get by like everybody else."

Dustin puts his ticket-book back inside his jacket, sticks the pen behind his ear and contents himself by taking a long, unnecessary drink. He wipes his mouth on his sleeve, says, "When are they coming back?"

"When they finish their research in the Amazon and figure this mess out. We've gone through this how many times?"

"A million."

"C'mon," I say. "Let's go find some electricity-pirates. That'll make you feel better."

It doesn't take long before we spot some lights peeking out from a curtained basement. We knock on the door and, sure enough, the lights go out. A woman opens the door, forty something, still wearing her bathrobe.

"Hi, ma'am. We're with the Sustainability Unit. Would you mind if we came in, took a look around?"

I know the look she's giving me. Our dog used to do the same thing after he peed in the house.

"Of course," she says. "And who's this little cutie-pie?"

She doesn't know it yet, but she just earned herself an extra ticket. "This is Officer Dustin," I say and give her a look which she interprets perfectly.

"Oh, you'll have to forgive me. It's just that I haven't seen such a handsome officer before."

Dustin is having none of it. "The basement?"

I shrug and she leads us down the hallway. On the way, I peek my head into her bathroom, note the tube running from her Recycler into a hole in the tiled floor. She must have just gone because the thing is still agitating, filtering out the urine, turning it into clear drops of water to be used for laundry, dishes. On the side of the 5 gallon plastic jug, in big black letters, it says, 'Do Not Drink.'

The basement holds the usual violations: hydroponics, a sprinkler, lettuce, carrots, tomatoes. The only surprise is the row of Dragon Lilies.

"Dragon Lilies were his favorite. My husband's I mean," the woman explains. "He died last year. I share with others when I have enough. Please, you have to understand," she says and I want to grab her hand, put my arm around her, sit down and have a nice big salad, eat every last morsel of evidence with her and tell her she has no idea how much I do understand.

"I still have to write you up for this. They'll probably just garnish a few liters, put you on water probation for a year. It won't be so bad."

"Not so bad?" she starts to say, but stops when she notices Dustin scribbling away.

"Let me see," I say and take the pad from him.

"Fourteen violations," Dustin says. "And that's not counting the fan you have on upstairs."

"Officer Dustin," I say. "Can you go outside and check the perimeters, make sure we didn't miss anything?"

"Gotcha," he says and actually goes so far as to hitch up his pants.

"I'm already getting by on less than most do," the woman begins, her hand rubbing her neck, the robe parting just a touch. "Isn't there something we can work out, some sort of community service I could perform..."

I take a step back, cough some of the color back into my face. "Here," I say and hand her two of the tickets. "Just pay these and dismantle the greenhouse, okay?"

Her eyes go all soft and big and I hurry out the front door before she can get to me. As we head down the street, Dustin glares at me, asks, "How many?"

"Fourteen," I say. "Nice work, D."

\*

After our shift, me and Dustin get cleaned up for our date. Jerusha's asked me to bring D, said she had a surprise for us, but she's a bootlegger--someone who makes un-recycled water at home and sells it on the black market--and I don't know how he's going to take it. She only lives a few blocks away, but by the time we manage to get there the house is dark, her parents long asleep. They're the opposite of Jerusha: obedient, scared, good citizens.

"Home illegal home," she says, waiting for us by the garage behind her house.

"You live out *here*?" Dustin asks.

She doesn't answer, just unlocks the padlock and does a clean-and-jerk with the garage door. With a flip of a switch we're doused in red light. A king-size bed with satin sheets sits in the middle of the garage.

"Whaddya think, boys?"

Dustin immediately goes for the bed.

"This rules!" He points to a second story loft with bed sheets hanging from the ceiling. That must be where she hides her paraphernalia, her water-making lab. "What's up there? Can we go up there?"

"That's my secret place, Dustin. Sorry."

I haven't turned her in yet. There's my being head over heels in love with her, but also the fact that she knows where my Mom and Dad are. It works out well, a blackmail made in heaven since I can't imagine being chained to anything sexier than Jerusha's lips.



*Would you rather get laid or ...*

"Mind your own business, Dustin," I say. "Or you won't get to see the surprise."

"Surprise, surprise, surprise!" he yells, jumping up and down on the bed.

"First you have to promise not to tell anyone. Can you keep a secret, Dustin?"

"I can keep a secret."

"I thought so. How about you, Thomas?"

"I don't have much choice, do I?"

"No, I suppose you don't," Jerusha says and scrambles up the stairs to the loft.

"Do you think she has water-guns?" Dustin asks.

"I wouldn't be surprised."

"That would be so cool!"

"No, it wouldn't," I say. Water pistols are one of the ten Unforgivables, but Dustin doesn't take his work home with him. Once the jacket comes off, he's one-hundred-percent kid again.

"You know we can't tell anybody about this, right? We'd both get in big, big trouble."

Dustin plops down on the bed, says, "Don't be such a wet rag, Thomas."

"You don't even know what that means."

"Do too!"

Jerusha is standing at the top of the stairs, her jeans replaced by a pair of bulky flannel pajamas. "Thomas, can you give me a hand with this?"

She's holding something wrapped in a white bed sheet. I climb half-way up the stairs, grab the thing and walk it down.

"Ready?" Jerusha says once we stand it up. She doesn't wait for an answer before whipping the sheet off. "Ta-da!"

"Wow!" Dustin says, standing on the bed again. "What is it?"

"This, Dustin, is a projector. It's what people used to play movies on."

Another Unforgivable. *Anyone caught possessing movies of any kind will automatically be placed in an Un-concentration*

*Camp*. I remember the DVD burnings held on the weekends, the free liters of water passed out for every ten movies burned. No longer would we gorge ourselves on distraction, no longer would we amuse ourselves into submission.

"Where did you get that thing?" I say, not quite wanting to hear the answer.

"Here, make yourself useful and hang this on the wall." Jerusha hands me a white bed-sheet and a handful of tacks. As she goes about threading the film, Dustin puts his hands on his lap, morphs into good-little-boy. When the images from *Star Wars* start jumping on the wall, Dustin's mouth doesn't seem able to close.

Satisfied that Dustin is sewn to the end of the bed, Jerusha fluffs a few pillows, then nods toward the ladder. "Dustin, honey, I need to go upstairs with your brother for awhile. You okay down here?"

"Yeah, okay, whatever," he says. I'm worried he's going to drool all over her sheets.

"Give me a minute," Jerusha says before she cranks up the volume and disappears up the ladder. I count out two long

minutes in my head, then follow after her. When I part the bed sheets at the top of the ladder, Jerusha is standing next to a claw-foot bathtub filled with soapy water, the steam slowly rising, a blue towel wrapped around her.

"You can't just..."

"I can Thomas, you should know that by now." She lifts her leg up, the towel opening up along her thighs in a V as she dips her toes in. "When's the last time you had a real bath?"

Number One on the list of Unforgivables.

I can't speak. My tongue's deserted me.

*Would you rather watch R2D2 or take a bath with Jerusha?*

"Five years ago, freshman year of high school," she says.

"Am I right?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"Well, what are you waiting for?"

"Where did you get all the water?"

"Take your clothes off and I'll explain." Jerusha drops the towel to the floor, starts coming toward me and I back away, worried about Dustin. "We're just taking a bath, Thomas. What do

you think's going to happen here?" The smile widens. "He can't hear us anyway."

I undress, sit down in the tub, barricade my knees against my chest as the water envelopes me like smoke. It feels pornographic, so pure it's dirty. An entire tub full of water hot enough to turn my legs a deep pink.

"Now relax." Jerusha takes her hand, tugs at one of my feet so that my leg slides down along her thighs. "That's better." Her hair is spread out against the back of the tub like a shiny black fan and I can't stop staring. "Feels good, don't you think?"

"Yes," I say, my voice quivering more than the water.

Jerusha leans forward, places her mouth against my knee, gives it a soft bite and the world pulses and pounds in my ears as she lays back with this pleased look on her face.

My eyes are closed, the water almost cool by the time we speak again. "I guess now you're a Violator, too." I open my eyes to find Jerusha smiling that illegal smile of hers.

"If Dustin wasn't here," I start to say. "I'd violate more than just..."

"Oh God, I forgot about him," Jerusha says, and pulls herself out of the water, starts drying herself with one foot on the rim on the tub, giving me an eye-full.

"You like that?" she says and drapes the towel over my head. "Be a good boy and maybe you'll get some tomorrow." With that she climbs back into her pajamas and heads down to Dustin.

I dry myself with Jerusha's towel, rub her smell as deeply as I can into my own skin before putting my crusty clothes back on. I'd been so preoccupied with Jerusha that I haven't had time to really look at her water-brewing system. I've seen them before, but this one is especially tricked out. There's a car battery on the floor, jumper cables hooked up to an iron rod that leads to a small skylight in the roof. Aluminum foil covers the bottom of the skylight and plastic tubing drips down like an IV into a 5 gallon barrel. It must have taken her a month to get enough water for just the one bath. I feel honored almost to the point of tears.

When I go downstairs, the film is flapping away on the reel, Dustin fast asleep on the end of the bed. Jerusha turns the machine off, covers Dustin with a blanket and pats the bed for me to climb in. I fall asleep with my arm around her, her

back arched into my chest as I dream of flash floods, thunder and lightning, showers, tsunamis.

\*

When I wake up, it isn't to the sound of rain tap-dancing on the roof, it's to Dustin's voice. He's sitting beside Jerusha on the bed, studying a map.

"We're going on a camping trip! Guess where, Thomas."

"Prison?"

"No. We're going to a lake!"

Jerusha hands me the map, her finger pointing to a place up in the mountains.

"It's hard to get to, which is why the government doesn't know about it. It's hidden away, fed by mountain run-off."

"I don't know."

This time it's Dustin. "Thomas, don't be such..."

"A wet rag. I know."

"A pussy," he says, and immediately scoots away from me. "I want to go."

"And how are we going to get there?"

Jerusha tosses a set of keys at me. "My parent's lent me their car."

"Do they *know* they lent you their car?"

Jerusha's parents think she's an angel, living out in the garage so she can remain close to them. The fact that they're being used as a cover has, I'm sure, never even occurred to them.

"C'mon," Jerusha says. "The sooner we leave the better chance we have of finding it."

"You haven't been there before?"

"That's the fun part, dummy."

"Yeah dummy," Dustin says and grabs the keys from me. "I'll drive. Let's go."

\*

We take the highway out towards the coast, the mountains bare, most of the trees felled long ago.

"It looks like a sick dog," Dustin says from the back seat.



"What does, honey?" Jerusha says.

"The mountains. Like our old dog did after surgery, after they shaved his butt."

It's exactly what it looks like. The back-side of a very large, very sick animal.

I try to change the subject using Dad's old fail-safe.

"Dustin, would you rather be an eagle or a salmon?"

"There are no salmon."

"Pick one."

"A tiger."

"*Dustin*. Eagle or salmon?"

"Fine. Eagle. My turn." Dustin puts on his serious face, scrunching it up like a raisin. "Jerusha, would you rather be a fart coming out of my butt or Thomas' butt?"

Jerusha turns around in her seat, completely un-ruffled.

"Definitely your butt, Dustin. Hands down."

"Gross!" he says and rolls over on the back seat, his hands covering his face.

"My turn," Jerusha says. "Dustin, would you rather be a water-cop or a Leftover?"

I can hear a humming in the back seat that's threatening to spill over into laughter. "Mmmmm...a rain-maker!" Dustin says.

"See what you've done," I say, but Jerusha's already reaching over the back seat, tickling Dustin. At this rate, he's never going to want to go back to work.

"Pee break," I say and pull the car over.

"What, no recycler?" Jerusha says from her open window. "Isn't that illegal or something?" Before I can answer, she rolls her window up.

I go against one of the few remaining Alaskan blue cedars still looming along the roadside. Beyond that there's what's left of a river: a sluice of dried mud. The bright green moss on the cedar branches is now brown and dried out, the limbs of the tree like the hairy legs of an old tarantula.

When I get back in the car, the laughter's long gone.

"What?" I say.

"Look," Jerusha says and nods at the windshield.

At first I look right past it, notice only the naked tree stumps along the highway. Then I see it. A solitary drop of water on the windshield. I'm about to ask Jerusha if she's up to something, but the look on her face tells me she's beyond serious. She cranes her neck under the glass, peers up into the sky. "You see it now?"

Above us, there's a cloud. Just one, but a big one. The rest of the sky is all blue and sun. "Maybe it's bird shit," I say.

"Clear bird shit?"

"You guys think it's *rain*?" Dustin says, pronouncing 'rain' like somebody from old times might 'God' or 'Elvis'.

"No Dustin," I say. "It's a drop of water. That's all." I put the key in the ignition. "How much further to this lake?"

"What. Is. Your. Problem?" Jerusha reaches over, rips the keys out and dangles them in front of my face. "Dustin and I are going to investigate, aren't we Dustin?"

Dustin scrambles out of the car and onto the hood, props his elbows on the windshield.

"You're probably right that it's nothing," Jerusha says.  
"But what's the harm in..."

"Dustin is the harm," I say quietly. "I don't want to get his hopes up."

"Hope's not such a bad thing."

"Depends on who's doing the hoping." The words are barely out of my mouth when I see Dustin lick the windshield. "No harm, huh" I say, and we hear a muffled, "Tastes like rain!"

"Great," I say and Jerusha rolls her eyes at me, gets out of the car and starts spinning around with her arms raised up to the sky like she's Fred Astaire in *Singing In the Rain*. Dustin sprawls down flat on the hood, watches as she goes into a mock rain-dance, her chest jutting in and out, her elbows pushed back like a chicken's.

Dustin starts chanting, "Rain, rain, rain!" and hops down off the car so he can shadow behind Jerusha. I'm witnessing an ancient culture, a shaman possessed by the Gods of rain, as Jerusha goes into an impromptu prayer.

*"Oh, Mother of water, we thank you for this sign of your glory. We know you are up there. We know you are watching. We*

*are good, humble people deserving your sweet nourishment. We beg of you, let your bounty fall and cleanse our parched souls!"*

When I look up into the blank face of the sky, I almost expect to feel something on my cheeks, but like always, there's nothing.

"Bravo," I say and Dustin and Jerusha look confused, like maybe they thought the dance would actually work. "Can we go now?"

They both give one last disappointed look up into the summer sky, then get back in the car, the colossal wind turbines spinning away indifferently along the mountain ridges as we continue our drive in silence.

*Would you rather die from thirst or drown?*

It's Jerusha who finally speaks up. "Turn right after the guard rail."

I slow down, take the turn which leads to a dirt road and we make it maybe a hundred yards before coming to a large gate. "What now?" I say, and Jerusha gets out of the car without a word. Me and Dustin watch as she scratches around in the dirt at the base of a nearby stump, finds a key, and unlocks the gate.

"I told you Leftovers weren't all bad," she says when she gets back in the car. "You ever been skinny-dipping, Dustin?"

"What's that?"

"You'll see."

The closer we get, the more excited Dustin gets. He's like a dog who knows it's going to the park. This lake better exist or he's going to tear up the interior of the car. We make it up one last incline and park the now wheezing car under a massive dead cedar. With all these giant specters grave-yarding the land, the few remaining plants look like sprigs of parsley ornamenting an already devoured plate.

"We just follow this trail here and bang, there's our lake," Jerusha says and Dustin wastes no time, darts off ahead of us.

"No running!" I call after him.

"I'm not," he yells and slows into a trot.

Me and Jerusha have barely started walking when she turns to me and says, "Have you told him what happened yet?"

"What happened when?"

"To your parents," she says and gives me a look I haven't seen before.

"No, I haven't."

"He still thinks they're away doing research?"

"Uh-huh."

"And you're okay with that?"

I say nothing and we walk on, every now and then catching glimpses of Dustin up ahead. I haven't seen him this happy in a long time.

"The longer you wait, the harder it's going to be for him to understand why they did it. And more importantly, why you didn't tell him."

"What exactly am I supposed to say? Mom and Dad killed themselves so we'd get their water rations? Oh, and by the way, Dustin, they're buried in our basement. You walk over them every day."

"No, I want you to tell him what love means," she says.  
"How you found them holding each other."

*Would you rather I lie or tell the truth?*

"I can't do it," I say.

"Then I'll do it."

"No. You won't."

"He trusts me. It'll be like removing a band-aid."

"It'll be like removing a heart."

"I'm sorry," she says in a beautifully small voice. "I just want to help."

Maybe she's right. I honestly don't know anymore.

