

Table of contents 09/09, Down in the Dirt, volume 074

Peter Schwartz art	1
Michael Joseph Schmidt	2
Mel Waldman	2
Jeffrey Bernard Yozwiak	3
Chris Butler	
Gregory Liffick	29
Daniel Gallik	
Joe Quigley	31
Trinity Martin	
T. S.	

Scars cover art is of the changing of color of tree leaves ona roadside in Pennsylvania.

Jnnuendo, art by Peter Schwartz

(page 1)

that one thing

Michael Joseph Schmidt

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most search for that profound thing whatever it may be. most search and search even though we know we may never find it. it is that important: even though it's a losing game a losing battle a losing war most still have faith and move in all directions (not just forwards) in order to obtain it. what it is, what it could be is anyone's guess. but no matter what most keep searching losing precious seconds of our lives to find that one thing that will bring meaning and satisfaction to everyday life. and those who don't look for it, the apathetic, are the smart ones, the naïve and the idiots will survive without that one thing and they will know a content death.

Compulsion

Mel Waldman

"Doc, I keep having this crazy-freaky dream in which I kill this stranger."

"Tell me the whole dream," the shrink commands.

"It's real vague, doc. I'm lost in this mansion, rushing from room to room in search of something or someone. And when I enter the 13th room, I find him. He looks familiar but I don't recognize him."

A vast silence separates the doctor and patient. Eventually, the patient breaks the silence and speaks.

"The stranger wants to tell me something. He mutters a few words and...before he finishes the sentence, I shoot him, blowing his brains to Kingdom Come. What does it mean, doc?"

"According to Freud, each dream represents a wish or fear."

"Don't think I wished to kill him. I wanted to hear what he had to say. But I was compelled...!"

"Perhaps, you were afraid to hear his insights."

"No, doc, not afraid. Just disgusted!"

And in a flash, he shoots the shrink who resides at 1301 River Side Drive in Manhattan. Standing over the fresh corpse, he says: "Like everyone I cared about, you disappointed me. And you see, I've got these evil voices in my head and they compel me to kill. Sorry, doc."

Afterwards, he jogs along River Side Drive Park, exorcising the demons in his head until the voices emerge in his psyche and speak again.

Writer's Bloc Or, Confessions of a New York Caffeine-Drinker

Jeffrey Bernard Yozwiak

Listen, I wasn't sleeping anymore.

Every night as I lay awake in bed a beast took his heavy leather hands and flemcrusted fingernails and pounded on my cranium—the bars of his cage. The paint on the ceiling of our apartment splintered into crow's feet, as if gremlins had just stalked across it.

On Monday morning, I gave in. I crawled out of my bed and into the kitchen. My office was the kitchen; my desk, the breakfast table. My ThinkPad hummed on the faux-maple counter top. I opened the battered lid and squinted against the glare from the screen.

My novel, finger-painted on Word's pixel-page. Like a '50s b-movie monster, the manuscript was growing. I couldn't sleep until I finished it.

An hour later a mug of coffee steamed by my side, the white procelain placed evenly over the brown rings we never scrubbed from the table, residue from previous nights. Sam's ghostly hand on my shoulder. I ceased the machine-gun fire of my keyboard to return her touch, to apologize for waking her. And then I returned to my writing.

Morning light streaked over the New York City skyline and leaked through brittle glass. My alarm clock sounded from the bedroom. Time to go to school.

The subway swayed in the darkness of the tunnel as it careened uptown. Breakfast was an egg and cheese from Sal's and more coffee, black. Long wool coats smothered me as I huddled over my *rugged nylon*—L.L. Bean's description, not mine—backpack and the crumb-covered wax paper on top of it. A canopy of hats, mittens, and scarves blocked the sterile light.

Businessmen scanned copies of the *Times* folded in elegant commuter oragami. Construction workers read *The Post* while wearing paint-stained workboots and baggy jeans.

I taught English at Williams Prep on 68th and Park. The boys had a dress code—collared shirts and khakis—so I needed to outdo them. Thus the thin, black tie; the starched-white shirt; the black Dickies and the scuffed derby shoes.

The windows of the room I taught in opened out onto the Quad, the atrium in the center of block-long Williams. The skeletons of four birch trees rose from metal rings in the cobblestones. The granite-brick walls eclipsed the still-rising sun. The Quad was in shadow.

My students filed in. I left the window for the lectern. Time to begin, by the generic Staples clock. "Open your books to page twenty-seven," I commanded.

Fifteen vacant faces reflected on polished birchwood desks. Dutifully, they took *Frankenstein* out of their backpacks.

These boys had drunk the best of society. When you are, literally, served your meals on a silver platter, life can't be hard. The Upper East Side is home to the aristocracy of New York: bankers, politicians, CEOs. These fathers had given their sons every possible advantage, incuding a private education.

"Explain why Frankenstein built the monster," I demanded.

Privelege is intoxicating. Like absinthe, it's delicious, it's addictive, it dulls your senses—

It was clear only a few of them had done the reading.

"Anybody?" I sipped my coffee and scrutinized the room.

Jimmy Stewart was especially vulernable. His dark blue Ralph Lauren polo draped over his wasted shoulders. He put a show of burying himself in his book when I targetted him. He was dead before I painted the bullseye.

I smiled. "Stewart, enlighten us."

You should have seen his face. Like pus draining from a scab.

I waited until the silence became murderous. He writhed and I suckled my coffee. "Stewart, when was the last time you did the reading?"

"Honestly, I haven't gotten a chance to do it yet?..."

"Have any of you read the book?" I queried the room.

No one volunteered.

"Don't waste my time." I closed my eyes and pinched the bridge of my nose. Reastraining myself from saying something worse. "Get out," I said. But no one moved. Little trust-fund fucks. Fifteen frightened faces. "Now!"

My office was too small. The president of my high school had occupied a tyrannosaurus mahogony desk in the center of a study wallpapered with book shelves. The cases had been filled with leather-bound tomes locked behind glass panes. He never read the books. To him, they were investments. Skin oil would depreciate their value.

My own books balanced in precarious towers from the floor. My desk didn't offer enough space for my computer and a student's paper at the same time, so I tended to keep a book in my lap while typing. The surface of the desk was made out of plywood. I knew because I once punched a hole through it. There was a slit of a window onto the Quad, but it never let in sunlight.

Detective Anderson runs to the edge of the roof and leaps onto the stucco ledge. He teeters as the toes of his Rockports slip over the precipice. A whirlwind of traffic horns rush from the underscore of pavement a mile below...

I pecked at my story. I had dismissed the class forty-five minutes early. I wanted to use the time to write, but nothing was coming. It was like forcing myself to vomit.

You can't rush creativity. In the book *It's a Bird.....*, Stephen T. Seagle proposes that procrastination is part of writing. Even the most prolific authors can't write constantly.

You need to give yourself time to manufacture stories from the external world.

I checked my email instead. Two new messages. The first was a summons from the Dean:

FROM: Serton@williams-prep.edu BODY:

> *It is unacceptable to dismiss your class like you did this morning.* Word had traveled fast.

You need to control your class more appropriately. Please reply with a time to discuss your recent performance with the president and me.

Fuck. I kicked over a stack of books next to my desk.

I didn't recognize the sender of the next letter.

FROM: joyce1941@gmail.com

BODY:

Beware the Ides of March.

March 5th—that was the date. When I closed the message my computer screen flickered. It blinked white once, almost imperceptibly. Word and Outlook returned. The pale blue blacklight. Then the screen bled to black.

Fuck. Was it a virus? I smacked the bottom of the clamshell and the plastic keys rattled. "Piece of shit!"

"If you're going call me that, I can take this back." Edward Fox's gaunt form dodged pyramids of paperbacks and the books strewn across the floor. His gray formfitting crew-neck sweater was Pendleton. I didn't recognize the khakis, but his round *spectacles*—his word for them—flashed. Like the eyes of a hawk. Gray flecked his sharp black hair and goatee. He held two steaming paper cups.

Coffee. The fresh laundry smell as he passed it to me. "I heard about this morning."

I flicked the brown stirrer into the trash.

A rare laugh from him, but he grew severe again. "I didn't tattle. But the kids were in the library, fucking away their free time playing computer games." Fox patrols the library I call him the librarian, but he says the title is too feminine. He prefers *sentry*.

I rebooted my computer. Caffeine glowed in my stomach. When everything goes to hell, the coffee machine is my defibrillator. Windows welcome music chimed.

"Anything from the publishers?" Fox asked.

"Turned down by Randomhouse on Friday. Email from Grand Central last night saying the same. Fuckers."

"You could use an agent. Finish the manuscript, too."

Sometimes it's like he reads my thoughts. I hadn't been published since his contacts landed me a story in *The New Yorker*. Teaching was only a part time gig, but I had said that a year ago.

"I haven't been sleeping well," I told him. "I'm as *incruably insomniac* as Anton Vowl."

"Don't look at me," he said. "I already stretched myself to get you that one spot.

I've got other shit to do ... "

A Hitchcock scream from the Quad interrupted him. "Let's go check it out," he said.

Jimmy Stewart was dead. His body twisted in little half circles as it hung from one of the birch trees. His woven brown leather belt was cinched around his neck at one end and tied around the bony limb of the tree at the other. His khakis sagged over green boxers with white pinstripes. He had popped the collar of his Ralph Lauren. Prep clothes.

His neck was eggplant purple. Bloodshot eyes bluged from his skull.

A secretary had discovered him as she cut through the Quad to get to the faculty lounge.

We sent the students home. The administration had assembled the teachers in the Quad. Idiots—it was too fucking cold. Police flitted through the crowd, wraiths in dark blue uniforms and black leather jackets. Silver N.Y.P.D. badges.

The Dean spoke with a detective—dark blue Kenneth Bernard overcoat and a brick red scarf. Upturned collar. The Dean's grisled chin talked to the detective, but his Cro-Magnon brow shot streams of plasma hate at me.

He beckoned with a finger. And like a loyal beagle, I came.

"Inspector Dupin, this is Phædrus." The detective's thick leather mitten smothered my bare hand. I quickly buried the chafed skin in the pocket of my wool coat. "He was the last person to see Jimmy Stewart," the Dean continued.

"Not true," I said. "He left class with his friends, and Fox says that they were in the library after—"

"God, because you dismissed them early!"

Dupin strode above the argument. "We'll need to interview each of the students. And I may want to speak with this Fox. Leave a contact number in case we need to reach you."

I scribbled on his small leather-bound notebook. "Why the police interest? It's a suicide."

"Look at the marking on his neck." Maroon-speckled rotten purple. "Notches above his voice box. Thumb prints—hand prints. He was strangled. It's supposed to look like a suicide, but it's a murder." He slapped the cover of his notebook shut. His head ticked forward. "Moderately clever."

Tuesday. The bug-eaten yellow baseboard showed beneath the peeling paint of our East Village walk-up. The tiles of the kitchen floor were cracked and cold seeped through my socks. The room was grimier during the day: a layer of congealed crumbs and coffee stains. The smell of my toasted bagel. I sat at the table with my laptop, breakfast, and Internet Explorer opened to the *Times*.

MURDER AT PRESTIGIOUS HIGH SCHOOL

There were no leads, yet, in the Stewart case.

Then my phone beeped from the bedroom. I had hung my pants in the rough-

hewn closet so I could wear them again. I retrieved my gray RAZR from the pocket. The square-inch screened confirmed a new text.

Fox: Didn't want to call in case you were still sleeping/working. Bev wants to know if you can do her house @ 8 on wed

The weekly Writer's Guild meeting?...

Phadrus: sounds good

More information poured in: an email from the school administration, concern for Stewart's family, blah blah. They were really worried about press coverage and alumni donations. The Dean suggested closing school for the rest of the week *just as McAdoo closed the NYSE during 1914*. His authority as an investment banker shone and the administration ate it up.

Cell phone beeped again. A text from Sam. Sam: Meet me @ starbucks for brunch 11:15

One person at a plasterboard table for two near the window. Glass cool on my forehead, hair smudge when I pulled away. Black bags of trash mounted higher on Midtown sidewalks.

There are 171 Starbucks in New York. In L.A., you're never more than five feet from a screenplay; in this city, you're never more than a block away from a Starbucks. This yuppie franchise is a plague. J.K. Rowling wrote the most famous bestseller to date in a Manchester coffee house, but I will never jack my laptop in at a Starbucks.

