The Memory of the Body and Other Stories

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“THE MEMORY OF THE BODY” AND OTHER STORIES

by

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of

Brigham Young University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of English

Brigham Young University

August 2006
GRADUATE COMMITTEE APPROVAL

of a thesis submitted by

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ABSTRACT

“THE MEMORY OF THE BODY” AND OTHER STORIES

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This thesis is a collection of short stories written over the years 2002 to 2006. The short story is a genre that requires brevity. The short story writer, instead of treating the totality of human life, is forever, as Frank O’Connor suggests, selecting the point at which he can approach it. For this reason, unlike the novel, there is very little dallying in the short story. The short story writer, as the form requires, must make his world believable and coherent with only a minimum of words.

Based on the experience of the actual author, the short story, like all fiction, entertains and distracts us from our troubles, and broadens our knowledge of people and places. The short story seeks to create an image of the life process by which we feel ourselves moving toward meaning. In brief, the short story, if it is any good, does many things: it convinces us through what can be seen, heard, smelled, tasted, and touched in such a way as to render the highest possible justice to the physical world; it creates a vision that allows the reader to see different levels of meaning in one image or situation;
it gets at the mystery of existence embodied in the prosaic of life as well as in the extraordinary; and it has a sense of immediacy.

This work explores a variety of themes: the body’s ability to remember and internalize both positive and negative actions; the perceived importance of money, status, and respect in marital relationships; how the inability to forgive can make the victim just as culpable as the offender; the middle ground between love and hate; and how sorrow and joy are necessary components for a well-adjusted life. The combined experience of reading this work should be, first, to entertain the reader, and, second, to allow him or her contact with the mystery of existence.
I wish to thank those undergraduate professors whose faces, sage words, and love of literature, even five years after my graduation, still remain fresh and vivid in my mind: Ed Cutler, Jackie Thursby, Ed Geary, Lance Larsen, Cherry Silver, and Doug Thayer. They helped me see how literature should make us feel uneasy about our faults and limitations, and reinforce the qualities that are most noble in us. Having run the gamut of all types of teachers, from poor to extraordinary, I place them at the top as shining examples of the dedication, love, and patience of an exceptional teacher and superior human beings. They gave me more than knowledge—they gave me part of themselves, and I will forever be thankful for that.

I would like to thank my thesis committee. John Bennion, whose time seems to be thinly divided between many student theses, was gracious enough to join the committee at short notice. I am remiss to have made his acquaintance at the end of my tenure at BYU. A writing class from him would have been worth its weight in gold. Bruce Jorgensen, a man who bleeds graphite, picked through my thesis a number of times with a fine-tooth comb. His thoroughness amazed me, as did his many incisive comments. Not much escapes him. Lastly, I want to thank Doug Thayer, my mentor. I’ve been unworthy of the time he’s given me. Over the years, I’ve appreciated his readiness to read a story and comment on it. I’ve cherished, and always will, our correspondence, and look forward to many years of sending him my work.
I also want to thank my good friend, Joe Plicka. Somehow we’ve hitched our wagons to the same writing star, and what a ride it’s been. My time at BYU has been immensely more fulfilling with him. First and foremost, he will always be the audience I wish to please and fascinate when I sit down to write.

Finally, I want to thank my family for their love and support, and for taking an interest in my writing. I want to especially thank my wife, Jen. She’s been patient with my strange compulsion to write, and with the slug’s pace it seems I’ve had in pursuing my Master’s. Her sacrifices haven’t gone unnoticed.
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The Memory of the Body

Halfway through his junior year, Sterling Barrett began dating a dance major named Summer Jamison, a pale handsome girl with long chestnut hair parted down the middle and straight white teeth. Her tight, sculpted body amazed him, as did the way she moved, shoulders thrown back, the gentle sway of her hips, the lightness of step when answering the phone or opening a door, no clumsiness or wasted movement.

At the end of the semester, Summer invited Sterling to a dance recital hosted by the College of Arts. As he sat in the dark shell of the auditorium and watched her turning and leaping in perfect time with the other dancers, Sterling wondered how anyone could put to memory such a complex routine. After the recital, over a bowl of ice cream at Oliver’s, he asked her how it was possible, if it was ultimately the ability to memorize or something more.

Summer didn’t even pause as she spoke, didn’t even slow the progress of the spoon to her mouth, barely looked up. “It’s memorizing,” she said, “but it’s not only about the mind. After a while I don’t have to think about the steps anymore. It’s like it becomes part of me, second nature. My dance instructor always says that our bodies, just like our minds, have a memory of their own.”

Though his relationship with Summer ended soon after the dance recital, Sterling remembered what she had said: our bodies, just like our minds, have a memory of their own. He thought about it later that night as he lay in bed, feeling on the edge of discovery, feeling as if he were moving closer to a place from which he could see life more clearly. What was it? Summer’s words had the ring of truth, a simple wisdom whose authenticity he had always believed, but could never quite articulate, a truth whose
proof resonated not in words alone, but also in actions: our lived experiences inform the body as much as the mind, Sterling repeated to himself as he listened to his roommate’s soft, steady breathing. Sterling knew it was odd, but he could feel the truth of what Summer had said in his body, feel it as an awakened understanding that had unconsciously been shaping his thinking and would forever shape his thinking.

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Soon after graduating, Sterling secured a position in Phoenix teaching high school business and economics and coaching girls’ softball. And then, a month before school started, the principal called him at home and asked him, because of budgetary cuts in the district, to teach a general education course in health and wellness, nothing that difficult, the principal explained, safety, wellness, reproductive health, life skills. Reluctantly, Sterling accepted.

The following week, studying the materials the principal had given him for the course, Sterling began to see a pattern in the curriculum. The textbook, the plastic mannequin with the removable organs, the poster of the circulatory system showing veins in red and arteries in blue, a smoker’s lung, as black and charred as an over-cooked steak, immersed in a glass jar—all spoke to what Summer had told him, a truth he knew most of his students didn’t understand, a truth he wished he’d understood at their age. When the call came, Sterling initially felt less than thrilled about teaching a course on health and wellness, but as he wrote his lesson plans, a certain excitement took hold of him. There was an immediacy and urgency in the curriculum he didn’t find in business and economics. If his students were to find happiness and success, Sterling knew it wouldn’t be through accident or dumb luck; it would be through understanding that simple truth
Summer had shared over ice cream: our experiences, both good and bad, inform our bodies.

So this became the underlying theme of the course, a simple abstraction Sterling reiterated again and again to his students, a concept he hoped would become concrete for them.

On the Friday before winter break, Sterling wanted to prepare his students for a unit on wellness and safety they would start after the holidays, so he showed a slide presentation on substance abuse, hoping it would give them something to think about during their idle hours, maybe even keep a few out of trouble.

Sterling had borrowed the slides from another teacher, the football coach, a tall thick man with a gray beard and a round belly soaking through his shirt. “It’s not enough just to tell them not to do it,” he told Sterling. “You got to scare the hell out of them. That’s what you got to do.” Sterling didn’t like him, didn’t like his icy, unapologetic gaze or his booming coach voice. He seemed colored with disdain and mistrust, a product of a different era, but Sterling appreciated his honesty, liked the way he spoke his mind without pandering or euphemism.

The slides were lurid and shocking, meant to scare with their unflinching honesty, and even Sterling found it difficult to watch them the first time. Each showed the sad physical and mental effects of addiction: the total loss of will manifest in vacant stares and in arms, legs and feet dotted with infection from dirty needles.

That day, in the darkened classroom, as Sterling sent the final slide into the projector, he paused momentarily for effect. He didn’t look at the screen; instead, he watched his students’ rapt attention, the disbelieving eyes and gaping mouths he could
see in the semi-darkness. The slide showed a black man who’d died of sniffing glue. His head was still in the white plastic bag he’d used to contain the fumes, and his unbroken stare visible through the tenuous veil of plastic.

“Beware, ladies and gentlemen,” Sterling told them before the bell rang. “What happened to these people could happen to any one of you. Despite what you think, you are not invincible.” He let his eyes move over the class. “The things you do to your bodies now will affect you for many years to come.” Sterling let his voice trail off until the only sound in the room was the soft hum of the slide projector throwing out its beam of light.

***

On the day after Christmas, Sterling sat on his parents’ couch with the newspaper spread over the coffee table, blowing the steam off a cup of tea, trying to ignore the Andy Williams song playing in the background. The tree, sagging under the weight of a cacophony of glass bulbs and wooden figurines, winked on and off in a way that hurt Sterling’s eyes. He felt restless, penned up, and out of place in his parents’ life, ready to return to Phoenix. He’d flown in the Tuesday before Christmas and planned to stay only a few days, and though his parents had protested, he’d rented a car at the airport and driven slowly toward their house, choosing a scenic back road that would take longer.

The drive bored him, put him on edge. The sky had been the dull color of brushed aluminum, low and menacing, ready to fall in and envelop everything, and the naked trees looked like sticks shoved into the ground. As Sterling had driven through the streets, he’d felt pressed in, the sky lowering, the dark, lifeless storefronts inching forward, the dirty asphalt rising before him. He drove past the rail yard on C Street. At
sixteen, drunk on Keystone Light and on some incipient romantic idea of riding the rails across the state, he’d waited all night for a train to pass, but no train had ever come. There were other places: the water tower from which he’d shined a laser pointer into passing cars; the overpass where he dropped water balloons on cars and pedestrians; his old high school. There were names of teachers he couldn’t quite remember, the steely crash of lockers, the smell of pine disinfectant and bland cafeteria food. Sterling had felt nothing of nostalgia, no tear in the eye, no wish to turn back the great cosmic clock and walk in his old shoes, none at all. Every trip home left him empty and unsure, slightly annoyed and edgy. It was more than his parents’ fawning attention, the way his mother would often remark how happy she was that, despite all the world’s entrapments, he, in the end, had turned out all right, though marriage and a few children, she reminded him, would take off a few more rough edges. Or the way his father, a Canadian with an archaic reverence for teachers but blind to the reality of American schools, would proudly comment to friends and family about his son, the teacher. There was more to it than his parents. It was this: whenever Sterling visited, he couldn’t help wondering: Who was that who waited all night in the train yard? Who was that who stood on that bridge? Who was it that walked those halls with a smirk on his face? It was like another life, another person who’d walked these roads, a person Sterling, now, wouldn’t have liked. In all of this deviance, though, Sterling knew he hadn’t been alone. There had been someone by his side in the train yard, on the bridge, and in those halls, whose face Sterling always hoped would diminish with the passing years and eventually fade from memory. Actually, it was quite the opposite. Year to year, the face enlarged, its features and dimensions becoming more vivid and exaggerated, and no longer did this face
encroach only upon the past. It was a fixture of Sterling’s present, floating there like a parade balloon, like a giant cartoon brought to life, the eyes forever indignant, the unapologetic smile, the voice seeped with disappointment: *Buddy, what have you become?*

Sterling folded the front page and set it aside. The phone rang, a shrill, electronic pulse that pulled at the stiff hairs on the back of his neck and sent his heart racing every time someone called. He watched his mother pad across the kitchen to answer it and he knew immediately by her drab tone that this was the call he’d been dreading since his arrival. “It’s Reed,” his mother whispered to him, her hand clamped over the phone. She had that look on her face, and he knew that look: eyes narrowed, head cocked to the side. It was disapproval she was trying to convey. Sterling had felt the force of that look many times as a teenager, boring into him when he’d taken the car without asking or come home at three in the morning with no explanation.

As Sterling leaned against the countertop and spoke into the phone, he could see his mother locked into place at his side, arms crossed, foot tapping, as if marking time.

“Buddy boy, I’ve been waiting for your call,” Reed said.

“I didn’t know you were in town,” Sterling said, lying. A month before he’d gotten a practically illegible postcard from Reed telling him they should get together over the holidays. The postcard showed an open market in Bethlehem, cramped and filthy. Putting it to his nose, Sterling could almost smell the slabs of meat hanging from some of the booths. There had been other postcards over the years, from Venice, Karachi, Munich, Beijing, all written in a sharp, hurried scrawl. Then there were the letters, letters as thick as novellas, stuffed into envelopes Reed had elaborately decorated with ink. The
letters went on and on about the places Reed had seen, the people, his hope that Sterling could join him, ruminations on past memories, and plans for the future. Sterling couldn’t read them; they were too long and laborious. Nor could he ever respond with equal enthusiasm. The letters seemed too rhetorical, as if they had no purpose beyond persuading Sterling to recapture some vague memory they had once shared, some bygone bond from years past. Sterling had grown up, moved on, gone to college, become a teacher. Reed was part of another life, a forgotten incarnation of himself he didn’t want to think about or relive.

“Didn’t you get my postcard?” Reed asked, and before Sterling could think of an excuse, Reed answered his own question: “I bet it didn’t get through. They were watching me, you know, going through my mail, tapping my phone. Israeli spies. Sometimes they’d follow me. But it’s not important now,” Reed said, brushing the whole matter aside as if the inconvenience of wire taps and surveillance were a fact of his workaday world. “What’s important is that you’re here. Tonight, my house, eight o’clock. We have to catch up on old times.”

“I’ll be there,” Sterling said, knowing that “catch up on old times” probably meant an anarchic diatribe or some bloated recount Reed would give of his travels, something that wouldn’t interest Sterling in the slightest. But he knew the alternative: playing Scrabble with his parents, listening to his dad grumble about his irritable bowel syndrome, surfing the channels until he fell into a stupor.

“I’ve never liked Reed,” his mother said, as he hung up the phone. “Even when you were both little boys, I always thought he was a bad influence. Lighting fires in the backyard and throwing my kitchen knives at the fence, and that wasn’t even the worst of
it: all that mischief in high school, all that tight-lipped rebelliousness and anger. I never believed you thought of any of that yourself. Bob and Edna always had a handful. She still calls me and cries about him. Did you know that? She doesn’t know where she went wrong. She blames herself. I know how that feels, Sterling. Believe me. Heaven knows I shed tears for you back then, all those late nights, all that worrying about where you were and what Reed was concocting.”

“Sometimes you’re so dramatic, Mom,” Sterling said. “Boys will be boys. That’s it.” He didn’t believe it, though. Maybe at one point in his life, years ago, when he and Reed were younger, but not now.

“Yes, but when do boys grow up?” she said. “You grew up, and it’s about time he grows up and gets a job like you, gives something good to society instead of tearing things apart. That whole fiasco in Afghanistan, or wherever it was, and prison in Egypt. He’s an embarrassment to his family, to the whole town. And who knows what’ll happen in the future. God bless Bob and Edna for opening up their door to him again, but they have to know it’s short-lived. Who knows what goes on in that boy’s head? And I don’t understand why you want to see him. It’s not like you’ve seen him in years. I don’t know, maybe you can talk some sense into him, tell him to go back to college, tell him to stop giving his parents grief. I think Edna would appreciate that.”

“I’m not going to talk some sense into him,” Sterling said. “He’s not a child. And it’s not like I even want to see him. We’re not close anymore. This is just a courtesy. I’ll stop in for twenty minutes and then tell him I have to catch a plane tomorrow. In and out.”
“Well, I can’t blame you for feeling that way. You just be careful,” she said as a final admonition. “I can’t imagine he’s changed much. Still the same old Reed I bet.”

Sterling plopped himself on the couch and dug back into the paper. Though he knew his mother had always been prone to exaggerate and lean toward caution (looking for the worst in people is how Sterling put it), he still accepted the grain of truth she somehow spied through the thickest facades—even his own. Call it mother’s intuition or paranoia. But Sterling knew she was right, though he wouldn’t admit it. And he would certainly not continue the conversation. It was old, hashed-out, almost a cliché now that stretched back to when he was a teenager. He’d grown tired of defending Reed.

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They’d known each other since they were five years old. They went to the same church, went to scout camp together, played on the same teams, and got cut from the same teams. And when they were sixteen both declared an unofficial and undefined war against the decadence and hypocrisy of the corrupt bourgeoisie. Or in other words, they were prankish youth who rode around town in their parents’ station wagons committing random acts of vandalism. They drove the country roads at break-neck speeds, harangued yuppies who frequented the posh bistros in Seattle, snuck into construction sites to pull survey markers and beat the heavy equipment with baseball bats. Once they even slashed all the tires of a tow truck company that had bullied an exchange student into forking over five hundred dollars after his car was towed.

Reed saw all of these events as a type of war that allowed him to pass private judgment on those he considered destructive to his cause—or to those he simply didn’t like. He was given to revenge, measured, ruminated on, and dished out tenfold under the
cover of night. There was an older woman, a friend of Reed’s mother. He said she was bossy, trying to turn his mother and the rest of the family against him. One spring his mother let the woman use a part of their backyard to plant a small garden. Carrots, string beans, beets, corn. Sterling had seen the woman a few times, a plump thing planting and watering, weeding and coddling the small green shoots poking through the soil. She looked harmless, but Reed couldn’t take it. “She’s always here,” Reed would say. “She talks about me to my mother. She’s trying to turn her against me.” One night he collected the household cleaning supplies and struck out for the burgeoning plot. He dosed the ground with Windex, Mr. Clean, 409, anything he could get his hands on. The poor woman never understood how her verdant garden had become a barren wasteland, and how that wasteland exuded the sweet smell of Pine-sol.

Only near the end of high school did Sterling begin to realize just how unstable and fanatical Reed could be. There were things that he never considered abnormal until he approached that tenuous line of adulthood and began preparing for college. There was Reed’s strange obsession with the scatological, the passion for mutilating dead animals, his Oedipal hatred for his father—“He wants me out,” he would say; “he’s jealous of me”—the fact that he’d begun taking Ritalin. None of this seemed to make him very different from any other teenager.

But as he approached the final lap of his senior year of high school, Sterling knew there was something horribly wrong with Reed, something that went beyond that age-old adage that boys will be boys, something that the rebellious child grows out of with time. There was the gleam of insanity in Reed’s eyes, an intensity that both attracted and repelled Sterling. Reed was serious, committed to his cause, armed with antipathy, ready
at a moment’s notice to subvert the bourgeoisie, to annihilate globalism, imperialism, colonialism, anything that struck him as rotten in the world. His was the gaze of Moses breaking the tablets, of an angry Christ cleansing the temple. Sterling believed in tragedy, in one small error snowballing into an avalanche. He believed in luck and viewed it with a finite eye. He knew Reed’s luck would someday end, and he didn’t want to be around when it did.

It was during the last part of their senior year that Reed’s aggression took on a paranoid militancy. His letters to the editor in the city newspaper about the denuding of the forests and the horrors of the meat industry were full of vague threats and cries to throw off the shackles of authority and act. Soon he was telling Sterling about his weekend excursions to spike trees and blockade logging roads. Instead of attending the senior class trip, Reed had spent the week chained to a tree somewhere in Idaho.

Reed dropped out of college after a year and joined a church group doing service in Albania, but was quickly deported after helping to organize a strike that shut down the country’s railway system. Six months later he spent a month in an Egyptian prison for vandalizing a rug factory that exploited child labor. Sterling was in college at the time and read every gritty detail in Reed’s letters. The letters were full of Marxist rants decrying the plight of the common man and predictions about how soon the heroic, hungry Proletariat would rise and usher in a utopia where humankind had all things in common. And often he wrote of the prankish acts of their youth, which he now heralded as the start of his personal revolution to change world—through whatever means possible.

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On Reed’s doorstep, Sterling listened for a moment to the music pulsing through
the door, strings and a high androgynous Arabic voice locked in a sad, repetitive groove.
He looked around at the potted plants and knickknacks on the porch, at the
rhododendrons they’d hid behind as boys when Reed’s dad came looking for them. On
the sidewalk, next to the steps, was a black spot as round as a garbage can lid, a dark
cloud forever etched in the cement, from the time they’d started a fire there with rags and
gasoline. Trying to be Boy Scouts is what Reed had told his father after he’d put the
blaze out with a fire extinguisher. Sterling pressed the doorbell and heard a pealing
chorus of bells that was almost lost in the shriek of the music, and he wondered what in
Reed had drawn him into complicity with all the recklessness they’d courted as teenagers.
He knew, inwardly, that the force that had brought him to this door so many times over
the years, that powered his legs as he pumped his bike up the hill and carried him to the
doorstep to ring this bell, was a type of inertia, a compulsion, an energy not part of his
new life. It was Reed’s power to draw him in, to make him feel that they alone
understood something about the inequality and the injustice in the world, and that they
alone could fix it. Sterling kicked at the doormat. He felt nothing now and hadn’t for a
long time.

The music stopped, and then a moment later Reed was framed in the doorway, a
smile cutting across his face, eyes—the eyes of the ascetic emerging from the desert—
blazing. He was wearing a T-shirt, faded jeans, and a knit hat that looked like a
swimmer’s cap. “It’s been too long,” he said, taking Sterling’s arm and pulling him into
the house.

“Yes, it’s been too long,” Sterling repeated.
“Do you know how long?” Reed asked. “Six years. Six years and only a few letters from you, and never a phone call. For all I know you could have fallen off the face of the earth. And look at you now—the teacher. I hardly recognize you. And what do you teach? Business, right? Raising a new crop of capitalists?”

“Business mostly and then one class on health and wellness,” Sterling said.

“Health and wellness,” Reed said. “What’s that all about? You putting condoms on cucumbers for the tykes?” He gave a little snort and then rested an arm on Sterling’s shoulder.

“Nothing like that,” Sterling said. He smiled at the joke, smiled because he wanted to seem affable. “Reproductive health, drug awareness, some life skills.” And then he thought: I teach them not to be like you.

“A teacher,” Reed said. “As long as I know you haven’t gotten stuffy on me.” They walked down the hallway, Reed’s arm still draped over Sterling’s shoulder. “My parents went up to the cabin for the weekend,” Reed said. “I could tell my dad wanted to get away from me. But when the cats are away the mice can play, right?”

Sterling stared at his own hands, at the nervous mechanical movement of his palms rubbing against each other. He didn’t know what to do with them. He was nervous, and he knew why. In their time apart, he’d become everything they’d once despised: the enemy, the repressive System set up to insure the failure of some and the success of others, the booming voice echoing through the halls, the threats and the warnings, the Dockers and crisp button-up shirts he put on every morning—he had become them. There was no adventure in it, nothing of the bravado and intrigue they’d once dreamed about and discussed over coffee at IHOP years ago. He had stability, the
respect of his colleagues, a condo and a car—but Sterling could see these achievements meant nothing to Reed.

Sterling licked his lips and waited. There was really nothing else to say on the subject. “And look at you,” he said, “the world traveler.”

“I’ve been a few places,” Reed said, ushering Sterling toward the couch. “But there’s no place like home, the old stomping ground. Can I get you something to eat?” he asked. “Something to drink? Some coffee or cookies?”

“No, I actually just ate. I just came to say hello.”

“Don’t be silly. You have to stay a while. What can I get you?”

“Really, I’m fine,” Sterling said. “Really.”

They were sitting across from each other, a glass coffee table full of Woman’s Home Journal magazines separating them. Sterling took in the drab room, the brown carpet and the leather couch and chairs rising out of the carpet like strategically placed mounds of dirt. Nothing had changed since he’d been there last. And on the walls, the same pictures of Reed and his parents—at a Sonics game, at Disneyland, at Snoqualmie Falls, Reed as a baby, as a fourth grader with a cowlick, as a teenager. Sterling could see the metamorphosis, the insanity entering and occupying the body. Something in the eyes and something around the mouth, something that caused the lips to curl upward into a maniacal grin. He could see it now in Reed’s smirk, as if everything he took in slightly amused him.

“Nonsense,” Reed said. “I got something you have to try. And you can’t refuse. I brought it all the way from Palestine.” He was already halfway to the kitchen before
Sterling could protest. “I bet you’ve never had anything like this,” Reed shouted. “It’s a little something to put hair on your chest.”

Sterling realized it was necessary that Reed give him something, some kind of offering, some kind of sup, as if they’d turned back the clock two thousand years and he’d just stumbled out of the desert into the arms of a generous host.

Reed returned with two glasses filled with a brown liquid and a plate of baklava. He set the glass and plate before Sterling, and then took a long drink from his glass. He smacked his lips and looked at Sterling expectantly, smiling. “You’re not afraid, are you?” he said. “Not afraid to try something new? Don’t tell me you’re not going to take a sip.”

