THE SENDOFF AND OTHER STORIES

By

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These stories are dedicated to my parents.
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I would like to thank Padgett Powell, Jill Ciment, Mary Robison and especially David Leavitt for whipping me into better shape. I would like to thank the University of Florida for allowing me to spend two years in the unreal world. And I would like to thank my parents for their love and support.
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Abstract of Thesis Presented to the Graduate School of the University of Florida in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts

THE SENDOFF AND OTHER STORIES

By

Lawrence Wood

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Chair: David Leavitt
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The Sendoff and Other Stories is seven stories about scarred, defective characters trying desperately to find the practicality of their lives through relationships that are often more flawed than themselves.

In the title story, a minor league baseball player confronts his failures on both a personal and professional level when a teammate, after getting released from the team, throws his own going away party. In “Bones,” a man considers whether love inevitably expires after he learns that his dog has epilepsy. The titanium screws in a boy’s hips in “Winter’s Watchers” demonstrates the twisted notion of comfort in pain. And in “Saltwater,” a college teacher realizes his knowledge of language is no match for his best student’s knowledge of everything else.
THE SENDOFF

Old Triplett threw his own sendoff party. He was that kind of guy. He bought the booze and some snacks to stuff your face with. He had a nice sound system that played fine, appropriate music for the occasion. He made and then hung streamers that read, Good Luck Triplett! We’ll miss you, big time! You’re the best Danny! No one can replace you! You’re one hell of a guy, Triplett!

We were impressed.

These were done with careful penmanship and lots of different colors. They did not get in the way of the party. They did not hang down too low, which is a common error when hanging streamers. They were done the right way.

Triplett had prepared the party a couple of days in advance. He told the team about it the day of, right before he was set to pitch. That was the way it was with Triplett. He always looked ahead, wanted things the way he imagined they should be. This was it, a party announced at the last minute, only when he arrived he discovered it had been thought out and organized and wonderful. Nice things were said about him all night, and everything was honest. Triplett had decided that this was the right way to exit. No other would do. Nobody was surprised by this arrangement. It was Triplett at his finest.

We’d all felt this day was coming – when Triplett would get cut. I guess he just had a better sense of when it would actually happen. Maybe some guys just know when their time is up. Maybe Triplett knew he didn’t have anything left.
He and I roomed together on the road. When we weren’t talking about baseball, which wasn’t often, we passed the time telling each other phony stories about our lives. It was clear to me that what we were saying was bullshit, but to Triplett, I was hooked into his remarkable life. We were an interesting duo. He believed everything – what I told him and what he would tell me. I believed nothing.

Yet we kept our stories a secret. Like we had something to lose if they ever got out. That’s how we got along. How we kept our minds off everything that was happening on the field – which wasn’t anything to brag about. I tried not to point out the flaws in his stories. Like when he first told me that as a kid his eyesight was as good as a wolf’s. Literally. And then a couple of months later he told me he was partially blind as a kid because he’d eaten some berries you weren’t supposed to eat when he was on a nature hike. That one I let slide. Others I couldn’t resist. And when I did bring up one, he’d say something like, Huh, I said that? And then just continue with the story he was telling. I liked that about Triplett. He didn’t give a shit about too much.

We were sitting in the dugout waiting to take the field and Triplett made an announcement.

He said, There’s a party happening later. No big deal. A little sendoff, I’ve been told. A little bit of liquor. Should be okay.

We took the field. We didn’t talk about the party the rest of the game. We lost the game 13-5. We’d played hard for the first couple innings before things started falling apart. Mostly it was Triplett’s fault. He knew it. We knew it. It was past the point of blaming the entire team. For his sake, though, we kept it to ourselves. He’d thrown about seventy fucked up pitches in three innings and we had a good sense that tomorrow
he wouldn’t be around. We gave him some pats on the back, but didn’t try to console him. In the grand scheme of things, the loss didn’t matter much. We were here to play for ourselves, to earn promotions. You don’t ever like losing, but on this level you can deal with it. Triplett had learned to deal with it. Had learned to deal with the fact that every time he pitched, he was a big reason why we lost. For that reason, we were keen on him sticking around.

We use to call him Good Old Triplett, but after awhile we realized he wasn’t good at all. One of the worst pitchers on this level I’d ever come to know. So we decided, appropriately, to drop the good and stick with the old. Triplett didn’t seem to notice. Or if he did he didn’t say anything. I suppose there’s not much to say when it comes to your nickname.

But then he pulled the glove down and let out a laugh and shook his head. He’d known what was coming.

He sat next to me in the dugout with his mitt over his face. I heard some moaning I assumed was crying. I scooted away.

Triplett moved to the end of the bench and filled a paper cup with water. He stayed there.

Back in the clubhouse after the game, Triplett was laughing it up with some of the other guys. Xavier Pepper came up to me as I undressed. Xavier was a meaty catcher who’d defected from Cuba. After signing on with the team, he’d changed his name to fit in. We had no other Hispanics. His English was pleasant to listen to. It sounded full of fat. Succulent.

You coming to this party? The party should be real kick ass, he said.
You bet.

Should we say anything to Triplett? About the game.

Like what? He knows what happened.

Xavier shrugged his shoulders. He went to his locker and sprayed Sure deodorant under his armpits.

I showered. The water was too hot. I put on my street clothes and shut my locker. Triplett did the same.

Where’s this party? I asked.

Oh, just at my place.

You set it up?

Nah. My girlfriend did. Told me she’d take care of it when I came here.

Didn’t know you had a girlfriend, Triplett.

Oh sure. A couple months now. She’s a doctor, so she works a lot. An ears, nose and throat surgeon, in fact. I couldn’t handle that, but she seems to like it. She’s actually the youngest practicing surgeon at the hospital.

Sounds like a great thing, I said.

Yeah, it’s pretty good.

I drove home in my beat up VW Rabbit. I’d wanted to get something new for a while, but we’re not paid the way we should be. The car had been a gift from an old wife. We exchanged things somewhat peacefully. I took the car and she took two dogs, the microwave, and the portable phone. She calls me late at night. She doesn’t say much, if anything. Usually nothing. I can hear the dogs barking in the background, though, so I know it’s her. Sometimes I hear a sound like the one Triplett made after he
was yanked – like muffled crying or laughing, it’s truly hard to know. Maybe both. I usually hold the phone to my ear until I can’t hear the dogs anymore. That’s when the call no longer matters. Besides, it gets me mad when I think that she’s using the portable phone to call me and not say shit.

She had a lot to say about me before she left. I suppose I should be thankful that I don’t have to hear the yelling anymore. But for some reason I always liked her voice. It wasn’t exactly kind. Just protective. It made me trust my life. My ambition. My goals.

I cracked open a Keystone when I got home and drank it. I had a message from a woman named Penelope whom I’d met at a bar in Little Rock on one of our road games. She was interested to know when the team was coming back. I realized I’d given her the right number. I was surprised that she called anyway because I hadn’t said goodbye. Just left her in the motel room and hopped on the bus. I’m not that type of guy, but sometimes you do things because you can, not necessarily because you want to. It’s easier that way. I wasn’t going to see her again and that was the way it should be.

I figured the party was going to be just the team, seeing how it was a party that was to do with his exit, but with Triplett you never knew. Every so often he’d leave the game with a couple of strangers we’d never seen before. They were friendly enough. Occasionally he’d meet a few of us at the bar, arriving with some people we’d never even heard of. He wasn’t the same when he was with those randoms. He would drink different drinks and talk about shit that didn’t seem worth talking about. We liked him the way he was around us. I guess we just wanted him to ourselves. I hoped it would be that way at the sendoff.
Me and Triplett played together for parts of two seasons. Except for the stories we told on the road, we were content just to be teammates rather than friends. I suppose I felt that about most of the guys on the team. We would drink together on the road and occasionally at home, but that was just to kill the boredom. Most of the guys moved away during the winter, not talking until spring training. By that time half the team was gone, either traded or promoted or cut.

Some of the guys move south to play winter ball in Mexico or Puerto Rico or somewhere else in the Caribbean. I just go home. Me and my ex-wife lived in New Mexico, which is where she’s from. But after that concluded I moved back to Colorado. The winters are nice and I don’t have to think about baseball while I’m there. I’ve got a brother who owns a restaurant so I can help him out, make a few bucks until the spring. I’ve been doing this for the past four years and if it doesn’t change, I’ll be headed to where Triplett is. But I’m sure I’ll be okay. I’ve got a good feeling about me.

I left the window down. It was humid, but any kind of air felt nice. Since the game I’d felt lightheaded, like I wasn’t getting the proper amount of oxygen, like I was wearing a shirt with a collar that was too tight.

I thought of my wife trying to choke me in her sleep. It was before we were married. It was endearing at that time – when she didn’t actually do it consciously. After we made our vows it was a whole different story. I felt like a battered spouse, coming to the ballpark with fresh, crimson rings around my neck, like I was an oak tree. But she kept me well fed and came to all my games and didn’t say a thing when, that first year, I would come home with fresh dents on the car. She would ignore the whisperings that I
was a drunk – because I wasn’t. But the first year with a contract to play baseball you tend to want to celebrate.

Triplett’s front lawn was covered with weeds and smelled like bananas. The walk to his front door stirred my sinuses, giving me a fit of sneezes until I could safely enter his duplex. But this night the weeds weren’t in Triplett’s plans. He’d gotten himself a mower, a non-electric one. There were a couple of those Tiki torches on either side of the walkway.

I knocked on the door. A girl answered it. I wondered if it was true that Triplett had a girlfriend. A strawberry daiquiri was in her right hand, pressed up against her breasts.

You here for the going away party? she asked.

Where you going? I asked.

She didn’t laugh.

Not for me, silly. Danny. He’s the one going away.

That’s right.

She let me through and then shut the door behind me. It was strange to hear his first name. It was like watching a girl from across the bar, imagining all the things you could do with her, and then walking over there and discovering she wasn’t what you thought she was at all. She was younger or older or uglier. She had her flaws. That’s what I thought of when I heard Triplett’s first name. With a first name he was a real person, like the rest of us. When it was just Old Triplett, he was something else. He was a person you wanted to be around because he made you forget your problems. But when
you heard Danny, when it rang out of the speakers at the park, you remembered that he
had his own problems we didn’t know about.

There seemed to be two types of women, some like the girl with the strawberry
daiquiri, girls ready and able to party, and some that you’d be surprised to see at a bar, to
have a drink at all. Guys from the team were talking to both kinds.

There was an oval shaped metal tub with handles in one corner that was filled
with ice and bottles of beer. Some kind of danceable music was playing at a reasonable
level and there were red and blue plastic cups stacked on a table along with a covered
bucket that held ice and tongs for the ice, and yellow party napkins that had written on
them in cursive writing, Goodbye, Sunshine. The rest of the table was clustered with
half-full bottles of liquor and two-liters of soda and tonic and cartons of juice. Some of
the girls had grass leis around their necks, and sang along with the music, singing to the
crowd of people.

I headed over to the drink table. I poured a glass of bourbon and sipped it slowly.
Triplett was talking to strawberry daiquiri before he saw me. He made his way over as I
surveyed the people awkwardly moving their hips to the music.

Hey, man, he said.

Good party, Triplett. That your girl? I pointed to strawberry daiquiri.

Nope. Old friend. Beatrice. She shows apartments to prospective renters.

You don’t say.

Yeah, my girlfriend got called away. She’s at the hospital, operating on some
poor schlep who’s got a tumor in his throat the size of a jumbo chicken egg. He’s not
going to have the use of his voice box afterwards, but at least he’ll be alive.
Sorry to hear it.

Old Triplett poured himself a mix of Southern Comfort and Seven-Up.

Did I ever tell you about my babysitter? Triplett asked after taking a big gulp.

I shook my head.

He was getting ready to begin the story, when a guy I’d never seen called him over. Remind me to tell you later, he said, and went over to talk to the guy.

I returned to my drink, trying to remember the parties I’d had in the past, the best ones I’d ever been to. I came up with only my own birthdays. The ones when I was younger, swinging at whiffleballs with plastic bats, and baseballs that rested on tees.

Freddy V., our eighteen-year-old first baseman who was destined to play in the Bigs, stumbled over, hammered and droopy-looking. He had a lit cigar resting in the palm of his hand. I watched it carefully, waiting for it to brand his skin.

What the fuck is going on? he shouted. His eyes were bloodshot and unstable.

I shrugged my shoulders.

His head swayed back and forth, like a scale that couldn’t get even, and he hummed something to himself.

I decided to have some fun with him.

Freddy, see that guy over there? I pointed to a man wearing a Stetson.

What about him?

He repossesses furniture from old people’s houses.

So what?

So, it’s not his job. I mean it’s not what he’s supposed to be doing. He ain’t supposed to repossess people’s shit.
Really?

Then he sells the stuff out of the back of his truck. That’s how I got my TV and reclining chair. Actually, to be honest, half my shit comes from him. He gets you a real good price.

That true?

Absolutely. You could go and talk to him, but he doesn’t like people knowing about it. I mean, he could get into some serious trouble. He doesn’t really want it to get out. He’s got his clientele list.

In his glass, Freddy splashed some gin over a few cubes of ice and sucked it down. He was listening now, no longer paying attention to the dancers.

How do you know him? he asked.

It’s a complicated story that involves a lot of heartache, I said.

Sorry, man.

It’s not your problem, I said. It’s mine.

I looked away for effect, waiting for the right time to explain.

You see, I sort of saved his wife’s life, but I couldn’t save her from going into a coma, which is where she is today. We just didn’t have enough time. Just not enough time, I said, and shook my head, like it was real painful, like I could’ve done something else to keep her from falling into the coma.

That’s fucked, man.

It is fucked. Really fucked.

Freddy V. gave my shoulder a squeeze. He said, You’re going to get through this.
He left me alone with my bullshit thoughts. I refilled my cup with bourbon and headed over to a table with chips and dip. There was a woman piling food onto a paper plate. She had a gob of guacamole on her aqua tank top. She wore a black skirt with beads dangling down at the bottom. She wasn’t what you’d call attractive, but not unattractive either.

How do you do? I asked.

Her mouth was full of food. She turned around and laughed, her cheeks puffed out, trying to retain all the food in her mouth. She stuck out her hand. I shook it.

She swallowed. Nice to meet you, she said.

You know Old Triplett? I said.

She looked confused. Oh, you mean Danny?

Right.

My name’s Casey, she said, in a rusty sort of voice.

You can call me Felix.

That’s a cute name.

It’s not really mine. I wish it were, but it’s not.

I wish my name were Jane, she said.

There was a fire blazing outside. Someone had started it by pushing over a Tiki torch. Fortunately Triplett had trimmed back the weeds, otherwise we’d have been hoofing it out of here. Then what kind of sendoff party would it be? But Triplett didn’t seem to care. It didn’t appear to be dangerous, though you never know with fires. I almost started a brush fire one summer in Colorado. But it’s dry there – anything can catch and then, boom, you’re in deep shit. But here, it’s just muggy and uncomfortable.
Some nights I think how remarkable it is that we can even light a fire in a place that’s so damn wet. But then someone pushes over a Tiki torch and, boom, it’s blazing over a four by four spot of trimmed lawn.

You want to take a look at the fire? I asked Jane.

Well, she said, that sounds fine.

She filled up her plate with more food and followed me outside. I imagined myself running away with this woman. I imagined quitting baseball and taking her away, plate of food and all. I thought about things I would say that would make her fall in love with me. Things I hadn’t said to my wife. Couldn’t say. I don’t even know this woman, but immediately I considered a life with her. I made plans with her as we moved towards the fire, along with fifteen other idiotic gawkers. And I thought, I look like the rest of them. Stupid jocks getting a kick out of a patch of burning grass. I didn’t want to be like the rest of them. I wanted to be like Old Triplett. I wanted my own sendoff party with streamers and fine liquor and groups of people who had never seen each other, but were very important to me. I wanted to do things over again. I wanted to be a better ballplayer. I wanted to be the best. As we made our way to the fire I wanted the fire to take off, to start burning like the brush fire I never started, to eat up the entire team. The entire stupid ass team.

My boyfriend’s best friend died in a forest fire, Jane said indifferently.

I’m sorry to hear that, I said, meaning more the part about her having a boyfriend.

Well, it’s over now. My boyfriend is off doing something somewhere else, and I’m left with nothing but a promised phone call.
We stood watching the fire intensify. We were entranced. The boys were drunk, spitting mouthfuls of liquor onto the burning lawn. I was staring at Jane, wondering what her skin felt like, how her hair smelled. I thought about how our lives were different, how she was waiting for a phone call that never came, and I got phone calls that were silent, save for the dogs, only there to remind me that once I had things I no longer have. I wondered what Jane and I would talk about on the phone, how she would greet me when I picked up the receiver and said hello.

What do you do? I asked. The fire picked up steam.

I write greeting cards and I work in an adult store. Actually I just file movies in the computer for the store. Titles and volumes, you know. When I’m done with that I work on my greeting cards.

You have a service?

Freelance. I’d like to do something with it, but the adult store pays more. I was just trying to get by until my boyfriend retrieved me.

Freddie V. came up behind Jane and gave me a lewd tongue flick and then laughed, stumbling over his own feet, nearly crashing into the fire.

I hated him right then and I hated myself for sharing something with him. At one point in my life I probably would’ve found that funny. I could’ve even pulled that move myself. But not now. Not ever again. It was disrespectful on a night like this. It was Triplett’s farewell and it should’ve been classy and dignified. I wanted so much for it to be something that I’d never been a part of. I wanted it to be more than just a baseball team getting drunk and ogling a fire. I didn’t want to be what my wife called me before
she left with my dogs – irrelevant. And what I thought could get me there was Jane. She was worth something.

I can make a great pork chop, I blurted out. I didn’t want to talk about baseball or about her boyfriend or my wife or anything else that I thought about on a daily basis. In truth, I’d never cooked a pork chop. I didn’t know how. I didn’t know what you ate them with or even if they were something women liked. But I was sure that if Jane liked them, I could manage to grill up a couple.

I’m a vegetarian, she said. She finished off the contents of her plate and tossed it into the fire.

What’s your story? she asked.

I don’t have one. I’m just here to say farewell to my friend Triplett.

I don’t know him that well. I came with a couple friends who are in his yoga class.

I didn’t know he was taking a yoga class, I said.

Teaching one, she said. He’s been doing it for years. Every Tuesday and Thursday for as long as I can remember.

Every Tuesday and Thursday, huh? All year long?

Without fail, she said. He’s the best, I hear.

Jane became preoccupied, not with the fire, but the people who surrounded it. The people who were handling it like it was a performance, burning for their amusement.

She brushed her hair back and laughed.

She said, My boyfriend use to jump through flaming rings at the circus. He was a daredevil.
I thought about asking Jane to point out Triplett, to make sure we were talking about the same person, but the truth was, I didn’t care. We shared something very similar that made me feel partially relieved – we’d both lost someone we shouldn’t have. There was no explanation and there never would be. Every person at this party had his own story that would probably be as exciting as any story you could ever hear. A sendoff party, I suppose, required these types of stories.

My stories, the great ones, the ones that are worth telling, always sneak up on me. Just as if I’d read them in the morning paper.

The story I could tell of my wife was never very interesting until she left. Now it gives me something to talk about. I can tell people about the dead phone calls and the way we separated. I can say that she used to trade my vinyls at rummage sales for items that she would later give to me for Christmas. But I can also tell them that before we were married she never let me pay for a single meal. That she rode in the trunk of my car one full day because she wanted to feel what it was like to be kidnapped. I told her it wouldn’t be the same and she told me that it didn’t have to be exact, only close to the truth. At the time I was embarrassed and wouldn’t have told a soul about it. But now I have freedom and it’s a story people like to hear.

