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The Battle of Monmouth
and other stories

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Seeing Yourself Seeing Yourself

Down in the gullies and ditches in the woods behind the house we would pick up where we left off and scream and kick at each other and climb the trees that we could climb. You would take the lead, and Ted Dolan would sometimes come over and talk about books and you'd call him a nerd and try to bash him with rocks. When we went home you would slam the screen door as hard as you could and the louder it was the happier we were. We both knew what was coming from dad but you did it anyway.

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Underneath my desk there are empty cans that crackle around when I move my feet. On top of my desk is a stack of false start apologies that I have written to my brother.

Mrs. Beatty opens the door and sits in front of me. She had flipped on the lights, which I hadn't realized were off.

“We need to do something about these kids, Mr. Pendant,” she says.

“Which ones?”

“The ones who keep dropping cans of food off the overpass.”

“They’re at it again?”

“Yes, and they’ve hit four cars this week.”

I stand up and head for the door. The knob is hard to turn. Mrs. Beatty follows me out into the bullpen. My father’s office door is open and he walks out, stands very close to me and says, “You know this is a serious situation, right, Chazzy?”

“Of course,” I say. “I’m going to take care of it.”

“You’d better,” he says. He smiles and his chemically white teeth shine. Next week he is finally going in to have them reshaped, something he has been dreaming of for a while. He grew up poor, and saw straight, clean teeth as the paragon of wealth.

I want to ask him if he has anything for me to tell Bill when I visit him. But whenever I bring it up he says it was Bill’s own fault and he’s learning a hard lesson. So I don’t bring it up; I allow my father to live in his own world.

There was a time when I was not trapped in the beige hell that is the office of Pendant and Son, esqs.

On the walls there are too many clocks. Mrs. Beatty is a clock collector and my father lets her display her treasures in the office, since they will no longer fit in her apartment. When I suggested she get a bigger apartment she laughed, and asked where she would get the money for *that* and my father clapped me hard on the back and laughed with her.

The kids with the cans throw them from an overpass above I-95 that happens to hold a large yellow billboard with my face on it: *Pendant and Son, We Go To Bat For You*. And people think it’s a set-up, that we pay the kids to damage cars so they, the drivers, would hire us. My picture smiles through it all, the corners of my mouth digitally upturned.

It is cold outside and there is frost on the windshield of my original 1974 Corvette. The salamander roads I drive to the overpass are without cover. I see all the way to houses on either side through twigs that otherwise would be gleaming life. There is no snow but the grass is white.

To get to the overpass I first drive under it. How hard it was to smile for that photograph, but my father wanted it to be authentic, with Son on the front lines. Under the photographer's lights, which themselves brought me back to Sears's family portraits, I could not stop sweating. My father gave the photographer directions and kept saying, "C'mon Chazzy, it's just like the old days." And, "Look sharp, this is going to be your firm some day. That should put a smile on your face." It had been fifteen years since I was a teenager on a billboard with Bill, in a cheesy ad for our father's business when it was just *Pendant, esq.*, singular.

On the way out of the office Mrs. Beatty asked me what I was going to do. It is not until I reach the overpass that I realize I have no plan. So I park on the grass on the side of the road beneath the gray sky, inert as it is, and wait.

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Past the ridge on the far end of the property we found a small cave, and we'd have to shimmy down in there, legs first, one at a time and the first one in was practically licking boot the whole time and we finally found the flashlight in the house and saw that the cave went on for more or less ever and we stopped going in. Once I pushed you down farther than you wanted to go. You cried for my help and my death and I helped you, taking care to pull by your hand, not your bruised wrist.

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I get out of the car and walk toward the bridge. The exhaust from my car smells burnt and makes me sick. The wind keeps threatening my hat, my hands keep warm in my pockets, and the tails of my jacket, which is too long, scrape the ground. It is my father's old overcoat.

Up by a house a man kneels and hammers at the porch. The beats reach forever, they must, and the hammer must be close to shattering. I see three boys that can be any boys walking from the direction of the high school. They have just gotten out for the day. They are lean and poorly dressed for the weather and have large backpacks.

"Hey," I yell at them. I hate them immediately. My emotions have been through the wringer in the last weeks, it feels like, and I am reduced to screaming at teenagers in the street.

They turn toward me.

"What's in the bags?" I ask. Obviously it is school books, but I ignore myself.

"Looking for something?" the biggest one of them says, "Lost your blankie or something?"

"What?" I ask, squinting at them, only half in anger.

"Like your security blanket," the one in the back says. He is ugly, with an enormous nose and greasy hair.

"I didn't have one of those," I say.

"We're gonna go," the biggest one says. "So why don't you fuck off."

"Just stop throwing the cans," I say. "What's wrong with you?"

"What's wrong with you?"

"Don't give me that snotty attitude." I am yelling again.

They laugh and walk away.

I stare over the edge of the overpass and cars go by slowly, like blood through a dying man's veins. I am seething as the boys walk past my car, staring at it as they do. The world is gray and I am wearing gray and my car is red and down the road it is a clot, resting on someone's lawn, making them wonder if an auditor is coming around, if they are being foreclosed, if there will be no Christmas there. The suburbs of Newark are all the same, I think, and also, inescapable.

A car drives by close to the wall, and I straighten up against the barrier. There is no sidewalk so there is no chain link barrier to keep anyone from throwing cans onto the highway. I shake my fist at the car and realize that I have become an angry person, before turning back to the barrier and taking a deep breath.

The highway meanders, each new town marked by an overpass like this one. Closer to the city they are painted white by zealous councilwomen who liken graffiti to war.

Last week I went to Newark to pick up affidavits and file papers and there was a woman there who helped me. The room was huge and white in ways that made it seem like the walls went up forever. Muffled voices came from other room, arguing or laughing while I flipped through the stack of papers.

I lean over the concrete ledge of the overpass to look at my own face on the billboard, with such an unnatural smile. Is it not obvious that it is not my smile? That it was forced on me? It is elongated by the angle and I look ugly, like an alien or a horse. Another car passes and honks. Can't anyone leave anyone else alone?

One of the files I was pulling in Newark was on my brother Bill. He had been arrested for his second DUI. The woman helping me with the files had this voice like water. I couldn't hear it

because it was a part of the world I forgot to notice anymore. Bill had crashed into a house and nobody died, but the guy inside, who was watching TV at the time, had had a small heart attack.

“Is this everything you’re looking for?” the woman asked, as if I could ever answer that question.

“It is,” I said.

Then she went back to her desk and became scenery.

According to her files, Bill was going to get the full 90 days for the DUI and up to a year from the heart attack man’s trial. My father didn’t know I was getting Bill’s file. He washed his hands of the matter after the first DUI. I was having trouble doing that. It was Bill’s fault; he had been incredibly stupid, twice, and maybe time away would do him some good. That day I was walking down the steps of a dilapidated courthouse in Newark, wondering what Bill would do if the situation was reversed. I couldn’t think of an answer besides: nothing.

←

At Ted Dolan’s pool party we dunked each other until you threw up. We said it was the closest we’d ever been to dying. We had more hot dogs and soda and the grass was so green that day I wondered if Mr. Dolan had spray painted it special for the party. We ended up pulling each other’s bathing suits down and Mrs. Dolan called our mother and we had to go home early and our father yelled at both of us and sent you to your room.

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I hear, “Heads up,” as a can hits me in the arm.

The three boys are back and they run past me, each putting out a hand and slapping me hard on the back and chest. I shove back at them and try to grab their backpacks, or their flailing arms, or their shaved heads. Fighting is not something I have done in a very long time, and they

continue past me, back toward where they originally came from. The ugly one says, “Watch it, Brandon,” when the biggest one steps on the back of his shoe.

All of a sudden I am not so sure these are the kids who were throwing the cans. They don't seem smart enough to come up with any kind of plan. They only got the idea from when I said it to them. I pick up the can and hurl it at them but miss terribly. I run after them, screaming, “Fuck you, you shits.” I am not fast enough. The biggest looks back at me and I feel he could be my brother in high school: six feet tall, baggy clothes, freckles.

The man on the porch has stopped hammering to stare, so I get in my car and drive. By the time my anger starts to subside I am halfway to the prison.

After I sign in at the gatehouse, a chain link door slides open and I get inside. The walls are cinderblocks painted white and there's a window to another room that I have to pass more clearance to get through, which means going through a metal detector. The guard pats at my legs two and three times.

“Hey, man, what's the deal?” I ask.

“Who're you here to see?” the guard asks.

“My brother.”

“Well remember, your brother is in here for a reason. The reason being he's a scumbag. Just like every other last piece of garbage in here.”

“Shut up, Rosol,” a guard waiting down the hall says.

“You're clear,” Rosol says.

My shoes click more than I would like and I don't know how fast to walk. It seems the hallway goes forever except for the guard getting bigger, and I start hearing voices from the other side of the door.

My brother is tall and when he walks in from the other side of the room I remember that. His wrists are not in cuffs, and he shakes my hand hard and looks glad to see me.

“It’s been a while, Chuck,” he says.

“I’m sorry I haven’t been out here before. I’ve tried to write you.”

“Try harder, maybe. I’m dying in here. I’m not supposed to be here.”

“I know. Wrong place at the wrong time.”

“Don’t be sarcastic. I’m getting fucked in here. And you and dad are off shooting the back nine on your lunch break, I bet.”

“Which dad would that be?”

“Your dad,” he says, not looking at me.

“The same dad who gave you a fat lip just like that when we were kids.”

“You know what happened? I got in here and somebody heard my last name and kicked the shit out of me. Bucky Nails, they call him. He got busted fifteen years ago for driving a nail into his wife’s head while she was sleeping. And you know who prosecuted?”

“I remember that case.”

“Fucking dad. He would come home and rant about this lunatic who killed his wife. Then he’d hit me, and not even realize how much of a fucking hypocrite he is!”

“And Bucky Nails –”

“He’s been thinking of that for fifteen years.”

Bill has a fat lip and his hair is buzzed short and he has lost so much weight.

“Chuck, you have to get me out of here.”

“I don’t think there’s anything I can do.”

“You can’t appeal? That guy was three hundred pounds. He was bound to have a heart attack some day. I’ve been in here two weeks. It feels like two years.” He sighs and I feel so bad.

“Stop biting your nails,” I say.

“Oh God,” he says, “I’m really going to die in here.”

It’s a year, max, I want to tell him. But there’s no way I can.

“And you’re out there having fun. Getting laid, eating real food. What does dad think of all this?” Despite the years of silence he still wants to know.

“Dad doesn’t even know I’m here.”

He isn’t crying, but it is the closest I have seen him. He starts shaking the plastic table that separates us.

“It might be good,” I say, “for you to get some thinking done.”

“Did you just say that to me?” he shouts. “Who the fuck are you? Whose side are you on?”

“I’m on your side, Bill, but there aren’t sides. Just because I’m doing the same thing as dad doesn’t mean I’m doing it for the same reason.”

“You’re going to come here and talk, like, semantics, to me? Are you kidding?”

This is not what I want to happen. But Bill is a foot from my face and shaking the rickety table harder.

“Calm down over there,” a guard tells him. He is standing to the side, by a window to another room. All the windows in prison are to another room.

←

Daisy had those gaps in her teeth, those even gaps between each that made her lovely. You tripped her once in the third grade hallway where our self-portraits hung on the walls. Your

portrait had orange teeth and blue hair and you only got on the wall because everyone got on the wall. Once Daisy came over to see you and dad got one look at her and sent her home. It was much later he told me it was because of her teeth.

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At the top of my garbage can at home are the remains of two dinners in a row. I can eat some, but not very well. The clock on the wall is digital so it does not tick and disturb the room, which is silent except for my salamander's terrarium's heat lamp, which hums not unlike the clocks at the office.

The sonic glow of the microwave as my leftovers from lunch at Russo's heat up.

I had wanted to tell Bill that prison was something, it really was, but life was something, too. I eat half of what's left.

I have nothing to do so I go back to the overpass. Dangling my feet over the edge and staring down at the highway seems like the only way to get through another hour or day. My father has always made me into the person he wanted me to be. My brother has always tried to make me someone I'm not. I have always been either, but I'm trying real hard not to be.

