

# seven★sided dice

***The Collection of Junk***

***Volume 3***

***by Jeremy Bursey***

Featuring:

Short Stories

Flash Fiction

Poetry

Nonfiction Essays

And  
Other Bonuses

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## **Acknowledgements**

Once again it's time to thank the people who helped me through the seasons while I labored over the development of this book. Some folks are new to the list, while others are returning champions. If you're not on this list, but would like to be on one in the future, then spend a little time hanging out with me and you might just get your turn. It's like writing a letter to be on a game show: not that difficult to do and you might just walk away a millionaire (though probably not). Anyway, here we go with the acknowledgments:

### **—To God—**

Well, we made it through Round 3. Pretty amazing how you can take a burned-out procrastinator like me to put not one, not two, but three of these collections together. Thanks for the strength to get me through the day in my ever-growing quest to uncover my identity. It's been a rough ride, I know, but I'm glad you're faithful. I would've given up this journey long ago if not for your strength and peace. Thank you.

### **—To Mom—**

Thanks for giving me a roof over my head, for what must be the third time. Maybe if I spend less time working on these books and more time getting my foot into the career door, I wouldn't have to keep coming back here, right? Anyway, thanks for being patient. And since I'm writing this while I'm sick, thanks for making me that chicken soup yesterday. Best soup I had in months.

### **—To Kara—**

I'm proud of you for helping your school get second place in all those band competitions. One piece of advice from your older brother: even though I get on your case about being on the phone too much, don't start getting so used to the busyness of life that you take the other extreme and neglect your friends entirely. Find a balance as you get older. It's better for everyone. I think you'll do fine.

### **—To the Family—**

Thanks for reading my books. Thanks for all the advice, too. And thanks for all the pumpkin pies and the holiday dinners. And the emails. And the funny jokes. And the extra space to store my boxes. And the phone

calls. And the Christmas cards. And the annual new pair of jeans. And the prayers. Am I leaving anything out?

**—To John—**

Dude, congratulations on finishing yet another hospital degree. I guess this means that after a Bachelor's Degree, two specialty degrees and a nuclear medicine license, you can finally get a job. That's inspiring for the simple fact that you've proven to me that just because we grew up in this neighborhood, it doesn't mean we have to spend our lives fighting the dead-end market. Of course, now you gotta prove yourself by actually finding a job. Good luck with that. Oh, and thanks for lending me a hand with the cover.

**—To Mika, Devoney and Kenneth—**

Thanks for giving me a place of refuge on those crazy nights when I can't stand to lock myself up in my room any longer, staring at this blinking monitor. Thursday nights at your place for *My Name is Earl* and *The Office* has been a staple of my relaxation for more than a year now. If only I could get past the exhaustion of the day prior to getting in my car to go up there, then it might be a perfect night. Thanks for being like family, too.

**—To Dani and Carmen—**

Sorry I haven't hung out with you much since you got back from Missouri, but I'm sure there are ways to fix that. Anyway, just wanted to say congratulations on the upcoming child—I know you've been waiting a long, long time for that, so blessings come when they're ready, and I guess you're ready. Don't let Devoney scare you too much about parenthood.

**—To Jeremy and Maria—**

This is just my official well wishing for your time in New York. I hope you get from of the experience everything you want to get. I think you did a great job editing *Sons and Daughters*, which I still have to order when money's not so tight. I'm sure your big limited edition send-off book will be a great read, too, so I look forward to the chance to read that (hint hint). With that, keep me posted on progress.

**—To Chris and Amanda—**

Thanks for all the spiritual counsel and movie updates you've provided throughout the years. You're still like a big brother to me, even if we are in our thirties. I hope I get to come up to Washington someday to hang out, preferably during summer. You gotta show me those kayaks.

—To Chalis—

I appreciate having someone to write to every couple weeks, and I hope I haven't strained your eyes too much with all the lengthy monologues I've sent over the last few years. Really, I don't know when to shut up sometimes, so if I'm writing too much, feel free to smack me (or whatever the long-distance equivalent might be). On a serious note, though, your words always find a way to inspire me, so I value everything you say. And I look forward to seeing you again soon, though if you decide to stay in Sydney for a third year, you know I'll support your decision. Just send me another CD sometime (with new songs) to make up for the waiting time, if you don't mind.

—To Al, Avee, Melissa, Colleen, Stephanie, Chris and Dave—

Until I joined the Wednesday night group, I didn't have much going on for the night, except for the possibility of working. Fortunately, you guys have made that trade-off worth it. Though others have come and gone throughout the year, you're the core that I'm glad stuck around the longest, and I'm glad to know you. I've actually learned a lot by hanging with you guys. Had some good laughs, too. And my wardrobe is a little less outdated. And now I know what it's like to eat at a Hibachi grill restaurant. And now I know how crazy you can get during karaoke events. And I'm glad to know I'm not the only one who still laughs during SNL. And that's not to exclude the cats of the group (Bob (Tripod), Natty, and Olive), who also made study time interesting, if not distracting. You guys are just a cool group. Thanks, also, for all those Boo Koo energy drinks.

—To Heath—

Congratulations on completing the filming of *9:04 a.m.* I know it was a rough ride getting all the pieces together, but you got through it, so you proved your devotion to your film. And thanks for giving me the chance to help you with your rewrites, too. Also, thanks for putting *Nomadic Souls* in a scene. I guess it's fitting that you'd use a book in your film that acknowledges said film, thus returning the favor back to me. Anyway, let me know when the movie is ready for viewing.

—To Adriana—

Thanks for hanging out with me for those couple of months last year. It was nice to know that not everyone was too busy to be a friend. Sorry that I was never into the whole bar and nightclub scene, though. It made for an interesting atmosphere, but not one I like being a part of. Just not

the way I'm wired, I guess. Anyway, I appreciate hanging out in those days—the time spent not being bored unlocked enough drive and creativity in me to start and finish a novel in record time. Thank you for allowing that. I hope you're doing well.

**—To Monica—**

I know that when you wrote me that first message a few months ago, you had one sole purpose in mind: to make it into the acknowledgments pages of this book. Well, congratulations: mission accomplished. Anyway, laughter aside, I think you're gonna do well with this publishing goal of yours. You have a good sense about how to design an essay and the words you use are impacting enough to make your points clear. Any magazine that ignores your articles will obviously have a lot of fear to overcome, because I think you have sale-worthy stuff, and those magazines would be pansies not to give you a chance. Anyway, having said that, thanks for letting me help you with the critiques and such. And thanks for the return advice on those things that I have no understanding about, like women, for example. And tell all those childhood friends of mine you seem to be connected with that I said “hi.”

**—To Murray—**

A good team needs an easy-going leader, and you kept our work staff in good spirits, even when the facility was trying to break us. Thanks for believing in me in all my accomplishments, and for all the good references you've given me since. Also, thank you for letting me write my stories while on the job. Some nights, that was all I had going for the shift. Now I'm going on record once and for all to say that I don't write in pseudonyms (sometimes in alternative characters, but never in pseudonyms), so a book that appears to be mine won't actually be mine unless my real name is on the jacket. The experience made for a great story, though, one that I couldn't write without your help, so thanks for pointing it out to me.

**—To Irish and Greg—**

Irish, your wisdom throughout the last two years has really affected the course of my writing. Your encouragement has brought me to reevaluate my knowledge of the basics, to really open up on my crazy ideas, and to actually believe that I can turn this stuff into actual literature. I probably wouldn't have started *Panhandler Underground* as early as I did if I didn't have someone who understands my humor to talk about it with. Also, thanks for reading the whole novel to Greg over the phone. Reading



130,000 words out loud must be tough, but thanks for doing it, anyway. And for Greg, who I've never met, thanks for those interesting stories I hear about all the time that inspire me to keep working toward publication. And thanks for your input on the novel, too. I think the knowledge you both gave directly and indirectly have upped me yet another level in this writing game. So thanks for that.

**—To Carl, Crystal, Jenn P., Ani, Chase, Julie, Lani and Antonio—**

You guys have made coming into work worthwhile sometimes, because Lord knows no one goes into that job expecting to make a living. Thanks for listening to my endless tangents about the stories you're probably sick of hearing about, and smiling all the while. Thanks also to those of you who took the time to read my stuff and to give back valuable comments. And thanks to those of you who just give me an excuse to laugh in those moments when I've had enough and am ready to bolt for my car. You've been the staples of this two-year experience (which was only supposed to be for two months), so thanks for giving me a comfortable chair to ride on.

**—To Dr. Gumberlich—**

Thanks for cracking my back each week.

**—To Everyone Else—**

Once again there are many people I could probably acknowledge in some form or another, but I can only allow for so much room, so alas, I have to limit the remaining specifics to a big lump sum. But it doesn't mean I don't appreciate your place in my life. So if you're still in my life, thank you for taking the time to know me. I hope you all are doing well. If you're not in my life, then there are ways to fix that.

—Jeremy

## Volume 3 Introduction

Load the confetti in the ceiling, for this book, a book that has been five years in the making, has now reached its end (which you'll discover more fully when you actually get to the end). I present to you the third part of an ongoing saga where junk gathers together to form what might be the most outstanding collection of literature the world has ever seen. I bring to you, with much hype, with much trumpet blowing, the wonder, the mystery, the financial gamble that is *Seven-Sided Dice: The Collection of Junk Volume 3*. Someone give the band director a hand.

Since the 1990s, I've written my ideas through various styles of fiction and journals. When a thought needed to be spoken, it spoke through the puzzles of the alphabet. Although short stories have been my primary form of escape throughout the last fifteen years, I have spent plenty of time with flash fiction pieces, poetry, and even fake essays to make a point clear. Where verbal speech had often failed me, the written word had often saved my case. And now, in the year 2006, I can present to you the book that brings it all to a head. With two volumes preceding it, the collection of junk, as current as I have it, is now complete. My heart, my statements, my ideas, my ego, and all those funny little characters that resemble each facet of my being, are now presented to you in a full set, with little else straggling behind.

When I finished the paperback version of *Life Under Construction* last year, I mentioned in its introduction that it was the second half of a set. The two halves of that set co-existed with each other since the summer of 2000, but neither saw the light of the paperback day until *Nomadic Souls*, as it was later named for publication, was printed in 2004. From that day on, it became my mission to bring both halves together in book form to complete that old set in a new revision. In 2005, that completion came. But was it truly complete?

Because I filled the majority of both volumes by mid-2000, I logically had to save any new work I'd written since for a third volume. Though I managed to cram in a few flash fiction pieces into the second book a couple years after it was officially completed, most everything else had to wait its turn—as little as there was to wait.

The fact was there wasn't much to put into a new book. Even as I returned to those old volumes to edit them for publication (or whatever one would like to call this print-on-demand thing, as calling it a publication feels a bit like cheating), there just wasn't a whole lot waiting to be included anywhere. The ideas had stirred in my head for years, but

very few of them made it to paper. So when I wrote my introduction for the last book, I knew there was another part of the story to tell, a third part to the trilogy, but most of the pieces were still mere concepts.

Fortunately, that day of conceptualizing is finally over, as now I can show off those pieces that lingered in my head for five years, now in full black-and-white lettering. And it's quite the joyful moment, as I couldn't wait to get all these things on paper.

Having said that, it's time to officially introduce the star of the show:

Coming to you live as one unit, the third act of a grand symphony that is the *Collection of Junk*, I present to you *Seven-Sided Dice: The Collection of Junk Volume 3* as it was originally meant to be seen: small, readable, and in your hands.

Enjoy the show.

—Jeremy



## **Short Stories**

Eleven Miles from Home

Uncomfortable

Shell Out

When One Falls

When Cellphones Go Crazy

Teenage American Dream

The Narrow Bridge

Waterfall Junction

The Celebration of Johnny's Yellow Rubber Ducky



## Introduction

Well, I guess it's time to go from one introduction to another. Funny how these collective anthologies work, isn't it? Makes you wonder when any of us writers ever get to the point. I could say I'd get there now, but that would be too easy. What on God's green earth is ever that easy, anyway? To give you that now would be to give you false hope in other things, like the hope that your cellphone service won't jack around with your minutes, or that your local congressman won't surprise and infuriate you with some arcane scandal involving Instant Messaging. No, nothing in this world is easy, most of it isn't stable, and some of it won't even get you to the point without first issuing a series of monotonous explanations (which you will undoubtedly face as you continue on from section to section). Giving you something easy would be to give you something false. Why would I do that?

So now that I've forcibly frustrated you with the truth of how things are, I think it's fair to tell you what to expect in this coming section.

The short stories of the *Collection of Junk* volumes have traditionally incorporated nearly half the books. In this case, there isn't any difference. What you're about to face is an exercise in endurance, patience, and goodwill. You'll exercise endurance by getting through the section; you'll exercise patience by putting up with each individual long haul; and you'll exercise goodwill by giving me the courtesy of reading what I've spent several years writing, regardless of how long it might take to finish it. Put all these things together, and your exercises will pay off; you'll get to move to another section.

On a lighter—and more promotional—note, I think you'll like what lies ahead. The stories you're about to read dabble in the arts of relationships, oil spills, evading traffic tickets, hiding in boxcars, shopping in exotic grocery stores, studying high school English, taking spiritual journeys, waterfalls, and carting rubber ducks around Europe—all the finer points in life. Some will brighten your mood; others might crush it. But each will offer an experience that you won't get from television (because none of these were adapted for TV). So take heed and let the lessons in these acts of fiction overwhelm you, or teach you, or just simply entertain you. I think you'll like the ride.

As usual, the end of the section, which you'll know about if you've read the first two volumes, features a lengthy commentary on all the works represented here. The commentary itself will explain in greater detail its purpose (largely because you can just read it and see for

yourself), but I wanted to mention it here so you can keep an eye open for it, and maybe skip ahead after reading each work to keep your memory of them alive.

And that's it. Go ahead and find your favorite couch or coffeehouse chair, get comfortable, and start reading the fiction ahead, beginning with the double-perspective piece called "Eleven Miles from Home." It's guaranteed to thrill...hopefully.

—Jeremy



## Eleven Miles from Home

**Richard**

Eleven miles from home. That's all. Sounds like salvation for a man up a creek, doesn't it? For most, it's a skip and a hop. For the rest, it's a quick drive to the market—simple stretch of road for the whole world to travel. Well, those people obviously never had to spoon feed their own mouths.

Rachel and I stopped getting along a few months ago. It's something I've yet to figure out, because we're into the same things. But sometimes two similar people are less than kindred spirits, like the clown that went to school with the mime—and bullied him. Maybe there's some negative aura thing that makes us friends to dysfunction. Then again, I'm not really the type who believes in auras and stuff like that. Rachel doesn't either. Perhaps there's the heart of our similarities: a connection that we find everything weird, yet obtainable in the context of noun use, because the word "aura" sounds pretty cool.

We also think Jet Skiing is cool. It's the water sport that brought us to this place along the side of the road all those deceptive hours ago. Convenient, right? There's another interesting word for dictionary types—an adjective this time.

I guess I should back up a few feet and explain our history, not that history matters anymore, because here we are now secretly wanting to strangle each other's throats—not out of malice of course, but because that's just what we do. But here's the general scoop: we used to date, a lot. Again, not out of malice, but because we actually liked each other.

So how do two people go from liking each other, to not, to standing by the side of a road eleven miles from home? Well, there's the Jet Skiing thing. But obviously it goes deeper than that. It began with the other girlfriend.

Her name was Abby. Not really the nicest girl in the world and certainly not the prettiest, but she smelled really good. I'd describe her neck like a scent of shampoo dipped in flowers. It was the kind that made me forget about the horse face she carried. Yeah, I know, comparing her to a horse is a bit extreme, but she'd never make it to the runways—not then, and probably not now—it's just one of those painful facts of life. I didn't mind, though, because she never expected me to kiss her. Her only demand was that I held her during movies every once in a while. The whole setup was good, because I could smell her neck all the time without ever having to look at her. It was the perfect relationship.

But as irony had it, Rachel had to show up and ruin all of that.

I realize I haven't mentioned anything pertinent to the situation. But I guess that describes life. Nothing ever happens, yet, it all comes together and places two contentious people along the side of the road for reasons neither understand. The fact that nothing ever happened with Abby and then, BAM, Rachel comes along and screws everything up, undoubtedly reinforces that theory. I guess deep down I'm still upset that she disturbed the order of my life. I mean, the low expectations and the great-scent thing were really awesome. The fact that both characteristics of my relationship with Abby demanded absolutely nothing in the realm of change made it even better. But when Rachel invaded my life, she introduced a whole new factor of excitement that I never found in Abby, and thus brought into my life an unnecessary shift in nothing. That, of course, was the love for Jet Skis.

One day Abby and I headed off to the park to watch the lake ripple. There was no reason for it other than because there wasn't anything good on TV. As usual, we sat on the bench, put our arms around each other's waist and said absolutely nothing for as long as the situation allowed. The lake undulated, we watched it with gaping mouths, and I savored the fact that her hair was up my nose. But then, it happened: some girl on a Jet Ski flew by. My gaping mouth hit my knees. The machine looked amazing and I felt fuzzy. In retrospect, it was terrible.

To this day I don't know how Abby reacted. Since I made a point to never look directly into her eyes, I just focused my attention on the Jet Ski and assumed she was equally mesmerized. She didn't speak of it, but deep down I figured she dreamed of riding it. I mean, the machine was unlike anything we ever saw before. Literally. We lived in a backwater town that believed lakes were meant for fishing, not fun.

When the skier docked her machine, I felt the compulsion to talk to her and discover more about this crazy device. So that's what I did. I didn't wait for Abby to follow; I just assumed she'd find her way. Apparently, I was wrong. Looking back, I think maybe she was being shy. After all, she was a shy person when it came to meeting strangers and their strange toys. It didn't matter, though. She had a right to support her quirks.

Anyway, I started talking to the ski girl and immediately got hooked on the topic. It became all I harped about for twenty minutes straight. The girl seemed interested in my interest. So after my excitement dwindled down, she invited me to give it a ride. That floored me. Since I couldn't refuse, I took the ride.

And I loved it. The adrenaline was more intense than riding a lawnmower. It was a rush in a can, a Red Bull on the water. By the end of the day, when I finally docked and called it quits, the skier congratulated me for making it through my first session in one piece. I shouted my joy at the treetops.

It wasn't until a couple days later that I realized Abby was nowhere in sight.

To confirm the obvious, Rachel was the girl on the Jet Ski and I never saw Abby again. Don't get me wrong, I tried to find her later that month and was even willing to apologize—I really didn't want to lose her awesome scent. But I couldn't. I don't know why, but sometimes I think she just dug a hole next to that bench, jumped in, and covered herself up. That was the only logical explanation.

To get back to the point of the current problem, Rachel and I started dating that very night. We hit it off pretty well: talking about Jet Skiing, how much we thought weird people should keep their thoughts to themselves, penguins, and more Jet Skiing. Eventually, we made special trips to Jet Ski camps, which meant spending entire weekends in ecstasy. Of course, that meant I had to buy my own Jet Ski, which was naturally the greatest investment of my life.

But as the order of nothing became something, things started to change. I realized we were in an actual relationship: not a small movie watching, bench sitting, Jet Skiing thing, but something that involved talking to and looking at each other. Sure, we got to spend a lot of time on the water, but we also had to pay attention to each other's words and pretend we cared what was on the other's mind. I wasn't sure I was ready for that.

I don't know, somewhere along the line what became something started becoming too much. Rachel always asked why I didn't care, even though I said I did, even though I really didn't and she'd accuse me of lying. I'd buy her flowers on the advice of friends, hoping to prove that I could've cared, but she'd always get picky saying that plastic flowers from the dime store was not an appropriate make-up gift. After watching a few of her tears fall, and getting frustrated that I wasted twenty-five cents on the stupid flowers, I'd walk away to see if there was anything good on TV. That, of course, was when she'd come to my side, apologize for being so rude and tell me she loved me. That, of course, pissed me off. What did she really think she was going to accomplish by saying that? Abby never said the word "love" the whole time I knew her. The girl was obviously loony.

It's not that the word "love" bothers me. I mean, let's be real; I love Jet Skiing. There's no reason to think it's a dirty word. The problem I had, however, was that this girl thought she was going to get me to marry her or something. Obviously, that's the only reason why she'd ever say it. Truth was, I didn't want to be involved like that. So, eventually, I called it quits. That's when the fireworks exploded.

When I use the term "fireworks," I should probably mention that they began as small firecrackers, rather than a full array of M80s. Even though the tension resembled a cloud that could be spotted from miles away, she never chose to yell at me. In fact, I'm not sure she ever yelled a day in her life. Her big thing was to be polite when she blatantly insulted me and then shed a few tears for emphasis. She was a dirty player, certainly, and that's how the dislike for each other escalated. The more she turned her anger into words, the more I'd flip them back at her. Our exchanges became cold war matches to see who'd get madder at the other without intensifying it with volume. In the end, she was better at the game than me. It usually took three insults to break my patience. Of course, my eminent yelling always brought her to the point of flinging her arms upward and turning her back on me, to which she'd finish off with a sob-fest. She was a girl after all. We eventually got tired of fighting and acknowledged that "quits" meant no contact of any kind. That's when we agreed to end the tension and avoid each other completely.

So how does one go from dating, to hating, to going Jet Skiing together? It's a complicated situation to the untrained mind. The bottom line is that we both love to Jet Ski and neither of us know of another soul who shares our passion, so we bear the burden of sacrifice for our true love.

In retrospect, this may seem too insane for truth. But believe me, it's all true. It's what I like to call the "Jetskius Magnetismo," which translated into layman's terms means the attraction to aquatic adrenaline. I guess the best way to describe it is to compare it to a Vin Diesel movie. When one has a deep love for a Jet Ski, he or she is willing to experience that love with anyone, regardless of feelings or incriminating evidence. And that's precisely what Rachel and I possess. Frankly, I think it's beautiful.

But in all things considered, none of this really explains anything. To the minds that don't understand our relationship or the love of Jet Skis we share—shame on all of them—this whole setup probably seems like babble. It's true that our depth of substance might have difficulty sinking a gerbil, but that's all it took to bring us together in the first place. And maybe it's true that if what brought us together is still strong in our lives

today then hypothetically we should still be together. But life doesn't always work that way.

Let's examine this concept for a moment. Pretend a girl is sitting by herself in the park listening to the radio. For the sake of hypothesis, let's pretend this girl is Abby. Now Abby has an easy listening station tuned in, which if I remember correctly was her favorite kind of music. Imagine if Dude X came walking by, whistling some Neil Diamond, or Frank Sinatra or some other popular old rich guy song. The tune wouldn't be that interesting, because who really listens to easy listening? But think about it. If Abby is uninteresting enough to listen to that kind of music, and if Dude X is really known as Dork X, then maybe some kind of connection will take place. Hence, an alternative form of Jetskius Magnetismo occurs.

It can be a beautiful thing. Maybe not so much in Abby's case, but for the most part it can be a beautiful thing.

But that doesn't change the current circumstance. The problem is that this section of road is nowhere near a lake and that means Rachel and I are separated from our only real commonality. And trust me, when the link to a man and woman's heart is severed, it sucks. Not only does it suck that we have to find another way to make due with our situation, but it also sucks because we can't have fun doing it. The truth is, we stopped having fun when the ride ended, and this forsaken highway isn't the object that's meant to restore our passion. The only fires lit in our hearts are the ones that left me craving a turkey sandwich and her to give me the silent treatment. As far as I know, those fires aren't even strong enough to brown a marshmallow.

So that more or less brings us to the present, or at least the recent past. I know it doesn't explain how in the world we ended up here, but it does explain how we ended up here together. Of course, if knowing how we got here was important at all, then I suppose this would be the best time to discuss that. After all neither Rachel or I have anything else to do but to sit alongside this craggy road, trying to figure out why we had to find ourselves stranded out here, reflecting on whether or not it was worth it.

## Rachel

To be honest, I don't know what I was thinking. I just wanted to spend a nice day on the lake—to take a deep breath. One could probably call me a recreational dependant for all the deep breaths I needed. But I don't know; maybe I wouldn't call myself that. Maybe I'd just call myself a

hopeless mess. It was the appropriate label back then and I think it's still the case now.

Forgive me for sounding extreme, but I have no other way to describe it. I was depressed over the continual disappointments I faced each day—disappointments of losing the simple things in life I expected to come to pass, like finding jobs that didn't involve sweeping out horse stalls. It was like trying to climb the Himalayas with an ice pick and a jogging suit. Sometimes I'd ask myself if I was aiming too high, but I realized that asking the mailman to be punctual was aiming too high.

For two years I gave up on life's simple things and cried every chance I got, no longer expecting the obvious.

My therapist used to tell me that life was just life, and that there was nothing particularly unusual about mine. And I guess to some extent that was true—maybe. But the reality was that my therapist had problems of his own. Like, there was one day he came in carrying a cup of coffee and a couple bags under his red eyes. I asked him if everything was okay, and he just sort of nodded and took a sip of his coffee. He, then, countered by asking how I was doing. That's when I cried again.

I wish I could accurately describe how I was before the crisis began, but I was so hazy back then that I really can't remember all the details. I do remember the smiles were present and that I occasionally looked forward to the next day of existence, but somewhere along the line all that faded. Sometimes I believe it was my blatant irresponsibility that brought me to my low point, but deep down I think it had something to do with my heart shattering after I found out the guy I loved was married with three pets. So much happened since then that narrowing it down to a singular event might be counterproductive to the truth, but I'm pretty sure that's how the spiral started.

When my therapist once asked how the whole attraction to the wrong man began, I described it as having happened by chance. The events that brought me down that path should never have happened, but they did because it was my time to start living in pain. My answer garnered a look that branded me insane.

Realistically, the question should've been a simple one, involving the recall of a historical moment that occurred not long ago. But every time I dwelled on it, it brought me nothing but sorrow. Maybe I'm a crybaby at heart, but I think any girl in my situation would've reacted similarly. After all, that was the day I hit my gutter—the day when I dropped my standards to the floor and swept them under the rug. Granted, I didn't know it back then, but it sure became obvious as time moved on. I had fallen so hard from perpetual loneliness that I was ready to invite anything

into my heart to quench it. It was at that point that Harry entered the picture.

Harry was the kind of guy who could flash a lawyer's smile, even though his teeth were smoke-stained and his lips were cracked. His tastes for appearance involved mock Italian suits from Wal-Mart and cheap scented colognes from the local drug store. To his credit, he had a way of playing them up. I never would've considered him strikingly handsome, but he had that gentle touch that caressed my skin with excitement. And that was enough to enrapture me. Looking back, I can see I was desperate to be caught—the sad face sporting the invitation from the fool. But when that slick phony found me crying by a park bench that fateful day, he found the right buttons to push.

Just to clarify things, I cried in public where families walking their dogs could openly see. My heart was that beaten. I forget what triggered the drama, but I remember it had to do with the ongoing loneliness I felt since college—something I still suffer from occasionally.

When I was a freshman, I flunked out of my classes, because I partied too hard too often. I either attended class inebriated or flat out didn't attend at all. Even though my friends supported my party chick lifestyle, my instructors were less than understanding. After a spell, my math teacher advised the dean to kick me out, because I was "wasting the campus's resources." When the dean summoned me to his office to make it clear that I either shaped up or shipped out, I laughed at him, puked on his chair and flashed him my headlights. I think in my head I was trying to reveal my attributes to appease his disappointment in me, but in my heart I was just trying to salvage what little future I had left. Either way, it was a bad decision. When the dust cleared, my reaction stunned him for a minute; then he closed his eyes and pointed to the door.

I cleaned out my dorm room the following day.

The disparaging loneliness set in a few months later when I realized my friends weren't coming to rescue me. They had their own lives to live—far away I might add—and the fun we used to share died away. I continued to go to bars and clubs, because that's what I knew, but the thrill weakened when I realized going anywhere by myself really sucked. Then one night, as I sat underneath a strobe light with a bottle of Zima in hand, I stared at all the animated dancers slowly pulsating with their eyes glazed over, wondering what their lives were like before dark. Somehow I concluded they had spent their sunlit hours thinking about coming to the club, which was exactly what I did each day while I waited on the diner's lunch patrons to leave. At that point, my heart broke and I questioned

where my life was going. When I realized I had no idea, I set the Zima on the floor and walked out of the club forever.

Needless to say, I was ready to change my life from head to toe and actually pursue some honest ambition. But doing that meant changing everything about me.

So I returned to college—a campus a little closer to home—and tried out for a future again; this time without the parties, or drinking or anything that didn't revolve around studying. In fact, anything that sounded remotely like fun had to get the big red "X," because I wasn't about to get kicked out of college again.

But as irony had it, my lack of a job led me to financial disaster and I had to drop out of school anyway. And though I was sober, I left without making any friends.

And I think that's what ultimately led me to the park bench that introduced me to Harry.

Harry didn't seem like the wrong guy at first. In fact, I found him quite charming. His presence made my heart light, which was great considering he made my tears vanish. He took me to dinner, bought me the usual romantic stuff, and touched me in the usual romantic ways. The whole bloody package felt wonderful for five straight months.

But one night, when we were planning our first exotic adventure together, his wedding ring fell out of his pocket.

I spent the next few days and nights crying on a different park bench—occasionally returning to my dingy apartment to erase my phone messages. Somewhere in that block of time I hoped that maybe another prince would come and rescue me from that random hideaway, but I gave up when I concluded that all the charming ones buried something gold and circular in their pockets.

So that was the time I decided to go for total losers.

Admittedly, I was nervous about the thought of dating guys with beer breath and greasy armpits. Nevertheless, deep down I was too numb to care anymore. They weren't attractive, and they certainly weren't respectful, but they weren't married either, so I tolerated it. Of course they all broke me eventually, to which I had to go off and look for another. But in the long run I never had to worry about loneliness. That was the one thing they were good for. They always hung around. Even when I wasn't home, they'd hang around...eating my food, putting their grungy flip-flops on my couch, putting their huge filthy dogs on my bed, putting their used utensils back in the drawer...and I was okay with it because...because I was afraid to be alone....

I was afraid to be alone.



Truthfully, I hated my life. I hated every moment of it, because I couldn't be alone. I wanted to be alone—believe me, I couldn't stand any of those drunken scrubby guys that kept coming around, bringing six-packs of beer into my apartment, drinking up a storm...pissing all over the seat. I wanted to get them out of my life once and for all. But I couldn't, because then I wouldn't have anyone. And that was something I just couldn't handle.

So I kept inviting them over, because I knew they wouldn't leave, even when I asked them to. They'd insist on staying day after day, night after night, headache after headache, and I'd be grudgingly thankful, because there was another body to keep me company. Sometimes there would be two guys overlapping shifts. That usually broke into a fight, of course, where one guy claimed dominion over me, and the other called the police claiming assault. But the new guy would always win and I'd have to put up with him until the next one entered my life. And I would never be alone—yet I would pray for the day I could handle the solitude.

And now I suppose would be a good time to mention the Jet Ski.

Shortly before Harry dropped his big revelation on me, he bought me a special gift. He knew I loved the outdoors; the problem was I never had the right toys to take with me. Even though I spent my studying phase in open courtyards and under trees at the park, my resources beyond the books were limited. So he thought I'd enjoy a little outdoor action. That's when he covered my eyes and walked me outside my building to reveal to me a lump of tarp in my parking lot.

When he shed the mystery device's protective covering, out popped a sexy little white two-person Jet Ski with the Kawasaki brand name and a racing stripe emblazoned on the side; with flower insignia and my initials inscribed underneath on the front.

I fell in love with the watercraft the moment Harry taught me how to use it. The thrill of the speed, the splash of lake water against my face—it was a bit nasty, but oh so exhilarating. Immediately, it became my second love. Each day I'd go out and hop a few waves before breakfast. Then, I'd go out again after coming home from my useless job until night fell and Harry came over with flowers and a movie.

But when the night fell that Harry shed his scales, he managed to take my love for the watercraft with him. Though the thrill of hopping water lingered, I no longer had the heart to put his machine between my legs. After two weeks passed, I wanted freedom from the reminder, so I put a "For Sale" sign across the handlebars.

I stuffed the money I made from the sale into my bank account so I'd have something to go back to college with. But as time passed and

deadbeat men came and went, I started to think that my return to school just wasn't meant to happen in my lifetime. The income trickled too slowly, the guys cleaned me out of resources and I still had bills to pay. Eventually, I had to put my academic pipe dreams to bed. So with my ambition for a degree vanished forever, I decided to spend my money on something else.

Since my love for the lake never wavered, I decided to invest in my own personal watercraft—free of Harry's wallet.

Unfortunately, I couldn't sell my old Jet Ski for the full price that Harry probably spent on it, so a new two-rider was out of the question. I looked through the classifieds for a nice used one, but realized the prices offered were too low for comfort, so I decided to invest in a new one-seater. And sure, it was expensive enough to break me, but it was still comparatively cheaper than my first. My only real concern was that I had accustomed to ride the sit-down models and this one required me to stand.

I'll admit that the two-man machine was easier to ride, but the stand-up model offered unparalleled freedom. It was like skipping a motor scooter across the water. The experience carried all the benefits that my old one provided, but added a new thrill with the whole butt-suspension thing. Needless to say, I felt free to live my love again.

And that's what finally made me happy. I had my own Jet Ski—bought with my own cash, ridden with my own passion, unattached to any man. No one could steal it away from me. This was my true love. No greasy stranger would intercept my heart now that it was spoken for.

But then, came the event that relapsed me into oblivion. Richard entered my life.

## **Richard**

I have no idea how it happened. We weren't eager to ride together. I didn't like her and she didn't like me. Yet, somehow we found ourselves traveling in my SUV, hitching a small trailer with our one-man Jet Skis attached, heading back to town—because, we were stupid.

Now, we weren't stupid because we spent the day Jet Skiing together. Realistically, we'd Jet Ski with Hitler if he were alive and knew how. What made us stupid was that we elected to leave the lake. Sure, the decision had to come eventually. But it forced us to enter into a situation that required us to talk. And if we weren't required to talk, then we were required to sit in silence, or worse of all, spend several miles on the road alone with each other.

When two people share no common interests other than aquatic adventure, trying to make do with a measly road trip would be like licking the fires of hell without a glass of lemonade on hand.

Now, I'm no masochist—I didn't place myself in this vehicle with this woman to punish myself. After all, it's my vehicle. I had every right to ride in it. But I bit the bullet with her because I didn't want to Jet Ski alone. To this day I never rode solo and I have no intention of starting. I had to invite the only girl I knew who shares my passion, because that was the only thing that made sense to me.

I should've known that opening the door for her would've caused major problems down the road. I did it anyway, because I'm the moron and because I'd hate to leave my Jet Ski alone on the trailer without the company of another Jet Ski. I think most guys in my situation would've called me a patriot. I love my Jet Ski—so much in fact that I park it inside the house every night to protect it. To let go of my selfishness, to let the woman into the vehicle, and to return back to town with her was my visual labor of love for my watercraft. And what kind of man would neglect the one he loves?

Of course, all I've done here was to talk about my SUV and my Jet Ski. The real issues began inside the vehicle—inside with Rachel. It all started as soon as we pulled out of the lake's parking lot.

The drive was silent for awhile. I had nothing to say to her and she had nothing to say to me, so we didn't say anything, initially. But something happened and Rachel asked me a question. Normally I'd humor her and answer whatever she asked, but this time I just didn't feel like it. So she asked again. I ignored her. This went on for a few cycles. Finally, I got sick of listening to her, so I drove to a nearby gas station to pick up a sandwich.

I think in retrospect, I probably deserved what happened next.

I'll admit that I could've treated her questions and opinions a little more seriously. In fact, if I were to dive into deeper retrospect, I think maybe I could've treated her better as a person. The effort would've demanded more than I wanted to give, because I really got sick of all her constant crying. But...the problem was...

Look, there was absolutely no way I could've put up with her crying for the rest of my life. Every time she cried, I felt like I was responsible. I can't speak for every man, but I hate feeling accountable to a woman's tears. Rachel's or anyone's. The fact that she cried a lot pissed me off, because much of it was on my behalf. She expected more from me than I could possibly want to give. All I expected from her was to give me some

breathing room. Neither of us could deliver our mutual desires, so we crumbled at the foundation.

And our Jet Skis couldn't save us. We were doomed as a couple.

And I was content with that.

I was seriously content with that. Because...

Bloody hell....

Well, to make the long story short, when Rachel and I went to buy our late-afternoon snacks, some dude ripped off my SUV. With both Jet Skis attached. I felt responsible for that.

In my defense, I didn't think leaving my keys in the ignition while parked in the middle of nowhere would've been that bad of an idea. Stupid me.

The more I think about it, the more I realize that all of this fell entirely on my shoulders. I didn't like her anymore, and I let it show quite vividly. But tracing my reasons back to their origin brought everything full circle into my lap. I didn't like her because she cried too much. She cried too much because I didn't want to be deeply involved with her. I didn't want to be deeply involved with her because...well because...um...

Okay, truthfully I don't know the answer to that last one. She stuck with me—even when Jet Skis weren't part of the agenda. She used to say nice things to me when my days were bad—even when she didn't believe her own words. She took bottles of alcohol out of my hand to keep me straight—even when her eyes lusted after the drink herself. Rachel did all that...and I didn't want her to.

Why?

I didn't trust her. She was too interested in me—cared too much. She'd actually massage my shoulders when I was tense. She'd actually kiss me on the cheek when I had a bad hair day. She'd actually say positive things about me when I'd fall flat on my face. And she'd actually say that seriously twisted word called love to me when I felt like a reject. I didn't trust her at all.

And now my SUV is gone. Now my Jet Ski is gone. And, heaven forbid, now Rachel's Jet Ski is gone. All because I didn't trust her.

It's almost laughable.

Sometimes I wish I weren't such a jerk. Yeah, I know; I'm not blind—I know exactly what I am. I used to gawk at people like me once, too, back when I only hung out with the band geeks. I think somewhere along the line I found out about culture shock, and popularity and biker bars, and pretty much changed the way I thought about life from that point forward. And sitting here along the side of the road with Rachel crying eleven miles from home really makes me wish that I could return to the

band geek days, look for that poor little kid who thought he was cool but really wasn't, and lock him up in a closet for the next ten years. Maybe that kid would've put a smile on this girl's face.

It's funny really; funny how things work to clarify life's major points. I grew up without any deep issues weighing me down, and still found a way to take this road. I believe some relational scholars would call me an idiot, a moron, a retard, a dimwit, or a crack head. I know the empty spot on the road, where our Jet Skis should've been, would prove all of that. It's no secret that I'm brain damaged. I mean, for crying out loud, how did I lose our Jet Skis? Most guys don't just sit around expecting good things to come to an unlocked SUV with its keys in the ignition. Some guys don't veer off into a gas station just to avoid answering his ex-girlfriend's questions. And yet, I still found a way to do both. And yet, this girl can still find an excuse to sit by me.

Sure, the redness in her face has shades of anger, but I suppose the tears helped in her discoloration, so I'm still the moron. All she wanted was to give me a chance. After all the hassles she had with other guys, including some dude who was already married, she really wasn't in the mood to talk. But I had to be curious about that love machine of hers—the Jet Ski for those with short-term memories—and find out all I could about it. So I was the moron back then, too. I still had Abby, and I still had silent nights on the couch in front of the television, but that day at the park gave me the chance to have a new life of excitement and a decent girl to enjoy it with. And the girl loved me. Abby never said the word “love” the entire time I knew her. Rachel on the other hand said it, and probably meant it, quite a bit. Deep down, however, hearing those words triggered a feeling too intense for me to handle and, in the end, it helped me to make the decision to sabotage Rachel's chances at being happy with me. Therefore, those relational scholars would've made an accurate assumption.

I actually remember the first night she said it. We were driving home from the lake, as one might expect, when she asked me to stop along the side of the road. I can't tell from the lack of landmarks, but I think it was fairly close to the spot where we're sitting now. There was an exposed stretch of road that ran through an expansive parched field, with a few foothills in the distance and a small block of woods far behind us. As the sun neared the edge of the horizon and the mosquitoes made their way into the rift of our spatial circumference, the crickets started to chirp and the breeze that blew through the area faded.

There wasn't any reason for us to stop other than to talk face to face. And Rachel knew that I was uncomfortable talking to any woman face to

face—it was harder for me to lie that way—but she asked me to pull off to the side anyway. And sure enough, she wanted to talk face to face.

When she opened the door and stepped onto the grass, I thought I was off the hook. I figured she just needed to take a leak and wanted me to stop so she could get out and dig a hole. But then, I remembered that girls didn't pee on the side of roads like guys did, and that Rachel wasn't very well disposed around me, so I was confused.

She stood silent by the open door for a good twenty seconds before walking around to the front of the vehicle and leaning against the hood. I remained seated for a few minutes before finally getting out to see what in the world she was doing—I thought maybe she was reflecting on the Jet Skiing day we had. She took my hand and smiled when I leaned up next to her.

And that's when she said it—the word “love”—to me. The very first time. Yeah, she said it a bunch of times since, but that was the first.

I released her hand and returned to my seat. That was the moment that changed everything. And all the stinking mosquitoes were biting me.

I'd say that at least two months passed before I made my big snap at her. Maybe three. To be honest, once those words started leaving her loose lips, all my days started blending together. It was grating to my nerves—not because I disliked her, but because I wasn't ready to accept her feelings. My true ambition was to have fun zipping across the water. And I thought that's all she wanted, too. She had been in one bad relationship after the next for at least two years; I figured the last thing she wanted was to get stuck in another one. So I had no desire to bring our relationship closer than what our Jet Skis allowed. To even mention the word “love” would've only complicated such contentment, becoming dangerous for both of us.

She broke our unwritten boundary when she brought it up. And then, she continued to break it when she started sneaking me kisses and such. Although the kisses were within reason, because who really hates being kissed by a pretty girl, everything else spelling love and romance and deep relationship with her just seemed like too much.

I arrived to the point where I couldn't handle the direction she was steering us. The last thing I wanted was to cause more relational tears, so I forced myself to hate her, just so I could be the one to break up and spare her the agony of going through the same crap that she went through with everyone else. I didn't want our days of Jet Skiing to take the road of sacrifice, but our dating relationship had to end.

Of course, that ultimately introduced a new set of problems. Our casual dating fights escalated into ex-boyfriend/girlfriend flame wars.

When those transformed into the insult matches, I could no longer stand the thought of being anywhere in the same proximity with her—except for those times when we were on the lake.

Eminent disaster fell at last.

And yet, here we are staring at the fields, sitting side by side, waiting for a passerby to notice us, wondering what to say to each other. It's painfully obvious that I'm the one to blame for our stranded state. And though I'm sure I could fabricate some excuse about how it's really all Rachel's fault, I just don't feel like it anymore. I suppose that's a step forward.

We've been here waiting for awhile now. There's still a couple hours of daylight left, but the sooner someone comes driving by here, the better. Neither of us wants to be stuck here throughout the night. We need this light to last as long as possible.

To be honest, I miss the good times we had together. Sometimes I think it would've been nice for us to share a few more moments in the sun. Even when her feelings intensified, we still had our laughs after experiencing our spills. I guess to hear the four-letter L-word every once in awhile could've been a nice bonus. I suppose there was even enough room in me to say it reciprocally, had I just been a little more open to the seriousness of it. That, more than likely, would've erased a few of her tears.

I'm not sure how things would've been different had I just given a little more of myself—if I had been nicer to her. I'll admit the questions occasionally stir in my mind, questions that ask how she'd react to me if I hadn't fallen into a spiral of "coolness." Sometimes it's hard for me to really care about the future, because she pisses me off so much. But I suppose a lot of that is just my interpretation of who she should be. My friends used to try convincing me that she was a great girl and I just needed to see it. They accused me of not wanting to. Of course, they had their blind sides, too, but their comments got me thinking from time to time. Deep down I would've liked to see her smile more without having to fake it—Jet Ski or not. Sometimes I hope that maybe she would be truly happy at least once, and that I could be part of the reason for it.

I guess it's funny that on an afternoon like this, I wonder if it's too late to give her what she once desired.

## Rachel

As I said before, I just wanted to spend a nice day on the lake. I had no intention of meeting some uncultured stranger along the shoreline. Maybe the girls that never bleed liked to be eternally noticed, but I was through with it. I couldn't take another round with heartbreak, or regret, or anything of the like. And yet, something inside of me forced out a smile when Richard jogged up to the shore to greet me.

I think I was just surprised. Most of the guys I met prior to Richard found me on a park bench while I was shedding tears or wiping my nose after they dried. There might have been a few exceptions—okay, many where the desperate horn dog saw me at a grocery store and thought I'd make for a good rockin'. But most of them introduced themselves for the sake of playing upon my vulnerability, as if that would validate their own sense of manliness. Richard, unlike the rest, really wasn't looking for me. He just wanted to get onto my Jet Ski.

I'll admit that I was shocked by his intrusion. When he ran up and asked me about my personal watercraft, I assumed he was only acting interested to get in good with me. So I felt cold toward him. But when he kept going on and on about the Jet Ski and how he had never seen anything quite so amazing, all of a sudden I felt jealous. I should've been relieved, considering the problems I dealt with before that day, but his lack of interest in me left me silently grumpy.

I suppose there was no good reason for me to feel the way I felt. I wanted to be happy that a guy was interested in a part of me that didn't involve screwing with my heart. I wasn't, though. I wanted to be the more important body on that shoreline.

After about twenty minutes, I finally decided that maybe his lust for my Jet Ski would've ended if I let him ride it. It turned out I had made the right decision. Maybe it was my silent vengeance against men kicking in, but I laughed as I watched the beginner wipeout every other minute. Seeing the waves mix with that splash of falling orange—it was like an artist's masterpiece coming to life—but on the set of Benny Hill. When he finally brought it back to the shoreline a short while later, it took all my strength to stifle my laughter. The water dripping over his goofy smile was priceless. Fortunately, I kept my composure. And sure enough, he started talking about the ride with full passion—okay, he raved over it—the second his feet touched dry land. That's when I decided to invite him to dinner. I had to know that I was exciting, too.

I think a sensible woman would've remained cautious throughout the entire encounter, both initially and thereafter. I knew the pains I felt



before—pains that resurfaced time and time again. But I managed to forget every time. A new guy would show up, often under the same conditions, and I'd fall into the same trap. It got so bad that I eventually had to move out of my apartment just to escape the madness.

Someone once told me that the definition of insanity was to live under the same routine and go through the same experiences repeatedly, expecting a different result each time. And I knew what the word meant when I broke up with the guy who followed Harry. But I kept putting myself in ridiculous situations, because my learning curve was straighter than a yardstick. When Richard came along, I should've just let him ride my Jet Ski, and then push him out of my life forever. But I didn't, because I thought he was different than the rest. Looking back though, I don't know if it was a good difference.

It turned out that my plan to wrestle his attention away from the Jet Ski worked swimmingly. Even though we still volleyed about the watercraft for much of the night, as I should've expected, we managed to slip a few other subjects in as well, including topics that centered on our personal lives. We enjoyed the time together, and decided that the moment we shared was something that needed to be shared more. And though I knew I was taking a monster's chance by even thinking about letting him into my life, I thought this time it would've been different—that maybe I wouldn't have had to cry again.

Something sick happens, though, when a person convinces herself that the person she's with is in fact the one who will never screw her around, or break her heart, or make her feel like the eternal fool. That sick thing is the psychological dysfunction of "falling into deep smit"—or "falling in love" as some people call it. Somehow, I managed to sucker myself into that gladiator's arena when I turned off my judgment and looked at Richard through a dreamer's eyes. I guess I thought he'd become the prince that guys past failed to be.

But somewhere along the line I could no longer deceive myself. The curtain displaying my portrait of fantasy finally rose, revealing the putrid wasteland of reality stretching for miles behind it. Richard refused to love me the way I thought I loved him. He walked away every time I tried to get close to him. He threw up his arms and called me hopeless whenever my tears fell. And he failed to realize that the only reason I cried was because he wouldn't take the time to cherish me. I mean, I was his girlfriend for crying out loud.

Of course, my therapist said the girlfriend thing was only my interpretation of myself.

I don't know. I think in a perfect world, Richard would've taken the chance. There wouldn't have been any emotional fear held against me and his involvement wouldn't have been just about my Jet Ski. But, as they say, this isn't a perfect world and the truth about life is that it's heartbreaking.

So I guess the big question now is why do I still place myself in such an awkward place? The circumstances never change between us—whenever we share the same space he cringes and hides his face from me. And the intelligible conversations, as few as they were in our dating months, cease completely nowadays. In the end, we have nothing but our Jet Skis to keep us together. And thanks to our side trip to the gas station, we don't even have that now.

I'm not sure I really understand it. There I am each weekend gliding along the water's surface, hopping over Richard's waves, and it's completely absurd. We go there together, return to town together, and we spend the whole day together in between. Our relationship all but died awhile ago, and yet we still find ourselves in that same place. Each week. And it eats me up inside, because I never know why I'm there. It's not even fun for me anymore.

Ironically, the last couple hours have awakened me. The harsh reality is that we don't have a thing binding us together. And yet, we still sit side by side, expecting something to happen—something good to come from all of this. Sure, we could sit on opposite sides of the road, or camp about a mile-and-a-half away from each other. But we don't. We sit side by side, staring at the fields, hoping for anything to bring us out of this mess. For what, I don't know.

For a moment, I wonder if anything will ever be spoken. We haven't said a word since we sat along the road's shoulder a couple hours ago. I know our thoughts have been running rampant: thoughts about why our thumbs don't seem to be working; thoughts about why the few cars that do drive by pretend they don't see us, or care. But our mouths remained quiet since the last time we saw our private way home.

Deep down I think Richard has been silently destroying himself over this. And I'd argue that he has every right to torture himself. But it concerns me that after two hours he can't turn the accusation around on me; not even one word about it being my fault. Makes me wonder what he's been thinking about this whole time.

I really hoped our relationship would've been better than it was, but I think, in retrospect, it never had the right tracks. The fact remains that we came together at a vulnerable time in our lives. He had a girl in his life. I wasn't over Harry. I still cried nearly every night since watching that

golden ring fall out of his pocket. No man had what it took to bring me out of that.

In the end, I just wasn't ready yet.

There have been a few moments when it looked like Richard wanted to say something—his eyes drifted and he opened his mouth slightly as a soft breath escaped. But he stopped and closed his mouth each time. Every attempt to speak followed with a quick butt shift and a frustrated brush over his hair. In the past, these actions dictated something very personal on his mind, something with which he knew he needed to say, but for some reason didn't know how. It was usually in these moments when I needed to help him by asking the questions necessary to get him talking. But this time I don't know what to ask. This time I feel like I've done enough.

It's funny the things that happen when we're far away from home: things that could've been avoided had we just started walking to town, rather than plopping down along the side of the road; things that impress the point that we have nothing left to say to each other or emotions to force between us; things that make obvious the fact that we have nothing else to share or any desire to find something new to discover; things that smack us hard in the head to remind us that our relationship never really existed, but only looked real in my mind. And, in the end, it's funny how much we realize that in all things considered, emotions are deceptive and we really aren't that bright after all.

Maybe if I had been on stronger ground, I wouldn't have brought this upon us. If I had just let him go after that first afternoon on the lake, then we never would've had to deal with this. And if I had just stuck to my original plan and allowed time to heal my ridiculous wounds, then maybe I wouldn't have needed Richard in my life, period.

If I had just let go from the start I'd probably be sitting on my couch right now with a book in one hand and a slice of pizza in the other.

Time seems to tick slowly as we watch the sun fade into the horizon. Neither of us had ever liked the idea of being stuck in the middle of nowhere in the dark of night, so this is uncomfortable. I know that getting a motel room together is completely out of the question—partly because most of the motels nearby are also miles away from here. But we can't stay at the gas station, either. If we had family in town we could call them. Or if we had friends that weren't chronically away from home, we could call them. But, as it stands, we're in a tough spot.

Richard opens his mouth again and says nothing. But then, he does something unusual. Instead of brushing his hair back in frustration, he

simply puts his arm around my shoulder. He says nothing, but he gives me what feels like a comforting pat, assisted with a smile. My body quivers from this action, because I don't know what he's trying to say. So I simply return his action by removing his hand and placing it back to his side. And it hurts, because I've longed to feel that touch for awhile now. But all I can do is to get up and walk to the middle of the road, where I just stand and stare into the distance.

Moments later, a pair of headlights shine from the horizon. I wait between the two lanes as the lights draw closer. Within moments, the approaching vehicle becomes so close that it's dangerous. Richard speaks to me, finally, telling me to get out of the road. But I don't do it, even though I know I should. I just stand there, watching the vehicle, waiting to see what it does. I stick out my thumb as the headlights blind me and the horn nearly deafens me.

Finally, the vehicle, a pickup truck, screeches to a stop. I sidestep the truck as it skids right past me, a small boat trailer jackknifing behind it. I leap to the side of the road to avoid that, too.

As I hear the driver side door slam, I look up to see a single white Kawasaki two-rider Jet Ski setting in the trailer. I get up from the ground to get a closer look. The driver approaches me and starts demanding to know if I'm crazy. All I can do, however, is to stare at the Jet Ski. It looks dirty and a little bit damaged, but I make out the Kawasaki logo on the front of the hull and a racing stripe along the side. I also discover a small flower insignia just below the brand name and the letters "RDF" just below that. A tear escapes my eye as Richard steps up beside me and asks if I'm okay.

Richard and I explain our situation to the driver, and he empathetically agrees to give us a ride home. But something unusual happens along the way. The driver explains that the Jet Ski he has in the back trailer was damaged when he crashed it into a dock a few weeks earlier and that he had been trying to sell it to anyone interested. He drove far and wide trying to nail down a buyer, but everyone only wanted a Jet Ski in good condition, so naturally he returned to town with it each time. But because our story seems to strike an emotional chord with him, he decides to offer the Jet Ski to me for free to replace the one that was stolen.

At first, I'm speechless by the incredibly generous offer, but then a thought occurs to me. As much fun as I've had with my Jet Skis in the past, I think the truth to my heart is that I need to start my life fresh again. I've lived in pain day after day and would really like to just relax.

I'm not sure if I made the right decision to turn down the man's offer, but I just can't keep going down the same road repeatedly. There has to be other ways to get through life and enjoy it. So I ask that he consider giving it to Richard, instead. I think deep down I would much rather that he had it for himself. He really loved my Jet Ski.

***UNCOMFORTABLE***

The phone crashed to the floor from ringing for so long. The sudden impact sent the cat blazing for the kitchen. Gordon sat in his recliner with his feet propped loosely, watching it unhook from the receiver. It was a new model he picked up at Best Buy a few weeks earlier—the kind that vibrates.

A moment of silence passed before the muffled voice on the other end spoke softly.

He sprawled out further to encourage his apathy. The recliner was the leather kind, the sort of device that seemed to adhere to every contour known and unknown to the human physique. It was like sitting on a half-flat air cushion, but much more sleek and black.

The voice, identifiable as a male, spoke louder. It was almost clear to the ear.

Gordon folded his hands over his belly as he tried to drown it out. This was the life he wanted. Sitting in his chair, folding his hands, relaxing his sore back, melting into the leather beneath him—that was all he needed anymore. This phone call, the voice behind the receiver—none of that was for him. Not anymore.

“Gordon,” echoed the voice, now loud enough to hear from the floor. “Gordon, I know you’re there. Talk to me.”

He knew the voice well. It was the voice he grew up with. It was the voice of the man who cast a shadow over him his entire life.

It lost clarity. Muffled sounds replaced the identifiable words. Within moments, everything died in its place. No more voice. No more words.

Gordon reached over his side and placed the phone on the hook. Hopefully his point was made. If not, then the phone would start ringing again any moment.

He closed his eyes as he sunk deeper into his chair. He felt the weight of a cloud against his recently injured back. This was plenty for him. This was what he wanted for years. Too many had passed without it.

He reached for the television remote. It was setting where the phone used to be. He clicked the power button and smiled as the news flashed on. Much to his delight, his favorite anchorwoman read off the teleprompter tonight. Gina Warren, half woman, half dragon lady, all chaos in the making; and it was her night to report the world’s problems.

He would've gotten up to pop some popcorn if he didn't like his chair so much.

It wasn't that he found glaring faults in the other anchors; in all things considered he thought the others were just fine. But something about Gina Warren—this woman who had the reputation of being a lioness in a blue dress—caught his attention night after night.

He once spent two hours trying to piece together the truth about his admiration for her. The only thing he came up with was that he had an eye for independent women. Except, the facts didn't strike at her independence, but rather revealed her cold-heartedness and hunger for power. It was the difference between the solidarity of a simple run-of-the-mill feminist versus the steely determination of a militant man hater. He wasn't certain she hated men or anything, but her investigative interviews often reflected the possibility. In any case, he thought her spitfire was sexy.

"And now for tonight's top story," she said, as her earrings sparkled from the reflection of the camera's light. "Two teens are in jail after getting linked to a crime we reported a month ago about a local man found bound and gagged with a pair of lit sparklers sticking out the back of his pants. Terri Collins is at the scene. Terri..."

The image on the screen switched from the news desk to a dark and abandoned parking lot. The field reporter named Terri Collins stood in the middle of the frame stepping over her microphone cord. Gordon didn't find her nearly as interesting as he did Gina. Perhaps it was her lack of energy or personality that left his feelings for her somewhere in Cleveland. He didn't really care what the reason was. The important thing was that Gina wasn't on at the moment, so he could get up and pop his popcorn if he wanted to.

But then, there was the chair. It wrapped its leather chains around him. It had no voice, but Gordon heard it begging him to stay where he was. And even though he really had a craving for popcorn, he figured it would've been best to obey the call of his captor. So he stayed put.

"The two teens were apprehended here just a couple hours ago after a daylong pursuit by local authorities that began in the older boy's tree house. And even though some would call this case unusual, skeptics have something else to call it..."

Gordon closed his eyes and carefully tuned Terri out. He really didn't have an interest in her reporting skills. For all he was concerned, she was just a hack wannabe who couldn't cut a job reporting for a high school newspaper. Her words were blah blah blah to his ears. He hit the mute button on his remote to make sure he stayed out of listening range.

\* \* \*

The phone rang again. His ears continued to chime from its last five attempts to wake him. Gina's demanding voice drowned in the pool of noise, so he turned up the volume. That husky pitch he loved so much echoed throughout his living room. The phone rang again. Her voice spoke of music, with the lyrics of arson and gang violence. The incessant ringing threatened her command of his attention, but he focused on her. Gordon focused hard. She had words to deliver: words that could quiet the rush of a waterfall, words that could end the noise of a thousand jackhammers along a city sidewalk, words that could shut this good for nothing phone up. But it kept ringing. Finally, Gordon ripped the cord out of the phone jack. It silenced.

The room shook from the waves sounding from Gina's booming voice. Gordon saw those old family pictures on top of the entertainment center rattle. A couple pictures of his ex-wife fell over. He cranked up the surround sound. It was like Gina was all around him. It was like she was speaking the world into his soul. Her lungs were powerful, and her presence commanding. Shivers trembled down his spine. He thought that maybe he should pop some popcorn after all. Gina's eyes were piercing. They communicated the words "don't touch that dial." Her lips sparkled from the studio lights. He thought that maybe the popcorn could wait.

"And now for some good news," she said, with a straight face. "Pipeline Industry Giant Reginald Keebler Smithson has been arrested for multiple counts of soliciting himself to minors in the back of popular teen hangouts all over the state. Witnesses say that the oil tycoon has been stalking various pizza restaurants and discotheques in search of young adults who would be interested in, I quote, 'trying out his special brand of pepperoni,' and 'taking a spin under his disco balls.' Smithson has been under suspicion by state authorities since he was first accused of selling himself to minors more than five years ago. More on this story as it develops."

Reginald Keebler Smithson. There's a name Gordon hadn't heard in awhile.

Somehow the world shuffled around since the last time he paid attention. The room was darker and his eyes blurrier, but the television continued to scream pop culture in its most raucous form. Gina Warren mysteriously transformed into a series of overweight rednecks with gapped teeth and saggy breasts, each shouting at the next over the infidelity of some truck



driver or gas station attendant. The woman on the left punched at the woman in the middle, while the woman in the middle tried tackling the woman on the right. As the walking mounds of flesh stomped around the gaudy looking stage doing their best to kill each other, the talk show host carefully withdrew to the corner of the screen and waited for his moment to speak. Disinterested in the horse-faced host's commentary, Gordon turned off the television.

It took maybe two minutes for his eyelids to feel heavy again. As he let his back absorb the soft contours of his rapturous chair, he slowly sunk into its mold, waiting patiently for it to steal away his consciousness for a second time. And even though he felt slightly betrayed from its sucker punch during Gina's airtime, this silence was tranquil enough to offer it forgiveness. The imprints of the bickering fat chicks faded by the third minute.

Like the fury of an earthquake, a thunderous rumble shook him out of his slumber. Gordon scanned the room with racing heart, but saw no signs of disturbance. At first, he thought maybe he left the surround sound on, but a quick glance revealed all the signal lights snuffed out. A second scan unveiled all of his plants standing upright and his coffee table containing the same contents from before he passed out. With one culprit left, he checked his side to see the phone cord unplugged and the receiver off the hook. Again, with nothing seemingly out of the ordinary, he wrote the alarm off as a product of his lucid dreaming and closed his eyes.

Bang, bang, bang! The noise pounded again, yanking him from his REM, nearly throwing him from his chair. This time, he identified the source rather clearly. Something or someone was trying to destroy his front door.

There had been only two events to tempt Gordon out of his chair this evening. The first was the possibility of making popcorn for the adequate enjoyment of his fantasy ladylove. The second was a bit less dramatic—he would've left his chair for the bathroom. Since he didn't do either during the course of the evening, he didn't see much reason to sacrifice quality time with his seat to answer the door. But, as the clamoring continued louder and more intrusively, Gordon finally decided that maybe the time had come to part company and face the dreaded terror of his personal discomfort.

Setting the first toe to the floor was the most painful. It was like stepping into a frigid pool one inch at a time. As a child, his friends used to tell him to jump in all at once. From there, it took two or three seconds to absorb the shock to his skin. After careful deliberation he

figured the same principle applied here. One foot on the cold surface of the wooden floor wasn't enough to adjust. He'd have to literally leap out of his chair full body to make the transition bearable. And even though he found contentment in staying right where he was, the person on the other side of his door wouldn't treat him so kindly, so this was necessary.

Taking a deep breath, he leapt forward with all his strength, extending his feet toward the floor. It felt intriguing at first—the feeling of rushing wind seeping between his cushion and his back—but immediately transformed into an alien sensation. His shirt adhered fast to his slightly sweaty back, sliding its wrinkles around just enough to compensate for his forward range of motion. As his feet made touchdown, the slick nature of his black socks brought him skidding toward the coffee table. He stopped a few inches short of crashing shin-first into the edge.

Then, he felt a sharp pain in his back that took a moment to subside.

When Gordon finally gained some composure in this godforsaken hour, he carefully slip-slid his way toward the front door. Even though the room was remarkably clean from clutter and trash, his haphazard arrangement of furniture made the journey from the living room to the entry hall an obstacle. When he finally managed to reach the door, he outstretched his hand for the doorknob, just in time for his unwanted visitor to bang on it again.

In his exhausted state of mind, Gordon almost shouted at the person to go away, but caught himself before the first word escaped his lips. In his slowly reforming rationale, he decided the knock could've belonged to a frantic woman in search of refuge. Since it would've been wholly uncivilized for him to turn her away in her hour of need, he accepted his place as a chivalrous hero and opened the door to welcome his distressed guest.

Of course, he tried to slam the door shut when he realized it was his older brother on the other side.

The door crashed against Gordon's shoulders as his brother reached out and grabbed his shirt collar. Immediately, Gordon noticed the man's clammy hands brushing coldly against the skin of his neck.

"Gordon," said his brother, "where have you been? I've been trying to reach you all night."

Gordon winced as he caught a whiff of the whiskey bourbon emanating from his frazzled brother's breath. Careful analysis also revealed that the man reeked of cigarette smoke. A small layer of ash covered the bulgy top ridge of his white-collared shirt's lower abdominal area.

"I'm in a lot of trouble," he continued. "You gotta help me."

\* \* \*

The thing about Frederick Knack was that he never got himself into a situation he couldn't handle. In high school, he was given the task of taking charge of the classroom overhead projector before and after each lesson. His assignments often included stocking and filing the transparencies, wiping the tray and the mirror with cleaning fluid, and wheeling the machine in and out of the corner depending on the classroom needs of the day. It was thankless job for a sixteen-year-old aspiring to become the smartest and wealthiest businessman on the planet, but he did it with pride because he knew small tasks in the present ushered in greater things in the future.

Every morning when he got to class, he set down his book bag, strutted over to the corner near the teacher's desk and dragged the overhead from its domicile. When he got it into position, he scrutinized the display areas for smudge marks and wiped away any he found. Once everything looked clean, he checked the vents and the power cord for possible faultiness. Providing all elements maintained his standard of perfection, Frederick then took the responsibility of plugging in the projector. As soon as the plug made contact with the wall socket, he flipped the power button on to complete the assignment. The whirring of the fan and the coming of the light signified his task had been performed successfully. The routine made him the teacher's pet.

But one day something unusual happened. A challenge befell his daily ritual—a challenge that threatened not only his position as keeper of the overhead, but also threatened his credibility as a classroom saint.

It was at the beginning of class on a Thursday when all hell broke loose.

As angelic as he might have appeared to his trusting teachers, one thing plagued Frederick's mental stability: he could never turn down a challenge. He reasoned that as a self-proclaimed leader he had to possess the ability to rise up to any demanding situation. If a classmate was sick, it was up to him to submit his or her assignment. If the teacher was sick, it was up to him to get the substitute up to speed. In many ways this level of responsibility was the only existing thing that maintained the balance of the classroom. But every once in awhile his studiousness to leadership fell short of producing sound judgment. It was on this fateful Thursday that his lack of discernment rose against him.

After wheeling the projector out and plugging it in, he flipped the power on to get it started. As usual, the base light kicked to brilliance and the fan whirled up shortly thereafter. The hum was barely audible over

the noise of the chattering classroom, but Frederick found a way to train his ears to pinpoint any sound that signified possible dysfunction. When he noted that everything maintained its proper working order, he looked to his right to see something that didn't fit protocol: a fellow classmate designing a paper airplane. Since he was the self-proclaimed leader of this band of thirty, he decided it was up to him to address his classmate's lack of educational productivity.

"You know," said Frederick, sternly, "Mrs. Rice is going to make you tear up that paper airplane when she sees it, so I'd suggest you put it away before you lose it."

The rather portly student stiffened up his chin and grimaced.

"Yeah, what's it to you, projector boy?"

"I just think this classroom could run a lot more smoothly if our teacher doesn't delay the lesson because some slacker decided to make an airplane. I don't know about you, but I care about my education."

The portly student, Randy, folded over both wings and threw the messy wad of terrible craftsmanship in Frederick's face. The paper plane landed facedown on the projector tray.

"Okay," said Frederick, "that was completely unnecessary."

Randy's face turned red as he angrily reached for the wadded airplane.

"You know," said Randy, "you need to lighten up. You're always serious about stupid things when you come to class, and frankly it drives me nuts. Every day you criticize someone about something they're doing wrong, but you never take the time to realize that you're being a complete butt-munch. We don't care how professional we look when we come to this class, because we're not here to impress anyone. We're here to be sixteen and free to live however we want. If I want to make a paper airplane, then that's what I'm gonna do. But if you're so bent out of shape by my freedom of choice, then I'll just rip my plane to pieces."

And with that, the portly student grabbed one edge of the crumpled left wing and tore the airplane to shreds. The little fragments of paper flew upward and out like a fountain of snow, with some pieces floating to the floor, while others floated casually onto the projector tray. The shards on the tray cast dispersed shadows along the front wall of the room.

"Oh, thanks a lot," Frederick said. "Now I have to clean this up before the teacher gets here."

"Oh, boo hoo," said Randy. "Why don't you just live a little? Stop treating that stupid projector like it's your child. It doesn't need a bath. It doesn't need your love. Let it go. Here, stuff a piece of paper into the projection mirror. Watch how it magnifies on the wall."

Randy grabbed a handful of paper shreds and tightly jammed it into the projection mirror at the top of the machine. Most of the light on the wall drowned out from the clutter of shadows.

"See, it's not so dangerous, is it? Now you try."

Randy tried to hand Frederick his fistful of litter, but Frederick was hesitant.

"I don't know," he said. "It just seems so unproductive."

"But that's the point. Live like you're having fun, not like you're trying to get promoted. Here, just take a couple pieces and stick them... let's say...in the vent. Yeah, see if you can get the fan to blow them back out."

"I don't know..."

"Come on, Frederick. I dare you."

At that point, Frederick understood the challenge bestowed upon him and realized that to win this student's trust, he'd have to do what he asked. Even though he didn't see the logic in stuffing a fistful of paper shreds into a cooling vent, he figured he could at least earn some respect if he followed through with it. So he took a couple paper shreds from Randy's hand and slid them through the open slots into the cooling vent where the whirring fan took command of relocation duties.

Only, the fan didn't do exactly what Frederick thought it would do. Instead of spitting the paper shreds back through the vent and onto the floor, it sucked them into the projection lamp beneath the tray. Of course, the more he considered it afterward, the more he realized that expecting the paper shreds to shoot through the tiny slots didn't make any sense. But in the heat of his dare, he temporarily shut down his center of wisdom to follow through with the nonsensical. The end result initiated a downpour of trouble that introduced him to the world of scrape-dodging. In this case, the projector lamp heated up the bits of paper until they caught fire. A moment later, when the smoke poured out of the vent, Frederick panicked.

Randy, of course, followed with a couple expletives and an "oh crap," without actually using the word "crap."

The teacher was naturally horrified when she chose the window of the next ten seconds to enter the classroom. She also had a few choice words to say when she noticed the tiny licks of flame giving her the finger through the projector's vent. But in her shock she didn't place the blame on anyone. Instead, she unplugged the projector to minimize the destruction.

As Frederick silently panicked to himself, he questioned why *he* didn't think of unplugging the machine, first. He quietly slapped his sweat-soaked forehead.

When the teacher finally dropped the plug to the floor and found the nerve to speak again, she looked right into Frederick's eyes and demanded an answer. The thing that followed next catapulted his reputation as business leader to tremendous heights.

"Randy thought it would be funny to stick paper into the vents. I tried to stop him, but he wouldn't listen. He kept going on about how lively it would be to stick things into the projector. And because of that horrible attitude, the projector caught fire."

Naturally, Randy, like a man with a gun to his head, refuted Frederick's statement both during his explanation and afterward, but the teacher wouldn't have anything of it.

"That's enough out of you, Randy," she said. "I'm tired of you screwing around in my classroom, and this time you took it too far."

"But, Mrs. Rice—"

"Don't 'Mrs. Rice' me. Your actions were not only careless, but you could've endangered the class. Not only that, but you vandalized school property. What you've done was both shameful and an embarrassment. I can't even look at you. Now go to the principal's office. You're his problem now."

"But Mrs. Rice!"

"Do not shout at me, mister. Get to the principal's office right now."

She pointed aggressively toward the door. Randy gave Frederick the evil eye before he stood up, but Frederick sported the look of innocence. As far as the teacher was concerned, he was still the most responsible student in class. He knew that as long as the boss was happy, the world would continue to turn successfully. Even in the scope of his English class, the world needed to spin again, and he needed to maintain his outstanding reputation with his overseer. Fortunately, the rest of the class hadn't been paying attention to his conversation or his actions prior to the destruction, so for all they knew he was just as innocent as he led them to believe.

Randy, meanwhile, was expelled from school that afternoon. Frederick never saw him again after that day.

"Does it have anything to do with your boss?" asked Gordon almost unsympathetically.

Before Frederick bothered to answer his brother's question, he stumbled across the room to head for the living area. Gordon did his best

to obstruct his incoherent intrusion, but the man was too quick. Before he knew it, Frederick slumped his body onto his favorite leather recliner and curled up like a fetus.

Gordon raised his hands with disgust as lofty cigarette ashes spilled from his brother's shirt onto the leather upholstery he had spent many weeks trying to protect. At first he winced, but then a tear emerged from his eye as a stream of drool poured from his brother's mouth. At that point he was ready to grab the back of his chair and hurl the wretched being out on his butt. But as the tears in turn poured from his brother's eyes, Gordon stopped himself mid-reach and decided to take an adjacent seat.

"Frederick," he spoke, now trying to find the best contours in his cloth-wrapped sofa. The fabric enveloped his cheeks most snugly where the two cushions joined each other.

"I'm in trouble, Gordon," Frederick said.

"Does it have to do with your boss?"

He sniffled before speaking.

"He's going to name me."

Gordon paused a moment, not entirely certain what he meant.

"He's going to name you what?"

Frederick writhed his fingers like a claw as he searched for the answer, scraping his nails across his head. His unkempt hair separated with agony as his talons passed through the tangled strands. His moistened scalp reflected small traces of light as his fingers temporarily exposed small patches of skin.

"His accomplice," he finally admitted.

Gordon leaned back, folding his hands over his lap. He wasn't sure if he felt surprised or confirmed over this accusation, but nevertheless he gave it a moment to sink in.

"His accomplice in soliciting to minors?"

Frederick looked at his brother as if he were stupid.

"No, his accomplice in dumping oil into the ocean."

Gordon raised his eyebrows, this time feeling a sense of surprise. Once again he leaned forward to effectively show his interest. This was undoubtedly the first time he had heard anything about this.

"You guys dumped oil into the ocean?"

Frederick produced this look in his eyes that gave away the answer regardless of what he spoke next, but Gordon listened anyway, to give him some credit. Whether he used this respect to his advantage or not remained to be seen.

"The company was responsible for some minor spillage, yes," said Frederick, hesitantly. "The exact players responsible, and the reason for doing so, are a little less defined in this scenario."

Somehow, Gordon expected the spin doctor approach, but he really hoped this time his brother had it in him to own up to his misdeeds.

"Okay, I understand that you and Smithson and the other bigwigs of Signet weren't directly responsible for the physical act of dumping oil, but by whose responsibility did the spill occur?"

"Again, the actual details behind the event are subjective. The problem is that Mr. Smithson is going to name me as an accomplice when the courts interview him."

"Okay, Fred, don't forget who you're talking to. I'm not the court. I'm your brother. Tell me the truth. What's the real story behind this oil spill?"

Once again, Frederick paused before finding the right answer to say. This time, he closed his eyes and took a deep breath. After the moment of silence passed, Frederick opened his mouth in preparation to speak. Only, when the first syllable eked out of his mouth, he abruptly stopped again. He opened his eyes and looked directly at Gordon, instead.

"Do you think I could have something to drink?" he asked.

The thing about Gordon's beverage choices was that he didn't keep up with his refrigerator stock very well. Every once in awhile he bought jugs of milk and orange juice from the store, but eventually forgot he had them and they'd go bad. It was a cycle he told himself time and again that he'd never repeat, but a month later he'd forget his unwritten rule and buy another round of spoiled drinks. And when they too went down the path to Disgustville, he dumped them down the sink like all the predecessors before them. He also tried experimenting with bottles of soda for a season, but managed to get himself hooked on caffeine to the point that it was gone the moment he opened it. That, of course, left him with bottled water, but he chose to skip out on that for the sake of saving a few extra bucks a week. So all he had left was faucet water. And the problem with his tap was that it tasted too sulfuric to have any redeeming thirst value, so in his mind he didn't have anything to serve tonight.

"I haven't been to the store in awhile," he said.

"Well, you must have some water, right?"

"If you don't mind water from the sink."

Frederick smacked his lips before making the next move. Something in his face convinced Gordon that he didn't like his option, but the conflicting battle between his cheeks and throat, both of which undulated



in his attempt to swallow saliva, communicated the possibility that he'd submit anyway.

And it appeared, a moment later, that his battling facial parts spoke the truth.

Frederick uncurled himself from the fetal position and stood to his feet. Within a moment, he was off to the kitchen. Gordon, meanwhile, found his golden opportunity to reclaim his throne, so he leapt off the couch and hopped into the leather recliner. It caused some additional back pain, but he knew it was worth it. As soon as he brushed out all the nasty cigarette butts from Frederick's abdomen, he wriggled his body into the contours and casually stretched himself into a horizontal position. When Frederick returned from the kitchen with a cloudy glass of water in hand, he maneuvered around the stolen chair and made way for the now unclaimed sofa. Once he took a seat, he set the glass down onto the coffee table and sighed.

"You really need to get a filter for that thing," said Frederick, completely sidetracked from his purpose of arrival.

"I thought about it once, but I remembered clean water meant having uninvited guests over all the time."

"And that's too much to ask from you, isn't it?"

Gordon chuckled at his brother's slick attempt to derail the conversation, which was completely inappropriate given the hour that he knocked on his door.

"Yep, a bit like getting a straight answer from you," he said. "Speaking of which, would you mind finishing this exposé of yours so I can get back to sleep?"

Frederick reached out to take a sip of water, but stopped a few inches short of his lips. Some of the cloudy material settled slowly on the bottom, while the rest of stirred in the glass.

"All right, fine," he said. "Here's what happened."

Frederick set the glass down, but maintained his bent position over the coffee table.

"Keep in mind that none of this is my fault," he added.

"I'm not implying that it is."

"Right..."

Once again, Frederick started getting his voice primed to speak, only to have it cut short by some insecure form of confidence. The next word trickled out in delayed syllables, but somehow didn't make sense as a unit.

"Speak up," said Gordon. "I don't understand what you're saying."

This time Frederick closed his eyes and reached for his murky glass of tap water. Trying to hold back every element of fear that obviously

attempted to envelop his body, he sucked down a huge gulp, grimaced fiercely from the apparent foul taste, and reopened his eyes as he returned the drink to the table.

"I said Smithson ordered the spill," he finally spoke.

"Okay, so there was a command made—that's what I'm hearing, right? It wasn't just a company blunder?"

"No, Smithson ordered the ship's commander to dump it into the Pacific. Plain and simple."

"And obviously the commander complied."

"Obviously."

The harbor possessed an aura of silence on this otherwise chilly afternoon. The only things tempting serenity's destruction were a few random seagulls squawking in the wind. The waves milked over with a churn against the seawall, splashing foamy droplets onto the deck above. The water beyond carried a faint greenish tint, but signs of blackness glinted in the horizon. A large tanker ship called the *Arctic Uncharted* docked ominously in the central port, trying skillfully to hide the deep secret its captain left in its wake. If one were to look closely, he might notice the former shadow of a face dissolving from the hull.

The perturbed captain of the ship set foot on the port deck, where a slick man in a blue suede suit greeted him. The man was clean-shaven, with tie fastened up to his chin, but with eyes seemingly haggard and bloodshot. Even though the captain knew to call him "boss," something about him made him want to call him "the devil." Another man stood several feet behind him, almost in the CEO's shadow. The captain knew the other man as Mr. Knack, but never had the chance to speak with him directly.

Mr. Smithson greeted the captain with an outstretched hand—a slippery hand, coarse with sweat dripping from the palms—but outstretched. His black hair glistened from the perspiration migrating north from the places where his hands got too moist. Normally the captain would consider that odd given the cold nature of the day, but the heat rising from his own neck convinced him there was good reason. When he released his hand from the boss's grip, he wiped it along the side of his pants.

"Mission accomplished, I take it?" spoke Smithson in a virtual whisper.

"I can't speak freely, sir," said the captain. "My personal ethic requires me to forget about this incident. To achieve that responsibility, I can't talk about it."

Mr. Smithson smiled, not in a genuinely nice way, but in a sort of slinky, “that’s what I want to hear,” kind of way. The captain felt his spine shiver from this dastardly grin.

“Fair enough,” said Mr. Smithson. “I guess the next step is to get the governor’s attention.”

The CEO spun around and looked at the mannequin figure behind him.

“Mr. Knack,” he spoke again. “Assuming the plan is effectively in motion, I suppose it’s safe to say that you can now start preparing your move to Europe.”

The shadowed figure looked perplexed by all of this, just as the captain felt since the CEO first made the order to dump the oil at sea. It seemed he wanted to respond, but wasn’t sure what to say. The captain felt his stomach tighten as the boss turned back to face him.

“Captain Morgan,” said Mr. Smithson, with his face now faded, “thank you kindly for your contribution to your company’s advancement. Feel free to take the rest of the month off. We will notify the Coast Guard of the ‘accident’ accordingly.”

And that was that. The CEO turned away once again and headed back for the warehouses. Mr. Knack followed behind, but not closely. A moment later, Mr. Knack turned around with one of the most pathetic looking faces he had ever seen. All he could make of the expression was “I’m sorry,” and then he turned and continued on his way.

Later that night, the captain packed his bags and left for the airport. He didn’t bother telling anyone where he was going, or mention the fact that he didn’t have plans to come back.

“And why exactly did Smithson order the spill?” continued Gordon.

Once again Frederick closed his eyes and took a painful gulp of water. This time he appeared like he wanted to vomit.

“Do you have to keep doing that every time I ask a question?” Gordon said, now feeling his scalp itching.

“Sorry,” said Frederick. “I’ve never been on the spot for something so major before.”

“Well, if Smithson is going to name you an accomplice, you better get used to it.”

“Right.”

“So, once again, why exactly did Smithson order the spill?”

“Are you sure this question is relevant? The thing I’m trying to come to terms with is the eventual finger that’s going to be pointed at me. Not the reasoning behind things.”

“Well, obviously it’s relevant, because you keep avoiding it like the plague.”

Frederick stared at him open-mouthed, clearly beaten by the lack of comeback for this statement. Gordon felt proud for stomping on his older brother’s good name.

A few days before the spill, Frederick sat in his leather office chair going over some account numbers. According to the difference in value over the last three days, the company’s stock went up several points, which in turn skyrocketed the dollar value to nearly eight digits. Even though he didn’t contribute directly to the monetary increase, he felt honored to be a part of it. After all, as vice-president of the company, this kind of thing looked really good on him.

But that happy mood quickly vanished when the CEO of the company entered into the dull, whitewashed room.

Reginald Keebler Smithson had been in charge of the Signet Oil Company for quite awhile, but no one ever questioned how he got there. When Frederick joined the team as a post-graduate student of business, Smithson already had his title. In the short time he took to rise through the ranks, Frederick got to know the stories of many of his coworkers and subordinates. But he never dared question the man above him, a man who always wore a malicious smile. The truth was that of all the people Frederick could’ve been intimidated by, his shady looking boss was the top dog. Of course, Frederick was immensely curious about his superior’s background, but never had the guts to ask. In fact, in the time he spent growing in the company, Frederick never really learned anything about his boss. His only means of contact was to report to him the status of things.

When Smithson stopped a few feet short of his desk, Frederick looked up from his computer and waited for instruction. At first, he expected to share his findings about the company’s financial increase, but Smithson had something else to discuss. The CEO stood there with one hand hanging onto his chin and the other clutching his elbow.

“I have a proposition for you,” he said, with his steely voice. “You’ll either like what I have to share or you won’t. But regardless of your opinion, I need you to consider what I say.”

Frederick carried a healthy sense of well-being around all day, and the financial increase of his company’s stock lifted him even higher. But something about his boss’s words shot all that positive feeling to the

ground. In fact, knocking him off his high horse would've been preferable to the truth. Never have those words spoken in that order spelled good tidings for the one meant to hear them. He lowered his head as he waited for Smithson's next set of unsavory words to follow.

"I have been with this company for a long time and with it have seen vast amounts of growth."

"As have I," said Frederick, low and toward his desk.

"Don't interrupt," interrupted Smithson. "This is important."

"I apologize."

"So, during my tenure as CEO, this company has grown from a tiny little drilling site in the desert to a large-scale, state contracted oil producing enterprise. When I first took over, we produced maybe a few hundred grand-profit a year. That wasn't bad for the small business we were running. But we weren't helping anyone in the long run, either. We spent most of our time drilling for the local gas companies, which you can imagine didn't reap a high return."

"Right."

"I sat with a couple of my advisors and discussed a plan to turn the profit margins around, to swell them beyond levels any of us could imagine. After much delegation, we decided to approach the state government about contracting options to service not just the local markets, but the entire state. Fortunately, our sales pitch worked and the state contracted us to handle all its petroleum needs from the simple gas stations to the large-scale energy suppliers powering everything from border to border. The state essentially gave us the authority to run its entire utility network. As you can imagine, profits soared."

"Like a bird?"

Smithson looked at him with icy eyes. Frederick caught himself on what he said and felt stupid for saying it.

"That was a long time ago," Smithson continued. "We've been giving the state a viable resource for years now, but the problem with this industry is that sooner or later the thunder will wear out. And I'm afraid we've reached that point."

"What do you mean?"

"Profit margins have taken consecutive dives lately, and I'm afraid it's time we looked for other opportunities to grow."

"What are you talking about? Our stocks have risen—"

"This state is sucking us dry, Frederick, and it's time we move this company out of here. The proposition I'm giving you is to help me establish a new base in Europe, effective immediately."

"What?"

"I hear there's a thriving market for power in Germany and I think we need to transplant the company over there to make use of its growth potential."

"But, our stocks, they're rising..."

"I've looked into the country's open resources and I know we have a veritable shot at putting our business back on the rise if we move our base of operations over there."