I can show someone a poem she once wrote me on an anniversary and tell them that she’d read it to me and I’d just about cried because it was heartfelt but then she’d looked it over and said to me, Poetry sucks. And then she’d handed it to me and suggested we rent a comedy.
For a two month spell during our second year of marriage, after she did anything that she found enjoyable, whether with me or not, she’d say, That was the shit. Then one day she dropped it and told me it was yesterday’s news. That one I still think about.

I can tell people about my life with a wife and the one that I currently live – compare and contrast, that sort of shit. It’s just as interesting as anybody else’s. You just have to do it the right way.

Would you like something from the house? I asked Jane.

She shook her head. I left her with the other observers.

I filled up my glass with bourbon and tried some of the dip. It tasted like Cheese Whiz and mild salsa. I didn’t like it.

A few boys from the team were rubbing up against their respective partners, darting tongues into the girls’ mouths. Triplett was sitting by himself, drinking a pink cocktail. I went over to him.

He looked exhausted and relieved. What should we talk about? he asked.

Tell me about the babysitter, I said.

Oh, right. The babysitter. I was going to tell you that one earlier, right?

Yes.

I had this babysitter when I was younger. She was an ice skater. I do know that. But she also claimed to be a National Geographic photographer. She told me a lot of things when I was growing up. She would disappear for weeks, which I assumed was for her photo shoots. Best babysitter I ever had. And then one night, when my parents were set to go to a movie, my mom pulled me aside and told me I had a new babysitter. She
didn’t tell me why, only that the ice skater would not be coming back. I was upset, of course, and pressed her for more details, but I never got any.

Then one day I got this brilliant idea to jump on a bus and ride down to the ice rink to talk to her, ask her why she wasn’t coming back. When I got there she was missing. I asked another ice skater and she told me they didn’t know where she’d gone.

My parents were furious, particularly my mother. First she took it out on me but then started in on my father, screaming about chores that he’d forgotten to take care of, responsibilities he’d neglected, and so on. My parents were never really happy again. The fighting only ceased on special occasions, usually when there was company, though sometimes not even for that. After a while I got used to it. Or, I guess, used to it happening every day. Eventually I forgot about my babysitter, only remembering that my trip to the ice rink had set off the life I now lived.

Then when I was in high school, seven, eight years later, I bumped into her at a bar. I didn’t know it was her at first. She asked me if I wanted to throw darts. She looked beat up, older than she was. But being with an older woman was a turn-on. We played darts and drank beer. Then we got to talking and soon I realized that I knew her from somewhere. I must’ve asked her a hundred questions, trying to pinpoint her place in my history. I never even considered that she was my babysitter.

We left it alone. I ditched my friends and we went back to her place. It was in this shithole apartment complex that smelled like sex and acid. We drank some more and then fucked. When we were lying in bed she told me she used to be an FBI informant. She was in the witness protection program because she had to testify in this major case. I didn’t really care if it was true, because I was tired and drunk and just
wanted to fall asleep. But she kept me awake, telling me all these ridiculous stories, which eventually got me to ask her questions about the things she was claiming to have happened. Her answers were detailed and seemingly precise. I thought, wow, I’ve just laid an older, exciting, adventurous person. She ran her hand through my hair and I fell asleep.

I woke up a couple hours later and she was crying. But not just crying, bawling like a baby. She had my wallet in hand and all the cards with my picture were spread over the bed. This was when I figured out who the hell she was. She never told me herself, she didn’t have to. I just knew.

She apologized over and over again. She couldn’t stop telling me how sorry she was for having gone through my wallet. But that wasn’t it. She was ashamed of who she was. She wasn’t any of the things she claimed to be. She was a liar lying for money. And I think she saw my name and thought of my parents. She thought of ice skating and being younger and being pretty. She didn’t say a thing. Neither did I. I patted her hand and pulled her back towards me. We fell asleep.

I woke up before her and left without saying goodbye. I didn’t leave a note. I think of her when I watch ice-skating at the Olympics, he said.

We heard a loud hiss from outside. I stood and ran to take a look. The fire had swept across the gutter, licking the leaves that were jammed inside it. Flames soon covered the entire wall, and there was a silence that usually signals the end of the evening. Triplett was standing next to me, watching the fire eat away at his life’s belongings.
The soft red that glowed in the sky looked like a sunset. And for the first time all summer, it actually felt dry. The humidity had been whisked away. Ashes started snowing down on us.

I’d heard in a crisis you’re supposed to stay calm, keep your voice down and speak clearly, so as not to panic the victim. These can get very ugly if you’re not absolutely, one hundred percent, careful.

I didn’t do what I’d learned. I said, Triplett, what the hell are you doing? Jesus Christ, do something. I think your goddamn house is going to burn down.

I looked at him, stricken with what amounted to fear – not for our lives but for his belongings, every single possession he could care about.

I think I’m going back to Wisconsin to play the banjo in a bluegrass band. I’ve always wanted to do that, and now finally I have the time.

What? What the hell are you talking about?

The roof lit up. Screams erupted. Gatherers took off down the street. This snapped Triplett out of his trance.

I guess I better make the phone call, he said. He turned back around, watching the fire eat away at the remains of his life as a baseball player. He took a step forward, like he was considering going back in. Right before I was able to say anything he kicked at a plastic cup that had been left behind. He then walked away, down the street and up the steps to a neighbor’s house.

I headed towards my car. Jane was gone. Freddie V. was gone. Most everyone had vanished. I sniffed the air one more time, searching for banana, but it was gone, replaced by burning oil and cheap painted wood.
Driving home, I didn’t think of Triplett or Jane or my wife or the party or the team. I thought about what my sendoff party would be like. What I’d really want to have happen. I know it would be full of little league games and Big League Chew. Playoff baseball and lustful, passionate words full of real, honest-to-god emotion. I think I’d have grape soda and pizza and cheap beer. Backstops and no dugouts and clothes for bases. I’d have my dogs chasing after balls that were hit up the middle. Most of all, though, I wanted sound – a lot of it. Loud noise that made you forget what you were thinking or feeling. I needed this bad.

I imagined Triplett walking back into the flames. I couldn’t see him actually doing it, though deep down I didn’t really know if he was capable or not. In truth, I didn’t really know Triplett, which was the worst part of it all. If someone were to ask me tomorrow, reading in the paper that Triplett had burned alive, I couldn’t say that that was just like Old Triplett. I couldn’t tell them that he was stubborn and passionate and miserable and brave and walking into burning houses was just a thing that Old Triplett did, because I didn’t really know. I didn’t know if that was in his character. Or maybe he would get to the doorway and then reconsider and run to a neighbor’s to call for help, like I’d seen him do. I have no idea. I wouldn’t be able to say one way or another. Only that he was a friend that I would miss more for what I didn’t know about him than for what I did.

If it were my story, I’d have Triplett in that house, making the emergency call just as collected as possible, while parts of the house were crumbling in front of him, lit with fire. Then he’d hang up and casually navigate himself out of the wreckage, and back out to the street.
If it were up to me, I’d tell people that that was the way it went down and that was the type of person Old Triplett was. Because I think that’s the way he’d like to be remembered.

I drank a glass of water at home. I turned on my radio and television set and sat on my couch and closed my eyes. I nearly drifted off until the phone rang. I answered it. The dogs began to bark.

I said, I’m going to hit a homerun tomorrow. It’s going to be huge.

There was nothing on the other line.

How are the dogs? I asked. They barked louder, like they wanted to make sure I knew they were okay. That they missed me.
MISSING

Diana and I first got wind of the Cat Mutilator three months ago when we were staying at a Marriott in Rochester, Minnesota, just before our baby died. The story was in the complimentary *USA Today* that was left outside our room each morning. The article was on the fourth page, without a picture.

I was still in bed when I heard a shriek from the bathroom. It sounded serious, so I got up and rushed to the door. Are you okay? I asked.

Wonderful. I’m wonderful, she said. Here, let me read you something.

And she read me this story about a guy in our hometown, Sheboygan, Wisconsin, who opened his door in the morning to find the decapitated head of a black cat looking right at him. The cat’s tongue was cut out and replaced by, get this, a Post-it note in the shape of a cat that read, *Where’s your cat?* He didn’t have a cat, but was sure it meant something else. Something sinister. But what got me, what iced my bones was what this guy said when he first walked out his door. He said, I heard a scream as I saw the cat’s eyes staring right at me. It was only later that I realized it was me who had screamed.

Diana thought it was absolutely delicious.

What did you think? she asked.

I didn’t know what to think. It was one of those moments where you wish someone could’ve told you what to think. What the right way to think was. I had no idea.

Are you there, Francis?
I’m here, I said. Diana’s always been afraid of not being heard. It is her greatest fear. Not being heard and being left behind.

There were thirteen others, all with tales similar to the one Diana read to me. Fourteen decapitated heads found and nearly a hundred other cats reported missing.

What do you think all this means? she asked.

Hard to say. Let’s talk about it when you get out of the bathroom.

I could hear her tearing toilet paper off the toilet paper spindle, shuffling the newspaper as she shifted. I wondered what she looked like. I felt like I needed to know, because the image I had of her in the bathroom was utterly disgusting. I could see her sitting on the toilet, her face old and wrinkled and pathetic. And I knew she couldn’t look that bad. I don’t know where I got that image of her from, I’d never had one like that before. I tried to forget about it. Sometimes, though, things stick.

Diana and I had breakfast that morning and she rambled on about the Cat Mutilator. You’d think, she said, they’d come up with something better. Something catchier, like the Cat Crucifier or the Sheboygan Strangler. Anything’s got to be better than the Cat Mutilator. It’s so boring.

Those don’t exactly fit, though, do they? The guy who did this didn’t strangle the cats, and he certainly didn’t crucify them.

How do you know that? How do you know the cats weren’t tied to a cross first, or strangled with wire on a bathroom door before their heads were cut off? How do you know that?

I don’t. But the nicknames these guys, these killers have typically describe a revealed trait of theirs. Does that make sense?
How do you know it’s a man? Why couldn’t it be a woman? You don’t think a woman could do something like this? That’s *typical*. You’re a goddamn *typical* man.

It went on like this for a little longer and then we paid and left. We had some things to do and we did them. Diana was mad and I was annoyed that she was mad. That day was an absolute, complete disaster. It was our last in Rochester.

Diana took the newspaper home with us and taped the article up on the refrigerator. Why don’t you start a scrapbook instead? I asked.

This is fine. I’m just going to put this one up. Just a little token, you know?

Of what?

Aren’t you at all excited about this famous person in our town? In town, Francis. I think it’s fantastic. Look here, right here, she said, pointing to the article. *USA Today*. That’s nationwide. And all coming from this little town.

I just thought it might be better if it were concealed. I’m not sure how other people would react to it, is all I’m saying.

I don’t care what other people have to say. It’s not their house. It’s mine.

Ours.

Right, ours.

I remembered that moment in the bathroom, when I listened to her pull toilet paper off the spindle. I sensed the same demeanor in her. I felt bad for remembering it.

She’d highlighted the quotes. I waited for her to suggest we make this case into a musical, something she’d done before. It didn’t come. It wasn’t playful. It was something entirely different. I let it go. What are you supposed to do?
Diana searched through the local newspaper for more information on the Cat Mutilator. The newspaper was from the same day as the *USA Today*. There were two articles. One was on the front page and included a picture of three of the victims. This disappointed Diana. The second was an editorial Diana laughed at and threw away.

I can’t wait till tomorrow to see what else they have to say about the mutilator, she said. Maybe it’ll strike again.

You could tell she wanted to frame it. She adjusted it, considered using a different type of tape, maybe even laminating it.

It’s just this one, she repeated. I just want to save this one.

By the following Friday, on the fridge there were six articles, eleven victims’ pictures, and one interpretive drawing of what a mutilated cat skull should look like.

That one article just didn’t complete the story, you know? she said.

Are we done now? I asked.

I wonder what these people are like? Do you ever wonder what victims are like? How their lives have changed or stayed the same? Do you ever think about things like this, Francis?

So is this the last of it? I paused, looking at what she had collected. Why don’t you put it in the Chuck Taylor shoebox? That’s what it’s there for. There’s plenty of room. Just put it in there, I said.

The Chuck Taylor shoebox contained love letters and plastic jewelry and a roll of two-dollar bills and movie stubs from dates and moderately valued baseball cards. There were two chess pieces that had been hand-carved in Italy and a basic guide to French. I
think it had an autographed picture of Huey Lewis, but I can’t be sure. That might have been moved to the safety-deposit box. I do know there was a bundle of articles about that serial killer who was around here a couple years back – the guy who performed oral sex on his victims before he bludgeoned them. Diana loved that story. She would highlight the quotes. Read them like she was in a play. I think she might’ve suggested something like that before. Making the case into a musical.

You could write the music, I could write the words.

Compose, I probably said. I could compose the music.

Exactly, she said.

I really wonder what it’s like for them. You know, Francis, these cats these people find aren’t even theirs. They’re someone else’s. Can you believe that? I wonder what’s more traumatic, having your cat mutilated or finding a mutilated cat on your front lawn at seven in the morning? I think maybe finding the cat mutilated is worse. Because why would they choose to put a mutilated cat on your lawn? There must be some reason. I think if your cat gets mutilated, it’s mostly just random. That’s a little comforting. It gets you thinking.

Her clippings were starting to look like a family tree, the human victims lined up and dates scribbled underneath their pictures.

I had to go to work.

I played the piano at this bar called the Immaculate Club that caters to scum on the weekdays and wealthy, affluent high school kids on Fridays and Saturdays. For the first three weeks I didn’t know this. I only played the weekdays because weekends I was
in Rochester with Diana. It’s highly irregular that they’d let me have three weekends off, and even more so given that I’d only started. But they were sympathetic. I think some people believe it’s immoral if you aren’t, in cases like this. The baby, I mean. Diana stayed in Rochester while it was there. I drove up on the weekends because someone had to pay the bills. But the baby was sick and soon enough, it died. The whole thing was tragic.

I had an inkling of what was to come because I asked a bartender why there was a piano in the bar when so many of the customers ask me whether or not I thought they should get a jukebox. He told me the piano was for the kids.

Whose kids?

_The_ kids. That was all I got. He walked away and told me I’d have to wait and see. His elusiveness was petty, but intriguing. That first Friday night was scrambled.

I came in at five and _the_ kids were already arriving. I ordered a drink and talked to the bartender. He’s really nice and cordial. He gave his condolences. It was very appropriate and not at all sad. You sometimes wonder how awkward a moment is going to be when it involves a catastrophe. I think we handled it fine.

He told me he wanted to hear some George Gershwin. Said he didn’t hear much of it and was in the mood. I said that sounded good to me.

I sat down at the piano and played. The keys felt good under my fingers and the drinks were stiff. I played what I wanted to play for the first few hours until the kids started to settle in and request songs. They were a louder crowd than we get on the weeknights, but more pleasant and gentle on my ears. They danced.
The tables in the Immaculate Club are small, wobbly, and splintered. You can barely seat three at them. I sometimes question the true purpose of the tables. They’re remarkably light and would be easy to throw if you were so inclined. I think I’ve seen a couple weeknight drinkers tempted to throw one at me. The piano is only a few feet away.

That first Friday night, there was a table of three girls directly in front of me. The girls were young, couldn’t have been over fifteen. Yet there was a confidence about one of the girls that seemed unique and unfamiliar. She could hold anybody’s attention in the bar. She held mine. You could tell she was wise beyond her years, affable and self-reliant. Nobody else in the place was even close. She was quite stunning.

I’d been playing for about four hours when I took my first real break. I was surprised when I found myself outside smoking with this girl because the break wasn’t intentional. She’d come up to me with a drink she’d had the bartender make for me, and asked me if I could take a break and if so would I have a cigarette with her. I told her I could do anything I wanted, so I got up and announced I’d be back in half an hour. It’s funny how amiable kids can get when they drink.

Her name was Priscilla but she wanted to be called Bluebird. That’s what people call you? I asked.

That’s what I want you to call me, she said. My friends call me Priscilla or Prissy for short. But I don’t like Prissy, it makes me sound like a pussy. Still, I let it go because it’s affectionate and they let me get away with a lot more.
Why Bluebird, then? I said. And she showed me. She turned around so her back was facing me and lifted up her shirt. There was a large bird tattooed on the small of her back.

It’s going to be filled in blue soon, she said.

I believe it, I told her.

So this is your first day? She finished her cigarette and lit up a second.

No, first weekend.

It’s not bad. Seems like you should be somewhere else, though. You don’t exactly fit here, she said.

There’s not much work for a piano player in Sheboygan. They gave me some leeway. I played at a restaurant before.

Got tired of it?

Things change. You try to move with it as best as possible. At least I did.

Did it work?

Not often.

She laughed. So what are you doing in Sheboygan?

Have you heard of the guy who’s mutilating cats?

The Cat Mutilator? I haven’t heard much. You know, I play the piano, too. For eight years.

That’s not bad, I said.

I hate it. It’s good for college applications, though. That’s why I play it. That’s why most people at my school play instruments. That’s why we do a lot of the things we do.
It could be worse. You could be stuck at the Kohler factory for the rest of your life.

Or I could play the piano at a shithole bar for a bunch of high school kids.

She didn’t smile. It was intimate.

Do you want another cigarette? she asked me. I did. We smoked a couple more and then went back inside.

I played some popular music until midnight. They started piling out of the bar about that time. Curfew. Bluebird told me she’d give me her number, but it would be strange because of her parents. Just to talk, of course. I asked her about her cell phone. I told her I’d be interested in hearing her play. She told me her parents checked the phone numbers. It was only supposed to be for emergencies anyway. Besides, she said, I don’t like to play for anyone. I get uncomfortable. So we agreed that we’d see each other the following week. She was going out of town the next day.

I had a few more drinks at the bar. I asked the bartender what school the kids attended.

Some private school fifteen miles west, he said. I’ve never been there, but I hear it’s really nice. Why?

Just curious, I said.

Diana was mugged once. Next time she had to walk alone, she didn’t carry a can of mace or pepper spray. Instead she wore brass knuckles on her right hand. If she were leaving work or a restaurant or a theater, she’d put those thick, brass rings around her fist. It made her feel good. Started wearing them around the house. I don’t know why I wear
them, she would say. They make me feel real good. Like…I don’t know…like something I’ve never been before. Strong, maybe.

Maybe. Then I found the goddamn things behind the conditioner when I was showering.

I’d very much like to know how you intend to use brass knuckles in the bathtub? I asked.

I don’t intend to use anything, she said. I either use them or I don’t. In the case of my knuckles, I use them.

What purpose could they possibly serve while you bathe? I asked.

They just make me feel, she said.

Make you feel? I asked.

Good. They make me feel good, she said.

What does that mean? Makes you feel good. Cleaner? Is that what you mean? Cleaner?

Not cleaner. You know…good.

What?

You know. When I pleasure myself, she said.

I told her it was either me or the Knuckles. Reluctantly, she put them away.

So the Knuckles are in the Chuck Taylor shoebox, too.

The shoes that came in the shoebox were a present from my high school baseball coach. It was a hint, I think. Not an explicit joke. Not a gag gift. A hint. Basketball players no longer played in shoes anything like Chuck Taylor’s. But it was a message. And it was clear. I liked it, so I wore the shoes until they wore out, and saved the box.
I’d been drinking White Russians all night with Bluebird and felt it in the morning. I slept until one. When I got up, Diana was sitting on the kitchen floor, cutting out another article.

Just two blocks away, she said.

What?

