

Revealing all your dirty little secrets...

down in the dirt

v019
March 2005

03/05, Down in the Dirt, volume 019

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Front Cover Art: inverted image of Dawn in the winter.

FRED

Andrew J. Jones

when he was sixteen
he hiked into the woods
on a dare and held a pistol
to his head to see if God
would pull the trigger

BELIEF

Eric Westforth

I am a lonely traveler
Down the long hard road
Followed only by the shadow
Of a wolf of the steppe

In childhood, I was taught the love
Of the vengeful, jealous God
And that I had been born unclean
Into a fallen world

They had their own mark of the beast
Which was burned deep in my soul
But their empty anti-reason
Could not quiet my wondering mind

Although I had been taught to hate
This wretched human form
I had to listen to my gut
And to its call conform

And so I questioned everything
That I'd ever been shown
My intuition drawing me
Toward what I'd always known

Maslow, Miller, Watts, and Leary
Kerouac and Krishnamurti
Seeking freedom of the kind
That only comes with open mind

I've heard some speak of holy glory
But have they ever seen satori?
Not an image, just a knowing
A consciousness alive and growing

I've heard some speak of Christian vision
Blinded by dogmatic mission
To cleanse the world of the need
For every single other creed

And within my very kin
I've oft observed the heinous sin
Of using words the saints wrought
To excuse evil modes of thought

I've no desire to offend
Just a danger to portend
Although it may bring you relief
Beware the power of belief

She was very vulnerable. He kept giving her dope, and she kept snorting it. To make a long story short, her brains bled out her nose and she died after thrashing around on the floor for three minutes while no one did anything to help her.

A WHITE DEATH BEFORE A BLUE FUTURE

-for K. A.

Michelle Greenblatt

Nellie, Nellie, did we not fall
asleep on the sofa curled
in each other's arms did
you not catch me when I fell
like glass and shattered
did you not pull
me back up safely
where I slept until morning
the white morning
did the lark not sing
soft songs climbing in
through the window
is that why I didn't see
the hole in your chest
the leaking hole the glass hole the white
hole Nellie why did we eat
breakfast white
breakfast tender, chafed
nostrils why did we spend
days long days white days
wasting
away pink flesh

glistening on our white bones
grey brains flattening
against the sides
of our skulls we later
gathered quarters
from our pockets
to go to lunch
in my car, my silver car
encapsulated
against the world
glass windows rolled up
glass teeth chewing glass
hands moving glass
lips telling each other glass
stories
cold lurking
in the corner when we drank
cheap wine
at night
red wine
white nights
pushing deep into the sky the stars
black sky white stars
Nellie why didn't we fight
for a blue future
why did we put our backs against the wall
hands over our mouths
glass hands glass mouths
were we lost in the white
mazes weaving corners out
of blackness to forget
what we couldn't
forget
evaporation sublimation liquefaction
scraping away
at a full white moon

Nellie don't betray me
with your death
a white death a red death
ask your mother
what I've done to you
don't betray me with your death
who will catch me when I fall
in the white bedroom
like glass
off the couch
onto the floor
who will catch me
when I fall
out of the white mazes
into the blue future?

October 2003

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She was very vulnerable. He kept giving her dope, and she kept snorting it. To make a long story short, her brains bled out her nose and she died after thrashing around on the floor for three minutes while no one did anything to help her.

SEEING NELLIE, SOUTH MIAMI
BEACH, COLLINS & 17TH.
7.8.2004

Michelle Greenblatt

I thought you were dead Nellie, I could have
sworn your mother called me screaming
that you were "D-E-A-D" for she could not

even say the word
but there you were down in South Beach
during the Memorial Day Weekend Festival

hunched on a dirty sidewalk
skin lucent with heroin fever; now I could
have sworn you were dead Nellie

even A. told me so and cried to me about it
by the pool at his house on the beach
instead of fucking with me as usual

he said you were gone Nellie
and I think he may have even been sober
for just that one night

but I saw your black hair
and black clothing Nellie
wide brown eyes lined in black

skinny frail body
slumped against a moldy wall,
head lolling around with pleasure

do you remember when we used
to go to Checkers Nellie and get those
French fries you loved so much—

but even if I did see you, it was not you,
only someone that looked like you, Nellie,
and certainly they were not alive either.

7.8.2004

Author's thanks to Nashville Newsletter

THE MAN IN THE LEATHER MASK

THOMAS J. MJSURACA

Buzz stood six feet tall and was dressed in leather from his bondage mask to his steel-toed boots. In his right hand, he held a cat-o-nine tails, gently slapping it against his thigh. From the ceiling above him hung a chain and leather cradle, holding his lover spread eagle before him.

Buzz's eyes peered at her through the slits in the leather mask. Slowly, he pulled open the zipper that covered his mouth. The whip arched in his hand.

"Did you remember to buy milk?" he asked his lover.

She replied with a groan that Buzz knew meant she did not.

Buzz sighed. "You know I like to have milk in the mornings," he told her, "I hate stopping at a 7-11 on the way home. I prefer to go straight home after this and crawl into bed. Besides, those convenience stores charge twice the amount when it comes to milk. They're a bunch of crooks. I need my cereal and coffee in the morning. I mean, we could go out to breakfast, but I usually wake up hungry and coffee is a necessity."

His lover groaned that she understood.

Around them, men and woman performed or watched various sexual acts. Some stopped to watch Buzz and his lover, but when they saw no action, they quickly moved on.

This was Buzz's usual Saturday night haunt, the kinkiest sex club in San Francisco. It was an old warehouse converted into four stories of decadence.

Buzz and his lover enjoyed performing in public, as well as having encounters with other members of the club. Both never discriminated when it came to sexes. Men, women, groups, it was all the same to them.

A crowd now gathered around Buzz as he zipped his mask, lowered his leather pants and entered his lover.

"So I heard from Carol," he unzipped his mask as he slowly thrust, "She said she'd come tonight if she could find a sitter for the kids. I don't know what she was thinking, having children. They're like a death sentence. You can't do any of the stuff you used to do once you have them. I know I'll never have any."

His lover groaned in agreement.

Next to them was the private room. Private in the sense that the doors

closed, but there were plenty of windows and peeps holes for the members to watch through. The couple heading in there caught Buzz's attention.

"Was that Debbie?" he asked his lover, knowing she was not in the position to see anything but the ceiling, "I haven't seen her in ages. I thought she found religion or something. Maybe she realized she had it all the time."

After a moment, he sighed, "I can't believe we forgot to get milk." And zipped his mask again.

A few minutes later, Buzz climaxed. He grunted slightly as he released himself into his lover. Right after that, she screamed in the ecstasy of orgasm. Knowing the show was over, the crowd dispersed.

As his lover pulled on her clothes, Buzz's muffled voice asked through his mask, "Do you want to go upstairs?"

She nodded and accompanied Buzz through the catacombs.

The hallways twisted and turned through rooms that resembled prison cells and were bathed in red light. In there, the wilder sexual acts took place.

"I think we should invite Debbie to brunch with us tomorrow," he told his lover as they made their way through the catacombs, "I think it would do her good to hang out with some old friends. Of course, we're going to have to make it an early brunch. There's no way I'm going to make it to noon without coffee or cereal."

They passed by a cell where a man was urinating on a woman's breasts.

"I just don't get water sports," Buzz told his lover, "I just think some things should not be brought into sex. I hate when people I have sex with leave the bathroom door open after we've done it. I don't want to hear it, never mind see it. There was this woman who never wanted to shower together, but whenever I was in the shower, she always used the toilet. Maybe the sound of running water helped her go."

They reached the end of the catacombs and climbed up to the main floor. There were a few more social rooms up here. One had a pool table and the other a juice bar. But at the end of one room was a stage. Here they were holding the nightly slave auction. The highest bidder would get to have a man or woman for a night to do anything they wanted them to do.

"Do you want me to get you a slave?" Buzz asked his lover.

She shook her head.

"Yeah, they've been pretty lame lately," he admitted, "That last one couldn't even hold an erection, never mind a conversation."

They watched a fierce bid over one slave.

"I don't get it," Buzz said to his lover, "Why would anybody want to

pay so much money for that guy? I don't see anything special about him."

The numbers grew higher and Buzz grew bored.

"Let's move on," he suggested.

His lover agreed.

They decided to go up to the gay men's floor. Buzz's lover liked to watch men, as did Buzz. If he was in the mood he'd participate.

The set up of the floor reminded Buzz of an office building. There were rows of cubicles with beds inside for the men to perform. There was also a room with a maze of glory holes and another devoted to masturbation.

As Buzz and his lover made his way through the cubicles, a middle aged man walked past them. He was stark naked.

"Why is it that the old men are the ones who run around naked?" Buzz asked rhetorically, "I mean, who wants to see that. Yeah, it may work in a darkened corner, but I don't want to see it swinging toward me. None of the cute young guys ever walk around naked. No women either, except that really old woman who used to wear only a g-string, do you remember her?"

His lover laughed as she recalled.

They walked into the room that was devoted to masturbation, a television played gay porn and a group of men sat around in different stages of self-pleasure. Buzz's lover decided to head to the fourth floor, which was woman only.

"Have fun," he told her.

Buzz took a seat and joined the men in the circle jerk.

"So, how are you all doing tonight?" he asked the room.

People were focused on the television and ignored Buzz. He was quickly bored and left the room. He waited at the edge of the stairway for his lover.

When she appeared, he said, "I think we better go home. Maybe we can hit the Safeway before it closes and get my milk. There's no sign of Debbie, so I guess it's the usual lot for brunch. We can touch base with everyone tomorrow and figure out when and where."

As they exited the club, Buzz removed his mask. They headed to his car.

They drove to the Safeway in complete silence.

