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Wild & Wonderful: a Collection of Stories

Thomas Bennitt

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WILD & WONDERFUL :
A COLLECTION OF STORIES

A Thesis presented in
partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
in the Department of English
The University of Mississippi

by

THOMAS CLARKE BENNITT

May 2012

A few of these stories have appeared, in slightly different form or under different titles, in the following publications: *Burnt Bridge*, *Binnacle*, *Facets*, and *River Walk Journal*.

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ABSTRACT

My thesis is a collection of literary short stories, many of which spring from my life experiences: people I've known, places I lived, jobs I worked, or subjects I have researched. Some stories are more "realistic," where landscape and geography – often West Virginia, or my native Pennsylvania – is an essential part of the narrative. Other stories are more experimental, blending realism with other styles like satire, metafiction, and historical fiction. Yet the narrators in these stories share a common trait: they are somehow isolated, alienated, or marginalized. Some are physically confined – a lobsterman who works alone on his boat, coal miners working underground, office workers stuck in cubicles – and others are emotionally removed from love, meaningful relationships, or a sense of belonging. These characters are disengaged from their communities, on the fringes of society, but they struggle to endure and make sense of their lives. And while these are not political stories, many of them involve work and class, particularly blue collar work and the lower classes. Too often, in literature and popular culture, these people are either dismissed as poor white trash or celebrated as working class heroes. My characters are real human beings with their own flaws and virtues. In short, I've tried to create stories and characters with distinct narrative voices, using different styles, techniques, and points of view. They represent my diverse influences, and I hope they showcase my full creative abilities.

DEDICATION

To Mom, for your inspiration, to Dad, for your patience and wisdom, and to Rebecca, my best friend, for things only you know.

ABBREVIATIONS AND SYMBOLS

Since this is a creative thesis, I have no abbreviations to list. And while I believe there are literary symbols present throughout the text, they are inherently subjective, therefore I will defer to my intelligent readers attribute their own meaning or significance to them. Finally, please note that because this is a work of fiction, all the characters are fictional, and any real places or events may have been changed or fictionalized.

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*The river sweats oil and tar
The barges drift with the turning tide.*

- T.S. Eliot

There's so much goop inside of us, man, and it all wants to get out.

- Denis Johnson

Nor'easter

Brian Sinclair untied the painter from the cleat and pushed off the pier. A thin coat of ice covered his oarlocks as he rowed hard through the choppy, granite-colored water past moored yachts whose masts rattled in the wind, a blustery wind that kicked up a briny spray in his face. The dory creaked and swayed and the bait bucket – an oily stew of processed herring and redfish – sloshed under his feet. His joints ached like they did before it snowed. Autumn had left overnight. Last night he and his wife, Ellie, ate dinner – steamed clams and steak – on the porch under a Maine sky torched with stars, unsullied by city lights or smog. He wanted to stay in bed with her in this morning, but his summer catch was way down. He'd have to fish until Thanksgiving, maybe even Christmas.

He tied the dory to the back of his lobster boat and lifted the fuel can and bait bucket into the stern. As the diesel warmed up he restacked the empty traps and buoys. The wind cut through his oilskin pants and Carhartt jacket. After he'd coiled the unused trap lines and stored them in the cabin, he unmoored the boat and climbed into the cockpit. Leaving the harbor, he lit a cigarette. The horizon was pinkish red, the color of infected skin. He tuned the VHF radio to the Coast Guard band where a monotone voice read the forecast: *Today a Nor'easter will sweep up the Maine coast and bring a mix of freezing rain and snow. Highs in the mid-thirties, tonight's low around twenty.*

Brian enjoyed his job. He set his own hours and answered to nobody. But lately his expenses had been growing and the bullshit paperwork – who could even read these new Coast Guard forms? – never stopped. Besides, fishing in bad weather like today sucked. He'd thought about moving to Florida where he could find a job guiding deep-sea fishing charters and make more money. Ellie liked the idea, she hated the winters up here, but he also had Henry, his ten year-old son, to think about. Right now Brian saw him every other weekend, and neither Linda, his ex-wife, nor the family court judge would let him take Henry to Florida.

Henry called his dad's boat "the giant pickle." Its hull was long, tubular, and pine green. Brian had repainted it last summer to cover up the rust. The sides were low in the stern, so he could lift buoys and traps from the water, and high around the bow to protect against big waves. "Margaret Ann" was painted on the transom, named after his dead mother.

He rounded Mere Point and entered Maquoit Bay to pull some traps he'd set a few days ago. There were no beaches edging the bay, just rocks and trees – pine, spruce, birch – and a few cottages. This stretch of the Maine coast had not been spoiled by development, though it was just a matter of time before the New Yorkers and Bostonians built their summer mansions here, too.

His ancestors had migrated south from Quebec two hundred years ago. His father and both grandfathers were lobstermen, so he knew the waters of Casco Bay – a shallow bay buffered from the Atlantic by a string of banks and shoals – intimately. He knew where the rock bottom turned into mud or sand and where a ledge dropped off into deep water. He didn't need a GPS or fish-finding radar. Some guys had all the latest gadgets –

they probably even knew when a lobster near their boat took a piss – but they lacked the most crucial thing: instinct.

Beyond Sisters Island he cut the engine and let the boat drift up to his string of buoys, all painted red. He hooked one buoy with his gaff and coiled its rope around the hydraulic pulley. Once his first trap came out of the water, he knew what kind of day it would be. Some dickhead had set his traps too close to Brian's, and now their lines were snarled. Brian didn't recognize the green buoys, which probably meant this guy was not from Harpswell and should not have been fishing here to begin with.

This was exactly why Maine needed to limit their lobster permits, Brian thought. Too many boats and too many morons slinging traps all over the bay. These ass clowns couldn't even catch lobster with their fancy gadgets, so they spied on the best lobstermen and set their traps ten feet away. Some even stole lobsters from other traps. The Boothbay lobstermen were the worst of the lot: rusticators and part-timers who didn't care about the rules of fishing. Harpswell, Brian's harbor, was different. Harpswell lobstermen looked out for each other. If you were in trouble, someone would help you.

He decided to radio Uncle Dave, his dad's youngest brother, for a second opinion. Dave could catch lobster in a desert, and he'd taught Brian a lot about fishing. Ellie didn't like Brian hanging out with him, said he drank too much. But some nights, especially after a rough day on the water, Brian needed a few drinks to unwind.

“Great Dane, you copy?”

The CB radio crackled. “I'm here,” said Dave.

“Where you parked at today?”

“Near Eagle Rock.”

“Wicked far.” Brian poured coffee from the thermos into his mug.

“Yah, waves are knocking me around. Storm coming. Where you at?”

“Maquoit Bay. Some idiot has been fishing right on top of me.” Gunmetal gray clouds congealed and darkened the sky. The first sheets of freezing rain cut across the bay like a theater curtain. “Now my lines are snarled. You know anyone with green buoys?”

“From Harpswell? Pat McCurdy uses green ones, but he usually quits fishing before Columbus Day.”

Looking at his nautical map, Brian asked if Maquoit Bay was still inside Harpswell’s fishing territory.

“Rumor is the state opened it up to everyone,” said Dave. “But it’s not on the map yet, so I’m not buying it.”

Fishing territories were a time-honored reality of the Maine lobster trade. Different harbors had their own areas and some overlapped. They’d been established decades ago. Every few years the fish and game commission changed some boundary lines to justify their existence – typical bureaucrats – but most locals ignored them. Either way, problems on the water got solved on the water. Nobody used lawyers, and nobody went crying to the Coast Guard about a boundary dispute.

“Who do you think it is?” asked Brian.

“Maybe one of them Bailey Island hippies, fishing to support his drug habit.”

“Or some Boothbay fuckhead.” He finished his coffee and lit a cigarette. “What should I do?”

“Sledge hammer his traps.”

“I’m not ready to start a harbor war.” Brian didn’t have a sledge hammer on the boat, just an aluminum baseball bat.

“That’s nothing anymore,” said Dave. “Some guys will shoot at you. Or sink your boat at night.”

“I could steal his best lobsters.”

“Not enough. Those Boothbay guys poach our fishing grounds all the time. They need a stronger message.”

“You’re right. Fuck it.”

“There you go.”

“Back to work before this storm gets worse.”

After busting up a handful of his neighbor’s traps – the old wooden kind – with his bat, Brian started pulling in his own pots. They were coming up full of dark green, semi-hard shelled lobster, the valuable ones. In a few days they’d soften and turn bright red. He’d found their hiding place, maybe a floor of rocks covered by seaweed. He threw them in the fish hold, removed the old bait bag from the trap, and replaced it with a new one. Then he drove to the next buoy and repeated the process: pull, empty, reset. They’d been soaking for three days and were coming up full. A flock of seagulls trailed the boat, diving for spilled bait. He could make some serious money today, even in bad weather.

By mid-afternoon the sleet had changed to snow – large, wet flakes that stuck to his beard. He’d moved over to Middle Bay, just on the other side of Mere Point. As he hauled in the last few traps, his body ached and his clothes were drenched. When a large wave slammed against the boat and knocked him down, he tried to get back up but something tugged on his leg. A rope had coiled tightly around his boot and was dragging him to the stern. It’d happened so fast, like a sucker punch. The rope – attached to

hundreds of pounds of traps moored in the water – was trying to pull him out of the boat, while the boat kept churning forward. He couldn't reach the engine key or the radio. He remembered the hunting knife inside his pants pocket and fished it out. He wrapped his legs around the trawl table, which was bolted to the floor, and with his hands now free he started cutting the rope around his boot. Before he could finish the cut, the table's legs broke under the weight of the traps and gear. He dropped the knife and it slid away from him. All the force was on his right ankle – trying to tear his foot from his body – and it stabbed with pain. Since he'd probably drown without his knife, he grabbed one of the table's busted legs and batted it back into his grip. Then he took a deep breath, quit resisting the rope's pull, and let himself get pulled over the side.

The water was so cold, a godless cold that cut through his clothes. The one rubber boot, still attached, filled up with water. He started to sink. He tried to stay calm as he waited to hit the bottom. His feet settled in the soft mud. It was shallow here, maybe thirty feet, but he could barely see through the murk. He bent down, felt the rope around his boot, then started cutting at the frayed part. The cutting was much slower in the water. He knew that he could hold his breath about two minutes, but instead of wondering what would happen if he couldn't finish in time, he just set his mind on the task. He felt the rope getting looser. It took another minute, but finally he managed to sever it. He ripped his boot off and shot up to the surface. He gasped and tried to catch his breath, sucking air into his lungs as fast as his body would allow. Then he tried to get his bearings. Squinting through the snow, he spotted his boat: she was pulling away from him like the devil drove her, heading for a ledge. No other boats were in sight. His shouts for help died off, unanswered.

You have to swim for something, he told himself. Crow Island was maybe five hundred yards away. Swimming against the current, he decided he wouldn't make it. The ledge marker, a large metal buoy between him and the island, made more sense right now.

It felt like hours before he finally reached it. He tried several times to climb on it, but the marker kept swaying and throwing him back in, so he just wrapped his arms around it while his legs remained submerged in the fifty-degree water.

He prayed for the sun. His coat and pants, though waterlogged, still retained some of his body heat. The sun poked out, then quickly retreated behind the clouds. The cold sucked on his bone marrow. Huddled against the wind and too tired to hold it, he pissed himself. It felt warm and relaxing, if only for a minute.

His mind drifted to Henry. The boy was only ten. He remembered the last time they'd fished together, when Henry had caught three big stripers by himself. He was a natural, like his old man, but smarter. He could go to a good college. There was no future in lobstering – the sea was drying up, lobster boats were multiplying – and the work wrecked your body. Henry could be a doctor or professor, but he needed someone to teach him discipline and hard work. Who else would do it? Surely not Linda's boyfriend, that lazy creep who lived off of Brian's alimony and child support.

Afternoon turned to dusk. The last strands of light fell away. He felt dizzy and hot, like he ought to shed some clothes. Hands and feet numb. Hypothermia setting in. He could barely cling to the marker.

Then he noticed a white lobster boat entering the cove, skirting the western edge. Was it too good to be real? He rubbed his eyes and looked again. Still there, creeping closer. A searchlight from its wheelhouse flicked on, the circle of light dancing on the

water. When the light settled on him, he kicked his legs out of the water because his orange pants were the brightest thing he had on. The white boat grew larger. Sweet Jesus, I think he saw me, Brian thought.

The boat slowed to a crawl and the rumble of its motor died down. It slowly drifted past the buoy as a man stood in the stern and waved a white rescue float. He hurled the float in Brian's direction and it landed a few feet away. Brian made a few weak backstrokes and grabbed it. The man reached out his hand, but the sides were too high and Brian couldn't lift his arms. Then the man lowered a long gaff and hooked it under Brian's belt. He felt like a gutted swordfish as he was lifted into the boat.

The man helped him below deck into the small forward cabin. Brian sat on the bench, his body shaking. He grabbed a blanket and draped it around him. He looked around. Old fishing nets and rope littered the floor, next to an empty gas can and some old buoys. Dirty dishes slobbered in the sink. The whole cabin reeked of weed. A bolt-action rifle, looked like a thirty-aught-six, was sticking out of a storage bin.

The man stood over Brian. He had long brown hair and a goatee. Shorter than Brian, maybe five-nine, but thicker. Checkered flannel shirt, overall jeans. Dark lines under his eyes. The scar under his left cheek looked like a sliver of moon.

"How long were you out there?" the man asked.

"I don't know. A couple hours?" Brian's tongue felt like wet cement.

The man rubbed his goatee like he was deep in thought.

"How'd you find me?" Brian asked.

"I saw a boat stranded on the rocks, then I started looking around. I guess you'd be pretty screwed right now if I'd kept going!" The man laughed again.

"I need a doctor. My hands and feet are numb and my fingertips are black."

“Sure. Just sit back and relax. You’ll be fine.”

“Freeport,” Brian said, pointing southeast. “That’s the nearest harbor. Take me there and we can radio ahead for an ambulance.”

“Hey, I know something that would help you.” The man reached into his pocket and pulled out a joint.

What the fuck was going on? Was he dreaming all of this? He wanted to confront the man and ask him why he was fishing, here inside Harpswell territory. Then again, this man had just rescued him, and Brian didn’t have the energy to pick a fight. He looked at the joint.

“Why not,” he said.

“There you go.”

Brian pulled on the joint, but he inhaled too much smoke and started coughing.

“That’s it, get your money’s worth!”

Soon, Brian started to feel better. More relaxed. He smiled at the man and said, “By the way, I’m Brian.”

They shook hands, but the man didn’t offer his name.

“You’re from Harpswell, right?” the man asked.

“Yah. What about you?”

“Boothbay, but I move around a lot. You feeling better?”

Brian nodded and passed the joint back to him.

“That’s all you needed,” said the man. “Something to take the edge off. I ought to get back behind the wheel now. Just holler if you need something.” He climbed the steps to the deck.

Brian looked out the small window. The boat was turning around and heading out of the bay. They were going toward the city lights of Freeport and Portland. He looked up at the clearing sky and saw the North Star: Polaris, the sailor's compass. It would guide them home.

His head felt foggy from the joint. He closed his eyes and thought about Ellie and Henry again. He tried to picture all three of them together in his living room with a nice fire burning in the fireplace. He wondered if the doctors would have to cut off any of his fingertips – he'd heard about that happening with cases of severe frostbite – but it didn't matter, as long as he saw his wife and son again. He decided, right then and there, that they would move to Florida, all three of them. To hell with Linda, and the family court judge, for that matter. They couldn't stop him from pursuing a better life for his family. He was done with this shit. Fishing in Florida meant more money and less work. Trying to catch lobster, in weather like this, just wasn't worth it anymore.

When he opened his eyes again, he looked outside. They appeared to be moving farther away from the city lights.

"Where are we?" Brian yelled up to the deck. "I thought we were going to Freeport?"

"Shortcut," the man yelled back.

Brian stood up. He felt weak, but he pulled himself up to the deck. He made his way into the cockpit, beside the man, and looked around. It was nearly pitch dark now, but he recognized where they were.

"This is Maquoit Bay," Brian said. "It's not a shortcut, it doesn't open into anything else."

The man looked straight ahead. “I wasted a lot of time picking you up, and I need to get some more work done. I’m going to pull my traps here, so I don’t have to come back after dropping you off.”

“I’m about to go into shock,” Brian pleaded. His voice was weak. “I need a doctor.”

“Shock?” The man chuckled. “No, you sound pretty together to me. This won’t take long, I promise.”

“Isn’t it too dark to work?”

“Not a problem. I’ve got lights.” He flipped a switch and a beam of light issued from the bow, illuminating the black water in front of them.

Brian had a bad feeling. It had just occurred to him that Maquoit Bay was where he’d smashed up someone’s traps earlier in the day.

“You’re from Boothbay, right?” Brian said.

“Yah.”

“Did you know Maquoit Bay is inside Harpswell’s fishing boundary? You’re allowed to fish here.”

“You Sinclairs make me laugh, acting like you own the ocean.”

“How’d you know my last name?”

“Everyone knows the Sinclairs.” The man paused. “I know your Uncle Dave real good. We have some history. How do I put this? He had *relations* with my wife.”

“What does that have to do with me?”

“I probably shouldn’t let that cloud my judgment, but I’m not perfect. That’s a bad deal for you, I guess. By the way, you’re wrong about Maquoit Bay. It’s open water

now. The state changed it over the summer. I'm surprised you didn't know that, I really am."

"What is wrong with you?"

"There's nothing wrong with me. I'm just like you. A fisherman trying to make an honest living." The man pointed to something in the water. "What is that? A body?" He throttled down the engine and steered toward it. Then he went to the side and leaned over. He pulled two large pieces of wood out of the water and held them up to Brian.

"Looks like pieces of a trap. You know anything about this?"

Brian shook his head.

"I sure hope nobody fucked with my traps," the man continued. "That could throw a wrench into things."

Brian left the cockpit and went back downstairs. He felt warm and groggy. He had to do something. He tried to think straight. What about the knife? He checked his pockets. Nothing. He must have dropped it in the water. He looked around the cabin. The rifle. It was still there, sticking out of the storage bin. He walked over and picked it up. It felt heavy in his hands. He raised the bolt handle, pulled it back, and looked in the chamber. Empty. No cartridges or shells. He rummaged through the bin. He searched the whole cabin. No ammunition anywhere.

You're just paranoid, he thought. What would you do with a rifle, anyway? Nobody is going to die. He's just fucking with you, trying to scare you.

He sat back down on the bench and wrapped the blanket around his body. He told himself to calm down, that everything would be fine. He looked back up at the sky, searching for the North Star, but he couldn't find it. The clouds had returned. They were blocking the stars, and it was starting to snow again.

Torque

Once again, Timmy Mulligan was shooting tennis balls into the pond with the ball machine. I watched him from the pro shop window, too tired and hung over to stop him. Stu, my boss, had been running junior team practice. You can't force ten-year olds to practice, I'd tell him. This isn't the Bolletieri Tennis Academy. We should be happy they show up for the matches. Stu had just finished a drill, and when he left the court to piss, Timmy ran over to the ball machine and tilted up the arm. The balls shot over the fence like Roman candles. His friend Scotty Frazier giggled with each new blast. The surface of the pond was now covered, like a horde of frogs, with green balls.

As I watched Timmy, I asked myself why I'd returned home this summer. These were my answer choices: (a) a moment of weakness, (b) a false sense of nostalgia, (c) temporary insanity. I had just finished my freshmen year at a small liberal arts college in Maine, a place my parents had been proud to send me, thinking I'd been spending my nights studying or discussing literature with classmates. There had been a few such evenings, but I'd spent far more time playing drinking games, partying, and stealing burritos from gas stations at three in the morning. Last month, at Kappa Sig's May Day party, I found myself doing keg stands and then riding a Big Wheel around the yard.

Now I was back home in Butler – Butthole, Buttlick – Pennsylvania, a shitty steel mill town north of Pittsburgh where nothing fun happened, unless you found farm shows, bowling, and high school football games exciting. I should have followed my

college friend, Wes, to North Carolina – he’d said he could get me a job handing out fliers on the beach for time-share condos – but I was one of those sorry souls who thought too much of a good time might be a bad thing. I blamed it on my German blood. Either way, I found myself looking after a collection of brats whose moms were lounging poolside and whose dads were golfing with clients.

There was something nostalgic, however, about watching Timmy shoot balls in the pond. He reminded me of me at his age. In third grade, I brought an issue of *Playboy* into class for show-and-tell. My dad had stashed them under the bathroom sink. When Sister Margaret said “Your turn Mark,” my cheeks got hot and my stomach made weird sounds. I stumbled up the aisle, the magazine coiled in my hand. I had intended to display the centerfold and become a legend of St. Luke’s Elementary, but as I walked by her desk, Sister Margaret grabbed my wrist. She had quick reflexes for a fat woman. Then she led me down to the principal’s office.

I was convinced that she’d had been tipped off by an informant, probably Cindy Parker. Cindy, who sat right in front of me, always smelled like shit and wore the same clothes. And she had lice – I could see them jumping around in her hair during class. Cindy hated me because I had spread a rumor that she’d shit her pants in class. Later that year, when Cindy’s house burned down, I felt bad for being a dick.

I’d committed more than a few acts of rebellion in grade school, but I saved my best for the fifth grade spring choral concert. During the final song, a stirring rendition of “America the Beautiful,” I fished a pair of Oakley sunglasses from my pocket and slid them on. Then I lifted my arms skyward like a preacher and rolled my head around in figure-eight motions while grinning shamelessly. Apparently my Stevie Wonder impression had triggered strong reactions from the parents and teachers in the

audience. There were lots of gasps and whispers, even a few hearty laughs from some of the fathers. I heard one mother in the front ask “Whose boy is that?” Then I spotted my own mother, slumped down in her seat, covering her face with her hands.

The teachers in the front row traded glances of shock and horror. Sister Margaret, who had cataracts, was the last one to notice, but when she saw that I was ruining the concert she jumped out of her seat like some demented Christian warrior attacking a clan of heretics. She pulled me off the back row and escorted me down the familiar path to the principal’s office. Halfway there, the Sister stopped me and bent over, so that her eyes met mine. “Remember this,” she said. “One day, God will cut you down.” Her voice was laced with venom and her dark eyes refracted the light.

Therefore, based on my history, I felt empathy for Timmy Mulligan. But Timmy didn’t know when to quit, and his behavior seemed to be driven more by the impulse to destroy than the desire to entertain. If nobody had stopped him, he would have shot every last ball into the pond. Maybe this was my penance for being a difficult child, that I now had to supervise little monsters like this and try to be a role model.

Just when I had made up my mind to put a stop to Timmy’s sideshow, Stu came running out of the bathroom. He unplugged the ball machine and shouted something at Timmy.

Stu’s nickname was “Stork” because he looked like one: blond, skinny, and very tall, like 6’5”. His legs made awkward, mechanical movements, as though he used a remote control to move them. In his prime, Stork had been a world-class player. He had a menacing serve that he could either hit hard and flat or kick out wide, and he backed up his serve with crisp volleys and a big one-handed backhand. He’d dropped out of college, joined the pro tennis circuit, and for the next ten years he played in

tournaments around the world. At one point he was inside the top 200 in the world rankings – he'd won a few smaller tournaments, like the Malaysian Open, and one year he made the quarters of a major tournament, the Australian Open, where he lost to Sampras in four sets – but he told me the pro circuit was a grind. Since he was not a top-tier player he needed to play qualifiers to get into the big tournaments, and sponsors would often drop him without a second thought, so he was always scrambling to find new ones. Stork was also plagued by injuries: after he tore his Achilles tendon his game never recovered. He retired a year later and became head pro here at Butler, a golf club that treated tennis players like poor cousins.