This particular establishment was on 50th and 2nd, near Sam's office. Clean-shaven men in pinstripes courted floral women in blouses open three buttons. Businessmen swarmed inside the restaurant like ants crawling over a dropped cookie.

My size *Tall* was bitter with caffeine. My attitude was just as black because that imitation-Italian coffee was, actually, pretty good. Maybe you get what you shell out four bucks for.

Then Sam strutted through the doorway with debutante elegance. Closecropped corporate heads turned. Her legs scissored in heels and regal purple tights. A Paul Smith purse slung tastefully between her breasts—designer because it was a gift from her father; a molten swirl of browns and pastels because she thought she was boho chic.

"I'll call you back later," she said into her raspberry-red Blackbery before depositing it in her purse.

Her brown coat slipped from willowy shoulders to reveal a light blue blouse and khaki skirt. She draped her coat and striped scarf over the back of the plastic chair. Red Coach gloves with ornamental pinprick patterns. She pushed oversized red vinyl sunglasses back on her head to wreath her short blonde hair. Her eyes were her most alluring trait: one was blue, the other, green. Catlike.

I made small talk and pushed her brunch across the table. "You're late. How was work?"

"Insane," she gasped. "We're meeting Charles Schwalb at one-thirty, I have two binders to finish by four....." Busy season. I should mention she's an auditor for Deloitte. But she recognized my fake engagement, so she returned, "How's your novel?"

"Fine, I'm almost done with it." I had begun working on it when we started going out. "Haven't hit writer's block yet."

She nibbled her wild blueberry scone. I took a pen from my pocket and started sketching on napkins. A Waterman fountain pen is supposed to be *the world's finest word processor*, according to Stephen King, but it bleeds through anything other than thick cardboard.

She penetrated a frappelattemachiatto-chino. "No, really, I'm interested. What is Panther's latest misdeed?" She was fond of the villain and spoke as if he was a friend of ours.

Rorschach chicken scratches on brown recycled paper morphed into the scene I wrote this morning. The words scrolled like ticker tape.

She is as limp in her bed as a Barbie doll. Panther's face is an immutable drop of ink. He withdraws the piano wire from his utility belt and slips it below her ivory neck. His biceps tauten as he draws the string into a sharp X in the air. A puppeteer pulling a marionette's strings.

Her head lolls backwards.

"He kills Lady Usher," I said. The victim's name is an homage to Poe's story.

"That passage"—at that point I choked on my coffee—"sounds pretty horrific." I had done it again: I had said aloud whatever words I recalled. Incarnated them. I couldn't help it; stories possess me like that. It's like being ridden by a loa—Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*. "What happens next?" she asked.

"I'm still writing it. I want him to jump through the window."

He flings Lady Usher's body aside. Fire rages through his limbs. He tenses and then explodes through the glass window like a bullet from a chamber.

He plummets into the icy air above Park Avenue.

"Make him fly," she said. So I did.

He snaps his arms and spring-loaded wings shoot into place. Black Kevlar sails running from his ankles to his wrists.

She tightened her grip on my hand across the table.

Glass shards tinkle on the vinyl back of his costume. A shadow in the sky. He soars through the Upper East Side.

"P.," she said, "that's really hot."

She tugged me into the unisex bathroom. Cold finger tips alighted like fireflies up my chest, probing underneath my black Apt. 9 sweater and baby blue shirt. I sucked her neck, as smooth as baby powder. She undid my belt; I unclasped her garter. She groped the sink for support. I ripped away her lingerie and ventured into the steel wool beneath her skirt.

The taste of coffee with too much cream.

Sarah Anders. It's always sex with Sarah Anders, never sex with Sam.

We were in the blue moonlit Arcadia Academy library. Boarding school in Connecticut. Sarah dangled above me, her skin spectral, bone-white.

I lapped her like a dog.

She spun in little half-circles above me. She had cinched her silver-studded belt around her neck at one end and tied it to the track at the top of the book shelf at the other.

She had kicked away the ladder. It clattered into towering gloom of other book cases.

"We're doing things a little different tonight," she had said.

But soon she stopped being succulent. She stopped breathing. Her eyes bulged from her head.

Sam climaxed once and curled against my chest. Her lashes dusted my pecs. Whisper of kisses on my neck, faster, longer, *warmer, moist.* I tasted the latte on her breath.

My phone erupted in the pants around my ankles. "Don't answer it," Sam ordered. Like Peter Høeg's Smilla, *I've never liked telephones. You never know who's on the other end.*

Scrape of her manicured princess hand on my five-o'clock shadow. "Fuck you, you prick." She shoved me and I stumbled over the glossy tiles.

I consulted the caller ID. "Phædrus? This is Inspector Dupin, N.Y.P.D. Can you come in this afternoon?"

Bastille doors of the 19th Precinct. Dark blue uniforms hovered like wasps. An *Officer Murdoch* led me to the interrogation room.

Industrial cement blocks painted turquoise. A coarse gray floor. My breath steamed in the stone cold. A paper cup waited on a metal table burnished by scratches. The coffee was lukewarm.

Dupin entered. Aged skin around his sunken cheeks had begun to sag. I identified a charcoal Kenneth Cole suit, white shirt, and zinc tie, Arrow. "I hope you don't mind the accomodations. It's quieter than"—he ticked his head behind him—"out there."

"This coffee is cold."

Dupin smiled. "You were late." He took a pack of Camels from his inside pocket and removed a slender cigarette. Shriveled tobacco coagulated at the unfiltered end. "I want to hear your version of Monday morning," he said.

"Class on schedule, but I dismissed the students early. Jimmy Stewart was with them when they left. I went to my office after."

Click of a silver, embossed Zippo. When Dupin's hands clutched around the flare, I could feel the warmth from across the table. "You forgot: the students said you were pissed at Stewart." He looped his hand to click out the flame.

"He hadn't done his homework. And I didn't sleep very well. I guess I was frustrated and tired."

He exhaled around the cigarette. "What kept you up?" Ash suffocated the room. "I'm working on a novel—"

"Dean Serton hasn't been too pleased with your performance lately." He leaned across the table.

Rick Weiler. His greasy double chin dribbled inches from my face. Sweat black-

ened his yellow Oxford shirt and leaked around his wife beater. His blue and green Brooks Brothers tie was askew. Prep clothes. Basement of Higgins Dormitory, flawless Acardia Academy private campus, upstate Connecticut.

He exhaled the putrid odor of beer and Camels: "Scholarship boy." Then he snuffed his cigarette on my naked shoulder.

A perfect pit of smoldering flesh.

I fought the scream.

Saltwater taste of blood in my mouth.

"Let him go." Sarah Anders stood in the doorway. His ink-black hair fell to her waist, black turtleneck, silver-studded belt. A body wracked by bulemia. "Or I'll tell my father, the president."

"Let him go." Fox rose into the room into the room like warlock. Clothed in *garments gray as ash*—like Gandalf—he decimated Dupin. "Is he under arrest? No? Then we're leaving."

Dupin smacked his lighter into the table as we walked out. A table burnished with scratches.

Gum-splotched city sidewalks. I dodged a frozen yellow trail of dog piss. "I need some coffee."

Fox must have been riding a rougish high. "I know where we can get some, free of charge." We were only a block away from Williams.

Fox unlocked the back door with his skeleton key. A long corridor of trash bags and broken desks. Stone arches dank and aged, like Roman catacombs. We emerged into the waning light of the Quad. It was a quick door to the faculty lounge.

The lounge was overly comfortable. Plush walls like the maximum security room of an asylum. They were painted the color of rat fur. A pleater armchair and a couch framed a mahogony coffee table. A pine green carpet. A De La Vega sketch and a Monet impressionist print on the two long walls. A Charles Ebbet print of the smoggy New York skyline adorned the short wall. Opposite, a window opening onto the Quad.

I spooned grinds into a filter shaped like an oversized cupcake wrapper. The machine gurgled and the fragrance of coffee replaced the haze of Dupin's cigarettes.

The beverage scoured my tongue. Cast-iron Victorian streetlights in the Quad winked on, fighting the blue winter twilight.

"That tree"—I tipped my cup toward a spindly shadow—"was where they found Jimmy Stewart."

Fox's goatee was edgy in the gloom. His breath stirred the sepia liquid as he tilted it towards his mouth. His glasses fogged. "How are you dealing with that?" he asked.

"Today was rough. I have to write more. Picasso painted *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* by drawing his fear of syphillis. *The World According to Garp* reflected John Irving's anxieties as a writer. Successful artists sublimate their emotions into great works. I need to finish."

"At least this vacation will give you time to do that. Don't forget the Writer's

Guild tomorrow."

"I'll pull another all-nighter. If I binge, I can finish the last chapter by the meeting."

Stress was building higher. The manuscript was promising to eat even more of my life. I clutched the glossy back of the armchair for support.

"Look, I need to go pick up that book I came for. *Silence of the Lambs*," Fox said. "Right," I said. "I guess I better get to work."

"Take some coffee. You'll want the caffeine." He flew upstairs to prowl the library.

Wednesday dawned after a sleepless night. I had two new emails.

The first was from Sam. She had never returned to our apartment. An explanation? *FROM: svirginia@deloitte.com*

BODY:

My boss, Rob

No greeting, no preamble, no introduction.

is having an engagement party for his third wife. It's on Thursday at the Waldorf. You hate these high society things, so I wanted to tell you where I would be. Dick suggested I bring a date—

Dick. He is one of the coworkers I know. They met at night classes soon after Sam and I started dating. He wears *salmon* shirts. I think he was recently promoted. So I shot back:

FROM: Phadrus@williams-prep.edu BODY:

I'll be there. Thanks for the invite.

And the other message:

FROM: joyce1941@gmail.com

"joyce" again. Shakespeare, the Ideas of March—the accident on Monday. The sender knew I couldn't resist a story. McAfee scanned the email and I opened it. *BODY:*

For Frank, who was nineteen, to kill his first man was another loss of virginity hardly more disturbing than the first. And, like the first, it wasn't premeditated. It just happened. As though a moment comes when it's both necessary and natural to make a decision that has long since been made.

The acrid burn of coffee. That was the first chapter from Georges Simenon's *Dirty Snow*. Frank kills to seize power in the criminal underworld of Brussels. In my mind I completed the excerpt:

No one had pushed him to do it. No one had laughed at him.

I wasn't in my apartment. I was leaning against a book case in the Arcadia Academy library. The spines of books pressed against my exposed back. The pilled rug chafed my thighs. Sarah Anders' naked form, devoured by depression, rested in a fetal position on my chest. Her breasts like limp squashes.

She had embroidered her black canvas messenger bag with an image of Jack Skellington's leering head. It floated between two fleshless hands flared like wings. She lifted the flap and pulled out a flashlight. "Read to me, Scholarship Boy." She was the senior; I, a freshman.

A random hardcover: *Dirty Snow* by Simenon. She held aloft the flashlight and in the pale beam I continued:

Besides, only fools let themselves be influenced by their friends.

—My friends. The Writer's Guild tonight. I had to finish the manuscript if I was going to read something to them. I repressed the memory and forced myself to keep writing.

He had felt within himself a certain inferiority.

I took the subway downtown. Really far downtown. The neat city blocks of the Upper East Side devolved into the chaos of the Financial District. Trim townhouses became waterfront condos.

Bev lived in Battery Park City. Her apartment was on the fourteenth floor of a precarious Calder sculpture of granite and glass. She can afford to live here because her husband, Brian, is an M.D. with a private practice on the Upper East Side. Not far from Williams. The two met at Columbia and won't have children. That also makes it more feasible to live here.

Mirrors encircled me in the elevator. My black Marc Jacobs club shirt and dark sweater rebounded a thousand times in every direction. The maplewood banister. I clutched a molten green bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon. The floors ticked upwards on a red LCD. Stainless steel plating engraved with little X's.

Bev answered the door, trading a hug for wine. She must be thirty years older than I. Laugh lines had become drooping skin and when she stopped dying her hair, blonde had succumbed to snow. Her recommendation secured my job at Williams a year ago.

A fire smoldered in the slate fireplace of her art deco living room. Everyone, though, was around the dining room table. Conversation shot across it like bullets from trenches.

