

2009

Songs for cripples

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Songs for Cripples

by

Michael Nelson

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
Department of English
College of Arts and Sciences
University of South Florida

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Date of Approval: May 1, 2009

Keywords: Love, sex, God, abuse, death

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ABSTRACT

Songs for Cripples is a fragmented novel or collection of stories which attempts to commingle the profound and the profane while scrutinizing the absurdity of inexplicable hope and the endless pursuit of avoiding loneliness.

Introduction

There is a woman I know who wears pink mittens in summer, only makes right-hand turns and carries a spiral notebook filled with numbers. She diligently tracks the numbers of books she reads each month including the number of pages. She takes special note of the differences between shorter months and longer months and colder months, when she stays in bed, doesn't dress and reads. She makes an effort to read more and more, smashing her own previously attained records, treating the whole affair with the kind of ferocity and determination of an Olympian. In a nod to irony, or paranoia, she once told me, "Never write anything down." I wish I felt the way she does.

Writing is awfully disappointing. Not always, but typically. I'm certain I'm not the first person to compare the act of writing to the act of masturbation, but it is an apt comparison. It's self-gratifying and embarrassing, occasionally orgasmic and sometimes strangely unsatisfying. And it's so often merely functional. I'm horny. Now I'm not. The metaphor, of course, loses all momentum when you suggest that the work itself is a collection of these expelled fluids. This proposition is undeniably gross, but then again, come is quite literally the stuff of life. Conversely, it is almost always wasted, wiped up and flushed, collecting in fabrics or carpets, dried on walls, smeared in dirty socks. But, on occasion, it gives birth to something. It may be something deformed, but sometimes there is beauty to be found in even the most flawed things. The book that I present here is deeply flawed. Flawed in the same ways that I am. It's ugly and mean and self-indulgent. I hope,

though, it's also strangely sweet and acutely funny when it's not genuinely sad.

Songs for Cripples begins with Frank, a lonesome man in his mid-twenties who works at a nursing home and lingers in bars, being asked by his paraplegic father to assist him in arranging a rendezvous with a high-paid escort behind the back of Frank's mother, a kind and devout Jehovah's Witness. At the last moment, Frank decides to spend time with the escort himself and his relationship with his father quickly deteriorates. Frank's lack of faith, his feelings of disconnection between himself and his family and his ongoing inability to have a genuine relationship with another human being spurs his escalating desperation and declining mental health. His absolute feeling of isolation permeates the work as a whole, even as the stories drift into other areas of concern and Frank is absent from the narrative.

Songs is everything I have as far as writing is concerned. It's years of work, of things I purposely lost and additions I never imagined at the start. It's born, in part, from endless late nights and big glasses of red wine. It's revision after revision and the absolute recall of trivial criticisms that stick to the ears like warm honey to toast. The protagonist is "too whiney," "he's completely unlikable," "not believable at all," and the ever-present, "what's the point of this story?" On occasion, the work is enhanced by the encouragement and suggestions of people worth admiring for his or her own keen writing talent and wonderful intellect. More than that, though, *Songs* is an exercise in capturing my particular demons in an artful, concealed, but honest fashion. My own father is not paralyzed and he would never speak to me in the way that Frank's father speaks to him, but I often speak to myself in a very similar manner. Thoughts of self-loathing can be as frequent as the need to urinate.

In truth, I'm very uncomfortable speaking about the book. The idea of writing an introduction or reminiscing about how I came to write or admitting that I have a desire, a need to write or suggest that I have written something worth reading is unquestionably distasteful. The most arrogant man I've ever known once remarked to me, "I don't want people to mistake me for being vainglorious." I smiled as big I could. I wanted to hug the old buzzard. "I've never, ever thought of you that way," I assured him.

On those rare occasions when I mention to someone that I've written a novel-length book, the inevitable question is always the same: "What's it about?" I begin to stammer and shake my head, completely lost as how to respond. Once, my cousin with Cerebral Palsy, asked, "What's it called?" I said, "Songs for..." and then stopped. I looked away from him, sitting in his wheelchair with his knees kissing and his right hand balled up, his thumb peeking through his fingers. "Uh, cripples," I said. "Emotional cripples." When I looked at him again he wasn't looking at me.

I don't know how to talk about *Songs*. I don't know why I'm drawn to writing. I have no lofty goals when it comes to writing other than being pleased with the final creation. I might never be published, my book might never be represented by a stray pencil mark in the spiral notebook of a woman wearing pink mittens, but I take solace and gratification that some bit of me is captured in the words of *Songs*, and the creation of the work was an honest attempt to unearth my own pain, a tactic to dull my own hurt, maybe even put it off little, defer it. I am certain that art has that kind of power.

Songs for Cripples

Her breasts were a good size for a thin girl, and they were quite upright, Frank noticed, maybe filled with helium or stuffed full of clouds. She was intimidating in her beauty, dark hair streaming down the sides of her head, her lips as fat as tangerine wedges, her eyes like two orbs of light beaming out of her skull and Frank wondered if she was full of love. After all, love seemed so elusive. And maybe it was in this chick's heart, he didn't know. Or maybe it was in the fat of her breasts, pushing out under the tips of her nipples, waiting to drip out, be born into the world. Maybe it was somewhere in her belly, dissolving in acid and then it would tunnel through her bowels and then dangle out of her little anus. Maybe love continually passes through us, Frank thought, and some of it sticks and some of it's lost. Sometimes it burns the heart, gets puked up, farted out or just turns to shit, but it seemed so necessary. He imagined he could find love in her, the two of them naked on a bed, Frank's fingers dancing over her thick thigh, and up along her stomach, over the little hump of fat below her belly button and his fingers would be sensors, detecting love under her flesh, in her blood or maybe he could use his tongue as a swab in her mouth, and then have her saliva tested for love. He was sure she was riddled with it.

She moved towards Frank, smiling.

“You want another drink, sweetie?”

“Yeah,” he said, grinning, and then said nothing for a long moment. It was the type of dazed pause that comes after three apple martinis. “I'll have another one of these,” he

said, holding up his near-empty glass like it was a trophy.

She turned to look at the man seated next to Frank.

“How 'bout you, Clovis? You had enough?”

“No, baby. I'm still upright.”

She smiled again and her teeth were white and straight. Clovis was black and straight.

“You're drinking Heinekens, right?”

He nodded and she moved away from them, down towards the end of the bar.

“She gotta lotta ass for a white girl,” said Clovis.

Frank nodded as the observation was apt. He asked, “You ever pay for sex?”

Clovis squinted. “Shit, do I look like I gotta pay for it? There's five skeezers in here right now that would bend over if I asked 'em to.”

Frank laughed and Clovis asked, “Why you asking me that? You looking for a date?”

“No,” Frank assured him. “My dad is.” He finished the last bit of his drink, his throat burning a little as he swallowed.

“I thought your dad was paralyzed?”

“He is.”

“But his penis works?”

“I honestly don't know. I mean, he mainly talks about sucking tits and watching her masturbate. It's just I don't think it's right. And he wants me to pick him up Wednesday and tell my mother we're going to the movies, but he's expecting me to take him to a hotel.”

“That ain’t no big shit, Frank. Help him out.”

“You think so?”

“Goddamn, Frank. A man’s gotta have what a man’s gotta have.”

Frank’s father always wore little corduroy shorts and sometimes Frank worried that his father’s balls might pop out at any moment like a zombie in a horror flick. His father was in those shorts now, lying on his bed, an ashtray on his naked belly, staring at Frank as he smoked one cigarette after the other. Frank looked at his father, studied the deep grooves in his face, especially the ones pouring down along his nostrils to his lips. Sometimes he imagined swiping a credit card in one of those grooves and paying his father to shut up.

“Why do you keep looking at me?” asked Frank.

“I can’t look at you?”

“I don’t know. Not sinister like that.”

The bedroom was small and cluttered. The walls were covered with old photographs and drawings of farm animals his mother had made when she took art classes at the community college. On the dresser, vanilla-scented candles were burning in a failed attempt to mask the stink of nicotine. Hanging above the dresser was a large mirror, and Frank could see himself, sitting in a chair near the foot of the bed. He looked at his face, which he found to be a peculiar thing, two scars running down his nose to his upper lip, the result of a cleft palate at birth, and his nose was thick with nostrils that were flared and large. His cheeks were decorated with pock marks from years of acne and his upper lip was a shapeless, flattened slug, red and dried out with flakes of dead skin adhering to it.

“She’s four hundred an hour,” his father said. “The one I want.”

Frank closed his eyes and his own peculiar face became darkness, and then he quickly turned around to look out of the bedroom window. His mother was in the yard, stroking her cat's head, cradling it like a furry baby, talking to a neighbor. He turned back to eye his father.

“Do you understand the position you're putting me in?”

“What position is that, Frank? Is it the...forever horizontal position that I'm in? Huh? Is it the position of sitting in this goddamn house all goddamn day listening to your mother talk about that cat and Jesus Christ, and how I can achieve everlasting life while I lay here hoping I don't live through the end of the week? What position am I putting you in exactly?”

“That's your wife. It's my mother. And you're asking me to help you screw around on her with some teenage hooker.”

“She's twenty-three.”

“Oh, yeah? You've got all the vital stats, huh? She enjoys kayaking and crosswords, candle light dinners and licking whipped cream off of huge, uncut cocks.”

His father was quiet for a moment, grinding his cigarette out in the ashtray, the red glow dying, breaking up into ash.

“You think I'm shit, right?” his father asked.

“Yeah. I don't know.”

His father nodded.

“Sometimes I think she's glad this happened—your mother. I think she thinks God did it 'cause I wasn't good to her. And I wasn't...particularly good to her. I know. And now we're both these old, fucking things—things that don't want to touch each other anymore.

And I just wanna...” He paused and eyed the ceiling for a moment. “When I was, like, sixteen, I had this girlfriend and she had this ass—and I know it’s just an ass, you know, and it’s stupid that I still think about it now. It’s just two humps of muscle, really, but I loved that ass. I loved to touch it. It was like it belonged to me. It was like God consulted me about it. I mean, before either one of us were even created, God came up and said, ‘Hey, Bill, what does the perfect ass look like? Taste like? What does it feel like? What’s the skin tone?’ And me and God just really hashed it out. We made diagrams, we took measurements, you know? We considered how long her crack should be. We conceived it and we gave it to this beautiful girl, who gave it back to me. To admire. To be proud of and to walk around school with. And it was so simple and stupid and wonderful. I just wanna touch something young and beautiful again, Frank. Can you appreciate that?”

His father looked like he might weep and Frank was afraid that he might have to move over to touch him, to console this man, this cripple, his father, and so he relented and nodded.

His father asked, “You think this girl’ll let me eat her out?”

She was still an attractive woman at fifty, though her cheeks were beginning to sag, like the weight of the years was beginning to pull her flesh-first towards the grave, and the lumps of skin beneath her eyes were darker, tired, and the corner of these eyes were crinkled, the lines fanning out like a spider’s web. Her hair struggled with itself; gray vines streaming through dominant, yet dying dark tresses. She looked through a photo album at the dining room table, Frank sitting across from her, enjoying a glass of sweet vermouth.

“He was good looking, wasn’t he?”

She showed Frank a photo of herself and Frank's father on their wedding day. They were both young in the photo, maybe Frank's age of twenty-seven, though they looked a little younger, and a little less weary.

"I don't know," said Frank.

"What're you, homophobic?"

"Jesus. No. He's my father. I don't know what he looks like."

"Don't do that."

"What?"

"Use the Lord's name in vain. You know I don't like that."

Mouser, a fat, black and white cat sauntered towards the table, his big, yellow eyes sharply focused on his human mother.

"Speaking of that," said Frank, "You know, Dad thinks that—Well, he says that maybe you believe Jesus did this to him. Made him crippled."

"That's stupid. Jesus doesn't hurt people."

Mouser leapt onto the table.

"There's my baby," she said. The cat moved towards her, tilting his head down so she could run her fingernails over its right ear. "You don't believe that, do you?" she asked Frank.

"What? That Jesus made him crippled?"

"Yeah."

"I don't believe in Jesus."

"Don't believe in Jesus," she repeated while smiling down at Mouser who reveled in her touch. "Well, maybe you'll believe in him when he comes back and knocks on your

door.”

Frank scoffed. Then imagined sitting in his apartment, smoking, eyes closed, listening to Jeff Buckley on the stereo when the knock came. He moved to the door and opened it to find Jesus standing on his welcome mat.

“Jesus?” asked Frank.

“That’s right,” said Jesus.

“I can’t believe it.”

“Yeah, that’s what I’ve been hearing. But maybe now you’ll believe it, huh?” Jesus stepped closer, and that unyielding love he was famous for was not apparent in his eyes, Frank noticed, and so he began to shake like he was wet in winter. “You little inconsiderate prick,” said Jesus. “I mean, it wasn’t enough that they hung me, Frank? That they humiliated me, stripped me, nailed me to a tree? That wasn’t enough for you, was it? You couldn’t believe it, and you make me come all the way down here...wasting my time on your dumb ass.”

“Jesus, I didn’t—“

“Don’t interrupt me, dude.”

“Please, Jesus, I swear.”

“Shut up. Shut...up. All right? It’s over. I hope you like hell, you stupid mother fucker.”

Maybe the tin of gasoline had been in Jesus’ hand the entire time, but Frank first noticed it when it was bashed against the side of his head, and Frank faltered back, quickly raising his hands to protect himself. Jesus was relentless, however, striking him repeatedly until he fell to the carpet. Frank cried, pleading as Jesus covered him in gasoline. Suddenly,

he heard a voice. And it was Clovis.

“Jesus, are we gonna hit the club and get some tail or what?”

“I’ll be right there, man.”

Then Jesus lit Frank on fire.

Frank rubbed his face, stifling a laugh. He looked down at Mouser, who was sporting a tiny, pink erection, and he was licking it, and though it disturbed Frank to watch Mouser pleasure himself, his mother seemed quite at ease, stroking Mouser’s back, seemingly encouraging the self-gratification, like it was commonplace, like it was something they shared. She loved him and Frank was envious because he wanted someone who would look at him the same way she looked at that cat, and suddenly Frank wanted her to hold him, so he could smell her, so he could be warmed by her heat, so the skin of her cheek could be soft on his face.

“Can I ask you something?”

“What?” she replied.

“If I burn in hell when I die and you’re up there, lounging around on clouds or whatever one does in heaven, but you know that your only son—your own child that you love maybe more than anyone on earth—is burning for all time, in constant agony. How can that be paradise? How can that be okay? How could you love Jesus if that was going on?”

She stopped stroking Mouser.

“Frank, why are you asking me questions I can’t answer? You know, people are half-animal and half-spirit. And with all these medical advancements and weird sexualities, we’re coming very close to understanding the physical part of us. But we’re way behind on

the spiritual. I just know there's something beyond the physical. There's a greater spiritual power that's guiding us all."

"That's ridiculous."

"No, Frank, things happen for a reason. I mean, if that truck hadn't fallen on your father, I wouldn't have met Mrs. Brick, and I wouldn't have been in the clinic waiting on your father the day she sat next to me and told me about her husband dying and how she couldn't bend down to feed her little cat anymore. You see? God put her and I together so Mouser and I would find one another."

Frank stared at her. "Well, I guess that's proof enough for me." Then he laughed.

Frank was alone, in his apartment, smoking and watching European pornography. He preferred European to American porn because the girls usually didn't have breast implants and more attention was given to set design.

On Wednesday, Frank and his father arrived at the hotel a little after nine. Frank checked his father into a room, helped him into bed, where he would wait in his little shorts for the girl to arrive. His father told the service that he wanted to meet the girl in the bar first and then bring her up to the room. In actuality, he wanted Frank to meet her first and determine whether or not she was an "ugly bitch" because he was concerned that she would be unattractive and he instructed Frank to act like he didn't know who she was or what she wanted if she was grotesque. But if she wasn't an "ugly bitch," he wanted Frank to explain his condition before bringing her up. Frank argued with his father, saying he didn't want to be so involved in the adulterous act, but after a few minutes of resisting, he agreed,

deciding that it didn't much matter after he already drove his father to the hotel, wheeled him to the room, pulled him out of his wheelchair and rested his massive body on the mattress. He was already involved, already guilty.

Sophia walked into the bar, which was nearly empty, glanced around and quickly spotted Frank. She was young, wearing very little makeup and no earrings. Her smile was big, like her tits, and her dark hair spilled out from the top of her head, flowing down in waves past her small shoulders. She was someone you would definitely notice in a room, yet a little quiet in her beauty. The girl was dressed in jeans and a white sweater, which surprised Frank, but then again, maybe she wasn't interested in drawing attention to herself. She moved to him.

"Bill, right? Blue shirt. Black hair."

"Yeah, I guess. I mean, not really. It's Frank, but I imagine you're not really Sophia, so who cares, right?"

She shrugged. "Do you wanna call me something else?"

"No. I don't care."

"Okay. Should I sit or do you wanna go upstairs?"

"Will you have a drink with me first?"

Frank was sitting at a small table with two rum and Cokes in front of him. She sat down and he slid one of the drinks towards her.

"It's good," she said, sipping it.

"You look clean."

"Well, I bathed before I came."

Frank smiled and said, "No, I'm sure you did. It's just...I was expecting someone

unclean. Like it would take one of those pressure washers—you know, that they clean the sidewalks with—to really get her stuff sanitary, but you look...suburban.”

She looked at him for a long moment, one eyebrow lifted. “I’m not really sure if you’re complimenting me or being insulting ’cause I don’t wanna have to remind you which one of us is paying for attention.”

Frank laughed. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t trying to be insulting at all. Really. I’m surprised. And I’m—obviously in a very inept way—trying to tell you that I think you’re very attractive.”

“Okay. Thank you.”

“I’m not good at talking to people.”

