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# **DUNGEONS & DAYJOBS**

2d6 stories, 5 recipes  
& a novella

By Rob Northrup

awkwardly publishing

san diego :: houston :: yazoo city :: jackson

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The seated figure on the cover was lifted from "A Satyr Family," an etching by Giovanni Battista Tiepolo circa 1743-57. Behind him is a slightly doctored photo of West Ave. in Jackson, Michigan.

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# Trailer of the Temptress

When I read the flyer for Meals on Wheels, I never thought I'd be hauling a frozen goat out of my trunk and down a hole in the ground. Plus I expected to be in kinda run-down neighborhoods, since I figured it was poor folks mostly.

Ted's place was sandwiched in between two big brick houses in a fancy, old suburb. You'd walk up to this wide flowering shrub that kinda shot limbs out in all directions and hung back to the ground. And right in front of the shrub was a rusted mailbox that said Ted Skarburton.

I'd have to lug this cold goat under one arm and hold back branches from the shrub 'til I could find the hole. Then I'd get on my hands and knees and drop my legs down the hole, while twigs and little buds and flowers got tangled in my hair.

I'd come out of the tunnel to his big cavern and yell, "Anybody home?" The place reminded me of the bargain basement of a flea market, because it was a huge, open room, maybe fifty feet across the big circular hollow, and it was always kinda cold and musty. And because there were thousands of trinkets on shelves all over the walls. These mismatched shelves made out of fiber board and old, gray plywood and corrugated tin poking out of the dirt walls from every direction. The shelves were covered with German cuckoo clocks and kissing Dutch tots and glass kittens cleaning themselves and ceramic figurines of anorexic faeries holding flowers and golden angels blowing trumpets and purple plastic Happy Meal gorillas and three issues of *Popular Mechanics* and a broken remote control for a TV that's been gone fifteen years and more ceramic figurines and glass hearts and fake orange flowers and wooden clothespins.

He would always stretch up right beside me from somewhere I hadn't noticed, spookin the shit outta me. But that's because his skin was all sandy brown and scaly to hide in the earth. We went through that thing when I first started bringing him meals, where he wanted to feel my hair and he let me check out his skin. He ate and lived among white folks all his life, so I was one of the first Blacks he'd seen in person. I tried to brush it off when he first

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asked to feel my hair. I said, "Don't you get white people asking weird things about you, treating you different? Like asking to touch your skin or see your claws?"

But I was curious about him too, since he was the first troll I had ever met.

"No, most times when humans treat me different over the years, I eat. Them I eat. But you know, doctor says no more, most of them give you worms. They all bad livers from drinkin, you know, lungs fulla tar." He would cross his long arms, lick his chin and smile. "I use to enjoy, now no more. Goats."

We talked about it for a while, but after the discussions of race and class, I still wanted to touch his skin, so we exchanged our curious, racially ignorant groping for a minute. His arms looked like packed dirt with gravel and pebbles, but it was really like a hard lizard skin or frog skin. Once in a while when I stopped in, I'd catch him before he straightened up the lair, and see his empty, molted skin lying on the rug. He'd always grab it up quick and kick the little strips and flakes of skin into the corner.

When he pressed a lock of my hair between his abrasive fingers that time, he hummed and studied my hair and skin and eyes with no shame for staring. "Good hair, looks very pretty tied as you have done so. Why they make a big deal of how you black so different? You skin no more tough or durable than pale skin. Clear to me that you just camouflaged for different setting than those Norwegian and Asian peoples. Bah! No matter. Very pretty hair and hips you have. Strong girl if you carry goats for me."

He kept staring at my hair and smiling and scanning down the buttons of my shirt to my legs and up again. I almost said something, but he patted me gently on the shoulder and said, "Grow you some babies soon, before you too old to enjoy them. Frowning people make the world crowded, but never too many smiles like on you."

Ted was always real nice. He'd show me his shelves full of angels proudly, reminding me of where he had gotten the pieces, as if he hadn't told me the week before. I guess he was really getting on in years, several centuries. He couldn't get around very quickly, and apparently didn't have the money to buy food or the strength to hunt anymore.

"And this kitty," Ted would say, "my heart's pride, real really." It was a white ceramic cat with blue ear tips and paws and a face that was too human. "Before Jimis Hendrik took this from a girlfriend, it was actually own by the sister of President Eisenhower."

His cavern slowly got smaller over the two years I delivered meals to him. He was gradually filling it, so he could finally bury himself when he grew too weak to go on.

He might still be there, though. I'd guess another year or two before that den will be full.

When I'd finally pull myself away from Ted, I'd drive over to the

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state park. It was a mile of tall pines and their orange needles fallen along the roadside. I'd pull to the side of the roadway to Gar Lake and grab a cupcake and a stack of newspapers off the back seat. There was a jogging/hiking trail across the road where I'd make my way back through the pines and the needle-covered forest floor. As the ground turned boggy and the pines gave way to leafy trees and bushes and cat-tails coming out of the mud, a sign stood two feet off the ground to identify the patch of yawning green trumpet weeds growing nearby.

At the marker sign, I would turn off the path and walk toward the edge of the swamp water. Within a few feet of the water, depending on how much it had rained in recent weeks, was the dead husk of a tree trunk, broken off a foot or two over my head, hollow from top to bottom. In a small crevice at the base of the dead tree was Kenny's crystal.

Every time I walked up, Kenny would say, "It's so good to see you! God, I hope you can stay awhile today!" I'm pretty sure he started crying on more than one occasion, but it was hard to see his shrunken form inside the crystal.

And I did stay for long hours the first few times I visited, out of pity. He couldn't go anywhere, and no one else came to see him. I was the only one who would bring him cupcakes and newspapers. His life force and all his powers had been confined within the crystal. But he had a little residual magic that he could use to turn the pages of newspapers lying on the ground near his crystal. And he could slowly absorb cupcakes, some kind of magical telepathic ingestion, I don't know how it worked. Anyways, he couldn't eat or drink anything while he was trapped in the crystal, and he would likely be there for thousands of years before they would let him out. So tasting a real cupcake now and then was a special treat for him.

He would start flipping through the magazines and newspapers as soon as I brought them, asking me if I knew more about the wars in North Asia or the unicorn scandal that threatened to topple the Canadian prime minister. "Man, I knew from the first time I saw that guy Cretien, there was something hidden behind that glamorous facade. Didn't you see it? I mean, the way he was always so nervous, he couldn't help slurring his speech?"

"Uh, I just thought it was cause he was from Quebec."

Kenny would scold me for not keeping abreast of politics, as if it was important for someone trapped in a crystal for twenty lifetimes to know the political climate in Canada. I never paid attention to that crap, but I'd try to tell him what little I heard on the TV news about current events. Kenny would lean forward on his seat to hear every tidbit, like I was a queen announcing a royal decree. (Yes, on his little seat. He had conjured tiny armchairs and bookshelves within the crystal, and his walls were hung with paintings by Mondrian and Warhol. I'm not sure where he slept. Either the

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couch was a well-concealed futon, or maybe he conjured his bed every night and sent it away every morning.)

"When I break free and the Old Gods reclaim their domination over this world," Kenny would tell me, "I'm gonna do something special for ya. I really mean it. Maybe a new car. They'll let me do that, ya know. I'll have that much power if I help them return . . ." And he would go off on his usual gripe about how life would have been great if only he had succeeded in calling the Old Gods before getting locked up.

Usually that would cure my pity for him, when he showed how much self-pity he still had. And I would look at my watch, or my bare wrist, or otherwise make an excuse to leave. Kenny would rise from his chair, as if he were seeing me to the door, and thank me for coming. Sometimes he would be angry that I wasn't staying, and he would turn his chair away from the crack in the tree trunk, picking up a tiny book from his microscopic coffee table. Like he had been enjoying his stay in the tree trunk and my visit was a minor distraction. He'd say, "Please see if you can find some back issues of *The Economist* next time." Other days he would beg me to stay with him a few minutes longer. Once he jumped out of his chair and threw his arms out, screaming and waving his hands back and forth and around in circles in front of him, and a green bud poked out of the dirt in front of the dead tree and blossomed into a daisy. Then he fell to the floor (the bottom facet of the crystal), panting. "One day . . . soon . . . something special . . . just for you . . . new car maybe . . ."

I took the daisy that time, said goodbye, and made my way back through the bushes to the trail. When I got back to the car, the daisy was wilted. As I opened the door and sat in front of the steering wheel, my hands were empty.

My last stop was not as emotionally taxing as the others. I often looked forward to it after long visits with Ted or Kenny. It was a beautiful drive through the rest of the park, passing by Gar Lake and into the countryside. Just farms and silos and old, scattered farmhouses for a few miles. Then the road grew small shops and businesses like moss along a stretch here and there, until the moss became a series of fungal strip-malls. After a row of warehouses, newly built condominiums with torn-up mud lawns, and a strip of video joints and empty storefronts, I would turn off the main road to Sunshine Court.

The trailers near the front of Sunshine Court were old but well-kept. Lawns mowed and porches neatly arranged with rocking chairs and a few wind-chimes. As you drove back over the speed bumps further, the lawns grew denser with car parts and old refrigerators, stacks of salvaged lumber and crippled motorcycles. Near the back corner of the trailer court was a dull yellow trailer with a cracked plastic birdbath beside the front door.

I would park in that trailer's empty space, walk up beside the

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dry birdbath and knock on the door. This place was just a standard delivery, some generic dinner entrée in a white styrofoam take-out box. I would wait beside the wobbly concrete blocks that served as stair steps to her door, looking over the few deprived weeds that grew out of the hard-packed sand. It always spooked me when the door opened and the lady appeared. Inside the trailer, the shadows would hold her tight. Satin robe, maybe blue or brown but you couldn't tell until she stepped into the light. The body of a ballerina, and always the deathly serious lips. Her hair was straight and black and her face was so white that sometimes I thought she had answered the door in the middle of giving herself a facial. Then she'd step into the light more, and I could see there was no cold cream spread over her cheeks and forehead, just cold skin.

The problem was, she looked thirty, no gray in her hair and not enough wrinkles on her face to be any older. I always wondered if she was scamming the charity to get meals delivered to her for free. I couldn't figure how she was a shut-in. The only hint was when I would hand her the white box with roast beef and potatoes and gravy, and her skin would brush my fingers as she reached for it. Her flesh was like marshmallows, reminding me of my grandmother's skin, the way she bruised so easily and felt like her skin would come off in puffs of dandelion seeds if a strong wind caught her.

When the lady had to step down into the light, she stepped slowly. Then I could see that she wasn't a lanky ballerina, just about the same height as me. And in spite of her perfect stream of hair and her sharp, royal face, her hips were more apparent. I don't want to say she was unattractive because her hips were too wide, but standing above you in the dark, you'd swear she could go get a contract as a model, and you'd put some money on the probability that she had some surgery to look that good. But when she stood next to you, you'd see she was plain and real.

She'd receive the box of food with both hands, looking at the ground as she whispered thank you. Then she would set a pink slippered foot on the step and ease herself back into the trailer. So many times I wanted to say, "Are you all right? Is there anything else I can get you?" But the door would click shut, and I'd stand there wondering.

I was too curious about her, so I finally asked one of the veteran meal deliverers, this hippy dude that carried the boxes of food in the sidecar on his Harley. He said she never talked to him either, but he knew her story. His grandfather had told him about the Temptress, the farm girl who had risen to Duchess of the territory around the turn of the century. Back when the town had wooden sidewalks and hitchin posts outside the dime store, back before flying carpets went into mass production and "horseless carriages" were propelled by the tortured spirits of stallions that wizards harnessed, instead of six cylinders harnessed by Korean engineers.

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She had found that those dangerous secrets known by only the oldest, most powerful wizards could be available to her, if she made herself available to them. It was much easier than the usual system of being sorcerer's apprentice to some lout, gradually learning magic over decades of study. As she mastered more spells, she drove off the major warlocks within the township and then the county as soon as they became useless to her. She rose to Duchess over half the territory before it got too boring and she decided that political power wasn't her bag.

Then she disappeared from public view, back to her little castle in the woods. People heard stories about movie stars heading into those woods, and one of the last tzars made a trip to visit the area. President McKinley made a train stop in town for his campaign, after which he was seen in a convoy of old Fords heading into the woods. Some say he pissed off the Temptress, and that it wasn't for political reasons that he was later shot. They said she had offered herself to him and he had declined.

After that, there was less traffic into the woods. In the 'Fifties, a traveling salesman passing through town told people about the demolished castle he had stopped at in the woods, and sure enough, it had been smashed to rubble. She was later recognized as one of the inhabitants in the new trailer park, but no one paid her any attention after that. Still pretty, but somehow not enough. She had lost her magic. She could still seduce the pizza boy, but he wouldn't think of her as a mysterious woman to pledge his life to, just the slut in the brown trailer.

Then again, when I was making those deliveries, I felt a pull too. I wanted to stay and talk with her, give her some company.

I'd drive the long way home through the country, sometimes bring an extra styrofoam box up to my apartment in the hillside and sit in my kitchenette, eating cold roast beef and mashed potatoes under jelled brown gravy. Looking out my window at the cars, I would wonder what the Temptress watched as she ate.

What does she do with her days? Clearly she has a lot of them left if she's been around a hundred fifty years already, according to the biker dude, and still looks that good. Does she watch the Rosie O'Donnell show and Oprah after a morning of soaps? Does she yell at the guests on Sally Jesse Raphael? Does she listen to Josephine Baker records all day and read books that she's read hundreds of times before?

Or does she gather ingredients for ancient spells, poring over disintegrating parchments and repeating the incantations over and over, day after day, hoping she'll regain her lost power? Because I can see her doing that, just sitting at a little kitchen table booth that folds down into a bed, staring at the dried husks of paper and concentrating until her head blossoms into a migraine. That's how she always looked when she came out to get her food, like I had interrupted her from flogging herself.

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When the leaves turn red and brown on the trees and the cold winds blow the dead leaves off, I think of those times I took food to the shut-ins. I know it's just autumn setting in, but I wonder how many more years the trees have left, if they're shedding leaves for the cold season, or for the last time.

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# Almost Always, Somebody Lost an Eye

This is the story of the Mountain-Tree. Two Gods were hanging out in the area we now call “Kansas.” Etchiti lay on his side in the grass, propped up on one elbow, for he was the God of Flat. He had much responsibility in Kansas, chasing away Gods of Rivers and Lakes that would dig valleys through his land, making deals with the Hill Gods to keep them at bay, and that funny adventure that involved blinding the Mountain God so he would never find the plains. But like I say, that’s another adventure, so we won’t go into it.

Dono sat nearby, twiddling his wet thumbs, for he was the God of Creeks. He and Etchiti had a working arrangement, because Dono’s creeks would not mar the flat landscape too badly, but they would nourish the grass, which would prevent soil from eroding. Dono benefitted by not having to battle the Gods of Rock and Hill and Mountain just to have a place for his creek to run.

Etchiti and Dono hung out often, for they were both laid-back fellows.

“Shall we wager?” Etchiti asked. Puzzles and mind-games and wagers were the only entertainment they could agree on, because Etchiti had an affinity for all things two-dimensional. You try playing cards or boardgames with the God of Flat!

“Okay,” said Dono.

“I bet I can grow a tree so tall that its leaves poke into the Heavens, roots so deep they curl into the Underworld, yet no mortal will ever notice my tree.”

Dono sighed. Another of Etchiti’s grandiose wagers. Every time he agreed to one of these schemes, a dozen mortals would end up crippled or insane or beheaded, daughters screwing fathers, cousins stabbing grandmothers. Almost always, somebody lost an eye.

“Too hard to prove,” Dono said. “How can you tell what a mortal notices or doesn’t notice? Plus it’s too easy for you to rig the bet. You make the tree invisible or you kill all the mortals within

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five hundred leagues. It needs clear qualifications if you want to make this a fair wager."

"Such as?" Etchiti rolled on his back and stared at the Sun. Another one of those painful things you can get away with if you're a God.

Dono didn't want to suggest any real limits, he just wanted to put the kibosh on the whole idea. "I don't know. For one thing, I don't want to hang around here 'til Ragnarok waiting to see if you're right about this wager. I have things to do. I have to make sure my creeks flow around and through obstacles, because I'm sure as hell not going to give any more power to Relchberg, God of the Lakes, just because some humans want to damn up my creek. I gotta feed Betty the Delta Queen down at the end of the line, and there's the shipping contract with Gorell where I have to move one thousand cubic leagues of silt down from the hills before the next planetary alignment or else he'll cast me into the Abyss for what I did to his daughter."

"Fine, fine, a qualification for time then. Let it be five score centuries we'll watch this wager. If no humans notice within that time, then I win."

Dono splashed at a stag drinking from the creek. "Wait, five score? Okay, sure, but I still don't like that word 'notice.' Does that mean the same as looking at it, or does it mean they have to be aware of the tree in some way? I can just see you arguing that it doesn't count because the mortal let it go in his peripheral vision, so he didn't really take 'notice' of it."

Etchiti sat up, which is about as vertical as he ever got. "Touch, then. A human takes notice if he touches. No, no, a fool could stumble into the tree by chance. That would skew the wager toward you." Etchiti considered what it means to notice. It struck him within three years. "A song! When man truly notices a thing, he sings of it. If a man notices this tree enough to sing of it within five score centuries of its planting, it shall be my loss. The glory will be yours!"

"Screw that," said Dono. "The Greatest Glory coupled with a nickel won't buy you a cup of ambrosia. What is the meat of your wager?"

Etchiti sprawled forward on his belly, resting his chin on his hands. "If I win, you alter the flow of your creeks until the Delta Queen is brought upstream to me. Here she will be enthralled by the lush, simple land. Unable to resist my wide open spaces, she will surrender to me."

"Yeah, right. Wide open spaces means big sky country. She'll fall in love with the Sky Goddess instead of you. Anyway, what do I get out of this?"

"Why, I have much to offer! Awesome bounties shall be yours! Uhhh . . ." And here again Etchiti had to think, which allowed Dono a decade to patrol his domain, clear out the beavers and rocks that

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obstructed some of his creeks, cause droughts for humans who attempted to misdirect them. "Here now! If you win, I shall call in my favors with the angels, that your creek may flow above the clouds, for I am in tight with the angels. Being positioned thus, you shall cause light rains, learn to control clouds and apprentice yourself to the Storm God. After he decides to fade away, or after his seventh son castrates or devours him, you shall be made God of the Storm."

Dono shook his head. "I really don't want to join the Majors just yet. All I really want-"

"If not power, then women. Angels, grass-nymphs, all the women of all the tribes who live on my lands. I shall hook you up."

"No."

"If not women, then men? Beasts?"

"I can get my own women! All I really want is to get Gorell off my back. If I win, then you use your connections or your power over Flatness to get me out of his silt transport contract. Maybe you can bend space, make the silt two-dimensional so I could easily move it all at once and be done with it. Or you could have your angel pals pick up loads of silt from my source upstream and scatter it lightly across your plains, just to disperse it. If I win, you have to help me dispose of his contract within two centuries."

"And if I win, you shall alter your creeks so that the Delta Queen is drawn to my territory. Agreed?"

Dono thought on the matter for seven months before barking, "Agreed!"

"I don't like the odds," Etchiti said. "You agreed too quickly."

Dono slapped his palms on the water surface, sending sprays that nearly emptied his creek bed.

Etchiti continued, "For what is a song? If a man speak all his words with lilting aspect, has he sung? I have known many men who mutter melodically over every matter, as though-"

"Four verses," Dono said, "a chorus repeated at least once, and a bridge. Any fewer verses, any lack of bridge, we will not judge it to be a song. This will tip the wager in your favor. We will tip the scales a pebble in my direction by demanding that the bridge may be hummed, and that there need not be any words in the bridge. If you do not agree to these terms, I'm going to start building a house of cards right here and now." Seeing a house of cards built was a torment to Etchiti, for he saw all the two-dimensional potential of the cards, and thought they were being abused by their use as three-dimensional building materials.

"Agreed," said Etchiti, and he shook hands with the Creek God. Then he burst into laughter and wiped his hand off on the grass. "I shall plant the seed and prepare a throne for my new mistress the Delta Queen."

Dono swam upstream, calling over his shoulder, "And I shall begin my school for wandering minstrels in the hills where you may not touch them."

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"D'oh!" said Etchiti.

This part of the tale would explain how Etchiti called in his favors and set his plan in motion, by blessing a prairie dog with human intelligence, sending the creature on a mission to collect The Really Big Acorn from the ice-vaults of Tera the Ultimate Bitch, an eternally birthing dog-queen who was often confused with the Earth-Mother because it sounded like "terra," but no relation to the One True Earth-Mother, who preferred to be called "Bertha" anyway. This One True Earth-Mother left a lot to be desired in the amicability department though, and often warred with Tera the Ultimate Bitch just because of the name-thing.

So anyhow, that's a pretty cool story in and of itself, Jojo the prairie dog's quest to gain The Really Big Acorn, and ballads about his triumph were sung for thousands of years afterward by the very same bards who Dono had tutored, so you can imagine how Dono felt about it all.

And then there's all the stuff where Etchiti planted The Really Big Acorn in the middle of Kansas, then gave out a mighty call to Yeart, the centaur-hag who tended the Star Gardens. Upon gazing down, she saw that the God of Flat was pointing at something with both hands, and she had to pull her glasses down off the top of her head to see that he was guiding her gaze by thrusting both hands toward the Root of All Evil, his manroot! Outrageous, vile gestures to be making at the High Gardener of The Cosmos! So she dug both her arms into a mucky part of the Heavens, scooped out a load of holy fertilizer, and hurled it down toward Etchiti, a horrifying brown streak tumbling from the Heavens! The empty space where she had scooped it out can be recognized as, oh, I don't know, let's say the Horsehead Nebula.

Of course, this was all part of his plan. Etchiti side-stepped the bolt of dung, an easy feat for a god whose only cool talent is to make himself totally flat. Heavenly dung tore through the sod, halfway down to the Underworld, and all that holy fertilizer square on top of The Really Big Acorn. Etchiti could see a massive crater for only a moment before the ground shivered and his tree shot up from the bottom. Few leaves sprang out of the trembling mass as it grew sideways more than up, like an oak-skinned pyramid blooming out of the crater. Soon it eclipsed the edges of the crater, rolling across the prairie grass like floodwaters. The peak pushed into the clouds and easily pierced Heaven. Surely the roots had already covered the little distance between the bottom of the crater and the top floors of the Underworld.

Now Dono could see why this greatest of all trees would go unnoticed. Because its girth resembled nothing as much as a mountain. Enormous crags in the bark looked like fissures in rock. The comparatively tiny branches that flourished on the sides of the great trunk looked like nothing more than normal oaks sprouting from a mountainside.

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There was still a chance that graduates of Dono's Upstream Minstrel College would happen upon this tree and sing praises of what they thought to be a mountain. So Etchiti went through his usual machinations of seducing and dominating and badgering mortals into doing his dirty work. He conned this dimple-chinned hero named Rollo into tunnelling to the Underworld, breaking through the gates of the Alchemical Prison and removing The Chastity-Belt of Opiumta, who was later known as The Whore of Babylon, but who always defended herself by saying, "Marriage is the same as prostitution, 'cause you're really just trading a piece of ass for that long-term security, so at least I'm being honest about it." Rollo's ordeal of taking the belt from Opiumta had some cool moments, but it's a whole nother story, really, a bawdy tale that can only be told properly by an untouched old maid past the age of seventy.

That's where somebody had to lose an eye, because any mortals who set eyes upon Opiumta would succumb to a fatal itching, which made them scratch themselves to death. He could have tied a blindfold on himself or something, but that's just the kind of macho idiot Rollo was, and anyway, he was always into scarification and full-face tats and that modern primitive shtick, so plucking out his own eyeballs was just another little way for him to prove to the world how hardcore he was. You know the type.

If you're taking notes for a Lit paper, remember that eyeball popping counts the same as castration, because it involves removing two little spheres from the body. Be sure to really play it up when you get to that part. If you can work in the words "juxtaposition" or "dichotomy" somehow, that can't hurt either.

So Rollo scored the magical Chastity-Belt off Opiumta, emerged from the Underworld blind, but with a nice seeing-eye cerberus. Etchiti wrapped the nasty belt around the base of the mountain-tree, which gives you some idea of the more-than-Reubenesque proportions of Opiumta, and the true scope of Rollo's achievement, because he had to talk her out of it.

All of this within three years of planting the mountain-tree. Those first enrolled in Dono's bard college were barely finished with their junior year, and already Etchiti's plan was complete. Now all mortals who came within sight of the mountain-tree grew hazy from the magic poppies that sprouted from the unholy chastity belt, or maybe from the fumes of the belt itself. Those who persisted far enough to touch the mountain-tree lost all mental focus, and most became unable to speak. As they left the influence of Opiumta's belt, mortals lost all memory of contact with the mountain-tree. Hence, no songs were written.

Do you have the picture of it firmly in your mind now? An oaken wall rising from the middle of the flatlands, its peak lost in the clouds even on the clearest days, because the clouds are in your own mind as you look. If you could burrow beneath the skin of the

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mountain-tree, you could follow the ant trails down along the roots to places where demons try to patch the root-holes in the roofs of their steaming ghetto.

Now put it out of your mind. Forget all of this tale except for the image of the mountain-tree, because it was window dressing for the story that follows.

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# Vampire in the Mountain-Tree

Part Two of “Almost Always, Somebody Lost an Eye”

This is the story of Gon the restless vampire. Fed up with three-hundred years of life on Earth, endlessly sucking blood from humans, all the wars and petty politics of the undead community, Gon dropped out of the vampire lifestyle. He spent twenty years wandering the globe, studying Zen Buddhism and Qabbalah and following the Grateful Dead. Still he could not find himself. The harder he looked, the less he discovered.

Finally he gave up trying to understand himself and his life. He moved back in with his parents, who had a big place in Milan. They were so glad to see him back that they held off a few years before complaining about how he should grow up, establish a domain of his own somewhere and resume devouring humans like a normal vampire. After all, vampires cannot expect to inherit castles from their immortal parents.

Gon spent these years listening to the radio, watching a lot of TV, customizing his Studebaker with lots of chrome and green flames down the sides. He read a lot of old books that he had never gotten around to. *Steppenwolf*, *Canterbury Tales*, *The Hobbit* and about half of the *Lord of the Rings*, but it really got bogged down in *The Two Towers*.

Looking through a box of old papers and photos from school days, Gon found a picture of the family dog they had while he was growing up. He forgot the box of junk and stared at the dog. Stevie was a shaggy Golden Retriever, always overweight and happy. Gon remembered how he cried when the dog died, and how he pleaded with his parents to make the dog undead too, but they said it didn't work like that. Gon used his own coffin to bury the corpse for a few days, but it just made his coffin stinky and they had to fumigate it. The little stone with “Stevie” written on it still sat outside the window of Gon's bedroom where they had buried the dog.

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In his wandering days, Gon had heard many conflicting stories about the afterlife. Hell, Purgatory, Reincarnation, bodies getting rejuvenated on distant planets. Funny thing was that about half of those stupid religions denied that pets could accompany humans to Heaven. It always infuriated him.

Gon slipped the photo in his pocket and went upstairs to find his parents. They were dining on a Moroccan tourist whose rental car had broken down just a few miles away. "Say, Dad, Mom. I think I'm going to Heaven and see if I can find Stevie."

His mother wiped her bloody hands on her napkin and licked her chin and nose clean. "Dear, I thought we explained that to you three-hundred years ago. Stevie can't come back."

"I know, I know. But I can go up there and bring him back. I'm going to climb the mountain-tree." Though it was known to vampires and all the supernatural creatures, humans had not yet discovered the mountain-tree. More accurately, none of those who had discovered it could remember anything about it. "And if they say no dogs are allowed, I'm going to destroy the place."

"Sounds dangerous," said Gon's father, finishing a morsel of liver. "Give your Grandmother a kiss before you go, or else we'll never hear the end of it."

"Take care," said Mom.

Gon descended to the crypt and shoved the stone-cover off the smallest sarcophagus. Grandmother was understandably a little paranoid, after all the run-ins she'd had with angry villagers trying to stake her and cut off her head and shove garlic down her neck. She always bared her fangs and hissed when you woke her suddenly.

"Just me, Grandmother," Gon said, pulling his hands out of reach from her snapping jaws. "I'm going away for a while and might not come back."

"Good, good. I knew you'd secure a domain before long. Is it very far?" She stepped out of the sarcophagus and stretched, revealing a few places where the white lace dress had rotted away. Grandmother had gone over when she was sixteen, an eternal hottie who had to be kept away from Gon's friends when he was growing up.

"No, nothing like that. I'm going to climb the mountain-tree to the Heavens and see if I can find my old dog."

She set her fists on her narrow hips and scowled at Gon. "Oh, so you're just here to collect your stuff and run off, eh? Go ahead and leave me sleeping for a century, just wake me when you need Grandma to provide equipment for your quest, and then you can run off and never see me again. It's God damned typical of you and your post-Renaissance generation--"

"No, Grandma! I don't--"

"--always ME, ME, ME, no time to spend with your family."

"Grandmother, I just came to kiss you goodbye. I don't need

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any equipment from you."

"You know good and damn well that I'm obliged to outfit my only grandson for his quest. Don't act like you don't know! And don't tell me it's not a quest, because I know a quest when I see one. I've been on a few of my own, thank you very much, and they were almost as pointless as looking for your dead goldfish or whatever. So don't try to teach your Grandmother how to suck eggs from the golden goose!"

She lifted her face toward the roof of the crypt, her mouth open, inhaling deeply. "Is that Moroccan? Never mind. Has the vault been raided lately or are your parents keeping on top of things?"

She led him down the stairs to the vault, rolled the stone out of the way, brushed cobwebs out of her hair as she pushed through. "Ah," she said, striding through mounds of coins, jewels, crowns, bits of meteorite composed of undiscovered substances, "I see your father finally got the chalice back from those Romans. Maybe he is good for something." She pulled the string on the light bulb dangling from the ceiling. Past the boxes of lost Rembrandts, knuckle bones of saints, a big Tesla coil which Grandmother squinted at before reaching the back wall. She rubbed her hand over a rectangle drawn on the rough stone wall, and it popped out, the front face of a drawer which eased forward.

"My mother's mother gave these to me," she sighed. "I'm supposed to guard them for eight hundred years and give them to my last descendant so he may challenge the boundaries of this world." She removed a piece of black velvet that covered the contents of the drawer. A bronze shield gleamed brighter than a forty-watt bulb ought to make bronze gleam. Emblazoned on the front of it was a crescent moon. Grandmother lifted the shield from the drawer to see what was beneath it. "Five armies were lost in the war to capture this shield. My mother got staked by a thief who wanted this stupid shield, and I had to spend fifty years searching to get it back. This shield was forged for you alone. DO NOT MISPLACE IT."

Next she removed a dog tooth from the drawer. "When you get to Heaven, this will grab Stevie's attention, so he'll come to you right when you call him."

The last item was a small box with rounded corners. Grandmother picked up a cord attached to the box and placed it around Gon's neck. She bumped the drawer closed with her thigh and said, "That's it." Then she snatched the drawstring on the light bulb and headed back out of the vault.

Gon said, "What's this box? Does it do something special that you should tell me about?" He hurried after her, up to the crypt where he could see the box better in the torchlight. On the front side of it were the words "Sony Watchman." He pushed a button and saw Joan Collins slap someone. "Cool! But how did you put this

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in a drawer centuries ago? They've only been around for a couple years."

"What, you never heard of a crystal ball? What do you think all that crap was, magic? It's just technology. And anyhow, I'll let you in on a little family secret, since I might never see you again." Grandmother lowered her voice. "My mother's mother's maiden name was Sony."

"Cool!"

She kissed him on the forehead and swatted him on the butt. "Now go make us proud. I'm going up to get some Moroccan, if there's any left."

With that, Gon slung the shield on his back, slipped the tooth in his pocket and began his journey to the mountain-tree. He had some difficulty finding it, since no humans could help him with directions. But there were enough friendly demons and bugbears in America that he eventually made his way to Kansas.

From the base of the mountain-tree, he could only see a mile of it poking up to the clouds. If the magic of the Heavens provided this illusion that blanketed its upper reaches, Gon figured he could reach the top within a few days. He grabbed an edge of the bark and began climbing.

Two months later, the vanishing illusion of the mountain-tree was now above and below him. It seemed to taper off into a hazy nothing only a few hundred yards below him, even though he could still see the ground and the clouds far below. Climbing only at night, Gon had to stop before dawn each day and punch a hole deep into the bark as a refuge from the sun. Then he could watch the Morning News from Kansas City, or *Live with Regis*.

One evening when Gon woke, he listened to a news segment on "the bloodshed in Kosovo." Those words reminded him of his great hunger, and he slammed his fist on the wall of his wooden cubby-hole within the tree bark. A few chips flew away from the impact, but the sound was like a drum. He pounded on it again and heard a definite hollow. Within a few seconds, he had ripped the bark away until a hole was cleared to that hollow.

Gon crawled into the open space, and nearly stumbled down the stairs. Inside ten feet of bark, there was a winding passage of stairs that spiraled up the trunk of the mountain-tree. He laughed at the thought of finishing his journey without any further mountain-climbing. Gon shut off the news and ran up the steps, two at a time.

Two years of blank, wooden stairs. Seven-hundred thirty days of stairs. Ten miles, maybe twenty miles each day he climbed. He was far from the Earth's atmosphere, so on the few occasions that the sun shone through a deep fissure in the bark, it was only a yellow glimmer, like light from a full moon.

One day Gon reached a crack in the bark and peered out at the stars. He left the television quiet and slept there on a wide stair

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step.

The sound of a meadowlark woke him. It lighted on the cracked rim of bark where the stars shone through. "Finally," the bird said, panting. "I had to flap like a S.O.B. to get up this high."

Gon lifted his head from the bronze shield that he always used as a pillow. He slung it on his back and started up the stairs.

"Hold up, man," the meadowlark said, hopping up the steps behind him. "I didn't fly all this way just for you to walk off. Let me catch my breath and we'll talk."

Gon waited a moment, then laughed and kept walking.

"Hey, I'm serious. Wait!" The meadowlark flew up to perch on his shoulder. "This is not going to work. You're heading into this without putting any thought into it."

"Heading into what? Heaven? I don't care. I'm going to get my dog or die trying."

"No, no, not Heaven, I mean this whole adventure. Getting the dog makes for a cute anecdote, but you need something bigger if you're going to sell your memoirs. Dude, when people are done hearing about you, you want them to come away with a big message, like *Never Eat Spinach With A Stranger*. Or your life could describe the origin of some plant or animal or bug or the movement of a Heavenly body. You want people to tell about your great big quest and end with 'That's why the mosquito buzzes,' or 'That's why the moon turns red.' Know what I'm saying? Maybe you could do something with the Autumnal Equinox. People already celebrate the solstices, but there's not much publicity about the Autumnal Equinox. Your life story should be so big that it defines why the tides change or how something was created."

"But everything's been created already." Gon looked around for an example, felt the Watchman swinging on his neck. "They show all the creation stories on here already. It's called The Discovery Channel."

"Have you heard of that DSS thing? Like 'digital satellite' or whatever? That sounds sweet."

Gon said, "I'm not here to prove anything. I just want my dog."

"Well, you're going to come across three obstacles," the meadowlark said. "And I'm one of them. Really, I'm not trying to get in your way of completing this quest. I just want to show you how you need to rethink it. You are your own biggest obstacle."

Gon continued up the stairs.

The bird flew off his shoulder for a second, then came right back down where it had been. "Look, between you and me, I'd advise against this vampire business."

"What do you mean?" Gon stopped and the bird hopped down to the stairs.

"It's sorta against the rules. I mean, there's no formal rule about this, but usually you get an ordinary man or woman, sometimes with no name, and they go on this extraordinary journey."

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Things are tipped out of balance by some taboo they violate or something, and they have to jump through hoops to set it straight, maybe sacrifice their lives in order to restore balance. This tree and your three obstacles are the hoops you have to jump through. But you got some problems with your whole background, see, because you're not an ordinary man, I mean, not a human. Being a vampire makes it too complicated. I'd advise against it."

"What am I supposed to do about it now?"

"Oh. I hadn't thought of that. You're stuck with it? Okay, go ahead and run with it now, I guess. Can you do something with your quest to explain how vampires originated through your actions? Or why vampires have to drink blood?"

"You don't even wanna know. It's tied in with women and why the moon turns red and all that. No, it's all been done. Really, I'm just here for my own reasons."

The meadowlark cocked its head from side to side, turning and blinking and turning back to him. It was hard to tell whether these movements indicated the bird was pondering the vampire's words, or whether he was just jerking his head around like all little birds with eyes on the sides of their heads do. "Well, hell. You got me, then. Stick a fork in me, cuz this obstacle is done. You should come across at least two more before you're through."

Two years of climbing. Five years of climbing. Gon watched carefully at all the tiny openings and cracks in the bark, thinking his other two challenges would come through these windows the same way his first obstacle had come. Maybe a dragon or an eagle, that eagle that tears out Prometheus' guts every night?

Four years. Seven years. TV reception came and went. Damn good batteries Grandmother left in that thing. He didn't know if TV signals came in better or worse in space, but they only seemed to go fifty or sixty miles through the regular atmosphere, and he had passed out of Earth's atmosphere decades ago. It should have been nothing but static all along, but he was still able to watch *Friends* and *Frasier* and *New Yankee Workshop* most days.

Gon had taken to punching new holes out through the bark to check outside. Sometimes he would knock on the giant core of wood in the middle of the spiral stairs and listen for hollow spots.

One evening when he was preparing to settle down and sleep, Gon spotted a lion on the steps above him. It lay across the passage, so anyone who passed would be within easy reach. The cat had been sleeping, but it lifted its head and opened its mouth, which looked a little like a smile.

Gon stood and held the shield in front of himself. "Don't bother to talk me out of it," he told the lion.

It said nothing, just stood and paced back and forth across one step, always keeping an eye trained on Gon.

Gon had not killed a human or any other animal in at least a hundred years. Besides his feelings about killing, the lion could

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mess him up here. If he tried to rush past, it could still wound him, and Gon would not heal unless he slept in his native soil. He imagined another thirty, fifty, five-hundred years limping up the stairs.

The vampire stepped closer, until finally the lion lunged. Its claws slid across the face of the shield, then caught on the rim and dug into Gon's right arm. A sound like fabric tearing came as the lion's claws pulled through dry flesh. Without thinking, Gon backhanded the lion with his shield. The lion tumbled backwards into the solid core of the tree.

He ran up the steps, propelled by instinct. The lion was faster. It could easily be on him within seconds. Even wounded, the lion could recover in the days and months and years of climbing ahead.

There would be no wait. The lion bounded up the steps and leapt on Gon's back. The vampire fell forward on his shield, rolled over on top of the lion, thrust his elbow back through the lion and into the wooden steps.

He quickly stood and stepped away. The lion's chest was crushed, blood streaming down the steps below it. It kept straining to breathe.

Gon flipped the shield on his back and ran up the steps. He ran for days, for three weeks, then rested a few sleepless hours and resumed running up the steps.

The batteries in his Watchman expired. A blue-green crust seeped out of the battery compartment.

Gon ran for months, then slowed to a walk. He should have been to the moon already, long beyond the moon. It was some trick of the Gods. No way of knowing how long his journey would last. Unable to sleep or dream for many months, he wondered what the Gods intended by this puzzle. The tree must have been created for some higher reason. It had stood for thousands of years, unique in this world, but no one knew why.

Perhaps his journey had been willed by the Gods. Someone must have assigned these three obstacles. Unless the Meadowlark had been lying. Maybe there were legions of obstacles waiting to block him. Maybe there had been no real obstacles, and the lion had gotten into the tree by chance. How long had it been in the tree before Gon came? If the Gods intended to stop him, why had they left a beast that a vampire could easily defeat? Was there only one more obstacle?

Gon began to imagine that Meadowlark was the God who had created the obstacles. Either he was a benevolent God who set the obstacles to force Gon's understanding of Life or the Afterlife, or else he was a wicked trickster God who knew that nothing could ever climb this tree to the Heavens. Or it was just a mortal bird talking crap.