"The scene where the monster murders Elizabeth? It's light inside the house and dark outside. I'm telling you, Frankenstein can't see the monster through the window. Instead, he sees his own reflection!"

"But if the monster is Frankenstein's hallucination, why do Walton and the other members of his crew see it as well?"

"Because the monster represents Frankenstein's ambition. I'm with Vance on this one. The monster appears like a specter, an omen, to Walton, because the explorer has the same deadly drive as Frankenstein."

This was our Writer's Guild: seven high school English teachers desperately trying to become published. Every week we meet at a member's house to share a meal and manuscripts. It's supposed to be a forum for literary critique, but we usually just end up drunk. In the tradition of Hemingway, Faulkner, Kerouac.

I was the last to arrive. I nodded to Fox in his parchment-colored cardigan and greeted Brian in the kitchen.

"How you doing, skipper?" he waved back. His black canvas apron read D-1-

N-E in bright subway symbols. He wore it over a Christmas-green shirt, khakis, and loafers. A retreating ring of black near his ears still resisted the onset of gray.

He winked. "Wait til you taste my raspberry tart."

An accomplished cook, he served us chicken breast marinated in lemon. Dionysus couldn't have decanted more wine. The red serum swilled in Cascadeshimmering glasses.

Walter Vance seized command. He had held the Sacred Heart English Department Chair for seven years and spoke with the assurance of the position. An intelligent man used to being correct. "Alright, alright." He rapped on china with his spoon. "Let's begin, shall we?"

Tess read a poem about opium addiction. She fancied the sedative high and the Sambo smile of an uncomprehending immigrant worker ready to please. She aspired to *The Kenyon Review*, but it was evident she had never imbibed herself. I suggested she do some research, ideally at ABC No Rio in the East Village, a college haunt of mine.

This critique earned me an exclusive honor. "Phædrus, why don't you read next?" Vance suggested behind interlaced fingers. He had close-cropped hair and a clean-shaven chin. He looked like an ascerbic Jeremy Brett. His thin lips were *ascetic and cruel*.

I pulled three pages of creased printer paper from my back pocket. Last night's labors. They were only a prompt. Like Alice disappearing down the rabbit hole, I dived into my story.

Detective Anderson skids over nail-bed concrete. He dabs his forehead with two fingers: blood, deep scrapes.

Financial buildings loom on either side of Exchange Alley. The body of Anderson's assailant eclipses the last lights from the street. Pointed ears crown his black gymnast's body. "Panther? I know you killed Lady Usher!"

"Shut up!" Panther barks. The silhouette barely flicks its wrist. Pain pierces Anderson's shoulder. A switchblade clatters across the cobblestones and ice slices into his bare skin. An X-Acto cut through his tan overcoat and white dress shirt. The starched fabric grows soft with blood.

"Don't you read, detective?" Panther shouts. "An elegant murder is like a good story: it requires a sequel!"

Anderson slips his coat belt out of its loops and braces himself against the lip of the sidewalk. Panther spreads his arms: an archangel haloed by streetlight. Two steel blades glint yellow, one in either hand.

Panther springs, but Anderson rolls out of the way. He wraps himself around Panther's back, a high school wrestling move. He shackles his adversary's neck with the belt.

Anderson grips with gleeful adrenaline. He pulls the leash tighter, the nylon straining like the veins in his forearms. Panther's form sags under his weight. Sinew contracts into rigor mortis—inhumanly fast.

"Is that true?" Anderson spits onto the carcass. "Then I want to live through the entire series."

Anderson retrieves his tan fedora and shakes off the sidewalk scum. He pulls a scrap

of paper from the fabric around the brim.

I gasped for breath.

He crosses Panther's name off the list.

My pulse slowed back to normal. Like a diver, I surfaced. But not one welcoming wave from the rescue boat. None of my peers looked at me.

Oppressive silence. Tess ventured to break it, "I'm not sure this piece is living up to what it can be....."

"I agree," Valencia Galloway supported her. "This sounds like something from the pulps. Or worse—comic books."

Vance's deltoids shuddered as he speared a piece of chicken on his plate. He aimed the sliver at me. "This is vulgar sensationalism."

An island of Dr. Moreaus. They took turns vivisecting my manuscript.

"Look,"—Vance savored his chicken. He adopted the condescending tone he must use with his students. "In literature, there are two schools of writing. There is high culture and there is low culture.

"High culture—these are the classics." He spoke slowly, as if I was retarded. "They are rich, symbolic. The canon of our language.

"But pop culture? That's your story. It's crude genre fiction. This action sequence? Gay pornography. Mike Hammer subdues the rebellious feline. The bondage will arrouse any sado-masochist. This is not literature!"

Valencia scowled between flat brunette locks. She tried to temper Vance's tirade. "What he means is, why are you writing detective fiction? Don't compromise your talent by writing for the masses."

My vision blurred to black and white TV static.

"You're not living up to your potential," Bev chirruped. So, her too.

Fox cocked a telepathic shotgun, my eyes sighted along the dual barrels. He took a currant-colored Blackberry from his sweater pocket and secreted it underneath the tablecloth. No one else could see his fingers fly over the miniature keyboard.

And my phone rang—an airy 8-bit Tocatta & Fugue to puncture the mood. "It's Sam," I told them. "I have to take this."

In the art deco living room I pretended to have a conversation with Sam, but it was really Fox on the other end.

Vance was elegizing the Alaskan wilderness when I returned. I told him Rick Bass had done it before and was just as revolting.

"I'm sorry, I have to go," I said. I grabbed my manuscript from the table.

"I think I'm going leave too." Fox said. "The ride uptown will be lonely otherwise."

"You're leaving?" Brian held a glass platter between floral ovenmits. A toasted pastry oozing with red gelatin. "At least stay for coffee and dessert."

"No thanks. But I'll take the coffee to go."

Vance closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Jesus, I need a cigarette."

In the kitchen, Brian poured black oil into a vibrant spring-green cup.

"Listen, skipper," he said as he dumped half-and-half into the coffee. He shrugged towards Vance's disciples. "Don't worry about them. I'd read your novel any day." He handed me the cup.

The elevator was mirrors and maplewood. Callous stainless steel. Fox, Vance, and I crammed into the shrinking box. The walls bowed inwards. Claustrophobic silence, by mutual mandate.

Vance pulled a candystripe pack of Malboros from the breast pocket of his shirt. Too much maplewood for the construction workers to install smoke detectors.

The drowsy taste of coffee with too much cream.

His plastic Bic zipped from his slacks.

I elbowed Fox. "Smoking is a disgusting habit," Fox said.

Vance exhaled, long and languid fumes dripping from nostrils. They swirled around us. Wine in glasses, coffee in a mug, words on a Microsoft faux-page.

I choked, tar coating the tender pink of my lungs. Second-hand death.

"You're cocky, Phædrus," Vance said.

The words rebounded a thousand times. The LCD ticked down.

We reached ground floor.

I wander thro' each charter'd street...

I fired my manuscript into the green latticework trashcan and emptied steaming coffee onto the street.

"Fuck them," I said.

Fox and I clambered into the West Side Highway overpass. Our boots echoed in the tube. Modernist girders streamlined by on either side of us.

"Popular fiction sells. It's like *spinning straw into gold*," I said. "With money you can climb the ivory tower. That's why high culture hates it so much."

"Joyce once said, The only demand I make of my reader is that he should devote his entire life toward reading my works," Fox said.

"What a fucking pretentious prick."

We stepped over a bum slouched against the granite corner of a skyscraper. The hood of his ragged parka hid all of his face but a gray beard. He left his cardboard bed and pulled down his Champion sweats. His piss steamed against the side of an Escalade.

And mark in every face I meet?...

OPEN 24 hours in orange neon tubes. Cobwebs inside the windows. "I'm going to get some coffee," I told Fox.

Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

He scowled. "You're not high culture, Phædrus, but you want to be." He slung his tan cowhide briefcase behind his back, haughtily. "I'm going back to Bev's. I didn't get to read my book review."

A shimmering treasure chest of candy wrappers and a white plaster counter top. "Anything else?" the clerk said.

"No, thanks," I said.

"Seventy-five cents and a quarter change." My skin creased around the slick coins. Tocatta and Fugue aria.

"Phædrus? This is Dupin, again. I called you an hour ago."

"I never got it."

"Yes, you did, because you picked up and told me I was *Sam*. Don't play with me, Phædrus. Where are you now?"

The leather seat of the police cruiser swallowed me like the grasping tentacles of a kraken. It was too comfortable, like an old La-Z-Boy. There was a web of thick, yellow mesh between Dupin, in the driver's seat, and me.

"Walter Vance is dead," he said. He drove through alleyways I didn't know. "Multiple stab wounds from a switchblade we found at the crime scene. His clothes were stained burgundy from the blood. Guess what, though? The cuts didn't kill him. He died of strangulation and was then mutilated. Similar M.O. to the Stewart case. This one is even more outrageous."

Dupin swerved onto the Westside Highway, deserted at this time of night. His caterpillar eyebrows scrutinized me in the rearview. "We're rounding up everyone at your meeting. He was killed in the lobby of Beverly Simonson's building."

We turned into the drive in front of Bev's condo. Swat car strobe lights whirled. An ambulance parked on the curb. I tried the cruiser door but it was child-locked. Dupin opened it from the outside and grabbed my bicep.

His coat billowed like in a TV crime drama commercial. The Hudson air ate through my sweater.

Green marble arches and crystal chandeliers. Three writers and Brian clustered between impassive dark blue guards.

A doctor and police officers rushed a stretcher to the ambulance. Vance's skin glistened clay-wet before a man in a green surgical mask zipped the body bag closed.

Bev hugged my neck. Dupin's claw never left my arm. "We were worried," Brian said, hands in his pockets.

"Where's Fox?" I asked. Dupin's talon.

Bev's brow creased as evenly as subway rails. "Who?"

"Librarian at Williams. He came back to share an article. Edward Fox," I repeated. Faces as empty as a new notebook.

Murdoch replaced Dupin's vise clamp with iron shackles. "We're taking you in," Dupin said.

"What is this? Fight Club? Do you expect to believe this bullshit?"

Dupin's tobacco-specked spittle sprinkles me.

He closes his eyes and pinches the bridge of his nose. He takes three sheets of paper from a manila envelope and fans them out on the table. "Williams employment records. There is no one named Edward Fox."

"I always suspected that he worked off the books. Anything for the administrators to make a quick dollar."

Dupin throws over the chair opposite me. A cathartic explosion. "There never has been an Edward Fox!"

In a dark corner, Murdoch tenses. His African skin glints luminous with sweat.

Dupin raps on the iron door by the one-way mirror and it opens. "Tell us when you're ready to cooperate," he says over his shoulder. He and Murdoch exit.

The turquiose cement blocks. My blood vessels scream for caffeine. I need to write.

Dupin locked my hands behind my back. I crane my body with invertebrae flexibility. Like a trained seal, I poke a blue ballpoint out of the manila envelope.

I grip it in my incisors and start sketching over the Williams empoyment records.

Dupin is wrong. Fox is the killer. And maybe only I can stop him.

"Okay," I say. "If not Fox, it's 'joyce.""

Dupin places coffee in front of me. My reward: a paper cup not bigger than an esperesso shot.

I try to slurp it like soup. Dupin draws it back across the table toward him. "Don't make a fool of yourself. Who is it?"

"Someone's been emailing me. I don't know who. But his emails preclude the murders."

"'Predict' the murders?"

"Right, yeah, predict the murders. The emails are on my laptop."

"Murdoch, bring this man a straw." Dupin smiles, too many teeth for his mouth. "Where?"

"My apartment, the East Village."

"Okay." He exits and Murdoch forgets the straw. The coffee steams at the other end of the table, just out of my reach. The beast inside, hammering on my head he craves the caffeine.

I stand and the handcuffs knife into my wrists. The chain between the two cuffs snakes through the upright of the metal chair. I drag it like *un boulet* and it sparks across the raw cement.

Blood drips onto the floor. I sip the coffee by lapping it with my tongue. My head sways like a hot air balloon.

Dupin and Murdoch will cruise down to my house. They will ride in front of the yellow mesh because they are partners. A fair-haired man named Laney will ride behind the cage because he is a tech specialist and a rookie and therefore their bitch. Laney's eyes will be hidden behind thin ovaline rimless glasses and he will silently stare out the window the entire trip downtown.