“Well, let’s stop talking and go upstairs.”

“Not yet, okay?”

“Why not?”

Frank paused to formulate a lie.

“I just masturbated,” he said.

“You called an escort service and then you masturbated?”

“Yeah.”

“Why would you do that?”

Frank was quiet, and then said, “I don’t know.”

“You know you’re paying for the time, right? From when I sat down?”

Frank nodded and then swallowed some of his drink.

“You look like someone.”

“Someone you know?”

“No. I mean, you look like a wife. Like you’re married. Or somebody’s girlfriend. You know? You look like you bake cookies.”

“I do bake cookies.”

“Yeah, huh? Do you think someone should have sex with somebody they don’t love?”

“I’m okay with it.”

“Why is that?”

“Why is what?”

“That you’re okay with it?”

“I don’t know. Do you ever eat with somebody you don’t love?”

“It’s not the same thing.”

“I think it is. It’s just something we do. We eat, defecate, have sex. I mean, you stop and think about it, I’m no different than a waitress. We both serve people.”

“Yeah, well, I’ve never fingered my waitress.”

She smiled. “And I have.”

Frank smiled, too, and for a moment he wanted to confess to her everything that he held trapped inside his own head, those things he never shared with anyone, and he wanted to tell that it wasn’t just his face that was deformed, but it was his heart, too, and he knew what hell was, he knew it was being close to someone, anyone or anything you love, but never being able to have, touch it, fuck it, walk around with it and hold its hand, or knowing what it looks like first thing in the morning, or smells like after a shower. Hell is never knowing everything about it, knowing what kind of heat it generates when you lie on it, knowing every flaw of its body, its form, the scars, the tiny birthmark on its ass, the

filthiness of its toenails, or knowing where it hides its pain, what makes it sob and wish it was dead, or what makes it laugh or give off affection, or reach out and touch you and unabashedly love you. For a few moments, with her now, he decided he wanted to avoid Hell.

“I’m gonna get the room,” he said. “Wait here.”

“I can’t believe my luck,” Frank said.

They stood in the elevator.

“What?”

“The room number. I mean, they only had one room left ’cause there’s a convention.”

“So what? Are you superstitious about the number or something?”

“Sorta,” he said.

The doors glided open and Frank and Sophia moved down the hallway and into the hotel room. Frank walked to the bed, and then put his head close to the wall to see if he could hear anything in the next room, where his father was, smoking and waiting.

“I need to call the service and tell ‘em I’m okay,” she said. “You can get undressed if you’d like.”

Frank nodded and began untying his shoes while she dialed the phone.

“It’s Sophia. I’m in the room now. Yeah. Bye.”

She hung up the phone and turned to Frank as he removed his socks.

“They keep close tabs on you, huh?” asked Frank.

“We’re careful. I have a driver.”

She took off her shoes and sweater and slid out of her jeans. She wore a black thong, black bra, and she had a tattoo of the sun circling her naval. Frank stripped down to his underwear. He looked at her.

“Should I take ‘em off?”

“Let’s take care of the money first.”

“Oh. Sure.”

Frank picked his pants off the floor and dug out a roll of twenties. He handed it to her and she took a moment to count it and then put it in the pocket of her jeans.

“You can take off your underwear and lie down on the bed.”

Frank pulled his boxers off and his cock was hard before he hit the comforter. Sophia climbed on top of him and kissed his neck. He moved his hands over her ass, and she leaned down to lick his right nipple. She pulled her hair back, then opened her bra. Her nipples were large, spread out like a man of war, and light brown and she leaned forward so Frank could taste them, which he did. She said his name. She would say it again, often and loudly. Frank had forgotten about his father, forgotten about the cripple in the next room, sitting in silence, listening to anything that made a noise.

Sophia was dressing in the bathroom and Frank was on the bed, putting his shoes on.

“Do you think I could see you again?” he asked, loud so she could hear it.

“Yeah. Call the service.”

“Can you come to my apartment?”

“Uh-huh.”

It was then that the phone rang, surprising Frank, his body involuntarily jolting. He quickly pulled the phone off its cradle and put it to his ear.

“Hello.”

Frank heard heavy breathing before his father snarled, “I know what you did.”

The ends of her hair slid across Frank’s naked chest as she moved her hand along the inside of his thighs, and up towards his balls. Frank’s bedroom was dark except for one small lamp on the dresser. No light came in through his bedroom window because he covered it with aluminum foil, so he could be in total darkness anytime he needed to be. Her tongue slithered along the furry trail from his crotch to his belly button, while her hands glided underneath him, solidly clenching his ass.

“Will you say you love me?” he asked.

Her tongue retreated back into her hot mouth.

“What?”

“I know you don’t. Just say it, though.”

“I love you,” she said, but it sounded empty. She also looked annoyed, so he half-smiled and then closed his eyes, his head sinking into the softness of a black pillow.

She returned to the task of pleasuring him.

After a while, Frank asked, “Do you think we could talk about something?”

She looked up. “You wanna talk now? I mean, right this minute?”

“I wouldn’t mind, yeah.”

She slapped her hands on his thighs and then sat up. “Okay, then.”

Frank glanced over Sophia’s left shoulder, finding himself in the mirror’s face,

bearing a blank expression. He shook his head and managed, “Are you political?”

“What? No. Why?”

“You’re not?”

“No, I’m not,” she said. “I mean, I believe in animal rights and I think abortion’s great. I think we should legalize prostitution and gay marriage, but I wouldn’t call myself political.”

“Huh. So you’re okay with killing babies, but you draw the line at hurting animals?”

“Animals are innocent.”

“Babies are innocent.”

“Whatever,” Sophia said, getting off the bed and moving to the closet door, her pants dangling from the brass doorknob. She pulled a pack of gum from the pocket. “Do you really find this interesting?”

“What about God?” he asked.

“What about him?”

“Do you believe in God?”

“I don’t know.”

Frank fondled his balls, his scrotum loose, the skin spreading out across his lap, like eggs whites expanding in a hot skillet. He asked, “What if Jesus came back and found you sucking on some guy’s nuts?”

“I don’t—Frank, why are you asking me this?”

“I just thought we should know these things about each other.”

“You know, I’d tell you that you really need to get laid, but here I am sleeping with

you. Or trying to, anyway.”

“I’m wound tight?”

“You could depress a clown.”

His teeth were cold and the stench of sex was still stuck in his nostrils. He was staring at Sophia, who was quietly putting a spoonful of ice cream into her mouth.

“You like it?” Frank asked.

“Yeah, it’s fine,” she replied, looking at him from across the table.

Outside, it was raining. Several drops clung to the overhang above the window, lingering, then ballooning briefly before plummeting to the ground.

“What are you doing tomorrow?” Frank asked, looking at the rain.

“I’m working tomorrow.”

“After that, I mean.”

“I’ll probably be working after that.”

Frank sucked in a big rush of air through his wide nostrils. “I was thinking maybe we could go out and eat.”

“Why do we have to go and eat? I’ll just come here.”

“No. I mean, we would just go out and eat. It wouldn’t be sexual. It would just be two people going out.”

Frank eyed her, hopeful.

She dropped her spoon. “Are you asking me out on a date?”

“Yeah, I mean, if you wanted to go and eat.”

“Well, I really don’t wanna go on a date with you, Frank.”

Frank looked down. “Why?”

“Cause that’s not what this is...And even if it wasn’t, you know, what it is, you’re not my type.”

“What’s your type?”

She held one hand up, arcing back, like she expected a raindrop to burrow through the roof and splash into her palm. “I don’t know what my type is exactly, but I know what it’s not. It’s not someone who smells bad.”

Frank paused. “I smell bad?”

“I’m sorry. Are you surprised? Nobody’s ever told you?”

“What do I smell like?”

“Trash. I don’t know. Some people have that problem.”

“So if I didn’t smell like ass—”

“Trash. And it’s not just that—it’s a lot of things. I mean, your hair for one and your penis and the fact that you look like an old monkey doesn’t help. Look, I’m sorry —”

“My dick?”

“It bends. I don’t why that makes gag so much, but—Look, I’m not trying to get personal.”

“Oh, that’s not personal?”

She stood up. “I’m sorry. I don’t know what you’re thinking, but I’m not interested.”

Frank rested his forehead on his left hand, which was spread out, his thumb and middle finger on his temples.

“I just—I guess I thought we connected,” Frank managed.

“Connected? You stuck your penis in me. That’s how we connected.”

Throughout dinner, his father eyed Frank, saying nothing. After eating, Frank took his father into the bedroom and helped him into his bed while his mother cleared the table. Then he sat down at the foot of the bed and asked, “Are you gonna say something?”

“Yeah, I hope you get AIDS from banging that whore,” his father said.

Frank shook his head. “You’re unbelievably pathetic, you know that? You got someone who loves you. Doesn’t that mean anything to you?”

“I know I needed you and you turned your back on me. I know that.”

“Like you turned your back on your wife?”

“Hey, fuck you. You don’t what’s between me and her.”

“No, I don’t. I don’t know. I just know that she’s better than us. I know that sometimes I wish that truck would have smashed you to death. I know I don’t have what you have and you don’t even appreciate it...or understand it or whatever. I mean, she spit me out of her and she loves me and I don’t understand her most of the time, but I’ve never had someone love me—someone that wasn’t obligated to. Someone who wanted to because they thought I was worth it. And I just don’t understand it. I don’t know how someone could have that and not be grateful.”

Frank waited for a response, but then whispered, “I really think I hate you.”

His father nodded, like it was understandable or maybe even deserved. He put a cigarette in his mouth and then put a flame to it. He did not look at Frank.

“You know when you were born,” he said, “you couldn’t suckle your mom’s tit.

We had to feed you with a syringe because of your deformity. Your lips were split open because of the cleft palate and it was really rather disgusting...the way you looked. And I was embarrassed to show you to our friends or to the family. It was just so uncomfortable—getting their pity because you were fucked-up looking. But your mother—she showed you off like you were some goddamn bowling trophy. I mean, it was embarrassing how proud of you she was. But she's good. She's like God. And you and me, we're stuck with this thing between our legs...This goddamn miniature version of the devil himself. This thing that doesn't love. This thing that's selfish and heartless and maybe it's true. Shit, I don't know. Everything you said. Maybe I don't love her the same way she loves me. But I think the truth is that I can't. Frank. I can't. I don't think I'm capable of it."

Frank walked out of the bedroom and into the kitchen. His mother was there, at the sink, wiping refuge from her china. She turned to look at Frank, who was filling a wine glass with Chianti.

"You all right?" she asked.

"Yeah."

"Your eyes look dark."

Frank muttered, "Huh."

She turned off the facet. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Just do the dishes, okay?"

"No, there's something wrong, Frank. What is it? I wanna help you."

"You wanna help me?" he asked.

"Yeah," she said.

“You can help me by shutting the fuck up.”

Sorehead

Frank eyed Half-Woman in the bathtub. She was near dead, her skin almost slipping off her bones, and her mouth was gaping open, her lips drooping inward like two wilting flower petals. Frank dubbed her “Half-Woman” because she didn’t have any legs. She had diabetes, and as a result of blood not circulating through her lower limbs, the doctors had chopped off both appendages. Half-Woman didn’t really seem to notice, but Frank told her that he was a cannibal and he had eaten her legs and that he would eat her heart if she didn’t keep quiet about it.

“I’m cold,” said Half-Woman.

Frank watched her body tremble, but it was a good time for him to smoke.

“You ain’t clean,” he said.

He lit a cigarette and leaned over the tub, took the sponge from the soapy water and rubbed it across her dying breasts and then down to her pale underbelly. He tried to imagine what her body had looked like at sixteen. He tried to imagine how smooth her skin once was and how her ass was firm, and her legs, when she had legs, were shapely and made boys lustful. And suddenly Frank saw himself in the bathtub with this girl, his face close to her body, two jets of warm air spraying out of his nostrils as he moved down the length of her stomach, lightly brushing his dry lips along her saturated skin.

The door to the bathroom opened slowly then, accompanied with a soft tapping, and Heather, who Frank often referred to as “the Happy Hillbilly,” was smiling big, her

little teeth showing, crooning, “Knock, knock.”

Frank looked at her. “Bit redundant, isn’t it?”

“Huh,” said Heather. Her head looked like a balloon on the verge of bursting. Frank often thought about the day Heather wept uncontrollably at the news of a NASCAR driver’s death. He remembered hearing that they couldn’t intubate the driver because his brains were in his mouth. Heather had also cried unabashedly when she was named Bright Garden’s Employee of the Month for November. At that morning’s meeting, she had thanked her grandmother, who had spent many years in a nursing home, “one,” she had said, “not nearly as nice as this one.” Then she thanked Jesus Christ, saying, “He saved me. I was almost a borderline personality.”

Heather’s smile disappeared. “Are you smoking, Frank?”

Frank sat up enough to lift the toilet seat and slip the cigarette into the bowl. It hissed when it hit the water. “No,” he said.

Heather shook her head disapprovingly. “I know you’re busy, but your mother’s on the phone. She wants to know if you’re still gonna stop by their house tonight.”

He nodded. “She’s a chronic planner. Will you tell I’ll be there at seven?”

“Yeah, okay.” Heather moved out of the bathroom, leaving the door gaping open, and detectable coolness crept slowly into the room.

“I’m cold,” Half-Woman repeated.

“You’re cold ’cause you’re a goddamn skeleton.”

Frank didn’t want to look at her just then because there was something very frightening in her weakness and the degradation she was suffering, but wasn’t quite aware of, and Frank wanted to meet Jesus so he could punch him in the head.

“Did you know that Jehovah knows every single star by name?” Frank’s mother looked hopeful in that moment, her eyes glistening like grease smears, her wet mouth hanging open a little, white strings of spit stretching between the two halves of her open lips. She often made a sucking sound, a moist, slosh-y sound with her mouth as she spoke. To Frank, she seemed to get older every moment. In a few years, she would be sixty. He would be thirty. “Isn’t that amazing?” his mother asked. “Every single star.” She said this slowly, like it was gravely important. Her head moved closer to his, leaning in, like the presence of Jehovah was there in front of them, if they only looked close enough.

“That seems like an incredible waste of time to me,” said Frank. He leaned back in his chair and crossed his legs tight, like a woman in a skirt. “That’s like me naming every single one of my pubic hairs.”

She spit a word from her saliva-coated tongue and the word hit the air, not high and dry but heavy and wet, making it muddled, utterly indistinguishable.

“Though I shave my balls so that should save some time,” he said.

“Don’t be graphic.” she said, looking away and waving her hand in a dismissive fashion. It was the same dismissive wave she used in Albuquerque once, at the end of the Big Bang exhibit at the natural history museum. She said the Big Bang was “phony baloney.” His father stood next to Frank, and leaned over to whisper, “You were conceived in a big bang, too.” He laughed, wheezing from years of smoking, his breath a fusion of various stinks: coffee, cigarettes and teeth rot. His father was walking then, wearing his usual tan corduroy shorts, which revealed nearly all of his hairy legs. These legs looked sturdy, thick and not very long. Thick and not very long could also describe his

father's penis and Frank was absolutely ashamed to know what it looked like, but his father was never bashful in his younger years, strolling in and out of the house's only bathroom most mornings bare-assed, a cup of coffee in hand. This was years before a truck fell on him and paralyzed his lower half. He shit his pants now. Occasionally, when his stool was impacted, a nurse's aid would come and literally extract the feces from his father's anus. She was like a coal miner, Frank supposed, only on a much smaller scale.

To Frank, the asshole was a metaphor for life itself: a tunnel of darkness, something you pass through, mysterious, confining, stinking, and so often packed full of shit.

His parents' home was small and the floors were all wooden and cold. He could hear the TV in the other room, the faint sound of whistle blows and color commentary. He wanted to go home and jerk off.

His mother lifted a glass of water to her lips, her hands shaking. "This system is so corrupt," she said. "Bush and his war...the violence and these crazy, religious whackos." Frank suppressed a smile, and she continued, "I just think it's something both you and your father should be thinking about. Thinking about what's beyond this." Her eyes were fixed on him. Her cheeks were fat and her hair was dark with a smattering of gray streaks, shimmering bright like lightning in a black sky. "Don't you want to live forever?"

She asked this earnestly. He could see that she loved him deeply, and it made him feel a little guilty that he didn't love her with the same ferocity. He looked away when he said, "No."

Frank watched Stevie from a chair in the TV room. At this hour, the TV was tuned to talk shows. Frank wondered if these old creatures could even understand what was being

said. They all stared, eyes half-closed, mouths half-open.

Stevie strolled down the hallway in his white pants, which seemed translucent because his black flesh and green bikini underwear were plainly visible. He wore the required work shirt, and the fabric was stretched out, hugging his enormous chest and gut. The words, “Bright Gardens” were sewn above his heart, little flowers and leaves coiling around the ends of the words. This nursing home was a garden, Frank supposed. A sort of return to the Garden of Eden, but here Adam and Eve were never ashamed of their bodies because their bodies were more like loose-fitting pajamas than actual things of beauty, of form, of sex, and the apple was difficult to bite without any teeth. Perhaps they even wanted to know God again after a lifetime of ignoring him.

Stevie approached Frank, sack lunch in hand.

“Ready to eat?” asked Stevie.

Frank nodded and wondered what it was like to tote around so much fat. How could Stevie’s heart pump enough blood to flow all over that blob of a body and keep him moving? How could his lungs supply enough oxygen? And he wondered how Stevie’s wife could make love to him? Hopping around on top of all of that flesh, the flesh shaking, moving in waves, slimy with sweat.

“Come on,” said Frank.

“It’s miserable out here,” said Frank, just outside the boundaries of the air-conditioned Garden, out back, at a white circular table with an umbrella erected in the center, saving them from the relentless radiance of the sun.

