

down in the *dirt*
revealing all your
dirty little secrets

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Scars cover art of buildings
in Stockholm, Sweden.

Affirmations

Pat Dixon

The pattern began to emerge, as a shrink told my first wife, while I was in the Army. He was judging from a case that's still valid in my mind, though I see the roots of my "problem" as being deeper and somewhat older.

Fresh out of high school and newly wed to a classmate who announced--erroneously it turned out--that we were going to become premature parents, I joined the service to learn about electronics and leadership while helping my country. After three years of training and duty as a squad radioman, I thought I was really moving up in the military world and decided to re-enlist. I was a corporal and had recently been recommended for promotion to acting sergeant. As luck would have it, my true stripes appeared two days before I was to sign the re-up papers.

"Fuzz"--as we called our newly commissioned 'toon leader--had assigned me to collect donations from my squad for the Red Cross. When I turned the money in to him, the amount was more than any of his other three squads had contributed. However, when he asked me what the "percentage of participation" was, I told him the truth--it was about two-thirds.

"Corporal Brown," he said with his sarcastic little college-boy smile, "that is just totally unacceptable. I want you to try harder. I want you to exercise some leadership here. Your squad needs to have one hundred percent participation--by noon tomorrow."

"Yes, sir," I said, saluting him quite smartly.

Back then, most of the men in my squad were making barely \$78 per month, and, like me, many of them were having big allotments taken out and sent home to wives or parents--and about a quarter of them had kids already. By next morning, however, I had collected an additional \$14.75 from the squad and took it to the lieutenant with a precise calculation of the participation: 83.333 percent. I could have lied and said everyone had contributed, or I could have kicked in a couple more bucks of my own and thought of it as a "loan" I wouldn't be repaid by the 'cruits that hadn't contributed. Maybe in a couple other alternate universes, that's what Thomas J. Brown, Jr., did.

As others might've foreseen--but somehow I did not--Fuzz became furious with me.

"Corporal Brown, did I or did I not give you a direct order to get one hundred percent participation?"

"Yes, sir. You did, sir," I said, knowing that it had really been phrased more in the form of a hope or a wish and not as a command.

"Why, then, have you failed me? Why is it that my other three squads in my

platoon all have one hundred percent participation and all four of the other squads in the other three platoons of Delta Company all have one hundred percent participation--and all of the squads in all of the other five companies in our battalion have the same? Why is it that your squad is the only one in the entire battalion unable to do so, Corporal Brown?"

He might have asked about all the squads in all the other four battalions in our brigade, had he known about them as I did, and the answer would have been the same. I told him the literal truth.

"Sir, it's because they've all falsified their reports. The NCOs collected what they could without squeezing the troops' balls, and then they winked at their officers and said they had got one hundred percent participation, which is what the general wants--sir."

For about twenty seconds Fuzz stared at me in silence.

"Do you know this for a fact, Corporal?" he finally asked.

"Yes, sir. After duty last night, sir, I made a point of asking direct questions in twelve day rooms and also at the NCO Club. My squad has absolutely donated the highest actual dollar amount and almost certainly has the highest real percentage on this whole post, from what I've heard--sir."

"Corporal Brown," he said after another thoughtful pause, "how difficult would it be for you to get one hundred percent participation, as I ordered you to do?"

Again, in some alternate universes, various Lieutenant Fuzzes might never have tried to push the matter further with me or else might have seen the reasonableness of Tommy Brown's statement and backed me up--or maybe put in a few extra bucks themselves and lied to the C.O. about the participation. Or various Tommy Browns, if pushed, might've caved in--or might've pushed back harder, figuratively in some universes, maybe literally with his fists or a rifle butt in others. In my universe, though, I had my answer that suited me, and suits me still.

"Legally speaking, it's impossible, sir. The only ways Third Squad could get that percentage would be if I illegally harassed some of my men who really can't afford to donate--or else if I falsified my report to you, sir, which I am certain you as a commissioned officer would not ask me to do. Would you--sir?"

After a third pause Fuzz said, "Dismissed, Private Brown."

Tops, our company first sergeant who had listened quietly to this conversation, gave me a half-hour head-chewing and a ten-minute ass-chewing and then explained why I would not be approved if I tried to re-enlist: I had a dishonorable, un-patriotic, un-military attitude. I tried to argue with Tops, but he'd hear none of it and looked at me as if I was the battalion idiot.

I suppose it was really all for the best that I didn't re-up: four buddies I stayed in touch with, even after I began working towards my law degree, told me that later, as the Vietnam War got cranked up, they were expected to get one hundred percent qualification of basic trainees on the rifle ranges and did so by poking holes in the 'cruits' targets with pens, pencils, and cartridges to raise the scores of those who failed--while their company officers and range officers calm-

ly looked on. If I'd seen that sort of life-endangering stuff, I probably would've gotten myself sent to Fort Leavenworth for twenty years for unpatriotically reporting it to my superior officers.

My first wife's therapist told her I was "frontal" and pointed to this "failure to adapt to the realities of our society" as my initial turning point towards my "self-destructive behavioral pattern." Perhaps so, but the seed was planted at least three years earlier, at my high school class's senior banquet.

During the banquet, which was held on a Thursday evening in the ballroom of a yacht club on the coast of Connecticut, various student groups and teams and individuals were recognized for their merits by our superintendent, our principal, and our school board--who all sat at a head table and made endless speeches about things past, passing, and to come. Ironically, my bride-to-be and I were both honored that night--for being among the five brainiest kids in the graduating class.

As the valedictorian, she would be recognized more specifically during the following Monday's graduation ceremony, where she would give a pre-approved speech. On this evening she was called on by name and asked to stand up, and then the other four of us were also invited to rise as a group for some polite and very brief applause. The bulk of the evening's recognition, of course, went to senior members of the school's basketball and football teams, with the baseball team placing a poor third but still far in front of us five scholars. And Chess Club, which had the best won-lost record in the whole school, got even less praise and wasn't asked to stand.

In those days, of course, it was illegal for teenagers to drink in public, and so nothing alcoholic was being served to us at our graduation banquet--which consisted of over-cooked vegetables, stale rolls, and a choice between pinkish chicken with a thick, pasty white sauce or dry, gristle-bound beef with soggy onions. I discovered by chance, however, during a pilgrimage to the men's room, that most of my classmates had brought bottles of their own and had partaken therefrom with great liberality. In a pattern that they would re-enact with equal determination at Saturday night's Senior Prom, many of them were making themselves varying degrees of mellow, belligerent, numb, and/or sick. While I was washing my hands, one member of the football team puked his partial denture into a toilet and flushed it down before he realized what he'd done.

I noticed, too, that some of the harder-drinking members of our semi-finalist basketball team were arguing about having run out of the liquor they'd brought with them and were debating how best to replenish their supply. A few suggested they forcibly appropriate the partially empty bottles of the men's room's other occupants, but I don't know whether they acted upon that motion after I returned to my seat in the dining room. I briefly told my intended what I'd just observed, and we exchanged smug, self-righteous, self-congratulatory smiles.

About this time our superintendent of schools stood up and gave the climactic speech of the evening. He was a short, bald, heavy-set man with a plump

face and an ever-present smile. His nickname was “Pops” among the students, and it had been so even when my parents had gone through the school system twenty-five years before me. Introducing him was “Big Jim Bob”--James Robert Harrison--our tall, muscular principal, he who'd patrolled the corridors of the school, swinging a twirler's baton like a policeman's truncheon, maintaining amiable iron discipline among scholars and non-scholars alike the past four years.

We five, we happy scholastically gifted five, were sitting together on the right-hand side of the dining room, about forty feet from the head table. We exchanged nose-wrinkled grimaces as we heard this strong man give a long litany of fulsome, lick-spittle praise to a corpulent little clown who scarcely had three contiguous functional brain cells. We may have occasionally joked about Big Jim Bob behind his back, but previously, I think, we'd all had a grudging and sincere respect for him and the way he carried himself--a bit like Fess Parker or Clint Walker, a couple of early television heroes. That night, though, several of us whispered “Suck-up” under our breaths during his introduction of Pops.

After Big Jim Bob was done, Pops himself was full of fulsome praise and windy platitudes. At one point I whispered to my intended, “The good news is, if the enemy ever capture him, at least they won't get anything out of him.”

Pops's speech ran approximately twenty minutes and might have run much longer. One of the minor stars of our quarter-finalist football team--who was half unconscious in his seat, just five feet from the superintendent--suddenly began acting like a one-man Greek chorus. At the end of each rhetorical pause by Pops, this bit player would chant in a loud slurred voice, audible to everybody, “Yesh-yesh-yesh-yesh-yesh!”

Although Pops's eyes sometimes rested on this player and glared through his rimless glasses, he maintained his patented smile and continued his speech with a studied aloofness to the disturbing element. Big Jim Bob, though, looked considerably distraught and repeatedly tried to gesture something to various other football players at that table. They themselves, however, appeared to be enjoying their teammate's performance, and they made no acknowledgement of Big Jim Bob's cryptic gestures.

All might still have gone well and, for all I know, my own life might have taken a different turn, had not the manager of the yacht club suddenly stormed up to the head table and grabbed Big Jim Bob by the shoulder in an angry and agitated manner. Pops skipped a couple of beats to listen, and his smile half faded for just a moment. He briefly put his hand over the microphone and spoke rapidly to his high school principal, making some pointing gestures roughly in our direction.

In half an instant, Big Jim Bob was on his feet and walking towards us. He didn't have his twirler's baton in his hand, but there appeared to be murder in his eyes, and I'd never before seen him look so intent and serious.

In about fifteen seconds he reached the seats we were in and told the two of us who were males to get up and come with him. Gripping me and Charlie Swift roughly by our upper arms, he hustled us out the dining room exit and

into the parking lot.

“All right, you little shits,” he said, breathing heavily the stale odor of alcohol in wave after wave, “who was it broke into the club’s liquor locker?!”

Was this man insane? We two students were both obviously sober. Neither Charlie nor I spoke. Big Jim Bob shoved us against the latticed wall of the garbage-can area, cracking some of the thin boards with our heads and backs.

“I don’t have all night! Who the fuck did it?” he roared in our faces.

“We don’t know,” I said, wincing. “My best guess, though, is it was some of those darlin’ basketball players who’ve been getting all the praise and applause this evening.”

This speculation caused Big Jim Bob explode.

“You little shits aren’t goin’ t’ get away with this sort of thing. I’m goin’ t’ suspend you both until we’ve had an investigation. Now, both of you get the hell off these premises or I’ll have the police take you in.”