Frederick couldn't believe how little this man had paid attention to his own financial reports.

"Our business is fine—"

"The obstacle we face, however, is that our state contract binds us from uprooting our operation."

Frederick felt a sigh of relief echo from his lungs. He didn't know why he felt relieved, but a sense of hope somehow came about him.

"But," continued Smithson, "I have a plan for getting us out of that contract."

And seeing as how Smithson was exceptionally clever in executing his plans, Frederick felt that tinge of anxiety creep upon him once again.

Gordon slid two of his fingers up along the tiny folds in his abdomen. Earlier, an itch had overwhelmed a small patch of skin near his belly button, but he had since rubbed it out. Always cautious, he maintained his fingers' position in case it decided to come back.

"So if my early morning brain has processed this correctly," yawned Gordon, "Smithson ordered the spill to break out of his contract with the state?"

Frederick didn't give the answer in words, but his tight mouth and blinking eyes more or less signified his confirmation.

"Hmm, that's almost brilliant...in a sick, twisted kind of way."

Frederick nodded and followed his agreement with a dual stroke of his temples.

"Of course, now that everything has changed overnight," he said, "I'm the one who's gonna get stuck with the questions. If it were my own fault, I'd accept the fact that I'd have to own up to it. But I had nothing to do with this."

"Yeah, except you knew about it, which validates your position as an accomplice. And thanks to your troubling conscience, you've just effectively made me into an accomplice, which is absolutely insane considering I should be passed out in my chair."

"Look, Gordon, I'm sorry to drag you into this. But I really don't know what to do. When Smithson goes up before the court in a few

weeks, this incident will likely come up and he's going to name me. And even before he gets that chance, the state environmental protection agency *and* the grand jury will be knocking down *my* door, since I'm the one who is technically in charge now. Yeah, it may be awhile before Smithson will get his chance to stab me in the back, but the state—it's only a matter of time. By law we had to report the spill to the Coast Guard as soon as it happened, but then Smithson got into trouble with his personal life and effectively robbed us of time. Now it's too late to cover our backs. The best plan I have is to keep it silent, but these things never stay silent for long. A tanker captain knows what happened that day. He could come out of hiding at anytime to alert the authorities. Smithson himself will more than likely confess it to the courts so he can break the company out of its contract with the state. When it all does finally hit the fan, we can claim it was an accident, but by then the damage will be done. Sooner or later, the authorities will know the spill was purposeful and at that point everything will be out of control."

Gordon folded his hands over his lap, leaning forward. At this point, he was ready to make it clear he had heard enough.

"So what am I supposed to do about this?" he asked. "If it's your company, your problem, and your bad luck, then how am I supposed to help you?"

Frederick paused; then took another swig of his drink. Somehow he managed to get through half the glass. When he pulled it away from his lips, he stared at the liquid. The pollutants inside must have wreaked havoc on his system.

"If anyone comes to talk to you about me, protect my good name."

He stared at Gordon for a moment, but didn't say another word. Instead, he set his water to the table, stood up, brushed out his shirt and headed for the door. When he let himself out, he didn't bother to apologize for his intrusion.

And once again, Gordon was left alone to sit idly in his black leather recliner, only this time without finding a comfortable position. He decided to head for his bedroom, instead.

Throughout the next month, Gordon went about his business pretending he never learned of the events that transpired in the ocean. Even when the news started covering the "newly discovered" spill, which a deep-sea fisherman and his small crew stumbled across during a short trip off the coast a few days earlier, he glossed it over, rationalizing that Frederick was resourceful enough to dodge the bullet—assuming the authorities would ever link it to his company. There were a few moments when doubt

slipped in, but its anchor was so flimsy that he regressed to denial—the truth would never surface; his brother could shovel enough cover story to hide behind a wall of BS. He eventually tuned the whole affair out of his life.

It was only when Gina Warren took over the report that he regained interest in the story.

“Just five weeks after the arrest of Reginald Keebler Smithson—who is currently in custody for solicitation to minors—the oil tycoon is once again in the spotlight for his company’s suspected involvement in the recent oil spill in the Pacific.”

He folded his hands over his belly as he watched the angelic form of Gina Warren glide delicately across the dark pavement of a parking lot in her silky red dress of fire. She sidestepped down the rows of cars, maintaining eye contact with him throughout her journey—her eyes flashing with such intensity, as if to say to him, “this report is for your eyes only, darling.” As her garments shimmered under the sunlight, he gripped his armrest tightly to keep from falling off the ride.

“This evening, we have an exclusive interview with the CEO to discuss the truth about his personal life and what went wrong in the open waters.”

Gina continued floating down the parking lot until she reached the front entrance of an office building. Gordon couldn’t tell if it belonged to a business or legal firm, but he was able to make out its dark transparent form and a handful of letters that spelled out half a name. Gina opened the door and let the television screen follow her inside.

Before her next set of words enchanted his living room, a brief silence interrupted the moment and an image of the newsroom flashed. When he blinked again, he realized he was staring at the two evening anchors, Bill Jackson and Lacey Matterhorn, both of whom lacked that gazing eye and fiery red dress.

“Thank you, Gina,” spoke the android-like Jackson, a man who looked satisfied in knowing how to comb his own hair, but not in much else. “We will return to our growing coverage of the Smithson interview in a few minutes. But right now we turn our attention to warthogs. Lacey?”

And once again his rapidly beating heart found a stall point, and his spirits sunk along with his body into his leathery cushion below his thighs. The way these people teased him was brutal.

After having been blitzed with a few minutes of drivel he had no desire to learn about, Gordon perked up again. Gina once again appeared onscreen and brought with her a bag of happiness that she bestowed



graciously onto his lap. Upon seeing her return, Gordon sat upright and eagerly awaited her blissful tales of convicting interviews from Frederick's former boss, which, from the look of the man's face, was bound to be good. He clutched his armrests again just in case he needed the support.

"Thank you, Bill and Lacey," she said, candidly. "Right now I am standing in a conference room where Reginald Keebler Smithson is waiting for interview. Good evening, Mr. Smithson."

The television panned slightly from Gina's lovely form down to Smithson's tidy being, which sat patiently in a leather chair at the foot of a large mahogany table. Gordon could see a khaki colored sleeve with a police department patch sticking out from the right edge just a few inches from Smithson's head.

Smithson delivered a subtle nod.

"So let's cut to the chase, shall we?" Gina said. "What is your take on what happened in the ocean recently?"

A pause followed her question, but not for long. After Smithson leaned over the table and folded his hands, he looked up and raised his eyebrows.

"I am quite uncertain to what you refer to," he said, matter-of-factly.

"Surely, Mr. Smithson, you know about the oil spill found in the Pacific earlier this week, do you not?"

Smithson paused, but looked stupefied.

"I have been locked away for the last month, shut off from the world and its problems. All things happening in the ocean in recent weeks, I know nothing about."

"But, Mr. Smithson, insiders believe your company, Signet Oil, is responsible for the spill. Your tankers were the only ones on record to pass through the region in the last two months, and the reports we have suggest that the spill happened more recently than that. What would you say to these claims?"

"I would say the events taking place within my organization in the last five weeks are unknown to me," he said. "If anything went wrong with my tankers, then the man to ask would be my successor, Frederick Knack. All things involving the company, the pipeline and the tankers are in his hands. When I stepped down last month, my company retained its good name with the state and the environment. I cannot be held responsible for all that happened since."

"So you know nothing about this?"

Smithson paused before letting an afterthought escape his lips.

"No. However," he continued, this time with a sense of informational cheer, "there was chatter prior to my departure that

something major was on the horizon. I interviewed my docked ship captains to see if anyone was plotting anything, but all of them unanimously agreed they heard nothing. The only person I had my doubts about was Captain Morgan of the Arctic Uncharted, but he assured me everything involving the transportation of our oil was sound and secure."

"And how did he assure you of that?"

"He told me that Frederick Knack had complete control over the operations of the tanker vessel, its crew, and its travel route and that there was nothing to worry about despite all the chatter. I trusted his information to be accurate, so I let it go. However, if something happened in the open waters, then maybe I should have been more pressing with the interrogations. Perhaps I should have even interrogated Frederick Knack. If my company was responsible for this environmental disaster, then he might be the one to blame."

Gordon's mouth hung open as he absorbed the CEO's words. To his lack of surprise, his phone sprung into a panic immediately following the short statement.

He didn't want to, but he placed the device to his ear. The loud shouts and babble to follow were completely incoherent, but he had an idea what was said anyway.

"Calm down, Fred," he spoke softly. "The world hasn't collapsed just yet."

A deep silence and a few shallow breaths quickly interrupted the volume of words spilling into his ears. Gordon dangled the receiver by the cord as he took a moment to catch his own breath. He waited patiently to see if Gina would somehow shake the truth out of Smithson.

"While we have your attention," she said to Smithson, "would you mind discussing the circumstances involving the minor solicitations?"

The steely man turned his head completely to face her, but said nothing.

"Our viewers would like to know the whole story involving your accused form of free time," she continued.

"First of all, the whole thing is one big misunderstanding. Secondly, I'm afraid our time together is up. Thank you for giving me a chance to set the record straight about my company. For now, all questions need to be directed toward Frederick Knack, for he is the one responsible for all events taking place with my company's name. Thanks again and have a nice day."

Gina smiled back, but only for an instant. Gordon noticed her eyes narrowing, as if she saw right through him. Mr. Smithson, meanwhile,

stood up from his chair and his escorting officer took him by the shoulder.

"Wait, before you go," she said, "I do have one urgent question to ask."

Smithson stopped and looked directly at her face, holding his composure in such a way to make it clear that his patience had worn out.

"Yes?"

"From a hypothetical standpoint, why would a tanker contracted to your company accidentally spill oil into the ocean at about the same time you departed from society, assuming, of course, that the guilty tanker is one of yours?"

"Once again, that is a question for my successor, as I have no opinion."

"Because some experts believe that the spillage might be just a little too coincidental to be a coincidence, as if maybe it was designed to redirect media focus from your personal life. I'm asking this because the only person who would benefit from this spill would in fact be yourself."

Again, Smithson displayed an obviously cold eye in Gina's direction before answering her question.

"Except that the experts who would believe this theory would ultimately ignore the fact that placing attention on me for one thing will undoubtedly draw a heightened attention on me for the other, which completely makes this diversion theory a complete joke. Ultimately, I could not benefit from such a scandal, because something of this magnitude would hurt my good name, and why on earth would I want to do that?"

"The good name you have from contributing to the community, or the good name you have from soliciting to minors?"

Smithson turned from Gina's gaze and walked abruptly from view.

"All further questions can be addressed to either my successor or my lawyer," he said, from off-camera. "As far as this interview is concerned, goodbye."

"Does that mean you're confessing to the spill?"

No further answer came from Smithson's direction.

Gina smirked for a moment before looking back toward the screen.

"Back to you, Bill and Lacey."

The screen switched over once again, and the two uninteresting co-anchors sat idly at their desks waiting to speak. Both appeared slightly wide-eyed from their obvious surprise at the interview.

"Thank you, Gina," said Bill, cautiously. He turned to his female co-anchor. "The dragon-lady strikes again."

"You said it, Bill," said Lacey, half-cheerful, half-stunned. "Looks like the new head of Signet will have to find a place to hide before she comes knocking on his door."

And with that, the two co-anchors shared a dull laugh, and then moved on to some story about designer flyswatters.

Gordon paused, still trying to process all the shock that came out of Smithson's statements. Nearly a minute had trudged before he remembered his brother was still on the line. When he placed the receiver back to his ear, all that responded was the dial tone.

Gordon spent the next twenty-four hours trying to check on his brother, but Frederick's answering machine kept chiming in. Sometime toward the end of the second evening, the answering machine stopped picking up. By the third afternoon, Gordon gave up and decided that silence was his way of dealing with the problem.

Sometime near the noon hour on the fourth day, he found himself stirring in his recliner. He usually didn't make a big deal of anything his brother got himself into, since he always found a way out. But it also never took this long for him to break silence, so Gordon had to admit he was a little worried.

Nearly two months had passed since he last showed up to work after having his accident, so he figured getting out of the house would've done him some good. As comfortable as his recliner had been to his sore back, he thought his legs needed stretching, so he fought his way out of the cushion's fierce grip and exhaustedly set his feet toward the front door.

Gordon went to Frederick's house in the valley first, but found it unoccupied, so he headed for his office at the harbor. When he arrived in the parking lot a half-hour later, he noticed very few cars parked. Even though he thought it odd, he rationalized that this could have been a regular thing, which was possible considering he had no way to verify the facts otherwise—he never actually came to the harbor before. In any case, he checked his watch to make sure it wasn't Sunday.

After a couple minutes evaluating his possible isolation, he decided the only thing left to do was to walk to his brother's office and see if he was there. After clutching his lower back for relief, he headed toward the double doors marking the entrance to the neighboring office building, hoping to find some answers.

From what Gordon remembered about the Signet Oil Company, most of its business conducted from the harbor, utilizing four docks, three office buildings and three warehouses. Even though the company managed several pipelines throughout the Pacific region, most of its

supply came from the northern ridge of the world, between Alaska and Siberia. The company also subcontracted a series of tanker vessels from a group called Hydro Transports, Inc., which transferred its oil from the refineries to its warehouses. But as far as the intricate details of the company were concerned, Gordon had no knowledge.

He searched the ground floor of the building to locate Frederick's office, but found no receptionist to guide him. The faint buzz of the air conditioning system purred, though the halls were empty of businessmen and secretaries. He traversed one corridor after another, having no luck for the first three floors. When he stepped out onto the fourth floor, however, his luck changed: he found the sign leading to the CEO's office. Even though the sign still brandished Reginald Keebler Smithson's name, Gordon took the chance that Frederick had already moved in place.

When he found Frederick's office at the end of the last hall—the office he thought was Frederick's—he discovered the wooden door closed. He abruptly knocked to get his brother's attention, but received no answer. After pounding a couple more times on the mahogany barrier, he decided to let himself in. To his dismay, the door was locked.

After a couple more minutes of waiting for something to happen, he gave up and decided to wander the premises, hoping to find someone who could give him answers. When he searched the entire office building to find it completely empty, he went down to the security office near the docks. Fortunately, a suit and badge manned the guard depot.

"Excuse me," he said to the distracted guard, who was reading a newspaper. "Can you tell me where everyone is today?"

The guard dropped his newspaper and stared him down.

"Who are you?" he said. "You're not a reporter or an FBI agent, are you?"

"No. I'm just a relative of one of your staff members."

"Do you have identification?"

Gordon patted his trouser pockets, but found them devoid of wallets.

"It's in my car. Listen, I'm just trying to figure out where my brother is. If you can help me, I would appreciate it."

The security guard picked up his newspaper and poked his nose into the left page.

"Everyone but the security staff has been ordered to leave the premises until the oil spill investigation is over. If you need to find your brother, I'd suggest checking the Flounder Geist building downtown. Most of the staff has been redirected there until this area has been cleared of suspicion."

Gordon thanked the guard for his information and returned to his car. Nearly an hour later, he arrived at the Flounder Geist building in the heart of traffic, this time finding life in the parking lot.

But his pursuits became challenged when the office secretary solicited him bad news.

"I haven't seen Mr. Knack in nearly four days," she said. "We tried calling him to make sure he was okay, but we never got through. We hope he'll return soon, but we have no idea when or if that will happen. May I take a message for him in the meantime?"

Gordon didn't bother leaving a message. He just turned around and headed for his car.

After five days passed since Reginald Keebler Smithson placed the hypothetical blame on Frederick for the spill, Gordon received a pleasant surprise. Gina Warren stood outside his front door with a cameraman in tow.

For the first four days, he worried about Frederick's sudden disappearance from everything he knew. But on the dawn of the fifth day, he let it go. He decided if there was anything he could've done to lure his brother out of the shadows, he would've done it. But as it stood, his brother didn't want to be found, so he made the decision to get on with his life. Earlier this morning, he initiated that plan by going to the grocery store to stock up his kitchen. He figured since his back was slowly healing from the massive trauma he endured on the job quite a few weeks ago, he deserved to start assimilating into the world again. Buying a basketful of groceries was his idea of getting back to reality.

When he came home with two plastic bags of produce and frozen food in his hand (with several other bags still out in his car), he didn't expect to see the woman of his dreams standing at his doorstep. But it was the unexpected that made his days worth getting up for.

The sight of her nearly caused him to drop his groceries, but he maintained his grip long enough to reach the door handle. Granted, when it came time to fumble for his house keys, the bags slipped and a few oranges rolled out onto the walkway.

"Hi there," said Gina, with hand outstretched and an unusually pleasant tone. "My name is Gina Warren and I am a reporter with the local news. I'm here to speak with a man named Gordon Knack. Are you him?"

Gordon wanted to stretch his hand to shake hers, but for some reason, seized up.

"Sir..." she continued. "Are you him?"

"Y-yes," he sputtered. "What can I do you for...to do for you?"

"I was wondering if you could answer some questions I have regarding your brother Frederick. May I come in?"

He couldn't believe Gina Warren wanted to come inside his house. At first, he was all too eager to open the door and let her in, but he became paralyzed over the notion that his place might not have been clean. He panicked for just a minute, but then remembered he never let his house get dirty. So, assured that his dream woman would be impressed with his domicile's interior, he carefully inserted the key and opened the door.

A moment later, he found himself stumbling about the kitchen for something viable to drink. At first, he opened the refrigerator to see if he had anything worthwhile on the shelves, but all he saw were bottles of lemon juice and a jar of ketchup. Then, he thought of all the groceries he just bought and tried to recall if there were any beverages in the lineup. He was certain he purchased some bottled water and a carton of orange juice, but didn't think he'd have enough to offer this woman and her cameraman without running out. That, of course, left him with the faucet as an option, and he cursed himself for not being more heterogeneous with his drink choices.

"I'm afraid I don't have much to drink," he admitted to the opening in the living room. "All my consumable beverages are still out in the car."

"That's okay," said Gina, from around the corner. "We won't take up much of your time."

Gordon waited for his heart to slow before taking a careful walk into the living room. He turned the corner to see the cameraman setting up a large news camera near the sofa where Frederick had given his confession a month ago. Gina, meanwhile, adjusted the tiny microphone pinned next to her collar.

"I could bring you some chips or pretzels if you'd like," he said.

"No, that's okay, really. We have to get back to the station shortly to drop off the footage for tonight's airing. This interview won't take long."

"Okay."

Gordon felt the pit of his stomach churn as he ran out of ideas for being a hospitable host. He figured the only thing left to do now was to take a seat in his favorite recliner and wait for the next move.

And that's exactly what he did. He carefully sunk into the leather black cushion of his chair and waited for his body to absorb its warm comfort. Once he felt the contours conform along the curvature of his shoulders, back, waist and thighs, he released a sordid breath and kicked out the footrest. Much of the pain he felt earlier rose from the depths of

his sore muscles and dispersed into the soft fibers, massaging them into relaxation. A moment later, he sensed his stomach loosening from anxiety. Shortly after that, he cleared his mind of any foolish babble that would make him look uneducated before the woman of his dreams. Once all was sorted out, he convinced himself he was ready to face Gina eye to eye.

And the timing couldn't have been more perfect. As soon as he looked up to see Gina pacing next his coffee table, the cameraman spoke the moment of truth.

"Okay, Gina," he said, emotionlessly. "Ready whenever you are."

Without speaking another word, Gina took a seat onto the sofa next to the recliner. She tapped her microphone one more time to make sure everything worked. Then, she leaned toward Gordon with a gentle smile and half-narrowed eyes, to which he immediately felt his stomach churning again. But he tried to remedy the ill feeling with a dry swallow from his itchy throat.

"Thank you for agreeing to speak with me today," said Gina, directly. "I trust you are comfortable?"

"Mostly," said Gordon, feeling it only where his body met the chair.

"Excellent. Now just to clarify for our viewers at home, we are speaking with Mr. Gordon Knack, brother of the new CEO of Signet Oil."

Gordon smiled loosely at Gina, though the butterflies in his stomach made it difficult for him to concentrate.

"Now, Mr. Knack," she continued, "the first question many of us have this evening concerns the whereabouts of your brother Frederick. Our sources tell us that everybody is looking for him, but no one knows where he is. Where is he?"

Gordon continued to smile, trying his best to swat the butterflies away.

"Mr. Knack?"

Gordon felt them moving slowly up his esophagus, but he didn't quite have the strength or will to shoot them out through his throat.

"Mr. Knack, are you with us?"

He lightly pressed on his stomach to try forcing out a burp. Gina's voice was so lovely, even when it was sharp.

"It seems we've lost our contact," said Gina, to her cameraman. She leaned in closer to Gordon and snapped her fingers repeatedly, just inches from his eyes. "Gordon, wake up. You're on the air."

Gordon finally managed to eke a burp from his gut, disbursing the butterflies—or at least calming them down.



"S-sorry, Gina," he said, finally. "My nerves got the best of me. What was your question?"

"Where is your brother?"

Gordon found himself mesmerized by her enchanting green eyes, the exotic shape of her thin dark eyebrows and the serpentine quality of her hypnotic stare. Her dark hair brushed savagely tame over her forehead and down the side of her cheek leaving him eager to reach out and stroke those locks past her shoulder and graze the soft texture of her skin in passing. But he thought a woman like her would burn his hand the second it came in contact, so he stuck his hands underneath his chair cushion to suppress his urges.

"Mr. Knack, we *are* on a time schedule today," she said.

"I don't know where he is, Gina," he snapped to attention. "He disappeared."

Gordon smiled gleefully as Gina looked at her cameraman with a frustrated pair of eyes.

"I can see we're gonna have to do a lot of editing before six o'clock tonight," she told the cameraman, who returned the sentiment with a sigh.

She returned her focus to Gordon, fighting hard to display a smile.

"Fine," she continued. "I guess he will turn up when he is ready. So onto other matters—what kind of man is Frederick Knack? Is he kind, shrewd, cautious, reckless—how would you characterize him to our viewers?"

Gordon saw the frustration in her face ebbing under her smile, so he tried hard to maintain his focus on the conversation more and on her beautiful and intimidating presence less.

"My brother is a go-getter," he said. "He works hard to be an effective leader. He does what he can to lead his team down the path of prosperity."

"Would you say that your brother is a man of honesty? Does he lead his team down a path of integrity?"

"Well, seeing as how I never really worked with him, I couldn't comment on his methods of leadership. I can only claim that he does what he does with determined passion. I'd like to say he does it honestly..."

"But you can't be for sure?"

"I can be pretty sure."

"Mr. Knack, what was your first reaction when you found out Frederick would become CEO of Signet Oil?"

"Well, let's see...I felt...well..."

Gordon thought back to the night when his brother appeared drunk on his doorstep, frightened of the trials ahead. He remembered how little compassion he had for his situation, because he was too sleepy to really take it to heart. But now, in his more awakened state, he understood what becoming CEO actually meant to him. It was a dream tainted by scandal and bad timing. For the first time since this all began, Gordon felt sorry for more than his brother's need to disappear; he felt sorry for his shattered dreams. The man who had walked tall during his entire youth, who averted quite a few mishaps through the use of skillful truth weaving, had fallen. For the first time since that night several weeks ago, he saw life through his brother's eyes.

"I felt sorry for him," he said, a bit surprised by his own answer.

It seemed to catch Gina off guard, too. "Excuse me?" she said, after a pause.

"I felt sorry for him, for having to follow in that slimeball Smithson's path, fixing all the tangled webs he created during his tenure as CEO."

"I see. And how did Frederick respond to his recent promotion?"

"He was a bit overwhelmed with all the loose ends that Smithson left him to tie."

"A little hot under the collar, was he?"

"Wouldn't you be hot under the collar if you had to follow in Reginald Keebler Smithson's footsteps?"

"I suppose that's possible. But tell me this; why would your brother disappear in the wake of his promotion? If he has a passion to lead his team down a road to prosperity, why would he abandon them at the start of his appointment?"

"Because he was..."

Gordon had to stop. He saw now where this conversation was headed. He thought back to the Smithson interview and all the accusations that popped up about the oil spill, and something deep inside convinced him this was where Gina was leading him. Until now, there had been no proof the spill came from a Signet tanker, but the likelihood was so stacked against it that even the slightest leak of the truth would've been enough to send the courts knocking down his brother's door. And even if the truth doused Frederick in black ink, he was still innocent of Smithson's reckless scheme, so Gordon felt it was his duty to protect that, even if the word accomplice somehow came into play.

"Because he was what?" said Gina, inquisitively.

"Because he was afraid."

Her eyes lit up from this comment.

"Afraid of what?"

“Afraid of...well...”

He knew what he wanted to say, but he wasn't sure how to deliver it. He carefully adjusted himself in his seat to acquire a more comfortable position, but by this point he felt the novelty of his recliner growing thin. A thought simmered in his brain, though the inquisitive woman and the fading comfort of his chair battled with his coherence. Whether or not the words in his head were appropriate, he didn't know, but, in the end, he knew they had to be said, despite the reaction that might follow.

“Afraid of what, Gordon? Tell me. Afraid of what?”

“Afraid of meeting you, Gina.”

Again, he seemed to find the right words to stun his dream girl into silence. She hung there a moment, looking at her cameraman for response, but he seemed too fixated on recording the interview to actually pay attention to it. She looked back at Gordon with a nervous smile.

“Afraid of meeting me?” she said, surprised, but mildly flattered. “How so?”

“He was afraid you'd try looking for him and cornering him by putting words in his mouth.”

Again, she found herself speechless.

“Don't get me wrong,” he continued, “he would've loved a chance to meet you—the most lovely news reporter in the entire southwest. But he's terrified of you, because your reputation would've led him to say something untrue. And given the mess his boss left behind, that would've been more than he can handle right now.”

She regained her composure.

“And what exactly did his boss leave behind?”

“Well, you know...CEO related stuff. I don't know all the details, since I'm not part of that company, but Frederick complained about loads of paperwork that never got sorted out, and mutinous captains and stuff of that nature. With all the business problems falling onto his plate during the transition, the last thing he wanted was to be tricked into saying something that wasn't true...that he had no prior knowledge about, all the while uncertain of whether or not his boss had even been truthful to him to begin with.”

“And what do you think he would've said had I had a chance to interview him?”

“I don't know what he would've said, because he's not here in front of you. But I am, and my response is that Smithson lied to you. He knew perfectly well what was going on with his company after he stepped down, because the wheels that he set in motion led to the events that we're supposed to believe he knew nothing about.”

"So you think Smithson knew about the oil spill before our interview?"

"I think Smithson was the one who ordered it."

Gina raised her eyebrows at this remark.

"Ordered it?"

At that point, Gordon realized his clever attempt to get his brother off the hook had in fact opened the wrong door, and now the momentum was too out of control to stop.

"Um...yeah...."

"And what gives you that idea?"

"It's just...something...something that sounds like him."

"I see. Mr. Knack, Reginald Keebler Smithson has set for himself a very unflattering reputation, but *ordering* an oil spill? Why would he do that?"

"I don't know. Maybe he wants to break out of his contract with the state. Maybe he wants to move the company to Europe. I don't know."

"That's a very wild theory you have there."

"Yeah, well..."

"Did your brother have the same theory?"

At that point, Gordon believed he lost control of the conversation. He felt proud at first for going toe to toe with Gina Warren for as long as he had, but he realized sooner or later she'd get the best of him, and that time had finally come. He watched enough of her news reports to know any interview she conducted would somehow lean in her favor, and challenging that would've been foolish. As he sat uncomfortably in his leather recliner, feeling the sweat emanating from his back and shoulders, he realized his biggest mistake was letting her through the front door. All he had to do was to decline her request for an interview, but he had to let infatuation get in the way. Now the damage was eminent.

Therefore, he found no point in hiding the details anymore. He found no point in covering for his brother anymore. Gina wasn't about to stop asking questions—at least not before getting the answers she sought for. The truth was he needed to get this over with so he could get some rest and recover in peace. He wasn't sure how it would affect his brother in the long run, but Frederick always knew how to remove himself from sticky situations gracefully. There was no reason he couldn't get through this one, either. In truth, he only involved Gordon to buy some time.

"Gordon," said Gina, interrupting his thoughts. "Can you answer my question?"

"Smithson told him he wanted out of the contract with the state. Something to do with the industry on the west coast taking a dive. He

told my brother that he had a plan to move the company to Germany where they could flourish, but he never said how he planned to pull it off. Everything sort of fell apart for my brother after that. When the ship came back to dock just before Smithson's arrest, Frederick realized what the plan involved. Smithson still played it off as an innocent blunder and promised to take care of it right away, but his arrest prevented him from doing anything further about it. By that point, too much time had passed and it was too late for my brother to fix it."

"And now he's in hiding..."

Gordon felt his heart beating faster, now worried that he might have betrayed his brother. He wanted to say something else to reduce the situation's harshness, but nothing came to mind. The clock on the wall ticked slowly in silence, setting the rhythm of his impending guilt. Gina, meanwhile, leaned back against the sofa, looking at her cameraman with the eyes of a hawk.

"You can cut the tape now," she said to him, coolly. She looked back at Gordon with a thin smile on her face. "Thank you for the interview, Gordon, and for setting the record straight about your brother. I know this was hard for you, but I appreciate it, nonetheless."

"It was all Smithson, Gina. This whole thing was his fault. Remember that."

She leaned forward and set her hand on Gordon's knee. At first, he felt a sudden jolt of electricity course through his body from her touch, but then he realized what she suckered him into, so the happy feeling died quickly.

"I know, Gordon. That's what I'm setting out to prove."

"My brother had nothing to do with this."

"I know."

She carefully removed the microphone from her blouse and stood up from the sofa. She brushed the wrinkles out of her skirt.

"I know I can be intimidating," she said, suddenly. "My reputation of 'dragon lady' didn't follow me without reason. But I don't embark on missions to condemn innocent people. I just want you to know that before you see me as the evil woman who sicced the FBI on your brother's trail. I'm after the truth about Reginald Keebler Smithson and my heart is to see him receive every ounce of justice he deserves for every despicable thing he's guilty of. I knew he was covering up about the oil spill; I just needed your brother to confirm it for me. When I found out he disappeared, I thought maybe his nearest relative could help me. And it seems that after several minutes of useless runaround, you ended up

being the ammunition I needed to confront Smithson with the final question.”

“And what’s that?”

“Tune into the six o’clock news tonight to find out.”

Gina smiled almost sweetly as she took a step away from the sofa and made her way toward the front door. Before she and her cameraman managed to make it to the front of the house, she turned around and smiled one more time.

“And just for the record,” she said, from the foyer, “I’m actually very nice when I’m off the clock. But don’t tell anyone, okay?”

And then, she was gone.

There was no doubt that the employees of Signet Oil and their families had a tumultuous time brooding over the whole oil spill nonsense this past week. Gordon, however, knew of Gina’s fiery ambition to shed light on the truth almost intimately. If she could offer even the slightest hint that the front doors to end this madness would fly open tonight, he believed her. And even though he was still horribly nervous over the interview’s possible fallout, he sidled up to his favorite recliner, plunged in, trying to find that most satisfying position, and turned on his home theatre system to embrace the inevitable. After a tense moment of searching out the most appropriate decibel level for his five-channel speakers, he took a quick glance of his clock, saw it was two minutes to six and inhaled a deep breath.

The moment came swiftly. After a brief announcement from the weatherman that skies would remain dry for the hundredth day in a row, Bill Jackson introduced the highly anticipated segment that Gina Warren promised the community she would deliver.

“Thank you, Bill,” she said. She turned to reveal the inside of a tiny conference room in some undisclosed location. “As many of our viewers know tonight, we have tracked the solicitation to minors case of Reginald Keebler Smithson for over a month now, trying to find some end in sight. Tonight, we are standing in the doorway of his former conference room, where authorities have granted us permission to conduct one final interview. But, before I sit down to talk to Mr. Smithson, I would like to briefly show some footage of another interview I conducted a few hours ago with the brother of the current CEO of Signet Oil to shed light on the current situation with the company.”

A brief pause followed as Gina stared motionlessly at the television screen, obviously waiting for something to happen. A moment later, the video feed changed and Gordon recognized the scene immediately. He

saw his living room wall on screen, along with a few of his hung paintings, his favorite leather recliner and himself sitting anxiously in the chair. For a split-second, he thought the footage was live. But when reality hit him, he noticed Gina's direct voice emitting from his sound system.

"And what do you think he would've said had I had a chance to interview him?" said her voice, from off the left edge of the screen.

"I don't know what he would've said, because he's not here in front of you," said the onscreen version of Gordon.

As the real life version of Gordon watched himself through the picture, he noticed the redness in his face gradually intensifying and the awkwardness of his hands fidgeting underneath his thighs.

"But I am," continued the onscreen Gordon, "and my response is that Smithson lied to you. He knew perfectly well what was going on with his company after he stepped down, because the wheels that he set in motion led to the events that we're supposed to believe he knew nothing about."

"So you think Smithson knew about the oil spill before our interview?"

"I think Smithson was the one who ordered it."

"Ordered it?"

A very slight pause followed.

"Um...yeah...."

"And what gives you that idea?"

"It's just...something...something that sounds like him."

"I see. Mr. Knack, Reginald Keebler Smithson has set for himself a very unflattering reputation, but *ordering* an oil spill? Why would he do that?"

"I don't know. Maybe he wants to break out of his contract with the state. Maybe he wants to move the company to Europe. I don't know."

"That's a very wild theory you have there."

"Yeah, well..."

"Did your brother have the same theory?"

A much longer pause followed. Gordon saw himself lingering on some forgotten thought.

"Gordon, can you answer my question?"

"Smithson told him he wanted out of the contract with the state. Something to do with the industry on the west coast taking a dive. He told my brother that he had a plan to move the company to Germany where they could flourish, but he never said how he planned to pull it off. Everything sort of fell apart for my brother after that. When the ship came back to dock just before Smithson's arrest, Frederick realized what

the plan involved. Smithson still played it off as an innocent blunder and promised to take care of it right away, but his arrest prevented him from doing anything further about it. By that point, too much time had passed and it was too late for my brother to fix it.”

“And now he’s in hiding...”

Another short pause followed before the screen flipped back to the live feed of Gina standing in the conference room. Only this time, her position changed and she was now standing next to Smithson, who again looked stone-faced and not the least bit amused for having been dragged into yet another conversation with this woman.

Gina turned toward the ex-CEO and sported her usual bemused look as she asked him the first question.

“Mr. Smithson,” she said, “you’ve seen the tape of Frederick Knack’s indirect confession. The tape clearly identifies you as the party responsible for the offshore oil spill that happened what must have been nearly six weeks ago. What have you got to say about that?”

Smithson looked clearly perturbed by this information.

“I thought we were here to discuss the elements of my other charges,” he said, through clenched teeth.

“Not one for focusing on the guilty truth, are you Mr. Smithson?”

Gordon immediately remembered how Smithson displayed his disapproval for switching the subject from the unconfirmed oil spill to his charges about minor solicitations in the last interview.

“Your professionalism overwhelms me,” he sneered.

“Well, let’s have it. You’ve been named the guilty party, according to the new CEO’s brother. What do you have to say about that?”

“I say that this is the kind of question I would only answer in court.”

Gina snickered, which even Gordon had to admit was a bit unprofessional of her.

“Does that mean you’re pleading the fifth?” she said.

“You’re a smart girl, Miss Warren.”

“I see. You know, if there’s anything a good movie has taught us in recent years, it’s that only the guilty parties plead the fifth.”

Smithson didn’t seem to have a response for this. He only stared at her with birdlike eyes, sneering ever more nastily at her remarks.

“So assuming that your desire to plead the fifth is admission to guilt,” she continued, “why would you want to move your company to Europe? Everything seemed to be flourishing for Signet prior to the spill. According to an anonymous tip we received last week, your stocks were reaching an all-time high the same week you lost your position. Why give that up for Germany?”



"The market is stronger in Germany," said Smithson.

"How so? It seemed, according to these sources, that the market is just fine over here."

Smithson didn't answer. Gordon couldn't tell if it was out of refusal, or if it was because he hadn't thought up a good excuse to counter with just yet. He leaned forward as he anticipated the next response to this climactic question.

"Mr. Smithson, our viewers would like a response."

Smithson strained his eyes as his lips curled, but after a moment he could no longer bear the tension in his face. He exploded in a shout.

"You infernal woman," he screamed, "why won't you let me be? I agreed to answer your questions in an attempt to minimize my sentence, and you pelt me with these accusations that can only damage my case further! I did not agree to conduct these interviews so I could further incriminate myself! Stop asking these loaded questions when you know I can't give you a convincing answer!"

Gordon noticed a guard advancing onscreen in response to the outburst, but Gina waved him off.

"You mean a soft answer, don't you?" she said, no longer amused. "One that sounds fluffier than the truth? Is that what you mean by convincing?"

"Oh, blow it out your (bleep)ing (bleep), you horrible filthy (bleep)!"

Gordon forgot that the news aired on a seven-second delay.

"I never said I'd give you easy questions, Mr. Smithson. I told you through our contact that I was after the truth. If you got it into your head that you could lie your way out of incrimination, I'm sorry that it's starting to backfire. But, nevertheless, our viewers would like your answer."

"Tell your viewers to stuff it up their nosy (bleep)ing (bleep)s! This interview is over!"

"Fine, but we're not leaving until you tell us the truth. We'll stay here all night if we have to."

"I've pleaded the fifth, you ignorant (bleep)!"

Gina's face turned fiery red.

"Enough with the language, Mr. Smithson. This is the evening news. Kids are watching this."

"Send them to bed, the ungrateful (bleep)ing brats!"

For the first time in her career, or as much as Gordon has seen anyway, Gina flustered. He felt proud for going toe to toe with her earlier in his own interview, but he was genuinely surprised to see someone managing to tip her over. His back started to strain from the pressure, but

he leaned in ever closer to see what she would say next—if there was a way she could regain control of the situation.

“Mr. Smithson,” she said, now appearing exhausted, “I’m asking again: how is the market in Germany going to pull your company out of a financial dive that it was never actually in?”

“Are you deaf, or just stupid? I’ve pleaded the fifth! This interview is over!”

“I am not a member of law enforcement, Mr. Smithson. I am with the press. I will not leave until I get the truth. And according to those overseeing your containment, neither will you. So stop wasting my time and the time of our viewers and answer the bloody question.”

Smithson narrowed his eyes further, to which Gordon didn’t think possible, but didn’t say anything further in the line of keeping quiet. Instead, he looked up to the guard, who in turn nodded at him with a smile of confirmation and pointed at the newswoman as if to say he was on her side. A moment later, Smithson rubbed his bare hands through his matted hair and let out a horrible sigh.

“Oh fine, you miserable twit,” he said. “I give up. So here’s your bloody answer: I didn’t want to move the company to Germany for the profit margins. I know the profits were high enough as they were. I wanted to move there because the legal drinking age is considerably lower than the age we have in America. Happy now, you (bleep)ing (bleep)?”

Gina stood there in stunned silence. Even the guard looked bewildered. Gordon nearly fell off his chair from the absurd statement.

“Excuse me?” she said.

“Teenagers are allowed to drink alcohol in Germany. Hence, young sixteen-year-olds are allowed to get drunk. Do you understand now, you brainless (bleep)?”

“Are you telling me you wanted to uproot your entire company... with all your employees and their families...to Europe, for...for... drunken sixteen-year-olds?”

“They’re less likely to turn you down when they’re drunk,” he said.

“You would jeopardize everything for a drunken sixteen-year-old?”

“Not one drunken sixteen-year-old. Many drunken sixteen-year-olds.”

Gina’s face turned from a deep red to a soft green.

“And you contaminated the ocean for this?”

“Not without help from my devoted staff.”

Smithson looked into the television screen dead on and sneered.

“You hear that, Mr. Knack? You hear that, Captain Morgan? You hear that, members of the Signet Oil council? If I’m going down for this whole conspiracy, you’re coming with me!”

Gina looked over the left edge of the screen and cut her fingers across her neck, signaling her cameraman to cut the feed. A moment later the image switched back to the newsroom where Bill Jackson and Lacey Matterhorn stared into the screen with their jaws dropped. Neither one had anything to say. About twenty seconds later, a stage tech informed them they were back on, but they still had nothing to say. It was the weatherman who finally spoke up.

“And tomorrow we will see the possibility of our one hundredth and one straight day of sunshine.”

And immediately his voice trailed off into an awkward silence.

Gordon’s greatest worry over the next few days was the possibility of fallout from the incriminating confessions passed through the airwaves. When Smithson robbed himself of any chance at getting off lightly during his fit of rage, the future of Signet, and in hindsight, the future of Frederick became highly uncertain. When the local news recovered from its bout of silence following the last interview, Gina and her colleagues began covering the FBI investigations that immediately ensued. Reports about agents swarming over the company harbor searching for additional evidence came on a nightly basis. Gordon held his breath every time the Signet name was mentioned, holding a twinge of hope that it would somehow emerge from the madness unscathed. His brother, of course, remained in hiding during this new and nerve-racking scouring season.

Since the interviews aired, Gordon tried on many occasions to contact Frederick, but his phone remained silent. Authorities also made attempts to contact his brother—occasionally knocking on Gordon’s door to fish for answers—but no one had a clue how to reach him. He even made an effort to call his parents, in case they heard anything, but everyone on the face of the earth was none the wiser. And as the investigations around Signet got more heated with the discovery of Smithson’s plan to break out of the contract with the state documented on paper and filed in the back of his cabinet, Gordon began to think his brother would remain in hiding forever.

Then, finally, after several weeks of investigations, a rival oil company took the place of the missing CEO, buying Signet through a hostile takeover. And just like that its future turned on a dime. The company lost its name, adopting a subsidiary name to its new owner, and half the former staff was laid-off. Among the list of people to lose their jobs,

Frederick was at the tiptop. The new CEO appeared smugly onscreen as he announced that “drastic changes had been made to the company.” Clearly the golden age was over.

It was a night during the seventh week following the last of the interviews that news involving Reginald Keebler Smithson and Signet Oil finally died into obscurity. Smithson was on his way to trial, the new oil company started recruiting for new tanker captains and whatnot, and Gina Warren started her prowl on a corrupt police officer accused of poisoning his department’s water cooler. Frederick had yet to emerge from the shadows, but Gordon decided to stop worrying about him. The truth was his brother had nothing to return to after the dust cleared, so coming out of hiding now wouldn’t have done him much good anyway. And even though he thought that was still an unlucky reality to arrive to, Gordon decided if anybody could handle the repercussions of big business turned upside down, his brother was the man for the job. So he stopped worrying, cranked up his surround sound, and delighted in the ecstasy of his favorite newswoman ripping a new one out of the corrupt police officer’s navel.

It was later that night, after he passed out in his chair, that he awoke to the sounds of thunder. His blurry eyes opened to see a man with a mullet fighting a man with ten tattoos along his shoulders. The two fleshy beasts trounced each other across a wooden stage, nearly hitting an older blond guy with silver-rimmed glasses and a big face, while a fat woman in a short skirt looked on. Disgusted by his rude awakening, Gordon powered off the surround sound and turned off his television, plunging himself into darkness lit only by the tiny flashing Christmas lights of his stereo equipment. A moment later he closed his eyes.

Bang, bang, bang came the sound for a second time. This time his eyes flung open to see his television off and his room still dark, and he knew without a shadow of a doubt it wasn’t thunder.

His back still hurt after more than three months since his on-the-job injury, but he stifled the pain long enough to set his feet to the floor and slowly melt out of the chair. Once he stood upright, he carefully, though exhaustedly, scuffed his way across the living room to the front door. Upon reaching it, he opened it to greet the person outside.

Only, there wasn’t anyone standing there.

Uncertain of whether he was dreaming or not, Gordon poked his head through the door to see if anyone was running away—perhaps to play a joke on him. But he didn’t see a soul. The cool night air was silent with nothing in the area disturbing it. Scratching his head at the mystery, he decided to go back to sleep. But, before he stepped inside completely,

he caught something white taped up next to his brass knocker. Curious, he ripped off the tiny paper to examine it. What he saw were a series of words scribbled in black ink across its tiny white face. The words, which were obviously meant to give him peace, were very simple and very direct. In short, they read: *Gordon, I'm alive, so don't worry. I changed my name and am working for a used car lot in a city that I cannot name right now. I'll tell you more when I feel it's safe, but for now, don't worry. Thanks for your help. And don't tell anyone that you heard from me. Frederick.*

Gordon figured his brother had good reason for staying silent for so long, so he honored his part by crumpling up the paper and tossing it away. He didn't think anybody else would come looking for him now that everything involving the investigation had slowed, but he decided it was better to keep this bit of information to himself, just in case.

And with that in mind, Gordon hobbled his way to his bedroom where he hoped he could finally get some decent sleep again, shutting his brain off from everything he learned since his furniture moving partner accidentally dropped a leather recliner on his back.

## Shell Out

Greg signed the rent check and ripped it from his thinning checkbook. The tearing split the structure of his wounded heart. It was a common theme every man dealt with, but his theme was uncommonly harsh. His theme was chronic. And there it was: another chunk of his diminishing wealth escaping. With every ounce of hope he tried to hang on, foolishly. The envelope had to be stuffed and sealed; it was inevitable.

He stared at the numerical figure in that little rectangular box; it was impossible. There was no way a party could expect a payment so high.

The bank register appeared to laugh at him, too, the way the pages flit open like a sly grin. He flipped it to the last record to see the horror of his past figures carrying the same denominations as this, many topping the upper end of three digits. A bead of sweat rolled from his forehead; this couldn't have been fair.

He looked around his dingy apartment to see a sparse supply of amenities: a chair, a nineteen-inch television, a two-cushioned sofa and a coffee table. There weren't any magazines on the coffee table, there weren't any extra pillows on the furniture, and there certainly weren't any remote controls to go with the television. And yet, judging by his current bank balance, it seemed that adding accessories to his bare apartment would be impossible.

A tear rolled from his eye as he recorded the rent's value under his account total. The final balance came out thin—skin of his teeth thin. Once this check made it to the renter's hands, he'd be flat broke. And that would stick him with canned soup and water for breakfast, lunch and dinner for at least a week.

It was funny, really; two years ago Greg had it all worked it out. He would leave home, move halfway across the state, and attend a major university to study philanthropy. The plan was perfect; it would make him more successful than his father was. All he needed was a small cash reserve for an apartment and a little extra for his first semester's tuition, which he had, with extra change leftover to flirt with any random cute girl to cross his path.

But then, disaster happened: economic turmoil flipped its middle finger at him. Although he managed to land his apartment and pay for his first term's tuition—with cash leftover to buy two tickets for *Rush Hour*—the wide open job market stood behind two massive iron doors soldered

shut with melted locks. His perfect plan to manage some gazillionaire's money somehow got lost at the printer's shop.

Greg spent his first month in the big city with the Classifieds in his lap, circling any insignificant, no-degree-required job he could find. The majority of available positions involved telemarketing or other tragic options that required unhappy people to fake a smile, even when no one was looking. None of that was his forte, but when the end of the month came, he knew he had to do something for money. With the market he craved somehow lost in shadows, he realized lowering his standards was the only way to pull it off.

He applied to a local temp agency for additional help, thinking a temp agency could never fail, since it knew the urgency of finding a job, while having resources to fill a crappy position immediately. Granted, there wasn't much glamour in a job like telemarketing, but it paid better than a fast food place, so he swallowed his pride, stuck out his thumb, and hitched a ride to the local Wal-Mart—a common temp agency hub—for his interview. He would've driven himself had he not needed to save gas for emergencies.

After delivering a successful interview through the use of fake smiles, he landed his first telemarketing job with a local phone company.

At first, he assumed he could advance the ranks to become the CEO of the corporation; nevertheless, reality hit him when he failed to make a sale during his first month. His employers furthered his understanding when they assured him he would go far—very far—as long as it was with a different company.

When another rent check's due date approached from the horizon, Greg returned to the Classifieds. There, he circled a job that didn't require so many salesman demands.

He managed to survive a little over a year at the Psychic Friends Hotline, which was amazing considering he couldn't even read his own mind. But he eventually fell into hot water when a caller suspected him a fraud. It was a shame, too, because his future predicting skills, or what passed as skills, landed him a weekly paycheck almost worth smiling about—almost. The call in particular, which brought the lead psychic to break out his big fat red pen, began after lunch:

"Well, Heeeellllloooo," said Greg, as he dangled the phone by his mouth. "Thank you for choosing the Psychic Friends Hotline, where your future can make your dreams come true. Let us join minds, Mis..."

“Wow, hi,” interrupted the male caller. “I can’t believe I’m finally calling the Hotline. I’ve thought about it for months, ever since my girlfriend dumped me, but she used to make fun of it saying it was all a big joke. I didn’t get the nerve to call until a girl at the fast food place I work at said, ‘Tommy, you need to get over Mandy. She was never good for you. If you call the Psychic Friends Hotline today, the friendly psychic can tell you your future so you don’t have to end up with girls like her again.’ Wasn’t that nice of her? So here I am, calling the Psychic Friends Hotline, and I’m nervous, but I need advice.”

“Well, Mister Tommy, let us see what we can find.”

“Whoa, you know my name? You’re the real deal, man.”

“Of course, Tommy. I’m a psychic.”

“That’s so amazing. That is so frickin’ awesome. I’m listening to everything Kelly says from now on. So what’s my relational future?”

For effect, Greg emitted a droning noise; he liked to do this whenever he needed the illusion of reading futures. Habit also brought him to spit and gurgle at the end of the show. The whole system took about sixty seconds of the caller’s time.

“According to my amazing psychic powers, I can predict that getting over Mandy will be in your best interest and that awaiting a new love is in your future.”

“Really? When?”

“Well, Tommy, I predict a new beautiful woman will show up in your life very soon. And this woman, Tommy, you will not only find attractive, but with her you will also desire a relationship.”

“Wow, really? Are you sure?”

“Do not underestimate the all-knowingness of a psychic friend. There will be a girl arriving very soon who will catch your attention and fill your thoughts with love. And this woman will be highly, highly attractive.”

“Omigod, omigod, that’s so frickin’ awesome.”

Greg paused, as he waited for Tommy to stop hyperventilating.

“Tommy, are you okay?”

“What else can you tell me? What else can you tell me?”

Greg cracked a smile, as he always did when he got a caller begging for information.

“I predict this woman will seduce you with her beauty and make you want to sleep with her all day and night.”

At this point, Tommy’s words flew off his lips so fast that Greg couldn’t understand a word he said.

“Tommy, I sense you’re happy about this revelation.”



"This is the greatest moment of my life! Thank you, Psychic Friends Hotline!"

Greg lurched. "But, Tommy, there is still more to this tale."

He normally preferred the easy way out. Since he was getting paid by the hour, not the minute, he tried to end his calls after the first load of crap was dished. But for some reason, whether it was a desire to look productive for his boss, or just the thick layer of smoke in the air getting to his brain, he couldn't resist dragging this one out.

"What's that, Psychic Friend? What could possibly be better than a beautiful woman coming into my life?"

"Well, Tommy, I'm afraid there's a bulldozer accident in your future."

Tommy's chipper spirit took an abrupt turn.

"What do you mean? I thought this was about my love life."

"It is about your love life, Tommy, but the path to happiness will be mildly detoured by a bulldozer—a big yellow one."

"How so?"

Greg found a tabloid magazine opened haphazardly along the corner of his desk and consulted the cover story for details.

"I sense the bulldozer will be under the control of a crazed vampire named Gruptach the Wagner, who will use the device to wreak havoc on humanity."

"No, that can't be."

"Oh, but it is what I see. A terrible vampire in really horrible clothes—I'm guessing from one of those whacked-out French designers—will try and infect the living with his bloodsucking disease, and you, Tommy, will be at the center of it."

"The vampire is going to bite me?"

Greg paused for dramatic effect, and also to think up his next line of BS.

"No, Tommy, the vampire will not bite you; I see that clearly."

"Really?"

"Yes, Tommy, and not because he's a sissy—he is indeed not a sissy—but because you are a hero."

"I'm a hero?"

"You are a bona fide, certified, classified hero, and the vampire will be afraid of you. Gruptach the Wagner will be downright, out of sight afraid of you."

"Then...how will there be a bulldozer accident in my future?"

"The bulldozer, Tommy, is not afraid of you. The vampire, though too frightened to bite you, will have no regret sending his devious devices

your way, stopping at nothing to bowl you over—to flatten you, making you easily devoured by his bloodsucking fangs. But I see you acting swift, Tommy. The hero won't allow that bulldozer to touch you.

"The accident, Tommy, will be the bulldozer falling into a ravine, into which it will attempt to knock you over. In your swift action, you will dodge the ten-mile-an-hour bulldozer, just as it plummets over the edge. And in your triumph, Tommy, you will see the explosion wipe away all obstacles that threaten your dream—your destiny of crossing paths with the beautiful woman."

"Wow, are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure, Tommy! I am a psychic friend. I know the future of your path to the future. You cannot begin to underestimate my ability to convince you of these ironclad predictions. What I've told you today, I stand by in the vicinity of one hundred percent, with a hundred percent probability of definitive possibility."

Tommy lapsed in temporary silence; then quickly piped up with an anxious breath.

"So what must I do to prepare for this vampire attack?"

"You must eat three cloves of garlic a day; then attempt to kiss a beautiful stranger. This, Tommy, will also be the gateway into ushering your dream into reality—the dream to discover and stand close to the beautiful woman I have predicted. When you lean in to kiss her, that is the moment she will notice you."

"Wow, okay, Psychic Friend. I can do this."

"Of course you can, Tommy, as I have already seen it. Now go, you have a beautiful maiden to lay eyes upon."

"Thank you, Psychic Friend."

"No, thank you, Tommy. Thank you for being a hero. Now will you be paying with Visa, MasterCard, or American Express?"

A few days later, the supervisor summoned him to his office to discuss a call involving a vampire and a bulldozer. Although Greg took the phone conversation in an absurd direction to make things interesting, the supervisor (and lead psychic), didn't find it so amusing when the caller named Tommy complained about a severe injury he incurred while crossing a demolished sidewalk.

"He said you told him he wouldn't get hurt by a bulldozer," said the supervisor, "and yet, somehow he did anyway. Care to explain?"

Greg was dumbfounded. Never in a moment did he think there would be a bulldozer in Tommy's future.

"I was just..."

“Mr. Agnew wants to sue us for fraud. He stated, with conviction, that his psychic advisor informed him, with absolution, that he would dodge an oncoming bulldozer. I’m sure you can imagine his surprise when he, in fact, did not dodge the oncoming bulldozer.”

At first, Greg wanted to laugh at the man’s ridiculous misfortune, but instead felt angry over this seemingly odd coincidence.

“It was just a joke, Mr. Freedman. Who really takes this stuff seriously?”

“Well, evidently, Mr. Agnew takes this stuff seriously. And also, *evidently*, so do I.”

And the rest of the story segued into to a speech about ethics, emotional abuse, and the fact that the Psychic Friends had no room for practical jokers or irresponsible manhandlers, so Greg once again found himself in the unemployment line.

In a normal world, Greg wouldn’t have minded that the job market was infertile. He grew up in a simple home with three kids and two parents sharing the sparse commodities: two bedrooms, one bath, a small living room, and a closet for a kitchen. Carrying riches around was a dream he didn’t know he was supposed to have.

Although he endured cramped living conditions in his youth, he listened to his classmates brag about having their own rooms—big rooms with lots of toys—and TV rooms attached to living rooms, with living rooms attached to dining rooms. But he had never seen these fabled establishments in person, so he didn’t know how to be jealous of his friends—which he learned in third grade was required for growing up. Even though he tried to imagine life with spacious luxury, he just couldn’t grasp the concept. Everything seemed okay as it was: two siblings snoring away at bedtime, people yelling through closed bathroom doors that it was their turn to take a shower, shared family meal times around the tiny living room, watching an old wooden floor television with channel tuner knobs. That was the life Greg understood in his early years, and to his assumption, the life he thought he would always accept.

The problem, however, was that as he got older, educators made bigger deals about college, and Greg realized halfway through high school that he would have to conquer the university realm, and more importantly, the realm of finance if he were to survive the future. School further taught him that if he were to remain happy in life, he had to provide an environment that he and his future family could use to make friends and enemies jealous. That meant bigger pursuits for bigger

paychecks, and bigger homes for bigger egos. Whatever his parents did to scrape a living from, it was obsolete.

Ultimately, this new way of thinking brought him before the gates of college, ready to break the competition in half. But he had no idea what to compare himself to. He figured his first step was to make more money than his parents ever did, because they never made enough to fill a penny jar. But he wasn't sure how much more he had to pursue. Plucking through his memories, he realized he had to at least make as much as his classmates' parents. But to win the competition against them, he had to surpass their income. That left him with the question of how.

The third and final great problem to his fortune-seeking dilemma was that, as he grew up, he found out girls only liked guys with money. During his early years in junior high, he made the startling discovery that, despite his ironclad beliefs in childhood that spoke contrary, he actually liked girls. It was a strange thing to awake to one morning, considering he had just gotten through defending his point about how yucky they were merely a few weeks earlier. But there it was haunting him—laughing at him. And, as his hormones grew and the years to follow whispered advice in his ears, he came to realize that to win the heart of any great beauty, he had to strike it rich, because the pretty ones only wanted rich guys.

So, having these problems compounded during the start of eleventh grade, he realized he had to do something quickly to enter into college. From there, he would have to think of a plan to rake in the cash so he could live happily within the will of society; not miserably, like he was sure his parents had lived.

After he chose a campus to attend, he plowed into his first and greatest obstacle—to figure out how to pay for it. He didn't have enough money to get him through the first four years, nor did his parents have it, obviously, so he had to scour for options. His teachers told him multiple times about scholarships and federal grants, but for some reason he couldn't get any. There were a couple scholarships he applied for, though fell short of winning, because other people in his class found ways to outsmart him. He also considered grants and loans, deciding later that the road to riches would've looked bad had he gotten there through pity. So, after much deliberation, he decided he would work for it.

But, of course, there was the problem that his jobs never worked out, so he barely scraped enough for his entrance fees. How he'd manage to stay enrolled, he didn't know, but he was determined to strike it rich, so he endured economic trials as much as he needed to get to his place of desire.

\* \* \*

When his position at the Psychic Friends Hotline came to an end, Greg decided to change gears and head for something less unconventional and more competitive. His first inclination was to apply at the local fast food joint, but rationalized that fighting for cashier or line cook status wasn't that spectacular of an endeavor and neither would the final result be profitable. So he resolved to look for work at the city football stadium, where he'd become a janitor.

At first, he thought it was a smart decision—for a total of two minutes. He remembered a split second after the two-minute mark that his father made a living doing exactly the same thing, and that didn't pan out for the best. So he did a U-turn in the middle of the street to protest his momentary lapse of reason. Unfortunately, his illegal maneuver went noticed by law enforcement, and the blue and red lights flashed in the rear view mirror just a few seconds later.

If Greg were running any sort of lucky streak, this sure wasn't that time. As the squad car pulled him over, he searched hard for ways to get out of receiving a ticket, but wasn't sure how thick his charm ran. He knew of people that gracefully eluded tickets before, so he tried to recall their countless advice. Unfortunately, as the nerves in his stomach rose, and as the damage a ticket would've caused his financial pursuits entered his mind, all his plans for a smooth exchange went blank. And as the smug looking officer with a handlebar mustache strutted over to his window, Greg lost all sense of prediction about how the conversation would go, which, incidentally, started off badly:

The officer stood at the smudgy window gesturing him to lower it. A moment passed before Greg realized what the cranking of the man's hand meant. Nervously, he fidgeted for the rusty handle to roll the window down.

"Good afternoon," said the slick looking police officer, with toothpick dangling from his lip. "May I see your license and registration?"

Greg nodded, but didn't say anything. He was too preoccupied with the number of times sweat dropped from his forehead to realize he was poking around the wrong pocket. When he noticed how empty it felt, he frantically searched for his other pocket, which he managed to find as a slight weight on his leg. The cop noticed his sudden shift in behavior and sported a twitchy smile.

"Whoa, no need to be nervous," said the officer. "Just need to see the cards. It's a simple request."

"I'm not nervous," Greg spat, hastily. "I just don't want a ticket."

Greg shoved his hand into the weighty pocket and found his wallet buried in its depths.

"Well, no, I didn't think you did. Don't know of many people who ever really want a ticket."

Greg removed his wallet and fidgeted around the top before opening it. Once the interior contents emerged from obscurity, he jabbed his thumb against his license and fumbled it from the center pocket. As it slid away from his credit cards, the license slipped out and tumbled wildly to the floor.

The license landed close to his feet, but too far to reach while strapped in his seatbelt. He deliberated a moment whether to remove his harness while an officer of the law stood just inches away. But, in the end, he resolved that there was no way he'd recover his liberated information if he kept the seatbelt intact. As Greg clicked at the safety release button, letting the belt escape into a stationary position, the police officer tapped his ticket sheet with his pen.

"Sir, are you fit to drive?" asked the officer, pointedly.

"I'm fine, officer," he said, pawing around the floor. "My license fell on the floor. That's all."

"Well, you seem to be exceptionally nervous. You sure you're not trying to hide something from me?"

Greg shot him a furtive look.

"Of course not," he said. "I just dropped my license."

"Sir, you don't need to develop an attitude with me. A simple 'yes' or 'no' will do."

"I'm not...I'm not developing an attitude. Sorry."

Greg finally made contact with his license and abruptly shot upward with it displayed prominently in hand. The officer lurched back at Greg's sudden movement.

"Here it—"

But Greg's grip failed as he returned to an upright position, and once again the license escaped his hand, this time flying out the window, nearly hitting the officer in the eye. The officer watched stone-faced as it flew past his neck and landed on the shoulder of the highway.

"Okay, now see if you can show me your registration without trying to take my head off," he said, his patience wearing thin.

As the officer bent over to confiscate Greg's flighty license from the street, Greg reached into his glove compartment to search for his registration card. It had been awhile since he last saw it, and could only assume it was at the bottom of the large stack of receipts and envelopes

taking up most of the room. He stuffed his hands inside the papered mess, searching hastily through each section of trash until he managed to happen across his target. Only, every sheet of paper he rummaged through seemed to be stuck firmly to the next, which made locating the registration card a painful excursion.

After a minute or so of twiddling his thumbs, the officer cleared his throat. Greg felt the hairs stand on the back of his neck as the officer's hot breath blew nastily through the window. In his increasing nervousness, Greg pulled out every piece of trash from the glove compartment and scattered it like a fan across his passenger seat—every article that wasn't stuck to something else.

"I'm waiting," said the officer.

"I'm looking," said Greg, almost at a shout. "I haven't had a chance to sort through this stuff yet."

"Would you like me to help?"

At this point, Greg was tempted to just drive off—to escape this police officer's annoying reliance on sarcasm—but he remembered that doing so would've risked him more than a ticket, so he stomached the man's yawn of a voice just a little while longer.

"I'll find it," he said. "It's in here somewhere."

And after another minute of searching, Greg finally found it stuck to a faded old drugstore receipt that he collected three years earlier.

"Here it is."

Careful not to fling it at the cop, Greg clutched the card between his thumb and index finger, passing it over to the now impatient officer. The officer took it and smiled.

"Now that wasn't so difficult, was it?"

Before Greg could respond, or even think to respond, the officer strutted back to the patrol car with his driver information in hand. He noticed in the rear view mirror the officer speaking into the transmitter from over his shoulder. Unwilling to watch the man's actions or expressions, Greg shoved everything back into the glove compartment and slammed it closed. Then, he refastened his seatbelt and waited. When the cop finally came back, he wore a smile on his face.

"Sir, it appears that your registration expired two months ago. Do you have anything more recent in that...hellhole you call a glove compartment?"

Greg's heart sunk at this news. He knew there was something he had to do around his birthday, but couldn't remember what.

"No, officer. That's what I have."

The officer nodded and began scribbling stuff on his notepad as he spoke.

"Then, I suggest you go and update your registration as soon as possible."

A moment later, the officer ceased writing and calmly tore a sheet of yellow paper off his notepad. He handed it briskly to Greg.

"Now then," he continued. "I'm citing you for the illegal U-turn I initially pulled you over for. That's a dangerous place to be changing direction, so I can't in fair conscience let you off with a warning. Secondly, I'm citing you for your expired registration, because two months is way too long to be lazy about taking responsibility. Thirdly, I'm citing you for your uncouth attitude toward me. You have to understand that an officer of the law deserves respect, not rudeness. I hope that if you should ever face another officer again, you'll have a better attitude. Fourthly, I'm not citing you for this, but in the future I'd suggest you calm down, because I'm this close to searching your car for illegal substances. Frankly, I think both of us have better things to do than to wait for me to pick your junky car apart, so be calm next time. And with that, drive safe."

Greg sat dumbfounded as he looked over his citations. The cost would undoubtedly sink him into the negative financial zone. As he sat there and marveled over his bad luck, the advice that a friend told him long ago finally entered his mind. Her advice: always remain calm, polite, and have everything ready before the officer reached the driver side door.

Greg stood before court to deal with his traffic citation the same day his rent was due. It was doubly painful, not because of the headache it caused him to snuff out two chunks of his savings, but because he still hadn't found a job to replace the last one. He searched high and low for someone to break him out of his financial funk, but none were looking for a guy with his qualifications. It wasn't because he was useless; they just couldn't afford to train him. The best they had to offer was to hire him for minimal pay. But seeing that he was unskilled in most applications, none believed him competent to avoid breaking their businesses in half. So Greg was forced to sweat his moment of financial fleeting as the judge banged the gavel, ordering him to pay the cashier. Of course, he asked for a job on the way out, but the judge looked at him oddly.

After signing and dating both checks, Greg sat in his nearly empty bedroom staring at his outdated computer that a friend sold him for less than a hundred dollars. He had a couple basic programs installed and a cheap Internet service running off banners and pop-ups, but no real drive



to use it. He tried to get established once by setting up an email account with some company promising him free storage, but realized a month too late that free storage essentially meant no more than ten emails at a time—including junk mail. After the tenth message, he was charged ten cents for each additional message and twenty cents for anything that came with an attachment. The friend who sold him the computer warned him about the emailing company the following month after many complaints stacked against them, but by then, it was too late and he owed them an additional fifty dollars. After that incident, Greg nearly vowed to never use email again, but his friend signed him with another, more reputable company, which he fortunately found valuable.

As he contemplated his future and the moves required to get him there, he thought of an option that sounded foolproof. People at school discussed openly time and again about an online merchant company called Ebay, talking about how a member could buy and sell nearly anything for any price. It made him curious about Ebay's mechanics and how he could make the system work to his advantage.

When he stared at his blank computer monitor, he envisioned a huge marketing empire designed to rescue him from his financial nightmare. Looking to capitalize on this information, he resolved to turn on his computer, find this Ebay place, and transform his hard-earned assets into pure gold.

His first inclination was to call up a search engine and type the word "ebay" into the search field, but he figured the company probably named its website after itself, so he typed it into the address bar instead, followed by the famed dot com. After a minute or so of page loading, the site miraculously appeared in his monitor, and Greg's hopes of financial liberation finally came true. He saw before him a homepage filled with membership requests and info about how best to navigate the sales world.

As he stared at the site specific navigation tool, Greg became tempted to scour the place for additional toys for his apartment, but stopped himself, making a gentle note that he was only here to sell. Of course, as he pondered the thought, he realized that selling anything meant owning less stuff than he already had. The fact that he even arrived at this page was an act of desperation.

He scanned his room to see if there was anything he would miss. As he took inventory, he noted that he'd undoubtedly need his bed in the coming months. He also noted there was no way he'd abandon his television or floor lamp. Perhaps, he thought, there was something attached to the bed or the floor lamp he could dismiss, or maybe an additional trinket setting on top of the television, but there wasn't.

Next, he figured he'd find something in his closet he could part with, but upon careful observation he realized he needed his clothes and shoes. When that failed, he searched the rest of the house.

Fortunately, at the end of his search, he found a few items worth discarding, though he wasn't sure how much he could actually get for them. Those items included his dish detergent (he could rinse his plates clean), his toothbrush (he could brush his teeth with his finger), his Taco Bell cups (he had about twenty of them), his Subway cups (he had twice as many as those), his plunger (it was already in the bathroom when he moved in), his hairbrush (he had a plastic comb in his closet, somewhere), his oven mitts (he never cooked), his ten-year-old pair of tennis shoes (they were so beaten they no longer stuck to his feet), and a couple pairs of underwear (he could always reverse whatever he had leftover). In the end, he thought if someone was needy enough, he could earn enough to cover part of his utility bill.

Visions of economic waterfalls danced in his head as he imagined the masses pouring over the entries. Images of short people, tall people, skinny people and fat people, each fighting over the rights to the masterpieces that made up his stuff filled his mind. In his folding chair, he leaned back, placing his hands behind his neck and exhaled with relief at the reality that his financial problems were finally over.

He took a few minutes to register with the site and make entries for his items. He didn't have the means to show pictures of the sales features, but he did write intriguing descriptions for each one—his favorite being that they had only been used once. When he finished setting the parameters for each object, he sat back and waited for the auction to begin. He arranged for the bids to close after seven days; he figured that would allow ample time for his prices to skyrocket without having to miss the deadlines for his bills.

But after seven days of frequent checking, with minimal food or bathroom breaks in between, Greg discovered, to his horror, that nobody in the world really wanted his stuff. It seemed the only thing that even remotely stood a chance was the oven mitts, because the pair was in relatively good condition—okay, perfect condition—but the only bid it got was for one dollar. And that was it. No one else made an effort to acquire his prized possessions.

He was crushed. As he poked around the corners of his apartment, faced with the same items he tried pawning off to worldwide traders, he felt tears trickle from his eyes. He wanted so badly to be economically free, but that dream seemed distant now. He couldn't get a job, no one wanted his stuff, and he still had debt up to his eyeballs from rent, traffic

tickets, and college tuition. For the first time in his life he thought, it was, perhaps, time to return home.

But then, he wouldn't know what to do. His parents were in no position to take care of him. His dad mopped a football stadium for a living—there was no support in that. And getting back? His car was a clunker, running off its last inch of rusty axle. There was no way he could run from his failure, because there was nowhere to run to. As it turned out, regardless of his post-high school ambitions, he had set out on an adventure that would swallow him whole. All because no one wanted to buy his underwear on Ebay.

Greg melted in bed, staring at his ceiling for three days straight. The depression over his merchandising failure pushed him to paralysis. Emotionally, his wits escaped him and physically, his health toppled into sickness. After awhile, he felt the underside of his skin crawl from the stress eating away inside. He knew that if he didn't move soon, he would disintegrate into his mattress, failing to set foot to the floor again.

And that was what he wanted now.

On the fourth day, his ten-dollar phone rang from a distant corner of his room. At first, he didn't want to move, but he figured it rude of him to ignore the caller entirely, so he oozed his way over the edge of his bed, dropped to his belly and slowly slid across the floor. When he finally reached the phone and knocked it off its base, the guy on the other end spoke in a virtual shout. It was one of Greg's friends from class.

"Greg, where've you been?" asked Jeff. "The cat detailing assignment was due today."

"The what?" asked Greg, not really caring.

"The cat detailing assignment...for sociology. Remember?"

"I don't care."

"You don't care? That was half our grade."

"Then, I guess I fail. Goodbye."

"Dude, are you all right? This doesn't sound like you."

"I have to go."

"You didn't blow up your cat, did you?"

"I don't have a cat."

"Well, then why are you acting so weird?"

"I'm just depressed right now."

"Depressed? What? Come on, you don't get depressed."

"I'm depressed *now*. Leave me alone."

"If you're depressed, then why don't you hang with us tonight? We're going to a club."

"I can't afford to leave my house."

“Why, because of unemployment? Whatever. I’ll spot you the cover. Get dressed. I’m coming to pick you up. And I’m bringing a cat so you can draw it and finish your detailing assignment.”

Somehow, around ten o’clock, Greg ended up standing at the front door to the Fiddlesticks Nightclub down the clogged neon-lit arteries of the metro area. He assumed he could weasel out of it had he slipped a dummy in the passenger seat of a taxicab, but he couldn’t find one amid his sparse inventory, nor could he find a cab willing to cart one to the club for free. So he threw on his best shirt, gargled some toothpaste with some tap water, and hopped into his piece of junk car. And that’s how he ended up at the front door of the nightclub. His wallet was empty, of course, but his friend Jeff made good on his promise. He stood there waiting for Greg with a five-dollar bill in hand.

“There’s a girl inside I want you to meet,” he said, as he slipped the bill into his hand.

Greg still felt darkly depressed over his Ebay disaster and didn’t want to meet a girl for fear it would intensify the pain. He didn’t have much female experience to begin with, but he knew they didn’t particularly gravitate toward guys on the verge of homelessness, so the last thing he wanted was to discuss, not only his empty treasury, but his life without job or shred of survival ambition.

“Tonight’s not a good night,” he said

“Why, because you’re broke? Nonsense. There’s no reason why you have to enlighten her on that secret.”

“But what if it comes up?”

“One word: *misdirection*.”

As depressed as he felt, a sense of laughter echoed from Greg’s lungs at the sound of Jeff’s response. After a moment’s thought, he figured it was worth a shot.

“Fine, we’ll see what happens.”

And that’s what he did; he saw what happened:

“Greg,” said Jeff, with a smile as fake as that of a Hollywood actor’s, “this is Mandy. She’s a masseuse over at the day spa.”

“Great.”

Greg extended his hand to the blonde beauty standing next to the bar. She took it. Some flowery-scented perfume emanated from her neck, while some beer-scented breath emanated from her mouth.

“Nice to meet you,” she said, with an eager smile. “Jeff told me a lot about you.”

“Really? Like what?”

“He says you’re studying to be the next Dr. Phil. I think that’s awesome. So many people in the world have so many problems these days that we need someone with expert advice to solve our issues with three minutes of counseling, because who really has the time to sit down for more than three minutes?”

“Not I, certainly. Jeff, what about—”

Greg looked over to discover that Jeff had slipped away. He scanned the crowded room, but couldn’t locate him anywhere.

“Hmm,” he continued, “I guess he’s gone.”

“Better for us to get to know each other, right?” Mandy said, holding her smile.

“Yeah. So you’re a masseuse, are you?”

“Yep, just got my license a couple months ago. You’d be surprised what people will pay for a backrub.”

“A lot?”

“More than is probably necessary. It’s actually a bit amusing, because the same people come back every week to have a procedure done, knowing full well they’ll be out of whack within a few hours, but are willing to shell out sixty, ninety, or even a hundred dollars a session just to feel a small spurt of comfort. I mean, a good friend could give the same quality back massage I give for free, but because I’m a ‘professional,’ they think they’re getting a bargain. All they’re really doing is wasting their money. Sure, they’re lining my pockets, which is great for me, but if they knew there were better therapists out there, they wouldn’t be so quick to come to me. Not that anyone needs to know that, of course.”

“Of course.”

“So what classes have you taken to earn your Dr. Phil status?”

“Well, I’m taking sociology right now. That’s about it.”

Her smile weakened, but the upward hooks in the corners of her mouth lingered.

“That’s one of the basic courses, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, well I’m still trying to finish my prerequisites. It takes a little time to build up the reputation I’m working for.”

“Well, as long as you get there eventually, right?”

“Exactly.”

“So what do you do in the meantime?”

“What do you mean?”

“For money. What do you do for cash while you’re still in school?”

And, of course, this was the question he hoped she wouldn't ask, but knew in his heart she would ask anyway. The first thing he thought about was misdirection.

"What did you do for cash while you were in school?" he deflected.

"I worked in a pharmacy for four years, realized I wasn't making enough to really be happy, so I quit and went to work in the day spa. That was six months ago. Now I'm a certified masseuse who makes lots and lots of money."

"And you like money, don't you?"

"It buys the things I want."

"I see."

And, somehow, this revelation made him even more depressed—if that were possible. Since childhood, people told him how important economic success was, but it wasn't until now that he understood why. As he looked into this girl's eyes, he realized it wasn't having riches that would make him happy, but that having riches would make the woman happy. So the problem he faced wasn't the lack of stuff he had to fill his apartment, but the lack of stuff he had to impress this girl with. If he were rich, he would be problem-free. But because he was poor, he was problem-consumed. If this girl found out the truth, he wouldn't get past this initial conversation. And even though that wouldn't have been a problem five minutes ago, he didn't want to blow his chances at having a future with her, now that he started getting to know her. So he decided he would puff up his chest, make another attempt at landing a good job, and do whatever he could to get rich quickly. He decided the best road to take after this night was to become a masseuse.

And that's precisely what Greg set out to do. The next day, he promptly borrowed a phone book from a neighborhood restaurant and scoured the yellow pages for a massage therapy school. Upon finding what he thought was the cheapest place—he only called schools with basic listings—he requested information regarding tuition, duration and job placement. The school of his choice said they would offer classes in a month.

Greg had to make a firm decision: one month in his world meant the difference between sleeping in a room and sleeping in a gutter. Holding out that long would've been like testing the duration one can handle a dog biting him on the ankle. A prize might have been waiting at the end of the test, but the road getting there could've gotten him killed. Of course, he had no choice; he had to stick it out. That meant working anywhere, doing anything, and doing it for many, many hours a week. In the end, it meant having to withdraw from the university.

He resolved not to stay out forever, though, because sooner or later he would need his psychology degree, which he switched from philanthropy, because he thought there was more money in it, and because he really didn't know what a philanthropist did. But there was clearly no room for his college education in the meantime, so he elected to drop it.

When Monday came, his friend Jeff called to ask where he'd been hiding, but he never gave him a straight answer. He just claimed he would return to class when he knew the time was right. The ambiguous statement didn't leave Jeff all too satisfied, but Greg dodged his unrelenting questions by asking about the girl from the club, and whether he knew how to reach her. He didn't get the information from her personally, because, just before he was about to ask, she was distracted by another girl's shiny bracelet and proceeded to ask a million questions about it, which Greg found rather dull, so he left. Fortunately, Jeff ran into her a couple nights earlier and managed to get her phone number. He graciously passed it to Greg, who in turn chose to store it in a safe place.

The girl, Mandy, turned out to be easily reached. Every time he called, which he kept to a cool three times a week, she answered on the fourth ring, just before the voicemail kicked in. They typically spent twenty to thirty minutes talking about life, ambitions, and the money that came with serving both, and ended each call with an "I miss you," or "wish you were here," or something cheesy along those lines. On several occasions, Mandy tried to talk Greg into going out with her, most notably to fancy restaurants and comedy clubs, but Greg *misdirected* her seductions by insisting he was too tired that night and would try to go out later in the week. The only times he elected to be "alert" and "ready to go" were the times they agreed to meet at a park, or any place allowing free parking, free entertainment, or didn't involve him coming to pick her up, or meeting her in the parking lot where she might see his car. Those times, of course, were the best times of his life.

But as his entrance to massage therapy school drew closer and his wallet became increasingly weakened—which really wasn't saying much anymore—his ability to dodge the financial truth got tougher. There had been several occasions when Mandy insisted on coming over to see his place, but he insisted harder that his apartment was too messy from his mountains of possessions to be comfortable. She always responded that she could help him sort things out, though he consistently retorted that there would be no fun in that and that it would be more fun to take a walk somewhere, instead.

During this season of monumental evasion tactics, he managed to land a job sweeping floors at a burger place, which he did for sixty hours a week, making close to two hundred dollars a paycheck. He was exhausted every Sunday, but managed to slow the decent of his wealth, which was a milestone in his life. Whenever his battle to stop Mandy from coming over to his “messy” apartment failed, he relied on the pseudo truth that he was too busy making money to entertain her company to get him out of trouble.

Then, when massage therapy school started, and he had successfully dodged Mandy’s every attempt to uncover his poverty, he breathed a sigh of relief. He knew that in a few short weeks he would be well on his way to financial freedom.

And, thankfully, he passed his class. Between working at the fast food place and taking lessons, Greg had no time to do anything else. But, in the end, it was worth it. When he received his certificate stating he could administer backrubs for money, he set out to land his first job. He ended up working at a downtown massage parlor three days a week. He accepted his part-time status as an opportunity to reapply with the university and continue with his classes.

After three paychecks, Greg had enough to start furnishing his apartment with tables and chairs and anything else that seemed necessary to make the place seem livable. After his fourth paycheck, he decided he was making enough money to quit his sweeping job, which was great considering he hadn’t slept much in the last month. After his eighth paycheck, he concluded he was able to fill his apartment well enough with nice things to start inviting Mandy over. After his ninth paycheck he realized he was in too far over his head with these crazy ambitions to really know what the heck he was doing with his life anymore. It was Mandy’s first visit to his apartment a few nights before receiving his tenth paycheck that he came to this revelation:

Greg situated the fake tree next to his new cloth-upholstered couch, which he used to replace his old sofa, when he heard the knock on the door. He quickly adjusted the thinner side of the plant so it faced the back wall, primped the leaves so they looked fuller than they were, and proceeded toward the door. As he set his hand to the doorknob, he made one final check of his surroundings: couch, fake tree, 25-inch television, stereo system with two speakers—he would upgrade to surround sound after his next paycheck—and a brand new coffee table. Everything seemed to be in order, so he opened the door.



“Greg, hey,” said the beautiful blonde Mandy, as she reached in to give him a hug. “So we finally get to meet at the pad?”

“Finally? How many times have I invited you over?”

“None.”

“Several,” he corrected her. “It’s just that things always kept coming up. But now...welcome to my home.”

Mandy stepped over the threshold into the living room. She nodded as she surveyed the area. Unfortunately, something about her eyes disturbed Greg. He couldn’t figure out what, but he noticed her eyebrows dipping into the bridge of her nose. It was something he never saw her do before.

“It’s nice,” she said. “Though...”

Greg stood waiting by the door, feeling his heart skip as he waited for her to finish her thought.

“Though what?” he finally blurted.

She clutched her chin as she subtly worked her way over to the couch.

“Though it seems a bit sparse...”

“Sparse?”

“I guess I was expecting a bit more—I don’t know, like maybe a statue next to the television or something.”

“A statue?”

Mandy finally reached the couch and plopped down. She spread one arm across the back against the wall.

“It’s nice, though,” she said. “Yeah...”

Greg remained suspicious from that point on. He thought for certain his apartment was ready for her eyes to see, but now he wasn’t sure.

“Would you rather I had a statue?”

Mandy continued to scrutinize the room, but didn’t say much more. She just kept nodding away, holding her lips pursed and eyebrows narrowed.

A few minutes later, when he showed her the furnished bedroom, she commented about how it was missing a fountain.

“It’s just that I met this guy a few days ago who had a statue in his living room, and a fountain in his bedroom, and...”

“And?”

“And I don’t know...he just seemed really cool. And he had a Porsche in his garage, and he lived in a mansion, and...”

“And?”

“And I guess I just thought you would have a palace of your own, too.”

“Even though you know I’m a college student?”

Mandy didn’t respond to this question. Instead, she stared blankly out the window.

Greg fixed his attention on her with exasperation. He fought hard for eight weeks, or rather, for two years to get this apartment up to livable standards, and here Mandy was slamming him because he didn’t have a fountain. For the first time since he met her, he thought she was wrong. Even crazier was that for the first time since meeting her, he was actually proud of the state of his apartment. In just two short months, he surpassed the wealth of his immediate family, and that, for heaven’s sakes, made him feel accomplished.

“Well, this is my palace,” he said, “like it or not.”

Her eyes remained fixated on the window. He noticed her lip curling under her teeth, as her cheeks took a slight purplish tint. It seemed she wanted to say something, but didn’t know what, so she kept silent.

“Mandy?” said Greg, to break the silence.

She lurched out of her trance.

“Yeah?”

“Are you ready to go out, or shall we continue staring out the window?”

She held her breath for another moment until the weight was ready to leap from her chest. At that point, she faced him head on.

“Greg, I’ve been doing a lot of thinking these last few minutes, and I don’t think it’s gonna work between us.”

Greg froze. He felt his feet touching the floor, but wasn’t sure how to move them. His heart also continued beating, sort of, with the occasional independent dive every few seconds. His arms for the most part lost all feeling.

“What’s not gonna work?”

“Us...this...everything.”

“Why, because I don’t have a fountain in my room?”

Mandy once again turned her attention toward the window.

“It’s not because you don’t have a fountain in your room.”

“Then, why?”

“It’s just...well, you don’t have a Porsche in your garage...or a statue in your living room...or—”

“Or a fountain in my room?”

“Right...”

She stood there a moment, clearly trying to think of ways to escape. Greg, meanwhile, continued to hang frozen, as he waited for her next

move. After at least another half-minute of silence, she finally made that move when she turned to face him.

"I'm sorry, Greg," she said, with sagging eyes. "You're a nice guy, and I like you, but I'm not looking for a nice guy or someone I like. I'm..."

"Looking for a guy who can afford you?"

She nodded, sheepishly.

Greg finally recovered the energy to move his legs. The spark awakening his knees led him to step aside from the door. He also found enough life in his arms to lift one up to show Mandy the way out.

"Then, I guess your dream guy is somewhere outside this door. Good luck finding him."

Mandy lowered her eyes, as she stepped toward the door. Upon passing Greg, she patted him on the arm.

