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The Waiting Unknown: Stories

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
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Abstract

These collected stories are a narrative exploration of a collective life in middle-class suburbia. Here the reader is introduced to a troop of characters who share a community but yet they are adrift in the atmosphere between identity and memory. At times, as in “When to Lie” and “Afraid of the Question” we see conflict arise when the suburban religious dogma alters character identity, leaving behind haunting memories and scar tissue. Memory and identification play an important roll when, as in “Rx” the protagonist is faced with the sudden loss of his family as he struggles to keep their memories alive—without their memory he is no longer a father or a husband. Whether the characters are looking to re-engage in society after being done wrong, as is the case in “Playing the Game” or coming to terms with sudden loss, afflicting memories play an important role in each narrative.
Introduction

The stories in this collection, *The Waiting Unknown: Stories*, represent the work I have done over the last three years as a graduate student in the University of South Florida’s MFA program in creative writing. As well, they are a sample of two book-length collections of short stories that will soon be completed. The first collection, *Red Pop and Ritalin: Stories*, is a linked collection of stories that share a small suburban lifestyle in which the cast members bob and weave from one story to the next. The second collection, currently titled *YOU*, is a non-linked collection of short stories told from a male perspective and deals with individual relationships. The stories in *YOU* are either told in a second person point of view or the reader is directed to a “You” character. The stories in *The Waiting Unknown: Stories*, I believe, demonstrate the narrative dexterity I’ve developed over the last few years.

In order to understand where I’ve landed, it is important to look at my jumping point. In my first creative writing class, I wrote a short story in which the male protagonist met his mother in a diner. His mother had left when he was a young child and this was to be their reunion. However, the narrative lacked a story. The protagonist sat in the booth waiting for her arrival, during which he smoked, drank coffee, and relived the events that brought him to the restaurant. Because the story was a thinly veiled episode ripped from the pages of my life, it was cathartic to write. Unfortunately, the protagonist was a passive observer without a clear conflict and zero resolution. So often we are told
as fledgling writers to “write what you know.” And we do, sort of. We write about events that happen to us. We disguise autobiography as fiction. What we don’t understand is that the “what you know” is not necessarily the events of our lives, but how those events affect and form our worldview.

Determined not to make the same mistake again, the stories I wrote after were far from autobiographical. I wrote of fictitious twins overdosing on ecstasy, home invasions by stalking mental cases, and defeated office workers on shooting sprees. While these stories had a clear conflict and usually a resolution, they lacked voice—my voice. I worked hard to remove any of my real life from the fiction. By excising “me” from my writing, I left behind a trail of empty letters, words, sentences, and paragraphs.

Ernest Hemingway once said, “When writing a novel a writer should create living people; people, not characters.” Before I started the MFA program at USF, I created really good characters. They had interesting backgrounds and intense life experiences. What I wasn’t doing was creating living people. I wasn’t creating people readers cared about—people who exist, if only in that single story.

Over the last few years, I’ve worked tirelessly to turn my characters into living people. And I believe I was able to accomplish this by evoking those early lessons: writing what I knew. That’s not to say that I resorted back to autobiography but rather I discovered the ability to slice a small event from my life and ask, what if? Let my mind wander around awhile and see what might have happened in somebody else’s world.

For example, in the short story “When to Lie,” we have an expensive bicycle stashed away so that a father could file an insurance claim. In the story, the bike is forgotten and later is given to the protagonist. In my real world, the bike was stashed,
then weeks later given to a much-too-young neighbor. But the event itself, the stealing of
the bike, is what intrigued me. I asked myself, what if that happened in a different
world—my world, but different. This process allowed me the freedom to take the feelings
and moods that this small memory evoked and weave it into my story.

I believe it is through my understanding of the fundamental concept of writing
“what I know” that I was able to push my prose to a higher level and develop a newfound
confidence in my writing. And because of this confidence, I’ve learned to trust myself
and to not be afraid when writing what I didn’t know. I know this seems contradictory
but it seems to me that fiction writing requires the author to step away from the world
that he/she understands and enter an alien world. In this world of the unknown, the author
can find the freedom to use the mind to imagine what could happen and to then write the
outcome of daydreams and fantasy. There is much liberty to be found in the “what if.”

For example, in “Rx” the reader is invited into the desperate world of a
protagonist who recently and tragically lost his wife, his son, and his will to live.
Throughout the narrative the protagonist is searching for ways to keep his family alive in
his memories because the memories are all that prevent him from pulling the trigger.
Fortunately, the events of this story are fictitious and are a direct result of “what if.” What
if you lost your family? What if the gun was unloaded?

I have also found that how a story is told often affects the reader’s involvement.
My early writing focused on a straight narrative, often told in a first person point of view.
My participation in the program has granted me the time to explore and craft different
narrative techniques and given me the freedom to use character point of view as a
strategy from which a story is told. For example, in “Playing the Game” and “Book of
“Puzzles” I chose to use a second person point of view to create a detached yet empathetic relationship between the reader and protagonist. This technique leans on the reader and forces him/her to walk a mile in the protagonist’s shoes.

What I didn’t understand nor accomplish in my early writing is the merging of the “what if” with my personal world view. I didn’t lend voice to the casts in my stories, I didn’t give them life, and I feel that over the last three years, my work now has life—my characters are now people.

In order for me to move my prose to elevated levels, I took to reading as much as possible, not only for pleasure, but for discovery. This is the part where I should say that I turned to the masters of the craft; I should open my Norton Anthology and insert the obligatory Hemingway mention. I should talk about Chekhov. I should pay homage to the recently deceased like Updike, Vonnegut, and Salinger. I should say that their work is what helped me to form my work. Their work did influence my work, but I feel like you’ve heard that enough. I’d much rather discuss the contemporary writers I turned to for a focused study on craft and technique.

Point of view is critical to my writing and over the course of the last three years, I have sought out writers who used these techniques to their advantage. Lorrie Moore’s Self-Help, for example, was instrumental in the study of second-person technique. I should also tip my hat to T.C. Boyle, Jonathan Franzen, Michael Cunningham, and Chuck Palahniuk—each of whom played with point of view and narrative structure. In their own way, they have taken the seemingly ordinary and benign moments in life and pushed them over the edge—making them risky and dangerous, scary and funny, ugly and absurd—in other words, beautiful.
Because of the somewhat dark nature of my stories, I try to infuse humor so that the reader isn’t overwhelmed. Humor is a tricky technique. In order for humor to work, it needs to be naturally occurring. In my opinion, if a writer forces humor, most likely it will fall flat. To understand the craft and art of funny, I turned to contemporary writers such as David Sedaris, Chuck Klosterman, and Sam Lypsite. While all three utilize different techniques for their humor, they all write in such a way as to not draw attention to the writing of comedy. A.M. Homes has recently been the object of my literary affection as well. Her use of the absurd creates a traumatic comedy, one where the reader feels the need to laugh—because it is laugh or run away in horror. Similar to David, Chuck, and Sam, Holmes places the narrative attention on the moment; not on the writing of the moment. Hence, the reader is lost in her brutal, funny, and sad world.

I’d like to take a moment and awkwardly transition to my future outside and beyond the MFA. My immediate short-term goal following graduation is a two-phase plan. The first phase is a one-week vacation in front of the television. I have yet to decide if the week should pay homage to cheesy 80’s movies like Flash Gordon, Teen Wolf, and Bill and Ted’s Excellent Adventure or if I should spend the week watching Zombie movies. Either way, I will spend the week on the couch decompressing.

After my week, I will start my two-year plan of writing. Because the summer is short and I have a lot I’d like to get accomplished, I will start right back to work.

First, I have a few more stories to write in order to complete both of the collections of short stories I have in progress. Each collection presents its own set of tasks. The collection Red Pop and Ritalin: Stories still needs at least two to four more stories to be complete. As well, I will also need to go through each story; edit and weave
the narrative threads to create the connecting links that bind the collection. The second collection, *YOU*, is in need of three to five more stories and revision to be complete.

I also have two book-length projects I will start writing. The first is a novel whose premise is still vague but forming. In a nutshell, two childhood friends form a rock band, the band breaks up on the cusp of success, and the two follow separate paths which intersect 20 or so years later. I am also forming a creative non-fiction book that explores the effects of growing up in a suburban utopia—potentially exploring themes of race, class, and fundamentalism.

I also hope to continue to teach one or two creative writing courses each semester. I find that working with students is rewarding in that I can help emerging writers as I have been helped. I also believe that teaching creative writing will keep me on my toes as a writer and will help me to stay involved in the writing community.

Finally, I have been playing with the idea of editorial work. I have given some thought to putting together an anthology of unusual, mostly undiscovered yet great short stories. As well, my experience with literary journals could lead me to join an established team or start a new journal. While I have much interest in the editorial side of writing, I am a writer first, so 90% of my energy is going into my two-year writing plan.

As I finish up with the MFA program, I am excited about the endless possibilities that await me and look forward to exploring the various worlds my writing will take me to.
Rx

Bryan woke at 1:21 a.m. for the 116th straight night, and he knew he would not sleep again until 4:07 a.m.—not a minute before. Grief is what the good doctor called it on his first visit to the strip-mall shrink. The good doctor described it as an episode—as in “What do you do when an episode occurs?”

“I watch TV,” Bryan said. “I get up, go to the den, and watch football.”

“Football, at that time?”

“I watch a videotape of a football game.”

“What else?”

“That’s it. The 1991 NFC Semi-finals game.”

“You only watch that one game.”

“And the commercials.”

On Bryan’s second visit, the good doctor called it a cathartic release and wrote him a script for sleeping pills. He said, “Try not watching TV—break the ritual. Try classical music or buy one of those nature disks with chirping crickets and rain.” He gave Bryan a reassuring smile and handed him the small piece of paper. “Chirping crickets can be very relaxing.”

Was it a ritual? Bryan wondered. He didn’t think so, at least not in the sense that going to church was a ritual. Ritual was sacrament. Ritual bestowed grace. No, this was
more like habit, as in a creature of. The same room. The same videotape. The same gun. But then, the good doctor didn’t know about the gun. Every episode started the same. Every episode ended the same. No, not a ritual, he thought. Cathartic, maybe. Torture, probably. But a ritual, definitely not.

Bryan threw back the blanket, stood, and walked to the den. The room was a tribute to circa 1982 with its plush forest-green carpeting and faux-wood paneled walls decorated with yellow brass light fixtures, seagull wall art, and dark-wood shelves displaying shiny trophies and chrome picture frames of Andrew and Amy.

Bryan looked at the VHS tapes stacked 15, 20, maybe 30 high—three leaning towers of plastic. He thought, in those piles are tapes filled with dancing purple dinosaurs, blue cartoon dogs, and a yellow sponge with an ear-piercing voice and a fondness for tighty-whiteys. There are tapes filled with made-for-TV melodramas where former child actors (now grown up) and has-been sitcom stars kill TV fathers and husbands with axes and butcher knives and gasoline. And then there are the tapes filled with playoff football games. Old games from ESPN Classic—games from ten years ago, last year’s games, and the so many in-between. All those tapes and not one containing his family.

They’d talked about redoing the room, he and Amy, tearing down the paneling. Throwing a light paint on the walls, maybe a tile floor. A new leather couch and some plants—maybe a silk bamboo tucked in the corner. They planned to get rid of the tapes and the old TV. Replace them with a flat screen and TiVo. But then people die—Amy dies, Andrew dies—and suddenly the color of the carpet isn’t all that important. The comfort of a couch is trivial. TiVo is pointless.
Bryan crossed the room, opened the side-table drawer, pushed aside a pile of small white sheets of paper, took out his gun, and placed it on the TV table. He sat on the couch, a loose spring jabbing him, and with the remote he pushed play.

The good doctor had asked, “Why do you only watch that tape?”

“I like the game,” Bryan said.

He hated the game. He hated everything about it. The cold fans uselessly cheering, then booing. He hated every player and every coach. He hated the color commentary most, with all those statistics and trivia. He didn’t need to be told that the snow was really falling now and it was wreaking havoc on both teams. He could see that.

Just as he could tell by the score, the defense stayed home that night.

But he had to watch this tape. This tape was his punishment, his penance because he recorded over his family. He knew they weren’t there anymore, but still he put the tape in the VCR, wanting to see his son and his wife full of life again. Instead, he got this game.

Bryan told the good doctor, “I like that I know what’s going to happen.”

“You should try a warm bath? Try warm milk?” He handed Bryan a new piece of paper. “This one is a little stronger,” he said. “But I think a warm bath might help too.”

In the den, on the TV, muted, the replaying of that football playoff game on a snow-covered field—a late-night classic. Bryan watched as the players tried to warm
their hands on the sidelines. Thousands of fans were wrapped in red blankets—losing team colors—a 31-0 blowout in the second quarter. He thought, it won’t be long before the stadium clears out. Another good kick—34-0. Bryan scoffed and shook his head.

Bryan thought about the images, the lives that were on this tape before the game. He could almost see Andrew doing homework while his mom off-camera narrated, “Aw, look at my smart boy.” Bryan couldn’t remember what she was wearing, but he could see her messy hair when Amy was caught walking down the hall early one morning, no coffee and no patience, and Andrew, offstage, said, “Say something for the camera, Mom.”

“Something.”

“Seriously, Mom,” Andrew had pleaded.

“I need some coffee, please, Andrew, not now.” But the camera stayed in her path.

On the screen, Amy looked puzzled, then said, “Today is a good day. Everyone is alive and healthy and the sun is shining, point the camera toward the window. Show your audience the sunshine.” She pushed the camera toward the kitchen window.

“Mom.” Andrew’s voice teetered on a whine.

“I don’t know what to say. Why don’t you go point that thing at your dad. Go on, I want to have a cup of coffee and read the paper.”

From the time Andrew was born, Amy talked to Bryan about buying a video camera. She argued that it would be great to have a movie of him growing up.

“But they’re really expensive.”
“These times are priceless.”

“Can’t you take still pictures? You never use the camera anymore.”

“It’s not the same.”

It took years, but Bryan broke down. He bought a used VHS camera at a garage sale. It was big and clunky and old—its battery held 15 minutes of charge time—but it recorded movies. And it was fun. For a few weeks, the three of them took turns pointing the camera, trying to capture life. The first few days brought moments of self-awareness—that awkward feeling of not knowing what to do or say when the camera was recording. But that feeling faded and life with the video camera was normal, until they sat and watched their movie.

The camera captured Bryan sleeping.

“You didn’t believe me,” Amy said. “Always in denial.”

“I guess I scratch my butt when I sleep too,” Bryan said as the tape continued to play.

“That’s not all you scratch, Dad,” Andrew said. Bryan could see that Andrew was proud of his camera work. He was proud to record real life. But still.

“Yeah, let’s erase that part,” Bryan said.

“Absolutely not. These are great memories to keep,” Amy said. “We won’t be erasing the things that embarrass us.”

With a man down on the field, the TV screen cross-faded from vintage grainy film to the modern-day Technicolor and Bryan squinted. Beautiful, large breasts strangled in red lace invited him to call. Her lips murmured something like “lonely” and
“call me.” Bryan picked up the gun, opened the chamber, and counted the bullets out loud, breaking the silence of 3 a.m.: 1,2,3,4,5,6. He flipped his wrist, snapping the chamber closed, and spun the reel with a sheeezzzz.

The good doctor asked, “What are you afraid of?”

“Forgetting.”

“Forgetting what?”

“They. Us.”

Each night Bryan tried to remember different scenes of their life together. He’d get a fragment here or there, but he always came back to that last day. Bryan had worked in the yard all morning and the last thing he wanted to do was drive to her dad’s house. What he wanted to do was sit down on his shitty couch and watch a game. He wanted to fill his wobbly tin TV table with pretzels and a cold beer.

“How can I stay home with Dad?”

“No,” Amy said. “You need to visit with your grandparents.”

“I wanna stay home with Dad.”

“You get to hang out with me all the time. Go spend time with your grandpa and grandma.”

“But they’re boring and I’m not even allowed to sit on the couch.”

“Get your things,” Amy said.

“But Dad, can’t I…”

“Listen to your mom.”
Andrew ran off and Amy cozy’d in next to Bryan on the couch. “You sure you don’t want to go?”

“Let me think about it—dinner with Howard and his going on about how health care will destroy this country—how the left wants to socialize everything and destroy all his hard work, how liberals will steal the legacy that he wants to leave to Andrew. No, I think cold pizza and rerun TV is a better option.” Bryan nuzzled Amy’s neck. “You sure you don’t want to cancel?” He playfully nudged her with his elbow. “Huh? You know? You can give them a call. Tell them Andrew has a book report or a 110 fever.”

“Mom’s been cooking all day.” She kissed Bryan. “I’ll leave early, though, I promise.” She squeezed his leg, stood, and left. He tried to remember what Andrew was wearing before they left. He tried to remember if he told them he loved them.

Bryan told the good doctor, “I’m afraid of the black shadow over their memory.”

“Try exercise before bed? Muscles release endorphins that relax the body, alleviate stress. Try some push-ups or sit-ups. Take a long walk or masturbate.” The good doctor took out his little pad. “Don’t underestimate the exhaustive power of an orgasm.”

Bryan pointed the gun at the perfect television breasts, then at the VCR whirring in the silence, and whispered gun-shooting noises. He placed the gun down on the TV table and a new commercial took his mind away from the red lace and sexy taunts—away from the gun.

An anguished mother in the kitchen with her son—blurry—she takes weary hands to her head. Large yellow words streak on the screen, pause, and vanish. Headache?
Stuffy nose? Irritated eyes? Sinu-gone eases your burden. A lens slide and the boy is instantly clear. The boy, much like his Andrew, with wavy brown hair and a pre-teen swagger, says something to the audience, to Bryan—something he cannot hear.

Bryan first noticed Andrew’s swagger at the mall while they were looking for a birthday present for Amy. A swagger that ebbed and flowed as they walked in and out of the shops. When Andrew ran into his guy friend he exuded confidence, but when he passed by a gaggle of girls a year or two older, he seemed to shrink. Even so, his eyes were glued to them—curious, borderline hungry. Bryan knew he would need to talk to his son about growing up, soon.