“You know, we could eat inside if you didn’t have to smoke,” said Stevie.

“I could fill up an ice tray with the sweat pouring off my balls.”

Stevie, who was eating, grimaced. Frank wiped some sweat off the back of his neck, the tiny sweat spheres launching into the air and then colliding with Stevie’s warm skin, exploding on his ear and cheek. Frank moved his hand over the top of the patio table, which was strewn with cigarette butts and empty coffee cups. Frank listened to Stevie’s labored breathing, glancing over at his mouth, which was packed full of steak, cheese, mayonnaise, saliva, tongue, teeth, tonsils.

“Doesn’t it bother you a little?”

“What’s that?” managed Stevie, masticating.

“Wiping somebody else’s ass and knowing someday somebody might have to wipe that colossal black ass of yours? Does that bother you?”

Stevie ceased chewing. “Well, I don’t think of it like that, Frank.”

“No?”

“No, ’cause that’s defeatist. That type of thinking. You let that negative energy bear down on you and you’re finished. That’s why my wife—she’s been reading this book on positive energy—this thing Asians do—and she’s been arranging the furniture in a way that allows for the most positive energy to flow around a room.”

“Is she retarded?”

“Shut up, Frank. I’m just saying that these people are sick and they’re dying and they’re looking for you and me to give ‘em a little dignity of their way out.”

Frank scoffed, smoke flowing from his nostrils. “Who are you trying to fool with that bullshit?”

“I’m not fooling anybody.”

“I know you’re not. There’s no goddamn dignity in it. Believe me. It’s like, getting to the end of something—you know, your life and all of this time you’ve wasted thinking you’re working towards something—some meaning, right? But you get to the end of it and it turns out to be nothing. It’s utter humiliation and being alone. Being some goddamn old man.”

Stevie wiped his mouth with a soiled napkin.

“You’re a real downer, Frank,” he said.

“Yeah, huh?” Frank smirked and then thought of something. “I saw an alligator this morning. I mean, it was right near my house, on the side of the road, but it didn’t have a head. And at first, I was coming up to it and I only saw the body and nearly pissed myself.”

“You were coming to work?”

“This morning, yeah.”

“Maybe it was a cult.”

“What?”

“That cut the alligator’s head off.”

Frank smiled, thinking Stevie was as stupid as he was fat. Then Frank thought about the headless gator and how he would like to gut it and slide inside of that sucker, so he could be an alligator with a human head. Then he could carve out a hole where his crotch was, so he could piss and hump because he was sure that it was every girl’s dream to be molested by an alligator named Frank. And then Frank thought maybe he didn’t want to be inside that alligator, but he just wanted to be that alligator: on the side of the road, the glare of the sun smeared all over his back, without a head.

He looked over at Stevie, who was rubbing his tummy. It must have ached.

“The water pressure,” said Peeps.

Frank stared at Peep’s face and then down at the wastebasket next to the old man’s bed. It had urine in it.

“What about it?”

“What?” asked Peeps, turning an ear towards Frank.

Peeps had large ears. The type of ears a child might purchase in a magic shop.

“What about it?”

“It’s too hard. The water. It’s liable to go right through me.”

Frank nodded and Peeps moved in a little closer until Frank could smell his decaying mouth, a large chasm that seemed to be sucking in Peep’s face like a black hole.

“I’ll take care of it!”

“Yeah,” said the old man, nodding.

Peeps stared at Frank as a silence grew between them. Frank looked over to find a picture of the old man’s dead wife hanging on the wall. She was young in the picture and her lips looked fat and wet. And her eyes were large, blue and pulsing with hope.

Frank found himself staring at those eyes. They were familiar, like the eyes of Elizabeth, his first love. He could see Elizabeth sitting naked on her bed, her round belly forming several rolls of thick skin, like a fleshy accordion, and her breasts, two massive sacks of fat, hung low, and her pinkish nipples were large enough to serve bagels on. Frank remembered lying next to her, a cigarette erected between his teeth, his dead penis flopped over on his thigh, and he was thinking, I could do better, I could do better. Elizabeth was speaking quickly, her words falling over each other, fumbling off her tongue. He imagined

her mouth as an anus; tight and puckered at first and then opening up to let all of that shit fall out of it. He remembered the last time he saw her. She was sitting in her car and listening to The Smiths, crying after Frank told her, "I could do better."

"That's my wife," said Peeps. "Died of cancer."

Frank closed his eyes tight, his fingers moving over his face. Peeps put his finger and thumb close to his lips, pretending to smoke.

"Cigarettes," he said.

"I bet you miss screwing her," said Frank.

Peeps turned his ear towards him. "What?"

Frank said nothing and then smiled. After a moment, Peeps responded in kind.

Sitting at the bar, Frank could see the city, the lights, the people moving, girls in snug skirts, college boys grinning, vagrants, the blur of headlights streaming past, a short man, a fat couple, a woman staring into the sky, likely finding faint stars. Frank turned from the window and looked at Clovis, who was situated next to him. Clovis wore his hair pulled back tight into a ponytail, the hair short and curly at the end, sprouting out from the green hair band like a black broccoli floret. His mocha skin was glowing under the pale lights of the bar, and as was his custom, he was drinking Heineken. His eyes were set far back in his face as if God had used too much force when he was stuffing his sockets with eyeballs. Clovis was wearing lime-green pants with a white shirt, which was his uniform for work, the words Lucky's Place of Beef stretching across the length of his right breast pocket. Frank was dressed for work as well, but work was over. The Big Blue Bar was quiet for a Thursday night, and it was happy hour, but Frank was depressed as shit.

“So this stoned-out chick’s in the toilet,” said Clovis, “pissing all over herself. In the restroom mind you, but in her goddamn pants. And she’s got this real creepy dude with her, and he’s standing outside the bathroom door, looking real nervous. Finally, he comes up and tells me to call 911. Five minutes later, or whatever, the EMT is talking to him, asking, ‘Does she have any allergies?’ He says, ‘No,’ and real loud, ‘but she’s got AIDS and Hep C.’”

Frank nodded and said dryly, “Wow.”

“We got some wild people ‘round here, man.”

Frank nodded, watched the girl behind the bar move, watched a blue light fall over her face and then slide off as she walked towards them. Frank knew her name was Hope. She had eyes as big and blue and empty as a desert sky.

She approached. “Clovis, you ready for another Heineken?”

“I’m always ready for another Heineken,” assured Clovis.

She looked at Frank. “How ‘bout you?”

Frank smiled like he was in love. “Vodka and tonic.”

“Okay,” she said, smiling before turning away, graceful as a dancer.

“She’s a charmer,” said Clovis, shaking his head. “And I got a snake in my pants.”

Frank moved his hand down his face. “You got a good memory?”

“Only when it comes to women,” he said, and laughed.

“I don’t remember hardly anything of being young,” said Frank.

“No?”

“Do you?”

He pondered this for a moment, like the question was intensely difficult.

“Parts,” he said.

“We lived up north and I remember the winters better than the summers. I remember seeing Beth Buell naked when I was young. This kid and I were coming back from sledding and she was in her bedroom window and we were staring at her and she was just naked...and I was so struck by it.”

“How old was she?”

“She was a little girl. Nine or ten, maybe. I mean, her business wasn’t even developed yet, you know? ’Cause I remember looking at her privates and that barren little area and that little slot thinking she looked like a piggy bank. But it was her face, really. It was her expression—that’s what I remember most. I mean, she didn’t look happy or sad or anything. She just looked like she wanted somebody to look at her. So we did.”

Hope returned. She had drinks.

Frank moved along the rows, the images on the covers smearing together in a blur of nakedness and juices. There were other men, lingering and leering at covers. There were signs hanging from the ceiling reading: Black, Asian, Hispanic, all female, all male, gang bang, anal and so on. There was a little man at the counter with a movie in his hand speaking to the owner of the store. The owner was loud.

“Sir, I don’t make the films. You know, if what’s on the cover is not actually in the film, I can’t be held responsible for that. That’s a problem you need to take up with the makers of that film.”

The little man spoke inaudibly.

“Sir, if that girl doesn’t perform the act on the cover, you know, or whatever was

supposed to take place didn't take place, then I'm sorry. That's deceptive marketing, I agree with you, and you should write a letter to the production company. They made it. I didn't. I mean, we get several movies a week, sir, and I do not sit here and view them all and make sure that what's on the cover is an...accurate depiction of what happens in the movies. I mean, Jesus Christ, I rent porn cheaper than anybody else in town. What else do you want from me?"

The little man did not want to be defeated. His words were mutters and whispers.

"Sir, I don't care what was supposed to be shaved. Do you hear what I'm saying to you? We don't give refunds unless the disc was defective. Okay? I'm not giving you your money back."

Frank might have laughed if the situation wasn't so embarrassingly horrible.

After dinner, Bright Gardens was quiet. The dinner hall was large and stuffed full of round tables. There were flowers forever in bloom tattooed on the walls with vines and leaves crawling over a swirling beige paint. Situated at one of the tables, Frank had a smirk stuck on this face, looking at Missy, who was not smirking, looking at Stevie wearing a Santa hat.

"You still living in that motel?" asked Stevie.

"Uh-huh. It's extended stay. I pay by the week," said Missy.

"You like it?"

"It's all right. Of course, most of the people working there are Mexicans and they can't speak English."

"Is that right?"

“Oh, yeah. They’re dumb. I said to the girl working for the front desk, I said, ‘Is it your hiring policy or just a coincidence that everybody that works here is totally retarded?’ You know, they got ‘em cooking in the restaurant there at the hotel and you order a steak and the waitress brings you back a taco.”

Frank laughed and Missy looked at him, giving him a small smile. Frank glanced at her breasts and then pulled a cigarette from his pocket, fingered it, wished he could smoke inside. Stevie pulled out a baggie of olives from his sack lunch and began popping them into his mouth, his teeth mashing the olives into small, gnarled fragments that were fumbling around on his slimy tongue. Missy finished off her soda, stifling a belch.

“Did I tell you about my brother-in-law?” asked Stevie.

Missy shook her head.

“He was in the paper.”

“For what?” she asked.

“He bit his baby. My sister’s baby.”

“Jesus.”

“And not playfully, you know, but like a shark. I mean, that’s what it looked like.”

“Why? Why would he--”

“Bite her?”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t know. She left him. And I guess he’s not coping very well to being alone. But the doctor says she’ll scarred on her stomach, you know? And her being a girl, you just wonder if she’ll be ashamed of herself. Of being scarred like that.”

Missy muttered, “Yeah.”

“And it’s just got me madder than a wet hen. I mean, if he was willing to bite her—to do something that twisted, what else has he done? It makes me crazy thinking what I’d like to do to him.”

“No shit,” Missy managed.

“In a way, I’m glad my mother’s dead,” said Stevie. “I mean, she tried real hard to be decent, and this would really upset her. Make here incredibly sad. And as I get older, I wanna try and be like that. Be decent. Not embarrass myself or my family.”

Missy nodded, her hands on the mahogany table.

“You gotta be really demented to bite a baby,” said Missy.

“Well, that or really hungry,” said Frank.

Frank slid a moist towel into her ass crack, his eyeballs wet, his humming from the stench, which not surprisingly stunk like shit. There was a diaper slumped over in the trashcan next to the bed and there was another decaying woman sitting in the corner, staring at Frank. She wore a pink nightgown and wrinkled skin. She was a little girl grown old, thought Frank, who missed the taste of a boy’s tongue, missed his eager eyes, missed giggling with other little girls and Frank wanted to pull out her chair, shake her, make her feel his restlessness. He wanted to be in love again. He could remember when he loved Paige, who was a pretty girl and conservative outwardly, but a tigress in private life, naked on the kitchen counter with toe rings on her baby toes, Frank sucking on them. This is what it meant to be alive. And Frank figured that people knew what the future would bring, that they would become mangled by life and lose control of their assholes, but they still didn’t do anything with the time that’s good.

“What are you looking at?” Frank asked. She responded by smiling a caved-in smile. Her brain was mush, but there was something not quite dead about her face and he wanted to know what she was thinking, he wanted to communicate with her, but she was prone to stammering and groaning. She had disintegrated to the point of being an animal. A dog. A mutt. She had to be fed, taken out for walks, called a “good girl.”

Frank moved over to her, leaving the soiled towel on the pallid ass of the big lump of flesh lying in the bed. Frank looked at her eyes, which were green, lost, focusing on him. She seemed innocent. He crouched down and placed his head in her lap, his eyes wide open, taking in a world of blurry pink, and then he felt the decaying woman’s hands crawling in his hair and it was comforting. He stood and undressed.

He took the woman’s wrinkled face in his callous hands and he leaned over and kissed her mouth. She closed her eyes, like maybe she enjoyed it, and Frank slipped his right hand under her pink garment, touching her soft, veiny thigh. His tongue slid into her mouth, rubbing her gums, moving around like a worm after it’s been severed in two. He could feel the heat inside of this being, a good indication of life, and she was moaning softly like a microwave.

He closed his eyes and suddenly, he was not in this home, this waiting room for death. And he was not with this old woman, either, but he was with a girl, who was blonde, not gray, with teeth that were natural, coming out of the gums, not gone or noticeably fake, and she had a stomach that was smooth and tan, not bleached white with little crevices under her belly button, and she had breasts, which were round and topped with nipples that were brown, not pink and not hanging low, trying to breastfeed the linoleum. She was innocent, too, never touched by some creep who didn’t love her, and she worshipped

Frank.

Frank was younger, too, and he could feel something in his stomach. It was in his heart and in his eyes and in his head. And it was hope. And of course, she was a little afraid at first, but Frank was secure in the way he felt about her, and they had everything, and it was right there, in that place in time, that moment. She moved her fingers around the small of Frank's back and he laughed.

Then the lump of flesh in the bed moaned and Frank turned. He could see himself in the mirror. He could see his white body, fleshy, coated with black fur, and his limp penis looking like a dead snake ensnared in a spider's web. He was not even faintly aroused. He could see his face and it was looking older than it should. He was not young. Frank tried to remember what he looked like as child, when people said he was cute, when his blue eyes got more notice, and when he didn't give a shit. He could see the old woman, too, crouched over, her hands on him, partially smiling, maybe responding to the affection. And even if she didn't know who Frank was or where she was or what the fuck the purpose of her life had been, she was in love now, and she wanted what Frank wanted.

She wanted to be touched.

God's Presents

The people who so adamantly professed that they were going to heaven once dead, Missy thought, were the same kind of people she had no desire to spend eternity with. The naked boy in front of her, in his current state of being blonde, lean, and blessed with oversized genitals, would have been much preferred. She was only in her flesh now, on the motel bed, which was slick with her sweat and she had this boy's stink deep in her nostrils.

He was smiling at her or maybe at her tits and she had a faint feeling that she loved him until he started fucking her as hard as he could muster, like maybe he had the strength to rip through her, tear along her white belly and then split open her chest, exposing her heart, which he could then stab with his stiff dick.

And she wanted to say something sweet to this boy, but he was deaf to phrases other than "fuck me" and his tongue, which was fat and wet, was slithering around in the moist, dark pit that was Missy's mouth. His face was shining on account of the thin layer of sweat smeared on it and his breath was hot on her neck, and then on her face, and she wondered if this boy was capable of treating her like a human being and not a wet, velvety hole.

The boy had a banana-sized grin stuck on his pretty face and his pretty blue eyes stared at her eyes, and maybe he was waiting for her to open her mouth up and moan, but her lips were not open, and now, as in life in general, she was quietly waiting for something unique to happen.

The boy was in the bathtub, his balls tight to his body, and his soap-coated fingers were sliding along the shaft of his penis and then down to his testicles, which he was caressing with his soft palm. She noticed him looking at her and she was at the sink with a cigarette jammed in her face, staring at her somewhat large head in the mirror.

“I’m thinking it’s clean, Caleb,” she said.

Caleb smiled at her, removing his fingers from his privates, and she thought if she had a kid, she might want him to look like that boy.

“You wanna wash me?” he asked.

Missy smiled at the suggestion, mashing her cigarette out in the sink. She moved over to the tub, knelt down next to him and kissed his fat, pinkish lips.

“Gimme the soap,” she said.

After all, boys were very dirty. She rubbed the soap between her hands, forming a thick lather and then put the soap on the side of the bathtub. She moved her hands up his inner thigh and then tickled the skin beneath his balls and Caleb smiled.

“What are you doing tomorrow?” she asked.

“Skate park. Then nothing, probably.”

“You wanna come eat dinner at my Dad’s?”

“Your Dad’s?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

“I don’t wanna be alone with him.”

He looked at her. “Why is that?”

“I don’t really like him.”

“Then why are you eating dinner with him?”

She thought about it. “I don’t know. Just ’cause, I guess. Will you come or what?”

The boy nodded. “I guess I can.”

She moved her hands over his belly in a circular motion, the abdominal muscles hard and visible, like he had swallowed a whole tortoise shell.

“How old are you?” she asked.

“Just turned twenty-one.”

“You look younger.”

“Well, how old are you?”

“Twenty-six.”

He smiled big. “Kiddy raper.”

Missy was drunk earlier than normal and when she was drunk, she was suddenly very uncomfortable in her panties and she was forced to remove them. The shirt she wore was long, but the two smiles at the tops of her back legs, the ones that merged together at the crack of her ass, were quite visible. Caleb was on the bed, clean from his bath, in his little white undies, which were tight to his ass and crotch and Missy found his eyes in the mirror above the dresser and they were big, bulging eyes and she felt secure in how they were taking her in. She slid a cigarette in between her lips and then burned the head of it with a lighter.

“Why don’t you take off your shirt?” he asked.

The ends of her mouth were crawling upwards as she sputtered, “Why don’t you

shut up?”

“I can’t see you?”

“You just saw me, dummy. I look like a goddamn marshmallow with nipples.”

