### The Battered Suitcase

**Volume 1 - Issue 1 - July 2008**

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The Art of Being Human

The Battered Suitcase focuses on literature, poetry, and art that explores the human experience — for it is our stories that make us human.

From the earliest moments of our history, human beings have been sharing stories — defining in each moment of time who we are, what we are and what we’re capable of. In a world filled with danger, our ability to share knowledge and wisdom through narrative may perhaps have been the only survival edge we ever had.

Humanity is not defined by its shape, the number of its legs or the color of its fur. It is defined by those things that are only recognizable to other humans; the ideal of compassion, the practice of tolerance, the monster of rage, the paralysis of fear and the necessity of love. And it is our stories that teach us how to recognize them.

In the second issue of The Battered Suitcase, performer and poet Lucie Barât serves up a breakfast of eggs and angst in Joe, Ham and Eggs. E.S. Parkinson paints a stark portrait of birth and death in The Red Shoes while Eric McKinley reminds us that in love, like comedy, timing is everything. Award-winning author Melanie Haney portrays a grief-stricken mother and her ritual for redemption in Milk. Michael Mirolla's Triptych silver-plates the clouds of madness and Malachey’s humorous Perceptive Norm offers a new perspective on the old tag line "A world turned upside down". Stephanie Davies reminisces on adolescent regrets and Sarah MacManus draws a fine line between lust and passion in a tale of art and angst in the Midwest.

Lyrical contributors this month are Adam Franklin-Williams and Moist Bamboo of Welsh acoustical pop group Toy Horses whose refrains run the emotional scale of heart-breaking pathos to whimsical self-satire.

Poetry selections for July include the editor of Tiger’s Eye poetry journal, Colette Jonopulos. as well as novelist David LaBounty, philosopher Duane Locke, Colin James, Joseph Goosey, Kat Lillian Steiger, Richard Fein and the Senryu-like gems from poet and composer Suchoon Mo.

Each contributor featured in the July issue takes a turn at giving the reader a glimpse into the human condition. Different voices, different viewpoints, all a part of the story that is the human experience.

“Storytelling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it.” ~ Hannah Arendt

Fawn Neun
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The kettle starts its grumbling and spluttering almost as soon as Tatum switches the life into it. Her brows draw together in anxious union as she moves to the kitchen door to ease it soundlessly shut. It's the time of the morning when life seems deafeningly loud, perhaps because the solitude seems almost sacred. It's the time of the day that Tatum likes to herself; she likes to gather herself... she likes to be the only one conscious to hear the sounds of everyday lurch into action.

On this particular morning, at this particular time, the sounds of her life gearing up are in danger of being snatched by a youngish man languishing in her uncomfortable futon bed. A youngish man of 30 odd years (the specifics having not been accurately exchanged), 30 odd years and the name Joe, a rather distressed pair of once indigo jeans, a faded T-shirt (black and white striped), a very strong probability of a hangover and a love of Brazilian films. As far as Tatum knew, this is what Joe already possessed — whether he was in the habit of enjoying private, early mornings, she did not know.

She felt imprisoned in her kitchen, moving about in careful, pantomime motions so as to preserve the quiet, re-file her thoughts and maintain the equilibrium of her sanity. She could not at this moment—this ritualistic, intimate moment—decide whether or not she actually wanted a 30 (odd) year old boyman with questionable clothing decisions and a love of foreign films snoring through the duvet her aunt had bought her for Christmas. She didn't know if she was numbed enough to be reckless or relaxed enough to be open to someone, or whether she just wanted to sit with her own stark loneliness for the foreseeable future. She seemed to find something bracing in the acute awareness of herself that resulted from staunch independence and the confiding company of her own mind.

She felt a lurch in her stomach and an involuntary shudder domino down her spine. Now she was feeling repulsion for the invited intruder. Now she was feeling annoyance at herself and the way she was feeling; the inevitable inconsistency of her behaviour as she'd guiltily usher him from the house avoiding all self-examination of her unintelligible emotions. Hating herself for not understanding her self — hating herself for being so earth shatteringly terrified of the one thing she craved. Oh dear. The kettle climaxed and the flurry of steam and gurgles began to subside. The decision Tatum had reached required instant action. She had decided the best thing to do was make breakfast.

The reliable fall-back of activity often managed to bury any internal rebellion. She thrust herself into motion flinging back cupboards and clattering through the cutlery drawer. The new plan was to be innocently loud so as to penetrate Joe's slumber. To be mid-activity when he squinted into the kitchen half dressed, ruffling his hair, drawn to the bustle of his missing bed-mate. She had a strong position in this role of offering breakfast, if only she'd thought to dress first, she could avert any misconception that they'd be taking a post breakfast tumble in the sheets.
Tatum tried to rein her thoughts back from despair as she smacked eggs against the lip of a Pyrex jug. She felt disgusted at her inward lack of cool as she unsheathed the eggs from their shells and snatched up a folk with which to beat them around in time to her mind:

"There's something wrong with you Tatum, there is something really wrong..."

She just wanted space back. Just the lonely click of the kettle as it reheated the water for a second cup of coffee... just her thoughts clanging around an empty kitchen... nobody to challenge her fragile grip on herself or the handy distance of her dreams.

But not this tarnished morning. No. This was the beginning of yet another mistake to be quickly aborted, erased and rewound. This was to be another afternoon sat alone berating herself for her rash impulse and immense lack of judgement. This was going to be a day spent cleansing herself once Joe had been extradited from her house, the egg pan had been washed and the ham been consumed.

Maybe she'd call her friends and wash the experience away in a bar. Yes, that's what she needed; a night out with her friends, a night out in her comfort zone, a night soaked with whiskey and possibility where her spirit felt free. Maybe she'd meet somebody to take her mind off herself, to engage her from her loneliness... maybe... She just had to get through this morning and eat her breakfast: Joe, ham and eggs.
A Gypsy's Clip
William de Rham

Under the coiled Chinese dragon and its great bumbershoot, I fought my brother, the colonel. I loved freedom. He worshipped Franco. I beat him bloody. He exiled me to America. I never saw or spoke with him again. Franco is gone. Most of the communists are too. Still, I miss my brother. ~ Vicente Diego

Amidst the bright light of seven a.m., Michael Olvidas flashed a grin at the hotel’s doorman and made his entrance onto La Rambla. He did not see the frown of distaste cross the old portero’s face.

It had rained only an hour ago, and though a spring sun now favored Barcelona, its streets still were wet. And the air was so cool — too cool for the sandals, black cargo shorts, and T-shirt Michael wore. But with his spiked blond hair, and the diamond stud in his ear, he thought himself quite the fashion plate. He turned up the collar of the black leather blazer Marci bought him in Florence and set off on his quest.

Marci had sent him to fetch tea and fresh-squeezed orange juice from La Boqueria, Barcelona’s ancient market. He’d pled for room service. After a night of lovemaking (“one fabulous fuck-a-thon” Marci called it), that would have been romantic. And Marci had the dough. But she was “double-dammed” if she’d pay her “left tit for hot water, a ten cent tea bag, and some fuckin’ Valencia oranges!” Michael couldn’t argue.

From an old woman’s flower stand came the sweet smell of fresh-cut roses. The small parakeets and canaries she sold filled the bright air with song. As Michael passed, he saw the woman mount a rickety chair to hang a cage. One chair leg was shorter than the others and as she reached, she wobbled. Tongue between her teeth, she froze, steadied herself, and hung the cage. Then she carefully climbed down for another.

Michael almost stopped to help. I could hand her the cages, he thought, or hold the chair, or hang them myself. That would be the gentlemanly thing, what Abby—uh, uh, can’t keep Marci waiting. Giving the woman his brightest grin, he quickened his pace.

He and Marci had strolled La Rambla only last night. Now, in the sunshine, he saw he hadn’t seen a thing. He’d been too entranced by the lights and people of the outdoor cafes; plus the promise of paella, sangria, and four-star sex in their five-star hotel; plus the woman begging for money.

“Are y’all American?” she had asked. “Oh Gawd, please say y’all’re Americans!”

Michael could tell she was from someplace south of the Mason-Dixon: Mississippi maybe, or Alabama.
“We are,” he had answered, arrested by her thin but top-heavy figure and her flowing brown hair. Marci hooked her arm in his to pull him away.

“Well I’m American too and I need y’all’s help. Someone stole my bag. And it had everthang in it. Passport, wallet, room key — everthang. I ain’t eaten since yesterday and it’s Memorial Day weekend and the embassy’s closed. Can you help? Please? Just some Euros. Maybe ten? So’s I can get something to eat? Everthang’s so expensive here.”

Michael couldn’t think of anything worse than being stranded in a foreign city with nothing. As he dug into his pocket, Marci cut in: “Who you think you’re talking to? Couple of hicks? We get that crap ten times a day back in New York! Only lots more original. Come on, Mickey.”

By that time he’d had out his wad: some Euros and his ATM card clasped by the silver money clip from his grandfather. Stepping from the shadows, the woman eyed the money hungrily. She was much older than Michael first thought. Deep furrows creased the sides of her mouth and nose and yellow-gray streaks infested the hair he’d found so luxurious. And she smelled ripe, as if she hadn’t bathed in days, as if she were decaying.

The woman’s hand darted for Michael’s money, revealing an arm pocked with festering needle marks. Marci drew back in disgust.

“Fuckin’ junkie!” she spat. “Get the hell away from us, ya fuckin’ junkie!”

“Please!” the woman cried. “I’m so hungry! Please, Mister?”

Michael looked down at his silver-clipped wad. The rod of Asclepius, the snake entwined staff that was the Greek symbol for the healing arts, glinted. He separated bills from the clip.

“Oh no!” Marci had cried. “We didn’t work like dogs to have you throw it away on this loser. Come on.” She pulled him towards their paella.

Two hours later, they saw the woman again, talking to another couple: same spiel—bag stolen and nowhere to go — but different accent and embassy. The woman’s new targets wore identical T-shirts emblazoned with Britain’s Union Jack. Now the woman affected the rounded tones of a Londoner and it was the British Embassy that was closed for Bank Holiday.

“See?” Marci said. “What’d I tell you? Just another junkie hustler! No different from New York. What’s Europe got we haven’t got? Huh? I knew that accent was phony the minute she opened her mouth. And if I could tell, why couldn’t you, Mr. Actor?”

The memory of it made his face burn. Again he quickened his pace.

He arrived at La Boqueria only to find it closed. As he stood before the tall, stained-glass entrance wondering what to do, a policeman approached.

“A las ocho, Señor. A las ocho.”

Confusion clouded Michael’s face. He remembered only enough high school Spanish to ask for the bathroom.

“A las ocho, Señor!” the officer insisted. “El mercado es cerrado hasta entonces. Vuelva a las ocho.” He waved his hands to shoo Michael away, but Marci wanted tea and orange juice. Michael stood his ground, looking even more confused.

“He means you should go away now,” spoke a hoarse voice behind him.
Michael turned to see an old man in a tan blazer and white shirt open at the throat. His yellow silk ascot and ivory-handled walking stick bespoke a man of refinement. But his hands told a different story. Gnarled and nicotine-stained, they ended in long, pointed nails rimmed with dirt. Michael appraised the man again. Short and stocky with rounded shoulders and rheumy, brown eyes, he reminded Michael of a small bear.

“The market opens at eight and the policeman says for you to come back then,” the old man explained.

Michael turned to the officer and said “Gracias,” which he pronounced, “grassy ass.” The old man cringed as the policeman’s face turned sullen. Clearly, he wanted to arrest Michael for his pronunciation. Instead, he grunted and went his way.

“Thank you,” Michael said.

“My pleasure,” the old man replied. “Perhaps you would care to join me for a coffee until the market opens? Then I can show you where to get the best deals.”

The old man’s gaze made Michael uncomfortable.

“Can’t,” he replied quickly. “Gotta’ get back. Woman’s waiting.”

“Are you sure? There’s so much I can show you. I know the best butchers. How would you like one of our fine Spanish hams? I can get you one for what we Barcelonans pay. If they think you’re a tourist, someone in there might charge you double, maybe triple—”

“That’s nice of you. But, I have to—”

“And the fruit! Anything you could hope for — figs, mangoes, pineapples—anything! Or maybe some flowers for your lady? They have all sorts of beautiful flowers in there. Look, you can see them setting them out.”

“No. Like I said, my woman...”

“Well, if your woman waits. But let me offer some advice. To give thanks in Spanish, don’t say ‘grassy ass.’ Try saying it as your word ‘gracious’ with a slight lisp on the c. Then say it fast. Say it with style, so that it comes out ‘Grathias.’”

The man’s manner had seemed gentle, but when he said “Grathias,” his voice hardened and he struck a pose reminiscent of a matador preparing to strike. The violence of it jarred Michael.

“You’ll find people friendlier if you do,” the old man concluded softly.

“Grathias. I’ll remember that.”

“Are you sure you don’t need my help?” the old man persisted.

“No. My people are from here. I know what I’m doing.”

“Ah. Then I bid you buenos días.” The man strolled off, the silver tip of his cane tapping.

Michael continued down La Rambla. He wasn’t going back to Marci, not without tea and juice, but he wanted to be away from the old man and his sad-eyed solicitude. And coffee sounded good; he was dying for coffee. Screw it, he thought, Marci can just wait. He took a table on the patio of the Café de L’Opera and, pointing to pictures on the menu, ordered coffee and rolls.
As he waited, he gazed across La Rambla to study the Gran Teatre del Liceu, Barcelona’s 160 year-old opera house. With its sand-colored façade, its columns and balconies, and its arched, two story windows, it seemed to Michael a palace. Between the windows, two long, red banners ran down the wall of the building. Like sails, they billowed in the breeze. As they filled, Michael gasped.

“A problem, Señor?” asked the waiter, setting down rolls and coffee.

“The banners,” said Michael, pointing, “what are they for?”

“For the festival to commemorate the 85th anniversary of the birth of Don Vicente Diego. He was a very great writer, a Barcelonan. Have you heard of him?”

“Yes,” Michael whispered, unable to take his eyes off the banners. The face of his grandfather — Abby’s face — stared back.

* * *

Had Michael known of the festival honoring his grandfather, he never would have come to Barcelona, no matter how badly Marci wanted a tan. He’d never forgiven the old man.

They’d been close once, so close Michael called him Abby, short for abuelo, the Spanish word for grandfather. The day after his seventh birthday — the day Michael lost both his parents to a boating accident on the Hudson — Abby took him to live high in the sky on east 72nd.

The apartment wasn’t what one might expect for a man whose plays and films earned millions: just two bedrooms, a kitchen, and a living room with Abby’s desk, an old TV, and lots of books. Widowed, Abby was a man of Spartan tastes who refused to have more than he needed. But the view was spectacular, especially at night.

“Look, Michael, at all the lights,” Abby would say, lifting him up to see out the window. “See how they sparkle like a pirate’s treasure?”

Abby immediately established their routine. Mornings, sleepy-eyed, he would wake Michael with sweet, milky coffee and a buttered roll. “Miguelito, it is time to greet the new day,” he would urge softly. He could still feel Abby’s warm hand as they walked to school, still see his grandfather—so dignified in his three-piece suit and yellow bow tie — wave from outside the school gate. “Learn well, Miguel!” he would call.

Afternoons, they would work together: Abby writing at his desk while Michael sat across from him at a TV table doing his homework. Sometimes, the scratch of the old man’s pen would pull him away from his math or science and he would watch as words poured from Abby onto the page. He loved the grace with which that strong, blunt-fingered hand danced. It was as if God or a ghost whispered in Abby’s ear and he simply copied out what he heard.

By the time Michael started high school, he could help Abby with his work. Evenings, the old man sat back and listened as Michael read aloud the pages completed that day. Michael loved Abby’s plays and stories. They were so stirring. They spoke of freedom and self-determination and what the world might be without tyranny and want.

Going with Abby to the Broadway opening nights, the film premieres, and the awards banquets was exciting. The courtly Spanish gentleman taught him how to dress and make his manners: to say “please,” “thank you,” and “may I have,” to open the door for his elders, and to stand for the beautiful women who came to their table. Everyone treated Abby with such reverence. Michael longed to be treated that way.
Michael tried emulating his grandfather. Pad and pen in hand, he’d wait for the words to pour forth. But they never did. Abby said it was because he didn’t have that kind of mind. “You’re not an idle dreamer like your grandfather, and thank God for that! You are a helpful, practical boy. And with your genius for math and science, I know you will do great work. Someday you will be a doctor healing the sick, or a scientist unlocking the secrets of the universe. In that, I have faith.”

The older Michael grew, the less he shared that faith. True, it was at the blackboard with equations and at the laboratory dissecting table that his own hand moved effortlessly, as if guided by an unseen force. And he liked the feeling volunteering at the hospital gave him, the satisfaction that came from helping someone else. But all that counted for less than nothing with his classmates who shunned him as a “grind” and a “know-it-all-geek.”

And the future Abby painted — college, then medical school, then years of post-graduate training—loomed before him like some steep and craggy mountain, not impossible to climb, but tremendously hard and lonely. He didn’t want to be stuck in some lab. He wanted to be out amidst the city’s lights and the glamour of his grandfather’s set. What he really wanted was an actor’s fame.

Senior year, he gave up the science club, and Hospital Volunteers, to join the school’s theater society. Drama coach George Lipson gave him the lead in Cabaret. “Excellent Michael, excellent!” the slim, beautifully dressed teacher praised during private rehearsals. “With your looks and talent, you’ll go all the way. We’ll make your grandfather proud. He’ll come to the performance, yes? You’ll introduce me, yes? So we can plan your future.”

Abby did not come. But when the mail arrived the day after the show, Abby was elated.

“It is here, Michael! It came!” he cried. “Columbia has accepted you as a pre-med student. All your dreams are coming true.”

“I’m not going,” said Michael.

“What?”

“I’m not going to college. I’m going to be an actor.”

“An actor? Oh no. No, no — that is not where your talent lies.”

“George says I have talent. He says there’s always room for someone bright and fresh like me in the theater.”

“George?”

“Our drama teacher. He says with my connections, it’ll be easy. He was in Cats, and if anyone should know, it’s him.”

“He is wrong. The theater is never easy, especially for one with no talent.”

“How would you know?” cried Michael, stung. “You didn’t even come.”

“I know from your readings. Michael, do not do this. Do not throw away your gifts!”

“Some gift! I get to spend my life in a laboratory, hanging out with bullfrogs and rats? How come I don’t get to have friends like yours?”

“God chose your talents. I didn’t.”
“Yeah? Well George says I have talent for the stage. He says lots of people with lots less have made it. And with your help, I’d make it in no time. It’d be easy.”

“Is that what you want? Something that’s easy?”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“I forbid you!” snapped Abby. “I forbid you from the theater!”

“You can’t forbid me. It’s a free country. I can do what I want.”

“Yes? And who will support you? What will you do for money?”

“I’m eighteen. You have to give me the money my parents left.”

“But that is for college!”

“It’s mine and I want it. Give it to me.”

“But...”

“Listen, I know my rights. If you don’t give it to me, I can call the cops, tell them you’re stealing from me!”

Throughout the theater world, Abby’s temper was legendary. Now, for the first time ever, he lost that temper with Michael. Small but strong as a bear, he swept Michael almost off his feet and out the front door. “Get out and don’t come back!” he roared. “Not until you’re man enough to accept who you are!”

Michael walked the streets for hours, furious at the old man, then spent the night at a friend’s. When he returned to his grandfather’s the next morning, the doorman would not let him in. Instead, he gave Michael his suitcase and an envelope containing a bank book and a note:

Michael,

As you are eighteen, I think it best you make your own way. Here are your clothes and the ten thousand dollars left you by your parents, plus all the interest earned. Should you change your mind, you may call me.

Your grandfather.

He couldn’t believe Abby’s betrayal. He refuses me? And then throws me out? Fuck him! I’ll do it myself.

Through “Roommate Finders” he found a situation on the West side, sharing a grimy two-room walk-up with four other actors. The last man in, he got the futon in the front hall for his $500.00 a month. He paid for headshots and resumes and began auditioning. When he heard the sighs, he started acting lessons.

It didn’t take a math whiz to figure, at New York prices, he’d soon be broke. He went door-to-door looking for work. With no degree or experience, the best job he could find was as a busboy and waiter-in-training.
His acting went nowhere. Occasionally, he’d get a small role in an amateur show, but that was the best he could do. He couldn’t land a paying job, or even find an agent. At times, an equation or two would dance through his head and he’d wonder about returning to school. But the mountain of years was too daunting. And he refused to give Abby the satisfaction. He learned bartending, took more classes, and kept auditioning. Still, he couldn’t find a paying part.

It was in the third year of this apprenticeship that Abby died. Michael didn’t go to the funeral; he saw it on Eyewitness News.

A lawyer called. Abby’s will left everything to the Vicente Dieg Charitable Trust for Scientific Research. There was one provision for Michael. If he went to college and studied mathematics, science, or medicine, the Trust would pay his tuition and a generous stipend. The same was true for graduate work. Later, if Michael needed a research grant, the trustees would look favorably upon his application. However, the Trust would not support Michael’s acting. Michael hung up on the lawyer.

Several weeks later, Marci prowled with a feline grace into the struggling café he ran. Her red hair flamed and her green eyes sparkled as they bantered across the bar. The first time she laughed her wild, raucous laugh, all he could think of was sex. She hauled him back to her loft for a night he’d never forget.

Marci was a party girl whose dad did real estate. She wanted to convert one of his downtown warehouses into a dance club. She took Michael to see the place and liked his ideas and his knowledge of the business so much, she hired him to help build and run it. Then she moved him into her loft.

They built the club cheap. Most of the money Marci’s dad fronted went into the long bar, the huge dance floor, and the state-of-the-art sound system. They bought Sears patio furniture and some lion cages from a bankrupt circus, painted pictures of jungle animals on the walls, and called the place “New York Zoo.”

The law said they had to serve food, but Marci’s dad didn’t want to spend the money. “When it comes to the bar business,” he said in a voice still rough from Hell’s Kitchen, “food’s a loss-leading pain in the ass.”

It was Michael’s idea to rent space to push cart vendors. They wheeled in their carts to perfume the club’s air with the aromas of food from the streets: hot dogs with sauerkraut, onions and mustard; garlic-laced sausages, gyros, and kabobs; lo-mein, fried rice, and General Tso’s chicken; plus melons and ices and Cracker Jack for dessert. And hadn’t all the preppies and yuppies and Wall Street wanna-be’s just loved eating all that junk with their Stoli and vintage champagnes?

Marci changed his name to Mickey and dressed him in silk jackets and grungy jeans so he’d have just the right cachet. They schmoozed and networked and were so busy building their party list that Michael barely noticed the silliness of the crowd. The club made a ton and he was a star and it had been so very easy. But sometimes at dawn, as the champagne whirled him to sleep, an equation or two would unfurl in his head and he’d wonder whose voice he heard lamenting: “Such a waste.”

Marci’s dad was a shrewd operator who said clubs were fragile things. When he saw the first three per cent drop in gross receipts, he sold the place for a mint and sent Marci and Michael on this junket to Europe while he built a new place uptown.