“He’s cute,” one girl said as they passed.

“Who is he?” asked another.

“He’s in my sister’s class. She has a crush on him.”

“They’re talking about you,” Bryan told his son when they were safe from earshot.

“So.”

“Do you want to go back and talk to them? I can go grab a Coke.”

“No, what would I say?”

Bryan ruffled his hair. “It’ll come natural.” Bryan thought, *The talk can wait, you still have time.*

When the auto insurance commercial appeared on screen—a car driving with a woman looking in the rearview mirror putting on lipstick, another car swerving across the yellow line—Bryan turned off the television.
He watched the scene every day in his head—a looping film reel—over and over. Not the TV cars with reckless actors. He watched his car, his wife driving carefully. He watched a teen in a pick-up truck, messing with his radio, or playing with his phone, or lighting a joint. He watched this guy cross the yellow line. An ocean-blue Camry, a black-and-rust pick-up, a swerve, a pothole, a blowout, brake lights, Camry airborne sideways into the rear quarter panel of the pick-up, setting off a twirling tango that left the two vehicles wrapped around a 100-year-old oak.

In the dark, Bryan opened his mouth and wrapped his lips around the barrel of the gun. He pulled back the hammer.

The good doctor had asked, “What do you think about when you’re watching this football game?”

“I think about death.”

“Specifically?”

“Her death. His death. I think about the death I want to deliver.”

“Do you think about your death?”

The first time Bryan tasted the barrel of his gun was the day of his family’s funeral. He drove home, sat on his couch, and stared off, wondering what was next. After nearly two hours, Bryan looked at the media shelf that housed their collection of VHS tapes. Where is the tape we made? he wondered.
One at a time, he inserted a tape into the player, pressed play, stop, fast-forward, play, stop, fast-forward—looking for his wife and son to appear on TV. When he reached the end of each tape, he said, “One of these has to be the one.” He placed the finished tape on the pile and inserted the next, whispering, “It has to be here.”

When he reached the last tape, he sat in a heap on the floor and decided he’d had enough. He stood, walked to his bedroom, and removed his .38 from the lock box high in the back of his closet. He sat on the end of his bed and put the barrel in his mouth and pulled the trigger.

Hot urine ran. He looked at the unloaded gun. Bullets. He went to the closet, found the box of shells, hidden behind Amy’s shoeboxes. He loaded the gun, sat on the bed, and stared down at the weapon. After an hour, he set the gun on his pillow, stripped off his wet clothes, showered, and dressed. He took the gun to the den, sat on the couch.

His mind raced with delays. A letter, he thought. I should write a letter. Why bother, he countered. It’ll be obvious. Not here, the mess. I’m not going to clean it. The camera. What about the camera? The tape is in the camera. There is one more tape. It has to be in the camera.

Bryan put the gun on the TV table and went to the coat closet. Inside the camera there was a tape. It’s here. He grabbed the tape and nearly tripped rushing it to the VCR. He sat on the couch with remote in hand and hit rewind. I’m not going to miss a minute of this. He listened with giddiness to the buzz of the tape rewinding. When the tape stopped, his chest ached and he hit play.
Their movie-making grew into a game. Each player was looking to catch on camera something even more embarrassing than the last gotcha. For a few weeks, the camera could be anywhere at any time. Andrew captured bed hair in the morning, snoring and butt scratching during naps. Amy captured drinking from milk jugs, belching, and farting. Bryan caught more than one extraction of a wedgie, and then there was the shower invasion. Most likely trying to catch Bryan by surprise, Andrew snuck into the bathroom one morning, video camera recording. He jerked the shower curtain back and found both his parents in the shower. The game ended abruptly.

When the bathroom door re-closed, Amy said, “You’ll want to erase that.”

“Yep. Consider it done.”

The good doctor asked again, “Do you think about your death?”

“Why would I? I’m not dead.”

“Is that a problem?” The good doctor took out his little pad. “Try this. Lie on your back and wiggle your toes up and down twelve times, wiggle the toes of both feet at the same time. It’s very relaxing. Try to visualize something peaceful or something boring.” He handed Bryan the small sheet of paper. “Imagine a jellyfish in the ocean. Jellyfish are both peaceful and boring.”

Bryan took the gun from his mouth, released the hammer, and set the gun back down on the table. He licked his lips and tasted the oil. Bryan turned the TV back on. 41 to 0—20 seconds left of the third quarter.
He got up from the couch. He grabbed a couple of the good doctor’s little sheets of paper from the side table drawer, walked out the front door, and stood on the porch looking out to the neighborhood. Four blocks up the street was a 24-hour drugstore. He could walk there in 20 minutes. Be home in less than an hour with the pills. He couldn’t force his feet to move. He listened to the wind through the trees. He listened to a lonely cricket nestled in the yew and remembered it was that time of year when Andrew would beg to set up his tent in the back yard so he could camp.

Bryan walked to the back yard, looked at the area where Andrew’s tent would be if…

If.

His son had tried every year since he’d been eight to sleep out in the yard by himself, but it was too scary and Bryan found himself dragged out by 10 or 11 to sleep on the unlevel, unsoft ground. Except, he remembered, last year Andrew did make it. Bryan remembered sitting on the couch at 10 waiting for Andrew to come in. At midnight, his son still had not come in to ask for company and there was a moment of fear that something bad had happened. He walked outside to check on Andrew, bare feet cold from the dew-covered grass, only to find him fast asleep in the tent. Bryan remembered the feeling of relief that Andrew was safe, the feeling of pride in his son’s bravery, and the pang of sadness because it felt like Andrew didn’t need him anymore. He remembered.

Bryan wiped his eyes and went inside the house. In the den, he placed the papers and the gun back in the side table drawer. He lay down on the couch, propped his head on
the armrest, and stared at the ceiling. Shadows from the TV roamed the room, filling it with the chaos of a pretend life.

When the room lit bright again, Bryan knew that the red-laced woman was back to further tempt him. He knew that the next commercial would be for Bud Light and the next for Burger King. He knew that in about three minutes the visiting team would score for the last time, giving them a 48-point advantage over the home team. And he knew it was time for a new ritual. He pushed eject, shut off the TV, and stared into the pitch dark. Bryan imagined the Sponge Bob cartoons that Andrew was so fond of. Tomorrow, he thought, if I can’t sleep, I’ll watch cartoons. He visualized the yellow sponge chasing jellyfish with a butterfly net. He looked toward his toes and wiggled. One, two, three…
I don’t remember a lot of things about us. About you. From back then, all those years ago. You were the pastor’s boy. That’s what the adults called you, “the pastor’s boy,” not Todd. I always found this strange. I mean, I get why they didn’t call you the pastor’s kid, what with all your sisters, how many were there, four or five? Pastor’s boy in that light makes sense, but why not the pastor’s son? After all, you were his only son, the one to carry out the family name. You were expected to marry a nice girl and have grandbabies or at least a grandson so he too could carry on the line of…what was your last name? I don’t remember your last name.

We were both 13; you were three months older and half a foot taller. It was early summer and we were swimming in your freezing cold pool. *Marco. Polo.* Your sister, the one with blonde hair, and her friends lay around on the lounge chairs trying to catch a tan. Soon she would be old enough to drive her friends to the beach where the older boys lay in wait. But now, they giggled and talked about girl stuff in a hushed whisper. One of your sister’s friends stood up and walked to the edge of the pool, bent over to feel the water—her boobs practically falling out of her bikini top. I stared at them. You stared at
them. When she stood back up, complaining that the water was way too cold, she caught us.

“You like what you see, boys?” she asked. She licked her lips, like all those MTV video sluts, and lowered the string to one side of her top. She let her boob pop out so that we could see the whole of it, uninhibited.

We stared.

Your sister got angry. “The little squealer’s gonna tell my dad,” she complained. “And I’m gonna get grounded.” I wondered which one of us she considered the little squealer. Her friend covered up and walked back to her chair. Before she sat she asked, “You aren’t gonna tell the preacher man on me—are you, boys?” I shook my head no. We both did.

I had a crush on your sister; well, all of your sisters, but the one with blonde hair was my favorite. She was the closest to our age, only two years older. Still, I never told her. I doubt she would have cared that her baby brother’s little friend liked her—not then, when we were 13, not when we were 14—and not a few years later, when I saw her and her boyfriend at the mall—a few months after your funeral.

I regret not talking to her that day as she let her boyfriend buy her a pretzel. I could’ve said, should’ve said, “I’m really sorry for your loss.” I could’ve given her a hug, and said, “Todd was a great guy.” Should’ve.

I was afraid—afraid of the question. Not the one where she asked, “Why didn’t you come to the funeral?” Not the one where she asked, “Why did you stop hanging out
with Todd? You two were such good friends.” No, those questions were easy—sort of. I was afraid of “Do you know why he did it?”

I don’t know why you did it. Not really. You didn’t seem the type, not when we were friends. When we were friends, you pretended to be a normal teenage boy. But then didn’t we all pretend to be normal—just a little?

Sometimes, when I’m thinking about things, things like this, like you, I wish I could remember better. I want to remember some of the small details, like your last name, your sister’s name, the one with blonde hair, even her friend’s name, the one who showed us her boob. But more importantly, I wish I could remember what we used to talk about back then—when we were friends. I wish I could remember why I think we were such good friends—why everybody thought we were such good friends.

My mom took me to your dad’s church—an old elementary school converted to sanctuary. In the gym, under the basketball hoop, your dad saved my mom, showed her the path to everlasting life. He told me I needed to accept Jesus Christ as my personal Lord, and I did, because back then, I listened, I did what I was told.

After I was saved, I was sent to the youth group, where I met you and a few of your sisters and that girl Carla, the one who got pregnant, and that older boy, Sean. He was like 15 or 16, right? You thought he was cool because he could grow a mustache and wore muscle shirts and because he actually had muscles. His arms weren’t skin-covered sticks like ours.
Every Sunday, after youth group, while our moms gossiped and your dad tended to the flock, we played board games, goofed around, and talked. Once, during a game of checkers, you told me about your secret girlfriend.

Your dad was serious about sin. I mean he wanted no one in his congregation to backslide. He used to tell us all the time, “Check your heart.” He used to say, “Root out that evil. If you die in sin, then you shall inherit hell for all of eternity.”

There was that one Sunday when youth group was cancelled and we all had to sit in with the adults. Since that girl Carla got pregnant, your dad felt it was imperative for us to hear his sermon on lust and sex. For nearly two hours, he quoted Old Testament—about spilling of seed and lying with men. He preached about lust of the flesh and he systematically told us how bad sex was. That it was sin. “Masturbation, sin. Looking at porn, sin. Lusting,” he said, “over the guys or girls at school, or at work, or even here in the holy sanctuary, it’s all sin.” He rattled it all off, louder and louder—sex before marriage, oral sex, kissing: sin. “Homosexuality,” he roared, “sin.” And he slammed his Bible closed. “And sin,” he finished in a quieter, more dad-like voice, “is the pathway to your soul’s destruction.”

After the sermon, while you jumped my last king and left me with one last trapped checker, I asked if you knew what oral sex was, and you whispered that you thought it was when you talked about sex.

“What? Really? You can’t even talk about it?”

You laughed. “No,” you said. “Oral sex is a blow job.”

I laughed along with you and said, “Ohhh,” like I knew what a blow job was.
Did I ever tell you? Shortly after I joined your dad’s church, I lost all my friends from the neighborhood—all the kids I’d played with since my family moved on the block in second grade. And that loss was sudden. One night, inches and inches of fresh new snow fell from the sky, and the next morning—no school. The guys all came down and we played tackle football on the front lawn. We spent most of the morning shoving our friends’ faces deep in the snow. Scooping fist-fulls of the white powder and dumping it inside the collars of thick winter coats. And then my mom made lunch for us all. But before we could eat our peanut butter on week-old store-brand white bread, we had to say prayers.

“Like grace?” my friend David asked.

“No, not grace,” my mom said. “That’s what those Catholics do. No, there will be none of that. We need real prayer. You all need to pray to Jesus. All of you need to accept Jesus into your heart.” And for a long time my mother told my friends, the kids I used to go to catechism with, about the absolute necessity of turning their lives over to the Lord and the sin of being Catholic. After prayer, we sat quietly eating our sandwiches—the bread a little hard from sitting too long in the dry heat of furnaced air.

When we were allowed to go back outside, my friends decided they wanted to go down the road to the playground. I said, “Hold on,” and ran in to ask for permission.

By the time I negotiated permission and raced back outside, they were gone. I ran to catch up. I ran all the way to the park—my cheeks numb, my ears throbbing, and my lungs closing from the cold—but nobody was there. The snow was still fresh and untouched.
I wondered about other things. I wondered how you could keep your girlfriend a secret from your dad. I wondered why I didn’t know your girlfriend’s name. I wondered about that girl Carla, the one who got pregnant. Was it possible she was your girlfriend? It’s not that big of a stretch. I mean, after all, you knew that oral sex was a blow job and you knew what a blow job was. But then, if you were having sex, wouldn’t you tell me—because that’s what best friends do, right? They tell each other things they can’t tell anyone else.

At the beginning of my first all-night lock-in with the youth group, the boys had to fold and stack all the chairs that were set up for church service so that the basketball court would be available for a game. And so we could, at midnight, both boys and girls, spread out our sleeping bags on the floor and sleep—girls on the visitor side of the court, boys on the home side, next to the altar. There was basketball and dodge ball for hours. Pizza, chips, and pop. The youth leader, Karl, brought his boom box and we listened to Christian music loud and proud. We even got to watch a video on TV. The tape was a church movie, but still, it was TV—a rare treat for many of us. Of course there was Bible reading and praying, but by now, that was so much part of life every day, like brushing teeth.

While we were stacking the chairs, you told me more about your girlfriend. You said you kissed her a bunch of times. You said that kissing another person, real kissing, was awesome. You said that it’s best when you both chew different kinds of gum or eat different candy, and then you try and guess the flavor when you french kiss. I can admit it now: I thought you were lying. Seriously, guess the flavor of somebody’s tongue? I asked
who this mystery girl was. “And when,” I asked, “could you possibly have the opportunity to kiss her?” You just laughed, said, “That’s my secret.”

When we were ready to play, you and that older kid, Sean, were picked captains. You picked me first, because we were best friends and only a best friend would pick me, the second shortest and by far the worst basketball player in the building. We lost three straight games because I kept passing to kids who weren’t on our team. And because the guys were getting pissed at me, you said, “No worries.” You told the team it wasn’t my fault, it was Karl’s because he wouldn’t let us play shirts and skins and it’s too hard to know who’s on your team when everyone’s wearing the same “Christ is King” navy-blue t-shirt.

During the third game, you took an elbow, from Sean, to the side of the face and it knocked you flat. After he offered his hand and helped you to your feet, he gave you the ball and said, “Take your shots, that was completely a foul.” Except, it wasn’t.

In prayer circle that night, when we each had to offer up something to pray for, Sean offered up your face in prayer; he asked for a fast healing. And then you offered up his elbow, that the next time it would stop before striking someone. And everyone laughed. I was angry with you, or jealous, over this banter. Then it was my turn and I had nothing.

I don’t know how you did it. It’s not that I forgot; I simply never asked. On purpose. I didn’t want to know. I don’t want to know. Though I do hope you chose sleeping pills or carbon monoxide. I hope you chose something that let you peacefully go to sleep.
I wonder if you left a letter. A note. I wonder if you placed blame on others, indicted those who failed you. I wonder if I’m in that letter. I should be. All those years ago, that one night, when I could have chosen to be a friend, accepted you for you, but instead, I taunted you, then walked away—hid from sight until I could make you disappear.

Even with the pregnant Carla controversy, even though I was still grounded for a bad grade on my last report card, my mom let me go to the “end-of-summer” lock-in. She said I could use a break. I did deserve a break. For most of that summer, instead of riding my bike, or skateboarding, or swimming, I had to sit at the kitchen table writing scripture. That summer I wrote all of Psalms, all of Proverbs, and I wrote all of Revelation, twice. I also wrote in repetition the Ten Commandments. Each commandment I wrote 1,000 times. I wrote 10,000 commandments and I wrote John 3:16 500 times. By that night, the end-of-summer lock-in, my left hand and forearm were taut writing machines, while the rest of me was pasty and weak and angry.

That night was the last night we were friends. We stacked the chairs; we turned over our five bucks for the pizza and pop, and we picked teams for basketball. Karl was captain this time, and you. And there was a lot of smack-down between you two. A bet was placed. The losing team had to set the chairs back up in the morning. You picked first. You picked Sean; I took a step forward before understanding that my name wasn’t Sean. I stepped back. Karl picked David. You picked Chris. Chris? Karl picked Bobby. You Travis, he Dennis, you Tony, he Shane, you Corey. And there I stood: the last man standing.
I wish I could say that my anger drove me to play better. It didn’t. I wish I could say that I contributed to your team’s loss. I didn’t. But I cherished the win nonetheless. After the game, Karl led our team in prayer, giving thanks for our victory.

Later, after prayer, after scripture, we ate pizza and you acted like everything was cool. You challenged me to checkers. Sean said, “Later, we could play poker.” He told us he brought three rolls of Neccos. “We can use them for chips.” Then one of the girls knocked over a pop bottle—spilled Faygo Redpop all over the floor. Karl sent you to get the mop. In the chaos of a girly squeal and laughing and five or six people scrambling with piles of cheap napkins to absorb the sticky redness before it spread, nobody noticed Sean went with you.

After five minutes, you still had not returned with the mop and Karl called for me to go find you, “Now. And tell him I said to hustle.”

I ran out of the gym and toward the maintenance closet. The closet was in the toddler wing and there were no lights on. The halls were dark with darker shadows. I slowly walked down one long hall, then turned left toward the closet.

It was dark. I can’t be sure what I saw. Not really. But there you guys were, kissing. You and Sean. Kissing. He had you pressed up against the wall. His face close to yours. Kissing.

