

ALPHA

MIKE

FOXTROT

a novel

John L. Sheppard

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For Nancy

Since my earliest childhood a barb of sorrow has lodged in my heart. As long as it stays I am ironic—if it is pulled out I shall die.

— **Søren Kierkegaard**

1.

"THE END"

Picture this: A pair of jump-boots, spray-painted silver, tied together by the laces and tossed up to a power-line umbilical to my barracks. Short-timer!

After my honorable discharge, my DD-214 in hand, I walked outside the out-processing barracks and whooped and spun my class A jacket round my head.

Shit, yeah.

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I wasn't really happy. But sometimes you have to celebrate no matter how you feel.

An old-man colonel noticed me and tsked.

In the out-processing barracks, I was issued a new military ID, a blue one identifying me as retired, TDRL, so I wasn't out of the Army. Not completely.

They wouldn't bring me back. I would disappear, I'd decided—naively as it turned out. I threw away the plane ticket that would have jetted me back to my home of record, Sarasota, Florida, put on my civvies and walked off post, heading away from official Washington, and Fort Myer and the big depressing cemetery, down Columbia Pike, just another suburban street in suburban Virginia, my duffel bag slung over my shoulder.

Somewhere near Bailey's Crossroads, a van honked at me and pulled over. I hopped in.

The driver announced himself as Kenny and told me he was going to Chicago. His sappy hair was all over the place, his skin like onion paper. He looked like a heroin addict who'd time-traveled in from 1972.

You from Chicago? I asked him.

No, Kenny said. Should I be?

Kenny drove and drove and I looked out the van's filthy windows. My country was so green. Power-lines and melty blacktop and rolling hills—the lushness of it all was staggering. I'd forgotten. The smell of it, this country of mine! Sweat and pollen and hydrocarbons.

At a Stuckey's in West Virginia, under a throbbing road-sign proclaiming the divinity of Jesus Christ, I bought Kenny a full tank of gas, a six-pack of Mountain Dew and a jumbo bag of nacho-cheese Doritos. Night drew down upon us. Summer heat continued to wiggle up off the Interstate.

Where you headed? Kenny asked me.

Chicago, I guess.

You from Chicago?

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No, I said. Should I be?

We pulled over in Kentucky, or Ohio, and slept in a strip-mall parking lot. When the sun came up in the morning, I wept as quietly as I could, tears coursed across my temples, a phlegm bubble popped in my mouth. I don't think he heard me. Eventually I stopped and wiped my face with the heels of my hands. Sat up.

What's your name, anyway? Kenny asked. A silver-metallic blob had been jammed through his septum. He was a Descendants fan, according to his t-shirt.

Dugan, I said. I thought a moment. Joe, I mean. I was free to use my first name again. I popped open the back doors of the van and hopped out into all that sunshine. I rubbed my still-wet temples. Where were we? It didn't matter. A vulture spun in grand wide arcs overhead.

In the strip-mall—a sign. I believe in signs, and good and bad luck. This was a real sign: An Army-Navy store. I pulled my duffel out of the back of the van and took it in. Fifteen minutes later, I was \$150 richer and 20 pounds lighter—not that I needed the money, but it was a good sign and good luck. I believe that for one bit of good luck you must pay with two bits of bad luck. So I'd have to watch out for the next couple of weeks. Bad luck didn't lurk long.

What's in the little bag? Kenny asked.

My real clothes, I said, shaking the plastic bag. He didn't want them.

How long were you in the Army anyway?

A while. How about Denny's? My treat.

Hey, hey, hey, wait: It's not that I'm ashamed of having been in the Army, or that I have a proto-macho can't-discuss-war stance, it's just that I was sick of talking about it. At Walter Reed, that's all we did. We sat around in plastic folding chairs talking about the war until it died in our mouths.

Sweet, Kenny said.

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A quick hike across sticky asphalt brought us to the smallest Denny's in the world. It was not the saddest Denny's. Nor the seediest. The manager did not look like Weird Al. The waitress did not keep a pencil in a beehive hairdo. Kenny said to the waitress, I hear this is snake-handling country.

Y'all want something to drink? she asked. She was youngish, maybe 25, but a hard 25.

I'll have a diet coke, I said.

Pepsi all right?

Fine, I said.

I'll have a Red Bull if you have them, Kenny said.

We don't, she said.

Then a Pepsi, please, Kenny said.

She left.

Tough crowd, Kenny said.

I shrugged. You could talk about college football, I said.
Or NASCAR.

You think she likes me?

She hates you, I said.

Close enough, Kenny said.

When she came back with our drinks, Kenny asked her to go to Chicago with us. I'm meeting my band there, he said.

Uh, huh, the waitress went. I think she'd introduced herself as Cathy. She wasn't wearing a nametag. Or maybe she was Kitty. Something like that.

Don't mind Buster, I said. He has the Tourette's. You heard of it?

She smiled. I think so. Don't they shout out bad words?

I've known him since we were in kindergarten. He hasn't said an appropriate thing yet.

Grand slam! Kenny shouted.

His sister is waiting for us in Chicago. They have better doctors there. New drugs, I said.

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I want to make looove to you, Kenny said.

Oh my, she said.

It gets sad quick, I said.

Grilled cheese on wheat, Kenny said.

‘Grilled cheese on—’ she repeated. She wrote down his order.

Give him the onion rings, I said. I’ll take a patty melt with fries.

She trotted away.

Man, I was gonna—

You weren’t gonna score.

You interest me, Mr. Joe Dugan, Kenny said. If you need a place to crash when we get to Chicago, I’ll arrange it. He smiled, not unkindly.

We stared out the window for a while, watching the big rigs rumble past. I saw some of the Mexican kids from the kitchen peering out. Free freak show. Kitty/Cathy nudged past them.

Fart, fart, jalapeño poppers! Kenny shouted.

You poor boy, Kitty/Cathy said, setting down our food.

Outside Denny’s, I had a chance to study Kenny’s van in daylight. Someone, back in the 1970’s by the look of it, had loved Kenny’s van, airbrushing it into a prog-rock album cover, replete with a nude woman wrestling a snake, beardy gnomes, and other claptrap. I thought of long electric organ solos and flowing girl hair on guys and falsetto voices begging me not to kill my fellow man, or whales.

The tires, possibly retreads, had no treads. The door handles were shiny and sculpted in obscene shapes. The chrome had worn thin, and through, in spots. Rust dots blemished bumpers and the bottoms of doors.

You want some ginseng? Kenny asked.

No.

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I could use some ginseng, just to get going. That big meal made me sleepy.

Indiana is more than corn. Indiana is also industrial waste. We drove through Gary, Hammond, haze.

Desolation alley, Kenny said.

I scratched at the shrapnel wounds in my face, which looked like acne and itched like hell. I wasn't allowed to have an MRI at Walter Reed because of them. The magnets in the machine would have ripped the tiny pieces of metal out of me in a most unpleasant way, my doctors said.

Other than the fake acne, I was feeling pretty good. No obvious limp, nothing. I closed my eyes and leaned my head up against the window. Thump-thump, thump-thump went the tires as they crossed the crumbling and pot-holed highway. I felt no urge to be on the lookout for roadside bombs hidden in refrigerator cartons. None whatsoever. Cured, cured!

Sometimes, even when I am speaking with someone directly, I wonder whether the voice is coming from whoever it I am talking to, or maybe I hear the voice in my own shattered head.

I have spoken to people who are not there. Or, perhaps, I have spoken to people who got up and walked away, and then left me speaking to myself.

I have spoken to the dead. They come to me at night and sit on the corner of my bed. They are mostly pleasant, but mainly they want to know what it is like to still be alive. They claim they don't blame me for a thing. I don't believe them.

I speak to the living. I don't let them touch me.

I am a million years old. I am 24. I am a retiree.

I fell asleep and missed Chicago entirely. I woke up and saw a billboard for a station called The Loop. Chicago, I said.

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Just passed through, Kenny said. We're almost there.

There?

Smithville, Kenny said. Just north of Chicago. That's where my friend's house is. I called her, let her know to expect an extra person.

Thanks, I said.

You sure can sleep, Kenny said. I had the radio on, was talking on my cell and the road was rough and you slept right through it.

I can also juggle, I said. Back in Sarasota, I was a member of my high school's circus. I was a toss-juggling clown.

Ha! Kenny went.

Two Interstates merged into one, six lanes of trucks and cars trying to squeeze north together. Kenny inched and inched. Don't think I'll be driving much around here, he said. An hour later, he said, Nothing funny about the traffic here.

We got off the Interstate twenty minutes later, trundling through potholes into the small-town Midwest. I need a drink, I said.

You and me both, Kenny said. He unfolded a piece of paper with instructions printed out on it. Can you read a map?

I laughed. He was puzzled. Sure, I said. You want grid coordinates?

We found the house a few minutes later. The house sprawled irregularly on a flowered plot. A Rooms For Rent sign was planted along with the flowers out front, along with a telephone number. I decided it was a gingerbread house from a nursery rhyme, a built-up, four-story maze from Wonderland. In front of the house, most of what would have been a yard was gravel and was filled with dented, ancient econo-cars parked every which way. Kenny pulled into an available space and killed the engine.

An ample girl came bounding out of the front door. She was short with unnaturally black hair that spun out of her head

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every which way, possibly shoulder-length hair, soft-fuzzy springs of hair. She wore sandals and a peasant dress and big round glasses that made her face seem rounder than it was. She was so beautiful that it almost hurt to look at her.

I hopped out of the van and stretched. She ran around the other side of the van. I watched through the passenger's and driver's side windows as she kissed Kenny, her boyfriend I guessed correctly. Kenny walked her back around, his hand clenching hers, to meet me.

This is the Bun, Kenny said. Bun, this is Joe Dugan.

Hi, I said.

Hi yourself, she said, a pink stone sparkling on the side of her nose.

I looked down and saw that she had a tattoo on the top of each foot, both partially obscured by her sandals.

I've never met a girl with a definite article in her name before, I said.

You hungry? she asked.

Starving, I said.

Come on in, both of you, she said. She yanked Kenny alongside her like a toy balloon. I followed two steps behind, taking in the curves of her white calves, and then looked up nervously to see that she'd caught me checking her out. She smiled, not unkindly. I thought that was pretty generous of her, not rating me out.

2

BEFORE I WAS A SOLDIER

I lived in Sarasota from the time I was six until I was 18. My father moved the family down from Nebraska in search of boodles of cash to be provided by an endless supply of suckers. The cash rarely materialized.

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My sole ambition from the time I was seven was to leave Florida and never come back, not even for a visit. In that, I've failed miserably.

I remember the day the recruiter came to pick me up on the morning I was to formally enter the Army. My mother, a frail ghostly woman, was attempting to stuff a 12-course breakfast into me. My sister Magda, ten years younger than I, followed my stick-thin mother around the kitchen asking, Joe doesn't have to go, does he? Chess isn't leaving, too, is he? She was in her Strawberry Shortcake phase, dressed in sickening pajamas, trailing the scent of an overly sweet breakfast behind her.

My twin brother Chess, whose brain was beginning to curdle, sat across the table from me. Despite being identical twins, and sleeping in bunk beds (me top, Chess bottom), and being forced to wear the same clothes our first ten years of life, and sit together in church and school, and being put through Which one are you? all the fucking time, we had never become close. We each considered the other a far shabbier version of himself.

You're never coming back, are you? Chess asked. It wasn't an accusation. There was a lot of hope in his voice. He'd developed this tick. The left side of his face would spasm, like a muscular wink. Afterward, he'd stretch his jaw by closing his eyes and opening his mouth as wide as he could. No one acknowledged it. To acknowledge it would be to grant it special status, and then someone might have to admit that he was going nuts, that he had been going nuts his entire life.

That's the plan, I said.

Chess finished stretching out his jaw and smiled.

I thought, That's his gray smile.

Chess thought, Fuck him fuck him fuck him fuck him fuckity fuckity fuck him. A year later, he wrote me a letter telling me so. It was postmarked from the state mental hospital in Arcadia.

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The recruiter knocked and let himself in. Which one's my guy? he bellowed cheerfully. The one with all the food in front of him, I bet!

How could anyone mistake my brother for me? I wondered. Couldn't they tell?

When am I going to get you to sign up? the recruiter asked Chess.

Fucking fucker, Chess thought. You'd like that, wouldn't you? he growled across the table at me. I can see it.

Chess got up and went to his room, It's my room now, you fuckity fuckers! slamming the door behind him.

His problem is jealousy, the recruiter said. If he hadn't been a black dude, the recruiter could have easily been a living Nazi master race poster. He was a massive man, robust in all senses of the word, not an ounce of fat on him, his uniform gleaming with ribbons, marksmanship badges, a blue rope and yellow stripes. And his teeth!

He was a salesman. His main selling point was his unshakable faith in himself and his Army.

Two years later, I would take a drunken swing at him in a tiny off-post bar in Taegu, South Korea. The recruiter was a cannon-cocker staff sergeant by that time and I was an E-5 infantryman, a three-striper with a combat patch on my right arm.

You cocksucker! I shouted at him. And the recruiter grabbed my swinging arm, tied it behind my back and escorted me into the street, slamming me into a butcher shop window displaying dogs' heads. Everyone gets one swing, the recruiter told me. You just had yours.

You lying sack of—

I never lied. Not once in my life.

He left me on my knees in front of the glassed-in dog heads, humiliated.

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When the recruiter came to my high school, I took one look at him and said aloud, That's who I want to be. I craved his certitude.

My brother, standing next to me, commented, Dick.

I wanted to scrape my brother off my shoe, every last bit of him.

And by joining the Army I was getting to do just that. Sort of. I dropped my fork, chewed what was in my mouth, and got up to leave.

Naw, said the recruiter. Finish your breakfast. Plenty of time. He clapped me on the shoulder to sit me back down. The recruiter glided around the house, running his hands across our shabby furniture. Almost the entire house was in one great room—the kitchen, dining room, living room. The bedrooms were all tucked away down a narrow corridor. Yes, indeed. Shouldn't be in a rush to leave all this. Your moms makes a nice house.

He knew that the father was gone already. The old man took off to start a new family a year before, though that wasn't the story our family sold to strangers.

My mother went to work in the china department of Maas Brothers department store.

Here there is no money, my mother said, wiping her hands. This is why Joe joined the Army.

Are you German, ma'am? the recruiter asked, slipping into a chair that my father used to sit in. He'd met her a half-dozen times before, but had rarely let a word pass through her lips. Mostly, he'd rhapsodized about the opportunities awaiting me in Uncle Sugar's camping and rifle club.

Yes, she said.

Was your late husband a soldier? he asked. My mother had told us to tell anyone who asked that our father had been hit by a bus.

He was in the Air Force, she said.

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My father had been married before my mother, to his childhood sweetheart, and there were two older half-siblings living in Ohio, where my father hailed from originally.

Oh, the Air Force, the recruiter said contemptuously. Suppose that counts as service, too. He got up from the chair, he was restless, and walked over to the bookcase. Reader's Digest books. Haven't seen these in a while. He touched one. He looked at the Hummel's under glass.

Many years before, Chess had very deliberately snapped off their heads, before the arrival of Magda, before we came to Florida, and he had glued the heads back on with a mixture of Elmer's Glue-All and library paste in the clumsiest way possible. Chess told me about it much later.

Where was I when you were doing this? I asked Chess when he told me all about it, in exacting detail.

You were sitting around in our room, reading, he said, as if what he'd been doing was far more productive.

When the family was packing up to move to Florida, my mother saw the cracks around the tiny ceramic children's necks and let out a little shriek. She clamped a hand over her mouth and looked at both of us accusingly, but never said a word directly about it to us—though to anyone who looked at the Hummel's, she said, The boys broke them.

Tsk, tsk, went the recruiter, after the words came from my mother's mouth for the umpteenth time.

I furiously stabbed at my food and crammed it down my throat in hard swallows. Jesus fuck I need to get out of here.

Magda hid behind our mother. She wasn't that small. The mother wouldn't leave the kitchen. It was her sanctuary still, a year after our father took off.

I stood up chewing a bolus of scrambled eggs and the last of an English muffin. Mmmph! I went and headed toward the door. I grabbed an overnight bag there with one change of clothes (the Army would provide new clothes) and toiletries

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(which the Army would not provide), opened the door, swallowed and said, You coming?

Hold up! the recruiter shouted. Ain't you gonna say goodbye?

Goodbye! I shouted, and walked out to the Government Issue Chevy Cavalier, For Official Use Only.

The recruiter was outside like a shot. He popped open the trunk and in dropped my little gym bag.

The mother and the girl wandered outside. My mother stood on the front doorstep, her arms crossed, watching me.

The car started up. The recruiter reached across and unlocked the passenger-side door. I opened the door and hesitated for a moment, looking at the old lady. Just like his father, she said, and turned around and went back inside, the door clapping shut behind her. Magda stood staring at me, alone. She may have cried.

I rode in silence. The recruiter was unusually silent. At the bus station, he handed me a ticket to St. Pete, where I'd get my last physical before heading off to basic training.

Keep your head down, the recruiter said, and popped open the trunk. Don't make no waves, he said, handing me the gym bag. Don't take no leadership positions. Don't let them learn your name. That's the best way to get through.

I nodded at him and walked into the bus station. A month later, the twin towers and the Pentagon went up in flames.

3.

GATOR BAIT

Where're you from? the Bun asked. She had a lot going on behind those round glasses. The way she handled herself she didn't seem like someone from my generation. She did not swaddle herself in irony laced with gooey sentimentality. Curly too-black hair whirled around her pretty face, a little pink slit of a mouth curled up. A pink stud gleamed on her tiny nose. We were sitting around the kitchen table, a wooden slab possibly carved from the hull of a 19th-century whaling ship.

Florida, I said.

No one's from Florida.

I grew up in Florida, I said.

Kansas, she said, guessing. She smelled the Corn Belt all over me. My mannerisms. Something.

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Nebraska, I said. But we left there when I was a kid. Hardly remember it.

Go big red, she said.

Huh?

University of Nebraska?

Rings a bell, I said.

Kenny produced a pile of sandwiches from the ancient refrigerator. As soon as he closed the door, its motor clunked to life and emitted sounds like a prop aircraft. Bup-bup-bup-bup...

Nice place, I said.

It's my parents', she said. I went to high school just down the street. Go Patriots!

You thrill us with your enthusiasm, Kenny said between bites of a chicken salad on white.

You're spitting mayo, the Bun said.

Sorry, Kenny said, spitting. He wiped at the spatter with his free hand, the one that wasn't jamming sandwich into his mouth. Chew-chew, swallow-swallow.

What brings you here? the Bun asked.

Kenny, I said, peering over at the sandwiches. I was starving. Jesus. Denny's had been a while back.

The Bun reached over and pulled the platter of sandwiches my way. Eat, she said.

Hey! Kenny pawed across the table and snatched another sandwich.

Spitting, the Bun snapped at him, slapping a hand.

Sorry, he said, shoving the sandwich into his mouth choking-deep and reaching over the table, and her, for another sandwich.

After lunch, she introduced me to her parents, who were lounging on a dusty, asymmetrical sofa in the room adjacent to the kitchen. Yellowed lace curtains semi-obscured the window,

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sifted dots of sunlight behind them. The room was dominated by an antique TV/Hi-Fi combination on one wall. On another wall, heavy wooden bookshelves that had once been painted, but apparently not sanded before they were painted. Paint chips flaked all over the walking-path-grooved wooden floor. I peeked over and caught sight of one of the books—Flann O’Brien’s *At Swim-Two-Birds*—a book I like immensely.

On my first tour in Iraq my lieutenant had brought it with him but did not like it; he’d been instructed by a television show to buy it. I don’t like seeing books tossed to the side of the road. It’s disturbing. I pulled my unarmored vehicle over and ran over and chased a wild dog away from the book, he was sniffing it quizzically, wondering if it had food value, I suppose. I carried the book with me and read it religiously.

Most of the rest of the books on the shelves appeared to be college textbooks.

At first, I didn’t believe that the geezer sitting in the overstuffed chair was her dad. More like her grandpa. Or great-grandpa. Sprouts of white-white hair swept out of Dad’s head every which way. It was clogging his nostrils and ear-sockets and forcing its way out of his shirt collar. He cocked his head and squinted his eyes as if he were about to be smacked in the face by an invisible man wielding an invisible flyswatter.

The mother I could believe. She looked like she’d caught a glimpse of the hippie days and decided that she’d be just like that.

Hello, the father said, putting down the paper. I couldn’t place the accent, mid-American but with hints of somewhere else.

Mom was a broad-hipped, narrow-shouldered gal with two henna braids whipping around her head. She wore a Teamsters t-shirt over her hippie dress and flat-soled sandals on her narrow feet. She noticed me looking at the sandals. You like my sandals? she asked. Got them in Kenya years ago from a Maasai tribal chief. They make them out of old car tires.

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I nodded and smiled. I don't know why.

Where's Kenny? her father asked.

He's still eating, the Bun said.

This one. Where will he stay?

We have the attic room, she said.

The attic room. Eh, her father said. He shook the newspaper back into position and continued reading it.

Nice, dad, she said.

Leave your father alone, her mother said. My name's Sandra, by the way.

I'm Joe, I said. We bridged the expanse of the room shaking hands.

Well, show Joe to his room, will you, and give him a key, Sandra said, standing now. She gave her skirt a little shake; maybe she was ridding herself of cookie crumbs.

Okay, mom, the Bun said.

Death by fire, I said to the mom, quoting Flann O'Brien, it's no joke. I pointed at the book.

Oh, she said. Never read it. It's the Bun's.

They tell me drowning is worse, said the Bun.

You can drown me three times before you roast me, I said, completing the joke. Yes by God and six. Stick your finger in the sink and what do you feel? Now put your finger in the fire.

We stood smiling at each other for a moment, until mom or dad coughed. I followed the Bun out of the room.

We tromped up three narrow flights of stairs, passing a payphone on the second flight. At the top of the stairs, the Bun reached up and grabbed a ping-pong ball attached to a white rope and yanked downward, and down came a ladder out of a rectangular hole in the ceiling. I climbed the stairs behind her. No looking up my dress, she said, then peered over her shoulder, smiling. My face burned. Why so shy, sunshine?

Nothing, I said. I was on fire inside, roasting. It was not unpleasant. You can't choose who you're attracted to. You just

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can't. I would have chosen, at that moment, to be attracted to no one, had I a choice.

Up in the attic, we stood side-by-side. The walls were covered over in artwork. Some of it was experimental and some looked like it belonged in the cheap cigarette stink of a rundown motel off a long-ago abandoned highway.

My grandmother, the Bun said. She's the artist.

She lives here?

No. She died last year, the Bun said.

I'm sorry, I said.

Why? You didn't have anything to do with it, she said cheerily.

Dust hung down from the bare rafters in gray clumpy strands, a dash of turpentine in the air. The lone window, a wood-and-glass number, framed a cardinal on the other side of the pane, who was staring in at us, twitching his head this way and that.

The Bun rolled a fold-up bed out of the corner, unfolded it.

There you go, she said.

How much do I owe you? I asked. For rent?

We'll see, she said. Don't figure we'll charge you much until you get a job. She smiled.

I wanted to kiss her. I did not kiss her.

So you're from Florida, eh? she said.

Yeah, I said.

Tell me a Florida story, she said. She sat down on the bed, patting the mattress next to her. Keep in mind that I require compelling characters and a semi-decent plot.

I sat down. I began. My story involves my twin brother.

Oh, a twin brother, she said. Do you feel each other's pain, or anything like that?

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No, I said. In fact, if he felt my pain, I'd hit myself in the ass with a two-by-four all the livelong day.

She laughed. I had to look away from her.

Chess walked into my room and announced that he'd found ten bucks on the street. We were—what?—ten, I think.

Actually, what happened, he said, was he was sitting on the curb when the ten-dollar bill fluttered out of someone's car window as the car zipped past. He suggested I split it with him. We could ride our bicycles down to the Gate Food Post and eat a ton of candy. I didn't buy the story about how Chess got the ten, but who can turn down candy?

On the way down to the convenience store we passed a golf course. Chess stopped his bicycle suddenly in front of me. So I stopped, too. I stared out where Chess was staring. Out on the course, an old man was slowly running from a slow-moving gator. The gator's mouth was open as it lumbered toward the old man. The old man's body was bent into a question mark. He wielded the golf club like a sword, waving it around in front of him, even though the gator was behind him. Man and gator reached the golf cart about the same time. The gator stood by the golf cart, hissing, its mouth open. The old man managed to drive off without getting hurt.

I chuckled at the memory.

Wait, the Bun said. Did you buy the candy?

Oh, yeah. Tons of it. We ate it all in the parking lot, sitting next to the air pump.

Did he really find the ten dollars in the street?

No. He stole it from our mother's purse. He took me along so I wouldn't rat him out.

Did she notice?

She announced at dinner that the ten dollars was missing. She said it sadly. I looked over at Chess and he was smirking at me, his lips oozing mashed potatoes. My father didn't notice that anything was happening, and my sister was too young to notice

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much. I'm sure my mother saw what was going on between Chess and me, but she never mentioned it again.

Thank you for the story. I'll leave you to get acclimated, the Bun said, standing up suddenly. Gotta go hang out with my boyfriend. The way she said it made me think, hey, I may have a shot. The subsequent thought was: I should not have a shot. I'm too... I'm broken.

I followed her over to the opening in the floor and watched her clomp down the attic stairs. She looked up and waved at me.

I crouched down and waved back.

4.

PLAN B

On my last visit home to Florida, on convalescent leave from Walter Reed, limping and wounds still seeping, I'd made the mistake of staying with my mother – she with the guilt rays emanating from her eye-sockets. Her guilt rays had doubled in power. She'd just been diagnosed with breast cancer.

You should visit your brother, she told me, sitting in her favorite easy chair, wearing her ratty housecoat. She'd just sold the family home for boom-times money and bought herself and Magda a tiny condo in a fake 19th century New England whaling village called Wamaponga, which was still under loud construction.

Why it made sense to build a fake 19th century New England whaling village in Florida is beyond me. I lived in Florida most of my life and never really understood the place.

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Paul Harvey's voice boomed out from next door, along with the shrill whine of circular saws and the hiss and clap of pneumatic nail guns.

I don't wanna visit my brother, I said. I closed my eyes and knew I was gonna.

I drove out to Arcadia in Mom's Saturn Vue, to the G. Pierce Wood State Psychiatric Facility, in the wilds of undeveloped Florida. State Route 72 is a straight, slightly warped, two-lane blacktop. Scrub palmettos, razor wire fences, Australian pines, armadillo roadkill, turkey buzzards, Brangus cattle covered in swarms of horseflies, the burnt remains of a former citrus grove, a county work farm, a makeshift trailer park and then there was Arcadia.

I found a visitor's parking spot. The facility had been built in the 1960's. It could have stood in for Starfleet Command on the Shatner version of Star Trek.

The guard eyed my military ID suspiciously. I signed in. The guard led me down a corridor to a visitor's area and directed me to a table. I sat down on a plastic chair in a clean, empty room, industrial lighting buzzing overhead. The walls hummed narcotic green.

After a few minutes, in walked Chess wearing cotton-pilled pajamas, a shabby bathrobe hung over his shoulders, crinkly paper slippers on his feet. So, he said. You've come at last. He plopped down in the seat next to mine. What happened to your um, err, ah. He waved his finger in the general vicinity of my face. You look like shit. He had about 30 pounds on me. His face was round and pink, accented by a poorly trimmed Van Dyke with little streaks of premature gray in it. It's my twin brother, Chess told the attendant who'd led him in.

The attendant smiled. He walked over to the far corner of the room, leaned against a wall and flipped open a magazine.

The last time I had seen Chess he was bug-eyed insane. He only took his pills if someone stood over him and watched

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him swallow. Even then, he'd developed a way to make them come back up.

What brings you... um? Chess asked. The drugs dulled him, made him rummage for words. Off drugs he was hyperarticulate, and—I think I've mentioned it before —batshit crazy.

I could leave, I said.

Yeah, Chess said. You're good at that.

We sat uncomfortably. Look, I said. Are you planning on getting out of here anytime soon? Mom's sick. She's probably getting sicker. If you could manage to take your pills, on occasion, you could take care of her and our little sister. I'm sure she'd like that.

Oh, I get it, Chess said, narrowing his dark eyes. This is about the... hmmm. Pills? Yes.

This is about Mom, I said. This is about you making a fucking effort.

Yes, sir, sergeant, sir, he said. Am I planning on getting out of here? That's rich. I'd leave today if that was... He smiled, like he was remembering a time he'd enjoyed, whenever that might have been.

You're working on someone, I said.

After four years, Chess was becoming an old hand in psychiatric wards. He knew how to get out, nice and legal:

Step one, find a young doctor who needs his or her first success.

Step two, develop a tick that disrupts the entire ward.

Step three, let the young doctor cure you of the tick. The doctor becomes your most fervent advocate and soon you're on the street.

Nah, Chess said. These docs are all on to my little tricks. Bastards. Chess stood up. Have you finished yet? Have you done your good deed for the day? Because I have to go back to, um, yanking, um, my arm hairs out. I still have three or four left.

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I slumped forward in my chair, elbows on knees, and let out a long gasp.

Wait. Now I can see it, your grand, um, grand, grand, grand plan. Mom takes care of me, the poor sick thing. And I take care of her, the poor sick thing. And Joe is not really part of it. Joe has done his duty without doing a fucking thing, like always. Ain't that right, my man Joe? He rubbed his belly counter-clockwise three times and then snapped his fingers three times, quickly.

New tick?

Do-wah, do-wah, do-wah, Chess went. Yeah. You like it?

It has a certain style, I said.

On to plan B, Saint Joseph, Chess said.

As a child, I was a typical, overfed, pasty and underexercised American with a lower-case a, with little interest in anything beyond the tip of my nose. The Army, with a capital A, remade me using its not-so-subtle methods.

Standing in my new attic home, a week (was it a week?) after leaving Uncle Sugar's employ, peering into an oval, full-length mirror, I saw a scarred beanpole with eyes that could bore a hole through a plate of depleted uranium. Get right, soldier, I told the reflection. He glared back at me with scorn – Civilian.

Some of those little scars in my face came from my old battalion XO, a major who'd snapped at us troopers out of the side of his mouth like an old-timey movie gangster. He'd told us not to pick up anything that looked out of the ordinary maybe an hour or two before he died. We'd swept into Iraq earlier that day and were ready for adventure. Anything could be booby-trapped, the major had told us. Anything at all. With a capital 'A.'

Less than an hour later, amongst a pile of Iraqis we'd just killed from afar – poppity, poppity-pop with our M-16's and M-4's and .50 cal's – the major stooped over to pick up an AK-

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M, which is an AK-47 with a wooden stock. And, ka-pop!, off went his hand and face in a pink slurry of smoke, man-meat and gristle. Magic! He was dead, just like that. He fell, gently, onto his side. I was about ten meters away and little pieces of metal and officer face chunks and hand bones lodged in my arms, legs, face and hands. Nothing debilitating, mind you. Body armor saved my torso and ESS goggles my eyes. The major took the brunt.

I saw a man killed, a field-grade officer, and my reaction was surprising, even to me with bone-bits of him prickling me. I thought, That was pretty cool. It took me several months to feel the horror reaction and when it came, I cringed at myself, at what I'd allowed myself to be. Become.

As you were.

The major who replaced him, two months later, was a reservist from Sheridan, Wyoming. He was a dog trainer back in the world and offered winning advice for dealing with newly freed Iraqi personnel. He told us what he'd told all of his clients back home in bumfuck moo-cowland: Don't make eye contact. Walk into any situation as if you're the alpha male, and that will make you the alpha male. It was sound advice for dealing with dogs.

He wasn't the only one who had a theory. All of our superior officers, from the generals on down to dippy second lieutenants, were encumbered with theories and books. I'd never seen so many books. The books were going to tell them how to pacify our new Iraqi friends. In the meantime, we were living inside our vehicles and swallowing great dry gulps of sand. The heat and sand came slamming down from above and up from below and whipped around our heads and got inside our ass cracks. The people from back home sent us baby wipes and silly string in a can and congratulatory letters. Dear Soldier, I don't know you but thank you for saving my freedom.

Etc.

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I killed a man one day on a street crowded with angry, hungry people and us with not so much food. I picked the man out at random, him and his shrieking ungrateful face, and I shot him. Ka-pop. It was not cool.

You sure know how to end a riot, Dugan, said a second lieutenant right after I'd zapped the dude.

Check your theory book, page 19, second paragraph, sir, I said, not looking at him, all alpha-male-like, my hands shaking, as people screamed and ran away from me, down the heat-and-dust-clogged street.

Har-dee-har-har, he went.

Smoke came out of the dead man's wound. He was maybe twice my age and his family, or people I assume were his family, came and dragged him away. A boy, a girl, a woman. The horror reaction came toot-sweet with that kill. I'd become cold. I was coldness incarnate. I was not yet old enough to drink beer. Plus, there was no beer available. Whiskey-Tango-Foxtrot, over.

We dug in, eventually. Sandbags and concertina wire. Guard towers. Eventually, the cans came. They were little sleeper compartments. And then showers. And then air conditioning. And, much later, soft-serve ice cream in several ambrosial flavors. And contractors to serve the soft serve. And delightful dining facilities in which to consume the soft serve. And plasma TVs and the Armed Forces Radio and Television Service, where we learned every day that we were winning, always winning. More importantly, we also learned who was leading the points standing in NASCAR and which college football teams were doing well. We discovered that our encampment was named Camp Eagle.

After winning the war on a daily basis, I rotated to CONUS. Then I rotated to Korea. Then my Korean unit rotated to Iraq. Then I got myself blown up and went to Landstuhl Army Hospital in Germany and, later, Walter Reed Army Hospital in Washington, D.C. And then I left the Army with a capital A. Sort of.

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5.

PRAY

Hours lazily glided by. I stared out the round attic window at the quiet little town of Smithville. Robins flitted past. Leaves rustled in the trees. Next door, an American flag flapped from a pole jutting from a front porch. A yellow ribbon was tied around an old oak tree. A Catholic church glowed across the street. I found some tennis balls in a tin can in a corner of the attic and practiced toss juggling. Quick hands, quick hands.

I was summoned from the attic for supper. That's what they called it: Supper. It was so quaint that I about teared up. Leaving the Army had made me sentimental. The super soldier in the big oval mirror did not approve. Fuck you, sergeant, I told the reflection.

I climbed down from my attic. Heading down, and down, I saw the old payphone again and made a mental note to call home. Or was this home?

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When I entered the big kitchen, I witnessed another scene that about made me tear up. Ten people were sitting around the big table, all holding hands, and praying over the heaps of food piled in the center.

....and Lord, please end violence and hunger and poverty, said the gray old man, the Bun's father. Amen.

I said, I'm sorry I'm late.

That's okay, said the Bun's mother.

Fine and dandy, said the Bun's ancient father in his inscrutable accent.

Sit down, said the Bun, slapping the seat next to her.

I sat down next to her. I was... vibrating.

Everybody, this is Joe Dugan, said the Bun's ancient father.

Murmur, murmur, grumble, went the boarders, older single men, not professionals. Dirty and chipped fingernails. Graying beard stubble. They were busy stabbing at the pan-fried pork chops with their forks. Mashed potatoes were passed around. Green beans.

Prayer is good for the soul, said the Bun's ancient father.

I looked over at him and realized that he was addressing me. Yes, sir, I replied. The bucket of mashed potatoes arrived in my hands via the Bun. I plopped some on my plate and handed it off to the next person.

You don't have to call me 'sir,' said the Bun's ancient father.

Yes, sir, I replied.

The Bun's father was a huge man, with great circles around his glowing-sad eyes. The eyes were becoming sadder every time I called him sir. I wanted to stop. I couldn't. Some people cry out for respect despite their feelings on the matter.

I'm heading down to the Buy and Bye tomorrow, if you want to come along, said Kenny, who was sitting on the other side of the Bun. The three of us looked out of place at this table.

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That's a scab shop, said the Bun's ancient father.

It is, said Kenny.

Oh, Daddy, said the Bun.

The Bun's ancient father stared down at his food. Hmm.

Oh, Daddy, said the Bun.

Scabs, went the Bun's ancient father, not looking up.

Grumble, grumble, slurp, slurp, belch, went the older boarders. They didn't like the old man's leftist leanings. But, I guessed correctly, the leftist old man was the only one in town who would take them in. All of them worked, I found out later, on a cash basis on the other side of Lake Grant, where all the rich people in town lived. They mowed lawns and hacked up bushes and painted fences. They suffered a lot of competition from undocumented Mexican laborers, so they had to keep their wages low and their complaints to an absolute minimum. They felt that everyone else should do likewise. Why should anyone have a better shake than them? Who did the old man think we were? Did he think we were better than everyone else? Hmmph! Slurp, grumble, belch.

For a job? I said at last.

For a job, Kenny said. Yeah. What else?

Maybe for a ten-pound box of macaroni. Or a cubic-ton of Velveeta. Or Chinese slave labor electronics that would short out a day after the warranty expired.

Tell them you want to work in Merch, said the Bun.

Merch? I went.

It's in the warehouse, Kenny said, peering around his pretty girlfriend, who I couldn't bring myself to look directly at. That's what I'm going to ask for.

I didn't want to tell them this: I had money coming in. I had been TDRL'ed – Temporary Disability Retirement List. I was supposed to get money from the government until I was cured of my injuries. It wasn't much. I gave my home address as my mother's house. The government would sent all my corre-

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spondence there. I was also supposed to check in with the VA. I had failed to do so. I would continue to fail to do so, as far as I was concerned.

Warehouse, I said aloud. I wasn't sure I'd be up to lifting heavy objects, if it came to that. I was only recently out of physical therapy. On the other hand, why not? I'd seen a VA hospital on our way in. I could always drop in there if something snapped. Maybe that would count as my check-in? And then there was Vicodin, wonderful Vicodin. The VA had a rep about giving everyone and their brother Vicodin.

Sure, I said.

You haven't taken anything but potatoes, the Bun pointed out. She heaped more food on my plate. More than I would be able to eat.

After dinner, I climbed up and up and up the stairs to my little attic room. I passed by the payphone in the hallway, slapped at the wallet in my front pocket where my calling card was and continued on upstairs.

I sat down on my bed and watched the world again through the little round window, the sun sparkling through the dark green leaves. When the sky outside dimmed from blue to orange to black, I curled up on the unfolded bed and fell asleep.

I dreamt that gunmen had taken over my mother's fake New England fishing village in Florida. They wanted the release of many prisoners in Gitmo or they would execute my family, starting with Magda. I woke up, grabbed my wallet and tiptoed downstairs. I could hear the tenants growling and grumbling and snorting their way through angry sleep. Phlegm and chesty death rattles, like sucking chest wounds, but without the wounds. I remembered plastic sheeting on my chest during my golden hour, the blood spurting up... Stay with me, stay with... This is not happening. This is not real. I'm drowning and I'm in a desert. I'm drowning and I'm going to—

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Stop it. Stop thinking about it. Stop. Just stop. Stop. Stop. Stop!

The center of my chest pulled tight into the center of me and my heart went poppity-pop-pop-pop. Calm the fuck down. You're in America. You're home.

Anyone who tells you you're a better person for having faced combat can go fuck themselves. You tell them that: Go fuck yourself.