Needless to say, Charlie and I left the banquet without giving anyone an explanation. Later, we and our folks tried to protest that we hadn’t done anything wrong, and the following August we were quietly sent our diplomas in the mail. When mine arrived, I was already married and taking basic in the Army.

That night of our banquet, I resolved that I wouldn’t take any more horse shit from anyone who was deliberately messing with me.

During basic and afterwards, I met a lot of military authority figures who’d given me stupid orders or who’d made honest mistakes in judgment--both of which I’d tolerated--but until I met Fuzz I had not had to deal again with willful, consciously malicious idiocy.

Who knows what I would have made of myself if I hadn’t been hassled and bent by my unprincipled principal? If I’d gone ahead unwarped, I might have gone straight into the college of my choice, become an ROTC lieutenant like Fuzz, risen to the rank of light colonel, shredded evidence for some president of the United States, lied to congress, and then become a state senator or a TV personality. I often wonder.

Sorry Mommy

Raud Kennedy

She carries a heart
deep inside her
hard as a walnut.
Living in a house of opulence,
little touches her.
A bee might sting her
but someone will be blamed
for leaving the door ajar.
Her daughter wants a hug
but first she must apologize
for needing one.

AN AUTUMN TALE

Mel Waldman

In the autumn, a long time ago, the boy sang to Grandma. Grandma lay in the old, creaky wooden bed, waiting for the Signal. While she waited, she counted the falling leaves outside the window. The golden-eyed boy, oblivious of the leaves, kept singing. When Mother entered the room, he stopped.

“Joseph, come here!”

The boy passively obeyed her. Mother closed the curtains and left with the boy.

Mother whispered to Joseph: “Now son, I don’t want to frighten you. But Grandma is dying. We love her deeply and if we could keep her alive forever, in that room, we would. But we can’t!”

Joseph looked up at the tall five foot Giant. “You keep singing to her, son. Make sure you do. And she’ll live another day!”

The snow fell heavily outside Grandma’s window. The room was pitch-black, as black as the snow was white, gloriously white and defiant of human existence. Grandma tried to count the snowflakes. But the task was impossible. She grinned at the heavenly designs as they floated past her window. They kept her company till Mother brought her supper and removed the bedpan.

Grandma prayed to the innocent snowflakes as if they were saints. “They want me dead,” she chuckled. “I’m too tired to end it without His strength.” But He didn’t give the Signal. And without His final consent, she couldn’t leave. “I should have gone in the fall,” she whispered to the snowflakes while she gasped for air. “You old stubborn mule up there. Why didn’t You take me when my friends left? The leaves, you know. Well, maybe my new friends will not betray me.”

The rain came down like a torrent from Hell, rattling and tapping on Grandma’s windowsill. The old woman awakened from her sleep and spoke to the noisy guests. “My time is long due. And yet the leaves, the snow, and now you-play with me. You noisy guests. How well you dance on the windowsill! John, how I miss dear John, my husband up there, where you come from! He too was a gracious dancer. He danced lightly, waltzing here, there, like a butterfly dancing in the sky. Rain, rain, never go away! John, I’ll be putting on the old shoes soon. We’ll be knocking their eyes out.”

While Grandma slept, Joseph locked himself in his room. Mother and Father argued downstairs in the living room. Father beat Mother until bloody saliva trickled down her neck. He left her standing in the middle of the living room. He strolled to the den, nonchalantly smoking his pipe. She screamed, but he ignored her.

One rainy night Father vanished. Mother disappeared too-inside a black widow's invisible heart.

Mother stampeded upstairs and knocked on Joseph's door. But he refused to open it. He hid in the closet. In the dark he felt things-real things that grasped his heart. His tiny fingers fell into an abysmal hole, which was actually one winter boot. "Grandma loves you," he told the boot. Then he grabbed a long, thin object. "We will fight the enemy and conquer! For you are my sword of victory!" He was addressing an umbrella. Joseph wore a big, fat smile until he remembered the knocking on the door. Joseph hated noise. He loved the Silence as much as he loved Grandma. Eventually, Mother stopped. The boy kissed his boot, Grandma slept, and Mother wandered through the house on a scavenger hunt. And Father? Father was gone!

Mother searched for something. She ran, danced, and pranced across the corridors. But she did not find what she was looking for. Each time she passed a mirror, she hurried on. She hated the faces in them.

The sun came through the window. In the garden, roses bloomed. Inside, Grandma was shriveled up, sweating in her cauldron. But she gloriously absorbed the fragrant odors that seeped into the boiling room.

Joseph marched into her room with an umbrella, which he pointed in the direction of the blazing sun. "I have come to rescue you from the enemy!"

"And who is the enemy, Joseph?"

"The real enemy is ..." He turned around and pointed the umbrella at the door. "The real enemy is beyond the door."

The autumn came again. Joseph sang to Grandma in a high soprano voice. Then one day he was ill. He had to stay in bed for days. Mother didn't care. She was obsessed with finding a precious object. Her craving devoured her mind, which split into an infinite regression, each time she passed a mirror and paused to stare.

Grandma was obsessed too. She craved for Joseph. She lifted herself up until she sat erect in bed. Slowly, she got out of bed and moved silently toward the door. She opened it. Closed it. And walked barefoot to his room down the corridor. When she entered his room, the boy smiled at her. They hugged each other.

Mother trampled the floor with her heels. When she galloped into the attic, she found an old broken mirror. The mirror was dusty and reeked of rat odor. His odor! She inhaled the odor with joy as she stared at the image in the broken mirror. She grinned sardonically. This was the image she was seeking. The wicked memory of childhood was in that mirror. Love and hope were in it. Power!

Suddenly, Mother hunched her back and grunted like a rat. She bit her skin

until she bled. As the blood trickled down her throat she roared with laughter. She rejoiced in the stench of rat odor. And she laughed hysterically at the sight of her self-inflicted bites.

Then her eyes darted across the little room-vast universe. In the corner, it lay. Just a motionless thing now! A twisted smile crawled up her face.

A minute later, Mother picked up a huge sack and filled it with the motionless object and all the garbage she could find. Hunched over, with corrugated brows, sweat dripping from her hairy armpits and unshaven legs, she dropped to the floor. Grunting, screeching, and reeking of rat odor, she crawled across the infinite room. With the broken mirror in one hand and the sack in the other, she crawled out of the attic and down the steps. She crept toward Grandma's room. Her odor arrived before she did.

At the foot of Grandma's door, the Rat Lady left the ground. She rose and stood slightly hunched before the door. With the sack in her left hand, she stared at the shattered mirror. It revealed only disappointment and rejection. Ugly thoughts jumped out of the mirror, violently assaulting her. With madness in her eyes, she grabbed the mirror. She drove it into her eyes!

Mother screamed as she blinded herself. Her body twitched and shook violently. Blood gushed from her eyes. A fatal signal. Then she stampeded into Grandma's room. She lunged for the woman who wasn't there.

Joseph couldn't stop crying. He lay in bed hugging and kissing Grandma. The Signal had come, a few seconds before that awful scream penetrated his bones, exploding his veins and corpuscles. The Signal was His final consent.

She lay in bed, feeling the incessant heat exploding outside and within her body. The sun's intrusive rays bombarded the windowsill first, before reaching her bed. Joseph was at her side. He sang to her in a sweet soprano voice.

"When will the autumn arrive, Joseph?"

"Soon."

"I will count the leaves, one by one as I have always done every autumn."

"No," Joseph said softly.

"No? Why not?"

He didn't answer. He sang until she fell asleep. Downstairs, the den was empty. Father had never returned.

Joseph spoke to her once more. "No, Mother! You will not count the leaves! You're blind! Yet I will always sing to you. Maybe someday I will love you too the way I loved Grandma."

So it was. In the autumn, a long time ago, the boy sang to Mother.

Skipping

Ken Dean

“So you read and signed the waiver?” professor Ashkalal asked while looking at his clipboard.

“Yeah, it’s signed,” John Valentine answered.

John was an Ohio State University student just looking to make a quick buck. He heard from a friend that a research project needed some volunteers and they were paying, so he thought, ‘Hell Yeah!’

Professor Ashkalal was a tall, thin Indian with a bushy mustache and a thick accent. John didn’t much like being questioned by the professor. Sometimes they came across with an air of superiority. He couldn’t help thinking, ‘you’re in America, damn it!’

“Hopefully you read it carefully; this is a risky experiment. That is why we are paying so much.”

“Of course. But who is going to turn down ten thousand dollars?”

“There are some who would. The worrisome type, or those who are older and feel they have more at risk. Just remember the waiver absolves the university and myself of any responsibility and cuts off any recourse for litigation on your part in case anything goes wrong.”

“Yeah Doc, I realize the risk, let’s just get on with it.”

“Soon enough. The nurse has to hook you up first.”

Okay. Whatever. A nurse with a slightly worried look on her face came over to attach some medical equipment to his body. What was that look all about? He was getting just a little worried himself. But ten thousand dollars! That’s a lot of party and beer! The nurse was busy attaching an IV drip in his arm and electrodes all over his chest, head and feet.

“Doc, what’s this experiment about anyway?”

“I can’t tell you too much; it might affect your responses and the outcome. But I will tell you that I’m trying to prove a theory of mine using chemicals where I thought complex electromagnetic fields and particles streams would be necessary.”

“Wow – sounds complicated.”

“Doctor, he’s ready now. We can begin anytime,” Nurse Flaherty said.

“Just a moment – I need to set up his brainwave activity baseline first.”

“Yes Doctor.”

“All right, that’s finished. Go ahead and bring around the drug cart and crash kit. John, once we start, We’ll be injecting two different chemicals in a timed release. The first may make you feel like you are floating. I’ve included a tranquilizer so as not to cause you any panic. The second is the one I’m actually experimenting with. That’s all I can tell you now. If successful, we will go through a debriefing after the drugs have worn off.”

“Sure.” John was starting to feel a little more nervous.

“Are you ready?”

“Yeah, let’s do it.”

“Nurse, start releasing the first drug.”

John started to feel a funny tingle run through his body. Doc was right; he was starting to feel like he was floating a little above the table. Thankfully he had included the tranquilizers.

“Nurse, begin the second drug sequence.”