The liquid had the sheen of motor oil and smelled slightly fermented. Sterling took a sip and cringed as the sweetness hit his fillings. He set the cup on the glass table and stared at the weave of the carpet.

“Tasty, isn’t it?” Reed said. “Tamarind nectar. The Palestinians love it.” He took another pull at the glass and finished it. “Small comforts we don’t have in blessed America.” He rolled his eyes and then rubbed his arm.

“It’s different,” Sterling said, watching Reed stare at his glass, as if he expected him to have more. “Very different, I’d say.” There was something foreign about Reed, Sterling thought, something that reminded him of Lawrence of Arabia galloping through the desert on a camel, the focused intensity of his blue eyes blazing through the slit of his headwear. And his smell: pungent and old world, a mix of cumin and frankincense. And then: “It’s good to see you,” Sterling said. “Really good.” He tried to think of something else to say, some nugget from years ago to carry the conversation, some
innocuous memory Reed wouldn’t latch onto and rant about, anything. But nothing came to mind.

“It’s been too long,” Reed said. “I was hoping you wouldn’t skip town without stopping by. The postcard said it all. I figured you wouldn’t get it.”

“I didn’t,” Sterling said, lying. “I thought you’d still be in Israel over Christmas.”

“Palestine,” Reed said. “There’s a big difference, and people are dying to make that difference common knowledge. The whole place is a mess of Jewish tyranny. It really pisses me off. People die every day and no one hears about it. That’s why I went.”

“I thought you were studying Arabic. Didn’t you say that in one of your letters?”

“That was just a cover,” Reed said. “My ticket in. A lowly student. Can you believe that? My mother was thrilled. Actually, I was a human shield for an Arab minority group called Adalah. I just told people I was student. But they found out what I was doing because they read my email, you know.”

“Who?”

“The Mossad. Israeli Secret Service. They got their hands in everything. They think I’m a revolutionary, an insurgent. Can you believe that? Actually, I don’t mind the label. All I know is they won’t let me go back. They told me at the airport, took me into a room, looked through my bags, acted real tough. All a bunch of bull to scare me.”

“A human shield,” Sterling said. He thought of long-haired, wild-eyed college students throwing themselves in front of bulldozers, waving signs and shouting mantras above the roar of a diesel engine, dingy, unshaven, Birkenstocks and dreadlocks, a Grateful Dead concert without the band. “Are you serious?” Sterling said, feigning surprise and admiration, even a little jealousy, everything Reed would want him to feel.
Sterling could just imagine the image Reed had of himself: the intractable student in Tiananmen Square, the revolutionary, a minor savior to the oppressed.

“Yeah, the real thing,” Reed said. “Building roadblocks for tanks and bulldozers mostly in Ramallah and Nablus. It was a rush. But that wasn’t all. That was just the tip of the iceberg. Remember how I said I always wanted to be in a revolution?”

“Sure I remember.”

“None of that passive-aggressive stuff for me,” Reed said. “I wanted the real thing. I knew a couple guys our age with Hamas. I’d sometimes go out with them at night. Crazy, I tell you. Crazy. I even got something to show for it.” He slowly rolled up his sleeve to reveal a gauze bandage wrapped tightly around his bicep. He unwound the bandage with a practiced dalliance that Sterling knew was meant to effect an air of drama, a kind of slow striptease. The gauze fell away to reveal a crusted red gash no longer than an inch. “The kid standing next to me got it in the stomach. I don’t think he made it.”

“You got shot?” Sterling said.

“Damn straight. An Israeli sniper.” Reed had reapplied the bandage and was cradling his arm as if it were some kind of badge of honor. “Revolution, man, the real thing,” he said. “Bullets, teargas, Molotov cocktails, tanks. I’ve known twelve-year-old kids who’ve blown themselves to pieces in Israeli buses. They’re committed and you have to admire that.”

He stood up and went into the kitchen and raised his voice so Sterling could hear. “Oppression. That’s what it is. People should never be occupied and oppressed.” He returned, a glass in his hand brimming with the turbid liquid he’d offered earlier to
Sterling. “Bullies,” he continued, staring down at the glass as if reading something in its dark surface. He spit the words out as he walked to the window. “Sterling, isn’t the world full of them, from the playground to the office to the White House? Aren’t they everywhere?”

“Sure,” Sterling said, looking at his watch, wondering if his parents were waiting up for him. He spoke the words not in agreement, nor in denial, but merely because he felt that’s what Reed wanted him to say. He watched Reed staring down into his drink, his arms rigid, his muscles tense, his breath coming in small bursts.

“You know, last spring I spent a week in Venice and had a strange experience,” Reed said. He started pacing around the room, gripping his glass as if performing a kind of exercise. Sterling could see the white ridges of his knuckles poking through the skin. “I ran into Liz Schuller at a bar in San Marco’s Square. Remember her from high school? She sometimes hung out with Carly Cantwell. You must remember Carly.”

“Carly Cantwell,” Sterling repeated, the name strange on his tongue. Of course he remembered her. She was a quiet girl, a state champion swimmer with blond hair and full red lips, and a lean body tempered through long hours of cutting through water. They’d had a few honors classes together, had even studied together on a few occasions, and Sterling knew he’d had a crush on her, one of those pubescent musings that’s never realized. She wanted to be a doctor, Sterling remembered. He’d wondered about her sometimes when searching his bookcase and spotting the green binding of his high school yearbook, wondered what had become of her. “Did Liz mention Carly?” Sterling asked.

“Yeah, she mentioned Carly,” Reed said. “In fact, I think she told me a little more than she wanted to. In vino veritas, man, if you know what I mean.”
“Well, what did she say?”

“You ready for this? This is big time. No one knows about it, but Denny Bradshaw raped her the summer after our senior year. Liz didn’t know all the details, but it was at a party and he cornered her in a room. Sure, she tried to fight him off tooth and nail, but how could she against that animal? And to top it off, in the middle of it some girl walks in and just turns around and leaves. Doesn’t do a thing. Carly’s just crying for help and the girl bolts. Can you believe that?”

“Why didn’t she go to the police?”

Reed shoved a worn ottoman with his foot until it was facing Sterling, then sat down on it and leaned forward until their knees were touching. “You see, that’s the kicker, my friend. She did go to the police and they wouldn’t do anything about it. That’s the legal system for you. They’ll give you all the justice you want unless it interferes with what old daddy Bradshaw’s passing under the table.”

“I can’t believe it,” Sterling said, though really he could. Denny Bradshaw was a year older than they were, a high school athlete whose father sat on the school board and had the second largest construction company in the state. Though time had passed, Sterling had certain images of Denny: the arrogant athlete with his shoulder lowered, pushing through the halls as if moving down the field; the young drunk showing up to class in shades, or not even showing up at all; his light eyes and thick jaw, his voice often raised and set to ridicule. Sterling despised him, as many people did. He’d gotten a football scholarship to a midwestern school after graduation, but lasted only two years before dropping out and returning home. There were other rumors floating around, a DUI conviction, money problems from gambling, how his father had threatened to cut
him off because he couldn’t hold down a job in the family business. This was the last thing Sterling had heard, but that was years ago.

“But that’s not all. Here’s the real nut kicker,” Reed said. “You ready for this? The girl who walked in on the rape—the only witness, the only one who could put him away—now works at Bradshaw Construction, as a secretary. A real coincidence, isn’t it? And Carly was just the tip of the iceberg. Liz said she thinks there were others. Who knows how many? But rest assured no one will ever hear about it.”

“It’s not right,” Sterling said. He looked at his hands—surprised they were formed into fists—and opened them slowly. He examined them in the light and closed them when he saw they were trembling.

“Of course it’s not right. It’s a travesty.” Reed walked to the window and glowered at the darkness beyond the glass. “And with guys like Denny the great injustice is that it keeps going on and on. I’ll bet my life on it. Seven years after high school he hasn’t changed. The man’s a time bomb and we’re going to stop him.”

Reed just stared at Sterling.


“I don’t want to make him a hero. I want to shame him.” Reed began pacing around the room again. “I was thinking something more public, like performing a little body work on his car. Let him know somebody’s watching him. Leave him a message he’ll understand.”

“Am I crazy, Reed? I can’t believe you’re talking like this.”

“But I am.”
“Reed, come on. This is nonsense. Really.” Sterling tried to laugh.

“You’ve always swung a bat well, so you’ll man the crowbar. I’ll work the spray paint. Two or three minutes at the most.”

“I’m a teacher. I’d be ruined.”

“We’ve got to take care of business, Sterling. If we don’t, then who will?”

“It just doesn’t feel right.”

Reed laughed.

“Doesn’t feel right? You act like you’ve never done this before. This should be old hat. Remember, make the world a better place? Don’t you believe in that anymore?” Reed straightened his face. “Okay, think about it this way: what about that rapist running wild out there? Does that feel right? He’s probably got his eyes on girls young enough to be your students.” Sterling didn’t answer and Reed kept speaking, but more softly. “I thought you of all people would want to take action. Don’t you see this stuff every day where you work? The Denny Bradshaws of the world pushing down the halls, knocking kids to the ground, mouthing off in class, wanting a free ride? And let me ask you this. Doesn’t it feel good when you can stick it to one of those jerks? Detention, suspension, expulsion. Tell me truthfully, Sterling, and be honest. It’s bliss isn’t it?”

“There is a certain satisfaction.”

“You want to do what’s right by the law,” Reed said. “I respect that. I value that. But isn’t there a higher law here? You do what you want, but I’ve made my decision.”

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Reed filled Sterling in on the details as they drove through the darkened streets, how Denny was now tending bar at the Mecca Lounge on Main Street, and no doubt still
dipping into his father’s piggybank to supplement his meager wage. He’d thought about it a lot, Reed said, even done some research on when they could get the job done. He explained that Denny always parked in the bar’s back lot, and how at this hour the casual drinkers were already on their way home and the serious drinkers were just settling in for the night, and how the band should still be playing, loud enough to mask any sounds they might make.

A dozen or so cars were scattered across the lot. Reed backed into a space on the far corner of the lot where the yellow glare of the street light did not intrude. He looked around and then popped the trunk before motioning for Sterling to follow.

Sterling stepped from the car and felt compelled to follow Reed as he lifted the trunk and pulled out a can of red spray paint and a crowbar.

Denny’s car was parked exactly where Reed had said it would be, between the dumpster and an alley.

The car surprised Sterling. Knowing Denny, he’d expected something conspicuous, a muscle car with wide rear tires or at least one of those small foreign sports cars people mortgaged their houses to buy. Sterling walked around the car, a mid-size Ford with plenty of trunk room and passenger space, something his father would buy, something he someday imagined buying. The car was clean, well-maintained, no insulting bumper stickers, no opulent specialty wheels, no four-thousand-dollar paint job. Sterling peered through the windshield and saw something shiny hanging from the rearview mirror, a photo encased in plastic suspended by a gold chain, a color snapshot of a woman holding a baby. She was smiling at the camera, or at whoever took the picture. Even in the faint, dingy glow the parking lot lights oozed out, Sterling could see the lawn
and the green trees behind the woman and child. Her hair was slightly lifted as if by a burst of air.

“Take this,” Reed said, handing Sterling the crowbar. He lifted the can of spray paint and touched it to the crowbar as if making a toast. “To Justice,” he said.

The crowbar felt cold and foreign in Sterling’s hands. He listened to the bright twang of the music filtering out of the tavern and felt the deep throb of it in his stomach. He watched Reed lean over the hood and write the word *rapist* in large letters that spread from one side of the car to the other, and then the word *bully*. Sterling knew there was a truth in the words. He thought of Denny perched behind the long, lacquered bar, his dark eyes sullen and blank, his square jaw set firmly as he courteously poured drinks and took money. What had he taught his students: that hard work and dedication pay off in the end, that life is fair as long as one is prepared? But then there were the Denny Bradshaws whose brute strength allowed them to take what they want, and when that failed there was always someone’s money to bail them out. Sterling only wanted to bring some good into the world. He slapped the crowbar against his palm and began to understand the message it could send.

Sterling walked around to the driver’s side of the car. He gripped the crowbar with both hands and touched the curved end to the door exactly where he wanted to strike. He widened his legs for support and brought the crowbar above his shoulder as if he were getting ready to swing a bat. He let it go with all his strength and knew, even before the hollow thump of metal against metal and the shock of the blow resonating in his arms, that he would regret this forever.

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Two weeks later Reed called Sterling in Phoenix.

“Buddy, I’m down in Mexico,” he said. His voice sounded distant, as if he were calling from the bottom of the Gulf of California. “I got a little something-something going down here until June and then it’s off to Indonesia. Maybe you’ve already heard about the exploitation, about the sweatshops. Nike, Reebok, the Gap. We’re talking 19th-century England, children working their fingers down to the nubs for a nickel an hour. So how about it? You and me?”

Sterling felt the weight of the receiver on his shoulder, and then the heat building between his ear and the molded plastic.

“Correct me if I’m wrong,” Reed said, “but maybe you don’t want to get involved.”

Sterling switched the receiver to his left hand.

“I hope,” Reed continued, “that you don’t hold something against me.”

“No, it’s not that,” Sterling said, and thought: *it’s what you are and what I am now.*

There was a momentary roar on the other end of the line—a passing truck or bus, Sterling imagined. He imagined other things, the movement of perspiring bodies, dark skin, the chatter of a language he couldn’t understand, the smell of rot and food permeating the streets.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Reed said. “You’re thinking, ‘He made me do it. He made me break the law.’ Well, is that what you’ve become? Is that the truth of it? If it’s true, then people like you shouldn’t break the law. Are you one of those people now, Sterling? Are you? Remember, Sterling, I know you.” And then he went on. But the
words were like an old, overplayed song, a cliché, an argument as faded and worn as the political tracts he and Reed pored over in high school and discussed with a sense of vengeful self-righteousness.

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Three weeks after the call, a letter arrived from Reed. The envelope, bearing a return address for a Calle Estocolomo in Mexico City, was thick and elaborately decorated with a labyrinthine arabesque penned in blue and red ink. Sterling squinted at the design. Its complexity made him dizzy. He weighed the letter in his palm and, knowing he would never read it or reply, scribbled out his name and address, wrote return to sender in a small place where Reed’s design hadn’t consumed the envelope, and returned it to the mailbox—but still he felt this wasn’t enough.

Later that evening, after he’d finished grading some papers, Sterling went to the hall closet and took down a cardboard box from the top shelf. It contained Reed’s letters, large manila envelopes, regular size envelopes, and small envelopes that bulged on one side where it had been necessary to fold the letter—and all bore a dizzying arrangement of intricate designs: arabesques, paisleys, loopy-loops twisting and falling in on themselves in a practically untraceable procession. Sterling knew he should have some kind of affection for Reed’s efforts. Surely, each drawing must have taken hours. But looking down at the envelopes as he carried the box to his study, Sterling felt nothing of that affection. Rather, the way the elaborate patterns ran into each other to form a complex maze angered Sterling, as did the layers of complication and the obstructed paths and blind alleys. And for the next half hour, as he fed the letters into the paper
shredder and listened to its high-pitched whine, Sterling tried not to look as the paper disappeared into the machine.

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Sterling always thought Reed would have a short life, and Reed thought so, too. He flirted with death, courted it as often as he could, and even as a teenager mulled over the possible scenarios of his passing: shot by a Norwegian whaling captain in the icy waters of the Bering Strait; ground into nothing but hair and grease under the tracks of a Russian T-90S tank; hacked to pieces by a crazed band of Somalian militants. It was a slow dance, Sterling thought, a blindfolded back-and-forth Reed had started as a teenager, closer and closer to that sharp edge and the eternity below. For Reed, anything less would have been unworthy of his life, and so he had lived, traipsing the world for a cause that required, first and foremost, an unblinking ability to stare into the darkness of that great unknown, to accept the possibility of the ultimate sacrifice as a pale-faced, medieval saint would: the mortal wound, the dull, spreading pain, the cooling limbs, the rattle, the knowing smile—and finally the end.

So that Sunday morning in Phoenix when Sterling answered the phone and heard his mother’s voice—straining, fighting for composure—he knew what she would say before she said it. He sat at the kitchen table and gazed through the living room and out the window to the overgrown acacia and bougainvillea he’d been meaning to trim. “It’s Reed,” she said. “He’s dead.”

The details were few. According to a phone call Reed’s parents received from the American Embassy, he’d been working with a small non-profit organization protesting the treatment of workers at a textile mill near Guadalajara: picket lines, boycotts, even
sabotage of some of the looms. The Mexican police didn’t know if it was related to the protests, but Reed’s body was found, bludgeoned and bloody, a block away from the hostel where he was staying, his pockets emptied, his shoes stripped from his feet.

“Can you tell me anything else?” Sterling asked.

“His right kneecap was shattered,” his mother said, her voice tripping on the words. “The police think they used a metal pipe to stop him. Isn’t it so brutal? That’s really all I know.” And then she asked: “Will you come to the funeral, Sterling, as a favor to Bob and Edna? I don’t think many people will be there. Maybe you could share a memory about Reed, something nice. It might make them feel better.”


He set the phone down and walked to the window in the front room and stared out at his neighbor’s son, Jimmy, absorbed in pedaling his bike up the street and launching himself from a ramp he’d constructed from a piece of plywood and a cinderblock. Sterling put his hand to the window. He could already feel the heat building. Arrangements must be made, he thought, a bag packed, a ticket purchased, and that afternoon he would be going home again. Standing there, the heat of the window on his palm, he could see the events of the next day: the darkened chapel and the dim colored swatches the stained glass would cast over the scene; the drab organ music grating against his nerves; the black coffin, open, the comfortable white interior, silk maybe, or satin, and Reed, dressed as his mother had always wanted him, in a black suit, a starched white shirt, a red striped tie, his face in repose, his hair trimmed, a smile creasing his lips. But Sterling knew he would see it, the defiance, the pride, even in death, the insolence
and audacity not even lifelessness could quell. And perhaps at the funeral, it would be
expected that Sterling would say something, something kind, and he would rise and say
what was necessary for Bob and Edna, comforting words, words of hope. But Sterling
could not say everything.

He could not say how after Christmas he began a reoccurring dream in which he
always walked the black asphalt of a long country road. On one side was a strawberry
field whose straight green rows ended at the banks of a dark, languid river. The
strawberries were ripe and heavy, ready to pick, and their smell wafted past, the smell of
sweetness, of his mother bottling jam on a muggy summer day. Sparrows squeaked and
darted past like soft brown lines stretched over the scenery. Every few minutes, from a
distance, a car would materialize out of the striated heat rolling off the road and speed
past in a rush of air Sterling could feel against his chest. There was no one he
recognized. The people in the cars were abstractions, generalizations, sometimes men
with mustaches, sometimes with beards or clean-shaven, women with long hair, women
with short hair, teenagers, old men and women, no one Sterling knew. And as always
happened in the dream, Reed would appear out of the undulating heat, driving a black
truck, his right arm draped over the steering wheel, the other waving through the open
window, a smile smeared across his face, his eyes narrowed as if he’d just come upon
something amusing. And in every dream, as Sterling waited for Reed to pass, he would
feel revulsion and disgust working through him. And he could never say how always in
the dream, as if it had a life separate from him, he felt his arm rising in reply.
Sure, I should be looking for a job, out pounding the pavement, networking, dropping resumes. Sure, but I’m not. I’m home, splayed out on the couch in my pajamas, soaking up the last bit of syrup on my plate with a piece of bacon, watching an infomercial on juicers. I could do a lot worse. Between *Days of Our Lives*, *Matlock*, and *Judge Mathis*, I’ll take the infomercial.

I recognize the guy selling juicers. It’s Ron Popeil, inventor of the Ronco rotisserie grill, set it and forget it. He must be in his sixties, a little wrinkled around the eyes, hands spotted, but his teeth are white, bone white, and his hair is the color of stained mahogany, without a speck of gray. He’s smooth, confident. With his patent leather shoes, gray slacks, and crisp white shirt, he could be a lot of things—a politician, a preacher—but the green apron with I FOUND THE FOUNTAIN OF JUICE printed across the chest makes me think he’s found his place in life and does pretty well.

I enjoy infomercials. A few even stand out in my mind: Chef Tony slicing through a pineapple with his titanium knives, the guy with the food vacuum pack and his idiot sidekick, the frumpy middle-aged woman with the frizzy blond hair and the dumb grin smeared across her face. I wonder how much she makes just standing there, looking surprised as the guy vacuum packs wieners. The way she carries on with her uh’s and ah’s, you’d think he was spinning crap into gold right in front of her eyes. I could do something like that, really lay it on thick with the dumb questions and the wide-eyed stare. I know I could do it, stand there, shake my head, and pretend I’d never seen anything so interesting. I could sell, too. It doesn’t take a genius to lift a bowling ball with a vacuum or get some grass stains out of a pair of jeans, and then tell the audience...
my product will make the world a better place, more time with the family, less busy work. Hey, I’ll be the first to admit I’ve fallen for it, even believe it to a certain point. Somewhere in the garage I have a nacho plate and a carpet steamer I’ve never really gotten around to using. Maybe one of these days. Maybe.

Ron asks if anyone in the audience has a cold. His voice is thick and rich and comforting. An Asian woman raises her hand. Holding a microphone, Ron runs out of the kitchen and takes the steps up to the audience two at a time, incredible speed for someone his age. His apron flaps around his knees. Every head is craning to get a look at him. Everyone’s smiling. That’s what I like about infomercials. It’s always a good day, always smiles and applause, always sunshine and puffy white clouds beyond the windows, and always the promise of more. You can tell there’s no other place these people would rather be.

“What’s your name?” Ron asks, pulling the woman up by the elbow.

“Mary,” the woman says timidly. She hooks a loose piece of hair behind her ear and lets out a nervous giggle.

“Mary, my friend, what kind of cold are we talking about—sneezing, aches and pains?”

“I sneeze and cough,” she says. She scrunches her nose and shakes her head. “I don’t breathe good. I don’t sleep good neither.”

Ron turns to the audience and speaks in an urgent, exaggerated voice. “What are we going to do for our friend Mary? Should we drive down to the pharmacy and buy some drugs so she can fill her body with chemicals? Are we going to do that?”

“No!” the audience responds together before bursting into applause.
“No, we’re not going to do that to our friend Mary,” Ron says, leading her by the elbow into the kitchen. “We don’t want to fill her full of chemicals. We want her to know exactly what she’s getting. I’m going to give her all-natural medicine, just as Mother Nature intended it.”

Again, as if by magic, the audience erupts in applause.

Ten juicers line the white tile countertop, all brand new, all shiny. There’s a sink at the end of the counter and next to it a window that looks out onto a few trees and shrubs silhouetted against a sky too blue to be real. Ron stands next to one of the juicers and runs his hand over the silver top. Mary stands next to him, her arms crossed.

“I have something special for you,” Ron tells her. “My own secret recipe. Something I take when I’m feeling under the weather.”

He flips a red switch on the top of the juicer and then begins feeding spinach, parsley, carrots, and whole cloves of garlic into the top of the machine, mashing them down with this square tool that fits perfectly into the hole. An orange liquid oozes from a nozzle on the side of the juicer and slowly fills a glass under it. Ron holds the glass up to the audience.

“Do you know what this is? Pure, all-natural medicine for Mary’s cold. Mary will feel better and know exactly what she’s taking. Drink up, Mary.”

Without any hesitation, she takes the glass and drains it. Ron asks her how she feels. She smiles. The camera moves in real tight so all you see is Mary.

“I so good,” she says.

As the audience applauds, the phone rings. I answer on the second ring. I yawn and scratch myself.
“Hello, Rovin here.”

“Hello, Troy. How are you? What are you doing?”

It’s Anne. Lately she’s taken to rapidly firing off questions when she calls from work, as if there was some kind of big hurry. I know work stresses her, a lot of responsibility, especially this time of year. It’s the busy season she’s told me.

“What am I doing?” I reach for the remote and mute the TV. “Just going through the classifieds.” I reach for the paper and crease it, loud enough for her to hear. I can hear movement on the other end of the line, the low whir of a copy machine mixed with a man’s voice saying, “We can have it out by the end of the week.” I picture her sitting in her cubicle, staring at the prints she bought a while back, blurry paintings of red and yellow flowers in a vase, nothing to get excited about. I can picture the phone cradled against her neck and shoulder.

