

1-1-2007

## Lake Affect: A novel excerpt and other stories

Perry Sundberg

*University of Nevada, Las Vegas*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/rtds>

---

### Repository Citation

Sundberg, Perry, "Lake Affect: A novel excerpt and other stories" (2007). *UNLV Retrospective Theses & Dissertations*. 2088.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.25669/cui7-tytu>

This Thesis is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by Digital Scholarship@UNLV with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this Thesis in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself.

This Thesis has been accepted for inclusion in UNLV Retrospective Theses & Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Digital Scholarship@UNLV. For more information, please contact [digitalscholarship@unlv.edu](mailto:digitalscholarship@unlv.edu).

LAKE AFFECT: A NOVEL EXCERPT  
AND OTHER STORIES

By

Perry Sundberg

Bachelor of Arts  
Kent State University  
1999

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the

Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing  
Department of English  
College of Liberal Arts

Graduate College  
University of Nevada, Las Vegas  
May 2007

UMI Number: 1443499

### INFORMATION TO USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleed-through, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

**UMI<sup>®</sup>**

---

UMI Microform 1443499

Copyright 2007 by ProQuest Information and Learning Company.

All rights reserved. This microform edition is protected against unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code.

ProQuest Information and Learning Company  
300 North Zeeb Road  
P.O. Box 1346  
Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346



**Thesis Approval**  
The Graduate College  
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

April 5, 2007

The Thesis prepared by


Perry Sundberg

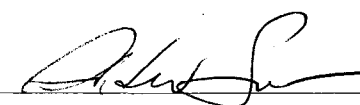
Entitled

Lake Affect : A Novel Excerpt and Other Stories

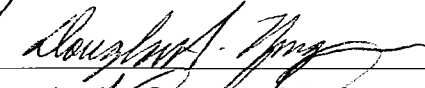
is approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

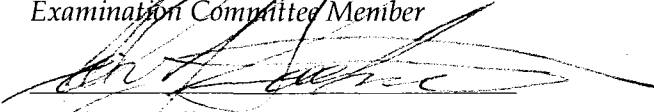
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

  
Examination Committee Chair

  
Dean of the Graduate College

  
Examination Committee Member

  
Examination Committee Member

  
Graduate College Faculty Representative

ABSTRACT

**Lake Affect: A Novel Excerpt and Other Stories**

by

Perry Sundberg

Richard Wiley, Examination Committee Chair  
Professor of Creative Writing  
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

As part of the degree requirement for an MFA in Creative writing I am submitting an unpublished, original collection of short stories and a novel excerpt as my thesis. These stories are meant to encapsulate the feelings of need and confusion, the desire for understanding and acceptance, and ultimately the finality and the sometimes futility of life. These stories are meant to infuse the reader with feelings of both joy and despair, but never with passive acceptance. The title story, Lake Affect, is best described as an excerpt from a novel in progress. This portion of the novel should stand alone and exemplify the desired emotion affect upon the reader of this collection.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	v
DOIN' THE TOWN.....	1
EULOGY.....	10
THE TROUBLE WITH POETS.....	22
FAITH AND CIRCUMSTANCES.....	39
FEARLESS DAN AND THE MONKEY MAN.....	50
SCAR REVISION.....	68
LAKE AFFECT: A NOVEL EXCERPT.....	94
FRIDAY NIGHT.....	95
SATURDAY NIGHT.....	132
1983.....	149
SUNDAY.....	155
VITA.....	167

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

You would not be reading this manuscript right now if it were not for my mentor and advisor in the Creative Writing program at UNLV, Richard Wiley. With his guidance this manuscript sees the light of day. Further, this writer would not have made it through the program if it were not for the kind words and guidance of Douglas Unger, who helped me continue on through the darkest of times. He knows what I'm referring to. Many thanks also to Dr. Kelly Mays and Dr. John Swetnam for their input and willingness to sit on my committee. I would also like to thank my mother, Marilyn, who is always there with a kind word and help. Perhaps the person most responsible for my drive and success is my wife, Andrea, who always knows when to support me, when to comfort me, and when to kick me in the ass. Thank you for being perpetually poised to do all three; I love you more than you can imagine.

This collection is lovingly dedicated to the memory of my father, Thomas Sundberg, who was a man entirely unlike Lake Affect's Hank. A better man I shall never know. Thanks for always believing I could do it, even now.



## Doin' the Town

The sun shone on Stanley's back as he ate his lunch. The day would be nice, but Stanley sat with his back to the window. He could see the distorted reflection of the world on the glass of a framed family photo. Looking down on the table, Stanley saw that his mail was piling up. He was tired of opening it. No letters from friends. They were all gone. No letters from his family; they were too busy. Only letters from the bank, and they weren't interesting anymore. Stanley finished his lunch and stood up slowly, balancing himself on the kitchen counter. He pulled his jacket on and headed outside.

Stanley carefully walked down the last few steps and onto the sidewalk. He always remembered to be careful, ever since Mrs. Lowenstein had fallen down the stairs last summer and hit her head on the sidewalk. She was in the hospital for almost six months before her son put her in a home. Stanley missed Mrs. Lowenstein. She had always been

nice to the other tenants. Now she just sits in her chair looking out the window. Stanley doesn't visit her. He can't drive anymore because of his eyes.

Out on the street, Stanley fished in the pocket of his best suit for one of his cigars. His wife, when she was alive, would never let him smoke in the house, and the habit stuck with him. He bit the end off and spat it into a garbage can, lit the cigar, and started off towards the subway.

Back in his day this had been some neighborhood. Right after their wedding, he and his wife moved into this building and lived there ever since. Cohen's Deli was gone now, as were most of the little businesses that had grown up with Stanley. His son and daughter both had wanted him to move in with them after Lucille died, but he didn't want to leave his apartment. Now they had a woman coming in once a week to clean for him. What mess did she have to clean, he wanted to know. All his friends were dead or in Florida, which was just as bad. That or in some home being wiped and told to eat their vegetables, like some damned kid. No, he'd stay right where he was, thank you very much.

Even before he got half done with his stogie, he was at the stairs leading to the subway. He put the cigar out on the cement wall and put the butt in his pocket. At \$2.50

apiece, he couldn't see tossing it in the garbage. Gripping the handrail he limped his way down the stairs. He was proud that at seventy-eight he could still get around town, even if it did take him a little longer than most. But he didn't have much to do, so what's the hurry?

"Hello, dear, I'd like a token if you please," smiled Stanley, sliding his money under the glass. The woman didn't even look up as she slid him his change and a token. Stanley picked up the token and moved toward the turnstile.

He walked towards the platform and found a bench to rest on until his train came. Off to one side, one of those street musicians was playing a trumpet. He was pretty good. He was playing real music. Jazz.

Stanley had only been sitting for a few minutes when a couple of young kids came and sat down near him. They were all dressed like they were wearing their big brothers' pants. Droopy and sloppy. When Stanley was young the boys dressed nice to meet the girls. Nowadays if you looked like a slob you could meet a girl. The kind of girls Stanley and his friends used to call "easy."

The kids saw Stanley looking at them and started to move closer to him.

"Heya, pops. What the fuck you lookin at? You an old fag or somethin'?"

Stanley didn't look at the kid. He just slowly stood up and walked off. The kids laughed and continued to taunt Stanley, but their insults fell on deaf ears. He had been called names for so long he didn't care anymore. A transit cop walked past the kids and gave them a menacing look, but that just made them laugh.

As the train pulled into the station, Stanley was glad that the kids did not get on it. He shuffled on to the first car he came to and looked around for a place to sit. There were none. He reached up and grabbed one of the loops and leaned his tired body against a pole. Making sure his wallet was safely in his jacket pocket, he hung on for the ride downtown. Stanley hated the subway. Noisy, crowded, full of young hoodlums. He should have taken a cab.

It wasn't all that long before Stanley was at his stop. He fought against the crowd of people pushing their way on the train and was almost pushed to the ground by a man in a gray business suit. He didn't give Stanley a second look as Stanley fought to steady himself. Thirty years ago Stanley would have popped him in the jaw. Today he just walked toward the stairs to the street.

It was nice to be downtown. When Lucille had been alive, she and Stanley used to come down here every other weekend, walk in the park, and have dinner at DaVinci's,

with a nice bottle of wine. Stanley would smoke too many cigars, and Lucille would have too many glasses of wine. Once on their anniversary Lucille had surprised him with a suite at the Plaza. They stayed there all weekend and went to two Broadway shows. They made love every night. In fact, on Saturday night, they made love twice. He truly loved Lucille. These memories were all he was going to have left if he wasn't careful. Yet he would trade them all if he could just wake up next to her one last time. Oh, to see her smile one more time when he kissed her awake.

Stanley walked into DaVinci's and up to the hostess. She greeted him without the smile that he and Lucille used to get from Victor, when he managed the place. She seated him at a small table near the bathroom. He really wanted a booth, but she told him they were for parties of two or more. Besides, all the booths were in the non-smoking section. Stanley pulled out a cigar, but a waiter told him no cigar smoking, only cigarettes. The waiter offered to get him a couple if he wanted, but Stanley politely refused, putting the cigar away.

Everything about this place had changed. When he and Lucille would come here to eat, they could get a bottle of the best wine for three dollars. Now you couldn't even get bread for three dollars. Stanley thought about getting up

to leave, but he really wanted to eat here. On his budget he could eat for a week for the price of one dinner, but it was worth it. Tonight was a special occasion. To eat their veal again would be a treat.

After about twenty minutes his dinner arrived, and Stanley was not pleased. Smaller than he remembered, and not at all like it used to be, the veal was more tomato-y, with a lot more garlic. Nowadays everything was made cheap and quick, even the good stuff. He felt a bit light headed as he paid his check, leaving a generous tip. He shuffled toward the door.

Out on the busy street he hailed a cab and told the driver to take him to the theatre, but to take his time. Stanley didn't get into town that often anymore, and he wanted a look around. Things had changed, and not for the better. Progress was rarely a good thing these days.

After a drive through town he was at the theatre with plenty of time to spare. He listened to a street performer playing the sax outside of the theatre showing *Sunset Boulevard*. The man was playing "My Way," but not very well. Stanley dropped a couple of ones in the man's sax case and nodded. The sax player shook his sax toward him in a thank-you, and it made Stanley smile. At least someone was polite to him tonight.

Stanley didn't like the show. It was all noisy and depressing. Norma Desmond looked like a clown to him. A pathetic old broad that didn't know when to quit. Nothing is quite as depressing as an old person trying to recapture her youth. Stanley walked out into the air before the show was over and lit a cigar. He stood still, smoking it, wishing the sax player was still there; he would have liked to hear Lazy River. It had been Lucille's favorite.

Hailing a cab and climbing into the back seat, Stanley gave the driver a five to let him keep smoking. It was like the old days. You could smoke where you wanted back then. No one would tell you to stop. They would probably join you in a smoke. It was well past dark, so Stanley avoided the subway and took the cab all the way home.

Back in his house Stanley poured himself some scotch and turned on the news. He got his pills from the medicine cabinet and took his daily dose. He turned and watched the television. Someone was murdered, something burnt down, and some old nun won the lottery, giving all the money to God. Same news as yesterday. God always gets the money.

Stanley went into the kitchen and put his glass in the sink. Opening the refrigerator, he pulled out the last piece of cake from his birthday party two days ago. Three of the other tenants brought a cake up to him and said

good-bye. They were all moving out. Stanley ate his cake and looked through his mail. When his cake was nearly finished, he poured himself another glass of scotch.

Sure enough, the first letter was from the bank. His loan had not gone through. His building was going condo, and he had to come up with \$260,000 or move out. He had not gotten the money. He had sixty days. He shook his head and reached for the pill bottles over the sink. He counted out his daily dose and downed them with the scotch.

He already knew the bank had denied him. Last week he had spoken to Mr. Huxley, vice-president in charge of bad news. He had called around about apartments, but he did not want to leave. He and his wife had lived their lives here together. She had died in the bedroom, peacefully in her sleep. He could not stand the thought of anyone else living here.

Stanley finished his last piece of birthday cake, poured another glass of scotch, grabbed his pills, and went to his bedroom. He called his son, but got the machine. His daughter wasn't home, either, according to his son-in-law, who was watching the game and couldn't be bothered. Stanley set the phone down and went into his closet, taking off his suit and hanging it neatly on the hanger. He put his dress shoes in the back of the closet and hung his tie on the tie



rack. He put his hat on the shelf and took his pajamas off the hook on the closet door. He took what remained of his pills, and finished his scotch.

Stanley closed the closet door and walked over to the CD player his son had bought him for his birthday. He put on *The Ultimate Bobby Darin* CD he bought at the store the next day. He lay on his bed and closed his eyes as he listened to Bobby Darin sing "Mack The Knife." Bobby Darin had died when he was thirty-seven years old. What a waste, he thought, as he listened to him crooning "Beyond the Sea." He had been such a talent. When the song ended, Stanley rolled over and went to sleep.

## Eulogy

Uncle Johnny spent the last three years of his life trying to teach his cat, Joseph, how to say "hello." He would sit at the kitchen table with a snack Joseph liked. Maybe tuna, maybe a piece of chicken, something the cat really wanted. Uncle Johnny would hold the morsel up in the air and, staring at the cat, say "Hello. Heeelllllooooo." This would go on for an hour or more before Uncle Johnny would give up in disgust. The cat's incessant meowing would be silenced with the snack Uncle Johnny had thrown to the ground.

I really shouldn't have begun by telling you that story. It may make you question the sanity of my Uncle Johnny. He had been a railroad conductor for forty years before falling from a train one night outside of Topeka. He lost his leg and retired to a small town in Michigan called Fisherman's Cove. He had always wanted to be a fisherman, so he just up and moved there. We would visit him at his house right on Lake Michigan, and we would walk down to the

pier where he sat with his line in the water, drinking a beer, and smoking his pipe. Standing next to him on the pier would be his leg. Uncle Johnny called it Roy, after the engineer who saved his life the night of the fall. Uncle Johnny never wore his leg when he was at home unless he had to, and even then, he only put it on for company.

Uncle Johnny would always receive them on the pier. He would sit there, next to Roy, puffing away, with one eye on his fishing pole. Joseph would lie in the sun, warming his belly. Uncle Johnny would reach into his cooler and pull out another Miller, toss it to you, and talk about whatever was on his mind. He would stop to show you Joseph's newest trick, and try to get Joseph to walk on his hind legs, roll over, or say hello. Joseph would just lay there looking at you with one eye. Uncle Johnny would swear the cat had done it right before you got there.

Last summer, things were a little different. I usually spend the first week in August with him, drinking Miller and pretending to fish. I pulled my car into his driveway and got out with my duffle-bag. I walked down to the pier, tossing my bag up on his back porch, startling Joseph. Uncle Johnny half turned, waved, then turned back to his bobber. As I stepped onto the pier, he reached down next to him into his cooler, picked-up a beer, and tossed it over

his shoulder. I grabbed it, opened it, and sat down on the pier next to him, taking a big drink.

"Hey Uncle Johnny."

"Hey shithead."

I smiled and drank some beer, watching him watch the bobber. He tugged on the line a few times, trying to tempt the fish. Then he looked at me.

"You like coming up here, or do you like seeing me?"

"Do I have to choose one?" I took another drink of beer.

"Yes."

I paused, and took another drink of beer, looking out over the lake. Uncle Johnny let the end of his pole drop, and he looked at me.

"Is it that hard to answer?"

"When you get like this, Johnny, I would have to say I like coming here better than seeing you."

Uncle Johnny just smiled, and said "Good answer, shithead." Then we laughed and fished until midnight.

That had been Uncle Johnny's last summer. He died right after Christmas. He would have said, "I could have saved a bunch of money dying before I bought all them damned presents." I was upset when Uncle Johnny died, but

he was almost eighty-five, and he lived a long good life. What really upset me was the funeral. Uncle Johnny would have been really pissed.

The funeral was held in Crandal's Funeral Home, on Center St., downtown Fisherman's Cove. This was the first sore spot I noticed when I arrived at the funeral. Most of the family lived outside of Pittsburgh, and most of them seemed to resent the fact that Uncle Johnny had the audacity to die during Christmas vacation. Aunt Milicent, the rich one, was the only one who flew in. The rest had to drive, which took a day and a half. This put them all in sour moods.

My arrival met mixed reviews. It was no secret that I had been Uncle Johnny's favorite nephew. Uncle Johnny used to revel in saying in front of the family, and in front of me, that "Davey's the only one of you all worth a damn." I was the only one who ever drove his car besides him. It was a 1963 Chevy Impala, and the most beautiful car I ever saw. He had a name for it, but never told anyone what it was.

I walked into the funeral parlor. The first to approach me was Sal, my cousin. Sal was a lawyer in Fort Wayne. He told everyone he dealt with big business, but we all knew he was an ambulance chaser. We let him tell his big success stories to us, then laugh behind his back. He

weighed almost three hundred pounds and always looked like he was sucking on a lemon.

"Hey, Dave, too bad about Uncle Johnny, eh?" Sal said without a hint of sadness.

"Yeah. I can see you're all broke up about it. How's the ambulance-chasing business, Sal?" I said. But before he could answer I said, "Excuse me," and walked off. Sal stalked off toward the kitchen to look for another cookie as I made my way toward the viewing room.

"David . . . Oh poor sweet David." It was Aunt Milicent.

"Hello, Aunt Milicent" I said. Milicent met my evasive movement with a counter move, and kissed me on the cheek.

"A sweet angel has been taken from us David. I hope your eulogy will express how much we will all miss him. Oh there's Salvatore. I'll see you in a bit. . . . Salvatore! Oh poor sweet Sal . . ."

"Eulogy?" I looked at my cousin Mike, who had been watching with amusement.

He laughed a bit and nodded. "Yep, it was Uncle Johnny's last wish. You better go see Pastor Grosnik." I usually liked Mike alright, but I wanted to slap him as he walked away chuckling.

Pastor Grosnik was on the other side of the funeral home when I finally found him. He seemed eager to talk to me, as he led me his office.

"David, I know this is a shock to you, and I tried to call you all week, but none of your relatives had your phone number. After meeting them I'm not surprised. Anyway, your Uncle wanted you to have this." He handed me a yellowed envelope and moved towards the door, away from me. He turned back as he reached the door. "I'll leave you alone with your thoughts, but first I would just like to say this. I knew your Uncle very well. We spent quite a few hours fishing together, arguing about religion. I know how he felt about his family. He loved you very much, David, but the rest . . . well . . . let me just say that I think I know what's in that letter. And I think your family knows how Johnny felt about them. What purpose would it serve to remind them?" With that he smiled and left me with the letter.

I stared at it for a good ten minutes before I got the courage to open it. Inside was a letter, written two years ago. I began to read.

David, How are you? I am dead. But don't be sad.

No, I changed my mind. Be sad. Anyway, as you know by

now I want you to deliver the eulogy at my funeral.  
I've spent too many hours arguing with Grosnik about  
God to trust him to do what I want.

Anyway, I want you to know that I know the family  
thinks I'm crazy. I should say "Was crazy." I think  
Joseph is the only one who didn't. And that's OK. I  
really don't care. And neither did you. You would  
always visit me and talk to me and just let me drink  
my beer, smoke my pipe, fish and try to get Joseph to  
do his tricks. That's why I always liked you, and  
hated the rest. You accepted me as your uncle Johnny.  
No strings attached. You are a special kid to me,  
shithead. Try not to change.

About the eulogy. Let 'em have it for me.  
Especially if that bitch Milicent outlived me. I hope  
she's in the ground already, but if not, tell her I  
think she's a phony bitch who should have stayed in  
Pittsburgh. As far as the rest of them go, they aren't  
welcome. Just Grosnik, you, and my fishing buddies.  
Ask the rest to leave.

I know I can count on ya,  
*dead Uncle Johnny*



I had no idea what to do. Walking into the viewing room, I looked at my Uncle Johnny in his casket and felt my eyes welling up. I saw him wearing his favorite fishing cap, vest and red flannel shirt. In his pocket was his pipe, and next to him in the casket was his fishing pole. Then I saw a small little coffin at the foot of his. I looked in it and saw Roy, his prosthetic leg. I laughed, then started to cry, and soon I felt a hand on my shoulder. It was Scully.