That’s what I have to look forward to back in New York, thought Michael, running another playground for the rich. That, and the acting thing.

* * *
The red banners snapped in a stiffening breeze. His coffee half-finished, his rolls uneaten, Michael stood, wanting to be away. He was so cold. By the opera house clock, it was only seven-thirty, still a half hour to kill. He would warm himself with a walk down to the Christopher Columbus monument overlooking the harbor.

As he paid the bill, he noticed his cash was light. He hated not having plenty. He wasn’t sure how much he had, but he knew it wasn’t enough.

He remembered passing an ATM and walked back up La Rambla to the gaily-tiled sidewalk mosaic by surrealist Joan Miró. Something about one of the buildings caught his eye. He looked up to see a large, green Chinese dragon curled around a pole jutting from the building. Hanging below it was the sculpture of a half-furled umbrella, what Abby used to call a bumbershoot.

He knew this place! It was where Abby had fought his brother Francisco over the fascists’ right to rule. Francisco was a colonel in Franco’s army who insisted that Abby enlist. Abby had beaten and humiliated Francisco so badly that he’d had to flee, ultimately coming to America as a political refugee. The brothers never spoke again.

“Runs in the family,” Michael growled to himself, separating his card from the clip. He stared at the rod of Asclepius and remembered the pride in Abby’s voice when he’d said: “So you’ll always remember your gifts.”

Eyes blurring, throat constricting, Michael fed the machine his card and stabbed at buttons as images of Abby rushed through his head: sleepy-eyed, offering morning coffee; so dignified on their walks to school; “Learn well, Miguelito... I have faith.” Oh Jesus, I miss that old man.

A hand clutched his shoulder and he turned. A cocoa-skinned boy stood before him, his dark hair unruly, his eyes full of pain. He had a harelip and his bottom teeth jutted like the rotted posts of a picket fence.

"Dinero?” the boy mumbled. "Yo necesito dinero.”

Michael’s heart went out to the boy. Then he remembered how humiliated he’d been by what Marci said about the junkie. He knocked the hand away and turned back to the ATM. But the boy would not be denied. Again he grasped Michael’s shoulder. "Por favor, dinero!” he hooted, his breath rank with old garlic.

It was the stink that made Michael snap. Wheeling, he shoved with all his might and felt triumph as the boy stumbled away. But when the boy collapsed in the gutter, his elation turned to shame. He rushed over and reached out his hand. The boy wouldn’t have it. Wiping scraped palms on mud-splattered trousers, he spat at Michael and stalked away.

Michael ducked his head under the stares of the crowd that had gathered. Behind him, the ATM beeped. He wiped up his card and money, shoved them into the clip, which he dropped into his jacket pocket, and hurried for the harbor.

He was just outside the large, sun-filled square known as the Plaça Reial when the hare-lipped boy caught up with him again. Michael never saw him coming. One moment he was walking along, still berating himself—the next, he was jostled from behind. Stumbling, he felt a weight in his jacket pocket. He looked in time to see a hand emerge with his money clip. His eyes traveled up the arm to meet the boy’s frightened stare.

Then they were off. Quick as a rabbit, the boy ran into the plaza. Between giant palms and around a fountain he fled, Michael’s silver clip flashing in the sun. Michael was fast, but the boy was faster. He dashed through an arcade, then a maze of café tables, veered left, dodged right, leapt a chair, and was off again across the square.
Michael raced to catch up. As he charged through the maze, he tripped and spilled into the square. He looked up just in time to see the boy’s dirty shirttail disappear down an alley.

Michael gave chase. If this had been New York, he’d have let it go. His street savvy would have told him it was too dangerous, that he’d get himself killed. But this was Barcelona, the city of his grandfather, and somehow, he felt invincible.

Halfway down the alley, he came upon a teenaged girl standing against a building. Her skin was also cocoa, much like the boy’s. But she was beautiful. Tall, willowy, with dark, shimmering hair and flashing black eyes, she looked so clean in her faded jeans and pleated shirt, freshly starched and achingly white. She held a deck of tarot cards.

One look at the girl and Michael knew she was a gypsy. Then he knew the boy was a gypsy and that somehow, the two were connected. He didn’t know how he knew. He just knew.

"Fortuna, Señor? You like I tell your fortune?“ the girl asked, coming off the wall to stand in his way. Her English was halting and heavily accented, but Michael wasn’t buying it.

“All right,” he panted. "Where is he?"

"Qué, Señor?"

“The boy who stole my money. Where is he?"

“Qué?”

“Don’t qué me! You know what I’m talking about. Look—tell the boy I’m sorry. Tell him to keep the money. I just want the clip back. It’s special to me. It was from my grandfather. Mi Abuelo. You understand?“

“Qué?” she asked again, a smirk gathering at the corners of her mouth.

“How about policía? You comprendo policía? Because that’s who I’m gonna get. Donde está la policía?“

"Por qué tu quieres la policía?“

“Por qué tu eres una gitana y su hermano es un gitano y ustedes son... son... how do you say thieves? Because that’s what you and your brother or cousin — whatever the hell he is — are. Gypsies and thieves! Don’t deny it. I know.”

"Vaya á la plaça. La policía están allá.” The girl pointed to the Plaça Reial and Michael, amazed by his burst of Spanish, started heading back to the square. Then he realized that was what the girl wanted. He turned to see her hurrying down the alley. He ran and caught her arm.

“Oh no! You’re coming with me to the police.” He pulled her towards the square.

“Let go of me!” she yelled. “What do you want? You crazy American!”

“See? You do speak English.”

“You’re hurting me. Let go, or I’ll scream. Then see how fast the police come.”

Michael released her and followed her down the alley away from the square.

“Look, I don’t care about the money. I just want the clip. It’s only a small piece of silver. But it was a gift from my grandfather, Don Vicente Diego. It’s the only thing I have from him.”
They reached a small, four-way intersection surrounded by balconied apartment buildings. Although deserted, the windows were open and Michael had the feeling he was being watched.

“Did you hear that?” he shouted to the balconies. “I don’t care about the damn money! Just give me the clip. It was from my grandfather, Don Vicente Diego.”

Even though he and the girl were alone, Michael could have sworn a hush fell over the street. Then, on the second story balcony of one of the buildings, double-doors crashed open. It was the hare-lipped boy, running for his life. Chased by two dark-haired men, he skidded into the railing, almost lost his balance, recovered, and ran for a set of iron stairs leading to the street. He was not fast enough. The men seized him and held his arms behind his back. Michael thought they would throw him over the rail.

The doors banged again and the old man from the market appeared. Hooking his cane on the railing, he looked down at Michael and called, “You see? You need my help after all.”

He gestured and his two men hustled the boy down to the street. As he followed, the silver tip of his cane rang on the stairs. Now people lined the balconies and looked down from open windows.

“You say you are the grandson of Don Vicente Diego. How can I know you tell the truth?” asked the old man.

“Why would anyone lie about something like that?”

“To get special treatment, of course. As you are trying to do now. Don Vicente is a hero to Spain. For years, he spoke against Fascism and the Franco regime. And do you know he was one of the only men to write about what the Nazis did to us in the camps? So, he is special to us, as he is to many throughout the world. How can I know that you are his grandson?”

“I don’t know.”

The gypsy circled him, eyeing him as if he were horseflesh.

“What you say must be true. The resemblance is very strong. But why do you wear short pants and your hair in spikes? They look so foolish. So, grandson of Don Vicente, what do you do? What do you stand for?”

“I run a nightclub in New York.”

“No! A nightclub? Surely you can find something more useful to do with yourself. Do you not write?”

“No.”

“But why a nightclub?”

“Because I’m good at it.”

“I am good at making love, but I don’t earn my bread as a gigolo.”

Laughter and “Ole!”s rained down from the crowd.

“What do you want here?” The old man’s face was hard, his eyes dry and cold.

“What he stole from me.”

“I thought the money did not matter to you.”
“It doesn’t. Only the clip. And the bank card. I need that and it won’t do him any good without the code.”

Holding out his hand, the gypsy leader advanced on the boy gripped by the two men. Defiant, the teen thrust out his chest and shook his head. The old man whipped his hand across the boy’s face. The slap echoed and the gypsy’s pointed nails dug furrows into his cheek. He moaned as his legs buckled under him. The men propped him up. One grasped him by the hair and made him look at the gypsy elder who again held out his hand. The boy hooted something incomprehensible. The old man gestured and the men let the boy go. Wiping blood from his face, he went to the corner of a building, and from a crack in its façade, extracted the clip.

The elder pointed to Michael. The boy trudged over and gave him his clip. Then he went and stood between the two men. The old man snapped his fingers. The boy reached into his pocket and handed him Michael’s money and bank card.

“Michael Olvidas,” the gypsy read off the card. “Why is your name not Diego?”

“Olvidas was my father’s name. Don Vicente was my mother’s father.”

“Ah. Well,” he said, handing back the card, “you have what you came for. I trust there will be no mention of this to the police.”

“No. No mention.”

“Good. Then you may go.”

Michael turned for the Plaça Reial.

“One minute!” the gypsy leader called. “How much money did you have when this thief robbed you?”

The two men held the boy once more and there was a desperate look in his eyes. Alarm ran through Michael. Had the boy given up all the money or had he held some back? If the amount Michael stated did not tally with what the elder held, surely the boy would receive a beating. But Michael didn’t know how much he’d been in his pocket. He was sure of the fifty he’d gotten from the machine. But he didn’t know how much he’d started with. It could have been twenty. It could have been sixty.

“Well? I’m waiting. How much did you have?”

“Not sure,” Michael stammered. “Around a hundred, maybe.”

“A hundred? There’s only seventy here.”

The old man growled in Spanish and the two men went to work on the boy. One held him while the other threw punches. The first knocked the wind out of him, doubling him over. The second crunched the cartilage of his nose. The third shattered rotted teeth. The boy gasped, then wheezed. A terrified look came over him as he struggled for air. His face purpled and he fell to his knees, clawing at his neck.

“He’s choking!” Michael yelled. “Can’t you see he’s choking?” He ran at the boy’s tormentors. “Get away from him! Give him air!” He knelt to see what could be done.

“Not so fast!” the old man commanded. His men seized Michael. “You want to help this boy? What can you trade?”

“Are you nuts? He’s choking to death!”
“You want to save him. What can you trade?”

“You know I don’t have anything. You took it all.”

“Not so. I see that pretty diamond in your ear.”

“Fine! It’s yours. Now let me help him.”

“Not enough!”

“You fucking son-of-a-bitch. Look at him!”

“Not enough!”

“I don’t have anything else!”

“Think again. What about your precious clip?”

“But it isn’t worth anything. It’s only worth something to me.”

“As you said, the boy is dying.”

“All right!” Michael yelled. “Let me help him and you can have the diamond and the clip.”

The old gypsy nodded. The men freed Michael.

“Help me!” he said to the two toughs. “Hold him up.”

The old man translated and the men dragged the youth to a standing position. Michael hugged him from behind, stuck a fist into his solar plexus and jerked. Nothing happened. Michael jerked again, this time with all his might. With an explosive retch, the boy expelled the bloody tooth lodged in his windpipe. Then he and Michael collapsed.

A collective sigh rose from those gathered on the balcony and at the windows. The two thugs hauled Michael to his feet and led him to the old man who held out his hand.

“I fulfilled my part of the bargain. You got to save this boy’s life. Now give me the diamond and the silver.”

Michael undid the stud from his ear and handed it over. It wasn’t difficult; it had only been a few weeks since Marci bought it for him in Amsterdam.

The money clip was harder. He looked at it. The rod of Asclepius winked back at him. The round-shouldered old man in the tan jacket and yellow ascot held out his hand. His eyes were soft and rheumy again and, for the briefest moment, Michael thought ... He dropped the clip into the hand and watched the claw-like fingers close over it.

“Now,” said the gypsy, “we had better go before the police really do come.”

“What about the boy?”

“What about him? Ah, I see. You think we will hurt him more. Don’t worry. He has learned his lesson.”

“You mean he’s learned never to hold out on you.”
“No, he’s learned never again to get caught. Good day to you, Miguel, grandson of Don Vicente Diego.”

The gypsy clapped his hands and within seconds Michael was standing alone with nothing but his ATM card. Dazed, he walked slowly back through the Plaça Reial, not quite believing what had happened. But he noticed that, for the first time in ages, he felt good about something he’d done.

He returned to La Rambla, passing the opera house. There was no breeze now. The banners bearing his grandfather were perfectly still. Again the portraits reminded him of all the times Abby had praised and encouraged him and dreamed aloud about his future.

The sun was higher. It warmed Michael as he retraced his steps to the hotel. He did not stop for cash, or at La Boqueria. But he did stop to return the doorman’s greeting. Although the old portero was at a loss to explain it, he now found Michael charming, even with the spiked hair. And later that afternoon, after a brunch ordered from room service, as a silent Marci seethed beside him on the beach, Michael gazed upon the Mediterranean’s cool, blue waters and began considering that future.
Altar of Melancholy

This is not spiritual pilgrimage or dive into restraint, the recluse in dark, baggy clothes, hair shorn, head bent low over Birkenstocked feet. This is
doubling back into a wide blank field where air turns the color of water rusted in aged pipes, whispers its insatiable need to rekindle fire into angry blue sticks.

I am haunted by the cadence of desire: stolen blackberries dropped into chilled wine, rolled between my teeth, the end-crust of expensive bread. Tonight

even the moon reflects another’s light, its desire for a fleshed-out image, round instead of halved, as real as my need for absolution. This is not spiritual pilgrimage,

but the child gone adult, fingers purpled with stolen fruit, mouth stuffed with wine-soaked bread, with more than illusion to lay on the altar.

Three Forms of Indecision

I have become a tri-fold a paper accordion: one moment an obstinate crow with voice, eggs just hardening in promise the next a slight dancer without fear of my partner letting go—then a crow again—comes the musky scent of winter clumps of sodden leaves; I become the changeling a third thing not even I expected: the mare ready to throw her rider.
underwater origami

it began with a drowning
her going under
his following
an old devotion like folded

handkerchiefs or origami
birds fashioned from scratch paper
metal being hammered into the shape
of luck
luck being hammered
into fire

theirs was not the dance of opposites
stepping on left and right footprints
red and blue patterns laid out by teachers
they could not trust

it was more catching the wave on its crest
and following it to shore
breathless
unsure

when their thought became too large
for either of them to carry
they buried it in
desert sand
half-way between snow and
coastal fog

they asked what it meant
when ice plants
appeared in ridges of waxy purple
questioned each other
without words

at last they bent to the gods
begged to know
how two can discretely
begin a necklace of cranes
open their eyes at the
same moment
the necklace intricately
linked and them
breathing evenly
underwater
Colin James

Incomprehensible is a Good Word

This part of the bedspread where the sheet overhangs shall now be referred to as The Widow's Eyelid.
Inexplicably, the reduction in background noise is unprecedented

The Insurrection of a Pick-up Line

Reaching deep into a pocket, retrieving a pedantic semblance of small talk with hopes of converting Aphrodite to the nominative polemics of the Divine.

Be Still, My Little Aphrodisiacs

Sometimes my fingers slither just out of reach. When inversely interlocked, their intent is to represent a church congregation. Instead they all wave in the wind like would-be opportunists
David LaBounty lives in suburban Detroit. His poems have appeared in several journals and his most recent novel is "The Trinity".

David LaBounty

no romance or flowers and this is what you get

a Friday night and I said
tomorrow
she would be mine

and she shot
back that
she
doesn’t belong
to anybody
and I said
I thought I belonged to you.

no, no one belongs
to anyone she said
we’re free, all free

and I thought
about what she
said and I’ve
read a few novels
by French writers
dead and brilliant
and I thought about
freedom.
I thought about
god and country,
about duty and devotion
and choices and responsibility
I thought about
the will of my
cock and the
hours of my life that
are measured into
paychecks and weeks
and I said baby,
Saturday, I want
to touch you
but I sure as hell
don’t feel

free.
Born in Harlow, Essex, England, New York-based artist Samantha Keely Smith immigrated to the United States as a child with her family. Smith attended the School of Visual Arts, NY, NY and Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey. Smith’s work addresses that which is at the core of human experience. Rather than speaking of specific social issues, this work explores the idea that there are universal experiences, needs, and desires that have existed throughout the history of human beings, and therefore bind us together – something we share that stands outside of time, culture and place.  www.samanthakeelysmith.com

Samantha Keely Smith

Asunder
Entwined
Surrender
Velocity
Wake
Siren
I watch out of the Clinic window as Mrs. Morris bumps her pram down the wide step. Her head scarf catches in the wind, whipping up and exposing her pale neck. She reaches down automatically for her toddler’s hand as she prepares to cross the busy high street.

I can feel my hair sliding out of its bun, and I skewer it roughly back in place. My shoulder always aches these days. So many babies delivered in awkward places, so much time spent creeping round cramped rooms, and kneeling over low beds. Some days it feels as though everything aches.

When Mrs. Morris reaches the far side of the road, she crouches suddenly, and I watch her re-fasten young Daniel’s shoelace. He holds out his foot in its second hand boot, worn through and cracked. How do they manage? Three already and another on the way. “He’s good to me,” she said of her husband. But her eyes weren’t saying the same thing.

I send my Pupil Midwife, Julia, out to call the next lady, and bend down to massage my calves. My thick stockings make my legs itch even on a cold late winter day like this.

“Mrs. Hennessy,” announces my pupil portentously. Apparently she yearned for drama school and took midwifery as second best. I look briefly at her spidery mascara and her teased up hair. I can well believe it.

Mrs. Hennessy slips off her mac and sits down quietly. It’s her first baby. Her wedding band looks almost too heavy for her pale finger. There are two streaks of darker fabric on her dress where she has let out the darts to give herself more room. Even so, as she twists towards me, the side seams pull. I smile at her and ask Julia to take her blood pressure.

I flick through Mrs. Hennessey’s notes. Born in 1939, just as War broke out, she is barely 21. When I was 21, I watched a woman die in childbirth for the first time. Her name was Mrs. Henderson and she never spoke a single word to me. I held her baby while she died. I was only really a girl then. Mrs. Hennessey has chosen another way to grow up. Once upon a time, she was called Marigold Fryer. I delivered her and her sisters, Violet and Rose. Mrs. Fryer fancied herself as a gardener. I wonder suddenly who she was before she was Mrs. Fryer. Her daughters are all Mrs. somebody now — she was so proud to see them all happily married before she died.

Mrs. Hennessey fiddles with her wedding ring as Julia pulls off the blood pressure cuff, and then she leans forward suddenly as Julia is fiddling with the notes. She asks me if she might have a hospital confinement. Her husband is in the Army and she has only an auntie near by.

“Well see,” I say. “I’ll make the application.”

Julia motions her to the couch, and leaves her to undress behind the screen. While she waits for Mrs. Hennessey to get ready, she fusses with her hair in the tiny mirror above the sink. Sometimes I could slap her.
When Mrs. Hennessey has undressed, her skin paler than her worn bra and slip, I move behind the screen and run my hands across her belly. It heaves beneath my touch. She smiles up at me, “He moves such a lot.”

And I smile back, “It feels a good strong kick, and a nice size.”

She nods as well as she can, laid flat on her back in her best underwear. I stand back to let my Pupil practice her palpation. Her fingernails are really too long for this work — I will need to speak to her about it when we have a moment.

I wash my hands whilst Mrs. Hennessey re-dresses. I ask Julia to weigh her and go back to my desk. My head is beginning to ache with a heavy insistence. On the street outside, the lamps begin to flick on. Sometimes it feels as though winter will never end. I let my head drop briefly into my hand.

At last Mrs. Hennessey shuffles slowly out from behind the screen. Her left hand holds her mac carefully closed and her wedding ring flashes briefly in the glow of my desk lamp. Her baby will be born in the summer, when the heat makes the tarmac shimmer and the rose bay willow herb dances in the verges. The baby will spend each day outside in its pram until the sky darkens to autumn. I remind Mrs. Hennessey to make an appointment to return in four week’s time, and she nods, a smile crossing her pale face.

Julia lets the door slam shut behind her as she goes to fetch our last patient. I want to kick off my shoes and warm my feet in front of the fire at home. But I’m on-call tonight, waiting, half-alert for a bang on the door and a slip-slither in the ice to somebody’s house. I wonder how much of my life I have sat waiting in other people’s houses. The drama of the birth, the heart-stopping moment as we wait for the first breath, the relief as the after-birth slides out unresisting. It’s all there, annotated in the birth registers stacked up on my little bureau. But the waiting, the long moments that don’t get recorded, they are the bits that stay in my mind. The clock ticking, and maybe the fire crackling. Some women are terrified, some are resigned, others are powerful. But for me, the waiting is always the same.

I run my finger down the list of names in my appointment book. The pregnancy is just another part of the game. On clinic days I see an endless procession of women, trapped in hope and resignation. They sit quietly on the wooden chairs, swathed in macs and scarves, and they wait. And after the babies are born, I see them in the park, at the laundrette, or in the queue for the butchers and they are waiting still. I suppose it’s only fair, that whilst they are in labour, someone else waits for them.

"Mrs. Tyler," Julia intones, waving the woman vaguely to the seat next to my desk, like an usherette at the cinema. Mrs. Tyler sits down carefully on the flimsy wooden chair. She crosses her legs demurely at the ankle and I wonder what made her wear red stiletto shoes to see the midwife. Winkle-pickers, they call them. They look new, still with a fierce bright sheen. Mrs. Tyler’s cheeks are pink, two pin-pricks of fever. I shuffle my papers and she waits. She came in last Thursday to take a pregnancy test and she has returned today for the result. I assume she knows the answer already. Most women do. Her eyes do not meet mine. She keeps her gloves on, and her grey coat pulled tightly around her slender frame.

"Well," I say. "You’re certainly pregnant, an autumn baby judging by the dates you gave me, Mrs. Tyler..."

All our ladies are addressed as “Mrs.,” as though being pregnant alone confers that honour. Never mind rings and dresses, tea sets, and honeymoons in Scarborough. You lived your life before all that. I know that Mrs. Tyler’s finger is bare under her gloves. I look at her, sat so tidily on the spindly wooden chair. She’s got a trim figure on her — she should be fine until June for a wedding if she is careful with the fabric
I pull a record card towards me and Mrs. Tyler — Joyce — finally looks up. Her eyes are blank. I put the card down. Suddenly I know that she will do everything in her power to make sure that I don’t see her again. She won’t play the waiting game. I wonder if she has lost her fella, or whether she never really had him. She clicks her stilettos on the tiled floor. I’ve heard all the solutions; gin and hot baths, getting your man to thump you in the belly, pills advertised as safe and effective and taken by the bucket load. And if all that fails, there are the women, discrete and silent, who will do the deed.

I look back at her, her eyes as grey as the wool of her coat, her cheeks as red as her fancy shoes. Last week when she came, her eyes still sparkled, and she was almost giggling for shame and shock. Today her eyes look dead, as though she has seen her life ebb away. The things we do.

“‘I’ll take your blood pressure,” I hear myself say, “and we’ll need to see you again in four weeks time…”

I pause and she whispers, “I see.”