“So how goes the job search? Have you found anything yet?”

I tell her, and this is the truth, the God-honest truth: “Not going well. It’s not a good time to be out of work, you know. I think the next step is to wait for those construction jobs to close and then see if I can get an interview.”

A dog barks somewhere down the street.

“What about that employment agency? I thought they said your resume looked promising.”

“I called that guy yesterday—the one with the Boston accent—and he said they were still trying to find something to match my incredible talents. Those were his exact words, but it was the way he said it, Anne. He had this sarcastic edge in his voice and I got the impression he doesn’t want me to call anymore. I can tell he doesn’t like me?”
“And the ‘Work Today, Paid Today’ place?” she says.

“I went down there after you left,” I tell her, looking down at the flannel print on my pajamas. I switch the phone to the other ear. “They don’t have a thing. It’s just not a good time.”

I feel bad lying to her, but I’ve really been there before. There was something so depressing about it, the dark waiting room and grimy plastic lawn chairs lining the walls, the dozen or so men and women milling around, waiting for their names to be called. What I always tell Anne is that I’m restless, ready to get out of the house and do anything temporary until a construction job opens up, and that’s why she’s always asking about these crap temporary jobs, because she assumes from what I tell her that they’ll tide me over, make me happy. I know what these temp jobs are, counting nuts and bolts from dusk to dawn or helping some middle-age fat ass load sheetrock onto his truck, and I don’t want any part of that. I might seem anxious around Anne when we talk about work, but the reality is I’d rather wait. Something will open up.

I hear her sigh. Another phone rings in the background and then stops. I wrap the phone cord around my finger.

“I know it’s not a great job,” she says, “but I talked with my manager—Rick. Do you remember him from the company barbeque last summer?”

“Sure, I remember him,” I say, picking at a piece of dry skin on my thumb. Anne brings him up a lot. The way she talks about him, you’d think he was some kind of business god around the office, real smart with the numbers, real good at closing the deal.
“I talked with him about your situation, about our situation, and he said he could pull some strings, get you hired on in sales, for a while at least, if you want, until something else opens up. I think it would be good for you.”

I don’t need to think about it. “I wouldn’t be happy selling computer exams, Anne,” I say. Last July at the company barbeque I had some drinks with a couple guys in sales. Ronnie and Matt I think, no older than twenty-one or twenty-two. Nice enough, but all gloss and shine, gold watches and necklaces, soft pink hands that never hefted anything heavier than a bag of groceries. They asked a lot of questions about what I did. And I told them: excavators, graders, bulldozers. They were impressed, I could tell. I wonder if they still work there. “It would be wasted time,” I tell Anne. I stretch my legs and let them fall to the floor. “It’s better to be out, you know, meet people and drop some resumes. It’s just tough right now. All the problems with the economy.” I say that because I know Anne understands it. Her company’s been hard hit, and she tells me it’s all bottom-line at work.

I stop and wait for her to say something.

“I know,” she says. “We’re feeling it, too. There’s so much pressure when sales are down. It’s just”—her voice gets quiet—“it’s just that I want to get on with our lives, get you established so we can buy a house, start a family someday. Wouldn’t that be nice?”

“It’s in the cards,” I say. And I believe it. I really do. Things are going to change.

Another phone rings in the background.
“I have to go,” Anne says. “But do you want to meet at lunch? I need to tell you something, something good. We could take a walk in the park.”

“Sure,” I tell her, watching Ron mash whole stalks of celery into the juicer. “I’ll meet you at twelve.”

I hang up the phone and watch the infomercial. The juicers are starting to interest me.

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I wish our story was more interesting. We were both nineteen when we met in a comparative religion course at Green River Community College, both fresh out of high school and motivated to take night classes out of a vague sense of guilt and promise that some education might open up a few doors. I saw Anne on the first day of class, slender and pale, sitting in the front row, reading the textbook. She wore her hair long and favored turtlenecks and always walked around with a leather book bag dangling from her shoulder. Her large green eyes seemed to take the whole world in at a glance. I usually sat at the back of the class. That day I took a seat next to her.

The teacher, a short, balding man with a trace of accent and eyes that constantly blinked, was insane. On the second day of class he confessed he’d had a nervous breakdown a couple years back and could only drive taxicabs in Seattle during that time. Anne and I had a good laugh about that after class. We learned that we were both working full-time and taking some night classes when we could. She was serious about it, though, real serious. It impressed me. She wanted a lot out of life, a nice house and a job with some security, and of course a family. At the time, she’d just started as a secretary with the company she’s with now. I had plans, too. I was working construction
with a small land development company. We’d take a piece of land and prepare it for houses, grade it, put in sewer and drainage, measure out sidewalks and streets, and then lay the concrete and asphalt. It was temporary. I had plans, too: of one day starting my own land development company, hiring some guys and buying equipment, really making it big.

After we got married, Anne was waitressing nights at Mario’s to earn some extra cash for tuition. Sometimes I’d stop in after work to see if I could get something on the house, a pizza and a beer. She’d wait on me, the whole nine yards, hand me the menu, fill my glass with water. I’d give her a wink and run my hand down her thigh when she’d get in close enough, touch her breasts when she’d lean over the table to fill my glass. It amused me, just a little game I liked to play to make her blush.

I’d watch her move around the restaurant, winding her way through the tables with a tray of food above her head, filling glasses with water, smiling, always smiling. She said that was the secret to big tips, that and the other small gestures people liked: putting a hand on the arm when leaning in to answer a question and always keeping the glasses filled. She raked in the tips, a few hundred a week.

Sitting there was like a reward. After a long day up to my knees in water and muck, I felt I deserved the service. It seemed like the proper order, the way things were meant to be. I thought I’d work my way up to foreman and make enough for a house, start my own business eventually. She’d quit school and work, and we’d start a family.

It hasn’t happened yet. In the six years we’ve been married, Anne finished her associate’s degree and then transferred to the state university where she did a BS in business management. She told me a few months back her company might pay half her
tuition for an executive MBA program. I haven’t been as fortunate. Ten months ago my boss died and his wife liquidated the company, gave us a little bonus with our last check, and told us how sorry she was. I haven’t found anything since.

Lately, I’ve been thinking about when Anne worked at Mario’s. I have an image of it in my mind, me sitting there in my Carhart jacket and Danner boots, pulling at a beer and watching her, and Anne winding through the tables with a pitcher of water, in the black pants and white shirt she wore as a uniform. I see she’s moving toward something, very slowly, but moving. And I’m just sitting there with a smile on my face. I almost don’t recognize myself. And then I see myself touching her thigh as she leans over the table to fill my glass, and I think, “He has no right to do that. None at all.”

It’s not a race, I have to say to myself. It’s just ebb and flow. One of these days I’ll be back on top.

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Before leaving, I straighten up the house, make the bed and fold some laundry. I dust the TV console and around some of the pictures in the front room. I put on jeans and a brown sweater. I drive slowly and tap my finger against the steering wheel, mimicking the beat of the radio, thinking about the juicers. I’m thinking about what Ron said about the juicers, about the medicinal superiority of fresh-squeezed juice. I think he may be onto something.

I pull into the park and drive down the narrow road toward the picnic area. The trees are like a yellow canopy overhead and seem to crowd in on me. The leaves are falling, large yellow leaves as big as big as my hand. I see them in the rearview mirror blowing out from under the car and then settling on the road. After a mile of trees,
park opens up into a field with covered eating areas, bathrooms, horseshoe pits, and volleyball nets. Anne is standing near the jungle gym, jacket buttoned to her neck, hands in her pockets. She waves as I pull in and kill the engine.

“It’s cold,” I shout to Anne as I step from the car. “Even with the sun out.” I bury my hands in my jacket and walk toward her. The cold air stings my sinuses. I can taste it in the back of my throat, the earthy rot of leaves and grass, and for a moment I’m lightheaded.

She looks up at the sky and smiles. “Cold, but beautiful.” She points to a grove of alders near the river. “I can actually hear the leaves falling through the trees.”

“You must have the hearing of a bat,” I say. I listen, but hear only the click of the engine cooling.

“Fall’s a guilty pleasure,” she says. “It’s getting cold and the leaves are changing and it’s dark by five, but I feel so alive. It’s something about watching the change that I enjoy.” She walks toward me and puts my arm around her waist, leading me toward the river. “It’s sad that there won’t be many more days like this,” she tells me. “Rick says we’ll have a severe winter.”

“Rick. What does Rick know about the kind of winter we’ll have?” He had on pressed khakis and loafers at the summer barbeque, a brown braided belt, and a polo shirt with Calloway embroidered into the breast pocket. “Is he some kind of amateur weatherman on the weekend?” I mean it as a joke.

“He wasn’t joking,” Anne says. “He said you can tell by the wooly bear caterpillars. If their fur is thick, then we’re in for a severe winter.”

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I give a little snort to tell her what I think. “Come on, Anne. Can’t you smell the bullshit in that? I think he’s yanking your chain.”

“Rick wouldn’t do something like that,” she says. I can tell she’s serious about this. “He’s not like that. He’s very professional. I could learn a lot from him. He says I have a lot of potential.”

We take a narrow trail that runs along the river and stop at a bend where the deep water ends and rushes over shallow rocks and sends up a mist. The river makes a low roar. Anne stares at the water, and I can see it reflecting in her eyes.

“Angry water,” I say.

“Angry, but beautiful,” she says.

I kick at a small rock and send it skipping down the bank where it disappears into the water.

“It reminds me of something I read in one of my humanities classes, something about the sound of moving water. I think it’s in Moby Dick.” She bites her lip. “Something about how water and meditation are forever wedded. Do you ever think of it that way?”

“I think of water as cold,” I tell her. Some of the guys I worked with were really into fishing, and they’d always talk about the water, the tranquility of standing in it, the rush of it against their legs, casting a line into it and watching a fish rise. I really don’t know the feeling. Never been much of an outdoorsman. But I do know something about water: the sight of it when you dig down three feet and it comes boiling up, its sour rotten smell when it’s collected on a field and the sun’s heated it, the steady pulse of rain against my thighs when I’m on a bulldozer all day. Not exactly what I would call
romantic. But I don’t want to be too contrary. “It’s a nice idea,” I say. I purse my lips to show I’m really thinking. “I guess I never thought of it that way.”

“That’s why I’d want to build a house close to a river,” she says. “Every night I’d open the windows and fall asleep to the sound of water. Rick has a house right on Lake Tapps. It’s not the same thing, but I bet you can still hear the water. That would be close enough for me.”

I nod my head and kick another rock.

“Maybe it’ll happen,” I say. “We could buy a piece on the White River. I did some work up there. Land’s cheap.” I’m picturing it, a little house with a red tile roof, a slice of the river visible from the upstairs master bedroom. I put some color on the house, plant some shrubs and trees in the yard, but nothing else comes to mind.

“It could be sooner than we think,” she says. She’s smiling, and I know that smile. It’s loaded, ready to burst. It’s hiding something that wants to bubble to the surface.

“What? You know something I don’t?” I ask. “Some little secret?”

“I couldn’t say anything over the phone because no one else is supposed to know,” she says, “but Rick’s promoting me to be Communications Manager. Can you believe it? I’ll be over all the advertisement for the company.”

I step in close and hug her, then kiss her. “Great. I’m proud of you.” I try to feel it. I really do. But I have this thought. Her face is pale, pale and beautiful, except for her cheeks, which are red with the cold, and I can almost picture her dissolving, growing paler and paler until she becomes transparent, and I can see right through her, until she
slips from my arms because there’s nothing left to hold, until the only thing that’s left is the red in her cheeks.

“This is what I’ve dreamed about,” she says. “All that hard work has paid off for once and it couldn’t have come at a better time. This is so good for me—for us, I mean. And it’s not just about the money. It’s about the respect, too.”

“You deserve it,” I say. “If anyone deserves it, you do.”

“But there’s just one drawback,” she says.

“What drawback?”

“Rick says we’ll be putting in some long hours and maybe some weekends too, especially for the next two months since we’re under a deadline with the new products. Are you all right with that? He wanted me to make sure you’re all right with it.”

We stare at the water. I can feel the sound of it soaking into me, grating on my nerves, running into my ears and eyes, flowing between us and the world around us. Water and meditation? I can barely think.

“It’s fine,” I say. “This is what you’ve worked for.”

“Did you see that?” Anne says. She grabs my arm and I feel her fingertips digging into my arm.

“See what?” I follow her gaze to the river.

“I saw something move.”

She points to the water running over the rocks. I can’t make out anything except gray stones and foam. But then I see something with black and silver spots. It disappears and reappears an instant later. And then a black fin breaks the surface and then a silver tail.
“What is it?” Anne asks in a whisper.

“I don’t know,” I say. “I think it’s a salmon going up river to spawn. I’ve never seen one so close.” I can’t take my eyes off it.

“Incredible,” she says. I nod my head.

For the first time I look closely and see that the river bottom is alive with salmon, fighting against the current. I see one in the shallow water near the bank, suspended, kicking its tail wildly, almost madly. The tail stops and the salmon disappears into the deeper water and it’s quickly replaced by another salmon.

“So what happens to them?” she asks. “Don’t they die?”

“I don’t know,” I say. I have only the vaguest idea, a few weak images from somewhere, maybe a TV show or pictures I saw as a kid, a few scraps of unreliable information. I think of salmon flying from the water, snatched midair by a bear. I recall something about home waters and reproduction, but I don’t know if they die. I can’t say for sure.

We stand on the bank and say nothing. She looks at her watch.

“You have to go?” I say, watching the water. She nods her head and turns toward the car.

“I’d love to stay all afternoon, but at one I have to meet with someone from human resources. I can’t be late,” she says.

As she walks away, I remember that I want to tell her about the juicers. She might find it interesting how prune juice cures constipation and pineapple juice relieves arthritis, but it doesn’t seem important now. I can’t stop thinking about the salmon.

I follow behind her and turn to look one last time.
Allison was making an event of the evening, and the last thing Robert wanted was an event.

He stared at the wedding china on the table, at the polished forks and knives, at the starched white napkins folded into a crown and set on top of each plate. He tried not to let her see how this preparation irritated him. She brought a steaming bowl of mashed potatoes from the kitchen and set it near the center of the table. He stared at the cratered surface of the potatoes. The phone rang, and instead of listening to Allison answer it, he walked into the living room and peered through the window.

The dark, menacing clouds seemed fitting for the occasion. After all, it was only his father and his new wife (What was her name again?—Judy) coming for a day or two, “passing through” was how his father had explained it over the phone, as if that were his only reason for the visit. Apart from an occasional call and the belated birthday cards, Robert had little contact with his father. Allison knew only a little, the barest of details. “You should just bury the hatchet,” she would tell him, “or someday you’ll regret it when he’s gone.”

A burst of wind rattled the bare alders in the front yard. Things like infidelity, like betrayal and lost trust, just don’t vanish. They are like scars that might pale over time, but remain visible. A mid-life crisis, a restlessness associated with growing older. Perhaps it was the same restlessness that kept them waiting, with Allison in the kitchen preparing the fatted calf for the glorious arrival, not knowing there was a good chance the guests of honor might not stop and then call tomorrow from Canada to say they’d decided to keep driving.
“It’s for you,” Allison said.

Robert could see her faint reflection in the glass. He turned away from the window and looked at her standing over the table she had prepared. It would almost be satisfying if his father didn’t stop. The wasted food, the wasted time—then maybe Allison would begin to understand. For a moment, he hoped it was his father on the phone, ready with some excuse.

“It’s someone from work,” Allison said. And then she gave Robert a look that told him he was not to leave, that his responsibility was to be here when his father arrived, to break bread and fill the room with merriment, to smile and burst with interjections like “you don’t say” and “think of that” while his father jabbered the night away.

“I thought it might be my father,” Robert said, “telling us he’d just scratched our visit and checked into the Best Western.”

“I’m sure he’s on his way. Probably just running a little behind.”

“Always behind,” Robert said. He pulled at the collar of his shirt and swiped a hand across his damp forehead. He could just picture his father held up for the evening in some cozy nook off the highway, oblivious to all the preparation that had gone into his arrival. For a moment, Robert wondered if something might have happened, a flat tire or some other kind of car trouble, or at worst an accident. It was easy to imagine the tattoo of the skid marks, the strewn debris, the broken windshield and crumpled hood, a wheel hanging off its axle, the car resting in a ditch, and people milling around it shaking their heads.

He stepped away from the window, saying, “I’ll take it in my office.”
The glow of the streetlights was a feeble presence in the room, but Robert didn’t bother with the light switch. He rather liked sitting in the darkness, liked watching the precession of the swirling wind-swept gloom beyond the window. He picked up the receiver and waited to hear the click of the phone in the kitchen before he began to speak. As he listened, Robert stared at the low clouds passing like ships on a dark sea, and remembered how as a child he would stare at them until images appeared. Often he wondered about these strange apparitions, where they came from, if they were a reflection of something within him or merely random connections between the eye and the brain.

Just as he finished the call, Robert heard the bright pealing of the doorbell and then his father’s voice: “We would have been here sooner, but Judy had to stop at every rest area between here and Sacramento.” The voice was light and joking, and Robert imagined his father speaking the words. Below the cheerfulness, though, lingered a hint of annoyance those who didn’t know him might miss. Robert adjusted his tie and walked into the hall.

For a moment he watched the embraces, and then Allison taking coats and firing off questions about the trip and the weather through the passes. She had just put the coats over the loveseat when Robert stepped from the dark hall into the living room. He saw his father straighten up and turn to face him. He looked more gaunt and sunken than Robert remembered, and his hair was almost silver now and somewhat thin around the crown of his head. A stranger passing through or a man trying to make an impression—Robert was unsure.
“Wood floors,” his father said, tapping the floor with his heel. “You’ve done well, son, and been so modest. Judy and I thought we were in the wrong neighborhood.”

Robert looked at his father, not at his face, but more at the space he was filling. His presence felt unreal, like an old acquaintance that appears in a dream. “Allison’s fixed a nice dinner,” he said. “We thought you might be hungry after your trip.” He lifted an arm to direct them to the dining room.

“We haven’t had a good meal all day,” Judy said. It was the first thing she had said since arriving. Robert had been in the same room with her only a few times since the marriage, and in their brief encounters, she was exactly as she appeared—a brunette with gray roots, full of smiles, as interesting as a bag of nails. Her saving grace, Robert thought, was that she said very little.

Instead of moving toward the table, the father draped his arm over Robert’s shoulder. “Give your old man a hug,” he said. Robert almost stepped back—almost withdrew himself as if the embrace were some kind of punishment. But he stopped, barely flinching as he felt his father’s hand drumming softly against his back. When they stepped back, Robert, for the first time, looked more closely at his father’s face, at the sallow skin stretched tight over the cheekbones, as if the skeleton were working itself through. He saw now that his father had become an old man, slightly stooped and dappled on his face and hands. But the deep blue eyes—like his own—were still clear and intense.

“Let’s sit down and eat before the food gets cold,” Robert said, motioning his father and Judy toward the dining room table. The sound of his voice, its flatness and formality, surprised him, as did his wooden gestures, the way he walked toward the
dining room and pulled out his chair as if everything in the room, the chair and table included, were made of glass.

Allison brought in the roast and the green beans while Judy rubbed her palms together and sniffed the air like an animal on a scent, saying in her high breathy voice how they’d gone to too much trouble. Allison pooh-poohed that idea and stuck a serving spoon into the potatoes. Robert stared at the steaming bowls set on the table, a first-class meal they provided because he knew it was the right thing to do—a man cares for his family, as simple as that. He took a spoonful of potatoes and watched his father fork green beans onto his plate. What am I looking for, Robert wondered: regret, guilt, sadness? He took a bite of potatoes and thought about what he wanted to see on his father’s face. Guilt, even if it were as faint and fleeting as the pulse of a star.

While they ate, Robert’s father chattered away about some of the adventures he’d had over the years as a sales rep with a pharmaceutical company, and more recently how he and Judy planned to spend their retirement traveling. He didn’t eat much, just picked and nibbled a little at the green beans and meat. About halfway through the meal he turned to Robert. “So what about you, son? How’s the private investigator business?” Robert crushed the napkin on his lap and noticed, for the first time, how the glass bowl holding the potatoes was shaped like a rose. The sides of the bowl are the petals, Robert thought. The idea seemed ridiculous to him. When he didn’t answer, Allison began speaking.

“Just the other day Robert was telling me how he was at work when he heard a metallic boom from the street below. He looked out the window and saw two crumpled cars in the intersection. You know what he did? He grabbed his camera, ran down to the
street, and started taking accident photos. He gave his card to the girl who got T-boned
and now he’s working for her lawyer.”

Judy was smiling, her head bobbing back and forth like a sprung jack-in-the-box,
and Robert’s father was smiling too, the plastic, constipated grin Robert always despised
because it revealed nothing. “That’s my boy,” he said, leaning an elbow on the table and
throwing a wink. “Carpe Diem, make hay while the sun shines and all that stuff.” He
said the story reminded him of something that had happened to him, and then he was off
on a string of tales that lasted until Allison brought in the pumpkin pie and started carving
out pieces.

While the pie was getting passed around, Robert stood and tossed the crumpled
napkin on the seat.

“I have to leave now,” he said.

“Robert!” Allison said. She set her fork on the china plate with more force than
was necessary. Judy’s head began bobbing back and forth between them.

“That was Ian on the phone. He can’t go tonight.”

“Can’t this wait? I mean, why do you have to go tonight?”

“This is surveillance on a big case. We’re talking thousands of dollars in the long
run. It has priority.”

“Can’t someone else do it? You own the company. Can’t you get on the phone
and make someone else do it?”

“It’s my responsibility.”

“There are other things you’re responsible for.”
“A doctor in Kent is getting divorced because his wife is a meth addict. As things stand now, she gets custody of the children unless we can gather evidence against her. Think about the children.” Robert scooted his chair under the table and glanced at his father, who had suddenly taken an interest in the green beans on his plate. “Really, there’s no place I’d rather be than here, but I cannot.”

“My son the private investigator,” the father said. “You don’t worry about us, cowboy. You go out there and get them.”

“How long will you be gone?” Allison asked.

“I don’t know.”

She stared at him as he pulled the video camera and his briefcase from the hall closet and then put on his coat and hat. He was checking the camera battery when he heard his father pick up right where he had left off with one of his old yarns. When Robert opened the front door, he heard his father call out, “We’ll save some pie for you.”

Robert paused slightly, then lowered his head and stepped into the night.

He drove slowly through the deserted streets and into the foothill neighborhoods where each home looked like a dark ship riding its own sculpted acre. The alders and maples trembled in the wind. Craning his neck, Robert noticed how they faintly resembled the human skeletons he once studied in an anatomy class, stripped and fragile, deprived of mystery.

When the call came, Robert had jumped at the chance to get out. For this he felt ashamed. But as he listened to his father chatter away with that fake smile smeared across his face, Robert feared he might say something, feared he might ask his father how he managed to sleep at night. He pictured his father seated at the table, relaying some
problem he’d encountered and the ingenious way he’d solved it. And then he’d laugh, his whole body collapsing backwards as if he’d been struck with something happy. There was nothing restrained about it, and Robert saw in that the hubris of his father’s life.

The doctor’s house was at the end of a quiet, sleeping neighborhood. Its red tile roof and arched portico reminded Robert of photographs he’d seen of Tuscan villas. The house, fringed by lilac, forsythia, and juniper bushes, looked better planned than most people’s lives. To the right of the front door was a large plate glass window. The blinds were open and a single lamp threw a moody layer of light over the room.

Inside the car, Robert sifted through the radio stations, watching the indigo glow of the dial speeding through the numbers as if it were searching for a code. He punched at the radio again and listened to the clinical baritone of a man’s voice building an argument for military action against Colombian drug lords, berating any caller who disagreed with his position. Robert reclined the seat slightly and watched the open window for any movement. He dreaded surveillance—this voyeuristic peek into a stranger’s life—and realized if his father were not coming, he would have done everything to get out of it.

When he’d first gotten into the business, he enjoyed this. There was a certain curiosity in capturing people’s truest moments—when they felt no one was watching. Plus, he found that many people were intrigued by what he did, intrigued that he carried a license in his wallet that permitted him to sort through a person’s life like he would a closet of clothes. But with surveillance, the tedium and the boredom and the long hours were only some of the frustrations he’d developed over the years. There was another:
often, he felt the scenes playing out before him were pre-determined, that the people before him, like actors entering and exiting a stage, were following a sequence of events they had unknowingly scripted. The scenes were sad, full of people playing their worst selves against the backdrop of their crumbling lives.