SENIOR YEAR

Mark Gaudet

Prom night
was great

two girls
hanging on me
they were juniors
I think

A dirty blonde
a busty redhead
they kept asking me to leave
I made out
with one of them
in the men,s room

“I’ve never did that before”
the dirty blonde said

she reeked
of stale cigarettes
and bechnut gum
it was god awful
I wanted to
vomit in her mouth

but I smiled

and told her she was a great
kisser

HEALING

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What, this? That’s nothing. It’s no big deal. I’ve got a lot more. I know it looks bad, but it’ll heal eventually. I’m used to it. I’ve got lots of ‘em, see? Each one bluer than the next. This big black one—yeah, it looks like Texas, doesn’t it?—I got it from that big brawl broke out last week in the cafeteria. Yeah, you remember. A lot less students were hurt than what the papers said. You know that, right? You can never believe the media.

People make a big deal out of this place, but what people have to realize is that these kids just need to be put in their spot. They just need a little discipline. Take Clark, the one that started the whole row. He’s a big guy. He comes from one of those so-called at-risk families. Well, how many of ‘em don’t, really? But now Clark, he’s big, like a truck! And he knows he can’t control himself. Once he’s riled up, his brakes don’t work no more. He needs even larger folk like you and me to take care of ‘em.

When he picked up that plastic tray an’ whipped it at little Dave Thomson’s melon, I was behind him in two mil-liseconds with my arm ‘round his neck like a rusty bear trap. He wasn’t goin’ nowhere. He knew I had him. So what does he do? He bites me! Drew blood, too—punk bastard. Look, you can see teeth marks. I held on, though. That’s my first bit of advice: hold on.

That's not the worst of 'em though. On my chest and back I got a whole mountain range of welts from when I got attacked a month ago. It was after the last bell and I was trying to get out of here on time—which never works. And I was in the parking lot trying to get some of these punks into their cars and on their merry way so their drunk mommies and dads could handle 'em for a while; and they started chucking stones at me when I told 'em if they didn't move it and go on home I would ticket 'em and, worse yet, get 'em suspended for a week. There's no discipline at home, so it's up to us to give it to 'em. I gave as good as they did though. My stick laid into their legs at just the correct angle. Most of those hoodlums got away, but a few were sorry they tried my patience that day. Some of these kids just need it good and hard before they're satisfied. You'll see, after you've been here for a while.

This bluish-green one here? Yeah, that is a strange one, isn't it? You're right it does look like a volcano crater or something. Rich Lewis stabbed me with a pencil. Plunged right in there and broke off. I bled like a stuck pig. Yeah, that Richie! It surprised me too! Oh sure, he seems like a good kid. Never had any trouble him before that. We were just having a chat while he was waiting in the counseling center for Dr. Lowe. You met him yet? What a pussy. He's got as much backbone as a wet noodle.

Anyway, Richy's sitting there and I ask him what's wrong with him and he says he just wants to talk to Dr. Lowe. I told him if he just stayed away from them funny cigarettes he wouldn't need to see no pussy-ass counselor. Well, then, of course, he denies he ever touched any cigarettes. But, I know these kids. I can look 'em in the eye and I know they're on all that junk. Most of them are. Doesn't matter how nice they look. And so then the shit starts to fly and he gets all crazy. I barely moved toward him and he grabs some pencils off the desk. If I hadn't jerked out of the way at just the right time, this hole in my shoulder would have been a hole in my damn eye! But, I'm quick. I'm like a hawk and a weasel combined. I know when to duck and when to dodge. Know when to dodge; I'd advise that, too. I guess Richie doesn't know how to dodge, huh? He knew what he needed from me, and I gave it to him. I don't give a shit what Lowe says. It was a good thing I was there.

You'll see what I'm talking about soon enough. Don't think of these here marks as bruises or scars, think of them as badges of honor. Wear 'em with pride. When your task is cleaning up a junk yard, you gotta expect some sharp edges now and then.

This one? No, this one my dad gave me when I was ten. No it ain't a

tattoo, it's a cigar burn. Shouldn't have pissed Dad off that day. But, I was asking for it. He just had to straighten me out, that's all. It's the same thing we're doing for these kids. Some of 'em aren't lucky enough to have dads at all, you know. And if they do, most of 'em are drunk and on welfare. We're the dads at this school, you and me. Don't forget that.

Oh, now this is a great one here; this one's a classic. Susie Reynolds gave me this. She didn't like it when I told her that drinking so much would cause her kid to come out with two heads. I probably shouldn't have added that she wouldn't be carrying around that extra load if she wasn't such a damn slut. Finish school first, then get yourself knocked up, I said.

Then, wham, a fist full of white, bony knuckles knocks me in my ear. It still rings sometimes. In my thirteen years working here, I never had a female student strike me like that. I'll never forget it. You gotta look over your shoulder for both the chicks and the punks. Don't let them pretty faces fool you.

These kids, I'll tell ya, they'll turn on you. Don't trust 'em. They'll sneak up on you when you're not looking, so watch out. They might even pretend to be your friend, but don't fall for that shit. You know, sometimes I can sense when they're gonna strike. I can feel it. Happens more than you think, and it really gets me anxious. And when you know one of these punks is gonna pull something, you know what I do? (And this is when I feel them staring me down behind my back) When their distrust is burning a hole in my head... What you gotta do is—and this is important—get in the first shot.

HOT TEA

Braden Cannon

hot tea for an
anti-fascist world

warms the fists
pricks the brain
meets pen to the most
egalitarian
of paper

ANOMALY

Edward Rodosek

The supervisor on duty sits on his chair in front of a huge panel for the control of mental activities. Right now he's a bit drowsy, but that's all right because the automatics would warn him if any irregularity turned up. Still, nothing at all is happening on the panel now; nothing has happened since he began his duty this morning. In fact, he can't remember the last time an alarm occurred. It would be better if something did, in fact, happen—at least now and then. Otherwise, his superior might cancel his post some day, consider him redundant. But today, as always, all is quiet; all the indicators are green.

Somewhere, a long way off, Thomas Mogul is sitting at ease in front of his big multivisor set. Today is the first Sunday morning of the month, the time of his regular psycho testing. Beside him, today's psycho controller, Arouser, is arranging his instruments. Mogul knows the filling meter is the most important, the decisive appliance among all those devices.

Mogul absent-mindedly listens to Arouser's talking, trying not to show his indifference. He's aware of the need to appear that he is willing to cooperate. Despite that, Mogul doesn't believe that Arouser will find anything anomalous on him. None of the earlier psycho controllers had found anything unusual. Through all the years up to the present, he'd been tested by many of them without any result.

Now Thomas Mogul sees that Arouser is presenting him with fragments of the most exciting moments of various sports events. There are penalties taken on the football pitch, with roaring fans in the stands, the final match of the biggest tennis tournament, the last round of the heavy-weight boxing match for the world title, the finish of a horse race with enormously high wagers... Mogul tries to hide the boredom on his face.

Arouser switches to the newest video scenes. Cakes are flying into surprised faces, people are falling into mud, a naked lover is climbing through a bedroom window. There follows short fragments from sitcoms, appearances of the most popular comedians, fantastic gags, never performed before jokes and jests of all kinds. Mogul can hardly stifle his yawns.

Arouser skips over to presenting deeply disturbing sights. A long knife is stabbed again and again into the helpless body of a beautiful woman, the murderer laughs; a man falls from a high building on to the

impaling spikes of an iron fence; a blast among a crowd of people throws their body parts all around; a heavy tank rolls over a soldier roaring with pain. Mogul takes a sip from his glass and reaches for some popcorn.

Next, he sees erotica that cedes increasingly to hardcore porn: full breasted and long-legged women are doing their sexual acrobatics with muscled men; they thrash about in various perverted ways. Mogul's eyelids are closing, slowly but as inevitably as a glacier.

The multivisor set switches off and Mogul becomes aware that Arouser is talking to him about something. Obviously, he's given up on the technical and now he's using a more personal approach. Arouser's excitable face draws nearer and nearer to Mogul. He abuses and insults him; he mocks and scoffs at Mogul's professional incapability, his poor intelligence, his disgusting physical appearance and his sexual impotence. Then Arouser vulgarly rains curses down on Mogul, on his family, his ancestors and descendants, relatives and friends. Suddenly, Arouser slaps Mogul's face and snatches him out of his apathy – but only for a moment. Mogul knows well that it's nothing personal, just business. In the same spirit, he stoically accepts the next blow to his stomach, the next kick in the shins. Mogul is glad that Arouser doesn't spit in his face like some of psycho controllers did some months ago.

Throughout all this, Thomas Mogul catches a glimpse of the filling meter; its pointer lazily waves slightly over zero.

Now Mogul becomes aware that Arouser has already cleared away his trifles. Behind the mask of placidity, Mogul suspects some degree of disappointment. What nonsense. Still, he'll get his compulsory fee, which doesn't depend on the test results. Perhaps Arouser's professional pride is affected? Mogul has never understood such nonsense. All these bureaucrats sent by the government are the same—they can do nothing more than just the standard, routine procedures. He nods coldly at Arouser's farewell and closes the front door behind his visitor with a remote control.

All right, that's behind him.

However, before him is still the whole Sunday afternoon, which he has to fill up with something. But with what? What on earth? Thomas Mogul rejects all the various possibilities that are entering his mind, one after another. Indeed, all forms of entertainment are very similar to what Arouser tried to force on him.

Maybe he should go for a long, healthy walk? Oh, no—on that asphalted pavement and through all that smog? Or perhaps some jogging or cycling? Or tennis with a robotic partner, where you can regulate the skill degree?

Ah, nonsense. All that is much too tiresome. And what about some of his many computer games or e-books? No, no. All that's nothing but boredom.

With his mental command, Thomas Mogul is reading a long line of menus and submenus, which flicker by in orderly fashion. His hope that he'll find something interesting is melting away. No, regretfully there isn't anything to help him to kill the superfluous, unnecessary Sunday time. Who was that blockhead, anyway, who came up with such a foolish rule that on Sundays it isn't proper to do any work—nothing which would gain a man some extra money? Thanks to that, one-seventh of his weekly earnings are lost: a sum enough to pay all his income taxes. Thomas Mogul emits a deep sigh and reaches to his temples to take down his mental command when something instantaneously stops him.

What might that be?