"I was gonna kiss you tonight," she said, bittersweetly. "But that was when I thought you were rich. I'm sorry I was wrong about you."

"And I'm sorry I was right about you."

And with that, she continued to pass by, walking through the living room and stepping out of Greg's life. Greg, meanwhile, trudged toward his bedside, shot his feet from underneath his knees and collapsed onto his softened mattress. As his face hit the pillow, he heard his living room door close. A moment later, he closed his eyes and wondered whether he even cared.

A month later, Greg sold most of the stuff he bought with his massage therapy income to pay off a portion of the credit card debt he accumulated during his two-year season of poverty. To his delight, Ebay worked out better this time, but he still fell short when it came time to write his checks. His rent was due, which rose in price because of increasing costs of living, and his electric managed to climb more significantly since he had more toys to plug into the wall. All of his expenses, including credit card bills, car insurance and cable added to a small fortune that even his massage therapy job couldn't keep under control. But, despite giving waves to the money siphon, for some reason he didn't let it destroy his hopes for a future. After all he had come through, and after all the years of having nothing to his name, somehow he reached this point, and it really didn't seem so bad.

The following months weren't much easier, but he stood strong and did his best to enjoy what he had. Throughout the journey, he managed to improve his grades, find a quiet neighborhood for taking therapeutic walks, and bought a new 19-inch television (to replace the 25-inch he sold

a couple months earlier) to keep his brain preoccupied during the dry season of life. He didn't visit the club anymore, and he didn't want to meet any new girls since the Mandy catastrophe, but after that painful experience he thought it was for the best anyway.

After sealing his rent check inside the fattened envelope, Greg pushed it aside and took a deep breath. Like every man, he didn't want to say goodbye to his hard-earned cash, but rationalized it was the price for living on one's own, so he accepted it graciously. The walls were bare and the couch had seen better days, but at least he had something to call home. As he thought about his good fortune, he idly shifted his attention toward his telephone, which he realized hadn't been used in a few days. It had been quite awhile since he last spoke to his parents and decided to call them. When his father answered the phone, Greg told him how things were going and mentioned he was grateful for all his old man tried to give while he was growing up, despite the hardships of low income. His father, of course, said thanks and told him he had gotten promoted to custodial manager, which meant getting a pay increase, so life would be easier. Greg said he was happy for him, to which his father promptly explained that he already knew.

## WHEN ONE FALLS

The wooden chair squeaked as Jackson shifted position. The musty air within the dark, sparsely occupied chamber stuck against his skin. The combination of randomly illuminated areas, made possible only by shafts of light entering through the cracks of boarded windows, not to be outdone by the harrowing sight of the bloodied man in the chair across the room, forced him to close his eyes. As the minutes passed in this dingy hole, he wondered if there was reason for this madness to continue.

"This is the last time," screamed the fat man Jackson had last seen standing over his pummeled witness. "Tell me where the Gigas Corporation keeps its weapons cache, or I swear I'll stop doing this the easy way."

The witness, with whom the fat man had spent the last ten minutes knuckle-bashing in the cheeks, remained silent. Jackson didn't know anything about the man in the opposite chair, only that his will was ironclad. The stubbornness was a quality he found admirable, even if it was one he wasn't technically supposed to admire.

"Okay," continued the tormentor, "if that's the way you want it, then that's the way it'll be. Jackson, watch him. I'll be right back."

Jackson reopened his eyes to find that he still hadn't adjusted well to the darkness.

Keebler, his fat, mustached partner, waddled across the wooden floor, silently cursing to himself. When he opened the front door, the bright morning sunlight crashed in like a tidal wave; then receded as he made his exit. When the intense dimness returned, Jackson refocused his sights toward the witness.

"I understand your position," he said, through interlocked fingers, "and I respect your silence. But my partner doesn't know when to stop. If your loyalty is that strong, you can be sure he'll make you feel it. Personally, I don't want to see that happen. Believe it or not, I'm a bit squeamish toward the sight of pain."

The man in the corner returned the gaze through blackened eyes, but refused to speak.

"When he comes back," continued Jackson, "I'm gonna leave, because I can't stomach his 'hard way' methods. I strongly doubt you'll stomach them, either."

The witness spat a glob of blood to the floor. Jackson rubbed his burning eyes.

"How about we approach this from a different angle. Maybe instead of hounding you about things you refuse to speak about, we could talk about things that stand with no consequence. Perhaps, you could tell me about your favorite color."

Still nothing.

"Okay, maybe that's a touchy subject. Should we talk about your pets? Are you a dog person or a cat person? Personally, I prefer cats. Dogs are meaner, but cats do a better job screwing with your head. I respect that. Perhaps, you're a cat person?"

The witness spat another glob of blood to the floor.

"Or maybe your alliance ties in with something different—a camel, maybe?"

Before Jackson could follow up with another question or the witness with another blood chuck to the floor, a wash of light deluged the room and Keebler emerged from the doorway holding a bear trap in hand.

The witness's eyes widened at the sight of him.

"Okay," said Jackson, "I guess this is my cue to leave."

Jackson stood from his chair as his partner marched across the room. As he headed for the front door, he shielded his eyes. The ensuing light was guaranteed too bright for him.

Before he could turn the handle, his partner's cellphone chimed in with the love theme from *Top Gun*. Keebler dropped the bear trap to answer it.

"Yeah?"

Jackson cracked the door open, but didn't step out. If the call was important, he had to know about it.

"Where? Why didn't you call us two hours ago? Okay, okay. Yeah, we'll meet him there in fifteen minutes. Tell him not to leave."

Keebler disconnected the phone; then returned focus toward the witness.

"Looks like you're off the hook," he said. Then, without even a second of rethought, he rushed the man for his jaw and belted him clean out of his chair. Once the witness hit the floor, Keebler spat at him. "Gigas won't trust you anymore, so I'd suggest you run."

A split-second later, the fat man switched direction—a near impossibility for a body of his size—and picked the bear trap off the floor.

"We have to go," he said to Jackson. "The boss said Jones found a lead we can't ignore."

It seemed the desert had no boundary. From the ghost town, the road had no end point; just a series of uninhabited dots pock-marking its edges. Dried up water towers, defunct farmlands and broken windmills—everything on this abandoned highway appeared lifeless. In theory, the old train station should have displayed the same fate.

Except, when the two men pulled into the dusty parking lot, they found themselves in the company of several parked SUVs and Cadillacs—a sinister showroom for the underworld. All the vehicles, as far as Jackson could tell, were empty.

“The boss told us to meet Jones on the platform,” said Keebler. “Said he found an unlikely candidate to reveal our target.”

“Who?”

Keebler popped open the door, setting foot to the ground from the driver’s seat, jamming a cigarette into his mouth. “Don’t know. Let’s find out.”

The station had a wall three feet tall separating the admissions gate from the parking lot. When the two men traversed the parking area and stepped though the entry gap, they immediately stopped. Keebler nearly lost his cigarette.

“You gotta be kidding me,” he said.

Just beyond the barrier, several bodies in green and blue—colors matching the Gigas Corporation’s one-suited uniform—lied bullet-ridden on the ground between the ticket window and the entrance. Fresh blood trickled a few inches through the dust.

“What the hell happened here?” he continued.

Jackson didn’t wait for Keebler to reach his own conclusions; there wasn’t time to wait. Whatever happened here, could’ve still been happening. He dashed through the ghostly station entrance to see if he could find answers on the platform.

When he reached the defunct passenger area, the bile crept up his esophagus. The image before him certainly answered his questions. Unfortunately, they also opened a slew of new ones.

“My God,” said Keebler, as he stepped on deck behind him. “Who did this?”

From one end to the other, the carnage of fallen soldiers—all of them from the Gigas Corporation—filled the train station. Waves of green and blue intermixed with red, brought the wrong kind of life to this deadened place made of wood. And in the center of it all, Jones, the third member of Jackson’s team, sprawled out in a dead heap.

Holding his mouth to stop the bile, Jackson moved in to study the scene. He started with his own fallen comrade.

\* \* \*

Back out front, the bloodstained picture flapped in the wind as Jackson studied the contours of its image. The figure within the frame burned a smile at him—it didn't make sense. She looked too innocent. He blinked several times, letting the soft edges fade in and out. Something was wrong here; he couldn't place the link.

"The outcome doesn't look good from this end," said Keebler. "If the girl in the picture had something to do with this, she's long gone. Probably on the express train to nowhere by now."

She had this look about her, a look that screamed contradiction. Though her smile was passive, something in her right eye twinkled deception. Maybe it was the way her blonde hair fell over her left. He couldn't tell.

He studied her clothing: a white T-shirt and pants made of black leather. She carried her shoes, a detail not entirely worth noticing, but she stood on the pavement. That too was trivial, except that the shadows casting off the antique building behind her were very short. Clearly, her skin was tough, or at least her threshold of pain was high. Her face also glistened with brightness and her blonde hair shined like a light. It was virtually angelic, but framed with barren ugliness. With the image of dry earth and a single cactus carrying the early stages of rot supplementing her, the photo was the embodiment of glorious ambivalence.

"I'm gonna make one more sweep of the station," said Keebler. "Maybe I can find her footprints or something."

Jackson looked up from the picture in a watch's tick to see his fat mustached partner dropping his dying cigarette to the dust. The spark extinguished as it hit the ground.

"God help her if we find her," he said.

Keebler turned his back and headed for the station. He casually looked this way and that as the dust rolled behind him.

Jackson continued to study the picture, hoping to find some detail he missed in the last fifty scans. But he maintained his doubts—he had already examined it for twenty minutes without answer. The girl looked sweet, yet her bare feet on the noontime pavement suggested her invincibility. It was the only telling piece of information he had. And yet, it seemed to explain a lot—whoever she was, she had strength—perhaps more than he had. Such strength made it possible for her to endure any situation, and ultimately, possible to blend into any environment. In truth, she could be anywhere and do anything. She could blend in with the innocents, or mingle with the guilty, or travel within any place, peaceful or



hostile. This woman, who couldn't be more than thirty, was anywhere this world had to offer—blending in, unnoticed, unrecognized, and unhindered by everything. The picture couldn't say a thing, yet managed to say everything. She was missing and wanted to stay that way.

He knelt next to Jones, whom he transferred outside for the advantage of sunlight, to search his vest. Perhaps, there was at least one more piece of memorabilia to answer his maddening questions, like a second photo, or secret note or something providing a clearer answer. But after searching for the tenth time, he figured his hopes were completely dashed. He resolved to see if Jones himself provided the missing answers.

The agent looked at peace with his sleeping face, though the scene was unconvincing. No sign of struggle and no evidence of surprise, yet clearly, he went down involuntarily and remained that way. Whether he was killed standing up or lying down, no one knew, for all the witnesses were dead. With all the clues running amok, one thing held true: whoever did this, whether it was the girl or someone else, was a professional.

The thing that didn't make sense: who would want both sides eliminated? Jones was good, but not so invincible that he could finish off an entire squadron of Gigas thugs alone. The girl was the only person evident to fit the equation. Unfortunately, the picture was inconclusive. In all things considered, she might not have been anybody—just a replacement photo from JC Penney. Then again, he knew Jones; the man never carried anything that failed to bear significance.

"Why didn't you warn us?" Jackson asked the dead body. "We could've saved you." He paused. "What were you doing?"

He examined the knife wound in Jones's gut. It was deep, but very clean—perfect, actually. Excess tearing of surrounding skin tissue was absent; the bloody flesh pocket matched the dimensions of a blade to a tee. The precision was so exact that it appeared as if the attack had been done on an operating table.

"Who'd do this to you?"

He scrutinized the picture again. Specifically, he studied the shadows, comparing them to the shadows around him—a comparison yielding a two-foot size difference. When converting shadow length to hours, he figured a quarter of the day had passed since the snapshot's conception. If the girl managed to hotwire a Cadillac out of here in that time frame, then his questions would go on forever.

He picked up the Polaroid camera dangling around Jones's neck, checking the photo dispenser to see if anything got stuck inside. Nothing leapt out at him, however, so he set the camera down.

The girl's willingness to pose for him didn't make sense, either.

Sand and tumbleweed particles blew in his face, causing his eyes to itch. Perhaps, the time had come to pack up the scene and get Jones out of here. As it stood, the situation required a forensic investigation, so Keebler and he weren't likely to find anything more without help from the Faction. Resolving that his job was finished, then, he stood up and headed for the station, shielding his face from the onslaught of the ensuing dust storm.

Once inside, Jackson found Keebler sitting on a wooden bench smoking another cigarette, staring across the tracks toward the rusting power station. Jackson stepped over a couple fallen soldiers to reach Keebler's side.

"I think it's time we packed up and got Jones out of here," he said. "It won't be long before Gigas commanders figure out they haven't heard from their boys in awhile."

"Screw Gigas," said Keebler. "We have to figure out why they were fortifying here."

"What difference does it make why they were fortifying here? Look at the bullet holes in the floor. Look at the blood on the railroad. Do you think they found a strategic advantage in this? Clearly, this place deserves desertion—something we need to do now."

Keebler puffed a cloud of smoke before setting his cigarette to his side.

"The place is quiet now," he said. "And the opposition has been eliminated. Desertion is far from necessary. I called the chiefs a little while ago and told them they can start moving our boys into the power station when the sun goes down. If this place is that important to Gigas, then they'll try to reclaim it, and we'll be waiting for them. Over there, of course."

"Are you crazy? After what just happened here?"

The fat man darted a sharp look at him.

"We don't know what happened here. We only know what finished here. Right now, neither possibility is enough to drive this opportunity away. We have to take this."

"And if Gigas had the same theory about something else?"

"There's no evidence of that. The only thing we have is that picture of yours. The chiefs won't stand for cowardice in the face of some thirty-year-old blonde chick, so we can't run. We have to take this opportunity."

Jackson saw his point, but didn't like it.

“Well, we gotta get this place cleaned up at least,” he said. “Our efforts won’t mean much if the police interfere before we have a chance to set up our position.”

“Let the police come—as if they even patrol this far out. They can’t handle us.”

Jackson felt a hush overcoming him. Keebler didn’t used to be this cocky; it didn’t make sense that his attitude shifted now. The war raging between Gigas and the Freedom Faction United Organization had resulted in shifts of power of the underworld for years, but Keebler was the type of guy who just went with it. He never took the positioning to heart; he just wanted the paycheck. But now it seemed his brain started to work—leading him to make precarious decisions. Jackson wasn’t sure he was comfortable with this new, unrecognizable fat man.

“They shouldn’t have to handle us,” said Jackson. “We’re supposed to remain invisible until we have the leverage to stop Gigas at its core. Even if we take control of the power station, we’re still too weak to hold off everyone who’ll try to oppose us. And with this girl on the run, if she knows who we are, it’s gonna be hard for us to stay invisible for long. So the bottom line is that we have to clean this place up before we attract the roaches, because when they come, we don’t want them finding us. Got it?”

Keebler extracted another puff from his cigarette. The smoke billowed out in rings.

“How long have we been doing this?”

Jackson thought about it a moment.

“Several years, why?”

“With all the opposition we faced throughout the existence of the FFUO, have we ever once crumbled to the law?”

Jackson snatched the cigarette from his hand. He flicked it across the railroad tracks.

“We never had to face the law,” he sneered. “Now help me clean this place before there’s a first for everything.”

Jackson headed for the exit. His first order of business was to get Jones into the trunk of his car, somehow. But he stopped when Keebler called out.

“It doesn’t matter what we do, Jax,” he said. “We can’t hide the bullet holes. Sure, we can bury the Gigas guys, clean up the blood and take Jones back to base, but there’s still the evidence of war out here. If the police really care that much to come out here and visit this old train station for the first time in months, these bullet holes will tell them what happened here. Frankly, I’m tired of touching these Gigas douche bags.”

Jackson folded his arms over his chest, disbelieving what Keebler had said. The old Keebler would've already scrubbed the bloodstains away. The old Keebler would've hounded him to open the disbanded freight train cars to toss the Gigas commandos into the empty crates. The old Keebler would've already searched the power station to make sure there weren't more soldiers waiting to ambush them. This Keebler hadn't even bothered to get his butt off the bench.

"Realistically," said Keebler, "the only way we can do this place cleaning justice is to burn it to the ground. That's the best way to bury everything."

"Then, I guess we're screwed, aren't we?" said Jackson.

Keebler glanced at Jackson. His eyes were unlike anything he had seen in the man before. They appeared distant, even empty.

"I can't believe you tossed my cigarette away," he said.

Jackson wanted to smile, but was too upset to strain his facial muscles. One partner was down, the other was losing it, and everything about this operation was slowly unraveling to pieces. He started getting a headache.

Keebler returned his focus toward the power station. He removed another cigarette from his pocket and placed it in his mouth, his mustache overlapping it. Jackson didn't want to look at him anymore.

As he continued heading for the exit, he heard Keebler strike a match. That man had to be the most dedicated chain smoker he ever knew.

A few minutes passed before Jackson could get the trunk to his old beat-up Plymouth open. The lock broke off in a gunfight two months earlier, so he had to pry it with a crowbar every day since. One of the FFUO's auto body guys hammered most of the bullet holes out, but had yet to track down a compatible locking mechanism to restore its former glory. Even though the damaged one did an adequate job keeping the trunk closed, it required creative maneuvering of the latch and a quick slam of the lid to get it to lock effectively—and that merely underscored the talent required to reopen it.

Once he popped it ajar, he scooped Jones off the ground and carefully placed him inside. He was a bit concerned about Jones's safety, especially since the floor of the trunk was rusting out, but had confidence his car wouldn't allow him to fall through into the road. It already managed to cart automatic weapons around for several months, so one body wasn't likely to change the rules.

After Jones plopped into the trunk, Jackson tinkered with the latch until he felt it was in the catching position. It took some patience, but he managed to get it where he wanted. Then, he slammed the lid shut. It only took a second for it to bounce open again.

“Oh, come on, trunk,” he complained. “Don’t do this to me.”

He fiddled with the latch some more, this time doing it with the lid barely open. His goal was to hook the latch into the locking mechanism and hope it would hold. It took extra diligence, but again he positioned it where he thought was his best chance. Then, he clapped the lid, barely getting his fingers out of the way in time.

Finally, it held in place.

Jackson exhaled a sigh of relief, turning his back to the vehicle and leaning against it. He let his exhaustion from the day’s events slide him toward the ground. Within a moment, he sat in the dirt, watching as the sun drew closer to the mesas in the distance.

He removed the picture from his pocket. Something about this woman haunted him. Perhaps, it was the contrast of her beautiful appearance versus the train station’s ugly ramshackle state of existence that got him, but it had to be something more. Namely, he thought, she didn’t belong in a place like this. Trains didn’t pass through here anymore, except for military operations. Civilization staggered miles away. The Gigas connection didn’t make sense, either. They were all dead and she was nowhere to be found. Last he checked they didn’t employ women in their ranks, either. Her existence here, by all rights of evidence, offered no merit.

But then, Jones did say he found a lead. Her connection with Gigas had some shred of validity. Unless...unless, of course, she wasn’t whom Jones had in mind. The man did have a thing for white girls—especially blondes—so maybe she wasn’t a lead, but some early morning date, or a late night date that never went home, whom he brought along for the ride. That might explain her smile.

But that didn’t make sense, either; Jones was more responsible than that. Her entire presence had some other purpose—one that Jackson couldn’t figure out to save his life. She had to be a chameleon.

Jackson returned to the platform a few minutes later to check Keebler’s status, to see if he combed the power station yet, or had at least gotten off his butt. When he arrived at the bench, however, his partner was nowhere to be found, so he breathed a hesitant sigh of relief. He hoped the fat man found a clue they hadn’t considered yet.

When ten minutes had passed without sign of his partner's return, Jackson decided it best to help him with the search. He cupped his hand over his mouth to prevent gagging to the ungodly smell polluting the area and set off toward the tracks.

But, as he veered around the first layer of abandoned freight cars, he couldn't hold the vomit back any longer. At his feet, past the corner of an opened cab, a near dead cigarette had burnt to a stub next to a full dead Keebler lying face down in a pool of blood. Losing control of his stomach, he puked in the space between them.

Before he could flip the body over to examine the extent of the wound, he backed away. Whatever did this to him still lurked in the area, and there was no way he would let it catch him off guard. He ran for the nearest opened boxcar for shelter.

Inside, he scurried into a bale of hay and waited. The area was completely silent—save his beating heart—though, he was ready to take action should the setting change.

He waited an hour, at least, but all signs of activity eluded him. It was hard to tell if he was safe.

Through the cracks in the ceiling he saw vultures circling overhead, preparing for the great dive ahead of them. Soon, the carnivorous feast would begin and he would be stuck here watching it if he didn't leave now. It was risky, but he had to believe that whoever was responsible for this carnage had to be gone by now. If they knew where to attack Keebler, then they knew where to attack him, and so far that hadn't happened. He had to believe he was safe.

Jackson crept to the edge of the boxcar, peeking out the side door. As far as he could tell, the coast was clear.

When he climbed out, he scanned the area for movement. The bodies in the station continued to rot, but no one poked around to challenge that. With the air silent in all directions, he had to know he was alone out here—that whatever happened to Keebler wouldn't happen to him. But, then again, Keebler thought he was alone before he wound up dead on the tracks. No matter how much denial Jackson was ready to swallow, he couldn't deny reality. In truth, something was still gravely wrong out here.

There was another problem to consider too: Keebler called the faction before he was killed. If Jackson abandoned the train yard now, there would be no one left to warn them of the slaughter or of the risk that still lingered in the area. Should the chiefs arrive and another massacre ensued, the survivors would wonder what happened to him. If

he weren't among the dead, then he would be regarded as a deserter. The situation was truly precarious.

In the end, he resolved that he needed to call them. Unfortunately, the only phone nearby was buried somewhere in Keebler's jacket.

After brief deliberation, Jackson voted on braving the fire. It was true he was legendary for his squeamishness, but he was still a member of the Faction, so he needed to prove his worth. Uncertain if danger even remained in the area, he swallowed his fears and headed back for the first row of freight cars. When he passed in front of the target boxcar, he knelt down next to Keebler's body and reluctantly jammed his palm under the limp torso. It took only a second to discover the bloody gash scraping across his fingertips.

"If I survive this day, Keeb, I swear I'm quitting."

A zipper bound the two halves of the jacket together. Fortunately, Keebler was so fat that it only had room to ascend part of the way, which meant it would take Jackson only half the time to unzip it. The bad news, however, was that he didn't know where the latch stopped. Instead of searching around the neck, he had to hunt around the belly, hoping the weight on his hand wouldn't crush his bones.

As soon as he found the top and unzipped the jacket—an ordeal that took the better part of a minute—he groped around the inner pockets, clearly smearing blood across the dead man's shirt. He located his objective underneath Keebler's let rib.

The phone was smashed—most likely from the impact of Keebler's weight sandwiching it against the ground. Back to Square One.

Jackson scraped his palm against the dry, pebbly earth, retrieving his freedom from the tight confines of a gashed stomach. Even though he felt another wave of sickness overcoming him, he refused to use his defiled hand to cover his mouth. Like a man, he held it in.

A sharp breeze blew through the train yard, kicking a thick cloud of dust in his face. In an effort to shield his eyes, he crouched away from the onslaught. It took several seconds for it to subside—long enough to color him brown. When he finally stood upright, he caught sight of something he hadn't noticed before: a window shattered on the upper floor of the power station.

A musty smell, thick with leather and sweat, followed behind the wind.

"Don't move," whispered a female voice, with Australian accent, as a hand yanked his forehead back and another one pressed a hunting knife against his throat.

The bloody edge of the blade coddled his skin. Its heat from the sun nearly singed him. His turn to die had come at last.

“Who are you?” he winced.

“How many more are here?”

“Just me.”

“Who else is coming?”

“I don’t know. Who are you?”

The blade whisked from his throat, but a blunt object forcefully counterattacked the base of his neck. As he staggered, another blunt force smashed against him.

Some indeterminate time later, he awoke to find himself in an upright position tied fast to a metal folding chair. As his bleary eyes wandered left, he noticed a series of pipes, large and small, running at varying angles down a long corridor. Tracking right, he discovered a small room filled with photos, automatic weapons and a blown out window. Several high-voltage panels pocked the walls around him.

The blonde woman from the picture stood live and in full animation next to the broken window a few feet away. She seemed ill-concerned about his awakening state.

“Why have you spared me?” he said, as his sight returned to full capacity.

“I haven’t,” she said, affixed on the outdoors. “I’m waiting for information.”

“Information about what?”

“Why did you come to this train yard?”

Jackson wanted to rub out the pain from his abused neck, but couldn’t move from his confines.

“I was about to ask you the same question,” he said.

“I’m here because I needed to escape. I infiltrated the Gigas Corporation’s headquarters as the mock girlfriend of one of its lieutenants, but I was discovered, so I ran. Unfortunately, they followed me. Now I’m fighting to stay alive.”

“Infiltrated for who?”

“That’s none of your concern. Now it’s your turn. Why are you here?”

“One of my teammates said he found a lead in our fight to unravel Gigas’s core. The man you killed by the tracks and I came here to follow up with him.”

“The man with the camera; he was your teammate?”

“He was one of our best soldiers.”



"Well, I'm sorry for your loss."

"I don't sense remorse."

"I wasn't trained to show remorse."

Jackson studied her posture. She looked tense.

"We don't belong to Gigas, so why kill us?" he asked. "We don't punish those who don't deserve it."

"It wasn't my initial intention to kill your partner," she said. "He seemed like a nice guy, full of charm and smiles. I let him take my picture to humor him. But I didn't trust him being alone in this desolate place, and I sensed he didn't trust me for the same reason, so we started asking questions of each other. When his questions pried into details that superseded casual business, I viewed him as a potential threat, so I stabbed him. Then, the Gigas Corporation found my location, so I ran for cover up here. It didn't take long for me to empty out my stockpile. An hour and a half later, just as I thought I could breathe again, you and your fat partner showed up, so once again I felt threatened."

"So why kill him, but spare me?"

"As I said, I haven't spared you. I'm just waiting to make sure no one else is coming."

"And what if they are? Where will you go? The desert has no end."

"That's why I have to make sure."

At that point, she finally broke focus from the train yard and redirected her gaze toward him. Her face was beautiful, with a long bang of hair covering her right eye, but her skin was worn, as if she had spent her life in distress.

"Am I clear to escape this place?" she asked.

Jackson was well aware that his answer decided the timeliness of his fate, so he considered his response with a fine-tooth comb. Unfortunately, any devisable answer he thought of kept him in a perilous situation. After a brief deliberation over his situation, he resolved to get it over with.

"As far as I'm concerned, you were clear to escape hours ago."

"Fair enough, then. I'm glad we had this exchange."

With that, she stepped away from the window, grabbed a rifle off the floor, and cold-cocked him in the head with its butt.

A mild rumbling disturbed his slumber. Though the room was dark and incredibly cramped—he lied in the fetal position, yet his entire body extended into both walls—the smell enveloping him was the worst. The scent was putrid, like a decaying animal plucked fresh off the road, with

nowhere in which to ventilate. He assumed the smell emitted from the lumpy mass spooning him from behind.

After taking quick inventory of the carpeted floor underneath his shoulder, he realized he was jammed in the trunk of his own car—with Jones's body behind him. When he questioned why the woman stowed him away alive, he figured it was her decision to take him out somewhere else—somewhere like, well, anywhere really.

Regardless of the details, he knew he had to find a way to escape. Fortunately, that meant fighting against a lid that had a blown-out lock. Because his legs were free to move, he believed his efforts stood a chance. With several rapid-fire kicks to the ceiling, the trunk flew open. The mangled locking mechanism couldn't stand a chance against him.

Blue sky stretched across the space beyond, barely filled with a single white cloud. Immediately, the dense stench of post-mortem flesh fled its confines, lessening the environment into something bearable. Jackson still wanted to vomit, of course—the scent brought with it the image of slaughter—but he traded his ill feelings for the joy of fresh air.

As he sat upright, surprised that his bonds were removed, he looked out the back to see a dust cloud stretching endlessly from behind the rear axle. The cloud was so thick that he could hardly see the earth below—earth that was clearly desert and not road.

At last, the truth reached him: the girl intended to take him somewhere off the map, somewhere the world couldn't find him. He had to escape.

Then, another realization hit him: the car hadn't stopped. Under normal circumstances the driver would've noticed the trunk pop open, screeching the vehicle to a halt. But this driver didn't seem very well aware, or careful. For someone so cautious about being discovered, the woman appeared oddly ill-concerned about her prize escaping. This worried him.

Though it was hard to keep his balance on the bumpy trail, Jackson peeked around the lid's edge to see what occupied the woman's attention. It was hard to see through the rising dust, but he managed to sneak a look inside the passenger cabin.

What he found shocked him: the car was empty.

It was also heading for a ravine.

And he only had a few seconds left to react.

Any move he chose would injure him, but a lack of one would kill him, so he swung his legs over the lip of the trunk and anchored his feet against the bumper.

Another second passed; anymore without action and he would barrel off the cliff for certain.

He flung himself out of the hold, landing into a backward roll amidst the thickening dust. Speeding at nearly the full velocity rate as the car, he pulled out of his manic control-loss, just in time to see the old Plymouth careening over the edge and himself coming dangerously close to following it. He skidded along his belly into a complete stop about ten feet short of the plummet.

A few minutes later, as the dust settled and his heart rate slowed, Jackson stood to his feet. Although he was thoroughly soiled with blood and desert sand, he smiled at the life he still had. Granted, the desert went on forever in the opposite direction, so the time he had short of dehydration left him uneasy. But, if he did make it back to civilization, he knew he had a mission to tackle.

It was worn from the abuse, but he still possessed the picture that Jones had taken earlier that day. With the right analysis, he would uncover the mystery to the woman's identity.

Now filled with resolve, Jackson hobbled up to the edge of the ravine to pay his teammate his last respects. The smoke from the burning car several hundred miles below slowly rose to his level. It brought with it the scent of purification.

## ***WHEN CELLPHONES GO CRAZY***

When he briefly met Melissa at the University party last semester, Avery collapsed from the wave of deep smit overpowering him. Whether it surged from her laugh or through her smile, he couldn't tell, but it hit his stomach full force, keeling him over onto the backroom sofa. She was enchanting from head to handbag, like an adult-sized pixie fluttering up from the depths of a mirror spring. He couldn't avoid the eminent infatuation.

As he prostrated across the couch, nervous of the words filling his mind, he resolved, somehow, to speak to her again before the night ended. After a violent season of heartbreak, he needed her inviting face, and the possibility of her warm touch, assuming she was warm, to bring him back to the living. Although she was woman, like the beast that mauled him before, she was also soft. For that, he had to believe in her sensibility—that her first sixty seconds of cheer toward him were genuine.

Therefore, when he finally rounded up the courage to initiate the sequel to his interaction, reality slapped him across the face when he discovered she had already left the party.

Sometime later, when he recovered from his daze, he felt the wave in his bowels sucking his nerves down into a whirlpool. He didn't know whether to cry or to puke.

The story might have been common fare for most guys his age, but a spellbinding of this level only happened to him three times before—most recently with the girl who betrayed him. For the crush to happen again, with her, convinced him she was special. But seeing her walk out of that party, bereft of a second chance to converse with her, was to burn into his mind a memory that tormented him with the fierceness of a bloodthirsty bog monster.

So he had to thank God for second chances when he veered into the condiment aisle of a ritzy supermarket several months later to find her shopping there.

Melissa strained to grab a bottle of olive oil from the back of the top shelf, facing opposition from her inch-too-short arm-length. Her long brown hair danced against her shoulders as she bobbed on her feet, trying to divide the mass of fatty cooking grease cans that blocked her target.

Unfortunately for her, her efforts were futile. Fortunately for Avery, he had a window of opportunity available.

Avery examined his desire to assist her. He figured a stock boy could easily drag a ladder into the aisle and kick the bottle off the shelf as he could stand in her place, but he didn't want to give a stock boy such advantage. Her petite form stunned him: a physique resembling a pepper mill, moderate in length and remarkably thin, hands shaking to finish the job she started. Whether he could develop a convincing story to sidle up to her or not, he wasn't sure. For all he knew, she had forgotten about him.

Of course, there was only one way to find out.

In his heart he knew he didn't need any more bottles of olive oil for his pantry, but he didn't want his brain to know that. After taking another short breath to verify his aliveness, he stepped once, then twice in her direction, following with several more until he stood within whispering distance of her. He smiled at his newfound courage.

"Here," he said, feeling some heat rising from his collar, "let me help you with that."

Without waiting for response, he pushed the remaining cans of grease aside and grabbed for the first olive oil bottle in reach. It felt wet and slimy, so he searched for a dry one. Satisfied with the better choice, three options later, he pulled the new bottle from the shelf and placed it in her hand. At that moment, he caught glimpse of her green eyes and lost his train of thought.

"Thanks," she said.

For some reason he expected more from her, perhaps a demure smile or seductive hair-flip, but he only received thanks. After placing the bottle into her shopping cart, she scooted off. It all seemed wasted. But watching her skirt rise and fall made the departure worth it.

Another moment passed before he remembered why he came down this aisle: he had to find some Italian dressing and steak sauce for his barbecue bash on Memorial Day weekend, which his college friends commissioned him to host. Since he knew his Psychology classmates were an analytical lot, he wanted to acquire the highest quality condiments available to waylay them of false opinions about him, or at least to distract them from his lack of wealth. Even though his miniscule salary made it difficult to shop at classy, high-quality supermarkets, he reasoned the risk to buy into the National Chain Grocery Saver would have a nice deceptive payoff. Of course, he didn't count on the anomaly of the salad dressing aisle distracting him.

The mission changed: he had to invite her to the barbecue, reclaiming his once lost second chance at love.

The passages of this fancy supermarket were decked with all sorts of exotic décor, from interwoven vines to bookend Greek statues. The owner once interviewed with a *20/20* style television show explaining that he wanted to give American shoppers the European experience, breaking them of Wal-Mart culture and immersing them into a world of mythology—while searching for frozen pizza. The interviewer challenged his vision, asking why the populace would care about such innovation. The owner responded that if people didn't care about a different world, then filmmakers never would have made the movie *Troy*, or its subsequent film, *Mr. and Mrs. Smith*. The interviewer, in turn, nodded and smiled.

Swallowing from his alleged boldness, Avery turned the corner, nearly spearing himself with Eros' heart-shaped arrow, which protruded from a wall of vanilla-fudge cookies. Spinning away from the sudden Greek god of love, he regained his balance, zeroing in on Melissa sauntering near the packaged meats island. He was scared, but couldn't be deterred.

He had his share of problems: top of which had to be his inability to step forward. Physically, he moved just fine, but metaphorically he had an anchor tied to his foot. When he saw Allison the year before—a little blonde candy store hottie that seduced him with a wink and a smile—he wanted to approach her, but chickened out. It was her who had to talk to him. Fortunately, her initiation led them to an engagement three months later...

And a nasty breakup two months after that. She met a lion tamer earlier that week and decided she was more interested in marrying him.

The pain still ate at his heart—he really liked Allison—but he couldn't guarantee the brunette olive oil goddess would destroy him, too, so he resolved to follow through with the risk. Besides, her slender legs begged for attention. Not that physical attraction was his main ploy, of course; he just agreed that it was a nice bonus.

Avery cupped his hand over his mouth to analyze his breath. The pepperoni pizza slice he had for lunch, a favorite twelve o'clock tradition, lingered, having the potential to spell disaster if he failed to neutralize it. Fortunately, the toothpaste aisle was close, but he was under a time constraint—the young, brown-haired beauty was getting farther away—so he skipped his alternative option and continued forward. As long as he stood a moderate distance from her, he thought he'd be okay.

She had already rounded the corner into the produce section when he resumed course. The sight pleased him, because the destination meant that she took care of herself—unless she strolled through the vegetable

aisle to reach the bakery. Fortunately, she didn't look like a massive cake consumer, so he allowed himself to breathe.

He continued toward her location, slowly, even hesitant, but nevertheless with forward motion. When he touched the edge of the produce section—an area highlighted with wall depictions of maidens sucking on purple grapes—he stopped. Before he moved in, he had to know that he was making the right choice. The wrong move, or the right move played badly, guaranteed him a wealth of problems, so he had to ensure his position. He considered a couple stories his friend, Dexter, shared with him over a beer several months ago about outcomes:

Story #1: When Dexter became infatuated with an “awesomely hot” lifeguard, a blonde woman made of *Baywatch* substance, he came up with a plan to lure her through urgency. Since she wouldn't give him a second look—he was pasty-skinned and absent of muscle tone—he decided to drown himself. He knew, going into the water, that he was taking a huge risk, especially considering that a fake drowning would've been smarter, but he really wanted this woman's touch, so he inhaled some liquid after a wild display of panic. The plan seemed flawless when he blacked out, for the woman had no choice but to rescue him. But it wasn't until after he awoke, spitting a fountain, that he realized his attempt had a major hole: he drowned himself during a change in shift. When those luscious lips pulled away from his waterlogged tongue, he discovered, to his horror, that they belonged to a mustached butch in one-piece bathing suit. Immediately, he gagged; then begged to go back under.

Story #2: Not long after the lifeguard catastrophe, Dexter met a girl on a bus to Atlanta. She was a southern sweetheart, the kind of girl who walked around in checkered skirts and pigtails, but hid a nasty personality disorder. When he turned up the charm through an exchange of phone numbers, he immediately regretted it. She started calling, a lot, while still on the bus. Even when they parted ways in the big city, she hounded him: ring, ring, message, message, ring, “why aren't you returning my calls, lover boy?” ring. It became such a problem that he filed a restraining order against her. But when he started getting lonely, he canceled it. For her, that was a good thing, because she was primed to violate it. After another week of hounding him, the girl impressed Dexter with her determination. So he caved. The week after that they married.

At the end of the beer, and after several loose shoulder pats, Dexter convinced Avery the outcome could go either way. Then, Dexter left with a sullen look on his face.

As he mulled over the stories' details, Avery considered his avenues. He knew Melissa wasn't butch, and he didn't think she was psychotic—at least not according to those precious sixty seconds at the party—but he was still unsure what to offer her. He remembered she floated about the party without being introduced: that she initiated the introductions herself. Maybe, he thought, she was the independent type, flourishing from her self-will. If that were the case, then he wouldn't know how to stand a chance.

He also wondered if he violated her privacy when he tried to help her with the olive oil bottle.

But because he thought she was unlikely to take notice of him otherwise, he resolved to overstep that line of concern. He had to search for any means necessary to win her over. That's when it occurred to him that wine was the great mediator of all things relational.

The wine aisle was the fanciest in the supermarket. Actual models posing as Helen of Troy offered samples of expensive grapes to passing guests. When he entered the area, he nearly passed out from the overwhelming state of beauty. He had to count to thirty just to regain his focus.

After inhaling some air, he studied the bottle labels for standouts. Many famous names crossed his eyes from Cavit to Sutter Home, but none struck his fancy. He also had a budget to consider. A good Pinot Grigio might've run him under ten dollars, which was reasonable, but it would've also run him under a truck in the great first impressions department. To win the girl, he needed to show some balls, metaphorically speaking, so he had to spring for the Titan of wines. He thought a 1995 Dom Perignon was a good choice, but the hundred-dollar price tag made him cackle—a good first impression still had to be sensible. The price deflected him toward the bargain section where dying ivy withered on the shelf. A fifteen-dollar non-alcoholic wine had to do.

The green bottle clanked as Avery removed it from the shelf. He knew it was the one; it stood alone in a sea of black bottles. Blood red liquid churned inside as he swished it around, emulating a motion he once saw in the hands of a connoisseur. Frankly, he didn't know why he was doing it; he only remembered that people swirled wine to test its body, whatever that meant. Once he brought the bottle to a standstill, he glanced at the label to fully absorb his prize. It read, "Welch's."



He figured Melissa would near the end of the produce section by now, so he clutched the bottle tightly and worked his way over there. When he entered the sacred aisle of fruits and vegetables, he spotted her thumbing a head of lettuce. Now she was caught.

His heart raced as he took another step toward her. This couldn't be right. Something seemed irrational about his decision. He was about to pick up on a woman he had only met once, and he was doing it at a grocery store. It almost violated his character.

But every great move in history started with a violation.

He took another step. She palmed a stalk of okra, lightly bending it to test its freshness. He took another step. She put the stalk in her basket. He took another step. She leaned over the peppers and tapped them. He took another step. His cellphone rang.

Avery groaned as he checked the number. It was Chet, the head of the barbecue planning committee. As much as he wanted to forsake the call, he couldn't. His reputation with the guys was on the line.

He stole another glance at Melissa as he hit the "talk" button. She dropped a pepper in her cart; then glided to the melons. They looked so luscious.

He hoped the call was life or death.

"Yeah," he said.

"Avery, it's Chet. We have a problem."

"What?"

"Dexter's wife just cheated on him."

"Gina? Already? Should've seen it coming."

"Well it came, and now he wants to punch her. He's trying not to, but he's afraid of losing control."

"Yeah, that sucks."

"Yeah, it does." Chet paused, clearly waiting for a response. Avery didn't give him one. "We can't lose his participation, Avery. He's in charge of grilling the hamburgers."

"I know."

"The committee thought you could talk to him, seeing as how you're studying to be a counselor and all."

"Yeah, I could see where you thought that."

"So when will you talk to him?"

That was a good question. Avery already had an agenda established, beginning with a conversation with the beautiful woman in the produce section, and ending with a movie about cyberpunks laying down the law against digital super agents. Somehow, he hoped he could even combine the ends together and throw in some popcorn for flavor. Spending an

hour or more counseling Dexter would undoubtedly throw a wrench into his plans.

"I'm not sure I'm going to," he said. "He's gotta learn to control himself. If he had paid attention to her cues, he'd already know this would happen. He should've been prepared to deal with it."

"He's threatening to punch her, Avery."

Avery considered the importance of this statement. Gina was overly ambitious, and not much of a supporter of faithfulness, but she didn't deserve to be punched. Likewise, Dexter didn't deserve having assault charges brought up against him.

As much as he didn't want to be bothered, Avery still realized he had some responsibility to protect his friends.

"Fine, I'll head over to his house as soon as I leave the store," he said.

And then, he clicked the "end call" button.

He slid his phone into his pocket, while attempting to stomach his resentment. Loneliness tormented him for the last two months and he wanted out. The only door he thought he could take was taking the moment to examine apples. How he could make time for everyone, he didn't know.

Then, the solution popped into his head: Dexter was analytical, and thus could wait a few minutes, maybe even an hour for his emergency counseling session. With his penchant to outline his ridiculous actions before going through with them, two hours was even okay. His fists weren't even that forceful. Three hours was plenty of time.

Avery returned focus to the slender brunette, only to discover that she slipped out of the area when his eyes were briefly turned away.

He searched frantically through the aisle, looking behind produce islands and shopping carts, before finally discovering her passing through the bakery. The sight of her shoulders gyrating up and down calmed his fears, but they were short lived. When he looked closer he realized it was her turn to flirt with a cellphone—laughing, talking, and laughing some more. He saw his window of opportunity shrinking.

A moment of desperation shot through his soul. Time was running out. Her shopping cart squeaked as she turned the corner, dodging Aphrodite's clamshell. She headed for the checkout line.

Fortunately, she carried a pile of groceries, so she would be stuck at the register for a few minutes. But her phone call seemed pretty involving. Avery wasn't sure how to steal her attention away. If she had left without him saying a word to her, then she might not have offered

him a third chance. But if he just jumped in and ruined her conversation, he was likely to blow his critical impression. Either way seemed bleak.

He didn't know which decision to make, so he threw reason out the window and decided to checkout, too. Perhaps, he could catch her at the end of her call.

She carefully maneuvered her cart into the cashier's lane. Avery maneuvered himself behind her. He felt his heart beat faster as he carefully, though nonchalantly to the observer's eye, listened to her conversation.

"I know what you're saying," she said. "I had the same problem with my VCR. I guess I'm not technology savvy either. Huh? Yeah, I had my neighbor record it for me, instead. He's a bit of a geek, but he likes me. It's sweet. What? No, that's not gonna happen."

She laughed some more. Her voice chimed as she spoke—soft as she delivered, ringing as she finished. Her laugh was more like a giggle than a spontaneous burst of hilarity, but the breath exuding from her had the sincere whistle of deep amusement. It was like she was holding back an uproar, while unable to stop the dam from cracking.

"Oh, give me a break," she continued. "He's not my type. Huh? Yeah right. You're impossible, Jenny. No, he didn't record a love note on my videotape; at least I don't think he did. I didn't actually watch it, yet. Did you? Really? How was it? Really? Jack and Karen did what? That's funny. Do you feel like watching it again? I was thinking of watching it when I got home. Wanna come over?"

The lady in front of her paid the cashier and collected her bags from the counter. Melissa, meanwhile, unloaded her groceries onto the turntable. Her shopping list ranged from the obvious olive oil and peppers, to a gallon of milk and a can of fish food. One thing after another hit the turning belt, slowly making its way to the cashier's hands. The speed of checkout seemingly increased.

There wasn't much time left to make his move. First, a roll of paper towels, next, a box of cereal, then, a bag of noodles, followed by a jar of tomato sauce—her shopping cart looked like the victim of a vacuum cleaner attack. On top of that, her friend still wouldn't let her off the phone. If the tide didn't shift for him soon, he was gonna have to interrupt her.

"I'm sure the car wash can wait," she continued. "Come on, it'll be fun. I'll make some pizza. Jenny, it's the series finale. Come over, okay? I won't take no for an answer. Uh huh, I got some chocolate fudge ice cream. You can't resist, can you? Diet schmiet, you weigh less than I do. Come over. You know you gotta watch Harry Connick, Jr. again. Yeah, I

thought so. You remember how to get to my apartment, right? Yeah, take Parker to Yates...uh huh...yeah; the name of my street is Nochants Forward Avenue. Okay. I'm in the Brickyard Sky Apartments. Yeah, I'm in building 2025, apartment 311. Right, the five-story building. You're coming, right? Oh, Jenny, hold on a second, okay? I have another call."

Avery's worst fear was coming true: one phone call became another. The cashier already started ringing up Melissa's items as they slid into her reach, passing them one by one over the scanner for pricing. Melissa clicked a button on her cellphone before bringing the device back up to her ear.

"Hello?" she said. "Oh hey, Erica, what's up? What? Yeah, I was just talking to Jenny. She's coming over to watch it with me. Yeah, I recorded it. You wanna come too?"

Avery reached for the item divider and placed it behind Melissa's two-liter Pepsi bottle. He figured if he was going to checkout, too, he might as well set down his own stuff. First, he placed his non-alcoholic wine onto the belt and watched it move uniformly behind her products. Next, he grabbed for his...for his...empty hand. He immediately checked his shopping cart to discover he had only one thing, which was crazy considering he came here for two completely different things. At first, he thought it wise to go back and grab the items while he was still here, but realized that if he left now, he wouldn't have his chance to talk to Melissa.

The solution couldn't avoid a paradox. One way or another, something was getting shafted. As the cashier scanned the last of Melissa's items, Avery made up his mind: he resolved to return to the store some other time.

Melissa barely took a breath as she removed her checkbook from her purse, going on and on about some other show she recorded. It seemed trivial to Avery, but then, he wanted an excuse to hate it. It was, after all, ruining his day.

As Melissa set her pen to her check, she filled out the required fields, bringing the end of her transaction dangerously close. The cashier, meanwhile, displayed the green digital price in the register window, showing an amount higher than a hundred dollars. After finishing and tearing off the check, Melissa handed it to the cashier.

Once the bag boy finished bagging her items, he loaded them into her metal cart and pushed it toward the exit.

Avery stared into nothing as his dream girl strolled out of the store, with cellphone surgically attached to her ear. The bag boy followed her, taking the occasional glance at her legs as she moved in front of him. He wanted to strangle the kid.

He heard the scanner beep as the cashier slid his bottle of wine through the laser: it was almost as loud as the pop he heard coming from under his chest. His vision faded as he heard the bottle hitting the counter and a plastic bag at the end of its slide.

The automatic exit doors closed as Melissa passed through them. Even though he could still see her through the glass, the separation seemed unnatural. She was out there and he was in here. She walked into the parking lot and he was stuck at the register. She was still on the phone and he didn't get his chance. He wanted to strangle the bag boy.

"That'll be \$5.75," said the cashier.

Avery looked at the cashier to see a bored expression on her face. Perhaps, she didn't notice how beautiful Melissa was, or how delightful one might feel standing close to her. Perhaps, she didn't notice the scent of her Obsession perfume, or the melody of her sweet sounding voice. Perhaps, she didn't even realize that Melissa was there, or that he was sweating with anticipation for a chance to speak to her. After all, what did the cashier know? She was probably making minimum wage.

He didn't care to abuse anymore time in this line, so he quickly pulled out his leather wallet. It was something he wanted to throw out a number of times, because it was a gift his ex-fiancée gave him for his birthday, but elected to keep because it was a nice wallet. He opened it up to find a ten-dollar bill—his last ten-dollar bill.

"Here," he said. "Keep the change."

As he reached for the bag with his bottle of non-alcoholic wine, the cashier stopped him.

"Sir," she said, "we're not allowed to accept tips. I have to give you your change."

He felt the tension rise in his neck. Melissa was almost out of sight. She had already passed several cars. The bag boy had already smiled twice. By his estimation he had maybe two minutes before she reached her car and the bag boy loaded it up for her—two minutes until fate utterly ruined his day, maybe even his life. He narrowed his eyes as he stared at the cashier.

"Well, then what's the hold up?" he said, extending his hand.

The cashier pressed another button to open the register. The bills inside were in complete disarray: folded, wrinkled, and in their wrong compartments. She reached in to remove a five-dollar bill, but stopped and put it back.

"You wouldn't by any chance have three quarters, would you?" she asked.

"What?"

"If you give me three quarters, I can give you a five-dollar bill."

Avery was ready to choke her.

"You're kidding, right?"

"No. Your change right now is \$4.25. If you give me three quarters, I can give you a five-dollar bill."

He began sliding his hands toward her, but realized he was still holding his bag.

"Why don't you just give me the four-twenty-five?"

"I just thought it might be easier if—"

"What would be easier is if you just gave me my change so I can get out of here and get on with my day. Is that cool with you, miss?"

The cashier backed down and reached into the change drawer. Avery took another glance to see that the bag boy started unloading the groceries into the backseat of Melissa's car. He also noticed that Melissa finally hit a button on her cellphone and placed the device into her purse.

Now was his last possible chance.

As the cashier handed Avery his change, he quickly bolted for the exit door, dropping his quarter on the way out, nearly running over an old lady. By his estimation, he had twenty seconds before the bag boy loaded the last of Melissa's groceries, and thirty-five before she got into her car. He had maybe forty-five seconds before she pulled out of her parking spot and a minute-and-a-half before she left the area. Since her car was about two hundred feet away from him, he guessed it would take him until the bag boy finished loading it to finally reach her.

Twenty seconds was all he needed—it had to be. By the time he saw her opening the driver's side door, he would be there, holding his bottle of wine. Twenty seconds was more than enough time, because nothing was going to stop him. It was his destiny. The adventure would pay off in fifteen...ten...

And then, he heard it: the one thing he had no desire to hear. It wasn't the sound of her engine firing or the crash of his bottle hitting the pavement. No, something far worse shook up his eardrums.

His cellphone rang, again.

The entire world reverted to slow motion. His heartbeat pounded as his limbs fought against the air. Mellow drones of voices lost cohesion, stretching like a piece of audio taffy. The bag boy let the last bag fall into the backseat and countered with a gentle hydraulic push against the door. It closed softly, but emitted a thunderous roar, rocking the parking lot's atmosphere. Avery nearly tripped over his feet from the deafening shake.

He could let it ring, oh how he could let it ring. But it was the double-tone. Nothing in his world could rightfully lead him to ignore the double-tone. It meant "emergency."

He skidded to a stop, much to his irritation, and removed his cellphone from his pocket. With the press of the talk button, he swallowed his hopes.

"Yeah, it's Avery," he said. "This better be good."

"It's Dexter again," said Chet, from the other end.

"Jeez, what's with him? Tell him I'll be there in a few hours. I have something else to take care of right now."

"It's not that simple. He's got a gun now. He wants to shoot her."

"Well, tell him not to. I'm busy."

"Avery, what's gotten into you? She's panicking. He's panicking. Drop what you're doing and get over there, now."

"Why don't you go over there? You *are* the head of the committee."

"But, *you're* the counselor-in-training."

He looked at Melissa to see her sitting in the driver's seat. She closed the door and ignited the engine.

"Something's come up," said Avery, "and if I don't take care of it now, I won't get a second chance."

"What in God's green earth is more important than Dexter's life?"

The red lights of her brakes flashed and the white lights of her reverse gear followed. It was now or never.

"I have to go."

Avery zapped the off button. Within seconds, he felt his lungs contracting as he ran the sprint of his life.

His out-of-control power-dash nearly bowled him into the oncoming bag boy, but, at the last second, his quick agility kicked into autopilot.

After taking a few more strides and at least twenty more breaths, he found himself in line with the car as it backed from its spot.

He wasn't quite sure what to say or do once he reached her—he didn't exactly have time to plan this strategy—but something had to work. Knocking on her window offered one possibility, though a gesture like that might've scared her. The last thing he wanted was to freak her out, so he searched for another plan.

His final decision didn't seem like the best choice, but it was the only thing he mustered from an unclear line of pursuit. It required pain and humiliation, but was better than coming off as a parking lot creep. Unfortunately, the decision reflected nothing more than spontaneity, and the execution reflected nothing more than a sheer accident. The best he had was the illusion of success.

He collided into the front of her car, rolling off the hood and dropping to the ground on the other side. That had to do it; now he had something to talk to her about.

When he stood up and brushed off his body, however, he noticed that she continued to look over her shoulder. How she could completely ignore his impact, he didn't know, but she kept driving backward, further and further away from him. When she finally turned forward, she gave him only a brief glance before straightening her wheel and shifting into drive. His heart fell to his feet.

As he watched her pass, her barely gracing him with eye contact, he heard the sound of a stereo blaring through the thick glass of her windows. The whole car shook as it moved forward, pounding like a drum machine.

Avery looked at the cellphone he dropped when he rolled off the car hood. Next to it lied the remains of his shattered wine bottle and the glistening grape puddle flowing among shards of glass. Both stilled in silence as the stereo faded away. He looked up to see the car turning a corner, disappearing behind a row of other parked cars.

His phone rang.

"Yeah, this is Avery," he said, as he plucked it from the pavement and hit the talk button.

Chet spoke softly through the device.

"Avery, I think we need to talk after you visit Dexter today. Stop by and bring your committee badge with you."

Avery ignored him. His heart quivered as he thought about the moments he lost with Melissa. She was finer than any statue in the supermarket, yet she slipped through his grasp like a buttered chisel. It was an injustice to his future. She never gave him a chance.

Even his ex-fiancée, Allison, gave him a chance. She didn't turn a blind eye with a cellphone; she made herself available to enrapture him, with her luscious smiles and girly hair twists, from the beginning. The first time he met her in the candy aisle, she groped his arm, stroked his hand and begged to be treated with all sorts of sweets. It was an exciting thing for him, because most women didn't give him that kind of attention. Later, when Allison gave him her phone number and kissed him goodbye at the checkout line, with bag of candy in hand, she exhilarated him. Then, the following week, when Allison convinced him to propose to her, she became the highlight of his life. After a lifetime of people trusting their hopes, dreams, and troubles to anyone else, Avery finally saw that his time had come.



But, in the end, they all ran. Including Allison. It didn't seem fair. Even Dexter's girl would stick around, despite the gun he apparently held on her. Sure, she cheated on him, and would probably do it again, because she was just that kind of tramp. But at least she returned to him after all her misdeeds fizzled out. Allison never returned. And now the latest didn't even have a beginning with him. It looked as though the world would fall apart for the fifth time.

He closed his cellphone and stuffed it into his pocket. This time he turned it off.

The following week, Avery stepped out of a cab to get a better look at the Brickyard Sky Apartments, a building complex he heard Melissa talking about in the checkout line. It looked old, perhaps a product of 1920s architecture, or even further back than that. He couldn't tell for sure. Since he never studied the arts of bricklaying or structural erecting, he didn't think his opinion on the matter amounted to much.

Shrubs, palm trees and neon signs clashed with the earthenware brick, which he did credit his opinion for the simple fact that he knew what looked good. It seemed to distort any sense of history. It was like introducing Elliot Ness to the eighties. It just didn't seem right to him.

He handed a twenty-dollar bill to the cabbie. It was the first time in years he paid cab fare instead of gas for his own vehicle. The week before, Gina seized Dexter's gun, and got so mad that she shot the air out of Avery's car tires. Avery had been going everywhere by cab ever since.

It was an unusually cool evening for May, but was welcomed over the pounding heat of the last two months. It made the nervousness that steamed up his collar lighten its intensity. Even the soft-spoken birds chirped little "hellos" to him.

As he took a hesitant step toward the building, he looked at the stack of papers in his hands. He hoped he had printed enough to cover all the apartments. Even though 311 was the critical door, he had to make it seem like anyone was invited to his barbecue—or Chet's, rather; he was no longer an official member of the committee. As long as Melissa got hers, he didn't care who else showed up.

He took another step toward the building, this one with more confidence.

## TEENAGE AMERICAN DREAM

Eric was never a big fan of Burger King, or of the food it offered to kids with five bucks in their pockets. The commercials, however, managed to pique his interest weekdays after school, when he viewed whatever Power Rangers hybrid was on FOX at the moment. But the food, for some reason, never satisfied him. Sure, the meal did its trick, taking away all recognition of hunger that could've possibly been linked to his brain, but for some reason the lasting impression was anything but agreeable to him. And no matter how many times his mom ignored his pleas to leave the greasy burgers alone and brought home multiple Whopper Value Meals for him and his siblings, he'd still eat the food, swallowing it down with a medium soft drink, and that would be the end of his stomach for another couple hours.

So eating a Whopper for lunch right before his high school English class didn't do him any favors, either.

He had been a student for most of his life and did what he could to pass each grade. It was his routine each day to learn the tricks to spell "frog," graduate to the intermediate "phenomenon," and finally upgrade to words that were unsolved with phonetics, like "reign of phlegm," for example. From there, he studied the importance of adding one and one together; then somehow find a way to divide that by the square root of 98.6; then figure out how that related to the scientific study of Jimmy Carter. Once his education gave him the nod that he was in fact ready for the next level, he would go forth, primed to learn the next piece of information that he was destined to forget by the time he was married. And that was the life he knew that brought him into the eleventh grade.

Spring Break was only a week away, but his English teacher, Miss Andrews, insisted on finishing *Death of a Salesman* before then. It was common practice for her to cram all her lectures in before the start of a major holiday, so all the kids expected it. The students, fortunately for her, had no problem with her policies, since they agreed completely that schoolwork on a weekend or holiday was a punishment worth saying the word "sucks." Apparently, she was a student once, too, and hadn't forgotten the things that most teachers were contracted to forget. The students rarely had a complaint about her.

Eric couldn't think of much to complain about her, either, but the feeling of a Whopper in his gut, weighed down with a layer of fries and a liter of soda was enough to make him complain about himself—or at least about his mom's lack of attention toward him. He had sworn he told her

time and again not to pack a greasy burger in his lunch, because his stomach would revolve a few turns and gas up within moments, making him feel unnaturally sick. But seeing as how she and his dad fought over the bills nearly every night, she probably had too much on her mind to think about the aftereffects of his lunch, and therefore didn't realize he would be able to puke on demand throughout the second half of his class day.

He fidgeted at his desk, trying to do everything he could to keep his mind off his stomach. He listened to the discussion about Willy Loman and tried to piece together the points that Miss Andrews had made, but just couldn't get his mind off the gassy pain he felt. He thought about the consequences of farting in class, wondering if it was worth it anyway. Perhaps, he thought, running to the bathroom to purge himself would've been more appropriate, but his school had gotten so strict about students prematurely leaving the classroom that to leave for any reason would've risked him a Saturday detention. So he decided to curse himself for his wicker stomach, curse his mom for not listening to him, curse Burger King for making food that brought him pain, and to curse his family for being too poor to invest in pizza.

And that's what he did until about ten minutes before the bell rang: cursed everything he could think of, just to make himself feel better. But it didn't help. His stomach still groaned, getting down on his intestines, begging him to stop cramming it full of junk.

At last, he couldn't endure the pain any longer. Simultaneously, he burped and farted, waking the football jock next to him. He covered his mouth and knocked his knees together.

"Eric Bachner," said Miss Andrews, as she looked up from her copy of *Death of a Salesman*. "That was not an appropriate response to my question."

Of course, the other kids laughed as they cautiously backed toward the wall.

Eric wanted to say something in his defense, but all he could do was to slink even farther in his chair.

"Right on, Eric," said one of the kids, from behind his shirt's neckline.

He thought his best strategy to circumvent the issue was to stick his own nose in his copy of the play and attempt to answer the teacher's question more legitimately.

"What was the question again?" he asked.

"From a theoretical standpoint," said Miss Andrews, "what was Willy Loman's main goal in life from his early years until the time this story began?"

Eric had to think about that for a moment. He knew Willy Loman was the main character of the play, but didn't remember most of the story's details. Through the extreme page-skimming he did two weeks earlier, he gathered that Willy was a salesman, though he had no idea of what, and that he was getting old, if not really old. The creative side of him could've probably come up with a satisfying answer if he really gave it deep enough thought, but he knew that Miss Andrews was smart enough to know when her students didn't pay attention to the material, so he elected to leave this one alone.

"I don't know," he admitted.

She nodded at his lack of knowledge. The classroom dumb kid raised his hand to pick up the slack.

"Yes, Bobby."

"He wanted to be a success," said Bobby. He smiled at the rest of the class as his answer rolled off his tongue.

"That's right," said Miss Andrews. "That was a vague answer, but yes, that's what we can gather about his youthful dreams. Willy Loman set out to be a success. He wanted to pursue what we would now call the American Dream. We can only assume that he wanted to be rich, maybe even a member of the Forbes 500 had it been around back then. But how did this dream affect his life?"

One of the Student Council girls raised her hand.

"Cindy?"

"The dream controlled him," said Cindy. "He fought hard to succeed in a system that was only kind to those who fit into the upper social class. But, in the end, the dream pushed him away. He failed because he couldn't fit into the required structure it demanded. In a sense, it cost him his life without it ever giving him the chance to enjoy it."

Miss Andrews smiled. Cindy had been known to display her supposed maturity and college level intellect to dazzle her teachers and peers alike, so her lengthy response was expected. Eric, strangely enough, was still impressed, but he saw it coming a mile away.

"That's right, Cindy," said Miss Andrews. "I couldn't have said it better myself. The dream claimed Willy Loman's life, because the dream chose to claim him. It didn't matter how hard he struggled, because failure was his destiny. Anybody disagree?"

Freddie, one of the smart kids in class, raised his hand, but the bell cut him short. What he started to say made sense, but Miss Andrews offered no response since she was more eager to get the students out than she was to listen to him. It wasn't likely that she'd revisit the question, either, because never in the history of class did she return to a question from the day before. That would inevitably set her lesson plan back a session and that was a mortal sin in her teacher's handbook.

But, somehow, the comment Freddie made rang in Eric's mind. He couldn't figure out why it kept playing back. It wasn't as though it was something he really wanted to remember, since it was just part of English class. But it wouldn't let him go. As he walked into the hall, fighting the churned burger that spun his stomach into circles, he wondered what the rest of Freddie's response would've been had he finished it.

"I disagree with you and Cindy both," Eric recalled of Freddie through memory, "because the American Dream is just a symbol. Willy died in his failures, because he didn't put his mind in his success. If only he had—" and that's where the bell cut him off.

There was a lot in life to be said about the "if only"—probably too much to keep track. If Willy had only invested in the stock market when he was young, then maybe he would've lived a richer life. Or if Willy had only jumped out of a plane without a parachute before becoming a salesman, then maybe he would've died a more heroic death. But who could say what the salesman would have done if not for the play, because he didn't do anything but sell stuff and die. And that didn't make sense for a man of his age, because there wasn't success in such a bleak existence. So for Willy to die without putting his mind to success was really his own fault, because the American Dream was willing to let anybody share in its glory.

At least, that's what Eric thought Freddie was trying to say.

Eric considered asking what he meant, but somewhere in his pondering, he lost his chance: Freddie vanished in the crowd flooding the hallway. Maybe if he remembered tomorrow, or cared, he could ask about it then.

By the end of the school day, Eric walked home with his mind slowly erasing the things his teachers corrupted him with. As soon as he stepped through his front screen door, dropping his backpack to the floor, he made his class discussions a distant memory. His television and snack foods were all he needed now.

He turned on his thirteen-inch black and white television and waited about three minutes for it to warm up. Once the picture started fading in, he flipped the dial from static to static until he found the network he was

looking for. Within moments, an animated robot blasted onto the tiny screen and cackled the words, "I'll get you next time!" to another animated robot; then flew off. Once the credits started rolling, Eric cursed his television for taking too long and he kicked it until it threatened to tip over.

Considering that was the only cartoon he enjoyed watching at such a post-childish age, he decided to see what was on another channel. Normally, the stuff airing on the other networks at that time of day were less than desirable, but he figured he needed something to do, so he thought he'd experiment. He flipped over to the first clear channel available to discover a debonair gray man in black suit making out with a long dark-haired woman with full lips and a whitish dress. The fantasy of devouring a woman's face intrigued him enough for him to watch what happened next. When the woman whispered to the man that she wanted him to buy her the world, Eric thought this was the stuff that Willy Loman missed out on.

So much for forgetting everything he learned earlier.

Eric watched the show a little longer to see if the woman's clothes would come off, but they didn't, so he went to his kitchen to find some toaster pastries. He hadn't eaten anything since his burger and fries, and figured this was the best time to test whether or not his stomach was ready for something else.

He popped the pastry into the toaster and wound the timer for three minutes. He listened to the television while he waited for the timer to countdown, hoping the woman would make some funny noises, but she didn't, so he placed all his focus back on the toaster. The timer hadn't dinged in months, ever since a power surge destroyed the bell inside, so he kept a close eye on it. Once the timer got down to the last time notch, Eric turned it off and opened the toaster oven door. The pastries were a dark golden brown on the top and burnt to a crisp on the bottom. He set them on a plate and returned to his torn couch to watch some more television.

When the closing credits rolled, Eric took note that the lead actor had a lot of luck on his side: the guy managed to make it with at least four different attractive women, fought off weasely upstarts threatening to destroy him economically, and still had money left over to tempt his massage therapist mistress and her sister. Somehow, he thought, this was the missing point to Freddie's response.

Eric replayed the discussion in his head, adding his own idea about what his classmate was thinking.

"I disagree with you and Cindy both," said Freddie, "because the American Dream is just a symbol. Willy died in his failures, because he didn't put his mind in his success. If only he had made it with gorgeous women and stepped on weaker people to get to the top, then he would've never died, and the American Dream would've been to him what Dream was supposed to be."

Eric rolled out onto the couch and continued absorbing all the information the television fed him—his best source of education. He learned about actors' successes and the business of talking. Young entrepreneurs taught him the joys of six-week six-pack stomachs and the plus side to minus sizes. Even young attorneys gave him advice about how to make more money through insurance claims. These were lessons that his teachers never would've shared with the class. If he had a notepad in front of him, he might've even considered taking notes.

As the mid-afternoon programming continued, Eric felt the call of naptime beckoning him. Somewhere between a soap and a tampon commercial, he had fallen asleep. Within that session he had a dream about Willy Loman kissing the woman from the first show. He noticed that Mr. Loman had a sly grin on his face as the temptress sucked his neck like a vampire. Eric floated into the room to watch Willy handle the moment. Willy gave him the thumbs up.

"Hey, kid," said Willy, "want a real lesson in life?"

Eric nodded, as he sat down on a nearby loveseat.

"Take everything you can in this world," he continued. "Don't let anything escape your grasp. You can have anything you want as long as you don't settle for less. Riches, glory and women are the things you want. Make sure you don't lose them, like I did."

Eric continued to nod, uncertain if he was taking real advice, or just making things up as he listened.

"Here, try this taste of the good life."

Willy flung the woman into Eric's lap and she nearly toppled the chair as she landed. Without missing a beat she cradled Eric's cheeks and went in for the kill. He knew this was a moment to savor, so he closed his eyes in anticipation. As he felt her breath growing ever so strongly, he felt his legs tremor. He opened his eyes to see his dad standing at the foot of the couch rapidly shaking his feet over the armrest.

"Wake up, Eric," said his dad. "I wanna watch the news. Go sleep in your own bed."

Eric sat up and rubbed his head. That wasn't the first time he lost a good dream to reality. He hoped that going to his room would somehow make his dream return, but by the time he got to his polyester blanket, he

realized he wasn't that tired anymore. So he decided he would just stare at the wall and try again to forget everything he learned so that he would have a clean slate for the next day.

When the next day came, he lost his thoughts from the day before. He awoke with a fuzzy head, knowing he had school coming, but was too incoherent to remember why he was going there. By the time he threw on yesterday's recycled jeans and brushed his stirred up hair, he realized he was going to school because he had to. After snacking on another toaster pastry and brushing his teeth, he grabbed his backpack from just inside the front door and trotted off to school.

His first four classes successfully distracted him from thinking about everything he learned from television the day before, and lunchtime successfully reminded him why he hated fifty-nine-cent fast food cheeseburgers. Once English class came around, however, his memories of Willy Loman and the woman from the daytime drama rekindled. For a moment, he smiled at the thought of kissing such a beautiful woman again, but his daydream faded when the teacher dropped an exam sheet onto his desk.

That was the moment he remembered that he didn't study the night before. Of course, that was partly because he forgot she had mentioned there would be a test today. For some reason, he had gotten Friday in his head, not Wednesday, as the testing date. But then, it occurred to him that Miss Andrews wanted to tackle one more American short story before the break. Therefore, he was screwed.

Eric looked at the test sheet for a good five minutes before mustering up the courage to uncup his pen. He pondered all the philosophic essay questions setting before him, trying to figure out which three he could easily answer with the most realistic BS worth conjuring. Once he decided that all the factual questions would reveal his ignorance, he chose the "American Dream" related questions, instead. At least those were subjective.

He looked at the wall clock to see that eight minutes had already passed. That left him with only forty-two minutes to take the exam. Given that he had to answer three of the eight questions, he deduced that he only had fourteen minutes to answer each one. Considering that each answer had to have an introduction, a body and a conclusion, he figured he would have to write the best load of crap he had ever written to finish this successfully.

So he attempted to answer the question about why Willy Loman died a failure, first. He was sure to include reasons such as that Willy wasn't cutthroat enough to step on the little guy, and that he didn't have a soap



opera hottie on his side to make out with. By the time he finished his answer, he was proud of the results, certain that he understood the hidden mind of Willy Loman intimately.

It almost made him wish he had one more day to discuss it with the class.

When the exam was over, he caught up with Freddie to talk about his discovery. Freddie, however, looked unnerved about his answer.

"Are you retarded?" Freddie said. "That's not what I meant at all. The American Dream wasn't about soap opera politics; nor would Willy Loman have saved his life had he followed them. On the contrary, my point was that to sustain his life, he had to let it go. Giving up the American Dream would've given him the freedom to live under his own means—comfortably and non-conforming. He died because he gave up his identity for something else. For him to make out with women and step on peons...you're on crack."

Eric stood in the hall with his mouth wide open. Conformity killed Willy Loman; he could see that now. How he missed the point, however, was painfully obvious considering he never analyzed the text. Although, to study it now would've meant conforming to his teacher's standards, and not his own. Therefore, he thought, his English class was trying to kill him.

That was a scary thought to think about. But then, maybe, he thought, it was time for him to stop thinking.

## THE NARROW BRIDGE

Kirk forgot what peaceful weather looked like; the Storm raged for so long. The sky swelled with clouds of darkness, as the rain whipped about in all directions, blinding him of the road forged ahead. Streaks of lightning engulfed his path, offering the light to see his map, but the danger to nullify his comfort. With all the natural chaos, he thought, the sooner he ended his journey, the better.

The map showed a canyon sunk into the road before him, introducing the possibility of floodwaters blocking the way. The road behind seemed the safest place to which to retreat. The trees in that old place, however, were stripped by the elements, with scattered branches in heaps along the road. Fortunately, he knew where each piece had fallen, so he was content to return to familiar territory, if only to escape the unknown ahead.

Nevertheless, he couldn't betray the heart that urged him to continue. The journey had been arduous, but turning back would have made it futile. He had to push forward.

He huddled over his soggy map that dripped profusely onto the muddy pathway. There were so many crisscrossing lines covering the sheet that a casual glance might've confused a navigator. Fortunately, his chosen path, the only path to reach the mark of his destination, was defined boldly in red. Unfortunately, it drove right through the heart of the canyon and over the peak of the mountain summit.

He scoured the chart for a way around the obstacles, perhaps one that didn't even stay on the page. Lines traveled in spiraling motions, winding from one printed landmark to another—none of them presenting an alternative. Therefore, he thought, with the map failing to show him what he wanted, he undoubtedly had to find an uncharted path on his own.

The last time he searched for his own safest path, taking dead end after dead end, he discovered the hard way that the map was resolute. After staring down the blinding road, looking only into a curtain of water, he figured he had to trust what others had outlined before him.

By his understanding, the road pushed forth in a northeasterly direction. It looked dangerous from his standpoint, with lightning striking in heavy doses into the bordering forest—each bolt sending a new tree bursting into flames, causing a chain reaction to engulf the entire region. Logic told him not to continue, but logic had no connection with his

heart. Treasure awaited him; nothing—not lightning, floods or mountains—would stop him. He hoped.

Additional paths branched off from the small muddy artery. Each was a wider, though barren road passing over treeless fields, leading to places that appeared unhampered by the Storm. The paths looked flat and easy, with safe spots for veering around the deeper puddles. Most of them also lacked the deadly debris that automatically attracted to this single road, with not one flying branch or piece of bark whipping by. One seemingly inviting road even had a storm shelter erected along its shoulder. It was a journey to get there, but one that could've been worth it: the shelter looked like it was made of decent wood. If he took the beeline over there, he could definitely catch a break from the nasty weather. He also thought he saw the outline of a neon sign in the deep distance—perhaps a diner or an entertainment venue. But he couldn't tell for sure, because the place was so far away and, according to his map, the road tangled in so many directions that he couldn't predict how long it would take to get there.

Nevertheless, as the Storm wailed louder than it had before, Kirk found the prospect of making the distance trip to the neon lights attractive. It would've completely delayed his journey, that much was clear, but he was tired of getting pelted with leaves, berries and pebbles, and thought a reprieve from the pain would've been nice.

As he stepped toward the side road, Kirk halted and meditated. There was no telling whether he could find his way back to this small trail or not. According to his chart, each branching road led to more branching roads, which led to more branching roads, which led to more branching roads. Sure, any one of them could've had storm shelters, diners or entertainment venues, but this one—this unwavering one—was the only one to lead him past the canyons, past the mountains, and past all other landscapes within the Storm. At least, that's what the map claimed.

Perhaps, through no failure of possibility, an incompetent mapmaker created the map with a drunken navigator at his side. Perhaps, it was one of many fakes designed to set would-be treasure hunters onto the wrong path. Stories had told of such things happening before; civilizations have preserved anonymity over such ruses. If such a decoy existed in his hand, then he would be foolish to continue along this dangerous course. Not to mention, only a fool would keep traveling within this Storm into the burning forest and beyond, just to reach a place he had never seen before—that might not have even existed. It only made sense, therefore, to go to the storm shelter, or the neon sign or any place he could see with his eyes.

But the map had been accurate so far. Up to this point, everything it outlined had in fact appeared at the place recorded. Each crossroad cut across the trail exactly where the map had shown. Even the major landmarks along the red line emerged from the rainy horizon at the revealed points. Doubting the accuracy of the map seemed more foolish than continuing along this wild road. He decided it was best to keep going, even if he did get blasted by flying twigs.

And so he continued toward the fiery forest.

Several hours into his journey, Kirk incurred bruises, making the narrow road an uncomfortable place to travel. The Storm continued hurling branches and stones toward him, throwing also the occasional spark from the forest inferno. He covered his head with his map for extra protection. None of it, however, brought him to crumble under the Storm's ridicule.

In one sudden moment, however, after a lengthy spell of repetition, the Storm became angry. As Kirk continued to trek along the trail, he felt the wind increasing its speed and its whistling howl through the trees deafening him. Within moments, he thought a tornado had come.

The power of the wind nearly swept him off his feet, threatening to send him into the unknown. As he quickly slid toward the edge of the road approaching the burning forest, he caught onto the cleft of a boulder and held on for dear life. It took all his strength, but as he hung from the fissure with his feet to the air, he pulled himself down behind the rock, seeking cover from the wind's fury.

Trees uprooted all over the place; several of which fell onto the road. To his horror, the raging fires blanketed most of the fallen trunks now set on the path before him.

The wind continued to rage, tossing blazing trees around like a game of pinball, from one edge of the road to the other. Kirk held his grip as tightly as possible to ensure he didn't get tossed, too. Even though the boulder absorbed most of the wind's force, he knew letting go would've been fatal. He had to wait for the onslaught to finish.

A few burning trees flew over his head, while another slammed against the opposite side of the boulder. He planted his feet firmly into the ground, pressing hard against the rock to guarantee he remained.

When the wind finally slowed and the trees stopped skidding along the dirt, Kirk stood up and breathed again. Only, his heart couldn't relax: a fallen tree had blocked his path, stretching from shoulder to shoulder with no room to maneuver around it.

There had been many close calls on this expedition since the beginning, but each seemed more harrowing than the one before. The

traveler who offered him the chart months ago, a man who sought after the same treasure, told him of burdens that laden the road. Kirk took the warning to heart when he set off for the journey, fresh from the greasy tavern in the last valley, but had quickly forgotten what the message meant when his focus wavered away.

Kirk realized, as he ducked a few rogue sparks, that in his plunge into the unknown he had only dreamed of the imagined troubles—the things swirling in his head. He never expected to have to pass through fire, or face the brunt of the Storm. The reality of the natural war around him made his desire for the treasure all the more intense.

He climbed to the top of the rock to evaluate the path ahead. To his disappointment, he discovered many burning trees had clogged the road, starting with the one before him. Some spanned the length of the road, making only the shoulder dangerous, while others lied diagonally and horizontally, making the passage through next to impossible. If there was ever a time to turn back, this was it. But, as he looked behind, he discovered that additional trees had blocked him in.

Fortunately, after the onslaught of the wind, the map, though soaked with water, was still legible. He triple-checked the possibility of an alternative way, but the map made it clear the red line was the only way. He looked down the road again. It seemed hopeless.

Regardless, he had to press on, fire or no fire.

It took a few moments for him to muster his strength. Once he felt ready to brave the flame, he jumped off the rock and hurtled over the first burning tree. As he sailed over, the isolated blaze nearly scorched his legs, but he landed safely on the ground, rolling to absorb the shock to his feet. When he stood up, he brushed the mud off his body.

The next tree failed to challenge him, as it clung primarily to the road's shoulder. Only the loose branches fanning halfway across the trail posed any sense of deterrence to his cause.

Feeling the comfort to catch his breath, he jogged past the bushy treetop to face the next challenge.

His next obstacle, however, was not as forgiving as the one before it. This one hung low, diagonally over the road, stretching from the right-hand forest edge into the interior left. Its branch mass was thick: dense enough to prevent the trunk from lying flat on the ground. The nearly horizontal angle left only a tiny space for Kirk to crawl through.

The flames of the trunk nearly singed his back, but he made it through unharmed. The next tree was another longitudinal breath-catcher, followed by a tree that never fell completely over. But the last one he faced was by far the meanest of them all.

It clung tightly to the ground, leaving no room to swerve around it, and no room to pass underneath it. It stretched from deep within the left forest to well inside the right. Its trunk was thick, perhaps the thickest of both woods, sporting a diameter of about ten feet. Tangling branches covered it from its top down to its roots.

The fire consumed everything it was, licking the rain-soaked sky above. Nothing could pass it by safely. Kirk fell to his knees in despair.

"Is there nothing treacherous along this path?" he said. "Have I traveled for months just to be stopped by this? So many roads were safe and secure; so many provided wines and women; so many have offered riches and entertainment. Why didn't I just take those?"

At that moment, something chirped in the sky. He looked up to see a small white bird flying through the pouring rain over the burning logs. As it extended its wings against the intensity of the Storm, it glided, calmly out of sight down the road beyond the forest.

The sight intoxicated his mind. For the entire journey he kept his eyes on the road—as he thought he was supposed to—unaware that his answers could come from elsewhere. Now with wisdom catching him from above, he knew that if a tiny bird could forge ahead, then perhaps there was still a way for him to reach his destination, too.

With all the troubles he dealt with inside the forest, Kirk had almost forgotten that he hauled a knapsack on his back. It wasn't quite as big as the packs he saw on other travelers' backs, but it was still big enough to carry his essential items, like food, canteen and a blanket. When he remembered he had one, he removed it from his shoulders and unzipped it open. The first thing he found was his blanket.

He pulled the thick woolen sheet from his sack and wrapped it around his body. From the combination of the rain outside and Kirk's drenched shoulders inside, the blanket turned completely fireproof.

After covering everything but his hands and face, he slid his map into the knapsack and zipped the bag shut. This time he was ready to traverse the final obstacle the forest had to offer—or what he hoped was the last blockade.

He tossed the pack over the trunk as hard as he could, hoping to clear the flames. The elements of the Storm, however, were too loud for him to hear any thuds hitting the ground. It didn't matter, though; when the bag reached the right trajectory, he calculated he had gotten it to the other side. In any case, he was ready to try getting over the barricade himself.

The fire raged its worst, with its ferocity increasing every second. The rain could no longer control it, nor could it stop it; it vaporized from

its own reckless animal. As he caught sight of the rising inferno, Kirk knew he had the fight of his life ahead of him.

With every step he took closer to the fallen tree, he felt the vengeance of the Storm's heated assault persecuting him. Sparks flew off the clustered branches as the fire attempted to deter his progress. With elusive feet, however, he quickly sidestepped each one. Burning twigs crackled and popped, with embers falling before him, but he pushed forward. Each footprint he left behind snuffed out tiny flames in the mud.

But, in the end, no move of his stopped the heat from intensifying. As he neared the first major branch, the air rose to temperatures that threatened his skin.

When he outstretched his hand to take hold of the first branch, he quickly snapped it back—the shock of heat nearly sent him running. He took another examination of the situation just to make sure he understood how best to overcome it.

The thickest branches were also the longest, and proved to be the greatest challenge. Even though they offered him the best support over the trunk, they also guaranteed him the most fire to handle. The smaller branches, the ones that were more like twigs, had considerably less of a blaze to pass through, but there was no way he could climb them without breaking them.

As he examined the tree further, he noticed one more type of branch adhering to his liking. Where thick wooden arms once grew, broken stumps hugged various spots around the trunk. They jutted from the thick body of the tree like foot-long pegs destined to be stepped on. Even though some were ablaze like the rest of the tree, a few were not. Kirk hacked his way through the loose tangles to reach the closest unconsumed broken branch he could find.

The first peg was sturdy enough to hold his weight. As he hoisted himself up to reach the next stump, he felt the pain of the heat eating up his body. He had no time to wipe the sweat away. Like a ladder he reached for the next protrusion and then the next, until finally he met up with a burning one. At this point, there was no reason to jump back down, so he buried his free hand inside his blanket and grabbed the fire with the wool. As he made contact, he wrenched the stump until he rubbed the fire out. He reached for the next one.

The fire was strongest at the top of the trunk. By the time he reached the upper branches, he kicked his feet into the flame and stood upon the horizontal bark. Although the blaze danced around him as he found his

balance, his wet blanket shielded him from the burn. It was a beautiful thing, he thought, to stand above the Storm's worst soldier.

As he crouched into the excruciating heat, he looked into the sky to receive a face full of rain. The feeling of cold water against tormenting fire was bittersweet, indeed. But it was a paradox he refused to endure for long; he sprung off the top of the trunk and shot over the remaining branches to the other side. He landed onto the muddy road next to his knapsack, rolling through a huge puddle of water that quenched the small fires in his blanket.

As he plucked his nose out of the filthy puddle, he looked up to see, to his relief, that the road ahead was finally clear of the forest's anger.

Time demanded a chunk of his life before he finally reached the edge of the forest. A short distance past its end, he found the beginning of the Canyon Deep, a place that stretched farther than the eye could see. At first, he considered it a milestone to emerge safely from the wrath of the forest, but with a beat, he changed his mind. The valley, as he expected, was flooded discriminately by the Storm, confirming his fear that the journey had no place for rest.

Now he wasn't sure what to do.

According to the map, only one path led beyond the canyon—one that went far below the surface of the floodwaters. Though he could see faintly the outlines of trees peeking through the haze on the opposite bank, he couldn't see where the path restarted. For all he knew, the straight line ahead would lead him miles off course. And that was assuming he could hold to a straight line on such choppy waters.

That was also assuming he had the ability to cross the water.