There was a mutilation two blocks away. The Ramirezs found a calico cat in their backyard. It had its eyes hollowed out and the eyeballs stuffed in its mouth. The cat’s head rested on top of a stake that was stuck in the ground. Its tongue, of course, was missing but instead of a Post-it note like all the rest, there was black magic marker writing on the stake that read, Can you see me? Creepy, huh? Oh, yeah and the cat was from a family that lived thirty miles away. Can you believe that? The mutilator drove thirty miles to plant a cat in someone’s lawn, and hopped a fence to do it. That takes balls.

When did you start saying balls?

There’s a picture of the stake in the paper if you want to see it. I’m tempted to go over to the Ramirezs and talk to them. No, I think I’ll wait a few days. It might be insensitive to talk to them the very next day. Maybe on Monday.

I remembered the bathroom. That putrid image I’d carried around of her.

Are you going to the store today? I asked.

There was no response.

Diana! Are you going to the grocery store today?

What? Yeah, I guess. I’ll go later.
She returned to the article.

Can you get me some milk and vodka and Kaluha?

There was no response.

Diana!

Put it on my list, she said.

She was still only wearing a nightshirt and underwear when I left for work a little before five.

I ordered a White Russian and sat down at the piano. Sometimes I took requests. Sometimes I didn’t. It depended on my mood, which the kids could normally pick up on. You exert an energy that may not be apparent to you, but those around you can sense it. You don’t have to work at it. It’s just there. If I was in a bad mood, people could tell and usually left me alone. Otherwise, they were zealous when requesting songs, which was all right with me because when I’m in a good mood I to enjoy variety. And these kids, if nothing else, could provide variety.

That night I wasn’t feeling terrific, so I stuck to what I wanted to play. I’d had a good time with Bluebird the night before. After we had come back from our smoke break, I watched Bluebird move through the bar, talking and laughing and buying drinks. She had long, shiny amber hair that she would occasionally tuck behind her ears when it fell in her face. She wore a white t-shirt and had a turquoise bracelet on her right wrist and two small rings, one on her thumb and the other on her middle finger that were of a similar shade. I wondered if she was going to fill in her tattoo with turquoise.

She started singing, out of tune – a few of the songs I played. But when she started singing, she gathered a crowd to sing along. I attributed her less-than-perfect
voice to the alcohol, which can make you sound strange, even if you don’t know it. The beauty of a long night of drinking is the next morning – despite the hangover – you can remember what you want to remember. I’m pretty sure she chose not to remember her singing. I did, though.

But the next night was different, less energy. Maybe I was just anxious from being at home.

I don’t even remember what I played. An ensemble of jazz and rag. Nothing popular. There were no complaints.

Even in my hostility and annoyance, I admired the place from behind my piano. I watched what took place that night, what probably took place every night. The routine. There was a carousel of kids coming from the tables to the bar and then back again. Seemingly never ceasing. They moved with alacrity and conscious caution. Which was a foreign concept, a different practice than what most people are familiar with. We are either enthusiastic and eager about doing something, therefore enjoying it to the fullest – or trying to, at least – or we are tentative and slightly suspicious about it. Rarely do the two meet. It appears to be contradictory. Impossible. But these kids were able to pull it off.

And I think it all had to do with me and my piano. Probably, I’ll admit, more the piano. But I played it and played it with a friendly disposition. I think I can take credit for that.

You see, the kids are comforted by the piano. It’s something familiar, and they need that badly. Because this place is the closest thing to adult life they can get and it is unsettling. It is not like a house they party at. It’s not comfortable and sheltered. It is
not what they are used to and that can be terrifying. And yet enthralling at the same time. That’s why I say they moved with alacrity and caution. Something new and exciting, yet slightly frightening. It’s like breathing and choking at the same time. You can see it in their movements and on their faces. At times it’s laughable and other times charming. You can long for the feeling.

And the piano is a plausible distraction from the surroundings. It’s better than a jukebox. Both warm and intimate. I wanted to join them, experience what they were experiencing. But I couldn’t. You can’t. Not now. And there is a certain recognition that you’ve moved on, and it’s, despite the nostalgia, a good thing. Certainly worth feeling.

But the night still wasn’t the same without Bluebird. I’d have to wait an entire week to see her again.

By Wednesday I’d had enough. Diana, why don’t you put the articles in the Chuck Taylor box like the other articles you collected? I asked. They’ll be safer there.

I think they’re fine where they are, she said.

On Tuesday I’d gone to the library to do a little research on Bluebird’s family. Funny how much stuff you can find at the library. I was able to get a hold of Bluebird’s school directory, which had the names of the students and faculty. She is the only Priscilla in the school, which was lucky because I didn’t know her last name and that was the whole point of the search. So then I was ready to get down to business; I wanted to find out if they had any musical background or were involved in the arts in any way. As it turned out, her father owned his own construction company and her mother worked for the government. I did discover that Bluebird had won a tap dancing competition in
Chicago just two years before. It must’ve been a big deal because there was a website dedicated exclusively to the competition. Apparently the creative gene skipped her parents and went right to her.

After the library I went to a pub and ordered fried cheese curds and a brat and lemonade. I’d started going to this pub right after Rochester. It was new and not too crowded so I got pretty good service. I didn’t have much of an appetite, but just having all three in front of me, the smells and the small tastes I could digest made me feel good. Occasionally I’d sit in the pub for two, three, four hours. They had a couple TVs that played whatever sports were on at the time and then they had a screen that played movies – old and new. I liked to watch the movies. If there was an old one I’d seen I’d try to remember where and when I’d seen it. I usually sat through at least one movie, but I have stayed around for two before.

Diana and I used to watch a lot of movies together. She would get mad when anybody would talk. She’d yell at a complete stranger if they were talking. Wanted complete silence. Not terribly unusual, I suppose, wanting silence, but when she found herself in an environment that was less than desirable, she voiced her objection in a deafening way. I liked watching them with her, though, because she made you somehow feel like you were the center of attention – not the film. You knew she could feel your presence and that was what she wanted. For all the silence that she desired during a movie, not being heard in life was what she hated most. She was afraid of being forgotten, of not doing something that counted, of not getting what she wanted. That why in everything else that we did, from cooking to driving to sex, she liked to talk and you to listen. I will say, that she listened when I played and made everybody else listen too.
But even there, my music, my livelihood, spoke volumes about who she was. That was something that needed to be heard, too.

When I got home from the pub I found Diana on the phone with the police department asking them if they had any details about the mutilation that weren’t in the papers.

Just in case I spot somebody suspicious on the street, she said. I want to be able to identify the mutilator.

They told her no, all the information they could give her was provided in the papers. She was set on solving the case. On Wednesday she was on the phone with some of the victims, asking about details that could help.

No, I’m not actually with the police department or any law enforcement agency, just a concerned citizen, she said.

She had surprising luck.

Diana, you’ve started to take down some of the pictures of us off the refrigerator, I said.

There’s no room for them right now, she said.

When was the last time you went to work? I said. You haven’t been since before Rochester. That was over six weeks ago. You can’t keep this up.

It’s fine. They think I’m still there. I don’t need to go into work right now, she said.

Diana, they allowed you to leave for a month. I think you should call them. It’ll be good for you.
She looked up and snorted spitefully. We don’t need the extra money anymore, she said.

When was the last time you showered? She didn’t respond. I left her and decided to head up to Bluebird’s school to see if I could talk to her.

I asked a secretary at the front office what classroom she was in. I told her I was her uncle. She looked at me suspiciously, but then went in the back, retrieved her schedule and told me her biology class had gone on a field trip to the zoo in Milwaukee. I decided to drive the forty-five minutes. I had nothing better to do. It was better than being bored.

When I got there it was raining. I thought I had missed her for sure. But I saw her run towards a bus that had the name of her school painted on both sides. I called out to her. It was raining hard and people were screaming, so I started running towards her, calling out her name as I ran.

When I caught up to her, she looked startled. Hey, she said.

Hi, I said. I wanted to talk to you.

She looked annoyed. I’m sorry, I said. I should’ve waited until the weekend, but I just needed to talk to you. I know it’s raining, so can we talk another time. Tomorrow?

I don’t think that’s such a good idea, she said.

Your parents? I asked. She nodded her head. Just have lunch with me tomorrow, I said. I’ll come by your school during lunch hour. We’ll go somewhere special. I won’t take no for an answer.

I could tell she wanted to laugh, but felt awkward about the situation. I imagined her parents were rather strict.
Fine, she said, but that’s it. It’s sort of strange, you coming all the way out here.

Didn’t have anything else to do, I said. I smiled, hoping to get her to loosen up.

What time? I asked.

Be there at noon, she said. She ran onto the bus and I waved. The bus shut its doors and rumbled off. I got into my car and drove back to Sheboygan.

I felt better after that and was ready to forgive Diana for some of what she was doing. But I should mention, because I’ve failed to acknowledge it so far, that I’ve been rather short with Diana myself. I’m not sure why I’d acted the way I had towards her, it just sort of happened.

After the night I met Bluebird, I was adamant about Diana buying me milk, vodka and Kahlua at the store. And it’s peculiar how I acted when she would forget to get it or, later, when she purposely left the store without it. I would question whether she really cared about me. Don’t you know how much these items mean to me? I asked. How much I need these? Do you know anything? It’s not that hard to remember to pick up a gallon of milk, a bottle of vodka, and a bottle of Kahlua when you’re in the grocery store. They’re pretty distinct. They stand out. Do you even care about me?

First she would try to console me, tell me she was sorry and that of course she cared about me, how could I ask that? Then she’d get frustrated and decide the best solution would be to go back to the store and pick up the items. I’d let her go. It was the least she could do, I thought.

As this behavior continued, she became less receptive. At times she’d come right out and tell me she didn’t have the milk or vodka or Kahlua and if I wanted to get some I could drive to the store and pick them out myself.
But what really irked me was that my behavior seemed uncontrollable. I was unapologetic, even when I sat by myself and thought about the fight we’d just had. I couldn’t find any reason why I should be sorry. It was rational, I thought. I guess it really wasn’t, and I started getting the message when Diana refused to apologize for neglecting my repeated demands. Which, looking at it now, was probably a major sign.

That night I got home from work and found Diana sleeping on the couch. I went upstairs and took a shower. When I got out I wrote Bluebird two letters. One I would bring with me, and the other I would send to her house. I just wanted to tell her what I thought about her and how much she had to offer. Of course I mentioned her tattoo; she seemed proud of it when she’d showed it to me. I was sure she would appreciate compliments.

I woke up at about eleven-fifteen. I dressed and went downstairs. There, on the floor in the kitchen, was Diana. She wasn’t examining the Cat Mutilator article. Instead she had her face in her hands and she was whimpering.

Diana? I said.

She looked up and I could see her face soaked with tears.

What happened? I asked. I had gotten a call the previous day that threatened Diana’s termination from her position at the bank if she didn’t come back that day. I figured that must have been it.

Look, we’ll find you another job, I said. It’ll be okay.

I had to hurry this up or I’d be late for lunch.

What? Another job? I don’t care about that stupid, awful job, she said.
Then she showed me a picture in the newspaper of a guy who was apparently the Cat Mutilator.

Well, that’s good, I said. The guy is off the streets. Better for the felines.

Diana didn’t blink. I knew if I didn’t leave soon I’d be late.

I’m not sure why I said what I said, but for some reason it seemed fitting. So it was a guy, right? I said. See, a woman could never commit such a heinous crime. That should give you some sort of comfort. Knowing it’s not your gender.

You’re scum. You’re dirt, she said.

I knew it had sliced deep. She put her head back in her hands and kept muttering, I can’t believe he’s gone. It wasn’t supposed to happen like this. I can’t believe he’s gone.

We kept other things in the Chuck Taylor box. I think there might have been some foreign currency and a label from a bottle of tequila we drank in Tijuana. I think we had the label, but maybe it was never there. Maybe we had just planned on it. Talked about how funny and appropriate it would be to have a label from a tequila bottle we drank in Tijuana. Maybe we had decided on it, and just forgotten it in the hotel. Maybe it was lost in the wash. It’s hard to remember.

And there was a stopwatch from the same trip. Diana carried it with her when we walked around the town and on the beach. I’ll say this much – her sense of humor was unique. In Tijuana, the sidewalks are full of Mexicans selling different things. Peppers, gum, watches, hats, beads, batteries. Diana was never interested in anything that was being sold but, I suppose, found the situations, the constant pestering by the sellers,
amusing. So she would propose to some of the people that if they completed various deeds and exercises they would be rewarded with American money. Sometimes she’d have them stand on their heads for a minute. If they could do it, she’d give them a dollar. If not, they were out of luck. Occasionally she’d play clapping games with them for a couple of minutes and then give them fifty cents or a dollar. Whatever she had.

But her favorite was the street race. She’d gather five people and time them running as fast as they could down the street. They thought they were racing against each other, so they ran as fast as they could. But Diana didn’t find that too entertaining. After they ran and she noted down the times, she’d tell them that they would get each get a dollar if they could beat their original time. Typically, they couldn’t. But she found it funny just watching them try. She usually gave them the money anyway. She thought the scenarios she created were a riot. I was concerned that they would create one.

On the beach, Diana would give me the stopwatch and tell me to time her holding her breath under water. She was impressive. Close to two minutes usually. Once, though, she stayed under too long – I think she swallowed water, or got stuck, I can’t remember – and I had to give her mouth-to-mouth. I put an end to the stopwatch after that. I was going to throw it away but she insisted that we keep it, just put it in storage, as a reminder. I told her fine.

The Chuck Taylor box didn’t have any valuables. It didn’t have diamond or pearl earrings. It didn’t have birth certificates or passports. We didn’t keep antiques or heirlooms in the box. None of that stuff. Instead it was like a cheap, modest and mutually beneficial safe. For the valueless.
A few weeks after the cat mutilator story broke, though, the box went missing. There wasn’t, I admit, a frantic search. It was not where it was supposed to be and so I assumed it was somewhere else. Moved in the process of cleaning. I thought it best to ask Diana.

We were sitting down on the couch, watching a show on cable.

What happened to the Chuck Taylor box?

What do you mean?

I mean, where did it go? It’s not where it’s supposed to be. Did you move it?

I don’t know. Maybe during cleaning. It could’ve been moved when I was cleaning. Maybe you should clean more, than you would know exactly where the Chuck Taylor box is.

Maybe, I thought.

That was enough for me. How far could it really go? It wasn’t necessarily a bad thing. I occasionally had suspicions that a certain object was being removed from the box, enjoyed, and then returned clandestinely. So I forgot about it.

I got up to her school a little after twelve. Bluebird wasn’t in sight but as I pulled up to the curb to park, a man came over to my car and tapped on my window. I rolled it down.

Are you Francis Billows? he asked.

I told him I was. He began by informing me that if I did not stop contacting Priscilla, the family would have no choice but to seek a restraining order against me. I drove off before he could back away from my car. I couldn’t understand the extremes a
family would take to shelter their daughter. I almost had the nerve to drive back and give
the lawyer a piece of my mind, tell him that the world is not going away. People need to
experience it. It’s not healthy. You’re only going to cause problems for her later. It’s
detrimental. It’s not right. I thought about it, but kept driving instead. Maybe, I thought,
it would be best to clear my mind. Try to understand the ramifications of everything. It
would not, I knew, look good if I had a restraining order issued against me. Best to wait
until Friday. I could talk to Bluebird at the Immaculate, get everything straight. Things
would cool off.

When I got home, though, there was more bad news.

On the refrigerator was a sticky-pad note in the shape of a cat that read, Fired.
You Motherfucker. It was hard to handle. I won’t say that I couldn’t breathe, which is
what a lot of people say when they get some very unexpected and terrible news. I don’t
think that’s true. I could breathe just fine. Everything was working for me, everything
that needed to, anyway. I guess I probably just looked around the kitchen, our home, to
see if anything had changed. I didn’t feel much different. Of course I wasn’t happy
about it, but I think the wind that was in my sails, so to speak, had all but vanished long
before this happened. When I must not have been looking. It was, I suppose,
unbelievable. In the truest sense of the word. I wouldn’t have believed it could’ve
happened. But there it was. I looked at the note and then at the rest of the refrigerator
and then around the kitchen and then back at the note.

I called work and they told me not to contact them again. They’d send me my
wages.
I plopped down at my piano and tried to compose. I used to love to write love songs for Diana when we first met. I was playing at an inn on the Atlantic Coast in Georgia. I played in the restaurant and bar. I met Diana one night while she was in the bar. She’d broken an engagement off, a couple of weeks prior to our meeting.

We spent three nights together and then she had to leave. I thought that would be the end of it, but she came back. She told me a story about her father who sold guitars in Mexico one summer. We talked about how beautiful it was down there, how, as she put it, easy it is to forget about yourself. It sounded pretty good. Maybe we could go, she said. Maybe we could go and write a musical about how absolutely wonderful it was. You could write the music, I could write the words.

Compose. I could compose the music.

Exactly, she said.

We made it down to Mexico both before and after our wedding. I was surprised. There are times in your life when you talk about doing something, taking a trip or buying a house or having children and you hope it’ll work out but a lot of those times it doesn’t and you’re not surprised because you think those things weren’t meant for you. I think the trip to Mexico was sort of like that for us. And so when it happened, twice, it surprised me. I thought that was a good sign for our marriage.

We had to move to Wisconsin after two years in Georgia. We had a baby boy and it wasn’t born right. We moved to Wisconsin because Diana’s dad works for the Kohler factory. A vice-president. He took care of us while the baby started to recuperate. Then it got sick. Her dad told us to take him up to the Mayo Clinic in Rochester. It’s the best, he said. Sometimes, though, the best doesn’t matter.
You wonder about why things happen. I couldn’t tell you why this happened. I
don’t think it always works that way. Sometimes you’re not meant to know. It was all
very sad.

I went to bed before Diana got home. It was early. She slept on the couch. We
lived like this for a couple of weeks, not talking. She would leave during the day and I
would sit at home and try to write music. It was hopeless.

Then one day I saw an article in the newspaper about two cabbies who’d been
found bound and gagged with their throats sliced open, in the trunk of their abandoned
cabs. A third cabbie had gone missing.

I thought this would thrill Diana, but when I showed her she glanced at it and
continued watching television. I don’t care about that stuff anymore, she said, like it was
out of style.

About a week later I noticed that the shoebox was missing. Diana said she must
have moved it while she was cleaning. I bought into that explanation until I was
searching for an old vest in the spare closet and noticed the tattered box sticking out from
beneath a mountain of mothballs. I yelled to her.

I found it. I found the box.

There was no response. I heard her get up and walk to the kitchen. The house
was quiet. When I reached down to pick up the box, there was a scent that was
unfamiliar and unnerving. I opened the box to find all of our stuff gone, replaced by
what appeared to be a package wrapped in newspaper. I took my pocketknife out of my
pocket and made an incision down the center of the package. There was further wrapping
– plastic bags and plastic wrap. I tore away at everything until I broke through.
In marriages, secrets and surprises are rare. You rely on yourself to know your spouse. If all else is falling apart, you maintain some sort of stability. It becomes the partner’s most endearing quality because you can hold onto it. Nothing else is quite like it, and that’s what I enjoyed about marriage. Knowing that you know somebody, that even if you’re unsure about everything else in your life, you know that person. Sometimes better than yourself.

But when you learn a secret it becomes something bigger than what it should be or what it ever would’ve been before you were married. And I think some people believe these things tear people apart because there is a feeling of disloyalty or distrust. How can I ever trust you again? they say. You lied to me. You’re not the person I once knew. You’re not the person I married. They’re all clichés, probably ones that are said, wrongly, every day. And there is a hint of that, I’ll admit. Trust is huge. When you’re younger, if you don’t have trust, you don’t have anything. I need to be able to trust you. But when you’re older, it doesn’t mean quite so much. Because you know neither of you is being completely truthful. Not necessarily in a very malicious way. Mostly in an emotional sense. Rarely are your feelings the same as they were when you met. You don’t say that, of course, but you’re both aware. And you’re fine with it. Because mostly you can trust yourself and at this age that’s everything.