"God I'm glad to see ya here, Davey. All these people are givin, me the creeps," Scully whispered. Scully was almost as old as Uncle Johnny. He was only about 5'5" and maybe 130 pounds, but he had the look of someone who at seventy-eight could still kick your ass. He was dressed up for the occasion. He was wearing shoes.

Scully lived next door to Uncle Johnny for the last seventeen years. They fished together every day, rain or shine. Scully had been an iron-mill worker in Detroit for about forty years, and his face had the wrinkled brown quality of a pair of trusted leather shoes. It was good to see him. We took a long walk to the couch that was five feet away and sat down. Sitting next to the No Smoking sign, Scully lit up a cigar, and used a candy dish for his ashtray. The kids didn't seem to mind.

"Ya know, yer uncle always talked about you. No matter what that there letter said, he loved you a lot."

"I know Scully. I loved him too. I just don't know about this whole eulogy thing."

"Oh don't worry about it, kid. Yer uncle said he could trust you. He never cared much for the other family that would come to visit. They would always roll their eyes when he talked, or not even pay attention. Johnny used to call their visits 'Last Will and Testament Maintenance.' Not yers, though. He always bought extra beer when you came over. Whatever you do up there, yer Uncle Johnny will be proud of ya. As Johnny used to say, screw the bastards." As Scully finished his stogie, Pastor Grosnik walked up toward the front of the room, and the Frank Sinatra that had been playing in the background, Uncle Johnny's favorite, stopped. All eyes turned to the pastor as he began speaking.

Pastor Grosnik spoke, recounting how the many hours discussing religion on Johnny's pier had helped him in his own spiritual life. Uncle Johnny was right, he couldn't have trusted him with the eulogy. I knew what Uncle Johnny wanted me to say, but as Pastor Grosnik announced I would be delivering the eulogy, I couldn't do it. I walked up to the portable pulpit, and just as I started to speak I heard

my cousin Sal whisper to Aunt Milicent, "I thought his cat would deliver the eulogy." Several people began to giggle as I stood there looking out at their blank faces. Then my eyes met Scully's, and he nodded a little smile to me. I made up my mind, and started my eulogy.

"We're here today to say goodbye to a great man, Uncle Johnny. I know he was a great man because I spent many summers on that pier, drinking beers, and talking about family. I remember the stories. I think it would be a wonderful thing if I shared some of them with you today, so we can all remember the real Uncle Johnny. As he was.

"Aunt Milicent. I'm honestly surprised you're here today, but I have to say I'm glad you are. Uncle Johnny wouldn't be. He hated you. But we all knew that, but never knew why. Well, remember that summer you and your then husband, Bob, went up to visit Uncle Johnny? He says you approached him about, how did he say it, joining you and Bob for the evening? Seems Bob needed some help in that department, but Uncle Johnny told me he'd never be that drunk to spend time with you.

"Maybe my favorite story is about you, Sal. Uncle Johnny used to tell me about the time you came up to visit him. You were being sued, remember? Most of the family knows about the paternity suit, but only Uncle Johnny heard

the whole story. He told me about it. You needed some money to make it go away, or the girl would file a police report. How old was she? Fourteen? He leant you the money, right? Never paid him back though. How's that kid, anyway? Oh. I mean the one born, not the one you molested."

Scully said I targeted each and everyone of them with the precision of a sniper. By the time I was done, the only people left were Pastor Grosnik, Scully, three of Uncle's fishing buddies, and me. After it was done I felt surprisingly good. Pastor Grosnik, looking rather pale, said a simple prayer, and then we carried the coffins out to the hearse. Little over an hour later Uncle Johnny was in the ground, and I was in the Catfish, Uncle's favorite bar. Scully and I drank and talked until closing, walked back to Uncle Johnny's house and said goodnight. I pulled out the keys Pastor Grosnik had given me and walked into the house through the garage.

I sat down at the kitchen table and looked around. I stood up and walked over to the refrigerator. Inside, next to the bait he always kept was some left-over Kentucky Fried Chicken and a six pack. I pulled out the beer and, after smelling the chicken, decided it was good to eat and

sat back down in the dark at the kitchen table, looking at the moon over the frozen landscape of Lake Michigan.

So I had alienated the entire family. They would probably get over it in a few years. Except Aunt Millicent-- Scully said I went pretty hard on her. But Uncle Johnny was right. Screw the bastards. He had lived his life the way he wanted, and all they could do at its end is judge him. He was a good man and would have helped and accepted anyone who accepted him. I was still eating the chicken, staring at the moon, when I felt Joseph rub my leg and let out a little meow. I reached down and petted his back as he purred and rubbed my leg. I gave him a piece of chicken and listen to him purring happily in the darkness, then meow for another piece. As I tore it off I looked at Joseph's face, illuminated in the moonlight. Holding the chicken above his head I leaned in and whispered at first, then said out loud enough to wake the neighbors.

"Say Hello, Joseph. Hhheeeeelllllllloooooooooo!"

## The Trouble With Poets

Howard looked at his face in the mirror and tried to imagine it smiling, wrinkles somehow conforming into a pleasant expression. Taking the toothbrush out of his mouth, he smiled. Then he relaxed his face and smiled again. It looked as fake as it felt. He could see the graying hairs in his nose as he smiled. What the Hell did Dale know anyway. He finished brushing his teeth and walked back into the bedroom.

His wife, Darlene, was still asleep so Howard dressed quietly and in the closet. He picked out his gray suit and a tie, slipped on his wingtips, and left the bedroom. Car keys were taken from the porcelain seashell on the hall table, his wallet and comb from the drawer. He put them in their designated pocket, turned off the porch light, and walked out into the cool morning air.

The drive to work was pleasant enough, but with each mile, he could feel the queasiness in his stomach growing.

He tried not to think of the day ahead as he pulled into the parking lot, glancing at his dash clock. 7:42. He was early. He could also see Dale's car. He could see the back of Dale's blonde head, sitting in his car with the window open, smoking a cigarette. As Howard turned off his car, he could hear the music from Dale's radio blasting into the quiet morning. It was some old Blues, or Jazz, or whatever it was he listened to. Dale waved from his car, and yelled "Tom Waits, "Mr. Siegal"" nodding toward his dashboard, as if he thought Howard wanted to know. Howard nodded to Dale as he walked toward the building, the knot in his stomach tightening.

Until last month, Howard had liked coming to work, but then Ed Thompson retired. Ed was Howard's age, and they had shared an office for nineteen years. They had become friends quickly and worked well together. Ed was older than Howard, with a daughter and son. It had been a comfortable, familiar environment. No unpleasant surprises. Howard sponsored Ed in the Moose lodge. Ed invited Howard to join his bowling team. Their wives got along. Now he had to deal with Dale, Ed's replacement. Howard did not like change. Howard did not like Dale.

Dale smiled and dropped his briefcase on the floor beside his gray metal desk at 8:07. He was scratching his

goatee. His tie had a small stain on it. Howard looked up from his paperwork and frowned.

"Hey, Howard, where's that time clock at again?" Dale asked.

"You know we don't have one."

"Want some coffee, Howie?"

Howard slowly and deliberately pointed at the mug sitting on his desk in front of his paperwork and said nothing. Dale whistled his way down the hall to the coffee pot. Ten minutes later he was still not back, and Howard could hear laughter from the break room. Dale's voice penetrated the walls, creeping into Howard's ears as he watched the clock. He felt justified keeping tabs on Dale—he was training him. At 8:33 Dale came back in with a cup of coffee in his hand, a doughnut in his mouth, and another on a napkin. He set it down next to Howard's coffee.

"Marie brought doughnuts."

Howard gave Dale a half-smile and went back to his paperwork. Dale sat down and opened his briefcase. He pulled out a small notebook and a pen. He laid them on one corner of the desk, then pulled out another pen and some folders. Howard had been wondering about that notebook. Every once in a while, Dale would stop working and write something down in it. After two days Howard couldn't stand



it anymore. When Dale was on one of his many breaks, he peeked into it. There were all kinds of writing and doodles in it. Howard noticed some poems. He replaced the notebook and sat down just as Dale came back into the room.

Howard and Dale's desks faced each other in their windowless office. Next to the door were three mismatched metal filing cabinets filled with forms and customer billing information. On one wall hung a calendar, on the wall opposite was a picture of the building they worked in. A fluorescent light above Dale's desk buzzed and flickered, and Dale occasionally shot rubberbands at it, calling it a form of mind control he was rejecting. Howard ignored him each time. On Howard's desk, next to his clock, was a picture of his wife and picture of his daughter and son-in-law. He had a desk organizer that held all his supplies. Howard kept his desk very neat and orderly. He could barely stand to look at Dale's.

He had only worked there for three weeks, and his desk was already a mess. He had a picture of his girlfriend, Jenny, whom he lived with, holding their cat, Diablo. He also had a picture of some guy named William Burroughs. When Howard had asked who it was, Dale had seemed offended, so Howard pretended to know of him after Dale told him his

name. Howard later found out it was a writer, and he's pretty sure he was the guy who wrote *Tarzan*.

Dale slid two folders over to Howard's desk. Howard had to check all of Dale's work until he completed his probationary period. They processed orders and billing for eight hours. It was not too mentally tasking, but Howard felt that it must be done with precision, with care. "Few people truly understand the importance of billing, even management," he would often say to his wife over dinner. So far, Dale had done his work correctly, though not with care. His numbers slopped off their lines and out of their boxes, and his nines looked like fours. For someone who was college educated, he couldn't write neatly to save his life. Howard had mentioned his penmanship to Dale, but Dale answered, "Hey, that's what word processors are for."

Howard began to go over Dale's numbers, and he saw Dale pick up the phone. He dialed a number and looked at Howard and grinned. Howard quickly looked back down to the paperwork and casually glanced at his watch. Dale began speaking into the phone.

"Hiya babe, you awake? What? Don't you have that job interview? I hate that fucking bar you work at. You didn't get your degree to wait tables. I know."

It went on like that for almost eleven minutes before Dale hung up and looked at Howard. "How do they look, chief?"

Howard nodded and handed back the paperwork. Dale put it into the basket on top of the filing cabinets. On his way back over to his chair, he tilted the picture of their building so that it was crooked. Howard breathed heavily and said, "We have something new today. Let me show you what we do with these."

Howard picked up two huge stacks of forms, placing one on Dale's desk and one on his own. "If it is a red form, it goes into a yellow envelope, the envelope is sealed, and we stamp it with the Detroit office address stamp. If it is a white form, it goes in the red envelope, remains unsealed, and we put it in this basket. I'll show you what we do with those later."

Dale stared at Howard for what seemed like a full minute. "Those envelopes aren't red, Howard," he finally said.

"Well, I know, but the stripe at the bottom is, see?" Howard pointed at the stripe.

"Why don't we put the red form in the red envelope, so they match?" Dale said, and started to grin.

"Because they go in the yellow envelopes."

"We could put just one in the red envelope, you know, to be different."

Howard just stared at Dale, and Dale began to work, stuffing and stamping, that grin on his face. Howard watched him out of the corner of his eye, making sure the right envelope was used for the right form. Seven more years until he could retire. Howard didn't think he would make it.

At the end of the day, the powdered donut was sitting on the napkin on his desk, untouched.

\* \* \*

"I just don't like this Dale," Howard said to his wife, Darlene, between bites of chicken and carrots.

"Why?" Darlene said as she cleared her and walked into the kitchen. Darlene and Howard had been married for twenty-eight years. She had worked at a bank when they met, but Howard had convinced her to quit after they were married. She was not a vain woman and had let her hair go completely gray. Howard once told Ed that Darlene reminded him of a potato on stilts.

"He is just so flippant. Doesn't grasp the importance of it all."

Darlene scraped her plate off over the garbage disposal and said, "Well he hasn't been there twenty-three years, dear. Give him a chance."

"He likes to try and get a rise out of me. He says stuff that makes no sense. And he's always writing in his little notebook, like a god-damned spy."

"What is he writing?" Darlene asked, clearing Howard's plate.

"Poetry. Can you believe that?" Howard said and started chuckling.

"I don't see anything wrong with it."

"I do, especially in the business world. He should move to New York or San Francisco, with the rest of the failed writers," Howard said. He pushed away from the table, walked into the living room, and switched on the television. "Hurry up Darlene; *The Wheel's* starting."

That night Howard undressed for bed and thought about Dale. Thought about how he didn't want to learn the work, learn to do it right. He wondered what Dale and his girlfriend talked about over dinner, if he read his poems to her and drank wine or whiskey. Dale should go to New York; he should go anywhere. He obviously had no respect for his co-workers, no respect for Howard. The little bastard should just go be a bohemian on someone else's

time. Howard looked at his wife laying in bed, reading, and got into bed next to her. She took off her glasses, put the book on her nightstand, and switched off the light. He turned off his light as well and closed his eyes. He felt his wife move closer to him and felt her hand on his thigh.

"My God," he thought, touching her breast through her cotton nightgown. "Is it Thursday already?"

\* \* \*

Friday was the same as Thursday. Dale arrived late, drank coffee until 8:30, and spent half the day on the phone. At noon, Howard pulled his sack lunch out of his briefcase and unwrapped his tuna fish sandwich.

"Hey, Howard, why not let me buy you lunch today?" Dale asked.

"I brought my lunch."

"You bring it every day. The same thing. Tuna fish and egg, an apple, and peanut butter crackers. Come on, let's go get a big greasy cheeseburger, some fries and a milkshake. How 'bout it?"

"What do you have against tuna fish, Dale? Afraid I might be eating a dolphin?"

Howard stared up at Dale, until Dale just said, "See you later," and walked out of the office. Howard ate his lunch and read the paper. Howard and Ed used to share the paper. One day Howard would bring it, the next day, Ed. Dale didn't read the paper. The few times Dale did eat lunch at his desk, he read books, or wrote. Never wanted the paper. Howard took a bite of his sandwich just as the phone began to ring. He swallowed quickly, and it hurt. He picked up the phone, annoyed.

"Howard."

"Oh, hello Howard, did I miss Dale?" Howard recognized Jenny's voice.

"Yes. He should be back at one," Howard said, emphasizing the "should."

"Shit," she said, very much the lady. "I have to leave. Can you tell him it came today? He'll know what I mean. Thanks, Howard."

She didn't wait for the answer before hanging up.

\* \* \*

Dale got back from lunch only ten minutes late. Howard had written Jenny's message on a post-it note and stuck it to the center of Dale's computer screen. Dale read it and got

a huge smile on his face. Howard wanted to know what "it" was, but didn't want Dale to know he was interested, so he said nothing and continued typing numbers into the computer. Dale didn't offer. Howard didn't ask.

At 3:00, Howard left the room for a staff meeting. He knew Dale wouldn't work while he was gone, but it was unavoidable. He entered the conference room and sat in his usual chair. The meeting started late, as usual, which annoyed Howard. There was a lot of work that could be done before he went home. These weekly meetings were a waste of time. Every division gave the same report every week. This time, however, Mr. Davidson asked Howard how Dale was coming along. Howard sat silently, gathering his thoughts.

"I don't really know yet, Mr. Davidson. He can do the work, when he wants to."

"When he wants to? Is he ignoring his duties?"

"No, nothing like that. He just isn't that...well...motivated."

They discussed Dale's work, and everyone but Howard seemed to feel his output was fine. Howard began to feel that familiar knot in his stomach, his face getting hot. Finally, he blurted, "He writes poetry, you know." He immediately wished he could snatch the words back out of the air and make them go away.



They seemed to think this was interesting. One of them mentioned some children's doctor that wrote poems about wheelbarrows and chickens. Howard sat there in disbelief as everyone talked about poetry and books and plays they had seen. After the meeting, Howard went back into the office and sat and stared at his computer screen. Dale put his notebook away as Howard came in the room. A few moments later Mr. Davidson knocked on the doorframe as he leaned his head in.

"Don't forget about Ed's retirement party tomorrow night. Hey, Dale, you really should come. Howard will give you directions. I think Ed would like to meet the new Ed." Mr. Davidson laughed as he walked off down the hall.

Dale smiled while Howard wrote out the directions to the Moose Lodge he and Ed had joined in 1983. Dale took the directions from Howard and asked, "You sure you don't mind me crashing your party, chief?"

"Care? Why should I care," Howard said into his computer screen.

\* \* \*

Howard was at the Moose early, setting up tables and decorating the room. Darlene was helping as much as Howard

would let her. The guests started arriving at seven, and Ed walked in at eight. Everyone yelled, "Surprise," and Ed pretended to be just that. The wives congregated around the tables; the men stood at the bar, clutching their beers and celebratory cigars, toasting Ed into his life of fishing and golf. Howard had been relieved when Dale didn't show up by seven-thirty for the surprise, but, sure enough-late as usual-he and Jenny walked in. Dale was wearing jeans and a T-shirt, tennis shoes and an olive drab shirt hanging open. Howard thought he looked like a communist. It was the first time Howard had ever seen Jenny. She was wearing a short skirt and a puffy white shirt. Her long hair flowed free over her shoulders, and she wore sandals. Howard couldn't help but think that they looked cheap. He turned his back toward the door and picked up his beer again.

Mr. Davidson introduced Dale to Ed as, "A younger version of you," and everyone laughed, everyone except Howard. Dale was nothing like Ed. Howard and Ed had been best friends since Howard started working with him. Ed had trained him when he transferred into billing. Dale asked Ed how he liked working with Howard, but Howard interrupted, announcing it was time to eat, so everyone took their seats. Dale's was no where near Howard's.

After dinner, Mr. Davidson stood up and gave an eloquent speech, ending with a toast to Ed's thirty-three years of dedicated service. The men returned to the bar—the women loitered at the tables, talking. Dale was standing with his wife, talking, with his arm around her. Mr. Davidson pointed him out to the rest of the men at the bar when Dale put his hand on Jenny's ass, making her short skirt shorter, kissing her.

"Hey-Hey-Hey, Dale! Save some of that for home!" Mr. Davidson yelled, and began to laugh. Jenny put one hand on her hip and smiled, cocking her head to one side, then kissed Dale back. Everyone laughed while Howard took another drink of beer, and Dale joined the men at the bar.

"Just like a poet," Mr. Davidson said as he handed Dale a beer. Howard felt his face begin to get hot.

Dale looked at Howard for the first time without a grin. "How do you know about that, Mr. Davidson?"

"Howard told us at the staff meeting yesterday. I think it's great," Mr. Davidson said.

"You write poetry?" Ed asked.

"Yeah, didn't Howie tell you?" Dale asked, still looking at Howard.

"No, he didn't. I'd love to hear some," Ed said.

Howard looked at Ed. Ed wanted to hear a poem? It must be a put-on. Howard started to laugh, and then stopped when no one else joined him. He took a sip of beer.

"Actually I just got a magazine in the mail today that I was published in. I could let you read the poem if you want. I'm supposed to meet friends later to let them see it."

"Read it to us all, Dale," Mr. Davidson said.

Dale smiled and went over to where Jenny was trapped, talking about gardening. He asked her for the magazine, which she pulled out of her monstrous purse. He walked back over to the bar, and Mr. Davidson clanked his whiskey sour glass with a spoon. Everyone quieted down, and Dale prepared to read.

Dale read his poem to the silenced room. It was not very long, but it seemed to take forever for him to get through it all. There were some graphic words in it, words Howard would not even use in private with his wife. Drinking his beer quietly, he listened to Dale read his sex poem, knowing this would finally make them understand what he had been feeling all along. Dale just didn't fit in.

Dale finished reading, and everyone sat there for a moment. Howard scanned their faces for displeasure. But then they clapped, and people came up to him for the rest

of the night and asked to see the magazine. Howard drank another beer, but didn't feel like a cigar.

\* \* \*

On the way home Howard was silent. He drove, and his wife said how much she enjoyed herself, how nice Dale and Jenny were. How she enjoyed dancing. She had majored in dance in college, in another life. She had spent time talking with Jenny about college, dance, and art, and Jenny had ended up inviting them to come to dinner sometime, and Darlene accepted. Howard said nothing. His job may be in turmoil, but he would not let Dale affect his home. He would come up with excuses not to have dinner or socialize with Dale and Jenny, and that was that.

Howard went into his house and straight into the bedroom. This was his last sanctuary. Dale could not bother him here. He undressed in silence, got into bed, and turned off the light. Darlene got into bed a few minutes later. She rolled over to his side of the bed, and he felt her hand slide up his thigh and onto his crotch. It wasn't Thursday, and they had church in the morning. Darlene slipped her hand under the waistband of his pajamas and

leaned over and kissed him. She whispered softly into his ear, "I really liked Dale's poem, how 'bout you?"