The boy smiled.

“That’s okay. All I care about is your pussy, anyway.”

The boy laughed as if the sentiment wasn’t true. She was deciding how to feel about him just then, in that moment, and it was a sudden gush of a feeling, a certain wanting or desire and it was very simple: she wanted to be in love with somebody. She needed to realize that even though life was long on misery, she could find happiness now, with this boy, and know that tomorrow didn’t matter tonight when she was pretty well drunk.

“I think you’re really beautiful,” she said.

For a moment, Missy felt like she might cry. The boy slid off his underwear and she looked down at his scrotum, which was loose, droopy like an old man’s neck.

“You can go again?” she asked.

He laughed while his dick stiffened. Missy crawled onto the bed and fingered his chest as the largest hole on Caleb’s face opened wide to accept her warm spit. She was very close to him now and she told him that she was in love with him. Maybe he believed it.

The sun was burning out as it sank deeper into the ocean. Missy was standing on the balcony where it was cool and she put her cigarette out on the balcony railing and then flicked it off, down towards the pool. Sometimes she imagined herself in the ocean, swimming out to where the water became darker and she could feel her arms and legs give out from exhaustion and she would be limp, but afloat and alone and not afraid to die.

In fact, there was something reassuring about death. The fact that one day, chemical solutions would be injected into her vascular system, her blood would be drained, her eyes would be sewn shut, her heart would not beat, her brain would dry up, and her skin would be like rubber. She would be stiff and smelly. There would be no more misery or humiliation or embarrassment or resentment or pain and Missy would piss and shit one more time and then she would be empty, dead, like her mother.

“He claims he got Hepatitis C from snorting coke. I mean, sharing the straws,” said Missy. “You know, that you stick in your nostrils. I mean, you bleed, I guess...I don’t know. I’ve never snorted it, but I just—I don’t know who he thinks he’s fooling. He was banging strippers in Newport while my mother was home with me. This place called the Brass Ass. He was managing that place for years after he got thrown off the police force, and he’d have sex with those girls and they were young girls. Younger than I am now, even.”

Caleb was in the passenger seat, the window down, wind rushing in, his hair gyrating on the top of his skull, like the frantic arms of Pentecostals being overtaken by the Holy Spirit, and he looked at her.

“He’s dying?”

“Slowly, I guess. He’s got other problems, too.”

“What?”

“He’s bipolar. He was given...uh, convulsive—electroconvulsive therapy—goddamn shock treatment...in Cincinnati two years ago. I didn’t think they did that anymore, but then again, Ohio is, like, five or ten years behind the times. And he was

with my Granny after my mom died, but Granny's too old to be putting up with his horseshit, so she couldn't take it after a while and sent him back here."

"Huh," Caleb managed. "Is he fucked up from the shocking?"

"For a while he sorta walked around like he was ninety...and he shook and sweated profusely, but it's almost like it wore off. I guess he shakes a little and sweats a little, but it's not that noticeable."

"That's weird."

"Don't encourage him tonight, okay? I mean, don't ask him questions or look like you're interested in what he's saying."

"You want me to sit there and not talk to him?"

"No, just be polite, but don't be overly friendly."

"That makes a lot of sense."

Missy pulled into the driveway. The house was small, painted blue, and the grass had not been cut in a very long time.

"I don't remember when I was here last," she said.

"I wish you would have told me you were bringing someone," said Buck.

"Well, if it's a problem, we can do this some other time," Missy said.

"No. I just woulda straightened up more. Place is a mess."

"Oh, I don't give a shit," the boy assured Buck.

Buck nodded. "You want something to drink? I got beer or some Dewars, if you want?"

"Yeah, I'll take whatever you got beer-wise."

“Missy?”

“Whatever soda you got.”

“You can sit at the table,” said Buck, moving towards the kitchen.

The dining room table was glass, an ashtray filled with a mound of ash and the ends of a cigarette was in the center, and the lights hanging from the ceiling above was reflected on the glass surface in little, glowing spheres, spread out across the table like land mines. The walls in the dining room were painted a golden yellow, the paint spread around with a sponge, and old photographs were stuck on every wall, little windows to view dead people. One photograph was of Missy, who was still alive, but she was just a child in the photo, standing in front of their house in Cincinnati, a lunch box in hand, leaving for her first day of kindergarten. She remembered how her mother sobbed that day, hugging her, like she intended to crush her to death.

When Buck returned from the kitchen, Missy studied his face. His mouth seemed large in proportion to his other facial features and his teeth were spread out, gaps in between most of the teeth, almost like a jack-o-lantern and his teeth were light yellow from smoking and downing endless cups of coffee. His eyes were small, his dirty blond hair was receding, and his neck seemed fatter, swelled out like a pocket of air was stuck underneath his skin.

“How’s work?” Buck asked, setting her drink down.

He handed Caleb a can of Blatz.

“It’s one of the things I hate most about my life,” she said. “You went back to the office, huh?”

“Yeah. Fucking Mandel’s a supervisor now,” said Buck, sitting down.

“I don’t know who that is,” she said.

“This colored guy, Mandel. And the first day he’s supervising, he hands out these forms, these personality profiles, right? Buncha fucking nonsense I don’t have time for, and I’m, like, ‘What is this?’ And he says ‘I want you to fill this out, so I’ll know how to talk to you.’ And I said, ‘Look, I’m not filling this shit out. You wanna know something about me then you just come up and ask me and I shredded that goddamn thing right in his fucking face.’”

“Yeah, that’s smart.”

“Ah, he’s an agitator. Always been...Like when Tiger Woods won the Masters, he comes up with the sports page and this dumb smirk on his face and he says, ‘Now we own all the sports.’ You know, it’s that attitude. He’s that type that wants to make everybody else miserable. Plus, the blacks don’t own hockey.”

“Yeah, like that’s something to hang onto,” said the boy.

“What are we gonna do for dinner?” asked Missy.

“I ordered pizza,” said Buck, turning to Caleb. “You like pizza, little man?”

“Sure.”

His eyes moved back to Missy. “You still at the Sea Shell?”

“Yeah.”

“What a waste of money when you could stay here for nothing.”

“It’s not that much.”

“I know it’s not that much. It’s a shit hole. It’s like the Rancho—that hotel I stayed at to withdraw in all those years ago.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard this story before.”

“There wasn’t any Betty Ford clinic for me, man. I drove to a cheap, fucking hotel—rat infested, which it was, and in one little room, I withdrew for about three months. That was my treatment for drugs. I mean, when the shrinks ask me what facility I went to, I tell ‘em the El Rancho Center for Drug Abuse.”

“You’re so clever,” said Missy.

“And they always say, ‘In a situation like yours, you’re lucky to have friends and family to support you.’ And I say, ‘Yeah, it is lucky,’ but of course that’s not true...I did it all by myself, you know?”

“That’s cool,” said Caleb.

“Yeah, it’s real cool,” said Missy, slapping her palm smartly against the table.

“Fuck the soda. Do you have any rum?”

Buck smiled. “I think I might.”

“Did I tell you about Bobby?” asked Buck.

The ashtray was off the table and a large pizza, thin crust covered in tomato paste, cheese, pepperoni and small pools of grease, was in the center of the table in a white cardboard box.

Missy shook her head. “Who’s Bobby?”

“Big Bobby D. You met him once.”

“I don’t remember him. Why?”

“He got fired.”

Missy ate her pizza with a fork, watching Caleb chew with his mouth open. Grimacing, she let a heavy breath fall from her mouth.

“Somebody caught him jerking off,” said Buck. “I mean, he was looking at porn on his computer and printing it out and then taking it to the john and I guess somebody walked in on him. The guy’s sexually frustrated, you know? His wife split a year ago. I don’t know. It’s odd. One day he’s there and then he’s not there. The guy’s going through a bad patch—you don’t can his ass.”

“Well, they don’t pay him to masturbate, do they?”

“Yeah, I know. I’m just saying that I don’t think it’s right. I just think there shoulda been some consideration for employee morale. I mean, when somebody leaves...it’s not easy. It hurts everybody. And he’s a man, and Christ, he lacks a little self-control, but shit, who doesn’t? I mean, you get these things that are so easy to access now, some chick rubbing ice on her nipples, you know, over and over and they’re so hard you could break your goddamn teeth on ‘em. And then you got this steel rod in your pants...ya gotta take care of it, right? Caleb knows what I’m saying.”

Caleb smiled and nodded, and for a moment, Missy wanted to smack the shit out of him. She imagined bashing him across the side of the head, his pizza spraying out of his mouth in thick, wet chunks, splattering against Buck’s fat face.

“Apparently, Bobby was really into anal,” said Buck.

“Am I eating here or what?” asked Missy. “I don’t wanna hear this crap. I mean, why can’t you talk about something...not disgusting?”

“Well, all right. I’m a conversationalist.” Buck grinned. “I can talk about whatever you want to talk about.”

Missy set her fork down. “This pizza is disgusting, by the way.”

“I thought you didn’t want to talk about disgusting things.”

Caleb looked at Missy and then offered, “I got new shock pads for my skateboard today.”

“Huh,” replied Buck. “That’s interesting. Tell me more.”

“I’ve updated my will,” said Buck.

He sat in his recliner across from Missy and Caleb, who were situated on couch, Missy smoking and Caleb was nursing a glass of red wine having finished all of cans of Blatz.

“I wanna be cremated and then I want my ashes separated like lines of coke and then thrown into the eyes of my enemies.”

“I don’t think there’ll be enough of you to go around,” said Missy.

Buck laughed. “No, huh?”

“Are you feeling bad or something?” she asked.

“I don’t feel good. I mean, I get really tired sometimes...I worry I might fall down, break my goddamn head open, and nobody’ll fucking notice. Me here...all alone like this. And the neighbors will start sniffing the air and be like, ‘I think somebody on the block’s decaying. Maybe we should check it out.’”

“Well, you could get one of those alert systems like the old people have. Something you wear around your neck.”

“You’re full of suggestions.”

“And you’re full of shit.”

Missy glared at him for a long moment.

“Who is this? Is this your mom?” asked Caleb.

She turned to find Caleb holding a framed picture of her mother when her mother was quite young. He had taken it off the table next to the couch.

“Yeah,” said Missy.

Buck said, “She’s pretty, huh?”

“I was gonna say that, yeah.”

“It’s a fucking shame,” said Buck.

“What happened to her?” the boy asked.

Buck was quiet.

Missy muttered, “She killed herself.”

“Jesus,” the boy managed. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay,” she said. She looked at Caleb and touched his hand.

“It was real shock,” said Buck.

She turned to her father quickly, “Was it now?”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“It means I don’t think it was a shock. She was pretty sad and she tried to kill herself before that.”

“Oh, right. It was a couple of pills. I don’t even think you coulda killed a baby with the number of pills she popped. I didn’t take her serious.”

“I know you didn’t.”

“Right, okay. So I’m to blame? Huh? It was all me. I didn’t give a shit and I made her wanna die?”

“I don’t know.”

“I buried my fucking wife.”

“Yeah, I know. I was there.”

Suddenly Caleb’s glass of wine hit the floor, and the liquid and glass burst apart on the white shag, streams of red stretching out over the white, and Caleb blurted, “Shit.”

Missy stood quickly, chastising the boy, “You fucking retard.”

“I’m sorry,” he managed.

Missy rushed out of the room, into the kitchen and then came back with dish towels, dropping to her knees, quickly laying the towels over the wine and putting her weight down onto the cloth to soak up the red fluid.

“I’m really sorry,” said Caleb, picking up shards of glass, hunting for them in the rug like he was searching for shark teeth in the sand.

“It’s okay,” said Buck.

“Yeah, maybe if you hadn’t given him all of that fucking booze it wouldn’t have happened,” said Missy.

“It’s only carpet,” Buck said.

“It’s her carpet,” she said. Her hands shook as she raised them off of the floor and they were wet.

Caleb asked, “Your mom’s?”

“Yeah,” said Buck, “Evie—her mom—had gotten this carpet and for some reason she couldn’t handle it being dirty. I mean, as soon as I came into the house, I have to take my goddamn shoes off and if anybody else came over, they’d have to take off their shoes, too. I mean, you think the chick was Japanese. You know? It was ridiculous. Sick, really, but she had these thoughts in her head. She would come up with these scenarios...like she would worry that if she got injured and had to call the paramedics, they might come in and

find her in a filthy house and she couldn't handle that, so the house could never be dirty.”

Missy pulled the towels off the floor, wet and red, balling them up into her hands, quickly moving into the kitchen to put the towels in the sink. She could still hear her father speaking.

“I couldn't have porno either 'cause we might die and Missy would go through our things and find that shit—like she's never seen it before or played with herself. But I had to hide it in the backyard—I mean, Evie didn't know it was back there and she wouldn't have wanted it back there either, but here I am, a grown man, out back, jacking off in the shed.”

“Jesus Christ. Will you stop talking?” asked Missy, wringing the towels out, streams gushing with each twist.

“I'm talking to Caleb,” he said, looking at the boy. “Evie didn't want to get any blood on the carpet, so she...she climbed into the bath tub, so it wouldn't splatter, I guess. And she had the phone in there with her and she called Missy and her mom and her sisters—you know, not saying nothing 'bout dying, but just talking to 'em...saying she loved 'em. Then she called emergency and told 'em to come get her...so I wouldn't find her like that. All bloody and dead. So she put the pistol to her heart and put a hole in herself. And at the funeral, everyone was saying how they talked to her that last day, you know? And what she had said to 'em. And Evie's mom turned to me and said, “What did she say to you, Buck? And I was so goddamn drunk and that fucking cunt was so goddamn blurry, I couldn't admit it, so I said something like—I said that Evie told me that I was the reason that God had put her on earth. That she was God's present to me.’ Can you believe that? I mean, it was the only thing I could think of at the time, but they looked like they believed it. Even Missy. But the truth is...she never called me. She called just about every fucking person

she'd ever come in contact with through the entire course of her fucking life," Buck smiled.

"But I never got a call."

Missy walked into the room and Buck looked at her.

"Am I supposed to feel sorry for you?" she asked.

"No," he said, "I just can't wait for this to be over, you know?"

"What that?" she asked.

"My life."

Buck grinned, bending forward suddenly, like he had just taken a punch to the gut.

In and Out of Holes

He imagined that someday he would have to spread her massive, low-hanging breasts like curtains to reveal the design of the butterfly tattooed around the pothole in her tummy. The butterfly's green wings spread open, petrified in flight, frozen in its infancy now, might someday become lethargic and begin to go limp, like maybe the green butterfly wished to die, slip down into her old crotch and hide in her darkness.

"I don't think that tattoo was a good idea," said Caleb.

Missy looked down at her tummy and then into his eyes. She was lying on the bed in pink panties and a white bra, working on a glass of Southern Comfort trounced by orange juice.

"I think it's pretty," she said.

Caleb sat in a chair at the end of the bed and he was nude. The hair growing from Caleb's head was short, blonde and thick, plastered in hair gel, smeared forward from the back of his skull with a slight curl upwards at the end, like a hairy wave cresting at the top of his forehead. His face was feminine with a smallish nose, and his eyes were big and blue with thin, light-colored eyebrows hanging above them, arcing like a skinny man in mid-hump, the ass raised to its peak.

"Does it make you feel sexy?" he asked.

She smiled. "I am sexy."

A spurt of air was driven out of his nostrils and he grinned. "It's weird what

turns people on.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Caleb lolled his head back as far as it would go, and muttered, “Nothing.” He was staring into the track lighting, directly into the center of one bulb, which had four planks of illumination extending from its intensely radiant and hazy center. Then he looked over at Missy again, who suddenly had a transparent pink spot hovering over her face.

“Do you think I’m attractive to fags?” he asked.

“Why? Are you leaving me for a guy?”

“Shut up. No. I just...I saw Danny doing things,” he said. “Gay shit.”

“I thought he had a girlfriend?”

“Yeah, I don’t know. I mean, he hangs out with that one girl a lot – who looks like a salamander.”

“Kristen, right?”

“I don’t know her name—and who gives a shit, really? I mean, it doesn’t change the fact that he had all of Cody’s dick in his mouth last night.”

Missy looked confused. “Well, maybe they were just experimenting. Did you consider that?”

“Experimenting? No, I didn’t consider that because experimenting involves beakers and safety goggles. Two guys sucking each other’s cocks involves homosexuality.”

“Well, shit. Who cares? And don’t jump on my ass about it,” she said, moving to the side of the bed and sitting on the edge of it. “You want an Ambien?”

He shook his head and she stood up to move into the bathroom.

“We grew up in the same room, is all,” he said.

“So what?”

“So I used to be naked a lot in front of him.”

“Oh, right. You’re his brother.”

She opened the medicine cabinet and pulled out one of the many pill bottles extended across the length of the glass shelf.

“Well, I’m attractive,” he said.

“Are you kidding me with this horse shit?”

“Well, you think you know somebody, you know? Your own family and Danny especially...and now I’m not so sure.”

“That’s ridiculous,” she said, popping a pill in her mouth and then bending down to drink from the faucet. She moved back into the bedroom and Caleb looked at her.

“I don’t want that for Danny,” he said.

She was quiet for a moment and then muttered, “You should get ready for work.”

He nodded. “Speaking of things that suck dick.”

Clovis’ face shone like little orbs of light continuously revolved around his head, but it was the grease in this place, which seemed to hang in the air, to cling to any flesh available, and it was particularly bright on Clovis’ black skin, making him appear radioactive.

“That shit’s nasty, man,” said Clovis.

“Then don’t watch me eat it,” Caleb managed, with a boulder of beef, cheese, ketchup, and fragments of bread protruding from his right cheek. Caleb sat at a small break

table covered with orange paint and grease fingerprints. Clovis stood across from him, leaning against an open door and smoking a Marlboro. Clovis was wearing the required green uniform and a nametag that denoted his authority: Assistant Manager in Training. Lucky's Place of Beef was embossed on his shirt pocket. Caleb's costume was just as green, but his name tag failed to extend him any authority.