When a secret is learned, it’s not so much a feeling of dishonesty or distrust of the other person that you experience, but a feeling of confusion. You’ve come to rely on your knowledge of that person, an expertise, but when you find out something you never thought possible, it makes you doubt yourself, and that’s the worst. When you’re older,
it’s the absolute worst. When most people say, I don’t know you anymore. Or, You’re not the person I knew before. What they really mean is, I don’t know who I am anymore.

And what’s absolutely terrifying about it all is how small the secret or surprise can actually be.

I’m not sure why Diana had gone to such lengths to preserve what was in the box. Perhaps it was a way of sealing them from the world. Building a kind of fence to protect them from other eyes. From judgment. Who knows?

What I found was a bundle of sealed, unaddressed envelopes. There were at least twenty-five, all with different names. Steve Irons, Ron Kildren, Dennis Phillips, Janis Buckley, Teresa Lendberg, Guy McIntosh, etc. I took my knife and slit open one. It read:

Dear Mr. Collins,

I am writing to tell you that I sympathize with your destruction of life. I know you are not a bad person, only misguided. If you only knew how much I understand your pain. I don’t understand why others can’t see that. I don’t understand why they can’t just treat us like normal human beings. I just don’t understand anything anymore. The only thing that seems to make sense is you. That’s why we should meet. We should know each other, at least as much as possible.

Sincerely,

Diana Fitzsimmons

I opened others, with the same tone, but different subject matter. Some mentioned me. One wrote of a fight we’d had over burnt toast. Others were more abstract, more elusive. Some salutations were benign, others affectionate. The farewells
ranged from Best, to With Regards, to Love, to Always Yours. The letters were in no apparent order. They were just her thoughts, feelings, concerns, dreams, passions, in letter format. They were love letters. They were the type of letters I would never see. I would never receive.

I put the letters back in their envelopes and then back in the box. I secured the lid on top and shoved the box into the space in the closet where I’d found it.

I walked down the stairs and into the kitchen. Diana was on the kitchen floor with her newspaper articles and a pad of paper and a bowl of soup. I opened the freezer, took out some leftover pizza and defrosted it in the microwave. I put two pieces on a plate and put the rest back. I filled a glass up with water and then took the pizza and water upstairs and went into the bedroom and shut the door.

I’m not sure if the missing cabbie was ever found – I doubt it. But Diana’s lack of interest was understandable. You can grow tired of the same thing over and over again. The story was stale – similar things had happened before. We wanted something new. Something exciting. Maybe just something different.
BONES

Bones, our five-year-old Rottweiler, had started to get the shakes. I found it amusing. My wife May did not share my opinion. He’s for protection, not for amusement, she said.

He’d also become inconsistent, ferociously barking at strangers one day and then barking at us the next. He’d be full of energy and then inexplicably dazed and lethargic. But I just assumed he was going through a rough patch.

He’d learned to clean up after himself. When he urinated in the bathroom, which is where he slept, he licked it up. Self-sufficient. That’s a trait most would envy, I said.

Not me, May said. Is he just going to start pissing when a rapist is breaking into the house? That doesn’t sound like a good time to me.

One morning we were both home from work because a great deal of snow had fallen overnight. A long, too-usual silence had infected our house that morning so I started an argument so we could say something, anything.

Which word was more passionate, love or loathe?

I told her I thought love was the winner because there are only so many things in your life you can truly love. And when you find that, it’s like nothing else. It’s something you’ll sacrifice your life for. And it makes you feel so many things all at once. It’s that powerful.

I rubbed her hand.
May, of course, chose loathe, which, though fucked up, was what I wanted to hear from her.

Ugh, she said, shaking my hand off hers.

And then she argued that a person could be consumed by it. Loathing someone could eat up their life. People love a lot of things in life. But it is truly rare to downright loathe something. And it has to be the result of a terrible circumstance. You can fall in love with a dozen people at the same time if you want to. But to loathe somebody takes patience and luck and dedication.

And we went back and forth, talking more than we’d talked in months. We weren’t evasive or elusive, like we’d recently become. We told each other what we thought. She cited the dictionary, calling attention to the minimal entries under the word. Claiming that you can’t confuse loathe with anything else. It only means one thing. There’s no substitute.

I responded by telling her that you wouldn’t plan your life around the loathing of another person. You wouldn’t move to another state, find a new job, buy a house and adopt a dog for protection if you just loathed someone.

How do you know? she said.

I didn’t. It was true. I had no idea if a person would change their life out of loathing. Perhaps it was possible, though I didn’t want to admit it.

I shrugged. And I realized, at least at that moment, I didn’t love her. Maybe just for an instance I thought perhaps I would never love her again.

I didn’t know what it was, maybe her tone of voice. Maybe it was the demand in her voice. Maybe it was the fact that I knew she’d already won our debate – by a
landslide. Or maybe it was because I knew how much she enjoyed the argument we were having. Not necessarily because she thought she’d won, but because she believed in what she was saying. Because she was passionate about it. And I hadn’t seen that from her in a long time. Not towards me, towards Bones, towards work, towards anything.

Bones had been sporadically shaking this day, which I attributed to the weather and our ratty house that leaked heat like Bones leaked unsavory fluid. May thought he wasn’t acting appropriately. He wasn’t fulfilling his responsibilities. This was evident, she pointed out, when a UPS worker had knocked on the door and Bones, instead of taking the initiative, wildly barking, and knocking over furniture in an attempt to get to the front door for first crack at the stranger’s throat, made a pathetic grunt and limp in the direction of the door, and then flopped back down and closed his eyes.

We agreed that it was time to pay the vet a visit.

We took him the next day. We told the vet the symptoms. He nodded while we spoke.

It’s possible he has epilepsy, he said.

You’re kidding me. I didn’t know dogs could get seizures, I said.

Oh yes. It’s almost as frequent in dogs as in humans.

That’s unfortunate, I said.

Is there anyone in the family that suffers from it? he asked.

May pointed at me. He does, she said.

The vet laughed.

No, I mean anyone in Bones’ family. His parents? Brothers and sisters?

No clue, May said.
Well, we can’t be sure. Unlike humans, dogs can’t tell us what they’re feeling so it’s harder to diagnose. What I would suggest you do is videotape his behavior. You can set it up when he goes to sleep and if you catch any tremors or disorientation during the day, record that as well. In two weeks come in and I should have a better sense of Bones’ condition.

We borrowed a video camera from a neighbor and set it up in the bathroom. There wasn’t much change in Bones. Some days he was as I remembered him. He was cheerful, affectionate and energetic. He seemed to be without fault. I loved him without hesitation. I took him running. We played fetch. I rolled around with him.

Other days he was stubborn, tense and unloving. I tried to keep his behavior on these days from May. I wasn’t sure what she’d say. I lied, told her I’d stepped on his tail when he’d squeal for no apparent reason. I made excuses when he bumped into walls or barked aggressively at either one of us. But she knew better. And besides, there was the videotape, which captured everything May or the vet needed to see.

We showed the vet the tape after two weeks. It confirmed what he’d feared – Bones was epileptic. But not just ordinarily epileptic – severely so. He was having seizures three or four times a day which was most disconcerting, the vet told us.

Does that mean he has to be put to sleep? May asked.

Oh, no, the vet said. There are a number of medications you can administer daily that will have positive effects on Bones. He should still be able to live a healthy life.

For how long does he have to be on the meds?

Well, it’ll be for the rest of his life, he said.

This is going to have to be for the rest of his life? I said, too loudly.
May spoke before the vet could answer.

What if we can’t give him the drugs? I mean to say, what if we aren’t capable of keeping up with it? What happens then?

I don’t see why you wouldn’t be capable of administering the medication needed. It’s a pretty simple procedure. You’re both young and healthy people. And you have each other so it won’t seem quite as burdensome as it would if you were alone. Not that I think it would with a dog like Bones, he said.

However, animals have been euthanized in the past when an owner does not have the capacity to take care of the pet. But that’s something we highly discourage.

Can you give us a minute to talk about things? May asked.

The vet nodded and left us alone.

Much like I’d taken her hand during our argument the day before, May held onto mine and started rubbing.

I just can’t watch Bones deteriorate before my eyes, she said.

He just told us with medicine he’ll be okay. It’ll help him out. It’s probably just like with people. You take the drugs and they stop the seizures.

Always?

I paused.

Most of the time.

Listen, it’ll be okay. He’ll get through this. He’s a tough guy. He’s Bones.

But he won’t be the same. He won’t be like he was before. I mean, are you?

I was a kid when I got it.
But Bones isn’t a puppy anymore. He’s not going be the same. I just can’t go through with it, May said, putting her hands over her eyes.

I looked at her and then Bones and then back at her. I thought of the things I would be giving up by giving up Bones. And I looked at May and thought about what I’d be like without her, what my life would turn into without my wife. If I’d end up finding someone else to love or if I’d just end up loathing myself for not making it work? Or maybe it was possible that I’d end up loathing her for making me feel like I was still in love.

I looked at Bones and then at May and then at Bones again. I gave him a quick hug and then wiped my eyes and said, Okay, fine. Let’s call him back in here.

She was horribly ecstatic. May gave me a kiss on the lips and rubbed my hair and told me nice things about my life and our life and what Bones meant to us. Then she retrieved the vet.

He tried to persuade us to reconsider, but May stayed strong. She explained our hectic schedules, our disorganized home life. She exaggerated my epileptic condition, claiming I needed a lot of tending to. We persuaded him, I suppose, after ten or fifteen minutes. We kissed Bones goodbye.

After I’d signed the death certificate, and the technician had explained the procedure, May turned to me, holding a solemn face, and with more sincerity than I’d heard since she’d agreed to marry me, since she and I had first made love, since we’d made up stories about each other on a train in southern France while she lathered my sunburned back with aloe lotion, since we’d picked out Bones at the breeder while promising to make child-making a full-time gig, she said, You’re next.
WINTER’S WATCHERS

Ray was ten and his brother Shelly was seventeen and they’d taken a trip in Shelly’s green F-150, which was a good truck. They’d gone up to Summit County to hike around because it had snowed for the first time and that was what they liked to do as brothers. This was in early November, during the second go around with Iraq, which was significant to Ray only in that he liked watching the bombs explode in the green, night vision light of the networks. It was different than the bottle rockets and black cats and cherry bombs he lit up in the park, pretending he was firing missiles at some foreign location. The bombs were for real and the thought of them was exciting.

On the way back down, Ray and Shelly ate fish tacos and tried to make up slang that they could use in front of their parents. Words that meant something only to them. A language of their own.

On a dirt road, in a tiny town half way down the mountain, while Ray and Shelly decided on a word for boob, a car slid out of control and snapped into the F-150. Ray was buckled up. Shelly was tossed through the windshield.

An old wooden fence that used to keep cattle from wandering off and a mailbox that didn’t seem to belong to anyone were the only things around. Shelly lay by one of the fence’s post. Ray couldn’t feel much in his legs. He tried to unhook his seatbelt, but it was caught on something. He didn’t struggle. He looked at his brother who wasn’t moving. Then he rubbed his legs, which didn’t feel like anything. He knew his legs were fucked. They were asleep except he couldn’t shake them awake. And they were shaped
differently than before. Even if he’d wanted to, he couldn’t have made it over to his brother, his legs would’ve crumbled. But he didn’t want to go over to him. He didn’t want to see how much worse off Shelly was.

He didn’t feel right anyway. He couldn’t focus on anything. It was better to close his eyes.

What was the word they were trying to create? What was it that Shelly had suggested? He should’ve felt pain, serious, terrifying pain, but he didn’t and the paramedics blamed it on shock.

Two months later it was January, and Ray still had the screws in his hips which isn’t really abnormal unless you’re a ten year old boy who’s used to things being easy to do. He’d been in a wheelchair, but was out of that by the time the New Year had rolled around. He walked with crutches. He hobbled with crutches. He held everybody up. His mother would massage his armpits every night because the crutches made them red and tender. But Ray didn’t like being at home. His parents yelled at each other. They blamed each other for Shelly’s death. Ray didn’t think his parents thought much of him. They must’ve thought he was useless. He was a cripple.

In February, after Ray had got off the crutches, Joseph Tobar went missing in Iraq. Ray did not think of him or of Joseph’s brother Alexander, whom Ray went to school with. No, Ray thought of those glowing green, night-vision lights of the networks that he’d nearly forgotten about. He thought of the popping of the bombs you heard on television. Those bottle rockets – which were his favorites – he couldn’t fire off
anymore. Ray did not think of Joseph who was twenty and was presumed to be in the same place as Shelly. The Tobars had even gotten a letter. The government couldn’t confirm that Joseph was dead, but they were confident he wasn’t alive.

Ray wondered what bombs did to people. If they were like in the movies, where they incinerated anybody within a block of the explosion. If they just destroyed your entire remains, which was why the government couldn’t confirm that he was dead. Or whether they were much slower. If they exploded and you just watched yourself die. If you could feel everything happen to you. If it just drained your life away, like the people caught under water, slowly loosing their breaths until there’s nothing left. If it was like an accident. If it, in anyway, resembled an accident.

When Ray heard about Joseph Tobar, he thought of himself. It was only fair. He thought of what he’d gone through. Nobody had considered what he’d gone through. His parents had a right to cry, to scream. But they weren’t in the car. They weren’t trapped by a seatbelt while Shelly lay in the snow by a splintery fencepost. They didn’t need to be sawed out of the truck and flown in a helicopter to Denver. He had the body that was damaged and was bleeding from the inside, which didn’t seem all that bad until they told him that bleeding on the inside was worse than when you bled on the outside. They weren’t the ones with screws in their hips.

Ray, though, did start thinking about Alexander, only because they were classmates and Alexander’s brother was also dead. If only because he seemed to have more in common with Alexander than with anyone else.

For the three months before Joseph Tobar disappeared, Ray rehabbed with a therapist who told him that he was unlucky that he wasn’t fully developed, and that if he
didn’t work harder than he’d ever worked before he’d be four feet tall for the rest of his life.

His parents, meanwhile, treated him like he was retarded. They spoke slowly to him and when out in public, if Ray in any way delayed a response to a question or in making a decision on a pair of shoes or a type of sandwich, his parents would explain to whomever was around that Ray suffered on the inside. And they’d leave it like that.

After school or after dinner, when he had time by himself, Ray would go into the bathroom with the black ceramic tiles and he’d make himself put his hand on his hip, as firmly as he could, and move it so the joint would shift. That was the only time he could feel the screws. But he could feel them on both sides. He would massage the bone and then the screws and then the bone again. On particularly cold days his hips ached and he always imagined the screws were grinding away at the bone, rubbing off flakes of bone until there was little left and they would just fall out, into his leg, clunking through his body. But he knew that wasn’t true. They were in there keeping the bones together, healing them, reminding him of what had happened. And by feeling those titanium screws, he kept the event close to him, vivid. There were days when he hated them. And days when they were the only things he could depend on.

Then after feeling for the screws he’d take off his shirt and lie down on the floor and press his face hard onto the cold tiled floor and pretend that he was stuck in a snowdrift, freezing to death. And then he’d imagine someone watching him, just standing by watching him slowly die without offering a hand. Their eyes would meet and the person would not flinch, just watch as Ray struggled unsuccessfully to free himself
from the snowdrift. And then Ray would fall asleep on the black ceramic tiles that could, on very cold days, ice your body.

When Ray was feeling particularly shitty, after he’d finished whatever it was that he was required to do, he’d head towards the bathroom for personal time. But instead of just lying on the ground and touching his hips, he’d stand over the toilet and rub the screws over and over again until he began to heave. Sometimes he’d throw up, other times not. It depended on his mind, his memory. If it was sharp and vivid, if he could make out the EMTs bagging Shelly’s body or revive the print of his brother in the snow, it could be almost instantaneous. If he hadn’t done it in a while, it would be quick and easy. On the other hand, if his mind was foggy, or somehow weighed down, he might not be capable of doing it at all. If he’d had a constant streak of vomiting, the streak would inevitably come to an end. It was the least, Ray used to think, he could do.

But then Joseph Tobar was presumed to be deceased, and though Ray had thought about Alexander, it wasn’t until he came back to school after a week and Ray could see that Alexander was not the same person he’d been before Joseph had gone missing. And that made Ray consider him more. Alexander was a tubby kid with sandy blond hair that he could never keep out of his eyes, even when Alexander would go to the water fountain and splash water in his hair and slick it back with his hand. This was a constant source of amusement.

But when Alexander came back to school he kept his head down and said very little. Teachers didn’t push him to answer any questions they might have asked him before. He ate his lunch somewhere other than the cafeteria. Nobody asked him where. There were rumors. Some thought he took it to a graveyard to eat with other dead
people. One kid said he took his lunch to the boiler room to share it with the rats. But most people just ignored the topic.

When Alexander returned to school, Ray became less self-conscious and more observant of Alexander, even if no one else wanted anything to do with him. Ray watched him from afar. He was more concerned with how Alexander would handle himself. How he would move through school, how he held his head, how he carried his backpack, how he answered questions unrelated to his brother, how he ordered his lunch from the lunch ladies. How he’d changed.

Ray hoped Alexander would be worse off than himself. That he’d break down. That he was weaker than Ray. Because then maybe everybody would remember Ray’s tragedy, that they’d realize what he’d gone through and they’d respect him for being strong, for handling himself with dignity and class and he was a lot different than people thought.

Ray was sure that Alexander was becoming a weirdo, which made him even more interesting. Ray thought about what kinds of weird things Alexander did, and that kept him from thinking about Shelly.

But then Alexander didn’t return. It had been one week and the following Monday he never showed for class. Ray sat across from an empty desk, expecting to see Alexander walk through the door, not concerned about being tardy. This seemed like a scenario suited to Alexander’s behavior. Ray was sure he’d show up. Even giddy at the idea that he’d disrupt the class. That everybody would go quiet as he marched to his desk, head down, feet dragging, hair tangly and greasy, backpack empty.
As they moved from language arts, to science, to math, Ray no longer expected Alexander to show up. He just hoped he would. He tried to make excuses for Alexander. Maybe he was sick. Maybe he was out of town. Maybe he had an appointment that took all day. Maybe.

But it didn’t matter. That wasn’t the point. Who cared why he was gone? It only mattered that he wasn’t in school. Because by the end of the day Ray felt alone. Horribly alone and insecure and angry. Again he was the one with his head down, his feet dragging, his mind preoccupied with getting through school without making eye contact. And he was scared what it might be like tomorrow and the next day and the day after that.

Tuesday came and he was the same as he had been on Monday, only that he found himself praying that Alexander would walk through the door. That he would show up and bail him out of the mess that he felt he was in. But nothing.

And it was like this on Wednesday and Thursday. He reverted to his old patterns of self-torment. He pressed his hands against his hips, harder than ever before, and jerked around the bathroom, feeling the screws in his hips. Feeling the titanium against his bones. Trying to push them out. Get them out of his legs. Look at them, bloody and cold and useless.

That night, lying on the floor of the bathroom, shirt and pants balled up in the corner, stuffed over the heating vent to prevent himself from warming up, Ray missed the snow that started falling outside. He had no idea it was even supposed to snow. But it did.
Slowly it started frosting over windshields and glazing the grass that was brownish green and dry and ugly. It covered blemishes that had been quite obvious before.