Stork was in his mid-thirties and still a bachelor. He was a strange bird, but I liked him. His father owned a steel company that had been in their family since the Carnegie and Frick days. Stork didn't come from old money, he came from ancient money. But his father, who considered tennis a sport for punks and brats, had disowned and cut him out of the will.

To a slacker like me, Stork had a dream job. He set his own hours, worked outside, and delegated most of the administrative bullshit to his staff. That's what I wanted, a job where I wouldn't have to grow up, yet in the back of my mind I knew I'd probably end up working some boring office job. The kind of job you tolerated but secretly hated. Adults would say things to me like, *You can be whatever you want to be*. But it was just another platitude. What they really meant was, *Soon you'll realize that most of the world is closed off to you and has always been*. Either way, I was content to be spending this summer getting a tan and not working too hard.

“Mark, I need you to retrieve balls from the pond,” Stork said after practice.

“Can't we get someone's dog to do it?” I asked.

“This is a man’s job.”

“Exactly. I’m still a young adult.”

“Just do it.”

“Half the balls are in the middle of the pond, I can’t reach them.”

“Get a fishing net from maintenance. Or find a raft, or swim. Be creative. Look, Schiller’s been up my ass for week about this.”

Schiller was the club’s general manager. A bearded Austrian, he always wore suits and his nose hairs were as long as vines.

“What can he do?” I asked.

“Shut down the tennis program. He’s already cut our budget thirty percent from last year. He can do whatever he wants, as long as he keeps that golf course beautiful. I’ll make you a deal. If you get most of the balls out of the pond, I’ll give you my private lesson with Jane Stutz, okay?”

“Done.”

Jane Stutz was the hottest tennis-playing mom at the club, and she played more often now that her son Billy was on the junior team. Her husband was some oil industry consultant who spent large chunks of time out of the country.

After the maintenance guy gave me a fishing net, I skirted the rim of the pond and fished out all the balls near the edge. Then I removed my shoes and socks and waded knee-deep into the water and snagged as many as I could.

Since the stench of pond water lingered on me, I found a can of Right Guard deodorant spray in Stork’s bag and sprayed it all over. Jane came in a few minutes later. She wore an all-white outfit, a tank top, and a pleated skirt. She had a deep tan from many hours by the pool. I said hello and told her I was filling in for Stu today.

“Lucky for me,” she said with a big smile. I felt guilty, like I was getting away with something. “I remember when you were Billy’s age.” She scanned me and up and down. “You’ve grown into such a handsome young man.”

We made small talk about the weather as we walked onto the court. She unzipped her racquet sleeve and I opened a new can of balls.

“Do you have a girlfriend at college?”

‘Not really.’

“I bet you have more than one. If I were twenty years younger, I’d be all over you.” Her laugh was deep and devilish. I felt myself getting erect. Oh shit. How could I teach a lesson like this?

I went to fetch the ball machine from the other court, which bought me a few minutes, then I erased Jane from my mind and only thought of one thing: Barbara Bush wearing a slingshot bikini. Worked every time, and fast.

“Okay Mrs. Stutz. What would you like to work on today?”

“Call me Jane. Well, I’ve been having trouble with my serve lately.”

“Great. Line up at the service line and show me your typical serve.”

She tossed the ball in the air and thrust her torso at the ball. She was off balance and the ball sailed long.

“You’re athletic, that’s a good start. We just need to work on some mechanics.”

There was a high quotient of bullshit when it came to teaching tennis. “You’re letting the ball drop too low and then lunging at it with your body.”

“Why don’t you show me how you do it?” she said.

I jacked a hard flat serve down the middle that hit halfway up the back fence, followed by a second serve, a big kicker to the ad court. The kick serve was my best.

When I hit it perfectly, it jumped high and wide to my opponent's backhand side and was difficult to return.

"Can you teach me that?" she asked.

"We can try. Line up in your stance again." I stood behind her. Cautiously, I placed my hands on her hips. "Now widen your feet a little and bend the knees." Good Lord, did she just make a purring sound? Then I caught a whiff of her top-shelf perfume and my mind went blank.

I didn't understand my special attraction to older women, though I figured it had something to do with my Aunt Lois, who'd made sexual advances toward me when I was sixteen. Well, she was no longer my aunt by then, since she and my uncle, my dad's brother, had divorced. One day after school, I went over to my cousin Justin's house. They lived in this big old house in downtown Butler, and I often hung out there because my parents were stricter than Lois. On this particular afternoon, while I was alone in Justin's room playing a video game— he'd run down to the convenience store to buy cigarettes — Lois came in. She was wearing a see-through nightie over a black bra and panties. I tried not to stare. She put her hands on me and started rubbing my shoulders.

"Are you winning?" she asked. She smelled like roses and cotton candy.

"No."

"Do you need something to drink?"

"No thanks."

"Okay, I'll be in my bedroom if you need anything."

Part of me wanted to follow her to her bedroom and see what happened — I had not had much luck with girls up to that point — but doing so would have put me in therapy for years, maybe even a psychiatric hospital.

“Earth to Mark, anybody home?” Jane said.

I didn’t know how long I’d been standing there with my hands on her waist.

“Sorry, just went blank for second. What was I saying?”

“You told me to widen my stance and bend my knees.”

“Right, that should help you with your balance and straighten your ball toss.”

As she did this I could see the outline of her ass, like heart-shaped candy, through the thin material of her skirt.

“As you’re tossing the ball, bring your right arm all the way back.” I held her right elbow in place. “Then drop the racquet head back behind you, like you’re scratching your back. Finally, extend up and out, and try to hit the ball at the height of the toss.”

“Complicated!” she said.

“Just keep practicing that motion and your muscles will start to remember it. It gets easier.”

She asked if I would give her another lesson next week.

“What about Stu?” I asked.

“He never teaches me anything. We gossip about people and talk about his dating problems. I’m the one giving the lessons.”

“Sure, next week sounds great.” I tried to make it sound like no big deal.

“By the way, are you going on the Kennywood trip?”

Kennywood was an old amusement park in Pittsburgh. Stu took the tennis kids there every summer.

“I think so.”

“Me too,” she said. “Billy’s going and I agreed to be a chaperone. We’ll have to go on some rides together.”

After Jane left, I went back inside and made some phone calls. Stork was in his back office, the door open a crack. He and Carol Mulligan, Timmy's mother, were talking in low, hushed voices. Carol served on the country club's board of directors. (The board had hired Stork, and they could also fire him.) Stork was a good listener and she was always bending his ear about something. She also flirted aggressively with him, I'd noticed. Carol had a confidence about her, like she was clearly used to getting her way.

I walked past his office and glanced through the opening in the door. Stork was seated in his chair. Carol stood behind him, rubbing his shoulders. Her platinum-bleached hair was tied back into a tight bun, and the top few buttons of her pink shirt were undone.

"Carol, this is not happening again. It was a mistake. You're married, and you're also my boss."

"That's why you should let it happen again."

"Is that a threat?"

"Why are you always so serious? I'm only kidding, you should know me by now. I have to go, but we'll talk more about this later."

I pretended to rearrange the new racquets on the wall. Carol ignored me as she left. I knocked on Stork's office door.

"Come in."

"I got most of the pond balls out, and I lined up enough kids for tomorrow's match."

"Good. Can you stick around and put out some of the new Prince apparel we just got in? And string Mr. Martin's racquet. I have to take off, I have a date tonight in Pittsburgh."

“Who’s the lucky guy?”

“Funny.”

A few minutes after Stork left, George Yost popped in. George was a retired dentist who spent his leisure time reading economic theory.

“George, what’s new? Play any golf today?”

“Golf is no longer a sport, it’s a leisure activity. Everybody plays with tungsten steel drivers and oversized irons. There’s no more challenge, no more test of skill.”

“How would you fix it?”

“Make people play with old equipment. Woods made out of wood. Blade irons. Make things like touch, feel, and hand-eye coordination matter again.”

George had a skeptic’s view of the world. He felt that most people, if they knew they could get away with it, would lie or cheat to gain or acquire something important or valuable. He watched golf tournaments on television, and if he saw a rule violation he’d call the network and report the infraction. He called his actions ‘The Invisible Hand of Sportsmanship.’ During the final round of the PGA Championship one year, Phil Mickelson removed a piece of bark from his ball, causing it to roll a half-rotation. George called it in. Mickelson received a two-stroke penalty and lost the tournament in a playoff.

“Nobody plays by the rules anymore,” he said. “Ethics are extinct.”

“George, what do you think I should do with my life?”

“Be a shepherd.”

I wondered if that was some kind of metaphor.

“Hey, do you know anything about Jane Stutz?” I asked. “What is she like? What is she into?”

“You mean, is she into college-aged tennis assistants?” he said. “I don’t know her well, but she seems nice. Her husband’s a prick, but he’s out of the country most of the time.”

“What about Carol Mulligan?”

“You got a crush on her, too?”

“No. She’s always coming by to talk to Stu.”

“You don’t want to get on her bad side.”

The Kennywood-bound charter bus pulled into the parking lot and we all climbed in. Our whole staff and most of the kids were going, along with a few mothers. I hadn’t seen Jane all week but I’d been dreaming about having sex with her in various places: my bedroom, the pro shop couch, the big sand trap beside the ninth green. Jane sat in the front of the bus with the other chaperones. I was near the back with the high school kids.

Compared to the junior high bus trip I took to Kennywood – when Danny Rockenstein, a crazy kid who accepted any dare, drank from his own spittoon and hurled out the half-window, while Kelly Bowser gave hand jobs for ten bucks in the back seat – this trip was quiet and uneventful. We drove across the Fort Pitt Bridge, which spanned the confluence of Pittsburgh’s three rivers, then through the Liberty Tunnel. Kennywood was perched on a plateau that overlooked the Ohio River. We unloaded the bus and entered the park, the smaller kids trying to keep up with the bigger ones. I wanted to hang out with Jane, but she was embedded within a pack of moms.

I walked around with the high school kids for an hour. When I got bored, I separated from the herd and wandered the park on my own. I wasted an hour in the arcade playing pinball, then I took a ride on the Thunderbolt, the oldest coaster in the

park but still fast enough to give you a few thrills. It started off inside this creepy wooden tunnel, then it opened up and began the slow incline to the ride's apex, and you could see across the Monongahela River to downtown Pittsburgh. The amazing view lulled you into thinking it was just a scenic ride. But before you knew, it you were doing Mach-3 straight down to the bowels of the earth.

After the Thunderbolt, I tested my skills at the shooting gallery. I'd shot a gun only a few times in my life, yet somehow I was knocking over bottles and ducks and hitting the center of targets. Finally, the game attendant asked what kind of prize "the lady" wanted. I looked over my shoulder. Jane began to clap.

"How long have you been there?" I asked.

"Long enough. Is there anything you can't do, Mark?"

"Cook."

"Pick a prize," the attendant said.

Jane pointed to a pink panther.

"You like it?" she asked me.

"A cougar like you."

"Oh, that's rich."

"Let's get some lunch," I said.

We browsed the food stands, and I settled on cheese fries and a funnel cake. I could never leave an amusement park or county fair without getting a funnel cake. As we ate, she told me that she had worked at Kennywood one summer in college, and how she and her boyfriend used to fool around in an old maintenance shed at the far end of the park. She talked about her current life – how much she enjoyed being a mother, more

than she'd ever expected, but how hard marriage was sometimes. She said her husband treated her badly and didn't respect her.

"Do you love him?" I asked.

"It's complicated."

"I think he's a lucky guy," I said.

She squeezed my hand and kissed my cheek. "Let's go on that haunted train ride. It's dark the whole way through and nobody can see us."

There was no line and we jumped right into a train car, a two-seater. After the first turn, it got pitch black. I was nervous and wondering if I should make a move when she whispered in my ear, "Are you scared yet?" and chills ran down my back. I kissed her. She put her hand on my knee, ran it up my jeans, and squeezed me. I wondered how far we could go in five minutes. Then, some creepy dude in a hockey mask popped up beside us. He revved his fake chainsaw and screamed. He must have been waiting for the right time to jump out. He was probably some pervert who took this job so he could watch lovers and couples fool around. Anyway, that killed the mood. Jane sat up straight and tried to catch her breath. I was still aroused, so once again I conjured up "Slingshot Barbara" in my head. At the ride's end, we got out of the car. A line had formed and we noticed Stork standing in line with Timmy Mulligan.

Stork smiled as I passed. "See you on the bus, player!" he said. He tried to high-five me, but I left him hanging.

Jane wanted to ride a roller coaster before we left, and that was fine with me because I didn't want to talk about what had just happened, if we'd started something or not. I went back to the Thunderbolt, but this time it felt different. As our car crept up the slow incline and I looked out at the city, it dawned on me that the reason I came to

Kennywood was to share an old, familiar place with someone new and interesting, a woman who made me feel like a boy and a man at the same time. We rounded the summit and the coaster shot downhill and then zoomed sideways through a series of S-curves, and the torque threw her body against mine. Sometimes, when life took a crazy, unexpected turn, you just had to lean into it.

At five o'clock we walked back to the bus and waited for the rest of the group to board. Stork and Timmy were the last ones to get on. Timmy was crying and Stork looked angry. I felt badly for Timmy that he had such a crazy mother.

I had the next few days off from work. Mainly I sat around the house and thought about the haunted train ride with Jane. When I returned to the pro shop, Stork was back in his office, putting his things into boxes.

“What are you doing?” I said.

“Cleaning out my desk. They suspended me without pay.”

“Who?”

“Management. Schiller.”

“Why?”

“They accused me of inappropriate contact with a minor. They're doing an investigation. I need to get a lawyer.”

“Are you kidding?”

“You think you know people, but I guess you never really do.” Before he took them off the wall, he stared at some old photos of his days on the pro tour. “It's Carol Mulligan. She's a fucking monster. She's getting back at me because I didn't sleep with her, but I had no idea she'd go this far.”

I was still trying to decipher this information.

“I’m being set up,” he continued. “I took Timmy on that haunted train ride because he was afraid of roller coasters, and the other kids were making fun of him. But the train ride scared him, too, and when he started crying again, I put my hand on his shoulder and hugged him a little and told him that everything was okay. That’s it, that’s all I did.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I can’t stay. Even after they do the investigation and clear my name, the damage is done. My reputation here is shot.” He paused. “I need you to take over and run things for a while.”

“You can’t just sit back and let them do this.”

“Don’t get involved, Mark.”

I ran junior team practices the rest of the summer. Each time I saw Timmy, I wanted to sit him down and interrogate him.

One day, during a snack break, I noticed that Timmy and Scotty were standing outside the bathroom door, laughing and high-fiving each other. As I got closer I heard someone inside the bathroom, pounding on the door and yelling “Let me out!”

“What’s going on here?” I asked Timmy.

“It’s me, Julie!” said the muffled voice inside the door. “I can’t get out.” Julie was one of the older girls in the program.

“Timmy, did you lock her in?”

“How could we?” he said. “It locks from the inside.”

I knocked on the door. “Julie, you need to unlock it on your side.”

“It’s not the lock,” she said. “They did something to jam up the door. I heard them.”

Timmy was holding something in his right hand. “What’s in your hand?” I asked.

“Nothing.”

I pried it open, and a bunch of pennies fell out. I reexamined the door. There were pennies wedged in the frame, all the way around. “Now you’ve done it,” I said.

After the maintenance guys got Julie out – they had to extract the pennies from the frame with a coat hanger – I pulled Timmy into the pro shop and shut the door.

“You need a time out. You’re staying here until the end of practice.”

“You can’t tell me what to do. You’re not the head pro.”

“I am now. Stu is gone. Now I’m in charge.”

“Whatever.”

“Do you know why Stu is gone?” I asked.

“He quit.”

“No, he didn’t quit, he got fired.” I paused. “Timmy, what happened at Kennywood?”

“What do you mean?”

“What happened with Stu? Did you go on some rides with him?”

He looked down. “I’m not allowed to talk about it.”

“Did you have fun at Kennywood?”

“Yes.”

“So nothing bad happened with Stu, right?”

“No.” He scratched his head. “I mean, yes. I can’t talk about it.”

Just then, Carol walked in. “There you are,” she said to Timmy. “Did he get in trouble again?” she asked me.

“He trapped a girl in the bathroom by jamming pennies in the doorframe.”

“He’s bad sometimes.”

“That’s an understatement.”

“C’mon, Timmy,” she said. “Let’s go to the pool.”

“I asked him about Kennywood,” I said.

“I beg your pardon?”

“He said he had fun at Kennywood. He said nothing bad happened.”

“Are you accusing my son of lying?””

“Somebody’s lying. Maybe both of you are.”

“Stay out of it. You don’t know the facts. Besides, it’s a legal issue now, and I can’t talk about it.”

“I’ve seen you and Stu in private. Maybe he didn’t play along, so you fucked him over. It’s called sexual harassment.”

“Timmy,” she said, “go outside for a minute. I need to speak to Mark in private.” She waited for him to leave, then she continued. “You’d better be careful. You’re on dangerous ground. You don’t know Stu. He’s a sick person. He needs help, and he shouldn’t be around kids.”

“You’re the sick one. You’re going to ruin his life, just because he rejected you.”

“I told you, stay out of it. Don’t talk to Timmy about this, or anyone else. I’ll come after you. You’ve seen what I’m capable of.”

I didn't tell anyone about my conversation with Carol, I just kept my head down and my mouth shut. When I finally saw Jane again, she seemed more serious and reserved.

"It's a shame about Stu," she said. "What's going to happen to him?"

"They suspended him until their investigation is complete."

"So you're running things now?"

"Pretty much. The whole staff is pitching in, working more. So how are you? What happened to our weekly lessons?"

"I'm too busy. Jimmy has day camp, and my husband is back from South America."

"When can we start back up?"

"I don't think I can, Mark. I really like you, and that's the problem. I don't want to be involved in the second big scandal of the summer. People talk around here, and I have my son to think about. I had a wonderful time at Kennywood. You made me feel twenty years younger. But you're just a kid, and you're leaving in a month to go back to school."

"I'm not just a kid, you know that."

"I can't get involved. You'll find a nice college girl."

"I need to see you again."

She kissed me on the cheek. "Goodbye, Mark."

Labor Day, the final day of the tennis season, was a rainout. There was supposed to be an outdoor party for the kids, but I had to cancel it. I spent the day cleaning out the pro

shop. As I was getting ready to lock up, I walked George Yost. He had on a raincoat, khakis, and golf shoes.

“George, what’s new?”

“I wanted to play a few holes, but this rain won’t quit. So, when are you heading back to school?”

“A few days.”

“Are you coming back next summer?”

“I don’t think so. This job was not what I expected.”

“Life never is. Have you heard anything about Stu?”

“He’s got some tennis pro friends down in Florida, so I think he’s moving down there to find a job.” I paused. “What do you think really happened?”

“I’m not sure we’ll ever know. Whether it was Carol, Timmy, or Stu, somebody lied to get something they wanted.”

“It’s Carol,” I said. “I think Stu ended their affair, and that pissed her off. I think she told Timmy what to say and do, and he played along.”

“There’s a lesson to be learned from this.”

“What?”

“Every act has a consequence. Your actions affect others in ways you can’t always see or predict.”

“George, you’re like an oracle.”

“I’ve been called worse.”

As I drove back to Maine, I was happy to be leaving home. Things hadn’t gone the way I had hoped. I was angry that the “Stork scandal” had ruined my chances with Jane. But

maybe George was right, maybe I had learned lessons that would prove valuable to me later on. I could not say where my life would take me, but it didn't matter because I felt ready for anything.

The Life Draining Out

Mike Milanovich believed most parents today wanted to be friends rather than teachers. They cared more about being liked by their kids than being respected by them. They used logic and timeouts, not the paddle or the belt, and this had spawned a generation of soft, spoiled, bratty children. The only way to treat bad behavior was to correct it. He'd been tough on his two boys, Jason and Eric, and occasionally they'd challenged him, but for the most part they'd obeyed his rules. They knew the rules and structure and discipline would help turn them into men. And they feared the consequences.

Jason, his youngest, was eighteen and wanted to play college football. Mike would tell him: if you want to play in college, and the pros, it requires total commitment and effort. Lately Jason was beginning to see that all the hard work – the weight lifting, the drills, the nutrition – would soon pay off. He'd just returned from a recruiting trip to West Virginia, where the upperclassmen threw a big party for the new prospects. The past few days, Jason had been wearing a big-ass grin and working out twice as hard. Mike figured seeing all those hot young coeds helped to change his attitude.

The start of Jason's senior season was two weeks away. He was projected to be an all-state linebacker, and all the recruiting magazines had listed him in their Top 150 high school players nationwide. Penn State, Pitt, and West Virginia were going after him hard. Even Ohio State and Notre Dame had shown interest. Since mid-July, he'd been working out twice a day: lifting weights at Gold's Gym in the morning, then drills in the back yard after Mike got home from work. Today, Mike had Jason working on tackling

and agility. After hitting the first tackling sled, Jason would backpedal, shuffle diagonally through the cones, then run up and hit the second sled. He would repeat those steps ten times, but about halfway through he stopped.

“You want a break?” Mike asked. Sweat dripped from Jason’s face as he bent over like he had to puke. It was hot and muggy, a typical August day in western Pennsylvania.

“Yes sir, just a short one.”

“Tough shit. You don’t get breaks in college. You can’t take plays off. Get back in your stance and go again.”

Jason – his mother’s baby – had always been a little soft, so Mike needed to ride him harder than Eric, his oldest. Jason had all the physical gifts – he was bigger, stronger, and faster than Eric – but Eric would have run through a brick wall if Mike had told him to. Eric had been a fucking Tasmanian devil on the football field. In one game, he ripped the helmet off a 300-pound lineman who had speared him after the whistle.

Because of his size, Eric received no Division One scholarship offers. He could have walked on somewhere, or played for a small college. Instead, he joined the army. Mike had tried to talk him out of it, but Eric said he wanted to do something important. He was an Army Ranger. Right now he was somewhere in Afghanistan, the center of Hell: bodies in the streets, buildings on fire, kids shooting rockets at their tanks and Humvees, but Mike kept his mouth shut. You couldn’t question the war in a town like Butler, where everyone had a friend or relative over there.

After his drills Jason went upstairs and washed up for dinner. Mike went to the kitchen, where he found Linda

“Please take it easy on him,” she said, chopping lettuce.

“What do you mean?”

“It’s ninety-five out there. Let him enjoy his summer and have fun with his friends.”

“His friends won’t play college football. Most of them won’t even go to college.”

“You want Jason to turn out like Eric?”

“Eric turned out fine.”

“You think so? He won’t even talk to you. Did you know he’s been home for a week?”

“Eric’s here, in Butler?”

“He’s been staying with his girlfriend.”

Mike paused. “He just needs time to decompress. He’ll come around.”

Friday night, Butler Memorial Stadium. The lights were on, the seats filling up for the home opener against Central Catholic, last year’s Pittsburgh City League champs. The whole town was here: old-timers, kids, parents, rednecks from Slate Lick and East Butler, high school girls, all dolled up and looking around for their friends. Mike heard some college scouts were here to check out Central’s all-state quarterback, but he knew they’d be evaluating Jason as well.

Like most good high school players, Jason played on both sides of the ball. He was a good running back but even better at outside linebacker. He was strong enough to plug the holes and stop the run but also quick enough to defend the pass. He had the uncanny ability – you could not teach it – to sniff out a pass, glide to the receiver, and break up the play.

The crowd roared when Butler took the field. Mike was all jacked up: he wanted to put on the pads again and hit some people. Thirty years ago, Mike had run around this same field, playing free safety and quarterback. Mike still held the Butler High School records for passing yards and touchdowns. His coach had been an offensive-minded guy who ran the West Coast offense before anybody knew how to defend against it. Mike used to sling the ball all over the field: screens, slants, skinny posts, long bombs. Western Pennsylvania had always been a hotbed for quarterbacks. He'd played against guys like Dan Marino and Jim Kelly, and during his junior year, he had more touchdowns and passing yards than either of them. The next year, some big-ass defensive end, who took offense to being called a pussy, picked him up and drove his right shoulder into the ground, breaking the clavicle and damaging the rotator cuff. Mike had no arm strength after that and his dreams of playing college football died. He drank and partied for a few years, but he landed on his feet and got a good job at the Armco Steel Mill.