Now that Bill was in prison I might be able to see him regularly, I think. Usually he shows up and makes a scene then leaves again. From above the road the lines look so long illuminated by headlights momentarily. It is like looking down at my arms as blood courses through, each car a packet of life.

The air is freezing and I walk back to my car and its scalding interior. Either way being too much for me.

Outside my apartment window is a garden that has a dozen breeds of flowers in the summer. For a moment I consider closing the blinds until Bill gets out of jail, like an act of

solidarity. But nothing I could do would ever be enough for him. My red car is down there, in a spot close to the building.

There is a message on my phone. *Where were you at the end of the day, Chazzy?*

Business as usual tomorrow. Nine a.m. The machine clicks.

At night I can hear the cold gasps of my neighbors in ecstasy. It is now like a train going by, or a waterfall: a symptom of existence. My neighbors are nice people. The one who is a blind man sometimes comes into my apartment by accident.

I sit down in front of the TV and watch and use the TV tray as a desk to write my brother a letter. I do not know what to say. I feel like I have been thirty forever, though I know that isn't true.

←

In high school I was Germany in the model U.N. I don't think you'd remember because you skipped high school most days, and when you graduated you moved out immediately. The next time I saw you, you showed up half-drunk to my college graduation party, and dad told you to leave. He had lent you money and it turned into shouting.

I am trying to remember the last time we were brothers. We never stopped, not in any tangible way, but spiritually I think it was that day. That was the day I knew our chance to share experiences was over. We had diverged. I have never gotten over that. Even when I went to law school and you disappeared again. When you came back and I was living on my own it seemed we could have some of the old days back. But I was deluded. Ultimately that is why I am sorry. There is no way we can be the people we once were. Perhaps we never were those people. I may have fabricated the whole thing.

A couple of my friends from high school were at the graduation party and remembered you. You didn't see me, but I watched your whole meltdown as I talked to somebody, maybe Latvia or India, about the job they were starting. I don't remember exactly who or what. When you left that night, your eyes red and your clothes dirty, you hadn't said anything to me. I had been waiting for a reunion, or something, but you didn't give me anything.

What Did You Say?

The copper kettle on the range was going warped from years of service. My mother used it exclusively. When she wanted ice water she boiled tap water then added ice that she had already boiled. I didn't know this until I stayed with her for a week last month.

I was on vacation from work and hadn't been home since I graduated college two years ago.

Down in the basement she had cases of water bottles stacked neatly on a wooden palette. She changed them out every time she went to the store. She drank one bottle per day. She brought them to work. She worked as a paralegal, and her boss, Ken, thinks she's efficient for drinking exactly one bottle of water per day, and never needing to refill it or even go to the bathroom. At home she boiled her toilet water, too. The tank takes a couple of gallons per flush so she had to prep for each use. It's crazy, because she didn't let anyone else use the toilet without boiled water. Not that anyone is allowed into her house. In fact, I was the last person inside since she and dad split up. She was crazy before that, too.

She was a garage sale fiend. She had dyed blond hair and a nose ring that she put in herself after piercing her skin with a red-hot needle. I barely knew her when I moved in, and not much has changed since I moved out.

But I was back for a little while. Down on my luck is probably the wrong phrase. I stayed with her because we both needed it. I had been feeling homeless and she had an empty home. Empty in a metaphorical sense. In a literal sense it was filled with things small enough to fit in a large pot, but big enough to exist.

In the corner of the kitchen was an empty fish bowl. Early on in my stay I suggested she get a pet, something to keep her company, to give her responsibility. She answered that three of her boss's clients had gone to jail and she had done research for each case. If that wasn't responsibility then she didn't know what was. Then she boiled eggs for our dinner.

It's not that I didn't know how to cook. But she bought food fresh each day and I didn't think even that far ahead. Her thoughts were erratic and there was nothing to get used to. She was all impulse and method, making rules for every movement of her small body, of her bright mind. She's the type of woman who lives by a code, who knows it and cherishes it.

Over dinner I prayed she wouldn't ask me any questions. And for once, she didn't. We sat in silence and she didn't ask how long I would be home, or how my job was, or why Heidi wasn't with me. I came here to forget about Heidi, I would have said. Not to talk about her.

The second day I stayed with her I went to see Chase Manhattan.

He still had his blond hair but it was browning a little, and there was a stain on his shirt.

"Hey, Chase," I said.

"Buddy." He put his hand in my hair and hugged me close.

“How have you been?”

“Good, good. How are you?”

“I’m doing it, man. I’m good. My mom’s doing really well, also. She’s my rock, man.”

Oh yeah, Chase was a momma’s boy, to a fault.

“That’s great,” I said.

“Want to come in?”

The foyer was still nice, like he had made an effort to keep it up, but from then on it was a disaster. Maybe pizza delivery guys were the only people over anymore, so the ten feet behind the door mattered most, but the rest of the house was chaos. Why did he invite me in? Maybe that was my fault.

Where the walls met the floors were chairs, mostly, with stacks and piles of papers and rubbish. One wall’s deal was just VHS tapes, and another was DVDs. Pizza boxes did play a role in the scene, as did toilet paper and paper towel tubes, macaroni and cheese boxes of dinners that had already been boiled, and tons of light bulbs that I could tell were burned out. Their sleeves were scattered around, as if they were the one piece of refuse that escaped sorting.

But Chase and his mother were two of the happiest people on earth. They got by, in the sense that a tree gets by – it’s growing, but who can tell day to day?

Chase led me to the kitchen, where there were two chairs empty of junk.

“Can I get you a water or something?” Chase asked.

“I’m fine. Thanks though.”

He got himself one from the fridge. Nothing tumbled out, and my view of the inside was blocked by the door, so I chose to think that the fridge was the one place that order reigned in his house.

“Can you stay for dinner? Mom’s making mac and cheese.” Chase looked at me like I hadn’t slept at his house once a week from the time we were 5 till we entered high school. He was offering me more than a dinner.

“I would love to,” I said, thinking that there had to be a way to flip it so that the lie was at the end, “but I have to go up to Punxy tonight. I’m seeing my grandparents.”

“That’s great,” he said. “How are they?”

“They’re holding up well.” In truth, I didn’t know. I knew they were alive, but beyond that, well, my mother hated them.

“That’s great,” he said. “You know, my grandparents died in a car accident.”

All four of them. It was at his parents’ wedding, and I had heard the story before.

“I know, Chase,” I said.

He looked around, took a sip from his bottle of water, and beamed at everything. I had a suspicion that he was on drugs, probably prescription, but there was no easy way to verify. I thought of going to use the bathroom to check the medicine cabinet. When we were kids the thing was filled with his mom’s painkillers and hair dye and lipstick. In fact, I had never seen toothpaste despite my frequency of overnights.

“What have you been up to?” I asked him.

He had been volunteering part time with the fire department. I wasn’t to tell anyone but every time they put out a fire that he was on the scene for, he took a souvenir. He showed me one. It was a little stuffed puppy that was singed on the back. It was a beagle toy that some kid had loved and lost, that Chase had found and loved.

Later I asked my mom, “What do you say to a person like that?”

“Are you looking for a rubric? I’m not sure I can provide one. I’m more of a holistic person. I would need to observe Chase at his most vulnerable. I’d need to see him making love.”

“Mom,” I said. Was there anything else to finish that?

“There’s a level of this that you don’t know about. You, as a virgin, I mean.”

“What the hell?” I said.

“A mother can tell,” she said. “I’ve known since the day you were born.”

“Well, obviously, when I was born I was a virgin, but there have been years since I’ve even seen you. You’re the most insane person I’ve ever known!”

She blew her hair away from her eye and turned around. Her copper pot was going red on the range, and I left and went to the living room.

There had never been candles in the house until my father died. He must have hated them, and mother loved them. The orange ginger Yankee on a snow-man embroidery burned down, the wick getting close to the end, as my mother must have been. Her life had ended when my father’s did. But there was a scent of her life, a whisper that must have spoken to her even as it spoke to me.

At Chase’s, I tried to avoid thinking or even looking at the future. It was a dirty cup, a good dancer, a full gas tank that would never run out. It was like the cacophony of glasses would coalesce into a carafe of water rather than a highball. When a man starts being complacent with a life, or more importantly, a woman, like Chase and his mother, they do things that more rational men would never do. The rational part of their relationship was over – they were as reactionary as children who just discovered that there was a difference between them. Chase’s corduroy jacket gave me hope – he must have cared about something, even if it was his appearance. It was

like collateral for his personality. If there was ever a second when I thought he took care of himself it was when his jacket was wrinkled.

“This is the nicest room in the house by a factor of a couple, at least,” Chase said.

“It’s just as I remembered it,” I said. It was hard to be excited but I did my best for Chase. It wasn’t his fault but the whole world was coming down around him.

Heidi used to say that he rode the bus back and forth to the mall as a form of relief – that it gave him a relaxation time like only children got naps. But it was more a way to lose himself in other people. She told me this in high school, when he would go off and leave us alone. It was really his fault Heidi and I ended up together in the first place.

Now Chase’s living room was in terrible shape. There was a very large collection of glasses around the ceiling on a dedicated shelf that circled above our heads, and from there down and in it was chaos. The wallpaper was peeled away in places, there were stains on everything, and there was something that obviously used to be food on a table by the window.

“I like the painting,” I said.

It was a ship at sea, clipping through a wave, on the way down a slope of water twenty feet tall. It made me feel hopeless, or maybe that was just reinforcement.

“Here,” Chase said, taking it down off the nail and handing it to me. “It’s yours.”

“I don’t need to have it, I was just admiring it.”

“No, take it, I insist.” He was smiling at me, “Mother always says things are less important than people. But things are good when people share them. I want you to have it, if you like it.”

“Well,” I said, “thanks.”

We talked for a few more minutes about him, he was working as a delivery boy for a pizza place, and his mother was still collecting disability – it had been a fun day when we were kids and he told me this. He had been so nervous about it, and it had been clear that he felt a certain shame, as if he was sublimating something that his father might have said, by really beating around the bush about it, even though my parents knew and his mother was open about it, he just hadn't wanted to tell me, until finally he did. We had been on the way home from school in sixth grade, and he was asking me all kinds of questions as to whether or not my mom worked, and if so, did my dad, too. And he had known all that stuff, since we had been neighbors our whole lives and in sixth grade I had been aware of something other than me for at least a couple of years.

And now, as I watched him lead me to the door and we said goodbye, he was still coated in that slight, small shame.

Because I was home and there seemed to be nothing better to do, I went out that night. I called my friend Luke and found out where he would be.

It was Mardi Gras and everyone I knew was having fun. The lines for certain clubs were thirty, forty, fifty people long, so I just walked down the street looking for a safe place. Besides, I had been preparing for hours.

When I finally realized that Lent was coming up – quite a few weeks earlier than usual – I started to decide on the things I was going to do, and what I was going to give up. There were a few things that I would give up in the academic sense: chocolate, which I would give up unless offered, since then charity would dictate I accept it; and coffee, which I only took after dinner

and then only once a week. Other indulgences: alcohol, cheese, swearing; well who could give those up, even nominally?

I pounded the pavement around the VIP queues, around hopefuls who would go home before they would see a lick of club, and ended up at Babe's. My friend Kelly happened to be waiting outside for her boyfriend. Not many people go to Babe's on Friday or any holiday so Kelly was waiting alone, in a skimpy white outfit that, truth be told, got me a little excited.

"How's it going?" I asked her.

"How do you think? I've been here for half an hour, no sign of him," she said. "Half an hour more and he's gone."

"You're so generous," I said.

"What are you up to?" Kelly asked.

"I'm just looking for something to do," I said. She looked lonely but at the same time who could bring himself to talk to her? "I think Luke said he'd be at Reggie's around eleven."

"Good luck," she said. "I'll be here till then."

"Maybe I'll see you," I said. "I only want one drink with Luke. He goes longer than anyone I know. He's too much for me."

"So long," she said.

I hesitated a second before I said, "You know Heidi broke up with me."

"I know," she said. Kelly was one of the only people who would have known. Heidi was her sister.

And I left her out in the cold.