"I can't eat it anymore," continued Clovis. "It's tired. Taste like goddamn snake meat."

"I'm hungry."

"The only burgers I eat these days is fur burgers, man. Talk about juicy."

Caleb smiled a little and a piece of chewed meat plummeted from his mouth, crashing down into one of the folds of his pants. "You're so stupid," he said.

"If that's stupid, then I'll gladly be the biggest dumbass in America."

"Not too many chicks you'd turn down, huh?"

"Aw, long as they smell good. That's why God gave us eyelids, man, and imaginations."

"Yeah, huh? So the uglies can procreate."

"Hey, I've seen that little chick of yours, Caleb. I'd have my eyes wide open for that shit."

Caleb finished his sandwich, stood and slipped his hand into his pocket to retrieve his cigarettes. He moved over to the door, near Clovis, near the current of wind that slid in from the darkness outside.

"Really makes you wonder about queers, doesn't it?" asked Caleb, lighting a cigarette.

“What?”

“Well, you’d fuck a girl you think is ugly. You’re doing your part as an animal to continue the species or whatever, but queers don’t do that. They’re wired wrong, don’t you think?”

“Something like that.”

“You think they’re wired wrong? I mean, you don’t think something happens to ‘em that makes ‘em that way?”

“How the fuck should I know? I don’t know how the goddamn toaster works.”

A chime sounded, which indicated that someone had come into the restaurant. Caleb looked at his watch and frowned. “Ten minutes before we close. What cocksuckers.”

“I’ll take out the trash if you go up front,” said Clovis.

Caleb nodded and moved through the kitchen, through a door that led out to the counter, where she was standing, looking up at the menu board. Caleb instantly found her obscene. First, he noticed her arms, which seemed to be stuffed full of gelatin, two big lumps of flesh hanging from her arm bones like dysfunctional wings. Then he noticed her legs, which seemed to be swelling up, maybe slightly stifled by the purple stretch pants that sheathed her skin, the color of the fabric growing lighter as it covered more area, like an expanding balloon ready to explode. The pants only covered her thighs, leaving her thick knees and lower legs exposed, the legs covered with veins, looking like a dozen baby octopi stuck under her skin. He took in her bloated gut and tits, which he thought must be exceedingly heavy, pulling her body downward a little, like she was constantly ready to dive into a pool. For a moment, he considered that God was a puppeteer, and that God’s

hands and forearms were aching from holding that fat ass up all of the time, and so maybe God was resting his arms on the backdrop of life, letting the strings slouch a little.

“Can I help you?” he asked.

As she moved toward the counter and opened her fat mouth to speak, he noticed she was missing two of her bottom teeth and he quickly decided they had fallen out as a result of overuse.

“Can I have two hot apple pouches?”

“Yeah, okay, but I’ll have to put some down so it’ll take five minutes to cook and then put the icing on it.”

“I don’t have five minutes,” she said.

“I’m sorry?”

She seemed bewildered. “What?”

“It’ll be five minutes,” Caleb repeated.

“Why don’t you have some already made up? That’s ridiculous.”

“We had a really busy dinner, all right? Do you wanna wait or don’t ya?”

She paused. “Where’s the manager?”

Caleb took a moment to lick his lips. “Why?”

“I’d like to speak to the manager.”

“The manager’s gonna tell you the same thing I just told you.”

“What is your name?”

He pointed to the nametag affixed to his shirt. “Can’t you read my little nametag?”

“You’re rude, you know that?”

Caleb grinned and then leaned his face closer to her face, like he was going to tell her a secret. “Look, I realize that five minutes is the longest time you’ve ever gone without eating.”

“Excuse me?”

“So why don’t you hop your fat ass over the counter and snack on my cock for the next five minutes?”

She suddenly seemed dazed and stepped backward. She looked at him like the skin had fallen off of his face.

“Manager!” she said.

“The manager is not gonna help you, ma’am.”

“Manager!” she repeated, louder. “Manager!”

“What the fuck do you think this is? Huh? You think for minimum wage I’ll suck your fat fucking ass?”

Caleb walked over to the cooler and pulled out a large, tan bag and then spilled every apple pouch into the fryer, the grease erupting into a sizzle, the pouches splashing the grease in slender streams that burst out of the grease sea like flying fish.

“I’m gonna make you every fucking apple pouch we got, okay!?! And the ones you can’t eat, we’ll just stick up your enormous ass.”

“Manager!” she said again, desperately.

Caleb took one of the metal baskets hanging above the fryer and hammered it against the tile floor until he bent the handle.

Clovis sauntered in from the kitchen, “Caleb, man, what is this?”

“Hey, fuck you, Clovis. You ain’t firing me ’cause I quit,” spit Caleb and then

turned to the woman, pointing his finger, chastising, “And you, ya cow cunt, there’s a Dunkin Donuts right across the street and their apple crullers are...fucking awesome.”

He hopped over the counter, but his eyes remained on her and her eyes remained on his. He shook his head, looking at her with his eyes watery. The three of them suddenly seemed paralyzed for a moment with only the sound of the apple pouches crackling and spurting to kill the silence.

Finally, Caleb asked, “Why are you so goddamn ugly?”

“Look at these little bumps,” said Caleb, “where the hairs are starting to come back.” His face was close to her thigh, his index finger running along her skin, examining it. “Sometimes, it looks like just one little hair poking up and sometimes it looks like two hairs coming out of the same hole. But sometimes it’s three hairs sticking out side by side, like a little fork.”

“Are you bored or what?” asked Missy, leaning back against the headboard, Caleb lying next to her, smiling.

“Drunk, actually.”

Missy nodded. “I believe that, yeah.”

“I’d like to...I’d like to touch you inappropriately,” he said.

“Well, that’s quite romantic.”

“I’d like to have you sit on my lap while I’m hard and spin you like a dreidel.”

She laughed. “I’m pretty sure my legs would present a problem.”

“Your legs are hairy – we’ll cut them off.”

Missy shook her head. “What’s with you today? You’re acting like a real weirdo.”

“I gotta get out of here is the problem. I’ve been feeling like I can’t breathe all day.”

“Out of my apartment?”

“No, no. Out of this shithead town. Just for a few days. We could drive to New Orleans, maybe.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Just you, me and Danny. Just to breathe a minute. ”

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure you have to work, though.”

Caleb looked down, puckered his lips, letting a gust of breath burst out of his nostrils. “Uh, not really.”

“Huh?”

Rampart was rampant with black men, some masculine and some with tits. Missy smiled often, sometimes releasing a “hi” from her mouth, which was then sucked in by caramel ears, and spit back out through countless lips in her direction.

“They’re cute, huh?” said Missy.

“Why didn’t we just stay on Canal?” asked Caleb.

“This is more fun.”

“No, this is more gay, which we’re trying to avoid at the moment. And where the hell did he go?” Caleb turned around to look for his brother, who was jogging up behind them.

When he was close, Danny managed a “sorry” while taking in deep gulps of air and giggling at the same time. “Some black dude said he’d buy me a steak dinner if I let him suck my dick.”

Missy asked, “What’d you say?”

“Well, we already ate.” He laughed. “Who knew I could find out what it was like to be a chick just by wearing a tight shirt on Rampart?”

Missy and Danny smiled big, but Caleb seemed displeased. Caleb took hold of Missy’s hand and pulled her close to his side until her left breast, soft and warm, nudged against his arm, suddenly making him a little more comfortable. They turned down St. Louis, crossed Dauphine and then slipped into the stream of people flowing down Bourbon, the people covered in the glow of lights, beads, the stink of smoke and booze, and the occasional piece of confetti. A young man with sideburns and a flat nose was handing out tickets to one of the nude clubs and Caleb was swift to secure three of them.

Inside, in the near-darkness, they sat huddled around a small table, watching a young girl bend a little, push her ass out, her hands slipping down the sides of her rear as the fleshy humps shook, her head turning to the side, her pink tongue sneaking out of her mouth and coating her upper lip with spit.

Caleb turned to Danny, “You like that?”

Danny nodded, smiling. For a moment, Caleb remembered seeing his brother lick Cody’s testicles, which were tight, round and fuzzy like a worn-out tennis ball. He turned back to the naked girl who was facing them now, crossing her arms so her tits collided and perched up on her crossed arms like two puff birds on a wire, and then she stepped closer, spreading her legs, straddling Missy’s lap. Her tits spread out and hung as her arms opened and her hands ran through Missy’s hair.

“You’re beautiful,” she said to Missy.

Missy gnawed on her bottom lip, looked away for a moment before saying, “So are

you.”

Caleb leaned in so his mouth was close to the naked girl’s ear. “Let’s lay off the same-sex shit, okay?”

She turned to look at his face and scowled. She took Missy’s hands in her hands, moving them around to her ass until Missy’s fingers were pressing down, slightly sinking into the girl’s softness, turning the girl’s flesh a little lighter around each finger, like the girl’s ass was mapping Missy’s handprints. The naked girl’s eyes remained on Caleb as she stated, “I like feel of you.”

Missy laughed, and the girl leaned down until her breasts were pressing on Missy’s, and then she said, “I’d love it if you sucked my tits.”

Missy shook her head and giggled like a child. The naked girl continued to eye Caleb as she stood and retreated back into the brighter lights, near other naked girls who were gyrating and glistening, sliding their hands all over their bodies, bending and stretching, spreading flesh or pressing flesh together, looking intense or innocent or maybe even a little bored.

“What a cunt,” said Caleb, standing up, moving away from the table.

They were injected back into the vein of Bourbon, flowing with the other blood cells, gliding in and out of holes, the tiny spaces between the tight fabric of people, constantly colliding against other skins, other clothing, other asses, hands, shoulders; a kaleidoscope of faces passing in a blur. Caleb seemed determined to push past all of them, to create his own path in the middle of all of these bodies that seemed to be moving against him, ensnaring him into this warm, fleshy mesh of hot breath and leering eyeballs. He pushed forward with Missy occasionally reaching out and talking hold of his hand, but

always slipping away, their hands separated by other bodies moving in the opposite direction. Soon he found himself striding past barriers into a crowd of men, into the intersection of St. Ann and Bourbon, where a mass of people were corded off on St. Ann holding signs that stated, “God hates fags” and “Homosexuality is an abomination.” There were cops, too, mounted on horses, which meant there were mounds of horseshit to be avoided.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” said Caleb, finally halting, spinning around to look at it all.

Missy came up behind him, laughing, wrapping her arms around him, her lips almost touching his ear. “I think maybe there’s a gay festival this weekend.”

“Ya think?” he mocked, his eyes narrow slits. He watched one guy put his tongue in another guy’s mouth, and muttered, “Goddamn. Goddamn, are they breeding them somewhere?”

Before Danny caught up to them, she whispered, “Yeah, at your house,” and smiled.

Danny sauntered up, grinning. “Hey, let’s go in there.” He was pointing over to a club where a line of men was stretching well into the street, where the doors were open wide enough to see the pulsing lights inside, the movement of shadows, a muscular boy on the bar top in a G-string, bobbing his stuff, then slinking down and humping the bar.

“No, no,” said Caleb. “Let’s go to the casino, man.”

“Danny’s not old enough,” said Missy.

“He wasn’t old enough for the strip club, either, but his little friend, Dickhead Dave, gave him a fake ID months ago.”

“Let’s go in there, huh?” said Danny, looking like a child pleading for a toy.

“No, let’s just go back to the hotel and order a pizza,” Caleb replied.

“Why? It looks fun,” said Missy. She took Danny by the hand and said, “I’ll go.”

The two of them moved away from Caleb, who was left standing still with people moving all around him. “Hey, assholes,” he managed, but no one was listening. He looked over a fat man, holding a sign that read, “You will account for your sins.” Caleb walked over to the fat man, looked at his fat face and said, “You realize gluttony is a sin, too, right?” The fat man shook his head, like he was dismissing Caleb as someone who pounded ass. “How would you like it if I followed you into McDonald’s with a sign that said, ‘God hates fat fucks?’”

On the cops started moving towards Caleb, and so he turned, and sank into the sea of homosexuals.

“There you are,” said Danny.

Caleb was near the window, slumped back in a hotel chair like he’d taken a bullet in the gut, a bottle in hand, New Orleans outside, gleaming and alive.

“Look who it is,” said Caleb, his eyes barely open.

“I see you found the liquor store.”

“Yeah. I like the liquor store.”

“We found this jazz club,” Danny said, “and Missy’s down there holding a table. We met a couple guys from Quebec and they’re down there with her.”

“Fags?”

“Huh? Yeah, they’re gay.”

“You’re a fag, huh?”

One of Danny’s eyebrows lifted and he muttered, “Not exactly.”

“Hmm. Well, I hate to break it to you, Danny, but straight guys don’t give their friends head.”

“Yeah, well, you said you were going to Missy’s that night.”

“I surprised you, didn’t I? No, we got in a...spat.” Caleb’s head lolled back and forth. “Of course, you really shouldn’t really do that sort of shit in the living room and you sure as shit shouldn’t do it on my couch.”

“It isn’t anything, though.”

“No?”

“No. Cody’s a fairy and it makes him happy to go down on me and so I let him...and that’s sort of a give-and-take thing, so I do that for him, too.”

“You want some of this?” Caleb asked holding out the bottle.

Danny walked closer to him. “What is it?”

“Cheap Sangria.”

Danny took it and drank. “It’s okay.” He handed it to Caleb and sat on the end of the bed.

“You’re not into it?”

“Ah, I like beer.”

“I mean cock sucking.”

Danny covered his face with his hand for a moment, then pulled his fingers over the tip of his nose, balled his fingers into a fist and pressed the fist against his bottom lip. “It’s fine. I mean, it’s nice in a way. I don’t love Cody or anything...And I’m not sure if he loves

me, but he might.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Well, I don’t either...I mean, it’s all just holes anyway, Caleb. You fall outta one when you’re born—they put you in one when you die. You spend a lot of time trying to stick your dick in other peoples’ holes and you wanna get excitable ’cause I’m not stuffing the holes you think I ought to be. Like it matters somehow and I think that’s bullshit and it doesn’t interest me.”

“I don’t care, really.”

“Why are you lying?”

“I’m not lying. I’m not. I just—I thought maybe this meant something. Like this dick-sucking shit could be an indicator of something else.”

Danny smiled. “Other than liking cock?”

“Don’t make a joke, Danny. I’m talking about something serious.”

“Do you want to clue me in on it?”

“No.”

“You don’t?”

“Nope.”

“Why?”

“Cause I don’t want you to know...what a fucking worthless thing I am.”

“Caleb, I—”

“No, I don’t think I could know anyway. It’s just that I don’t put anybody over you, Danny... I don’t love anybody like I love you, and I feel so goddamn sick that maybe something happened ’cause I wasn’t a good enough brother to you.” Caleb swallowed,

shook his head. “But then maybe I think I wanted it to happen...I wanted it to happen to you, too, ’cause I didn’t want to be alone in it, you know? I wanted us both to be ruined in the same way.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I don’t know.”

“ What do you mean you don’t know?”

Caleb stood and turned, pressing his forehead against the cold glass. It felt good and he let his head rest there.

“I want you to go now, Danny. For a while, okay? I wanna drink by myself ‘til I get tired.”

“No. You should come with me.”

“Danny, please, dude. They’re up all night here. Go back and stay with Missy. Go home with those guys if you want.”

“I don’t want to leave you alone like this.”

Caleb smiled. “I’m not alone, Danny. I’ve got all my demons here.”

The Mississippi was fluid darkness and the light of the moon seemed to struggle to remain atop it, rising up and then falling down, like the chest of a sleeping baby. Caleb sat behind a railing, his arms crossed and resting on the cold metal, just a little ways from where the black water was rushing towards the Gulf. Missy was next to him sucking on a bottle of wine.

“Aren’t you cold?” he asked.

“Wine keeps me warm,” she said, handing him the bottle.

He drank a little and then gave it back to her.

“I can’t believe you quit your job,” she said.

“Being twenty-one and working in a hamburger stand is pretty pitiful.”

She nodded. “You’ll find something better.”

Caleb slapped his thigh suddenly and said, “Shit.”

“What?”

“Something just bit me.”

“Mosquito?”

“Huh? I don’t know.” Caleb pulled up the leg of his shorts and rubbed his skin. “It stung, though.”

Missy moved her hand over his thigh and her palm was warm on his flesh. She leaned her head towards him, opened her mouth, and compressed Caleb’s earlobe between her teeth.

“Don’t do that,” he said, grimacing, tilting his head to pull of her off.

She released the earlobe and said, “I just wanted to see what the attraction was.”

“Attraction?”

“In biting you.” Missy smiled.

“Don’t be silly.”

Missy giggled and then the hand she had on his Caleb’s thigh became a little spider and crawled up the leg of his shorts and tickled his balls.

“Come on. Not here,” he said.

The little hand-spider retreated. “What’s with you?” she asked.

“What’s with me, what?”

“Well, you had a fit and walked off your job, Caleb. And yesterday you were worried you turned your brother queer. And now, for reasons passing understanding, we’re sitting in New Orleans.”

He smacked his shin, and said, “Shit, let’s get out here. These things are eating me alive.”

“We can leave as soon as you tell me.”

“Tell you what?”

He looked at her, at her blue eyes, which seemed to be glowing in the white spotlight of the moon. The breeze off the water scattered her yellow hair in countless directions, blonde strings caught across her face, the breeze pressing the hairs against her skin with their slender ends extending off of her cheek, free in the moving air, constantly fidgeting like a cat’s tail. She brushed the hairs back with her hand, but her eyes remained on him.

“I mean, what do ya want?” he asked.