Jerusha loops her arm through mine like we're on a Sunday stroll through the park, like we're not searching for a forbidden lake, not about to change a kid's life.

"I found it! I found it!"

Dustin is leaping up and down ahead of us, pointing to what must be the lake below him. I have to admit that I didn't expect to find it, and, now that we have, I get instant goose-bumps. Jerusha unhooks her arm from mine and we both start running toward him.



There is a moment of silence as the three of us stand on top of a ridge looking down at one of the paltriest looking lakes I've ever seen. It's a sad excuse for a lake, but it's ours just the same.

"Last one in is a rotten egg," Jerusha says and crabs her way down the slope.

Dustin doesn't move.

"C'mon, D," I say. "I'll help you down."

Big mistake.

"I don't need your help," he says and to prove it he climbs past me, slips and ends up going down the slope on his butt. My heart stops, but he's fine, pops right up when he reaches the bottom. "Rotten egg! Rotten egg!" he yells, pointing up at me.

I would be a million rotten eggs for the view I'm getting now of Jerusha stripping along the edge of the water. Dustin, too, stops his yelling when he sees the miracle happening only feet away from him. The tan lines. I hadn't noticed them as much this morning, but now, in the light of day, they stand out. She puts her feet together along the edge before diving in and taking it all away from us.

I scrabble down and almost bump into Dustin. He's still transfixed, like he's not sure if he's dreaming or not.

"C'mon you two! I won't look if you're shy!" Jerusha says and turns her back on us.

"Can Thomas go skinny-dipping, too?" Dustin says.

"Of course he can, why not?"

"Because he's not skinny!"

I have my pants off just as he's saying this.

"He's skinny enough," Jerusha says.

"Thanks, Dustin. Nice one," I say and jump into the water before Jerusha has a chance to turn back around. It doesn't occur to me that Dustin has no idea how to swim until I notice him sitting on the bank, underwear still on, legs dangling in the water. Jerusha realizes the problem and coaxes him in the water by placing his lucky arms around her neck, his legs kicking behind him, his face crammed in between her breasts.

I have the ridiculous thought he's faking the entire thing.

I'm not asleep, but not exactly awake either, when I hear the sound of an animal whimpering. Like something small caught in a trap.

Before I can focus my eyes, I understand.

I can see Dustin cradled in Jerusha's arms, his head against her shoulder, his back broken with sobs. I'm stuck there, my back pinned to the ground. It feels like I have a boulder lying on top of me. When I try to get up my stomach muscles are useless. I have to roll over on my side and push myself up with my arms. When I make it over to them, Jerusha is cradling Dustin's head in her lovely arms.

"C'mon you two," I say lamely. "We need to get on the road or we'll never make it back before curfew."

There's no argument from them. Whatever fantasy we may have found here in the woods has turned into something else: a place Dustin will go back to for the rest of his life when he thinks of his childhood. Or the end of it.

We're on the road maybe ten minutes before I hear Dustin snoring in the backseat, the tears having left him exhausted. On

the radio the announcer reads off a list of recent Violators. I turn it off.

"I'm sorry," Jerusha says in that small voice again. "Maybe you were right."

"Too late now," I say and realize it sounds more judgmental than I intend it to. "I'm just glad it's over."

But I know it's not. Not even close.

"He's going to want to see the basement."

"I'll have to explain how Dad did it," I say and I can see the egg timer he used, the pit, their bed and the glass housing he surrounded it with.

"Tell him they weren't in any pain. He should know that."

"I will," I say.

"It was the right thing to do," Jerusha says, and the conviction in her voice is almost enough to make me believe it.

At some point Dustin stops snoring and all I can think of is what he might be dreaming. I'm half-expecting him to wake up screaming when Jerusha reaches over, squeezes my hand, but neither of say a word. Instead, I stop the car in the middle of

the road and we watch as rain pelts the windshield, the highway. Dustin wakes up, probably more so because of the car stopping, and hangs his head over the front seat. We are mesmerized, speechless, frightened.

Dustin is the first to speak.

"It was a waste then," he says in a voice that shouldn't belong to a child.

*Would you rather be safe or sorry?*

There isn't an answer anybody in the world can give him, so I turn the windshield wipers on, start driving through what may turn out to be the biggest downpour we've had in years. I can see my parents climbing into that pit as the windshield turns into the glass of their coffin, the winding road their bodies spooning around each other one last time.

### Comet's Snowball

Comet put the pages of the children's book in order, her hair slanting forward over her face, making her appear shy, submissive, Korean. She focused on the pages, on the numbers on the bottom so she wouldn't place the picture of the butterfly before the caterpillar. Not that it really mattered. Was it important for children in America to know what she called a caterpillar? To know that girls here, too, liked to stop while out walking down a country road to watch a butterfly in flight? No. There was no need for their children to learn her language.

It was no use. She had passed the protest on the way to work and now the images of the two school girls kept creeping into her head, mingling with the innocent story-book pictures. The protesters all carried signs with photos of the two bodies pressed into the dirt, their entrails squeezed out like black toothpaste onto the road. Somehow, it was never as gruesome as Comet thought it should be, the girls too neat-looking, even after a 60 metric ton tank rolled over them. She could see them, fingers in their ears, looking at each other and giggling nervously at the large rolling-sound behind them. They were used to the Americans and their tanks; there was nothing to be afraid

of. Then one of them falling. Or not falling, more of a snapping down. Or maybe one of them seeing the large jutting steel-nose of the cannon over her head just before. How long did it take for the tracks to ladder them down? Did they pass out? Did they have time to cry out? The same questions every time she saw the photos. But that's what they were for. So nobody would forget.

Comet had to look the name up when the school hired her. A celestial body. Not a perfect fit, but it would have to do. 8,500 won an hour. About seven of their U.S. dollars. And for what? To sit around and listen to overgrown babies whine about their teaching jobs. They thought they had it so rough even though they made twice her pay. Plus a free apartment. Plus the free round trip airfare. Plus the month's bonus if they stayed the entire year. And why? Because of their precious language. Whoever heard of being hired for the language you happened to grow up speaking? English. The word even sounded like money.

Comet looked up from her pile of papers, attempted a smile as Dan came into the office.

"*An-young haseo,*" he said, smiling with his teeth exposed.

"Hello Dan," Comet said, looking down at a cartoon bumble-  
bee. "Today English, okay?"

"Wae?" Dan said, leaning back in his chair.

Normally, Comet would let Dan practice his Korean with her during the fifteen minute break between classes. Today she just looked at him, at his pointy chin and green shirt so bright it hurt to look at, and said, "Because."

Dan stopped smiling, pulled out his lesson plan. "You seem different today, Comet. Do you understand 'different?'"

"Yes. Not same."

Comet's written English was probably better than his. She guessed he didn't know the difference between count-nouns and mass-nouns. Or why the plural of fly was spelled 'flies' and not 'flys.' Most Koreans knew the rules of the English language. It was like knowing all the notes to a fugue, but never hearing it played. Dan was just a CD player.

"Why are you so glum? Do you know glum?"

Comet smiled, brought her hand to her mouth. "No," she said from behind a fence of fingers.

"It means sad. Are you sad?"



"Not sad. Angry."

"Angry? Why angry?"

"The demonstrations. It is a big deal," she said, trying out a phrase he'd taught her the day before.

"Yes," he said. "I know it's a big deal. I saw it, too."

"Everybody obsess."

"Obsess?"

"Angry and sad."

"Oh," he said, his smile creeping back out. "You mean upset."

"Yes, upset. Everybody upset."

"*Ki-op-ta*," he said, probably having over-heard the word from one of the children. Everything was *cute* in Korea. Comet wouldn't be surprised if one day a Hello Kitty doll made its way onto their national flag.

"No," she said, hoping the bell would ring. "Not *ki-op-ta*."

"No, not the demonstrations," he said, putting his papers down. "I meant *you*."

She stared at the hair on his arms, had to stop herself from reaching out and petting them like she'd seen some of the children do. They called him 'the white monkey' but Dan had no idea.

"How about we watch the World Cup together after work?" he said and stood up.

"I not drink."

I don't drink, she corrected herself. Why did she get so flustered around him? Just because he was American?

"I'll buy you a Coke. You know the little chicken place down the street, by the bank?"

"Yes, I'm under...I understand."

The bell rang. Good, another eighty minutes and she could go home.

"It's settled then," Dan said as he left for his next class. "The game starts at six. *An-young-he-kay-seo.*"

"Yes. Goodbye, Dan."

Comet knew she wouldn't go. She couldn't be seen in public with a *meegook* after what happened. Suppose an *a-jo-she*, a

respected business man, saw her talking freely with an American. If Dan had asked her two weeks ago, before the accident, she might have gone. Then it wouldn't have been such a 'big deal.'

When Comet got home there was a note on the table from her mother. Her parents were at Samsung Plaza watching the game against Germany. Comet was to call. Her parents would find a nice spot in the grass and meet her after she'd eaten something.

Comet wondered what Dan would wear tonight. She thought about Ahn-jung-wan, Korea's star striker: 'the golden boy' with his rock-star good looks, his long hair, and those legs like a horse's. Then there was Dan with a face like a horse. Comet tried to picture Dan on the 33rd floor of their honeycomb-like apartment building. He'd probably grown up in a mansion. Didn't all Americans? Comet didn't know one family that owned a house. All her friends lived in these cardboard cut-outs. What would Dan think of her small bedroom with the paint peeling and the metal desk she used for studying? Or the pictures hanging in the front room of her grandparents wearing traditional *hanboks*?

Her parents would never allow it anyway. Dan, this is my father, a prominent soju-man in the area. You may have seen him

staggering through the streets, bowing grandly into his cell phone. Oh, I'm sorry. Yes, this is my mother. She serves what I've heard you call 'dog soup.' Oh, and don't bother to bow now, it's too late. She's a *meegook* vulture, she's already picked apart every move you've made since you walked in. You never had a chance.

Comet smiled at the thought and went into the living room carrying the *bibimbop* and *kimchi* her mother had left. Dan would like the giant plasma television set they had now. Her father bought it last summer when his restaurant was doing well. It was the nicest thing they owned, though it stood out like a diamond necklace on a *hanbok*.

The phone rang. Comet's mother. She wanted to know if she was coming to meet them. There was something so assuming in her mother's tone that Comet surprised herself and said, "No." *Why not?* Because she was going to meet a friend from the English school. *What friend?* Comet speared a piece of *kimchi* with a chopstick, told her the name of one of the other Korean secretaries. *No drinking and come home right after the game!* Okay, Comet said and hung up.

If her mother ever found out about the time she went swimming with Dan, she'd be grounded until the New Year. This was before the accident, before people started staring at her when she was with him. They had gone to the park at night and Comet had made him eat dried squid. Dan ate some, then said he needed to go swimming to get the taste out of his mouth. When Comet told him that people didn't swim in the lake, Dan took off his shirt, climbed over the railing and dove in among the koi. People stopped to watch, but nobody seemed to mind once they realized he was a foreigner. When Dan swam back and hopped back over the fence, his body glistened like a giant white eel.

Later, on their walk home through the woods, Dan kissed her for the first, and the last, time. It was soft. She remembered that much. Soft and gentle, not what she expected at all.

The cicadas were in full bloom, their voices pulsing across the Wan River. They sounded so near, Comet could almost feel their legs tickling her earlobe. She was late, halftime already over by the time she found Dan outside of *Kentucky Fried Donkey*, sitting alone at a table watching the game on a TV the owners had set up on a picnic table. A small crowd, gathered to watch

Korea fight its way into the finals, wore red shirts with the words 'Go Red Devils' written across the front. Dan was still wearing the same green shirt. It didn't matter; as the only American he would have stood out no matter what.

"Nice to see you," Comet said, waiting beside the table.

"Comet! I didn't think you'd come!"

"I did not also," she said, and sat down when it became apparent Dan wasn't going to offer her a chair.

"Do you want a coke, maybe a beer?" Dan asked.

"Coke, please. Beer makes my face go red, like *kimchi*."

Dan left and returned with a beer for himself and a can of Coke which he poured into a glass for Comet. At least he had learned it was bad luck to pour your own drink. They watched the game, still tied in the late-goings, as a German player went down on the pitch cradling his knee. Comet couldn't see anybody near the German, but the referee ran over, raised a yellow card into the air like he was awarding him a prize.

"You came alone," Dan said, speaking in bursts so as not to be drowned out by the yelling at the table next to them. "How come?"

"My family at Samsung Park."

"You didn't want to go?"

"I want to go. But I want to go here, also."

"We can go to the park after the game if you want. I'd like to meet your family."

"We will see," Comet said and smiled at him with her teeth, like an America. She knew her mother would bow politely and welcome Dan with milk and sliced Asian pears, no different, on the outside, than how she welcomed Comet's real friends.

A cheer, followed by a collective groan, went up as there was a near miss on Germany's goal and Comet thought she could hear the massive crowds in Seoul echoing around them.

"Comet, what's the big guy saying?"

Dan did this often. Sometimes she obliged, sometimes she didn't. The man at the next table was hacking out his syllables, a technique used by older Koreans to emphasize a point.

"He say, I really like Korea sport!"

"Funny. You know what 'sarcasm' is?"

"No," she said and rolled her eyes. "What do that mean, Teacher Dan?"

Teacher Dan didn't smile. "Just tell me what he said."

Comet knew the large egg-shaped man in the expensive suit was a doctor. He was telling his table full of friends that Korea would wipe out the Nazis just as they had the Americans a week before. After saying this, he had turned, and while staring at Dan, added, "Americans- the new Nazis."

"Something about game," she said. "Nothing really."

The score was still Germany 1, Korea 1, and even though Comet didn't know much about soccer, it seemed Korea was spending a lot of time at the wrong end of things. A melancholy settled over the crowd, only the doctor continued gesturing at the television, shouting objections into his cell phone. Everyone else remained seated, some clasping cigarettes between their hands as if in prayer, the smoke rising like incense.

Ahn-jung-wan.

Golden boy. Rock star. Long, black, flying hair. Legs of a horse poised to kick Korea into the finals, into history, into all the sunshine promised them for so long. For one long second



you could almost hear the country's breath held as Korea awaited its destiny. Even the cicadas seemed to have quieted down temporarily. Then, as quickly as hope had risen, Ahn-Jung-Wan passed the ball to a teammate whose shot veered wide and missed.

"You idiot!"

Had the words been uttered during a church sermon, it would have seemed less offensive. Comet counted six heads turn in Dan's direction.

"That's too bad," he went on, abundantly casual, abundantly American. "I doubt they'll get another gift like that."

The doctor rose, stumbled the few steps to their table and grabbed Dan's arm, pinning him to the chair. "We Koreans speak English very well," the doctor said. "You watch what you say. For your own health!"

The doctor released Dan's arm and turned his swaying bulk toward Comet. His words came out thick, weighted down with *soju*. Didn't she realize she was an embarrassment to all of Korea for dating this foreigner? Did she know that the American president had not yet apologized for what their tank had done to those two innocent girls? Wasn't two enough, did they need to lose yet another young one to the Americans? Is that what she wanted?

Dan stood up, planning to do what she didn't know. Probably shoot the doctor, isn't that what Americans did?

"Sit down," Comet said and, to her surprise, he did.

Comet stood up slowly, then bowed deeply before the doctor, her hair nearly touching the pavement. When she spoke, it was in a voice normally reserved for her grandparents.

*"I am sorry if I have somehow offended you, doctor. This man is a teacher and I know he didn't mean what he said. We will be leaving now. Our apologies."*

Comet bowed once again while the doctor stood there, observing her like he might a patient, before returning to his table where he was met with solemn pats on the back.

Dan spoke first.

"I'm sorry, Comet. I didn't realize..."

"We need to go now," Comet said and stood up to leave.

As they left, Comet glimpsed a few of the grown men at the doctor's table giving Dan the finger behind his back.

"I didn't know they spoke English," Dan said, keeping a respectable distance between them as they walked. "Why don't you ever tell me what people are saying?"

"It too hard sometime."

"But I need to know."

"Sometime it not okay," Comet said. "I need to show you something."

The place she wanted to take him wasn't far, another block. Dan said nothing, just stared straight ahead as they walked, probably thinking about the game. Comet no longer cared whether they won or lost. It wouldn't change anything.

"You're taking me to a 7-11?"

"This way," Comet said and disappeared around the corner of the store. "I want to watch the photographs."

The same photographs were all over town: the two girls posing in their grade-school uniforms, the army tank, the dirt road, the bodies, the coffins.

"Comet, I've seen these," Dan said, almost whispering. "It's horrible. What else can I say?"