Sometime during the night it stopped, but resumed the next day when Ray was walking to school. But even before that, even before Ray left for his walk, before he got dressed, he felt different. The snow on the ground, maybe an inch, made Ray feel, in a way, nice. It was pleasant. Clean and refreshing. It seemed to patch up sores that he knew were still there, but this morning, for a reason he couldn’t understand himself, it only mattered that he couldn’t see them. It covered up the oil stains Shelly’s truck had left on the street. It hid the small patch of bare land where a bird had been buried by the four of them. It made things look different. It made him feel different.

And then when it started to snow – lightly – Ray decided on something he hadn’t thought of before. Or maybe he just wasn’t brave enough to go through with it. Maybe subconsciously he had been planning it since Alexander first came back to class.

Ray decided to make a detour past Alexander’s house after school. He’d just check it out. See what the house looked like. If it seemed anything like his home. If, by chance, he could see Alexander. See how he was doing. Even if he just watched him from a distance. Like at school. Even if he only had to guess what Alexander was feeling.

In all honesty, Ray did not expect to see Alexander. He thought he could take a look at the house, maybe peer into a window – if he could gain enough courage – observe any kind of movement, a shadow, a silhouette, an animal that was curled up on a pillow on the floor. To see if Alexander was anything like himself.
But when Ray turned the corner to the house he found Alexander sitting outside on a chair, bundled up, with his hands stuffed in his pockets, staring blankly up and down the street. Watching for something that wasn’t there.

Ray paused and then hurried to hide behind a blue spruce. The snow crunched underneath his feet. He kept his eyes focused on the road, studying something that wasn’t visible to Ray.

A woman appeared from the doorway with a thermos in hand. She brought it to Alexander and then went back inside. Ray liked the gesture. Alexander held it in his hands but didn’t take a sip from it. Ray wanted to know what was in it. He hoped it was hot chocolate. He loved hot chocolate. It made him feel warm.

Ray waited for Alexander to take a drink, but he never did. He just stared up and down the street, back and forth, his head shooting forward when a car passed. Ray was cold. His hips started to hurt. He could feel it deep in him. He wanted to get going.

As he turned to leave, he heard Alexander’s coat crackle. Ray shot a look over in that direction. Alexander was staring at him. They made eye contact. Alexander held his gaze. Like he was trying to read his mind, like he was trying to take something important from Ray. It spooked Ray. He ran.

At home that night, Ray considered what he’d witnessed. Alexander Tobar was not right. This was obvious. But what harm would it do to take another walk over there, scope out the place, figure out what it was Alexander was looking for?

Saturday morning Alexander and Ray were in identical positions as on Friday. Alexander was not wearing a hat, as he was the day before. His hair was dark and looked as if someone had matted it down with butter. He must have serious B.O., Ray thought.
That was a clear indication that something was wrong. Bad odor was the number one
telling sign in school. All the kids with B.O. were strange and creepy. Everybody knew
that.

Alexander had something in his hand. It looked like a gun, but he couldn’t
exactly tell. He thought Alexander was a person who should not be holding a gun of any
sort.

He shifted his weight when a car drove passed. He adjusted the sleeves of his
coat, which brought the so-called gun high in the air. But that was not what it was; Ray
could see that. In fact it was a small vehicle. A black dump truck. And on the ground
next to him, in a paint bucket, were other items with similar shape and usefulness. What
was he planning on doing with those toys? He wasn’t playing with them. He didn’t have
any fireworks that Ray could see, so he wasn’t planning on blowing them up. Maybe he
intended to through them at things. But what do you throw toy cars at? Animals were a
good bet, he thought. He could see the practicality in throwing them at cats. But were
there cats around? No, he didn’t see any. So what could they be for?

Alexander put the truck on the ground and stood up. He turned towards the tree.
Ray held his breath.

He knew this wasn’t a good thing. He could run, but then that would be a sure
sign that he was up to no good. And then it would be almost impossible to return. That
would be the end of it. So, he just stayed there, sucked in his stomach, held his breath,
pressed his body tight to the tree. He stayed still. As still as during the accident. As still
as Shelly had been. Dead still.
Alexander took a step forward and opened his mouth, pausing before speaking. Ray’s stomach dropped, hanging low to the ground. He could see Alexander gaping at him. His crooked teeth and slight overbite, his breath becoming visible.

He said, You want to play with my trucks?

The voice was soft and inviting. It wasn’t the harsh cackle of a voice he’d imagined Alexander would have. He thought of him as the clown who had a laugh that sounded like an alarm clock buzzer. It was that sound he expected, even worse. But instead it was pleasant. Friendly. And Alexander was smiling. Hopeful, though not desperate, which made Ray feel comfortable.

He shrugged his shoulders.

I guess so, he said, and walked, cautiously, over to where Alexander stood.

Take which one you like, Alexander said, while Ray looked into the bucket. He pulled out a crimson dump truck.

This is a weird color for a dump truck, Ray said.

My brother gave me that, Alexander said, yanking it from Ray’s hands.

Sorry.

Alexander nodded his head. He said, It’s a special edition dump truck. It’s actually a hybrid dump truck, which means it takes half gas half electricity. It’s not even on the market yet. The real life dump truck, I mean.

That’s pretty cool, Ray said.

Alexander handed Ray a yellow bulldozer that was a Caterpillar replica. With that one they moved a pile of snow off the sidewalk into the street, Ray pushing the snow
into the back of the hybrid dump truck, and Alexander dumping it into the street. Ray thought it looked like his snowdrift, the one he imagined getting trapped in.

They didn’t speak much after their initial conversation – only occasionally suggesting directions, methods of making piles of snow. Ray didn’t construct any scenarios that involved moving piles of snow. He just went through the motions, thoughtlessly, watching Alexander do the same – though he couldn’t guess what he was thinking. Maybe Alexander had created a world that Ray was a part of. Maybe he was a new member of the scenario Alexander had built a long time ago. Or maybe Ray had just replaced someone else.

The same woman appeared from inside the house, caring a similar thermos to the one Ray had seen the day before. She seemed surprised to see Ray.

Oh, hi, she said, flashing a vague, crooked smile. She handed Alexander the thermos.

I’ve got to go, Ray said, leaping off the ground. The woman walked back to the house.

Alexander continued to dump snow into the street as Ray walked swiftly home.

He picked three trucks at random out of his crate and then found the replica of a semi Shelly had gotten him one year, and took that one out too. He’d bring them to Alexander’s. They could do more the next time. Maybe they could design a mission that the trucks were involved in. Maybe they were transporting something top secret through the snow. Maybe they were going on a raid with explosions. Or maybe not. No, that probably wasn’t a good scenario to play with Alexander. Maybe it was better to have him decide on one. Then he wouldn’t say anything dumb.
But there were chores to do on Sunday and because Shelly wasn’t around to do his share, Ray’s father had to do them, which made him more upset than usual. His mother was out at the grocery store and though she didn’t let him off any easier than his father did, she at least was nice about it. She still looked at him like he was broken, spoiled, which wasn’t such a bad thing when Ray had to do his chores. At least she was gentle.

His father, however, was not. He didn’t even like telling Ray to do his chores at all. His father often told Ray to get going, hurry up, stop dilly-dallying around. Ray once told his mother that he was being treated like a slave. She looked at him pathetically, like he was incapable of ever knowing better. Like he wasn’t capable of being anything but a ruined ten-year-old boy.

So it was Monday when he was able to return. He’d stuffed his backpack with the trucks. He’d worn extra layers. But when he got there Alexander wasn’t outside. There was no chair and no thermos. There wasn’t any real sign he’d ever been there. Ray wasn’t exactly sure what to do.

He shook snow off of a tree branch, which made a snapping sound louder than he’d anticipated. It was suspicious. It was time to go home.

But then he heard clattering at the front door, and it swing violently open, whereupon Alexander appeared in a puffy black snowsuit. He hurried out, not minding the open doorway, and then stopped twenty feet short of Ray.

I thought you weren’t coming back, Alexander said.

Why aren’t you sitting outside? Ray said.

My mom doesn’t let me stay out here all day. She makes me watch these math and reading videos.
You still have school?

The videos are kind of neat. Neater than school, at least.

Ray kicked at some snow.

You don’t have to get home?

I’ve got some time.

Well I could get my trucks, if you wanted.

Yeah, okay. I brought some in case you wanted to see some of mine.

We could play with both, Alexander said.

That sounds fine, Ray said, staring at his shoes.

Alexander returned with his bucket of cars. They plopped down underneath the Blue Spruce.

They dug holes with the trucks and then their hands. They packed snow, forming snow bridges over the holes. They wheeled the trucks across. They made huts out of snow and twigs. They pulled needles off of the tree and filled some of the holes with them. Then sprinkled snow over the holes.

For traps, Ray said.

Yeah. Those would be pretty good traps.

They’d do damage.

A lot of damage, Alexander said.

Alexander put the truck down, out of the way of the bridges and holes and said, We should have the semi crash into one of the ditches. That would make sense. Semis crash all the time. You see it all the time. They’re crashing into everything. Especially
if the bridges are icy. Or maybe we could just have them drive over one of the traps.

That would happen for sure.

Ray shook his head.

I don’t think so, he said, shaking his head again.

Oh yeah, Alexander said. It could definitely happen. They’re real easy to tip over. You see it all the time.

No, Ray said. I don’t want to do that. I don’t want that to happen.

He hadn’t anticipated this scenario. It wasn’t what he’d thought about when he’d imagined playing with Alexander. It was much worse. But what did he imagine doing? Wasn’t it the way you play with cars and trucks? You blow them up. You crash them into things. You build ditches and drown the cars in them. You have boulders fall on top of an unassuming line of cars. You bury them alive. You fill holes with pine needles and call them traps. You have semis crash into them. That was what he did with Shelly. That was what he’d do by himself. That was the rational thing to do.

Ray said, No, that’s a lousy idea. I don’t like it at all. I don’t want to do that.

What’s your idea, then? I think mine is perfectly fine. It’s realistic. You come up with something, then. Huh?

Okay then, Ray said, nodding his head.

But he didn’t say anything. And Alexander didn’t wait for an answer. They resumed the tasks they were undertaking before. They made small guardrails for the bridges. These took some time because they had to be careful not to break the bridges.

The semi was from Shelly. That’s my brother, Ray said.

Why didn’t you just say so?
I don’t know.

I told you about my hybrid dump truck. That was from my brother who’s gone, too, Alexander said.

I just told you that I don’t know. That’s what I just said.

Alexander looked down, picked up a truck, spun its wheels and then set it back down.

He said, We could just have another truck fall into the trap. That would work too.

Let’s not do that. Let’s not crash cars today.

I think the bridges need more guardrails, if you ask me, Alexander said.

That’s true, Ray said.

They made tight, sturdy guardrails for the bridges. They dug more ditches, filled them up with needles and covered them with snow. Ray was proud of their work.

There were days when one boy or the other had obligations that conflicted with the fortress they had decided they were building. Ray was not fond of those days, but it made the days they spent together more exciting. They’d tell each other what had happened since they’d last seen each other.

Ray told him stories about school. It was his collateral for playing in Alexander’s front lawn. Ray would relay the rumors and the detention sentences handed out.

Sometimes he made things up because he could. That was fun. He didn’t think he had a great imagination, but it didn’t seem to matter to Alexander. He was always eager to hear more. So it wasn’t always bad when they weren’t together.
After a three-day hiatus – the longest one to date – Ray told Alexander about a tackle football game that was played at school where someone fractured his collarbone, which was made into a big deal, even though Ray didn’t know why.

Midway through the story Alexander interrupted.

He said, Your parents don’t mind you coming over here?

Ray shrugged.

Do you tell them you’re coming over here?

I tell them I have detention, Ray said.

They don’t get mad at you?

They don’t really ever get mad at me. Not any more. They just get mad at each other. Even when it’s my fault.

So they let you get away with everything?

I don’t know. When I tell them I got detention or when I forget to do something that I’m supposed to do they look at me like I’m retarded. Then they blame each other for it. Somehow it’s their fault that I’m the way I am.

At least they don’t yell at you, Alexander said.

I guess so. But there are times…I guess you’re right.

My mom and dad don’t yell at all. My mom stays in bed a lot. My dad spends time up there too. Sometimes me and my dad eat alone.

Snow started to fizzle down.

Ray said, Are you coming back to school? Or is this it?
I don’t really want to go back. I didn’t like the way I felt when I came back. I didn’t like being ignored. At least at home I can pretend that it doesn’t exist. It didn’t happen.

So this is it?

I think this is it, Alexander said.

On the way home Ray had to wipe his face clean of snow and his tears. He wanted Alexander to come back. He didn’t like being at school, but he didn’t like being at home either. Home was worse because he had to hear his parents fight about Shelly and other things because of Shelly. He wanted things to be quiet.

But during those rare moments that things in his life were mute, when he walked home from Alexander’s, or when he was in the shower or lying in bed, late at night, he thought of his new friend. He was happy that they had something in common. Something special that others didn’t have.

Ray didn’t know if it was wrong that what he most liked about Alexander was that he had a dead brother too. He knew it was best not to say anything, but he wasn’t sure it was the worst thing in the world.

For himself, Ray couldn’t help but be thankful that Joseph was gone. It made it easier to remember Shelly and not break down.

But others couldn’t understand.

Ray had been scolded for his frequent trips to after-school detention. His mother had told him that there was no excuse. Enough is enough, she’d said. You’ll be serving extra detention around here if it happens again, she’d said. You think your father treated
you like a slave, I’ll treat you like a prisoner with no rights. You won’t be complaining about your father’s methods then, she’d said.

So the next time he was late he told her the truth.

I’ve been hanging out with Alexander Tobar after school this week, he said.

The kid whose brother got killed in Iraq?

Ray nodded.

That’s pretty morbid, she said. Why would you want to do something like that?

Haven’t you had enough of that?

But she didn’t tell him not to see Alexander. She just looked at him like he was crippled, like he was underdeveloped, like he was incapable of reasonable thought or action.

With the grass thickly frosted with snow, Alexander and Ray lay on their backs and nibbled on Ritz crackers. This was the position Ray had found Alexander in after school. His chair was absent and there was no sign of the cars, but he had a plastic container full of snacks. He was staring up at the sky.

Why are you always outside? Ray asked. Is it because you don’t like being in your house?

No, Alexander said. I don’t mind being inside. It’s just better out here.

Why’s it better?

Because I can see better. Because I can’t watch from inside.

Watch what? Ray asked, spraying crumbs onto his chest.

I’m watching for my brother.

Where is he coming from? I thought –
He used to tell me that if you wanted something bad you just had to watch for it. You had to really want it, and if you did it would come. We used to do it for Christmas and our birthdays and other times too.

Did it work?

You had to really want them. If you didn’t deep in your heart want them then they wouldn’t come. But if you did and you watched hard for them and you thought about them when you were watching then they’d come.

Me and my brother used to have a language we spoke that nobody else could understand. We made up words along the way. We spoke it when we were bored or mad or feeling not so good. That’s what we did.

Ray finished his cracker.

What are some of the words? Alexander asked.

I don’t remember.

You could watch if you wanted to. We could get some chairs and watch from over there by the street.

I kind of like it lying here, Ray said.

I guess you could watch from over here. I’ve never tried it but I guess that would be okay.

Why do you sit by the street?

Because that’s where I think he’s going to show up from. And that’s where me and him used to sit to watch. It worked.

Ray nodded.

What if they’re dead? he asked.
I don’t know, Alexander said. I guess you just have to watch harder.

They watched lying on their backs and sitting in chairs at the street, sipping on hot drinks, eating dried food. They watched through binoculars and while the snow turned into slush. They watched through windows by themselves and while crawling up trees in torn jeans and long-sleeve shirts. They were silent and garrulous, evasive and intimate. They watched while Alexander felt the screws. While Ray confessed that what he’d liked watching most were the green-lit bombs that exploded on TV. They watched while Alexander admitted the same. They watched so hard, it actually worked.

One Saturday morning in March, while both boys were sleeping, while Alexander’s mother was huddled underneath the covers, awake, while his father was out, while Ray’s parents were clattering around, a prank phone call was left on the Tobars’ answering machine that was so cruel that when the Tobars heard it, they didn’t even make a sound. Alexander’s mother erased the message. She went to bed. Alexander’s father took her Zoloft. Alexander went outside and sat on the grass.

The government, apparently, had found Joseph. Somewhere in Southern Iraq he’d been found. Where? They weren’t sure. There was a number for the explanation. It was all very official sounding, which made the call that much worse.

Some had thought, around the Tobar household, that it was possibly Ray. Though it seemed preposterous, based on the deep voice and articulation of large words, Alexander’s mother and father felt that it was an avenue worth exploring. Perhaps, they’d said, he was working with someone else. Perhaps it was Ray’s father who’d found it as amusing as Ray had. It was their version of entertainment.
So this was how Ray found out about the call and how he’d learned that he was no longer welcome. It didn’t appear that Alexander had put up much of a fight, but it was also clear to Ray that Alexander wasn’t completely convinced that it was a prank.

Ray’s parents had received an unpleasant call from the Tobars that was loaded with unsavory language. It threatened physical harm to their house and treasured belongings – if they wanted to call their son a treasure. It was also suggested that Ray’s father might want to consider carrying around mace or brass knuckles or a handgun.

But Ray’s parents didn’t blame him nor did they blame each other. Ray’s father was protective. He told Ray that if he saw any of them to tell them to fuck off and then let the police know about it.

You’re doing better, he said. We’re doing better.

They’re wrong about this, his mother said.

Dead wrong, his father said.

Dead wrong. They’re falling apart. They don’t know what they’re talking about. They’re not like us. Remember that.

Somehow that sounded right to Ray. They were different. Alexander’s mother slept all day, kept Alexander out of school. They let him sit outside all day, watching for a ghost. Wasting time doing nonsense. It was ridiculous. He was not like him. They were better. The Tobars got what they deserved.

Ray’s parents received other undesirable phone calls. Ray overheard his father say, Fucking fuck off, and then the phone slamming onto the cradle.

But things were better. There were still arguments, but they were mild compared to what they had been like before. His parents didn’t look at him like he was retarded.
They didn’t look at him like he was helpless, crippled, useless. Once they mentioned Shelly which made the conversation awkward but that was okay too because it was a start.

It was sometime during a late afternoon, after Ray had returned home from school, that the Tobars discovered it was not a prank. A man came by in official officer dress and explained to Alexander and his parents that Joseph had been found in Southern Iraq, tortured but alive. They’d put him up in one of the hospitals. He had puncture wounds in his arms from the IVs and other things they could only guess. They were ready to send him home.

And the next day, he returned. There was a story about it in the paper. There was a picture of Joseph – pre-Iraq. There were quotes from the family. They were ecstatic. They cried. They thanked God. It was a miracle.

I’ll be damned, Ray’s father had said.

Guess no more calls, his mother had said. Good thing for that.

You bet, his father said.

Ray was appalled. His parents treated the story like it was nothing. Like his father had just read the football scores. Like it didn’t matter.

How the hell could this happen? Ray said to himself. How the fuck could this happen?

The TV and newspaper reporters swarmed the elementary school, interviewing students and teachers that knew Joseph or Ray or neither.
Midday, one of the TV reporters stopped Ray as he was on his way to the bathroom. They asked him questions about Alexander, about how he felt that Alexander’s brother was home.

It’s pretty good, he’d said. I’m happy for him. I guess he can come back to school now.

Instead of using the bathroom and then returning to class, Ray ran. He left his backpack at his desk, the hall pass somewhere in the hall, and the chewed up contents of his lunch in a bush a half-block from the school. It was mostly bile because he couldn’t eat much at lunch in the first place. It just sort of drained from his mouth. It wasn’t what he was used to. He didn’t feel sick, only tired. Exhausted, really. And his sides hurt. He could feel the screws in his sides breaking his hips again. It wasn’t even cold out and he could feel them in his body, like eggs that had been laid inside his bones, finally hatching into a parasite.