“I want you to explain your weird-ass behavior.”

“Yeah, and what if I can’t do that?”

“I think you could try.”

He looked down and closed his eyes. When they opened again, the river was gone and he was looking up at the surface of water from the bottom of a pool, at an old face that was looking down at him, the face stretching and compressing as the fluid rippled. A bloated, old face that he knew. A barrage of bubbles erupted from his mouth and nostrils, the spheres scurrying upwards, and colliding against the surface of the water, vanishing. With his breath gone, he would have to ascend. He ran his hands across the cold cement

beneath him, looking for some way to hold onto the bottom, but he couldn't. The river materialized then and Caleb turned to Missy and said, "You won't know what to say about it, anyway."

"Say about what?"

"It doesn't matter."

"Jesus Christ. Will you, please?"

Caleb looked at her lips, which suddenly seemed so dry. There were deep grooves etched into her bottom lip, lined across the length of her mouth like the bars of a cell, and he wanted to lean into those lips with his, and drain all of the moisture inside of his body and transfer it into those lips so they'd be fat and moist and beautiful. He thought there was something unusually kind about the way she looked at him and he was sure it was something close to love.

"Ever have your grandfather hug you with an erection in his pants?" he asked.

"What?" She laughed. "Are you serious?"

Caleb shook his head, looked down and slid his hand over the top of his skull. "No, I know it's funny."

"Caleb, are you serious?" He was quiet and she grasped his wrist, shook it, and muttered, "Huh?"

"I don't even remember hardly," he said. "I mean, I remember some of it. I can still picture what his old, fucking body looked like. And I can picture his nipples looking like little pointed horns...and I remember how goddamn fat everything was, but saggy, too. You know, his skin. It's like the body and spirit had already started separating from each other and the skin and fat and his old fucking balls were just crawling towards the

ground—like it knew it was going there anyway, you know? And maybe the spirit was trying to move upwards, I don't know. I mean, if he had one. And I can still see his hands, too. They were real hard and the nails were real thick and yellow 'cause the bastard smoked and smoked. Just the sight of 'em made me goddamn puke, but it was the feel of 'em that really made me—”

Caleb clenched his teeth and shook his head. “All the kids on the block—the ones near where he lived—all called him, ‘Manatee Man’ 'cause he was a big bastard. He seems so big to me now even...Impossibly big...and I was twelve at the time and I guess I was sorta developed by then. And I remember those gigantic hands on my hips. I mean, I don't recall the pain or even the acts so much, but I know what he said to me that first time. He was behind me, you understand? I'm not even sure why it stuck, but it did. And I could hear him breathing. I mean, he breathed loud 'cause of the smoking and his voice was rough from it, but his breath was really loud then—like excited, like an animal—and I remember him saying to me, ‘breathe deep.’ As if that would mean something to me... or like it was some measure of kindness, like it would dull the pain or something. I don't know. Breathe deep. What the fuck is that? I couldn't even breathe at all.”

He slapped the back of his right arm and screeched, “Shit! These fucking things are eating me up.” He sprung off of the cement and she quickly stood with him.

She mumbled, “Jesus, Caleb,” and took hold of him, one arm wrapped across his back, one hand holding the base of his skull.

“Aren't they eating you?” he asked.

“Huh?”

Caleb sunk his face down into the side of her neck and whispered, “In pictures at

my parents' house, he's smiling."

The little droplets of light splattered across the black sky seemed slightly dull, maybe because they were fading out as they slowly drifted farther and farther away from them. In the passenger seat, Caleb leaned his head against the glass and looked up at the pinpoints of light, wondering where they were going. In the driver's seat, Missy rolled down her window and a torrent of air rushed in, bounded off the back window and slid over Caleb's neck, making him cold. He looked at her and then turned to look Danny sleeping in the back seat. He glanced at Missy as she slipped her left hand under her ass, knowing that she was pulling her ass cheeks apart, hoping her fart would be soundless. He wanted to laugh because it seemed both lady-like and disgusting at the same time.

"It's kinda cold, isn't it?" he asked.

"I just thought I'd let some air in."

"I'm sorry. Did you say let some air in or let some out?"

She paused. "I don't know what that means."

"Mmm-hmm." Caleb leaned forward and pushed the car lighter in, opened the glove box and snatched a cigarette from his pack of Kools. "Guess I'll smoke then."

Missy shook her head. "That's such a filthy habit, Caleb."

"Yeah, right. You quit, like, two days ago and now it's the worst thing ever."

A white light poured over her face, lingered briefly and then dissipated. "You ever heard of Pan Gu?" she asked.

"What's that?"

"Who's that, actually. Chinese guy. He created Heaven and Earth."

The car lighter clicked and Caleb reached down and pulled it free from the shiny tunnel it was jammed into. The end of it glowed orange in the darkness and when he rested the orange on the tip of his cigarette, the tiny slivers of tobacco and thin, white paper began to burn and give off smoke.

“He was in an egg for thousands of years,” she said. “I mean, just this egg in the middle of nothingness, I guess. And when he grew up, he busted out of the egg, separating it into two parts, and he was so afraid that the egg might come back together and he would get stuck inside of it again, so he pushed the two halves as far apart from each other as he could. And part of the egg became Heaven and the part of the egg became Earth.”

“So what?”

“Well...So I think it speaks to the importance of separating ourselves from this shit that can imprison us, you know? If we let it.”

“I think it speaks to the fact that you need to lick my nuts.”

“Hey, I’m trying to help you.”

“How do you know that story?”

“Some Asian kid told me.”

“What Asian kid?”

“Who cares? Some guy I dated for, like, two minutes. He was a goddamn bore, and I know it’s a stereotype, but he had a bird’s nest with no goddamn bird in it. It was like sucking my thumb.”

A tongue of smoke stuck out of Caleb’s mouth and then expanded and disappeared just a few inches from his face. He looked back again to make sure Danny was sleeping and then whispered, “So you think I’m still harboring that shit? What happened to me when I

was twelve?”

“Aren’t you?”

“No, I’m not. I could give a shit about me.”

“Then I guess I don’t understand.”

“Don’t you think what happens to us when we’re little shapes us into what we are now?”

“I would think some of it, yeah.”

“Okay. Well, when I was little—when that happened to me, you know? I never told anybody. I mean, I was a mean little prick of a kid. And I used to humiliate my sister ‘cause she was fat and ugly and sixteen and I could make her even more miserable. And so the bitch took to a knife and cut me—on my ass, actually.”

“I thought you said—”

“Yeah, I lied about the scar. So my parents sent me to stay with that old, sick fuck for a while...who was nice enough to wait till the cut healed before sticking his fossil cock in my ass.”

“Caleb, we all have these wounds that we carry ar—”

“No, I never told anyone. Don’t you understand what I’m saying to you? And I was always so worried that he might do that same shit to Danny. It’s just—I couldn’t say anything. Or I wouldn’t, okay? I mean, I would look for ways to keep ‘em apart or I would look at Danny after he came back from being with him and see if I could see something in his face, you know, like embarrassment or something. It’s just—I didn’t ever see that. And last Monday, I come home and he’s going down on some guy and I got really scared.”

“Yeah, but that’s not what that was. It’s not related. Don’t you think that if I was

raped, I'd be less likely to have sex with guys?"

"We don't know how these things make us, though, do we? I mean, he may not even remember it exactly, but it planted something in him."

Missy shook her head and Caleb closed his eyes, his lips tight around the cigarette, the glowing tip creeping closer to his mouth. He pulled the visor down and found his brother sleeping in the mirror. He imagined Danny as a child then and saw his Grandfather lurking behind his brother, reaching out for him. Then he pictured just one of the old man's sperm penetrating the wall of Danny's bowels and swimming up Danny's spine and then burying its little head in his brain where it grew over the years. Then Caleb imagined bashing Danny's head open so his brain fell out onto the floor and there was a long, white tail thrashing around from the back of it and Caleb yanked on it, so the big, white head came out of Danny's brain and Caleb swung it real hard, like a bat, and whacked it against a wall so it burst apart, covering him in white nastiness.

Neon lights flooded through the windows as the car pulled up to a fast food joint and Missy turned the car off, reaching back, shaking Danny's knee, asking, "You gotta pee?"

Danny's eyes opened and he looked a little confused before nodding. Missy opened the door and a light flickered to life. Caleb did the same, moving out of the car and pulling his seat forward so his brother could climb out. Danny stood, stretched his arms up, pushing his belly forward, yawning. Caleb wrapped his arms around his brother then, sticking to him tightly, hearing his own breath, which sounded staggered, like wind moving through dead trees.

"What are you doing?" asked Danny.

“Huh?” said Caleb, letting him go. “I don’t know.”

Shaking his head, Danny moved away, half-smiling when he said, “Fag.”

The Whispers of Little Pricks

Now. “You guys really are serious about bringing books back on time,” said the cop, a smile stretching across his bloated head, which seemed swelled with helium, as if his head might split apart from his neck at any moment and float lazily to the ceiling. Corrine smiled at the cop because the joke was slightly funny, and because she smiled at men who paid her the least bit of attention. Corrine was heavy with large breasts and she felt strangely old for twenty-five, her hair brown and cut short, stiff and spiked like stalagmites were growing out of her skull.

At the cop’s feet, a young, black man was sprawled out on the carpet, bleeding and moaning. He squirmed hysterically like he was being feverishly tickled. An EMT was cutting off his clothes and Corrine looked at the young, black man’s body, which was tight and muscular and tattooed, and when they began cutting off his pants, the cop turned to look at her looking and she was shamed into averting her eyes. The young, black man was shot in the gut and seemed incoherent. Corrine had jumped when he came through the lobby doors of the library, his right hand firmly gripping his stomach, blood spilling between his splayed fingers like morning sunlight seeping through the cracks of vertical blinds, and he was screaming. If he were in a play, the audience would accuse him of overacting, his screams exceedingly raucous, his crash to the floor hard and decidedly dramatic.

When he had burst through the door, Corrine had been checking out books to

Amanda Fox, who always would call ahead and have books pulled for her, saying with a rich southern accent, “Oh, honey, I got to have something to read.” Her choice of novels, Corrine thought to herself, was consistently shit, and usually involved two cats solving mysteries. Amanda was a part of the Genealogy Society, a group of old people, Corrine would note, with very little future spending valuable time digging up the past. In a rush of adrenaline, Corrine had spit out the word, “shit,” as the man fell to the floor and Amanda Fox had chosen to say, “Oh, Lord,” placing her thickly veined hand over her heart.

For a moment, Corrine wanted to fall to her knees beside the bleeding man and pull his body close to her body, resting his sweaty, slippery head on her chest. She wanted to whisper, “it’s okay,” in his ear as he shook and then he would look into her eyes, suddenly falling silent, like he had found the loving eyes of God on her face and all of the pain and confusion of the moment slipped out of his quivering mouth in a lone, fleeting breath.

An EMT poured peroxide on the carpet where the blood had soaked into it, and soon, like the bleeding black man himself, the evidence of the incident was gone. She had read in the paper a day or so later that the young man had lived. But in retelling the story to friends and to her mother, she would always say that she wasn’t sure if he had died or not. That she may have been one of the last people he ever gazed at, that he may have seen her in that pain-filled haze as something of an angel.

Then. Corrine ran her hand along her pale belly which was swollen with fat, and then pinched it, leaning further back into the patio chair, letting the sun illuminate her whiteness, making her appear to glow. She had little canyons carved in her face and her hair was long, dark at the scalp, but light brown as it flowed away from her fat head. The two boys in the pool next to her were slapping each other around, squealing the words,

“buttslut” and “cockface.”

“Jesus Christ! Will you two cut it out or what?” Corrine hissed.

The boys eyed her. Caleb, who had turned thirteen the week before, spit a stream of pool water at his brother Danny, who was flying around on the pool’s surface using a raft, which was bright orange and swollen with air. Caleb had just come from the park where the neighborhood boys were playing “Smear the Queer,” a game Corrine found retarded. One boy would have possession of the football and having possession of the football made his boy a homosexual, presumably because queers are known to fondle balls, and then the queer would run around until the other boys tackled him, rubbed his head into the grass, ultimately stripping the ball from him, relieving him of his desire for same-sex intercourse. Corrine opened a new pack of Kools and then struck a match.

“I’m telling mom you’re smoking again,” said Caleb.

“Yeah, like I give a shit,” said Corrine.

“You’re so stupid!” he said.

Corrine slid the cigarette between her lips and she tried to watch the boys without actually looking at them. Caleb dived under the water and removed his swimming trunks, and though he was still a boy, he had some fuzz sprouting above his genitals and under his arms. Danny looked at his brother’s naked figure under the water and then looked over at his sister and began to giggle. The naked boy burst out of the water and slung his shorts at Corrine, the wet fabric slapping her hard across the face, snapping her cigarette and her cool.

“Motherfucker!”

Both boys were laughing. Corrine glared at them, their mouths grinning wide and

then she heaved the trunks into the tree nestled at the side of the concrete. She was used to this. Used to the whispers of little pricks as she moved down the long halls at school, them saying she was a nasty, fat whore. And there were jokes that circulated about her, saying her tits drooped so low they needed sneakers, saying her ass looked like a couple of chewed-up marshmallows, saying intercourse with her must be like screwing a bean bag. And she was pretty sure she wasn't even that fat. She took solace in the knowledge that she summer was close and graduation would come in a year. She wiped bits of tobacco off of her belly as Caleb came to the edge of the pool.

“Go get ‘em,” Caleb said, referring to the dangling shorts.

“I ain't getting shit. You want everybody to see your ass so goddamn bad, you go get ‘em,” Corrine told him.

“Go get ‘em or I'll rip your ugly fucking face off your skull!”

Corrine considered getting up, jumping into the pool, smashing his nose flat, watching the blood spew out of him and into the water, materializing into puffs of red smoke. It would be understandable to some extent, but she just breathed hard, hoping to let the rage pass out of her insides and die in the dry air. It wasn't fair to get this type of abuse in her own goddamn backyard from people who shared the same genetics and blood and toilet with her. She sat up, her belly forming several rolls, and she was contemplating action, but feeling a little too weak to actually do anything.

“You're a real asshole. You know that?” Corrine asked Caleb.

Caleb grinned and then made his way up the pool steps, not seeming to mind that he was naked, his genitals flopping about as he walked over to Corrine. She watched him, not sure what he was up to, not happy that he was beautiful. His eyes were big, blue and his

body was lean, the muscles strapped tight across his chest, and he looked almost hairless, his skin glimmering in the sun, looking like seal skin. He stood next to her, his butt and her acne-scarred face pointing towards the pool and Danny, who was just staring, his thick lips apart.

“Now, in your honest opinion, Danny,” said Caleb. “What’s cuter? My ass or Corrine’s face?”

Corrine’s fingers bunched into a fist and struck Caleb in the lower back. He took a step forward, almost bouncing, howling a little before beginning to laugh. She stood up to smack the side of his head, but Caleb was dancing away from her, his hands covering his head, moving towards the water, like he was avoiding the bite of a horsefly. Corrine looked down at the two round humps of muscle that were the boy’s smallish ass as he scampered away. She let her breath fall out of her mouth in a long, heavy gust and then moved into the house.

Now. It was the type of memory you bottle up and toss into that great ocean of forgotten things, but it laps back onto the shore now and again, suddenly under your feet, broken and sharp, slicing you open in a stinging prick. Corrine was thinking of Danny, and maybe he was ten or so then, leaning back, kicking the water, and propelling himself towards the deep end of the pool. Then he stretched his arms out wide and spun in place like a weightless ballerina. Corrine rested her head on the window of the plane now and it was cold and vibrated. Outside, gray clouds stretched out across the night sky, the moon full and brilliant, and she remembered as a child her mother telling her that the full moon was God’s flashlight, and she imagined God lurking somewhere behind it, hiding in the darkness, quiet as dead air and as a lovable as a cockroach. Danny was dead now. He

would exist in memory in a perpetual state of youth and prettiness. He would be the dead brother. He would be the perfect emptiness into which they could pour all of their unused love .

Her mother had phoned Corrine in the last hour of morning, speaking in clipped, restrained sentences, like she had a gun to her head and she was calling with the ransom demands. She had said, “Your brother died.”

Corrine had at the library, sitting at her desk, flipping through a stack of books about seashells she had pulled for a display on the ocean. In truth, the ocean scared her tremendously. It was deep and icy and it could swallow you whole.

“What?” she asked, the word sounding more like a cough than a question, carried on a great burst of breath.

“Danny,” Her mother said. “He’s dead.”

Corrine’s eyes narrowed, as if she was trying to conceive something incomprehensible to her like the theory of wormholes or the notion of God existing forever. Time itself, perhaps. Time heals all wounds, even the throbbing, open wound that is life.

Her mother spoke. “Corrine.”

“I have nothing to say to that.”

“Well. What could you say, possibly?”

“Yeah,” Corrine said, and had the sudden desire to stop talking and pull the phone from the wall, taking the phone wire and wrapping it completely around her neck, an end in each hand, her arms stretching outward in a deft, jerking motion until her head popped off like a wine cork.

“How?” Corrine asked, feeling breathless.

“OD’ed.” Her mother said in a voice as sterile as urine. There was silence then, which swelled in Corrine’s ears and quickly become unbearable.

“I didn’t know he did that,” she said.

“Your father and I didn’t know either. Caleb knew.”

“Where is he?”

Her mother was terse. “The morgue. Where do you think?”

“No. Where’s Caleb?”

“Oh. I don’t know.”