Robert noticed a bit of dried mashed potato stuck to his shirt cuff and wiped it away. He wondered if his father, Judy, and Allison were still talking, or if they had long since gone to bed. As he looked down at his watch, Robert saw from the corner of his eye that another light had been turned on in the living room. He lifted his arm carefully, as if a quick movement might cause the scene to scamper away. The camera felt like dead weight in his hand, like a weapon that only required him to aim and push a button. With a tap of his finger, Robert thought, he could start the process that would save some lives and ruin others. He put the camera to his eye and framed the doctor’s wife in the viewfinder. And then he pressed RECORD.

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It was much later than he thought when Robert started home. Rain began to fall as he drove through the deserted streets, and he listened to the metallic din of the drops striking the roof of the car. Despite the cool weather, Robert felt hot and stuffy, and opened the vent to let in the outside air. He leaned forward and inhaled deeply the smell of wet pavement and decomposing vegetation blowing on his face.

Approaching an intersection, Robert watched the light change from green to yellow, and then to red. The streets were empty and he felt a sudden urge to sit at the light and watch it go through the sequence again and again. He listened to the steady slap
of the wipers working over the windshield and slowly inched forward when the light changed.

The house was dark. Robert flipped off the headlights as he pulled into the driveway. He listened to the click of the cooling motor and slowly gathered the video camera and the briefcase, pausing slightly to scan the windows for any movement. He opened the front door and walked through the shadowed house with an assured, practiced step. He set the briefcase and the camera in the closet. In the morning he would transfer the 8mm tape to DVD and review his notes in preparation for writing a report.

Light filtered through the front window, dark and watery, spilling shadows onto the floor and furniture. Robert glanced around at the silhouettes of Allison’s plants throwing their strange figures across the room. He saw the glossy top of the dining room table through the doorway and detected the slight aroma of food lingering in the air. He heard a muffled sound and went rigid.

“Son, I thought I’d wait up for you like a good father.”

Robert felt his hands tingling and the blood pounding in his ears. As his eyes adjusted, he saw his father slouched on the loveseat with a bottle between his legs and a glass in hand. Immediately Robert felt anger slip in behind the fright, irritation that his father would desecrate the house with his drinking. “So you’ve taken up the bottle again?”

“Just a nip for an aging man,” the father said. And then he laughed and threw back the glass. “It’s strange, but I can’t sleep anymore.” He motioned to the couch. “Why don’t you take a load off and give your old man some company before running off to bed?”

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Robert watched his father refill the glass. He forced himself to stay in the room and sit on the couch facing his father. He rested his hands on his knees and waited, feeling as if he were being interviewed.

“So how’d it go?”

“Pardon?” Robert said.

“The surveillance. The mother on meth?”

“Oh, too long.”

“So what happened?” the father asked. “Smoking gun?”

“No,” Robert said. “We’re rarely that lucky.” He rubbed his eyes and let the silence build.

“But still you get the bastards and bring them to justice.” His father whistled and then took a drink. “My friends’ kids are teachers, mechanics, boring stuff like that. But when I tell them my son has his own P.I. firm, they’re in awe. Really knocked out. They want specifics, but I don’t know any.”

Robert watched his father, how the shadows of the streams of water coursing down the window twined together and cast an enormous net over him.

“I read about the capital case your company did,” his father said. “The skinheads who stomped that kid to death outside the pool hall. I even saw the interview you did on TV. I told everyone that was my boy.” He paused and Robert knew he was filling his glass. He didn’t look, but he knew.

“Do you mind if I drink?” his father said. “I should have asked.”

“I’d prefer you didn’t,” Robert said. “Not in my house. Not after all that’s happened.”
“I understand,” his father said softly. He set the half-empty bottle on the coffee table, but held onto the glass. Robert stared at the bottle sitting on top of a stack of Good Housekeeping magazine Allison was always thumbing through. In the dull light the glass and the magazines looked like a still life, like an artist’s horrible joke at juxtaposition.

“So what has that really done for you?” Robert asked. The question sounded hard and accusatory, and he meant for it to strike a nerve.

His father sucked a tooth and then set the empty glass next to the bottle. “We both know what it’s done, Robert, but tonight”—he paused and then took a deep breath—“maybe tonight I hoped it would give me some confidence so we could sit and talk as father and son.”

“So that’s what you want?” Robert asked. He stressed the “you” and held onto it for a moment. “Twenty years after the fact you want us to sit down as father and son, and have a wonderful conversation?”

For an instant, watching his father’s dark figure caught in the shadowy net cast over the room, Robert listened to his own voice and hardly recognized it. And then he pictured the woman—the doctor’s wife—in the living room, surrounded by the wooden bookcases and the photographs on the walls, unaware that beyond the dark window he was watching, recording her seated on the couch, cradling a toddler wrapped in a pink blanket. Robert exhaled and rubbed his hands against his face.

“I don’t want us to pretend,” the father said. “I just hoped we could sit here and talk like normal people, like two men who know people make horrible mistakes they regret forever.”
The doctor’s wife had sat on the couch, smiling and singing softly to the child while Robert sat in the car, craning forward, the camera humming. He’d wanted her to do something horrible to that child. He stood and walked to the window. Looking past the tiny streams on the glass, he could see the wet pavement glistening under the yellow street lamps and knew anyone trying to look in on them couldn’t see.

“Do you remember when I played little league?” Robert asked.

He heard his father take a deep breath. “I remember you played baseball and played it well, but I don’t remember much from that time.”

Robert was so close to the window he could see the moisture from his breath building on the glass. “When I was ten I told you I wanted to play little league. You said you would put me on a team. But I told you the city didn’t have a league. Do you remember what you did? You called the mayor and got him to donate some uniforms and equipment, and then you got some guys to coach.”

The glass felt cold when Robert touched it, almost glacial. “Once in college my roommate and I were talking about memories from childhood, and I told him that.”

Robert pulled his hand away from the window and saw he had left a small smudge. “My roommate said his father would never have done something like that. He was jealous of me . . . of us.”

Behind him, Robert could hear the creak of the loveseat and then his father’s steps blending with the sound of the rain as he approached the window.

“The woman tonight didn’t know I was there,” Robert said softly. He watched his father’s reflection pulse and shudder with the movement of the water on the glass. “Do you know what she was doing?”
“No. I don’t.”

“She was rocking her kid to sleep.” Robert turned away from the window and felt blinded as he looked into the dark room. “That’s what I got.”

“So that’s it?” his father asked. “Case closed, time to move on?”

“It’s not like that,” Robert said. “They’ll pay me to keep watching until she slips up, or until she does something we can construe as neglect.”

“It seems like a strange business,” his father said. “I guess I really don’t understand what you do, Robert.”

“It’s simple, really. I sort through people’s lives and find what they don’t want anyone to see. I watch them when they think no one’s watching and hope they do terrible things so my clients are happy. That’s what I do.”

“But in the end, aren’t most of them guilty?” his father asked.

“Most are,” Robert said. He sighed, suddenly at the edge of exhaustion. “Others are just trying to start over. But the truth is”—he paused, reluctant to continue, but knowing he must—“the truth is, if I had to, I could find something on anyone. Everyone has something.”

“Sounds like a line of work that lends itself to pessimism,” his father said. “I’ve heard it’s the same with cops. After a while they can’t trust anyone. They think everyone’s lying. I don’t blame them. The world’s rotten—at least most of it. But what. . .” His father paused, then tipped his head back and laughed. “What a strange idea I just had. What if some guy walked into your office today and hired you to find the good in someone? Wouldn’t that turn the business on its ear?”

“It would never happen,” Robert said. “There’s no money in it.”
“I’m just speaking in the hypothetical,” his father said. “Really, what if some guy walked into your office today and instead of all that insurance fraud crap, adultery, and bad credit, the guy—and remember he has deep pockets—wants you to find the good someone had done? Could you do it?”

“I guess I could, if I wanted,” Robert said. But he was unsure where he would start such a search. The resources he used—county, state, and federal criminal databases, marriage, bankruptcy, and Department of Motor Vehicle records—would be of no help.

“And let’s say,” his father continued, “that this guy hired you to sit outside a house like this one, on a night just like this, to watch a father and a son talking in the dark. Do you think you could find some good in the father?”

Robert rapped his knuckles against the glass. “It would be impossible to look in,” he said. “Without lights I couldn’t see anything.”

“But what if you could?” his father asked. There was an insistence in his voice Robert had never heard before. “What if it were possible to see the whole scene perfectly, the son standing where you are, and the father standing exactly where I am, neither knowing he’s being watched?”

Robert was silent for a moment, rubbing his eyes, as if that might help him see better. “After so many years, I don’t understand why it’s important anymore.” He stepped away from the window and grabbed for a glass ornament Allison had put on the coffee table. He hefted its weight in his hand and watched the faint light play on the colors floating below the cold, transparent surface. It was a useless object, he thought, totally useless.
His father stood like a statue against the window, unaware that Robert was no longer standing at his side. He reached an arm into the emptiness where Robert had been, and smiled sheepishly at his reflection. Robert sat down heavily on the loveseat and loosened his collar. He felt restricted, caught in the shifting net working down the walls and across his body.
Middle Ground

It was a week ago Saturday. I was at the shop hosing off my toilet auger, taking in the red and yellow Indian summer, the darkening sky, and the smell of water and dirt. I was planning the evening: a thick steak, the four Coronas and two limes stashed in the refrigerator, a movie, something loud and fast with little talking. That’s when the doctor’s wife called.

“Doctor Plumber,” I said. “Healing for your home."

“Doctor Plumber.” It was a low breathy voice, as thick and as rich as a bowl of mousse. She articulated each syllable, repeated them slowly and carefully back to me in a way I didn’t like, in a way that reminded me of the amused, unbelieving tone most of us take with children. “Listen, Doctor Plumber,” she continued, “the toilet in my guest bathroom is broken and I need it repaired immediately. You see, my husband’s a doctor and when he comes home I like to see the house is in order. Do you understand? We’re having company tonight, very important people, and you must come now. I live at 1673 Highland Drive. I’m hoping you’ll finish quickly. I don’t want anyone to see. . . . Just hurry, please.”

The voice pulled at the hairs on the back of my neck, squeezed at my lungs, moved slowly up my back like a claw. I could feel my stomach churning, could taste something sweet and acidic building in the back of my throat.

“Have I ever worked for you?” I asked, scribbling the address down on a pink work order. The phone made a dry, yielding squeak as I gripped it. I could feel the heat building where it touched my ear. The pen seemed uncooperative. My hand shook.
There was something in the voice I didn’t like, something abrasive. It sounded strangely familiar.

“You haven’t,” she said quickly. “I’ll give you all the necessary information when you arrive. 1673 Highland drive. Please hurry.”

I sat there, turning that voice over, examining it like I would a small shiny stone. The woman had no connection to me. She was a stranger, yet why was I so bothered? I try not to be bothered. The gravity of my profession requires it. Burst pipes, regurgitating sinks, leaky water heaters—I’ve handled them all without breaking a sweat. I couldn’t believe it. Sixty degrees and I felt the heavy beads collecting on my forehead.

That voice. I wanted to say it was nothing more than snobbery. Occasionally I get a rich bastard, but usually the affluent are some of my best customers, very kind, very cooperative, very ashamed and embarrassed that a stranger should lay eyes on their waste, if you know what I mean, as if the secret would get out that they actually move their bowels like the rest of us. This was more than snobbery, but what? I looked through the open door. A pair of mallards streaked past through the twilight like stage props on a wire. What about that voice? And then it hit me like a steel-toed kick to the guts: the woman’s voice reminded me of my ex-wife’s, firm and demanding, dark and painful, as aimed and weighted as the wrecking ball she’d driven through our lives three years ago, a voice like splintering wood, shattering glass, metal scraping metal. The sound of things coming apart.

I could feel my fists harden, could feel my fingers wanting to tickle the wrench hanging from my belt.
Three years after the fact, three years after the whole catastrophe, she’d still pop up, some grating memory of her, some thorn in my side.

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“It’s a dirty job, isn’t it?” I must hear it a couple times a month, and it’s not the question, it’s the way whoever asks it smiles and slaps my shoulder like they’re so witty and original they can’t contain themselves.

I won’t deny it: I’ve been up to my eyeballs in crap; felt it pressed up against me like a cold, wet hand; picked it from my ears a week after the fact; tasted it on my tongue; looked through it like a brown lens when it’s run into my eyes. But it’s not always that bad. Usually it’s mundane, plunging a toilet, snaking a drain, laying pipe. People ask other questions too: How I can stand the sight and smell of it. How I can slave away in some forgotten crawl space. But when I tell people my services come at sixty-five bucks an hour that usually does it. There isn’t a lot most of us wouldn’t do for sixty-five bucks an hour. Money’s only part of it, though.

Turn to plumbing in the Yellow Pages. Take a look at the full-page ads: a dark-haired beauty leaning over her clogged sink, her hand resting on her forehead, as if that hand’s the only thing stopping her from plunging into the murky water; a sculpted J. Crew model poured into a pair of Dickies and a mesh hat, a pipe wrench dangling from his lily-white hands; the silhouette of a busty woman in a steaming shower revealing just enough glistening flesh to make a search for the magnifying glass a tantalizing chore. That’s what it’s become. But turn past all the commercialism, past the $2000.00 full-page spreads, past the melodrama and phony cartoons, and you’ll see my ad: Doctor Plumber, Healing for Your Home. And there I am, in black and white, wearing a lab
coat, concerned and ready, brow furrowed, eyes narrowed, lips tight, right foot slightly forward as if ready to spring into action.

It wasn’t my idea. Bruce Hart, a friend from high school I’d played softball with in the city league, a money-minded guy who’d run a convenience store out of his locker during most of his senior year, suggested it when I was getting started in the business. He said there were as many plumbers out there as attorneys (after law school he’d established a successful practice by dressing as a Mariachi and soliciting legal counsel for Hispanics on daytime and late night TV—Señor Amigo, I think he called himself). He said I had to do it differently, stick out in the consumer mind even if it was as a caricature, and that’s where I got Doctor Plumber. And it’s not fake. There’s something to be said about how a plumber restores the body and spirit of the home. Serious.

I’m one who looks beyond the surface, to the heart of something. That’s what a plumber does. When most people look at a home, they see the Alenco windows, double-paned, the Clopay insulated steel garage door, the Sears aluminum siding, the shingle roof. I see that too, but there’s more. I see a body, a mouth, eyes, an organism as real and as tangible as human flesh. And my specialty? The veins, the arteries, the intestines—or simply, the water and sewage pipes.

Most people never consider this complex circulatory system running under their feet and above their heads. They don’t give a second thought to the water running from the tap, to the metallic whirl of the garbage disposal, to the way waste disappears with a small flick of the wrist. A small gurgle and it’s gone, the water and the waste sent into motion toward an unimaginable subterranean realm. And nobody cares about the comings and the goings until one day when all that waste and foul water creep back up
and work across the floor. Or no panic until they turn the faucet and—for the first time—nothing. Absolutely nothing. And then the system comes to a gurgling, bubbling halt, and for such simple reasons—a corroded stopper valve, a utensil or coin lodged in the sink, a forgotten dishrag blocking the main house trap. The home becomes a useless receptacle of waste, poisons collecting, vital fluids unable to flow, a body slowly dying. A home can die from any number of things.

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My wife must have thought little of the life we’d built. She left most of it behind: wedding photos, letters, recipe books, the dresses and jewelry I’d bought her.

I needed to start over, to forget ten years as if they’d never happened. That’s what I remember thinking: that forgetting was important, that forgetting was a new life, a new start. But all those things—the personal effects we pack into drawers and closets, the photographs and journals meant to record our days—were still there. I’d find myself standing in her closest, running my hand over her dresses, turning over pairs of pumps, staring at her blouses, marveling at how limp and lifeless they seemed dangling from the hangers. I hated her for how quickly she detached herself from me and from everything we had, and never a phone call, never a letter. She wanted nothing.

I couldn’t snap out of it. I couldn’t work, I couldn’t eat, I couldn’t move a foot forward. The hate infected me, filled my mouth with the taste of metal, settled into my limbs like sediment, looped unmercifully through my mind, gaining momentum and expanding until I felt it was all I knew. I wanted to smash her to pieces, grind her to dust, feel the soft contours of her body snug against mine as I drifted to sleep.
At about that time Bruce dropped by. He’d heard what had happened, he said, said it was tough, a real ball-breaker. He was freshly shaven, dressed in khakis and a button-up with a loud tropical print spilling over it—flowers as big as my fist oozing blood red petals, parrots cavorting in trees. It gave me a headache.

He stood in the shaded living room, his nose lifted, sniffing the foul stagnant air I’d grown accustomed to, tiptoeing over the pizza boxes and crumpled hamburger wrappers scattered here and there, observing the situation objectively as if it was a messy case he’d just been handed and expected to put in order. He’d avoided looking at me, and, finally, when he did, the look told me everything. He opened his mouth as if he wanted to say something, something unchecked and honest, but then snapped it shut.

“Do I look different?” I asked.

“Yes, you do,” he said.

I didn’t need to ask. I could feel it, the weight of my body, the skin sagging. That afternoon I’d studied myself in the mirror, full face and then profile, and then I grabbed a picture taken of us last year on the beach at Saint Anthony’s and compared it to what I was seeing in the mirror. The change was incredible. I’d aged since she left, my hair graying around the temples, thinning out a little higher up, bags under my eyes, my skin pale and shiny, almost translucent. I inched up my sleeves and stared at my forearms. They’d once seemed corded, the thick bands of muscle like taut rope under the skin, but there was no definition now, only a flabbiness that sucked at my fingers when I poked at the skin.

“It’s strange,” Bruce said. He hovered above the couch and stared fixedly for a moment down at the mess of dirty clothes draped over the cushions, spilling onto the
floor, and decided against sitting down, choosing instead to lean against the wall. “I’m at a loss for words. I could tell you everything you need to know about the legal issues surrounding divorce, but I have a feeling you don’t need to hear any of that.” He set a card on the coffee table. “It’s a support group for divorcees,” he said. “Some clients recommended it and I thought it might help.” He yanked at his collar, setting the whole tropical scene on his shirt into motion. “It’s tough, it really is, but life—” He stopped and stared at the ceiling, as if what he wanted to say next was written there and then had suddenly vanished. “I have to meet a client for lunch,” he said, sidestepping the mess on the floor to get to the door. Before softly closing the door, he said, “Think about the group. It’s seems like such a cliché, I know, but it might just be what you need to get back on your feet.”

I was skeptical, I’ll admit it. But I was lonely, locked up in my sad, miserable world. I was vulnerable, open to almost anything by that point.

At the first meeting I sat on a cold metal chair with a group of people, young and old, male and female, who looked as haggard and disheartened as I was, drinking coffee and gnawing at the free store-bought cookies with bland, pale faces, as if life itself had lost all flavor and texture and become a process of mechanical motions—of trying to endure. Some stood and spoke—sad tales, blind alleys and long roads back, and all the tales seemed cut from the same cloth, variations on a theme, characters and setting different, but the same end playing itself again and again.

And then it was my turn. I told them every grimy detail, how it all began with the Internet. I could hear the drip of the coffee, the heater hissing through the vents. A few heads bobbed in acknowledgement, their eyes holding mine. And I went on, about how
after I bought my wife a computer with an internet hook-up, how it seemed to become her life. I’d come home and find her typing away. When I asked her what she was doing, she simply said chat rooms. What the hell is a chat room? I’d ask. I didn’t know then. Or other times I’d walk into the room and she’d turn off the computer and tell me it wasn’t polite to barge in on someone without knocking. Knock in my own house! And then I told them how I tried to get on that damn computer to see what she was looking at, but it was impossible. *Enter I.D., enter password.* The secrecy—it was the first sign.

I stopped there. The silence in the room was enormous. Suddenly I was embarrassed, standing there. I felt transparent, riddled with holes, felt my manhood like a small shrunken thing everyone could see. Then Bob, the group leader, chimed in. “You don’t have to go on,” he said. “Not if you don’t want to, but I think it would help. Remember, we’re all friends here, all damaged goods trying to help each other out.”

So it got worse, I told them. I noticed the occasional hair around the house. Not my hair or my wife’s, but blond, wispy hairs, as light as corn silk, matted to my pillow, in the bathtub drain, on my bathrobe. And something else about the bathrobe: it was damp when I hadn’t used it. And the smell on it. Not my smell, but the smell of another person, the earthy reek of patchouli oil. I thought there must be some kind of mistake. I always give people the benefit of the doubt. It goes along with the idea that the customer is always right. It’s the motto I live by in my line of work. I didn’t want to jump to conclusions.

By now all the heads were bobbing, all the lips pursed in agreement, all the eyes holding to mine. So I kept going and recounted the final act, the smoking gun somebody called it later.
I was supposed to be up north for three days, working a bid on a set of duplexes, but the job fell through and I came home that afternoon. I saw it from down the street before I pulled into the driveway, a BMW, black, tinted, so dark it looked like a hole cut in the scenery. I opened its door. Everything was black—the leather seats, the dash, the steering wheel—and glittered in the afternoon light, glittered in a false and irritating way that hurt my eyes. I leaned into the car. I could smell it wafting past, patchouli oil, pungent and sweet. It nauseated me.

Quietly, carefully, as if a sudden movement might cause the car to vanish, I shut the door and walked to my work truck, reached into the front seat, and grabbed a pipe wrench. I hefted it, turned it in my palm, and rubbed away a small spot of grease on the handle. The adjustment nut clicked as I walked toward the porch.

I opened the front door and stood there, listening: laughter coming from the bedroom, my wife’s laughter, the high, breathy laughter I’ve only heard in our most intimate moments. I made my way up the stairs, grabbing the railing and lifting each foot, surprised at the weight of my own body. Was there a scrap of hope as I stood at the bedroom door, I asked the group, some good explanation for the last few months? Would I open the door and find her there, ready to answer my questions, the computer, the hair, the car out front, the stink of patchouli, the laughter ringing in my ears like the peal of an air raid siren? No.

I pushed the door open and saw her, naked, straddling some kid with a nose ring and hair the exact color and texture of meringue. The moaning and the laughter and the creaking bed—my bed—stopped. They stared at me, eyes swollen out of their sockets. Silence and then a voice, my voice, ripping at the soft flesh in the back of my throat,
pounding at the walls. And my hand—now a vague memory—swinging the pipe wrench above my head, and the guy’s pale face, sheep-white, bone-white, paper-white, and the puffy lips intoning feeble pleas, the eyes wet and sloppy. My hand raised, gripping the wrench, my wife grabbing for it, the wrench falling to the carpet and vanishing beneath the yellow dust ruffle, the guy—the guy screwing my wife and wearing my bathrobe—kicking and scratching, trying to bite my wrist, my hand taking hold of the cotton candy hair, my fists working at the nose and the eyes, the eyes swelling, the face slippery. And then, just as I felt myself warming to the task, I saw her in my peripheral vision, my wife, her eyes like a thin black line drawn across her face, the pipe wrench wedged between the knots of her fists, the downward arc, a red streak against the burnt umber on the walls, the connection of metal with the top of my head, the pull of gravity, the room suddenly pitching to the left and right, darkness washing in—the beginning of a horrible nightmare.

I stopped, breathless. What more could I say? Divorce: suitcases, attorneys, formal complaint, mutual restraining orders, affidavit of assets and liabilities, pretrial conference, trial, the end.

But, to be honest, there was more. I told them about the first few nights alone, the tick of the clock, the rattle of the ice cube maker, her ghost there, behind each door, her scent, citrus and vanilla, still lingering on the bed sheets, on the pillow cases. Hatred. The kind that breaks things, that washes over and drenches the mind and body. I could taste it in my mouth; with each bite of food, with each sip of water, it was there, thick on my tongue, unbreakable, bitter and sweet. That’s where I was, some strange place between love and hate, between past and present.
After the meeting, most of the group stayed and drank coffee, talked and joked with a familiarity developed, I could only imagine, from having suffered together, a familiarity from sharing the most intimate and embarrassing details of their lives. It attracted me, scared me, baffled me. I stood near the window and sipped coffee from a Styrofoam cup and took in the stiff rhododendron buds pushing out of their stems, the new growth on the alders. I’d almost forgotten it was spring.