I didn’t say anything. I didn’t make a sound. I turned back and walked to the gym. I crept back to the table. I told myself that this wasn’t really happening. It was dark. I didn’t see what I saw. Couldn’t have. You were both boys. Boys don’t kiss boys. Boys kiss girls. You kiss girls. You told me so. You told me a lot of things.
A couple of minutes later you walked in, wheeling the mop bucket—hot water steaming. You mopped the floor. Sean put up the wet floor signs, and when everything was cleaned up to Karl’s standards, you both put everything back in the closet.

Later that night, after the church video, you asked if I wanted to play a game of checkers. I said, “No.” You gave me a look, one that said, “What did I do?” You never asked me, but still the look said everything. I said, “I don’t want to play checkers with you.” I said, “Maybe you should go ask him to play with you.”

“Ask who?”

“Who do you think?”

I wonder if you ever got into a fight. A real fight—against another boy—hands balled up into tight fists and thrown toward the face, or the stomach. Did you ever punch somebody? You should have. You should have punched me, that night. I said, “Who do you think?” and I puckered my lips in an exaggerated kissy-face and kissed the air three times with as much anger and hatred as I could muster. You should’ve punched me. Right there, on the basketball court, standing before the altar, with the chaos of teen frolic, in front of everyone, in front of no one. I would have punched you back. We would have fought. Sean would have pulled you off me. Karl would have pulled me off you. My eye would blacken while your nose bled and neither of us would answer Karl—neither of us would tell him why exactly we were fighting. Karl would make us shake. He’d make us ask for forgiveness, he’d make us forgive. And things might have gone back to normal. Instead you stood there, wobbling on your feet like somebody just
punched you, face bloodless, eyes wet like you were going to cry. You should have slugged me right in the mouth. But you didn’t. You stood there and I walked away.

My mother was the person who told me you took your own life. “His funeral is tomorrow,” she said. She asked if I wanted to come and pray for your soul. I don’t remember how old I was; 18 or 19, I think. So you were 18 or 19. I quit going to your dad’s church long before then, and by then I had written off God and Jesus.

My mom told me you were still part of the church and that you had been fighting your demons but lost. She told me like I cared about demons. She said you’d been fighting them for years. She charged you with being an alcoholic and a drug abuser. She said there were whispers, there were rumors and allegations in the congregation that you were a homosexual. She said that the ladies in her prayer group found out that your dad caught you naked with another guy. She said the pastor went down in the basement of your childhood home for some paper towels, or dish soap, or hamburger from the deep freeze, and there you were, with a guy, engaged in oral sex—a blow job.

My mom thought that was why you killed yourself. Maybe she was right. Maybe you couldn’t shake the image of your father at the moment, the look he must’ve had on his face. Maybe that’s what you could not live with.

I imagined that moment, with your dad standing in front of you. What did you see? What was looking back at you? Did he call you a fairy, fruitcake, queer, pansy, or homo? Did he call you a cocksucker?

I wondered what Bible story he would use to help soothe the flock. I thought it would be fitting if he chose the parable of the prodigal son, where the father forgives the
lost boy of his transgressions. Or maybe the story of the adulterer—the one where Jesus says, “He that is without sin…” Or maybe the one where Peter betrays Jesus, not once, not twice, but three times—before the cock crowed.

That day, my mom told me she was glad that God had given me the wisdom to move away from you—given me the wisdom to choose friends with better character. Wisdom and character. “Do you want to go? You can ride with me.”

“What’s the point?” I said.

“You can pray for him,” she said that day, all those years ago. “It takes more than being the pastor’s boy to get into heaven.”

“Son,” I said. “Todd was the pastor’s son.”

I believe we all have that one moment we forever regret. That one time we wish we could do it all over. A take-back. A rewind, try again. But we can’t really take back or rewind so we live with the brutal image of the damage we caused. Forever. The image remains. That one second before I turned my back to you and walked away. You remain. The look on your face—the one that said, But I thought we were friends, best friends, brothers. You had the look of a boy bitten in the leg by his own dog.

That day when I saw your sister with her boyfriend, buying a pretzel, I wondered if she knew why we stopped being friends. I didn’t say anything to her. When I said I was afraid of her question, I was lying. I was afraid of my answer. Truth is, I hadn’t been your friend in many years. I didn’t know you anymore. I don’t think I ever did, not really. But still, I wonder if we could’ve shook hands that night, with bloody noses and black eyes,
then maybe things would have turned out a little better for you. Maybe that would have been enough.

I didn’t apologize. I didn’t say goodbye. I didn’t pray. I could’ve, should’ve—if only to say, Please God, God of the New not of the Old, if You are really out there, look after Todd. Accept him for him and grant him the understanding I didn’t give when he stood before me. Tell him for me—dream, telepathy, vision, it’s up to You—Todd, my friend, you cocksucker, I loved you too.
When to Lie

The cars and trucks faded in, passed, faded out. A bus wheezed and coughed a black cloud of burnt diesel. On the corner of Main and Fourth, men in ties and women in long dresses and heeled shoes held the hands of toddlers wearing little collared shirts and Nikes and waited for their turn to cross the street. Shane kept his distance. Balanced on his bike, he leaned on the corner of the building and didn’t notice the soot that dusted the back of his only white button-down dress shirt. A horn blasted him to attention. In a green blur, Shane saw Tommy hanging out the backseat window, first waving, then giving him a thumbs-up. Shane waved back and felt a twist in his stomach. That thumbs-up was a reminder of what Shane needed to do today. A reminder that there was no tomorrow. A reminder—as if Tommy didn’t remind him enough yesterday walking home from Zane’s Park.

“It’ll be hilarious,” Tommy said.

“If it’s gonna be so funny, you do it,” Shane fired back. He felt cornered, trapped. He didn’t want to do this, but the dare was made. The bet wagered. Shane accepted the terms. Tommy picked up a handful of road rubble and started to chuck rocks, one by one, at roadside mailboxes, occasionally hitting one with a thlanck.
“You know my parents won’t let me touch the wine, not till after Confirmation,” Tommy complained. “But you, you’re allowed, so the plan works perfect. Plus, you’ll make your dad proud.”

“You think?”

“Hell yeah. If your dad hates Deacon Steve as much as you say, then what’s not to be proud of? I can see the deacon’s expression now; a scared little bunny. He’ll probably piss himself—maybe even squeal like a girl.”

Thlanck.

“Look, just take the chalice,” Tommy said. He dropped his rocks and grabbed the invisible chalice from the hands of an invisible deacon. “And drink.” Tommy drank the invisible wine, threw the invisible chalice behind him, then bent down and grabbed another handful of the rubble.

“I don’t know, man, any other thing but this. This seems so wrong.”

Thlanck.

“Hey, you don’t have to do it. Just bring the bike over after Mass and we’ll be square.”

“That ain’t gonna happen.”

“Look, I’ve given you two chances already and you’ve chickened out both times.”

“Last week don’t count,” Shane argued. “I can’t help that they ran outta wine. I was gonna do it. I was ready.”

“There’s a big difference between gonna do it and doing it.” Thlanck. “But I get it, really I do,” he added. “You’re a chicken-shit.”
“Kiss my ass.” Shane shoved Tommy’s shoulder.

“Look, tomorrow you either chug-a-lug the wine or you give me the bike. A bet’s a bet.”

“I’m gonna, but what if they run out again?”

Thlanck.

“Then you’ll be doing a lot more walking,” Tommy said. “A bet’s a bet.”

When the light turned green and the little walking icon lit up, Shane jammed down on the pedals, grabbed speed, and zipped past the herd of churchgoers who meandered down the walk to St. Peter’s. He pedaled hard to see how fast he could go. He raced to the side entrance of the building and hid his bike where he always hid it—behind the six-foot cypress shrubs—under the stained-glass window of a whipped and fallen Christ burdened with the weight of a cross on his shoulder.

In the vestibule, Shane, tucking in his shirt on the run, bumped into an altar boy, who bumped into Deacon Steve, who scowled at the boy, then at Shane. “Slow it down,” he said as Shane darted past and entered the church. Dabbing holy water—Father, Son, and Holy Ghost—he scanned for his pew.

As he sat next to his mother, she dusted off the back of his shirt. “Look at this mess,” his mother whispered. She brushed and smeared the black dust down his back. “Oh Lord, look at this mess. Really, I don’t understand how you can ruin everything nice you have. I knew I should never have let you ride your bike. Well, never again. You hear me? Never again.”
The organ bellowed and Shane’s chest tightened. His ribs started to hurt as he gasped quietly for breath. By the first reading, from the Book of James, Shane thought he was going to die. He thought his heart was going to explode from the pounding in his chest and he could feel the rhythm all the way down in his shoes. “‘For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all.’” Dizzy and nauseous, he prayed for a remote control. He thought, If I had one I could fast-forward past the part where I put my two dollars in the basket and shake hands with the old man next to me; and past the Lord’s Prayer; and past the part where I drink all the wine. I could fast-forward to the finish of this stupid bet. “‘For judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.’”

“Thanks be to God,” the congregation announced. Shane looked up and watched Deacon Steve walk slow and deliberate, guiding his robe, white with a purple sash, as it skimmed the floor. The girlish gesture reminded Shane of his cousin Stan’s wedding. The bride’s huge dress and the long tail that dragged behind. The bride gliding across the floor as if she were floating, not walking. He watched the deacon sit on the altar’s bench and smooth out the robe.

The taste of wet tin flooded his mouth and sweat began to trickle down his back. Shane knew he had to calm down or he was going to puke. He also knew now what he refused to admit only a day ago. Tommy was right. Last week, had there been any wine to drink, he never would have drunk it all. He remembered sitting on this ass-bruising wood. He replayed the scenes in his head; how he worried about the report on a book he had not finished reading. He remembered thinking about Jenny Beck’s boobs and how
they seemed to get bigger every day. He remembered tenting in church, so he stopped thinking of Jenny’s boobs and looked up at the Jesus nailed to a cross nailed to a wall behind the altar and apologized for his impure thoughts. Clear as day, he remembered. Now, Shane refused to look up at the crucifix. He thought, This week it’s like God himself is sitting on me so that I can’t win—so I have to give up the bike.

Maybe, Shane thought, I can chicken out and Tommy won’t take the bike. Hell, I’m getting nothing out it if I do do it. Well, I get to keep my bike. That’s what Tommy said, right? He said there are consequences for chickening out. If I don’t drink all the wine, then we’d have to make up a believable story why I gave my bike to him. Everyone knows how much I love that bike. No one would believe us. Maybe the bike’s not worth keeping. Maybe I’ll just give it to Tommy. It’s not like I paid for it, it’s not like my parents paid for it, he thought. It was free. Stolen merchandise.

The August of Shane’s twelfth birthday, he and Nick, his next-door neighbor and best friend since fourth grade, watched their dads hoist the bike up the ladder and stash it in the garage attic, wedged between the cardboard box that held Shane’s toys of years past and the twiggy plastic Christmas tree that his mom declared every December third as, “Ruined; if any more needles fall off, all that will be left is the twisted green steel and black tape.”

With the attic closed up, the dads looked at the sons and said, “If anyone asks, that bike was stolen.” They told Nick he’d get the bike back in a few months. Later that day, during dinner, Shane’s parents argued.
“This is so wrong,” his mom said. “That bike is too stolen. As soon as they filed the police report, it became stolen. If they want to commit insurance fraud, that’s their business. We shouldn’t be involved. Keeping the bike here is a sin. Being a part of this scheme is wrong.”

“Don’t be so damn naïve; right, wrong, black, white. These days you gotta blur the line just to survive.”

“So you teach our son to lie?”

“He already knows how to lie,” his dad said, exasperated. “He needs to learn when to lie.”

In late September, with rumors of foreclosure drifting from one street gossip to another, the family van disappeared from Nick’s driveway—taken in the middle of the night. “Imagine,” Shane’s mom said at breakfast, “criminals right next door.” Shane’s dad folded the paper and tossed it in the pile stacked knee high in the corner. To Shane he said, “Those go out to the garage today, and start a new pile.” To his wife he said, “The van was repossessed. They weren’t criminals; they were doing their job.”

“I wasn’t talking about them,” she said, and got up to fill her coffee cup.

The old man to Shane’s left tapped his shoulder, held out his hand, and lisped, “Peas be wit you.” Shane looked at the hand with raised blue lines mapping out the raisin-like terrain to bulging joints that held the curved digits in place. He took the man’s hand and gently shook. “And also with you.” He shook the woman’s hand in front of the
old man and spied Tommy two rows up. Tommy held two fingers in a “V” and mouthed, “Peace, dude.” Then he squinted a smirk and mouthed, “Last chance.”

It was nearly ten p.m. when Nick’s dad secured the last of his family’s possessions on the truck and wheeled down the door. Shane told himself, “This is your last chance. Run out there. Put on your shoes, grab your raincoat, and remind them of the bike in the attic.” He wanted to yell through the window, “Don’t forget Nick’s bike.” Instead, he sat cross-legged on his dresser, in his pajamas, staring out the window as Nick and his family pulled out.

That Halloween, as tradition dictated, Shane’s father, with a beer in the hand and a beer in the sack, walked with his son for trick or treats. Both father and son missed the other half of their traditional trick-or-treat party. “This is boring,” Shane whined. “And I look stupid.” Shane and Nick had planned this Halloween to every detail, since this was their last year for trick or treats. Next year they would be thirteen, and teenagers didn’t beg for candy. They planned the route that gave out the best candy and the route that gave out the most pennies. They even planned their costumes—The Dynamic Duo—Batman and Robin.

“If I’d known,” Shane told his dad, “I would’ve never agreed to be Robin. I mean how stupid is this—a Robin with no Batman. Can we go home? I don’t want to do this.”

Shane’s dad steered the boy to the curb and they sat down. Shane started to cry, something he almost never did in front of his dad. When his dad was around, no matter
how much it hurt, be it a smack in the head from a baseball or an over-the-handlebars crash jumping street curbs, he did not cry. He sucked it up. He took it like a man.

“I miss him.”

“Look,” his dad said, putting an arm around him, “what happened to Nick and his family, well, that could have just as easily been us. That’s how it works; plants close, unions strike, bills don’t get paid—old friends move away, new friends move in.”

The organ groaned to life and Shane watched as the ushers, dressed in dark suits, pushed the collection baskets down each pew. His dad once described the collection basket as a witch’s old wicker basket duct-taped to her broomstick. That time, Shane’s First Communion, was the only time he could remember his dad going to Mass. “I didn’t see any duct tape, Dad,” Shane said from the back seat.

“Never mind your father, he’s just playing around,” his mom said.

“Was it really a witch’s basket?”

“Look what you started.”

“No witches, kiddo. I’m not even sure what I meant.”

“And don’t you go around talking about witches in church, Shane. What your father said, that’s a house secret.”

The basket zipped past Shane and he thought, Everything’s always a house secret. He dropped his two dollars on top of a small pile of envelopes.
The spring after Nick’s move, Shane stood at the bottom of the ladder, greedy and anxious. A muffled yelp of pain and a “God damn it!” and a slight jerk of the two legs at the top of the ladder. “You okay, Dad?” Shane called up.

“Fine, snagged my hand on a nail’s all.”

Shane could not wait to lay his hands on the bike. Nick’s bike—the chrome Hutch Pro-racer—was now his bike. “You ready?” his dad called down. “Pay attention, and grab the frame, not the wheel.”

“Ready.”

The bike slid through the hole in the ceiling. Shane stepped up on the ladder and braced himself for the weight. “Grab the frame,” his dad reminded. Shane reached for the frame, wetness slapped his cheek, and his t-shirt started to bleed. He looked at the single hand dangling the bike, strong and secure, and shiny. “Your hand is bleeding bad,” he called up.

“Don’t worry about my hand, get a hold of this thing.”

Shane grabbed the frame, sticky wet with blood. “Got it.”

His dad released the bike and Shane lowered it to the floor.

“Hold the ladder,” his dad called. “I’m coming down.” More blood dripped onto Shane’s arm as he prevented the ladder from wandering. Once down, his dad inspected the wound. He turned his hand so Shane could see the small flap of skin cut from his palm. “Not so bad, looks worse than it is.”

“That’s a lot of blood. Does it hurt?” Shane asked. “Do you need stitches?”
“Naw,” he said. He grabbed a sort-of clean towel from his rag bin and wrapped his hand. Shane wheeled the bike, dusty and streaked with blood, to the toolbox and flipped it over.

The two cleaned the bike, filled the tires, and oiled the chain.

“Good as new. Take care of it,” his dad said, righting the bike back onto its tires.

“I will, I promise,” Shane said. “I can’t wait to show Tommy.” He jumped on and pushed off, racing out of the garage and down the driveway.

_Body of Christ, Amen._

As he stood in line to receive, Shane thought about the penance. He reviewed the list he and Tommy had been putting together. He wondered, How would this sin rate? On the list, three swears got you an Apostle’s Creed and three Hail Mary’s. This penance was equal to one of the big swears, an “f” or a “gd.” A bad grade on a test, two HM’s; a bad grade on the report card, five. Lifting bubble gum from the corner store, two AC’s. Giving your teacher the finger was three AC’s. Smooshing your butt up to the glass and mooning the old ladies in the Sew Shop, five AC’s and five HM’s. If that butt was naked, ten and ten. If you dishonored your parents or if you lied to a teacher (Father John said a lie was always a dishonor to your parents), you got hit hard—a full Rosary.

_Body of Christ, Amen._

Once, Shane was going to confess that he found his dad’s hidden magazine and that he liked looking at the girls. He asked Tommy what he thought the penance would be.
“No. You don’t confess the sexy stuff.”

“What?”

“Because. My cousin Jerry told me, the priest will tell your folks. Jerry said he told the priest that he always got boners and like a week later, his dad sat him down to talk about it. And on top of all that embarrassment, for penance he got five rosaries.”

*Body of Christ, Amen.*

Shane thought, Five to ten HM’s and two to three AC’s. That was about what the penance would probably be. Unless, he thought, Father John gets really pissed, then it might go as high as two or three rosaries. Maybe four, but no more than four. Drinking wine has to be less than having boners all the time. Tommy’s right, it’ll be funny. I’ll keep my bike.

“Body of Christ.”

“Amen.” Shane took the tasteless wafer into his mouth.