## Faith and Circumstances

Jack Huffgaurd had always regarded his son, Billy, as a reliable and good young man. At twelve years of age, he did his chores without being told, was respectful to his parents, and went to Sunday school every week. He could recite the Apostle's Creed by heart, and he was always the loudest singer on Sunday. So when Billy found God one Saturday afternoon while doing his chores, it should not have been a surprise, but it was. Jack had never expected that God would be living in his basement.

The Huffgaurd's basement was old, wet and nasty, just like a hundred other basements around Painesville. Jack's family lived in a house that had been built around the turn of the century, so Jack figured God could not have lived there for too long. Besides, Painesville, Ohio, was not much of a community to live in. Jack figured God should probably have been living in the rich parts of Cleveland. Bratenahl, or at least Shaker Heights. But there he was,

right in the basement. Sitting on a big pile of dirty laundry, looking at an old National Geographic.

Billy had been cleaning the kitchen when he heard the music. From underneath the basement door he could see that someone had turned the lights on. When he opened the door, the music get louder. It was 1940s Cuban big band music- lots of congas, and men yelling "hah." Billy crept downstairs, and he started to get nervous. Until he saw Him. He just knew it was God.

He didn't look like God at all, but Billy knew it was. The way you would know yourself in a mirror. No doubts. But God looked a lot different than Billy had expected. He appeared to be really old and wrinkled, with a dirty, scraggly gray beard. He had tangled eyebrows and was losing his hair, which was very thin on top, and not clean at all. God was wearing a pair of faded khaki pants that where torn on the cuffs, a pair of brown leatherette sandals, and a faded New York Rangers T-shirt stretched very tight over his rather large stomach. He looked over at Billy from where he sat sprawled out on the laundry then turned back to his magazine.

Billy was left standing there, listening to Cuban Big Band music and watching God read. Billy thought that the music was coming from everywhere until he realized it was



coming from his boom box. Billy didn't know what he should do, so he quietly slipped back upstairs and into the kitchen.

Jack and Penny Huffgaurd arrived home three hours later and were greeted at the door by an excited and confused Billy. After trying to explain what was going on and who was in the basement, Billy gave up and just led them down. God was still listening to the Cuban Big Band music, but he had put the *National Geographic* aside. He was smoking a cigar and watching a hockey game on a portable black-and-white TV Jack had put in the basement when they bought their new family set and moved the old color one into their bedroom.

God did not even look up from the game, but sat muttering about the linesman's and the goalie's glove ability. He angrily puffed on his cigar and cursed loud when the period ended and the Rangers were two goals down. The Huffguards snuck quietly up the stairs, not exactly sure how to approach their not entirely welcome house guest. It's one thing to stop by and see someone, it's quite another simply to let yourself in and make yourself at home.

Saturday night at the Huffgaurds was always take-out night, and tonight was no exception. Penelope Huffgaurd had

stopped at Chen Pi's on the way to pick up Jack at the gym where he played basketball with the guys. Billy was mature enough to stay home for the several hours they were gone, and he used the time to do his chores. He had not gotten all of them done, but considering what he had found in the basement, his parents were not that upset.

The Huffguards had not really spoken to each other about what was going on. They all seemed to accept the fact that God was down there, and secretly hoped that he would simply go away just as mysteriously as he had arrived. As they began to pass around the little white containers from Chen Pi's, they heard footsteps on the basement stairs, and they all stopped and stared at the door.

Hearing the laborious ascent end with a thump on the basement door, they knew God was standing right on the other side.

"No one say anything," Jack hissed under his breath as the door swung open. They saw God standing there scratching his stomach, cigar still clamped in his mouth. He had taken his sandals off. He looked around the kitchen as if he had never seen it before, and walked toward the table. He was limping slightly, as if he had a sore left leg.

God looked at the cartons of Chinese food scattered about the table and made a face. Picking up and smelling

them before setting them back down with a thud, he finally settled on steamed dumplings and pea pods. God tramped back to the basement steps, then stopped. He walked over to the Huffgaurd's wine rack, grabbed a bottle of red, then descended the steps to the basement.

"God smells funny," Billy whispered.

"He's old dear, sometimes old . . . people smell funny," Penny said, trying to sound soothing.

"I was looking forward to the dumplings," Jack muttered as he dished out some pork fried rice and began to eat.

After dinner, Jack and Penny were watching television, and Billy was out in the yard. It was getting close to sunset, and Billy was on a mission. He was going to try to peak in the basement window and find out what God was up to. Lying down on his stomach, Billy pretended he was a secret agent as he slithered along the ground until he was right by the window. He leaned over just slightly and looked in. A steamed dumpling slapped into the window with a squishy thud, scaring Billy. He leapt up and ran off. God cranked up the Cuban Big Band music.

In the living room, Jack and Penny were getting annoyed. The music was getting very loud in the basement. "What are we going to do?" Jack muttered, looking over at

Penny. She had always been the more religious of the two. Raised in a strict religious household, she had married Jack after college. Jack had never been one for church, but he'd become more accepting of her faith after the birth of Billy. They had gone to church almost every Sunday since. But this was too much. Jack wanted God out of their house.

"There isn't anything we can do," Penny replied, turning up the volume on the TV. "He is God, after all." Jack turned back to the TV with a grunt, and they watched together to the beat of the Cuban conga drums.

"God threw a dumpling at me," shouted Billy as he ran in from the backyard. "I tried to see what he was doing in the basement, and as soon as I looked in the window, SPLAT!"

"Leave God alone. I don't think he wants to be bothered down there. And he'll know if you are spying on him; after all, he is the all-knowing-all-seeing-one-true-God," Jack said, feeling like he was delivering a Sunday morning sermon.

"Now go get ready for bed, sweetheart, we have church in the morning," Penny added.

Just then they heard the basement door open and close again, and bare feet walking on the kitchen floor. Then they heard the bathroom door open and close. Jack looked at

Penny and shook his head slowly, whispering, "This is weird." Billy looked at his parents and ran upstairs. As he changed into his pajamas, he heard God return to the basement and his father complain that God forgot to flush.

\* \* \*

Penny called into Billy's room that this was his last warning—he had better get out of bed and get ready for church. Billy looked over at his clock and saw that they were going to the early service. It was 7:33 am. Church was at 8:30. Billy yawned and stretched, wondering if God was going to go with them.

Jack took a shower, put on his church clothes and went downstairs. Penny and Billy were eating breakfast when Jack entered the kitchen. God was sitting with them at the kitchen table, staring out the window. On the table in front of him was a bowl of Captain Crunch with Crunchberries. God apparently wasn't going to church today. He was in his boxers.

Jack watched God chewing his cereal for a moment, then crossed to the counter and got out some bread. He put two pieces into the toaster, then stopped.

"Want some toast?"

God shook his head, never looking over at Jack. He finished the last of his cereal as Jack put grape jelly on his toast, and stood up, put his bowl in the sink, and went back downstairs.

"If God isn't going to church," Billy asked, "why should we?"

Penny looked at Jack, then back at Billy. "Because dear," she finally said, "we should go to church to worship God, and to pray." Jack looked at Penny and raised one eyebrow, then went out to start the car, thinking, how much reverence can you show for God after you've seen him in his boxer shorts?

From the car, Jack saw someone walking through the living room when they got back from church. It was God, sitting on the couch, drinking wine from a bottle and watching a bass-fishing show.

This continued for the next few days. And he never really talked to them. Just muttered a lot and watched sports on TV. He even ordered ESPN2 so he could watch Brazilian Football. God wandered about the house, drinking all of Jack's wine, eating their food, not flushing the toilet.

In bed Tuesday night, Jack rolled over and faced Penny, who was not asleep, either.

"This is really starting to get on my nerves. He's taken over the TV, eaten all our food, and today I saw him drinking the last of our Rosé."

"Don't talk so loud."

"I give a fuck if he hears me. I know he can hear me. He can hear every fucking thing I think, let alone say."

"Maybe he'll leave soon."

"I think it's time we ask him to leave."

Penny looked at Jack and nodded. Then rolled over to try and sleep.

Jack canceled his usual Saturday morning basketball game. He sat at the kitchen table before anyone else was awake and drank his coffee. He had always loved Saturday. It was his day. No work, no chores. Just Jack, the boys, and basketball. Since last Saturday, however, things had been different.

Jack refilled his coffee mug and looked at the basement door. Taking a deep breath he opened it, and, for the first time in a week, he went downstairs. He could see God lying on a folding cot next to the furnace. He was wearing his boxers and snoring loudly. Jack cleared his throat a couple of times, but God didn't wake up. Not sure what to do, Jack sat down on the ever-growing pile of dirty

clothes under the laundry chute. That's when it hit him. Jack began to pray.

He closed his eyes, folded his hands in front of his face, and prayed. He prayed that God would wake up, put on his clothes and get out. After about five minutes of praying, Jack opened one eye. God had rolled over on his side and was scratching himself in his sleep. Jack picked up his mug of coffee and went back upstairs.

Jack spent the rest of the day moping around the house while Penny was at work. Around six o'clock, Penny arrived home as the dinner Jack was preparing was just about done, and she helped Jack set the table. They opened two bottles of wine, one for God and one for themselves, letting them breathe for a few minutes as they dished out their dinner. They set God's plate at the head of the table and poured him a glass of wine. They called Billy to dinner and waited for God.

After about 15 minutes, they called out to him. "God, dinner's ready." He still did not come. Jack excused and went downstairs. After about two minutes the Cuban music stopped. Jack came up the stairs, barely able to suppress his smile.

"He's gone."



They ate their dinner in silence for the first time in a week. God didn't come back that night. He did not come back at all. Within a week their lives were back to normal, and when he didn't show up all day Saturday, they felt safe. They went to bed early and slept sound. Billy was the first up the next morning. He woke his parents, and they all ate breakfast. When they got to church, Billy sang the loudest of all.

## Fearless Dan and the Monkey Man

Somewhere, out there in the dark, the carnival was creeping into town. Every year around this time all the kids in my town would get worked up into a frenzy, waiting for Friday night. Just after the sun went down was the magical time to be at the carnival. The smell of corndogs, the eerie sound of screeching rusted metal, and the yellow and red lights of the swirling rides would, if only for a night, turn our small town into something other-worldly, something unique. We kids would all rush to the ticket booth, eyes wide, hearts pounding, eagerly waiting to buy our ride tickets. The Jumbotron, the Roto-twirl, the Rocketship. These rides would quicken the pulse, and, if we ate too much cotton candy, sicken our stomachs. But the heart of our journey to adventure was at the back of the carnival. We would work our way back, riding the rides and eating hot-dogs on a stick until we got to the scariest area of the carnival.

Tucked away, by the games of chance, stood the true test of bravery. The side shows.

Friday was the big night for the side shows. You could see the bearded lady for a nickel, or the dog boy for a dime, but that was kid's stuff. What we all wanted to see was Fearless Dan and the Monkey Man. For twenty-five cents, we got to meet Fearless Dan, an African explorer who had discovered a half-man, half-ape. Twice an hour the tent would get packed full of wild-eyed young boys (and a few brave girls), and Fearless Dan would come out, warning us, "Be careful, do not make any sudden movements. And PLEASE... no cameras, The Beast will become angry, and even more dangerous..."

The lights would dim, a curtain would be drawn back, very slowly, and we would see him. The Monkey Man. His hairy body held back by a big metal cage. That cage was the only thing between us and certain death. Then the beast would start growling, shaking the bars. A few of the braver boys would push forward, trying to get a better look. But someone would always pull out a camera and take a picture, the flash illuminating Fearless Dan and The Monkey Man in all their grotesque brilliance. This would send the Monkey Man into a rage, and he would break open the bars, sending the crowd screaming for the exits. But somehow, after we

were all safely in line for the tilt-a-whirl, the Monkey Man would be subdued, and made ready for another showing.

\* \* \*

With the carnival just days away, I couldn't sleep. I was up way past dark, staring at the ceiling, praying that some idiot wouldn't take a picture this year, so maybe, just maybe, I could get up close to the cage and get a good look. I was planning on trying to touch the Monkey Man's foot when it wasn't looking. My best friend, Roy Bean, thought I was crazy but had agreed to come with me to witness this historic event. I was thinking about the Monkey Man when I saw a light travel across my bedroom wall. Someone's headlights were shining in my window. I jumped up and saw two headlights coming down my driveway. When it pulled up in front of my house, I realized it was the Sheriff in his old Packard.

As quietly as I could, I opened my window, but my grandpa and Sheriff Riley both looked right up at me. Sheriff Riley lit a cigar and he and grandpa walked around to the back of the car, talking real quiet, and I couldn't hear nothin'. I saw someone sitting in the front seat of the car. It looked like a kid.

Sheriff Riley and my grandpa shook hands, and the Sheriff called to the boy sitting in the front seat to get out. He got out and picked a bag up off the floor of the Sheriff's car and walked over to my grandpa. It was John Simmons, the ugliest kid in school. I watched in horror as my grandpa put his hand on John's shoulder and led him up onto our porch. Sheriff Riley got into his car and drove off the way he had come, leaving John with us.

John Simmons was a year older than me, but almost a foot shorter. He also outweighed me by at least fifty pounds. The kids at school called him Mule. I heard grandpa and Mule talking downstairs, and then grandpa called to my grandma to come down. I snuck out of my room and listened at the top of the steps but couldn't really hear anything. Then my grandma started upstairs, and I had to hightail it back into my bedroom. After about fifteen minutes my grandparents were back in bed, and Mule was in the room across the hall from me. I didn't sleep at all.

\* \* \*

Come morning, I was up at daybreak to do my chores, and Mule was already up, sitting out in the barn. I walked past where he sat and went over and grabbed a milking bucket.

Mule didn't look up at me. He just sat on the ground, rubbing a stick in the dirt.

"Hey," I muttered to Mule as he sat in the dirt, "what's goin' on?" Mule didn't answer. He didn't even look at me. I looked around the barn, trying to think of something to say. "Ya wanna help me milk the cows?" Mule just sat there, staring into the dirt, rubbing that stick around. I shrugged my shoulders and started milking. He was just like he was in school. That's why the kids at school called him Mule. Even when people picked on him, he would just stare at them or walk away. Miss Scott told John one day that he was "as stubborn as a mule," and the name just kind of stuck.

"If ya want to, later you could come with me to Mrs. Leary's house and brush her horse." I looked up, but Mule was gone.

After the milking, I went inside for breakfast. My grandma had made blueberry pancakes. Blueberry pancakes! And it wasn't even Sunday. Grandma hadn't made blueberry pancakes for me since the day last fall I found out my mom had died. I looked up at Grandma, but she just asked me where Mule was, and I told her I hadn't seen him since the milking. She went out onto the porch and hollered for him,

as I dug into the pancakes. Grandpa came in and sat down and looked at me real strange.

"Do you know John from school?"

"Yeah, the kids call him Mule."

"Well, I don't want you calling him that. You be extra nice to him, ya hear?" Grandpa sounded almost mad. "He's stayin' with us till Sunday, then his Aunt will be here to pick him up and take him to St. Louis."

"Why? Where's his mom and dad?"

"Never you mind, just eat your breakfast and do your chores. And be nice to John or you won't be allowed to go to no carnival on Friday."

The carnival! With all the excitement I had almost forgotten. Tomorrow was the day. Fearless Dan and The Monkey Man. I would beat them tomorrow night, they wouldn't get me. I finished my chores in record time and ran off to clean Mrs. Leary's barn.

\* \* \*

I knocked on the side door, and her maid, Sarah, answered. "Well hello, Samuel! I didn't expect to see you today. I thought you cleaned on Friday."

"If Mrs. Leary don't mind, I want to do it today. Tomorrow's the carnival, and I wanted to go early and watch them set up the tents."

Sarah started laughing like I'd told the funniest joke she had ever heard. "Well I don't see why she would mind. And stop up at the house before ya leave, I think Mrs. Leary wants to talk to ya, and I'll have some lemonade waitin'." She shut the door and laughed as I walked to the barn. For someone who waited on a crabby old lady all day, she sure was happy.

The barn wasn't very dirty; it never was. Mrs. Leary only had one horse, and it roamed around in the pasture most of the time. Her grand-daughter came down from Chicago some weekends and rode it, and other than that, it just wandered around. It usually came down to see me when I came to clean. I liked to brush the horse, I called him Trigger, even though Mrs. Leary's granddaughter named him Prince Valiant. What a dumb girl. Naming a horse after someone who rides 'em. Trigger was a much better name. I almost called him Silver, but that seemed wrong somehow. Silver is a name that should belong only to the Lone Ranger. No one could yell "Hi Ho Silver" like the Lone Ranger. Besides, I think he liked being called Trigger. I know he liked it when I brushed him. Once I brought him a carrot, and he followed



me around the barn all day. Now when I bring him one I give it to him when I leave.

Anyway, when I finished in the barn, I ran up to the house. I figured Mrs. Leary wanted me to clean something else, or maybe paint her fence. She had been talking about that last month, but never fixed on getting it done. I saw Sarah motioning to me to come to the back of the house, and I saw Mrs. Leary outside, sitting on her patio. I had never seen Mrs. Leary outside of her house. Except once at church when I first moved here. I always talked to her through the screen door before. Now she motioned me over to sit down. I figured I must have done something wrong.

"Hello Samuel, how are your grand folks doing? Tell them I said hello, will you?" Now Mrs. Leary had never said more than "fix this, clean that" to me since I started working here, so I really didn't know how to act. I just said, "Yes Ma'am," and kinda stared at her. Sarah brought me a glass of lemonade and set it down on the table next to where I was sitting. On the tray with it were a ham sandwich and a cookie. Sarah nodded toward it with a smile and walked back into the house.

I picked up the sandwich, still staring at Mrs. Leary, and chewed slowly. She was talking about the summer, and school, and the neighbors. I was getting a little scared. I

ate faster and faster until the sandwich was gone, then chugged down the lemonade in one gulp. When Mrs. Leary wasn't looking, I slipped the cookie in my pocket and stood up. "I have to get home now, Mrs. Leary. Thanks for the sandwich and cookie. But my grandpa needs my help, er, in the barn."

Mrs. Leary started to say something then snapped her mouth shut. She smiled at me for the first time ever. Her face looked like cracked plaster. "Samuel, tell me about John Simmons," she finally said after smiling at me for a few minutes.

"Uh... well...He's staying with us till his aunt picks him up Sunday."

"It's just terrible. Terrible to think what that little boy went through. Having both his parents die like that...." Her voice trailed off, and she smiled at me again. I was shocked. His parents were dead? A thousand thoughts were flying through my head when I heard Mrs. Leary's voice. "Samuel. Samuel? Are you listening to me?"

"Sorry, Ma'am."

"I said, is he OK? I feel so sorry for him. Here, take this envelope and give it to your grandpa. There's a note inside for him. And here, this is for you. Buy him some

cotton candy or something at the carnival tomorrow, will you?" She handed me a five dollar bill!

"Yes, Ma'am!" I hollered and ran off down the driveway toward home, clutching the five in one hand and the envelope in the other.

\* \* \*

When I got home, I handed grandpa the envelope and told him what Mrs. Leary had told me about Mule's folks. Grandpa said something in German to Grandma, then took the envelope from me, tore it open at the end, and looked inside. Inside was a note my grandfather read. Also in the envelope was \$200. He told grandma it was for Mule, and his Aunt.

Then I remembered about the five. I showed it to grandpa and told him Mrs. Leary had ordered me to spend it all at the carnival, on me and John. Grandpa told me that he didn't think John was going to the carnival, and if he didn't, the five was going to St. Louis with John. I nodded to grandpa, and put the five in his outstretched hand. Then I went looking for Mule. He was sitting out in the barn again. I went and sat down next to him.

"Hey," I said and got nothing in return. "Want to go to the carnival with me? I have five dollars Mrs. Leary

gave me to spend there. We could spend it together." John shook his head. I was in trouble now. "I'm tellin' ya, it will be a lot of fun, Fearless Dan is gonna be there. I'm going to touch the Monkey Man." Mule looked at me for the first time.

"No, you won't," he said very quietly.

"Oh, yeah? I am, too, gonna touch him, and Roy Bean is gonna watch me do it."

"You'll chicken out."