* * *

Walking up to Reggie's, avoiding the crowds, probably stepping closer to the curb than was necessary. Neon glowed on me; it was like the glow of the Spirit come in a different medium: once visible: once invisible. Finally under the ten-foot tall space heaters I found Luke.

"Mind if I cop a seat?" I asked him. He was surprised.

"Go for it," he said. The bartender clearly wasn't carding, since Luke was only nineteen, and half the people at the bar I knew from being a camp counselor.

"How have you been?" I asked. Luke was only a grade below me but four years younger.

"I don't know what to do with myself. It seems like every time I reach a plateau someone is on my back for not reaching another."

Luke was the kind of guy who the neon and the stereo didn't reach. He was Chinese and played by his own rules. You had to bet that that was half the reason he was so cool, and all the reason that the bartender at Reggie's was willing to believe he was twenty-one. For one thing, his acne was acting up and he sweated like there was no tomorrow. Before his drink had the chance to condensate – it was a whiskey ginger ale with Seagram's – the napkin under it was soaking wet with his forehead's output.

I ordered a beer and drank it just about as fast as I could, hoping that Kelly's boy wouldn't show up before I would again. Then I drank another just to be sure that she would be alone.

"How've you been?" Luke called from a seat away. He was pretty far gone and what do you say to a person like that beside: "Just perfect."

The atmosphere was suggestive of the day. People stumbled around us; people shouted across the street; some number of people were throwing up at any given time on our very half block. It was full-bloom in February, the kind of scene that you'd have to wait to see on any

other block in town, but in the Jewish Quarter was par for the course. These were Catholics embracing their roots and others just joining in for a night to remember.

In the old days the Catholics would dress up as bishops and the pope and go around full-on embarrassing themselves and the people they represented and spouting heresies and breaking the rules. Now, they found more fun getting roaring drunk and keeping the heterodox for when their less agreeable friends and relatives came around.

Take, for example, Chase Manhattan. That guy was the number one example of straying from the straight and narrow that I could think of. Sure, he appeared straight and his interests were definitely narrow, but the full picture of his existence pointed to him being irredeemably obsessed with his own mother, and an enabler of her hoarding and her depression.

The thing was, growing up he had always been a talented kid. For example, when our art-class paintings went up on the wall as a matter of course, you knew that Chase's would have hung even if quality had been the bar rather than completion. He had strokes, he had guts, he had an eye. But so I had invited him out, one last chance before I left town again, to get a little bombed, or at the very least to see what was out there. I still took him for granted as the guy who would say yes.

But back on my way to find Kelly he was not that guy anymore. He was at home, maybe even sleeping as I turned the corner onto Mason and headed past the rows of revelers waiting to enter clubs that wouldn't be worth it when the dives worked just as well for fun forgetting. So many men in tight pants and women in groups or with boyfriends, never anyone of either sex alone, except for me, except for Chase and his mother, lonely, lonely, soon to be not lonely.

If I had a chance to go back to high school, like say a game show that sent you back started up and my name got into their system and I got picked and flown out to LA for an

audition, I think I'd tell them to shove it. I didn't think of myself as that kind of guy, who would go back. I wouldn't go back to any time.

But Chase was eternal. I thought of him as such from sixth grade on, when we had the encounter with our band teacher.

I would call it "the incident" for longer than either of them would remember it, though I'm not sure why. It was an ordinary day before Chase decided to get sick (which, of itself is disputed, though we'd have to bring in Mrs. Manhattan and who's got the time for that?), and I had to play first chair trumpet at rehearsals for the winter concert. Before that I had hung back and mostly lip-synced and imagined that the teacher, Mrs. Dufraigne, would compliment my trumpet, which was actually a cornet, which had been my grandfather's. But with a class of 30 students and a brass section of 4 which had a trombone but no tuba (thank God), there was no room for compliments or demotions. So I sat in for Chase ahead of the concert, and did okay, though Mrs. Dufraigne seemingly never knew my name, and always called me "Sub" from the day of "the incident" forward. Luckily Chase wasn't there so no one remembered the nickname.

I walked back toward where Kelly had been. The drinks with Luke had left me a little heavy and slow.

When I got to her restaurant she was waiting alone outside. The windows had the orange glare of a fire burning inside and I grabbed her wrist and brought her around back.

I tried to kiss her on the neck but she evaded me.

"Come on," she said, "This isn't us."

"It's as us as any two people who ever were," I said, and at the very least dragged her toward the bar inside.

It was warm and there was no sign of anyone we knew. Probably because it was such an upscale joint. There weren't any photos of local sports teams on the walls and they weren't bare either. The menu had drinks we had never heard of, which for girls was the worst thing of all.

She ordered a Negley Riser, and I got a Negroni. The bartender mixed the drinks and took cash on receipt.

"What do you think this is?" I asked her.

"What? Like a date?" she said. "This is charity."

"Join the convent, then, sister."

"Well if it was a date you wouldn't be looking at every other girl in the joint."

"What a point." I glued my eyes to her. With the coat off I don't know why I had been looking around. Kelly was the kind of girl who turned the heads toward her, not away. "How've you been?"

"It's Mardi Gras and I'm at a bar with you. I've been better." Then a second later: "I've been worse."

"Tell me about it," I said.

"I'm at a point where tossing and turning and watching TV are my two most frequent activities. I know, it seems contradictory that I would not be able to sleep and so I turn on the TV. Surely the dark is better? But it is because of the not sleeping that I watch, not the other way around. But Heidi is making me go to a Magic the Gathering Tournament where five thousand nerds will be and thinking of that many people makes me want to break out in shingles. And she tells me, 'stop being so provincial.' I will do anything for her, sure, true, but that does not mean that I want to be surrounded by so many people. Sorry for saying nerds, I am tired. At Mass this week they sang the triumphant, glorious allelulia, and for hearing it I am better, a little. I try to

call it back to my head as often as I can, especially when I am away from home, because if I don't then I get bad, and I don't want to be bad."

"Here, let me," and I broke into the song. I had finished my drink and ordered another. "Why'd you have to bring up Heidi, anyway. That was just mean."

I told her lies. I told her lies about Heidi, saying Heidi always whipped herself into such a fuss when she was mad that eventually she'd get light headed and have to sit down but sometimes she just kept going and would drop onto the floor, and I'd feel even worse because she was yelling at me in the first place. I told her these lies when we were waiting for our drinks to come, and so I could lean in close and maybe put a knuckle on her thigh, just one, quickly, to emphasize a point. Like that Heidi got mad when I was late and when I was early. That she only tolerated knocks on her door at precisely the time we had decided in advance, though I lied a little more and said that Heidi chose all the times and I had nothing to do with it besides showing up at that exact minute. Her hair glowed in the light of the fireplace as I told her more and more. She was listening and, I think, pitying, which is where I wanted her to be. I really wanted her to hold my hand, but I wanted it to be spontaneous and natural so I had to engineer it just right. There is much waiting in this, I told myself, and I told her that sometimes Heidi wouldn't come to the door at all if I make a mistake in the time. Like if I remember seven fifteen as seven oh five then that's it, date off, not happening. But she knew that Heidi and I are more than dating, that we're basically a sure thing, which is why I wanted the pity. If I wanted her I could have had her, or at least, I tell myself that, and hide that from Heidi, and hide it from her, except for in the ephemeral who-would-ever-know way that I then was putting on her.

Kelly eventually found an excuse to get away from me that I don't remember. It's probably better that way.

That night I had a dream about me and Chase. We were lost at sea, or rather, we were on a giant ghost-ship that appeared to be made of stone, and wasn't going anywhere. We were as good as stranded on an island. Chase wouldn't talk to me, and was also a kid, but he had this one oar and was paddling, without effect, endlessly. The dream lasted what felt like a week, and halfway through, a steamer appeared in the distance behind our stone ship. It moved steadily closer, until it turned around and disappeared, as if we were not worth the trouble. I looked over at the painting that Chase had given me, where it was leaned up against the wall. Why did I come home?

My mother woke me up with three tattoos on the door.

Downstairs she had eggs and pancakes going, so I couldn't complain about the soreness forming just behind my eyes. Eggs were one of her favorite foods, since they came in their own containers, and you could boil them without them coming out disgusting, like other foods she tried to cook that way.

"Remember when you tried to boil that cheese?" I asked her, "And the whole place stunk for two weeks?"

"It was winter!" she said. "I couldn't open the windows."

She had a mug in her hands, her fingers gently wrapped around the shiny glazed clay. A timer dinged and she opened the oven. Out came two small bowls of French onion soup.

"The works," I said.

"How's Heidi?" she said.

“We broke up.” I didn’t want to talk about it so I walked to the front window and looked across the street at Chase’s house. It had some green creeping up around the foundation and it just didn’t look the same.

“I know you did,” she called from the kitchen. “That’s why you’re here. I know you, Buddy.”

“Nobody calls me that anymore,” I thought.

You and the Rest of the World

I fell asleep watching Seinfeld.

“What do you mean you lost the cats?” Kramer shouted at me.

“They’re just gone,” I said.

“Cats don’t just disappear! You did something and I’m going to get to the bottom of it,” he said while leaving, slamming the apartment door behind him.

Then father came in and sat down at the round dinner table. He stared directly into the camera.

I woke up Friday morning on the couch with a sore neck. “I should put the TV in the bedroom,” I said.

In the pre-dawn gum-light that came from the lamp I had left on in the corner I got up and brushed my teeth. I never ate breakfast, just showered and somehow wasted enough time to have to rush to work.

There was a message on my machine: Milton wanted to know what I was up to this weekend. I called and got his machine and left him Lizzie's phone number. And, I was heading down to AC to watch Lizzie's cats.

The man across from me on the lame, decrepit bus looked dead. He had a gray beard and dirty suspenders holding his gray pants up to his white shirt. He had a cane and the ubiquitous all black senior sneakers. Velcro, even. He swayed a little too much for it to just be the motion of the bus. As we headed through Asbury and Brick and Toms River he got more still. I wondered at him. His past, his future. He probably liked to play the penny slots.

I pulled a wrinkled sheet of paper from my duffle bag. I had brought a short story my sister had written for her college's literary magazine, though she didn't know I'd found it. Reading made me feel like I knew her better than she could tell me. Since she moved south to Atlantic City we had lost touch, until she called for me to cat-sit. It seemed strange that she would ask me. It had to have been the fifteenth time I read this story. It was becoming part of me the way my lived past was: for granted.

Boy & Sugar

'They must have heard the cries from the house. The savage yelps that Sugar was giving, releasing to the world like sonic despair – the incarnation of suffering. Boy had chained her to a nice tree pretty far in the woods. It was where there was some distance between trees, and the sun was setting out back where the house was, where everybody else was having dinner. Boy chained Sugar up tight and let her walk around the tree a few times. It was more like trotting. Sugar was a rottweiler/lab mix, with stripes down her back, and some orange in her tail. She didn't like when Boy started to splash her with gasoline. She tried to run. The chain was too strong. He continued to splash. A bite would never come. Not to Boy. Sugar loved Boy. But the smell of the gas was putrid to her, and it irritated her eyes, so she tried to run. Then Boy threw the match. That made Sugar start to snap. Boy was well out of range. Sugar's fur was crackling and her howl was a mix of painful gulp and bloodthirsty battlecry. There was nothing she could do. Her eyes, rolling everywhere. Her running into the tree. The fire followed her as she tore the chain in all directions. Boy wiped his hands on his dirty blue jeans and watched. He didn't seem

sad or satisfied. Sugar must have realized she was going to die. She nearly broke her neck throwing all her weight against the chain, over and over again. Frothing at the mouth from fear, humanlike fear. No one came from the house. They had seen Boy with the gas can. It was his dog. They had all had dogs. Boy had been with his father when he had to take care of his last dog. Sugar's time to go, this time. Fire didn't spread to even the tree. Sugar never laid down. Boy smelled the burner from the stove. It was flesh. Rattle of the chain. A whimper. Crackling. Then a dead dog.'

I sighed. The bus offered the same isolation it always did when nearly empty. Sometimes people who had loud voices and big cell phones would start up, thinking only of themselves, or the driver would mutter to himself, but other than that it was peaceful. It was a waiting game as the waterways gave way to small towns, to big towns, to trees, to small stations with no people. The old man put both hands over his eyes, uncovered them, closed them on his thighs, and did not move again.