*Blood of Christ, Amen.*

Shane watched his mother walk up to Deacon Steve. He watched her look at him, the deacon. She smiled. Not a big smile, just a hint of smile. A secret smile. Shane had seen this smile before. He’d seen this smile from Tommy’s mom when she “first met” Nick’s dad. He’d seen this smile from Jenny Beck when the principal passed her gang of friends in the hall and said, “Good morning, ladies.” He’d even seen this smile on Stan’s
face just before he kissed the bride, and when he hugged the bride’s sister, and the maid of honor, and some woman Shane never saw before.

“Blood of Christ.”

She whispered, “Amen.”

She reached up; her hands touched the chalice, but not the chalice—his hands. She put her hands on his, tilted the chalice back, and like a beggar poured a sip into her mouth. She guided his hands back to position and moved her hands to prayer mode. She turned and walked back to kneel before God. Shane suddenly wished his dad was there. His dad would never take this. He would have flattened the deacon. He watched Deacon Steve wipe his mother’s lipstick from the chalice.

“Blood of Christ.”

Shane’s mind fell apart.

Just drink. That’s all it takes to win. I can’t lose the bike. It’s worth the grounding. It’s worth the penance. His hands are so small. Soft. This is so wrong. Don’t do it. His hands look like plastic. Like Grandpa’s that time in the coffin. Don’t do it. Lose the bet. Why did I make this damn bet? Sometimes it’s better to just shut up and not talk. A secret smile. He wiped off the lipstick with plastic hands. I’m not going to be a beggar. I am going to take that chalice, like a man. Don’t touch his hands. Not like her.


“Amen.”

Shane leaned in as if to beg a sip. He reached both hands up, grasped the chalice, and pulled. The deacon’s initial resistance caused a small spill to the carpet of the altar
and onto Shane’s shirt. He gave a second pull and the chalice slid from the plastic hands of the deacon right to his mouth. Their eyes met: Shane’s eyes gleamed and the deacon’s went dark.

A pang of panic hit Shane. What if no amount of Hail Mary’s could fix this? The thought occurred to him that this could be a mortal sin—a sin from which there was no return. He remembered Sister Lucy telling his catechism class that mortal sins were the worst. She said, “God suffers none of that foolishness.” He remembered Tommy made a joke about the party he would throw when he got to hell and how she hollered “Lake of fire” and smacked the desk so hard that Jenny had yelped. “Lake of fire,” she repeated in a hiss.

All that’s left, Shane thought, is my bike. He gulped. He gulped again. Halfway through the final gulp the chalice jerked away, dousing his shirt with the remainder of the wine, giving the illusion he’d been shot.

Shane didn’t hear the shocked, faint cry from his mother or her attempts to yell in a whisper, “Shane, what in the hell are you doing?” He didn’t hear Deacon Steve say, “You son of a bitch,” or the collected gasp of the parishioners.

He was aware of the red stain that clung to his chest. He was aware of the hard smack across his face, the sharp bend of his nose, the taste of blood and the release of his bladder. Shane was aware that this was not at all funny. It was not hilarious.

He stood paralyzed at the foot of the crucifix, looked up at the deacon’s eyes—hard as stone, as if he wanted the boy dead. “What the hell happened?” Father John asked.
Deacon Steve’s eyes softened and flooded. “Oh, Jesus, what have I done?” He took the napkin, the one with Shane’s mother’s lipstick, and covered the source of the bleeding. The man with the small plastic hands started to cry. “What have I done? Sweet Jesus, I’m sorry. What have I done?” He wrapped his arms around Shane and guided him behind the altar—to the sacristy.

Shane stood paralyzed in the middle of the small room. Outside the door, the organ groaned and parishioners strolled out of the church. Mass was not dismissed, but rather forgotten. He imagined the mumbles from the parishioners. “What was that all about?” and “Did you see all the blood? I think he got shot.” and “Who was it?” and “I think it was the O’Brien boy.” and “The O’Brien boy punched the deacon?” and “It couldn’t be the O’Brien boy, they’re up north this weekend.” And “I think the deacon punched him.” And “Who?” and “The Murphys’ boy.” And “I heard about his temper, he’s a menace.”

Shane stared at the empty hooks on the wall. In the corner, rolled up on the floor and crying, the deacon chanted, “What have I done? I’m sorry. What have I done?” Shane thought the altar boys would be here soon to remove their smocks and hang them on the empty hooks. Then they would get in the car and drive home with their parents. Or maybe to dinner at Grandma’s—roast beef, mashed potatoes, and squash. Maybe if Grandma’s hip wasn’t all flared, they’d get homemade pie or maybe some chocolate cake.
Outside the door, Shane’s mom was frantic. “Where the hell is my son? Why the hell did Steve punch my goddamn kid?”

“Please, calm down,” Father John commanded. “Calm down and follow me, we’ll find Deacon Steve and your son.”

When the door opened, the deacon jumped up.

“What the hell were you thinking?” Shane’s mom yelled.

“I don’t know what happened, Theresa. I just…umph.”

She shoved the deacon in the stomach and knocked him into the wall with a thud.

“You never touch my son.”

“You need to calm down, Mrs. Taylor,” the Father said, steering her toward Shane. “See to your boy.”

“I—I don’t…he drank all the wine…he grabbed the cup.”

“Enough!” Father John bellowed. “Deacon, you should leave now.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t know…” His mumbles trailed off.

“Now.”

Shane’s mom, crying, kneeled in front of her son. “Are you okay?” He nodded. Then he cried. His nose started to bleed again and Father John brought over a handful of paper towels. “You’re sure you’re okay?” the Father asked. Shane nodded, then looked down at his dress shirt, his only white button-down dress shirt, covered with wine and splattered with blood. The shirt bought for him so that he could go to his grandfather’s funeral. The shirt that made him look so grown-up that his grandma said, with tears
streaming, “My, my. You’re turning into such a fine young man. Your grandpa would be so proud.”

Now, the shirt was ruined. He knew no amount of detergent, no amount of scrubbing could make it right. “Father,” Shane asked, “am I going to hell?”

On the drive home, Shane wore clothes from the church’s donation closet. He sat in the back seat, his bike in the trunk. Neither passenger spoke a word. On his lap sat a plastic bag containing his wine-stained, bloodstained shirt and his pants, heavy and wet and sour. Suffocating from the silence and the sticky smell of piss and wine, which clung to his skin, Shane lowered the window for air.

His mom pulled up the driveway, put the car in park, and shut down the engine. She sat silent, looking down at the steering wheel.

“Mom.”

“No,” she snapped. “No, no, no.”

They both sat in silence a minute longer. “I blame your father for this,” she said. “Put your bike in the garage.” She held out the keys and released them before Shane’s hand could touch hers. She got out of the car and walked toward the house. Shane got out of the car and rode his bike to the garage. He thought about turning the bike around and riding away—just him, his bike, and a sack full of smelly clothes. But that passed. He didn’t know what was next, but he did know one thing. The bike was still his.

Shane could hear them yelling while he walked from the garage to the house. The closer he got, the louder the yelling. He reached for the handle of the back door, and saw
for the first time his reflection in the window and froze. He stared at the ghosted version of a ridiculous kid—his face streaked with sweat, tears, and blood. A ridiculous kid wearing a way-too-big pair of sweatpants and a way-too-small Gumby t-shirt. A Gumby t-shirt that was his shirt a year or so ago, before his mom cleaned it out of his dresser and donated it to the church. She said, “There’s a young boy around this town who could use it more than you.” He used to wonder how it would feel to bump into that poor kid, the one who got his donated clothes. Would he feel bad because the kid was wearing charity? Would he tell the kid that the shirt he was wearing used to be his shirt?

Shane’s dad bellowed, “That bastard is lucky I don’t break his neck. Snap his body like a pencil.”

“And what would that prove? Would that make you feel all big and str—?”

“That church, that man may think they have the right to intrude,” his dad interrupted, “to help themselves to what is mine—but they don’t get to hit my son.”

“You’re being ridiculous.”

“He doesn’t get to hit my son!” his dad hollered.

For what seemed like hours, Shane stood outside—hand on the door handle. He thought, This fight is all my fault. I caused this. He didn’t want them to fight, but he sure didn’t want to interrupt. He didn’t want to redirect that anger onto himself. He wished he could go invisible…if only for five minutes. Long enough to walk past his parents, to his room. He wanted to clean up—shower off the wine, the blood, the piss. He wanted to put on some clean clothes—his clean clothes. He wanted to hide under his covers and cry—
to be left alone with his shame. He turned the handle and ever so quietly, pulled open the door.

“I don’t care if he drank a whole goddamn bottle.”

“But it was blessed. It’s unforgivable.”

“It was cheap watered-down wine. It was a stupid stunt. But that’s all it was. A stunt.”

“It was the blood of our savior.”

“Blood? Do you hear yourself?”

Shane walked into the family room, bag in hand, and stood. He could not look at his parents.

“Look at this,” his dad said, not quite yelling. He grasped Shane’s head and looked at his swollen nose and damaged lip—the puffed, split gorge still wet with blood.

“This,” he yelled, “this is blood.”

“Does it hurt?” his mother asked—her eyes swollen from too much crying—too much anger—too much disappointment.

“No,” he lied.
Coach

It was worth the gut-punch I received from your ten-year-old son, Jeff, that time when I struck out and lost the game. We needed two to tie, three to win. With two outs, and with runners in scoring position, you grabbed my shoulder, looked me in the eye, and said, “You know what to do, right? Please, tell me you know what to do.” I knew what to do alright, the same thing I had done every game, every at bat: stand real still, hunker down, and don’t swing at anything. I was supposed to do this because I—how did you describe it to my dad after our first practice; oh yeah—I swung like a little girl.

So I swung the bat. Not because I wanted to hit the ball and be the hero. I swung because I knew I’d strike out and end the inning—end the game. This game was not just any game; this game was for the league trophy. If I took the walk, I’d give your son, Jeff, the chance to win the game and I would probably have a trophy—a trophy for my 22 walks that season—a single trophy to make my dad proud.

I wonder if, almost 30 years later, you still have a shrine of Jeff’s greatness in your den. Shelves filled with the trophies he won before that game, the trophies he won after that game, and all the trophies, plaques, and ribbons from junior high, high school, and college. I wonder if, almost 30 years later, you still see the trophy he didn’t win.

It’s not like I planned this moment. This was no grand scheme. It was more like the straw and the camel. You sent me to the plate and as I passed Jeff standing in the on-deck circle, he whispered, “Don’t mess this up, dickhead.” When I passed him with a
smile on my face, after I did mess it up, he gut-punched me. It didn’t hurt, not really. And if I could be so bold, I think Jeff punches like a little girl. Having told you this, I wonder how it makes you feel, knowing your son can’t make the smallest and weakest boy in school cry.
Playing the Game

When you’re 22 and your high school sweetheart goes to the bar with her girlfriend and cheats on you, again, but this time when the sex is over she is left naked in a hotel room, her clothes stolen, her purse stolen, her cell phone stolen, and she calls you collect to bring her some clothes and not to ask questions and it’s four weeks before your wedding day—then what?

When your only two friends, left over from high school, stop calling you two months after the big break-up because dragging you and all of your depression out with them was a perpetual cock-block at the clubs; and then it’s three years later and people have stopped telling you that you need to move forward with your life and you wake up one morning, hard, the first time since that day, and decide that maybe, just maybe your erection is a sign that it’s time to move on—now what do you do?

You move on.

You get back into the game.

Except you’ve played this game only once and you played it poorly. With a little help from the Internet, you locate and call Mark, the Mark who quit calling you years ago. Mark tells you Davey sold his parents’ New Jersey Colonial and moved to California with his girlfriend, broke up with her, and stayed in wine country working in a vineyard. Mark tells you this right before he told you that he himself is married and his wife is expecting a baby and oh yeah, he too fucked your fiancée, Lori, but before she
was your fiancée, way back during that one spring-break trip when she said she was in South Carolina but was really in Ft. Lauderdale where he happened to bump into her drunk-ass and took her to the back of the van for the night. “But back then, she was just your girlfriend,” he tells you. “I’m confessing this now because I have cancer and I wronged you all those years ago and I don’t blame you if you hate me but if we could make peace before I die, I can’t tell you what that would mean to me.”

So now what?

You turn back to the Internet. You pose questions to search engines to find answers. How do you meet the perfect girl? What do you say to a woman in a bar? How do you meet Ms. Right? Dating sites, discussion boards, online magazines. The answers, they’re easy to find once you start looking.

PickUpChix.com teaches that you should look for an easy target. A mark, if you will. Make sure she’s sober. She needs to be sober. And she needs to be standing by the bar. That’s not that hard; the hot chicks looking for free drinks are always standing by the bar. Oh yeah, and she has to be all into herself. Watch for her to check herself out in the mirror behind the booze. She’ll probably scoot around till she finds an opening between Jack and José. There’s always the chance there will be no mirror and if this is the case, watch for her to pull out a compact from her handbag and check to make sure her hair is done good and her lipstick is still succulent and red.
You first saw Lori when you both were freshmen, in the hall of your just-like-every-other suburban high school. She was fixing her hair and applying lip-gloss in the magnetic mirror stuck to her locker door and it took you until the summer of your junior year before you had the nerve to say hello. You were wiping down the outside tables of the Golden Scoop ice cream stand. And she was there with her friend Sara, licking an ice-cream cone and telling the secrets teenage girls tell their best friends. And for the first time you had a backbone. You wiped the table right next to hers and you looked up. She and Sara were watching you. You smiled and said, “Hello.” She said hello and then you went back inside to restock the display freezers with the vanilla, the chocolate, and the Superman ice cream.

It took another four months before you asked her out. Except, really, you were made partners for a speech and you asked if she wanted to go to the library. She suggested that you meet at the coffee shop by the mall.

It was in this coffee shop that she asked why you were so quiet. Your face heated up. “I, I, I don’t know. I, I just am.”

“I think it’s cute that you get embarrassed when I talk to you.” She placed her hand on yours and said, “Can I ask you a favor?”

“Sure,” you said, hoping it didn’t involve standing up and walking anywhere.

“You see, I’m grounded, I’m only here now because we have to do this speech and my mom is going to pick me up at 8 p.m., but I’m supposed to meet my friend Sara at the mall in like ten minutes. Can you wait here for me, work on the speech, and I’ll be back in an hour?”
Of course, you said yes.

PickUpChix.com says after you spot your mark, stand back at least 50 feet. Look at her until she sees you. Now smile. She’ll probably give you the cold shoulder, look away, not smile back. But that’s okay. Because you just want her eyes to register your warm smiley face. Now, get a drink. Find a place she won’t see you, but you can see her. Smoke a cigarette. That should be enough time.

While you smoke your cigarette, check her out. Tits, ass, you know. How low is her skirt, or is it how high is her skirt? Can you see the natural curve of her ass peeking out? Is the skirt tight? What type of material is it? Jeans? Leather or faux leather? Stretchy cotton-like? How about her top? Imagine standing next to her, what will you be able to see? Is her shirt tight, pushing forward cleavage? Or is the shirt a loose button-down with one too many buttons undone? If you look down her shirt, will you be able to see her bra? Is she even wearing a bra?

Before you said hello to Lori, before you met her at the coffee shop, you observed her from a distance. One rainy Saturday you saw her at the mall and ditched Mark and Davey so that you could follow her around. For three hours you hung back and hung outside The Limited and American Eagle and Old Navy. You watched her hold clothes up for Sara’s approval, a laser-green tank-top, a black mini-skirt, a pink lace bra, and imagined what they looked like on her body.
She caught you staring through the glass. Maybe she smiled and winked, or maybe she was simply her flirting with her own reflection. You couldn’t tell. But it felt like she looked you in the eyes as she stole that pair of earrings, then fixed her hair in the glass, smiled again, and walked out of the store past you and to the next store.

After you finish your cigarette, it’s time to get to work. Go up to the bar, squeeze in, and attempt to flag down the bartender. With your money clip in hand, knock your gold ring on the bar to attract not only the bartender’s attention, but also her attention to your hand. If you don’t have a large gold ring, get one.

Tell the bartender, “Bourbon, neat, and a drink for the supermodel here.” Now look at her. She’ll eat that shit up. Then, while looking at her tits, ask her, “What are you drinking, beautiful?” She won’t notice where your eyes are because her eyes will be looking at the wad of cash. Not a fake wad like the fucking amateurs will bring out: 20 bucks in singles, three or four twenties, and a fifty or two on top. Those amateurs, after they have spent the big bills on chicks who have no interest in them, will take their sorry-ass stack of singles to the titty-bar down the street for a few songs and maybe a lap dance that will leave them horny with no cash and no choice but to go home and pound it out.

Don’t be a fucking amateur.

You thought it was true love, but then you were in high school, green; what could you have known about true love? What could you ever know about true love? Both Mark and Davey tried to school you, telling you not to take her so serious. They agreed that
you should bang her until she got bored or boring and move on. Mark tried to explain that she was using you to get at her parents. Davey tried to tell you Lori’s parents wanted her to find a smart Harvard boy. Davey said, “They tell her that the only way to move up is to marry up.”

Mark said, “Dude, you’re out of your league. You don’t live in the right neighborhood. You aren’t going to go to the right college.”

You told Mark, “She’s not about money.”

“Dude, you work at an ice cream parlor. What is this, 1950-something?”

“You don’t know her.”

“You don’t even have a car.”

PickUpChix.com tells you to ask, “So, whatcha drinking?” After she tells the bartender a “Cosmo” or an “Appletini” or whatever, fan out your stack of green. Feign a search for a small bill. Let her see you’re the real deal. Snap out a twenty from the center, hold it up for the bartender, and say, “Keep it.”

The ten-dollar tip to the bartender ensures two things. First, and most important, it demonstrates to her that you’re not afraid to throw your money around. Second, a good tip pretty much guarantees that the drinks will be strong and the bartender will come back when you need him. Note: Because the drinks are going to be stronger, maintain a two-drink rule. The object is to have her loosened up and ready to play, not have a sloppy drunk on your hands.
While you wait for your drinks, set the hook. This is important: don’t ask her name; that is trivial. Besides, she’ll eventually tell you. Instead, say, “You know, I’m not good at this kinda thing.” Tell her, “I wouldn’t even be here if it weren’t for my brother dragging me out.” Ask her, “Do I know you? You look very familiar.”