I calmed myself down by imagining a field. Bees. A cool sprinkling rain on my face. I opened my eyes.

I pulled a calling card from my wallet. On the front of it was a picture of a G.I. in the nicest desert you'd ever seen, the sun sparkling high in the blue-yellow sky above him, and him on a payphone that had miraculously popped up out of that desert, his head bowed, calling home. Hi, Ma! Hi, Pa!

Oh, Sonny Boy! How is the war going?

We're winning, Ma! We're winning, Pa! Everything's swell! How's Sissy? How's Sparky? How's our swell mutt Jasper?

Everything here is peachy keen! Biggest economic expansion in human history now that you've secured our freedom and protected our country.

That's swell!

It sure is swell!

Etc.

I punched in all the appropriate numbers. The receiver emitted its buzzing noises. Nothing unusual there. The mother picked up. Hello? I went.

It's your brother, said the mother. The brother who can't buy a cell phone like everyone else.

Hi, I said. How's it going? Whatcha doing? Is anything wrong?

I picked up a plastic gin bottle on the floor and took the last swig, tossed it into a nearby wastepaper basket.

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It's four in the morning, she said. You haven't called in three weeks, she said. Maybe everything is going wrong. You wouldn't know, would you?

My Catholicism sickened me, along with the leftover gin. It's 3 a.m. here. I guess I must finally be going nuts, like you know who.

Don't mock your brother, she said.

I think you should call him right up. Invite him over. He can tell you about his doppelgänger from the red universe who's having all the fun, while he's stuck in this universe working his ass off like a sucker.

I don't have to call him. He's here.

Chess was out. Free. I thought about running down to the front door and locking it, as if that would do any good. A vision of Chess with a fire ax chopping down the balsa wood door.

Oh, that's just swell. Is he taking his meds?

We both take our pills at the same time in the morning.

If you don't mind, I'll start carrying a tazer with me. Just in case.

You're too hard on your brother. He's your twin. You two should be closer.

If we felt each other's pain, I'd be hitting myself in the ass with a board all the live-long day. A board with a nail in it.

That's a terrible thing to say.

Yes it is.

There was always something wrong with my brother, some little kernel of not-right. Chess knew it. And he knew that whatever was wrong with him didn't apply to me.

Being a twin is supposed to mean never being alone. We dressed alike, were crammed into the same room, shared the same filthy little strings of DNA, but were always, both of us,

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alone. I took it better than Chess. Chess was twitchy and filled with violent fury. I was merely twitchy.

Stop being afraid of me! Chess shouted one time, when we were little. We were in a vast, dandelion-covered field near our house in Nebraska. Chess had come outside to play Red Rover with the neighborhood children. I was part of the group. They all stopped, the children, stunned voiceless in the presence of Chess' rage.

I gotta go, an undersized kid said. He had the look of a boy with a career in accounting in his future. He wanted to become that accountant. He ran off.

I'll show you, Chess said to me. He practically whispered it, but the other kids heard and involuntarily backed off a step. Then, voluntarily, they peeled away one-by-one until only Chess and I stood in the field. Chess stood close enough for me to feel the anger pouring out of him as heat. He looked everywhere but my eyes.

You, he finally said, staring, trying to will a hole in my forehead, my cheek-bones, my chin. Chess turned on his heel and stalked off, leaving me standing alone in the field.

By the time the family moved to Florida, I had given up on the idea of friendship, mostly.

Hello, big brother, Chess said through the receiver.

The sickly mother had surrendered the phone to him.

I was older by ten minutes. If you believed the reports.

So you beat up a dying old lady and snatched the phone away from her, I said. Good for you. Who needs a lawyer when you have 'not guilty by reason of insanity' in your back pocket?

She waved me over and handed me the phone, he said. Did you know she had the movers bring my weights over from, um, the old house? I'm setting them up in the garage.

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That's comforting. When you stop taking your pills, you'll be twice as hard to restrain. How's your double in the red universe doing? Still taking all your vacation days?

Look, I'm trying to be, err, uh. Quit it. This is what you wanted, isn't it? For me to sit with Mom until she croaks?

Okay. Calm down. It's ten after four in the morning and you haven't had your pills yet.

It's an all-night party over at the Dugan Compound, I thought.

Fuck you, Chess said, in an almost civil tone.

The phone clicked dead. I stared at the phone a moment, and then hung up. They didn't even ask where I was. Not interested, I guessed.

Quiet out there! one of the angry boarders shouted through a closed door.

I staggered down the stairs to the big, empty living room and then into the big empty kitchen. I turned on a tiny TV set bolted to the underside of a kitchen cabinet and set the volume to low.

On the last half-hour of the network overnight news, the young, white-haired anchor was leading the crew and his blonde co-anchor in singing, "The Late Night News Polka." They were accompanied by a ruddy, toothless Bavarian in lederhosen playing an accordion. He'd descended from the ceiling, suspended by wires.

When did crazy become the new black? I wondered aloud.

A little later, in a runway-style segment with a New Order song pounding in the background, the newscasters showed off the Army's latest uniform – much different from what I had been wearing until recently. The new uni looked like a Waffen SS uniform topped off with a Girl Scout beanie.

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All they needed to complete the look was a pair of jack-boots, a riding crop, a monocle and a box of lemon pastry cremes to sell door-to-door.

6.

BATTLE BATTLE

The Bun's mom was the first downstairs.

How are you this morning, sunshine? she asked me.

I kind of jolted from the greeting.

I said fine. I'm fine. How're you?

In my family, sunshine is considered an insult. As in: You know why I call you 'sunshine'? 'Cause you're so bright. My father the salesman used it to secretly insult customers.

The Bun's mom, Sandra. Sandra, Sandra, Sandra. I'm not good with names. Sandra started making quick oatmeal in a pot. I grew up with the other kind, the not-so-quick. Steel-cut oats. Which take forever to cook, but smell heavenly. Would you mind making some toast? she asked me. I've forgotten your name. I'm sorry.

I'm Joe, I said.

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Joe, would you mind?

No problem, I said. She had an industrial toaster. In basic training, which seemed like forever ago, I'd seen one. Thanks to contractors, out in the real Army no one sees food production up close. No soldiers, anyway. I fired up the toaster, which was about the size of a 19-inch tube TV, and fed the white bread in the top. It came plopping out below a minute later. I buttered each slice with Country Crock and cut them all into triangles. I felt useful for the first time in maybe in year—a productive, producing citizen.

The boarders came shuffling down the stairs, growling and groaning. Hard labor followed by hard drinking and a hang-over.

Sandra was cooking scrambled eggs on an industrial griddle, a heated, two-by-two metal sheet. Coffee was brewing. The kitchen was a-buzz with industrial grade breakfast manufacture.

Did you guys install all these restaurant tools? I asked her. Or did the place come like this?

The place has been in my family since about 1900, Sandra said. I had all this stuff installed years ago.

It couldn't have been cheap, I said.

It wasn't, she said, scraping individual clumps of eggs onto a succession of plates. The pot of oatmeal was already on the table, already being consumed. The two of us delivered the plates to each man along with the platter of toast I'd created. She dug a jar of cherry preserves out of the refrigerator and put that on the table, too. The men groaned and slurped coffee and chewed down the food. They grabbed at it and shoved it in their mouths. Without thanks, one by one, they stood up and shuffled out the door.

I helped Sandra clean up. I bused the table. She washed and I dried. I scrubbed off the grill with a grill brick. When we were finished, we sat together at the table drinking the dregs from the bottom of the coffee pots.

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I was a labor lawyer, she said to me. Long time ago.

Ah, I said.

It's a long story, she said.

Oh? I went.

I should tell it to you sometime, she said.

Indeed, I said.

What brings you to Smithville? she asked.

Kenny, I said. I was hitchhiking.

You don't seem the type, she said.

I'm not, I said. Not usually.

Escaping?

Exactly.

From an old life?

That's it.

That you didn't want anymore?

Roger that.

What?

I mean, 'In a nutshell.'

Kenny and the Bun came down hand-in-hand. I looked at her longingly, just for a moment, and then retreated behind myself.

Mom and Joe are old pals already, the Bun said.

I feel left out, Kenny said. He gave the Bun's hand a little squeeze.

High school sweethearts, Sandra said. Look at them. She took another sip of her coffee and winced.

I thought you weren't from around here, I said to Kenny. He sat down at the table with us. The Bun went over to the coffee machine and started up a fresh pot.

I'm not. Not originally. My parents are from Virginia. We moved here when I was fourteen, he said. My parents moved

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back to Virginia last year. Now I've moved back here. I'm getting the band back together.

We're on a mission from God, said the Bun, pouring herself and Kenny each a cup.

Don't you blaspheme in here! said Kenny.

The three of them were laughing. I didn't get it.

I excused myself and climbed back upstairs to my room, gathered some less stinky clothes, and then back down to my designated latrine. I was road funky. I took a shower and borrowed someone else's shampoo. I brushed my teeth using a dab of toothpaste on my index finger. I shaved with a borrowed razor. The curve between my chin and neck was shotgunned with blood. I borrowed someone's styptic pencil. I dabbed off the blood with a few sheets of toilet paper. I took a big, proud American shit. Let the Europeans try to catch up with that one. C'mon China, Japan. What's the matter? Can't compete? I dressed and combed my hair with my fingers. I wadded up my clothes and carried them back to my attic room, tossed them in a corner.

Kenny was waiting for me at the bottom of my ladder. Ready to go? he asked.

Why not? I could worry about how I'd get to work later. Maybe it was within walking distance.

As it happened, it was about a mile and a half away, at the corner of Lincoln and Hartranft.

Hey, Kenny, the girl at the security desk said. You back?

Evidently, Kenny said.

How best to describe a Buy and Bye? It consists of mountains of stuff. It is full of things you don't really need, much of it not in great condition, but every item is priced in such a way that you may not be able to help yourself buying it. Up front, to our right, there was a shopping cart area featuring traditional basket-type carts and flatbeds. There was a racetrack with gondolas of low-priced crap stationed across it. The racetrack is a long circle

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that you follow to more stuff. Eventually you end up back at the registers, which were to our left.

Who's your friend? the girl at the security desk asked. She was thin with needy eyes and a Prince Valiant haircut fitted atop her bean-shaped head. She wore the standard Buy and Bye uniform: Yellow golf shirt, khaki pants, black belt and black sneakers. Her uniform shirt had an embroidered simulation of a policeman's badge sewn on the front.

Smokin' Joe Dugan, Kenny said, gesturing grandly. Meet Becky.

Where you from, Joe? Becky asked.

She may be flirting with me, I thought. Or maybe I'm an ass. Florida, I said.

You don't sound like you're from Florida, she said.

Yeah. I get that a lot.

Where's Randy? Kenny asked.

Becky looked down at her control panel. She fiddled with a joystick. Bingo, she said. Electronics.

Let's go, Kenny said to me.

See you later, I said to Becky.

Not before I see you, she said, tapping the control panel.

Actually, it was Randi with an i. She was counting USB cables in an aisle marked Overstock! Look who the cat dragged in, she said.

What's the manager of the store doing counting cables? Kenny asked.

I'm not the manager anymore, she said. I'm the head of product process now.

What happened?

Nothing happened, she said testily.

Okay, Kenny said.

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Don't be a problem child, she said. Are you back? She was a stocky woman with a hard face. She reminded me of a sergeant major I'd once known.

Not officially, Kenny said. This is Joe.

Need a job, Joe? Randi asked.

I guess so, I said.

You don't sound so sure, she said.

Yes, sergeant major! I need a job, sergeant major! Hoo-ah, airborne all the way!

Yes, I said. I need a job.

Terrific, she said.

But it didn't turn out to be that easy.

First we walked to the back wall of the store, where a bank of computers were lined up under signs featuring happy youngsters, wearing the yellow golf shirts, leaping into the air. In one of the signs, a girl I assumed to be a representative of Hispanics was doing the splits in midair, her face frozen forever in a rictus of pure fun-ola.

I sat down at a computer. Cracked my knuckles. First came the easy questions. Name, date of birth, social security number. I could have told them my last weapon number, on my M-4 carbine, if they'd asked: 1979183. Then came the second part of the test, a modified Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory. I'd read about this test in *The Psychosocial Facets of Civil Affairs*, a book that a lieutenant had loaned me back in Iraq. He thought I'd seemed a bit smarter than the rest. At least that's the way he'd presented the book to me after morning formation, after chow at our luxurious dining facility with a 50-inch projection TV in the background telling us how much ordinary Americans loved us, especially schoolchildren with darling speech impediments.

I like to take charge, the computer stated. I could strenuously agree, or strenuously disagree, or there were two in the

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middle. Stealing is wrong, was another question. I am comfortable in large groups. Working long hours does not bother me.

According to the book, there were many cruel assessments of my character available to the computer including, but not limited to, Lack of Ego Mastery, Defective Inhibition, Alienation (Self and Others), and Denial of Social Anxiety. Thanks to The Psychosocial Facets of Civil Affairs I knew what social type the computer was looking for: A relentlessly cheerful, extroverted, finger-pointing moralist. As long as I remained consistent over the course of the 150 or so questions, most of which were repeated over and over, they would have their chatty-churchy, back-slapping ratfink.

At the end of the test, a glowing pack of multiethnic people waved to me. A few moments later, an insistent voice over the intercom beamed me to the customer service desk, which was in the front of the store. Kenny still wasn't finished. Meet me by the security desk after they hire you, Kenny said, looking up at me. I saw that he was giving the exact opposite answers I had given, the ones I would have given if I'd been honest.

At the customer service desk, a chatty-churchy gal with no hips and cornsilk hair stood waiting for me. Joe? she went. Her name-tag announced her as being Hannah.

Yes, ma'am, I said.

Let's go over to the furniture department, she said. A tiny crucifix hung in her cleavage, dangling there like a dare. Go on, Joe, tiny pewter Jesus seemed to say. Look at her jugs. They're right here, dude, to my left and right. And he pointed them out with his tacked hands.

I observed her from the rear as I followed her down the racetrack. Nothing going on there. No ass. Nothing. Like a lot of women these days, she'd starved herself into having the build of a teenaged boy. I looked around the store as we walked. Screams of electronic death came from the video-game department. A bored sales dude stood watching us march past, a video-game controller in his hand. He looked me in the eye. Run! he

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mouthed at me. Then he busted out a grin and went back to engaging the virtual enemy.

Madonna's chipmunk voice trilled out of the car audio department. Mew-zic, repeated the voice over and over as the bass speakers thumpity-thumped. A lot of the store seemed empty.

Hannah, who'd never introduced herself, sat down in a simulated office on an office chair with a price tag hanging off the headrest (\$149.99 marked down to \$79.78... Lowest Price!), behind a simulated wood desk with a price tag in a plastic picture holder (\$299.99 marked down to \$119.99... Lowest Price!). I sat in a green lawn chair in front of the desk. She had a printout of my psychological assessment and my typed-in resume that had only one job listed. Tiny freckles dotted her face and neck and down where Jesus was still pointing out her tits. Hey Joe! he went. There's one and there's the other one. Take a peek-a-boo. I dare you.

I smiled and kept my eyes up, making occasional eye contact.

Reading upside down, I saw the list of questions she was supposed to ask me and their preferred answers. When she read the questions out loud to me, I read the answers. I'd look up a moment before she did. When her eyes went back down to the page to make sure I was giving the correct answer, I'd sneak a peek down there to make sure that I was giving the correct answer, but not in the exact same words.

Q: Why did you pick retail?

A: I like interacting with people.

Q: Why did you choose Buy and Bye?

A: My family has always shopped at Buy and Bye. Everyone here is friendly and helpful.

I glanced at her tits. They were round and small, like a pair of ripe peaches. The air conditioning was turned up to max volume, so a tiny pair of nipples poked out through the bra and

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60/40 cotton/polyester blend uniform shirt. It was fairly quick. She didn't catch me, I believed.

After question-and-answer time, she flipped through my resume. Why'd you leave the Army? she asked.

I'd been warned by counselors in my TAP class at Walter Reed to be careful when answering this question. For instance, saying that you're sick of witnessing death and dismemberment on a daily basis may lead a civilian employer to believe that you're a nutjob who'll come in and shoot all your co-workers. Telling them that I was medically discharged would have the same effect.

I was ready for a change, I said.

Under awards and honors, you put down 'Silver Star,' she said. Is that a medal or something?

Yes, I said.

What did you get it for?

Um, I went.

That's okay, she said. It's all right if you don't want to talk about it.

Actually, I was having problems remembering the rationale behind the Silver Star. I'd read the citation once at Walter Reed before mailing it home to Florida, where I was sure it would be shoved in a drawer by my mother.

The medal itself fetched \$75 at the Army-Navy store in Ohio. The scruffy, potbellied dude behind the counter asked, You sure you want to sell this, man?

Yeah, I said. How much?

Hannah said, Thank you for protecting my family and fighting for my freedom.

Sure, I said. No problem.

We shook hands over the discounted desk.

She stood up. I stood up.

Follow me, she said.

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I followed her. We wandered through the store again. Buy and Buy. How can I explain my disgust? I can't. Honest people work there. Poor people spend their money there. But something about the place strikes at my very core.

Down a short, narrow corridor I followed her. On the right were two bathroom doors. Between them, a water fountain. A sign on the wall said, No unpurchased merchandise in the bathrooms, please. At the end of the corridor was a door marked Employees Only! On the left was a door marked Private. We went through the door on the left.

Behind the door was a small, messy conference room that doubled as an office, with plastic and chrome chairs stacked here and there, a white board on the wall marked up with metrics and other business gobbledegook, a thrice-marked-down refrigerator pilfered from the sales floor burred in the corner, a fold-up conference table with a few stacking chairs arranged around it, and a smaller folding table with a computer a-top it and the manager of the store sitting in front of the computer, swearing. Cocksucker, he went, elbows astride the keyboard, knuckles propping up cheeks, glaring into the screen.

Doug? Hannah went.

Huh? he went, his back to us.

I have Joseph Dugan here, she said.

Who?

Potential new hire.

Oh, Doug went. He turned around to look at us. Right. For a moment, his face was blank. In a blink, it blazed with seemingly authentic cheer. My father could do that. I've always found it chilling.

Doug stood up and walked over. He was rail-thin, a few inches taller than I am, probably early forties. He made immediate eye contact and held it. We shook hands. Hannah handed him the paperwork. He took it without taking his eyes off me.

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Cop a squat, Mr. Dugan, he said, waving his hand in the general direction of the big table.

I walked to the other side and sat down, where I was treated to another whiteboard. This one had a question posed on it: Where is our mystic caribou? After reading that, I had the Pixies song 'Caribou' stuck in my head.

How are you today? Doug asked.

Caribooooo, howled Black Francis in my skull.

Outstanding, sir, I said.

Outstanding, huh?

Yes, sir.

He flipped through the paperwork. Jesus. Six years in today's Army, he muttered.

Yes, sir, I said.

Call me, 'Doug,' he said.

Yes, I said, brain re-calibrating, Doug.

So, I assume... He paused. Silver Star?

That fucking computer had to ask for awards. I should have kept it to myself. Permission to speak?

Sure.

Don't pay attention to those medals. The Army gives them out like candy.

I like your modesty, Joe. May I call you 'Joe'?

Sure thing, Doug. I realized I was sitting at the position of attention. I relaxed and sat back in the uncomfortable plastic chair.

Let me tell you a story, Doug said. A few years ago I was let go by Sudbury's. If you're unfamiliar with them, they went into bankruptcy. Shut down a ton of stores. Then they went out of business.

It was the place with the little clipboards, I said, remembering. We had one in Sarasota. You looked through glass at what you wanted and wrote down the numbers on a clipboard.

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After you paid for it, the stuff would come rolling out of a little chute, like luggage at the airport. It was kind of neat.

Yeah, and Buy and Bye opened up next door to every Sudbury's and out-priced us, Doug said a little bitterly.

Oh, yeah. I remembered the Buy and Bye opening up in the strip mall in Sarasota across the street from Sudbury's. Then, kaputski. The sedate and well-ordered universe of Sudbury's was no match for the flash and low prices of Buy and Bye.

Doug said, I'd worked for them for 17 years by that time. Suddenly, it was all gone, along with my pension and stock options. A dark cloud raced across his face. Then the sunshine reappeared. I thought, this is my opportunity to get out of retail. I can leave. I'm free. I went to a job counselor and asked him what I could do instead of retail. You know what he told me?

He paused. This was the interactive portion of the interview.

No, I said.

He told me that if I wanted to feed and clothe and provide shelter for my family, I'd better go right back into retail. He smiled that salesman's smile. And here I am.

I'm sorry.

I'm supposed to ask you a bunch of questions. The computer generates them. He tapped the papers in front of him. You got a Social Security card and a picture I.D.?

Yes, I said.

Joseph Dugan, I am offering you a part-time, seasonal, contract position at Buy and Bye at the rate of \$8.50 an hour. Do you accept?

I accept, I said.

Welcome aboard, he said.

We shook hands.

I filled out a thick stack of paperwork in the adjoining break room. Yellow-shirted people flitted in and out, standing in

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front of the candy machine and standing in front of the pop machine. There was a long coat-rack along the wall, cardtables and cardtable chairs, a cheap sofa with the stuffing squirting out here and there and a 42-inch TV set blaring out its nonsense from the far wall.

A news channel was on. In the upper right corner, an America flag flapped. A stock ticker pushed prices relentlessly across the bottom. Above the stock ticker, another ticker summarized what the man on screen was saying. A big head, who claimed he was the last angry man in America, was blathering on and on about how many child molesters there are in the world and how the liberals are doing nothing to stop them. On the lower third of the screen: **FACT: MORE CHILD MOLESTERS THAN EVER.** The liberals were in control of everything according to the man and they were shoving civilization down a rocky cliff where we would crumble into nothing. And then the terrorists would win.

A commercial came on for *Girls Gone Wild*, which featured teenaged girls getting drunk and flashing their perky little breasts for fun. Little *Girls Gone Wild* logos popped up in strategic places and protected viewers from the wild girl nipples while the girls smirked sleepily. After that came a commercial suggesting that viewers who had any one of a number of vague symptoms listed on screen should consult their doctor and ask for a certain brand of pills. One of the symptoms was **Loss of Productivity at Work.**

The show popped back on and the last angry man in America continued shouting. Another head popped up in its own window. The angry man thanked him for coming and then, after a pause, shouted at him.

Kenny sat down next to me. You're not going to get your paperwork done, Kenny noticed.

Oh shit, I got back to work.

Mostly what I was doing was signing my name to allow the company to test my urine whenever they wanted, agreeing

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that I was hired on a contract basis and could be fired for no reason whatsoever, and agreeing that the company could look into my credit history. I signed more paperwork there than when I joined the Army.

I went back into the office where Doug was swearing at the computer. Oh, he went, spinning round, his face snapping back into salesman mode. Hey! He took the papers from me. How 'bout those I.D.s, then?

I pulled out my Florida drivers license and Social Security card.

Oh, he went. Out of state license.

How about this, then, I said, and pulled out my blue military ID. DUGAN, JOSEPH, SSG, USA-RET.

I guess that'll do, he said. He left the room with them. I sat looking at the posters on the walls. In one, a man in a superhero costume was lassoing another man with a skien of Saran Wrap. The Saran Wrapped Man was dressed as a ninja. In the explanation below, I found out that the superhero was The Shrink Wrapper! and he stopped shrink, their euphemism for theft.

A kid in a yellow shirt came in. Hey, he went. New hire?

Yeah, I said.

Shrink Wrapper, huh?

I guess, I said.

Pretty gay, he observed. Doug around?

He's photocopying my ID, I said.

Cool, he said. He shoved his hands in his pockets and whistled unsweetly. He stopped and glared at a chart across the room. No payout, he said.

No payout?

None. Zip. Nada, he said. Having made his point, he took his hands out of his pockets and left.

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Doug came back a few minutes later. Up close, I noticed that he seemed to have a lot of dried skin flaking off him. He smiled sickly. Here you go, he said, handing me back my IDs.

I put them back in my wallet and shoved it in my front pocket.

Come back on Saturday at 11 a.m., he said. He shook my hand. And thank you for protecting my family and the freedom of this great land of ours.

You're welcome, I said.

Becky the security guard and I stood at the front of the store together wordlessly. I was waiting for Kenny. She was watching a group of migrant workers shop via the hidden camera in the ceiling above them.

It's a little warm to be wearing that big coat, Mr. Mexican, she said, joysticking the camera around and zooming in on him.

Mr. Mexican and his wife were staring and staring at the rows of products. Their kids were on camera two, watching Madagascar on a big screen TV in the home theater department.

Isn't that racial profiling? I asked her. I mean, we're not supposed to do that here in the United States.

Without taking her eyes off the screen, she thumbed out the door. Out there is the United States, Mr. Moralist, she said. Once you cross through these doors, you're in Buy and Bye land.

Then Mr. Mexican reached over to a peghook and slipped a plastic bubble of product into his big coat.

Gotcha, Becky said. She pushed a button on her control panel. She picked up a walkie-talkie and said, Three-Five-Zero, Go. Two security guys descended upon the couple, grabbing them by the elbows. Most days, she said, I'll stand here for the full eight hours without anything happening. My God, it's boring.

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We looked at each other, attempting to measure the other's level of interest, or lack thereof. I tried smiling at her, well aware that my smile these days lacked a certain élan. She smiled back at me. She wasn't exactly filled with élan herself.

So where are you going to work? she asked.

The warehouse, I think, I said. It wasn't discussed during the interview, actually, but that's where I'd applied.

Cool, she said. We're both part of the same product process team. She held up her frail hands to demonstrate, lacing her knobby fingers in the space between us. Thank God she didn't mention Synergy, another word I'd seen over and over in Army theory books. Alignment was another oft-used word.

Kenny appeared. Ready to go?

Yes, I said. See you later, Becky.

She smiled, almost sweetly. We passed through the automatic sliding glass doors and back out into the United States of America.

Up above, seagulls whirled and swooped above the parking lot. Where do they come from? I asked Kenny, looking up at them. There isn't an ocean for thousands of miles.

The lot chickens? Kenny went. I don't know. Lake Michigan?

Exsanguinate.

This is what my shrink at Walter Reed told me came rattling out of my mouth over and over when my dinged-up corpus was delivered to Landstuhl Army Hospital in Germany. I'd survived the golden hour, the hour after I'd been blown up by an IED. Then I was magically swept out of good ol' Iraq.

So I'd been patched up and flown out of Iraq before I knew what hit me.

I was in Landstuhl, in that wretched old Army hospital, rolling down a corridor watching the acoustic tiles above me. Here a yellow stain, there a yellow stain. Florescent lighting, yellow stain. The hospital was oozing.

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And me: Ek-SANG-win-ate! Ek-SANG-win-ate!

A little prick of something to calm me down, but still more: Ek-SANG-win-ate! Ek-SANG-win-ate!

I bring this up because I couldn't stop saying over and over, Lot chickens. We were in Kenny's van, heading back to the boarding house.

Kenny: What?

Me: Lot chickens!

Kenny: Yeah. Funny.

Me: Lot chickens. Lot chickens. Lot chickens.

Kenny: Yeah. I get it. It's not that funny.

Me: Lot, lot, lot. Chickens, chickens, chickens.

He pulled the van over. What the fuck, dude?

Sorry, I said. I could feel it bubbling up, lot chickens.

Don't say it, he said.

Erg! I went. I bit the inside of my mouth—crunch—bloody. I closed my eyes. This is what I'd always feared. Here it was, finally happening. I breathed in and out. I opened my eyes.

Kenny was giving me an unusual look.

Sorry, I said.

Dude, he said.

Sorry, I said. Bloody, blood-blood in my mouth.

He put the van in gear and away we went.

When we got back to the boarding house, I apologized to Kenny and strode quickly through the kitchen door, past the Bun and her mother sitting at the kitchen table.

How'd it go? the Bun asked.

I nodded my head yes. To open my mouth – that would have been taking the risk of answering with lot chickens.

I climbed the stairs, up and up and up, to my little room. I pulled the stairs to the attic down with the cord, climbed them, and tried to yank them back up with me. I failed. I lay on my bed, both hands over my mouth. I was afraid and angry.

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7.

TIP YOUR WAITRESS

Two years before I joined the Army, and two-and-a-half years before Chess had gone so obviously insane that my mother had no choice but to sign the commitment papers, my father took his three kids in the family truckster over to the Ringling Museum of Art to tell us all about how he was leaving Mom.

And us, for that matter.

When we walked in the museum's front door, through the glass behind the ticket counter we could see the open courtyard.

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The museum formed a big U around it. A bronze cast of Michaelangelo's David stood in the elements with his dick hanging out. My father paid for our tickets and we made our way out there.

My father wasn't one for the arts, though he had a rough appreciation of Andy Warhol's work, for the swindling aspect of it.

He brought us there because the museum had guards. If Chess took a swing at him, he had a small army of guards that would tackle his enraged son. He sat us down on a bench out in the courtyard near a sculpture of a woman getting fucked by a swan and stood in front of us, all nervous and twitchy, wringing his hands and trying out his salesman's smile. My father had an unshakable faith in his ability to convince anyone of anything, save his family, to whom he'd preached the wisdom of not being the sucker. Now he had to make us suckers as his final gesture as head of household.

So how are you kids doing today? he asked us.

Tip your waitress, Chess said. His hand tap-tap-tapped on his knee, which was rapidly popping up and down. We were 17, identical twins who didn't look a damn thing like each other, who couldn't stand the sight of each other.

My hands were laced, shoved between my thighs, my head down, staring at my Doc Martens. I'd done my hair up like Morrissey and dressed like him.

What's going on? Magda asked. She was so tiny then. My mother did her hair in rag curls. Her feet swung, not reaching the ground, patton-leather Mary Janes gleaming in the hellish Florida sun. In high school, she became an artist, painting portraits of circus people and illustrating homemade children's books on the lives of the saints.

This is it, isn't it? Chess said. You're leaving.

He slowly rose to his feet. My father was not a big man. Guile, craft and wit were his weapons.

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We were about 5-foot-11 by that time. I was thin. Chess was ripped. He spent his afternoons mowing lawns and lifting weights that he'd bought with the lawn money.

While I lounged around reading and trying to listen to the Smiths in our room, I could hear Chess in the adjacent garage growling and clanking his cast-iron weights, a boombox blasting out CD's full of Black Flag and the Angry Samoans and Minor Threat, loud music from an earlier, angrier time. A picture of Henry Rollins in full fury, his eyes blazing and neck tendons popped out, adorned the underside of my bunk so that Rollins would be the first thing Chess saw when he woke up in the morning.

Now, son, my father said, his hands raised up, pasty palms out. He was afraid. We were all afraid of Chess, except for Magda. She admired him.

C'mon old man, let's hear it, Chess said. Shine us on. He was inches from the father, his fists balled up like he was going to knock his teeth down his throat.

I'm your father, he said pleadingly, half in a whisper.

Chess was confused for a moment. He stepped around my father like he was a pile of dogshit and stomped over to the vulgar statue and kicked it. If he hadn't had steel-toed work boots on, he'd have broken his toes. He leapt back from the statue, like the statue had attacked him instead of the other way around.

Go to hell! he shouted at my father, and ran off.

My father stood frozen and sweating, staring off toward Chess as he flew out of the courtyard.

I stood up and took my sister by the hand. We'll be by the car, I said.

My father pulled a wad of keys out of his pocket and handed them to me. I shoved them in my pocket with my spare hand.

Get it cooled down, my father said.

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I felt sweating drizzling down my back. My father walked in the direction of where Chess had run. He sped up to a trot and disappeared around a corner.

You want to see some paintings? I asked my sister.

What's happening? Magda asked.

Remember that lady we saw him with at his office? I asked her.

Yeah, Magda said.

He's taking her with him, I said. Now he'll start a family with her, just like he started a family with Mom after he left the lady he was married to in Ohio. And he'll forget Mom and us the same as he forgot the lady in Ohio and those kids.

You're lying! Magda said. But she knew.

Nobody likes the truth, I said. That's how Dad makes a living. He tells people what they prefer to hear rather than what they should hear. You want to take the car and get some ice cream? We can go to the mall, too.

Daddy'll get mad, Magda said.

Who gives a shit? I said.

Yeah, Magda said. Who gives a shit?

I heard the clomps. Up the stairs they came, clompity-clomp. Closer, closer. They stopped down below my attic room. You okay? the Bun's voice asked.

I took my hands off my mouth. Yes, I replied.

Can I come up?

Sure, I said. I sat up in bed.

The black curls bounced, and then the rest of her appeared. She was wearing a skirt with flowers all over it and a Lollapalooza 1995 t-shirt, white sneakers with little black skulls hand-drawn all over them. I saw the little window reflected in her glasses, saw a bird staring in. When I turned my head to look out the window, the bird was gone. Maybe the bird was never there. There's no telling.

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She had a well-thumbed little book in her hand. It had no cover on it.

I swung my feet over the side of the bed.

She sat down next to me. Kenny told me what happened. In the van, I mean.

Nothing much happened.

You're just a little tired. We'll get you a regular room as soon as one of our hoboes takes off. They leave all the time.

Thanks, I said.

You'll get more sleep in a regular room, she said. She slipped off her sneakers. I looked at her tattoos. On one foot was a metronome. On the other was a painter's palette. She noticed I was looking and held up her feet, curling the toes. The metronome is for my grandfather. He tuned pianos. The painter's palette is for my grandmother.

They're very pretty, I said. I blushed.

Thank you, she said.

And I blushed again. I laced my hands and shoved them between my squeezed-together thighs.

So you're okay? she asked.

Sure, I said. Sure thing. Just a little tired.

She set the book next to me, in-between us. Are you a praying man, Joe?

I was raised Catholic, I said. So I'm a guilty man. The only reason my mother allowed herself to marry my father was that his first marriage was not in a church, so it didn't count.

This was my grandmother's prayer book, she said. I figured since you're living in her studio, you might want to get to know her a little better. She read this book every day.

I pulled my hands out from between my thighs and picked the book up. The cover had fallen off years, maybe decades, ago. I opened it up. My Prayer Book – Happiness in Goodness – Reflections, Prayers, Counsels and Devotions by Rev. J. X. Lasance. On the facing page was a manger scene with the

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caption: Jesus, Mary and Joseph, I give you my heart and soul – 100 days indulgence. Pius VII. I fanned through the book. Somebody had used prayer cards to mark pages. All those dead people, now bookmarks.

My forehead itched. I reached up and scratched it.

Hold still, said the Bun. She scooted next to me. I could feel her breath on my neck. I looked at her knees. Some knees! She reached up and pinched a shiny piece of shrapnel out of my forehead. Here you go, she said. She placed it on top of the book in my hands.

Porcelain blue eyes. Little pink mouth. The dye flat-black in her curly, curly hair. Little wisps of ginger hair around her temples. I stood up suddenly. The book slapped on the floor. I had an erection. I sat back down as she stood up. She bent over and picked up the book. She placed the book back in my trembling hands, and then leaned over and kissed my forehead.

Oh, God, I whispered, involuntarily.

Please come down to dinner? she said, standing up straight. There's hardly anything to you.

I will, I said. My chest hurt.

She slipped her feet into her sneakers, toed them into place. Take a little nap, she said. I'll shut the door behind me. She clomped down the stairs. A moment later, the stairs came up into the attic with a thump.

I opened the book at random. My God, I firmly believe that Thou are everywhere and seest all things, I read. The bird was back, chirping in my little circular window.

I don't care if Thou are watching, Big Guy, I said. I covet her, and you know it. I covet. That sin's mortal, I believe. My chest tightened with a mixture of guilt and... It was not lust. It was something better. It was... it was. I read:

Keep our life all spotless,
Make our way secure,
Till we find in Jesus,

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Joy forevermore.

I had most of a week to kill, so I took walks around Smithville. The township was laid out on a grid, so it was very hard to get lost, though I tried. Every route I took ended up taking me back to where I started, eventually. I was out for hours a day, tromping up and down the streets and avenues. I was on patrol, vigilant.

One day, I found a department store and bought two pairs of pants, two packets of underwear, two packets of socks and five pocket t-shirts. I took them all home and washed them in the laundry room in the basement while reading grandma's prayer book.

One day, a couple of guys in a pickup truck slowed down and shouted, Faggot! at me. I laughed in a way I had not in a very long time. It was the horseshit bravado with which they delivered the line. What a strange world, I thought. What a wonderful world. Here I am at home in the world. Here I am. You really don't know that you're really home until somebody calls you a faggot.

On another day, a loose Border Collie trotted up to me, sniffed me, peed on a tree, followed me for half a block and returned home, low crawling under a wooden fence.

North-South streets were Lincoln, Jefferson, Monroe, Fillmore, Jackson, Pierce, Buchanan... Okay. Got it. Easy one: Presidents.

East-West avenues were Thruston, Hartranft, Abercrombie, Davis.... didn't get it. I found the public library and went in to ask. It was a tiny library, one of those that Carnegie had built at the end of the 19th century and had named after himself. He'd clawed his way to the top of the American pile in the most merciless fashion possible and then gave all his money away. The girl at the information desk didn't know about the East-West streets. She summoned another librarian, who looked at me as if I'd soiled myself. But she didn't know either. The way they were

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acting, I thought that one or both of them might summon the police, so I left. On the steps outside, an elderly woman called to me from the door. Sir!

Yes, ma'am.

The names! she shouted, breathlessly. They're all Civil War generals!

Thank you, ma'am.

I continued walking.

I stopped going downstairs for dinner. The old men disgusted me, and I did not want to be disgusted by them. And the Bun scared me. My meals consisted of things I bought while on patrol. All I had to eat one day was an apple and a peanut-butter cup.

But you can't avoid the Bun forever.

The Bun came tromping up the stairs. Hello, attic person! she shouted up to me.

The stairs were up in the ceiling with me. I'd found a hook up there that came in handy for that. I was in the middle of my calisthenics, doing the windmill. I stopped, my left hand on my right foot. Yes?

Mind if I come up?

No problem, I said.

She pulled down the stairs and climbed up until just her head was showing. Feel like a movie?

At a movie theater?

What are you doing? she asked me, noticing my position.

Recover, I told myself and stood up straight. Exercising.

Yes, at a movie theater. A drive-in theater.

I didn't even know that they still existed, I said.

They do. We live in the Land of Quaint. We're all piling in Kenny's van and going. I won't let you say no.

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Okay, I said, surprising myself. What I meant to say was no.

Meet you downstairs in five minutes. And her head disappeared.

I changed my tee-shirt, wiping my pits off with the old one. I hadn't shaved in a week. It felt good. I no longer was convinced, upon waking up in the morning, that I'd missed formation.

The pussy wagon was in full effect. Kenny had taken it somewhere to be detailed and the poor old thing was gleaming with wax on the outside and perfumed with vanilla-scented spray on the inside.

Also on the inside was Becky the security guard. She was wearing a skirt and a Simple Plan tee-shirt and black Chucks. The pussy wagon had no back seats, so I sat on the floor next to her, both our backs leaning against the carpeted wall. The same carpeting went from floor to ceiling. It was, if I hadn't mentioned it before, hideously purple. Kool Aid purple. Black-light poster purple.

I made a show of looking around as Kenny slid the side door shut, bang. Just us kids, huh?

Becky looked at her feet. Yup.