In some nursery, a little kid is vivaciously searching among his toys. Mogul can't remember that scene; that must be something very old because this format of digital recording hasn't been in use for all that long. Only when he slows down the speed of presentation does he realize what he's looking at. It's a sequence from the surveillance tape of the automatic camera in his nursery when he was four or five years old. At that age, he was called Tommy and not Thomas.

Tommy picks up a toy from a heap, glances at it for just a moment, drops it again and continues with another one. After some time Thomas Mogul notices the kid squeezes something under his armpit that's not made of plastics like all his other toys. Only when Tommy sits down on the floor and tenderly presses this toy against his cheek does the long forgotten memory flash through Mogul's mind.

For God's sake—that is his Harlequin! His precious, his favourite toy—the one their servant once sewed together from motley bits of clothing. Harlequin was all in tatters from overuse and being hidden in various unseemly caches. That is why Harlequin was a strictly forbidden toy. A long-time ago, Tommy's mother had confiscated it and thrown it into the trashcan. No child of hers was going to play with such an unhygienic and disgusting toy.

After Tommy finally recovered from his desperate cry he dug Harlequin out of trashcan. Since then, he caressed it in secret—mostly at night or when he was sure that his mother had gone out shopping or on some other errand.

Thomas Mogul suddenly shuts his eyes and his mental command interrupts the performance. Now he feels a shudder for the memory of

that evening, when he was put to bed after supper.

A glittering light makes his eyes smart; his mother's severe figure is at the door. Her hands are methodically searching through his bedclothes; inexorably she wrenches the Harlequin from his resisting hands. His cry of despair is in vain.

Mother reproaches him, "You naughty, ungrateful child – what do you mean by lying baldly to my face? Now I'll take care of this disgusting thing once for all! I'm going right to the cellar to throw it into the stove!" She hurries out of his bedroom and locks the door from outside. Tommy howls and beats on the locked door; his imagination shows him the terrible blaze devouring his poor, helpless Harlequin. The tears are sliding down his cheeks. Never since has he come to hate someone more than his own mother.

Thomas Mogul is sitting motionlessly, stooping in his armchair when he suddenly feels some alien moisture behind his eyelids.

At the same instant, somewhere far away, the supervisor on duty flinches in surprise. A loud alarm rings out—the first after a long, long time—and one among many green indicators is now blinking carmine. After the first shock, the supervisor calls his superior with his mental command and after some moments, his drowsy face appears on the big screen on the wall.

At first, the chief supervisor doesn't understand what his excited subordinate is trying to tell him. But after a few moments, he starts to talk and his verbal commands are simultaneous with text running over the big screen. The entire procedure is precise and objective, strictly according to the set routine. Finally, the chief allows himself some personal remarks. Yes, the matter is unusual, even irrational—especially for a person of Mogul's rank. Still, there shall be no deviation from the reign of law. During the whole operation, all the men involved have paid strict attention to discretion. Any unusual disturbance in that distinguished residential area is strictly forbidden. Any questions? No? Then liquidation team must leave at once.

After the connection cuts off the supervisor leans comfortably back in his chair and sighs deeply. This unexpected event has given him a great relief. It's all right, now. Finally, something outlawed has happened. His position won't be cancelled.

THE SHAKEDOWN

David B. Reid

Parole Release Date: April 22, 2006. Crime: Malicious Wounding.

I've read more than my fair share of Department of Corrections face sheets. But this one was different. This one was personal. Looking at it now takes me back to the summer of my third-year practicum at the Middleton Corrections Institute in Lima, Ohio.

"Do you think they ever change?" he asked as I plowed through the records of one of our latest arrivals.

How in the world was I supposed to answer that question? Talk about being between a rock and a hard place. If I said, "Sure, I think they can change," he would accuse me of being naïve. On the other hand, if I suggested, "No, of course not. We should lock them up and throw away the key," he would challenge my faith in my chosen profession and tell me to abandon my dreams of ever becoming a psychologist.

At the time, I was a 25-year-old, still wet-behind-the-ears graduate student and one of only two women to set foot on prison grounds on a daily basis.

He pressed me again. "Sara, you haven't answered my question. I realize you're still a student. But for God's sakes, you've been working with these men for the past ten months. Just give me your opinion on the matter."

Dr. Blair intimidated me the moment I met him. He was, after all, a looming six-foot-five African-American who'd been forced to abandon his lifetime pursuit of playing professional football after tearing his rotator cuff in an untimely automobile accident. He went to graduate school instead, studied forensic psychology, and eventually became third in charge at the largest correctional institution in Ohio.

Sitting before this dark giant, not certain how to respond, I did the one thing I thought was in my best interest: I pled ignorance.

"I honestly don't know, Dr. Blair," I told him.

"Humph. That's fine," he said. "I can at least respect your honesty."

I smiled, relieved.

He smiled back, and I knew then he had succeeded in playing me like a country fiddle at a backyard hoedown. My suspicion was confirmed when he said, "Well, let's say we go find out."

"What's that?" I asked, gripping the arms of my chair as he stood to exit his office.

Motioning me to follow him, he said, "Let's see if we can answer the question."

"How do you propose we do that?" I asked, sounding more assertive than I intended.

"Pick an inmate from our group," he suggested, referring to our Monday morning group therapy session with convicted pedophiles.

"Do what?"

"Pick an inmate from group," he repeated as we exited the building. "I don't want to appear biased or divisive in this project, so you pick someone."

I wasn't sure what his intentions were, but trusting that my selected guinea pig would not be unjustly punished, and like Pontius Pilate, I could wash my hands of the entire matter if the inmate just happened to have engaged in prohibitive behavior, I boldly announced: "Hoolihan."

With that, he freed the walkie-talkie from his belt, pressed a black button, and spoke into the speaker requesting assistance from a Corrections Officer on cellblock D.

An unfamiliar voice responded immediately. "Block D here, Doc . . . Over."

"I need a shakedown on inmate Hoolihan," he quipped. "I'll be by with Ms. Jordan momentarily. I'll need two C.O.s pronto. Over."

"We'll snag him right away, Doc," the broken voice cackled back. "C.O.s Anderson and Melloy are on the block now. They can help out. Over."

Walking across prison grounds was never a pleasant task. Being a reasonably trim—and yes I know it sounds snobbish—but better than average-looking woman, the self-conscious stroll made me feel like a soggy saltine floating amongst a school of hungry guppies. With Dr. Blair at my side, the walk was less intimidating, though I still made only fleeting eye contact with passing inmates.

"When we get there," he said, his baritone voice serious, "stand off to the side of the cell, opposite Hoolihan. Don't address him, don't acknowledge him, don't look at him."

Never having witnessed a shakedown before, I didn't know what to expect. Lost in thought as I imagined worst-case scenarios, I failed to respond to his directive.

"Is that understood, Ms. Jordan?" he asked, keeping a hurried, purposeful stride.

"Yes sir. Understood." I swallowed hard, trying to suppress the anxiety I knew he sensed.

Within a matter of minutes, inmate Hoolihan walked through the pod and spied the small group of individuals hovering outside his cell. His star-

tled reaction told me he knew what was about to happen. The tension on his face quickly faded, replaced by a self-assured grin, worn in hopes of convincing all onlookers that he had nothing to hide.

His grin widened with each step taken. *Did he think this was some kind of joke?* It was as if he had just thrown open the door to his own surprise birthday party. Like usual, Hoolihan was disheveled. His state-issued navy-blue shirt, spotted with spill stains and bits of crusted food particles, looked like a well-used napkin after Thanksgiving dinner. His shirttail hung out like a limp flag on a windless day, and his pants, bunched in the front making makeshift pleats, were two sizes too big for his gaunt frame. Peering from a pockmarked complexion were two oily, gray eyes that had likely witnessed heinous acts born of the most evil of intentions. As I watched him, I wondered if this was the same mischievous grin he held while violating his young victims. *Is this what they saw?*

Dr. Blair was the first to address him as he approached.

“You have anything you want to show us before we rummage through your belongings, Mr. Hoolihan?” he asked.

All inmates were afforded the opportunity to turn over any contraband before their cells were rummaged. Coughing up any prohibited goodies didn’t necessarily negate punishment, but it certainly minimized the severity of the imposed sentence. At the very least, it saved a few days in a windowless, seclusion cell in the basement of cellblock F. Or what was coined by the corrections industry as “The Hole.”

“No sir,” Hoolihan replied.

“Very well then,” Blair said with a nod. “Gentlemen, proceed with your shakedown.”

Without batting an eye, the corrections officers began searching every nook and cranny of Hoolihan’s cell, leaving no pillow, mattress, or desk drawer unturned. From my vantage point, I could hear more than I could see, but it became readily apparent that inmate Hoolihan would be spending the better portion of the next 30 days in solitary confinement.

It was over within minutes. To my surprise, the C.O.s reordered the cell and returned all of Hoolihan’s permitted belongings, including a couple of hardcover textbooks, a stack of *Rolling Stone* magazines, and even his underwear, back to their rightful place.

Dr. Blair exited the cell with a stack of papers and what appeared to be a three-ring binder in his left hand.

He stood next to Hoolihan, whose gaze remained fixed forward, and said, “I’ll see you tomorrow morning in the hole. If it’s as bad as I think, you just banked yourself a good four weeks down there.”

Hoolihan remained silent, his crooked grin long gone.

Turning to me, Dr. Blair said, “Ms. Jordan, come with me. I think we may be able to answer that question.”

The walk back to his office, usually no longer than a five-minute trip at a casual pace, seemed longer that day. Perhaps time was slowed by my own eager, voyeuristic curiosity to review the stash concealed under his arm. More likely, it was the fear and apprehension for what I was about to see that rattled my innards and lengthened the silent walk.

Once in his office, he dropped the stack on his desk. Speaking for the first time since leaving the cellblock, he encouraged me to review inmate Hoolihan’s collection.