"Yes, but you not see them."

Dan looked again, like maybe he missed something, his face trying to put the puzzle pieces together, but coming up short.

"Your President Bush not apologize," Comet said.

"He's not my President," Dan said, backing away from the memorial. There were others stopping to look now, too. Not at the photographs, but at the *meegook*. Comet hesitated, then grabbed Dan's hand, leading him up the street toward Samsung Plaza. As they walked, Comet tried to explain.

"In your country, people always think snowflake."

"Snowflake?"

"Americans. They think everybody snowflake. Only one snowflake. Only one you. I read this."

"You mean everybody is unique?"

"Yes. Not same."

"Okay. Not same. So?"

"In Korea we think opposite. In Korea we think like snowball. Everybody snowball." Comet packed an imaginary snowball in her hands, then lifted them, palms up, as if offering Dan a present. "You see? Snowball."

Both of them looked at Comet's hands holding nothing.

"Snowball," Comet repeated, then looked at Dan, at his loud shirt, his face that looked like it had been bleached, his pointy chin and his unhappy mouth, and she pictured him sitting in that tank, listening to head phones, maybe reading a *Rolling Stone* magazine, then the call coming in over the radio, the hurried attempts to think of an excuse, some reason why he didn't see two twelve-year-old girls walking down a deserted country road in South Korea.

Comet dropped her hands, looked at her shoes half-expecting to see a puddle at her feet, then at the road dividing the town in two. On one side lay rows of rice paddies, the old men and women hunched over as if tending to needy children; on the other was Samsung Park, a television screen the size of a small building broadcasting the final minutes of the game, a sea of red shirts clapping and chanting in unison. Comet knew it was far too late to find her family now, but she set off down the hill anyway, her body gaining an awkward sort of momentum,

looking like people do just before they dive into the ocean,  
just before they disappear under water.

## Spider-Man

Elmer Rising Sun reached inside his snowsuit, pulled out a bag of tobacco, and laid some on the water as an offering to the Creator. Normally he wouldn't have come alone, but he needed to get away. His mother had died. For three days and nights he'd sat by her side and watched helplessly as the spaces between her breaths got longer, the rattle and gurgle in the back of her throat, louder. He could still hear her breathing. Like now, when the waves lapping against the side of the johnboat took on that same haunting sound.

He shook his head, rested the metal spear on his shoulder, and kicked the battery again. "Work, goddamn it," he muttered and suddenly the shroud of black covering the lake lifted. He scanned the mud flats along the bank, tightening his grip on the spear. The walleye were there, huddled just beneath the surface, the light reflecting off their eyes as the car headlight mounted to his helmet flamed.

He steadied the spear in his hand.

*"Just let it happen."*

It was something his father had told him when teaching him how to throw.

There was still some ice hugging the shore that hadn't fully melted yet. Elmer tugged on the zipper of his snowsuit. He'd be dead in no time if he fell in, the suit filling up with water, turning him into a sack-full of anchors. He braced his feet against the sides of the johnboat and soon was pulling fish from the water like prayers. Like Ojibwe medicine too late to give his mother.

He remembered the protests from when he was a boy, the hate white people would spew at his relatives as they tried to dock with their boats full of fish. "Ignorance," his mother had told him, "is a dangerous thing. But now at least you know its face."

A few more and he'd go home. A storm could roll in any time. He raised the spear again and threw, but when he dragged it back to the boat there was a sluggish feel to it. He leaned over the side and found a child's lunchbox on the end of his spear. Most of it was rusted through, but he could still make out the word *Spider-Man* on the front, see the red of his costume pushing through the rust.

He'd had one like it as a kid.

His brothers always teased him about it, told him that his people had their own heroes, their own stories. He'd kept it secret after that, hiding the comics under his mattress.



Spidey powers. He wished he'd had them when she was dying.

*Just let it happen, Mom. Just let it happen...*

He was about to throw Spider-Man back into the water when he noticed something on the back of the lunchbox. A faded bumper sticker. He recognized it.

A lot of the pick-ups outside the rez had them.

*Save a Salmon, Spear a Squaw!*

Elmer tossed the lunchbox into the boat.

He hadn't noticed it before, but just past a stand of maple trees stood a small house. A truck in the driveway, toys in the yard. He turned the headlamp off and let blackness swallow the lake again.

Elmer felt his heart pounding, his hand tightening around the spear.

Somewhere across the lake a loon keened.

Then, in the place of his mother's breathing, he heard those words again.

*Just let it happen...*

His grip slackened.

Then stillness. Quiet.

Only the sound of his own unsteady breathing.

### **Publish or Perish**

David Butter had tried his hand at just about everything:

*Who Shot Madonna?* (mystery/crime/fantasy)

*Catchers and Pitchers in the Rye: Homosexuality in America's Heartland* (non-fiction)

*How to Stop Writing: Short stories by David Butter* (literature)

He read books on how to write the perfect query letter, the most tantalizing pitch, synopsis, you name it. But that's all gone out the window. His letter to the editor of *Northwest Fiction* contains only the following: 'Dear, William Speisbel: Publish this or I'll fucking kill you. Regards, David Butter.'

### **POV Switch**

I read recently that a good back story is important to getting your first book published, that people want to read books written by interesting people. Well, if that's the case, then here's your back story: author murders editor of pretentious literary press.

Let the *Oregonian Newspaper* write my back story.

### **Information Dump**

Home for me, David Butter, is Portland, Oregon. I live in a one-bedroom house left to me by my mother although I am responsible for the taxes and utilities. Not exactly a small sum when you work in the service industry. But who cares about my house, right? The latest rejection letter came in a record 9 days. I've submitted four other novels to *Northwest Fiction* and so am familiar with their response time. It usually takes about 9 weeks for me to get the usual 'not quite right for us' baloney and the hastily (if I'm lucky!) penned initials of the editor. This time, though, is a little different. Same stock rejection letter, same initials (B.S., appropriately) but at the bottom there's a little note:

*My guess is you'd make as lazy a murderer as you do a writer.*

*Regards, B.S.*

4435 SE Hawthorne.

The address is right there on the bottom. I could walk there. It would take me ten minutes, tops. The bastard must have known that. He's taunting me. Of course, I'll have to break in now, get the letter back if he hasn't already tossed it. Or worse, hidden it somewhere safe just in case I follow through.

Patience, David. You need to do this write.

**Revision**

Patience, David. You need to do this right.

### **Pacing**

The best part of all of this is that I can write about it afterwards. Like Michelangelo breaking into the abbey's morgue to secretly cut open the cadavers. It was illegal, sure, but he advanced the fields of medicine and science by taking a chance. I'll pen a tale of murder rivaling *Crime and Punishment*. Did Fyodor ever kill anybody? I don't know, but yeah, probably.

I begin by doing the obvious: I stake out *Northwest Fiction*, which, to my surprise, is nothing more than a two-storey Victorian with a meager hand-painted sign hanging beside the door. I sit in my car for hours on my day off but only see him peek his bald head out the door once. And why did he peek his head out the door? To get the mail, which I note, is loaded with 9 X 12 envelopes. I can't be sure, but I swear I see a smile cross his lips as he clasps the envelopes, brutally almost, and retreats back into his lair. Before the door closes, I hear Strauss playing. How typical. If it was something like ZZ Top, I might have changed my mind about all of this.

And so it goes for another two days. The guy's a shut-in. Lives and works from home. There's a wife, if you can call her that. She's

more of an extra. One of many running around Portland. You probably know her. She dresses like a librarian the way some kids dress like rock stars. It's what she should have done with her life had she not taken what little literary talent she had and married this d-bag and gone into the advertising business. She drives a Subaru with a bumper-sticker ('Impeach Bush!') that she slapped on after deciding against the one she really wanted, *Free Tibet!*, because her neighbor already had that one on her Prius.

Let me put it another way. You know how some people pick certain bands to play the soundtrack to their lives (as if their dull lives warranted any). For Speisbel's wife, think Carly Simon or The Indigo Girls.

(For me: Nick Drake's "Poor Boy" looping endlessly)

Okay, so I don't really know any of this, but I'll bet you the royalties from my soon-to-be published book that at least half of it is true. Trust me; I've lived here my whole life. These people are exactly what they seem.

Anyway, all that's important here is that she's gone all day, every day.

And I haven't seen a dog, but I'm guessing if he does have one it's a Pomeranian or some such lapdog that he strokes like a cat as he goes about mocking the submissions sent to him. *Oh, Skittles, listen to this one. Ha, ha, ha, it really is too horrid. 'A Pomeranian he strokes like a cat.'* Ha ha ha. What a clumsy simile! Ha ha ha...

**Details**

Oh, and in case you're wondering, I drive a 92' Honda Civic that has 145,000 miles on it and no stereo. Another gift from my dear mother. I've been loading up a cooler every day with deli sandwiches, chips, Twizzlers, and a coffee maker I can plug into the cigarette lighter. (And an empty 2-liter bottle of Coke. My own little Porta-Potty. Too much information? Well, too bad. If I leave out the details here, who's to say I won't leave them out later? I got that priceless gem from a craft book on writing.)

And, of course, books:

Tom Watson's *100 Classic Golf Tips* (I don't play but have been thinking about trying it out)

William Saroyan's *The Man with the Heart in the Highlands and Other Early Stories*

Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*

**Character Arc**

I'm not going to change. So get over it.

Fuck character arc.

People do not change.

Our lives are sentences and they all end in periods. One big, dark, black period. The kind William Speisbel's about to come to.

Period.

There's your character arc.

### ***Plot Point #1***

I've decided that William will come to a full stop next week, on Wednesday, August 4<sup>th</sup>. I've chosen a literary date of course: the death day of Knut Hamsun, as well as the birthday of Franz Kafka. Who could ask for more? Were they alive today, I am sure William would spend all of two minutes on their manuscripts before sending off his rejection letters, teeming with the moral certitude he'd just saved the world from more bad literature.

Even though I've picked the perfect date, I have to admit my resolve has been wavering as of late. The solution: I've started watching *Nightline* a lot. It's a huge motivation watching all these idiots killing their wives, husbands, whoever and then getting caught because of something stupid. Just last night this ingenious woman typed in 'Ingenious ways to commit murder' into her computer's search



engine only days before her husband was mysteriously chloroformed, jig-sawed into pieces, and stuffed into suitcases that were tossed into a nearby lake, only to float up days later.

My most recent internet searches:

*How to volunteer in Portland, Oregon*

*Who is illegible to adopt needy children from third world countries?*

*How to send flowers anonymously to people in retirement homes*

My Mom didn't raise a dumb-dumb.

Mom.

### **Audience**

I already told you she died, but let me see if I can build up some sympathy here.

On second thought, forget it.

Chances are your heart died long ago and you could care less about anybody's mother, dead or otherwise.

Bravo for you.

**Action**

I get a break on Tuesday.

The mole leaves his burrow at 11:37 a.m. I hadn't planned on this but decide to nose around while I have the opportunity. I walk around to the side of the house, stand on tip-toe so I can reach over the wood fence and un-latch the door. I could have drawn it before I even set eyes on the backyard: plastic patio furniture, a raised garden that's about six feet by two (just enough to bury a certain editor in), and a rusting barbeque with a ceramic ashtray brimming with cigarette butts.

There's no yipping dog though. Not even when I turn the handle on the back door and find it unlocked. Typical. The middle-class is so trusting. I pass through an empty kitchen into the living room where I find something like a manuscript graveyard. A graveyard that's been carpet bombed.

It's worse than I thought. Twenty, maybe thirty, corpses strewn about the floor by a heartless serial killer.

I take my time, dig through them reading snippets as I go along ("*I think I'm feeling a little incontinent!*" her uncle screamed.), but there's no David Butter book. Still, I want to save them, each and every one of them, but I know I can't. Instead, I do what I can and rescue one called *The Life of a Calculator*. I figure the title alone warrants a sincere rejection letter. A decent burial, if you will.

The form rejection letters, all of them pre-initialed, are stacked neatly on the coffee table. I steal the entire batch. Take that, William Speisbel. After rummaging around one last time for my manuscript and finding nothing, I take my leave.

Once I'm safely back home, I dig into *The Life of a Calculator*. When I finish (it only takes me two hours, being a natural speed-reader), I write the following letter and enclose it with one of the rejection slips, the bottom snipped off where those hurtful initials once lay, replaced with the friendliest of signatures.

*Dear Ms. Clark,*

*Thank you so much for sharing your novel with me. I can't think of a better way to spend my time. Really, I should send you a check. A blank one! I thoroughly enjoyed your story about Sally and her love for Math. I assure you, the subtle metaphor running throughout the book (her feeling like a continually punched calculator that is used and subsequently tossed aside by the men in her life) was not lost on me. What a beautiful prism through which to view a life!*

*Unfortunately, I cannot publish your book. I have recently come down with a bad case of cancer and the publishing side of the press will be shutting down indefinitely. I wish I could print up a million copies and drop them all on Oprah's doorstep. I know she'd love it.*

*Best of luck finding a home for Sally.*

*Yours,*

*Billy Speisbel*

Now that's a rejection letter. I promise you that our Ms. Clark will be so inspired, she'll write another 432 pages by the end of the week. A sequel perhaps: *The Death of a Protractor*.

### ***Plot Point #2***

There are many times when a golfer should swallow his pride. Being faced with a bad lie in the rough is clearly such an occasion. If you can't see your ball from ten yards away, think about hacking it out into the fairway.

-Mark O'Meara, from *One Hundred Golf Tips*

I was fantasizing about teeing off on William's head, wondering if anybody had ever been killed that way before and contemplating buying some pumpkins to practice on when I stumbled upon the above quote.

I am in the metaphorical rough.

Hell, I don't even know if I'm still on a golf course.

It's August 1<sup>st</sup> and I'm beginning to wonder if killing Billy is the way to go. I mean, how is he supposed to publish my book if he's a period?

I go back to my surveillance of the house, but nothing much happens. No wife. Not even a stray bald head for two whole days.

Nothing, nothing, nothing, and then *Whammo!*

Everything.

At first I think it might be one of *Northwest Fiction's* authors coming to pay our man a visit, but no, the man's too young. Well, there's that and the fact that he doesn't look like a writer. (And don't tell me writers don't have a certain look. Give me a roomful of people and I'll tell you who the writer is. I can even tell if they're any good or not. It's a talent I have. For example, the prolific ones tend to resemble morticians. It's all in the brow. And here I'm actually thinking of someone in particular. Can you guess? Okay, I'll give you a clue. It rhymes with 'Moist Feral Goats.')

Anyway, this kid is definitely not a writer. A skater maybe. Or a musician of some sort. Both maybe. His head is shaved and he has one of those full-sleeve tattoos that's nearly a prerequisite for living in Portland these days. All I know is that when William opens the door, he places his arm around the kid's shoulder and lets him right in.

I'm giddy.

And I don't use the word 'giddy' lightly.

All sorts of scenarios are running through my head as I wait in the car and read...

He took a key from his pocket, and unlocked the door, and flung it open...and suddenly...at the sound of the door opening, all the rows and rows of little square candies looked quickly around to see who was coming in. The tiny faces actually turned toward the door and stared at Mr. Wonka.

"There you are!" he cried triumphantly. "They're looking round! There's no argument about it! They are square candies that look round!"

-from Raold Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*

### ***Leave Something to the Reader***

No. You might miss it. For all I know, you aren't all that bright. And besides, you'd have to be insanely intuitive to know why I put that quote there. I have a feeling our editor friend might be a square candy looking round.

There, I said it.

Too obvious, or do you still not get it?

Fine.

I think William might be having an affair.

### ***Dialogue***

The boy doesn't leave the house for nearly an hour and when he does, he looks incredibly sheepish. I mean like he's way overdoing it, hands in pockets, brisk walk, eyes darting up and down the street.

I decide to follow him.

"Excuse me. Sir? Sir?"

The kid stops, looks at me like I'm nuts, like who the hell do I think I'm calling *sir*. He doesn't say a word, just stares at me all catty-like, the way good-looking women look at other better-looking women.

"I'm sorry to bother you, but I need to ask you a question. Well, a favor more like." Again, nothing, like he's trying to gauge what kind of a waste of time I am. "Don't worry, I'm not a freak or anything. I just wanted to know if you're a friend of William's by any chance."

"Who? Oh, Bill. Yeah, sure. We're pals."

His voice doesn't match his face somehow. I expected deep and scratchy, something like a cheese grater lodged in his throat. What I get is an indoor voice. A lactose-intolerant voice.