The Bun craned her head around and peered over her shoulder at us from her captain's chair. Hang on, she said. Kenny's not much of a driver.

You don't have to tell me, I said. I told Becky how Kenny and I met.

He was in the army, the Bun added.

Oh, wow, Becky said. Her cousin was in the army. She told me his name, which I instantly forgot.

Nope. Never ran into him, I said.

He died, she said.

I'm sorry, I said.

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The cargo plane he was in crashlanded in New Jersey. And then, Becky had to say it, as everyone seemed to be compelled to say it: Thank you for protecting my freedom and my family.

You're welcome, I said. All this gratitude.

We were heading down a two-lane blacktop through a wooded area, with occasional fields of corn. Tipped over garbage can on the side of the road. I closed my eyes. Not an IED. It is not. It is not. Not. I am in America, which does not have such things. Someone called me a faggot the other day, ergo I am in America. Mens sana in corpore sano.

You're trembling, Becky pointed out. And you're talking all foreign. Are you having flashbacks or something?

I remembered what my shrink had told me, about fitting in and being normal and all that shit. Didn't want anyone to think I was going to go shoot up the Buy and Bye. I opened my eyes. I looked up, not down. Sunlight pouring through leaves turning gold and orange. I'm fine, I said. I felt fine. The drive-in, huh? We'd had two in Sarasota when I was a little kid. One became a medical park, the other a high-rise retiree condo complex.

It's new, the Bun said.

They're coming back into style, Kenny said.

Pretty soon, we were queued up outside, the tenth vehicle in line. I got on my knees between the two front seats. We inched forward.

I'll pay, I said.

It's okay, Kenny said. The Bun has it covered. She's loaded.

I work two jobs and go to school, the Bun said. I'd hardly call that 'loaded.'

What do you do? I asked.

She glared at Kenny, who shrunk a little in his seat. I guess he was supposed to have talked non-stop about her the

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whole way over from Virginia. He didn't even mention that he had a girlfriend. Mostly, he talked about his band.

The Bun worked at the Smithville Journal as a copy editor and a teen beat reporter, she said. She walked dogs for cash, \$12 per twenty-minute walk. And she was taking journalism classes at the College of Lake County.

What's a teen beat reporter? I asked.

She made a sound like fffftttt.

Don't get her started, Kenny said.

I looked up into the rearview and saw that Becky was behind me on her knees. I scooted aside and let her grab onto the back of Kenny's captain's chair just in time to lurch forward.

Give this to him, the Bun said, handing me a rolled up wad of cash.

I gave it to Kenny. At the entrance, Kenny gave it to the attendant. Dusk glowed orange and deep blue on the horizon. We drove forward to a guy wearing an orange reflective vest, who waved us into a spot with a flashlight covered in an orange cone. Our front tires were on a ridge facing the big blank screen. Underneath the screen was the radio frequency we were to tune in. Kenny did so. They were playing some music I'd never heard before. Pretty good, huh? Kenny said, looking around.

What? Your parking job? the Bun said.

You know what I mean, he said.

What? I went.

That's Kenny's band, the Bun said, smirking a little and shaking her head. The real reason we came tonight. They're playing his demo.

I need a pop, Becky announced. She tugged on my shirt.

I guess we'll be leaving you for a while, I said. Anyone want anything?

Popcorn, Kenny said.

Pops for all my friends, the Bun said, trying to give me more money.

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I'll pay, I said. I mean it this time.

Becky and I unassed the vehicle. She walked next to me. Slow down, she said.

Sorry, I said. We dodged a car or two.

The vending area was brand new. No one had peed on it yet and the cement floors weren't yet stained with nacho cheese goop. I bought a jumbo popcorn and four cokes. They stuck the four drinks in a cardboard tray. I was about to head back when Becky stopped me. Give them a few minutes, she said. Hang back here for about twenty minutes.

The cokes will go flat, I said.

I don't think they'll notice, she said.

Why's that?

Kenny's proposing to the Bun.

My heart fell. And fell.

What's the matter? Becky asked. You don't look so hot.

Nothing, I said.

You have a crush on the Bun, Becky said. Her face scrunched up. I thought you liked me.

Becky wasn't looking bad in her concert tee and bare legs, holding a quartet of soft drinks. I suddenly thought, why do I do this? Why do I want what I cannot have? I could have Becky right now, why don't I want her? She seems to be into me? Isn't that enough? Why isn't enough... enough?

The Bun getting married to that idiot. I mean, she must like him, or something. Or love him. It didn't seem that way. It seemed more like she tolerated him. Maybe she liked having sex with him.

That last thought did it. It had to be true. She was having sex with that idiot Kenny. Why was I hung up on her? Let go, Dugan. Let fucking go.

I set the popcorn down on the bare concrete floor and kissed Becky lightly on the lips. She leaned into the kiss and soon the drinks fell to the floor and fizzed between us. I hadn't kissed a

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girl in so very long. It was awkward. We backed away from each other for a moment.

My feet are sticky, she said, backing out of the spilled coke. I took her hand and we walked around the side of the building. I took her cheeks into my palms, lightly. I kissed her again, this time more competently. The projector hummed to life. We were beneath the hole where the images came streaming out. We stopped kissing and fell into a clinch. I knew you liked me, she said.

Up on the screen, Pepe the Jalapeño was begging for attention. You should go to the snack bar, pronto. And while you're there, order something to drink, señor.

She felt me poking at her through my jeans. You really like me, she said, smiling.

No, not really.

We've failed in our mission, I said.

Becky grabbed my hand and gave it a squeeze. Not me, she said. Mission accomplished. She stopped. I stopped.

In the family truckster next to us, Ma and Pa and the younguns were squabbling over the Raisinettes. Through the van's rear windows. I watched Kenny lean way over and pull out a ring from the glovebox, leaning over the Bun. For a moment, she tensed up, looking at the jewelry box. She relaxed. He opened the box and she saw the teensy-weensy ring nestled inside. I read his lips... will you...?

She looked up at him, and then back at the ring.

Sure, went her lips. Why not?

He slipped the ring on her finger. The two of them leaned across and kissed. Kenny sat back in his captain's chair and honked the horn, shout-chanting along with the honks: U - S - A! U - S - A!

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I'm going to go back and get the food again, I told Becky, releasing her hand. Before she could say anything, I slipped away.

How could I be upset? I asked myself. I'd only known her a week. Why was this bothering me? What was wrong with me?

Okay. Lots of stuff was wrong with me.

And 'Sure'? Is that any way to say yes to a marriage proposal?

I waited in line for four more cokes and a tub of popcorn, standing in the sticky spilled coke circle.

Fuck it, I thought. What business is it of mine, anyway? I've got Becky and her needy kisses. I bought the popcorn and balanced it on the tray of cokes, walked out into the chilly night.

Who cares? I said aloud.

I got back to the van and kicked at the door. It slid open. Becky took the popcorn off the top and the cokes got passed around.

We got engaged! Kenny shouted. Show him the ring!

The Bun set her coke down on the center console and held out her hand for inspection. The tiny stone sparkled. Call Brinks, she said. Get an armed guard out here, pronto.

I worked all summer to buy that ring, Kenny said, hurt.

Sorry, the Bun said.

You could at least act like you're excited, Kenny said.

I am excited.

You don't sound like it.

Please.

Well, I'm excited.

We're all happy for you, sweetie.

I can't believe you guys are getting married, Becky said. We all went to high school together.

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I sat down on the van floor, scooted toward the back a little. Becky slid the van door shut, thump, and plopped down next to me.

The couple up front each crossed his and her arms, leaned back in his and her captain's chairs, stared up at the screen through the bug-spattered windshield.

A trailer played for a movie in which people were vivisected. According to the disembodied voice, they each had to pay for their crimes... with their arms! And their legs. And their spleens. The stereo speaker next to my head made some buzzcut noises. The speaker across from me made some screams.

We're together now, Becky announced in sing-song.

The Bun turned around in her seat half-heartedly. Oh, yeah? she said, her elbow jutting.

We kissed already, Becky said, scooting next to me and entwining her arm with mine.

That makes this the perfect evening, the Bun said, and turned back toward the screen.

Becky licked my earlobe.

I watched the back of the Bun's neck. She appeared to be grinding her teeth.

Kenny reached to the middle of the dash and turned up the stereo. The van was filled with the screams of the dying.

Becky slowly kissed and tongued the skin along my carotid artery. I sat still.

Coming this summer to a theater near you! boomed the disembodied voice. Rated R!

Two very bad movies later, we left the theater and went home.

Somewhere in there, the Bun and Kenny made up. Somewhere in there, Becky bit my lip so hard that she drew blood. Somewhere in there, she mentioned that she had a daughter and an ex-husband and that her parents had bought her and

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her brother a duplex that they shared. The brother was a nurse. Becky was thinking about becoming an artist.

What kind of artist? I asked.

You know. An artist artist, she replied.

Do you want to paint? Sculpt? Draw cartoons?

Yeah, she went. Whatever. I can't believe you two are getting married!

Whoop-tee-doo, the Bun went.

Yeah, boy, Kenny said.

This was before they made up.

But now, on the way home, they were chattering away up front, while Becky and I drowsed in each other's arms. I could feel her bones through her shirt, the buttons of her spine. Her ribs. She had nice tits, though. I couldn't wait to give one a squeeze. I have a Y chromosome, even though I try to ignore it.

What are you thinking about? Becky asked suddenly, pulling away and giving me this look.

Just enjoying the moment, I said.

It looked like you were thinking about something, she said.

No, not really.

Were you thinking about me?

Of course, I said.

She smiled, her eyes narrow and calculating. I bet you were thinking about me.

I almost laughed, but held it in.

Your day will come, she said. She leaned back into me and closed her eyes.

Having her next to me made me jumpy in a different way than usual.

Soon enough, the van came to a halt. Becky jolted to wakefulness. We're there?

Yeah, Kenny went.

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She practically leapt out of the van, yanking the door open and out she went.

Do you want me to walk you to—? I didn't get to finish.

Bye! she went, and she slammed the van door shut.

Kenny put the van in gear and we rolled away. Holy crap, I said to no one in particular.

Becky's a little... Kenny offered.

Nuts, the Bun said.

I was going to say 'peculiar,' Kenny said.

'Nuts' is closer to it, the Bun said. She was leaning back in her seat, her feet up on the dash.

She has a kid? I said.

Oh yeah, Kenny went. Nice little kid. A girl. Sweetheart. The dad is in my band.

Whatever, the Bun said. You can blame Kenny for this, if you want. It was his idea to fix you two up.

A man has needs, Kenny said. Am I right, Joe?

Pffftt, the Bun went. Disgusting.

Come on, back me up here, my man! Kenny went.

Quit it, the Bun said.

The next morning I ate chow with the old timers. No eye contact for them. Eat them vittles and get out of Dodge.

I sat with Sandra afterward, the dishes piled high in the sink.

The Bun tells me that you already have a girlfriend, Sandra said.

I don't know what's going on. It's like an arranged marriage, I said.

I'd never smoked a day in my life, but sitting there I felt the need for a cigarette, or anything to keep my hands busy. I had both hands wrapped around my coffee cup.

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I realized that we'd been sitting there without speaking for a few minutes. We were both far away.

I coughed.

I was thinking about how I met the Bun's father, Sandra said.

8.

"THE HAND OF GOD

Sandra was a 20-year-old dental hygienist who owned her own car (a beater, no payments) and lived at home in Smithville with her father, a piano tuner, and her mother, a former barn painter for Rock City, the tourist attraction in northern Georgia.

Her mother spent ten years of her youth traveling around southern Illinois, offering cash money to any farmer who would allow her to paint his barn roof jet-black and bright-red with six-

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or twelve-foot-high white bold sans-serif letters shouting, **SEE ROCK CITY.**

What's Rock City? farmers would ask her.

And she'd tell them about the wonderland a-top Lookout Mountain, Georgia. Gnomes and elves and crystal caves. See seven states from the observation deck. She'd never bothered to go, but she had read the brochures provided by her employer, an odd duck of a man who smoked apple-scented tobacco out of a pipe that looked like it was carved out of a goat's horn.

No kidding, the farmers would say. More often than not, they'd take the money and say something defensive like, The barn needed painting anyhow, as if they needed to justify bringing unneeded attention upon the barn roof.

Sandra's mother retired to the kitchen while Sandra was growing up, mostly drinking coffee and looking out the dusty window at the long gravel road that led away from their home. Looking out that same window today, Sandra can see pavement and a Catholic church and burbling trucksters.

Sandra enjoyed the company of people who had traveled. Vicarious travel. The world outside of Smithville fascinated her. She wanted to see it up close.

Bavaria: It seemed interesting to her. It was where her father's great-grandparents had come from, she'd been told.

Her brothers, all older, grew up and sped away as quickly as they could. Her youngest brother was only 17 when he walked outside their door to the road, jerked a thumb and hopped in the cab of a Mack truck hauling a trailer filled with live chickens. He was never to be heard from again. They didn't even come home for Christmas, all her ex-pat siblings. Maybe an occasional card. It was like the wide world had swallowed them all without choking. Gulp and gone and silence.

Sandra's father had tuned every piano in about a 100-mile radius. His work occasionally kept him away from home until the dead of night. Then home he'd come, pulling into the driveway in his Dodge pickup, the engine pinging and clanging

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after he killed it. The headlights filled Sandra's room with a blinding flash of light, then darkness, and then she would close her eyes at last and pass into sleep and in sleep she flew to the vastness of the world. Iceland and Thailand and Madagascar. She sometimes dreamt she could float in low-earth orbit and then swoop down into the jungle or float onto the tundra, her feet tippy-tapping along the ground for moments before she sped off to some new place. There was too much world and not enough time.

He wasn't a talkative man, her father. Often, he'd shush everyone at the dinner table, make them put down their forks and spoons and he'd say, Listen. They'd all sit in mid-chew, listening. Sandra could hear what her father heard. Some interesting sound. An unusual bird. A car playing an old song out of a tinny in-dash speaker. The drumming of the rain on their slanted asphalt-shingled roof.

The brothers had no patience with their father. They'd continue chewing after a moment, snorting and gobbling down their food with abandon so they could get away from the two strange people who had somehow given them life. Her youngest brother, before he departed in the chicken truck, said to Sandra: Get out of here. You're becoming like Dad. One of them.

One of who? she went.

Space alien—I think, her brother said. I hadn't decided.

Their mother, the boys hardly noticed at all. She was the plate-filler. The dreamer who lived in the kitchen. After dinner, she'd spend the evening slowly hand-washing each plate, spoon, fork, knife, pot and pan. Carefully drying them off. Putting them away. When that was done, she'd sit with her cup of coffee at her little formica and chrome table on the orange-plastic chair by the window, peering out into the dark. Sandra would crack open the kitchen door and watch her, her mother lost somewhere else.

Behind her, her father watched the television, its gray ghost light flickering, the sound all the way down to tinny mumbles. War movies and horse operas.

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Eventually, her mother would slip silently upstairs. Her father would snap awake in front of the TV, click it off, and climb up to bed.

They didn't own a piano, though her father could play gorgeously. Sandra had heard him on the odd occasion when he'd play at a local wedding or at the VFW. He'd sit on the piano bench with his eyes closed and his head twisted slightly to the side, listening for the tiniest parts of each note as he played them. His hands were slender and small, like a girl's, his mouth a pink pucker, his forehead crinkled up, his broganed feet tapping and working the piano's pedals. A metronome ticked a-top the piano.

She was effortlessly a straight-B student, our Sandra. Had she put any effort into it, she could have... who knows? Her mother would sign the report card without saying a word, smile wanly, and hand it back to her, a moment's eye contact, a few embarrassed blinks, then her gaze would redirect back out the kitchen window.

After high school, on the advice of a guidance counselor, Sandra took a course at Illinois Technical Institute in dental hygiene. She enjoyed the course work, especially fooling around with the dummy head mockups with their overly perfect teeth. She learned how to shoot x-rays, to clean teeth, and a little accounting. She took out a loan to go to school, never having discussed her career options with her parents. She got around using the bus system and her own two feet.

They never asked her to move out, so she didn't. Living with them, with the boys all gone, was like living in a modest boarding house with two pleasant older people and a half-dozen dusty extra bedrooms. She shared silent meals with her parents and watched television with her father for an hour or two at night before studying, or reading a pictorial travel guide borrowed from the Central Library: *Bangkok on a Dollar a Day!* and *The Dusty Traveler's Guide to Ostland and Kulusuk: The Gem of Greenland.*

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Sandra graduated in the top third of her class. The family dentist's son, who had been a few years ahead of her in school, started up his own practice in a strip-mall a few blocks from his father's practice. She found out when she went to the dentist to ask for a job. He directed her to the son.

Kismet, she said.

The old dentist wrinkled his nose at her.

She rarely dated. In high school, she went to the dances with a closeted gay boy. He'd kissed her once or twice but, realizing that he didn't need to put any effort into being her boyfriend, didn't try kissing her again. He thought she might be gay, too. Or not gay: just not interested in sex, or much of anything beyond her travel books. She didn't seem to know how to have a normal conversation.

They'd be dancing and she'd say, for instance: In Comoros, an island nation in the Indian Ocean, the rainy season lasts from November to May. Or: The chief exports of Fiji are coconut oil and sugar.

He'd think, What the hell is she talking about? And smile at her.

It was assumed by casual observers that the pair would get married shortly after graduation. But he took off for New York and she stayed put and they never wrote each other or even promised to write each other.

She heard much later on that he ended up joining the Army as a water purification specialist. After the army, he moved to upstate New York, used the GI Bill to become a teacher, taught at a boarding school, and lived quietly with his companion nearby.

After high school, Sandra went out twice with a boy she met in the cafeteria at Illinois Tech. He was in the culinary arts program. On their second date, while kissing, he slipped her the tongue and tried to grope her. They were parked at the edge of town, near the bus depot. When he parked the car, a dilapidated

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Chevy Nova, she knew what he wanted to do and she wanted him to do it. She thought, Let's get this over with. After the clumsy bit of grappling, she decided that maybe she didn't want him to be her first.

Okay, she informed the student chef. That's enough.

Huh, he went, huffing like he'd run the 100-yard-dash wearing hip-waders.

Maybe some other time, she said. Take me home. Now.

He took her home.

She stood on the porch waving to him.

She went upstairs to her room, a bit upset with herself for not being very upset. I should be insulted. I should be... something. She stepped through the unlocked front door, closing it behind her. Her father sat in his same groove on the couch, his arms crossed, the gray lights of the television dancing across his stolid face. It was the TV show Combat, starring Vic Morrow.

Dad?

Hmmm?

Dad, is there something wrong with me?

Nope.

Really, Dad. Would you look up for a moment?

He looked up.

You're upset? he wondered.

Not really.

You look upset. Kind of.

Am I good looking?

I suppose. Never really thought about it.

Why not?

Just assumed, I guess that... I don't know. Your mother's in the kitchen.

He went back to watching TV.

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She pushed through the kitchen door. Her mother sat in the same place with the same coffee cup, staring into her reflection in the windowpane.

You're not bad looking, her mother said.

Sandra took a deep breath, let it out noisily and pushed back through the kitchen door, which swung back and forth squeakity-squeak behind her and stopped. She went up to her room, closed her door and stood in front of the full-length mirror. She was wearing a plain powder-blue dress. She was slim with deep red hair, her face and shoulders splattered with freckles.

She slipped out of her slightly worn Keds and ankle socks, took off her dress, her bra and panties and regarded herself, her hands on her hips. She turned from side to side, studying her reflection.

I'm not bad looking at all. Maybe some makeup is in order. When I can afford it.

After she got the job with the dentist's son, she saved up for six months and bought a car, a lemon-colored Ford Falcon with four new tires. She had a passbook account with the savings and loan. She tried flirting with the boyish teller.

Hi, how are you?

Fine, he said.

So. Um, you're not from around here?

Mundelein, he said.

She couldn't think of anything else to say, so she winked at him, badly. She was not good at winking. She'd had very little practice.

So she practiced in the mirror at home. She tried making a kissy face, like on TV. She failed. She bought some makeup from the five-and-dime and attempted to apply it. When she tried wiping it off, she found that it had an unanticipated semi-permanence. She remembered her first period and her unassist-

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ed fumblings with maxi-pads and how she eventually figured that out.

She sat on her bed chewing on the inside of her cheek, her make-up smeared face squinched like so. She heard her father's pickup clackity-clunk to a halt in the driveway. She picked up her library copy of *The Shorebirds of the Bay of Fundy* and attempted to read. The pickup door slammed. She looked up from the book into the mirror at herself on the bed, her face zigzagged with blushes and reds.

This is a multi-year project. I am still young. I can do this.

Much scrubbing the next morning brought her back to fresh-faced clean. She put on her uniform, pinned her hair up and drove in to work. She was an okay driver, having gotten a B in a high school summer driving class three years prior.

She pulled into the strip-mall parking lot to find that three of the spaces were taken up by an extra-large pickup truck hauling an oversized camper in its bed. She got out of her car and walked over to the truck, a rusty Ford F-250 with Pennsylvania plates. The Keystone State. Stickers festooned the back of the camper announcing that its occupant had been to just about every tourist trap in North America, and Sandra knew them all by heart. One extra-large sticker, seemingly holding the right side of the rusted bumper together, said, SEE ROCK CITY. She crouched down and ran her fingers across the sticker. It was smooth and not-so-sunfaded as many of the stickers.

The camper bumped from side-to-side, the back door creaked open, and down stepped a wooly, spindly man. He wore jeans, sandals, a flannel shirt and had so much jet black hair spiraling from his head that it seemed like he was nothing but a pair of eyes and a nose and a porcupine of hair.

There was a mouth in there somewhere, from which issued, Hello there.

Hi, Sandra said, standing up.

The camper bobbed up and down and up as he stepped off the back.

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He was a head taller than her, broad-shouldered and quite possibly, and tantalizingly, foreign.

Pennsylvania is a commonwealth, she said. The state bird is the ruffed grouse.

Hmm. Are you a nurse?

I'm a dental hygienist.

She nodded toward the strip mall. The sign above the office announced, DENTIST.

Ah.

My mother used to work for Rock City. Years ago. She painted barn roofs for them.

I was just there. It is, if I may be blunt, a big slice of cheese. He laughed at his joke.

Sandra did too, even though it wasn't all that funny. She winked at him. He didn't seem to notice. She tried it again.

Is there something wrong? With your eye?

I'm winking at you.

Ah.

It's meant to be flirtatious.

Ah. I'm probably twice your age.

At least, she said.

Ha, ha. True enough. You still want to wink?

I'll give it up in a second. Mountain laurel.

What?

The state flower of Pennsylvania. Mountain laurel.

Ah.

What do you look like? Under all that beard and hair?

Why don't you go out to lunch with me and find out? I'll get a shave and a haircut. He nodded toward another sign in the strip-mall, BARBER. I'd planned on cutting it all off anyway. It is a mere affectation.

They shook hands, his wrapping around hers, and she went in to work.

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The morning dragged by in the dentist's office. The dentist's son was abrupt, which wasn't unusual. He grumped about the battlewagon parked out front, taking up valuable patients' spots.

Mrs. Cermak needed bridgework.

Mr. Franks was in for his six-month cleaning. His teeth were clotted with tartar. Sandra tried to lecture him on proper brushing techniques, but his eyes were fixated on her breasts, or rather on the smock which covered the Playtex bra which covered her breasts. She stopped mid-sentence, patted him on the shoulder and wished him a nice day please see the receptionist before you leave thanks for stopping in have a super day bye-bye now there you go.

She looked out front and the camper was gone. Her heart sank.

She shot more X-rays of Mrs. Cermak's teeth.

Open! Bite down please! Hold still!

The state bird of Pennsylvania. Give me a break.

What? asked Mrs. Cermak.

Nothing, Sandra said. The doctor will be with you in a moment.

I used to go to his father, but I wanted to give the son some business. He's a nice boy.

It's back, Sandra heard the nice boy say. Goddamnit.

She left the office and went out front to the reception room. Sure enough, the battlewagon was back. She checked the clock on the wall.

It's time for my lunch break, she said.

Did you shoot Mrs. Cermak's—

Yes, doctor.

She was out the door before he could say another word.

The Pennsylvanian, possibly foreign, slipped out of the cab of his truck a different man altogether. He seemed taller without all the hair. His face was angular in a foreign kind of

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way like he couldn't possibly be American. Exotic! His suit (he was wearing a three-piece suit!) was cut differently and not just because it was obviously as old as she was. It was a European suit, she was sure of it now. Oh, Europe!

I saw a charming place, he said, just up the road.

Charming place! she thrilled.

Will you drive or shall I? he asked.

He smelled like Lifebuoy and cigarettes. He'd gone to the Y to shower after his shave and cut. The barber had given him the same haircut he gave everyone else, a flattop.

She drove.

He directed her to the Pizza Inn, where they enjoyed the \$1.99 lunch buffet special. He smoked all through the meal and no one said boo to him.

She screwed up her courage and asked him, while they ate matching slices of chocolate-chip pizz-ert, where he was from.

Originally, I mean.

Ah. Well.

Europe?

Pennsylvania.

She imagined that wherever he really was from was suffering under the yoke of Soviet Communism in all its monolithic, goosestepping glory. She imagined his relatives down in the basement tapping out signals through shortwave radio to the West. Freedom fighters!

In Pennsylvania, I mined coal, which was unpleasant. But not terribly unpleasant.

He told her that his name was Joe Allan.

He told her that he once-upon-a-time had been a first-chair violinist in the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra. That he had won medals at competitions all over America by the time he was twenty. That he'd gotten sick of playing the violin and hadn't picked one up in years.

ALPHA MIKE FOXTROT

You've been to an awful lot of places, haven't you?

I suppose. But I'm tired of it. I want to stop, stay somewhere. Here, maybe.

Two weeks later they were married in a civil ceremony at the Lake County courthouse by a clerk, with another clerk as witness. The witness clerk shot a Polaroid of the couple – him wearing the same ancient suit he wore on their first date and her wearing the powder-blue dress and Keds. Shaking the photo dry, the clerk handed it to the happy couple and wished them well.

Happy? Yes, as happy as anyone had a right to be.

He relieved her of her virginity, slowly and carefully, at the Pioneer Log Cabin Inn near Wagon Train Lake State Recreation Area.

Do you have family?

It hadn't occurred to him before to ask. His were all in Pennsylvania, he claimed.

The couple had been meeting every night after work at his place, which was in the parking lot of her employer. After she'd drive him around town, such as it was, they would have an aperitif in the back of his pickup, kiss a bit, and he would tell her what much of her country looked like from his perspective. He'd been driving in concentric circles around the United States for two years after a lucrative lawsuit, going back to Pennsylvania four times a year to pick up his mail at a P.O. box, roll up another wad of cash, and wade back out into North America. He'd driven in from the edges of North America, slipping over into Canada and then Mexico, and tighter and tighter around, finally ending up approximately in the dead-center of the continent. More or less.

Yes, she said. I live with them. My mother and father.

Ah. Do they know of me?

No. I thought about telling them, but I wasn't sure they'd be all that keen on you.

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Do you love me?

She blushed. She did love him, but was too embarrassed to say so, even now that they were married.

I love you, he said.

They lay together inside the fake log cabin on a bed that was as comfortable as a haystack, as trucks buzzed past on the highway all night and into the next day.

She got up first, it was maybe 11 in the morning, and took a shower. The water pressure was nothing to write home about, nor was the water hot. She felt like bees were trying to escape from inside her. It was... unusual. Maybe even uncomfortable. But she was married and no multi-year project was necessary for the marriage to happen, only for the right man to show up and present himself to her. She assumed that it was the hand of God. She finished her shower, dried with a rough hotel towel and slipped on her powder-blue dress and Keds.

She shook her new husband awake. Time to meet my parents, she told him.

9.

ORIENTATION

Doug the store manager had all us new employees gathered in the employee lounge. There were maybe twenty of us. Welcome to orientation week, he said, with forced cheer. You're all going to get paid to learn and have fun. Isn't that great? He looked around at us expectantly. Blank stares.

Great! Kenny shouted finally.

Quiet, Kenny, Doug said.

We were mostly white kids, mostly male. Other than Doug, I was the oldest person in the room. I had a sergeant once upon a time who, when he'd walk into a day room composed of a group of soldiers like this, would shout, What the fuck? Is this a Klan meeting?

He had us introduce ourselves and talk about what we'd done for a living previously. Most of the kids had never held a job before. There was one black kid, male. First job. One His-

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panic kid, male, with a beard and ponytail. His name was Jesus. One female, white, pregnant. She'd never had a job before and was married to a sailor. There was Kenny, of course, who'd only had one job in his life, Bye and Buy. He said that his band was going to conquer the world.

All of you, except for Kenny, are part-time seasonal employees. That means that you may be let go at the end of the upcoming holiday season. But I've found that people who work hard and play by the rules usually end up sticking around long after that as regular part-time employees or as, who knows, full-time employees! Doug said.

The brass ring, Kenny said.

Quiet, Kenny, Doug said. We pride ourselves at Buy and Bye for Having Fun While Being Number One. Doug flicked on a DVD player and the small TV set blinked to life.

He used the remote to navigate to Having Fun While Being Number One in the menu of options, which also included It's Fun to Be Safe, Stopping Shrink With the Shrink Wrapper, Energy Conservation Is Fun, Bye and Buy In the Community: Having Fun While Helping the Less Fortunate, and several other videos that he eventually would end up torturing us with. All of the videos starred Larry and Donna. Donna was a black female. Larry was a person of indeterminate racial background. He could have been a Pacific islander, perhaps. They both wore the yellow Buy and Bye shirt. Both were relentlessly chipper. A bizarre melange of techno, hip-hop and heavy metal music accompanied each lesson, along with sound effects, and graphics that spun round. The Shrink Wrapper appeared in his video. He caught a couple of shoplifters and wrapped them in magic plastic wrap. In passing, he mentioned that most shrink (their euphemism for stealing) was committed by associates and dishonesty would not be tolerated by the company. Ever. Oh, and the Shrink Wrapper rapped. I'm the Shrink Wrapper and I'm here to say, 'Don't take what's not yours... That's not the Buy and Bye way!'

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Buy and Bye president and CEO Bert Bacon told us that if we worked hard and played by the rules, we might end up with a full-time position at Buy and Bye, and then we might be eligible to buy Buy and Bye stock at a special employee price.

After the videos were over, Doug allowed us to go urinate. Our bladders relieved, we walked the store with him. Conveniently, all the department heads were in their section to greet us and tell us all about their little corners of the store.

I found my mind wandering.

Video screens, everywhere, shouted out at us. Best value. Best store. Buy and Bye.

What was I doing here? Why had I been in such a hurry to get out of the Army? Oh, right. I got blown up.

Eventually, I left the store without saying a word.

I didn't feel good, and hadn't felt good in a long time. It was not physical. But I did feel like throwing up. I didn't eat much because of that. I walked and I walked.

The town. The leaves on the trees. The placid green. The quiet. The lack of suspense. The tiny, well-kept houses and pleasant howdy-do's and the yapping dogs and the sprinklers shooting cool water at my feet.

Everything seemed so fucking normal. Normalcy was sickening, if I paid any attention to it. Normalcy was vulgar.

The chaos I was used to – the dust and the rage and the exoticism – had a hard, true edge to it. That's why I didn't fight going back to Iraq the second time. That's why I was thinking of going back right at that moment, even though I was considered broken by the Army. I was 75-percent disabled. The Army docs would clear me of my disability and restore me to active duty. The Army was that hard-up.

The squawking boxes filled with simulated combat in the video games section at Buy and Bye and the movies section and the home theater section – they were combat made normal.

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But there was nothing normal about actual combat.

When I get home, when I get back to the world, when I get home, when I get home. That's all you think about when you are there.

And then you get home and it's fucking bullshit.

I walked back to the boarding house and found the Bun. She wasn't hard to find. She was in the living room watching TV and eating macaroni and cheese out of a blue-plastic cereal bowl.

What's the matter? she asked me.

I told her.

What do you mean 'it's fucking bullshit'? she asked me. The phone rang. The Bun answered it. It's for you, she said, handing me the receiver. It was, perhaps, the last phone in America with a cord attached to it, so I was tethered close.

Hi, Joe! Doug said.

Sorry, I said.

About what? Doug said, too cheerfully. Just thought I'd tell you your hours. You left before we got to that part!

Oh, I said. I thought I'd quit.

He asked me if I had a pen.

Sure, I said. I didn't have a pen.

Sunday through Wednesday, 7 a.m. to 11 a.m.

Every day?

You bet! he said. If that's all right with you. It's okay, isn't it?

He was being awfully accommodating, I thought. How nice. Maybe I would go in. It's fine, I said. Thank you for giving me the job.

No problem-o, Doug said. So see you tomorrow morning?

I'll be there, I said.

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Super! Doug said. Terrific!

I hung up the phone.

I guess I still have a job, I told the Bun.

And a boss, the Bun added.

I sat down on the couch next to the Bun.

I think he's a bit demented, I said.

We all think that about our bosses, the Bun said.

Kenny's van rumbled up in the parking lot. He came trudging in. What the hell happened to you? he asked. I almost got in trouble!

Almost? the Bun asked.

It was very close, Kenny said. Well?

That place gets on my nerves, I said.

Welcome to the wonderful world of work, Kenny said. He leaned down and kissed the Bun on the cheek. She'd gone back to eating her mac and cheese. She fed him a fork of it. It's cold! he said, almost spitting it out.

Your life's one long misery today, she said.

He swallowed. You know it, baby.

On the TV, a nail fungus treatment commercial demonstrated how nails go yellow and what you could do about that.

I slipped quietly out of the room and climbed the stairs. I paused at the payphone. I could call home, I thought. But then my brother, mother or my sister might answer. I kept on going.

10.

LIFE DURING WARTIME

I was a lousy marksman when I was in basic training at Fort Benning. Yet I somehow managed to score a sharpshooter's badge, but that was only after I barely qualified as a borderline marksman, the lowest ranking you can get before the Army decides that maybe you shouldn't carry a weapon.

I was an infantryman, an 11B1O, also known as “11 Bang-Bang” in Army vernacular. After eight weeks of basic, our

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drill sergeant strutted in and informed us we were in advanced individual training now. Congratulations, everybody!

I actually felt a bit embarrassed carrying around my M16A4 rifle. It was made of plastic and looked more than a bit like a toy – a toy with a maximum effective killing range of 274 meters, that is.

The Army had us shooting at these pop-up targets (called Ivans) that looked like demonic front yard Santa Clauses in green commie uniforms. Some of them were so shot-up that they had football-sized holes in their jolly bellies full o' jelly. You half expected them to sing 'Jingle Bells' to the tune of 'Boat on the River Volga.' Ho, ho, hooooo, comrade! Blam!

The Cold War was ten years dead. Yet there we were. You fight the enemy you wish you had.

Somewhere in there, one day after morning PT and morning chow and morning showers, the drill sergeants came in half-apologetically and led us down to the dayroom to watch the unfolding national nightmare on the TV. We are, apparently, at war, one of the morning show hosts opined. No cooking segments that day.

We're at war, one of the drill sergeants half-whispered like a man who'd found an object in his sock drawer but couldn't decide whether it was a turd or a lump of gold.

Funny thing: The president was at my elementary school that morning, reading *My Pet Goat* to the kiddies.

We were allowed to call home from a bank of payphones at the PX. The lines buzzed. I got to the front of the line, punched in all the numbers from my calling card, and got my sister on the line. She was crying and babbling. Don't die, Joe. Don't die, and on and on.

My heart went cold. I thought, whatever, man, and hung up. The next guy in line quickly took my place.

After that, our training took on special meaning. I still had problems hitting my targets, but I cared that I couldn't hit

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my targets. Everything took on a special intensity. Even marching became muscular. Fucking terrorists. We'd kill them all.

The president sent in some special forces guys on horseback to Afghanistan, accompanied by B-52 bombers, to take care of the enemy. No heavy armored divisions? No infantry? What?

He told America to forget there was a problem and to continue spending money, that if Americans really cared they should get out and blow a big fat wad at their neighborhood supercenter.

So there I was at the Buy and Bye on a Sunday morning, many years later, getting ready to help Americans do their patriotic duty. Just pitching in on the war effort, by golly, by helping to stock the shelves.

A group of us were crowded outside in the still dark. We shrugged it off, hands in pockets, in the semi-chill of near-autumn.

Randi the product process manager showed up and unlocked the door. First came the glass double automatic doors, a simple lock. Then came a metal garage-type door, which rolled down from the ceiling somewhere, not so simple. I walked over and helped her yank it up. Clank, clank, clank.

Dugan, she said, recognizing me.

Yes, ma'am, I went.

Ah, she said, peering through her glasses uncomprehendingly. She needed coffee, I guessed. What's so special about you?

I dunno. What's with the metal door?

We had a problem with smash and grabs, she said. This makes it a little harder to drive a car through our front doors and run off with our stuff.

Everyone filed in the store and lined up in front of a computer. I stuck with Randi. What are you following me for? she went. Go punch in.

I started to walk away.

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Oh, wait, she said. I didn't give you your employee I.D. number. Wait.

She gave it to me on a sticky note, along with a password.

I waited at the end of the line. I typed it into a box on the computer and hit enter. **MANAGER OVERRIDE REQUIRED.**

I found her in the electronics section. Manager override required, I said.

She looked up from a stack of Command and Conquer boxes. PC required. Oh, shit, she went. She helped me punch in at the computer, and then tried to abandon me again.

Now what?

Oh, she went. Hmm. Have you done your E-Teachings?

What's that?

She took me over to a cash register, which was also a PC. She showed me how to sign into the Associate's Toolbox, which recognized me as Joseph Dugan, Merchandising Associate. I clicked on E-Teachings.

I stood there for three hours and forty-five minutes learning about Lifting With Your Back, and Spotting Shrink and Stopping It, and What Every Associate Should Know About Shrink, and Ethics in the Workplace, and Using Mustang Sally Correctly.

Mustang Sally, as it turned out, was a modified electric-motored forklift. Instead of forks on the front, it had a platform. You put product on it, hopped on the platform next to the product, put on the safety belt that attached you by retractable cord to an arm above the platform, pushed the green button, and up-pity up you went to the shelves above. Mustang Sally was bright yellow, like a school bus. Treat her with respect, the animated E-Teaching Guy told me, and she will be your best friend at Buy and Bye.

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A sales associate came by and poked me. It was the same guy who'd called the Shrink Wrapper gay. Sir, he said. I need to get on my cash register.

Sir?

Aren't you a new manager?

I signed out of my account and slipped the sticky note in my wallet. I stood there for a second, not quite knowing what to do. I needed guidance. I walked the store and found Randi in the electronics department hunched over a cardboard box filled with Spongebob Squarepants games. Rows of Spongebobs leered out of the box deliriously.

It's almost time to go, she said. You don't need me to help you punch out.

I punched out five minutes early and walked back to the boarding house.

I got up at 3 a.m., which I now refused to call 'zero-three-hundred hours.' I went downstairs and turned on the TV in the kitchen. A Laurel and Hardy movie was on, the one where they had to deliver a piano across a rope bridge in the Alps. Stan says to Ollie, I see a monkey. And Ollie says to Stan, That doesn't surprise me.