He contemplated performing a breaststroke to the other side, bypassing the road completely; a strenuous effort, he knew, but possible to achieve. In the end, however, he concluded the distance was too far. Without a boat or piece of driftwood to claim, he realized, much to his dismay, that he was stuck.

Like his mind's tired old clockwork, he pondered over the possibility of turning back. Not that he wanted to waste the steps he had taken so far; he just didn't think he had it in him to progress. He wanted a solution, but wasn't sure where to find it.

He sat on a rock next to the valley's edge to eat some time. If there was anything he thought he could attain in this hour, it was time.

Waiting here for the death of the Storm seemed like the best choice for his situation. The valley would drain and he could continue along the soggy path, if only the downpour stopped. Unfortunately, the Storm had



raged for so long that it offered no sign of ceasing, and no comfort for the weary. Waiting for the Storm to pass would've been like waiting for the arrival of Judgment Day. He rumbled his lips through his discouragement. There had to be another way.

Kirk checked his knapsack for possible resources. Nothing worked for him. His blanket was drenched, unable to absorb anymore water. His canteen was too small to drain the valley. He certainly didn't have enough food to plump him into a sizeable floatation device. Even his trusty map was too thin to support his weight. The knapsack itself was perhaps the only thing capable of ferrying him across.

Testing its buoyancy was worth a try.

When he set the bag into the water, his heart skipped. The knapsack, his dear companion since the beginning, sank a foot to the bottom. Now he was out of options.

He reached into the shallow water to pull the bag to the shoreline. After that, he didn't know what to do. Even with his successful navigation of the forest under his belt, he had drawn himself empty of ideas.

More time passed. The pressure ate at his soul. Treasure was waiting to be found, and he was sitting here moping over his failure. Surely, braver men had reached the goal. For him to lose his bearings now, he didn't deserve to be called a man, much less a brave man. It was a burden he refused to keep. He had to find a boat.

It was unlikely he would find one at the edge of a canyon, but he searched anyway. He scoured a mile-wide radius for anything, anything at all resembling a water vessel. After an hour, though, it proved to be a fruitless endeavor.

Now desperate for any means of success, he returned to the road, ready to do what he feared since coming to this shore. He readied his bag for a swim. Although his transformation skills into buoyancy were untested, he believed he could make himself and his bag float-worthy, so he dumped everything into the mud and went to work.

He took his shoes off, first. Without the extra weight on his feet, he thought he could kick a little more smoothly. Next, he wrapped his shoes and his loose items in the blanket. Once everything folded snugly together, he restored the blanket lump into the bag, hoping the blanket would center the bag's weight.

Once he closed the sack and gripped it to his chest, Kirk prepared to swim across, hoping for the strength to get there. The last time he tried swimming, he only made it a mile before clutching to his floatation device for survival, and nearly puked when he returned to shore. This swim

looked to run about three miles; his stomach churned prematurely from the anticipation of such disasters recurring.

With nothing left to hold him back, he stepped boldly into the shallows of the water. This time, there would be no turning back. If only, he thought, he had something other than his bag to float with, then he thought the journey could end in success. Unfortunately, the valley was nothing more than a wide-open field, so there were no trees or rocks above the waterline for him to grab onto along the way. All he could do was to swim the distance.

When the water reached his chest, he heard the loud crack of thunder burst behind him. He thrashed a wide arc as he turned to see what happened.

Three trees cracked at their bases. Within moments, the first toppled over, coming within a few feet of crushing him. The second fell shortly afterward, knocking the first away with a hard splash. The third tree plunged a beat later, creating a wave to push Kirk underwater.

When he resurfaced, he discovered the first tree floating away. He latched onto the nearest branch within his reach to catch a ride.

A few hours later, after a steady stream of him paddling his bark-covered vessel, Kirk and the tree landed on the other side of the canyon. From there, he shouldered his knapsack and climbed off the branch into the shallow water. It didn't take long for him to fall to his knees and kiss the ground.

When he looked up to estimate the trials he would face this time, he noticed a small cottage along the side of the road. It hugged the edge of a hill and revealed a pillar of smoke scattering into the rain from the chimney. He took the smoke as an invitation to seek shelter there. Slowly, but excitedly, he crawled toward the front door and knocked. A bearded man, probably in his thirties, answered the door.

"Ah, another traveler," he said, with his hand extended close to Kirk's chin. "Perhaps, you are here for a rest?"

"That would be nice," said Kirk, dropping to the ground.

The Owner of the cottage lifted Kirk to his feet and helped him inside. He guided him over to a couch in the middle of the room and let him fall onto the first cushion. Kirk passed out as soon as his head hit the pillow.

When he awoke, he noticed the Owner sitting at a table with a few other travelers. Each had refreshed looks on his face. Plates full of food from turkey to cauliflower set before them. There was also an empty chair waiting for a body to join, and a full plate setting in front of it.

"Hey there," said the Owner. "I see you are awake. Come join us for the feast."

Kirk had no reason to argue. He was starving.

After spending the next hour talking and eating with the Owner and the travelers, Kirk despaired. The time came when everyone's plate emptied, and each had to prepare for the journey ahead. Kirk refilled his canteen. The others refilled theirs. The Owner put together a basket of rations for each to carry. When everyone had his gear in order, the Owner sent each on his way with one important word to remember.

He said, "Many of you have traveled this road in isolation, and it was treacherous for you. Even though you made it this far, at any point you could've failed. Some of you started with companions, but lost them when you faced the trial in the forest. Some of you didn't have company for even that long. Some companions abandoned the journey early and sought refuge in the shelters and pleasures along the winding paths. A few of them may try the journey again, but most will not. Those travelers who gave up, I'm afraid, will never reach the great treasure beyond the chasm.

"None of you have given up, but the temptation for it has been immense. You've taken a journey of solitude that has left you open for great failure. You may have lasted this long, but the Storm will continue to relent, and sooner or later the isolated journey will betray you. Through your isolation you'll allow the tempest to knock you out of the adventure. But stick together, and you'll do better to combat the elements. Holding each other accountable to the journey will guarantee that each reaches the end.

"I will also send a fellow adventurer to guide you along the remainder of the path. He'll meet you at the first checkpoint before the ascent into the mountain. He knows the map intimately.

"All of you take care. Endure the remainder of the hike. I've seen the treasure myself and it's guaranteed to blow your mind."

With that, the Owner sent them back to the trail.

The initial hike to the first checkpoint came easily. The road ascended slightly, offering little resistance to Kirk's calves. The ease did more to lighten Kirk's spirit than it did to lighten his body.

The rain, meanwhile, continued to fall, but the travelers were equipped to handle it, with umbrellas and ponchos at their disposal. One traveler offered to share his umbrella with Kirk. For the first time since he began the journey, Kirk saw that he had a chance.

When they reached the first checkpoint, a slender man with racing shoes stood by the sign.

“Greetings,” he said. “I’m the Guide you’ve been told about. I’m here to lead you the rest of the way. If any of you should stray from the path for any reason, listen for my call and head back to the source of my voice. I will not leave any of you behind. We’re a team now. Does anybody have any questions?”

Kirk looked around, but none raised his hand.

“Good, then let us make our journey.”

The hike up the mountain took more than a day to complete. On several occasions, each member of the party wanted to stop as the road grew steeper and the Storm fiercer, but the Guide spurred each of them to continue. When they finally reached the top and had a chance to catch their breaths, they marveled at the view they saw below. A great green cliff stretched for miles down the mountainside, with groups of people setting up various camps along the edge. Sheep grazed in the wet grasses near the rocky edge, while goats chased each other among the boulders. Many individuals took shelter beneath the trees, while others stood openly in the Storm. It appeared that the road ended at the cliff’s edge where a great chasm separated this land from the next. As Kirk absorbed all the sights, the Guide extended his hand toward the field below.

“Each of you have come far to reach the treasure,” he said, “but your journey will mean nothing if you do not make one more important decision. That decision awaits you at the edge of the cliff below.”

Across the wide chasm, Kirk spotted a suspended island cliff bordering the sands of a tropical paradise. In the land beyond, lush vegetation grew thick around the great beach, which in turn bordered an ocean that poured a vast waterfall into the ravine. Past the jungles, he discovered golden towers stretching high into the sky, emitting natural light to cover the island. Beyond that, mammoth glaciers sparkled like glitter, scraping the clear blue sky above. The sky, in stark contrast to that plagued by the Storm, had a series of flashing lights racing across the horizon, chasing each other like children. In the middle of the great island, he noticed an intensely bright light shooting out like a laser, engulfing the land from one edge to the other. Inside the dome of light, everything glowed without scar or blemish.

Another path stretched from the edge of the ocean into the depths of the jungle, directly across the rift from the path below. It was the only path leading to the heart of the golden city.

Before Kirk could rub his eyes, the Guide led the group down the road into the grassy field below.

When they reached the cliff, many of the group members separated from the whole to see what the place had to offer. Kirk, meanwhile, clung to the road as much as possible, looking from one end of the field to the other, gathering what he could from where he stood.

The grassy field stretched for miles in both directions. Each half was remarkably flat, hauntingly familiar to the fields prior to the forest, but with the distinct difference that both dropped into the endlessly deep ravine. Travelers of all races and nations scattered about the field from the most distant rock to the nearest tree; each celebrating the vision of the land ahead, with most running to the edge and back with a shout. Many bodies also danced in the rain as it fell into their faces.

Perhaps, the most startling revelation, however, was not in the simplicity of the field, but in the absence of treasure. He thought for sure that he would find some hint of reward when reaching the road's end, as hardcore journeymen might think, but he found the cliff, instead. While scanning the faces of the travelers around him, he noticed that most of them didn't have the same realization that he had. They continued to run around, dance about, laugh, party, and stare into the distance as if they've already been paid their rewards.

Kirk reasoned, therefore, that the treasure was perhaps somewhere on the cliff, and that these people had already found it—thus explaining why they were enjoying themselves. His theory had challenges, though: even the vast majority of people he traveled with were partaking in the festivities without having claimed a single jewel. Frankly, he was confused.

He examined his map to double-check the location of the treasure, to find—to greater surprise—that he still hadn't traveled far enough. The marked spot was not on the cliff, contrary to his presupposition, but rather, beyond the great chasm.

His heart sank when he discovered there was no way to reach the floating island on his own.

The Guide approached Kirk and placed his hand on his shoulder.

"I see you discovered where your true goal lies," he said. "But you are perplexed how to reach it, are you not?"

"Well, yes I am," said Kirk. "I came all this way just to hit a dead end, and the treasure...how am I supposed to reach it when the road ends here?"

The Guide smiled as he directed his hand toward the island.

"Do not be deceived, Kirk, for the road does not end here. Take another look at your map and tell me what you see."

Kirk looked at the map to notice a bridge icon spanning the chasm from the cliff to the island.

“A bridge,” he replied.

“Look at the edge of the path again and tell me if you still see a dead end.”

Kirk followed the path with his eyes. To his surprise, he noticed in his second glance a huge wooden cross hanging over the chasm, stretching evenly from the road at the end of the cliff to the road leading to the golden city. His mouth dropped as he wondered how he missed that on the first glance.

“Where did...”

“Journeyman have taken few steps along the narrow path, just to allow distraction to get the best of them. The result of their actions led them to choose the winding roads as their treasure. For those who fought the first temptation, many were lost to the forest when they strayed. Of the few to emerge unburned, many set up camps in the valley just to be washed away by the flood. Even those who came this far have tried to reach the island by their own methods. Many have come to seek treasure, Kirk, but most have sought it through their own wisdom. Look again at those who have wandered the cliff thinking they know how to traverse the chasm.”

Kirk watched the traveling multitudes dash from various spots around the cliff seeking materials to build their contraptions.

“They think they can get there by their own strength, but the Land of God, the place of your treasure, can only be accessed through this bridge. Most refuse to acknowledge its validity, because most believe they don’t need it. Look again.”

To his utter surprise, and horror, Kirk watched as a young athlete leapt to his doom. At first, the man’s actions didn’t seem like anything out of the ordinary, for he stretched his legs and shook his arms as if to prepare for a race. Things changed, however, when he sprinted across the field toward the edge of the cliff. Kirk imagined the young man had participated in a dare from his friends, testing how close he could get to the edge before stopping in his tracks. But the young man didn’t stop. Within moments he leapt from the cliff, reaching like a frozen mannequin toward the island, and fell headfirst into the deep pit.

Kirk dropped to his knees, as the image of the fall burnt into his mind, and covered his eyes from the sight of further atrocity.

“What was that guy thinking?” he said.

"He was a good man, but a man who thought he could get to his treasure on his own strength," said the Guide. "Uncover your eyes and look again."

Kirk slowly lifted his eyes to the crowd, just in time to see a horse rider gallop toward a different place along the cliff. The man whipped his steed fiercely as the stallion blazed the grasslands, knocking other people out of the way. As it drew closer and closer to the edge, however, the horse whinnied in terror and skidded to a stop, hurling the man off its back and into the ravine.

Kirk wanted to cover his eyes again, but the Guide informed him to keep looking.

Next, he watched a young woman in short dress gently lay rose petal after rose petal to the ground. She winked at the group of drooling men that followed close behind her, while leading them toward the cliff's edge. Kirk looked at the Guide and moaned.

"Make them stop," he said.

"I can't," said the Guide. "They choose to do what they will."

He looked at the young woman with her seduced men-sheep; then cringed as she performed a double back flip into the ravine. Naturally, the panting guys jumped in after her. Kirk was beside himself.

"Now what?" he said.

The Guide pointed to another girl who carried some books and a basket of pastries. She casually handed the tasty looking sweets to a group of emaciated travelers and read poetry to them as she walked them all over the cliff and fell in herself. Next, came a man who emerged from a cave in the mountain, strapped to a set of wings that he must have designed himself. He dove off the cliff in an attempt to fly across the ravine, but fell short about a quarter of the way and plummeted into the abyss.

"The girl thought she could somehow get over there if she did good deeds, and the inventor, well...he didn't realize there's very little air pressure in the void."

"Why do I have to watch this?" asked Kirk.

"So that in your understanding you can show the rest of them why they need to take the bridge. You've seen where they failed. Show them where they can succeed."

Kirk looked at the field again. He noticed that some people sat in the grass facing the mountain. Others continued to devote their attention to their stuff.

"What about those people?" he asked. "Some of them aren't diving off the cliff. Why?"

“The people with their backs to the ravine and the island don’t want to acknowledge that either exist. They got this far already thinking this was their goal. The ones preoccupied with their toys have made that their treasure. Just like the travelers who were distracted in the winding paths, these travelers are content with keeping their focus on what they have here.”

“Will they ever take the bridge?”

“Some might. You can always remind them why they came this far. God wants to take everyone from this stormy flatland and invite him to His City to partake in the treasure, so there’s no reason for you to keep quiet. The people will never make it if they don’t take the bridge, so make sure to show them the way. Beware, though, that not everyone will trust its ability to hold him. Those who do not trust the bridge will not come to it.”

“But they’ll jump off the cliff?”

“They believe in themselves more.”

Kirk scanned the region again. More travelers geared up to take the dive. Others planted their feet deeper into the ground.

Meanwhile, the Storm drenched the field as it dumped its rain in heavier doses. Some people left their umbrellas closed, while some danced in the raindrops. A deep fog swept in from the mountain. Kirk feared that another gale would soon follow, sweeping everyone off the land.

“Will they listen to me?” asked Kirk.

“They may, but again that’s for them to choose. Your job is to point out the path to them. The rest is between them and God.”

Before Kirk could process the Guide’s words, a small group of travelers came down the road from the mountain and reached the cross bridge. Like the people in the field, this group consisted of individuals from a variety of backgrounds, from a nice little old lady to a bald, beefy titan. Each gave Kirk a friendly smile as one by one they set foot onto the wooden plank. At that point, Kirk noticed a bearded man traveling back and forth from one side to the other leading the people over.

“Wait a minute,” said Kirk. “Who’s that?”

“That’s the Carpenter,” said the Guide. “He made the bridge.”

“He looks familiar. Where have I seen him before?”

“He gave you some food and shelter yesterday when you emerged from the flood. Remember?”

“The guy who owned the cottage? But what’s he doing here?”

“Take a look.”



The Carpenter gently led each new arrival across his bridge to the other side. Each step they took seemed risky for the most part, given the narrow nature of the boards, but each one kept his eyes planted in the Carpenter's direction and not one slipped. When they reached the other side, the Carpenter walked them through a shower stall that dispersed some kind of red liquid over them.

"What's he doing to them?" asked Kirk.

"Every traveler who ventures to the sacred land must go through a decontamination process before he is sterile enough to handle the environment. No germs are allowed in that land, so the red liquid, which the Carpenter designed and created himself, eliminates the presence of such undesirable things."

Kirk wanted to respond, but his last vestige of inquiry escaped him. It appeared that the Carpenter had everything worked out.

When the Carpenter approached the cliff from having taken the last member of the group to the other side, the Guide placed his hand on Kirk's shoulder.

"Your treasure is on the other side of the bridge, Kirk. You know how to get there. Gather as many people as you can from this field and start walking across. There's no reason for you not to trust the Carpenter, so make sure you stay focused on him when he leads you through the remainder of the journey. If for any reason you should lose your step, which is possible if you look anywhere other than toward the Carpenter, make sure that you reach out your hand so he can catch you. It's as simple as that, so don't delay. For as long as you're on this side, the wind can sweep you into the ravine at any time."

At that moment, the Carpenter stood at the edge of the bridge and extended his hand to Kirk. As Kirk prepared to reach back, he noticed a hole in the man's wrist. He flinched from the sight.

"What happened to you?" he said.

"Nail scar," said the Carpenter. "It happened while I was preparing the bridge."

"Does it hurt?"

"Yes, it does. But people are coming over to my sacred land, so it's worth it."

Kirk was speechless. All he could think to do was to apologize for the guy.

"Sorry it hurts."

"I accept your apology. Now how about rounding up some of those confused people in the field and start leading them over here? I'd like to have a party at the Great Castle tonight."

Kirk hesitated briefly as he saw the people in the field carry on with their own affairs. But once he gathered the nerve to approach them—these strangers preoccupied with futile things—he quickly reminded them why they traveled the road to begin with. As he pointed out the existence and purpose of the bridge, many of them snapped to attention and headed for it. Even though some continued to focus on their games and such, while others still continued to dive off the cliff, some still reached the foot of the bridge and walked across with the Carpenter. Once Kirk traveled from one end of the field to the other and back again, he stood at the foot of the bridge himself and took the Carpenter's hand.

"You trust me, right?" said the Carpenter.

Kirk nodded as he took his first step onto the wooden plank.

"Excellent. Now let's go receive your prize, my son."

And with that they walked across the bridge to enter into the Land of God, where the Storm had no dominion, where the ravine posed no threat, and where everyone could get to know each other without obstacle. Kirk felt a breath of fresh air when he stepped onto the other side.

## *Waterfall Junction*

War was averted. At least, that's what he hoped for. As the moon elevated from behind the Great Mountain, a lone horseman in tin-plated armor trotted along the banks of the Paradise River, breathing deeply from behind his mask. Although his rusting sword dangled idly by his hip, the blade destined to see countless engagements remained untested.

Wandering for hours where the fountains of blood slumbered, he stopped next to the water's edge to labor another breath. As his Iberian Saddle Horse knelt down to drink the rapids, the rider removed his helmet and tossed it into the current. Where he was going, he didn't need it.

The rider, named Dalowin, stepped down from his four-legged accomplice and collapsed along the shore. With his thighs touching the soft ground, he picked a rock out of a shrub and rolled it between his fingers. The river crashed and bubbled in its flowing fury, but he stayed close, hoping the anger would somehow quench him. On his own there was nothing he could do short of tossing himself in, but he waited—for an earthquake, maybe, to give him that jarring nudge. When reality set in, however, he scooted away from the riverbank, and plunged the stone in his place.

"Do not be afraid," echoed a soft voice, from the water.

Dalowin jumped to his feet from the intrusion. The words vibrated the pit of his heart.

"What?" he shouted, darting his attention everywhere. His chest heaved from the shock.

He stared deeply into the churning cauldron, but saw, nor heard anything. The mist continued to float from the surface, as it did when he parked his horse by the shore, spraying his metal face like the spit from a babe. The surrounding field of wild marjoram covered his senses with its sweet aroma, but nothing else answered his call. The butterflies fluttered without resonance and he stood there on the shore looking like the fool. His horse glanced up from the river, snorted, then returned to its drink.

"Thank you, Aspyre, for your staunch reassurance," he hissed, his heart calming.

The beast didn't bother to respond. Dalowin chucked another rock for good measure.

The lucid dream fought him three times: the first, a week before departure while sleeping in his father's castle, the second, when his army split into

three parts at the Hill of Resilience, and the third, while resting along the banks of the Paradise River. Each time it tapped the back of his eyes, the vision replayed the story picture for picture, engraining him with visions of terror. Although the images were short-lived, they panned out with an orchestral voice so booming that the pieces haunted him in broad daylight.

A castle with four towers stood like a giant at the foot of the hill, with a bloody moat on three sides and a mountain on the fourth. A city opened at the base of the drawbridge, surrounding the canal to the edge of the rock. Walls of mortar encased the city, with an inner wall keeping the castle court. From an outsider's perspective, it looked as though the strongholds were also covered in venom.

Soldiers with crossbows paced the surface of each protective layer, while scores of swordsmen roamed the city streets. Multiple guards stood outside the gates, while pikes stabbed down from the ramparts like wooden icicles. The image reminded him of old mythological war paintings.

The cowardly son of the duke, regarded among his countrymen as Dalowin the Rabbit, stood on the hill's peak surveying the land. Though his army of a hundred horsemen stood loyal to him—or to his father, rather—their presence brought him little comfort. Hundreds more stood between him and the throne of Destiny, waiting to knock him off his saddle. The sky moved at the speed of an arrow, but he and his men remained frozen in time.

A man in purple robes materialized a few feet down the slope and stretched his hands toward the kingdom.

"The king of this land has defiled his people and must be dethroned at once," spoke the prophet. "Go and claim the kingdom for your father and the Lord will bless your people accordingly. Do not delay or the city before you shall die."

Three times, Dalowin wanted to take that first step toward the valley to rush the gates, but three times, his courage failed him. With every scuffle of his horse's hooves, he spun the animal around and charged the opposite side, fleeing from his own men. And every time he woke up, he lurched into reality with a dry mouth and a shattered will, convincing himself that the prophecy was false and the war was never meant for him.

"Do not be afraid," whispered the voice of ambience.

Bolting upright, Dalowin stared at the water, breathing heavily through the shallows of his lips. Although the signs continued to elude him, he was certain something chased him. He strained his ears to hear it

again. Whitecaps broke less than a meter from his feet. The wind blew softly through the reeds. But nature, like an irritating mime, lacked its chariot of speech. Whatever it was, it was hiding itself. Taunting him. Scolding him.

Confounded by the problem, he insisted the place had been cursed.

Weeks ago, his accompanying cavalry vanished. And it was his fault. When the three squads separated atop the Hill of Resilience, he broke away and dashed for the woods, hoping they all had the sense to take his lead. Without a commander, he was certain—or hopeful—they'd return home. Even if it looked dreadful on his character, disbanding them was the only way he knew to keep them safe.

In his heart he believed the prophet undoubtedly fed his father a lie. There was no way the kingdom below the Hill would've fallen before him and his soldiers. The castle guard clamped the city with the strength of a thousand elephants. Cowardice was the key to his survival. It had to be.

For many nights, he rationalized himself to sleep. A dead man never dethroned a corrupt king. An army was never raised from a bloody heap. A sound leader was a wise leader and a wise leader was a living one. Whether or not he actually led made no consequence.

After giving it a beaver's tail whack of a thought, he hoisted himself over the saddle and clutched the reins with eagle claws. It was urgent for him to get as far away from this land as possible.

As Aspyre the Iberian Saddle Horse trotted along the riverbanks, Dalowin fell asleep. With his cheeks planted firmly against the animal's mane, a heavy trickling noise filled his ears. Though he only saw unmistakable darkness, he imagined the picture of a slanted brook rolling over the edge of a mountain. In the dream, an immense hand leapt from the current and knocked him off his seat, throwing him over the lip of a mighty waterfall. And then, he plummeted, faster and faster, farther and farther, until at last he ripped his eyes open. In his frantic state of alertness, he overcompensated his position and fell off the steed.

"Aspyre, stop," he shouted, as the beast continued without him. "I said stop."

When he caught up to his equestrian companion, Dalowin noticed the landscape had changed. Even though he could only see by starlight, he realized he was on the verge of hitting a gargantuan cliff towering nearly a thousand feet above him. Pine trees stood tall in his path, but a narrow opening etched into the heart of the mountain a short distance down the river. Deciding that it had the potential to offer the best shelter, he hopped onto his horse and headed for the break.

Although the rock sheer rose nearby, tree clusters of the forest extended over the shoreline, forcing him to waver through the wood. It took nearly an hour to navigate the foliage, but he reached the cleft. From there, he entered a narrow canyon that stretched beyond sight. With only a few feet separating the rock wall from the swelling river, Dalowin held his arms close to his body and took a deep breath. The squeeze brought strain to his triceps, but it was worth him staying dry.

He and his horse traveled along the skinny path for the remainder of the night. With vertical rock faces repeating him by, the hope for an escape looked slim. Not only did the trail seem to go on forever; it was too narrow to turn back. When he realized he failed to address this matter, he clasped his forehead and shook with despair.

Although the rapids spilled down the declining river, the rider knew the only way to escape was to brave the current. Reversing direction, however, meant getting wet in the harshest way. The path ahead seemed dry, but endless. The path behind was the only guarantee.

“You know the way behind you,” whispered the voice of ambience. “Your freedom lies in the risks ahead.”

Once again Dalowin stopped his horse and waited. The voice sounded clearer than ever. The landscape didn’t present any changes, but the air rustled in his ears. The thought of its warning brought sweat to his brow.

A few minutes passed before he had the courage to move again. Only, he resolved he had gone mad, so he attempted to turn the horse around. With a tight grip of the reins, he jerked its neck to the left. But the creature didn’t move. It snorted.

“Aspyre,” he shouted, rib-kicking the animal, “move it.”

The horse spat; then continued on the normal path. Dalowin kicked it with greater force.

“Aspyre, turn around.”

Five gusts of wind passed before the rider gave up his effort. The river, meanwhile, continued to splash water in his face, reminding him he was trapped.

The hopeless journey continued for another hour, moving up a leftward bend into an even narrower section of the canyon. With his toes scraping the mountain wall, the horseman dismounted his steed by climbing over its head. He, then, continued the path on foot, leading the animal by the bit.

He and the horse walked for another mile before the river leveled out and calmed to a trickle. To his relief, the path also began to widen. With

a glimmer of hope in his heart, he decided to rest briefly against the cliff. The ensuing comfort nearly pushed him back to sleep.

Sometime later, when the morning reached its peak, Dalowin nearly lost his balance. The road before him finally changed. Although the rocky trail maintained its rugged surface, the bordering cliffs tapered off into a series of platforms that formed a cylindrical container that must have reached a thousand feet at its highest point, with the river spilling into a bowl-shaped lake. The entire landscape reminded him of the interior of his discarded helmet, but upside-down, craggy, and full of water—and made of rocks.

The river itself, now calm at the mouth of the great pool, branched into three adjoining streams that met at the edges of each shore. The channels, all about thirty feet wide at the mouth, flowed from the spray point of three large waterfalls. Dalowin took a deep breath as he attempted to absorb the splendor.

Each waterfall spilled from consecutively growing heights: the lowest precipice standing at the height of a tree, the highest at the top of the cliff. He also noticed a series of steps ascending the rock face from the base of each surrounding path. Although the segments passing the greater falls were inaccessible—cut off by the adjacent streams—the stair leading up the side of the smallest one started at the end of the main path.

The majesty of the reflecting pond drew from him a sense of wonder, but he still felt entrapped by the confined quarters and so resolved to find a way out. Unfortunately, the path he followed getting here reached a dead end, but the steps climbing above the first stream appeared to lead to a higher river. He breathed a sigh of relief.

“Come, Aspyre,” he spoke, gently, “I think we found our way.”

The horse was hesitant to take the first ascending step, but Dalowin managed to help it navigate the curvature and sharp zigzags leading to the next level. It was certainly no simple ordeal—the steps couldn’t have been wider than his shoulders, which made the journey especially awkward for the horse. But with an intense strain on the horse’s bit to keep it level, the difficult task was a successful one. At the top of the stair, he found a small field on the edge of a wood with a stream passing through.

The field was quite narrow, with trees squeezing it against the banks on one side and the wall of the bordering cliff spanning the other. It was also absent of any defined path, making the river the only clear navigation point to—well, he didn’t really know where he was going. It bent right, about half a mile down the way into the heart of the forest. Wherever he was going, it was guaranteed to block the sun.

As Dalowin mounted his horse, he set course to follow the shoreline. It seemed the trip would've been easy compared to the canyon's claustrophobic situation, but he still had his uncertainties. On the one hand, the ground was softer than the former path, making his steps potentially shakier. On the other, the forest was so dense that keeping to a straight path would've been next to impossible. If anything, the safest bet would've been to tread the shallows of the river, but that, of course, meant the possibility of hitting deep pockets, throwing both him and his horse off footing. In the end, he rationalized he had made a mistake coming this far.

"Take the boat," whispered the voice of ambience.

Again, Dalowin stopped to listen to the surroundings. That voice—it was driving him mad. And the boat—what boat? He looked around, but all he saw was—wait, there was a boat. Setting up against a small rock just inside the forest: it was wooden, rickety and far too small for a horse. The voice was clearly suffering from head trauma.

"Leave the horse behind," said the voice. "I will take care of him. Your journey must continue in this boat."

"Who are you?" Dalowin said, at last. "Why have you been following me?"

"Set the boat in the river and I will answer your question."

He looked from treetop to treetop, suspicious of the wind and of the birds. But then, he laughed.

"Certainly there is no one there. Aspyre, am I imagining things?"

"The horse will not answer you," spoke the voice, more sternly, "for a horse does not use speech."

"But the wind speaks? How is this so?"

"I am more than wind, as I am more than life. Trust My instruction. Set the boat in the river."

The rider wanted to protest the wind, but realized that further response was folly, so he did as the voice instructed him—questioning his intelligence at the same time, but keeping obedient.

"What shall I do now?" he asked, as he stepped into the boat.

"Let the current carry you."

Dalowin squeezed himself into the tiny vessel and waited for the river to respond. It took a moment for the boat to move, but a soft breeze pushed it to the center. From there, the flow gained control, leading him down the water path. Without an oar to steer it, he prayed he had made the right choice. Only, when he realized the current did not lead toward the bend as he assumed, but toward the waterfall, he quickly panicked.

"This is mad," he shouted. "I will not do this."



Before he could take further action, the boat accelerated, pulling him into a current stronger than his ability to fight. Whether he was ready for it or not, whether he stayed in the boat or not, one way or another he was going over the edge. He pressed his forehead against his knees to prepare for his impending doom.

A moment later, the river hurled him over the precipice, causing the boat to ride the bumpy cascade a pine tree's distance to the bottom, where it splashed nose first into the stream. The impact submerged the vessel long enough to draw a few inches of water, but not enough to sink it. When Dalowin looked up, he was floating toward the reflecting pond in the middle.

The ordeal left him speechless.

The boat drifted to the next shore where the channel met the lake. As soon as the vessel touched the rocky bank, he stepped out of the boat and kicked the water off his feet. Silence followed. Inside, he was shaking, but he didn't know what to do. The gurgling rush of the falls rumbled back to his attention. The spill of the river rose from his gut and flooded into his cheeks. The dam in his throat couldn't maintain its hold any longer.

"What illness struck your reason?" he finally shouted. "You could have killed me."

As the water dripped from his metallic skin, a zephyr blew fiercely down the canyon wall and knocked him back into the stream. For one brief moment he was completely submerged. When he resurfaced, the voice reverberated off the rocks.

"Are you dead?" asked the voice.

"No, I am not dead, but I could have been."

"But are you?"

"Do I look like I am pale?"

"Draw the boat from the water and ascend the next stair," said the voice of ambience.

"What? Are you mad? After—"

"Do you trust Me?"

"I do not know who *you* are."

"In your spirit, you know. Do you trust Me?"

Dalowin kicked his feet against the rocky path. He didn't need this, nor did he want it. Ambient voices, unpredictable journeys; all he wanted was to go home.

"What do you want from me?"

"Draw the boat from the water and ascend the next stair."

"As you wish," he muttered, vehemently.

It was a difficult reality to process; the voice of ambience was Someone indeed, Someone with an agenda no less, but Someone who knew a lot more than he did, so he complied. Though he couldn't stifle his resentment, he pulled the boat out of the stream, dumped the water from the hull, and carried it to the adjacent stair, which climbed about a hundred feet to the next level.

The top region looked similar to the one below, though a bit wider, a lot darker from cliff-side shadows and more unkempt. The grass was wilder and the gnats busier, but the rest remained the same. Dalowin huffed in his exhaustion as he threw the boat to the ground. The second set of stairs nearly wasted his stamina.

The river on the second tier had a wider channel than the first, but flowed a little slower. The currents hugging the banks barely moved, while the deep regions moved at a resistible speed. The scent of decaying fish emanated from downwind.

"Set the boat in the water," spoke the whispering breeze.

"But the river fall will kill me at this height."

He waited for the voice to respond.

"Why do you wish to kill me?" he cried out.

"Do you trust Me?" said the voice, fainter than before.

Dalowin nodded, though the tear in his eye left him questioning the truth.

"Set the boat in the river."

Continuing to nod, though he didn't know why, he dragged the boat to the water's edge. Climbing stairs and falling down rivers took its toll on his body. But he pressed on. When he set the boat into the stream, he entered the hull and let it carry him to the next precipice. He held his breath as he drew closer and closer.

Even though he could justify survival from the first fall, he wasn't sure what to make of the second. There was still enough ground presence from the lower tier to sense the swiftness of the drop, but from this level, he could not see the bottom. His vision only permitted him sight of the wall across the lake, and the huge pit in between. Anxiety tapped him on the shoulder and clawed him in the chest as he waited. Then, the river took control of his future.

From this height, his stomach lost anchor. As the nose tipped over the edge, the rush of the plunge engulfed most of his boat. Far below, the central lake expanded across the rocky canvas; then quickly hid itself behind the curtain of water closing over his eyes. Within a second he lost contact with all surfaces, feeling only the torrent on his back and his sword detaching from his waist.

It took only a moment for the end to come.

When he splashed into the stream below, he went in knees first. His boat landed a few feet to his left and his sword dropped like a missile, just inches to his right. Both he and the weapon went under—so far that he hit the bottom. The fall took so much out of him that he didn't have the strength to kick back up to the surface.

"It is not finished yet," gurgled the voice of ambience. "Remove what armor you can and swim to the boat. I will give you the strength to make it."

Though he was tired, Dalowin felt the second wind hit him, even at the depths of the stream. Heeding the surge of energy, he quickly unfastened the straps holding his breastplate together and slung it over his head. The strain on his muscles exhausted what was left of his lung capacity, but he was buoyant enough now to make it back to the surface. Grabbing his sword from nearby, he kicked away from the bottom and rose into the violent bubbles of the falling stream.

When he reached the surface, he inhaled a large volume of air. For the first time in his life, survival never felt so refreshing. It was like watching a ship coming to rescue a survivor on a deserted isle. He whooped with whatever amount of strength he could muster.

Once he got hold of his boat and floated to the shallows of the shoreline, he climbed out onto the next rocky platform and fell onto his back. For several minutes, he panted as the sunshine spilled onto him from high above the bowl. When his strength finally returned a short time later, a swift breeze shot down the sides of the cliff and rode speedily across his face.

"Dalowin," spoke the voice of ambience, "it is time to climb the final stair."

He didn't want to argue with the voice anymore. For whatever reason it put him through this trial, he didn't care. Twice now he survived the impossible, and it only made sense that he'd survive the next. The commands were strange, even brutal, but he got through them. If the voice wanted him to climb the thousand-foot stair, then that was what he was going to do.

His legs were weak and his shoulders sore, but he took up his boat and climbed the final stair. The journey lasted nearly an hour, to which he collapsed at the top from exhaustion. But he made it. The relief of lying still was enchanting.

While he rested on his back, staring at the sky, he drifted into deep sleep. Immediately, the silence transformed into a burning hill where soldiers lit their arrows and sent them off into the valley below. He stood

there, shouting at the men, as they set the city by the mountain on fire. A smile crossed his face as the castle guard fell off the parapets.

When he awoke sometime later, he sat up to look at the area around him. This time there were no cliffs, but a field that stretched infinitely toward the skyline, with rolling hills cascading both up the side of a mountain and down the slope of a valley, in the middle of which the stream branched in two directions. At the top of the waterway, a spring percolated in all its glory, giving the stream its source of life. At the bottom, two other streams met the first at the mouth of a great river, which continued well into the horizon. Thanks to the overwhelming image before him, he couldn't find his breath.

"Set the boat in the river," spoke the voice of ambience, knocking him out of his stupor. The accompanying wind kissed his forehead.

He didn't argue the voice's logic. A thousand-foot cataract plummeted down the side of a cliff—certain doom would befit any man attempting to ride it—but he didn't argue. The voice kept him alive during the first two descents; certainly it would keep him alive during the third. He didn't know how many limbs he would stand with afterward, assuming he could stand, but that was no longer a concerning issue. What mattered now was that he finished his journey.

So he entered the boat, allowed the stream to carry him toward the precipice overlooking the impossible drop and waited. Only, when he drew near, the voice whispered through the breath of a swift breeze.

"Your faith has saved you, Dalowin. You need not continue this course." A pause followed, as Dalowin searched the sky for validation. "Now turn the boat around and sail for the valley, for the waterfall ahead will surely destroy you."

The sudden realization that death awaited him at the bottom of the fall didn't faze him like it could have. The strength that coursed through his blood from having survived two previous drops toughened his will to leap out of the boat and force it into the opposite direction. Though his legs fought against the weights of his shin guards, he pushed hard from the depths of his gut, keeping the vessel as far away from the precipice as possible. For several minutes, he struggled to keep himself afloat as he resisted the currents, but his endurance paid off. As soon as the stream changed direction at the top of the declination, he let the boat carry him all the way into the valley. Once the water leveled out again, he inhaled another desperate breath and pulled himself back into the boat.

Without a paddle, the journey was void of direction, but Dalowin clutched his knees together, believing that God would lead him to the next trial. Whatever that was, he figured, somehow, His Protector would

take care of him. Shivering from the cold, he looked ahead toward the river, attempting to understand what test of life that might be.

"Do you trust Me?" whispered the voice, from across the grassy fields.

The drenched rider nodded against his elbows.

"Then, climb out of the boat once the three streams meet the Paradise River."

The mouth of the river was close—maybe a half-hour's worth of sailing away. Although the stream's current decelerated at the foot of the hill, it increased speed gradually as he drew closer to the wider body of water. With the two adjoining streams adding pressure to the mix, the boat took off as it crossed the first junction.

In actuality, the approach only took about twenty minutes. Once the nose of the vessel reached the mouth of the river, he sheathed his sword; then he collapsed over the edge into the refreshing water, taking a drink as his head went under. Despite all the streams and rivers he dealt with since late evening, this was his first real effort at hydrating himself. In all his agonizing punishments, this was his first attempt at healing. A broken twig slipped past his cheeks to commemorate the moment. He caught it before he resurfaced.

When he pulled himself onto the riverbank shortly thereafter, he lifted his eyes to discover a welcome surprise. A set of hooves scuffed the grass before him.

"Aspyre," he whispered, digging his face back into the ground, "you found your way."

A moment passed before the soft breeze of late afternoon brushed across his back.

"Dalowin," spoke the voice of ambience, "you are now fit to fulfill your destiny. Take your horse and return to the Hill of Resilience. May your courage offer you a new name: Dalowin the Falcon, for your stance will be mighty and your attack swift. With My strength you and your armies will prevail against the city of corruption. Ride now, for your army awaits you."

And so Dalowin rose from his grassy bed and mounted his valiant Saddle Horse, thanking God for his newfound courage. Once he felt situated on the saddle, he raised his nose to the sky and kicked the animal into action. Like an arrow, the equestrian chariot sprinted off down the riverbanks until it met the moon at the place of prophecy. It was there that he met his eager army and promptly told them his story.

## The Celebration of Johnny's Yellow Rubber Ducky

### The Introduction

Every word of the story you're about to read is absolutely true. From the characters to the details, from the settings to the narration, all of it, except for maybe a few things, are completely and utterly eighty percent true. For the thirty percent that might be fake, nearly most of it is sort of accurate...to a degree. For the first half, which isn't made up and can be verified by as much as forty percent, the events that are about to unfold are practically without reasonable doubt (which can be held up in court), except in Alabama where only twenty percent of its truth can be accounted for. And even though the absolute reality is that none of this actually happened, it doesn't change the fact that it makes for a wonderfully heartfelt story, so enjoy it for its merit as completely uninspired fiction, except for the events that happen in France, which are almost entirely inspired by the movie *Amélie*, which is rumored to have gotten its gnome scenes (which you might find some parallels) from an event that happened in real life. So, without further adieu:

### The Present

At the whopping age of twenty-three, Johnny finally graduated from Oxford University and headed for seemingly greater dreams in London, which, conveniently, was the place of his birth. Even though he could've finished school two years earlier, he decided to change his major from business to literature; then from literature to philosophy; and then from philosophy to art before finally making the decision to study business. His six years of university had absolutely nothing to attribute to stupidity, however, for he did in fact make it to Oxford and not some school in a pass-me-through country like America. But the constant shift in direction left him feeling disoriented. Therefore, when he finally graduated and returned to London, he didn't know where he was.

After somehow ending up on the Northern Line of the Underground near the Stockwell Station, Johnny hunched over in his seat to inhale some paltry air. It was while his eyes scanned the floor that he affixed his gaze on an object he never expected to find.

A dirty rubber ducky, yellow with an orange beak, set next to his shoes with a few sheets of paper and a curious note attached:

“To anyone who finds this, please take this rubber ducky wherever you go. At any point you should experience something great, I beg of you, write it down and attach it to the duck. Then, leave it for the next body to find. When the seventh individual writes his experience, keep the duck and publish the letters for all to see.”

Johnny looked around the boxcar to see if anyone was looking. When he saw he was alone, he picked up the toy to examine the sheets of paper. The first one told the story of a man named Will.

### Will

To whomever finds this rubber ducky, I say to you congratulations, for you have stumbled across a truly wonderful duck. Some ducks are peachy, while others are flat out unlucky, but this duck has a history of greatness. As you'll read in the following letters—each written by people who carried the duck before me—every person to have it had something wonderful happen to them. And this is my story.

My name is Will and I spent many nights in a hotel with broken beds and awful food. I had traveled through Europe as a street side musician when I decided to get some rest in London. My feet were sore, my hair frazzled, my vision was blurry and frankly I couldn't take another day of charity performance. When I found a cheap hotel in the lower part of the city, I paid for a room with my last bit of change and hid in the bathroom for three days. My eyes were bloodshot, I didn't want to talk to anyone, the circuit had been bad this year, I averaged twenty Eurodollars a day and I was hungry. In all things considered, I needed a change.

On my fifth evening at the “Pallider Hotel,” I stared at the grimy ceiling with my bongos to my side when I rolled over, knocking them off the bed. As I leaned over to pick them up, I noticed this worn out little rubber ducky touching its beak against the wooden floor. When I looked closer, I saw the letters tied around its neck and decided, after much deliberation, that I'd take the duck with me.

On the eighth day, I left the hotel and gave the music circuit another go. For two weeks, I slept in the park, and for two weeks, I barely scraped a living. But I endured. When I started showing people the rubber duck, many of them thought it was sweet, so they compensated me for such sweetness. One pound turned into two, two pounds into four,

and next thing I knew I was able to afford a better hotel. That was a few days ago.

If you're wondering how the duck got on the tube, that answer is simple. On my way to the "Diamond Hotel," I decided to grab the train. My stop wasn't for at least three miles, so I had time to write my story. While I was writing about my good fortune, a pretty girl sat next to me and saw my rubber ducky. She thought it was so sweet that she kissed me. And thus, I realized right there that the duck fulfilled its mission and now was the time to pass it on. So, as I finish this last sentence, I am leaving the duck behind to bless the next person. And I am hoping this girl will give me her number. Of course, why wouldn't she? I have a rubber ducky with me.

### **Grant**

Okay, I'm in a bit of a hurry here, but I think I can write my tale rather quickly. My name is Grant, and I found this duck while I was on the run. Two months ago, I lived in Paris, working as a coffee merchant at a local café, when the French Mafia found me. Even though I lived under witness protection for the last year, I never had the funds to leave France, so I hid in the biggest city in the country. That was a mistake, because the French Mafia operated less than ten miles away. In my defence, I thought I could blend with the crowd. My luck flew south, however, when one of the lieutenants spotted me wiping tables near the street corner.

The reason why the Mafia was after me is irrelevant. The important thing was that they found me, and I had to leave my post immediately. The gunshot sounded and my feet kicked into action. With my dishrag in hand, I hopped the metal railing in front of the café and dashed for the nearest bus. The lieutenant, in turn, chased me with his Lamborghini. I barely escaped his bumper when I jumped on the bus. The chase, then, became a duel of wills. He had speed; I had brawn. Only one was going to escape the city alive. And he had the gun. I had the dishrag.

I found the rubber duck in the backseat, adjacent to two lovers engaged in a heated display of affection. I took the seat because it gave me the best vantage of the Lamborghini, but kept it because watching the overjoyed romantics felt like going to the theatre. Between the adrenaline of one issue and the distraction of another, I almost overlooked the duck completely. But in my haste to duck the window, I dropped belly-first onto the toy, and it squeaked.

Grabbing the duck, I sprinted to the front of the bus as the sports car sped ahead, and jumped out the door before either vehicle had a chance



to stop. From there I bolted through three commercial neighborhoods—taking mostly the alleys—and ended up on the front court of the Gare du Nord, where I dashed for the gate and bought a ticket for the Eurostar.

The quid I made in tips that day was the only cash I had, but somehow it was enough to buy a ticket—barely. Even though I managed to lose the Lamborghini somewhere in that first neighborhood and didn't know what became of it, I kept an eye open for the driver as I waited for the bullet train to arrive. Fortunately, he never checked the station. About five hours later, I was on my way to London.

When I arrived at London International, I immediately ran for the surface and found a job waiting tables. With the pounds I earned, I bought a room at the Pallider Hotel and lay low for the next two months. Under my reserved profile, I continued serving tables, watching for any signs of my pursuers tracking me here, until this morning when everything changed. Before heading off to work, I read in the newspaper that the leader of the French Mafia was put behind bars for attempting to kidnap a Louvre tour guide, and that his entire syndicate was now hunted by Interpol. Feeling my bout of freedom approaching, I decided that my tenure with the duck was finished and that it was time to write my part of the story. And even though some agents will escape the law and continue to search for me, I know now that their chances of catching me are slim. With that, I hope the person who finds this duck will have fewer Mafia types chasing him.

### Carla

Okay, so I'm sitting at this café in the middle of Paris when I find this cute little duck setting in the chair beside me. Oh, I'm Carla by the way, nice to meet you—okay, we're probably not actually gonna meet, but you know—I don't want to be rude. So anyway, I'm alone—a little too alone—so I have nothing better to do than to read all the sheets of paper attached to it—the duck in case you forgot already. See, I'm actually from America, and I came to Paris a couple weeks ago to find some adventure and romance. But I couldn't find any. It was supposed to be part of my post-graduate plan: finish college, take the summer off, travel Europe, and then return home in the fall to start my career. But without the adventure or romance, I just keep a boring jaunt through foreign cities with nothing to show for my travels except postcards. Big whoop, right?

So like I said, I'm sitting at this café waiting for anything to happen when I look to my left to see the little rubber ducky setting in the chair next to me. I think, "how cute," and pick it up to read the notes. Then,

when I see what the notes are about, I decide to take the duck with me. I figure I'll keep it until I find my own brand of adventure or romance.

I take the duck all over Paris, exploring art museums, visiting parks and touring hotels. But nothing exciting comes about. Tourists take pictures of me, most of them whispering to their friends, "Look at the crazy French girl; she's carrying a duck." It's no more exciting than drinking from a fire hydrant back home. I need more. And up until a few hours ago, I started thinking that I wasn't going to find my adventure and romance—that my duck companion was just another little yellow trinket to stick me out in the crowd for the wrong reasons. So I wait at a bus stop preparing to leave the duck behind for someone more fortunate to find it.

But I don't leave the duck. Something snaps in my head. All these people before me had a story to tell, and I'm not about to let them down. So I keep the duck and board the bus. I don't care where it takes me, as long as it takes me somewhere. I sit in the back just because it's bumpier back there. A handsome French guy gets on the bus a few stops later and sits next to me. When he smiles and points out how cute he thinks my duck is, it occurs to me that I finally found my adventure and romance.

So that brings us to the present. Even though the adventure is still in its preparation stage, the romance kicked in about fifteen minutes ago. We both missed our stops awhile ago—okay, neither of us really had a stop, we were just looking mutually for random encounters—so we hung out on the bus to make out. I stopped for a few minutes to write my story, but now my story's finished, so now I can throw the duck into the adjacent seat and hope the next person to stumble across it finds his or her adventure and romance, too. France is so cool.

### **Ricky**

My name is Ricky, and my story regarding the duck began with a tragedy. I was at the hospital a few weeks ago suffering from some serious indigestion when I found the duck setting on the nightstand beside my bed. I was rolling in pain from what I thought was food poisoning, but turned out to be a bad case of gas. For several hours, I waited for the doctor to give me his diagnosis, but to no avail. Things kept coming up, my needs kept getting pushed to the backburner, my stomach continued to rumble and my answers continued to elude me.

When the doctor finally showed up at five o'clock, he stepped three feet into the room, shouted something at me in French and then walked off. I didn't know what he said, but an English-translating nurse told me

he was upset that I wasted his time. Not really understanding how I wasted his time, I apologised to the nurse. She involuntarily shrugged her shoulders; then discharged me from the hospital an hour later—with my stomach still aggravating me.

Speaking of French people, I noticed that none of them picked up this duck. I guess the duck only caters to those who can read the notes attached.

Anyway, when I was released, I decided to take the duck with me, because the letters suggested it would've been a good idea. And, because I never questioned what a note told me to do, it just made sense to me to not question this one, either. Besides, it was a rubber duck. There wasn't any reason for me not to take it.

So I went back to my flat that night—I was renting a place in the south side of town for school—and meditated on my dilemma. My stomach was in pain, but I decided to sleep it off. Several days later, however, I finally felt some relief. After making a valiant decision to stop eating ice cream with clams, my mysterious illness vanished. My body felt lighter than air; so much that I jumped for joy, landed on my bed the wrong way, and bounced out the second floor window. I ended up back in the hospital where my French doctor merely looked at me with disdain and shouted some word that sounded insulting.

I didn't have the duck with me when I went to the hospital the second time, but I recovered it when I returned home a few days later. From there I took my duck to school—I was studying the culinary arts—and told all my classmates about the mission it had embarked upon. Most of them thought it was cool, but some of them thought it weird. After I told them about my visits to the hospital, however, they all agreed it made sense.

And that's the way it was for two months. I went to class, brought my duck and learned how to cook meals without making myself sick. The course began teaching us how to make a chef's salad, but steadily moved us into learning the realms of steak, squash, and other elements of fine dining. Although it took me some time to really grasp the concept of how to make a delicious and artistic meal, the whole thing finally clicked when I managed to turn grape jelly into a masterpiece—I spread it onto a T-bone. At that point, I was ready to test my skills as a chef.

I know that's a long story, but that's how I got to the café where I'm sitting now. I came here with the intention of showing the head chef my signature "Grape Crepe Su-Steak" to promote my name to the industry. I found out just a few minutes ago, however, that he wants to buy my recipe for his restaurant. As of this afternoon I am now three hundred

Eurodollars richer than I was this morning, and the feeling is beautiful. And thanks to this happy ending, I can now leave the duck here in my chair and go on about my day.

### Megan

Hey, I'm Megan, and I found this duck when I thought I was dying. There's a train against a brick wall for you, right? I suppose that deserves clarification. I didn't feel some abnormal pain and assume the worst—I'm no hypochondriac. Rather, my body did something it had never done before, and it scared the heck out of me. For a solid week, my nose bled. Not continuously like a hemophiliac, but intermittently like a cancer patient, every morning when I woke up. The first time it happened, I cleaned myself up. The second time it happened, I thought it was strange. On the third time, I thought I had a problem. On the fourth time, I resolved to see a specialist. The day that I found the duck—on a park bench between two trees—I had reached my seventh day without change. The doctor put me on the list for the following week and I was scared. My life had finally shown signs of promise—just two weeks earlier, after much hardship, I moved to Paris—and now this cancer threatened my future. I didn't know what else to do.

The next few days passed with the same waking routine. Sunshine flooded into my room, my eyes opened to reality, and my cheek was stained with liquid red. After wiping my face with a towel, I felt around my sinus cavities for lumps. Each day, I couldn't find any. None of it made sense. Then, finally the day came for me to see the doctor. First he took my blood, then he had me urinate in a cup, and finally he checked my blood pressure. When all that was over, he interviewed me for symptoms. Then, he felt my cheeks. He couldn't find anything, either.

Another week passed without news. My nose continued to bleed, but the doctor remained silent. I was about to lose my mind when his secretary finally called me back to the office. After much anticipation, I would finally know the truth. Only, as I listened to his diagnosis, I was shocked. He sidestepped my main concern. It wasn't the nosebleeds that bothered him. It was my blood pressure.

It didn't make sense. My nosebleeds had nothing to do with my blood pressure, yet my blood pressure was the main concern. Cancer was obvious, but it wasn't the important thing. I didn't know what to do. I consulted the rubber duck for some peace of mind, but it couldn't talk—it could only squeak. I wanted to run home and cry.

The following week, I admitted myself into the hospital per the physician's instruction. From there, he conducted a series of tests ranging from cholesterol count to hypoglycemia scans. He also tested my bloodstream for cancer, but only to humor me. He didn't think the nosebleeds were attributed to that. I thought he was crazy, but I didn't have the option to argue with him; I just had to accept his opinion.

Finally, after a full day's worth of waiting, he told me I could go home. It turned out my bloodstream was fine. As for the possibility of cancer, there was nothing to support it. When I asked him about the nosebleeds, he asked me if I ever bothered to check my nostrils. When I told him no, he told me that I should. Apparently, my nose was scratched on the inside. It had nothing to do with cancer. It had everything to do with someone picking my nose while I slept.

So that's where I am now—getting ready to leave the hospital—relieved that I'm not dying. Because this was the greatest news I received all year, I figured this was the best place to pass the duck. Of course, when I leave the hospital, I'll have to find a new place to live, because the thought of going home to a roommate who picks my nose while I sleep just flat out gives me the creeps.

### **Matthew**

Okay, this is an exciting day for me. After four years of carrying around this rubber duck, I finally get to put this plan into action. First off, my name is Matthew, and I am sending this duck on a mission to change the lives of seven individuals. Or rather, I am sending this duck to experience the life altering moments of seven people. Since I am the first, six more shall have the pleasure of taking this duck wherever they go. Then, when the seventh body has his amazing moment, he or she will publish the entire story for everyone to see, and ultimately keep the duck. At least, that's the hope I have.

I suppose I cannot commission this duck on this grand journey without first explaining how I came to find it. The day after my father vanished, I walked down a beach near Calais to gather my senses. The previous night had been wrought with horrible thoughts of foul play and I lost sleep. The morning after, I was so groggy that I couldn't think straight. I sauntered down the avenues to see if I could find him, to see if maybe he was just resting in some alley with a wine-stained shirt on his back. But the search turned up void. With the police on the trail, I decided I had to get out of town for awhile. So I headed up for the coast. When I got there, I found this duck washing ashore.

I was surprised, at first, to discover such an odd trinket rolling up from the Channel. But I thought it had a long journey getting here, so I decided to rescue it from another trip through the straits. The duck was worn from the salt water, though it still squeaked, so I figured it was in sufficient condition to keep for awhile. The markings on the underside were faded, but I was able to make out the letters “J” and “G,” just barely. I brushed off a couple loose tangles of seaweed and put the duck in my pocket.

At first, I thought about giving it away to some kid in the street, concluding later, however, that finding this duck was a special event. Therefore, I decided that to get rid of it, I had to experience another special event. So I held on, for four years, carrying it wherever I went until something wonderful happened in my life.

A little while ago, I finally found my special event. As I was walking through the park trying to figure out why my tenth girlfriend in as many months dumped me—she claimed it had something to do with me squeaking all the time—I spotted a bloke sleeping on one of the benches. Even though his beard was gray and his clothes were wine-stained, I recognised him immediately. And I’m sure whoever reads this will already guess the outcome, but I will write it anyway, because it’s part of my glorious story.

The man on the bench was...it was my...I’m all choked up here...it was my dad’s former business associate and he knew exactly what happened to him all those years ago. It turned out there was no foul play involved, but rather, my father found a loophole in his business and was able to exploit it for millions of Eurodollars. It involved screwing over his business partner, a side effect of business, but it made him rich. When he disappeared and never came back, it wasn’t because he was in trouble, but because he moved to Tahiti without telling anyone. The knowledge that he was okay lifted a huge burden off my shoulders, and thus I decided the time was right to enact my plan for the duck. So I found a couple sheets of paper, wrote the note and the story—which I’m doing now—and in just a moment I will leave the duck on this park bench for the next bloke to share his happy moment.

So to whomever finds this duck, please remember to write your story when your tenure ends, so that the body following you can keep the continuity in line. And for the seventh person to find the duck, once you have your happy moment, please publish the story for the world to see. And with that, I will now squeeze the yellow rubber ducky one more time to say my goodbye and good luck. And no, I will not go looking for my

dad. He could've told us he was heading for the South Pacific. He didn't have to fake his own death.

### **The Present**

After Johnny finished each story, he squeezed the worn duck to allow its unchanging squeak to fill his ears. Although it was soft, the pitch was pleasant to him. The toy reminded him of a duck that he once had as a child.

As he continued to sit on the train trying to make his way home, he thought about the life he once had—the life he lived in childhood—then, removed a pen from his book bag and began to scribble on the last sheet of paper.

### **Johnny**

My name is Johnny and I found the duck while riding home from Oxford on a tube train. Even though the note tells me I have to wait until something amazing happens to write my story, I think it's better to do it now. Not to be a rebel or anything, it's just...now's the time.

When I was a small child, my grandfather gave me a rubber ducky for Christmas. He was my favourite grandparent, and I was his favourite grandson, and the two of us were inseparable. When he gave me that rubber ducky, he showed me how it squeaked, and told me about all the adventures it could share with me. I was excited. My grandfather gave me more than a toy that year; he gave me a new friend. And then, he died.

Heartbroken from the loss, I clutched my rubber ducky tighter than ever and vowed to never let it go. I was afraid that by losing it, I would lose the memory of my favourite grandfather, and I couldn't allow that. So I took the duck everywhere: to school, to church, to the pool, anywhere I could hold onto it. I even wrote my initials underneath the duck with permanent black marker to ensure it stayed mine.

Every year, I refreshed the duck with new ink to make sure the letters didn't fade, and did so until I was seventeen. But then, something awful happened. I was riding with my family down a road along the Thames when my brother swiped it from my possession and threatened to lose it. Since I was ten he made fun of me for carrying it around, but I never broke my stance to keep it. That duck was part of my lifeblood, and to tuck it away in a toy chest would've been like closing the prison doors over my heart. I stood up to his ridicule and carried my duck with pride.

So when he stole it from me that day, I panicked. When I demanded that he gave it back, he adamantly refused. I tried to wrestle him for it, but he got the better of me. Finally, when all hope seemed lost, he dropped the guillotine to finish me off. In one last effort to rid me of my crutch, my brother tossed the duck out the window. Although I tried to catch it, it slipped through my fingers, and disappeared into the world. I begged my parents to stop the car so I could go back and pick it up, but it was too late. It didn't hit the pavement like I had hoped. It flew into the river. As I looked out the back window with tears in my eyes and shoes in my brother's face, I watched as the rubber ducky I loved with all my heart floated out of my life.

For six years, I tried to get its memory out of my head, but it was maddening. I substituted my disillusionment with fake laughter, intense schoolwork, shallow friends and occasional alcohol. But I couldn't do it. I missed my duck. Two years ago I finally broke down and bought a new duck, but it wasn't the same. I ended up giving it to some kid who lived on my block. I didn't know him, but his parents loved me for giving him the stranger's toy—sarcasm implied. It didn't matter. I just coasted through life trying to make some sense out of the world. Then, one day I gathered up the nerve to pick a major and graduate. And that was recent. The whole thing felt like crumbs falling off a slice of bread, but somehow I made it—I felt hollow, but I made it.

I got on this train thinking that somehow I had to find happiness in a career next, but I just didn't feel like it. I wanted to go home, but I was scared. Truth was, I didn't know what I wanted to do. And that's when I found this duck—about ten minutes ago. The last thing in the world I ever expected was to find a duck on the floor of a tube train, but here it is in my lap, waiting to send off the tale of its journey. And I have to marvel, not because it reminds me of the duck I once had, but because it symbolises a part of my heart that was ripped away during a difficult age. And I am writing my story before it even gets started, because deep down I know that I have my happy ending. I don't think I need to explain that, either. Something about this story has to be sacred to the one who owns it and let's just say that you know enough.

### **The Present**

As Johnny finished writing his part of the letter, he removed a black marker from his bag and popped the cap. As the aroma of ink flooded his nose, he flipped the duck over to see the faded markings of two initials, the first a "J," the other a "G," and traced them both with the marker.



The stroke of his hand matched perfectly the shape of each letter and he smiled, because he knew, after a tremendous journey, his duck finally came home.

## **Short Story Commentaries**

Welcome back, friends. For those of you who popped open either *Nomadic Souls* or *Life Under Construction*, you will know that this section is a special place where I sit back and talk about the things that inspired me to write each of these nine short stories you just finished reading (most likely in multiple sittings). In my explanation, you will discover the processes of my thought, my purposes and rationale, my frequent madness, and my occasional insecurities. You will also discover, to some degree, why I thought these stories were important, or why I thought some of them were worth dangling over the trash bin. All of them have a special place, of course, for they're all part of a *Collection of Junk* family. But just like your siblings, they all have nuances that make them incomparable to another, and in some cases, reasons why they frustrate me. Having said that, feel free to take a peek at the behind-the-scenes explanations of these stories and find out why they look the way that they do.

### **Eleven Miles from Home**

This story actually began in the early part of 2001 while I was sitting at my desk at JFK Medical Center one lonely Thursday evening, doing...well, probably nothing. Okay, it might've been Thursday, it might've been Friday—the day of the week doesn't matter. What matters is the reason why I wrote it.

I wrote it because I was bored and needed something to do. I hadn't written a short story since the summer before, so I thought it was time to start a new one. The problem was that I had hit a season in life where I didn't really want to stick to anything for very long. I was so annoyed that my education at UCF had come to a halt that my brain just didn't care anymore. The desire was still in me, but the fire had burned out. So when I started this story, I wrote the first three pages; then shelved it for two years. There was enough in me to light the spark, but someone forgot to douse me with fuel. Little did I know this perpetual stall-out was about to become a common theme in my life—a theme that will be evident throughout the commentaries ahead.

The story initially began as an experimental piece. I was interested in the point of view of a guy who displayed himself as a complete jerk, so I thought I'd see what I could do with it. There was no clear purpose for the story yet, other than to establish voice. So I wrote the first three pages

(up to the whole “Jetskius Magnetismo” discussion) with nothing going for it but the character of Richard and his attitude toward Abby. I guess one could say that I wanted to try to figure out how he thought. I was also interested in the art of language, discovering new ways to say old lines. I wanted Richard to have a lyrical intelligence about him without necessarily having worldly experience. Then, I wanted to see how he would react to the disruption of a Jet Ski. Since I had my own slight fascinations about Jet Skis, I thought it would be interesting to translate that into a character. What I didn’t anticipate was that the Jet Ski would become the glue for the entire story.

And that brings relevance to the structure of the story. When I finished that “Jetskius Magnetismo” paragraph (or the one following about “Dude X”), I still thought the story would remain entirely in Richard’s head. I had no idea where to take it—realistically, the only cue I had was the title itself, which I wrote before writing the first paragraph (a common habit of mine). So with that deadly combo of having no fire in me, I saved the file to disk, brought it home and left it there for nearly two years unclear and untouched.

Other projects started and faltered along the way, but eventually, I decided to pick up on this again. That’s when I reached a decision to make it into a perspective-switch tale. I still wasn’t sure how I wanted to tackle the structure, but I knew both characters had to have their say, so I divided them up. Richard had his four pages; then Rachel had hers. At that point I discovered that Richard kept his story in the now (sort of), while Rachel kept hers in the past. That’s when I decided the story needed balance. So I tried to use the second half to mirror the first, with Richard living in the past and Rachel accepting the present.

This brought about a critical question: what’s the point of the story? A good writer will know his point long before he writes the first word, even though the execution won’t be known until after he writes the last. With this story, I didn’t have that. Like I said, it was experimental. Not only did it test the boundaries of language and point of view; it tested the boundaries of purpose. Could a good story come from zero plot? Could two characters living in narration, rather than in-the-moment action, carry a story from start to finish? Once I got to Rachel’s second block, I had to decide if it worked. Since she had to close the story out, I had to make sure it was worth it. To do that, the characters had to end in the same place.

That’s when I decided the two characters needed to make a complete switch. I wanted to make sure they stayed at odds (as far as the nature of their relationship went), but I wanted them to get there on a swing. As it

stood, Richard had to admit he was a jerk who lost a great thing (and consequently desired to give it a second go), and Rachel had to admit she was needy and just needed to let go once and for all. In the end, I think the lack of direction somehow found its place.

So that's the gist of "Eleven Miles from Home." It was entirely experimental, hard to edit and came about during a rough season of life. But somehow it worked, so I'm glad I can make it public now. I hope it was a good read.

### Uncomfortable

This is another one that started at JFK Medical Center on a long and boring night. I didn't have a story to tell at the time, short of the intrigue behind what happens when a comfort-seeker is forced to face off against his dream girl in an uncomfortable situation, but I did have an image I wanted to put into words: the image of a guy becoming too attached to his chair. Without much else to do, I started writing the scene involving the main character losing the battle of his outside desires (like popping popcorn) to his rapturous chair (an image, or sensation rather, that I took directly from *The Tick* in an episode called *The Tick vs. The Breadmaster*, where the blue superhero gets trapped inside a warm loaf of bread and finds himself sapped of the desire to break free). When the phone call rang, I knew it needed to be the catalyst to ultimately bring Gina Warren to Gordon's front door, but I didn't yet know how. And I didn't know for at least three years.

Yep, this is another one of those legendary false starts. I made it to the Jerry Springer scene before I shelved it for some browner pastures. I think by this point I was just depressed—I hated my job, couldn't get the girl I liked to want me, didn't know when the tide would turn, and simply wanted to fall into the leather recliner I had written about and disappear. With my attention distracted, I moved onto yet another short story (which you'll read about in just a moment), and falsely started that one, too. I also wrote this alongside some other projects, including some game reviews on an independent game-making site, a couple screenplay false starts (still unfinished as of this writing), a walkthrough of my own game I made a couple years earlier (both the game and the walkthrough still unfinished as of this writing), and a host of other things I had simply forgotten about. After having finished two volumes worth of writing a couple years earlier, I thought I had finally reached the end of my passion.

But it wasn't so. I was just depressed. As you can see, I had since finished the story...a month or two after I sent *Life Under Construction: The Collection of Junk Volume 2* to the printers.

The idea for the oil spill hit me during my second attempt to finish it. I passed the concept around with a couple people at work, at a restaurant this time (amazing how successful we writers can be in the career world, isn't it?) to figure out how exactly to tackle this story. By now, I had decided that Smithson was the villain, which I initially set up three years earlier, but didn't know how exactly he would play into the story. I also figured out that he was both a statutory rapist and an oil tycoon, but didn't know how to tie them both together. A guy from work helped me come up with the idea to move the oil company to Europe to make the drinking age thing work. The rest I had to give development credit to Wikipedia for all the resourceful articles it provided during my research (though I chose not to research the world of drunken sixteen-year-olds, since there probably isn't a vast listing for those, and because I really didn't want extensive knowledge of the subject). Through the search of oil industries, however, I learned that all great scandals involved tankers with twofold names, often with a region followed by an adjective; in this case, *Arctic Uncharted*. For this story, I was delighted to know that I could make up my own tanker—a neat bonus for us writer control freaks. So, with all of these little details coming together, I finally had a bond for bringing all the subplots into one grand epic.

Which introduces perspective. A story this long can suffice just fine from one character—novels do it all the time. The problem was that to properly unfold the story, I had to take the focus away from Gordon during key scenes. So that's why you had to read through five different viewpoints. Personally, I like this structure for what it achieves. Even though I still prefer a centralized character, which Gordon can only take that claim for his role with the chair (a good observer will tell you the story is about Frederick, not Gordon), I still find it intriguing to watch stories unfold through others' viewpoints. I think, once I started writing Captain Morgan's little block of text, I realized just how special this story was going to be to me. Makes me able to forgive myself for making it so incredibly long.

One interesting little tidbit: the flashback scene, where Frederick sets the classroom projector on fire, really happened. In my sophomore year at Lake Worth High (I think it was that year), a classmate in English thought it would be funny to stuff paper shreds into the projector vent; for what, I don't remember. Moments before the teacher walked in, a woman who had the misfortune of teaching us three years in a row (she

taught our Gifted program for the first two years, and became the eleventh grade English teacher the third, and was the iconic symbol behind my repeated statements that English teachers are cruel), the projector caught fire. Although the class saw the kid again, eventually, it wasn't for at least a week. I don't, however, remember seeing the projector again. And the English teacher was only occasionally in a good mood, so I don't remember when she started smiling again.

Another less interesting tidbit: the episode with the tap water was loosely based on my experiences in Orlando. The tap water there, no matter where in the city you go, tastes like sulfur. It is, by far, the worst thing one can drink short of sticking his face in a river or a toilet and sucking it down. Only a few places managed to get the vile taste out prior to dispensing, including the Fazoli's (an Italian fast food place specializing in spaghetti, subs, and double-slice pizzas) next to the University, and the water fountain in front of the workout room at Capistrano Condominium where I lived for a year. Both places saved me a lot of money on bottled water. During that season, I was also notorious for letting jugs of milk and orange juice go bad. So Gordon Knack got that circumstantial trait directly from me.

Gina Warren doesn't have a background in my life, even though I think it would be cool if she did. She essentially comes from the image I have of the perfect woman who not only isn't perfect, but turns out to eat people alive. Not that I like that type of girl, mind you—I prefer the humble ones—but there is something alluring about that type of character, dare I say even sexy? In the end, though, I think women as a whole intimidate me—not through nervousness, but because I don't understand a darn thing they do—so I thought it was only fitting that Gordon became intimidated, too. I know if I were in his shoes, I'd be sweating, too. Gina had to be the right girl to do the job. Plus, I had to see what it looked like when a character like her gets put in her place. Even though I like to see the righteous ones win, I also like to see the smug ones topple, so I had to offer a little bit of both with her. I think it was fair; she still got her story.

Well, if I had more to say about this story, I would, but I don't, so I won't. It took a long time to get it off the ground, but I'm quite happy with the results. Hopefully, you were, too.

## Shell Out

And here we are with yet another false start, this one surprisingly having two different forms: one which I'll discuss now, and one which I'll discuss when I get to the commentary on "Teenage American Dream." The one I'll discuss now, the one actually titled "Shell Out," started, once again, at JFK Medical Center—the place where false starts are born.

The idea for this story began with a nighttime call-in radio show on 97.9 WRMF, hosted by a primetime married couple who had to spend 24 hours a day with each other, which invited listeners to share their crazy stories with other listeners. On this particular night, the couple issued a discussion about the things people put on Ebay. Apparently, the woman DJ found a broken telephone selling for \$50, and was even more surprised to find that someone had actually bought it. So the example in odd behavior prompted them to invite listeners to share their Ebay stories on-air. The caller that caught my attention was the guy who claimed he sold his underwear on Ebay (which the DJs promptly scoffed, "Yeah right," and cut the guy off). I thought it was so brilliantly absurd that I had to write about it.

Unfortunately, that scene came long after my initial stall—this time I got as far as the Psychic Friends Hotline scene, or half of it, anyway—but I made sure to keep it in the back of my mind for the next two years (or three...I don't really know anymore), so as not to lose it when the time came to finish it. And though it didn't pan out exactly like I first envisioned it, it still did its job nicely, I thought. But that was the scene, or the image, rather, that initiated this story.

The Psychic Friends Hotline scene was another key scene that I had been itching to use, somewhere, for years, but had no place to put it. Sometime in the 90s, I had spent many hours watching late night television, just to be pelted with countless advertisements for various hotlines involving sex chats and psychic friends—usually not in the same commercial. Because I thought the psychics were a joke, I had to scoff whenever one came on. The commercials, regardless of who promoted it, were always the same: some male dancer or cleaning lady would stand on camera talking about the good fortune that the psychic predicted, usually in the form of financial or relational bliss, and the joy the caller had when it came true. My first thought, "Why don't these psychics ever predict grisly injuries? Why don't these male dancers and cleaning ladies ever come on camera in full body casts saying, 'I don't believe it; Kenny told me I'd be hit by a Mack truck very soon, and wouldn't you know it, it happened! Thank you, psychic friend.' " I saw it as a giant joke needing

some parody, so I kept the image tucked away for years, until this golden opportunity arose.

The development of the Psychic Friends Hotline took shape from something my uncle once told me. According to someone he knew who had worked for one of the hotlines, the “psychics” were trained to listen acutely. When someone called, the operator (we’ll call them what they really are) listened for details such as name, desire and whatever other keywords the caller unknowingly spat out, and reflected them back in a spin approach to make it sound like they were “predicting.” It’s a technique that politicians perfected long ago, and thanks to media marketing, the psychic entrepreneurs could use it, too. So that’s why Greg handles the call the way he does. He accepts the whole thing as one giant joke, much like I do.

The actual framework for the story—the whole thing about his constant shift into poverty—was an echo of my own financial misfortunes. Though, as anyone who knows me can tell you, I don’t worry much about income, I do recognize the cancerous feeling that a lack of progress can bring, and that was what I wanted to fictionalize with this tale. As I stated in my commentary for “Uncomfortable,” I was tired of waiting for my life to take off (and ironically, I’m still tired, as I’m still waiting—stinkin’ English degree), so I wanted to vent my frustrations through Greg’s haphazard attempts to make for himself a better life. Since ideas are better communicated through concrete images, I decided to model the computer game *The Sims* to make my point clear. In the game, you navigate the lives of these virtual people, trying to bring them up from an impoverished single life to a wealthy family life (through many “real life” factors). To make them wealthy, you basically buy more crap for their house as they advance up the career ladder. It’s a fun game. Since the game was fresh in my mind, I decided to take the same principle to give Greg’s futile ambitions some relevance.

Which brings us to Mandy. Part of the male struggle is not so much to furnish his apartment with nice toys, but to satisfy the woman he desires. Since the world, or Madison Avenue, equates manhood with high income, it makes sense that the man would think he needs these things to impress a girl. It doesn’t help, of course, when the woman confirms it by going after the daddy’s boy who drives a Porsche, rather than the unfortunate laborer who can only afford a Toyota (I’m stereotyping, obviously, but you understand my point). Psychologists say that the woman wants the self-sufficient man, and I believe that, but at what point does he become self-sufficient? Since the world skews everything beyond reasonable proportion, I thought Mandy would best serve the plot to take



the extreme end of it, to show just how ridiculous the world's mindset can be at times. This isn't to say that Greg would deserve any woman should he choose the road of the deadbeat, but that his desire to win one shouldn't be hampered by his lack of toys. I get a little annoyed when success, in general, is measured by how much crap one can fill his room with. Of course, that was more of a byproduct of the '80s than it is of the zips. Nowadays, an unemployed sweat-hog has as much of a chance getting the girl as the rich snob, so Greg's story is slightly outdated.

And yes, she is the same Mandy that we hear about early in the story. If you picked up on that, then congratulations: that's ten more points added to your score.

The last little detail, which probably means nothing to everyone but me, and maybe M. Knight Shyamalan, is that Greg's father's custodial job at the sports arena was a direct tribute to *Unbreakable*, starring Bruce Willis and Samuel L. Jackson. I really liked that movie for everything it was. If you haven't seen it, then rent it today, or the next time you go to the video store. It's worth it. Then again, I also liked *Underworld* and *The Matrix Revolutions*, so it's your call.

I think that's it. I'll talk a bit more about this during my commentary for "Teenage American Dream." Until then, I don't know, get a cookie or something. Or read on; that'll be good, too.

### When One Falls

In 2001, while I was still somewhat productive in making games for an independent gaming community (and reviewing other people's games), I volunteered to make an entry for a 48-hour contest in July. The contest, as it implies, was to design the best game one could produce within forty-eight hours. My entry came in at eleventh place—out of a possible eighteen.

The game, which I co-developed with my neighbor at the time (he made, or ripped—I'm not sure which, the battle graphics), was about a blonde woman who woke up in the middle of the desert with amnesia and a knife wound in her gut. After a lengthy introduction explaining her shock and confusion, a hyena attacks her, of which the player must defeat by throwing the bloody knife at the animal. From there, it goes on to tell the story of her trying to figure out who she is, why she had a knife wound in her gut, and how on earth she ended up in the desert. Through a journey of survival in the scorching wasteland, she finally happens across a chance for answers—a hideout within an oasis. I brought the story up

to the point where a mystery man reveals that he can uncover the mysteries of her lost memories, through a machine that can read her subconscious. It was a graphic disasterpiece called *Tightfloss Maiden*, a story with which I have every intention of novelizing (with a trilogy) some day soon, and loosely precedes a short story I wrote for *Nomadic Souls* called “Eve of Construction.”

There was so much to do with the story that I couldn’t possibly finish it within the 48-hour period, nor could I finish it in the five years to follow, so I committed to taking it beyond the initial design experience. After the contest, I decided to enhance the game with better graphics, niftier tricks (like allowing footprints in the sand to trail the girl, for example), and longer game time; and re-release it with bonus materials ranging from sound bytes, to posters, to tie-in short stories providing alternative possibilities to her mysterious identity. I had aptly called it *Tightfloss Maiden: The Candy Edition*. Five years later, I still haven’t finished my updates, nor did I finish the supplemental materials I had planned on releasing with it. And I certainly didn’t add more to the story.

“When One Falls” was originally written to supplement the *Tightfloss Maiden* story line. I started out writing four separate accounts of the woman’s possible identity, ranging from tribal warrior, to a princess, to a housewife, to something that I never started and can no longer remember. But after several false starts with each of those stories, I decided that none of them were going anywhere, so I scrapped them all, and started this one to replace them. And, naturally, this one had a false start, too.

But I liked the potential it had, so I kept it. Like the stories preceding this (the stories within this collection, not the alternative story lines for the game), I wrote a significant portion—five pages this time—but shelved it in favor of some other shiny object that crossed my path. And I left it alone until it was time to edit it for this book.

Originally, I started the story with the scene where Jackson is studying the picture. The problem with that, and ultimately the reason why it was so easy to shelve it, was that it didn’t allow me to come from anywhere, or take it anywhere. In a sense, all I had was a vignette piece, and who really wants to spend 4,000 words or more reading a vignette? So I had to write a new beginning. That’s where the Tarantino opening came into play. The rest, in retrospect, was easy to pull off.

To keep the video game mindset intact, I have to mention that most of the images in this story came from that gaming influence. There probably isn’t any point in mentioning the specific influences, because chances are you’ve never heard of them, and wouldn’t care one way or the other if you had, but each of them originated from the first-person

shooters I used to play. Though, none of them bore any story elements to this plot, they did affect the settings rather highly. The power station, in particular, was the first to take the influence, followed closely by the train station itself. The only one to break the trend was the power station's interior, which I took influence from *24 Season 4*. The rest, well, probably doesn't need commentary—and quite honestly, this probably didn't need one, either.

That's actually all there is to say about this one. There weren't any lessons to be learned, or any statements to be made. It was simply made to tie-in with another work. Fortunately, it has strong enough legs to stand on its own, where its predecessors, unfortunately, did not.

### When Cellphones Go Crazy

Unlike the first three stories written there (or started, rather), this originally had purpose within the confines of JFK Medical Center. First titled "When Pagers Go Crazy," I wrote this story with the intention of voicing my frustration over the frequency at which our on-call pager went off. Every night, I sat at my desk doing whatever I had to do, waiting for the printer to spit out an order (I tracked and supplied equipment around the facility). At any point I had to deliver an item, or carry out my rounds, I obviously had to leave my desk. Sometimes that meant letting an order sit in the printer for a few minutes. Sometimes that meant letting STAT orders sit in the printer for a few minutes. And it never failed: anytime those "emergency" orders came through the pipeline while I was away from the desk (emergency was a subjective label, by the way, for most of those "stat" orders ended up hanging out at the nursing stations for hours throughout the night), I would have to hear it from both the overhead page (which the operator was very good at doing) and the department pager (that screechy little thing I had to wear on my waist whenever I left the office). And sometimes the double-whammy wouldn't even wait for me to leave the office. Sometimes it went off while I was collecting the order from the printer, a foot away from the telephone. Often, it went off while I was on my lunch break—a curse to a man, for those who don't know. No matter how one might swing it, I hated that pager. One night, after I had inadvertently snapped the clip off from yanking it off my scrub pants too harshly, I decided this story had to be told.

And then, pager technology became obsolete.

Although I wanted to vent my frustrations over the annoyance of pagers, or more specifically, the neediness of the people who chronically

blitzed them, I had another idea to tack onto it. What happens when a psychologist goes crazy? Interesting question, indeed.

Except that a counselor friend of mine informed me that psychologists go through a psychological scan before getting their positions, and thus the idea was implausible. So now I had two things weighing against the relevance of this story. Figures it was the one story I managed to finish the first time through.

As it stood, I had to change some elements of the story to make it work. I actually considered scrapping it entirely, but I liked the idea of sending a guy through a mythology-themed grocery store, so I changed the unfit details. The psychologist, originally named Ward, transformed into a psychology student named Avery to bypass the discrepancy over the psychological evaluation. The pager, laterally, transformed into a cellphone to keep intact with the current trends in technology. With these two changes in effect, I had to alter the nature of the phone calls from a nervous client to that of the nervous friend. Unfortunately, the switch lessened the urgency of Ward's (now Avery's) mandatory decision to answer the call, but the ethical dilemma remains in place.

The story itself, now a critique of people's unrelenting dependence on cellphones, began as a tale of a psychologist turned stalker—the original opening showed Ward taking a taxicab to the girl's apartment (which I'll use for something else someday), a girl with whom he hadn't met previously at a party. But with the change in main characters, I decided to take that whole thread away, which gives our new protagonist a little more sympathy over his situation—I think—so now we get to see the hopeless romantic fail at meeting the girl. I added the party background to give the guy a better reason for pursuing her. As it stands, chasing a girl around a grocery store because she looks good is not only shallow; it's disturbing. I don't really like taking my characters down that road if it doesn't contradict a stereotype, so I scrapped that whole element. I think the story is funnier now anyway.

The only other grand tidbit is that it was the first (as far as I can remember) to go the extra mile in detailing a scene. Not only did I give more attention to the settings than I did in past stories, but I tried to spin them in more interesting ways. The results led me to take all my rewrites to a new level (which readers of the first two volumes can see firsthand, since they were revised after this story was first written). Unfortunately, that level had branded me as an overwriter, so I had since forced myself to pare it back again. It's thanks to this story, and that of the rewrites of the first two volumes, that I have to rewrite everything yet again. Not for a couple more years, though, but someday, maybe in 2008.

Just for the record, I still hate cellphones. I hate that friends will take them to lunch and answer them while I'm trying to converse with them. I hate that people will ignore me while I'm trying to talk to them (while they're sitting at a table, on my time), just to give their cellphone its precious moments. I also hate that technology is so ill-content that it has to add new features every day, just to keep its users happy. At what point was it no longer acceptable to be reached only at home? As far as I'm concerned, the only good thing about a cellphone is that I have a means to call a tow truck when my car breaks down in the middle of nowhere, assuming I'm near a communications tower to relay that call.

Well, that's the interesting stuff about this story.

### **Teenage American Dream**

As I said a few comments back, this story spawned from a secondary version of "Shell Out." In 2003, I decided to give a legitimate novel a try. Although I played with the novel format a couple times in high school, neither effort really showed anything substantial. Now that I was older, wiser, and a bit more dedicated, however, I thought the time had come to give novel writing a serious shot. The best idea I had at the time was to novelize the "Shell Out" story.

Which meant I had to plan an outline. Normally, a good writer will figure out his characters before he figures out his plot. I didn't really do that. I just took experiences I had in Orlando a few years earlier (real and contrived) and put them into story format; the central focus being that the guy had a hard time finishing school, because he couldn't hold back the tide of debt. To this day, I never got past Chapter One.