“Nice evening, isn’t it?”

The group leader, Bob, stood at my side, the whole massive bulk of him, a round belly soaking through his thin t-shirt, hanging over his belt loops; bulky, pale arms with little hair; thick jowls that rounded out his face and gave him a bulldog look.

“It is,” I said.

“You know”—I could feel his arm on my shoulder. I could feel its softness and heat sinking into me—“tonight you made a big step and it’s a hard step, damn hard. But I want you to know something. There’s a lot more steps to take, and they’ll be easier if you remember that she’ll only hurt you again if you let her. You got to give up that hatred.”

“I know,” I said. “I can feel the change.”

“That’s right,” Bob said. “Feel it. Drink it in. Eat it up.” We stood there, not saying a word, not until Bob pointed out the window. “It’s springtime,” he said. “The winter’s over.”

I hoped.

But it wasn’t that simple. I still had my occasional bouts. Sometimes I’d find a hairbrush or an old scrap of paper she’d scribbled on, something I’d forgotten to burn or
throw away after she left, or I’d hear a voice in a crowd, a voice that would set on me like nails working down a blackboard. Those were the dark moments, the bad images: finding her, hurting her, squeezing her into nothing that could harm me again. I’d call Bob and he’d talk me through it, tell me I had control over my life, tell me hatred was as disabling as drugs or alcohol, tell me I had to give my life over to higher powers. He said he’d gone through it, fought the demon and almost lost until somebody pulled him out of the darkness and into the light. Fifteen years ago, he told me, he’d come home from a gun show and found his brother in bed with his wife. He busted his brother’s legs with a tire iron and spent six months in the county jail. But Bob had reformed, overcome the world, turned all that hatred into empathy and love, had forgiven and been forgiven.

“So how do you change it?” I asked him one night. “How do you get rid of the hatred?” Sometimes he’d show up after work with a six-pack of Heinekens and we’d sit around the kitchen table and listen to the moths batting against the screen door as the room darkened. This was a few months after my first meeting. I was still feeling like crap, like a codependent piece of crap.

“The hatred never goes away, not fully,” Bob said. He stared at his Heineken as if trying to piece together something written on the can. “You’ll always fight it. Even when it becomes an inconspicuous germ in you, you’ll still fight it. The group helps, the discussion, the Bible passages, all of that helps. But you know what helps me the most?”

Somewhere in the distance a car horn sounded. I leaned forward and set my palms flat on the table, waiting. He sat there fingering his Heineken, staring at the table.

“Are you going to tell me?” I asked.
“Sure, I’ll tell you,” he said. He lifted his Heineken, tipped it my direction, and drained it. “What helps me is in this room, right next to me.”

“The beer,” I asked. “You’re saying the beer helps?”

“No, not the beer.” Bob leaned on his elbow. I could feel the slight rise of the table under my palms, the wood, the nuts and bolts straining. “I’m talking about you, being here, helping you. That’s what it’s all about. Losing yourself in others, forgetting the pain because you’re listening, helping some poor bastard out.” He reached for another beer. “You feel horrible right now. But down the road, maybe in a few months, maybe in a few years, you’ll feel better, feel alive again, and you’ll have the chance to help somebody out. And I’ll tell you”—he cracked another beer and took a drink—“nothing feels better.”

But last Saturday after the Doctor’s wife called, as I drove upward and upward on Highland Drive, I was thinking about my wife. I felt vulnerable, dancing on the edge, afraid of the image factory whirling in my mind. I wanted to admit defeat, go home, and lose myself in alcohol, lose myself in a dark tableau, no thoughts, no words, nothing. My grip was loosening. I could feel the slip—her voice clicking in my mind, knocking things around, cluttering things I’d tried to put in order. It was like china breaking, silver striking plaster walls, wood splintering, terrible sounds I felt capable of reproducing. I’d already admitted defeat once. It was the first step that pushed me from the dark world I’d created for myself into a new world, a world smacking of hope, of new beginnings, and I didn’t want to admit defeat again.

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1673 Highland Drive. I sat at the gate, absorbing the monstrosity rising out of the manicured lawn and shrubs, a southern replica torn from the pages of Gone with the Wind, high white columns, wrap-around porch, and a pitched roof. And then, as if by magic, the gate crept open. I drove down the long asphalt driveway lined with cedars and stopped in front of the house. A tiered granite fountain, built into the side of the house, sent a stream of white water racing into a fish pond. The sound annoyed me as I walked up the steps.

I stood at the door, tools in hand, a thin smile stapled to my face. The doorbell pealed a long chorus of chimes, and then I heard the approaching hammer-to-nail ring of high heels against tile. And then the voice, each word like a drop of alcohol on an open wound, sand in the eyes, orange juice on a canker, a claw raking at my skin. “I’m coming,” the woman said.

A sharp female form appeared through the frosted glass and then a pair of eyes blazed at me momentarily between the drawn curtains at the side of the door.

The door opened. “Doctor Plumber?” the woman said, suddenly appearing in a swath of soft light radiating through the open door. She crossed her arms and stared at me, eyes tapered, the bridge of her nose scrunched and slightly lifted, as if she’d just stumbled onto a scent she couldn’t quite place. She was tall and thin, with blue eyes and platinum blonde hair, an angular chin and nose, unmemorable and attractive in the way that anything overdone and smeared with enough layers of color is attractive, a cutout from a Neiman Marcus catalog.

“I expected you here sooner,” she said, latching onto my arm with a hand as cold as something pulled from the Bering Sea. She had long nails I could feel digging into my
arm, nails painted a loud red and accented with small clusters of silver stars. “Didn’t I say it was an emergency on the phone?” She was pulling me toward a winding staircase. “If I didn’t say it was an emergency, you should have known. Can’t you hear it in my voice? I’m in hysterics. A dinner party in an hour and another thing to worry about.” She paused. “It’s a very important party. I’m sure you can understand that, Doctor. Shall I call you Doctor?” She spat the words out and hurried upward.

Her voice. I followed behind in the wake of her swaying red skirt, hoping she would shut up so I wouldn’t have to hear her drone on and on in her self-important, self-centered way. I could hear now, better than I could over the phone, why her voice reminded me of my ex-wife’s, and I realized it wasn’t so much in the voice itself, but more in the tone, in the attitude it reflected, the inability to be satisfied with anything but the center of the world, to want more and more.

She led me up the circular staircase, down a long hallway, and then toward a set of French doors that opened into a room with high vaulted ceilings. The room was enormous, and the color—I’d never seen so much red, red from the dust ruffle to the highest point of the vaulted ceiling, from the lampshades to the curtains, a red so bright it looked like the walls had been painted with bloody rags. The room was immaculate, the wooden floors scrubbed and oiled, the leather reading chairs near the bed shining, all in its place. But the bed was a mess, a rat’s nest of scattered and deflated pillows, comforter tossed aside, sheets crumpled and untucked, mattress exposed. And the smell permeating the room: musky, stale.
“The bathroom’s here,” she said, stretching a long arm through the doorway. I could hear the dry scrape of her nails against the wall and then the click of the light switch.

The bathroom, three hundred square feet of marble counter tops, maple cabinets, and gleaming white porcelain, seemed to soak in the overhead lighting and throw it back with increased brightness. A Jacuzzi whirlpool bathtub sat on a raised stone platform and four white columns rose around it. To its right stood a shower enclosed on four sides by blue-tinted glass. I set my tool chest on the gray tile floor and opened the lid, waiting for the woman to leave. I puttered among the tools, searching for nothing. But she was still there, standing in the doorway, staring down at me.

“I trust you won’t break anything,” she said. “The marble and tile are imported from Italy.”

With a little click of the tongue she turned and walked back into the bedroom, her heels sounding against the lacquered wood floor as she made her way toward the window. She opened it and then began straightening the bed, pulling at the thick red comforter and running her fingers over it to iron out the wrinkles, fluffing the pillows and setting them in a long row against the dark mahogany headboard. She examined her reflection in a long ornate mirror hanging above the headboard, patted down her hair in the back and then picked at a piece of lint on her shoulder, shot me one more icy look and left the room.

I sat onto the edge of the Jacuzzi tub, exhausted and drained, holding my head in my hands, and trying unsuccessfully to knead away the sharp pressure I felt building between my eyes. Her presence—the woman’s—was like poison, like a bitter, lingering
odor, rotten and stagnant, a weight I could still feel pressing against me. And her image, like a shape stamped into metal, invaded my mind, the face drawn as tight as a guitar string, the pinched, insatiable expression, firm and resolute, like a sinister wooden mask you see in a museum. What was there to love in her? Could the thick layers melt away? Could the thorns and sharp edges be blunted? I thought of something Bob once said about hatred, how it is only possible to hate someone you once loved. In my honest moments I recognized this truth. It’s a long, fast road to hatred; so long and fast, in fact, it’s hard even to remember the love. But in my honest moments, I remember it well, the long rambling phone calls, the quiet conversations flowing into the small hours of the night, the first time she said I love you. It seemed like so long ago, yet not so long ago, and every day since I’d been fighting for the middle ground, the place between love and hatred where I had to live, the only place I could survive.

There was work to do, I remembered, a job to finish, money to be made. The thought cheered me somewhat as I pulled on latex gloves and grabbed for the plunger in my tool box. I was ready to write the day off, chalk it up to experience, have a laugh and a few beers with Bob later, and sleep well. But as I walked toward the toilet, I heard muffled steps moving through the bedroom, leather-soled shoes shuffling along the wood floor.

A tall, willowy man in gray slacks and a blue gingham button-up shirt walked in. “I didn’t mean to startle you,” he said. “I’m Dr. Friedman. My wife said there’s a problem with the toilet.”

“Just a clog,” I said. “Nothing to worry about.”
He reminded me of a horse, with his long face and muddy eyes, and when he smiled his upper lip curled up over a wall of strong white teeth.

“I thought so,” he said. “Probably not even worth your time to drag you out here on a Saturday evening. I apologize. I told my wife I’d take care of it when I got home, but she insisted on calling someone, was adamant about it, in fact. Said it couldn’t wait. I came home and expected a deluge.” He leaned against the sink and crossed one leg over the other, settling in it seemed, but I didn’t mind. I liked his smile, his unpretentious air, a stark contrast to his wife’s acid reception. “My grandfather was a plumber in Boston,” he said. “I used to go to work with him when I was a kid, fetch tools, clean up his shop. He paid me a buck an hour.” He liked to talk, I could tell, and I didn’t mind listening. His voice, with the slightest accent, a subtle stretching of the vowels, a touch of East Coast I imagined, filled the hard gleaming space around us. He said this kind of work had always fascinated him, building, plumbing, painting, small repairs around the house, but he just didn’t have time. He’d had the house built about two years ago. The southern theme was his wife’s idea. She was his secretary at one time—that’s how they’d met—and then things got serious. “You know how that goes,” he said with a wink. “She’s a firecracker, I tell you. Fifteen years my junior and she keeps me young. And the crazy hours. You can understand the hours a cardiologist keeps. She doesn’t mind at all. Very supportive, one to grow old with.”

By this time he was looking over my shoulder. “Just a clog, you said?”

“Nothing to worry about,” I said. “A few hits and that’s all. Very simple.”

I shoved the plunger in and a soggy ball of toilet paper floated to the surface and broke to pieces. Two condoms dislodged from the mass and swirled around the bowl. I
gave a little laugh and nudged the doctor. This was quite common, really. In fact, I’d seen it quite often over the years, condoms clogging toilets and septic tanks.

“They’ll foul your pipes,” I told him. “Better to throw them away.”

The doctor stepped back and leaned against the wall, blinking quickly, looking as if someone had just slapped him. He took a couple deep breaths, and then yanked at his collar. A thin blush spread over his neck and rose until his face seemed painted with it. And then I knew, knew it without a doubt: he didn’t use condoms.

“I think I can finish the rest,” he said, taking out a maroon alligator wallet from his back pocket. He was standing up straight, somewhat more composed, but confused, staring at the wall, as if some scene I couldn’t see was playing out there. “I don’t know what I owe you”—he took three hundred dollars from his wallet—“but I think this will do.”

“My wife too,” I said. “Three years ago.”

“Please take the money and leave,” he said. “Please.”

Already there was a sad undercurrent in his voice, a quaking insecurity where only moments before there had been the confidence of an almost perfect life. I hefted my tool box and left the room, and turned once to see him taking in his surroundings, his face slack, his shoulders deflated, as if he had suddenly realized the meaninglessness and worthlessness of all the polished, gleaming surfaces surrounding him. I went quickly down the hall, took the stairs two at a time, and kept walking when I saw his wife on a wooden bench near the front door, making a business of sitting there with her long shining legs crossed. She looked glossed over.

“I hope everything . . .” She paused, as if leaving a space for my comments.
I stared at her, not so much at her, but at the space she filled, at the thin layers of fabric that outlined her body against a background of bright still-life paintings and mahogany-colored leather couches and chairs. Glass and polished wood gleamed behind her. It looked like there was nothing to her, no flesh and bone, no substance, as light as air, and I felt, if I wanted to, I could pitch her across the room with little effort.

Her pale face looked ghostly. “What? What are you looking at?” she said. Her watery blue eyes darted between me and the stairs.

I stepped onto the brick porch, not caring to close the door. She was there in the doorway, practically gobbled up by the soft yellow glow around her. It was dark, a moonless night, and the house seemed to rise up before me, solid and unmoving, and as I watched her standing there, I marveled how something so empty could break things to pieces and make such a mess.

The night seemed endless. The stars looked brittle. A sharp breeze pulled at the alders and maples and sent their leaves clicking across the road. I drove slowly down the hill toward home, slightly comforted by the long even grid of lights materializing through the trees. I imagined the Doctor still standing in the bathroom, taking the first steps into his new life. I imagined him forcing himself into a suit and tie, smiling at the guests sitting around his table, beginning to grasp that soon she and these people would dissolve, that soon his house would be dark and lifeless, that he would be there alone. I pretended I would return, pretended what I might say. I would tell him this isn’t the worst moment. The worst moment would come later, perhaps long after she’s gone, when he’ll sit alone in his empty house and see the wasteland she’s made of his life. Or the moment he’ll want to cut her to pieces for ever having loved her. I would tell him two or three years
tops until the pain dissolves into a kind of numbness that's even bearable. That's when he’ll know he’s arrived at the middle ground, that place he’ll have to live, that place between love and hatred. I could see us sitting around the table on a cold winter night, drinking beer and listening to the wind push against the windows. I could see it, but I couldn’t say who was helping who.
Several Scenes from Norman Reeves’ Life

One hot summer evening, Norman and his date, a tall girl with red hair and pale freckles on her nose, were driving home from an art exhibit downtown when they passed an apartment complex with a large swimming pool.

“Why don’t we sneak in and take a swim?” the girl said. The pink gloss on her lips shimmered.

Norman didn’t feel comfortable. What if we get caught? he wanted to say. There are laws. Instead he said, “It’s getting late.”

She laughed. “Oh, you’re a real stick-in-the-mud,” she said.

Though Norman never saw her again, the comment angered him.

A month later, Norman met Carolyn at a church social. She had a beauty that would remain as she grew older, blond hair to the shoulders, pale blue eyes, and an athletic build. She taught biology and coached volleyball at a middle school across town. She’d already put some money into her 401K, not a lot, only five hundred dollars, but still this forethought impressed Norman.

Soon they began dating exclusively, falling into a pattern Norman enjoyed: a matinee on Friday or Saturday, dinner, a drive up the canyons on Sunday if the weather permitted. Several times he met her parents when they visited. Both seemed like sensible people, unobtrusive but caring, moderate in the cars they drove, the clothes they wore, and in the foods they ate; and it seemed to Norman that they—her father a lawyer and her mother also a teacher—would, if his relationship with Carolyn did lead to marriage, make good in-laws: financially, they were secure, and physically and mentally, as well as genetically, there seemed to be nothing out of the ordinary. In fact, Norman
was quite impressed with Carolyn’s mother’s physique. At fifty-five, Norman could see she took care of herself, and if it were true that the daughter becomes her mother, then Norman was satisfied with what Carolyn would become. But still he was unsure.

One night Norman made a list on the dry-erase board in his kitchen, though he would never have told Carolyn this, of her pros and cons. The pros: she worked out three days a week, watched little TV, and truly cared about him, even buying orange juice, chicken soup, and medicine for him when he got sick soon after they met, a small gesture Norman appreciated. The cons were few, but they gave Norman pause: often she left food out on the counter, perishables that might spoil: cheese, milk, eggs; instead of putting her clothes away, she slopped them over the dressers and bureau in her room; and—and this was Norman’s biggest concern—she could be absentminded. In the time he’d known her, she’d lost her wallet twice.

All in all, though, after dating a year, Norman liked Carolyn, maybe loved her. Their relationship was predictable, no surprises, just the way he wanted it, until one night when Carolyn told him she’d decided to move home for the summer.

“What? You’re ending this?” Norman asked. “Is that what you wanted to talk about?” When she’d called earlier that evening and said they needed to talk and had then been so reticent and glum about what they needed to talk about, Norman knew it wasn’t good. “Is it something I’ve done?” he asked. Reviewing the past few days, the past weeks, he couldn’t think of anything, nothing at all. This seemed so sudden, so out of the blue.

“It’s not anything you’ve done,” Carolyn said. She was sitting solemnly on the couch, hugging a pillow against her chest, looking out at the darkness through the
window, her eyes red and moist and slightly swollen. Norman saw she was wearing a new black turtleneck sweater with short sleeves and a raised pattern of lines and dots running down the front. It looked like Cashmere or Merino wool, soft and expensive, and Norman wondered how much she’d spent on it and why she hadn’t told him about the purchase.  “It’s what you haven’t done,” Carolyn finally said.

“What I haven’t done?” Norman asked.

“The writing’s been on the wall for the last two months, Norman. I don’t want to break up. Quite the opposite. I want more. Do you understand that, Norman?”

Norman traced the grain of the wood on the coffee table, head bent down, listening. There was anger in her voice, warming to a boil, pent up for months, now bubbling to the surface. He was stunned.

“I’m beginning to think things will never move to the next level,” she said, standing up. “I’m beginning to think that last year’s been a waste. I could get old waiting for you, Norman. You’re too cautious, too safe, too comfortable.” Carolyn opened the front door and paused before leaving, one hand resting on the knob, the other resting on her hip. Norman looked up and knew that what she would say next was meant to hurt, meant to be the final blow, either the last words of their relationship or a call to action, on his part, to move things to the next level. “I’m surprised,” she said, “that you ever had the nerve to ask me out in the first place.”

Suddenly Norman felt angry. What was wrong with caution, with patience, with taking time to be sure of something before jumping in? The way he saw it, the world was full of reckless people. He’d read about them, even known some, people careening through life half-cocked, with no regard for others and no forethought to the path ahead,
relying on luck and good graces to see them through, and when that didn’t work, violence or coercion. Their faces still loomed large in his memory, a few Norman had known over the years, the uncontrollable, inattentive kids from junior high and high school: Andy Dumas, Calvin Richards, Danny Manetti. They’d done poorly, barely graduated, really, had spent most of their time buying stereo equipment and mag wheels for their cars, smoking weed in the school parking lot during lunch, boozing it up, and bedding any girl they could. What had become of them, Norman often wondered, where were they now? Even in high school he had a vague idea they’d somehow reached their zenith, that for them life after high school would forever be a struggle, a life of bad habits and regrets, of trying to recapture a freedom they’d never really had. Every day these types passed through Norman’s office at the high school where he worked as a guidance counselor, oozing a palpable bravado and indifference he could sense in the way they shuffled along with no hurry or urgency, in the way they slouched and yawned whenever he discussed their grades or academic schedules. “What do you want to do when you graduate?” Norman often asked, hoping the question might galvanize them into taking a hard look at themselves and at the vast world that awaited them. Most shrugged their shoulders and stared past him at nothing in particular. And wasn’t that the truth of it? Few of them looked that far ahead.

As Norman saw it, his job required more than helping students pick classes and fulfill basic requirements. It was his mandate to help them learn to make decisions and accept responsibility, to solve their own problems and develop, at a minimum, a basic understanding of the world that awaited them. Most of the troubled kids were rowdy, petulant, with a propensity to talk back. At the worst, a few smoked cigarettes and got
into fights. But what about in the years to come? Norman had tracked a few: pregnancy, drugs, low-paying, unfulfilling jobs. One student—a nervous, hyperactive boy with a mop of bleach-blond hair and eyelashes and brows that looked washed-out—had used an axe to bludgeon to death a woman after some drug-related spat. He was now on death row. After the trial, the State had required Norman to send the young man’s school records to the Public Defender for inclusion in a mitigation folder the defense would use to appeal the sentence. What was the commonality in each one of those students? Norman could say with certainty that it was a lack of foresight, a lack of planning, a tendency to disregard the consequences of certain behaviors and act impulsively.

After Carolyn left, Norman did some reading for a training seminar he planned to attend that summer, but he couldn’t concentrate. He kept turning over what she had said, and imagined how he should have responded by explaining to her the importance of forethought and caution in all aspects of life, and above all in love and marriage. For a moment the image satisfied Norman, but then it quickly soured as he thought of himself standing in front of Carolyn and lecturing her, solidifying the very image of himself she disliked. And what of this image? What if they did get married? Surely, the odds were good. And if they did get married, Norman didn’t want Carolyn’s perceived image of him as some kind of anal-retentive pantywaist to cloud their marriage and be a quiet resentment forever grating on her. Such an image, Norman knew, might create more problems years down the road, and Norman believed strongly in using foresight to avoid any problem.
At ten, Norman closed the book he was reading and reached for the yellow pages. He flipped to *Jewelers* and chose the flashiest full-page color ad—a company called Caesar’s Jewelers—and scribbled down the address and phone number.

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The next morning Norman was sitting in the jeweler’s office, thumbing through copies of *Modern Bride* and *WeddingBells*. The office had dark oak paneling on the walls and a large oak desk of the same color in the center of the room. Behind the desk sat a polished black safe. Judging by the furnishings, Norman imagined the company pulled in a hefty profit.

The jeweler was leaning back, drumming his long slender fingers against the top of the desk. Norman could see three large rings on the man’s left hand. One held the hologram of an NFL team logo that changed colors when the hand moved and the light played on it. The other two were thick gold bands crowned with the largest diamonds Norman had ever seen. All the rings, especially the one with the hologram, reminded Norman of fake jewelry he’d seen as a kid in gumball machines for a quarter. Strangely, they seemed to fit the jeweler. He was dressed in a blue pinstripe suit, a tall man with oiled black hair that gleamed under the lights and the shadow of a beard spread across his cheeks and chin that gave his face a strange green hue. There was something overly contrived and out of place in his appearance, as if he seemed more suited to pushing used cars than to selling jewelry in an oak-paneled office.

When the jeweler noticed Norman staring at the rings, he asked how much he thought they were worth.
“I have no idea,” Norman said, knowing the jeweler thought he would guess some lowball price and then be impressed by how much they were actually worth. Norman was tempted to name an outrageous price and burst the jeweler’s bubble, but he didn’t feel like it, nor did he feel like playing a guessing game with this man. “I really know nothing about jewelry,” Norman said.

“Thirty thousand dollars for the three,” the jeweler said, brushing at something imaginary with his hand, as if thirty thousand dollars was a drop in the bucket, nothing to be concerned about, chump change. “And look at this.” He set his arm on the desk and inched up his shirt sleeve in a slow kind of tease to show Norman the silver Rolex strapped to his wrist. “Nice, isn’t it. Just a little anniversary gift from my wife. You should see some of the bling I’ve gotten her.” He lowered his sleeve and then leaned back with a satisfied look on his face, as if he’d just proven something to Norman.

“Diamonds speak, Mr. Reeves. You probably don’t know that. When I walk into a busy restaurant for lunch, do you think I wait for a table? When I walk into a car dealership with these babies shining, do you think I’m dickering with Joe Salesman on a plastic chair in the showroom? No way. Diamonds open doors, Mr. Reeves. Think about that as you make your choice.”

“I don’t know,” Norman told the jeweler. He closed the wedding magazines and pushed them away. “All the rings look the same to me. I don’t even know what she wants. Maybe I’m making a mistake by not asking her.”