I found a plastic bottle of gin in one of the cabinets, tucked behind the coffee. Drink me in case of emergency. That's what I'd deciphered from its location. I uncapped it, took a long, burning swig, recapped it, and stuck it back in the cabinet. I made coffee.

While the coffee percolated, I flipped through some old records in the living room. Every tenth one or so, I'd take one out of the jacket and inspect it. All of them were dusty and scratched. The inner sleeves were yellow, some crumbly.

One, two, three, four – your left, your right, your left.

I drank coffee in the kitchen. Sandra came in wearing an extra-extra large t-shirt, which came down to her knees. I saluted

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her with my mug. The tee-shirt said Union PROUD! She had on a big pair of puffy pink slippers. Good morning, she said groggily. I thought I heard someone down here.

I made coffee, I said. Which was obvious. Perhaps I was angling for a round of applause.

So you did, Sandra said. She went and poured herself a cup and sat down.

We sat silently for a few minutes. Some part of the house was creaking. Another was making a tick-tick-tick noise.

The Bun tells me you're from Nebraska, Sandra said.

I had stopped mentioning that I was originally from Nebraska to people for a reason. People always wanted to talk specifics, and I could barely remember the place.

It was incredibly hot there in the summer and arctic in the winter. Was there a week, each, of spring and fall? That was all I could remember.

No, wait. There was kindergarten at William Jennings Bryant Elementary School. The kiddies churned butter in the classroom. We visited a real farm. My brother acted up.

Overheard:

Is that the normal one or the weird one?

They're both strange.

Is that the quiet one or the loud one?

The quiet one.

I glued together stock cars out of model kits. Chess used a wood etching gun to burn bullet holes in them. I taught myself to read.

One day in class, I had my head on my desk, a book in my lap, reading. The teacher came over. I saw her legs.

What are you doing? she demanded.

Showing off, Chess said.

Lift your head, she demanded.

I lifted my head.

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Show me what's in your lap, she ordered.

I handed her the book.

The Adventures of Tom Sawyer, she said.

I told you, Chess said. Show off.

Read it, the teacher said, shoving it at me.

I took the book, set it in my lap and started to put my head back down on the desk.

Aloud, she said.

I flipped through the book, found my spot, and read aloud.

After the hymn had been sung, the Rev. Mr. Sprague turned himself into a bulletin-board, and read off 'notices' of meetings and societies and things till it seemed that the list would stretch out to the crack of doom—a queer custom which is still kept up in America, even in cities, away here in this age of abundant newspapers. Often, the less there is to justify a traditional custom, the harder it is to get rid of it.

Do you even understand what you just read? she asked.

I wanted her to go away so I could finish.

Sure, I said. Our parish priest does the same thing.

Showoff, Chess said.

Quiet, the teacher said. Then she said something deadly to Chess: You ought to be more like your brother.

That's when Chess shouted a word that no six-year-old should even know, but thanks to our father's military background, he did. In the 1980's, the world had become fairly jaded, but some things still shocked. Especially in the grain belt. The air went right out of that classroom.

Chess' hand went up to his face. The word had ejected out of his mouth and shat itself all over the ears of the impressionable. He clapped his hands over his mouth anyway, as if he could shove the word back in.

The teacher crossed herself.

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The word was a Grand Canyon. I stood on the edge looking into it. Wow, I said.

That woke everyone up. A chorus of Ummmmm filled the room.

Chester Dugan! the teacher went.

Ummmm! went the classroom.

Wow, I said again.

Chess slugged me on the arm. Weirdo!

Ow! I went, grabbing my arm.

The teacher grabbed Chess' upper arm and dragged him out of the classroom, leaving the children all alone.

I went back to reading, but not for long. I felt a poke on the arm. When I looked up, some of the class were standing around me.

Your brother's in trouble, a red-headed kid noted.

Don't I know it, I said.

I looked around the room. All the kids were staring at me. This I didn't need. I pulled the plastic tray in my desk out. It was filled with crayons and other kindergarten implements. I dropped the book in and pushed the tray back into its slot beneath the desktop. I got up. The kids watched me. I pushed past them and out the kindergarten door.

I found it shockingly easy to leave. I had imagined that there would be guards, or that some sort of fence would pop up out of the ground, but the school had nothing of the sort. I walked down an empty corridor, my shoes clackity-clickity-echoing off the walls. I pushed through the big double doors and walked across the weedy front lawn of the school. The flag flapped in a gentle breeze. I didn't see another human being until I'd left the school grounds, an old man working on his yard, pulling dandelions and placing them in a sack. The back of his gray work shirt was saturated with sweat. His bad comb over was coming unstuck from his pink and spotted scalp.

Whatcha doing? I asked, standing on the sidewalk.

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A flying squirrel floated from one tree to another.

Shouldn't you be in school?

They let us out early.

Oh. Early. The old man wiped his forehead with the back of his hand, stared at the sun for moment as if he might cold-cock it. I'm pulling these dandelions so my wife and I can eat them, he said. He went back to filling the sack.

No kidding?

No kidding, the old man said, pausing again and squinting over at me. You heat up a skillet, fry some bacon, add some sugar to the bacon grease and cook the greens in that.

Sounds awful.

Takes all kinds, the old man said, and continued on pulling his dandelions.

I walked down to the community pool, which had been emptied. A stoop-shouldered man was inside pushing a broom around. I watched him for a minute. The man saw me. I tried to walk away.

Hey, kid! he shouted up at me.

The sound of broom scratching stopped.

I walked back over to the lip of the pool.

Toss down that pack of smokes and the lighter.

I tossed down the pack of Kools and then the Zippo. The Zippo had a funny symbol on it. The man caught it with one hand. His other hand was a claw.

Thanks, kid.

I stared at the claw for a moment. The one-armed man held it up like a rake. Boo! he went, and laughed.

I left.

Lincoln was such a small town. Hardly anything to it. The father, Tech Sergeant Dugan, put on his blue uniform in the morning, nodded at the kids sitting at the kitchen table, kissed his German wife, and drove off to work. He looked like a bus driver,

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I thought, except for all the ribbons on his chest and stripes on his sleeves.

Hey, why aintcha in school, another lug asked me. Blonde man and redheaded wife, farmers in town for a day of goofing off. I was downtown. I'd walked that far, to my surprise.

They let us off early, I said. We had an atomic bomb drill. Reagan was president, so we were almost at war all the time. The bombing begins in five minutes. Har-dee-har.

No kidding, the guy said. He looked to be my father's age, whatever that was. Hair cut close to the scalp. He and his wife wearing depression-era clothes, baggy and worn. Scuffed black shoes.

Whatdya learn?

Nothing important, I said.

Nothing important, huh? he said, skeptically. If an A-bomb drops on Lincoln, you think ducking under a desk is going to do any good? Reckon not, he answered himself, smiling at his wife. She smiled back at him. She had some fine horse teeth gleaming in her head.

I have to go in here now, I said, and ducked through a glass door into a hardware shop.

I realized what was familiar about the man and his wife. They were the farming couple I'd met on a field trip. Or maybe they weren't the farming couple, but they reminded me of them. I'd only met them for a moment.

I realized that Sandra had asked me a question and was waiting for a response.

Um, I said. And finally: What?

I said, 'Do you like my daughter?' Sandra said.

Yes, I said. Very much so.

I think she likes you a lot, Sandra said. She talks about you all the time.

She's marrying Kenny, I said.

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So they tell me, Sandra said.
How does someone end up with a name like 'The Bun'?
It's short for 'The Bundle of Joy.'
Ah, I went.

11.

THE BUN AND THE BECKY

Sandra's was not an easy pregnancy. The equipment, Sandra liked to say, was skewed. Sandra had a tipped uterus, her doctor informed her. She was to go to bed and stay there for the last three months of her pregnancy.

Which suited her fine. Her husband, as it turned out, was loaded. He had no living relatives so all of his resources went to his wife and his prospective baby, who, if Sandra could manage to lay still, would pop out into the world that winter.

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Sandra's mother spent much of the day upstairs with her, in her room, which she hadn't entered since Sandra was six-years-old. Her mother sat looking out the window, but if Sandra stirred, she'd leap up to assist.

More tea? Done with that book? Should I take it to the library and get more? Would you like some toast with apple butter? How about I fluff your pillows while you go to the bathroom?

Sandra, far from annoyed, enjoyed all the attention. I should have been pregnant all my life, she decided.

Her new old man husband spent his days downstairs, yakking with her father.

She nipped downstairs every once in a while, when the old lady was cooking dinner or off at the library fetching books, to refresh her memory of what that husband guy looked like. He was terribly sad. He looked a bit like Honest Abe.

Life! Who can make heads or tails of it?

And all the books she read! She read *The History of Western Pennsylvania* and *The Complete Tree and Bird Guide to Pennsylvania* and a biography (her first) of John L. Lewis, the UMW president. From the bibliography of the Lewis bio, she found more books about unions and coal mining. She read *The Mine Workers: A Study in Immigration*, *The History of Labor Relations in the Coal Industry*, and *The Burning Question: Labor Unions in Conflict*.

She asked her mother why big corporations needed so desperately to shortchange their workers for the labor and treat them so shabbily. Why did good men have to die so fat-cats could get even more filthy rich?

I don't know, dear, her mother replied. It's nice we can discuss things though, isn't it? Isn't this fun?

You bet, mom. Say, how about some toast with apple butter?

I'll be right back, honeybunch.

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Clump, clump, clump.

What this country needs is a revolution, Sandra told her husband when he clomped upstairs to visit.

Her belly was growing. Sometimes, she could feel the little worldbeater banging a drum in there.

She read Upton Sinclair. She read *The Grapes of Wrath*. She read about Cesar Chavez. She grew larger.

The coal dust leached from her husband's nostrils, leaving a fine coating of dust on his upper lip.

These new books had purpose. A path was unfolding with every page.

Can you feel it? she asked the baby, tapping her swollen belly.

The Bundle came out apple-cheeked and healthy and loud. Boy howdy, loud. If the Bundle was displeased, the whole house seemed to shake.

Sandra went back to work a few weeks after the Bundle entered the world, leaving her at home with the folks, neither of whom worked in anything like a full-time capacity. Her father hadn't formally retired, but had stopped working so much. He only took jobs that were nearby.

Her husband was like an extension of the parents, an adjunct, a newfound best buddy for her father.

Her mother, on the other hand, had started up on housework. Piles of laundry that had been accumulating, perhaps for years, in her parents' room found their way to the washing machine in the basement. Inch-deep dust was swept from the shelves. Rugs were summarily beaten on the laundry line strung across the backyard.

And the Bundle, who hadn't yet a name, caterwauled whenever she felt the need. Her grandparents responded to every peep.

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In the middle of the night, it was the grandparents who would respond to the tiny girl's cries.

My turn.

No, it's mine.

Yes, mother.

How's the Bundle? What does her need? Yes, her is a hungry one. Yes, yes, yes.

And the Bundle would slow down to a burble. Cases of formula were at the ready. Every room in the house was converted for the Bundle's every need. Sandra's parents started to refer to themselves as grandma and grandpop, which were almost immediately shortened to Gran and Pop.

With their new names settled, a name was needed for the Bundle's birth certificate.

Let's just call her Muffy, said Gran, kneeding dough. She seems to like muffins.

Works for me, said Pop.

Sure beats the Bundle, said Sandra. By the way, I'm thinking about going back to school.

Don't worry about the Bun, said Pop.

You mean Muffy, said Gran.

Six of one, said Pop.

Muffins? went Sandra. Gran, she's a baby.

A little pinkie-dab of batter on her tongue and she's happy as a clam, said Gran.

Yeesh, went Sandra.

Sandra left the room, more than a little disgusted that the Bun was getting a better version of her parents than she'd ever known.

The Bun grew. The Bun was enterprising. The Bun got into every damn thing. She was two.

Sandra was a junior at the University of Illinois-Smithville and still working part-time for the dentist's son. She

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was more like a roomie. Quiet had to be maintained for her studies.

The Bun had spread out Pop's records all over the floor. She liked the pictures on their sleeves.

Oh, no, Bun! Gran shouted. Pop's not going to like this, not one bit. I only left the room for a moment. How could you? Pop's not going to like this one bit.

Surprise! the Bun shouted.

Gran tried to pick up the records. She'd spread a couple dozen all over the floor.

Oh, Bun! Naughty, naughty Bun! Gran smiled and crouched down, her hands clasped between her knees. Would you like to listen to one?

Yes! went the Bun.

Which one?

The Bun pointed out a Frank Sinatra album. Frank was smirking, a smoldering Pall Mall perched on his lip. Gran opened the record player up, dropped the record side one up on the spindle and carefully placed the stylus on the edge of the record. A chipmunk voice squawked out, making the Bun laugh. Gran changed the speed from 78 to 33 1/3 and replaced the stylus at the beginning. Out came a voice that transfixed the Bun.

Miracle: The Bun was still!

Gran took the opportunity to pick up the albums and place them back in the wire record rack. When the album side was finished, the Bun shouted, More! More! Gran flipped the album and played the other side. The mellifluous voice. A new way to still the Bun, or at least slow her down for a half-hour.

Pop, when he came home, noticed that the records were out of place. The Chopin, the Sinatra, the Tommy Dorsey. They were not even along their spines. They'd been carelessly put away.

Oh, Pop, Sandra said. You haven't listened to those old records in years. Besides, Gran says they slow down the Bun.

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Slow down the Bun? asked Pop.

Doesn't seem possible, said her old-man husband, who had taken to going with her father everywhere, like a shadow.

On her first day of school, Gran walked the Bun to the bus stop down the street, holding her tiny hand, the Bun's hair done up in bright red ringlets, her hair naturally curly, her nearly translucent skin glowing in the late summer heat.

Why do I have to go to school? the Bun asked her for the hundredth time.

That's what kids do, Gran said. They go to school.

Sandra's not a kid, the Bun said. And she goes to school.

She's your mother. Call her mom, Gran said. Sandra goes to college. She's going to be a lawyer.

Big deal, the Bun said.

It is a big deal, Gran said. The child exhausted her. What a relief to have her out of the house for half a day.

Big, big deal, the Bun groused. She slipped her hand out of Gran's and sped ahead to the bus stop.

Even as labor unions began to die, Sandra became their champion. Or she tried to be a champion. She went to work for the Congress of Federated Unions in Chicago. She moved into an apartment in the vast brown city. All the travel guides did not do Chicago justice. From a distance, the loop was a shining, black-glass otherworld. Her apartment was in a neighborhood on the north side on a street filled with working class Swedes. She heard the red line elevated train rumbling past every half-hour at night and police sirens and neighbors arguing in their foreign language and smells of bakery and sewage and a mouse that she named Fred would wander into her apartment at night looking for scraps, his feet scratching along her wooden floors, the steam radiator going ping-ping-ping.

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Her husband and daughter were left behind in Smithville. Sandra visited them on weekends.

She flew all over the country fighting for the rights of union workers, finding defeat at almost every turn. So much work to do.

Sandra sat in a blue line train on the way back to her apartment from O'Hare. This man sat across from her, a pleasant smile on his face, his hair slicked back like the rest of the locals, a neat mustache combed down above his lips, which were, she noticed again, smiling. The smile was directed at her.

Hey there, he said. He was overweight, like many people in Chicago. Sandra had never seen as many fat people as she did there. He was wearing a stained chef's smock that, seemingly, had been dunked in brown gravy, which had been allowed to dry to a flaky crust.

Hey, Sandra said.

You're that union girl, he said. It came out yer dat union girl.

Yep, she said, not recognizing him at first. Hotel workers? Restaurant workers? She flipped through her internal index cards. The train slipped into a tunnel.

Restaurant workers, he said, reading her face. Local 24?

Yes, she said, relieved. Of course. But what are you doing traveling into the city? Shouldn't you be off shift by now?

I forgot something at work, he said. Got home, realized I left it behind. Book I'm reading. You recommended it. About the coalminers?

Someone actually listened, which felt a bit strange. Often, she felt like she was talking to the walls when she went to meetings. Hopeless.

The restaurant where he worked took up the entire bottom floor of a high rise on State Street, she remembered. The

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kitchen was all steam and slippery floors and yelling. The clanking of machinery. Soft food scents.

He had something soft about him, she decided. Too many of the people she dealt with had that hollowed-out look about them, like there was nothing left inside.

My ma wore sneakers just like them shoes you got on, the cook said. Jist like dem shoos.

She'd lived in Illinois her whole life, yet Chicago seemed so exotic. Smithville was only thirty miles from the city limits, yet she'd only been down a couple of times as a child to go to the Museum of Science and Industry and the Art Institute on field trips. Oh, and the Field Museum.

Keds, Sandra said.

That's right, he said. His swollen belly stuck out, gravy flaked. He wore worn-down and stained clogs and pajama-like chef's pants with frayed cuffs. Never much cared for lawyers or them other smart-asses, 'scuse my French, but what you said made sense. Sticking together and such.

Thanks, Sandra said.

The train stopped. The conductor said something unintelligible. This is my stop, the cook said. So long honey. You take care now. He left and the doors slid shut. As the train started up again, she watched him through the glass walking up the stairs into the world above and the windows went black and the train trundled along and she faced her smiling reflection in the black windows.

She got off at the next stop alone. She walked through a pedestrian tunnel to catch her red line train home. She heard the man's voice over and over in her head.

So she didn't hear when the thief slipped up behind her until he placed a hand on her mouth and the knife to her throat and hissed, Don't move...

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The old laborers came staggering down the stairs. Sandra hadn't even started breakfast yet. I'd thrown her off her game. I gulped down the rest of my coffee, made an apologetic noise and walked to work.

Day by day, the wind was picking up a chill. I'd been warned that winter would come suddenly here, but it wasn't that way at all.

Gingerbread houses, detached garages. I had to fight the urge to stop and pull weeds from otherwise perfect lawns. The Midwest! What's wrong with normal? The Midwest was hyper-normal.

I was so enthralled that I didn't see the big video production truck outside the Buy and Bye. I walked past it. Everyone was already inside. I checked my watch. I was five minutes late. I tapped on the window, framed my face with my hands and peered in. Stepped back. Hmm. Locked out. I saw a doorbell. I pushed the button.

Becky opened the inside set of doors and waved at me. I slipped my fingers in between the outside double glass doors and peeled them apart and stepped through. Everyone's waiting for you! she said.

What?

Hurry up! She grabbed my wrist and yanked me inside.

Doug was in there. He handed me a yellow Buy and Bye shirt. Put this on, he said.

I followed orders. I slipped it on over my head and tucked it in.

A woman wearing headphones clipped a tiny microphone to my collar, shoved the wire inside my shirt and clipped a little box attached to the wire on my belt.

There you go, she said.

A barstool was set up for me near home electronics. The electronics were strangely silent. Green fabric in a semicircle, lights and reflectors. A man was focussing his camera on a piece

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of typing paper held out by another man. A couple of lights were aimed at the barstool.

Say 'one-two-three,' the woman who'd mike'd me said.

One-two-three, I said.

Perfect, she said. Didn't anyone tell you to shave?

He looks rugged, the man holding the piece of paper said.

Hoo-ah, the man behind the camera said.

You ready? the woman asked the man behind the camera.

Born that way, he said.

Sit here, the woman said.

I sat on the barstool. The lights were awfully bright. The man with the piece of paper stepped beside the camera. I recognized him. You're the Shrink Wrapper, I said.

Yeah, he said.

He and the woman were both wearing the same yellow shirt I had on. I felt foolish.

Relax, Joe, the woman said.

Rolling, the man behind the camera said.

Tell us about what happened in al-Raisul, the Shrink Wrapper said.

Al-Raisul, I said. My face flushed.

We googled you, the woman said. Speak to me and don't look at the camera.

The IED on the side of the road, the Shrink Wrapper said. How you saved your buddies? Pulled them out of the vehicle wreckage, one by one, even though you were horribly wounded?

Very heroic, the woman said.

Now you work for Buy and Bye, the Shrink Wrapper said. What made you want to work here?

Let's not get ahead of ourselves, the woman said.

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Let him say something, the man behind the camera said.

Um, I went.

I was in the Army, too, the Shrink Wrapper said. Armed Forces Network. I was a sergeant, ten, fifteen years ago. Before your time.

I was a 31-Charlie, the man behind the camera said. Radio operator.

Air Force, the woman said. Tech sergeant. Weather.

You're among friends, the Shrink Wrapper said. Don't be nervous.

Nervous? Air Force said. This guy won a Silver Star.

He didn't 'win' it, the 31-Charlie said. He received it. He's an award recipient. Get right, zoomie.

Roger, Air Force said.

Thirty-one Chuck, I said. That doesn't exist anymore. It's 31-Mike now.

No shit? 31-Charlie said.

Times change, the Shrink Wrapper said.

After I talked to them for about fifteen minutes, they filmed Doug giving me a novelty check for \$500. Doug assured me that the actual check would show up in my first week's pay. It was all for a promotional video called, America's Heroes: Working at Buy and Bye.

I'll kick you loose for today, Doug said. Thanks for not freaking out on me, champ.

No problem, I said.

I'll work it so you get paid for four hours, too.

Thanks.

Hey, Beckster! he shouted over his shoulder. Becky came jogging up. You wanna take Joe home?

Sure, she said. She smiled over at me.

You two have fun now, he said.

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While being number one, I said.

Becky's car was a rattletrap Volvo with a gutshot muffler. A yellow handprint was smudged on the passenger's side window. Pretty cool, huh? she said, when she noticed me looking at it. I did that.

On purpose? I asked.

Yes, on purpose, she snapped. Why not on purpose? You think it's weird or something? You're not so normal yourself. She fumed for a while. On purpose, she muttered, half to herself, shaking her head.

So how did you—

I dipped my hand in a paint bucket, she said. Now can we get off the subject? Huh? Or are you going to keep picking at it?

Beautiful day, I said.

What's so beautiful about it?

Where are we going?

You know what your problem is? It's always about you. You should have heard yourself in there, talking about your so-called exploits. Me, me, me! I, I, I! Anybody can do what you did! All they have to do is join the Army, if you're that stupid. I mean, it doesn't take brains to join the Army, does it?

I don't suppose it does, I said.

Damn right, she said darkly. She calmed down quickly and said, We're going to go pick up my daughter.

How old is she?

Two, Becky said. She's everything to me. The sun and the stars and all that stuff. Moon. No wait! She's three.

The car made enough noise that the lack of talk the rest of the way wasn't uncomfortable. Not that I was dying to talk.

This is my parents' house, she said, pulling into an asphalt driveway behind a Jaguar.

Her parents lived in a McMansion on the corner of Polk and Delafield. The houses surrounding it weren't very McMan-

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sion-like. The neighborhood had gone high-end because of the good schools in Smithville. The working class houses surrounding the mansion had been cleaned up considerably and many had BMW's and Lexuses parked out front. Becky's parents had apparently decided to do a tear-down and rebuild. The McMan-sion swallowed up most of the lot.

Becky got out of the car. I opened up the door and began to get out. Stay here, she said. I'll be back in a sec.

I got back in the car and shut the door.

She jogged up the driveway and then along a stone path to the steps, which she took two at a time, one-two-leap, up to the front door. She yanked on the handle. It didn't give. She was about to try her key when the door flew open. Her mother, she looked much like Becky, shoved the tiny daughter, who looked like a tiny Becky, out the door and into Becky's knees. The door shut quickly. Becky picked up the daughter and walked to the car as quickly as she could, almost tripping once on the lip of the driveway.

She opened the back door and said, Get in your seat.

The child climbed inside the car and climbed into the car-seat. She expertly strapped herself in like a jet pilot. Becky slammed the rear door shut and got back in the front seat.

Are you okay, Mommy? the child asked.

Did you strap yourself in? Becky asked.

Yes, Mommy. Do you need anything, Mommy?

No, Mommy doesn't need anything. Mommy gets a headache from Grandma, who's a bitter old hag. She started the car up, cranking the starter a little too long, slammed the car into gear, almost backed over a jogger, who slapped the trunk as he veered round the car, and almost got t-boned by a cellphone yakker driving an Infiniti, who dropped his phone, honked and swerved. She said, 'I'm not your babysitting service.' Can you believe that?

I love you, Mommy, the kid in the back seat said.

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I love you, too, honey, Becky said. See? I'll never be like my mother. Her problem is that she never loved me. My brother either. That's why he married that ogre.

She stopped at a familiar intersection. We were only a few blocks from the boarding house.

Thanks for the ride, I said, smoothly unstrapping my seat-belt and flinging open the door at the same time. I leapt out. I shut the door and leaned down to wave. She stepped on the gas and peeled rubber, the Volvo buzzbombing away.

Back in the boarding house, I placed a call home. Chess picked up. I'm feeling fantastic, he told me.

Good, I said.

I'm beginning, just beginning, to get some definition again.

Lifting those weights.

Pumping iron, he said. Grandiosity: The first sign of going bonkers.

Listen, is Mom—

She's at the doctor's. Chemo day. Magda took her. It's nice to have your children around when you're sick and all.

Yeah, I said.

You're not coming back, are you, he said.

I gave him the number for the payphone and my new mailing address.

Oh, yeah, Chess said. By the way.

Um.

The Army sent you a certified letter.

Certified?

Yeah. I signed for it. And since I signed for it, I opened it up.

What does it say?

It says you owe them \$2,498.

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What? What for?

Lost or destroyed equipment. It's quite an extensive list, Chess said, chortling. An M4 rifle. A canteen comma plastic comma one each. Helmet comma kevlar comma one each. Some Army you joined.

It was all the TA-50 I had on me when the IED exploded. Jesus Christ.

Yeah. Pray to Him and see what happens. Bet He won't pay your bill.

So how is Mom, anyway?

She's a feisty old kraut. Still barking out orders. You know.

Time marches on, I said.

What's that supposed to mean?

I don't know. Do you ever wish we'd been like normal twins?

I guess, he said, irritably. I don't know. He hung up.

I climbed the stairs to my oubliette. It wasn't literally an oubliette, I suppose. It did have a window. I found the Bun up there, sponge in hand, accompanied by a bucket of foamy water. Again, she was in a t-shirt and skirt combination. Pink skirt, black t-shirt. She was cleaning up. So you and Becky aren't getting along, she said. Foam ran down her arm, from her delicate wrist to dripping off her elbow. Jesus, it was sexy.

What makes you say that?

She called here swearing at me about you. 'He's all yours, you bitch!' she shouted.

Hmm.

She said, 'I can't believe you set me up with him! He's crazy!'

She may have a point.

If anyone's crazy around here, it's her. Wasn't my idea. It was Kenny's.

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Gotcha, I said. You wouldn't happen to have \$2,498 I could borrow?

Nope, she said. What's that for?

I told her.

That's crazy.

You sure are tossing around the 'C' word a lot, I said.

This world, she said.

Yeah, I said. This world.

Listen. I have Thursday off. You wanna go downtown with me? Go see the museums and stuff?

Let me finish cleaning up here, I said. Whatever she had in the bucket smelled like a timber mill.

You didn't answer me, she said.

What about Kenny?

He doesn't own me.

Okay, I said, against my better judgment.

Super-dee-duper, she said. I'll leave you to cleaning your fortress of solitude. She stood up and dropped the sponge into the bucket, splat. She climbed down the stairs. I pulled the stairs up with me, creak-thump.

I was up again at 4 a.m. I forced myself to stay in bed, my arms crossed against my chest, feet crossed, watching car lights splash across the ceiling. No cobwebs up there anymore. I'd pine-cleaned them all away.

How do you feel about what happened to you? the shrink had asked back at Walter Reed.

I don't know, I replied. Angry?

You say that like a question, he said.

Do I have to have feelings about what happened?

Yes, he said.

Then I choose 'angry,' I said.

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A poster on the wall behind him said, Keeping Children Safe at Home and Safe in the Community: Child Abuse Prevention Month in the Army, April 2000. The poster featured a couple of stylized children standing on a stylized baseball diamond, with all the positions on the diamond labeled clearly. The children were standing on Pitcher's Mound.

So you're angry? the shrink asked.

I giggled at the poster. Pitcher's mound, I went.

What are you laughing at? the shrink asked.

Army posters crack me up, I said.

He turned around and looked at it. That poster is about preventing child abuse, he said. Were you abused as a child?

Pitcher's mound, I said, laughing. I mean, it's not enough that they show what's clearly a baseball diamond. They have to label the whole thing. Fuckin' Army.

So, were you abused as a child? the shrink asked again, all mock-concerned. What a voyeur. Nothing would have made him happier at that moment than to hear that my father had done me up the ass as a child.

So I said, Yes, I'm angry. Angry at having been blown up. But I've gotten some great medical care. So I'm grateful, too. I guess it all evens out.

You changed the subject, he said.

From what?

Child abuse, he said.

You mean, did Dad ever get to 'Second Base' with me? I did air quotes.

We'll talk again on Thursday, the shrink said.

Sure, I said. I grabbed my crutches and hobbled out of the room.

The old house groaned.

I was in pain. If I wanted, I could go to the VA, the closest one was in North Chicago, and get as much Vicodin as I

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could eat. A Swedish buffet of Vicodin. Instead, I took the advice of another of my doctors and kept on moving. When you stop moving, she'd told me, that's when your body will lock up. Forever. So I kept on moving.

I could have gone to Florida to my family after the Army kicked me loose. I was supposed to do that.

I felt sore. Today would be tough.

This isn't a free ride, kid, my father used to say, usually right before he told me to mow the lawn.

The walk to work was agonizing. I'd been overdoing it lately. I stopped and sat on a curb. The trees. They were so leafy and they were changing color. Some had already gone to orange. The sun blinked through the treetops. The light breeze smelled vaguely sweet.

Hey! You! a lady shouted from behind me. She stood in her driveway next to her Ford Battlewagon GS. Her child, a waist-tall girl, hid behind her legs. What are you doing there? I'll call the police. The lady's manicure probably cost as much as I'd made my first week at Buy and Bye. She brandished her cell-phone.

I got up and moved along.

I don't want to see you here ever again! she shouted after me. Ever! Funny: The back of her truck sported a yellow Support the Troops! magnet in the shape of a ribbon, probably made in China.

I was five minutes early, but everyone was already inside. I rang the doorbell.

Becky opened up the doors. It's you, she said.

Look, I'm sorry, I said.

It's okay, she said. Some people can't take criticism. She kissed me lightly on the lips. I kissed her back a little. It's okay. Nobody can see. She kissed me a little harder.

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Why didn't I run? In my defense, I can only say that Becky had nice tits. I may have recently been blown up, but I wasn't dead. We stopped kissing and I opened my eyes. We were nose to nose, the same height. Becky's eyes sparked with poor mental hygiene. Her pupils eclipsed her corneas. She saw something in my eyes, like panic. Oh, go punch in! she said. She spun me around by the shoulder and pushed my back.

After I punched in, I found Randi by the USB cables in the computer department, counting. Hey, Mr. Celebrity, she said. How's it going?

Okay, I said.

Good, she said. Super. She stopped counting for a second. Have you finished your eTeachings yet?

Not quite, I said.

You can finish them next week. Right now, I need you to help out in the warehouse. Go find Jason back there. He'll hook you up.

I found Jason tapping around in a DOS program on a cheap, ancient computer in the warehouse. The computer ticked and hummed. Hey, man, Jason said. Hold on. He finished what he was doing. The computer convulsed with effort. One word replaced everything that was on-screen: SUCCESS. He stood up. He was a head shorter than I am and built like a fireplug. How's it going?

Okay, I guess, I said.

You're Joe?

I am.

You okay?

Sure.

You don't look okay.

I'm fine.

I'll show you what you need to do. I followed him to another section of the warehouse. Metal shelves were piled up there. See these shelves?

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Yes.

I need you to clean them. The cleaner's over where we keep the mops. You'll find some rags there. Clean the shelves and then hang them up on these posts here. The posts had slots, the shelves had hook-like appendages. When you're done, come see me. He turned to leave, stopped. Wait. I hadn't moved. How long are you here today?

Til eleven, I said. I almost said eleven-hundred-hours, but stopped myself.

You won't even finish by that time. He smiled. Enjoy.

I did not enjoy. But all the shelves were clean and hung by the time I was ready to punch out. All the work had given me a bit of a high. I didn't feel nearly as bad as when I'd arrived. I punched out without consulting anyone. Becky met me by the front door. Ready to go? she asked me.

I am, I said.

Good, she said. So am I.

Tell me something.

Okay.

Why does the company pay for a security guard to be here when there aren't any customers in the store?

To watch the employees, she said. Ninety-five percent of shrink comes from the employees. You have a nice time cleaning and hanging shelves today?

You watched me?

I watch everyone, buster, she said. She grabbed my elbow with both hands. Let's go.

Becky drove me over to her place, rolling through four-way stops and revving her engine at red lights.

I've been meaning to ask you. What's with those zits on your face? Becky asked.

They're not zits, I said.

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Oh, ‘They’re not zits,’ he says like it’s the world’s biggest mystery.

It’s shrapnel, okay? From an IED. A bomb.

No reason to get all testy, Becky said.

I sat silently.

Now he’s pouting, Becky said, perhaps to the air conditioner, which was going full blast even though it was 70 degrees out.

I crossed my arms across my chest and leaned my head against the safety glass beside me. It was garbage day. Everything on the side of the road looked dangerous. I missed the Army. I wanted a cheeseburger.

Becky’s method of driving took her all over the road at various speeds. A squirrel hopped out into the road. She expertly swerved around it without tapping the brake. The tires squealed. Throttle up, throttle down. I was getting sea sick.

Who taught you to drive? I asked her.

‘Who taught you to drive?’ she repeated in a snivel. You don’t even own a car. Who made you king and jury?

We came to a four-way stop. A mommy and her two knee-highs were crossing the road. Becky came to a full stop, popped the car into park, revved the engine and shouted, Take all day! They passed the midway point. Becky popped the car back into drive and peeled out.

You drive like shit, I said.

You don’t even—

Own a car? Shut the fuck up.

Surprisingly, she did. Unsurprisingly, she began to cry. I let her cry. The waterworks went on for approximately 30 seconds before she asked me why I was so mean. Vroom, pause, vroom.

Some people bring out the best in me. You don’t.

We pulled into the driveway of a new duplex. The whole neighborhood was new construction. She pushed a button on her

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sun visor and the garage door opened, revealing why she didn't pull into the garage. C'mon, Mr. Grumpy, she said, getting out of the car.

We weaved through piles of junk, mostly baby toys and variants of tricycles and car seats, and went into her half of the house. We entered through a packed laundry room, which was shared between the two halves of the house.

Inside, we found a punk rocker looking guy filling a black Hefty bag with beer bottles and other party detritus. Pizza boxes. Toys were mixed in. What had been a relatively new white leatherette sofa was acne-ed with cigarette burns, smudged with fingerprints and smeared with crayons and paint dabs.

The punk rocker stood up and shook my hand. You're Joe, I take it, he said.

You're in the band with Kenny, I said.

If you can call it a band, he said. I'm in another band that actually makes money and everything.

A cover band, Becky said.

So what?

So give me some real money every once in a while instead of letting my parents pay for everything, Becky said.

Her parents are loaded, he said to me. I'm Jason. We shook hands again.

Hey, you're my second Jason of the day. I cleaned shelves for another Jason this morning.

It's a world filled with miracles, Jason said.

Look at them bond, Becky said. How heartwarming. She peered around. Where's the brat?

In her room, Jason said. Maybe I should take her for a tetanus shot later.

Fuck you, Becky said, and left the room.

Dude, Jason said in a confidential whisper, peering past me. I have to be here. We had a kid together. But you. He poked me in the chest. Damn it. Run.

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Point taken.

You're not running, Jason said.

Let me help you, I said.

Bags are in the kitchen, he said, nodding toward a door.

I walked through the door and regretted it. The kitchen was a disaster area. If the president saw it, he'd send in the National Guard. The smell. The window over the sink looked out over a nature preserve. A bunny hopped by.

I pulled a black bag from a box and went back to Jason.

Was there a party here? I asked him.

This is the way she lives, he said. If you can believe it.

I'm beginning to. We both were bent over, tossing garbage into the bags.

I mean, she's spoiled, man. To the core. He stood up straight and stretched. If it wasn't for my kid, I'd never see her again. Seriously, dude. You seem like an okay guy. Get out of here.

We work together, I said.

Quit.

I just started.

I can't believe Kenny set you two up, Jason said. He did the same to me. Of course, the reason he set me up was because I had a crush on the Bun. He stared at me for an uncomfortable second. I picked up my pace. You have a crush on the Bun.

I kept on stuffing trash into my bag. It's not like I'm going to do anything about it.

I wish I had done something. I wish I'd stolen her from him.

That's not a nice thing to say, I said.

It's the truth though.

Becky brought out her screwed-up kid. She stood there, balancing the kid on her hip, saying, Look at daddy work.

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There's a first time for everything, isn't there? Daddy thinks that just because he pierced his nose and has tattoos all over his body that he's a musician.

Etc.

Why didn't I take Jason's advice? Need I say again that Becky has nice tits? But her tits were getting less delectable with each word that slithered through her lips. And how can someone's eyes look sleepy and deranged at the same time?

We finished picking up Becky's mess. Jason took the two trash bags into the nightmare garage.

Okay, so I'm not much of a housekeeper, Becky said, setting the child down on the floor. The child made upsies gestures, which Becky ignored. What do you want? A round of applause? Fine. Becky clapped her hands. There. Satisfied?

I was about three miles away from the boarding house. Too far to walk, the way I felt. I sat down on her filthy couch, tilted my head back and closed my eyes. I felt her sit down next to me.

I'm sorry, she said. It's just that I'm under so much pressure. It's hard to raise a kid all by yourself.

I thought of my mother and how she soldiered on after my father left. There was something courageous about it. It is tough, I said, not opening my eyes. I can see that.

She leaned over and kissed my cheek, those fabulous tits rubbing up against my upper arm and my sunken chest. She leaned her head on my shoulder and tickled the hairs on my forearm. Look at all these scars, she said. She touched some of them lightly. Does it hurt?

No, I lied.

Jason came back in. I opened my eyes. He shook his head no. I'm all done, Jason said. I'll be going now. You kids have fun. At the door, he turned and gave me this look.

I know. I know.

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The kid stood right in front of us, wringing her tiny hands. I didn't even realize.

Go to bed, honey, Becky said.

Nighty-night, the kid said, not moving.

Yeah, Becky said. Go to dreamy-bye land.

Bye, bye, the kid said to me.

Bye, I said. I waved lamely with curled fingertips.

Shut your door behind you, Becky said.

I will, Mommy, the kid said. She walked away, looking back at us, down the hall.

We waited, and heard the door shut.

Kiss me, Becky demanded.

I leaned over and kissed her in a closed mouth pucker. She kissed back, her tongue jamming its way in toward my clenched teeth. She straddled me, her knees on either side, glaring sleepily at me the whole time. She pushed my shoulders back. Her thumbs, I noticed for the first time, had been gnawed on. Pink fingernail polish, indifferently applied. A mole on the side of her chin.

Now kiss me like you mean it, she said, leaning in.

We tongue-wrestled for a while. She grabbed at the back of my neck. She was a terrible kisser. No finesse. She pulled my shirt off over my head, turning it inside out.

I love skinny guys, she said, and rubbed her hands up and down my bony chest and down to my abdomen. Scars, she said.

She unbuttoned my pants and pulled down the zipper. She was fast. She reached in and found my cock. It was most of the way there. She pulled on it like it was a cow's teat. She hopped up and pulled my pants down to my knees and stood in front of me, fully clothed still. I stared at her tits.