This time the sensation was different. John felt as if he was being pulled somewhere, but he couldn’t pinpoint the direction. The room and everything in it was beginning to dim from view. He felt his right hand reaching for –

skip

the next rung on the ladder leading up to the police rescue copter as he tried to haul the teenage boy out of the turbulent Scioto River. The boy had become trapped during a flash flood. John reached down to get a better handhold and –

skip

drove the piton home as hard as he could into the icy shelf above him. He would be one of those counted as conquering Mount Everest or die trying. But the piton just busted the ice shelf loose and he began to fall backwards! John grabbed for the safety rope tied to the other climbers and –

skip

securely fastened the silencer to his Sig-Sauer 9 mm. He had snuck in silently avoiding the security cameras per the blueprints given to him by his client. ‘I want him out of the way and I want it to be quiet’, the client said. But John was always quiet and stealthy. He was proud to be deemed ‘the invisible hitman’ by the press. The mark always worked late, so he should be by himself. John slowly opened the unlocked outer office door. No one – good. He opened the inner office door graveyard quiet and saw the mark facing away from him, working on the computer. All the better. When they don’t know it’s coming there is a lot less hassle. John aimed the

gun at the back of the mark's head, pulled the trigger and –

skip

adjusted her bra quickly before putting on her sweater. Her supervisor had told Janice if she was late again she would be let go. Can't afford that, she thought. Not with trying to raise three kids on her own since her bastard husband had abandoned her. She had no idea where he was and that made it difficult to press any kind of charges. Bastard! She ran down the steps to her old Volkswagen bug, hoping it would start. Reaching for the door handle she –

skip

felt his whole body jerk. He was suddenly back on the examination table looking up at professor Ashkalal and nurse Flaherty.

“What the hell was that!?”, John gasped.

“We're just glad your back, John. That was part of the risk; that we might lose you forever.”

“But what was it? Some kind of acid trip?”

“No – definitely not an acid trip. Describe it to me.”

“I felt like I kept changing situations, bodies, being different people: but I also felt I was still myself all along.”

“That sounds reasonable. But you weren't here except for physically. Your mind was skipping timelines and realities.”

“But Doc, how can you be sure?”

“Your brainwave pattern disappeared off the screen. Your mind had essentially ceased to exist in this reality. You weren't here, John.”

punctuation as a second language, i

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a dash is redundancy, prefaced--
clarification that is often misleading,
or oddly contradictory; however,

as a bracket--an aside, which won't be held;
that can't wait--it is quite useful.

RANDOM FEAST: He Still Doesn't Get It

G.A. Scheinoha

How can she stand there with a plastic smile fixed firmly in place and spread the same administration b.s. about retreat is defeat? Laura Bush certainly took a page from her husband's play-book.

In this case, the words of mass distraction are aimed at the media.

Blaming them for the public's attitude about the war. She says the press have no idea what's going on over there. Hmm, I thought they were embedded with the troops.

When was the last time she waltzed her butt into harm's way? If Laura Bush is so sure this is such a righteous cause, how come she doesn't offer her daughters up as fodder to the front?

If it's petty to refuse to see your mistakes, how much worse to refute the need for change? And you know that's what it's coming down to. President Bush won't alter our course in Iraq because he still doesn't get it.

We want our soldiers back home. That's why we voted for Democrats. Or the fact the U.S. cannot win this one. We're a superpower, not God.

Instead, he's actually considering requests to send in more bodies.

Nearly three thousand dead G.I.s isn't enough to satisfy his blood lust?

Not to mention the hundred thousand Iraq civilians.

Somebody explain to me what the difference is between him and the deposed Saddam Hussein. They've both wrought nothing but death and destruction.

Doesn't he understand more battalions not only spell a larger, i.e. extended commitment, hence no real reason for Iraq to defend itself?

They also equate a greater American presence. Aggravate an already tense situation.

We are viewed as occupiers. Just because we can shove our way of life (democracy) down some other sovereign nation's throat doesn't mean we should. Freedom is, after all, about the right to make your own choices

Since he can't grasp reality, maybe Congress needs to show him a different one; in which he's removed from office by impeachment.

He isn't a monarch. Remember? We kicked the last King George out of this country.

SLIPPAGE

Christopher Frost

We are above the condominium that our reluctant hero has dwelled for the last seven years. It is within these walls that he has struggled to control his mind. It is here that he has lost several battles to his own inner demons and utterly and sadly lost hope, not only in the world but, worse yet, for himself. From outside we can see that every light that can be lit, is, and that our poor friend, our dear sweet friend whom others value more than he will ever know, is filled with torment and despair. We see him stand up from his desk which resides in the corner of his office. The shelf above filled with comic books, novels, and short stories. Assorted action figures – Star Wars to Buffy the Vampire Slayer figures, the center holds the slayer herself beside her Angel and to the left and right a handful of villains - line the shelves on walls and floor to ceiling bookcases. Also posters, a newspaper cut-out about his grandmother and an assortment of pictures of his beautiful wife. The office is on the rear of the condo that faces the cul de sac. The eggshell drapes are closed but thin enough to see through. He is lost from our vision for a moment as he leaves the office. We travel through the cool winter air and slowly fall towards the second floor where we hope to get a view of him again.

There is a brief pause as he is withdrawn from sight but we have an idea of where he is headed and we are sure that any moment now....ahh, there he is stumbling off the first step of the staircase and circling into the living room. We hoped that he wasn't already so lost but from what we can see he is much further gone than we had hoped. As he comes towards us, unaware of our presence, his body is slouched against the wall, his shoulder pressing heavily into it, his temple meeting the dark grey paint of the wall, a color that he had chosen when he, his wife –girlfriend at the time- and two friends had redecorated the living room. He had been complimented on the choice in colors and the design of the room which is sponge painted on the bottom half of the wall in three different hues of grey with a border just above that and above the border a solid hue of dark grey. The design is something we would see out of a fancy catalog or maybe the décor of one of the rich and famous. From here he drags himself into the dining room, the motif is Chinese inspired, his wife's idea, the wall ends in the living room and he stumbles over himself until he reaches the dining room table and steadies himself here. He is far more lost than we had originally suspected. His pupils are large and undulating, his skin pale, almost as white as a ghost, his hands shake uncontrollably as he tries to hold his weight against the table, and he is gagging on saliva that he feels is suffocating him. Our job here is only to observe, even if we wished to –which believe me we do-

we could not interfere. But if we could...if we could, we promise you that we would take him into our arms and hold him tight running our hands through his hair as we reassured him that this would all end, it is after all only a temporary set back. At least that is what we hope. Again he is on the move, with more conviction at this point. His eyes glimmer with hope as salvation is only feet away and he no longer needs walls or furniture to support him. Almost running he moves from the dining room to the kitchen, to the stove and the cabinet just to the right of it in only a few seconds. He violently throws the cabinet door open and scuffles through the content of medications, herbal remedies, vitamins, and other miscellaneous items until his fingers clasp the object he decided he was in need of while up in the office on the third floor. It is a sheet of drugs – prescription of course he has given up on illegal contraband since his last experiment resulted in the stop of his heart (figuratively speaking) the drug we speak of is Klonopin, used for individuals with anxiety and severe panic disorder.

His name is Christian Michael Winter and what we are observing from outside the second floor of his condominium is a fall from reality that he has not endured since December 17th in the year of two thousand and four. Almost a year to that date he is once again relapsing. Christian tears the protective sheet away and inside are eight dissolvable pills neatly tucked into individual sealed packs. We know he only needs two, his doctor knows that two will calm the attack and right his mind though make him a bit tired and withdrawn, it is already 10:04PM and there is no need for him to be worried about the side effects, because work, and driving his vehicle, and all the things the warning discusses one should not do while on the medication, are ten hours away into the next day.

We cross our figurative fingers and hope that he will abide by the directions and his doctors written prescription to only take those two white circular dissolvable pills and place only those on his tongue. As he opens one, two (our hope is not realized), three, and four pills are set free of their package and dumped into his hand. He pops one and two into his mouth they instantly begin to dissolve, Christian moves to the fridge and pulls out a plastic bottle of Cranberry juice, he places this on the counter above the dishwasher to the right of the sink. Above the counter is another cabinet, one that should be locked and the key safe guarded by his wife, but we cannot blame her, no, no, that would be wrong. After all it has been almost a year; almost a whole year since he was discharged from that hospital that helps the helpless and he began to move on with his life in control of these attacks. It isn't her fault, how could it be? She is only human and humans make the mistake of believing the ill when they tell stories of their recovery and hide the pain and sickness. For six months after his discharge the liquor cabinet above the dishwasher was empty. But slowly as Christian convinced his wife, his friends, and his parents that all was well in that mind of his, the alcohol returned in small quantities. Even tonight

there isn't as much as there once was. At one point this cabinet of liquor was so full that the cabinet door would not fully close, it instead remained ajar three inches to accommodate all the different bottles of inebriated soldiers.

During this dry spell that Christian acknowledged as a means to make himself well the cabinet was empty and the shelves in the fridge that at many times were lined with bottles of Bud Light, Rolling Rock, and Mich Ultra, were gone - replaced with O'Doul's non alcoholic brew. For a time he was content with drinking the taste of alcohol but settling without the buzz. For a time that was. There are three chemicals that most highly contribute to these attacks of anxiety and utter panic; not all scientists, doctors, and experts may agree but for Christian these three concoctions can mean the difference of sanity and utter dismay, they are: caffeine, nicotine, and alcohol.

Today Christian has mixed all three.

You might be asking yourself why does he do this to himself? For you to understand that you have to give him the benefit of the doubt and realize that it is not a conscious choice. Christian does not know that he is doing this to himself. It has been so long since an episode - that is what we call these set backs and attacks - has occurred. Almost a year you must remember. To Christian he has regained control of his life, he is stable, and he knows the signs of a down fall. Even so, knowing the signs of relapse doesn't mean recognizing them when it begins. He tends to rationalize the symptoms and signs away. He had a bad day at work. The wife and he aren't getting along this week. He's tired. These are all rational diagnoses of someone who can combat their own symptoms and for the most part he is correct and accurate and the attacks can be overcome through mediation and a calm perspective. But every so often he is wrong and when he is wrong is when it is most dangerous for him. And the danger ladies and gentleman...well you will see. We employ you as we watch and tell you of Christian's spiral, to keep an open mind and try to understand that this is not entirely his fault. He is after all...a good man. And if you meet the people that love him the most, you will hear stories of a man that would sacrifice himself for those he love and that no one more than he, is more honorable, more courageous, and the single best listener. Christian gives all of himself to those closest to him and he is a man that you would wish to be your best friend, brother, or lover.

However, we are pulling too far back and have missed a critical junction in the events. While we were talking my friends, Christian had reached into the cupboard and opened a bottle of Grey Goose, mixing it heavily with a splash of cranberry juice and a few ice cubes. We also missed him taking the other two Klonopin, and opening the other four. As we catch up he is now popping the other four pills in to his mouth, and as they dissolve he washes them down with the mixed drink.