He hoped they wouldn’t show his awful interview. He could barely contain himself from screaming at them to fuck off, like his father had told him to say. Just fuck off. Nobody, he wanted to tell them, had asked about his brother. Nobody wanted to know anything about Shelly, or himself or his screws that were destroying his legs. He wanted to ask what they thought it felt like to have your hips fractured. Maybe, he would say, I could smash your hips and then you’d feel what it was like. That, he thought, would teach them.

He spent much of the afternoon in the bathroom. He couldn’t make himself throw up, which was not unusual because he’d just thrown up earlier, but when he moved his hips and pressed his fingers to the skin and bone, he couldn’t feel the screws. He pressed
harder, eventually punching at his sides, but he couldn’t feel anything. He grew frantic, using both fists at the same time, pinching, punching, pounding at his sides, but he couldn’t find them. Was it possible that they’d actually fallen out of his bones and were rattling around somewhere? Was it possible that they’d vanished altogether? Is that what happens?

His parents found him on the bathroom floor and woke him.

You’ve got a call, his father said.

It was Alexander. He sounded different. His voice was thick and steady, like oil paint dripping off a paintbrush, rather than meek and hesitant, like it had been before. He did not apologize for not coming to Ray’s defense.

Well I guess you heard the news, Alexander said.

Yeah. Congratulations. That’s pretty neat, Ray said.

My parents are still going crazy over here. They’ve sort of been taking him around to see people all day. He looks pretty tired. I think he just wants to go to sleep. That’s what I’d want if I were just coming home from Iraq.

Yeah, I guess.

But it’s pretty cool. Anyway, you know what he asked me? If I was watching. That was, like, one of the first things he said to me. He just said he knew when he got out of there that I must’ve been watching for him. Or it was God. But I told him it wasn’t God it was me watching.

That’s pretty good.
And you know what else? Alexander said. I told him that I got a friend whose brother got killed and watched with me and that must’ve helped too. And you know what else?

Unh, unh.

He said he wanted to meet you to thank you for helping him out. That’s pretty cool, huh?

I don’t think I really did much for him, Ray said. No, I don’t think it was me. You should tell your brother that. I didn’t do anything.

It doesn’t matter. He wants to meet you anyway. You can meet my brother. I told him you liked the hybrid dump truck he gave me.

Ray stayed silent for ten or fifteen seconds and then said, I’ve got to go for dinner. Well if you want to come by after school tomorrow we’ll be around.

He hadn’t planned on ever returning to Alexander’s house, but when he overheard his father call Joseph, Damaged Goods, he thought it might be worth a peek.

Alexander’s house didn’t look different, which surprised Ray. He thought, despite the absence of snow and chairs and trucks, there would be something else that had been obviously changed. But it didn’t seem like that at all. It looked the same, maybe worse. It wasn’t as inviting. Before he’d felt most comfortable lounging on the grass with Alexander, not thinking of school or home or his accident. But now it simply looked like any other house that he’d visited on more than one occasion. It just seemed less important.

Joseph and Alexander appeared out of the house. Joseph was messed up. He looks like a concentration camper, Ray said to himself.
He was pale and walked with a slight hump in his back. His clothes wore him and he had bruises on his face. There didn’t seem to be much to him, and yet he was smiling. Alexander was pulling at his shirt cuff. There was a white Honda Accord parked on the street that the two were steering towards.

Ray tried to imagine seeing Shelly like this. He’d had nightmares about Shelly. He’d dream that things weren’t the way they were, that Shelly was alive and well. And then he’d wake up and it seemed like a horrible trick his mind was playing on him.

Those dreams were the worst kind of nightmare, because they made you believe things were better than they really were.

Ray had never considered that if Shelly had survived, he wouldn’t be the same. He just pictured things going back to normal. That if only his neck hadn’t snapped, if the paramedics had got there sooner, that things would be like they had before. But that wasn’t true at all. Shelly would probably have been worse off than Ray was. Something would most likely be seriously wrong with Shelly. And how fun would that have been?

It would be more of a constant reminder of what had happened than the screws ever could have been. Maybe it was better for everyone that Shelly hadn’t made it. Ray could remember him like Shelly had been before. Ray could endure being thought of as retarded because he knew he wasn’t. It was quite possible that Shelly really would have been and that, Ray didn’t think, he could have handled. Shelly would probably have been even more fucked up than Ray was or would be.

In a sort of haze he heard himself say, Where you going?

Joseph and Alexander stopped and looked over. Alexander smiled.

That’s him. That’s Ray, Alexander said.
Ray skipped over to them. He stuck out his hand. Joseph shook it.

Where you going? Ray asked.

Going to a movie, Alexander said.

You can come along, Joseph said.

I think I will.

He’d been nervous riding in the car. Joseph didn’t seem like a good person to trust with your safety, but Ray was glad he’d gone. Joseph bought their tickets and some candy. Alexander seemed very happy, which was good, but Ray knew it wouldn’t be like that forever. Joseph fidgeted a lot during the movie, and left the theater at least three times. Once Alexander followed and that was nice because Ray had time to himself and he could watch the movie without any distractions.

Sitting next to the two was somewhat uncomfortable because Alexander seemed too happy for what had happened. But Ray knew Joseph was damaged for good. And that was probably going to sting Alexander sometime soon. Maybe even in the red-carpeted lobby of the theater. And for Ray, he was happy knowing that he’d never have to experience that kind of trauma. There are better things to think about, to look at, to watch, than a cripple who makes you struggle to remember when he wasn’t one.

The movie was something he could watch without thinking. It was about Elves. It was a Christmas movie in March. He liked Christmas. He thought of what he might like come December. Maybe he would write it down when he got home. Or maybe he’d just try to remember it, think about it until it was time to tell his parents. That was definitely something he’d enjoy dreaming of. It wasn’t bad.
You shouldn’t have been able to feel the screws, his mother had explained, when Ray told her that he couldn’t feel them anymore.

But perhaps, she said, you’ve started filling out.

You’re growing, his father said. That’s what kids your age do. Got some meat on your bones.

And so Ray could think about that. He’d stand in front of the mirror in the bathroom, naked, and squeeze his sides, rub his thighs, feel the flesh that had miraculously appeared at some point during his sleep.

Every morning he’d watch himself in the mirror, and think about what he’d look like in a year or five years or ten. If he’d, in any way, resemble his brother.
AIRPLANE

I was digging a splinter out of Rose’s hand with my pocketknife in our room at the Holiday Inn in Minneapolis. This was a better method than tweezers, I’ve always thought. I was good with knives. I was good with my hands. I was thirty-one and a surgeon.

We were from Duluth but had come down to see the best malpractice lawyer in the state. I was being sued because I’d had a patient die on me. She was old and prone to falling apart. She’d had hip and knee surgery. She’d had emphysema and severe arthritis. She’d shown signs of dementia. She’d been a wreck.

But then I inexplicably advised her to have a number of moles removed from her back, for fear that they would become malignant. I talked her into it. Her body couldn’t handle the stress of the minor surgery, which can happen when a person is old and fragile.

The weekend after finding out about the lawsuit, Rose held a lawn sale, where we attempted to clean out excess leather recliners, fishing rods, rifles, exercise equipment, bicycles, movies, video cameras and other things that made our sale grossly genteel. Fortunately Rose marked everything at retail, so the only thing we sold was a painting of an old Spanish cottage somewhere, presumably, in Southern Spain, done by a New Mexican artist. We kept the price tags on all the pieces we hadn’t sold and moved everything into the garage. We didn’t verbalize what we thought would happen, only that it comforted Rose knowing that everything was easily accessible.
Rose used the money from the painting to buy condoms, and started to take her leftover birth control pills. I didn’t fight her. There was no reason to make things worse. It did scare me, to think that she saw me as unfit to father a child, but it wasn’t quite that dramatic. She was, I think, just being careful.

I wrote the checks for our monthly bills in my car in a parking lot. I envied the people who sent me my bills. How simple their life must be.

By referral from another doctor, I made an appointment with the attorney and convinced Rose to come.

Rose looked sharp and stayed calm. He was pleasant and we looked happy. We held hands. I told him the story. He asked me if there were doctors who would come to my rescue and I said, Oh, certainly. And we talked about how broken down the patient was. How she was on her way out anyway.

The more I spoke, the more we harped on the details of the case, the more we made the patient out to be a degenerate, the more I realized how rightful this lawsuit was. And yet at the end of the meeting he was laughing, his tongue slithering out of his crooked teeth, wetting his lips, as if he were about to bite into something deliciously soft and juicy. He was more than fairly confident that he could get me off. Rose didn’t seem as turned off as I was, but these days it was tough to tell how she felt.

After our appointment we walked around the city. We had lunch at an Irish pub by our hotel downtown, then went uptown, saw the exhibits in the Walker, and canoed from Lake Calhoun to Brownie Lake. This was in May and it was beautiful. Minnesota is a great place to be in May. I’d convinced Rose to move here from San Diego with the same line.
We don’t do enough of this, I said, after we finished canoeing.

You’re right, Rose said.

I mean it. We’ll do a lot more of this. We should come down here more often.

Come see a show, a concert, a hockey game.

We will, she said. We’ll buy a canoe and go canoeing every weekend. We’ll buy a boat and sail it up and down the St. Croix. We’ll come down and stay in a hotel for the weekend, have dinner and cocktails and see a musical. After awhile we’ll get a cabin and use it on the weekends. We’ll have two homes. We can come down to get away. We’ll have an architect design it, have it overlook a lake. We’ll have an airplane that will get us there faster. We’ll have it just the way we want it.

I’ve always wanted to take flying lessons, I said. I could learn how to fly the plane and then we wouldn’t have to drive. We could rent the plane and fly around and look over the lakes and rivers and skyline and then we could stop if we wanted or just fly around until we felt like coming home.

Yes, we can do all of that, Rose said.

For a moment I believed it. I thought it was truly possible. And I thought Rose wanted it as much as I did. Perhaps she wanted it more. But I knew her words were filled with hope, not optimism. She wasn’t ready to return the furniture, to strip them of their sticky price tags. She wasn’t ready to abandon the contraceptives. She could only hope that if the time came, she could sit confidently next to me in the airplane.

We returned to the dock with the canoe. As we were unloading it, Rose’s hand slipped down the side and caught a slight sliver of loose wood that pierced the palm. She didn’t complain.
She picked at it on the walk back to the hotel. She had long nails but couldn’t pry it out. It was her right hand. I was walking on the right, so I switched sides and held onto her left. I told her to stop unless she wanted to push it deeper into her hand.

I dug out my pocketknife, cleaned it with the rubbing alcohol Rose had brought from home, and then set her down on the bed. It had been made up by the maids. There were mint-chocolate rods wrapped in plastic on the pillows. I held one up.

You can have this if you’re very, very brave.

Can I suck on it while you’re operating? she asked, and laughed.

You can suck on it afterwards, I said.

Rose and I had removed splinters with a pocketknife a half-dozen times before. It was really better than tweezers. Tweezers are thick and clunky. A sharp knife can penetrate without spilling any blood. You can catch the splinter and ease it out of the skin.

I pushed the tip of the blade, slowly, gently, into the palm of her hand. She flinched and I had to pull out.

That hurt, she said.

I’m sorry, I said.

We tried again. Her hand jerked.

You’re pinching me. That’s why it hurt the first time. That’s why I pulled my hand back.

I firmly grasped her wrist and slowly moved the tip of the blade back to the spot. But before I could reach it she shook my hand off.

She looked into my eyes and said, I need to take a break.
She went into the bathroom. I heard her running the faucet.

I needed to wash my hands again, just to be sure, she said, sitting back down. I tried to hold onto her wrist again, but she pulled her arm back. I can do that. I’ll just hold my own hand, Rose said.

The room was hot. I felt sweat on my forehead, underneath my armpits. As I moved the blade closer, her hand started shaking and then it tightened into a fist.

I can’t get the splinter out with you moving your hand. Let me hold onto it. I can make this quick.

I don’t want you to hold my wrist. You do it too hard. Let me set it on the bed. I can position it so it can’t be moved.

She rested her elbow on the bed and then steadied the elbow with her good hand.

That’s not going to work. All you’ve done is made sure your elbow is secure, but it’s the hand that needs work, I said.

I know what needs work. Just do it, she said.

She was brave. I moved closer and she didn’t flinch, didn’t move a muscle. She was right. But then my hand jittered. Right before I could enter her palm it tremored and this time I retreated.

What was that? Rose asked.

I shook my head.

We tried it again and again. We tried it from different angles, different positions. I tried using both my hands. But we could never get the blade into her palm.

Maybe I should do it, she said.
You don’t know how to do it, I said. You’ll cut yourself.

Well then do it, she said. Just go ahead and do it.

I wanted to do it. Right then I wanted nothing more than to dig that fucking splinter out of her skin and kiss her and take her back to Duluth and forget everything. I wanted to see the knife with the sliver of wood, free of blood, stuck to the tip. I’d wash it down the sink and clean the blade and put it back in my pocket, ready for the next emergency.

I lifted her right hand and kissed the spot and then gently held it and took the knife and pierced her skin and saw little dribbles of blood bubble and then surround the knife. I could see the dark, discolored of the wood through her palm, but my knife couldn’t find it. I was slow and careful at first, but soon I was aggressively swishing the knife around, trying to get to the splinter. I looked up at her and she was crying. But she held her hand steady, which scared me because I wouldn’t have been able to keep my hand steady if the roles were reversed. She looked away from me, past me, around me, somewhere other than me.

I pushed harder, hearing her suck in air, squeal, but her hand didn’t move. It was pale, small and fragile. It was spotted with blood that had started dripping onto the light blue comforter. It had a knife stuck in it that was much larger and dangerous than the splinter that she’d tried to pick out with her fingernails.

You must have pushed it down into your skin when you were playing with it, I said. I did it to get back at her for the splinter. For her bravery. Because I couldn’t think of anything else to say or do.
She didn’t reply. She was elsewhere. Maybe she was back in Duluth. Or maybe in the airplane circling the city. Maybe she was flying it alone, me somewhere far away. Maybe that was what was getting her by.

I pulled the knife out and went into the bathroom and searched Rose’s bag for her eyebrow tweezers. I washed them with soap and water.

She’d moved to the window. She was holding the complimentary *USA Today* in her hands.

Do you want me to try with the tweezers?

She turned and looked at me sadly. I cupped the tweezers, hiding them from her sight.

What a shame, she said, and flipped the page to finish the article she’d been reading, her right palm smeared with blood.

We should bandage that, at least, I said. Here, let me cover it with a towel or a band-aid.

She didn’t respond.

I went back into the bathroom and found a towel. I gripped it loosely.

Rose’s hand lay limp against her leg. It looked as if, with a hard tug, it could come right off. I took a step forward and then stopped. She was staring at me, searching for something she was having trouble finding. I had the tweezers in one hand, the towel in the other and I felt like a clown. I couldn’t bear getting any closer.

I’m going to get coffee, I said, dropping the towel on the night table.

It was still nice out when I left the hotel. It was quieter than before. A couple blocks down was a diner. I went in.
At the register was a stack of USA Today. I bought one and ordered a piece of cherry pie. The tweezers were still in my hand.

There were three stories on the front page. One was about the peace-talks the president was attending in Egypt. Another was about all the damage a forest fire had caused in California. The third was a story about a three-foot robot that was being designed in Japan to help the elderly in need of assistance.

I read through all four while jamming pie into my mouth. I tried to find the article that would make someone say, What a shame. I pinched my hand with the tweezers, and then twisted, ripping a smidge of skin.

There were a lot of words I’d use to describe the articles but none of them was shame. I thought about what it would be like to loose your house in a fire, or have the first thing you saw in the morning be a three-foot robot. It seemed morbid or lonely or exhilarating, but not shameful. That, I couldn’t understand.

When I was done I tore the articles into strips with the tweezers. My hand hurt but it wasn’t bleeding. I pushed the tip of the tweezers back into the spot of my hand that was missing the skin, but it started to shake, so I stopped.

I’d wanted so much to be able to fix her hand and to make this trip make sense. Maybe the airplane wasn’t such a bad idea. I was still young enough to take it up. Make it more than just a hobby. Make it my ambition in life.

Instead of taking long drives at night, I could go up in the plane and fly to wherever. Maybe I could take Rose back to San Diego to visit her family, show her she hadn’t made a mistake. I could prove that I was still capable of fixing everything. There were a thousand different things I could do with the airplane. I could fly over California
and dump water over the fires. Back and forth until they were extinguished. I could save potential victims of genocide in my plane. I could transport the elderly in my plane, get them whatever they needed – food, medical supplies, clothes, companionship. I could get them as many robots as they needed. I could remove all of our furniture, use the plane, at the very least, as a storage facility, if that was what was needed.
We ate Mexican at a restaurant called La Mesa on the night of the blizzard. It was my idea. I didn’t want to be at home, or surrounded by a hundred people in thick, wet coats scrambling for supplies at the grocery stores still open. This blizzard was supposed to be big time. Four feet overnight was the word. Denver didn’t usually get these types of storms, so the city was on edge.

Most places had shut down early. La Mesa was still open at eight when Belinda and I finally met up. It was the only restaurant I could find serving food. They hadn’t paid much attention to the warnings. She told me we were lucky it was still open. You’re right, I’d said, before arriving.

There was a bar inside that served tequila almost exclusively. There were a half dozen wooden booths and a small, ground level stage that was empty. Framed, autographed photos of Mexican celebrities were hooked to the walls. I didn’t recognize a single one. There was also a black and red serape nailed to the wall behind the stage. It was frayed at the ends.

Belinda and I were the only customers.

A waitress and a bartender were working. We sat ourselves. The waitress brought over menus.

This place looks like it has potential, Belinda said to me.

She scanned the room.
I have a friend who’s eaten here before, I said. He told me it was okay. I had to make a dozen calls before I found one that was open.

I ordered a pitcher of margaritas. Belinda wanted a Corona. The waitress brought us overly-salted tortilla chips and runny, spicy salsa. Belinda and I made a mess of the table, trails of salsa leading from the dish to our own sides.

The margaritas had reminded of a night a couple months before, when Belinda and I had drunk super sweet Pina Coladas and danced in our underwear to the Battle Hymn of the Republic.

You will never be forgotten, Belinda had said. You know that, right? Nobody will ever forget who you are. That’s quite an accomplishment.

Let’s toast to it, she’d said.

We did. We’d gulped pina colada until our heads hurt. We’d tried to have sex, but neither of us was sober enough to remember to maintain consistent motion. I fell asleep inside her.

At the time her words made me feel good. I was happy. I didn’t think of the consequences. I didn’t think about the meaning of her words. I didn’t think that a few months later we’d be having dinner at a cheap Mexican restaurant the night before my best friend Geoff was to return home and I’d probably have to settle for her remembering me and what we’d done together. That all I’d be was a memory. Being remembered means shit when that’s your whole act.

Belinda and I met two years ago at a charity dinner to raise money for an addition to the natural history museum. The addition was to educate on endangered and extinct
birds. Belinda spoke at the dinner. She was an assistant professor of ornithology. We were thirty.

Geoff, whom I’ve known since I was six, worked in the Nutrition section of the museum and secured two free passes to the dinner. The museum was not handing out free passes to all the workers, and Geoff was not supposed to be a recipient of any, but he has a certain charm that allows him to acquire things he doesn’t have a right to. He’s also missing two fingers on his left hand from a paper cutter accident when we were ten. It was my fault. People feel sorry for him, which only helps his cause. He never brings it up with me, which sometimes makes me feel incredibly guilty about my carelessness. Sometimes I wish he’d rub it in my face. But he’s above that.