Finally, after walking for several years without rest, Gon found where the staircase widened into a chamber, thirty feet wide and ten feet high. A dented and scarred desk blocked the opening

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where the stairs continued at the back of the room. Someone had actually taken the time to put down paneling up the walls, hardwood floors that looked like some other kind of wood. The woman behind the desk bent over a small stack of forms, stamping and signing them, making notes. As she set a form in the "Out" box, the paper disappeared. Shin bones and skulls and broken shoulder blades filled the corners of the room. The plaque on the front of the desk announced, "Lisa, Goddess of Machines Forgotten."

"May I help you?" she asked. Her dress was burgundy, a tasteful combination of godliness and business. The shoulder pads were maybe a little too exaggerated, or maybe those were her real shoulders, but otherwise, divine.

The vampire stood well away from her desk. "You can tell me why we're here."

She leaned way back in her leather chair. "Oh, Golly. I don't know why you're here. I'm here to keep mortals from getting to the top. It's one of those things where your dad, the God of Corn Whiskey, transforms into a wildebeest in order to seduce your mother, but doesn't have the power to transform back, so he makes a deal with the River God to have his firstborn serve as a threshold guardian up this cockamamie tree." She sighed. "Just one of those things. You want some coffee or something? I'll tell you," she said, holding out a cup that had materialized in her hand, a cool trick, although you'd think she could conjure something fancier than a paper cup, "it really sucks doing double-duty here. I have to stop people coming up the tree, but at the same time I have to do all the clerical duties involved with unwanted machines, useless antiques, expired service agreements, discontinued models. Plus I have to keep an eye on recalls. Just the database for all that warranty information takes up half my hard drive, and we're talking about a heavy-duty piece of equipment, the kind they only issue to Gods. I think it's supposed to hold one-third of an eternity of information. Or three-fifths, something like that."

Gon came forward hesitantly to accept the coffee. "If you're only here to prevent mortals from moving up the tree, then you'll let me pass?"

"Oh! I'm so sorry!" she cooed. "Vampires can be killed, so we consider you mortal also. But let's not battle yet, please? It's so rare I get a visitor I can talk to, someone who isn't intimidated by the fact that I may have to vanquish or destroy them. Have you been climbing long?"

Gon dropped into one of the polished wooden chairs in front of her desk. "Eighty years, a hundred, I'm not sure. Two hundred?"

"It's sad, really," she said. "So many try climbing this tree to the Heavens, because it looks so direct. It would have been so much easier to just stay home for two hundred years, concentrate on becoming a master sorcerer, summon angels and demons to build you a portal to Heaven. So much of this existence is just

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ridiculous. Totally pointless. I mean, for example, my duty as Goddess of Machines Forgotten covers dead languages and dead religions too, like the Shakers and Heaven's Gate and televangelism. Who will ever need to consult records on these things later? I tried to argue my way out of handling cigarettes when those finally went under, but the higher-ups told me cigarettes counted as a religion if not a device. They got their own savior, The Marlboro Man, who died so that his followers would know full flavor. And smokers had their ritualized way of worshipping him, by sacrificing a few days off the end of their lives every time they lit up."

"You mean they finally outlawed smoking?" Gon realized how very long he had been away from Earth. What else had changed since he'd been up the tree?

"Oh, no, they just legislated the tobacco companies out of business. As an individual, you're still free to smoke. But as a corporation, you're responsible for any products that kill more people than the nation loses in 'peacekeeping' missions each year."

Gon looked into the bottom of his empty coffee cup. "Wow."

"Yeah, so the car companies went under too. God, that was a nightmare. All of a sudden I have to supervise this legion of cherubim working for me as temps to repossess a quarter million beat-up trucks and Escorts and Escalades. Ugh."

"Thanks for the coffee and the conversation," Gon said, crumpling the cup and tossing it in her wastebasket, "but I need to get up those stairs."

"Are you sure you need to? I can crack your skull into tatters just as easily as you elbowed that lion?" Lisa spoke in the same tone she might have used to say, "Are you sure you don't want more coffee? Just takes a second for me to conjure as much as you want?"

Gon arched his back, bared his fangs, roared. "I swore off humans centuries ago. The blood of a Goddess is very tempting, but I think we can avoid battle."

Lisa pushed her desk and leather chair to the side of the room. The monitor wobbled on her desk as it screeched across the hardwood floor. The mouse fell down to the floor, and she had to set it back on her customized mouse pad, which was a photo of an Underwood typewriter. "The nice thing will be that you won't make too much of a mess. If you've gone so long between suckings, then you won't have any blood to spill. It's really not that difficult to clean, once you've treated it with a few coats of varnish."

"How much paperwork do you have to do when you discover a machine that no one uses anymore?"

You probably know how wicked a smile looks with fangs in it, but Lisa didn't notice yet. She was pulling off her shoes and throwing her arms in circles to limber up. "About three weeks for each item I discover. These forms get detailed when they're made to be read by people with all the time in the universe to spend reading."

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"So if I keep making use of this big necklace," Gon lifted the Watchman from around his neck and held it out toward the Goddess of Machines Forgotten, "then you won't have to do your god-awful paperwork on it, because it's not forgotten yet. And you'd be so thankful, you might let me squeak by up the stairs."

She stared at the old hunk of plastic crusted with turquoise battery acid like he was holding a dead carp for her.

"Or I could throw it down the stairs for you to chase," he said.

"And I'd catch up with you and kill you after doing the paperwork. Okay, you got me. Go ahead up the stairs. But if I hear you set it down on a step and leave it there, then the deal's off and you're dead."

Looping the useless machine around his neck again, Gon rushed up the steps, knowing his goal was near. He had defeated the third threshold guardian, and nothing more stood in his way. Strange that he had not really used or needed the shield, but maybe that would come later, or maybe there would be different guardians on the way back down.

Fifteen years he ran, offering praises to God or The Devil if they would only let him reach the Heavens soon, then cursing both when they didn't, then trying to remember all the demigods so he could repeat the process.

Two-thousand years later, the idea came that he could walk back down to beg The Secret from Lisa, because there had to be some secret way to reach the Heavens. He imagined a network of secret passages through the core of the tree that would take him to rocket elevators, shooting him out the roof and into the stars.

The vampire still walks up the steps of the mountain-tree, and always will. He has met thousands of travelers and wanderers heading down to Hell, up to the Heavens, down to the Meramec Caverns, some just burrowed into the core of the tree, waiting for enlightenment, waiting to die, hiding from demons, searching for angels, studying entomology. Some joined with the vampire. Some attacked him. Some shared tea or tobacco or Doctor Pepper, or offered him Trail Mix, but he never liked that stuff, especially the kind with carob chips.

Gon became the threshold guardian of a thousand other legends, the mentor to a few dozen, and even inspired several level bosses in commercially viable video games.

But what of the wager between the God of Flat and the God of the Creek? Both had been distracted by other events long before. Their wager had blown away like dust, like most of Kansas, like the song by Kansas. A thousand years earlier, Etchiti the God of Flat had been called away to Greece and Arabia, to lord over scholars of Geometry. Dono eventually defeated Gorell the Silt God with some help from Meadowlark the trickster God. Dono won the hand of Gorell's luscious daughter Ugust, who never achieved the status of a deity, but became well-known for polishing stones. His influ-

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ence grew until he was God of Rivers, then God of Lakes, washing great canyons out of Kansas, finally Municipal Sea God over the whole sunken Midwest.

What happened to the mountain-tree? It still grows from the middle of Dono's sea. Naturally you have never heard of this mountain-tree by mortals who cross the Kansas Sea. That's how potent the spell of forgetfulness was. You could still touch it today, but you would not remember it as you sailed away.

What happened to Gon? He still walks the stairs of the mountain-tree. The reason he never reaches the Heavens is that the tree still grows, but mostly downward. All the denizens of Hell dig at the roots of the tree, so it has to keep pushing down at them to grow back in place. Inside the tree, Gon is actually walking up the largest down-escalator ever created. So even after thousands of years of climbing the sinking staircase, he is no more than a few miles above sea level.

. . . Did you really think you'd be allowed to see Heaven? Then you are as much fool as he is.

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# The Wire

## Tetragrammaton

### 1

**This guy at work** told me about an art gallery hidden in the pizza place where he used to work. One night he was mopping the back room with most of the lights off, waiting for the manager to finish paperwork so they could split. He noticed a sliver of light coming from under this rack of pizza boxes in the back corner. Where the wall of the walk-in freezer meets up with the back wall of the store, he saw a gap with light filtering through. He pulled the rack out of the way to see it better. Eight inches wide at the bottom, tapering up to nothing. He bent down to look through the gap and there's Bridget. Painting herself into the corner. The girl who stopped coming to work three weeks ago. Everybody thought she had quit, but really she had slipped through that crack and stayed at work. She hadn't gone home in three weeks.

He said a twin size mattress standing on end could hardly fit inside that space, but she's in there with a light bulb, a brush and a palette, painting every square inch of those hidden walls. Tiny scenes of medieval countrysides, little farmers leading donkeys, minstrels playing lutes, hay wagons full of corpses, lots of monks and bishops and goats and tiny songbirds.

She wouldn't come out on her own. Her parents and her sister and the police couldn't convince her to come out all night. The owner authorized Fire Rescue workers to pry open the gap with Jaws of Life so they could remove her, since they classified her as a trespasser by that point.

Bridget got some counselling. She started working at a halfway house or clubhouse or community center, whatever you call it, helping other people like her.

The guy who told me that story had to quit working at the pizza joint. He was having nightmares about those tiny farmers and minstrels sealed up behind a crack in the wall where no one will ever see them again.

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## 2

**This guy I worked with at corporate** finished his shift one night and couldn't find his car. Big parking lot, you know, so he was looking around a while. It wasn't stolen, he just couldn't find it. This was a Friday afternoon, so we were surprised to see him on Monday morning with red-rimmed eyes, wearing the same clothes, stumbling in and asking someone to cover for him. He figured another ten or twenty minutes and he could find his car, then he'd be right in and get back to work. He promised to make up the time he missed.

The other guys make fun of him now when they see him stalking between cars or sleeping next to the back-up generator out back of the building. I smile and say hi. Sometimes a couple of the gals pitch in to buy him a sandwich. He doesn't cry anymore as he trudges through the lot, but he still has that look.

## 3

**This guy I used to work with** had a breakdown. He had just been promoted to regional manager, which meant a lot more spreadsheets and emails and meetings about how to cut down on all the spreadsheets and emails and meetings. His wife called to let us know that he was going on short term disability, and to say he'd be back to work as soon as he was able. She said he had gotten carried away with TLAs (Three Letter Acronyms). It was just silly when it started. He'd say WFD instead of "What's for dinner?" Or PPS for "Please Pass the Salad." That got old quick.

GWP = Get With the Program.

INS = I'm Not Sick!

SOC = Slept on Couch.

When he started using acronyms that incorporated other acronyms within them, she couldn't understand him anymore. He would say "ITSS" when he meant "IMHO TLAs s/b SOP" (In My Humble Opinion, Three-Letter Acronyms should be Standard Operating Procedure). He got hostile to anyone who didn't pick up on his coded layers of acronyms. Eventually she took him to a place where he could get the kind of help he needed.

Nobody at work had noticed anything wrong. We all understood what he was saying, AFAIK.

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**When I worked at corporate**, I met this kid who had a brand on his shoulder. Gordy in Shipping and Receiving. I asked if he got it in a fraternity. He said no, and when I kept asking, he smiled and waved me off. I had to pry the story out of somebody else.

Years back, the Shipping supervisor had issued a cranky memo: "I realize it's a boring job, but there's no excuse for the stick figures and graffitis that have been found etched on the sides of two desks. This behavior is unprofessional and unacceptable. Defacing company property may result in severe reprimands, of which may include termination."

One of the janitors saw the memo posted on the bulletin board and told the boss, "That's not your people, that's the kids. We been trying to catch all the kids that got away on the latest Bring Your Child To Work Day, but three or four of 'em are still loose in the building." He promised to round them up soon, but within a week the stick figures became a border pattern at knee-level throughout the department. They found rolls of twine and brown wrapping paper unfurled across the floor each morning. Another day when they came in, the postage machine on the letter table was surrounded by a partial igloo made out of packages of paper.

The supervisor took matters into his own hands. He left a Rubik's cube on the floor of his office and rigged the door to automatically swing shut and lock. It worked. Go figure. Next morning he called Facilities to take care of this kid he caught. A woman from Human Resources answered. He started to apologize for misdialing, but when the woman understood his situation, she thanked him. "Don't call Facilities," she said. "We can take care of that for you."

Now I don't know where they raised the kids, maybe in a spare warehouse, maybe they outsource that part of it. I'd have thought it costs too much to feed them and care for them until they hit legal working age. But think of how much they save by eliminating all the interviews, help wanted ads, temps, all that paperwork, not to mention wages and benefits, when you can train them from a young age and just call down to the warehouse when you run low. It worked so well that "Bring Your Child To Work Day" became a monthly event with t-shirts and prizes and bonuses for employees who participated. Things really got rolling when they opened an on-site daycare center.

Oh, I forgot to mention: Gordy was that first rascal who drew the stick figures on the sides of desks. What a little attention-seeker!

**This guy at work** (we'll call him Whitney) got hung up on the idea of designing the ultimate paperclip. Long before he perfected it, he came up with a name for it: "The Wire Tetragrammaton."

You know when you walk into a room and you hear people talking about you and they say, "Speak of the Devil!" The legend is that if you say the true, secret name of a devil or demon, then it has to answer your call. Some people figured the same thing applies to God, that if you work out His secret name, one powerful word, then you could call Him and make Him do your bidding. It might be a certain pronunciation of Yahweh or Jehovah or YHWH, or some combination of those letters. That's the "Tetragrammaton," the four letters of His name in some Bibles. It would explain why He's so particular about mortals taking His name in vain.

Hold on, I'm getting back to the paperclip. You've seen at least a couple different designs of paperclips, right? Your standard oblong spiral, or a triangle or that crisscross version for holding thick stacks. Whitney figured there must be some perfect design that would hold papers adequately, but also one that could draw a line, erase, receive AM radio signals, walk itself across your desktop, and if you folded it precisely, in a certain complex pattern, it would do your entire job for you.

He was a hard worker, which is why they gave him extra leeway when his work started to slip. Verbal warnings quickly turned into written warnings. Everyone had seen him toying with the rolls of wire on his desk, shaping, snipping, testing, while his daily job responsibilities piled up, untouched. They had to let him go.

Given all the free time he suddenly had at home, it took him about a month to work it out. He had put together hundreds of prototypes that failed to write or erase, or even hold papers together better than the standard design. It always seemed to work better in his head than in practice.

Whitney got a small advance for his book, *The Wire Tetragrammaton*. It was about finding what you really want in life, your personal key to happiness, how to recognize and avoid the empty substitutes for happiness that we all pursue. Like money and prestige when we really want love and respect and satisfaction. For Whitney, the Wire Tetragrammaton design was the empty substitute. What would he have done if he had broken the code and finally designed the ultimate paperclip, one that could tune in Paul Harvey and walk across the desk and do his job for him? He would sit behind his desk and stare at it to make sure it worked right, still hating his job as paperclip monitor, still wishing he could escape.

Sales took off. He hit the talk show circuit. He got offers to run seminars with the *Men Are From Mars* guy and the *Chicken Soup*

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*For The [whatever] Soul* folks, but Whitney took the money and ran. There was no design for an ultimate paperclip that would get him out of his job. But with the right combination of words, he was able to retire and never had to work another day.

## 6

Now here's the story you can tell about **this guy you know**.

I used to drive 31 miles up and down the highway to the bakery. Really it's a donut shop. A hundred people buy donuts and one person orders a cake for graduation, they wanna call it a bakery instead of a donut shop. Go figure. They paid me enough to get a house and made it worth my while to drive 31 miles each way to work. You'd be surprised how little it takes to get some people driving that far. I guess they didn't pay me enough to make it my life, cause here I am by the side of the road.

When depression set in hard, about year seven, I tried to distract myself with hobbies. Anything that helped me stop thinking about the next three or four decades I expected to spend making donuts, washing out industrial mixers with that fermenting dough smell. I made pencil drawings and tried painting for a little while. Nothing you'd be interested in. Nothing I was really interested in.

I painted a few birdhouses, which got me outside and looking around the yard a little more. I started a vegetable garden along the side of the house. Then I extended it all around the back of the house. Now the front yard is all flowerbeds and beans and tomatoes with a sidewalk running through.

Anyway, I wanted to start composting my kitchen scraps and dead leaves and stuff, but I'm too cheap to buy one of those bins specially made for composting. Too mechanically incompetent to try building one. So one day on my way to the bakery, I see this plastic garbage barrel stuck under a guard rail on the side of the road. Perfect for making my own compost bin. Except I hesitate, and by the time I talk myself into getting it, I'm a mile past it. I'd be late for work if I turned around to get it, so I let it go.

Luckily it was still there when I came home from work. I banged it off as much as I could, hunks of leaves stuck to the outside, before I stuck it in the back of the Cavalier. The garbage can had a big gash under the rim, but that worked out perfectly. You don't want an air-tight bin for composting, because the bacteria needs oxygen to break down your banana peels or whatever. First thing you need to do is bust a bunch of holes around the thing, which I did with the claw end of a hammer. Then I nailed some holes in the bottom so water would drain out.

Great little at-home project, because you can't hardly screw it up. There's nothing to do but poke holes in the thing and fill it with

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stuff to rot. How can you go wrong?

The next week on my way to work, I watched for more garbage cans. Not that I needed another one, but the first one had worked so well. I saw a milk crate and brought that home. Used it to stack up some potted plants. I had a lot of plants in containers, cut-up milk cartons that looked like grade school science projects so I could grow more spider plants and ivies. Even with a row of them on the sidewalk, you had enough room to get by without stepping off the path.

For two weeks I saw nothing worth picking up. Just mufflers, Burger King cups, a piece of plastic bumper cover. But I watched harder on the way to work and on the way home. I thought about it all day at work. One night I tried coming home on the back roads. Maybe I was missing some good stuff on all those country roads with the big ditches on either side. But that's a wash. Some of those ditches are along people's front yards, so they pick up anything that falls there. And some of the ditches are full of tall weeds that would mask anything good.

Mainly I think the highway just gets so much more traffic, there's more opportunities for stuff to fall off trucks or for people to throw things out. It's not worth it to spend your time looking on residential streets. I figured that out pretty quick.

I tried to think of something I could use a muffler for, or that scrap of plastic panel. They'd probably be useful to somebody.

Finally I saw something orange one day, a grubby pylon with a big streak of grease or maybe a tire print across it. After a few days passing it on my way to work, I figured I could turn it upside down and use it for a planter. I pulled over and had to cross all four lanes of traffic to get it.

At home, I brought it into the basement and considered how it could work best as a planter. It couldn't balance on the small, pointy end if it was full of dirt. I could bury half of the point in the ground, leaving the big opening at the top. But the yard was full. There was no more space to bury it. It would have to go on the sidewalk or the front steps. I decided to cut the point off, set it on its base and fill the opening with dirt. I made a mark on the side of it where I wanted to cut, then started thinking about what to plant in it. Another spider? Aloe vera? Should I cut it off near the top or lower down? Once it's cut, I can't change my mind. I set this one aside and waited to pick up another pylon to experiment on first.

There were no pylons on the way to work. All friggin' spring you see pylons crushed and littering the side of the road, but when you finally want one, of course they're all gone. I took a bagel and two donuts on my lunch break and drove down the highway the opposite direction from my place, a stretch that I don't see too often. Nothing but a muffler down that way. I could probably cut a muffler in half and make two planters out of it, but that would take some kind of cutting torch or heavy duty saw or something.

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You see how stuff started to blossom in front of me? I was opening up to all the things discarded along the side of the road, and I kept imagining how they could be useful to me or to other people. If a person gathered all this stuff and set up a junk shop or a booth at a flea market, how much money could you make off it? Would it be enough to live on?

I started getting written up at work for being late, putting all those mufflers and plastic panels in my car on the way to work. Even disposable drink cups are useful. You tear up the paper cup and add it to your composter. That stuff will break down just like newspapers or leaves. Why let the weeds by the side of the road benefit from that when my plants can get the reward? People just can't see the value in it, stuff all around that they could be using.

Finally I got to the point where I was finding more and more good stuff, and I'm thinking, do I really need to be dumping sacks of flour into mixers all day? I spent my days moving ingredients, jugs of milk, bags of mix, eggs, sugar, then heaving the trays into ovens, pull 'em out and glaze them, sprinkles and hearts and drizzled chocolate over top. Then you move all these trays out to the display cases. Then you listen to customers ask why you don't sell half-caff or fresh-made pitas or hummus or at least some God damn lox, or why did you stop selling those Mocha Maltacheenos, those were so good?

Listen, why don't you shmucks make my job a lot easier: we'll move this counter out of the way, bring you suckers straight in back of the store and I can just pour the flour and sugar and eggs and decorations straight down your gullet. Or save your body the time and effort of trying to digest it, we'll just inject it straight into your ass and your heart, cause that's where it's going to settle.

I never said that to a customer, because I thought it all through on my way into work, when I was finding all kinds of cans and paper fast food wrappers and pieces of metal. Do you realize how many little nuts and bolts and nails are just lying by the side of the road? I can pick up probably two pounds every five miles, and that's without even getting down to look in the weeds or moving the gravel around to see what might be covered up. How can you pass that buy knowing what scrap metal goes for these days? I didn't make it in to work that day.

Now I'll be first to admit that the basement was filling up with mufflers and things I hadn't found uses for. Getting through to the washing machine with a full basket of clothes took some skill not to trip. But I don't know why Shannon couldn't see all the things we could do with those pylons and mufflers. As soon as I took a couple milk crates full of metal to the scrap dealer, I started bringing money in again. I'm sorry, but she was the one being unreasonable. She just wasn't as practical as me, so she had to split us up. She still says it's my fault, but she's the one who asked me to move out. If I had asked her to move out, then it would be my fault.

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She couldn't pay the house note on her own. We could have managed between her income and mine, once I started selling stuff at flea markets. But she never gave me a chance. If I could have done it once or twice at a flea market, then she'd have seen the money coming in.

I make enough now off cans and bottles to keep the car running. Without the car, I wouldn't be able to keep finding stuff. Plus I find better things some days, like there was a stuffed animal tiger wearing a Santa hat and scarf. I got a few dollars off that at the pawn shop. Probably two or three times a week I find car parts or hubcaps or a baseball cap that they'll buy at the junk yard or one of the pawn shops around town. And there's Ella on Height Street, she runs a yard sale on her porch almost year round. I guess she stops when it snows because there aren't enough people walking by. The rest of the time, she has kids' clothes hanging from a line on her front porch, and a folding table with toys and appliances on her lawn. Sometimes if I find something the pawn shops don't want, Ella will pay fifty cents for it. Sometimes she won't take it, but she's always nice and says, "No, thank you." She never tells you to stop coming around with your junk.

I still get along with Shannon. She'll stop and give me a few bucks when she sees me getting bottles. Another example is even after she made me move out, I helped her move into her apartment. We had kept up house payments for maybe two extra months by selling my radio, the tv, a bunch of gardening books, but it wasn't enough. We were civil for a few hours hauling boxes. When we got it all unloaded at her new place, we sat down with some pop and she told me she was still pissed. She said, "I'm sorry, man, but you're going to hit a low point and you're going to realize how ridiculous this is. Then you're going to get some help. I hope."

I said, "Where am I gonna go, to AA?"

"No, you're going to see a psychiatrist because your priorities are whack."

She still doesn't understand, but that's okay. I'm not going to hit any low point. What I've hit is a plateau. I mean, not a low plateau either. I don't have a boss to suck up to anymore. I don't have to humor pawn shop owners or Ella either, because there will always be other people willing to buy this crap. There are other towns, and it only takes a few bags of cans to save up travel expenses. I'm scooping up the natural resources around me, living off the refuse of the land. Recycling the refuse of the land. I'm changing it from junk into things that people will use again. It's much more interesting than making another fucking tray of donuts. I never know what lies ahead of me. I found a twenty dollar bill one time on a weed, flapping in the breeze. Part of it was torn off, but there was enough intact that the bank took it.

Shannon thinks I lost something on the side of the road, but she can't understand what I found.

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# Chicken Fried Love Interest with Cilantro and Asparagus

## 1. flour

The first dinner I made for Ben was scalloped potatoes with ham. When I was a little girl, my mom taught me how to throw it together without taking time to measure.

### Scalloped Potatoes with Ham

bag of flour  
jug of milk  
sticks of butter  
bag of potatoes  
quantity of diced ham

1. Peel and slice potatoes until you cover the bottom of an ovenproof dish with a layer of potatoes.
2. Dot the potatoes with butter, maybe one teaspoon for every two or three potatoes.
3. Sprinkle a thin layer of flour over the potatoes and dots of butter.
4. Spread some ham over that, as much or as little as you want.
5. Repeat layers (steps 1-4) until the dish is full. Pour milk slowly over the top, trying to dampen as much of the flour as you can on the top layer, until milk rises to about one-third of the depth of potatoes. (Transparent dish is helpful for this.)
6. Bake at 300° or 350° F for 45 or 60 minutes, or until potatoes are done.

I don't know if it's my grampa's Dutch heritage or gramma's English, but one of them taught my mother the technique, and she taught me.

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Ben was sweet. We were in love and he couldn't find anything wrong with my scalloped potatoes. He's not a big fan of ham, so he had a couple helpings and just pulled the cubes of ham to the side of his plate.

About three months later he moved in with me. It made more sense than me moving in with him because his apartment was small and grody.

## 2. cilantro (optional)

Ben had a little difficulty with the name "Moors and Christians" applied to black beans and rice. I said it's Spanish, blame them. Probably hundreds of years old. Isn't it okay to use it if they used it in the first place? Ben said we might be perpetuating stereotypes or something. It was probably privileged white Christian Spaniards who came up with the name. Is it insulting to call someone a Moor nowadays?

Well, anyhow, we had Cuban black beans and rice, which they supposedly call "Moros Y Cristianos". I set out this big ceramic bowl full of the stuff. Ben noted that it was more than the two of us could eat. I said, yeah, because I like it and I want to freeze the leftovers and have it for lunch at work. Skip the salami on wheat for a few days.

Ben asked, "Where's the meat?"

I said, "Oh, I don't know, I just put so much stuff together, I thought with all the vegetables and beans and rice and stuff. I didn't even think of it."

Ben said, "You got this out of *Vegetarian Times*, didn't you?"

"No," I said, "but I got the idea there. I saw a version of this in *Vegetarian Times* and I didn't want to mess with plantains, so I found a different version on a website."

Ben said, "All right. Can we please have meat next time?"

"Yes. I'm not turning into a vegetarian. I just thought this seemed like a cool recipe, and I got all this stuff together. I was hoping it would turn out good. I think it did. Will you try some?"

He said, "All right." He tried some. He didn't complain about it. I had a lot left to put away in the freezer.

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### Moors & Christians (Cuban black beans and rice)

1 cup black beans	salt
6 cups water	black pepper
3 tbsp butter or oil	cooked rice
1 tsp dried thyme leaves	1 bay leaf
1 cup chopped celery	
1/2 cup diced onion	
1/2 cup chopped bell pepper	
1 1/2 cups chopped tomatoes	

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diced red onion (optional)  
cilantro (optional)  
sliced hard-boiled eggs (optional)

1. Clean and rinse beans. Soak overnight in a pan covered by at least one inch of water. Drain, rinse, and place in a large saucepan with water and bay leaf. Bring to a boil. Reduce heat, cover and simmer about two and a half hours or until beans are tender.  
2. Melt butter or oil in a skillet. Sauté thyme, celery, onion and bell pepper 10 minutes, stirring occasionally. Add tomatoes. Cook 2 to 3 more minutes.  
3. Add vegetables to beans. Simmer 45 minutes or until the sauce thickens. Salt and pepper to taste. Serve over rice. Garnish with diced red onion, chopped cilantro and slices of hard-boiled egg (if the person you're cooking for notices extra touches like that).

### 3. water

I didn't bring any exciting dishes to work for a while. For dinner, I made standard meals like baked chicken and rice-a-roni, burgers and chips, stuff like that. Didn't bother making extra for work. My usual lunch at work is a package of ramen noodles with some extras. I like spicy shrimp flavor.

#### Lunch at Work

1 package ramen noodles, spicy shrimp flavor  
1/2 cup frozen mixed vegetables  
water

1. Cover noodles with water.  
2. Microwave on High for two minutes. Stir.  
Microwave one more minute.  
3. Steep for two minutes.

One morning I told Ben, "Anyways, meat is expensive."

He was on the toilet, reading *Harper's* magazine. "What?"

I said, "It's expensive. You can't hardly get chicken for a buck a pound anymore, or ground beef for a buck and a half a pound. Even if you get a big family pack. It's not cheap anymore."

Ben looked up from the magazine. "What are you talking about?"

"When I made black beans and rice. We don't need to go vegetarian to be smart about eating vegetables once in a while and skipping meat, which happens to be expensive and usually bad for you."

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He went back to the magazine. "Humans have sharp canine teeth for ripping apart meat. Our anatomy has evolved to be omnivores, and it messes up peoples' stomachs when they eat only vegetables for long periods. We're not herbivores."

I made a pot of black beans and rice that night, just so I'd have it for lunch at work again. It was a good batch. I think I added more tomatoes to that one and used two bay leaves instead of one.

#### **4. dried split peas**

Ben took me to Red Lobster one night. That was really nice. I had coconut-lime shrimp. He had lobster.

I liked their biscuits, the kind with cheese baked in them. I tried to make them on my own, looked up a couple different recipes on the web. Never came out with anything very satisfying, but it got me on a real cooking jag. I started making a lot of soups. The thing about soup that appeals to me is that, after you cut everything up and throw it in a pot, you let it simmer for a while and then it's done. No complicated steps except for stirring it now and then, or sautéing some ingredients at the start.

I tried chicken noodle soups, cream of broccoli and mushroom. That turned out pretty good. I tried different ways to make the cream part. The recipe I started with used flour and milk and butter and a little tarragon, and it wasn't bad, but it tasted like flour and milk and butter. I wanted something that was more of a creamy cream. I tried soup mixes from the store, trying to reverse engineer them so I could make them from scratch.

Eventually I figured out that the secret ingredient in the yummiest canned soups is MSG. People bitched about Chinese restaurants to the point that they started putting up neon signs that say "No MSG," but nobody raises a fuss about it in grocery store items like soup, crackers, everything. If you buy something processed and it tastes good, you can bet your ass it has MSG in it.

I got burned out on the cream quest after a while. I had absorbed enough to start improvising soups without recipes, knowing which combinations of vegetables worked, which ones add strong flavor or subtle flavor. I try to be fearless about putting unusual or wrong things together. Don't tell me what I'm doing is wrong unless you can explain why plum pork is right. If some bastard put ham with pineapple and made it work, then there must be a combination out there with my name on it, waiting to rule the world.

So Ben came home from overtime one night. I didn't plan it this way, because he usually picks up a sandwich out of the vending machine at work. But this time he came home starving, just as I was finished an experiment called "Untitled #7 with Split Peas and Rice."

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### Untitled #7 with Split Peas and Rice

1/2 cup dried split peas  
3/4 cup long grain rice  
4 potatoes chopped  
1 onion diced  
2 to 3 tomatoes diced  
2 Tbsp butter  
1 tsp salt  
1/2 tsp sugar  
5 to 6 cups water  
1/2 tsp coriander  
2 stalks celery diced  
1 cup or more mushrooms  
1 clove minced garlic

1. Bring peas, rice and water to a boil in big pot.
2. Reduce temperature, cover and simmer 15 minutes.
3. Add potatoes, onion, celery, garlic and sugar. Simmer 15 more minutes.
4. Add the rest and simmer 15 to 30 minutes.

He tried a couple bowls of **Untitled #7**. It wasn't as bad as it sounds. I had been experimenting with dried split peas. I like how they disintegrate into the broth and give it a different flavor from the typical, clear chicken broth. I didn't like the freaky stinking farts that pure split pea soup gave me. So I was minimizing the peas, just enough to give a flavor and thickness to the soup, but not enough to be dangerous. Some carrots, onions, a little ham in there if you got some around. But you'll survive if you don't have any.

Ben took a bowl of it and ate in front of the tv, watching *CSI: Hoboken*. I asked what he thought. He said, "Yeah."

I said, "What?"

He said, "What?"

I said, "How do you like it?"

He said, "Yeah, yeah, it's cool."

I said, "Okay, good. Thank you."

## **5. cauliflower**

About a week after Ben mentioned the possibility of moving back in with his friend Stu, I attempted Cheesy Cauliflower and Mushroom Gougere. I made it on a night that Ben was going to be home. I added some damn bacon so it would have meat in it.

### Cheesy Cauliflower and Mushroom Gougere

1.25 cups water  
4 ounces butter

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5 ounces flour (1.25 cups!)

4 eggs

1.5 cups Gruyère or Cheddar cheese, diced

1 tsp French mustard

salt and black pepper

Filling:

14 ounce can tomatoes

1 Tbsp vegetable oil

1/2 ounce butter

1 onion chopped

1/2 cup mushrooms, sliced

1 small cauliflower, broken into bite-size pieces

some thyme

1. Preheat oven to 400° F and grease a large oven-proof dish. Heat water and butter in large saucepan until butter melts. Remove from heat and dump flour in. Don't mix it in slowly; dump it all at once. Beat well with a spoon for 30 seconds until smooth. Allow to cool a little.
2. Beat eggs into the mixture, one at a time. Continue beating until thick and glossy. Stir in cheese, mustard, salt and pepper. Push mixture to sides of dish, leaving hollow center for the filling.
3. You're supposed to puree the tomatoes. Like it'll make any difference. Diced is good enough.
4. Heat oil and butter in skillet and fry onion 3-4 minutes until softened. Add mushrooms and cook three more minutes. Add cauliflower pieces and fry for one minute.
5. Add tomatoes, thyme, some salt and pepper. Cook over low heat uncovered for five minutes or until cauliflower is tender.
6. Spoon mixture into center of ovenproof dish. Don't hold back any of the liquid. Bake 35-50 minutes until golden brown pastry rises.

The problem with my gougere, which I figured out after four or five more attempts, was that the fucking recipe lists the amount of flour in ounces. I was unaware that there are dry ounces of measurement and liquid ounces. Whichever kind of ounces is marked on my measuring cup, I guarantee it was the wrong kind. To make the proper gougere, you have to use dry ounces. Or better yet, fuck ounces. Use one and a quarter cups of flour. You use the right amount and you get this savory pastry with tomatoey stuff in the center and it's all good and it rises like a cake or something. You use the liquid ounces and it will only give you half as much flour, and your end product is a ring of pasty eggs, surrounding a jumble of vegetables that bleeds into the eggy part. It's like a wet, aborted omelette.

The last elaborate meal I bothered making for Ben was the wet,

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aborted omelette version.

It took me two weeks after Ben left before I felt like making anything more complicated than ramen noodles and tv dinners. I ate dinner watching *Law and Order: Special Vegetarians Unit*.

## 6. mad dog

Chicken Pot Pie with Death Stars Soup was not something I made for the joy of cooking. Running out of tv dinners motivated me. I also ran out of salami, ramen noodles, peanut butter and cheese. Shoved in the back of a cupboard, I found a package of tiny star pasta. I could never figure out what to use them in until I got this desperate. I had green onions and bean sprouts leftover from stir fry, from back in the days when I could stand to cook. I didn't have any fucking meat.

I had no parsnips or flavorful vegetables, so I thought about what I could use to give it flavor and thickness. On the door of the freezer was a chicken pot pie that had been waiting there since before Ben moved in. I did not want to eat that chicken pot pie. But I figured after it thawed, the gravy and chicken would give my soup flavor and thickness, and the pie pastry would either thicken the soup some more, or it might break apart into something like dumplings.

### Chicken Pot Pie with Death Stars Soup

1 generic chicken pot pie, frozen  
1/2 pound stars pasta (or alphabet)  
1 cup water  
1 bouillon cube  
some green onions, chopped  
some bean sprouts  
1 shot of Italian dressing  
1/3 cup Mad Dog/cheapest wine available

1. Make sure you have a pot pie that comes in a tin, not in a microwavable cardboard container. Save the tin pie plate. Defrost the pot pie. Peel off the top crust and eat it, standing over the sink.  
2. Boil enough water to cook pasta. After the stars have been boiling about 7 minutes, pick one out and throw it on the ceiling. That's supposed to be some kind of test of whether it's done. If you throw food on the ceiling in the first place instead of just tasting it, you fail the more important part of the test.  
3. Drain stars into a big bowl. I was afraid the little stars would slip through the holes in my colander, so I created a better one by poking fork-

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holes in the tin pie plate and draining a cup at a time.

4. In the pot you used to cook the pasta, boil one cup water, bouillon cube, sprouts, green onions, Mad Dog and Italian dressing. Chop up the pot pie and dump it in. Add stars. Heat through. Serve with Mad Dog until it's all gone.

The next day after my hangover diminished, I went to see *Revenge of the Sith*. I knew it would be as lousy as the last two *Star Wars* movies, but thought it would give me something to despise more than Ben.

At the concession stand, a guy named Larry spilled his drink on my arm. He manages a sporting goods store. Larry has a passing interest in sci-fi, but his real passion is reenacting frontier days as a buckskinner. They call the events Mountain Men Rendezvous. Imagine a biker gang crashing a Civil War reenactment and you get a sense of the atmosphere. He showed me his fringed deerskin pants and matching shirt and the authentic tent he sleeps in at the semi-annual rendezvous. They're supposed to camp out using no modern amenities.

He made me corn bread on his cast iron skillet over a campfire. The only details that might not have been authentic were the tiny bits of wild grapes and jalapeño he added, because it wasn't the standard way of making it, and you probably couldn't find jalapeños in this part of the country two hundred years ago. Larry's corn bread was moist and sweet and melted in my mouth.

We lived happily ever after.

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# My Terrifying, Dry Warrior

## Chapter One: Francis Gives Gus The Finger

I've been sober three weeks now. I'm pretty sure I've hit my lowest low and I don't want to go there ever again. It helped me re-focus my life. The event was I missed eleven out of eleven on the fractions quiz. You might get to the third or fourth degree in the Junior Order of the Free and Accepted Millwrights of Fowlerville with C's and D's, but you aren't gonna get to the thirty-third degree. The way you move up in this organization is by getting good grades, doing what you're told, getting your job done. Plus a little volunteer work when you hit middle school. Looks good on your college applications.

I'm not trying to excuse my drinking, but I got a lot of stuff going on. School, missions for the Millwrights, soccer, plus dealing with my crazy little brother Ray. He's two and a half. He can mostly dress himself and he's halfway potty-trained, but he still wets his pants and his bed. For a while he was talking okay and learning new words. Then he got stuck. Right now he thinks it's really funny to say only two words. He always says the two words together and always hollers them: "Never! More!" It's because our dad's favorite episode of *The Simpsons* is the Halloween one where Bart turns into a crow.

Now when my parents try to coax him to say other things, all he says is, "Never! More!"

So I gotta go around Soccer practice and hear the guys say, "Gus, how come your brother can't talk?" My brother the crow.

Anyways, the Millwrights is related to some of those other organizations you might have heard of, only you won't see little pentagram emblems on Millwrights' cars hinting at the secret society they're in. We keep quiet. That's why you haven't heard of us. It's like the Masons, only younger and hipper. A lot younger.

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The goal of the Millwrights is to keep the world from going bad, which usually means preventing OTO from taking over the world. That stands for Ordo Templi Orientis. OTO started off as an occult group, practically a parlor game for Brits with too much time on their hands. Satanist Templar wannabes who didn't really know much about Satan or the Templars. Some of the splinter groups still do that kind of high-brow dabbling with "magick" and writing boring books about Egypt and demons and blah blah blah. But one of the splinter groups was really evil. You encourage members to live up to their fullest evil potentials and naturally you're going to end up with assassination becoming the main method of promotion within the organization. As members carried out nastier plots every year, killing their masters to assume positions of power, younger bosses had to recruit younger and younger apprentices to do the dirty work. Until finally the average age of OTO members bottomed out around 11.