"Maybe you would. But I won't... wanna bet on it?"

With that, I spit in my hand and held it out. Mule spit in his, and we shook hands. The bet was on.

\* \* \*

I finished my chores early Friday, and Mule and I walked down to the fairgrounds and watched them putting up the tents. I saw Roy standing with a group of kids from school, and they all stared at us when we came walking up. Mule walked over to the fence and sat down on it, about ten feet away from the other kids. I walked over to Roy.

"Hey... Don't forget to meet me here tonight, Roy. I'm gonna touch the Monkey Man for sure. Me and Mule have a bet on it. Spit hands and everything."

"What are you doin' hangin' out with him anyway, Sam? He's weird," Josh Adams teased.

"Didn't you hear?" said Roy, "His folks were in a car wreck on the way home from Chicago on Tuesday. They're both dead...."

"No way, Roy, yer lyin'," said Josh.

"No I'm not! My dad is helping set up the tents, and he was talkin' to Sheriff Riley about it. His aunt is gonna pick him up to go live in St. Louis on Sunday, and until then he is stayin' at Sam's." Everyone got quiet and just kinda stared at Mule. It felt like he should have his own tent, and we should be paying 25 cents to see him sitting there on that fence. I walked over and told him I was goin' home for dinner. He followed quietly. I walked faster than him, and halfway home, I heard him crying, but I didn't turn around, or let him know I heard him. He was done by the time we got to my grandparent's. We ate dinner early that night, and we all headed off to the carnival. We paid our money and walked into the fairgrounds. The sun was starting to go down, and half the rides had their lights on. The scratchy calliope music was blaring from the Merry-go-round as we saw the line of little kids waiting to get on, their parents waving to them like they were never gonna see 'em again. I asked Mule if he wanted to ride something,

and he shook his head. He said he wanted to see the Monkey Man. I asked grandpa what time it was, and he told me it was only six o'clock. Roy wouldn't be here 'till seven. We agreed to go see the other side shows, and wait for our witness.

After an hour of bearded fat ladies and a guy who bit the head off a chicken, Roy was finally here, and it was time for the Monkey Man. We waited until a whole crowd went in and the show started before we got into line. I wanted to be up front, where I could reach out and touch him, then make my escape. We could hear Fearless Dan instructing the crowd how to behave, and I could feel myself starting to sweat. In fact, I started feeling a little sick and dizzy. Roy and I were so scared and excited that we jabbered away at each other. I couldn't wait to touch the Monkey Man. I would become the biggest hero in Wayne County. All the kids in school would look at me and say "that guy touched the Monkey Man."

Then we heard screams coming from inside the tent, and we fell quiet. Some men behind us in line with their kids (who were too afraid to go in by themselves) laughed to each other. They had no idea what they were in store for. The Monkey Man had attacked. Maybe he had killed. We watched the crowd running out, and Josh was among them. He

looked at us and tried to brush it off, but we knew the truth. He had run like the rest of them. It was time for the men to go in. Time to touch the Monkey Man.

Fearless Dan came out holding a safari rifle and told us to come in, but be quiet. He disappeared into the tent, and a man took our quarters as we silently filed in. We could see the stage, and the black curtain. Some of the fools in the back were talking. Didn't they know they could set off the beast? The lights began to dim, and out came Fearless Dan.

"Ladies and Gentleman. fifteen years ago this very night I was in deepest darkest Africa. Lost, I stumbled across a beast I had never seen before." The excitement and fear pounded in my ears, and I could barely hear Fearless Dan describing the capture. I could hear the rustling behind the heavy black curtain that separated us from the Monkey Man. The air in the tent smelled stuffy and sweaty as everyone packed in and the tent flaps were closed. My heart began to pound so hard I thought it would burst. The rushing in my ears was unbearable. I began to feel weak. I looked at Roy, who was staring at the curtain with wide eyes. I looked forward and saw the curtain was parting. It was then that I realized we were right in front of the cage. We were face to face with the monster.

We had nowhere to go. Fearless Dan stepped aside and yelled, "Ladies and Gentlemen, I give you... The Monkey Man!" The Monkey man was snarling, biting at his chains, and shaking the bars. I looked up in amazement at what I saw. I had never had the nerve to get this close, and I could see his savage face. His hairy body looked strong, and I think I saw some blood dripping from his mouth. Then it happened. Some fool in the back took a picture, and the Monkey man began to howl. I felt a wave of panic cross my body. I no longer wanted to be a hero. I wanted nothing more than to get out of this tent alive before the Monkey Man escaped. But it was too late. The door slammed open and out he came.

If I hadn't been so close to the stage, I would not have been able to hear the howl of the Monkey Man over the screams of the panicking crowd. Some of the men were actually so frightened they were laughing as they made their escape, clutching their screaming children's hands. I turned to run, followed by Roy, when the dizziness overcame me. I tripped myself up as I turned, and I fell, with the Monkey Man hot on my tail. I tried to get up but was bumped back down by Roy, who never looked back. I was finished. I would become famous in Wayne County after all. I was gonna be the guy eaten by the Monkey Man. I stood up to run,



fully expecting to be grabbed from behind, and looked behind me. I saw Mule standing at the edge of the stage, staring at the Monkey Man, who stood staring back at him.

It was like he had charmed him. The Monkey Man just looked at Mule and stared. Mule was standing there with his eyes closed, hands down to his side, shaking. He was crying ever so slightly. I ran to the tent exit and peaked around the corner, watching Mule.

Fearless Dan walked over to where Mule was standing and put his hand on his shoulder. "Ya gotta leave now, kid, it's almost time for the next show." Mule opened his eyes and saw, as I did, the Monkey Man walk to the back of the stage and take a drink of water out of a glass. A glass! The Monkey Man sat down on a stool, and the curtain closed. I think I saw him light a cigarette as the curtain fell.

"I thought he was a monster. I thought he killed people," Mule said quietly. Fearless Dan walked him to the exit.

"Yeah, Kid, you were lucky he wasn't hungry. Come back again," Dan said as he scooted us out the exit.

Roy was waiting for us outside, along with Josh. They both started talking to me at the same time, wanting to know what had happened, how we escaped. They weren't even looking at Mule. They treated him like he was one of the

side show freaks. Mule started walking away, but I stopped him.

"John saved me. He saved us both." John stopped and looked at me. Roy and Josh stood there with their mouths wide open. "The Monkey Man grabbed me and was about to kill me, when John... uh... grabbed... Fearless Dan's whip, and whipped him. Then he dropped me, and John grabbed the Monkey Man and helped Fearless Dan get him back in the cage. Fearless Dan said if John hadn't been there, we would have all died."

Josh and Roy stood there with their mouths open, staring at John and me. I turned to John, who was as surprised as Josh and Roy, and told him, "Come on, I want to buy you some cotton candy."

John and I ate cotton candy until we were sticky as hell and rode every damn ride at that carnival. Twice. My grandparents took us home about ten o'clock. They had heard about John. They just smiled and told them how brave he was. They said how brave we both were. John told me that night about how his parents were killed in a car wreck in Chicago. I told him my Mom died a year ago from cancer. Then we went to sleep, dreaming of the Monkey Man. On Sunday, John's aunt came and took him to St. Louis. She told my grandpa to thank Mrs. Leary for the \$200 and tried

to give him ten dollars for taking care of John. He told her she would need it herself. John stood by the side of the car, holding his suitcase. I looked at him, and he looked back.

"...see ya later, John."

John smiled and kind of half waved to me, then climbed into his aunt's car. As they drove down the driveway, Grandma walked into the house, and Grandpa and I sat down on the porch steps. I watched the car slide down the road, kicking up a cloud of dust in its wake. The sun sank below the horizon as their car slipped from view, and I jumped as Grandpa's hand touched my shoulder.

"Do you want to go to the carnival tonight?"

I shrugged my shoulders. Grandpa nodded and went inside. I sat in silence and looked out at the darkening landscape of my Indiana home, the lights of the distant carnival lighting the sky.

## Scar Revision

"Lawyer called. I saved the message."

Martin nodded and walked to the phone. He dialed voicemail as he looked at the back of his wife in the kitchen. She was cutting carrots. She could just have told him what the message was. He turned and leaned on the breakfast bar, picking up a pen.

The message was to tell him his appointment at the plastic surgeon would be a week from this Wednesday, at 9am. Martin wrote down the information on a notepad then hung up. He glanced in the kitchen once more before walking down the hall.

He watched his reflection pass through the photos on the wall in the hallway. It was more of a flash really, a blur of him moving over set images. He paused in front of one picture to look at his reflection more closely. Even in this light, he could see the scar above his left eye. It was Frankensteinish, almost two inches long, and jagged. He

looked at the image in the photograph, seeing his unmarred forehead. It was a wedding photo, taken about two minutes before he had cake in his nose.

\* \* \*

They had been driving down Lakeshore Boulevard, on their way to the West Side Market. It was a Saturday ritual. They would get up early, have breakfast at Lakeside Diner, then drive to the Market to buy their week's meats and vegetables. This Saturday had been different. Shawna's parents had wanted to come with them. They would have to drive from Ohio City past the Market to her parents' house and have breakfast with them in Euclid. Martin did not like her parents, and, in reality, neither did Shawna. Her mother was a brooding nag, her father a doorstop.

"Why do you always go to the West Side Market? Aren't there supermarkets in Ohio City?" Shawna's mother, Sophie, asked.

"The Market is fresher, Mom."

"I like Fazio's. They take coupons."

Martin listened to the exchange as he took bites of egg salad, thinking about Lakeside Diner. He once made the mistake of telling Shawna that her mother reminded him of a

confetti-less Rip Taylor, without the mustache. She hadn't spoken to him for almost a week. Good thing he hadn't said what he was really thinking—that Sophie's mustache just didn't seem as thick as Rip's.

Martin looked down at the other end of the table, where Steven, Shawna's dad, was starting on his second egg salad sandwich. He made a strange smacking sound when he chewed, never closing his mouth entirely. Martin tried not to look, or listen, but it was simply too annoying to avoid. Martin finished his sandwich and sat quietly, waiting for Sophie and Steven to get ready to leave.

Somewhere between Steven's egg salad and a discussion about coupons, Sophie decided she was having one of her "spells" and couldn't go to the Market. Martin was pissed. It was already getting late, and Palducci's would probably be running low on their produce. Vic Palducci always saw them coming, and would start compiling their order before they were even to his booth. Carrots, English cucumbers, mushrooms, onions, lettuce, and red potatoes. It never varied, unless they were late. Then Vic would shrug and gather what he had left for them, and they would have to hunt around for the rest. This was always a pain. And Vic's produce was the best.

Martin and Shawna did not argue out loud. Theirs was more of an understanding of anger. Martin had come from a home that did not value the expression of emotion. Shawna's family not only valued it, they reveled in it. The first time Martin had witnessed a disturbance at a Sims family gathering, he almost called 9-1-1. But fifteen minutes after it began, they were all gathered around the dinner table. Martin's family disagreements had usually climaxed with his mother making a clicking noise with her tongue and his father rolling his eyes. Martin and Shawna met in the middle of this in their arguments; they just didn't speak.

The car had pulled out of a side street right in front of them. Shawna saw it first. She put her arms up toward the dashboard and said the only word spoken during the accident. "Honey!" Martin saw the car on impact and turned the wheel to no effect. He slammed on the brakes as he felt the airbag smashed into his chest and head, forcing him backward. Their car was pushed into oncoming traffic, where they were hit again. This was the impact that put his head through the side window and cut his forehead open to the bone. The car came to a sudden stop half on the road, half on the sidewalk. Smoke billowed out of the hood from where radiator fluid poured onto the hot engine block. Martin rubbed blood out of his eye and looked over at his wife.

She was shaking and had started to cry. The most shocking thing about the entire incident was his wife's reaction. She had not called him "honey" in over a year.

\* \* \*

Shawna turned after she heard Martin hang up the phone and saw that he had walked down the hall. She could see his shadow on the wall stop moving and realized he had paused to look at their wedding picture. But the carrots seemed more important to her, so she picked up another freshly washed vegetable and placed it on the cutting board. She thought of Martin as she cut it in half.

Earlier in the day she had met her next-door neighbor, Viola, for lunch. Martin hated Viola, which made her much more interesting to Shawna. He said her name made her sound eighty years old. Viola's husband, Will, was a delivery man for Coca-Cola, and not once had he ever given Martin a free can of Coke. Shawna was certain this was why he didn't like them. They went to Lakeside Diner for salad and to commiserate.

"Will just has no clue. It's like he is trying to tune a radio or something."



Shawna laughed and took another bite of her salad. Viola looked at her and waited until she was almost done chewing to speak again.

"What about you and Martin?"

Shawna shrugged, "You know."

"How are things going for you two? Any better?"

"About the same, really. I'm starting to think of him as the night janitor. All he does is eat and look in the mirror. He is totally obsessed with that stupid little scar."

"I can't even see it. That accident was like three months ago--"

"Six."

"Okay, six months ago. You guys have been out of physical therapy for what, two months?" Shawna nodded.

"Alright then. So what's the problem?"

"Hell if I know. Maybe he doesn't like the radio."

Viola laughed, and shook her head. "Not what I mean and you know it. This shit has been going on a lot longer than you'll admit."

"I don't know. Things are kind of . . . strained right now."

"What do you mean by strained?"

Shawna lowered her eyes. Her family fought, but almost never outside the confines of family. Her mother considered it uncouth to "air your dirty laundry in public." Shawna didn't know what to say, so she said nothing.

Viola paused and hooked her dark hair back behind her ears, an action Shawna knew meant Viola was about to get serious. She leaned forward, her arms on her legs, and her collarbone almost touching the table's edge. She looked like she about to lower her head, and start grazing in her salad. "I want to ask you something, Shawna."

Shawna leaned back in her chair and looked at Viola. "Yes?"

"Does he hit you?"

Shawna laughed. "No, nothing like that. He doesn't hit. He doesn't cheat. Hell, he barely talks to me."

Viola sat back up. "Why?"

"I guess . . . sometimes people just don't love each other."

Neither of them said anything for a few minutes. The only sound was the other diners talking, clinking forks and knives on plates. Viola broke the silence, stabbing a piece of cucumber with her fork, lifting it up. "I guess that's why God made vegetables."

Martin stepped into the shower and felt the hot water on his sore back. The spray hit his lumbar and he closed his eyes and thought of what his family doctor, Dr. Hoover, had told him about plastic surgery.

"It isn't simple, Martin. It isn't like spackling or painting something. Besides, I can barely see the scar. I don't think someone who didn't know it was there would even notice it."

"Yeah, they would. But anyway, I notice it."

"Martin. They don't take the scar off. They basically just move it. It's close to your eye, so they will probably try to move it under your eyebrow. Nothing really changes, except the scar is harder to see, and we can barely see it as it is. This is not risk free. Things can happen, I just want you to realize this."

"I'm not even sure I'm going to get the surgery," Martin lied. "My lawyer just wants me to see the plastic surgeon to add money to the settlement."

"Just so you know, I'm against this."

Martin shook his head and turned into the spray of water. He opened his eyes and reached for the shampoo. He lathered up his hair, wiped his armpits with his soapy

hands, then stepped into the spray. He rubbed his hands over his face, lingering over his left eye. He thought about his first day back at work after the accident. It had been just over two weeks before he went back to the shop, and things were going well until he went to check tools out to go to a job site. His friend Josh stepped over to where Martin was waiting, and he leaned against the chicken wire wall of the tool shed.

"Welcome back, Capone."

It took a full thirty seconds for Martin to realize what Josh had meant. Martin's smile at seeing his friend dissolved into a glare, punctuated by a "Fuck you."

"Oh, come off it. When I broke my arm, you fucked with me for a month, calling me righty and shit like that."

"A broken arm isn't permanent."

"Whatever."

Martin picked up his tools, walked to the work truck, and loaded them into the back. He got into the driver's seat and pulled a pack of cigarettes out of his shirt pocket while he stared straight ahead. He could see Josh shaking his head, talking to some of the other workers; then they all laughed and looked toward the truck. Martin tore open the pack of cigarettes and shook one loose and lit it. He started the truck and drove out of the bay,

without looking at his coworkers again. It wasn't until he got out onto the street that he looked into the rear view and saw the scar looking back at him. He flicked the cigarette out the window and drove to the worksite.

\* \* \*

Shawna put a CD into the stereo when she heard the shower turn off. She curled her legs up underneath her and picked up a book. Martin walked into the living room and looked at her. She smiled for a moment before going back to her book. He smiled at the top of her head, then stood there, unsure of what to do.

"Did you want to watch TV?"

"No, you can listen to music. I was just wondering if we were going tomorrow night."

Shawna closed the book and looked at him. "I thought you didn't want to."

"Well, I don't, but I think we should."

Shawna nodded. "I didn't cancel. I was going to go alone if you didn't come, but I would like you there. I think it's important."

"What's his name?"

"Cynthia Zimmer."

"I thought it was a guy."

Shawna shook her head, finger holding her place in the book. Martin nodded, then sat down and picked up the paper. Shawna sighed slightly and opened her book. Martin heard the sigh and rustled his paper in response. They read until dinner was ready.

\* \* \*

The sign on the door was innocuous enough. *Cynthia Zimmer, PhD*. No hint of what lay inside, other than education. Martin held the door open for Shawna, then followed her in. The waiting room was empty. It seemed friendly enough, with the requisite fern and magazines lying on a table. There was a couch and a chair around the table. Martin chose the chair, and Shawna sat on the couch. Martin looked at the door leading into the inner office.

"Do we knock?"

"No," Shawna replied. "She told me she would come out and get us when she was ready."

Martin nodded and picked up *Smithsonian*. He started reading an article about a Cold War submarine that was tracked by the US Navy as it approached the Eastern seaboard. He could hear muffled voices inside the office,

and he thought about being on that submarine. Underwater. Essentially alone. He found it comforting to think of being confined in that little metal tube deep in the water. How long could he stay down there? How long would the air last? He thought about running out of food and water. Then he thought about that movie where the plane crashed in the mountains and they ended up eating each other to stay alive. He would much prefer a submarine to an airplane. The door opening broke him out of his thoughts.

Two women walked out of the inner office, and the door shut behind them. Martin and Shawna averted their eyes as the women passed by on their way out of the waiting room. Martin looked up at them exiting. "I thought this was couple's counseling."

"It is."

Martin nodded, then set his magazine down. Shawna was reading another issue of *Smithsonian*. He looked at her hair, at her body. He always did think she was pretty. He remembered the first time he saw her. She was tending bar at the Odeon when he went there to see The Cramps play. Her dark hair was pulled back into a pony tail, and she made his heart melt. When she tells the story, she tells people she thought, "Another asshole staring at my tits." That was almost eleven years ago. They had been married for eight.

Shawna wondered if they really had fallen out of love, but neither of them had the courage to admit it.

"So, why have you decided to come to couple's therapy?"

Martin looked at Shawna. She did not look back at him. She spoke directly to Cynthia, knowing Martin would say nothing. "Because our marriage is in trouble."

"No, it isn't. We're just in a rut."

Shawna continued to look at Cynthia. "It is in trouble."

Martin leaned back into the chair and crossed his legs. Cynthia looked at him, then back to Shawna. "Martin does not seem to agree with you."

"Martin doesn't even agree with himself."

Cynthia turned to Martin. "Do you have anything you would like to say to Shawna about that?"

"We're just in a rut."

It felt like the therapy lasted three hours to Martin. Shawna felt it was over too quickly. Cynthia told them that they needed to learn not only to communicate, but also how to fight. Before they left, they committed to coming twice a week for the next month, then made their insurance co-pay and left the office. They averted their eyes when they saw a couple sitting where they had sat. In the car, Shawna



asked Martin what he thought about Cynthia. He told her he wasn't sure a divorced woman could give good advice on marriage, but he would give it a try. Shawna turned and looked out the window until they got home, then went upstairs and read until she fell asleep.

"What do you mean, couple's therapy?" Sophie said as she sat down on her couch.

"Just what I said. We are going to couple's therapy." Shawna had dreaded telling her mother about this, but Cynthia thought it was important to get family and close friends involved. She had told them both that the problems with their relationship most likely had their genesis in learned behavior from their childhood. Martin thought it was pure doctor speak. Shawna took it to heart.

"Well, I think that's just silly. Your father and I have been married for forty-two years, and we never needed someone else to tell us how to do it."