"I thought so. I saw you leaving his house just now."

"Uh-huh. So what?"

"Well, this is a little awkward, but I'd like to know exactly how it is, I mean, in what capacity, you know Bill."

"And how, I mean, in what capacity, exactly, is that any of your fucking business?"

I'd foreseen this type of reaction. I take out my wallet, turn so that he can't see how much cash I have.

Mom left me fairly comfortable.

"Does a hundred bucks make it my business?"

"Sure it does," the kid says and smirks so that a dimple momentarily dents his cheek. "Only I get the money first."

"Fair enough," I say and hand it over. "The truth now, please."

### ***Plot Twist***

"Bill is my dad."

"Your Dad?"

"Last I checked."

God, I'm an idiot. Why didn't that ever cross my mind? The smirk is still on the kid's face. I could kidnap the little asshole, hold him ransom until his Daddy publishes my book. But how? It's the middle of the afternoon.

"Can I go now?"



"Yes, of course," I say. "Don't spend it all in one place."

The kid crams the bills into his front pocket, turns and stomps off. Another dead end. Maybe this isn't meant to be. Maybe I'm really not that great of a writer. Maybe I should try writing poetry. I mean, anybody can write poetry.

### ***Educate Your Reader***

Did you know that poetry used to be known as *The Gay Science*?

That's what I'm thinking about when I hear footsteps behind me.

"Hey, wait up a sec!" It's the kid. He's running, his face all flushed. "Funny thing," he says when he reaches me. "But I hate my dad."

"I'm not--" I start to say, but he stops me.

"And truth is," he says and holds up the bills I gave him earlier. "I could use a few more of these."

### ***Sub-Plot***

"Rewrite what?" he would roar. "It comes out perfect!"

-from Herb Caen's introduction to William Saroyan's *The Man with the Heart in the Highlands and Other Early Stories*

I seem to have made an unlikely friend in Chekhov Speisbel. That's right. William named his kid Chekhov. You name your dog after writers, not your son. Anyway, turns out Chekhov is a whiz with computers, says he can hack into his Dad's computer and get me anything I want: emails, websites he's visited, that type of thing.

Why, you may be wondering, would this kid be so willing to help me?

Chekhov's sitting on my sofa, flipping through the latest issue of *Northwest Fiction* when I ask him just this.

"Let's just say I don't give a fuck. And like I said, I need the money."

### ***Talking Heads***

"Drugs?"

"No, thanks. I'm good."

Little shit.

"I mean, do you need the money for drugs?"

"Yeah, sure, for drugs. Whatever."

"I'd just feel bad giving--"

"Save it, okay. I don't do needles. That ease your mind?"

"Yes, actually, it does."

"A blackmailer with a conscience. How novel." He puts his father's magazine down, walks over to the bookcase in the living room.

"You read all these?"

"Most."

"Dad has about ten times this."

"That doesn't surprise me."

He pulls out *The Idiot*, lets it fall open at random.

"All these Russians. Fucking soap operas if you ask me. Never did get what the big deal was."

"You've read that?" I say, trying not to sound too surprised.

"Dad made me read all this shit. Wanted me to be on one of these shelves someday. If I ever have a kid, I'm not going to force him to play guitar just because my band never made it."

He snaps the book shut with one hand, slides it back onto the wrong shelf.

"You're in a band then?"

"Bees! Ever hear of us?"

"The Bees? No, I don't think so. But then I don't--"

"It's just *Bees!* With an exclamation mark. No *the*. Anyway, of course you haven't heard of us. Nobody has yet."

I'm about to make an attempt to sound interested in *Bees!* when Chekhov squats down, starts manhandling one of my manuscripts. "What have we here? This your own personal stash?"

"I wrote them if that's what you mean."

"I'm beginning to see what this is about, David. It can be a little tough getting into the business, am I right?"

"Look, if you're not interested in doing this, I'll find some other way of going about it."

"I'm interested, David. Definitely interested." He puts my manuscript back without bothering to open it, stands and leans against the wall. "Have you ever heard of a book called *The Debris of a Poet?*"

"No."

"Guess who the author is?"

"I don't know. You?"

"C'mon, even I could come up with a better title than that. That's all Pop." Chekhov walks to the couch, sits down and pulls a cigarette from his shirt pocket, starts tapping it on his knee all James Dean like. "It's never been published. Want to know why?"

"Why?"

"Because it sucks ass. And it's not exactly the type of thing *Northwest Fiction* publishes. You want a copy? I could get you one. For a fee, of course."

"Of course. Can you tell me what it's about first?"

"You ever hear that story about James Joyce and how he used to love the smell of his girlfriend's farts? I think he wrote a famous poem about it or something."

Chekhov lights his cigarette.

"I think so. Yes."

"Only thing ol' Joyce ever wrote that I liked. Pretty fucked up, huh? Joyce, I mean, not me. Anyway, *The Debris of a Poet* makes Joyce look like a nun."

Now I'm drooling.

"How much?"

"Three bills."

"Done," I say and grab the ashtray that I keep for guests. "Anything else I might find useful?"

With each drag his dimples come to life, like somebody is shooting his cheek with a bb gun.

"I can get you records of websites he belongs to. Copies of emails I know he wouldn't like to surface."

"What kind of websites?"

"The kind my Mom wouldn't want to know about."

I knew it.

"How much?"

"For both? Another four on top of the three."

"I don't know..."

"Tell you what. I'll throw in his cell number at no extra charge."

"Throw in your mother's email and we've got a deal."

"No dice. Mom *does not* find out about *any* of this."

I hadn't considered this.

"Fine," I say. "I'm not interested in breaking up anybody's marriage anyway."

"Well, good. Because if she ever hears about any of this, I'll be right back over here and you can believe--"

"That won't be necessary, Chekhov. I promise you that."

He puts his cigarette out, walks to the door.

"Give me a few days. I'll have what you want."

***Plot Point #3***

I take my time with *The Debris of a Poet*, force myself to read slowly, something that doesn't come easily to me. But it's worth it. I savor every word, swill every adverb around in my mouth like a fine wine. Or rather, a cheap, nasty wine. If one can savor such a thing.

At various points in the book, I'm almost convinced that the book is meant as a parody of some sort, a collage of all the bad writing ever sent to him. I'd show you what I'm talking about, but even I have standards to keep to.

### ***The Unreliable Narrator***

*They were there, his beautiful toes, hidden under the veil of a sneaker, a temptation Mr. White could not allow himself to consider. He felt himself growing, his blood running to certain neglected extremities, and suddenly he knew he'd either have to leave the room or risk acting upon his impulses.*

*But what would happen if he did give in to his baser instincts?*

*Then it came to him.*

*"I'm sorry, Tommy, but could you please remove your shoes. My wife's rules."*

*It was perfect. Flawless.*

*Tommy, the boy from next door, took his sweet time removing his New Balance running shoes. As each pure white lace came undone, Mr. White found himself thinking about corsets, how seductive he'd always found them. It was only a short step further picturing young Tommy in one. He'd have to sit down soon lest his passion become too obvious.*

*Even an eleven-year-old boy would soon spot what was happening in his trousers.*

-from William Speisbel's *The Debris of a Poet*

### **Tension**

It takes four phone calls before I finally get an exasperated, "Yes?"

"Hi, William. This is David Butter. You don't know me yet, but you're going to be my editor."

"Where'd you get this number? It's not--"

"Before you hang up, I have two very good reasons why you shouldn't. Number one: Foot Fun dot com. Number two: Big Hot Thunder Rod For You at Yahoo dot com." There's a scratching sound on the other end, probably holding the phone to his chest, trying to smother me. "Still with us, William?"

"Who is this?"

"I already told you that. This is David Butter."

"Is this a friend of Chekhov's?"

"No, I'm afraid it's worse than that. I'm a writer."



"Christ. Listen, I don't know what you're after, but I've never heard of those things you mentioned. Now goodbye."

"Maybe I should contact your wife then. I'm sure she'd be interested in this secret life of yours."

He sounds tired all of a sudden, like I've injected him with morphine somehow. "What is it you want?"

"Be so kind as to open your front door in a few moments and all will be explained. You see, I happen to be parked in front of your house with my laptop. Did you know you can get Wifi out here?"

"Look, you can't be here now. I've got to--"

"I suppose I could wait for your wife to come home. She has yoga tonight, doesn't she?"

"You can't just--"

"I can."

End call. Moments later the front door opens.

### ***Climax***

When I'm let into the house, the first thing I notice is how un-editor-like William looks: short and heavy-set, wearing a bright orange Hawaiian shirt and a *Mariners* baseball hat. I don't know what I

was expecting, some bushy-eyed monster in sweater and glasses, drinking white wine, snacking on cheese, and burping Proust.

"We can talk in here," he says and leads me into the dining room where there's a table covered with more manila envelopes.

"Shall we begin?" I say and place my suitcase on the table, hand him a few of the ill-gained documents.

"Where did you get these?" he mutters.

"I can't reveal my sources. I'm sure you understand."

"No, I'm sure I don't." He folds the copied emails in half, stuffs them into the front of his baggy jeans. "Why are you doing this to me?"

"Here," I say and hand him my manuscript, *How to Stop Writing*. "This might make things a little clearer."

"Oh, Jesus. You?"

"I told you in my last cover letter that if you didn't publish my book, I was going to kill you. You responded, and quite eloquently I might add, that I'd make as lazy a murderer as I do a writer. Do I appear lazy to you now, William?"

"Listen, you don't have to do this. We can work something out. I have--"

"Settle down, William. I'm not going to kill you. What I want is very simple: Publish my book. You do that and these other nasty inconveniences go bye-bye."

He looks down at the manuscript, contempt ransacking his face.

"I'll be the laughing stock of--"

"Of what, William? Foot Fun Dot Com? I really don't think they'll mind."

He looks down again, holds my manuscript by his fingertips like a smelly sock.

"Can I at least edit it?"

"No need to. Perfect as is."

"You're bluffing. You wouldn't tell my wife. You're desperate, but not that desperate. Authors always mirror their writing." He pauses here, for dramatic affect no doubt. "And yours is spineless."

"You may want to consider this bit of ugliness before you say anything more."

I pull out my copy of *The Debris of a Poet* and hand it to him in the same smelly-sock manner.

"Look familiar?"

"Oh, my God."

"Oh, my God? What are you, a pre-pubescent teen? Or maybe that's just wishful thinking."

"That's enough."

"I should say so."

"We're done talking," he says, standing up from the table like maybe he's going to run for it. Behind him, on the mantle, is a picture of Chekhov, age twelve maybe, wearing cleats, a baseball stadium in the background.

*Cleats.*

I toss the book back into my briefcase and lock it.

"Isn't that your son, William? Seems to me he's about the same age as the boy in your little novel. Quite an awkward coincidence, don't you think?"

Then, before he can give me an answer, we hear the front door open.

A woman, far too attractive to be married to this bespectacled pear of a man, walks into the room.

"Hi, honey. Who's your friend?"

She says it like I'm some sort of playmate for her husband, but, nonetheless, I stand and offer my hand like the true gentleman I am.

"Janet," William Spiesbel of *Northwest Fiction* says. "I'd like you to meet Mr. Butter. My latest discovery."

## Bullhead

I know there's a ladder the salmon use somewhere at the bottom of the dam, but I can't imagine how they get up the thing.

An escalator seems more plausible.

Maybe an elevator.

On cast 17, the man I'm fishing next to speaks to me. I know it's cast 17 because I count. I try to think of it as a sort of meditation, like a monk counting each breath, but it's really just another way to keep my thoughts at bay.

"Looks like you brought a knife to a gun fight."

"Excuse me?"

"Your pole," the man says. "This is meat fishing."

I hadn't been paying my two neighbors much attention, but now that I do, I notice the boy seems to be playing with a puppet of some sort, dangling it in the water, then pulling it up again.

"It's an *Ugly Stick*," I say.

The man looks at his son, then back at me. "No argument there."

The man's pole is twice the length of my own, obviously overcompensating for something. I also notice that the other man is fishing with something like a bobber. True, the thing is more buoy than bobber, but it's still a bobber. And the salmon eggs he's using are probably dripping with WD-40.

A friend of mine told me about that.

How it's like steroids for bait.

I go back to casting, working on getting the feel of the current, placing the spinner in that sweet spot where I can feel the line pull like the string of a kite. That's when I'm fishing. Everything else is just prep.

After cast 32, I take a smoke break.

I tell myself I'll quit if I land one today.

I wonder if fish can get cancer of the gills.

The salmon are rising near the dam, their backs breaching the surface like miniature whales then disappearing again. It's maddening, but there's no way to cast that close to the dam.

No matter how big your pole is.

I'm trying to gauge the steepness of the cliff, figure if I can shimmy my way along the ledge into decent enough position, when I finally realize what the boy is doing.

He isn't playing with a puppet.

He's dangling a bare hook in the water and catching bullhead. I watch as the boy pulls one up, pushes his thumbs into the back of the fish's head and caves its skull in.

I stare as the boy holds the black fish at an angle, inspects it, then flicks his finger, knocking one of the bulging eyes into the water. The boy tosses the rest of the fish in, wipes his hands on his jeans and goes back to dangling the hook in the water. The man, his back to the boy, seems oblivious or indifferent. I can't tell which.

I continue to cast and count, every now and then glancing over as the boy catches another bullhead. He appears to have a system down: thumb-killing them, then tossing their lifeless bodies in the water as if chumming for Spring Chinook.

I remember hearing something about bullhead overpopulating Oregon rivers, eating all the salmon eggs. But still, it bothers me. I know bullhead are good eating because my own Dad used to fry them in butter. The smaller ones anyway, the ones that didn't have mud running through their veins yet. The thought of it makes me want to slap the boy upside the head with one of the fish, maybe lacerate one of his chubby cheeks with a spiked fin.

I shake my head, force myself to concentrate on the surface of the water until I forget about the boy and his father, lose myself in the rhythm of casting.

Until number 54 catches a snag.

I tighten the drag, yank the pole up over my head like maybe I hooked a semi. I feel silly torque-ing the line out of the water, but, at five bucks a pop, I can't afford to donate any spinners to the riverbed. I walk my line down as far as I can toward the trees hoping something will wriggle free, but no such luck.

I have no choice but to walk down and lift the pole over the man's head. As I do, I think I see a sneer crawl across the father's face before he goes back to ignoring me. On the rocks, I notice two flopping bullheads.

Escapees.

I bend down, pick up one of the epileptic fish, pinch it so that my hand remains safe from the whiskers, then let it sail over the boy's head.

The boy turns around, his jaw slack and his forehead knotted up, trying to figure out what's happening. I pick up another fish, toss it into the river and smile at the boy. I think of sticking my tongue out at him too, but check myself. It



wouldn't have mattered, though, since the man just continues to cast, thinking, no doubt, that it's only the boy tossing more useless bullhead into the river.

The boulder, most likely left over from when they blasted the dam, is painted yellow. A sign, partially covered by a dangling branch, reads: *shing beyond this point*. I shrug. I have no intention of *shinging*.

I keep the rod over my head and make my way up the narrow ledge of rock until I get a bird's eye view of the swarming cauldron of salmon. I wrestle with the line but it seems nailed to the bottom of the river. As a last resort, I go into a sort of dance, hips pushing out, hands rising up and over my head like I'm worshipping some ancient river God. It's no use. I'll have to cut the line. Then, just as I'm reaching for my pocket knife, the line gives way like it's simply decided to let go.

I pause, take in the scene: the salmon rising, one on top of the other, jockeying for position like heaven itself is at the top of the ladder. I reel in, the spinner skipping across the surface of the water until its path meets the teeming circle of fish.

I let the spinner sink.

My arms are tired, I tell myself. And besides, it's only for a second, then I'll climb right back down.

It isn't at all like when a Northern hits, how the rod sort of curtsies to the water a few times before the chase begins. No. As I'm trying to remember what number cast this is, the rod bends nearly double, stays there as the line zips out like the kite has gotten caught in a tornado.

"Fish on! Fish on!"

It's the boy yelling, tugging on his father's vest and pointing up at me.

I scramble down the side of the cliff, both hands holding up the tip of the pole, my butt scraping against the rock wall until finally I have to sit and slide down the rest of the way. The boulder's still there but somehow I manage to straddle my way over it. The man and the boy stand back, lines out of water, watching the spot where they figure the fish to be.

"She's good size," the man says. "Rolled right in front of us."