The boss of the local chapter of OTO was nine, a year older than me. Lisa Reinhart. She had gone to the same recess schedule while I was in second grade. All her friends would hang around with her on the sidewalk during recess with their girly pink notebooks. They'd write lists with titles like "My Friends" and "Girls Who I Would Never Dress Like" and "People Who Should Just Give It Up" and "True Skanks". Lisa accused one of her friends of being a copycat by writing a whole list of the same names and the same title as Lisa had already written. That girl moved away all of a sudden and she never called any of her former friends. She had gotten onto Lisa's "iHATEyou" list. Millwrights searching the woods around school had turned up a shoe that had belonged to the missing girl, but never found a body.

What I was missing on June First was a rum and Coke. My assignment that day was to deliver a package from one place to another. The package was supposed to have a psychic jewel inside, but I'm just a mule, I don't get to mess with the artifacts. When Mrs. Haggerty's class left for Chorus, no one would notice me gone for an hour or so. I biked over to St. Luke's, which is a Catholic school on the edge of town. Luckily my school is on the edge of town too, so it's only about eight blocks away.

Getting into St. Luke's is no big deal. I've done it before. You just got to change into the uniform before you go in. White shirt and a St. Luke's tie, plus those clunky blue shorts. Then you got to act ashamed when they catch you walking through the halls in between classes. I found an unlocked door next to the gym. The chapel's close to that door so I got in without anybody seeing me.

The chapel is just a little classroom that smells like paste with a skinny stained glass window in the back wall. No bleeding martyrs in the stained glass window, just a guy in a robe with halo, quill pen and a book that he's about to write in. I'd have to be out of there by 10:30 for the sisters' mid-day mass. I don't think they hold

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student mass there, because they need the auditorium to fit all the classes in at once. They use the chapel more like a study hall or for time-outs, or for brown-nosers who want to be seen praying before or after school. Nothing in the place but a few rows of plastic chairs and a small bookcase packed with copies of the same hymn book. I got into the closet right away.

Inside the closet were more stacks of that same hymnal, plus some packages of textbooks all shrink-wrapped together. Probably never used because they taught evolution or something. Some jerk had put a stack of chairs in there, so I had to squeeze in next to them and hold my breath practically.

I started getting antsy and reached to press the light button on my watch when I heard a scraping sound from the back wall of the closet. I moved a shrink-wrapped stack of textbooks out of the way so I could see the hole where my contact Francis had removed a brick from the room on the other side of the wall. He said, "Gus?"

I said, "Yeah. Shhhhh. Where is it?"

Francis's little second-grader fingers pushed a tiny cube through the hole in the wall. I unwrapped the glossy page covering the velvety box. The sheet torn out of a math workbook had story problems filled in with answers that made no sense, unless you knew the code. But I knew which answer to look for. "The second train delivers its auspicious cargo to Fenway Park just in time for the 12th inning, where it's unloaded by Alan Trammel in the number 40 jersey." The rest of the handwritten answers made about as much sense as that, so if the message was intercepted, the enemy would have five fakes to mislead them.

"FENway Park" stands for Fowlerville Elementary school. "Auspicious" meant the auditorium. The twelfth inning was military time, twelve hundred hours, Noon. Alan Trammel was a red herring to waste the time of any idiot trying to decode it. Number 40 jersey represents the 40th president of the United States, Ronald Wilson Reagan. So I had to deliver the box to the auditorium back at my school at noon, and my contact there would be Ronnie Crenshaw. Get it? — "Ronnie."

I dug a fingernail under the rim of brass around the middle of the box and flipped it open. It was a legit jewelry box but the thing inside was a big hunk of purple plastic faceted like a crystal.

Could this thing be a psychic jewel? Sure. They could make anything look harmless. I've seen a kid outside a supermarket pull a plastic tube off the side of a gumball machine, jam it into his arm and donate blood into the thing. Actually I don't know if he made a deposit or withdrawal. After a minute, it shot a wad of bills out onto the floor, but he was too little a kid, or gave too much blood, because as he reached for the bills, he fell over and stayed there. I didn't stick around to see who was responsible for the machine or what they really wanted from the kid. Any six year old who can jam a needle in his own arm and find a vein is in too deep for me to get

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him out anyhow.

And then there's the story of an artifact disguised as a Stretch Armstrong doll. The kid guarding it couldn't believe it was really something important, so he cut it open to see what was inside. To me, that story is proof that nuclear energy is safe, because they made up the story about the Three Mile Island Accident to cover up for what really happened. It should have been called "The Bleeding Meteorite Inside Stretch Armstrong Accident." Also a reminder to me that no matter how cheap or plasticky this artifact looked, I didn't need to screw with it and find out how dangerous it might be.

I heard Francis humming or clearing his throat to get my attention. He's only second degree in the organization, so I could make him wait. I could make him stand in the middle of the playground and pee on the swing set for all the kids in school to watch if I wanted to. Membership has its privileges.

I stuffed the jewel case in the pocket of my uniform shorts and picked up the package of unused books. Why did they need me to wait until noon for the handoff? The organization always made arrangements to cover for absences like this, but I wished they could get it off my hands sooner.

Then I realized Francis wasn't clearing his throat. He was trying to sing through his nose without opening his mouth. Not sing, actually, but scream. The scream dipped to a hum, then sounded like blowing his nose, then a girl's voice said, "Gross!"

His hand came through the hole in the bricks again, fingers straining to pull at the wall, knuckles going white. Then his four fingers dropped into the closet with me, streaking blood down the wall. They bounced off the package of textbooks and scattered across an upside-down chair.

I pushed out of the closet, tossed a bible through the stained glass window and got the Hell out of there. I didn't look back until I was a block away on my bike, but already the girls were coming for me. Two big girls, at least fourth graders. I'd never seen them before, but their yellow ten speeds were notorious. It was the Bronson twins.

They were skinny and tall with matching patches of freckles on the apples of their cheeks. Their white shirts and navy blue skirts were exactly the same, but you can't blame them for dressing like twins when everyone at St. Luke's wears that uniform. Both blonde as Barbie dolls, both wearing pigtails. The way to tell them apart was that Sonia scowled and showed her teeth almost constantly. Gina looked casual. Even with cords standing out on her neck as she pushed her bike to maximum speed, Gina kept her gameface, not like someone who had just watched her twin cut the fingers off a second grader, or perhaps done the cutting herself.

Don't take this as some kind of statement about churchy schools twisting kids into monsters. The Bronsons were twisted

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long before they switched to that school.

My bike was a gray, single speed BMX, an old Mongoose that my uncle had fixed up and handed down to me. I had to pedal like crazy to keep ahead of them.

If I could lose them somewhere near St. Luke's, maybe they would think I was actually enrolled there, and they wouldn't look for me around Fowlerville Elementary. There was no way I could outpace them on the road, so I cut through a chain link gateway between two houses. I slapped at the gate to shut it behind me, anything to buy a few seconds. If there were people in the yard to yell at us, they might slow down the twins. A stretch of sidewalk ran between the two houses. The backyard was all grass except for a big red sandbox in the shape of a turtle.

I heard a dog barking close by, and got scared that it was in this yard. Pretty soon I heard it clattering against the fence in some other yard. Looked like a boxer maybe, muscular with a pushed-in snout, a dull gray coat that made its bloodshot eyes stand out as especially bright and bloody.

No other gate in the fence circling this backyard. I slid sideways, my tires skidding to a stop against the back fence. If I could get over to the yard that butted up against this one, I could thumb my nose at that gargling gray beast and at the Bronson Twins while I got away. With a mighty grunt, I tossed my bike over the fence and dug my little Nikes into the chain link.

One of the twins plowed past the swinging gate in front and slammed her bike into the fence under me. I felt her hand clamp around my shoe just as her bike banged the fence. I jerked away and left her with an empty shoe, but she grabbed my other ankle. I couldn't balance up there, toppled over toward the other yard until my face mashed into the chain link. She was still holding my ankle above the fence.

Gina had circled around the block. She came at me from the yard I had almost escaped to, letting her bike drop without the kickstand. She told her sister, "Thank you," as the mean one pushed me into Gina's custody. Gina sounded polite but she still held my arm up behind my back and yanked on it until I stood on tippy-toes.

Sonia clawed over the fence and took my other arm. "What do we do with him?" She had managed to get over the fence with my shoe still in her hand.

They stood quiet for a minute while I pulled and squirmed and kicked. I don't feel ashamed; they outclassed me by a whole grade. Plus I've heard how girls get that early growth spurt before boys do.

The only one of us speaking was the dog, clattering against the chain link and pleading for any one of us to dare set a foot in his yard. He was only a few feet away from us now in the yard to the side of this one.

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His argument was a compelling one, because Sonia threw my shoe over to the dog, then grabbed my ankles again. Gina secured my wrists. Just before throwing me to the dog, Gina said, "Hold up," dropped my wrists, and stuffed a folded piece of lined paper in the front pocket of my shorts.

The note read:

*My Terrifying, Dry Warrior,*

*And so our journey ends,  
poignant,*

*bitter sweet.*

*I am so angry at you.*

*My love for you swings*

*about my midsection*

*like a pendulous, overripe fruit*

*of some kind.*

*Maybe a squash.*

*But there was a puncture on that*

*fruit or vegetable*

*dripping*

*moldy, rotten pus.*

*So you understand why I had to*

*throw*

*the whole thing*

*away.*

*Such is your fate*

*when you don't listen.*

*I told you:*

*DON'T*

*FRIG*

*with Lisa Reinhart.*

*Crestfallen,*

*LR*

*LR + OTO*

*T.L.A.*

*T.I.E.*

T.L.A. stands for "True Love Always." When written on blackboards, it's usually followed by T.I.E. to ensure that your declaration of love becomes "True If Erased."

That moment proved to me that the Bronsons were either stupid or they had no intention of killing me. Because why else would you give someone a note and murder them before they could

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read it?

Gina yanked my wrists again and the two of them stretched me out like housewives folding a sheet. On the count of three, I was flying over the side fence, looking down at a big pink grin set in gray cheeks, descending into the jaws of death.

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# My Terrifying, Dry Warrior

## Chapter Two: Kidding the Buddha

I lounged on a hammock made of wind and momentum. Squinting wasn't enough to survive the glare from the dreamy, blue sky. It forced me to look in the direction I was avoiding. Where fangs strained for me. Yellow fangs and saliva and gray hairs too short and bristly to call fur. Dog stubble.

The one thing I regretted at that moment was that I was going to die without ever trying Campari with Capri Sun.

I never liked the taste of Campari. It was the first bottle that caught my eye when I was standing on my tippy-toes on a step ladder in front of the fridge, trying to see what was in the tiny cupboard over the fridge. Behind the bottles of Jim Beam and Jagermeister, I caught a glimpse of some letters, C, P, R, I, and thought it was leading up to spell "Capri Sun." God, was that ever wrong. Campari tastes nothing like fruit punch.

They'd probably taste okay mixed, but I never got around to trying it. Never would.

The thing that extended my life for a few more seconds was that the dog didn't move to where I was going to land. You know how dogs do when they jump up to the spot where the frisbee is going to be, and that's where they catch it? This dog stayed at the fence and craned its neck to watch me fly over its head and come down on its back.

Instead of tearing me to pieces, the dog yelped and ran out from under me. I knew it wasn't going to go very far before coming at me. I tried to run around the nearest obstacle, the four foot tall walls of a portable pool with a wide rubber rim around the top.

I jammed my hands in the pockets of my shorts, which made it harder to run. A plastic egg, a little, green Army guy, my hot-lunch card, a rainbow-swirled rubber ball, the velvet box containing the

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psychic jewel, the wadded-up page of math homework with coded dropoff instructions, two raisins, some lint and a tube of breath freshener spray. One of these might slow down the dog, but which one?

The moment I felt the dog touch the back of my thigh, I would have wet my pants except my bladder was empty. Instead of tearing into my flesh, it felt like a pinch. I pulled loose, ran to the fence and tried to pull myself over. Jaws clunked after me, finally clamping onto my ankle when I slowed at the fence.

Was I numb from so much adrenaline? The jaws felt like a hand wrapped tight around my heel. Still no feeling of teeth or anything breaking the skin. It hurt, but only because of the pressure.

My left hand slapped at the dog's eyes. My right hand snaked into my pocket, scooping out everything I could find. The dog lunged back from the fence, taking me to the ground. I felt the slippery tube of breath freshener in the dirt and whipped the tiny cap off. The dog pounced at my face. I caught the beast square in the nose with a blast of minty, peppery freshness.

The mint is supposed to linger around the tiny bottle of breath freshener to disguise the fact that it's actually pepper spray. I hadn't stopped the monster's momentum. He still pushed his face into mine and slobbered on me. I saw glistening pink and black gums like a ring of bubble gum and licorice around its mouth. Inside was a cavern of flattened bubble gum and tarpaper. No fangs. The only thing that looked like it was supposed to be there was the massive tongue trying to escape out one side of the mouth.

If he had contacted anywhere other than my cheek, I probably would have been bawling from the pepper too. But it was a glancing blow. Then the dog ran straight over me, snapping and snarling at the air, stopping to paw at its nose every few feet before yiping, leaping at full speed in a different direction.

Somewhere behind me I heard the woosh of a glass doorwall opening. A round-bellied dude came into the light. Dark brown mutton chops covered most of his cheeks. Wavy chunks of Ted Koppel protected his scalp. A rubbery-looking yellow curtain covered the doorwall from the inside. The Bronsons were gone.

He ran straight past me and grabbed the dog's collar. "Carlos, Carlos, stop! Are you okay? What did you do to him?"

"I sprayed him with mint breath spray. Just wash it off."

The man scooped up his dog and threw it in the pool. After a minute, the dog stopped biting at the air and started swimming around the rim of the pool, blinking and whining.

I cried and rubbed my ankle, but it seemed okay. "There were two—" I stopped and coughed, which gave me time to embellish my story, "two high school guys threw me over the fence so your dog would get me. What's wrong with his teeth?"

He waited for the dog to come around again and grabbed its collar. After wiping water out of its eyes and holding the dog above

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water so it could blast snot all over the pool a half dozen times, the guy said, "Jaw cancer. We had to get 'em all removed. I gotta puree all his treats and table scraps now so he can digest 'em. When I heard him yelp, I figured he was trying to chew up another bunny and it disagreed with him."

He kept rubbing Carlos's face, saying, "I'm so sorry."

"It's okay," I said.

He turned to me. "Oh, are you all right? I got some Neosporin if you want some, or a Coke?"

[Insert rum and Coke joke here.]

"I'm Buddha, by the way. Like the Great and Powerful god." He took that moment to tuck in the black string hanging down from the front of his swim trunks, which were covered with neon green skulls.

"Sorry about falling on your dog. I better get my bike and go." I stood, dusted off my uniform shorts, limped toward the yard with my bike in it, then walked normal when I realized my ankle didn't hurt enough to limp.

"Sure, hey, I'm not going to stop you. Just long enough to tell me a joke."

I stopped at the fence. "What?"

"Tell me a joke and we'll call it even."

"Call what even? Those guys threw me over a fence to get attacked by your dog."

"You were just minding your own business in the middle of the school day and those two girls pulled you away from your science class, chased you a mile from your school and threw you to Carlos? I think not. You're too young to be cuttin' class. That's something that would go down on your Permanent Record if a person were to phone the Truant Officer about it."

He must have seen the girls running away or something. But it was funny how he said a mile from school. We were only two blocks from St. Luke's. It would be more likely that a kid from St. Luke's would be running around his neighborhood than a kid from Fowlerville Elementary, which really was a mile away. Plus the uniform was a dead-giveaway for the Catholic school. No uniforms at my school.

"Now tell me a joke." He folded his arms. Wispy tufts of brown hairs poked out over his nipples, curling up like eyelashes.

"You're serious?"

"As serious as a person who knows the Truant Officer's phone number off the top of his head. You know what a Truant Officer is?"

He would have been less threatening if he just tried to beat me up. I knew at least eight techniques to incapacitate him within eight seconds. But he would wake up eventually. How could I defend against an adult reporting me to the principal?

I looked for some smirk or twitch on Buddha's face to show he

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was pulling my leg. He hadn't moved a bit. His nipple lashes rustled in a gust of wind, but his face was set.

I said, "A mushroom walks into a bar--"

He said, "Heard it."

I sighed. "Come on, I'm not a jokebook."

He glared.

I said, "There was once a kingdom full of tiny people called Trids. They were ruled by a wicked giant who loved kicking them around."

"Yeah, yeah. Silly rabbit, kicks are for Trids."

I said, "Damn. Okay, wait." I scrambled for the joke that my mom always told, a groaner, the only joke she remembered. My little brother Ray had heard it often enough, he knew to laugh when she finished, even though he couldn't understand the punchline. "There were two clams who were best friends: Joe Clam and Sam Clam. Joe Clam died one day in a car accident and became an angel."

"He visited Earth for a big party," Buddha finished, "and then returned to Heaven singing *I Left My Harp in Sam Clam's Disco*. I'm about to make the call."

"Wait!" I thought about bolting through the doorwall, just getting away. Would the Bronsons be waiting for me in front of the house? Buddha uncrossed his arms and leaned against the rubber wall of the pool. I said, "I never seen a picture of Buddha with a beard like that."

"So? That's not Buddha." He slapped his swollen gut. "This is Buddha!"

I looked at the dog, who was floating easily, resting his blubbery maw over the rim of the pool and waiting for my joke.

"Okay. This will make you laugh: I'm actually a member of a secret society of children fighting to stop a bloodthirsty cult, also comprised of children, from dominating the entire tri-state area. Those twin girls you saw killed a second grader less than ten minutes ago."

Buddha squinted at me. He said, "Huh!" The dog sneezed. "All right, that's acceptable. Go back to school."

I put my best foot forward into the chainlink. In the meantime, Carlos had floated around to face away from me. When he heard the chainlink rattle, he woofed, scrambled to look my way, then lost interest again.

I straddled the top of the fence for a moment. "You're not going to call my school?"

Buddha chuckled, "What, come between you and an ancient evil? The Doublemint Twins of Death?" From the way he carried on, it sounded like he could only find belly laughs from his own jokes. Or maybe I had primed him to laugh this hard.

"I didn't say they're ancient. They ripped off the name and logos from an old group," I said, trying to balance on the fence,

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“and even the original group is only one or two hundred years old.”

Buddha stuck out both arms and waved his hands up and down, the way you’d do with a handkerchief if you were wishing someone farewell as their train pulled away. The gesture kinda fit with his antique facial haircut.



I sat on the floor in the Green Room waiting for my rendezvous with Ronnie. Don’t look around for serving tables lined with bottled water or platters full of yellow M&Ms, or anything else that you’d see if you were waiting to go on the *Tonight Show*. Look for a deep storage closet lit by a clamp lamp, cord draped across the entrance for you to trip and land on the old backdrops depicting castles and dragons or Our Town. Calling it the “Green Room” is Mrs. Cardo’s idea of teaching the real lingo to kids who are theater-bound. The younger kids my age are mostly scared to go in there. With the older ones, you can tell which ones are only dabbling in theater by the fact that they’ll stand around outside the door of the Green Room during productions. Fifth graders with theater in their blood, the kind who describe themselves as “bitten by the acting bug,” are the ones cramped together in the Green Room at show time, trying not to spill punch on the props.

I got to the Green Room before 11, so I had plenty of time to worry about what it all meant. If the Psychic Jewel was worth killing Francis for it, why didn’t they take it as soon as they caught me? Maybe they had already stolen the real jewel and replaced it with a fake. But then there would be no point in chasing or killing anyone. It didn’t add up.

Why was I the middle-man picking up this thing and delivering it to the next step? Why couldn’t Francis take it to the final destination? Because they were on to him. Francis needed to hand it off, and our superiors hoped that OTO could be thrown off the trail by a skilled operator like me.

What did the note mean? It’s not like I’ve ever “terrified” anyone or acted like much of a warrior, but “dry” really shook me. Obviously Lisa Reinhart’s minions found out about my drinking problem and how I was trying to keep sober.

Why would the Bronson twins stuff a note in my pocket and then throw me to a dog? I’d never get to read the note if the dog killed me. Either they were careless or they knew Carlos couldn’t gum me to death.

I could tell when noon rolled around because I could hear squeals and stamping feet and “Stop running in the halls!” Everyone heading to lunch. When my watch showed quarter after twelve, I pushed my aching little body out of the corner and stepped out of

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the dark Green Room, into the dim backstage. I gave up on Ronnie and made a beeline for the bathroom.

Whoever designed our auditorium had put more thought into it than Mrs. Cardo. For an elementary school, you don't need a Green Room for the kids to hang out between performances. You need a potty. I really needed a potty about that time. It was a helpful landmark for when Mrs. Cardo tried teaching "stage right". She might as well have taught them "stage potty" instead. It's smaller than the Green Room, but no props or backdrops taking up space. Big enough for us.

I heard a boy's voice as I was about to flush. I flicked off the light, felt for the doorknob, spent about a minute and a half slowly turning it. The damn thing still clicked loud enough to wake the dead. I eased the door in toward me and stuck my ear to the gap.

"Gus? Come on." It was Ronnie somewhere stage left.

I flushed and came out to meet him behind the back curtains. When I got to stage left, I heard rustling and a slam from the direction of the bathroom.

This time I came across the middle of the stage. The front curtain was open to a hundred dark seats. The backdrop for today was a mountain side, gray and jagged. Actually it wasn't bad. I would have put a moon up in the black space next to the mountain, but this was all gray and black. My idea would have looked hokey. The mountain slanted down toward the bathroom, so you'd have to climb up stage left to get to the top of the mountain.

Up near the front of the stage were low clumps of paper-mache rocks. A cone of firewood balanced in the middle of the stage surrounded by a ring of small stones. A few flaps of orange plastic hung down the back of the campfire. They would have looked fake as hell with a little flashlight pointing up at them as a fan blew under them, but that's as close to a campfire as you're gonna see in grade school.

I said, "Ronnie, what's-"

There was no need to finish the thought when I saw Ronnie come out of the side curtains with Sonia Bronson. I backed away, trying to watch for those paper-mache rocks and the edge of the stage, wanting to turn full around and look for the other Bronson, but I couldn't let this one out of my sight either.

Ronnie said, "Can I go now? Hector is saving his brownie for me."

Sonia dug her fingernails into his t-shirt right around the front pocket and twisted. Then she crouched like she was going to keep me from making a layup and started toward me. Ronnie stumbled offstage crying.

Keeping my eyes on her wouldn't help if she just kept coming. I turned and ran for the opposite curtain. First stride I managed to catch my foot on the stupid campfire and fell flat.

I heard crackling, then something in the darkness over the

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stage broke loose and came at me. It sounded like girders shredding under extreme stress, like the Hulk bending a tank turret or something. Whatever it was, it came down on me like a ton of rocks.

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# My Terrifying, Dry Warrior

## Chapter Three: Crushed Gus

It could have been a row of huge stage lights coming down on me, or a rusted beam giving way, the whole roof collapsing, or a huge bundle of boulders that had been tied over the stage especially for me. The floor shook from the sound of clattering rocks, but not like you'd feel from impact. More like the rickety fender on a teenager's car when he's bassing, trying to let everyone know how much of a gangsta he is. Whatever it was came down on me like a thick gray sheet. I stooped, let my knees buckle as if it was something I could limbo under if only I could get low enough.

It knocked me to the ground, but it had no right to. I mean, it wasn't really heavy enough to knock me over, but I had given it such a head start, it didn't take much to put me the rest of the way down.

I wasn't hurt except for where my ankle bone and elbow and shoulder had hit the stage. I really thought it was a mess of little boulders because of the clattering sound, but when I stuck my arms up to bat it away, it felt like heavy plastic. I thrashed under it, tried to kick it off me. The clattering sound kept going for a second or two after the stuff had settled on me, then it cut off.

Suddenly the stuff pressed my feet and legs tight to the floor, accompanied by a loud thump. I slapped one hand sideways and managed to pull the tarp off my head, just barely. The top side of it was gray and scratchy like sandpaper. It had creases and folds all over the surface, making it look like sandstone when it stopped bending and moving. Gina Bronson stood on the edge of the rocky tarp, maybe a foot away from my leg. There was some lump under the tarp right next to her, which she proceeded to stomp viciously. Scraps of paper-mache shot out in all directions. It had been one of those paper-mache rocks near the fake campfire. She caught sight

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of my face just after that, and flashed a look as if my head had been very naughty for not being under her foot. Since my head wasn't cooperating, she moved to finish the job.

To prevent that, I swept up two handfuls of tarp and pulled it toward my head. Not to cover me, just to pull it out from under Gina's feet.

I'd love to have a video of her at that moment, flapping her arms as she lost balance and flopped off the front of the stage. There was a real orchestra pit down there. Not that we ever had an orchestra worth filling it. Thirty kids with plastic recorders trying to play the same notes is an orchestra only their mothers could love. At least it was carpeted, so she didn't hit bare concrete.

I pushed the tarp toward my feet, then kicked it off. I managed to nudge the campfire in the process. Another ton of rocks clattered, but nothing came from the ceiling this time. The rockslide tarp and sound effect must have been triggered by that phony campfire.

I got one knee on the ground to push myself up, then I was down again under the other Bronson. Sonia had dropped her shoulder on me like a professional wrestler. It hurt way more than the rockslide or hitting the stage or anything that dog had done to me. I pushed her off me in the direction she was already headed, trying to dump her into the orchestra pit right on top of her sister.

Sonia sprawled out and grabbed the floor. She launched herself at me. I kicked my legs up and leapt to my feet, taking the monkey-phoenix-crane defensive stance. Sonia blasted some wicked phantom tiger strikes but I slapped them down. We traded blows about ten seconds before I felt myself losing. She could block everything I threw her way, and I couldn't stop all of hers. I caught one in the shin, a glancing blow off my cheek, then a solid hit to my chest. It wouldn't last much longer at this rate.

I slid over toward the campfire just as she was spinning her foot toward my hip. I triggered the rockslide sound effect but it didn't phase her. She connected hard on my hip and it was all I could do to stop the next shots aimed for my head.

I was done for. I blocked as fast as I could, not bothering to throw anything at her, just keeping her off me. It seemed hopeless. I would have to take any opening.

"Gus!"

A woman's voice from the very back of the audience. Sonia stiffened and turned toward the teacher.

I kicked her in the side of her stomach as hard as I could. Sonia fell, skidded a few feet back, then clutched her side and whimpered. I'm not that powerful. She was playing it up for Mrs. Cardo.

Mrs. Cardo strode quickly down the aisle between the seats with Ms. Simon a few steps behind.

"I cannot believe," Mrs. Cardo said, "that the nice little boy I cast as the Pied Piper of Hamelin last year would pick on girls like

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this!" She came up the steps and eased Sonia to her feet.

Principal Simon stalked right up to me and clamped my wrist. She said nothing as she pulled me away. That's when you knew it was going to be bad, when she didn't have anything to say.

The other times I had sat in her office weren't for punishment. She had asked me questions about two kids I had known who disappeared. I couldn't tell her we worked together as Junior Millwrights, but I think my act had been convincing. Besides, she was pretty freaked out by the number of kids that went missing around here. No wonder her hair and face were so gray. This time around I'd get a good look at the joke nameplate on the front of her desk which read, "SIMON SAYS."

But halfway to her office, Ms. Simon led me into the lunch room. We walked in between five lunch ladies dumping cans of mixed vegetables and gravy into long, stainless steel trays.

Ms. Simon stopped in front of a refrigerator door set in the wall. She grabbed me by one shoulder in a Spock pinch. "Gustav, I've brought you here to die." I kicked and struggled but she was a wiry broad.

She patted my pockets. All I had was my hot-lunch card, a plastic egg, the box with the psychic jewel, a plastic army man throwing a grenade, two raisins, some lint and a rainbow-swirled rubber ball the size of a quarter. She took the egg, the army man and the rubber ball, but handed me back the card. "I wouldn't want you to go hungry. Help yourself to some lunch in there, anything soft enough for you to eat before the deep freeze takes full effect."

She unsealed the door, explaining that the walk-in freezer was sound-proof, radio-proof, and designed to rapidly reach -100°. "This is what you get when you frig with Lisa Reinhart and OTO."

As Ms. Simon shook me and tossed me into the freezer, I saw the pudgy lunch ladies looking at me, then looking back to their huge bins of food. Their heads were all covered by big ear-muff headphones, wires dangling in front of them, not plugged in to anything.

Outside of the freezer, Ms. Simon raised a thick padlock so I could see it through the window, tapped it on the glass, then lowered it. I couldn't hear the click when she snapped it on the door handle, but the muted vibration came through my fingertips.

For a minute, I thought she had messed up. This wasn't a freezer. I saw giant plastic bags full of shredded cheddar cheese on steel shelves, plus several boxes of apples, pears, bananas. You might keep those things in a cooler but you wouldn't freeze them. They'd go bad if you froze them. Of course, a person willing to kill a little kid, willing to install a sound-proof, radio-proof freezer of death, probably wouldn't worry too much about a few damaged fruits and clumpy cheese.

I could have blown the door open easily if she had left me the little plastic army man. Or the diamond saw in the rubber ball

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could have whipped through the lock, no problem. The only thing left was my counterfeit hot-lunch card, and it probably wouldn't work. Just in case a signal could get through the reinforced walls, I slipped it out of my pocket and broke it in half. The sound it makes when you crack it is more like metal than plastic. It releases some kind of radioactive isotope that's easily detected from a distance. Maybe they hadn't shielded the walls from that kind of distress signal.

A red digital display next to the door showed -38° F.

I pulled boxes of apples off shelves and started ripping cardboard to shreds until my fingers were too numb to work. Then I laid down on a couple boxes of mock chicken patties and pulled the pieces of cardboard over myself. After ten minutes, I knew the signal must not have penetrated the walls of the freezer. They would have come for me. I closed my eyes and tried to stay awake, but there was nothing else I could do.

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# My Terrifying, Dry Warrior

## Chapter Four: Dry Ice

If I had kept up my drinking, it would have taken longer for me to freeze solid. I'd be pickled and everybody knows that pickles keep for months in the fridge. I wanted to tell Ms. Simon that pickles don't need to freeze, but she wouldn't believe me.

I jumped out of my hamster nest of shredded cardboard and started pounding on the door. The hinges were on the outside, so I couldn't tamper with those. The window was probably extra thick, no way of bashing through it with anything less than a tank shell. A plain light bulb poked out of the wall to the right of the door and about a foot over my head. The light bulb was covered by a thick condom of glass, the kind of thing you'd see in an old submarine.

I looked around for tools I could use. Boxes of cheese and chicken patties wouldn't get me through the door. The cold steel shelves looked like they might be light enough for me to push them around if I emptied all the boxes and food off them, but it wouldn't accomplish much. They were the kind of shelves made to be easily taken apart or modified, so you could adjust the height of the shelves or keep stacking layers of shelves on top.

I climbed to the top of one shelf that was empty. The shelves weren't attached by bolts. They were made to be easily customized, so you could stack one on top of the other, as many levels as you needed. I pried the top shelf off. It was just a layer of criss-crossed steel rods like a grill, but solid enough to hold big boxes of cheese.

I dropped the shelf and climbed back down. Slamming the long shelf against the shielded glass bulb got me nowhere. I kept hitting it just to make noise, watching the window, which was above my head. All I could see was part of the ceiling outside. I stacked boxes of veal patties in front of the door so I could get my face up to

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the level of the window.

I saw one lunch lady in the kitchen, pouring a big tray of yesterday's meatloaf into an industrial size mixer. The bowl was at least two feet across. A little juice splattered out when she turned on the mixer for a few seconds. Then she turned it off and dumped the sludge on top of a tray of something frozen and red. In chili, no one can taste the leftover meatloaf.

I hammered on the window itself, couldn't even scratch it. I tapped the drum solo from Wipe-Out. I tried to think of what the lunch ladies might listen to, something they'd recognize. God damn Neal Peart anyway.

Where were all the kids? The doorway from the kitchen into the lunchroom was straight in front of me, thirty feet away, but the angle was all wrong. I could see the line of ladies spooning jello and turkey gravy on pastel trays, all of them standing in profile against the serving counter. If all but one of them were serving, it must be second lunch period. There must have been a hundred kids on the other side of that serving counter, passing in front of them, taking trays of "food" and giving them a hard time. But there was a wall between me and them, so I could only see the lunch ladies' side. Probably one Junior Millwright passed through the line every minute or two, but I had no way to get their attention. I couldn't see any of the kids and they couldn't see me.

I flicked the lightswitch off. Helps me think better in the dark. If I could break the light bulb, maybe I could jam a piece of metal in the socket, short out a fuse or at least pop a circuit-breaker. With any luck, it would short out a whole section of lights and outlets. The equipment would go dead in the kitchen, maybe even the some of the lights in the cafeteria.

But the glass cover was too thick. No way my eight-year old arm could bust that thing, even if I had a Louisville slugger.

The fluorescents in the kitchen were fairly dim. Apparently their decades of dwelling in caves had made lunch ladies' eyes sensitive. The brightest thing out there was the little wall behind the string of ladies serving kids. I could see shadows of all the kids passing along that wall. No matter how dim the lights were in the cafeteria, there were windows to the outside world. The sun must have been glaring with full force through the windows to cast those clear, skinny shadows on the wall.

Then it dimmed. Clouds passing in front of the sun. Again the shadows grew distinct, then faded away.

I turned the light on. Off. On. I saw a tiny gleam off the side of that giant mixer. Even though the aluminum was dulled by years of weathering under scraps of pork and cole slaw and grease, I could see a tiny reflection on it when my light in the freezer went on and off. If the kids at lunch could see a reflection on the serving table, pinpricks of light winking all around the gleaming metal in front of the unresponsive lunch ladies . . .

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I flashed the light on and off.

Flash-flash-flash. Flash. Flash. Flash. Flash-flash-flash.

Wait a few seconds.

Flash-flash-flash. Flash. Flash. Flash. Flash-flash-flash.

Wait a few seconds.

They weren't seeing it. I kept repeating the SOS, trying to think of anything else I could do. Who can remember Morse Code when the rest of the world has moved on to HTML and Perl and Javascript? Maybe if I moved the hot-lunch card signal to the little window, then it could get through the glass and they could detect the signal back at headquarters.

As I dug in my pocket for the fake card, I saw two of the lunch ladies step back from the counter, holding out their arms like line-men. Kirby Johnson's head ducked under a flabby arm. It was like he dove right into a headlock, but that was all he needed. For a few seconds before the lunch lady pushed him back out of sight, I screamed, "Help me! Come get me! Call somebody!" I waved my hands over the window and put on a display, even though I knew he couldn't hear me.

Pretty soon the five ladies serving food were mobbed and overrun by squads of second graders. They pushed past and came right up to the freezer door, smiling and hollering like it was the best recess ever. Kirby held up his hand and waved me back away from the door. I moved behind one of the shelves that I hadn't cleared off earlier, so there was plenty of rock-solid meat to shield me from the blast. Love those little, green plastique army men. Almost as effective as an egg full of Deadly Putty.

The kids swarmed in and escorted me out, some of them still pressing the lunch ladies to the walls. I led them down the hall like a sea of tiny revolting peasants, back to Lisa's classroom. I knew it was going to look conspicuous, but grown-ups always write it off as kids acting silly. I peeked into the open doorway of Mrs. Conklin's room, but there was way too much noise and crowding behind me for the kids inside not to notice us. Mrs. Conklin saw her students turning to look at the doorway, so she noticed us too.

She said, "May I help you?" All sarcasm, but there was enough chuckle in her voice to know how far I could push it.

"Surprise birthday party for Lisa Reinhart," I said, "but where is she?"

The kids inside Lisa's class started to murmur, and so did the little Millwrights gathered behind me. Even members of a secret society like birthday cake.

"She's not on my calendar," Mrs. Conklin said, "and even if it was her birthday, Lisa's not here today. She stayed home because she wasn't feeling good."

Groaning at the loss of cake, Mrs. Conklin's students gave us a perfect opening to slip away. While the teacher turned to quiet them, we all ran away from her door.

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I told the kids to get back to lunch or class before they got in any more trouble. Simon would be coming for me soon. I went straight to my locker to load my pockets with fresh supplies and ran for the buses.

Transportation was tricky, but I had gotten away with it before. A few buses lined the sidewalk, waiting to take home kindergarteners. Lucky little bastards only have to be at school half the day, and they get to go home on their own buses. I stepped on Bus 25 and handed the driver a note from my mother.

"To Whom It May Concern, Gus needs to ride the bus home with Bill Pierce this afternoon. Please call me if you have any concerns. Thanx, Bess Thompson (Gus's Mom)"

The note was real. The only forged part was the date, which I had modified when I pulled it out of my locker. Luckily this driver was different from the one Bill had last year when I really went camping with his family. Conning the bus driver was easy. The difficult part was sitting next to Bill Pierce for twenty minutes. If you need an operative in Kindergarten, Bill is your go-to guy. Just don't sit next to him on the bus: he bites.



Lisa Reinhart had a sweet treehouse. It hung over a country road about half a mile from Bill's house, in the big yard in front of her real house. They had a pole barn and a lot of pasture fenced off, but the horses had been sold off a couple years before. I hate to consider whether Lisa was mean enough to have her horse assassinated after it bucked her off.

No, that's wishful thinking. There's no doubt.

A grid of ropes hung down from a thick tree branch, the kind of rope-ladder you see on playground equipment. Wide enough for three kids to climb up at once.

I climbed as quickly as I could to the first landing, which was like a section of veranda that had been ripped off the main house by a tornado and deposited in the branches of the tree. Polished wood slat floor, rails around two sides. Against the trunk of the tree was a wall of pale yellow siding that matched the main house, so it really did feel like you were standing on a front porch.

The higher landing was a small room built in the crotch of the tree, complete with a door, siding around the outside, a shingled roof, glass windows. Border trim around the inside of the room consisted of galloping horses, plus curtains and a lamp with matching beige background and brown horse silhouettes. Horsy nicknacks, comfy pillows, two blue sleeping bags unzipped and bunched up in a corner.

I climbed through a window with a branch near it, pulled my-

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self up on the branch and climbed to the roof, which was empty except for a few twigs and leaves resting on the shingles. There were no other landings, nothing but limbs and tree above this.

No hiding spots up there. I would have to go into that house alone. I told myself that scanning the treehouse was the right thing to do because I was being thorough, but really I wanted a reason to delay going in that house.

I pulled the small deck of Yojimbo cards out of my pocket, carefully removing the rubber band. I thumbed through the warriors, robots, monsters, treasures, pictures of flaming samurai swords. In the middle of the deck were the cards I wanted: a blue dragon surrounded by crackles of lightning energy, an Egyptian mummy with a third eye drawn on his forehead, and Derek Jeter.

When they first showed me the Personal Derek Jeter Assistant, I argued that they should have used a rookie card because that was the coolest and most valuable. But our tech geek Wally explained that a valuable card was the kind of thing that other kids or adults might steal. Say you get captured and sent into a locked cell, or into detention. Or a bully manages to knock you down on the playground and take all your secret stuff. He might not figure out how to activate the Deadly Putty or anything else, but he would take your Derek Jeter rookie card. You want to disguise everything as common junk, not very valuable, so it'll get passed over by playground bullies or wicked principals who lock you in freezers to die.

I pressed the dragon card, mummy card and Derek Jeter together. The rest of the deck went into my pocket. I always forget which way to put the cards together, dragon up, mummy down and facing backwards, Derek up. They don't snap together unless you have them the right way. Anyone watching me then would have thought I was standing there shuffling three cards over and over. Finally they aligned properly and snapped together. Derek disappeared from the face of the PDJA, replaced by my homepage, a live update of the encrypted Millwrights' news page. Slightly more reliable than BBC World Service on most topics.