Corrine leaned back in her chair, which gently squealed under her weight. She stared ahead, through the window of the workroom, seeing the circulation desk and the tall, slender man standing there, a DVD in hand, waiting in line to check out. The man was staring at Corrine. She moved a hand over her cheek and found that it was wet and nearly as slippery as ice. She knew the man. The staff often referred to him as “Mr. Creepy.” Once, he leaned in close to her, his eyes silvery as two new nickels, and whispered, “Do you think you could find any information for me on semen boosters?” She remembered the stink of his mouth, certain it was as pungent as the stink of his anus. Two openings. One at each end. A wormhole.

“I should come home,” Corrine said. “I should hang up and come home now.”

“Are you driving?”

“It’s six hours.”

“If you’re upset, you shouldn’t drive.”

“If I’m upset? Jesus Christ. Danny died.”

“Yeah, sweetie.”

“He was a little kid, really. Eighteen.” She said this as if the words were too heavy for the fragile air escaping her lungs and drifting out over her quivering lips.

“He was my baby,” her mother said, as distant as the sun.

Then. Corrine was shaking like a blender, her brown eyes shifting back and forth and she was in the kitchen, at the sink, exhaling loud, staring at Caleb through the window, thinking his ass was cuter than her face and she trying to figure out how she pissed God off so bad that he had made her look like she did. She was a deformity, an anomaly, a point of embarrassment for an otherwise attractive family. Even her parents in their state of being middle-aged seemed to have some type of simple eloquence, features that were unremarkable, never drawing attention to themselves. But here was Corrine, every day, looking like a defect. Though it wasn't just her looks. It was the entirety of her, this rotten thing.

When Halloween had come around the year before, Caleb had decided that he would dress as a burglar, but her mother wouldn't let him use a good pair of her panty hose to wear on his head, so she told him to take a pair of Corrine's hose. Without her knowledge, he swiped a pair from the laundry basket and moved into the living room where Corrine, Danny and her mother were staring at the TV. The room was dark except for the light from the television, which bathed their skin in constantly changing colors, making them look like chameleons on speed. They turned to look at him and Caleb began sliding the hose over his skull.

"Hey," muttered Corrine. He had the fabric stretched across his face, his nose nestled flat in the crotch area, inhaling deeply and it was then that he ripped the panty hose off of his head as if they had been set on fire. Corrine closed her eyes, trying to protect

herself from the sight, knowing that her vagina smelled rather foul, and she could vaguely remember the first time she noticed it, nude on the toilet, the smell slithering up her nostrils, making her feel slightly ill. But she thought that everybody stunk because everybody was slowly decaying, like fruit, drying out, the fruit flesh tightening and toughening, marred with bruises. You don't get out of this unscathed. Everything rots, stinks. She was embarrassed by the stink at first, and the only love she got was from her own fingers. But soon she got over it and moved onto other fingers, fingers attached to hands, attached to a boy, a boy that could maneuver his hands all over her back, bite on her neck and lick inside her mouth. A boy that could make her sweat in her shadowy areas, who could lie to her and mutter her name as a waxy nose burrowed into her cheek. And she was quite certain she was in love with this boy. Though at first, he seemed to think Corrine was the ugliest thing since the elephant man, but after she offered to give the boy oral, he didn't seem overly concerned with her appearance.

She would meet the boy in the woods by the school and he would close his cinnamon eyes and she would gently pass her lips over his lips, moving her hands over his slender waist. She would pull up his shirt and admire his lack of noticeable body fat. Then she lowered herself down so she could stare directly into his belly button as she undid his pants and pulled them down to his knees. She slid one hand around his back to feel the softness of the boy's ass.

"I like you," he said.

She looked up to find his face, which was pretty, and he was showing her all of his teeth, which like the boy, were white and straight. He moved his fingers through her dark roots and it made her skin shiver.

"I like your hair," he said. And it was then that she felt love. It was installed in her heart and she stuttered for a moment trying to express it.

"I think—I think you're really aces," she said.

He moved himself closer to her face and she wanted to hear him say how he liked her again, so she began to please him. But it wasn't long before any liking he had for Corrine erupted out of him, originating from his testes, jetting through his prostate, and that liking, which burst out in a milky fluid, was in her mouth and then spat out all over the grass. And then it wasn't too long before the boy's interests shifted from Corrine to Gwen, an anorexic girl that resembled a praying mantis. Corrine imagined that Gwen's bowel movements looked like rabbit turds. And Corrine hoped that Gwen's stomach was so desperate for sustenance that it would begin to eat Gwen's own insides and one morning Gwen would stand up from shitting and see that she had shit out her own heart. And Gwen would see her heart sinking in a pond of shit water and fall to her knees trying to retrieve her heart so she could stuff it back in, but she would die then, collapse, her head falling into the bowl. And maybe later they would flush the toilet without noticing poor Gwen's heart sunk down there and the newspapers would say that it was a miracle that someone could live so long being so completely heartless.

Corrine wrinkled up her own face with her hands, trying not to think about it. She crouched to look at herself in the shininess of the toaster, moving closer to her reflection, studying her face as if she had never seen it before. She studied the pocket of air that seemed to be stuck under the flesh of her chin, the small chasms in her cheeks, like some microscopic organisms had been diligently eating off her face. Or maybe they were backyard pools dug by mites and the mites would take dips when she would sweat or find

herself splattered by rain. She studied her nose, this thick thing with holes that God had sprinkled heavily with brown specks, making her look perpetually dirty. Her face was an amalgamation of failed structures, misshaped, coarse and uninteresting. Her face was fucked.

"Goddamn," she said with her jaw tight.

Corrine watched the boys from the kitchen. Caleb was near a pool jet, where the water pumps in, his arms resting on top of the patio surface. The water pumped hard against the shaft of his penis and he was telling Danny to find one of the other jets and try it.

"Take your dick out," Caleb instructed.

Danny came up on a jet and then looked around before taking down his shorts. The water pressed down on him and his head lolled back. He turned to smile at Caleb, but Caleb had his eyes closed and his lips looked soldered shut, almost white. After a minute, Danny got bored and brought up his shorts. Corrine was staring at Caleb, a stupid smirk slung on his face, his penis like a flower reaching up for the light, and in his moment of bliss, she considered mutilating him. Finally, Caleb spotted her through the window and his smile waned. He held up a fist with his middle finger extended. Fuck you. And it wasn't so much that he was speaking for himself with this gesture, but for Gwen, too, and the pricks at school, and God, and that flakey boy that made love to her mouth. She could see the boy's hard cock in her hand, the veins like blue vines intersecting and meandering under the thin flesh with no particular destination, the wrinkled ring under the head of this thing pulled taut and the sideways mouth on the head of the cock, which only opened up to gush or dribble liquids. But now it spoke to Corrine.

"Thanks for blowing me," said the boy's cock. "And thank God that I don't have eyes or a nose—you know, so I don't have to look at you. Or smell your stinky cunt."

Corrine opened the drawer next to the refrigerator and eyed the steak knives.

Now. On the way to the funeral, Corrine noticed a sign on the side of the road, and it was a sign she had seen many times before on many streets, but today it seemed to effortlessly encapsulate life itself. The sign was bright yellow, diamond-shaped, and cruelly blunt. It said: STOP AHEAD. She smiled and closed her eyes. A moment passed and the car paused briefly before moving on.

"He was a practicing homosexual," her mother said.

Corrine turned to her, eyes open. Her mother was driving, wearing dark shades, facing the road ahead of them. Caleb was in the back, directly behind Corrine, and she felt his knees press against the back of her seat.

"Are there out-of-practice homosexuals?" he asked. "Are there queers who've forgotten how to suck a dick?"

"Are you funny?" her mother asked Caleb. "That's your brother."

"Maybe it's like the boards in medicine—you have to show some level of expertise. You have to show a certain competency at licking balls," he said.

Her mother turned to look at Caleb and Corrine studied her mother's face in that moment, noticing crevices that she had never seen before, new formations, fault lines growing deeper, stretching out further across the terrain of her forehead and spilling down over her cheeks, like streaks of rain cascading down a window. Her mother looked as friendly as a fire ant when she asked Caleb, "What is wrong with you?"

"It's nonsense," he said. "Talking about that shit now."

Her mother turned back to the road. "I didn't know if Corrine knew that."

Corrine didn't answer. She had known. Last Christmas, on a rare visit home, she nosily went through the pictures on Danny's cell phone while he was passed out on the couch with a bowl of salsa trembling on his lap. One of the pictures was of a young man, blonde and naked, sporting a hard-on, which looked greasy and purple-ish and bent, like it had been accidentally slammed in a car door. There was a picture of Danny naked, too, twisting around in a mirror, taking a snapshot of his own ass, like it was a prize he owned or a celebrity with whom he wanted to be photographed. It was tight and hard-looking and golden brown. She stopped looking when she found a picture of a shirtless, skinny boy rooting around Danny's mouth with his fat, red tongue. They looked enthusiastic in their kissing, ardent as two copulating turtles.

Corrine heard a tearing sound then and turned to look at Caleb, whose fingers were digging into the seat, ripping it open, making tiny, bloodless wounds, the fibers snapping apart like dry pasta. Caleb said "Fuck," but held the word in his mouth for a long moment and it sounded guttural and full of sorrow. Corrine looked at his face and she wanted to cry. She wanted to reach back and touch it. It was soft and innocent and perfectly beautiful.

Then. Caleb was humming, his blonde hair wet and plastered to his forehead, eyes closed. Danny had his face in the water, looking down at the bottom of the pool. Corrine came onto the patio, her right hand grasping the handle of the knife, which was shining, looking like a blur of light radiating from her fist. She stepped over the edge of the concrete, dropped into the pool, and Caleb's striking eyes opened and locked on her as she came closer, the blade under water at her side.

"What?" he managed, like he didn't understand what she wanted. Corrine's head

was pulsing, pressure at the back of her eyes, so much so she was sure her eyes would eject out of her face, hitting the water like hail. Caleb moved away from her, towards the pool steps. She moved with him, like they were one entity, reaching her hand out so she could dig into him, press through his skin so she could get a solid handle on his bones.

"Don't," he said, sounding like a girl, like the underdeveloped man he was. Caleb progressed towards the steps, eluding her, but finally Corrine's fingers wrapped around a thick clump of his soaked hair and she yanked it so his head jerked upwards and he squealed in response to the pain.

"Corrine!" he cried.

It was a plea she couldn't hear, the pulsing overwhelming her head, her brain somehow dissolved, leaving a void that allowed the pulsing to bounce off the skull, without insulation, unencumbered to overcome even the most intense thoughts of reconsideration. She wanted to hurt him. She slid the blade over his ass quickly and the skin opened easily, a haze of red spilling from the wound. Corrine looked down at his laceration, dropped the knife and then began beating the back of his skull repeatedly with her fists.

"I fucking hate you! You goddamn little faggot..."

Caleb was screaming as he rushed up the steps, slipping, bleeding and then collapsing on the concrete. He was crying, trying to squeeze the cut closed with his right hand, blood oozing through his fingers. Corrine looked at him, looked at what she had done and let her hands fall to her sides, her anger dying. She walked up the steps and sat down next him. She put her hand over his hand, the blood smearing all over her palm. Caleb's other hand was smacking the cement and it occurred to Corrine that the cut must have stung. She could appreciate his pain. They could share it. She slid a leg under Caleb's head and his cheek

rested on the fat of her thigh, a foamy stream of spit leaking from his open mouth.

"I'm sorry," she said. She looked over at Danny in the pool, his arms outstretched, the water rippling around him and he was sobbing, gently floating backward, hopelessly drifting away from them.

Now then. Her mother was standing next to Corrine, discernibly pale, her silver earrings reflecting smudges of light, as if stars had broken apart above her and she had looked up at the night sky as two bits of gleaming rock had jetted down, embedding a speck in each ear. They were besieged by ghouls, white-faced and red-eyed, those who had come to see the body, surrounding the coffin, gazing at Danny's dead face with the same kind of curiosity they might observe a sleeping baby lying in its crib. Her mother took Corrine's hand and it was wet and cold, like a freezer pop half-frozen.

"I wish I could see his eyes again," her mother said.

Danny's eyes were her father's eyes, intense blue, like the burning blue that hides at the bottom of a flame. Her father was there, lingering in the back, his new wife holding onto his arm tight, her head resting on his unsteady shoulder. Her name was Ping and she was Chinese, brown as cooked bacon, and habitually cleared her throat. Ping was short and thin, almost ageless, like she could have been fifty, or fifteen. Her dress was tight and low-cut, showing her skeletal chest, the bones distinctly visible, like dinosaur bones being carefully excavated from the earth. Corrine's mother, in years past, after downing a few margaritas, had called Ping a "mouthy Chinese cunt," and a "hypocritical San Francisco liberal who loved abortion, but wouldn't eat meat because it was murder." Corrine remembered her father standing at the doorway one morning, a mere month before she graduated high school, a satchel in his big, hairy fist, saying, "Sometimes in order to be a

happy, you have to make a whole lot of other people incredibly sad.”

Corrine, her face decorated with cystic acne, oily and hot, replied, “Sometimes in order to be an asshole, you have to spew out a whole bunch of fucking shit.”

In the face of his dead son, Corrine’s father was crying hysterically, one tear chasing another, spilling out over his swollen cheeks. Loud, stammering breaths and shrill whimpers were surging out of him, and he swiftly covered his mouth with his hand as if he hoped to contain the sounds in his own head. Corrine turned back to look at her brother, the specimen on display, the pretty dead thing in the front of the room. The lights clustered above him were more intense than the other lights, as if the brightness of heaven was burning through the ceiling and glowing on the lacquered wooden box that held his lifeless body. The lights blazed on his forehead and his cheeks, the tip of his small, upturned nose and his lovely, fat lips. Danny would never be old. And as strange as it was to think about, he would never make love to something old, know the taste of old flesh, never see his pubic hair turn white as snow in the winter of his life, or watch his perfect, little ass sag, as flat and dead as a pinned-down butterfly. In the simple act of believing, perhaps, that he was too young to die, or too strong, he had stumbled onto the ideal situation of actually being dead. He had walked off stage while they still wanted more of him. Actually, he had fallen off. Corrine imagined his insides already dissolving, like a chunky cloud of cotton candy melting in a warm, wet mouth. She was jealous of him.

“Do you see what she’s wearing?” her mother asked.

“Who?”

“Ping. That slanty-eyed slut. Practically showing all of her tits at my son’s funeral.”

“You know,” said Corrine, “it’s really hard to sympathize with you when you say shit like that.”

Her mother’s grip on her hand tightened and she staggered slightly, as if her bones were splintering apart inside her own body and she might collapse at any moment, quick and hard as a falling Jenga tower.

Her mother’s voice was frail. “I hate her so much.”

Corrine tightened her jaw and pulled her hand away, her fingers bending into her palm tight, like a roly-poly balling up in defense of itself. Her mother’s eyes looked impossibly large and thoroughly wet. “I bet she hardly ever thinks of you,” Corrine said.

“Please don’t be mean to me,” replied her mother, her voice gentle as bird feathers. “Not today.”

Corrine pushed her tongue over the inside of her cheek, where she had bitten herself while chewing a piece of gum on the airplane. It was an aching, little wound and her tongue soothed it a bit.

Her mother said, “He was so sweet.”

“Yeah,” Corrine said, the word hurling out of her mouth on a fat bead of spit.

“I don’t know why, really. You’re father’s so awful and I was so goddamn miserable all of the time. I mean, I made things impossibly hard for you kids. I didn’t deserve a sweet boy.”

Danny was dressed in a white suit, looking like a little boy dressed for Easter Sunday, anxious to hunt for colored eggs.

“I think he was disillusioned. In a good way,” said Corrine. “Completely unaware, you know? He was in his own little world where everything seemed to be okay all of the

time. I wish to God I was that disillusioned. If I was disillusioned like that, I wouldn't be drinking constantly and popping Lexapro. And I wouldn't eat so much. I eat like I'm starving--I'm so goddamn fat."

"No, you're not."

"Yeah, I am. I'm ugly, anyway. Even if I wasn't heavy."

Her mother waved her hand dismissively. "Oh, for Christ's sake, today isn't about you, Corrine." She opened her small purse and found a crumpled tissue, bringing it to her ruddy nose. "This is Danny's day."

Corrine moved away from her mother, stepping up to the coffin and reaching out to take Danny's hand, which felt strangely nonhuman. She leaned down and kissed his dead lips. Then she turned and faced the ghouls. Ping was rubbing her father's arm and looking duly sad, her eyes mere slits, like the gills of a shark. Her father was sobbing, shaking and red. His sorrow would not be stifled. She looked at her mother, who was staring down with puffy eyes, her nostrils copiously bleeding snot. Finally, she eyed Caleb, who wasn't crying. He looked stoned, staring at her, staring through her.

Corrine said calmly, "I would have rather seen any one of you in that goddamn box." Then she was wrathfully pointing at them, like she was identifying her rapist in a court of law. "He's the only one of you motherfuckers I even love."

The Acts of Animals

Now. Caleb watched the man as he melted, descending the steps of the pool, his skin summer brown, his body shaved, the bright light of the sun adhering to his aging, wet tits, glowing as he sank further into the water. The man stretched his arms forward, stabbing the clear surface, and then rowed his arms back, moving towards the deep end, towards the darker waters. Caleb continued to stare. After several minutes of moving back and forth in the pool, the man rose out of the fluid, his dead ass seemingly slipping down the back of his thighs, sheathed only in blue spandex, and Caleb shook his head in disapproval. Then Caleb looked up into the canopy of blue above him, which was unusually clear, like all of the clouds had shriveled up in the devastating heat and then fell out of the sky, and maybe these clouds fell in droplets of milky, warm goo, as if God was jacking off and coming all over them.

Caleb didn't have a shirt on, and his shoulders were broad with tiny brown flecks sprayed across the length of them, and he had sizeable muscles strapped tightly across his chest, his skin stretching a little to accommodate them, and his nipples were small, brown points, each outlined by a ring of blonde hair. He moved towards the pool, towards the man who was stretched out on a deck chair, sucking the end of a Dos Equis bottle. The man looked skeletal, his cheeks collapsing inward and his nose was thick with thin threads of snot hanging on the inside wall of one of his nostrils, like sucker fish clinging to a shark.