The jeweler gave a long dramatic sigh. He interlocked his fingers and rested them on the oak desk. His face suddenly seemed weighed down, revealing a small network of hairline wrinkles around his mouth and eyes, a transformation that gave him a
fatherly air, and Norman almost expected the jeweler’s next line to be something like:

*Son, be patient and I will tell you how the world works.* Norman shifted in his chair. It had become uncomfortable. Why did this man feel it necessary to dish out advice, Norman wondered. Was there something about him that screamed out for it or was it just part of the sales pitch?

“I see a lot of guys like you come in here,” the jeweler said. “You want it to be a surprise, but you don’t know what she wants. Maybe still a little unsure of the whole thing, right?”

Norman nodded. He could see the jeweler working up to something.

“This is the truth, the God-honest truth: you pay for what you get, Mr. Reeves. That’s what men can’t understand.” He was staring at the rings on his left hand, holding them up against the light. “Remember that women are much more observant than men. They notice the quality of the setting and the size of the diamond, especially the diamond, and you know what, they talk about it with their friends, how big so-and-so’s diamond is, if it’s a platinum setting”—the jeweler put his right hand over his heart—“and you wouldn’t believe how many unhappy women I see because their husbands are cheap. That’s the truth. And guess who has to wear the evidence of that for a lifetime? It’s a bad way to start things off. Don’t you think, Mr. Reeves?”

The jeweler began kneading his hands together, warming to the subject. Norman could see right through the mushy spiel, the subtle persuasion building on guilt, and wondered how many men actually fell for it. But the speech, whether true or not, bothered him for another reason. In their short time together, the jeweler already had him pegged as a cheapskate, and Norman wondered when he’d come to this conclusion: the
moment he greeted Norman at the door, when he’d invited him back to his office to talk, or maybe when he saw Norman walking across the parking lot.

Then the jeweler threw his hands up and continued: “But, hey, if that’s not your thing, I understand. I have some Black Hills gold settings and some cubic zirconium if you want them.”

Norman crossed his legs and then cleared his throat. He tried to imagine how a man with no regard for price might act, tried to imagine his slack face, and how the indifference in his voice might resonate. “Cost isn’t an issue,” Norman said.

The jeweler smacked his hands against the desk and smiled.

“I knew it the moment I saw you. I said to myself, ‘Here’s a man who’s not going to let price stand between him and love.’ I respect that, admire it. You’re going to make your fiancée very happy.”

Though Norman questioned the man’s sincerity, he took the hand the jeweler offered and shook it. The hand felt warm and dry, and its size dwarfed Norman’s. The jeweler smiled and Norman could even see the glimmer of gold in the man’s back teeth. “Why don’t we get a little more comfortable?” the jeweler said. He punched at a green button on the phone and a nasal feminine voice crackled through the speaker: “Yes, Mr. Benedetti.” “Fran,” the jeweler said, “why don’t you bring us in some lemonade”—he winked at Norman—“and some of those biscotti I like.”

“So should I keep looking through these?” Norman asked, resting his hand on a copy of Modern Bride.

“Look through those?” the jeweler said in an exaggerated, incredulous voice. He grabbed the Modern Bride from the desk as if it had suddenly become offensive and
heaved it over his shoulder without looking. “We’ve moved beyond magazines, Mr. Reeves,” he said. He inched his chair toward the safe and then began turning the dial. “Haven’t you learned anything from what I’ve said today? You, Mr. Reeves, have just moved to the next level.”

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On Saturday morning Norman picked up the ring. When he left, the jeweler, in a fatherly gesture, draped an arm over Norman’s shoulder as he walked him to the door. “When your fiancée gets back into town, I want you to bring her by. Will you do that? She sounds like a lovely girl, a real peach.” Norman smiled and said he would, though he had no intention to. Even at the end, after picking a stone and a setting and signing the necessary forms, Norman still didn’t like the jeweler, didn’t like his sentimental rhetoric and subtle cynicism, didn’t like the way he tried to pass himself off as one of the family to sweeten business. But still, despite his dislike for the man, Norman had gotten what he’d wanted with a minimum of problems, though in the end he’d paid a premium for it.

As he drove home, Norman could feel the square wooden ring box in his right pocket. He was excited and carefree, and wanted to show the ring to someone and share the good news. Norman decided to visit Rick, a high school friend living in the area whose wedding he’d attended. Norman had even stayed with him and his wife, Erica, for a couple weeks when he was waiting for his apartment to open.

“Who is it?” Erica asked after Norman knocked at the door. He told her and then heard what he thought was a curse and then a slamming cupboard.

“It’s early,” Rick said as he opened the door.
The living room was still dark and shaded, but Norman could see they’d remodeled since he last visited. Erica sat on the couch in a blue terrycloth robe and looked bored. Rick paced the room tidying things, chatting nervously.

“You remodeled,” Norman said.

“Yeah, about six months ago,” Rick said. “I guess we haven’t seen you in a while, have we?”

Norman was still standing near the door. He wondered why they hadn’t asked him to sit down. Then he thought of something he’d forgotten: he’d run into Rick a couple times over the last few months and he always said he’d call Norman, promising they would get together, but he’d never called. Norman had even left messages that were never returned.

“So what about you?” Rick asked. “Are you still dating that girl? What’s her name? Shannon, right?”

“Carolyn,” Norman corrected, “and funny you should ask. We’re getting married.”

“Oh, the poor girl,” Erica said, breaking her bored silence. She was now thumbing through a *Cosmopolitan* and yawning. Norman, from the first time he’d met Erica, had always thought of her as a sarcastic person. He’d grown accustomed to her manner of dealing with him. He ignored her and fished the ring from his pocket.

It sparkled in the dim light as he opened the small wooden box. Erica perked up and Rick nodded his head approvingly.

“Cubic zirconium and white gold,” Erica said. “I know you, Norman. You wouldn’t have spent more than a thousand.”
“Not a chance,” Norman said. “Platinum setting and a one-carat diamond. $8000.00 plus the tax and insurance. Tomorrow I’m driving to San Diego to surprise Carolyn.”

“So unlike you,” Rick said. He had a stack of magazines in his hands and was arranging them on the coffee table. “This from the guy who wouldn’t go to our senior party because he’d be out too late.”

“Does it have a return policy?” Erica asked flatly.

“Ignore her,” Rick said. “We’re both happy for you. We really are.” He was moving toward the door and Norman followed. “Taking the plunge and all, that’s great, really great. It’ll be good for you.” He glanced at his watch. “I don’t mean to hurry you along, but I have some friends from work coming over to watch the game and I need to scour this place.” He opened the door.

“I’ll send an announcement,” Norman said.

“You do that. And good luck. When you get back, I’ll call you.”

Norman wanted to say something else, but the door shut before he could. As he walked across the parking lot to his car, he wondered why Rick hadn’t invited him to watch the game.

***

In the middle of Nevada, Norman’s car started making a sharp metallic noise, something like loose change rattling in a dryer, and then almost immediately after, a translucent veil of acrid smoke began pouring out from under the car. Just as Norman pulled onto an exit, the car stalled and came to a lurching halt, and when he tried turning the key, the engine made a faint whining noise, but wouldn’t start. Norman opened the
door and stepped onto the dark asphalt, feeling the sun pounding down on him like a hammer. He’d passed a town twenty-five minutes back, a small place, only a vague memory, but now a significant fact. Norman looked at the travel itinerary and map he’d prepared the night before. Wells, Nevada.

Off in the distance, Norman saw a dilapidated farmhouse and started walking in that direction, thinking he would find a telephone to call a tow truck, until a kid in a pickup—Norman really thought he couldn’t have been more than fourteen—stopped and offered to send someone to help. Norman thanked him and waited by the car.

After forty-five minutes a tow truck materialized out of the furrowed heat rising from the highway, a massive thing with a long flat bed. The towman nodded as he pulled off onto the gravel. He jumped from the truck and slowly began pulling on a pair of leather gloves, making a business of it, and staring at Norman through dark sunglasses, smiling as if someone had just told him something funny.

From his college days Norman remembered the many tow trucks circling the apartment complex parking lots, waiting to snatch a car or throw on a boot. The towmen were always big guys, he remembered, close-cropped hair and thick muscles pushing against greasy shirts. This guy appeared to be poured from the same mold. He leaned against the truck and pushed a lever that sent the bed into a slow, grinding tilt, and then lifted his glasses and wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. “I bet you’re wondering how I’m going to do it,” he said, staring at Norman with eyes that looked almost as black and vacuous as the glasses he was wearing.

“Pardon me?” Norman said.
“I bet you’re wondering,” the towman said slowly, pointing to Norman’s car and then to the bed of the truck, “how I’m going to get your car on the back of this truck.” He opened a steel box under the bed of the truck and pulled out four greasy chains.

“Everyone wonders. Last week I had a van load of Japs stop and take pictures of me loading a car. I swear to God, they must have taken a hundred pictures, going on in their Jap language, smiling ear to ear. I couldn’t even see their eyes, just slits really. They were so excited I thought they’d piss themselves.”

Norman nodded. The towman seemed coarse, totally deficient of any kind of professionalism. Norman didn’t know what to say and didn’t feel like humoring the man with small talk. He fingered the ring box in his pocket and gazed at the sky. The sun looked like a child’s ball suspended against a great background of blue, and already it had reached its apex and was dropping. But still, its intensity made Norman squint. He stared off in the direction of the farmhouse. Everything looked washed-out and muted, ugly browns and dull greens as far as the eye could see. He kicked at a bleached can lying near his foot and sent it flying down the gravel embankment.

The towman had attached a chain to the car’s undercarriage and was slowly raising it onto the back of the truck. As Norman watched the mechanical process, the pulley motor straining, the car lurching upward against the pull of gravity, tottering slightly, he thought of a fly helplessly suspended into a spider’s web. The bed of the truck, now bearing the car, came level, and the towman secured the chains over the axles and boomed them down. He kicked at the taut chains, seemed satisfied, and then jumped to the ground. He motioned Norman toward the passenger door. “I have to tell you now,” he said, “we’re a good twenty miles out of town. This isn’t going to be cheap.”
It never is cheap, is it? Norman wanted to say. He climbed into the cab and at least felt somewhat cheered that his credit card provided free towing, though he wouldn’t tell the driver this because he’d charge even more, Norman was sure of it. He had a sense this guy wanted to take him for as much as he could. That’s how these small towns operate, he thought, just a dot on a map, a parasite sucking life from the concrete artery that fed it: gas, food, gambling, and towing—all for a price.

Norman nudged himself into the mess collecting on the worn vinyl seat—fast food wrappers, loose paper, and a few glossy magazines with women in bikinis bent provocatively over the hoods and roofs of flashy, souped-up cars with wide tires. The cab smelled distinctly of motor oil and dirt, and the air was thick with dust. Norman rifled through the clutter around him looking for the seatbelt latch and was even ready to stick his hand into the seat’s dark crevices when the towman spoke.

“You won’t find it,” he said. He slammed the truck into gear and pulled onto the onramp. “Got rid of them a long time ago. Read something once about how many people die from wearing seatbelts. Car rolls into a lake, you can’t get your seatbelt off. It happens more than you think. You know what I mean?”

Norman made a low grunting noise, neither a negative nor a positive response, and thought the last standing water he’d seen was the Great Salt Lake. He wanted to collapse into himself, empty his lungs of air and be gone, or just close his eyes and wake up when they’d arrived at the mechanic’s garage.

“My friends call me Curly,” the towman said. He extended a calloused hand that Norman reluctantly took. Curly had a tight grip. His arms were thick and tanned a deep
brown, and the muscles looked like pieces of tight rope pushing against the skin.

Norman couldn’t help thinking how pale and soft his hand was next to Curly’s.

Curly wore a gun on his hip, partly concealed under the greasy shirt he wore untucked, and when he saw Norman eyeing it, he explained it was for job security. “Last month alone,” he said, “two of my buddies in Elko almost got robbed. The cops call it attempted robbery, but you never know what will happen. A few years back I heard of a tow truck driver out of Vegas who got shot in the head, execution style. Far from me to make a racial slur, but I think it’s these wetbacks bringing their drugs across the border. I can see you’re a Utah boy by your license plate and I know you’re getting them over there too. I have an uncle who lives outside of St. George. He says you can’t turn into Home Depot without almost running one of them down in the parking lot. Hell, it’s the same all over the West I hear: L.A., Vegas, Salt Lake City. And it’s not just the drugs and the crime. White people are becoming a minority. Excuse me if that sounds bad, but it keeps me up at night.”

Norman didn’t like the suggestion that he had anything in common with this man, or that by being white he was bound to agree. “I’ve never had a problem,” he said.

“Don’t think I’m racist,” Curly said. “Not at all. But some of these people will shoot you in the leg, steal your car, and then brag about it to their friends. They don’t care about giving, they just want to take, take, take, and they don’t care who from or how.” Curly adjusted the air vent and cleared his throat. “I hope I haven’t offended you. But you have to understand what my work’s like: dark, deserted roads, strangers. I’m one who sees and hears things in the dark.” He smiled. Norman could see the yellow glint of his teeth. “Hell, I wish all my customers were like you, clean-cut and white-
bread. You know, you look like a guy I knew from high school who was voted Nicest in Class. No joking. Scott Chandler, nicest guy. You could have nailed his sister to a tree and skinned her alive, and he wouldn’t have raised his voice. No one liked him, though. Too nice, too boring.” Curly, as if suddenly taking notice of the filth surrounding him, threw a few of the magazines and some of the hamburger wrappers behind the seat. “So tell me,” he said, “what’s the worst thing you’ve ever done?”

The heat in the cab and the hum of the diesel engine had made Norman drowsy. He’d been listening to little of what Curly had said, but the question jolted him awake. “The worst thing I’ve ever done?”

Curly smiled, showing a row of teeth that reminded Norman of something he might see in a horse’s mouth.

“Yeah, the worst thing you’ve ever done. Something you’ve never told anyone.”

Norman didn’t know why, but he suddenly felt panicked: his palms were wet and trembling, his knees shaking, his mind frozen.

“Forget it,” Curly said after a moment. “Forget I ever asked.” He gave a little laugh and switched on a CB radio near the gearshift.

Norman took a deep breath and wiped at his forehead. He didn’t know why, but the question persisted like a lingering, noisome odor. What was the worst thing he’d done? As a teenager, he’d once shot out a window with his friend’s BB gun and blamed a retarded kid who lived down the street. In junior high, on a dare, he called Christie Reed’s parents when he knew she was at the movies with friends and told them she’d been in car accident, and then he gave them the number to the county morgue. Later, in
high school, he and a friend left an unkind note on the windshield of an overweight girl in their history class. Norman heard she committed suicide a few years after graduation.

When Norman considered these things, even after so many years, he felt their weight like a heavy stone on his chest and neck. Sometimes he thought about them before falling asleep at night and felt bad they’d ever happened. Still, he knew Curly wouldn’t be impressed. Clearly, Curly had him down as a straight arrow. And in a way he was. Norman really did try to do the right thing. He’d always felt that life could quickly become tragic, one small mistake propagating another, and then another, until the unspeakable happened. So maybe some people saw him as a goody-goody. But what was the alternative? Still at times he wondered if he should have rocked the boat a little more, lived life on the edge with no care beyond having a good time.

The CB crackled. Norman listened to a distant, drawling voice give the details of an accident somewhere south of town involving a pickup truck and a station wagon. Curly gave a loud cheer that startled Norman, then grabbed for the CB mic without taking his eyes off the road. “I’ll be there in twenty minutes,” he said, holding the mic so close to his face that it looked fused to his mouth. Curly turned to him, wide-eyed, licking his lips. “That’s a hundred and twenty dollars in my pocket,” he said. “It probably sounds bad, but that’s how I make my living. The more accidents, the more money I make.”

***

Three Guys and a Gal Automotive. Norman saw the sign first and then the building, a decrepit white structure with two bays that gaped like open mouths. The building seemed to blend with the barren desert around it, and Norman, at first glance, thought it might be some kind of wrecking yard judging by the rows of immobile cars—
flat tires, peeling paint, gutted interiors—littering the parking lot. The place looked like a wrecking yard, not an ounce of life, a badland from which cars never returned.

Curly pulled in sharply and braked harder than was necessary, jumped from the cab and quickly began loosening the chains that held Norman’s car to the truck bed.

“Help me give it a shove,” Curly told Norman, and together they pushed the car into an open bay.

After Curly had returned his credit card, Norman thanked him out of courtesy, and then began walking toward the mechanic’s office. When he reached the door, Norman heard someone calling his name. He looked back and saw Curly jump off the truck and run over. “Listen,” Curly said, somewhat breathless. “I’ve been thinking I might have offended you back there.”

“No, not at all,” Norman said. “It’s just been a long day and I’m not very chatty.” He felt Curly wanted something more from him, some kind of validation of his worth as a human being. Norman turned to leave. A service had been rendered and paid for, a receipt given. He felt he owed this man nothing more.

“I have a feeling you don’t think much of me. Maybe I’ve given you the impression that I’m not a good person or some kind of brute,” Curly said, patting the gun on his hip. “You have to understand this isn’t Utah. This place is isolated, out in the middle of nowhere. You see strange things. And about making money from accidents”—he paused, looked off toward the freeway and then back to Norman—“it’s not like I’m a vulture. I mean, somebody has to do it. Somebody has to get their hands dirty to clean things up.”
Norman didn’t like the insinuation that by being from Utah he was in some way naive. Nor did he feel Curly had any right to lecture him on the realities of life.

“Really, I’m not offended. As I said, it’s been a very long day. I’ve been distracted.”

“I understand,” Curly said. “I just didn’t want you to have the wrong impression of me. I can see you’re a nice guy. I just didn’t want to shake you up or anything.”

“I’m fine,” Norman said. He took a step toward the mechanic’s office. “It was nice to meet you. Good luck to you.”

“Hey, I’ll tell you what,” Curly said. “I need to run and take care of this job, but later this evening I want to buy you a drink, show you the town and all.”

Norman looked up and down the street. On one end were a gas station and the freeway, and on the other a few bars and mobile homes.

“I appreciate the offer, but I plan to be gone by then.”

Curly smiled and began tapping his foot. “By the look of things, you won’t be going anywhere tonight. So come on. What do you say? My treat.”

“I don’t drink,” Norman said.

“Then a cup of coffee.”

“I don’t drink coffee.”

“Man, someone’s got you on a short leash,” Curly said, shaking his head. “How about a soda? Do you drink soda?”

Norman couldn’t speak. He felt the silence gathering and knew Curly wouldn’t take no for an answer.

“All right. A soda.”
“Good,” Curly said. “About two hours. I’ll be back.” He mounted the truck and, just before closing the door, turned to Norman. “Don’t wander too far. Wells has a special kind of entertainment that’s not for good boys like you,” he said. “I’ll tell you about it later.”

Norman watched the truck move toward the freeway and knew he would do whatever it would take to be somewhere else when Curly returned.

***

Norman sat on a worn couch in the garage office and perused an old newspaper he’d found on the floor. He looked through an open door that led to the garage and watched the mechanics. Both wore blue coveralls with the sleeves cut off and the buttons undone to their stomachs. One was smoking a cigarette near the bay door and the other was bending over the engine of a black Ford truck, tapping his foot to the drone of a radio set to a classic rock station. Norman glanced at his watch and drew a long breath.

“I hope you don’t need to be anywhere tonight,” a woman said. She walked across the room and sat at a metal desk in the corner cluttered with paper and dirty coffee mugs, picked up a bag of potato chips someone had left there, and started eating.

She was pretty in a way that reminded Norman of photos he’d once seen in a *National Geographic* article on farm girls growing up in Iowa.

“No hope of getting out tonight?” he asked.

“Since this is the only garage in town, these guys tend to take their time.” She tipped the bag of potato chips in Norman’s direction. “Want some?”

“No thanks. I really don’t have much of an appetite.”
“It’s probably for the best,” she said, throwing the bag on the desk. “Doctors say these things will kill you. Hydrogenated oil. That’s what does it.”

“Bad stuff,” Norman said. He looked up at the garage sign. Already its shadow was growing longer over the mass of crippled cars in the parking lot.

“I’m the gal,” the woman said.

Norman turned from the window. “Pardon me.”

She pointed to the sign. “Three Guys and a Gal. I’m the gal.” She crossed her legs and smiled. Norman noticed her teeth for the first time. He’d never seen teeth so white and straight. It almost seemed that light radiated from them. Norman wanted to compliment her, but decided not to. He didn’t want her to take it the wrong way.

Norman watched as the mechanic bending over the Ford leaned back and began fingerling a large wrench in time with the music. The other mechanic wasn’t to be seen.

“So you’re the gal? Where’s the third mechanic? Or did he get fired and nobody’s changed the sign?”

It was meant as a joke, but the woman became very serious. “Oh, he’s not around anymore,” she said. She picked up a stack of papers and stared at them a moment before putting them aside. “My name’s Maggie,” she said, smiling again.

Norman meant for the conversation to stop there, but she asked him a few questions and, to be polite, he felt he should ask her a few. She was born in Wells, spent her youth there, and briefly attended a small college in Colorado. She was unmarried, and had been working at the garage for the last three years. The owner knew her father and hired her when she got back into town. “But this isn’t the only thing I do,” she said.
“I make herbal products like soap and oil, and sell them on the Web. That’s my other job.”

“Soaps and oils,” Norman said. “I didn’t realize there was much of a market.”

“Oh, yes,” Maggie said. “I have customers in Europe and Australia. They’re things I make in my house. People like that.”

Norman envisioned large vats of bubbling lye and Maggie standing over them in goggles and a rubber apron, stirring the writhing concoction with a large metal pole, pouring in beakers of scented oils. He imagined her body leaning into it, her hips turning in small circles.

“So what about you?” Maggie asked. “I’ve been chattering away and I don’t even know your name.”

“Norman Reeves.”

“Norman Reeves,” Maggie said. She repeated the name a few times. “I can’t say I’ve met many Normans. In fact, I don’t think I’ve met any. The only Norman I can think of is the one from Psycho.” Maggie narrowed her eyes and lowered her voice to a whisper. “So Norman, do you have your dead mother stashed away somewhere?”

Norman got the joke. “Nothing that exciting,” he said. “It’s an old family name. My great-grandpa—I don’t know many greats back—crossed the plains in the dead of winter pulling a handcart. I guess it’s supposed to be inspiring. I’ve never liked it. And the diminutive’s not much better. Norm. It makes me think of an obese alcoholic.”

“You think you got it bad?” Maggie said. She leaned forward as if to impart a confidence. Norman could smell her scent circling the room, something like vanilla.

“I’ll tell you a secret,” she whispered. “Maggie’s my middle name. I’m really named
after my grandma.” She looked around and then spoke. “Her name was Elva. Isn’t that horrible?”

Norman laughed and tried to think of something to say. He felt awkward and disoriented. It seemed strange to him that after all the inconvenience of the last few hours, he was now speaking with a pretty, intelligent woman. Norman had nothing to say, and was even unsure if he should be speaking with her.

Maggie rubbed at her right knee and then straightened both legs. “So tell me about yourself,” she said. “What do you do out in the real world?”

He debated telling her the whole story, about Carolyn, the ring, and his attempt to drive to her house on a whim. But by now the whole experience seemed tainted in light of his present situation. Rather than being daring, Norman saw the events of that day as a kind of low comedy, the plot of a B movie in which the protagonist’s every victory is negated by a humorous blunder. Norman told her a few of the general facts of his life, that he was thirty-one, employed as a guidance counselor, and enjoying a little bit of his summer break by taking a short trip to California.

Maggie sighed. “My high school had some wonderful counselors,” she said. “It seems like teachers get all the credit, but counselors do so much too. It must be great to have a job that helps people.”

“It really is,” Norman said. He cleared his throat and stared out the window. When he told people what he did, the response was always the same: It must be great to have a job that helps people. It bothered Norman, made him feel uncomfortable, made him feel unworthy of their admiration. He wasn’t sure if he’d ever really helped anyone.
“I don’t have any formal training, but I think I’m good at helping people,”
Maggie said. “Like when I walked in, I could see immediately that you were having a
bad day, which is understandable.” She waved in the direction of the garage and Norman
understood. “Sometimes it’s just enough to talk with someone, to have a connection, and
that makes our problems not seem so big. At least that’s the way I see things. Is that
strange?”