The images, predominantly hand-drawn, were vile and repulsive. Detailed, close-up sketches of erect penises penetrating small mouths and children’s anuses covered most pages. Pristine photo clippings from teen magazines of the young actor who played Doogie Howser, candid portraits of a bright-eyed Fred Savage, and a potpourri of prepubescent celebrity pictures were glued into a spiral-bound notebook like it was some kind of makeshift family photo album. These, Dr. Blair later explained to me, were sacred trophies collected by Kevin Hoolihan that would remain untarnished.

As I continued to timidly peruse the perverse collection, Dr. Blair finally answered his own question. “They can’t change, Sara. Incarceration or capital punishment is the only effective means of treatment.”

That was a decade ago. Despite graduating from Ohio State University seven years ago with a doctorate in clinical psychology, I have yet to sit for my licensure exam. After giving birth to my daughter Elizabeth, I became a stay-at-home mom and swore no depraved monster like Kevin Hoolihan would ever lay a contaminating finger on my child. But even a maternal oath like that can’t always be kept. And that, I believe, is the harshest lesson any parent can learn.

Now, standing in line with several women before me—a row of orange jumpsuits looking like an overgrown pumpkin patch—I await my turn to be processed into the Dayton Correctional Institute for Women. I glance at the DOC face sheet in my hand.

Parole Release Date: April 22, 2006. Crime: Malicious Wounding.

Silently, I wonder how the man who sexually molested my daughter will be free in six to nine months, while I must serve the larger portion of a three-year sentence for having good aim.

I frequently reminisce about the day of Kevin Hoolihan’s shakedown. I remember what Dr. Blair said to me: “They can’t change, Sara.”

THE FINAL SMIRK

Don Chenhall

It wasn't like Nira was a vindictive person. Quite the contrary.

She had lived with Jason for almost a year, put up with everything, and it never occurred to her to strike back. She had never intentionally hurt anyone in her life.

Not that Jason didn't totally deserve it, the slimeball. If he didn't want a full-sized woman, why had he pursued her? If it demeaned his sorry ass to have a supermarket checker for a girlfriend, what was the point?

It hadn't taken long for him to start making suggestions. Go to the gym, sign up for some college courses. Hey, at 23, she was what she was, a home girl whose future was more of the same. So what? She had a job, a paid-off OK car, a decent apartment, and a whole small town that knew her and figured she was living up to expectations.

The pretentious jerk just couldn't accept that he'd never do any better than her.

Did she miss him at all? Not that much. She missed having someone around, but she would rather be alone than with an ass. She just wasn't that needy. Vulnerable still, hopefully, but not needy.

Her car was getting a new exhaust, so she asked her good friend, Betty, to borrow hers. Betty's was having transmission problems, but she arranged to get Nira one from her brother, Goob, who owned a junkyard. It was a rusty old pickup truck.

She was sitting in the parking lot, over in the last row bordering the big boulders that drop off into Tongass Narrows. You get a lot of seagulls there, and crows. People who work at the Safeway feed them while they're taking their lunch break.

She saw him in the rear-view mirror as he drove up. White sports car, new skinny girlfriend. She just didn't want to deal with it, so she slid down a little and looked away. Jason pulled up next to Nira and parked. He and The Stick got out and left without seeing her.

Fate depends on intersecting coincidences. There was the truck Jason didn't recognize, seagulls on the hood looking for handouts, a loaf of bread in her grocery bag, and The Stick leaving the passenger window of Jason's sports car wide open.

Nira felt possessed, like she was having one of those out-of-body

things. She started taking slices of white bread and squish-rolling them into little gummy balls. When she was finished, she began flipping the balls into the front seat of Jason's car, about a minute apart.

Within a short time there were at least ten seagulls inside the white sports car, screeching and flapping, fighting over the food. Feathers and bird droppings flew everywhere, covering the fake leather seats. Nira started the truck's motor, to make a fast getaway if someone came by, but she kept tossing until the breadballs were gone. She parked on the other side of the lot and laughed herself silly.

She went into the Safeway and started back to work. It got really crowded and the lines grew long, a major rush. She was very busy, checking fast and non-stop, when she happened to glance up and see Jason and The Stick in her line.

Would she start laughing? Or would she allow herself to get pissed off and ruin the day? Neither, she thought, just stay aloof and get through it. He doesn't deserve any more attention.

She saw him realize he was in her line, noticed him look around quickly, check the length of the other lines and conclude he would waste a lot of time switching. He clenched up and assumed a look of casual disinterest. Good, she thought.

When they got up close, two or three customers back, she looked The Stick over. I'll bet she didn't even graduate from the alternative high school, she thought. GED material at best. Bad bleach job, smacking her gum. Doesn't look remotely capable of an orgasm. Perfect for Jason.

That had been the beginning of the end, when Nira brought home a book about sex techniques. Jason got angry, told her if she wasn't satisfied, it was her own fault, everyone knows large women have that problem. After that, his nasty and abusive side started doing a daily workout on her. Not your standard slap-around stuff (he was too much the wimp for that), but a combination of rough sex, public put-downs, and endless snide, nasty comments.

A bunch of this was going around in Nira's mind while Jason and The Stick slowly moved up the line. The smug, arrogant look on his baby face complemented the recent haircut and clean, pressed clothes. The flaws were hidden, but she knew.

Just let it go, she told herself. You're fine.

And she would have been, except that when she started checking his groceries, she looked up and saw him smirking. It was the expression he always used when he was working her over, making her feel worthless.

She clenched her teeth, and a rage began building that she had never known before.

The groceries, the teeming mass of humanity, the smells and sounds all swirled around her as she automatically checked the bananas, olives, coffee, beans. She suddenly snapped and stood red-faced, motionless, staring into his cruel face. His smirk took on a beaming intensity as he saw that he had succeeded once again in stripping her of resolve and dignity.

She was in an evil trance, a silent frenzy of hate so overwhelming that nothing could stop its momentum. She reached under the counter, closed her hand over the cold steel, and slid her index finger into position. As she brought it up to eye level, she saw the look of horror on Jason's face. Her mouth moved as she squeezed, and several hundred people turned their heads to the sound.

"I need a price check on register three", the voice boomed over the intercom loudspeakers. "For the small condoms."

*"Sloane Recline,"
photographed from
Scars Publications*



IN MEMORY OF VINCENT

Don Burdette

The sweet smell of lilacs swept down Breed's Hill like a mother's warm hand, settling on the small spacious houses of Breedstown, their picketed yards, and manicured gardens, warming the hearts of their residents with the comfort of their heritage. These descendants staked out their claims generations ago, after the Breed plantation had been shut down by law. Some were relatives of the employees of the plantation, others acquaintances of the Breeds and their kin. Whatever the case, they were all connected to the land, and its history, and they reveled in that connection.

The last remnant of the Breed's plantation, its decaying mansion, sat on the prominent hill overseeing the community. Like an elderly relative, it watched, with its tall rectangular eyes reflecting its glare upon the town during the day, and staring in hollow judgment through wind-swept shadows at night. Upon closer look, one could see how the southern elements had stolen much of the mansion's youthful charm. Its window sills cracked like crow's feet. Larger veins of exposed wood ran the length of its exterior walls. Its roof had come away in patches exposing darker-colored earlier layers. Its joints and joists had swollen in places, warping parts of its frame.

But the Breed's house had maintained a pride despite its age. Out of respect for its landmark status, it was unsullied by the cold metallic crutches of modernization. The only pipes in the house ran to an underground septic tank, put in by the local government. Candlelight replaced the sun at night. Hearthfire produced the only heat. A nearby well served as an adequate source for water. And the Breed mansion dressed itself sharply to appear ever dignified. Its crisp curtains were hung just right. Its beds were made. Every corner of square footage was meticulously dusted. And the lilacs on the mound surrounding the mansion were well tended.

Under the mansion's watchful gaze, the people of Breedstown made sure to act appropriately. They treated each other with respect, exchanged pleasantries when there was nothing better to say, complimented each other's dress, children, and homes, and kept their complaints focused on the weather and politics. Like many southern towns, all appeared well in Breedstown. But unlike its residents' deliberate pleasant smiles, one could not see the heart, mind, or soul of the mansion and people. The Breed family had hidden those long before. In fact, they had buried them. They now lay under the mound by the mansion. Under the lilacs.

Betty and Carl Hope never planned on digging up any trouble when they moved to Breedstown. In fact, they had every intention of blending in. Colored by the enthusiasm of a new job and a new child, they felt they could leave their city apartment and city ways for the more spacious country. They did it for Jimmy.

“His two-year-old legs are too big for a nine-by-nine room,” Betty complained.

“It seems like things just keep getting rougher out here,” Carl agreed. “The city makes people immoral. I don’t want to raise Jimmy in that kind of environment.”

So they figured Breedstown was an area of similar minds and morals; if not a refuge for disaffected city folks, then a Mecca for unrushed, family-oriented, God-fearing neighbors. Carl cashed in his small business and got a job near Breedstown in a cooling and heating equipment repair shop. The sale of the business gave them enough money to buy a small house from the state in a probate deal. And they sold enough of their belongings to allow them to squeeze into their station wagon, for one final ten-hour drive to the town from which they never expected to return. Even Jimmy was pleased. Chubby and long-limbed, he jumped around in the back seat like a spider, and called out everything he saw through lips made purple from constant use. “Car. Van. Truck. Cow. Fence. Houses.”

Road worn but cheerful, they pulled into Breedstown with naive enthusiasm, and were initially awarded for their confidence. Breedstowners had the polite habit of assuming that any passing car or approaching pedestrian was a member of the town. A couple walking their dog waved slow greetings to their approaching car, as did a man standing outside a hardware store, and a woman on a porch outside her house. Carl, and Betty returned the gesture and encouraged Jimmy to do the same.

“People. Doggy. Man. Woman. Bike.”

But a boy on a bike, who stopped to wave as the car approached, sat close enough to the Hope’s car to get a good look at the people to whom he was waving. When he saw the unfamiliarity of their faces, their dark black skin, coarse hair, and wide features, his hand fell to his side and he stared, until the car turned out of sight. As the Hopes slowed to check the house numbers along the streets in their new neighborhood, Carl and Betty noticed a similar reaction from people in their yards and the street.