"Okay," I say, but I can't make out what else he says, something about a net, because my heart is a frying pan and my blood is banging away on it like a big wooden spoon. I do notice the father's smile though, how steady it seems, how the laugh

lines carve his face, and I realize it was a smile he'd given me earlier. Not a sneer.

The city, I think, it makes you assume the worst.

I have little idea where the fish has disappeared to and my arms are starting to ache for real now. I tuck my elbows into my sides for support and tell myself that my Dad could use a good fish story, that it would cheer him up.

No matter how I caught it.

I take my time and coerce the fish across the current until it's only feet from the shore. I get my first look at the broad, knobby back. The prehistoric jaw. It could clean its teeth with a Northern. It doesn't last long though. The fish pauses, as if considering its options, then tears off downstream again. I've been so transfixed that it isn't until my heart goes back to merely pounding that I notice the boy standing beside me with a net.

"You think that's big enough?" I say.

The net seems large enough to bag a porpoise.

"Should be," the boy says without an ounce of sarcasm.

"Well, let's see if I can't get him into range," I say. "He should be getting tired soon."

The boy inches closer to my side, says, "Dad once fought one for an hour. Forty-two pounds."

I ignore the kid, and, after a few more minutes, the fish stops running. There's some pull, but no fight left, like I'm dragging the thing sideways through mud.

"Get ready," I say and bring the pole up, drop it down again, reel in the slack. "You be careful now," I tell the kid. "Don't fall in."

The boy laughs, says, "It's not *that* big."

When the fish comes within range, it's listing, nearly capsized, the hook embedded in its eye, a white film already forming. The boy kneels down on the rocks, gently dips the net into the water until it's under the fish, then, in one deft swoop, pulls up with the fish kicking away inside the nylon cage.

"We got him!" I say and the boy tries to drag the fish up onto the bank, but it's too big for him. I set my pole down, take the net and lift, my hands straining.

It's glorious.

Just a tinge of pink.

Spotted and silver.

I remember the first Pike I caught back in Wisconsin, how it flipped right out of the boat, how my Dad had given me a hammer, told me that next time I needed to put it out of its misery with a good whack to the head. I can't help but think of my Dad back there all alone, lugging around his oxygen tank like an anchor, not being able to take the boat out anymore.

I grab a rock more than big enough for the job, say, "Stand back," like maybe I'm going to detonate something.

"It's--" the boy starts to say, but I smash the rock against the salmon's head before he can finish.

It isn't until I stand back, grinning wildly, hands trembling, that I see the father standing there, his hand on the boy's shoulder.

"You understand that fish is all kinds of illegal."

I feel dizzy.

"I didn't...see that sign until...after," I stammer.

"Not talking about the sign," the father says. "Though there's that, too."

"It was wild," the boy says. "It had a fin. Didn't you see the fin?"

I look down, and, sure enough, there's the adipose, perfectly intact. I remember somebody telling me to check the back first, to look for a scar, that those were hatchery.

"I didn't--," I start to say, but I can't think of anything more to add.

"C'mon," the father says and tousles the boy's hair, turning him away. "That's enough fishing for one day."

I wait until the two gather their gear and leave before I take out my rusty fillet knife. I know I should leave, know a warden could show at any minute, but I'm finishing this. If there's one thing my Dad tried to teach me, it's not to waste life.

I sink the knife in below the chin and begin sawing through the rubber-like belly. The innards spill out and I scrape away at the insides, at the black embedded along a spine that looks infested with cavities. I shove the pile of organs into the water, setting aside the seine of eggs and place the gutted fish into a Hefty bag.

Twenty pounds. Maybe twenty-five. I can't be sure.

I remain kneeling, sit back on my heels and try to listen to the sounds of the river. The eggs in their netting look cradled and safe.

I cut open the seine, pop one of the eggs into my mouth.

It tastes like salt. Maybe butter.

I start to light a cigarette, but remember the deal I made and work it back into the pack. Instead of smoking, I flick the remaining eggs in the water, feed the bullhead like ducks on a pond.

When I get back to Portland, I'll call Dad, lie and tell him I quit smoking, tell him how I finally caught the Chinook he never did.

How it wasn't as fun as bagging a Northern.

How it wasn't nearly as fun as getting skunked with the old man.

### Oscar Lansing

Oscar sat in his trailer rehearsing lines with the priest who also doubled as his drama coach. The priest called it a kind of "two-fer" deal.

Oscar called it fate.

"That was very powerful, Oscar. Now if you could try it once more, only this time read it as if your life depended on it."

Oscar looked up from page 112. "You didn't just say that."

"Oh, my Lord. Isn't that funny? Well, I suppose funny isn't the right word."

"Not remotely."

"I'm sorry, son. I'll try to be more delicate."

"That would be appreciated."

"Okay then, where were we? Oh yes, once more with feeling. That better?"

Oscar stood up, head bent slightly so that it didn't rub along the ceiling of the trailer. Outside, past the white-painted bars of the window, he could see them setting up for the final shoot. That's what they called it: a shoot. He wanted to



say something about irony, show the priest he knew the word, knew when and how a person should use it, but there was the scene to worry about. Oscar pushed his shoulders back, then slowly rolled them over.

*"Well, I guess you got me. To be honest, it's a relief. You'll be doing me a favor."*

"No, no, no," the priest said like maybe Oscar had just peed the carpet. "What you have to realize is that this is a transcendent moment. He's finally come to terms with his own mortality. Oscar, you of all people should understand that."

"Settle down, Father. It's just a movie."

"But it's not *just* a movie. This is your last chance. Your chance to repent, to take God into your heart, to make something of your life. And we've only got the one take to do it in."

"I've only got one take to do it in," Oscar corrected him.

"Yes, I know. I'm sorry. But I have faith in you, Oscar. You can do this."

"It's not my fault the dialogue is crap. The guy's been running from the cops the entire movie and when he's finally caught, he considers it a favor? C'mon now."

"I'm sorry, but we don't have the luxury of picking another script at this point. This is what we have to work with."

"I want my Kentucky Fried Chicken."

"I've already told them," the priest said. "It's on its way."

"Original, not Extra-Crispy. And don't forget the Café Mocha, heavy on the whipping cream. And the two Snickers bars."

"It's already been ordered, Oscar. There's no need to worry."

"I want all of it. Or I don't do this."

Oscar eyed the half inch-thick chain around his ankle and glared at the collar-less priest dressed in jeans, a hoodie, and Mariner's baseball hat. Every time he looked at the man he remembered the church from his childhood. The dark candle-lit rectory, the smiling priest with his big dark robe. Mostly he just remembered the darkness.

"Let's try again," the priest said, adopting his cop voice. *"You knew it had to end sometime, bud. I'm just glad I'm the last person you'll ever get to see."*

*"Don't you want to know where I buried the body? I'm the only one knows."*

"Our dogs found her. Not very original, using your mother's basement."

"Sorry. Didn't realize I was going to be judged."

"You believe in God, bud?"

"Of course I don't. What kind of animal you take me for?"

The priest aimed his finger at Oscar, cocked his thumb like a hammer and said, "Do you want to wash your hands?"

"And why would I want to do that?"

"Cause you're about to shake hands with the Almighty!"

Oscar tossed the script on the coffee table, plopped down in the lawn chair he'd special requested.

"This is elephant shit. What if I just ad-lib some?"

"That's not part of the deal, Oscar. You know that."

"Well the deal is dumb. Give me a couple more days and I'll write the ending myself."

Outside the carnival was coming to life. Oscar pressed his face between the bars again, nestled the tip of his nose in a triangle of chicken wire and watched the crew set up the final scene.

That morning he'd sat down with Nathaniel Ash, the star of the movie, for over an hour. Oscar had to listen to him yammer on and on about how it wasn't really Nathaniel Ash doing the shooting, how it was the sheriff, his character. When Oscar didn't seem impressed by his logic, the actor said Oscar should see it like a chance at immortality, that Oscar would live on forever in the movie. It was a golden bag of bullshit and Oscar had told him as much, which, it turned out, wasn't such a good idea because Nathaniel Ash had started crying and Oscar had to console the handsome bastard. *There, there, there. It's not your fault. There, there.* Christ on a stick.

"I guess that about does it then," the priest said, realizing Oscar had no intention of continuing with the rehearsal. "After that, well, you know what happens after that."

"I go shake hands with the Almighty."

"Yes. About that. The producers say you should let yourself feel whatever you're feeling. You don't have to take it like a man, I think, is what they're trying to say."

"So I have permission to piss myself?"

"In a nut shell, yes." The priest stood up. "I'll go check on your food now."

Thee priest slashed his security card in the lock and when the door swung open, Oscar glimpsed the back of a guard, a semi-automatic cradled in his arms. There was a mini van parked nearby, a handkerchief-sized American flag flicking around on the antenna.

The door shut, giving two angry beeps before locking again. Oscar went back to staring out the window. It seemed appropriate that the final scene should take place in a carnival. They even had a haunted house. He'd hated them as a child, but isn't that what life boiled down to: one long, on-going haunted house a person was forced to walk through. But that was just fine with Oscar. Soon he'd be safely on the other side, in the daylight, laughing as the rest of the world struggled through all the darkness and ghosts. And priests.

It seemed like no time had passed at all before Oscar heard the two beeps again. The priest, this time wearing a black robe and a white collar, carried in a silver tray piled high with steaming chicken. Costume change, Oscar thought and grinned as the priest set the food down.

"If you don't mind, I'd prefer to eat alone."

"Of course," the priest said and made a sort of drive-by blessing of the food as he left the trailer.

Oscar devoured his chicken, knowing he wouldn't even have time to fully digest it. He only slowed down once he reached the second Snickers bar. It was then, in the bliss of a food-coma and gingerly dipping the chocolate nuggets into the remains of his Café Mocha, that Oscar began rehearsing alternative endings to the movie.

*"My name is Oscar Lansing! You can all rot in hell!"*

He shook his head. No. Too cliché.

*"My name is Oscar Lansing and you, America, are the real murderers!"*

He smiled. It was better. Still not quite there, but better. Outside there were more guards taking position, a sniper atop the House of Mirrors, another sitting in a giant tea-cup aboard the Tilt-O-Whirl. Apparently they weren't taking any chances with Nathaniel Ash's marksmanship.

Oscar sighed, then downed the rest of his coffee before picking up the newspaper on the table. There was no mention in it of Oscar Lansing. His imminent death wasn't newsworthy enough. Either that or they were keeping a lid on it until the movie was in the can.

He looked at the red flashing button on the table, pushed it. Thirty seconds later, the priest reappeared.

"All finished are we?"

"In more ways than one," Oscar said and smiled.

"Come now, that's no way to talk. Remember what we discussed?"

"Death is an open window, not a closed door."

The priest was obviously impressed. "You really are a wonderful student, Oscar. It's such a shame the way things..."

Oscar waved his hand in the air like he was trying to shoo away a mosquito.

"Yes, well, no point dwelling I suppose. Have you made a decision yet? Are you going to be a sport and let me do my job?"

Oscar looked at the little man, thought what could it hurt, and laid down on the cot he'd been sleeping in for the last two months. The priest pulled out all the bells and whistles: incense, a deluxe-sized rosary, and plenty of that funny chanting stuff.

Oscar remembered his days as an altar boy, how much innocence he had then and how he spent the rest of his life mourning the loss of that innocence. It was like a best friend that had suddenly been killed. Hit by a car or something. Everything had vanished that quickly.

The priest held up a white wafer and Oscar knew what he was supposed to do. He opened his mouth, let the priest place the paper-thin bread on his tongue where it dissolved into nothing.

"You're all ready for your journey now," Oscar heard the priest say when he finished. "Go with God."

*Sure, I'll go with God. And if I don't, I'll drag God with me by his wax-filled ears.*

Oscar kept quiet and thanked the priest as sincerely as he could. When he left, Oscar changed into the cowboy shirt and overalls that stank like cigarettes and mildewed popcorn. The director said it kept his character "authentic." Oscar wanted to shave, look decent for his going away party, but they wouldn't allow him even that one small dignity. Authenticity again.

There was a knock at the door, followed by a frantic voice.

"Five minutes!"

"A Hollywood-sanctioned snuff film is what this is," Oscar said to the empty room. He could hear muffled gun shots in the distance. Nathaniel target practicing, no doubt.

Then, after what seemed like only a heartbeat, the door swung open and the director stood there framed in sunlight.

"Ready to do some acting?"



"Ready to do some dying more like," Oscar said and curled his toes inside his boots.

"Only so much daylight to work with, Oscar," the director said, not a morsel of pity in him. "Best get this done now if that's okay by you."

"The sooner the better I suppose."

"Good man. I'll tell everybody to take their places."

The director stepped down, leaving the doorway open for Oscar to follow. Oscar looked around his temporary home, at the small pile of letters he'd written, at the romance novel he was reading but would never finish. He nodded for the guard to come unchain him.

"Make sure my letters get mailed, okay?"

The guard looked over at the letters, but said nothing as he wrestled with the lock around Oscar's ankle. When Oscar walked out into the daylight everything seemed frozen. Extras, dressed up as carnies, stood still inside their booths. Grips and camera men stopped what they were doing and gaped. Only the Tilt-O-Whirl remained whirling.

Oscar took his time, tried to swagger as much as possible under the circumstances. The quiet was nice. Respectful. They'd

gotten that part right at least. He made his way to his mark outside the House of Mirrors and an intern of some sort ran up to him. He swore the scrawny kid bowed as he handed him a bullet-less shotgun.

Before Oscar could thank the kid, Nathaniel Ash appeared from a nearby tent smoking a cigar, looking very John Wayne. Oscar understood that Nathaniel was in-character now. Nathaniel had explained it to him earlier that morning, said he didn't want Oscar to take any offense, that it was how he always worked. And, much to Oscar's surprise, he realized he didn't take offense.

Oscar surveyed the lot, the director watching from what looked like a lifeguard chair near the elephant tent.

This was it.

"We only have one take to do this in people," the director bellowed. "Let's make sure we get it right."

The director paused for a moment, then stood up in his high-chair and slowly began clapping. Oscar was confused, until he saw the rest of the crew, including Nathaniel Ash, join him.

There was nothing left for Oscar to do but bend double at the waist and graciously accept the ovation. When the cast and crew finally quieted down, Oscar sprayed them all with a round

of imaginary bullets which made everyone laugh, until, just as awkwardly and abruptly as it had begun, the laughter stopped.

The director took his seat and Oscar waited, his gun uselessly pointed at Nathaniel. Oscar tried to think of his lines, the real ones or the invented ones, but he couldn't remember either. Not that it mattered. He could feel his throat turning into a vice, clamping down on itself. He doubted he'd be able to get a word out anyway.

Oscar could make out the priest standing at the foot of the director's chair, his baseball hat on again but wearing headphones now. The priest's head swayed side to side like he was mouthing the words to a song or maybe chewing bubblegum. Oscar was trying to figure out which when the director's bullhorn rose and the one word Oscar he'd been dreading for weeks crashed into the silence.

"Action!"

Nathaniel Ash approached him, revolver raised, and spoke the same lines the priest had earlier. Each time it surprised Oscar how much better they sounded coming out of a real actor's mouth. So much better, in fact, that it almost made him believe the movie wasn't complete and total crap.

"You knew it had to end sometime, bud. I'm just glad I'm the last person you'll ever get to see."

Nathaniel had a cigar in his mouth.

Oscar should have asked for a cigar, too.

Shit.

"Um," Oscar managed to say. "Okay then."

If you blinked, you would have missed it. But Oscar saw how Nathaniel's chin scrunched up, saw how his face twitched.

Oscar had thrown him off.

"Our dogs found your wife's body. Not very original, using your mother's basement."

Not bad. Nathaniel was improvising. Well, two could play at that game.

"Your face isn't very original."

Again, it was almost imperceptible but the stumble was there. Oscar had found a chink in the armor. He looked over at the priest. His headphones were off now and he was shaking his head, mouthing the words *no, no, no* over and over again.

*Yes, yes, yes*, Oscar thought to himself.

Suddenly he wasn't as afraid, and he felt a warmth bellow up inside him.

"You believe in God, bud?"

"Yes," Oscar said and smiled. "But my guess is he don't believe in you."

Oscar eyed the director. He seemed paralyzed, holding the bullhorn halfway to his lips like he was about to yell *Cut!* but for some reason couldn't bring himself to do it.

"Well, that may be," Nathaniel said, looking more and more clownish by the minute. "But maybe you'd like to wash your hands at least?"

"I'm good. Thanks though."

Nathaniel looked at the ground like maybe he'd dropped his next line, then said, "Well, okay, but you're about to shake hands with the Almighty!"