Dupin will break into my house. He will kick down the door, maybe splintering it. That is, if my landlady doesn't let him in, which she might, because she hates my reclusiveness and she hated Sam's prettiness.

R2D2 will gurgle on the kitchen counter, brewing a fresh pot of smooth French Vanilla roast for them. My laptop will not be hard to find.

And then they will return to me.

Hair grease on the rusted scratches. Dupin yanks my head upright, tearing my Marc Jacobs collar. "Open it," he says.

Laney hovers by the door. He is geek-thin and wears a dark blue turtleneck with a silver N.Y.P.D. insignia. Murdoch paces, grisled chin scowling. I try to lift my wrists, but the cuffs tether me.

Laney opens his hairless jaw to object, but Dupin's quarterback shoulders shut him out. Laney's finger falls limp. Murdoch shakes his head at him and cracks his black knuckles. Dupin's coattails whirl in his fervor.

He must be feeling hubristic. He unlocks the handcuffs. I open Outlook and instantly, *I've got mail.*

FROM: joyce1941@gmail.com

They crowd behind me, Murdoch smelling like monkey sweat, Laney reeking of soap like a girl, Dupin crisp as the pages of a new book.

"Joyce could never stop revising his manuscripts," Laney pipes. "They're a cryptographer's wet dream." He sifts his hand through straw hair.

"Open it," Dupin commands.

BODY:

Dr. Lecter finds the keyhole in his left cuff, inserts the key and turns it. He feel the cuff spring lose on his wrist.

My handcuffs are already open. Hannibal Lecter twitches inside of me.

The air swarmed with crystal notes. Dr. Lecter could hear the holes they made in the echoes of the music.

I pump my derby shoes against the legs of the chair and launch back, driving the iron chair onto Dupin's Rockports. I roll and kick on the floor. Murdoch falls on top of me.

I bury my incissors into his peach-soft skin. The taste of skin oil and salt. I *shake my head like a rat-killing dog*. I don't hear his scream.

I rip the can of Mace and the blackjack from his belt. With the blackjack, I crack Laney's kneecaps.

Dupin's pistol is in my face. Polished gunmetal glimmer. "Freeze," he says.

I blast the Mace into his eyes. His hand flies to his face, trying to wipe the acid from his eyes. I know the blaze of Mace. *Carol didn't wear her lab glasses. Now she doesn't have to.* High school science class.

Dupin doesn't dare fire while blind. In any event, I don't think he would shoot while indoors. Murdoch's jacket is already unzipped, if a bit gory. I steal it and turn up the collar. I dash out the door and pull the brim of his hat down over my eyes. Dupin barks into his radio. *"Two officers down. Repeat, two officers down. Prisoner is missing. Lecter is missing."* Laney is shock-cold.

I walk cooly to the nearest exit door and out into daylight and a brick alley.

"What are you doing here?" Sam's fierce whisper. Champagne bubbles precariously in her cup.

She wears a nightingale-purpe gown with pleated bodice. Her skin is white as cream, the complexion of a socialite. Her dress flares like a mermaid's tail around her legs. The twin Waldorf=Astoria towers rise above the city like *Shannard*'s Paranor. The red and white taillights of Park Avenue churn around it like a moat. The outside is *art deco*—according to the brochures—but the interior is Renaissance.

The Basildon Room, a court in the clouds. A menacing two-tiered chandelier hovers over the bar. Managers and partners dot the room in conversation clusters mudstains on Easter pastels.

"Phædrus! What are you doing here?" Dick loops an arm over Sam's shoulders. His tux frames a pink tie, almost as if he tried to color-coordinate with Sam but missed the shade. I smell the burnt plastic gel he used to glue his hair into hedgehog prickles.

"I told you I was going to come, didn't I?" I say to Sam.

The old men of the company stare. A gray Santa beard on one, a rotund pot belly on the other. I know how I must look: dirty, messy hair; my one Marc Jacobs shirt in tatters.

"Can we talk in private?" Sam flashes a glittering Crest smile to the others. "Excuse us."

Dick squeezes her hand. She kisses his square, cocky, rock-star jaw—his high, feminine cheek bones—and then storms through the Camelot gates of the room.

Gilman's *smoldering unclean yellow wallpaper* plasters the hallway. I squint to see Sam's purple trail ahead.

"You're a mess. What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

We enter a private library. Books line the walls, locked behind soaring glass panes. First editions, all of them. I can tell. There's a tyrannosaurus mahogony reading desk in the center of the room and an anchronistic winged chair of protein-red leather. It's embellished with brass buttons and has an indentation on the seat as if someone has just sat there. Three gold pens form a neat row on the desk—instruments waiting to be used.

On the desk a hard cover lies open, with a vein-blue ribbon marking the place. Extensive black comments coat the margins. It looks..... like Fox's handwriting.

"Is Fox here?" I ask Sam. "He may be coming for you. I thought he might be. He has contacts."

She criss-crosses her arms under a prominent forehead. She has pulled back her hair so tightly the roots seem to be tearing out. "We're through, Phædrus. I want you out of my life." A bony finger trembles. "Don't make me call Dick."

What book was he reading? I have to read it. Someone underlined and starred a passage.

She faces him, but he knows she can barely see him. "Who're you?"

"Sarah! It's Strangers on a Train! Do you remember that night?"

"Phædrus, you're a hack. You're a loser."

She's a warm ugly black spot.

"I'll show you success, bitch."

He springs with such concentrated aim, the wrists of his hands touch. He shakes her. His body seems to harden like a rock?... He has her too tight for a scream. He sinks his fingers deeper—enduring the distasteful pressure of her body under his so her writhing would not get them both up. Her throat feels hotter and hotter. Stop! Stop! Stop! He wills it. And the head stops turning.

Sam's body underneath my splayed legs. The bruises on her neck carefully match the color of her dress. Storm trooper boots hammer tiles and a fist connects with my jaw. *He hears his teeth crack*.

The dusty taste of the floorboards. "How you could lose him?" Dick shouts over Sam's carcass.

Dupin strolls to Dick and slaps him. Leather connects with hide. Dupin grimaces because he knows he underestimated me. The rubber soles of his Rockports halt in front of my aquiline nose.

Murdoch, face a mess of gauze and petroleum jelly, cuffs my wrists behind my back, again. I need those hands to write.

Dupin drops a Camel butt—I should've smelled the smoke before—and grinds it out. A perfect cricle of smoldering wax. "You're not an artist," he says. He spits and a glob of saliva lubricates my eyeball, drips off my nose, and pools on the ground. "You're just a plagiarist."

The Rainmaker

Chris Butler

I trudge down the long and lonesome road, dwarfed on both sides by fields of monstrous sunflowers. I refuse to look directly into their judging black eyes. Sheets of cold rain mercilessly batter my exposed skin. But the month is September - the dry season - it hasn't rained in September around here in years. The temperature dips. My sopping backpack weighs me down. My joints creak and my muscles shiver with every step, like I'm coming down with pneumonia or something. I need to catch a lift, somehow, somewhere. But no headlights have passed in either direction for what seems like hours. The scene appears so strange and twisted, but at the same time so familiar. I think I may be lost. But I know that I am home.

In the distance behind me, a roaring engine approaches. I recognize the car. I turn to spot the pair of headlights flash by me. The tires splash the raging river forming along the curb into my face. I pause to wipe the dripping water from my eyes, but as I do, my eardrums rattle with the piercing blare of screeching tires. I look up to see the bright red taillights of a rusted Trans Am turn white as the transmission shifts into reverse. Finally, a familiar face.

"What's up you crazy nomadic asshole! Only you would be wandering through this shit," he shouts from the partially cracked window. "Is that you, Guy?" I ask with a quivering voice. I know him well, but I barely recognize him. Dark circles droop beneath his pitch-white eyeballs. He seems to have lost a lot of body weight.

"The prodigal son has returned! I can't believe it! I thought I would never see you again."

"The summer's over, Guy. It's kind of tricky backpacking across Europe in the snow, you know. Plus my wallet ran dry pretty quickly over there. I forgot about the exchange rate with that goddamn Euro. Anyway, I told you I'd be back."

"When the hell did you get back, Man?"

"I just hopped off the bus."

"Well, why don't you hop in tell me about your journeys."

"Did you get your license back yet, Guy?"

"Just get in and I'll tell you all about it. You'll catch pneumonia or some shit in this weather."

I leap into the passenger's seat, frantically seeking warmth. Water drips from every branch of my body. I brace myself against the leather seat, wrapping the safety belt securely across my chest. Guy peals out.

"Just take it easy. I may have been gone awhile but I still remember how you drive." "And how *do I drive*."

"Like a maniac."

"Oh yeah, that's right." A sly smile appears on his face. "But I've been taking it easy. There are no new dents or anything. I've been taking good care of her."

"Just keep it below the speed limit, all right? It's getting pretty rough out there."

"I'm not concerned. So, how have you been, Man? How did the broads across the Atlantic treat you?"

"They treated me pretty well. Especially in Amsterdam - they love young, impressionable American boys over there."

"Man, I wish I could get in on that action. I would have a ball in Holland. I'd never want to leave."

"I'll tell you, Guy, it is the experience of a lifetime. I can't wait to go back. I'll be on the first plane out of here. But there's more than just Amsterdam over there, you know. I went to Brussels, Lisbon, Madrid, Paris, Rome, Munich, Berlin, all over. It's truly a peaceful continent over there. None of the bullshit like over here. It's nice to get away sometimes."

"Yeah, it sure beats this dead-end town," Guy utters.

Guy's arm squirms below his seat, his body dipping slightly forward, as his other uneasy hand grasps the wheel. He yanks a full pill bottle from the shadows. He pops the top, tips the container upside-down and pours a mouth full down his throat. He swallows them dry, with only mild discomfort smeared across his face.

"What the hell is that? I hope you're not all doped up again."

"It's my medicine."

"Your medicine?"

"Yeah, I got a prescription. Don't worry, Man. It's all legal."

"Just take it easy. You are operating heavy machinery."

"Easy is my middle name."

I slouch back, relaxing my cold muscles against the warm leather. Guy continues careening down the winding concrete, crushing countless toads darting across the glistening road.

"So, where are we going?"

"I was on my way to go see Dude. Want to come along?"

"Of course. I haven't seen that madman in months. How's he doing, anyway?"

"You'll see when we get there," Guy says.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Oh, shit!"

"What?"

"I'm totally fucked, Man."

He jerks the wheel violently towards the side of the road, slamming on the brakes. The car spins sideways, coming to a dead stop, with the tail end in the middle of the road.

"I can't believe they found me."

"What the hell are you doing? Who's after you?"

"The fucking cops. Can't you see the flashing lights back there...?" I slowly turn my weary head to find complete darkness around the car. "...I knew I was going to get busted. They'll never let me go this time. Three strikes and I'm out!"

Guy's eyes blink every other second. His bottom lip quivers. The muscles in his face spasm involuntarily as if he has lost control.

"It's all right, Guy. They're gone now," I say softly. "I think you lost them with your clever maneuvering."

"Really?" His frantic eyes glance back, double checking as if he doubts what his eyes are showing him. "I thought that was the end for me."

"Are you sure you don't want me to drive? I don't mind."

"No, I'm doing just fine."

Somewhere, deep in some cavity of my intestines, doubt boils. We accelerate down the road again, leaving behind matching black skid marks. He begins mumbling lyrics to some melody I cannot recognize. I listen and say nothing for the rest of the ride. I wonder what else has happened since I left.

The Trans Am eases into the short gravel driveway directly in front of the small, dilapidated home. So many memories, and forgotten nights in this place, they wash over me like tidal waves. Before I realize, the engine's rumble ascends into the cold night air and Guy is trampling through the front door.

"Guess who finally returned!" He yells to someone I cannot see.

I hop out and stride towards the door. It's raining even harder now. I enter the two-room macabre scene. My nostrils sting with the stench of burning ether and drying urine. I stumble over crushed beer cans, boxes of moldy half-eaten pizza, overflowing litter boxes and hundreds of multi-colored car air-fresheners spread across the floor. I am barely able to balance over the debris strewn across what at one time must have been the floor. A dense fog of stale cigarette smoke lingers just above my head. A puddle forms beneath my feet from the dripping water. I realize I'm soaked from head to toe.