When Geoff got the two passes I was trying to get over an old girlfriend, he was fighting with his, so we used the dinner as a distraction. There would be free food and drinks. We took the opportunity to get dressed up. We both wore ties and sport jackets. I hadn’t worn mine since college graduation. We looked good. We looked like we belonged to a place better than where we were – Geoff at the Nutrition wing of the museum, me at the front desk of a Hyatt Regency. The evening made us like life again. We were eager and willing to do, try anything, which, I think, is what Belinda saw in us. She’d been worn out by her pursuit of endangered birds. She wanted back what she thought she should still have. What a lot of people our age still had.

There were several speakers that night. Belinda went last. Belinda spoke about the types of endangered birds and what their possible extinction would mean to the environment. She spoke about the mating pattern of the bald eagle and the effects of light pollution on the northern spotted owl, the most endangered bird in the country.
I tried to think of the best bird story I had, the one that would make me sound like I knew something about birds, that I had an honest interest in them, which after hearing her speak, I did.

At our table Geoff was eating a piece of caramel almond cheesecake and talking to a guy about calcium deficiencies. At that point in the night he felt guilty about talking to other women, even if he was fighting with his girlfriend. But his attitude changed at some point, which was no good for me.

While waiting for the bartender to fill my glass with wine, Belinda came up to me.

We talked about birds. She told me things I hadn’t known. I told her the movie, *The Birds*, still frightens me. We started flirting because of birds.

Then suddenly Belinda was whisked off to another part of the room.

I stayed by the bar, swishing red wine in my mouth, waiting for her to return, thinking about what our conversation would’ve led to. I started thinking of my old girlfriend and decided to take my act outside.

Winter was approaching. The foothills had seen snow, which meant Denver wasn’t too far off. I’d never been able to handle winter alone. I got stir crazy. I had mood swings and grew pudgy when I wasn’t dating anybody. In Denver, most of the time, even if it’s cold, the sun is still shining. But on the days when it snowed, when it was overcast and the gutters were filled with black sludge, I didn’t feel very well. I had trouble getting out of bed, unless, of course, I had someone there beside me. But more often than not, I woke up alone. This was my fear when I stood outside, smoking and feeling the wine take effect. I worried about whom I’d end up with. I tried to convince
myself not to call my old girlfriend when I got home, but I knew I wouldn’t be able to help it. That was me.

I started shivering so I went back inside. Geoff motioned me over to our table where he was drinking gin.

You should go talk to her, he said, pointing to a young girl who was holding a tray with plates of cheesecake on it and shifting her weight from one leg to the other.

She’s a waitress, Geoff.

Waitresses like to have a good time too, Geoff said. He was slurring his words.

I bet they do. Just not with me, I said.

Belinda was speaking to a group of men. I caught her looking over. I smiled. Geoff was mashing on the ice from his empty gin glass.

He said, What you need to do is go and talk to the waitress. She’s cute. I could see you with her. She’s the type of girl that could make you happy.

I don’t think so, I said.

Belinda looked over again, watching our exchange. She was interested in me. I thought she wanted to know more about me. I wanted her to.

You go and talk to the waitress. I’m going to talk to that woman, Geoff said, pointing to Belinda.

Geoff stood up and started walking towards her.

You have a girlfriend, I said. You can’t do this, Geoff. You’re dating someone.

He shrugged his shoulders and then jabbed the air with his finger in the direction of the waitress.
I should’ve caught up to him. I should’ve told him I liked her. That Belinda could make me happy. That I could see her with me. But instead I sat there and watched him work his charm, even as hammered as he was. If she liked me, I thought, she’d certainly fall for his charm.

A year later they were still doing it. They spent time at movies, and took weekend trips to the mountains. Belinda brought her students’ papers back to Geoff’s place. Geoff bought extra shaving cream and toothpaste for hers. Belinda knew stories about Geoff as a kid. She knew about me as a kid. They threw dinner parties. They made brunch together. He helped paint her walls red. She bought a bigger bed.

And yet I could deny that they had anything of true substance together until they started arguing about having a baby. Which is also what drove him to Ireland by himself. He went on a Fulbright to study the murals in Belfast, and initially Belinda was going to join him. But then she told him that he would make a good father and he told her he didn’t think he would. He told her he thought he’d be the kind of father whose kid is always trying to impress him, but it’s never good enough. He’d be the father who’d push his kid too hard. Geoff said their kid would end up resenting him and resenting her for marrying him. They’d raise someone very fucked up because he couldn’t handle the responsibility. No, he said, it would be a mistake to have a kid.

They didn’t exactly break up. He just boarded the plane without her.

We’ll see what happens, he said.

Maybe you’ll change your mind.

Anything’s possible, Geoff said.
Once he’d said to me, You have a child when you realize what you have is not
good enough any more. When you don’t think you’ll be happy again without a change.
When you’re bored.

I’d taken him to the airport, alone. I asked him how he felt about her, how he felt
about me taking him to the airport instead of Belinda.

You’re my best friend. Why wouldn’t I want you to take me to the airport?

What about Belinda? How’s that going to work out?

I just wish she hadn’t brought it up, he said.

I shrugged my shoulders. I wanted Geoff to be happy. I wanted Belinda to be
happy. I just didn’t want them to be happy together. What I wanted was to be with
Belinda. And when Geoff boarded the plane, when he told me that it was clear to him
that they were both looking for different things, I was happy. He was going to be gone
for a year, across an ocean, away from Belinda, far, far away.

In my mind I imagined Geoff calling me from Ireland to tell me that I was better
suited for Belinda. That I should go out with her. That he’d met someone in Ireland
whom he felt more connected to. That everything was going to be okay.

When he boarded the plane, Geoff said, Make sure she’s okay. Tell her I think
she’d make a terrific mother.

I did tell her, though it was awhile before I got the chance to see her.

She’d called me one night, upset because she’d gotten a postcard from him. He
told her he was safe. Belfast was exciting. He was having a good time.

She asked me if I’d heard from him. I lied and told her no. But I had heard from
him. We’d actually spoken. He’d told me about his work. He’d told me about the city.
He’d told me that he thought it was best that he and Belinda didn’t speak for a while. They could sort out their priorities in the meantime. I told him I thought it made sense.

Two days after speaking to Belinda, I snuck into the back of the lecture hall where she was teaching and waited until she finished.

I stayed where I was when she dismissed class. She came up to me and smiled. She looked sad.

It’s good to see you, she said.

I’m sorry about things, I said.

I know you are. I am too. I wish things were different.

Belinda shaded her eyes with her hand. She shook her head.

There’s nothing I can do about it, she said.

Do you want to get dinner?

Do you think we should? she said.

I do. I think this is something we should definitely do.

She hesitated.

Okay. I’ll get my things.

I walked her to her car. We decided on a cheap Italian restaurant that served great bread. We shared a twenty-dollar bottle of Chilean white wine. I followed her home in my Honda. She left her car and got into mine. For an hour we sat in that musty car, talking about birds and snowshoeing and her students and cathedrals in France she’d visited and the documentaries I watched when I was by myself. We talked about getting frozen custard, but we couldn’t remember what time the place closed, so we gave up on that idea. Next time, she said.
Yes, I said, it’ll have to be next time.

I said something funny that made her laugh, and then told her good night. I left her thinking about how funny I was. How much fun she’d had. If nothing else in life, I knew how to make a good exit.

As I browsed the menu, I realized I wasn’t as hungry as I thought I’d been. I had a knot in my stomach. I drank a margarita quickly to see if that would loosen it up, but all it did was put pressure on my bladder.

I’ve got to go to the bathroom, I said.

If she comes back, would you like me to order for you? she asked.

I don’t know what I want you to do, I said.

I peed in a cracked, red urinal. The bathroom was clean. It smelled like disinfectant. There was some writing on the wall. Phone numbers and caricatures of penises and boobs.

I’m getting enchiladas, Belinda said when I returned.

I nodded. For some dumb reason I was annoyed at her. For deciding before me. For being happy rather than being sad, as I was.

I was hoping we could share something, but that’s fine. I’m just not that hungry.

She said, You could take what you don’t eat home with you. Then you’ll have it for tomorrow.

I don’t want to talk about tomorrow, I said, snapping my menu closed.

The waitress came over. Belinda ordered the cheese enchiladas. I ordered a chimichanga. The waitress refilled my glass with margarita.
Belinda put her hand out. I reached across the table and held it. It made me feel better.

What’s going to happen? I asked.

Do you miss him?

Of course I miss him. I’m happy that he’ll be back. I’m excited, even. But I want to know what’s going to happen between you and me. What’s it going to be like? How’s this thing going to play out?

Can’t we focus on tonight? I thought you didn’t want to talk about tomorrow?

I yanked my hand away from hers.

This is bullshit, I said. Why did this even happen? Why did we even do what we did for the past ten months? What did you get out of it?

We were lonely. We were friends who were lonely and we turned to each other.

Fuck that, I said.

I was ready to leave.

What would you like me to say? That I’m in love with two men at the same time? That I’m terribly sad about tomorrow? That it’s going to be nearly impossible to see you after tomorrow? What is it you want to hear?

I said nothing. Belinda sighed. We sat silent for minutes. I finished another margarita. The waitress came over and Belinda ordered another Corona.

After the waitress came back with the beer, Belinda took a swig and said, Do you think you can be in love with two people at the same time?

No, I said. But I wasn’t sure. I didn’t know if a person could be in love with two people at the same time. Not the kind of love Belinda was talking about. If that really
was what she was talking about. I knew she loved Geoff and I didn’t doubt that she loved me, but whether she was in love with me was another question. I’d convinced myself on an occasion that she was, either by the way she touched me when we slept together, or the way she looked at me or the way she kissed me. But I didn’t know for sure.

I had dreams of Geoff dying in a bomb explosion in Belfast. I had dreams of him being beaten to death by a militant. I had dreams of gunning him down myself. Those were only dreams, but they helped me with more reasonable possibilities.

I played the banjo. I thought that if I wrote an amazing song, the most beautiful song ever written, just for her, that she’d keep me. I orchestrated the moment while at work. I began working on it late at night. I sat down with my banjo and I tried to write that song just for her, one note at a time. But I couldn’t do it. Perhaps it wasn’t in me. But I blamed it on the plinky sound of the instrument.

I bought books on tape to learn Italian. We could forget about the cheap restaurants in town, fly out to Italy for something so romantic she couldn’t possibly go back to Geoff, who would’ve become an Irish sot. There were words in Italian that I thought could help me keep her. But Belinda felt sluggish after pasta, so I abandoned my lessons.

I thought about securing a loan from a bank and then donating it to an endangered birds refuge. I bought books on endangered birds to delight her, but that wasn’t what she wanted from me. She didn’t want both of us to be miserable because of the state of our environment.
And I thought about calling Geoff and telling him. I would convince him, after a while, that it was me who should have her. That we were better for each other. That we wanted the same things. That we were pregnant.

But we weren’t and wouldn’t be while Geoff was still alive, which made me dream more vividly of his death. Of natural causes. Of something so peaceful it would be beautiful. That he would die the most beautiful death ever conceived.

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Was what we had worth it to you? she said. If Geoff found out about it, would it still be worth it? Or would you regret these past ten months? How would you feel about it?

I shrugged my shoulders.

I can’t help the way I feel, I said. I don’t regret any time I’ve spent with you. I wouldn’t regret it.

She nodded her head.

Would you regret it?

Yes.

I need to go outside, I said, trying to act as calm as possible.

It smelled fresh outside; the snow was coming. There wasn’t any traffic. It was quiet. I lit a cigarette.

The first time Belinda and I got together was two months after Geoff had left. There’d been other chances. We’d gone out a few times prior to that. Once we’d got drunk and shared an oily cheese and mushroom calzone in my car, outside her house. She would take a bite, the oil dripping onto my ratty car seat, and laugh and move her
face towards mine. We finished the calzone and then she started talking about shit. I can’t even remember. She sat there and talked, stalling until I leaned over and kissed her. I wanted to, and I did lean over, but at the last second, I reached past her and opened the door.

I’ve got to get home, I said.

We didn’t see each other for a couple of weeks, and it seemed like that would be the inevitable fate of our relationship. I missed her but I had a good sense of security. A security that would allow me to stay faithful to Geoff. It somehow legitimized my loneliness. I felt like I could endure it if it was for a good reason. This, I supposed, was one.

I started spending more time at the Hyatt bar, drinking for free, spilling my guts. The more time I spent away from Belinda, the better I felt. I missed my friend. I knew him better than Belinda and so I could draw on memories from our past that would remind me of why I’d become friends with him in the first place. At this point, my life was manageable. But then late one night Belinda came into the hotel, where I was working the front desk, and started to cry. She’d had a conversation with Geoff that day and he’d reiterated his feelings on the baby issue.

I took her into the bar. We sat in silence. My bartending friend brought me a glass of Southern Comfort doused with ginger ale. This was what he considered his serious drink. When you were dealing with something heavy, you drank Southern Comfort and ginger ale. He had a good perception of things. Though I hadn’t spent time with him outside of work, there were moments, like this one, where I thought that if I lost
Geoff, if something happened with Belinda and I lost Geoff for it, I could start a friendship with this guy. He was a good person.

Did he break up with you?

No, not exactly, she said. I just hung up on him. Then I broke the phone, smashing the receiver on my kitchen table until it broke. Now I’m without phone.

I ordered a screwdriver for Belinda. It was a drink she liked when she was feeling rotten.

And now my kitchen counter has gashes everywhere. Deep gashes. I really messed it up. There are chips and splinters of wood along with the gashes, she said.

I’m sure that can be fixed somehow, I said. It’s a counter that can be fixed. I can take a look at it sometime if you’d like. I was good at shop.

Then after I noticed I’d really damaged my counter, I took a serrated knife and carved words into the counter. I’d never done that before. Ever. I mean, carved anything into a table. Not even during school. It felt good.

What did you write? I asked.

Just words. Words I thought you’d deface things with. Fuck. Bitch. Shit. Asshole. Dick. Pussy. I tried to write C-U-N-T, but I hate that word so much I couldn’t get myself to do it. But for the most part I did pretty well. All things considered.

How does it look? I said.

It could be better. I don’t have much woodcarving technique. Maybe you could show me a few pointers.

She put her hand on top of mine. I didn’t remove it.

My shift runs another hour, but I could call you tomorrow.
My phone doesn’t work, remember? Why don’t you just stop over after you get finished.

She got up and left.

I drove over to Belinda’s, thinking only about my bartending friend. What a great person he was. How accessible and understanding. I kept my mind off Geoff. I was drunk. I was happy to be so.

Belinda let me in. She had Lou Reed playing in the background. She’d been crying. I checked out the counter. It was all fucked up. Along with the words, she’d carved stick figures of no one in particular and geometric shapes. I figured these were the two easiest things to draw with a knife.

We sat down on her couch with glasses of red wine.

I started touching her hair, and then I kissed her earlobe. Her breathing sputtered. I moved my lips to hers. We kissed. And then I moved my hand to her breast.

We banged our way to the bedroom. I tried to get out of my clothes as soon as possible, before she or I changed our minds. She stripped. We hid under the sheets.

I put myself in her. I started moving. She moaned and then stopped me.

We can’t, she whispered, and peeled herself off.

We can, I said, and I hugged her and pushed myself back in. I moved again and she moaned and then she repeated, We can’t, and I eased myself off her.

We continued like this until we were both ready to come.

We can’t, she said, but we did. She made no attempt to move away from me.

That was the last time either of us ever said we couldn’t.
Our food had arrived when I got back to the table.

Belinda had waited for me.

I’m sorry, she said.

She was telling the truth, but I’m not sure why she said it. Was it because she didn’t mean what she’d said, or because she was sorry that she’d hurt me?

Why are you sorry? I asked.

Let’s not get into it, she said.

I want to know, I said.

Why do you have to know? Why can’t it just be enough that I’m sorry?

Because that’s not how it works. You can’t just say things that don’t mean anything, I said.

She looked at me, and then took a bite of her enchilada.

I hated her. I hated her and I hated Geoff.

As I watched her cut the enchilada into small cubes, dipping each in its share of mole sauce, I wanted to slap the fork away from her face and shove her plate onto the floor. I wanted to kick over the table and tell her to fuck off, to have a great life with a guy who would never have a child with her. That he’d leave her for someone younger in a few years. That she’d never be as happy with him as she was with me. That she was ignorant and naïve and insecure.

I wanted to shake her and ask her why she was acting this way. Why she was treating me this way. I wanted to tell her that I would never run away from her. That we were more than just in love. I wanted to ask her what she and Geoff had, if she truly thought that that was worth more than the price of an international airline ticket, which is
what Geoff chose to pay for rather than staying home with her. I wanted to tell her that I
loved her more than Geoff ever could. But I was afraid of what I’d hear.

Are you not going to eat your food? she asked.

She stabbed a piece of the enchilada, dribbling with cheese and sauce, and
brought it to her mouth. Then she shrugged her shoulders.

I stared at her.

Fine, she said, dropping the fork on the plate, making a harsh, cold sound that
stuck in my ears.

I’m sorry that I hurt your feelings. I’m sorry I’ve ruined tonight. I’m sorry about
tomorrow. I’m sorry that it’s cold out and you get down when it’s cold.

I nodded my head.

I’m sorry for telling you I loved you when I didn’t. And not saying anything
when I did.

Good God, Belinda, I said, but couldn’t finish what I wanted to tell her.

I started to cry. I could feel tears slowly drip down my face. She made no
attempt at trying to soothe me. I didn’t wipe them away. I let her watch. And perhaps
this was what it had come to – her watching me lose it. And I loved her too much to
make her look away.

Finally she went back to her enchilada. I ate my chimichanga.

I had trouble swallowing my food. My head hurt.

You could hear our forks scrapping the porcelain plates and the alcohol being
gulped down our throats. There was clatter in the kitchen that you could just make out if
you were silent. I wanted to apologize for acting the way I had, for arguing with her, for
spoiling our night together. I wanted to beg for us to go home and do what we’d gotten used to doing for ten months. I wanted to love her one last time and I wanted to tell her how much I wanted to do this. But when I tried to open my mouth, nothing came out. Somehow, the silence seemed fitting. I didn’t want to disturb it. I felt at ease. So we sat there like the former lovers we seemed destined to be, trying to explain something there are no words for. Trying to make sense of an affair that had gone wrong along the way.

We ate our food. Mine was tasteless and heavy. I couldn’t stomach much of it, but I kept putting bits of the food in my mouth instead of setting my fork down. I did it to keep busy.

I thought it would go on the rest of the night until the bill came, and that would be the end of everything. But then a man and a girl walked in, the man carrying a briefcase, and slid into a booth four tables away from us. The hand not carrying the briefcase was slightly deformed, which made me think of Geoff, though the man had all his fingers. Belinda was facing their table. My back was to them.

I turned my head and spied on them. They sat on the same side of the booth, but were not talking. The waitress came over and handed them menus. The man spoke too quietly for me to understand. The girl stayed silent.

She was probably between six and ten, I’m not exactly sure because I have difficulty with children’s ages. But that’s a pretty good guess. The man was in his early forties.

Belinda forked more enchilada into her mouth and watched the man and girl. At that moment I hoped her food was perfect. I hoped that she would come back here with Geoff, raving about the food, but secretly thinking of our time here. Thinking about this
night. Thinking of me. That was what I hoped, when it came right down to it. I hoped that when she was with Geoff, she would think of me, that she would compare him to me and wish it were me that she was with. Even if she never said it to anyone but herself, I hoped that, having to do it over again, she would choose me.