When she stands up, she belts her coat tightly around her narrow waist. I adjust my hat, catching my finger on the badge that declares boldly that I am one of the Corporation’s midwives. Mrs Tyler says, “Thank you,” in a quiet voice. I know that I will not see her here next month. I know that, in her bright red heels, she will do everything in her power to become Miss Tyler again.

* * *

That night, sitting in my chair, half-alert for a call-out, I dream of Mrs. Henderson. I hear the blood splashing onto the wooden floor as I see her face, as grey as Mrs. Tyler’s coat. I put my hand to my face to push my hair away, and realise that the damp streak across my face is blood. I want to scream, but no sound comes out. There is blood on my skirt and my shoes.

I wake up, my heart pounding. I can still see her face. She was dead before the doctor arrived — her pulse, weak and thready, simply disappeared. She never opened her eyes and I never heard her speak.

The baby mewled in the corner, and the midwife under whose instruction I was working told me to take it to a neighbour and make sure I was well-covered in my coat before I went home. Outside it was drizzling and I splashed through the puddles to try to get the blood off my shoes.
I am not who she thinks I am. This much is clear. I am seated alone at the middle of the bar. My friends, who had joined me here, have both left. They are both married, but not to each other. She walked in as they walked out. Luckily, I was not quite ready to go.

This is a mid-town spot with a Euro motif that is hard to discern because the room is crazy dark. Dozens of votives provide the only light. This is plenty. The room is smoky from the steady burn of incense. A driving bass, like the smoke, is constant. I will have a headache in the light of the morning.

It is two times evident that she believes she knows me. She is certain I am a friend. Her glazed over eyes, which are hazel, could mean that she simply cannot see straight. But, she seems so sure.

She taps a slender, moisturized, manicured index finger on her nose and says, “If you want, you can have a bump. I’ll let you know when my guy gets here.”

Liquor and pussy aside, I haven’t touched a drug in years.

Before this offer, she is even more definitively mistaken. She greets me with, “Hey, Mark. Oh my God. I was just thinking about you. I mean, this is really unbelievable. How are you?”

As she steps toward me with outstretched arms, I take her in. She has a symmetrical, pretty, waspy face. She flips her lightened hair, which falls around her shoulders before instantly returning to its previous place. She smiles and it’s an orthodontist’s fantasy. Straight, white, even. She is toned, no doubt from pilates and undereating. When she hugs me, she feels tight. Whenever I hug a woman, I take note of breasts. Hers are right. She is a study in the elimination of flaws. Except, my name is not Mark. Not before tonight, anyway. She begins the dance of catching up.

“So, my God, I haven’t seen you in ages,” she says.

“I know. It has been awhile.”

“Too long.”

“I agree.”

“Are you still deejaying?” she asks me.

“Yeah, here and there. I’ve cut back recently though.” I say this without a blink. She presses on.

“Well, thank you again for working my house warming. People are still talking about it.”
“Yeah?”

“Absolutely,” she says, so enthusiastic. “And then, how you helped me clean up afterward, so thoughtful.”

“It was nothing,” I say. “Really.”

We pause. She looks toward the door. I think of pretending to step out for a smoke, only to take my ass home. But, I don’t know if Mark smokes or not.

“So I guess you’re wondering why you haven’t seen me for a while,” she says.

“You must’ve read my mind.”

“I’ve been away.”

“Away?” I ask. Then I wave to order a round.

“Yeah, away, in a facility, a hospital... I was in a mental hospital.”

Because maybe Mark would be stunned by this, but then again, maybe not, I simply nod.

“Fucking restraints,” she says, making an angry face.

The bartender puts down her cosmo, my stout. The angry face is gone.

“Well, cheers anyway,” she says.

We toast to freedom.

“So I suppose you want to know why I was locked away.”

I desperately want to know.

“Only if you feel like telling me,” I say.

“Sure, I mean, I trust you, right?”

“Right.”

“Well, you remember my dad was having those problems?”

“Vaguely,” I say.

“He shot himself, last year. Put a shotgun to his chest.”

“Oh my god,” I say. “I’m so sorry.”

I mean this.

“Don’t be,” she says, defiant. “I’m done blaming myself.”

“Well, that’s good.”
“I realized there’s nothing I could have really done to help him, you know. I mean he was the parent.”

I nod again. She drinks half the cosmo in one sip, then looks to the door again. She’s wearing a sparkling necklace. With the nose pointing finger, she plays with its stones. All I can think about is what fucking her would be like. Desperate, I imagine.

“That’s a pretty necklace,” I say. She touches it with more certainty.

“Oh, thank you. It’s from my new line. By the way, how do your girls like their bracelets?”

Thankfully, the bass has grown louder. “I’m sorry, what?”

“The bracelets, the ones I made for you. How do they like them?”

“Oh, the bracelets,” I say. “They were very happy with those bracelets.”

“And, how are things there? With your girl?”

This is veering away from where I want it to go.

“You know, the same. Ups and downs.”

“Well, your daughter is absolutely gorgeous.”

“Thank you.” I say, pretending she means my own daughter.

I am now pissed at Mark. I thought he knew this woman biblically, not neighborly. Perhaps she is friends with the mother of Mark’s daughter. Terrific.

“Fucking Bryan cheated on me while I was away.”

“Now, that doesn’t surprise me,” I say, hoping this flies.

“I know, right? Everyone told me. Now I’m just a fucking divorce statistic.”

“Maybe it’s for the best.” Here, I am sure to look her in the eye.

“Definitely,” she says, looking right back, killing the cosmo. I have barely dented my stout. I am questioning where I am with her. Or rather, where Mark is.

Her guy comes in. I know this because she walks away from me mid-sentence. He is diesel, chiseled, Asian. I don’t see his face for that long. I watch them. They don’t speak. They walk down the bar’s dark corridor, which leads to a darker stairwell. The bathrooms are downstairs. It occurs to me that this place is perfectly laid out for down low moves. They descend. In a minute, her guy comes back. I try to see him better, make eye contact. He has none of it. In another minute, she returns.


“Everything alright?” I ask.

“So listen, it’s a little crowded in here, right?”

“True.”
“I’m gonna go. It was great seeing you.” She kisses my cheek. The brush of her skin is like softened butter.

“Thank you for listening to all my drama,” she says.

“No problem.”

“You are welcome to join me, you know.”

“I’ll walk you,” I say.

She turns to go. I place money on the bar and stand. With half steps and my hand approaching the small of her back, we move toward the narrow exit.
Yang Chu's Poems #317

With two Zen monks,  
Sat as still as stones,  
With me by bamboo.

I, a Taoist, said, “Listen to the music  
Of the bamboo.”

“That is Maya,” they said.

I said, “Is that so.”

I gazed at the wine  
In the hand of a man  
Who was surrounded  
By friendly gibbons,

The two monks saw me  
Gazing, said “Wine is Maya.”

I said, “Is that so.”

I started staring at a girl,  
Long, black, glossy hair,  
Slender in her tight green silk kimono.”

The two said,  
“She is Maya.”

I said, “Is that so.”

Years later we met,  
Both the monks  
Were called “Masters” now.  
They asked me what I had learned  
From my meditations and study of the Sutras.

I replied, “Maya is maya.”

“Is that so,” they both  
Replied in unison
Yang Chu's Poems #318

On an autumn red-spotted leaf autumn
In Mount Hakusan chilly forest far

Away from people I recited aloud
My poems about

About the transport of the transient,
How the concept of permanence is a lie.

I heard the bright green tip
Of new emanated pine needle applaud.

Felt the pine needle’s lips kiss my cheek,
Knew I had not written in vain.
Milk
Melanie Haney

She didn’t tell her husband what she had seen. That while standing in front of the bathroom mirror, scrubbing her face, brushing her teeth, he was there. Not a shadow in the bathtub, but a boy, couldn’t have been more than five or six and pale, nearly iridescent, looking at her over the glossy white lip of the tub. The toothbrush fell loose in her mouth then dropped to the tiled floor by her toes. She blinked, rubbed her eyes with the pits of her palms and then peeked again. He smiled at her and then leaned forward, out of view. She heard the splashing of water. Then nothing.

She smoothed lotion over the loose skin of her cheeks and exhaled slowly. She inhaled, bent down and picked up the wet toothbrush, dropped it in the trash. Exhaled again. And then she went and lay down beside her husband, who was already breathing slow heavy breaths in the dark.

“Toothbrush,” she said quietly into a handheld tape recorder. She slid it back beneath her pillow and closed her eyes, hoping to find him again, the iridescent boy, slippery in her tub. She imagined him holding a delicate pile of bubbles in his palms, blowing them toward her. She felt them melt on her skin and smiled as she slid into sleep.

In the following weeks, he began popping up more frequently. At the dinner table, staring blankly over a plate of slippery noodles; during meetings at work, running his finger along the long windowsill; in her car, strapped to a booster seat and gently nudging his feet against the back of her seat.

He was always reluctant and milky white with round guileless eyes that she couldn’t quite bring herself to meet.

She wasn’t sure why he came like this, as the boy she had held during thundershowers and after bicycle spills, the child who brought her his scrapes to be kissed. She had always felt guilty for giving him that impression — that her lips could heal anything, that she had any magic in her at all.

On the morning of the anniversary, she ate dry toast and listened as a stocky man on her television warned her about the traffic she would face on her drive to work. Hovering above the expressway in a helicopter, he told her where the accident happened, why the cars were backed up in a colorful chain, twisting down the roads like ants trapped in a maze. Flippantly, from his perch in the sky, he chuckled, “I’d say it’s a good day to walk to work.”

She sipped her coffee, felt it coating the soft walls of her mouth as she swallowed. She imagined herself walking to work, winding her way down the highway, waving at drivers trapped, shoulders slumped in their overheating cars.
The accident itself was a tractor-trailer truck, somehow turned over on its side. Two or three other cars, she couldn’t tell exactly — with all the flashing lights and official vehicles crowding on the scene, smashed and gnarled behind it. One rammed into it. The front half of the vehicle was gone. She couldn’t tell if it was buried in the truck or had simply snapped off. Like a Matchbox car. They all looked like toys. The whole scene looked like something her son could’ve arranged on their living room carpet. She could almost hear him calling to her, pointing to his play area. A carpet designed to look like a miniature city, a maze of roads, buildings, curved crayon-green treetops. *Look, Mom. The truck flipped.*

She put down her coffee and lifted the handheld recorder to her mouth. “Milk,” she said then popped the stop button and stuffed the recorder into her purse.

She took the back roads to her office.  

* * *

They had company coming for dinner, she and her husband. Their daughters were coming home, and she imagined each of them folding into her arms. She knew them by their bones, by the way the curves of their shoulders met with her own when they embraced. Katie’s slight frame nestled itself completely in her chest. Jennifer was broad and taller. She could’ve cradled her mother like a small child. And Melissa was her equal, the daughter who matched her frame, their shoulders first knocked against one another, like bumping against a mirror. Then they’d each slide just enough to accommodate the other and exhale in unison.

The cursor on her computer blinked at her as she sat in her cubical, imagining her daughters sitting in traffic, making their way to her house for dinner. She thought to warn them about the truck. About the accident, the cars splayed sideways, ripped apart. The line of metal and wheels strung together by puffs of exhaust, waiting with impatient grunts and long motorized moans.

“String beans, cherry tomatoes, salsa,” she said into the recorder, then laid it beside the phone on her desk.  

* * *

Her husband followed her around the kitchen as she cooked. He didn’t say much, just watched her as though she was on the verge of collapse. Slicing onions, misting the counter with the pungent spray, she resisted the urge to snap at him, to tell him to go sit and drink a beer. Leave her alone.

Instead, she stole glances at him, trying to see him as she used to, when his puttering around the kitchen was welcome. How he used to whistle while slicing cucumbers and she’d hum, stirring pots of tomato sauce. And how sometimes their tunes would mingle, and he’d put down his knife and come up behind her. She’d put down the spoon. Let the sauce burn.

But now he was just a nuisance. Another shadow hovering in her periphery, another reminder that things were different.

“I called the girls,” she said finally, glancing at him sideways from the cutting board. He was standing beside the sink. “You know, to warn them about the traffic,” she explained.

“Of course,” he said and then shook his head. He looked down to the tiled floor, then back at her, climbing from her bare feet to the curve of her shoulders, her bent neck, gray eyes, focused intently on the pile of white onion, the knife in her clenched fist.

“There was an accident,” she explained as though he has asked.
“I know,” he said and walked to the fridge. He pulled out an amber bottle and added, “There always is.”

“Don’t start with me, Martin,” she called after him as he walked out of the room. “There was a truck overturned.”

* * *

The phone call had come as she was setting the table. Accident. Miller’s parking lot. Kevin. She remembered it all in fragments — flashes of light, the droning cries of car horns, spiny twists of metal, shattered glass glittering on pitch-black pavement, the asphalt so new that it looked like it would sink if they’d stepped on it. The vapors of exploded airbags, exhaust, smoke, and the scent of fresh tar on a humid August evening.

The gurney wheeled past, a white sheet draped over the humps of his head, chest, feet. A tan hand dangled down, paint stains beneath the fingernails, the oily residue of his summer job.

Someone had sped from the off ramp and into his car as he was turning into Miller’s to pick up milk for his mother.

She hated the sheet that hid him from her, and then later the coffin at the funeral carrying his body away. She felt heavy walking behind it, drifting forward with the current of the procession as though she were wading through water. She stared at the hands of her nephews as they hoisted her son on their shoulders and down the aisle in a box that seemed too small to hold him. She watched it through the blurred veil of her tears, dumbstruck at the reality of it — that her son was somehow contained in that there. At the absurdity that such things could hold any of us.

* * *

“Good God, Joy,” her husband said, coming up behind her as she was setting the table. “Don’t do this.”

She stood straight and blinked as though she was just waking. She felt the weight of the silverware in her palm. Her eyes bounced across the white tablecloth. Plates, glasses, napkins, all set neatly. For six.

“They’ll be here any minute,” Martin said, turning back toward the living room. “Please, don’t do this in front of them.”

She didn’t speak, only reached down and lifted Kevin’s plate. She held it to her chest and walked it back to the hutch.

What was left of her family sat at the table and scooped the food she’d cooked onto their porcelain plates. Katie spoke of a new boyfriend. Jennifer complained about work. Melissa was quiet and their father busied himself with pouring wine whenever someone’s glass grew shallow, mostly his own.

Joy saw her son sitting as a child in the seat across the table from her. She blinked, squeezed her eyes tight and then popped them open, one at a time and complained about her contacts not feeling right whenever she felt someone watching her curiously.

She wanted to see him as he was last year, just through the door from work, chuckling in the kitchen with his father. She wanted to see the smile lines on his tan cheeks, the flop of his paint-speckled hair falling over his blue eyes. His gentle voice, volunteering to go to the store for her, to pick up what she had forgotten. “You should at least wash your hands before you go,” she’d told him. “You look like a bum.”
He’d smiled at her and told her to relax; it was just a quick trip.

Then there were the sirens, the droning car horns, the white sheet and the humps of his body beneath it.

And now this boy across the table. So small and clean and quiet, watching her. She slid her hand into her pocket and felt relief as her fingers wrapped around the tape recorder. She brought it out and set it on the table. A dull thump that stopped Jennifer mid-sentence in her explanation of standard office procedure in the event of a fire drill.

“Joy,” her husband said, his eyes darting from the small silver recorder to his wife’s blank face. “Not tonight,” he said and reached toward her, his fingers nearly touching the back of her hand before she jerked it back to her lap.

“Every night,” she said.

Martin slapped his palm down, wobbling the table, sending wine sloshing over the lip of his glass and onto the white tablecloth. It soaked in and then feathered outward, crimson wisps unfurling between them.

"This is ridiculous. I mean, really," he said. His eyes implored his daughters around the table: Help.

But they sat, each with lips slightly parted, speechless.

* * *

She had bought the tape recorder two days after the accident, convinced that if she hadn't forgotten to pick up milk on her way home from the work that evening, her son would still be alive.

She recorded everything she might need throughout the day — chicken thighs, salad dressing, soap, dish sponges. At first, she slid the plastic strap around her wrist and clutched the body of it in her palm throughout the day. Later, she found it more practical to have it attached to her somehow, so she couldn’t lose it. She fashioned a clasp and clipped it securely inside her purse, easily accessible for her. She rambled to herself in the car. She talked to it in her cubicle at work. Her little scarlet letter, tucked beneath her pillow at night.

"I’m sorry, girls." Martin stood from the table. "I thought having you here tonight would help." He walked to the living room, muttering beneath his breath and hanging his head.

Joy stood without speaking and then disappeared into the bathroom.

* * *

“I think Dad’s out for the night,” Melissa said after the other daughters had each taken their turns at hugging and leaving. She stepped beside her mother, who was sitting on the edge of the bathtub, the slender tape recorder resting on her lap. “I think he finished that bottle himself,” she said.

Joy didn’t speak, only closed her eyes and let herself lean against her daughter’s warm waist.

“It’s not going to bring him back, you know,” Melissa said.

She sat straight and looked up at her daughter. Her palms smoothed over her thighs and she shook her head. “Go check on your father; get him a blanket or something before you leave,” she said.

* * *

"..."
Joy filled the tub. emptied it. filled it again. with bubbles. Without bubbles. Ran it ‘til the water ran cold. The boy did not appear; her husband did not come for her.

She sat with her feet in the water until they were numb, her toes shriveled like white raisins. And then the sirens started. Loud and whirring like carnival music blasting through her bathroom window. She pulled her wrinkled feet from the tub and covered her ears. *Was the neighborhood on fire?*

She ran out to the living room and found Martin lying on his recliner. She tore past him to the front door and flung it open, letting in the August night but nothing more. *Where were the lights? The sirens? The chaos?*

“What’re you doing?” Martin mumbled without so much as sitting up in the chair.

“There’s been an accident,” she said and grabbed her purse. “How can you just lay there? Can’t you hear it?”

“There’s always an accident,” Martin said and turned away from his wife as the screen door slapped behind her, and she ran wildly into the night.

* * *

“Where is it?” Joy yelled, storming barefoot through the storefront.

“Where’s what?” the man behind the counter asked.

“The accident?” she insisted. “I heard the sirens all the way up the street.”

“I don’t know what to tell you, Ma’am,” the man said, eyeing her bare feet and shaking his head. “I just got here an hour ago, but it’s been quiet.”

She squinted at him. The sirens were harder to hear with the music he had playing over the speakers. He might have missed them. But she didn’t.

She walked to the dairy case and pulled down a gallon of 2%.

“Just this,” she said, placing the plastic jug and her purse each on the counter.

“You ok, Ma’am?” he asked.

“Just the milk,” she said again, but nodded slightly. He was about Kevin’s age, she thought. He had the same rumpled, careless look about him, a good kid.

The man counted her change without looking at her.

In the parking lot, Joy sat in the car and listened to the wailing and screeching of horns and sirens. She pulled the tape recorder from her purse, rewound it to the beginning. She got out from the car and pressed play.

“Peanut butter…orange juice…shampoo…” She lowered the recorder to the ground beneath her front tire. “French dressing… tomatoes…”

She climbed back behind the wheel; the boy was in the backseat. She turned the ignition and saw his round eyes in her rearview.
“You ready?” she asked, looking back and smiling at the boy, her son.

He didn’t nod or smile or even flinch as Joy pressed her barefoot down on the pedal.

The bump was quick, almost nonexistent. And after she slammed her foot on the break, she practically leapt out of the car to see if she’d even done anything at all. To see if it even worked. It had. She knelt to finger through the pieces: the shards of silver plastic, the tangle of thin brown tape, the red button, all there, crushed and scattered on the concrete.

"Is everything ok?” The man from the store called out from behind her. “Did you pop a tire?” he asked, coming nearer. “Did you lose something?”

She heard him and thought of a thousand answers she could give. That she’d lost more than he would ever understand, more than she could ever explain, or record, or crush beneath the thick rubber of her tires. But she didn’t say anything, just climbed back into her car, leaving her shards behind on the pavement.

The night was finally quiet.
Dmitry Fesechko is 20 years old and lives in Moscow. He has enjoyed drawing all of his life, but began seriously about a year ago. Starting with acrylics on canvas, he soon began working in oils. In the beginning of 2008 he had his first solo exhibit. His paintings are held in private collections in Russia, Latvia and Ukraine. Some of his paintings (including "Departed by the Road to Heaven") were purchased by Novosibirskiy Musey Mirovoy Pogrebalnoy culutri (Novosibirsk Museum of the World Funeral Culture). His paintings contain strong elements of philosophy, and he enjoys hearing opinions from different people about their meanings to compare with his own. He believes that creation process is finished only once the work has been viewed and its meaning contemplated—and that art which will never seen by somebody except the artist is unfinished. 

Dmitry Fesechko

Departed by the Road to Heaven
God Phone
The Last Sign of the Past
Toy Horses

Gareth
by Moist Bamboo

he asked me if I knew
and had I wondered
had I ever wondered who
was sitting on the sand, he'd smiled and waved
whilst games I'd played

but I
was happy as can be
no I dont know him
or what he means to me
She'd lived for all those years
with all those hidden tears

But he still flickers on the wall
while I just sit and stare
In black and white and shades of grey
they tell me I was there
My slate has been wiped clean
now tell me who was he
to me

and now the proof is on my screen
it feels so real
so real
the ink had dried some 40 years ago
goodbye to you although I'll never know
that little boy from the photograph
they had to let you go

But he still flickers on the wall
while I just sit and stare
In black and white and shades of grey
they tell me I was there
My slate has been wiped clean
now tell me who was he
to me
Charity Shop
by Adam Franklin-Williams

If you happen to see this
I'd like for nothing more than to walk by your side
to every charity shop along the way, in the hope...

That we might find some inspiration on a dusty shelf
that sleeps in the sunlight, smile at me
We planned our escape to the start of the week
while kids ran from crime scenes

And listen to the weather, beating down from above
well I can hear your eyes roll, and I could be anyone

In those transit lit tunnels, with friends you used to know
I wanted to keep you from the world
smile at me and hold out your hand and I'll kiss it gently
Is it this that you see, or d'you see through it all?
you.

But What About The Future
by Moist Bamboo

You've got an IQ that's so bloody high
and I watch Rugrats and it makes me cry
If I drink so much that I miss my flight
would you drive to the airport in the middle of the night?
There's a thousand things that I'd do for you
but I'll never miss an episode of Doctor Who

These days won't last forever
Could you make them last forever?
Well I'm just a geek, and you're no fool
you'll have to tell me what to wear so that I can look cool
Say I take a test online one day
and the results say I might be 42% gay?
Well if this makes you laugh and you still want me
you'd better wait until you've met my family

These days won't last forever
Could you make them last forever?
But we will both like Stephen Fry
He's such a clever fucking guy
Oh my
And if we've got no money just a clapped-out van
we'll 'ave an ironic trip to a caravan
We'll sit in the van in the seaside town
feeding chips to the seagulls as it chucks it down
And then one evening for a special treat
we'll have a nice curry while the kids are asleep

But if we do quite well then I'll make you ski
we'll go twice a year and you'll be cross with me
But we'll live in a house with a swimming pool
you'll have ducks and chickens and an aga too
In the summer you can go for a daily swim
and I'll buy a TARDIS and stick it in the gym

These days won't last forever
Could you make them last forever?
But we will both like Stephen Fry
He's such a clever fucking guy
Oh my

And then one day when we're really old
and we're all cwtched up so we don't get cold
You'll be dressed in purple and I'll be fat
So what d'you think of that?