"What, were you raised in a barn or something? Wipe your feet. I just cleaned up in here."

"I can clearly see that. How's it going, Dude?"

The grungy figure rises slowly from the stained couch. Several feral cats hiss at the disturbance as they leap to all corners of the room and out of sight. Dude constricts me.

"Well, it's good to see you too, Dude."

He hasn't shaved since I left, and I doubt if he's bathed recently. The odor emanating from his greasy, nappy hair cues my gag reflex. His skin is pale and pasty. Something has changed about him. I slowly push away. I notice Guy seated in the center of the room, probing his skin carefully for something that isn't there.

"So, how is everything going around here?"

"It's going, Man. We're all glad to have you back. Things just haven't been the same since you left."

"I can see that. So where's your little Bro? I haven't seen him in ages."

Dude's face flushes as his joyous expression turns sour. His legs give out beneath him as he slouches into a pile on the floor.

"Are you okay, Dude? Did I say something?"

Guy snaps out of his trance and leaps to his feet. He wraps a consoling arm around Dude's shoulders.

"It's all right, Dude. He didn't know."

"What? What happened?"

"His Bro snapped. Just went completely nuts. No one knows what really happened. They think he's bipolar – but what do they know. Fucking quacks. He's been under suicide watch at the hospital for two months."

"Jesus Christ."

"I know, it's a tragedy," Dude mumbles.

"What about your folks? What did they say about all of this?"

"My folks? They haven't seen either of us since we got kicked out for growing."

"Didn't they go visit your Bro in the hospital?" Guy butts in.

"Yeah, I forgot. They paid him a little visit. And ever since then the orderlies took away his belt and his shoelaces. How is a man supposed to live hitching up his pants all damn day?"

"It's no way to live, Dude. I'm really sorry." I try to change the topic. "How are you doing, by the way?"

"Me? I've never been happier! Life is good, life is great," Dude says, smiling.

"Well, it's good to see that you have such a positive outlook."

"Were you followed here?" His tone becomes sharply menacing.

"What? What are you talking about?"

Guy releases his embrace around Dude and darts towards the single window, peering shadily through the dusty blinds.

"Were you followed, Man?" He emphasizes every syllable, like I was a deaf three year old.

"No, Dude."

"There were some cops on us before, but I lost 'em with my clever maneuvering," Guy interrupts, smiling widely, turning away from the window. He reaches into a pile of filthy clothes, pulling out a five-pack of cheap beer by the vacant loop. He tears a can from the dangling plastic rings, cracks the top and chugs.

"Well, good. I just wanted to make sure. It's better to be safe than sorry," Dude says, his mood elevating with every word. "What are we waiting for? Let us celebrate! This is a special occasion! It's a reunion of some good-old boys from east Bum-fuck, U.S.A.!" He snatches the four-pack from Guy, tossing a can at my chest. It's piss warm and covered in a sticky film. "We got nothing to do, nowhere to go." He pulls off a can for himself. "So let's get wasted!"

"Yeah! Hey Man, close your eyes and you'll get a sweet surprise," Guy says.

"I'm not falling for that one," I say, laughing to myself.

"Come on, Man."

"I haven't forgotten the days of the original pranksters. You could toss anything in my mouth."

Guy holds out a mound of multi-colored pills in his palm.

"Just close your eyes and open wide. You won't regret it. Cross my heart."

I feel a longing for the days when life seemed simpler – when friends could get together and party without regret as if the apocalypse was the next day. I tilt my head back. My taste buds dance with chalky delight. I open my eyes to see Dude pouring his beer into my mouth, washing everything down into my stomach.

"Feel better?" Dude asks.

"I didn't feel shitty in the first place."

"Well, you'll be feeling right as rain pretty soon," Guy says.

"What the hell were those, anyway?"

My palms feel clammy. The tips of my fingers go numb.

"Just my medication," Dude responds.

"For what?"

"I don't know. I'm not a pharmacist."

"I like the blue ones. They taste just like Pez," Guy blurts.

"Is this all you two eat?"

"Only on the weekends," Dude says.

"But today is Wednesday."

"Liar!"

Dude's outburst startles me.

"It's all right, Dude. No worries," I say, patting his shoulder.

"I know, I'm sorry. It's just been rough around here lately, you know? What am I saying? You don't know. You've been gone," Dude begins whimpering. "The shit

just keeps piling higher here. We really need you around, Man."

"Why? What's wrong?" I ask, expecting the worst.

"Nothing. I just get sick of hanging out with this retard all day long," he says, looking over at Guy, his smile returning. Guy stands oblivious, returning Dude's smile.

The nerve endings in my head flicker. My blood feels as if it is bubbling. My muscles twitch. My vision blurs, all at once.

"It's great to have the crew back together again," Dude says, smiling.

"I know, let's get some hash." Guy interrupts.

"Yeah, now you're talking. Who can we call around here for some?"

"I can't call anybody these days. The phone got turned off. I guess you can't get by on credit forever," Dude says. I notice the telephone, wrapped in its own wires, stuffed in the corner of the room.

"It's all good. I'll come up with something," Guy says. He walks towards the kitchen counter, which is littered with a murky blender, empty liquor bottles, crushed beer cans and filthy plastic cups full of rotting fluids. He fractures the safety cap on a fresh bottle of vodka, and splashes several shots into the blender. He breaks open another beer and pours the contents. Dude walks over and dumps in a handful of pills.

"We need something else." Guy's eyes scan the room, glowing as he notices a bottle of liquid Imodium. "This is for the morning-after. A little hangover relief, if you know what I mean." Guy, the mad scientist, empties the entire bottle of the white sappy fluid into his concoction. His finger pushes a red button. The appliance shrieks. My head is pounding. I rub my temples counter-clockwise.

"You gonna make it, Man?" Dude asks. "You can't quit on us now. The party just started."

"Yeah, I just feel like I'm having an aneurism."

"I got your cure right here," Guy says, handing me a dirty glass of the thick liquid. "Drink up. I call it the superman smoothie."

I chug the entire cup. It slips down my throat like a tepid stream of Ovaltine mixed with shards of broken razor blades. It swirls like the eye of a category five hurricane in my stomach. I can feel the liquid reforming into a solid as it moshes with my stomach acids.

"Ah, that hit the spot."

"That's what I'm talking about," Guy shouts gleefully. "No more brain cells alive in here!" He taps my forehead with his pointer finger. The floor spins around my feet. I feel lightheaded. Everything fades to black.

A jackhammer is pounding against my temples. My eyes peel open, just enough to be blinded by the single light bulb dangling directly overhead. My brain feels like melting mush, draining through my sinuses. I open my eyes a second time, but they burn with blood-shot aridness. I can barely make out a figure seated directly in front of me.

"Goddamn, what the hell did we do last night?"

"Drugs. A lot of drugs," Guy says, laughing softly to himself.

"My head is killing me ... "

"Yeah, I guess you turned into a lightweight ambling across Europe, huh?"

"Uh, I guess so. How long have I been out?" I ask, rubbing my eyes.

"I don't know. I can't tell time," Guy says, humoring himself. "It's been awhile, though. Things got pretty rowdy last night."

I peer behind me to find Dude swinging his arms sporadically.

"What's up with you, Dude?"

"Flies! There are so many flies!"

I don't see any flies.

"We ate all of his meds last night," Guy whispers in my direction.

"What?"

"We ate his week's supply of medication last night. Man, those sure were good times," Guy says with a reminiscent smile.

Beside me lies a plastic green pill box, with each day-of-the-week compartment empty. Dude continues swatting at his invisible enemy, his motions reminiscent of King Kong perched atop the Empire State Building.

"Is he going to make it?"

"Sure, he's just fine. You want some breakfast?" Guy offers me the half-empty bottle of vodka.

"I think I need some fresh air."

"Don't bother going outside, Man. It's still pouring."

"Still?"

It must be late morning, or maybe the afternoon, but I can't tell from looking out the window. The sky is charred black and thick raindrops continue to pummel the puddles.

"What the hell is going on?" I ask.

"The sky is falling," Dude says, still swinging his arms through the air.

"I wouldn't worry about it, boys. Nature's just a bitch sometimes. It will clear up eventually," Guy says, his hopeful smile returning.

"I don't know. I'm beginning to doubt that," I say, lighting a Lucky Strike. The smoke swirls inside my mouth. I exhale slowly, watching the smoke ascend in front of the window.

I stare vacantly past the blinds, through the twisted branches and beyond the horizon, where the bleak storm clouds seem to stretch on for eternity.

Day three. I think.

"Are any of you guys itchy?" Guy asks as he digs his fingernails across his forearms. Blood seeps from his pores, caking against his arm hairs.

"Hey take it easy, Guy. You're bleeding!"

"It's all right, Man. I just got these teeny-tiny bugs all over me. If I keep scratching, I'll get them all. I know it."

"Why don't you just hop in the shower and wash them off? That should get rid of all of them," I say, leading him towards the bathroom.

"You know, you're right, Man. You're always right. You're real level-headed, you

know that? It's good to see someone around here with their head on straight. I'm glad to have you back."

I find no comfort in his praise.

"Don't worry about it. Just hop in a nice, warm shower and all of those bugs will be gone." I push him into the bathroom, and close the door gently behind him. I scratch my arms and neck impulsively.

"Can you write me a prescription?"

The wicked pitch of the voice behind me raises every hair on my body.

"Oh shit, Dude. You scared the fuck out of me. You shouldn't sneak up on people like that."

"Answer the question!" He lowers his torn jeans and the tinged yellow briefs to his ankle, crouching in the squatting position. His bare as hovers over the litter box in the center of the room.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"Just answer the goddamn question, Man."

"No, Dude, I can't. I'm not a doctor, or a pharmacist."

"I'm all out of pills."

"I know, I know. Don't worry about it. We'll go see the doctor tomorrow."

"If you say so, Man."

Dude's eyes wander downward as he defecates into the box. His left eye squints as he squeezes and strains. The grey and green crystal pebbles instantly stick to the brown coiled log. He lifts up his pants and straps his belt around his waist. He peers back down at his fecal pile, maybe to make sure in fact that he really did shit in a box in the middle of his living room. He jabs his finger into the pile. "Still warm," he mumbles to himself.

"Do you want anything to drink, Dude?"

"No! Whatever you do, don't drink the Kool-Aid. Kool-Aid is the devil!"

"Kool-Aid, Dude?"

"Yeah, that's how they get to everybody. I mean, everybody drinks Kool-Aid. It's just too sugary sweet. And everybody around here is lemmings at the cliff's edge. They poisoned the water supply with something evil."

"What have you been smoking this morning?"

"That's how they try to control us."

"Who?"

"If I told you I would have to kill you."

"Are you sure you're all right, Dude?"

"What's the deal with the inquisition, Man?"

"Never mind, you're right. Don't worry about it."

"I won't. Just as long you stay away from the Kool-Aid."

"Dude, take it easy. I won't go near the Kool-Aid. I promise."

"I don't believe you."

"What? Why?"

"Because you're with them!"

"I don't even know who they are!"

"Oh, you know very well who they are. They followed you all the way here from Europe. And now they're going to drown me in a pool of Kool-Aid."

"Calm down, Dude, you're freaking me out!"

"I won't let them get me."

His dilated black pupils flood his white eyeballs. He steps aggressively towards me. I hear the running water of the shower cease behind me.

"Relax, Dude, no one here is after you. We're all on your side."

He continues marching in my direction. I step backwards, colliding against the bathroom door. I notice a closing gap between us I can break for. I leap for my chance, but Dude's hand clamps viciously around my throat. He slams my rag-doll body onto the floor, not relinquishing his hold on my neck. Damn, he is strong. His yellow teeth are clenched so tight they could shatter into his gums at any moment. The veins covering the top of his hands pulsate. I can smell the shit on his fingertips. Out of the corner of my eye, the bathroom door swings open. Guy, dripping wet, arms still crimson and wearing a stained white robe, several sizes too small, stands motionless at the scene in front of him.

"What the fuck?" Guy asks, still standing in the doorway.

"Help me, he's going to kill me," I shout, gasping for air.

Guy bolts over to us and seizes Dude's shoulders.