"Maybe you should have asked. This is helping Martin and me. We are talking more. I am feeling happy again."

"You think your father and I aren't happy?"

Shawna stood up, walked over to the coffee pot, and poured herself another cup. She scooped two spoons of sugar into the cup and stirred it, looking out the window at her father, who was painting the fence around the garden. He

painted it every year, whether it needed it or not. Martin had once offered to bring the sprayer from work and paint it for him in twenty minutes. Steven had responded, "It isn't about the paint."

"Dad's painting the fence again? Didn't he paint it last year?"

"Yes."

"What did you guys do yesterday?"

"Your father went golfing."

"Well, I guess you are happy."

Sophie picked up her coffee and left the room.

\* \* \*

"God my mom drives me absolutely crazy sometimes."

"Just sometimes?" Viola smiled.

"I tried to tell her about the therapy Martin and I have been going through. I tried to get her to understand. But she thought it was all about her. So I let it be."

Viola nodded and took Shawna's hand, giving it a squeeze. "You know, I think this is great, right? So does Will. Hell, Martin and Will are even talking to each other now."

"He really is trying."

"Have you two been listening to the radio at all?"

Shawna laughed, and Viola joined in. "No. But I think we might. We talked about that last week with Cynthia, and she told us to ease back into it. It has been over a year. It's almost like we are dating again. As cheesy as it sounds, Cynthia is right when she says we have to walk before we run."

"Well, I would sure want to be running."

\* \* \*

Josh and Martin were assigned to the same job site for almost two weeks straight. The first time they drove out together in the work truck, they were silent. It wasn't until lunch time that Josh broke the silence between them.

"Dude, what I said was fucked up. Sorry man."

Martin sat silently for a few minutes and then just kind of smiled. "Sorry I called you righty."

"You were right. My arm healed up. But listen man, that scar is only there when I look for it. Don't worry about it."

"Well, mine isn't permanent, either."

"You getting it fixed?"

"Yeah. We're getting our settlement finally, now that everything is all said and done. I'm getting my scar fixed. The scar revision was enough that I can afford it, and we'll still have money left over to fix up the house."

"Awesome. I bet Shawna is happy 'bout it." Martin looked at Josh, his eyes flashing slightly. "I mean about fixing the house, man. Calm down."

Martin nodded and smiled again. "Yeah. She is pretty pumped."

\* \* \*

Martin took the day off before surgery to relax. Dr. Wilkinson said that the surgery would take only about an hour, and he would be healed up and ready to go back to work in a few days. Dr. Hoover had been right. They were going to hide the scar under his left eyebrow. It would essentially still be there, but you would not be able to see it. Martin was as happy as a child. Almost everyone had tried to talk him out of the surgery, even Shawna. She said she couldn't see the scar, and in a year or two it would probably fade completely. Dr. Wilkinson had said it wasn't necessary, but also that neither was breast augmentation.

It was simply a matter of personal choice. If Martin wanted the surgery, he would get it.

Will came over around noon, when he stopped at home for his lunch break, to see Martin. Since couple's therapy had begun, Martin had become more approachable and likeable. He and Will became friends. Will even brought him a can of Coke now and again. They were sitting on the back porch, talking.

"Viola says Shawna seems a lot happier. And I gotta say, you do, too."

"We've been going to see this doctor, and she has been helping us with our problems," Martin said, and kind of laughed.

"Well, whatever she is doing, it's working."

"She isn't doing much really. This doctor is a 'couple's therapist'," Martin made quote signs in the air as he said this. "She thinks she knows what she is talking about, but it is all a bunch of crap really. I kind of approach this the same way I would if I were reading some woman's magazine like *Cosmo* or something. It's kind of like one of those little relationship quizzes. Once you learn the right answers, things work out on their own."

Will nodded his head and took a drink of Coke. "So she isn't really telling you guys how to improve or anything?"

"She is. She thinks I listen. So does Shawna. It's important to her, so I go through the motions. My insurance pays for it. I just have to fork out twenty bucks a visit. It's worth every dime."

"All I know is Viola says Shawna is happier than she has ever seen her."

They talked until Will had to return to work, then Martin went back inside the house. He turned on the TV and flipped through the channels, not really watching anything. He was feeling anxious. Tomorrow, he would have surgery. Tomorrow, he would look normal again. He would be rid of that damned scar.

Shawna came home from work shortly after five, carrying two bags of take-out from The Thai Gourmet. She smiled at Martin, and he helped her set the table by getting two bottles of Sam Adams out of the fridge. He pulled two paper towels off the roll and sat down as Shawna put plates on the kitchen table. They ate dumplings and Mongolian chicken while Shawna talked about her day. She asked if Martin had done anything, and he told her he had just hung around the house, relaxing before tomorrow.

After dinner, Shawna put the dishes in the dishwasher and went into the living room where Martin was sitting on the couch watching TV. It was Thursday night, and *Scrubs*

was on. Shawna walked past her chair and sat on the couch next to Martin, leaning against him gently. He put his arm up on the back of the couch so he would be more comfortable, so Shawna nestled in against him. He felt obligated to put his arm down around her shoulders. She smiled up at him and strained her neck gently, kissing his chin, then turned back to the television.

They watched TV like this for around an hour, before Shawna put her hand on his thigh. She slid it up and down as they watched *Scrubs*. She then turned to face him, her hand sliding up to his hip. She leaned in and kissed him. He kissed back.

"What are you doing?" he said with a smile.

"What do you think?"

He kissed her again gently, as she slid her hand onto his crotch. He definitely knew what she was doing, she thought.

"I am glad to have you back, Martin."

"I was here all the time, it was just hard to see me."

She took the remote from him and turned off the TV, then smiled and kissed him again. They went to the bedroom, made love, and fell asleep. Shawna awoke in the middle of the night and smiled as she looked at Martin's sleeping back. She knew things would be okay.

\*   \*   \*

A week after the surgery, Martin and Shawna went to see Cynthia. Looking at Martin, Cynthia thought his left eyebrow looked like he was doing the Mr. Spock thing, but she didn't say anything about it. She knew it was a sensitive subject. She simply told him he was looking good. Martin smiled, and for the first time since their therapy began, they sat on the couch together. Cynthia could not help but feel a small sense of victory pass through her.

"How have things been for you two this last week?"

"They have been great, Cyn. Martin and I are getting along much better. We speak to each other, we share our feelings, and . . ."

Shawna blushed, "we made love."

Cynthia smiled and looked at Martin. "Are you feeling as good as Shawna is about all of this?"

Martin responded as he knew he should, "I am. But more than that, I am glad I am finally making Shawna happy again."

Shawna took his hand and squeezed it, then looked to Cynthia. "Cyn, we appreciate what you have done for us, we really do. But we think we are going to be okay now. I think we want to stop coming to sessions."



"I do think it is too soon. I think it would be a mistake to stop before we've gotten to the cause of the problems."

"Martin's job is picking up again. They're getting more projects, and my work is keeping me busy."

"Don't make this mistake, guys. Martin was right. Your marriage is in trouble. Fixing that scar has solved some of the surface problems, but you—"

"It's got nothing to do with the damn scar. It has to do with us getting out of our rut. We're fine, and we're done," Martin said.

"It's a mistake. I can't stress that enough. Ultimately it's your decision, but it's a decision that will end your marriage," Cynthia said.

\* \* \*

"Things are wonderful, Viola. I cannot believe the change in Martin. He is attentive, loving, and damn can that man tune a radio station in."

Viola grinned at Shawna and handed her a can of Coke. She plopped down on the couch next to Shawna and opened her own can. "I am getting jealous now, Shawna. I am thinking about causing problems with Will just so we can go to

therapy for awhile." She laughed and took a sip out of her can, turning on the DVD player.

"Seriously, though. Things are great. I mean . . . he is working a lot right now, but when he is home things are perfect."

"When he is home."

"Don't read anything into that." Shawna sounded more like she was trying to convince herself than Viola. *Maybe I am*, she thought as she watched the movie. Martin was more responsive now. He talked to her, let her air her problems to him, and responded with the "positive feedback" Cyn had suggested. But it sometimes felt scripted, like she was talking to that idiot Dr. Phil from Oprah's show. He said things that sounded good, but then went back to watching TV or reading the newspaper. Now she felt silly complaining about the lack of connection, when they were talking about feelings more than ever before. Besides, she had talked up the therapy and their newfound relationship so much that to admit to anything now would be far too embarrassing. After the movie, Shawna made an excuse to go home and found Martin on the couch, watching TV.

"My parents are coming over for dinner on Sunday. I am thinking about having a roast." Shawna knew he wanted to watch the game.

"Oh . . . okay." He turned back to the television. She sat down on the couch next to him and snuggled up annoyingly close, letting her hair brush over his face. He reached up and brushed her hair back gently.

"Am I bothering you?" she said as she sat up quickly.

"No. Your hair was just tickling me a little. What's wrong tonight?"

"Nothing."

"Did you and Viola have a fight or something?"

"No."

"You seem kind of pissy. Is there something you would like to talk about?"

"No." She moved over to her chair and sat down, crossing her arms over her chest. Martin slid down the couch so he was closer to her.

"There is something wrong. I think we should talk about it. Remember what Cyn said. When something is wrong, we need to verbalize it, not internalize it."

Shawna stood up abruptly from her chair. "Fuck Cyn."

Martin sat alone and watched *Letterman*, thinking about submarines.

\* \* \*

Sophie and Steven showed up for dinner on Sunday around 4:30, an hour before they said they would be there. Martin greeted them at the door, as Shawna checked on dinner. Her parents were habitually early, so they were ready for them.

"Hello, Martin dear, it is nice to see you," Sophie said as she kissed his cheek. Steven shook his hand and headed for the couch. It was the first time Martin had seen Shawna's parents in weeks. Sophie had only recently started talking to Shawna again.

Right after they had left therapy, Shawna was at her parents' house, discussing how things had worked out. Sophie, still mildly upset at having been accused of being unhappy, started in on Shawna.

"Why is it that every time someone discovers a new restaurant or a book, they feel that they are the expert on it and tell everyone else they need to eat or read the way they do?"

"Mom, this isn't about you."

"It most certainly is. You told me you thought your father and I were unhappy and needed therapy. You're here to rub it in that you did your little therapy and have a wonderful relationship now."

"Mom--"

"Don't 'mom' me, Shawna. Just keep your therapy to yourself." With that she left the room and didn't answer the phone or door for almost two weeks. It took another week to build up the stomach for dinner. Shawna and Martin both knew at that point that discussing anything more important than the weather with Sophie and Steven would be off-limits for at least a year. They had a nice dinner, punctuated with discussions of work and movies, recipes and sports, and comfortable silences.

Shawna did not look at Martin. Martin did not look at Shawna. They smiled politely in each other's direction when addressed. Shawna played the role of the happy wife, and Martin bought it. As Sophie and Steven left, Sophie hugged Martin and smiled.

"You know, I can't even see your scar now if I try."

## Lake Affect: A Novel Excerpt

Friday Night.

"What are three words in the English language that begin with the letters 'dw'?"

Mo looked up from his cheeseburger and frowned. He hated it when Dale did this kind of shit. All he wanted to do was eat, but he knew better than to try to resist. This was the price of free cheeseburgers. Inane conversations. Stupid questions. Dale thought these made him look smart, or "learn-ed," as he liked to say. After Mo swallowed a bite of burger and took a sip of Coke, he shrugged and said, "Dwarf."

"That's one."

"Dwell."

"You got the easy two." Sometimes Dale liked to narrate conversations he was taking part in.

Although Anchor Lanes was probably one of his favorite places in the world and the only place he had a job he had

actually hung onto, Mo watched the action around him with only mild interest. It wasn't so much that he liked bowling, which he did, or even that he liked the people who frequented Anchor Lanes, which he didn't, that made this a place where he felt comfortable. Whenever Mo bowled, worked at, or even just hung out at Anchor, things just seemed to make sense. People knew the rules. Mo, for the most part not big on following conventions, accepted and embraced those associated with bowling. Perhaps he just found happiness at the one place in Cleveland where rules were viewed as being a good thing. Things were understood.

Anchor was exactly what should come to mind when someone said that they were going to go roll. Well-oiled, slightly warped lanes. Cigarette smoke. Cans of beer, not glasses. The bowlers that came into Anchor entered a world that hadn't changed much since the '50s. The walls were an institutional green-the same green that adorns countless elementary school cafeterias. The ball returns were still the above the lane variety, and the benches were an orange and blue that-while completely at odds with the color scheme they were a part of-mysteriously matched the walls. Rows of shelves holding balls of every color and weight adorned the back wall of Anchor and swayed precariously whenever a ball was pulled free. The snack bar sat in the



middle of the lanes-metal spinning stools with blue torn cushions surrounding the counter. It seemed to lord over the bowling alley, and it was a role that was elevated when Dale took over the counter nearly ten years earlier. It was the heartbeat of Anchor.

Dale worked the grill daily at the snack bar, turning burgers and filling Mo with words of wisdom. The waitress, Denata, kept her distance. Denata didn't like being involved in a conversation with either Dale or Mo, and being in one with both of them at once would have been unbearable to her. Typically, she kept to herself, spending her shifts filling catsup, salt, pepper and napkin dispensers and taking the occasional customer's order. She would also deliver orders to lanes when the bowlers were too busy to wait for them. Although the snack bar was small and not busy enough to having a waitress, Dale kept her on. Probably because she was his wife. She took the orders, Dale worked the grill. Surprised that Lew Archer, the owner of Anchor, kept Denata on staff, Mo figured that Denata's presence, while quiet, balanced out Dale's abrasiveness.

A rather large man, Dale kept himself peculiarly clean. Although he worked a grill and fryers, his clothes remained neat and orderly. He took his apron on and off between each order, and never, never, came to work with his

hair out of place. His hair bordered on being a masterpiece. Each hair, sculpted into place with a variety of hair care treatments, remained an enviable feat of engineering. Sculpted into a duckbill, it reminded one simultaneously of a 1950s greaser and a water buffalo. If he had grown sideburns, he would have looked like an unsuccessful Elvis impersonator. But he was proud of his hair. His *coiffure*, as he called it, always arranging it with freshly washed hands. Only someone like Dale would be allowed to call his hair that in this bowling alley and not risk personal injury.

Mo sat on his usual stool at the snack bar and chewed a bite from the cheeseburger Dale had made him, drinking his beer. Dale kept talking, and Mo half-heartedly listened.

Mo took another bite of his burger and said, "Dwight," with his mouth full.

"Nope."

"What do you mean nope? Dwight is a fucking word, and it begins with 'dw'."

"It's a proper noun."

"So?"

"The other word ain't a noun."

"You never said anything about nouns."

"Well, I'm sayin' it now. Dwight is someone's name."

"No it isn't," Mo said, getting irritated.

"The fuck it isn't. Use it in a sentence."

"By dwight of the moon."

Dale shook his head and muttered "asshole."

"So anyways, I tell this guy he don't know nothin', and he moves to take a swing at me, but I'm too fast for him," Dale drones on endlessly, punctuating each sentence with a slap of the spatula against the hot grease on the grill.

Between bites, Mo muttered, "oh yeah?" and "really?" just enough to maintain the illusion he was paying attention to the conversation. Dale minded his burgers and fries as he paused to look around the lanes. He noticed Mo not paying attention at all, so he stopped talking. Mo had been watching a girl bowling with her friends on 14. Mo liked looking at her. In the fifth frame she had picked up a baby split with company, the 2-7-8, as if born to do it. When she bowled, her follow-through made her roll with a right-handed Brooklyn cranker, but Mo didn't mind. He normally wouldn't pay attention to a Brooklyn roller, but this girl was different. He could tell she cared about the game. The Brooklyn hit had not been ignored, but accentuated and improved into a meaningful strike that sent

the dentist's teeth flying to the backstop. He bet she kept her scores and analyzed the game each night after she rolled. From the seventh she went all the way and finished with a 240. Impressive.

Mo let out a low whistle, then took a sip of beer. About to turn back to Dale, he noticed the girl sit down and take off her shoes. It was between games, with one more game to go to make tonight's roll a regulation one. Mo furrowed his brow for a moment, then saw her slip on a pair of tennis shoes and start toward the snack bar. Changes her shoes before she leaves the lane. Serious bowler. He turned around and looked at Dale, who looked at the girl as well.

Denata met her at the center of the snack bar, and the girl scanned the menu, leaning forward on her elbows, her left foot raised, resting only on her toes, her skirt rising up the backs of her thighs slightly. Mo admired more than her bowling style. She ordered a Coke, a Dr. Pepper, and an order of fries, then sat down on a stool three away from Mo. He looked her up and down out of the corner of his eye, when she looked over at him. Smiling a not-too-intimidating smile by Mo's standards, he enjoyed her embarrassed blush for a moment, then turned back toward Dale, who filled a metal basket full of fries. Dale caught

Mo's eye and wiggled his eyebrows at him, nodding his head toward the girl.

"Yer buddy Clint's gal."

Mo hated bowling on a team with someone like Clint. It was one thing to appreciate a game, to understand it and use it. To take the intricacies of the game and make it a part of you, so that it becomes a part of a routine. Clint went beyond this. He worshipped the game. It defined him. Refusing to believe it, Clint argued that bowling was just a part of his job that he liked, but everyone on the team knew the truth. Without bowling, Clint Breen had nothing.

The girl turned around in her stool, looked back at the lane her teammates were on, and smiled at them. Then she laughed and looked at Mo then back at the lane. Denata placed the drinks in front of the girl, who sat reasonably, waiting for her fries. Mo chanced a few more looks at the girl, admiring her thighs. If Liz would just learn to bowl, Mo would buy her a ball, a bag, and a nice pair of bowling shoes, maybe Brunswicks or Dexters. They were the best. He thought about Liz in this girl's skirt, bowling a 230, then took a sip of beer.

"Here's your fries," said Dale, setting the paper container on the counter close to where Mo sat. She stood up and walked over and picked them up, and Mo could smell

her. Her neck sparkled, and she smelled very sweet. She looked like a holiday. Dale filled a tray with the rest of the food and slid it across the counter toward Denata, who picked it up to deliver.

Dale waited until she was out of earshot, then looked at Mo. "She's a little tasty-cake, don't ya think?"

Mo nodded, taking another bite of his cheeseburger.

"Tasty, tasty little cake. Clint is all hot for her, but she won't give him the time of day. Smart girl."

Neither Dale nor Mo liked Clint very much, but he was a good bowler.

Starting to work at Anchor at 15, Clint had begun at the snack bar. Frying corn-dogs and slathering cheese and catsup on burgers was his introduction to this world, a world he had always known to be special. But he also had felt that a hair net did not play into his future. He dropped out of the general program at Eastlake High School, which he struggled in, and went into the vocational education tract, where he excelled at building maintenance. Wood and metal shops as well as a bit of auto repair, filled the holes of his education, and when he graduated, Lew—the owner of Anchor—promoted him to assistant technician. He never even asked Mo, who was lead technician. He just went ahead and did it. He had stayed in

that position ever since. As business continued to pick up, Lew hired another assistant, but Clint continued to work nights and weekends. He reasoned, "that's when the serious bowlers are in. Those are league nights."

Clint settled into his routine with a regularity both familiar and comforting. He ate his meals at the snack bar, worked Wednesdays through Sundays, and, as he told his coworkers, "had no time for a girlfriend." Living only with his cat, Eddie, (named after Eddie Elias, the 1958 founder of the PBA) to keep him company, his life remained solitary, but not meaningless. For Clint, bowling remained not only a pastime-one in which he averaged a 217 on Monday night league-but a vocation. Something about the sound of a bowling alley, the smell, even the look, gave him a sense of self-worth. It made him feel not only needed, but wanted. At home his life took on no colors, no sounds, but when at Anchor, he felt respected, even admired.

"So Clint has another target, huh?" said Mo.

"Yep. Lew already had to tell him to leave the girl alone. Surprised she's here tonight, cause Clint is," Dale said, nodding toward the lane Clint was practicing on. Clint had waved to Mo when he came in, and Mo nodded to him on his way to the snack-bar to get his cheeseburger. He'd have to spend time with him for the next few hours once

league started up. No sense in putting in any more time than he had to.

"You give up on the last word yet?" Dale asked, his back toward Mo.