Because she’s seen your face smiling, she’ll think you too are familiar and start to question where you grew up, where you went to college. Say, “I know I’ve seen you around somewhere.” Ask her, “What church do you go to?” It doesn’t matter if she does or doesn’t go to church, just like it doesn’t matter what college you went to or where you grew up. You’re letting her get to know you. You’re letting her get comfortable with the idea that she will undress in front of you in about an hour.

Throughout your senior year of high-school, you and the guys had stolen beers from Mark’s dad and wine from Davey’s basement, but you usually shared and there wasn’t enough to make you feel as good as you felt that October night. That night, you were drinking something from a soda bottle, cola mixed with—rum, vodka, bourbon—you didn’t know. The drink was sweet, burned going down, and now your head was loose. You were loose.

And Lori was into it too. At first, she complained. “A haunted hayride? That’s for kids.” But then she brought a few soda bottles and a blanket. “Drink this,” she said and you did. The tractor pulled the trailer down a bumpy dirt path and you both bounced around on bales of hay, getting drunk. Every so often, teenagers wearing cheap costumes of Dracula and zombies would jump from the cornfield or from behind a tree and yell
something about eating blood and sucking brains, but after awhile you both ignored them. Wrapped close together with the blanket fighting off the autumn chill, you kissed—a lot. You put your hand under her shirt, on her naked breast, and for the first time, she touched you there, and rubbed and squeezed.

She said, “Let’s get outta here,” and jumped off the back of the wagon. You followed her into the woods, where you spread out the blanket amongst the fallen leaves and lost your virginity. At least you did. She said she did. But then you found out later she lost hers long before the hayride. When it was over, when you held her hand and walked the path until you found her car and she drove you home, you told her you had fun—a lot of fun. She smiled. You kissed her goodnight. You said, “I love you.” And you meant it.

Laugh a little and say, “This might sound ridiculous, but I don’t know what to say to someone as pretty as you.” She’ll eat this shit up.

Make small talk. Get her talking about herself. If, by the time you’re halfway done with your second drink, the talking about herself or the booze isn’t loosening her up, start looking for her replacement. Find the next mark. Once you have a target, cut your losses and move on. Politely excuse yourself from the conversation and walk away. If you are rude, she might make a scene, which is, if you give it some thought, no different than pissing in your own bathwater.

However, if things are progressing, pull out your cigarettes and offer her one.
That first year in college, you didn’t have the cash to go to Florida on spring break. Neither did Davey. Mark jumped in a van with his dorm roommates and mooched a floor to sleep on. He offered you and Davey a spot, but you both said no. You said you had papers to write, equations to solve for X, and phone calls to make. There had been less of Mark since he went “away” to school and more of Davey since he got his boss to give you a job. Yes, it was a telemarketing sweatshop, and while it took you a few weeks to get used to people calling you an asshole and hanging up, the job paid seven bucks an hour and you could work evenings.

Lori tried to get you to go with Mark, told you to go see what the world outside of New Jersey had to offer—to live life a little. She told you this right before she told you that she was going with Sara to South Carolina for the week. But you refused. You wrote papers. You solved for X.

If she accepts a cigarette, ask, “Do you have a lighter or a match?” When she starts digging around her handbag, watch closely: her handbag contains important clues that will define the rest of the evening. The items most likely in that handbag: her cell phone, her keys, her I.D. or a fake I.D., her lipstick, and condoms. There may also be a tampon or Kotex or something like that, cigarettes, if she smokes, and a pack of either breath-mints or minty gum. If you see any type of birth control, she is telling you she’s prepared.

Be aware, if she pulls out anything remotely related to Kotex, then she’s saying, “Not tonight.” Remember, the arbitrary flashing of Kotex may not mean that she’s at that
time. It could also mean that she’s using it as a decoy to scare off undesirables.

Regardless, if you’re allowed to see the Kotex, you’re done. Move on.

So you bought a ring. You put it on your credit card—$9200.00 at 19% apr—and you put it on her finger. She cried. She said she loved the ring. “It’s so big and beautiful and big.” She called Sara and told her. “Hell yeah, we should celebrate,” she shouted into the phone. “No, he won’t mind.”

To you she sort of asked, “You don’t mind if I go out with Lori to celebrate, do you?”

When she hung up the phone, you asked, “Does this mean yes?”

“Yes? Yes, what?”

“Does this mean you will marry me?”

“Of course it does,” she said and kissed you like she meant it—she kissed you like she hadn’t done in some time. When you tried to advance the intimate moment, she slowed your hand to a stop. “Can’t today. It’s that time.”

This surprised you because you kind of almost knew when that time was and it didn’t seem that it was that time. And come to think of it, there hadn’t been any of the telltale hints—no wrappers and such in the trash, no “I need to stop at the store, you know, to pick up a few things.” But still, you stopped. You asked, “You want to grab some lunch?”
PickUpChix.com states that if things are going well, you’ll know it. There will be the casual touches and twinkling smiles. Remember this: do not touch her. Not while you’re in the bar. Nothing will scare her off faster than a stranger’s touch. Allow her to place her hands on you, if she wants. Let her get comfortable with your presence.

As the alcohol filters through, she will open up and talk all about herself—ad nauseam. Nod your head and smile. Listen for interjection points. A laugh here and an “I don’t believe it” there. Keep your comments generic, yet relevant. Watch her face for your cue. She will stop and wait for your response—a confirmation that you are listening. This is the hard part. One miscue and you’ve wasted 40 bucks and probably don’t have enough time to get back out on the playing field.

It’s at this point you’ll want to transition from the bar to the bed. And you’ll want to do this before she shows signs of wanting to dance. Do not dance. There are two very good reasons to not dance. First, the exercise will metabolize the alcohol in her bloodstream quicker. Second, you cannot dance. You may think you can dance, but you’re wrong.

You told Mark about the ring, about the upcoming wedding. You asked him to be the best man. And you were shocked when he said no. He said, “I will not be your best man if you marry Lori.”

“Why?”

“When did you propose?”

“Saturday. Last Saturday.”
“Then why was she at the bar last Saturday with Sara?”

“They were celebrating.”

“Who were the guys?”

“What guys?”

“Ask her who the guy was. Whose lap was she sitting on? Whose leg was she grinding on the dance floor? Whose hand was on her ass, on her tits, and up her skirt?”

Here’s what you do. Wait for the crowd in the bar to grow. As it does grow, ask her to repeat herself every other minute or so. The larger the crowd becomes, the more often you ask. Start to lean in close, let her talk directly into your ear. At the same time, occasionally pull on your collar a bit and use your drink napkin to wipe your forehead. When you speak, act like you are talking louder, but rein in your volume so that she has to lean into you to hear. After several rounds, ask, “You wanna go out front?”

Once outside, try a genuine heartfelt compliment. Not too sappy or trite. This is actually trickier than it sounds. I suggest you spend time on the Internet looking for simple, easy-to-remember compliments. Google “compliments for women.” Don’t forget to be simple and selective. Memorize no more than three and choose the best one for the occasion.

Also, try and steer the conversation to something that will allow you to demonstrate your sense of humor. Hot chicks love good-looking and funny guys. They can be often overheard telling their girlfriend, “He’s really cute and he’s super funny.” What this means is funny gets you into the bedroom.
Lori laughed when you asked her about the guy in the bar. She thought you were joking. Or she thought that if she pretended to think you were joking that you might laugh along and change the subject. Then she denied there was a guy. She said she didn’t even go to that bar. Except she was at that bar because she told you last week she was there. Except there was a guy because she told you Sara hooked up with a guy that very night and she said she was stuck talking to his loser friend half the night.

She started to cry when you reminded her of these facts. She said, “It was the ring. You gave me the ring and I said yes, and I got scared and he flirted and I liked the flirting, then he kissed me and I was scared because of the ring so when we went out to his car I did stuff I would not have, should not have.”

“Did you have sex?”

“Can we stop talking about this?”

“Does that mean yes?”

“I can’t talk about this anymore. Don’t you understand? I was scared.” She cried. She went to the bedroom, closed the door and cried.

Once you get her outside of the bar, try a test touch. Use caution here. If she is still touching your arm or shoulder, look her in the eyes and place your hand over hers and give a gentle squeeze. Watch for a negative reaction. If none, move in slow, for a kiss. Watch for uncertainty. If you see too much of it, back off, shake your head, and say, “I’m sorry. I don’t know what came over me. It’s just, I don’t know.” Stop for a second,
then go ahead and kiss her. If she doesn’t stop you, keep it going for 15-30 minutes, then say, “Let’s get out of here.”

You weren’t really surprised when Lori called at 11 in the morning and said that she had a problem and you needed to come to Budget Room Hotel off the interstate with clothes, “Room number—hold on—115—and don’t ask any questions.” What surprised you was that you laughed at her. She told you that someone stole her clothes, stole everything except 50 bucks, and you laughed. You should have asked if she was hurt. You should have asked if she wanted the police called. But you knew the answers. You knew she was fine. Sure, she would have to call credit card companies and shit like that, but that wouldn’t take that long. So you laughed and hung up.

When she called 23 minutes later and asked what was taking so long, you told her that she needed to call Sara to pick her up. You told her you were done with being treated like an asshole. You said, “I’m packing up your shit and leaving it all on the porch. All of it.”

You hung up the phone.

You waited all day for her to call back. You waited all night. When the headlights pulled up the driveway at 2:30 a.m., you watched through the peephole while a drunk Lori, dressed in sweats that you assumed were Sara’s, walked to the porch and picked up her suitcase and two trash bags filled with her life and loaded them into the trunk.
You watched through the peephole as she walked back up the driveway with a tire iron and hurled it through the front window. You watched her scream at the door, “Don’t you think you’re getting this ring back, you useless prick.”

PickUpChix.com says that the rest is up to you. They say, Just remember a few little things: Do not take your car. Take a cab. Going to your place is out of the question. You do not want her to know where you live. If she is uncomfortable with going to her place, grab a hotel room. Nothing too fancy, but still, the room needs to be clean. Do not take your cell phone, or if you must, buy a disposable.

Finally, when all is said and done, do not fall asleep. The last thing you want is to wake up and be obligated to breakfast or coffee or an exchange of phone numbers. Let her fall asleep. When her breathing has slipped into deep slumber, slip out of the bed and church-mouse-quiet get dressed. Leave cab fare. Take from your clip a fifty and place it on the nightstand, under her handbag. When she wakes up in the morning, she might be a little upset that you have left without saying goodbye. Finding the money will let her see exactly the kind of guy you are.
Book of Puzzles

She refuses to be called Ms. anything. She rejects that she is a teacher. “I’m your guide,” she says. Dipped in black, she walks into the classroom, sits on top of the desk, criss-crosses her legs, and says, “My name is Michelle and I will lead you to your path,” she pauses, looks around the class, “but you must explore it on your own.”

You paid for this program of self-actualization—a five-week seminar in a rented classroom of the adult learning center of North Central High School. The website asked, “Do you want the ability to DO and BE what you know you WANT?” It asked, Are you selling yourself short, living the ‘same old, same old,’ ‘getting by,’ ‘settling’? “Are you living an average life of convention, conformity, mediocrity, unhappiness, and despair?”

The website promised to let you discover your unique purpose in life. The website guaranteed that you will never worry again about what others think or say; become unleashed from anything that holds you back from your full potential. It guaranteed you results or your money back.

Because you’re a sucker, and because things are going bad for you at work and because things are going worse for you at home, you “clicked here” and you paid the $485 to improve your life, to become self-actualized.

Michelle turns off the lights. She lights a candle. She puts on tribal music—Native American, if you had to guess. She says, “I want you all to close your eyes.” She says, “Search for what scares you. Envision your fears. Embrace them. Absorb their power.” With your eyes closed, you think eccentric. You think quirky.
With the lights still off and your eyes still closed, Michelle talks about her recent fast, the one, she says, “that lasted at least a week, but probably longer because you lose the reality of time and place when you fast.” She tells you her spirit led her to the woods for an evening frolic in the wild. She tells you she met her talking crow. “Not any talking crow,” she whispers. “My talking crow.” You think odd-duck. You think carnie-freak show. She says, “If you sit in the woods long enough, still and quiet, your crow will find you. Bring you your message from the nether space.” You think head-case, nut-job.

She reads her poems about Texas, trailer homes, and rape. Poems of booze and pills. Poems of binge eating and purging. You think damaged. You think fucked-up. And because damaged and fucked-up is something you think you could get behind, you decide you like her.

It’s late when you get home and Sarah is already in bed. At first, you aren’t all that interested in telling her about the seminar. Maybe it’s because she’s a shrink and you think—no, you know, she’d scoff at the idea of improving one’s lot in life by way of, what is it, positive thinking? Or maybe it’s the idea that starting this conversation would inevitably end in an argument you aren’t capable of winning. Or maybe it’s the excited feeling you get when you think of Michelle and that feeling just might disappear if you talk about the class. But then you see that Sarah’s enthralled in her book of crossword puzzles and didn’t see you walk into the bedroom. To distract her you ask her about her day. “Huh, oh fine, yours?” she answers and goes back to her puzzle.

“Strange,” you say and you again miss the old days, back when you were first married. Back when she noticed that you entered a room, that you were breathing the
same oxygen. You miss how she listened to your daily war stories of spoiled actors and
lazy directors. You miss how she told you stories of crazy patients, “not my real patient,”
she used to say. “My pretend patient, David. Or my ‘friend’s’ patient, Leslie.” It was
always David and Leslie. You even miss how she used to ask for help when she was
stumped with her puzzle. You miss, “Do you know a seven-letter word for strange? Last
two letters RE.” Back in those days you seemed to pull the words from out of nowhere.
“Bizarre,” you’d say and she would start to fill in the word and say, “That’s it. Thanks,
You’re a life-saver.”

She was happy.

But then she quit asking about your day, she quit telling you about David and
Leslie. She quit asking if you knew “a five-letter word for cool and distant, starts with a,”
and now you can’t tell her “aloof.” You can’t save her life.

In the bathroom, you change from office attire to gym shorts and a t-shirt. You
brush your teeth.

“Strange how?” she calls out.

You tell her how you found this class. Once a week for five weeks and you will,
in the end, be self-actualized. “Or,” you tell her, “I get my money back.”

She says nothing.

When you go back into the bedroom, she looks up, asks, “How is that strange?”

“Well, that’s not all that strange,” you say as you climb into your side of the bed.

“But the teacher, I mean the journey guide, is, uhm…”

“Strange?”

“Bizarre.”
With that one word, bizarre, you become aware that you have nothing else to add to this conversation. You took a class and the teacher was bizarre. Next topic, please.

You could talk about your show. How the producers want you to bring in a new character, a possible love interest for one of the leads. Someone to freshen up a stale storyline. A stale time slot. But that conversation was also stale and always ends with Sarah saying, “You could always quit. Start a new project.”

But you know that’s not an option. The show has remained in the top ten for years and the money is good. You know you need to ride it out. Stick with the show until it ends. Until the studio quits making money from it and cancels it. The studios aren’t interested in new sitcom projects from quitters.

“Anyway,” you say, “I think I could make a sitcom of her life.” And you really do think it is possible; the show would be a little dark, a little tragic. A little funny.

“Whose life?” Sarah asks and scratches a word in her puzzle.

Michelle doesn’t light candles this time. Her face is paler than last week and you wonder if it’s the fluorescent light bleaching the life out of her. She is again dressed in black, but this time she shows more skin, more leg. Her flour-white legs look like prosthetics attached to the blackness of her torso. She explains that you must envision your success before you can achieve it—that you must see yourself being successful. “If you can’t see it,” she says, “then how can you do it?”

She tells you to think back to one of your failed attempts in life. She says, “Think back to a time where you wanted something and you messed it up or stopped trying.”
Maybe it got a little too hard.” She turns to the person to her right and says, “Please tell everyone your name and tell us your failure.”

“Yes, uhm, my name is Jared. And I, um, so I tried once, but then I, um…”

“Don’t be afraid,” Michelle says. “In the right capacity, fear is an emotion we need, but too much of it can prevent us from doing things necessary in our life.”

“Uhm, okay.”

“Jared, fear is a necessity, unreasonable fear is an obstruction. You need to learn the root of the fear, visualize how your life will change if you challenge your fear; if you face your fear. Don’t let fear prevent you from achieving your prime directive.”

You think, *Prime directive? Where have I heard prime directive?* It’s there in the outskirts of your memory, but you can’t touch it. You write in your notebook: Google prime directive. You write in your notebook: Fear is a necessity. Use fear to achieve goals. You’re not exactly sure this is what Michelle meant, but it’s close enough.

It’s your turn and with all eyes on you, you share the first time you met with Sarah—your first date. You explain that it wasn’t a date, not really. It was research for your show. You were interviewing several female psychiatrists because you needed to get into their heads collectively. You wanted to build an archetype. “I paid each one for a session,” you say, “and they pretended to be my doctor.” Typically, you met in their office, for effect, but this time, with Sarah, it was dinner, and wine, and valet parking, and you picked her up and you were dropping her off after. “So yeah,” you say, “it felt more like a date.”
While sipping wine, she asked you questions. Typical getting-to-know-you type questions, but with a shrink tone. She asked about your childhood, your parents, your romantic relationships; she asked about what made you angry and what made you happy. She asked what you were afraid of.

You told her in one breath what scared you: “Poisonous snakes and rats.” You said, “I’m not afraid of insects really—when they’re onsey-twosy. Yes, they creep me out, maybe cause the shivers—but not real fear. Swarming insects, well, that’s a different story.” You told her, “Thousands of bees or millions of ants invading my personal space—shit.” You said, “I’m anthropophobic, isolophobic, and I fear contradiction. If I think too long about Alzheimer’s, I have panic attacks. I’m scared of getting old, of choking on peanut butter, of the fallacy of ghosts and leprechauns, of dogma, and of the number 8.”

“Did you practice that?” she asked, looking over the rims of her glasses. “It sounded well-rehearsed.”

You told her she wasn’t the first shrink to ask what scared you. You said, “You aren’t the tenth.”