These days won't last forever
Could you make them last forever?
These days won't last
Could you make them last?
Would you make them last forever
The Lost Art of Funerals
Lynne Hinkey

I spend a lot of time thinking about funerals. Not about death, just funerals. And not an inordinate, obsessive amount of time — just more than the average forty-something. This could be a result of growing up in a household where, "The green dress — that's the one I want to be buried in. Not the pink one," was considered part of a normal conversation. Photos arriving from 'the old country' — Czechoslovakia — often showed dead relatives in coffins and live relatives gathered around tombstones, smiling brightly for the camera.

Maybe it's a Czech thing? All I know is that my friends give me strange and horrified looks when I tell them stories from my childhood that begin: "This one time, at the funeral home... " and "There's this one cemetery that we go to... "

Today, I'm on my way from my home in South Carolina to what was home twenty-five years ago, upstate New York, for Grandpa's funeral. I can't wait to get there. Not really an odd reaction to a death in my family, where funerals are one part mourning, two parts social event. It's not that we're callous about death, but that we consider funerals just one more celebration of life, like births, weddings and holidays.

Like so many families today, though, we've spread out. My generation left home for college, career and family. Every return for a funeral makes me wonder, what will happen when we — those of us who've moved away — die?

When I arrive home, my family — mother, stepfather, brother, in-laws, nieces, nephews, aunts, uncles and cousins — greet me at the airport. This is a family event, after all. We spend a late night laughing over memories of Grandpa "and his little dog, Toto, too," and in the morning, go together to the funeral home to make arrangements.

My brother's three children; eleven, eight and five, have already been to their fair share of funerals. Their 'other' Grandfather, Richard, died only a month earlier. The funeral director, Mr. Sedlock, greets my nieces and nephew by name and they help themselves to the candy dish on his desk.

I'm pleased to see them so at-home in a funeral parlor. Sadly, funerals are a fine art that is rapidly being lost in today's world of geographically separated families and feel-good-all-the-time culture. I'm shocked to learn how many of my friends have never attended a funeral and how many won't allow their children to attend them, to "protect them".

Avoiding funerals doesn't make a death easier to bear. Funerals are a necessary process that helps us deal with the loss and celebrate the life of a loved one. Done right, they combine joy and mourning, tears and laughter, and through it all, they affirm that the life of the departed continues through family and friends.
Some of my earliest and fondest memories are of playing with my cousins at funeral homes. Organ music whispering in the background, a tropical fish tank bubbling in the corner, and old ladies smelling of mothballs and perfume ferociously patting my back. “Ti si velika girl-yeh,” Czech-lish for ‘what a big girl’.

Our favorite funeral home was Pecko-Oswalds, an old Victorian house complete with hidden passages. It was the perfect setting for funerals. My cousins, brother and I would sit on the landing of the stairway and dare each other to look behind the dark door at the top, certain there’d be dead bodies on the other side. We shrieked with delighted horror when we discovered that’s where the Pecko family lived.

Cemeteries were another place we loved to visit. As soon as spring arrived, we would climb into Grandma’s car to ‘make the rounds.’ First to Calvary to plant geraniums in the marble planters on either side of Grandpa Borush’s headstone, then to Aunt Anne’s grave. She was my grandmother’s sister who’d died as an infant. As Grandma scrubbed the small, white marker, I would talk to my baby aunt while petting the stone lamb, its features blurred by sixty winters. After that, we’d go to Riverhurst to pull out the plastic flowers that adorned Great-Grandpa’s grave during the winter and put in colorful new pansies and marigolds.

Sundays, dressed up in our church-clothes, we’d return to the cemeteries to visit dead relatives. Grandma took pictures of us standing next to their gravestones. Great-Grandma especially loved having her picture taken there. Side by side in one album are two pictures of my brother Matt and I next to our Great-Grandparents' headstone. In the earlier photo, Great-Grandma stands between us. Ten years later, in a photo taken at her funeral, a white human-shaped blur fills the space between us. It could be the sun reflecting off the lens, but we prefer to think Great-Grandma wouldn’t let something as minor as death stand between her and a photo op.

At the funeral home, Mr. Sedlock leads us into a room full of caskets and we examine them, looking for the one best suited to Grandpa. Five-year old Robert takes my hand. “Watch this, Aunt Lynne.” He reaches under the pink silk lining of a casket and pulls out a wrench. Lifting the pillow, he inserts the end and turns. The lining lowers. “That’s so they don’t pinch Grandpa’s nose when they close it.” I’m impressed. Matt and I hadn’t discovered that until we were much older.

We select a metal, matte gray finish casket with an American flag sewn on the white silk lining and American eagles at the four corners. We all knew immediately that this was Grandpa’s. He served four tours in WWII—two in the navy, one in the army and one in the marines—then spent the next thirty years in uniform working for the US Postal Service.

Two days later we return to Sedlock’s, this time dressed in somber black. Matt nods his head and whispers, “He looks good for a dead guy.” It’s a long-standing joke we’d share with Grandpa at funerals when people complimented ‘how good’ someone looked in a casket.

The family surrounds Grandpa, patting his hands, straightening his tie, and smiling at his ever-present grin, as if there was some big joke that only he’s in on.

My mother frets. “I should’ve put him in his funeral suit.” Matt and I barely suppress our giggles.

Grandpa was a frugal child of the depression, never buying a new shirt when the old one still had life in it. He had a new suit that he’d only worn once, to my brother’s wedding. Whenever our mother prodded him to wear it he’d say, “It’s not comfortable. I’ll wear it for my funeral.” When it came time to select clothes to take to the funeral home, Mom didn’t want Grandpa to be uncomfortable for eternity, so she took his old Sunday suit.

“He’s going to haunt you for this,” Matt teases.
Throughout the next two days, family and friends stream into the funeral home. Quiet tears give way to laughter as tales are told of a long and full life. We hear of a Grandpa we'd never known.

"He was the State singles tennis champion when we were in high school," his old doubles partner told us. "He came to every ship reunion we had until the last few years, after your grandmother died," we hear from a navy-buddy. "He was quite the prankster at the post office," my mother's mailman tells us, "always slipping something into our bags when we weren't looking." "When we had to start driving the jeeps on our rounds, he'd drive around the corner from the post office, park the thing, and walk the three miles to his route," another former co-worker told us.

These stories about the man who was John Pranaitis, not just Grandpa, make him even larger to us in death than he had been in life.

* * *

After two days of viewings, it's time for the family to say our final, private good-byes before the lid comes down. We examine the mementos visitors have slipped into the casket. There's the blue corduroy driving cap he always wore, a rubber chicken key-ring, photos and notes, and a pocketful of drink chips from his favorite haunts: Red's Kettle Inn, the VFW, and Sharkey's. I put the cap on his head.

"Now he looks like Grandpa," says my niece, Kimberly.

My mother surreptitiously slides a box beneath the covered half of the coffin. "Toto's ashes," she whispers. They'd been inseparable. Grandpa kept the dog's ashes on the mantle after Toto died.

"Don't cry, Aunt Lynne," Robert comforts me as I laugh through my tears. "He's not really in there." He thumps hard on Grandpa's chest and we hear a dull, wooden thud. "See? Empty. And, look at this," he scrapes a small finger down Grandpa's cheek. "Make-up," he says, certain this proves it's not really Grandpa.

"You're right, Robert. Grandpa's in heaven, and in here." His mother taps Robert's chest.

On the way to the cemetery, Mom and I realize we forgot our cameras. We emerge from the limo giggling over the lapse and try to compose ourselves for the graveside prayers. When the VFW honor guard raises their guns for a final salute, a volley of flashes split the air. My cousins haven't forgotten their cameras. The roar of the guns drowns our sobbing laughter and we cling to one another, comforted in our shared sorrow.

As the crowd walks away from the mausoleum I notice Kimberly is missing. Matt and I find her on a ladder, the upper half of her body swallowed by the black hole in the mausoleum's marble façade. "I hope you don't mind," the young man holding the ladder says. "She asked to see inside."

"I saw Grandpa Bob!" she tells us. My father died before she was born but she grew up with stories and photos of Grandpa Bob all around her. "He's next to Great Grandma," another dead relative she'd never met. "It's really cool how they fit them in. They're perpendicular to each other, like this." She shows us with her hands.

My brother and I exchange a look — we want to go back and see.

Before leaving the cemetery, we visit all of our dead relatives, stopping to touch a marker, pluck out a weed, and chat. We take a picture by Great-Grandma and Grandpa, hoping for another visit from Grandma's ghost, but the picture is blur-free. I say good-bye to Aunt Jerry and Uncle Frank. I was living out of the country when they'd died and had missed their funerals. Touching the cool, marble stone, and whispering an apology and a farewell, gives me some consolation.
We head to church for the traditional post-funeral luncheon. Quiet conversations over fruit salads and sandwich meats are broken by hearty guffaws as people recount stories about Grandpa. I can't see him, but I know he's in his usual seat in the corner, by the coffee maker, taking it all in.

Afterwards, we make our way across the street. Every family wedding, funeral, baptism, and confirmation ends at Sharkey's. The nieces, nephews and cousins play the electronic bowling game with the metal puck and hanging plastic pins—the same one we’d played as kids.

Watching them, I am hopeful. The art of funerals, their importance in marking the continuity of life and family, isn't lost. Our family — those who've come before and those yet to come—will continue to live through their generation's celebrations of life and death.

“A toast,” Cousin Jean raises her glass, “to Uncle John.” We lift our glasses and echo, “To John.”

“You all throw a helluva funeral,” Grandpa’s neighbor nods solemnly. "John would've had fun."

Grandpa would agree.
Cigarette Mouth, Rainy Tile Floors

Will you play scrabble with this addled brain of mine?

She asked,
Would I care to go to dinner?

Listen,
I said,
I've had this social commentary piece about
the futility of the sexual act
that I've been trying to write
since last Thursday afternoon

Oh,
She said,
Goodnight.
"Gaps, know what I mean? Missing pieces. Of time and space — and other things. Other important things. How do I know they’re important? Well, they have to be, don’t they? It just wouldn’t be right otherwise. Just wouldn’t make any sense otherwise. Take yourself, for instance. What are you? Flesh and blood, right? Isn’t that what everybody says? Bone and cartilage. Brain and brawn. Mind and matter. Body and spirit. Aren’t those the expressions everyone uses? And it’s all so simple, isn’t it? All so obvious. All so crystal clear. So, tell me, what happens when you’re here one moment — and there the next? And you don’t know how you got from here to there. Haven’t got a clue. Or you’re neither here nor there — and that’s even worse, if you can imagine such a thing.

"Neither here nor not here, to put it in its lowest common denominator form, the mathematical logic of the permanently lost. At sea and not at sea. At least, that’s the way you feel sometimes. Kind of unsettled, to put it mildly. Queasy and full of wormy, knotted-bark feelings in your stomach. Like something’s rotting beneath it all but you’re afraid to look because it might make you sick. Might make the rest of you rot as well. Head in the clouds; boots in the muck. And nothing in-between. You stare down from on high and there’s nothing there until you get to those muck-encrusted boots. You try to put your hands on your hips – a kimbo, I think they call it – and neither hands nor hips make any effort to accommodate you. In fact, they make no effort to even appear for you.

"Gaps, like I said before. And then, you know, in an effort at stabilization, you nail your feet to the floor. The tips of your boots, that is. You nail them solidly with railroad spikes so that they won’t jump without you realizing it’s happening — and what happens? You guessed it. It gets even worse. You’re nailed to the floor alright — with 20-centimetre spikes — and that’s a good feeling. A warm, wonderful feeling. Like suddenly being surrounded by family. By four generations of family ready to celebrate genetic persistence if nothing else. But then other things start bopping around. Appearing and disappearing when they feel like it and for as long as they feel like it. The harder you’re nailed down, the more they won’t hold still. Things, I mean. Know what I’m saying?

"They won’t come together long enough for you to pin them down. For you to nail them to the spot. Hold still, you want to say. Hold still and be numbered, damn you! Useless. More than useless. You can shout and swear and pull your hair all you want. In fact, after a while, you don’t even know if you’re still shouting and swearing at the same object you were shouting and swearing at a moment before. Or something else that just happens to look like it. That just happens to be passing by — in its devil-may-care way — when you happen to look up.

"It’s like... like trying to count butterflies in a wildflower field. Ever try that, huh? Used to do it all the time as a kid. I guess I did anyway from the vivid memories I have. The vivid, slow-motion memories I have. Anyway, they’re fluttering all over the place. The butterflies, I mean. Up and down and all around. Just hopping and hopping to their hearts’ delight. From milkweed pod to dandelion. From apple tree to bramble bush. From sweet clover to prickly pear. And you, curly-haired and sun-burnt, Greek-god-boy-like, chase after them, trying to keep count in your head. One... two... three ... and then one of them, one you’ve already counted naturally, decides to fly by you again. Right by your left ear. Or you think you’ve already counted it but aren’t sure. They all look pretty much alike, don’t they? One doing it is okay. You can keep track of that, no problem. A couple won’t cause too many problems either. Even three or four or five aren’t much to handle.
for the mathematically sophisticated ten-year-old able to put numbers to objects, albeit in a rudimentary way. It’s when they all get to doing it, leap-frogging each other just for the fun of it, hitching rides on one another’s backs, doing the butterfly version of car-pooling.

"That’s when you tend to get pissed off real fast. Mighty pissed off and mighty fast. That’s when you snap off a switch from the nearest maple bush and start clipping their wings. That’s when you run them down and begin to mash and smash their little bodies into bits of colored powder. Twitching pieces of brightly-colored powder. It’s not that you want to hurt them. Or keep them from getting to where they want to go — wherever that may be. But they just won’t hold still and be counted. Just won’t allow you to properly tag them. You understand, don’t you? It’s all a matter of counting, life’s inevitable census taking. Something we all have to go through before we can rest in that cold, cold ground. Safely immobile. Safely unemotional. Safely unseeing. Safely there in the true sense of the word — with no longer the option of not being there. Do you see what I’m getting that? Do you? I doubt it."

I’m talking to a man in a long coat and a sharp-featured, deeply pock-marked face. A face that’s practically beak-like in all its contours: nose, chin, forehead, ears — everything comes to a point. Even his glistening, slicked-back hair sweeps to a Brilliantined tip. A sculpted helmet-visor sitting squarely on top of his head. And his legs, they’re more like stilts than human legs. More like jointed-stick appendages than properly-shaped limbs. When he walks, he lifts first one, then the other, straight up, straight into the air before bringing it down again ever so gently, ever so carefully. The coat, open at the front, drags over the sand, picking up the wetter particles on the way. These particles cling for a while but then fall off as soon as they dry. It’s a spring day. A warm spring day. And, even though we’re walking along the lakefront, where the breeze is fresh and on the brisk side, he really doesn’t need the coat. A windbreaker or some kind of light sweater would do just fine. But he’s wearing a long, black, ground-dragging coat — like he’s an old-fashioned gunslinger or something. Like he just came out of the Black Hills, pockets full of gold-colored dust. Like he’s about to pull an ace out of his many sleeves. He isn’t and he hasn’t, of course. Just some guy who likes wearing long, black coats. Even in the sweltering heat of August, I’m willing to bet.

When I speak, he nods and smiles at me but otherwise doesn’t answer back. Even when I ask him something and expect some kind of response. Be it pertinent or non-committal. Or even a curt “fuck you, buddy — you’re full of shit”. At first, I think he’s just not the talkative type. Or one of those people who choose their words very carefully — like gunslingers and prospectors and riverboat gamblers. But then he gives me a hand-written card that explains his silence: *Cat got my tongue*. At least, it sounds like it explains his silence. Now that I’ve had a chance to think about it, I’m not really sure.

"Sorry to hear that," I say. "I mean, sorry to read that."

He shrugs and then hands me another card: *You know, I was lonesome as I traveled, but you know, I’m talking now."

"Glad I could be of help," I say.

We continue to walk along the beach, which stretches before us in both directions. Occasionally, he picks up a flat stone and sends it skimming across the waves, making it hop and skip and jump until it finally loses momentum. Until it finally sinks out of view. I do the same. Or try to anyway. He’s much better at it: the way he positions himself, legs out and well-balanced; the way he leans sideways so that his torso is parallel to the ground; the way he whips his arm back with a sort of half-twist and releases the stone at just the right moment and with just the right spin. All a matter of practice, I suppose. Years of frequenting the same beach and picking up the same stones. Or perhaps some people are just better at certain things. Are born with the ability to skim flat objects across choppy water. Could that be possible? Something to think about anyway. In the distance, the sailboats are also skimming, carefree, kittenish after their long winter confinement. I find them easier to count than butterflies. But they, too, won’t hold still for any period of time. They, too, bob and weave. And there’s another problem. If I stare too long, if I focus too sharply, if I concentrate
on concentrating, they begin to blur. To rise above the water. To change shapes. To become dragons or some sort of prehistoric birds. Or even everyday kitchen appliances that have suddenly developed the ability to fly.

"Have you noticed that? You stare at a spot for too long and it wants to get away from you. Wants to edge out of the frame. To slither away beneath the nearest stone. Like it’s afraid of you or something. Like it’s got something to hide. I wonder what it wants to keep from you. I wonder what secret it doesn’t want anyone to know about. Maybe that’s not it at all. Maybe it doesn’t have any secrets. Maybe it just wants to be left alone. Leave me alone, it says. Let me be a sailboat and nothing else. Let me exist in my brute dumbness without you putting words in my mouth — a mouth I don’t claim to possess in the first place. Or maybe I’ve got it all wrong. Erratum in fundamentum, as the scholastic philosopher would most likely say. Now, where the hell did that come from? I don’t remember reading any goddam philosophers at all — never mind scholastic ones. Maybe, it’s all a mirage, you know. All a trick. A trompe-l’oeil. The sailboats, the beach, the elevated highway, the traffic jam on the elevated highway, the people shouting at each other in the traffic jam on the elevated highway, the bus driver trying to calm down the people shouting at one another in the traffic jam on the elevated highway. Maybe I just make them up as I go along. Like some sort of demolition-construction company. Like some firm that’s just as good de-constructing as it is putting things up. But, if those particular objects are mirages, tricks of the eye, then where are the real things? Tell me that, huh? Where are the things that really count? Better still: Where are the things when they really count?” I look at my friend, at his beak-like face, the eyes black and beady, almost all pupil.

"Am I making any sense?" I ask, head tilted, foot on solid rock. "Am I going crazy? Am I really here? Am I man or mouse?"

He pulls yet another card from what seems an endless selection in his vest pocket and hands it to me: Let me be a young boy, with a mustache just starting to show above my lip, I wish.

* * *

It’s just before dawn now. The two of us are once again walking — it’s what we do best, I think. We’re walking, each of us holding a cardboard box in his hands, between the glass walls of the city’s skyscrapers. It’s still dark on the streets where we’re walking but, high above us, the sun glints off the mirrored windows, sending off little sparkles where the paint has been flecked with gold. Soon, it’ll be blazing, impossible to view directly. I’m on one side of the street; my friend, the man in the black coat, is on the other. I call him “my friend” but I don’t really know if he is or not. And I don’t really know what we’re doing here in what’s called the financial district — but my friend insisted, shaking me out of sound sleep in the middle of the night and dragging me to this spot. I look across at him, hoping for clues. He doesn’t give me any. Not a one. Instead, he simply continues to walk slowly, deliberately, stopping occasionally to look up. I look up when he does — but I don’t see anything. At least, nothing out of the ordinary. Just the skyscrapers and the sun climbing relentlessly their gleaming surfaces. Like the walls of some Aztec temple. Like some landscape where dark rituals are performed, growing more blood-red by the moment. Aztec temple? Dark rituals?

"What are we doing here with these boxes?" I shout across to him. "Come on. I don’t like mysteries. Especially this early in the morning. You’d better tell me right now or I’m turning back. Come on. Flash one of your cards or I’m going back to sleep."

He indicates I should hush, exaggerating the motion of finger to nose. A moment later, a police patrol glides down one of the grid-like side streets. Predator on the prowl. Crosses the intersection. Snout, torso, tail-lights. And vanishes again. My friend resumes walking. His head is now constantly in the air, acting like some ball-turret gun as it swivels left and right. I’m about to follow through on my threat to leave when I hear a thud. High above us. Echoing. Re-bounding. I’m still trying to locate the sound when something plummets through the air in front of me, landing...
squarely in the middle of the street. My friend rushes towards it, getting there only a split-second after it strikes the ground. By the time I arrive, he’s holding it in his hands, cradling it.

"What the... " I begin to say. Then stop.

It’s a bird. I have no idea what kind, except that it has a red chest and deep blue wings with little streaks of yellow. Cute little fellow but obviously accident-prone. My friend is stroking the chest, rubbing it, coaxing it to revive. But it’s no use. I can tell by the way the head hangs and the tongue droops out of its beak that it’s no use. I’ve seen that exact same look before somewhere — the vacant stare; the stiffening claws; the useless wings; the still, unbeating heart. They’re sure signs. Inescapable signs.

"It’s dead," I say. "There’s nothing you can do. Just leave it there. Some cat will gobble it up. Have itself a pleasant surprise of a feast. Or it’ll serve as a home for the spring flies. Maggot heaven. Nothing more you can do."

My friend, crying openly now, shakes his head and continues his hopeless attempts to bring it back to life. I’m about to reach down and take the bird out of his hand when the sky overhead resounds with a flurry of thuds, rapid-fire, one after the other. Entire flocks are falling now, plunging towards the asphalt. They’re falling all around us. Some strike head first. Others, struggling to right themselves, end up smashing the ground with their chests. Or backs. Or wings. Some arrive dead. Or die on impact. Others pick themselves up and walk around in a daze. Like cartoon characters who’ve been hit over the head once too often. Some even attempt to fly off again — to once more smash into the sides of the self-reflecting, self-absorbed buildings. I try to help those I think have the best chance of surviving, those with the least injuries. I lift them and put them in the box. When I look up again, I see several dozen other people doing the same thing. They’re all silent in their work. All concentrating mightily on what they’re doing. A van appears behind us, moving slowly down the middle of the street. The driver takes the full boxes and places them in the back of the van. Then he distributes more empty ones. When the van is filled, he drives off — to be replaced by yet another van. This goes on all morning, until the sun is high and the glint vanishes and the thuds stop.

Something ought to be done, I say. Just to say something, you know, and not really expecting an answer.

One of the women looks up at me. Her task is to toss the obviously-dead ones into a garbage bag. Perhaps as precursor to a proper burial — I don’t know.

"Raze the buildings," she says, dropping one more stiff little body into the bag. "Paint them all black. Nuke them to hell. Hiroshima and Nagasaki them. Suck them kicking and screaming into the lair of the white worm."

"Yeah," I say. "Something like that."

She continues down the street, talking and getting more angry by the moment. Soon, in a rage, she’s slamming the bodies into the bag, hurling them with all her might. I return to my friend who is still sitting where I left him, the bird cupped in his hand.