I traced a few letters on the face of the device to put it in scan mode. Sitting on the shingled roof, I slowly passed the PDJA back and forth over the surface, then aimed it up towards the higher limbs of the tree. It was a real tree, nothing electronic hiding up there, no signs of life, normal levels of radioactive matter.

Inside the treehouse, more of the same. Any of the horsy tchotchkes on shelves could have hollow spaces with secrets hidden inside, the porcelain mother and foal curled next to each other, the Avon perfume bottle in the shape of a rearing horse. MRI scans revealed nothing but perfume and emptiness inside them. No drugs or explosives molded into the clay or ceramic bodies. No hidden compartments between layers of wall. The five Nancy Drew books dated 1953 were actually made in 1953, according to Carb-

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on 14 dating.

I stepped backwards out of the doorway onto the ladder. I took a few steps down and reached to scan under the floorboards of the main treehouse. A few old drips of polyurethane had seeped down between the floorboards, but nothing worth noting. I used the same vantage point to scan the roof of the veranda. One dead beetle.

A few minutes more scanning this veranda and I'd have to head to the main house. I scanned the ceiling, the rails, the rope ladder, the floor. Found dust, rain, a few leaves. The PDJA could reveal standard trace amounts of dioxin in the dust. It could pinpoint to within 100 miles the forest where the lumber had grown. It told me the tree was 68 years old, that it was free of disease, that invading insects would not be able to undermine the structural integrity of the treehouse for at least 50 years, but it couldn't give me a damn thing to work with.

I looked around for something else to scan, anything to put off going inside the house.

The pale yellow siding of that false wall up against the tree trunk, the part that really made it look like a front porch. I hadn't scanned that yet.

Aiming the upside-down blue dragon at the siding, I saw the rectangular outline of a steel door. The encryption on their entrance code must have been state-of-the-art, because it took forty seconds for the PDJA to find it. The siding slid up out of the way. The steel door in the tree trunk swung out to me.

A polished metal shaft descended down the center of the tree trunk. I scanned for traps and for activity. No traps, one girl's voice coming from eighty to one hundred feet away. I couldn't get a more accurate reading because the voice was bouncing off several surfaces to get to us.

I peeked down to the bottom, about five stories below. A rail of angled iron trailed down the near wall of the shaft. At the bottom was a small platform, shaped perfectly to fit up and down the shaft. Fluorescent light spilled over the platform from the wide opening on the other side. Short rods stuck out from the sides of the rail all the way down to the platform. It would be a long climb back up, but not bad going down.

Instead of a doorway at the bottom, the shaft cut into the side of a room. Halfway down I was close enough to hear the girl's voice that the PDJA had detected. "You win again," she said. I crawled lower until I could barely see into the chamber at the bottom.

The room was a concrete dome fifty feet across, curved like a flying saucer. (Don't worry about OTO having that technology. Real flying saucers are titanium, not concrete.) The curved walls and ceiling were supported by riveted steel ribs that met overhead like longitude lines converging on a globe.

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Three long couches lined the room, covered with toy trucks and ratty-haired fashion dolls. A ten foot wide tv screen in the curving wall alternated between views of security cameras aimed at our school, a few storefronts in downtown Fowlerville, cartoons and home decorating shows. Lisa and a little kid sat playing cards on an aquamarine rug in the center of the floor. I saw three window frames around the walls with those same running pony drapes. Instead of glass revealing some other room beyond, the centers of these window frames showed concrete.

Lisa pushed up the sleeves on her burgundy Harvard sweater to keep them bunched around her elbows. There have been long debates among Millwright strategists about why she wears her blond hair in pigtails, and why she uses those hairbands that look like two little marbles wrapped around each other. Or why she wears coke-bottle glasses when she could easily afford corrective eye surgery. For that matter, she could have her eyes replaced with a better pair involuntarily transplanted from someone else. Wouldn't be the first transplant they had done. Anyhow, I figure the pigtails and glasses and the dorky ponytail bands are meant to keep her looking harmless and childish.

Lisa had a small pile of cards on one leg of her jeans and her infamous notebook on the other leg. I had seen microfilm reproductions of some pages from that notebook. She kept lists titled: People I Like, People Who Dress Well, Teachers I Don't Want To See Next Semester, Places Where We Set Deadfalls, stuff like that.

The little boy in front of her wore a black t-shirt and black sweatpants. Just what I needed, a toddler to save while I was trying to confront Lisa.

Looking over the layout of the room, the bright fluorescent lights, the wide open space in the middle, it was clear that I couldn't hide behind furniture and get close enough to spring on her. The direct approach would have to do. I stepped quietly to the floor, saying, "I like the shape of the place. It's not as villainous as I expected though. I figured you'd have at least a few high-schoolers guarding the entrance, sitting around playing Texas Hold 'Em or something."

Lisa's pigtails flapped around until she had me in view, then they settled behind her. She aimed a remote control at the nearest blank window. A thin layer of concrete slid down into the window sill. Beyond was a dim room where three high school boys sat around a table playing cards. Beer cans and ash trays and piles of cash decorated the edges of the table, and there was a little slab of wood in the center with red and green pegs in it. No poker chips anywhere.

Lisa said, "For some reason the hot game right now is Cribbage. I don't know why."

The boy sitting in front of Lisa grabbed one of her cards, continuing the game of War. The rules appeared to be that each

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player flashed a card in the middle of the rug, then the boy would scoop them up and add them to his pile, no matter which card was higher.

"We don't usually get visitors from the treehouse," she continued, "so the underground entrance from Dad's house is more heavily guarded."

I paced along the edge of the wall, casually putting myself out of view from that window to the guard station, tapping on the PDJA to scan for anything important concealed in the walls or furniture. Derek Jeter shook his head sadly at me. A word balloon next to his mouth said, "Sorry, dude. Signal's jammed. Can't get anything." I slipped him in my pocket.

"Well, the effect is charming," I said, "sort of Doctor No's rumpus room, or like a room in his volcano complex set aside for his niece to play in while the real villainy gets done elsewhere. This place just doesn't intimidate me that much."

Lisa flicked the remote at the window again and the concrete cover zipped back into place. "You're mixing up villains and lairs from different movies. But we do have a laser and a stainless steel table to strap you to if that would help you feel more heroic."

"No time for that. I'm just stopping here to shut your operation down before I complete my real mission. The only question is whether you got the nerve to fight me yourself, or whether I have to take down all your toadies first." I set my feet, crouched and held up my fists in a standard boxing stance. Faking a boxer pose sometimes throws people off when I launch into monkey-phoenix-crane style.

Lisa stood and backed away from the round rug in the center. I thought she was going to jump for an exit and call the guards to attack me, but as soon as she stepped off the rug onto the bare concrete floor, she aimed her remote at the boy.

The rug seemed to shrink until it was clear that there was no rug. Each thread sucked down into its own hole in the concrete, until the boy and the cards were resting on a circle of dotted concrete with a few seams criss-crossing it. The little boy covered his face with both hands and turned to me as the seams slid apart. Just before falling into the hole below him, the boy pulled his fingers out of the way. Instead of "Peekaboo," he shouted, "Never! More!"

I screamed, "Ray!" and dove for my little brother.

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# My Terrifying, Dry Warrior

## Chapter Five: Live and Let Dry

I dove too far. In order to catch Ray by his armpits before he could fall into the hole, I had to go over the edge with him.

My usual shoes are more flexible, developed for Millwright operatives, made of thinner material than the clunky ones I had worn that morning to blend in at the Catholic school. It would have been a piece of cake to hook my toes on the ledge with my Millwright shoes. Encased in lumps of uniform leather, it was a struggle. I was able to hook one foot on the ledge. Any slight movement would have dislodged us. Within seconds, my toes and foot were cramping, threatening to release us into the pit.

Ray looked straight up at me and started balling. Probably better that he was looking up at me and the room above, because my view around him was the dark, stainless steel shaft, at least fifty feet to the bottom.

Lisa came up behind my balancing foot, stepped within an inch of it. "I'll pull you both up and let you go. If you tell me where the Psychic Jewel is."

Ray shouted, "No!" He had been waving his little arms at his sides a moment ago. Now he clamped his tiny fingers on my wrists. "Gus, let me go. Save yourself! The Psychic Jewel is too important. Don't let her have it! Let go of me!"

"Hey, the little bugger can talk!" Lisa laughed. "What'll it be? Will you do what's right for the cause even though it means certain death for your brother and yourself, or will you turn over the Jewel for me to enslave the entire tri-state area!"

"Never!!" Ray shouted. For a second I thought he was reverting to his old speech pattern. "Don't tell her, Gus!"

No gadgets would save me this time. No drink later would spare me from thinking of my little brother broken at the bottom of

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that pit, if I survived long enough to dwell on it. She'd probably try to kill us even if I gave her the jewel, but at least it would put us in a better position to fight back or escape than dangling over a pit.

I said, "Pull us up! I'll tell you where it is!"

Lisa backed away. A sheet of glass slid across the shaft about five feet below Ray, then it rose to meet us and lifted until we were even with the main floor.

Offering a hand to help Ray up, Lisa said, "That counts. He said he'd give it up. You lose!"

"That doesn't count!" Ray screamed. "He might have been tricking you. He might have had some plan that would have gotten him out of this. Anyhow, no fair talking about the bet in front of him! You forfeit by talking about it, so I win."

"I beg your pardon, Master, but he gave up. He asked me for help." Lisa crossed her arms. She uncrossed them a second later to block Ray from slapping at her.

"Oooooooo, I will eat your nose! I'll have you drawn and quartered!" Here's my two and a half-year-old brother slapping at a girl almost twice his height. "No one talks like that to the Master of the Fowlerville Chapter of Ordo Templi Orientis and lives!"

I said, "Ray, quit clowning. What are you talking about a bet?"

"It's not even her fault," Ray said, "It's your fault! I thought you were a team player. I thought you'd never let sentimental crap get in the way of your mission. It should have been a safe bet that you'd let your brother fall to his death instead of surrendering a world-class weapon to your enemy. How could you, Gus? I lost three grand because of you!!"

It wasn't sinking in. "You made a bet with Lisa Reinhart?" My crazy little brother. The one who could only say two words. The one who had not yet mastered pottyng. "You made a bet with the most dangerous person in Fowlerville? The girl who runs OTO?"

Lisa said, "I don't run OTO, silly. Ray does."

"Yeah, right."

Ray said quietly, "How many heads do I need to leave rotting on pikes across the countryside," building up to his little shriek, "before jerks like you start obeying me?!"

"Okay, Ray, then why would she dangle you over a pit if you were really Master of the local chapter of OTO?"

"Because if you get a really thick foam rubber pad and spray paint it silver and put it at the bottom of a pit, then your big brother will think it's a steel floor, because he's a moron and he didn't inherit any of the brains in the family like I did." Ray turned to Lisa and snatched the remote control from the where she had tucked it into her belt. "Here's something to help convince you." He pressed the remote into my gut, pushed one of the buttons, and something exploded in me. The remote flew backwards out of his hand from the recoil.

The wound looked smaller than some pistol shots I had seen,

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but it was the first time I had been shot. Probably a .22 shell rigged inside the remote.

I cried. Come on, I was a little kid. It hurt. I said, "You are totally cheating! Nobody uses guns anymore! I thought you were above that."

Lisa said, "Under new management now, man. You weren't counting on how low Ray could go. He brings a fresh, common sense perspective to everything we do. I don't want to say childish, but child-like. Logic and rules don't hold him back, because Ray doesn't know them. We get our best brains, tenth graders with straight A's to plan how we can sneak into a police station and steal weapons, drugs, explosives and computer stuff. They'd show us their foolproof plan and Ray would say why don't we just bribe the desk sergeant? Or take his wife and kids hostage until he gives us what we want, then ice them? Simple yet brilliant.

"That's why I haven't killed him and become the real master of OTO. I still have so much to learn from him." She patted Ray on the head.

Ray pushed her hand off. "I'd like to see you try!" He wiggled his butt at her and sang, "That'll be the day-ay-ay when you die!"

High school guys came in, stripped me down to uniform shorts, scanned me to find any last concealed weapons. They took the PDJA. They tied my arms and feet, letting me bleed.

One of them found the box with the Psychic Jewel inside. They handed it to Lisa. She walked to a couch with toys on it and picked up a faded She-Ra action figure with a gray shield. Three little tabs stuck out from the shield. They clamped around the Psychic Jewel perfectly when Lisa pressed it home. She held the shield up to her forehead and said in a quavery voice, "I predict . . . that Gus is stupid! Ha ha ha ha!" Then she tossed the figure and its jeweled shield back onto the couch with the other old, scuffed toys.

Lisa waved her hand over the wall and a section slid away. Before she and Ray stepped through, I moaned, "Wait! How did you know?"

She turned and waited.

"No one in the Millwrights knew I had been drinking. I never told anyone. Plus you knew I had been trying to stay sober for two weeks. How did you find out?"

She laughed and laughed. "No way! You mean like beer? I can't believe it!"

"But—the poem."

She looked at the domed ceiling and laughed. "Yeah, what about it?"

"You were probably kidding when you called me terrifying and a warrior, but how did you know about my drinking problem? And why did the Bronson Twins put your note in my shirt pocket if they thought the dog was going to kill me?"

Ray said, "No wonder you were so sloppy. I never would have

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made that bet if I had knowed he was drinking! Do over!"

Lisa said, "That poem wasn't for you. It was for Ray. Somebody would have found the poem on your corpse, and everyone in OTO and the Millwrights would have heard about it, including Ray. It was just my way of rubbing it in Ray's face when I won the bet. See, at that point we were just betting whether you could survive the Bronson Twins. Then later we made the bet about whether you'd choose to protect the Jewel or save your bro."

I coughed. That really hurt. "But you said dry. Ray quit drinking too?"

Lisa said, "No, silly! His diapers. He hasn't wet them or messed them in ten whole days." She picked him up and tried to carry him on her hip, but she wasn't big enough to hold him like that, so she just squeezed him, saying, "Who's my little, dry master? Who's my terrifying, dry warrior?"

The Cribbage players gagged me, carried me through the exit, past the guard station, down a long corridor to the main house, through a bookcase in the downstairs study, out the back door, then dragged me over the dirt, through an open gate to the furthest, muckiest corner of the empty pasture. They dug a hole, tossed me in face down, gradually filled it back in over top of me.

Then I died. Then I wrote this.

The End

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# GODFELLA

Awakened by a jostling at the foot of his bed, Paul was disturbed to discover that The Lord God Almighty had fucked-up teeth. He sat on the edge of Paul's bed in a glowing human form, drinking the juice from an old jar of olives Paul had lost in his fridge. Not your typical bearded old fogey, this Almighty God was a stocky, mean-looking, black-haired youth. The overbite was barely noticeable, but all His teeth were jagged and sharp, the canines set forward from the rest, one of the bottom front teeth tilted sideways and inward.

"I am your Lord God Almighty," He said, and waited for it to sink in. Then He rested.

Paul squinted. For no particularly solid reason, he knew it was God sitting in front of him. But there was a tiny millisecond of doubt when common sense made Paul think, This is all just a dream. Then God took another swig from the olive jar, and the potent smell of fermented olives climbed up his nostrils. Paul's dreams were never vivid enough to include fragrances. He decided he wasn't asleep, and that it was very definitely God sitting in front of him.

The Lord God Almighty slurped at the last of the juice from the olive jar and selected an olive to chew on. He spit the pimento back into the jar and mumbled, "Pauly, I decided I'm gonna give you a break. Figured I'd just pop in here to your place and tell you the Secret of Life, so you can kill yourself now and be done with it. I know it's earlier than you prefer to wake up, but I figure, why let you waste another day? We'll just nip it in the bud before the day even gets going."

There was no good reason for Paul to believe this character on the end of his bed was God. In fact there were a lot of reasons to believe He wasn't. The glowing aura wasn't awe-inspiring enough to really prove He was God, since it was kinda dim. Would God be the kind of being who would sit with only one butt-cheek on Paul's oak leaf and duck pattern bedspread? For that matter, why would God choose to visit Paul at all? Let alone to tell Paul the Secret of Life?

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"Seeee-ahem-Secret of Life?" Paul croaked, his throat clogged with morning phlegm.

"Yeah," the Lord God Almighty said, spitting another pimento into the jar, then sucking another olive out. "The secret of life that tells why you're here. The answer to all questions of philosophy and religion and crap like that. You ready for it?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm awake." Realizing he would be up for a while, Paul pulled his glasses off the nightstand and fumbled them on his face. "What did you say your name was again?" Paul asked, scratching a pimple on his lower back.

This was enough to make the Lord God Almighty stop chewing and look steadily at Paul. With a frown worthy of a supreme being, the glowing figure at the end of Paul's bed spit another pimento into the olive jar and said, "Bruno. Call me Bruno. I'm sure you've heard some of my aliases like 'Allah,' 'Yahweh,' 'Jehovah,' 'Zeus,' 'Ra,' 'Lord,' 'God,' 'Godhead,' 'Godfella,' 'the Godmeister,' 'God of Abraham,' sound familiar? Just skip all that malarky and call me Bruno."

Paul thought that such a momentous occasion as meeting God should be sealed by a handshake (if God would permit it). But his father had taught him to always stand up when shaking hands with someone, and to do that would mean getting out from under the covers and standing in front of God wearing nothing but Fruit of the Looms. "Okay, Bruno, uh, sir," Paul said. "What's that you were saying about the Secret of Life?" Paul was also curious about the God's idea that he might kill himself, but thought it better not to ask.

"Yes, well, the Secret of Life is this-" Bruno began, and swallowed the olive He had just started, pimento and all. After making a sour face, Bruno the Lord God Almighty said, "The quality of your life, and all the events in the course of your life, are determined by the fights you have when you're in elementary school."

With that final tidbit tipping the scales to an overload of nonsense, Paul felt the urge to go back to sleep. It would be rude to go to sleep when God is trying to talk to you though, maybe deadly if He was as jealous and temperamental as some of His followers claimed. Paul blinked at the digital clock that showed 5:46, struggling to keep his eyes open. "When you say 'fights,' you mean the struggles and tribulations that I faced as an elementary school student?"

"No, I mean the fights. Like fisticuffs. Knock-down, drag-out punching and kicking and hurting with occasional biting." Bruno set the olive jar on the floor near the cornerpost of the bed.

"Okay." Paul stared at the thick, dark V where the deity's eyebrows ran together over His nose. Paul's mind reeled backwards and missed the point again. "So what does the fighting in school mean again?"

As angry as Bruno looked, He didn't let Paul's bleary thinking

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affect His mood. "The fights in elementary school determine how well the rest of your life goes. If you won the fights on the playground, you win at the rest of your life. If you lost those crucial childhood fights, then you lose at every major life event for the rest of your days."

There was no question of how this secret applied to Paul. He had lost every fight in school. He had been beaten on the playgrounds, in between classes, during class when the teacher wasn't looking, during class when the teacher *was* looking, even on the bus rides home.

Paul had to refute the idea. "What about people who win some and lose some? Their life turns out so-so?"

Bruno shook His head with tight movements. "Doesn't happen. Nobody wins some and loses some. There is no middle ground. Childhood fistfights have only winners and losers. The people who claim they came out even are lying, because they're losers." God licked His gray lips and looked back at the olive jar, now full of little, red, glistening, maggot-shaped pimentos. "You got any pretzels around? Eagle brand especially . . ." He looked back through the wall toward Paul's kitchenette and said, "Aha! Crunchy chow mein noodles! I'll be right back!" God trotted out the door of Paul's bedroom.

The course of human lives, Paul pondered, are determined by whether they win or lose their childhood fights? "Like how much of a person's life is determined? I mean, exactly how important is it that you win those fights? Does it kick you up into a higher tax bracket, or does it just boost you a little, or does it get you one better job? Or does it, like, make you really win at everything, like money, women, happiness, paradise?"

"Everything," Almighty God Bruno said when He finally returned from Paul's kitchen cupboard with the crunchy chow mein noodles. "You win those fights, your life is great. Jimmy Stewart picked on every boy, girl and teacher at his school until he kicked all their asses twice each. You know why Katie Couric smiles so much? She snuffed a class full of kids when she was in fifth grade. Her family moved and changed their names, and now she can't stop smiling for an instant. Arnold Schwarzenegger lined up kids at school and beat them down every day until he was distracted by weight-lifting championships.

"On the other hand, Pauly, you got beat up by Neal Omus in kindergarten; Jenny Lasky and Brian Eberhart in first grade; Benny Charles, Olaf Stevenson, Sally Taffeta, John Perez-"

"Yeah, all right, I get the picture!" Paul ground his teeth and looked at the corner of his bedroom away from God. He considered the many battles of his childhood, all losses. From the first time he was knocked down by a neighbor girl at age three, he had never won a fight. His usual strategy was to run away, though he was rarely fast enough. But what was he supposed to do? He had

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always been scrawny, born scrawny when his mother ejected him from her womb three months early. The quality of his life had been determined by the dozens of fights he couldn't help losing as a boy? Paul looked into God's beady eyes and said, "That's bullshit."

"Oh no, it's true," God said, looking infinitely sincere.

"I mean, it's a bullshit way of doing things. It's not fair!"

God Bruno grew bored with the plain chow mein noodles, so He strolled back toward the other room for something to dip them in, saying, "I know. I wasn't really thinking of the justice of it all when I set it up this way. You know, this place looks pretty bare. You oughtta get some posters or some cheap art prints. Maybe some sculpture?"

"Then what were you thinking when you set up life this way?"

Paul threw off the bedspread with brown ducks all over it and followed the Lord God Almighty into the other room. Then he remembered he was still wearing only his Fruit Of The Looms, and thought he should put something on. But it was God he was about to go yell some more at, the Creator of Paul's underwear and all they contained. He stormed off to confront his Creator.

"I honestly wasn't thinking about how it would affect you people," God said, digging His fist into the can of chow mein noodles and dipping fist and all into a small jar of Murphy's Oil Soap. "It was a long time ago. I was young. You know, 'the Folly of Youth.' I was just fiddling around and thought it'd be fun to watch some partially intelligent creatures playing around with each other, and . . . well, that's not the point. I realize now that it wasn't a very nice thing to do. That's why I'm here trying to clear things up for you. I'm letting you know why your life is the way it is, and how it will be for the rest of your life, so you can decide whether or not to continue it."

Some of Paul's anger flashed away for a moment when he asked, "How will the rest of my life be? Can it get better if I go out and beat up some little kids?"

God chuckled, "No, too late for that. Your life is set, nothing you can do about it now, assuming you follow through and live out the rest of it. It'll go pretty much the same as it has gone so far. No one has ever fallen in love with you. The people you think of as your 'friends' think of you as their 'acquaintance.' You work at the plant making basketball shoes you can't afford to wear. You're always tired and scared and bored and suspecting that you'll come across some good luck a few days down the road. You think you've only had a little streak of bad luck, but it's been running twenty-eight years straight.

"And from that, you can guess how the rest of your life will be." God shovelled more crunchy noodles dipped in oil soap into His mouth, crumbs falling down his t-shirt and onto the crusty vinyl floor.

Paul leaned back against the wall and stared up at the glass

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light shade on the ceiling and all the dead flies in it. If he could look through walls and wood like God could, Paul would have seen in the apartment above where Kelly Terliss was sitting in her bathtub getting chilly. Kelly was somehow chubby yet flat-chested. She had her dingy blond hair cut short, and enough blond hairs over her lip to take electrolysis seriously. She was getting chilly because most of her blood had flowed out the fresh, deep slashes she had made in her forearms after God had visited her. The hot water had numbed her arms a little bit, so she had been fairly comfortable watching the blood make tiny waves in the surface of the bathwater.

After putting a lot of thought into it, Paul was just angry. Questions about the whole situation kept springing to mind, but they all echoed back to feed his anger. Why give humans so much intelligence if He was going to let them beat each other and live out their unjustly earned fates? Why hadn't He killed off everyone long ago? Where did He get the nerve to pull this kind of bullshit? Paul shouted, "Why are you telling me all this? What's in it for you?"

"Like I said, I was feeling a little compassionate today, so I'm granting pardons to a few thousand people. You seemed pitiful enough that I decided to let you in on the whole thing so you can get out of it if you want." God up-ended the can over His mouth to get all the last little, broken pieces.

Paul walked to the front door and swung it open.

"If you're thinking of going up to the roof to dive off, I'd recommend against it." God wiped His mouth with the back of His hand. "This building's not high enough. You'll break a lot of bones, but you won't die from it. Try something like—"

"I'm not going anywhere," Paul interrupted, standing beside the open door. "You are. Get out."

It took a minute for God to close His mouth again and regain His composure. He shrugged and walked slowly out the door. "You're right. I got more people to see. Uh, goodbye, I guess." The Lord God Almighty stopped at the threshold and turned back to face His creation. "Say, if the suicide goes wrong for some reason, don't bother telling anybody we had this little conversation, okay? It'll only make things worse for you. They'll think you're whacked, and they'll put you away."

"Right, well, thanks for all you've done," Paul said as the door flew out of his hand and thumped shut. What gall! he thought. Paul turned the key in the lock, clicked the deadbolt into position and trudged over to lean against his eighteen-inch wide kitchenette counter. He stared at his bare feet on the vinyl floor and saw all the crumbs and handful of chow mein noodles God had dropped.

What a slob, Paul thought. He breaks into my place, wakes me up, tells me that not only is my existence pointless but that it's pointless by design, pre-destined to be shitty, then eats my fucking

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food and doesn't bother cleaning up after Himself!

In the end, Paul was left angry with a vaguely empty feeling, like the way you feel when you realize this is The End and the loose ends aren't all tied off to your satisfaction. But Paul also felt happy and a little powerful for having yelled at God and thrown Him out of the apartment, like the way I feel to have screwed you over with this ending.

And that was enough.

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# My Time with the Capitalist Swine

[Chapter Ten of **Grand Theft Boblo**. After stealing a jet-ski and committing a few acts of waterborne theft, our narrator Lee doesn't feel much like the pirate he wishes to become. He feels like an assistant manager of a sporting goods store who moonlights at mugging fishermen. Taking a break from his feeble attempts at piracy, Lee begins playing Bloody Monopoly on a regular basis with some guys from the mall where he works.]

The first time I played with the Capitalist Swine was at Billy's house. I can't remember how to get there, except that Terry took me up some squirrely way through a maze of subdivisions around Plymouth or Canton or somewhere.

Billy took us out in the backyard to show off his split-level deck. He had two maple saplings with about a dozen leaves between them. They looked like Charlie Brown Christmas trees compared to all the other trees shaggy with leaves.

We played that first game in the back porch, an unfinished addition with particle board walls and studs showing. A sliding glass doorwall blocked sounds and cigar smoke from passing in or out of the living room. The kids were not allowed back in Billy's sanctuary, and he boasted that only his things decorated or rested here. Stacks of freeweights and a bench dominated one end of the porch, and the card table almost filled the other end. The only decorations were posters of a very young Brando leaning over the handle-bars of his bike, and another poster of a glistening Triumph motorcycle.

Just after the turning point where all the properties are owned and the game really starts to get bloody, Billy's wife brought in a massive tray full of baked chicken and fries. He seemed to have a great thing going, with a growing house, smiling wife who cooks

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and cleans, and 2.4 kids scampering past the portable gas fireplace with the flintlock rifle over the mantle of it, next to the framed service award from the Department of Natural Resources. In recognition of outstanding blah blah whatever, presented to Officer William Cadieux. The .4th kid was a teenage step-daughter who I never saw, only heard about.

Overshadowing the otherwise plain décor of the living room was a grandfather clock Billy had designed and put together himself. You could see the long pendulum swinging through a stained glass crucifix down below, complete with a little blocky version of the savior. It showed time in Roman numerals, with the moon and stars and sun gradually rolled behind a little window on the face of the clock. The crowning touch was the ten-point rack of antlers sticking out from the sides of the clock, taken from a real buck on a real hunting trip, which Billy described at length. I don't know what kind of statement the antlers were supposed to make about Christ, but it made an awesome looking clock.

During that first game, toward the end of the night, I let out a particularly vicious, messy sneeze in my hands. It took more than one kleenex to clear off my nose and fingers, but they didn't notice, or made a point of not noticing.

The next time I came, instead of playing Monopoly, we helped Billy move out. He said it was a trial separation. After that, we usually played at Billy's parents' house in Redford, where he had moved in. We'd show up around seven or eight, me and Terry car-pooling sometimes from the mall. Dean would show up an hour later, and we'd play Monopoly 'til two or three in the morning. A couple times I fucked up and played 'til dawn, then had to go to work three hours later.

Mrs. Cadieux always came down to the game room in a heavy terrycloth robe around ten or eleven to offer us turkey sandwiches, or roast beef or whatever leftovers from dinner she didn't want to put away. I would try not to be the first into the kitchen, and try not to take too much food and look like a pig. Dean would skip the food and grab another beer. I'm not sure if he was trying to stay lean, or knowing that food would diminish his buzz. Terry always whispered in the kitchen, because the attached dining room was always dark, and just beyond that were the stairs up to the parents' bedroom.

I only talked with Billy's father once. His accent was pure Hamtramck, halfway between Chicago and Poland.

I had been quiet the first few times we played at Billy's and later at his parents' place. By the third game, I felt comfortable enough to grill them about the game. Why Monopoly? Why the weekly event?

"Somewhere in the mists between Poker Night and D&D lies Bloody Monopoly," Terry said.

He stared at me and I felt sure he was mocking me somehow. I

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laughed to break the tension.

Dean told him, "You're such a cock." To me, he said, "Billy's the freak for Dungeons and Dragons. He got Terry into it, and they convinced me to waste one night of my life trying it. They couldn't find anybody else to play after that, including me, so they gave up D&D and we started playing Poker. We did that for about six months until it got boring as hell and we started doing Hearts, Rummy, Euchre, Shit on Your Neighbor. By the time it got down to Crazy Eights, I had to get good and drunk. Next night, they tell me I invented Bloody Monopoly."

"Bullshit!" Billy threw doubles and moved his lead demon eight spaces to Baltic Avenue, then rolled again, saying, "It was Terry's idea."

"Yeah, but whose idea was it to use real money?"

"Mine," said Billy.

Dean yelled at his brother, "Dammit, you told me I invented part of it."

Terry landed on Community Chest, pulled a Get Out Of Jail Free card, and sold it to Billy, who was always willing to buy them for forty five cents. "You invented the part about tequila on Free Parking."

"Yeah! That was when the game was good. Why did we stop doing that?"

Billy shoved the dice at Dean. "We stopped after Chantal's vodka watermelon. I know you remember that."

"I remember the watermelon. Who's Chantal?"

They acted like the game was just a way to pass time, as if any game would do. But the room would get serious when they brought up old debates over house rules, or when the die would land on an angle against the board, so it might be a five or it might be a one. Do you re-roll it, or call it as it lands? Dean said he was only here for the beer, but he'd argue harder than the others. Billy would pull out the tattered rulebook, plus the notebook full of customized house rules. Sometimes that settled it. Sometimes it led to courtroom dramas over what the Framers of the House Rules had intended back when they wrote the House Rules.

The other two had stopped playing as distinct characters, but Terry played the role of the Socialist Party. His moves and failures and successes represented the prosperity and tribulations of the Party as it rose to power. When he won, it represented the Socialist Party gaining enough acceptance to take over Atlantic City.

For the first month, they badgered me about choosing my token. "You can take the easy way out," Billy explained, twiddling his fingers like a wizard over Dean's pewter top hat, "and pick one of the boring, old pieces that come with the Monopoly set. Or you can find a token that suits you." He slouched back in his chair and smiled. Billy's token was a two-inch high lead figure of a demon, perched on a little mountain-top base, wings spread wide, a flam-

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ing sword in one hand and a cat-o'-nine-tails in the other. A leftover from the days when Billy's title had been "Dungeon Master." Every few months, he repainted the figure's deep red skin and black nails.

Dean performed his Ritual of The Bottomless Bottle before replying. One beer nearly drained. One fresh from the freezer, which he kept stocked and rotated frequently enough that they never froze. He would open the full bottle, take a quick pull, and leave enough room to empty the old, hot bottle into the new, cold one. Like he was only drinking one beer each night. One long, ever-expanding beer.

"I've said it before and I'll say it again: fuck you. There's no shame in keeping tradition. You assume that I chose this piece casually, but I put some thought into it, maybe more than you." Dean blew a long puff of air, the remains of a stifled burp. "I like that it's an old game. What, eighty years, a hundred years, depending who you believe?"

"This game has some weight to it, and you clowns take something away from it when you bring your toy soldiers and chess pieces into the game. You're totally fuckin' with the vibe of Monopoly. It's like playing Pinochle with Pokémon cards."

Terry said, "That's been done," but couldn't derail his brother's thesis.

"I limit myself to the eight traditional tokens as a matter of respect for the game. So which piece do I want representing me? What do I got to work with here?"

Dean grabbed the sandwich-sized tupperware box with all the green houses, red hotels, pewter tokens and extra dice. "The Scottie dog and the iron are out, cause they're for pussies. The car looks too much like a toy. It doesn't move me. The wheelbarrow I kinda like. Makes me think Working Class. Back-breaking labor for forty years. Makes me think of those VFW-types my dad hangs out with. Not 'Proletariat,' some bullshit term a college kid would apply to them, but fuckin' Working Class. I respect these people, but I don't wanna be one of them. This game is about winning the fuckin' lottery and investing your money to become King of the World, so I ain't gonna be a fuckin' wheelbarrow."

He picked the wheelbarrow out of the box.

"Thimble's kinda cool, but it has that Working Class stigma just the same. Plus I read where it was only included with the set because back in the old days, people would lose a couple of the tokens, so they'd play with a real thimble instead. Fuck that.

"The shoe, no offense, Lee," because I was using the shoe that time, for no particular reason. "It's got the working class stigma, makes me think of cobblers making that shoe. Plus I had this girlfriend who told me how shoemakers were one of the trade guilds originally involved with the Illuminati, right alongside the Masons, and she said you could prove it because the word 'cobbler' was

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really derived from 'cabala.' So every time I look at that shoe with the fuckin' loop on the back, I got an image of her armpits bursting with tufts of black hair.

"So that leaves me with either the bucking horse or the top hat. Even if you didn't have the base broken off both your Lone Ranger dudes, I wouldn't want them. He looks like a boy scout or a mountie or something.

Billy said, "Chantal busted the second one." He ignored Dean's frown and said, "I don't know why you ever brought her into the game."

Dean shook his head and frowned at Billy. "Who's Chantal?"

"Will you just roll?" Terry set the dice in front of Dean.

"Now the top hat, on the other hand," Dean said, as he held the dice a couple feet over the center of the board and dropped them without shaking them, as Billy fell forward and battered the table with his forehead, sending his straight piles of money askew from where they had been lined up under the rim of the board, "that's a fuckin' token." Dean advanced his top hat nine places to Pennsylvania Railroad. He dropped two dollars on the bank next to Billy. "I want it.

"I look at the top hat and I see Abe Lincoln. John Fitzgerald Kennedy at his inauguration, huh? Then I think of W. C. Fields and how he died tragically, but kept joking up to the end, and I think that this is the most meaningful piece in the game."

He took the railroad deed that Billy finally found, set it on the table next to his other deeds and stared at them. He was looking really glassy-eyed. Only ten o'clock and he looked like he would nod off right there without replenishing his everlasting beer.

"So it's not like I just pulled the Balrog figure out of my old Dungeons and Dragons collection because he looked cool. I put some fuckin' thought into it."

I rolled three, landed on B&O Railroad. "Hey, I'll buy Pennsylvania off you for two-fifty if you want."

"I'm not as fuckin' dumb as some people think I am." Dean didn't mean my offer for the railroad, because he was staring at Billy when he said it.

Billy crossed his arms, which made his thick biceps look even more swollen.

"You popped her implant," Terry said.

I put down two dollars on the bank and tapped the title card for B&O in front of Billy.

Terry shook off the dirty look from Billy and repeated to his brother, "Chantal was the one whose implant you popped."

Dean looked up at Terry, instantly sober. He looked at the game board, studied it for confirmation, adjusted his top hat so it was better aimed on the path.

"Oh! No no, she tried to put that off on me, but we were just wrestling. She was trying to tickle me and I was just holding her

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arms away from me. I squeezed too tight and the thing popped out on me."

I said, "Eeeewwwww," and shrank away from the table. Billy grabbed the dice from in front of me and made his roll.

"That thing stunk, too. It was infected or something. Some quack doctor in Ferndale gave her a big discount, but he fucked her up. Of course, she blamed it on me."

"Fools!" Billy thundered. He stood up too fast, knocking the chair over backwards as he flexed, a pale Lou Ferrigno in a Lions sweatshirt, growling, "I consign thee to the depths of Hell, puny mortals!" He drew his hands toward the board in trembling claws. I thought he was pantomiming strangling Terry across the table in slow motion, but his massive talons stopped and hovered over the board where his demon figure had come to rest. "Park Fucking Place! You losers may as well kiss your money goodbye right now."

Dean said, "It was Norplant that popped out, not an implant. Little sticks of birth control medicine inserted in the arm. Do they even make that shit still?"

Terry scooped up the dice and shook them silly. "All I'm saying is those things were not real."

"Motherfucker, those were all original parts, straight from the factory. Original miles. Factory-to-dealer incentive."

"Fake," said Terry.

Dean was on the way to the kitchen for a fresh bottle, saying, "Slam the doors and kick the tires."

Terry didn't need to explain his playing piece. He used a live round from a .357.

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# Basqura's Homecoming

I had been badly injured and left for dead, far from the world where I hatched. Health had returned, but the bones had fused together wrong at my hip. I knew that I would be safe if I could get to my homeland. I knew the shaman would call on the spirits of our fallen ancestors to heal me. And when that didn't work, I knew I could count on his solar-powered surgical droid.

After landing in the Halfling spaceport Kliendorf, I made my way through the crowds of thin-skinned creatures. They no longer sickened me like they had when I was young. Too many years I had quartered with elves and orcs and goblins. Staying alive occupied our minds more than hating each other.

Twenty minutes of ducking and crawling through the low-built Halfling city, then the shanty town of taller races outside the city walls. Finally I came to fields of wheat and cattle. Even with my dragging pace, the country turned quickly to marshland, then swamp. Backwater, my homeland.

This word "Backwater" does not mean the same thing in your tongue that it means in mine. Our Backwater is not distant from settled areas. The name comes from the tendency of our people's corpses to float with faces down, shoulders and spines poking out of the water. Someone saw enough of these rotting backs and named it Backwater.

I spent five days roaming the places where my tribe had rested. But lizardfolk tribes move often. I came near to settlements that I did not recognize. A generation of them had grown and most of my generation had probably been enslaved like me or killed. How would I recognize my own people?

My tribe would mark their territory with half moon and quarter moon carved into trees or rocks. The nearer settlements were branded with eyes and pistol designs, so I left them quickly. Besides, these were greenskins. Most of my people were gray or brown. As I wandered toward another area where my tribe had settled, I saw a familiar face slouching through the mud. He had been the runt of the brood, and grown into a small, thin adult. Wiry. Looked like he could put up a good fight. He held a rusty

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trident in one hand and dragged an elk with the other.

I put myself flat to the ground behind bushes and called, "Tailchaser!"

He dropped the food to grip his weapon with both hands. He faced my direction but hadn't spotted me yet. "I am called Chase now. Who is that?"

I peeked around the bushes and showed my scaly smile.

I didn't expect him to recognize me now, three times the size I had been when we were stolen away from the tribe. I don't know what year we were taken, or how many different star systems I'd seen since then, each with their own idea of what a year means. But he saw through the years and said, "Brother?"

I barked with laughter and rolled out of hiding. It was amazing to find someone who might share my blood. We might not have been born of the same parents, but we had hatched in the same brood. I left my spear and sack on a lump of dry moss behind the bush and limped over to embrace him.

"Remember Sickly? I am Basqura, but when I was small they called me Sickly." Pretend you're too ill to go out on the hunt one time when you're three years old, our people will never let you forget. "It's good to see you survived."

Chase dropped the trident and embraced me, then waved for me to help him carry the elk. I grabbed my things and picked up the back legs so he could lead us to the village.