The next morning, Mike woke Jason at eight o'clock and fixed their breakfast: oatmeal, egg whites, and a protein shake. Jason had always had thick, strong legs – a solid base – and his upper body was finally starting to catch up. Last spring Mike had pumped him with some of that Decca that all the pros used. He gained ten pounds of muscle in a month. Now he was 6'1" and weighed 205 with low body fat. Mike felt strange about feeding his son steroids, but you had to take every competitive advantage, and Jason sure as hell wasn't the only guy using them.

After breakfast they watched the video of last night's game. Butler had won by six points and Jason had played a decent game – he ran for a hundred yards – but he

missed a few key tackles. Sometimes he got lazy on defense, which pissed Mike off more than anything else. Mike paused the film, stood up, and pointed at the television screen.

“Okay, the good news first,” he said. “That’s a perfect run. Instead of bouncing it outside, you showed patience, stayed behind the left guard and waited for the hole to open up. Then you accelerated and, boom, you gained twenty yards just like that. That’s your game, running downhill, north and south. It took both safeties to bring you down. You don’t need to bounce it outside unless they’re stuffing the middle.”

Jason nodded, then returned to his phone to see which girl was texting him now. Mike swiped the phone and hurled it against the wall. It broke into pieces.

“What the hell, dad? Take it easy.”

“This is your most important class. Do you understand me?”

“Yes.”

Mike fast forwarded to the fourth quarter when Central drove the ball eighty yards and scored a touchdown to make it close. “Look, right there, you’re out of position. You’re supposed to be spying the quarterback, but you followed the tight end and turned your back, and looked what happened, he tucked the ball and ran down the sideline thirty yards. That’s basic shit, son. What was the problem, were you tired?”

“Dad, as long as I don’t get injured, I’ll get a scholarship somewhere good. I’m not going to bust my ass across the field during the first game of the year.”

“I’m not sure who told you that bullshit, but you better lose that attitude. Do you want to work beside me in the mill?”

“We were up two touchdowns at the time. I’m supposed to play off the line of scrimmage.”

“So you thought the game was over and you were taking it easy? Listen hard. The game is never over until the clock hits zero.”

The cold, raw wind stung Mike’s face as he crossed the tracks and unhitched a disabled rail car. It felt more like December than October. He supervised the rail yard of the Armco Steel Plant. Logistics Engineer was his fancy title. He monitored the train traffic going into and out of the yard to make sure there were no bottlenecks or collisions. The trains delivered carloads of coal from West Virginia and iron ore from Minnesota.

Sometimes Mike got bored out here but it beat working inside. For fifteen years he’d worked at the base of the blast furnace, where the molten steel poured out into the pig troughs, and then he’d have to scrape the slag residue that formed on the top of the hot liquid steel like the head of a draught beer. Working inside, he had to wear a welder’s mask and a shiny silver suit to prevent getting burned, but it was so fucking hot he always felt like he was on fire anyway.

The plant had briefly shut down in the nineties, but a Japanese company bought it and reopened it. They hired half the workers back but they kept the union out. Mike felt lucky to have been recalled. He knew many guys who never were. He could find most of them at the Beacon Hotel, drinking their days away. It was a shame, but Mike’s sympathy had limits. If they wanted to piss away their lives, fine, but it wasn’t his problem. He’d wasted enough hours of his life at the bar already. When Eric and Jason were babies, with all the commotion in the house and Linda always bitching about something, he’d go to the bar after his shift. Happy hours would turn into evenings, and he’d come home later and later. After the night of his DUI – the one and only time he hit

Linda – he knew he had to slow down. He did the AA thing, went through the twelve steps, and apologized to his friends and family for all the crazy shit he did.

A few of Mike's work buddies wanted to hear all about Jason. They asked Mike to meet them at the Beacon after their shift. He figured one beer wouldn't hurt anything. He allowed himself an occasional drink just to remind himself that he could control it. Driving across the Hot Metal Bridge, he looked up at St. Vladimir's Church – where he and his kids were baptized – perched on top of Institute Hill, its gold onion dome glimmering in the fading sun. He cut through the North Side, his old neighborhood, past the Elks Lodge and the Sons of Italy Club where his father had done most of his drinking.

Outside the Beacon, a pregnant woman with a neck tattoo and a nose ring smoked a cigarette. This town was crawling with fuck-ups, he thought. When the good jobs disappeared, the good people – God-fearing, hard-working, responsible people – moved away, replaced by deadbeats. For a few years, Butler had been the heroin capital of Pennsylvania. The local Veterans Hospital's drug rehab program brought in addicts from Philly or Pittsburgh, and after they finished the program, or dropped out, many of them stuck around. Everyone turned a blind eye to it, until needles started turning up in the high school bathrooms and a group of teenagers died from overdosing. But it was too late. Now the town was infested with animals who had nothing interesting to say, nothing to contribute, nothing to lose.

Mike found his friends and grabbed a stool. He noticed Frank Zawrotuk sitting nearby. Frank wore an Adidas track jacket, no undershirt, chest hair and gold chain sticking out. His thin, black goatee looked like it was painted on. Mike wondered if he

still played in that Bon Jovi cover band. In high school they used to call him Frankie Tough Nuts.

Mike could not avoid him. “Hey Frank,” he said. “How you been?”

Frank gave a quick nod and kept drinking. Mike ordered an Iron City and looked around the bar. Across the room a young man with a buzz cut downed a double-shot of something. His left arm was missing and the left side of his face looked caved in. Mike figured it was from the war, maybe a roadside bomb or IED.

“Y’uns see the game Friday?” Mike asked the guys from work.

“Jason looked good,” Big Tony said. “That quarterback Schultz was playing like a scared rabbit.”

Frank chimed in, “Schultz sucks. They need to bench him.”

“It’s the coaching,” Mike said. “They’re trying to throw all these deep passes the kid can’t make. They need to simplify the game plane and just run Jason behind that big right tackle.”

Frank snorted. “Maybe you should be coaching, Mike, since you know everything about football.”

“Sure Frank. Have another drink so you don’t get the shakes.”

“I bet you’re real proud of Jason. He looks big this year. He’s gained what, like twenty pounds? What’s his secret, is he juicing?”

“Good genes.”

“He’s still a pussy.”

“And you’re a fucking deadbeat who spends his government check to pay his bar tab.”

“You know your problem, Mike? You’ve always thought you’re better than all of us. You forget that I’ve known you my whole life, even back when you were the worst drunk in Butler.”

“Now that crown is yours.”

“Wife beater,” Frank said.

Mike stood and walked over to him. “Say that again and see what happens.”

“Hey, settle down or take it outside,” the bartender said.

Before he lost his shit and kicked Frank’s ass for the third time in his life, Mike finished his beer and stepped outside into the fading light. The cold air felt good on his face. He wasn’t ready to go home – he was too keyed up – so he walked down the street a few blocks, ducked into Larry’s Pub, and ordered another beer. As he waited for his drink, he noticed his son, Eric, coming out of the bathroom. Mike yelled his name. Eric hesitated, then walked over. He still looked the same. Short and wiry, like his old man. Black, short-cropped hair, high forehead, dark brown eyes.

“How long you been home?” Mike asked.

“About a week.” They shook hands.

“Why haven’t you come by the house? Your mother’s worried sick.”

“I did. You were at work.”

“Oh, so you don’t want to see me, is that it?”

Eric said nothing and took a long pull on his beer.

An older man sat beside Eric and Mike. “You a soldier?” the older man asked, slurring his words.

“Yes sir,” Eric said. “Army Ranger.”

“Thank you for your service. Bartender, a round of shots for my friends.”

The bartender poured three tequila shots and set them down. Mike buried his first. The old man talked about his Vietnam days for a few minutes, then staggered off to the bathroom.

“I saw the game Friday night,” Eric said. “Jason looks good.”

“Penn State and West Virginia are going after him pretty hard.”

“Looks like you’ll finally get your wish, a son playing big-time college football.”

“When do you go back?”

“Not for a while.”

“You working anywhere?”

“I’m looking around.”

“Why don’t you come by for dinner Sunday night? Jason wants to see you.”

“I’ll think about.”

Eric put a five on the table and patted Mike on the shoulder. As he walked out he said, “Dad, take it easy on Jason. He’s still a kid.”

Mike wondered what had happened to him in Afghanistan – maybe he cracked or something – because that wasn’t the Eric he knew.

Mike glanced up the television. Some college football game was on. He thought about how good it would feel to watch Jason playing in a huge stadium, fifty thousand fans erupting after he made a vicious tackle. He even allowed himself to think about Jason playing in Heinz Field, where the Steelers played.

Jason would make him proud. He was a good kid. He’d take care of his parents, move them into a nice big house, maybe even buy them a condo in Florida. Mike ordered one more shot and chased it with his beer.

Linda stood over the bed. “Where in the hell were you last night? You smell like a goddamn brewery.”

He’d blacked out. He had no idea how he got home. The only thing he remembered was seeing Eric. “I met a few guys after work for a drink. Then I ran into Eric, and we had a few more.”

“And that’s it? Mike, you came home at one in the morning.”

“Can we talk about it later? I’m late for work.” He shielded his eyes from the light pouring through the window.

“I don’t even want to know what happened. Just don’t do it again.”

Day after Thanksgiving. Last game of the year, against Butler’s big rival: North Allegheny. Mike and Linda sat on the visitor’s side with a large group of Butler fans who’d made the trip. Butler needed a win to make the playoffs. Jason was having his best season ever. Led the league in sacks and tackles. Third in rushing yards. The *Post-Gazette* named him to its all-state team. He had narrowed his college choices down to two: Ohio State and Notre Dame.

On the play where Jason went down, the North Allegheny quarterback had been scrambling around the pocket. Jason was not even involved in the play. He was back in pass coverage, guarding their tight end. Out of the corner of his eye, Mike had seen his son collapse. No contact with anyone else. He just dropped.

Five minutes later, he still had not moved. The trainers were crouched around him. Coaches and players stood quietly on the field. Mike tried to reassure Linda. He told her it was just exhaustion or a cramp, or maybe Jason was a little woozy from the previous play where he made a big tackle. But Mike had a bad feeling about it.

They descended the bleachers and walked quickly along the track that circled the field, past the cheerleaders and the band. They waited at the edge of the fence, near the ambulance. It took several more minutes for them to strap Jason onto the stretcher and load him in the ambulance. Mike approached a paramedic and grabbed him by the shoulder.

“I’m the boy’s father,” he said. “What happened? Is he okay?”

“We’re still trying to revive him.” The paramedic gave Mike directions to Pittsburgh Presbyterian, the hospital where Jason was going.

They ran to their car. Mike put on his four-ways and sped along the interstate towards the city. They parked and ran through the doors to the Emergency Care wing. A nurse greeted them in the waiting area.

“Mr. and Mrs. Milanovich?”

“Yes.”

“They took Jason upstairs,” the nurse said. “They had to do emergency surgery.”

“What kind?” Mike asked.

“Vascular. His heart stopped. We’ll give you an update as soon as possible.”

Mike felt inebriated. He kept looking at his watch but couldn’t make out the time. He just kept watching the second hand go around.

While Linda went to the bathroom, Mike stayed in the waiting area. Sitting across from him was a man with a broken nose. The man held a blood-soaked towel under his nose and had black marks under his eyes. Amazing how many ways we can hurt each other, and our ourselves, Mike thought. At the registration counter, a young mother – she could not have been more than twenty – struggled to control two toddlers, a boy and a girl. She looked tired and her winter jacket had rips and holes. Mike wondered if she

had any health insurance. Was she a single parent? Did the father abandon these kids, like his own father had walked out on his family? He wondered if she'd expected her life to turn out like this. He wondered if any of us could ever predict the shape of our lives.

Finally, an Indian doctor came out of the operating room. He looked young for a doctor. He wore eyeglasses and had thick, dark hair. "I'm afraid Jason had a massive heart attack on the field. We did everything we could, but it was just too late."

Mike's head buzzed, like a dim siren from the Underworld. He felt the life draining out of him.

"It's hard to tell what happened," the doctor said. "He had no history of heart problems, though it looks like he had an enlarged heart with an irregular beat. That, combined with severe trauma or physical contact during the game, may have had something to do with it."

"Is this some kind of sick joke?" Mike asked.

"Sir, I'm very sorry," said the doctor. "There's one more thing. We can't confirm this without an autopsy, which would not be done without your approval, but the blood tests indicate that Jason had some chemicals in his bloodstream. Were you aware of any drugs that Jason may have been taking?"

"Your tests are wrong. My son doesn't take drugs. He was healthy as an ox."

On the long drive home, neither one of them said anything. Linda just looked out the window at the half moon. Each time they passed a bar or tavern, he felt the impulse to drink until his body went numb, until he forgot everything. As they crossed the Ohio River Bridge, Mike wondered if he was going fast enough – if he swerved hard to the right – to clear the guardrail.

Jason was going to make them proud. He was going to take care of them. That was all gone now.

Finally, Linda turned to him. "Pull over," she said.

Mike obeyed. He turned off the car.

She pointed at him and screamed, "You did this! You killed my son!" She balled up her hands and started punching him in the chest.

Mike unbuckled his seat belt and reached over to hug her. At first she resisted, but then her body just went limp, and he could feel her hot tears on his neck.

Molt

I once found the molted skin of a black snake in the shrubs edging my driveway. The snake must have lived in the woods behind my house. A few months earlier, while mowing, I had discovered a dead rat. The rat's carcass was infested with maggots, crawling playfully through the eye sockets.

Why is it that some creatures molt, but not others? I have heard that lobsters shed their shells and grow new ones several times throughout their long life.

The word molt is derived from the Latin root, *mature*, to change. Yet it's only one letter away from "melt." And the adjective "molten" means melted, or something made liquid by heat.

I grew up less than a mile from a steel mill. My uncle had worked there. To make steel, you throw coke, limestone, and iron ore into a blast furnace, then cook those raw materials at 2500 degrees Fahrenheit until they melt into a thick tawny liquid which gets deposited into troughs. When the liquid cools and hardens, it becomes cast iron. Add nickel and a few other alloys to reduce the impurities and, presto, you've made steel.

The other day, Oprah interviewed a woman named Connie who had just undergone a face transplant. Connie's husband had shot her in the face from close range, just a few feet away, obliterating her nose, cheekbones, and jaw. Her face had caved in. Imploded. The doctors replaced her old face with a new one, taken from a woman who had died only minutes earlier. The surgery took twenty-two hours. Connie's new face looked like a thick wad of wet clay had been slapped onto the front of her skull. It was shaped like a trapezoid, with the jowls extending out. She must take a dozen pills every day for the rest of her life so her body won't reject her new face. I wonder how that would feel, if your body rejected your face?

Sometimes I wish I could shed my skin and grow a new layer. Last night, my girlfriend gave me my first pedicure. She shaved the dead skin off my toes and the bottom of my foot with an old razor. The layers of dead skin came off my foot like pencil shavings. I felt no pain. After she washed and scrubbed my feet, she put lotion on them. Now my feet look and feel shiny and new. I wonder if that's how snakes feel when they molt.

Coal Veins

Luke eased his truck along the valley road, the V8's rumble drowning out the song of thrushes and meadowlarks. A stout fog rolled off the river.

He pulled into the mine entrance and parked next to Wild Man's truck, a dented-up Tacoma. The truck bed held a fishing pole, bait box, and a full case of Iron City Beer. There were two stickers, bearing logos for the Steelers and the NRA, on the back bumper. He peered into the driver's side window and saw Wild Man sprawled out across the front seat, his mouth agape, his Carhartt jacket covering him like a blanket. After Luke banged on the window a few times, Wild Man shot up. He opened the door and stumbled out. Luke asked how long he'd been there.

"Won big at the dog track last night," Wild Man said. His eyes were bloodshot. "Had to celebrate a little. Figured if I went home, I'd never get up for work." He rubbed his neck like he'd slept on it wrong.

His real name was Scott, but he'd gone by Wild Man as long as Luke could remember. He did a couple tours in Iraq and came back from the second one with a gimpy leg: shrapnel from a roadside bomb had shredded his popliteal artery and now, after three or four operations, a brace covered his left calf and helped to move the leg.

They climbed the warped wooden steps to the miners' locker room, an old trailer with holes in the roof. Inside, they clocked in and got ready for work.

At his locker Luke wrestled into his coal-stained overalls, laced up his steel-toes, and clipped his mining hammer and flashlight onto his belt. He replaced his Steelers cap with a hard hat. Then, touching the Celtic Cross tattoo on his bicep, he said a quick prayer for safety. The rotten-egg stench of sulfur lingered in the air as he left the locker room and joined the rest of his crew at the mine entrance. He looked up at the surrounding hills and ridges. This land was like skin, he thought. It covered rich veins of bituminous coal that stretched across southwestern Pennsylvania: the Pittsburgh seam.

Luke and his crew piled onto the mantrip, a shuttle car powered by electricity that carried them deep into the mine, through dark tunnels, to where the last shift had stopped working. Luke got out and walked in a slight crouch to the machines. This morning the mine roof leaked like a diaper. An abandoned mine was around here somewhere, they'd been told. They could have been right next to it. Luke hoped the engineers had used accurate maps to cut these tunnels.

This mine – Seneca, one of the largest underground mines in the region – had wide chambers and tunnels. Most mining companies had switched to longwall mining, where rippers and hydraulic shovels would crosscut huge chunks of the seam. It cut the need for labor in half. The land above would usually cave in, but the suits and number crunchers figured it was cheaper to grab the coal this way and buy out the landowners or just let them sue.

Today Luke worked as a roof bolter. He had to screw long steel rods into holes drilled into the tunnel ceiling to stabilize it and prevent a roof collapse, but water kept seeping out of the holes he drilled. Along with explosions and fires, roof collapses were a leading cause of death for miners. Up ahead Wild Man steered the continuous miner, a coal-cutting machine that looked like a mutant crab. He worked that way for most of the

morning. Because it was Friday and they all wanted to leave early, they shortened their lunch break. Luke and Wild Man talked about the fight: their friend Donny Kuharik, a heavyweight boxer, and was fighting tonight at the Mountaineer Casino in Wheeling, just across the state line. They didn't have tickets but Wild Man said they could buy them at the door.

After lunch they started working a new section, just as wet as the first one.

“Quit jerkin off and finish that cut,” Luke yelled up to Wild Man. “This mine’s a fucking swamp and I want to start drinking some beer.”

He took the scenic way home. Once on Mohawk Road, he rolled down the window and grabbed a cold Yeungling from the cooler on his passenger seat. There were no clouds in the sky and the sun felt good on his face. Past the power plant the road began to climb. A Skynyrd tune played on the radio. He was finally starting to relax. At the apex of the road he decided, abruptly, to pull off and get out. He walked to the edge of the grass and took in the view: a series of ridges and mountains, part of the Allegheny Range, extending north and west. It looked like ocean waves, blue and rolling. He took a pinch of Skoal from his tin and worked it under his lip. The fading horn of a train, probably a Norfolk Southern, issued from a distant valley.

His grandfather used to bring him here. He'd called it his sanctuary, the only place where he could clear his head and fill his lungs with the smell of hemlock and pine. He and his family had emigrated from Poland when he was only seven. They'd lived in a two-room company house. He followed his dad and brother into the mines and spent the next forty-five years working in them.

Denise's car was parked out front when he got home. His one-story ranch was modest, but nicer than a trailer. Inside, she was sitting at the kitchen table reading the classifieds.

"What happened to you?" she asked, looking up from her paper. Her face had sharp, Slavic features: deep-set brown eyes and a long, thin nose.

"Mine flooded."

She got up from the table and put her plate in the sink. The back pocket of her cut-off jeans had a faded white ring, the mark of tobacco cans. Her coffee-colored hair came down past her shoulders. She wore a dark red tank top, the same color she had Luke paint the living room last year. The paint color was called Deep Passion. He would never forget the kid at Trader Horn who'd said over the loudspeaker: "Luke Sadowski, your Deep Passion is ready."

"You look like hell."

"I'm fine."

"You should quit. I really don't want you going back in –"

"I know."

"I'm late for work. We'll talk about this tomorrow. Leftovers are in the fridge."

Luke told her he was going to the Mountaineer to see Donny fight.

"Who with?"

"Wild Man. Maybe one of his friends."

"I want you coming straight home when it's over. You hear me?"

"Yes ma'am. Have fun changing diapers for them old fogies." She worked for a nursing home. An *assisted living facility*, that's what they called it now.

"Cute."

After dinner, he showered and changed and got back on the road. He'd taken a shortcut to Wild Man's place but got stuck behind a truck carrying a load of gravel. Pebbles were spilling over the sides of the truck bed and pelting Luke's windshield, so he slowed down and backed off the truck's tailgate.

In the western sky, the blood orange sun had just faded behind the hills, leaving bands of purple and red. It was the kind of sky that curly-haired hippie artist on PBS would paint, the one who always painted those "happy trees."

He drove past one of the weirdest places in a county full of weird places. A retired miner and his wife had converted their log cabin house into a business called "BUCK RUB – Taxidermy and Massage Therapy." Luke had been in there once, to get a buck head mounted. The place was divided into two sections. The left side was the massage parlor, filled with the scent of exotic oils and perfumes and soothing instrumental music. The right door opened up to a vaulted room with the heads and skins of deer, elk and bear on the wall, and the music of Hank Williams or Willie Nelson playing. It was an odd pairing, yet they seemed to make it work.

Just like with him and Denise, Luke thought. They'd been together almost ten years, off and on. He'd always thought they'd get married and settle out in the country with kids and dogs running around the yard, but he just didn't know anymore.

He wondered why you could never keep a lid on love, why something that had started off so well could turn out so complicated. And he wasn't talking about the small stuff, like Denise's deformed toe or the lumps on her ass. There was a larger void between them – a cold, dark space – but he couldn't figure out where it came from or when it first appeared.

They'd first talked to each other after a football game his senior year. She'd waited outside the locker room with her friend, Nicole, who was dating Charlie, a teammate of Luke's. Luke had noticed her in school and thought she was cute, but he hadn't even known her name. For their first date, he took her to the Clearview Mall Cinemas. They went to see *Seven*, that movie where a serial killer cuts off the head of a cop's wife and then delivers it as a Fed Ex package to the cop. Denise kept shielding her face. Afterwards, at Eat n Park, Luke ordered grilled sticky buns and laughed at how scared she got. Once he graduated, he started mining. A year later, she went to nursing school over at Pitt-Johnstown. Sometimes, in the middle of the week, he'd surprise her up at school and spend the night in her dorm. They'd make love in the mornings, and he remembered how the light coming through the blinds would streak their bodies. She'd come home on weekends and they'd go to the Pour House – they never carded back then – or the Pioneer drive-in. Occasionally they'd head up to Pittsburgh and see The Clarks, their favorite band.

Denise changed after her father died of lung cancer. The doctor said it was from his forty-year, pack-a-day habit, but Denise was convinced he'd gotten it from mining, breathing in all that coal dust. She started telling Luke to quit mining, that he was selling himself short, that he ought to go to trade school and become an electrician or work on computers, something like that. She said he could get a job with her brother, a contractor who built houses in the wealthy Pittsburgh suburbs. But Luke kept resisting.

Last year, he'd wanted to propose – he got her mother's blessing and started looking around for a ring – but before he had the opportunity, Denise saw him walking out of a bar with Brandy, his ex-girlfriend.

She moved out, saying she needed to figure some things out. Things stayed that way about six months. Luke saw Brandy a few more times – she oozed sex and had skills – but she was too much for just one guy. She’d rather spread the love around. Luke had known that from the start, but why let that ruin a couple months of fun?