“I guess we’re a bit of a curiosity, Bet,” Carl said with a weak smile.

“More than a curiosity.”

“What do you mean?”

“That first boy, his legs and hands, they were trembling. I’ve seen that before.”

“You think he’s scared of us?”

“I think he’s scared of someone who isn’t going to like us.”

“Home,” Jimmy called. And he was right. There was their new house, an old fixer-upper, dark maroon and ochre, with unhinged trim, a broken window, an unkept garden with an old knotty tree, and a fallen fence. It stuck out like them. How did Jimmy know?

It seemed as if Jimmy and Carl adjusted immediately. At Jimmy’s precious age, he was neither concerned nor conscious of the issues surrounding their move. As long as there were toys to play with and space to run around, Jimmy was happy. The first thing Betty unpacked was Jimmy’s bag of favorite toys. She

dumped them in the living room before filling in much of the rest of the floor-space with boxes from the car. Even in the cramped area, the house had more room than their apartment. Jimmy ran back and forth through all the rooms in the house his arms dangling in the air by his sides as if he had been turned free on a wide open field. When confronted by boxes he simply dodged around them as if they were part of an obstacle course. When resting between sprints, he began to climb a large pile of boxes near the front door.

“Jimmy!” Betty scolded.

It was similarly easy for Carl. He was running like Jimmy, back and forth from his new job. He spent little time in Breedstown, leaving the house by 6am, before the sun even rose, and getting home by 8pm, after the summer sun had gone down and most people had shut their doors to their evening meals and bedtime rituals. By the time he finished his, he climbed into bed, exhausted.

Although Betty wasn’t tired, she would slip into bed with him, just to share the time.

“Carl?” she asked. But he was through.

“How you doing?” She knew he was asleep, but she asked anyway in the hopes that he might ask her the same. She wouldn’t ask him when he got home from work, or as they ate dinner, or played with Jimmy, or watched television, or put Jimmy to sleep. Carl had enough on his mind. Instead, Betty brought her concerns to Carl just as he nodded off to sleep every night. She had started the habit in the apartment. Her mom had told her, “Last words are first dreams.” And she had read a book that said that dreams are the mind’s way of cleaning house, of making bad thoughts and worries go away. So every night she asked, “How are you doing?”

“I’m a little worried,” she admitted, before finding a comfortable position in bed, an arm and leg draped over Carl. She waited for sleep.

Adjusting to Breedstown was not so easy for Betty. She spent all her free time unpacking. One by one, the boxes disappeared as she loaded items onto shelves and into closets. There was more than enough room for everything. But still, the process was slow. Jimmy took most of her time. He didn’t need much attention; he could keep himself busy. But he was such an energetic kid, Betty always had to keep an eye on him to make sure he didn’t hurt himself somewhere. Betty had spent a lot of time making the apartment Jimmy-safe. But she didn’t know the new house well enough. There could be some unseen nail sticking out of the wall, some loose floorboard, something to trip on or fall off. So she followed him around waiting for moments when he would settle down in one place for a while. And she’d start to work on whatever boxes were in the room, until Jimmy decided to move again. Betty didn’t mind keeping after him. In fact, she was appreciative that Jimmy seemed content to spend the first days in the house. She was inclined to do so herself.

Nevertheless, Betty couldn’t stay holed up in the house for long. Eventually Betty’s supplies ran low. First it was the sugar, then the coffee. When the diapers

ran out, she dressed up Jimmy in his most rugged pair of overalls, a thick t-shirt, and running shoes. She checked her hair before walking him out the front door, past the shade of their knotty tree, into the blinding white southern sun and the streets of Breedstown. She kept a firm hold on Jimmy's hand, as her eyes adjusted.

But once past the front gate of their rickety fence, Jimmy squirmed free and was off at an awkward gallop shrieking his way along the sidewalk.

"Jimmy! You come here!" Betty called after him, gathering up her skirt to run after. Betty cursed herself for not wearing more comfortable shoes, and promised herself she'd buy a new bra when given the chance. She couldn't worry about either as she gave it her all to close the gap between her and her boy. But a lesson she had taught Jimmy in the city soon came to her assistance. As instructed, Jimmy came to an abrupt halt at the intersection, and turned to face his mother with an awkward smile. He held out his hand, waiting to be taken across. He looked so adorable the anger dropped out of Betty as she let down her skirt and relaxed to walk towards him.

"Good boy," Betty told him. "Just like I taught you."

She took Jimmy's hand and checked the intersection as Jimmy hopped in place, waiting for his mother to take him across. To one side, Betty caught a curtain in the front window of a light blue house fall back into place. At a neighboring house, a door closed so slowly that only a trained eye could see it latch into place. To the other side a man skulked in the shadows of his porch tilting back in his chair, hiding under the brim of his hat. Jimmy pulled Betty across the street. Once on the other side, he squirmed free again and was off. This time, Betty didn't chase. The block wasn't too long. She just kept one eye on him, and another on the houses around her.

The streets were just as empty of cars as the yards and houses seemed to be of people. Except for the man she had seen on the porch, and the movement of curtains and doors, there was no sign of the occupants of any of the houses. Someone's tending those gardens, Betty thought to herself. Betty and Jimmy passed several blocks this way. So when she saw an elderly couple walking towards them on the sidewalk at the end of the block, she smiled in anticipation of seeing another person, and prepared to be cordial. As usual, Jimmy ran off ahead, bouncing down the sidewalk with his arms flailing up and around. While the couple kept a stately pace, moving their legs in time as if marching to some processional beat, perhaps the beat of old age or some slow southern tempo. When Jimmy ran into the elderly pair, he had every intention of dodging past them to reach the intersection at the end of the block. But the couples arms interlocked so that they formed a fence blocking Jimmy from getting past. The couple stopped and looked on as Jimmy moved to the right, the left, then between their legs, looking for a gap wide enough to squeeze through. There was none. The old lady's wide flower-print skirt hugged the tight three-piece suit of the old man's spindly legs.

Betty kept her smile as she approached with a "Good morning."

The woman didn't respond. Standing still, with her white gloved hand hanging firmly through the loop in her husband's arm, she kept her glossy eyes focused on the sidewalk ahead. Her puckered mouth was drawn tight as if by a string, the cherry-red lipstick building in its folds.

The man spoke for her with a lazy drawl, looking and speaking down to Jimmy with half-shut eyes.

"Hasn't your momma taught you to step out of the way of good white folks when they walking down the sidewalk?"

Betty lost her smile and grabbed Jimmy by the strap of his overall and pulled him towards her.

"His momma taught him never to go out in the street or walk on people's property!" Betty answered.

The man looked up at her, keeping his eyes half-shut, perhaps to keep out the sun.

"The street's a safer place for him than this sidewalk," he warned.

"Come on," Betty said to Jimmy as she led him into the street and around the couple. The couple resumed their pace. They never turned back. Betty kept her eyes on them and everywhere else as she led Jimmy the rest of the way, refusing to give his hand any freedom. She wiped her brow free of sweat. She was sweating more now than she had been from chasing Jimmy.

Betty got a similar response as she entered into the center of town. Some people on the sidewalk stopped in her way. She passed around them without a word. Others moved into stores as she approached. Others stared from the side. Even cars, for a car passed by now and then, slowed to watch almost to the point of stopping. Whispers seemed to surround Betty and her son. They tapered off as she approached and began again when she passed. Betty couldn't follow them all with her eyes. Fortunately, Jimmy pulled her along.

She neared a general store, but decided to continue past it rather than attempt to push through the large man that blocked it's door. In fact, she continued walking past the two commercial blocks in the center of town, until the cars and people thinned again, and she could stop and return her eyes to Jimmy.

"How are you doing?" she asked him.

"Fine."

She took a long breath and remembered Jimmy's diapers and turned around. This time, she kept her eyes focused on the street signs, looking for the nearest general store. "Breedstown Supplies, Since 1861" was the first that caught her eye. It was a smallish store, with few people near it. Unlike the rest of the town, it had been poorly maintained. The large sign was weathered gray and split towards one edge. The door and exterior were constructed of oversized irregular planks of wood, not the modern streamlined factory pieces that fit into each other to form perfect corners. The store's sole window was a small square puzzle fit with diamond pane pieces. It's edges were stained with chips of previous paint. It seemed dark inside, and safe. Betty snuck Jimmy in.

The inside of the store was not as dark as Betty had expected. An overhead skylight lit everything from above, and a few well-placed lamps softened its harsh shadows. The interior of the store was built entirely of the same large wood of the exterior, only much of the inside wood was unfinished and worn to a glossy smoothness. Shelves lined every wall up to the ceiling, and four rows of head-high shelves filled the center of the store. Each shelf was packed tight with an eclectic array of goods, organized by type: dry food, canned food, kitchen utensils, cleaners, etc. Betty was relieved to see that the inside of the store was empty of customers. She closed the front door behind her.

To the far left of the store was a long counter that ran along the wall and ended with a small swinging door. An ancient cash register sat atop it, unattended. Behind the counter was a door in the back wall of the store. Inside, someone moved in reaction to the soft click of the door handle. A young woman in her early twenties stepped out of the back room straightening her dark blue knee-length skirt and pulling at her white flower-printed t-shirt. Her ponytail hair wagged as she looked up to see Betty and Jimmy. Her heavy-mascara eyes widened and her pink lips frowned in surprise, and stayed frozen that way as she anxiously checked the store to make sure no one else was present. She cleared her throat as if to speak, but watched Betty without a word.

Betty kept hold of Jimmy and disappeared into an aisle.

“Now you stay close and don’t touch anything,” Betty said, as if she might give him chance.

Betty gave a quick scan of items as she made her way down the closest aisle. When she came out its other side, she stood closer to the counter and the woman who was now prepared to speak.

“You best hurry up in here, ma’am,” the woman squeaked.

“I just need some diapers, sugar and coffee too, if you got it.”

“Sure,” the young woman smiled. She began to point Betty in the right direction.

Betty stayed put.

“That’s the first smile I’ve gotten,” she commented.

The young woman appeared nervous again, and paused as her mouth moved before the words were ready. “People ‘round here can be a little...,” she managed before her words trailed off.