This was it.

The cue that meant Oscar only had seconds before a bullet would be sailing through his heart. They'd given him that much anyway: the option of head or heart. It was something.

"Anybody watching this is guilty of murder!" Oscar yelled out as Nathaniel drew a bead on him. "You're the guilty ones, America! Not me! You!"

Oscar gave up, lowered his head as the cameras moved in for the final close up. There was nothing more for him to do now but wait.

*Goodbye, haunted house. Goodbye, darkness.*

Oscar never did hear the sound of the gun going off, only the sensation of somebody tackling him, throwing him back onto the ground. He laid there in a cloud of dust, his eyes opened, the blue spreading out above him. And there was blood. A lot of blood, pouring out into the dirt.

His shoulder.

He'd been hit in the goddamn shoulder.

The dumb bastard. The dumb fucking...

Oscar stopped moving. There was something he remembered from the end of the script, a scene he didn't think much of before but that now seemed beautiful. It might work, just so long as they thought he was dead. If not, it wouldn't be long before the snipers finished the job.

Oscar could smell cologne, knew that Nathaniel was near, knew that soon he'd be bending down beside him, delivering corny lines intended to bring the audience to tears. Lines also intended, Oscar knew, to relieve any unwanted pangs of guilt the audience might be experiencing.

God forbid.

Bleed, Oscar prayed. Bleed so that this ninny won't know you're still breathing. He felt a hand on his good shoulder. It was called for in the script. Good. Let's hope the adlibbing is through with.

"We've had a long run, you and me, bud. I'm sorry it had to end this way."

There were limits to things. Limits to what a person can let be done to them. Limits to what a child should have to endure.

Oscar waited.

"May God have mercy on your soul, Oscar Lansing. You were a good man. A good man gone bad."

They'd be rolling the credits soon, and, even though Oscar knew they'd could cut what he was about to do, he hoped it might make it in as a bonus scene someday.

Maybe the director's cut version.

Oscar lunged for Nathaniel's gun and it came free without a fight. Limp wristed ninny, Oscar thought, and, in one fluid motion, turned and fired. Almost immediately he could hear a flurry of popping sounds and Oscar knew this was the sniper fire.

Before Oscar fell forward, he could see the priest's head wobble, the headphones fall to the ground, the blood come fountaining out where the baseball cap used to be.

Oscar wanted to shout "Amen!", wanted to stand and take a final bow, but everything around him was slowly turning white.

A glorious, glorious white.



## THE LAST PRESIDENT

My father took me. He said it was a once in a lifetime chance to see what a great man looked like. But I didn't need that; I already knew what a great man looked like.

We sat in the front row, both of us mesmerized by the President. His eyes sparkled something crazy, and when he spoke he kept clamping and unclamping his thumb and forefinger together. Like there was this invisible something he couldn't help but pinch.

He wasn't our last President, but that's what most of us refer to him as now.

In private, of course.

My Dad was a scientist. A nobody scientist who worked in a nobody lab trying to make life better for strangers. He was trying to harness the forces of nature, trying to make it so people around the world would always have enough water.

"Watch," my dad said to me back then. "They'll kill him. They always kill what's beautiful."

And that's exactly what they did.

They killed the President.

And then they closed the borders.

They didn't just remove our footprint from other countries, they removed our whole foot. That was the pitch anyway. They also did away with science. They said it was the root of all our evils. So they took science out in the backyard, shot it in the head, and buried it.

More or less.

My dad died shortly after that.

From natural causes.

But I think it was more from a broken heart. All he wanted was to make it rain in places suffering from drought.

I call that being a somebody.

With a capital S.

"Would you rather live in a prison or a home?"

That's what my dad said when I asked him why he never locked the doors of our house.

I didn't really understand then, but I do now.

Nobody thought it could happen here, but now that that world is long gone, it seems so obvious.

The President saw it.

I don't remember much from his speech that day, but I do remember him talking about oppression, how throughout history most people never saw themselves as the oppressor. They were always convinced they were on the side of good.

Which can sometimes make it hard to tell the difference.

I found this is my dad's things. A paper clipping from that day the President spoke...

*"They will never walk in, take their hats off, and introduce themselves as Fascism. No. Instead they will tell you you're special. You're different. You're one of them. Part of a select group. And because something in our nature wants to believe that, we believe. That's how it creeps in. How hate, and not love, quietly takes a seat at our dinner tables."*

I think my father saw it coming, too.

But not me.

All I saw were those fingers of the President's pinching away. And now I wonder if maybe he wasn't trying to wake himself from the nightmare he saw on its way.

We're safe now, though. Those of us that are left.

We're safe and there's plenty of water.

God only knows about the rest of the world.

## Technical Writing

"Hey Phillip, you think you can write an instructional manual on how to end the war?"

I'm watching the World Series with my daughter's husband as my sixty-fourth birthday comes to a close. He's only five years older than my son, works as a technical writer for some international toy company.

"Writing instructions for operating a helicopter is one thing," he says. "But..."

"But what?" I say, and for the hundredth time tonight I wish my daughter wasn't working the night shift at the hospital.

"I mean, I wouldn't have the slightest idea how to..."

"Of course you wouldn't," I say.

*Step One: Remove Clown from Office.*

There was a story on the news earlier about a high school teacher accused of having an affair with one of her male students. They showed a note allegedly written by the woman. *IWTFY*. The boy claimed it stood for something dirty, the teacher said it referred to a homework assignment. This is the sort of garbage I have to watch while waiting for news about my son.

Carson used to play an innocent version of the same game with his mother before she died. It was something like a ritual between the two of them, writing down the first letter of every

word in a sentence and then guessing. If we were watching say, *Murder She Wrote*, Carson would scribble down something like *WDYTDI?* and pass it to his mother. I always pretended to ignore them, but after I would pick up the pieces of paper and try to puzzle out what they were talking about.

*Who do you think did it?*

My son's in Iraq. Day two hundred and sixty-three. Carson McGraff. A strong, Scottish name, which means, ironically, 'son of the marsh'. My wife named him after a woman author she liked at the time. I had a hard time explaining that one to the boy, had to come up with an entire list of manly Carsons.

*Kit Carson. Carson Palmer. Johnny Carson...*

"Have you heard from Car lately?" Phillip asks.

I correct him every time he does it.

"No, I haven't heard from *Carson*," I say and he smiles, thinks I'm kidding around. Jesus, the jowls on him. Looks like a turkey, has a scrotum for a neck.

"Well, I'm sure he's fine," Phillip says.

*PSN. Phillip Scrotum-Neck*

"Allah providing," I say, but he doesn't smile. Rarely does. "So what product you working on these days?"

"Hold on, I'll show you," he says and leaves the room.

I should have known. Last time it was a half-hour demonstration of a toy car that could ride on both land and water. Fascinating.

Phillip comes back holding a tiny helicopter in the palm of his hand. It's a Dragonfly, the kind used in World War Two. The windshield bulges like the eye of a bug. Now they have Blackhawks. Even the names have gotten better.

*Step Two: Bring Home All Soldiers Named 'Carson.'*

"Watch this," he says, holding a remote control twice the size of the copter. "This is the fun part."

The helicopter lifts smoothly from his hand, hovers above the coffee table, then spins around so the front is facing me.

"Took me an entire day just to figure out how to do that. You should see the old manual they gave us." The front of the copter dips down, like it's nodding its head at something, then dive-bombs toward me.

I move my head to the side, but the thing swings in the same direction and I have to swat at it, send it flying into the kitchen where it skids across the linoleum. It stays there, blades spinning, flipping around on the floor.

Phillip hits the off-switch.

"Jesus, sorry about that."

"I feel like Godzilla."

"Don't worry," he says and goes to fetch the thing. "She'll still fly. These things are nearly indestructible."

*Step Three: Make all Blackhawks out of plastic.*

"Can I see it?" I say. "Wouldn't mind giving her a spin."

"Sure, but it's pretty complicated," he says and hands it to me. "Had a real bitch of a time writing the instructions."

"I'll just toy around."

Carson would have loved this when he was a kid. Was a kid. Christ, he's only nineteen. Twenty next month. Just a half-formed thought. Sometimes I'm sure I won't ever see him again. I carry that around with me everyday.

Phillip rattles off some instructions while I watch the game. The pitcher looks to be about twelve, a patch of armpit hair on his chin, long thin sideburns like an Elvis impersonator. He looks utterly convinced in the importance of what he's doing, and all I can think about is how somebody halfway across the world is sitting in their kitchen reading instructions on how to build roadside bombs. I can see them assembling and soldering detonators. I guarantee nobody in that stadium is thinking about the war. We are a country obese on distraction.

"...kid's only nineteen," I hear Phillip saying. "Can you believe that? Talking about giving him MVP."

I fidget around with the helicopter remote. It's easy, only two levers: one for height, one for direction. *A real bitch of a time.* Jesus. I move my thumb and the copter lifts from my pant leg like a bird

"You're a natural," Phillip says.

I ignore him, maneuver the helicopter, duck the head down like Phillip did earlier, and guide it toward the T.V. I picture Carson in the helicopter, Rambo-like, strapped to the gills with bullets, cannons sprouting from his arms, bearing down on Phillip, then an explosion, a cloud of smoke filling the living room, Carson sitting in Phillip's place when the smoke clears.

"Going to be a close one. Who do you want?" he says, eyeing the hovering helicopter.

*My son.*

"Milwaukee," I say, and the helicopter drops, bounces off the T.V.

"So much for revenge," I say, and Phillip smiles like I'd never really do such a thing.

We go back to watching the game and when they cut to commercial, I ask Phillip if he's got any beer in the fridge.

"I think Amanda has something in there. Let me check."

Phillip doesn't drink. Why is it that the people who should drink the most are always the sober ones? Still, he gets me a



beer. *Jumping Frog Ale*. There's a picture of a frog on a lily pad. It tastes more like food than beer.

"It's a wheat ale," he tells me and I take another sip, nod my head like my face made some sort of mistake earlier. Oh, *wheat* ale. Yummy.

When the game starts back up Phillip grabs the box, starts reading me the directions for the helicopter.

"*'The helicopter will take a slow forward speed when a gentle Clockwise turn is made.'* You see what I have to work with, Dad?"

I picture Phillip sitting down to his laptop, flipping imaginary coattails behind him like a pianist about to perform.

"Yeah," I say, turning to the television, trying to will the volume up.

Phillip puts the box down, obviously disappointed I didn't ask him to read more of the broken English he's been hired to correct, but I ignore him. By the time Milwaukee finally wins, I've managed to put down two *Jumping Frogs*.

"Some game," Phillip says and gets up. He stands there in the middle of the room like he's waiting for a bus.

"Well," I say. "Thank you for the beer." I reach out, shake his hand as heartily as I can without having to get up from the couch.

"Okay, Joe," he says and releases my hand. It's more than a relief when I realize he's not going to hug me, not going to call me 'Dad' again.

*Step Four: Ban use of the word 'Dad' by all In-laws*

Phillip is upstairs and I'm dozing on the couch when I hear the cell phone my daughter bought me ringing. It's blinking and scuttling across the coffee table like a crab. I answer without bothering to check the number.

"Carson?" I say, in a soft voice.

"HEY FRANK! WHERE YOU AT, MAN?"

There's loud music in the background. Sounds like a bar. A wrong number. I hit the red button, set the phone back down. Ten seconds later it begins to crawl again, but I ignore it. There's a pulse there, but it's not Carson's.

I switch the TV on, settle on a re-run of *Cheers*. Kirsty Alley is on, back when she was just top-heavy. God bless her. I'm ten minutes into it, Norm drinking his yellow water, when I hear Phillip creaking down the stairs.

"Hey Dad, still up?"

"Guilty."

"Mind if I keep you company for a bit?"

"Help yourself," I say and scoot over. They offered me their bed, but I refused. The couch is fine, feels like I'm being cradled in a big leather hand.

"Cheers?" Phillip says.

"Yeah," I say.

"Never cared for it."

"Me neither really. Except for Coach. Carson always liked him."

"He's dead."

My heart stops.

No. Every organ in my body shuts down.

"Coach is dead?" I say.

It takes a few beats, but Phillip eventually figures it out.

"Oh shit, Dad. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to..."

*Step Six: Kill Phillip*

"Forget it," I say, everything going back to normal inside.

"Don't you have to work tomorrow?"

"Just around here. I can get up whenever."

"That's right."

"Was that Carson earlier?"

It's a miracle. He actually got it right.

"No. Wrong number."

"He's probably just too busy having fun over there."

I look at him. He's trying. It's better than the kid-glove treatment he usually gives me. Good on him.

"Swimming in Saddam's pool," I say.

We smile at each other. Half-smiles. All we really ever do. There's no Coach on *Cheers*. Only Woody. I turn the sound down.

"Why does it do that?" I say, and nod toward my phone. The screen is lighting up, then going dark again.

"Let me see." Phillip grabs it, presses a button. "Yep, you've got a text message."

"A what?"

"A text message. It's like email for your phone."

"Oh," I say, and he hands me the phone. On the screen there's some sort of SOS. *Hpy Bdy D! Lv U, C.*

Phillip reaches over, gives my shoulders a rub. I can't remember him ever touching me before, except for maybe a handshake. I'm so excited I forget to cringe.

"Can I write him back?"

"Here, I'll show you."

Phillip gives me a quick tutorial and I have to admit, his instructions are easy to follow. I play around with the buttons, feel like a gorilla trying to play the piano, but eventually get the hang of it.

"This'll come in handy," I say.

"Thought Amanda had already shown you."

"No. She probably meant to."

I stare at the phone, a million messages going through my head when I hear Phillip clear his throat. I'd almost forgotten he was there.

"Well, I guess I'll head up then," he says and places his hand on my shoulder again. This time I don't flinch.

"Okay," I say. "G'nite Phil."

I turn the TV off, send Sam and the rest of them back to the eighties, and am left alone with my son. It's pitch black now and when I touch a button a lasso of blue light is thrown around me.

I want to text Carson a novel, but I limit myself to just the one message.

One like he used to write his mother.

*PCHIOP*

*ILYS,*

*D.*

## THE SORRY STORE

***Aquarium Castle, small****The Moon Loves It*

"I need to replace a fish," I tell the girl at PetWorld.  
"Something special for my little boy."

"We have some pretty nice Bettas. Would that interest you?"

"He just had one of those. I don't know, just something...special."

She looks me up and down, says, "I think I have just the thing. Wait here."

The girl, who can't be much older than sixteen and whose acned face resembles coral, disappears through a door by the turtle display. While I wait, I try to think of what the night will be like. It's been one year now since Rose's death. I'm still putting one foot in front of the other. Or, rather, one plate of pancakes in front of the other. One hot dog, or Happy Meal, or whatever it is that Alex wants. The anger is still there, but I'm able to keep that hidden most of the time. I did bloody my knuckles against the bathroom wall at work once though. When I came out with my hand bandaged in paper towels,

nobody said a word. Sometimes it's something small, like a commercial, that'll set me off. Or an ad in a magazine. From everything the world is telling me, you'd think only mothers raise children. Hell, most of the children's books I get from the library are guilty of it, too. Apparently only women change diapers, do the laundry, place Band-Aids on skinned knees, and put kids to bed. Even the majority of advice columns and blogs are often specifically "For Mothers."

Capital F. Capital M.

*Fuck Me.*

The coral girl comes back, says she had to go down to the basement, that the "little guy" had just come in. In her hand is a plastic bag filled with water, a white fish darting about inside.

"This is an Albino Rhodo. She wasn't even supposed to be in the shipment, but we got her somehow. What do you think? Special enough?"

I nod. The fish is beautiful.

Like a floating piece of silk.

"They do change color at night, so if that happens don't freak out or anything. It's totally normal."

"How much?"

"How old is your little boy?"

"He just turned four."

"How does four dollars sound then?"

"Seriously?" I say, feeling like a jerk now for thinking the coral thing. "But why?"

"My daughter is twenty-two months," she says, smiling at me. "We parents have to stick together, right?"

"No. I mean yes. Thank you so much. I'm sure he'll love it."

I drive back home with the fish riding shotgun on the front seat. I'm listening to Billie Holiday, one of Rose's favorites. I have it turned up loud like I do whenever I'm alone in the car. I soon find myself wondering what music sounds like to a fish. And if fish can even hear. I know very little about fish, about most things really. And Alex will ask, no doubt, so I'll have to make something up or sneak off and Google. *Do fish sleep?* There's no end to the stupid questions I've asked Google. Unlike Rose who was a walking encyclopedia.