The story had two main focuses: the first being the challenge of getting through school, the second being the challenge of getting the girl. To get the school, he needed money. To get the girl, he had to first compete against her for a position with the Dr. Phil show, and then prove he was still worth the effort to get to know. Since I had no idea how to get him on the Dr. Phil show (I don't exactly have that much clout to find out, either), I scrapped the idea until a better time in my life would prove that I could get the answer.

Since the novel was about the main character's rise and fall through the financial spectrum, each chapter was supposed to open with his current bank balance displayed. But to make either the bank balance or the chapter format work, there had to be a first chapter. This story, the "Teenage American Dream" was that first chapter.

In actuality, calling it the first chapter would be inaccurate. The legitimate first chapter started Eric off at a bank, trying to get a loan for school. This chapter was actually the introduction, a pre-chapter that produced the foundation for his eagerness to pursue the American Dream. With thirty-five dollars in his pocket—according to the introduction’s opening title—he set off to learn exactly what it meant to be a success. The introduction ended while he was still at home.

Since I decided later that the novel (still with only one chapter) didn’t need an introduction, I had to find a new home for the passage. That’s when I decided to make it into a standalone story, with its own title and its own purpose to supplement it. Fast forward three years later, and that’s when I finally tacked on its ending—the whole sequence covering Eric’s next day at school. Somehow, a philosophical debate surfaced in its execution, a debate that may or may not make my high school English teacher proud. In any case, I’m happy with the outcome. Oh, and I’m not a big fan of Burger King, either.

### **The Narrow Bridge**

I thought of this story while I was gathering equipment from the soiled utility rooms of the hospital one lonely Sunday night after midnight. Obviously, I was in no position to write it that moment, as I was currently on the fourth floor with a huge metal cart full of IV pumps in tow. But I retained the concept for two years until the day came that I was ready to write it.

Jump ahead to the summer of 2003, and meet me at the place where the story became urgent. My department’s contract was coming to an end—finally. We knew the day was coming for four months, but no one gave us a straight answer about when exactly. We treated each week from February on as if it were our last, and finally got that confirmation the first week of June. Being that it was going to be my last time working there, I had to get my mini-collection ready as soon as possible. And I wanted “The Narrow Bridge” to be in that collection.

It was a mess, but I managed to finish it before my last day of work. The night before I left, I bound this, along with several other stories (including “Eleven Miles from Home”), in a series of folders that I gave to friends and coworkers. And that was the last that most of them had seen of my stuff. To this day, I don’t know what they thought of this story, or of any of the other stories I had written, but I was glad to finally show them how I had spent my free time. And it came at the price of a Surgical

Services supervisor's electric hole puncher. After fifteen hundred sheets of paper, it couldn't take anymore abuse. Ironically, that same Surgical Services supervisor interviewed me for a Gallup Poll a couple months later and told me, indirectly, that JFK wouldn't be taking me back, because they didn't think I'd like my job (a job I had already done quite well for three years). It was no loss, though, since I left South Florida the following month. Plus, they would've been right about me, anyway, had I taken it.

Anyway, the concept for the story spawned from a diagram that InterVarsity Christian Fellowship produced (or borrowed; I'm not sure which) that shows two cliffs separated by a vast canyon: the left cliff being the world of men and the right cliff being God and Heaven, and a cross spanning the gap. The metaphor, for those unfamiliar with Christian teachings, is that God wants man to meet Him in Heaven, but the gap of sin prevents man from crossing over. Christ, the Son of God and blameless in His sight, therefore, died on the cross because God so loved us, that our sins might be forgiven (or the gap might be nullified), so that we would be able to traverse the void into Heaven. John 3:16-17 in the Bible (the map) explains this far better than I just did, but the basic gist is that there is no entry into Heaven without first trusting in Christ. The purpose of the "Bridge Diagram," then, is to show this, and the purpose of "The Narrow Bridge" is to make an allegory of it.

The structure of the story was always meant to play as "Christian Mythology." In other words, I wanted a mythical, though allegorical tale, much like *The Chronicles of Narnia*, to set its backdrop. Certainly, I could've just jumped right to the climax where all the people are diving into the ravine—that was, after all, the first thing I thought about when I was hauling all those IV pumps around a couple years earlier, and the only part of the story that really needed to be told. But I wanted a framework modeling the persecutions that those of us committed to this journey face, and the temptations we deal with whenever the forests get hot or the valleys reach up to our necks in floodwaters, to give the relief of the bridge some real strength. Even though the narrow bridge (the trusting in Jesus) is the only way across the gap (the only way to stay out of the pit), and taking it is so freakin' easy that's it's stupid not to, it's still a challenge to endure the pressures of the Storm (the flesh, Satan, etc.), and taking the bridge is truly like taking a treasure. So that's why the story had such a long opening. I wanted to show what the bridge ultimately takes people away from, should they choose to take it.

I realize this is potentially one of the harder stories to follow in this book, or in any of my books for that matter, because it is unconventional,

and mildly fantastical. But I don't apologize for that. Every line is supposed to mean something, and every line has its place, so it is what it is. The important thing, to me, is that its message is clear. I'm not trying to tell a measly story (not that I ever am), but I'm trying to illustrate a truth that I've come to know as truth. As far as I know, it works. Though, I'm sure if it doesn't, I'll hear about it. And then, I'll fix it.

I don't actually have anything else to say about it. It's not the kind of story that needs much explanation. Even though it's told like a mythological tale, its point is very clear, very straightforward and very easy to follow. No one can get across the gap without Christ's help. How hard is that to understand?

So that's the background behind "The Narrow Bridge."

### Waterfall Junction

This piece was planned, initially, to be the last part of the short story section for *Seven-Side Dice: The Collection of Junk Volume 3*, after "The Narrow Bridge" had lost that bid. But it didn't end up that way. More on that, shortly.

Like the story before it, I wanted a mythological tale to make my point of morality clear. In this case, I wanted to retell the story of Abraham's faith in God to give to him the nation that He had promised him. For those unaware, toward the end of Genesis we learn of the story of an old man (with an old wife) whom God chooses to build a nation from. The old man is already older than most of our grandparents are; his wife hasn't been on a cycle—menstrual or otherwise—in decades; and he has no kids, so clearly this is an absurd claim to him. But being that it came from God, he thought it must be true.

So he took matters into his own hands: he impregnated his wife's servant. Yay, Abraham (or Abram as he was known back in those early days). Now he had a child (albeit a bastard child) to build his nation. He called him Ishmael.

Fast forward thirteen years, and Abraham gets egg on his face. His faithful wife, of God knows how long, conceives—at 90!!! What? 90!!! Abraham must've been shocked. When God said He intended to build a nation through Abraham, through his legitimate bloodline, He meant it. What was he going to tell Ishmael?

Isaac, the child that God promised, was born nine months later as a bouncing baby boy (as many of us are also born, ironically), and couldn't have made his hundred-year-old papa more proud. As the child gained a



few years, becoming more aware of the world around him (not in a rebellious teenager sort of way, but the precocious four-year-old kind of way—or however old he was at the time), he started hanging out with his dad.

And that's when God threw a test at Abraham—the test of all tests.

Leading up to this story, God challenged Abraham on a number of faith issues, prime of which was his response to having kids. Marriage was as sacred then as it is now (yes, folks, marriage is still sacred, so stop wrecking them), and so was the principle of keeping one's seed with his wife alone. By Abraham's taking matter into his own hands (sleeping with the maidservant for those who forgot), he created a nation all right, but not the one God had promised him. He created the one that would lock into an everlasting war with the promised nation. Look at all the troubles today, and you'll know which two nations he sired—one nation being the original planned number.

Obviously, when Sarah, his wife, became pregnant (at 90!!!), he saw the error of his ways. God tested him, he failed, God tested him again, he failed, God tested him again, he started learning, God tested him again, and we see this event unfold:

Abraham and Isaac went up a mountain. Isaac thought they were looking for lambs. Abraham knew better. God issued a command, one that Abraham didn't understand, but trusted God about anyway. That command: to sacrifice Isaac on the altar. "What? After Sarah pushed that kid out of her ninety-year-old womb, You want me to sacrifice him?" That was probably the thought that would've gone through most of our heads, had we been in that situation. But Abraham stopped questioning God. It didn't make sense—how else would he build this nation? Through another child? It didn't matter; that was the command. So Abraham took his son up the mountain to obey God, trusting that He had His reasons. It wasn't until Abraham put his son on the altar, put the dagger over his head, and his son probably thinking, "Dad, is this a joke?" before God said, "Enough."

Abraham said, "What?"

God said, "Take him down. Through your faith I will now multiply your seed like the stars in heaven."

All of this paraphrased, of course. For the full story, read the second half of Genesis.

"Waterfall Junction" takes the same principle of God testing man to purify him, to make him able to handle the blessings that are promised or just plain given to him. The setting, I think, was just a product of me being unable to get the image of *The Two Towers* out of my head. There

wasn't really any other purpose for this story, but to show obedience, and to show it in a fantastical setting. I know that God tests me in my faith all the time (I finished college on that same scale of faith—I left home without a job or much of a savings, and He still provided the means for me to finish), so I wanted to tell a story that visualizes it, while reminding me that future uncertainties will still require my obedience to God. It'll be hard for me to forget now.

Another small tidbit: in the original ending, I had the knight's soldiers refer to him as Dalowin the Lemming, but scrapped it when I realized it would've been inappropriate for the mood. Also, I planned on sending him down four waterfalls, but changed it to three when a friend of mine told me that sometimes it's better that the writer "gets to the point."

And that's all. I hope you liked it.

### **The Celebration of Johnny's Yellow Rubber Duck**

Okay, this became the last short story of Volume 3 after an unwritten challenge had been issued to me over the summer this year (2006). During the development of "Waterfall Junction," I had written some letters to a friend, letters with content that somehow got interpreted as depression, lack of cheer, or something that was missing a smile. The exact comment that triggered me was one that suggested that I laugh more—that I really try to laugh (which was said because the friend hadn't seen me really laugh). Although I appreciated the friend's concern, I thought it was a grand misjudgment of me. The truth was that I laughed often; I just had a hard time showing it to people who didn't see me in person very often.

Because I felt like I had to justify myself—and why any of us feel like that, I'll never know—I decided to write a story to prove my humor. Sure, I had plenty of things to represent my sense of comedy. Anyone who's read or seen anything involving Powerstick Man (my superhero parody character), will know just how deep of a sense of humor I can have. But because I wanted this person to see that humor—through justification or pride, not sure which—I decided to write a story to adequately display it. And this was that story. The intro alone was supposed to display my laughs.

I chose to write about the rubber duck, because it's the prime symbol of childhood. Though not all of us have grown up with such a toy (I seem to recall that I was one of the unfortunate ones to be without a duck), all of us remember what it meant to others (most likely through the

Burt and Ernie segments of *Sesame Street*). Naturally, the prime symbol of childhood had to play the role of Johnny's crutch—a device that transported him back to a time when his grandfather still lived—so I gave him a duck.

But why make him so attached to the duck? When children grow into teenagers, they leave their toys behind—no matter who gave it to them. So why does Johnny hold on? Because I hold on.

Packrats are one thing; dependents are another. I tend to be a little of both. I have a hard time going through my mail, because I have a hard time throwing stuff out. It takes me months just to delete my junk mail from my email. I still have the toys I played with when I was eight setting in a box in my attic. Why? Because somehow those things branded into my identity. To get rid of them now would mean getting rid of history.

The rubber duck is a symbol of that. It goes on its journey, because, though it's an inanimate object, it has personality. Because it has personality, it has identity. Because it has identity, it can have an adventure; much like the gnome from *Amélie* that the story first refers to. It's the same idea that drives me to intrigue when hurricanes form. Because they have names, to me they have identities. Anyone who has shared a name with a bad storm can agree, since those same people tend to tug at their collars with pride when they know they share a name with a weather event that made history.

And, ultimately, that's why I had to bring the duck back to Johnny. To him, losing the duck was like losing his grandfather all over again, so to bring it back was like giving him a chance to restore his lost family. As far as I know, people still think this is sweet. Either they're as crazy as I am, or there's some validity to this thought.

So that's the story behind the charm. The structure of the letters seemed like the best way to put the duck on an adventure (after all, it can't tell us its adventure itself, because it can't talk—it's still an inanimate object), and the location brought the whole *Amélie* feel back into play for me. Plus, I just think Europe is far more intriguing than South Florida, and I'd rather read a story that fascinates me. Of course, I've never been to Europe, so Wikipedia had to step in and assist me with most of the content. But the experience brought me to really like that website now. All aspiring writers and researchers need to pay it a visit.

And, just for the record, I tried to keep all the characters' nationalities in mind when writing the letters. So if you stumbled across a misspelled word, make sure it's really misspelled before you assume I can't spell. And if it turns out that I can't spell, please tell me so I can fix my

mistakes. I'm not completely learned of British writing habits, so I probably missed something somewhere.

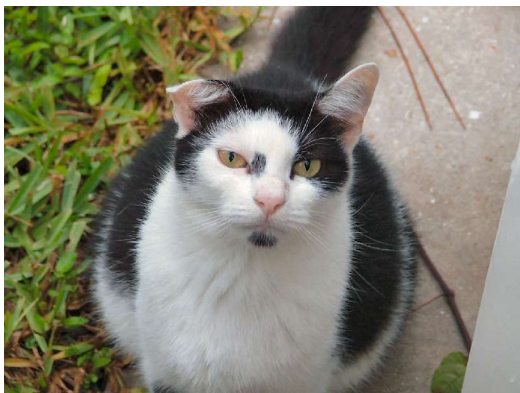
### **In Conclusion:**

Well, I, like you, am tired of looking at this segment. It was a long haul, certainly, even longer than the last book, if such a thing is possible. But, thankfully, it's over now. Now you can freely move to a new section—a place filled with works of Flash Fiction—a series of stories much like what you just read, but considerably shorter and punchier. You'll see what I mean when you get there. Anyhow, thanks for sticking through this adventurous jaunt, and for the support you gave when you savored each line. I hope your dreams are now effectively filled with Jet Skiers, oil tycoons, Psychic Friends and hormonal teenagers, as you wait for a new day to begin.

—Jeremy



**Sniffy (top) and Nova (bottom)**





## **Flash Fiction**

A Moonless Night Over Julie's Video Store

The Fountain of Truth

The Evil Clone of Michael Keaton

Nosing the Edge of the Plummet

Coffee Grande

Fruity Attractive

Corporate Irony

Blue-Haired Anime Fighter

Energy Wrappers

Pieces of Fred

Sculpture





## Introduction

I know what you're thinking: the best part about getting through the Short Story section of a collective is that you don't have to read them anymore. Two hundred pages worth of words (and then some) can be overwhelming, especially if you hate to read and are doing this out of obligation (and if you're doing this out of obligation, then I think it's fair to let you know that none of these works are canonized, and thus, someone lied to you). Fortunately, this section is less daunting with fewer pages and shallower characters, and thus, the time spent reading these should become less involved. For those who have to juggle work, school, friends, family, church, dinner and volleyball in the course of a single day, this is definitely the easier section to handle.

So what then can you expect from the Flash Fiction section of a collective? If I were any more ambiguous than I tend to be in real life, I might tell you to read on and find out. But then, this wouldn't be much of an introduction, so I won't be a jerk like that. What I'll tell you, instead, is that this section represents the collective of smaller works, works that span a range of 2,500 words or fewer. These are too short to feature as short stories and too prosaic to feature as poems. Therefore, the content to follow shall appeal to anyone wanting to escape reality, without demanding extensive focus from those who have short attention spans. One might call this the perfect section.

In the last two volumes (*Nomadic Souls* and *Life Under Construction*), I littered the Flash Fiction sections with writing exercises I did in college. This volume is predominantly absent of that. With the exception of the final two pieces, everything here is entirely independent of that old life. This should hopefully garner more appreciation for the segment as a whole, though I suppose liking the stories would do better to assist that affair. Either way, this volume presents the strongest lineup in my opinion, so hopefully you'll enjoy it.

As usual, a short commentary for each work will follow the last story, so be sure to read them if you're the slightest bit interested in how these stories came about. Think of it as a DVD bonus feature in paperback format. Enjoy, and don't let the bomb shape of the title page fool you. These don't suck.

—Jeremy

## *A Moonless Night Over Julie's Video Store*

They told me never to go down Mission Avenue, a side street off Legend Boulevard. There wasn't an explanation; they just gave me the stern warning that ended, "for nothing good ever came from traveling Mission Avenue." I always thought they were full of it, though I never questioned why they'd say it. Being the lip-service artist I was, I entertained them anyway, writing their warning into my journal. My heart told me they offered a bunch of words without substance, but I just wanted them to leave me alone. When I closed my book, I pushed it out of mind.

It was eleven to midnight when I took that late night stroll through Legend Boulevard to gather my thoughts, writing down relevant notes for my next story. I had already spent many nights worrying about my future, so I needed this night to get my head together. In the end, I hoped that after my journey I'd have it all figured out, somehow.

I carried a thick portfolio binder under my arm, thinking of parked cars and quiet things—anything worth filling the few remaining empty sheets of paper inside. I also started on the south end and walked north, passing one street after the next, looking inward to find possible subjects to write about. Every avenue I crossed partook of the same resonance: stillness, slumber and the periodic street lamp. So far it was unproductive.

The air was also cold—not frigid, but chilly. Since I didn't plan ahead, I disembarked in a T-shirt without a jacket. Even though the chill was tolerable, I still found it uncomfortable. To keep my mind off the weather, however, I resolved to write down anything I saw that interested me.

My binder was my life. Everything I wrote in the last two years made its way inside, showcasing talents, as much as preserving ideas. It never left my side. Without it I felt malnourished, inadequate and even naked. It stood by me even when my thoughts didn't. Any time I struggled to resolve a plot line or discover the best hook for a situation, I flipped through the pages to see what I could find. Whenever there wasn't anything there, I went into the world to uncover the answer. If the solution hit me, then it made its way into the binder. The cycle became my crutch.

Unfortunately, tonight I couldn't fill it. For nearly twenty minutes, I walked without finding anything worth recording. It was the repeat of a pattern I dealt with for many weeks now. I had spent an entire month trying to discover the point of my next story, but my research failed to produce new ideas. Just like the previous month, everything I could

dispose to uncover the hero's conflict had already been used and wouldn't keep the momentum a second time around.

Something new had to spark my imagination.

In my first few minutes, I figured each street as lifeless as all appeared, but I supposed that was the nature of the evening. It was cold, the moon was absent and I couldn't hear anything but my own footsteps. I hoped for at least a flash of light to shine down from one of the empty side roads to break the monotony, even if it came from an automobile's headlights. But nothing happened; my footsteps remained the center of attention. Even though I could see the shadows of trees waving back and forth through the dull breeze, I had to squint to see the smaller objects parked along the asphalt below. It seemed to me that I wasted my night.

But finally, as I approached the end of Legend Boulevard, I saw some diversity up ahead. There was a tiny strip mall—if that—edging the corner of the intersection. There wasn't much going on, as far as I could tell, but it was lit. I wasn't sure what it had to offer since I only saw it from behind, but it looked to have a convenience store in the mix. In any case, it drew out my curiosity.

About a block before reaching the strip mall, I found a spark of life down a side street to the right. It was actually the last street before reaching the strip mall/convenience store/mystery building, which dragged out my journey to the last possible minute. Cars were parked along the curb and the street lamps illuminated the bowels of the road rather nicely. Even though there was still something remarkably quiet about it, it was visible, and that was the important thing.

As I looked deeper into the depths of the street, without actually entering, I saw a unit shop brightly lit, more so than anything else in my immediate view. This radiance absorbed much of my attention, so much that for a moment I tossed a mental block against everything else.

I took a few steps past the curb to get a better look. A few proved not enough, however, so I took more. Finally, after a short walk into the side street, I saw the store clearly.

It was a video shop standing independent of its immediate neighbors. On the front, it had a large glass window displaying its contents—a number of displays carrying an assortment of video and DVD selections, which a video store would undoubtedly have. The interior walls, through the glass, were also yellow, making the emanating lights seemingly brighter than they truly were. The ceiling, to fit in with the flashy theme, held a series of bulb lights flashing like the rim of a UFO, intimidating any denizen of darkness that might pass through the area.

After absorbing all the illuminants I felt I could handle, I looked up to see the red store sign, brightly lit over the lip of the roof. It read: "Julie's Video Store." I thought it was catchy.

The standalone building seemed abandoned at first, but then, I noticed some people milling about. It looked as though they were in their own little world, though I couldn't tell. They scanned the back of boxes like they were absorbing information for their own health—reading every little word, studying every little picture—and then returned the boxes to the shelf. It was as if they started an entertainment diet.

Even though it was late and I felt the world slip into translucence, I thought it worthwhile to take a look inside—from the inside. I had been to video stores periodically before, but never this one, so I had to see how this was different.

But then, I noticed all the activity around me. I didn't know why I blocked it out before, but crowds of people walked up and down the street—many of them wearing brightly colored costumes. Vendors maintained hot dog stands and jewelry carts in the middle of the strip, while patrons perused the contents of the shops. Some of the more colorful pedestrians twirled glow-sticks and neon necklaces about as they strolled by, dancing to some unheard music. Laughter echoed from all over the place, as the traveler squalls passed by the brick buildings on the asphalt walkway.

Next thing I knew, my attention to the store diverted to the depths of the street, where the origin of life poured from its source. Curious to discover the start point of congestion, I pushed past the oncoming traffic that flowed briskly down the walk. Music floated through the air, as jazz and techno-rave collided, mixing with the smell of pretzels and cooked meat. People with purple hair and multiple body piercings glided around, as if floating on an invisible cloud—some strolling, while others slam danced against each other.

Getting to the end was a challenge, but to the end I managed to get. And what I saw was both very like and very unlike the rest of the street. The lights were dim and the crowds were thin, but a huge campfire raged in the middle of a courtyard. The walls surrounding the cul-de-sac's end were of dark brown brick—each covered with gang-style graffiti, but tastefully so. No one seemed to give it notice; most of them were strangely affixed to the campfire. I didn't see marshmallows burning or anything, but there was certainly a fair amount of people dancing around it. These people hopped on one foot and shook their hands in the air; none speaking a word—no song lyrics or chants—just a moderate group of alternative mimes performing a fake tribal dance.

At this point, I believed I ventured to the wrong place. I prepared to head back. I figured the sudden change from having nothing to write about to having too much was culture shock beyond what I wanted, so returning to the quiet world was heavenbound. But then, I saw a child wandering around the corner with his father standing nearby. From this I sensed normalcy, so I decided to stay longer.

The father appeared to want the child's attention, but the child ignored him. So, taking the father's unbidden cue, I tried to intervene. But the child didn't offer me a chance. Instead, he passed through a gap in a broken section of wall where the back and right sides adjoined. The father hurried after him.

I stood a moment wondering what to do. It was late and I was overwhelmed, but since I already ventured off my course—I planned on only walking from one end of Legend Boulevard to the other—I thought a little more exploration couldn't hurt. So, curious to see what was beyond the gap, I followed the man and his child through the wall.

Only, when I passed through the hole, I didn't see anyone. In fact, everything went silent. All the music and laughter faded. The presence of human life vanished. I searched for something to grasp, but could only see a dark, bluish wasteland. The rocky field stretched for miles, with not even a howl of wind giving it life. It was chilly and lonely—introducing so much instantaneous dread inside, that I didn't believe it possible to endure another moment gazing upon it.

And then, the silence broke. When I looked up, I saw the moon finally, which had been absent until now, hovering ominously like a searchlight around me, illuminating the land before my eyes. And a creature far beyond my scope of vision cried out, howling its hunger to the sky. The sudden shift from melancholy to cold fear drew up my cue to leave.

I darted through the gap to see the punk dancers hopping around the fire, but didn't hang around long enough to join them. This place unsettled me. I had to leave.

Hurriedly, I walked down the sidewalk, passing by loads of colorful wild men and women, each unnerving me more than the one before. From there, I scurried past the vendors calling me out to buy their strange meats and jewelry, each getting into my face. When I finally reached Julie's Video Store, the light inside grew dull and the people slowed to a crawl, but the crowds outside got rowdier and rowdier. At this point, I picked up enough speed to blow out through the front of the street, though parked blue cars got in my way. It was an obstacle course by

every measure, but I didn't let it stop me. With my heart racing, I reached the edge of the curb in a flash.

When I caught my breath, the unthinkable happened. A tremendous gust of wind blew from the avenue over the parked cars, passing over me with enough fierceness to rip my binder from my hands. Before I could blink fast enough to capture the image of my nightmare coming true, all my papers ripped away and scattered in the wind.

When the gale finally stopped and my binder hit the ground, no sheets of paper remained. Everything I had written vanished.

By reflex, I fell to my knees. My heart also might've stopped—I couldn't tell.

A short time thereafter, I returned to my feet, rubbing my eyes. When the silent world returned to focus, I picked up my empty binder and dusted it off, silently weeping. After cleaning it, I looked back to see the street behind me dark and abandoned. It looked as though it had been asleep all night. I also noticed, for the first time, the little green sign on the curb that labeled the street, displaying in white letters: "Mission Ave." My heart thumped.

A moment later, I scanned the area for any remaining sheets of paper to salvage, but all had gotten away. After several more minutes of frivolous hunting, I gave up and headed back for home. There wasn't anything else I could do out here.

When I finally returned home, I immediately began refilling my binder, starting with the material most fresh in my mind. The very first thing I wrote was the warning I should've heeded from the beginning. "Never go down the first street on Legend Boulevard for nothing good ever came from traveling Mission Avenue." From that point, I began writing my story: a story that began with a warning.

## THE FOUNTAIN OF TRUTH

The Kingdom Affair restaurant in the upper section of town was world renown for its ritzy atmosphere, its genteel clientele and its popularity among holidays. Established from the skeleton of an old ballroom at the base of a glamorous hotel, the restaurant developed a style of high-class living that rivaled the aristocracy, wealth and social gatherings of the posh sort. It was the perfect locale to usher in the Rolls Royce of façades when the name of saving face was in order.

For this wealthy establishment, Christmas Eve was regarded as the busiest night of the year. On this eve of holidays, families and cohorts of the upper class persuasion dined to their hearts' content, laughing and chatting over things that bore little significance to their lives. Dominating conversational topics ranged from pools, to spas, to Mercedes automobiles—all delivered through smiles that masked what people truly thought of the world. It was colorful bliss of the richest kind.

But on this particular Christmas Eve, something remarkable happened. All across the restaurant, from one wall to the other, from the big room to the private one, the façade somehow fell. Families and friends abandoned their discussions of plastic surgery and million-dollar homes to speak of life in its true color. Those who were sobered were stunned. "How dare they speak their mind?" they thought, as sincerity erupted from out of nowhere.

The first sign of this Christmas miracle began with a table of eight—four men, four women—all wearing thousand-dollar outfits and million-dollar smiles. They had just taken their seats, the drinks had already arrived and the hors d'oeuvres were on its way when the first break in conversation occurred.

"And the Jaguar drives like a dream," laughed the first man, a frail gray-haired chap of about seventy. "I haven't been so happy since I got my latest Botox injection."

He took a sip of his soft drink, which he ordered to keep from mixing his medication with alcohol.

"But then, what's a Botox injection," he continued, "but to mask my decrepit state and inability to compete with the young men of today?"

The rest of the table gasped with astonishment. Where did this insult to the miracle of plastics come from? The old man next to him "tsked" his tongue.

"What kind of question is that?" he said. "Botox gave me new life."

He took a sip of his own soft drink.

"A new life," he continued, "to show me how discouraged I was with my old life...a life spent with a woman I never loved, who grew old on me ten years into marriage and was no longer the trophy I was proud of."

The woman next to him gasped with angry surprise.

"Trophy wife?" she said. "Is that what I've been to you for forty years? A trophy wife? I loved you with all my heart and this is how you repay me?"

She took a sip of her own soft drink to clear her rapidly drying throat.

"I mean, I lied to you night and day so you wouldn't divorce me and kick me out of your will. Do you realize how much I endured to pretend my love was real so I could have all your money? I put up with your bad breath and your smelly feet for forty years, because I wanted to be rich, and now you have the nerve to call me a trophy wife? How dare you?"

And that wasn't the only place this miracle unfolded. On the other side of the restaurant, in a broader space, a family of three shared a table, awaiting the arrival of their prime steak dinners. The father, a young strapping man in his mid-thirties, the mother, a young beautiful woman made of diamonds and pearls, and the ten-year-old boy made of oatmeal and cookie dough, all sat around with soft drinks in hand, discussing the wonderful day they were about to have.

"You're gonna love all your toys," said the father to the son, with such glorious pride that his smile flashed halfway across the room. "I don't want to tell you everything I bought, but I promise it will be grander than last year's big one hundred."

The father took a sip of his soft drink.

"Because," he continued, "I don't want to show you just how inadequate of a father I am, so I have to do my part to buy your love, which I know I can't do, because I'm shaping you into a young spoiled brat, but I don't want to take the time away from my business to be with you, so I figure that buying all these toys will hide my guilt, and that your mother will think I'm a good father and in turn respect me, which I know deep down she doesn't, because I hear her muttering unsavory things at night in her sleep, but that's okay, because I know I can buy her love, too, as long as I keep the fine jewelry coming."

And again, the table gasped, but this time the young impressionable heart and the soft, yet jewelry covered woman both sobbed at the revelation that things weren't what they seemed and that façades had taken control.

Eventually, the young mother, after taking several sips of her own soft drink, finally said, "Maybe we need help."



Restaurant staff members—always keen observers of the way high society operated within those walls—were astonished at all the truth unfolding before them. Table after table swept up in rages, while others floated off in a stream of tears. Meals were sent back as steaks and pork chops went uneaten from lost appetites or had just gotten cold from being unattended for so long. Drinks continued to arrive, because throats kept running dry from all the shouting, but the truths didn't stop and the hearts kept exploding. When the head chef finally asked if anything environmental had changed to cause this outburst of reality, one server by the name of Valiant spoke up with bright eyes and steady demeanor.

"I thought the greatest gift I could give these people," he said, "was the gift of truth. So I injected the soft drink syrup with a vial of serum I bought from the mall, and now every guest has consumed it unknowingly. Even though I've ruined Christmas for most of them, I delivered them from their phony existence, and now they can live truthfully again."

As the head chef looked at him with astonishment, Valiant took another sip of his favorite soft drink, which he had forgotten that he tampered with just ten minutes earlier.

## **THE EVIL CLONE OF MICHAEL KEATON**

The penetrating glow refused to stop. The news report left him frozen. With darkness shrouding the furniture around him, Inglewood had no distraction from the television's entrancing power. Each progressive advertisement lured him with the sex appeal of beer and the aroma of pepperoni, while threatening his control should he choose to touch that dial. As much as he wanted to throw himself from the grip of his sofa, the allure of the flashing lights overloaded his free will.

"Call now for your toenail converter, a sixty-dollar value yours for only \$19.95 through this special TV offer, and receive the Hachma Head Shaving Kit free."

The blue screen with the 1-800 number held for a blink of an eye before the computer animation of a movie theatre floated into view.

"And now we return to the midnight movie: *Batman*, starring Jack Nicholson, Michael Keaton and songs by Prince."

Inglewood placed his hands behind his back as the floating movie theatre transformed into a gothic scene involving a Batmobile shooting the crap out of a chemical factory entrance. The hour was late and he needed to sleep, but the hypnosis of flash fire paralyzed him.

The room shrank as he coiled into the fetal position. The shrieking drone of the "end of programming" color strips forced the lyrics of "Mary Had a Little Lamb" from his throat. While his body quivered against the polyester cushions, he heard the footsteps drawing closer to his apartment door. Hoping the ingratiating buzz would drive the intruder away, he kept his thumb fixated on the volume control.

An hour before *Batman* aired, the local news reported a disturbing event. Apparently, an elusive geneticist started cloning famous actors to promote the production of movie sequels without accepting the annoyance of continuity errors. In this case, the geneticist duplicated the hair of Michael Keaton to create a picture perfect clone worthy of starring in a *Batman Forever* remake. According to the local news, the clone was scheduled to begin the digital-mapping sequence that would allow it to overwrite Val Kilmer's performance in the movie the following day, mimicking every detail down to the bad dialogue and gratuitous butt shots.

But as brilliant as the plan seemed to Hollywood, the execution turned out dangerous to society. Based on insider reports, the geneticist

had an ulterior motive to this agenda. Even though the clone was designed to instill Michael Keaton's likeness into the overbearing sequels, the geneticist had no intention of following through with the production. Thanks to an unscrupulous combination of adrenaline and lightning-charged gasoline (used to fuel its mental energy—a near impossibility if not for the scientist's genius), the clone obeyed the order to wreak a path of destruction. The geneticist implanted the reason that without the taste of blood on its fingers, it could not stand firm within its purpose.

And that was all the information the news gathered about the project. According to the newscast, the evil clone of Michael Keaton was last seen a mile from Inglewood's neighborhood.

When the footsteps finally stopped at his door, Inglewood promptly buried himself under his pillows. Even though he spent a good portion of his adult life—all ten years of them—living with an inflated sense of bravery, he decided it was better to stay hidden if the evil clone of Michael Keaton were to break through. Bravery, he thought, never ensured protection from death for anyone.

His heart raced when the pounding started. Boom, boom, came the hardwood door, overpowering the strength of the “end of programming” drone. The pillows flew off the sofa when he sprung into a flattened shape. The whole bravery thing was actually a fabrication. He could admit that now.

“Open the door,” yelled a sneering voice. “I have a message for you.”

Inglewood wanted to tell the intruder to go away, but he elected to keep his location a mystery.

“I know you're in there,” continued the voice. “I can hear your television buzzing. Open up before I break it down.”

The intruder pounded on the door again, this time in conjunction with jiggling the knob. It was clear the being would stop at nothing to get in. With the darkness covering all possible escape routes, Inglewood clutched his cushions against his chest, as his seconds of safety drew to an end.

“This is your final warning. Open the door.”

Without the stomach to comply, Inglewood held his breath as he awaited the next move. The colored bars on TV disappeared, as the meandering drone died away. Everything turned to black, except for the dim light beneath the door and the two dark objects dividing it into three. With one quick snap to reality, he realized his finger was pressing the

“off” button. When he looked back to the door, the dark objects severing the crack were gone.

The disappearance brought him momentary relief. With everything quiet, he sat up to assess the situation. In short, he would be...okay.

And then, the door crashed open. The living image of Michael Keaton stood between the hallway and the doorframe with battering ram in hand. Inglewood screamed as he leapt from the sofa in horror.

“The news lied to you,” shouted the Michael Keaton clone, as it threw the battering ram to the ground. “My clone has not been unleashed. There is no danger this evening.”

Unable to catch his breath, Inglewood dashed into the darkness.

“The neighborhood is safe,” said the clone.

“I don’t believe you,” shouted Inglewood, as he tripped over a beanbag chair. “The news would never lie.”

“It would if it didn’t present all the facts.”

Inglewood tried to stand again, but he kept falling over the beanbag chair.

“Why would the news report a false story?”

“The ‘clone’ they thought was terrorizing the neighborhood was really me—the real deal.”

Inglewood finally regained his composure and backed further away from the light.

“So the real Michael Keaton is terrorizing my neighborhood?”

“The real Michael Keaton isn’t terrorizing anyone. I’m trying to warn the populace that the clone isn’t real. Not yet.”

“How do I know that you’re real?”

“Would the clone stop short of your door like this?”

Inglewood reached the corner of his living room just before the bedroom hallway. The real Michael Keaton had a point.

“Okay, prove it,” he said, uncertain that his test would prove anything. “How many people saw *Herbie: Full Throttle*?”

“Twenty-five.”

So far the real Michael Keaton appeared to be who he said he was.

“All right, next question: who was the inspiration for *Beetlejuice*?”

“Not ‘who.’ ‘What.’”

“Okay, *what* was the inspiration for *Beetlejuice*?”

“A designer hallucinogen that was only popular in the ‘80s.”

Inglewood didn’t know the real answer, but he didn’t think a clone would come up with something quite so creative, so he accepted it.

“Okay, last question: what was the age of Jack Nicholson’s oldest date during the filming of *Batman*?”

"The same age as my first answer."

"Really?"

"There was a girl in her thirties who almost got a dinner out of him, but her crow's feet canceled the deal."

"Wow, who knew the Joker would be so picky?"

The real Michael Keaton stepped one foot through the doorway.

"So do you believe me now?"

In an act of trust, Inglewood started forward, but only at a pace of few inches per second.

"I might."

The actor pawed at the wall next to the door panel. A second later, the living room came alive with brilliance. His hand retracted from the light switch.

"Good, then I need you to come with me to warn the others. If enough people find their courage, we can turn the geneticist's eminent schemes against him."

"So there is a threat?"

"There will be if we don't act now."

Dawn approached suddenly as Inglewood found himself in the passenger seat of an ice cream truck speeding down the highway with the real Michael Keaton driving. The blurred road put him in a steady trance, which he didn't mind, considering he hadn't slept all night. When the hypnosis started lacking power, however, he transferred his focus to the speedometer. It recorded over 85 m.p.h.

"Why must we go so fast?" asked Inglewood, as he gripped his armrest. "And why have we left the neighborhood?"

"I want you to see the situation firsthand before you start warning the public."

"What situation? I can see that the streets are quiet."

"The news got everything wrong. It's not just the geneticist we have to worry about."

A half-hour later, the real Michael Keaton stopped the ice cream truck in the middle of the desert. Before them, two intersecting highways leading nowhere respectively stretched for miles across the desolate dunes. A series of SWAT vans also covered the exits, except for the one they came from. The real Michael Keaton cut off the engine.

"Get out of the truck and follow me," he said, as he reached for a pistol from underneath his seat. "It's time to discover the truth."

The real Michael Keaton stepped out of the truck and proceeded toward the roadblock. Terrified of both the presupposed clone and the real thing, Inglewood resolved to stay where he was. The last thing he wanted was to be the victim of a rampaging movie star.

The real Michael Keaton approached the black van at the head of the blockade with his gun drawn. Cautiously, he stepped up to the back door as he aimed at the windows. Once he secured his position, he violently rapped on the metallic door; then immediately clutched his pistol with both hands. A moment later, the doors swung open.

Inglewood rolled down his window to hear the scene. All was silent but the sound of an old voice screaming from inside the van.

"Alas, you found me, Michael Keaton, but I fear it's the last thing you will ever do."

The real Michael Keaton backed up as his face took on a new look of horror—one that didn't seem to fit his facial vocabulary. Without a second's warning, he began firing into the opened van. The weapon's chamber emptied after six shots.

"Turn on the engine," he yelled, as he hightailed it from the vehicle. "We have to get out of here. Now!"

Inglewood turned the key that the real Michael Keaton had left in the ignition. The actor, meanwhile, made it to the truck just in time for the object of his terror to step out from the hull.

Inglewood expected to see the worst, but the worst wasn't anything like what he actually saw. In fact, the scene before him shattered reality as he knew it. The real Michael Keaton was right—the news lied to him. The geneticist didn't make an evil Michael Keaton clone as it had claimed. Even if one were coming, it wasn't what stepped out of the van. Whoever came up with that information was clearly trying to cover up the truth—a truth that was far more awful than the fabrication they developed.

The ice cream truck backed away from the roadblock with a fury to rival a volcano. Within moments the two men put the intersection miles behind them.

"What do we do now?" Inglewood said, as he tapped the dashboard. "Who can protect the public from this?"

"I don't know," said the real Michael Keaton. "The truth I expected to show you was different than the truth we saw. I thought he was still in the planning stages."

Inglewood stared at the waves of sagebrush as they all shot past his window.

"I'm scared," he said.

"I am, too. The Hollywood machine has gotten too big, even for me. With a Val Kilmer clone on the loose now, I'm afraid the populace and all the *Batman* movies are in mortal danger."

He thumbed the steering wheel, as his mysterious thoughts left him staring into a void.

"Hollywood strikes again," he said.

Inglewood nodded as the Los Angeles skyline came into view. The future was indeed bleak.

## ***Nosing the Edge of the Plummet***

### **The Nice Guy**

The problem with reaching one's mid-thirties is that his options start running thin. If he doesn't find what he's looking for by the time he hits twenty-five, it all goes downhill—I have a bright red hand truck with television box to prove it.

At twenty-nine, I decided to quit school. After coming within six credits of solidifying a major (graduating), a friend informed me there was no money in that future, so I changed. Twelve credits left in the new coursework and another friend gave me the same advice. With the third time always spelling the charm, I tried my hand at Chemistry—Music and History being one and two—but fell in love with a girl who broke my heart. After she told me she just wanted to be friends, I lost my concentration. Then, I started failing. So, now sick of the college madness and depressed over all the money I wasted, I dropped out and changed direction with over two hundred credits to my name.

In retrospect, I didn't see a future in my career options, either. I'm sure I could've become a teacher, but why would I want that? With government bureaucracy being what it was, I wouldn't actually get to teach anything. I'd only have room to facilitate a bunch of state-mandated BS, with some glorified babysitting on the side. The only legitimate teaching avenue vacant was with the private school system, but those guys had a habit of firing people for no apparent reason. With lack of passion versus lack of job security, I really didn't have much choice. My future would've only been set had I chosen a business or medical field in college, and since I liked having some level of free time after my forty hours a week, I didn't find those career paths suitable, either.

So that's how I got my job delivering appliances. A moving job might've been more glamorous—I would've been part of a team—but this was the only thing available when my bank account emptied. With my future long behind me, I settled here for six years. And I hated every moment of it.

The romantic side of life hadn't been any better. Only four women in the last twenty years were relationship worthy. Four. And each one had the same response—that "just friends" thing I mentioned earlier. Sure, they padded their rejections with encouraging words, like: "you're a great guy, but—;" "I'm sure you'll find someone soon enough, and she'll be the one;" and my favorite, "you're wonderful, but I'm just too busy



right now.” But those encouraging, busy women—the only ones I considered worth my time—went off with some stranger, cutting me off from their lives forever.

I spent the last five years blaming my job aspirations over the “friends” talks, but truthfully these things started happening early in college. Of the four that I thought pursuit worthy, there had been tens, maybe hundreds I thought date worthy. And each responded in similar ways. “You’re too nice.” “I have a boyfriend.” “I like guys with blond hair.” The trivialities were overwhelming.

When I was thirty, I decided to give up. On everything. My career plans were shot in the toilet, I didn’t want to hear the “friends” talk anymore and I had spent too much time on this road to start over. So I pressed forward into the abyss that somehow led me to this elevator.

There was one thing that changed in the last few years, however. Divorced women with children started giving me the eye. I admit that it gave me a spark of hope—that maybe someone out there got who I am. But the problem was that they were divorced women with children. As a single man of thirty-five years—a man who had been unfortunate enough to be declined more than a hundred dates—the last thing I wanted was to take over some other man’s life. I wanted to start my own—fresh, untainted. As much as I appreciated being noticed for a change, I felt insulted that it had to come from the wrong kind of woman.

And last year, the story got worse. Last year, I started getting the eye from currently married women.

The woman to whom I’m delivering this television is one of them. For the last two weeks she ordered appliances, sold them, ordered replacements and requested *me* to deliver them. While her husband’s away on business, of course. As a man of integrity, I’ve tried to get out of the deliveries (not the first time though—I had yet to meet the crocodile then, but after she gave me that “ooh, aren’t you the catch?” look, I resolved to get the heck out of there). Unfortunately, my company has a strict policy about putting customer satisfaction above everything else. So if a customer requests a specific delivery artist, the delivery artist has to respond. No exceptions. So now I have to take this television to this beautiful, but terribly psychotic and terribly married woman in the name of public relations. All because I dropped out of school.

Truthfully, I don’t understand it. My whole life women dodged me. But now that they give me attention, they’re inappropriate. Needless to say, I’m more stressed now than I’ve been during my entire college years.

The flecks of gray hair along my temples prove it.

\* \* \*

In thirty seconds I have to face her again—Mrs. Willow. The elevator to her penthouse will open, she'll be standing there in a bathrobe with a plate of cookies in hand, and she'll ask me to stay for lunch. Of course, I have to refuse, but in the end it'll make her cry. I wish I knew what I did wrong to get here.

### The Jerk

I hate being married. It's like leaving the free lands to come home to a prison. So I just don't come home. I tell people—my wife especially—that I have to go away for business, when the truth is I just have to go away. It never matters where. I've left my city penthouse to hide in the country; I've taken road trips across fifteen states when my wife thought I was just a few miles away—and vice versa.

Forwarding numbers also fails to keep my anonymity intact, so I just don't do it. Ninety percent of the time, I also leave my cellphone off—except for those moments when I'm expecting a stock tip. Disappearing into the night is often the only way I can feel liberated.

I'm not one of those cheating types, though. I know when people ask why I'm in Nebraska and my wife isn't, they think I'm sneaking around on her. I'm not. Let's just get that in the open. Of course, it's not out of faithfulness—that little deceptive muse of a thing—it's because I don't want two prisons on my hands: one at home and one following me around the country. I don't even want the one. I certainly didn't want her for life, just for the first couple months when bedtime was fun.

And let us not forget the job front—the only other reason I'm with her. I never would've made CEO if not for her daddy. But that's an issue I don't want to discuss. Every time I tell it, I get depressed—reminds me of how little I still want it, and how much I regret selling my soul to her family. The money was certainly attractive back in the day, but what good is it now if I'm never home to appreciate it? And what good is going home if my riches can only buy a glorified set of bars?

Since my early college years, I wanted to be a great businessman—a millionaire even. But I didn't come from anywhere. The only way I had a chance was to get in tight with Medina, and ultimately, with her powerful old man. And, at the time, that wasn't such a bad prospect; she was gorgeous. We didn't have anything in common, though, and we certainly didn't have anything to talk about, but I liked having a beautiful girl walking around with me. And somehow, I convinced her I liked her. Not

sure how—I treated her like garbage all the time—not in front of her father, of course, but anywhere his eyes couldn’t reach. I guess she was just immature.

Anyway, that was the past. Right now I’m sitting at a bar in Wisconsin flashing my teeth at some hot twenty-two-year-old who’s smiling back at me. I’ll probably put the moves on her in about two minutes and find my way back to her apartment in ten. It’s usually how these things work.

Oh, and about that “I don’t cheat” bit I was talking about a moment ago—I lied. I often tell myself I don’t cheat so I’ll believe it by the time Medina asks me where I’ve been. But the truth is I’m like a rabbit. Been that way since college. But I make sure all my adventures are “one night only” events. When I said I don’t want two prisons in my life, I meant it.

I don’t feel proud about this, by the way. In movies where the nice guy defeats the jerk, because the jerk was a promiscuous scumbag, the jerk is never remorseful. The only sign of regret he ever shows is that of getting caught. But I don’t need that cinematic revelation to tell me what I am. Nor do I need my ego to tell me it sucks. If I could do it all over again, I’d start my life as the nice guy, marry a girl I actually clicked with (for the right reasons) and pretend such an alternate lifestyle wasn’t possible. I’d also convince myself that being a CEO of a large company wouldn’t be all it’s cracked up to be.

But as it stands, I don’t have a rewind button on my chest, nor do I have a woman I love—or one that I tell her I love—so I’ll have to make do with my night of twenty-two-year-old seduction and pretend I don’t have a conscience.

## The Wife

Many women are jealous of me, because I live in a two million-dollar penthouse overlooking the city. They don’t know what I come home to, though: a room that’s empty forty-nine weeks of the year. They think I live in luxury when the truth is I live in desperation. I spent my whole life having attendants looking after me, men trying to pursue me, and my father trying to shower me with money. But my husband took all that away. And now, with him gone six days a week, I don’t have anything. If I don’t travel down to the streets looking for action, then I just sit in my bathrobe all day trying to figure out how best to step out onto the ledge and jump.

When I was in college, I thought Harvey was the best thing to ever come into my life. He was ambitious, commanding and knew exactly

what he wanted. When he zeroed in on me, I couldn't refuse his advance. Though he yelled at me a lot, referring to me with his favorite five-letter B-word, I submitted to him, because he was so driven—so masculine. I considered myself lucky to capture a guy so passionate.

But after the first year of marriage, I realized I was retarded. His ambition had nothing to do with his own circle of power. He had to usurp my father's business to make his own dreams into reality. And when he took control of the empire, I rarely saw him again. Those feminine charms I used to lure him with in college, I couldn't re-ignite to save my life. After that first year, he didn't even want to look at me.

That was fifteen years ago.

There had been many occasions when I considered stealing the company back and giving it to some Japanese conglomerate. I thought forcing him to struggle from the bottom up again would've been enough to sever his business trips, driving him back to me. But I didn't because I knew his temper would've evolved past harsh words. There were two instances when I tasted his advancement and it left me crying for days. And those moments came after absurd things—like denting the Mercedes and breaking a vase. Losing a whole company? I dare not risk it.

In my college years I never considered myself evil. But I've had so many lovers and would-be lovers since that I hadn't felt clean since the early nineties, and now I feel downright polluted. Even after a bubble bath and moisturizer, I feel like there's an inch of sludge covering my entire body, taking away my beauty. I still flaunt what I think I have, but there's no passion anymore. I know the glow I used to have faded into a faraway life.

A few minutes ago I tried to seduce my television delivery guy, but he saw right through me. He was back down the elevator and out of the building the moment he kicked the cardboard box off his hand truck. Now it's going to take another call to his company just to get the TV unpacked and set up. But I know he won't come back. I'll just have to seduce someone else.

I really wish I had chosen differently in college. Then, I wouldn't have to be the woman that other women whispered about.

### **The Nice Guy**

Right now I'm standing on the corner contemplating where to eat, still reveling over the crazy events of my day. A few minutes ago something happened that I don't really want to repeat, because it sounds utterly cliché. But I'm going to anyway, because it's relevant to my morning.

A guy in his late-teens stepped out of a diner with his girlfriend in tow. He was the kind of guy who looked like he walked around with a jockstrap in his pants. As he grabbed for her arm, a portly teen wandered by with magazine in hand. Seizing his opportunity to impress the girl, the jock tripped the fat kid as he passed. When the kid dropped face first into the sidewalk, the jock laughed hysterically. The girl, in turn, smacked him on the shoulder and yelled at him. Then, he countered with some words shrouded in smiles, and the girl turned her irritated expression into bemusement. Then, they continued on their merry way. The fat kid, meanwhile, picked himself up, wiped the blood off his nose and kept walking as if nothing happened.

Anyway, take what you want from that. I'm going to get a burger.

## Coffee Grande

Silence lingered for many hours; then the infernal alarm clock interrupted his dream. Owen had spent several R.E.M. minutes waiting to find out what happened to his upside-down horses. Now the dream was gone. He hated his alarm clock.

At 5 a.m., the hour in which all things seemed hazy, the clock flashed with digital audacity. Three hours was the most sleep he got from the night. Late night packing, last minute checking, and he still failed to brush his teeth before bed. With the morning harassing his awakening, he knew now was the time to finish what he started. He had to brush his teeth.

Owen lived in the Kissimmee region of Central Florida—a town that bordered civilization and the boondocks. Today he planned to escape to Virginia into a place of which he forgot the name. He figured sometime during the course of the drive he'd remember.

The plan was to visit a friend for the week and look for a new job. Life in Central Florida had gotten stale—cheap, but markedly unexciting. At twenty-three years old, he figured it was time to see another part of the country, so this was his moment to scout.

By 6 a.m., he had taken his shower and gotten his bags into the car. By 6:15, he turned off the kitchen light and prepared to leave the house, remembering he still needed to brush his teeth. By 6:18, he got into the driver's seat—refreshed and free of plaque—but exhausted from his reduced night of sleep.

At approximately twenty minutes to seven, Owen reached the entrance to I-4, an Interstate highway stretching from Tampa to Daytona, pocked with road construction, slow drivers and the occasional downtown-theme park congestion. When he reached the edge of Orlando, he pulled off in search of a wake-me-up. The only thing open was a Dunkin' Donuts.

After ordering a small coffee, he returned to his car, taking a sip as he opened the door. The first taste reminded him—immediately—how scorching the donut-dunked coffee was, forcing his hand to release the cup. With only one shot of caffeine in his system, he left the container on the pavement and tried his luck driving without it.

Two hours later, he pulled off the highway again.

Now he was near Flagler Beach, a town off I-95 (to which he transferred from I-4), about twenty miles north of Daytona. This time his coffee options were broader, with Starbucks leading the way.

After taking two power naps in the parking lot, Owen stepped out of his car—one of those old Buicks—and entered the coffee shop. The scent of ground-up coffee beans hit him with a brief jolt of alertness. With three more steps, he registered the soothing ambient music that served as his theme song. It was a mild techno score mixed with a hint of jazz. It gave him an additional shot of energy.

With such a long drive still ahead, to a destination he hoped to reach by dinnertime, he decided he needed the extra help. He convinced himself to order two drinks. But he wasn't sure what would keep him alert the best.

He concluded the decision had to base on more than caffeine quantity; taste had to play a factor, too. Regular coffee would've done the trick; there was no question about that. But the taste—it was too bland for his needs. Whenever he'd shop for coffee, he had to consider the powerful effects of flavor.

Flavor was necessary to wake up his taste buds—a factor necessary to wake the rest of him. It was the same principle behind eating lunch. Coffee without flavor, even under the shroud of cream and sugar, was a beverage unfit for his tired body. He resolved, therefore, to order something with kick.

After carefully perusing the wall menu behind the counter, he decided on the Caramel Macchiato and Java Chip Frappuccino with espresso shot. He figured the combo attack of hot and cold, of steam and ice, would incur a storm of alertness in his belly. And though it would mean three straight hours of hardcore belching, he figured anything getting him into the Carolinas with open eyes was better than nothing.

His next decision involved size. He felt incredibly tired, so volume was critical. Two "tall" coffees, which were actually small, might have been enough to get him out of Florida, but not enough to get him through the unoccupied stretch of Georgia, so those were out of the question. The "venti" sizes, considered the largest, would've been ideal to get him through most of the journey, but not without that wired feeling—which he hated—so those were out, too. That left him with two "grandes," a size meaning large, but served as medium. Two of those would've supplied the proper run of fuel he needed.

When he completed the cycle of ordering them, picking them up and dressing them with spices, he sat down for a couple minutes to get his bearings. The sofa in the corner of the room looked the most comfortable.

When he woke up a moment later with a startled jolt, he checked his watch to realize he had lost ten minutes. With his Macchiato still

moderately warm and his Frappuccino still moderately cold, he returned to the parking lot to continue his journey. Only, when he got within eyeshot of his vehicle, he nearly dropped his coffees again.

His license plate was missing.

There was no thief in sight. There were no witnesses in sight. All he had was a half-empty parking lot and a few chirping birds snapping at his ears. He didn't know what to do.

He returned to the coffee shop to inform the barista of what happened. The woman in her forties didn't seem to care. The manager was a bit more helpful by providing the number to the local police station, but he insisted that he call from his own cellphone.

When the police finally answered, the main desk transferred him to the theft department. It took a few bars of "Some Like it Hot" by the Power Station to get a response.

When the investigating officer picked up, she asked a series of personal information, followed by the important questions.

"When did you last see the license plate?" she asked.

"About twenty minutes ago."

"Where did you last see it?"

"At Starbucks."

"Okay, I'll forward your report to your local tag office. For now, I would suggest grabbing a couple napkins and taping them to your rear window with your license plate number written across the face. Make sure to mention it was stolen. Then, go to your area tag office to pick up a new plate. Mention the case number."

"Well, I'm on a trip right now. Can I pick one up around here?"

"We don't supply Osceola County plates in this town, hon. I'd suggest heading home and taking care of this. Napkins don't stay legal for very long."

Owen, dismayed by the news, understood the urgency. He grabbed the napkins, as the officer suggested, jotted down his plate information and taped them to the window. Then, with a pressing gulp from his Caramel Macchiato, he stepped into his car, revved up the engine and headed back for Kissimmee.

At noon, he found himself standing in line at the Osceola County Tax Collector's office, waiting to claim his new tag. Though he felt the surge of energy from both coffees coursing through his system, he knew the effects would wear off soon. Tiny weights slowly piled onto his eyelids as he approached the cashier's window. It was only a matter of time before he demanded more caffeine.



By 12:15, he was back on the road again, back on I-4, back where he started. Now he was looking to pull into his destination around 2 a.m., giving him another three-hour night, and not much reason to enjoy his day tomorrow. By 12:45, passing through the congested downtown area of Orlando, his body craved another visit to Starbucks. Frankly, he didn't know how he was going to make it.

## Fruity Attractive

Mack and his construction buddies sat in the parking lot as they panted for liquid. They had spent the entire day building a wall in the sweltering heat. With only half a jug of water between them, they ran out of fluids shortly after lunch. Now on the verge of dehydration, the four guys prepared to journey through their favorite chain superstore, where clothing and groceries cohabited together, to fix their quandaries. Inside they would search the drink aisle for the Fountain of Youth.

Once they transcended the automatic doors, the drink aisle wasn't hard for them to find. They had to travel far, nevertheless, but it wasn't hard for them to find. Back by the wine aisles, adjacent to the curtain and bathmat department, the drink aisle ran parallel between snack foods and laundry detergent. It took less than two minutes to reach.

Willing to grab for anything, the four guys cycled through all the soft drinks and thirst quenchers, hoping to find the magic formula, but all discovered it difficult to settle. Mack found the moment harrowing, because he knew the time to shrivel up like a salted slug was approaching. But he held on, sifting his hands through the Cokes and the Arizona Ice Teas, until the greasy Patrick spoke up from the main aisle separating the food from the clothing.

"Hey, I found the perfect drink," he shouted. "It's new."

Mack and the other two crawled toward the main aisle to see their buddy standing next to a display of accordion-shaped water bottles filled to the brim with a fruity green liquid, showcasing one with a smile. The logo on the label read: "Scrubbalicious."

"I've never seen it before," he continued, "but it looks like Gatorade. I'll bet it's the new thing."

The other two lit up from the revelation and immediately reached for their own bottles. Mack, however, was hesitant.

"I don't know," he said. "I'm not sure I trust a drink called 'Scrubbalicious.' It doesn't sound right."

"What's to fear?" said Patrick. "It's green. It comes in a water bottle. Put two and two together—it's trustworthy. And I'm willing to bet tasty, too."

"Hey," said Henry, the construction buddy with the fifty tattoos, "I'll trust it. I got a dry tongue and a parched throat that says I'll trust pickle juice if it came down to it. This Scrubbalicious won't know what hit it."

Waldo, the third guy, who never speaks, simply nodded.

Mack resolved not to dispute the dehydrated guys, but was unwilling to share in their discovery. Instead, he returned to the drink aisle and settled on a bottle of green tea. When the four men paid for their beverages and left the store, each of them promptly opened their bottles and guzzled the contents.

Within moments, Mack felt his throat vindicated, but found his comrades rolling around the pavement with stomachs clutched.

"Oh God," said Patrick, "call a doctor. I think my stomach is fighting World War III."

The other two guys couldn't even speak. They were too busy vomiting on the tires of a Volkswagen.

Mack picked up one of the opened bottles of Scrubbalicious and read the label. In fine print along the backside, he found the truth.

"This is cleaning fluid, you dolts," he snapped. "You retards drank a floor scrubber."

Patrick and the others didn't bother responding. They were too busy falling in and out of consciousness to listen.

## CORPORATE IRONY

With less than twelve hours before the storm's forecasted arrival, Quentin hammered the last board over the window. He already cracked the eastern dining room pane with an ill-placed nail, but he figured he'd deal with it after the winds died. As long as the barrier was firmly attached, he didn't see the point in panicking. Finishing the prep work was the most important thing to him right now.

Of course, he still thought it appropriate for Corporate to hire specialists for the job, but with five other stores in the area, he figured it would've been a headache for them—assuming they'd pay attention to this corner hole to start with. In the three years he managed his Burger Hut, not once did the corporate office show interest in his work—only in the profits he turned. And since his profits were marginal at best, his store got very little attention at all.

Needless to say, when it came time to pack in for the night and cross his fingers for the morning, he didn't expect a cleanup crew waiting for him. He already designed his plan for hauling the rotten burgers to the back lot Dumpster, which he'd manage himself once officials deemed it safe to drive. The only hope he carried, as he locked the doors and headed for his car, was that his teenage staff could help with the cleanup. Of course, deep down he knew that relying on them would translate into doing the entire job himself.

Later that night, the storm arrived. The minimal Category 1 hurricane that was supposed to shoot in and out by morning's end actually became a fierce Category 3 that hung out until midnight the following evening. Quentin sat on his bathroom floor for most of the day knocking his knees together, waiting for the moment he could step into the light. The opportunity didn't come until after he fell asleep twice.

Three days later, the police deemed it safe to travel the highways. Although he had to swerve around fallen trees to get there, he arrived at his store, unharmed, to discover he was very much alone. The night before, he sent a voicemail to his staff inviting them to help with the cleanup. As he suspected, no one was interested. At ten o'clock, he unlocked the doors to begin rummaging through the perishables.

Unfortunately, his plan was abruptly altered. When he stepped inside the building to survey the damage, he discovered the entire ceiling had collapsed and the floor was ruined with rainwater. Crossing the threshold into the unknown, he also felt some raindrops falling on his head.

As he stumbled over the wreckage in the restaurant's darkness, he noticed mold seeping through the walls. With flashlight in hand, he searched the plaster for an untainted spot, but couldn't find any. Through further investigation he also noticed an army of ants marching along the prep counters and rats digging around the walk-in cooler. He also discovered a raccoon giving birth in the ice bin.

Later that day, he sent a new voicemail informing his staff that they no longer had a job—at least not with that store. He also wished them good luck, though he didn't know where they would find it.

For the next few weeks, he tried to get Corporate to send an auditor to appraise the damage, but no one heeded his call.

His bank account also started running dry. To survive, he had to work at a clothing outlet store along the outskirts of town—as a cashier. He hated it.

By the end of hurricane season, three months after the storm blew through, the Burger Hut Corporation finally sent an insurance agent to examine the place. The man with the briefcase claimed the restaurant would have to be gutted and rebuilt—no easy task. The corporate office, of course, wasn't ready to spend the money for that, so Quentin was doomed to sell women's dresses well into the Spring Sale.

In July the following year, Corporate finally approved the rebuilding process. While Quentin modeled off leather skirts to forty-year-old divorcees, construction crews hauled into the restaurant the materials needed to transform the shattered mess into its former glory. He got the call to return to Burger Hut the day they replaced the old serving counter.

The month before the scheduled Grand Reopening, Quentin distributed news that the store was hiring. Like a wave of cattle flocking to the highest grass, a hundred teenagers came out of the shadows to apply for the resurrected restaurant. For the first time in his career, he finally believed the store had something to offer.

Finally, in mid-September, the ribbon was cut and the Burger Hut in the south end of town received its first customer in a year. As he personally greeted the old man with a walker, he offered to pay for his meal for the occasion. When the next client walked through the door—a thug with tattoos on both arms and a girlfriend—he simply nodded and let his cashier take the order. With a smile on his face and his women's dresses behind him, he knew that business was back for good. He even bought a new car to celebrate.

Unfortunately, the following week, another Category 3 hurricane stormed through, this time blowing the roof clean off. With tears in his eyes, Quentin returned to the clothing store with ambition to rise through

the ranks. He had to take the bus, though, because his new car, a Fiat, flipped into a tree.

Two weeks later, a demolition crew arrived at the Burger Hut to finish what the hurricane started.

## **BLUE-HAIRED ANIME FIGHTER**

Midnight in the downtown district, three hundred feet in the air, two figures plummet to the asphalt earth. With buildings stretching nearly a quarter-mile to the sky, random lights in scattered windows race by like streaks of laser beams. Someone—one of them—will reign victorious tonight, no matter how much wind intensifies their hair.

Hair—blue hair—befits the leftward warrior. With a name sounding more Japanese than Tokyo, his voice roars against the updraft in a guttural cry. “Hazuka!” he shouts, shattering the glass around him. “Hazuka teri yo saki!” amplifies from the busted windows, which inappropriately translated into English means, “I am the thunder snake!” With his mouth growing from the size of a ping pong ball to the size of a bowling ball, the blue-haired warrior screams his battle cry a third time—a word that speaks the thunder, but by itself means nothing. Lightning sizzles in his hands.

The opponent, an androgynous fighter with long silver hair and a woman’s face, slaps his forearms together to cover his body. With another hundred feet slipped through the air, the man-person braces for two impacts. “Ashkani Ishtar!” he yells, as the incoming sparks engulf him. In roughly translated English, that means, “Shield me with the cloak of Warren Beatty, oh great desert king!” Another fifty feet and the white fireball passes, leaving his skin charred black and his eyes burning with anger—literally.

The blue-haired anime fighter, a man named Yoshi, assumes the lotus position. Pissed off that people confuse him with the little green dinosaur from *Super Mario Brothers*, he prepares for the shock to his butt cheeks. His anger from the ridicule fuels enough energy to survive any great impact—a feat that would elude him if his name were Mr. Myagi.

And then, the meteor strike comes: the two fighters punch a twenty-foot crater into the street below.

Traffic flies in multiple directions as the two punk rock martial artists face off. At the bottom of the pit, they stare each other down—the blue-haired anime fighter standing to his feet, the androgynous silver warrior brushing off his grease stains.

“Tonight you die,” sneers the reject from Sailor Moon.

“Over my dead body,” growls the living pencil troll.

“Maktaro yo Sashi!” the silver guy shouts, lunging forward with diamonds in hand. No one knows what that means in English.

“Bashuko el Paso!” returns Yoshi, turning his body into a giant repelling magnet, apparently unaware that he tossed a bit of Spanish in there.

The sky cracks with thunder, as the two men fly across the crater basin like shooting stars. The surrounding populace, meanwhile, freezes in place to prevent accidental focal detraction from the fighters.

When the warriors clash and pass, they turn to see the other still standing. Determined to finish Yoshi off, the androgynous fighter pulls a sword impossibly too large for his body from his back and gleams it under the moonlight. The blue-haired warrior smirks.

“So you think you can defeat me with the Sword of Nokia, do you?” he says. “I am the destroyer of satellites—do not mock me!”

The androgynous warrior polishes his weapon as he stands daintily like a light post.

“I did not travel through burning villages and hundreds of years to mock my opponent,” he says. “I came this far to win the prize—the prize that I slain thousands to reach. Do not think I came here simply to mock.”

“But I have slain thousands more to prove I am not to be mocked. The prize will be mine.”

The androgynous warrior moves his feet as the blue-haired anime fighter hunches his shoulders and clenches his fists like a bull. This time the tournament will end—after twenty-six grueling half-hour battles, it will finally end.

Springing up like a rabbit, the androgynous challenger races toward the blue-haired defender with sword angled from his hip, ready to slice him to ribbons. Mounting the ground like a boulder, as it spins away from level earth to a speeding forty-five degree angle, the blue-haired warrior electrifies his body as he waits for his opponent to strike. Within seconds, the two men clash for a second time—the androgynous man sizzling from the electric blast, Yoshi stealing the sword from his opponent’s hand.

At the speed of a snake, Yoshi spins at the waist and brings the stolen weapon down through the center of his challenger’s body. When he pulls the sword away, his challenger laughs.

“You really thought my own sword would harm me?” he muses. “How weak-minded you must be!”

And just as the blue-haired warrior stands in full upright position, a glowing light streaks down the middle of the challenger from head-to-crotch, and the next thing he knows...

Through the eyes of Tokyo—its original eyewitness—his body splits into a wild bloody mess. But through the eyes of the American ten-year-



old, the androgynous warrior merely screams something incomprehensible in both languages and the blue-haired fighter looks on with satisfaction.

"Alas, the prize is mine," he says, jamming the sword into the earth. "I am undefeated."

As he turns away to head for the lip of the crater, his victory quickly diminishes. The entire earth shakes.

"Not so fast," roars a thunderous voice, from underground. "No one gets the prize without first defeating me!"

Pieces of asphalt explode into nearby skyscrapers as the street ahead blows apart. From the depths of the hole, a huge green creature made of dragon parts and cattle horns rises above the city. Its eyes are like amber rocks, glowing with the contempt of humanity. Its teeth drip malice with the ooze of the subterranean sewers below. And its legs straddle the remains of a subway train, crushing it with devastating thighs.

"No one defeats me!" the creature adds. "I am the undefeated!"

The blue-haired warrior smirks as he steals his opponent's sword back from the earth.

"We'll see about that," he says, with a vicious grin.

Unfortunately, the world goes dark in that moment, because the English translators decide they don't have the time to finish the story. Another translation project involving a purple-haired anime fighter falls into their laps, promising five hundred dollars for each unique battle cry, so they put the next season on the shelf for an unknown length of time.

## energy wrappers

The call hit him like a slingshot: not the little plastic toys that kids used to pluck from Cracker Jack boxes to launch paperclips across the room, but the huge metal ones that delinquents used to fire mothballs at passing vehicles from over half a mile. He, of course, was the passing car. He ate breakfast peacefully at his favorite diner when the frantic caller blitzed him with the urgent ringing.

“Yeah,” he said, with pancake mix dripping from his mouth, “I understand. I’ll take a look shortly.”

And shortly, he did. Fifteen minutes later, Rick stood at the apartment doorway of the friend of a friend of a cousin of a guy who had a dog previously owned by another friend’s brother’s friend of a guy that met him at a Star Trek convention—that’s how the caller got his number. When the distraught man opened the front door, Rick walked inside to see the friend of the cousin of the guy...blah blah blah...that met him at the Star Trek convention lying fast asleep on a sofa. He shrugged his shoulders. As far as he could tell, the emergency was overblown.

“The guy’s asleep,” he said. “What do you want from me?”

“He shouldn’t be asleep,” the man said, darting his finger at the floor. “Look around him.”

At first, he thought the guy was a slob—that maybe he prioritized his apartment upkeep somewhere below the need to deep sea fish in the Atlantic. But through closer analysis, he realized the mess was too definitive to classify as random carelessness. The torn energy bar wrappers—all ten of them—scattered at the foot of the couch, each coming from the same box. Slob or no slob, he thought, everyone cleans up after the ninth bar.

“Hmm, this is odd,” said Rick. “Who would fall asleep after eating an energy bar?”

“After eating *ten* energy bars,” corrected the client. “Now you know why I’m concerned. That’s not supposed to happen, so I need you to find out why it did.”

“Fair enough. The first thing we must do, then, is to eliminate probable cause. We must assume the energy bars had something to do with this.”

“Then, what?”

“Well, there isn’t a ‘then what’ until there’s a ‘that didn’t work.’ So far we don’t have either.”

The man frantically ran his fingers through his hair.

"Well figure it out before my girlfriend comes over. She hates this guy and will leave me for someone else if she sees him here. I tried waking him up, but—"

"No, no, don't you dare wake him up. You must leave the crime scene alone until the case is solved. That's the rule of detective work. You must respect my domain."

"Right, I understand, but—"

"I know you think waking him up and *asking* what happened seems like the most probable solution to this case. But believe me, it's not. Victims have the worse sense of recollection than any other person involved. The clues have to solve the case for us. We need him asleep until we can put the puzzle together."

"Okay, then do what you must. Just hurry; she'll be here soon."

Rick elected not to waste anymore time; he headed straight for the box of energy bars. There were two left inside.

"I need you here to spot me," he said. "I'll do my best to solve this case, but there's a chance I might go under. You must be ready to wake me if that happens."

"What do you mean 'you might go under?' "

"The only way to find out what happened to your friend is to duplicate his journey—to walk in his shoes."

"You don't mean..."

Rick removed a nutty energy bar filled with chocolate chips from the box and ravaged the wrapper's tip with his teeth.

"Yes," he said, spitting a piece of tin from his lips, "I do mean. It's the only way to understand the truth."

The man's eyes widened. Apparently, this was bad news.

"This is necessary," continued Rick. "It must be done."

Before the man could protest his actions, Rick champed the end of the bar, grounding the nutty core between his teeth. As the fragment broke apart in his mouth, he found it unusually difficult to chew.

"Wow," he said, with mouth full, "they really packed this thing tight."

It took nearly a minute, but he managed to pulverize the energy bar into a goopy mush; then he swallowed. The entire action fatigued his jaw.

"Okay, so far, so good."

He took another bite. His body felt the same as before, but his mouth progressively weakened with each successive chew. By the time he finished the first energy bar, he felt like he needed a drink.

But because the man on the couch didn't have a glass of water on hand, he voted not to have one, either.

The second energy bar, and thus the last in the box, had a peanut buttery flavor mixed with the nuts. Rick ate that one, too, dealing with the same chewing problems as before, but emerged from the battle less victorious. Before he analyzed what happened, he lost strength in his mouth. Then, like rapid-fire clockwork, his body overcompensated the loss by drawing energy from other parts, ultimately burning him out. In one fell swoop, he dropped to his knees.

"I have to sit down," he said, through shallow breath. "I feel like I just ran a marathon."

After a few more struggles with his system, his face collided with the floor.

Sometime later, he awoke to the sound of distant arguing. Three voices: a man, a woman and another man battled for the right to be the loudest person in the room. So far the woman had the lead.

"I figured out what happened," he said, before opening his eyes. "Who wants to pay me?"

Apparently, no one heard him.

## PIECES OF FRED

### “The Invention of Fred”

Fred extinguished his car alarm as he set his milk jugs inside the trunk. Then, pulling his baby-blue cardigan over his rounded belly, he limped over to McDonald’s to be the first in line for breakfast. Upon reaching the counter, he pushed his glasses up with his thumb to read the menu. As he leaned against the counter, shifting his good leg from side-to-side, he pleasantly asked the cashier about her morning. Meanwhile, a large line began to form. After asking another series of questions, he complimented the girl on her beautiful eyes and suggested that if he were forty years younger he would take her to the soda fountain. His charm rubbed off on her.

### “Fred, the Man”

Why does that alarm have to go off every time I step within five feet of my car? I swore I pressed the right button. Oh well, technology has changed so much in the last forty years that it’s hard to keep up. At least my beautiful white Cadillac is safe from danger. Besides, the day is pleasant—a little ruckus from the car won’t kill it.

Well, here I am at McDonald’s for the early bird breakfast. Let me just put my milk jugs in the trunk, and off to the ordering counter I go. I love the Egg McMuffin.

The line is steady for seven in the morning; there seems to be a lot of college students around. Makes me happy to see that the kids can still get up early these days.

It takes a little while for me to get to where I’m going, because my leg doesn’t work the way it used to, but I’m persistent. Ever since my boating accident happened, I’ve been stuck with a limp. The years have also been unkind to my belly—I have to tug at my cardigan sweater often to make sure my belly doesn’t expose itself. Not that I’m ashamed of it, but it’s much more comfortable to have a warm, fuzzy garment covering it up.

When I reach the counter, I have to stare at the menu a moment. My vision isn’t up to par, even through the aid of my glasses. I adjust them a little more to read the selections. Not much better.

The lovely girl behind the counter patiently waits as I read the prices next to the food options. Her smile lights up my day. I make a nice little comment about her teeth and she smiles wider. I tug at my sweater again.

I decide to make some friendly conversation while I look to see what I want to eat this wonderful day.

# Sculpture

## An Adaptation to "My Last Duchess" by Robert Browning

I remember the day when the duke of Ferrara entered my chamber with an image of his lady, the duchess, in hand. I had just cast a sculpture of Neptune wrestling a sea horse in bronze when he entrusted me with his new assignment. Upon his request, I took the painting and transformed it into full dimension through chiseled marble.

When I placed the finished product onto the pedestal, my breath swept away. Such beauty, this lady—oh how she radiated with life. Both the portrait and the sculpture were wonders to behold. When the duke came to see, he jumped for joy, for he remembered her living passion and the cheerfulness of her smile.

"With this, I shall never be lost without her," he said.

Myself, I was unsure how to release the image. Such a beautiful woman she was—this lady. I wanted to hide the sculpture in the cellar so I alone could admire it, having once loved the lady from afar—the way she hid her wrists under her sleeves and smiled shyly when they fell back along her arm. I also adored her quick attachment to happiness. She found amusement in any little thing, brightening her day, in turn brightening the day of others. The lady was physically endowed, as well, fruitfully combining her joy with her beauty. She was breathtaking. Oh how the duke loved her.

If everyone could see her sitting here before us, they too would want nothing but her smile to pierce their hearts. But the lady was always compassionate and forgiving, and this image cannot compare. Perhaps I will not keep it from the duke. Instead, we can display it in a museum for all to see. They cannot feel her passion for life, but they can experience her beauty. Oh duchess, why did you leave us? Did we disappoint you somehow? It is not the sculpture we want to display, but you, my lady. Your image I stare at piercingly; your gaze holds me tight. Your eyes smile to everyone who sees you; it taunts me.

The duke has fallen to the floor, mad, as you have taken away his command. And I cannot manage to escape your stare, either, my lady. I feel as though you control me. You are here, my lady, but you are not. Only by covering you with a sheet may my heart find peace. You were love to me, duchess, you were love to all. But the duke is lost to you, and

I cannot allow the same for me. I am an artist, outside the realm of your people. Let no man lose himself to you.



## **Flash Fiction Commentaries**

That wasn't so bad, was it? As usual, the following segment will inform you of behind-the-scenes action that helped establish the characters and plots of each story. Odds are you'll laugh, or cry, or throw the book at your cat—I suppose your reaction will depend entirely on your mood. But whatever you choose, the inescapable fact you face is that reading this segment will further enlighten you to the insanity that taunts my mind daily.

And believe me, there's something wrong up here, even if it's mildly entertaining. But I can only blame that on my dreams. The stuff I observed in real life I can't help.

### **A Moonless Night Over Julie's Video Store**

From a visionary point of view, this story actually happened—not in the physical sense, of course, but through the context of a dream.

In 2004, while I finished up my English degree at UCF, I lived in a condominium near State Road 436 in Altamonte Springs, Florida. The building set within a mile of nearly everything I found convenient in life—a park, a mall, an AMC movie complex, an Office Depot, a couple Christian bookstores, a Panera Bread, a Blockbuster Video and a number of other amenities that made owning a car unnecessary. Since I found joy in walking, I took every opportunity I had to leave my Honda Civic behind.

But this wasn't to say I only chose 436 as a travel route. Nor was it to say I only walked to go somewhere. On many occasions I left the apartment after midnight to take a soul-searching walk along the two-mile residential road I lived on called Maitland Avenue to try figuring things out. There usually wasn't a destination—I traveled as far as I needed to get my thoughts in order. But it was often quiet, and sometimes a little cold.

One night during the course of my stay, I had a dream that I walked Maitland Avenue from the south side northward—the direction opposite of my normal route—heading from the curve to my house (you can download Google Earth if you need a supplemental picture of this). The street was darker and quieter than usual, but I was determined to discover life down the side roads, as I often did in real life. As I plodded along, I had my binder with me, which symbolized something I had in reality, but

never carried with me—the real binder held rough draft copies of other *Collection of Junk* material, not a handwritten journal. Though I didn't actually write anything down in the dream, I kept hearing a strict warning, "Don't go down Mission Avenue, for nothing good ever came out of walking down Mission Avenue." And naturally, with my sense of rationalization turned off, I forgot to tell myself that in real life, there was no Mission Avenue. In fact, where Mission Avenue should've been a shopping center with Curves Fitness Center and a laundromat stood in its place. But then, that's the sensibility of dreams.

Anyway, the rest of the dream played out the way the story is written, so the conclusion involved me losing the binder. As any writer knows, losing one's work is perhaps the worst thing that can happen to him—it means losing years of one's life to the elements. Although I didn't consider it a nightmare (I don't really get nightmares), I considered it powerful enough to translate it into fiction. So here you are.

And yes, that was the name of the video store in the dream. And no, there isn't such a place in real life (in that region). Blockbuster Video was the only UFO-looking place in the vicinity.

### **The Fountain of Truth**

There isn't a story behind this; I just remember thinking at work one day how funny it would be if someone spiked the Diet Coke syrup with a truth serum, since most of our Diet Coke drinking guests seemed to have serious problems to address. After thinking about the possibilities, I decided to explore the outcome in the form of fiction. And this was the result.

I decided to target the wealthy class since I saw them as the group with the most to hide and the highest accumulation of psychological issues to expel. I also chose Christmas as the season since there had to be some type of "miracle" attached to the theme, and what better time of year to milk that than Christmas? Plus, I wrote it on Christmas Eve, so it fits. The twist ending didn't come out through any sense of fable; it was just the only sensible way to end the story. I didn't want to make this into another vignette piece.

And that's the bottom line. The explanation behind it is pretty straightforward. The only thing you might not get from the text is that I first contemplated making it into a longer story, but changed my mind when I realized it didn't need more than it already had. And that explains "The Fountain of Truth."

### The Evil Clone of Michael Keaton

This is another exploitation of a dream I had—one that I awoke from nearly a year ago. In 2005, I had a series of “rampaging movie star” dreams that started with Sean Penn chasing me with a gun, and escalated into a vision of Michael Keaton trying to save a town from his army of evil clones. In the latter dream, I sat in the living room of a dark apartment knowing that the angry knock on the other side of the door was the blood curdling attack of a robot of Michael Keaton’s likeness, but turned out to be a false alarm. Then, as the dream continued, the real Michael Keaton took me to a residential intersection where a mad scientist had unleashed the first clone—a being intent on devastating the populace—with more on the way. And that’s where it ended.

Although I considered the subject matter funny enough to write about, I didn’t think the vision alone stood well enough on its own as a worthwhile story, so I transformed it to fit my *Batman* movie ideologies.

Here’s the thing: in 1994, I was genuinely upset when I heard that Warner Bros. replaced Michael Keaton with another actor for the third *Batman* movie. Continuity had always been a big thing with me, and it drove me crazy when actors switched out with other actors. It pissed me off even more when they did it again for the fourth movie, two years later. Even though I’ve had a number of gripes since the franchise changed hands in the mid-90s, none toppled the other like the actor-switch toppled the continuity. The only thing to rival it was the idiotic dialogue thrown into the fourth movie: “Everyone, chill;” “the Iceman cometh”—cometh on!—and those cheesy butt shots.

Needless to say, I started having fantasies about movie technology taking a drastic turn—one that would allow current actors to replace established roles. In this case, I delighted in the thought of seeing Michael Keaton getting digitally mapped over the performances of the subsequent actors of the later films. Not that I had a problem with the latter performances in of themselves—I saved that gripe for the writing and direction—I just hated seeing the replacements standing in Michael Keaton’s shoes. The only time I’m ever able to stomach a switch in a franchise lead is when it happens to the James Bond universe. Strangely, a James Bond change has a reverse effect on me—I actually look forward to seeing how the new guy pulls it off (as of this writing I’m three months away from seeing *Casino Royale* with Daniel Craig as the new Bond; after watching *Layer Cake* a few nights ago, I think he’ll do a good job with it).

Since I needed a plot to hold this story together—which the dream by itself couldn’t do—I chose to use my fantasy of continuity to act as the

support beams. I figured this way I could tell an interesting story while voicing my thoughts about the Hollywood Machine in the same breath. I think it worked.

And yes, I have no doubt that the movie *Multiplicity* influenced the structure of this dream. I hadn't seen it in nearly ten years, but my mind has a habit of pulling strange elements of the past into light, so I wouldn't put it past my subconscious to do the same here. After all, I still have the occasional dream about people I knew in high school trying to finish the fourth grade. Don't ask.

### Nosing the Edge of the Plummet

This story, originally titled "How to Repel a Married Woman," started with the intention of blowing the lid off of female blindness. For years, I asked the same questions the nice guy asked, "Why am I being overlooked for everything?" Maybe my job sucks. Maybe I'm not showing enough ambition. Or maybe, in the words of my "jerk" friends, I'm not enough of an A-hole. In any case, I thought I was doomed to miss the mark indefinitely.

And then, I realized the married and the formerly married women had a habit of showing appreciation. Why? They're non-pursuable—well, the married ones are—the divorcees, they're not really what I want; though I might have to settle if the tide doesn't turn soon. Why should they be the only demographics to show me appreciation?

Then, the answer hit me: they already had their jerks. The grass on the other side wasn't so green after all.

Of course, I'm completely projecting this idea. Maybe my job did have a lot to do with the overlooks. Maybe I was too quiet, or too interested. I'm not one to think I'm perfect and that the world is retarded for overlooking me; I'm just an explorer trying to figure out the answers. Sometimes that means writing a story about it.

The end result is a bit of a cliché; I can admit that. But even the clichés have a place of origin, which started because something needed to be addressed. Of course, these things keep coming back, because no one learns from them, but at least they're there for reference. This story, for whatever impact it makes, is now one of those references.

Anyway, I changed the title because I realized halfway through that it wasn't about repelling a married woman, but rather about the bad decisions people make. It encompasses the primary objectives most people from eighteen on up think about—work, family and success in

both—but shows how little we can really know without following a sense of wisdom. When we follow impulse before following wisdom, we end up standing on the edge of descent. In this case, these three characters made crappy choices (Nice Guy drops out of school, Jerk wrecks everyone's life for his own futile gain, Wife ignores wisdom and suffers), and now they have to live with the consequences. As a modern day fable, I think it offers some relevance.