“What’s got into people around here?” Betty asked directly.

“Ghost of the Breeds hanging over ‘em,” she explained, as if she talked about others, not including herself among them.

“Who are the Breeds?” Betty asked.

“You don’t know?” The woman asked incredulously.

“No.”

The woman slowed one last time, as if she struggled to hold the words back. But as her mouth cracked open again, they began to flow unrestricted, flooding Betty’s ears. The woman leaned over the counter to the side of the cash register.

“They’re the people that made this town. Town’s named after ‘em. Started a plantation way back. Used to own all this land. Slaves worked it. Had more slaves than they had white people. Until slavery got stopped and they lost most of their money, and had to sell a lot of land.”

Betty stepped forward, holding Jimmy so firmly with both hands that he didn’t even bother to squirm. “So what does this have to do with me?”

“There aren’t any black people in Breedstown. Never have been.”

“What happened to the slaves?”

“Word is, when old master Breed heard they were gonna be freed, he called ‘em together to give ‘em a big thank you dinner, to send ‘em off with style. Gave ‘em a feast of white people’s food. Put poison in the food. Men, women, and children too. Poisoned ‘em all rather than set ‘em free.”

Betty put her hands over Jimmy’s ears. “My God,” she gasped.

The young woman smirked at the reaction. She eagerly continued.

“You seen the old Breed mansion on the hill? You can’t miss it. You can see it from anywhere in town. Anyway, there’s a mound that goes all the way around it. Word is, that’s where the slaves ended up. The old widow plants lilacs on ‘em.”

“Old widow?”

“She’s the last of the Breed line. All the rest’s dead and gone. Camille Breed. She lives alone in the Breed mansion. Well, I don’t know if you’d call it alone, with the lilacs and all. She’s real old now. Comes in here to get her food, this being the oldest store in town. I just work here.”

“Was she married to the old master?”

“No, no! She’s not that old! She was married to master’s grandson, Vincent. Vincent Breed. But he’s a chip off the old block. Just like his grandfather. Sold off most of the land to keep the mansion going, but wouldn’t let the old South die. Hated what nigger lov...sorry. Hated what other people did to his granddaddy. You was either with him or against him. Took it out on everybody that was against him, including his boy.”

“I thought you said Camille was the last of the Breeds.”

“The boy didn’t make it.”

“What happened?”

“No one knows for sure. Got sick or something. Maybe ‘cause his daddy used to beat him awful. Boy didn’t have enough hate in him to keep the Breed line going, I guess. Vincent had a way of spreading hate. Dedicated his life to stopping people, like you, to keeping black people out of Breedstown, to stopping desegregation, to stopping everything that had to do with black people. Wasn’t too successful, I guess, but he at least kept Breedstown clean, um...you know what I mean. With Camille’s help, of course.”

“How did Camille help?”

“Camille’d call the tea parties.”

“Tea parties?”

“Well, they weren’t really tea parties. Wait, yes they were. Well, whenever

Vincent had anything to say, Camille would send out these tea party invitations to all the women in the town. But everyone really knew what they meant. They meant that Vincent had something planned to deal with the black people, either people moving through Breedstown, trying to stay in Breedstown, or even people in the surrounding areas. He was always trying to send a message to everyone, in Breedstown or not. Anyway, everyone came to the tea parties, men, women, and children. And Camille'd serve tea. But then Vincent'd start to speak. And he'd get everyone riled up. I'm too young to've seen it, but I heard a lot about it. I heard he had such a power over people. He'd start talking about the South and history and people's heritage. And people'd be whoopin' and hollerin' and gettin' so agitated they'd come away shakin'. I heard Camille couldn't even keep her tea cup still when Vincent used to speak. And soon enough, everyone was putting down their cups for guns and things and they'd do whatever Vincent said."

Betty stood silently, through the woman's pause.

"From what I heard, there should be lilacs growing on a lot of places 'round here; not just that mound at the mansion."

The woman raised her eyebrows, giving time for Betty to speak. Betty held Jimmy closer.

The woman continued, changing her tone to one of concern. "But Vincent's long gone now. Hasn't been a tea party since. Now you're here and I think Breedstown's finally changing," she feigned optimism.

But just as quickly, the woman's demeanor shifted back to its original hushed nervousness. Staring at the window, the woman rushed to the end of the counter and swung open its small door.

"You'd better come back here," she said as she watched a shadow moving near the window.

Betty reacted immediately, directing Jimmy behind the counter and into the back room, just as the front door snapped open and the shadow entered.

"Mornin' Dora," a man's nasal-voice sounded near the counter.

"Jim," Dora answered.

"Need some ice from out back. Motor oil. Things."

"I'll get the ice. Go ahead and get the rest," Dora suggested.

Dora came back into the room, where Betty sat at a chair beside the ice machine. A fashion magazine and half-empty coffee sat on the small table under which sat Jimmy. Betty's hand held his mouth firmly. Dora smiled uncomfortably as she pulled a bag of ice out of the freezer to Betty's left.

Jim and Dora met back at the counter.

"Hear 'bout them niggers moved in this week."

"Yah," Dora mumbled.

"Wonder how long they'll last. If Vincent was here they'd already be gone. But Mrs. Breed will do something."

"Think so?"

“You bet. They’re a damn insult to her, Vincent’s memory, and the Breed name.”

“If somethin’s gonna happen, will you tell me?”

“You’ll hear about it. Everyone will. Well, here you go.”

“Thanks.”

The cash register bell rang and Dora shuffled the change.

“Be seein’ you.”

“Bye.”

Betty could hear Jim’s heavy footsteps passing through the front door. Dora closed the door behind him.

“Ma’am?” Dora called.

Betty led Jimmy out.

“Sorry,” Dora offered. Her pink mouth curled with genuine concern.

Betty could only nod. She was sweating again. “I’d better hurry up in here,” Betty commented.

“Sure,” Dora agreed. “What was it? Diapers? Coffee?”

“Just diapers would be fine.”

Dora went to a far shelf and reached down to get two packages.

Betty waited with her cash as Dora filled a grocery bag.

When Betty turned Jimmy to leave after paying, Dora added, “I’m Dora.”

“Betty. And Jimmy.”

“Bye Jimmy. Bye Betty.”

“Bye,” Jimmy responded.

Betty led Jimmy out of the store and past the eyes on the streets. She kept her own eyes ahead of her the whole way. She didn’t give Jimmy any room to move.

That night, when Carl’s breathing slowed and deepened, Betty leaned over him and asked, “How are you doing, Carl?”

He didn’t answer.

The following morning, Betty sent Carl off to work without any discussion of the day before. She was comforted by the approaching weekend. Two more days of work and she’d have him home. Then perhaps they’d talk. He was bound to ask her then about her week, her experiences, her feelings. She could pass two more days, she told herself. After Carl left, she closed up the house and kept herself indoors and worked and cared for Jimmy as she had done before. But there wasn’t any pressing work to do and Jimmy wasn’t as interested in playing in a house with little furniture and few boxes to jump around and climb. He stayed entertained when Betty followed him around the house or played with his toys. But when he was left to preoccupy himself, he began to fuss and cry, until he was picked up and held.

As she rocked Jimmy in her arms, Betty was fondly reminded of a younger Jimmy, a baby that needed her constant attention. But she couldn’t hold a two-year-old for two days straight. So she gave up on the house and focused on Jimmy. She sat with him and doled out toys from his bag of favorites, switching

them around to keep his attention.

But the South wouldn't leave her and Jimmy alone. Even with her doors and windows closed and the curtains drawn, the heat began to filter in uninvited. It slipped into the spaces below the front door, between the gaps in the window frames and insulation strips, and down the shaft of the chimney. It snuck in as small beams of light, creating pockets of steam that spread out through the house. And it gathered in the air and thickened with humidity into an intolerable boil that started Jimmy crying regardless of toys and attention, and made carrying him and running with him intolerable. Betty imagined they'd stew unless they could get out to someplace cooler.

Or at least, get out to a phone, so she could call Carl. Their phone had yet to be installed. Ironically, Carl worked for a cooling equipment repair shop, but had neglected to install an air conditioner in the house. She had her reason to call.

So Betty dressed Jimmy in shorts, a light t-shirt, and a baseball cap, and herself in a white skirt, t-shirt, and sun bonnet and prepared to wade through the heat. There would be no running through it. They'd have to swim through it, taking slow breaths for fear of taking in too much water. And she'd float Jimmy in the stroller, under the safety of its canopy shade, and the comfort of a steady rolling breeze.

But she soon found out, as she got onto the street, that her plan for Jimmy left her in the deep. It was simply too hot. She had to tilt her head up to keep the sweat from running into her mouth and eyes; fortunately, even at the tilt, her bonnet was sympathetically large enough to keep the sun off her neck and face. But the heat compensated by rising all around her. She might have pushed quickly, but a wavering dizziness developed whenever she exceeded a walking pace. Also, her skirt grabbed at her legs every time they finished a swing back or forth.

There was an emptiness to the steaming streets. Neither cars, nor people braved the sticky tar or dry-cleaning bills. Only desperate black women, stuck with children, in new houses, in unwelcoming neighborhoods, short on conveniences. Not a shade or curtain moved along Betty's path. Even the businesses in the town center had closed their doors, leaving behind only the grumbles of overworked air conditioners, the sweat of their labors dripping along the sidewalks like snail tracks. But the stores themselves were no less empty than they had been the day before. Betty glanced in through the glass front of a diner to catch the leering faces of the waitress and her customers seated at a counter. Their bodies and faces were twisted by the inconsistencies in the glass so that a rather large man's belly seemed to poke out on one side, as if he had eaten somebody who now fought for escape; a young man's wiry arms and legs slithered around the counter; and the painted face of a middle-aged woman drooped into a clown's frown. The three people at the counter had left their lunch to turn full around to watch Betty. Actually, had their purpose been to watch, they would have glanced courteously and looked away, perhaps glancing again after some conversation. No, their glares remained fixed in rudeness, hoping to communicate rather than record. Betty got the message. There were five empty stools at

the counter and four empty tables, but no room for Betty and Jimmy.