“Not at all,” Norman said. He could truthfully say he felt somewhat cheered just
talking with her. “It was nice talking to you. I mean that.”

At that moment the mechanic who’d been smoking came into the office. Norman
flinched. He suddenly felt panicked, as if he’d just been caught doing something wrong.

“Don’t you need to get to the bank?” the man asked Maggie.

She jumped from the chair and grabbed an envelope from the desk drawer. “I
almost forgot.” She looked over her shoulder as she walked through the door, and
smiled. Norman noticed she had the smallest limp, a slight favoring of the left leg over
the right. She stepped into a small blue car and drove away in the direction of the bars.

“Women,” the mechanic said. He sat down heavily behind the desk and made a
swiping motion with his hand in the direction Maggie had gone. “Especially this one.
She’s a dreamer, always got her head in the clouds.” He yawned and began scratching at
a patch of wiry hair poking through his open coveralls.

Norman cleared his throat. “What’s wrong with my car?”

“Head gasket. You blew a head gasket.” The mechanic took a piece of rubber
hose from his pocket and flopped it on the desk. Norman could see a small, ragged hole
in it. “A hole in your radiator hose. I’m guessing you weren’t looking down at your gauges because you overheated, shot your engine all to hell.”

Norman knew little about cars, though he had a vague notion that a blown head gasket was a major problem. “How much?” he asked.

The mechanic took a thick green book from a shelf over the desk and began thumbing through it. Norman watched the man’s dingy black fingers flip through the pages and then stop to write numbers on a pad of paper. From where he sat, Norman could see that almost all the numbers were three digits.

“Parts and labor will cost you $2000.00 and that’s on the low end.”

The words were like a punch to the gut. Norman felt helpless, at the mercy of the man sitting before him. Norman could see the mechanic’s name embroidered on his coveralls: Lou. It seemed like a stereotype, like a joke people make about bad mechanics.

“So what do you want to do?” the mechanic said. He’d found the chips and shoved a handful in his mouth.

“Are you sure?” Norman said. “That seems high.”

“Positive,” the mechanic said. “It’s straight from the book. Look for yourself if you want.” He was smiling and Norman knew why. “I’d tell you to get a second opinion, but what can you do?”

Norman knew the cost of repairs wasn’t worth it. The car was old, his grandmother’s car, a gift she’d given him after he graduated from college. He’d already put money aside for another car. What bothered him was the immediate problem of being stuck. He looked around the office, at the faded walls and furniture, all in various
stages of decay, a reflection of the town beyond the window. People live in this. The thought baffled him. By now the mechanic was drumming his fingers against the binding of the green book, waiting.

“I don’t even think the car is worth $2000.00,” Norman said.

“I got a buddy who owns a junk yard across town,” the mechanic said. “He’ll probably give you fifty bucks for it.” He paused and then began picking at the grit under his thumbnail with a pencil he’d found on the desk. “I need to tell you now that I’ll have to charge you a twenty-five dollar diagnostic fee. It’s policy.”

Norman handed the cash over. The mechanic counted the bills and then shoved them in his pocket. “I don’t mean to hurry you along,” he said, “but we’re going to close in a few minutes. If you want there’s a motel near the freeway, not more than ten minutes on foot. I think Greyhound passes by there tomorrow afternoon.”

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A hot wind blew through the empty streets. Overhead, the streetlights began to flick on, making an annoying buzzing sound. Norman, a small bag with a few clothes and toiletries hanging from his shoulder, walked toward the bars rather than go to the motel. He looked at his watch. It was now nearly two hours since Curly had left. Norman scanned both directions of the street and decided he should get inside some place. The last thing he wanted was an evening listening to Curly’s small-town opinions.

Off the road a ways Norman saw a building with a flashing neon sign partly obscured by a tractor-trailer, and he could only see the word Ranch pulsing in a thick, lurid red. Norman walked toward the sign. He’d get a bite to eat and try to call Rick for a ride. He felt the sooner he could get out of town the better.
When Norman tried the door to the restaurant, it was locked, though he could hear voices inside. A red curtain hung over the inside of the door. Suddenly it parted and a man with a bloated pink face appeared. He pointed at something to the right side of the door. Norman couldn’t understand. And then he heard the man’s voice coming faintly through the glass. “You have to ring the bell,” he said.

Norman pressed the button and listened as a faint chorus of bells pealed over the voices. A woman in a low-cut red dress and black stiletto heels, blond and heavily made-up, opened the door. “What can I do for you?” she said in a low breathy voice. The affectation in her voice made each word sound sticky. Norman didn’t like the way she stared at him. Her face seemed constricted around the lips, as if she were suppressing laughter.

“I need to use the phone,” Norman said.

“Come in,” she said. She leaned against the doorjamb, leaving just enough room for Norman to squeeze by. “You just need to use the phone?” she asked, leaving room for Norman to add something.

“I might order something too,” Norman said. He could smell her, a thick lavender scent he tasted in the back of his throat. “Is there a menu I can look at?”

“A menu,” she said, and suddenly all the playfulness drained out of her face. “You’re serious, aren’t you?”

“Yes, isn’t this a restaurant?”

“No,” she said. She was laughing at Norman, her head thrown back, her eyes closed. “If you want a restaurant you got to go down the street. This is a brothel. I bet you thought I was your waitress, didn’t you, honey?”
Suddenly Norman felt a blush creep up his neck and color his cheeks. He could see his reflection in a tall mirror by the door, and he disliked what he saw: stooped shoulders, his arms crossed over his chest, a reflection of insecurity.

“Donna’s Ranch,” the woman said. “You never heard of the world famous Donna’s Ranch? Where you from?” she asked, and Norman knew the question didn’t require an answer. In a subtle way, she was making fun of him.

Norman had heard about the brothels in Nevada. Recently he’d read how some of them wanted their tax money to fund education: buying books for students, building schools, hiring more teachers. Though he’d given little thought to their existence, the brothel conformed to a generic idea he had of such places: dimly lit, isolated, cheap, and tawdry. There were groups of men scattered throughout the room, sitting at round wooden tables, playing cards; truckers, Norman thought, judging by the big rigs he’d seen in the parking lot. And why hadn’t Norman noticed it before: there weren’t any plates on the tables, no smell of food in the air, only the stench of stale cigarette smoke, alcohol, and perfume. There was a palpable tension in the room, a tightness and anticipation Norman could see on the men’s faces and hear in their voices, as if they were waiting for something to spring to life. He could see their eyes darting around the room, looking at him and then at a drawn curtain against the back wall. Norman felt revulsion for all of them. He wanted to run out the door as a sign of protest, but knew this would be misinterpreted. To this woman he might already be the joke of the evening, the stuffy out-of-towner who mistakes the brothel for a restaurant, and even though she was a prostitute, Norman didn’t want to hear her breathy laughter as he marched out. Instead he decided to use the phone and quickly leave after.
“I just need to make a call,” Norman said. “That’s it.”

The woman sighed and then pointed Norman toward a dark hallway at the back of the room. Norman, as he walked toward the phone, heard her say, “If you change your mind, take a seat anywhere.” Norman didn’t acknowledge her as he weaved through the tables. What she said bothered him, not so much the invitation to join in, but the way she said it, as if she were mocking him.

Norman held the telephone to his ear and listened to the dull pulse. Across the room he could see the woman talking with a co-worker, a short woman in a red strapless dress serving drinks. Both were looking toward him and laughing, and Norman knew he was the butt of the joke, the laughable, stuffy character, the good guy whose naiveté serves as entertainment. He wanted out, back to the safety of his comfortable, prescribed life.

He turned his back to the women and dialed his friend’s number. After three rings, Erica picked up.

“Erica, I need to speak with Rick.”

“Who is this?”

Suddenly Norman heard an eruption of sound behind him, a twangy country song with a sharp steel guitar, clapping, voices shouting over the steady beat of drums. Norman cupped his hand against the phone. “This is Norman.” He paused. “Norman Reeves.”

“Rick isn’t here,” she said. “Call back later.”

Her voice began to fade and Norman had to shout. “Wait, don’t hang up. Erica, please.”
Then he told her about the trip, about the car and the mechanic and how he was stuck and needed a ride. “It’s only two-and-a-half hours away,” Norman said. “I’ll pay you for gas.”

“If you want to know the truth,” she said, “I’m not at all impressed with your burst of spontaneity. You’re still boring, and I’m not the only one who thinks so. Don’t you get it? There’s a reason Rick never calls you. It’s because you’re no fun. You weren’t any fun in high school and you’re still no fun. I’d rather stab myself in the eye than spend even five minutes listening to your pompous speeches about the reckless, misguided world and how nothing is good enough for you.” She took a breath and continued. “You got everything figured out, don’t you Norman? We don’t have time to come get you, so why don’t you figure yourself a ride home?”

At that moment a hand clamped onto Norman’s shoulder and spun him around. In the dim light he didn’t immediately recognize the man, but then saw the dark eyes and the yellow teeth framed between two thin lips.

“Look at what we have here,” Curly said. He had his arm around Norman’s shoulder. “Of all the places, I never thought I’d find a good boy like you here.” His words were thick and slurred, and his breath smelled sour.

“I really need to go,” Norman said. He tried to lift Curly’s arm, but it tightened over his shoulder.

“Just stay a minute,” Curly said. He motioned to a woman across the room.

“Marta, grab a Coca-Cola for my friend Norm.”

Norman saw that the room was now filled with women, all wearing short silk dresses that glittered in a false and irritating way. Some circled the tables carrying trays
of drinks and some were sitting. One was on a man’s lap, her head thrown back, laughing, making small circular motions with her hips. The curtain was pulled back and Norman could see a long hallway that led to some rooms. One door was open. There was a bed in the room and a black light that made the bedspread look like a white neon liquid.

“Please,” Norman said. He suddenly felt sick. “I need to go.”

Curly raised his hand and whistled. “Everyone, this is my friend, Norm, one of those Utah boys, voted nicest in his high school class. Unfortunately, his car broke down and he won’t be leaving tonight, but while he’s here he’s chosen the finest entertainment in town.”

The room erupted in a chorus of shouts and wolf calls. Some of the men lifted their glasses and winked.

“Looks like your friend needs to loosen up a little,” one woman called out. Norman could see dark freckles on her chest. They reminded him of constellations. “Maybe I should toss him a freebie just to put a smile on his face.”

Again the room erupted. Norman stared at the smiling faces and felt as if his mind had shrunk into something no larger than a pebble. The scene was like a nightmare of everything he despised, the laziness, the lechery, the hedonism, all crammed into a crowded, overheated room.

“Well, what do you say?” Curly asked. He lifted a sweaty glass of beer and took a long drink. “How’s that for hospitality?”

“I don’t feel well,” Norman said. He turned for the door and felt Curly’s arm drop from his shoulder.
“What do you mean?” Curly said. “Why’d you come here in the first place?” He set his glass down and took a step toward Norman. “You don’t have any explaining to do, Norm. You’re among friends. No one’s going to tell and no one’s going to care.”

Norman didn’t turn back. Behind him he heard a crescendo of laughter and boos. He opened the door and decided he was doing the right thing.

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Norman started walking toward the motel near the freeway. He passed a bar with a wagon wheel hanging over the door and looked inside to where a dozen couples slowly danced. Norman contemplated calling Carolyn. He wanted to hear a familiar voice, any voice really. As he was about to open the door, Norman saw Maggie walking up the street. A short overweight man with thinning hair and lardy skin followed behind her, talking excitedly and motioning with his hands.

“What do you mean you’re waiting for your boyfriend?” the man said. “Just one drink. It’s not going to hurt anyone. You’re the cutest little thing I ever seen in this town.”

Norman was about to turn away when Maggie waved.

“Just play along,” she whispered when he was close enough to hear. She held his hand and turned toward the man. “I told you I was waiting for my boyfriend,” she said. “Get lost.” Norman narrowed his eyes and tried to stand a little taller. The man shrugged his shoulders and walked the other direction. Norman looked down at their hands, at her fingers intertwined with his. The hand was soft and warm, and he didn’t want to let it go. Maggie smiled and brushed a piece of hair behind her ear. He gently squeezed. She
squeezed back. “What am I doing?” Norman thought. He slowly released her hand and took a step back.

***

They sat side by side in a small café down the street from the bar. Norman wondered why she’d brought him to this place, with its gleaming white tables and Pine-Sol-scented air. She said he would love it. What did she mean by that? Across from them an older man and woman silently ate pie and drank coffee. Maggie’s perfume smelled like a mixture of vanilla and flowers. It seemed to come at Norman in small bursts. He wanted to close his eyes and breathe it in.

“I really appreciated that,” Maggie said. “We get some real creeps passing through.”

“My pleasure,” Norman said.

“I tried to hurry back to the garage, but you were gone,” Maggie said. “Tough luck with the car. A real bummer. Lou told me all about it.” She was making water circles on the table with her glass. She seemed genuinely concerned about his predicament.

“Some things you just can’t see coming,” Norman said. “A few weeks ago I was supposed to get a tune-up, but I forgot. One small mistake and all this.” Norman realized the last sentence sounded too harsh. “I didn’t mean to criticize the town. I just meant that the circumstance aren’t very good—for me.”

“No need to apologize,” Maggie said. “Sometimes I feel this place is the end of the world, but it does have its redeeming qualities.”

“I’m sure it does.”
“You know,” she said. “I had a feeling I was going to run into you tonight. Well, I guess more than a feeling. Lou told me what direction you went and I started looking. Do you think that’s weird? I mean, I don’t usually do this.”

“Neither do I,” Norman said.

“Maybe it’s strange,” Maggie said, “but being with you makes me feel safe. But more than that, it’s just nice to talk, to connect. No one realizes how lonely small towns can be.” She pushed her plate back and reached for the check. “That’s why I’m going to enlist your services for just a little longer,” she said, a teasing smile parting her lips, beckoning Norman to play along. “In a place like this, who’s going to walk me home?”

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Norman thought it would be best if he went to the motel after walking Maggie home, but he couldn’t think how to end the evening. Truthfully, he didn’t know if he wanted the evening to end, so he followed her inside and waited by the door as she turned on the lights. The house was small, one bedroom and a kitchen attached to a living room furnished with two blue couches and a wooden coffee table. Next to the door hung a collage of photos in a black frame. Several pots of herbs, arranged according to size, adorned the windowsill. Maggie twisted a yellowed leaf from a basil plant and set it beside the pot. “I believe in being honest,” she said.

“So do I,” Norman said, thinking either she was married or wanted to sell him something. He hoped so.

Maggie said nothing. Instead she lifted her pant leg and took her right leg off below the knee. Empty, the pant leg swayed slightly. She took the leg, with the shoe still attached, and set it under the coffee table. Then she looked at Norman. “Do you mind?”
“Why would I mind?” Norman asked.

“I was just asking. I’ve had some bad experiences. People can be very cruel sometimes.

Seeing her without the leg, Norman remembered something he’d once read about men who are attracted to women with prosthetic limbs. There was an actual name for the condition, though it escaped him at the moment. Norman knew he should leave, but if he went now she might misunderstand and be hurt.

“When I’m at home I like to be myself.” She hopped to the couch with one graceful leap and sat down. “If you’re a floor person, you can use a pillow. I had the carpets shampooed a few weeks ago.”

“I’ll just sit by you,” Norman said. “I can’t say I’ve ever been much of a floor person.” As an afterthought he unlaced his shoes and set them near the prosthesis.

“That’s much better,” he said, and then leaned back.

“I knew it wouldn’t bother you,” Maggie said. “I’ve noticed that good people are interested in more than just the appearance of something.”

“Really, I don’t mind,” Norman said. “I think it’s wonderful you’re so comfortable.”

“Sometimes it’s not so easy. In high school my friend and I were driving home from Elko when a drunk driver hit us. My friend walked away, but obviously I didn’t.” She rested her arm on the back of the couch. “At that time my dad was out of work and didn’t have any health insurance. The whole town pitched in. Maybe that’s one of the reasons I stay. On the outside people here seem rough, but on the inside they’re very good. It beats a city where people look nice on the outside and are mean on the inside.”
“It must have been quite the community effort.”

“It really was,” Maggie said. “I wasn’t doing well at all back then. Just imagine, one day I was running track and then the next I couldn’t even walk. And on top of that we couldn’t afford a prosthesis or the rehabilitation. That’s when everyone chipped in.” She pulled some matches from under the table and lighted the candle. “After that I always swore that if I had the chance to help someone, like I’d been helped, then I’d jump at the chance. That’s why I came back.”

Maggie lifted herself and skipped over to the collage of photographs hanging on the wall. She set it in front of Norman and pointed to a picture of a heavy-set man. He was sitting on the hood of a truck and had a rifle resting on his shoulder. Beyond him was nothing but the flat, monochrome desert stretching to the horizon. Around that picture were others. Norman could see Maggie in various stages of her life, playing the piano in a white dress, making a pie, running track. He found it interesting that the picture of the man was at the very center.

“Is he your father?” Norman asked.

“No,” Maggie said. She stared at the picture and then wiped away a piece of dust stuck to the glass. “His name was Bill, a family friend. In fact, he was the third guy down at the garage until he got sick. Pancreatic cancer. I was in college at the time. My mom told me about it and said there was no one to take care of him.” She paused. Norman could see she was fighting for composure. “I realized anything I was studying then was less important than helping him. So I moved back and took care of him.” She wiped at her eyes and smiled apologetically. “Have you ever read The Sage?”
Norman knew about the book—the story of an old sage imparting pearls of
wisdom before his death—and had even flipped through it a few times when he saw it on
sale at the bookstore, but he’d never read more than a page or two, though many people
had recommended it to him. It seemed too contrived, too feel-good and saccharine, one
of those books that litters thrift stores after its initial popularity has waned. “I haven’t,”
Norman said.

“I just mention it,” Maggie said, “because you’re a guidance counselor and help
people. Maybe this could be a tool you might use.” Again she lifted herself and hopped
to a bookcase near the window. She brought back a worn blue book and started
thumbing through it. Norman could see a raised gold seal on the cover with an out-
stretched hand in it. In the palm of the hand were human silhouettes stretching their
hands upward. Also stamped on the cover was the title, *The Sage*. “My high school
guidance counselor gave me this after the accident,” Maggie continued. “It really helped
me. After reading it I started writing my own poetry. When Bill got sick I thought it
would help him, too. Every day we would read a chapter and discuss it, share
experiences and things like that. I want to read you something.” She cleared her throat
and began. The poem was about death, how death is like standing naked in the wind and
melting into the sun, and that death is nothing more than freeing our breath so it can rise
to meet God. Norman could see she barely glanced at the page.

He tried to smile as she read. He was thinking that nothing he had ever thought or
said had been as powerful. He knew that he had never helped someone the way Maggie
had helped herself, and later Bill.
“You are very beautiful,” Norman said. Maggie set the book aside and fingered the golden seal on the cover. “And I’m talking about more than just the way you look.”

“Thank you,” she said. “I appreciate that.”

“Did you say you write poetry?” Norman asked. He suddenly wanted to hear her voice again reading something.

“I dabble in it,” Maggie said, “but it’s awful stuff. I’m embarrassed.”

Norman touched her hand. “Please read something.”

Maggie took a notebook from the shelf and flipped through it. “I wrote this last year.” She took Norman’s hand. “I love the way you look at me.” And then she began to read.

Norman closed his eyes and listened to the words. They were simple and the meter somewhat forced, but he enjoyed the poem and even began to believe what she was saying: that the deeper we are cut by sorrow, the deeper our joy, and that joy and sorrow are inseparable, and without them life is empty. Norman began mouthing the words as if he was rehearsing a part he must soon play.
Afterword

Two years ago in a graduate class on creative writing theory, I wrote an essay entitled “A Brief Exploration of Writing and the Creative Process,” which centered on the idea that writing fiction is not an act of purely conscious calculation. I argued that most processes of creation—writing included—are mysterious. While I feel there are many unconscious calculations in writing, I have since changed my opinion on the subject, believing now that one learns the craft of writing through trial and error; through careful observation; through a practiced rendering of gestures, facial expressions, and turns of speech; through understanding that art, as John Gardner believes, is selective and requires the choicest concrete details to create a vivid, continuous dream in the reader’s mind; in short, through a thousand conscious decisions one writes. Though in no way exhaustive or complete, what follows in this Afterword, then, is an informal commentary of some of my conscious deliberations of plot, setting, character, and theme when I wrote these stories. In addition, I will also treat in this essay the inspiration for these stories.

Of all the stories in this thesis, I have the most affinity for “Memory of the Body.” It’s hard to say why. Maybe there’s an honesty I feel in it that doesn’t emanate as strongly through my other stories. Or perhaps it’s more personal than my other stories, more of a space where my lived experience and fictional experience overlap, not so much in the actual events of the story, but more in the issues Sterling, the story’s protagonist, grapples with the siren call of the past, our occasional inability to maintain high ideals, those haunting, youthful indiscretions. Even though I began writing the story three years ago, and am thoroughly tired of it by now, I still read it with a sense of anxiety and always hope that in some way it might end differently, perhaps more hopefully. Every
time I read, my revulsion and sympathy for Reed are still fresh, my sadness for Sterling palpable, and the final image—Sterling’s arm raised to greet Reed—inevitable and shocking. For better or for worse, Sterling has made himself. Ultimately, he’s the product of his actions.

Many of my characters are preoccupied with reckless actions—Sterling in “Memory of the Body,” Norman Reeves, and Robert in “The Private Investigator”—and view these actions as a precipitous slope one might, in a moment of weakness, set foot on and then come tumbling down. Sterling, unlike my other protagonists, had a reckless youth and danced on that precipitous slope, but, unlike Reed, managed to pull his life together and become a law-abiding, responsible adult, everything Reed is not.

Unbeknownst to Sterling, the memory of all those callow indiscretions, all that thoughtlessness and cruelty, still inhabits him, though it’s become a minor mission for him as a teacher to persuade his students to avoid the type of youth he had with Reed.

The story’s genesis and preoccupations stem from my own youth, from one of those intimidating tyrannical friends most of us have or are at one time or another, and from how cruelty and vindictiveness—though not on the scale of Reed’s shenanigans—became second nature to teenagers. Often I think back on those times, just as Sterling does, and wonder who that was, who committed those pranks, certainly another person. And what becomes of all that cruelty and vindictiveness? That’s the important question. Does it dissipate with maturity? Does it leave any residue? Does it lie dormant, ready to awake if we uncover it?

For years these preoccupations moved about at the periphery of my mind as passing thoughts and as an occasional feeling of malaise when I’d reflect on my youth. It
wasn’t until three years ago when a female friend from church, a dance major from BYU
not unlike Summer Jamison in the story, explained to me one evening how the complex
routines she learned for performances became second nature over time because muscle,
just like our minds, has the ability to remember.

In the realm of dance and sports, this idea of muscle memory seems innocuous, a
necessity without which most of us could not function. However, the larger implications
of this somatic reality are problematic. What of the recovering drug addict, the alcoholic,
the chronic gambler, the repentant porn fiend? If one devotes a substantial amount of
time and energy to these negative activities, just as the basketball player or soccer star
does to his sport, wouldn’t their memory inhabit the muscles? If true, then change in
one’s behavior, good or bad, must be physical and mental. And what of those youthful
indiscretions, the cruelty and vindictiveness, that came to be second nature? Even after
all these years, does the memory of those acts still reside in me? Perhaps. Anyway, the
question seemed promising enough to explore in a story.

“The Memory of the Body” begins with Sterling’s epiphany: that our bodies, just
like our minds, have a memory of their own. Though Sterling might not have been able
to articulate this truth before Summer said it, he realizes he’s always believed it, always
seen its veracity in his complex relationship with Reed, and soon after this new
knowledge begins to guide his thoughts and actions, begins to resonate in what he teaches
his students.