"What's wrong, Dude?" But before he can finish, Dude turns his raging attention on Guy. "Dude! Take a fucking chill pill!" Their arms and legs intertwine awkwardly, and they spiral through the front door and onto the cramped wooden porch. Dude ends up on top of the contorted pile of flesh and bone, and grips Guy's throat. Behind them, the heavens continue to aggressively downpour. I grasp the breakfast vodka bottle next to me and scurry towards Dude, kicking over a dish of cat food. I raise the bottle over my head.

But I am blinded by a furry body and a cat's claws burrow deep into my scalp. The glass bottle drops to the floor. I scream, but only inhale flakes of dander and loose hair. I hear footsteps dash towards me.

"Hey, Man! Stop trying to poison my cats!"

I tear the cat from my face and chuck it at Dude's torso. He yelps in pain as the cat sticks to his shirt. I rush to Guy's motionless body, still sprawled in the doorway. His chest moves with slow exerting arcs. His throat begins to bruise as a stream of blood trickles down his cheek.

"I won't let them get Guy!"

Dude's hands jerk my body back into the middle of the room. Before I can gather my senses, he's back on top of my chest, pinning my shoulders against the floor.

"It's all because of you!"

"Get off you paranoid fuck! I did nothing to you!"

"It's all because of you! You're pure evil! Ever since you got here it's been raining! You allowed them to follow you here. Right to my home!"

"No! No one followed me here!"

"Lies! All lies! And you got my brother taken from me! My own flesh and blood!"

"No! I loved your Bro!"

"No! You abandoned all of us! You left us to die in this nowhere town! And now you come back, and you bring them with you! You're dead to me!"

He raises his whitened fist. Irrepressible rage floods his face, elevating the pulsing vein in his forehead. With my free hand I reach next to me and grasp the breakfast bottle. I smash it against Dude's skull. Grains of shattered glass and Russian water splash across the room. His eyes cross. Blood sprays from the side of his head. Dude's limp body crashes in a heap to the floor. Choking for air, I rise sluggishly to my feet. I hesitate, surveying the horror in front of me; broken glass, puddles of cheap liquor, an injured cat and two battered and bloody psychopaths among piles of garbage. I should stay and try to save my friends. But no, I have to get out of here. I force my legs to budge. I realize I'm running.

I float down the road, swimming through the raindrops. What the hell just happened? Maybe Dude was right. Maybe I was followed here. Maybe I brought all this rain along with me. Maybe there were flesh-eating microscopic bugs crawling all over my body. Maybe Kool-Aid is a mind-controlling device. Maybe I am one of them.

My legs burn. My lungs contract rigidly in my chest. I stride by the massive sunflowers – I can't let them know that I know that they're watching. Ignore their glare. Avert my eyes. Run. Don't stop.

I think I hear an engine approaching behind me. Run faster. Flashing red and blue lights catch the corner of my eye. It can't be. I must be hallucinating. Don't panic. It's all okay. No clever maneuvering required. Just keep moving. No turning back.

Release

Gregory Liffick

Bitten lips and held tongues can't trap the truth. It'll knock out teeth to be loose. It'll escape on any outgoing breath. Honesty can't handle lock-up. It has to break free.

Some Men Need To Be Owned

Daniel Gallik

Hank said, "What the fa?" And drove down to Columbus to check out the scene. Hank was out of it. Old. Fat and fate had put a beer-belly attitude onto his personality. He was just in it to be in it. Knew nothing great would ever happen to him again. "I myself am an ill wind. Tomorrow's death. I had my truly good time back in 66 when I went to college, U of A, to be exact, and met the woman of my dreams and she never wanted to date me." It had become a roving joke in all the yrs. Hank had told it to everyone. One of the ladies that worked in the Chuckery said hi to the kid. And he fell in love. The lady was less than five feet tall, Sicilian, and hotter than July when it hasn't rained. Hank asked this fifty seven yr. old out. And she slapped him. Right in front of the entire crowd there in Akron's favorite food hangout. Hank never cried. And he never opened his mouth again to any woman. Even his mom. Hank said, "Women are deterrents."

All this is what brought on this jaunt to Columbus. Hank heard this lady named Ge rt was passing on. She was ninety seven and living out her last in Jark's Senior Resort on the southside of the city. Hank got it in his mind he wanted to make love to her before she attacked the pearly gates. Of course, the boy, himself, was feeling the pangs of aging. One leg was wobbly. His eyesight had gone tri-focal. He was on three different pills. One was for water retention in both his ankles. And he was starting to stutter as the yrs blindly and methodically added themselves to his psyche.

Hank made it to Ohio's largest city. Luckily. He went straight to Jark's, asked around, and there Gert was, napping in the huge vestibule with all the other ladies. And I mean all the other LADIES. Hank decided to watch his manners. Stole a rose from one of the bouquets left by a departed and deserate family, walked up to Gert, quietly said, hi, I still do love you. Gert awoke, kick the hoot in the shin, and said, where the hell have you been all these damn yrs? Hank said nothing. Gert added, "Well, why don't you take my clothes off and give me a blast from the past this very moment? I need a little gasm afore I pass." Hank quietly agreed and became a slave for the next hr. to the lady. Gert then passed right at her orgasm's zenith. With a bit of a smile on her face. And a melody in her caveat emptor.

Hank got in his car. Sat there. For hrs. The night gave way to the morning. Hank was grinning for a world record twenty two hrs.

No one saw him do any of the above.

A yr later in the Akron Beacon Journal a small news article appeared. A few paragraphs about a man found dead. So dead. That only his bones were left. In a 2002 Ford Tauns. In a parking lot in Columbus. With a smile showing up on his scull. And music playing at the local used car dealership. The story ended with a question, "Anyone knowing the identity of the skeleton and his happy misdemeanor should contact local authorities. To answer all the questions. Which all start with the word 'why'."

A Beach Story Joe Quigley

I told the boss that a guy down the shore named Slink owed money to an associate of mine. No one knew Slink, not by that name, anyway. I told the boss that my associate couldn't collect the debt and offered me the job, and the boss gave me the okay as long as I kicked him the usual twenty percent. No one, not even Turtle, asked for the name of my associate. That was good because my associate didn't exist.

"I already told you that you ain't gotta split it down the middle," Turtle said in the car. He talked like he had a tube sock stuck in his mouth and when he became excited and talked too fast you really couldn't understand a word. The beer didn't help. He was Puerto Rican but slurred like a mick after a few cold ones.

"You're coming for the job," I said, "so we split it down the middle."

Turtle shook his head. His belly jiggled slightly. "Fuckin micks are bad with money."

"Fuck you," I said. I passed him a beer from the twelve-pack between my legs. "If we're so bad with money—"

"You're gonna say it again?"

"If we're so bad with money then why do you work with us, you beaner fuck?"

"Micks are a bunch of ignorant motherfuckers. And beaners are Mexican, by the way."

I paused, then added: "Beaner."

Turtle and I went to the shore every summer and this time was no different except for the business with Slink. Turtle didn't mind doing a job during our trip; he enjoyed the convenience of making a few dollars while on vacation. The town was perfect, a hidden gem on the Jersey shore. The neighbors were trusting, and unlike Wildwood there were no boardwalks with police on the lookout for drunken teenagers. The town had few attractions save for the beach and a few token bars. In all the years Turtle and I made this trip, I saw no bar fights, no DUI's. Even the seagulls didn't squawk as obnoxiously as they did in Wildwood.

Really, if you were going to murder a guy, there was no better place to be.

The combined effects of the drive and the beer left me yawning when we finally reached the beach. Turtle chugged a cold one and dragged the cooler to the sand. I stayed behind to call her. She cursed at me when she answered. I asked her how our little chick was doing. She hung up.

I met Turtle on the sand and slammed a fresh beer. It chilled my throat and built sickening pressure in my stomach.

"You talked to her," Turtle said, smirking. "I can always tell when you talk to her." "Shut the fuck up," I said. I fell asleep five minutes later.

A crab poked my arm. I jolted awake and swatted it away. A moment passed before I realized the beach was dark and empty. Artificial stars dotted the sky. The moon looked bloated and ugly. When it reflected off the water the waves glittered. I wouldn't have seen the kid otherwise.

A baby, actually, bobbling in the waves where the moon made the water shine. I saw fear in the kid's face; no run of the mill grownup fear, but the simple, dark fear of children. The kid didn't know where he was, what kind of trouble he was in, only that he was cold and wet, screaming because he was too far from home.

I screamed for help but no one answered. Before I ran into the water, I realized how scared I was, and how much I missed Turtle's company. The ocean groaned. It was the sound of her depths, the sound of an unseen colossus sending a cautionary message. Her waves broke into lines of marching angels on the shore.

I dove in. I swam hard but I smoked too many cigarettes in my twenty two years and within seconds my lungs were shattered and broken. A wave caught the kid and tossed him. Another wave surged toward me. Water filled my nose and mouth with the taste of salt. I came up for air just as her angels swirled around the kid and pulled him under.

The kid screamed. The ocean taunted me. Her voice was in front of me, under me, ahead of me.

Leave her, she said. You know you want to so just do it.

"Fuck you," was what I tried to say, but before I could the angels slammed into me. I tasted blood in my throat. A nine-millimeter I used since I started this line of work hung on my waist. I wanted to shoot, though I didn't know where to aim. By the time I realized the piece was useless, the bitch snatched it from me anyway.

I know I'm a bitch. Just like I know that you don't really want her.

She must have meant the boy in the water. Anger pulsed through me.

The angels pulled me under. I no longer felt sand beneath my feet. Unending nothingness nipped at my heels. Dread filled my stomach like rotten eggs as I imagined the bitch pulling me into her depths. I felt what boy felt, fear at the foot of a colossus, the primal horror of being too far from my mom. At once the bitch snapped me in the other direction. Momentarily I was head over heels, and her angels flipped me backward into shallow water. I hit the sand. A bone in my chest cracked. Fire filled my lungs when I tried to breathe. Out there, I couldn't hear the boy scream.

The angels reappeared on the sand. I realized that the kid in the water was a girl. She wore a pink My Little Pony sweat suit, the same one I bought for our little chick. The angels carried her gently. I had to shut my eyes when she rolled to shore because this wasn't just a girl, but my little chick. Her face was bloated and purple. Her eyes rolled in her sockets without meaning or life.

The bitch was laughing. The angels receded. I crawled next to her and put my hand on her cold, dead belly, content to stay, hoping that the angels returned to claim me.

Turtle shook me. I woke with a start and yelped when the waves broke on my feet. Turtle handed me a beer.

"Don't sleep on the beach," Turtle tossed me sunscreen. "That's how you cook, Son."

My name isn't Son. Turtle called me that in grade school. I hated the nickname. "How long was I out?"

Turtle shrugged and handed me a cigarette. A breeze off the water whipped against my face. The beer was cold and I forgot about the dream.

"Shit," I said. My shoulder was red and tender. "I did cook."

"Irish bitch," Turtle laughed.

I didn't look away from my shoulder. "Fuck you, beaner."

"Beaners are Mexicans. And the Irish are the lesser white race."

I held up my middle finger. "I wanna do the job tonight."

Turtle lay back in his beach chair and closed his eyes. "You should relax more."

She called my cell. I answered and she said that she just called to remind me that she *knew* that Turtle and I came to the shore to pick up teenage sluts and if that's what I wanted then she and my little chick would be gone when I got home. I wanted to tell her that this trip was part business and that she would appreciate that business because I was doing it for her, but she couldn't know. Not yet, anyway.

She hung up.

Turtle smirked.

I said nothing.

Turtle shook his head.

"Shut up."

I saw three girls in the water. Two were blond, slender and tan. The third was a fat brunette. I swore she had more meat than Oscar Meyer, but her eyes caught my attention. Certain people had eyes that showed they were happy. It was a natural happiness. Turtle had it in his eyes, and so did Oscar Meyer.

"I seen you look," Turtle laughed.

"I told you to shut up," I said. I looked away from Oscar Meyer. Suddenly I hated her for that natural happiness. Turtle, too.

"I'm just saying, if you and her had it so good then you wouldn't be looking at girls like that."

"I can't look?"

"Not like that."

"You're a fuckin idiot."

Turtle smiled and closed his eyes again. "That bitch got you trained, man."

She wasn't a bitch, and even if she was, it wouldn't have been any of his business. I admitted that sometimes she could be hard to get along with and said things she didn't mean, but she wasn't a bitch. She loved me. It wasn't any of Turtle's business, anyway.