Lizzie met me at the bus depot. She promised to meet me when I called that morning. I got up before the bus stopped moving and left the old man where he was.

Seeing my sister for the first time in a year was like remembering our childhood all at once. She was only three years older than me, so we had been around for almost every achievement and failure of the other. Her red hair was exactly as I remembered it: tied up on top of her head, and she was wearing a sweatshirt despite the August heat. Classic Lizzie. We hugged, briefly.

The walk to her apartment was short. We passed a Mexican pizza restaurant, two "Checks Cashed" stores, a "Cash for Gold", some beaten up tenements that were falling in, and a laundromat. There was no one inside. Only flickering fluorescent lights.

Her building was depressing. All four sides were flat as could be, poured concrete, eight stories high, a behemoth of gray that blended into the overcast sky. It was the kind of place that

made “dead-end” feel a little too real. And I knew mother hadn’t been there, but if she imagined half as bad then she was still right to worry about Lizzie. A jitney drove by.

“Normally I’d catch that,” Lizzie said, pointing to it.

“To go to work?”

“Yup. It basically exists to bring casino workers there and back.”

“You work nights?”

“Yeah. Or at least I’m starting to. Now that they think I can handle the traffic when everybody is playing. And I do handle a full table pretty well. My boss didn’t expect it. Plus nights pay better than day.” Lizzie’s latest job was in the Plaza. She dealt three card poker.

Growing up she was really into card games, but I don’t think that’s what motivated it.

Sometimes people try to look for that direct connection, but mostly childhood doesn’t predict adulthood. At least not for people as well off as we were – just scraping by as middle class but proud of it.

The door to the building was broken and so it didn’t fully close, but had it, we would have needed a key. Lizzie gave me that key, just in case. Then the deadbolt, and the doorknob lock. Apartment 3A. Just upstairs and to the left. The whole trip lit with too dim or broken fluorescent tubes. Then we had to squeeze through the door, so the cats could not get lost. Get lost was not a euphemism for escape, Lizzie assured me: the cats liked the apartment very much. They were just curious about outside.

There was an orange bandana over the lamp, throwing the whole room into mock-sunset, to the sets of fantasy novels stacked five high around the whole room. It was like a recreation of her bedroom as it was in high school. Only she had a futon now, instead of a bed. As soon as the

door was shut behind me Lizzie was down on her knees rubbing a cat's belly. Her suitcase was packed and waiting next to the small kitchen counter.

“So I've written down all of the things they need,” she said, looking up at me. “This is Cheddar. Say hi, Cheddar.” And she waved his paw at me. “It's pretty simple. Just water and food and Lucy takes a pill, but she's usually pretty good about it.”

“What's the pill for?”

“Pain. She's got cancer.”

“Oh.”

“You might have to put it in her mouth if she doesn't eat it off her plate.” There was a pill plate next to the food and water bowls. “But make sure Cheddar doesn't eat it.”

“No problem. I think I can handle that.”

“I'm sure you can. Now,” she said, checking the small clock on the wall, “I have to get going. Thank you so much.” She hugged me again.

“Of course, Lizzie.”

Then she was out the door and I was battening down the hatch behind her. The chain slid in its track smoothly, and all the locks clicked with authority. I picked up my duffle bag and threw it on the futon, which was in couch position. The white cushion was still mostly white, but it looked good for playing host to two cats and their owner.

I sat down and did a sweep of the room. I was always one for snooping, and this was a good opportunity.

A couple of Sublime CDs on the floor by the TV stand. The TV itself extremely large. An old rear projection box, perched atop a faux wood credenza with a door missing. More CDs in the credenza. A feeling in the air like the windows had never been opened. It was stale and

stifling. Perhaps that was just the litter box. But I got up and pulled open one of the two small windows on the wall opposite the door. Noise from the street got louder. Then I saw the other cat, Lucy. She was a pipsqueak next to Cheddar. Cheddar was incredibly overweight. His stomach looked like any day it would start to scrape on the floor as he walked. Lucy was healthy, except for her right eye, which I could see was milky, and apparently, the tumor. I held my hand out, palm up, where she could see it, but she wouldn't come over. So I went to the kitchen to read the note that Lizzie had left.

It was long and repetitive, but I could see that I had nothing to do for the rest of the day, so I decided to go out for dinner.

There were many people on the street as I headed toward the shore. Old men in fishing caps, sitting in plastic chairs wedged against the buildings. Young men with sagging jeans on the corners in groups. Girls walking in groups, not looking at the boys. Almost no one was alone. Besides me, but I didn't mind it. Two kids threw a small rock back and forth. The one kid, who was heavy, was sitting down on the sidewalk with his shirt off. His face was blank and his motions smooth. They had played that game before.

I went to this little place named RigaTony's and had a couple slices of pizza. It was cheap and pretty good, and no one bothered me. I sat on a bench outside, looking around at all the other people. There were so many, and no one seemed to be in a rush, or in arguments, and every once in a while a whole group would break out into laughter. That's when I realized that I was both on vacation and enjoying myself. The clouds above were like stallions charging to the sea and I decided to follow them as far as the boardwalk. I started walking. For as long as I could remember I had hated vacation. There was always someone asking me if I was enjoying myself, and I usually was until they asked. Because then I felt a pressure to seem like I was having a

good time, since obviously the questioner couldn't tell. But now I was alone, and I had the freedom to enjoy Atlantic City.

As I got closer I remembered that I had technically been there once before. We had driven through it on Pacific Avenue at night, on the way home from vacation even further south. I had my whole head out the window and looked around at the blinking, bright lights, and the mirrored glass of the casino floors, not knowing there were no windows, that they kept it dim inside around the clock to distort people's sense of time in the hope that they spent more time and money inside. But as a kid I was mesmerized. It all looked so glamorous and perfect. When we were kids, Lizzie and I had played this game where one of us pretended to be the moon, and the other an astronomer. When the moon would come out of its hiding place, the astronomer would chase it across the sky, which was usually the backyard, and try to capture its secrets. Looking up at the Atlantic City skyline, I felt I had not saved up enough of Lizzie's secrets to be her brother.

As I got closer to the boardwalk, a man with no shirt on was eating pizza and being bombarded by seagulls. He was sitting on the curb alone and to keep the birds away he kept waving his hands but the problem was that meant he was waving the pizza, too, and the birds took that as a challenge. I've never seen a wild animal at the Jersey shore that was afraid of humans

I decided to go into the Plaza because it was where Lizzie worked.

There was no showgirl to greet me at the doors, and for that matter there were almost no people inside at all, but it was flashing and bright. Or somehow bright and dark all at once. The slot machines blinked and chirped, but their light didn't seem to reach more than a foot from them. Between machines was darkness. Every tenth machine was an old woman, or a young

woman, or an old man pressing the flashing “repeat bet” button every three or so seconds it took to lose their penny. I walked further to the table games.

The tables were even worse than the slots. One man was playing black jack alone with the dealer. A sign by the table read “Minimum Bet \$5.” Besides him the only other people were three dealers standing over their tables, waiting for a lucky winner to come see who they were lucky for. Their clean white shirts were buttoned up to the neck and they all looked suffocated.

On a whim I sat down and put five dollars in a slot machine. I wanted to play roulette, but going down and playing one five dollar game would have been bad form, I told myself.

When my money disappeared almost immediately I got up and walked toward the boardwalk entrance. The place was like a maze, though, with no windows to guide. Eventually, after passing a buffet I found myself back in the open air. Twilight was coming on.

The dunes were high but I could hear the ocean out there, same as always, as it ever would be. I walked to the railing close to the sand and sat at a bench. Close by, on a bench facing inland, two older women sat, and their conversation was mostly recounting which machines had paid out and which were dead. One of them had a transparent visor on, and the other had a wig. After a while of them rehashing their pulls, and the ocean rehashing eternity, I decided to head back to Lizzie’s. I had a feeling that Milton had called.

So I left the spit shined gleam of the boardwalk. The ironic thing was that spit was a primary ingredient of the grime, too.

Lizzie’s cats were hiding from me, most likely scared by the ten minutes I took to fit every key in the right lock. The mechanical clack of a key in a tight hole was always louder on the other side of the door.

The light on the answering machine blinked like the slots. Figuring it must be Milton, I pressed play.

“Lizzie, it’s your mother. Call me when you get this.”

A beep and the light went dark. It was only 7:30. Much too early for Milton. I sat on the futon and flicked on the TV.

Nothing. Nothing. A local news story about a lifeguard competition. Nothing. Nothing. Baseball game. I turned off the TV and tried to read a book I had brought. I was almost praying for Milton to call and distract me.

Eleven hit and still no call. I went to bed. The futon folded neatly flat and Lizzie had left fresh blankets out. I brushed my teeth and called it a day.

The next day I ate a couple of pieces of toast for breakfast and went out for a newspaper. I could read about different local politicians, different drug problems. But standing there in the convenience store it all looked the same. The Times. “Papers” that were really just booklets of ads. Tabloids. But there was one local paper that didn’t look like complete trash. Sensationalist, probably, but not terrible. What really interested me was the headline below the fold. *Former Entrepreneur Found Dead on Bus*. On the hope that it was the man from my ride down I bought it. Hope is a perverse thing to say in regard to a stranger’s death, but there it is.

Restaurateur Found Dead on Bus

Herbert John Winkel, 68, of East Rutherford, NJ, originally of Radansk, Germany, was found deceased on an express bus from New York City to Atlantic City. He was found by an NJ Transit employee, the driver of the bus, who was cleaning before leaving for the night. ‘Sometimes people fall asleep on the bus and just fail to get off,’ said the unnamed driver, ‘or sometimes it’s a homeless person who’s trying to sleep on the bus overnight. But those are more common in the winter.’ According to the driver, who was the only person to come across Winkel before an ambulance arrived, Winkel looked homeless, like any other stowaway he had seen before. ‘So I did my usual. I said, ‘Excuse me sir’ pretty loudly to wake him up. But he didn’t wake up. So I tapped him on the arm. Still nothing, but I was

being cautious, you know. Never know who's going to pop up and clock you. When I shook him pretty hard he slumped over kind of in his seat.

His eyes weren't completely closed, though, I saw, and the lights were reflecting in the exposed slivers in a really freaky way. Like double reflecting because of the glaze. So I ran out of the bus to call an ambulance.' Winkel was pronounced dead by EMS at 5:57pm.

Winkel, predeceased by his wife, enjoyed early success, before encountering trouble in his later years. At the age of 20

he emigrated from Germany to the US. Arriving in Jersey City in 1962, he used his inheritance to open a small restaurant named "The Love Den." Winkel's establishment seemed to anticipate the spirit of the 60s, down to the shag rug. The last mention of Winkel in the papers before his death was in the police blotter. He had become violent against a woman who delivered meals-on-wheels to his apartment in East Rutherford. Police responded to the call but in the end no charges were filed. Winkel leaves behind no relatives. No memorial service is scheduled.

I took my eyes off the paper. I had seen that man die without realizing. Had I been the last person he had laid eyes on? I had ignored him.

I was back at Lizzie's without remembering the walk when the phone rang.

"Hello?"

"Drew, it's Milton. I forgot you'd be down there."

"No problem."

"So what are you getting up to? Or rather, who are you getting in to?" Milton hadn't changed much since college.

"It's actually pretty quiet."

"So hit the casinos," he said, "get a taste of the city."

"I went out last night. I went to the Plaza, it was depressing."

"You probably weren't in the right place, and it probably wasn't the right time."

“Maybe.”

“So now what? You’re just going to sit on your sister’s couch for the next two days? That would be just like you.”

“For your information it’s a futon. And I’ll be taking care of the cats. One of them has cancer.”

“Great, great. Great. Listen. I’ll be there tonight. What’s your sister’s address? You need a pick me up, or something.”

I told him the address and we hung up and I wasn’t sure if he was serious about coming but I hoped he wasn’t. Maybe he would forget, or get side tracked. Friends have a way of pushing you into these territories of fear.