"Come on," I say, searching my pockets for a few precious coins, a few coins earned from street-corner labor. "There’s nothing more we can do here. Let’s go get a cup of coffee. A sweet, hot cup of Java."

My friend stands up, holding the bird like a sacrificial offering. And then, with a shrug of his shoulders, tosses it in the air. Like all tossed objects, especially those that were once alive, it looks for a moment as if it were moving on its own. A leftover momentum like the wing flaps of slit-throated fowl. But I know, from past experience, that’s just the spasming of involuntary muscles. And I expect it to resume its plunge the moment it realizes how serious the situation really is and
gravity takes hold of it again. Instead, the bird continues to move upwards. And I stand there slack-jawed as the wings open, as the wings stretch wide, and it darts away. Up between the buildings. Then quickly past them. Higher and higher. Red breast flashing beneath the blue sky before it spins and becomes a dot and vanishes forever.

"How did you do that?" I say, turning back to my friend. "I was sure it was dead. I’d swear to it. But it wasn’t, was it? Just stunned, I guess." I shake my head. "Jeez, you never know, do you?"

I expect him to pull out a card. Another of his cryptic cards. Another of his calligraphically-perfect, encrypted cards full of pseudo-explanations. Maybe something about a bird in the bush and what it’s worth — or not worth. But he just looks around for a moment, tilting his head up and down, chin making contact with breast at one point and then jutting straight into the air the next. He just looks around, spiralling on one leg until he’s back facing me. Until I can see my reflection in his beady eye: scruffy and unkempt. In desperate need of a shave. In desperate need of a bath. In desperate need of illumination. And then, smiling, he holds out his hand. That sharp, talon-like hand.

_Who needs God?_ I think as I reach out to take it, as I feel its rough, comforting touch, its goosebump-producing touch. _Who the hell needs God?_

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I’m curled up tight in a bed, knees to chin. It’s not my bed. I know that because it smells newly-washed. My bed never smells newly-washed because no one bothers to wash it. Or even change it. Of course, I only call it my bed. It’s not really my bed as such. Not really my property at all. More like a place where anyone can drop. A way station. A kind of transit point from which people are launched into their lives. Or out of them. And the stories always filter back to the latest inhabitant: The last person to use that bed before me jabbed herself in the left eyeball with a syringe — just to feel what it would be like. The person before that managed to escape into the countryside where he’s now a gentleman farmer, raising prize pigeons. Or something like prize pigeons at the very least. And me... well, I’m not in that bed anymore either. Someone else has taken possession of it. Someone who needs desperately to sleep and who doesn’t care that it smells of piss and cum and puke and monthly blood-lettings — both natural and induced.

The bed I’m in at the moment is clean and starchy. It feels stiff, like a Victorian matron of some sort covered to the ankles. If I stay in it for too long without moving, without bothering to visit the little boy’s room, someone comes along and pulls the dirty sheets away from beneath me — like a magician yanking a table cloth and leaving all the settings intact. Placing the new sheets is a little more difficult — but just a little. I hold perfectly still, determined not to help in any way. Despite my lack of cooperation, the job is always accomplished in less than ten minutes: corners all tucked in; pillow cases replaced; covers folded back in neat pleats. And that’s not all. Every morning, I get the same treatment — whether I’m dirty or not: a shave, followed by a complete change of clothing. With a sponge bath every second day for good measure.

An operation of military precision, I want to clap when it’s over but I just don’t have the energy. I’d like to put my hands together like a seal and make “aarfing” sounds of approval. Bravo, I’d like to shout. Hip, hip and well done. I’d like to set up a trapeze act and balance myself high above the world. Way beyond where things can reach up, take me by the ankles and suck me back down. But it’s not worth the effort. Instead, I just lie there with my back against the wall. With my back right up against the wall. All scrunched up and with nowhere to go. I just lie there waiting for the oxygen to be pumped out of the room and the whole place turned into an airless bell jar for certain experiments that must be performed, that are of crucial importance not only for this generation but for those yet to come.

At least, that’s what the scratching from the other side of the wall tells me. _Whatever you do, it says, be prepared at all times to offer yourself up as a sacrifice. The short term effects might be devastating. Fatal, in fact. But that doesn’t mean your sacrifice has been in vain._ On the contrary,
the more you die now, the more likely future generations will survive. After all, you don’t think all this suffering, all this pain and torture and anguish is for nothing, do you? Come on. You can’t be that ridiculously near-sighted. You can’t have become that much of a sloth — what do you call them? Slow lorises. That’s it. They got big eyes so they must have big hearts, right? No, no. Forget the anthropomorphy of primate equivalence. Set your mind to the higher things. Think of purpose and meaning and the good of the species. Think of evolutionary change and the necessity inherent in our plans for you. Against that, your suffering (the suffering of some slow loris) pales to nothing — a hangnail in the universal scheme of things. So make the sacrifice. Now! Be prepared to offer yourself up.

I have no answers for any of this. No rebuttal. All I can do is hold my breath. I hold it until I’m bursting. Until my gut is aching. Until my eyes bulge and my skin turns blue. And then I have to let go. There’s the moment when I have to let go. The inevitable moment. It comes out in a huge rush — and I grab another mouthful before the vacuum kicks in. I have no idea what I’ll do when that happens. When the air runs out. But I do know I want to have plenty of the stuff in my lungs. I want to be able to last for as long as possible before the last gulp is gone. And I don’t care how selfish that might sound. I don’t care about those scratching noises telling me that each breath I consume is one less for those who really need it, for those who aren’t about to be sacrificed, for those who have something to contribute. I don’t care about any of that. I just want to stay alive for one more gulp. For one more moment. For one more blink of an eye. Is that too much to ask?

Yes, the scratching noises tell me. Your death is needed. Your non-existence is requested. Your vanishing from the face of the planet is demanded. So stop resisting. Stop being childish. Stop being Mr. Important and screw everything else. Stop—

Fuck you! I scream, pounding the walls with my fists, with my shoulder, with my head, with whatever part of my body happens to be available. Why don’t you take your own fucking advice? Why don’t you fuck off and die? Why don’t you—

When I start to scream and beat the walls like this, I often attract visitors. My room is suddenly invaded with soothing voices and manufactured concern. One moment I’m the most important person in the whole wide world, the focus of everyone’s attention. And, after I’ve calmed down — can’t stay angry or upset forever — or been forcibly calmed, I get another kind of visit. This time from someone who really enjoys the art of conversation, who really likes to hear herself gab. It’s the only explanation I can find for this frumpy middle-aged woman who sits on the edge of my bed, hands folded across her lap, and talks a mile a minute, seemingly about nothing at all. About any subject that comes to mind. I think of my friend in the long black coat and the silences we created between us. The intimate silences where words became irrelevant and contact all that really mattered. I think of the fact I’m no longer there. No, he’s the one who’s no longer there and I’m here. So that means I’m no longer there either. But I wouldn’t be there even if I was. Not without him there. Not without his comforting presence beside me. Not after he’s flown away. That’s where it becomes confusing. That’s where I want to curl up against the wall again and sleep forever. But this woman with the sweet, well-scrubbed, oval-shaped face won’t let me. She insists on talking as quickly as possible. On leaving no gaps between the words and sentences. And even worse, she insists I also talk.

"Freely," she says. "What you say won’t leave this room. That’s a promise. Your words will stay right here — and in my heart."

I look around the room, searching for an escape route: if the words won’t leave, maybe I can. No such luck. There’s only one way out — a locked and bolted steel door. Now, she wants me to express my feelings. To let it all hang out and tell her what I feel inside.

I feel nothing, I tell her, not wanting to complicate matters. Or perhaps because I’m not in the habit of divulging the state of my emotions to total strangers. Even if they do have sweet faces and soft voices and bodies that give off the faint scent of lilac.
She doesn’t accept that answer. Instead, she keeps right at me, trying to pry me open with her crowbar words. Now, she wants to know my background, where I come from, my loves, my hates, my fears, my fantasies.

Telling her about my background and where I come from is easy; I don’t know. I haven’t a clue. As for my loves, hates, fears and fantasies, those come under the category of “feelings” last time I looked — so they’re none of her business.

She picks up on my 'I don’t know'.

"You don’t know?" she says. "You don’t know where you come from? I shake my head. And you don’t know who you are? You don’t know your name?"

"Giulio," I say, wondering what that has to do with anything. "That’s my name. That’s what it says on the name tag anyway."

"Yes, Giulio," she says, her face all earnestness. "That’s your name. We’ve established that much. It says that on the door. But who are you?"

I shrug and pull away from her, edging as far back on the bed as possible. Maybe she’ll go away if she sees I’m not interested in talking to her, in telling her any secrets. I push back so far my head makes contact with the wall.

_Tell her who you are_, the scratching says from behind me, from just behind my left earlobe. _Tell her you’re a sacrificial lamb. You’re being fattened as an offering to the common good. You’re being led up to the high, windswept altar where dry tinder awaits and the flames will engulf you, the flames will purify you so that others may live. Why else would they feed you and clothe you and change your bed sheets every morning? Why else would they treat you like a pampered pasha in his mountain kingdom? Why else would they send someone to pretend she really cares about you when you know — ?_

I break contact and lurch forward again, almost falling into her lap. She pats my head and begins to speak in a singsong voice, a voice designed to lull the listener to sleep. Or into divulging everything, disgorging secrets like a cat bringing up chewed grass.

"Let me be your guide," she says. "Let me help you out of the wilderness. Let me bring you to someplace warm and inviting where you’ll finally understand who you are. Let me be the one to make you whole again."

I feel trapped. Which one should I believe? Which one is more likely to be telling the truth? Let’s see. One wants to sacrifice me; one wants to save me. One claims to be my mentor; the other my tormentor. The choice should be easy, shouldn’t it? No one in their right mind would take sacrifice over salvation. Unless, of course, one precedes the other. That would make both of them right, wouldn’t it? Or maybe they’re both wrong. Maybe there’s a third path that neither of them wants me to see because they don’t know enough about it themselves. Or, selfish creatures that they are, they want to keep it for themselves. It’s been known to happen.

"Go away," I say. "Both of you. I don’t care who I am. I don’t want to know. Just go away and leave me in peace."

I cover my head and roll myself into a ball. A tiny, tight ball lying between this woman and the wall. I won’t listen to either of them if I can help it. I won’t give either of them the satisfaction. Cutting off the scratching sounds is easy — I just stay away from direct contact with the wall. The woman is another matter. Despite my efforts to drown her out, she continues to speak in that droning voice of hers. And I’m too tired to stop her. She talks for half the night. Chanting. Repeating words that make no sense to me. At one point, she tries to tell me how the world began: on a strange, back-lit evening just like this. On the back of a turtle, she says. But I don’t believe
her. I know better. The world didn’t begin, I want to tell her, because the world doesn’t exist. Turtle or no turtle. It just isn’t there. See. You think it’s all solid and healthy and nutritious — but you can poke your finger right through it. Can make it come apart with one silly question. Or it’s all a big joke and you’re the butt of that joke. That’s what I want to tell her but I don’t have the energy. I just don’t have the strength to say anything. And she wouldn’t understand anyway. What do you mean, she’d say. Look I stub my toe against this bedpost, I’ll cry out in pain, won’t I? So I don’t say anything.

She, on the other hand, continues to talk non-stop. She talks so much my stomach begins to cramp. Tighter and tighter. Harder and harder. Muscles contracting and pulling everything else with them. Until I can’t stand the pain any longer. Until the pressure of holding it in is too much. With a loud explosion, I soil myself. I let go and feel the soft, hot detritus fill my pajama trousers, spreading out in all directions, wet and clammy and full of childhood memories. Maybe that’ll drive her away. Maybe the stench will be too much for her and she’ll retreat. Or she’ll be overcome with a wave of utter disgust for this sub-human creature before her. This befouler of his own nest.

For a moment, the plan seems to be working. Her sweet face twists and scrunches up, going from oval to eccentric. She places a handkerchief over her nose and hurries away from the bed, retreating close to the door. But it’s only a tactical retreat, a temporary setback, a pause before marshalling her forces. She’s only moving out of the way so that the sheet changers can charge in. Four of them this time, all practically identical, all marching in step. One pair lift me up, gingerly, one under each arm, and carry me to the nearby shower stall. There, on the cool ceramic floor, I’m stripped and hosed down, the foecal matter dissolving under the spray of sudsy water. At the same time, the other pair busy themselves with my bed: rolling the dirty sheets into a ball and replacing them with crackling duplicates that snap into place with a slingshot sound. Within a few minutes, everything is bright and clean again — and smelling of Lysol. The men troop out, hauling away the last traces of my inappropriate behavior. I follow them with infinite longing, wishing they’d haul me away, too. Wishing I, too, could be wrapped up in a ball and tossed into an industrial washing machine. The woman smiles as she sits again on my bed. As she smooths out a wrinkle that only she sees. She smiles because she knows I’ve been defeated. She knows that I’ve done my best. Or worst. And it didn’t work. She knows.

"Once upon a time," she begins, "in a world very much like this one — in a world exactly like this one — there lived a... what? Coyote? Crow? Bear? Blue jay? Wolf? Wishing well?"

She looks at me, her eyes suddenly reflective pools where my fear and longing can easily be fathomed.

"Help me now," she says. "I know you can do it if you put your mind to it. We all can. There lived a... a what?"

"A man," I say, feeling as if the words were being ripped out of me. As if the deep tendrils were being ripped out and hauled up through my throat.

"Yes!" she says, clapping her hands. "A man. Bravo! There lived a man. A man as in a member of the male gender of the species. And this man’s name was... come on now... work with me on this... this man’s name was...?"

"Giulio," I say, my voice no louder than a mouse’s squeak, no more certain than a child held under his mother’s thumb.

But it doesn’t matter to her. She’s beaming now, grinning from ear to ear. She’s happy now. She knows that, once she has me talking like any ordinary human being, my salvation can’t be very far behind. At least, if she has anything to do with it.

"See how easy it is," she says as she places her hand on my knee. It’s warm even through the cotton pyjamas. "If you put your mind to it, that is. Once you accept that you’re not alone and that
others can help you. That others are there for you when you need them. It’s the easiest thing in the whole world, isn’t it? Almost as easy as apple pie — if not quite as tasty. Hah, hah."

I’m about to smile along with her, hoping to get into her good books, when she suddenly becomes very serious — to the point of scowling.

"Your story," she says, pushing her face right up against mine, almost as if trying to mimic some form of sexual intensity which she couldn’t otherwise feel.

Or maybe it has nothing to do with sexual intensity. Maybe she sincerely wants to help me discover who I really am.

"Tell me your story," she says, her eyes locked on mine. "Please. I need to hear it. And it’ll make you feel better, too. Promise."

I lean back against the wall, hoping for inspiration. Or for anything really: My name is Mary Jane and I live down the lane. What’s my number? Cucumber. Come on, come on, I say to myself. Think of something. Something a little more original.

*Riverrun,* the scratching whispers, *past Eve and Adam’s...*

"Riverrun," I repeat, staring intently into the woman’s dreamy, hypnotized face. "Past Eve and Adam’s, from swerve of shore to bend of bay..."

And then 628 pages later, the woman asleep, my lips parched, the scratching whispers still going strong: Given! A way alone a last a loved a long the...

"The end," I say when I realize there’s no more, when I sense the scratching is about to start all over again and I don’t want to be forced to give the real ending away. Not to her anyway.

* * *

Some time afterwards (I’m not really sure how long), the woman leads me outside into the bright sunlight. I presume it’s the same woman, although I have no way of knowing really as everyone looks pretty much the same: bright-eyed and oval-faced. She leads me outside by the arm and I stumble like someone no longer used to walking.

"You’re free," she says, "free to rejoin your friends." And letting go my arm, launches me towards the street with a gentle push.

I turn to thank her but the sun blinds me and, by the time I’m able to focus again, she’s gone — only the click of the self-reflecting double doors as they shut left to indicate there was anyone there in the first place. I look down at my feet instead. At least, they’ve returned my clothes to me, I say to myself. Even if they are starched and stiff and make me feel like a zombie. And my good old bag with the name tag on it, the tag that identifies me. I stand there, unsure of where to go next. From around the corner comes a man on a motorcycle. He screeches to a halt in front of me, the bike slipping slightly sideways before he manages to regain control of it. I don’t recognize him at first — what with his helmet on and all. But the moment he gets off the bike and starts walking towards me, I know exactly who it is. I drop my bag and rush into his arms.

"You didn’t leave me," I say, face pressed to his chest. He nods. "You waited all this time for me?" He nods again. And takes out a sign: Come on. You’ve been in this world too long. Time to get back to the real one.

He hands me a spare helmet. I slide it on my head, climb onto the back of the bike and hang on tight.
Kat Lillian Steiger

Tap

Little birch
branch
weave;
  v. having moved from side to side while going forward
along headboard – threaded between
rungs;
  n. a rounded crosspiece between the legs (of a chair)
as tight and loose as a child’s
cross-stitch.

This is how
we begin
to tap;
  n. 1. a. spigot 1. b. faucet 2. a. liquor drawn through a tap 2. b. the procedure
of removing fluid (as from a body cavity) 3. a tool for forming an internal screw
thread 4. an intermediate point in an electric circuit where a connection may be
made 5. wiretap
into each
other.

Beside,
between;
  prep. 1. the common action of 2. in the time, space or interval that separates
3.a. from one to another of 3.b. serving to connect or unite in a relationship
3.c. setting apart 4. in preference for one or the other of 5. in confidence
restricted to 6. taking together the combined effect of
we take
awhile.

There are
many well-received
distractions;
  n. mental confusion

Just before
the last
rub;
  v. applied pressure and friction to (something) with a circular or backwards –
and forwards movement
the little limbs grip
almost as tender
and troubled
as had
their
roots.

definition references: http://www.merriam-webster.com/
Perceptive Norm

Malachey

Norman was tootling happily along on his moped one crisp and sunny morning when the entire world suddenly flipped like a pancake. The poor fellow nearly crashed as everything rolled 180 degrees, so that the tarmac road took the place of the sky and the sky ended up on the floor.

"Stone me!" he exclaimed as he wobbled his moped to the side of the road. "What’s happening here?"

He dismounted unsteadily and struggled to remove his helmet before it got wedged, for the blood was already rushing to his head, swelling it and turning his cheeks crimson.

He took a look around, beginning to feel nauseous, and sure enough everything was now upside down; he was dangling by his feet from the road, which was now a ceiling, with his floppy hair standing on end and clouds passing underneath him. Cars drove past stuck to the road, trees held onto the grass verge by their roots and an upside down paperboy cycled by on his upside down bike. The whole thing was like some incredible superglue joke, but more than that, because apart from his hair and his blood, gravity had reversed too. He experimented by holding out his helmet and letting go and saw with mounting fear that instead of dropping into the sky, it flew up and hit the road with a crack. *This is insane,* he thought, *the whole world has flipped!*

There was no time to ponder the unusual turn of events at that moment though, because his eyes were beginning to bulge from the pressure. Bright lights assailed his vision like red carpet flashbulbs and his ears rang loudly, throbbing to the beat of his heart. It was becoming quite unbearable just standing there and he knew if he didn’t do something soon he, would pass out, so he tried bending forward at the waist and tucking in his chin. Sure enough this alleviated the roaring in his ears and the paparazzi retreated somewhat. Experimenting further, he found if he stood with his head between his legs (and thus the right way up) and hugged his knees, the symptoms were altogether better and his lovely locks flopped back down around his ears.

Norman remained at the side of the road like this for several minutes wondering what to do next, but it was all rather harrowing. He was generally a shy, unassuming fellow and the compromising position he had arrived at left him a trifle embarrassed. His flea-bitten Blues Explosion t-shirt had joined the gravity revolt and gathered under his armpits, exposing his hairy alabaster paunch. His trousers, which were a little on the baggy side, had slipped to reveal two inches of underpant (not in a cool hip hop way – they were not cool hip hop underpants) and about four inches of densely hairy arse-crack. As a result a he was effectively standing in the road and mooning the public. He frowned unhappily as he felt the morning breeze tickle his bum fuzz and, between his knees, he saw a young woman walking her children to school yelp with fright and cross the street at the sight of him.

*This will never do,* he thought to himself, *I shall be arrested imminently on the most awful charges if I stay like this.* He had an idea; he lifted his head just enough to wrestle his t-shirt all the way off and folded it up on the floor/ceiling in front of him. He then rested his head on the t-shirt and gingerly raised his Doc Martins skyward, achieving a wobbling headstand.
"Now that’s more like it!" he pronounced happily. He was still hanging from the ceiling but at least he was now hanging the right way up. The redness disappeared fully from his cheeks and he felt his blood flowing in the normal fashion once more. He was a little disappointed he had forgotten to tuck his trousers into his socks however, as the hems were now around his knees which he expected looked a little ridiculous (he was self-conscious about the thin hairy sticks he used for calves).

Once again, Norman’s chance to ponder was cut short, this time by the screeching of tyres and an angry car horn. He wasn’t exactly in the middle of the road but he wasn’t exactly at the side of the road either, and a BMW had just come very close to running him down — or up. He heard the slamming of the car door and saw a neat pair of brown Brogues come marching towards him from the driver’s side.

"What in God’s name do you think you’re doing? I nearly ploughed straight into you you damn fool!" barked Brogues Man.

Norman tried to peer down at him without loosing his balance and glimpsed a thirty-something in a sharp suit with gelled hair before giving up and deciding to simply address the shoes.

"Sorry about that mate, when everything flipped I nearly came off my bike, and then the pressure got so bad I had to get myself the right way up sharpish."

"What?" The shoes adopted a defiant stance; far apart and toes pointing outward.

"The pressure," said Norman, "doesn’t it bother you?"

"What pressure? What are you talking about?"

"You didn’t notice it?" Norman was surprised but then, he reasoned, it had happened very quickly.

"Notice what?"

"You can’t feel it now?"

"What?!

"How strange," said Norman. And it was; Brogues Man appeared to be completely oblivious to the current crisis. *Well perhaps some people are better at being upside down than others*, he thought.

Just then Norman heard the approaching clip-clop of female shoes accompanied by the scurrying patter of a dragged child.

"Don’t let him get away, I’ve called the police!"

A pair of smart black ladies shoes with smart grey trousers clattered to a halt in front of him. A tiny pair of sandals over thin white socks hid behind the shoes, writhing sheepishly.

"Exposing himself he was!" cried Smartypants. "And right by a school!"

"Now look I can explain," began Norman, a little panicked by the accusation.

"Paedophile!" she screeched.

"No no no, my trousers were falling down that’s all," he protested, "I felt dizzy and I had to bend over, but then I decided to stand on my head so that, well, it wouldn’t look strange."
"Good job mate, good job," said Brogues Man sarcastically, looking Norman down and up. He turned to Smartypants, "You know I nearly ran the guy down, and then I ask him what he’s doing and he starts babbling on about pressure."

"Excuse me madam," said Norman, trying to swivel on his head to face the woman’s feet. "I take it you saw the world turn over? For some reason this gentleman doesn’t seem to have noticed."