At some point, after he and Denise started talking again, he convinced her to give him another shot, and until now, things had been really good again.

He crossed the bridge into Millport and drove past the shuttered steel mill. He and Wild Man had grown up together on the South Side, where Wild Man still lived. It was a bad neighborhood then, even worse now. After the mill shut down and people left, the crack and heroin addicts moved in.

Luke pulled up to Wild Man’s place and honked the horn a few times. A minute later Wild Man and Jake came out and piled into Luke’s truck. Jake was a new miner who used to bartend at the Pour House.

“So who’s Donny fighting tonight?” Jake asked.

“Some big fucker from Jersey,” Wild Man said. “He used to be a mixed martial arts fighter, you know, that shit inside the cage where anything goes.”

The first time Luke saw Donny fight was in seventh grade. Donny was fighting some older kid about a girl, Jenny Hutchens. After school, Luke had followed a pack of kids down the street to Pullman Park, where all the big neighborhood fights went down. Luke still remembered the sound of Donny’s right hand breaking the bigger kid’s jaw, like an axe splitting firewood.

Luke asked Jake what he thought about his first week of mining.

“Gets pretty fucking cold and damp down there,” Jake said.

“Don’t be such a pussy,” Wild Man said. “At least we’re not strip mining.”

“Damn right,” Luke said. “I’d never do that. They cut the tops off mountains, cause floods, all kinds of shit. You ever been to that Flight 93 Memorial over in Shanksville? Me and Denise went last summer, and you know where that plane crashed? Right in the middle of a backfilled strip mine.”

They headed west and drove along the Ohio River through a series of old mill towns. They passed churches, bars, tattoo parlors, dollar stores, and the occasional VFW Hall or Elks Lodge. Everything was dark: the sky, the river, the towns. They crossed into West Virginia and followed signs for the Mountaineer Casino. They passed a strip club called “The Filly Corral.” Soon after, the big lights of the casino appeared. They parked and hurried inside.

They found the boxing arena and bought general admission tickets. The place was packed by the time they found their seats. Donny’s fight was on the undercard. The main event featured Kelly Pavlik – a middleweight fighter from Youngstown, Ohio – against some German guy. Much of the crowd had come from Youngstown to see Pavlik, but Luke recognized a lot of Millport faces, and when the announcer introduced Donny, there was a big roar. He entered the ring wearing a gray sweatshirt with the sleeves cut off, revealing his bicep tattoo, a snake wrapped around a sword. His nickname “The Dagger” was etched on the front of his black and white-trimmed boxing trunks.

His opponent, Vinnie Delsardo, came out wearing a red satin robe. Shaved head, black eyes. Bigger and taller than Donny, but shorter arms. He reminded Luke of that dinosaur, Tyrannosaurus Rex.

“This guy’s huge,” Luke said. “Donny’s gonna get his head ripped off.”

“Donny is nasty,” Wild Man said. “And this fat dago looks dumber than a shit stain.”

“Like a bigger version of you.”

Luke felt a pang of envy as he watched Donny warming up. Donny had been an amateur boxer as a kid, but he quit to start playing football. In fact, Luke and Donny had played together for Millport, both linebackers. Any time Luke made a great tackle, it seemed Donny would make a bigger one. Slippery Rock gave Donny a football scholarship. One weekend when Luke visited him, they'd ended up at some big frat party. Girls had swarmed around Donny, wanting to go home with him. He was a fucking rock star until he blew out his knee. He had surgery and did the physical therapy, but Slippery Rock had already cut his scholarship. He never graduated, just returned home, married to his high school girlfriend, and started working at the steel mill. When they laid everyone off a few years ago, he decided to give boxing a shot.

When the first-round bell rang, Donny sprang out of his corner, his gloves in front of his face. He danced around the ring in circles as Delsardo pursued him. Near the end of the round Donny threw a flurry of body shots, but he stayed inside too long and Delsardo planted a left hook on his jaw. Donny stumbled to the canvas. The ref began his count. After six seconds Donny got up.

“Shit,” Wild Man said. “That one hurt him. But Donny’s got a tough chin.”

The crowd was buzzing. They smelled blood. Donny took a few more punches, but he dodged the big ones. The bell rang. He'd escaped the first round, barely.

“Donny’s done,” Jake said. “He got too cocky and walked into that left hook.”

The next few rounds were slower. Both fighters settled into the fight, both landing some good punches. In the seventh round, Delsardo lost his balance throwing a wild punch that missed, and Donny connected with a solid uppercut. Delsardo landed some body shots, including a kidney shot that made Donny wince, but Donny countered

with a couple of straight right hands. A cut opened over Donny's left eye, the result of a head butt. His cut man closed it up between rounds but it kept opening back up with each new round.

As the final round began, some guys behind Luke were saying Donny was way behind on the scorecards and needed a knockout to win, but Luke thought it had been a close fight up to that point. Donny was dead tired and threw desperation punches that missed wildly. Delsardo should have played it safe, but he was going in for the kill, trying to knock Donny out. Wild Man was right, he must have been dumber than a shit stain. When he missed with a hook, Donny ducked it and nailed him with a big right uppercut. Donny moved closer and kept punching him. His hands looked like engine pistons firing: left-right, left-right. Delsardo was stunned. At some point he just dropped his hands and collapsed, his face hitting the canvas first.

Donny went to the nearest corner and the ref started counting. At eight seconds, Delsardo tried to get up, but his knee gave out. Luke couldn't believe it. Their boy had won.

They got back to Wild Man's house around midnight. Luke wanted to keep drinking, since Denise wouldn't be home until six or seven in the morning. He took a piss off the back porch and gazed at the gold onion domes of St. Vladimir's, the Russian Orthodox Church that rose above Lyndora Hill. Then he went to the kitchen and found a bottle of Wild Turkey. He poured a shot and let it burn in his throat before chasing it with a beer.

Wild Man sat on the couch holding a glass pipe. His pupils were black marbles, dilated from the meth he'd been smoking. He kept scratching his neck. He flashed a gap-toothed smile and Luke noticed how yellow and crooked his teeth were. The pipe was

homemade: Wild Man had connected the neck of a test tube to the base of a light bulb with duct tape. He passed the pipe to Jake. “No matter where you’re going,” Jake said, blowing smoke out of his mouth, “with God’s grace you can enjoy the ride. I heard that on the Christian radio station this morning.”

He offered Luke the pipe, but he declined. Instead, he picked up a baggie of yellow powder and dumped some of it on the coffee table. He took his library card out of his wallet and cut a few lines, then rolled up a dollar bill and vacuumed them into the back of his brain.

Luke reeled in his fly line and wondered how that steelhead trout got loose. Cheat Lake was a pristine sheet of glass. It was getting dark, so he fired up the Evinrude and headed back. A few minutes later the cabin owned by Denise’s brother came into view. He and Denise had the place to themselves this weekend.

Denise stood on the dock, talking to some guy on a big yacht idling about twenty yards out. Luke had seen that boat gassing up at the marina this morning, a forty-footer with twin V6 inboard engines. The guy had wavy blonde hair and Bermuda shorts. Luke imagined him with a tennis racquet and sweater tied around his neck. Before he could make out their conversation, the big boat pulled away. Luke cut his motor and coasted up to the dock, then jumped out and tied it up.

“Make a new friend today?”

“Relax. He’s friends with my brother and just asked if he was around.” She was wearing shorts and a bikini top.

He grabbed two beers from the cooler and gave her one, then he laid down a beach towel. It was dark now and the stars illuminated the lake. A few minnows jumped

near the dock and he watched the ripples. There were no other boats around and the cabin beside theirs had been empty all weekend. He leaned over and kissed her and pulled her closer.

“Maybe we should go inside.” She rubbed her hand up and down his thigh. “What if the neighbors see us?”

“I’ll turn on the floodlight. Let’s give them a show.”

She gave out a devious laugh. Luke unzipped his jeans and moved behind her, then he unhooked her bikini top. She pulled her shorts off. He lifted her leg up and moved gently into her, then deeper.

He woke around ten after a full night’s sleep, free of any weird dreams he’d been having lately. He followed the smell of bacon into the kitchen.

“You look happy,” she said.

“I feel relaxed.”

“So, have you thought any more about what my brother said?”

“About working for him? Yeah, I thought about it.”

“I think it’s a good opportunity. You’d love Pittsburgh. They have great bars and restaurants. We could go to Steelers games. And Millport’s only a couple hours away.”

“I don’t need another job.”

She folded her arms. “I’m interviewing for a nursing job with a Pittsburgh hospital next week.”

That’s why she’d been reading the classifieds, he thought.

“Denise, we’re not city people. Change your hair and your clothes all you want. You’re not fooling anyone.”

“I’m not trying to fool anyone, asshole.”

“I’m a miner. Coal is in my veins.”

“And pretty soon it’ll be in your lungs. Like my dad. I’m not going through that again.”

“Denise, we have a good life here. We’re not hurting for money, like most people.”

“What if you’re down there when there’s an explosion or a fire?”

“That won’t happen.”

“How do you know?”

They ate breakfast in silence. Finally, Denise said, “So what happened with Donny the other night?” Luke was glad she’d tabled their argument and changed the subject.

“He won. Knocked the guy out in the last round.”

“Why didn’t you come straight home?” Luke had slept over at Wild Man’s.

“We had a few drinks and I didn’t want to risk driving home.” He’d gotten a DUI last year, so that excuse still carried some weight.

“What else did you do?”

“What do you mean?”

“Nobody just has a few drinks at Wild Man’s. Why do you hang out with meth heads?”

“He’s not a meth head. He’s working again and starting to get his shit together.”

“You shouldn’t protect him so much.”

“You shouldn’t hate him so much. He’s my best friend and he’s always been good to you.”

“He’s a bad influence. So what if he had a rough life? Lots of people have.” She pulled out a pack of Marlboro Lights from her purse. “I bet you guys went to the bar last night, and I bet that slut was there again.”

Luke knew she was talking about Brandy. “That was a long time ago.”

“Not that long ago.”

“Why are you bringing this up again? I thought you were over it.”

“Luke, I need to tell you something that happened when we were broken up.” He thought she was going to say there was somebody else. “I had an abortion.”

Luke stared at her, searching for any kind of sign, but her face didn’t show anything. “What do you mean?”

She looked away.

“What are you saying? You killed our baby?”

“You had cheated on me! We were broken up! I couldn’t bring a baby into the world like that.”

“Was it even mine?”

“Of course it was yours.”

“I can’t believe you made that decision without me. You had no right.”

“You had no right to cheat. But you did.”

“This is different and you know it.” Luke bit his lower lip and shook his head. “I don’t know what else to say. Maybe you should go to Pittsburgh. Maybe that’s the best thing for both of us.”

The next week passed quietly. Luke hadn’t seen Denise all week. She’d been staying at her friend Nicole’s house. After their fight, she told Luke she needed time to sort things

out. Things at the mine were back to normal. They'd been working a new section, a nice dry section with a high roof. When his shift ended on Friday, Luke jumped off the mantrip and walked up to the locker room.

"You wanna get a drink?" Wild Man said.

"Sure, why not."

Luke went home, took a shower, changed, and ate a microwave pizza. By the time he got to the Pour House, the parking lot was nearly full. Inside, it was a strange crowd: college kids, miners, a group of thirty-something women, a few businessmen, even a couple of hicks trying to look like cowboys with their bucket hats and boots. In the back room, the house band covered a Bon Jovi song. He found Wild Man and Jake at the bar.

He ordered a Yuengling. "Jake, where you been? Haven't seen you all week."

"I got my job back here," Jake said. "I'm better off working above ground, pouring drinks."

"Can't be something you're not, I guess." Luke took a long pull on his beer.

"There's some fine looking cooter in here tonight."

"You see who's here?" Wild Man said. He pointed to Brandy, drinking with her girlfriends at a table across the room. "I still remember that Motley Crue concert, when she flashed her tits on the jumbo screen.

"I'm telling you, that wasn't her. It just looked like her."

"Let's ask her, then." Wild Man got her attention and waved her over. She waved back and started walking toward them. She had on a low-cut red top, a tight black skirt and black cowboy boots.

"It's been awhile, Sully," she said. "I like the goatee, it's working for you." She took out her Parliaments from her purse. The Pour House was the only bar in town

where you could still smoke inside. Somehow they'd been grandfathered in. "How's Denise?"

"She moved out."

"I don't mean to pry, but if you want to talk about it." She put her hand on Luke's forearm.

"Hey Brandy, settle a bet for us," Wild Man said. "Were you at that Motley Crue concert in Pittsburgh a few years ago?"

"Hell yeah," she said. "I'll never forget it. They put me on the big screen."

"You or them titties?" Wild Man covered his mouth and giggled like a teenage girl.

"Same thing, right?"

Jake told Brandy there was a late night party at Wild Man's, and that she and her friends should stop by.

"That could be arranged," she said.

As she strutted back to her table, Luke followed the sway of her skirt. She turned back and smiled like she knew he'd been watching her.

He looked around the rest of the bar. The old miners and alcoholics stared at their beers, trying to forget their problems. The college girls were dancing with each other in front of the band.

"So, what's up with you and Denise?" Wild Man asked.

Luke said she was looking for jobs in Pittsburgh.

"Are you moving up there with her?"

"Doubt it. I got no reason to leave. I like it here. Got everything I need."

"I told you that girl was an ice queen. She never liked us. She never tried."

“She’s just quiet around y’uns.”

“It’s like she’s never satisfied,” Wild Man said. “Like she’s always looking for something better.”

“You’re drunk. You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Hey, this place is dying,” Jake said. “Let’s bail.”

Pulling out of the parking lot, something didn’t feel quite right to Luke. Maybe it was the worn look on Brandy’s face that he noticed when he saw her up close. Being with Brandy, Luke remembered, was like getting lost on one those back roads where the pavement turned to dirt, and then it narrowed from two lanes to one, and you knew you’d hit a dead-end real soon, so you kept looking for a place to turn around, but you couldn’t find one.

For some reason he started to think about Denise’s hair, and how it smelled like lemons when she came out of the shower. He’d be turning thirty in a month. He wasn’t getting any younger. He wanted to have a family and be there for his kids. He wanted to teach them how to cast a fly line and throw a curve. Maybe it was time to leave this place. Seemed like nobody grew up around here.

He thought about turning around and heading to Denise’s friend’s house – he wanted to tell Denise that they could figure this out, they could make it work, they always had before – but he didn’t know if it was worth fighting for anymore, especially knowing what he knew now, that she didn’t fight for them, that she’d been willing to let things die between them. He was tired of bailing water from a sinking boat.

He kept driving into Millport toward Wild Man’s place. It had started to rain, and Luke rolled down the window a little to feel the rain on his face.

Brief History of Shanksville, Pennsylvania

These hills hide secrets within their notches and folds. Once the wild frontier, the land of whiskey rebels.

Flight 93 crashed here, in a wooded field beside a backfilled strip mine. A year later and just a few miles away, nine coal miners spent seventy-eight hours trapped inside a flooded coal mine. A tubular cage plucked each one from the bowels of the earth and pulled them through layers of rock and history. The first miner emerged from the cage soot-faced and squinting, like a sixteenth-century explorer glimpsing the New World for the first time.

Mushroom Girl

Late for her morning shift, Jessie threw on work jeans and a flannel shirt and tied a black bandana over her hair. She jumped into her battered Ford pickup – the tail pipe rigged to the bumper with a coat hanger – and sifted through her bag until she found her Camel Lights.

She drove along Coal Hollow Road, below the naked ridges and hillsides where the mining companies had clear cut the trees, strip-mined the coal, and backfilled the land. Backfilled land reminded Jessie of a bad toupee: it looked normal far away, but up close you could tell something wasn't right.

At the Laurel Valley Mushroom Farm entrance, the security guard looked up from his newspaper and waved. She wondered why they needed a guard. Who stole mushrooms? Who even ate them? They weren't a vegetable, they were a fungus. Rich people, she thought. They liked to stuff them with weird shit like crabmeat and serve them as appetizers.

A burly trucker stood on the loading dock, waiting to load his trailer with pallets of packaged mushrooms. Steaming piles of compost – wet straw mixed with chicken manure and gypsum – lay in long windrows behind the pack house. Someone, maybe Rhonda, had recently told her that chicken shit made good fertilizer for mushrooms because it was full of nitrogen.

Jessie walked through a maze of tunnels to her work area. Laurel Valley wasn't really a farm, it was an abandoned limestone mine. The mushrooms grew underground on wooden trays, double-stacked like bunk beds. She fastened her hard hat and turned on the headlamp. She could see her breath.

Last week she'd worked in the pack house but she could make more money harvesting mushrooms, since harvesters got paid by the amount picked and she had quick hands. She got into a rhythm, slicing off the stems with a small knife and then tossing the mushrooms into the fresh or canned basket. The first group of trays contained specialty mushrooms: Oysters, Shiitakes, and Portobellos. They'd grown in full and healthy and would be sold fresh at a good price. The more common kind, White Agaricus, were growing in the second group of trays, but they were coming up deformed and brown-spotted. They'd be sold to canners and food processors at a cheaper price.

Joe, her foreman, came over, holding a clipboard. He thought he was God's gift to women. God's prank was more like it. His 'Pittsburgh Steelers' sweatshirt hugged his gut. He probably couldn't see his own balls, she thought.

"Hey, Jessie Dawn. Looking fine today, girl," he said.

She wondered why some people still used her middle name. As a kid, she liked when her older brother called her J.D. – she was the only girl who played in the neighborhood baseball games and could hit a curveball better than most of the boys – but she was nineteen now and deserved to be treated like a woman, and having two names made her sound like a little girl. Then again, Jimmy, her friend in Iraq, said she was too special for just one.

"You don't have to use my middle name. No other Jessies down here."

“None that look like you,” Joe said. “You’re built like a dresser with the top drawer sticking full out. I’m a leg man myself, but I’m not too picky.”

Jessie knew that, with guys like Joe, you had to shove it right back in their face. “If we’re doing furniture metaphors today,” she said, “then I guess you’re a bean bag.”

“Damn Joe, she got you again!” Rhonda said in her scratchy smoker’s voice. The only other woman on Jessie’s crew, Rhonda had been here for twelve years and had the rough, calloused hands to prove it. She was married to a truck driver and had two kids. Nobody fucked with Rhonda.

Joe glowered at them and shuffled away.

“Any big plans tonight?” Rhonda asked

“I’m going up to Pennsylvania to see Brady,” Jessie said.

“I thought he was history.”

“He called me last week. It was out of the blue, but I could tell by his voice how much he missed me. So I’m gonna surprise him.”

“He doesn’t know you’re coming?”

“Nope, but I know he wants me to come. He wants me back. Woman’s intuition.”

“I say go,” Rhonda said. “Have fun while you’re young. Who cares if it don’t last.”

“It’s something to do. Gets me out of West Virginia for a couple days. What’re you up to this weekend?”

“Tommy’s pee-wee football game tonight, then Pizza Hut. Not having to cook is my idea of fun these days.”

“Hey!” Joe yelled from across the tunnel. “You’re not getting paid to chit chat. If y’uns need separated, I’ll do it in a heartbeat.”

“The only thing needs separated is your head from your ass.” Rhonda muttered.

Jessie's shift ran long and she was late for dinner. After taking a shortcut home, she barreled down the long driveway that cut through her family's farm, kicking up dirt and gravel, past the barn, silo, and cattle. The chickens squawked and flapped as she drove by their coop.

She scrambled inside and washed up for dinner. She needed to eat fast and dodge her mom's interrogation. When it came to a woman's role, her mom was stuck in the fifties.

At the dinner table she bowed her head and joined hands with her mom and Tommy, her ten-year old brother. Her dad sat across from her.

"Bless you, Lord, for these gifts we are about to receive and give us thankful hearts," her dad said. "Amen."

Right away, her mom started in. "You think I don't know where you're going? You think I'm stupid?"

"No."

"Then tell me why you're going to see that college boy."

"Jessie got a boyfriend!" Tommy said, giggling.

"Shut up, you brat!"

"Why you still running around with him?" her mom said. "You two got nothing in common."

"I'm not getting married."

Her mom pointed her knife at Jessie. "You better start thinking about it. You're not getting any younger. At least with that Marine, you know he'll be there for you."

"He's thousands of miles away in Iraq."

"He's a good boy and writes you all the time. And he'll be home soon."

“We’re only friends.” Jessie passed the meatloaf. “Deal with it.”

“Watch your tone, young lady. I just want to see my daughter happy. Excuse me for caring.”

“I do everything you ask me to. I went out and got a job because there’s not enough work here, and we need the money.”

“Jessie, you know we’re struggling to hold onto the farm,” her dad said.

“So why don’t you sell to the coal company? You said they gave you a good offer, and we could buy a better house close to town.”

Their farm sat above a rich coal seam. Coal, she thought, was the only way to make money in West Virginia.

“I won’t do it. This farm has been in our family for a hundred years. Goddamn coal company thinks they can come in and take whatever they want.”

Jessie laid her napkin on the table and stood up. “Excuse me. I need to get going.”

“I want you back Sunday morning for church,” her mom said. “And we’re not done talking about this.”

She hustled upstairs to get ready. In the shower she thought about Jimmy. They’d grown up together. Such a polite kid, he always saved her seat on the bus. Back then he was scrawny and got bullied a lot, but now he was a soldier – a Lance Corporal in the Marines. In high school she’d gone on a couple of dates with him, but it just never felt right. The week before his unit got shipped to Iraq, he proposed to her. She hadn’t seen that coming and didn’t know how to respond. She told him she wasn’t ready to marry anyone. He wrote her letters about the crazy things they did over there, like raid Al Qaeda safe houses and drive tanks through roadside bombs. She wrote him back because she thought he was lonely and scared, and she did miss him, even though it was

more as a friend. Maybe she always went for the wrong guys, but she never burned for Jimmy. No sparks, no butterflies.

She fixed her hair and sprayed on her favorite scent: Curious by Britney Spears. She even put on lip gloss and mascara, which she never did. In the hallway mirror she turned around to make sure her butt didn't look too saggy or fat in her jeans, since she'd be standing next to all those college girls who starved themselves. But she liked her curves, and so did Brady. Finally she threw on a V-neck top that showed a little cleavage.

She took Mohawk Road to the interstate. On a flat straightaway she passed a coal truck: boxy and wide – a dump truck on steroids – going way too fast. Jessie's dad had told her coal trucks often traveled in pairs so, in case of an accident, they could claim it was the other driver's fault and have a witness to back it up. Last year her friend Nicole had been hit by a coal truck and spent a week in the hospital.

After a while, she rolled down her window and started to relax. Springsteen and Mellencamp kept her company. Cresting a hill, she looked across the blue-tinted Laurel Mountains. A fire tower crowned a distant ridge. Above, a red-tailed hawk hovered, suspended by a strong thermal.

The road descended into the valley and she followed a low bridge over the Monongahela River, shrouded by a canopy of oak and sugar maple leaves. Moss clung like velvet to the riverbank. The fading sunlight filtered through the trees, casting long shadows. Wood thrushes and whippoorwills sang to their lovers. She thought about Brady and how surprised, but happy, he'd be when he saw her.

They'd first met at the Barking Spider, a bar in Morgantown that served girls under twenty-one. He had shaggy blond hair and wore a green Izod shirt. When he started singing that John Denver song "Take Me Home, Country Roads" on the karaoke

machine, she jumped onstage and sang a duet with him. Normally she didn't go for pretty boys, but she made an exception for Brady. They dated for two months before he went back to college, but they were so different. His dad was a WVU professor. Brady hadn't even gone to high school around here, he'd graduated from a prep school in Connecticut. He enjoyed her stories, like the time she fed beer to her pigs, but knew little about her world: living on a farm, working with your hands. Still, Brady never acted like he was superior. She hated people like that.