The cats were as fine as cats could be to a stranger who made them take pills. By this I mean they pissed on my duffel bag.

“Get off of there,” I said, too late.

I dragged my stinking bag at arm’s length for two blocks to A.C. Cleaners.

Standing there in the laundromat with a “Bust a Move” t-shirt and brown corduroy pants on was the most beautiful man I had ever seen. Not in an attraction way, definitely not in a sexual way. But something about his face, the soft gray skin of his cheeks, perhaps, suggested to me that here was a soul. That I was not witnessing a man but Man himself, in street clothes, at the laundromat. I was sitting in one of those flimsy plastic chairs that bolt to the wall, worn blue from age, and with sharp spots from collisions with handbag pendants and people and baskets and who knows what else, next to a vending machine that “Proudly Carries Dad’s Soda” or at least it did, because it wasn’t plugged in at that moment. And this was the backdrop for the appearance of Man. Only one washer, mine; it had been weeks since my laundry day. And I had

forgotten my book and trusted Man not to steal my clothes but I also didn't want to leave while he was there. As of then he had not acknowledged me. I didn't expect him to. I thought: he might be some modern Sisyphus repaying his debt to God with an eternity of spin cycles and folding.

People walked by outside and missed the fine specimen leaning against the wall as his clothes spun and spun, They are not ready to confront Man as he does his laundry. That is also why they also ignore bums and orphans, they will have the change ready in a separate pocket next time. If you open a wallet and pull a \$1 from a sea of \$20s, you will both look and feel bad, but producing \$0.25 from your empty front pocket is a good thing to do, because you planned for it and the anticipation of A Good Thing is almost as juicy as the thing itself.

I pretended to stare at the washers, tapping my feet to a rhythm I didn't pay attention to.

And so the clacking of my shoes added to the gurgling of the washers and the soft THWAT of the tumbling dryer, and I got self-conscious of what I had to fold. Would it seem like I had wet myself? Of course Man would not notice, or if he did he would pretend not to. He would even convince himself that it was something else. Any way it shook out I should not have cared, but I began to dread that ten-foot walk over dirty white and black tiles to my machine.

Finally Man's dryer cycle buzzed and he had something to do. He folded his clothes neatly and stacked them on the table. He placed them gently into a laundry bag that I didn't notice he had until he was dropping in his whites. Then pants then shirts. Did Man ever use the dry cleaner? Man did not separate his lights and darks. I wanted to follow him. Before I knew what I was thinking I had already mentally tailed him to any number of places -- the apartments he could have lived in -- some dank, some made of gilded white everything. Then he was out the door and so was I. It was a bad plan.

What about my own clothes? And I did some quick math: I could replace it all for a little more than a hundred dollars. The bells clanged above me as I entered the street.

It was not a busy day in the way that only cities have unbusy days -- it seemed as if the whole world had disappeared. There were simply no people outside. Stores were open and a few regular strays entered restaurants, but it was dead.

Following Man would be no problem. Perhaps because he hadn't so much as looked at me in the laundromat I was working under the impression that he could not see me. Maybe he could but chose not to. It had to be suspicious that I left my clothing and just happened to be going in the same direction as Man at a slightly slower pace. And so what if I do see where he lives, then what? I thought. There's no point to this. I should just turn around. Man turned a corner onto a street lined with bright neon signs: "Camera Repair".

Inside the shop was bright, with cameras stocked virtually everywhere. An Asian man stood behind the counter, and it seemed like he had been expecting me.

"May I help you with anything?" he asked.

I walked around the shop, which didn't take long. "I'm fine, just browsing."

When I got back to the laundromat (without realizing it I had ended up back there) my clothes were waiting in a still, silent dryer. I folded them, still thinking about Man, and already having trouble picturing him.

Then the sun started to go down. It was sudden like everything is when you're in a new place.

I found out that the front door to the building was secure when Milton buzzed the apartment around nine.

“Milton?”

“Drew,” came the reply. I gave the “unlock” button a good long press and next thing was Milton knocking on the door.

He came inside and plopped on the futon.

“It smells like cat shit. Clean their box, will you?”

“I did clean the box. The smell is more or less permanent, it seems.”

Milton shifted. “Anyway. What should we get up to?”

“You seemed to have all the plans.”

“Did I? Hm.” He laced his fingers behind his head and was poking at Cheddar with his booted toe. “All right. I can scrounge up a good time.”

“Just when I thought I’d never have fun again. My hero.”

“Knock it off, Drew. You love me.”

He was up and ready and I was up and ready as I could be. Milton hadn’t brought anything and I wondered if he was planning to stay over. Maybe he left a bag in the car.

That car was really something: an 86 Volvo wagon with wood paneled sides. He insisted on driving it to the boardwalk. Of course he would have to pay for parking, and it was only a fifteen minute walk, but he insisted.

The lights looked a little better the second time, but I told myself that was a misperception. Milton drove with one arm out the window. And fast. My head out the window was like a second childhood that I got to choose. Milton was there because I didn’t give him a fake address, and I was maybe going to have so me fun.

It started off that I watched him play slots. Then he insisted I play some, so like the day before I, surrendered some of my hard earned money to a millionaire who didn't earn it. At least he pays my sister, I thought. The blinking didn't seem so bad, and the place didn't feel so lonely.

Milton said he knew a bar a few blocks up that was cheap and mostly clean. How he found time to know this bar I didn't know, and I just went along with it. We weren't the kind of high rollers to get our drinks comped. So I settled for cheap.

We walked a little way up the boardwalk before he turned inland. A couple of hours had passed since we had left Lizzie's and there were kids on the boardwalk searching through the neon gift shops, looking for something, anything, that wasn't their experience. *I "heart" AC too*, I thought. *So much I'll let it have its space and never come back.*

The streets weren't as well lit, and as we passed people loitering on the sidewalks I felt a little more wary than I had during the day. The bar, The Glass Chalice, was squeezed between two houses, but it had the medieval style wooden sign, appropriately worn and swinging in the wind.

Inside it was even darker than the casinos. We took a seat down near the end of the bar, by a cash register from a bygone era. They seemed to have something of every age but new.

"I'll have a boilermaker."

"My grandfather used to drink those," I said.

"Sounds like a smart man. Now order. First round is on me."

I got a beer.

Milton put ten dollars on the bar, the bill getting wet from whatever the person before us had been drinking. He looked all around as we headed toward an empty booth.

Weekends at my grandparents' came back in force. Pop drank a boilermaker every night. He'd prepare both a shot in a plain glass, a beer in a plain glass, never in the bottle. He'd carry the shot into the dining room on a little silver tray and sit down alone. He'd sit a minute. There was no wall between dining and living so he'd watch me on the couch, me watching TV. Then he would down the whiskey and sip the beer. I never saw him have more than one of each. The beer would get caught in his enormous mustache, and he'd part the bristles and drops would fall out.

Then we were sitting in silence, beers halfway gone. We sat and sipped. Finally I said, "You know I saw a man die yesterday."

"No shit? When?"

"On the bus. I thought he was sleeping but he was dead. The paper today ran a story about him."

"Damn. That's heavy. You didn't think to poke at him?"

"He looked like he was sleeping. His head was all over the place but I figured he was just a heavy sleeper."

"Damn. Who was he? Did they say?"

"Just a homeless dude. But he used to have a restaurant chain. Apparently it happens all the time."

"What does, homelessness?"

"That too. But I meant dying on the bus. He was the first this year but they said it's been a slow one."

"I've never seen anyone die."

“Never? This was my second.” As soon as I said it, I knew it wasn’t true. That I had seen three but I didn’t want to talk about my father.

“Who was the first?”

“My grandfather. He had something like four heart attacks all in a row one night when I was at his house for dinner. He fell off his chair and he reached out to catch himself but he smacked his plate. My grandma was still picking spaghetti off him when the ambulance got there. While we were waiting for the ambulance he just laid there on the floor. Grandy propped his head up and I don’t think she knew how serious it was because she wasn’t crying at all. Pop didn’t say anything. No last words. I bet he knew. He always seemed to have a bead on everything.”

“So he was gone before paramedics even got there?”

“Yeah. That’s when the floodgates opened for Grandy. She kept whispering ‘oh no’ over and over. The ambulance took his body away, to a funeral home I guess, then she had to start calling people. My mom and my aunts and uncles. Each time she broke the news she started crying fresh. After a while she couldn’t say it anymore and she stopped calling. My mom showed up and took me home. She left me with Lizzie and went back.”

Milton was shocked in a drunk way. He had both elbows on the table and was leaning really far forward and nodding a lot. He didn’t respond. I didn’t think he expected such a big answer.

I didn’t mind talking about my grandpa. It was a long time ago and my memories of him were mostly good. It seemed like Milton understood that I wasn’t being gruesome for the sake of it. I was just telling it as best as I could what it was like to see someone die. For me, it wasn’t so bad.

Two beers later: “How about those chicks over there?”

“How about them?”

“They haven’t been on your radar?”

“I don’t know if I have a radar.”

“Well mine’s pinging off the charts.”

“Go get one. But you have to go to her place. There’s no way I’m sleeping in the same room with you and some chick you met at a bar.”

“You’re no fun.”

He swilled some of his drink around in his mouth.

“You know a body is just a hunk of meat,” Milton said. “And we’re all just animals. If there were an animal with better guns than we’ve got they’d be eating us right now. You wouldn’t be so skinny, either. That’s another thing, they wouldn’t need guns. They’d walk us right to the slaughter like we do to animals. They’d use the guns to control the food and the food to control us. Man is an animal, man. There’s no two ways about it. A fat sack of meat.”

“You think so?”

“I do. When I die I should just be thrown in the garbage. Or better yet, feed me to some bears at the zoo. Maybe they’ll evolve past man and my donation will be what sparked it. Hopefully something takes over soon. Or a volcano blows us all. You know Yellowstone could cause another ice age. All the dust in the air would block out the sun if Yellowstone went off. Then everybody would get wiped out. Maybe start out nicer.”

He drained his beer. I hadn’t finished mine or gotten even halfway so he got another just for himself. By that time it was crowded and loud. Someone had made an announcement about karaoke but but I thought it was a joke. People looked tired and local or too upbeat and tourist.

“I’m telling you, I’m telling you. It’s not over ‘til it’s over. Despite what I’m saying I love life. Well, what’s love? But life can be fun. It can be the best, certainly better than the big nothing.”

I let him talk because if I talked he’d be all over everything I said. He would bring up things from weeks or years ago and run with it. His drunk memory was better than my normal memory.

“You hafta start having fun,” he told me, “or you’ll end up old, deciding to start, and dying from shock at how great life can be. Do it without hesitation the first time around and you won’t have to wish for a second.”

Then he stood up with his beer, used his free hand to salute me, and walked off toward the group of women.

Milton just sort of disappeared after that. He was as I remember him -- there and gone, never when you need him to be either, and I found my way back to Lizzie’s alone, walking the ten o’clock streets with my head down. It felt barely even dark, still hot, and somehow lovely.

I got back and Cheddar was freaking out on a piece of paper that was hanging loose from one of Lizzie’s drawers.

“Hey,” I said, and grabbed the paper away. It was another one of Lizzie’s stories. I took a deep breath.

Boy & The Contraption

‘The contraption. It is made of wood and leather. For starters, there is the enormous back plate. It is screwed into studs in the wall, and is immovable.

The leather is thick buffalo hide, deep brown and now stained in places from hot sweaty Texas nights. The straps are imposing; they look like being stranded at sea might feel. They are powerful.

And so this effect, of suddenly feeling adrift in the middle of the ocean, with no help there or coming, is what Boy feels as they strap him into this thing. It is, the ocean feeling, basically one of helplessness, but also fate.

But so Boy has these feelings in his own bedroom. The back plate is molded to his shape. There is a hook with a soft rubber tip that fits into the hole in his cheek.

Boy's mother slid the strap through the buckle. The leather was cool on his forehead. His mother did his ankles next. Always top, bottom, then up from there. It stopped Boy from constantly looking down to watch her strap him up. Boy's eyes were fixed straight ahead. For him, it was just his mother's duty to put him in the contraption. His father would never do it. His father would never acknowledge it. His father danced with his eyes when Boy was in the room.