Christian's therapist, a woman in her late fifties maybe even early sixties was of no help to him nor were many of the therapists in the past. It is difficult

for them to understand a man who thrives on passion and literature; many have believed he was a drug addict. He was not at the time but as we have witnessed tonight he is, on some level.

It will take anywhere from fifteen minutes to thirty minutes for the drugs to kick in, at that time two things can happen. The first: Christian will become incredibly tired and hopefully fall asleep on the couch or even his office floor. The worst case, the case that we hope more than anything will not happen is he will go up to his office and begin to write. We pray that the writer's block that has consumed him for the better part of this week is still in effect and he will not be able to coherently put together any thoughts that can be written down or typed on his WORD program. But we already know his intention is to do that later. To retire to his office, alone and secluded from the world, his wife who is at school for the night, and sit down in front of that screen and try to write.

We watch him as he crosses into the dining room, no longer stumbling or reaching for corporeal objects to steady his pace, and moves back towards the staircase that ascends to his office. We won't watch from outside and we move toward the glass patio doors and slip through following Christian from behind. He has only made one drink and sips at it as he walks the bottle of Vodka left behind on the counter along with the cranberry juice. This trip he has decided to leave the alcohol behind.

For now.

Christian enters his office. The adorned walls with posters and pictures also have a Batman clock that hasn't read the correct time in some months. Slouching in his comfy leather chair he gazes up involuntarily at the framed article from *The Trader*, a newspaper forum that ran an article on his late grandmother about her skill as a teddy bear maker. She was for all intents and purposes one of the most inspiring persons in Christian's life. Like so many others he has loved, she is gone. He continues to blame himself for her death but that story is too long to discuss at this time, again as we have sidetracked we missed another critical moment.

Now planted in his leather chair that he loves more than any other physical possession he wobbles back and fourth on its pivot as he logs onto his Blog. One of the skills he was encouraged to utilize during his first incarceration at a mental institution at the age of fifteen was to write in a journal. He has three going at the present, but the scariest and most dangerous one he has is his Blog. Because within the internet and on this Blog Christian does not write as himself but as one of the dangerous personalities he has created within his mind. There are bits and pieces of him in the writing but mostly he dwells in the fictitious person his mind created and spins the stories towards the macabre. The alter ego, Gabriel, a person who suffers the same illness that Christian does, tends to describe events gruesomely, tells of his sexual affairs, and describes his lust for pain and the hope of an accidental suicide. Gabriel is a dark recess of Christian's mind, a person who intoxicates all of Christian's darker thoughts of

himself and his gambles with death. It is being inside of Gabriel's mind that Christian can escape from his personal journals of his struggle and glamorize them in a medium of darkness and passion.

At this moment we watch as Christian logs on to this Blog and bring up a blank template to put his thoughts in. Although we are sure the medication has not kicked in yet, Christian is behaving as though it has. He rolls his shoulders and rubs his cheek across the coarse fabric of his shirt like a person on ecstasy. He cracks his knuckles, takes deep breaths and forcibly scratches his nails across his skin. This last behavior is quite frightening because if Christian continues on this path it won't be long until the dull edges of his nails aren't enough to arouse him and he'll venture a return to the kitchen where the knives now sit tucked away in their wooden block.

Oh Chris, if only this set back had happened the night before or the night after tonight when your wife would be home and able to recognize your anguish. We will hope and pray again that her professor is tired or sick and lets his students out early this evening. We could travel through the sky, across this town and into the city to where she is, venture through the halls of her school and up the flight of stairs that lead to her classroom, if only we weren't afraid of leaving Christian alone.

From the threshold of the office we float up to the ceiling and watch the events as they unfold from here. Like a fly we perch and rub are hands together anxiously.

Christian sits in front of the computer a blank template box in front of him, he has signed on as Gabriel. He sips at his strong drink, the taste of vodka doesn't settle with him right, but after this glass it will go down easier and by the third glass it will flow over his tongue and down his throat and into his belly as easily as water. Between the keyboard and the monitor is a pack of Parliament lights, purchased today. Until today it has been forty-nine days since his last cigarette. To the left of the keyboard is a large cup of Vanilla Spice Decaffeinated coffee, but we know that the girl at Dunkin Donuts that made the coffee was out of decaffeinated and instead of waiting for it to brew filled the cup with regular coffee and added the vanilla spice flavor. It has been more than six months since Christian has had a cup of caffeinated coffee and almost the second he sips at it he knows something isn't right but decides instead of engaging in a conflict with the girl at Dunkin Donuts he lets it slide and drinks the coffee. In front of the coffee is the green Rolling Rock glass that his wife had bought for him earlier in the year, now filled with three ice cubes (slowly melting), Grey Goose vodka, and a splash of cranberry juice. He switches between the two drinks. Reaching out for the pack of cigarettes, Christian withdraws a single coffin nail, as he calls them, and puts it between his lips. He strikes the lighter and brings the flame to the head of the cigarette and as it lights he takes a deep breath of smoke, filling his lungs.

We look away at the cataclysmic combination perched around Christian on the surface of his desk and take a second to check the clock. The time reads:

10:17PM. Thirty-three minutes until his wife is released from class and it will take her twenty to twenty-five minutes to get home from Manchester to the condo.

Only an arm length away from Christian is his journal. His most current hand written journal, the one that he Christian Michael Winter writes in as himself, we don't count the blog written by Gabriel as an accurate account of Christian's thoughts. The journal is leather bond, brown, in the center of the cover the word: Journal, in cursive is written, the border is some Celtic design. His first entry was on April 24, 1997, the last entry July 17, 2005. There are large gaps in the entries, some spanning days, most months, and a few spanning years. It has been over five months since the last entry. We so hoped that he would write in that leather bond journal this evening and not venture to the internet where his doppelganger does more harm than good. But we are observers, not therapists, not doctors, nor friends, family or angels. All we can do is watch from the invisible web on the ceiling looking down at a man who has more to offer then he will ever see.

Christian realizes as we do how long it has been since he was last in the hospital for the mentally ill. He can't remember the date and that is really the only reason that the brown leather journal is on his desk. Most months it is tucked away in the bottom of his filing cabinet where uncompleted stories, both potential novels and short stories lie untouched. He opened that black filing cabinet tonight, pulled the bottom drawer out and rummaged through his work for the intention of finding the brown leather journal. At the time he hadn't opened it but it now sits open on his desk. Let us venture a bit closer, over Christian's shoulder and read what he wrote on that date a year and five days ago.

It says:

12/17/04

9:14PM

I woke up this morning feeling like shit as I do everyday. Last evening I had gone to see Arlene {Christian's therapist} with Candice {Christian's wife} and Candice had explained to her about the hallucinations and episodes. Arlene wasn't aware of this so she decided the Zoloft wasn't right for me. Over the course of this week I was supposed to begin to lower my dose until I was weaned off the drugs.

After next week we would begin a new drug. Here's to starting over .
FUCK THAT!!! I'm sick of no one knowing what's wrong with me.

This morning at work my mind was spinning out of control and finally I couldn't take it anymore so I left work. Said nothing to anyone. Went home, dropped to my knees and began crying. I thought about killing myself. Just ending it all. So I went downstairs grabbed all the ice cubes we had and filled the bathroom sink. I read somewhere that if you submerge your wrists in the ice water for ten minutes it doesn't hurt when you slit your wrist.

But I couldn't do it. I'm a coward. Terrified of a purgatory that has never been proven. So I didn't kill myself.

Candice happened to come home during this present episode and we decided it was time to go to the hospital. We – Candice I mean – called Arlene to figure out what to do but she never returned our calls. Instead of waiting we decided to go the hospital.

I've been here in the hospital since 1:30PM. I'm not scared as I have been in the past but I don't feel that this is going to make me any better .

Once again I'm losing my mind.

I wish I could see Candice the way I did when we first met. She's the most beautiful woman in the world, she loves me, she supports me and saves me from the darkness and I dishonor her by these feelings. It makes no sense. None of this does. It just doesn't...

12/17/04

Christian M. Winter

Here we are once again and Christian is close to the breaking point that almost took his life. He is beginning to type and we return to the web on the ceiling that gives us the best vantage point to watch our friend without getting in his way. We don't want to read what he is writing. We don't want to see what mess Gabriel is going to make of Christian's thoughts. Maybe he will stop, we can only hope, and he will pick up the brown leather journal and tell us the story of himself. Maybe he will write how he is feeling and not let his fictitious alter ego fictionalize a story of dark despair and suicidal tendencies. We watch as his fingers flurry over the keyboard and he pauses only to take a sip of the mixed drink that is rapidly emptying in the green Rolling Rock glass. The cigarette he lit only moments ago is burning down in the ashtray untouched. The cup of coffee we know is not decaf grows colder and untouched in the Styrofoam cup, we are sure that Christian will only touch it now to throw it in the rubbish behind him.

Again he pauses, takes a sip of the liquor and cracks his knuckles. Is Gabriel done with him?

Christian goes down to the START icon on his computer, it brings up a screen of command icons, and he highlights his media player with the mouse and double-clicks bringing up the media player screen. We watch as he scrolls through his library looking for a song. What will he choose? Something up beat? We wait with bated breath, if we did breathe. Instead he opens up a folder titled: SUICIDAL TUNES. Within the folder is a collection of movie scores from some of Christian's favorite movies. There's *The Crow*, *Legends of the Fall*, *The Hulk*, *Gladiator*, and *The Devil's Own*. All in their own way tragic movies, more so the first two mentioned which also happen to be our hero's favorite movies.

Back a year ago when Christian was in the hospital one of his daily routines was to attend group meetings. This was a collaboration between the social workers and therapists to help get the patients lives in order so that they could be discharged with tools to help them on the outside of the hospital walls. The earliest meeting, the first of the day, was designed for the patient to recognize what brought each of them to the hospital to begin with and identify traits to help them under-

stand for each of them the oncoming symptoms of their specific mental illness. Christian had been diagnosed as bipolar with anxiety disorder. He explained to the group how depression was a constant in his life and the anxiety only added to the depression, when he spoke of the attempted suicide he named the transformation between depression and suicide as *slippage*; the break in reality when everything around him became unfamiliar and frightening. This slippage was when his mind could no longer contend with reality and the thoughts in his mind and the personalities he had created within his mind would get the better of him. He spoke of how he would have conversation with his multiple sides and how he was told by the figures, which were real to him, that his life was too difficult to go on with. Christian didn't look at ending his life as suicide but as freedom from a prison that his mind was serving consecutive life sentences.