So that's the story behind it. I know it plays out like the shotgun version of "Eleven Miles from Home," but I guess I'm just jerky enough to make you read it twice, so there you go. If nothing else, at least it teaches you how to string three oddly related words together to make a cool sounding title.

### Coffee Grande

This story essentially began as a tribute to my newfound love for coffee. A few years ago, I didn't particularly care for it. Even though I appreciated the coffeehouse atmosphere, I didn't see much point in downing its beverages. Frankly, I thought its excuse for caffeine was weak. But then, I discovered the Chai Tea Latte from Panera Bread and quickly descended into the depths of the coffee lifestyle. From there, I progressed into the bowels of Starbucks, where I'm currently hooked on the two mixes featured in the story.

But I didn't think a vignette about drinking coffee was appropriate for this volume, so I searched for a subject. Fortunately (or unfortunately, depending on one's perspective), a subject fell into my lap.

The week before I wrote this, I went to my car to head for work when I discovered a nasty surprise: my license plate was missing. After a mild headache of dealing with the theft and borrowing my mom's car to keep myself somewhat punctual with my job, I finished the afternoon at the tag office replacing the plate. The whole thing ended up being easier than it looked. Then, sometime after I attached the new plate with theft-resistant screws (a handy tip for all you folks who like keeping your license plates right where you left them), I discovered the base I needed to thread the story.

Of course, the next challenge came with deciding where to present the hook. Originally, I considered making the theft the reason behind the character's need for coffee. But when I realized there was no story in that, I changed it to something I identified with better—the drowsy road trip. So, keeping in line with days of old, I set the tale along the corridors

of I-4 and I-95, while crafting that bit of irony that would upset any man taking a long, long drive. Granted, the actual climax would probably never happen in real life—I didn’t get the sense that I had to replace my plate within my own county—but the story would lose direction if I didn’t offer that limitation, so there’s my justification in breaking what might be standard protocol. In any case, I like the result. Hopefully, you do too.

### **Fruity Attractive**

This story came about from my own observations within a chain superstore. One night when I needed to get out of the house, I took a trip to a certain popular 24-hour superstore to take a look around. I usually go to these places to check out the DVDs, but this time I was more interested in seeing what I could find to drink. After picking up a case of Coca-Cola Blak, a coffee-flavored soft drink from everyone’s favorite carbonated conglomerate, I stepped out into the main aisle bordering the vacuum cleaners to see a display of green-colored floor cleaner (or maybe it was window cleaner) contained inside what looked like a series of Zephyrhills water bottles. Immediately, I thought, “what genius thought up this lawsuit?” and realized, “Hey, I can make a story out of this.” So even though I don’t remember the name of the product, I will always refer to it as “Scrubbalicious.” Hopefully, someone will take that horrible design out of the chemical department soon.

### **Corporate Irony**

The inspiration behind this tale originated with Hurricane Wilma, a storm that hit my hometown last year with over 100mph winds. For many years, the Greenacres-Unincorporated Lake Worth community had a McDonald’s at its service between Target and a bowling alley. This particular store offered a ‘50s style theme with motorcycle and model train chugging around the dining room perimeter, keeping its drive-thru open 24 hours. For the thousands of young adults who lived in the area, the late night hamburgers were a godsend.

But on the weekend of October 24, 2005, the store, like every other business in South Florida, shut down early to prepare for the eminent Category 3 hurricane threatening to charge over us. And it was one of many that failed to reopen the following weekend. Although it looked okay from the outside, the boards stayed up for several weeks and the

golden arches stayed shredded for many months. And even as the boards came off, the restaurant remained dark. It wasn't until this summer that reconstruction efforts began.

A couple weeks ago, as I tried to think of an idea to succeed my "Scrubbalicious" tale, the concept for this story hit me when I drove past the store. Construction crews had been busy restoring the restaurant, and the manager had already hung the "now hiring" banner on the front wall, but all of this started in June—the month hurricane season began. It didn't take a genius to figure out the timing was off-color, and that the irony of the situation was possible. Even though the store in real life didn't suffer the climactic fate of the Burger Hut in this story—partly because the store in real life hadn't opened yet, giving irony a chance—the possibility alone made the tale worth telling. So that's why I told it.

\*Okay, since this hasn't been printed yet, I have time to throw in a quick update. The week after I wrote this commentary, the McDonald's finally reopened. The week after that—I kid you not—Tropical Storm Ernesto hit South Florida. Even though the storm itself turned out to be nothing more than a Tropical Rainfall (that'll teach people to panic over nothing), the fact that a named storm threatened the possibility of this irony happening was absolutely hilarious. Though for McDonald's sake (ahem), I'm glad it wasn't serious. Heaven forbid a corporation should actually lose money.

### Blue-Haired Anime Fighter

After discussing briefly with a coworker about the unoriginality of anime—which started from a complaint that the show *Full Metal Alchemist* blatantly ripped off a popular and brilliantly written Brazilian novel called *The Alchemist*—I decided to write my take on the genre. There really wasn't anything to say in the process; the idea here was to simply recreate a *Dragonball Z* meets *The Matrix Revolutions* story line, with a little bit of *Yû Yû Hakusho*—a tournament fighting cartoon that models ninety percent of the other shows shipped to America through the Cartoon Network—to flavor it. The parody further stems from the onslaught of *Dragonball Z* episodes a friend and I had to sit through during our visits to Cici's Pizza a couple years ago. For a time, we didn't think the Cartoon Network aired anything else; shows like *Pokémon*, *Inuyasha*, and the above-mentioned *Yû Yû Hakusho* proved that.

If the world could produce another *Akira*, then maybe I wouldn't be so embittered over the decline of programming quality. But so far no one has risen to the challenge. The first step would be to take all the imports off the Saturday morning lineup (Fox and the WB mostly) and bring back the *Animaniacs*. Then, this generation's version of the British Invasion (which happened to music in the '80s) wouldn't seem so cruel. I probably still wouldn't get up Saturday mornings to watch TV even if they did switch it—modern day anime ruined that mood—but it would be an improvement for the kids growing up today. I don't know if domestic programming will teach them how to be original—American shows have been vastly bereft of that quality, too, but at least they can know what a good story looks like.

So there's the brief history of this piece. It was never meant to present a moral, just a laugh.

### Energy Wrappers

I came up with the idea for this story after eating a Slim-Fast protein bar at work a couple weeks ago. Since I haven't been sleeping well lately, I've needed all the help I could get from supplemental resources, ranging from Starbucks coffee to Boo Koo energy drinks (but not vitamins ironically). By the end of my workdays, I usually have to take a nap. Trying to get a stronger start into my morning, I decided to eat this protein bar, hoping it would help. The first thing I noticed when I started chewing, however, was that it took more of my energy just to eat the thing than I could get from it through digestion. After finishing the bar, I thought the paradox was so absurd that I had to write about it. The real trick, then, was to figure out how to present it.

Which brings us to the characters.

The detective in the story should be familiar to anyone who read the first two volumes of my work. Rick (a.k.a. Rick Razorface) was the title character of "Rick Razorface: Detective's Night Out" from *Nomadic Souls*, and the alternatively retarded lead in the flash fiction story called "Damage in the Streets" from *Life Under Construction*. I contemplated using a different character for this story to separate him from the idiot side of detecting, which I greatly abused in the latter story, but resolved not to switch gears from the line I started, so I kept him as the lead. The rest doesn't need explanation, so there you go.



## Pieces of Fred

This is one of the lost exercises from my college years that I chronically overlooked during the production of my first two collections. The reason why it's showing up now, rather than before, is because it has to show up eventually, and I figured this is the best time, since it's better late than never.

Actually, the real reasons are a.) because I was never proud of it as a standalone piece—it doesn't really say anything, and b.) I'm featuring it anyway, because I needed more works to fill this section. Plus, by including it, I can finally round out my college writing exercises once and for all. As far as I can remember, this is the last of them.

Having said that, the purpose behind this piece was to create a character out of two perspectives: the third-person past and the first-person present. I don't remember what I had to do with it when it was finished, but I do remember having to draft it with a small group (which I only remember because the original version had two other names attached). So that's the moral of this story; it took three people to write "The Invention of Fred." Geniuses at work.

## Sculpture

Written a month after "Pieces of Fred," this story was made for an English Literature class, which attempted to analyze and re-convey the theme behind Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess," a poem that relays the life of the duke of Ferrara and his transfer of wives (or women he wanted as wives—I don't know) through a series of difficult-to-read verses. There wasn't a particular style I had to adhere to; I just wanted to keep the tone of voice somewhat in the moment. I know it can be a cumbersome read by today's standards, but back in 1999 I didn't think anyone would actually read it. And now that this story, originally titled "The Sculpture: His Last Duchess" is here for all to see, I have to stand corrected. Funny how that works, isn't it?

To get the full gist of this story, I'd recommend googling "My Last Duchess" and reading the original poem. It was written back in the mid-nineteenth century, but don't let that stop you from taking a look. All writers and poets want to be read; even the dead ones.

### **In Conclusion:**

Well, there you go. There isn't much to say in a conclusion about short works of 2,500 words or less, because none of them develop enough steam to invite deep discussion or reflection. Having said that, I think it's safe to say that you made it through another wondrous section of amazing works (don't you love an author's ego?), and therefore now get the chance to experience the joys of Hallmark worthy poetry (there it is again—shameless). Have fun.

—Jeremy



**A boat chugging along the river in Savannah, Georgia**



## Poetry

The Candles of Life  
Distraction  
The Reflecting Pond  
Like Candy  
Vanilla Coke in the Hall  
Midnight Wire  
Spiral Cellar Staircase  
Overwhelmed  
Jewel Colored Smile  
When the String of Lights  
Five Steps to the Future  
A World of Transformers and G.I. Joe  
Ezer Kenegdo  
Words of Wisdom  
Message with a Tie  
Zephyr Umbrella  
Prioritized  
Holiday Lyrical



## Introduction

Oh poetry, poetry, where for art thou, poetry? Perhaps in thine land of pop culture—a cheesy place where original lines go to die? Die, die, oh for diest, ye must, for butchery is a symptom of all things pop culture—a place where gangsta rappers think remakes of “In the Air,” by Genesis is a service to thy community, and ten remakes of *Pride and Prejudice* is the movie executive’s answer to sound marketing. Desecration is thy name of all things new—a state where couplets becomest limericks and nursery rhymes becomest horror tales. Atrocity is thy place where the reservoirs of genius draineth from thy world, revealing the sludge puddles of the uncreative nightmare—that place of old where roses are red and violets are still blue. Poetry, poetry, where for art thou, poetry? Perhaps in a place where creative executives launchest their stereotypical atomic bombs and the uninspired go to scratchest their heads. Oh poetry, poetry, can thou be freest of this pop culture madness? Perhaps not in thy place where junk goes to collect, for here thine lyrical defilation is eminent. Oh poetry, poetry, forgive the poison that floods thou here, the poison that makes room for cheesy pop culture, for none who enter shall avoid its stale tongue.

Okay, getting past that painful opening, I am here to tell you that it’s time to switch gears. The best parts of the *Collection of Junk* are now over. It is time, therefore, to wade through the waters of verse and rhyme, of meter and rhythm, and experience a land free of pop culture (except for those many pockets that blatantly refer to pop culture). It is a place where the creative brain can break free of its limits and explore a world that others have undoubtedly visited before. And though none of this is likely to make sense (it is poetry, after all), it will tell of stories that most of us can identify with (unless, of course, we can’t make sense of the nonsensical).

What does all this mean, exactly? It means I have no idea what else to say about this section that might sound remotely interesting. After all, does it really matter if pop culture is involved? There is still a place where creativity shines; there is still a place where the heart can be tugged. The whole setup is designed to reach those places that most of us can identify with. I mean, half this section was written as part of an entrance exam into Hallmark. How much more identity can come from that? Of course, the rivers of genius have to eventually subside. These poems have to say what the uninspired can’t say for themselves. It’s a place where the

human heart can live, even if everything in it has been said before. It's more than pop culture to the untrained eye; it's poetry, true and free.

Okay, now that I've thoroughly confused you, I think you're ready to read these.

—Jeremy



## The Candles of Life

The first candle lights  
A brand new world,  
Bearing the fuse  
Of exciting wonder.  
The earth is fresh;  
The winds breathe joy;  
The sun sparks life  
For drinking eyes to see.

The second candle burns  
A fresh new heart,  
Scorching with hope  
To play with creation.  
Laughter sky rises  
From delighted innocence,  
With peace enveloping  
The child inside.

The third candle flickers  
A place familiar,  
Where adventure transforms  
Into a quest of strength.  
The heart's passion brews  
From the old to the new,  
And the sun still glitters  
For hungry eyes to see.

The fourth candle sparks  
A new kind of love,  
Where desires take shape  
From likeness of heroes.  
The earth is old,  
But its stories progress,  
And life's new wonder  
Sets eyes where it's bright.

The fifth candle glows  
A radiance of dreams,  
Illuminating the spirit  
Of ambitious heart.  
The steps make contact  
With newly paved roads,  
Where visions create  
Imagination from life.

The sixth candle waves  
A cheerful hope  
That many more follow  
In patterns of joy.  
Life takes off  
Into skies of wonder,  
When the world is fresh,  
And seeing eyes sparkle.

The seventh candle shines  
A beauty within,  
That seeks the romance  
Of a promising future.  
Laughter still rises  
With the hopes of dreams,  
And a fresh new heart  
Is born again.

The eighth candle illuminates  
A highway ahead,  
As the sacred heart blossoms  
Into flowers of joy.  
And though the world ages,  
And the sun still sparks,  
The candles still multiply  
For lovely eyes to dream.

The candles of life awaken  
A beginning of new years,  
Where love, hope and dreams,  
Grow with delicate strength.  
The world is never old,  
And the sun always shines,  
Much as the beautiful life,  
Of the one who sees;  
Looking passionately  
Into the sacred light  
Desiring her candles  
To burn ever so bright.

## **Distraction**

The hunter twitches  
When the deer shines  
A beaming headlight  
    Into his eyes;  
It delivers an arrow  
    Into his heart,  
And thus, I break  
    In jagged two.

When attention fades,  
    So does my heart;  
Find God, I must,  
And cry out to Him.

One man I am,  
A man of peace;  
The other I am,  
A man of chaos—  
    I become both,  
A doppelganger of sorts  
Contentious and complacent,  
Confused and chaotic,  
Cautious and careful,  
Conquered and crushed.  
    I look one way,  
But get hit from the other  
    And topple over,  
    Onto my knees.  
It makes no sense  
When I get up again,  
Just to have everything  
    Distract me again.

When attention fades,  
    So does my heart;  
Then I must find God,  
And scream out for Him.

## THE REFLECTING POND

Grand it stands, unyielding,  
Like a rock, unswaying;  
Boldly and majestic,  
Towering over all.  
Unaltered by the wind,  
On the shoreline of the pond;  
With dignity, it rises,  
A centerpiece abroad.

A centerpiece abroad,  
The tower rises tall,  
High above the river,  
Lofty above the pond.  
With eyes that see beyond,  
Through silver planes of glass,  
Looking over water—  
In stillness of the pond.

In stillness of the pond,  
Reflection looking back,  
Mighty like the tower,  
With frailty like a swan.  
The image of a model  
Crafted in the glory,  
Of the tower frail and mighty;  
Perfection in the calm.

Perfection in the calm,  
Unblemished in its rest,  
Uncanny mirror likeness,  
Of the tower standing tall.  
But apple in the pond,  
Sending great ripples all around,  
Rocking hard its tranquil image—  
Now unsettled like a gong.

Now unsettled like a gong,  
 The still picture breaks apart;  
     Wind blowing motion,  
 Through ripples of the squall.  
 By its strength, tries realigning,  
     To iron out its flaws,  
 But the wind sends a shiver;  
     The image takes a fall.

The image takes a fall,  
 Giving up the stormy fight;  
     Accepting its defeat,  
 It embraces fast the squall.  
 Forgetting about its maker,  
 Its likeness undulates away,  
     From its former glory—  
     The tower above it all.

The tower above it all,  
     Shedding a drop of rain,  
 Moistening the ground below,  
 Where shoreline meets its paw.  
     It looks into the pond,  
     Seeing once its image frayed  
 From the pounding of disorder—  
     The effects of the squall.

The effects of the squall,  
 Knocking apple from the tree,  
     Creating the great ripple;  
     Reflection in the fall,  
 It grieves, the mighty tower  
 Unchallenged by the storm,  
 So it scatters vast the wind,  
 Bringing peace to the pond.

Bringing peace to the pond,  
The tower stands at joy;  
Once again, its grand vision—  
Its blessed image created calm.  
And though the wind, it rages,  
It breaks upon the walls,  
Built of the great tower,  
Impenetrable against it all.

Impenetrable against it all,  
The tower finds delight  
In its glorious own reflection  
In the silence of the pond.  
And the image again marvels  
At the splendor from above,  
For the tower rises, unswaying—  
Standing grand, above, unyielding.

## **Like Candy**

How can it be  
Like candy I see  
The sugary dew  
Of sweetness in you?

In years gone by  
It seemed so wry  
To compare stale treats  
To your abundant sweets.

I wish I knew  
Of others like you  
But it's a dry creek  
For you're so unique.

With a peppermint smile  
To add your profile  
You're a candy cart  
Of your own sweet heart.



## VANILLA COKE IN THE HALL

Luscious, at three-thirty, it silently waits,  
Beckoning, quietly, the tongue's great quench;  
Setting, dismally, on a misplaced nightstand,  
It whispers, furtively, for precious attention.  
From a distance, it captures, my wandering eye,  
Standing, alone, down the isolated hall—  
A hospital, bustling, with hectic activity,  
But a Vanilla Coke, holding, its place alone.  
Dying, at three-forty, it goes unheeded,  
Clearly, abandoned, by its former owner;  
Stagnating, roughly, at one-third empty,  
Its condensation, dripping, softly like tears.  
Patients, and nurses, pass with no reverence,  
Walking, briskly, to vendors and smoke huts;  
But the soft drink, the bottle, hangs disastrously silent,  
Slowly, falling, from its plea for support.  
Tired, at three-fifty, I descend from the elevator,  
To see, to my heartbreak, the Vanilla Coke in the hall,  
Standing, alone, on a misplaced nightstand,  
Its owner, clearly, too busy to care.

# MIDNIGHT WIRE

Silky sheets rolling up my face  
 Midnight sky flowing through my space  
 Telephone setting near my head  
 Silence wrapping my dreamland thread  
 Pillow caving to body heat  
 Blankets tossed onto my feet  
 Pinhole stars flecked over clouds  
 Stillness hiding the chaotic shrouds

Until silence breaks  
 And disaster quakes  
 The midnight wire  
 Rings in like fire  
 Frenzy explodes  
 Stillness erodes  
 The midnight wire  
 Rings in like fire

My eyes scream open to raucous stir  
 Telephone blazes in steady blur  
 Hands leap out from beneath the pleats  
 Grabbing the wire from amidst the sheets  
 Yanking the receiver clean off the hook  
 Making a break like a dirty crook  
 Putting the telephone up to my ear  
 Hearing the words that I most fear

The hospital calls  
 My loved one falls  
 The midnight wire  
 Sinks in like mire  
 Teardrops flood  
 Curdling blood  
 The midnight wire  
 Sinks in like mire

Feet fall hard to the softened floor  
Slippers missing behind closet door  
Skin racing from toes to heels  
Legs slipping like banana peels  
Overcoat dangling from picture clasp  
Reality sliding from mental grasp  
Silence gripping the midnight wire  
I leave the house like a blazing fire

## SPIRAL CELLAR STAIRCASE

A portrait hangs by a wooden door,  
Of a lady tossing out a smile.  
She bats her made-up still-frame lashes,  
Whispering, "come over to the door."

The door stands short in back of room,  
Holding tightly to corner shadow.  
The rusty knob splits loose from wood,  
Dangling dangerously from its screws.

Looking for ideas to paint a canvas,  
An artist stretches intently for the portal.  
He twists the knob off its foundation;  
The entrance rattles itself ajar.

The room ahead seems vastly dark,  
But the man identifies his needs.  
Many portraits of the lady hang,  
Calling out for his utmost devotion.

Artist passion draws him through,  
Now putting them blindly face-to-face.  
The lady's image of the long red dress  
Convinces him of her perfection.

He proceeds to remove it from the wall,  
Now uncovering a painted arrow.  
Boldly, it points to a neighboring portrait;  
The lady, now seductive in blue.

Coming quickly off the adjacent wall,  
The next picture points to another.  
After five more cycles of gathering circles,  
A middle arrow points to the floor.

The man advances below the arrow,  
To find a floor hatch still and waiting.  
Square-shaped and centered in the floor,  
The door blocks mystery in the dark.

Bolted fast with its pivoting hinges,  
It folds open from the man's power.  
Darker than the room in the corner,  
He sees a shaft descending to a cellar.

At first, he hesitates looking forward,  
But a portrait calls out from below.  
He kneels steadily to the passage lip,  
Finding a staircase spiraling to the bottom.

Though his arms are full of the lady's portraits,  
Curiosity shoves him against his back.  
He steps questioning toward the spiraling staircase,  
To heed the lady's boisterous shout.

Descending the shaft slowly in circles,  
The artist glimpses the lady in shorts.  
Her pinned up hair now draping down,  
A spiraling arrow protruding from her canvas.

The deep, dark cylinder drops a distance,  
A new portrait smiling from every step.  
The lady's red dress grows shorter and shorter,  
While her shorts become fully absent.

When the man finally hits the bottom,  
He finds a small cellar of cobwebs unfolding.  
Though the wine barrels appear most plentiful,  
The liquefied grapes lie pungent on the floor.

The seductive lady's no longer decent,  
Nor her smile anymore friendly.  
But her portrait portfolio runs plentiful,  
Consuming each corner of the wall.

The artist prided himself on decency,  
 But now his mind spins out of control.  
 With spilled wine stinking the floor at his feet,  
 The lady surrounds his thoughts with whispers.

The cellar walls constrict at her cue;  
 The way of his escape drawing thin.  
 As her portraits break free of their place on the wall,  
 He covers his head from her assailing power.

Desperate to leave the abyss of her cellar,  
 The man runs speedily for the staircase.  
 But as he takes his first few steps,  
 The metal stairs fold downward into a slope.

The revealing lady pummels him fiercely,  
 As he tries desperately to claw up the stairs.  
 With every step he moves upward,  
 He plummets painfully down three more.

Hitting the cellar floor time after time,  
 The man notices something new.  
 The once still frames of the lovely lady,  
 Transform into vivid motion.

When the cellar shrinks to half its size,  
 The walls among wine barrels split open.  
 And, alas, the moving pictures of the lady,  
 Make room for her living likeness.

Though her face shines with beautiful makeup,  
 Her claws drip savagely with blood.  
 As she makes her way toward the struggling artist,  
 Rusty spikes penetrate the closing walls.

Quickly, the enclosure increases speed,  
 Ready to crush the man to a pulp.  
 And the lady breaks stride to a run,  
 Ready to ravage him for the rest of his soul.

Wistfully hoping for a chance of escape,  
The man makes one final sacrifice.  
Though his project may ultimately suffer,  
He throws, fiercely, the portraits at the lady.

Like a discus, they hurtle resolutely at her,  
Seven dresses knocking her in the chest.  
As she tumbles floorward like a ragged doll,  
A light upstairs flashes on.

Narrowly escaping the spikes in the walls,  
The man grabs tightly to the staircase railings.  
Looking upward to find the only way out,  
He fights viciously the downward spiral.

## Overwhelmed

Lord, God, even as hours pass  
I'm speechless  
Your glory overwhelms me  
I cannot contain it  
I'm losing my mind  
You're so overwhelming  
My heart shudders  
It can't comprehend  
The amazing beauty  
The absolute glory that surrounds you  
Where does it come from?  
I lament, Lord  
For I don't know what to do  
I'm stunned  
And yet, scared  
Your glory surrounds me  
You bestow my world with beauty  
Even the faintest hint of your image  
That true, deep, purity that cleanses,  
That heals  
That magnifies your brilliance  
And it's enough to knock me  
On my back  
I can't contain it.  
I'm overwhelmed.  
I am so completely overwhelmed  
I'm vastly overwhelmed  
Please comfort me  
Restore my heart  
The beauty you've bestowed  
I can't grasp it  
Who am I to grasp it?  
Why do you love me so tenderly?  
I'm losing sleep over this  
My soul yearns for more  
But my heart can't take it  
You overwhelm me



Your glory is beyond measure  
Your love is beyond measure  
How can this be true?  
Only through your love can this be true.

## Jewel Colored Smile

Emerald green,  
Fluoride clean,  
Brush away  
The quarantine.

Ruby red,  
Candy fed,  
Upturn your lips  
From sorrow's lead.

Sapphire blue,  
Sparkling true,  
Light those eyes  
With brilliance anew.

Velvet violet,  
Comic style it,  
Hair blown back;  
A smile to wile it.

Diamond white,  
Teeth so bright,  
Radiate beauty  
For heart's delight.

Orange orange,  
Rhyme with orange,  
Laugh out loud—  
Can't rhyme with orange.

Rosy pink,  
Blushing cheeks,  
Sunshine glowing  
On laughter's brink.

Crystal clear,  
Freshened air,  
The sweetest breath  
To hold most dear.

Liquid dry,  
No need to cry,  
Dreams come true—  
The heart will fly.

Fluoride green,  
Squeaky clean,  
Smile deeply  
You're a queen.

## *When the String of Lights*

When the string of lights  
Dance around ornamental songs,  
Evergreen branches wave  
For all Christmas long;  
Celebrate the joyous moments  
From morning 'til night,  
With family, friends and Jesus  
Around the string of lights.

## *Five Steps to the Future*

When I took my first step to the unknown,  
My path was dark and I lost my way home,  
Uncertain of how long I would journey alone.

Taking my second step was less of a plight  
For God had decided that I needed a light—  
Something to lead me out of the night.

And as I set upon my third growing stride,  
Noticing quite plainly out of the corner of my eye,  
I saw my heart lift into the sun-drenched sky.

For my fourth step came packaged with your smile,  
Which I first discovered along this sacred mile,  
Filled with God's pure artistic style.

I took my fifth step with my hand outstretched,  
So happy you chose to reach out and accept,  
To share with me the next adventurous step.

***A WORLD OF TRANSFORMERS AND G.I. JOE***

I remember a time long ago  
When life had dreams with room to grow;  
In a world of Transformers and G.I. Joe,  
A place of sunshine and a land of “whoa.”  
In those days past, amusement reigned  
Like a king and his horse, a throne unchained;  
With laughter abundant and friendship gained,  
I found my twin and you remained.

*Ezer Kenegdo*

When through our window flashed the dawning light,  
A flood of revelations hazed my sights:  
Woken beside me I found great wonder,  
My elusive rib—a living sculpture.  
For a number of years I fell asleep,  
As a man fulfilled, but not yet complete;  
The world persisted in a fuzzy dream,  
Where somehow the balance had missed the beam.  
But a moment came when our worlds converged,  
My eyes were open, but my brain submerged,  
Yet, somehow, I realized the world transformed,  
For life was instantly a dream reborn.  
We spoke our soft greetings, sharing a smile—  
The mystery of romance fresh in style,  
Soon to unveil a black tux and white dress;  
Now our bright future will decide the rest.  
Without you, I'm sure my heart would die,  
And the green earth would sob from darkened sky;  
Although my day would linger some,  
Your hand saved me from life's tedium.  
Thank you much for your gracious love,  
More precious that it came from high above,  
I know the journey is long ahead,  
But there's none other I'd want with me instead.

## *Words of Wisdom*

### **Long-Distance Friend:**

If cars could drive on the ocean,  
I'd like to meet halfway in Hawaii.

### **Inspiration:**

When you kneel down to drink from the oasis,  
You'll catch a reflection of the sun.

### **Teasing the Relatives on Their Birthday:**

The nice thing about turning fifty—  
You get to tease your kids about turning thirty.

Turning forty is a lot like crashing a sports car—  
When the wreckage clears, you misplace your youth.

### **Graduation:**

Graduation is the cherry  
Atop a cake made of dreams.

### **Personal Philosophy:**

Sometimes the smallest thing,  
Like clean fingernails,  
Can reveal a man's quality  
To everyone.



## ***Message with a Tie***

When I leapt bluntly into the world,  
The physician delivered you a smack,  
Neither on the face, nor on the hand,  
But resolutely on the back.  
He said, "Congratulations to you, sir,  
A blessing popped in your world;  
Treat the little youngster kindly  
And through the grown adult you'll find reward."  
And after all these passing years,  
I am quietly proud to say,  
The doctor was a well-learned man,  
Because you proved your love each day.  
And now I'm here to pay you back  
For all the milestone things you braved  
Through loosened teeth to prom night sweets—  
You're worth this happy day in waves.

## *Zephyr Umbrella*

A dark cloud erupting  
could've drowned my life's ever uncertain journey,  
raining on me  
the weight of blind decision.  
But somehow,  
your wise words,  
your dedicated involvement,  
through my fountainous years,  
sent a comforting cold front  
through my life's blistering heat—  
my life's unstable skies—  
sweeping away  
any trace of vapor  
vying to soak my path,  
causing me to slip,  
and stumble.  
I stand here confidently,  
dry and stable,  
because you know  
how to keep me this way.

## **Prioritized**

A father's love  
is more reliable  
than his car—  
the one he invests  
his life to preserve.

## Holiday Lyrical

Snowflakes falling,  
Cider steaming,  
Cookies baking,  
Children dreaming,  
Chimneys rising,  
Cellphones ringing,  
Families laughing,  
Choirs singing;  
Christmas is here.

## **Poetry Commentaries**

So how did you do? Is your brain still reeling, or did you get through the section unscathed? Well, regardless of how you're feeling, you've now arrived to the sacred land of commentaries, where the verse of poetry can reach its end. Therefore, from this point forward, consider yourself spared from further lyrical onslaught. It's a happy thought, don't you think? Anyway, as usual, the following segment will shed some light on the story behind the poems. Hope you finish it with a warm, fuzzy feeling inside.

Oh, and just to prepare you, the first half deals with personal material I wrote for friends, more friends and for the sake of this book, while the second half deals exclusively with my Hallmark application. I think you might be impressed, though I won't be upset if you're not. And with that, I hope you dive in nose-first and enjoy.

### **The Candles of Life**

I suppose it's fitting to start the most ambiguous section of the book with the most ambiguous entry in its lineup. This poem, "The Candles of Life," began its first flicker as a handwritten gift to a friend.

For her 24<sup>th</sup> birthday, I wrote this poem for this friend I once cared a lot about, that she might appreciate the birthday for what it was—a celebration of life. It was also a means for me to actually give her something tangible, since I didn't have any object ideas to send her at that time, and I figured this was the best thing I had to give. After all, it was creative and could not be denied its place as one "from the heart." But the sound gesture didn't change the fact that it was a hard poem to write and one that could never quite get its footing together.

Which introduces its problem: it's an interesting poem with nowhere to go. It's supposed to chronicle life according to how many candles were on the cake, and more specifically, to chronicle this friend's life (even though I had missed most of it). But because 24 stanzas were far too many to write for the type of poem it wanted to be, I had to cut it to eight candles and a summary. So now it tried to encapsulate a life that had so much more to tell and many more candles to tell it with, within a considerably smaller margin. Trying to fit those little tales into 44 lines was an absurd endeavor, indeed, and for that, I think it shows.

This isn't to suggest that I think it's a bad poem. I just think that to make it great, it has to be rewritten from scratch. Unfortunately, that would mean remembering the things that I once admired about this friend, and I'm not sure that I can. Likewise, I can't rewrite it for another friend, because then it wouldn't be original, or heartfelt. In the end, it's another casualty of bad positioning that will only be remembered for its purpose.

### **Distraction**

This poem also began its life from ink on paper—a piece of stationary if you really care—but not from a sensible order. I started it at my desk at JFK, because I was distracted by something—probably thoughts of a girl—probably thoughts of the girl I wrote the first poem for—but I didn't feel like putting it into the computer. Most likely I had forgotten to bring my floppy disk with me (an ancient form of saving data for those who forgot about the evolution of personal computers), so the pen and stationary were the best instruments I had to take the poem home with me. And, of course, I wrote the jumbled mess, stuffed it in my backpack and forgot about it for several years. It wasn't until last March that I finally transcribed it into my own computer. And now it's conveniently available for anyone to read.

Now why was the act of getting distracted such a big issue with me? Why is it still a big issue with me? Because I think God has great things in store for my future, things that I'll have in time, provided I don't stray from the path He's outlined. By chasing some shiny quarter in the street, I think I jeopardize that—maybe not indefinitely, but certainly in the time that it matters to me. It's the thing that keeps us in the same place for far too long. It's the thing that makes ADD, among other things, so aggravating to handle. Because I get so frustrated over my propensity toward distraction, I thought it was worth getting poetic about. So that's what I have to say about it.

### **The Reflecting Pond**

The story behind "The Reflecting Pond" began with a busy friend. Now it's no secret that I have a hard time getting friends to take time out for me, they're that busy, but it's a hard time I've forced myself to put up with. One could call it my defense mechanism for fighting self-esteem

problems. By the time I moved into that lakeside condominium called “Capistrano” for the year I finished school, however, that hard time had managed to follow me, and my patience in dealing with it had grown thin. This friend, who put the absurd parts of the busy life ahead of me, or rather ahead of talking to me (a friend who claimed to appreciate me, not a friend who tried to tell me something by not telling me anything), triggered in me a realization about busyness when she neglected me yet another phone conversation with her to attend to her own busyness. That realization looked a lot like distortion.

One of the nice things about living in that little two-bedroom apartment was that I could sit in my living room on a Sunday afternoon and watch Jet Skis fly by. Or, at nights I could stand in my empty dining room and look out the window toward all those little porch lights across the lake. Or, if I was feeling really ambitious, I could stand outside my sliding glass door and count all the windows covering the nursing home on the adjacent shore. My opportunities to appreciate my backyard lake were limitless. On this particular night, however, I didn’t do any of the three, but I did try to find a lesson in the madness of the supposed busy life that plagued my friends.

The image that finally came to me, after only a couple minutes of staring over the water, was the symbolism of the tall building on the other shore (the nursing home) reflecting in the pond. It was the largest structure on that shore, but it also cast the biggest reflection. And that reflection was clear as long as the “busyness” of the water didn’t distort it. But once the distortion came, the image was no longer recognizable. Take that back to the Fall of Man and you have the point behind “The Reflecting Pond.”

It’s like the adage that says, “If the devil can’t make you bad, he’ll make you busy.” If anything happens to kill a relationship, then the devil did his job. It’s something most of us don’t think about, of course, probably because we’re too busy to give it consideration. But anything that jeopardizes relationships is a violation of God’s plan. After all, the whole reason why He put us here was to relate, not to busy ourselves with ninety hours of work. Why else is it that our relationships are the things that carry into Heaven, not our huge projects that we completed in a week, or the money we made from finishing? Why was man’s first sin, the sin of disobedience, the one that invited him to experience knowledge—that canvas of understanding that stands opposite of relationship (specifically, the leaning on our own understanding, rather than on the experience of God and others)—and to ultimately discover himself naked

(a product of understanding), where now he's ashamed to be exposed to his wife, and thus is afraid to relate to her?

Obviously, this could become a theological debate that could fill an entire book in itself, but I just wanted to share my viewpoint here, anyway, because I can. So with that, I'll leave you to run somewhere with a new add campaign I'm making for the Western World:

"Welcome to progress, friends. Welcome to the Great Decline. Here's to distortion and the embracing of the busy life. Go ahead and answer that business call during dinner. Your friends and family won't mind. They have their own things to do. Welcome to progress, friends. Welcome to the Great Decline. You don't have to answer to God, just answer to your cellphone. Your idol is calling you."

### **Like Candy**

This was another birthday gift to the friend I was once crazy about. It was actually my last birthday gift to her, as her propensity to return my calls had stalled out shortly thereafter. It was for her 27<sup>th</sup> this time and had absolutely nothing to do with candles. It was, rather, meant to express my impression of her "sweet heart." I think she might have liked it, but I don't know for sure; I really didn't hear much from her again after that month—maybe once or twice, but far too long after to really discuss it. I think she had gotten too busy; I seem to recall that being the reason she gave for not responding to my calls anymore. Sweet of her, indeed.

### **Vanilla Coke in the Hall**

The concept for this poem originated during my term with JFK, but was never written until a few months ago. It was just another byproduct of my overwhelming roster of projects that I had to finish over time, rather than at once—much like my continuously growing DVD collection of movies I never watch—that didn't get its due until I was ready to put this book together. Fortunately, I had gotten around to writing it, and now I have to admit that it's one of my favorites here.

But what does that really lend to the subject itself? Well, besides my obvious neglect to immortalize the very thing that I saw neglected, probably not much. So maybe it's time to talk about that neglected subject.



Yes, the Vanilla Coke in the Hall was a real Vanilla Coke in a hall. On an afternoon in my last year at JFK, I had walked down the main corridor of 3 North toward the elevator, lugging around either the big metal decontamination cart we used for emptying the soiled utility rooms, or a gastrointestinal suction machine that was used for assisting gastric bypasses (those procedures where morbidly obese patients get their stomachs stapled), or maybe both, when I looked toward 3 Northwest (the navigation of the hospital doesn't really matter, so don't feel bad if you have no idea what I'm talking about) to see a bottle of Vanilla Coke setting alone on a patient's food table that had conveniently been removed from the patient's room. When I saw that image, I immediately thought of loneliness (remember, I'm the guy who wrote the story about a traveling rubber duck, so there's merit here), and consequently thought the image would make for a great poem about isolation. So that's what inspired "Vanilla Coke in the Hall." It had nothing to do with my feelings about big corporations, or what I'd like to see happen to most of them.

### Midnight Wire

Honestly, this poem is one of the few that I tend to forget about. I have no doubt that it's a good poem; might even be one of the better ones here. I just can never remember I have it. Why? Well, I wrote it spur of the moment during that season when I was working full steam ahead on *Panhandler Underground* (my novel that I hope some big named publisher will pick up someday), and then put it in my document folder where I later forgot I had it.

I broke rhythm from my novel one night in November to write this after I had read the news that one of the kids from that gaming community I sometimes write for had committed suicide. The news stunned me—not so much for what he had done to himself, but for how his brother (another active member) responded to it. Let's just say it prompted me to write a poem about the shock one might have from hearing tragic news in the middle of the night.

The style, though not relevant considering the source of the inspiration, was supposed to mimic the oscillation between the calm and the frantic. It's that blend of hearing reality without knowing how to respond to it. I imagine most of us can understand the rhythm for one reason or another. It's not hard to imagine the rhythm of one's off-kilter heart in the face of such despair.

So that's the tragic story behind this poem. I didn't know the kid, but sometimes that's not required to feel like crap about it. I'm sure you can agree, as I'm sure you might be feeling like crap about it right now, too.

### Spiral Cellar Staircase

Every once in awhile I attempt to create an epic poem. For this collection, "Spiral Cellar Staircase" is that poem.

There are a couple influences—okay, maybe more than a couple—behind it's aesthetic quality. For starters, the title alone comes from the same title resonance as a Lifehouse song I like a lot called "Sick Cycle Carousel," which is part of the group's first CD. I don't remember listening to that song at the time I thought of this, but the title was so hard to forget that it just crept up on me during that pivotal naming period. Also, the imagery of the scene had its influences from other pop culture sources, including a bit of *Clue*, a bit of Edgar Allen Poe's "The Raven," as parodied by *The Simpsons* in their first Halloween special, a bit *TimeSplitters 2*, a shooting game that I have for my Gamecube, and a bit of my own "Eve of Construction," where the protagonist descends to his place of judgment. All of these things lent to the design of the poem, but not to the subject.

The subject brings to life the warnings of Solomon in Proverbs Chapter 7, where the immoral woman tries to lure the wayward traveler away from his mission to invite him to his destruction. In the chapter, he talks about how the woman shouts from her window to the man, and then goes down to the street to meet him, calling him to join her for some night of pleasure. The man, who is without sense, goes into the woman's chambers, where she essentially devours his soul.

Fast forward several thousand years into our own sex-saturated society, and we have the same problems luring in all those wayward innocents to their places of destruction. The man who can't please his wife, because he's too focused on his nudie magazine; or the one who leaves his wife, because she can't satisfy him the way his hot coworker might—all of these things are a product of that warped mind that gets caught by a siren who sings through the wall of good sense. Solomon warned the world of these issues long ago, and "Spiral Cellar Staircase" reflects the fact that not everyone listened. Of course, where God intervenes, healing and rescue can take place, as is the point of the last stanza.

So that's the point of this poem: use good sense and read the Proverbs, too.

### **Overwhelmed**

This poem doesn't need commentary. After seeing the beauty of God in perhaps the strongest form I've seen it yet, I felt winded, stunned and, well, overwhelmed. This was my reaction to that. As far as what it was that God used to bring me to my knees, and later into the fetal position, and even later still into a long walk through the park...that's between God and I. Sorry.

### **Jewel Colored Smile**

I wrote this one to a super long-distance friend during the halfway point of a letter. There wasn't really anything to prompt it; I just wrote it. I guess one could say I wanted to be sure this friend was smiling, and I thought this poem would be one way of encouraging that. I still don't know if she smiled, because I haven't received any comment about it, yet. But maybe one day she'll let me know. (Hint hint.)

### **When the String of Lights**

And this was written to the same friend, but for a digital Christmas card. Like the one before it, I still don't know how it was received. Too well written to speak of it, maybe—like the awe one feels from having seen the Grand Canyon for the first time? Yeah, probably not.

### **Five Steps to the Future**

All righty then, now we hit some commercial territory. How nice, right? This is the start of my Hallmark examination set.

This particular poem was the first example I wrote for the writing prompt: "Write a serious rhymed and metered verse (12-16) to a loved one or friend (choose one)." This was the first of two I wrote "to a friend." It started out as a single stanza, but I broke it into five pieces for the sake of this book, because, since I never got into Hallmark, I didn't

think it mattered how the poem looked anymore. Anyway, this was part of the first round of exercises. It was also one of three poems I wrote to answer the prompt, and ultimately was one of two that I decided not to use in my application. I thought it was a good poem, but ultimately too dark for a greeting card, so it was brushed aside for something else.

As far as the reference, it was just something I pulled out of thin air. This doesn't refer to anyone in particular. Sometimes poets and professional greeting card candidates just have to do that.

### **A World of Transformers and G.I. Joe**

My second option for answering that first prompt looked something like this. Stemming a little more into reality, this poem chronicles the early half of the life I had, where the '80s produced pieces of pop culture that tickled my senses the way that the '90s tickled Elmo. Since my closest friends all grew up with the same pop culture influences, I think it made sense to write a poem reflecting that, ultimately tying us all to the same mold. And that, of course, took us down those same bike trails, those same pitching mounds, and all those other things that shaped a boy's first twelve years. And because it referred to these elements of '80s pop culture, I pushed it aside, for I didn't think Hallmark would care. They are, after all, "progressive."

### **Ezer Kenegdo**

Okay, the last of the three options centered on the "loved one," also a theme I pulled from thin air, because surprise, ladies, there is still no one to fill that void. Ahem. So I wrote this one, thought it was the best of the three (certainly the most Hallmark-y), and used it in my application. I don't mean to brag, but it helped me get to Round Two of their vicious scrutiny. What? Hallmark vicious? May it never be! (Figure of speech, folks. I'm sure they're nice—they are America's most reputable company after all. Anyway, enough with the hyping of the major greeting card company. This isn't their anthology.)

The original poem—the version I sent with my application—ended after the line "Now our bright future will decide the rest." Because it had to be a maximum of sixteen lines, I couldn't very well make it longer than it was. So I didn't. And thus, the poem itself centered on the aspect of a

guy waking up on his honeymoon, thinking “Holy crap, I’m married,” and then reflecting on how the heck it happened.

But then, I had to expand it, because the term “Ezer Kenegdo” has nothing to do with a honeymoon, but of the “lifesaver” that the woman is to the man, as John and Stasi Eldredge point out in their book about women called *Captivating*, a book that I had to read because I still don’t understand women. I mean, I really don’t understand them. I thought I did, but I don’t. Ahem. So having liked the way that term sounded to me, and having liked the way it describes a woman’s role to a man (read the book for greater clarification), I thought it was the most appropriate title for the poem. The poem, however, wasn’t the most appropriate representation of the title, so I added a few more lines to impress the point that the guy is better off with this girl, which is an addition I chose to write exclusively for this book.

So there you go. And thank you in advance to the girl who decides to be my “Ezer Kenegdo.” Hopefully you’ll read this book.

### Words of Wisdom

This wasn’t a poem so much as it was just a series of quotes and one-liners. The examples covered a number of writing prompts, which rounded out the remainder of the creative exercises in Round One, and launched the opening exercises of Round Two. Each title in boldface print indicated the prompt that the exercises asked for. That’s about as straightforward as it gets.

If there’s anything I can add to this, it’s that two of the examples here referred to real people. The first, the two-liner about driving across the Pacific to meet a friend halfway in Hawaii (a line I would’ve used for the “submit a line of dialogue to the *Transformers* movie” contest, had I known about it a week earlier), referred to a friend I have way overseas. The second, the “teasing a relative” prompt about turning fifty, referred specifically to my aunt, who, at the time, had just turned fifty, while my cousin, coincidentally, had just turned thirty. So if you’re reading this from a large continent in the Southwest Pacific, or if you’re my aunt (and you know who you are because you’re both my favorite aunt and my only aunt, and you make the best pumpkin pies ever), then you can be happy to know that I wrote about you in my application for Hallmark.

### Message with a Tie

This was the first exercise for Round Two, which asked for either a Father's Day poem or a Valentine's Day poem. Since I was sick of the Valentine's Day poems, I decided to write something for all the dads. And this was what I wrote. I didn't want something cheesy, or sappy, or any of those other things that would make an old man question his son's masculinity should he receive something like that on a card, so I went with something that involved the doctor smacking him. Any good father would appreciate receiving something like that from his kid. Plus, the poem had to be humorous, and how much funnier can a poem about a doctor smacking the parent really be? If my own father were still around to read this, I'm pretty sure he'd display that smile and that nod of "yep, that's my son" on his face. So there you go.

### Zephyr Umbrella

This was supposed to be written from the perspective of a woman thanking her aunt (or some relative, but I thought of aunts) for helping her through the hard times. Yes, sometimes we writers are asked to do the unthinkable and change genders on a dime. I'm not proud of it, but then, that's why it's competitive. Okay, that doesn't really make sense. Whatever—that's what the prompt called for. So anyway, I had to write a poem catering to this audience, and somehow came up with the imagery of troubles raining down and the aunt serving as the umbrella. And, ironically, as dark as the imagery was, I used it anyway. Round Two was the final round, by the way, and I'm still waiting tables if that gives you any indication how things went with that. So that's the story behind "Zephyr Umbrella." Nice tough name for a poem about influential females.

### Prioritized

This poem was simply written as a rewrite to another poem about a grandma. I can't really call it mine, because the original (about the grandma's love) wasn't mine. But then, I can call it mine, anyway, because the only thing to translate over was the template. So that's the short and sweet version of this poem's origin. I had to change the subject to a "father's love," and this is what I came up with. Pretty simple exercise.

### Holiday Lyrical

This was another rewrite exercise, this time transforming an Easter verse into an “updated” Christmas verse. Although the words are mostly mine (as much as words in this scenario can be), the format is not, so I have to give that credit to Hallmark, or to whomever it was they ripped it from. Since this poem is Christmas thematic, and since it was written for a greeting card company but never used, feel free to consider it public domain. I don’t mind. Christmas is two months away, anyway. Merry Christmas (in two months).

### In Conclusion:

Well, good things come and good things go, but poetry will never leave. Having said that, I hope you felt inspired by the words within the meters, and that maybe you even feel led to share them with your friends who you want to say things to, but don’t know how to express yourself. That is, after all, one of poetry’s functions. And though you might not appropriately get your message of strong feelings across with a poem like “Spiral Cellar Staircase,” or adequately show your appreciation of a friend through a poem like “Jewel Colored Smile,” because your friend would have to read it first, you could take a poem like “Message with a Tie” to tell your dad, “thanks for hanging in there,” and that would be great, because then the poem’s purpose can be fulfilled, and all of us can have a smile. So having said that, I hope you enjoyed this section. Stay tuned for the next segment involving stories of my real life.

And for those who might be wondering, the second round of exercises for Hallmark didn’t stop with poetry. There was a whole marketing campaign element in the latter half I didn’t tell you about (a fictitious one at that), which was an area I had very little experience dealing with. I’m sure it was my clunky response to their fake rapport campaign that ultimately landed me my rejection letter. I won’t put those campaigns in this book (I’d like something of that test to stay exclusive to Hallmark), but if you’re really interested, I can email you what I wrote.

So that’s the end of that. Take your breather now and get your head together.

—Jeremy





# Nonfiction Essays

Summer 1999

Invigoration

Writer's Block

Messages of Purity

Urban Livestock

Transition of an Era

Palm Trees

Drug Induced Pedestrians

What Blows Around, Comes Around

The Perfect Day

Novel Mysterious



## Introduction

Once again we reach a point where the fiction has to take a nap and the true-to-life stuff wakes up. Though the stories behind us may have been amazing, none of them compare to the tales ahead, tales that are amazing because they're true.

I guess there's a special kind of thrill that comes from reading other people's life stories. Unlike the fabricated lives of Jack Bauer or Mickey Mouse, both very adrenaline-pumped characters, these stories couldn't be made up if someone put them in a fashion magazine. A tale about cows eating grass near a mall, therefore, has to be true and exciting, for who in their right mind would fabricate that?

The world expects another James Bond. The world expects another Batman. The world even expects another Michael Jackson. So why should the stories of the world be limited to them? Why not give people something new to look forward to? Why not put the perspective of a palm tree into focus and think about what it must be like for a tin shed to fight a hurricane? This segment of *Seven-Sided Dice* addresses these questions in the form of my real life, and I assure you, the questions are answered.

Excitement may be an inflated word for the life of a writer—the fact that excitement escapes us in the real world is the whole reason why we craft stories to begin with—but I think I've had my share of interesting moments, enough to fill this section with golden nuggets. Though some of these essays are merely journals, not much in the way of narration, many more outline the life that defined my late-twenties. So if you're one for action, adventure, and all the things that make life a dream, then pop in a copy of *Die Another Day* and watch as James Bond takes out a North Korean platoon on a hovercraft in the middle of a minefield. But if you want to see the things that gives my life a plethora of crazy dreams, then turn the pages to see for yourself what kind of life a writer can have.

—Jeremy

## Summer 1999

I don't know why I'm writing what I'm writing. I'm not certain if I'm composing a journal or just random thoughts from my head. I know I've endured much this summer, so much that I feel like I'm still reeling, yet am completely numb to my feelings at hand. But I don't know if I'm suffering or just learning what life is supposed to be about this point in time, while uncertain why the summer of 1999 is unfolding the way it is. I guess I feel like my sense of balance has wavered. Then again, I don't think whatever it is I'm writing here is my attempt to justify, or even to analyze the events that have taken, or will continue to take place this season. I'm not even sure if there's a point to writing any of this down, other than to remember what I've learned about myself.

I should probably start by saying that I'm twenty-three years old. Two weeks ago I celebrated yet another year of my life, but am not entirely sure what impressive things I've done to highlight it. I'm still trying to earn my Bachelor's Degree after having been out of high school for five years. The last semester of classes I've taken have proven to me, through unsightly failure, that it'll take me even longer to graduate than I had originally anticipated. The truth is, after such failure, I have no idea when I'm getting out of school, nor do I know what I'll do afterward. I feel like a fish shot into space—can't breathe and can't swim and have no control over my future.

It's no secret that I'm on my knees a lot, asking God why things are the way they are. I can't say the answers are clear, either; I discovered the hard way that not everything I hear in my mind is God's voice. Truthfully, I'm not even sure how to listen to God anymore. Some say that peace in my heart is usually the final sign of confirmation to a certain decision, yet I'm also told that the heart is deceitful. In the end, I've found that my judgment has put me into a lot of difficult or even harsh situations, all because I followed my heart or listened to my brain.

The only way I feel I can live anymore is by the choices I make each day; then seeing where I end up in five or ten years. Evidently, this is the way that people with peace live anyway. It drives me nuts, though, not to know where I'll be in the future. I can't help but to think that the decisions I've made in life, and the things to occur this summer, are in some way the elements that break down my heart so I can see the world a little more objectively. In other words, as painful or even frightening as some things may be, it all works out for a reason. I guess the reasons just

like to harass me. Perhaps, after all, the way to listen to God is just to live and see what unfolds and know if the outcome is right or wrong.

Even with my mind probed, I still have no idea what point I'm making here. I'm not upset about anything right now, so my emotions aren't particularly stirred. One could say I'm finding the peace that follows a vicious shock to the system—which in my case would be at least two in a row, with a flavor of those various little things that keep my week interesting, if not scary. Or maybe I'm just looking for a way to remind myself that even the hardest moments last only briefly, and that there is a form of lasting growth to come from it.

After an incident that left me feeling empty and stupid after the summer began, I had slowly been learning new things about myself. Some were shocking, while others did not surprise me. The biggest thing probably comes down to my combination of compulsion and fear. I find it difficult to stand aside and let God direct my life the way He wants to direct it. I know I'm not the only person to struggle with this, but it doesn't make me any more comfortable to know it. It shames me to think that many of the things I've done in recent times have been for myself and by my own direction, rather than what I have originally believed to be God's direction. It shames me even more to know that I may have put my own ambitions ahead of God, or at least ahead of God's will. I feel like a majority of my lessons this summer have been reflective of my evident distrust.

I thought I was going to go into detail about the things I've learned, and why I learned them, but I'm not sure I want to put those on paper. It may serve as a good memory background to reflect on over the years, but realistically, there will be new conflicts in life that will require the same lessons to be put into practice. So the lessons that have brought me to attempt to understand my faults are irrelevant in the long run, even if they are a big deal to me right now. I guess the important thing to remember is that I'm twenty-three years old and that my concerns are pretty much the same as those that any other single and careerless person in this country would have.

I cannot say that I don't have my anxieties about the future, though. I believe the lessons that have been given to me, especially the lesson that anything can happen at any time, have shown me that all the worrying in the world won't change my outcome. If I have to take any comfort in anything, it's knowing that God is directing me, whether I can see it or not. This is pretty evident in the implications behind each lesson, and why they have worked out the way they have. Whether it's life, love, responsibility, or anything really, I don't have sound control over my life.

Anything I take into my own hands is a risk for failure, and a nose-breaking one at that, so a genuine trust in God is the only sensible way I can live. If I had truly understood what that meant early on in life, maybe I wouldn't labor over the reasons for things working out the way they do. On the other hand, I could never learn if my mistakes weren't made, so I guess it's not all for folly.

I don't know. Maybe it takes a strong man to live, but it takes a shaped man to live right. I'm still not sure if I'm either, but I'm confident that I'm becoming something important. I'm sure something will arise, though, and all this will make sense, and I may even know how to tie it all together. I do know that if God wasn't directing me, I'd still be doing the same stupid things with my life, and focusing on the same ambitions. I'm not saying I don't still struggle—I'll always struggle—but I can look to my future with some kind of hope that I'm not going to turn out so badly.

From  
July 11, 1999

## ***Invigoration***

It's been awhile since I last recorded the matters of my life with the hope of figuring things out. I think I've tried a few times lately, but deleted what I started, because frankly I've forgotten how to begin these things.

Occasionally, I question if what I'm struggling with is even worth writing down. And when I do start jotting my thoughts, I wonder if I really want others to read them. Then, when I finally finish, I sit back and wonder if I myself want to read them. My train of thought seems to constantly drag along some rusty track, threatening to derail at any moment. And yet, when it's all over, I still end up reading the final result, much to the shock that, perhaps in all that jumbled mess, I really did have something to say.

But because I'm writing down my thoughts anyway, I guess I should start by chronicling the moment in time that triggered this. I figure it's good to remember the events that brought me here, so I'll just recount the last few days and see where this goes.

About four hours ago I walked away from my job at the hospital that I kept for nearly three years. After months and months of dragging out our services, the hospital finally allowed my department's contract to end. We knew it was coming since February (it's June now), and to be honest, some of us anticipated that ending long ago. But we couldn't land a date, because when the hospital and the contractor couldn't come to a firm agreement about when to cut us loose, all sorts of mind games began. Our supervisor was given promises that no one in charge could keep. The rest of us were offered new positions within the hospital to do the same type of work, plus a little extra, for a substantial decrease in pay. And while some of us chose to go with the new position for one reason or another, others of us had to bow out for the sole fact that unemployment statistically paid more. The confusion both parties set upon us, and the uncertainty of when we could back out safely—as in making ourselves eligible for unemployment services—had evaporated our morale to terribly low levels. Job performance grew slack and job duties were cut. Asking us to do any kind of work became an offensive gesture. We were tired of the way things were going.

But the resolution finally came and now there's some peace in a few of our hearts.

So why even mention my work status? Realistically, my job situations don't carry a lot of weight in my bank of concerning thoughts, so why now? I don't know what tomorrow will bring now that have no job to get

up for. I have all sorts of freedom to do whatever I want, yet have to save money in case nothing new opens up right away. And frankly, I'm not bothered by that. Why? I don't know. Mentioning the events of today should only be written for the sake of creating a timeline.

But I can't limit myself to that, because there is something playing a factor into my life that the job and the crap it brought to me had greatly magnified. Frankly, I've been angry for quite awhile now.

Emotions are a tough thing to handle, whether you're a teenager, a grumpy old man, or something in between. For the three years that I worked from that desk, punching asset numbers into a mindless system of records; for the three years of leaving that desk to scan those said asset numbers in the rooms of old people, sick people and dead people; and for the three years that we got crapped on by the "established" departments within the hospital (those departments that were considered special because they had their own focus weeks once a year, while us lowly contractors didn't), I had suffered a decline in joy. And for good reason, I think.

I never wanted to come back to South Florida. I left in 1998 to make a new life for myself—starting with that fabled journey through college. Armed with an Associate's Degree from the local community college, I left for Central Florida to finish up my education. In my journey, I was on track to collect that Bachelor's Degree by December 2000. It was a great time in my life. But, in the approach to that final semester, my financial reservoir had run dry. A bad job, two junkmobiles and about \$8,000 in auto repairs later (within a six-month timeline), I had no means to survive up there any longer. So I came home. Without my degree. Without my joy.

I didn't have a job since I quit Blockbuster at the end of 1999. I tried to get one—preferably a good one—preferably one that didn't require me to juggle forty hours of work and a full semester of classes, just to pay rent—but I couldn't. Maybe I didn't look hard enough. Maybe I was scared I wouldn't be able to make it to work, since my transportation issues were spiraling out of control. Or maybe there was just a roadblock in the way of that need. I didn't know why I was forced to watch my savings plummet into an abyss of bad circumstances. But the results sent me back home to South Florida. And I was pissed.

My job started a week later—fortunately. I felt odd for having taken a job in Palm Beach County again (especially one in such a frantic environment as a hospital), but I knew I needed to make up for lost wages, so I dealt with it anyway. I knew I had to buy a new car at some point—with a better car I thought I'd have a chance at staying out on my



own again. But I had no idea how long it would take to get there. Two years later, I finally got there. My 1996 Honda Civic came home at the end of May. As overjoyed as I was to finally see one goal completed, however, I couldn't escape the fact that now I was two years behind schedule—and still not in a position to finish my degree.

Fast forward another year and here I am out of a job (again), and still not back in school. But now, fortunately, I don't have to own that angry feeling, because for once I feel like I'm free to do whatever the heck I want. My savings may not last me forever, of course, but unlike three years ago, at least I have one to work with, and a little bit of time to make the choice I want. That's somewhat inspiring, right? It may be that I need another job to replace this one, just to ensure I have a strong back to leave town with, should the job hunt in Central Florida prove fruitless again. But the fact that I'm free to do that, that maybe I can even do what I was gifted to do in the meantime—unlike the position I just left, which didn't use even a single synapse of my brain or an ounce of my creativity—is invigorating to me. And now I feel like writing about it.

## *Writer's Block*

Something's been seriously wrong in my life lately. It used to be in seasons past I could find comfort in relieving pains, fears and other troubling thoughts through this soul-pouring medium called writing. It used to be that if something weighed heavily on my heart, I could share it with others, once I knew how to communicate it through words. But in the last year or so, my language has been faltering, my understanding of things slowly vanished, and my ability to really tap into my heart and soul gradually diminished. And though I've had things I wanted to write down in recent past, most have been false starts that ended up in my forever-growing file of scrap. The fact is I'm getting scared.

Right now I'm trying to get through yet another depression. I've spent the last month attempting to rewrite some of my old short stories to refresh two of my writing collection volumes, but I've been so unfocused with my thoughts, that the words just stagnated into passionless narration, leaving me stuck on page six of the first of four rewrites. I started the rewrite quite a few weeks ago and am only on page six. I wanted to have all four finished by the end of this month, which is tomorrow. And I'm stuck, because my passion has been slipping through the cracks in the sidewalk, where anyone could step on had it not been for the broken state of the concrete. Every once in awhile I'll sit at my computer, activate Microsoft Word, and try to see what I can type out, but after two or three paragraphs of numbing narration and dialogue, I close out of the program to take a nap or a walk.

This isn't fair to me. My writing was the one thing I could count on to get my points across in the past. My stories were the one way I could truly live the life I had dreamed about, and imagine the ideas of lives that I could've dreamed about. To sit down and see what a character did was exciting to me—it was an escape. When my heart just needed to vent the season's frustrations, punching away at the keyboard was like some intimate way of God bringing comfort to my soul. There have been confusing times in my life, but thankfully, I still found ways to write them down. But now I feel as though that outlet has been growing cold.

As I sit here and ponder the sadness I feel inside, even though my face is dry and my eyes are clear to see what the heck I'm writing here, I'm not so sure I know what I want to say next. Somehow, I think I've traveled this road many times before and even wrote about it once or twice, but it boggles me why it still bothers me. Sometimes pain numbs

itself when a certain version of it has been experienced a number of times. And I think that's part of the issue, because all I can think to do is to numb myself of the thing that bothers me, because frankly I'm tired of dealing with it. Very few things in life truly depress me, but the one thing that can, persistently haunts me, no matter where I am in life. And now this trouble has managed to eat away my very passion of creativity, and consequently, my ability to relate to others on a deeper level. I wish I knew how it came to this.

I can already feel the connection between my heart and mind fading. Three sentences into this paragraph—into a new thought—and I had to delete what I wrote, because I just don't know what I'm trying to say here. This is where I've fallen. This is where I've gotten stuck. Not even a page into my pain and I'm emptied.

This makes me wonder if I'm genuinely afraid to write down the thing that weakens me. I have a wound in my heart that refuses to heal, and I'm not sure what it takes to heal it. I keep thinking that it's a matter for God's hands, and yet, I still wait time and time again for the remedy rather than just a Band-Aid. Every day that passes, I wrestle with the question of whether or not this wound will see its last visible mark. Lord knows I plead for a change in my life, but I feel my attempts to step out and experience the desires of my heart get shot down by the uncontrollable circumstances surrounding me and those who are in my life to help me. It's this lack of control that both humbles and frightens me, because what am I supposed to do? My dreams are threatened with every ounce of disappointment I endure, and yet, they keep coming because I can't control anything but my own actions.

It's the dreams that all this really comes down to. Dreams are a thing of the future, not of the present. There is nothing I can do in this moment that will fulfill a dream today. All I can do is to monitor today's effects in regard to the outcome of tomorrow. A dream can live in the hope chambers of my heart when today manages to plant a seed for the fruit of tomorrow. But my discouragement sprouts from the soil when the action I take becomes intercepted by the events that strive to plant a weed into my dreams. The fruit that blooms thereafter becomes tainted with sour juice and prickly stems.

I know I'm being vague. The title of "A Friendship Dying" seems to have very little to do with the subjects of writing and dreams. And I think that's my point here. I'm so worn out with dealing with the issues of my heart that I don't even want to admit that I'm still carrying this burden. I've dealt with it off and on for many years now, and I'd really like to take on something different. To a casual reader, this ambiguity leaves

absolutely no purpose to my words. Keeping my tongue silent and my fingers bound from revealing the intricate details of my battered spirit removes everyone else from really sharing, or even identifying with the struggle. Almost makes reading this pointless. I have to wonder if it even makes writing it down pointless. There is nothing concretely evident here to make this essay or confessional or whatever it is truly relevant for understanding. And yet, I still type away, hoping that maybe I'm not just a little insane.

The funny thing is that I started writing this with the intention of sharing the details of why I'm discouraged, of why I find myself taking more and more naps, and why I take much longer walks than I used to. And now that I've come to the critical junction of getting to the point, I'm not sure I want to write it down. I guess in a way I'm not certain my struggle is justifiable. Yeah, it racks my heart with discouragement, depression and mild bitterness, but I'm not sure it's legitimate. On the surface, I think it's a bit ridiculous. It's almost not even worth the thought, much less the haunting nature it brings me. And yet, I have to address the heart of the issue, because a writer can leave nothing unresolved, especially when the trouble triggering the need to write it down still nags me. I'll still deal with this tomorrow, and it will still bother me.

And I'll still have no idea how to tackle it.

## Messages of Purity

The following essay is actually a twofold response to questions posted on a message board. Neither question was asked specifically of me, but I chose to answer them anyway, because I thought I could offer the posters sound answers. I also don't have the questions in their original contexts, so you'll have to just guess what they asked. It shouldn't be that difficult.

### Point on Pre-Marital Sex:

Here are some reasons why pre-marital sex is not the best plan of action:

1. Your first time is not something you'll ever forget. You can try all you want (assuming you would actually want to forget something like that), but unless you hit your head on a table and forget everything you've ever known, you're not likely to forget something like that. I'm sure a majority of you who have at the very least kissed someone will remember your first kiss. It's not something that just packs its bags and moves to my backyard (Florida). Sex is by no measure a lesser extreme. You do it once; you won't forget it—ever.

So the question you should ask yourself is "What is it about this girl that makes me want to remember this moment with *her* for the rest of my life?"

Let's be realistic: most of you are in high school or early college. Your first time may be with a girl who might someday forget about you. Maybe you'll forget about her. You'll have your day to settle down with someone. So to spread your seed into people who'll be a stranger to you down the road is nothing to deliberate over.

Except, you can't stop thinking about it, because there's more to sex than a physical feeling. It's what ties two souls together. That's why marriages aren't complete until the relationship has been consummated. Every time you engage in that activity, you're giving away a piece of yourself that you can never call your own again, even if you wanted to.

So I guess the new question you should be asking yourself is "Do I really want some girl I won't care about in three years to walk around with a piece of my heart and soul, never to give it back?"

If you can safely say “yes,” then do you think your future wife will agree with you? You certainly can’t expect to give her your entire heart, because, unfortunately, some other chick is walking around with a sizeable part of it. Do you think your wife, who craves your heart with a passion, will appreciate that, or not? I’m guessing not.

2. Amidst the problem of never being fully adequate as a devoted husband (since a man with a true desire to protect and love his wife with all his heart will think of her well-being long before he even meets her), premarital sex often leads to the fear that something unsatisfactory may come to pass from the result.

Let’s take children for example. When you’re married, you’re ideally in a place where you can support a family, whether it’s a wife and no children, a wife and one child, or so on and so forth. Most people with sense in their head won’t marry until they know they can handle the responsibilities of marriage. This includes making and raising children.

But when a boyfriend and girlfriend discover that they walked away with a little bit extra from their previous encounter, panic most often ensues. Literal translation: “Oh my God, what are we gonna do?”

These words aren’t typically spoken in a marital relationship, by the way.

When a married couple discovers a bun in the oven, it is typical that the couple and their families celebrate with great joy. But when an unmarried couple is faced with a pregnancy, one of three things generally takes place:

a. The boyfriend marries the girlfriend out of guilt and responsibility. They may not be ready for marriage, and it may take years for them to get to a place that would normally have taken a quarter of the time to reach, but they do it anyway, because it’s the “right thing to do.” Granted, life is hell, Burger King sucks, and the wife can’t work because she’s raising the child, but that’s just the way it goes. In the long run, the ending is not exactly happy, though that one fateful night was awesome.

b. The boyfriend either splits, or makes it clear that he cannot do much to raise a family. Either way, the girl is left to decide on raising it herself, with no adequate provisions or to give it up for adoption so the child may never know where it came from. Both methods are likely to have

undesirable results for her heart, since she herself cannot provide for her child's needs.

c. The girl decides to get an abortion so no one will ever know or love the child. And so she feels empty and destroyed ten years down the road when she realizes she can't hold the child that she now wishes she had been able to keep, or be proud of his accomplishments in life, or congratulate him for making a really awesome game.

Sure, most of us guys don't have to care about all these consequences, because we have the power to sow our oats and move on when the real heat starts. But doing so proves our cowardice and makes us pathetic to our girls and to the world. Not to mention, no girl deserves that kind of sorry response from us. Humans are supposed to be better than that.

3. Let's not forget the joys of contracting things that'll make our commodities fall off some day. One of the reasons for saving sex for marriage is that a monogamous relationship severely droughts the risk of catching something nasty. Sure, there is the danger of getting stuck with bloody needles (by the way, some diseases like Hepatitis can linger in dry blood too, so don't ever touch blood that's not your own). But a majority of the population is not at that sort of risk, which means bodily fluid transfer is still the prime source for ruining lives. If a man and woman stay within their personal boundaries, never to stray from one another, then the risk for disease is minimal at worst, nonexistent at best.

Now, you may be thinking, "Okay, I'll just stay faithful to my girlfriend, then. No big deal." But who's to say she'll stay faithful to you? Or better yet, who's to say the relationship will last? The commitment of marriage hasn't been made, so what makes you think your girl won't leave you for another guy? Sure, this can happen in marriage, too (which this discussion will have to be saved for another day), but not without the hassles of courts, money, children (or pets), residency, etc., and is therefore less of an option than just walking out on a boyfriend/girlfriend relationship.

And how about those additional psychological issues? Do you think your girlfriend wants to live in fear that you might not love her the next day? She already gave you everything she has, but you're not satisfied because her hot chick neighbor has more, and that's what you want. Is it possible that your girlfriend will be crushed if she gave you the depths of her heart

and soul, and you just took it for granted and left? Is it possible that she may destroy your car during her venting phase?

Here's the bottom line:

Sexual desire is the strongest drive we have. It's so strong that it can make or break a world (the Trojan War was over sex—the Greek battle, not the condom). Friendships and partnerships can die as a result of sex. Lives can be broken in half as a result of sex. But mind you, these things most often take place only when sex occurs at the wrong time. Let's be realistic here: the wrong kind of sex brings forth jealousy and rage. Sexual desire is also part of the drive that creates aggression in men. Sex with the wrong person can often turn violent. And then, there's the whole loss of innocence thing. Why do you think forced sex is a capital crime? If you want to get technical, pre-marital sex is a type of theft and possible aggravated assault (the latter applying to unconsenting sex). I'll let all your analytical minds figure that one out.

The point is that certain conditions are given to us to avoid pain and suffering. Sex within marriage is part of that conditioning, since sex within marriage is very good and very pleasurable. Not to mention, a couple who saves sex for marriage is much more likely to have a higher frequency of intercourse than those couples who didn't bother to wait. Think about it, the drive is strong as is. By the time a marriage takes place, it'll be like opening a soda bottle after the drink has been shaken about a thousand times. If sex takes place early, the bottle won't have as much pressure to let loose and won't be as good. Plus, your girl (now your wife) has already given you all the loving she cares to give you, so you're stuck sleeping without the option for action. But that's a trivial point. If those conditions aren't adequately met, then one of many undesirable consequences can take place.

So the heart of the issue is to weigh the consequences. One night of passion for many nights of misery (pre-marital sex) or many nights of passion for many nights of joy (marital sex). Personally, I think the scale is heavily weighted on one side.

If you can't tell, I support the abstinence movement. I'm also glad that my future wife won't have to compete for my heart. I may or may not have to compete for hers, but my choice states that she's worth it anyway.



So, in conclusion, you can nail all the girls you want, but sooner or later it'll catch up to you. Frankly, I hope you all realize that you're worth more than that, as are your future wives. But if you don't really care about what's best for you or your wives, then I guess it won't matter if I respond to your future hardships by saying "whatever, dude."

### **Response to "Why Does Love Hurt" on Zantetsuken:**

It's a bit concerning that the married people never seem to respond to these kind of threads...

But anyway,

I'm responding to this simply because I think Ace comes across as overly obsessive (you're the monologue guy, right?—forgive me if I'm thinking you're someone else), and that's just not gonna work in your favor.

First of all, I agree in large part with no\_shot, and in small part with Rinku (even if their words are the same, I think their perspectives are different—and I tend to side more with no\_shot's philosophies than I do with Rinku's). Before you can truly love someone, you have to be able to love yourself. Rather than feeling desire over your narcissistic being, the more accurate definition of loving yourself is to be able to take care of yourself and to be content with your life at hand. If you think you're no match for the other man because of something you devalue about yourself, then you're not taking care of yourself and the girl will likely pick up on that when you defeat yourself in front of her.

Girls tend to look for male security (or a man they can trust, to be specific). Defeatist guys aren't very trustworthy, since they don't know how to protect themselves, much less the girl they like. That's why it's important to train yourself to be a man, not a wimp ("I can't do this") or a lazy bum ("I refuse to make the effort").

If you keep crying about it, then you're either the wimp (afraid of the outcome), the lazy bum (you wish the girl would just read your mind, melt at what she sees, and stagger up to you in a drunkenness of infatuation), or the most dangerous of all...

The obsessor.

The thing I can tell you about obsession is that it comes from a heavy dose of insecurity and discontentment. If you're finding yourself obsessed, then it's likely rooted in the fact that you feel as though you can't live without her. Case in point:

If you can't live without her, then you're probably saying that you're not strong enough to be your own man, and that violates the whole manly security thing. And if you can't live without her, then you're most likely telling yourself that life sucks when you can't romance her (and this will likely branch off into believing that life sucks without having any woman by your side), which means that you're not content with your life as a free single, which means that you don't love yourself too well.

And this translates into a love for the girl that isn't really love, but just a mess of feelings that'll eventually die someday, leaving you bitter when it's all over.

Feelings are just like everything else superficial—they do fade over time. If you're basing your choice to pursue a girl entirely on your feelings, then you're risking some major disappointment down the road. All the kids who said friendship is the best way to begin a relationship are on the right track. If love comes, it's because the individuals involved chose it, not because they "fell into" it.

Every satisfied couple I know didn't realize they were meant to be together until after all the circumstances lined up and a deeper relationship with each other just made sense. The ones I know who dove into a dating relationship right away live in constant frustration over it. Think about that.

So to bring this first point home: if you're obsessing over the girl, then what makes you think that it's meant-to-be, or even should be?

It's also worth asking yourself if this is even the right time in your life to find the girl you're meant to be with. If you're nowhere close to being ready to support your own family, then you're probably not ready to hook up with any girl right now anyway (at least not one whose "meant-to-be"). All you'll end up doing now (if you're not in that ready-to-be-married bracket) is basing your life's decisions on what the girl wants to do, or what she might want to do, in an effort to stay with her. This is poor judgment, mind you, because you may be taking yourself away from the

best place and best circumstances for your life (or taking her away from hers), and that's a painful reason to hold onto a girl that may very well be best for someone else.

And it goes without saying that you'll also risk taking yourself further and further away from the one whom is meant to be with you. But fortunately, you'll have plenty of chances to figure that out before you overlook the best girl for you entirely.

So even if you're like most people on this board and completely skipped over everything I just wrote, remember this:

Don't be afraid to let go if the girl doesn't respond (or if the circumstances don't add up), because you'll likely be freeing yourself up for a better future than the one that you'd have if you kept yourself stuck.

And yes, I've gone through it, too. God opens better doors when you're not fighting hard to keep them closed.

## URBAN LIVESTOCK

During a mid-afternoon Wednesday in early August, I got the final word that I wasn't getting my old job back. Coincidentally, I didn't want it back, but having two ladies in middle management telling me they didn't want me back, either, somehow released me from that feeling of obligation. Part of their decision felt insulting, of course, but another part gave room to my inspiration. It was a volatile mix that left me wondering where to go from there.

I actually ended up driving around Boynton Beach, but that's something I'll talk about later.

Going further back, notably to the early parts of June, my department at the hospital finally got word that our contract was officially over. For several months, we lingered in the storeroom office, wondering when the hospital was going to cut us loose. Neither the hospital nor the company that signed our paychecks wanted to keep us there, but both agreed that certain measures had to be installed before either could safely release us. The fact was, even though it wasn't worth much to either party to keep us under contract, the job itself was too important to dismiss completely. So part of the administration's insurance to keep things running smoothly involved creating a similar department under the hospital payroll, but doing so at a cheaper cost. It also involved developing a system that would transition over to the new department flawlessly so the hospital wouldn't look incompetent at the end of the day. The whole process came about with hushed silences and a lot of runaround. It also made life very difficult for us, considering we still had to cover our round-the-clock staffing, but did so after steadily dropping to five employees. We were also, conveniently, stuck in a hiring freeze. Add to the fact that none of us wanted to miss out on unemployment compensation, the whole thing brought us to an emotionally toiling stalemate. So when the hospital finally gave us the word that it was time to say goodbye, I was thoroughly sick of my job, and sick of the hospital for keeping my day-to-day future in the dark.

Before all the whispers and the jacking around started, however, I spent my weekdays tracking patient care equipment through a database called TrackStar. Even though the system required tech support every other week, the job itself was a no-brainer, offering very few challenges short of trying to figure out how to convince the fifth floor that, despite their overly anticipatory equipment needs, they really didn't need walkers

delivered to their patients stat. All in all, the job sucked out my creativity short of what I forced myself to do during downtimes. If not for the random jaunts through the facility hallways, or the meaningless conversations with transporters and PACU secretaries, the whole thing would've undoubtedly been the duller experience of my mid-twenties. Add to the fact that it had no career merit, it was also one of the most heart-killing experiences of my mid-twenties.

Needless to say, when the contract ended, I had no desire to return or to serve under the hospital payroll. Taking it back with the new conditions would've meant doing the same tedious stuff for more than a dollar an hour less, helping the central processing department sterilize their scalpels and clamps (which really sucked), and reporting to a woman that none of us really trusted. It also would've meant walking around the hospital with a skullcap all day, and that just wasn't something I wanted. So I turned down the hospital's offer to come back.

But then, I realized I needed money. I had planned on heading back to college that December, but wasn't keen on wrecking my safety net of unemployment compensation, which would've happened had I taken another boring job for such a short length of time. So I stewed over my options until I realized that I didn't really have any. When I visited the hospital the following month to hand out another round of my mini-collection of short stories, my old supervisor, the guy who helped make the transition from contracted department to hospital department smooth and profitable for everyone (except for the supervising lady that none of us really trusted), had talked me into coming back. He said the new conditions weren't that bad, and that much of the things that had me antsy weren't even an issue. So, after mentally checking the status of my bank account, I decided to go ahead and give it another go. After all, according to my plans, I wasn't due to head back to Central Florida for another seven months anyway.

So far the plan seemed flawless. I already knew the job, and the people in charge already knew me, so my credentials were through the roof. The only thing that would've stopped me from taking it back was my lack of desire for going back.

Strangely, that was the thing that ultimately screwed my chances.

One of the major changes from working under contract to working for the hospital, besides the fact that contracts paid a lot better, was that, unlike working for a contracted company, the hospital required me to take a Gallup Poll prior to employment. For those who don't know, a Gallup Poll is a phone-based questionnaire that essentially quizzes one's

personality, giving surgical service supervisors a chance to play psychologist for a day.

After submitting my application for employment, I had to take one of these over-the-phone surveys to get the whole screening process out of the way. It felt awkward at first, because I had to interview with a woman, who not even two months earlier had let me borrow her electric three-holed hole puncher to put my mini-collection together, as if she didn't know me. But I went through with it anyway, because my old supervisor was eager to get me started again, and as I said before, I needed the money.

Then, I waited a week for the results.

When it came time for me to get the rest of my paperwork together the following week, I got a call that completely threw me off guard. According to the caller from Human Resources, I didn't pass my Gallup Poll. Bear in mind, this was a test that no one was supposed to fail. As I sat there with my mouth hung open, the Human Resources woman informed me that after careful examination, the hospital decided that if I were to start working for its mobile equipment department, I would essentially hate my job. Therefore, they didn't want me working there. In other words, if I couldn't hold a smile as I passed all the people with dying family members in the hall, celebrating the fact that there was great excitement in hauling machines around the facility, dropping them off in rooms where old people sat on the toilet next to their beds, then administration didn't want anything to do with me. Only the people who lied on their Gallup Polls (or were completely insane) were allowed to work there. After I told my old supervisor what happened, he became shocked, sickened and a little gassy (the last one was possible).

Not to say he was about to take that lying down, of course. This man, who fought for the well-being of his department after it was taken into the hospital's greedy clutches, made one last-ditch effort to bring me in. Going off some hidden hospital byline, which probably didn't exist, but made for great drama, the supervisor decided to use his one "Great Override" to make my employment happen. According to this phantom byline, anyone in charge of hiring was allowed to bypass the Gallup Poll once in favor of his potential candidate. I didn't really want him doing that for me, because frankly, I would've been happy being completely free of the place. But he went through with it anyway. Thus, I found myself sitting inside Human Resources a short time later, filling out my W-2s and all those other necessary documents that made my employment official.

Only, I never got to finish them.

If I hadn't made it clear yet, I'll make it clear now. This new department didn't belong exclusively to my old supervisor. The woman who none of us trusted had supervised it alongside of him. Even though he had the right to bring people in, she had the right to decide who stayed and who didn't. While I was sitting at this huge table in the back of Human Resources filling out my forms, the secretary came in to tell me to stop filling out the rest until the woman who co-supervised the department arrived to speak with me. Apparently, the news was important.

When she finally got there, she led me into a room where an even more important woman awaited my presence. From there, the two sat me down, explained gently that my Gallup Poll couldn't be overridden, and that according to hospital guidelines, they couldn't give me the job. So after telling me to come in on my own time to fill out paperwork, they pulled me away to tell me not to bother filling out *all* the paperwork. The whole thing felt like a waste of time, and more or less summed up my three-year observation of the hospital administration's organizational skills.

And that was the last I had to do with them.

So, having put that experience behind me, I decided to take a drive into Boynton to get my mind off things. While I was down there, I thought about taking a side trip to Gamestop to see if there was anything new and cool available for my Gamecube, but decided against it when I realized I couldn't afford to buy anything. So I continued on, this time heading north on Congress Avenue, which ran from Boca Raton to the airport—starting up again somewhere in downtown West Palm Beach. While I was passing the mall, I looked to my right to see something that I've seen before, but never really valued for its irony.

Across the street from this bustling suburban marketplace, complete with glass building banks and above average dining, a small number of cows grazed contently in a field.

There was actually one in particular that caught my attention. It was a brown cow—nothing more exciting than that, but it stood apart from its crowd. While the others chewed grass in haphazard places within the field, lazing away the way cows often did, this one hung out near the corner of the fence, not even five feet from the intersection. Normally, I wouldn't give it an additional thought—I had seen a cow before. But in that moment, as I drove down the avenue free of the job I hated once and for all, my pent-up creativity finally unhinged and for the first time in three years I could see clearly again. Even though South Florida was weird, cows weren't commonly known to graze just fifty feet away from a

Toys R' Us, or a mall entrance, or a Nations Bank or anything like that. All in all, it was just a fitting way to end such an odd period of life.

And so I drove home with the intention of writing all of this down, calling it "Suburban Cow" or something like that, but got sidetracked with some other element of life and ultimately put it off for two and a half years. But in that interim period, I left for school earlier than planned (I actually ended up going back to Central Florida the following month instead of in December on the advice of a fifty-year-old who reminded me to live by faith and not by doubt), graduated UCF the following summer, and landed a job I hated waiting tables across the street from that same field where all those cows had grazed the year before.

And now, thanks to that summer's crazy experience, that brown cow chewing its grass at the corner of Congress and Old Boynton, like my screwed up hospital experience, is forever immortalized.



## Transition of an Era

On June 26, 2003, at 6:30 p.m., I sat on the hard white sand of Ormond Beach, catching up on my *Lord of the Rings* reading. When the first movie was released a year-and-a-half earlier, it grabbed me by the throat, leaving me to wonder what in the world was gonna happen to the Fellowship. The Hobbits went down the river, the Elf, the Dwarf and the Man chased after some Orcs through the woods, and the crazy Gray Wizard fell off a bridge. Chaos was pending, the Ring was whispering, and my Legs were shifting in my seat with anticipation. For a solid year I waited to see where those buggy little halflings ran off to, and in December of 2002, I discovered the answer: they ran right to the end of another cliffhanger. I knew it was coming, but I wasn't satisfied. I had to find out how the whole story ended. What happened to the members of the Fellowship? Who else would the Ring seduce? Why the heck were those trees walking and talking? Shortly after the release of *The Two Towers*, I said "screw it, I'm not waiting," and bought the whole book series, starting my reading with *The Hobbit*. By the time I got to the beach five months later, I had just started reading Book Four of the trilogy (out of six books), and finished the chapter where Frodo and Sam descended the rock face with Elven rope. And like my usual outcome of beach reading, I got seriously tired after the second chapter and quit for the day. I decided to enjoy my beach time with a walk, instead.