He had called last week, "just to say hello." First time in a month she'd heard from him, yet she could tell by his voice that he wanted her back, that he was dying to see her. He'd be surprised, but by the end of the weekend she'd have his head spinning.

She jumped on I-79 and crossed into Pennsylvania. A hundred miles later, north of Pittsburgh, she saw a sign for Meadville College. Once on campus she looked for the Greek letters "DKE." She found them over the porch of a large house made of gray stone.

Brady had seen her drive up and walked out to her truck. "Jessie? What are you doing here?" he said. His blue t-shirt was one size too small, probably to make his arms look bigger.

"You sounded lonely on the phone. You want me to go back home?"

"No. I mean, you could have called first." He looked nervous. "But I'm glad to see you. You look amazing." They hugged awkwardly. "Let me take your bag."

She followed him inside. They cut through the library. Next to the bookshelves hung black-and-white composite portraits of old fraternity classes. All the photographs looked the same: young men with crew cuts, blazers, striped ties.

"Actually, you picked a good weekend," he said. "My frat's throwing a big party tonight."

He led her up a creaking staircase to the third floor. Halfway down the hall she glanced into a room: two guys on a couch, one smoking out of a bong. In Brady's room she set her bag down. There was a painting on the wall, some kind of abstract art. Jessie thought it looked like a five-year-old had splattered paint on a canvas. An acoustic guitar lay on the bed.

"I didn't know you played guitar."

"Passes the time when I'm bored," he said.

"So, you haven't called me in a month." She rubbed her shoulder, trying to get the knot out. "Do you have a girlfriend up here?"

He shook his head. "Half the girls here are snobs, and the other half are too uptight. I'm sorry I haven't called, school has been crazy this semester. What's wrong with your shoulder?"

"Just sore from driving."

"Let me help you with that."

She sat down on his bed while he massaged her neck and shoulders. Then, he ran his hands down the exposed part of her chest. She turned her head and kissed him. He tried to take off her sweater. "What's your hurry?" she said, although she liked his enthusiasm. "We've got all weekend."

They returned downstairs to a house filled with partiers. Jessie noticed a tall, slender girl walking toward them, wearing a sundress. She had fake tits, a fake tan, and fake hair.

"Brady!" she said. "I can't believe you made me wait in line. I thought I had VIP status here!"

"Kirsten, this is Jessie, my friend from back home."

“How wonderful!” she said like a cheerleader. “And I love your hair. Is it naturally that red?” She scanned Jessie from head to toe. Her pupils were rolling like marbles. She kept rubbing her nose. She probably just snorted some cocaine or something, Jessie thought.

“Nothing fake here,” Jessie said. “Where are you from?”

“Upper East Side.”

“East Side of what?”

“Are you being serious?” Kirsten said, muffling a laugh. “Manhattan? New York City?”

Jessie nodded and said “Right, of course,” but what she wanted to say was *Why don't you go back there, you bitch?*

“So you live on a farm? Do you have horses?”

“We used to, but now just chickens and cows.”

“I love horses. We have them at our ranch in Vermont.”

“Beautiful animals,” Jessie said.

“You’ve got a fine stud here. Better hold onto him!” Kirsten’s hand brushed Brady’s forearm.

Jessie’s cheeks felt hot.

“Ciao, Brady.” She winked at him and sauntered away.

“That bitch,” Jessie said. “She wants you and just announced it to me. Or maybe she already has you.”

“Don’t let your imagination run wild.”

She folded her arms and looked away.

“Why do you always think the worst?” Brady asked.

“More often than not, the worst happens. That’s the difference between your life and mine.”

He changed the subject, pointing out a fraternity brother who’d streaked across the football field during Meadville’s last game, but her mind was still on that bitch.

“I need a beer,” she said.

“I’ll get it.”

“No, I can handle it.”

She walked to the back porch and tried to fit in. A few girls shot her icy glares. She scanned the crowd for a friendly face and settled on a tall guy with dark curly hair and a dimpled chin. She got behind him in the keg line. When he turned around she smiled.

“Let me fill that for you.” He took her cup. “You look familiar. Are you premed, too?”

“Nope. Just visiting a friend.”

“Oh really? Who?” He handed her the beer.

“Brady Baxter.”

“Sure, I know him.” He paused. “Wait. So you’re the mushroom girl?”

“Is that what he calls me?”

“He just said that his friend worked at a mushroom farm. But he didn’t mention how hot you were.”

Between his deep voice and the beer, her stomach stirred. She smiled up at him and let his eyes trace her curves.

“So what’s the story with you two?”

“We dated this summer. I figured that was about it. I mean, we had fun, but we’re real different, you know? Then he calls me out of the blue and invites me up here. So I thought I’d check out the college life, see what the hype is all about.”

‘What do you think so far?’ he asked.

“Overrated.”

He had a natural, easy laugh. Not forced. “I’m being rude. What’s your name?”

“Jessie. Or Jessie Dawn, that’s my other name.” Shut up you moron, she told herself.

“Well, I’m Derek, and it’s a pleasure to meet you. Have fun tonight. And if you’re not, then come get me and I’ll make sure you do.”

“You’re the first nice guy I’ve met tonight. How can you stand it around these snobs?”

“You get used to them.”

She returned to the living room and glimpsed Brady and Kirsten standing in the back corner. Brady whispered in her ear and her eyes flickered. She leaned into him. They kissed.

Jessie ducked into the bathroom. Her head was pounding, her body shook. She took a few deep breaths and tried to compose herself. She didn’t want to make a scene, but she was not going to run and hide, either. When she came back out, Kirsten had moved out of the living room and was now talking to a girl in the hallway. When Jessie walked past, she casually bumped her hip into Kirsten’s skinny ass.

“Watch where you’re going, tramp,” Kirsten said.

“What was that?”

“You heard me. Run along, Farmer Jane. Go milk a cow or something.”

That's it, Jessie told herself. I'm sick and tired of this shit. This girl will remember tonight. She'll remember me. After she looked away, Jessie lifted her full cup of beer over her head. She felt strong and pure, like she'd been summoned by God to rescue this lost soul and lead her back to the flock. Then she tilted her cup and baptized Kirsten in beer, washing her sins away. It drenched her hair and face and sluiced down her dress.

"What the fuck?" Kirsten said, her mouth open and arms outstretched, looking down at her drenched dress.

Kirsten attacked her. Jessie felt her hair being pulled, and it hurt like hell. Jessie got free and slapped her face, but the girl didn't stop. She started screaming and thrashing her arms around. Jessie shielded her face, waited for the right moment, and then punched her in the gut. Brady and another guy pulled them apart.

"Brady, put your heifer back in the barn!" Kirsten shouted. There was a red welt across her left cheek. "This dress costs more than your entire Wal-Mart wardrobe, you skank!"

"Want some more, bitch?" Jessie said.

Brady grabbed Jessie by the arm and pulled her into the game room. "What the hell are you doing? You come up here uninvited, then you embarrass me like this?"

"Embarrass you? What about your tongue in that slut's mouth, or did I just *imagine* that? You know what, I couldn't care less. I just came up here because I was bored."

She freed herself and walked into the bathroom. Her arms were scratched up but her face looked fine. She went back outside and found Derek.

"Back so soon?" he said.

"Brady's a shit bag."

“What happened?”

“He was making out with some tall blonde. They had their hands all over each other.”

“Kirsten?”

“That’s the one.”

“I heard a rumor about them hooking up.” He paused. “I’m not gonna lie, Brady and I aren’t friends anymore. My ex-girlfriend cheated on me with him. You deserve better.”

Feeling bold, she pulled his head down to hers and kissed him. Then she whispered, “Let’s go somewhere.”

“Follow me,” he said.

Inside, they pushed through the crowd. Someone pointed at Jessie and said “That’s her.” They scrambled upstairs to the third floor. Derek led her into a dark, empty room.

She closed the door, and he started working on her. He pulled her sweater off and slid his tongue from her bellybutton stud to her nipples. She unzipped his jeans and felt how hard he was. Before she knew it, they were both naked and he was on top of her.

“Don’t you have a condom?” she asked.

“I don’t like ‘em.”

What am I doing, she thought? This is so fucking stupid. I can’t do this, not like this. I’ve known this guy for ten minutes. Who knows, he could be full of shit. Maybe he fooled around with Brady’s girlfriend and not the other way around.

“Wait,” she said in a shaky voice. “Stop. I’m sorry. I can’t do this just out of revenge. Brady isn’t worth it. I like you, and I really want to, but I don’t do this kind of thing. I’m not thinking straight.”

“Crazy bitch, that’s not how it works. You have to finish what you start.”

“No, I’m serious.”

“So am I.”

He held her down and pushed inside of her. She tried to scream but his hand covered her mouth. He had pinned her arms behind her back, locking her wrists with one hand. He kept moving in and out of her. It felt like she was getting stabbed.

“Just relax and enjoy it,” he said.

She realized she couldn’t move him. She wanted to cry, but she wouldn’t let herself. At some point, he took his hand off of her mouth. Instead of screaming, she said “Oh yeah,” trying to convince him that she liked it. She even cracked a smile.

“Why don’t you get behind me?” she said. “I like it better that way.”

He pulled out, rolled off the bed, and stood up.

“Here, suck my dick first,” he said.

She stood facing him, looking down at his junk. Then she kicked him as hard as she could.

He fell to his knees, moaning. “You fucking cunt!”

She looked around the room and saw a lacrosse stick on the floor. She picked it up and hit him hard on the back of his head.

“Motherfucker,” she said flatly.

She found her clothes and got dressed, keeping one eye on him. He was squirming in pain. He wasn’t getting up anytime soon. She went down the hallway to

Brady's room. Thank God it was empty. She grabbed her bag and descended the back stairwell, stepping over some passed out kid.

She started up her truck. The clock read "2:15 a.m." Once on the highway home, she lit a cigarette and rubbed her pounding forehead as she drove in the direction of the barren moon. A cold wind hurled through the trees, which would soon be stripped naked. She wanted to cry, she tried to, but no sounds came out of her throat. She had lost her voice, but even if she could talk, she didn't know where to turn. Not to Brady, she never wanted to see that asshole again. And her mom would get on her high horse and say something like *You're a stupid, foolish girl and you got what you deserved*. Maybe she could tell her dad, or Rhonda. Maybe it was better to keep her mouth shut. That guy Derek was in pretty bad shape when she left. Then again, he deserved it. He deserved even more pain than he received.

She woke up around noon on Saturday. Her dad was in the kitchen eating a sandwich.

"Didn't hear you come in last night," he said. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah, it was late. I was sick and didn't want to stay up there."

"You hear the news?"

"About what?"

"The coal company called this morning. They doubled their offer. And they agreed to pay off any debts I have on land or equipment."

"Are you going to take it?"

"It's too good pass up. I've been losing money for too long. It's time to start fresh. Maybe we can buy a nice house closer to town."

“That’s great, dad.” She didn’t say anything about the previous night, not wanting to spoil his good news.

On Monday morning, she was back on the packaging line. “How was your weekend?” Rhonda shouted over the din of the packing machines.

“It’s too loud in here,” Jessie said. “Let’s talk at lunch.”

Jessie went back to work. As the blue containers marched down the conveyor belt, her job was to position the mushrooms “face up” so the tops of the caps and not the stems were showing. Market research showed that the white, domelike caps were more pleasing to shoppers’ eyes than the stems and brownish gills under the cap. Since it was the dullest job in the pack house, she tried to picture something good in her head, so she thought about Jimmy. He’d be home by Thanksgiving. She tried to picture him and what he looks like now but, for some reason, as she faced the mushrooms she started thinking about the bodies of soldiers being shipped home. She wondered how they looked when they slid down the conveyers off the cargo planes. If the bodies shifted during the trip, would someone turn them face up before putting them in caskets and shipping them home? And what if their faces were mangled? Would their mothers and wives see them like that?

She wanted to see Jimmy when he came home, but for now she was done with men. She’d keep working at the farm until next summer, or until she had enough money to leave West Virginia. Maybe she’d head west to California. Maybe she’d go south. She’d always wanted to see New Orleans. There was nothing left here, and she was too young to be having babies and going to Pizza Hut on Friday nights. She kept facing the mushrooms and tried to keep the bad thoughts out of her head.

Mississippi Drift

I drive west on Highway 6 as the North Mississippi hills flatten into fields of cotton, the budding bolls like powdered sugar sprinkled over the black soil. Kudzu blankets the shrubs and small trees. Clouds morph into animal balloons.

In Clarksdale, dust and grime taint the windows of abandoned buildings. A frayed couch and rusted-out smoker line someone's front porch. The mannequin in a clothing store window wears a purple zoot suit and white fedora. I browse a record store and flip through T-Model Ford albums as a tailless cat sleeps on the stack beside me.

I cross the I-40 bridge into Arkansas and follow a gravel road that leads to the river's edge. I pass a shirtless old man carrying a fishing pole and bait box. He smiles and raises a nonviolent fist. Where the road ends, I leave the car and cut a path through the sedge grass and scrub brush until a sandy patch of riverbank reveals itself. Part of a wooden chair floats past, drifting towards the Gulf. Above, thunderheads billow into a mountain range and heat lightning clicks on and off like a strobe.

Viking On A Sea Of Ice

I drive a 1978 Cadillac hearse. It drinks gas like a yacht, but when the day of reckoning comes I'll be ready. Just throw me in the back and start the procession.

Boring people with dreary lives are happier because they have lower expectations. Look at my coworkers. They never even leave the state. Shelly goes waterskiing on Conneaut Lake. Julie owns goats and is afraid of flying. Scott brags about the NASCAR race in the Poconos, and I'm like, dude, you spent all day on the roof of your RV watching the same cars whiz by a couple hundred times. I share a cubicle with Sheila, a blonde cougar who rides a motorcycle with a sidecar. The sidecar is for her dog Twinkie, a hairy monster of unknown sex. She also uses the sidecar to pick up younger men she meets at dance clubs. Why are corporate offices filled with drones who have never read a novel, couldn't buy a sense of humor, and eat lunch at their desk? And what happened to a gin-and-tonic, or three, at lunch?

When you call your health insurance company and ask if that MRI is covered, I'm the guy who says no. When you ask why, I say "pre-existing condition." These are the company lawyers' words, not mine. I'm just an actor, a voice, a megaphone. Recently, however, I've been adding my own lines. Instead of saying no, I'll say "We're running a two-for-one special today. So you're not only covered for that MRI, we'll throw in a colonoscopy or an ultrasound. Free of charge." My life was not always like this.

This was my life at twenty-one: legendary, mythic. Do you know what it's like to snort rails off the ass cheek of a Swedish model named Petra? Neither do I. But I did some other legendary things with a woman from Sweden. Her name was not Petra. These things happened on a Russian cruise ship in the Baltic Sea.

Here's how it all started. I was going to college in New England, an elitist liberal arts college with a tree-lined quad that made parents and visitors think of the word "idyllic." Half the students were smart, the other half had wealthy parents. A sizeable percentage of the girls were lesbian or asexual, but I discovered that the more I drank, the less discriminating I became.

I remember one girl my friends and I called "Hungry Eyes." She had these bulging brown eyes and talked slowly, like she was talking to a child. She was a free spirit from Idaho who came to our parties, drank our beer, and smoked our weed. She also enjoyed magic mushrooms and hash brownies. She was cute in a nature-girl sort of way: flannel shirts and Birkenstocks, homemade hemp necklace dangling between her small breasts, dirty blonde hair, scent of patchouli. One night we got drunk together and started dancing in the back room. We went upstairs and found an empty bed. As I unbuttoned her flannel shirt, Hungry Eyes vomited all over my jeans. She told me to stay while she went into the bathroom and cleaned herself up, but by then I had lost the urge. The following semester, Hungry Eyes dropped out of school and joined a cult in Peru. I admired her for making such a bold choice.

I was looking for something different as well. I had grown tired of playing drinking games in rancid fraternity basements and taking classes like Icelandic Agriculture or the History of North Korean Musical Theater. Back then, I called myself an intellectual and thought I should live in a sophisticated European city.

Stockholm intrigued me. The Swedes were progressive people, and they spoke English well. Also this: Swedish women: Ridiculous. You could not compare them to the dour girls at my college. It would be like comparing sexy, juicy oranges to dry, shriveled-up apples.

In January of my junior year, I bought a one-way ticket and flew from Newark to Stockholm. During the flight I drank four vodka tonics. This was 1997, when you could still get loaded on a plane without being called a terrorist.

I took a train from the airport into the city. Stockholm has one of the cleanest, most efficient subway systems in the world. That's what high taxes and big government can do for a country. But Swedes love to stare at each other, and when you're a foreigner they hold their gaze even longer. People studied me, examined me. I kept thinking I had something on my face or snot dangling from my nose. If I stared at someone that long on a New York City subway train, I'd get my ass kicked. I got off at the University station and found the campus. The university buildings were gray and utilitarian. Snow and ice covered the quad and the sidewalks. A kind soul pointed me to the administration building.

The Dean of Students was a friendly, lanky man named Lars who had nasty tobacco-stained teeth. I told him I'd like to enroll for the semester. When Lars confided that Baywatch was his favorite TV show, I told him David Hasselhoff and my father were close friends. That was a lie – I don't think my father could pick David Hasselhoff out of a lineup, though I suspect he'd watched a few episodes of Baywatch on nights my mother had choir practice or a school board meeting – but Lars responded favorably to my story. He registered me in four classes and said he'd make arrangements with my

home college to transfer the credits. Then he gave me the key to my new dorm room, shook my hand, and said “Vel-come!”

I found my dorm room, which smelled like Pledge and was furnished with Ikea-type furniture. I introduced myself to my floor mates. There was an Irish girl, a Bulgarian guy, and the rest were Swedes or Norwegians. No other Americans.

Ivan, the Bulgarian, enjoyed practicing his English on me. He had a thick, dark unibrow that I couldn't avoid staring at when he talked. He'd also competed in the Olympics. His sport was the biathlon, where you shoot a rifle at targets and run several miles, then shoot and run again. It sounded like a good sport for Americans, except the running part. He was working on a Ph.D. in Russian Politics. Soviet policy, he told me, had essentially been a series of poorly designed five-year plans: after one plan failed, they'd make a new one that was even bigger and more complex. But Ivan preferred to talk about women. He'd say things like “Women are like a box of chocolates. You can't stop until you've tried every flavor.”

This is what Stockholm is like in January: Buffalo. Snow every day. Only four or five hours of light.

In my dreams, Swedish women had long legs and blonde pigtails and wore German beer girl outfits – ruffled skirts and knee-high stockings – and the men had beards and big arms and Viking helmets. In reality, I found the women to be sophisticated and pretentious, though still gorgeous, and the men were skinny, effeminate, leather-wearing creatures who enjoyed techno music. Everyone had sleek mobile phones. Back then, the only cell phones I'd seen in America were those large bricks. The slang term in Swedish for a mobile phone was “yuppinaller,” which meant “yuppie teddy bear.”

Yet I could see traces of Viking blood in the people. Some mothers would strap their infants behind their shoulders, wearing them like backpacks, and take morning walks through Arctic wind and snow.

Despite the cold, Stockholm had a certain charm. I often wandered around Gamla Stan – Old Town – and browsed art galleries and music stores. Because the city had never been ravished by war, some of the buildings dated back as far as the ninth century. When World War Two broke out, the Swedes quickly declared neutrality. The Nazis occupied their southern ports but never invaded. The Americans and the British said their declaration of neutrality was a cowardly act, but to me it was a smart business decision. What the Swedes lacked in pride or passion, they made up for with logic and prudence.

During in the middle ages, Sweden had been a major power. Year after year, their fierce army – Viking descendants – would sail across the Baltic and roamed the European continent, conquering and plundering other ethnic clans, but at some point they got fat and lazy and began staying at home with their wives and kids more often.

Eventually, I met some other Americans studying at the university. They were like all the posers back home: jocks, preps, nerds, and the artsy, creative types. There was one girl, Katie, who seemed interesting. If you took a poll, seven out of every ten men would call her attractive, though her numbers would be higher in blue states. We hooked up a few times but she never spent the night. She hung out with this guy Ned, who was quirky but harmless. In February, the three of us took a train to northern Sweden, above the Arctic Circle. We met a few Laplanders, the indigenous people of Scandinavia. They wore boots with pointy tips that curled upward. One night we ate reindeer meat and saw the Northern Lights, which looked like red and green worms, and

it made me crave a bag of gummy worms because I couldn't find them in Swedish grocery stores. Grocery stores in Sweden gave you no choices. There was only one kind of everything – peanut butter, toilet paper, pickles.

Anyway, back to the real story. Ned and Katie wanted to go somewhere for spring break. We discussed Greece or Italy, but Ned had found a cheap cruise from Stockholm to Russia – only a hundred American dollars for a four-day trip to St. Petersburg. It sounded crazy enough to be memorable, so I agreed to go along.

The Russian company's ship looked more like a deep-sea fishing boat than a cruise liner. The beds were smaller than European train beds. At least I had my own cabin. The first night, after dinner, we all went to the nightclub on the second deck. The DJ played techno music. The crowd was an odd mix of Russians, Swedes and Finns. Katie complained about the music, so we left and went to the lounge bar on a lower deck. Inside it was dark, with red velvet chairs and couches and a karaoke machine. I was coughing from all the cigarette smoke. A Russian woman with auburn hair and heavy makeup sang "You've Lost That Loving Feeling."

I noticed a girl walking toward the bar, alone. Blonde hair with streaks of black. Deep brown eyes, full lips. A gold stud above her left nostril. She looked Swedish, yet she had her own style. She was attractive but not like a model. She looked approachable.

Katie, drunk on vodka tonics, said she felt sick and had to go lie down. Ned, playing the chivalrous knight, said he'd walk her back to her room. I didn't protest because I didn't care anymore. Sure, I liked Katie, but why fight over an American girl? The whole idea of going abroad was to find something different, something exotic. After they left, I went to the bar and sat next to the Swedish girl and ordered a Carlsberg.

"Is your girlfriend okay?" she asked.

I was shocked that she'd noticed me.

"She's only a friend." I said.

"I bet she doesn't think so."

I tried to steer away from that landmine. "Are you Swedish?" I asked.

"Yes. I go to university in Uppsala. Are you American?" I nodded. "So what's an American doing on a boat from Sweden to Russia?"

I tried to think of something deep to say. "I'm living in Stockholm for the semester. I just want to see more of the world, and Russia is so interesting. All their revolution and war and literature."

"I didn't know Americans appreciated good literature," she said. Her English was flawless.

"So what about you?"

"I had to get away from my life for a few days. I'm done with men. Why are you all so *needy*?" She had wonderfully crooked teeth.

"Maybe you haven't found the right one yet. Maybe you just did."

While I fully confess to the cheesiness of that last line, please understand that I was trying to make an impression. Also, there is something about talking to a Swedish woman in a smoky bar on a cruise ship in the Baltic Sea that makes you feel bold and reckless.

She looked me up and down. "How old are you, anyway?"

"Twenty-one."

"My God, you're just a boy," she said. But she stayed and ordered another drink.

We listened to an old man in a leather jacket sing a Black Crowes song. The man took out a harmonica and started playing it, except the song had no harmonica parts.

“You want to sing something together? Maybe Abba?”

“I’m a bad singer,” she said. Just then, a belligerent Russian across the bar started yelling and knocking over bottles. “Let’s get out of here. This place is depressing.”

We walked outside to the top deck of the ship and looked out over the Baltic. The sky was black. To the south, the lights of a port city glowed blue.

We shared our stories. Her name was Ingrid. She was twenty-four and studying art history. She’d grown up in a small farming town at the southern tip of Sweden. Before attending university she had lived and worked in London for a few years. She was curious about America and asked me if everyone carried a gun. I said yes.

We walked back down to her cabin and stopped outside the door. She pulled me close and kissed me, a long drunk kiss.

I wanted to take her to the bottom of the ocean and make love like two humpback whales. No human has ever seen humpback whales have sex: during mating season they dive to the deepest parts of the South Pacific. There’s no light down there, so surface concepts like *cute* and *hot* have no meaning.