Watching Christian now from the ceiling and his fingers that thump, thump, thump, thump, on the keyboard as his mind races and his fingers try to keep up typing the words that run through his head, we are watching slippage in progress. At the same time he is typing, or more accurately Gabriel is typing, Christian has taken a back seat to his doppelganger. We can see on a plane that humans are not privy to that Christian has stepped out of his own body and stepped away from the computer as Gabriel continues to hammer away on the keyboard spilling his vile thoughts to the internet and anyone who will listen or come across the Blog. There is a gooseflesh raising chill to the smirk on his face. We shudder high above him on the ceiling, the electricity of his deluded sense of self worth encompassing the aura of the room, the lights seem to dim and the brightness of the world is less though no such physical event has happened. The lights remain as bright as they were when turned on at five o' six this evening, but the apparition of darkness settles like a cold mist off the ocean. Christian's mental self, withdrawn as it may be, writhes on the floor of the office, detached from his body, this ghost form of him that only we see and like a ghost is transparent, smokes a figurative cigarette that is clenched between his lips, there is a beer in one hand that will not suffice his thirst and he listens to rock music that plays only in his imagination.

Slippage.

Gabriel writes of heartache and hate, revenge, and vendettas against people that he feels have wronged him and deserve to suffer. We are between the two now, watching Christian and observing Gabriel. We can watch what Gabriel types and cry for Christian as he loses himself deeper into his own subconscious to the lyrics of Sarah McLachlan. His mind acting as a media player now shuffles to another song.

What song is it, Christian?

What song has you on the verge of slipping further into yourself and possibly getting too far lost in a world created by you with no round trip flight?

Is it...?

No, we don't want to think it is.

You're only having a bad night.

10:46PM.

Only thirteen minutes until Candice is removed from class. Thirty-three minutes until she walks through the door. The hour glass has been counted in grains of sand and turned over. It's light brown grains drop into the cylinder filling it as the minutes count by.

Gabrial has grown frustrated with his words. He is at an impasse and unable to continue for the moment. Instead of thinking, instead of rereading what he has written to get a better scope of where he wants to go, he pushes back from the computer with empty glass in hand. It's time for another drink, its time for another round of 'happy pills'. Christian has been fused out of his thoughts and is left alone in the office as Gabrial moves towards the kitchen for a second round, possibly returning with the bottle of vodka and cranberry juice. We know where Gabrial is going but we stay in the office with the apparition of Christian. He needs us the most right now as he slips further away from reality to a place he has not revisited since he was fifteen years old. The others want to emerge; the ones who helped him get through the hardest of times in his young life. But he can't remember them; they've changed so much over the years. His mind was once a vault guarded by honorable soldiers, but they have been defeated over the harder years of his adult life by this Gabrial, this fallen angel.

Slippage.

As we watch Christian descend further there is a change. His physical appearance has slipped. He is no longer the twenty-seven year old that we have watched tonight, not the man that goes to work everyday and works hard for his father and suffers through the torment of thinking he doesn't matter to a man that means more to him than he could ever express. He is once again that awkward fifteen year old boy with golden strands of chin length blond hair, skinny, short for his age, a hint of acne across his forehead. He sips the beer in his hand and takes a long drag on the cigarette, which appears out of place because of the image we can now see, it is odd that we see a child with a beer and cigarette but this is Christian or the child that once was. There is something else that has changed...warm tears stream his cheeks and trace over his cheek bone down to his lips and into his mouth. The palms of his hands are pressed to his eyes trying to block the physical emotion leaking from his eyes. And it's not until we float down to his level and near his head, to his ear that we can hear the lyrics and rhythms playing in his mind. It is as we had thought.

Do what you have to do is playing in his mind and we know why the tears fall.

Christian is blaming himself. The guilt of all those that he loved and couldn't save are surfacing like zombies from the grave inside his mind.

We watch as Gabrial returns to the office. As we had predicted the bottle is in his hand but the cranberry juice was left behind. There is a little still left in the glass but we hardly believe that he is going to refill it with juice. There is also something far more frightening, something that we hoped this night wouldn't

come to.

The phone is ringing from somewhere in the house. We take this moment to leave the two dueling minds to themselves. Outside the office the ring is louder but it isn't coming from this floor. Floating through the floor to the second level we enter the living room, a Christmas tree is in the corner with only lights wrapped around its body, the decorations and ornaments haven't been placed with care yet. The coffee table in front of one of the couches holds the telephone face down. We go to it and float up through the table so we can read the caller ID. It is Candice calling. We believe to tell Christian that she is on her way home.

It is 11:01PM.

Fearing to leave Gabriel and Christian alone for too long we float back up through the floor and back into the office. Little has changed. Gabriel has returned to the computer, he's taking a sip of the vodka straight from the bottle and gives little physical sign that the taste is as distasteful as it was earlier. He has lit another cigarette and moved the coffee cup into the rubbish to occupy its latter space with a knife. He is subconsciously digging his fingernails into his forearm; dark red lines are left in the wake. It won't be long until he decides the knife will make a far better substitute for his fingernails.

As though pressing the repeat button on a CD player the emotional raving song of Sara McLachlan is playing again from the beginning. Christian has stopped crying though, he stares blankly at the ceiling the cigarette in his mouth vertically standing from his lips like a chimney stack. Are he and Gabriel on the same page? Is that the reason for the lifeless stare that seems to be looking far past the ceiling and deeper into the far recess of his mind?

The pills mixed with the high content of alcohol consumption have dulled his mind. He believes he is seeing clearly, that his thoughts are concise.

Gabriel has stopped writing. He holds the cigarette in his left hand as his right navigates the mouse to the media player's library. He scrolls through the many song titles and double-clicks the one he most wants to listen to. It is *Do what you have to do* by Sara McLachlan. He clicks the PLAY icon and as the music floods through the speakers he stands back from the computer and moves toward the floor lamp. He shuts it off. Returns to his leather chair and sits. Beside him on the desk are three candles. He lights them all casting an eerie phosphorescent light off the office walls. The room immersed in shadow. He leans back in the chair smoking his cigarette and taking long sips from the bottle of vodka. Three more drags of the cigarette and he crushes the head against the ashtray until it is extinguished. He pushes back the chair, replaces the cigarette with the knife and lies on the floor consuming Christian. His eyes open to the ceiling and are blank, which one is looking up past us...we can't tell.

Tears fall again from his eyes, his lips sync to the words playing over the speaker but his voice is silent. His eyes droop closed and the hand holding the knife rises from his side and rest on his chest, the blades tip pressed between the ribs over his heart.

There is no more pain, the drugs and alcohol extinguished that fire. Now there is only a choice to be made.

Slippage.

He opens his eyes again and standing above him is an old friend. One that has not been present in almost fifteen years but now standing over him looking down through a curtain of dirty blond shoulder length hair. The beautiful porcelain face, and glowing green eyes of a perfect immortal man in an open white shirt that is untucked and drapes down just above the thighs. He kneels down toward our hero and extends a hand.

"Where have you been?" Christian cries, "I've needed you."

The man says nothing but smiles imploringly and extends his hand. We see how tired Christian is, his muscles struggling to react, the knife still but poised between the ribs over his heart. The man doesn't waver. His steady hand waits, unmoving. We watch as Christian weighs his options, his eyes locked on the person who he believes abandoned him so many years ago.

"I can't," Christian says.

"You can." The voice of the man is filled with warmth and safety, like a God promising refuge.

"You left me," Christian weeps.

"No, Christian, I never left. I've always been with you...part of you."

"Help me, Connor," Christian cries, the knife falling from his hand.

"Always."

As Christian reaches out to take Connor's hand, the apparition he created fifteen years ago to help him get over the first person he loved and lost, the friend that gave him the strength to make it through that first hospitalization when he felt more alone than he had ever in his young life, the man he immortalized in his first written novel, disappeared as their hands clasped.

We retreat from the floor and float back to the web on the ceiling. The darkness of the room, that dreadful aura lifts away, even in the candle light the room emanates with brightness.

It's 11:21PM.

Candice pulls Christian up from the floor and into her arms. She holds him tighter than ever before and runs her hands through his hair and kisses his wet cheek.

"Shhh..." she whispers. "It's okay."

We pull back from the office and float through the window and over the cul de sac; it has begun to snow blanketing the ground in white. We rise up past the tops of the condominiums and the tree's and further up the towns lights illuminate through the snow like stars, higher up we ascend through the cool mist of the clouds until the sky is dark and sparkling with distant stars, the moon is full and bright and beyond that a light as warm and bright as a sun is waiting, we travel towards it until we are pulled in.

The Loner

Donald Kern

Peter Garrisch, who was divorced at age thirty-two after seven months of marriage, had never felt comfortable around people or, for that matter, his wife. He preferred a solitary life, as much as that was possible, and thought nothing peculiar about it. So his short marriage to Gertrude was a thing totally out of character. It was as if she had cast a spell over him.

They met when Gertrude walked into his one-man Brooklyn print shop for a small job. Her bulk filled the space between the door and the counter. After placing her order, Gertrude struck up a conversation, to which Peter mostly listened and nodded. She took him to lunch, and two days later proposed. Gertrude had overpowered him with her physical size, desire and will.

She so frightened Peter, who was not only sickly thin, but also three inches shorter than the five-ten, two-hundred pound Gertrude, that he felt compelled to give in to her every demand. She treated him much as a Greek goddess on the prowl might have mesmerized and captivated a mortal Athenian for whom she had developed a momentary yen. Six weeks after they met, they were married.

Peter couldn't remember a happy day in the seven months of their marriage. Gertrude ignored and overrode his quest for solitude with her incessant needs, foremost of which was sex. When she didn't get it, she nagged him about his lack of virility and made fun of his puny size. Peter, of course, would agree and acquiesce simply to end the matter. This often infuriated his Germanic giant into beating him on the side of the head (which Peter would have preferred to sex, had sex not followed in any case). Gertrude succeeded in forcing herself on him whenever her urge dictated, which to Peter seemed constant.

Peter's sexual preference had been, like most of his desires, solitary; a mental state of fantasy in which young women he had seen or met, but had seldom spoken to, succumbed to his winsome ways. To Peter, this fantastical universe in which he played the varied roles of dynamic hero, tender understanding knight, defender of the weak, in a sequence that resembled the shuffle mode of a DVD player, far exceeded anything mere reality could ever approach.

The happiest day of Peter's life was the day Gertrude left him. On her way out the door, she said: "You're less interesting than an onion skin!" Slam! Of that day he remembered only an indescribable ecstasy.

Since then, Peter had been living in a modest railroad apartment on the west side of Manhattan. He enjoyed his quiet, anonymous life: riding to work on the subway in the warmth of a myriad of silent souls; walking the streets of

Manhattan uninhibited by the potential of recognition; sitting in a darkened movie house surrounded by the silence of an absorbed patronage; or sitting in solitude in his apartment watching television, daydreaming, or cleaning his rooms. (He was a neatness freak.) All this anonymity amid a vortex of urban humanity rendered him tireless satisfaction.