“Is any of it true?” she asked.

“Why would I lie?”

“Why would you tell the truth?”

You both sat quiet for a moment, then you picked up the bottle of Merlot, half tipping it toward her glass. “A little more?” She nodded.

She asked about what you do and you told her that you work in TV. You write and produce TV shows.
“Anything I’ve seen?”

You told her about the two shows that nobody has seen yet. Two pilots. “One is a campy little sitcom about a gay plumber, a fag hag who loves the plumber and tries to convert him, and her brother, a failed poet whom the plumber loves and tries to convert.” She scrunched her face with deep worry and you saw what would be deep wrinkles in the next couple of years. She said, “That sounds really stupid.”

“It *is* stupid. But in order to develop my idea, I have to develop this pilot.”

After ordering your meals, handing over the menus, and resituating yourselves, she asked, “So then, what’s *your* idea?”

“My idea?” You sipped your wine. “My idea is a drama about a shrink who blows a case. She misses a problem with a kid and he kills himself. The kid comes back as a ghost—he haunts her in a way. She has all these sessions with him trying to cure him, and whatever issue she tries to address, one of her real-life clients suffers through something similar.”

“Sort of like that Bruce Willis movie, you know that one with the goofy-looking kid?”

You know that movie. And you’ve heard this comparison before. Stephens at MGM said pretty much the same thing. He even had the stones to ask, in the middle of the pitch, if he could change the doctor to a male lead…maybe even try and get Willis. Before you walked out of his office, before you called him a useless hack, you asked him if he even “bothered to read the fucking manuscript.”

“No, no, no,” you said, “not at all like that movie.”
You explained how in your story, the kid dies because the doctor messed up. The kid is a ghost who comes back to haunt the doctor, but he is a good kid. He is a confused kid. And the doctor has all this guilt.

“They have imaginary sessions, right?” she asked. “And they both receive mutual therapy?”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

“And through this therapy, strangers are helped by the kid or the doctor?”

“Yeah.”

“Just like that movie?”

You picked up your glass and finished off the wine. Filled it, and took another long swallow. Behind her, in the distance, the kitchen doors flapped open and a tuxedoed waiter hauled out a tray of dinners for some table somewhere. Outside your window, in the corner a spider was preparing its dinner. You said, “Yeah, just like that movie.”

When you finish your story, you admit to Michelle, to the class, that Sarah was right. Your show was a thinly disguised imitation—or more accurately, a rip-off. What were you thinking? Maybe, in part, that is what you loved about Sarah. She calls things as she sees them. She pulls no punches. You say, “She saved me from spending one more minute on this project. She freed me to look for something more original.”

“So what can you do to avoid this type of failure in the future?” Michelle asks.

For the others, this was a trick question. For you, the answer was painfully obvious. “I need to listen to Sarah more.”
“Why would you do that? Her advice is what caused you to quit your idea. Her opinion is what caused you to give up on yourself and fail to follow though on your goals.”

“But it was a really bad idea that no studio was going to buy. I was able to spend more time on the show that the studio wanted, which has proved to be a moneymaker. It made me a success.”

“But you hate it. You have settled. You have fallen into the trap of mediocrity and conformity. How many other ideas will you let another crush before you trust yourself?”

She looks to the person to your left. “Your turn. Tell us your failure.”

You think Michelle is wrong. You don’t let others step all over your ideas. You never have. Which is why Stephens doesn’t answer his phone when you call. But that’s not important, not the idea, not whether or not you failed or fell into any trap, not anymore. What is important is your new concept for a sitcom. This one based loosely on Michelle, or not so loose. This Michelle. This damaged young woman and what? She can’t be a self-help guru, can she? There’s irony, but it’s too close to reality. Maybe a dietician, you think, an anorexic dietician. Or maybe she is a hotline consultant, phone-sex worker, or maybe a web-cam porn star? The more you think about it, the more you like the idea of Michelle as a character. She’s a gold mine…if only you had a plot—a conflict.

You decide to talk to her after class. You tell her she was right. That you should never have given up on that shrink story idea. You tell her that you want to restart your work but you need to freshen up some research. Would she allow you to interview her? “Can we meet for a drink? Talk a while. Informal really,” you ask. “Or maybe coffee.”
“Coffee sound good,” she says.

“So how was class?” Sarah asks. “Are you self-actualized?”

She’s working a puzzle and you can’t tell if she is mocking you or if this is playful banter—the type of banter that used to lead to sex. “It was okay,” you say and plop on the bed and lie back. “Shoes, please,” she says. You sigh and hang your legs off the side of the bed. You sit, not talking. She scratches the pencil on her puzzle. You stare at the black-and-white photo on the wall—Sarah on the beach, Sarah in a bikini, Sarah splashing and playing with a beach ball. *What was that, two, no, three summers ago—St. Thomas, Rum Runners, reggae and the sex, all the sex. Damn, what happened to her?*

You wish you could pinpoint that exact moment when the two of you quit talking to each other, or worse, when you quit listening to each other. You wonder if it was an exact moment, or if it was a gradual drift. Like erosion, a fraction of an inch here, a fraction there. And then one day you look at a picture on the wall and think, what happened to that happy couple?

You tell her that you have set up an interview with Michelle for the next Tuesday.

“Michelle?”

“The teacher from class.”

“Oh.”

“I told you about her last week. I told you that she was a little strange and would make a great character in a sitcom.”

“You said she was bizarre.”
“Yeah, well, I’ve set up an interview so I can develop a character sketch, develop a story line.”

“Like you did with me?” she asks.

“Exactly,” you say and remember how that first interview ended with Sarah. You think about the two extra bottles of wine, you think about the invite to her place, waking in her bed, both of you naked with sex still fresh on your skin. You wonder if Tuesday’s interview will end the same and this thought excites you. You wonder if Sarah is thinking the same thing. Moments pass—the clock ticks and she taps her pencil on the puzzle book. She’s stuck on a word and you wait for her to ask. She doesn’t.

You check your watch every minute or two. When Michelle is 20 minutes late, you think she is fashionable. At 40 minutes you think flat tire, maybe rear-ended. At an hour, you decide she is a no-show. You finish the last cold swallow of your coffee and pack up your stuff. You convince yourself to wait five more minutes and stare out the door, willing her to open it. You watch out the window as cars pull in and out of the parking lot. You see this little kid outside, sitting with his mom. He has long, wavy blonde hair and huge blue eyes and you think he’s six, maybe seven. You think he could be in commercials and if he was good, on TV. He waves at you while his mother talks to her friend and smokes a cigarette.

You wave back.

You’re watching the window, like TV, the boy eating a cookie, making faces at strangers, when Michelle walks in.

“I need something stronger than coffee,” she says. “You in?”
She is a wreck. Her black mascara, you think yesterday’s mascara, is smeared around her puffy eyes. Her stance is nervous and jittery.

“Yes,” you say, “let’s go.”

You sit on Michelle’s futon holding a paper cup half filled with tequila and struggle for something to say—something, anything to break the awkwardness of virtual strangers. Michelle is sloppy drunk. She holds her cup up. “Cheers.” You soundlessly clink cups and drink. You know it would be easy getting her into bed, and this would be the farthest thing from the “same old” that you can think of. But really, would it, you think—a bored husband cheating on his wife—isn’t that the very definition of bourgeois?

“Did I tell you about my husband?”

“Husband?” you ask. “No, I don’t think you ever mentioned your husband.”

She looks across the room, at herself in the mirrored wall. She unslumps her shoulders, pushes out her breasts. She lifts them up, supporting them. “They’re starting to sag a little,” she says, but not to you. “I’m not even thirty yet and they’re starting to sag.”

She lets her breasts go and pushes her fingers through her hair. “Maybe that’s why?”

“Why what?”

“Did you know that my husband is in prison? Felony assault or maybe it was attempted murder, I don’t remember.” She walks across the room and grabs her cigarettes. “Get this. He beat the man who fucked his woman. Not me, he quit fucking me a long time ago. He kicked the shit out of some young kid who fucked his nineteen-year-old girlfriend. Put him in a coma.”
You look to the front door and wonder how exactly to leave. You think about all those old spy shows you used to watch. When danger was in the air, they always had a secret passage or an emergency exit that led them to safety. Now, just this one time, you wish for the secret passage, you wish you could go to the mirror, touch the corner, and swoosh, a door.

“Can you fucking believe it, she was only nineteen.”

You don’t know what to say so you ask, “Are you going to divorce him?” She starts to pace around the room.

“All he said was, ‘I’ll make it up to you, baby. When I get out, it will all be better, I promise.’” She drops her cigarette on the carpet and grinds it out with her foot. “His lawyer, the fucking swine, says six months minimum, two years max.”

Your entire body tenses when she sits next to you, close to you. She puts her hand on your leg. Her fingers glide up your thigh, stopping fractions of an inch from your starting-to-get hard dick. “Or,” she says, “I could be lying and he could walk in any minute. He could catch us in the throes of hot steamy passion.” She says this while drawing small circles on your thigh, her long nails sending lightning across your body. She asks, “Can you feel the danger?

“Dangerous sex is my favorite kind of sex,” she says. She leans over your lap, her breasts dragging across your lap, and grabs for the bottle of tequila. You grab hold of the bottle. You say, “Michelle, it’s time to stop,” but you’re not sure what exactly you want to stop. She lets go with a pout and rests her head on your shoulder, staring again at the mirror.

After a few minutes, she asks, “Am I the kind of girl you’d leave your wife for?”
You pretend not to be listening. You zone off, stare deep in the mirror, at the reflection of the cheap art hung on the wall behind you—a deserted beach at sunset or sunrise; only a set of footprints walking across the sand hints at a person. You put on your faraway eyes and don’t answer. You wish for the escape hatch again; you think maybe it’s behind the picture of footprints. There is no easy answer to her question, you know this. If you say yes, then you’re leading her on a long, deceptive road. You say no, and—well, it seems too cruel to say that out loud.

You wonder why you’ve never asked yourself that question. Not Michelle’s question, but your version of that question—should you leave Sarah? Not for Michelle, that’s clear. But to leave. To escape the mundane existence that your relationship has become—to stop sleepwalking through the marriage and wake up. You wonder if she would notice that you left. If she noticed, then what? Would she just keep living her life? Would she continue to see Leslie every Wednesday and David every Thursday? Would she get a cat or a dog to share her stories with? Would she find a new person to help her with her crosswords, a new person to help fill in the blanks?

“I know this is a shitty question,” Michelle says, sounding a bit more sober. “I’m not asking you to. I don’t even want you to.” She sighs deeply and stares off with her own faraway eyes. “I just wonder if I would be the type that would make you want to.”

You want to tell Michelle that she’s all character, no plot. You want to tell her she needs to find a story; she needs to find a beginning, a middle, and an end. But then what would be the point? She wouldn’t understand. “No,” you say. “I don’t think you are.”

“I didn’t think so,” she says and falls asleep.
It’s after midnight when you get home and Sarah is asleep, her crossword book folded on her stomach. You undress and slide into your side of the bed. You pick up her puzzle book with its cover worn and slightly tattered. She’s been working on this book for as long as you can remember. You flip through the pages, see the empty boxes of the unfinished puzzles. You see all the unasked questions. 40 across: a five-letter word for “single entity.” Starts with “t,” ends with “g.” 44 across: “far from fresh,” six letters, ends with “cid.” You pick up Sarah’s pencil and start filling in the empty boxes. You write: thing. You write: rancid. You write: clone, realm, stoolpigeon. Page after page, the empty boxes are filled.
Appears To Be Working

I am content. Well, for tonight, anyway. So what if I am spending the night in a shitty motel in the middle of the Arizona desert, on an 800-year-old mattress, its only good spring poking through and grinding into my spine. This will probably be the last motel, the last bed I’ll sleep in for a long time. So, I am content. Content to lie here, naked with Jenna—her body smothering me in the hellish heat of this sun-baked room. I am content, even though the ceiling fan spins just fast enough to be considered by the clerk at the front desk as “appears to be working,” but not fast enough to throw off the clumps of dust from its blades. So, regardless of the fan, the mattress, and the heat—tonight, I am content. Tomorrow?

Tomorrow, the sun will rise; we’ll wake somewhat rested, somewhat happy. We’ll climb out of bed when our sex-soaked bodies can’t tolerate the heat of our closeness any longer. We’ll want a cold shower, and though we only turn the knob marked “C,” the water will be hot; nothing cold exists in the desert. We’ll dress; wear the bare minimum. She’ll put on her sexy cut-offs and a bikini top. Me, the same pair of ripped shorts I’ve worn since I left my dad’s trailer—since we left our small town 40 miles outside of Phoenix.

The shower won’t matter once we leave our room. The wind will coat our sweat-damp skin with a layer of desert grime. We’ll trudge across the road to the diner. It’ll already be too hot for me to eat. I’ll order ice water and light a smoke. She’ll take my cigarette, and I’ll light another. She’ll say, “I want pancakes,” or she’ll tell me she’s “in
the mood for eggs.” And I’ll confess that all we have is $47 and that $47 is barely enough
for a tank of gas and a pack of cigarettes. A tank of gas that will get us 350 miles closer
to Chicago. A tank of gas that will get us out of the desert, maybe all the way to Denver.

She might want out. Maybe even call her parents. I can hear her father now: “I
told you, dear. He is no good; a factory rat.” Jenna will want to defend me, she’s always
been good like that, but this time, she’ll probably request bus fare or maybe ask, “Daddy,
can you just pick me up?”

And when she gets back home, she’ll forget about me. She’ll meet someone else,
someone she might even love. They’ll marry, do the kid thing—maybe twice—and get a
dog. Not that she’s a dog person, but her perfect husband will hate cats, so she’ll settle for
the dog. I can’t blame her for going back. Hell, if there were something for me to go back
to, I just might turn around as well.

The first time I saw Jenna, she was walking into the IGA. I was walking out with
a few frozen dinners and a carton of Marlboros and I held the door for her. She smiled,
“Thank you.” She hooked me with two little words. Maybe it was her smile, maybe the
spark or the gleam in her eye, or maybe it was the way the sun shone in her hair—I know
that sounds straight from some crappy romance novel on the rack marked “Summer
Reading” down aisle three of the IGA, but what can I say. She wasn’t from around here,
that much I knew. She had none of the signs of a native desert dweller. Her hair was
sheen and smooth, not straw. Her skin, instead of brown lizard-like toughness, was soft
milk. And her voice, sweet and...well, she said, “Thank you,” not “Thank ya.”
I saw her again that next Saturday, coming out of the post office. I didn’t know if my seeing her again was fate or karma or plain dumb luck and didn’t care. I walked toward her. As I got close, close enough to smell the flowery scent of her shampoo, or perfume or whatever, I froze. My mind froze. I couldn’t think of one thing to say. I knew, deep down, all I had to do was smile and say something she’d find irresistible, but my pick-up playbook was nothing but blank pages. There was nothing. I counted the cracks in the sidewalk as I walked past.

“Where were you last night?” Stevie asked. He slid his time card into the slot, waiting for the clunk, a sound I imagined to be the same as the sound a heart makes when it crashes to a stop. Like a heart attack, if a heart attack made noise. “There’s a new bartender up at Jac’s.”

“Yeah?” I clunked my card and felt my heart stop in-between beats. We walked over to our press. “Who?”

“Dunno, never saw her b’fore.” Stevie threw the breaker on, then set the safety. “I think maybe she’s that new chick you saw last weekend.”

I dragged goggles over my eyes and adjusted the lenses so that the long scratch was below my sight line. Stevie smushed a white foam plug, shoved it in his ear, and asked, “Did your girl have brownish hair and a great rack?”

“No, her hair was blondish.” I plugged my ears with smushed foam.

“Maybe it was blondish.” He slid on his leather gloves. “I don’t remember so well.”

“What color were her eyes?”
“Her eyes? I wasn’t looking at her eyes.” Stevie pushed the yellow button and typed his code in the keypad. “Didn’t I tell you she had a great rack?”

The shift buzzer buzzed. Our press initiated. “We should go tonight, she’ll probably be there,” Stevie called over as the press climbed up. He dragged a flat plate of steel over what he nicknamed the ‘nipple.’

“Count me in,” I said, and he hit the green button.

The press thundered down with so much energy that the vibration from steel on steel tickled the hairs on my arm. On release, the hiss of compressed air ksshisssht like a cracked steam pipe.

I grabbed the now bubble-formed steel plate, just one more top to one more barbecue, and placed it on the short stack from yesterday. Stevie placed another flat plate on the press. Then the thunder and the tickle. No more talking, no yelling, no thinking—only the rhythm of 3.7 seconds.

That’s all you got between the up and down of the press—3.7 seconds. You could count it out. The hiss stops, one one-thousand, two one-thousand, three one-thousand, four one—crash. Ksshisssht—one one-thousand, two one-thousand, three one-thousand, four one—crash. So no talking.

Talking caused what the company described as unfortunate incidents. Even if you wanted to talk, no one would hear you unless you were yelling, and yelling was strictly prohibited. Imagine standing at press one and yelling something, anything—say you yelled, “Fire” and the guy on press four heard you and he was on three one-thousand, four, turned for a half a second, then BOOM, an unfortunate incident. Now imagine if one person from each of the seven presses turned their heads collectively—seven
unfortunate incidents. So yelling was strictly prohibited. Only counting. One one-thousand, two one-thousand...

Jac’s was a watering hole—my watering hole—across from the plant. It was dark and desperate; a vivid reminder of what life was like when you lived in the city too long. Bikers, wannabe cowboys and factory rats sat on bar stools and listened to Merle Haggard sing “It’s Not Love (But It’s Not Bad).” They drank boilermakers and breathed in the cloud of smoke that floated above their heads.

We arrived between shift rushes. Most of the factory’s day-shift crowd went home to their families, their dogs, or their TV, and the afternoon-shift didn’t come in until after midnight. We took our seats at the bar. Stevie was right: there she was, filling draft mugs and emptying ashtrays. I felt my throat tighten.

“What can I get for you boys?” she asked. Stevie said, “Two Buds.” When she turned to fill a couple of mugs, Stevie elbowed me and asked, “It’s her, ain’t it?”