It was rare he would keep his back toward Mo at the snack-bar. But it had been almost a month. He began to slip again. Tarmo Wanska and his brother Jakko had a game they liked to play at the counter. Mo was mustard, Jake was catsup. They would see who could get the most on Dale's back before he realized what they were doing. He kept his work uniform-a white shirt, white pants, white apron, and dark shoes-as immaculate as he kept himself. By the end of dinner, they could usually have flicked several nice streaks down his back off the end of a knife or fork. Denata knew when they were doing it, but she would just watch, occasionally cracking a smile.

"So. How's Denata?" Mo asked loudly, as usual. Denata was within earshot, if they spoke in normal voices, but she usually had to strain to hear them. Dale had once told Mo that he and Denata had been married for close to thirty years and ten of them happily. Denata didn't like people for the most part, and it surprised Mo that she had stayed married to anyone, let alone someone like Dale. Mo turned toward Denata as Dale answered.



"Mean as ever."

"You hear that, darlin'? I wouldn't take that if I was you. No jury in Ohio would convict you, given that fat bastard's record." Mo gave Denata a little wink to punctuate his sentence, but also to push her deeper into a mood. She didn't need any help. Of all Dale's friends, Mo remained the only one she liked. But she would never admit it, and this made her angry most of the time. Mo thrived on this.

Denata made a disapproving clicking sound with her tongue. Dale always looked uncomfortable during these little exchanges, another reason Mo liked them so well. Seeing someone in a state of confusion always had a calming effect on Mo, especially when it was the result of something he had done.

Dale took the new orders from Denata and turned back to the grill, throwing cheese onto the burgers he knew he was going to have to make before Denata had even gone out to the lanes for orders. League nights were predictable. Mo smiled to himself and asked again. "Dale. Want to bowl a few games after league tonight?"

"Nope," Dale said, shaking his head without turning around. Mo looked toward Denata.

"Yoko. Let him out to roll." Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Dale tensing up.

"Why do you assume it is always me? Maybe he just don't want to bowl with you."

"I doubt that. Don't want to lose, sure. But don't want to roll?" Mo shook his head, then ordered a cup of coffee. Denata clicked her tongue again and got him a cup, pouring it full of coffee.

"Can I get some sugar?" Denata nodded and handed him the sugar shaker. "Wasn't talkin' 'bout that kind of sugar."

"Well it's the only kind you're getting from me," Denata said, making yet another disapproving clicking sound.

Dale didn't say anything. He merely took the cheeseburgers off the grill, dressed them, and set the plates on a tray for Denata. Dale looked up and nodded toward the door without speaking a word, then took his apron off and went to wash his hands. Mo picked up his bowling bag and headed down to the lanes. Jake and Chet had arrived. As he moved away from the snack-bar, he heard Dale yell.

"Dwindle!"

Anchor Lanes consisted of seventy-two alleys. The walkway ran from the check-in desk at one end to the lane's bar, The Eleventh Frame, at the other. In the middle was Dale's counter. Mo considered his surroundings as he made his way down to lanes 15 and 16, the lanes his team, The Cleveland Steamers, had for tonight's league games. He figured he must have bowled on every lane in Anchor at some point over the years, but not always as a Steamer.

The Steamers had been a team for the past five seasons, and they were pretty good, typically finishing in the top five in a league averaging over thirty teams. Mo hated the name. Proposed by Mo as a joke over beers at the Eleventh Frame one night before league sign-up, no one had understood the reference. The rest of the newly formed team decided Mo had suggested one of his poker terms for a team name. Jake remembered Mo had once told him someone who was "steaming" in poker was going "on tilt" and likely to call anything. When a player faces a bad beat, or gets sucked out on the river, they tend to steam for a few hands afterward. Jake, Chet, and Clint decided it would be a good name for the team, and Clint submitted their sign-up sheet to the league secretary. The Cleveland Steamers were born.

It wasn't until Mo saw the name and explained the sexual connotations of it that they realized perhaps the name was not the best choice, but at this point, it was too late to change it for the season. After they took first that year, no one wanted to tempt fate and change the name except Mo.

Mo looked around Anchor as he approached the night's lanes. He saw that the team they were currently chasing for first place, The Tumblers, was bowling on 10 and 11, which didn't make him very happy, as those lanes were cheesy cakes, and their scores would be high. The Tumblers were facing the twelfth-place team, so the Steamers would have to sweep the card tonight to keep pace. This would put Clint on edge, make him offers suggestions to his teammates, and in turn make Mo want to throw a gutter ball to get him to shut up. He had done that more than once. Clint always tried to offer board corrections or fingering tips, and Mo would get up to roll and throw the ball directly into the gutter.

"Something like that, Clint?" he would ask, walking back to the ball-return to await his ball. Clint would sit and glare.

"Thanks for the advice. It always helps. Anytime you give it to me, I get a puddle ball." After that, Clint would keep quiet for at least one more game. It wasn't so

much that Mo didn't like advice. If Jake or Chet offered some, he would accept it willingly. Chet never offered advice, however, unless it was a suggestion that all that was really needed was another round. Mo never minded that kind of advice. He just didn't like any interactions with Clint that might make Clint right about something.

Jake sat at the scoreboard, penciling in the bowlers' names as Mo stopped at the top of the stairs leading down to their lanes. The other team, the Loopers, had started warming up. Shadow rolling seemed pointless to Mo. He would just throw two balls on either lane to check the slide and be done with it. Clint thought he needed twenty rolls to get into his groove. Chet would throw five or six balls a lane. Mo drank beer to get into his groove. Then, even if he lost it, it didn't bother him.

As was his custom, Mo sat down on the chair near the top of the stairs, took off his street shoes, pulled his bowling shoes free from his bag, then stood and walked down to the benches at the ball-return. Clint nodded to him, then turned and walked back up to roll another ball. The little bastard had bowled two practice games earlier and was now shadow rolling another game before they started. Mo laced up his shoes, set his ball on the return, and slid into the chair next to Jake at the scoreboard table.

"Don't spell my name wrong."

"When'd ya get back?" said Jake, not really asking.

"Sunday night. Would've called, but I knew I'd see you tonight."

"Why would you call?"

Mo shook a cigarette out of his pack. He usually smoked only when bowling or playing cards. It had become a part of his ritual. Buying the pack. Tearing it open before getting to the table or the lanes. Smoking that first cigarette as he got ready to do battle. Everything became a battle in Mo's eyes. Cards, bowling, even conversation. This was behavior learned from Jake and Mo's father, Hank. While some families had holiday traditions, Mo and Jake's family had confrontation traditions. Hank was big on ritual.

Mo pointed at the dues envelope, nodding his head at Jake.

"We're still on Lew's dime," Mo said, going up to check the slide.

Mo often took trade from Lew in exchange for not making him pay up on his gambling debts. Lew was lousy at sports betting and always placed bets on the team he liked, thinking that liking something was a good enough reason to bet on it. A big Cleveland Indians fan, Lew always bet them

to win, regardless of who was pitching and who they were playing. It never made any sense to Mo that someone would bet on something simply because they liked it. Mo's favorite team was the one that was going to win. During baseball season, Mo could always rely on Lew running up a debt big enough to pay for his and his brother's league dues. Some years he could have covered Chet's and Clint's as well, but he didn't like them enough to ever consider it.

For the last two years, Jake's warm-ups had gotten shorter and shorter. He preferred to save his strength for game three, when he knew he would be fading. An average of 183 had slipped in the last two years to just a little over 140. It was the third game that was doing it to him. By then, he felt fatigued, his vision sometimes blurred, and it became hard for him to make out the boards between the diamonds on the lanes. It was this that first took him to the doctors—not because his vision started to be affected, but because his average had begun to fall. Always a spot bowler, Jake had been pushed to a pin bowler, something he had been trained to avoid since his father first put a bowling ball in his hands.

Jake first accompanied his father and older brother to their Saturday morning bowling practice when he was nine

years old. Sandra, Jake's mother, had insisted he be allowed to go along and bowl at least one game. She had asked their older sister, Kalle, if she wanted to try bowling, but she was never interested in spending time with her father, let alone her younger brothers.

Five years older than Jake, Mo had been bowling for some time at this point and bowled all three games against his father, never quite managing to beat him. The first few weeks, Jake was only allowed to help keep score. His father called it math homework. Soon Hank allowed him to throw a few balls, but only after Hank and Mo had bowled two games. They bowled three games each Saturday morning, and his father wanted to keep his stride up for the first two, only allowing a child to bowl after he had worked out whatever perceived glitches he had in his follow-through that week.

It had bothered Jake that his father let Mo—who didn't seem to care about bowling—to bowl all three games while Jake, dying on the inside at being reduced to a lowly scorekeeper, had to be content with only one game toward the end of the afternoon. It wasn't until just before his thirteenth birthday, when he struck out all the way from seven after nearly picking up a double pinochle in the sixth, that his father started to respect his roll. After that, he got to bowl all three games with Hank and Mo. He



still had to keep score, but now he felt part of something. A month after Jake turned 17, he and Mo went bowling with their father for the last time. Both sons beat their father all three games by more than 20 pins each. Jake had beaten Mo two of those games and had gotten better each time. He had rolled nothing but blow-outs and big fills the entire third game. Hank never bowled with them again. He stayed at home alone on Saturdays-Sandra had already left him when Jake was twelve. Keeping score had become a habit for Jake, and he kept it up even after he stopped rolling with Hank and Mo on Saturdays. But now, things were different. Jake again felt like a little kid, keeping score while the adults rolled their games.

Chet and Clint had noticed Jake's average slipping earlier than Mo did. Mo barely paid attention to his own scores when he was bowling on this league, let alone his teammates. Clint questioned Jake's stance. Chet suggested glasses. They even went so far as to question his commitment to the Steamers.

"You need more practice. You had three opens in the third and at least two nose hits. If it hadn't been for that spiller in the tenth, we would have lost. You've been throwing pumpkins for two weeks," said Clint one night as

they cleaned up after the third game. Jake just nodded as he unlaced his shoes.

"He ain't lying, Jake, I mean you're, you know, its because of, I mean," Chet added, zipping his bag shut.

"We fuckin' won, boys," Mo said as he exhaled a cloud of smoke directly at Clint, his eyes fixed on him. "This wasn't a soft alley. The track was as oily as my Buick's block. Maybe the maintenance staff in this dump needs to wake the fuck up. Don'tcha think, Clint?"

That ended their criticism, at least in front of Mo.

"You need more practice, man. Why don't you start meeting me on Wednesdays?" Clint said the next week after league play. He waited until Mo disappeared back behind the lanes to the poker game with Lew and Dale.

"I don't know," said Jake, watching the game on the big screen TV in the Eleventh Frame.

"I do. You need to get serious about it. This is league play, man."

Jake did his best to ignore Clint. Chet wasn't so bad. He had seen Jake at work, messing up much more than usual. Talking to Chet about the problems he had made it seem to Jake that his whole world was coming apart. The things that used to work-bowling, work-were now falling apart much as his marriage was. But bowling mattered to him. He just

didn't like talking about it. While Clint thought it was okay to talk about Jake's suffering game when Mo wasn't around, Chet would keep his opinions to himself on league nights, but never on the trip into Tucker the next morning.

"Man. We're tryin' to win, ya know? I mean, you've gotta."

Jake would just nod and watch the traffic on the way in. He had no idea what was going on, why his game was off, or why he felt like he did all the time, especially if he got near any of the heat presses. It wasn't until Mo said something that he realized he needed to figure out what the problem was.

"Jesus, bro. You're startin' to bowl like you don't give a shit. Almost makes me proud of ya." Jake went to the doctor two weeks later. They thought at first something was wrong with his optic nerves, so they sent him for a series of tests. When those provided no answers, he ended up with blood-work and an MRI. That led to a trip to the neurologist's office with Maggie. They were convinced it was a brain tumor by this point. So when the news was broken to Jake it was multiple sclerosis, both he and Maggie were relieved, but probably for different reasons. Now that his team knew why his average was dropping, and

his dizziness, blurred vision, and fatigue had been explained, Jake's scores were never mentioned.

After his four rolls, Mo sat back down by Jake, pulled his cigarette from the ashtray, and took another drag. They sat in silence, watching the others shadow bowl. This, too, was becoming part of Mo's ritual. Jake had always kept score, but usually he was up walking around for most of the night, stretching his legs. Now he just sat, except when it was his turn to roll. Another way of reserving his strength for the finish, and Jake hated it.

"Look down at 10 and 11. Tumblers are bowling the Wooden Bottles. They'll take four points for sure on those lanes. We gotta throw bricks tonight," said Clint, taking off his glove. "Feeling good tonight, Mo?"

"No."

Clint just looked at him for a moment, then picked up the team envelope and put his check in for the week. Chet had paid for his entire season up front, so each week Clint was the only one who had to pay. He always looked angry while doing it, felt that this was just one more way that he carried the team. As he put his payment in, Chet sat down next to him on the bench, nodding a hello to Mo.

"Welcome back. Got a cigarette?"

Mo tossed him the pack, watched him draw one out and toss the pack back. Then he heard the tell-tale sound of the lanes powering down before they would spring back to life, loaded with pins. As he turned toward Jake to ask him how he felt, he saw the familiar hairdo walking down the lanes.

"Hey, Gina, smoke your way down here and get some thirsty men a drink," Mo yelled over Jake's head, grinning as he saw Clint tense up. It always brought him a bit of happiness to see Clint uncomfortable, and he could always count on Gina's presence to bring it on. This probably helped Mo like Gina more than most.

Two years previously at the New Year's Eve Rainbow Bowling Party--a party where bowlers paid twenty-five dollars for a night of drinks, hotdogs, and endless bowling with multi-colored pins determining prizes when strikes were rolled--Gina, the cocktail waitress from The Eleventh Frame, kissed Clint at midnight. Right on the lips. She had done it on a dare. A dare from Mo.

Gina had a Rastafarian's hairdo, long blond streaks zigzagging through dark tresses. She favored tight clothes that showed off her body, but god help someone if they dared notice it. Her skin was an alabaster white, and she had dark eyes you knew were sizing you up from the moment

she saw you. She was in her mid-twenties, with the body of a teenager and the mind of one, too. Her chin pointed, her nose small, she'd be beautiful with a little hard work.

Everyone knew Clint had had a crush on Gina. It was rumored that under the guise of checking the air vents, Clint had once climbed through the ceiling and crept on his belly toward the women's restroom, where he had hoped to catch a glimpse of Gina peeing. What wasn't a rumor was that he had fallen through the ceiling over lane fourteen and dislocated his shoulder. No one, he managed to convince himself, ever suspected his true intention. It was at the next New Years Eve party that Mo dared Gina to kiss him at midnight. A dare she accepted after it was sweetened with a twenty dollar bet. So she kissed Clint. Afterward, his face had turned red, he immediately got the hiccups, then left the party. His crush on her ended that night. He couldn't be with a girl he saw as easy.

"What'd you want, Marty?" she said as she came onto their lanes. She called him Marty because she knew he hated it.

"You know what I want, but I'll take a beer instead. Bring one for my brother, too. Want one, Chet?"

Chet nodded, then looked at Clint, a grin creeping onto his own face. They all liked to watch Clint squirm, so

none of them would offer to order him a beer. Gina wrote down their orders, then took the orders from the other team as they got ready to start the first frame. Then she looked at Clint.

"Anything for you?" she said with little enthusiasm.

"Beer?"

"Is that a question, or an order, sweetie?" Gina said. Mo laughed, and Clint flushed.

"An order."

"I don't like men who order me around outside the bedroom, Clinty," she said, making Clint blush even harder.

"Can I have a beer, please?" he said, trying to recover.

"Begging. Even better." She wrote his order down and moved onto the next lanes to get their drinks.

"Maybe this'll be a fun night after all," Mo said, getting up to roll the first frame.

By the seventh frame of game two, it was starting to look like the Steamers would take 4 points. Clint obsessively checked on the Tumblers, and it became obvious they were dominating as well, so Clint was happy they would at least stay even. Jake had a bad night, however, rolling a good 15 under average. He was cherry picking at the splits and throwing chicken wings on his approach. With two

Greek churches in the first game, things had not gotten any better. After Mo rolled, he sat down and took the pen to mark Jake's frame. He watched his little brother's approach, saw his wobbly follow-through, and saw the ball hit Brooklyn the second time this game, leaving grandma's teeth all over the lanes.

"Watch it, Jake. You got double wood on the left," Clint said, watching his approach also. Jake just nodded, drew his ball from the return, and positioned his foot on the center diamond. On the follow-through, he almost fell and ended the frame open with a total pin-fall of seven. He sat back down next to Mo and shrugged, taking the pen back and watching as Clint began his pre-throw ritual. Jake found him as annoying as Mo did, but tolerated him much better.

"How's your leg, bro?"

"I'm getting dumped to third at Tucker," Jake said, picking up his beer for another sip.

"That blows. They run a mill on third?"

"Nope. Just presses. I'm gonna be miscellaneous man."

"Well that ain't too bad, is it? Is that what I did that summer?"

"Tomorrow's my last weekend overtime shift. They tried to cut my salary. Union's fighting it. Nice roll, Clint."



Clint had bowled a strike, and as usual he just smiled, walked back to the bench and sat down. Jake and Chet held out their hands for a congratulatory knuckle bump, but Mo didn't acknowledge Clint's roll.

"That place sucks. You need a new job, bro," said Mo, pulling another cigarette out of his pack as Jake marked Clint's strike.

"That'll be the day."

"What's Maggie say?"

"I don't go to midnights for another week."

Mo took a deep drag on his cigarette and watched Chet roll, thinking back to a conversation he had had with Dale about Maggie. They had been talking about women in general the week after Dale had met Liz.

"There's two kinds-a women out there. Girly-girls and femme fatales. That Liz, she's a femme fatale," Dale declared.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Well. She's a woman who don't take no shit. She's cool, ya know?"

Mo nodded. "What kind of woman is Denata then?"

Jake thought for a moment before answering. "Well, she's a girly-girl. She's mean and nasty and all, but when

it comes right down to it, she is a girly-girl. She's all feminine with doilies and shit at home, ya know?"

"What about Maggie then?"

"You mean Jake's wife?"

"Yeah."

Dale thought for awhile and a bit more carefully than he seemed to think about other things. He even took a break from the conversation and put some fries down for Mo. Then he came back and leaned on the counter again.

"Maggie's the rare third kinda woman."

"What kind is that?"

"The fatal femme. She'll kill everything in her path."

They had laughed about it, but Mo thought it pretty much true. It wasn't a secret in their family why Jake and Maggie had gotten married, but it remained a mystery why they had stayed married. Their mother Sandra had left Hank, and Mo saw no reason why someone would stay with a woman after it stopped being fun. Mo had asked Jake about it once, but that conversation ended with a fist fight, not an answer, so he had never asked again. They just had different taste in women, Mo figured, and also different ideas about what to do with them. Mo liked the one's who didn't get attached, and Jake liked the ones who stayed, even when you didn't want them to.

\* \* \*

After league, Mo typically walked home, and tonight was no exception. He took the transit as close as he could, then hefted his bag over his shoulder for the walk home. Walking around the corner from Superior onto East 111th, Mo could see his building in the distance. He lived near Garrett's Square. This area of town was renamed after a black inventor from the 1920s, who invented, among other things, the traffic light and the gas mask. Mo always ended up thinking about this guy when he walked past the square. Garrett Morgan installed the first traffic light in Willoughby and the second in downtown Cleveland. Honestly, he wasn't known because of this invention. It was the gas mask that got him his fame.

He invented it back in 1912, and he tested it by helping the police rescue someone from inside a water tunnel under construction beneath Lake Erie. There had been a gas explosion, and no one could save the guys trapped inside. Morgan ran inside the tunnel with his mask on, basically testing it, and saved several lives. Kind of fitting, Mo thought, while walking through this part of his neighborhood, to name an area of town that stinks after the

inventor of the gas mask. But Mo didn't think there was anything special about the guy. Sure, he saved some lives, but he did it to prove his invention worked. With anything in life, there was an agenda. He did this heroic act, ultimately, for the money.

As he got closer to his building, Mo saw Liz's blinds were closed. Either in bed, in the shower, or gone for the night. He knew she wouldn't answer the door or phone. Mo went straight to his apartment, which was always a reliable disappointment.

His apartment was on the third floor, right above Liz's. Both apartments were the same layout, but her's had something Mo's lacked. He called it "the woman's touch." She called it sanitation. They both agreed Mo's nearly complete lack of furniture was problematic, but they disagreed about the reasons. It wasn't until after they had started sleeping together that Mo let her into his apartment for the first time. He had to finally let her in or masturbate until he did.