“Can I come in?” I asked.

My offer was politely rejected, but she agreed to walk around St. Petersburg with me.

The next morning, after getting off the ship, Ingrid and I walked along the Neva River into the city. We passed a Russian Orthodox Church: its onion domes looked animated, swirling with loud, hot colors. The government buildings looked worn and dilapidated. Roads and bridges were closed. We saw abandoned cars, those little sedans they made in East Germany. I remembered what Ike had told me, that when the

Communist system collapsed a few years earlier, the country had gone bankrupt. A trolley car, packed like a woman's suitcase, screeched past. Everywhere, people stared. In Palace Square, a woman in a red babushka ran her hands over me and felt the texture of my fleece jacket and corduroy pants. Peddlers and street vendors pestered us and tried to make us buy Matryoshka Dolls. A few teenage girls passed me. They looked defiant and rebellious and were dressed like Madonna in the early 80s: miniskirts and tights, fingerless gloves, jean jackets, big hair full of holding spray, heavy eye shadow.

During our tour of the art museum, Ingrid and I walked behind the rest of our group, stealing glances and laughing about the previous night. We also discussed the paintings. I impressed her with obscure facts, like how Gauguin kept a teenage mistress during his years in Tahiti.

Here I was, walking through a Russian art museum next to a beautiful Swedish girl. I was only twenty-one. Life can be funny that way.

Like most Swedes, Ingrid was self-conscious and avoided eye contact. She would look down or straight ahead. Her hair fell over her right eye. I could never get a clear look at her, she always remained slightly hidden.

After the tour, as I waited for Ingrid outside the restroom, I bumped into Katie. She had spent the whole day with Ned.

"Where have you been?" she asked. "Too cool for us now?"

"No."

"Who's the Swedish girl? She's pretty."

"I met her at the bar last night." I paused. "What have you and Ned been up to?"

"She's playing you. She'll break your heart."

"Why do you care?"

“God, you’re such an idiot.” Katie walked into the ladies’ room.

A few moments later, Ingrid came out. “What’s wrong with your friend?” she asked. “I said hello and she just glared at me.”

That evening, the ship left St. Petersburg and we started back to Sweden. After taking a nap in my cabin, I met Ingrid for dinner. We found a corner table. I ordered Chicken Kiev and she had the salmon. We shared a bottle of wine.

“Russia is the strangest place I’ve ever seen,” I said.

“It’s good to see strange places,” she said. “Travel broadens the mind. I want to see every continent before I die.” Her shoeless foot brushed my leg. “What will you do when you go back home?”

“I don’t know. Finish college and get a job.”

“What kind of job?”

“Some kind of office job. Maybe advertising or banking. What about you?”

“I don’t want to work. I want to travel and make art.”

“Don’t you want to settle down, have a family and kids and all that?”

“Not right now. Do you?”

“Yeah, someday.”

“Maybe you should not go home right away. This summer, we could tour Europe together and stay in hostels.”

“Really? I would love that. I’d have to change my plans, but I’m sure I could figure it out.”

“I’m sure you could.”

“So, where did you have in mind, and for how long?”

“I don’t want to talk about travel plans right now, do you?”

“No.”

“In fact, I don’t want to talk at all.”

“Okay.”

“Good.” She finished her glass of wine. “Let’s go to my room.”

She took my hand and led me to her cabin and I followed her inside. She took off her jeans. I undressed and followed her into the small bed. I imagined that I was a Viking – with a red beard and a big war hammer – and that she was the daughter of some feudal lord, and I had stolen her away from her village.

At four o’clock in the morning, I woke up to the sound of grinding metal. I had recently seen *Titanic* and was convinced we’d hit an iceberg. Ingrid was still asleep, so I quietly put on my jeans and sweater and went up to the top deck. Reflecting off the bright moon was a sea of ice that extended for miles. I didn’t understand what I was looking at. I scanned the deck and noticed an older man, smoking and looking calm. I walked over to him.

“Are we sinking?” I asked.

He smiled. “These are ice floes. That sound comes from the ship’s ice cutters, big steel blades on the front.” He studied my face. “Ice covers part of the Baltic in winter. Don’t worry, it is normal.”

This wasn’t just normal. This was destiny! I was a Viking cutting through a sea of ice! I had just ravished a Viking woman, and together we were going to travel the world and conquer wild, vast, foreign lands.

The next morning, the ship arrived in Stockholm. As we said goodbye, Ingrid and I agreed to meet in a week or two.

She never returned my calls. A month later, I saw her at a Stockholm nightclub talking to another guy. I don't think he was American, he looked Swedish. When I approached her and tried to talk to her, she pretended not to remember who I was. I was stunned. That night I wandered the streets of Stockholm for hours, lost in a fog of alcohol and bitterness.

In June, I returned to the states. I never got to travel Europe with her. In fact, I never saw her again.

Fifteen years later, this is my life: Irrelevant. A series of failed five-year plans.

I'm a claims representative in the Pittsburgh office of a large health insurance company. We have the highest rejection rate of any health insurance provider. Last month they cut my salary twenty percent, and now I can barely pay the inflated mortgage on my shitty townhouse. My boss Maura likes to say *In this economy, you should be happy to have a job*. She has rust-colored hair and a twitchy left eye. During my job interview I thought she was hitting on me, but soon I realized that she does it with everyone.

On weekends I drink Beam-and-Coke and occasionally sleep with divorced women or single moms. For several years I've been living off the grid, stuck between youthful immaturity and adult responsibility. In your twenties, when you go to work hung over and circulate a mildly obscene e-mail around the office, people laugh. In your thirties, people tell you to "grow up, you insensitive prick." Friends and colleagues give you a wide berth and politely turn down your happy hour offers.

I've been having a lot of weird dreams lately. In last night's dream I dined at an upscale restaurant with a Viking woman. She wore a helmet with pink horns and skinny

jeans. She had a war hammer tattooed on her forearm. She ordered the rabbit-and-dumplings.

The other night, while cleaning out my closet, I found some old pictures of my trip to Russia. There's only one picture of Ingrid. She's in the lower right corner and I can barely see the profile of her face, half-covered by a streak of black hair. But the more I think about it, the more I realize that picture is perfect because it duplicates my memory of her, which lurks in a shadowy corner of my mind.

Jo

You take Aunt Joanna's hand and lead her outside. She follows like a scared child. Maple and birch leaves litter the deck, remnants of last night's storm. A briny zephyr sweeps off the bay. Along the shoreline the ebbing tide exposes skeins of seaweed and ledges of barnacled rock. Farther out, a lobster boat idles beside a buoy. The bearded lobsterman leans over the side and hauls up his pots.

You help Jo into the wrought iron chair. Jo's threadbare dress shows her scarred knees. She wears the scent of hospital rooms: an amalgam of disinfectants, ammonia, flame retardants, and stale cheese. She has coarse, gray-tinged hair and her pallid skin affirms the quarantined life she has lived.

As she often does, Jo rocks back and forth, unable to sit still, her nerves damaged from years of electric shock treatments. That's how doctors treated schizophrenics back then, said your mother. They shocked her to induce seizures that were intended to minimize her delusions and self-inflicted acts of violence. No anesthesia, no painkillers. Nurses strapped her to a bed and attached wires that channeled electric current throughout her nervous system. You wonder if the doctors ever performed a lobotomy on Jo. She has been shuffled in and out of mental institutions most of her adult life. She often goes days without speaking.

"Don't pick your nose," you say, pulling her arm down. "Want some cheese and crackers?"

Jo pokes her tongue through a toothless gap in her neglected mouth. You take a Triscuit and a slice of Colby from the paper plate and lay them in her palms, cupped like she is receiving the sacrament.

“The body of Christ, the bread of heaven.” You pause. “It’s a joke. It looks like you’re taking communion. You know, in church, when you kneel at the altar and they give you a piece of bread and a drink of wine? I bet you don’t believe in God, not after what’s happened to you. I don’t blame you.”

After she inhales her snack, she stares at you fervidly, like she is channeling your inner thoughts, even your creeping, consuming suspicion that you, too, are schizophrenic. You fear that you’ve inherited your aunt’s disease and will soon be diagnosed with it. Sometimes you picture it as a small mass, like a wad of Play-Doh festering in the back of your brain. You share the same features – blue eyes and a Roman nose protruding over thin lips – and the same physique, which your mother calls “big boned.” You and Jo are the only family members who failed to graduate college. After a nervous breakdown your junior year, you left Boston and returned to Maine, moving back in with your parents in Waterville and working at a used bookstore. Your mother openly questions how you’ll ever get married now, since all the Riley girls found their husbands in college. All but Jo and you.

Your parents have rented this cottage in Boothbay Harbor, near your grandparents’ old house. When he was still alive, your grandfather would pick Jo up and bring her back to their house for family dinners. One night you sat across from Jo and watched her play with her food – she flung mashed potatoes at your mother – and moan. Most nights she sat frozen and silent. Occasionally she was lucid and would ask you about school or field hockey.

With her thumb and index finger, Jo stretches out her lower lip to its farthest point and then pulls it side to side, her mouth a contorted rictus.

“What is it like to be crazy?” you ask. “How long did you keep it a secret? Are people always laughing at you or whispering about you? Do you hear voices? What do they say? Do they tell you how fucked up you are? Sometimes I hear voices, too.” You rub your temples. “Why can’t you be normal again, Jo?”

The sound of tires crunching gravel grows louder. A few minutes later your brother Drew swings open the screen door. A commercial fisherman, he looks the part. His hair is wavy and sun-bleached.

“Jo, look who it is,” you say.

Jo looks nervous, anxious.

“Hi Jo!” Drew says sardonically.

“Don’t make fun of her,” you say.

“She’s not offended.”

“How do you know?”

“She’s crazier than a sewer rat.”

“She’s not crazy. Just sick.”

“Erin, she’s insane. She doesn’t even know where she is, or who we are.”

“Yes she does.”

“Hey Jo.” Drew claps to get her attention. “What’s your favorite food? Pizza?”

Jo nods.

Drew continues. “What about monkey testicles?”

Jo nods again.

“Could you not be a dick, for just one day?”

Jo lowers her head and buries her hands deep in her lap. Then she hears a noise from the water – the drone of an outboard motor, which soon grows to a high-pitched buzz. Stirred by the noise, Jo walks to the porch railing. A ski boat pulling a water skier cruises past the dock. A lanky teenage boy holds the tow rope with just one hand as he gracefully crosses the wake.

You stand beside Jo. “See the boat?”

“Big fun!” she says.

“Drew, did you hear that?”

“No.”

“Tell him what you said.” You wait. “C’mon Jo, say it again.”

As the water skier re-crosses the boat’s wake, he launches into the air sideways. He crashes and releases the rope. The driver slows his craft and horseshoes back to the boy. Laughter vibrates off the water.

Jo covers her ears and makes grunting noises.

“It’s okay. The boat’s turning back around. See, they’re going back to rescue him.”

You put a hand on Jo’s shoulder to calm her. But she pushes you away, as though you were a total stranger.

The Incorruptible

10 Thermidor 1794

The prisoner sat propped up in a wagon pulled by two guards. His hands were bound. His broken, bloodied jaw throbbed. Sweat and blood drenched his ruffled shirt. A loamy musk of dirt and manure issued from the wagon bed. A loose front wheel caused the wagon to tilt and sway along the stony path that was flanked by Parisians who had packed Revolutionary Square, eager to witness the event. The spectators he passed eyed him cautiously, as they would a dangerous and rabid animal. These same people, not long ago, had kissed his hand and called him “The Incorruptible.”

As the wagon lurched through the square toward the platform, he sized up the guillotine. Once the force behind his principles, the blade of his virtue, he now saw it with clear eyes: a machine of hate, a deranged doctor’s love letter to the angel of death. Satan himself could not have created a more efficient instrument by which to destroy human civilization.

A small part of him still wondered how it could end like this, yet the realist in him had seen it coming for months. The Reign of Terror’s collapse. Implosion of their fragile new republic.

He would admit the Terror had brought out the worst in him. It had brought out the worst in all of them: the Girondins, the Jacobins, the Enragés, the military. Still, he had never intended to become an iron-fisted dictator. He followed the classical Roman

model of governance – rule according to the principles of justice and natural law – but when people crossed the line, they had to be punished. By death, if necessary. If a leader sat idly by, if he tolerated traitors, then he became a willful accomplice to their treasonous crimes. In times of revolution, one had to choose a side. If you stood in the middle of the road you'd be trampled. Terror without virtue was evil, yes, but virtue without terror was impotent. The two went hand in hand. You could not have a Revolution without revolution!

Speech had always been his chief weapon. He was physically weak, not imposing like Danton, and he lacked Mirabeau's charm, but he was cunning and persuasive. A master of propaganda, his well-chosen words, fueled by passion and zeal, had won over French hearts and minds. This morning, however, he could not speak. The broken jaw prevented him from rendering any last words.

He had nearly finished his work – that was the cruelest part –but his enemies were dedicated to destroying what he'd created, and it appeared they would finally succeed. Last night, after they shouted him off the podium of Assembly Hall, he had bolted like a skittish horse. A few hours later, when the guards came to arrest him, he placed the pistol under his chin and pulled the trigger. But he'd failed at that, too.

So here he was, sitting in a wagon, his jaw swollen like an anvil, waiting for a machine to finish the job.

9 Thermidor

Maximilien Robespierre woke tense and tired from shallow, uneasy sleep, and searched his closet for something appropriate. Like other revolutionary leaders, he favored plain clothing, eschewing the lavish, frivolous costumes worn by aristocrats and royalty, but

tonight he would likely speak to the Assembly and he wanted to impress. He chose a silk dress shirt with lace ruffles, his crimson velvet waistcoat, black breeches, silk stockings, and his buckled black shoes. An servant powdered his wig as he sat before the mirror.

Presently, he climbed into the horse-drawn coach. It carried him over cobblestone streets into Paris's government district. Some reckless, feral children played tag in the street, scaring women headed to market. A homeless man in tattered rags sat on a curb and begged for bread. At Place du Carousel he exited the coach and entered a gothic building. Two demon gargoyles hovered above the stoop.

"I'm tired of answering their lies," he said. He had convened the Committee of Public Safety to address the mounting criticism of his leadership. Lately his enemies had become more brazen. They called him a killer, a hatchet man, a dictator. They denounced him for running a police state. They said he used fear to orchestrate the Revolution and prolong the Reign of Terror. They said the blood of thousands who'd been executed under his reign could not be washed from his hands.

"Maxime, you have no choice," replied Saint-Just, his closest ally and confidante. "You must respond. The legislators are conspiring against you. They question your ability to lead. They question your sanity." Sunlight filtered through the window, streaking the side of his face.

"I'm getting attacked from all sides. The Moderés call me a mass murderer, but when I try to slow the executions, the radicals say I'm too weak and feeble to lead the revolt."

Paranoia consumed him. He trusted no one. Even here, among his inner circle, he smelled the acrid stench of betrayal. Billaud-Varenne and Collot-Herbois kept him at arm's length and often challenged his decisions. Look at how they exchanged glances,

they must be plotting something. And Couthon had the army's loyalty. He could turn the soldiers against him, persuade them to stop fighting, and let the Prussians and Austrians march right into Paris.

"They want power," said Saint-Just. "They want to control this Committee and replace all of us."

Power was a scarce drug and Maxime had been hoarding it. He had been essential to the success of the revolt, and he deserved to reap the rewards, but power had distorted his judgment and caused him to do foolish things. For God's sake, what else would have compelled him to change the months of the calendar, or to create a national holiday in his name, The Day of the Supreme Being? Even worse, he could no longer stop the executions. Last year he'd implemented the Law of Suspects, which allowed any ordinary citizen to arrest and detain any person he suspected of subverting or opposing the revolution. The law had been crafted to target foreigners and those who speculated in foreign currency, but it soon expanded to include anyone who spoke too critically of the revolution and its leaders. Now, a neighbor who disliked or harbored a grudge against a fellow neighbor could accuse him of being an enemy of the state. Maxime and the Committee had been rubber-stamping death sentences with no deliberation, as if they were small fines for misdemeanors. If he tried to end the Terror now, his enemies would smell fear and tear him apart, limb by limb. He had created a killing machine, but he could not turn the machine off, and now it was aimed squarely at him.

"Do they understand what is happening? Do they realize the Prussians and Austrians have invaded France, that they intend to occupy Paris and slaughter us all?"

“The people are tired of revolution,” said Billaud-Varenne. “So long as their stomachs remain empty due to the droughts and bread shortages, our words mean nothing. Bloodshed is all they respond to. The only way to keep their loyalty is to hold up the head of another traitor.”

“We lost popular support when we killed the king,” said Collot d’Herbois.

“That’s absurd,” said Saint-Just. “Everyone agreed he had to die.”

“We ended the Capetian dynasty. Their family’s bloodline goes back to Mary Magdalene. And we didn’t just kill the king. We cut off his head and then held it up in front of thousands.”

Maxime pounded his fist on the table. “King Louis was an impotent half-wit who made France the laughing stock of Europe. And Marie Antoinette slept with half the king’s court. Clearly they both had to die.”

“I think Danton’s death was our biggest mistake,” said Couthon.

Deep down in a corner of his heart he tried to keep hidden, Maxime knew this to be true. Killing Danton was the one thing he would take back if he could. They had once been closer than blood brothers. He had always envied Danton, a bright-eyed visionary with a generous heart who could seduce women with a smile and win over men with a great story. But he was too loyal. Too humane. He could not withstand the hot furnace of the Terror and its purges. When he refused to incriminate his friends, even those who had turned against him and the Revolution, Maxime called for his death. But the moment Danton’s head rolled off the platform, Maxime was no longer whole, either. He had lost his most important connection to his past life, along with his sense of hope and goodwill.

The people did not love Maxime: they feared him. They respected his devotion to the cause. The people had loved Danton. But Danton was dead, and Maxime reminded himself that he would rather be a survivor than a martyr.

“What’s done is done.” Saint-Just stood up and paced the room. “The king is dead. Danton is dead. We cannot change the past. Maxime, you need to look ahead. You need to address the Assembly tonight. Win the people back with your words.”

Maxime returned home to eat a midday meal his cook had prepared: duck à l’orange, roasted potatoes, and shallots. A bit indulgent, but why should he not enjoy a nice meal now and then? He finished a second glass of Bordeaux while he prepared his speech. For inspiration he opened his copy of Rousseau’s *Social Contract* and read from a dog-eared page: “The people want what is good for them but they cannot always see it.” He repeated those words aloud.

He declined his usual carriage ride and walked to Assembly Hall. He cut through an alley and watched a woman dump her bucket of shit from a second-floor window into the street gutter. He followed the left bank of the River Seine. A rat scampered over his feet and plunged into the river. The July sun was scorching. He removed his coat and traversed a foot bridge. As he passed a young couple, the man removed his hat and the woman curtsied. She wore a corset and low-cut dress. Her curled hair and soft features reminded him of Elise, his first and only love, the only woman he’d ever courted, the only woman he’d ever proposed to. Just before the wedding, however, her father rejected the union. Despite being a successful lawyer, Robespierre had come from a bourgeois family with a bad reputation— his father was an alcoholic who’d abandoned his family and left Robespierre to look after his younger brothers and sisters. From that moment on, he dismissed trivial things like love and set his mind on what he could

control, such as a political career. He'd been elected to the National Assembly in 1788 and had quickly made a mark with his radical views and powerful speeches. He desired power, respect, and fame, yet he also advocated a free and egalitarian France. He'd studied the American Revolution and believed France could establish a similarly-modeled democracy, and conversations with Benjamin Franklin, that flamboyant American expatriate, had only bolstered his conviction.

The Revolution had been Maxime's calling, his religion. Where others rejected the burden of leading France, of helping her achieve prosperity and reclaim old glory, he embraced it. Since he had no distractions – no wife or children – he gave himself freely to the cause. This made him different; his attention was undivided.

Maxime was a skeptic. While he believed in liberty and freewill for the masses, they were not equipped or prepared to govern themselves. They needed guidance. Most people wished to live simply and anonymously – come home from work, eat their meat stew and bread pudding, love their wives, play with their kids.

He governed himself with discipline and self-control. He drank wine socially, but never beyond his tolerance threshold. When his sexual urges could not be ignored, he would discreetly visit a brothel in the east end. Loneliness was a state of mind, and these days he was never alone; his face was now the most recognized in Paris.

He passed the Bastille Prison and turned onto Rue Saint-Antoine, recalling the spring of 1789 when they stormed the Bastille and freed hundreds of revolutionaries. Had it really been five years since then? Late nights at the Jacobin Club, discussing political theory and plotting the revolution. Shouting *Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité!* during protests in the Place de la Concorde. Back then, Paris hummed with vitality and revolutionary spirit. Anything was possible.

But this was also the street where he'd first killed a man. On a rainy morning in September, 1792, he'd been watching federal guards transport two dozen political prisoners – mainly priests and aristocrats who supported the King and had communicated with the Prussians, urging them to invade Paris and put down the revolution – to the Abbey St. Germain, a temporary prison. When a savage man came out of the crowd, grabbed a prisoner, and beat him with a club, others joined in. Within minutes a mob had crystallized. Someone handed Maxime a long metal rod, and when another prisoner began to run, he chased him down and clubbed him in the back, then once more to the head. Maxime watched the man die at his feet, the blood flowing out of his ear. The act of beating someone to death had made him feel like a Roman gladiator.

Later that day a band of revolutionaries hunted down the Princess de Lambelle, Marie Antoinette's close friend. They ripped off her dress and raped her, then cut off her head on stuck it on a pike. One man bragged that he would wash and curl her hair, make up her face, and implant the pike on the lawn outside Marie Antoinette's window. After five days of the September massacres, Paris had become a bloodbath: bodies were piled in the streets. The mob had killed not only prisoners but prostitutes, the homeless, even women and children.

As he entered Assembly Hall, the buzz and chatter grew. All the revolutionary factions were present. The radical Montagnards were shouting across the aisle at the conservative Girondins. Gothic buttresses anchored the ceiling. The tri-colored revolutionary flag, replacing the fleur-de-lis symbol, hung from the balcony.

Saint-Just found him and led him to a quiet corner. “Maxime, they won’t let you speak, that’s what I’m hearing. They’re going to shout you down and then call for your arrest.”

“Nobody will shout me down. They want to hear me speak. And once they do, they will once again be on our side.”

He never doubted his ability to persuade. As a university student he’d studied Aristotle’s principles of logic, and empiricists like Hume and Rousseau who wrote that knowledge is derived from sensory experience. As a young politician he had convinced his peers to kill King Louis XVI without a trial – agreeing to a trial, he’d reasoned, was a tacit admission that the king might be innocent and, consequently, the trial would be biased in the king’s favor. Since there was no question of the king’s guilt, there was no need for a trial.

“I think we should leave the city,” said Saint-Just. “We need to disappear until this dies down.”

“My friend, you worry too much.”

“Well, then give them a new list of enemies. The people want fresh blood. Appease their appetite.”

The Speaker of the Assembly yielded the floor, and Maxime took the podium. Yet he could not finish his first sentence before the shouts and jeers arose. He pulled out his kerchief and wiped his brow and waited for them to quiet down, but the noise only grew louder.

“What’s the matter, Robespierre? Why can’t you speak?” someone yelled.

“The blood of Danton chokes him!” shouted Foucher, his chief enemy in the Convention.

“Our nation is at war from outside and from within!” Maxime shouted. “The Prussians and Austrians are invading. There are riots in the south. These traitors want to tear us down and destroy our fragile republic. Are we going to stand aside and let them? We cannot stop the revolution now, we must press on.”

“What must be stopped is your terrorism!” shouted Hebert, another radical. “Murderer!”

“I have a new list of enemies here in my hand!” he replied.