So Betty pushed on, and just a few doors down discovered the opportunity for which she had hoped. She glanced into a barbershop window at four empty chairs, a full magazine rack, and a wall of mirrors reflecting an abandoned store, its lights and air conditioner left running on the slim chance that someone might be willing to have an electric razor applied to their clumpy, sticky, wet summer hair. When she opened the door, Betty gasped like a diver breaking the surface, as the frigid air rushed past her. She held the door open and swung Jimmy around to pull him in after her.

Once inside, she closed her eyes to better feel her skin tingling at the coldness, then prickling. Jimmy's breath slowed and relaxed. She smiled at no one.

"We don't cut that kind of hair here," someone responded.

Betty let out a sound that was a mix of a stifled scream and an "Ooh!" Following the voice, she noticed a man, camouflaged in a corner, where no mirror had been directed, wearing the colors of the store, red on white, so that he matched the chairs lining the walls across from the hair cutting stations. He held a magazine in his hand upside down, most likely pulled from his waking face. That face, hair unshaven and unkept, sneered itself into shape.

"We just wanted to get in from the heat," Betty tried.

The man returned the now-familiar rude stare, then turned his head up to one side and gave an exaggerated sniff around him. He stood up.

"I smell lilacs."

Betty grasped for the door and pushed Jimmy outside again, rattling him around as she turned back onto the sidewalk and rushed by the remaining stores, refusing to check them. At the "Breedstown Supplies" sign, she slammed open the door, flung Jimmy's cart in, and slammed the door behind her.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry," Betty apologized to the empty store.

"Dora?" she called.

No one was there. Without the whine of an air conditioner box outside, perhaps people had assumed the store would be uncomfortable. But the wooden room was cool. Betty had to wait for her eyes to adjust to the dim skylight before she could be sure. But the store's silence confirmed what her eyes couldn't see. She had found her cool place.

Betty checked the door to make sure the barber hadn't followed. Finding the streets empty again, she checked Jimmy. He was fine. She pulled a toy from the back of the stroller just to make sure. He took to it right away.

"You alright?"

"Yah."

"Momma's gonna get some ice. You want some ice?"

"Popsicle?"

"Ice'll have to do."

"Okay."

Betty pulled at the stickiest parts of her dress as she stepped through the

counter door and followed the counter into the back room to the ice machine she had seen earlier. She stood before it and lifted its front lid, releasing a waft of frigid air that hardened her for a second before she forced herself to move into it, breath it in, put her wet sleeves against it, as she reached along its sides snapping off large pieces of frost. She rubbed them into her hands, neck and forehead. Her cooler sweat dripped down with the water into the ice chest. When she was sufficiently chilled, she snapped off a few more pieces for Jimmy, closed the chest, and left the room.

But Jimmy was no longer alone. He sat silently in the stroller, staring up at the figure of an old lady that now stood in the store's doorway, silhouetted against the bright outside, but no less visible in the dark store. It was as if the figure repelled the darkness, and brought the brightness of the outside into the store with her. She wore a bleach white dress with seams trimmed in lace. The bleached brightness and wispy lace made the dress appear translucent, ghostly, making the brown-and-green garden grass stains near the knees appear as if they shown through from behind the dress. Their dullness suggested that washings and bleach had attempted to cleanse them. But some things can't be washed away, no matter how much bleach is used, without tearing at the dress itself, as one tattered cuff and the frayed lace trim at the shoulder suggested.

Betty had never seen anyone that looked so old. The woman stared at Jimmy with a face of stone. Its expression had been carved long ago, but the angry fingers of its sculptor were still dug into its folds. They pulled the skin of her face away from the bones in clumps that sagged down at the cheeks and chin. They left caverns around the eyes, where its orbs seemed stuck like smudged white marbles. They made a cliff below her nose, eroded into cracks that converged to form her thin lips. They pulled at the nose that hooked downward as if it had been broken. They pulled at the center of her furrowed brow, tying it into a tight knot of disapproval. Only her dull eyes complicated the rigid austerity of her expression, suggesting that there was something that could not be expressed among the hardened lines of her immobile face.

Only when those dull eyes turned upward to Betty, did Betty get a sense of the fire that raged within the woman's petrified shell. Upon seeing Betty, the woman's eyes locked in place as if the muscles that held them pulled taut. They reddened and moistened under the strain of some internal heat bubbling up against the mantel of her skin. Betty had seen the look before, in the Daguerreotypes of western settlers and Armageddon preachers. Betty could feel their heat. Betty's own eyes winced away as the ice slipped from her hands and scattered across the floor in escape.

When Betty looked back again, the woman had focused her attention on Jimmy. The woman's eyes had widened all the more. And now she stretched forth a trembling hand, as she stepped on unsure legs, reaching for Jimmy as if she planned to mete out some judgment on the little boy. The skin pulled away from her twisted hand further exposing its clawlike nails, clotted with earth.

Jimmy's shriek called Betty to action. She ran forward with arms at full extension, grabbing the handle of the stroller, and swinging Jimmy away.

Just then, Dora stepped through the door, immediately losing her saleswoman's smile and standing speechless, looking from the woman to Betty to Jimmy and back again.

"Mrs...Mrs. Breed," Dora chose as she stepped towards the old woman and directed her away to the counter. "I'm so sorry. I'll have your order right away. Please excuse the inconvenience. I'm...I'm sorry for the wait and, um, any trouble," she stammered.

Dora went right to the cash register and began to busy herself, flipping through papers in the bottom drawer.

"You're not welcome here, ma'am," she called to Betty, without looking over. "I hope you understand."

Betty welcomed the cue and pulled Jimmy from the stroller and held him before freeing one hand to direct the stroller out of the store back into the summer heat.

The nearest cool spot in Betty's field of vision was a patch of shade next to a closed seamstress' shop across the street. Betty waded to it and put Jimmy back down. She listened at Dora's store for conversation, but could hear nothing. Soon enough, Camille Breed stepped out on hobbled legs, holding a small bag of groceries with two hands. She turned up the street towards Betty's house, but cut to the other side, towards a street that diverged off to the left, to a slow upgrade that led to a far away hill and mansion. As Mrs. Breed walked down the streets, doors opened along the row of businesses. All along the avenue, people piled into the heat, watching the slow path of their elderly matron with reverent silence. Only when their lady approached the mansion did they end their ritual and file back away.

Betty had used the opportunity to file herself away onto a back street, unnoticed. But she had not succeeded in escaping all eyes. As Dora had mentioned, Betty could see the mansion atop its hill from anywhere in town. Even when Betty avoided watching it, it seemed the mansion's eyes watched her the whole way home, following her, tracing her path, noting her address when Betty turned in at her broken picket fence. Betty realized there were no cool places left.

So, Betty and Jimmy braved the day's remaining heat until the sun tired and the humidity rested on the ground and trees as a soft drizzle. When Carl came home, Betty was in the kitchen covering dinner in cellophane and moving it to the refrigerator as Jimmy played on the floor with spoons.

"Bet? Bet, you home?"

"In the kitchen."

"Hey you guys!" Carl came in enthusiastically, going straight for Jimmy and snatching him up.

"Daddy," Jimmy stated.

"You seem happy," Betty noted.

"I like the new job. It's a lot of time now, but it's not as draining. And it's going to get easier. Whew, it's hot in the house. You gonna open some windows?"

"It was a hot day today."

"Sure was," Carl agreed.

"Jimmy could have used an air conditioner."

"Oh God!" Carl exclaimed, slapping his palm against his forehead. "I can't believe...I'm sorry. I'll come out tomorrow, take an early long lunch, get one in here by about eleven-thirty? Think you can make it 'til then?"

"I think so."

"How about some of that dinner? I'm starving."

Betty reversed herself and began emptying the fridge, while Carl moved Jimmy out into the living room where she could hear them playing. In the kitchen, Betty stopped, just inside the fridge, its cool air slowing her down, reminding her of the events of the day. The sounds of Jimmy laughing and playing, and the comforting presence of her husband were such a contrast to the seriousness and loneliness of the day.

"Carl?" she said.

"Yah honey?" He had heard her.

"How are you doing?"

"Good."

"How are people treating you around here?"

Carl didn't answer at first.

"Reception's been kinda cool. Boss has been nice. Can't complain too much." He let the silence return, until he stood in the doorway with Jimmy in his arms. He placed Jimmy amongst his spoons and came over to Betty and put his hands on her shoulders.

"Bet, we knew the move would be hard." He kissed her softly and held her. "We'll all get used to each other." The skin of Carl's cheek, pressed against hers, had remained cool from the night air. For a moment, just a moment, she had found her cool place.

The following morning was tolerable. Carl arrived on time with the air conditioner, installed it, ate a quick lunch and was gone. They had little time to speak to each other. But the cool air that Carl left behind was a pleasant enough companion. Jimmy seemed content playing in its company. Between feedings, he kept himself busy all day, without Betty having to run him around and pass him toys. In fact, Betty had time to relax and reflect. Both drew her outside. With little to look at inside her sparsely decorated house, she felt compelled to peek past her closed curtains, to stare at the trees, flowers, houses and hillside. Her eyes locked on the nearest things in motion, the birds that flitted from tree to tree in long glorious loops and twists. All against the swathes of yellow, pink, blue, red and green of flowerbeds and wildflowers. It was beautiful here. She was not too different from her neighbors, she thought, peeking through the curtains in the hopes of finding something worth following. And like her neighbors, she

kept watch for visitors or passers-by. She watched for them, just as they had watched for her. But no one braved the day's heat as she had. Between times with Jimmy, Betty passed her day this way, moving from room to room to vary the view. In her bedroom, Betty found the window from which she could see Breed's Hill. Its mansion looked like a small box she could reach out and grab, and its windows like fingerholes. Betty could imagine what the town, and her house, must have looked like from up there. When she strained her eyes to focus as best she could, she thought she could make out a hint of white in an upstairs window. It didn't move. All day. Nor did Betty.