Oscar Meyer and her friends sat on some beach towels a few feet away. Oscar was looking at me. I held eye contact and smiled, though I didn't mean to, and she smiled back, which sent an unexpected chill of excitement through my chest.

Oscar waved to me.

I shook Turtle awake. "Let's go see Slink now."

He sighed. "I'm chilling. Leave me alone."

"If we go now, we'll have the rest of the weekend to ourselves."

Turtle rolled over and stuck his middle finger up.

"Fuck you," I said. "It's my job, fat boy, and I'm telling you that we're going now." Turtle growled. "Am I gonna know this guy?"

I sipped my beer. "Nah. He ain't from our part of the neighborhood."

"I asked around. Nobody knows a guy named Slink that brung himself all the way down here."

"He kept his head low, I guess."

"Shit, everybody knows everybody around our way."

I said nothing. Oscar Meyer was looking at me again.

The bookstore was five miles from our motel, along a road beside the ocean with nothing on it except Slink's bookstore and the odd pile of seagull shit. We toyed with our fishing rods as we waited. Now and then I heard smacks against the water and when I looked over the edge I saw silhouettes of crabs.

Turtle grunted and checked his watch.

"Give him a few more minutes," I said. We were parked a quarter-mile away from the bookstore. It was closed, the owner long gone, but we saw a red security light dimly through the windows.

He flipped his line out of the water and recast it, this time further out. "You said he lives here?"

"Yeah. With some faggot."

"He's a faggot?"

"I don't know."

Slink wasn't a faggot. I knew this. Turtle didn't have to.

"I hope he's not a faggot," Turtle said.

"How come?"

"I dunno. I never killed a faggot."

"I guess it wouldn't be any different."

"As long as they ain't...you know...the girlie ones. 'Cause that's too much like doing a chick. I would never do a chick."

I was looking into the waves. By now my dream had faded from memory, but the foam atop the waves still gave me chills. "Nah, I wouldn't do a chick neither."

"I know one chick you would do," Turtle laughed.

"Shut the fuck up," I said. "I told you earlier that I don't want you talking shit about her."

"I meant the fat one from earlier."

I was grinding my teeth.

"Seriously man," Turtle said, "you know I got no problem with her or the baby. But look what happened with the birthday party."

I remembered the birthday party. It was two months ago, my little chick's first. Her and I were in a fight over some nonsense and she told me to leave the party because I wasn't my little chick's real dad and eventually I would run out on them.

He messed her up when he left. I don't know if she loved him, but after he left

she was different. When she was really angry, she said, "You'll leave us just like John did." Sometimes I wondered if she loved me or just wanted a guy to stay with her. But there was love. I loved both of them.

"Yeah," I said. "Sometimes she gets rough."

"Maybe you should think it over more. You know, before you do it."

I glared at Turtle. No, there was no way he could have known, no way he could have figured it out. He didn't know Slink. He knew nothing of the bookstore or the faggot that allowed Slink to live there.

"Before I do what?" I said.

"Before you get in too deep, man." Turtle stole a cigarette from my pocket and lit it. "I know you love them, especially the baby, but I dunno. How long can you go with her constantly up your ass about some bullshit?"

I lowered my eyes to the water. Out there, I heard the Atlantic roar.

"I guess you have a point," I said. "I'll think about it."

Turtle punched me in the arm as hard as he could. "You know I'm just looking out. If you love them, then fuck it, do what you want."

I swung back. Turtle ducked, but I caught him with a two-piece in his ribs. "Fuck you, you faggot-lovin' motherfucker."

Headlights appeared in the distance. We went quickly back to our fishing poles. Slink's car passed us and continued to the bookstore. I hesitated. I didn't know why. A quarter-mile down the road I watched Slink stumble out of his car, most likely high on dope, and I thought of how much I despised him, and how much I wanted to kill him, yet part of me screamed to go home, to forget Slink. Dread filled my stomach, it reminded me of rotten eggs, and this dread told me that I'd regret finishing the job.

I turned to Turtle. "Fuck it, man. Let's go home."

Turtle raised an eyebrow. The normal cheerfulness in his cheeks was gone, the warmth in his eyes chilled to nothingness. It was easy to forget what Turtle did for a living. For years I worked with him and saw this exact look on his face as he finished a job, but I had never seen that look turned on me.

"Something wrong?" Turtle said.

I paused. "Nah, man. I'm just fucking with you."

Turtle's expression didn't change. "You sound funny."

"I'm cool."

"You sure?"

I nodded. "Stay here and keep an eye out."

"We're alone for miles."

"If anybody comes past, it'll look suspicious with the car just sitting here."

Slowly, Turtle's face reverted to the one I knew so well. I was relieved but felt uneasy knowing that he could turn that look on me again. "You gotta stop being so paranoid, you mick asshole. Nobody's gonna see us."

"It's my job, so it's my rules. I go in alone and you keep an eye out."

"Then why bring me?"

"Because I need someone to keep an eye out."

"Man, that ain't fair," Turtle said, kicking the ground.

"I got this," I said.

"I don't want half if you're doing all the work. If that's how we're doing it, I want less."

I smiled. "Man, you're getting half."

I cocked my piece and started toward the bookstore. I knocked. Slink answered and I greeted him with my nine-millimeter.

"Hi John," I said. He wore a short sleeved shirt that revealed the track marks on his arms. "You're looking well."

He was high. The motherfucker was always high. She had to get my little chick tested for all types of bugs when she discovered that he had been shooting up before he got her pregnant. She was terrified that little chick might have contracted a bug, and I remembered how scared she was as the days dragged on, all the while wondering if my little chick had AIDS or Hepatitis.

I remembered this. Any hesitation I had disappeared.

"Inside," I said.

John led me inside. "I got nothing," he said. "I came here because I didn't want nothing to do with her or that fuckin neighborhood."

"Where's the certificate?" I asked.

"It ain't here," he said. I understood why he wanted it. John took the certificate before he left. He thought it was the last piece of my little chick he could hold on to.

I pressed the barrel against his forehead. "You think I won't?"

He closed his eyes. "Okay."

He led me to the second floor. I asked John if he had to suck that faggot's cock for a bedroom and a job. John didn't answer, so I bashed him in the face with the butt of my weapon. Then he said no, he didn't have to suck cock to live here. "Good for you," I said.

John shuffled through his underwear drawer. I kept the piece pointed at the base of his neck. I told him that if he got tricky with me, I wouldn't kill him. Oh no. Instead I would shoot him in the spine and make sure he was paralyzed from the neck down. "Then try sticking a needle into that arm," I said.

Finally he found the certificate. I snatched it from him. The space reserved for the father's name was still blank, just like she said. Of course she didn't know I was here getting the certificate, but it would be a nice surprise when I returned home. Now my little chick could really be mine and she wouldn't accuse me of wanting to leave ever again.

John's eyes were glazed. "You can leave now. You have what you want."

I shook my head. "Money."

He emptied the contents of the safe into a trashbag. There was only five grand but I had to come away with something or else the boss and Turtle would get suspicious. When John finished he looked me in the eye and said: "You can say what you want about me, Son. About all the shit I squirted into my arm. But I promise you that I never meant to hurt either of them."

I pressed the barrel against his forehead. "You shot heroin while she was preg-

nant. You could have gotten the baby sick."

He was crying again.

"Then you bounced on them," I said. "You left my daughter."

John's eyes flew open. "Fuck you. You were fucking that whore while I was still with her."

I shot John in the face.

I gave Turtle our cut after I set aside the boss's percentage. Turtle didn't know how much money I took from Slink and when I handed him the entire cut he figured it was only half.

"Damn," he said, "I didn't think some faggot in a bookstore would have money like that."

His suspicions from the night before vanished once he counted his money. When I woke up the next morning he wasn't in the motel room; I looked out the window and saw Turtle at the ice cream stand buying double-scoop cones for all the children by the pool. I remember wondering how Turtle could be so happy. Turtle made me think of all the people in the world like me, who felt that happiness was a privilege. That wasn't true for Turtle. Happiness was normal for him. I was partly jealous, but in a good way. He gave me hope that one day I could be that happy.

We went to the beach after breakfast. We each drank two beers before we carried the cooler to the sand. I felt loose and happy being here with my friend. As we passed the dunes I spotted Oscar Meyer and her friends nearby, packing their things. She smiled at me. I tried to ignore her but I smiled back anyway.

Turtle snickered.

I wanted to tell him to shut the hell up, that it was none of his business, but instead I snickered too. Oscar Meyer didn't look fat from here. Her eyes showed the same natural happiness that Turtle had. A thought ran through my mind like ice water, refreshing but making me wince at the same time: I could talk to Oscar Meyer now and look into her eyes and perhaps I would feel that same natural happiness.

Oscar Meyer and I exchanged smiles again. She stood by a dune while her friends continued away from the beach, as if she were waiting for me.

Out there, I heard the groan of the ocean. Her calls grew louder, the beckoning of the hidden colossus. Her angels broke on the shore and crept along the sand until they covered my feet, like they were trying to pull me into the water. Her voice and her angels pinched my heart and I wanted to go home to her and my little chick very badly. But the water scared me. Even from here, far from the deep parts, I feared the water would toss me, break me, and forget me.

"Go 'head," Turtle said.

I smiled at him because I knew I couldn't go.

"Nah man," I said. "Let's get whacked on the beach before we go home."

The Brother

My mother's hands were soft as she wiped the sweat from my brow. I sat up in my bed and stared blankly at my bedroom walls as she dipped a cloth into a pail of water and began wiping it across my forehead. She sat the pail in my lap and then she smiled slightly.

"Your brother said he feels ill too," she said to me, "He said it started not long after he came home."

"That thing is not my brother," I said.

"Stop it, Tommy," my mother said frowning, "I don't understand why you keep saying that."

"Because he's not," I said. I continued to stare at the wall as my mother let out a sigh of exasperation.

"Listen, I understand you're not feeling well after everything you've been through this week. You're just imagining things, Tommy, and so is your brother. He is saying strange things, too. You both need to rest. Your father and I are so glad to have you both home safe, but you need to stop this. Your brother has been through just as much if not more than you have."

"That thing is *not* my brother," I repeated as I cut my eyes sharply to meet my mother's gaze.

"Stop saying that!" she said. She yelled so suddenly I flinched, sending the pail of water in my lap tumbling to the floor with a metallic thud, and spraying water across the hardwood. My eyes were wide, startled, and my mother's hands flew up to her mouth. She was shaking. "I'm sorry," she said. She bent down, picked up the pail, and then began frantically wiping the floor with the end of her dress.

"It's okay, mom," I said quietly. I looked at the wall again and cringed as a bolt of lighting raced horizontally across the evening sky like a string of bursting Christmas lights and a sharp report of thunder cracked. I listened to the rain and was quiet.

My mother sighed again, stared helplessly at the water stain on the hardwood floor, then slowly rose to her feet with her hands bracing her knees. She smiled slightly, but the gesture felt forced, and her hands were still shaking as she wiped them on her dress. "Too much water," she mumbled, "I'll have to get the mop." She did not look at me as she turned and began to walk towards the door. "Lie down sweetie, try to get some rest before dinner."

"Where is he?" I asked.

"Who?"

"Jacob," I said.

She finally looked at me. Her face was sad and her eyes looked tired. "He is with your father in the shed."

My body grew tense. "What are they doing out there?" I said as I tried to keep my voice level.

My mother shrugged and tilted her head. "I don't know, just talking I think. This is your father's first chance to speak to your brother since they released him

from the hospital."

"What are they talking about?" I asked.

"I don't know, Tommy," she said as she brushed her hair behind her ears and furrowed her brow, "Why?" Her eyes were squinted as she watched me, visibly troubled. The stress of the past week was apparent in the lines in her face and the bags under her eyes.

I shook my head and managed to smile somewhat. "No reason, just curious."

"Get some rest and I'll let you know when dinner is ready," my mother said. Her face erupted into a huge smile and she said, "We get to have a family dinner again, just the four of us. For a while I didn't think we would ever be able to do that again." Her smile wilted a bit and her eyes began to well with tears. She wiped them quickly, sniffed, then her smile reappeared. "Well, anyway, get some rest. I'm going to finish dinner. I love you."