Oh, she said, and pulled her shirt off over her head. She tossed it next to my shirt. She unhooked her bra and out popped her breasts. She toed off her shoes, unzipped her pants and

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yanked them down in a two-part cadence. All of her clothes were piled on top of mine.

She was completely nude in front of me. It had taken less than a minute. The last time I'd seen a nude woman was – shit. I couldn't remember. Was it in Korea? Was it that long ago?

She pulled off my shoes and socks and yanked off my pants. I wanted it to be sexier.

Lengthwise, she said, gesturing at the couch.

I pivoted until my head was on the armrest and my feet extended toward the other end. She rubbed my cock until it was hard, and then straddled me again. Those tits. The other thing keeping me from popping off right there was performance anxiety. She inserted me into her and sat back, not moving. She did something muscular, inside.

Feel that, she said, smirking. Bet you never felt something like that, soldier boy.

I thought – condom. Shit.

Don't worry, she said. I'm on the pill.

That wasn't what I was worried about. I looked at her tits. It was too late now.

She started working and once she got going, she was like a piston. When she got close, she growled in short bursts. She was insistent on her orgasm. C'mon! she shouted at me. Let's go! Grrr! Grrr! Grrr!

I concentrated on her tits.

Yeah! Yeah! Grrr! Grrr! Grrr!

She arched her back and let out a whoop.

I wasn't done, but that didn't matter. She dismounted, kissed me on the forehead and walked down the hall. I heard the shower turn on.

I felt sorry about every premature ejaculation I'd ever had with a woman, which was just about every other time I'd had sex. I walked over to the pile of clothes, dug her panties out of her pants, and wiped myself off with them.

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The shower clunked off.
I put on my clothes.
She walked out in a towel. Oh, she said.
Hi, I said.
I thought I heard you leave, she said.
Nope.
Anyway, she said.
Yeah, I said.
You have a big dick, she said.
Thank you.
I mean, it's not long, but it's kind of wide.
Uh, huh.
Which really helps.
Right.
Anyway, she said.
We stood there uncomfortably.
You want to do it again? she asked.
That's okay, I said.
You need a ride home?
I'll walk, I said.

I can give you a ride. She dropped her towel and leaned down toward her clothes. She noticed. That's disgusting, she said, hands on her knees, inspecting. God, men are disgusting!

I backed away. I gauged my distance to the door. Little droplets of water clung to her back. The buttons of her spine. She straightened up and turned toward me, wrapped her arms around my neck, and kissed me so deeply that I almost gagged. She was soft and damp and nude, her hair bouncing wet. I grabbed her ass with both hands. She pushed me over toward the couch, tearing my clothes off again.

It was faster and more savage. Her hair snapping around. Her torn fingernails ripping at my chest. She bit my shoulder.

I had nothing. It didn't matter.

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Oh, man, she said, after she was done. She gathered up all the clothes off the floor, even mine, and tossed them into the washing machine. I heard it clunk to life. You want something to drink? she asked me, walking through the room. I watched her walk through. Heart-shaped ass and all.

She walked into the kitchen without waiting for a reply and came back out with a box of juice, a tiny straw protruding. She sucked on the straw. Hit the showers, loverboy, she said, her head tilted down in what she probably thought was a come-hither look. I'll be waiting for you.

It sounded, more or less, like a threat.

I walked down the hall, past her daughter's closed door, and into the master bedroom. A clothes bomb had exploded in there, by the look of it. But that wasn't the main attraction. Her walls were covered over in near-life-sized cardboard cutouts of celebrities, all of them leering at me from every angle. My hands automatically cupped my groin.

I pivoted round. There were multiple Arnold Schwarzeneggers, in varying states of frivolity and/or menace. Denice Austin pointed down. Sonny and Cher smiled in their psuedo-hippie clothes. Garrison Keillor glared down grandiosely. The youthful Steve Lawrence and Edie Gorme showed off their teeth. One of the members of Kiss kicked out a silver elevator boot, his tongue lolling grotesquely.

How could anyone sleep in this room?

I continued on to the bathroom, which wasn't as filthy as I'd expected, though a single, perfect strand of toothpaste was calcifying on the lip of the sink. Every surface of the room, from the linoleum to the ceiling, was skeined over in her hair. Two tours in Iraq had removed my gag reflex, so I had no problem walking through the filth and hopping into her shower.

She had a vast array of half-empty shampoos to choose from, which circled the floor of the shower and took up a couple

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of tiny shelves. I picked what I thought would be the least fragrant and used it, giving my sticky groin an extra wash. The water coming out of the shower was uniformly cold. I stepped out of the shower after I finished and realized I didn't have a towel. I went back into the room of cardboard celebrities and looked through the drawers in her bureau. Each drawer featured an assortment of clothes. In one, I found three identical iPods.

In another, I found an M1911A1 U.S. Army Colt. I'd found more than one of these while searching homes in Iraq. I clicked on the safety and popped out the magazine, which was fully loaded. I pulled back the slide and found a round chambered. I placed the round into the magazine and popped the magazine back into the pistol and snapped the slide forward. This was not a happy development. I put the weapon back where I found it, safety on.

In her closet, I found a stack of neatly folded towels next to an unclean breast pump. I took a towel, wiped myself off, and wrapped it around my waist.

I found Becky nude, asleep on the couch in the fetal position, her thumb jammed in her mouth.

I stuffed our clothes into the dryer and then sat down next to her on the couch. Those tits!

Mmmmmph, mmm, she went in her sleep.

I thought about waking her up. I stared off into space and tried to think of nothing. I failed.

I checked on my clothes. They were still damp, but I put them on anyway.

I found a blanket, shook it out, and placed it over her, up to her chin.

Huh? she went. She opened her eyes and looked at me as if I were a stranger ready to strangle her. She sat up quickly, wrapping the blanket around herself. How long was I out? she asked.

Maybe an hour, I said.

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You're dressed, she said.

Yeah, I said.

Had your fun, she said.

I could have more fun, I said.

Naw, she said. Nappy time is almost over. Back to being a mommy. She shifted and the blanket slipped down to her waist

I told a whopper: Seems like you're doing a good job.

Better than my mother, she said bitterly. Did you really have a good time?

You're beautiful, I said.

Bet I could make a million bucks as a stripper with these, she said. She shook her shoulders, one-two. And those tits bobbed wonderfully.

Boy howdy, I said.

I didn't have them until I got pregnant, she said, looking down at them. She grasped them from under and gave them a squeeze. Best thing about getting pregnant as a teenager, I guess.

That and the kid, I said.

Yeah. She's okay.

She's very smart, I said.

She doesn't get that from her father, that's for sure. She sat up and kissed me lightly on the lips. You're sweet.

I kissed her back. When I leaned over for more, she leaned away and said, You gotta go. My kid will be up soon.

Okay, I said. Can I just—? I gestured.

Go ahead, she said. She sat back and let me feel her up. She gasped a bit. Her big nipples popped out. Oh my God, she said. Stop.

I stopped.

That didn't mean stop, she said.

I started up again. She closed her eyes. Okay, now stop for real, she said.

I stopped.

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She pecked me on the cheek. She rubbed my cock through my pants. Go home, she said. She got up from the couch and let the blanket drop at her feet. I watched her walk out of the room, burning the image into my memory. I stood up, arranged myself in my pants so the bulge wouldn't be so obvious, and left.

I'm not the kind of guy who fits in at a bar. I'm not good at conversation with drunks, or anyone else for that matter. But after walking for about a mile, I needed a rest. My body ached.

The outside gave no clue to what the inside would contain. It was a beige brick building, no windows, with an Old Style beer sign. 'Ray's' it said on the white space provided by the sign. The door said, 'Ray's' in script. I pushed through it.

So, a man walks into a bar.

The interior was dark and long and narrow. The bar and stools took up about half of the corridor. Tables and chairs were lined along the opposite wall. Foam rubber stuffing leaked from seat gashes. At the end of the corridor was a glowing white sign with red letters: RESTROOM.

Cop a squat, chief, the bartender said.

I plopped down at a stool.

You look wiped, the bartender said. He had two other customers, old-timers wearing crushed and beaten Sox hats. On a TV set above the bar, the game was playing.

I thought baseball season was over, I said.

The Sox are in the playoffs, the bartender said. Where you been?

Um, I went.

The bartender studied my face for a moment and then pulled me a draft. First one's on the house, he said. He leaned on the bar near me and watched the game. On his upper arm was a Marine Corps tattoo.

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I sipped my beer. It tasted good. I watched the game. The Sox were winning. I felt better about the world.

When I was done, I thanked the bartender. I tried to leave money. Your money's no good here, he said. He leaned on the bar and continued to watch the game.

I left. Outside a cab was waiting. I knocked on the window. The guy stopped reading the Sun-Times and smiled at me. I got in.

Where to? he asked me in a lilting accent. He was from the Indian subcontinent, probably.

I told him the address.

He kept up his end of a one-sided conversation with me, occasionally looking up in the rearview to make sure that I was nodding along with him. The gist of it was that he was from the so-called third world and yet he had never seen as much corruption as there was in the great state of Illinois. Apparently, the governor was on trial for selling driver's licenses to out-of-state individuals, one of whom went on to use the license to drive a big rig into a minivan filled with a reverend, his wife and his children, all of whom died a gasoline-fired death. Sanjiv, that was the name on the hack's license affixed to the back of the front seat, also went on to accuse the mayor of Chicago of countless crimes for which he had not yet been indicted.

When we arrived back at the boarding house, I paid Sanjiv and tipped him lavishly. He wished me a most wonderful day.

I clomped up the steps and pushed through the front door. I found Kenny in the living room playing America's Army on the Playstation. He was blowing the fuck out of Iraqis at an alarming rate. I sat down next to him on the couch. I picked up the plastic game box and flipped it over. It gave the address and phone number of the Smithville Army Recruiting depot.

Can you believe they're just giving these things away there? Kenny asked me.

They have your name now, I said.

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A small price to pay, he said. Dude told me that I could have any job I wanted in the Army.

Yeah, they'll train you to be a supply clerk. But when the time comes, every soldier is an infantryman, I said.

I hear you have a date with my old lady, Kenny said.

My heart jumped. Then I realized he was kidding. Yeah, I said. Tomorrow, I think.

You give ol' Becky the salami yet?

I thought about being a gentleman. Yeah, I said. You know, you could have warned me.

Ol' crazy Becky, Kenny said. Blam-blam-blam. Nice tits, though. Incredible tits. Blam-blam-blam. What I wouldn't give for a sneaky-peeky. You just drink some beer or something? You smell like a brewery.

I stopped at a little joint called 'Ray's' on the way home.

Ray's? That fascist creep? He threw me out of there for being underage, Kenny fumed. And when I say 'threw' I mean he picked me up and threw my ass. About ten feet, if I recall clearly.

Big Marine dude?

That's him. Why? He give you some shit?

Nope. Just free beer.

Fuck, man. I could use some free beer. Blam-blam-blam.

You're pissing away your rounds, I said.

I have unlimited rounds, Kenny said.

Not in real life, I said.

Who cares about real life? He hit the pause button and sat up. I have a theory.

Here it comes, I thought. In the Army, everyone had a theory.

I think that real life is whatever we say it is, Kenny said.

You appear to be sober, I said.

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I am sober, Kenny said. He put down the controller and stood up. Am I in love with the Bun? In real life, maybe not. But I say I am in love with the Bun, and now I start to feel it. And maybe she isn't totally in love with me right now, but she will start to feel it. See how that works? So maybe I'm not the world's greatest musician, but now I say I'm in a band and, voila, I'm in a band and therefore a musician. I will myself onto the world.

It sounded like something I'd read in a lieutenant's library over there, like 19th century Germans. Or maybe our president.

You're thinking about joining the Army, aren't you?

How bad could it be? he said.

Very, very bad, I said.

Maybe you lacked the will to make it better than very, very bad, Kenny said.

Or maybe a jihadist blew me up with an IED.

Negative thoughts, Kenny said. That's what got you.

Whatever, I said. I crossed my arms and looked away. With that kind of attitude, he'd be dead in a month over there.

Free beer, Kenny said.

I tromped up the stairs. On my way, I came across the payphone ringing. I picked up the receiver and my brother was on the other end, ranting. I was unsurprised by this. I wondered what had taken him so long.

Something I can do for you? I asked.

What? he went.

Did someone forget to take his Klonopin?

I don't take Klonopin!

That's obvious.

I'm trying to share! We're close now! We've bonded!

No we haven't.

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This is hard, he said. Watching the old lady die. You should be here. This is really your job. She always liked you best.

Be that as it may.

Okay. I get it. Crazy McCrazy is ranting, so nothing he says has one ounce of—

That's it exactly.

Fuck—

—don't say it—

—you.

The click you will hear—

Click. He hung up first. I stared at the receiver for a moment. I had to call them, didn't I? Had to give them my address and phone number. Now the phone calls. Later, the guilt drenched letter from mom. Or maybe my sister would try to guilt me back to the church by sending me selections from Hallmark's line of Catholic greeting cards. May you have a blessed St. Joseph's Day, was one I'd gotten in the hospital in March. Magda gets genital warts from some dude and the next thing you know she is on her knees for the Lord five to seven times a week.

Just thinking about being anywhere near that house made me want a Klonopin.

I hung up the phone. It rang again.

Just one thing— started Chess.

I hung up on him. Slam! That felt good.

An old man poked his head out the door. What the fuck? he went. He slammed his door shut before I could apologize. I left the receiver hanging by its metal cord and continued on up to my perch.

The smell reached me first. Paint. I climbed up the ladder and found the Bun running a roller across the boards and ceiling joists. She was standing on a paint spattered sheet. Hi, she went.

Hi, I went. Nice.

You like?

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Nice, I went.

It's called 'Summer Peach,' she said.

Peachy, I said. You better watch out for your fiancé.

Why's that?

A recruiter is after him, I said. They don't give up.

A recruiter?

An Army recruiter. I'd wandered up close to her. Probably too close.

That idiot, she said. No offense.

None taken, I said. Kenny seems to believe that he'll be bulletproof. All that it takes is thinking that he's bulletproof. I was close enough to feel the heat from her body.

He's been reading again, she said. Some people probably shouldn't read. She dipped the roller into the paint pan, rolled off the excess and finished up the ceiling.

Do you need any help?

No, thanks. Do you like it?

Very much so.

She set the roller down. Her eyes had turned the gray of a cool December morning in Germany, the day I knew that I would live.

The gurney is rolling outside, clickity-clickity-clunk and then the cool gray sky is gone, replaced by stained ceiling tiles, and the crisp air is gone, replaced by the scent of antiseptic cleanser. I've just arrived from the killing grounds. Something needs to be said, but only one word comes to the surface: Exsanguinate. And I have the overwhelming need to inform the world. I'm not... I'm not unhappy. I am the happiest I've ever been. I was supposed to bleed to death in Iraq, I'd heard the doctors, but now I am not bleeding to death. I am alive. I will continue to be alive. I'm in Germany and not Iraq and I'm alive. I must say my word. I must tell the world my joy. Exsanguinate!

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I realized that the two of us were standing there staring into each other's eyes for a long while, perhaps a minute, wordless. I said, I'm sorry.

Sorry?

For staring.

She blushed. No.

No?

I don't mind, she said. She looked down at the floor. Better clean up.

I can help, I said. I started to.

No, she said. I'll do it.

I backed up off the paint-spattered sheet. She opened the paint can and poured the paint from the pan into it. She put the lid back on the can and stepped on it. I got out of her way.

12.

**'THE CHURCH,
THE MUSEUM,
GLOWING**

ALPHA MIKE FOXTROT

Avoid the occasion of sin, that is, all persons, places and objects usually leading to sin. Be temperate in the use of intoxicants. Abstain from them entirely, if harmful to your soul, your family or others. Be fearless in the performance of all your Christian duties; fear God alone. Practice holy prayer. Receive the sacraments frequently. Assist at Holy Mass devoutly on Sundays and holy days of obligation, and hear the Word of God as often as possible. Practice constant devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, and, if possible, daily recite the Rosary.

—**How to Spend the Day in a Christian Manner, Means of Perseverance**

The pamphlet arrived in the mail, postmarked from Florida and addressed in my sister Magda's loopy handwriting. The front: Mother of Perpetual Help—**PRAY FOR US**.

Inside, a note from Magda read, Judge me, O God, and distinguish my cause from the nation that is not holy; deliver me from the unjust and deceitful man. For thou art God, my strength.

She added: We pray for you every day. Yours in Christ, Magda.

Funny thing was, directly across the street was St. Alphonsus Catholic Church. Instead of dismissing my sister as a nut, as everyone had my brother, I decided to go visit the church, even though it was the middle of the week.

Maybe it was the paint fumes.

Let me flee from myself, and turn to You, so that I may merit to be defended by You. I think that's St. Augustine. My head is filled with Catholicism.

The boarding house was empty. I wended my way down through it without seeing a soul.

I crossed the leaf-covered street. Orange and brown leaves whirled around. A squirrel raced with me over toward the church. I trotted up the front walk, and yanked on the ornate front door, half-expecting it to be locked. Instead it flew open un-

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expectedly easily. I almost smashed my noggin with it. Inside was dark. The wooden pews were surrounded by old-fashioned Stations of the Cross. Jesus was taking a beating in all the little carvings. I walked through the empty church staring at them, reaching up and touching them with my fingertips. Jesus is Condemned to Death. Jesus Falls. Jesus Meets His Mother. At the front of the church, hovering above the altar, was a crucified Christ. At first, I couldn't figure out what was different about the statue. Slowly, I realized that this rendering was of Jesus before he died. His eyes were wide open, but calm. The Roman soldier hadn't chucked a spear at him yet, so there was no red gash in His side. It was eerie. It had a very Catholic influence on me: I wanted to apologize to Him.

I genuflected and sat down in the first row near the center aisle. I pulled out the kneeler, knelt down and crossed myself. I looked up into Christ's composed eyes. My knees were too tender for this. I winced with the pain.

May I help you?

I craned my neck, still kneeling. An older priest approached me from the back of the church via the middle aisle. Gray wisps of hair covered his shiny head. He had on the priestly black with the accompanying white collar. Brown plastic lenses with turtle-shell frames obscured his eyes.

I'm sorry, Father, I said. I'll leave.

No, no, he said. I wasn't trying to shoo you. He hurried over, like maybe this one would get away, and quickly sat beside me.

I lifted myself up on the bench. Hard job, I heard myself say. It was something my father had always muttered when he was doing something he thought was too closely related to manual labor.

We sat for a few minutes together, staring up at Christ. Finally, the priest said, I'm Father Tom.

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Joe Dugan, I said. We shook hands. His was cold. He hasn't died yet, I said, nodding toward Jesus.

No, Father Tom said. I suppose He hasn't.

It's a little unnerving, I said.

Why's that?'

This is the part where He's suffering, I said.

Indeed.

We sat together for an uncomfortable moment.

When's the last time you went to church and had a nice conversation like this with your parish priest? he asked, peering over at me through his brown lenses. It had to be like looking at the world through a pint of root beer.

Five years, I said. I wasn't interested in participating in this sacrament.

And what have you been up to, lo, these past five years?

I'm not a bad person, Father. I don't need reconciliation.

No one's saying that.

I have to leave, I said. I need to leave. I stood up. The priest was between me and the center aisle. I turned and walked all the way to the other end of the pew, by the statue of St. Alphonsus on the wall, took a quick right and practically sprinted out of the church. I turned around at the door. The priest sat in the same spot, his arm hung over the back of the pew, his head aimed in my direction. I'm sorry, Father, I called over to him.

He lifted his hand up and waved. Or maybe he was shooing me this time.

I left.

By the time I'd climbed all the way back upstairs to my attic, I was sweating and shaking from all the pain. I'd overdone it.

I'd had sex though. So now I was the type of person who had sex, instead of the type of person who thought about having

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sex. And since I was Catholic, either alternative came with a sweaty dollop of guilt.

I lay down on the rack in my paint-fumed room, the sun glinting through the dirty window. In the hospital, not so long ago, I could have demanded a needle filled with relief. Maybe an ice cold drink, too. But not here. Here, I was on my own.

Smiles everyone, I said. Smiles. I closed my eyes.

I opened them. It was dark.

I closed my eyes.

I opened them. A hazy yellow glow from a swinging, bare lightbulb half-filled the room. Becky was standing over me. I can't believe you live in this place.

Me either. I coughed.

She knelt down next to the bed. You don't look so good. She placed her cool palm on my forehead. You're burning up. She wiped her hand on her pantsleg. Ew. She ran her hands across my chest. You don't weigh anything, do you? It's kinda sad.

I closed my eyes.

I opened them. The sun beat in relentlessly through the window. Birds chattered outside. I got up on my elbows. Bun? I collapsed back down. I wasn't sure I would make it out of bed. I rolled myself onto the floor face first. I found a note there, folded in half.

Joe, You're a nice guy and all but I'm not sure I really want a boyfriend right now. Things are crazy!! You've seen it!!! Anyway I think we should be friends maybe even good friends if ya know what I mean. I think ya do!! Becky.

Nice.

I soaked in the bathtub for a while. It was one of those clawfooted numbers. Someone had scrubbed it to shiny clean, probably Sandra. All the old men were at work, so no one would

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mind, I thought. Five fresh white towels were stacked atop the toilet tank next to five fresh white washcloths. They were all marked Holiday Inn in green lettering. Collections of tiny shampoo bottles were stashed under the sink. I picked out Prince Maricopa Green Tea Shampoo.

After the water turned cold, I drained the tub, stood up and took a shower.

I dried myself off with one of the sandpaper towels and put on some fresh clothes. In the hallway, I found the Bun sitting on the floor. She was in another of her skirt and t-shirt combos. She was barefoot. A tattoo on top of one foot was of a painter's palette, well used and smeary with paint. On the other foot was a metronome. The tattoo artist had very helpfully drawn motion lines. She wiggled her toes.

They were nice tattoos. In the Army, I'd seen some pretty bad ones, including one on a dude that was a latticework of straight-razor scars that spelled out Lori. The guy explained that his girlfriend had decided to sign him with a razor the night before he left for basic training. Of course, she'd already dumped him by the time I'd asked him about it. Later on, we commiserated over a contraband bottle of whiskey that we'd stolen from our dog-trainer reservist XO.

The Bun wiggled her fingers at me and I helped her up, yank. We were nose-to-nose and holding hands. I had an overwhelming urge to kiss her, but successfully fought it off. I'd dropped my dirty clothes on the floor and leaned over to pick them up.

Joe?

Don't look at her, I thought. Hmm? I went.

Nothing, she said.

I walked over to my ladder and tossed my clothes up through the opening in the ceiling. I followed her downstairs.

Kenny was sitting in the living room watching CNN. He had on his work clothes and was missing much of his face metal,

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including the uncomfortable-looking blob of metal through his septum. Oh, hey, lookee there. A war is going on. U.S. troops are dying. Imagine that. Where's this? Kenny asked me, pointing at the screen.

I didn't even look. Don't know.

The Bun sat down next to him and he tossed his arm casually as you please over her shoulder. She laced her hands in her lap. She wasn't wearing his ring, I noticed.

I went into the kitchen and found the Bun's ancient father sitting at the kitchen table reading Sports Illustrated and drinking a cup of coffee. Sandra was washing an endless pile of dishes. I offered to dry and she gratefully accepted.

Ask him where he's from, she said, nodding at the old man. Go on.

Where are you from? I called over to him.

Pee-ay, he said.

Now say, 'No, really,' Sandra said. Go ahead.

No really, I called over to him.

Penn-syl-vania, he said, not looking up from Sports Illustrated.

Never a straight answer out of him, Sandra said.

I've told her a million times, the old man said. I have no credibility around here. I saw an almond-sized hole in the back of his flannel shirt. He had a full head of salt-and-pepper hair that hadn't been combed, by the look of it, since 1990. He took another sip of coffee.

Yesterday, a man shows up on my front porch, demanding to see him, Sandra said. So the old boy toddles out front, glares at him, doesn't have the common courtesy to tell me who he is, this stranger on my front porch. She handed me a plate. I dried it and put it in a stack on the counter. And the kicker is?

Och, the old man went.

He sat down on the front steps and talked to this stranger in a foreign language, she said.

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Foreign language, the old man said. Listen to her.

What the hell would you call it?

I was born the day I met her, the old man said. We stared at his back. That's not good enough, though.

Why all the mystery? Sandra said. Are you a secret agent?

Yes, the old man said. I'm a secret agent. Sent here to spy on the Midwest. But I keep getting thwarted by moose and squirrel. Now if you'll excuse me, I have to speak into my cufflink. He did not speak into his cufflink. He flipped a magazine page.

See? Sandra said. See what I have to put up with?

I'm not exciting, the old man said.

You don't have to tell me that, she said.

Who's telling you? I'm telling the boy.

Yeah, that's it. Have a Y chromosome party with your male pal.

Sometimes you have to make a clean break with your past, the old man said. For your own sake.

Damn the consequences, Sandra said. She glared at me. Go sit with him.

I poured myself a cup of coffee and went over to sit with the old man.

You know what I'm talking about, the old man said to me, sotto voce.

I guess, I said.

That's the attitude, he said. He winked at me and went back to his magazine.

You what? I heard the Bun shout.

Who what? the Bun's ancient father went.

Trouble in paradise, Sandra said. She'd finished the dishes and was smoking a cigarette standing over the kitchen sink, watching the water drain. Slurp! went the sink.

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You idiot! I heard the Bun shout.

Heavy, man, the old man said.

Idiot, Sandra said. Good word choice.

Shall we? the old man asked, pushing himself away from the table.

Not yet, Sandra said. The Bun will let us know.

Let you know? I asked.

Summon us, the old man said. You have another one of those cigarettes?

Cookie jar, Sandra said.

The old man toddled over to the refrigerator and reached above it into a garish cookie jar shaped like a teddy bear. Teddy was smiling so hard his face might break.

If you both smoke, why are they hidden? I asked.

Why do you think? the old man said.

Sandra nodded in the Bun's general direction. One day she goes to school...

...the next day she comes home an anti-smoking Nazi, the old man said. It's what they teach these days instead of math and science, which are full of inconvenient thinking.

Da-aaaa-d! the Bun shouted. Kenny's being stupid!

That's our cue, Sandra said.

They both tossed their cigarettes into the kitchen sink and turned on the tap. For good measure, Sandra flipped the switch for the insinkerator. It buzzed and clanked. She flipped the switch off and turned off the tap. You coming? Sandra asked me.

I don't know, I said.

Oh, come on, the old man said. It'll be fun.

I got up and followed them into the living room.

The Bun was pacing in front of Kenny. Kenny watched her like a man at a tennis tournament. Her parents stood near her. I kept back, near the hi fi.

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Kenny joined the Navy, the Bun said.

The Navy? the old man went.

Is there an echo in here? the Bun said.

Navy, Navy, Navy, the old man went, hands cupped around his mouth.

This calls for a celebration, Sandra said. Hip, hip—

—don't Mom, the Bun said.

Hooray, Sandra said.

It's your fault, the Bun said to me.

My fault?

Coming here with your veteran vibe, Sandra said.

Veteran vibe? I went.

Is there an echo in here? the old man asked.

Vibe, vibe, vibe, I went, hands cupped around my mouth.

Everyone's a comedian, the Bun said.

I'm going to be in the Navy band, Kenny said. Right after I pass the audition.

Nice, I said. In Iraq, we had bandsmen guarding prisoners in detention camps. Stop, or the drum major will shoot.

Nice? the Bun went.

Is there an echo in here? I asked.

Nice, nice, nice, the old man went.

Grrr! went the Bun.

We're supposed to be going downtown today, the Bun said, pointing at me.

Who's stopping you? Kenny asked.

Go, Sandra said.

I'm just trying to provide for us, Kenny said.

Right, the Bun said.

Hey, someone has to get health insurance! Kenny said.

Uh huh, the Bun went.

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Back me up here, Kenny said. He was on his feet now.
Where's the metal you used to have in your face? I asked.
I took it out, Kenny said. I'm going to be a bandsman.
So you said, the old man said.

Bandsman! Sandra said. She snorted.

Yeah! Jesus! Kenny said. I mean... a little faith.

You know, you could have discussed it with me, the Bun
said.

You don't own me, Kenny said. That's not how this
works.

That's exactly how this works, the Bun said.

I don't own you, Kenny said.

You can say that again. Let's go, the Bun said to me.
We're walking to the train station.

Yeah, Kenny said. That's right. Go! Run away.

I'll leave the running away to you, the Bun said. She
grabbed my wrist and gave me a yank. We have plans.

Have a nice time, honey, Sandra said.

Thanks, mom, the Bun said.

'Thanks, mom,' Kenny mocked.

Shut up, the Bun said.

Be nice, the old man said.

Do me a favor and beat him up, the Bun said to her fa-
ther.

I'm taking a nap, Kenny said.

Bandsman, the old man said, trying it on for size.
Hmmp.

You've never heard him play, the Bun said to her father.
He never met a chord he couldn't slaughter.

That's the problem right there, Kenny said. No faith in
me. None.

Oh good God, the Bun said. She gave me a harder yank.
We're going to miss our train.

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Toodle-oo, Sandra said. She winked at me.

I smiled at her. Another yank and we were heading out the door.

Don't worry about me! Kenny shouted after us.

When we were safely out of earshot, on the sidewalk heading toward the train station, the Bun asked, What's going to happen to him?

I don't know, I said.

You were in the military.

I was in the Army. He joined the Navy.

So he'll be on a ship, the Bun said. Why did I agree to marry him?

You're asking me?

Rhetorical question.

Ah, I went, like I understood anything.

She hadn't let go of me yet. She strode purposefully down the street pulling me after her like a recalcitrant child. We're going to miss our train, she said, and picked up the pace. She checked her watch. I stumbled a bit and caught up. On the sidewalk were children's chalk scrawlings. Amongst them, written out in a florid adult hand, was this bit of psychobabble: When was the last time you got goosebumps thinking about your potential?

Potential. When I was a kid, that's all anyone talked about with me. My potential. It was more like a sentence than it was something to get goosebumps over.

Clang, clang, clang! We were almost there. The train was pulling into the station. All the morning commuters had already gone down to the city. We hopped on the train, one-two-three steps, past the conductor wearing a blue uniform, through the vestibule and into the coach. Green vinyl seats. I slipped in and sat next to the window. She slipped up beside me, our legs touching, our arms touching. She released my wrist.

Sorry, she said.

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It's okay, I said. I stared out the window, feeling her body heat.

We rode through the northern suburbs of Chicago, past corn and new houses and old neighborhoods and trees bursting with fall colors, stopping occasionally to pick up new passengers. The conductor wandered by and we bought our tickets from him. The car we were in slowly filled up with people. A mommy and her screaming child. A bum-looking guy. Workaholic suits and their cellphone chatter. Giggly teenagers and their cellphone texting. A mailman. A hipster wearing clunky glasses and carrying a canvas bag. Hasidic Jews wearing black fedoras. Clang, clang, clang.

You're not saying much, the Bun said.

Sorry about that.

It's okay, she said. She reached over and placed her hand atop mine. Her palm was smooth and cool. Mine wasn't. It was sweating through the knee of my jeans. We won't do too much today, she said. She retracted her hand.

A very large man wearing a blue janitor's uniform walked up. He said, without looking at either of us, Hello the Bun.

Hello, the Bun replied.

The Bears are playing the San Francisco 49ers on Sunday. The Bears are the favorites for the game even though they lost last week to the San Diego Chargers.

Thank you, the Bun said.

Is this your friend? he asked.

Is there a beverage car on this train? I asked.

No, she said. At least she didn't add, You idiot. She checked her watch.

No he is not your friend, the man said. Why is he sitting next to you?

He's my friend, Ned. Ned, this is Joe. Say, hi.

Hi, I said. Nice to meet you.

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My name is Ned, Ned said. It is very nice to meet you. Do you like sports? I enjoy sports very much. I enjoy talking about sports.

I'm not much of a sports fan, I said. I'm sorry.

There is nothing to be sorry about, Ned said. Ned turned to the Bun and said, I'll let you know how the Bears do against the 49er's.

Thank you, Ned.

And I got a picture in my head of Ned with his therapist and the therapist telling him that he should try to work through his autism by talking to people about things that he liked. What do you like, Ned? I like sports. Then talk about sports, Ned. I shall talk about sports, thank you therapist. And he carried out his assignment. Somehow, this assignment felt cruel. Or maybe this was because I found therapists to be such condescending shits.

We were in the city now. Coming around a bend, I caught a glimpse of the Hancock building off in the distance. Sears Tower.

Do you like art? she asked me.

Sure, I said.

Who's your favorite artist?

Um, I went.

Mine is Van Gogh, she said.

I wasn't doing well at all, I thought. This was another man's fiancé, I told myself. I wasn't supposed to be doing well. I could really use a drink. It was a funny thought, considering that the only alcohol I'd had in a year and a half was the beer I'd had the day before. A shot of whiskey, I thought. A shot of rubbing alcohol. In the window, I could see my reflection. What an attractive man. Shaking, sweaty, skinny as a rod, tiny pieces of metal embedded in his face. What woman in her right mind would turn down a date with you, Joe Handsome?

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The Sears Tower was monstrous, with clouds of steam whirling from its tippy-top. Clang, clang, clang. And into the train garage we went. People were standing up already, anticipating the end of the ride. The train came to a sudden stop and people were flung foreword and then backward. Many laughed. The train quickly emptied out. We got up and left.

We walked through the train station. I gawked.

We walked down the street, crossed over the Chicago River on a tiny drawbridge. Crowds of people, undulating. Crowds crowding up. IED, kaboom.

The river was lined with high rises. Boats full of tourists snapped pictures. The Bun waved at them down below. A massive opera house squatted beside the river. The Sears Tower penetrated the sky. What a city! I said.

She grabbed my hand and yanked me along. I was standing in the middle of a busy street and was almost hit by a cab. Come along, rube, she said. More wonders await.

We walked under clacking elevated train tracks, sparks flying. Ding-dong! the train above went, coming to a halt. This is State! You're on a Red Line Train.

What a cheerful train. Such good manners. We stumbled forward, past a diamond merchant area and a Starbucks and a Jamba Juice.

Look, the Bun said. Not up! Straight ahead!

Up ahead, at the end of the road, was a massive building left over from the Columbian Exposition, all columns and marble and steps. Two massive lion statues protected it.

Read the banner, the Bun said.

The Art of Empire: From the Spanish-American War to the Persian Gulf War.

Yikes, I went.

We crossed the street by a Bennigan's, waved on by a fat Chicago cop with dull, traffic-spent eyes.

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By this time I had to sit down. I plopped down on the front steps of the museum, facing traffic, and took a long, ragged breath. The Bun sat beside me, radiating her strange energy. She checked her watch. Hmmph!

Late for something?

No! she went. She composed herself. No, she said.

I will give away her nasty surprise, one she wrongly thought would thrill me: My father was waiting for us inside.

We entered the museum and paid our seven dollars each. I treated and she didn't try to stop me. I still had plenty of money from the Army, and my TDRL check had just deposited.

Too many people packed inside the big, airy building. Suicide bomber, kaboom.

The fuck of it was that back in Iraq, I carried a weapon. When I told motherfuckers to get out of my fucking way, they got. Here, it was the opposite. Snickering little art school shits in their big, clunky glasses, overindulgent moms and their squawling brats, gramps and grammy in their orthopedic shoes – none of them got out of the way. In fact, they stopped and stared at objects d'art whenever they fucking well pleased.

We passed through a section filled with medieval armament on our way to the exhibition. Most of it was ornate, sickeningly so: Pop guns with gilt etchings of horses, shiny swords frilled up with curlicues and gleaming body armor aching with glyphs. I was rushed past all of this by the Bun. I could have told her all about what was wrong with wearing this crap on a battlefield, but she wouldn't have cared anyway.

We took a right at the end of the Hallway of Poorly Designed Warfighting Equipment and entered the exhibit area. Luckily, no one cared about American imperial ambitions either. The hall was fairly empty, save for the man in blue sitting under a Frederick Remington action painting of American troopers smoking and joking. Fuck yeah, one trooper appeared to be say-

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ing to another. Springfield motherfucking rifle. Takes a leg clean off, the other trooper said. I snorted out a half-laugh.

Up close, the man in blue turned out to be my father in his Air Force uniform.

Well, I said.

Son? he said.

Hmmph, I went. Define 'son.'

I was expecting the other Joe, Junior, he said.

From the Ohio Dugans.

Yeah, he said. When your girlfriend called, she said you were in the Army.

I was, I said. Am. Sort of.

He stood up and shook my hand. I let him. One, two pumps and he let go. You, of all people, in the Army. Wouldn't have guessed it.

So you thought you'd slap on the dusty uniform and everything would be swell, I said.

He peered down at himself as if to say, this old thing? I've been recalled to active duty, he said.

Wow, I said. Things are worse than I thought.

They don't call retirement pay 'retention pay' for nothing.

Where are they sending your old ass? Green zone, for a little REMF duty?

Mannheim, Germany, he said. To an Army billet.

And you just thought you'd swing by the art museum for a refresher course on what military life looks like?

I don't need to be lectured by you—

Yes, you do, you irresponsible shit.

You can't—

I'll talk to you in any manner I please. Did you know the old lady has cancer? That's wife number two, for those of you keeping score at home. Not that you'd care. Did you know that

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Chess has been in and out of the nuthouse since you left? Not that you'd care. Did you know that Magda cried herself to sleep every night after you left for a year? Not that you'd care.

I was getting worked up toward something. Maybe hitting him. What I felt like doing was buttstroking him in the forehead with my rifle. Maybe I could dig an ornate popgun out of its glass case.

Son, he said.

No, I said. Don't son me. You don't get to take off and son me so many years later. I thought, I'm only 24.

That's it? Just 24? Not 30? Not 60? What happened?

Where am I?

What's going on?

The walls moved. All around me, paintings of soldiers, covered in mud, screaming, brandishing sabres and pistols and rifles. Gatling guns and cowboy hats. Bugles and guideons.

Are you okay? the Bun asked me. She grabbed my arm and led me to the bench under the Remington painting.

Are we done? the old man asked her. I have a plane to catch.

Yes, she said.

If you ask me, he told her, I think you could do better than the likes of him.

No one asked you, she said.

He's always been a little high-strung, he said.

You've said enough, she said.

Him, in the Army, he said, a smirk curling up his lips. Look at him. He's weak.

She stood up straight, reared back and slapped him hard across the face. The smack reverberated through the exhibit like the report of a rifle. Go, she said calmly.

His eyes wide, he reached up to his face. To his credit, he didn't say another word. He turned and left.

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I'm sorry, said the Bun. About everything. Your mother has cancer? Why haven't you—

That's okay, I said.

I had no idea, said the Bun.

It's okay, I said.

I found him on the Internet. I mean—

Frederick Remington, I said.

What?

My favorite artist. I just decided.

I got up and pretended to look at Remington's painting. Yes, indeed. The brushstrokes. I moved to the next one. The Bun followed along.

We moved from room to room, stopping occasionally to look at one painting or another. Many were supplied by the U.S. Army. According to one of the informational signs, the Army had been sending artists to the field to document wars since the Revolution. During World War II, 42 artists worked for the Signal Corps, painting and drawing what they saw.