When I get home, Alex has his mouth full of apple, munching away while playing a game of Hungry Hippo with his aunt. Cass



watches him sometimes for me. Rose's sister. It helps, but sometimes it makes it worse. I don't know what it's like for Alex, but for me she's like a misshapen shadow of Rose. It's hard to explain. Pieces of Rose are there. In the way Cass chews her food. In the way she'll pick Alex up. These are things, thank God, I'm pretty sure only I can see. And every time she's here, I find myself swallowing down these reminders so I don't start bawling in front of Alex. It's something I've gotten pretty good at. For all my failings as a parent, I vowed early on that crying in front of the boy wouldn't be one of them.

After the shadow leaves (the shadow is younger and hugs just like Rose, too), I unveil the fish and watch Alex's eyes light up.

"Is it mine?"

"She's yours, Alex. You like her?"

He jumps up and down a bit, squeezes his little hands into fists, his body coursing with what can only be called glee. I'd buy a thousand fish to keep that coming.

But, then, just as quickly as it comes, it vanishes.

I'm used to this. And I'm *not* used to this, if that makes any kind of sense. Like, even though I know it's coming, I'm still always hoping against hope that it won't.

"Is she going to die someday?"

Our last fish, TV (name courtesy of Alex), died a week earlier.

"Yes, Alex, she's going to die. Everything dies."

This is how we do it.

How *I* do it.

"And TV died?"

"Yes."

"And you're going to die?"

"Yes. But not for a very, very long time."

I've forced myself to edit off the "I hope" part at the end. That's the most I'll do to cushion things for him.

"And Jo Jo is going to die?"

Jo Jo is a friend at preschool. "Yes, Jo Jo will die someday, too. Can we stop talking about death now?"

"I don't want Jo Jo to die."

"I don't either. The fish is pretty, isn't she? What should would call her?"

Alex snaps out of it, temporarily pulling himself back from the cliff that is his mother, the thing that sends him free-falling. I can see it coming when it happens, how he starts to crumple and collapse inside at the very thought of his mom.

At the thought of Never.

"How about The Moon?" he says, the start of a smile creasing his face.

"I love it. Moon it is."

"No," he corrects me. "*The Moon.*"

I go about making us some dinner, put on some TV for Alex. Two episodes of *Transformers*. Rose never wanted him to watch much TV. Some nights, though, when things get hard, I'll let him watch more than I should. After we eat, I rinse out the old fish bowl we have and fill it with fresh water and the PH balancing stuff the girl at PetWorld gave me. When it's all ready, I place the bowl back on top of Alex's dresser in our bedroom.

"Story," Alex demands after we read the last book for the night. It's the same thing every night. After we read books, I make up a story for him as he curls up in the crook of my arm. After that it's a song. The song was something Rose always handled. I wrote down the names of all the ones I could remember her singing, then printed out the lyrics and carried the pieces

of paper with me everywhere I went until I had them memorized. You see, I live in constant fear. Constant fear that his mother's death will be some kind of demonic shadow forever rising up behind him. I live in fear, too, that he'll forget her. That I'll forget her. That I won't be enough for him, that all the commercials, advertisements, and books are right. That all love *does* begin and end with a mother.

When I finish singing "A Bushel and a Peck", Alex jumps down from the bed and turns off the lights. He's quiet for a bit, watching the fish, and I'm just about asleep when he says, "Dada, what's wrong with The Moon?"

I look up at the bowl, and, for a moment, I can't find her. But then the fish moves and I remember what the girl at the store told me. The Moon is nearly black now. Like a floating silhouette of herself.

"She's put on her pajamas," I tell Alex. "Just like us."

"Fish have pajamas?"

"Looks like this one does."

"And Mama is dead?"

This is how it happens. Like a thunderbolt.

To the heart.

I never know when or why it's going to come out.

Just that it will.

"Yes, Al. Mama is dead."

"And she lives in here?" he says, tapping his chest.

"Yes."

He turns away from me. "I don't want her in there anymore."

"Then where do you want her?" I say, realizing a second too late just what an incredibly stupid question it is.

"Out here with us. In bed. Cuddling."

"I know," I say. "Me, too."

He's quiet for a bit, then, "I don't think The Moon has pajamas on."

"No?"

"No. I think she's going to run away."

"Where would she go?"

"To the park. They have a fountain there."

"No," I tell him, my hand on his chest, his heart pounding away in there, too small for the job we've given it. "The Moon is staying. I promise."

He turns his head to face me, gently pats me on the shoulder. "It's okay, Dada. Let's just go to sleep now, 'kay?"

This happens sometimes, too. Alex turning the tables on me, becoming the one who does the comforting. "Do you want me to tell you again?" I ask, knowing he won't be sleeping anytime soon.

"About when I was still in her belly?"

"Yes," I say. "About the sorry store."

"Okay," he says, squeezing my hand. "Story, Dada."

### **Flexible Book Light, Blue**



Magical!

*Once upon a time a beautiful woman with a big belly walked into a store. The store was called The Sorry Store. All along the walls were boxes with little scraps of paper taped to them. The woman went to the counter where a rabbit sat. He was wearing glasses perched upon his whiskers. He did not look like a friendly rabbit at all, and the woman was a little nervous about speaking to him.*

*"I need something for a little boy," said the beautiful woman. "For all the mistakes I'm sure I'm going to make as a mother."*

*The rabbit pulled his glasses down and looked shrewdly at her. "This is a store for people who have already done something wrong. I'm sorry, but we do not give out sorrys for things that have not happened yet." He turned away from her and picked up a black carrot and began munching on it. When the beautiful woman didn't move, he stopped munching. "You can go now," he said coldly. "Good day."*

*The beautiful woman felt a kicking in her stomach. You see, she was pregnant and due to give birth to an amazing little boy very soon.*

*"That's me," Alex whispers.*

*"Yes," I whisper back. "That's you."*

*The beautiful woman felt her baby kick again in her stomach. It was almost like he was trying to tell her something. But what? Was he trying to tell her to leave, that she would never need to apologize to him for anything? But the beautiful woman didn't know, so she placed her hands on her belly and rubbed, trying to soothe her little boy.*

*"I'm sorry," said the rabbit, "but you'll have to leave if you haven't got anything to be sorry about."*

*Again the woman felt a little kick.*

*"You're not a very nice rabbit, are you?"*

*"Excuse me?" said the rabbit.*

*"Nothing," said the beautiful woman. "I think I know what I need now." With that, the woman began walking down the aisles and reading the various pieces of paper on the boxes.*

*YELLING, one piece of paper said.*

*FIGHTING OVER SOMETHING TRIVIAL, said another.*

*LATE FOR LUNCH. FORGOT TO CALL. HITTING. BEING SARCASTIC. FARTING. MACHO. SNAPPY. INCONSIDERATE. LAUGHING MEANLY. NOT SAYING THANK YOU. MEAN THOUGHTS. NO FUN. MESSY. BAD FRIEND. TOILET LID/TOOTHPASTE CAP. TOO MUCH TV. SNORING. ULTIMATE...*

*The woman picked up this last box.*

*It was a big box but weighed almost nothing.*

*She carried this box and one smaller one up to the counter.*

*"How much for these?"*

*The woman opened her wallet and once the rabbit saw the money inside, he smiled at her. In fact, it was almost like he*



became an entirely different rabbit. He pulled his glasses down off his whiskers and smiled with his two big front teeth. "I should tell you that the *ULTIMATE SORRY* costs a bit more than the others since it's, well, a sort of all-in-one apology. Are you still interested, miss?"

"How much, please?"

The now-friendly rabbit punched a few keys on his register and out popped a receipt which he handed to the beautiful woman.

"Oh, my," she said after seeing how much it would cost.

"This is rather a lot. Are you sure it will work?"

"Guaranteed," said the rabbit, a small piece of black carrot dangling from one of his whiskers. "There are very specific directions included with each box."

"Very well," said the beautiful woman and handed over four crisp bills to the rabbit. Upon seeing the money, the rabbit's whiskers began to jiggle and dance, shaking loose the stray bit of black carrot which, as soon as it landed on the counter, he greedily snatched up and stuffed back into his mouth.

"Would you like these gift wrapped?" asked the rabbit once he finished chewing.

*"No, thank you," said the beautiful woman, picking up the larger of the two boxes and leaving the smaller box there on the counter as she walked away. When the rabbit noticed this, he started hopping up and down excitedly.*

*"Miss, you're forgetting your other sorry!"*

*At the door, the woman rested her box on top of her belly and then turned to the rabbit. "Oh, I'm not forgetting," she said kindly. "That one's for you. Good day!"*

*After the woman had left the store, the rabbit looked down and read the piece of paper on the box: MEAN THOUGHTS. He thought for a minute before finally understanding and then pushed the box away from him. "Hmmmph," he said out loud, "well, I'm not going to open it. Apology NOT accepted. How rude." And with that the unfriendly rabbit reached under the counter and pulled out another large black carrot and began munching away, frowning.*

*"But what mean thoughts did she have about the rabbit?"*

*"We don't know. What do you think they were?"*

*"Ugly, stupid, old rabbit."*

*"Maybe."*

*"But that's not the end of the story."*

"No, not quite. Do you want it to be?"

"No. Keep going."

*The beautiful woman took the bus home, riding along with one hand on the box and the other on her belly, protecting both from any dangers that might come. When she got home, she sat on the couch in her living room and read the directions:*

*"Congratulations, you have purchased the ULTIMATE SORRY-BOX. In order for your apology to be 100% effective, please follow these steps closely.*

*ONE: Open the box inside a small room (preferably a bathroom) with all the lights off. It is important for the room to be entirely dark. If this step can be done at nighttime, that is preferable.*

*TWO: Be completely quiet and still. Any sudden movements or noises can scare the apology. If the apology should evaporate, no refunds will be allowed.*

*THREE: While sitting completely still, wait for the apology to rise out of the box. Do not be frightened. You will see something like a flame in the shape of a butterfly. Again, please do not be alarmed. This is no ordinary flame. It will not burn you should you touch it. But do NOT touch it. This could result in the disappearance of the sorry.*

*FOUR: Open up your mouth as wide as possible. Again, do not fidget. If you are nervous, some have found it helpful to close their eyes.*

"I'm going to close my eyes," Alex says quietly, not moving a muscle.

"Good idea," I whisper and grab the small reading light I just bought. When I turn it on, I can see him squeezing his eyes tight, his mouth opening.

*FIVE: When the room goes completely dark again, you'll know the sorry has landed on your tongue. Warning: this may tingle, but do not be scared. When you feel a tingle, close your mouth.*

I turn off the reading light.

Alex closes his mouth.

*SEVEN: Swallow. You should feel a soft glowing sensation in the pit of your stomach. This is love. The feeling will be softer at times, stronger at others, but rest assured that it will remain with you forever.*

"Do you feel it?"

"I do," Alex says. "I feel it."

*EIGHT: Congratulations, that completes the assembly of your sorry. You are now the proud life-long owner of one ULTIMATE SORRY.*

*The woman, after following all the directions exactly as written, lay down on her bed and began to speak to her belly, to the little boy waiting patiently in there. "Did you hear all that? Did you open your mouth like the directions said?" She felt a little kick inside her. "Good," said the beautiful woman. "Now if anything ever happens to me, you'll have this sorry from me and know that I will always love you. Do you understand?"*

*Again, she felt a kick. Bigger this time.*

*"Good," said the beautiful woman. "Now promise me you'll never forget that."*

*Alex turns on his side, places my hand on his stomach. "I promise, Mama. Now go to sleep, okay?"*

*"Okay," I tell him and squeeze his hand.*

*There's just the faintest smile on his face.*

*No shadow to it.*

*Zero thunderbolts.*

**Round Flying Hoop, 15"**

Decent Frisbee, Easy To Lose

It's a Friday night and Cass is over again. I've had a few beers and am out on the back porch smoking. I don't drink much anymore, and, of course, I never drive when I do. I'd never risk even for a second putting someone else in this situation. And I only let myself smoke when someone's over to play with Alex. He hasn't caught me yet. But that, like everything else, isn't going to last forever. So when Alex comes out on the back porch to ask if I'll get his Frisbee, I quickly drop the cigarette between the floor boards. "Okay," I tell him, herding him back inside. "We'll go talk to them together. Good deal?"

"Good deal."

I tell Cass that we'll be right back, and, hand-in-hand, Alex and I make our way over to the neighbor's house. He's been after me all week to ask about the Frisbee, but I've kept putting it off. The neighbor's front yard and driveway, like always, is littered with empty McDonald's bags and beer cans. Which is fine, except for the fact that the wind will eventually blow it into our yard and I'll end up picking it up. I already don't like them much but not because of the garbage. Their dog bit Rose when she was pregnant with Alex. She was fine, just

bruised a little, but did our neighbors offer to pay her medical bills (we would have said no), come over and apologize, do anything that most any normal person would do? No. And we could have had their stupid Chihuahua put down, but we didn't. Mainly because their young girl would have been devastated.

With Alex still holding my hand, I ring the doorbell.

"If they won't give it back, I'm going to blast them."

We've been watching a lot of Transformers lately.

"Let me handle this. You keep your weapons holstered."

"Yes, Optimus."

The window beside the door is open and when I ring the doorbell I can hear the young girl call out something in Spanish. Then there's some movement behind the curtain, but nobody comes to either the door or window.

"Hello?" I say to the window. "It's your neighbors. My son lost his Frisbee over the fence and we were just wondering if you could maybe toss it back over. Either that, or I could hop the fence?"

Silence.

"Why aren't they talking?"

"I don't know."

I wait a bit longer and then say, "Okay, fine. I guess I'll just wait a few minutes and then hop the fence. Thank you."

As we're walking away, Alex says, "You meant not thank you, right?"

I've been trying to explain sarcasm to him lately. "Yes, I meant the opposite of thank you because they weren't very much help."

"Then why don't you say that?"

"I don't know."

We go back home and Cass is on the couch watching TV, her legs tucked under her, leaning on the armrest just exactly like Rose used to. It's a common thing people do, I know, but there's this half-second where I can almost see my wife again. That's all I get, though. These short breaths that are equal parts euphoria and poison.

"Any luck?" she asks, patting the couch for Alex to come sit by her. Again, something Rose used to do. Before I can answer, Alex says, "Dad's going to climb over the fence!"

"No," I say, going for another beer. "We're going to wait and see first."



"Can I come with?"

I feel like smoking an entire tree.

A Redwood.

"Sure," I say. "C'mon."

We leave Cass inside and while we're waiting out back, Alex points between my feet and says, "Dada, is the porch on fire?"

I pour some beer between the slats which causes these little smoke signals to rise up. I imagine it's puffing out *Father...Of...The...Year.*

"I must have dropped a match down there earlier on accident. It's okay."

"But why were you--?"

"Hey, let's go see if the Frisbee's back yet. Good idea?"

"Good idea!"

We go and look, but, of course, the Frisbee isn't in our yard. I grab the ladder and set it up alongside the wooden fence, planning to hop over it and brave whatever consequences their ratty little Chihuahua might have in store for me, but I soon realize I won't have to worry about that because the Frisbee is now gone.

"It's not there, Alex," I say, climbing back down.

"But how?"

"I don't know."

"They took it."

"I think so. Yes."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

"That's not nice."

Alex starts to cry. Something he likes has been taken from him, and it's not fair. He wants it back.

"C'mon," I tell him. "We're going back over there."

"Are you going to fight them?"

"No, I'm going to talk to them."

"And then you're going to fight them?"

"No."

I take him around the side of the house to avoid having to explain things to Cass. She'd just coddle Alex, and he'd end up escalating. I know he needs coddling sometimes, but I'm not always so good at it. I can still see Rose folding him into her,

the way she would wrap her arms around him, how he would just sort of disappear into all the warmth and love there.

Just exactly like I used to.

I ring the doorbell.

No answer. Not even the sound of the little girl moving around now. I ring it again and Alex stares up at me, then at the door. "Why don't you knock? Let's knock."

"Because they have a doorbell. Can't you hear it ringing?"

"We should knock."

"I'm not knocking." Then, to the open window, I say, "They know we're here. But they aren't answering because they're COWARDS."

I tug on Alex's hand, pulling him away from the door.

"But I want my Frisbee!"

He starts to cry and I stop, turn back to the window. "You just made a four-year-old cry! Thanks so much!"

"Not thank you!" Alex says, the tears starting to come in earnest now. I pick him up, let him cry into my shoulder as I carry him home. Cass is already at the door when we get back.