"At least you have a dining room table."

"Poker table," he answered, turning on the living room lamp.

"So you can't eat on it?"

"Sure you can, just don't get any grease on the cards."

Liz walked around the room, taking it in with a critical eye. Younger than Mo by at least fifteen years--Mo had never asked her age--she didn't seem to have developed the ability to spot a losing bet. Even Mo knew his apartment should have ended their relationship. It was almost enough to make him clean it up and buy some furniture. But he liked his life, the temporary nature of his existence. Never owning something you cared about made picking up and leaving much easier. Thinking this somehow made his Spartan existence easier, even though he had lived in the same apartment for nearly ten years. He had a couch, a television, a table with seven chairs, a bed, and a dresser. What more does one need?

"Why seven chairs? I thought a good game was eight," Liz said, as she turned to check through his cupboards. That was one of the things Mo liked about Liz. She understood the game, if not the intricacies of the rules.

"Eight is good. Five is essential. But seven just feels right for me." Actually, Chet had broken the eighth chair, and now Mo made him bring his own folding chair when he played with them.

"Three plates. About thirty glasses," Liz said, looking in the cupboard.

"I don't cook for people."

"Well, I ultimately think that's probably a public service."

Mo watched her as she snooped. Drinking it in. Watching her adjust her take on him, seeing how his environment fit his projected character. It was the same thing he had done the first time he saw the inside of her apartment. Her apartment looked much different. Decorations, furniture, cleanliness. The place of someone putting down roots. It was the only flaw that Mo had detected so far. She certainly had no physical flaws in Mo's eyes, even if she had some in others'.

Her look first attracted him to her. That and the fact she totally ignored him the first time they met. He didn't exist. He had gone to Mickie's and saw her, sitting at the end of the bar as if she owned it. Long dark hair and dark eyes, wearing just a pair of jeans and a tank top. Her skin looked like a cup of coffee with just a touch of cream. He looked at her feet, saw black leather boots, and was hooked. He could have done without the nose-ring.

Their first meeting did not go well. He sized her up like he would any mark. Watched her actions, analyzed her

facial expressions as men approached. Looked for her tells. She was tough to read. Another plus. Occasionally talking on her cell, she didn't pay the room much attention. She was eating a plate of something, Mo couldn't tell what from his end of the bar, but it must have been something she would need a drink for, so he called Seth the bartender over.

"Who's that?"

"You mean Liz? That's Liz."

"Send her whatever she drinks."

"S'always somethin' different, Mo."

"Fine. Send her a beer."

"Bottle or tap?"

"Pick a beer she's drank before, and send it over."

Seth nodded and reached into the beer cooler, pulling out a Sam Adams. He popped the top off and set it down in front of her. She looked at Seth as he spoke to her, then said something quietly without ever looking in Mo's direction, even after Seth had motioned toward him. She looked back down at her dinner, taking another bite as Seth picked the beer up and walked over to Mo with a grin on his face, setting it down in front of him.

"What?" asked Mo.

"She said to tell you to 'save it for amateur night.'"

Then he turned, got another Sam Adams out of the cooler, and took it over to her. Even without the boots, Mo would have been hooked now for sure.

Three weeks later he saw Liz in the lobby of their building, heading for the stairs. She didn't look at him for more than a second before starting up the steps. He followed her up, and she stopped in the landing of two, searching for her keys, not standing by any door in particular. Mo smiled to himself as he passed her on the way to his own apartment. Cautious. Another plus. She still hadn't opened a door when he went into his own place. By the fourth time they saw each other in the building, she would nod to him and not hide which apartment she lived in. They were beginning to know each other, slowly becoming "hey" neighbors. The kind of neighbor you say "hello" to, or nod a greeting, but never take further. Hey neighbors don't have names. It is the only kind of neighbor Mo had been in the past, and it was the only kind Liz later told Mo she usually liked to have.

Keeping tabs on her proved to be difficult. She had no regular routine, worked odd hours, and he noted no regular visitors. It started to feel like he was staking out her apartment for a robbery or something, and it would be an



impossible job to pull with any degree of safety for time alone inside. Eventually he gave up trying to accidentally run into her again at Mickie's, and he just left a six pack of Sam Adams outside her door with a note on it. 3E. She left the empties outside of his door a week later with a note on them. *Thanks.*

Then he saw her at Mickie's again. He was there to watch the Brown's versus Steelers. Monday night football at its finest. There should be a few people in the bar that owed him from the previous week's game, and he was happy to be there because he actually came out ahead on his bets for the week. More wins than losses. Life was good. Then Seth appeared in front of him. He set down a Sam Adams.

"From Liz."

Mo didn't look away from the screen, but merely said, "Tell her Wednesday is amateur night, I might try then. Bring me a Sam Adams." Seth walked off, and Mo watched the game.

When he got home that next Wednesday afternoon, there was a six pack of Sam Adams outside of his door with a note on it. 2E. He picked them up and went down to her apartment, drank the six pack with her and spent the night.

They were not going to be boyfriend and girlfriend. They were not lovers. Liz told him that they were going to

be friends with benefits. This suited Mo just fine. There was something about Liz that existed for him that he liked other than her looks. Her attitude. She was the kind of girl that Mo knew would have his back in a bar fight and could hold her own. She would come to the bowling alley sometimes, and that's where she met Mo's life. She met Dale and Jake there, and she sat and talked to them for an hour at the Eleventh Frame. Every dirty joke, every jab at her, was met with a verbal body blow of her own, and she became one of the boys. Chet started calling them Ebony and Ivory. Liz found it funny, but it also became another reason Chet had to bring a folding chair after breaking Mo's. That, and the full-house he had won the hand with.

\* \* \*

Mo opened the door to his apartment and listened for footsteps above him. No noise at all came from upstairs. She must be out or in bed. Throwing his duffle on the floor, he saw his mail organized on the poker table. Bills in one big pile, junk mail in another, and a two letters in a third. He looked at the return addresses on them. Nothing of interest. He smiled as he thought about the organization of Liz, sorting his mail for him. The world she lived in had neat little boxes for everything that she dealt with.

She was by far the most organized spontaneous person he had ever met. He wondered if she had snooped at all. Probably not. If she had done it once, she would know how boring his life looked through the eyes of his apartment. He took his bag into his bedroom and saw his bed had been made, his sheets changed. He threw his bag on the floor, kicked off his shoes, and laid down on the bed. His trips to Lorraine Correctional always kicked his ass, and he needed some rest.

*God, he thought as he drifted into a much needed and overdue sleep. I hope this is a hint from Liz for Saturday night, and not a sign that I'm not becoming a fixer-upper.*

Saturday

Looking out the front window of his house was like looking out onto a landscape void of life. Jake opened the front door of his little two bedroom house and stepped out onto the snow-covered front stoop. Almost four inches last night, he would have to shovel the driveway when he got home. Jake turned the key in the dead-bolt--Maggie would be pissed if she woke up and the front door was not as locked as it could get--and turned to look down the street. Chet's Dodge was nowhere in sight.

Jake walked where he knew the sidewalk was, listening to the crunching of the snow between his work boots and the cement. Walking past the front window, he saw Maggie's cat, Mitts, inside the warm house, sitting on the window sill. Jake stopped and bent over, picking up a handful of snow. Mitts looked at him, then licked one paw. As the cat looked away, Jake threw the snow against the window, and the cat

tried to run, but instead fell off the sill. Jake smiled. As much as Jake hated snow, he hated that cat even more.

The only good thing about snow as far as Jake was concerned was the quiet it brought. He liked the soft crunching noise his boots made as he walked. Kind of like Styrofoam being stepped on, it always made him think of Christmas and presents. He looked at his watch. 6:17 a.m. Nothing on the street was moving. In fact, the only movement seemed to be the warm fog puffing from Jake's mouth. At the end of the driveway Jake had put a small bench, so he could sit and wait, so Chet wouldn't have to pull in. Chet's Dodge was not exactly a luxury car, and its rumbling usually woke Maggie. Jake wanted to make sure he didn't wake Maggie today.

The battered Dodge pulled around the corner and slid ever so slightly before straightening out. It crept up to Jake and stopped right in front of him, while exhaust puffed from the tail pipe. Jake pulled the door open and sat down, kicking his boots one at a time on the bottom of the door, knocking the snow off before grasping each pant leg one by one, swinging his legs in with balled fists of pants.

"Close the door man, it's fuckin'."

The car was a mess, and it never made any sense that he cleaned his boots off before getting into it, but he did it anyway. He saw the coffee sitting in a holder and reached for it. "Thanks," he said as he lifted it to his lips. Nineteen years of driving to work together, and Chet still didn't know Jake took sugar.

Chet was Jake's best friend by default. They had driven to Tucker Rubber together every morning, always in Chet's Dodge, for the last nineteen years. In high school, they had known of each other, but once at Tucker, they became fast acquaintances. They worked in the mixing department and were always coated with plant black when they clocked out. Jake didn't want to get the powdery chemicals on the interior of his own car. Maggie didn't like Chet, but put up with him to save their car. Chet had worked in mixing for eleven years, and his car was already ruined from it. Chet was a big man, close to three-fifty, possessed with a face not unlike an unsuccessful boxer's. He wore his hair shaved close to his scalp, and had the look of a man who had given up on his appearance, but didn't quite realize that he had.

"Watch the game last night?"

Jake shook his head, looking out the side-door window, then grunted a negative. "Maggie was watching some show."

Chet nodded as he turned onto Grant Street. "Rangers were on fire. Kicked some ass last night."

Jake took another drink of his coffee as he looked out the front window. He could see the plant in the distance and begin to smell it as well. It always smelled like burning rubber this close to Tucker. He often wondered about that--that and the plant black. Plant black was what the workers called the black powder that went into the rubber mixture. It ruined clothing, cloth, anything it touched.

The first day Jake worked in the milling department he was trained in mixing and got coated with plant black. When he got home to shower, he saw that it had penetrated his clothes and stained his skin. It took almost half an hour to shower it all off. He now knew why most of the guys in the plant had really short hair like Chet's. On his second day he asked his foreman if he should be wearing a face-mask or something to keep from breathing plant black in. His foreman said, "Asking questions like that is a good way to get fired." After that Jake just kept his mouth shut.

"Poker this Saturday now that Mo's home, right?"

"Can't do it," said Jake. "Got to spend some time with Maggie."

"Fightin' again?"

"Yeah. It's that fuckin' cat this time. I kicked him off the bed, and he made a noise like I tried to kill him or something. Maggie's all pissed off."

"Let it sleep on the bed, save yourself all this crap."

"I do. But all night it's meowing and rubbing-lookin' at us. From the time I got home 'til I went to bed. It was driving me nuts."

"I woulda kicked it too."

"I didn't *kick* it. I just pushed it off."

"Well, I woulda kicked it," Chet said as he made the turn into Tucker's parking lot. He pulled into a spot and turned the engine off. Jake just sat looking out the window at the plant. The black smoke billowing out of its stacks. The smell of the rubber. The waiting plant black. Inside, the plant was dingy, with cement floors and grey walls. The windows looked like they were tinted due to years of neglect. This was always the hardest part of the day for Jake--getting out of the car and going in to work. It had been worse when he worked midnights. He almost never saw the sun. Another reason Jake was glad that Chet drove him to work was because he knew one day, if he was driving himself, he would drive by the plant, get on the freeway, and never look back. Now that he was going back to



midnights, he wasn't sure what he'd do. Jake sat in the front seat and thought about this until Chet hit the hood of the car and yelled, "Come on." Jake pushed the door of the Dodge open with his shoulder, grabbed his coffee, and headed inside.

\*   \*   \*

Jake works on the mill in the mixing department. Two giant cast iron rollers roll together beneath a shoot fed by a conveyer belt. Crumbled rubber flows through the shoot onto the rollers, where it is crushed together, mashed. This raw material is blended on a series of mills that also cool and clean the rubber with a continuous flow of fresh water. Jake works on the first of these mills. It is the messiest. It is also the most dangerous.

During his training, a man with one arm hanging loose at his side came in and lectured about safety. His left arm never moved. He showed everyone where the emergency stop cord was. This cord also sounded an alarm. "If you start to get pulled into the mill, sound the alarm. Stop the mill, or you will end up like this." With that he lifted up his left arm with his right, showing them how it had been crushed and now hung useless. They were then told that when

the alarm sounded everyone would come running to help. When Jake mentioned that to his shop trainer later in the week, the trainer just laughed. He said the only people who come are the foreman and the janitor. The janitor brings a mop to clean up the blood.

The crumbled rubber pieces fall onto the rollers. These rollers spin together, forcing the rubber down between them. As chunks fell out, Jake and his mill-mate, Sandy, would pick them up and throw them back on top of the rollers. As fewer pieces fell and the raw rubber wrapped around the rollers, one of them would "broom" the rollers, helping to smooth the rubber out with a hand held roller that looked like a big broom, until it was covering the entire roll. The other would continue to pick up the pieces and throw them on, until it was time to cut.

Cutting was the job Jake hated most. Everyone hated this job the most. He would stand close to the rollers, with a knife, and cut the rubber off to send down another conveyer belt to a different set of rollers. If this was done properly, the rubber would roll off in a single long strip, only the knife guiding it. Because of the positioning of the belts, the rubber had to be fed into the conveyer with your right hand as you cut it with your left.

Jake was right-handed. More than once while cutting, he almost got pulled into the rollers by the sticky rubber.

Jake and Sandy were brooming the rubber when the rollers stopped. They looked at each other for a moment, waiting for an alarm bell, but none came. They both smiled—the line was down. Tucker Rubber was a union shop, so the line being down meant easy money. They would sit and wait while maintenance tried to get the line up and running.

Sandy sat down on a wrapped pallet of rubber and pulled his gloves off. As Jake sat down on a pallet across from him, Sandy shook a cigarette out of his pack and held the pack toward Jake. Jake shook his head and popped open a can of Coke. Sandy lit the cigarette, leaned his head back, and blew smoke toward the ceiling. He pulled the cigarette from his mouth and smiled at Jake, the gap where his front teeth had once been creating a look that was at once creepy and sad. "Gotta love break-downs. Paid to smoke." His breath smelled like a grocery bag.

Jake just nodded and looked around for Chet. They usually met when the line went down and played gin. He didn't want to spend this break with Sandy. Sandy had dropped out of high school in the tenth grade and started work at Tucker Rubber. That was twenty-three years ago, but Sandy already looked sixty. He had gray hair, and his face

was as bumpy as the rubber they were trying to smooth. He was missing one finger on his left hand. Jake never asked, and Sandy never brought it up.

It had taken a long time for the union boys to warm up to Jake. It probably had more to do with his dad than with him, but when he started work he had been skinny, short, with blonde hair, goatee. He did not fit the mold of a Tucker miller. Jake had taken a summer job at Tucker Rubber after his second year at community college. That summer had turned into almost twenty years. He had met Maggie in his English class the first semester, when they had to pair up for "peer review" of their essays. Jake always suspected it was the prof's way of getting a day free from work by making his students grade each other's papers. By the end of the second semester they were seeing each other regularly. In July, Maggie got pregnant. In August, they were married. Jake stayed at Tucker Rubber, and Maggie finished school. They stayed married and had one more kid. Twice they had split, but by the time the kids were school aged, they had learned to live in relative peace. Any other choice would say that their love had never been true. Maggie taught school, and Jake milled rubber. Maggie always said that Jake had worked at the wrong kind of rubber factory.

Jake looked over at Sandy, who had suddenly started laughing. He knew it was coming before it hit him--a flat piece of sticky rubber smacked into the middle of his back.

"Fucker," Jake said, looking over his shoulder at Chet, who was laughing like he had just told the funniest joke in the world. Jake peeled the rubber off of his back and threw it back at Chet, who dodged the throw and sat down.

"You tell Sandy about your pussy problem?"

"Bite me," said Jake, his cheeks reddening slightly. He didn't like things to get personal with Sandy. Chet was his friend--they had gone to high school together--so it was alright to talk with him. But he had a big mouth. The whole plant probably knew about his fight already. Jake was sure Chet's version was much more exciting than the truth.

"Got a problem with your old lady?" Sandy asked, leaning back on one hand.

"Nah."

"Yeah, he does. He hates her pussy," laughed Chet. Jake hit him on the arm hard enough to let him know he wasn't enjoying this conversation.

"Maggie's mad at me for pushing her cat off the bed." It wasn't entirely the truth. That was what made the fight come out, but it had been building all week. He took a

drink of his Coke while Sandy and Chet--both single-- offered him relationship advice. He thought about Maggie. She was a year older than him and had finished college while he worked at Tucker. The deal was that he would put her through school and then she would do the same for him. She was a teacher now at Garfield Elementary School out in Mentor. After her first year, Jake said he wanted to go back to school, but Maggie said he couldn't just yet. They needed the money for child care. The district wanted all of its teachers to get their Masters. It wasn't required, but it was forcefully recommended. It would mean more money. It was only two more years. Maggie argued that Tucker wasn't that bad, and he did make good money. Then she had another child, and the cycle began anew. Five years of breathing in burning rubber, and he earned a grand less than Maggie was after one year of teaching. Now he didn't even know the difference in their pay. They had separate accounts.

Jake loved his wife, but sometimes he didn't like her very much. He thought about her small hands, her little feet. She was barely bigger than the kids she taught. Waking up in the morning with her hand in the middle of his chest, her body curled against his own, always made him feel safe--loved. This morning he woke up, and she was on the far side of the bed, facing the wall. He felt very

alone as he got dressed. Only Mitts was aware of his presence.

The shop whistle blew, and they could hear the machinery warming up. The line was fixed. Sandy ground out his cigarette on the heel of his boot and headed back toward the mill. Chet shrugged an apology to Jake as he headed back. The foreman stopped him on the way to his station and told him to see him at the end of shift. He knew it would not be good news as he walked slowly to the mill.

\* \* \*

The garage door started to open as Jake got out of Chet's Dodge. Maggie was standing in the front window holding the opener. He waved, but she turned and walked away from the window. Chet started laughing. "Dude, she is pissed. You gonna tell her?"

Jake shut the car door without saying anything and walked up the driveway. Chet revved the engine once, then pulled away down the street. Jake looked back and could see his footprints in the snow on the driveway. Holes in the white, ringed in black. He picked up the shovel and went to work on the driveway.

He thought about Tucker Rubber and all the things he had gotten used to. The noise of the mills. The heat. The smell. The plant black. People like Sandy. He hated it. He thought about Sandy, imagining what his life must be like, wondered what he was doing right now. Probably at a bar, drinking. That is where he usually goes after work.

One time Sandy had invited Jake and Chet along with him to his favorite haunt. It was a beer-and-shot joint in Eastlake, with a pool table with a broken rack. No matter how hard you tried, you could never get a tight rack of balls. Even if you wanted to play, you couldn't ever get a good break. At one time it had been a beauty parlor, but it went bankrupt and sat vacant for almost two years. When a liquor license came open, this bar was opened. It still bore the name of the previous occupants. Jake thought it was amusing to drink in a bar called Angel's Salon.

Behind the bar was a woman of indeterminate age, with a face like wrinkled muslin and bright blonde hair with blackish-grey roots. Jake thought at first she was wearing a half shirt, but he realized as she poured his beer that it was just too small for her. Chet and Jake looked at each other and drank their beers in silence. Jake liked to think that she was Angel, and she had fallen hard. He imagined her with a cigarette in her mouth, cutting someone's hair,



talking about men, in rhythm with the clipping of her scissors. He could see her sweeping up at the end of the day, counting the day's take, shaking her head, knowing the end was near. Maybe she would go home at night to her empty apartment, make a TV dinner, then go to sleep. As he watched her fluid movements behind the bar, he noticed Sandy staring at Angel as well, but he knew he was imagining something else. Sandy was always talking about the "babe at the bar," and it could only be Angel. Jake shook thoughts of haircuts from his head as he finished his beer. They put a dollar on the bar and left Sandy alone with his Angel.

Jake finished shoveling the driveway and started on the sidewalk. Mitts was in the window again, looking at him suspiciously. He could see its mouth open and close, but couldn't hear the meowing through the glass. "Fucking cat," he muttered. The cold was wearing him down. He walked back toward the garage, stomping his feet clean of snow. He hit the button to close the garage door and began to take his clothes off. The garage was the safest place to undress after eight hours in Tucker. He put his clothes into a garbage bag and walked inside, wearing nothing but his boxers.