The paintings became more macabre, and more humdrum, as we approached the present. A painting of soldiers shaving in the field in Vietnam was positioned next to an impressionist representation of My Lai.

The paintings went from lush green in one room, to sand in the next. A massive oil painting dominated the final room. You could almost reach into the painting. Actually, I did sort of reach up toward it, until the Bun grabbed my hand. It was drawn from the perspective of stepping off a plane in the desert. GP medium tents and Air Force personnel running around and a portable D-Fac. It was stunningly familiar. That moment before your life changes, one world to a completely different one. And people were walking past it like it was nothing. I wanted to grab them and say, See? But I guess you wouldn't get it, the significance of it, unless you'd stepped off that plane.

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Buzz Pepper, the Bun read off the sign next to the painting. U.S. Army illustrator.

I'd like to shake his hand, I said.

Too late, she said. He died in 2000. Brain tumor. Guess where he's from.

No idea, I said.

Sarasota, Florida.

What a strange world, I said.

I'm sorry, the Bun said.

You didn't kill Buzz Pepper, I said.

No. About your father. Bringing him here.

I waved her off. How were you to know? Wait 'til you meet my mother. She's ten kinds of fun.

Meet your mother?

Theoretically, I said.

Out in front of the museum, we saw my father again. He was trying to hail a cab. I stopped the Bun by grabbing her hand. I nodded toward the old man. We stood and watched him for a while. He kept waving and waving, and cabs passed him by. Finally, one stopped and he hopped in. I think he saw us, but he pretended not to.

A few weeks later, I'd receive a letter from him, post-marked APO AE. You'll regret not knowing me, he informed me in 14-point Helvetica. Your loss. He underlined Your loss with a red ballpoint and signed it with the same pen, Your Dad.

We walked down the stairs, the wind blowing paper coffee cups around, clop-clop. At streetlevel, we found what at first appeared to be a dying black bird. Wings flapped. Four wings. And two yellow beaks stabbing at a pair of chests. The Bun clapped her hands. Shoo! she went. The birds regarded her for a moment, and then went back at each other. Either one of us could have ended the argument right there by stepping on the both of them. Their tiny bodies would have crunched under-

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neath either of our heels. Instead, we stood there for a moment observing them. People walked past yakking and tapping on their cellphones without giving the birds a second thought, or even a first thought.

I need a jacket, I said, my hands jammed into my pockets.

I know just the place, the Bun said. She took my elbow and led me down Michigan Avenue.

After a half mile of walking, occasionally jerked to one side by a chilly wind, we ended up tripping into a building duded up with cement gargoyles, passing through a rotating green-glass front door. Inside were several stores without names offering up their wares – Oriental gimcrack cures (Happy Joy No Constipation! one box on display announced), varieties of muffins trapped under a jeweler's case and presented on paper doilies, Chicago-themed t-shirts for toddlers (Grandma went to Sear's Tower and all I got...), and a hipster store.

We went into the hipster store, presided over by a clunky glasses guy wearing an Underdog t-shirt and a smirk.

I don't think I've ever seen an episode of Underdog, I said to the guy.

Hi, Bun! he squealed to the Bun. I heard you're getting married!

Yeah, she said. To a butthead.

Oh, honey. Then why? he asked.

He asked, the Bun said, looking right at me.

I pretended to shop. Everything in the store was ironic.

Is this the lucky butthead?

Nah, she said. You remember Kenny?

Him? I thought he moved back east.

Well, he's back, she said. He called me every day while he was out there. Oh, and he just joined the Navy.

Oh, Gawd, the guy went.

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Bowling bag purses. Magic eight balls. Cat Diesel Power hats. Mint-flavored condoms. I found a rack dedicated to jackets. The warmest-looking one was a used Coca-Cola driver's uniform jacket, mainly composed of cotton and polyester. The former owner's name was Chuck. At least it was cheap.

The two finished catching up and I bought the jacket.

After we were safely outside, the Bun asked, So what did you think?

About what?

The shop.

That guy was gay, right? I shoved my hands in the pockets. I was right. It was very warm. It didn't come close to fitting me. Chuck was a big man.

She got hot. You're not a homophobe, are you?

Just making conversation, I said.

The military's full of homophobes, she said.

It's full of people, I said. Some of them don't like anybody. Others are like me – cheery lovers of all humanity.

Yeah, she said, not convinced. Bobby is gay. I talked him into coming out, back in high school. His parents got him that store and a place in the city just to get him out of Smithville.

We took a right on Monroe and headed upwind toward the train station. The Bun had to stop for a moment to lean against a building in an alleyway. I stood next to her to block the wind a bit. My back has been killing me, she said. It's like a pain, deep inside.

The middle of your back?

No, like right here, and she reached around and grabbed her side.

Your kidney.

Kidney, she said, narrowing her eyes.

Bet you have a stone. Saw that a lot over in the desert.

Oh shit, she said, her mouth drooping a bit. You think so?

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What the fuck do I know?

I'm sorry about your father, she said. I shouldn't have done that.

Now you know, I said.

Did you mean that, about meeting your folks?

I wouldn't call them 'folks,' I said. That sounds a bit—

Folksy?

Whatever, I said. I jammed my hands into my pockets.

Someone was bound to call me Chuck before too long and ask me when I was going to service the Coke machine.

At the end of the alley, a guy in cook's whites sat smoking on a back stoop while a cat rubbed up against his shins. He ignored the cat, just looked up at a window across the alley two stories up. Maybe he was looking at a reflection of the big city flashing off the window up there. Maybe a girl was getting dressed. Maybe that's where he lived and he was pining for a shower. I wished that I had a camera and could take a picture of him.

Let's go, the Bun said. She grabbed my elbow and yanked me along.

What I noticed, on the train-ride back, after the city disappeared and we chugged into the countryside, was all the stunted corn. A drought? The corn wasn't any good, so farmers hadn't harvested it. All that was needed was the first frost and it would be completely dead. Why haven't they plowed the corn under? I wondered aloud.

You can take the boy out of Nebraska, the Bun said.

She was sitting close, her thigh up against mine, our hands almost touching. I mustered up the courage and reached over and took her hand in mine. She did not yank away. We laced our fingers together. For the first time in... forever—I felt strangely, ecstatically happy.

Knee-high by the Fourth of July, I said.

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You're smiling, she said.

Dusk and then twilight and then dark, and the train pulled into the station in Smithville. I hadn't let go of her hand.

Smithville, Smithville, Smithville station, a voice droned over the intercom. We let go and stood up, shuffled down the aisle and into the vestibule where the cold night air hit us. By the feel of it, the stunted corn had hours to live. I took off my jacket and draped it around her shoulders. She did not protest. We stepped down onto the asphalt, over a painted yellow line and began the short walk home.

If you ever need a second husband, I said, I'm your man.

What if I need a first husband? she wondered aloud.

I'm your man, I said. Just something to keep in mind.

We've only known each other for like a week, she said.

It doesn't matter, I said.

She took my elbow. You're serious though. Right?

Serious as a heart attack, I said.

I reached across her, pulled her close, her body warm. My jacket flopped off her shoulders to the ground. And I kissed her. First soft. Then less soft. The world spun off its axis for a moment. It was like the first time I stepped off the plane in Kuwait, before the invasion. When the plane door opened and there was that foreign place and I knew that my life had already changed forever, without my noticing it until this very moment.

You two-timer, Becky said. She was standing on the sidewalk, two feet away. We both jumped. She was brandishing her venerable piece of ordnance, the .45.

Becky, the Bun went, tremblingly.

Yes, Becky snapped. She wasn't pointing the gun directly at anyone. Not yet. So, lickety-split, I snatched it out of her hand and dropped the magazine and unchambered the round. That's my gun! she shrieked. The streetlamp above us clicked with bugs and buzzed electricity. A moth as big as a bat cast shadows down

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on us. Becky was close enough to break her jaw with the butt-end of the .45, if need be.

Let me point out the obvious, I said, staring her in the face, her eyes darting away and locked back on mine and darting away again. I've killed people. You haven't.

I don't—

I will finish, I said.

She shut her mouth.

If you ever point a gun in mine or in the Bun's general direction again, I will kill you. Do you understand?

She looked over at the Bun. Did he tell you that we had sex? Huh?

I don't care, the Bun said. That's over with now.

Becky shook with rage. Her eyes glistened with zealotry. Give me my gun!

No, I said.

I'm telling Kenny!

So are we, the Bun said.

I'll get you, Becky said, not looking at either of us. She jerked her head around as if someone was about to jump her like she'd jumped us.

You're proposing an unwinnable situation, I said. What's your desired end state? After you get us, what happens to your child?

Don't you talk about my baby! Give me back my gun!

Sure, I said. And the moment you walk away, the Bun will call the cops on her cellphone to inform them that you're running around with a forty-five caliber pistol through the streets of Smithville threatening to kill people. Here you go. I held out the pistol, grip toward her.

She stared at it. No, she said.

You sure? I asked her.

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You think you're clever, she said. You're a twerp. That's what you are. A twerp.

Go, I said. Now.

She backed up five meters or so. I'm telling! she shouted and turned and ran.

We listened to her feet slapping the pavement for a moment.

Oh my God, the Bun said.

Something to tell the grandkids about, I said.

Did you really have sex with her?

Yes, I said.

Right, she said.

You have a lake around here? I quickly disassembled the weapon. She put the jacket on. I handed a couple of parts to the Bun.

Lake Grant, she said, and stuffed pistol pieces in the jacket pockets.

Is it far?

No, she said. You were amazing just now. She was shaking like someone who'd never been threatened with a firearm before.

Me, I felt pretty good. Oh, the adrenaline.

She led me down a wooded street. We threw the gun, in pieces, into the lake.

The Bun's ancient father was pacing the gravel in front of the homestead, his hands in the pockets of formerly black jeans, now gray with dabs of paint, a flannel shirt buttoned up to his neck.

Look who's outside, the Bun said as we walked up.

Your crazy friend was here, her father said. He stopped pacing.

We know, the Bun said.

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She said things, her father said.

We know.

Is it true?

I backed up a step. If he took a swing at me, it might not connect. But he was big enough that if it did, I'd get hurt.

The Bun looked over at me. I smiled at her. I couldn't help it. She's cute.

Yes, she said.

Oh thank God, the old man said, and wrapped his long arms around her. After they were done, he shook my hand. Well done, he said.

Thank you? I went.

He never did like Kenny, the Bun said.

No one likes Kenny, the old man said.

That's being a bit harsh, I said.

No, the Bun said, with a little shrug. Not really.

Go on in, the old man said.

The two of us started to go in. Not you, he said to me, placing his hand over my chest. Come sit with me. The Bun took off the jacket and handed it to me. I put it on.

She went inside.

The old man and I sat down on plastic lawn chairs on the porch that circled the grand old house. The sky was so full of stars, like in a science fiction movie, that if you stared up long enough you might convince yourself that you were about to launch into hyperspace.

I could feel the wet from my chair wicking through my jeans.

Hello, princess! I heard Kenny shout.

The old man smiled with... satisfaction?

After I married her mother, I had no idea what to expect when I walked through that door. After the shock, I was wel-

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comed with open arms. He reached over and shook my knee and winked at me like a department store Santa. Ho, ho, ho!

He sat back in the chair and laced his hands together across his chest, his elbows jutting out. Her father and I were best friends until he died. Her mother went quickly after he did. They were beautiful people.

Take the ring! Take it! the Bun shouted.

He was a piano tuner. Did Sandra tell you that? I rode around with him. It was pleasant. He knew everybody in town. Even then, in the eighties, everyone around here owned a piano. Not that they necessarily played them, mind you.

I'm very tired, I said. I apologize in advance if I pass out.

Have you seen the American Legion Hall here? It's in our old town hall, which was built in the 1890's.

I'd walked past it once or twice. Yes, I said.

We'll get you a membership, the old man said. I was in the Air Force back during the Korean War.

Air Force, I said with unintentional malice.

Well, I was brought up Amish. It seemed like the least likely place to cause harm.

Amish?

Don't tell my wife. She imagines me to be foreign. It adds spice, the mystery.

Amish, I said.

I was stationed at Elmendorf in Alaska and delivered the mail on base for two years. They issued me a sidearm, the mail was so important.

Here comes the Amish guy delivering the mail, I thought. Huh, I went.

Will you have babies? the old man asked.

We haven't discussed it yet, I said.

You can wait to have babies, the old man said. But not too long. He sat up and looked over at the door. We don't have any Iraq war veterans at the Legion yet. You'll be the first.

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You won't see me again! Kenny shouted. You won't see me ever again!

Fine! the Bun shouted.

The door slammed open. The old man was on his feet. I rose to mine. Kenny glared at me. She's all yours, dude, he said. She's a peach!

No trouble, the old man said.

See if I ever give a hitchhiker a ride again, Kenny said. The rage on his face relaxed into a smile. Shit, that's funny.

I'm sorry, I said.

Do you love her? he asked me.

Yes, I said. I hadn't even said it to her yet.

Well then, he said. His face was snail-trailed with tears. He walked away. Nearing his van I heard him say, Fuck me.

The old man watched the van pull away. He said, Her mother and I knew.

Knew? Knew what?

That you love our daughter.

What? How?

When she came in the room, it was the only time your face changed expression. You were... glowing.

We would see Kenny again in three months. After his graduation from boot camp at Naval Station Great Lakes, eight miles up the road, he dropped by in his cracker jack uniform. He was serious and respectful, calling the old man sir and Sandra ma'am and telling me that he respected my service to the nation.

He didn't speak to the Bun, though.

13.

OPLAN

The Bun kissed my cheek. Ow! she went, pulling back. Her lip was bleeding. She dabbed her lip haltingly with a fingertip.

She left the room and came back a few moments later with a couple of Kleenex and a pair of tweezers. She sat down as close as you please to me, told me to hold still, and yanked a nailclipping's worth of metal out of my face.

If Army ever wants you back we're moving to Canada, she said. She stared at me. She took off her glasses and cleaned them with her shirt, put them back on. I saw smeary whirls in them. Say something, she demanded.

I sat staring at her. I've never been able to talk to people. Not really. There are words inside, but they don't come out very easily. There is feeling in there, too. But no one knows about it. I

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do feel things. I do. And it's not only sadness or fear or that battlefield bullshit or my kind-of-sad upbringing.

My soldiers, my squad, when they went out with me trusted me because of my expressionlessness. Cool Joe Dugan, they called me. Others in my platoon whispered about me. The first time I was over there, as a private infantryman, I'd kept quiet and studied the Iraqis and my squad leader and saw what worked and what didn't. So when it was time for me to lead, I led through ruthless intuition.

Despite this, or maybe because of it, there is much joy inside of me that wants to come out. There is the sound of bird-song inside, the rush of the Gulf of Mexico against the beach. There are the leaves rustling and dancing in the wind. The beauty of a fall day, the crispness in the air. The smell of Sandra's cooking. There was the sunset on Siesta Key Beach in Sarasota, too. There was my little sister's dainty artwork. My mother's stoicism when my father left. That was part of the joy. There was the feeling when I knew I was alive, back in Germany, that I would live, that my life would continue. It is a gift, this life. There was the bird who lit on my windowsill upstairs in my attic, cocking his head at me. Even the old men, grumbling and belching, there is something there that makes my insides sing—their indomitability, their humanity. It makes me want to weep pure tears, to smile until my face aches.

But I sat there, my face impassive, nothing coming out of my mouth.

Somehow, I felt, I must share these joys, because what is joy if it is not shared—somehow? Joy is like fresh-baked bread. It needs to be passed from person to person until all have had their fill.

But for her, for the Bun, I was beginning to think... I could maybe start to—I don't know. Something.

People have always found it easy to talk to me, I suppose, because I don't say anything. Because I have no real expression on my face most of the time. My soldiers called it my blank stare.

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It's innocuous-seeming—like I'm human wallpaper and you can place any pattern on me you like.

I looked over at the Bun, and then her parents. I wanted to tell them that I loved them, but the word—love—sounded ridiculous in my head. Unseemly. How could I say such a thing? How could someone like me say it to such good people? My love seemed shabby, pallid, shopworn, as I sat there with them, these interesting, warm people who seemed so eager to embrace me in their home, to keep me there among them, to make me one of them. This love felt too much like hope.

We sat in their dusty living room drinking valerian tea out of delicate, chipped, parchment-colored cups.

Please say something, the Bun said. She stared into my eyes. I looked down into my lap, embarrassed over the depth of my feelings, feelings that I felt I had no right to possess.

It's a good thing your eyes give you away, the Bun said.

The Bun told of our adventure near the train station.

Sandra said, You're not going back to Buy and Bye.

But I signed a contract, I said. I have an obligation.

As a labor lawyer, let me tell you about that contract. It turns obligation inside out. All that it does is permit Buy and Bye to fire you at will, or give you the right to walk away from the job without repercussions. Go get your copy of the contract, she said. I'll point it out to you.

I lumped it up the dark stairs, listening to the old men groan in their sleep. That could be me in five or ten years if I don't come up with an operations plan, I thought. Downstairs, an OPLAN was being formulated for me. Calls were being placed.

I climbed the pulldown stairs up to my attic room for the last time. I found the envelope with all my documentation from Buy and Bye and climbed back down with them clamped in my teeth.

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Bzzz! Groan! And, creepily, out of one room came a voice calling in artillery fire. Fire for effect, he barked into his dream Prick-77.

What do I say in my sleep? Nothing, I hoped.

Down I went. I handed Sandra my packet of Buy and Buy paperwork. Maybe not an entire tree was sacrificed, but definitely a substantial part of one.

These belonged to my parents. I want you two to have them. She handed me her mother's and father's wedding rings. The ring boxes were covered with red and blue felt. The lady's ring box was shaped like a seashell.

You've been awfully understanding, I told them.

They looked at each other as if sharing a private joke.

What? the Bun asked.

Nothing, her mother said.

Nothing, her father said. He put his arm around his wife and she leaned into him.

I took over Kenny's room, which he hadn't personalized. It smelled like popcorn. The Bun boxed up his clothes and took them to the cellar. She retrieved my belongings from the attic. She changed the sheets on his sagging double bed.

I lounged around in an overstuffed easy chair, like a lump, reading a five-year-old Sports Illustrated. I learned about the habits of Martina Hingis. I read that the LA Lakers were favored to win the NBA Finals over the Indiana Pacers. The Lakers had Shaq, who could not be contained.

The Bun was a ball of energy, a perpetual motion machine. She only complained once, and that was about the pain in her back. She wouldn't let me help. She said it was something that she needed to do herself.

Three dusty bookshelves held seemingly every volume in the Reader's Digest series of condensed books for people who could not be bothered to read the full text of, for example, To

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Kill a Mockingbird, The Shoes of the Fisherman, Seven Days in May, and To Catch an Angel, which were all in one volume marked 1963.

A heavy chest of drawers, ornately carved from dark wood, the drawers lined with cedar, squatted in the corner. A carving of a sea captain, grinning stupidly, stood on a lace doily on top of the dresser. New Bedford, Connecticut was notched into the base of the carving. Avast, I said to him.

I was on the second floor with the family. I could hear the tenant in the room directly above getting up, the floorboards creaking and singing. I watched the ceiling where he walked, heading to the bathroom.

When the Bun was finished, we kissed goodnight. I leaned in so quickly that I slightly chipped one of her incisors with one of mine. Oww! she went, but we kissed anyway.

I closed the door. I couldn't sleep, so I pulled one of the volumes off the shelf and sat in my easy chair reading John Dos Passo's 1919 in land-speed record time. I snapped the book shut, clicked off the lamp, and lay in bed watching headlights stroke the ceiling.

In the Army, I'd craved normalcy, a real life. And here it was, delivered like the morning paper. My luck, I remembered. This is my luck.

So now something bad has to happen.

Can you drive? Sandra asked me over coffee the next morning. I mean, do you have a license?

Yes, I said. Why?

It's a little embarrassing, she said. As it turned out, she hadn't left the big house in ten years. It wasn't a conscious decision at first. She'd eased into her life. She'd arranged to have her groceries delivered. Anything else, the Bun would pick up for her. Both Sandra and the old man had let their drivers licenses lapse.

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Out back, in a garage that looked like a shed, sat a car that hadn't been driven much in a decade, a two-door 1963 Mercury Comet, fire engine red with a chrome accent on each side that ran from the top of the headlight to the back of the car and circled back around to end at the front tire. Three chrome accents near the tail suggested speed. As did the fins.

The tires were bald.

If the car had had any gas in it, by the look of it, it would have certainly turned into varnish by now. Otherwise, it seemed in perfect condition.

I jangled the keys. I was thinking that I could have it towed to a shade-tree mechanic's lawn, where he could spend several leisurely months rehabilitating the old car. I sat behind the wheel, which was huge in diameter, but skinny in my hands. I stuck the key in the ignition, turned it and it started right up.

Later on, I found out that the old man had been coming out once a week to start the car, drive it to the gas station and fill up a gas can so he could cut the lawn or blow some snow, depending on the season. That was the only trip he dared make, considering his lack of a proper drivers license.

Cyclone V8 was written across the unpadded dash in more chrome. I pulled out of the garage and drove it to the Goodyear dealership a block and a half away. I left there \$551 poorer, but with a car that I had confidence in. The mechanic shook my hand afterward and thanked me for the opportunity to work on her.

The first place I drove the car was to the urologist with the Bun where, after she signed in, the Bun was told to take a cup into the bathroom adjacent to the admin office and fill it with pee. I stood at the window and watched as the cup came through a banker's drawer attached to the bathroom. Her urine was the color of iced tea.

May I help you? the clerk asked icily.

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Um, I went, and sat down in the waiting room amongst the coughing and wheezing. Most of the patients in the waiting room seemed to be elderly men shifting nervously in their seats, prostates on the fritz. Hack, hack, spit phlegm into hanky. Union local jackets and baseball caps announcing their military affiliation.

The Bun sat down next to me and took my hand in hers. Thanks for driving, she said.

No problem, I said.

Her name was called. She went in alone. Twenty minutes later, she reentered the waiting room. Tests, she said.

We left.

On Friday, the Bun rode her bicycle to the doctor's office to get the results of her test. The doc said, The lab sent over this written report saying that you don't have a stone. They both knew that was horseshit. So the doc ordered the actual X-rays to be sent over, which would take five (5) working days.

Or, he said, they could pretend like the Bun actually had a stone and start treating it. The Bun took the treatment, a noxious acid in syrup form that was supposed to dissolve the stone. The Bun also swung by the lab to pick up her X-rays.

I saw the stone very clearly on an X-ray taken out at random. She was transporting her own X-rays to the doctor and stopped by, ring-ring, on her yellow bicycle.

Why are you wearing that yellow shirt? she asked me.

Going to work, I said.

Tsk, she went. Becky is going to shoot you.

No she's not, I said. I reckoned myself a good judge of who was and wasn't going to shoot me, having had sufficient practice. Cool Joe Dugan. I think I'm going to drive, I said.

We kissed—this time without incident.

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Becky had nothing to say. She let me in through the front door, glared at a point in the distance somewhere over my left shoulder, and went back to her security station so she could spy on her fellow employees. Peeing in cups and being spied upon was nothing new to me. I'd expected it in the military, where I'd signed away my rights so that Americans could continue having theirs.

So much for that.

After I clocked in, I reported to my boss Randi, who I found aiming a Telxon gun at a can of discount tomato soup. Bleep! went the Telxon. Where's Kenny? Randi asked.

Joined the Navy, I said.

Poor Navy, she said. Bleep.

What do you want me to do today?

We have a truck coming in about a half-hour, she said. Go hang out in the warehouse until it shows up. Wee-ooo, wee-ooo! went the Telxon. Oh, you didn't like that one, you son-of-a-bitch? she shouted at the gun, shaking it.

In the warehouse, six other guys sat waiting for the truck and horsing around. A football was produced. Someone went long. The ball sailed toward him and he crashed into a display of DVD's presided over by a cardboard cutout Sean Connery, who appeared to be about ready to lick his Walther PPK. In your face, James Bond! the kid shouted. I looked around at all the kids, that's what they were to me even though I was only a year or two or three older, and all of them had some variant of the moptop haircut, carefully trimmed to look as if it hadn't been carefully trimmed. The ones who weren't running around were playing with their hair, pulling the bangs down toward their eyes, trying to look like someone who stepped out of a pop punk video singing about how his girlfriend let him down and how oh-so-sensitive he is, la-la-la-I'm-cry-cry-crying. I had a momentary idea about befriending one or two of them in the beginning, but that had faded by this point into attempting to tolerate them.

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So you were, like, in the Army? a blond moptop asked.
Nametag: Chad.

Yes, I said. I almost said, Chad.

So what was that like?

War is fun, except for the getting shot part. You should try it.

You're, like, kidding. Right?

Maybe, I said.

Back by the truck bay, one of the moptops was laying out fiberglass palettes under signs marked, Perishables and Audio and Car Audio and Computers and so on. A metal set of conveyors was rolled up to one of the truck bays.

Man, I wish the truck would show up, said a black-haired moptop. He was twitching around with his hands in his pockets. His nametag said, Zip.

Zip? I asked him.

It's not mine, he said, looking down at the tag. We swap them out.

Why? I asked.

It's fun, he said, as if I was stupid.

They also liked sneaking up behind their pals and making monkey noises in their ears, which was happening at that moment to the only working moptop, the one laying out the palettes.

Eeeep!

Crash.

Fucker!

Giggles all around.

Pneumatic brakes hissed. A few moments later, a buzzer went off. One of them punched in a code into the phone at the receiving desk and said into the handset, Randi to the warehouse. A few moments later, his amplified voice boomed out overhead.

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I thought that if I was a recruiter, I'd take a part-time job in this place and clean it out in less than a month. That's called initiative. I even worked up some patter for the kids: Why am I in here working part-time if I'm in the Army? Because I'm bored! I was infantry before I came here. And the infantry is all about action, not sitting in an office yakking with civilians like yourself. No sirree. The infantry is like ten video games in one. It's the most fun you'll ever have in life. God, just the feeling of firing live rounds downrange, man, that is better than seventy-two virgin orgasms. And speaking of orgasms, chicks are all over you once you put on that uniform. 'What's this ribbon for? What's that medal for?' It's for killing bad guys, baby. Transforming them into dead bad guys. Fuckin' A.

What I wouldn't give to be at Fort Benning when their little moptops are sheared off by an Army barber. Bzzz. The best is when the barber asks them... Would you like to keep your hair? before the cut. And they all go, yeah! yeah! And so the barber shears off all that pretty hair and gives it back to them in a paper lunch sack. There you go, he says. The drill sergeants can't get enough of that joke. Funny fucking shit, man.

What are you smiling at? Randi asked me, walking past, jangling keys.

What if something bad happened to the Bun? What if something bad is happening to the Bun right now? Thinking about the Army turned my mind dark. And once I thought that, a flood of images cascaded past my inner eyes, torturing me with their specificity. Hit by car while riding her little scooter, tossed across yard tumbling ass over tea kettle, finally coming to rest amongst a patch of dandelions, eyes wide open in death. Shot in holdup at Seven Eleven whilst buying a Twinkie, Twinkie clenched in hand whilst bleeding out on linoleum floor. Whilst I'm driving, passenger side hit by monster truck, cut to pieces by non-safety glass, her head in my lap, bleeding out again in this one. I got mad at my made-up monster truck. That fucker! Not a scratch on him. It was an F-250, jacked up so that you'd have to

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climb a rope ladder to get in. Smiling jerk with a fu-manchu and a pair of gleaming Oakleys hiding his eyes, wearing an ironic t-shirt (I LOVE BEER) unironically. Slapped on the back of the pickup is one of those yellow magnetic ribbons demanding that I Support the Troops, and a Jesus fish medallion, and a big number 3, for Saint Dale Earnhardt, who is currently up in heaven driving in circles with Jesus next to him in his black Chevy Monte Carlo. Faster, Dale! Jesus shouts over the engine roar.

I manage to climb to the cab and pull the dude out by the front of his ironic/unironic tee-shirt and commence to a-whoopin' on him. But even in my daydreams, these guys get the best of me. He takes a swing and knocks me down. Now he's kicking me on the ground. Now, once I'm good and beat, he spits on me and says, Fay-gut. He climbs back into his monster truck, backs up taking chunks of Mercury Comet with him, attached to his monster front bumper, and bumbles away.

Eventually, he sues me and wins.

I backed up the daydream and tried to will a different result, but each time came the same result. This is the problem with having a worst case scenario mindset.

Then, just to snap me out of it, one of the moptops crept up behind me and made a monkey noise. I convulsed, the way they wanted me to. Ah, ha, ha, ha. And so on. I attempted a smile.

Randi signed for the truck. There was the ceremonial cutting of the trailer seal with a pair of bolt cutters. The door was opened and the inside of the trailer was filled to the top with product. A collective groan was issued. A button was pushed and the pneumatic ramp on our side raised up and flopped into the trailer. The conveyer was wheeled inside the truck.

You wanna work in the truck? Randi asked me.

Sure, I said.

Hop in, she said.

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I went in the trailer. I felt the truck drive off. Boxes were just out of reach, so I set up a computer box as a step stool and reached up and started pulling boxes down. The boxes went from small (a box of pencils) to massive (a 42-inch plasma TV at the very end of the truck). In between was every product imaginable, none of which was made in the good old USA. An hour and a half after I entered the truck, it was empty. We filled up some pallets three times.

I took a ten-minute break, drank down a bottle of water handed to me by Randi, and went with the moptops into the store, where they'd used pallet jacks to transport the pallets stacked with foreign gewgaws. We put all the crap on the shelves. And if there was no room on the shelves, we had to top stock it. And if there was no room in top stock, we eventually ended up taking it into the warehouse, but that was a last resort.

Five hours later, we were done and I was exhausted beyond exhaustion. I was glad I'd driven the car.

We punched out. At the front door, we were all frisked by Becky, our hands placed against her security station. We were allowed to leave.

This became my work life for the next two months.

Three days a week, a truck rolled in. Depending on the truck sizes, I worked six to eight hours on those days. The wind picked up some snap, the air a little bitterness. I was getting stronger and stronger. It was like therapy. When I'd get home on work days, I'd take a long shower, put on sweats and read a condensed book while waiting for the Bun to come home from one of her occupations. She buzzed around town on an ancient Yamahopper covered over in stickers. Or rode her little bicycle.

On the drive home on Halloween, I saw a portly man wearing nothing but a Speedo and flip-flops walking a mini-pin on a very long leash. The rabid little dog was snapping at people as they attempted to walk past the man, who seemed oblivious. It

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was 55 degrees out and the leaves that hadn't been raked up were dried up and blowing away.

When I got home, I sat down at the kitchen table and had a cup of coffee with the Bun and Sandra. I wasn't the only one in pain.

The Bun had gone in for yet another painful test. She starved all day and then was injected with dye at the imaging center so the doc could tell the makeup of the stone. The doc gave her a script for 20 doses of oxycodone (hillbilly heroin), which is laced with a substance to make her feel queasy (so she wouldn't get hooked, presumably).

She was in pretty bad shape by the time she was done at the doctor's office.

Come Monday, maybe the doc will get serious about getting the thing out of her, Sandra said.

The Bun spoke fondly of a future visit to "The Rock Tumbler."

She and I had not yet made love. We'd decided to get married between Thanksgiving and Christmas and were trying to hold off. Also, it was hard to get in the mood with her parents living down the hall from us.

At night, she'd speak through the wall to me. She told me everything about her life.

And then something happened inside me, some key turned in a lock, and, click, I told her everything. I couldn't stop talking about my life, even the bad stuff. But especially the good stuff. Night after night, for hours on end, I spoke to her. The stuff that I couldn't imagine saying to anyone, ever, I said to her. I placed my hand on the wall one night and I felt the tears come pouring out of my eyes. They weren't from sadness. Not at all.

At work, Randi spoke occasionally of Black Friday, the retail name for the day after Thanksgiving. I began to look forward to it. By all accounts, it was to be harrowing.

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After a particularly large truck a week before Black Friday, the Bun's old man surprised me with an application for the Smithville Fire Department.

Me? A firefighter? I went.

Sure, he said. Don't worry. I'm pulling all the strings I have. The idea appealed to me greatly. You'd have to go to school.

That's fine. I have the G.I. Bill, I said.

We sat at the kitchen counter filling the application out. Some items I knew by heart. Others, I needed help with. I called home.

Mom is getting worse, Chess reported.

Worse than what? I asked him.

Worse than bad, Chess said. The day is coming. I don't know what's going to happen to Magda.

She was still a minor.

You'll take care of her, I said.

I'm certifiable, Chess said.

I believe you're certified already, I said.

You're going to need to come home, Chess said.

I am home, I said.

Quit fucking around up there and come home, Chess said. We need you here.

14.

BLACK FRIDAY

It was like pulling teeth getting information out of those Florida relatives.

What's all this for? Chess asked about all the questions. His voice over the phone sounded alternately up close and then suddenly tinny.

I'm going to be a firefighter up here, I said.

Wouldn't Dad be galled, Chess said. Public service with no possibility of graft.

I told him about seeing the old man. A long silence on the other end.

Anyway, I said, finally.

You can be a fireman down here, Chess said.

I'm not coming back, I said.

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Fine, Chess said. I'm sure Magda will love living in an orphanage.

Someone's been taking guilt lessons from the old lady, I said.

Not that I didn't love them, but I couldn't stand the thought of being in the same room as any of them, especially my brother. Is that love? Maybe.

In the kitchen, I found the Bun chugging milk directly out of the plastic jug. Her doc had warned her about mixing milk and a kidney stone.

You know, in the desert, you can't drink milk. It has a high ash content and dehydrates you, I said. I can be incredibly unhelpful, or indirect.

The Bun peered out the kitchen window, and then looked back at me. I'll take that under advisement next time I find myself in a desert, she said. She glugged a bit more milk, capped the jug and put it back in the refrigerator.

Thanksgiving was an oddment at the boarding house. First, at 2 p.m., we had the Thanksgiving for the boarders, who shoveled it down with their customary abandon, and then staggered out the door, possibly to work. Or maybe to tie one on.

We spent two hours cleaning up, Sandra and me, while the Bun prepared the second Thanksgiving of the day.

The old man sat at the big kitchen table reading the Thanksgiving circulars from the paper aloud, laughing boisterously at some of them. You can smell the desperation, he said. The Buy and Bye circular sounded particularly grim, he said, peering at me over the top of the tabloid nightmare of colors and shapes. Movies for a dollar each and 42-inch plasma TV's going for \$600! the old man roared.

That the TV's were LHB's (Lucky Happy Brand) and the movies were the ones that went into a theater on one week and

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were gone the next only to show up on video two months later, didn't make too much difference to the old man. He saw capitalist doom in their low, low prices.

I set the table. The food was placed on one end and we were on the other. We walked with our plates around that side of the table, plopping heaps on our plates. After we sat down, we all reached over our steaming piles of food, held hands and prayed.

After dinner, before I could participate in cleaning up, the Bun took me aside and told me I should call my family.

But I don't want to, I said.

Oh, they can't be that bad, she said. Have you told them about me?

I'd tried to, but they weren't interested. Their world had collapsed into the four walls of the little condo they shared. Mostly they talked about all the suffering they were undergoing. I was expected to join them in this suffering when I came to my senses.

Yes, I lied. I told them all about you.

I climbed upstairs, dropped a quarter into the phone and called time and temperature, loudly pretending I was talking to my brother. Put Mom on, I said after a while.

The time now is four-oh-seven-pee-em. The temperature is forty-eight-degrees-Fahrenheit. Time and temperature in Smithville, Illinois is brought to you by Rugco. The Rugco jingle was performed, possibly in 1968: When you need a rug, oh you need a rug! Better call Rugco!

The time now is four-oh-eight...

I hung up. I tromped down one flight to the family floor, lumped into my room, set the Big Ben alarm clock for 1 a.m. and collapsed on my bed. I had to be at work by 2.

Maybe it was the early hour that I had to wake, or maybe it was the tryptophan churning through my guts, but I had a dream. In it, I was driving along through Route Irish in al-Raisul. Instead of driving a military vehicle, I was driving the

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Comet, which had been painted appropriately for the tactical environment. Embedded in the dash was a loudly squawking ancient radio. the handset was like the one Andy Taylor would use to talk to Sarah the operator. Charlie One this is Charlie Six, squawked the radio. That's for you, said the Bun, who was seated next to and was wearing frilly pink lingerie. She handed me the odd headset.

Charlie Six, this is Charlie One, over, I said into it, steering the Comet with my knees.

Up ahead, I saw what was an obvious IED, a refrigerator box with BOMB spraypainted drippily across it in English.

The voice on the handset was my mother's. Charlie One, proceed to checkpoint one-niner-alpha—I had no idea where that checkpoint was.

The IED went off. The ground shook. Sparkling multi-colored mylar confetti fluttered.

That was a loud one, the Bun commented.

I sped past the exploded bomb, turned a corner and I was in Nebraska, driving past endless corn fields, the horizon an incandescent orange.

Keep going, the Bun said. She was dressed normally now, and so was I.

Charlie One? Charlie One, this is your mother. Charlie One, you better answer me! Ach, Charlie One, you are a willful child!

I picked up the handset and shouted into it, Leave me alone! Christ! I yanked it out of the dash, wires flopping crazily, and tossed it out the window. I stomped on the gas and the car sped up, faster and faster. The corn became a blur.

The alarm went off. I tapped the top of the clock and sat up in bed. Huh, I went.

I slunk down the hall, brushed my teeth, spat and observed myself in the mirror. Who is this guy? I wondered. The soldier was gone. The guy who replaced him—I had no idea.

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I dressed and drove to work, parking in front of the Golf Galaxy, as I'd been told to do by Randi. The walk to the front door was brutally cold with a cutting wind. A line of people were out front, waiting to get inside so they could fight each other for the plasma TV's and cheap movies.

Doug pushed a serving cart with a coffee tureen and styrofoam cups. A stack of the cups were picked up and wooshed away. I ran after them. Attaboy, Joe! he shouted. I caught up with the cups before they could hit the ground and made a diving catch. Touchdown! Doug shouted. I brought the cups back over. Hey, he said. Go punch in and take over for me out here.

Yes sir, I said.

The line of people zigzagged past the adjacent grocery store and down around the corner. I went inside, punched in. On my way back out, Randi told me to put my Coke trucker coat in the employee break room and put on a Buy and Bye jacket, the back of which had reflective stripes sewn in. Out front, I found the coffee cart, but with Becky at the helm. Go back inside, she told me. I did so, happily. Doug was waiting for me there.

Fill the first hundred or so with caffeine and it gets them out of the store quicker, he said. What I need you to do is go in the back and get ten more of those plasma TV's and line them up here in by the security desk.

The store had been set up as a maze with duct tape arrows on the linoleum, pointing. If you followed the arrows long enough, you'd end up at the front registers. Along the way, you'd have many chances to grab bags of candy, gum and salty nuts.

I pushed through the double doors marked EMPLOYEES ONLY, grabbed a handtruck and made my way through stacks of movies to the LHB TV's.

What are you doing? Randi asked me, when she saw me trucking the TV toward the front door.

Doug told me to—

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There he goes thinking again, Randi said. You're going to be doing carryouts and shagging carts. So you might as well leave the coat on.