Boy was dropped into darkness. It took him a while but he fell limp against his straps, eventually.

* * *

Quite apart from Boy's nights were his days. At the start of the day Boy woke in his bed. In the cool bloated morning before the sun burst into his room Boy's mother would carefully, agonizingly, loosen the straps until a tiny sleeping Boy pitched forward into her arms.

At least his mornings could be as close to normal as was possible. Which, normal, being the goal of everything in his life, led to him being the very opposite. It was like when a plumber causes a clog.

At his school, where he was a third grader, though he should have been a fifth, but was held back, Boy was mostly quiet.

The classroom and its metaphorical though palpable required level of restraint set him on edge.

"Hey Boy, how come you got such short fingernails?" the girl who sat next to him, Mary, asked him during their free-time period, which Boy mostly used to play just outside of the circle of other boys playing. They played a meaner version of jacks where the player got to throw as many punches as they got jacks. Even boys outside the circle could receive the punches.

Boy had such short fingernails. Because of how he constantly either picked them or bit them or ground them against the rough underside of his yellow plastic desk. But that doesn't mean he knew he could tell her that. She must have been a bad observer, anyway. "I pick at them sometimes." Sometimes his pickings would get squeezed out the hole in his cheek.

"You're lucky you're allowed to pick at them," Mary told him. Boy suspected she was just trying to get him to look at her nails. He was years away from looking or even thinking about nails. Much farther even than he was from thinking about lips, or exposed navels, or anything having to do with swimming pools. Middle-aged men might think about nails. "When I used to pick my nails my dad put hot sauce on them. So I started to bite them in my sleep, or pick them. Easy fix, right? Just stop putting them in my mouth." Boy was feeling a discomfiting camaraderie. There was no aspect of his life that he wanted to have in common with this girl. "But only I couldn't. They called it a compulsion. I don't think it was a compulsion per se. More like a habit. Which is breakable and not psychologically implicated." Boy didn't know what she

was talking about anymore. “If it was psychologically implicated, which I don't believe it was, because I've stopped, (see, perfectly healthy) then I wouldn't have been able to stop. They made me stop. They made sure I would stop. They tied mittens on my hands when I went to bed. Whenever I went to bed they tied my hands down. It was pretty clever that they did it in the summer. There would've been a whole other layer of grotesque control necessary if they'd have done it during school. Because they can't, like, follow me around and make sure I'm not biting but they also can't strap those mittens on me since I couldn't hold a pencil like that, or a paper, and I certainly couldn't hold scissors like that. But so anyway it wasn't a really big deal, which is, I guess, why I'm telling you about it. I've had my hands tied down every night, and I'm super better off, probably. They used to tell me that if I didn't stop biting my nails then the poison in my nails would melt my stomach inside out but in my estimation it was the really copious amounts of hot sauce that I ingested that melted my stomach inside out.”

And with that free time was over and Boy was sweating in his seat like he was standing through the night. His little Boy teeth chewed at the side of his mouth. He thought of his father and chewed at the side of his mouth.’

I read it in a fog, in the orange light that clicked on easily, intensifying the orange coming in from the open window. I was startled by a bang on the door.

He went to the bathroom and brushed his teeth. He hadn't brought a toothbrush, though, so he used Lizzie's. When he was done I put it in a plastic bag that I had found in the kitchen as a reminder to throw it away before Lizzie could use it again. Then he wanted what he called “a real Atlantic City breakfast,” which meant going to another out of the way place that was only the real one to him, and not to anyone else. It was midnight exactly.

“Do you think Lizzie has a boyfriend?” he asked me as we walked toward the diner.

“Why, are you interested?”

“Calm down. I've only met her once, I forget what she looks like.” Then a second later he added, “And she's your sister, man.”

“You better remember that. Stay away from her. You can't control yourself.”

“If you met those girls, you would know that I control myself plenty well. They were way worse than me.”

“I can’t imagine that.”

“They live in this crazy house, with like, 15 other people who all want to be artists or something but they really just do a bunch of drugs and have sex all the time. It was wild.”

Inside the restaurant was the same kind of oversized decoration that the casinos had. Everything was just a little more polished than real life.

We sat down in a booth and read the menus. Everything was themed. Golden Nugget Golden Nuggets. Boardwalk Fries. Pier Pierogies. Even Caesar’s Caesar Salad. So Milton had the capacity to be a tourist after all.

It wasn’t a bad meal. Our food came fast, like it was ready and under heat lamps. Milton ate fast, too, and I was left chewing away while he looked out the window toward the strip.

When I finished we paid and left. I pushed open the glass door and saw Man across the street. He was wearing the same clothes as the last time I saw him.

“Let’s go check out the boardwalk.”

“What for?”

“Maybe there will be some actual ladies,” I told him.

“All right. Now you’re speaking my language.”

I set off at a slower pace than usual to keep Man ahead of us..

All the bars we passed were packed and when we got to the casinos there were people spilling out onto the street, hopping from one to another waiting for their hand to get hot. Man just kept walking. He sped across the boardwalk and onto the sand and didn’t bother taking his shoes off.

“Let’s survey for a minute,” Milton said.

“We can scan better if we keep moving,” I said.

He shrugged.

Man was getting near the water and slowing down. Maybe he would disrobe and dive in.

I stopped when he did.

“Make up your mind, man,” Milton said.

“That’s what I’m saying,” I said.

“Okay. Whatever. Here’s the plan. We go back to the art house. I’m sure they’re still going strong. I promised I’d bring you back, anyway.”

I didn’t say anything.

“What’s your problem? What are you even looking at? That homeless guy?”

Man’s shirt was tattered, true, sure. But homeless? “I don’t think he’s homeless.”

“That guy. Right there. The orange shirt.”

“Yeah, he’s just a Man.”

“He’s a homeless man. I saw that guy eating out of the garbage when I was walking back from the art house.”

“Shut up. That’s not true.”

“What’s the difference? Why do you care?”

“He just seems like a nice guy is all.”

“Did we follow him here? Oh my god. He was outside the diner.”

“We didn’t follow him. He just keeps showing up. I saw him the other day at the laundromat, and then he sort of just disappeared. It was weird, and I can’t stop thinking about him.”

“He disappeared because he’s homeless. He doesn’t live anywhere. He probably lived at that laundromat if there was anywhere. Was it a 24 hour?”

“Yeah, but that’s beside the point.”

“When were you in there?”

“This morning.”

“Inconclusive, I’ll give you that much. But that dude is definitely homeless.”

I was worried that his loud prognosticating was attracting attention. But at the beach, in Atlantic City, people don’t care. It’s all happened there before.

“Damn, man. You’ve really gone off the deep end,” he told me.

“I don’t know what to tell you. Despite what you’re saying, I don’t feel crazy at all.”

“Why would you? It’s all completely normal. I totally get it.”

“Come on, don’t be like that.”

“We probably just need to get you laid.”

“I don’t think that will help.”

“No, it will. We’ll go see the girls. They have some friends. Maybe one of them will take care of you.”

“I don’t like that phrase. Take care of me.”

“They’re good people. Okay? Good. Let’s do that. You’re too stuck on this weird homeless guy.”

It was almost two by that point, which meant we had a long time ahead of us.

But all of public life pretty much amounts to pretending; the greatest sham of all is the implicit “I want to be here, of course I’m not doing this because I feel some obligation, a societal pressure created without my consent even though I am part of the society imposing it.”

All the while Milton had been dragging me to the house where he had got laid earlier.

The house was this beat up Victorian with a wrap around porch. There were people on the porch, smoking and talking, in the light coming from the open window. Music bled out.

“Milton,” one of them said, “I never thought you’d be back. You’re not as square as I thought.” I couldn’t see anyone’s face. It made me nervous. “Puke, come meet Milton.”

Somebody from the other side of the porch, Puke, a man with a massive nose and bags under his eyes, walked over.

“Hey man,” Puke said.

“Hello,” Milton said. “Joey, Puke, this is my friend Drew.” He thumbed back at me.

“Nice to meet you guys,” I said.

“Yeah, you too,” one of them, I think Puke, said.

It was hot out, and everybody on the porch was laying down with their sleeves rolled up, talking and smoking.

“Are Elise and Nina inside?” Milton asked.

“They should be, they were trying to get a game of duck duck chug started, which is why we’re all out here, hiding.”

We stepped over some lady lying right in front of the door, which had a window and dainty lace covering it from the inside. The lady was yellow in the crack of light from the open door, with a red bandana wrapped around her head.

Inside it was chaos. There were people everywhere, more people than should have been there, like it couldn’t be possible to know so many people. They were all wearing their sleeves up, too, except for the small group standing directly in front of the enormous fan in the kitchen to the left. Inside there were also lights everywhere. Those construction lights with the grates over an exposed bulb, hanging from hooks on the ceiling or sitting on the floor.

I was mostly looking down because I didn't want to talk to anyone, but with quick glances up I didn't notice anybody looking at me. The floor had this black and white checkerboard tiling throughout the entire house. There was crackly music coming from some other room, not very loud, but louder as I followed Milton toward Elise and Nina, who I assumed were Milton's new girls.

"Wait, Milton."

"What's up?"

"What do you say to people like this?"

"Oh god. Anything. You can say anything to these people."

In a back room with a bunch of people smoking pot we found Elise, at least.

"Milton!" She shouted across the room. "Back already?" They hugged like old friends.

"And who is this?"

"I'm Drew."

"Nice to meet you, Drew." She held out her hand, which was big.

I felt like everyone had a face on, but I shook anyway.

"What do you do, Drew? Do you work with Milty here?" They knew the guy one day and already they had nicknames for him.

"I don't," I said, "I'm actually just temping right now, trying to find something real."

"We're all trying to find something real," she said, looking over the guests at the party. I assumed it was her house, though nobody told me explicitly, and everyone acted like they lived there.

"What do you do?" I asked her.

“A lot of things, actually. I’ve been doing this performance art piece down at the boardwalk lately. Do you know those guys who pull tourists in rickshaws? Yes, well, I’ve been masquerading as one of them.”

“How does that work?”

“Well I show up for work like I’m some junkie who’s looking for a buck, willing to pull fat people the literally five blocks that are the boardwalk, and they pay me money, without knowing the whole time that I despise them!”

“It’s brilliant,” Milton said.

“But is it any different than someone who doesn’t hate them pulling them?”

“Everyone hates them, you see. I’m giving voice and form to the actual real life plight of the rickshaw puller, which is all art really is, you see. It’s giving voice to the voiceless, and making the statements they can’t.”

“I fucking hate those fat tourists,” somebody said from the floor. It was a guy with a potbelly and a bandana, too, pulling back his long red hair.

“I know, Pudge, I know,” Elise told him. “But let’s get drinks. It’s so rude of me to not have offered you boys drinks yet.”

In the kitchen were a lot of people and a lot of cans of beer in buckets full of ice.

“It’s Puke who really cares about the ice,” Elise said, “I was trying to tell you earlier, but you were only interested in the one thing.” Milton smiled and grabbed a beer.

“You know Elise and Nina did all these paintings,” Milton said, gesturing to the walls. Every room had canvas hanging from nails, the paintings not lined up in any recognizable pattern.

“So something did get through,” she said.

“They’re really something,” I said.

“Thank you. My work is strongly influenced by my surroundings. Once I painted the front door to look exactly like itself.”

That was when I began to suspect Elise was on something. But it was also when Nina arrived.

“Milton!” she shouted from across the room.

They hugged and we had more introductions and I found out that Nina’s art was inspired by her childhood, and so when she painted a portrait of herself as a child, people only saw a boy in a dress, which wasn’t far off the mark but gave her deep misgivings about the perceptions of the average art enthusiast. Not that their friends were average.

“You know Drew here has been following a homeless man,” Milton announced, suddenly.

“Oh, neat,” Nina said. “What’s your medium? You strike me as a sculptor.”

“No,” Milton said, “He’s just been stalking a homeless man for the good old delusion of it.”

“What’s so delusional about that?” Nina asked. She was going to bat for me. Before Milton could keep talking I jumped in.

“I’m not an artist or anything. He just seemed so real to me, like he was more than just a normal man.”