One Saturday afternoon about four months after Gertrude's departure, Peter, watching street scenes from a front window of his second story apartment, spotted a moving van in front of the building. Two burly men carried a heavy chair through the open door of the apartment house. He heard them struggle upstairs and stop on his floor. The door of the apartment across the hall opened, and a young woman's voice gave directions on where to put the chair.

Peter stayed by the window to watch the men at work. He heard them pound down the stairway and reappear on the sidewalk. With them was a woman about his age dressed casually in denim slacks, a T-shirt, and running shoes. Her glossy-black hair was pulled back into a long ponytail. She appeared short but well proportioned with wide hips, narrow shoulders, and firm breasts. Her face was finely structured and she wore large-framed glasses, lending her a bookish and somewhat helpless appearance. She was the antithesis of his large-boned, wide-faced, health-filled, ex-wife, Gertrude.

Each of the four floors of the apartment house had two identical apartments on opposite sides of a long hallway. The one opposite Peter's had been vacant for two months. An elderly, scruffy looking, white-haired woman, who never seemed out of a house coat, had lived there. Whenever she heard someone on the stairs, she would open her door a crack and yell obscenities at the top of her lungs, then slam her door shut. To Peter's relief, relatives took her away.

Although Peter fantasized about women, he shied away from meeting them, except for Gertrude, which was a freak accident on the order of an asteroid smashing into Earth. Since that first day, he thought salaciously about the young woman next door, whose name on the tab of her mail box read Ginny Flack.

Peter's sexual fantasies were like x-rated movies. They offered ecstasy free from involvement. He vowed that the knottiness of a real affair would never be his again. Having someone like Ginny so near, where he could track her activities yet not reveal himself, was the thing that sensually thrilled him.

Peter seldom heard Ginny enter or leave her apartment during the week, because he left early in the morning for his shop and usually returned late in the evening. But on weekends, he kept an ear open for any sound coming from her side of the hall. He spent time by his front windows looking out into the street on the chance of glimpsing her coming or going. He was careful, though, not to encounter her in the hallway. When occasionally he did, he glided silently by. Exposing himself in that way conflicted with his Walter-Mitty-like world of fantasy. Yet knowing her was his heart's desire.

Peter discovered that Ginny went shopping for food in the late morning on

Saturdays. Sometimes he tiptoed down the stairs and tailed after her to the supermarket to stealthily watch her wheel her shopping cart through the aisles. He liked the way she picked up a melon or some other piece of fruit or vegetable and caressed it in her hands. It was as if she were feeling and caressing some part of him. Sometimes this experience was so intense that spit dribbled from his lips.

At other times, Peter watched from the window as her friends entered and left the apartment house. One young man in particular came regularly on Saturday evenings to take her out. Peter didn't like the way he wrapped his arm around her shoulders as they left the building and walked up the street. Their hips touched and, at times, she glanced up at him as if totally possessed. Peter would stare up the street long after the couple disappeared from sight. Then he would sigh and turn on the television, go to movie, or lie down on his bed to fantasize.

One Sunday afternoon Peter walked to the Central Park Zoo. He liked watching the polar bears. Those magnificent beasts, so independent, self-reliant, and fearless; so capable of total domination. They symbolized everything Peter felt he should be.

When he returned to his apartment house, he heard a noise at the top of the stairs and saw Ginny standing there. She seemed to be waiting for him. Peter's first reaction was to turn around and retrace his steps. His body actually jerked in response to this urge, as if juiced with electricity. But he was too late. Avoiding her was impossible without appearing ridiculous. With his heart pumping wildly, he continued up to the landing. He hoped she wouldn't notice the small bald spot at the back of his head. He blushed at the idea and patted the spot, as if willing its disappearance.

"Hello. I'm your next-door neighbor," Ginny said in a rush. She seemed as agitated as he was. "I need to speak with you. Please?"

By this time, Peter had reached the landing. She gazed up at him. He instinctively averted his eyes and started to brush past her. "Me? Can't stop right now," he mumbled, head down. He was confused by how she appeared to know him. He moved on, but she stayed by his side.

"Please," Ginny repeated. "I know we haven't met, but I need your help real bad. Like totally. Oh, please help me."

He stopped and glanced at his door, then back at her, continuing to avoid her eyes. "I'm quite busy," he said, his eyes darting toward his door at the end of the hall.

"My name is Ginny Flack," she continued, "and I know what yours is, Peter, from the mailbox. Could you come into my apartment for just a minute and let me explain?" Stress pinched her face. Peter stood frozen to the spot.

Ginny grasped Peter's wrist and guided him to her door. He followed, as if captive to a desire beyond his grasp. She released him to unlock the door and enter. Peter remained outside, but reacting to a petulant wave of her arm,

took a step inside the door, which swung shut behind him.

"Come in," she said, rushing through the kitchen and two small, narrow rooms into the living room. "Sit, Sit," she said. "I have something to ask you. Oh, I'm so glad you came."

"What is it?" Peter asked. He realized he was sitting on the edge of the chair he had seen carried into the apartment the day Ginny moved in.

"You see, I'm frightened," Ginny said. "My boyfriend, I mean my ex-boyfriend, scares me. He called me on the phone not an hour ago and threatened to come over here. I'm afraid of what he might do to me, if he found me alone."

"But what could I possibly do?" Peter said, glancing through the room toward the way they'd entered. "You don't have to let him in."

"But you see, that's just it. He has a key."

"Oh. Well...maybe you could call 911 if he threatens you. Yes. That's what you could do." Peter stood, forced a camera-click of a smile, and started to leave.

"No. Please listen." Ginny took hold of his arm and held him back.

Peter glanced at her, then away and mumbled: "I must go."

"No! He'll hurt me! Do you want that to happen? He won't harm me if someone's here. I know that."

Peter saw that it was her desperation making her believe she'd be safe with him, yet her words flattered him. The truth is, he'd never saved anybody from anything.

Ginny's pleading voice held him back. He wanted to leave but couldn't. He simply remained where he was, staring down at his shoes.

The woman Peter had fantasized about these past months was pleading with him to help her. That thought was enough to turn his panic into a grudging willingness to stay the course. "All right," he said softly, as if afraid of his own words.

Peter went back to his chair and sat down at its edge, back straight, weight forward on his legs, hands on his knees, as if ready to sprint. "Who is it that's coming?" he asked, attempting to hold his voice steady.

"His name is Mike Prince," Ginny said. "He's very jealous. He found out that I was seeing someone else. He said he'd kill me if I went out with anyone else. I told him it was none of his business who I saw. I'll never forget the look on his face when I said that."

"Did he hurt you?" Peter asked.

"I think he would have. But at the time we were with another couple, and they told him to knock it off. And he did. He was okay the rest of the night. But I decided I wouldn't see him again. And when he called for a date, I told him that. You wouldn't believe the rage he was in." Ginny looked at Peter. "See?"

Peter couldn't respond immediately. He brushed his sweaty palms against the sides of his corduroys and licked his dry lips. Finally he said, "When did he call for a date?"

“Oh, awhile ago. Early this afternoon. He lives all the way over on the East Side and further uptown. So even if he came over immediately after the phone call it would take him almost an hour to get here.

“By taxi?”

“He never takes a taxi. That’s another thing about him. He’s a cheapskate about certain things, like paying for a taxi ride. Anyway, I knocked on your door, but you weren’t in. Then I stood by the window for the longest time and finally saw you coming down the street. That’s when I went out to the landing to wait for you. You can’t imagine what a relief it was to know that a man was around.”

Nobody had ever lauded Peter’s manliness before. He’d always been the runt to be picked on. Even Teutonic Gertrude treated him like that. Her words bolstered his self-image. His picture of her in his fantasies and seeing her in the flesh began slowly to merge. He remembered how she held his arm, feeling the warmth of her hand on his skin.

“I don’t mind staying,” Peter said. “I want to.”

“You’re wonderful. I feel so safe now. Like nothing can happen to me.” Ginny rose from the couch and stood in front of Peter. “Thanks,” she said. He looked into her face and saw tenderness, a rarity in his life. He’d do anything for her. Anything!

Just then her buzzer rang. Peter and Ginny looked wide-eyed at each other. “It’s probably him,” she said with a challenging look.

Peter nodded with a determination usually reserved for avoiding people. Ginny went out to the kitchen to press the button that would unlock the front door to the apartment house. A moment later, there was a knock on her door.

Peter remained in his chair. He bent forward to hear. He heard the door open and voices talking, but he couldn’t make out what was being said.

There was another door to the hallway in the living room. Peter glanced at it, thinking he might use that to disappear into his own apartment. But before he could act, he heard footsteps approaching. Ginny and a tall, dark-haired, muscular man stood at the entrance to the living room. He was the same one Peter had seen visiting on Saturday nights. He wore the look of coarseness.

Peter remained frozen in amazement as he watched them ostentatiously embrace and kiss, as if he weren’t there. The man moved away from Ginny and sneered at Peter. “This him?” he said, pointing at Peter with his chin.

“That’s him all right,” Ginny said, disgust sharpening her words.

Peter shrunk into the back of his large chair. He kept his eyes on the massive forearms and biceps of the man.

“You don’t know what this is all about, do you, you little freak,” the man said. “Oh, I know everything. Don’t look so innocent. Ginny told me. We’ve

got a good mind to turn you over to the police.”

The man took a step toward Peter, causing him to press back into the stuffing of the chair. His ersatz gallantry disappeared. Rattled confusion and fear took its place.

“Wha...what’s this all about, Ginny. I was going to help you, remember? You...you asked me here.” He barely managed to utter the words.

Ginny and the man smirked.

“Peter, meet Mike Prince, my boyfriend.”

Mike grinned as Peter’s uncomprehending eyes darted from him to Ginny and back.

“The little jerk doesn’t know what’s going on,” Mike said.

“You’d better tell him before he faints,” Ginny said. They laughed, hardly bothering to look at Peter.

“Well, let’s get to the point, little man,” Mike said, pointing a thick finger at Peter. “You’ve been following Ginny around. She’s seen you floating behind her like a little fairy. She used to see you peeking at her in the supermarket. Who knows what a queer jerk like you is up to?”

Peter stared openmouthed at Ginny. “You...you tricked me,” he said.

“Yes. You disgust me. They shouldn’t let your kind out in the street.” Anger filled Ginny’s voice.

Peter’s head jerked back, as if Ginny had smacked him in the face.

“Okay, farmer, there’s the door,” Mike said. “If you bother this lady again, we’ll report you to the police, but not before I beat the shit out of you.”