After I finished lugging the TV's up front, Doug called over the intercom for all team members to come to the front of the store. Are we ready? he asked us.

Yes, everyone replied.

Are we ready! he shouted.

Yes! we replied.

ARE WE READY?

YES!

Everyone put a hand in. We all reached toward an imagined middle where our hands would have all met in an enormous stack of flesh if we could all fit there. On three, go team Buy and Bye. One, two, three!

Go team Buy and Bye!

Team Buy and Bye dispersed throughout the store.

A trembling excitement to all this percolated through me, like something wonderfully bad could happen. Would happen. The doors were unlocked, the sign lights went on and in flooded humanity.

In the last four hours of my shift, I saw two bare-knuckled fistfights, three full carts snatched away from their rightful cart pushers (in one case, with a baby in the baby seat, who was lifted out of the cart crying and placed atop a depleted stack of toaster ovens), a woman throw up onto another woman (both of whom continued shopping after a quick apology from one to the other), a man jimmy open a locked display case filled with iPods (inspiring a rush of people grabbing at the iPods), and—did I mention the fistfights? People, odd creatures that they are, kept shopping around each set of two men slugging it out—poorly slugging it out, I might add. All that anyone in either fistfight would have had to do to conclude it successfully would have been

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to throw a straight punch. Instead, all the men fought it out with great wide swings that started from behind the waist, arched up over their shoulders and concluded by missing their intended victim, mostly. When these boxers did connect, it was usually on the shoulder or upper arm. The only body part they were in danger of damaging was a rotator cuff. Doug broke up one of the fights with an air horn blast. You and you, Doug said, having achieved the attention of everyone within ten paces. Get out of my store. The other fight, maybe an hour later, was left for me to break up. I grabbed a shopping cart that rolled past and bashed it into one of the fighters. Hey! I shouted. They both stopped and looked at me. Take it outside. People are surprisingly docile when confronted by a uniformed man, even one in a sunshine-yellow jacket. They complied.

15.

GONE

I'm thinking I forgot something, I said to the Bun. What else can I say about Black Friday?

We were rolling around together on the outfield of the elementary school's little baseball diamond, the sun almost down now at 4:30 in the afternoon, ozone blue sky dripping with burnt orange. We lay facing each other, our noses about to touch. I unzipped her coat and reached around her hips, inside her t-shirt, slid my hands up and down from her hips to her ribs. Soft.

Becky? she asked. How'd she do?

Becky, I said. The Bun hadn't mentioned Becky at all since the night we'd been confronted by her, since the night that the Bun heard that I'd had sex with her. My neutral face kicked in, along with my neutral voice.

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Never left her post, I said. Watched the video monitor, mainly keeping an eye on the warehouse. She frisked every employee who left, while keeping an eye on that monitor. I think they give her a taste if she catches a team member taking product.

Oh, listen to you. ‘Team member taking product.’ She pushed me onto my back and straddled me on her knees. I reached up and uphooked her bra from the front. Bad boy, she said. I caressed her breasts. Good boy, she said. Very good boy. Are you sure you don’t want to—?

We can wait til we’re married, I said.

What if we’re not compatible? Shouldn’t we take us out for a test drive? Then she made a little sound like, oh, and pulled my hands out of her shirt.

We’re compatible, I said. We kissed and rolled around some more.

Aren’t you going to ask about my day? she asked.

Which job was it today?

The fun one. Reporter girl, she said.

We rolled over onto our backs. She rehooked her bra and zipped her jacket back up.

I drove down to the Ritz-Carlton Club in Lake Forest to interview this guy Tom DiNardo, the world-famous golf course designer. I should have been paying attention to him, I guess, but I got caught up in a soccer game, which was playing on an HDTV hung behind the bar. Some cutie was getting ready to take a penalty kick when DiNardo came over to talk to me. I made him wait until the cutie was finished. He blew it. Wide right. This despite the dude having a very nice butt. Then I asked DiNardo a bunch of dipshitty questions that showed that I have no concept of golf. I made a comment about how I remembered when the beach outside the window of the swanky club we were sitting in was public property. He countered with a comment along the lines of, if poor people want to see the

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beach, they are free in this society to become filthy rich and buy their way back onto the beach. I smiled and nodded, because that's what I'm paid to do. Fuckwad. He told a somewhat funny story about posing with World Class Fuckwad Donald Trump. DiNardo wore a barber's outfit and had a pair of shears. The Donald sat in a barber's chair looking nervous. Cute, huh? DiNardo was designing a golf course for him.

When I got back here, I interviewed a far more interesting guy named Bill Pucinski who is going to bring an Oktoberfest to our new arena, which is having problems getting built due to iffy financing. It's a big event. They've held it at the Lake County Fairgrounds for the past few years. They had over 12,000 people pass through the gates. It's not Taste of Chicago, but not bad for here. The only complaint they've had is that the food is not German... it's the usual corn dunked in a vat of butter and funnel cakes. So they've found a vendor who can produce enough Kraut food to feed the masses this year. All the money goes to privately buying land around the state and setting up the land as nature preserves. Neat, huh?

I don't know, I said. If rich people want something bad enough, they'll get it.

We have to at least try, she said. She rolled over onto her side and stared at me. You know: Try.

It feels like the whole world is bleeding out and no matter how hard you press down, the moment you ease up just a bit, it's right back to a gusher.

Then you don't ease up, she said.

How's your kidney stone?

She smiled. Eventually they'll order counseling so that I can make peace with it. Being in constant pain sucks.

Tell me about it, I thought.

Let's go get our marriage license on Monday, I said. The stars began popping through the twilight, one-two-ten-twenty.

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Okay, she said. She rolled onto her back. The blue and the orange gave way to the black and then stars winked on one after another. Venus was high above, glowing. The moon was a thin crescent. We held hands and let the night wash over us.

We went to the county courthouse in Waukegan, showed our driver's licenses to the clerk, I'd gotten an in-state license a few weeks earlier, and we paid our \$15. The clerk told us we could come back the next day and get hitched.

Around the corner from the courthouse, we ran into an old friend of the Bun's, Tony. She introduced me to Tony as Joe, my husband. We went into Taco Bell and sat with him for a while as he ate. He was a huge man who, despite the cold, was sweating through his plain gray sweatshirt.

Do you keep up with anyone from high school? Tony asked.

No, she said. I hated it there.

Yeah, me too, he went. Gobble, gulp, burp.

I only remember the ones from high school I hated, I realized during lunch, while listening to the two talk. I wasn't that far removed from high school.

Tony told me about this guy the Bun hated, Kevin, who decided one summer between his junior and senior years that he was from Massachusetts (even though he was from Michigan). This Kevin guy started talking with a Kennedyesque accent, and so on. Anyway, a year ago, Kevin calls Tony up and tells him he's running for Congress and would Tony support him.

No, Tony says.

Why not? Kevin asks.

Because you're insane.

I don't know, I said, finally injecting myself. I would think that would make him more qualified rather than less.

Tony stared over at me like, Who the fuck is this guy? Where did he come from all of a sudden?

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Joe was in the war, the Bun said.

Oh, Tony said. He wiped his mouth and stood up. We stood up. Tony shook my hand. Nice meeting you.

And you, I said. My hand was greasy.

The Bun, as always, a pleasure, Tony said, bowing his head slightly.

Gutes Glück mein Freund, she said.

We took the same German class, Tony said to me.

What a bitch, the Bun said.

She was hot, Tony said to me. The teacher. All the girls hated her.

Outside, we waved goodbye to Tony. When he was out of earshot, the Bun said, I never liked that guy.

He seemed okay, I said.

Yeah, well, he's a little infatuated with himself.

I worked the truck the next day. Mostly, it was filled with iPods and junk food, so my back got a day off from heavy lifting.

When I got home, the old man and Sandra were bent over the Bun, who was doubled over on the couch. Christ, she said when she saw me.

The stone? I asked. I reached around my own back, felt a strange stab there.

Yeah, she said. I called the doc. He says I have a date with the rock tumbler.

The parents made way for me. I sat down on the couch and she put her head in my lap. She was too warm, sweating.

Sweetheart, I whispered, my voice trembling. I felt helpless. I blushed, looking at her parents. They held hands, standing there. Her mother, with her agoraphobia, wouldn't be able to leave the house. I would have to step up. I would have to do something. Cool Joe Dugan.

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On Thursday, I drove the Bun down to Condell Medical Center to have her kidney stone blown up through shockwave lithotripsy. The truck that performs this service only comes to Lake County once a month, so it was important to make it to the truck this time.

The Bun's date with the rock tumbler was billed as a quickie outpatient procedure. No muss, no fuss. Kaboom!—and the stone dissolves into dust.

She gets doped up, dunked into a tub, they send a shockwave through her, insert a stent into the tube between her kidney and bladder, she goes into post-op, the clouds clear and we hippity-hop out to the car.

Nothing in life goes that smoothly. Not in my family.

The Bun was taken into the pre-op room. I sat out in the waiting room, reading a Mark Leyner book. Then a nurse came out and flagged me down. You can sit with her a while, he said. An IV was planted in her arm and she was on a gurney, awaiting transport to the truck. We nervously chattered. The nurse met his wife at Fort Riley, Kansas.

After an hour, the Bun was whisked away and I was sent back into the waiting room. I read the rest of the Leyner book, then watched a TV show about cheaply refurbishing your home. The Bun was doped up and sent out to the truck, where the doc sent the shock through her system.

Here's something to remember about a shockwave. It doesn't merely hit the stone. It courses through your whole body. You would know this if you ever went through lithotripsy, or if you'd ever had a high velocity round enter and exit through your body.

The Doc came out into the waiting room and told me that the procedure was a success. He said that after he blew the stone, particles of it couldn't even be seen on an X-ray. I felt pretty good about the whole thing right about then.

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Another nurse came out and walked me back to post-op. I sat next to an empty chair for about a half-hour, then saw the Bun hobbling out of the bathroom, assisted by a nurse. She had a look of intense pain on her face that was humbling to me.

Oh my God, she said, sitting down.

A nurse asked her, On a scale of one to ten, one being no pain and ten being complete pain—

Ten, she said.

The nurse said they'd get something for her. Eventually, I stood up and stared at the nurses. The Bun moaned in pain. I couldn't stand it anymore and walked out to the nurse's station and stared at them. What? a nurse went.

Do something! I shouted. Do something, goddamn it! Do something!

This rage that had long lain dormant in me had suddenly galloped to the surface and shrieked.

They paged the doc. He trotted through, signed off on some meds, and ran out the door to do another lithotripsy in the truck. The truck is only here for a day, he said.

They shot her full of Dilaudid. We sat for about two and a half hours waiting for something positive to happen. The Bun tried to pee and pretty much failed. It feels like someone is standing on my bladder, she told anyone who would listen.

That's the stent, a nurse said.

They all said it was normal. But nothing about this seemed normal.

After a quick interview with a rude nurse, we were sent packing. I took the Bun home. Her parents helped me get her to her room. I wheeled an extra bed in there and lay down beside her.

Stop it! she said, smiling at me.

Stop?

Staring.

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I went down to the kitchen where her mother sat. Thank you so much for going today. I don't know what we'd do without you.

I— I started to speak. But I couldn't find the words. What was I supposed to do? I felt something overwhelming for this woman, from the first moment I'd seen her. Was I supposed to let her remain in pain? Was I supposed to walk away?

But, of course, this is what I was doing with my own mother. I was avoiding my mother, hiding out in Illinois and letting my insane brother and zealot sister deal with her.

I found some leftover soup in the refrigerator and heated it up on the stove. I poured it in a large mug and found a soup spoon.

I'll clean the pot, Sandra said. You take that up there before it gets cold.

But the pain was intense. She couldn't keep anything down.

About 11 p.m., she had me call the doc. I got his answering service, who forwarded a message to him.

She can't keep anything down, I told him when he called back. She's in intense pain. She can't urinate.

Normal, he assured me.

I put the Bun to bed with a dose of pain killer (oxycodone, AKA methodone, the heroin substitute).

She seemed a bit better when she woke up the next morning. I made her some hot chocolate and went to work. About 10 minutes after getting there, she called. The doc's office called, she told me. They want to see me ASAP. Something in her voice told me that this was serious. I ran out of the store, saying to one of my teammates, I have to take the Bun to the hospital.

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The Bun calmly took a shower. I paced. She dressed and we walked out to the car.

On the way to the doc's office, the Bun had me pull the car over and she vomited all brown. At the doc's office, he gave her a quick exam and decided she needed an X-ray. The Bun joked, I've thought about it and I'd like the stone back.

We drove five miles to the X-ray place, where they were expecting us. The Bun leaned out the window and threw up all over the side of the car on the way. The techs shot a pic of the Bun's newly recomposed stone, located right where the stent was supposed to stop it from reforming.

We drove back to the Doc's office. The Bun vomited on the way. This time I pulled over. She shook. I held her cheek in my palm. It was cold and wet.

By the time we made it back into his office, I knew from the expression on the Bun's face that she was in excruciating pain.

I thought, Either he says she goes to the hospital, or I take his fucking head off. I was sick of screwing around.

He didn't even have to examine her. The X-ray told the story. He'd written up the order for her to go to the hospital. I escorted the Bun out to the front door and ran to get the car. I ran over the curb, swearing, and drove over to get her, almost rear-ending a hospital shuttlebus filled with oldsters.

On the way to the hospital, stuck in traffic behind more geezers, I looked down at my future wife doubled over in pain on the bench seat next to me.

This is the worst I've ever felt, she managed to moan out.

It was the most helpless I've ever felt. More helpless than my final minutes on the battlefield in Iraq. I felt like I had more at stake here than I did there. Over there, it was merely my own life. Here, it was hers.

This is when you start bargaining with God. Okay, God. If you make this stop...

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I pulled up in front of the hospital and helped the Bun to the front desk. A sign outside said, No parking. So I had to go park the car in the adjacent parking garage. Once I knew that they knew who she was, I ran outside, pushing a sliding door ajar, and drove the car up into the parking garage. A lot of space in that garage was reserved for doctors and valet services. At the fourth floor of the garage, I parked the car and sprinted back inside the hospital.

I realize now that this was the first time I'd sprinted since—since a long time before.

Now the Bun was in a wheelchair, slumped over. The lady at the desk was helping a little poor family. C'mon lady, I said. Let's go.

Now if you'll follow me... We followed her to a waiting room. The Bun asked for something to puke into. The poor family slowly walked past a garbage can. I tried to get around them, asked them to please excuse me, etc., but they wouldn't get out of the way. I grabbed the can and dragged it over the Bun, bumping the little family. They looked offended.

I must have given them a look that quickly shifted them away, because they did.

As the Bun retched bile into the can, the staff conferred at the admissions desk. An orderly was dispatched to get annoying, puke girl out of there.

Our next stop was the admissions ward, where Nurse Pat took very good care of the Bun. We gave her the admissions sheet from the doc. But the doc's handwriting was a bit inscrutable, especially the order for the drug that would calm down the Bun's nausea. Can't make it out, Nurse Pat said. So I spent an hour staring at the handwriting, thinking that if I stared long enough the scribble would metamorphose into actual words. It did not.

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Meanwhile, the Bun continued to vomit up bile. Jesus, you asshole, I thought. When I die I'm gonna wring your neck.

The Bun demanded an enema at one point.

An enema? Nurse Pat asked.

It's very German, I said. We're weird like that.

Many questions demanded to be answered, of medical history and health insurance. I tried to answer some. The Bun tried to come up with a urine sample and came out of the bathroom with a cup filled with blood.

The nurses kept trying to raise the doc and finally got through. The anti-nausea drug was fenergan, and it knocked the Bun out. She was on an IV drip of sugared saline and Cipro by this time, and had had a shot of morphine on top of that. She was covered in sweat and curled into a ball.

We checked in at noon. At 3, a room was assigned. At 4, Nurse Pat said that the room was being cleaned. She handed me a sandwich and told me to eat it. At 5, transport was provided in the person of a 98-pound girl, who wheeled the bed over to the elevators and pushed the Bun all the way to her room. Another male nurse came in and said that he would be the Bun's nurse.

On autopilot, I got up and turned on the Cubs game. Then another orderly came in and said, It's time to go to surgery.

The Bun leaned over to me and whispered, It's Tobey Maguire. I stood up and looked at him. Son-of-a-bitch if it wasn't Tobey Maguire. He even had on the same glasses that Tobey wore in Spiderman 2. He spoke in surfer-dude patois, telling us that our Doc was awesome.

No, Tobey. You are awesome.

In pre-op, the Bun met her anesthesiologist. You are my best friend, she informed him. He seemed tickled by that.

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The Bun still hadn't signed her consent form for the surgery. There was also some question over a pregnancy test. So they tested her again. The doc came in and explained that he would take out the stent, guide a laser up to the clog of stones and blast them, and then insert another stent. He left.

Isn't she supposed to sign something? I asked.

The pre-op nurses paged the Doc. The Bun signed the form and I was shooed into the waiting room. Another poor family was in there watching Univision. I usually dig those shows, especially the soap operas, but I wasn't in the mood. I read a Smithsonian magazine instead.

I called the Bun's family on the courtesy phone and told them what was going on. It was 6 or 7 by this time. I was called to the desk and told to sit in a consultation room. The doc came in and explained that he'd blasted and scooped up most of the stones except for the ones that were still in the Bun's kidney. Those he just blasted.

About 8, I was summoned and there was the Bun on the gurney, looking woozy. Goddamnit if she isn't a trooper.

An hour after she was wheeled to her room, she was eating jello, her color coming back. I didn't want to leave. She said, Go home. Go make my parents calm.

I went home, sat her parents down and told them about the day. They both thanked me for being there. What would we have done? Sandra asked over and over.

I tried to sleep. I ended up going into the Bun's room and curling up on her bed. I ran my hand along the wall.

Morning.

I went to the hospital. The Bun was up. Some of her color was coming back. Relief. The doc came by and released her.

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On Sunday, the Bun managed to eat some solid food.

The first bill for the Bun's stone (\$38,832.16) was only a preliminary one, though it did offer the option of paying with MasterCard, Visa or Discover.

'16.

GOODBYE

Three letters and a large envelope arrived for me on a Monday. One informed me that I owed the United States Army a shitload of money. The charges were itemized on the attached sheet. Everything seemed in order.

The other informed me that I had been accepted into the Smithville Fire Department as a Firefighter II. I was to report to the Mundelein Regional Fire Academy at the end of January for 280 hours (9 weeks) of instruction in fire science. My tuition

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would be paid by the township of Smithville and I would receive a salary during the instruction period, after which I would be assigned to a fire station. In the large envelope was an ungodly amount of paperwork to fill out and return to the township.

The appointment was via the hand of the old man, no doubt.

The third letter informed me that I had jury duty.

Can't you get out of it? the Bun asked. The jury duty? I mean, you're a veteran. And this bill from the Army? That's bullshit!

I wasn't used to getting out of things, so I didn't try.

Before jury duty, I accompanied the Bun to a working ranch to interview one of the ranch hands, a big, quiet galoot named Ted. Ted had worked there for 15 years and the Bun's editor thought it would make a nice feature. The Bun thought I could use the air. And I wanted to keep an eye on her. She handed me a camera before we left and told me I was to pretend to be her photographer.

Ted drove us around the ranch in his Toyota pickup truck.

You have a cowboy hat? I asked him. The field we were driving across featured a stream near a stand of pine trees, along with many cattle. I could see the picture forming in my head.

Left it in the trailer, Ted said. The picture in my head changed slightly.

Ted parked the pickup and the cattle came running over. They lowed hungrily. We hopped in the bed of the truck. I tried to take a shot of Ted with the cattle in the background, but I'd brought the wrong lens. Plus, I didn't know what I was doing. It helps to know what you're doing when you're doing something, I've found. I shot a picture of Ted, sans cowboy hat, sans cattle.

I heard a pop, like someone had slapped an inflated paper bag. Ted heard it too. He peered out into the herd anxiously.

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A cow was running away from the herd, screaming, smoke pouring out of its side. Burning beef scent.

What the hell? I went.

People don't realize cows can spontaneously combust, Ted said, anxiously. It's all the methane in their guts. He hopped down, got back into the cab with the Bun. I did, too.

It happens once or twice a year, he said, putting the truck in gear. We drove off toward the screaming, burning cow.

I was stuck in traffic on my way to jury duty. My cell phone rang. It was new. It scared the shit out of me. I picked it up gingerly and flipped it open. I pushed the talk button. Hello?

Hi, big brother! yodeled my little sister.

Hey, I said.

It's Magda, she said. The Bun gave me your number! She sounds nice. I like her. Is she Catholic? Or you getting married in the church? She tells me there's a church across the street.

Ah, I said. So how's mom doing?

Okay, I guess, she said.

Her voice was crackling, like chatting on walkie talkies. She spent her life on the cell phone. Even when I was visiting, she worked the damn thing constantly, mostly texting.

You guess? Magda said.

How's Mom? I shouted into the thing. I was certain she couldn't hear me. Over, I went.

The cancer was in her liver now, Magda reported. Only a matter of time, the docs said, before it enters the lungs and brain. Funny how something that started out smaller than the period at the end of a sentence, detectable only through the use of sophisticated imaging systems, can spread itself through your body and eventually kill you.

Yes, I went. That's not only funny, it's hilarious.

She ignored my last comment.

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Run across anything interesting in your travels? Magda shouted, her voice echoing through the static.

I saw a cow explode, I said.

I've got to get going, Magda said, dismissing me. She must have had an extra 30 seconds between important teenage texts. The phone booped dead. I pushed the red button on mine and set it back down on the seat next to me. I turned a corner and it slid across the seat and landed somewhere out of reach. I heard it make a strange bleating sound.

When I got to the county's parking garage, the phone complained that it had a new text for me. Not knowing how to retrieve it, I decided to chuck the phone into the glove compartment.

All the traffic made me late. Every road in Lake County was under construction, seemingly. The day was brisk, maybe 45 degrees out. A bag lady shouted, Where your coat at! Hey, boy! I'm talking to you!

I climbed the courthouse steps and walked through the metal detector. The guard asked me to go through it again. Then she took me aside and waved the wand over me. My legs and face elicited much noise. Blown up in Iraq, I said to her. I pulled out my blue retiree I.D. card and showed it to her. She let me go.

The jury waiting room was around the corner. I waited in line in the corridor. I gave the jury coordinator my summons and the little questionnaire that came with it. She gave me a sticker that said, **JUROR**. I put it on.

About 200 people were crammed in there, all sitting on folding chairs. I sat next to an enormous, pursed-lipped lady whose nose was speckled with dots, possibly cancerous. A couple of minutes after I sat down, the lady leaned over and said, I wonder how many more people they can cram in here?

I imagine they have as many seats as jurors, I said.

They didn't. A few minutes later, people were crowding into the corners of the room.

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A judge came in, wrapped in his black judicial finery. He talked about how important it was for us all to keep our mouths shut if we were picked as jurors. This applied mainly, it seemed, to going to the bathroom. If I see you in the bathroom, I will make every effort not to make eye contact. Please don't be offended, he said. He wouldn't be the only one not making eye contact in the bathroom. We were not to make eye contact with all sorts of people, the judge said. Journalists. Criminals. Various lawyers.

A short film played on a TV monitor. In it, a young hispanic woman was chosen as a juror. Outside the courtroom, the judge and the opposing attorneys kept their distance from her, even in the elevator. A satanic-looking journalist wielding a notebook tried to talk to her, hounding her down the hallway. She didn't make eye contact. Snorts all around. Even her husband tried to talk to her. No way did she talk. It all faded away to the flag with the crunchy yellowed Constitution superimposed on it.

Any questions? the judge asked while the tape rewound.

No one said a word.

A group of 25 was chosen, each name read off. I was in it. As our names were called off, we went outside into the corridor and stood in line in the order we were called, while people were renewing their tags and getting fishing licenses.

We filed upstairs to a cozy courtroom. There were so many of us that some had to sit in what little chairs were available in the audience section. I was in row 3, seat 2. The attorneys studied our questionnaires.

The prosecutor was impossibly young, as was the defendant, who was wearing a pair of headphones attached to a microphone, into which a skinny redhead rattled on in Spanish. The defendant wore a Jim Brown throwback jersey, enormous sneakers and baggy jeans. His left arm was in a cast from his elbow to the tips of all five fingers.

The judge, who had an Easter Island head overflowing with white hair, gave us yet another briefing on the law. I peered

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around at my fellow jurors. They stared up at him. The young hispanic kid was accused of stealing something unspecified from the Buy and Bye. The judge finished.

The prosecutor hopped up to a podium, shuffled the papers on it and explained the same thing as the judge. Then he went into a soliloquy on reasonable doubt, which apparently isn't the same thing as without one single shred of doubt.

Now what if you found a gopher tortoise on a fence post? Would you assume it leapt up there on its own?

Why not a box turtle? A hedgehog? I accidentally said aloud.

I was ignored. Row one? The prosecutor was adorable, like a stuffed panda you might win at a carnival. I wanted to hand him a plate of cookies and a glass of cold milk.

A lady in row one raised her hand. Can I go to the bathroom? she asked.

The defense attorney asked, How many of you have been to Buy and Bye? Every hand went up. How many of you have been in a Buy and Bye when it wasn't busy?

A lady in my row raised her hand. I go there at 3 p.m. after my shift and it ain't busy.

After an hour of this nonsense, the defense attorney got around to questioning individual jurors about their bad experiences with the law. A guy in my row had a shotgun stolen from his garage. A cop came out and took down a report, but the cops never did a follow-up. A shotgun's a powerful weapon, the guy explained. You'd think they'd care.

A lady in row two had been tried and acquitted of fraud recently. I never did nothing, she said. And it took the law two years to figure that out. Now I'm broke from you lawyers.

You wouldn't hold that against me, would you? the defense attorney asked her.

You all the same, the woman said flatly.

ALPHA MIKE FOXTROT

The defense attorney asked, row by row, if we thought chopping off hands would prevent crime. The guy who'd had his shotgun stolen was all for it.

Finally, and he'd been itching to do it, the defense attorney turned to me. Mr. Dugan, he said. Where do you work?

I wasn't chosen for the jury.

But before I wasn't chosen, we were all given a potty break. On my way back to the courtroom from the men's room, filing along with the rest of the relieved potential jurors, we were treated to the defendant walking along toward the bathroom, smiling at each of us, hugging his broken arm like it was a day-old infant. It was a smile that said, Look at me. I'm harmless. I'm a stranger in a strange land with strange customs. And they beat me up. Isn't that punishment enough?

Well, maybe.

When we were all seated and the defendant was hooked up to his translator again, the attorneys met at the bench and whispered to each other. At one point, all three jurists glared over at me.

They broke up and announced their jury, six women and a female alternate—all the people who had barely spoken.

Women, shotgun guy said to me. It figures.

I shrugged, and smiled.

Outside, the day had warmed up considerably. I drove home. Two teenagers were playing football on the driveway. They were not tenants. Why? Probably because they're full of Self Esteem, which is what we teach kids in school these days instead of math. So I honked and pulled up and they got out of the way. They went into the street. As I shut the car down, I heard a loud thump. One of them had chucked the football at the back of the car.

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Aww! Aren't kids cute? They are our future, we're told. If so, our future is full of fellas who resemble Moe, the head Stooge. Ignorant and arrogant. It's a swell combination.

One of them pretended to apologize, snickering and smirking like the president does when he says, "Liberal."

I smiled winningly at them. The car was made in the 1960's. You could hit it with a crowbar and nothing would happen. And if, in a fit of Self Esteem, they decide to key it later on tonight, I won't care. Because it's just a car.

What are my options? If you hit a kid in this society, you go to prison. Soccer Mommies have made that (and drinking and driving) illegal as all hell. And if I call the cops, they won't do a thing. They're overworked as it is trying to keep poor people in their place.

I'm sure their parents are any one of a number of Hard Working Republican Pro-Life Jesus Worshiping Joes who live in Smithville. When I used to walk around here, I saw them all the time. And there's your irony, ladies and germs. Their parents are voting to create an America without pity. And at the same time, they are coddling their precious dumplings into being weak, dependent little snots. That worked for Our Beloved President, but that won't work for these kids. They don't have Bush Money or Bush Power.

And then they grow up. And when you're an adult, all that childhood protection melts away.

Eventually, they'll get fired for not working enough quality hours in the cubicle farm, or whatever will be replacing the cubicle farm in the next few years, since that's followed all of our factory work overseas.

Hard work? Ick! Can I see any of them picking up a shovel? Getting their hands dirty? Um, not unless they're beating down a gay man. I can see them doing that.

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When they become adults in an America Without Pity, they will get none. Better not falter. Better not get sick. Better not lose your no-benefits job.

I went back out to the car and dug my phone out of the glove box. I went back inside. I called my mother. The phone rang and rang and finally her answering machine picked up. It had one of those mechanical voices on it that informed me that the number I had reached was not available at this time. The mechanical voice sounded apologetic, or melancholic, or both. I thought, I should get some recordings with that voice on a little box that I could hang around my neck, with maybe some music mixed in, and then I could push a button on the little box and the mechanical voice could apologize for my behavior: 'I'm sorry, but I don't enjoy talking to you. So I'm going to stand over there.' Then Morrissey could sing, 'I'm soooooo very sickened...'

I hung up.

I went to the refrigerator and got a beer. I cracked it open and took a few swallows.

I called again. This time she answered. What day is it?

It's Monday, I said.

Monday?

That's right, I said. Your German accent is coming back.

I lost the weekend, she said.

Good movie, I said. Ray Milland.

You don't remember that movie, she said. You're too young.

You're never too young to watch cable, I said.

It's really Monday?

Indeed, I said. Tough chemo last week?

My hair is all over the pillow, she said. It fell out.

Good thing you didn't go in to your stylist, I said.

Not funny.

JOHN L. SHEPPARD

No, I suppose it isn't.

How did jury duty go? Did they pick you? Magda told me of this.

No, I said. I told her about it. She liked the story.

Americans and their justice, Mom said.

Whatever the world might say about Americans, all Americans share a core set of beliefs: No outright stealing (when anyone's looking), no non-revenge killing, and work hard (or die).

Bet you Germans could teach us a thing or two about justice.

Don't start, she said. I'm your mother.

So you don't remember the weekend at all?

You could visit every once in a while, she said. Fly down here from wherever you are. God I'm thirsty.

I'm tired.

You're tired? I just slept all weekend. Try it some time. It'll wear you out.

Being sick was her full-time job. She talked about drugs and chemo and blood counts and weight loss and her various doctors and nurses the way healthy people talked about work and co-workers.

Do you remember that doctor who used to appear on Merv Griffin way back when? I asked. What was his name? He used to talk about how he cured his cancer by meditating. He said that he imagined it as a rock that got worn down by a stream.

That was in the eighties, Mom said. People were silly then. Besides, that man died of cancer. He didn't cure anything.

I should come visit you, I said.

I don't call there because of that girlfriend of yours, Mom said. I'd call, but I'm afraid she'll pick up.

Yeah, she's scary all right, I said.

Make fun all you want, Mom said. That's all you ever do.

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I work, too, I said.

I remember finding out that you'd joined the Army, Mom said.

You should have a cup of coffee and an Ensure, I said. Hell, have three cups and three Ensures. That ought to keep you awake for an hour or two.

We talked a few more minutes. I agreed to think about visiting Florida during Christmas.

I hung up and drank my beer. I killed the beer.

No cure for cancer.

I collapsed on the sofa.

The Bun came shambling in. I picked up my feet and she sat down. I plopped my feet in her lap.

I have too many jobs, she said.

Me, too, I said.

You only have one job, she said.

Exactly, I said. You want to get married tomorrow?

Do you love me?

Yes, I said.

Why don't you say it? she said.

I don't know, I said. Didn't I say it once already?

Say it once more, she said. Try it on for size. She rolled her eyes.

I made some sort of face, apparently.

Not now—spontaneously at some point, she said. In the near future. Just a little something for you to work on along with your posture.

What's wrong with my posture?

It's way too erect. Slouch a little. Relax.

Yes, ma'am. So, how about getting married?

Okay. Tomorrow.

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She was all better now. I saw myself reflected in her glasses. The angry soldier was gone. It was just me again, whoever I am. I leaned over and kissed her. I meant to kiss her on the cheek, but she angled and we ended up in a liplock. I pulled away, flushed. I wasn't used to strong feelings. I whispered, Going on a walk. I hadn't meant to whisper, it just came out like that.

I put on my Coke jacket and left the boarding house. Outside, the first snow of the season came hissing down. It didn't seem like it should be cold enough, but what did I know?

The next day, we drove down to the county courthouse and got married. It took fifteen minutes. The clerk who married us, a nice middle-aged lady with a ya-hey lilt to her voice, took us into a small room. She also took our picture with a cheap digital camera we'd bought. Outside, people were getting their ice-fishing licenses and hunting permits. The Bun wore a Replacements t-shirt with a long-sleeved black t-shirt underneath, a purple skirt, black-and-white-striped thigh-high stockings and Doc Martens. I wore a pocket t-shirt, jeans, sneakers and my Coca-Cola jacket. We didn't bring anyone else along.

The Bun slipped her grandpa's hefty gold ring on my bony finger and I slipped her grandma's gold band on hers. We had our first kiss as a married people as the clerk snapped away.

Outside, all married and everything, the homeless lady shouted at the Bun for not wearing a coat. We slipped around in the snow. We ate at a barbecue joint across the street, not saying much of anything to each other.

She asked me, Do you feel different?

I said, Yes.

I felt strange. I felt happy. Or maybe, when I was with her, I forgot that I was supposed to be unhappy, that I was actually a sad person.

I was poor. We were poor. I had barely any money left from the Army. I'd secretly gone down to the hospital and paid

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off her kidney stone bill. I still had my own bill from the Army to pay off for all the equipment that I had as my responsibility.

The Bun wiped some barbecue sauce and grease from my mouth with a wet-nap. She slipped off her one of her Docs and ran her toe up my ankle and along my inseam.

I twisted the wedding ring on my finger.

Let's go, she said. She dropped some money on the table and we left.

We drove down the street to the Emperor's Inn, a strip motel far from any highway. We had a piece of paper that said we were just married. We got the honeymoon suite for \$120, the unit at the end of the strip, which meant only one neighbor. Inside, the whole room was done up in pinks and reds with a rotating, heart-shaped bed and mirrors on the ceiling and a heart-shaped bathtub big enough for two people and porno on demand on the TV and chocolate-dipped strawberries on wooden skewers on a silver platter and a bottle of cheap champagne in a galvanized tin bucket. The ice in the bucket had melted into slush.

You wanna pop the cork? she asked me.

Uh-huh, I went. I took her hand and led her to the bed. I found a remote control and made the bed stop spinning. We lay down together and looked into each other's eyes. I looked away first, and then looked back again. We kissed as man and wife. We made slow, methodical love.

So this is what it's supposed to be like, I thought afterwards. The ceiling rotated without help from the bed.

Curled together nude and wrapped in a gaudy sheet, I whispered in her ear, I love you. The words trembled out.

Was that so hard? she asked.

17.

MARRIED LIFE AND DEATH

I turned on the TV and was pleasantly surprised to find that it had basic cable in addition to the porno on demand.

I clicked around the channels and stopped on a commercial running against a Republican running for, um, something or other. **LIBERAL BILL BUCKLEY** it said at the top of the screen. A picture of Liberal Bill Buckley flickered ominously on

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the screen. He was smiling, the rotten bastard. The voiceover accused him of being **A FORMER DEMOCRAT.**

Turn that thing off and c'mere, the Bun said.

In the morning, we walked outside to find that the snow had melted overnight. In its place was five square feet of bird shit on top of, and around, the car. A rectangle of white. When I pulled the car out of the parking space, the outline of the back of the Comet was plain to the naked eye in the bird shit.

No tree limb hung over the parking space, so it's not like birds could sit above the car, drinking coffee and having a cheery little crap. They must have all been flying over in a nice formation when the lead bird shouted, Now! and down came the white torrent of feces.

Or maybe a car backfired and scared the shit out of them.

What caused a such a tight flock of birds to evacuate their bowels all at the same time? Why am I looking for meaning in it? Probably because it happened to me. I'd had a good run lately, what with getting married and the fire department taking me on. Time for bad luck.

We checked out of the seedy little motel and drove home.

Sandra and the old man were up when we got home, sitting at the kitchen table drinking coffee. Breakfast for the boarders was burbling on the stove. You got married, Sandra shouted, clapping her hands, looking at the Bun's hand.

We did, the Bun said.

I knew you would, Sandra said. I just knew it. She threw her arms around her daughter's neck and kissed her on the cheek.

Congratulations, the old man said, not getting up. He saluted us with his coffee cup and then took a sip.

Sandra hugged me so hard my back cracked.

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Later in the day, I took the car to be washed and have the oil changed at an Auto Spa. The car had been insisting that it needed an oil change all week, chiming at me while displaying the message OIL on the dash. The odometer had rolled past the magic 85,000-mile threshold a week before. I remembered driving along and seeing the 84,999 and almost driving onto a sidewalk while waiting for the three zeroes to appear. We're all hardwired to anticipate these moments, as if they have significance.

I figured the oil change and wash would take a while (it did), so I brought along one of my borrowed Reader's Digest books and read the condensed version of the novel Dealer Wins. While the bird shit was being cleansed from the car and the tar-thick oil drained, I read about how the narrator, Jon, an engineer from Indiana, decided to spend his 30th birthday in Las Vegas. He was expecting something big to happen, a defining moment. Or maybe expecting is too strong a word. Hoping?

Nothing incredibly important happened. Jon stayed in a shitty hotel casino and played cards. He saw George Carlin from a front-row seat. He rented a hot car.

At the beginning of his stay, while waiting in line at registration, he spotted an ex-girlfriend with her new husband, also waiting in line. He willed himself invisible.

Later, he ponders fate. Do you make your own? Or do things just happen? The odometer of his life had turned over and he didn't feel like anything had changed.

The book was finished, the car was clean and I headed home.

The Bun and I walked around the neighborhood that evening, holding gloved hands.

Which room would we sleep in? Should we move out? No, we couldn't afford that yet. We decided that I'd move into

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her room, but that I'd take the bed out of the room I was in now and push it up against her bed. Instant king!

The Bun noticed a lot of F150's parked around. Inside one of the houses, through the front windows, we saw a prayer meeting going on. Chairs were arrayed around a television set.

The president's on tonight, the Bun said. Her breath became ice crystals, floating.

Oh, I went.

They're praying for him, she said.

For a moment, I felt a strange pang, like I missed the Army. Like I should be back over there instead of back here enjoying my life, living like the war had never happened. It was so easy to believe that there was no war at all. It wasn't like the country had mobilized. There were no victory gardens, no rationing, nothing of the sort. People stateside weren't expected to sacrifice at all. Not even a draft. In fact, people in the United States were expected to spend and consume as if that was the most patriotic thing anyone could do. The war was practically invisible, especially if you ignored the news.

The F150's all had variations of three magnetic stickers on the back: A metallic Jesus fish, a yellow Support the Troops ribbon, and a big number 3 for their patron saint, the dead NASCAR driver Dale Earnhardt.

Poor dead Dale, I said, looking at the back of one of the trucks.

Dead who? the Bun asked.

Dale Earnhardt, I said. That's what the number 3 is for. It was his number.