She said, That guy over there is the girl’s uncle. But he’s not supposed to be with her. He’s kidnapped her from his brother and now they’re on the run. Snatched her right after school.

Seriously? I said.

But you know what? He’s the better parent. She should be with him, which is what he’s thinking, but it’s illegal nonetheless. So they’re running away from a bad situation to make things better, but he knows, he knows, things won’t be like they should. Eventually they’ll catch up to him. Eventually he’ll have to give her back, put her back in a situation she shouldn’t be in because she doesn’t belong to him.

And she doesn’t know it yet because she’s so young and naïve, but the situation with him is better than it was at home. Right now she can’t see it, but she’d be better off with her uncle.

But he’s not the father, I said.

He’s not the father. He’ll always be a significant part of her life, but he can’t ever have her, because as bad as the situation at home is, he still loves his brother.

Why did he take her?

He thought he could provide her with a better life. He thought he could do better. But deep down he just wanted to know how it felt to be a father. To be someone’s protector. He wanted to feel something that he hasn’t felt before.
Belinda took a sip of beer.

But he can’t, she said. Not fully. Not while his brother is around. He’ll never completely experience fatherhood while he knows she has her real father. It just isn’t possible.

Yes it is, I said. Belinda nearly spit up her beer.

She swallowed and then ran her hand through her hair, catching a knot that she slowly worked out. Then she kept going over the same, smooth spot, one hand and then the other, as if she’d finally figured out a problem and wanted to relish in her success.

I’d have kids with you. I’d raise a family with you, I said.

Thank you, she said.

I closed my eyes and tried to think of something amazing to say to her. I wanted everything from here on out to count. I just wanted things to be good.

But I couldn’t, so instead I said, But maybe they really think they’re going to get away. Because they aren’t just fleeing from her father, but this man – his name’s Lenny – is also running from something that he’s done that he’s not so proud of. They’re trying to outrun everybody and they just might make it. Because he’s determined. More determined than he’s ever been in his life. He’s stolen something besides the girl.

A lot of money.

No, something more valuable than that. Something endangered. Something worth saving.

Something that’s worth eluding the police for.

Right. So they’re together and I think soon she’ll realize that she’s supposed to be with Lenny. Her life will be better with him, I said.
But he didn’t really steal it.

Really?

No, because it was his to begin with, Belinda said. And you can’t steal something that was originally yours.

Are you sure? I said.

Yes, she said.

And they’re trying to get to San Francisco because they know somebody there that will help them out, someone who will hide them for a while. They can disappear if they get there.

No, I said, they’re trying to get to Sacramento. They’re going to Sacramento because no one would expect them in Sacramento because it’s a shit city. But it’s got more crime and more places to hide out in.

I think you’re right. I think Sacramento is their destination. And they’re coming from St. Louis, trying to get there in a day. They’re just stopping over in Denver for a meal, but they’re trying to make it before the blizzard hits. They can’t afford to waste any time.

Not even a night, I said.

But they’re concerned about the blizzard. They’re trying to make it before it hits because if not, they think everything’ll be lost.

They’ve got to get through the blizzard. And if they do, they have a good chance of being safe.

Probably.
They’ll be happy. He’ll provide for her. Take care of her. He’ll love her like her father couldn’t.

He’ll be there, Belinda said.

The waitress brought them their drinks. He drank some kind of soda. She drank a Shirley Temple.

And she’d grow up in a good neighborhood and go to a good school. She’d study endangered species, I said.

Belinda laughed.

That’s sounds about right, she said.

The waitress came and asked us if we wanted anything else. We shook our heads. The waiter cleared our plates.

When they get there Lenny would go looking for a job. At first he’ll have trouble. He’ll get down on himself, maybe even consider returning home. He has a little girl to take care of and he doesn’t have time to mess around. But then when he’s about to give up, he thinks of this great idea and acts on it and it’s amazing. He’s amazing. And so he’s doing his thing, taking care of her and she’s studying endangered species in California and –

I wish I had talked to you, I said.

What? she said.

That night at the charity dinner. I wish I had talked to you.

You did talk to me.
I mean really talked to you. I wish I had told you how I felt. I wish I had told you what I thought of you the first time I saw you. I wish I had asked you out. I wish I had done a lot of things.

I wish you had, too.

I wish things were different.

The bill came. We paid it.

Before we left we went over to the table. Lenny and the girl had just gotten their food.

I said, Good luck in Sacramento. Hope you get through the snowstorm.

He turned and looked at me. He held drink in his mouth. He looked like he wanted to talk and swallow at the same time. We left before he could either.

We decided to go back to my place. I could live with the fragrance of her and me after tonight. I could live with remembering us in my apartment. I wanted it that way.

She rested her head on my shoulder as I drove. It wasn’t too late, but there was no traffic. Everybody was anticipating the storm. I drove fast, with the window cracked and the heater on. Belinda’s breath was hot on my neck. She was asleep.

I nudged her awake when we got to my place. We played Lou Reed. We played Bob Dylan. We played Herbie Hancock. We drank coffee to stay awake. And then we made love.

Belinda asked me what position I wanted her to be in, but this night I didn’t want anything unusual. I wanted to do it the way we’d been doing it the whole time. I wanted to think of this night as special, only because we were together, not because it was different from every other night we’d spent together.
It probably wasn’t the best sex I’d ever had. We were both drunk and sad and vacant. But I’ll remember this time, every move and moan and gasp, more than I’ll remember my first. And right before I finished, I told her, We can’t, and she laughed and pulled me closer.

Belinda fell asleep right after. She curled up into a ball. I lay awake, waiting for the blizzard to come.

I’ve never been one for snow. It’s depressing. But I wanted it tonight. I thought of Geoff. I did miss my best friend. I wanted to see him. But he could wait. I wanted it to snow like it was supposed to. Three, four feet. The airports couldn’t possibly stay open with that much snow.

Or maybe I could wake up Belinda and we could get in my car and drive. We could forget everything in Denver and drive through the night, try to miss the storm and head west. We could go to San Francisco or Sacramento and meet up with Lenny and his girl.

That would be okay too.
SALTWATER

For a week when I was six or seven, I pissed blood. I was normal otherwise.

It was thick, fiery blood. It felt like somebody had jammed nail files up my urethra. I felt like I was being punished. Then it went away. Sometime during the night I stumbled into the bathroom, lifted up the seat, and pissed the most foul smelling thing I’d ever emitted. But it was deep yellow or pale orange. Not red. That was the last of it.

We’d been at the ocean and I was stung by a fish. I don’t know what kind. Something dangerous. The blood was the result of it.

I told this to My Best Student.

That’s not possible, she said. There isn’t a fish that would do that. You must have had a bladder infection. Fish can’t do that to you.

She had just told me everything there is to know about dangerous fish. There is a lot to know and I retained most of what she had to say. Some of it is not interesting, but when she spoke, I paid attention and pretended to care intensely, as you do with anybody you have a particularly carnal interest in before that interest is relieved. Other information, however, was quite captivating. She told me the Atlantic torpedo ray can discharge 220 volts of electricity. There are no reports of humans having been seriously injured by one.

Still, I had said, you have to think somewhere down the line that will change.

Well, I guess, she said.
So after she told me that my fish story was impossible, I began to think that maybe what I had said wasn’t correct. Maybe it wasn’t even from the ocean. Maybe I’d been accidentally booted in the groin or my bladder had, in fact, been infected in some capacity.

I must have been thinking deeply and disturbingly about it, because she offered to take me to bed right then. We hadn’t done it to date, but the evening was headed in that direction. She’d come over and I had some moderately priced wine that we both drank. A few weeks later she would tell me about the year she spent in France during high school, in the region where they make Merlot.

It was our first tryst, I suppose you could say, though we’d had meetings in my office when no one was looking. Nothing physical, only discussions of the unprofessional kind. There were moments when we discussed her composition, because it was atrocious, but that usually wasn’t why she came by, shutting the door behind her.

Though conventionally, she was not the best writing student, she was my best student in other less-than academic ways.

So after my story, she said, I want to go to bed with you because you have an interesting mind.

That line was, before the pronoun substitutions, from a Grace Paley story. I’d recommended a book of hers when My Best Student asked for some reading material.

You’ve read the story, I said.

I’ve read some other ones, too, she said.

What did you think?
But she didn’t answer. We went to my bedroom. The sex was fine, but I’d had better. I could get over the fact that she was my student and I, her teacher. It was never a fetish. But she was eighteen and I was twenty-eight and so I’d had roughly ten more years of knowing what’s good and what’s not. What you can endure for the benefit of your partner and what you need to do to benefit your own cause. What you want and what you can’t stand.

My Best Student’s given name was Carli, which is what her friends called her, but I chose not to use it out of class for anonymity purposes. It was best, when alluding to her within the company of friends that knew of her, to be as elusive as possible. Just to be safe.

My Best Student used vague pronouns, spliced her commas, fragmented her sentences, split her infinitives, compounded nothing, only knew that the colon was an organ and it filtered waste, was guilty of faulty parallel structure, dangled her modifiers and, regrettably, contracted her possessive pronouns.

But she must have recognized that this was a major fault of hers, and that I could fix it, promptly. I have taught freshman comp. for three years and I am certain that my students know that I know what I’m talking about.

I think for the most part my students enjoy me, if not the class, but My Best Student adored me, which, in turn, turned me on to her. She was attractive, but just the adoration she expressed was enough to get me worked up. It was enough to hold closed-door meetings.
At a seafood joint in the Florida panhandle, I told My Best Student that I really enjoyed eating snapper. In fact, it might be my favorite fish, I said. I could eat it frequently, if someone prepared it for me.

Yeah, snapper is good, but it’s not always a good idea to eat it, she said.

Then My Best Student explained to me that not all snappers are worth eating. The dog snapper, for instance, has been known to cause Ciguatera poisoning, which comes from fish that feed on, among other things, bacteria found on reefs. It is passed on when one eats the infected fish. Symptoms are similar to those caused by spoiled fish, but also include intense itching, joint and muscle pain, tingling of the lips, burning or pain when cold liquids are touched or drank. At times a victim can have the sensation of drinking something carbonated or feeling an electrical charge while drinking water. It also affects breast milk, giving the woman a fuzzy sensation.

I like tuna a whole bunch, she said. It’s real good.

I wanted to vomit. I could’ve corrected her. I wanted to correct her. I should’ve said something, because that was why I was there with her.

I enjoy tuna as well, I said. It is very good.

We both ordered the tuna.

What do you know about tuna? I asked.

Some things, but they’re not that interesting. Mostly I know they’re tasty. That’s enough for me.

My Best Student was a blonde with green eyes and perfectly straight teeth. She was very tan from spending time on the beaches in southern California. Her father owned a car dealership and her mother trained greyhounds to race. Logically she knew a
lot about cars and dogs, but her knowledge of dangerous fish came from somewhere else. Curiosity, I suppose, but I never learned why. We didn’t get into it.

The greater soapfish is much more interesting, she said. It has toxic snot. It’s related to the sea bass.

Or the Atlantic wolffish, which looks like a fish from Super Mario Brothers.

Is that right?

Oh, yeah. Just like one of those killer fish.

In the mornings when My Best Student had stayed over, we went running. She’d been a marathon runner in high school. She showed me how to stretch properly. We ran early so I could avoid people I knew.

She talked up a storm when we were running. I just tried to keep up.

She taught me about voodoo, while we sprinted around spiders that had attached themselves to trees. She spoke about Frank Lloyd Wright’s architecture and making bets during games of pool she played in bars that should never have let her in, while we ran alongside swampy regions that were rumored to hide gators.

I’d recently rejected kisses from My Best Student because I’d developed a canker sore above one of my canines. She explained the origins of canker sores and that the best way to relieve the pain is by gargling with saltwater.

I knew that one, I mumbled, which made me stop and keel over in exhaustion.

Did you? she asked.

I did it as a child, I said.

I guess that’s probably likely, she said.

And then she explained why it was the best method.
She said, The fluid in our tissue is salty. Canker sores strip the tissue of its fluids, so when you mix just the right amount of salt into the water, it is very soothing. You have to try to match the solution with what the fluid in your tissue resembles. Like, it replenishes the fluids, at least for a time. Regular water just pulls salt out of our tissue, so that’s why it’s real uncomfortable.

I just know it’s a form of Herpes, I said when we returned to my apartment.

Everybody knows that, she said.

On one of our runs, when it was particularly warm out, I tripped over a hidden log and crashed to the ground, bruising my knee and skinning my shin. My Best Student had to help me up. I limped home. After applying hydrogen peroxide to the wounds, she kissed my leg.

She said, I guess you’re just getting old.

Good God. There had to have been something else you could’ve said. Anything but that, I told her.

What should I have said?

Anything but that.

Should I have explained how hydrogen peroxide works? she asked.

I shrugged my shoulders, then went into the bathroom and took a shower. She left before I got out. I was happy about that. I didn’t want to see her, because I wasn’t sure what I would’ve said. I didn’t have a good response to her question, which was pathetic.
I considered giving her a lower grade than she deserved on the next assignment, or embarrassing her in class. I would write everything she said on the chalkboard and then have my students correct her errors on sheets of paper that I would provide.

But of course I wouldn’t do that. Notwithstanding the obvious professional consequences of angering her, I couldn’t stomach humiliating My Best Student. She deserved better. And I knew that if I pulled something like that, she would deserve someone better. So I bandaged my leg, graded annotated bibliographies, and read from a forgettable book.

We crossed paths in a tavern the next night. There wasn’t much said, only looks of mutual apology shot across the bar. I’d filled up on liquor and so was only hungry for her. I wanted to take her home. Carry her on my back. I would think of things to tell her that would blow her away. I would pull out old essays and show her what a real academic paper should look like.

Then a young, fertile boy of twenty-one or twenty-two wandered up to the table with two pints of beer, handing My Best Student one. He offered her a cigarette, which she also accepted. I’d never seen her smoke, and now she was puffing away like an addict of many years.

She paid no more attention to me that night, which made me wonder exactly what she meant when she shot me those looks of apology.

If she’d been anyone other than a student, I would’ve approached her, asked her what she thought she was doing. I would’ve gotten into it with her, as is my nature when I drink. But she was my student and I was with fellow teachers and so I controlled myself, leaving the bar without disturbance.
I glanced at her bibliography when I came to it. It was thorough. She more than met the assignment’s guidelines. But I didn’t want to continue reading it, for fear that the annotations were, miraculously, good. It would have been unexpected, to be sure, but I thought, at least this night, it was possible. This night I imagined she could do anything.

She was not in class the following Monday. For the best, I thought.

I yelled at my class about passive voice. I yelled at them about plagiarism. I yelled at them about over-using exclamation points. I yelled at them about the Cubs and their miserable luck. I did not return their god-awful annotated bibliographies out of pure spite.

Afterwards I went to my office, cursing myself for having to carry around their stack of papers for another day. My Best Student was waiting for me.

I scooted around her and unlocked the door. She followed me inside.

You can leave the door open, I said.

No, she said, I think you’ll want to hear this with the door closed.

I kicked it shut.

I’m pregnant, she said.

Is this a joke?

She shook her head.

This has got to be the worse day of my fucking life, I said.

That’s an awful thing to say. My Best Student shielded her eyes with her hand.

Is it mine?

Well, probably.
Probably? Who else have you been fucking? That fucking dolt in the bar? That’s the last person who should be having children. Please tell me it’s not his.

Do you want it to be yours? she asked.

I don’t want it to be anybody’s. But especially not that mutt. That halfwit. In particular I don’t want it to be his.

Why don’t you want it to be his?

He looks like a ventriloquist dummy. He’s the type of person you pack in a suitcase and bring out when you’re in dire need of a laugh. I bet he’s been stored in trunks before.

She laughed.

What’s so funny? I don’t find any of this funny. I don’t think you know the severity of the situation. Do you? I mean, you’re fucking pregnant and it could be mine.

She laughed harder.

Well, this can’t go any further. I mean it, I said, putting my hands on my hip, trying to look imposing.

I’m serious. You’ll need to take care of it. Of course I’ll go with you, but this is not something you want.

No. Stop, stop, she said between fierce cackles.

Enough, enough, she said, regaining her breath.

But I hadn’t had enough. I wanted to continue with my rampage. I wanted to fuck her up. I wanted to get inside her insidious brain and rip out the region that gave her the ability to talk. I wanted to take a scalpel and do it myself.
That was a gag, she said. I’m not really pregnant. I just went in for a pap smear and got the idea. Man, you really bought that. I didn’t think I could do it. That went good.

There was so much I wanted to say. I thought of grabbing for my letter opener, holding it up to her, threatening her, just to see how she liked it. I could’ve cursed at her, driven her out of my office with a barrage of ferociously filthy words that put to shame anything she’d ever said out loud. Or I could’ve used words that she’d never even heard of. I could easily have used the English language to make her cry. But I didn’t.

Instead I said, That went good?

Real good, she said, getting in a few more heavy giggles.


That had, remarkably, cut deep. So deep she stumbled back, nearly hitting her head on the door. I took a step forward, to steady her, to hold her up, to protect her. But I stopped. I let her crash against the door, and watched her squirm to keep from hitting the floor. I watched her try to fight back from crying. I stood there, watching her fall apart.

She opened the door and left. And then she left my class permanently.

My friends and I talk about our classes. We talk about our students and what their writing is like. We poke fun at the awful writers. We recognize the good ones. We talk composition. We talk about teaching. We talk about language because that’s what we know best.
Months later, during spring break, a group of us traveled down to Naples to see a spring training baseball game. Before the game we relaxed on a beach that was smoother than the ones up north. We did not wear swimming suits well. We were pasty white, some with bellies that hid lint, others with stomachs that seemed like they could store almost nothing. We were tragic, like a group of terminally ill patients set free for a day.

It was hot. I ran as far as I could into the ocean and then flopped down. I thought of all the dangerous fish I might encounter. The blue tang, California scorpionfish, wolf-eel, the bluefish, greater amberjack, scalloped hammerhead shark and, perhaps even the misunderstood barracuda. Of course it wasn’t reasonable. I knew that most of those fish didn’t inhabit the waters I was swimming in. At least as shallow as I was. But still, I thought about what they would look like swimming next to me, under me, around me.

I put my head under, accidentally swallowing a mouthful of water.

The water tasted stronger, but similar, to the saltwater solution Carli had made for me when I had my canker sore. She mixed it to perfection. Then when I was done gargling, she took a sip, swished it around in her mouth, spit it out and kissed me before I had time to react. She kissed me longingly, with her tongue, swerving it in my mouth, slithering it over the canker sore, as if she were trying to smooth out something that wouldn’t budge. As if she were trying to get rid of it. Her tongue was squirmy, slippery, slick, but it didn’t hurt.
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Lawrence Wood was born in Atlanta, Georgia, and grew up in Denver, Colorado. He graduated from the University of Wisconsin in Madison in 2002 with a BA in English. He earned his MFA from the University of Florida in 2005. Prior to coming to Florida, Lawrence worked as a sixth grade special ed teacher in Denver, and lived in Minneapolis, where he did very little.
The Room in the Tower and Other Ghost Stories by Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, Rudyard Kipling and E.F. Benson Summary: Three stories, three ghosts: a picture in a tower depicts a dangerous woman; a young woman marries an older man and arrives at his house, only to find that his dead wife is still there; and a dead man walks through a house every night, because sometimes the dead do come back. The Story of the Treasure Seekers by E. Nesbit, Robin A.H. Waterfield Summary: When their mother dies and their father’s business partner runs off with most of their money, the six intrepid Bastable children...