“Robespierre is our chief enemy!” shouted Foucher. “He has placed himself above the Revolution. He not only changed the days and months of our calendar, he created a national holiday in honor of himself! But my friends, I assure you that Robespierre is no ‘Supreme Being.’ He is a dictator and he must be die!”

Maxime staggered off the stage. He had never been silenced before. His authority had been stolen, his confidence demolished.

Saint-Just grabbed his arm, and together they fled, running through back streets like wounded deer leaving a trail of blood. They took refuge in the Jacobin Club. They had a few hours before the police, armed with arrest warrants, would begin hunting them. There would be no trial, just a quick conviction of treason. Death would be the only sentence.

“What should we do?” asked Saint-Just.

“There’s nothing left to do but wait”

“So you’re giving yourself up?”

“No. I’m going out my own way.”

“We still have a few hours. We can flee the city.”

“The police will find us,” said Maxime.

“But the police report to us.”

“Not anymore.”

“Suit yourself. I will not die tonight, and I won’t give myself up. I’m leaving.”

“Good luck to you.”

“We were so close. What happened?”

“Je ne sais pas.” Maxime kissed his friend, then watched him exit the back door and disappear down an alley.

As he stared out the window, he wondered how history would judge him: as a champion of liberty, or as a tyrant and murderer? Had he lived two hundred years earlier, perhaps he would have been an explorer like Marquette or LaSalle or de Champlain, those heroic and adventurous men who discovered and colonized America. Oh, but who was he kidding? He was neither adventurous nor heroic but rather a cold, calculating politician who had created a labyrinth of lies and deceptions. But he’d lost his way, and they were closing in on him. They would be here soon, he heard their footsteps. The revolver felt heavy in his hand as he waited.

10 Thermidor

The blood from his jaw wound had soaked through his bandage and flowed down his neck. As he studied the faces in the crowd – peasant farmers, artisans, lawyers – he saw their ignorance and pitied them; they were blind.

The guards extracted him from the wagon. His devoted sister Charlotte, the only remaining tie to his family, broke through the crowd and hugged him. Before the guards separated her, and made him climb the platform steps, she straightened his collar and fastened the top button of his shirt.

The executioner, who wore a mask and had bulging forearms, grabbed the prisoner by the collar, like a dog, and secured his neck into the chute. Then he ripped the bandage from his jaw to ensure a clean cut.

Maxime closed his eyes and tried to unlock a happy memory. He tried to picture Elise, but the only thing he could see was the face – proud and defiant – of Danton. He had known all along that he would meet the same end. It was the only way. The last sound he heard was the release and descent of the blade.

A wheelbarrow had been situated to retrieve the severed heads, but Robespierre's missed the intended target. It rolled over a few cobblestones and came to rest beside an old aristocratic woman. The woman backed away, disgusted. She found a rag and wiped the blood from her shoe. Those around her studied the head with a mixture of shock and awe. As the crowd began to disperse, a hungry rat – smelling the blood – scurried toward Robespierre's head, crawled up his face, and began to feast on a spongy, gelatinous eyeball.

Dear Literary Magazine

August 15, 2010

Dear Fiction Editor of Highly Respected Literary Magazine,

Submitted for your glowing approval and orgasmic pleasure is my attached story “The Cat Is You.” As you know, I have sent countless stories to your magazine for thirty years, spending several hundred dollars on contest fees and postage. But I can say with supreme confidence that this new story is my masterpiece, the one that will attract a “big pimping” literary agent, secure a six-figure book deal with a New York publisher, and launch my career. It was called “the story of the decade” by a writer who prefers to remain anonymous. Let me ask you this: Do you want to leave an editorial legacy? Long after I’m dead, scholars and writers will be studying my diverse, eclectic oeuvre (sounds like a naughty word, doesn’t it?), which will likely consist of ten novels, two story collections, and a scandalous memoir. When they put me in the literary canon – Krampert comes right after Joyce and Keats – my work will be read and admired for decades. Do you want to be remembered and praised and as the editor who discovered Leonard Krampert?

What is my story about? Glad you asked. In a word, it’s about a week in the life of Nikolai Gogol, my cat. You see what “Gogo” sees and think what he thinks. For example, when his owner (me, Leonard) fills his milk bowl in the morning, Gogo’s excitement becomes your excitement. You experience Gogo’s abrupt metamorphosis when he becomes fully aroused and ready for action. He goes from Mr. Sleepy to American

Gladiator in 0.3 seconds! You follow him as he chases the red laser-pointer-thingy around the house, or climbs halfway up a wall to snag a cockroach and then tortures the roach like a terrorist before eating it. Sometimes he forgets his manners and urinates in my bed, or he bites my toes while I'm sleeping. Bad Gogo! Other times, he watches me when I'm on the toilet. Creepy! When I go out for the evening – my social calendar is always full – Gogo's loneliness and depression will tug at your heartstrings.

When he escapes from the house and embarks on a crazy adventure, you go along for the ride. He sneaks through a hole behind the kitchen cabinet and journeys into the wild, where he encounters a pack of stray dogs. These bullies control their “turf” like gang members. (The dogs wear black or red neck bandanas to show their gang affiliation. Right now, the Crips control our block.) Finally, without giving away the goods, the real drama unfolds when Gogo naps – his favorite pastime – and we enter into his dream world. In the well-crafted dream sequence, Gogo slips into a wormhole in the back yard and shoots down through a tunnel, which feels much like a waterslide. This wormhole ejects him onto a planet where cats rule society and humans are the pets. Are you hooked yet? Thought so.

Finally, a word about the narrative point-of-view. Yes, I'm aware of the potential pitfalls of second-person. It feels contrived when used by certain writers – I won't name names – but as you know, I'm a pioneer and innovator of this voice. Remember my story “Masturbator” that I submitted to you in 1984? Rest assured, you're in the hands of a *master*. Anyway, here is the updated version of my short biography:

Leonard Krampert was born and raised on the Planet Quasar. (Kidding, that's just me being eccentric.) Actually, he is from Intercourse, Pennsylvania, where he was “reared” by an extremist Amish family known for forcing their children into lewd sex acts with barn animals. He ran away from home at sixteen, and after

spending a few years sowing his wild oats, he became a lawnmower mechanic, a world-class bowler –last year he rolled a perfect game during the semifinals of the Lancaster County Bowling League – and a renown creative writer whose talent transcends all the genres. His awards include Second Place in the Meridian Elementary School contest. His fiction has been published in respected, envy-inducing magazines like *The Amish Review*, *The Mennonite Quarterly*, *Feline Monthly*, *Kitty Kitty Bang Bang*, *Cathead*, and *Hustler*. Important people have called Leonard’s fiction “spellbinding” and “catnip for fiction lovers.” Douglas Spaniel, the editor of *Cathead*, says “Leonard Krampert’s prose is the new standard of excellence in the genres of feline fiction and erotica,” or something to that effect.

So that about covers it. Since I’m sure you will want to publish this story soon, just a word to the wise: I am submitting “The Cat Is You” to your competitors, such as *The New Yorker*, *Granta*, *The Atlantic*, *Harper’s*, and *Paris Review*. So you’d better jump on it before it gets scooped up! I can’t wait to start negotiating payment terms and placement in your next issue.

Your partner in crime,

Leonard “Big Cat” Krampert

To: Editors@topliterarymagazine.com
From: Big Cat69@yahoo.com
Subject: Submission Query
Date: January 10, 2011

Dear Fiction Editor,

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year. Did you do anything fun for New Year’s Eve? I stayed home. New Year’s is so overrated. Been there, done that, know what I’m saying? I was invited to a party hosted by the President of my Quilting Club, but my cousin Sally was going to be there, and there’s a lot of sexual tension between us. It’s so

awkward to be in the same social circle as your ex. She keeps giving me the bedroom eyes at parties, but then she plays “hard to get” and I’m forced to stalk her for months. Talk about mixed signals! What’s a guy to do?

Anyway, since I have not yet heard back from you regarding my story, “The Cat Is You,” I’m interrupting my busy schedule to inquire about its status. I assume the delay has been caused by one of two things: (1) you have already accepted my story, and my acceptance letter was lost by our laughable postal service, or (2) your editorial staff is in discussion – not about the literary merit of my story, which you all agree is of the highest order, but about any slight changes or “fine tuning” to make my highly stylized and intellectually challenging story more “accessible” to your audience.

You should know that my attorney and I are presently negotiating with *The New Yorker* about payment terms and copyright issues. But we want to give you first choice. The ball is firmly in your court. Time to make your move. You know what they say: if you want to run with the big cats, you gotta piss in the tall grass and whatnot.

‘Nuff said,

Leonard

To: Big Cat69@yahoo.com
From: Editors@topliterarymagazine.com
Subject: Re: Submission Query
Date: January 20, 2011

Dear Leonard,

After careful consideration, we have decided that your story is not the perfect fit for our magazine. I’m sure it will find a good home somewhere else.

Best,

Fiction Editor

To: Editors@topliterarymagazine.com
From: Big Cat69@yahoo.com
Subject: Mysteries of the Universe
Date: The Ides of March, 3043

Hey Big Bully,

When you say “fit” I assume you mean that my story is too damn good for your *sad bastard* magazine, that it would eclipse all the whiny stories and self-indulgent poems you publish. The universe is a galactic orgy of light and heat. I am a black hole waiting to grind up a star. And that star is you.

Insincerely,

Big Cat

P.S. Since I’m no longer under psychiatric supervision, I have been skipping my medications. Lately I have become especially unstable and hypersensitive, and I react violently to personal criticism and perceived insults. Have a great weekend!

To: BigCat69@yahoo.com
From: Editors@topliterarymagazine
Subject: Re: Mysteries of the Universe
Date: April 15, 2011

Dear Leonard,

We have decided to ban you from submitting to our magazine for the duration of your life, plus an additional fifty years. If you submit any more work, we promise you it will never be published, although we reserve the right to post it on our office refrigerator, so we can share a good laugh during coffee or lunch break. Please do not

contact us again, ever. Your emails are now blocked and will be kicked back to you immediately.

Yours,

Fiction Editor

66 Maytober 1792

Re: The Reign of Terror

Dear Traitor,

You cannot have a Revolution without revolution! We are creating a world where everyone will be brothers. But to achieve this world, we must run the blade of justice against those criminal heads that rise among us, and you, sir, are the chief enemy of the new world order. The time has come for you to answer for your crimes and offenses. Can you hear that music? It is the song of the executioner playing for you! Tomorrow you shall meet your end. You shall be escorted to the guillotine at dawn. (Unless, of course, you reconsider and accept my story.)

Best wishes,

Robespierre (kidding, it's Leonard again)

Hot N Ready

Television would be dead in ten years, Greg thought. For some reason he imagined Television and the Internet as two middle-aged men from the same wealthy suburb, two neighbors in a well-guarded, artfully landscaped development with a name like Tyrolean Glen or Ballybunion Ridge or The Sanctuary at Brittany Plantation. But the Internet had more hair and a brighter smile. He had Popeye forearms and a square jaw. He read literary fiction and watched foreign films. He drove a sporty BMW. Television drove a Camry. Even his name, the Internet, carried more authority because it included a definite article. Greg also imagined that Television's wife and the Internet were sleeping together, which led to her divorcing Television, taking the kids, and moving in with the Internet. Before long, Television's kids starting calling the Internet "dad."

Greg had been raised on television. He watched music videos –back when MTV played them – and comedies like Cheers and Three's Company. He learned about sex from HBO and Cinemax movies. He loved sports on television, especially women's tennis. But television's greatest gift had been the Infomercial, mother's milk for insomniacs like Greg. He got hooked on them five years ago, after his fiancé had broken off their engagement. When he couldn't sleep through the night, he'd smoke a bowl and watch thirty minutes of bad acting. It helped him forget his broken relationship, shitty job, and mushrooming debt.

He loved all kinds of Infomercials. He loved the fake-interview format where a model, acting like a reporter, would interview the product's inventor. He loved overly exuberant pitchmen and their outrageous product demonstrations. He loved the creepy, hypnotic doctor with the acne-scarred face, soul patch, and black vest selling his latest miracle drug. "Just rub my Frontal Lobe Lube on your forehead every night," he'd say. "Within two weeks it will seep into your brain and make you charming, witty, and brilliant." Greg used to jerk off to the image of Suzanne Summers in a leotard squeezing the Thigh Master between her legs and winking at the camera.

Greg believed in television. He believed it still had something to offer the world, just as he still had something to offer. This explained why his rented, two-bedroom townhouse was now filled with Infomercial products. He clapped his lights off and on with the Clapper, stayed warm on winter nights in his Snuggie, barbecued chicken in his Ronco, repainted his vinyl siding with a power painter, and cleared his tiny yard with a leaf blower. The male enhancement pills gave his penis more heft and girth. The Q-Ring Ion Bracelet kept him calm over tricky five-foot putts. The Sham-Wow Towel soaked up minor floods. Blood and semen stains vanished with Oxy Clean. He watched his Chia-Pet grow!

Greg couldn't wait for the day they tried to sell an actual piece of shit on television: *Introducing the Incredible Pile of Shit! A steaming heap of organic goat manure delivered in a recycled wooden crate for only \$19.99 plus free shipping! The Pile has a hundred uses! Artists, use it to make sculptures or add texture to your paintings. Gardeners, fertilize your vegetables and flowers. Kids, light it on fire and see which family member stamps it out first! Endless fun!*

By the way, Greg's real name was Elmer, but the name Elmer made him sound like a glue-sniffer or a nineteenth-century farmer, and there were no good alternative nicknames. Elmy? Mer? Tickle-Me-Elmo? So he changed his name to Greg. He felt the name Greg evoked the image of a normal, friendly, All-American guy, like Greg Brady from the Brady Bunch, and other normal, friendly Americans named Greg.

This morning, like most, Greg jumped in his car and began the forty-five minute commute to work. He put on his Ambervision sunglasses and turned the radio to WDVE, Pittsburgh's best classic rock station. He clipped his Blue-Tooth behind his ear, even though he rarely received work-related calls, or any other calls. He enjoyed singing in the car and felt it was more socially acceptable if other drivers assumed he was talking on the phone rather than singing. Today he sang "Lady" by Styx, which tested his range. During his college years at Penn State, he'd played bass guitar and sung backup vocals in a metal band called Mad Dog. Their lead singer, Uwe, was a German exchange student with a high falsetto. Mad Dog played shows in college towns throughout the Mid-Atlantic, mostly bars or fraternity parties. They'd once opened for The Scorpions in Philly, but they never caught their big break and broke up soon after college.

Greg now lived on the south side of Pittsburgh. He took the parkway to his office west of the city. The parkway was normally bottled up in both directions, but even when traffic was light it seemed that something always slowed him down: disabled vehicles, snow, deer darting across the road, a hundred chicken crates falling off a truck. Today, orange cones were squeezing three lanes into one. The cones had been there for months, during which time no road work had been done. They had become a semi-permanent fixture. If Greg drove a full-sized pickup, perhaps he would have mowed them down, but instead he drove a Honda Civic: fuel efficient but not designed for running things over.

Stuck behind a cement truck, he crossed the Ohio River Bridge. A few coal barges slogged upriver toward the power plant.

He parked outside the Agtech building. He swiped his key fob to get inside and greeted Deborah, the head secretary. She waved cartoonishly and continued her phone conversation. There was a framed portrait of Deborah's granddaughter on her desk. An ugly baby, she had a large head and dark eyes and the ironic smirk of a teenage girl. In the background were fake horses and mountains. If he had to guess, he'd say the picture was taken at a discount studio, perhaps at the Valley Mall by a photographer who still had a mustache and feathered hair, circa 1984, and drove a cherry red Camaro or Trans-Am.

Greg hung his coat, filled his mug with stale coffee and powdered creamer, and walked down the narrow hall to his office. While his computer booted up, he set down his leather carry-all. Insecure men would have called it a purse, but Greg thought it gave him a professorial look. He pushed aside the unfinished work on his desk – some half-edited contracts and a monthly chemical discharge report indicating a spike in ammonia levels – and scrolled through his new emails. The one from Nelson said “Come see me when you get in.”

Nelson's office was decorated with ships, replicas of Navy battleships and pictures of big sailing yachts, though he was neither a sailor nor a Navy veteran. Nelson looked like Rick Moranis from *Ghostbusters*. During office meetings, as Nelson droned on about quarterly earnings or budget estimates, Greg would whisper “I am the key master. Are you the gatekeeper?” to his friend Julie and watch her stifle a laugh.

Greg knocked on his door.

“Have a seat,” Nelson said.

“How was Peter’s competition?” Nelson’s son was an aspiring figure skater.

“He nailed it, even the double axel.” They high-fived each other.

“I read the Penlab email,” Greg said. “Are they suing us now?”

“This pile of shit keeps growing.”

“Why don’t they go after the Dutch company that sold them the steel grids?”

Nelson explained that Penlab would have to sue them over in Europe and would probably lose under their contract laws. He said Agtech was their next target.

“But the Dutch guys assured us their grids would hold up to two thousand pounds. I’ve got the email.”

“And that email is our back door out of this thing. But we still have exposure.”

“You mean Kevin?” Kevin, Agtech’s chief engineer, had supervised the project. He should have had the grids tested on his own, but he fucked up.

“No, I mean the contract. The one you drafted. There’s no indemnification clause. There’s no language anywhere that says we’re not liable for a manufacturer’s defect.”

“It’s implied.”

“Nothing’s ever implied.”

“You told me to keep the contract simple. That’s the only way Penlab would sign.”

“I’m not the lawyer here, Greg. You need to take pride in your work. Take ownership. If you can’t do the job, I’ll find someone who can.”

Nelson was the Chief Financial Officer. Greg reported to him because the CEO was semi-retired and living in Florida. Greg’s job title was Legal Compliance Specialist. He’d gone to a second-tier law school and passed the bar exam, yet he didn’t feel like a real lawyer. He pushed paper and filled out forms and tried to look busy. He never went to court or wrote briefs or filed motions. When the big shit storms hit, Nelson always

called in the lawyers at Buchanan Kirkpatrick, with their Ivy League degrees and downtown Pittsburgh offices with ignored views of the river and the stadiums, dressed in their shiny wingtips and pin-striped suits. Greg wore Dockers and wrinkled button-downs.

Though Greg had been called a slacker more than once, it was more accurate to say he was resigned to mediocrity. He was a thirty-six year old white male from an educated, upper-middle class family. His father was an architect, his older brother a venture capitalist on Wall Street. For Greg to be considered successful, relative to a person with similar background, education, and experience, he would need to do things like make partner at a big law firm, run triathlons, and marry the perfect woman who'd give him three perfect children. But to achieve these things would require a flood of energy, drive, and discipline. There would be no time left for the quiet enjoyment of life. *Success* and *overachievement* sounded good on paper, but Greg didn't have the constitution for it. He was satisfied with doing just enough to be considered adequate.

Greg decided to go out for lunch. His coworkers always ate lunch at their desks, but he needed to break the monotony. As he drove through downtown Beaver Falls, the town where he grew up, he passed empty storefronts with broken windows, a tattoo parlor, the Army-Navy store, and the local Elks lodge. He drove under a banner that said "WELCOME JOE NAMATH" which had remained up since October when the favorite son of Beaver Falls, the former Alabama and New York Jets quarterback, had returned home to be honored at a high school football game. Greg had gone to the game and watched Broadway Joe hobble onto the field like a troll. He had not aged well, much like Beaver Falls. A decaying mill town, it was mostly churches and bars now. The steel mill had shut down back in the nineties. Some meth houses had sprouted on the outskirts of

town past Teasers, the strip club. A cluster of Amish people lived in the western part of the county, near the Ohio state line, but they weren't hardcore Amish. Greg would see them at Wal-Mart and Dairy Queen, or playing miniature golf.

Greg wondered how many young people had disappeared from here over the last twenty years. Not just from here, but from all the rust belt towns of western Pennsylvania and eastern Ohio. Thousands of laid off steelworkers had moved south to find work in the oil fields of Texas, or with construction crews in Florida.

The hardest hit of these towns – places like Brownsville, Braddock, McKeesport, East Liverpool, Youngstown – looked like they'd been petrified. Nobody cared, not even the local politicians. Greg imagined an Infomercial product that could, within minutes, safely and effectively erase these towns, just wipe away their dingy row house and empty stores and dead factories. It would be called "The Obliterator" or "The Expunger."

Greg stopped at a light near a shopping plaza. It was mild and sunny for early March, one of those days that made you feel giddy and reckless because you'd been stuck inside for months and you tasted spring even though it was still a few weeks away. On the sidewalk, a Little Caesar's Pizza employee, a young girl in tight white jeans and a black thong sticking out, probably nineteen or twenty, held up a sign that said "HOT N READY." She had blonde hair with purple streaks. Greg felt a buttery tingle run through his body. As she walked past his car, Greg rolled down the window and turned down his radio. Then he asked the girl if the sign referred to the pizza, or to her.

"Fuck off pervert," she said.

Oh, how the human race was doomed! He'd simply tried to inject a little humor into the life of another joyless, unfulfilled person, tried to make a life-affirming connection with another lost soul. People were so stricken with fear, anxiety, and

insecurity that they no longer engaged each other. Verbal interaction was the yardstick of intelligence. Mankind had developed and refined itself through discourse and the exchange of ideas, so what would happen now that the art of conversation had vanished, now that people judged you by your body language, your appearance, and your opening sentence?

Of course, Greg wanted to believe that the charitable, benevolent traits of his personality – *noblesse oblige*, the gentleman with the common touch – had persuaded him to speak to this girl, but this was only half true and he knew it. He tried to ignore the other half: that his twisted sexual impulses had caused him to roll down the window and say something perverted.

Greg went to his favorite spot for lunch, an Indian restaurant called Curry Favor. Like most days, the place was nearly empty. A small television in back always played the same Bollywood movie. He wondered how they stayed in business. Maybe the owners were independently wealthy. Maybe the restaurant was just a front for an Indian mafia ring, a shell business for laundering money, except the only other South Asians he'd ever seen in Beaver Falls were doctors at the hospital. He ordered the Lamb Roganjash and opened his book, a novel called *Maiden Voyage*. He'd found this book in the Erotica section of a used bookstore the other day. He picked up where he'd left off:

Dirk untied Brandy's robe, unveiling her luscious breasts and her bearded clam. Brandy reached into Dirk's briefs and pulled out his sword. With horny breath she whispered "Is Sinbad ready to sail the high seas?"

"The jib has been raised," he grunted.

She opened her legs and guided his throbbing vessel into her harbor. Dirk steered through the narrow channel and steamed ahead, faster and harder. Ready to explode, he pulled out and dropped his anchor on her heaving breasts.

Did they still publish books like this, Greg wondered? Of course they did. Words could not compare to the lewd images we saw on television, on the internet, on the street, images we saw every day.

After lunch he went back to the office but didn't feel like working, so he checked his Facebook page. Some guy he barely knew from high school had posted a message on his wall that read "Is Jesus Your Soul Mate?" Greg's ex-fiancé, Lindsey, had just posted some photos from her honeymoon in Niagara Falls.

Greg had thought about Lindsey every day for the last three years. He remembered going blind the first time he saw her by the pool – she'd been reclining on a deck chair, reading a magazine, her sunglasses pushed up into her hair – of the apartment complex where they both lived. The sunlight had combined with the sweat and suntan lotion on her legs to generate a lustrous sheen, so bright that it momentarily blinded him. He also remembered how things ended: finding a white laundry crate on the hood of his car that contained his movies, CDs, and clothes. There was no engagement ring packed inside the crate, just a note that read "I'm keeping the ring for what you did to my cat." After discovering that Lindsey had been cheating on him with another teacher from her school, he'd thrown her cat in the dryer and turned it on the Heavy Duty cycle. He regretted that decision.

Greg kept a Shake-Weight dumbbell in his office, in case he wanted to squeeze a five-minute workout into his busy schedule. He picked it up and assumed an athletic stance: feet spread, knees slightly bent. Then he held the dumbbell in front of his face and shook it. It made a sound like maracas. When Nelson passed his office, he shot Greg a disapproving look.