No kidding, she said. I always thought it referred to the Holy Trinity.

A dog was up ahead of us, his barks coming out in hacks like a pack-a-day smoker's. He'd treed a squirrel. The squirrel nattered from halfway up the trunk.

That squirrel looks like he's shaking his fist, the Bun said.

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Hff! Hff! the dog went, wagging his rump. He had no tail.

I hadn't made any plans to go home to Florida for Christmas. The Buy and Bye claimed they needed me. Going home seemed ridiculous when everything was going so well in Illinois. You have to ride these lucky streaks all the way to the end, squeeze every drop out of them, so that when it came time to pay with bad luck you didn't feel cheated.

I was at work, stacking Happy Lucky printers in a cheap pile, when the call came in back at the boarding house. My brother was wonderfully shitty to my new wife. Just put Joe on and back off, whoever you are, he told her.

I'm his wife, she told him. After a long silence, He's at work.

Give me his work number, he said.

No, she told him.

They both gave the same account to me later on, both feeling aggrieved.

She called me up at work. I was paged to the warehouse. A phone was pointed at by a mophead.

May I help you, sir or ma'am?

Your brother called, she said, her voice trembling with rage. He claims that your mother has taken a turn for the worse.

Uh, huh.

As in she has a week left at most.

Uh huh.

He requests that you call him down in Florida at that madhouse.

As soon as I get off work—

Now please.

Now?

As soon as humanly possible, please.

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I love you, I said as sweetly as I could.

I hope so, she said, and hung up.

I slipped my calling card out of my wallet and dialed 9 for an outside number.

Is that a personal call? Randi asked.

My mother is dying, I said.

Right now?

So I'm told.

You'll have to call her from the payphone in the break-room, she said.

Roger, I said.

And you'll have to punch out for lunch, too, she said.

That's a rog, I said.

I punched out for lunch and went to the breakroom. It was full of mopheads eating pizza and shooting silly string at each other. Yo, Joe, what-up? a warehouse mophead asked. He squirted silly string at me. I pulled it off and continued on toward the phone. Like, you don't have to be so serious all the time.

I put on my jacket and left. On the way out of the store, Becky tried to frisk me. I took off my jacket and held it out.

What's that? she asked.

What's what?

The ring. Did you marry that bitch?

That's none of your business, I said.

None of my business, she said.

Fuckin' A right it's none of your fucking business, I said.

Okay, she said. Shit. She backed off. Just go.

And that was the last time I stepped inside that store. I believe that in Illinois they call that job abandonment. Whatever. I drove home to the boarding house.

My new family was sitting around the kitchen table playing cards, betting pretzel sticks. They were all losing, by the look

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of it. The Bun ran over to me as soon as I was completely indoors and threw her arms around my neck. I'm sorry! she went.

It's okay, I said.

So what did your brother say?

I haven't called yet, I said.

I made plane reservations for the both of us, she said.

The both of us?

I'm your wife, she said. Remember? I'm not letting you go alone.

Okay, I said. I wrapped my arms around her and closed my eyes. I don't want to lose you.

How would you lose me? she asked, her voice muffled in my jacket.

You may decide, upon meeting my family...

No, she said. You won't lose me.

They're pretty, um...

Yeah, she said. I got that.

Shitty.

Yeah, she said. She pushed off me. Go call them. Now.

Yes, ma'am, I said.

Her parents smiled weakly at me. Hi, folks, I said.

Hi, went the old man.

Sandra studied her cards.

I climbed the stairs to the second floor.

Oh, did I forget to mention that I'd smashed my cell-phone to bits, maybe a week or two before? It rang one too many times, unnerving me. So I killed it.

The old wood creaked and groaned under my feet. The sounds had texture. The house ticked and pinged around me. I saw dust bunnies gathered on each step. I noticed the sag of the stairs and the smoothed out slight concavity of the banister. I stopped at the top of that flight of stairs, on the second floor. I closed my eyes. I could hear that one of the workers on the third

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floor was up out of bed, pacing around his room. Another one was asleep in his, snoring. And my Big Ben clock: I could hear it ticking in our room at the end of the hall. The soldiers in my squad used to call this hyperawareness, spidey senses, but there was nothing mystical or superheroic about it. Just a matter of tuning in what you would ordinarily tune out.

I went into our bedroom, sat down on our makeshift king-sized bed and placed a call home.

You knew this day was coming, my brother said.

What day?

This day.

Ah.

And yet there you are up in Ohio—

—Illinois.

Illinois, fucking around.

I have not been fucking around. I got married. I got a job.

A job moving boxes? You can get a job like that anywhere. And that wife of yours—

You shut your psycho mouth about my wife.

Psycho mouth?

We're coming tomorrow.

We're?

Yes. Me and my wife.

You would foist her on us. Now especially. It's always about you.

She's my wife. She'd better be welcome.

Fine. Bring her. But we don't have anyone available to pick you up from the airport. Do you remember the address?

Yes.

I hung up.

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We took the airport shuttle down to O'Hare and arrived with two hours to spare. We ended up being the only passengers in the 20 passenger van (on the sides, the legend JAMMIN' SHUTTLE). Out on the highway, I asked a few questions. How'd you get time off from all your jobs? (She just did and I shouldn't worry about that at a time like this.) How did you pay for the tickets? (She has three jobs and I shouldn't worry about that at a time like this. And did she detect a bit of a whine in my voice?) Are you sure about coming? It could be unpleasant. (Yes, she was sure and what was the matter with my wedding band and why did I keep twisting it around on my finger?) Um.

The driver had political radio on in the background. Callers were incensed about flag burning. This country allowed entirely too much of it, especially when our troops were fighting and dying in foreign lands in defense of the flag. One caller suggested that flag burners should be lined up against a wall and shot.

So where you folks going? the driver asked. His hair was slicked straight back. In the rearview mirror, I could see his tiny mustache rotating as he chewed gum.

Florida, I said.

That's nice. Going to see relatives?

That's the idea, I said.

Oh dear God, the Bun groaned.

What? the driver went.

Are you listening to this? the Bun asked me.

No, I lied.

I can change the station, the driver offered.

I mean, a flag burning amendment? the Bun went.

I can change it to music. What kind of music do you folks listen to?

Yeah, I said.

What? the driver went.

Anything but this, the Bun said.

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Okeydoke, the driver said.

The weather is nice heading down at night. Pleasant. No traffic, I said.

Yeah, the driver said. I like working the night shift. He landed on a classic rock station in the middle of Styx's 'Lady.'

His mother's dying, the Bun said.

Aw, I'm sorry to hear that, the driver said. My ma died last year right around this time.

I'm sorry, I said.

I'm sorry, the Bun said.

We were all sorry.

Thank you, the driver said. He peered into the rearview mirror at us, continuing to chew and chew his gum. Some life, he offered.

Yeah, I said.

Flag burning amendment, the Bun grumbled.

Takes all kinds, the driver said.

At the ticket counter, we found that we'd have to sit in separate seats. Mine was in the rear of the aircraft. Hers was midway. The clerk at the ticket counter told us that we were so cute together, look! newlyweds!, that she could eat us with a spoon. We checked all our luggage and left with our tickets.

The airport was stuffed with people. Bustle, bustle. We made it to our terminal and gate. Across from our gate was a restaurant that served pirogi, sausages, Italian beef and Old Style beer.

What's Italian beef? I asked the Bun.

We don't have time for that, she told me. Our flight was boarding. We stepped in line and shuffled forward. The Bun was told to get out of line and sit with an old lady in a wheelchair and a white hip-hop kid in a roped-off area. I'll try to swap seats, she called to me, as she slipped off her shoes. I felt an irrational pang of lust. She has such pretty legs.

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THIS FLIGHT IS OVERBOOKED, a voice called out over the intercom. Volunteers could catch a later flight out and would receive a free ticket to anywhere the airline flew. No one was stepping up.

I was seated between a kid playing a video game on her cellphone and a granny. Granny had to get up to let me in. Hey, man, the video kid said, not looking up as I sat down. Like we were old pals from the neighborhood.

Boop, boop, boop, the old lady said, nodding her head toward the gamer. Her hair was sprayed stiff.

I watched the aisle over the seats in front of us, waiting for the Bun to get on. I saw her moving into a seat rows and rows away.

I leaned back in my seat and closed my eyes. I didn't feel us taking off. I drifted away into a dream. I was in basic training again. This time, my father was my drill sergeant, dressed in his blue Air Force uniform. He slept in the barracks with us on a tatty couch wrapped in a green Army blanket.

What's all the racket? he asked after reveille.

We gotta get up now, a private told him.

Somehow, I'd been demoted all the way down to private, too.

We dressed in our PT uniforms, but my father gathered us around the couch so he could read Mark Twain to us. He was young, I noticed, slick black hair and thin. He pulled a pack of Pall Malls out of his pocket. Anyone got a lighter?

We ain't allowed to have lighters, a private told him.

That's all right, my father said. He put away his smokes, but left one dangling unlit from his mouth, muffling his speech. Where were we? he asked.

Huck is pretending to be Tom, a private said.

Jim's locked up, another private said.

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We all sat on the floor around the couch, a leatherette number covered over with duct tape in spots. All right here we are, my father said, leafing through the book.

I didn't sit down with the rest. I walked over to a window and watched a gun battle raging on the street below. We were in Ramadi. I recognized it. I'm going to the arms room, I announced. I opened up my wall locker and dug out my BDU's and TA-50.

I need to draw my weapon, I said aloud.

My uniform had my proper rank on it. I was a sergeant again. I was having problems putting on my uniform. Nothing fit properly. I kept falling down.

My father continued reading.

A stray artillery round hit the base of the building. The corner crumbled away, revealing the gun battle outside. I was in my stocking feet, one leg in my pants, hopping. On your feet! I shouted.

The platoon continued sitting around my father while he read. I fell over and hit my head on the floor.

I awoke. Why did I pick now to start dreaming again? My eyes were all crusty. We were almost there.

The airplane door opened and I could taste Florida out there, bitter and wet. More than Iraq, this was the place I never wanted to go to again. I'd never felt one with it.

Everyone shoved their way off the plane, dropping overhead luggage on each other's head. Was it almost midnight outside? Home? This wasn't home. It wasn't anything, except where my mother was dying. I was in good shape, maybe better shape than before the incident. All the hoisting of cheap Chinese product and eating gravied American meals had built me back into a man. When the Army eventually claimed me back, I would be in shape enough not to get others into trouble. I'd hang onto my weapon this time.

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On the concourse, next to a statue of Hernando de Soto, I found my wife. She looked cute standing there and I told her so.

You're kind, she said, and smoothed out her skirt. I kissed her. Oh, my, she said, blinking. Hey. And she smiled some more. It was like a ladle of gravy on top of some happy.

Are we ready? I asked her.

Yes, sir, she said.

We walked past the homeland security maze and down a flight of stairs to the luggage carousel. While we waited, she told me about her seat mates. One she called Madame Dufarge, who knitted, knitted, knitted and occasionally looked up and glared. The other was a mentally handicapped kid who she called Slappy, who struck himself repeatedly on the forehead with the palm of his hand and said, Dog!

About two seconds after I sat down, I knew I wouldn't be enlisting their help, she said.

A buzzer sounded, causing me to jump approximately halfway out of my skin. Our luggage was the first out of the gate. I grabbed it and hustled it out to the curb, with the Bun directly behind me.

Are you okay? she asked.

I'm fine, I said.

You don't look fine, she said.

Thank you, I said. A cab was waiting for us, an ancient Ford LTD. I helped the driver hoist our shit in the trunk and we slid into the back seat. He hopped in. I read his name off his hack's license: Fred Jenkins. How's it going, Fred?

Dandy, Fred said. Where to? I told him. Fred was listening to a late night radio show on WKXY. The host was spinning hits from the 1970's and talking up the decade as a golden one for music. Before your time, right kids? Fred called to us.

I was born in the 1980's, I said.

Me too, the Bun said.

ALPHA MIKE FOXTROT

Don't let anyone tell you that the 1970's was a golden age in any way, shape or form, Fred told us.

Then why are you listening to this? the Bun asked him.

When you get to be my age, you start to crave the familiar, Fred said, peering into the rearview at us. The world changes too much. Especially since 9-11. Shit, I used to be a salesman. Sold paper to printing companies. Sold typewriters. Sold tires. Even in the '70's you could make a decent living being a salesman. Not no more. This isn't bad though. Don't cry for me, Argentina. Shit, went through three wives, if you can believe it. Shit. Excuse my French.

We transited through the dilapidated part of town.

I thought everything in Florida was new and plastic-looking, the Bun said.

No, I said.

No, Fred said. Wait til you see this in daylight. What a crapfest. You from here? He was looking at me.

Yeah, I said.

I could tell, Fred said.

What gave me away? I asked.

The look of disgust on your face when you came out of the terminal, Fred said. Your significant other, on the other hand, was looking around like, 'oh, lookit Florida.' I've lived here so long I almost qualify as a native. I got no home to go back to. Nothing's back in Ohio for me. So I stay here through wildfires and hurricanes 'cause I got nowhere else I can go to.

I feel sick, the Bun said.

That's the spirit, Fred said.

No, really, she said. Pull over.

He pulled the car over. She pushed her way out and walked over to some weeds, where she vomited a thick stream of spittle turned dusty yellow under the full moon.

The meter clicked over to \$20.

Almost there! I shouted out to her.

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She retched some more. I got out of the cab and handed her my handkerchief. She wiped her mouth off. Can we walk the rest of the way? she asked.

Not if we want to live, I said.

We got back in the cab and were in the fake fishing village ten minutes later.

This is cute, the Bun said, looking out at it.

Wait til you see this in daylight, I said. What a crapfest.

We stopped in front of the condo. Fred fished our luggage out of the trunk and I overpaid him. You kids take it easy, Fred said. He hauled ass away.

You ready? I asked her.

Yes, she said.

We walked to the front door. I knocked.

The door swung open and there stood my doppelgänger. For the first time in our lives, Chess and I looked exactly the same, right down to the discolored acne on his face. We were stunned. We looked each other up and down.

Nice haircut, Chess said, finally.

Nice shoes, I said. We were both wearing institutional black oxfords.

Nice acne, Chess said.

It's shrapnel, I said.

Mine's just acne, he said. You've been working out.

Tote that bale, I said.

This your wife? he asked.

Yeah, I said.

Zaftig! he said, smiling.

Hey, the Bun went.

Hey, Joe's wife, Chess said. Come on in. Join the festivities.

Oh my God, the Bun whispered in my ear. You said he didn't look anything like you.

ALPHA MIKE FOXTROT

He didn't, I whispered back.

Wer ist das? Was ist los? went my mother's voice, sort of. The voice was quavery, uncertain. Not characteristics my mother was known for.

It's Joe! my brother shouted. Go to her room, he said to me.

I took the Bun's hand. She resisted forward movement. What? I went. I looked at her. She seemed sickened.

The smell, she whispered.

It's okay, I said. Let's go back. You'll have to meet her at some point.

I don't know, she said. I don't want to intrude.

You've come this far, I said. You might as well go the rest of the way.

I took her hand and gently tugged her along. The living room was dimly lit with scented candles set atop muscle and fitness magazines. Our old furniture was covered over in dust. Mom's barcalounger sat empty.

Mom's room was lit by the glow of florescent lighting emanating from the master bathroom. The same old paintings were on the walls, bought by my father from a Holiday Inn in Omaha that was going out of business. Her Hummels were arrayed next to a Big Ben clock on her night stand – all the little cherubs gazing up at her.

Chess? she asked, opening her dry eyes. Who is this girl?

It's me, Mom, I said.

Joseph?

That's right, I said. This is my wife, the Bun.

What kind of name is that?

Everyone calls her the Bun, I said.

What kind of name is that?

It's just a nickname, I said.

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It's stupid, she said. Mein Gott. Er verband eine At-
trappe. Ein fettes Mädchen. Sie ist fett.

I still speak a little German, Mom, I said.

So do I, the Bun said.

Hergekommen, fettes Mädchen, Mom said. She waved a
brittle, spotted hand. We walked over to her. I pulled a chair over
and the Bun sat down. Mom gripped her hand with her spotted
claw. He only marries you, fat girl, to anger his mother. Don't be
offended. He only marries you to sadden his mother. This Joseph
lives to stick a knife in his mother's heart.

With a good deal of effort, the Bun managed to yank her
hand free. She rubbed it, glaring at my mother on her death bed.
I don't—

Go away now, fat girl. I want to speak to this son of mine,
my mother said.

The Bun stood up and glared at me. I didn't say any-
thing. I looked away. She stomped past me and out of the room.
I sat down in the chair. My mother didn't take my hand.

Hospice is coming tomorrow, she said.

Hospice, I said.

Yes, she said. They are going to give me drugs. I feel nau-
seous all the time. It's intolerable.

Okay, I said.

These drugs will knock me out until I'm dead, she said.

She waited for me to say something.

She said, So if you have something to say, say it now.

I said nothing.

That's what I thought, she said. I've left everything to
your brother. Do you understand that?

Yes, I said.

And you won't fight it?

No, I won't fight it, I said. What about the girl?

Chess will take care of her, she said.

ALPHA MIKE FOXTROT

Chess is insane, I said.

Chess promised to take his drugs and he will, she said.

I don't believe him, I said.

That doesn't matter.

No, I suppose it doesn't. Is that all?

Your sister prays a rosary for me, she said, a thin smile creasing her face.

Good for her, I said.

Yeah, my mother said, almost laughing. Good.

Ye of little faith, I said.

Or no faith, Mom said. I hope there is nothing beyond. How boring it would be, all that foreverness.

I thought the same thing, once or twice. When I got blown up.

We are the same, Mom said.

No, we're not, I said.

Same, Mom said. Don't disagree. I'm dying.

I said nothing. The Big Ben on the table next to us ticked, surrounded by all those leering cherubim.

You can have the Hummels if you want, Mom said. You broke them.

I didn't, I said. Let's clear that up once and for all.

Okay, you didn't break them. I have no strength to argue, she said.

Mom... I said. I didn't have the strength to argue either.

So we'll talk to the hospice people tomorrow, Mom said. Gute Nacht.

Good night, Mom, I said.

I slipped into her bathroom to pee. On her bathroom counter sat two dozen brown silos of drugs. I finished my business quickly. I picked a vial out at random. MS-Contin, 120 mg. I shook it. Not much left. I put it back.

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I left the door open a crack after I left the bathroom. Mom had drifted off into sleep. Her mouth was open a bit, the tip of her tongue protruding. She was only in her late 40's. The Army had taught me hard lessons in the inscrutability of God's will. I left the room.

Magda was sitting next to the Bun on the couch. So you've met my wife, I said.

Joe? Magda went. Her crisp white shirt was buttoned up to her white neck, topped off by her dirty blond hair and ball-bearing-hard eyes, the eyes of a girl who not only doesn't eat meat on Fridays, but who fasts while praying for aborted babies.

Yeah, I said.

Will you pray with us? The Bun says she'll pray with me, Magda said.

The Bun shrugged and blinked.

I don't think so, I said.

The Bun was just telling me how you two aren't really married, Magda said.

What? I went. Then, Oh, right. We hadn't been married in a Roman Catholic church by a priest. The sacrament.

Joe--? the Bun went.

So where are we sleeping? I asked my sister.

In the den, Magda said. Behind me, a little room separated off by sliding pocket doors. I peered in there. An uninflated mattress. A lamp on a table. Also on the table, my Silver Star commendation next to a portrait of me as a toss-juggling clown.

I picked up the green citation cover. Behind plastic on one side was the Silver Star award. On the other side was the full citation:

For conspicuous gallantry in action at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty, the Silver Star is awarded to Staff Sergeant (then Sergeant) Joseph A. Dugan. Bravo Company, while conducting a reconnaissance mission along Route Idaho, al-Raisul, Republic of Iraq, was unexpectedly attacked, first

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by detonation of two improvised explosive devices and next by a battalion-sized contingent of insurgents, supported by rifles, shoulder-held rockets, grenades and machine guns, from covered positions next to the road. In total disregard for his own life... Blah, blah, blah. Not-so-subtle nonsense tarted up by some lieutenant to burnish his career and the careers of his superiors. And he lived happily ever after.

What can I tell you? What can I say to make any of that real for you? It isn't even real to me anymore. It is words. Words are neat little boxes that can'

t contain any more than the box can hold.

I'm not brave. Or better: I have radical and continuing doubts about what may or may not have happened over there. Any argument you can make for my possible bravery can only be carved out of words. Make up your vocabulary, blowtorch and solder and glue some words together. I double-dog dare you.

Here's my secret recipe for my so-called heroism, just in case you're interested: I gave up. In the center of my chest, where so much panic lapped round in profligate circles, I silently surrendered my life. And then the panic was gone, replaced by nothing. I was dead already. They couldn't kill me twice. Is that brave? *Una salus victis nullam sperare salutem.*

Surrender gave way to the feeling of invincibility. So many endorphins from the feeling of invincibility.

What wasn't mentioned, in the neat little narrative slapped together by the ambitious lieutenant, was how many of those soldiers that I was supposed to have saved later died.

Three of them.

And some of the others were missing legs and arms. One didn't have a fucking nose anymore, though that's apparently replaceable thanks to the wonders of science and/or engineering. I saw most of my troopers every day at Walter Reed much later on. Many of them were trying to figure out how to get back into combat.

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This was the first time I'd read the citation since my commanding general gave it to me at Walter Reed. He'd flown in from Iraq for the occasion, a big smile on his moony face. He was an okay guy, even if he was an Academy grad. All I could do was sit there in a wheelchair and grind my teeth and wait for the whole shitfuck tapdance dog-and-pony to finish up.

Back to al-Raisul, before heroic acts were committed:

I didn't learn the names of the members of my squad. To me, they were Red, Joe Snuffy, Skinny, Shiznit, Nascar, GTA and a couple others. I was aloof. I shared a can with half my squad. On my cot at night, a fan blowing hot air at me, I'd listen to them playing games on their laptops or bullshitting about all the girls they claimed they'd fucked. I cursed myself for not buying an iPod at the PX in Korea before deploying.

I remember, after the first two explosions, when fire started pouring in, they all cringed and hid flat on their bellies behind that APC. On your feet, I remember shouting. They stared up at me. On your fucking feet. How are you ever going to make Soldier of the Quarter with those attitudes? Skinny stood up and got shot. And back down he went. Which, come to think of it, is just typical.

A lot of running around that day. I couldn't really feel all the metal I'd absorbed. I was high on combat.

Three men in my care had died that day, and I'd effectively abandoned the rest by carelessly getting myself kaboomed. A dumbfuck thing to do. Just typical. And then the Army gives me a medal and slaps conspicuous gallantry all the fuck over it. I could talk about it more, I could talk about every microsecond of that day, yes, but some things are too personal to share, even with you.

I liberated the inflatable bed, which was still in its original cardboard packaging. I used the electric motor attached to inflate it. Magda handed me the sheets. We'd prefer that you two sleep separately since you're not really—

ALPHA MIKE FOXTROT

Stop right there, I told her. Close your mouth. Turn around and go to bed.

You can't talk to me—

Yes. I can speak to you that way. I just did. Go, I said. Before my patience runs out.

She left.

The Bun came in. Jeez, she said. Listen to you, Mr. Bossypants.

I'm in a bad mood, I said.

Sure, she said. Anything I can do?

We made the bed together and shut the sliding doors to the room. I turned on the lamp on the table. Is that you? she asked, pointing at the photo.

It's me, I said.

You were so young.

I was 15 there.

You look sweet, she said. She picked it up and made eyes at the boy in the photo. She set it back down. What's this? She picked up the citation and opened it.

Do yourself a favor and don't read that, I said. It's all lies.

She closed the cover and set it on the table. She knelt on floor next to the bed. I knelt facing her. We kissed. We made silent love.

Afterward, we nestled in each other's sweaty embrace, our noses inches apart. Her breath smelled like peaches. She said, I hear your mom.

Mom was moaning softly. Oh, oh, oh.

I do, too.

Should we do something? she asked.

I don't know, I said. I'd say no.

No, huh?

Okay, I said. I untangled myself from her and stood up. I put on my pants and t-shirt and slid open the doors and quickly

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shut them behind myself. In Mom's room, I found my sister praying over her. She needs pain killers, I said. Not horseshit.

Magda finished her Hail Mary and set the beads in her lap. She said, So you're in charge now?

That's right. I'm in charge now.

Like in Iraq?

Yes, I said.

But we're not allowed to give pills to her. She might choke on them. We're to wait for the liquid morphine.

Hmph, I went. I considered things for a moment. No, I said. She needs pain meds now.

You can't! Magda hissed between gritted teeth.

I pushed into the bathroom. The light was still on, harsh and white. I took out one of Mom's MS-Contin's, crushed it on the counter using its plastic lid, and swept the remains into a dixie cup. I put a dribble of water into the cup from the spigot and swirled it around with my index finger. Still chunky, but partially dissolved.

Back out in the bedroom, Chess was waiting for me.

See, I told you, Magda said, standing behind him.

Whatcha doin'? Chess asked, arms crossed.

I dissolved one of her pills in some water, I said. It should give her a little relief.

Not a bad idea, Chess said.

Chess! Magda half-shrieked.

Mom moaned, right on cue.

I'll prop her up, Chess said. You open her mouth and pour it in. Slowly.

Slowly. Roger, I said.

Mom choked a bit on it, and winced, but it all went down.

Go Team Dugan, Chess said afterward.

Magda was already praying again.

ALPHA MIKE FOXTROT

Keep it up, sis, Chess said. I followed him down to his bedroom at the other end of the condo. I sat in a desk chair under a poster of Henry Rollins.

What's with you and this guy? I asked.

Henry's the man, Chess said.

We bullshitted a while. I told him again about meeting up with Dad and how the Bun hauled off and smacked him.

How can you not marry a girl like that? Chess said, smiling and nodding his head. You know, after Mom is gone, we'll have plenty of room here. You two can take the master bedroom. You don't have to worry about Magda. She's self-sufficient. All she needs is to go to church several times a week.

How about this? I went. Why don't you sell this place and move up to Illinois? The Bun's parents have a massive house, plenty of empty rooms. You can live off the house money and for Magda there's a Catholic Church right across the street. I've met the priest. He's super creepy.

What's with you and Illinois?

It's so... normal? It's all so normal. Remember Nebraska?

No one remembers Nebraska but you.

Yeah, well, it's a lot like Nebraska, except more so.

And you're going to be a fireman?

Her father set me up, I said.

You pay back the Army yet, for all the equipment you lost?

Her mother's a lawyer, I said. I haven't discussed it with her mom yet, but I bet she'd enjoy taking on the Army.

The war sure did change you, Chess said.

It wasn't the war, I said.

When we awoke in the morning, Mom was already up, sitting in her favorite chair. Magda had taken a knee next to her and was pleading for her to eat something.

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I'll throw it up, Mom said. Go to church.

Yes, Mom, she said. She stood up and gave us a look and marched out the door.

She wants me to live forever, Mom said. I'm ready to go.

Can I get you anything? Coffee? I asked.

No, Mom said. And please don't cook. The smell.

I went into the kitchen. The Bun followed.

She doesn't look so hot in the light of day, the Bun whispered.

I know, I said. I made some instant coffee using hot tap water and downed it standing over the sink. No one that nauseous wants to witness any kind of ingestion. I could hear my brother out in the garage, clanking his weights around. Go talk to him.

Who?

My brother, I said. I thumbed toward the garage.

By myself?

Yeah, I said. He'll need to give you the third degree without me around.

He's not dangerous or anything?

Nope, I said. Not today anyway.

Very reassuring, she said. She walked down the hallway and out to the garage.

I slugged down another cup of fake coffee, and went back into the living room. So this is it, I said, sitting down on the dusty couch.

This is it, she said. Das Ende. I thought I'd be more sentimental.

People die the way they live, I've found, I said. Magda?

She will drown herself in her Savior's blood, she said. Ich bin so müde.

You want to go to bed?

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The hospice people are coming, she said. I wish I could go home.

You are home, I said.

No, to my real home, she said.

Oh, I said.

It's hard, living in this place and raising Ausländer children, she said. The doorbell rang. She sat up a little straighter. Let them in.

Two of them: One was the nurse manager, according to her name tag, and the other I assumed was a social worker. Chess and the Bun came in from the garage. Lots of shaking of hands. The hospice people sat on the couch. The Bun and I sat on the floor. Chess sat in the love seat perpendicular to the couch.

So... went the nurse manager. She was Haitian, by her accent.

Mom talked. She said that she'd prefer to spend the rest of her life knocked out. That she had no interest in survival at this point. That she was in so much pain that she couldn't eat or sleep properly.

The social worker asked us how we were holding up.

Fine, Chess said.

Fine, I said.

Fine, the Bun said.

You two are twins, the social worker noted.

Yep, Chess said.

You've got your own built-in support system, the social worker said.

You look like someone famous, Chess said.

Tom Cruise? the social worker offered.

No, Chess said.

People tell me all the time that I look like Tom Cruise, the social worker said.

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Really? the Bun went. I'm not seeing it.

Me neither, I said.

Seriously though, the social worker said. I'm not making it up.

I guess I can see it, I said.

I can't, Chess said.

I'm with your brother, the Bun said.

This is your wife? the social worker asked me.

Yes, I said. Cute, isn't she?

You're gonna make me blush, the Bun said.

Ach! Mom went. For the love of God.

Right, the nurse manager said. I'll send out nurses, LPN's, on 12-hour shifts. They'll administer the drugs.

I'm going back to bed, Mom said. She pulled herself creakily up and thrust herself clear of the chair, no one attempted to assist her, no one flinched, and she toddled toward the bedroom.

Okay, I said, glancing over at my brother.

Chess and I hopped up and each took an elbow.

She's lucky to have you boys, the social worker said.

Tom Cruise, Mom muttered. Jesus Christ.

By the time we got Mom situated, the nurse manager had been out to her car and back. She brought with her a bottle of liquid morphine, a bottle of liquid phenergan and an eyedropper. Three drops of each under her tongue, with Chess and I standing there like idiots.

Three drops every two hours, the nurse manager said. Unless she's in more pain. Then three drops an hour. She and the social worker left. The LPN was to arrive within the hour. I sent Chess to the store for Depends and he was glad to go. He hadn't left the house in a week. The Bun came in and said she was going with him. They left.

We were alone.

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Mom still didn't look relaxed. You want more morphine? I asked her.

Yes, she said. That was the last, fully formed word that came out of her mouth.

Merry Christmas, the Bun said, shaking me awake.

It's Christmas, I said.

We dressed and wandered out into the living room. The TV, volume low, was on. Ray the LPN was watching a Star Trek marathon. I am Kirock! Captain Kirk shouted on screen, duded up like a Navaho.

Mom's breathing had become labored. Death rattle. Windpipes clogged. Every once in a while, Ray would lean her over on her side and pat some of the mucous out of her lungs. The relief was not permanent. The rattle returned quickly. Her death rattle was the background noise in the room, much like the humming of the refrigerator.

I like this episode, the Bun said.

How'd she do last night, Ray? I asked him.

Ray said, She seems fine. You gotta get those meds to her on the hour. So every time an episode ends, I get up and give her another three drops. Ray was an Army medic in his youth. He and I passed the time telling each other Army stories when no one else was around. Army stories are about, mainly, how lousy the Army is. For instance: Waiting in line an hour to get a shot that makes you sick. Waiting in line for an hour for green sausage and blue eggs. Waiting in line an hour to fill out a form, then standing in another line for an hour to turn in that form.

Chess came staggering in with a cup of coffee. It's instant, he said. A moment later: Make it yourself.

Twins, Ray said.

Ray was just saying that your Mom did okay last night, the Bun said.

Other than being on her death bed, Chess said.

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Other than that, Ray said. I liked Ray. The other LPN, Cheri, was a Jesus freak who I thought might be stealing meds.

A big laser on the Navaho planet blasted an asteroid.

This is the I am Kirock episode, Chess said.

Yes, the Bun said.

The labored breathing stopped. We all turned and looked into the bedroom from where we sat.

This is it, Ray said. He clicked off the TV. Go get your sister.

Chess set down his coffee and ran out of the room.

Ray and I went in the room. Ray had me help him roll Mom onto her side and we tapped out the phlegm. Her breaths came in hard gulps now. Chess brought in Magda. She stood in stunned silence in her Winnie the Pooh pajamas.

It's okay, I told Mom. Relax. You can go now. We're all here.

Goodbye, Mom, Magda chimed.

Goodbye, Chess said.

Ray held a stethoscope to her chest. We all closed our eyes. We opened them. She's gone, he said.

Magda stood there, her mouth open.

Chess shook. He brought his hands up to his face and wept loudly.

I was on one knee next to her corpus. I reached over, picked up a Hummel and snapped off its cute little head. There, I whispered to her. I set the pieces on the bed.

Ray was already on his cellphone, talking to the nurse manager.

I stood up, feeling queasy and weird. I said to Magda: Go get dressed. I walked out of the room past my weeping brother and sat down on the couch next to my wife.

I'm sorry, the Bun said.

Yeah, well, I went.

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I sat in the same spot even after the nurse manager and the social worker came. Even after the funeral people came and carted away her body. Mom had arranged with the Poseidon Society to have herself cremated without ceremony and her ashes dumped at sea. Chess helped the nurse manager flush away all Mom's pills and bottles of meds, down the toilet.

The social worker was talking to me.

Hmm? I went.

I said, 'How are you feeling?'

My mother just died, I said. I looked over at him. He did look a little like Tom Cruise and I told him so.

I'm still not seeing it, the Bun said.

Magda had arranged for a funeral mass, sans corpus, at a little church in Sarasota. Chess drove us up in my mother's rickety Saturn. Something was wrong with the power steering. Every time Chess made a turn, it made a wub-wub-wub sound.

You better have that looked at, I said.

I'll get right on it, Chess said.

Magda and the Bun were seated in the back. The girls stared out their respective windows.

We parked across the street from the church in a gravel lot.

The church was built during the 1950's, by the look of it. A congregation of humorless, life-size metal people decorated the front, a green patina smeared down their bodies, all covered over in double-breasted suits, starchy dresses and topped off by snap-brim fedoras and Rebecca-of-Sunnybrook-Farm hats.

Inside was an old-fashioned church, with wooden pews and thin padding on the kneelers. A bloody Christ, his eyes accusing, was tacked to the cross, INRI. A photo of our mother as a child, mischievous smirk, in her confirmation outfit, circa the mid-1960's, reds turned orangey in the Kodachrome, standing outside near the Rhine, a German priest at her side in his vest-

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ments, horn-rimmed glasses, toothy smile. The five of us sat in a row up front. The Bun patted my hand.

This priest, a Nigerian, I think, said something to us in incomprehensibly accented English. I nodded. A few rows filled up behind us, Mom's old co-workers and church junkie friends of my sister's acquaintance.

After the mass, these people I did not know told us how brave we all were. Some asked if I was still in the Army. I'm on the temporarily retired list, I told them. I'm training to be a firefighter in Illinois. Which was most of the way toward true.

After mass, they all came over to the condo bearing fatty foods in Tupperware. We made pots of coffee and listened to them tell stories and laugh and cry. Chess seemed to know some of them. Eventually, they all made their way to the door, all forgetting their Tupperware containers.

We pitched the remains of the food down the sink and listened to the disposal grind.

We sat around together.

I love you, the Bun told me.

I love you, I told her.

If we'd stayed up until midnight, we would have seen the new year in. Instead, we all turned in early. The Bun and I had a flight to catch the next morning.

18.

"THE

BEGINNING

I wish that I came across better in this story than I have. I wish I was more heroic, a better person, a better brother, son, husband and boyfriend.

I wish there was more happiness in this story, too. I wanted it so badly to end up as a happy story, something transcendent, something filled with uplift—if not for me, then for you.

JOHN L. SHEPPARD

I finished my fire academy training in the spring and was assigned to Smithville's firehouse number two.

While I was in training, Sandra managed to get the Army to back off through a series of letters to our congressman, a Republican who had narrowly won reelection his last time up. This is outrageous, the congressman said on the floor of Congress, waving a copy of my itemized bill.

The Bun and I were thinking of buying a home.

I finished my training and was assigned to Fire House #3. In order to move up in the fire department, I was going to need an associate's degree.

My chief at the fire station told me about the Excelsior College degree program, in which you could take standardized tests and get most, or all, of a real bachelor's degree. So, suddenly, all the reading I did in Iraq was about to pay off. I took the GRE subject tests in history and business theory and English and several CLEP tests at Smithville Community College, and turned in my Army basic training records for eight semester hours, and my fire department training for another 12. The Excelsior board awarded me a BA, which arrived at the tail end of the summer.

I can't believe how easily things come to you, the Bun said.

Wait, I told her.

Right, she said. Your bad luck paying for the good. Rolling her eyes.

Maybe she shouldn't have rolled her eyes.

I called my brother every week, asked him if he was taking his meds. Yeah, yeah, I'd get out of him, until Magda called late one afternoon, before I took off for the fire station for my shift.

I don't know what to do, Magda said.

What's going on? I asked her.

I think Chess stopped taking his pills.

ALPHA MIKE FOXTROT

I talked to my in-laws, with Magda still on the phone, and gained permission for her to stay with us. I kept her on the phone while the Bun bought her a plane ticket online for the evening flight. The Bun would pick her up at the airport, it was decided.

And Magda flew up and became part of our little family.

I spoke to Chess on the phone. He was back inside again at G. Pierce Wood. Something about secret signals on the radio. About how he had to smash it to pieces.

That's where you went wrong, I told him. That's what tips people off.

Yeah, yeah, he said, momentarily lucid. Where's little sister?

Don't worry, I told him. She's with me now.

Look who's taking responsibility, Chess said.

Whenever they let you out, come on up here, I told him.

You'd like that, wouldn't you? he said, suspicion creeping back into his voice.

I would, I said.

He breathed out loudly. Yeah, he said. I guess I would, too. He wept over the phone. It's hard, he said, and hung up.

More bad news came a few weeks later while I was at the firehouse. The Bun called me up and told me that I had received orders via the U.S. mail recalling me to active duty. Apparently, my taking a job as a firefighter had proven to the Army that I was no longer disabled, and therefore my temporary retirement was over.

But they can't take you back, the Bun concluded after reading the orders to me over the phone.

I guess they just did, I said.

You've done enough, she said. She suggested fleeing to Canada.

JOHN L. SHEPPARD

No, I said. Fleeing is not in my nature. Not anymore.

Somehow, through fudging I suspect, I passed my Army physical and was assigned to Fort Benning, Georgia as cadre for basic training. I was given a few days training and assigned to the arms room where I hand out M-16 rifles to the strange mix of kids and men and in their 30's who volunteer for Today's Army.

I'll be here for another nine months, probably, depending on circumstances, my first sergeant has informed me. He's also suggested, repeatedly, that I stay Army and perhaps go to Officer Candidate School. The Army needs me, he keeps telling me.

The Army needs a lot more than me, I told him.

There are rumors of a surge in the number of Army personnel in Iraq, but no one wants to believe it.

I am losing all the weight and muscle mass that I had as a firefighter.

I miss the life that I lucked into, but I know that I have to pay for that life, so I am here in Georgia paying for it.

The Bun will be flying down next weekend, so I have that to look forward to. And at least I'm not in Iraq. Not yet, anyway. That's something, isn't it?