He asked, "What does that word Basqura mean? Is it the Welsh or Dwarvish word for 'Sickly'? You were taken by Dwarves, right?"

I told him Basqura did not have meaning like most of our names did. A human had given me that name. I did not have any great love of humans, but I kept the name because this man had been kind to me.

We talked about Dwarves and other warmbloods, about the groups that had owned us and where they had taken us. Chase had been sold to wandering Gnomes. "Gnomads." He had been so small, they thought they were buying an adult kobold. It wasn't difficult to escape from them after he grew bigger. Three years he had been owned, then two years finding his way through warmblood cities and villages to reach Backwater again.

We came to a clearing full of my people and the first thought that came to me was a wicked, judgmental one. I saw their mixed shelters, their new swords alongside ancient bone tools, their few tattered shirts buttoned up the back, and I thought what the warmbloods had taught me to think about people like this: "Shirts and Skins."

Warmbloods say "Shirts and Skins" when they talk about savages who are slow catching up with technology. A few lizardfolk wore clothing to fit in with the warmbloods, or because they had gotten in the habit while living with warmbloods, but most stayed naked. For most creatures who are unfamiliar with clothing, pants

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seem strange and confining, something to trip over. But shirts can drape over creatures that want them loose, or fit snugly on creatures that want nothing in their way. So almost any group of savages that you see will include creatures without pants, thinking the shirts make them stylish and proper.

We think it's funny how humans and other warmbloods have to steal pelts because they didn't evolve good enough skins on their own. They think we're funny when we wear extra pelts just to please them. Both are correct.

Here it was mostly skins. Four of them wore clothing and the rest wore nothing, a toolbelt or backpack here or there. Shelters reflected their makers in the same way. An ignorant warmblood would see inadequate shelter for sixty creatures gathered around a firepit. Only three huts and a boggy field full of scattered rocks and logs. Those who knew the ways of lizardfolk would notice the rocks and logs heaped where they had built tight burrows under them, entrances concealed under brush or mudpuddles.

The lizardfolk in shirts were the ones who had built huts. One of these was the shaman, who immediately embraced me, then stood near the fire to burn off any harmful spirits that I might have brought with me. As I talked with the others, he came back to embrace me several times, carrying away spirits and burning them off repeatedly. Apparently I had a lot of them.

The children and some of the tribe backed into the woods, waiting and watching to make sure I would not cause trouble. They came back after a short time, and soon they all crowded near to listen or to brag.

Of course the ones in clothing were less shy than others, but even among them, one stood out as least shy. A massive bull lizard with a pegleg and a maroon shirt stood with his arms crossed, waiting for Chase to introduce him. This was Empeska. He announced that he was the biggest, which did not need announcing. Then he slashed open the belly cavity of the elk Chase had brought, tore out some entrails and sat back down to eat.

One small female, barely old enough to breed, wore a black cloak and said nothing. Streaks of mud coated the lower half of the cloak but it was still dark. Not faded like all other clothing in the village. The cloak was either new or expensively made. The fact that no one had taken it from her meant that she probably had an equally new or expensive weapon in the folds of the cloak, maybe implanted or hexed.

An older female wore gray-brown coveralls. She introduced herself as Ressa Halfchance, smiling in a toothy way that showed she was still young enough to be hopeful. Twenty-five years among the Halflings had made her accustomed to clothing. She was slow to adopt the old ways when she finally returned to the tribe. She said she was taking some of the children out for a swim and hoped to see me later. Playing hard to get, I guess.

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There was one other surviving brother from the same brood as Chase and I. He was easy to remember because no one else had light-brown skin like him. High Yellow was his name, but he didn't answer when I spoke it.

Chase tore off a front leg for High Yellow and pointed toward me. "This is Basqura. He hatched with us. You remember when he was little, he was called Sickly?"

High Yellow glanced at me and shook his head. "That's not Sickly. Sickly is little. Bloody Dwarves took him." He ripped a strip of elk flesh down to the knee and ignored us.

Chase explained that High had been befuddled ever since the tribe had fought an ogre mage. High used to be quite a warrior, but he caught some bad magic in that battle, and now he mainly sang songs and looked after the little ones.

I don't mean to ignore the plain lizardfolk and only talk about the ones who had taken up warmblood dressing habits. It's just that those are the ones more likely to make themselves heard. The plain folk will get to know you in their own time.

"You will be our guest for four days," said a gray female with a sheathed knife strapped to her thigh. "After that, we consider you a member of the tribe. You will be expected to participate in the hunt or patrol or other tasks." She appeared to be three or four seasons younger than me. Pretty, but her eye showed no spark of interest like I saw in Ressa. "Will you be staying long enough to be our guest or our brother?"

"Ahh, forgive me. It could be taken as an insult to state my plans before asking the chief for permission."

"I will not be offended. My name is Shell and I am chief for today."

I should explain that "chief for today" is an expression we use that is not literal. Control over the tribe is a give and take. Some leaders will fight to the death to maintain their positions, only to give away the position later as a show of respect or as a gesture of trust to strangers. Often the tribe will be led by five or six strong members who pass leadership between them. To say "I am chief for today" is to hint that someone might kill you and take your place tomorrow, or that you might slough off the role of chief like a snake crawling out of its skin.

"In that case, I'd like your permission to have the shaman treat a deep wound I suffered. My hip was broken. It healed wrong and causes me to limp. I'm sure his magic would take longer than four days, but beyond that--"

"Forget magic," she said. "We'll get him to use the surgical droid."

"Thank you."

Chase passed me a pair of elk ribs. If the warmbloods tried some fresh elk once without burning the blood out of it, they would surely swear off cattle and pigs forever.

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"I don't mean to stay with the tribe permanently. If my hip gets better, I would like to return to some friends offworld. I will gladly join in the hunt or patrol as soon as you need me to."

"I would like you in the patrol at sunrise then," Shell said. "We have rumors from other tribes that phantoms or spirits have been murdering swampdwellers. Bodies are left in pieces, so it does not seem like tribal warfare or slavers or the usual swamp predators. Whether it's magic or machinery hiding the murderers, we have to take extra care."

Two boys began biting and clawing each other, fighting over a swath of elk hide. The smaller boy drew blood. Shell dragged them away from the group, making them sit far apart at the edges of the village.

Empeska wanted news from offworld. Ressa wanted to know what I had seen in my years away from Backwater. They kept me talking until the sun set. They would have demanded more, except the time had come for mingling. This idea is hard to fit in the Common tongue, but I feel "mingling" is closest to our word in Draconic. It might also be called "orgy" or "dating," but I never paid enough attention to warmblood sexual rituals to understand how those words are different. Warmbloods make such a fuss over each individual act, who coupled with whom, and which of them should feel guilty afterwards. To lizardfolk, this is like squinting at the sky and focusing on only one or two clouds, averting your gaze from all other clouds, feeling guilty for seeing too much of the sky at once.

Chase and the girl in the black cloak stayed behind to guard the village. A few infertile elderly lizardfolk watched over kids while the rest of us retired into the swamp to play and mingle. The shaman didn't participate that night either, although they are allowed to. When we later found his body ripped apart in his hut, we knew why he hadn't come to the mingling.

But first I will tell you what I told them over the campfire, about the things I had seen and done on other worlds.

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# Basqura's Horror Story

No ghosts in this story. Many monsters. All true.

Raiders came to Backwater when I was five. Humans. They stole dozens of lizardchildren, a few grown-ups. I hid well.

The old shaman urged our tribe into darker parts of the swamp. Raiders came again when I was seven. Again I watched from underfoot as elves and humans and goblins beat lizardfolk and carried them away. One of them stepped on me but I curled into the mud where she couldn't find me.

When I was ten, I was too big to hide. Dwarves came on foot and in silent vehicles that hovered over the trees. I broke one of them, leg or arm I think. I was kicking backwards while another had hold of me. I never managed to see the one behind me who snapped. They stunned me with some magic or weapon, and that was the last I saw Backwater until this week.

I was gone from the Dwarves so quickly, there wasn't time to develop a proper hate of them. From the Dwarvish stronghold, we were marched into human transports, flown to a stockyard where we were auctioned by Elves, distributed to beasts and men all shapes and sizes. A hooded thing bought me. I never saw enough of him to know what he was. Might have been an insect or maybe his armor just resembled an exoskeleton.

He purchased me along with an infant bugbear and a small stable of grown orcs. We were packed together into a chamber of the hooded thing's ship, with no windows to see what stars were flying past day after day. I worried that the orcs would eat us, but they stayed away. Goes to show how foolish I was. It was the orcs who had to worry, because the baby bugbear chewed some toes off one of them.

The master must have had the chamber wired for sound or visuals. He came as soon as the commotion started and zapped the bugbear with a ray from his fingertip. Left a black spot on his forehead. Then he shoved the little monster into a corner and turned on an electric wall that kept him inside. He cried and carried on until his throat was sore. The orcs threw toenails and boogers at the crackling wall of his jail all day and night, which was fine be-

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cause it kept them from paying much attention to me.

The first farming I did was on Lieloth, an Elvish colony. They were trying to terraform this wobbling moon. We grew tiny, poisonous herbs that were engineered to give off tons of oxygen and make the thin atmosphere easier to breathe. Three years we planted and weeded and fertilized and mulched and starved and planned uprisings, then named names when they showed us mass graves filled with the planners of the uprisings. I watched a human boy slave far out in the field one day, tearing the herbs out of the soil and shoving them in his mouth until he choked. He foamed green bubbles out his mouth long after he stopped moving. The Elves beat me for that, because I should have protected the herbs.

I believe it was three years because one of the orcs in our work crew was an astrologer before he was a slave. He watched the stars and reminded us every so often when a season had passed. There were no seasons on Lieloth that you could feel or see, because our part always faced the sun. That took some getting used to, although it's the same as a slave ship when they don't bother turning off the lights. It's annoying for a few weeks, but you forget all about it.

The wobble got worse in the third year. Whoever calculated that Lieloth would make a good planet to spend all this time and money on, had failed notice a stray asteroid the size of a small planet which came zipping through the star system every few centuries. Gravity from the passing asteroid pulled all the other planets in the system back and forth as it passed near them. Our tiny, poisonous herbs began to wither a month after it passed our way. We heaped more fertilizer and planted more seeds and mulched more and dropped dead, then the bodies of spent slaves were used as more fertilizer. The Sun's angle shifted. The wobble worsened. Winds blew constantly, stronger than ever before. The herbs rotted. Elves tore down all their buildings, loaded the materials and vehicles and the most valuable equipment into ships and rode away.

One hundred of us were considered valuable enough equipment to be loaded on the ships. Hundreds of other slaves were left behind to eat mulch and rotting, poisonous crops and each other. Some could have survived if they found a few species among them that bred quickly enough, cultivated them as food. They're probably all gone.

They dumped us on a populated world, Cabtree or Caventy or something? A prison where they held workers until new assignments came. We were split up, decontaminated, inoculated, measured and processed. I had grown to almost my full size, bigger than most of the warmbloods who owned us. They put me in a dormitory with some of the bigger orcs, a few minotaurs and shapechangers. We were given cloth mattresses and fresh meat, video games, even a room with toilets. You've seen these toilets? Some of you? Never

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mind, it's too complicated to explain if you haven't seen one. Then they started training us with weapons, hand-to-hand techniques, rifles and heavy artillery. After a few weeks, they studied our progress and took some away to be snipers, some to be assassins. Me they took offworld to study magic. They called us "Assets," we who were selected for special training. It means an object or product that you value because you can trade it or hoard it.

I studied at the Academy for three years. This was incredible treatment for a slave, I thought. The Academy where free people attended, only the most privileged free people in the known worlds. I thought the Elves were foolish to invest so much in me. But my owners knew how to use me until they got their money's worth. And they weren't Elves.

Korsakov Group Limited. That is the name you should tell hatchlings late at night when you want to frighten them into good behavior. It wasn't the Dwarves or Elves or humans who had earned my hatred. This monster was bigger than race or nation. And how could I hate all those species when some of them were enslaved along with me, hating our owners just as much as I did?

It had started as an import/export business. Five freight ships and a staff of twenty warmbloods. I don't know the name of the world on which Korsakov Group started, because they outlawed the old name and started calling the planet Korsakov. Later they destroyed that world when it became too much of a liability. Now they just add numbers to each new world they absorb. No creativity in that bunch. Last I heard they were up to Korsakov 52. Even that's misleading, since it only counts inhabited planets, and they control many more barren worlds.

The Elves that rode our backs on Lieloth weren't even citizens of Korsakov Group. They were subcontractors. But no person or company or federation works with Korsakov Group very long without being absorbed into the Group. Like a transplanted organ, you either merge seamlessly with the body or fall off and become table scraps.

In between my studies at the Academy, I researched the history of Korsakov Group. When they sensed I was learning too much about my masters, I was isolated for several weeks. They corrected my attitude with high voltage and with blades. Imagine that: with all the technology and dark arts at their disposal, they still rely on a simple razor for simple jobs. I can't even remember what I had discovered that was so important to them.

Eventually they released me to finish my studies. One day a naga came to me on a shooting range and quietly asked me for "the code." She said there was a series of hand gestures that triggered self-destruct on Korsakov warships and I was the last of the rebels who knew it. She screamed at me and spit acid when I told her they had cut it out of me.

For a graduation present, they shipped us a few light-years

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away to a world the grunts called Armpit. I don't remember what the real name was, but two weeks after we got there, it was Korsakov 47. We stayed another month or so to clean up and secure the big cities.

They shipped us to other battles. We captured Salla, Mendigor, the Volga System, the Chadrihoora Empire. Some Dwarvish world, Anvil-something or Molten Hammer, something to do with a forge. When the going got hot, they melted.

If I had fought on all those worlds, I'd be a better warrior than I am now, or I'd be dead. But we were always brought in as reinforcements, hovering in freighters over battles until they needed us, and it was usually finished by the time we deployed. There was one nasty battle when native forces boarded our ship before we entered their atmosphere. They breached the hull in a few places, killed dozens of Korsakov Assets just from the decompression. I saw combat that time and I let loose. We weren't just following orders that time. We were defending our own lives.

Worst battle I saw was the 53-9 System. Trust a bunch of bureaucrats to come up with a catchy name like that. They had identified seven planets that would make worthy acquisitions, and planned to name them Korsakov 53 through Korsakov 59. This system was far from the other worlds under their control. They had stretched themselves too thin. We landed on the planet which would have been Korsakov 57 if all had gone well.

We hunkered down in hastily-built bunkers, waiting for attacks that never came. The natives barely touched our ground forces. They concentrated on harassing and sabotaging our starships still in orbit. Eventually we were cut off on the ground, no supplies or support from above. Korsakov Group cut their losses and ran, abandoning thousands of slaves to be slaughtered.

I watched hordes of these small warmblood natives pouring over our battlements, cutting down everyone in their path, shooting Assets who were trying to surrender. You can hardly blame them. It's no worse than we had done to their kind before.

I launched spells at a few of them. Then an explosion propelled me into a wall. When I woke, it was because one of the little warmbloods kept pulling at my fingers. Then he found a head with earrings still in it and dropped my boring hand. I was covered by rubble and bodyparts of slaves who had fought beside me. He pushed through the pieces, picking out bits of metal, tossing bloody hooves and drained battery packs and hunks of flesh on top of my pile until he could find nothing more.

I don't know where the explosion hit or how close I had been. It left a gash down my back and it broke my ass. Some part of my pelvis clicked when I tried to stand. I could wiggle my toes and my tail, move my ankles and knees slightly, but any attempt to stand or push with my legs caused such pain that I broke into a sweat and couldn't move for long minutes afterward.

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After the sun died below the treeline, I crawled free from the rubble, using only my arms to pull myself away from the ruins. I moved hand over hand toward the wilderness. A rocky, dusty place of sharp hills and mesas, with bare earth between stunted bushes.

My limbs are strong, but there would be no chasing after food on my two hands, dragging my body behind. You'd think I could hunt beasts by blasting them with orbs of fire or acid, but my aim was so bad I only managed to chase them away. I might have starved except for the yellow rodents with no eyes that tried to feed on me. They must have smelled the oozing wound in my back and thought I was already dead. I made a steady diet of them for a few days.

Far from native settlements, I found an outcropping at the bottom of a mesa. A kind of ivy grew there with fruits like round, black melons. The flesh inside them smelled foul, but they were full of water. I used one to cleanse my wound and drank others until my stomach sloshed.

The rodents couldn't smell anything dead about me after that, so they stayed away. I spent days at a time pulling myself near the barking turtles that gathered in clearings, blasting at them and missing. I'd get one every few days. They were more gristle than meat. Good target practice when your life depends on it. I think my aim improved because of that.

A troop of the little warmblood natives marched near my nest one day. I wanted to pick one off from the group, add a little variety to my diet, but that would have been foolish. They sang and chased the wind right past me.

Forty days I rested near the mesa. At the end of that time I could stand, but it hurt. After forty more days I could almost run. The range of movement for my tail was limited and I could not stretch my knees far up toward my belly, or pull them behind my back. I could feel something was not right, but it had healed enough to limp toward a city.

The spaceport was small. There were few lifeforms on that world other than the native warmbloods. Ulenj was their name for the world. It's only right to use their word, since they fought so hard to keep it from being renamed Korsakov 57. There were not enough aliens on Ulenj for me to blend in easily. I waited for a freighter with a small crew of offworlders. I slipped into the cargo hold as they prepared to leave. While the others strapped themselves down and the ship lifted off, I struggled forward to the pilot. A half-elf. I showed him my teeth. He cooperated right away.

It was too dangerous to keep him hostage with a full crew plotting behind me. I had them drop me off at Dogstar, a little truckstop brothel on an asteroid. From there, it was just a hop, skip and jump on a series of freighters, twisting a few arms to get them to change course, come down at Kliendorf, and here I am in Backwater with you.

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# Basqura's Mystery

I hurried the end of my story so the others could tell their own stories. But they squeezed more and more details out of me. How many worlds have you touched? Are there any planets controlled by lizardfolk? Is this Korsakov Group Limited a rival to the Dragon Guild?

Our storytelling had to end when the daylight ended. We left the firepit and made our way to the nearest pool with a depth suitable for mingling.

By the time we returned, darkness had settled into the swamp like a permanent thing, as if it would never give way for the sun again. Ressa walked beside me, asking about the Academy. She had shown much attention to me at the mingling, almost to the point of being inconsiderate, not sharing herself or letting others share me. I told her about the tall stone towers at the Academy. Then I noticed a young female near a hut, on all fours with her mouth open wide, twitching her head in all directions to watch for enemies.

A crowd of us rushed to see what was wrong. She ignored us, just kept looking at the hut and moaning, a rasping sound that was more frightened than frightening. Inside the cluttered shelter, we found the shaman, his chest and abdomen spread out in flaps over the rest of his body. Lungs and organs spilled down his legs, shredded into pieces. His intestines had been strung along his left side and ground into the dirt. Judging by the amount of guts, the killer had not taken any parts as trophy or as a snack.

Claws or teeth would have made ragged tears at the body. These lines were straight as steel. It looked messy, but his innards did not come unstrung from enthusiastic slashing. They had been pulled out and spread around.

A few of the younger adults pulled back from the hut and started moaning and hissing. Shell ordered, "Everyone back. Look at the ground, look at the sky. Do you see bootmarks or feathers or anything? Did anyone see smoke or lights earlier?"

She was looking for any magical or technological explanations she could think of. How could anything have taken the time to pull

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apart the shaman, in a hut only twenty paces away from a huge swarm of hatchlings playing? The entrance to the hut faced the firepit, so the attacker must have come in their sight without attracting their attention.

Chase said, "The shaman was a good friend. I'll find who did this. I'll spread their guts the same way, no matter who it is." He stalked off to the edge of the village and returned with his weathered trident.

After Shell had given up searching inside the hut, she circled the outside of it, staring at each jagged limb and twig that formed the walls. I moved close to her and spoke quietly. "Who are your best warriors?"

She glared at me. "Basqura, don't try to take over the tribe on the first day you return."

"I don't care about that. I think I know who did this, but it might be a creature too powerful for me to kill by myself."

She said that she was the best fighter of the Two Moon tribe, Empeska was second best. Shell read the doubt in my face. "Who do you think it was that took off Empeska's leg?" she chuckled. "He wanted to be chief for a day, and I showed him he didn't deserve it yet."

I told her to bring Empeska. We would retrace our steps back toward the pool.

"Chase," I called, "Come with us. We'll let you have the finishing stroke when we find the beast." He grinned the same way Shell did. You could see the family resemblance.

While the others scoured the heavens and the mud for clues, we four tramped into the trees.

"About halfway back from the pool, did any of you notice that limp tree?" I asked them. "The drooping limbs, uh, what do you call it? Each leaf has three sections. You know the type?"

Empeska said, "Untberry. What about it?"

I motioned for them to stop. "Let's see if we can find it again, I noticed a carving on one of those trees. As we were walking back, it was to my left." I faced them and waved Empeska toward me. "You were coming up far behind." He got the idea, hobbling a few strides behind me. "Shell, you were on my right."

As she stepped forward, I bellowed the trigger incantation, lunged forward and flung an orb of acid at Chase's leg. My aim still wasn't great, but half of it splattered on his lower thigh and knee, smoking through his hide in an instant.

He screamed. "Damn! What are you trying to do?" Chase clutched his leg, then shook his fingers as the acid started working on them too. He knelt in the ankle-deep muck and scooped it up toward the bloody hole, trying to wash off the acid.

He picked up his trident. "You think I did it? You're the outsider here! If anybody has power we don't know about, it's you."

He might have persuaded the others if I had let him go on like

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that. "Two reasons I know you did it, Tailchaser. First, I knew something was fishy when you didn't join the mingling."

"Big deal, I was staying to guard the village. You don't have to kill me for being loyal to the tribe, you lying foreigner!" He stayed low, made himself a smaller target, kept his trident out front.

"Shell, you were too young to remember," I said, "but Empeska probably remembers why they named him Tailchaser."

The big lizard shrugged. "Everybody saw him do it."

I rubbed the fingertips of my left hand together and a small flame flickered above them. "This changeling or doppelgänger or whatever it is, maybe just a warmblood that can cast a spell, he killed the real Chase and sank the body somewhere. He doesn't know what his own name means."

"Wrong!" Chase splashed mud at me with the foot of his weapon. "It's an insult! Lizardfolk always give derogatory names to their children. The shaman or chief or someone gives them a respectable adult name later when they've earned it. Makes them hate everything childish and strive for maturity. Chasing my tail was a waste of time, something foolish that a child does."

Shell drew her knife then. Family resemblance or not, she had heard enough to be convinced.

"It's an insult," I said, "but it's a figure of speech that does not literally involve your tail." As I coaxed the flame a few inches higher from my hand, I polished it into an orb with my other hand. "It's a roundabout way of saying you were a little too interested in your body. You lavished a little too much attention on your parts."

Empeska laughed. "A little? It was constant! They couldn't get him to stop abusing himself, all day long, out in the open in front of everybody. Kid like that wouldn't miss a good mingling with the whole tribe at sunset."

Chase had to keep backing away so the others wouldn't surround him. "Wrong. I was guarding the village. Everyone does that once in a while. So your first stupid reason was wrong. What was your second stupid, lying reason?"

"The second reason I know you did it is you didn't attack me back." The orb was too hot to hold. I had to bobble it between my hands to keep from burning myself. "I took a chance knowing that if I wounded the real Chase, he'd come at me and try to kill me. I'd explain myself quick, and with luck he'd understand why I did it and he might stop. But you just stand there whining. No self-respecting lizardman would let an attack go unanswered, even from his brood brother."

I crushed the flame tight and threw it at the impostor. Bad aim again. It flew wide to his right, almost hit Shell in the foot.

Empeska tackled him. He wrenched the trident out of Chase's hands. Shell thrust her blade into the middle of the impostor's chest. It clanked.

Firing another spell at him would risk hitting the others, so I

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skipped closer and grabbed one of his arms.

Shell uncoiled the straps of hide that held her knife sheath to her leg. She bound his legs and the three of us hauled him back to the village.

Along the way, his scaly skin sprouted black fur. His head doubled in width and tusks poked out of his mouth. Would have been a scary bugbear if he had been three feet taller, but at this size he was just a bear. The new look didn't help him pull free from me or Empeska. He shouted, "Dammit!" when we came into the clearing. The tribe crowded around us and a few kids started throwing sticks at him. The bugbear oozed back to look like Chase. "Don't let them do this to me!" he shrieked. "They're casting some kind of sick foreign magic on me!" His skin bubbled, then went furry, then he was covered with bark.

They let him live a few more minutes to explain why he had done it. He claimed there was a magic bauble stolen from a rich Halfling family in Kliendorf. A wondrous stone no bigger than an acorn that allowed its bearer to have occasional visions of future events. The magic stone had gone missing around the same time that a lizardfolk servant had escaped from the family. This change-ling creature had been dissecting lizardfolk for months all across Backwater, pulling their insides out to find the stone. "It's in one of your filthy gizzards, I'm sure of it! You gotta swallow rocks to make your gizzards work, don't you?"

That was enough explanation.

I settled into tribal life for a few months after that. The shaman had taught High Yellow how to operate the surgical droid, so after a few bad attempts, they fixed me up good. I warned them all that I was going to leave after it healed properly. It occurred to me that Ressa might make things difficult. She might be one of those deviants who wants to mingle with only one partner. I wasn't going to stick around just to indulge her, but I was sad that the others might treat her badly if they found out she had monogamous tendencies.

My fear turned out to be unfounded. Something came up to take her mind off me. The tribe needed a new shaman, and Ressa filled that job happily. She gave good advice, made sad people feel better, made raging people feel calm, figured out a code on the surgical droid that initiated its tutorial mode so she could learn all its features. Plus she had a dream about the Bloodeye tribe attacking us. Before it came true, she convinced us to hide far from the village. Everyone got sick of waiting after a few days and refused to believe it any more. We came back to find the village had been smashed. They had left eyeballs drawn on all the trees near our village and piles of scat on top of all the burrows.

Her predictions were much more helpful and accurate than those of the earlier shamans. When people asked how she got her power, she answered, "Must have been something I ate."

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# Suburban Lanes

## First Frame Lane One

Tim listened to the conversation being held on the opposite end of the table from him. The magazine in front of his face had been open to the same page for the last ten minutes.

"The way I know about it," the woman with black hair continued, "is a friend of mine, Jenny Crenshaw, she had a problem like that."

The woman facing her across the table, a redhead, nodded. This was the one who commanded most of Tim's attention.

The air rumbled for a moment, then clattered and returned to normal.

"This was when she was a carpenter. Anyway, she was using a nail-gun, halfway up this ladder. She was holding the one board—" here the talker pantomimed what she was describing "—and stuck the nail-gun up against it between her fingers. But the nail hit a knot in the wood, so it came up and around through the board, and back through her thumb. Her thumb was actually nailed to the board."

The redhead cringed. She leaned towards the table, listening intently. Her movement did wonderful things to her shoulders and light reddish-blond curls. In fact, Tim thought, the movement did wonderful things to her whole torso. Her face, bright and expressive, set off happy gears inside Tim's head. He could see the profiles of both girls from where he sat at the end of the table. He nudged his glasses back up his nose and peered over the magazine.

A softer rumbling spread for a long moment, followed by a quiet knock, the sound Larry's and Curly's heads make when Moe cracks them together.

"And the nails they use have barbs so they won't pull out easy. So she couldn't pull the nail out and slide her thumb off. She had to cut the head off the nail and jerk her thumb back the rest of the way."

"Eeeuw," the redhead said.

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"Only her cutters were on the ground next to the ladder. So this guy that's been watchin' it all comes up and picks up the cutters and starts laughin' at her. Well, she grabs the claw hammer from her tool belt with her free hand, hooks the claw under this bastard's collar, and lifts him off the ground. (She was the Southeastern California Women's Weightlifting Champion.) So the asshole stops laughin' and she drops him and snatches the cutters out of his hand as he falls. Then she cuts off the nail-head and yanks her thumb off it."

"Jeez," the redhead added.

Another loud burst of rumbling sounded before an explosion of clattering.

Content with finishing her story, the talker grabbed some M&M's off the table and popped them in her mouth. The tattered ends of her black hair fell onto her faded denim jacket. A black patch on the shoulder of her coat showed chunky, barbed letters with one letter frayed off at the end: MEGADET.

"Tim!"

The girls both turned to face him. Tim looked back at them in shock. Then a hand clapped on his shoulder and the girls turned back toward each other.

"How the Hell have you been?" a familiar voice asked. Tim couldn't place the face right away. The crew cut was different, but the round, boyish face and beady brown eyes reminded him.

"Perry?" A few images played through Tim's mind before he could remember whether to be glad to see Perry. A fist-fight in third grade. Lazy games of baseball in high school gym class. Laughing through English. "Uh, what's up?"

The smiling hooligan flipped a chair around backwards beside Tim and leaned his chest over the back of it. "Not too damn much, man." The hard plastic chair was an old contoured style, with a wide, curving seat that dug into Perry's thighs. But comfort wasn't his concern. "How 'bout yourself?"

"Oh, uh, not a whole lot, just hanging out after work." Tim set the magazine on the table.

"You workin' here? I didn't know you were big into bowling." As he spoke, Perry slid a pack of cigarettes from the pocket of his flannel shirt. He poked the pack toward his face and caught a stubby, brown cigarette between his lips.

"No, no, I'm an assistant librarian downtown. I don't bowl much." Tim crossed his arms and added, "No thanks," when Perry held out the pack.

A ball thumped and rumbled down a lane, then slid into a gutter. Someone grumbled, "God-" and trailed off muttering.

Perry fumbled a book of matches from his pocket, nodding. "That's cool. You got a consistent gig there?" After lighting his cigarette, Perry rose from his chair and appropriated an ashtray from half-way down the long table. "You're not using this, are ya?" he

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asked the girls. They shook their heads and Perry returned to his backwards chair.

"Yeah, it's a real job. Maybe a half step up from flipping burgers, but I like it." Tim closed the magazine on the table. It was the library's latest copy of *Newsweek*, with an article about the next *Star Trek* movie. He hadn't read more than two paragraphs of it in the last fifteen minutes. "Yeah, I come by here after work sometimes before heading home. The coffee from the vending machine here is better than the scum they try to serve at the diner."

Perry leaned his forearms on the table, leaving the stogie in a corner of his mouth. "I thought you lived the other side of town, out past the mill?" The stick of brown pulp in his mouth slurred his words a little, so it sounded more like "-out paft the miw?"

"Oh yeah, I use to, but I'm renting a room from my uncle now. His place is another couple blocks this side of town." Tim took a sip from the paper coffee cup and set it back on the table empty. "I had to get away from my parents. I guess living with one relative is as bad as another, but my uncle's okay."

"Hey, if you're making enough to get out of your parents' place, you're doing better than a lotta the people we graduated with." Perry tapped ash off his cigarette (or whatever it was he was smoking) and stuck it in the corner of his mouth.

"That's what I figure." Tim folded his arms.

Perry nodded.

Tim glanced at the girls down the table. He returned his gaze to the magazine lying on the table.

Perry blew smoke.

Tim asked, "So what have you been doing the last few years?"

"Fixing toilets in freight airplanes."

Tim laughed.

"Someday I'll look back on it and laugh," Perry said, "but that day hasn't come. I swear to God, I'm a plumber for the federal government. Figured I'd be a big-time pilot in the Air Force, right? Nothing physically wrong with me, right?" Perry leaned back from the table and spread his arms out to show himself.

Tim shrugged. "So what stopped you?"

"I didn't even have to finish the whole physical. They let me leave right after the eye exam."

"They can't be too bad if you don't wear glasses. Or do you wear contacts?"

"No, they're 20/20. But I'm color-blind. Evidently there's something crucial about distinguishing colors for flying. The controls, or identifying enemy aircraft or whatever."

Tim nodded.

"Yep. That's how it goes. So I've been dumping Liquid Plumber down sinks in Air Force bases and pulling pens and combs out of clogged johns for two years." Perry tapped off more ash and switched the cigarette to the other corner of his mouth. "I was

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thinking about going all the way and bein' a Lifer, retire at 44, all that. It's not as physical or restrictive as I thought it'd be. But I don't want to be fixin' toilets for the next thirty years."

Tim nodded, looking at the magazine.

"I'm surprised you didn't go to college," Perry said.

"Oh, well, I am, kind of. I'm taking a couple classes here and there at Kensington Community College."

"Ahhh," Perry said, making the connection of what Tim meant when he had said, "kind of." "So what are you goin' for? Business degree or something?"

"No. For now, I'm just taking some music classes. Symphony, Music Composition and Poetry. Just screwin' around, you know."

Perry nodded as he inhaled. "That's right: you were in Band, weren't you?"

"Yep." Tim counted down, five, four, three, two, one, anticipating how long Perry could stand to wait before calling him a "Band fag" like back in school. Happily, he heard no liftoff.

A rumbling ball smacked into enough pins to make the bowler and his buddies cheer. Tim watched the redhead throw back her head laughing at something. Even bland fluorescent lights made her hair flash. She had gray-brown eyes that complemented her light reddish hair, and vaguely reminded Tim of Hobbits. Not that she was particularly short, and he couldn't imagine tufts of fur on her feet. The colors of her hair and skin and eyes made him think of Fall and trees and the Earth, the elemental images associated with ground-dwelling Hobbits.

On the other hand, she was sort of stocky, with the kind of soft, pudgy-looking muscles that always hide surprising strength. She had the build of a volleyball or softball player.

Perry took the stogie from his mouth and blew smoke audibly: "Whewww." He clapped his free hand on his knee and asked, "Know where there's gonna be any parties tonight?"

Tim shook his head and shrugged, looking down at his magazine for the umpteenth time.

"You loser!" he recalled Perry yelling at him in what must have been a sixth grade Science class. He remembered a time when he had hated Perry, but that feeling mellowed into nothing after a pile of years. They had become, if not friendly, at least tolerant of each other in the years since, eventually talking and joking in some high school classes where the only people they had known were each other.

"Know where there's gonna be any parties tonight?" Perry repeated.

Tim started to say, "No," when he realized that Perry had asked the girls at the other end of the table.

"Actually, yeah," the black-haired girl said. No further details were forthcoming.

Perry didn't mind working for it. He said, "But will it be any

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good?" He frowned at her, then raised one eyebrow like an inquisitive Vulcan. His magic worked on both girls, gradually infecting them with smiles. It triggered a boomerang effect that carried a smile back around to Tim.

More pins clattered, more people cheered for the strike. The metallic voice of a robot announced, "Countdown intruder," from a video game.

The thin woman with black hair leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms. "Yeah, it should be pretty good." She resumed her purposeful silence.

Perry slouched back in his chair and crossed his arms to mimic her. "Well, what do I have to do to coax it out of you?"

"I don't know," she said. "How do I know you aren't going to be some trouble-maker that'll puke on the hostess and pass out?"

"He can vouch for me," Perry replied, hooking a thumb over his shoulder at Tim.

Tim grunted, "Ha! Until today I haven't seen him in two and a half or three years. But if you got a clogged john, I can vouch-

"What he means," Perry interrupted, "is that I have a reputation of honor and dignity, and a character that is untarnished. Right? So he vouches for me and there you go."

Tim said, "I would have used the word 'character' differently."

The redhead laughed and joined in, "And who's going to vouch for you?"

Perry said, "I vouch for him! So, what time does it start and where's it at?"

The black-haired cynic tapped her teeth with a red fingernail and said, "I don't know . . ."

Perry cocked his head sideways like a puppy dog. Tim sighed with real sadness, feeling this chance slip by.

"If nothing else," the redhead breathed, sitting up straight, "they'll keep us amused up until the time they puke and pass out."

Tim was giddy, smiling hugely, not quite restraining giggles. Going to the same party as the redhead would be wonderful enough, but "keeping her amused" would require close association. Tim wanted to associate with her as closely as possible.

Still tapping them with a fingernail, the cynic now sucked air through her teeth. She squinted in mock concentration, then raised her eyebrows. "Okay."

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## First Frame

### Lane Two

"Wait a minute," Sonny said when she started to pull her shirt off. He tugged at the bottom of her t-shirt until it covered her pale belly again. "It'll be more romantic this way." He popped loose the top button on her jeans and unzipped her fly.

She shrugged. "How's it more romantic to leave my shirt on?" She shimmied her substantial hips to help Sonny remove her jeans.

"Uhhh-" He held her jeans on the floor while she pulled on foot out. She nearly fell on top of him when she tried to pull her other foot out. Sonny smoothed his black mustache with his lower lip. It was a nervous habit that he was trying to break, but it helped him think. "-This way, whenever I see you in that t-shirt, I'll think of the time we fucked behind the bar."

"Oh," she said. The faded design on her shirt was an old, peeling, rubbery iron-on, but you could still see the globe and anchor symbol topped by a majestic eagle and labeled "U.S.M.C." She leaned back against the counter and peeled off her socks. "I'll have to wear it more often then."

Actually, Sonny didn't want to have to look at her tits. They were sort of small and perky, but size wasn't the problem. The problem was that her pointy little jugs curved way out away from each other, as if her nipples had little magnets that repelled each other. Surrounding her sharp tips were patches of brown more than two inches in every direction, even extending underneath the curve of her tits. It was like her nipples were an infection spreading across her chest.

She had nice legs, though. Sonny took pleasure in watching her wiggle a pair of pink panties off from around her broad hips, as she balanced against the bar.

She snapped her bubble gum twice in a row. "Are you gonna put your bow-tie on so I can remember this whenever I see you in your monkey-suit pouring drinks?"

"Shit," he echoed into the bottle of vodka poised at his lips. "The only time I wear a tie is when I'm gettin' paid." He took a swig from the bottle.

"Oh, I get it. I gotta do whatever to make you happy, but what I want don't matter, is that it?" She cocked her weight onto one leg and planted her hands on her hips. Her fingers framed the dark tuft of fur peeking out below her t-shirt.

Sonny smirked at her pouting face hidden in a mass of big hair.

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What a waste of bleach, he thought. "I'll give you something to be happy about in a minute." He jerked the end of his belt loose by the buckle. He lurched toward her, pressing her between himself and the counter.

Her hands snaked down between them and rubbed the zipper of his black suitpants. "Is that a promise or just a threat?"

She giggled as he lifted her by the ass and set her on the floor. Sonny stood up for another moment, looking through the glass partition between the Mark V Lounge and the lanes. The view allowed him to see lanes eleven through fourteen, none of which were in use. He looked back down at her. "Hey, don't start without me," he whispered. With his zipper open, Sonny stuck his thumbs under the sides of his pants and bikini underwear and pushed them down to his knees.

As he grabbed the vodka off the counter, she pointed out, "You know, that always reminds me of what you'd look like if your mustache grew up around your nose." To illustrate her point, she reached for it.

"Leggo!" he told her. She whimpered but complied. Sonny held the bottle high above her and dripped a shot on her belly: "Not just a social lubricant anymore!"

She shrieked and laughed and held out her hands to defend herself. She wiped off her shirt. "You dumb-ass! How am I gonna explain this to my bother? It's his shirt!"

"I don't know. But if he asks about the cum stains on it, tell him it depends on what the definition of 'is' is." Sonny dropped his hairy pelvis between her legs and began "making love". He grunted and added, "Just don't let him wear it ever again. I don't wanna get these—fuck-associations mixed up with his—ugly face."

She had already begun with her happy sound effects, one of the only other reasons Sonny put up with her. When she got going, she moved and shook like she was having a seizure, and she couldn't keep her mouth shut. If you didn't know any better, you'd think she was dying, and they had been interrupted more than once by people checking to make sure she wasn't.

Sonny figured no one could hear them today. Even though it was just glass separating them from the lanes and from the bitch who ran the place (Sonny's ex-step-mom Crystal), he knew they were safe. Crystal's hearing was getting worse, and she would have Frank Sinatra or some ancient AM radio crap blaring through the P/A system at that time of day. Since the Lounge was dark, and closed until four, they would probably be left undisturbed. And if they were disturbed, then oh well, it wouldn't be the first time.