Betty didn't tire of the surroundings, especially as the day dimmed and the fireflies flashed their beacons in the evening mist. The sun said goodbye so gloriously, tossing gold, orange, red, and purple banners, that she laughed and applauded, softly so as not to disturb Jimmy.

Carl should be home soon, she told herself, leaving her bedroom window, watching the darkness from the front window. Carl should be home soon, she told herself, watching peoples' house lights flicker off one by one. Carl should be home soon, she told herself, after feeding Jimmy a late meal and hoping he'd keep himself busy just a little longer, so dad could kiss him goodnight. Carl should be home soon, she told herself as she started to worry.

A truck snuck up. Lights off. It wasn't Carl. It stopped in front of the neighbors property to the side of the house. They were coming. Four figures hopped out of the back and crouched their way to the front of Betty's house. They stopped and watched for her. But only her eye showed, unnoticed. They stepped past the gate into the yard. They were small figures, kids, maybe high school age. The two largest seemed to be directing the others. They went to the knotty tree, and the tallest boy began to climb. "Hurry up," she could here the other oldest whisper.

They're just kids, Betty told herself, just kids.

Nevertheless, as the youngest two passed pieces of knotted rope up to the climber, Betty began to question her assumptions of innocence. The climber took the ropes and looped them around the lowest branch, wrapping them into the simplest knots, and adjusting them so that the nooses at their ends hung down at just the right heights.

The kids welcomed their climber with supportive arms as he came down. They snuck off, piling back into the truck. The driver turned on his lights this time as they drove past, surveying their work one last time. The headlights, flashing off the knotty tree, exposed the smug glance of the adult driver, and purer faces of the children in the back. Pure like mirrors, they reflected the hatred of their parents. These were Frankenstein's monsters created by the negligent science of their fathers and mothers. Kids are always drawn into the conflicts of adults. They become their greatest perpetrators and greatest victims.

The nooses were testimony to that. There were three. One large, one medium, and one small as a fist, hung lowest to catch a small body.

“Oh Jimmy,” Betty sobbed, “what have we dragged you into.”

Betty dropped the curtain and stumbled to Jimmy’s playpen. She snatched him up violently and dragged him to the bed. She pulled him in there with her and squeezed him to her belly, as if to push him inside her, where she could protect him. Jimmy struggled and screamed, but she held onto him, trapping his arms and legs with her own. One, three, five minutes of adult patience was too much for the ranting boy, whose own struggling tired him, until he eventually fell asleep in her arms.

When she heard the front door opening, she was prepared for whoever it was. Nothing would move her away from Jimmy, no words, no threats, no actions.

When the figure approached quickly and stood in the doorway to the bedroom, panting desperately, she knew it was Carl. But she could no longer move.

Even though Carl held the three nooses in his left hand shaking them furiously, screaming “What is this!?!,” she couldn’t move.

Jimmy woke, but Betty still held him firm. He began to cry again. But she couldn’t move.

Carl had to pry Betty’s arms away from Jimmy to set him free. He pulled Jimmy up into one arm and bounced him. The crying continued. She couldn’t move. Even when Carl noticed her lack of response and asked, “How you doing, Bet?”

And came by her side, “How you doing, Bet?”

And patted her hair, “How you doing, Bet?”

She couldn’t move.

“Three nooses,” she managed to answer his first question.

“And this,” Carl said, holding a piece of paper near her face, so she could just make out a few words: “in memory of Vincent.”

“I found this under the front door,” Carl explained.

Betty snapped to attention, grabbing the paper with both hands. In fancy calligraphy, it read, “You and your family are cordially invited to a TEA PARTY to be held at the Breed Mansion, in memory of Vincent.” The date was tomorrow night at eight pm. On the side of the invitation, scrawled in red ink was a message: “Betty, you better leave as soon as you can, Dora.”

Carl began, “What does this me...”

But Betty cut him off. Over a screaming Jimmy, she detailed all the events of the past days, explaining the history of the town, the meeting with Dora, the encounter with Camille Breed, the truck with the kids. As she continued, Betty could see the effect it was having on Carl. He reddened and boiled just as Camille Breed had. Betty took Jimmy from him, just long enough for Jimmy to escape from both of them, and run out of the room to safer areas of the house. Before Betty could finish, Carl left as well, rushing to the front window and keeping his eyes conspicuously searching.

“Carl,” Betty called, “we’ve got to...”

“I won’t...” Carl said to himself.

“We’ve got to think of Jimmy,” she warned.

“They can’t...” she heard him mutter. He wasn’t talking to her, she realized. He stayed by the window, keeping watch, repeating half phrases of reflective indignation, giving clues to his next day’s intentions.

“We aren’t...”

“This isn’t...”

“I’m gonna...”

Betty started to pack; but then went for Jimmy, and put him to bed. Afterwards, with Carl keeping watch, Betty went to bed herself, and managed to drift off. Whenever she stirred, she checked to see Carl still by the window, before going back to bed.

In the morning, she woke long enough to see him off.

“I’ll be right back,” he said, “It’s Saturday.”

And he was, within two hours, and stayed home with them that day, keeping watch as Betty tended to Jimmy and packed their things. He didn’t stop her, but he didn’t help either. They both knew she couldn’t finish by eight alone. But Betty tried. By four o’clock, when Betty carried her first box out to the car, she noticed the brand new shot gun sitting in the back seat, with a box of shells.

She dropped the box and ran into the house, but Carl was already coming out, past her.

“No Carl, no. Think of Jimmy. Nothing is more important than our baby. Please Carl, please. Don’t do this. Please.”

He pushed into the car, and slammed its door despite her. He bent the key starting the engine, and wrestled the car down the street towards Breed’s Hill, leaving her at the gate, sobbing.

Betty had no choice but to shut herself and Jimmy inside again, watching with her fearful eye as the fireflies flashed their warnings, as her world dimmed. After the mist sparkled in the final throes of sunlight, the house lights came on and their cars came home. They gathered inside, in every house. And almost on cue, they began to bring their lights outside. Flashlights outlined the procession of tall and small figures piling out in the streets from every house. They milled there in whispered camaraderie, until they turned en masse, and flowed down the street, joining the many streams of light that poured up towards Breed’s Hill like veins connecting the town to its fleshy heart, where their hateful sustenance flowed into its corridors and chambers.

Betty breathed shallowly at the hush of the empty town, staring out her bedroom at the flickering windows of the shadowy mansion.

As the hours passed, Betty could imagine the diabolical presentation being made by Camille Breed, in a voice cracked with age, summoning Vincent’s memory to invoke the town’s ire at a man and woman who dared hope to join them, and a baby boy who dared be born to them. She could picture the responses of the crowd, referring to the presence of their own children as evidence of some need to act drastically and with finality. And she could imagine Carl, somewhere

up there, with his shot gun, amongst the lilacs.

When Jimmy went to bed unaware, Betty was able to commit herself to her post in the bedroom. Had she been standing at the front window, she might not have given her wearying legs rest. But the closeness of the bed allowed her to open the curtains and sit. She confidently afforded herself the small comfort, but gave disciplined denial to the luxury of lying back or bringing up her feet. Nevertheless, the meeting outlasted her. Betty's head eventually lowered and she dozed sitting up.

A light tapping sound slowly eased her from her sleep. She startled herself awake, having realized time had passed. Upon quick glance, she saw the mansion's lights still flickering, and relaxed a little. But when the tapping returned, it drew her attention away. She hurried out of the bedroom and went immediately to Jimmy. He slept comfortably. He was fine.

Betty went to the kitchen to check the kitchen clock: 3am.

When the tapping returned again, from the front room, at the front door, it startled her. Someone was knocking at the door, in light, soft raps. Four, and it stopped. It wasn't Carl, she told herself, it couldn't be Carl. Carl would have come in. It was someone else. Dora perhaps? No, Dora was up at the mansion with everyone else, Betty thought. Despite the soft taps, Betty prepared herself for the door to burst in. She grabbed a kitchen knife and waited and listened. The knocking didn't return. After a few more minutes, she went to the window, and made a crack for her eye. No one was there. Eventually, she opened the door. Nobody.

Betty cursed her imagination and returned to her post, armed with the knife and a bit of rest. She sat impatiently as the hours continued to pass, until the sky lightened and the candleflames disappeared behind the light of the rising sun. Even in the light of the new day, Betty remained ready for the stream of townspeople to come pouring back down the hill towards her house. It didn't happen.

The lock of the front door turned, and the door creaked open.

"Bet?" Carl called.

"Carl!" she responded, running out to him. "What happened? Are they coming?"

"I don't know."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I don't know. I waited in a bush at the bottom of the hill. They all went up there. And they never came out, except some old lady, dressed in white. She just walked down the hill and into the town and never came back."

"What happened to everyone else?"

"I don't know."

Betty pushed past Carl and stepped out into the front yard. She was greeted by the pungent sweet smell of lilacs, too close to be wafting down the hill in the still morning air. She searched the ground and, next to the door, found a bound bouquet of lilacs, freshly cut.

NOT TOO LIKELY

Martin Willitts, Jr.

Every cop has a dead file,
a folder full of an unsolved murder
and it will haunt his coffee every retired morning.

Some take the folder with them
study it at night
looking for something they had not seen before

This was not one of those files.
I thought they had done it
but they didn't and there were too many suspects

Yet the file kept calling out: solve me.
There are unsolved crimes
and there are crimes we do not want solved.

This was one of those cases.
I found the one slender clue no one saw
then I was able to close the file and burn it.

FROM
THE
DEAD

Alexandria
Rand

And he rose
from what you think was from the dead
and could he come
and throw his beloved juices,
i mean, beauty,
all over the planet

did it sound religious?
did it sound sexual?
sometimes
they can be one and the same

sometimes
which is which?

Down in the Dirt
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• **Down in the Dirt** is published by **Scars Publications and Design**, 829 Brian Court, Gurnee, IL 60031-3155 USA; attn: Alexandria Rand. Contact us via snail-mail or e-mail (AlexRand@scars.tv) for subscription rates or prices for annual collection books.

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