### It began at the park...

Twenty-one years minus a day earlier, I celebrated my sixth birthday at John Prince Park. The park offered several major grassy sections, each divided by various small roads and two major roads (one of which passed right over the channel leading into northern section of Lake Osborne), and provided multitudes of picnic and play areas for visiting families. There was also a large winding lake cutting through the center of the entire grounds. We had my party on a Sunday afternoon at a small playground on the north side of the lake. A bunch of kids showed up, and at some point in the afternoon I scraped my knee on the entry stone that introduced the main entrance for that side. It was pretty painful.

Although the elements of my birthday party were standard for a six-year-old (cake, presents, balloons, swings, etc.), the thing that stood out in my memory (besides scraping my knee on that huge jagged rock), was the discovery I made with a couple friends across the street in the field

overlooking the lake. When we crossed the narrow two-lane road from the playground to the field, we found a rope hanging from a monster Banyan tree next to the restroom facility, with a board attached to the end. Normally, an adult in his twenties would've just ignored the stupid thing and continued walking toward the lake (for whatever reason he feels like—back then there was a boat hire providing paddleboat rentals), but not us six-year-olds. Finding that rope was like finding the Lost City of Atlantis (which is ironically the name of the gated city on the other side of the street from the park), and we had to play with our treasure.

Parents teach their children time and again to share. But as an only child at the time, I didn't have to exercise that rule very often. So when it came time to start issuing turns for the rope swing, I was the birthday boy, so I was first. And so I leaned over the foot-long board and started twisting around on the rope. Once inertia kicked in, the party got started. It was a total blast.

Twenty-one years later, minus six days (just five days before I sat on that beach with my book in hand), I took a walk around that lake to discover an awful surprise. The foundation of my secret treasure (that great monster Banyan tree), was getting uprooted by a construction crew and ultimately scheduled for destruction. After a week of hard times and broken feelings, that became the culmination of my dread. My single greatest memory from that park, in all the years I've been there, was getting trashed before my eyes—to make way for a new play area. How ironic.

The same day that all this was happening, my family was vacationing three-and-a-half hours away in a timeshare along the northern coast of Central Florida, five miles north of downtown Daytona Beach. I took that walk around the park because I was feeling emotionally toiled over my recently dismissed job from the hospital (my contract ended), and over my steadily fading relationships with the group of people I had spent the better part of that year hanging out with. And though it was pleasant having the house to myself for several days, the culmination of all that was going on left me feeling lonely. So after five days of isolation, boredom, VH1's *I Love the 80s*, and trying to find some peace in God, I got into my car on a Thursday afternoon and headed north on I-95 until I reached Highway 40 leading into Ormond Beach. An hour or two later, I sat on that hard sand beach with my book in hand.

### And continued at the beach...

At around 7:00 p.m., I went up to the hotel room to put the book away. I also kicked off my flip-flops, because they were likely to slow me down for my pending travels. As the daylight lost its peak and started hitting that late-afternoon tint (which obviously became the early evening tint during the summer), I left the room and headed back down to the beach to prepare for my journey. That journey: to walk to the building in the distance with the construction crane hanging over its roof. Since walking was a therapeutic exercise for me, I thought this was the perfect time to take one. Unlike the beach sand back home, the stuff up here was actually easy to traverse.

But easy didn't mean comfortable. Where the sand in Palm Beach County was so soft that it swished beneath one's feet, so much that it would take twice as much energy to run across it, the sand in Volusia County felt like "drying cement," soft enough to change contours upon contact, but still hard enough to blister one's feet. I had to stick close to the shoreline to keep my toes cooled for the journey.

Usually a journey like this had to tie in with some soul-searching experience, and given the week that I had, this was no exception. From the moment I departed the hotel, my heart and mind started racing for answers to questions that blitzed my concentration. The primary question asked of God, "what changes would the next year of my life bring?" There were plenty of things on my mind, like would I find a better job; would I have the income I needed to return to school; would some girl actually respect me enough to take the chance on being with me? These things came at me time and again, and out there on that beach, I was determined to find some rest.

But as my thoughts flew around my head, the first truly perplexing question I had was: "how far is that construction crane from the hotel?" Those other questions, I had been asking them for so long that they had quickly become novelty. They rooted in intangible things that existed only in my dreams. Expecting an answer right there, on that beach, in that very moment, was a comforting notion, but a vastly unrealistic one. Even if the answer did come to me, I wouldn't have been able to do anything about it in that hour. In the end, I still would've had to wait for the open door given to me. The only question I could really find an answer to—the only one that could be found from testing and exploration—was the question about how far I'd have to walk to reach that construction crane.

Here's a little insight on the reality of distance, according to my visual ability. When you're in your car, the traffic light up the street doesn't look

that far away. After a minute of driving, you'll see that catching up to it is quick and easy. When you're standing at the foot of a bridge overlooking a lake, the other side seems reasonably close. When you cross that bridge, looking at all the hills and trees surrounding the lake, you'll discover just how quickly you can reach the other end. Likewise, when you stand on the shoreline of the ocean, looking down the unobstructed beach toward a protruding construction crane in the distance, it seems like a skip and a hop away. But when a half-hour's worth of walking makes the crane appear to have gotten farther away than it did when you started, you'll realize just how deceptive straight line-of-sight distancing can be.

I left the hotel around seven o'clock that evening. The sun was high enough to light the world, but low enough to hide behind the taller buildings along the coast. After what became several miles of hard sand on bare feet, sloshing through the breaking waves, passing under the shadows of twenty-story hotels, I finally reached the building where the crane stood. At around eight-thirty at night. After the sun went down. In Daytona. My feet were killing me. And I still had to walk back.

The first thing I realized when I changed direction and started back toward Ormond Beach, or more specifically, toward my hotel, was that I had just experienced the last sunset of my mid-twenties. In just a few short hours I would emerge into a new era, an era that claimed acceleration on my youth, that the easy life of college and whatnot was slipping away, and that soon I would be too old to keep wasting time. Though still young, the late-twenties meant that I had to get my act together. I needed God to hear my cries. More importantly, I had to do my part to act on His instruction. And for that one night, I had hope that these changes were coming.

I don't know what it is about time, and my inability to get along with it, but somehow I find a way to create deadlines for myself. There were a number of things I had hoped to accomplish before the Year 2000. Not that there was any life-sustaining reason for it; I just wanted to hit most of my major milestones before the turn of the century. Made no difference if I was ready for it. I felt that way about turning twenty, and again about turning twenty-five. There were places I always assumed I'd go before hitting these milestones. But I didn't. When this new turning point stood on my backdoor—this thing called the late-twenties—I still hadn't reached these milestones. Sure, I finished high school many years ago, but not college. Sure, I moved out of my mom's house a couple times, but I came back. Sure, I wrote a bunch of short stories and screenplays, but never published any of them. Sure, I met a lot of nice girls over the years, but never hooked up with any of them. Sure, I bought my own car the

year before, but never traveled the country with it. Sure, I had a lot of different jobs, but never made a decent living out of them. Sure, I went to a lot Bible studies, but never really felt intimate with God through them. Sure, I made it through twenty-seven years of life, but never really felt like I did anything with them.

On the eve of my latest chronological transition, I still felt as though I hadn't gone anywhere. It was easy to see that I experienced a lot over the years—starting with the near loss of my own life (at birth), to the emergence of the social world (elementary school), to the pains of responsibility (homework in the gifted program), to the sadness of losing loved ones (both grandfathers dying), to the joys of the imagination (neighborhood Cops and Robbers), to the fears of getting killed (neighborhood teenage tormentors), to the heartbreak of losing friends (kids moving away left and right), to the excitement of video gaming (the height of the Nintendo years), to the traumas of adolescence (self-explanatory), to the discovery of Jesus as more than a Sunday School figure (joining youth group), to the joys of making new friends (no longer limited to the neighboring street), to the emergence of puberty (no longer afraid to get teased about my liking girls), to the discovery of my desires (the start of my life as a writer), to the insecurity of holding onto my own things (constantly losing my valuables to my father's drug addiction), to the beginnings of high school (chaos in the making), to the battle of getting my own car (financially underprivileged), to the pressures of finding a job (couldn't get interviews), to the pains of being overlooked by girls (was a bit shy), to the graduation of high school (another night of lost friends), to the beginnings of college (the community college up the street), to the maintenance of jobs I hated (one dead-end job after another), to the loss of a parent (father dying of brain aneurysm), to the first sight of a new landscape (saw snow for the first time in Virginia), to the disappointment of milestones (celebrated twenty-first birthday watching a friend eat a hamburger), to the joys of moving out of the house for the first time (for my junior year in college), to the anxiety of meeting the first girl I'd ever truly care about (and finding out about her boyfriend), to discovering the reality of living on my own (paying for all sorts of bills), to the joy of being part of a decent community (joining a couple college groups), to the hassle of living with people I didn't want to live with (petty roommates), to the sheer aggravation of dealing with junky automobiles (keeping them in the shop more often than on the road), to the disappointment of leaving school prematurely (running out of money a semester before graduation), to the soul-sucking feeling that I failed (having to move back home and work another dead-end job I hated), to

the bitter heartbreak of rejection (confessing my feelings to the above mentioned girl, just to receive the “just friends” speech), to the acquisition of my first decent car (my highly blessed Honda Civic), to the gradual thinning of my hair (which I thought was supposed to happen in my forties), to the challenges of living within my character (no longer trying to live “safe”), to the transition into my late-twenties (out there on the beach), to the realization that somehow I still had a story to tell (which I’m doing now nearly three years later). But in all these things I still felt as though the things that really mattered to me hadn’t come, and that even as I took that journey along the coastline, I hadn’t quite reached the goals I had once set out for. And it was painful. But as it does in all transitions, the hope that better things were on its way lingered in the back of my mind.

I continued along that beach for the next hour, trying to figure it all out, trying to make my way back to the hotel, when something cool happened. My rite of passage into the new era was extravagantly greeted with a show of fireworks. Night had fallen, the ocean no longer soothed my feet, and I hadn’t gotten my answers, but somehow, in that moment, none of that mattered. Fireworks exploded high over the beach in the distance, and somewhere deep down I knew they were firing off for me. Blue fountains, golden dandelions, green showers; they were telling me, “welcome to the next level.” All of a sudden, another typical walk became a walk to remember. I made it back to the hotel shortly thereafter, certain that my season was transitioning on a good foot, even if that foot was now sore.

### **And ended in the oldest city in America...**

The next morning, my back pressed against the flat of an uncomfortable green sofa, but my eyes awakened to the dawn of a new journey. Gifts piled up in the corner of the room between the sofa and the wall, just in front of the giant mirror, while sunshine flooded in from the balcony, making sure no darkness left me feeling drowsy. When I arose from the sofa, I took my shower, got dressed, and took my video camera down to the beach to capture the first images of my 27<sup>th</sup> birthday. After walking down to the site of the sunken ship (which couldn’t be seen from the shore, but it was cool to know it was there), I came back up for the tearing of gifts. And then, my family and I departed for lunch at a greasy spoon buffet called “Stacy’s.”

Stacy’s was, in short, an amazing place. It offered, in the form of all-you-can-eat, pretty much everything there was to offer at a restaurant for

the low, low price of six bucks. Burgers, pizza, macaroni and cheese, chicken, meatloaf, cornbread, pumpkin pie, salad, Coca-Cola; you name it, they had it. The glasses were spotty, and the silverware was questionable, but the food was top notch. I hadn't had a meal like that in awhile, and I loved it. I made a few return trips there later in the year (after moving back to Central Florida) just to relive the experience.

When lunch was over around 11 a.m., we hopped back into the car and headed north on A1A, leaving Ormond Beach and moving toward the oldest city in America. For an hour-and-a-half we cruised along the shore of the Atlantic, racing a straight line of seagulls in Flagler Beach to the tune of "Tourniquet" by Evanescence, passing by a roadside attraction featuring dolphins and other marine life, barreling down the small hills supporting a neighborhood of houses on stilts, until finally reaching the end of Anastasia Island—the place where the bridge connected to our destination. Upon turning that last corner next to a cheap motel, we ascended the architecturally unique structure spanning the channel into the Atlantic, when my eyes gazed at the top the most surreal vision I had ever seen in real life. St. Augustine opened up before me, and it looked a heck of a lot like Disney World.

In most modern American cities, when one comes over such a hill, an image of glass structures protruding against the horizon flashes before the driver. However, in this case, the structures were not of glass, but made of brick and stone, and the architecture looked almost gothic. Nowhere else in Florida had I seen such unusual design that wasn't a part of a theme park. It was like driving into Europe. It was strange, but breathtaking.

Shortly after catching my breath, I found a spot at the tourist center, and my family and I disembarked for the city sights. Our journeys took us all over the "Old City District," from the oldest schoolhouse in America (conveniently equipped with an animatronic teacher), to the Spanish fort called Castillo de San Marcos, where the first citizens had to fend off invaders, to a drained pool café in the Lightner Museum called Café Alcazar.

Now, Café Alcazar was an interesting place—as was most of the Old City District—but not for its Disney World qualities. When we entered the front doors, we immediately found ourselves walking toward the host stand down a century-old corridor, lined with photos of its former glory (as a hotel) and a series of water pipes in the ceiling. It certainly had its charm, though not for the magical qualities one might assume from seeing the rest of the town. It was, rather, for its antique design that one could call it "charming," much in the way that one could call my old high

school's social studies building "charming." It had that late nineteenth/early twentieth century style, where the floors felt hollow and the walls were of concrete. For three consecutive floors, I felt like I was walking through a government building in Alabama (like the one in *My Cousin Vinny*) or a mansion like the one in *Forrest Gump*. As I said, interesting.

The thing that set the café apart from other cafés, though tying it closely to other structures in the town, was its history. The Lightner Museum, which the café occupied, began its life as a hotel in the 1800s called, ironically, Hotel Alcazar. This hotel, which catered to the rich, boasted a huge indoor swimming pool, where the rich could get their exercise. Occasionally, during important festivities, the pool would be drained to make room for a dance floor, on which the rich could continue to get their exercise. It was a time where the Victorian style reigned, and the wealthy could have their fill of fun. But one day, several decades later, the hotel shut down, leaving its pool drained indefinitely. Fast forward another few decades, sometime after the abandoned hotel had been made into a museum, and the old drained pool received an iron fence and the carpet treatment, pleasantly transforming into the trendy Café Alcazar, where lunch was a delectable treat in itself.

I had a croissant sandwich with turkey. It was probably the best croissant sandwich with turkey I've eaten. But that wasn't what made the meal. Okay, maybe it was what made the meal, but not what made the experience. After I had returned from the restroom, which was on the second floor, a spiral staircase climb away, I started eating. And being as focused as I was on the sandwich, I failed to realize that the violinist had changed his tune to something a little more occasion-friendly. It took both the waitress and my mom to turn my attention toward the music, to which, I thought, "cool." Nothing like having a violinist playing "Happy Birthday" to me at the bottom of an indoor swimming pool, while I'm eating a turkey sandwich made from a croissant. It was different.

About two hours before we hit the café, my family and I toured the stone and mortar construct called the Castillo de San Marcos. This place, known as the Spanish fort, stood on a small hill overlooking the waterway leading out into the Atlantic. Although the fort's history would be too lengthy to mention in my own recounts, it's worth it to say that it used to be attacked by pirates. In fact, upon careful observation, one could still see the cannonball holes if one were to listen to the guides. I thought it was cool, though bereft of any real excitement. For twelve bucks it was worth the history lesson, seeing all the sixteenth century weapons and the mounted cannons on the roof, and watching all the television programs



describing each room. I found it difficult to see how 1,300 people survived in that fort during the invasions of yesteryear, of course, but the tour guides said it happened, so I had to believe them.

After the visit to Castillo de San Marcos and the Café Alcazar, we went back through the heart of the Old District, where we entered into this small alley next to the schoolhouse. Now, this alley had tiny shops fit for a midget. The ceilings were so low that I had to duck a support beam just to make it to the next room; and that was just for the souvenirs. Outside the structures, however, a collection of stalls filled the alley. The one that caught my attention was the sunglasses pavilion. Since my old pair of sunglasses was ancient (probably made in the '80s) and my blue-rimmed replacement that I bought from Islands of Adventure a few months earlier was better suited for a woman, I thought it was time to get something new. The pair I got looked a little like cop glasses, though not so hokey.

From there, we found a shop that catered exclusively to cats. Every piece of merchandise in this shop, which was converted from a second-floor apartment, featured cat memorabilia. Floor mats, towels, bookmarks; everything had a picture of a cat on it, or talked about cats. Being that my family loves cats, we had managed to kill about twenty minutes in that store, though I, admittedly, would've been happy staying for only two of those minutes. Somehow, from that side trip, I ended up getting a mouse pad with a picture of a feline swimming in a pool (I think my mom bought it without telling me and gave it to me as a gift sometime later), which I still have and am looking at through my peripheral vision as I type this. It was a testament to genius ideas that most of us had never thought of, and my mouse couldn't be more proud.

### **And end, it did...**

So that was the adventure that shaped my 27<sup>th</sup> birthday. Though my family wanted to stay past seven o'clock for some nighttime event (a ghost tour, I think), I had planned on heading back home that evening, so we left St. Augustine around four o'clock, and returned to Ormond Beach shortly after five. By six o'clock, I had pulled out of the hotel with my sunglasses on, with my P.O.D. CD blasting, and the feeling of my slipping youth on hold.

I would like to say that it was the perfect way to spend my birthday—it was certainly one of the most eventful of my twenty-seven years—but real life found a way to diminish that perfection, reminding me that even

the little moments, like the cat house, and my forgotten journeys through life, had to be cherished.

Somewhere in the Palm Bay region, traffic hit a virtual standstill. I expected to find a construction zone or a stalled car responsible for creating a pack of rubbernecks, but the reality was not so simple. In fact, the reality turned out to be something I had never seen before—something that defied logic, even.

An accident had happened sometime before I reached the area, though the image of it made little sense. Usually a traffic accident would involve a flipped car, a wrecked car or something in between. This accident, though obviously tragic for the ones involved, seemed to fit this otherwise unusual day. A Camaro, probably a late-90's model, had somehow found its way underneath the back wheel of a tractor-trailer. It was possible that the car had driven right into the trailer's backside, but it seemed impossible for it to get underneath the wheel without the rig backing up. And being that this was on I-95, I couldn't figure out how that was possible. Needless to say, it was an accident that defied convention, much like fireworks on the last day of my mid-twenties or a croissant sandwich at the deep end of an old indoor pool.

I'm not sure what I was supposed to learn from that image, by the way. After five days of experiencing reality, and then medicating it with the surreal experience of beach fireworks and St. Augustine, I wasn't sure what to make of the blending of reality with the surreal, as the vision of this accident had done for me. I suppose it was one way to close out my week.

So that was my transition into a new age. During the next three years, I had returned to Central Florida, graduated with a Bachelor's Degree, self-published two books and written a novel. Though other long-term dreams remained elusive, I thought it was nice to finally get the ball rolling again. I also followed up my birthday experience with another one—this time spending my 29<sup>th</sup> in Savannah, Georgia, a place that, like St. Augustine, featured a lot of culture and enough history to fill a book. It was an experience that returned me to that world of old, where people were quieter, buildings were antiques and pirates were all the rage. It was an experience I planned, simply because I wanted something to ride on the heels of my one truly cool birthday—my transition of an era.

## Palm Trees

Note: The content in this essay was inspired by a conversation I had with a friend about identity and purpose on the night of May 1, 2005. The insights I'm presenting are not entirely my own. I'm just reproducing them on paper so I won't forget them later.

Half past four finally rolled around; thus, the time had come for me to stand from my seat and relocate to another house. When the hour arrived, I had already spent a healthy two hours hanging out at my friends' condo playing *RollerCoaster Tycoon 3* on the computer. I didn't want to leave it at first, because I had enjoyed the time I spent importing coasters I had made from previous *RollerCoaster Tycoon* games into this new engine. More importantly, I enjoyed seeing how the coasters looked in glorious 3-D, complete with a first-person perspective of the ride from the front seat. The bumps, the hills, the drops and the loops; seeing ride names like "Chariots of Steel" and "Backyard Road Rage" transplanted from blocky two dimensions into an impressively realistic three dimensions delighted my heart to laughter. It was a creator's fantasy. Of course, the rides themselves could only be so impressive when they stood atop a flat expanse of grass. The truth was, they needed more. They needed substance. So I treated these naked rides with some scenery. I transformed the "Corn Husker" from a tall industrial looking coaster that started from a barn and ran over a cornfield in *RollerCoaster Tycoon 2*, into a tall industrial looking coaster that started near a graveyard and wrapped around an exploding oil derrick in the latter game. The "Backyard Road Rage," which began life as a massively twisted go-cart track along a forested lake shore in the first game, made the lavish transition into a chaotic highway within a sacred forest complete with Greco-Roman temple and killer robot in the second. And lastly, the "Chariots of Steel," formerly the product of an amusement park within a castle of brick and mortar, became the centerpiece of my "Land of Nostalgia," setting boldly over a sandy pond complete with shrubs and palm trees.

The day didn't begin with computerized roller coasters, however. This pleasant Sunday afternoon actually started with a mid-morning rise, complete with eggs and a cream-filled cinnamon roll. Between the last bite of my breakfast and the first planting of my digital palm trees along the lakeshore coast of "Chariots of Steel," I hopped into my car and headed off to church.

The interesting thing about Sunday mornings is that more often than not, they are sunny. Not necessarily the bright and shiny kind of sunny mornings that you would expect around noon during the summer months, but a crisp, clear, quiet kind of sunny—the kind of day that a camper might awake to if he sleeps in for a couple hours. Like most traditional Sunday mornings, this day was filled to the brim with cloudy sunshine—quiet and calm, with a touch of tranquility. It was the perfect day for shadows to hang at the feet of all the tall and proud construction cranes along the Interstate, and all the short and humble palm trees along the highways.

When I arrived at the church auditorium in the north campus of the community college, I found my friends sitting in one of the middle rows close to the left side. Carefully, I slid past each of them until I found a vacant seat to their right. As soon as the praise and worship ended and it was time for me to sit down and get comfortable, the pastor asked the congregation to squeeze down toward the middle of the auditorium so that we wouldn't have to stretch so far to pass along the trays during communion. I found myself sitting next to a lady I didn't know. But then again, that's where I usually found myself sitting each week.

When the sermon finally began, the pastor spoke about Joshua, and the journey that God took him and his people through as they approached the Promised Land.

As Sunday traditions often had in the past, the pastor initiated his sermon with a participation-friendly fill-in sheet. Unfortunately, I didn't have a pen or pencil on me, which was also a pretty common thing with me, strangely enough, so I couldn't fill in all the blanks. But the general beginning of the worksheet involved discussing the formula of relationships, which was “Shared Positive Experience + Time = Intimacy.”

This equation introduced the important factor that God wants us to know Him, not through estimations and logical thoughts, but through experience. The sermon discussed how Joshua led the Israelites across the Jordan River through his trust in God, which built upon the foundation that he knew Him by experience. The point was further expounded by the detail that God went ahead across the river first, rather than lag behind watching to see if Joshua would do things himself the right way. In other words, God provided the resources for Joshua to live out his purpose, and then showed him how it was to be done. And this was quite necessary considering that crossing the Jordan at that time was a lot like crossing the Mississippi River without a bridge.

When the service was over, our little small group went to the mall across the street to have some lunch. There we talked about books that were being made into movies and books that were made to get us thinking about various life applications. When we finished our meals, we dropped down to the lower level of the mall, where we observed a showcase of decked out doghouses that were apparently designed for a contest. The most interesting of the doghouses included a Japanese pagoda style house and a classic Victorian style house complete with porch and back door. We were wowed by most of them, and speechless by the rest of them.

And that was how the day began. When half past four rolled around, I ended my reign as supreme ruler of the theme park and followed my friends downstairs to our respective vehicles, where we each embarked on a journey down the Interstate to find ourselves at the front door of their father and stepmother's house.

The atmosphere from that moment on was that of anticipation. None of them really knew their stepbrother, who was supposed to make an appearance for dinner that evening, but each was anticipating the moment when they could get the chance to meet him. I felt a little on the indifferent side, because I was the only one in the room not somehow related to the guy. But, nonetheless, I maintained my sense of composure to be welcoming with the others for when he and his girlfriend arrived. I downed a couple bottles of IBC root beer while I waited.

When the stepbrother and the girlfriend arrived, everyone greeted them with handshakes and friendly questions. Then, it was time for dinner. We all sat around the round table in the corner of the room and waited for the stepmother to dish out the food. This in itself caused a slight bit of anxiety among the guests, because dinners in this house had proven on many occasions to be, well, exotic. Fortunately, I hadn't much experience with the deviations of mealtime normalcy in the past, because I had only eaten here once before, and the prime dish was hamburgers and hot dogs (which was sensible considering the get together for that previous time was meant to celebrate the new grill they had bought). But I heard all the stories of the meals that followed (which had been about two years' worth), so I had reason to be as equally anxious to see what would come out of the kitchen this evening.

And, to our lucky surprise, it was more hamburgers and hot dogs on the platter. So that made for two dinnertime bullets I dodged in that house.

The highlight of dinner, besides all the food and conversation, was the gentle cracks we made about the mustard that the parents served that night. It was a Finnish brand of mustard that I can't remember the name

of now, but it smelled terrible, and didn't taste much better. It came out of the bottle like toothpaste, and had with it some sort of brownish tint, which I'll have to say was not helping its case. I can't remember if any of us actually used it on our burgers, but I can recall that none of us were happy that it was our only mustard option. In the end, most of us just stuck to ketchup and relish for our condiments.

When dinner ended, we played a card game called Apples to Apples for awhile. Shortly after that, our numbers dispersed. Around eight o'clock, the friends who owned the condo (where this story began), had to put their son to bed, so they said their good-byes and headed out the door. The same went for the stepbrother and girlfriend, but without the putting a baby to bed part of it. So that left five of us in the house to embark in conversation.

Conversation time began in the living room, where we discussed various topics ranging from people and events going on in the parents' church, to topics ranging from other people and events going on in the parents' church. It steadily wound its way from this way to that, going in directions that I really didn't have much opinion about. The whole time the conversation went on, I felt the pain that the father felt when his wife sat on his lap in that otherwise uncomfortable chair, hanging onto that otherwise uncomfortable position, which was essentially lying at a forty-five-degree angle in a ninety-degree angled chair. I offered more than once to give up my own chair so that he wouldn't have to suffer any longer, but the wife was content where she sat, so I kept my seat—anguishing from my own pain of having eaten too much.

The topics changed when we brought up subjects to pray about. I had a friend leaving for Australia the following day to fulfill her identity in music ministry, and wanted prayer for a safe journey and for a completed purpose during the two years she was going to be away. After a brief discussion about the journey, and a rather inspiring prayer for God's will to be fulfilled in this friend's life, the conversations began to wind down a bit, and soon broke off into smaller units. It was at that point that the last remaining friend and I found ourselves walking around the neighborhood discussing various insights about living out our identities in Christ.

The neighborhood was typical of a South Florida habitat, with its overall tranquility and its abundance of lakes and golf courses. Most of the houses in the area were tidy domiciles with well kept lawns and a variety of plants and vegetation ranging from hedges, to hibiscus plants, to palm trees. I'm sure that many sprinklers have gone off at various times throughout the day, turning what began as green into something greener. Though the active sprinklers that night were few, the impression of

dampness lingered in the air. It was quiet enough to think about the conversational topics ahead.

Now typically, the topics of spiritual relevance to our lives ("ours" being a general term for the sake of this insight) comes during discussions about work, girls, the lack of work, the lack of girls, or some confused intertwining of the two. Sometimes we might throw in a chaser subject in there somewhere to break up the monotony of the surface baseline, but for the most part, one of these two subjects comes up in one form or another during the in-depth conversations that draw out the need for spiritual awareness.

On this particular night, I started voicing my opinion about how easy it is to become distracted away from the things that God might think important. For example: when trying to save up enough cash to move out of my house again for the third time, I find it very distracting and very unproductive to develop an impulse to visit Best Buy to pick up another game or DVD, and then follow through with my impulse so that I find myself fifty dollars shorter than where I should've been once the day ended. Where I know it's important to have a place to live when I reach the point that I have to leave town again, I often find it very difficult to put that need in front of my desire to own as many Adam Sandler or Will Ferrell DVDs as I can. Obviously, this battle of need versus desire plays a parallel role in my fight between the practical and the unnecessary. In my heart, God wants me to reach the next level of my life, which ironically doesn't include carrying credit card debt, but through distraction I find myself in danger of postponing that area of growth or change, because I'm still buying into the problem that my DVD collection is still incomplete. Truthfully, my DVD collection can't help me in my future as much as my room to grow can help, so the issue of distraction has been a problem.

On the spiritual side, the same problem applies. There may be a point in my life (or in general terms, in one's life) when the petty desires of my heart somehow outweigh the deep spiritual need I have to fulfill my identity. My friend and I share a common obstacle that we get sucked up in playing too many video games for too many long stretches of time (well at least I used to), when there are plenty more important things that need to be done that aren't getting done. When time spent with God becomes sacrificed because we are so determined to kill the three-headed mechanical beast before going to bed that everything else including prayer time is set on the backburner, we just let our petty distraction get in the way, and God is left asking, "what just happened?" Of course the painful result of this distraction is that when we find ourselves at a point when

we're spiritually emaciated and wonder why we're falling apart at the seams, God's response is often that we spent too much time trying to slay three-headed mechanical beasts to really pay attention to all the troubling things that were eating away at our lives. Of course, by doing away with the distractions, or at least minimizing them to the point that they can't interfere with the important things, we find ourselves back in the right focus.

From that point, as we finished half a lap around the neighborhood, we moved into a discussion about the church topic from earlier in the day, involving relational experience, and centering it on the fall of man, which compromised relational experience. The interesting thought about the fall of man, which ties in loosely with the problem of distraction, is that man fell because he sought knowledge. Both of us have a mutual friend who fell away from his spiritual beliefs, because he sought too hard to prove God's existence through scientific knowledge and other things that are just too large for man to comprehend. I've actually heard of many examples of knowledge seekers becoming atheists because they weren't given the mind to fully comprehend the knowledge of God—through their lack of comprehension, they think, therefore, He must not exist. This pursuit of knowledge was the very thing that caused the fall of man to begin with.

When Adam and Eve walked among the garden—the same garden that they had often walked hand-in-hand with God—passing by grape vines, rose bushes and palm trees, they came across this fruit tree in the middle of the garden that was patrolled by a harmless looking snake. The snake, seeing that they were currently away from God, offered them a chance to know things that God had forbidden them to know. Enticed by this proposition to gain knowledge—the knowledge of good and evil—Adam and Eve took a bite from the fruit of this tree, to which they became aware of their shame for being naked, for having defied their Creator, and for not having trusted His word that the tree wasn't good for them. This act of trying to do things their way, to live by their own understanding, ultimately brought them to defile the garden, to taint their relationship and their trust in God, and to get them kicked out into the desert where life ceased to be simple. The upside to their action was that they got to understand knowledge—like how barren the desert was, for example. The downside was that they threw away paradise in the process, while compromising the only perfect relationship they would ever know.

So far, the problems with distractions and the pursuit of knowledge are that both involve the need to be self-absorbed. And unsurprisingly, both do a fine job to remove us from that secure trust in God—the God



who is better at guiding our steps than we are, since He sees all outcomes from the very beginning to the very end. This, of course, brings us back to the issue that a relationship with our Father is the important part of life. Focusing on the relationship eliminates the focus on the distractions. Trusting in the relationship eliminates the need to pursue ideas and theories. When it all boils down to one thing, the important part of life is not the DVDs and the video games that I play, and it's not the pursuit of proving God's existence, or discovering the logical spider web of procedures that will likely make my dreams come true; it's giving myself back to the Creator so that He can push the world forward in the way that He knows best.

That brought us up to the final leg of our discussion, which involved following God's will. The one thing that a serious Christian often asks himself is: "How do I live in the Will of God?" Just about all of us want to know God's will for our lives, but most of us don't ever really pay attention to His answer, because we're too busy trying to be logical about what we think is the answer. As my friend and I continued to take another lap around the neighborhood, cutting across grassy curbs and dodging stagnant puddles, he pretty much summed up this question by saying that living in the Will of God involves understanding our own identities and living up to the personage that God made us out to be. In other words, if I find myself longing to create stories involving dashing characters and struggling circumstances (and vice versa), then my identity states that God's will for my life is to create—to model one of the many characteristics that He himself possesses, and not, as one may try to force me to believe, to sit around waiting for life to grab me by the shoulders and offer me to sell insurance over the telephone, or to spend the rest of my life asking people if they'd rather have soup or salad with their entrées. Simply put, if I'm writing a story about superheroes defending a city against the forces of evil, or if I'm just plopping computerized palm trees down by the lakeshore of a digital roller coaster called "Chariots of Steel," then I'm living up to my identity.

When we got back to the driveway and took a rest by the cars, my friend offered me to sit down and look at the palm trees in the front yard. We had spent the evening talking about identity and purpose, mixed with the inclusion of knowledge versus relationship, and the distractions that try to make us forget these things, but the whole discussion came to a head with this one final thought. I sat down, as he had requested, and looked at this palm tree. He asked me what I saw. I told him I saw a palm tree. He asked me what the palm tree was doing. I said it was standing tall. He added the fact that it also took in water and sunshine

when it was given such things. And that was all it needed to do. Take in water and sunshine; that was its purpose and design, or more accurately, its identity. More intriguing than that simple idea was that if the palm tree stopped taking in water because it thought it could do something else instead, it would die. Likewise, if the sun stopped shining indefinitely, or if it decided to move into a cave or something, it would die. Defying either water or sunlight would rob it of its purpose, and thus it would have nothing left to live for.

As if that weren't insightful enough, he pointed out the other palm trees in the neighboring yards, asking me how they compared to the current palm tree. In truth, the only difference between this palm tree and the others was the location. This palm tree was in his dad's yard, while the other palm trees were in neighbors' yards. They were all doing the same thing, each one fulfilling its purpose just as happily as the next. When the question came up about whether the palm tree was happy in this yard or would rather be planted in another yard, the conclusion was that it didn't matter, because it was fulfilling its purpose here just as well as it could've fulfilled it in any of the other yards. And that essentially tied in with living by my own identity.

In the end, all the questions about where I should go next when I'm finally able to move onto the next phase of my life can really be summed up by one comment. As long as I stick to my identity and purpose, and place my trust in God every step of the way, I can live in the Will of God anywhere and still live well.

I concluded the evening letting my friend know I was going to write all these insights down in a longwinded essay, and made mention the fact that I would email it when I finished. Well, that was three months ago, and now I'm finished. I hope these words flourish wherever they go, and that they awaken those eyes and hearts who happen to glance upon them, for their purpose is to show that God wants us all to live again and to start that life by realizing who He made us out to be, and to trust him to lead us in the process.

## *Drug Induced Pedestrians*

Something predictable happens when I get into the left turning lane of Congress Avenue, a major north-south artery in Palm Beach County, on my way home from getting a haircut. A homeless man in a wheelchair slowly backs up between traffic and the construction barricades lining the median, weaving slightly around the pavement jags toward the front of the intersection. I carefully drive past him on my way to claim my spot in the turning queue, only to stop one car behind the leader. As I sit and wait for my light to change, I watch the haggard man through my side mirror continue to back up—it's a mystery to me why he doesn't just turn his chair around and move forward—and I feel anxious as he draws closer and closer to my position. I take notice of other cars coming in behind me, also dodging the man as best they can, but they don't obstruct the fact that he keeps moving. And as I continue to wait for my light to change, he finally reaches level with my car.

And then, he stops.

The discomfort in my head grows strong as I look out the corner of my eye to see the back of this man's wheelchair lined up evenly with my side mirror, his body lined up evenly with my own, and his position only about a foot or so from my door. I wait for him to move again, but he doesn't. He just sits there with a Wendy's cup in hand, trying to decide what to do next. Meanwhile, I think about all the possible scenarios that this could involve me, ranging from monetary support, to food support, to the guilt of not giving any support. At first, I have the urge to roll down my window and ask him anything that comes to mind, since he is, after all, just a foot or so away from me. But I don't do anything. Instead, I continue to wait for my light, hoping that I'm not violating my conscience in the process.

And then, he moves again, slowly, etching his way toward the front of my car. My first thought is that he is going to back up right into my front bumper. But, thankfully, his coordination is better than that. As he carefully maneuvers backwards, waving to someone with a closed window a lane or two next to me, he cuts in front of my hood.

And then, I see the SUV in front of me pulling away. The light finally changed.

I wait a couple seconds for the man to get out of my way, and then I go. At that point, his presence is out of my sight, and I finish making my left turn feeling as though I just missed an opportunity for something. I'm not entirely sure what that opportunity might be at first, because the

Wendy's cup in his hand convinced me that he had some food or at least a drink already. And I know I didn't miss some chance to help him out financially, because for starters, I don't have much cash on me, and secondly, I stopped giving money to people on street corners for reasons I shouldn't have to explain. And as I speedily head away from the intersection toward the S-turn that leads into my home road, I realize that the opportunity I missed wasn't financial or edible, but was to ask the man for his story.

A man living on the street in a wheelchair, most likely a product of the seedy environment that plagues that area; what brought him there to begin with, and what dreams did he abandon to get there? That was the story I didn't ask for. And now I can't sleep, because all I can think about is grabbing the man a pizza and finding out where his life went wrong.

## ***WHAT BLOWS AROUND, COMES AROUND***

### **A History of Hurricanes**

At the height of the 2004 Hurricane Season, a friend of mine asked if I had a hurricane magnet in my pocket. I told him I did. I had carried it around since August of that year, only briefly to pass it off at the start of 2005, just to reclaim it back to my possession near the height of that season. It was an exciting thing—attracting so many anomalies over the course of fourteen months. Even now as I write this, I have no guarantee that the phenomenon has run its course. With some heavy hitting names like “Beryl,” “Florence,” and “Joyce” on the list, the 2006 season about to launch in six weeks will no doubt put the shade of red into Florida’s cheeks for the third year in a row.

Ah, the magic word: Florida, a peninsular state that weather experts all over the Western Hemisphere have whispered about for ages. The target of more than a hundred spinners in as many years, the trap of tourists who eagerly race for the northern highways come August and September—that’s the magic kingdom we know as Florida. My place of birth. The land of my upbringing. Florida. Both the weatherman’s fantasy and his nightmare rolled up into one ball of emotion. The state where insurance is an unpredictable commodity. My home state.

Anyone who has watched CNN or the Weather Channel since August 2004 will know that Florida was stamped with a bull’s eye. Those dormant weather makers that have teased us for years finally pounded on our front doors and demanded to rip us apart. For two straight years. With no guarantee that the torment has finished. As I type this, the state is holding its breath.

The funny thing is that life didn’t start with such anxiety in the early days of my memory. Even though some notorious storm systems made their way through my backyard over the years, none of them heightened my tension the way the 2004 season did. My first recollection started with “David,” a 1979 storm that kicked the crap out of the Caribbean, but somehow lost its punch when it brushed the South Florida coast. My father took me to the beach when the wind started churning, to show me the tide and to introduce me to the spectacle. Where normally that would’ve been a bad idea (storm surges are usually inevitable with hurricanes), the punch was so weak that it didn’t seem like anything more than just another windy and rainy day. And unless “David” was actually “Danny” (1985)—though I’m pretty sure I wasn’t anywhere close to nine

years old yet—this thing reduced my fear of hurricanes to an almost nonexistent level. Anytime the “threat” of a hurricane became eminent, I just shrugged it off, as if it were another “David”—that horribly weak storm that couldn’t blow a leaf off a tree—that storm that unbeknownst to me at the time had killed way more than a thousand people on an island south of me and at one time packed Category 5 winds not even a week before passing over me. Like most Floridians, I was disillusioned. At three years old, I was disillusioned.

My eyes didn’t awaken to the true ferocity of a hurricane until thirteen years later—the year that Florida had gotten its dues for the first time in a generation. In the late eighties, I heard about monsters like “Gilbert” (1988) and “Hugo” (1989) terrorizing the Atlantic and the Caribbean, but I figured they were products of a different world—a world that didn’t mess with Florida. “Hugo” got my attention when the local news showed footage of his aftermath in Charleston, South Carolina, revealing a level of damage that seemed uncharacteristic of the hurricanes that I knew. Wreckage remained where homes previously stood, and families sobbed over their hardened losses. It was a strange sight to see. The hurricanes in my world didn’t do such things. The hurricanes in my world sent their gusty breezes, but not much else. “Hugo” was no doubt a bit freaky. But he was an anomaly. Storms like him didn’t strike south of the Carolinas. Storms like him only struck the Carolinas.

If only that were true.

Three years later, his hopped-up cousin came to town.

“Andrew” (1992) changed my mind about hurricanes forever, sort of. When I was sixteen years old, I was hanging out with my youth group at the same beach where my father had taken me to see “David” so many years earlier. We were there on the Saturday before the new school year started, undoubtedly trying to squeeze out the last remnants of our sacred vacation, and I had no idea that something big was brewing in the Atlantic. The youth pastor’s wife mentioned that a storm was coming, but I didn’t think anything of it. Storms that came after Florida were like declawed cats that came after pine trees. Nothing about them spelled scariness. But then, I went home to watch the news and felt my heart pound for the first time. That little wimpy “Andrew” was packing over 150mph sustained winds. And he was aiming for South Florida. The storms that landed before him barely packed 80mph winds. They weren’t anything to panic over. But “Hugo” of South Carolina packed close to 140mph winds. And that thing wrecked a community. This “Andrew” was out there laughing at “Hugo,” and it was coming right for South

Florida? Laughing at us? The arrival of a hurricane didn't seem so comfortable all of a sudden.

Sunday was spent preparing the house for his arrival. As a sixteen-year-old who didn't want to be bothered with housework, I felt like I was wasting a perfectly nice day. I hated the prep work involved with bracing a house for a hurricane, but I put up with it because I didn't have much of a choice. If "Andrew" was coming, he wasn't going to be bringing roses. I did what I was told. And then, night fell. The news was dedicated entirely to "Andrew" for the rest of the evening. In my prior memories I couldn't recall the news devoting so much of its airtime to a hurricane. Undoubtedly, this one was serious. And I kept myself glued to the television all night.

Even as my parents slept, I stayed in the living room monitoring the progress of this storm. Not once did the wind speeds die during the course of its coming. Somehow I expected it to lose its punch as it drew closer, but it kept coming, inching ever closer as the harbinger of doom. I looked out my back window to see our palm tree whipping around as the winds kicked up to 60mph. It was enough to bend the frond all the way down to the grass. And the storm drew closer, holding its course. All it needed was to shift direction toward the north by one degree and it would be upon me full force. But it held its course—passing over the Bahamas, passing through the Florida straits, reaching the South Florida coast, hitting the city of Miami full force—brushing me with its 60mph shoulder.

It missed me. The news showed the streets of metro Miami getting smashed with horribly fierce winds: traffic lights flinging around like rag dolls, streams of water rushing through the avenues at ungodly speeds. But my palm frond continued to dance outside the back window, as if it knew the chance for fury had subsided. When the sun came up a couple hours later and the conditions failed to worsen, my trees, my home, and my neighborhood continued to stand. The great and powerful "Andrew" kept his fury limited to the south. The most we lost in the skirmish were a few leaves and the first day of school. All was back to normal by Tuesday. But the cameras were still rolling and the southern regions of Miami were on the news. "Hugo" was reborn. "Andrew" put the fear in me.

For the next couple years I watched the news during hurricane season religiously. For every new storm that surfaced, I had to find out what it was doing and where it was going. Each week I waited to see if my home was destined for danger, but nothing came. For two straight years, Florida received nothing in the catastrophe department like it did from "Andrew." Only "Gordon" (1994) stood a chance at re-igniting my fears,

but that was due to something that happened on the highway. All in all, Florida's big hurricane crisis was limited to one isolated storm. After the busy season of 1995, I became exhausted with hurricane news and decided I didn't care anymore. Each season before and after were as big of a bust as they were in the '80s. We spent an entire day preparing for storms that eventually turned into "coastal riders." In 1999, the last straw hit me as I sat in my darkened house in Orlando waiting for a new monster to come at me. "Floyd," the first storm to put the fear in me since "Andrew," came up to the Central Florida coastline near Daytona, promising to sweep across the state with an unholy swath of destruction in its Category 3 wake, and changed its mind. At the last minute, the storm swung northward and rode up the coast into the Carolinas, where it rerouted its destructive intentions into some small towns in the northern state. I was disappointed.

The thing that I learned from "Andrew" and confirmed in "Floyd" (and in many of the storms before and since) was that hurricanes, as destructive as they had the potential to be, were relentless teases. The big ones had a habit of taunting me, making it clear that they were coming for my house, bringing the pain with them, but only the little ones ever followed through. The ones that actually had damage potential put the fear in the local news enough to convince residents like me to board up, to bottle up, and to pack away a garage full of canned soup. But at the last minute they'd change direction, and all of a sudden my entire Sunday was wasted. No hurricane. No danger. Just a boarded up house and an idiot sitting inside. By the start of the 2000s, I didn't give any thought to hurricanes anymore.

My jaded heart against the hoopla continued all the way into the middle of August 2004. On Wednesday, the night of the 11<sup>th</sup>, I walked around the aisles of a Blockbuster Video in Altamonte Springs, Florida (a suburb of Orlando) searching for DVDs, when I heard one of the clerks nearby talking about two storms that were churning near the state: "Bonnie" and "Charley." I didn't listen very intently, because I no longer respected hurricanes for the dead-focused behemoths they should've been. I walked home that night (I lived up the street from the store), putting the thought out of my mind.

The next day I walked to the pool to catch up on some reading, where I was surprised to see the deck chairs stacked up and roped off. I thought the condo association was just cleaning the area, so I walked to the other pool across the parking lot to read there, instead. But I discovered the same ordeal. Without a place to sit, I decided to stick my feet into the pool and read by the steps. And that's when I noticed the



fitness room across from the fence sealed off with the big giant “X” of masking tape. Now I knew the comments from the night before meant something.

As it turned out, “Charley” was the one that got the clerk’s attention, as it was the one that got the condominium’s attention. The forecast predicted it to come ashore near Gainesville as a Category 2, but the threat to Orlando was subjective. Seeing as how the preparation efforts were primarily limited to masking tape coverings, I didn’t think much of it. I went to sleep that night with my usual expectations.

The next day, however, my mood changed. “Charley” had already become a Category 2 by the morning of Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>, but somehow, in the time it took for me to escape the Weather Channel in the early afternoon to go to the grocery store and to return an hour later, the entire forecast shifted. When I headed back to my apartment, one of the neighbors stopped me and asked if I heard about the updates. Since I was at Publix for the last hour, my answer was “no.” Apparently, that wimpy little “Charley,” a former list-mate of “Andrew’s,” had blown up into a strong Category 4. And it wasn’t heading for Gainesville any longer. Now the forecast aimed it straight for Tampa Bay—a coastal region surrounded by three large cities. For the first time in twelve years, I sensed that catastrophic destruction was coming. Seeing a place on the news that I had just visited three months earlier, called The Pier, intensified my dread. The last fond memory I had with a close friend, and the place that formed it, was endangered of getting wiped off the map. My dread sunk in.

But then, “Charley” did something no one expected. He shifted again. As conditions in my own town drastically deteriorated, “Charley” took his aim off Tampa and moved into the coast with destructive power through a town called Port Charlotte near Fort Myers. At Category 4 strength, he ripped through that region with the anger and fierceness of “Hugo,” but he wasn’t finished with them. He had a mission—a significant point to prove. After all the times I had been teased by weak storms and course-changing powerhouses, “Charley” initiated a war that would forever change my tune. He came right for me—dead on. That night, at 9pm, as my power blew out, the eye of this rampaging storm, which was supposed to strike Tampa Bay, reached I-4 in the Kissimmee region and rode the highway all the way up, past Universal Studios, through downtown Orlando, and right over Altamonte Springs—right over my buried head. For the first time ever, I sat in a darkened room without windows, waiting for a fierce storm to pass by.

Within an hour, the 90mph winds died down and the eye was on top of me. All was calm. I waited for the backside to hit, but there wasn't much to it. It was in and out and on its way over Daytona by midnight. I walked to my car to listen to the news. Palm trees were decapitated all around the neighborhood. A pile of fallen debris blocked the driver side of my poor Honda Civic (a car unfortunate enough to sit through four of these monsters). An oak tree had fallen on top of one of the buildings next to the first pool. Hurricane reality finally woke me up. And "Charley" was just the warning shot. The neighborhood was completely trashed, the city as a whole was littered with damaged signs and fallen trees, and "Charley" was only the beginning of a two-year nightmare.

### **To Shed a Tear**

By eleven years old, I had grown accustomed to using my backyard shed as a training module for the things that a young boy pretends to train for. The green tin storage chamber, with the broken doors and the eagle emblem nailed to the triangular white headpiece, stood tall as my friends and I used it for a number of faculties, including: rain sheltering, target practice (squirt guns opened-fire on the eagle), and the home base for our epic neighborhood Hide and Seek games. Though it claimed to be a run-of-the-mill tool shed—storing such things as my family's lawnmower, toolboxes, rakes and shovels—my friends and I knew better. With a grimy ladder pressed against an exterior wall, we'd occasionally climb to the top of the damaged roof to see how tough our guts were. As far as I could remember, no one fell.

"Eagle Base," as it was later christened for its role in our Hide and Seek games, stood tough against a number of elemental hazards, from common rainstorms to a couple incidents of hail. With two large trees protecting each side and a number of object barriers including flowerpots and ladders lining its base, even the worst events, including the big March storm of 1993 (a monster weather maker that hit the entire east coast at once) couldn't touch it.

The shed, though, didn't stand without some opposition. In 1979, during its early years of existence, it stood upright and fully formed. Just as it had for the decades to follow, the little tin structure housed its tools with complete vigilance. When the tools weren't used, it protected them with closed doors, just as it was designed to do. But not far into the second half of the year, it faced its first formidable opponent of its life: Hurricane David. Though the storm was only a Category 1 at the time of its arrival, the reckless winds pounded those doors with iron fists,

knocking them into submission. By the time the storm passed, the doors were bent and pushed off their tracks, never again to close properly.

That incident could've disheartened the shed, but no, the youthful structure went on. As the '80s approached and I became steadily more aware of the world (I was only three at the start of the decade), I began to discover its many uses as a "training center." From there, it became an important part of my life.

As the years passed, and my childhood transformed into adolescence, "Eagle Base" steadily transformed into a household utility center. Although I hated yard work at the time, I still found myself scouring the hull for rakes and shovels on those weekends when my parents wanted me to pick up leaves or fallen oranges. I wasn't a fan of the structure in those times, because the grimy foundation became a reminder that going in meant having to take another shower later, which meant I was going to feel nasty in the meantime. But even in my teenage grumbling, the shed stood tall.

Toward my adulthood, it transformed from a mere utility center to a shelter for cats during rainstorms. Every once in awhile, a new stray would find its way to my front porch, coming from some undisclosed place up the street. After hanging out for awhile, deciding it would adopt us, the cat would then move to the backyard, where it would take up arms on the deck or under the clothesline. During sunny days, the cats would roam fearlessly around the four corners of the backyard. During rainy days, however, they'd disappear. For the pregnant ones looking for a new home, the shed became a place to give birth and to keep the new litter dry.

More years passed, and more abuse befell it—including a tall object puncturing the roof from the inside, and a large hole wearing through the right wall—but it continued to stand, old but proud. As I reached my twenties, the old "Eagle Base" became a centerpiece for an expanding garden, starting with the Schefflera to its left and a small palm tree to its right. Though the trees made getting behind the shed difficult (with only a few feet of yard between the wall and the surrounding fences), they did so with aesthetic pleasure, making the wounded structure appear at rest.

In 2002, the Florida Holly along the back fence grew tangled, so much that it became a hazard. During this summer and the one to follow, I found myself out there sawing away at its tree branches—the ones too high to make my reach comfortable. The simple tasks of paring the tangled little beasts back, preventing the possibility of disaster striking our yard should another storm ever hit (which had been a rare thing since "Andrew" of 1992), turned into month-long projects. Those projects, in

turn, became annual events. While all the trees in my yard became victims of the pole saw at one point or another, the dreaded Florida Holly became my bane—the thing that bled sawdust in waves, but never fell under control. By 2003, we had to cut it down.

We thought we had done the yard a favor. When the jumbled mess of a tree came down that year, we thought we had spared ourselves from future disaster. As the last remnants of the Florida Holly went to the sidewalk, we thought we had ensured “Eagle Base’s” life to last for good.

In 2004, our sense of security proved false.

Hurricanes came and went throughout the last twenty-five years, none doing to the shed what “David” did in its early years. Though the doors piled up in the corner, never again to be used in regular service, we’d return them to their tracks for the brief moments when strong winds were promised, and they would hold long enough to keep the contents inside safe. Because no storm since 1979 packed a zephyr so fierce, we didn’t think any future storm would challenge it. Placing the doors back on their tracks for the arrival of yet another storm seemed like a good idea.

Hurricane Frances, the second of four Florida storms that year, threatened to come into South Florida during the first weekend in September. I had just returned home from my year in Altamonte Springs, having gotten through “Charley” just two weeks earlier, and now I had to stare this new monster in the eye. The news promised a huge storm, but I just shrugged it off. I came home, relaxed a couple days, prepared for the hurricane and then headed to my grandmother’s with my family to help her through the storm. I didn’t even bother unpacking my stuff.

With family and two cats in tow, we made it to my grandmother’s condo, where we hung out in front of the TV for several hours; then sat in the dark as the power went out. We stayed in that little unlit condo for three days. “Frances” was not only huge; she was slow.

That was Friday. We returned Monday, after an exhaustive ordeal of winds and heat, to explore the damage left to our home. As usual, the house came through unscathed. As usual, it boasted the expected fallen leaves and branches, with the occasional trash. As usual, it didn’t seem like the storm had been that big of a deal.

Except, something was different than before. This time, a story befell our backyard:

As usual, the shed endured the onslaught of those 80mph winds. For three days those winds blasted, but they weren’t enough for the tired old veteran to submit. “Frances” kept howling, but the old tin structure kept resisting. She whipped it with wind gusts reaching close to a hundred, but

the creaks of sheet metal endured her wrath; the shed vibrating fiercely, but fighting with everything it had. It was the fight of its life, but the old coot stood.

Finally, on the third day, “Frances” realized “Eagle Base” was winning the battle, just as it had won against “David” in its youth, and so she was scared. She came here with a mission, refusing to leave it unfilled. But sensing her time to win growing short, she knew she had to do something, something underhanded if the tide didn’t turn in her favor. It was a bloody fight she refused to lose.

The tide didn’t turn, so “Frances” stopped fighting fair and hit “Eagle Base” below the belt. She snapped a large branch off the Schefflera tree—the tree I didn’t cut—and used it as her weapon. When we came home Monday, we saw the results of the battle. It seemed, at last, that “Eagle Base” had met its match.

The branch had fallen on the roof, crushing the structure into a mangled mess. Under the branch, heaps of tin lay in piles on the old rocky foundation, burying shelves and tools like the lost bodies of a fallen tower. A cross-shaped foot made of brass, belonging to a rack or a chair, poked out from underneath the triangular white headpiece, spelling out the tragedy of the shed’s last stand. With a layer of leaves covering it over its still grave, the last visible trace of the old glory of my childhood set nailed securely against the headpiece: the black eagle emblem, the signature of “Eagle Base,” unmoved, but clearly lost of its purpose.

Normally, I try not to weep over the loss of an inanimate object, especially not one that served primarily as a place to store a lawnmower. But it was hard to hold back the sorrow of that day, a day where my childhood refuge lay fallen. The last vestige of that old life was gone.

An old childhood friend of mine came over that day, to see how we all panned out. The power was off, the place was a wreck, and there was nothing really to do but to clean up. He came over anyway to hang out, and I showed him what had happened. This childhood friend, a grown man in his mid-twenties, a man who never cries, a man who never lets water drench his back, stood there marveling. All he could say was, “But that was base. You can’t destroy base.”

And that day, this grown man who only had half the memories of this little green tin structure that I had, felt sorrow, too.

It was base. It was “Eagle Base.” And like all veterans of battle, it had to retire.

Now, in 2006, the old foundation serves as a backyard patio, complete with chairs, table, and pirate wine barrel. The old eagle emblem that used to loom over the shed’s entrance like a sentry, now sets nailed to

the wall next to my front door, where it greets all who choose to enter. And, like a dead relative who had a colorful past, the old shed lives on in pictures and in memory, where now it can never be forgotten. So now let us hold a moment of silence for this inanimate wonder that breathed life into my youth, which could only fall by slide of hand.

### **The Familiarity of “Wilma”**

On the morning of October 24, 2005, Hurricane Wilma, a major storm that chose to use my town as her exit point into the Atlantic, became the eighth hurricane to hit or pass Florida in two seasons. Ironically, she had something in common with each of the first seven:

Like “Rita,” she passed through a narrow channel of water, before heading for open waters where she would later pick up steam to smash against her targeted coastline; “Rita” picking Texas, while “Wilma” picked us. She, like “Rita,” also inundated the Keys.

Like “Katrina,” she surprised the world (or at least our section of it) when she suddenly transformed from a nobody to a reckless Category 5 storm, taunting her targets with unknown destruction. She also shared the history board with “Katrina” in that “Katrina” set the “costliest storm” record at over \$80 million dollars, while “Wilma” set the “most intense hurricane” record when she dropped to 882mb, which would’ve made her a nightmare over the Caribbean. Also, like “Katrina” and “Rita,” she was a 2005 Category 5 storm that had the letter “A” ending her name.

Like “Dennis,” she set a time record for earliest something. For “Dennis,” he was the earliest Category 4 formation and strike in the Atlantic Basin’s history. For “Wilma,” she was the earliest formation of the twenty-first storm (which only happened one other time in recorded history). Her formation also marked the first time that the seasonal naming chart had been exhausted. This was a thrill to me, because I’ve always wanted to know what happened if a twenty-second storm formed and there were no more names to label it. Now I know. “Alpha” came about while “Wilma” blitzed the Yucatan.

Like “Jeanne,” she became the reckless youngest daughter of her family (family being major storms of a season), and proved once and for all that she would not be forgotten. Also, like “Jeanne” she dilly-dallied in a faraway place before making the turn to strike South Florida, and blazed a

trail for the coast, jumping from a Category 2 to a Category 3 at the last possible minute before landfall. Also, like “Jeanne,” she confirmed to Floridians that hurricanes were nature’s way of harassing us.

Like “Ivan,” she left Floridians lingering with dread as we wondered where the Category 5 storm would go, and what it would do when it got there. Also, like “Ivan,” she set a personal record, where “Ivan” became the southernmost tropical storm formation in Atlantic history, while “Wilma” became the fastest drop in pressure (she lost 100mb in 24 hours, which is also nearly a world record).

Like “Frances,” she was a massive storm who lumbered about for so long that she pummeled her first target for three days. Though “Wilma” shot over South Florida in less than five hours, she hammered the Yucatan Peninsula as a Category 4 storm for an entire weekend. “Frances,” though only a Category 2 at the time, did the same thing to us the year before—on a weekend.

Finally, like “Charley,” she surprised the National Hurricane Center, and the citizens of South Florida, when she significantly increased in speed at a critical time. While “Charley” leapt from a Category 2 to a Category 4 about two hours before landfall, “Wilma” leapt from a tropical storm to a Category 5 about two days out from the Yucatan. This made life ominous for South Florida when the National Hurricane Center said she was coming for us next, and that her navigation around the cliffs of the Yucatan would decide whether she hit us with Category 2 strength or Category 5 strength. Also, like “Charley,” she swung into South Florida from the west coast between Naples and Ft. Myers, before making a beeline straight for my house, this time in Lake Worth.

### **The Politics of Weather**

Every year that destructive hurricanes strike land, the United Nations’ World Meteorological Organization receives a petition for name retirement. Nations will submit the names of hurricanes that caused extensive damage or loss of life in their lands to the WMO Regional Association, with the hope that those names will be taken out of circulation. Of the eight names that I mentioned in the last segment, all of them were submitted and approved for retirement, along with one more in 2005, a storm named “Stan.”

Retirement is issued to a storm when it becomes a topic of sorrow for the people affected. I tend to think of it more as a way to make the storm legendary. For example, who could forget the three-day old storm that struck Mississippi in 1969 named “Camille?” She started out as nothing, blew up into a monster overnight, and leveled the Mississippi coast two days later. She was just another blip on the radar until she made her mark, and then, like a phantom mistress, she was gone in the night. But she left her mark on American history. One storm, one name—both never to return again.

What of our recent copycat, “Katrina?” Like “Camille,” she blew up out of nothing and charged for the northern Gulf Coast, causing untold death and destruction. Sure, her name had been used before in the last round, in 1999, and once before way back in 1981, but she didn’t do anything but rain on Central America as a 40mph tropical storm in ‘99, or do anything but pass over the Haiti/Dominican Republic border in ‘81. Now that she’s left her mark in history, would it make sense for her name to be used again? Why should the memory of New Orleans or her significance in history be bastardized with a weak return in 2011?

I tend to get fascinated over the history of particular named storms. Some people think I’m crazy for thinking this way, but here’s my logic: as a fiction writer, all characters have an identity. That identity begins with a name. Just as each of us began life not as a musician or a construction worker, but as a name, so a character must start his journey as a hero or a villain with a name. Likewise, a hurricane must start its journey of passivity or aggression with a name. The heroes, those hurricanes that don’t hit anyone, always return six years later (if they’re low enough on the list). The villains, however, the ones that haunt our thoughts, are the ones that go down in history. It becomes a fascination, then, to see which names of the new season become heroes, and which ones become villains.

Those of us who grow up with the uncertain dread of what might happen between June and November of each year get this sick little joy from sharing our name with a hurricane. Though, I have yet to have my name on the list in any basin around the world (there are eight basins, I believe), I still wonder what a hurricane with my name could do. Will it be a passive storm, sputtering out in the middle of the ocean where the winds of sheer destroy it? Or will it be a history maker, a force so bad that it convinces a city to implement new ordinances to protect it from future damage of similar nature? Will it be a wimpy storm like “Alex” (“Andrew’s” replacement), who tries every six years to make its mark, only to fail by circumstances of weak power and poor direction? Or will it be a devastating storm like “Ivan” the terrible, who knocked a section of I-10



into a chasm; or “Wilma” the Flintstone, who ripped apart entire networks of telephone poles along Federal Highway between Boynton Beach and Lake Worth, singing the words: “yabba dabba doo,” which isn’t far off from the sound the howling wind makes, all the way to the beach on her first run?

Names are a big part of a hurricane’s existence, so it leaves me to wonder why it has to be up to the targeted nations to make the call about its future. If it’s about death, destruction, insurance, or confusion (the last being a symptom of what might happen if the National Hurricane Center were to rename a future storm “Camille” or “Andrew”), then why let the history makers return if the affected nations fail to submit a plea to retire it?

There are two names I think about every time I think about hurricane retirement: “Emily” and “Gordon.”

“Emily” had been making appearances every six years since she was first introduced in 1981. Like “Frances,” she showed up over and over again, trying to make her mark on someone, but just couldn’t muster up the right ingredients. In 2005, “Emily” finally performed the tasks necessary to be considered for retirement. Just as “Frances” finally made her mark in 2004 (after nearly ten attempts since the ‘60s), “Emily” made her mark last season. She was a Category 5 storm that, like “Wilma,” smacked into the Yucatan Peninsula as a Category 4 storm, stirred up trouble all over Mexico, and went out, finally, in a blaze of glory. In a year full of hurricane insanity, she was a star. But of the six hurricanes to wreck the Atlantic Basin, she was the only one slighted for retirement consideration.

“Gordon” was the name to replace “Gilbert,” when “Gilbert caused enough damage to come off the list in 1988. “Gordon” made his first appearance in 1994 as a minimal hurricane, but one that dumped waves of rain on the mountains of Haiti; one that ultimately killed more than eleven hundred people. This same storm later moved into South Florida as a tropical storm and tried to kill me when I was on my way to work; when I was getting tailgated by a florescent green car carrier on I-95; when I later hydroplaned off the exit ramp into Palm Beach Gardens and landed in a ditch at the bottom of the bend, where no one, not even the police officer who saw me struggling, offered to help me out.

Both of these storms were prime candidates for retirement in those years, but were overlooked for one reason: politics.

“Emily” was passed over in 2005, allegedly because her damage, though extensive, was minimal compared to what “Wilma” did to that same region three months later. Even though Florida could’ve used the

same excuse to slight “Frances” in favor of “Jeanne,” who hit the same exact area three weeks later, the state chose to bury them both into the history books once and for all, for they both sucked. Mexico didn’t take that road, however. The nation chose to favor the latter storm, as if only one could take the honor.

“Gordon” was passed over in 1994, simply because Haiti had bigger problems than hurricanes to deal with that year. There was a political coup happening that took top priority with its government, which “Gordon,” as bad as it was, could not steal away. So when it came time for the nations’ vote on their retirement nominees, “Gordon” was not to be seen. Incidentally, no one in 1994 came off the list, as “Gordon” was the only bad boy of the bunch. Now, in 2006, “Gordon” had since returned, but so far has yet to impress anyone with his fury.

This brings about my question: why wait for a nation to submit a name? Shouldn’t there be an in-house panel at the World Meteorological Organization who can retire noteworthy hurricanes without national outcry? Historically, notable storms have been submitted for retirement; but only by those nations that had nothing else going on that year. In the case of these two storms, which by all rights and purposes should’ve made the list for those respective years, would have benefited the Atlantic and the hurricanes’ victims had the WMO just taken the reigns away from the political institutions who were responsible for making the call. Then, “Emily” could receive her justice, and “Gordon,” the storm that nearly killed me, would never again have to haunt me with another appearance. Chalk up another victory for politics.

### For Reference

For a full history of all tropical storms and hurricanes, including the ones mentioned in this essay, as well as information about naming systems, how hurricanes work, etc., visit the Weather Underground at [www.wunderground.com](http://www.wunderground.com) or the National Hurricane Center at [www.nhc.noaa.gov](http://www.nhc.noaa.gov) for all the resources you could ever need. The first site stays current, with weather blogs written by experts that outline the potential for a storm, while the latter, though more official, tends to lag in information by a year or more. They’re great places to visit if you’re in a panic over a storm. You can also look up hurricanes through Google if you’re feeling really ambitious.

## THE PERFECT DAY

Sunday in mid-July, it's sunny, and I don't want to get out of bed. Noon has come, the time has gone and the sun washes bright through my window.

My body is exhausted.

I'm tossing and turning under the covers. I need one more hour, at least one more hour.

Some friends are meeting at Peanut Island today. Most of them are already there, I'm sure of it. They said they'd get there around noon, and yet, here I am still in bed. I really don't want to get out of it. I'm sure they'll be okay with me waiting one more hour.

Screw it; I can't keep doing this. This is my chance to get out into the early sun and enjoy the day as it was meant to be. There's no reason for me to sleep in this cave of a room anymore. Yes, I'm tired, but leaving the house will wake me up. Just throw off the blankets and get on with the day.

They told me earlier that I have to take the Water Taxi. Whatever that is. They all took canoes over to the island, but again, that was at noon. I can't exactly be a part of that now. According to their information, the Water Taxi leaves the Port on the hour every hour. So if it's pushing 1:30 now, and if it takes me a half an hour to get up there, then I better get the heck out of here now.

Traffic is typical for a Sunday afternoon: a lot of cars and none of them fast. I'm trying to maintain my constant speed of 75mph on I-95, but it's tough. I keep looking at the clock on my phone—the minutes ticking closer to the hour. I'll be lucky to make it in time.

I get off Blue Heron Blvd. into Riviera Beach, Palm Beach County's crime capital, around 1:50. I take the road all the way to the Intracoastal, hunting for the street that takes me to the Port of Palm Beach. I take the first street, but the road doesn't look familiar, so I backtrack. I go up to the next one, but that doesn't take me anywhere, either. How do I get there?

Two weeks ago, when I went there with some friends to eat at the Tiki Bar, the same night I nearly took my big toe off in a parking stop jumping accident—the fault of bad balance and a pair of flip-flops—I remember seeing a bridge at the end of the road. So if I find the bridge, I find the Port of Palm Beach.

I go back to the first street and take it down as far as I think I have to go. Sure enough, there's the bridge, and there's the Port next to me. I pull into the entrance.

The parking lot is crowded and all the good spots are taken. The only thing left for me to choose is some sandy terrain in a back lot where only a 4x4 should tread. It's already 2:00. I grab my wallet and my cellphone, making sure I'm prepared for the day.

Fortunately, the Water Taxi is still loading up. It costs me seven dollars to walk up the tiny stairway to the deck of the little tourist boat. I look down from the top to see vacationers and locals alike sitting around the benches in the open cabin, holding their tackle boxes, towels, and bottles of sunscreen. I take a seat near the middle where I can put my feet on the fiberglass stump across from me.

A few minutes later, we set off for the island.

As we steer away from the yachts and dodge canoes, the driver begins his tour guide speech: the island used to be a shelter during the Cuban Missile Crisis, blah blah blah; I just want to get there so I don't miss my friends.

As we get out to the current of the Intracoastal, I immediately notice how blue the water looks. I had just seen *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest* the weekend before, so to have this choppy blue water, complete with the paradise skies before my eyes, I can't help but to compare the two. Only a half-hour from my house, and I never knew a tropical paradise could be so close.

Of course, my first impression of Peanut Island from a distance is not one of wonder. My whole life I had it in my head that it was a lush green clump of sand setting in the middle of the water channel. But this lump of sand isn't lush. All the trees are cut down, like the shaggy head of a hippie who joins the Army. Not that I don't appreciate this moment on the water, but the island, from my viewpoint, fails to impress me. That is until we land at the docks on the other side.

What I see when I exit the boat, is not a bald island, but a beach loaded with hundreds of people picnicking, sunbathing, and canoeing. This is truly a surprise. This is truly something like a travel brochure—a half-hour from my house.

I head south down the sidewalk to start looking for my friends. It's a girl's birthday today, so I figure they would usurp one of the park areas for lunch, so that's what I look for. I get about two hundred feet down the walk when I see a group I recognize: two girls from the Tuesday night study group (I'm here to meet my friends from the Wednesday night

study group), and their pilot friend from England, whom I did not expect to see.

After a few minutes' visitation, they tell me that the others are on the north side of the island, so I start heading that way. When I get there, however, I don't see them. I scan the north beach up and down just to make sure, but to no avail. I keep walking, this time moving toward the west. Maybe I'll have better luck there.

Moving toward the fenced off areas of the island, the sidewalk pulls away from the beach, staying more in line with a muddy stream that separates the sands from the grass. Thick shrubs block my view of the beaches, so I take each bridge that I approach to cross the water and explore each tiny mass of sand I can find. Carefully, I dodge boat ropes, sunbathers and kids, but I still don't find my friends. When I check my clock to see that it's 2:40, I decide it's time to call someone.

"Where are you?" I ask, when the receiver of the phone answers.

"I'm actually on my way back to land," he says. "I have to take someone to a meeting."

"But where is everyone? I checked the north side."

"Where all the boats are. You can't miss us. We have two orange canoes tied to the boat."

"Okay, wait there. I'm on my way."

"Dude, I have to go. But the others are still here."

Fine, I think. At least someone will be around.

I return to the north side, this time scrutinizing the beaches as much as possible. I look for the boats. I look for the orange canoes attached to the boats. I look for the friends attached to the canoes. I don't see them. Where the heck are they?

I head back down the east sidewalk, hoping to find an answer. If the two girls know where everyone is, then I have to get details from them. I pass one of them on my way toward the south end.

"They're on the side facing the bridge, out where the boats are," she says.

I'm stunned. Clarity starts to wash over me.

"You mean, they're out in the water?" I ask.

"Yeah, out where all those boats are."

In other words, what she's telling me, is that to see my friends, I have to wade through the Intracoastal, through the seafood-filled waters, and search the boats among the sandbar. And I know in my mind that that's not going to happen. I hate fish, I hate being anywhere near fish, and God help me, I won't be walking among them. My day has just been officially wasted.

"You should go out there," she says. "It'll be fun."

Yeah right, I think. I head to the dock, instead.

While I sit on the dock rolling my cellphone between my hands for five minutes, wondering why the heck I bothered to come out here, I start thinking. Am I really that big of a sissy that I can't tread the water long enough to see my friends, to see the girl whose birthday it is today? She came out for my birthday dinner three weeks ago. Why should I deprive her of the same courtesy? Am I that squeamish around aquatic creatures that I can't brave them this one time? Besides, I got up for this. I drove half an hour for this. For crying out loud, I paid seven bucks for this. I need to just take it like a man and go hang out with my friends.

I head back to the north side, this time walking up to the shoreline. The sandbar can't be more than a couple hundred feet away, I think. It seems that a minute or two of wading is all I would need to get there anyway. If my friends are out there, I'll find them. Though I don't see the canoes, I figure they're probably floating behind the boats out of my visual range. I'll worry about the details when I get out there.

I take off my shirt and my flip-flops to prepare for the walk across the water. I'd leave everything here on shore if I thought I had a safe place to keep them.

I step into the water. No fish are biting; so far, so good. I walk a few more feet, slowly. The water comes up to my knees rather quickly. I think it should level out soon. I keep walking; the water keeps rising. It soon reaches my waistline. This is surprising. I'm only about thirty feet out now, but it keeps getting higher. It has to level out soon. The sandbar is just up the way. My shorts are bagging up. I must look like a goofball, carrying all this crap across the water.

I have to raise my shirt, my flip-flops, and my cellphone above my neck now, just to keep them from getting wet. It keeps rising. And now, I can't stop. Now the current has me. The simple walk isn't so simple anymore, and now I can't just turn back. Now I have to swim to go anywhere.

Crap, I forgot about my wallet in my pocket. And my cellphone, for heaven's sakes, is still in my hand, while I'm swimming, while I'm fighting to keep my head above water. I can no longer touch the bottom. I have no idea how deep the water is now, but I'm still trying to make it to the line of boats at the sandbar. With three things in my hands that I do not want to drop, I find the swim difficult, exhausting, and even dangerous. My energy runs out quickly. I'm struggling now, but I'm still too far away from the shallows. The current still fights with me. My hands still clutch

my stuff. The skin from my toe injury sways about. I have to start swimming on my back.

Another minute of fighting, and I have to rest. Fortunately, there's a pair of Jet Skis tethered to a boat nearby. I grab onto the first one for a breather.

A minute later, I regain some energy; then I set off for the remainder of the swim. Fortunately, I can touch the bottom again just a few feet in. My arms have time to rest.

My stomach churns and my chest heaves. I feel sick now, like I want to vomit. I haven't felt this ill since I took that swim test in that fish-filled pond at camp a few years earlier, the test where I refused to touch the bottom. I check my cellphone; it's dead. My digital companion of the last year-and-a-half is dead.

I finally make it to the shallows where all the boats are docked. Exhausted, pissed, and feeling sick, I tread among the vehicles of this watery parking lot, stepping over rope anchors, dodging young executives drinking their beers, looking painstakingly for my friends. Now that I'm out here, I'd call them for directions, but alas, that ability is shot to hell. I'm left to my own devices.

I wade through the water for at least fifteen minutes, but I don't see them. Not here or anywhere. I scan the decks of every boat, search every face in range, but none look recognizable to me. Sunday afternoon Palm Beachers, yes, but people I actually want to see, no. I can't believe I can't find them. I have to find them. I'm standing in the middle of the Intracoastal where barracudas have been known to swim. I have to find them. More boats, more faces, but none familiar.

At last, I accept it as a lost cause. They're out here, somewhere, but I don't have the strength to keep looking. I think I'm ready to go home.

Of course, to do that, I have to swim back.

About ten minutes later, I find myself drenched, sick, and without a working cellphone on that dock, waiting for the Water Taxi to pick me up. While I wait, hunched over from my exhaustion, the same two girls that I found when I first got to the island pass by in their canoe.

"Hey," says one, "Did you find them?"

"No. And I don't care anymore. I'm wet, I'm tired and my cellphone is dead. So I'm going home."

"Oh. Well, we're sorry you're not having a good time."

Yeah, me too.

The boat ride, though fun coming up, churns my stomach heading back. I feel in my system that I need some liquid in me. Anything, really. I keep my eyes to the floor, nonetheless, not because it suppresses the

sickness, but because I just can't look anyone in the eye. I feel like a complete moron.

I finally get back to my car a few minutes later, thankful that my keys and my wallet had never left my pocket. I unlock the door, throw my dead cellphone onto the front seat, and pull out of the parking lot.

Since I'm near dehydration, I stop at the corner Walgreen's to pick up a drink. I buy a green tea flavored Arizona, one of those tall cans, and pay for it with a soggy one-dollar bill. That leaves me with three wet ones to get through the rest of the day.

I return to my car, in this corner of the crime capital of Palm Beach County, just in time to see a man approaching me. He's a bit older, definitely homely, but nonetheless a man I don't want to see right now.

"Excuse me, sir," he says, as decrepitly as possible, "but can you lend me some cash so I can buy a sandwich?"

"I only have three bucks left. I'll give you a dollar."

"That's not enough for a sandwich."

I don't care enough anymore to bother with it.

"Just take it all, then," I say, as I throw him what's left of my wet money.

And then, I leave.

On the drive back, I guzzle my entire can of Arizona before I leave Riviera Beach. I still feel like I need more.

And that's my day of sunshine and sand—my perfect day. It isn't until I get home that I realize that sometimes exhaustion at 12:00 in the afternoon isn't a sign of laziness, but a sign that it's just better to stay in, despite how nice the day might look. I set my dead cellphone onto my desk as I go back to sleep for the rest of the afternoon.



## Novel Mysterious

The following is based on real life events, though the names have been changed to make a point.

At thirteen years old, in the ripe year of 1989, I began my first makeshift novel called *City Walker*. Though I made the game version of it the year before, it wasn't until seeing an episode of the *The Jeffersons*, the one where Florence writes a mystery novel using all the people in her life as characters, that I decided it was time to put my story onto paper. What followed, then, was an absolute mess of a tale, a story written by hand that resembled little of what a real story was all about.

The purpose of the story was to create an adventure tale about the hero, the "City Walker," having to find a television repair shop called "Mr. Hypno's Television Shop." As the story progressed, and the path to the television shop became littered with an array of obstacles (at one point the hero finds himself fighting his way out of an underground cavern, which he conveniently discovers long before he ever makes it to the store), a new plot emerged: three different organizations were looking to stop him. Why? Reader interpretation.

In the end, the reader didn't get to spend much time with the television, nor with the background of the hero, but he did get to experience a ride that took more turns than a roller coaster had to offer, with character depth shallower than a puddle.

After two years and 208 pages of straining the cat, I finally admitted that the story was going nowhere, so I tacked on an abrupt ending, drew a line across the page signaling that it was over (which seemed to be the only logical way to show that it had truly ended) and finally, left it buried away in its little silver folder with the hope that I might not ever read it again.

Because it had no story, no chapters, or any function beyond free writing (which is a method writers use to search for ideas), I discredited its position as a novel, especially as my first. Therefore, I needed a replacement story to take its place. The following year, during my junior year in high school, my creative writing instructor assigned the students to write a novel. My 91-page masterpiece, an eighteen-chapter handwritten tale about robots and space aliens in a restaurant, called *Zippy's Restaurant*, was the only submission the teacher received that year. It was also a piece of trash, like its predecessor, but had a little more direction than the last one had, so I got an "A" for the course.

And that's how it all began. That's also where it all came to a crashing end. After writing *Zippy's Restaurant*, a story that was more of a novella than a novel, and the beginnings of a sequel for both stories (*MF Guardian* was written to clarify the events in *City Walker*, but I only got through 72 pages before letting it go; *Zippy's Restaurant 2* was going to be the second part of a trilogy, but again I scrapped it after the first few pages) I redirected all my focus back to short fiction, a medium where I could improve my style and my ability to flesh out characters more effectively. That focus lasted for more than a decade.

In July 2004, a year before I gave the novel format a serious try, I released my first book to the online public. *Nomadic Souls* was the official title of that endeavor, a book containing short stories and poetry and whatnot. Because I was proud of myself for actually getting the collection into a state worth sharing (and in paperback no less), I started telling everyone I knew about it.

On a Sunday in early August, while I was busy watching TV from my desk in Altamonte Springs, I got a call from my old friend "Max Powers" (name changed to make a point), asking me if I had disguised my name. First, he asked if "Center Beach" (not the real name) was another name for Orlando. Apparently, he heard someone else calling it by that name, but that person was unverified as an expert. After about five minutes of trying to convince him that I had no idea, he started calling me "T. Edward Sylvan" (name changed to make a point). I sat at my desk trying to figure out what the heck he was talking about.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"Yeah, I'm fine, *T. Edward Sylvan*."

"Are you drunk?"

This went on for another five minutes.

Toward the end of that crazy exchange with Max Powers, I asked why he was grilling me with these questions, and why he was calling me "T. Edward Sylvan." His response: "*Grandeur Part 2*." I still had no idea what the heck he was taking about.

Earlier that week, I told him and my former supervisor, "Ferdinand Franz" (name changed to make a point), about *Nomadic Souls*. Specifically, I told them where to find it online. Since the job at the hospital only required three hours worth of work in an eight-hour shift, they had a lot of time to surf the Internet. Apparently, they found the book. Also, apparently, mine wasn't the only one they found.

Somehow in the course of looking for my book, Ferdinand Franz found another book called *Grandeur Part 2* (title changed to maintain anonymity). The book, the second of two parts, told the story of a

kingdom in a northeastern state (yes, a state in America), and the life and death of one of its glorified residents, a duke named Ferdinand Franz.

The real Ferdinand Franz read on, discovering that his daughter, Francine, had a part in the story, as did the clown of the department, Max Powers—represented as a court jester. With the added elements of the novel taking place in the same state as our former home office, and the king of the story sharing, conveniently, my name (name unchanged because I can't exactly disguise it), Ferdinand Franz put two and two together and decided that I, being a writer, changed my name to T. Edward Sylvan and then wrote this fantasy novel using him and the former staff of our company as characters.

As one could imagine, I was shocked to hear about the possibility that I harbored a double-identity, the second identity being one that I knew nothing about. But it made sense: "Edward" was the name of the actor in *Fight Club*, who unknowingly had a double-identity, and "Sylvan" was the name of the side street Max Powers and I used to play on as kids. Perhaps, I thought, I did write this book and was just too schizophrenic to know about.

That night, I went to Border's bookstore to see if they sold the book. I thought if they had it in stock, and subsequently, if the book had the author's picture on the back, I could verify once and for all that I wasn't crazy, or that I was crazy if that's what the answer revealed. When I got there, however, I couldn't find it. I searched the book database to see if it in fact existed. There was a listing for the book, but no information about the author. Now I was concerned.

I went home and looked up the book online. I found it on one of those expensive self-publishing sites, one that allowed the potential buyer to preview the first few pages. I fast-forwarded straight to the back, straight to where the "About the Author" page would be. Only, there wasn't one. Now the mystery was truly unsolved.

I decided, then, to read the first chapter. I had to know what I was being blamed for writing.

The first chapter opened with a choppy line of dialogue that made me blush. The second line failed to improve the first, making me annoyed that one could accuse me of this. By the end of the first page, I knew deep down that I was normal, as I would never write such terrible dialogue at this point in my life. My writing style justified me.

The one point I tried to make during my defense of my position, the one that clearly stated that I didn't write this novel, was that in my history, I, unlike Florence from *The Jeffersons*, never used the names of people I knew in my stories. Occasionally, if the situation called for poetic justice,

I might use a first name only (and a common name at that), but never both names. I would certainly never use the whole of an uncommon name like Ferdinand Franz in my stories. I just think that's tasteless. In fact, my shyness at using real people I know in stories goes so deep that I don't even like mentioning their names in nonfiction. Whenever I write memoirs of my life, the friends and family involved typically take on the label of "my friend" or "my cousin" or something of that nature. I'm not a fan of opening the windows of my friends' lives to complete strangers, so I try to avoid it whenever possible.

To this day, T. Edward Sylvan's true identity is still a mystery, as is the nature of the contents coinciding with my life and the lives of these friends and coworkers who shared a spot in the novel. And, as far as I know, the guy never released a follow-up to *Grandeur*, so his purpose is still unclear. However, one mystery has been solved: I used to think Ferdinand Franz stumbled across the novel while he was looking for *Nomadic Souls*, but Max Powers confirmed to me recently that he had actually been typing "Ferdinand Franz" into search engines when he found the link to *Grandeur*. Before the confession, I thought for sure that someone had linked *Nomadic Souls* to this steaming pile of impostership, so I was truly confused.