Pumping away into the lump of squirming arms and legs and big hair, Sonny noticed that she sounded different this time. Her vocabulary of ecstasy was typically limited to continuous groaning and grunting with her mouth open, variations of "ah," "oh," or "uhhhh." But this time, she said, "Gggoooooh, ohhhh, ohhh, oh.

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MMnnghhh, ahhhh, ahh, nkkkoohhh, ohhhh!! (Oh.) Nnnngguh. Uhhhh! Mnnngooohh!!” Sonny stared at her pleasantly contorted face until he understood the cause of her new dialect of the language of love. He leaned down to her face and sucked the lime green gob of gum out of her mouth. That fixed the problem. She went back to her standard exclamations of “oh” and “ahhh” and “uh uh uhh ooo uhhhh!”

Sonny swallowed the bitter wad of gum, felt it sink through his stomach and settle in his abdomen, where it seemed to touch the very base of his prostate. It felt like the gum had reinforced his cock.

Her spastic gyrations intensified until she was clawing and kicking at the floor and moving both of them across the carpet. Then she hitched sharply and seemed to stop breathing. She let out one last long, whimpering sigh, twitching slightly every few seconds.

Sonny kept going. That gum had somehow infected his dick, turned the whole thing into a shaft of old, hard gum. Just as he started to see bursts of colorful static in front of his eyes, the aphrodisiac effect of the gum wore off. He finished and fell on top of her.

“Ohhhhh,” she sighed again. She wrapped her arms around his back. “Now I remember why I put up with you.”

Sonny gave a final grunt, running a hand up and down her thigh. He inhaled her smell: sweat, make-up and hair spray. He sighed into her ear. “Not bad yourself,” he said, planting his hands on the carpet and pushing up off her. But she held on.

“Wait!” She heard how frantic she sounded and tried to keep it more collected. “Just lay here for a little bit.” His face was right over hers. She kept glancing back and forth at each of his eyes. “Stay in me.”

He watched her. Her freckles were cute from this close. It provoked a weird feeling: not a turn-on, like the feeling he got when he looked at her hips, or the way she scrunched up her face when she came. It was just a pretty brown patch of dots on her cheeks that made him want to look at her for a long time. He sighed again and settled down on top of her.



Crystal yawned and set the magazine on the counter. Having skimmed all the articles, she found the love scenes to be pretty tame in this month’s *True Confessions*. She’d have to check the pharmacy again for the next issue of *True Romance*.

The stupid radio announcer was blabbing about how great AM 640 WMVN was, with more “lite” songs. Crystal hated listening to

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DJs talk. The bastard went into a commercial, which was even more annoying. She grabbed the dial and spun it, producing a blurb of noise that made the few bowlers jerk their heads up and look around. Crystal turned the volume down a little and searched for a clear station on the other end of the dial. When she found it, WRHG 1140, it was another commercial blabbing about cellular phones.

She smacked at the volume dial until it clicked off, and walked off to the ladies' room. Just as she opened the door, she heard a peculiar sound. She could barely hear it, but it sounded like someone in pain. She frowned and looked out at the lanes. Someone hit a strike, which drowned out the voice for a moment. All the bowlers seemed to be okay.

Then she heard it again, coming from the double doors of the bowling alley's entrance. Imagining someone hit by a car, struggling up to the doors with useless legs, bleeding all over, Crystal jogged toward the entrance. The sound grew louder. She sped past the door to the Lounge, past the big window between the lanes and the Lounge, and noticed that the sound was coming from behind her now.

Crystal turned back toward the window. The sound stopped.

Looking through the window from the lanes, Crystal couldn't see anything. Too much glare to see into the dark barroom. She pressed her face against the glass and shaded an area with her hands. Everything seemed to be in place in the Lounge, all the chairs still on top of the tables, all the lights off except the neon "Duff's Light" sign on the far wall. The place was empty. Then Crystal caught sight of something on the counter. Shading her view a little better, she could see a crumpled pair of those goofy, new-fangled "stone-wash" jeans, one pantleg hanging off the edge of the bar. Beside them was a pink wad of cloth, maybe a handkerchief, except they don't put elastic waistbands on hankies.

"Tch! That stupid kid," she muttered. She was annoyed, but also more than a little relieved to know that the source of all that hollering was not someone who needed an ambulance. Crystal walked back to her desk, shaking her head and mumbling. "Like father, like son."



Sonny struggled easily out of her grip and rose to his knees.

She protested. "No! Wait. Just stay with me a few more minutes." Her hands scrabbled at his arms, then tried to get hold of his hips, but her nails slid off. As he stood up, she thought she could keep him by grabbing his dick, but he slipped away, leaving her with a handful of goo.

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She felt cold from the vodka drying on her belly, her brother's shirt sticking to her skin. She closed her eyes and wished for a blanket.

Sonny wiped himself off with a cocktail napkin, tucked his shirt into his pants and straightened out his collar. He noticed his clip-on bow-tie lying on the floor beside her head, where it must have fallen from his pocket.

"Hey," Sonny began, "uhhh-" Still feeling a little drowsy from the exertion, with a minor head-rush from standing up hurriedly, he almost said, "Sherry," but he knew it was Shelly. To be safe, he said, "-babe, could you hand me my tie?"

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## First Frame

### Lane Three

Ben held the ball with two fingers and the thumb of his left hand, and balanced it more precisely with his right. He checked his shoes against the marks on the glossy wood floor and adjusted them to the right position.

He concentrated on the middle pin and the pin just to the left of it. He pushed everything else out of his mind: the other bowlers, the zaps and screams of video games somewhere behind him, the high school kids laughing at a table, the quietly nagging voice belting out, "You are so beautiful toooooo mmmmmmmmm!" Ben saw only the spot where he wanted the ball to hit, heard only the crack of the ball knocking down all the pins.

He inhaled deeply, exhaled slowly, took three steps and tossed the ball down the alley. Rocking on his right foot, he watched the ball hook just slightly, but still more than he had intended. Six pins flew backwards into darkness. Ben snapped his fingers and said, "Shoot!"

As he walked back to make sure the computer had his score right, he shook the tension out of his hands. His dull black ball rumbled down the runner between the lanes and popped up right next to the constantly circulating hand-dryer.

Ben's score was 54 on the sixth frame. According to his superstition, it should be a good night. He always got in a few games as practice before league play. His theory was that he had one or two bad games in him every night. If he could get those games out of his system, he'd bowl better later. His first game that evening had been a 130, but his second had been a 79, incredibly bad. Which was good in the long run, of course, because it was out of his system and he would bowl better for the league. For it to be effective, he had to sincerely try to bowl good games. If they still came out lousy, he knew his scores later would be great.

On the other hand, there was the possibility that these practice games would use up his supply of good scores each night. Ben didn't worry about that.

He stuck his fingers in the ball and raised it with both hands, until it rested just below his eye level.

He remembered doing this. Not just the general act of bowling, but this exact minute. He remembered lifting this ball right now while the video game behind him said, "Countdown intruder." He remembered the teenager with the deeper voice saying, "You're so

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fulla shit."

"You're so fulla shit," the teenager with the deeper voice said from the table far behind him.

He remembered the laugh that would follow and the explosion of a ball striking pins a few lanes down.

The kid with the higher voice laughed. A few lanes down, pins scattered in front of a ball.

Ben lowered his ball and looked around. He remembered lowering the ball and looking around. He remembered the guy who had just bowled a strike raising one fist and jerking it down while he bit his lower lip in a display of victory.

The guy who had just bowled a strike raised one fist and jerked it down while biting his lower lip.

Ben blinked his eyes and stepped back, set his ball back on the rack. But he remembered that too, down to the muffled metallic sound of the ball settling into the rack.

He rubbed his eyes with the balls of his hands, and remembered that too. He remembered shaking his head to clear it, even started to do it, but caught himself. He decided not to shake his head.

Then it was all gone. He couldn't remember what he would do next. He looked around at the kids, the guy nearby still happy about his strike, and it was all gone.

Deja vu. Ben shook his hands out, looking around to make sure things were unpredictable again. The robotic voice of a video game said something about, "Run while you can, human," and Ben didn't recognize it. Or at least, he recognized it from the hundreds of times he had heard it before, but he didn't expect it, as he had expected precisely every event for the past half minute.

Ben sighed, spewing out his worries and ending with a whistle. He picked up his ball with two fingers and the thumb of his left hand and balanced it with his right.

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## Second Frame

### Lane Four

Crystal waited for him to say something weird. A few days back he had mumbled, "Shut your eyes and you'll burst into flame," as he walked past her. But he hadn't stopped or looked at her when he said it. This time, as he paid for exactly one game, he looked directly at her and said nothing.

"Lane four," Crystal said with a nod in the direction of his lane.

Delmore nodded back, saying nothing. He stood there staring back at her, the line of his eyebrows absolutely parallel with the line of his mouth. Just as Crystal opened her mouth to say, "Well?" he turned and strode to lane four.

Crystal watched after him. She re-read the same paragraph in the middle of the July issue of *Startling Detective* five times before she could concentrate enough to really understand it and continue.

The design of Suburban Lanes forced you to be sociable. Not that Crystal ever put a moment's thought into the layout of the lanes. It was just more convenient to have the plastic benches at the end of every lane curled around to face benches from the next lane, and more cost effective if each pair of lanes shared a single scoring machine and ball-return. If you took a survey of the number of people who had married or screwed or had real deep conversations after meeting on those plastic benches, and compared that with the number of people who had married or screwed or had real deep conversations after meeting at some other, less cozy bowling alley, you'd find more people married, screwed or well-conversed among the Suburban Lanes regulars. Granted, you couldn't find a less attractive shade of yellow than the one on those lumpy benches, but tell that to Paul Ferguson and Concepcion Mendoza-Ferguson and their twin girls.

So when Gary saw that his scoring machine had lit up for the neighboring lane, and he saw Delmore setting his bag on the table back from lane four, Gary muttered, "Hail." (Which means, "Hell.")

He considered going to roust Crystal and demand another lane, but realized that wouldn't be tactful: people would think he was prejudiced against harmless weirdos. He decided to keep like nothing was out of the ordinary and mind his own business. If Delmore started acting up, then they'd go have a talk with Crystal. Or if worse came to worst, Gary would straighten him out once and for all with an attitude adjustment administered the old-fashioned way, by hand.

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Lisa reclined on the curled plastic bench framing the end of lane three. She was busy cherishing the sight of her fiancé as he stood ready to bowl, when she saw his expression sour and he said, "Hail." Following his line of sight, she found Delmore. At first, she had the exact same thought Gary had: does he have to be in the lane right next to us? The only other bowlers this early were down at the far end. Why did Crystal stick him right next to us?

But then her conscience kicked in. She smiled and put down the memories of high school when everyone discussed whether Delmore was truly retarded or just insane, or a little of both. Lisa knew he had never been in any "special" classes. She had been in a regular Science class with him in ninth grade. She knew he was harmless, and he was probably a functioning member of society.

"Hi, Delmore," she said with her usual pert smile.

Delmore looked up at her with raised eyebrows. "Hello." He went back to pulling shoes out of his bowling bag.

Gary looked at her with a definite V-shaped dip in the middle of his single, black eyebrow. He tried to forget about it again, lofted his ball and tossed it down the lane.

"Why, I haven't seen you since Graduation," Lisa said. She thought about asking what he had been doing since then, the typical question to ask when meeting old schoolmates when you're back home for the summer from the big University. But she skipped that question, because she suspected he was becoming a sort of well-kept street-person, like a few others around town.

There were no real bums or pan-handlers in Pittsfield. But there was that short guy with a beard who rode his bicycle all over town in his bright orange, reflectorized safety vest. The guy was actually the son of an upstanding family within the community, so he wasn't poor or alone. He always cruised around the main streets of town on his bike, using hand signals and turning on his headlight after dark, and he talked like he was straining to defecate. Delmore was the most likely candidate of Lisa's generation to follow in the footsteps of that bike-riding guy. So instead, she asked, "Out for a little bowling?"

Delmore pulled a gray cotton bowling glove out of his bag. He looked at Lisa with his raised eyebrows, then turned his attention back to the glove and slid it on his hand. "Yes."

Lisa wanted to break off this conversation, but her good manners wouldn't let her. They were telling her to be polite, treat him like any other old school chum. "Me too. Well, really Gary wanted to come." And now she had to introduce him.

Gary had just flubbed up but good, knocking down four with one shot and only three more with the next. He let out a long, hissing, exasperated sigh as Lisa said, "This is my fiancé, Gary."

Gary turned to Delmore and nodded. "Hey."

Delmore smiled. This really set Gary to wondering, since he had never seen Delmore's face anything but blank. He had seen

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Delmore around town, with his bristly, buzzed black hair. People used to look for scars at his temples to confirm the rumors of his lobotomy. His pronounced cheekbones didn't help make him look very cheery either. But when he smiled, Delmore looked like one of those kids out of a Norman Rockwell painting, the kind sharing a soda with some equally gangly girl, or showing a frog to a friend while a slingshot hung out of his back pocket. He looked like a very mature twelve year old.

"Hello," Delmore said to Gary. He turned back to Lisa and cleared his throat.

Eventually Lisa's smile faltered as Delmore silently continued to look at her with that smile.

Gary's single eyebrow looked like it was fighting to push his nose out of the way and lay claim to the whole face.

Finally Delmore said, "Con grat ulations."

Lisa burst forth with a laugh and a large exhale at the same time. She had been holding her breath. When her laughter had run its course, she said, "Thank you, Delmore!" The voice of fear that was still shouting at her to keep away from him was now drowned out by her grace, which was wallowing in the compliment Delmore had spoken.

Delmore nodded to her, nodded to Gary, and pulled a white ball out of his bag. It looked clean of scuffs or scratches or marks, just pure, flat white. It might have been an eight inch pearl except for the three holes in it, and the faintest hint of blue. But that barely noticeable blue sheen was just as likely a trick of the fluorescents above. Delmore walked from the table toward the line of lane four swinging the ball at his side as he went, and threw it down the lane. It followed a straight line angled just to the side of the pins, so that it balanced along the edge of the gutter almost to the corner pin before falling in.

Watching intently, Gary grunted a laugh. This Delmore guy obviously had some kind of problem if that shot was typical of his bowling. To demonstrate how it was really done, Gary twisted his brown Crusher III glove around his wrist until it felt properly in place, and grabbed "Lulu," his candy-apple red ball with the fluid core and teflon pad inside the left edge of the ring-finger hole. Setting himself in a stance that might have marked the start of a well choreographed Elvis impersonation, Gary took three pounding steps and sent Lulu into a slightly curved strike.

"Good one, honey," Lisa said.

As weird as Delmore acted, he seemed to know that the proper behavior for neighboring lanes was to not bowl when someone next to you was going to bowl, because it might break the person's concentration. Delmore waited until Gary's shot was finished before tossing his own paper-white ball down the lane. It followed a straight line to the left of the pins this time, and fell into the gutter about five feet too early to touch any pins. Delmore snapped his

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fingers, but his face showed indifference.

"So how have you been lately," Lisa asked Delmore.

Gary's reaction affected his shot just slightly, so he only took out eight pins. One of the little problems with Lisa was that she'd talk to anyone anywhere for any reason or no reason. She'd start telling cashiers at the drug store the latest current events in her life and get them worked up to tell the same. It wasn't even gossip really, just boring shit like where she'd been earlier in the day, what she'd had for breakfast. Like any of them could care less.

'Course, in this hick-town, the cashiers all talked just as friendly, and knew everybody's name and asked everybody how their daddy's cousin Roy was feeling since his surgery. Pittsfield was just too small for anyone who grew up there to understand the Real World. You'd walk down the sidewalk downtown and total strangers would wave, or say Hi or "Nice weather we're having, eh?"

Friendly is one thing, but stupid is another. Gary knew about small-town charm and all that crap from growing up in Thibodaux, Louisiana. But he had become a man in the not-too-dinky city of Charleston, South Carolina, where he had been stationed for five years in the Navy. In real cities, that small-town shit won't get you nothing but a look that tells you you're a fool, if you're lucky; if you're not so lucky, you find a knife in your gut so you can watch rot dribble out of your stomach.

In a place like Pittsfield, Delmore was about the worst person to "open up" to, the most obvious one to stay the hell away from. Gary wasn't anything like worried about the clown for right now, but if Delmore took a liking to Lisa, or started parading around out-side her house, anything like that, things would get set straight. She could go on talking to him here, as long as he stayed normal and didn't start talkin' shit.

"I've been well," Delmore answered.

Gary put too much hook on Lulu and she only took down five pins.

"Good, good, that's real good." Lisa nodded and smiled. Usually both parties in a conversation give prompts, so Lisa wasn't used to holding up an entire conversation without a little help. She tried to think of something else to say.

After throwing another straight shot down the right side of the lane and taking out the ten pin and snapping his fingers again, Delmore came through with a prompt: "And you?"

Gary could almost hear Lisa's Life-Story Switch pop to its "ON" position.

"Oh, I've been great. I just got my grades in the mail the other day, and I've maintained my four-point." Lisa remembered who she was talking to and explained, "I mean, I'm still getting all A's. And I was accepted for an internship at Gorton-Frey out in Bloomington." Again she was getting ahead of herself and tried to make it more clear for Delmore. "Gorton-Frey is a big company and I'm going to

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train to be a stress management counselor for them. What I'll do is talk to the people who work there and help them with their problems so they won't get, uh, so they'll be happier."

"I thought you wanted to be a reporter for a big city newspaper," Delmore said, "or an editor like you were for the school paper." He had stopped bowling for the moment, holding his bright ball up in front of his chest with both hands. It definitely had a dim blue tint, but you had to really look at it to be sure it was in the ball and not a reflection.

"Yes, but that was in high school," she replied as Gary got another strike. "I took a few Psychology classes my freshman year in college and I like that better. Then I saw how many years you have to go to school to become a psychoanalyst or a psychiatrist, and I got into Industrial Social Work and Counseling instead." Lisa ended with a smile and didn't bother to explain. She hadn't been able to clarify it for her parents or any of her other relatives when they asked what it meant, so the best she could hope with Delmore was that he wouldn't ask.

Delmore grinned. "Got sick of Freud, huh?"

Lisa chuckled. "Yep!" She was glad to see Delmore prove wrong all those people in high school who thought he was retarded.

Gary tried to correct his trend of putting too much hook on the ball and ended up with not enough hook. Lulu only took out six pins.

Delmore walked toward the line and tossed his ball down the alley. Straight along the right side of the pins, but this time with enough force that it kept sailing over the edge of the gutter and knicked the edge of the ten-pin. The pin wobbled once and settled back into place.

Walking back to his place by the ball-return where he had been standing to talk to her, Delmore said, "I think Adler had a better idea of the human mind. But I'm sort of torn between him and the whole Behavioral school." He began to smile, but stopped when he saw the strange look on Lisa's face. "Uhh, then again, they all have their flaws just as much as Freud."

Lisa smiled, trying to eradicate the wrinkles of confusion in her forehead. "Right, right."

With just the right amount of hook, Gary picked up the spare. He hadn't been following the conversation behind him, but noticed the fading look of surprise on Lisa's face and decided to pay more attention.

Lisa chuckled, "I, uh, I kinda liked Jung's theories."

Delmore nodded to her, looked to Gary and nodded to him, looked back to Lisa. "Oh, sure," he said, and nodded some more.

Gary's long eyebrow once again pushed for control of the center of his face.

"Yes. I can see where Jung's system has its appeal," Delmore

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said. "It's very popular among the New Age movement right now. Lots of books at the library about 'Harnessing the Warrior Within' and 'Archetypes of the Tarot' and like that. Sure." Delmore nodded at Gary some more.

"Right," Lisa said. "I didn't notice that."

"Oh, sure. Just check the New York Times bestseller list and there's bound to be a self-help book about finding archetypes within yourself or drawing mandalas, things like that." Delmore nodded. The conversation stalled with Lisa smiling and Gary's eyebrow still squirming deeper toward his nose, so Delmore picked up his pearly, blue-tinted sphere and heaved it down the alley.

Now, Gary wasn't too sure what Yoong or archetypes were, or what Martha and the Vandals had to do with anything, or why the fuck Delmore was talking about the New York Times bestseller list. Come to think of it, why would anyone bother to list the issues of a God damn newspaper that sold better than other issues? But when Delmore sent that beautiful ball along the edge of the left gutter again, to fall in just about a foot before it reached the pins, and his score was only one so far, Gary knew for sure that he couldn't watch that shit any longer.

"Luck, Dalemower," Gary began (meaning "Look, Delmore"). "I'ma give you a crash course on hotta bowl rot."

This time it was Delmore's eyebrows that went awry, trying to merge upward into his hairline.

Gary stuck his gloved hand into Lulu and picked her up. "Watch."

Lisa strained to smile, afraid that Gary would be too brusque, afraid of how Delmore might react.

Delmore watched.

"Fer one thing, y'ain't aimin rot. It's jest like win yer shootin a rifle: you gotta have two things to line up on each other. When yer lookin down the sots on a thirty-out-six, there's one sot straight in front of your face and the other one on the business enda the barrel.

"Same thing goes fer bowlin. Rot on the floor, they put dots or lines or somethin, an you just stick yer feet on 'em wherever's comftable." Gary made an outlandish display of plopping his feet on two of the dots under his feet to demonstrate. "That way, you got the same startin place ever tom.

"See here, why don't you set yer feet over there an' follow along with me?" Gary waited for Delmore to carefully set his feet on the corresponding dots before continuing. "Now you jest look between them notches in front of the line there, and line 'em up with yer front pin." Gary threw the ball, careful to not put any hook on it. It rolled down to the front pin and knocked over all but the two corner pins. Gary smiled to Delmore and flicked a hand toward the end of the lane with a flourish.

Delmore nodded and smiled. His feet still on the dots, Delmore

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paced to the line and tossed the ball down his lane. It rolled a perfectly straight line toward the gutter just in front of the leftmost pin. Delmore turned back to Gary with a big smile. "Thank you."

Gary was all done with that shit. He picked up Lulu and, contrary to an urge to give Delmore an extreme close-up look at her, sent her smashing down the lane, taking out the two remaining pins. He kept facing the pins and caught Lulu as she rolled up beside him, without looking back at Delmore.

Delmore turned to smile at Lisa. Lisa was red all over, and had a hand clamped to her mouth as though she might be sick. But after a loud snort, she fell back on the bench laughing, and continued to laugh until her breath was spent, then gasped another large dose of air so she could laugh some more.

Gary unleashed Lulu on another six pins. He thought about ways of making that sharp crashing sound with his fists against Delmore's head, or maybe his ribs.

"I should be going," Delmore told Lisa. He transferred his white ball to the bag on the table.

Lisa lay back on the plastic bench, her arms pressed in against her aching sides. She tried to say, "Goodbye," but all that came out was "Guh" before her abdomen revved to life again with more involuntary laughter.

"It's been nice talking with you," Delmore told Lisa's spasming frame as he slipped his home-made bowling glove into the bag. After changing shoes, he stood and waved at Gary. Gary kept facing the far end of the alley, though, so Delmore called, "Nice meeting you."

Crystal watched Delmore stride to the front counter with his bag. She wondered how big a knife he could fit in that bag, and why the hell he needed to talk to her when he already paid on his way in.

Delmore smiled at her with his Norman Rockwell kid smile. "I didn't play the whole game, but you can go ahead and erase the score."

Crystal watched him. "Okay." He didn't do anything weird, except for continuing to stand there in silence. And he had gotten along with the people in lane three, even sounded like he was talking with them. Maybe the girl was laughing at him. Crystal wondered if Delmore wasn't just a harmless, regular guy after all. Maybe he was just misunderstood.

Delmore ignored the blue demon jumping up and down on the counter screaming, "Kill her! Kill her! Kill! Now!"

Another foot-high demon the color of silly-putty climbed up along Crystal's side screaming, "Fuck her! Fuck her! Hot woman right here! Fuck it!"

She didn't notice.

A mote of dust hanging in the air behind her showed Delmore every episode of the *Tonight Show*, including all the future epis-

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odes that would ever be filmed with all the different hosts, all running simultaneously.

Along the inside of his right ear, Delmore felt the toad that calculated the number of hairs that he saw in peoples' heads. Gary had 227,041 hairs on his head, hundreds of thousands more over his arms and chest, at least according to the toad. Crystal's was a wig, so it couldn't tell.

Delmore picked up a return message from an intelligence that he occasionally communicated with. The entity lived inside a star that had not been discovered by human astronomers yet because its light had not yet reached the Earth. The entity had no name, but it was friendly all the same. Its message this time was that AIDS definitely wasn't sent by any of the supreme beings the entity knew; and that the moods across the Earth really didn't mind existing through humans, just took it as a fact of life since they couldn't exist otherwise; and that it could have sworn the cute baby-sitter in *The Russians Are Coming* had been the same actress who played the sister in *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*.

A chorus of little purple humanoids in floppy white caps danced across the top of the cash register beside Crystal. They kept chanting something in Mandarin Chinese about baby wax, just a little off key. The little purple girl with red hair belted out a Janis Joplin tune as she trailed behind them. A green snork flopped along the cash register in front of them, clawing at its gills and gasping through the tiny bent tube extending from the top of its head.

A scorpion the size of Delmore's hand skittered along the carpet, up his pantleg and onto his shoulder. It had a huge bead of turquoise set into its back. The brittle thing arched its tail up and whipped it forward, striking Delmore an itchy shot in the middle of his eardrum that told him the quickest way out of the building, how many people were in the area, and how far to the nearest toilet. It scrambled away down his chest and across the floor.

Projected inside the top of his right eye, Delmore could see the blackness of Crystal's lungs, and the weak blood vessel in her head that would have finished her off later if the smoking hadn't already determined her time of death.

Also in that instant, Delmore heard the screams of people in Pakistan, discussed the dynamics of Parcheesi with a woman in Newfoundland, created an interesting design for a board game that would cover all of Luxembourg if it were laid out and additionally would cure the players of most major neuroses and even many borderline disorders through its dealings with emotions and belief systems of the players. A goodly sized chunk of Delmore's brain was taken up with the problem of figuring how to make interesting poetry without rhythm or rhyme, or alternately, how to reconcile the imposition of rhythm and rhyme on poetry.

A vein that ran from his knee to his big toe was the screen for several films, including a few dozen porno movies (but only the

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good parts where plots were played out or characters developed) and all the cartoons that would be released in the next ten years (but only the sex scenes).

Excerpts of the Bible scrolled along one of the eyelashes on his left eye. A few minutes before, it had displayed the side panels of cereal boxes. Next would be some comics, a few mysteries, and several unpublished manuscripts buried in drawers that no one else would ever read.

Delmore's attention span was pretty large, but even he couldn't take it all in without something slipping now and then. "The essence of wisdom is the fear of the Lord," he told Crystal, reading what it said on his eyelash.

She shook her head.

Delmore strode off toward the door. A teenage girl and her younger brother paused from their game at lane sixteen to watch Delmore pass by.

"Kill them!" the blue demon shouted, running at the pair. "Like this, kill them!" It pantomimed what Delmore should do to them with a big knife, an axe, a Garden Weasel, a lawn jockey, a log of cheese.

"Fuck them!" The silly-putty demon was right up with the blue one, vying for Delmore's attention, pulling at the little boy's shoes, jumping at the sister and trying to push her forward. The demon wept, whining, "Fuck all now right now!"

Delmore sighed and said, "Expect snow," as he pushed through the doors to the awaiting darkness.

The line of purple runts trotted after him singing about night winds against rustling leaves, pine needles, a field of grass and a freshly used condom by the side of the road. The little red-headed girl runt growled a song about crossroads with the voice of Koko Taylor as she kicked the choking snork out of the bowling alley.

None of what Delmore saw or heard or felt was hallucination or illusion. All of it was real.

He was mistaken, however, about the toad inside his head near his ear, the one who counted hair on peoples' heads. It was actually a frog, not a toad.

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## Second Frame

### Lane Five

"So I'm, like, the lead vocalist," Yeager said, nodding. "We just need a guitarist and a drummer and we're all set."

CJ slipped his ax across the ogre's stomach, then smashed his elbow into the back of its head twice, and kneed it in the face. The ogre fell back with a short cry, and flashed into gray stone, indicating it was dead. CJ had accomplished all this by pressing the Attack button a few times. He loved how the game improvised like that. But he was trying to sound like he was paying attention to whatever Yeager was talking about, so he repeated part of a phrase Yeager had said a few minutes before: "Right, but other than that, you're solid." The other ogre butted its head into the gut of CJ's warrior.

"Oh yeah, me and Henry are cruisin. We got some songs, I mean, like, we're starting a repertoire or whatever. He's figuring out some of the music for songs I know the words to. But it's goin okay. I mean, he could stand to do a little better. Like, he's just startin on bass, but he's getting better." Yeager slouched back against the side of the video game. He sat on the high vinyl-covered stool intended for people playing video games. "I don't think he knows any chords, but—Do they use chords for bass? Whatever, anyhow, we're cruisin."

CJ died. The number 20 flashed in huge, blinking red across the screen. He slipped another quarter in and pushed the one-player start button before it counted down to 18. A fresh warrior with full strength fell into the picture and began hacking away at the orcs surrounding him. Tapping the Attack button furiously, CJ asked, "Aren't you gonna play? You usually kick my ass at this."

"Huh? Nah, I can't look at that shit right now. I'll be seein those little fuckin trolls running around me the rest of the day if I play it now."

"So anyhow, I already got a bunch of equipment, couple effects pedals and shit. If we can get a guitar player, we can probably get a gig at the Doombox. Cause Henry knows the sister of one of the guys that owns the place." Yeager reached down below his feet to grab a can off the floor and guzzle another dose of Classic Cafeine.

CJ's warrior took a flying jump at the level boss, a giant sumo wrestler with a mustache. CJ used a hit-and-run method, jumping on the sumo to attack, then retreating, over and over. Eventually it

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fell and turned to stone. The warrior with the long, blond hair, bare chest and tattered, fur loin-cloth raised his ax in victory. CJ leaned back for a moment while the screen showed his total score and bonus for this level. It started to show more transition scenes of the story, but he tapped the button a couple times to skip them. "Will they really let you play and advertise with a band name like 'Uncle Fuck'?"

"Oh yeah, they'll do it. They had Smegma Chunk there a couple months ago, and the Pretty Tampons just last Friday or whenever. They'll book weird names. They'll take anybody." Yeager tipped the can upside down over his mouth and rattled it to get the last few drops. "I mean, anybody that sounds good. And they don't do the advertising, the band has to. I mean, the band has to pay for however much, like flyers or shit, y'know? But we probably won't do that. We'll just play, like on a busy night, and then we'll just rely on word of mouth."

"Cool," CJ said as another orc screamed and turned to stone.

Yeager dug through the pockets of his black overcoat draped over the stool and under his butt. He fumbled in the inside pocket and pulled out an orange pill bottle. He twisted off the childproof cap and poked a finger in the bottle. When he caught a blue capsule, he flipped it in his mouth. Replacing the cap and reaching the bottle back to his pocket, he noticed CJ watching him. "Oh," he mumbled around the capsule, "Uhh, you want one?" He held the bottle towards CJ.

"Uhhhhb," CJ was already shaking his head and looking back at the screen, where a big bruiser with a spiked club had swatted his barbarian. "What are they?"

Yeager frowned a little more than normal, pulled the bottle to his face and squinted at it. He twisted the cap off again with a little effort and looked inside. "I don't know. Blues and Valium, I guess. Must not be anything heavier, or else I'd be bouncin around here like a fuckin beach ball."

"I'll pass," CJ said. He died for the first time on this quarter, and his second fresh life fell from the sky into the screen.

"Ooo, damn, missed that one," Yeager said, still looking in the bottle. He pulled out another pill. This one was little, yellow, different. It had a big N on it. Yeager set it on his tongue. "Hmmm. God damn candy coating on these things like M&Ms."

CJ's blond barbarian took a beating from the club-wielding brute. He tried to jump away and jump back on the brute, but it swung its club while he was in mid-air coming down with a kick. The impact flung CJ's warrior back across the screen. He held his wounded side as he stood, then resumed his attack.

"Shit," Yeager said with a slap to his thigh, "I forgot to tell you what happened behind the gym today."

CJ continued to kill orcs and goblins. "What."

"Oh, this was great. I was waiting for class to let out, cause I

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wanted to talk to Tony? So I'm sittin outside that wall behind the gym. Grundy came by for awhile around fifth period, but he had a English test he couldn't miss last hour.

"So I'm sittin there waitin for the last bell, and this girl comes up. Fuck, what's her name? Stephi Maslo. Anyway, it's this girl that was in my grade when we were in middle school, but she moved away for a couple years and might of got held back during that time.

"So she comes up and sits down next to me. And I'm not at all interested, ya know, but she's tryin to be all cool like Rita Hayworth or something. So I'm not sayin anything, and she does this act where she flicks a cigarette out of a pack and lights it and takes a few puffs. Then outta the blue, she says, 'Do you have any *stuff* I can buy?' Big emphasis on *stuff*.

"And I'm like, 'What kind of stuff?' And I'm laughing, you know, and she's all, 'You know, *stuff*.' And I'm like, 'No, I don't know. What kind of stuff?' And she goes, 'You know,' and she looks around, like in case we're being watched, and then she turns back and says like it was the first time she ever said it out loud, she goes, 'Acid.'"

CJ chuckled and axed another goblin. Two more came to replace their dead brother.

"So I'm like, 'Duhhh, what, sulphuric acid for Chemistry?' And she goes, 'No, I mean some *stuff*.'

"Then she starts tellin me about how she knows all about me and how I'm The Guy With The Stuff, that Holly Cantrell told her all about me."

The name floated on the edge of recognition for CJ. Too many goblins swarmed him, beating the shit out of him, so he pressed the "Magic" button. His blond barbarian threw one arm high in the air, launching a bottle of potion he had collected earlier in the game. The potion flew into the video sky above the characters and burst into lightning, which shot into each of the bad guys. While they were all hunched over and stunned, CJ's warrior jumped from their midst and started slashing them from behind. "Holly Cantrell," he muttered. "Is she the one that drowned last winter when they drove that Camaro on the ice and it broke through?"

"No, you dumb-ass!" Yeager looked at CJ and grunted, "Who was I fucking every other waking minute for about three months last year?"

"Oh yeah!!" CJ yelled over the screams of more dying goblins. "Holly."

"Yeah, so anyways, this girl says Holly told her all about me, and she wants to know if I got any extra acid.

"But before I can say anything, she starts telling me it's okay, she can handle it because she's experienced. She tells me she does *Glade* almost every day."

CJ turned away from the game to laugh at Yeager. "Glade?!"

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"Yeah, she says she does Glade air freshener. I didn't know what the fuck she was talkin about either. But I got her to explain. It's like sniffing glue, only you use spray cans. Air freshener, Lysol, spray paint, hair spray. You just spray it on a towel, or through a towel or something, and then you sit back and sniff the towel for however long. She said it gives you a rush like when you hyper-ventilate. Said she saw it on *20/20*.

"So because of that, she's all set to try acid, she can handle it and won't have any bad trips, but she wants me to get her some. So I'm like, 'I'm not some kinda dealer or nothing. I just buy a little more than what I need and sell it to my friends.'

"This is where it gets cute. She goes, 'Then how can I get to be your friend?' and she smiles real big.

"So I go, 'Well, for starters, you can suck my dick.'"

CJ laughed while a goblin killed him again. He fished in his pocket for another quarter.

"It gets better," Yeager chuckled. "She says, 'Right here?' And I can't keep a straight face, so I'm about rollin around on the ground laughin.

"Next thing I know, she's crawlin over to me and tryin to unzip my pants. And I'm all, 'Back off, I don't want your fuckin skanky face on me.' So she's all confused and she's whining, 'It's no problem.'

"That's what was so funny, she's like apologizing at me and I'm like, 'Just back off. Bring some money tomorrow and I'll hook you up.'"

CJ let the countdown run out on the game, moving around to the game on the other side of Yeager. This was some kind of jet helicopter that shot tanks and people on the ground as it scrolled along over them. CJ slipped in the quarter and punched start. His chopper cruised at high speed for an exciting intro, then slowed to the normal speed of the game, already shooting as CJ rattled the fire button.

"It was just so fuckin weird," Yeager chuckled. "Like I wanna blow-job right out in the open behind the school!"

"You boys aren't the ones carving names into the machines, are you?" Crystal asked, standing with her arms crossed in front of Yeager.

"No, ma'am," Yeager answered.

"I hope not." Crystal kept her frown trained on him.

"Not us, ma'am. We're just your garden-variety, fun-loving hoodlums out to please ourselves. What you're looking for is the arty, quiet type hoodlum who has something to say." He smiled, slouching on the stool to match her height and crossed his arms to match her body language.

"Feh!" Crystal walked off to the vending machines.

CJ's chopper careened into the middle of a dozen shots of enemy fire. He smeared across the screen in an orange arc of

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flame. His next chopper appeared, blinking to show that it was invulnerable for a few seconds.

"Anyhow, me and Henry were talkin the other day, and we finally settled what we're gonna do. He's all hyped on this funk sound, something about slapping the strings or whatever. He saw Primus on MTV or something and he wants to be just like them. But I told him I want to do shit like Obituary and Deicide and the Left-Hand Path.

"So we agreed. We're gonna invent our own new form of music: death funk."

CJ yelled, "Fuck," as his helicopter exploded again.

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## Second Frame

### Lane One

Looking out the side window at the static of blurred green roadside only made Tim more sick. He decided firmly on the view out the windshield, which was an up-close look at the yellow Volvo ahead. From this distance, he could see the blemishes and pimples on the neck of the lady driving the Volvo.

"This is stupid," Perry shouted over the wind noise from his open window. He had one hand draped over the wheel, guiding the direction of the car by the skin of his wrist, the other hand on the bony chrome lever sticking up between the seats. "Fuckin' wild goose chase."

Tim figured that talking would get his mind off the uncomfortably high speed that Perry applied to pass the Volvo. "It's better than showing up someplace where nobody knows us," he enunciated.

"Shit, I do that all the time. This is just dumb, trucking way the hell out to her house just so she can show us where it's at in town. We prob'ly both coulda walked straight to the place from our houses." The steel dashboard shook with a metallic click. Perry grabbed a snuffed-out half of a brown cigarette out of the ashtray. Using the same hand to pluck the glowing cigarette lighter out of its hole, he twiddled his fingers dexterously to re-light the ashy end of the stub, then flipped the lighter back into its socket. "What's her name again?"

"Jess. The one with the black hair is Jess. The redhead is April." Flowers and spring-time lilted through Tim's head. April. The rich smell of a freshly plowed garden, the feel of damp grass under bare feet. He wondered if April's skin would look like snow if she were to lie in a patch of that bright green grass still wet with dew. Because sometimes Tim's fantasies were that cheesy.

The dust from the dirt road flashing below them added to Tim's wandering thoughts. But Perry rolled his window up, cutting off the dust and bottling up his smoke inside the Jeep.

"So," Perry said, doing an unintended imitation of Bogart as he spoke around his cigar, "been to any Shtar Trek conventions lately?"

The remnants of Tim's pleasant thoughts lilted away. "No. I quit going to those things in high school." He folded his arms and slouched in the vinyl seat.

"Oh." Perry mercifully snuffed out the inch-long stub in the

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ashtray. "Not even once?"

"Nope."

"But you watch the new ones don't you? *Next Generation* and *Deep Space Nine*?"

"Ahh, once in a while. Not fanatically."

Perry slowed, possibly for the first time since Tim had gotten in the car. He took the corner of Hoek Road at only 35 or 40, so the Jeep merely fishtailed into the shoulder of the wrong lane, instead of flying onto its side and beginning a fabulous series of tumbles. "But you watch *Deep Space Nine*, right?"

"Yeah."

"Is it just me, or is that second-in-command chick stacked? I mean, not 'stacked' really, but she's got that jacket she wears about filled to bursting. You know the one I'm talking about? The Bajoran with the wrinkled nose and short, brown hair?" Perry glanced sideways at Tim for his reaction.

Eventually Tim nodded. "Uh, yeah, I know which one you mean."

"Well? Am I right?"