“Far fucking out, man.”

“Yeah, he was like capital ‘m’ Man, you know.”

“That’s really deep, Drew. You’re working on another level.”

“I don’t think you two are understanding. We followed a homeless man to the beach, a guy who was eating garbage, for Chrissakes!”

“You need to chill out, Milt,” Nina said.

I felt welcome in that place, as strange as it was. The soft conversations happening all about, the fluid way that people negotiated groups, even the front door’s latch clicking to signal the voyage or return of a smoker to the porch was comforting.

“So you don’t do any type of art, Drew?” Elise asked me.

“Not really. I never think of it. My sister writes a little, but I never got into it myself.”

“Lizzie Hoffer,” Milton half-shouted. “She’s the next big name in New Jersey fiction!” We got the tour: everybody in there seemed to be the next somebody, and everybody else knew it, which I guess is why he brought her up.

“No way!”

“We know her! Your sister comes here all the time! We love her!”

“Lizzie comes here?”

“Yes, man, don’t act so shocked. Your sister is great.”

“And she comes here?”

“Yeah, man, yeah! Her essays about your dad are brilliant.”

I asked, “What are her essays about?”

“Whose?”

“Lizzie’s,” I said.

“Oh, yes, right. She’s just so brave to be able to talk about what he did to you guys. How he left you like that. It was so lonely for her to be the one who found him.”

“Fuck.”

“Drew, Drew, Drew.” Milton put his hand on the back of my neck and whispered something into my ear that I didn’t understand.

It was like I’d been knocked over. I put my beer down on the kitchen counter and leaned against it heavily.

“I have to go,” I said.

Milton followed me out the front door and almost tripped on Puke, who was laying on the ground. “Drew, hey, can I drive you home?”

“I don’t think so Milt.”

That wasn’t how it happened at all. He had been cleaning his gun and I was watching him. He had taught me the parts the week before and I was watching him, naming them in my head. I didn’t know why, at the time, he slid a magazine with one bullet into the gun, chambered it, and fired straight up through the roof of his mouth. Lizzie had been at church with mom, but I was still too young to get communion so I didn’t go every week. It was the week I wish I went most out of any.

I walked back in the dark, fast, with my head down. I fought with the locks and sat down on one of the cats who wasn’t quick enough to get out of the way, and read over the Boy stories and tried to think of my sister as someone who got drunk and high and made art and didn’t tell me anything but told them everything, and not even the truth.

When they got back from church I was in her bed, pretending to sleep. It was the only way I knew to make sure no one bothered me. It was pretending like I was sick. It was pretending I was well.

Lizzie had screamed of course. Eventually an ambulance arrived. It was much too late. The paramedics felt bad, I could tell. I was up by that point, crying along with my family, acting like I found out when they did. It was the hardest thing in the world to me.

It was hard to think of Lizzie telling other people. So I went to sleep instead.

I dreamt that night that it had never happened. That I had a father and sister and mother who were all together, except I wasn't there. They were the perfect family that existed before I was born, and my father was a carpenter full time, instead of a salesman. And my mother didn't have to work and Lizzie was happy and didn't need to lose herself to find herself. Then Kramer showed up and slammed a door in my face. Then the cats peed but it was acid and burned a hole in the floor that I fell through.

I landed in a polyester booth of a tourist-trap diner in Atlantic City, I ate quietly and felt bad about myself. Probably everyone else there was doing the same. I read Winkel's obit again.

The newspaper had included a photograph, from when he was younger. He was still bearded and had a big nose. I looked outside. Man was at the trashcan. I stared at Winkel. His flat eyes stared back. I looked at Man. Man looked up at me and we made eye contact through the glass. Looking back at me was father eating an apple core.

Looking up again he was a dead ringer for Winkel. It might have been the glare, but it wasn't. That was him. He had made it. The paper had gotten it wrong. I looked down.

I ran out into the street. I nearly got hit by a car. Man's orange t-shirt was dirtier than even yesterday at the beach.

When I touched his back he twisted and smacked my arm and I stepped back and he looked at me.

“Who are you?” I asked him.

Up close he was old. Something viscous had dried in his beard and his eyes were bright blue.

“I’m Oscar,” he said. “Who are you?”

“I’m Drew.” He took my hand but didn’t grip or shake at all. “Can I ask you a couple questions?”

“I’m allowed to be here. This is a public street, I’m allowed to be on this street.”

“It’s not about that, I’m not here to kick you out. I just want to know where you went yesterday. When you went into the camera shop.”

“I didn’t go into any camera shop.”

“Yes you did. Down by Radford Ave. You had laundry with you.”

He didn’t say anything.

“Do you know this man?” I held up the picture of Winkel from the paper.

Then he started running.

One of his shoes flew off as I caught up and grabbed his arm. The buildings falling apart all around us flipped and we hit the ground hard. Man was kicking and got back up.

“Are you dead? Tell me. Who are you?”

“What is wrong with you? Leave me the alone.”

He started running again. I followed but was slower, and I was crying. I had no choice. I could either prove it to myself that Man and Winkel and father were the same and I wasn’t responsible for death, or I was a murderer. I had been all along but now I was becoming sure of it.

“Please,” I yelled after him.

I realized how big people can be. As big as houses. As countries. As the world.

I left Atlantic City before Lizzie got back. I dropped her key off with her landlord, a greasy looking man who said “da boutayouse” and smelled like garlic. Even his handshake felt off.

I went to work as if it were usual. But it was my second month on the job and the weekend made me forget everything I had learned during my first. It was dull, and I found that I wasn't bad at doing two things at once. I could call companies and try to sell them new telecommunication software while at the same time thinking of excuses to head back down to Lizzie's. If only I had known, I would have brought something irreplaceable and left it there, so I could return. I briefly entertained the notion of getting a hotel room, or really a motel room. There was nothing, nothing I could do.

At the office there was this woman named Debbie. She had this high laugh that you could hear across the entire floor and she laughed all the time. She thought it flattered her customers. Since it was all over the phone we were allowed to dress however we wanted, and Debbie would alternate between sweatpants and miniskirts, depending on her after-work plans. And she would always call her boyfriend on her break and she'd do the same high laugh, so I never knew if she was faking it for him too, or it was really just how she sounded.

I sat in my cubicle, feeling time going by.

If Winkel could die and live. And Lizzie could remember?

I could hear Debbie in the next cubicle, reading from the sales script, wishing I had one for every moment of my life.

I picked up the phone.

“Hello?”

“Good Afternoon, this is Drew from Integrated Intercom Incorporated. May I speak to Elizabeth Day, please?”

“Drew?”

“Yes. Is Ms. Day available?”

“You know this is me.”

“Would you say you are satisfied with the quality of your long-distance memory carrier?”

“What does that mean?”

“Have you had any of the following problems: mis-memory? mis-representation of said memories? trouble reconciling the past with the present and or future?”

“What are you talking about Drew?”

“Can I please speak to Ms. Elizabeth Day? The Elizabeth Day I know very personally?”

“That’s probably an overstatement.”

“The Ms. Day who wouldn’t be spreading lies about her father’s suicide to deadbeats in a piece of shit flophouse in a ghetto of Atlantic City.”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“I met your friends, Lizzie, figure it out.”

“Yeah, I know, they told me. They were so excited to have talked to you. They said you were cool.”

“I don’t want them thinking I’m cool. I don’t want them thinking I’m anything. And I certainly don’t want them thinking that I was at church that day. I told you what really happened when I graduated high school.”

“Oh. God.”

“I’ve been really fucked up, Lizzie.”

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t remember any of it. The day or you telling me. I blocked them out.”

“Well I can’t seem to do that. He’s in my dreams.”

“Like he’s haunting you.”

“I don’t believe in that kind of thing. But it’s making it so I have to be blitzed or dead tired to fall asleep.”

“That sucks, Drew. What else can I say?”

“Tell me why you moved down there. Why are you so far away from me?”

“I had to get away from mother. It’s cheaper than New York or Philly. Safer than Newark. I don’t know. Why do people do the things they do?”

“Did you ever kill a dog?”

“...”

“Did you ever chew a hole through your cheek?”

The Battle of Monmouth

The summer I was the ice cream man I learned a lot about people, mostly that there was much more that I didn't know than what I did.

It was central New Jersey and I had majority white, majority black, and majority Mexican neighborhoods. Rich and poor of all races of people. The two apartment complexes that were ninety percent Mexican were owned by other Mexicans who had just been there longer. And poor whites and poor blacks lived side by side and pretended they weren't poor or that they weren't the color they were, which I learned is a great response to racism. Buster had like eight kids and bought them all ice cream everyday. You tell me what race he was.

But my favorite neighborhood was the one Maria lived in. In my head I called her "The Orderer." I think she was the only adult in her family who spoke English. "*Maria*," her younger brothers told her, "*quiero coco*." And this was the first house that ordered coconut and I mistook it for chocolate because I scooped before I got the translation. "*No*," they said, "*coco*." And Maria told me coconut. She had long dark hair and it was dark outside and in the fluorescent bubble at the side of the truck, she was wonderful. She ordered mango for herself. Her skin, soft

and brown across the divide, and below me so she was always upturned. Her brothers ate SpongeBob pops and Spidermans and two-ball screwballs that she ordered in perfect English. Their house was next to an abandoned one, which was huge and brick but they lived in the big white and yellow-lit one, the porch small yet imposing in a small town way – they were more like judges than they let on with their soft words and patience and the house felt like it was leaning over into the street and every light in it was on and like a haunted house I could hear it settling even then, from the third story down.

I guess the reason I was there, at first, was less to be close to this woman, and more to try to repay some loans that I took out for my own space and food and gas when my parents would have taken care of at least most of it had I not, for the time being, decided I didn't need them. I had even taken up the night shift unloading trucks at the Wal-Mart three nights a week and wound up working next to some of the same people I saw on his daily ice cream route, which made me question the nature of living in the first place.

But in June, in the lead up to festivals and block parties and school letting out, Sam Rainer was bitching to me about not getting on the Battle of Monmouth crew.

“How much did you pay Bossman to let you go?” He spit into the gravel where we dumped out our slop buckets. “A.V., can I get some backup here? Why am I not going?”

“I have no idea, it's not my problem, I don't care,” A.V. said. “Rambo going is fine by me.”

“I'm not even wearing the bandana today,” I said.

We were leaning against a picnic table in the yard, waiting for Bossman to show up so we could get our truck keys. I imagined that the building had once been painted fire-engine-red, but by the time I got to the job it looked more like dried blood.

“Why don’t you ask him?” I said, as tall, bald Bossman strolled out of his house next door.

“How’s it going, boys?”

Since it was my job to have run-ins with kids I had many run-ins with kids. The worst one was when some teenagers robbed me. It was a minor robbery, if you’re into classifying things like that, but it was the Fourth of July and I was parked at the mall for the fireworks. But my line was so long and I was taking orders first then scooping second then money third so when I handed these two teenagers their ices they simply just walked away and disappeared into the velvet crowd like nothing happened and I never saw them again. They were slightly better than the kid who stole my tip jar. But the joke was on him because there were only a couple quarters in it; and isn’t that worth it, when he finally comes to terms with himself?

For that day it only meant that I wouldn’t subsidize the cost of as many icees. It was always a fun time for me, because who cares, you know? Once this girl who must have been six only had a dollar, and when I said it wasn’t enough she disappeared into the house for minutes, literal actual minutes and left her brother, who was four, to look up at me from his place where he sat on the ground, literally in the street and had no shoes on and it was clear from his feet that he usually did not.

There were days when I thought maybe, *maybe*, I had it all figured out, in a vague sense of all that, that I would be able to make it. I didn’t even know what that meant, just that the future wasn’t as scary as everyone made it out to be. People who pretend to know the future are assholes and should be ignored. Well and but Sam was one of those. Every day I had to deal with him. He thought he was my boss and he thought the sun only rose so that he would know when

to wake up. Cockroaches were coming out and I was ready to lose my mind about a number of things, the number depending on what you wanted to count as a grievance and what as a minor offence, but Sam was always a grievance, so one, at the very least.

Maybe it was Sam being annoyed at me that made me bold that day. He whined about the schedule to Bossman and didn't get the answer he wanted. Justice.