Peter stood, and without looking at either of them, walked to the living room door, opened it and slid through. In the hallway, after the door closed, he gasped. He felt so weak he had to lean against the wall and remain absolutely still. His heart pounded so hard he thought he might die. After a several minutes, he gained enough strength to walk the few steps to his own door and enter his apartment.

Peter sat down on his living-room couch. Beads of sweat stood out on his brow. He mumbled to himself, “They made fun of you, didn’t they. Just like they all do. They treated you as if you were a common masher. It’s not true! It’s not true!” He sat, it seemed for hours, with these thoughts bouncing through every inch of his soul.

Slowly, though, his fear and shame turned to vague imaginings. Visions emerged and the disjointed images became fantasies. His eyes stared unseeing toward the ceiling, his body stiffened in concentration, and his jaw dropped. The power and domination of the lions became his. A plot emerged, one that he knew he would eventually act out. There he was, the star of his own horror show.

Rooster

Mark Scott

Cyrus took his grandson Tommy to the school bus stop every morning at seven. He would tell the children about how the neighborhood used to be, and they would tell him what they learned in school. Everybody in town was talking about the new high school stadium that the city council wanted to name after Rooster Williams, the only famous athlete to come out of their neighborhood. Tommy said, “One of the fourth-graders said the nickname had to do with his weight. A rooster is a bantam, and that’s like a gram or a stone in England, something in the metric system.”

“That fourth-grader has it wrong, Tommy. Bantam does mean ‘Rooster,’ but that’s not where he got the name.”

“It wasn’t on account of his weight?”

“Nope, and I should know. I was at his first fight in 1936 and his last one in ‘45. A bantamweight’s small and full-of-fight, like a rooster. But Rooster fought in the mid-range weight classes, not at bantam. The lightest he ever fought pro was junior-welterweight.”

Tommy squinted his eyes, deep in thought. He couldn’t imagine either a 4th grader or his grandfather being so far off base. “Is there a bird called a welter?”

“Welter means flurry, like a flurry of punches.” Cyrus said that Rooster fought mostly around 147 in the pros, which was indeed the welterweight limit. “He came in too skinny to fight middleweight, even when he bulked up.” Cyrus pointed over to the side of the dilapidated furniture warehouse, where street artists had painted a mural featuring Latino and black boxers, war planes and dancers. “He tipped the scales right around one-forty after his second year as an amateur. The welterweights had a lot of fans back then, when boxing and basketball were the only entertainment around here. In December there was the Bronze Gloves, the Silver Gloves in January, and then the Golden Gloves in February and March. People would all come out to see the Gloves in February no matter how cold it got to be.”

Cyrus stopped talking to look at his watch. The so-called bus schedule was more like a guideline in their town as long as the youngsters got to school before nine. The driver picked up the kids all along the rural routes, so nobody held his tardiness against him. “Boxing and basketball were the only things to watch around here in the winter months.”

“You mean they didn’t have cable?”

“We didn’t even have television.”

Tommy gave Cyrus a confused look. “They had basketball before television?”

“They had it. And they played it right there in the school gymnasium. Sometimes a couple thousand people would show up.” Cyrus looked over to where the Mexican, Texan, and USA flags were flying over the border that separates Juarez from their town. A demolition crew was razing the ground for a shopping mall “The high school used to be over there. We had the best basketball team in the state. After high school Rooster fought for about five years as a pro.” As the morning sun shone into Cyrus’ eyes, a far-away expression crossed his face and his voice dropped to a whisper. “Rooster and I went in to WW II in the same platoon. That’s what ended his career in ‘43.”

“But I thought you saw him fight in 1945.”

“I’ll get to that. First you need to understand why it was they called him Rooster. They called him that because his father was a champion cock fighter in Baja California. He was Cocker of the Year in ‘35, which was a big deal when I was coming up. He brought the family to Texas right in the middle of the depression, and made his living offa farming and cockfighting. But then the talk started, about how his boy would cry over the dead chickens that got killed fighting. It was a great insult to a professional cocker to have a kid like Billy, which was Rooster’s real name. His father said, ‘No son o’ mine is a coward at a cockfight.’”

“Did his father call him Rooster?”

“No, that was the neighborhood boys, mocking him. Calling him Rooster was kinda sarcastic, there at first. One day some *zoot-suiters* from the barrio roughed him up pretty bad, and he took up boxing after that.”

“Did you box with him?”

“No, I played basketball, though I would go see him fight. After he turned pro and won a few bouts, his father finally reclaimed him, in a way. But boxing never really impressed the old man. The only thing he respected was being able to cockfight, lay down your bet and keep that poker face, whether your chicken wins or ends up in a bloody dead heap.”

“Rooster started making money in the pros in ‘39, fighting hard-as-nails one hundred-forty. He was never a bantamweight except in the amateurs, when he was down in the one-tens his first year.” Cyrus watched the boys watching him, shading their eyes against the sun that had climbed up to 7:30. “In ‘43 he fought Beau Jack to a draw at the lightweight limit, a no-decision fight off the record. Most times he had to sweat down to come in at one-thirty-five. But he made the weight that night without a problem. As far as I’m concerned, just getting into the same ring with the great Beau Jack showed the courage of a lion.

“Right after he fought Beau, the Army called us both up. A few months

later we landed at Anzio and over the next year fought our way up to the Austrian border. Outside Padua, in Italy, is where he got the Gold Cross you heard about on television. He took out a machine gun nest, and a sniper shot him just between the neck and shoulder. Nobody knew where he was for about a week. A little Italian girl found him almost dead.”

“I got to be real fond of that little girl. She nursed Rooster back to health and when they came to give him his medals they took her picture along with his. That picture was the most famous thing to come out of our Army group. We were all real proud of Rooster.” A block away the neighborhood ice cream truck was making its rounds. The tune it played was a cross between Old McDonald and the theme from the Sanford and Son television show. “She took care of Rooster after the army doctor gashed him up getting that bullet out. He got so infected his whole head turned blue and yellow.”

“The girl and her mother lived in a little casa near the border, one I never went to see. Her mother named her Anastacia or Annabella-something like that. We called her Annie.” While Cyrus was talking he stared off into the horizon. Tommy and the other boys watched with eyes glued to Cyrus.

“Then she comes down with flu-like symptoms—nobody ever figured out exactly what was wrong with her. She got to coughing and choking like she had something stuck in her throat, and she just went from bad to worse. The doc looked her over and said she had ‘a growth,’ but said he couldn’t tell if it was cancer or not.”

“They put her in the army hospital. An army hospital on the front line ain’t no place to get your health back. If you’re not sick going in, you can betcha you’ll be sick coming outta there. Rooster found out he could have her flown stateside and treated at the best New York hospital for 2,000 American dollars. We wanted to pitch in to help him but he was just too stubborn.”

“Could he sell his medal?”

“Not for \$2,000. But something better came along. A lot of the boxing champions actually used to hail from outta Europe. Marcel Cerdan, a top middleweight who later came to be middleweight champion, traveled the continent, even when the Germans controlled everything. After Germany surrendered there was carnivals and all kinds of merriment. Anyway, Rooster hears that they need a prelim bout, and he can make five thousand dollars if he wins.” A sad smile spread across Cyrus’ face at the mention of the purse. He checked his watch and saw that it was a few minutes past eight.

“Like I said, Rooster came in real skinny at middleweight. But they was having a round-robin fight off for the European 160 pound title. The French kid he fought had an Arab look, probably an account of he was Algerian. But he was built like a heavyweight, and was mauling Rooster around the ring. You could see that Frenchie was quite a bit stronger than Rooster.

“In the fourth round Rooster’s legs started to wobble and that Frenchie charged in. Rooster caught him with a lightning fast one-two and he fell like a sack of wet cement. It was winner-take-all as for share of the purse and Rooster got his when they brought it in to his dressing room. Then he came out to sit with us and watch Marcel Cerdan beat up one of the local Italian boys. Rooster looked real tired, his eyes couldn’t focus on anything, kept asking me who was winning. He had taken some hard head shots from that Frenchie.”

“Cerdan threw body shots so hard you could hear a thud each time one landed. Over that you could hear ‘em next door, where they was fightin’ chickens. After Cerdan knocked his man out, Rooster got to thinking—Well, I really don’t know what he was thinking.”

“Instead of going to the hospital he stops off at where they’re fighting cocks, under the tents they had set up next to the stadium. I started to say something about him needing to let go of the past, but I didn’t know exactly what to tell him.”

They all sat quiet for a while as Cyrus seemed to debate whether to go on with his tale. Tommy said, “What did he do? I thought he didn’t like seeing the chickens get kilt.”

“He was a lot older by this time, keep that in mind. But older don’t always mean smarter. I reckon he still had something to prove to his father. He sees them calling out bets and taking them, like his father used to do and goes and lays down his whole purse on a scarlet fighting cock, at 3 to 1. The little bastard hacked and fought like hell, but then gets it in the fifth pitting. He took a metal spur in the side of the head that killed him. Rooster went over and, as calm as could be, carried the dead bird out of the arena.”

“Were you sad, Grand-pa?”

“In a way, yes I was. Understand that everyone was tired of war, and looking to do anything for a few laughs. All the Italian and French women without their men... Anyhow we felt bad for Rooster, but you have to realize that we had been living in the shadow of death for two long years. Rooster moped around for a week or so, not talking to anybody. Then all of a sudden he comes to the canteen for breakfast, happy as can be. He said the little girl had finally stopped her coughing.”

“So she got better on her own?” Tommy asked hopefully.

Cyrus sat silent for a while, then said, “No, I’m afraid not. She died when the winter got cold a week later, and Rooster disappeared. Being as how he was a war hero and all, there weren’t even no talk about desertion or nothing like that. Somebody said he went down to Costa Rica. I figure he’s dead by now.”

The yellow school bus pulled up and Cyrus told Tommy to bring home an A in science if he wanted to grow up to be a doctor.

Trade Secret

Bob Strother

I waited in the landing until my chest stopped heaving, then I entered the dim fourth-floor hallway and stumbled down to my office door. Sunlight penetrated the translucent pebbled glass, and sent daggers through my bloodshot eyes. *Helluva day for the elevator to be out of service.* I used a handkerchief to wipe sweat from my face and chanted my usual Monday morning mantra: *Never again. Never again.* The telephone jangled on the far side of the door and tripped another pain switch in my whiskey-glazed brain.

Carla picked up the phone as I dragged myself through the door.

“Scanlon Investigations.”