"Huh? Oh, right. Yeah, she's not half bad."

"Start watching for the address. Thirteen-oh-seven-one." Perry scanned his side of the road. "Looks like we're at twelve-nine hundred, so it can't be too far. Yeah, that's the nice thing about these new versions of *Trek*: they never use flat women. They got those unisex jumpsuits and they don't want you to confuse who's male and who's female. Any woman on the show that's s'posed to be older than a teenager has it to spare."

Tim glimpsed a mailbox labeled 12975 as they flew past it. "I never noticed that."

"Oh yeah. You watch next time, see if you can spot one with less than a couple good handfuls. Here we go, thirteen-oh-fifty, can't be too far." Perry slowed again, enough that he was able to stop before the right driveway without skidding past it on the loose gravel.

He turned the Jeep up the drive towards a two-story white Colonial in the middle of the countryside. The driveway looped around the left side to a garage opened off that end. A dark blue Mercedes and a gray minivan rested in the garage. Just outside the open garage door was an olive green VW Bug and a snazzy, little red pick-up. Peeking out from half-way behind the garage was an unidentifiable hatchback, white with tan paint on the rust spots, or maybe tan with white painted rust spots?

"Hell, maybe the party's here." Perry checked his watch. "She said quarter to eight, right? We're not early. You wanna go knock?"

"Uh, sure." Tim fished for the button to release his seat-belt, then looked for a lever or something on the unfamiliar door to open it.

A path of concrete circles set in the grass led Tim to the front

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steps. He lifted the slim brass knocker on the front door and knocked.

The tall, white door swung into the house to reveal April. "Jess isn't quite ready yet. Come on in." Tim looked back toward Perry and showed him an index finger: one moment. Then he stepped in after April and closed the door.

The living room inside the front door was as big and luxurious as the outside looked. Long, plush couches to avoid spilling things on. A vast leather chair for Dad, with a lever and a few buttons on the side. And a big TV which Tim didn't have time to survey as Jess stepped into the room. "All set. Hi, uh, I can't remember your name-"

"Tim."

"I'm sorry, Tim," she said, accurately shoving the hook of a dangly earring through a hole high along the edge of her earlobe. She strode to the door. "Are we taking the truck or your Bug?"

Tim followed her out the door and April closed it behind her.

"Why don't I drive so you can check your make-up without causing any accidents?" The ladies headed to the Bug. "Can we get around your Jeep though?" April asked him.

"Uh, yeah, I think so." Tim opened his door of the Jeep and started to get in.

"Just follow us," Jess hollered as she opened the passenger door of the Bug. "And if the parking lot's full when we get there, pull in behind us anyway. We'll point out someplace else nearby."

Perry said, "Parking lot?" while Jess got in the car and April waved and ducked out of Tim's view. Tim waved back to her as she backed the roaring car around the Jeep and down the driveway. "What the hell is this, some kind of party company, they have a parking lot?"

"I don't know," Tim laughed, settling into his seat.

Perry was careful not to spin the tires and kick up gravel until he was back on the dirt road. Surprisingly, he left a reasonable distance between his Jeep and the Bug ahead.

They followed the Bug back down the dirt roads, alongside the highway, and into downtown Pittsfield. Traffic was already getting lighter, with half the businesses already closed and the street lights beginning to flicker purple as the sun dipped below the horizon.

Perry's Jeep cruised after the Bug, between the library and the post office, around the corner. The Bug pulled on to a narrow strip of asphalt that ran between the funeral home and the dull green two-story that housed a used bookstore.

"What is this shit? We goin to the funeral parlor?" But he followed the Bug into the parking lot tucked behind the bookstore. There were still a few spaces left, and Perry pulled in beside the Bug. Jess and April walked towards the bookstore.

Tim slipped out and tried to hurry along to catch up with the

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girls. But Perry hung back, muttering, "Great, the bookstore. A fuckin poetry reading or something?" Tim drew a line across his throat for Perry to see.

By then, it was obvious where the party was. They felt the rhythm through the asphalt. The second floor of the green house was lit up. A flight of weathered stairs ran up the back side of the house to a small deck with a little barbecue grill. Smoke and light and jams drifted out the screen door onto the elevated deck. Blue curtains framed the window overlooking the the deck. Over a burst of laughter, they heard the chant:

*I like.*

*Big.*

*Butts and I cannot lie!*

*No otha brotha can deny! . . .*

"Hey, Brenda!" Jess screamed through the doorway, as she pulled open the screen door and stepped in.

April took a tentative step through the door. Perry shoved Tim toward the door and came in after him.

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## Third Frame

### Lane Six

A swarm of little boys in blue uniforms squatted in front of the counter. They faced out toward the lanes as they tied their tiny bowling shoes. They chattered happily, not yet at their maximum volume.

A little girl with glasses and blonde pig-tails, slightly taller than most of the boys, ran around the group and plopped on the floor. She pulled her Keds loose and began tying on a little pair of old yellowed bowling shoes. "Mama, can we try without the bumpers first?"

The scouts usually disagreed with anything Tina said, just on principle because she was a girl. But this time, the gender conflict was overshadowed by her wonderful suggestion. "Yeah!" most of them said.

"Can we, Mrs. Kennedy?" Donny pleaded.

Ricky said, "Yeah, Ma, can we?"

Helen leaned on the counter and sighed. "I suppose. Crystal?"

The slightly bent woman behind the counter shrugged her bony shoulders. With the voice of ten thousand Kents, Crystal said, "No skin off my nose."

"They'll prob'ly want it later," Helen said.

Maureen returned from the vending machines with a Diet Coke. "What's all the hubbub? We get to watch gutter balls?"

"Nooooo," a chorus of boys scolded.

"You already paid?" Maureen asked.

"Uh, yeah," Helen replied, distracted by a scout tapping her thigh to get her attention. "What, Kyle?"

"Which lane are we at?" Kyle asked. The other scouts were already picking out bowling balls from the big rack that stretched along the wall near the entrance.

"Uhhh—" Helen turned to Crystal.

"Five and six," Crystal replied. "Right in the middle so I can keep an eye on all you wonderful little bundles of energy."

"FIVE AN' SIX!" Kyle screamed to the others, and ran over to pick a ball.

Nick had already grabbed the red, white and blue ball, and walked toward the lanes holding it with one hand by the finger-holes.

"Don't drop it," Crystal warned him.

"I got it," he muttered back angrily. He set it on the ball-return

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by lane six with no problem.

It was Alan, the littlest one, who jogged toward the lane holding a black ball in both arms and dropped it.

Crystal sighed and picked up the paperback romance beside the cash register.

The rest of the scouts made their way to the lanes without dropping any more balls.

"So how's Big Scott?" Maureen asked as she made her way to the table behind lane six.

Helen wasn't thrilled with Maureen's tone. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Oh, nothing, not a thing." Maureen's grin grew. She pulled out one of the chairs and fell on it while Helen did the same. "Just that I saw him getting in the Taurus with the clubs and the spike shoes and the button-up sweater Sunday. He looked like a Golfin' Stud!"

Helen noticed more important matters in the other lane. Tommy bent over to roll his ball down the lane and Glen was dancing around behind him, trying to mess up the shot. Helen used The Mother Voice and it only took one word: "GLEN."

Glen's head whipped around and he crouched instinctively. He looked at Helen, then stared at the floor and walked back away from Tommy.

"I got a package from Roy yesterday." Maureen punctuated her words with a pop and hiss as she opened the can.

"Oh, no," Helen grunted.

"Oh, yes. He sent a new batch of pictures. You really should see them. There might even be a couple tame ones you'd like." Maureen whispered, "He sent this amazing wooden dildo. He said he used it on himself, so our spiritual energy would mix when I used it."

"Jesus Christ, Maureen," Helen propped her elbow on the table and cradled her forehead in her hand.

"I couldn't figure why he sent me copies of *Bawd*, because he knows I've got a subscription to it. But then I opened up this copy and there were all these curly black hairs in between the pages."

"God, Maureen, would you—"

Maureen giggled, still whispering. "He shaved himself. And I don't mean his beard."

"MAUREEN." But she knew that mothers are immune to the effects of The Mother Voice from anyone else.

"He wants me to eat them," Maureen hissed. "That's what he said in his letter. Of course, I gotta be the dominant one and tell him I won't."

"I don't want to hear it," Helen said.

A couple of the scouts were looking now. Maureen just smiled.

Helen shook her head and watched the kids again. "And this guy has your address. Smart move."

"Oh, he's harmless," Maureen said before taking a swig of

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Coke. "Roy's putty in my hands. His ad said he was looking for someone to dominate him, and so far he's done every humiliating act I've commanded him to do. The pictures of that shit would give you nightmares, I'm sure." She watched her son Bret pick up a ball and, using both hands, try not to roll it into a gutter. "Besides, he lives in Alaska."

Helen kept shaking her head.

Maureen had a vast stash of porno mags and toys in her attic at home. After John had found them and left her, Maureen answered some personals ads in the magazines, and placed a few ads of her own. Her circle of pornographic pen-pals changed constantly, but she had been corresponding with Roy through letters, photos, and sometimes video-tape, longer than any of the rest.

"This is ridiculous," Helen said, standing. Out of all ten kids, only three of them had knocked down pins so far. "I'm going to get Crystal to put in the bumpers."

"Noooo!" said Donny, the only one who had heard her.

Glen asked Donny, "What?" The others listened.

"She's going to get the bumpers."

"Nooooo!!" the scouts all yelled.

"Now, hush!" Maureen said in her version of The Mother Voice. "That's enough. You'll get better scores."

Kyle sighed and muttered, "Bumper ball."

"That's called cheating," William said.

Crystal walked down the aisle between lanes ten and eleven, followed by Helen. From the little doorway between lanes, she produced the end of a wide, black tube of hard plastic, eight inches in diameter. Helen took the end and walked back to the head of the lane, then across to lane five. With Crystal on the other end, the two of them pulled and tugged on the long tube until it covered the entire length of one of the gutters in lane five.

"Aw, man," Nick said.

"This is called cheating," William called down to them as they pulled out another tube.

They repeated the process until the gutters of lanes five and six were blocked off by black tubing. Now the kids would automatically hit at least a few pins, as long as they pushed the ball hard enough for it to reach the end of the alley.

"My turn!" Alan yelled, hefting a ball off the rack.

"No, it's not!"

"That's my ball!"

And things were back to normal.

As Helen returned to her chair, she realized the scouts were no longer the only ones bowling. At the other end of the row of lanes, down in lane nineteen or twenty, was a single man, Kirby Johnson. If it had been anyone else, she wouldn't have been able to tell so quickly. But Kirby was a distinctive man. He was older, maybe in his sixties, with soft-looking, fuzzy white curls around most of his

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head and above his lips. He was a beloved figure of the community, and you could often spot him strolling along the sidewalks downtown or collecting bottles along the roadside further out. There were other old men in town that fit all those characteristics, but none of them were African-American.

Helen watched the man set his bowling bag on a table, unzip it, and remove a flat black ball that reflected nothing. Kirby set the ball on the rack beside his lane and pulled a piece of leather out of the bag. He slid his left hand into the leather glove. Folding his brown fingers together, he pressed his arms outward and cracked his knuckles. Helen could hear them snap from half-way across the building. Kirby rolled his right shoulder in little circles, then rolled his left. He bent and touched his toes, sending another snap through the building.

Helen looked away for a moment and began to feel around her pants pocket for enough change to get a coffee. She glanced at Kirby again. He had his right arm stretched over his head while the other held it in place. His right hand hung sideways toward her, with the palm out. Helen caught the slightest glimpse of the lighter beige color of his palm, before he switched arms.

It wasn't anything she hadn't already known. She had seen enough TV shows to have noticed that Black people have palms that are almost "white." But this time she wondered: do they have that light color on the soles of their feet too?

Taking her hand back out of her pocket, she stared at Kirby. Did they have lighter peach color under their toe-nails, like they did on their fingernails? Did they have other light parts? For all she knew, they might only have dark arms and faces, and the rest of their bodies tinted lighter. No, no, she remembered seeing MC Hammer jumping around in his baggy pants with his shirt off. He had a matching brown chest. And she had seen Black people on TV in beach scenes, men wearing only shorts.

But she had never seen the bottom of a Black person's foot. She had talked to Kirby a few times, as everyone in town had at one time or another. But the man was a total mystery. More than that, she realized that this whole group of people were a mystery to her, millions or billions across the world that she knew so little about, she didn't even know what their feet looked like.

As she continued to study Kirby, she saw him pull out a chair and sit down. He bent over for a moment out of her line of sight, then straightened up, and bent over again. He was changing his shoes.

Unfortunately, there were too many tables between them, so Helen couldn't get a clear view. It wouldn't matter, she thought, because he wouldn't take off his socks anyway.

She kept watching him though. He pulled a pair of bowling shoes out of his bag, set them on the ground, and removed a pair of bright, yellow socks from inside the shoes.

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"What the hell are you looking at?" Maureen asked. Helen had craned her head out and leaned off her chair, only one cheek in contact with the seat. Maureen turned to look at the dozen empty lanes separating them from Kirby.

Helen stood and walked toward the entrance just past Kirby. As she approached him, he pulled off one sock and set it out of her sight. Helen saw him slip off the other sock and set it on the pair of street shoes beside him.

She couldn't just stop there and stare at him, though, so she continued toward the double doors. The urge to turn around and watch him as she left the building almost overcame her, but she kept walking. Helen even considered going right up to him and explaining. No, he'd think she was some kind of ignorant, racist buffoon.

She pushed open one of the glass doors and stepped around the corner, so she would be out of view from the inside. She waited there, pressed against the wall, holding her breath. After a few seconds, long enough to seem as though she had gotten something out of her van, she stepped back up to the door and walked in.

Kirby had one of the fresh socks on his left foot, the other foot was bare on the carpet. His leg and the top of his foot were dark brown. Helen was at the wrong angle to see his toe-nails.

As he started lifting his bare foot, her view was filled with Maureen. "What's wrong?" the part-time dominatrix asked.

Helen moved her head to the side to peer around Maureen. But now Kirby was looking back at them.

Helen popped her head back to a normal conversational position. "Uhh, I was afraid I left my keys in the van." She patted her pocket and smiled with vigor. "They were right here all along!"

Helen grabbed Maureen's arm and pulled her back to their table behind the scouts. Maureen kept looking behind herself. When she was pushed into a chair, she was finally able to say, "Kirby?"

"Shhhh!" Helen watched the old, brown man as he stood and began to bowl. "Don't say another word."

But she didn't have to say another word. Maureen communicated perfectly just by looking at him, looking at Helen, laughing, looking back at him.

Helen shook her head, exasperated. "You wouldn't understand."

"No, no, that's okay," Maureen said with her knowing smile. "I understand perfectly how these things work. It never makes any sense. Just comes out of your gut, or near there. No, I know exactly what's going on." She turned back again to watch the white-haired Black man. "I mean, I don't see what you see, but hey, whatever floats your boat."

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

"Well, I might not know this specific situation, but I get the

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overall picture. And I have absolutely nothing against it. Each to her own."

Helen let it go.

Maureen wouldn't. She was still turned toward him, talking to Helen out of the corner of her mouth. "I mean, I could almost go for a piece o' that." She tipped her Diet Coke to her mouth, found it empty, set it back down with a hollow click. "No, not quite. Reminds me too much of my grandfather."

"So how's John?!" Helen changed the subject loudly.

"Oh, you're embarrassed," Maureen cooed. "That's okay, hon. I'll leave you alone about it."

"John's a prick, as always." Maureen launched into her favorite pastime, running down her ex. With a few well-placed nods and affirmative grunts, Helen could keep her talking while devoting most of her attention to the Black man across the building.

As Maureen jabbered about her tribulations with trying to get child support, Helen plotted. When he stopped bowling, he would change his shoes, and maybe change his socks again. She would walk over to the big, three-tiered rack of bowling balls that stretched behind him toward the entrance. That would give her a good enough excuse that she wouldn't feel conspicuous.

Meanwhile, she studied him and imagined the bottoms of his feet. If they were pale like his palms, it would make sense. Yes, she decided that would be her theory. That was what she would expect unless she saw otherwise.

But what if they were brown like the rest of him? What if they were even darker? If Black people had such obvious traits she didn't know about, what less obvious things had she missed about them? What other people that she thought she knew were totally foreign to her on such a fundamental level? She glanced at Crystal leaning over the counter with a paperback held out at arm's length. Could Crystal's orange beehive hairdo conceal thick, blue antennae like those visiting dignitaries on Star Trek? For a moment, Helen was overcome by a wave of Twilight Zone paranoia, not a fear of being harmed, but a fear of the Unknown.

"Yoo-hoo!" Maureen called, snapping her fingers in front of Helen.

"Uh, what?"

"Don't you think it's about time to go?"

"I don't know. What time is it?" Helen looked around for a clock. There weren't any on the walls, but there were other signals that it was time to go. At the table in front of lane eight, William was asleep and slobbering on the sleeve of his blue shirt. Tina and Alan sat Indian-style on the carpet away from the lanes playing Cat's Cradle with a string. Only Nick continued sending his ball down the alley, the rest standing around talking, a few spinning the heavy balls on the floor.

"Okay, I guess . . ." Helen looked around for anything else that

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could delay them. She had to see his feet. "Hey, guys, wanna play some video games?" As if she had to ask.

It was unanimous. "Yeahhh!!"

"Uh, here, Tina," Helen beckoned as she unzipped her purse and retrieved a five dollar bill from her wallet. "Give this to Crystal and ask for quarters."

"Okay, Mama!" and she was off.

When Tina and the troop were busy zapping robots and drop-kicking ogres, Helen grabbed a bowling ball in each hand and began carrying them back to their racks by the door, behind Kirby.

"Lordy, Helen, you must have it bad." Maureen followed with two more balls.

"Just shut up," Helen muttered, dropping the balls in their place, "and we'll talk about it later." She checked the computer screen displaying the score above Kirby's lane. He was in his ninth frame. Two more throws and he might get ready to leave, and he'd definitely change shoes, might pull off those socks . . .

In Helen's mind, the bottoms of his feet had become like Schrödinger's cat: they would exist in multiple realities that could not become stable or fixed until she saw them. When she imagined them, pale or dark soles, both possibilities seemed absurd, more ridiculous every time she considered each option because they were only imagined. She became more and more frustrated as she visualized them, afraid to decide that one possibility was more likely because of how it might confirm her ignorance if she was wrong.

On their third and last trip to the rack of bowling balls, they lingered behind Kirby. Helen was too enthralled by the coming revelation to bother shooing away Maureen.

Kirby threw his last shot. He hit one of the three remaining pins. His final score was 113. He unbuckled the straps of his bowling glove as his glossless black ball returned. Kirby threw the wad of leather and buckles into his bag and set the ball in after it. He saw the two women standing a few yards behind him.

"Afternoon," he said.

Helen quickly turned to Maureen and began to sweat. Maureen returned Kirby's smile and waved.

He turned back toward the lane and fell into the chair that he had left pulled out from the table. With a small groan, he lifted one foot and laid it across his knee.

Helen stared unabashedly.

Kirby pulled loose the snappy bow of his shoe-laces and removed the shoe with all the speed he could muster, which was not much. He reached behind himself with the empty shoe in hand and dropped it into the top of the bag.

Helen edged a step closer.

Maureen covered her mouth to keep from laughing out loud. She didn't really think it was lust that drove Helen. But whatever it was was too strong to have anything to do with logic.

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Kirby removed his other shoe and dropped it in his bag. Beside his chair lay his street shoes and his other pair of socks. Kirby grabbed the empty socks, set them across his thigh, pulled his left foot over his right knee. Helen edged toward the door for a better view. Kirby placed his index finger and thumb on the loose material between his big toe and the next biggest toe. Helen held her breath as he pulled the end of the sock, and the length of it slipped off his foot.

William and Glenn and Donny and Kyle swarmed between Helen and the old Black man. "Mrs. Kennedy! Mrs. Kennedy! Can we have some more quarters?!"

Ricky ran up among them. "Mama! We ran out. Can we have some more?"

By then, most of the troop crowded around Helen, shouting for her.

Kirby looked back with a big smile. In answer to Helen's continued stare, he said, "Cute kids." He pulled the other sock the rest of the way up his foot.

"How could you spend all that so quickly?" Helen scolded them.

"I was going to say something to you about that," Maureen began. "Five bucks is only twenty quarters. You got ten kids here, that's two quarters per kid."

Helen glanced over at Kirby, who hadn't yet removed the other sock he had bowled in. (Why did he change socks, anyway?) He slipped a comb out of his pocket and ran it through the cottony curls around most of his head. Helen turned back to the kids. "Ricky, go get a ten out of my purse and take it up to get change from the lady at the counter."

Ricky asked, "Where's your purse?"

Kirby put the comb back in his pocket.

"Back at our lane, on the table back there," Helen mumbled, shooing Ricky away. The troop ran off behind him.

Kirby tugged at his remaining bowling sock, but it wasn't coming. The end of it stretched out in his fingertips, the rest remaining snug around his ankle. For a giddy moment, Helen wondered if it was glued on, if it had somehow welded to his ankle just to spite her. Kirby stopped pulling on it for a moment and lifted the cuff of his pants to reveal a garter still snapped to the sock. With a few quick flicks, he released the sock from the garter.

Helen edged closer, not caring that she was only three feet from him now, all thoughts of remaining inconspicuous forgotten.

Kirby slid the sock off his foot and stretched his leg straight out, curling his toes. It was the wrong angle still, Helen couldn't see. Kirby waved his leg in little circles to work out a cramp along his hip. Helen leaned forward, almost breathing down his neck.

Ricky stepped out in front of the old Black man, holding Helen's purse. "Mama?" He knew better than to interrupt when two adults were talking to each other, but he thought he had walked up dur-

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ing a pause in a conversation between his mother and the old guy.

Kirby set his foot on the floor and turned back to see Helen bent toward him as though trying to read over his shoulder.

"Uhhhh . . ." Helen straightened.

The whole troop stood in front of Kirby now, having run up the open aisle between tables and lanes. "The lady said she doesn't have enough quarters to do this much," Ricky explained. "So can we just use the ones in your purse instead?"

Helen kept looking at Kirby's jovial but concerned smile. "Uhh, sure."

The troop ran back toward the video games, leaving the adults to look at each other.

"Is something wrong, ma'am?" Kirby asked.

"Uhhhhhh . . ." Helen thought of telling him she had dropped a nickel and was just bending to pick it up, or that she had a kink in her back that she was trying to straighten out, or that she thought he was wearing a rare antique pair of socks knit by Shakers that could be worth thousands as a collector's item. She drew in a breath, let it out, and said, "You'll probably think I'm crazy, but . . . would you mind showing me the bottom of your foot?"

Still resting somewhere between amused curiosity and serious concern about what this lady wanted, Kirby's expression slipped over to the amused side. He broke into a wider smile as he lifted his foot for her to see.

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## Third Frame

### Lane One

The clock read 11:04. It stayed that way for about a minute. Then it switched to 11:05. Tim watched from the couch in the back corner of the room. Eventually it showed 11:06.

The musical selections had long since left Sir Mix-A-Lot behind, and gone the way of Queensrÿche and Metallica for a good couple hours. For a short while there was a grinding and screeching track by Pigface, but the heavy metal constituency regained control over the stereo, and it had relapsed to Slayer, then regressed back in time through Judas Priest and finally Led Zeppelin. Just then, at precisely—hold on, wait for it—11:07, the sound of the moment was a plodding, sort of lazy rhythm, and Robert Plant was crooning about a levy breaking.

Tim had wandered around the party for the first few hours, finally settling into a fixed position in the corner of the couch. As the affair evolved, he noticed that most of the party people stayed within certain approximate groups, so that wanderers like himself could make a circuit from one discussion or activity to another.

For example, in the corner of the living room near the stereo, a group of guys and a couple of their girlfriends discussed what might almost have been metaphysics. Tim had stopped long enough to hear one of them say: "It's like pissin' in the dark. I mean, everything's black, you can't see anything, but you can feel it comin' out, you can hear it splattering in the toilet, you can feel the little drops that splash back on your shins. But you can't see it. You can't really *know* it's there. Like, if somebody were to turn on the lights all of a sudden, it might just be air, no piss comin' out at all. Y'know?"

In the kitchen, a few girls leaned on the counter near the kegs. Tim was too conspicuous to melt in with their group casually, so he only heard them as he looked in the fridge and grabbed a Coke. "I tried to tell him I just missed that month because all the laxatives I'd been taking to keep my weight down, and they were, like, affecting my system? But he just freaked out all over thinking I was pregnant, telling me he wanted to keep it and all this. So I got away from him and moved back in with Craig . . ."

Four guys and a haggard-looking young woman sat Indian-style in the middle of the living room floor playing cards, switching from Poker to Blackjack to Shit On Your Neighbor. They were all intensely serious and intensely plastered, having presumably started

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drinking long before Tim got there. One of the players' girlfriends had been standing by as a go-fer to retrieve drinks and Chex mix for them.

A corner of the living room about six foot square functioned as a dancefloor, with a couple of girls and a skinny, girly-looking guy continuously slithering to the music. They were occasionally joined by other wanderers, but the wanderers never stayed long.

Something involving more than one person was going on in the bedroom, by the sound of the groans and screams that occasionally eclipsed the thumping music. Once or twice when songs finished and the stereo went silent, the voices from the bedroom could be heard and everyone in the living room would turn to the bedroom door. Then the next song would start, and everyone would go back to their conversations or dancing. Naturally wanderers came and went from the bedroom too, but Tim didn't bother. He wasn't really joining any of the conversations or activities, and wasn't sure if the group in the bedroom would care to have a spectator.

Out sitting against the rails of the deck was the academic crowd. The main participants were two guys and three women, but once in a while wanderers would listen to them when everything else became tearfully boring. The leader of the discussion was a kid with a neatly trimmed beard and mustache of short brown hair, wearing a navy blue turtleneck. The other guy was tall and looked sort of athletic, and he kept trying to steer the conversation to politics. Then there was a short, pear-shaped woman with inch-long hair who kept correcting the leader when he made any hypothetical statement that didn't focus on the perspective of womyn or beings of color. Whenever the leader tried to reply, the womyn would say, "Excuse me, I'm not done yet. I know that as a man, you're 200% more likely to interrupt me, but I won't let that happen, excuse me-" until he shut up.

April spent most of her time listening to the academic crowd. Sometimes she offered her opinions, but mainly let the others argue with each other.

Tim wanted to be around April, but he felt a repulsion and fear of the debaters. When their discussions came to locked conflicts, one of them would mention, "The professor I had for Comparative Religion said that there were forty historians in the area of Palestine at the supposed time of Christ's existence, and none of them mentioned a word about him." That discussion ended in victory for the professor-quoter, and another topic began. Later the womyn won a debate by citing the powerful authority of her source: "Look, okay? I volunteer at the women's crisis center in Oakdale three nights a week. When you go in for training there to be a counselor, they tell you-" here she ticked off points on her fingers "-at least three-fourths of all rapes go unreported. Ninety-eight percent of all victims of spouse abuse are women. And one in four women will be abused physically or sexually sometime during their lives."

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Somehow this point proved her interpretation of the movie *Eraser-head*.

Eventually, the academics began replying with bigger sources, comparing the degrees and backgrounds of their professors to prove who won the discussion. Tim was afraid that if he made a point and someone asked, "Where did you hear that?" he would have to tell them he read it in *Spy* magazine, or that he heard it in Government class, which would make them ask, "What school?" and he would have to say Kensington Community College.

But in another way, they all repulsed him, because they talked about the stupidest things. The meaning of some century-old tome by Charles Dickens and how it related to the current situation in South America. Or how a scene in a perfectly ordinary, perfectly dumb movie like *Death Becomes Her* revealed that the writer had some neurotic fear of sex and women. So on top of his fear of embarrassment, Tim was afraid that, if he did win an argument, it would mean he was an expert in all this useless drivel just like they were.

Tim visited their group a few times just to be around April, but never stayed long. He cruised the circuit a dozen times, past the dancers, the card players, the philosopher-dudes, the girls in the kitchen, the academic types. There had been a few other groups, but they had all dissipated or left. One group had piled into the bed of a jacked-up pick-up, off to get pizza, but they hadn't come back. Perry might have gone with them. Either that or he was in the bedroom.

So Tim had settled on the couch, where he had a view of the card players and the dancers. Someone had turned the tv on, although you couldn't hear it. The talking head on the screen was Gil Gantz. To the side of his head was a colorful icon depicting his topic: the U.S. Postal Service logo, the blue profile of an eagle with wings spread on white background. Only this logo had a few black dots randomly scattered over its surface. Beneath the bullet-riddled logo, the caption read, "Rampage."

The other end of the couch served as a weigh station for the remaining wanderers. Someone would plop down for a few minutes, then get up and circulate some more. It was like another stop on the circuit. Only the activity on the couch-stop was to sit and do nothing and say nothing. Tim had become the major participant in this activity, although an occasional wanderer would distract him by yelling, "How's it goin?!" over the music, and Tim would keep replying enough to sustain a lite but loud conversation.

At 11:08, Tim gazed at the TV. Gil Gantz had left the screen, replaced by a scene where two men guided a gurney covered with a white sheet out the front of a building and into an ambulance. Led Zepplin took a break from their thumping for a moment, and Tim could barely make out Gil Gantz's voice saying, "-head wound and spinal injury. With snipers on top of nearby buildings, the

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scene was a tense one . . .” The only thing preventing Tim from hearing Gil Gantz now was the high, male voice emanating from the bedroom, shouting, “You’re not done yet! You’re not done yet! AAAAOUUGH!! There you go, bitch. Now you’re done.”

Black Sabbath took up where Zeppelin had left off, singing about “killing yourself to live.” Gil Gantz came back on the tv, moving his lips and looking grim. He nodded to his right and spoke another syllable. The camera swung right to a Black woman with vast eyes and lashes like tree branches, smiling robotically.

On the other end of the couch, someone yelled, “Some party, huh?!” Tim was more interested in watching the robot woman lip-syncing to the melody of the lead guitar. He reluctantly turned to answer the person and saw April smiling back at him. “I said, SOME PARTY, HUH?!” It was hard to tell between the music and her shouting, but it sounded like she was trying to be sarcastic.

Tim nodded agreement, forgetting to return her smile.

April interpreted this to be Tim’s clever impression of a zoned-out, overloaded victim of too much noise and smoke and everything else. She laughed.

Tim figured she was laughing at him. He stood up, turning a little red, and said at normal volume, much too quiet to be heard in this place, “Let’s get the fuck out of here.”

Still chuckling, April yelled, “WHAT?!”

Tim waved towards himself and the kitchen, beckoning her with exaggerated sweeps of his arms.

She hopped to her feet with renewed laughing and followed him through the kitchen and out to the deck, where the academic types were discussing Clinton’s Family Leave bill, in a context of neo-Marxism leaning towards Maoism. Tim breezed past them and down the dark flight of steps to the ground.

April wasn’t laughing anymore but still smiling a little. “What do you want?”

Tim turned back to her and watched her smile become strained. “I’m going for a walk. Is there anything so exciting up there that I’d have to quote my Psych professor to get you to tear yourself away from it?” He wondered for a moment if the academics at the top of the stairs had heard him, and if they might be offended. On second thought, he hoped they had heard.

April’s smile blossomed again. “Let’s go.”

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## Fourth Frame

### Lane One

Perry squinted into the wind and turned to face the middle of the truck bed. Before he decided to accompany the pizza-run, no one had mentioned that the nearest pizza place was 25 miles away. He should have known better than to expect a pizza place anywhere near Pittsfield though, so he reconciled himself to suffer the consequences.

He sat in the back corner of the truck, with his back against the side panel and his left arm resting atop a mesh net where the tailgate was supposed to be. Bits of hay or straw occasionally whipped up and out of the bed.

The guy driving the truck didn't literally have a red neck, but his arms and face and most of his torso were browned from the amount of time he spent in the fields. He wore a red Roundup baseball cap with the brim folded sharply in three places.

Some other guy, who was alone in thinking himself a funny drunk, guffawed from the shotgun position in the front seat. The sliding window behind and between the good ol' boys was open, and the music screaming out of it was the tape of a local Rockabilly band.

Three girls and a guy sat along the front edge of the truck bed. Another guy was passed out in the back corner across from Perry, and a short kid maybe sixteen or seventeen sat on top of the wheel-well beside Perry. The girls and guy in front leaned in toward each others' ears to be heard over the music. The guy on the wheel-well watched the set of stars just above the horizon in front of him.

Perry tapped the kid on the shoulder. The kid leaned down to listen. Without pointing, Perry asked, "Who's the girl to the right of Jess?"

The kid straightened, looked at the girls, leaned over again. "I'm not sure which one Jess is."

"The one in the middle."

The kid gave him a solemn look. "The one on the right is my girlfriend Nikki."

Perry smiled and held out his hand with the OK sign.

Nikki was pretty, but she was having an uproarious conversation with the chubby guy on her right. Perry knew the guy, and he was never that funny.

Perry tapped the kid's shoulder again. "Who's the girl on the left?" he asked when the kid leaned down again.

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"Kaitlin." The kid remained hunched toward him, awaiting further questions, but eventually straightened again.

Perry watched Kaitlin. She didn't look too bad for a brunette. Kaitlin looked decently built, with a rather pretty face. She glanced at him once, giggling at something Jess had said, and Perry returned the smile. She looked away, but kept smiling.

The kid leaned down without being prompted. "I thought you came with Jess and that redhead. Aren't you hooked up with one of them?"

"Nah." Perry adjusted his view to concentrate on Jess. She had a pleasantly unique face, and the legs coming out of her cut-offs looked soft and golden-brown. He wouldn't have minded verifying if they were warm enough, or warming them if they weren't. But she had a bit of an attitude that Perry would be happy to avoid.

The kid leaned back down to say, "Good, I was afraid you were her ex," and sat up again.

Perry half tapped, half pulled the kid's shoulder down. "What do you mean, 'Good?'"

"I heard her ex totally welshes on child support. I'm glad you're not him." The kid looked at Perry and shrugged.

"Child support?" Perry stared at her across the truck. She couldn't be more than nineteen. "She's got a kid?"

"Two. Just had the other one a couple months back."

That was the attitude Perry had sensed: she was a mother. She had been through the horizon-broadening experience of squeezing out a creature the size of a bowling ball, twice. Those hips didn't look wide enough for it.

Before he had thought of her as a girl fresh out of high school, trying to act like a woman. Now he could only think of her as a mother.

Having hit a lull in her conversation with the girls beside her, Jess looked at the guy slumped in the other corner, then looked at Perry. He stared at her as if she were a page from *Where's Waldo?*, trying to find a hidden detail on her. She locked eyes with him, but he just kept staring. She thought it was another act of his, like his display back in the bowling alley, and she started laughing.

Perry tapped the kid on the knee. "So you've seen her around with her kids?"

"Yeah."

"Draggin' around carriages and diapers and bottles . . ."

"Yeah. She doesn't have bottles too much though, cause she breastfeeds." The kid nodded, seeing that he was done, and leaned back.

Perry watched her as she went back to talking with the girl on her right. Jess wore a bulky flannel shirt that puffed out and flapped a little as the wind came over the top of the cab and down into it.

Perry crossed his legs to hide his boner.

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## Frame Four

### Lane Three

The place was almost crowded when Ben walked in for his ceremonial pre-league practice game at about 3:30 in the afternoon. A bunch of kids hung around the tables and video games, just out of school. A troop of cub scouts took up a few lanes, and others were occupied by a young couple, a pair of middle-aged women and some individual bowlers. Ben carried his bag and shoes to the table behind lane three, where he would be sharing the ball return and score computer with the young couple, a pretty blond and a man with a Southern accent.

Ben smiled and nodded to the woman as he typed his name into the computer. She returned a friendly smile and said, "Hi," then turned to watch her boyfriend.

Ben changed his shoes quickly and carried his ball onto the deck. Something about the sounds of the place set Ben on edge, the squeak of someone's shoes down the way, or the rhythmic wobbling of a fan in one of the hand-dryers nearby. Ben noticed goose-bumps rising on his arms. He knew it would be a great day for bowling.

The pins stood ready and waiting for him at the end of lane three. He set his shoes against the marks on the floor, so he was just to the right of center. He pushed the sounds out of his head, the squeaks, the whirring hand-dryers, the buzzing video games, the other bowlers. He pictured the pins all flying from the impact of his ball and imagined hearing them clatter away.

Ben took his three steps and threw the ball with just the right amount of hook on it. It plowed into the front pin from the left side, just the right spot to send all the pins tumbling.

Normally Ben tried to follow through after his throw, allowing his left arm to carry itself forward and up above his head, balancing on his right foot for a moment. This time, Ben fell forward over the foul line onto the lane.

He saw it all again and remember everything as it happened. He had seen himself falling forward seconds before starting to fall, had seen the line under his ankle that would mean his shot was disqualified. He remembered it happening before he lived any of it.

But the experience was different this time. Not only did he remember falling, smacking his head on the corner of the gutter, the slight friction burn on his palm where he tried to catch himself. This time he remembered the next shot, which would take out sev-

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en pins. He remembered the rest of this game, exactly how each shot would go, the gutter ball in the fifth frame, the spare in the ninth, that his score would be 119, that the guy beside him would score a 140. He remembered that in half an hour, two girls back near the video games would start a shouting match, and fall to the floor scratching and punching each other for a minute and a half before Crystal would break it up, yelling at them, "Now see here!"

He remembered it all like it had happened to him yesterday. Beyond that, he remembered the rest of the day, eating a veal parmigian microwave dinner when he got home at about 5:30, with the tomato sauce leaked into the mashed potatoes. He remembered the rest of the night, watching the last half of *Donahue* and then *Hard Copy* before leaving for league night. He remembered drinking two cans of Mountain Dew that night while bowling a 98, then a 111, then a 164. He remembered giving Jim Marcello a ride home, then returning to his own place to watch half an episode of *L.A. Law* before going to bed, fidgeting in bed for an hour before falling asleep, getting up the next morning, brushing his teeth.

Then it was all there, nothing left out, memories of the rest of his life stretching out in front of him, only it seemed to be behind him because he had seen it all before. He would work at the book bindery for 34 more years, rising a few levels to supervisor, never marrying, retire at 65, receive three tiny pension checks and one social security check before having a painful but quick heart-attack in a McDonald's that was being robbed.

But he remembered it all clearly because it had happened to him already. It didn't feel like a premonition at all, but memories, things that he remembered going through from the distant past. They even had that coating of vagueness that dim memories sometimes have, like the memory of the time he started screaming at work, and had to be rushed to the emergency room for an appendectomy. Only that hadn't happened to him yet. It wouldn't happen for another six years.

It felt more like memories because he had lived it, and lived it more than once. He could see more now, behind this life when he was born as Ben Kelmon. But his past life was no fancy celebrity like Napoleon or Charlemagne or Alexander the Great. Before this life, he had been Ben Kelmon, living this same life at the same period of history, all the same events and experiences, and before that he was Ben Kelmon, and it stretched back quite a ways. There might have been a beginning when he had first begun living the lives of Ben Kelmon, but he couldn't remember that far back. He could remember 75 times back, maybe a hundred cycles of living this same life as Ben Kelmon, but before that they became foggy. The memories were all the same, exactly as he had lived them and would live them again.

Ben tried to stand up then, as he knew he would, having lived it enough times to be sure the same thing would happen again. But

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his memories of every time before showed him continuing to stand up, and getting on with his next shot. This time, he didn't get all the way up because the muscles in his legs and arms stopped working. He fell back on the lane with a solid thump to the back of his head, his legs twisted together, one arm behind him under his back. Ben felt the sting of a lump rising on his head for maybe a second and a half before the sensation started to fade. He saw a face cut into his view of the ceiling, perhaps the friendly blond woman, then a few other people standing over him, before they faded away too.

"Huh!" Ben uttered while his lips and lungs still worked. "This is different!"

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## **Fifth Frame**

### **Lane Three**

It was a dark place, completely silent. Ben couldn't hear his own heartbeat. He couldn't feel how he was positioned, whether he was lying down or sitting up, because he couldn't feel anything.