"Don’t you talk to us!" she hissed, clamping her daughter protectively to her thigh. Another pair of legs entered Norman’s field of vision, a rather nice pair as it goes, wearing open-toed shoes and a sparkly gold anklet. Two rows of cherry red nail varnish on cheery pink toes shone in the morning sun. A fine pair of feet, thought Norman appreciatively, who had until now thought of himself as more of a breast man.

"Is everything alright?" she asked. "I teach at the school."

"Don’t you worry Miss," said Brogues Man turning to point his shoes at Twinkle Toes. "We’ve got an oddball here causing a disturbance, but I’ll keep an eye on him until the boys in blue arrive." He had suddenly developed a warm, authoritative and slightly seedy tone of voice; obviously a fellow toes man, thought Norman.

"Eww, his legs are all hairy!" piped up the young girl, full of childish wonder.

"Yes, thank you young lady," grimaced Norman. "Run along now please."

"Why are you standing on your head?" asked Twinkle Toes in a polite but puzzled manner.

"Because he’s bonkers," observed Brogues Man flatly.

"May I say madam, you have the most wonderful toes," said Norman, trying to change the subject before they got bogged down again.

"My god, he is a pervert!" screeched Smartypants again, inexplicably clamping a hand over her daughters eyes. "Call the police!"

"Here they come now," said Twinkle Toes, who was blushing slightly and wiggling her toes with pride. A police car pulled up behind the BMW and black boots emerged, gleaming proudly as they creaked over to the incident.

"’Ell ’ello ’ello", said the policeman somewhat unbelievably. "What seems to be the trouble here?"

"This man was bending over with his trousers practically around his ankles!" squawked Smartypants. "And then he started taking his clothes off and then he stood on his head, right by a school! He’s quite mad; if this brave gentleman hadn’t intervened he’d be running around naked by now!"

"I had to do something," said Brogues Man with all the self-effacing modesty his vanity would permit. "Children are the future."

"Is this true sir?" asked the policeman sternly.

"Not in the least," said Norman.

"Well let’s be a good chap and stand up now eh? Then we can discuss this properly."

"I’m afraid I can’t do that."
"Oh? And why is that?"

"Everything’s upside down; it makes my hair stand on end and I get dizzy."

"That’s because you’re standing on your head mate," said Brogues Man

"No no, before that, that’s why I’m standing on my head. If I don’t then I shall pass out within minutes. The world’s turned upside down; surely one of you has noticed?"

"What’s he on about?" asked Smartypants.

"Ah, perhaps it’s a metaphor," said Twinkle Toes thoughtfully. "Is that what you mean," she asked kindly, leaning forward with her hands on her knees, "that the whole world seems upside down these days? Because that’s quite understandable really."

"Metaphor? No of course not, how could a metaphor make my hair stand on end?" said Norman. "But thanks for the effort," he added gratefully.

"Are you a Yogi or something?" asked the policeman.

"What’s a Yogi?" asked Norman, suddenly interested in case he was one and that would explain things.

"Like a Buddha or something, you know, are you meditating?" The policeman was concerned, there might be rules about this kind of thing; he could move the guy on and end up with a Hare Krishna riot on his hands.

"Meditating? Lord no! It’s just what I already told you a million times; the world flipped, we’re all upside down, so I stood on my head. End of!" Norman was beginning to get exasperated.

"Now you just mind your temper sir or I’ll arrest you for disturbing the peace."

"Oh God look, I just want to go home, if I try and go on my moped my head’ll pop before I get halfway. Is there any way you and Brogues Man could carry me by the legs and somehow arrange me in the squad car? I only live around the corner."

"Who’s Brogues Man?" asked Brogues Man. The policeman got down onto his hands and knees and attempting a sympathetic smile tried to turn his head to match Norman’s.

"IS THERE SOMEONE AT HOME WHO LOOKS AFTER YOU?" He asked loudly and slowly as if talking to a child; there were rules about dealing with mental patients too.

"Jesus wept," muttered Norman.

"But if everything’s upside down then why haven’t we all fallen into the sky?" asked Twinkle Toes, who seemed at least to be giving it some thought.

"Well I think gravity must have turned upside down too."

"So everything’s the same then!" snapped Brogues Man, who was becoming increasingly annoyed with Twinkle Toes’ attitude. "How can you even tell?"

"Because I just can. Plus I saw it happen, plus I felt it happen."

"Well I didn’t see anything," said Smartypants.
"Neither did I," said the Policeman.

"Everything seems perfectly fine to me," conceded Twinkle Toes.

"Me too," agreed Brogues Man.

"Well all the blood went to my head and my hair stood on end. Is anyone else’s hair standing up, I can’t really see from here?" Everyone glanced over everyone else, Norman wobbled pensively.

"Not mine."

"Nor mine."

"Nope."

"Oh..." frowned Norman, "... are you sure?"

"Yes," in unison this time.

"Hang on," said Brogues Man snapping his fingers, "if gravity is upside down then why isn’t it affecting you?"

"That’s a good point," said the policeman. He narrowed his eyes suspiciously, "care to explain that sir?"

"Well I don’t know officer. I was wondering about that when you all turned up. It doesn’t really make sense."

"It’s inconsistent that’s what it is," said Smartypants. "Doesn’t that prove to you that it’s all in your head?"

"But it isn’t though. I’m not mad or anything."

"Prove it then." The hem of Brogues Man’s trousers lifted indicating he had just tugged on his belt challengingly. "Go on, stand up and let’s see. You’ve got a fair old barnet by the look of it, if that bloody mop reaches for the sky I’ll be half way to believing you."

"Okay, okay, I’ll do it," said Norman huffily. He really didn’t see any way around it and the crowd of bystanders was building by the minute so he was keen to get his T-shirt back on.

As he hung himself by his feet once more his hair rose until it was at full stretch, making him four inches taller than usual. He stood there swaying queasily as the congregation gazed at him open mouthed.

"My god!" said Brogues Man.

"That’s incredible!" gasped Twinkle Toes.

"It’s drugs!" exclaimed Smartypants. "It must be; he’s a druggie!"

"Madam, I really don’t think doing drugs can make your hair stand on end, not literally," said Norman.

"I wouldn’t know I’m not a druggie," she retorted haughtily.
"Hmm... I think he might be right about that," said the policeman, thoughtfully recalling his police college training manual.

"Look he’s going all red!" said Twinkle toes.

"Well for his sake I hope it’s with shame at the scene he’s caused."

"There," said Norman folding his arms with satisfaction, "just like I told you."

"I really think it’s best if I just arrest you," said the policeman, unhooking the handcuffs from his belt.

"What for, having a red face and high hair?" said Norman woozily.

"Yes. And causing an obstruction and indecent exposure and... loitering."

"And he’s illegally parked," piped up Brogues Man.

"Oh shut up." Said Norman, and passed out cold.

...*

Norman was scooped up by an ambulance and driven to hospital, where he regained consciousness just long enough to explain himself and get sectioned under the mental health act. The next time he woke up he found himself in a secure psychiatric unit, where over the following weeks he caused quite a stir, being what the doctors regarded as something of a psychiatric novelty. The clipboard mafia would huddle around him and prod him and play with his hair, and then go away for an hour and come back and prod him a bit more. At one point, despairing of all else, they even tried gluing everything in his room to the ceiling while he was asleep, presumably in an effort to trick his brain. But to no avail; his hair still stubbornly refused to behave itself. In fact, he protested so vehemently whenever they tried to stop him standing on his head that in the end the doctors strapped his feet to the foot of a bed and stood it on its end, only putting him the right way up at meal times and for the purposes of study. Before they let him out of his straightjacket he looked rather like a white bat.

Eventually, after the interest in him had all but died out, his doctor (a man who, Norman noted, exhibited a very lacklustre approach to shoe maintenance) came to see him and told him they had reached some conclusions.

"Let’s hear it then," said Norman. Who had by now heard just about everything.

"It is your own mind that is causing the phenomena you are experiencing and nothing more. There are no conceivable physiological causes for your red face or your.... umm.... hair issue, so you must simply be willing it to happen."

"It doesn’t sound very probable," Norman mused.

"What sounds more likely," the doctor sighed patiently. "That the whole world is suddenly upside down and you’re the only one who can tell and is affected; or that you are sub-consciously complimenting a delusion you are experiencing, probably brought on by plain old stress, by psychosomatically manipulating your follicles, causing your hair to stand on end?"

"Hmm, they both sound pretty unlikely, Doc."

"Indeed," he smiled benevolently, "and that is what makes you such a fascinating case."

"Terrific. What do you suggest I do about it then?"
"Well, I think we should try shaving your head."

"Ah.... and how will that help?"

"Never underestimate the emotional healing power of a good haircut," he chuckled. "It’s a secret women have known about for years, you know."

_Ha bloody ha_, thought Norman. "And what about all this blood in my head, what about that then?"

"Low cholesterol diet," said the doctor, resetting his glasses in a manner that hinted uncertainty.

For want of a better idea Norman did what the good doctor told him, and over the next few weeks came to the conclusion that the world may well be upside down, but if it was then it wasn’t worth the trouble of trying to fight the fact. He thought his crew cut actually looked rather dashing, and the low cholesterol diet had done wonders for his waistline and complexion. The roaring in his ears was still apparent but no longer bothersome, a prescription for beta blockers to decrease his blood flow had left it sounding quite pleasant in fact; like living near the sea he convinced himself in the end.

After he conceded to the doctors that the problem had all been in his head and that the world was in fact fine, they let him out. He went back to work at the chicken soup factory down the road and saw a psychiatrist for an hour on Tuesdays and Thursdays. He would reiterate to the shrink that he believed he and the world were the same way up these days and the shrink would smile, write prescriptions for little yellow pills and shake him firmly by the hand. It was all very pleasant.

The only trouble was, no matter how comfortable and normal these little alterations made him feel, he still knew for a stone cold fact that the whole world was upside down.

"Say laa vee," Norman would say to himself as he kick-started his moped in the mornings and putted off to make chicken soup for the masses, "as long as it doesn"t turn inside out I’ll be fine."
Doug Sundling was raised in America’s Heartland and nurtured in the western wilderness. He credits both with inspiring a singularly artistic vision: organic nature and the geometry of humanity where the infinite intersects with the moment. His acrylic paintings, photography and writings express the enduring relationship he has with the wilderness. Doug has done month-long retreats of fasting in the remote Utah canyonlands and backpacked at the renowned McNeil River State Grizzle Bear Sanctuary in Alaska. He has hiked the Appalachia Mountains, the Rockies and the Colorado Plateau. He lives in Northeastern Indiana. More of his work can be seen at www.dougsundling.com.
Tree in Meadow of Yellow Flowers

Misty Bay
Doug Sundling

Twilight on Visionscape
The Punk and the Princess
Stephanie Davies

The train was leaking on the day that I met Chris. I had been watching the moisture gathering from the air-conditioning unit on the ceiling. Each drip fell to pool on the carpeted floor between my sensible shoes, between my aching feet. My body was shivering with cold, but it was a small commiseration when considering the infamous Gold Coast heat that awaited me outside.

That day, I was too exhausted to feign attractiveness. I had not even changed out of my work clothes. The Subway logo paid homage to the things that just didn’t concern me anymore. It was four p.m., I was going home. Who would notice if I had lettuce in my hair? Who would care?

The air-conditioning system had my full attention, until I noticed a presence beside me.

"You got a light?"

I think my mouth actually fell open the first time I saw her. Her hair was matchstick-red, short to expose each of her bejewelled ears. Piercings glittered at me from her eyebrows, her lips, her nose and the small indent above her upper lip. Clutched between her teeth was an unlit cigarette.

I nodded mutely and dug around in my bag for a lighter. I wasn’t a smoker in those days but I carried one nonetheless.

Click. Suck. The red-haired angel blew a halo of smoke. "Thanks. I'm Chris," she said. Her voice was husky from the chemicals that lined the tubes of her throat.

"I'm Jodie." My own voice came out a whisper. I could hardly believe that this girl was speaking to me. It felt surreal. Cancerous clouds wafted above our heads, getting lost somewhere near the leak. A nearby passenger narrowed her eyes at us and indicated to the No Smoking sign fixed upon the wall. A nervous thrill stirred inside me; never before had I been so close to a person so blatantly breaking the rules. I liked it.

So Chris and I began to talk. As she smoked beside me, we conversed about religion and the government. We talked about education, illness, rebellion and submission to popular ideals. Things which my peers showed no interest in. Things which mattered. She raised her middle finger to anybody whose stare lingered on her for more than a few seconds. At one point, she passed the cigarette to me, and without just a moment’s hesitation, I accepted it. The harshness of the toxins in my lungs made me feel dangerous.

And as suddenly as she had appeared, Chris uttered a profanity and jumped off the train. Ticket inspectors were heading into our carriage and the cigarette butt was still burning on the floor. Nobody said a word.

* * *

Australian-born Stephanie Davies now resides in Guildford, UK. Her inspiration, Lewis Carroll, is buried somewhere outside. Stephanie writes fiction and poetry reflective of her eighteen short years in this world. She hopes to learn the tricks of the trade when university begins in September.
I thought of her as I walked home that afternoon. Christina. Christina the punk. She told me that addressing her by her full name was punishable by death and I believed her. That day, there was an intangible feeling of something changing in my life, of an event biding its time until it would be analysed years later, when I'd look back and scream, "There! That moment! That's when it fucked up!"

* * *

The train became our ritual. Every Saturday morning, she would be in the same carriage with something to show me. Chris stole everything she owned. She said that she didn't want to be just another consumer. I reminded her several times that purchasing and consuming were two different things. Even if she refrained from giving the companies her cash, she was still reinforcing the social importance of "owning stuff." At these times, she would smile in a strange way and pat my head, calling me her "Dear Little Jodie.” I found it patronising but oddly pleasing.

She'd ask me to try pot with her, or to come to a party with her and her violent friends. I was more scared of how they would react to me than how I would feel about them. So it became just us two, content in each other's company. To my mother's horror she slept over every other weekend. Chris's radical image was a contrast to my straight-laced, well-mannered friends of the past, but I think she was secretly pleased that I had found someone with whom to share my thoughts, the ones she couldn't pretend to understand.

Chris and I would raid the liquor cabinet and drink vodka in my bedroom, listening to Bikini Kill, Le Tigre and Sleater-Kinney. "Music to fuck to," she'd wink. All the while she hinted at some deep river of unhappiness lying dormant underneath her tough exterior but I never pried and she never confided.

"Oh Jo, this is love, better than those fucking record industry cunts can define it," she told me once as I brought her a coffee for her hangover. I said nothing; I was scared of what would happen if I opened my mouth. She inhaled chemicals to escape what she had no control over, what she wouldn't tell me no matter how drunk we were. I stayed in school and pretended not to care that she was my only friend, that nobody had even grazed against me in a way that mattered for so long. Then one night, she asked me to run away with her.

It never even occurred to me to say no.

* * *

The train that we caught out of town was the same one on which we met, but the irony was lost in the thrill of the moment. After the first few hours, however, the novelty of leaving home died. My cash bought us a cheap motel room and a few joints.

Marijuana. Choking on the sweet smoke and sitting on our dirty mattress, I tried to clear my mind like she'd told me to. "Are you scared?" I asked her as she took a hit.

"Not even close." Her eyelids lowered. "Just roll with it. Hey... we'll look out for each other," she said, speaking slowly. Or was she? "We're going to be so happy together, Jodie!"

I hardly knew what she was saying. My thoughts were becoming too loud inside my head and my skin was numb, so I made my way to the bathroom. I took off my clothes and lay in the bathtub, cocooned within the dark ring of other people's filth. I don't know how long I was there before Chris walked in to use the toilet. "I cannot feel the difference between the air and the water," I whispered. My voice sounded foreign, sad and profound all at once. I liked the feel of the words in my mouth.

Chris laughed at me as she took another drag and pulled her tartan pants up. "That's because there's no water in the tub, you loser."
For some reason this was insanely funny. Laughter echoed in my ears, as I sat in the empty bath, acknowledging the cold beneath my bare skin. Chris sank to the floor beside me in a fit of uncharacteristic giggles, and this made the situation even funnier. But the laughter stopped when she leant forward, eyes closed, for the kiss.

Her cold lip ring barely brushed my mouth when I pushed her away. "Chris! What the hell!"

She laughed again, with a hint of uncertainty. "Jodie... come on... it’s okay. You’re allowed to do this."

I leant over the edge of the tub and grabbed my clothes, dressing hurriedly and avoiding eye contact. My hands were shaking.

"I mean, I know you never said you felt the same way, but... " she stopped, looking as confused as I felt. I had put as much distance as I could between us in the small room. Suddenly her fist slammed into the wall. "You didn't have to, damn it!"

"Jesus, Chris!" I cried at the violent sound. She looked at me with narrowed eyes. Her eyeliner had smudged and created dark sinister shadows beneath her lashes.

"I can't handle this," I murmured suddenly, walking out of the room.

I heard the sound of her heavy boots stumbling after me.

"You know what?! Fuck you!" she screamed, half-stoned and all angry. "Just piss off home, Princess, if you’re too delicate for this."

I kept my back to her, forcing myself not to cry. I was still in a state of confusion, my brain racing to make sense of the situation. This is happening. This is happening. I could still feel her lips on mine.

"Chris... " There was a long silence and a flicker of fear ignited in my clouded mind. I could hear nothing but a faint buzz. "Christina? Are you still there?"

"Don't you ever call me that!" Her words seemed to come from far away but there was no mistaking the rage and pain in her voice.

I didn't want to give her the satisfaction of hurting me, but I knew that I had hurt her. Wordlessly, I collected my belongings and left the motel room.

"Jodie, wait, come back," she mumbled after me from the doorway. I didn't look back.

* * *

My mother hadn't noticed my absence and I collapsed into bed. Despite my exhaustion, I was wide awake. The marijuana had worn off almost completely but something large and frightening was emerging in my chest. Something unwelcome, something I wasn’t prepared for was glowing its way from my chest to my throat and spilling hot tears from underneath my eyelids. I knew that if I didn't act upon it, if I denied these feelings to myself, I would lose that warmth forever.

But I chose to do nothing. I don't catch the train anymore.
"Well, look at it this way, kid, you'll be the only one in the whole school that knows what the spoon at the top of the plate is for."

Sam scowled at me and then turned back to look out the car window at the endless miles of well — nothing — to his mind. Endless miles of unidentifiable plants, all in disconcertingly straight rows, broken only occasionally with similar fields of cows. The cows were only slightly more interesting — he'd probably never seen one before.

Sam is my brother — my half brother really. He was my father's last bid at immortality. My father made several bids at immortality while he was still alive, and it took the patience of four wives. I'm still not sure he ever achieved it. Certainly not in the flesh — the whole reason I was driving Sam through the cornfields was because when my father died, his fourth wife didn't want to deal with him and promptly put him on a plane. I was Sam's last living relative.

I wasn't sure my father was going to achieve immortality through Sam or me, either. Not judging by events thus far. At 32 and still single, it didn't look like I'd be adding to the gene pool any time soon, and my time was running out, so it looked like it was going to be up to Sam.

Picking Sam up at the airport left me with doubts to this end. What 17-year-old boy owns a suit that fits that well? It was unnatural. His hair was carefully groomed and did weird, wispy things over his eyebrows. It appeared to be intentional.

I hadn't seen Sam since he was 6. Every couple of years, I would remember that it was his birthday and send a card with some money in. Christmas, too, sometimes, if I was talking to my father that year. But it's a bit hard to maintain enthusiasm for a relationship that you never really had.

Sam was my father's son by his third wife — long past the time that the indignant bitterness had worn off of his divorce from my mother. In fact, they'd become quite the chums toward the end. Sam was just sort of lost in the juggle of marriages and divorces. I was in high school when Sam was born and completely uninterested. I barely glanced at the announcement card with the picture of the bloated, alien creature in the picture before handing it back to my mother. She had seemed amused by it at the time.

It was sad. I liked Sam's mother. Her name was Lillian, and she was sweet and unassuming on top and hard as nails below. I'd only met her once, at the wedding, and she had winked at me at the reception. It was one of those sly winks shared between women gapped by generations that says "Just watch me, honey — I'll show you how it's done." But when Sam was only 4, Lillian was diagnosed with breast cancer, and she hadn't survived. Her funeral two years later was the first and only time I'd ever met Sam. Come to think of it, the only time I ever saw Sam was when one of his parents died. I hoped he wasn't going to hold it against me.
I went to Lillian's funeral. I didn't go to my father's. Make of that what you will. And now I've talked far more about my father than I ever intended, because this story isn't about him. It's just about what he left behind — one perennially subdued woman with dirty blond hair and a love/hate relationship with the Department of Defense, and one rather skeptical teenaged boy with at least one good suit and a painfully arranged hair style.

"There really isn't much to do around the house," I told him, navigating the curved roads around the fields. "I don't mean, you know, things to do. I mean work." Sam blinked at me like he'd never heard the word before. "I mean, it's just a small house, not much of a yard. There's a lot of farms out here, but I just have a little place on the edge of town."

He scowled at me again, as though I were speaking a foreign language, and I have to admit for a moment I was tempted to speak louder, just in case it helped.

"I just don't want you thinking you have to milk cows or anything."

He smiled. "Angela told me you were in the Army. I figured I'd be cleaning guns or washing tanks or something."

I stared at him, almost causing a rather closer cow encounter than was comfortable. My eyes shot back to the road before I found myself the inadvertent owner of a lot of fresh beef.

"Yeah, I'm in the Army."

"That's funny, Dana." he said, staring at the cows. "You don't look like a baby killer."

"I'm not," I sighed. Great, I thought, one of those.

"Me either," he said, a little too flatly for my liking. "I prefer to wait 'til they're in preschool. More meat on them, that way."

He winked at me.

* * *

Sam settled in pretty quickly for a pampered city kid. He hauled all his own luggage out of the car, made no comment about the less-than-luxurious accommodations I'd scrambled out of the spare room three days earlier when I'd been notified of his impending arrival. He didn't even say anything about the air mattress that would serve for his bed and the milk crate that would play nightstand in his domestic arrangements until I could have real furniture delivered.

He shrugged out of his suit coat and carefully hung it on a nail in the paneling and shooed me off while he changed into something more suitable for the country.

The thing about the Army is that they can pretty much send you anywhere, and you can't argue. They tend to take advantage of the relationship. That love/hate thing I was talking about earlier. Don't get me wrong, I love my job, as much as anyone can love a job — but I hate the Army. I'm a nurse in the Army, and I'm not sure what I'd be doing if I weren't. There's just something a little too perverse about an educated mind that makes it possible to swallow the idea of being hired to fix people who've been sent out to get damaged intentionally. I'm just not sure where in my personal philosophy to place that awkward and nagging concept that says that if we stopped sending them out to get damaged, we could forgo the whole patching them up thing.

This time, the Army had sent me to some isolated base in the middle of the US, surrounded by cornfields and cowfields. It wasn't even in the middle of nowhere — it was on the outskirts of nowhere. I figured I could manage. After all, I'd managed elsewhere, Korea, Saudi. I'd shaken out the duffel, put on my cap, pinned on the old caduceus and managed. And I managed here too,
renting a small house off base made of plywood and corrugated metal in a scrubby yard full of weeds, an old oak tree, and an abandoned pig trough. I'd always thought about planting flowers in it, but even that seemed too much an effort for this place. I was just killing time, hoping to end up with a better assignment somewhere — anywhere.