"Love you too," I said. I returned her smile, and she turned and left. I listened to her heels move down hallway, click, click, click and then descend the stairs. I was alone again.

I knew she would not believe me. When they brought Jacob home from the hospital, I was sitting in the front room, and I looked up at him as he walked slowly into the house. He looked weak and frail and I knew immediately that that...*thing* was not my brother. He was not the boy who fell into the creek with me that day and was washed upstream for god knows how far. He was not the boy who lay alongside me on that muddy bank, both of us unconscious. That boy was Jacob, my brother. The thing that my mother brought back from the hospital was not. We were different now. The dark people saw to that.

I did not bother to tell my mother about the dark people—the ones with the gray skin and all those sharp little teeth —and I did not tell how they came to Jacob and I as we lay on those muddy banks and took us away. I knew she would not believe that.

I did not tell her about their dull red eyes that seemed to glow in the dusk light like phosphorescent crimson coals, the thin layer of black hair that covered their gray skin, or the revolting, sewage smell that emanated from both their hair and skin. That stench seemed to stick to me like honey and stayed with me for days, even after I was found and taken to the hospital, and I swear I can smell it yet.

I also did not describe their mouths. Oh my god, those mouths. Thin, elongated jawbones that seemed to extend to their collarbones. A mouth that seemed to open 180 degrees like demonic Thylacines when they roared, as if their heads were on a hinge. Big enough to fit a human head in one bite, their jaws were, and maybe even the shoulders. And maws lined with tiny teeth, so many sharp and tiny teeth.

When I awoke on the banks, the sight of one of those beasts looming over me like an executioner greeted me, and when it opened its massive jaws and unleashed its terrible howl, I felt the bones rattle beneath my skin. It was like looking into the mouth of some malevolent cave from a world underneath my own, a dark world, with stalactite fangs caressed by demon winds, a place where no being pure of heart could ever spring forth and any creature that entered bearing crests of righteousness would inevitably perish. Then I saw more of them creeping from the brush, both before and behind me. They took us away.

There was another boy there with us, and I did not mention him to my mother either. The boy with the red hair. In an area where everyone knows everyone else, this boy managed to be a stranger, someone neither I nor my brother had ever laid eyes upon before that day, and he was scratched up and bruised from head to toe as he wept and shook convulsively in the presence of those things. The creatures descended on him from all sides as we watched, and the boy stood marbled with eyes wide and lips quivering. He made no sounds.

One of the creatures stepped forward and opened its huge maw, unleashing a deep roar from some devilish place in his bowels, and the boy whirled around and let out an ear-piercing scream as he looked down the throat of the thing. Things happened rapidly then. Jacob and I watched as the boy's head disappeared into the beast's mouth. We could hear the boy's muffled shrieks of terror and pain coming from the creature's throat for a few moments, and then we heard nothing at all.

It held the boy's head in his jaws for several moments, then suddenly it lurched backwards, releasing the boy. He fell like a rag doll and crashed into the dirt. He did not move for several minutes, and then he stood up slowly and looked around. His eyes met with mine and he stared at me vacantly. He was...different. He was no longer afraid, no longer crying, and no longer looking around with terrified eyes. The boy was changed somehow. He simply observed me with that vacant look, and it was enough to spur the hairs on my neck to stand up. There was something else in his eyes as well.

Hunger perhaps.

Jacob and I were sitting back to back in the dust beneath a tall tree and we leapt to our feet and ran. We did not know where we were or where we were going and at that moment it seemed not to matter; we simply ran. I had never moved so fast in my life. Jacob was more than a year older than I was and he was stronger, but he could not surpass me that night. I overtook him quickly and paced our escape. He grunted as he ran—perhaps his leg was hurt, I am not sure—and I could hear him careening through the brush behind me. My feet barely touched the ground as I leapt over felled logs and squeezed through the small trees.

But no matter how fast we moved those things moved faster, and they crashed through the brush behind us like runaway ghost trains. I heard their feet slapping against the leaf covered ground, their grunts, their pants, and those stomach-turning snarls. I turned once to look, and I saw their dark faces and scarlet eyes glowing in the moonlight like disembodied gargoyle heads inset with rubies, and those burning eyes bounced up and down with each step but always remained fixed on their prey. They caught Jacob. I heard a *swoosh*, the sound of something whipping rapidly through the air, a sickening fleshy thud and the sound of my brother crashing to the ground. He screamed once, and then he did not scream again.

I kept running and I stopped looking back. My legs began to burn as if the blood there had been set alight, but I kept running, and I felt the big muscles in my skinny legs beginning to turn to stone, but I did not slow, and every time my feet slapped against the earth it felt as if I was running on a bed of rusty nails, but I rushed through that as well. I ran until my legs finally locked up like an engine divorced of its oil and I collapsed face first to the ground. I don't know how far I ran or for how long, only that it was not far enough nor long enough. I laid there for a moment, gasping and delirious in the dust like a whipped dog, and then darkness took me. My next memory was a hospital bed.

I did not tell my mother that story. Who would believe such a thing? I would not believe it myself had I not been there, had I not seen it with my own eyes. It strains the mind to witness something too incredible to be real yet somehow manages to be. Believe me.

That thing posing as my brother tried to tell her though. He did not tell her everything, but he did mention the tall, dark people. He told her they took us. She only watched him with both compassion and sadness and then told him to rest. That was her answer for everything that ailed a person—rest. I lay out in the woods for two days before I was found. I had rested enough. They found Jacob two days after that, so he was out longer. Yes, we were both sick, and yes we were both near death when they found us. But no, I am not crazy, and I decided I would not bother explaining what happened to my brother and me. I made the decision to handle the situation myself, for I was the only one who knew what had to be done to put things right again.

I decided to kill my brother.

My mother called that dinner was done, so I slowly made my way down the dark hallway and descended the stairs. I walked into the kitchen and saw my father and Jacob already seated at the table, their plates piled high with hot food. Pots covered the surface of the stove—each billowing steam that filled the air with their aroma—and the room was smoky. My mother finished preparing my plate and then she smiled.

"Here you go," she said as she handed the plate to me, "Have a seat."

I took the plate and sat down at the table across from Jacob and my father. I did not touch my food, only looked at my father. My father was more silent than usual. He sipped on a tall glass of ice water. In all of my days, I had never seen my father drink anything with his dinner save a beer, but not that night. That night he stared impassively at the table and slowly sipped his ice water.

My brother got to him, I thought as my mother took her seat.

"Before we start eating," my mother said, "I want to say something. I don't want to hear any talk about what happened over the past few days, not from anyone." Her tired eyes moved from me, to Jacob, to my father. "I just want a nice, peaceful dinner tonight, okay?" She did not wait for a reply and began eating. No one moved to say anything anyway.

The silence was a wet blanket on the room, the only sounds the occasional crunching of chewing and the clatter of knives and forks on plates, and outside the rain picked up and was like the steady drum of a thousand wet fingertips against the windows. The walls creaked and groaned under the pressure of the blowing winds, and the single candle sitting in the center of the table cast soft shadows on all, its flame whipped back and forth gently by the breeze that crept through the walls. I ate slowly, but I was not hungry. Not even a little. My father had yet to utter a single word and his brow was furrowed. His fork merely pushing food. His face dark. Introspective. Jacob devoured his food as if he hadn't eaten in days, and I guess he hadn't really. My mother finally broke the icy silence.

"Well Jacob, looks like we will be able to have your birthday party next week after all," she said as she grinned at him, "and the whole family will be there." She looked around the table optimistically at all of us, but no one spoke or looked at her, so her smile faded and she began to eat again.

"You guys were outside in the shed earlier?" I said without looking up.

"Yeah, for a little bit," Jacob said. He stopped eating and stared at his food with an expressionless look on his face.

"Why?" I asked. I looked over at my father. My father shook his head non-chalantly.

"Just talking," he said, "Nothing special."

Jacob and my father both began staring at me intensely through half-closed eyelids, their lips pressed tightly together, and I felt a tingle go up my spine like tickling ghost fingers. They watched for a few more moments and then they both looked back down at their food simultaneously and continued to eat.

It was then I knew that not only had I lost my brother, but I had also lost my father. Jacob had gotten him in the shed and my father had changed. I placed my fork on plate and pushed back my chair, intent on getting up. "Excuse me," I said, "I'm going to go upstairs." I did not look at Jacob or my father as I spoke, only my mother.

"Tommy?" my mother said. She placed her fork on her plate and looked up concerned. "What's wrong?" Jacob and my father said nothing, they only watched at me.

"I'm not feeling very well," I said, "I think I'm going to lie down for the night. I'm sorry."

My mother sighed and said, "Well, go get some rest then. Let us know if you need anything."

"I will," I said, and as I rose to my feet I felt frightened for my mother. I knew they would not attempt anything with me awake—they don't work that way—but I knew they would move for her tonight, after dispatching me, of course. When their attention returned again to their meals, I picked up a butcher knife from the counter and then I ascended the stairs.

The blackness of the night was thick as I rose from my bed with the knife in my hand. I looked over and noticed my brother's bed was still empty despite the late hour; I had not seen him since dinner, but when I opened my door and stepped into the hallway he was there, standing at the opposite end with his hands behind his back.

"I've been waiting for you," he said, "I knew you'd be coming."

I took a few steps closer and made no effort to hide the blade in my hand. "Where's my mother?" I said.

"She's not your mother anymore."

I felt my face grow hot as I said, "So, you got to her."

"Not yet," Jacob said, "but we will talk to her soon. Tonight. After we are done with you."

I took a step closer and felt the bones in my knees pop and I winced. "We?"

I heard footsteps behind me and turned to see my father step from a doorway. I turned and looked at him. He stood with an axe clenched in his fists and staring past me to Jacob, his eyes awash with both grief and confusion.

"I don't see it," he said to Jacob, "I don't see what you are talking about."

"You will," Jacob said, "Tommy's not like us. Not anymore."

I stood pinned in the narrow hallway where memories hung like shingles from the paneled walls and said to my father, "I was right. He did get to you."

"Yes, we spoke," my father said, "Your mother doesn't know anything yet and we're going to keep it that way. We only want to help you, son."

"That's right, Tommy," Jacob said as he took a step forward, "Let us help you." I laughed and the sound was deeper than normal. I pointed the knife at my

bother and began taking slow steps toward him. My legs began to feel strange as they moved and my steps became unsteady, but I ignored it. "You want to help me, do you? How exactly do you plan to do that? And what were you planning on telling my mother after I was gone, huh? Let me speak to her."

"No."

"You don't tell me no!" I screamed. Something popped and began to rise in my spine, followed quickly by a grinding noise across the whole of my back, and I grunted with pain, and then my head erupted with a white hot flash of pain that stretched from my temples to my jaw. I bit down on my lip until blood began to seep out and kept walking. "Take me to her!" My voice felt much deeper than usual, like thunder rolled from my lungs.

Behind my bother lay the door to my parent's bedroom and someone began knocking there. It was my mother. She called out, asking what was happening, asking why the door was locked, saying she wanted the door opened immediately. Neither my father nor my brother responded to her, and slowly her cries increased in intensity until the pounding was regular and the screaming deteriorated into wild sobbing.

My skin began to itch. I reached up with my free hand to scratch my face and felt the stubbles of hair both there and on my hand, hair that was short and black and rough like the bristles of a scouring brush. My legs continued to pop, audibly now, and I felt a stretching sensation in my jaws, as if the bones there were constructed of rubber. The pain in my body was legend. I smiled and said, "Open the door, Jacob."

"No."

"I want her. She belongs with me."

"No. She's not one of you, Tommy, and I won't let her be."

I screamed—the sound like an ethereal siren call—and then I opened my mouth wide. And then I kept opening it. And I opened it more still. I opened it until my eyes were no longer facing forward but forced upwards to the ceiling. I felt my teeth popping through my mouth skin and extending like spines along my jaw, and I howled again and leaned to devour what was once my brother. I heard him yell out in fear and I heard his scrambled steps as he tried to move away from my gaping mouth. I heard my mother's frantic screams and her fists pounding the bedroom door. I heard both her and my brother call my name.

What I did not hear was my father. He was silent as the grave as he stepped up behind me with his huge blade in hand and swung for my neck; I never heard his steps and I never heard his axe, and I have never heard another thing since.

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