Greg stopped his workout and sat back down. From his desk he could see across the hall into Richard's office. Richard was the head of the Information Technology Department. Above his desk was a picture of a gray wolf gnawing on a large piece of raw meat. The caption below the wolf read, "If you bite off more than you can chew, then swallow it." Greg figured he'd swallowed a lot, considering the bulge around his waist. This morning he was yelling at his staff in the next room about the latest problem.

"The fucking server crashed again?" he said. "Why did we ever buy IBM? Their prices suck, their service bites, and they can't handle our network traffic."

The other day Greg heard them discussing how to fix the CEO's computer, which had crashed from a porn site virus.

If there was one thing Greg had learned from his years in the corporate world, it was that office workers pushed around more shit than a dung beetle. The goal each day was to minimize responsibility and disseminate as much work as possible onto other people.

Around three o'clock, Greg turned his attention to a confidentiality agreement with Bayer that required revision. He tried to manufacture some excitement by following Nelson's advice. "Own this contract!" Greg said out loud a few times. Although it failed to motivate him, Greg gave the document a thorough edit before handing a copy to Jim.

Jim was in his fifties. He had a gray afro and thick-framed glasses. He wore sandals, jeans, and a plaid flannel shirt. There was a Buddha sculpture on his desk. He directed the Bioscience Division and was in charge of product development. He had a doctorate in Plant Biology. After graduate school he'd spent three years in Ecuador. He was always coming up with wacky product ideas, most of which never got past the

planning or developmental stages. But an organic weed killer he invented had provided a valuable revenue stream for the company, so he was free to keep tinkering for a while.

Greg knocked on Jim's half-open door and stepped inside his office.

"How's the legal eagle?" Jim asked.

"Can we go over this Bayer contract?"

"Have a seat on the bean bag, it's better on your back than these hardback chairs. But before you sit down, I need a taste-tester for my latest product." Jim handed him a bottle of dark tan liquid. "It's a mushroom-flavored energy drink. We're calling it a Shroomy Smoothie. Try it."

Greg took a sip, hoping it might be hallucinogenic. Instead he had to stifle his gag reflex.

"Yeah, we need to balance the taste levels. I think we need to add some sweet or sour."

"I like the name." Reluctant to say any more, Greg changed the subject. "So how was Barbados?"

"Sublime. Check out my photos." He turned around his laptop, which ran through a slideshow of Jim and his wife scuba diving, sailing, and drinking. "They know how to live down there. Reggae music, umbrella drinks, friendly people."

"Never been to the Caribbean," said Greg.

Jim reclined in his chair and scratched his balls. "Son, you need to loosen up."

"I appreciate it."

"You got a girlfriend?"

"Nope, dodging bullets."

“You need to find yourself a nice rich gal and start a family. Let her parents do the heavy lifting, know what I mean?”

“That could work. So, here’s the final draft of that contract.”

“Tell you what. Just email it to me, and I’ll forward it to Bayer. I never read those things, anyway!”

“I never do either!” said Greg. “Just kidding. Sort of.”

When Greg got home from work, he cooked a steak on his Foreman Grill and watched the first period of the Penguins-Sabres game. He checked his Match.com profile: no new messages, not even any winks. He had dated a Russian woman for a few weeks. She told him her work visa had expired and she needed to marry an American citizen to stay here. Then she broke up with him by text message, saying she wasn’t ready for anything serious. What a cowardly act, to break up with someone by text. He thought about calling immigration and reporting her.

In light of the boring hockey game and the warm weather, Greg decided to get out of the house. He chose a trendy bar in the university section of town. It was called the Brillo Box, after a Warhol painting. Pittsburghers were proud that Warhol grew up here, ignoring the fact that he fled to New York right after college and slandered his native city until he died.

Greg found a stool at the quiet end of the bar, ordered a Maker’s neat, and glanced around. At a small booth were four older men, one wearing a black beret. Educated burnouts and priggish liberals, probably talking about the fascist Bush regime. At the far end of the bar, some young lawyers or bankers dressed in business casual chatted about golf or work while checking stock prices on their Blackberries and I-Phones.

Some hipsters filled out a large table: guys in skinny jeans and white sneakers and vintage porkpie hats, girls with bangs and thrift store sweaters and wrinkled skirts. Probably art or creative writing students from places like New York or L.A. or Seattle. Still living on their parents' dime. Free to pursue their artistic whims and sleep until ten every morning. But what did they have to write about, he wondered? Had they ever fought in a war or been in jail? Had they ever worked a real job? They hadn't yet experienced the abject pain and failure that life inevitably doled out. If they waited five or ten more years, they'd have plenty to write about. He remembered something he once heard from a comedian: In your twenties, you think you know everything. In your thirties, you realize you don't know shit. He wondered what happened in your forties. Maybe by then it didn't matter.

He was like none of these people here, nor did he want to be, but at least they all belonged to some identifiable group. They could walk into a bar on any given night and find a few of their own people. Greg couldn't do that. He would occasionally go out and catch a metal band, but he was usually the oldest guy there. He no longer had his own people. He lived on an island, but not some cool Caribbean island that attracted hot European women. More like a remote island in the Pacific, surrounded by ledges that sunk boats. An island that all the ocean currents slanted away from. An island that was inhabited by a tribe of cannibals.

Greg couldn't sleep that night. He kept thinking about the Little Caesar's girl. There was hostility in her eyes when she'd told him to fuck off, but there was also pain and longing in those eyes. She was reaching out to him, in her own way. He needed to rescue her, and he knew how to do it. In high school, he was an expert at making mix tapes. He used to give them to all the girls he liked. He would make a mix tape for the

pizza girl and give it to her tomorrow. What an elegant solution. He hoped that she was into early metal: Black Sabbath, Dio, Iron Maiden.

From his bed, he turned on the television and flipped around for an Infomercial. The creepy doctor was selling his Frontal Lobe Lube again. He had never tried it before. He had bought so many other Infomercial products, why not try the one that could improve his life the most? The testimonials were incredible. The woman who went from secretary to CEO of a Fortune 500 company. The bald, paunchy man whose IQ went from 96 to 153. What would happen to Greg? Would the pizza girl would find him charming and clever? Would other attractive women want to date him? Would he become a bad-ass super-lawyer? What did the future hold for the new-and-improved Greg? Starting at \$29.95, the possibilities were endless.

Wild and Wonderful

You needed good hands to operate the continuous miner. You had to know when to hold back and when to go deep. It was the best-paying job in the mine but also the hardest, and I was out of practice. I hadn't worked underground in five years and had forgotten how hard it was just to walk down here. The tunnel was less than five feet high – I had to crouch a little – but at least I wasn't working in those dogholes where you crawled around like rats. And it beat working a strip mine. That wasn't even mining, just blowing up hillsides and mountaintops with dynamite: destroying the land, flooding creeks and hollows. Down here at least I felt like a real miner – okay, maybe that last part was bullshit. With two divorces and a ballooning mortgage on a house nobody would buy, I was down here for the money. I guess that made me a greedy old redneck . Then again, a fifty-five year old miner stuck in West Virginia with no college education didn't have too many choices.

The continuous miner was a scorpion-on-wheels, long and low and dangerous. It cut the same amount of coal that ten or twenty men would cut with their pick axes and shovels back in the old days, only faster. The ripper head – a rotating cylinder on the front of the machine covered with sharp steel tips, like claws or fangs – spun around and gouged coal from the seam. But it was tough sledding tonight. My hands felt stiff and heavy, and I was pushing the controls too hard. This seam I'd been working was narrow, so I had to cut through a lot of rock and shale. The ripper head was loud and threw up

sparks when you cut through rock and got quiet when you were in the coal. Tonight it was loud as a chainsaw, until the machine died and everything went dark.

“Whoa! Hold up!” Wild Man yelled. He was one of the roof bolters on our crew, which suited him because he had a few loose bolts in his own roof. His real name was Scott, but nobody ever used his real name.

“What happened?”

“You tripped the generator.” Wild Man’s face was caked with soot. His new teeth glowed like white heat.

“Didn’t break the cable, did I?”

“Naw, it ain’t that bad.”

I’d pushed the miner too hard through the rock. It got too hot and sumped up the outside generator and killed the power. This happened all the time in small mines with old generators. Jerry the electrician would have us back on line in twenty minutes. It wasn’t a major fuckup, not like busting the machine’s power cable, which wasn’t that hard to do. If the cable got caught between the ripper head and the wall, it could shred. The cable alone cost about ten grand and I’d seen guys get fired for shredding it.

Luke, another roof bolter, came over. I told him it was my fault.

“I could use a break anyhow,” Luke said.

“You got any dip?” I asked him.

He flung his can of Copenhagen at me. I took a fat pinch and worked it under my lip.

“Haven’t worked with you in years,” Luke said. “Thought you was retired.” Luke reminded me of my oldest son, Zeke. He had respect for his elders. He did things the right way and didn’t take shortcuts. Zeke died in the mines three years ago. Methane gas

explosion. They said it was instant. Only twenty-four years old. Could the world get any crueler than that? My other son, Derek, was a different story. He was doing five years in Moundsville, the state penitentiary, for cooking and selling meth.

“I missed y’uns too much.”

“So how you doing, you know, health wise?”

“My doctors didn’t want me down here after the heart attack, but that was five years ago. I passed the physical, so here I am. And I can still run coal better than you turds.”

“You always did have the touch,” Luke said.

“How’s Denise?” I asked.

“She’s been living in Pittsburgh the last couple months. One of them temporary nurse jobs. Good money. She wants me to move up there.”

“You should. Don’t let that one get away. Trust me, you don’t want to be down here at my age. I’ve seen all the ups and downs. Right now coal’s in high demand and we’re all making money, but it won’t last.”

“Nothing else to do around here,” Wild Man said.

Our shift ended at midnight and I’d made five cuts. Our target was seven per shift, but five was enough to keep them off my ass, at least it used to be. I drove home through the center of town. It was dead. Only the whine of two crotch rockets burning up Main Street. My truck wormed its way up White’s Hollow Road.

My bulldog Lucky greeted me at the door. Tina was asleep on the couch, wearing only a Bon Jovi t-shirt. A pizza box, can of Iron City, and bottle of Vicadin were on the coffee table. The television was on, that same George Clooney movie she’d seen a hundred times.

As I watched her sleep, a strange thought hit me. As someone who enjoyed hunting deer and wild turkey, I'd always believed that men were hunters, that the male species was hardwired to hunt, kill, and provide. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized it was bullshit. All the women I'd been involved with were better hunters than I'd ever be. They used all their skills and weapons – whispers, smiles, body language, clothes, perfumes, hairstyles – to snare me. And I got caught every time, like the dumbest animal in the woods.

Things had started out hot with Tina, like they always did. She'd wear the tightest jeans or skirt that would make her ass pop like a blooming onion, juicy and round enough to make you weep. I used to love watching it bounce. But after she moved in, she just let herself go. These days she sat on the couch and drank beer or smoked my weed while she watched her soaps. Her closet was full of clothes she could no longer fit into.

Then again, I wasn't exactly the picture of good health, either. I slowed down after the heart surgery, which had left a zipper scar from my throat to the top of my stomach. We didn't make love much anymore, and I refused to take any pecker pills. Those were for senior citizens and Republicans. Still, I was too tired to be alone, too old to be trolling the bars.

I found it hard to enjoy anyone or anything these days. Maybe I'd forgotten how.

Tina stirred awake as I sat next to her.

"How was work?" she asked

"Same shit, new day."

When my disability benefits ran out six months ago – unemployment ran out long before that – she told me I had to go back to work. When I asked her to cut back on

her luxury expenses, like her tanning appointments and shopping trips, she said they were necessities not luxuries.

“I’m going to bed early,” I said. “Can you turn that down?” In the movie, Clooney was seducing some hot Italian woman. “How many times you gonna watch this movie?”

“Why do you care?”

“If you like him so much, why don’t you go to Hollywood and fuck him?”

“Maybe I will. I’d rock his world.”

“He wouldn’t even let you suck him off.”

I ducked to miss the beer can she threw at me.

“White trash motherfucker,” she said. “You got a broken dick and no more government checks coming in. That’s a low batting average. You’re lucky I’m still here, and not out fucking one of your miner buddies. If you don’t watch your mouth, you’ll have to find someone else to change your diapers.”

I felt a stir in my groin. That was the most passionate thing she’d said to me in a long time.

As I drove to work the next morning, I noticed a billboard with the new state tourism slogan: “WEST VIRGINIA, WILD & WONDERFUL!” At least it was half true.

Walking across the bridge – probably on her way to the high school – was a hot piece of jailbait ass. She had on tight black jeans and boots. Ten years ago I would have picked her up, taken her straight to the Mountaineer Motel, and given her a real education, but now she’d just call me a pervert and tell me to fuck off.

I looked down at the Monongahela River and thought about my dad. When I was a kid we used to fish the Mon all the time, up at Brady’s Bend. I remember the time he

picked me up by my ankle and dipped me in the river and told me, “Now you’ll be invincible.” For a long time I believed him.

The old houses crammed together on the bluff all had something wrong with them: no windows, busted porch steps, a jacked-up car with no tires in the yard. The low bank of heavy clouds concealed the ridge tops. Patches of snow covered the hillsides, but not enough to make it look pretty. The trees were skinny and bare, like naked old men.

Back in the seventies, VISTA workers were crawling around Fairmont – clean cut, eager-eyed boys in khakis and collar shirts. They’d tried to sign people up for literacy and job-training programs and whatnot, but after a few years they gave up and went home. Most everyone had given up on this place, even those who stuck around.

As I pulled into the mine entrance, things felt different, out of place. Sam the manager waddled out of the office trailer and yelled for me to come inside. Sam was a perfect asshole. Since he’d made the switch from mining to management, his loyalty to the miners had disappeared. His head was so far up the mine owner’s ass he couldn’t even see with night vision goggles.

There was a younger guy in the office who I didn’t recognize.

“Larry, sit down,” Sam said. “Now I ain’t saying you’re doing a bad job, but you know we need six or seven cuts of coal per shift. That’s the quota. That comes straight from the top, Mr. Lambert. He’s the one who writes my check and I gotta listen to him. You’re just not pulling your weight right now. This is Jamie, we brought him in –“

“To take my job,” I said.

“That ain’t true. You’re gonna split time running the miner. You make one cut, then he makes the next. When you’re not running the miner, you’ll do something else,

like help bolt the roof or load the coal on the conveyer. We need an extra guy on the crew, anyway, and he's got some experience. It's just a little healthy competition."

"Suit yourself. That's why they pay you the big bucks, right Sam?"

"Just do your job and you'll be fine."

I scanned this new kid from head to toe. He had spiky hair, acne-covered cheeks, two earrings in his right ear. "What's your last name?" I asked

"Bosco."

I think I went to high school with his old man. I remember him being a pussy, too. "Did you get a note from your mother to be here?"

"Don't get too excited and piss your pants, old timer."

Once I left the office, the fingers of my left hand started twitching like they were battery-powered. That was the other thing wrong me with me. Sometimes, out of nowhere, my left hand started to shake. I think it was triggered by stress. I balled my hand into a fist and slammed it against my truck door to make it go away.

I told Luke and Wild Man that they'd brought in a ringer to take my job. I pointed out the new guy.

"Who, that kid?" Wild Man said. "He looks like he can't even find a clit. How is he gonna find seven cuts of coal in a shift?"

"That's bullshit," Luke said. "We won't let him take your job, don't worry."

"I can handle it."

This whole shit show reminded me of those scabs who broke our picket lines in the eighties and took our jobs for three months while we went on strike. But that was back when the mines were unionized. Now hardly any of them were. Lambert Coal sure

as hell kept the unions out. They had the worst safety record in the state, and they weren't too picky about who they hired: inexperienced guys, guys with drug problems.

We jumped on the electric shuttle cart that took us a mile deep into the dusty, dark mine. When the shuttle stopped, the foreman told me I'd be first on the miner. I got situated and started cutting the coal. The tremors in my left hand had stopped and I was feeling good. The miner was deep into the seam and running smooth. Without too much rock or shale to bust through, I finished the first cut in forty-five minutes. Solid time.

Then it was the new kid's turn. He started cutting faster than me. I could tell he'd done this before.

"Watch and learn, old man!" he yelled. I could barely stand to watch him, the cocky little prick.

I always thought I'd die in a coal mine, that a fire or methane explosion would take me out. Since I'd spent most of my life working in them, I figured I ought to die there, too. Once I was trapped in a flooded mine for a couple hours, but that was the closest I'd come.

I'd heard a few stories of old-timers who killed themselves – or tried to – underground. There was one guy who'd caused a roof to collapse. He did it by taking out some bolts, and lodging a stick of dynamite into one of the holes. But he also killed three other miners in the process. I wasn't about to kill anyone else.

Still, as I watched the kid operate the continuous miner, part of me thought I could pull it off. That machine was so big and wide, the operator couldn't see anything but what was in front of him. When he backed it up, he'd run right over me. I was a small guy. I felt sure that a two-ton machine running over my weak chest would kill me.

Even better, people would call it an accident. They'd say I tripped and fell and couldn't get up in time. Nobody would question my manhood or label me a coward after I was dead. I'd been dying slowly for years, so why not finish the job? My life had no more purpose. I never spoke to Derek anymore. As for Tina, she was a wild animal; I would never tame her. Some people never learned from their own mistakes. I guess I was one of them. There was nothing left for me here.

I made sure the new kid didn't see me as I walked behind the machine. I studied how far up and back it was going. I thought about where to lie down. But I couldn't go through with it. I kept thinking about what I'd look like if I somehow fucked it up and survived.

When I walked back around to check his progress, I noticed that the power cable was jammed between the ripper head and the coal face. It was starting to shred. The new kid hadn't noticed it yet. I thought about saying something, but it wasn't my responsibility. Instead, I walked down to Section Two and checked on Wild Man and the other roof bolters. Wild Man tried to drill a two-foot steel rod into the hole he'd made. The rod was covered with hot glue and was supposed to bind onto the shale above the roof and stabilize it, but he couldn't align it and it kept getting stuck.

"C'mon, you fucker," he grunted.

Suddenly, things got quiet. I looked behind me. The continuous miner had stopped running.

I went back over and played dumb. "What happened?" I asked.

"No clue," the new kid said.

I examined the cable. "Looks like it shredded."

"How?"

“If I had to guess, it got stuck between the machine and the wall, and the ripper head just ate right through it.”

The foreman came over from Section Three. “Damn son, that’s an expensive piece of equipment,” he said. “What were you thinking?”

“I didn’t see it,” the new kid said.

“How could you not see that? I think you need go back outside and talk to the boss man. Larry, you go ahead finish the shift on this thing.”

It took the electrician half an hour to patch up the cable. Once I started running the machine again, I don’t know what came over me but I was working faster than ever. I made seven more cuts in five hours. Must have been the adrenaline.

When the shift was over I walked up to the office, ready to tear Sam a new asshole, but he started talking first.

“Larry, I heard what you did for us tonight. I’m sorry I ever doubted you.”

“You’re goddamn right.”

“I promise you that kid’s never coming back. You’re the man from now on. And if you stick around, I can get you a twenty-percent raise.”

I rubbed my goatee. “I can stick around for that.”

Luke had waited for me outside. “You saved us tonight. Hey, we’re headed to Sully’s Tavern. You up for a drink? I’m buying the first round.”

I was all jacked up – part of me wanted to go down to the bar with the guys – but I was also dog tired. “Maybe. I got to run home first.”

Tina’s car was gone – my first clue. Then I opened the front door: the place was half-empty. She’d moved out while I was at work. Her note on the kitchen table said “I’m leaving. Don’t know for how long, I just need time to figure some things out.”

I looked around the living room. She'd taken all the furniture. All that remained was the sour smell of suspicion and love gone bad.

I couldn't stay here tonight, so I jumped in my truck and went down to Sully's. I wondered how long my lucky streak would continue.

Here Is What We Know

Lightning cracks pierce the predawn quiet. Thunder rattles the ridges rimming the hollow. He changes into overalls, steel toes, hard hat. The electric shuttle hums through coal dust and sulfur stench. He gets out and walks to his work station. He hears a blast. Then a low, deep rumble – not thunder, something more vile – bickers the dirt floor. He finds his crew. They creep through the dark tunnel toward the entrance, but the smoke is too thick. They retreat, and erect a wall with boulders and concrete blocks to keep out the bad air. Their canisters hold an hour's worth of oxygen.

They spend the morning behind the wall. To kill time, some talk about what they'll do after they get rescued: go hunting, buy a fishing boat, take their families to Myrtle Beach. He pulls out a deck of cards and plays solitaire, using his helmet lamp. His mind drifts. He thinks about Gina.

Outside, you know the drill: the town mobilizes, rumors are exchanged, friends and family scramble to the church. Mine rescue teams and television crews bolt to this tiny blip on their navigation devices, the signal dropping out in the mountains. When the silver-haired CNN reporter is finally ready, he looks into the camera and says, *Good evening from West Virginia. Here is what we know. Twelve miners are trapped in a coal mine. Rescue teams have begun the search. Officials believe lightning struck an*

electric cable running into the mine, triggering a blast. Others say high-methane levels were to blame for the explosion.

He wheezes and coughs. His head pinches, like it's clamped in a vice. The empty oxygen canisters lay scattered around the bodies. He hears distant voices and thinks it must be the rescue crew. He shouts for help. One rescuer hears him and radios a message to the outside: *I think they're alive*, he says.

Word spreads like gasoline fire. Family members of the miners burst open the church doors, hugging and screaming as the television cameras roll. The CNN reporter goes back on the air: *We have some incredible news. This is unconfirmed, but we've just been told all twelve miners have been found alive. Stay tuned for updates.* The governor calls a press conference. *Believe in miracles!* he shouts into the microphones.

When the rescuers finally reach him, he is gurgling and sputtering like a boat engine. They load him into a helicopter bound for Pittsburgh Presbyterian Hospital. Less urgency with the others: they discuss whether to bring them out on stretchers or in body bags.

Police officers herd the families back into the church like cattle. The mine owner – button-down shirt, khakis, cowboy boots – stands at the church altar like a felon asking for mercy. *I'm afraid there's been a terrible mistake*, he says. *We found all twelve, but only one is alive.* A baby starts to wail. A wife in the front row stands and approaches

the mine owner. She lunges at him, her right hook missing wildly. She collapses at his feet. Two officers pick her up and carry her out as her screams fade.

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EDUCATION

University of Mississippi Oxford, MS
2009-2012. M.F.A in Creative Writing (Fiction)
Recipient of Grisham Fellowship
Will graduate in May, 2012. Current GPA, 3.94.
Master's Thesis in progress, a short story collection called *Sea of Ice*

Bowdoin College Brunswick, Maine
Received Bachelor of Arts degree (History major, English minor), May 1996
Graduated with departmental honors. Made Dean's List each year.

Dickinson School of Law Carlisle, PA
Earned J.D., May 2001.
Internship with Pennsylvania Attorney General's Office.
Passed Pennsylvania Bar Exam, 2002.

University of Iowa Iowa City, IA
June 2007. Attended summer session of The Iowa Writers' Workshop.

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Graduate Instructor, Univ. of Mississippi English Dept. Oxford MS
Summer 2010. Taught English 102, **English Composition II**.
English 102 fulfills the second half of the University's first-year writing requirement.
Summer 2011. Taught English 351, **Contemporary American Literature**.
Spring 2012. I am currently teaching English 211, **Introduction to Creative Writing**,
a workshop-style class where students study the craft of fiction, poetry, and creative nonfiction,
and do some writing in all three genres.

Adjunct Instructor, Butler County Comm. College Butler, PA
Taught evening section of Business Law during 2004-05 academic year.
General survey course on the relationship between business and law.