Maggie was standing in the kitchen, cutting carrots. Her back was to the door, and she didn't turn or say hello. Jake opened the basement door and threw the bag of clothes down the steps, shutting the door louder than he needed to. Maggie stopped cutting the carrots and put her hands on the counter, one holding a carrot, one holding the knife, and leaned forward, staring out the window. She started cutting again after Jake left the room. Maybe he would wait. Maybe he would tell her tomorrow.

The foreman had tried to break the news to him easily. His condition was starting to concern his coworkers. Not Sandy, he assured him, but others. They were worried about his safety. He had fallen several times in the past few weeks and twice had to pull the emergency stop. He couldn't stay on mill, or even in mixing. It was official. He was being moved to third shift, as the miscellaneous man.

Miscellaneous man was the position he had started in at Tucker. He would come in at 11pm and set up three punch presses. He would sit on his ass until 2:30am, when he would give three men a 30-minute break each. Then he would sit again until 6:30am, when he would tear the three punch plates down again. It paid two dollars less an hour, but at least he still had a job. At least he wouldn't be on disability yet. And the union would fight the pay decrease.

That was really what the fight with Maggie had been about over the past few weeks. She had urged him to investigate disability--she was concerned about his safety at the plant. Ever since he had had his multiple sclerosis diagnosis confirmed, things had gotten both better and worse for him. Better, because he and Maggie could understand what was going on, why the pains, why the unsteadiness and fatigue. Worse, because guilt now compounded their relationship problems. Jake was certain his marriage would have been over a year ago if it weren't for the MS. Just as they felt they couldn't divorce after the kids were born, now Maggie couldn't leave because of his medical condition. What would people think?

Jake showered and sat down to watch TV. Maggie stayed in the kitchen, talking on the phone and making dinner, which appeared on the table at the usual time. Jake passed the bowls to Melissa, his youngest daughter, who passed them on to Maggie. They were silent. Janie, their oldest, was out with friends and more than likely not coming home until long after they were all in bed. Melissa would rather have been out with friends as well. Dinner at the Wanska's was not a pleasant experience.

"Uncle Mo back?" asked Melissa to no one in particular.

"Yeah. Got home Thursday."

"How's grandpa?"

"The same. Pass the potatoes."

"I don't understand how Mo goes to see him. I don't understand how either of you do."

Jake set down the potatoes and looked at Maggie for the first time since dinner started and simply said, "Because he'd come to see us. That's how."

Dinner passed quietly, and Jake thought about his father, wondering if he really would go see him again.

1983

The river begins more than a hundred miles away from Cleveland in the rural county of Geauga. It flows in a nearly U-shaped route through Northeastern Ohio, and the Native Americans who lived there first gave the river its name. Cuyahoga. Crooked River. To natives it seems fitting that a river that ends in the city of Cleveland would have something to do with the word "crooked." Most of Cleveland seems to follow that maxim. But the river starts cleanly enough, flowing through rural and beautiful sections of the region, before being pinned in by industry and closed steel plants. It's not any mystery why the river has caught on fire several times, most famously on June 22, 1969. This fire captured the nation's attention and fueled the push for clean water acts. Songs were written. Stories told. And it wasn't even the worst and most damaging fire the river had seen. Those happened years earlier. But the river flows

through the city of Cleveland and empties into Lake Erie in an area known as the Flats, an industrial and warehouse district once crowded with strip clubs, bars, and urban eateries. Now only some of the strip clubs and lower-end bars remained. Few people spent their evenings or days in the Flats. It wasn't where respectable people imbibed. It was, however, where Hank Wanska saw his first dead body.

He had seen dead bodies before, of course, but this was the first time the body belonged to someone he knew. And it was the first time he saw a dead body so shortly after it became dead. He had seen Carine when she left the bar alone. She hadn't been drunk, which was new for her. She had seemed in good spirits and didn't bother to say good-bye to anyone. When she was upset she said goodbye to everyone in the place in one way or another. But now she was a corpse, her blonde hair dried red to her neck and shoulders, dress pulled back over her breasts, bruises on her forearms. Hank told the cops he just lit a cigarette and looked, unsure what to do. There was no payphone nearby, and her body was hard to see from the road where he was walking home from the bar. It was over the embankment, almost to the river itself. He only saw it because he had stopped to piss. He said he almost didn't call because he knew if he called there would be questions. If only he

didn't know her, he wouldn't have cared. But then someone saw him looking over the embankment, and Hank walked to the nearest building and asked to use the phone.

Hank told them how to find the body, what she was wearing, and her name. They asked him his name, and not thinking, he told them. He could have just left. He could have walked away. He later said it was his one big mistake in life.

"Stay where you are, sir, and stay on the line until the ambulance and cruiser get there. They're on the way. How do you know this person?"

"Listen, can I just hang up and wait for--"

"I need you to stay on the line, Sir. How do you know her?"

"She lives in my building."

"When did you last see her?"

"Tonight at the bar."

"What time did she leave?"

"Listen, I'm just walking here, okay?" It went on like this for nearly 4 minutes before the police cruiser arrived. For the first time in his life, Hank was glad to see one. It pulled up next to him, and two cops got out. He knew one of them from the bowling alley where he used to bowl with his kids. Maybe he could get home soon after all.

He knew this cop wouldn't care much about Carine. She wasn't pretty, she wasn't young, and she wasn't what most people would call a respectable citizen. She, like Hank, was on the outside looking in. The only difference was that Hank knew he was, and Carine hadn't.

Carine lived on the same floor of the Alcott Arms that Hank did. Hank in 4C, Carine in 4A. They weren't all that friendly. They were nodding neighbors. At the bar they might say hello, but little more than that. Carine had higher aspirations than Hank, but she would never achieve them. She had started as a paralegal for a firm off Public Square, but they soon found her drinking a bit of a distraction and let her go. She bounced from job to job, finally landing as a hostess at one of the bars in the Flats. Her job lasted almost as long as she did. A few weeks as a hostess at Pinky's—a stripper joint--led to more drinking, and when she got fired from that job she began to devote her time to finding a way out of the Flats and Cleveland for good. Hank decided that her plan must not have worked out quite the way she had envisioned.

Watching the cops "secure the scene for the detectives," Hank began to wonder how people would react when they heard the news. He wondered if they would react at all. Carine hadn't been well liked. She was one of the



few Pinky's regulars didn't give head in the VIP room. She never bought a round. She thought she was better than everyone else. She had the foolish nature that often bred ambition, not an admirable trait for someone living in this part of town. It was typically viewed as only leading to trouble and let down. Hank lit a cigarette, and the cop he didn't know told him to "cross the fucking street to smoke that thing and don't leave." He exhaled his answer and crossed the street, surprised at how little he cared about Carine, glad only to have finally gotten to see her tits, even if it was under these circumstances.

Hank leaned against the brick wall of a building and watched the circus. Pictures, police tape, every few minutes someone coming up and asking him a question. It wasn't long before a crowd started to form and the cops got testy. Thankfully, the detectives finished with him, and he was able to move on. He walked out of the Flats and hailed a cab. He as far as five dollars would take him, then got out and walked the rest of the way home. By the time he got there, there was a cruiser waiting. They arrested him.

After a lengthy trial, he was down at Lorraine Correctional, doing life for Murder 2. His story remained that he had just been walking home when he found her body. He didn't rape her. He couldn't remember where the

scratches came from on his arms and chest. He had just been looking at the body when the maintenance man across the street saw him. Who knows where the blood came from.

Jake and Mo visited him almost every week those first few years. They were both still kids. Mo had graduated high school, Jake had a year left. Their mother had left long before and didn't bother to come back to get them. Even after Jake got married and had a kid, he still visited his father. Mo didn't make it as often as Jake did, and it was on one of his solo visits that Jake discovered the truth. After years of denial, years of excuses, he knew his father did it.

"You bring some smokes, kid?" Hank had asked. Jake handed him the carton, and Hank smiled, pulling out a pack and ripping it open. "One of the only pleasures left, ya know? All this cause the fucking cunt wouldn't put out. Cunt."

It was the closest Hank had ever come to talking about that night, and it was close enough. Jake's visits slowed to maybe once a year. He was, after all, still his father. He never told Mo, but suspected he knew anyway.

Sunday

Mo woke up late Sunday morning. Liz was already showered and drinking coffee in her kitchen. He stretched, yawned, and thought about the previous night. Liz had wanted to stay at Mo's. She had her research spread out all over the dining room of her apartment. It really wasn't an argument, it wasn't a point of contention. Mo didn't care where he fucked, as long as he got to fuck. But they ended up at Liz's nonetheless, and Mo learned a little more about her life.

He had found out a few weeks previously that Liz was both a waitress and a graduate student at Case Western. He was surprised. It was an expensive school. To pay for it, she said, she taught a few "undergrad classes," as she called them, and waitressed a few nights a week to make rent. When Mo asked about what she was studying, deep down he honestly didn't care. It wasn't until she became somewhat evasive that his interest grew, and he took to

snooping when she wasn't watching. The best he could figure out was that she was majoring in either anthropology or sociology. Those were the types of books that littered her bookshelves and desk. It wasn't until one night of Sam Adams and "bumping uglies," as Mo liked to call their lovemaking, that he asked and she answered. She was a social-anthropologist. That should have ended it. It almost did. Until last night. Now he wishes they had fucked at his place so she could clean up her work and he could have fucked in peace.

Last night when they got to her place, she had gone to the bathroom. Bored, he went to the kitchen to get another beer and glanced at the dining room table on his way to the fridge. He saw the title of a paper being written by Elizabeth Perkins, PhD candidate in anthropology. It was called "Mating Habits of the Lower-Middle-Class-Male." He glanced through it until he heard the toilet flushing. It had phrases like "socio-economic strata" and "aggressive courtship ritual." It was written in a way that made him think this was firsthand information for Liz. He put the paper down and continued on for his beer.

After Liz fell asleep, Mo got up to go smoke a cigarette on her balcony. This time he took the clump of paperwork from the table with him. He couldn't understand

most of it, but he got the general idea. Then he saw an email from Liz another grad student. It was talking about her subject. How he seemed to be getting attached. Was she going to be ethically challenged due to direct involvement with a research subject? Should she discontinue the experiment? Mo wasn't sure, but he was pretty certain he was the "socio-economically challenged" male discussed in the paper. It was not flattering.

Now that it was the next morning and he had had time to sleep on all he had learned, he decided it really didn't matter to him that he was a research topic for a grad student. An attractive grad student. One that liked to fuck. He made the decision to let it run its course for now. He wouldn't interfere with her research. He was getting too attached? He would change that perception. All he would do with her from now on was fuck. Content with his decision, he got up to shower and get ready for dinner with Kalle.

\* \* \*

Kalle had gotten into town on Saturday night, but didn't come to see her brothers until Sunday afternoon dinner at Jake and Maggie's. She knew Mo had been to see their father and didn't care to talk about it until she had to. It was a

constant topic of conversation when the children got together. Hank Wanska. Father, bowler, murderer.

Of course it was still a matter of contention among the children whether he was in fact guilty of the crime he was convicted of. Kalle wasn't certain. She suspected that he was, but she could never know for sure. Mo shrugged it off, saying he thought his father was railroaded. His girlfriend, Liz, pretty much remained quiet, taking it all in with an unnatural interest in Kalle's eyes. Maggie tended to pick these moments in the conversation to clear dishes or to get everyone a refill on their coffee or a plate of korpu, the Finnish cinnamon toast that was a staple of every Wanska household. One of the traditions from Hank that all his children seemed to embrace. The women at the Wanska tables seemed to avoid the topic of Hank's guilt or innocence. Maggie and Liz never truly knew him. Kalle did. Her interest in Hank's conviction was cursory at best. He might not be guilty of this crime, but in her mind he deserved to be in prison.

Rarely did the conversation turn to their mother, Sandra. It wasn't so much a lack of interest as it was a lack of knowledge. They knew that she had left. They knew that she had been beaten by their father more than once and that she tried to hide it from her children. They knew that

once she was gone, she never contacted them again. She had left in the middle of the night, with only the clothes on her back. Hank filed a missing person's report. The police found it odd that she had not taken her clothes or any money from the household accounts--even though Hank never gave her access to them. She had simply disappeared from their lives. Things would be different in the Wanska household now. What only Kalle knew, she felt, was that when her mother had left, Kalle took her place in Hank's world.

The household of Hank Wanska after the departure of Sandra was rather sedate most of the time. The children knew to keep their rooms clean, keep the kitchen clean, basically keep everything clean so that they could avoid their father's wrath. She cooked and cleaned. She took most of the physical abuse when things were not done to Hank's standards. Mo and Jake tried to do their best, but it wasn't until Kalle took on Hank's discipline tactics that they truly pulled their weight. Jake took the brunt of her discipline. He was--after all--the youngest and weakest. Mo might have hit back.

When Kalle was 19, she left home. She didn't just leave the Wanska household. She didn't just move out of Ohio City or Cuyahoga County. Kalle moved out of state.

When she finally got her own apartment in Fort Wayne, Indiana, and started her job as a waitress, she felt she finally understood her mother's motivation. She, too, had no desire to see her brothers or father again. It was as if she had shut off a part of her life she wished she had never lived. But it wasn't shut off, it was merely shut down. Something she didn't realize until she had been through a series of unsuccessful relationships.

When Kalle was twenty-three, she began to realize she had turned into her father. He was in prison at this point, and she really didn't care. Unlike her mother, she had stayed in contact with her brothers. She tried to come home a few times a year to visit since their father had been sent away, but she saw the look in Jake's eyes when he saw her and imagined that the same look must be in her own eyes when she thought of her father. It was then that she went into therapy. She learned about things like post-traumatic stress disorder, survivor's guilt, parentification, and all the things that her therapist told her she had gone through. Her fear of abandonment came from her mother's departure and her father's abuse. Ten years of therapy, and she still wasn't married, so she gave up. But at least she could sit in the same room with her brothers and not feel hated anymore.



At fifty-two, Kalle--divorced twice and currently single--felt like a perogie on sticks. Seventy-five pounds overweight, with thin mousy brown hair and no breasts to speak of, she had given up on a family of her own and taken Jake's kids as her own. She was super-aunt. When she came into town, she would stay with Jake and Maggie and try to stay out of their fights. She never took sides, and she tried never to comment. She saw a lot of her father in Maggie's attitude toward Jake. So much for the theory that only women wanted to marry their fathers.

There was no abuse that she could see. Jake was a wonderful father and a good brother. He seemed to want to be a good husband. But Kalle also saw elements of Sandra in Maggie that she didn't care for at all. An inattentive mother, a distracted wife, and a horrible housekeeper. Kalle kept these opinions to herself, however, as she didn't want to be separated from her nieces. It was as if Maggie encapsulated the worst elements of both Hank and Sandra, and Jake found them appealing. The only brother who had done well, as far as Kalle was concerned, was the least likely to make something of himself in any other way. Mo.

Kalle loved Liz. She didn't like how attractive Liz was; it made her feel even more like a perogie. As much as she loved mashed potatoes stuffed into a noodle, she didn't

want to feel as if she were one. Maggie was cute, but Liz was beautiful. Being around them both was never easy, but at least Liz talked to her, even if she wasn't always thrilled by the topics. Liz loved to talk about family and wanted to know everything about Mo when he was a child. It seemed cute, endearing even, but also a tad bit creepy.

She had sat next to Liz at Sunday night dinner, and they were just about done with the korpu. It was what Kalle missed most about Ohio. She could not get a good korpu in Fort Wayne. There was something about the atmosphere in Ohio that helped the bread dry out in just the right way. It made it crisp, easy to break. And the cinnamon stuck to the dried bread in just the right way, like rust on metal. She had put the last bite of her korpu in her mouth when Mo brought up the topic they had all avoided throughout dinner. The nieces had left the table, so now it was safe.

"So dad says hi," Mo said. He had switched from coffee to his after dinner Rolling Rock.

"He ok?" asked Jake. Maggie stood up, clearing the dishes. No one offered to help.

"His commissary is running low. I threw in \$50."

"He spends it all on cigarettes. He'll get cancer soon enough," said Jake.

Liz and Kalle just sat and listened to the two brothers talked about their dad. After a cursory discussion of his current condition at Lorraine Correctional, the conversation turned into a rerun of all the conversations they had had over the past years. It was as if some conversation from the late '80s had cloned itself. Even Maggie's unusually loud cleaning of the kitchen seemed like *deja vu*.

Maybe it was Liz's presence that gave her the idea. Maybe it was her own desire to know. Maybe it was the third *korpu*. But this time, Kalle decided, it wouldn't just be the boys.

"You think he did it?" she said, almost in a whisper. She had never asked before. It had always been understood that, when they were all together, they would assume his innocence. Separately, they made their own decision. Together, they had to stand as one.

"What?" said Mo.

"You know what."

"Smoked too many cigarettes?" Mo added, staring right at Kalle. Liz shifted in her chair, taking a deeper interest that didn't go unnoticed by Mo.

"You know what I mean. Do you think he killed her?"

"What do you think?"

"I don't know," said Kalle. She wanted his thoughts, not her own. She looked down at the table for just a moment to collect herself, then stared right back at Mo. "What do you think?"

"I know what I think. How about you, baby brother? Want to tell big sis what you think?"

Jake looked at his brother and sister. They were both quiet, looking at him. He opened up his own bottle of beer and took a sip, then shrugged.

"Come on. Tell your sis what you think. Tell me. Did dad kill her?" Mo said. He had that grin on his face. The same one he had when he was torturing Clint at league. He was playing. Having fun. Jake was sick of it. He swallowed his beer and answered.

"Of course he fuckin' killed her."

Kalle didn't know what to say at this point. No one did. Liz was still quiet, taking it all in, working on her own bottle of Rolling Rock. That was one thing Kalle didn't like about her. She drank nearly as much as Mo did. After a few moments of silence, Kalle spoke up again.

"How can you be so certain? I thought you thought he was innocent?"

"I play the game like you do," Jake said, his voice a bit shaky. The sounds of cleaning in the kitchen had come

to a stop. Maggie was listening, but staying clear. "We are all kidding ourselves about this shit. He's guilty. We all know it."

"How do you know it, baby brother?" asked Mo, that grin still on his face.

"He told me."

Kalle and Liz looked at each other, almost like characters in an old-time melodrama. Then they both looked back at Jake, who was shaking. The stress was getting to his MS. He looked a bit pale.

"Let's change the subject," offered Kalle.

"Oh no. No fucking way. You started this, sis, let's finish it. Did he come right out and tell you? Did he say how he did it? What he used? Did he fuck her first?" Mo asked, starting to show his temper. Liz put her hand on his arm, but he brushed it away, and she sat quiet.

"No. He just hinted at it. But he wanted me to know. He wanted me to know he killed her."

"So you don't know for sure. You're guessing," laughed Mo.

"Fuck you. I know what I know. He killed her."

"Both of you just stop it. We all know he killed that poor woman. Let's just drop it," said Kalle angrily.

"He strangled her and would have left her on that hill right where anyone could find her. He just didn't get away in time is all. He killed her, so drop it," said Jake, standing up to take his own plate to the kitchen.

"Oh. Her. Yeah, he killed her," said Mo, leaning back in his chair.

"What are you talking about?" said Kalle to Mo.

"Mom. I thought we were talking about mom. Dad mentioned that to me this last trip. Something about her body being found," said Mo, rather quietly.

The last sound before they all left the table was Jake's plate, crashing to the floor.

VITA

Graduate College  
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Perry Sundberg

Address:

2101 W. Warm Springs Rd.  
Apt:4323  
Henderson, NV 89014

Degrees:

Bachelor of English, 1999  
Kent State University

Special Honors and Awards:

President Sigma Tau Delta, International English Honor  
Society, 1997  
Elected Eastern Region Student Representative, Sigma Tau  
Delta, 1998

Thesis Title:

Lake Affect: A Novel Excerpt and Other Stories

Thesis Examination Committee:

Chairperson, Mr. Richard Wiley, MFA  
Committee member, Mr. Douglas Unger, MFA  
Committee member, Dr. Kelly Mays, Ph.D.  
Graduate faculty representative, Dr. John Swetnam, Ph.D.