He knew there were three other beings with him, and he could feel what they were thinking. One of them had an idea of speed. Another wondered how much time it would take for this vehicle to meet the Earth at that speed. The first being returned a definite idea of how much time before this place met Earth. The second being wished good things for the first.

Ben tried to ask them something, but couldn't seem to open his mouth or make any noise in his throat. He tried to raise an arm to get their attention, but that didn't work either.

Ben could tell that the third being had an idea of the guest (Ben) being awake. The second being thought about the lack of a host form in this room, and that there was a host form in the place down the hall on the left. The third being wished good things for the second and went away.

The second being had an idea of getting Ben's attention, which was easy, since Ben already felt every thought they projected. The second being had an idea of itself as a leader. The leader had an idea of the first being as a driver. As the third being came back to the place, the leader sent an image of one who repairs things.

The repair being was accompanied by an insect with six limbs and a hard purple shell, standing maybe two feet high. The insect walked into the place on its hind legs, but there was no life in it.

The leader thought about a need to explain things to Ben. It had an idea of Ben as being broken. It thought about Ben being repaired and returned home, where good things could happen to him again. The leader sent Ben happy thoughts.

The repair being thought about the insect, and gave Ben the idea that he would not be hurt. Then the repair being manipulated Ben into the insect, and everything appeared.

Ben could see in three directions at once, but the sensation was not as dizzying as he would have expected. He could see all three of his companions now, thin beings with gray skin, large heads and huge black eyes, towering over him at twice his own height.

But his own height was now only two feet, the height of the bug. Ben held up his hands to look at them, but instead saw four stick-like insect legs rise into his three lines of view. The tips of his

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insect limbs each had a single claw which he could open and close.

Ben tried to protest to the leader, but his rows of mandibles only made scraping, clicking noises and ejected thick yellow drool which began to seep down his purple shell.

The leader had an idea that this insect form was only temporary and would be replaced with a normal form, that the insect form could not survive in Ben's home place, where they were on their way to return him.

Ben expressed disgust as he tried to wipe the drool off himself with three of his limbs. The limbs got in each other's way and only smeared the drool worse. He wondered how long this would continue.

The driver, sitting with its eyes closed along an edge of the domed room's floor, had an idea that they would have Ben back to Earth before he started his seventh cycle in the life of the insect.

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## **Fifth Frame**

### **Lane One**

Tim jammed his hands in his pockets and headed away from downtown Pittsfield toward what might laughingly be called the “suburbs.” The total urban sprawl of the town was three blocks of two-story stone buildings lining main street. A grid of streets spread around the miniscule “downtown” area, and the houses dotting surrounding streets covered maybe two square miles at the very most. The majority of people who considered themselves Pittsfield residents lived five and ten miles out, along the back roads where the houses were a quarter mile or half mile apart.

“Wait up!” April said, trotting a few steps toward Tim. “I thought you said you were going for a walk. You didn’t say anything about jogging!”

Tim slowed so she could keep up.

They strode along the sidewalk in front of the funeral parlor. A pair of faux Victorian gaslights hung off the corners of the building, casting dingy, yellowish beams across the walk as though their filaments were aged parchment.

Past the funeral home was a low church with three spires and “No Parking” signs tacked on the front wall. The stone sign in front read “United Methodist Center.” Orange wire fencing blocked the torn-up sidewalk in front of the church. Piles of dirt and chunks of busted concrete covered the strip that used to be lawn between the sidewalk and church. Tim and April were forced into the street to get around the mess.

Tim was careful to keep his pace reserved so she could keep up. He returned to the sidewalk. She remained in the street, edging toward the middle of the road.

April explained, “What cars are going to come along at this time of night?”

Tim nodded but stayed on the sidewalk, not wanting to crowd her.

The streetlights were sparse along this section of the road, and thick trees blocked the moonlight.

April caught some light walking down the center of the road. “I remember when I was little, I used to play soccer in the middle of the street with my cousin Tonya. They used to live in the apartments out by the high school, and they had almost no yard, so they’d always play in the streets. But at home, I was always told to stay out of the road. So it was like the most dangerous thing to be

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actually playing a game in the street."

Tim slipped through the shadows on the sidewalk. "Too bad we don't have a ball."

"That's okay. You'd beat me anyway."

He laughed, glad they wouldn't have a chance to prove her wrong. "What makes you say that?"

With another step down the road, April stood full in the light, out from the shade of any trees. One darker shadow extended straight back from her, cast by the streetlight at the corner, and a shorter, dimmer shadow tagged along beside her, cast by the light of the moon. "Weren't you on the basketball team or something?"

"Uh, no." Tim shoved his hands deeper in his pockets, then pulled them out. "I was in Band, so I was at all the home games."

"Oh. Maybe that's where I saw you." April stopped in the middle of the road at the intersection. "Which way?"

Tim stepped off the sidewalk and strode to the center of the intersection. "I dunno. Which way seems best?"

April lifted her arms high, trying to fill the wide-open asphalt clearing with a big shrug. "I don't care."

"That way then." Tim wanted to appear decisive, so he picked the direction he was already facing, left from the direction they had been walking.

This time, he stayed in the street with her, his pace slowed to match hers. They marched in silence five feet apart. Tim was very conscious of the huge distance between them. He pictured them walking side by side holding hands. And of course, if they were like that, they wouldn't have strained gaps in the conversation like this one.

"So what instrument did you play?" April asked.

Tim smiled. "The coolest instrument there is: oboe."

April's laughter echoed down the street and set off a tiny dog barking at a window somewhere behind them.

A car came from behind them, but it had to stop at the intersection where they had just been. Tim moved to the right side of the street and April stepped to the left.

The car passed slowly between them carrying an elderly couple, the man scowling straight ahead as he drove, the woman looking vacantly at Tim.

After it passed, they returned to the middle of the street, a little closer together than they had been.

Tim looked around trying to think of something to say, but only saw the dark, motionless leaves in the trees.

"You go to the same school as, uh, Jean?" Tim asked when he could finally remember the name of that skinny guy with the beard.

"No, I'm at Freemont." April folded her arms in front of her. "I applied to Stockwell though. Got on the waiting list even, but not enough people dropped out, I guess."

"Well, Freemont isn't exactly chopped liver either." Tim groped

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for something to say to support his outburst. "I mean, saying you got in to Freemont is still something to brag about, as long as you're talking to anybody around here that's not going there or to Stockwell. That's the majority of the rest of us."

April walked more slowly, her hands in her pockets. She aimed her head down at a pebble that she gradually kicked along with the insides of her feet, soccer-style. "Yeah, it's not bad. Actually I like it better at Freemont because I've heard their Social Work department is better than Stockwell's. Plus it's a little homier, not as big a place as Stockwell."

Tim gladly steered the conversation away from his exclusion from Freemont. "You're in Social Work?"

"Yeah. My uncle is a social worker in Oakdale. I'm hoping to get in there, or maybe just work here for Kensington County for a while. But I've got a couple years before that."

A few more paces brought them both to the next intersection. This time April tottered into the center of the crossing along with Tim.

"Shall we continue around the block?" Tim asked with a wave back towards the bigger buildings in the heart of the town.

"Sure."

So they turned left again.

The treetops pulled back from the road here, letting the moon touch the asphalt. The streetlights from the corners ahead and behind them spread their shadows in several directions.

Tim struggled for something to say to keep the silence at bay. The trees were frozen like models of a landscaping project blown up to life-size, like you could chip off the bark and find styrofoam underneath.

The sound of the wind came before any sign of it could be seen. It hissed through the trees and grew to a rush before the green masses above and ahead of them began to sway.

Then it stopped, and in its place came hundreds of dim shapes slowly spinning to the ground. At first it looked like a whirling snowfall. Each piece spun around rapidly, cutting spirals through the air, but their downward movement was an easy, floating pace. They made brittle sounds like dry leaves or small twigs when they hit the ground.

"Helicopters," Tim mumbled.

April tore herself away from watching the freaky scene to frown at Tim instead. "What?!"

"Helicopters," he repeated. "They're like seed pods. From maple trees. That's what these trees all along here must be." He grabbed a seed out of the air as it whirled down in front of him. "We used to call them helicopters when I was little. Cause they spin around like that." Tim tossed it up, but the design of the thing caught against the air and resisted, then twisted over and continued its easy float to the ground.

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Another gust of wind sent a rain of helicopters down from the trees, and brushed the fallen ones along the blacktop.

April kicked through the brittle wings littering the road. "So what have you been doing since high school?"

"Oh, lots of stuff. When I can pull myself away from these wild parties and beat back the crowds clamoring for my attention, I do my vitally important job of shelving books and typing overdue notices at the Pittsfield Public Library. Assistant Librarian. And besides working full time, I'm going to school part time at Kensington Community College. Plus I'm in the KCC Band program which occasionally tours other schools."

The dark houses lining the street fell away and the city buildings began. On the left was a shop selling antiques and collectibles, potpourri and scented soaps. On the right was a computer shop, plus some law offices or accountants.

The only cars parked along the side of the street were the hulking, gray cop cars on the left. The police station was just ahead in a dent in the building's modern, sculpted brick facade. Since the cops never had much to do in such a small berg, they were able to devote more time to giving out tickets, even bothering to investigate cases where kids decorated teachers' houses and lawns with strings of toilet paper. Devil's Night was a big event for the boys in blue.

They were known to give tickets for jaywalking. So April's desire to live dangerously by walking down the middle of the street gave way to thoughts of confronting some guy in a uniform on a power-trip. Without saying anything, they both angled to the sidewalk on the left.

April said, "Aren't you off for the summer though?"

"Nope," Tim said with his hands in his pockets again. "I'm still going, like the Energizer Bunny. But I'm only taking three classes anyway."

"What's your major?" April glanced through the glass doors into the Police station. Inside was an empty hallway, lit from a room further in.

"Uh, I'm not sure. I mean, I'm taking mostly music classes, but I'm not sure if I'm going to try to get an associate's degree or go for four years' worth, or anything like that." Tim noticed a blur along the left edge of everything he saw with his right eye. He pulled off his glasses and pressed them into a folded corner of his shirttail to wipe both surfaces of the right lens. "For now, I'm just taking whatever classes sound interesting. Couple music classes and a poetry class. But I'm not sure if I'm even going to go for a degree." Looking through the lens, he saw that he had only smeared the spot worse. He breathed fog onto the lens and tried wiping it in another corner of his shirt.

It was appropriate for him to mention it now, so he plunged into, "What I'd really like is to start a band . . ."

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"Hmm. Woodwinds and brass and everything? A big band?" But she could already see by his reaction that that wasn't right, so she ventured, "Or a jazz quartet or something? The kind that plays in clubs?"

"Uhh, not exactly." He put his glasses back on, but now that the right lens was clean, he could see how dusty the left one was by comparison. He breathed on the left lens and started scrubbing it in the folds of his shirt again. "Actually, I mean a band like a progressive punk band, only with instruments that you don't hear every day." Tim sighed. He already felt stupid saying it. "Except the only people who would be interested in the idea would be other goofballs like me who liked punk sounds on not-so-punk instruments. But everybody plays guitar and bass and drums, like that hasn't been done to death for the last fifty years."

"Cool. Sounds like something that would play at the Doombox."

"Really? That place in Oakdale?"

"Yeah. I went there with a friend of mine who's into that alternative stuff, always dresses in black, you know the kind." They passed another insurance agency in the corner storefront and cruised around it, left again towards the site of the party. The stoplights hung over the intersection flashing yellow for traffic on Main Street, red for Middle Street. "Anyhow, she wanted to see this band called Lubricated Goat. I figured it'd be a bunch of losers in high school or something, but they were kind of interesting. I think they were from Seattle, actually. But they weren't 'grunge' like Nirvana or Soundgarden or whatever. One of them played a sax. But they did all these grinding songs."

Tim's glasses were as clean as they were going to get, so he settled them on his nose. "I think I've heard them on the radio before. It's hard to miss a name like Lubricated Goat."

"But you're right, that's the kind of thing basically. I've been thinking about placing a classified ad in a paper, 'Forming progressive band, seeking players,' something like that. But how do I clarify all that in 25 or 30 words?"

April peered in the window at Maureen's, the antique shop just past the barber shop. A bunch of old books, old metal signs, a little antique carousel and some hand-crafted wooden things (bird-feeders? bookends?) were propped in the window.

"Anyway," Tim continued, trying to return to the root of the matter, "the classes I'm taking aren't necessarily following a line towards a major, they're just ones I'm interested in." He let the conversation lapse, thinking that silence would be better than his rambling.

But the wind prevented the silence, rattling the patchy leaves on some anorexic, ornamental trees set in planters along the sidewalk. A paper cup rolled out of the gutter and drew an arc toward the middle of Main Street, then wobbled to a stop and curved back.

"In a way, that's more admirable than following a set line of

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classes," April said. "I've gone through two years of taking the basic requirements, history and English and math and bullshit and I've only been able to fit in a few intro Social Work courses so far. The rest of it's been all this junk, the same junk you didn't need to learn in high school, only now it's at a higher level, so you can know more complicated bullshit just in case you need to figure out a tangent or a cosine or have to appear on Jeopardy or some damn thing. And I'll have two more years of a strictly outlined set of classes to complete my Social Work major.

"You're not stuck taking classes that some idiot in an office says you have to take. It's like, I wouldn't mind taking some sculpture classes, but you have to take three or four intro art classes for prerequisites, and I'm not sure if I'll have enough electives to do that."

Tim shook his head. "Yeah, but the classes I'm taking won't get me a definite job either. After you follow your strict line of classes, you'll be all set for being a social worker. I can screw around with these music classes and they might not get me anywhere. How many bands of any kind use an oboe? I might be able to teach oboe or something, but, even then, how many people are clamoring for oboe lessons?"

April shrugged. "Well, it's more adventurous that way. You might not be able to use it, but then you might be able to form your band and be really successful with it."

Tim pushed his glasses up by the corner of the frame, then slapped his hands at his sides to stop fidgeting. "I suppose." He stared at the yellow light flashing over the intersection half a block away. "'Adventurous,' huh?"

Across Main Street, a pair of lumpy, gleaming '93 Crown Victorias and a recent model Taurus sat in front of the Carmen Grill, a local yuppie hang-out. The restaurant's brown innards were lit with indirect lighting, revealing a handful of customers still rocking with laughter and tipping back cocktails.

"So, uhh, what kind of music do you listen to?" Tim asked.

"Oh, I don't know. I used to like punk and alternative stuff in high school, R.E.M. and all that. I guess now I'm more into Folk music. Like Tracy Chapman, Michelle Shocked, Suzanne Vega . . ."

"Ahhh." Tim nodded. "Ever heard of Two Nice Girls?"

"Yeah! I've got 'Chloe Liked Olivia' at home."

Tim stammered, "I haven't heard of them."

"No, that's not another band. It's the name of their last album. Two Nice Girls' latest album."

"Oh, okay. I just heard them a couple times on the radio. They're pretty good."

The corner was only a dozen yards away and closing fast. Around the corner and down another fifty feet or so was the bookstore, and above that was the party. Tim raced for an idea to keep their walk from ending.

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He dragged his feet, trying to go more slowly as they turned the corner. He looked around for something to talk about. On the other corner next door to the bookstore was a white building, three floors high, a fancy furniture store. The funeral home on one side and furniture store on the other were the only reasons they could get away with such raucous parties in that apartment over the bookstore. With those places empty, the library and water-tower behind the house and the church on the other side of the funeral home, the nearest houses were half a block away. The only people at that time of night close enough to complain were in the funeral parlor's freezer, beyond complaining about anything.

The street was clear of parked cars, so the only thing separating Tim and April from the party was the gray stretch of asphalt.

As he stepped on the blacktop, Tim found the idea he was looking for. "Are you going to be around for a while yet?"

"Yeah. I gotta give Jess a ride home, and she's out getting pizza with those guys in their life-size Hot Wheels car. Her baby-sitter's paid until three, so we'll probably be around until at least then. Unless she found a better party, in which case we'll be there 'til three."

"Baby-sitter?"

"Yep. Jess has two kids."

They reached the curb and began around the side of the bookstore to the back.

Tim stopped and jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "I'm gonna run home and I'll be right back. Promise you won't go anywhere in the next ten minutes."

April chuckled. "Okay, sure. I'll probably go up and listen to Jean and Daphne bickering some more. They get funnier when they're drunk."

"All right, I'll be right back." With a retreating wave, he was gone.

Tim hurried the three blocks downhill to his uncle's place, skipping and then jogging the last ten yards to the door. He slipped his key in the lock and turned it, while pushing in on the doorknob. (The lock was a little tricky.)

In through the pitch black living room, down the hall past the door to the spare room he rented and up to his uncle's bedroom door. He knocked and interpreted the grunted reply as "What?"

Tim opened the door a few inches and spoke softly. "Uncle Bert, did Tommy take that box of stuff with him after his last visit, or is it still here?"

The room was black, with a red glimmer from the digital clock on the bedstand, which read 11:45 with a little red dot that meant it was P.M. "What box?" Uncle Bert's voice grumbled from somewhere near the clock.

"The one with the stuff I gave him after I moved out of my parents' house."

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Uncle Bert grunted lightly, sounding like he might be on the verge of falling asleep again. "In the garage. His mother said she wouldn't keep it at her place."

"Thanks," Tim said and eased the door shut.

Minutes later, he rounded the corner of the green house that contained the bookstore and bounded up the stairs two at a time.

At the top of the stairs, Daphne was telling Jean, "I don't give a damn. Sex involving penetration is inherently misogynistic, and I have no idea why I'm still arguing this with you." By the time she finished speaking, all eyes were on Tim, who was panting on the edge of the deck. "What do you want?" she snapped at him.

Tim ignored her and spoke to April, who was smiling at him from the other side of the group of tipsy scholars. "Think we can find enough sober people to get a game going?" He held out the battered, off-white ball with black hexagons across its surface.

In the hours that followed, the card game in the middle of the party evaporated; the dancing stopped; the heavy metal constituency discussing metaphysics and scatology petered out; even the party people in the bedroom stopped their activity, claiming they were too tired to continue, although they weren't too tired to play soccer. The girls in the kitchen went outside with everybody else to cheer on their boyfriends.

Jean stood beside the corner of the bookstore watching the soccer-players in the street, shaking his head. "Andrea Dworkin," he replied to Daphne, "is the Reverend Al Sharpton of the modern women's movement."

Daphne set one hand on her waist where her ample hip receded slightly, and raised a can of Black Label to her mouth to finish the last half of it. "Jean, you're a living, breathing phallus and you can't exist without oppressing wimmin every minute you're alive."

April's team kept winning for the first hour they played, until Tim suggested that they re-organize sides to make it fair, with a more balanced ratio of wastoids to sober players. The tide was turned when Tim appointed a sober goalie for his team, and secretly told the cheerleaders to stop getting drinks for his team.

They kept the ball bouncing up and down the street into the wee hours of the morning.

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## Sixth Frame

Lisa watched her fiancé's ass as he assumed the stance, ready to bowl.

A man with a baby-face and short, brown hair set his bowling bag on the table behind lane three.

Gary strode to the foul line and threw Lulu down to take out two of the three pins left standing.

The man at lane three smiled and nodded at Lisa as he typed his name into the scoring computer. She returned a friendly smile and said, "Hi," then turned to watch Gary. Actually she turned towards Gary but glanced up at the screen that showed the scores, so she could see the man type "BEN."

The man changed his shoes quickly and carried his ball onto the deck. He paused for a moment with a frown of concentration on his face, looking out across the lanes. He seemed to shiver, then shook it off and assumed his own stance on the deck of lane three. Ben held his ball up and stared at the pins, then swung through his three steps and tossed the ball.

Lisa watched his ball sail into a clean strike, and she smiled when she looked back at him. He was just falling forward over the foul line as she looked back. He flapped his arms to keep his balance, but it was too late to stop. Ben's palm screeched along the floor sideways as his head smacked on the corner of the gutter.

Lisa couldn't keep from giggling at the sight of him falling, then saying, "Oo, jeez," when his head hit. She tried to cover her mouth and her laughter as she leaned forward and said, "Are you all right?"

The man leaned forward a little bit, pushing himself up on an elbow, smearing a thread of blood along the wooden floor with his hand. Lisa could tell something was wrong right away when she saw his "dumb expression, the look in his eyes like a blind person who doesn't bother to look in any specific or even vague direction." That's how she described it in her diary.

She stood and walked around the score computer and onto the other lane. "Sir?"

"Everything all right, honey?" Gary asked from a step behind her.

The man rolled toward one side and began to get on one knee.

"He's all right," Gary said, straightening. "Jest give a man some room to breathe, Lisa."

Ben rolled back to the floor. He collapsed with his legs twisted together, his arm and bleeding hand under his back. His head hit

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the floor again, hard enough to make Gary say, "Ouch," just watching it.

Lisa leaned over him and his eyes fixed on her, then wobbled to see the ceiling.

Ben spread his eyes wide and grunted, "Huh! This is different!"

Lisa tried to pick him up and set him straight, but he wasn't as light as he looked. "Sir, are you okay? Hey, are you okay?"

Gary turned to the rest of the lanes and yelled, "Somebody call the Poe Lease!" Everyone stared at him. "Calla ambulance! This fella needs help!"

"Oh my God!" Crystal screamed. She ran from the counter to lane three and screamed at Lisa, "What's wrong with him?!"

"I don't know, but I don't think he's breathing. Can you call an ambulance?"

Crystal continued muttering, "Oh my God, oh my God," as she stumbled back to the counter, then she exploded with, "Sonny!! He knows CPR!! I'll get Sonny! He knows CPR!" The short woman held her high wig in place with one hand and pumped the air with the other as she jogged around to the store room.

In lane six, Helen and Maureen tried to stand between the scout troop and the commotion. "No, you're not going to go see what it is," Helen told them, "you're going to stay right here. Now just calm down. A man got hurt over there, but he doesn't need all of you staring at him, so just go back to your game."

She wasn't fooling anybody.

"So I'm like, 'Steve, what is this fuckin place? It's a rat-hole, let's get outta here.'" Yeager punched the Attack button until the demon stabbing CJ was dead. "And Steve goes, 'Dude,' he goes, 'it's a fuckin crack house.' And I'm like, 'No way.' It was just this stupid boarded-up place on the south side, like maybe two miles from Oakdale High.

"So I'm like, 'Well, if it's a crack house, then where's all the dealers and crack-heads?' And he's all, 'I don't know, maybe they out at their dayjobs.' And he's tryin to tell me how they were all there yesterday, and he can't understand where they all went and this shit. So then this big Black guy walks in-

As Crystal raced by to the store room, Yeager watched her and said, "What's her problem?" A goblin punched him, draining his last bit of energy. His spear-wielding elf crumpled and flashed to show he was dead. "Aw, man! Shit."

Sonny's fingers were meshed in the dark roots of Stephi's bleached hair, guiding her head back and forth. He was about to instruct her to suck a little bit more instead of just sitting there like a hole in a log, but Crystal burst into the store room and screamed, "Get out here and do some CPR!!"

Sonny scrambled to pull his pants up, nearly zipping Stephi's lips into his fly. "What? We were just-"

"Come on!" Crystal grabbed his arm and pulled him into the

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wide open chamber of the bowling alley. Sonny kept trying to put the end of his belt through the belt-buckle, but couldn't do it with Crystal jerking him along by the arm. "Here!" she screamed, pushing him down to a pale guy spread out on the floor with his eyes open.

"Uhm, okay, uh," he put a hand on the guy and realized the situation was, unlike the drills and the practices for CPR class, very real and very serious. He shook the guy on the ground and yelled, "Are you all right?" not really expecting any answer, but following the script from the class. "You," he told the blond chick who seemed much more together than Crystal, "go dial 911. Tell them the address. Run." She did.

Sonny held his hands up in front of himself, patting the air to keep time from advancing while he tried to remember. He grabbed the guy gingerly around the head and neck, tilting the head back and pulling the neck up to open his throat better. He put his ear over the mouth to listen and feel breath coming out of it, while watching the guy's chest for motion. "He's not breathing," he announced to himself as much as to anyone else. Sonny pushed his fingers into the side of the guy's neck, felt nothing even after several seconds. He felt how warm the guy was, and how dry his skin felt. The dude wasn't cold or clammy like Sonny would have expected, but he could be soon.

"Shit, he doesn't have a pulse." Sonny leaned back to survey the guy's upper body again, trying to remember the classes, was it four or five years ago? He knelt close to the body and leaned over it, so he could get more of his weight straight down over the chest. He grabbed at the guy's stomach (a fucking Polo shirt, no less), felt for the knobby bone at the bottom of the sternum, measured two fingers up from that point and jammed the heel of his right hand over that spot, whipped his left hand on top of his right and pushed straight down and released, up and down fifteen times.

Then he bent to the guy's face, pinched the nose shut and breathed into the mouth with two good heaves. He was a little surprised to see the chest rise and fall twice, just like the CPR dummy's chest worked. The dude's mouth was dry, but softer than Stephi's. Sonny imagined how gay he must look, and how shitty he'd feel if he let the guy die.

Fifteen more compressions on the chest, two more breaths, then he listened at the mouth and felt for a pulse with his fingers on the neck. He was supposed to watch for the guy's chest to move, but all he could see was the legs still crossed over each other, like a person does when they're sitting at home with legs up on the couch, like he was just reclining there casually. Too casual to bother breathing or pumping his own blood. "God, somebody move his legs straight, willya?"

Fifteen more compressions, two more breaths, fifteen compressions, two breaths, check for pulse and start over. He went through

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the cycle until his shoulders and back ached. Eventually he started to hyperventilate and had to be more careful about taking those deep breaths to blow into the guy. The guy's lips were already beginning to go cold, a little closer to room temperature when the paramedics got there six minutes after the call.

The scout troop had left. Everyone else crowded around the action, although six minutes of the same thing with no change became boring quickly.

Lisa sat and cried after the ambulance left. Gary looked at Lulu sitting on the ball return and decided to put her back in her bag.

Crystal fixed up a bucket of soapy water and a rag to clean off the tiny streaks of blood on lane three. Her main concern was comforting the frightened people still in the bowling alley, getting that red, wet reminder out of their view. But the thought of lane twelve, where there was still a faint brown spot from the time Bill Higgins had beat poor old Harold Young bloody and Crystal hadn't cleaned it off immediately, was not the last thing on her mind.

Stephi wiped at the corners of her mouth and took another swig of diet root beer. She sat with her arm around Sonny on the curved bench at the end of lane three.

"Christ," Sonny said with his face in his hand. "Do I have to, should I go to the hospital to see if he's-" He doubted that the guy would live, and if he did, it would probably be because of the paramedics. If the guy didn't, how should he feel? Should he go balling for days because some guy he'd never met died? Or if he didn't feel anything, did that make him a psychopath or something?

Someone at the other end of the place tossed a ball down a lane. It rattled across the wooden floor and smacked through some of the pins.

"Hey!" Crystal yelled. She stood up and started walking across the lanes, stepping over the ball return channels and gutters. "Hey, we're closed, all right? Get your ball and please leave. We're closed, everybody."

The silver-haired lady who had begun to bowl again looked around with her hands out, like she wasn't sure if she was the one being spoken to or why.

Crystal turned and walked back to lane three. "Christ's sakes."

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## Seventh Frame

"Won't be long now," Delmore said. He plucked the top half of a weed free from its leafy sheath and slipped the thin end into his mouth. He chewed the sweetness out of the weed and tossed it to the ground.

Kirby sat beside him along the base of the bowling alley's back wall. A tiny grasshopper half as long as his pinky fingernail crawled onto his knee. Kirby watched the thing squat up and down, insect aerobics, before it flew off.

"It's a sad state of affairs," the old man said. "Why do they have to get after that poor boy anyway? They got nothin' better to do?"

"One day, in a blackjack game," Delmore said, "an old cook who was dealing the cards tried to be slick, and I had to drop my pistol in his face."

"Pardon me. What I mean to say is they're not causing this to happen. The boy is just — broken. They will fix him. It can't be helped."

The sky was already dark blue on the other side of the bowling alley. Overhead it became purple, with a short strip of rosy clouds, then in front of Kirby and Delmore to the west, the sun made layers of clouds glow orange.

A long field stretched back from the bowling alley. The grass and weeds grew to a foot and a half over the clearing. A line of trees defined the end of the clearing, and a short walk through those woods led to a cow pasture. You couldn't smell them from the bowling alley unless it was an exceptionally hot and windy day.

As they watched swallows glide along the tops of the weeds to catch low-flying bugs, the only smell was a vegetable fragrance of new plants and leaves.

Kirby pulled a short blade of grass out of the ground and pressed it between the thumbs of both his hands. He blew hard between the backs of his thumbs and the slip of grass became a musical reed in the narrow gap between his thumb knuckles. It produced a piercing note that made all the furry creatures scampering under cover of the weeds prick up their ears and twitch their heads around to look for predators.

As the sun dipped below the horizon, a point of light flickered above the sun. It grew to a line of light, then became so bright it was hard to look at.

The blanket of purple sky kept edging westward, following the sun at a safe distance, but pushing the orange and red blankets over the horizon just the same. The line of light that had appeared

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above the sun moved independent of the parading colors.

Shortly, the light hovered over the treetops, then touched down in the clearing. As soon as it cleared the trees, the light stopped glaring off it and Kirby could see it better. It was a shiny, squashed ball, like a bulbous frisbee, putting out no light of its own. The rays that Kirby had barely been able to look at had been reflections of the sun on the bottom of the saucer.

Delmore stood and brushed the dirt and bits of grass off his pants. "There you go."

"Say, uh, Delmore." Kirby drew himself up to stand against the wall. "They won't mind us watching them, will they?"

Delmore approached the metallic ship. "No, they're fine. (Soda pop?!) Just don't go telling them about any mystical experiences you've had. Or they might 'fix' you too. (I went to your institutional learning facilities?!)"

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## Eighth Frame

A white Escort dotted with rust slid out of the funeral parlor's staff parking lot onto Park Street. Tim backed a step closer to the house to get out of the way of other cars heading out.

The old soccer ball under his arm popped out of his grip, with a little help from Perry. It bounced across the driveway until Perry sprinted over and began dribbling it. He passed it between his legs once, then caught it with the fingers of one hand and held it up in front of Tim.

"She's lactating," Perry said.

Tim snorted with laughter. "What?!"

"Shhhh! Shut up." Perry looked around in all directions, but mainly up the steps toward the deck, and over toward the parking lot. "Jessica," he said under his breath, looking like a bad ventriloquist. "She's lactating."

Tim only laughed louder. "Well I hope she doesn't take too long 'cause I gotta use the bathroom next."

Perry stepped closer, until the distance between them was suitable for confidential matters. "No, you idiot, I mean she's generating milk."

Tim raised his left hand high above his head so Perry would watch it when he used his right to pop the ball out of Perry's control. Tim dribbled it a few times on the driveway, saying, "What, she brought a heifer up there and she's selling bootleg fresh-squeezed?"

"Let's try this one more time," Perry sighed. "What I mean," he said with his hands cupped over his pectorals, "is that *she* is generating milk."

Tim erupted into the kind of deep, snorting laughter that sometimes requires a kleenex to clean up after. He laughed his way back to the side of the house and out of the path of another exiting car. "Get outta here," he chuckled when he had it under control.

"I swear on my left nut," Perry said, drawing an X over his heart. "She's got two kids and she's still breast-feeding one of them."

Tim chuckled some more and finally said, "So?"

"So," he groaned with more than a little sarcasm, then straightened up. "We're going out Saturday."

Tim dropped the ball so he could hug his guts and fall against the wall laughing. He managed to calm down and giggle, "Oh man, oh man," before the painful convulsions took hold in his abdomen again.

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Footsteps thudded down the stairs behind them. "What's so funny?" Jess said when she got to the ground.

Tim was wracked by fresh spasms when he saw her.

"He's losin' it," Perry explained, grabbing the soccer ball before it rolled away.

But it was funny just watching Tim laugh, and Jess chuckled a little as she said, "I guess so." Her laughter trailed away after a moment. "Seriously, I just wanted you to know up front that, um, I got a couple kids." She looked expectantly at Perry.

This time, a few people from inside the kitchen came out on the deck to see what was so funny.

"Oh God, oh shit, stop it, stop," Tim grunted under the storm of laughter.

"Uh, yeah," Perry told her, "I know."

Jess looked at the ground and kicked at a dandelion poking out of a crack in the driveway. "It's just, like, it scares off a lot of guys when they hear that."

"Hey, forget that. Bring 'em along, we'll see a cartoon or something."

Jess grimaced. "Let's not and say we did. I wanna see a little action. Van Damme or somebody like that."

Perry turned to Tim and pointed at Jess. "A dame after my own heart."

Tim was wasted from giggles, but still feeling the effects. He groaned some more and said, "Stop. Stop."

"All right, I'll call sometime Saturday then," Perry said to Jess as he backed toward the parking lot.

"I'll be there," Jess said.

Tim moaned, "Wait a minute. I gotta talk to April. Or, well, never mind, I can walk home so you can split if you want to."

"All right then. I'll see you around town or something before my leave is over." He tossed the ball back to its apparent owner.

Tim almost caught the ball, fumbled it and finally got a grip on it. "When's your last day in town?"

"Uhh, the twenty-ninth? I think it's the twenty-ninth."

"Well, I'll call you before that and we'll set up a day to cruise around Oakdale."

"Cool. See ya."

"Bye." Tim turned back to the stairs and dragged his aching innards up to the apartment. Jess followed.

". . . I don't know," one of the girls in the kitchen said as Tim stepped in. "He's a nice guy, but he acts so tough and I know he's just a wuss. Like how he got a nose-bleed out of thin air just running around playing soccer." The haggard woman was among the listeners this time, and Jess leaned against the counter next to her.

As Tim stepped out of the room, the speaker continued, "He always gets nose-bleeds. One time when we were doing it, it was just so gross, I'm on top of him and all of a sudden this blood just

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pours out over his face—

The living room was quiet. The TV was dark and the stereo hummed, nothing playing through it but the volume was jacked up to 14. Tim tapped the power button to turn it off, producing a thump through the speakers before it faded and died.

Three occupied sleeping bags were spread out in the far corner where the dancers had been stationed half the night. Another person with long blond hair curled up under a blanket on the couch. The bedroom door was about three-quarters open, but that room was dark and quiet too.

The bathroom door opened and April came into the living room. "Oh. Hi," she said softly to avoid waking anyone.

"Hi. Uhhhh," Tim exhaled deeply to calm himself, but it didn't work. He transferred the ball from under one arm to the other. He felt exhausted from playing and laughing, and sometime during all that he had probably sweated a little, but hadn't noticed it at the time. Now he noticed very definitely that he was sweating. "You're done for the summer, right? I mean, done with school?"

"Yep."

"So you're, uhm," he wiped his forehead just in case there was any sweat on it. "Are you, uh, do you. Do you want to do something tomorrow?" (Great, sounds thrilling, wanna do sumpthin? I really thought you were a geek at first, but since you put it so eloquently, I'd love to do *sumpthin* tomorrow . . .) "I mean, do you want to go see a movie or something? Uhhhh . . ."

"Uhhh," April began with a tone that leaked disappointment, "I promised my Mom I'd go shopping with her tomorrow."

Tim felt it slipping away. After they went walking, everything had gone well. If he had just left it at that, he could have at least seen her around town other times and not felt like a complete fool. Now it was spoiled, a wonderful night, he had managed to entertain her and had a good time in the process, but now it was all gone, a total mess. He would walk home feeling like shit, go to bed feeling like shit, wake up to a bright, sunny day of feeling like shit and keep feeling like shit for the next week or two until he could forget about this and return to his normal level of feeling like shit.

And it wasn't even a good excuse, "shopping with Mom." Tim might have felt a sliver better if she had put some effort into concocting an excuse, but she had just groped for whatever lame, miniscule thing she had planned for the next day. He couldn't meet her eyes.

"Really it's stupid, she wants me to help pick out wallpaper and crap . . ."

"Sure," Tim said, looking at the carpet because he couldn't stand it anymore. "Yeah, that's okay, never mind."

"Are you doing anything Saturday?" she said.

"Uhh," Tim frowned at her. "I gotta work until ten." He made moon-shaped arcs in the skin of the soccer ball with his fingernails.

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"We'll catch a late show then."

Tim wiped his forehead and came away with sweat this time. "Really? Yeah, okay. You wanna, uh . . ."

"Here," she said, and walked into the kitchen. "Brenda, do you have a pencil or something?"

Tim heard the haggard women's hollow voice say, "Sure." Sounds of rooting around in papers and kitchen implements. "Hyep."

"Thanks," and April was back in view. She scratched the pencil on a slip of paper and handed the slip to Tim. "Call me tomorrow. If you don't catch me at home, leave a message, and we'll figure it out by Saturday."

"Okay. Cool!" Behind him, one of the sleeping-bag occupants coughed loudly. Tim whispered, "Cool!"

April smiled then and lifted her hand up to his head. Tim thought she was going to caress his hair, but instead she pulled a helicopter out of it and handed it to him.

He transferred the ball and the helicopter to his left hand and held out his right.

She laughed and shook his hand with a good grip.

"Saturday," he said.

On his second trip home that night, he skipped all the way.

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## Ninth Frame

Ben's oldest memory was when he awoke in the dark place with the three beings. He knew there was supposed to have been something before that, but he had no idea what it might have been.

For some reason, he had asked the leader to let him sleep until he got home, although he could no longer remember what "home" was or why he would want to sleep. They had granted his request, so Ben had nothing to complain about when they finally woke him.

They shared the idea that he would live without them now, which made Ben very sad. They gave him the impression that he would be happy soon, because he was home again. The driver expressed that Ben should not be sad about parting, because they would return if he ever needed repair again.

Ben told them how delighted he had been to know them and be with them.

They wished good things for him, and then Ben was gone from among them.

He was in a dark place again, and he could feel that the three were not near him anymore. This dark place was not silent like the other one. Here Ben heard a hissing and then a thump, like the wind and then blocks of wood being knocked together. The noises repeated. He could feel the thump too, and he could feel something pressing in around him from all directions. He could move a little, but whenever he tried to, it pressed on him harder.

Suddenly Ben felt a grip around his leg. With a pull, Ben's legs were out of the pressing darkness, kicking at the air. Another tug and he was all the way out of it.

He pushed away, his head wobbling around to take in the view of the inside of a dusty gray barn stall, straw on the floor and ropes in hooks on the walls.

Ben eased himself to all fours and grunted. A woman kneeled next to him with her sleeves rolled up and blood all over her forearms. She smiled at him, but Ben was in no mood to smile back when things were still so confusing.

Something much too loud to be pleasant happened behind Ben. He tried to turn around, but his arms and legs would not cooperate yet. Eventually he was able to see a man in overalls with a rifle standing over the carcass of a huge cow, a cow at least three times Ben's own size, the largest he had ever seen. Gobs of blood hung out of the back end of the dead animal, and a little hole trickled more blood out of its head.

"Do I gotta waste another shell on that one?" the man asked, in-

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dicating Ben by pointing the rifle at him.

"No," the woman sighed, "he looks fine to me." She started wiping Ben with a tattered pink towel, and it came away bloody

Ben looked back at the woman and frowned at her. He tried to ask her, "What's going on?" but the sound he made was a warbling yawp.

With a look at his arms, another big chunk of Ben's confusion fell away. The blood was mostly cleared from his white coat. His hooves were still wet and filthy.

He made a sound like a strangling sheep at the woman again, but she just chuckled and rubbed his nose.

They named him "Stan." After a while he stopped thinking of himself as Ben.

Stan had a nice, short life. He munched a lot of grass in his time, licked a lot of salt blocks, and fucked a good number of heifers. In the end, they sent him off to a place where a bolt was driven through his head, and he was cut into many pieces and dragged through the slop on the floor of the slaughterhouse so that some of the people who ate bits of him got sick for a few days, or died, or just had a bad case of gas.

But the good thing was that the leader, the driver and the repair being did such a great job on him, he would live through this form at least 100,000 cycles before anything broke down again.

The End