Without doubt, Sterling believes his discovery of this truth insures a kind of
freedom, a model one can live by to avoid life’s blind alleys and pitfalls. Paradoxically,
Sterling is not free at all. Rather, he’s bound to Reed.
One small indication of Reed’s power over Sterling is the incident with the tamarind nectar. Sterling has no interest in drinking the fermented, turbid liquid offered to him, but Reed’s insistence compels him to take a sip: Reed “set the glass and plate before Sterling, and then took a long drink from his glass. He smacked his lips and looked at Sterling expectantly, smiling. ‘You’re not afraid, are you?’ he said. ‘Not afraid to try something new? Don’t tell me you’re not going to take a sip.’” Sterling’s slight yielding to Reed on this small matter encapsulates the dynamic of their relationship that stretches back to their youth and suggests that the dynamic, even after so many years, still works. That is, Reed still has the power to influence Sterling, and, further, the linchpin of this power, what validates it, is this idea of the body’s memory. Sterling’s youthful indiscretions and shenanigans, and Reed’s power to manipulate him, play into this greater yielding to vandalize Denny’s car, a decision Sterling will regret forever.

By the end of the story, despite Reed’s death and Sterling’s effort to expunge any trace of his friend from his life, he can’t. Rather, Reed’s memory and the memory of their shared life still reside deep within him. Sterling’s reoccurring dream of walking a country road and seeing Reed drive by and wave indicates this subconscious propensity to yield to others: Sterling “could never say how always in the dream, as if it had a life separate from him, he felt his arm rising in reply.”

The culmination of all the events in the story, coupled with Sterling’s final gesture, suggest a complete disrobing: there is nothing more we need to know about Sterling. Any additional information, any actions or words, would corroborate what we already know about Sterling, that he will never be free, that this tendency to yield to others, despite his believed probity, will forever be a chain and ball he’ll carry.
The next story in this thesis, “Water and Meditation,” is, as all my stories are, an exaggerated extension of my own experience, and was, when I wrote it, a lesson in letting the prosaic—those everyday objects and experiences—speak for itself, and in this speaking, finding a profound meaning.

The speaking, in this case, is the realization that the protagonist’s wife, Anne, a woman who through struggle and sacrifice earned a business degree and just received a lucrative promotion at work, might leave the protagonist, Troy, an ambitious soul, but completely lacking in the kind of motivation that permits one to take chances, which, in his case, means doing what he’s always dreamed of: starting a land development company.

Over the course of the story, I knew Troy must come to the realization that his wife will soon pass him by in what he feels are the markers of success—money, status, respect—and might soon leave him. While writing this story, I didn’t know how those undercurrents of suspicion must surface, how the possibilities must solidify. Where would I do this? What would trigger this epiphany in the Troy? How could I figure it out?

The solution came one day in September as my wife and I walked along the Green River in Auburn, Washington, taking in the beauty and sound of the water. I was turning over some of the first lines of Melville’s Moby Dick—“Water and meditation are forever wedded”—when the answers came: I knew Troy and Anne must be walking near a river, and near this river, or in this river, the he must see something, something commonplace that would furnish this revelation. But not the water. The water itself, I felt, wasn’t the answer, nor did I feel anything for it beyond its meditative image and
sound. To use it in my story would force a pattern—baptism, innocence, blood, take your pick, horribly clichéd and empty. Then, as my wife and I stood there, I saw a streak of something dappled silver and black move through the water, and then another, until I noticed that the whole river bottom was alive, pulsing with a strange undulating movement. They were salmon, I realized, struggling upriver with an undeviating, instinctual desire to spawn, soon inevitably to die, whether or not they reached their goal. In that moment, I knew Troy must see these salmon, must clearly see how his own life resonated in this timeless struggle, must realize that his life would soon change. And as he walks away, I knew he would turn once more and wonder, with his limited knowledge of what these salmon are doing, how long they go on, if they give up?

How difficult this is: to let the object or experience speak for itself. So often when confronted by a story idea, we fail to see the endless possibilities of what inspires us, fail to separate it from us and view its protean form. Rather, we see the gleaming edge of the object or action or experience, the tantalizing view that pulls us in and engages our minds, and soon, as it often happens, all we can see is the gleaming edge which we’ve tried to polish and shape until it becomes incongruous and dull in relation to the larger part we cannot yet see. It’s tantamount to forcing meaning, what I’m talking about, an unnatural process, a lack of patience in which we are too eager to await the final form, the long-awaited fruit. We settle too often for branches with stiff, unopened buds and hard, flavorless fruit that should have stayed on the tree a little longer. Perhaps what’s required of the writer’s creative process is a little indifference, the ability to be surprised, a conscious decision that the seed we assiduously water every morning might, upon fruition, be a potato, a peach, or a beet, and still we would marvel at it and eat it up
rather than pining for the grapes we imagined every morning while standing barefoot in the garden with a hose in hand. It’s a condition of the modern world, I guess: the need to interpret the morass of data we absorb each minute that causes us to quickly form the protean into manageable, digestible chunks. Consequently, the writer, to achieve his creative potential, must, at least in mind, escape the modern world, escape the pressure for instant gratification and resolution. Brewster Ghiselin suggests the writer, to achieve meaningful creation, must be “conscious of a stage yet more primitive, a condition of complete indecision . . . in which nothing tends toward determination, nothing of a particular character seems implied, in which, therefore, all is still apparently free” (14). In fact, at one time Henry Miller claimed to have no idea what his future books would be like, nor the book he was working on at that moment. “My charts and plans are the slenderest sort of guides,” he writes. “I scrap them at will, I invent, distort, deform, lie, inflate, exaggerate, confound and confuse as the mood seizes me. I obey only my own instincts and intuitions” (180). So the salmon, unexpectedly to me, became the turning point, or the epiphany for Troy, and it was simply an exercise for me in letting an image present itself and then speak.

Also, since it was one of my early stories, “Water and Meditation” was a lesson in how good fiction must be character driven. That is, a story must provide a believable character, duplicitous in his or her thoughts, words, and actions, a dimensional human being with whom the reader can identify, a likable person who captures our interest and in whose destiny we feel invested.

Troy is such a character.
I wanted the reader to instantly feel a part of his present world, the doldrums of watching daytime TV and waiting for someone to call about a possible job interview. I’ve always firmly believed you could converse with any person for two to three minutes and learn in that time what that individual values, how he or she sees the world, qualifies it, and what position the person holds or wishes to hold in it. From the first page of “Water and Meditation,” I wanted the reader to see that Troy occupies himself with money, not so much in the sense that he wants to live a decadent, self-indulgent life, but simply this: he sees money as a marker of success, as a way to prove his masculinity—and his wife, as a challenge to this masculinity, has garnered a lucrative position at work, not only making more money than he does, but supporting him. In a sense he is fallen, his confidence dashed, the dream of starting his own company practically unattainable.

A part of the story that encapsulates this change is the wife’s relationship with her boss, a relationship that might tacitly seem to be leading toward an intimacy that will eventually destroy the marriage. In my mind, the relationship between Anne and her boss is nothing more than a mutual respect and a shared vision those in a professional environment have. Regardless of their relationship, Troy feels as if he’s moving toward the periphery of his wife’s life. He can’t provide for her, and in a sense he’s been emasculated, relegated to a world where he’s beholden to the whims of others, where his only success is in the past or in fantasy.

But let there be no illusions: Troy understands this emasculation. At one time, while Anne worked at Mario’s, he’d stop in after work for a pizza and a beer. Of this, he notes: “I’d give her a wink and run my hand down her thigh when she’d get in close enough, touch her breasts when she’d lean over the table to fill my glass. It amused me,
just a little game I liked to play to make her blush.” Real or imagined, justified or not, this is Troy at his apex, enjoying the reward he feels is his after a long day of work, reveling in the “proper order” of his and Anne’s relationship: he as a breadwinner and she as an object to serve him. Such an individual is repulsive, and my reader, I believe, recognizes this. But I hope my reader also recognizes that Troy, in light of his present vicissitudes, knows this proper order no longer applies to his relationship. In retrospect, as he thinks of how he treated Anne while at Mario’s, there is a palpable shame that softens the disdain the reader might feel toward him. Of this image of himself at Mario’s, Troy notes, “I see she’s moving toward something, very slowly, but moving. And I’m just sitting there with a smile on my face. I almost don’t recognize myself. And then I see myself touching her thigh as she leans over to fill my glass, and I think, ‘He has no right to do that. None at all.’”

Further, there is in Troy the realization that his wife, though flesh and blood standing by his side, is slowly fading from his life: “Her face is pale and beautiful, except for her cheeks, which are red with the cold, and I can almost picture her dissolving, growing paler and paler until she becomes transparent, and I can see right through her, until she slips from my arms because there’s nothing left to hold.”

For me, the ending is optimistic, an awakening of sorts in which the kitsch of daytime TV, that dreary place into which Troy escapes, begins to pale and the real treasure of his life—Anne—begins to recenter, though he knows the realization of this depends wholly on him. Perhaps the image of the salmon is too much, but I wanted to suggest that Troy sees in their labors a tenacity he must apply to his own life.
The genesis of the third story in this thesis, “The Private Investigator,” came after my four-month stint as a private investigator, a thankless paper-pushing job that sounds much more intriguing than it really was, especially on the low rung of the ladder where I was situated. On the top rung, though, I came to understand that the P.I. life, or so my boss told me, was quite exciting, full of posturing, stakeouts, and a thousand ear-tilting yarns, most of which had to do with drugs, white supremacists, or prostitutes—or all three. The top rung of the ladder, that lonely place my maniacal and humorless boss dwelt, came with a price, and I’m not alluding to the blood, sweat, and tears one exudes in building a thriving business. My boss had the eyes of the cynic, the pessimism of a Seattle garage band, and the trust of the Cherokees. It seemed his years of sleuthing through peoples’ lives had conditioned him to expect the worst from them, and what was the alternative? His clients, the bread and butter of the business, paid him, and paid him well, to illuminate and capture the most private indiscretions and foibles. I began to wonder how a character, someone like my boss, someone jaded by constant exposure to our worst moments, views life’s vicissitudes. Is everything viewed through a dark, depressing glass? And if so, are forgiveness and repentance possible?

The story begins with Robert, a successful private investigator, somewhat like my old boss, sullenly awaiting his father’s arrival, while his wife, Allison, prepares a meal befitting the occasion, wedding china, polished knives and forks, a beautiful roast, the works. From the first sentence, I wanted to instill in the reader’s mind a resentfulness and gloom that color everything Robert views. Though not explicit in the first few paragraphs, Robert’s relationship with his father, judging from this resentfulness and gloom, is strained: “The dark, menacing clouds seemed fitting for the occasion. After
all, it was only his father and his new wife. . . .” And: “The glow of the streetlights was a feeble presence in the room, but Robert didn’t bother with the light switch. He rather liked sitting in the darkness, liked watching the precession of the swirling, wind-swept gloom beyond the window.”

Obviously there’s a great rift in Robert’s relationship with his father, something from the past Robert hasn’t forgotten and which, because of the father’s visit, is warming to a boil. I describe the father’s shortcoming in these terms: “Things like infidelity, like betrayal and lost trust, just don’t vanish. They are like scars that might pale over time, but remain visible. A mid-life crisis is how Robert had often heard it referred to, a restlessness associated with growing older. Perhaps it was this same restlessness that kept them waiting.”

While many who’ve read this story and commented on it had no problem with the ambiguity surrounding the father’s former transgressions, other readers wanted a thorough account of the actions leading to this riven relationship between father and son. I agreed with the latter. All of us, either from our own strained relationships or from witnessing those of others, can fill in the blanks, so to speak. Was Robert’s father a cad? Probably. Was there alcohol abuse? Yes. Were there lies, hurt feelings, and an enduring mistrust Robert can’t forget? Yes. The mystery of the father is laid bare in these assumptions. They are corroborated by his actions and speech later in the story, and detailing them, I concluded, would take focus from the truly flawed character: Robert.

One of Robert’s flaws, undoubtedly part and parcel of his larger flaw of not forgiving his father, is a selfish myopia that hampers his seeing beyond himself and beyond the past: “Robert looked at his father, not at his face, but more at the space he
was filling.” And when Robert does look at his father, there’s an ulterior motive, a hope that in a subtle gesture or a fleeting curl of the lip or furrowing of the brow, he’ll see a momentary guilt pass through his father, the realization, Robert hopes, of the destructive power of his poor choices: “Robert stared at the steaming bowls on the table, a first class meal he provided because he knew it was the right things to do—a man takes care of his family, as simple as that. He took a spoonful of potatoes and watched his father fork green beans on his plate. Robert wondered what he was looking for—regret, guilt, sadness? He took a bit of potatoes and thought about what he wanted to see on his father’s face. Guilt, even if it were as faint and fleeting as the pulse of a star.”

Further, this myopia extends into the spiritual realms, for Robert, with all his cynicism and callousness, cannot see the spirit and mystery of things, especially his father’s spirit. This inability is apparent as he drives through a wind-tossed night toward the Doctor’s house: “Faintly, over the engine’s mechanical hum, he heard the dry sweep of the bare alders and maples trembling in the wind. Craning his neck, Robert noticed how they faintly resembled the human skeletons he once studied in an anatomy class, transparent and fragile, deprived of mystery.” For Robert, the spirit of things, the beauty within objects and people, is obscured by his clinical practicality, no doubt indicative of his professional world, a corporeal world in which indisputable facts win court cases. A glass bowl shaped into a rose, naked trees, a colorful glass ornament, even his father’s ebullience—to Robert, none of these have any value within themselves. They annoy him.

Robert can’t see what I hope the reader might infer from some of my description of the father: that possibly he is sick. The “sallow skin stretched tight over the cheekbones, as if skeleton were working itself through,” and the way “he didn’t eat
much, just picked and nibbled a little at the green beans and meat,” suggest that the father’s visit might be an effort on his part to make amends. And certainly his speech and actions suggest this. Beginning with his arrival, he’s complimentary of Robert, noting the impressive neighborhood and hardwood floors, and later confessing how he boasts about his son: “My friends’ kids are teachers, mechanics, boring stuff like that. But when I tell them my son has his own P.I. firm, they’re in awe. Really knocked out.”

Certainly the father enjoys the sound of his own voice, the way he chatters on about his adventures, the way he uses Robert’s story about the girl in the car accident to springboard into his own yarn, and perhaps this is why Robert values very little his father’s compliments. In addition, the fact that the father is drinking when Robert returns from his surveillance further discourages open communication.

But there’s a softening, a moment when Robert, though ever so slightly, begins to sense his father’s sincerity. Insulated by darkness, hidden behind glass so that “anyone trying to look in on them couldn’t see,” Robert recounts a conversation with a college roommate about how his father organized a city little league team, a memory the roommate greatly admired, and in that moment, in that simple recounting, there is a change in Robert, an insipient honesty, a self-confrontation of sorts that’s beginning to occur.

The fulcrum of change is this image of mother and child that pervades Robert’s mind during his conversation with his father. To the father, Robert’s work as a private investigator is full of excitement and intrigue, a bragging point among his friends. But the truth Robert divulges to his father is that the excitement and intrigue ended long ago, and in their place is the sad reality of Robert’s quotidian professional life: “I sort through
people’s lives and find what they don’t want anyone to see. I watch them when they think no one’s watching and hope they do terrible things so my clients are happy. That’s what I do.” This confession surprises the father because it agitates the image he has of his son as someone, unlike him, with a precise moral compass, the good guy bringing the guilty to justice. And then another confession by Robert: “The truth is, if I had to, I could find something on anyone.”

In the end, this is Robert’s great realization. As his father prods about whether he could sit outside the house, look in on this scene of father and son, and find some good in the father, Robert realizes his camera would be trained on the son, searching for some kind of goodness. In that moment, as the dark shadows run down the window and form a net over the room, Robert feels trapped, feels the crippling hatred he has for his father like a weight on him.

The next story in this thesis, “Middle Ground,” came from an experience I had with a repairman who came to our apartment to replace a ceiling fan. Unemployed and stuck at home, I passed the time by chatting with him about a topic that seemed to be on the cusp of his mind: his divorce. A palpable antipathy permeated the room as he laid bare his failed relationship, his undeviating devotion, his wife’s infidelity, their eventual divorce, and now the silent loneliness he tried to quell by working two jobs. He was bitter, to put it mildly, brimming with hatred capable of carrying out any number of violent reprisals. But, still, through all of his severe deprecations, I sensed the tiniest cracks in his seething façade, a swath of blue against an otherwise shadowy sky, a love, despite all the hate, that still burned for his wife.
In him and in his experience, I saw the possibility of a complex character, a character—resembling most of us, I imagine—who is a mixture of good and bad, a character whose actions and speech determine what he is and what he might become, a character at odds with the world and with himself. This conflict interested me the most because it asked some questions I’d never considered: Is it possible to love and hate someone simultaneously? If it is possible, how does one live with such conflicted feelings? How does one endure?

Initially, as I began writing the story, using my experience with the repairman as a springboard, I created a character too exaggerated to be believable. That is, the first incarnation of Doctor Plumber was too idiosyncratic, too eccentric, and too zany to illicit any sympathy in the reader, a walking caricature from a comic strip or a lowbrow comedy, not a breathing, pained human with whom the reader sympathizes and sees himself in each nuanced action and word. So in subsequent revisions I cut what seemed artificial and forced in Doctor Plumber, and tried, instead, to make him believable, though still complex. For example, in earlier versions of the story, I had Doctor Plumber wearing medical scrubs, a lab coat, and a stethoscope as a uniform and driving an ambulance which contained all of his plumbing supplies. Further, I imbued him with such a virulent desire for revenge and such a capacity for violence toward his ex-wife that he seemed repulsive to most who read the story. Also, in earlier versions I have Doctor Plumber believe that the call he receives at the beginning of the story, though he hardly recognizes the voice, is his ex-wife’s flaunting her new-found wealth and challenging his manhood by wanting him to plunge her clogged toilet. Though he prepares for this confrontation with his ex-wife by imagining everything he’ll do to her, he, much to his
chagrin, learns the woman is not his wife, but every bit as distasteful. This became the fulcrum of the story, while the human element—the most important part—became peripheral. In subsequent revisions, I excised Doctor Plumber’s thinking the woman on the phone might be his vengeful wife, opting instead to put into practice Raymond Carver’s advice: No tricks. “I hate tricks,” Carver writes. “At the first sign of a trick or a gimmick in a piece of fiction, a cheap trick or even an elaborate trick, I tend to look for cover” (88).

The last story of this thesis is “Several Scenes from Norman Reeves’ Life,” whose protagonist, Norman, is an amalgam of people I’ve known over the years, many at Brigham Young University, some members of my family, and of course, in all honesty, I must acknowledge facets of myself in Norman. The end result is a man whose life philosophy eschews anything unsafe or unprescribed, a philosophy with which he judges others by lofty expectations that few can meet, a philosophy that has blanched his life of any spontaneity, a fact he begins to grasp in the story. Further, he begins grasp the isolation in which he lives and the perception others have of him as a self-righteous perfectionist who’s never satisfied with a world he’s always looking down on. The story, then, is a series of events in which Norman begins to see himself as others see him, both the good and the bad in himself.

From the outset of the story, there is something repulsive about Norman that he doesn’t see, but which others perceive. His date, the tall girl with freckles, sees it when he refuses to go swimming, calling him a stick-in-the-mud, a comment that bothers Norman. In this encounter, I wanted to create a pattern the reader will see again and again throughout the story. It is this: the price of Norman’s prescribed, comfortable,
perfection-seeking life is isolation, not being part of a community, an emotional distance from those around him.

It is an issue of the heart and mind. Instead of using his heart, coupled with the mind, to make decisions, Norman relies solely on the mind, a problem we see in his courtship of Carolyn. Rather than mining the feelings of his heart to determine if he wants to marry her, Norman ticks through a laundry list—good physique, saves money, sensible parents—and weighs these against another list of cons. And his conclusion? Hopelessly sterile: “All in all, though, after dating a year, Norman liked Carolyn, maybe loved her. Their relationship was predictable, no surprises, just the way he wanted it.”

On the surface, Norman appears to be a superficial bore, a person many of us might know and avoid. For this reason I knew I had to take him deeper, break into his psyche to justify, at least in his mind, this strange behavior and create sympathy in the reader’s mind; otherwise, there would be no interest in following him through these several scenes from his life. To shed light on Norman’s eccentricities, I provide insight into his job as a high school counselor, a job in which daily he sees the kind of people he fears most, “people skating through life half-cocked, with no regard for others and no forethought to the road ahead,” unmotivated and indifferent young people on the edge of the adult world. Further, Norman’s antipathy for such people goes back years, to the “uncontrollable, inattentive kids from junior high and high school.” Norman’s superciliousness and fastidiousness aggravate the reader, but his justification for his behavior is understandable. He sees himself, I believe, as a living example of what he deems to be the characteristics of a responsible adult: foresight, responsibility, and a knowledge of the consequences of certain behaviors.
What becomes a catalyst for change is Norman’s understanding of how others perceive him. To Carolyn, he is overly cautious and insensitive; to the jeweler, he is a cheapskate in need of fatherly advice on the particulars of the female mind; to Rick and Erica, he’s a bore; to Curly, he is naïve, a man from Utah with no understanding of the world, a square, the guy voted Nicest in Class. For better or worse, Norman’s solution to soften the image others have of him is to act contrary to his personality. Still stinging from Carolyn’s rebuff, he decides to buy a ring and then drive to California to propose to her.

As so often happens in life, one’s decisions precipitate further choices with both negative and positive repercussions. While making a telephone call in the brothel, Norman is repulsed by what he sees: “The scene was like a nightmare of everything [Norman] despised, the laziness, the hedonism, all crammed into a crowded, overheated room.” Despite this revulsion, despite the fact that Norman is the joke of the evening, there is the siren call of community and anonymity around him, a tempting proposition Curly intones: “You don’t have any explaining to do, Norm. You’re among friends. No one’s going to tell and no one’s going to care.”

Norman’s decision to drive to California has landed him in this strange world he has difficulty navigating, a world he cannot control or foresee. There is the opportunity for community in the brothel, to smash the Nicest in Class image these staring eyes see. There is always the chance of falling or flying at such times. Norman makes a decision: “He opened the door and decided he was doing the right thing. But why did he feel so torn?”
There is a positive side to Norman’s decision to drive to California. In all the frustration of the day, he meets Maggie, a woman so diametrically different from Norman in her approach to and outlook on life that Norman pales in her presence. He finds himself strangely drawn to her, physically and emotionally, and she is drawn to him too, perhaps at first out of a desire to cheer him up. I want my reader to see the differences between Norman and Maggie. She’s outgoing and unguarded, aware and congratulatory of the goodness in others, kind and caring, giving of her time—all things Norman is not. Ironically, even as a school counselor, a position whose very nature suggests reaching out and helping, Norman is unsure if he’s ever helped anyone. He sees in Maggie his deficiencies; he sees her beauty that goes well beyond appearance; he sees fullness in her and emptiness in himself. And why?

Perhaps this gets at theme, the idea manifest throughout the story. One finds the theme in Maggie’s poem. Though the words are simple and the beat forced, Norman hears a profound truth: “that the deeper we are cut by sorrow, the deeper our joy, and that joy and sorrow are inseparable, and without them life is empty.” What does it all mean? It’s true, there’s a safety in Norman’s life, a safety in always looking ahead and in calculating one’s journey so as not to misstep. Yes, there is the potential that the misstep might bring some bit of unhappiness and sorrow, but in that misstep there might also be joy. Norman sees Maggie as living proof of this. Despite the sorrow of losing a leg and watching a friend die, she is full of life. Norman feels nothing. But there’s an awakening. He is moving outside of himself, wandering down a strange path he cannot foresee, mouthing the words of the poem—the type of action, as Flannery O’Connor suggests, “which might indicate that grace has been offered” (118).
In conclusion, some of my conscious calculations regarding plot, setting, character, and theme might be wrongheaded. Some may have made other decisions. Perhaps years from now I will read these stories with different eyes and revise again. If anything, though, these stories, despite a few weaknesses here and there, get at what the business of writing is all about: the attempt to arrive at truth, the attempt to create the process by which we find meaning in experience. Furthermore, these stories were wonderful practice, wonderful to workshop and revise, wonderful to turn into something that reflects a fair amount of passion and sacrifice. As Wallace Stegner said, “Creation is a knack which is empowered by practice, and like almost any skill, it is lost if you don’t practice it” (Plimpton 76). The writer needs rules and habits to guide him, and these come only with practice. I consider this thesis a two-year practice, a long, grueling boot camp in the writerly life. It is not the end, but a launch pad into other stories—into other attempts to convey truth.
Works Cited