Sam settled in quickly and carefully. The boy did everything carefully. He picked his way through the house, placing his feet with some thought, examining my meager belongings, the worn carpet, the broken window blinds, the second-hand furniture. He took serious pains to store his various concoctions in the bathroom, next to my half-spilled shampoo and soap bottles. He didn't appear to be afraid to offend, but he did seem to be conscious on not imposing his existence on my life.

The next day, I took him into the local high school to register him. I walked beside him through the dusty, concrete halls to the principal's office, noting the looks on the faces of the local girls with some amusement. I could tell they were quite impressed. A mop bucket may have been in order. Sam had dressed, well, carefully, for his first day in the new school. That was my little brother — six feet tall, shaggy, blonde hair that took two hours to look like he'd just rolled out of bed, with bedroom eyes and lashes that any woman would kill for. I had found myself forced to question his choice of dress that morning.

"You know, Sam, boys don't dress like that here," I said, eyeing his skinny jeans and suit jacket. "Do you have anything a little more... lived in? Something that fits a bit looser?"

"It doesn't matter," he said shrugging a long, pink silk scarf around his neck. I began to fear for his safety.

"Seriously, Sam, those jeans are so tight, we can all tell you're Catholic. That may be all the rage back in Chicago, but, you know, around here..."

"I said it doesn't matter, Dana. Either way, I'm going to be a freak, so I may as well start out being my own kind of freak. Right?" He looked at me with big, green eyes that should have held more wonder than cynicism, but what could I say?

"As it is," he smiled, "it may be a good thing you're a nurse, eh?" He threw his arm around me and kissed the top of my head.

But the local girls were impressed, if only by the addition of the pink scarf or perhaps by his complete lack of interest in them. I remembered those days — nothing more attractive on the face of the earth than a boy that has absolutely no use for you.

* * *

We spent evenings over sandwiches or take out food. I'm not much of a cook, to be honest. Sam carefully cleaned up afterwards. Sometimes we'd watch television together, but more often, he'd lock himself in his room with his laptop, and I wouldn't see him again 'til the next day, when I'd watch as the back of his latest fashion disaster rushed down the road to catch the bus, battered bookcase in hand. It was the only panic I'd ever seen in the boy. He seemed to go completely unmolested at school. I'm not sure if that was owed to his considerable height or because my little brother was simply too unflappable to be worth bullying.

A week or so after he moved in, I gave him a new chore and spent some time explaining it to him.

"Sam, it's time for you to learn how to take out the trash."

He looked at me with a raised eyebrow. "Is this something we do differently in Kansas?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact, we do."
I showed him the large, galvanized rubber trashcans, and, more specifically, I showed him the special locking bars to keep the raccoons out of the trash.

"You see, if you don't lock the trash cans, they'll open them up and drag the garbage all over the yard or all over the street, and then we'll have to spend half the morning picking it up."

"Wild raccoons?" his eyes were wide. I wondered if I noted just a hint of fear.

"Well, yes, Sam, there's hardly any other type, is there?" He looked at me, dubious. "Sometimes they even learn how to open the locks."

"You have to lock up your TRASH?" he asked, incredulous.

Sam then took on locking up the trash. In fact, it became a bit of a windmill for him to tilt. The first week was a disaster. He'd carefully placed all the tied bags in the cans and twisted some rope through the handles to hold the lids on. He didn't seem to be able to figure out how to use the locks I'd bought. The raccoons quickly learned to untie the ropes. Rather than spending an extra fifteen minutes making sure his hair was a perfect mess, he spent it picking up cereal boxes and Styrofoam containers and grapefruit peels out of theuts in the dirt on the side of the house.

He didn't complain — not once. In fact, he seemed bound and determined to get it right, to keep those trash cans closed, come hell, high water, or mutant ninja raccoons with opposable thumbs and a deep-seated knowledge of physics. Twist wires were the next step, then hanger wire. He wasn't about to ask me again how to use the locks, I could tell. I'd watch from the kitchen window as he'd pick them up, twist the metal bars back and forth, peering at them, trying to unravel their mystery. As he was with everything, he was incredibly patient — whether it was fixing his hair, dressing for school, washing dishes or locking the trashcans. My brother was the most deliberate person I'd ever met. Despite his caution and deliberation, the raccoons always managed to undo his ropes and cords and pick through our garbage like old ladies at a flea market, leaving wrappers and greasy papers all over the yard.

We quickly fell into a routine. I went to work, and he went to school. We shared a meal in the evening, a few words, sometimes a news program, and then parted ways. Some mornings, I'd climb into my ugly, economy car with the soundtrack of his profanity and his rants against raccoons floating over the hedge. He had quite an interesting vocabulary for one so young. It made me laugh, and I'd gun the engine, as if to punctuate the last "fuck" drifting through the chilly, autumn morning air.

I began to worry that he wasn't being parented in that old-fashioned American way of keeping people children for as long as legally possible. Then I realized that pretty much any damage that could have been done by my father and his fourth wife was probably done. There wasn't really much to be done on my part — even if I had any clue what that would be. Sam was my brother, not my child. He wasn't anybody's child.

* * *

"So, how come you're not married?" he asked me one night, through a piece of some mystery meat covered in tomato sauce that I'd nuked for dinner.

Too startled for the sharp retort such an impertinent question usually deserved, I just shrugged at him behind my own forkful. "I dunno. Never really thought about it."

"Angela told me you were engaged once. She was laughing at the time, so I knew it must be true." Angela — my father's fourth, and fatal, wife.
"You do go out, don't you?" he asked, as if it had just occurred to him. "I mean date. Men."

"I go out and have drinks with some of the other hospital staff, but I wouldn't call them dates. Not even when they're men. How about you?" I asked, turning the question back on him. "Met anyone at school?" He blushed, and I felt bad.

He shook his head and fell silent.

"I was engaged," I admitted. "It didn't work out. I haven't really met anyone here, yet."

"Don't you get lonely?" He looked appalled at his own candor, but he seemed to have something more on his mind than just my love life. "Don't you get...." and he went beet red and was suddenly nothing more than the 17 years that his ID card claimed.

I didn't laugh, but I smiled. "I see a bit too much of people's insides, Sam, to get really sentimental about their outsides, but, yeah. Who doesn't? I just haven't met anyone here yet. That's all."

"So what happened with your boyfriend?"

I wanted to tell him to mind his own business, then I remembered he didn't have anyone else. No one to warn him about the potholes in the road, the maze of good intentions and broken promises that littered the path in the mating game.

"His name was Todd, and he's was in the Army, too; he was a doctor. May still be, I don't know. We dated for a few years, got engaged, planned a wedding. It wasn't that there was anything wrong about him, it's just that there wasn't enough right. I couldn't shake the feeling that I was being gang-pressed into it? Do you know what I mean?" How could he? I barely knew what I meant, even five years later. But Sam nodded. He seemed to.

"When I told him that I wasn't going to change my name after we got married, he completely lost it. He seemed to think it was the most important thing in the world I could do to show him I loved him, and he told me that if I was unwilling to change my name, I couldn't possibly be serious about marrying him. But, I just couldn't do it.

"That's when I realized I was just playing a part in his little drama — the story of Dr. Archer. Anyone could have done it. After all, anyone could be Mrs. Archer, and she didn't have to be Dana. And so, she wasn't Dana. And I still was. Make sense?"

He shook his head as if to settle his thoughts to bottom of his mind and picked up his half-empty plate. He scraped it into the garbage pail and put his dish in the sink to soak.

Later that night, I stood at the sink washing the dishes and watched him argue with the trashcans. There he stood in the light of the half moon, his crisp, white, cotton shirtsleeves rolled up to the elbows, his black boots negotiating the mud holes. I watched his breath steam around his face in the chill and watched as it turned to short, labored puffs as he pressed the lid down hard and wrapped it with bungee cords.

After a quiet and companionable month, between the drama of the trash cans, the monotony of my cooking and the reserved caution of Sam's school life, we found ourselves startled out of the drone one evening by hammering on the front door. We shot glances at each other, but I finally got to the door and opened it. And there he was.

Sean Gordon had arrived.
He stood in the doorway, leaning against the frame with his hands stuffed into the pockets of his peacoat against the cold. He looked at me with sullen black eyes through a sweep of dark hair. He was young — older than my Sam but still undercooked to my eyes. He stood there on the porch with all the assurance of a man, and the pout of a child. He was handsome, and he looked like he knew it.

"Where's Sam?"

I could feel Sam go tense behind me. Every muscle in his body clenched, and the escaping air of his gasp hissed between his teeth.

"Sean." It was a whisper. It was a scream. It was horror and happiness in a single breath of relief.

The boy in the doorway dismissed me with his eyes, looked around me, looked through me, until they settled on Sam, where he'd staggered back from the door.

"Angela told me where to find you."

"What are you doing here?" More horror from Sam, or more relief — I couldn't tell.

" Came to get you, of course. Just like we planned. Just like we talked about. Right?" The dark-haired boy smiled. It was a hungry smile, even predatory.

"Why don't you come in?" I said and was ignored by both of them. Sean continued to dominate the doorway, somehow giving the impression that one would have to chew through him to escape.

"How did you get here?"

"I drove, of course. All the way from Chicago. And to be honest, I'm half dead. Can I come in?" He looked at me for just a moment, and he seemed to startle as if he hadn't actually seen me before. His brow furrowed, and his eyes narrowed, as though weighing me up for prey or enemy, he couldn't decide yet. Either way, he wore his thoughts on his face, and I dropped my original estimation of his age even further.

"I brought your stuff," he told Sam as he pushed by me. "It's all in the car, even the easel." It sounded like an apology disguised as an excuse.

I shut the door and went into the kitchen to make some coffee, straining to hear what they said. But, whatever they had to say to each other was exchanged in quiet tones that didn't make it past the sound of water filling the pot, the ker-lunk of my cup being placed on the counter, the panicked beating of my heart.

"We've talked about this for months, Sam," he was saying when I finally came back into the living room. "I've already found us a place to stay, and Jules says she can get me a job."

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"Sean and I were thinking of moving to New York after I finish high school," Sam said. He seemed regretful to admit it, as though it were far too clichéd an ambition for him.

"But you're not finished with school, Sam," I said. "Besides, Dad has already set up arrangements for college, hasn't he?" I sat down on the couch and sipped my coffee, eyeing the two young men who had squared off in the middle of my living room, with its dusty corners and worn carpet and overall atmosphere of neglect.
I thought they were going to come to blows, but I noticed that Sam started to slump, even with his fists clenched. Like he already knew he would lose any fight he ever had with the other boy. He seemed resigned. In fact, he looked as though he were looking forward to the bruises.

Sean, much sturdier than Sam, much more confident, arrogant, cocky even, stood there in his coat still, with a crooked grin, every muscle tensed, except for a strange sparkle in his eyes.

Sean laughed. "College?" He seemed to relax then and shook off his coat. Sam fell into an old chair I had gotten from the church thrift sale. The strange boy sat down next to me. "Sam doesn't need to go to college," he laughed. "He's a genius. Haven't you ever seen his paintings?"

I looked at my brother, who looked away.

"I've brought everything, Sam," Sean said, pleading. "Your brushes, your paints, even the acrylics. Even the watercolors — even though you never use them. You left all your paintings behind. Why?"

Sam said nothing, and Sean patted me on the knee, excited. "Your brother is fucking genius, I'm telling you."

So, that was the dream. They were going to high-tail it to the big city and set Sam up for fame and fortune, because after all — he was a genius. I supposed Sean was going to wait tables or something to support them both. Sam could work too, between inspirations. It was the dream, wasn't it? Sam didn't look sure. In fact, he seemed embarrassed by the whole thing.

"I didn't have any way to take them on the plane, did I?" he snapped. "Besides, what were you doing rooting around in my room? You ransacked my bedroom?"

Sean, looking young and vulnerable for the first time since he’d walked in the door, shook his head, whispering, "No."

"Angela let you in to do that, did she?" Sam was livid now, shaking and red-faced.

Sean simply shrugged. "I brought everything." His eyes went soft then, looking at Sam. "You promised."

Sam could only stare back, and, although his eyes glittered with rage, his body sagged with some hopeless defeat.

"Look guys," I said, trying to break the tension. "It's late, and I have work in the morning, and Sam's got school. In case you missed the point," I said glaring at Sean, "Sam is still in high school and has to be on the bus by 7:30."

"I'll drive him."

"That doesn't matter — it's late and time to call it a night." I rose and put my coffee cup in the sink, regretting that I'd had any of it at all, and switched off the pot.

When I walked back into the living room, Sean was kneeling on the floor next to Sam with one hand on his knee and the other gesturing wildly. He looked a bit like an old minstrel showman.

"Sam," I said, "He can sleep here. There isn't anywhere else. He can sleep in your room. There's some extra blankets in the closet in there."

Sam looked at Sean and shook his head. "No, he can sleep on the couch. Is that alright?" With the last he looked at me, and I could read something in his eyes that was a bit like a plea, and a bit like fury. I shrugged.
"Just take out the trash first."

I went into my room, stripped down and threw on an old nightshirt while the sound of Sam wrestling with the trashcans penetrated the windows.

My night was filled with the sound of their arguments, their debates, a door slamming. I tossed through it on the edge of caffeine-twisted consciousness, biting back the urge to intervene, to protect my brother, to discover this bizarre promise that hung between them.

The next morning, I showered and tossed on the tired whites, reheated last night's coffee and poked my head into the living room. The couch was empty, but a blanket lay there, pushed back and crumpled, and a small pile of keys, change, and other pocket debris lay on the floor. Perhaps, they had made up — if they were ever really fighting. Perhaps they had fallen asleep while sitting on the floor talking about the good, old days back in Chicago, or the good, new days to follow in New York. Whatever had happened, Sam's bedroom door lay decidedly and deliberately closed. I took that as a lesson to mind my own and left for work.

The house was dark when I got home, and the evening gloom was seeping in through the gaps in the window frames and under the door. Nothing more insidious than the early evening of a Midwestern autumn, in my experience. It seemed to stifle everything and any noise or life after dark was treated like an intrusion on the hibernation of some large and dangerous animal. Everything in the air — the color of the sunset, the chill of the wind, was an incitement to hush.

The living room was dark, and only a strip of yellow light from under Sam's bedroom door betrayed any life in the place. I could even hear the electric hum of the coffeepot that I'd forgotten to shut off that morning. There was a sense of something behind Sam's door, some activity, at least the feel of it, and I walked over, tapped on the door and opened it a few inches.

Sean was lying on the bed completely naked and smiling at someone across the room. He was wild-animal gorgeous — olive skinned, smoothly muscled — covered in wild-animal fur.

"Oh fuck!" I said, slamming the door. "Sorry!" I mentally upped my estimate of his age again.

I heard a peal of light laughter on the other side, and Sam called out to me.

"It's okay Dana. C'mon back in."

As deliberately as Sam ever could in his dreams, I slowly inched the door open, keeping my eyes down and sneaking an occasional peek up through my lashes. I couldn't decide if it was to make sure Sean was covered or to catch him before he was. He was. I pushed the door open the rest of the way.

Sam was sitting on the milk crate behind a short easel on the other side of the room. He was wearing nothing but shorts and holding a brush. He had blue paint in his hair. He had umber on his thigh, and hunter green, streaked by careless fingers, across his chest.

Sean had covered himself with a blue blanket. He wore umber paint in his black hair and a grin. He seemed to be enjoying all the attention he was getting. I assumed an air of educated curiosity and stood behind Sam to take a look at the canvas.

Sam had found a way to capture everything about Sean that was irresistible and set it in paint. Every intriguing swirl of belly fur, every sleek strand of hair that slashed across his face like a challenge to both comb and fingers, right down to the slightly mad glint in his eyes. The promise that hung between them was in there, too. It was indefinable — a certain painted color of light. It swept over the painting of the young man, caressing the skin and set it flaming into gold. It stroked the reclined figure where it lie on the bed, and left it open, supple, and wanting. The
promise hung over the canvas — waiting to be fulfilled. The pose was modest with a carefully bent knee, but the face held what could only be called a fierce and naked hunger. I swallowed. I swallowed hard.

And, suddenly, I had to reassess my opinion of everything. Suddenly, everything I knew about anything was completely wrong. I wasn't sure where my perspective would settle once my life stopped spinning, but I knew I was going to land somewhere facing a direction I had never considered before.

Because Sean was right — Sam was a genius.

* * *

I didn't count the days that followed, punctuated only by their frequent arguments, set within the parentheses of my hospital shifts. I didn't mind Sean being there, except for their arguments, which were usually too late at night, always too often, and generally left Sam in a shattered state. Sean started doing the dishes and even made dinner. He was a much better cook than I was. The one thing Sam wouldn't allow Sean to do was take out the trash.

One night after work, I found Sam standing on the side of the house, in his long impossible coat. I suspected he was crying — he and Sean had had another one of their louder blow-ups. I made sure to make some noise, let him know I was standing there. But he wasn't crying. He was smiling, standing inside a ring of raccoons. There must have been six or seven of them, and they were looking up at him, half with hope and half with distrust. He was carefully picking pieces of food scraps out of a paper bag and carefully distributing them amongst his little congregation — a primitive communion of human and wild.

"What are you doing?" I asked him, rather pointlessly.

"I'm feeding the raccoons. They're hungry. They're not trying to trash the yard."

"Yeah, Sam, but they get used to being fed, and the minute you're not here to dish up the grub, they're in the cans."

He squatted down, and the raccoons jumped back, and a couple of them hissed. "You see, Dana? Despite the fact that I'm standing here giving them food, they're still scared of me. They're too hungry to resist taking their chances." He handed out a few more pieces of stale bread.

"Funny old things, really. They just want to eat, and I just want to feed them. I don't know why. Maybe it's a way of feeling like I'm still part of the process. We live in concrete boxes and talk over wires, and it's as though thousands of years of living in caves and hunting in packs with stone tipped spears never happened."

"But we're still a part of it. Or we should be." He glanced up at me and smiled. "I guess this is the only way I can feel like I'm any part of the whole thing. Real life, you know? Where you get too hungry to resist taking your chances. There's no danger anymore, no risk left. It's all too easy."

"Besides, how can I resist those eyes?" he said, chuckling. They, indeed, glared at him mournfully, their whiskers bristling with barely repressed hope and hostility.

"By paying some attention to those ravening teeth would be my guess, Sam," I said. "They're going to bite you, if you're not careful."

"Yeah, I think that's part of the thrill, too." He grinned at me as he stood up and dumped the contents of the paper sack onto the ground.

* * *
Another round of days followed. If there was any more painting, I didn't see any evidence of it, though I assumed that their pursuits of artistic perfection (whether they included painting or not) stayed behind Sam's firmly and deliberately closed door.

For the most part, I saw little of Sean, except at dinner, where he lorded over the meal like a proud housewife, dishing out starchy dishes dripping with butter onto plates with admonitions to "eat up." In fact, as we settled into December, I was starting to feel a bit of a pinch around the waist of my uniform. I was going to have to have a talk with him about salads.

The only good thing about being posted to Bumfuck, Kansas was the lack of broken, bullet-ridden bodies to be repaired, so I had Saturdays off. At least the schedule was light, even if there wasn't anything to do with all the free time, except drink and stare into the cornfields — an amusement that one started taking seriously a few months into the assignment.

Saturdays were slow, and I slept in as a rule, putting in the kitchen over my coffee. One Saturday morning, I found myself pouring in the water, staring out the window at the frosted weeds in the yard, when Sean padded in, sleep-strewn, puffy-eyed, rubbing his hands through his hair. He stopped, startled by my presence, and I instinctively clutched my robe close around my neck. He rubbed his face and grinned at me.

"Hey."

"Morning," I said, pulling a clean cup out of the cupboard. I recalled a time in college when I'd woken up in my dorm room to find that my roommate had brought home some local boy. They'd been so drunk; they didn't even notice I was there. They'd smoked and drank and fucked loudly, while I'd laid there, frozen, pretending to be asleep. In the morning, the local boy had also grinned at me and rubbed his face at me, and acted like he had every right to be there.

He was just like Todd. Todd would just stand there with a stupid, knowing smile on his face, expecting you to put up with whatever he gave you, expecting you to give him whatever he wanted — simply because he was Todd.

Some people are just like that — they fit into the world, wherever they are. Or they make the world fit around them. As far as I could tell, I'd never be like them. I've always had to find a way to change myself to fit the shape of the world, to adjust, to manage. I envy them, and I despise them, because, against all sense of fair play, they simply get whatever they want by the sheer audacity of expecting it.

Sean was obviously one of those people. He'd moved in with us and found a way to wrap Sam around his finger. I knew it was just a matter of time before he'd convince Sam to go to New York. Things like that always work out for people like Sean. They get what they want, simply by being them.

"Mind if I have some coffee?" he asked. It was a strange question coming from someone who'd been living there for two months, who cooked and cleaned and had insinuated themselves into every corner of the household. I'd even found his jeans mixed up with my fatigues in the laundry. He had expected to be welcomed in and made a part of the family — so, of course, he had been.

I shrugged and pulled down an extra cup from the cupboard. "Sam still asleep?"

In two months time, I had never spoken to Sean outside my brother's presence. In fact, it was a bit like an assignment to a foreign hospital, constantly followed around by an interpreter just in case you couldn't remember the Arabic word for "hemorrhage" and you just had to hope that he was sharp enough to keep anyone from bleeding to death. Our interpreter was still in bed, probably covered in paint.
Sean murmured something in the positive, and I turned to pour out my coffee. As I ladled in the artificial sweetener, thinking of my waistband, he came up behind and lightly began touching my hair. I could just barely feel his chest against my back and shoulder, but I could definitely feel his warm breath against my neck. He picked up the messy strands and then let them drop back slowly, piece by piece. As each one fell back, brushing my against neck, my shoulders, my face, it raised goosebumps on my arms and painful electric fire shot through my thighs.

"You've got hair like Sam's, you know." he said. His breath was too sweet for morning, and the stupid but well-educated part of my brain whispered "diabetes?" I told it to shut up.

"But Sam's is... " That was me, always arguing details at inappropriate times.

He chuckled. "Sam bleaches his hair. Didn't you know?" I shook my head. "Yours looks like his did when I first met him. Warm and gold — like caramel." He’d run out of the hair tangled around his fingers and began to stroke the back of my neck with his fingertips. I kept my eyes firmly on my coffee, while my nervous system shut down in thrill and terror.

Sean backed away and leaned against the counter. He gently removed the coffee spoon from my hand and began pouring sugar into his own cup. I could hear him swallow, clearing his throat, and I could even hear him taking the mental run up for his next sentence. Funny how you can actually hear the firing of neurons in someone else's brain when time has stood still out of its pure shock at current events.

"Sam tells me," he said hoarsely, "that you sometimes go out for drinks after work."

I nodded dumbly.

"Maybe I could join you some time. I've been here a couple of weeks," (Two months, you bastard!) "and I haven't had any chance to get to know you." (That's because you've been busy getting naked for my little brother, you jerk!)