She glanced my way, then swiveled her chair to face the window. I couldn’t blame her. Who’d want to see this ugly mug? I tossed my snap-brim at the hat rack and missed – *the hell with it!* I slunk past Carla’s desk into my private lair, peeled off my wrinkled trench coat and flung it at one of the two guest chairs. Another miss. *Hell with that too!*

The desk chair protested noisily as I collapsed into it. The lower left drawer of my battered desk produced a half-full bottle of Old Grandad. Fingers trembling slightly, I unscrewed the cap and took a long pull. Then I fished a fresh deck of Camels out of my shirt pocket and lit up. Closing my eyes, I let the alcohol and nicotine work their wonders. Five minutes later, my pulse still pounded between my ears but I began to think I might live.

When I opened my eyes again, the object of my dreams was standing in the doorway. Carla leaned back against the doorjamb and stretched, giving me a profile that almost made me forget my hangover. Her long, dark hair parted down the middle and hung loose, covering the left side of her pretty face.

“Good morning, Precious.” My voice rasped like Linda Blair’s demon in *The Exorcist*.

“Want some coffee?” she asked.

I started to nod, then thought better of it. “God, yes.”

She disappeared and returned a moment later with a steaming mug. I spiked it with a liberal dose of Old Grandad and shook out another smoke.

Carla picked my coat up from the floor and hung it on a wooden rack behind the door. “Rough weekend?”

I slurped the coffee and ventured a half smile. “The usual.”

She gave me a concerned look. “I wish you’d stop drinking so much.”

“Marry me and I will,” I said, already knowing the depressing answer to that familiar refrain.

She tried smiling – to make a joke of it – but couldn’t pull it off. Her sea-green eyes went misty. “You’re too late, Rick. Sorry.”

.....

We’d all been friends in high school: Dennis, the football team’s star quar-

terback; me his favorite receiver; and Carla, captain of the cheerleading squad. After graduation, I was drafted. Dennis had a football-related knee injury and scored a 4-F with the local draft board. He started his own print shop business and married Carla while I worked military police duty in Da Nang. Her letter reached me six weeks after the ceremony. That's when it finally dawned on me that I was in love with her.

After my discharge, I parlayed my army experience into a private investigator's license and had my name lettered on the door of a five-story office building in the downtown's low-rent district.

Dennis turned out to be a better quarterback than a businessman, and even with the print shop open seven days a week, Carla had to work to make ends meet. I hired her two years ago. I thought it would be enough just to have her around. It wasn't.

.....

I nodded slowly. "*You're too late, Rick. Sorry.*" The last shot of alcohol had numbed the hammering behind my eyes but hadn't done a damn thing about the hollowness in my chest when I looked at her.

She turned to leave and the hair fell away from her face. A purplish-yellow bruise decorated her left cheek.

"Carla?"

She stopped, turned back to me and stared at the floor. I went over to her, brushed her hair back and touched the discolored patch gently. "That son of a bitch," I whispered.

It had started just over a year ago and at first she'd been able to conceal it with clothing. A couple of times, though, he'd gotten a little sloppy and left a visible mark. Carla had begged me to let it go. Said she'd have to quit the agency unless I let her handle it her way – that his business had picked up and she was sure that's all it was – that he'd been better lately, less angry.

That's when I started spending my nights and weekends submerged in whiskey river.

My jaws tightened and my heart rate doubled. "Leave him," I said through clenched teeth.

A tear rolled down her damaged cheek. "I tried to. He lost a big contract on Friday and came home drunk. We argued. I called a cab and threw some clothes in a bag and ..." She leaned her head against my chest. "And it was worse ... than before. He hurt me bad, Rick – said he'd kill me if I ever left him."

My breath came out in a low hiss. "Let me see."

"I don't want you to. I ..."

"Let me see, damn it!"

She hesitated, then stepped back and pulled the blouse out of her skirt. Her middle was covered with bruises where he'd pummeled her.

My fists clenched and unclenched at my sides. She saw the look on my face and shook her head violently.

“No, Rick!” she sobbed. “I know what you’re thinking and I can’t take that! You’re the only friend I’ve got now. I can’t take a chance on losing you too.” She melted into my arms and I felt the wetness of her tears soaking through my shirt.

I willed the tension from my body and stroked her back gently. “All right, Carla. It’s okay.” I tilted her face up toward mine and brushed her cheek lightly with my lips. Her scent filled my nostrils as a cold resolve filled my heart. “Really, it’ll be okay. I won’t do anything.” My eyes locked onto hers. “I promise.”

.....

That afternoon, I called Patrick Kelly, a retired cop who owned a small tavern over by the river. He answered on the third ring. In the background I heard muffled conversation and the clink of glasses.

“Rick! It’s good to hear your voice, Lad. How’s the investigating business?”

“Sucking wind at the moment, but my money’s on crime and greed prevailing. How’s Fiona?”

“She’s great! Married now to a nice boy – an accountant, if you can believe it. I’m to be a grandfather in three months.”

“That is great.” I smiled. “I need a favor, Pat, ... a big one.”

His voice lowered an octave. “Just say the word, Son. I owe you.” The phone went silent for a beat. “I’ll always owe you.”

Two years ago, Pat hired me to find his junkie daughter, gone missing for six weeks. I followed her trail into the porno business and snatched her out of a snuff movie at the last minute. There was some carnage left at the scene but it didn’t garner much attention from the cops. It seldom does in that kind of environment. Fiona went through rehab and came out a winner. It was the kind of thing that kept me going, blood on my hands or not.

“You’re closed on Sundays aren’t you?”

“That we are. Irishmen drink at home on the Good Lord’s Day.” He chuckled. “Or anywhere else they can find a bottle.”

“Good,” I said. “Here’s what I need ...”

.....

Late Sunday afternoon, I parked down the block from the print shop and waited. Dennis came out at five-thirty and bent to lock up. I pulled my heap up to the curb and tapped on the horn before he could get in his car. He looked up as I opened my door and leaned out. He’d put on a few pounds and he needed a haircut.

“Dennis! Hey, Man. Long time, no see.”

He stood frozen, his hand on the car door handle. I could tell he was nervous seeing me pop up that way.

I got out, walked over and extended my hand. “How you been, Buddy?”

He shook my hand and his expression relaxed a little. “I ... I’m good, Rick. What about you?”

I shrugged. “Business could be a lot better. Some months it’s hard to make the rent. But what the hell; we’re all struggling to get by aren’t we?” I put a hand

on his shoulder. “Say, you in the mood for a drink? I was just on my way to a little tavern over by the river. I know the owner and if we play it right, he’ll give us call brand booze at house prices.”

“I don’t know. I’m pretty beat.”

“C’mon, just one or two and you can be on your way.” I faded back a few feet and made a throwing motion with my hand. “We can relive our glory days. Remember the Wheeler game, Denny? You threw for four touchdowns. I had twelve receptions.”

“It was five touchdowns. And you never caught twelve balls in your life.” He grinned. “One or two drinks, okay? Any more and we’ll be doing a play-by-play.”

He followed me to the tavern where Pat Kelly welcomed us graciously and complained bitterly at his lack of other patrons. Three hours later, Dennis was telling me – for the second time – how his knees had kept him from getting a college scholarship.

“I could’a been somebody, Ricky.”

I neglected to point out that he could have been drafted like me and might never have been lucky enough to marry Carla.

He shook his head sadly and stared at his sixth bourbon on the rocks. “Could’a been somebody.”

We sat there for ten minutes with neither of us saying anything else, then I slid out of the booth. “C’mon, Denny, let’s get you home.” I helped him to his feet and we stumbled toward the door, my arm around his waist. On the way out, I nodded toward Patrick, who nodded back and locked the door behind us.

I dug the keys from Dennis’s pocket, opened the door to his car and poured him into the passenger seat. I told him that I’d drive him home and catch a cab back to the tavern – but I don’t think he heard me.

.....

It’s been two months since they found Dennis’s body in the burned-out hulk of his Chrysler, at the bottom of a canyon off Route 32 north of the city.

Carla is smiling more these days. She took a week off to deal with the funeral and the official paperwork associated with sudden, accidental death. Then she came back to work with a vengeance. Since then, she’s sniffed out a half-dozen new clients and talked the super into new carpeting for the office.

I’m doing better too. I’ve eased off on the booze, cleaned up my pad, even bought a new sport coat and slacks. After work last Friday, Carla and I had an early dinner and caught a movie. It’s still too early to say for sure, but I think it’s working for us.

Do I feel a twinge of guilt? Not really. Two lives full of new hope and promise, for one miserable, wretched existence. All in all, I believe it wasn’t a bad trade.

I may think about it once in a while, but then Carla will smile sweetly at me – and I’m reminded that I’ve never been one to dwell much on moral absolutes.

THE BAR IS CLOSING

Terrence Sanders

Last dance, bar is closing.
Water's up to her neck,
how much longer can she hold on?
Afraid to fall asleep,
where will she awake?
Lived a simple life,
consumed by bad decisions.
Listening to Satchmo,
sipping on air.
Falling deeper,
drifting under lucid spell.
She can't go any further.
Her will to survive is diminishing.
One day she'll forgive,
wishing she could go back,
to the way it was.

Before the Break of Day

Aya Jbrahim

I must say I don't have the power or the dignity
To cut a paper each night at twelve midnight sharp
A paper can be harder than it seems to the gentle eye
Just like a hand can be weaker than it should be
Or break a phrase into several words, words into several
Letters, letters into several misunderstood shapes
But sometimes I have the mouth to devour a thousand
Animals, a thousand times more my size, and churn
A thousand seashells without breaking one golden tooth

Controlled Burns

Sam Calhoun

In the ashes of controlled burns
are parched stems
of a woodland fern,
and melted plastic of something
left from a campsite trip,
gone astray like that one
blaze who jumped over the fire line,
like some student writing
a last minute essay,
scribbling over margins,
seeking new boundaries
to draw in charcoal.

There won't be any photographers
this year standing on that rock outcrop
where the road bends around the mountain,
nor any hikers exploring the barren landscape.
Only the return of those home owners
looking for something left unscathed
will bring life this land.

So much joy can be found
in a box of pictures,
some disfigured bottle of wine,
and maybe the chance to scratch a revision
to their dictionaries.

I CANNOT SING

Luis Cuauhtemoc Berriozabal

I cannot sing.
I cannot sing today's news.
I cannot sing for war.
This modern world is much like the past.
The same old prejudices are alive.
The mighty still pick on the weak.
Eloquence's throat has been slit by wires.
I cannot sing.
I don't have anything to sing for.

I cannot change the past.
The future remains asleep.
I cannot change the past.
It festers like an open wound.
The past cannot be buried.
It is the present that needs to change.

Down in the Dirt
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