She delivered two Buds and a couple of shots of bourbon. “From the gentleman in the corner,” she said and pointed to my father sitting at the corner of the bar, sun-baked and liquor-pickled, looking 75 instead of 52. “It’s on me,” he said.

“Thanks.” I held up the shot in his direction.

“It’s a celebration!” he continued.

“You know you’re late for your shift? Like six hours late.”

“Yeah, my shift, let someone else empty the trash and sweep up,” he mumbled.

“Ain’t you even gonna ask what we’re celebrating?”

“What are we celebrating?”
He announced, chest puffed up with pride, “Why, your birthday, of course.”

“My birthday was a month ago.”

“Happy birthday,” Stevie said, holding up his shot. To my father, he said,

“Thanks, man.”

I slammed the shot.

“You should talk to her,” Stevie said.

“What, here? I don’t…”

“I’ll clear the path.” To my dad, he said, “Hey, old man, how bout you rack em, and when I beat you, you can buy me another round.”

I watched her wipe the bar where my dad no longer sat. I watched as a rebellious curl fell in front of her eyes, and I watched as she pushed it back into place. She looked over and caught my gaze. She smiled. It was now or never.

“So, you new in town?” I nearly gagged on the words. I mean was that really the best I could do? Okay, I admit I was never good with opening lines. I was never a player. Really, in a town this small, can anyone be called a player? But still, all that build-up and the best I could do was, ‘You new in town?’ Jesus, what’s next? I guess I could have asked, “What’s a fine-lookin’ lady, such as yourself, doing in a place like this?” Yeah, that’s it. That would have won me points.

“I mean,” I continued, “I haven’t seen you around before. I mean, I did see you on the street a few weeks ago, not on the streets like I would see a prostitute, not that I see prostitutes, what I mean is I haven’t seen you around.” I stopped for a second and pulled in a deep breath and, looking down at the table, I mumbled, “I just haven’t seen you
around before.” When I looked up at her, I could tell she was trying not to laugh—at least not in a mean way.

“I’m Jenna,” she said, holding out her hand.

Behind Jenna, across the way, I see my dad trying to rack the balls and Stevie dropping money in the jukebox—some woman singing a country ballad meant to set a mood. He gave me a thumbs-up and finished setting the pool table.

“So, you work at the plant?” Jenna asked.

Nodding, I said, “Yep, I work press four—lids with Stevie.” Then added, “The press that punches out the tops of the grill.”

After graduation, I started working at the plant. I planned to stay only until I could figure out what I wanted to do with my life. I was looking for the what’s next, but needed some start-up money. I planned to escape the cage that was the town. While I didn’t know how I was going to, I knew I needed to and soon. If you don’t figure things out fast enough, you wake up one day 30 years later, old and gray, and on your way to the plant, you stop and buy a lottery ticket, hoping, maybe praying, that you win your retirement. After three years in the plant, I still told myself that was not going to be me.

“My dad works there, too,” she said. “You might know him, Larry Thomas. He does something in accounting—asset management or something like that.”

“We have something in common.” I looked to the pool table, to my dad, leaning, teetering, using his cue like a crutch. “My dad also works there, sort of.” I flipped a nod toward him. I lit a cigarette, and offered her one. She took mine and I lit another.

“Larry Thomas, can’t say I know that name.”
She said her dad moved here a year or so ago, on a special project. She said she’d been around last year—on spring break and on holidays. She told me that she’d finished her first year of college, some private school in the northeast, and moved back home with her parents. “I came out here for the summer, to see what was next in my life.”

“What happens after the summer?”

“Back to college, I think, I’m not sure yet. Or maybe Mexico. My folks are moving there in October or November.”

“Really? I hear they have pretty good food.”

“The pizza’s to die for.”

Behind Jenna, I watched my father slump and slide to the floor. Stevie grabbed under his shoulder, propped him up, and walked him toward the bar. “Keys?”

I threw him the keys and said, “I’ll be right out.”

“Poor guy,” Jenna said.

“Not really, he does this a lot,” I said. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

I tried to ask her out. It seemed easy enough, but the words didn’t form right.

Instead of asking how about dinner sometime, the words came out, “Did my dad pay his tab?”

“Yeah,” she said. “All good.”

“Oh,” I said and turned to leave. With my back to her, I asked, “Can I call you sometime? Maybe we can go out or something?” I turned back to face her.

“I’d like that,” she said and wrote her number on a Bud-Light coaster.
From the backseat of my car, my dad looked into the rear view mirror and said, “You boys need to watch your backs.”

“Don’t start, Dad,” I said. “I’m really not in the mood.”

Two years ago, on the job, standing at press two, my dad was caught drunk. Management wanted to fire him, but the union helped. In the end, he was demoted to janitorial duties and handed a $3 per hour pay cut. Since that day, my dad claimed they tried to fire him because he heard two suits talking in the john, saying that they were closing us down.

“They’re gonna pack up shop and go down to ole Mexico. No more jobs for you gringos.” I looked in the rear view mirror, his face staring back, my face in 20 years, leathered, unshaved with an unlit cigarette dangling from chapped and cracked lips. I shivered. “You got a lighter, buddy-boy?” he asked and Stevie handed him his.

“You’ll see,” my dad said. “I saw the fucking memo.” He then put his head down and threw up.

“Christ, Dad, warn me next time.” I swerved the car over and Stevie dragged my dad out of the backseat, while I used old newspaper and fast food wrappers to clean up the best I could.

“Those guys are coming for you, all of you,” my dad said. “You think this town sucks now, you just wait till the hammer drops.”

“Yeah, Dad. We know. They are shutting down the plant.”

“Sending the jobs south,” Stevie said. “The Mexicans will get our jobs.”

“Don’t mock me,” he said and jerked his arm free of Stevie’s guidance. “I saw the goddamned memo. Straight to fucking Mexico.” He threw up again.
It took nearly two months, but our first time, you know, the first time Jenna and me did it was so worth the wait. We were supposed to go out for dinner that night. The plan was, after work I’d stop by my house—my dad’s trailer—and shower. Then I’d pick her up at her house. I figured we’d go to the Olive Garden or somewhere nice like that. I was going to ask her if she wanted to go away this weekend, just the two of us. We’d finish our dinner, get in the car, and drive. I wasn’t sure where, just not here. When I got home, there she was—cooking dinner. Right there, on my dad’s shitty stove, the stereo blasting some punk band and a jungle of heat and steam erupting from pots filled with exotic ingredients, spices and other food bits spilled all over the counter.

I snuck up behind her and nuzzled her neck. She jumped and dropped her spoon. “How did you get in here?” I asked, a little confused. “I thought…”

“Don’t think,” she said as she kissed me, “shower.”

When I returned to the kitchen, damp and wrapped in a towel, she handed me a beer and I sat on the counter to watch her sing and stir, chop, and thrash to the music with a butcher knife in one hand. Flour was smeared on her face along with an I know you wanna smile. I stood and, pushing her backward, I kissed her, back pressed up against the wall, her legs wrapped around me. Her skin the same taste of humidity simmering in the pots.

After we cleaned up the dishes, after I locked my bedroom door for the night and we lay down in my childhood bed, I could still taste dinner on her skin. We lay quiet for a minute, lit a joint, and watched our smoke in the moonlight that beamed through the barred window.
“You know, this place isn’t as bad as you say it is.”

“Are you serious? This trailer is a pit of shit. Though,” I added, “it’s all mine to inherit. Play your cards right and you could be queen of my dynasty.”

“No, not the trailer, please, really, I don’t want it.” She playfully shoved me. “I meant this town. It’s quaint and friendly. Why do you hate it so much?”

“I hate the sun, the heat, the wind, the blowing dirt. But it’s more than that; this town is suffocating. This town is a cage and you have to starve to near death just to squeeze between the bars. You haven’t been stuck here long enough to know.”

“If you could leave tomorrow, get in your car and drive, where would you go?”

“I don’t know. Somewhere big. Someplace where it snows. An old friend of mine moved to Chicago, he said it snows a lot out there—so probably Chicago. I want to have a snowball fight.”

“Maybe we’ll build a snowman.” She rolled over and laid her head on my chest, as if listening to my heart.

“Yeah, that would be cool, a snowman—a button nose and two eyes outta coal.”

“And snow angels, that would be fun to do,” she said with a tiredness in her voice.

“How about you? Where would you go?”

“It’s not the where that is important, it’s the with who.”

I suppose maybe in her mind, she was building her snowman or she lay on her back, arms and legs flapping around like a bird, carving her angel. The last thing she said to me before she fell asleep—before we fell asleep: “My mom invited you to dinner on Sunday. Three sharp…don’t be late.”
I knew her dad hated me before he opened the door. I’m pretty sure ringing the doorbell 25 minutes late didn’t help any. As I untied my shoes and placed them neatly on the rubber mat next to the front door, he scolded me. Yeah, scolded. Her father scolded me like my high school geometry teacher used to do when I walked in class late, or stoned, or both. “Young man, how do you expect to be successful in life if you are not punctual? Tardiness demonstrates a lack of respect for those you keep waiting.”

“Oh Daddy, stop,” Jenna said. To me she said, “We were getting worried.”

“You were getting worried, I was getting disrespected.”

“That’s enough, Daddy,” she snapped. “Pay him no attention. He’s in a sour mood today.”

I turned to her father and said, “Mr. Thomas, I really am sorry for being late. I was only trying to pick the correct type of wine, and no one at the store knew what kind to buy. So I picked a red and a white.” I handed him the bottles and he turned, scowl-faced, muttering something that sounded like “Thanks,” or maybe “For christ sakes.”

For dinner, Jenna’s mom outdid herself—a four-course meal. That’s not to say that her dad didn’t outdo himself. For every new course of the meal, there was a new lecture. With salad, he focused on the necessity of goals. “I mean really, Julian, how do you expect to get through life without setting some goals?” The second course brought clam chowder, the red kind. With the soup, I was served “You should make a goal right now, say your goal would be to start community college next month. Set a goal of one class for the first semester. I mean really, Julian, how do you expect to get through life without higher education? You did graduate high school, didn’t you?”
“Daddy,” Jenna chided.

“I’m just saying education is important. Factory jobs come and go, mostly go, but an education you keep for life. Jenna, you tell him. Tell him how necessary college is, tell him nothing or nobody is worth giving up an education for. He might listen to you.”

“We got it, Dad.” Jenna looked over at me and winked. A wink that said, ignore him, the wine is taking over. With the roasted lamb and baby potatoes came the lecture on working in that “dead-end job.” “Where are you going to go when they shut that plant down? What then?”

“They are shutting down the plant?” I asked.

“I’m not saying they are shutting down the plant, but what IF they did. What if everybody stopped buying barbeques and the company goes out of business. Then what?”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“You hear that, Jenna, he doesn’t know.” He finished his wine, shook his head and said in a hushed tone, “He doesn’t know.”

The more he lectured, the more wine he drank; the more wine he drank, the more he lectured. By the time Mrs. Thomas brought out her “world-famous” upside-down pineapple cake, I’d had enough. “Ma’am, I really appreciate the dinner,” I said, “but I do need to get going. I have to get up early for work in the morning.”

“Hah,” Mr. Thomas cackled. “You hear that?”

“But it’s only seven-thirty, surely you can enjoy a piece of this cake,” Mrs. Thomas said as she rushed to cut slabs of cake—as if setting a piece in front of me would be enough for me to sit back down and eat. I thought I heard a quiver in her voice when
she said, “Jenna said you loved this cake, she told me it was your favorite.” I looked to Jenna and her expression asked me to sit down and have a piece of cake.

“Christ, boy, if you were so concerned on how early you needed to leave, then maybe you should have arrived on time. If you have to leave, be quick about it. I think we’ve had enough of your disrespect for one night.”

I looked back to Jenna and she mouthed for me to please stay.

“I can stay for one piece,” I said, and sat down.

As August inched toward September, we talked about maybe getting our own apartment, somewhere close to the plant. Apartments were kinda cheaper there. Her parents were less than thrilled with this turn of events. They already disliked the fact that I lived in my dad’s white-trash trailer next to the factory district, and probably more so than that, they were annoyed that their daughter visited me there. Yet, here we were, talking about “shacking up” in the area. Her father hated that I worked at the factory and was not going to school, and he really hated that she wasn’t going back to college nor would she join her family in Mexico. To her dad, I was a dead weight shackled to Jenna’s future.

That said, everything was really good.

Good until three days ago. Good until I was laid off from the plant—me and 118 of my closest co-workers. My dad was right. Management announced that production was moving to Mexico. They announced that the plant was closed “effective immediately,” with no warning, no apology, and no severance pay.
That night at Jac’s, the crowd was heavy and the mood was bleak. The jukebox was quiet and only a dull murmur came from the crowd. Jac announced, “Beer’s on the house till the keg runs dry.” If Jac’s announcement had been made the day before, the room would’ve roared to life with applause, whistles, and catcalls. Today, the news was greeted with a weak murmur of thanks.

Strangely, I felt pretty good—as if a doctor walked up and said, “You’re healthy, but everyone else here, all your friends…well, they have terminal cancer.” Part of me wanted to laugh and jump around. I couldn’t, though, because everyone else was sick.

“So what are you gonna do?” I asked Stevie.

“My uncle’s got a garage in Phoenix, he said he’d hire me to do maintenance services, oil changes, brakes, shit like that. I could get you in if you’re interested in going with me.”

“I don’t know—from factory rat to grease monkey?”

“You’re still holding out for that Wall Street job, huh?” Stevie asked.

I sat there and watched Jenna deliver full mugs of beer and a consoling hand on the shoulder of fathers with two, three, and four kids, now standing around shaking their heads and announcing, “This is bullshit!” I watched as she yelled, “Damn straight!” at men too old to be working, yet now forced into retirement, saying, “Fuck them.” Jenna didn’t stop filling mugs when the first keg dried up, or the second.

As Jenna drove to my dad’s trailer, I stared out the window. I watched as an empty trashcan blew down the street. “I hate this town. I hate all the shit that blows
around, I hate everything about it,” I murmured. Jenna rested her tired, consoling hand on my leg.

“Things need to change,” I said. “Leave with me.”

“And go where?” she asked.

“Chicago.”

I told her about my friend Justin and how he moved out there after high school. He had joined the Navy and was stationed at a training base just outside the city.

“He has his own apartment and we can crash there until we get jobs and get on our feet,” I said. “It’ll be hard for a while. I’ll find work. It’ll be an adventure. We’ll drive, leave tomorrow morning.” I didn’t tell her I only had $187.

“So soon—with nothing planned?” She was deep in her mind now.

“Think about this,” I added. “A cold and snowy Christmas. Snowmen and snowball fights.”

“Snow angels,” she said with a small smile.

As I said, I am content. Content until I let my mind wander around in a search-and-destroy mission—search for any gleam of light, then destroy all hope. Or maybe I have mistaken contentment for the quiet before the storm. To be honest, I don’t know what the difference is. The only thing I do know is that this motel room is suffocating me and I need a cigarette.

I unwrap her limbs from around my body and sit up. I’m careful, but not careful enough, and she wakes.

“What are you doing?”
“Nothing,”

“How come you aren’t sleeping?”

“Who can sleep in this heat?” I said. “I’m gonna grab a smoke.”

“Okay, but don’t fall asleep smoking in bed.”

I tell her that I’m sorry for waking her and to go back to sleep.

“Who can sleep in this heat?” She smiles, then drifts back to sleep. The moon casts a white kiss on her face, highlighting her gentle features, sharpening them; bringing them into focus. I lean over and kiss her forehead.

I walk over to the dark half of the room in search of my cigarettes. I stub my toe on the chair, and then my foot gets tangled in the shorts thrown to the floor. My hands fumble around on the dresser until I feel my cigarettes and the lighter. I grab a smoke and head for the moonlit part of the room.

Standing in front of the slider, I light my cigarette and stare at the moon. I’ve never seen the moon look so small yet so bright. I slide open the door and step onto the balcony.

Instantly, the night breeze of the desert cools my sweat-soaked skin. I spend so much time complaining about how hot the desert is that I too often forget how cool it actually gets at night. I guess I should leave the door open tonight to cool the room off. Or maybe I’ll grab that filthy pillow and sleep on the balcony, under the stars, the millions of stars. Just man and nature, the way it used to be before all the modern conveniences that have made humanity weak. Conveniences like a house, a TV, a car, and, dare I say it…food. I guess it’s easy to think like this when I am down to my last
$47—and when the money is gone and the gas runs out, it really is going to be man and nature. Or man versus nature.

I should have planned this out a little better. I don’t think the idea of moving to Chicago was flawed, only the execution of the plan. Plan? What plan? I don’t think I can argue with the timing of our departure, because every day we stayed meant we would have less travel money from my last paycheck. Hell, I already spent two-thirds of the money the same day I cashed it. That was my biggest mistake.

If I had a chance to do the last couple of days over, I wouldn’t pay the car insurance. I probably wouldn’t have left the 50 bucks for my old man, either. Had I kept that money, I’d have another $350. That would have gotten us to Chicago, and she could have breakfast. I also know that if I had a do-over, I would tell her before we left just how much cash we actually had. Five hundred or so dollars is still not easy living, but knowing that would still be better than the surprise she is going to get in the morning. She may choose to not come with me, in my do-over I mean, but at least she isn’t going to hate me.

But who am I kidding? Life doesn’t offer any do-overs. First, you screw things up, and then you have to fix it or find a way to live with it. I take one last drag from my cigarette and flip it into the breeze, watching the fire explode and fly off into the vast desert plains before vanishing in the vastness.

I stare out into the night. The moon, like a spotlight, shines on the desert plants, and the cactus cast long eerie shadows across the ocean of sand. A quick shiver races through my body and I am not sure if it is the view or a chill from the wind that inspired it. I rub my arms for a few seconds, the friction spreading warmth. I look down; notice a
scorpion on the handrail, a few short feet away from my hand. His tail curls up in striking position as he notices that I notice him. I know now I won’t be leaving the door open tonight or sleeping outside.