"You're a very pretty woman," he said, as if this were a reason for having a drink. The need for a drink in Kansas does not require the excuse of a pretty woman, or any kind of woman. Being in Kansas was enough of an excuse for drinking alone.

"Oh, but I thought... " and I looked at him, puzzled, my brow furrowed. I hate when it does that, but I’ve discovered that my brow isn’t under my own control most of the time. I’m told I look angry and cross — mostly I’m just confused.

"What?" He looked sincerely puzzled, but not bothered by my confusion. He just stared into my eyes. I vowed that it was definitely damn well time to check his ID and finally find out how old he was.

"What did you think?" he repeated.

"Oh, well... " (Think, Dana, think!) "I just figured... " I shrugged. "You know... since you were a friend of Sam's," (Okay, girl, pull it out of the nose dive.) "That, you know, you weren't probably old enough to get served." I smiled at him weakly. "I couldn't imagine you'd be interested in going out with a bunch of drunken nurses." I shot him the eyebrows, again. "I mean, we tend to go on about catheters and things. It's not very interesting."

He laughed and touched my hair again, but I was saved the slow, delicious torture of having it fondled, and he turned back to finish stirring his coffee. Another part of my brain — not the educated part, but the educating part, the one that throws pop-quizzes — became a bit worried all of a sudden about what I could possibly look like, standing in the kitchen in my fuzzy robe and winter underwear and the cold thin light of December on my face. I told that one to shut up, too.
"Well, just let me know." He smiled. "I promise not to embarrass you in front of your friends." He dropped the spoon on the counter and picked up his cup. "Not even during the ID check."

He headed back to the warmth of the bedroom and left me there with my confusion. Another spin, and I still hadn't landed anywhere long enough to take a good look around and see where I stood.

* * *

About a week before Christmas, I came home to find the house brightly lit. As I opened the front door and stepped through, I found my living room covered in streamers, music blaring on my old stereo, and balloons floating to the top of the ceiling, in danger of being punctured on the cheap, texturizing spackle.

Sean drifted through to the kitchen, throwing me a big smile, carrying wrapped presents and whistling along with the music.

Sam's birthday. I'd forgotten.

In those years that he spent as a faded photograph in my jumble of memories, one of the reasons I rarely remembered Sam's birthday was because it was so close to Christmas. Sometimes I'd remember his birthday and forget to send anything for Christmas. Sometimes I'd forget about his birthday and send along something for Christmas. Sometimes I'd forget the whole thing, hoping that the sheer, breathless unexpectedness when I actually did remember made up for the years that I didn't. Strange logic, but the only kind you can have when you're spending most of your days up to the elbows in damaged bodies.

Sean had found the "good china" — which around here meant not plastic. He'd found flatware that almost matched. There was a well-intentioned but sloppily decorated chocolate cake on the counter and spaghetti sauce simmering on the stove. There was even garlic bread. Sam's favorites.

And we waited.

He looked at the clock every few minutes and paced. I pretended to watch television, but it was just an excuse to watch Sean pace. I couldn't believe I'd frozen like that the other morning. Had it been so long since a man touched my hair that I no longer knew how to respond? Did I find him attractive? Of course I did. In my defense, I thought he was in love, or in something, with my brother, but that didn't stop me from admiring his muscular arms or his rebellious hair or the mad glint in his eyes. In fact, I'd found them impossible not to think about when the emptiness of my bed seemed particularly sharp and immediate, and I found myself making my own arrangements.

I didn't know what to say to him, could only come up with ways to avoid talking to him at all. I found nothing in me but excuses to get away. And that was not like me, not like me at all. It certainly wasn't the Dana I'd known and been in the days before the Dr. Archer Debacle. Had I saved Dana the Person, only to lose Dana the Woman? It bore some examination, and I'd be lying if I didn't admit that I thought there might be quick answers found in the tightly wound young man pacing my living room.

And here we were. But he didn't seem interested in touching me now, or flirting. At 7:30, he gave up and nodded towards the kitchen. I walked in to find him slamming the food dishes onto the table. He'd even made a salad.

We sat and ate the cold, gummy spaghetti, and I wasn't about to say a word about it. I could see the agitation jumping through his nerves. He sat with a hundred-yard stare, shoving food in his mouth and chewing as if to make the world's spaghetti farmers pay for his disappointment.

"So," I said, taking a drink of the cheap wine he'd poured. "Where did you meet Sam?"
He looked at me and then at his plate. "It's hard to say. I met Sam at school a couple of years ago, originally." He chewed some more and drank his own wine. Rather quickly.

"You couldn't have gone to school... " He'd bought the wine, so he must have been telling the truth that morning.

"I was teaching." He noticed the lines of disapproval starting to form on my face. "Well, I was interning, actually, going to college to be an art teacher. I was helping out at Sam's high school for a couple of weeks, needed it for credit. He's got a lot of talent, your brother. A real gift." I nodded. That was made very clear to me.

"But I didn't meet him properly until a few months ago. Found him at an after-hours club. You know what those are, right?" I did, nightclubs that turned off the taps and turned up the lights and made a few extra bucks selling virgin cocktails to the underage crowd who were pressing at the doors wanting to dance and pretend they were as mindless and superficial as real grown-ups. I always found that it made last call a bit more depressing. Especially when they turned the lights up.

"It was kind of surreal," he said, taking another drink of wine. "I'd had too much to drink and fell asleep at one of the tables. I didn't even notice when they shut down the bar and let the kids in."

"Anyway, when I came to, there was Sam, sitting across the table, sketching me as I slept." He stopped to reach for some garlic bread. "He knew I wasn't up to driving, so he took me back to Angela's and let me sleep it off on the couch."

"Angela?"

He chuckled, "Angela, yes. Quite a woman, Angela."

I gave him the eyebrow, and he just looked away. But he smiled as he did so.

"My friend Jules, from college, found a job for me in New York. Teaching at a private school. I have to get up there before the end of winter break." He twirled some spaghetti absentely around his fork. "Your brother has real talent, Dana. There's a place for him there. There really is. But he needs to be where the buyers are, where the galleries are. Chicago is one thing, but here...?" He motioned with the forkful of spaghetti to indicate the artistic void that was Riley, Kansas.

"Why are you so interested in Sam?" I'd had enough. This man had touched my hair and had stolen my brother's peace of mind, and I thought that entitled me to some answers. "What do you care what happens to Sam? For fuck's sake, Sean, he's only 17 years old."

"Eighteen, now."

"Eighteen, fine! But he's still in high school, he's still a kid, and he's still my little brother. What do you care if he can paint or not? Why do you care if he's got talent — if he's a 'genius'?"

Sean looked up at me then, the mad glint in his eyes was gone, as was the arrogance, as was the agitated flexing of his neck muscles. His eyes were flat and his voice was flat, and he'd found some calm pool in the middle of his truth. "Because, Dana — I can't. Because I don't. Because I'm not."

Before I could launch into the tirade that had been bubbling under my surface for months — the one about how his interest in my brother could be considered unnatural, excessive, unhealthy, perhaps, at least until today, illegal, Sam burst through the front door, dragging in the cold with him, covered with snow and grinning.

He saw us at the table. He saw the decorations. He saw the cake. His face fell.
"Oh. I'm sorry." He slumped and shrugged off his coat. "I didn't know," he said, his eyes pleading. "I didn't realize... Some friends took me out to eat for my... " Then his voice dropped into a whisper, "...birthday." he finished lamely.

"No big deal," said Sean, his voice still low and dead. "We've still got cake."

Sam cut the cake and handed it around on plates and we ate quietly. He was ashamed of his social gaffe, but Sean let him off the hook with a pat on the back and a genuine smile. I was still too shaken from my time alone with Sean, from our conversation, but I had some of the cake and kissed my brother on the cheek and called it an early night.

* * *

I didn't celebrate Christmas. I never do. Since I never even know if I'll be working or where I'll be working, I've just gotten out of the habit of making an occasion of it. It just seems a futile effort. Sam and Sean, however, seemed to have every intention of celebrating. Sam was out of school until after the New Year, so they spent their days with Sam making ornaments and Sean baking cookies.

I did manage to cadge some leave on Christmas Day, however. I gave the Chief Nurse a sob story about my poor brother, home alone, just lost his dad, time to strengthen family bonds and make up for lost years and a lot of other bullshit. She signed my leave request and handed it over with sardonic eyes.

Sean pulled out all the stops on Christmas Eve, roasting a ham, making sweet potatoes from scratch, even baking a Christmas cake, covered in coconut for the snow. My groaning scale was looking forward to his New Year New York deadline.

He'd also made eggnog, from scratch. Not the overly thick, overly sweet crap you buy in cartons, but the real stuff, light and fluffy, thin as milk and as alcoholic as my father's second wife. Inhaling the fumes alone would put you at risk for a DUI. Sean and Sam made the mistake of starting in on the eggnog before dinner, and after three cups, they were too drunk to slice the ham without risk of serious injury. I hacked off a few slices and we made sandwiches and put the rest in the fridge.

The eggnog, we finished. Two-thirds of the way down the punch bowl, with alcohol-infused logic, I decided it would be a good idea to get out of my uniform and into something reasonably attractive. I thought that if Sean touched my hair again that night, I might find out where I'd put the part of me that once responded so easily. I swayed into my room and pulled things out of the closet and out of drawers. Something soft, something accessible, something loose, something sexy... I didn't seem to own anything like that at all. I'd brought my cup in with me and finished the rest of it, panicked, wishing I'd shaved my legs that morning, wondering if I should brush my teeth, and finally settling on a pair of cotton pyjama bottoms and a T-shirt and a few dashes of perfume. It would have to do.

When I got back into the living room, Sam and Sean were sitting on the carpet, leaning against the battered couch, deep in argument. This time is sounded less like a fight and more like a debate.

"You don't know anything about passion, Sean – that's why you can't paint," Sam was saying. "That's why you can't create anything from your soul. You think you can talk the colors into the right places, to charm the clay into the right shape, but it doesn't work like that." My brother was completely sloshed, and, from all appearances, he was a cruel drunk.

"You have to want it with all your heart, all your skin, in your bones," Sean countered. "You have to be willing to take risks." Ah, Sean — our philosophic drunk.
I poured the last cup of eggnog and settled into the old recliner. Sean's head was bowed over his bent knees, and his hands were clasped in front of him. I could see the tension rippling through his shoulders. Neither of them were paying me any attention. They'd built some kind of bonfire out of their arguments and their promises, and they were too wrapped in the flames to see what lay outside of that circle of burning light.

"And you can't paint anymore than you can love, and for the same reasons," Sam said. "You think you can say the right things, and I'll follow you. You think you can convince me that you know what's best for me. But I don't trust anything you say, anymore."

Sean turned to him, searching Sam's face. Sam was biting down on his lower lip, trying to hold back things that desperately wanted to come out, but couldn't. Not even drunk as he was, would Sam let those words out. It didn't seem to matter, because Sean seemed to already know what they were.

"I'm sorry," Sean whispered. Sam looked up at him, and I could catch a glimpse of the tears that welled just shy of falling in the kaleidoscope colors of the Christmas tree lights.

"You said," Sam said.

"In the scope of things, it doesn't matter, does it? What matters is that you should be painting, Sam; you should be in New York where your work will be seen, where you will be seen. Where you can meet the right people."

"I thought I had."

Sean reached up to ruffle Sam's blond hair, and Sam flinched away. A real hair-toucher, our Sean, I thought, a real tactile sort of person. But I was held breathless and still by the tension, my every muscle clenched in sympathy with my brother's clenched teeth.

"You should come with me, Sam. Whatever you feel about me. You have a gift, Sam. You owe it to that gift to take risks, to give it a chance — to give me another chance. Even if you can never forgive me. Even if I'm not the person you thought I was, New York can be the place you dream it can be."

Sam pulled away and using the arm of the couch, carefully stood his drunken and lanky frame up. He staggered a little, but steadied himself with a deep breath.

"Don't you lecture me about risks, god damn it! You don't have the nerve to strip away to your very core, and you don't have the fucking guts to just let go. You know all the right things to say, the right things to do, the right people to meet. You know all the words, but you'll never hear the music.

"I feel sorry for you, Sean. You might never know what that's like, to have every cell of your fucking head wrapped up in the violent throws of something beautiful and uncontrollable. I feel sorry for you. But I don't feel sorry enough to let you try to find it by eating me alive."

He staggered into the kitchen, and we could hear him ripping the trash bag out of the kitchen can.

I was suddenly sick and sober, and I stared at the dark young man across the room from me. His eyes met mine.

"Did you sleep with my...?" My voice had gone hoarse with the bile rising in my throat.

Before I could finish the sentence, Sean was shaking his head. He looked old and sad and sorry.
"He told me he was in love with me..." he shrugged. "But no, I didn't. I... won't."

"Angela?"

He looked away then, picked up his cup and swirled the dregs of his nog around inside, watching them as though the tiny cyclone was the most fascinating thing in the world. Again, I could hear the thoughts churning in his head while they fluttered and fell into some sort of order.

"Sam," he croaked, "deserves to be loved by someone who can. He's not wrong about me. I wish he were." He drank the rest of his eggnog.

"And knowing this, you're still asking him to go with you to New York?" I was stunned.

His answer, if he had one, was swallowed by Sam's reappearance at the doorway, clutching a trash bag and a bowl of scraps for the raccoons. He stared at Sean for a moment, then hurried out the front door.

I found him bent over near the trashcans, surrounded by his usual congregation. They were less tentative now, friendlier, standing up on their hind legs to reach for food. Sam wasn't smiling, but he seemed at peace.

"You okay?" I asked him.

He nodded, doling out a small piece of ham to a particularly insistent raccoon.

"He can't help it, Sam," I said, stupidly. "You can't ask him to be something he's not."

"I've finally figured it out. You know what the biggest problem people have with raccoons, Dana?" he said. "Raccoons are okay, as long as people don't expect them to act like anything other than raccoons."

He smiled and stood up. "He can't ask me to be something I'm not, either."

I woke very late the next day. Christmas morning. I remember Christmas mornings waking up to a new world, one ripe with possibilities. It wasn't just the gifts under the tree, the lure of the unknown contents of packages holding a promise that I'd be happier person for opening them. It was the change of light, the point where the earth changed direction and you could feel it, the hope of spring, the turn of the earth towards the sun again.

This Christmas I awoke with a clanging hangover and a bitter stomach, only partially owed to the high proof of dinner. I laid in bed, listening for the aftershocks of the evenings debate. After Sam finished with the trash, he had gone straight to his room and again his door was deliberately and emphatically closed. The only difference was that Sean was deliberately and emphatically on the other side of it.

I had fallen into bed, only to wake up late the next day, the sun screaming through the window, my slippers still on from when I'd shuffled into them before venturing outside to console my brother. They were wet from the snow, my eyes were crusty, my teeth had moss on the north side, and I was pretty sure I needed to throw up at some point. But I waited and listened. For slamming doors, shouts, accusations, pleas, whatever the morning mayhem had to offer. There was nothing.

I crawled out of bed and headed for the coffeepot. Sean was sitting at the kitchen table and already half way through the pot before I found it. I sloshed some into a cup and sat down across from him. His eyes were red and his face was swollen under a layer of stubble. I didn't say anything, I figured that I looked as bad, minus the stubble.
"I should leave today," he muttered in my direction.

"It's Christmas day," I said.

"Even better. Less traffic."

"You're not going to try to change Sam's mind?"

"If I haven't changed it by now, I'll never change it, will I?" he said, bitterly.

"He loves you," I said.

"He thinks he does, or he used to think he did. Before he found me with Angela."

"He still does," I said, knowing it was true. After all, he was my brother, I should know. We had the same pride, the same hard core that would rather be alone and lonely than compromise.

"It doesn't matter. What matters is his art. He thinks he loves me, and he offers bits and pieces and promises of great things to come with every piece, every painting. And I guess," he laughed, "he thinks I've been doing the same. I guess he thought it was because he was only 17."

"You did tell him that you're not gay, didn't you?" I asked, again stupidly.

"Sam doesn't even know if he's gay — he's just a kid. He fell in love, or thinks he did, and suddenly he expects the birds to start singing. He just feels something and thinks it's the right thing to do; he just goes with whatever he feels. He doesn't stop and think about what he's doing."

"He seems to have stopped to think long enough about not going to New York."

Sean scowled at me, and with his puffy eyes and day's growth of beard and tired, world-weary sardonic eyes, I finally settled on somewhere around 23. It would be the last time I would guess, or try to.

"That's true," he allowed, blinking at me. "What he doesn't realize is that he can't let his romanticism overcome his ability to make wise career moves."

"I think," I said, running a finger around the rim of my cup, "that Sam is only half right about you. He said you would never be a great painter because you lack passion."

"Yes, he did. And he will never be a discovered artist because he lacks focus."

"And you think that he can simply turn off his heart and follow you and concentrate on his career while you stand over his shoulder at every turn?"

"I think that's what he should do, yes."

"That's why, I think, you never will be a great painter," I said. I reached up and brushed the hair from his face, out of his black eyes. "Because you could do that."

He had nothing to say to that, shrugged and concentrated on his coffee. I stroked his hair, I'd been wanting to touch it for months, and in deference to my brother whom I loved, I would never know what it felt like brushing across my breasts or watch it streaking across my belly in it's anarchistic way. But I would steal this moment, just for myself, just for now.

I could also feel sorry for Sean. There was no more envy.
That evening, Sam watched as Sean packed his few belongings into an old gym bag. Fortified with a thermos bottle of hot coffee and a paper bag of ham sandwiches, he stood at the door and shrugged on the peacoat he'd originally shown up with. He had on a rather stupid looking cabby's hat, but it suited him. He was handsome enough to pull it off and he knew it.

I gave Sean a quick hug goodbye. Sam stood back, his face betraying nothing. Sean looked up at him, waiting, "after all this?" in his eyes. Sam held out his hand, and Sean seemed defeated and resigned. His face twisted in a grimace as he took Sam's hand to shake it. Sam pulled the man into a hug and buried his face in his scarf-wrapped neck. Sean hugged him back tightly, and I looked away until I felt the cold air hit me as the door opened.

"See ya," I said, and Sean gave me a small smile.

"You call me if you change your mind, okay?" he said to Sam, who was standing, stiff-backed and stoic.

Sam nodded.

And then Sean Gordon was gone.

* * *

Sam and I quickly fell back into our old routine. I'm not sure what he was doing as the rest of his winter break days wound down, but he seemed to be busy in his room behind the deliberately closed door. I hoped he was painting. If he couldn't paint his joy, I hoped, at least, he could color in his pain and make some sense of it.

A few days after Sean left, I followed Sam out into the dark night. I had some leftovers from my packed lunch, and I wanted to find out what strange satisfaction he got from feeding the raccoons.

He squatted there in the semi-circle of bandit-faced mammals. Their tails were twitching in anticipation, and one of them had become brave enough to come up to him and take food out of his hand. I watched quietly.

"How ya doin', sis?" he asked me. I shrugged in my coat and made a non-committal noise.

"You know, it's kind of scary how much they've come to trust me," he murmured. "I could grab any one of them, but they don't believe I can, now. They don't think I will. That's what having it too easy will do."

I said nothing. He was right. He was wrong.

"You know, Sam," I said, "you could still go to New York, if you change your mind."

"I will, Dana, I will. Maybe Angela's generosity and sense of guilt will stretch as far as NYU. You never know."

"What do you want, Sam?"

"Sometimes people don't really know what they want. They think they want something, but it turns out that it's not good for them."

"I think Sean really cared for you, you know." I watched my brother's thin shoulders as he shrugged again, unable to answer either way. We were good at The Shrug, Sam and I. "I think he really was just thinking of what was best for you, in his own way."
"Yeah, well," he said, standing, groaning a little. I heard a knee pop. "Sean's always been so keen on doing things the right way. I think I'll go to college first and then see what's left of me. Either way, I can't be his pet boy painter anymore than you could be Mrs. Archer, you know?" And I was reminded again, Sam was my brother, not my child. He wasn't anybody's child. He'd proven that.

I nodded.
"He said that you're a very gifted painter, Sam. He was right about that."

Sam tossed the last of the scraps to the raccoons. They dove on the remainders of our lunches, our dinners, the things we didn't want anymore, the morsels we felt we could do without. They'd been tamed in their desperate hungry state, and now they depended on him. From now on, when they were hungry, they would look for Sam.

He crumpled his paper lunch bag and shoved it in the pocket of his unbearable, impractical and fashionable topcoat. He smiled at me.

"Yeah, but it's my gift, isn't it?" He winked.

I took his hand, and we went back inside my little house of plywood and corrugated steel, and, inside the warm light and shabby comfort, we waited to be rescued.

On our own terms, of course.
Schrodinger's Litter Box

If the outcome of a circumstance is presently unknown and by observing the circumstance you will disrupt it, then it exists in all possible states simultaneously

This early morning Shrodinger left the litter box unlatched. Predictably his cat escaped and the rest is problematical. 
My window happened to be in an open state which that wandering cat happened upon.
He jumped through it and on to my bed, then sat on its haunches over my chest and stared down at me. Behold, the observed now observes the observer.
What next? He could purr at me or poke my eyes out.
I could slowly reach for grandpa's old radium-dial watch and scare the beast away, or maybe not.
But such effort is bound to fully waken me and force me to face yet another good or bad day.
Possibilities, possibilities, I tired of facing a future of coin flips and dice rolls.
Stark impossibility would be a salve to my stability.
True, absolute certainty certainly produces an ennui of somnolence, but I like sleepwalking through life half dead.
So shoo Schrodinger's cat.
But for once that feline is steadfast in its place and time.
I'm eye to eye with unblinking fickleness.
I'll pull the covers over my face like a mortician pulls sheets over the dead.
Now I grin, for life becomes wholly my own undertaking.
Who knows, the dead might also be secretly grinning under their sheets, glad that's it's definitively over.
After all, no observer on one side of the sheet can see the perversions of the observed on other side.
The cat is out of my sight, and I’m out of his.
Maybe it’s gone, maybe not.
A paradox, all this guessing keeps me jumpy as an alley cat, yet I seek the comfort of snoring certainty.
Suchoon Mo

Gross Domestic Product

she wanted to know
how gross is gross domestic product
because her lingerie is all produced in China
and not produced domestically

since her lingerie is not produced domestically
it is not a domestic product
and is not gross at all
I told her so

she seemed quite reassured
because she didn’t take it off
to expose her nationalism

She Never Sat By Me

she said
she was in love with me
but she never sat by me
I was sitting on a fire hydrant
drunk

Try Harder

you foolish fly
you have landed upon her tit
she is still asleep
try harder
next time
One Loud Mouth

stop arguing
you have but one loud mouth
I have two silent ears

Drinking Happiness

your dog will quit smiling
your cat will quit laughing
once you quit drinking

or be happy and content
with your smiling dog
and laughing cat
Photography gives Randy a good excuse to wander. He loves bad roads leading to unknown places hard to pronounce. He's at his best when he's hanging off the back of a truck in the middle of nowhere -- that's where he get the best photos. That's when he's the most alive. www.rgetty.com

Randy Getty

Birds of Rangoon
Bird
Streets of Rangoon
Hanoi in the Rain
West Meets East
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