I went to Maria's neighborhood at the end of the day and took a long time to scoop. If I got back to the yard before ten I would probably get fired, or at least that's what A.V. told me. I never forgot that coco was coconut and that Mexicans liked to order it. That and king cones. They asked for soft serve about as often as not, because my main rival had soft serve and they must have been trying to get my goat, because who doesn't notice that I was not my rival and that I came around every day at the exact same time and did not have soft serve any time, not any day of the week? I have Italian ice and several ice cream treats but certainly no soft serve. I tried to time my route when the neighborhood kids were finished playing soccer, because they were usually thirsty and hot and Italian ice at least takes care of the hot even though they asked for soda every day too. "I wish I had a soda," I'd tell them. The guy doling out the flavored ice is not different from anyone, really.

I don't know how it came out of my mouth. Maybe it was because her family was walking away and she was waiting for the change. Maybe because it was a Saturday night.

I looked down at her and asked, "I'm off on Monday. Could I take you to dinner?"

I don't remember the look on her face because I had closed my eyes.

"Ask me tomorrow," she said, and walked away. She said it so sweetly, like she really might give me a chance.

I drove away from her house and forgot to put the jingle back on, so no one else stopped me.

“But you see the problem?” I asked A.V. the next morning in the yard.

“Today is tomorrow, and today you’re not on your route, you’re going to the park for the reenactment. That’s quite the problem.”

He was filling the water tank in the trailer that we were going to take.

It was time for The Battle of Monmouth. Bossman won a closed envelope blind bid to be the exclusive refreshment provider for the state’s biggest revolutionary war reenactment, which also means it was the most embarrassing. Bossman was supposed to go out with A.V. and me, but then Bossman got the summer flu, and he couldn’t do it.

When I got there they had already stocked the cart and the booth with ice from the walk-in freezer and all that was left to do was go. I rode in the truck with A.V. while Sam drove himself because he had worked it out with Bossman that he wasn’t going to help break down the equipment at the end of the night because he was leaving for a road trip in the morning and needed to get home to rest, which Bossman didn’t care about but said yeah sure whatever because Sam had bitched about his trip for ten minutes during count up the night before. It was hot in the truck even with the windows down and A.V.’s boombox was blasting but I managed to keep asking A.V. questions.

“How old are you?” he asked me.

“Nineteen.”

He laughed. "Take her down to Atlantic City for the weekend, find some place that doesn't card, and get drunk. And get married when you find out she's pregnant, and keep driving the ice truck all the while."

The first time I met A.V. told me that he was The Original Respected on the Streets Homosexual Gangster and that he got out of that life because he went to jail for something that went down in Asbury Park. Bossman put him on Neptune so there wouldn't be any temptation, and A.V.'s personality, and his boombox that he brought because his truck didn't have a radio, were such that he'd probably give in to that temptation, to say something to somebody, even though he was a Eunuch for the Kingdom now. So when A.V. told me to marry Maria I got nervous, and wondered if it was actually right to love her, if indeed I did.

"We got Bin Laden," he said. "There's nothing impossible, kid." He called me kid even though I was only five years younger than he was.

We got to the park and A.V. found a kid in a high-viz vest telling cars where to park, who directed us to the organizer and she put us up next to the visitor center, which seemed to be a really choice spot. We started to set up the booth while we waited for Sam to show up and take the cart. We were supposed to switch up roles every once in a while so that we didn't get overwhelmed, or to rest our arms because it was supposed to be a hot one.

Sam showed up and took the cart out first, which was fine by me, I mean, really, he was the worst, and so I kept my head down and worked beside A.V., who I could tell didn't think I was as good as he was at scooping, because for every nine I got through he did ten, but I think it was only because I got a lot of kids ordering mediums with big bills so I had to make more change than he did, he was getting a lot of smalls, which at a buck a pop were easy to change because who doesn't have a single? I couldn't even see the faces of most of the people who were

in my line, like they were all mouth and whatever they wanted I had to hop to because if I fell behind A.V. too badly I wouldn't like it, and also there is a divide between customer and ice cream man that isn't easily bridged, and they only saw me as a conveyer belt that tiny paper cups of frozen water and sugar came off of to their delight. Which, I guess, was why I was nervous about Maria – I had never said more than hello to anyone who ever bought from me and here I was, sweating like the reenactors in their wool uniforms, thinking about a girl who I saw once every two weeks and was probably going to break my heart.

After two hours Sam pulled the cart back over and said, "A.V., switch with me," so A.V. did.

"Alright, pissant," was the first thing he said. "How about I take the orders and you scoop?"

"No way, man, you know that would never work." A kid refused to take the bubble gum icee I was holding out to him. "Here," I said.

"I said cherry," the kid said. He was trailed by a leash that his parent had dropped.

I put aside the bubblegum and scooped a cherry.

Sam started talking again and I messed up a couple more orders.

"I have this one girl, Bree, and she's nasty. She calls me up while she's getting herself off and just moans into the phone. It's so hot. And Veronica lets me do whatever I want, if you know what I mean."

"You have to shut up, man, there are kids right there. And I don't want to hear it."

"Come on, they can't hear. You have a problem with the ladies?"

"I don't have a problem with ladies, I just happen to respect them."

“Hey fuck you,” he says, and I wince at the woman I’m handing the pre-made bubblegum to. “What do you even know about ladies?”

“Well, I have a girlfriend,” I said.

“Oh really? What’s this broad’s name?”

“Maria. And she’s not a broad.”

“Is Maria nasty?” He looked at me with a big smile on his dumb blond mug.

I didn’t stop my hand when I looked up and I nicked my thumb on the metal rim of the can of ice and I was bleeding. I had forgotten to take the rim off the new can because of the pace of the work and my general anger at being stuck beside Sam. “All right, Sam, it’s all you for a second,” I said, and held my bloody thumb under the counter so no one would see, and he saw it and said, “Shit,” then went right back to work, and I ducked out the back of the booth toward the visitor center, squeezing my thumb as hard as I could but blood dripped out of my clenched fist. I headed into the visitor center to find a bathroom and hopeful for first aid, dodging between red coats and blue coats and children with seemingly no supervision and got to the bathroom and rinsed out my cut, which stung sweetly, like a hangover headache, and wrapped it in a paper towel and went back out to the booth.

“What’s your problem with me,” Sam asked as soon as I got back. I told him that I couldn’t tell him, and he said, “Don’t keep secrets.”

And I kept as cool as possible and lied, “It’s not a secret, I just didn’t know why.” I wanted to ask how it was not obvious.

He was pissed at me for hating him and I was pissed at him for being him, and A.V. seemed never to come back, until he did, and I had to walk around with the cart and make change and scoop ice with a bloody paper towel thumb that no one seemed to notice anyway, and

it was even hotter in the sun because there was no breeze but at least I got to see Washington's boys giving the redcoats hell, even if at the end of the day, way back when, it had been a tie. I still remembered that from middle school history, from Mr. Pantino, who once threw chalk at a kid and I realized that more men than just my father were angry. But so the grass caught up in the carts wheels but I was doing crazy business so I lost track of time and spent four hours out on the cart, until I was out of lemon, out of cherry, out of sky blue. Sam went back out on a restocked cart then A.V. went back out then I didn't go back out because it was dark and no one was really around. Then, "A.V., what's this guy's problem?" Sam asked, pointing at me when finally it was nearly dead and we were leaning against the glass drawers of the freezers, and A.V. said he didn't follow, man, and Sam asked, "Why's he such a dick?" and again, A.V. didn't follow, and said he didn't talk like that anymore, and he was reformed and maybe Sam should learn some kind of lesson about the brotherhood of the profession, to which Sam said, "Fuck that," and said he was going home, and so he did.

Bossman didn't look so sick when he was totaling up our earnings at the end of the night to tell us how much we made that day. A.V. walked home a lot of nights but sometimes he'd ask me for a ride, which I initially refused him.

"I have to go to Maria's, man."

"Think. Is showing up at her place in the middle of the night romantic, or creepy?"

"I'll make it work," I said.

"Come on, it's basically on the way. Please?" I had never heard him say please before.

Which is how I ended up in A.V.'s apartment on the last day of June, a small place in south south Allenhurst like might-as-well-be-Asbury Allenhurst, hand feeding his cat while he ran downstairs to get me a thank you for driving him.

I sat on the couch and thought about how I ended up there. I had seen an ad in the Tri-town News: *Fun! Earn \$300-500 per week!* with a number and the logo. It was the same company that drove through my parents' neighborhood, so I grew up with them, never suspecting it was just Bossman and a bunch of kids, mostly new ones each year, and a truck yard behind his house. I just called, which is how I came to drink six beers in Allenhurst on a Sunday and But it was only lite beer so it wasn't, you know, that big a deal to have a couple of them, especially since I had sweated so much that day.

A.V. came up with the beer and I tried to get away but he cracked one open and handed it to me. The first thing I did was start talking about Maria. Then I told him, you confront your own existence when it's just you for twelve hours a day, and sure you get to talk to people intermittently and there's even some movement between driving and serving at the window, but all in all it's a solitary thing. Until you're back at the yard no one is sharing the same experience as you, which he didn't exactly eat up, but that was okay because I had thought of it in the truck when I was alone and sort of losing my mind because the radio had stopped working so it was just me and me and it was threatening rain so not many people were outside. Some of the regulars were, though, like Bobby and Dick who lived in a townhouse and were so in love that they actually did finish each other's sentences, usually when they were ordering. Bobby say "I'd like the –" and Dick would jump in "cherry!" and when it was Dick's turn Bobby would do the same thing, but how I knew they were in love was they always ate what the other person chose for them, not getting mad or anything, even though Dick was a huge dude and never wore a shirt and sometimes wiped the ice out of Bobby's mustache. That was a month and a half before A.V. made me drink five more beers after the first one, because whenever he saw I was getting close to finishing he'd open another and just put it there next to my hand, which was resting on the

small counter, with him in the kitchen and me on the living room side, on a tall stool while he stood across it and we shot the breeze. He told me a little bit more about what he did to land in jail and he made it seem like he was really sorry about it, and he kept saying it wasn't like he hurt anyone, and the whole experience of hearing him talk about what was essentially a life-saver for him, because he did tell me about his best friend who was shot in retaliation for something they did when they were 18, which he also didn't say exactly what they did, the experience was numbing, and made me see that A.V. was a person, whereas before he had been a guy in dirty ball caps and long shorts who I didn't see or think about that often.

“Thanks for driving me back,” A.V. finally said.

It was midnight.

“Don't get pulled over,” he said.

I don't know if it was a jinx, or what.

“I won't,” I said. “I can't. I've got to go ask Maria a question.”

The walk to my car was the hardest part. To cruise down roads I normally had to crawl along, listening to a maniacal jingle was a welcome treat. I wasn't really thinking about getting pulled over and a DUI and losing my job and therefore my apartment and life, but I wasn't thinking about Maria, either. It was strange. It was like a moment of perfect clarity. Like I had never been as lucid as I was, maneuvering my rust-bucket car through Freehold to confess my love to a girl.

When I got to Maria's the lights were out. It was a little before one, and the world smelled like grass, and tasted like beer, and my stomach was dropping. The house was cream in the sodium light and I was afraid it would pour itself down on me.

I knocked on the door to no answer. I picked up some pebbles from the path to the street and went around to the side of the house. Deciding which window I thought was Maria's took a windy minute. I was sweating.

The ticking of the stones off the glass woke somebody up. A small face appeared from the lifted window, but it was not Maria. The boy just stared down at me, and I waved.

"Is Maria home?" I asked in a whisper-yell. The boy disappeared and half a minute later the back door opened.

"What are you doing here?" she asked. Her hair was tied up and she had on bright blue baggy pajamas.

"I wanted to ask you to dinner. I guess it would be tonight. My name is John, by the way. I don't think I ever told you that. Sometimes people call me Rambo, but that's more of a joke." I shook my head at myself and the beer I had drank.

"I'm Maria," she said, smiling.

"I know," I said.

The orange streetlight was washing out the moon but I could still see pale white on Maria's nose. This is the beginning of something, I told myself, and believed it.