I step inside and I’m reminded pretty quick that the room is still at least 90 degrees and shows no sign of cooling down. I grab an old newspaper left inside the trash can and another cigarette, leaving just one smoke for each of us in the morning. I step back outside, relieved again by the cool night air. I look for the scorpion and see that he has moved closer to where I once was standing. I use the rolled-up newspaper to push him off the rail, two stories down to the hardpan. I can see him in the moonlight and he doesn’t move except to point and snap his pincher at me as if he is cussing me out. In the battle of man vs. nature, score one for man. I look down at him and say, “It was you or me, so tough luck, kid.” As if he not only heard me, but also understood, he shuffles into the shadows and from my sight.

I light my cigarette, breathe the poisoned air deep in my lungs, hold for a second or ten, and blow out a cloud of smoke. I watch it get carried away by the breeze—mix with the dust of the desert until it is no longer visible in the gleam of the moon. I wonder how close to Chicago the microscopic elements of that breath will get. I wonder how much closer that breath will get than me.
The Kid Your Mom Put You Next To

I can’t begin to explain how relieved I was when I read that my ex-best friend, my ex-blood brother, got convicted and sent to Jackson Prison for eight years. Deep down, I know he’ll serve only two or three years, but that’s better than nothing.

We had been friends since we were two. But those first couple of years don’t count. When you’re that young, your best friend is the kid your mom put you next to. He’s the kid you scribbled pictures with, or swam with, or built blocks with. It’s not until you share your first secret that a real friendship begins. The first secret I told Danny was in the second grade. I told him I thought his sister was pretty. He laughed. “She’s creepy,” he said.

As we grew up, we did a lot together—more than just baseball and bikes and our fathers’ collection of magazines. Danny was the one who found help when I fell from our secret clubhouse and smacked my head hard enough to sleep through what he called a bitchin’ ambulance ride.

And I was there when he found his dog dead behind the shed. Danny cried, not only because his dog died, but because his dog licked up the anti-freeze that he’d knocked over in the shed. When the tears ended, we buried the dog, cleaned the remaining anti-freeze, and, with the help of a rusty knife, we both carved a deep and sloppy X in the fatty part of our right palm and shook hands—swearing a blood-oath.
The last day he was my best friend, two weeks before graduation, Danny stood outside my house wearing his mirrored sunglasses and my old Pearl Jam t-shirt—the one he took when it no longer fit me, cutting off the sleeves with my kid sister’s scissors.

“Don’t be a pussy,” he said. “Sneak out—it won’t be the same without you.”

It might not have been the same had I snuck out my bedroom window. Maybe we would still be best friends, blood brothers. Maybe he would still have his right arm and his pick-up truck with the Yosemite Sam mud-flaps and chrome testicles dangling from the hitch. If I’d listened to him, maybe his sister would still be creepy—instead of “ejected through windshield.” Maybe my girlfriend would still be pretty—instead of “DOA.”

But what if we didn’t stop there? What if his dog didn’t find the spilled anti-freeze? Then maybe we wouldn’t have used that rusty knife. What if I hadn’t fallen from the tree, what if we never told each other secrets? Instead of Danny, what if my mom had put me next to Pete, the kid from two doors down? What if we told each other secrets, me and Pete? What if we took a blood oath? Pete’s in college now, not prison.

The last time I saw Danny—when he was still my best friend and we still shared x-shaped scars—he looked over his mirrored glasses, smirked, and shook his head. “Your loss,” he said, holding out his scarred hand for the last time. “Later, my man.”

We shook.
Under Control

I met Walter in the waning weeks of 11th grade. He walked into Health class after the bell, wearing his oversized leather jacket and an Iron Maiden t-shirt. He looked around the colonized room with the preppy girls up front by the jocks—with the grease monkeys and the stoners in the back. He sat next to me—the short, skinny kid with plain old clothes and messy hair.

“I’m Walter,” he said. “Today’s my first day.”

I gave a nod. He stunk like pot and cigarettes. His hair was long—like a girl. He was obviously a back-of-the-room kid, yet he sat in the middle, with the ghosts, with me. It was as if he didn’t understand the social pecking order.

“I got expelled from Mt. Clemens High,” he continued, with a big-ass grin.

“For what?” I asked.

“Pot. They found a dime in my locker. And they think I broke in and stole a radio from one of the classrooms.”

“Did you?”

“I broke in, but I didn’t steal anything. I don’t steal.”

“Do you do that a lot, you know, break into schools and not steal shit?”

“I do it a lot.”

I rolled my eyes and put my head down on the desk for my nap. But Walter kept at it.

“Dude, who’s that chick? Do you know if she’s got a boyfriend?”
“Dude, what class do you have after this one?”

“Dude, I got some weed, do you want to skip next hour?”

“Dude, man, do you gotta car? You’re sixteen, right, can you drive?”


“I just need to find a ride to work. Thought if you had a car, maybe you could do me a favor.”

For the rest of the class period, and all of biology, I learned nearly everything about Walter. I learned he had a sister, a year younger. His dad was an asshole and not just because he grounded Walter for the weed—took away the keys to his car, a 1970-something bright-orange Gremlin. According to Walter, his dad was an asshole for tons of reasons. Walter told me he worked in the produce department of a grocery store, Farmer Jack, the same chain I worked at. So along with the move to a new house, a new school, he was transferring to a new store, my store.

“Dude, that’s cool. I thought it was gonna suck at a new store, but now we can hang out.”

“Cool, dude,” I said without enthusiasm.

Those first few weeks I knew Walter I was a complete dick, but he never took the hint. I ignored him best I could when he talked to me at school and at work, but he was always around. In the morning, I’d walk into school and find him hanging out by my locker, waiting.

“Jimmy, dude, what’s up?”
I’m not sure why he tried so hard to be my friend. Walter wasn’t stupid. Maybe the booze or the dope fogged up his perception a little, or maybe he saw through my “dickiness,” straight through to my loneliness.

At work, he’d turn up in the break room, talk to me while I was trying to read a book. It wasn’t just that he was there. It was the fact that he never shut up. When he wasn’t talking about heavy metal or getting laid, he was asking me questions, personal questions, questions no one ever asked before.

“Do you have a girlfriend?”

“No.”

“Are you still a virgin?”

“What?”

“A virgin, you know, sex. Have you ever done it?”

“Why would I tell you that?”

“You haven’t done it,” he said and my face flushed. “You ever smoke weed?”

I thought about lying. Because I didn’t really have any friends, I was sheltered, in a way, from the cool sins of high school. And because I didn’t have any friends, I didn’t really know what I was missing. Now here was this kid, Walter, who had lived life and who was constantly pushing me to confess. Except I had nothing to confess. I wanted to say, _Hell yeah, I smoke weed. I smoke it all the time, dude._

“No,” I answered.

“Did you ever get drunk?”

“Once,” I said, a little proud that I had one of his badges sewn on my sleeve.
“Jimmy, boy. You got some catching up to do. I got a feeling that this is going to be a great summer.” He lit a cigarette and handed it to me.

In Health class, the teachers and counselors warned us about the dangers of peer pressure. They said, just because your friend does something, doesn’t mean you have to. They said, following the pack doesn’t make you cool. What they didn’t know is that we don’t cave to peer pressure because of our friends or because we want to be cool, we don’t fall to peer pressure because we want to follow the pack. What they never understood is how fucking horrible it feels to not be in a pack. I took a drag from the cigarette and coughed until my eyes hurt.

I was stocking empty beer and pop bottles on my 17th birthday. Walter found a pallet of liquor fresh off the truck. He picked off a fifth of vodka. “Happy birthday,” he said and we each drank from the bottle—a big swig, then another.

“The idea is not to get stupid,” Walter said. “But to feel good enough to not really care.”

The vodka warmed me up. And for the first time in a long time I wasn’t worried about anything. “One more?” he asked, handing me back the bottle for a third drink.

“Next time we’ll smoke some weed. Pot is the best.”

Instead of sorting the bottles, I sat around talking. Instead of pulling the brown bananas off the shelf and replacing them with green bananas, Walter sat around talking. He told me about his parents’ divorce. How his mom lived in another state now so he never saw her—but she always sent birthday cards filled with money. “And I talk to her on the phone sometimes,” he said.
I told Walter a little about life in my house—all Jesus, all the time. I told him how my dad worked every night and half the day and how he didn’t know what was going on. I told him that I had enough money saved for a car and my dad promised to take me out one day and find one. “But then my stupid step-mom keeps saying I’m not ready for a car and my dad keeps having to work on the weekends so I don’t think I’m ever gonna get a car.”

I told him I wished my parents would get divorced. I wished that my step-mom would move out of state. “And she doesn’t even have to send me birthday cards.” Maybe it was the vodka or maybe it was simply the fact that someone was listening; whatever the reason, the words ran from mind to mouth without restraint.

“Dude, can you get me a ride home tonight?” Walter asked at the end of his shift.

“My step-mom’s picking me up and she doesn’t like to pick me up, much less drive friends home.”

Truth: I didn’t want to ask her. She would if I did. She never passed up an opportunity to testify the Lord Jesus Christ. So I stopped introducing my friends to her. I stopped talking about my friends. In fact, I pretty much stopped having friends. And if I did introduce Walter to her, with his long hair and heavy-metal leather jacket, then she would try and convert him, and Walter would stop being my friend. For me, it was better to keep Walter in the shadows, hidden away in a box and brought out only when it was safe.

“Can you ask her, just this once?”

“Dude, even if she says yes, which I doubt, then we will have to listen to church the whole time.”
“It’s only a couple of miles, how bad can it be? Just this once.”

It’s an act. It’s always an act. She started with “Walter, it’s such a pleasure to meet you. Please, call me Mom.” I was slumped in the back seat behind her, out of sight from the rear view mirror. Walter sat up front, next to her.

“It’s nice to meet you too, Mom. Thank you for driving me home.” He gave her a genuine smile.

“My pleasure, anytime, really.”

I flipped off the back of her seat.

“So tell me how to get you home.”

She put the car in gear and turned up the radio—Amy Grant singing her praises to the lord. She sang. She raised her hand to the ceiling as if she was in church and sang. After the song ended, she turned the radio down. “I just love that song. It moves the spirit through me. Do you like Amy Grant, Walter?”

“Never heard of her. I like Metallica and King Diamond. Do you like them?”

“I don’t listen to secular music anymore,” she answered as she stopped at a red light.

“Oh, they’re not secular, they’re heavy metal,” he said. “I have a tape. Do you want to hear it?” I was confused. Perplexed. Was Walter playing around or was he trying to have a serious music conversation with my step-mom?

“No, Walter, that music is of the devil, and it does not get played in my car. Right, Jim?”

“Right,” I mumbled, Walter looked back at me. I shrugged.
“You see Walter, I used to live a worldly life but I have been redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ.”

“Green light,” I barked.

As we continued toward Walter’s house, she told us how the sins of the world will damn us to hell—not might, will. She told us of the one and only way into heaven. I had heard it all before; I could give the speech. I watched Walter nod in understanding. He was listening to this. I wondered what would happen if he believed it—if he chose to convert.

We pulled into his driveway and I held my breath; for a half-second I think we all held our breath. I imagined my step-mom was preparing to ask the big question. I imagined, I hoped Walter was preparing his escape. Me, I only wanted Walter out of the car.

“Walter,” my step-mom said, “Jesus can save you from a life a sin, he can save you from an eternity of pain and suffering. All you have to do is pray with me right now, turn your life to Christ. Will you pray with me right now? Will you accept Jesus into your heart?”

I hate you.

“No, thanks, Mom. But thanks for the ride,” Walter answered with his genuine smile. He opened the car door and got out. Before he closed the door, he stuck his head back in toward the back seat, “Happy birthday, dude. See you tomorrow.” He shut the door and I released my breath quietly.
My car starts. The engine roars. Black smoke, then white blows out the tailpipe. I jam the gas, jam the car into gear, and side-step the clutch. It’s pretty pathetic, actually—this piece of shit blue hatchback burning rubber down the street lined with autumn red, orange, and yellow-leaved maple and birch trees—puking toxic smoke everywhere.

I race down the street trying to outrun my anger. I wonder why I don’t tell her to fucking off. Let her try to throw me out, I think. Dare her to. I imagine what life would be like on the street at 17. I can sleep in my car. Park it in the woods. I want a cigarette so I speed up. 60 in a 25. That’s a hell of a ticket. But there’s never a cop here. 65. Then 70. Then slamming the brakes to turn into Walter’s driveway.

When I open the front door, I know by the musk of burning pot that Walt’s dad has left for work early—a meeting or a sales trip to Ohio. In the family room, Walt watches cartoons and smokes a joint. I take a hit and grab a Marlboro, light it, then plop on the couch.

“You wanna cut out today?” he asks.

“Can’t. I have too many skips in third hour. One more and they’ll send the note.”

I take another hit from the joint. And another. “Dude,” Walt says, taking back the joint, “what’s up with you? You never burn this early.”


“Just tell her no.”

“I tried. She says I’m booted if I don’t.”

“So put it on. I don’t see the big deal.”

“The big deal is that she wins.”
“So she wins.”

“And I look like an asshole driving to school with that on my car.” I watch the cartoon mouse put a stick of dynamite under a cartoon cat’s ass. “What if I don’t? What if she does throw me out? Can I stay here?”

“My dad won’t let you stay here. He don’t even want me here. He keeps telling me I’m gone as soon as I turn eighteen.” Walt hands me the joint and I breathe in more haze.

My anger doesn’t fade; it rages. Sitting on Walt’s couch. Then sitting in class. At lunch. The drive home. Rage. Then the house. Parked outside. I sit for a while, engine running. And there she is, at the front door, watching me. With nowhere to go, what choice do I have? I could say no.

“No,” I said out loud, hoping it sounded strong, confident—like that time Walter told her no. He said no and walked away. It worked for him. Why doesn’t it work for me?

“No.” It sounds weak.

“No.” Weaker.

And she is still watching. I get out of the car with the crumpled sticker in my hand. She’s smug. I peel off the slick white backing and place Jesus on my bumper.

Picture this. Driving down the freeway, Pink Floyd on the car stereo—Goodbye Blue Sky. Birds tweet in the background. I round a curve, jump on the gas, and climb the ramp of the overpass. In my speakers, a kid says, “Look, Mommy, there’s an aeroplane in the sky,” and I jerk the wheel—steer the car off the overpass. The car drifts ever so slowly to the peaceful rhythms of acoustic guitars and Roger Waters singing, “Did you
ever wonder why we had to run for shelter when the promise of a brave new world unfurled beneath a clear blue sky?”

A few weeks into my senior year of high school, this dream invaded my sleep—nearly every night for months. And each time, I’d wake before impact. I didn’t wake in a start. My heart wasn’t racing. I wasn’t freaked out or scared. Only disappointed. Disappointed I woke before the impact. Disappointed I woke.

After a couple of weeks of the dream, when I woke, I’d sneak out my bedroom window to my car, insert Pink Floyd into the tape player and drive that stretch of freeway. At first, I would start the tape on different tracks so that when I got to the overpass the kid would say, “Look, Mommy.” When I couldn’t time the song so that the kid spoke at the right time, I started adjusting my speed, going slower, then faster, trying to set the time just right. I practiced all fall, all winter, I figured if the kid ever said it at the exact right time—like in the dream—then I would do it. I’d jerk the wheel.

In early spring, three weeks before my step-mom moved out, five weeks before prom, nine weeks before high school graduation, ten weeks before my father filed for divorce, I did get the timing right. And I did turn the wheel. I didn’t jerk it…just sort of leaned into it. As soon as the tires hit the shoulder, I jumped on the brakes. A cloud of dust, gravel, and burnt rubber surrounded the car. I leaned my forehead on the steering wheel, breathing, and I listened to the song. Then flashing blue lights.

“Is everything okay?” the officer asked.

“Yes, sir,” I said. I was steady now, but still not right. “No, sir, I haven’t been drinking. No drugs, sir. Insomnia. I couldn’t sleep. Some kind of animal, a rabbit I think, maybe a deer, jumped out and ran across the road, sir. I’m not hurt. I was trying to get
myself under control, sir, because for a minute, I thought I was going to drive off the
overpass. I thought I was going to die, sir.”

The policeman followed me for a mile or so as I drove back home.

The next morning, before Walt went to auto shop and I went to co-op, we drank a
vodka shot and I told him what happened. I told him about the dream, the test runs, and
the cop. I told him I thought I really wanted to do it. I told him I chickened out.

He said, “I’m glad you didn’t do it, buddy. I mean it, man.”

He said, “You’re the only brother I’ve got.”

I never asked for Walt’s friendship, but I had it, unconditionally. At times, he
annoyed me, made me uncomfortable; he pushed me from the safety of my solitary and
he became my best friend, my brother. Yeah, we were both a little fucked-up but still
mostly harmless. He did his crazy shit that could’ve gotten him in a lot of trouble and I
did mine. Walter was my voice of clarity and I was his voice of reason—when we’d
listen.

Because my curfew was 11:15 p.m., the precise time my dad left for his midnight
shift at the plant, and because my dad had to work, leaving no adults in the house, I
hosted the post-prom party. Two cars loaded with friends of friends and trunks loaded
with beer waited four houses down. “Wait five minutes,” I told Walter. “Make sure he’s
gone. Then come on in.”

By 1 a.m., most of the crowd was gone. I was drunk and Walter was bored. So we
wandered the subdivision. We walked up to my old elementary school.

“You wanna go inside?” Walt asked. “I can get us in.”
“Why, how?”

“To look around. It’s easy,” he said. “Let’s go.” He took off running toward the back of the building. I ran after him and by the time I caught up, he already had a door open.

“How the fuck did you do that?”

“I’ll show you next time. Let’s go.”

Standing in the hall, I remembered, like flashback, all my trips up and down the glass corridor. Trips to the gym, to the art room, to the nurse’s office, the principal’s office.

“So now what?” I asked.

“We look around.”

“Why?”

“Because we’re not allowed to.”

And because we weren’t allowed to, we went to my old second grade class, then third, and then fourth. By the time I stood in my former sixth grade classroom, I was surprised how little everything changed. All the rooms had the same coat racks and closets. They all had the same bathrooms and the same desks, except now everything seemed so small.