"What happened? I can take him if you want."

Alex shakes his head, burrows deeper into my shoulder. He still prefers me to anybody else, which I'm thankful for, but when I try handing him over to Cass, he does this clinging-monkey thing where his arms and legs wrap around me in a death grip.

I can't remember the last time he's done it.

"Alex, I'll be right back. I just need to go out back for a minute. Can you stay here with Cass for me?"

He grudgingly unclamps and I pour him into Cass's arms. "Five minutes. Okay?"

As soon as the back door is closed, I light up. Why would they do something like this? It's not like our dog bit one of them. I smoke. Hard and fast. I climb back up on the ladder, double-check their backyard to make sure I haven't made a mistake. Nope. Still gone. I finish my smoke and flick it, still lit, over the fence. Right where the Frisbee used to be.

It's a small thing, but it feels good.

For the remainder of the night, I pinball between the living room and the back porch where I continue to smoke and drink and fantasize about all the horrible things I could do to my neighbors:

*Pound on their door and punch whoever (little girl included) opens it.*

*Set their garage on fire.*

*Climb over the fence and steal their dog.*

At some point Cass offers to stay the night, no doubt because of how much I've been drinking. Normally I'd tell her to go home, but I give in, let her stay and tuck Alex in. She's done it before, stayed over on the couch a few times, but tonight she ends up falling asleep in the bed. When I finally go in later, she's still there, right smack in the middle where Rose used to sleep, her arm draped over Alex.

It's too much for me.

Drunk or sober, it would still be too much.

If I blink, if I just squint my eyes a little, I'll have my wife back. It's too much, so I go back out on the porch and have another smoke. Alex and I watched a video of Rose on my phone the other day. I have to force myself to play them for him sometimes. I don't know if that's the right thing to do or not since he sometimes ends up with this sort of lost, blank look on his face. But I'm forgetting the sound of her voice, and I'm afraid it's the same for Alex. It hurts. I don't know what else

to say about it. It hurts. Like someone's reaching down inside of me and squeezing.

I eventually talk myself out of banging on the neighbor's door and go back inside to peek in on Alex again. He's rolled over toward the window, away from Cass now. I have to get her out of there. I don't want him waking up, thinking...

I gently rock her shoulder, and she brings her hand up to her eyes, squints at the clock. She nods, rolls herself out of bed. I have the urge to kiss her as she passes me. I know that's horrible, but it's there. And, if I'm being completely honest with myself, it's been there longer than I'd care to admit. I get into bed and lie awake for a bit, my hand resting on Alex's leg. I'll try the neighbor's door again in the morning. If they still won't answer, I'll take Alex to the store and buy him another Frisbee. As I lie there, I imagine thousands of Frisbees, thousands of Sorry Boxes, all of them heaped at Alex's feet, all of them with the same note written on them:

*"Sorry I'm not Mom."*

I stare up at the fishbowl. The Moon's in there, a deep black pacing back and forth in the water. *Do fish sleep?* I looked it up but forgot to tell Alex. Apparently they don't sleep like we do. They sort of float in place. Or wedge

themselves in somewhere safe, like mud or sand, where they can rest. But they still remain alert to danger. "A *suspended animation*" Google called it.

Which I completely get.

### Comments

[Margaret's Kin](#) says:

**Did you ever get the Frisbee back???**  
**P.S. Stop smoking!**

17 of 18 people think this post adds to the discussion. Do you?  Yes  No Thank you for your feedback.

[Amazon Customer](#) Replied:

**Margaret, I ended up finding the Frisbee stuck high up in our apple tree the next day. The neighbors must have thrown it back over like I'd asked. Probably right after the first time Alex and I went over.**

**Capital F. Capital M.**

**(And I'm working on the smoking. I know, I know...)**

**Peptic Ulcer Medication**



Drugs Are Good

I wasn't completely honest about the other night.

I left something out.

A big something.

And now I'm having trouble, *more trouble*, sleeping. I'm lucky if I get a solid three hours. And it's not because of Alex's pugilistic tendencies.

It's Rose.

Everything is Rose.

The dreams are all the same. She's there, doing something inane like washing the dishes or gardening, and I'll go to talk to her and she'll lean in for a kiss and then I'll lean in and everything is fine until she starts pixilating on me, fracturing and splintering into little bits and disintegrating before I can actually touch her. And Alex will be there, always in the background somewhere and he'll start noticing what's happening and get this look on his face and come running toward us and I'll be frantically trying to stop it, to pick up the pieces, the pixels, that have fallen to the ground so I can put Rose back together, make her whole again for him, for us, but it's never any use: the faster I try to build her, the faster she disappears.

So, and this happens every time, I end up bolting awake right before Alex can get to her. The setting of the dream is sometimes different, but the ending is always the same.



Afterwards I can never get back to sleep. There's this gnawing in my stomach. Like absence itself is eating away at me. It's hard to explain. Like my wife's death has manifested itself into a stomach ulcer or something.

A carbuncle. A cyst. A pustule. A boil. A canker.

A whitlow.

I Googled. To see if it was possible.

It is apparently.

Anyway, what I usually do in these situations is stay in bed and watch TV on my phone. I like lying there next to Alex. When he's not kicking and throwing jabs, he's the most beautiful thing in the world to sleep next to.

A security blanket.

A thirty-eight pound salve for whatever ails ya.

But this night my phone is dead.

And even though I know full well that Cass is sleeping on the couch, I think maybe I can keep the TV volume low, maybe place a chair close to it and avoid waking her up. But the thing is, she's already awake, sitting there in the dark with a box of Kleenex and crying. I think at first that maybe she's been watching a sad movie, but the TV isn't even on. She's just

sitting there, her feet curled up under a long t-shirt, her brown hair all tangled in her face.

She even cries like Rose.

I sit down next to her, but, when I do, I notice her place something between the cushions. She's been staring at it. Something small and red.

"You okay?" I ask stupidly.

She wipes at her face, tucking some of the loose hair behind her ears. "I'm fine. It's just...I miss her sometimes."

I forget that Cass lost a sister a year ago, that other people love my wife just as much as I do. I scoot closer to her, place my arm around her shoulder. Her forehead and cheeks are hot, so I pull a strand of hair away from her face, just like I used to when Rose would get upset.

It's nice. Comfortable.

When the crying subsides, I reach down between the cushions and pull out the thing Cass had been holding.

It's a Lego.

A red brick that's all blackened on one end.

Like it's been in some sort of fire.

"You don't remember, do you?" Cass says.

"Remember what?" I say.

Cass pulls away from me a little. "It's nothing."

I hand her back the Lego. "What? Did Alex do that?"

She shakes her head and the tears start flowing again.

"No," she says in between sobs. "Alex didn't do it."

"It's okay, Cass. You can tell me. I promise I won't get mad. Whatever it is."

"It's not that," she says, grabbing a tissue. "I took it from the accident. It was on the ground. I kept it."

I had completely forgotten.

Legos had been scattered all around the wreckage. Some of the pieces had been shattered, like they'd been stepped on by a giant. I remember wondering if the rescue workers had gotten annoyed by that, like I did at home when I stepped on toys Alex left lying around.

"I'm sorry," Cass says. "I know you already have enough on your plate, you don't need me to..."

"But I do need you," I tell her, and then I remember what I told Alex about the Legos. That mommy took them with her so she'd have something to remember him by.

It was one of the first mistakes I made.

After that I removed all the Legos from the house. I thought it would be easier that way. But it didn't stop there. Soon I was putting things in boxes whenever Alex was busy doing something else. It happened slowly, the removal of my wife from our house.

Pixel by pixel. Until the screen was nearly blank.

My hand is on Cass's thigh.

And her shirt has crept up around her waist.

I can feel her breath against my neck.

It's slow and deep.

I stuff the Lego back in between the cushions and sit there holding Cass, feeling how solid she is, how very whole and there she is.

How graspable.

And, yet, how completely not.

[BethanyAnnie](#) says:

**Don't do it! For Alex's sake! She will never replace your wife!**

30 of 34 people think this post adds to the discussion. Do you?  Yes  No Thank you for your feedback.

[PaulTor38](#) says:

**Go for it, bro! ;)**

2 of 23 people think this post adds to the discussion. Do you?  Yes  No Thank you for your feedback.

### **Building Blocks Set**

★★★★★ Spaceships Rule!

I bought Alex a Lego set big enough to replace his old ones ten times over. When he opens the box, he looks up and says, "Does this mean Mom won't remember me anymore?"

"No, Al," I tell him, the ulcer in my stomach starting to burn. "These are different ones. New ones."

"Oh."

He seems unsure, so, like I've done so many other times in the past, I go off script. "I lied about your old Legos," I tell him. "When Mom got in the accident there were some in the backseat and after it happened I didn't want to be reminded of--"

"Of how she died?"

"Yes."

He looks at the new Legos suspiciously. "You know what they remind me of?"

"No. What?"

"Of playing with her. Of those funny looking spaceships she used to make."

I know exactly what he's talking about. Rose would make these horrible, square-shaped monstrosities she'd try to pass off as spaceships. I'd forgotten all about them. "I bet we could make some just like hers," I say.

"Good idea."

He smiles at me, his cheeks dimpling just like Rose's would when she was happy. Building the spaceships makes me feel like I'm reaching all the way back to the accident, holding Rose's hand as it grips the steering wheel, the two of us holding the world still, me telling her it's going to be okay, that I can handle it, that Alex and I will be okay, that she can go. I know she had to be thinking about Alex in those last moments. I know because it's what I'm thinking every second of every day.

It's a feeling every mother knows.

### 36 Gallon Aquarium



#### The Moon and The Sun

It's Alex's idea we go to the fish store to find a friend for The Moon. He says it doesn't seem fair that she should be all alone in such a little bowl. The same girl is there, the coral on her face having since cleared up, submerged itself somehow. There's something else different about her, too. She seems happy. But there's more to it than that. The plumpness in her face, the light in her eyes, the barely noticeable bump pushing out at her smock. She's pregnant.

"How's your fish doing? Still alive, I hope."

"The Moon's not dead," Alex tells her, his hands on his hips, all serious. "Not going to the park either."

"Well, that's a relief to hear. I hate it when they go to the park."

"Yeah," Alex says. "Me, too."

We tell the girl, the young woman, we're looking to get the albino some company and she walks us over to a wall of fish and starts to point out a few possibilities but doesn't get very far because Alex is already jumping up and down, pointing to a solitary yellow fish on the top row.

"The Angelfish? That would be a wonderful choice. They're super peaceful and just love company. How big is your tank?"

I tell her we just have the small bowl right now, and she explains how we'll need to get something much bigger if we want to add another fish. "Especially if they end up having babies," she says.

"I'm allergic to babies," Alex tells the girl. "If I get near one, I'll sneeze."

"Well," she says, smiling down at him as she places the new fish in a bag. "You're not sneezing now."

"Nope. No babies around."

She leans down, hands him the bag and, in a whisper, says, "What if I told you I had one in my belly?"

Alex cranes his neck, trying to see. "You're joking."

"Nope," she says, standing. "Right in here." She lifts her smock, rubs her belly for Alex. "Pretty cool, huh?"

Alex backs away from her like maybe she's contagious.

"No, thank you," he says politely and ducks behind my leg, something he used to do when he'd get shy. I haven't seen him do it in a long, long time.



We end up buying a massive 32-gallon tank, and, on our way home, Alex dubs our new fish The Sun.

The Moon and The Sun.

A cosmological impossibility.

A perfect apocalyptic match.

### **LEGO Transformers: Optimus Prime**

★★★★★ Roll To The Rescue!

I've set the new tank up in the living room, right next to the couch so I can watch them whenever Alex is watching his Transformers show. They say watching fish is supposed to be a calming activity, but all it's doing is making me anxious because The Sun can't seem to stop chasing The Moon around and nipping at her butt. Or dorsal fin. Whatever it is, it's frenetic and spastic and I have the urge to pull him out of the tank and tell him to relax, that The Moon is a good woman, that he has zero competition and that there will be plenty of food coming so he doesn't have to freak out. It's probably just some sort of mating ritual, but still it's making me nervous.

The Transformers theme song comes on and Alex starts singing. Soon he'll be asking for another episode. And then

whining when I tell him no. Whether or not it turns into full-on crying depends on what I offer as a distraction.

"`Nother one, `nother one, `nother one!" he starts chanting.

It's what I imagine The Sun is saying to The Moon as he chases her around the tank.

I turn the TV off.

"Awwwwwwww...I wanted to watch another Transformers!"

Whenever we play Transformers, I am always Optimus Prime. Because I do a great Optimus voice. Alex thinks so anyway. It's also the only time anybody will ever hear my son refer to me as "sir."

"Ratchet," I say, my voice low and gravelly like somebody from the World Wrestling Federation. "I have a new mission for you."

Alex is always Ratchet. Ratchet is the medic. And also Optimus's best friend. Alex even has a little medical kit he'll grab when we play. There's a real stethoscope in there, something Rose got him about a month before the accident. He still uses it every chance he gets. Mostly to check my heart, probably to reassure himself that it's still beating.

He stops whining, hops up on the couch next to me.

"Yes, Optimus. What's our mission?"

"Ratchet," I say, "Auntie Cass is coming over for a bit."

Alex looks up at me, skeptical, disappointment already beginning to cloud his face. "You mean Arcee?"

Arcee is a female autobot. Alex's second favorite.

"Yes," I say, forgetting to do the voice. "Arcee is coming over."

"Be Optimus, Dadda."

"Sorry," I say. "I must be sick or something."

"It's okay. I'm ready for the mission now, sir."

"Wait here," I say and go into the bedroom to grab the box with the Lego Transformer in it. When I hand it to Alex his eyes light up.

"Whoa! Is this for me?"

"Yes. And your mission will be to build it with Auntie...with Arcee."

"Yes, sir. I accept your mission." He squeezes the box tight then, after seeming to debate it for a moment, climbs up on the couch and places his mouth right up against my ear. It's

one of my favorite things he does. "Thank you, Dada," he whispers in his normal voice. "You're the best."

"You're welcome, buddy," I whisper back and before he hops back down to begin tearing the box open, he returns to his Ratchet voice and says, "Now, look out below. There's lava. We'll need to put on our lava boots."

Cass hasn't been over since the night she stayed over. I've been worried about it. And not because anything happened but because we both know something *could* have happened. It's awkward at first when she stops by but Alex quickly puts her to work helping him build his new Lego. I love watching the two of them together. When he calls her Arcee she just rolls with it even though she has no idea what he's talking about. To think I almost did something to mess that up for Alex makes me nauseous.

Later, when Alex is busy playing with his new toy, I show Cass the new fish.

"They don't seem to get along," she says after a bit.

"No," I say. "Not a good match, I guess."

She looks at me and smiles. "No," she says. "I guess not."

And that's that. Everything goes back to normal and after Cass leaves I make Alex pancakes for dinner. I don't do it often, usually only when I feel guilty about something. He

doesn't realize this, but he could probably ask for pancake dinners every night for the rest of his life and I'd cave every time.

As we get ready for bed, I find myself thinking about the girl at Pet World. I can't imagine ever having another child. I won't ever have another child. There will only ever be Alex for me. The two of us against the world. Against the evil Decepticons that stole his mother away from him.

I read a few books and, after caving and reading two more than I'd care to, I tell Alex it's time for bed and to turn out the lights.

"Oh, my God," he mutters but does as he's told.

When he gets back under the covers I ask him if he knows what the word *God* means. I've avoided it for obvious reasons.

"No," he says and turns to me, waiting for the definition.

I'm usually pretty good at this. I explain all kinds of things: porcupines, Venus, how fish sleep...

But God? That's a whole different ballgame.

"Some people believe a being created the world and lives above the clouds and that's where we all go when we die."

Without skipping a beat, Alex says, "But that's not real."

"It's up to you to decide whether it's real or not. Mama and Dada don't think it's real but it could be. We could be wrong. Many people believe God exists."

"I know," Alex says, raising his finger in the air all eureka-like. "God is in yogurt pretzels. And sprinkles."

I love this kid.

"Sounds good to me," I say and am about to tell him it's time for sleepy-time again when he scrambles off the bed and grabs my reading light from off the bookshelf.

"Alex," I start to say but he stops me.

"Just hold on a second, Dada, okay?"

"Okay."

He lies beside me and, in the most solemn tone, says, "I think tonight I tell you a story. You seem a little sad."

"I do?"

"Yes. Now just be quiet, okay?"

And with that my son begins to tell me a story.

*"Once upon a time there was a beautiful woman..."*