Nowadays, the other mysteries are still open, and I don't know what to think of that. Coincidentally, Ferdinand Franz doesn't know what to think of that, either, as deep down he still thinks I wrote it. Max Powers, who has known me since early childhood, still has his questions, too, but he believes me now for the same reason why I believe myself—I just don't write that way.

## **Nonfiction Essay Commentaries**

The mystery to why real life events make for such popular movies has no hidden solution. People just love to see great true-life stories. Our hearts strive to know what other lives are like, and to consider, in retrospect, what our own lives could be. Sometimes that life begs for excitement. Sometimes it just begs for change. In my case, it begs for something new to learn, and ultimately, to share with whomever will listen.

Assuming that you've taken the time to read my true-life events, I will now fill you in on the rest of the story in the following commentaries.

### **Summer 1999**

It's been more than seven years since I wrote this, but I seem to recall my two big shockers that summer being the realization that my infatuation with the wrong girl might've been found out—and addressed to said girl—and that my instinct to pull out of my English Literature class on the first day would've been a wise decision, had I made it. The grand truth, however, was that the girl—and I think this story has been dealt with to death, since all of these stories were about the same girl—had no clue I was interested in her (until I told her three years later and she chose not to reciprocate—I should've listened to all the advice I got to back off); and that the English Literature class, though I ended up failing at the hands of the instructor's ambiguously driven ego, didn't matter how it panned out, because, in the end, I retook it and aced it with a better teacher five years later, and that looks better than anything I would've churned out during the summer of 1999.

If there's anything else to add to this story, it's that a.) I wrote this in a time when that girl of my interest inspired a number of emo-fueled journals, one of which I had written a week before and titled "Tangled Heart," which you might have seen if you've read the last volume called *Life Under Construction*; and b.) I didn't learn a whole lot from writing this, because seven years later I still question all the things I questioned back then. Of course, the fact that I still question them must mean there is still something to learn from them, but so far it's taken me seven years to make sense of it (or at least to do anything about it), and that's not including the number of years I might still have to go to figure it out.

So that's the history of my summer of 1999. I didn't include it in the last volume, because the book was already closing in on its maximum page

limit. But now you have the pleasure of experiencing that lost example of my chaotic neuroses here, so I hope you learned something valuable.

### **Invigoration**

The funny thing about my writing habits from 2001 to 2003 was that I rarely finished what I started. To this day, I don't know why that was. I used to be great at finishing a piece in its entirety in quick time. Prior to 2001, my average development time for a short story was two weeks, while my development time for an essay was one day. By the time I started my job at JFK, however, all that creative energy sucked dry. So it came as no surprise that leaving the job was my first chance at reinvigorating my soured imagination.

Of course, being that all things take time to restore, I needed time to allow the reinvigoration to last. When I started this essay on that fateful day in June 2003, I had the right legs, but not the right strength to stand on them. I only wrote up to the point where I said I was angry, and then went on to worry about my future. It wasn't until today—in an attempt to recollect my mood at the time—that I finished the essay. Though it was three years ago, and though I don't remember the true reason why I started it, I'm pretty sure it had to do with my anger for not living up to my identity as a creative type within the job I was doing, and the fact that now (as in then) I felt the time was right to fix that. Of course, to this day I still haven't fixed that, but I did manage to find some freedom that year: I moved back to Central Florida three months later out of faith that God would provide for my needs, and came back the following year with my coveted Bachelor's Degree in hand.

And three years later, I stand once again on the cusp of preparing myself to leave South Florida to take the chance that God has something better for me out there than what I'm settling for here. I have a feeling the events of the coming months will strongly mirror those of that season in late 2003. Just a hunch.

### **Writer's Block**

The point I was trying to get across in this essay was that I was discouraged at the realization that a trusted friend was slipping away. Another girl, of course—not one of particular interest, but one I trusted—and I thought she just didn't give a crap about me anymore. No

explanation, other than the busyness—as they all eventually claimed testament to—and the connections just faded. Obviously, this symptom wasn't exclusive to me, as all people have to watch their friends move onto other less important things (for the sake of progress), but I was just particularly sensitive to it at the time, because I saw a lot of my old friendships fade over time, and didn't want to see this one zip away so fast, either. But I've been hardened to it since then, so I don't think about it much anymore. The friend is still around (sort of), so the anxiety of losing the friend to pointless abuses of time didn't quite become valid. But others have gone their separate ways (others of even greater value, ironically), so it hasn't been an easy journey. Of course, time takes us all away sooner or later, so it's not something that can be stopped, no matter how intensely I might write about it. I think the only place I'm still sensitive is in that area where the trusted friend ignores me completely, giving no consideration to the fact that a letter or a phone call often requests some sort of response. I have another essay that deals with that problem more directly, so I won't mention it further here.

The essay was originally called "A Friendship Dying," but changed to "Writer's Block" when it became clear the essay would never talk about the friendship that I thought was dying (fading would've been a better word—I can admit that now). It unnerved me that I couldn't finish the frickin' thing, because it reinforced my repetitive struggle of not finishing anything during that time period. But, seeing it for what it is today, I can accept it as its own completed piece without disappointment. I'm just happy I was able to write something that day. That time in my life really sucked.

### Messages of Purity

I don't remember when I wrote these responses, but I do remember the circumstances that prompted me. The first, the response about waiting for marriage, stemmed from a morbid feeling I had when one of the message board junkies announced that he would no longer frequent the board, because he had met a "hot girl" recently, and was going to be devoting his concentration into trying to bed her. Frankly, I thought he was making a horrible choice (not the choice to abandon the boards, because frankly I would've supported that choice for anyone—it was one of those "gaming message boards"...blech—but the becoming a sleazebag choice), so I wanted to point out the "logical" reasons for skipping this idea (as the members of the board weren't particularly open to the

“spiritual” reasons for being pure, and I didn’t think my message would’ve gone anywhere if I had leaned it that way). The second, the question about why love hurts, basically was my attempt to adjust the tide of bad advice into one of sound judgment, as the guy who was “in pain” thought his infatuation for a girl was enough of a reason to have her, and didn’t understand why he couldn’t have her. After a number of immature answers flooded both messages, I thought it was time to throw in some sense. Not that I had the answers, of course, because I wasn’t a psychologist. But I just didn’t see anyone else stepping in to offer real life experience to the situation, so I had to say something. Deep down I had hoped the two or three married people on that board would’ve piped up, but they didn’t. Such is life, I guess.

### Urban Livestock

There isn’t much need for a commentary here, since the entire essay more or less explains its existence in the text itself. I will say, however, that it wasn’t originally a redundant retelling of “Invigoration,” because when I finished this, the second half of “Invigoration” hadn’t been written yet.

If there were anything I can add here, I would say that the entire field with which this cow story took place had since been developed into shopping centers and town houses, and that the cows, sadly, can no longer be found outside the Longhorn Steakhouse on the adjacent corner.

### Transition of an Era

This essay lingered in my head since the moment it began to unfold (at the park), though I couldn’t bring myself to write it until this past year. Like most of the works in this book, it became a product of a dreamer’s head that only lived in conceptualization, without having a firm canvas to transcribe upon. I finally forced myself to write it after I had developed a “Priority List,” which helped me organize my projects.

As far as the content is concerned, the only thing worth mentioning that wasn’t already mentioned in the text was that the trip to St. Augustine prompted me to return two more times that year: the first, because I couldn’t sleep (my roommate and his girlfriend were making too much noise in the next room); and the second, because I wanted to shoot my background picture of *Nomadic Souls* in the Old District. I hadn’t been back since, though I would like to someday.



### **Palm Trees**

The insight about identity was the most important part of this essay, but the construction of it had to have a frame. Because these insights came about through discussion, and not through introspection, I wanted to make sure I had the means to communicate it without misleading my readers into thinking I came up with these insights myself; nor did I want to take away from the option of my friend writing these same insights down in his own journal—which I believe he didn't do. So that's my excuse for tacking on the first half the way I did, and for switching the tense so dramatically. I wanted to separate the discussion from the scene, while still making this my own experience to write in an essay. I didn't set out with the exclusive intention to write an uninteresting account about my day playing *RollerCoaster Tycoon*. I just wanted to be sure the message had background. Okay, enough with the defense.

### **Drug Induced Pedestrians**

As the story implies, I wanted to find out what went wrong in this guy's life. But, also as the story implies, I didn't. I wrote this introduction, thinking that I might go back and find out the answers to his tales, but life got the better of me and I had put it out of mind. Therefore, what began as a premise for a possible magazine article, turned into a commentary about how we can never know what we're called to do until we allow ourselves a moment to find out. In this case, I had a chance to do something different; and I didn't do it. A part of me regrets that. Another part, however, believes that I couldn't have the story that I have if I had rolled down my window and asked the man what was up. So this one had two sides to its tale.

### **What Blows Around, Comes Around**

I originally had three different ideas for essays—okay, two to be fair to truth—but both shared the same subject of hurricanes, so I thought it would be better to combine the two. The first of these essays, “To Shed a Tear,” entered my mind immediately after the tragic events that inspired it took place. Though I was stuck without power for a week after “Frances,” my mind went toward other pursuits when the lights came on, namely to work on the editing of *Life Under Construction: The Collection of*

*Junk Volume 2*. So the essay stagnated in my mind for a year. Immediately after Hurricane Wilma barreled through Palm Beach County a year later, I thought of the list that compared her to the other major storms of the last two years (including the two that didn't hit the States, but were still troublemakers), but again, my power was off for a week, and I was too busy working on *Panhandler Underground*, my yet-to-be-released novel, to write that list when the lights returned.

I kept both essays in mind for many months to follow, until early this summer when I finally had the time to write them down. Only, I didn't want to break them apart for their similarity, so I intended to put them together as one piece.

Because the essays didn't make sense together as a couple, I decided to write the setup piece called "A History of Hurricanes" to initiate the journey. I wanted it to set the stage for my fascination, as well as my troubled history with these blustery beasts. Plus, I thought the following essays would make better sense with its existence, so I wrote that first. Then, I got caught up with some other stuff (as usual) and left the important pieces to wait for another few months.

The last piece was an addition I had considered, shortly before I started the first piece, when in April of this year, the World Meteorological Organization finally published its list of retirees for 2005. I was shocked to see that "Emily" wasn't on there. After further investigation, I found out that "Gordon," the 1994 storm I have the most hostility toward, was also a candidate scheduled for retirement that missed out because of politics. So the last piece was written, not to explain, but to vent. It more or less served the same purpose that "The Evil Clone of Michael Keaton" served to voice my disapproval of continuity flaws in Hollywood.

So that's the story behind this essay. As an update, I had written the first block prior to the start of Hurricane Season 2006. In my first paragraph, I stated my opinion that the season was going to be another blockbuster, another year full of chaos. As of now, in November, the season has been relatively quiet. Only nine storms have formed so far ("Isaac" being the most recent), and only three of them went anywhere. "Florence" and "Helene" both hit Bermuda (a rarity, I think), and "Ernesto" came after us (what else is new?). None of these storms were troublemakers, but they did prove how antsy the citizens of the Atlantic have become over the last two years. Though I wasn't in Bermuda to see the panic firsthand, I was here to see the reaction to "Ernesto" when the 40mph winds knocked on our door. Gas stations had four-hour waits; businesses closed like it was the end of the world; and boards went up on

houses all over South Florida. Panic was in full effect—for a storm that was no more powerful than your average rainfall. The news media, who promised “no hype, just the facts,” really dropped the ball on that one. I, of course, had to smile at the whole thing. We’ve come a long way from sending out eighteen-year-olds across town in a tiny truck down a blustery and busy highway amidst a storm that had just finished killing more than a thousand people just a few days earlier. Only, I think that long way somehow overcompensated in its necessity.

### **The Perfect Day**

Of all the essays in this set, the events making up this one are the most recent. In fact, this story never would’ve made it into the book if I didn’t think it was worth cramming for at the last minute. It’s a story that I considered blogging on MySpace, now that I’m one of the millions of sellouts who got suckered into signing up, but changed my mind when I realized it would make for a better addition to this book.

Anyway, the behind-the-scenes details about this story are minimal, but I do have one thing worth mentioning here. I ordered a replacement for that cellphone a few days later for \$50, just to have the company ship me one that locked up two weeks later. That phone, ended up getting replaced with the one I have now, which looks just like the first two, and works like the first one, but has a messed up screensaver. Essentially, the clock is too dim in screensaver mode—unreadable, in fact. It works, yes, but not like my original. Every time I look at my dim screen, I think about the first phone and about how nice it would’ve been to not have to tell this story.

So the moral of this tale is that sometimes your body might be trying to tell you something about your day, whether you realize it or not, and that if you choose to ignore your body for the sake of experience, just be sure to leave your electronics in the car. I’d also recommend watching the *Pirates of the Caribbean* movies if you haven’t had the chance yet. They’re very good. The second one will be out on DVD by the time you read this.

### **Novel Mysterious**

This is one of those stories that needed telling, though I wasn’t sure how to go about telling it. It doesn’t have the elements of suspense that a tale

about car chases and stalkers might have, but the fact that it got me questioning, not only my identity, but my sanity, made the story a prime candidate for this list. Also, because it has the most intriguing details of my life setting it up, I thought it made sense to include it at the end of the section, as sort of a bang up way to bring you into the last chapter of this roller coaster book.

Anyway, there isn't much else to say here, other than that I still don't use real names in places where fake names are just as good. I also have no additional information regarding the truth behind the novel (which isn't called *Grandeur*, but is called something like it). My theory, however, holds that the author worked at our home office and referred to our staff roster for his personal use. It's wild, I know, but the coincidences are too many. Hard to say for sure, though, where all of this really came from. The only thing that makes sense is that my old supervisor searched for his own name on Google. Of all the crazy things to happen in this scenario, that's the only part I can buy.

I also find it ironic that in all of this, my old supervisor bought a copy of *Grandeur*, but not *Nomadic Souls*. I don't understand that, either.

So that's the story behind "Novel Mysterious." As far as those earlier novels are concerned (and I use the term "novel" loosely, as neither really qualified), neither have been rewritten or transcribed from their original source, so they still remain in their forgotten folders somewhere in my filing cabinet. They have been adapted to screenplays, however, and into much better versions of the story, I might add. Currently, *The Tangerine*, the script version of *City Walker*, is still undergoing rewrite hell after more than eleven years, and the script version of *Zippy's Restaurant* was never finished because I wrote it on a corrupted floppy disk. I do plan on rewriting *Zippy's Restaurant* for my future book of novellas, which will probably be out in a couple years; I'm sure the rewrite will be better than the original. For now, though, those stories are collecting dust in the halls of my memory.

### In Conclusion:

It's been a long road putting these stories together—Lord knows most of them have been on my mind long before I ever got around to writing them—but now the past is behind us, so we can look forward to a new future, a future where life is as exciting as the explosions that come with it.

And that covers the Nonfiction Essays of this book. The last segment will reward you with a true collection of junk: a section that has

no boundaries and a bunch of works that are too few to be affiliated with a specific category. Enjoy.

—Jeremy



## Other Bonuses

First-Time Blogger

Burnout Syndrome

Insecurity

JFK Commercials

Saturday Morning

What's This in My Hand?

Lawyer in the Street

The Origins of “The Awakening of Powerstick Man”

Projected Path for Feature Article

Query Letter

Royal Crush: The Card Game

Cooking with Peach





## Introduction

It must be some kind of miracle that you made it to the last section of this potentially immense collection, but through your patience, you did it. Therefore, I will now reward you with the most diverse set in *Collection of Junk* history: the “Other Bonuses.”

This section separates itself from the rest of the book in that it features a variety of genres within its boundaries, like letters and screenplays, rather than limiting itself to just one genre, like poetry only. This isn’t to say that every piece in this segment acts as its own genre, nor is it saying that every piece cannot fit within an earlier section of the book (three of these pieces would fit very well in the Nonfiction Essay section, but I elected not to include them there for the sake of diversity here). All it’s saying is that everything presented in this section has a chance to be different than anything else this book has shown so far. And for those two or three pieces that really aren’t much different, let’s just say that sometimes I have to exercise sound judgment in the placement of things, and if I say it belongs here, then it belongs here.

So what exactly are we looking at? Well, there are a few essays: one’s a blog, another is one of those “why me?” rants, and the third is another response to a message board question. But that’s not all. You’ll also be entreated to a new set of screenplays (another staple of the *Collection of Junk*, though this time not exclusive to its own category), a few background letters regarding past works of mine (each of which can be read in *Life Under Construction*), the rules of a card game (yes, I’m not joking), and last but not least, a writer’s cut version of a scene from my *Panhandler Underground* novel. And there were many other works slated for presentation here, but were cut at the last minute because this book was already rubbing too closely with my self-inflicted deadline.

So that’s the brief overview of the section, though you’ll get more out of the experience by reading through the pages and finding out just how diverse they are from each other on your own. As far as the cut works are concerned, maybe I’ll feature them in another book someday. And with that, I wish you well.

—Jeremy

## First-Time Blogger

Well, I've known about this blogging thing for awhile, now. Since I don't journal often, however, I really haven't done much to take advantage of it. But for some reason, in my half-awake state (at 1pm on a Sunday), I feel like doing something different. Maybe it's just that I don't have any new emails to appreciate, or that the other site I visit from time to time hasn't had much activity in the last couple days. I can't really blame it on boredom, because I haven't been up long enough today to blame it on that. But, whatever the reason, I thought I'd look up some information about setting up my own web page (which I have also been meaning to do for the last year or so, ever since I put my first book online, for preview purposes), and somehow, I came across this again. Probably a strange time to decide all of a sudden to take a look at blogging; but then, I think there's enough to think about lately that it's worth writing it all down.

The first thing I discovered, just now, is that highlighting any block of text on this site, while typing, is bad. Evidently, when I press a directional key while a word or segment is highlighted, it deletes it. Good thing I know how the copy function works (Ctrl+C to copy, Ctrl+V to paste for those who are savvy enough to write a blog, but not enough to know how the copy and paste functions work). Just thought I'd mention that.

Well, now that I'm starting to wake up from this caffeine shot, maybe I can start writing about some pertinent issues—at least enough to get me to the point that my sister will start bugging me for the telephone (I'm still on dial-up). Something tells me that won't be long from now. She's 13.

The biggest thing I've thought about lately is the issue of prioritizing. A few months ago I listed a series of projects that I would like to finish over the course of the next three years, and listed them in such a way to give old projects priority over new ones. I decided I had to do this, because I kept adding too many new things to my already extensive plate, and I just wasn't getting anything finished. So now that I've written this planner (back in April), I've already finished some outstanding projects that I started way back in 2001, though others are still on the waiting list.

So far the plan had been working nicely, but something happened around the third week of September to change that. An outstanding idea came to me for a novel, and I thought it was something I had to write now, not at the end of my list. The idea was too fresh and too important to let it sit, so I knocked everything else to the wayside and started working on this novel...about panhandlers.

Yes, I'm writing a novel about panhandlers. And it's important. I'm not going to discuss the book itself any further, because I'm only on Chapter 9, but it's something that I can't wait three or four years down the road to write, especially with my ten-book epic in the planning stages. Once I start working on the epic, it'll be my writing life for the next several to many years, so I'd rather get my other stuff finished, first.

But back to the priorities; the hardest thing about keeping priorities is to know that new ideas keep filtering in, and that somewhere along the line I have to cut them off so I can keep whittling away at the old ones. That can get unnerving when it means going back to projects that I haven't touched in several years. Figure, the spirit behind my reason for writing them had changed over the break period, so I'm not sure I can go into the stories with the same heart I originally started them with. Sure, I can finish the stories with some feeling, but after three years, the risk is higher that they'll become objective. That doesn't mean they'll ultimately suck, however; it just means that they'll be different than what I probably intended them to be.

But that's all up for debate, I guess.

So what am I doing now, now that I've put my planner on the backburner (which I suppose defeats the purpose of having a planner)? I'm typing in all the handwritten content that I wrote for my book during the massive power outage that we had a couple weeks ago. Before the power went out Monday morning at 8am on October 24, I had written up to the 4th page in Chapter 6, which scaled down to standard paperback size would equal about page 7. Pretty sizable accomplishment given that I just started the thing about four weeks earlier. Once the power went out, I stayed awake for three hours watching the news on a battery-powered television, and then I fell asleep about ten minutes after the eye of "Wilma" passed through and slammed us with the back eyewall, which kicked our winds up from about 15mph, to more than 100mph in less than 30 seconds. For those who have never experienced an eyewall, it's pretty cool (I've always imagined the Rapture being something like that). But obviously, the sudden increase plays havoc with your backyard, and the turbine on your roof will eventually fly off after the plastic bag covering it (to keep the rain out of the attic) rips apart. And that's after you decide to bring in the stray cat that had been riding out the first half of the storm underneath the metal desk that you used to have in your bedroom before you picked up a better wooden desk with a hutch from Best Buy a little more than a year earlier, because the backside of the storm would bring in winds from the opposite direction, which would ultimately mean smacking the poor helpless feline right in the face with

100+mph winds, and no stray cat wants that, and neither did we. So we had our turbine fly off and we brought in a stray cat. But that's derailing the point that when I woke up to the gentle cold front that followed the hurricane, and after I took my pictures of the damage (which I did after "Charley" and "Frances" last year, but not for "Jeanne," because I really didn't know which damage belonged to her and which belonged to "Frances"), I ate a nice cold meal, read a few chapters of Douglas Adams's last book called *The Salmon of Doubt*, and then went on to write by hand on line-paper my own chapters. Over the course of a week I managed to write 55 pages stretching from the 1/3 point of Chapter 6 all the way to the 1/3 point of Chapter 9. Then, last Tuesday, I went to have a family dinner with friends of my mom's and managed to start my lengthy typing session over there, which, thankfully, I was able to resume in my own house the next evening when our power finally returned. So now, after several days of hunching over my computer keyboard, I'm finally at the point that I can transcribe Chapter 9, which means I'll be back on pace with the novel by the end of the day today. And that's good to know, because I hate having to write the same thing twice, especially when it involves nearly 20,000 words.

On another note, I just discovered that if you click an area of the page with your left mouse button after highlighting your text, you can save what you wrote. Interesting.

So that's the start of this blogging journey. I don't know how often I'll keep up with it, because I don't journal often and I hate having to combat for the phone, but I can see why people are addicted to this, so I don't know. Maybe next time I can talk about why I liked the new Batman movie way more than I liked the last four. We'll see what happens. I just know that I need to get a website soon, so I can showcase my books so that people might actually want to buy them. That would be nice, too.

Well, here I go back to the typing thing.

## BURNOUT SYNDROME

It's now late at night, a few hours after Memorial Day, and here I am sitting at my desk carrying a heavy heart. I suppose there's nothing new in that statement, as usual, since I often find myself carrying some sort of unwelcome weight at three in the morning. It's not even surprising that I'm writing this down, it happens so much. Many nights I try to suppress it—forget that I feel it—and then get on with my evening however I can (or in this case with my sleep). But the presence of such weight is hard to go unnoticed.

I went to bed a few hours ago, trying to let whatever depression I felt inside to help me drift off to sleep, as such an emotional burden can do. And yet, here I sit wide-eyed at my keyboard having been riled awake again by the realization of what my heart has dwelt on for the last few hours—and months.

I'll admit that, as I sit here, my feelings have subsided slightly from the point I felt when I originally stepped out of my bed to turn on the computer. As I waited for the computer to load, I hooked up my Nintendo Gamecube and played a round of one of my racing games called *Burnout 2: Point of Impact*. The title may be a little symbolic to the feeling of my heart, but ironically, the momentary mind substitute calmed me down. I suppose racing a sports car into oncoming traffic at more than a hundred miles an hour can do that. But now the race is over, I came in second (winning only the silver medal), and I don't really feel like continuing the race tonight.

Sounds a lot like where I'm at emotionally. Burnout. Points of impact. That's essentially what this letter is about. I'm tired. I'm sick of the place I've found myself. I'm wounded. This isn't a burden I want to be stuck with. And yet, I'm forced to own it.

I really don't know if this writing will pass anyone's eyes. Of all the things I've written down, only a few people have actually seen them. But right now I'm not entirely sure I care. I think for now this is just for me to process. But in a way I hope that the story I share will wake up those who are stuck in themselves. Not to say that the person who may come across this will feasibly be stuck on him or herself, but that may only be according to his or her opinion. Such a person could easily turn this letter around to say that I'm in fact the one who is stuck on himself. After all, who gets up at three in the morning to write a letter about the burdens he feels on his heart? Maybe the person who isn't stuck on himself is onto something here.

But I think the main issue is that this letter won't reach such a person's eyes, because that person would have to actually make an effort to sit down, put the paper in hand and read it. And what person with access to this letter would actually do such a thing? That would require both a commitment and some free time. Those two things seem to be unheard of in people anymore.

I suppose the question is worth my asking: "why am I burned out?" "Why have I brought myself to a place of apathy toward my own heart?" I think I'm just tired of trying to keep up. I'm tired of exerting the force necessary to maintain emotional and relational well-being—whatever that link is that ties the two elements together. I've spent many moments attempting to reach out to others, trying to be a friend and to find a friend, and frankly I'm sick of having no one reaching back. Yeah, maybe I have a couple long-distance friends who give a little of their own strength to keep things going, taking some of the burden off my shoulders, and I have to say that I appreciate that. But why should I have to drive two hundred miles to have that kind of friendship in my life? What's so freaking hard about having people like that in the place where I live right now?

I realize this letter may be unorganized. I didn't really think this through when I sat down to write it. I just know what triggered me to write it.

Earlier this evening, I got to hang out with some friends for a Memorial Day barbecue. I would say that maybe one party member was a decent friend and I sort of knew a few others. I wouldn't say I was particularly close to any of them, but the important thing was that I knew some of them. I had the same experience this past Saturday with a group of people in Tampa. In both instances, I thought it was nice to be among decent people and to have a few good conversations with them. I certainly thought it was a good way to spend the weekend.

But a terrible thought occurred to me when I came home tonight. This thought was partially triggered by a comment that had been spoken to me on Saturday while I sat on a pool raft. That comment: people in this place are essentially transient. They will come here for a season, maybe unpack a couple bags during their stay, and then leave again. The length of time is never fixed, but it's rarely for long. They come here, take a seat, make idle chitchat, and that's the last they're seen in this town. Trying to make any real connection with such a person is absurd.

I felt that absurdity when I conversed with a few of the barbecue attendees earlier this evening. I'll admit that it was a pleasant experience to talk to some of them, each of who had interesting stories to tell. But

when it comes down to it, the likelihood of seeing those people again is slim. The idea of actually getting to know them is beyond reason. They came for a moment, but will probably be absent for a lifetime. How do I connect with someone when that likelihood exists? Why even try?

I'm burned out because I'm tired of trying to reach out. I'm tired of going down my phone list of friends, just to find that no one picks up his cellphone or returns her calls anymore. I'm tired of enduring a stressful week of various issues, just to find that I have no source of recovery when that week ends. I'm tired of putting myself into group settings to make some desired connections, just to find that no one is that interested in connecting, or that the person I might actually connect with doesn't believe in consistency and will in fact never cross my path again. I'm tired of being so drained over this issue that I don't even know what I'm looking for anymore. I think there was a time when I did know what I wanted, but it seems that time has since vanished from memory. And all I can think now is, "oh well, now what?"

The point of this, for anyone who may actually be reading this (and it's unlikely that you are, because it's unlikely that you actually made enough time in your oh so important busy schedule to read this thing your "friend" wrote during a troubled time when he would've liked to have some connection with you, instead of trying to vent his frustrations through yet another piece of writing that you're not actually reading), is that I'm tired of carrying all the weight of a friendship. I'm tired of trying to connect with those who are making very little, if any, effort to connect back. I'm tired of expecting simple little encouragement from others, only to discover that that's asking for way too much. Frankly, I'm sick of competing with other people's self-centeredness, especially when I'm trying my hardest to get past my own by reaching out to them.

So here's my proposal if you say you're my friend: if I'm trying to reach out to you, do me the courtesy of reaching back. Pick up your phone, drop me a message, swing by my house, have lunch with me, go to the beach with me—I really don't care how you reach back. Just stop forgetting I exist. I don't want to be a stranger in Heaven.

## Insecurity

The following essay is an answer I gave to a question posted on a message board about insecurity. Like “Messages of Purity,” I felt like I had something to share, even though I am not a psychologist; I just know a bunch of them.

### **The Answer:**

I think Pixie is essentially asking why people put up fronts when talking to others. For example, if something is really bothering me, why would I make a joke about it, or pretend I’m not bothered? I think she’s also wondering if our secrets are transparent, like, is it safe to talk to somebody if he or she can pick up on what we really mean? For example if I’m talking “cool” to somebody, can he or she tell that I’m insecure about the topic?

That’s what I’m gathering from the question anyway.

To answer your question, Pixie, it really depends on how insecure a person is. People who don’t care how they’re perceived (not through denial but through general security of themselves) can be honest with and about themselves in front of others without a problem. Alternatively, those who are insecure for whatever reason are much less likely to be honest with themselves and with the people around them, because they feel they will be judged if the truth got out, even if it’s something they can’t change. It’s in these times that the insecure person will put up a front, be it the “too cool” front, the “super stud” front, the “macho man” front, the “model” front, the “class clown” front, the “wife beater” front, the “genius” front, etc. When these fronts come forth, the insecure individual can distract others away from the scars beneath the mask.

If you’re wondering where the insecurity comes from, ask the parent who rarely encourages his child. If dad isn’t around to give the child a pat on the back, then why should that child expect it from anyone else? The rest of the world doesn’t care about him, according to his view. Eventually, when a child learns this tragic mentality, whether consciously or unconsciously, his masks begin to form.



The funny thing about this is that most insecurity is perceived, from which none of us really needs to hide. The only time we're really scolded for the things we hide from are when those who are scolding have their own issues to unmask from. It's the classic bully syndrome where the big kid has to pick on the little one because the little kid gets better grades, but the little kid is terrified of the big kid because he doesn't think his foot is strong enough to hurt the big kid's nuts. The fact is that everybody needs counseling for one feeling of inferiority or another—even the popular jock who's afraid to confess that his dad's a janitor.

Moral of the story: who cares if you're a janitor? The janitors and the cleaning ladies are the ones that know the truth behind everybody's darkest secrets. And yet, society scolds them for being "bottom of the social chain." Meanwhile, the elite wonders why most of its counseling takes place in A.A. and divorce court.

In other words, it's a big psychological mess out there.

And now to make this personal:

What do I hide from? I post on this board infrequently because a.) I don't speak unless I have something to say, and b.) because I don't like to admit that I visit an RPG message board almost every day. Does it matter that I rarely have something to say, or that I'm a part of something that's largely considered "uncool?" Of course not, but the insecure part of me still battles with that.

And yet, that may not be the best example since I'm posting right now, but look what I'm replying to. This isn't the big debate over who the best *Final Fantasy* character is. It's a freakin' psychology question.

The fact is there are so many layers to a person's insecurity that to analyze and discuss everything would take a lifetime. Think about it: one form of insecurity spawns another. Or look at it this way: why would I think I have enough knowledge of psychology to answer this question? Look at me, I'm a creative writing student. And yet, answering questions like these seems far more meaningful than writing a story.

The layers just keep getting thicker.

To answer the other part of your question about the fear of the truth being discovered, I think it's natural to be paranoid over something like that. The more afraid you are of something, the more sensitive you'll be toward owning it. When you're sensitive, you're always aware of its presence once something threatens its discovery. It's like stealing from your best friend. The nervous issue of knowing you robbed your friend will constantly nag at you, but the paranoia of him finding out that it was you who stole from him will downright eat at you. If he finds out, what will you do? It's scary. The solution to the problem is *don't steal from your friend*. Or to bring this back to a practical light, stop worrying over insignificant things like what someone will think about you. If you're hurting over something, confess it. It'll liberate you.

Another personal example:

I was crazy about a friend of mine for four-and-a-half years, but I didn't feel it was right to tell her because she was already seeing somebody. So I hid those feelings from her for that entire time. Sometimes I was afraid of her discovering it, because what was I supposed to do if she found out and then turned her back on me as a result? The conflict ate at my heart and soul for years. I was already battling with depression for various reasons, but that whole madness intensified it. Eventually, I came to the point where I couldn't take it anymore and told her exactly what was going on. To my surprise, not only did she understand where I was coming from, but she was also cool with it. This isn't to say that she was able or willing to reciprocate (being open and honest doesn't necessarily guarantee dreams coming true), but being truthful about it gave me a reason to let it go and get on with my life.

So the moral of the story here is to stop worrying about what others might find out about you. Don't give them the chance to discover it; just be open and honest with who you are and what you're dealing with.

Granted, you don't want to spread yourself thin with people. Not everybody has to know everything. There is a thing called "too much information." But don't hide behind a mask. You aren't doing anybody any favors by doing so.

Hope this answers your questions.

"JFK COMMERCIAL #1"

FADE IN:

EXT. NEW BUILDING JFK - DAY

A building under construction--guttled, looks like Beirut, stands ominously like a husk along the side of a highway.

For fifteen seconds, the TRANQUIL BACKGROUND MUSIC lulls its listeners to sleep.

A disembodied VOICE talks over the music.

VOICE (OS)

Do you suffer from insomnia? If so, visit JFK Medical Center today and tune into Channel 28. You'll immediately be whisked away to the sight of this image. Sweet dreams.

The voice vanishes. The building remains still for another thirty seconds with the music continuing on its solemn track.

The screen goes black.

FADE OUT:

"JFK COMMERCIAL #2"

FADE IN:

EXT. NEW BUILDING JFK - DAY

A building under construction--guttled, looks like Beirut, stands ominously like a husk along the side of a highway.

A LONE FIGURE IN LIGHT BLUE slowly creeps along the rooftop. He wears a skullcap and

surgical mask. He carries a small white infusion pump monitor in hand.

The figure steps to the edge of the roof and looks toward the ground.

Within a moment, he scribbles all over the monitor face with a blue marker. After throwing the marker away, he hurls the white infusion pump over the side and watches it plummet to the ground. The monitor disappears into oblivion.

VOICE (OS)

We are now accepting  
applications for the position of  
ER nurse at JFK Medical Center.  
Please inquire with our Human  
Resources department for more  
information.

The lone figure in blue steps away from the rooftop and heads for the gutted stairwell.

FADE OUT:

"JFK COMMERCIAL #3"

FADE IN:

EXT. NEW BUILDING JFK - DAY

A building under construction--gutted, looks like Beirut, stands ominously like a husk along the side of a highway.

A CONSTRUCTION WORKER sits on some stairs eating a sandwich. A SECOND WORKER walks by humming some Enya tunes, while flailing his arms in the air. The first worker watches as the second floats by.

VOICE (OS)

At JFK Medical Center, we're  
determined to give you the best  
in both culture and health care.  
When choosing a place to stay  
this Christmas, choose JFK.  
We'll treat you like a queen.

The second worker puts his fingers on his  
head and twirls around. A THIRD WORKER  
leaps by gracefully.

The FIRST WORKER puts down his sandwich and  
walks away.

FADE OUT:

"SATURDAY MORNING"

FADE IN:

EXT. KEVIN'S HOUSE - BACKYARD - DAY

A reasonably small yard with tall, patchy grass, surrounded by a rickety wooden fence. A plastic patio table and some chairs set under an apple tree. A stone walkway leads from the porch to the patio table.

KEVIN ALMAN, 40, dark haired and wiry, bends over his lawnmower with sweat pouring from his brow. He wipes the sweat off his forehead and takes a deep breath.

The lawnmower sets on the grass just off the stone walkway. It waits silently for the next move.

Kevin grabs the starter chain and jerks it with all his might. The machine WHIRRS, but stays inanimate. He jerks it again and again, but the chain continues to drop into silence.

He lets out another breath.

He heads for the apple tree and takes a seat underneath for some shade.

EXT. JOHN'S HOUSE - BACKYARD - CONTINUOUS

A yard of about the same size as Kevin's, dark green, well watered, pruned bushes, and a healthy fruit tree. A lot of care has obviously been put into it.

JOHN IRONS, 44, dark haired and a bit muscular, takes a sip of water as he stands next to his lawnmower.

The lawnmower sets on the stone patio, silent, but ready for action. A gas can sets next to it.

John sets his water down and rubs his hands together, vigorously. His forehead is mostly dry.

Now ready for business, John leans over his lawnmower and opens the fuel tank. After a quick check, he pours in some gas and reseals the tank.

EXT. KEVIN'S HOUSE - BACKYARD - CONTINUOUS

Kevin rubs his fingers through his sweaty hair.

His lawnmower continues to stare back at him in silence.

He stands up and approaches the lawnmower, determined to defeat it.

Upon reaching it, he grabs for the chain and jumps as he yanks it, forcing the machine to lift off the ground.

As Kevin lands to his feet, the retracting chain nearly pulls him backward. His balance wavers before he finally falls down.

Kevin stands up and clenches his fists, ready to punch the machine. A moment passes. He raises his hands to the sky as if waiting for a rainfall.

The machine remains silent.

EXT. JOHN'S HOUSE - BACKYARD - CONTINUOUS

John leans over his lawnmower, pressing the primer button three times.

He stands up and CRACKS his knuckles. A dog BARKS in the distance. He stretches his arms upward to relieve tension.

Now relaxed, John squeezes the throttle on the handle and gives the chain a gentle tug. The engine CHUGS, but SPUTTERS out. He immediately tugs the chain again.

EXT. KEVIN'S HOUSE - BACKYARD - CONTINUOUS

Kevin sits on the lawn next to his mower with his face buried in his hands.

A LAWNMOWER ENGINE fires up from over the eastern fence, LOUD like the thunder.

Kevin looks up to place the sound, and then punches his own lawnmower for its incessant silence.



"WHAT'S THIS IN MY HAND?"

INT. DINER - DAY

A fifties style diner.

A MAN sits at the counter eating a sandwich.

A DETECTIVE walks in and sits on the stool next to him. The man pays little attention.

DETECTIVE

I've got some questions to ask you.

The man chews his food.

DETECTIVE

You don't seem to hear me. I got some questions to ask you.

The man spits out his food all over his NEIGHBOR'S plate. He holds up the sandwich.

MAN

Excuse me, what's this in my hand? When you see this in a man's hand, what does that tell you?

The detective pulls out a gun and shoves it against the man's temple.

DETECTIVE

No, excuse me. What's this in my hand? When you see this in a man's hand, what does that tell you?

The man drops his sandwich.

MAN

Ah, just testing your powers of  
perception. How can I help you?

"LAWYER IN THE STREET"

FADE IN:

EXT. DOWNTOWN STREET - DAY

A bustling cityscape around lunchtime.  
TRAVELERS walk to work with briefcases in hand.

A young thirty-something lawyer, AIDEN HAYDEN, skips along the busy sidewalk with a set of headphones over his ears.

AIDEN

I work hard for my money. So  
hard for it, honey. And you  
can't have it, my little bunny.  
You can't touch my wad of money.

He dodges oncoming foot traffic as he steps to the beat of his Walkman.

As he skips along, he spies people eating food.

He clutches his belly.

CLOSE ON MAN eating a burger.

Aiden drools.

CLOSE ON WOMAN munching a taco.

Aiden slows his walk.

CLOSE ON sign for a nearby sandwich deli.

Aiden looks at the sign.

AIDEN (CONT'D)

-So hard for my money-

Aiden shoves his hands into his pockets and pulls out a wad of cash.

Just then, Aiden stops.

CLOSE ON a half-eaten hot dog in his path.

Aiden licks his lips.

AIDEN (CONT'D)

-I dare not waste it, my honey  
bunny-

He shoves the money back into his pocket.

CLOSE ON WOMAN walking her dog.

Aiden approaches the frankfurter-

As does the woman and her dog.

Both reach the wiener at the same time.

The dog sniffs the treat. Aiden reaches down for it. The dog GROWLS at him. Aiden growls back. The woman tries to secure the animal.

WOMAN

Kraynek, stop it.

The dog snaps at Aiden. Aiden flinches, but pulls a fast one over the animal. He has the hot dog in hand before the beast knows what happened.

AIDEN

No money for my belly. No money  
for the deli.

He smiles at the dog as the animal tries to attack him. The woman continues to fight with its leash.

Aiden continues to dance to the beat as he shoves one end of the hot dog into his mouth.

Almost as soon as he champs it, he spits it out.

He tosses the wiener back to the ground where the dog finally snakes it, devouring it whole.

AIDEN

Okay, maybe for my deli. The deli can have my money. But I work hard for the money, so it better treat me right.

Aiden leaves the scene and heads for the deli, flailing his arms over his head.

FADE OUT:

## The Origins of “The Awakening of Powerstick Man”

The actual subject matter is not related to any particular experience, but rather to the understanding that I need to avoid sentiments that aren’t specifically tailored to detailed events. Therefore, I tried to think of something that would be tailored to specific detail and action. Initially, I thought of a poem about a man who escapes a dangerous villain by crossing a tightrope stretching between two cliffs. It would’ve served the basis of my fourth poem, until I realized my third poem was not any more specific than my other two; therefore I moved it to number three. As I gave the idea more thought, I considered using one of my pre-established characters from a satirical comic book I made in high school to serve as the central character for the poem.

The shape of the poem was originally supposed to form in accordance to the tightrope theory, in that Powerstick Man would escape his captor, the first big criminal he defeated, by crossing the tightrope; and if by chance the villain continued to chase him, he would fight back. Hence, the original title was called “The Rage of Powerstick Man,” considering that the energetic part of the poem would unfold in the battle between he and his nemesis. However, as I started writing the poem, I realized that just getting to the tightrope was taking way too long, and I discovered that more heart was taking shape within the prison itself. Then, when the nemesis first shows up, ready to knock him out, I figured the hero wouldn’t stand a chance being locked up and defenseless, anyway, and I realized the poem, as I had planned it, could never really happen. I figured this would make for a more interesting twist if the nemesis didn’t attack, but remained passive, to show the shift in characters. To me, that makes for a more interesting idea, and therefore the title changed to suit the occasion.

The stanza length is random. I wrote the first stanza, ended it at the period, saw that it was six lines, and kept up with that. The line length was random at first, and I wrote the whole poem without really worrying about syllables. By the third draft, which is when I decided to have an action packed opening to show who the hero really is, I started watching for the syllables, which eleven per line seemed to allow enough room for my images to define each stanza. As far as my variations, I tried to stay within one syllable per adjacent line, such as a line that only had ten syllables could not have twelve preceding or following it.

The big challenge I tried to meet for this poem was to make it poetic. After the first couple strong images were written in, I started to notice that the later stanzas were becoming more conversational, and less impacting, so I spent the fourth draft trying to make dull stanzas into something interesting.

## Projected Path for Feature Article

Possible magazine submission: Smithsonian

Titles: “The Mind, the Conscience, and the Stomach,” “Leaving the Food that Walked,” “Eating Against the Norm,” “Converting the Stomach of Conviction.”

Direction of piece:

Although I’m not sure yet where I want to take this piece, I am certain it will include the interviews I conducted with friends. The common theme of each interview is that people become vegetarians for personal reasons that others may not understand. Their convictions are firm for the most part, though circumstances may arise where a change is required. So far, the idea of this piece is to deal with personal issues that each interviewee feels about his or her lifestyle—like the why’s and how’s of the conversion. It would also examine how they live life now, and whether they find it difficult or not. Some background information about the meat industry may be needed to support their reasons for remaining vegetarian.

I think the best way to start the piece is to describe my intentions. As of now, this is not a researched article about the history of vegetarianism, nor is it designed to sway the reader to become a vegetarian. It is introducing to readers what the vegetarian sees, thinks, and breathes in an otherwise omnivorous world. Most of the “scientific” examples would only be enforced by what the interviewee told me. Perhaps in a revised draft I will go back and use actual fact-based information to support what they tell me about nutrition and the meat industry. A possible interview source could be the campus dietitian, who would evaluate the information already used in the current draft, and back up the facts. Additional book sources may be important.

Since this is mainly a presentation piece, I should probably keep each section categorized, so that I keep each interviewee intertwined with one another, allowing for a better comparison of subject.



## Query Letter

February 15, 2000

Jeremy Bursey  
957 Ponderosa Pine Ct.  
Orlando, FL 32825

Dear Mr. Walker,

As I am sure you have noticed whenever you enter a parking lot, people have a habit of coasting from lane to lane, looking for the closest spot to the building available. It does not seem to matter how long they spend searching for it; they just keep driving until the one next to the handicap spot opens. Precious time becomes wasted as the driver keeps allowing his energy to seep away as he sits behind the wheel, waiting for the car up ahead to back out in front of him. By the time the driver finds his spot, he is three minutes later than he would've been had he chosen the first spot he saw toward the back of the lot; not to mention his blood circulation is now slower. And he questions at the end of the morning why he is so tired.

Why are people so afraid to walk? I wonder that simply because I love to walk. I have been to weight rooms for physical fitness before, and admittedly, I "felt the burn." But weight rooms do not offer the fresh air or tranquil environment for appeasing the mind, the eyes, or the nose that walking provides. Frankly, sitting in one place, concentrating on one body part, and listening to loud clangs really bores me. When I walk, it gives me a chance to exercise my whole body at once, without straining it too far like running would do. It also gives me psychological therapy, since I can reflect on my day, or at least my surroundings, while I try to reach my goal of walking eight miles.

I would like to persuade others to consider walking as a means of exercise. The feeling of blood circulating through my legs often gives me a spurt of energy that can mean the difference between a sluggish day and a productive one, and I think it can do the same for others. If people give walking a serious try, there may be less need for caffeine, diets, and expensive health clubs. Not to mention, drivers will not have to become

frustrated over vehicles that hover inches away from their spot while they are trying to back out.

Please consider this article for publication, so that we can see park trails more widely used and stress levels drop significantly.

Sincerely,

Jeremy Bursey

## *Royal Crush: The Card Game*

### **Background:**

On the edge of the world, four kingdoms vow to gain supremacy over the entire land. But to take control, each must do what it can to annihilate the others, so that no opposition may threaten the future of the one victorious. Welcome to the Royal Crush.

### **Basic Rules:**

For a kingdom to prevail, a champion must first enter the fight. Up to four players can play at a time. But none shall enter the war unarmed. Therefore, each player will receive five cards at the beginning of the game.

But weapons without a target are useless, indeed.

Outside the ring of power will fall the deck of cards that hold the doomed to battle. The game begins when the top card is drawn and placed in the center of the player circle. Once the card is set for execution, each player will select one card from his hand to use for the attack. The player that comes out victorious will win both the executed card and his fighter card, placing each in designated piles.

Once the battle ends, each player will draw a replacement card from the deck for his or her hand. After the hands are refilled, the victor of the last battle will choose which card is next to receive its fate. The player can do this by either drawing from the deck, or by choosing a card from his hand. If the player chooses from his hand, then he must draw from the deck again to replace the card he set in the middle.

Or, if the players wish not to let the victor of the last battle pick the next victim card, then the next player in the circle may choose, instead. Either way is acceptable.

Once a battle is fought and won, a new one shall rise. Thus the cycle of battles continue until the deck is empty and the smoke of war clears. The players may also choose to empty their hands of fighter cards once the deck is cleared of its victim cards, but it's not necessary to finish the round.

### **The Cards:**

For a kingdom to claim its prize, it must wisely choose whom to send into battle. This is where card ranking comes into play.

The object of the fighter cards is to not only to defeat the card set for execution, but also to annihilate those that are in the way. To do this, a card must have a higher rank than everything else on the field. For example, if the Four of Hearts is set as a victim, then the fighter card must be a Five or higher to defeat it (because victims can still fight back). However, the fighter card must also be of a higher rank than the other cards if it's to be victorious in the fight. If the chosen fighter wins the battle, then the player will place the fighter card into his "fighter" pile and the executed card into his "victim" pile. If it loses the battle, then it's cast into the "abandoned" pile.

But sometimes a warrior will be equally matched with its opponent. If two or more players use fighter cards of equal value, then they all fall into the abandoned pile. Only those cards that stand above the rest may win. Therefore if a Six is thrown into the center, and two Tens, a Nine, and a Seven are dropped into battle, then the Tens cancel each other out, leaving only the Seven and the Nine to fight. Since the Nine is the more "experienced" card it will be the one that wins the battle. However, if all fighters are canceled out, then the victim card escapes and is placed into the "freedom" pile.

Even though most wars are won with its soldiers, an advanced kingdom will know that an elite fighter must sometimes enter the fight if the tables are to be turned. This is where the unranked cards come into play.

For a kingdom to be a kingdom, it must have its king and queen. Without a king and queen, there is no royalty to crush. For a king or queen to be crushed, it must be sent out for execution. But what force is strong enough to annihilate such power?

The Jack acts as an assassin against the members of royalty. If a Jack is used as a fighter, it automatically claims victory over the victim card. However, the Ten and the Ace can stop its assault.

If a Ten is used against a Jack in battle, it automatically cancels it out. If it's used against a Jack that's up for execution, it takes it. No other ranked card can fight a Jack in the victim's circle.

If an Ace is used in battle, it takes not only the victim, but all the fighters as well (including Jacks). Only another Ace can halt its victory. If an Ace falls into the victim's circle, only face cards can win the battle over it. No other Ace or ranked fighter card can stand a chance against it.

Kings and Queens have the power to execute Jacks and protect Aces. They will not fight soldiers. If an Ace is dropped into the victim pile, the Jack can be used to execute it, but a King or Queen can be used to "rescue" it. In the case of an Ace rescue, the player can either choose to place it in his victim pile or his freedom pile. Either choice will affect the outcome of the final score. If Kings and Queens are used as fighters, the King will always win over the Queen.

If a King or Queen falls into the victim's circle, any card ranked seven or higher can defeat it. Fighters ranked six and under are too "inexperienced" to win the victory. A player may also elect to use a Jack or an Ace against a royalty card, but other Kings and Queens may not be used to "rescue" them from the victim's circle. After all, the kingdoms are at war.

But, even in war, deception must rear its ugly head. This is where the kingdoms choose to abandon their noble ways and fight dirty.

For all the number cards that are ranked, the Two does not stand among them. Instead, the Two acts as a village thief. When the Two is used as a fighter, it automatically goes into the victor's fighter pile with the winning card. Except, instead of adding points to the player's overall score, it subtracts them.

The Joker is also a thief, used in the exact same way as the Two, but it works exclusively for the royalty. Therefore, instead of robbing the player for a small value of points, it robs him for a large value; in effect turning the tables for everyone.

Any fighter including Kings and Queens can take a Two or a Joker on the victim pile. Like the Aces, the royalty cards can choose the fate of the

thief cards. Thief cards in the freedom pile are worth double the score of those in the fighter piles.

### **Scoring:**

When the smoke clears, the body count must begin. This is where the score is determined. The player with the highest score at the end of the game wins.

The way the game is scored depends on which Crush Mode is being played. There are two modes—Overthrow and Knifedback. In either case, the value of each card depends solely on which pile it's recovered from.

#### **Fighter Pile**

Two – (-10 points)  
 Three – (15 points)  
 Four – (10 points)  
 Five – (10 points)  
 Six – (10 points)  
 Seven – (5 points)  
 Eight – (5 points)  
 Nine – (5 points)  
 Ten – (1 point)  
 Jack – (10 points)  
 Queen – (15 points)  
 King – (15 points)  
 Ace – (5 points)  
 Joker – (-30 points)

#### **Victim Pile**

Two – (5 points)  
 Three – (5 points)  
 Four – (5 points)  
 Five – (5 points)  
 Six – (5 points)  
 Seven – (10 points)  
 Eight – (10 points)  
 Nine – (10 points)

Ten – (15 points)  
Jack – (15 points)  
Queen – (20 points)  
King – (20 points)  
Ace – (25 points)  
Joker – (20 points)

### Freedom Pile

The freedom pile is essentially used to penalize the winner of the war for all the victims that he let escape into the wilderness, where they can potentially rebuild their forces against his kingdom. The value of the cards in the freedom pile are weighted exactly to that of those in the victim pile, but instead of adding the total to the First Place player's overall score, it subtracts from it. Thief cards however are worth double, so a Two in the freedom pile will remove ten points from the winner's overall score, while a Joker will remove forty points. Only the winner of the war will be affected by the freedom pile.

### Abandoned Pile

The cards in the abandoned pile hold no value. That's why they're abandoned.

As mentioned before, there are two modes of gameplay in Royal Crush. Overthrow is the standard way of scoring, as described above. But Knifenback uses card suits as part of the strategy.

If the players choose to play Knifenback mode, the challenge is to not only win the battles, but also to attack victims with fighters from the same kingdom or suit. Fighters that attack victims from the same suit in Knifenback mode are worth double the score. The best way to keep track of which fighters took out which victims is to score the top cards of the fighter and victim piles together. Bear in mind that the score only affects the fighter pile. Victim cards are still scored the same way.

It is vitally important to keep fighter and victim piles organized if Knifenback is the chosen mode of play. Disorganization may result in improper scoring.

When the war (or round) is over, all cards return to the deck, and the battle begins again. The game is over when a player is first to reach a designated target score by combining the scores of all the rounds played so far.



## Cooking with Peach

Excerpted and extended scene from *Panhandler Underground*

When I entered my country-style kitchen, made of wooden walls and iron kettles, I breathed a sigh of relief. Finally, I had made it home. My measuring cups, my knives, my bags of flour—everything had set on the counter just as I had left it. Sometimes, Betsy had a habit of cleaning my kitchen space when I wasn't home, inadvertently putting things in the wrong place, so I asked her this morning to leave everything where it was. I promised her an amazing dinner if she just withheld the urge to "straighten up." From what I could tell, she listened.

Feeling my spirits lifting, I tossed my tie over the back of a barstool and proceeded toward the refrigerator. I opened the freezer to see three packages of hamburger and two packages of chicken setting frozen on the top shelf. Since there wasn't time to thaw any of them out, I moved to the cupboard to pull out a can of Spam. After the day I had, I felt like I needed a challenge.

As I glided from one point of the kitchen to another, I removed from the hidden corner alcoves a bag of potatoes, a jar of parsley, a cup of oregano, a stick of butter, a bottle of vegetable oil, a shaker of salt, a clove of garlic, a dash of Tabasco sauce, a shot of bourbon, and a stack of mixing bowls. I also found a few necessary tools such as a can opener, a chopping block, a knife, a measuring cup, and a glass of water (which had probably been Betsy's, but I didn't care). After taking a long gulp of liquid, I went to work on the meal. I set my timer for seventeen minutes.

My first order of business was to get a pot of water boiling. Without that, nothing could save this meal. I filled an iron kettle with about four cups of water; then set it on the stove at its highest temperature. On high, water usually began to boil within three to four minutes. That gave me less than four minutes to wash and slice my potatoes and to measure out my butter.

As the steam began to float from the surface of the water, I stuck two potatoes under the sink faucet and thoroughly scrubbed them for about twenty seconds each. After a quick inspection for dirt and small creatures, I quickly moved them over to the chopping block. From there, I unsheathed my knife like a Samurai sword and brought the metal down into the spuds like lightning—chop, chop, chop. Each little slice tipped over and fell away like dominos. Took me less than a minute.

I heard the water beginning to rumble as I brought my knife down the center of the butter stick and sliced a healthy chunk away from the

base. Next, I stuck the chosen amount into the measuring cup. I needed a quarter of a cup, but I discovered that I sliced off about five-eighths. Knowing that too much would've made the meal unnecessarily fattening, I trimmed away the excess and set the discarded piece back onto the tray. Now I had the right amount. I quickly dumped it into the water just as the first bubble popped to the surface.

Next, I reached for the can opener and quickly pried open the can of Spam. As the lid wrenched off the top, I saw the brownish meat pulsating gently beneath the lip. Even though I felt a bit repulsed for having talked myself into turning it into a meal, I pushed forward with my brave excursion and dumped the contents of the tin onto a plate. I wasn't a fan of using the microwave, but I wasn't a fan of cooking Spam either, so I compromised and set the plate into the heat box for three minutes.

By this point, the rumble of the boiling water behind me steadied, so I picked up the cutting board full of sliced potatoes and dipped it into the pot. The little spuds slid swiftly into the scalding drink, and from there I felt satisfied. The first phase of preparation was completed.

The next phase involved the mixing of things. I had my butter and my potatoes raging under the surface of a miniature hot spring, I had my fake meat vibrating to a burn in the microwave, and I had my timer clicking ever so slowly toward the zero mark. I checked to make sure I still adhered to my cooking time limits before proceeding toward the wooden spoon.

The wooden spoon was actually my most important tool of the evening. Without it, I couldn't do anything short of creating a soggy mess. With the spoon, I could stir my potatoes and butter together to form a healthy mix of...well, buttered potatoes. As the butter melted in the water, and the potatoes grew perpetually softer, I dunked the spoon below the surface and stirred everything around. From there I turned the heat of the stove down to medium to keep my food from overcooking.

I still had about twelve minutes to spare on my timer, so I used my interim period between waiting for the meat to finish in the microwave and mixing everything in the bowl to measure out my additional ingredients. I actually had just a minute-and-a-half to do all my measuring, so the interim wasn't an easy one.

The hardest job I had ahead of me, for the time I had allotted myself, was to cut up the garlic cloves into a sizable amount for measuring. Fortunately, I had chopped garlic so many times that twenty seconds would have been enough, or forty if I were blindfolded. But I didn't set out to challenge myself with a blindfold, so twenty would've been all I needed. Just to be sure that I wasn't over-hyping myself, I dropped the

garlic clove onto the chopping block, which I had previously set down next to the stove, and proceeded to pulverize it with the sharp end of my blade. I set my fingers to the edge of the stinky blob and tore through it like a ravenous beast, reducing it to little chunks. Like the potatoes, I slid them off the board into a container—this time choosing the measuring cup. Perfect. And I did it in only twenty-three seconds. Close.

I still had a minute before the microwave buzzed, so I filled up a few measuring spoons with parsley and oregano. I thought two of each would've been enough to fill a bowl. The whole process took me about ten seconds. I still had a little over fifty seconds to wait.

At that point, my rhythm broke. From out of nowhere the phone rang. My phone usually didn't ring, so to have it ringing now at the start of my relaxation period (yes, this was still my relaxation period) was unnerving. I debated whether or not to answer it.

Fortunately, my wife settled the debate for me. She popped in from the doorway leading into the living room and reached for the phone. When she said hello, she patiently waited for the other line to say or ask whatever they had to say or ask. Apparently, they were asking for me. I only had twenty seconds before the microwave buzzed.

"Hey, Donald," she said, rather complacently, "Do you have time to talk to a telemarketer?"

"No." I knew she wasn't serious.

"I'm sorry," she said, to the telemarketer, "he's busy cooking right now. Can I take a message?"

Twelve seconds before the microwave went off; I had my mixing bowl ready.

"Hey, Donald, he wants to know if you'd be interested in buying...er, what was it? Instant Fetish Removal."

"What?"

Six seconds.

"Huh? Oh, I'm sorry. Instant Credit Approval. Sorry, sir, but I'm having a hard time understanding you with that ridiculous lisp you have."

Ding!

Fetish removal, credit approval—none of that mattered. The most instant thing I had to worry about now was my microwave. I quickly shuffled over with a potholder in hand and removed the hot plate from the machine. The steam floated off in waves.

"Donald," she chimed in again, "are you interested in 'Instant Credit Approval?'" She emphasized the last three words for effect.

"No, tell the telemarketer not to bother me while I'm cooking."

“Okay. Sir, my husband said not to bother him while he’s cooking. What? No, I would not like to talk about Instant Fetish Removal. Huh? Same difference. Okay, well if it’s that special of an offer, I’m sure I’ll see it in the newspaper sometime. Yes, my credit is fine.”

She held her hand over the mouthpiece as she looked at me with beckoning eyes. I understood that as her plea to help her off the phone.

I had a steaming plate of Spam on one side of me, a boiling pot of potatoes on the other, and a series of measured ingredients behind me. My timer had dropped below the ten-minute mark, and I still needed time to roast my softened potatoes in the oven. It was either the wife or the meal.

After a quick evaluation, I decided that I could handle both. The potatoes were softened as much as they needed to be, so I placed a colander in the sink and dumped the pot of boiling water over it. The buttered spuds dropped down with the waterfall and drained free of their former prison. From there, I countered with a quick flick of my wrist to whisk the colander up and over the oven pan, to which I spread the potatoes across the top. Another lightning fast volley sent me hurtling toward the oven, into which I shoved the pan face first and closed the door. I set the temperature for 425 degrees. I had nine minutes left on the timer, which was about how long I needed for the potatoes to cook.

Immediately, after setting the temperature knob, I rebounded toward the phone and yanked it out of Betsy’s hand. Without missing a beat, I placed the phone up to my ear and whispered as harshly as I could, “I’m an IRS agent. I don’t need credit approval,” and then slammed the phone against the hook. That got rid of them.

“Thanks, Donald,” she said, almost sweetly. “So how’s dinner coming?”

“It’s coming.”

The thing about my wife was that she usually disrespected me close to twenty-four hours a day, minus however many hours she was fast asleep. Only special occasions brought her out of that mode. The first typically involved my making an amazing meal. She understood that food was my passion, so she left me alone when I was making it, and congratulated me when I did a good job with the final product. The other major occasion was when telemarketers or other undesirable solicitors bothered us. We both shared a mutual dislike for people who invaded our privacy (a bit ironic for a guy in my profession, I know), so we tended to share the delight of getting one off our backs. It was in those moments that we bonded in a way similar to those times past when we were young

and in love. It was in those moments that I thought maybe there was still time to repair the damage that I brought into my life so long ago.

“Okay, well call me when it’s finished. I’ll be in the living room straightening things up.”

But it was in the moments after those moments, when the excitement died down, that things ultimately returned to normal—to the bitter normality that I lived with for ninety-five percent of my life.

She turned away from the phone and stepped back through the doorway. Once again I was left alone to tend to my feast in the making.

The best part about the second half of making the meal was that I got to sit back and wait for everything to come together. Less than nine minutes to go before the timer ran out, and I had everything ready for the mixing. The first thing I did was to pour the cup of chopped garlic over the Spam and mixed it gingerly with the shot of bourbon. The thing about Spam was that it didn’t have much of a taste without the garlic or the alcohol. The other thing about Spam was that it normally needed to be cooked with the liquid ingredients for it to get the softest flavor, but I wasn’t going for that this time. I wanted the meat to be a little wet, so I needed the bourbon to soak into the potatoes.

With eight minutes left on the timer, I gently sprinkled half a tablespoon of oregano and half a tablespoon of parsley over the softly seasoned Spam. Even though I wanted to save a little bit for the final mixing, I at least wanted to get the enhanced flavor set early so that the meat could take its form before the potatoes came out of the oven. It was a cooking precaution I often took in case something should ever go wrong in the final minutes. So far, nothing ever went wrong (like I never sneezed the seasonings out of the spoon or anything). But tragedies happened when I least expected them, so I always kept myself ready for the possibility.

After finishing with my premixing preparations, I checked the timer to see that I had seven minutes to do something else unrelated to the meal, so I chose to sit down on the barstool and give my feet some time to recover. Even though I had spent a good part of my day sitting on my butt, I spent the entire day (excluding my time at the beach) wearing shoes that pinched my toes together. Now that I was home and away from anything simulating business, I kicked off my footwear and breathed a sigh of relief. A moment later, I caught a whiff of my stale smelling socks and removed those, too. Granted, removing my socks didn’t improve the quality of the air, but it gave my skin room to breathe. As the socks hit the floor, I curled my toes and cracked them under the balls of my feet. The tension lifted away rather quickly. A moment later I set my arms

against the counter and leaned my forehead on top of them. I figured I had about six minutes to nap.

I closed my eyes for what seemed like only a minute when the timer finally buzzed. The sound was more pleasant than an alarm clock, but still carried a jarring awakening. I bounced my head off my arms the moment the ding coursed through my ears. From there, I hopped off my barstool and moved around to the stove, where I reached for a potholder, opened the oven door, and pulled out the pan of potatoes. As expected, they had turned a slight golden brown.

After setting the pan on top of the stove, I closed the oven door and grabbed for the mixing bowl. Now came the moment of truth when I could bring all the elements together.

First, I took a spatula and gently scraped the potatoes from the pan and dumped them into the bowl. Then, I followed suit with the Spam and piled it on the upper surface of the spuds. The two hot items coming together did a fine job of making the green plastic bowl steam up. After both the main ingredients formed their union, I poured in the rest of the parsley and oregano, topped it with a cup of vegetable oil, and mixed everything together with the wooden spoon. After about a minute of stirring, I poured the contents of the bowl into a serving pan and spread them out into a single layer of food. Thus, the dinner was now complete.

The final element of making the dinner perfect was to effectively serve it. But to do that, I had to set up the dining room table. So that was what I set out to do. I took a couple dinner plates from the cupboard, brought them to the dining room table between the living room and the Classic, and set them in spots across from each other. Next, I returned to the kitchen to fetch the glasses and the silverware. After that, I came back for the napkins. After that, I brought out the serving pan that was filled with my "Bourbon Potatoes a la Spam." A moment later, I was ready to tell my wife to come get her food. But before I called her to the table, I decided that I needed to clear the kitchen of my shoes and socks, because I had to get that undesirable odor out of there. When that was done, I made my subtle announcement that dinner was served. And she came to get it in record time.

"Hungry, are you?" I asked.

"I only had time to eat a bowl of cereal for lunch," she said. "So what are we having tonight?"

"It's a surprise. Take a bite."

She promptly sat down in the chair across from me and reached out for the serving spoon. She stirred the potatoes before bringing them out to her plate.

"Looks tasty. What is it?"

"Special treat...well special challenge, actually. Try it."

Betsy dropped the potatoes onto her plate and returned the spoon to the pan. A moment later, she dug her fork into the food. I took that as my cue to serve up my own plate. As I carefully transferred the meal from the pan to my personal eating space, Betsy took a bite of the food. Immediately, her mouth lit up.

"Mmm, very interesting taste," she said, with mouth full. "What's in it?"

"Bourbon and Spam," I said.

"Spam? Are you kidding me?"

"Not at all."

"Wow, I didn't think Spam could ever be this good."

"You'd be surprised what Spam can do when prepared in the right hands."

After returning the serving spoon back to the pan, I proceeded to dig my fork into my own plate. The best part about cooking the meal was in tasting the results. This had been a new experiment, so I was eager to see how I pulled it off.

But before I could get the bite into my mouth, the phone rang. I set the fork back to the dish.

"Donald, don't," said Betsy. "Not during dinner."

Deep down I thought she was right. The phone never rang twice in one night, but to have it go off twice in twenty minutes meant that the second caller had something important to say. I didn't want to address it. I had been waiting all day to try something new, but now that I had it right in front of me, this phone was beckoning me. I was torn, no doubt, though the suspense of the fleeting call outweighed the anticipation of tasting the rock-steady Bourbon Potatoes a la Spam. I could eat the meal after the phone call, but I couldn't answer the phone after the meal.

"It might be important," I said, finally.

"More important than enjoying the fruits of your passion?"

"It could be important."

"Fine, check the Caller ID, but come right back."

The phone had already rung five times when we reached that point in the conversation. On the sixth ring, I finally jumped out of my chair and raced for the kitchen. I had to know who had the audacity to call me during my favorite time of the day. When I checked the Caller ID, my heart sunk.

"It's my boss," I said.

"Call him back."

"I think it's important."

"Donald, stop putting that job first. Come eat your reward."

"Betsy, I..."

"Donald, just let the phone ring."

By that point, my brain snapped and I involuntarily picked up the phone.

"Hello?" I said.

"Peach, what in the world happened to you today?" said my boss. "I had to talk to you about some things."

"What do you mean?"

"Don't 'what do you mean' me, Peach. Yarrillo told me he saw you. Why did you leave?"

"I had stuff to do."

"Well, you should've changed your plans. Now I gotta have our private meeting over the phone, and I really hate conducting these things over the phone."

The directness of his voice disturbed me. A part of me wished I had listened to Betsy.

"What is it, sir?"

"Your name came up for performance review hearings this morning."

"What?"

"Sorry, Peach, but after the fallout with Bob Ginger, the FBI insisted that they analyze the man who betrayed him. They want to know why anyone would be willing to sell a good agent out so easily. To get their answer, they're evaluating your credibility as an agent. If they think you're good, then they'll leave you alone. But if they think you're bad...I'm sorry, but you're out."

I gripped my receiver tightly, uncertain how to respond. On the one hand, the prospect of losing my job sounded like a godsend—it would've meant getting out of the hellhole I awoke to each weekday. But on the other hand, it would've meant entering into a new hellhole, which included poverty and a zero percent chance of getting my restaurant off the ground. The alternative was worse than the undesirable outcome.

"Can they do that?"

"They can do whatever they want. They're with the government. One call to the director stating your instability as a trustworthy agent, and you're done for. My advice to you is to get on the ball if you want to make the money you need to get your restaurant. If they see any sign of incompetence in you...I can't save you."

For some reason, the greatest surprise to come from that statement was not the fact that my job was in danger, but that somehow my boss



knew I had planned on opening a restaurant. I buried my face in my hand as I tried to process the whole ordeal.

"This doesn't have to be bad," said Mr. Fadgly, solemnly. "But you gotta stop screwing around with these audit cases and get them finished. I know you're upset about losing your investigator status, but I never wanted you to suffer twice. So do what you can to save what you have. If you get through this, I may reinstate your rank."

And with that, the other line hung up. I stared at my phone a moment wondering what I had gotten myself into. Of all the things I expected to happen in my late-thirties, this wasn't one of them. I hung up the phone in a desperate attempt to not think about it. Somehow, I had to get my life in order, and somehow it had to start with the panhandler named Lucky, and more importantly, the origin of his mysterious blue transport.

I returned to the dining room to enjoy the amazing meal I had made. After having such a harsh revelation placed before me, I needed something safe to run to. But when I set foot past the kitchen, I stopped. Both my plate and the serving pan were flipped upside down and the food was spilled all over the table and onto much of the floor. And my wife was nowhere to be found. Her plate was empty, save the crumpled up napkin she stuffed on top of it, but she was nowhere near it. My heart, of course, was now crushed. This, in effect, had ruined my day completely.

I approached the table to scoop some of the food back into the pan, when I noticed a small note setting next to my flipped-over plate. The note had a message written on it that bit me harder than anything else I could've endured that evening. Simply put, the note said: "Choose your priorities wisely."

With my cupped hand, I slid the ruined meal into the pan. My knees trembled from my despair.

## **Other Bonus Commentaries**

The moment has finally come that you can put another *Collection of Junk* to bed (or rather, I can). But before you say “Hasta la vista” to *Seven-Sided Dice*, you have to get through this final round of commentaries. And I assure you, it will be easy.

As usual, these comments are designed to shed light on the works’ origins and purpose, without taking away from your imagination. If for any reason you feel as though your imagination has been violated by anything I write here, then it’s your fault for moving forward. And with that, I leave you with background stories.

### **First-Time Blogger**

Contrary to what 100 million Internet geeks will believe, this blog was not written for MySpace. In fact, prior to writing this blog, I had only heard of MySpace once before, and that was because the local band of a guy I knew used the site to promote themselves. I had no idea it was designed for communication or blogging; I just thought it was a cheap way to sell one’s toys. So when I wrote this blog, I wrote it for a site called BlogSpot, or something to that effect. I actually haven’t been back to that place except twice: the first, when I wrote another blog about feeling like a doormat for women’s shoes, and the second, when I deleted it from the archive because I didn’t want anyone else reading it. But I wrote this anyway, because I thought I’d link it to whatever web page I finally ended up getting, which, of course, I never actually got.

The main thing I wanted to get out of this blog, was not just the historical account of my entering into the trend, but also of the crazy moment when my family and I brought a stray cat, that we had named “Cleo,” into the house just a few minutes before 100+mph winds threatened to fling him against our kitchen wall. I thought if there was anyplace worth writing about that incident, it was online.

So that’s where it all began. I have since fallen into the MySpace abyss, so every blog I write now, I write there. Makes me wonder when MySpace will start asking me to carve golden calves and burn incense in its honor.

## Burnout Syndrome

I don't remember the event that triggered me into writing this on the night of Memorial Day, nor do I remember the party that I allegedly went to prior to my sleeplessness (though I definitely remember the pool party in Tampa the week before). What I do remember was that during the second half of my stay in Altamonte Springs, I had felt the fading of friendships that I felt during the year before in my hometown, and I was bummed about it.

When I moved up there in September 2003, I tried to reconnect with old friends that I knew from three years earlier, and immediately bonded with the Friday night study group that consisted of a handful of old friends and a good number of new ones. For the next two months, those people were like family to me. Then, the leaders of the group announced that they would be disbanding soon, since they were preparing to move to California. Within a week or two, the turnout became sparse. Though I still had a place to hang out on Friday's, the charm started to wear thin. The group turned into a couple stragglers. By February, I had to find a new group, as the old one was done for. The group that I chose (which was the one I planned to choose first, but had been thwarted by bad timing so I chose the latter) was good, but not quite the same. Connections were like counseling sessions and Bible studies were like exercises in theology, and though it wasn't a far cry different than the last study group, it just didn't have the same comfort that the first group had. I held on, but I wasn't excited.

By the time I wrote this, I felt like my connections were weak, so much that I didn't think I had a true friend among them. The pain intensified, not only from the ignored phone calls, but also from the statement one friend made about him being surprised that I called. When I asked why he was surprised, he said it was because he only expected calls from friends; as in, "even though we've been friends for several years, and even though we've been in the same small group for part of that time, we're not actually friends." "What the hell was that supposed to mean?" I thought. When my own friends made statements and neglecting gestures that brought me to question if they were truly friends, it frustrated me to the point that this essay had to come out. So that's what ultimately brought it out.

Unsurprisingly, the theme hasn't gone away in the last two years. Though people respect me now more than they did back then, I still have a hard time getting responses out of those "friends" of old. I revisited the issue on a MySpace blog not long ago with an essay called "Long-Distance

Strangers,” which talks about the rudeness of flat-out ignoring someone a person once called a friend. I wrote it because there are still many people on my list of contacts who never respond to direct greetings, and frankly, it pisses me off. I guess, therefore, that means some people never change.

Anyway, that was a choppy history lesson, but it defines much of my nihilistic approach toward relating to people.

### **Insecurity**

This was another message board response, this time to a girl who had a question about insecurity. I felt compelled to respond, because she worded her question in a way that didn’t make sense to anyone, and she was getting a lot of flack for it. Because I felt protective over her, for some reason—probably that “protecting a little sister” drive some of us have, which would make more sense for me to use for my own little sister—I felt like I had to step up and prove that she did ask a clear question, and that everyone else was just being obtuse. The rest, of course, was just me trying to play psychologist.

### **JFK Commercials**

Following on the heels of my fake commercials from the first volume, I decided to make three “public service ads” for JFK Medical Center, the hospital where I worked for three years. These were those ads.

During my final year, while the south wing was under construction, public access channel 28 aired live feeds of the construction. For anyone bored enough to watch, he or she could turn his station to 28 and marvel at the snail’s pace at which the building moved. Sometimes when I walked into a patient’s room to scan his equipment, I would find his television tuned into the inanimate building (with tranquil music playing in the background) and him passed out in his bed. Because I thought insomnia was the only reason worth devoting an entire station to a 24-hour security cam of the gutted building, I had to write a commercial promoting it.

The second reference, about the ER nurse and the IV pump, essentially satirized the pain my staff and I had to deal with everyday regarding the ER staff and its ignorance toward our patient care equipment. The IV pumps had a reset switch on the side. To reset the pump, the nurse only had to push in the knob, rotate it counter-clockwise

toward her, and watch as it turned itself off. It was so easy a monkey could do it. But these tired old nurses, in their stubborn I-don't-want-to-learn-anything-new ways, refused to listen to what we had to say whenever they'd misfeed a tube. Therefore, whenever they inevitably removed an infusion line improperly from the machine, ultimately sending the thing into an annoying blitz of "failure," its high-pitched signal that someone in a high-paying position doesn't know what the heck she's doing, they'd put the pump back on the standby rack as a "broken machine," and call on us to pick through our emergency supply to restock them with their mandatory ten pieces. Usually, that meant we'd bring them their mandatory ten, but only leave them four, since six of the machines just needed to be reset. Anyhow, the joke of the commercial was that the ER nurses (and pretty much every other nurse in the entire hospital) had such a war with these infusion pumps that they'd ultimately deface the machine in their anger. Though most of them would simply cut the line with scissors if they couldn't unload it properly, leaving us with the fragments, or leave the entire bag hooked up to the machine if they got really lazy, a few of them, especially in the ER, got creative. This commercial satirizes one specific event where the nurse slashed the "defective" monitor with a blue marker. We were pissed, of course, because that was another pump we couldn't use in our inventory; but not so much that we couldn't make a joke out of it.

The last commercial merely satirized our administrative leadership. I'll leave it at that.

### Saturday Morning

This sequential piece from the summer of 2004 was written for my scriptwriting class to prepare for the first act of my screenplay called *Some Manly Advice*. The assignment was to write an action scene of any type. To answer this challenge I decided to take a common man's household chore and turn it into an epic competition. For those who have read the finished script, they'll know that the character, Kevin, is a man who never had the chance to grow up, or learn "manly" things, while his neighbor, John, is the epitome of the Alpha Male, and ultimately the guy from whom he seeks his "manly advice." This sequence was a short film version of that struggle into manhood, showing that he didn't even know the low-end basics, such as starting a lawnmower. The full script (which doesn't include this scene) is even funnier.

### **What's This in My Hand?**

This was an idea I had for a scene in a detective film. There isn't really a story behind it, but I thought I wrote it well. In the end, I considered using it for a Rick Razorface script down the road. We'll see if it ever gets placed into something.

### **Lawyer in the Street**

This was another exercise for my screenwriting class; this time we had to write a whole story (with three acts) into one scene. The purpose was to show the teacher what we knew about screenwriting, and to show how capable we were of trimming unnecessary fat. Where most people chose to stay within the confines of their features to present this exercise, I designed something completely different so I'd have an excuse later to put it in this book. Funny how that works, isn't it?

If any of you budding filmmakers want to film this, by the way, be my guest. Just make sure you send me a message telling me where I can see it.

### **The Origins of "The Awakening of Powerstick Man"**

Although it would be nice if writing stories was all creative writing students had to do, the truth is that creativity makes only half the grade. Part of the writing student's curriculum is to write about the piece he just wrote.

To show readers what I had to go through behind the scenes in these classes, I thought I'd include three examples of pieces that I had to write to prepare or to reflect on the literary projects they cover. In this case, I had to write a reflection piece on the development of my poem called "The Awakening of Powerstick Man," which you can read in *Life Under Construction: The Collection of Junk Volume 2*.

### **Projected Path for Feature Article**

Like the piece before it, this served as a supplement to an article I wrote for my Magazine Writing class way back in 1999. I actually have one of these for two of my three articles, but I only elected to share this one for

space and personal reasons. The goal with this planner was simply to record what I wanted to achieve with my “Leaving the Food that Walked” article, which can also be read in *Life Under Construction: The Collection of Junk Volume 2*. In the end, I chose not to send it to anyone.

### Query Letter

To stand a chance at publishing through a reputable publication or magazine (which doesn’t include self-publishing, which is a road this book had the pleasure of taking), you must first get the editor’s attention (or agent’s, or whomever you’re ultimately trying to sell). To do that, you must hook them with a query letter, telling them what the article is about and why you’re qualified to write it. This is one such query letter.

Personally, I don’t think this is the best query letter in the world, and my rejection of the “Taking the Better Steps of Fitness” article proves that. Why? Is it because it’s written poorly? No. Is it because it fails to grab the reader’s attention? No. The reason is simply because I had to submit something to somebody before the end of the semester if I wanted to pass the class. Since I couldn’t find an appropriate magazine for the one article I believed in, I just sent it off to *Orlando Weekly*, knowing full well that they didn’t accept this kind of piece. In the real world, I never would’ve done that. But for a class, when my grade is on the line, I’ll submit an article about ducks to *Popular Mechanics* if that’s what it comes down to. Granted, there are ways to spin an article about ducks that would make it appropriate for *Popular Mechanics*. If a duck gets sucked into a carburetor, for example, there needs to be an article telling the owner of the carburetor how to get it out. But that’s just one example. A talented feature writer can come up with a hundred different ways to sell a duck to a mechanics publication. I wasn’t trying to do that, though. I actually had a point behind my article, and no one to spin it to.

Anyway, that’s the story behind my query letter. Like the last two examples, you can read the article it was trying to sell in *Life Under Construction: The Collection of Junk Volume 2*.

### Royal Crush: The Card Game

One of my second hobbies is to create games. I’ve enjoyed doing it since I was a kid, and still find pleasure in it whenever I have the time today.

When I was riding out my stalemate season between my two Orlando seasons, I played a lot of rounds of the card game “Hearts” with a group of friends. Night after night we’d hang out in one guy’s living room in front of the big screen television playing this four-man card game, trash-talking each other’s team into thinking they were losers. It was so much fun that we did this probably three times a week. One night, after the second or third month, I decided to make up my own card game, called “Royal Crush,” and try it out with these guys. The one night we actually played it, we got so confused with the extra piles that we gave up. Therefore, I concluded that it was too complicated to really watch it fly, so I never tried it again. But I’m publishing the rules in this book, anyway, in case someone out there wants to attempt to make it work.

### **Cooking with Peach**

This is merely the extended version of a scene in Chapter 4 of my novel called *Panhandler Underground*. In its original version, the pace of the book dropped to a crawl when I got to this moment, because up to this point, the book had nothing to do with cooking and therefore this passage took a large chunk away from the overall story. So in my third revision of the scene, I chopped out most of the cooking elements and left behind only enough to show the character of Donald Peach enjoying the one hobby he loved. I’m restoring the scene in its entirety here, however, because I think it’s a cool story on its own, and I think my readers deserve to see it, especially considering it will undergo yet another rewrite in a few months, and there’s no telling how much of the original version will be left.

### **In Conclusion:**

And so that ends another section of *Seven-Sided Dice: The Collection of Junk Volume 3*, and consequently, also ends the entire book. If you’ve made it this far without spilling too much drool (the sleepy kind, not the lustful kind), then you officially deserve for yourself a cookie. Go ahead, pick one: chocolate chip, peanut butter, white macadamia, a combination of the three; the choice is yours. I can’t supply it to you, though. I’m broke from having spent too much time writing this book.

Anyway, before you say your goodbyes to this volume, I just want to say thank you again for taking the time to read it. It’s an endeavor I started officially back in 2001 (though a few stragglers from earlier years

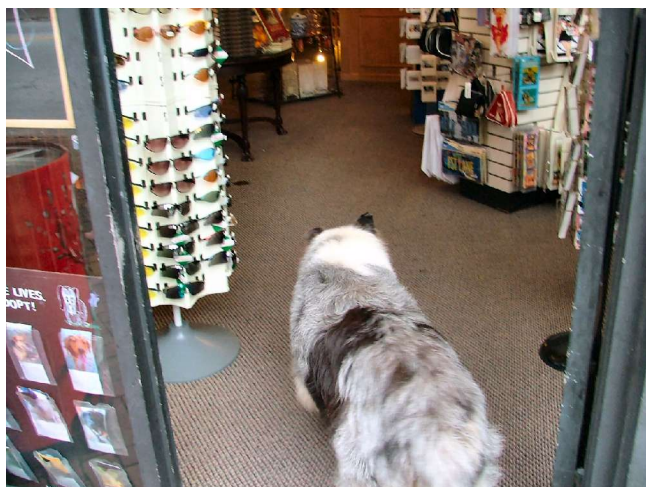


made it in, unsurprisingly), and I haven't been able to relax ever since. Five years later, I'm happy to finally put it to rest and to move onto other things. Though it was a long haul for me, I think the end result is worth it. Hopefully, you will agree.

And with that, the roller coaster ride has officially pulled into the station. You're free to vomit now.

—Jeremy





A dog in a souvenir shop in Savannah, Georgia

The Collection of Junk will return.



## About the Author



After several years of fighting to get out of South Florida, the author finally returned to the University of Central Florida in 2004 to graduate with his Bachelor's degree. Because he finished his education with a degree in English, he naturally came back to South Florida in the fall of that year to wait tables for a living. Therefore, he is looking for a job. If you are offering a position that doesn't require him to take off his clothes or sell insurance over the telephone, please contact him. Really. He needs the experience and the money. He is a writer, after all, so the money goes out a lot faster than it comes in. He also has a 135 I.Q., can learn any publishing software within minutes and is nearly broke from trusting his Boynton Beach clientele to tip him better than 10%. All he asks for, from anyone who can put wind in his sails, is a career that doesn't demean him in any way. Please consider this book as his résumé.

If you have questions about the book, or would like to contract him to write a letter or a manual for you (or anything creative, as he can do almost anything you ask for, except sing), feel free to email him at [zippywings@hotmail.com](mailto:zippywings@hotmail.com). Or, if you can get him a \$30,000 a year or better job doing something creative or meaningful to society, please drop him a line. He is looking to relocate to Tampa, if that helps. He also has an up-to-date official résumé if you still need to read that sort of thing. And he thanks you in advance for your consideration.



The Collection of Junk Anthology is now available in three parts (which most folks might call a “trilogy”):

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