Caleb stood at the end of the deck chair, and the man, whose eyes had been closed,

were now staring at him.

“Do you know who I am?” asked Caleb.

The man nodded slightly and said, “I think so.”

Caleb was quiet, glaring.

After a thorough pause, the man spoke again. “I’m Dave.”

“I know who you are.”

“Well, what do you want?”

Caleb said, “I wanna hurt you.” After a moment, Caleb looked away, quiet, eyeing the beach not far off: the ocean, the blue nothingness of the sky, the blurry light burning on the ocean’s surface, the light jittery and manic with an intensity that seemed intent on totally burning out.

Dave said, “Okay.”

“You have a condo here, right?”

Then. Dave took in Amanda’s nakedness. She was older now, and her smallish tits were slowly shimmying down the cliff that was her rib cage, and her pink nipples were enormous saucers stuck atop unbearably white skin, tiny blue veins weaving and twisting under the surface, and Dave thought her to be incredibly skinny, almost formless, and as she bent down to dry her wet hair with a towel, her spine looked like it might rip through her skin, the bumps sticking up like the bony plates of a stegosaurus. He watched her from the bed, stretched out in boxer shorts and brown socks, and she glanced up and noticed him looking at her in the reflection of the bathroom mirror.

“What?” she asked.

“I thought I’d take Anne somewhere today.”

Anne was his daughter. She was twelve and she painted her face and wore things that sparkled.

“She’s going out with Taylor and that little fat girl today,” Amanda said, moving into the bedroom, toward the dresser to get some panties and a bra.

“Jody?”

“Who? Oh, I don’t know her name. She’s the goddamn poster child for McDonald’s. It’s her mother’s fault, too, you know? Letting her stuff her fat fucking face like that.”

“Don’t you think she’d rather go out with me, though?”

Amanda slipped on a pair of black panties and turned around to look at Dave, her eyebrows slipping down in the middle, edging towards the bridge of her nose.

“Do you think she’d rather go out with you?” she asked.

“I don’t know.”

“She’s at the age where she wants to spend all of her time with her friends, Dave.”

Dave nodded and Amanda put on a bra and then returned to the bathroom and started brushing her hair.

“You’re at that age, too, huh?” muttered Dave.

She stared at him in the mirror. “You trying to start something?”

“No. I was just thinking I’d go down to Swanny’s tonight. Get some beer, play some pool, find some drunk chick to ball.”

She smiled. “Well, personally I don’t think you could get a chick to ball you in Ethiopia with a bag of potato chips, but you do what you want.”

Now. Caleb followed Dave into the condo. It had a small bedroom, a bath, a living

room with a sofa bed and entertainment center, and a small kitchen. On the kitchen counter was a supply of Dos Equis, a pack of bottled water and a porno magazine. Caleb glanced at its cover, which featured a muscular guy, shirtless of course, glazed like a turkey, looking intense, almost pissed, with the words “Proud to be a masculine bottom” emblazoned across his belly. Caleb rolled his eyes and Dave moved into the kitchen.

“You wanna drink?” asked Dave.

“No.”

“Okay,” he said, snatching up a bottle of water.

“Does your wife know you’re a cocksucker?” asked Caleb.

Dave looked at him, calm. “Why would you care about that?”

“Does your wife know you’re a faggot? Yes or no?”

“No.”

“What would she do if she found out?”

“She’d leave, I guess. I don’t know. I mean, she might use it as a reason to leave. I don’t think she’d really care who I was sleeping with.”

“Your wife wouldn’t care that you were banging young guys in the ass?”

“One guy and I doubt it.”

“Then why are you two together?”

Dave shook his head. “My daughter, maybe. I’m close to her...or I was. I don’t know. Maybe we’re just comfortable, but then again, maybe it’s none of your business.”

“And then again, maybe I’ll beat the fucking life out of you right now.”

Caleb glowered at Dave and clenched his fists, a popping sound erupting from his knuckles, but Dave did not look afraid. He pulled a cigarette from the pack of

Kools and put it in his mouth.

“You smoke?” asked Dave.

“No,” Caleb lied.

“You look like your brother.”

“Do you think that’s a wise thing to say to me?”

Dave lit his cigarette. “What’d ya mean?”

“Cause now I gotta worry if you’re getting hard or not.”

Then. Dave liked the way Danny smelled. He liked his skin, which was all evenly cooked, so much so that even his ass was tan and covered in nearly invisible blonde hairs and Dave liked to hold onto his ass as he sucked Danny’s cock, occasionally lapping his balls like a dog drinking water. Danny would sigh, and run his fingers through the hair on the side of Dave’s head, and it felt a little like appreciation, a little like genuine affection. And he liked the way Danny’s head lolled back, his fat little lips open, his eyes closed, and then he would moan Dave’s name, like the word itself, Dave, wholly defined pleasure, defined love, defined everything that Danny needed in that moment, or any moment in his life. The word was something sacred.

When they finished, they showered together. Danny lathered his hair with shampoo, facing Dave, smiling.

“What’s your wife look like?” Danny asked.

“Why do you wanna know that?”

“I don’t know. Is she fat?”

“Really skinny, actually.”

“Nice tits?”

“No. They hang...unusually low.”

“Hmmm...So you figured if you had to get on your knees to suck ‘em, you might as well suck a dick, huh?”

Danny smiled and Dave thought he was beautiful.

“Shut up,” Dave said, lips apart with his yellow teeth showing.

He moved close to Danny and kissed his mouth, maneuvered his right hand through his sudsy hair.

Dave asked, “Can you stay for a while?”

Now. Caleb had imagined numerous scenarios. He had imagined ripping Dave’s face off of his skull, the face skin stretching like a deflated balloon, blood bursting out from underneath the flesh in a flash flood of crimson, his eyeballs popping out, jetting through the air and exploding onto the walls, his teeth falling free from his mouth, scattering across the linoleum floor as his body shook and slowly collapsed to the ground.

Caleb was sure he was capable of hurting this man, but he was hampered by the calm Dave seemed to be enveloped in, and Dave seemed weak, tired, old, dead, with a heart that was still beating out of habit instead of desire.

“I guess it won’t matter if I say I’m sorry about Danny,” said Dave.

Caleb breathed out deeply and then turned around, facing the sliding glass door and a view of the water.

“It’s your fault, I think,” said Caleb.

“Is it?” Dave asked, smoke from his cigarette spiraling around his head.

“I think you should suffer, too, yeah.”

“I am suffering.”

“Shut the fuck up with that, faggot.” Caleb twisted around. “How the shit are you suffering? You gotta find some other kid to cram your cock into?”

“It wasn’t like that.”

“Oh, really? Was it love? Huh? You ancient prick. Were you in love with an eighteen-year-old kid...who you had to pay to fuck your sorry ass? My brother was stupid, you know?” Caleb swallowed hard, stifling a sudden desire to sob. “He was just—so goddamn dumb, but you were old enough to know better.”

Dave nodded. “I know I was.”

“Did you even know what he was doing with the money?”

“Not really. I mean, I had some idea.”

“But you didn’t give a shit?”

“I guess I didn’t want him to leave.”

Caleb sat down on the sofa bed and stared at the carpet. It was beige, matted and splattered with black and brown spots in various shapes and sizes randomly stuck across the room.

Dave asked, “Was he really queer?”

Caleb was slow to answer, but then offered, “I’m not sure you still qualify as straight once you’ve taken it in the butt.”

“I know, but—”

“He liked anybody—boys, girls. Who cares?”

“Did that bother you?”

“No. I mean, I didn’t understand it, really, but why? What difference does it make?”

Dave thought for a moment. "I guess it doesn't."

Then. Dave held close to Danny, lying on top of him, on the bed, both naked.

Glasses of Malibu rum mixed with orange and pineapple juice sat on the night stand next to the bed and Danny was reaching over for his.

"Don't," said Dave.

"Why?"

"You've had a lot all ready."

"So."

Danny moved from underneath him and sat up, taking the glass to his lips. Dave rolled over on his back.

"Ah, Danny...you're my little drunk."

"Don't mess with my buzz, huh?"

Dave stretched his arms and legs out, curling his toes inward so they crackled.

"You gonna be around next weekend?" asked Danny.

"Probably."

"Doesn't your wife ever wonder why you're gone all of the time?"

"Why are you so concerned about my wife?"

"It just seems odd."

"I tell her I'm fishing. She says she's shopping. Course, neither one of us actually gives a shit."

"You don't love her?"

Dave thought about it. "No."

"Did you ever?"

“Not really. I think she loved me, though. A long time ago. And I’m grateful she gave me a daughter.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, you’d like her. She and I were friends...For a long time she was my only friend, really, which is weird ’cause she was little kid, you know? What did she know about anything? I mean, what could I really talk to her about? But I think that’s what it was. That I didn’t have to talk to her about...horrible shit. And even if she didn’t know anything, she made me understand more about life than anybody else in the world.”

Dave sat up and edged towards the bed. He scratched his scalp ferociously.

“And it’s different now?” asked Danny.

“People grow up.”

Dave stood up and retrieved his pants from the floor. He dug a lighter out of the pocket and then moved over to the nightstand where his cigarettes were.

“Do you believe in evolution?” asked Danny.

“What?”

Dave bit down on the end of a cigarette and lit it.

“I was wiping my ass the other day,” said Danny, “and I was wondering why there’s hair down there...you know, ’cause it really doesn’t make any sense. It just makes the whole process more difficult and I wondered why we would’ve ever even needed it...You know, that area should be like your palm or the bottom of your foot.”

“Well, hair kept the body warm or I don’t know—maybe it kept ants outta your anus. What’s it matter?”

“No, it’s just – It’s strange how things don’t make any sense.”

Now. “I’d rather be empty than full of shit,” said Caleb.

Dave stepped closer to the counter, his eyebrows climbing up his forehead with a cigarette teetering on his bottom lip. “I don’t understand.”

“You’re embarrassed by what you are.”

Caleb didn’t look at him when he said this. The ocean was more interesting. The sun was starting its slow fall into the water, and Caleb imagined it would submerge itself, an enormous, glowing orb in the middle of watery nothingness, and then whales and fish and sharks would swim into it, disintegrating on contact, like mosquitoes hitting a bug light.

“Maybe I am,” said Dave.

“And maybe if you had been honest a long time ago, you wouldn’t have been paying my little brother to screw you. If you had been okay with it...you could have actually been with somebody.”

Finally, Dave offered, “Maybe.”

Caleb closed his eyes for a moment, and the thin skin lids that slid over his irises were radiating red. He suddenly felt unyieldingly tired. Then his eyes opened.

“The toxicology report,” muttered Caleb. “Jesus. The kid’s guts were like the supply room of a pharmacy.” He shook his head. “I don’t even know where he was getting all of that shit. I mean, I’d smoke a joint here or there, but I didn’t mess with anything else. Well, Valium, maybe. Danny, on the other hand...He wanted everybody to like him and he didn’t say ‘no’ to anything. And I don’t mean just pills or liquor, but if somebody wanted to fuck him—girl or boy—he usually would. Or they wanted him to come eat dinner with their family or play pool or whatever, he did it. He was somebody everybody

wanted to be around, you know? Everybody loved that kid so much.”

Caleb paused, sliding one foot forward on the carpet, the carpet growing darker under his heel, creating a streak that followed his foot like the tail of a comet.

“You know, I found him,” he continued, “I mean, I found him when he was dead. Fucker was blue, even his fingernails, his lips...and I remember looking down at him and I was so surprised by it. And I looked at him for a moment. A good, long moment and then all of a sudden I puked all over him. On his face, on his chest. I just opened my mouth and all this vomit came out of me and I just couldn’t even react, it happened so fast. And I kept saying how sorry I was and wiping it off, but by then I was crying and I had all this fucking snot all over me and I thought that I was getting it on him, too, and I just couldn’t believe it...I couldn’t believe he was fucking dead and blue and covered in my goddamn puke.”

Caleb held his teeth together and pushed a loud gust of air through his nostrils.

“I wonder if he saw that? That would be really embarrassing if he saw that.”

Then. Amanda was pulling black hairs out of her face when she looked at Dave in the reflection of the mirror and frowned.

“Most people like to watch TV,” she said.

“That hurts, huh?”

“Yes, Dave, it does.”

“Then why do you do it?”

“I don’t know. I guess I wanna stay attractive for my husband.”

Dave rolled his eyes and leaned back, lying flat on the bed, staring at the fan whirling above him. He turned his head to the side and found his daughter standing in the doorway, wearing tiny pink shorts and a snug tank top that fit her like skin, complete with

spaghetti straps and the words, “totally illegal” inscribed between her noticeable nipples. He closed his eyes and reopened them, attempting to focus only on her face.

“Hey,” she said.

Dave repeated, “Hey.”

“Do you think I could have some money?” she asked.

“What?”

“Mom doesn’t have any cash and Taylor and me are going to the movies.”

“Well...How are you getting there?”

“Taylor’s sister drives.”

“I can take you.”

Anne’s skinny little eyebrows sank low as she said, “That’s okay.”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why can’t I take you?”

“Maybe because I don’t want you to take us.”

Amanda turned around. “Dave, please.”

“Well, maybe I don’t wanna give my cash to a little bitch,” said Dave.

“Yeah, well, maybe you should jump off a...fucking building,” said Anne with her little hands affixed to her skinny hips. She was Amanda then, thought Dave, she was ugliness in little pink shorts.

Then again. Dave thought he looked his most beautiful when he was bathed in orange light, when the sun was close to the water, and Danny was looking out into it, Dave sitting next to him, drinking, smoking on the condo balcony. Danny would catch Dave

staring at him, and his eyes would open wider and half of his mouth would smile.

“It’s pretty, isn’t it?” asked Danny.

“Your face?”

“The sunset, Dickhead.”

Dave nodded. “It’s all right.”

“Boy, you’re gay.”

Dave laughed. “You wanna do the metronome for me?”

“No.”

“Come on.”

Danny shook his head, grinning and then stood up and moved inside. Dave smiled and followed him into the bedroom. Danny undressed and Dave hopped onto the bed, stretched out, and stared at Danny’s nakedness. Danny smiled big, his cock sticking straight up and he shook his hips a little so his cock swung back and forth, back and forth again, and Dave watched intently, like some form of important communication was taking place.

“I don’t know why that gets me going,” said Dave.

“Maybe ’cause you’re a sick fuck.”

“Oh, yeah.”

Danny climbed onto the bed, moved his face close to Dave’s until their lips touched, until their fluids intermingled. Then he touched Danny’s face.

“I have to tell you something,” said Dave.

“What?”

“I think it’s possible that I’m in love with you.”

“You’re not sure, though?”

“Well, I’ve never felt like this.” He was quiet, thinking. “That’s pathetic, I know. I’m gonna be fifty and never knowing what that’s like, but I don’t. I just know that I feel a way about you that I’ve never felt about anybody else. And I wish I could be young again...I wish you didn’t have to touch me like this—this old face—when you’re so young and completely perfect...and you’re so innocent. I mean, I know you’re not, but you are to me, and sometimes I don’t think I can handle it. I don’t think I can contain all of it and I feel so stupid ’cause I shouldn’t feel this way about you. About a kid or about another man...or I don’t even know. Because it feels like it’s right and it feels like it’s wrong at the same time, you know? It feels like it’s killing me.”

Danny shook his head. “I don’t understand.”

“I know,” said Dave.

Danny eyes shifted and blinked quickly before saying, “You know what I like?”

“What’s that?”

“I like when you kinda stand above me...and I’m on my knees and you fuck my mouth.”

Now then. “And I just kept thinking if he hadn’t gotten money...if he hadn’t gotten money from that old fucking fag. That dishonest, goddamn cocksucker,” spit Caleb and then frantically moved his hands over his head, like his head was swelling and breaking open and he was trying to hold his skull together before it crumbled, the little fragments spilling over his shoulders. “None of this would have happened.”

He looked at Dave, who looked so weak, and who had a streak of wetness running down from one eye and suddenly Caleb stood, his hands compressed into fists.

“Goddamn you.”

Caleb rushed towards him, and Dave stepped back as Caleb raised his fist and then brought it down quickly, the ball of flesh and bone and blood colliding with Dave’s nose. His nose bent to one side and spurts of blood pissed out from both nostrils. Dave raised his hands to cover it, the blood wetting his palms, slipping between his fingers as he faltered and fell down to one knee.

Dave squealed. “Jesus.”

Caleb struck the side of Dave’s head, causing him to tumble over sideways, one side of his face smacking hard against the linoleum floor. Little spheres of blood were hurled through the air in numerous directions, like streams of light from an exploding firework.

Caleb stepped back when Dave muttered, “God.”

In one deft move, Caleb swept his arm across the kitchen counter, the bottles of Dos Equis shattering against one another, beer gushing out, parts of glass racing towards the floor, and Dave’s cigarettes and matches were launched across the living room.

The porno magazine opened in the air as it soared off the counter, spread like a pair of wings, fluttering before dropping, like a goose that took a bullet.

“Fuck.” Caleb screeched, his eyes closed tight and his breath was expelled in loud, heavy gusts. He put his elbows down on the kitchen counter and then held his face with his hands. He was quiet for a while.

“I knew what he was doing,” said Caleb. “I knew he was sucking your old dick...and I let him, you know. I mean, I was broke and bored and he’d buy me shit, so what did I care?”

Caleb choked a little and began to sob. He glanced down at Dave who started to sit up. Dave moved himself to the wall, leaned back against it.

“I guess I thought if I hurt you, I wouldn’t have to hurt myself,” said Caleb.

He looked at Dave then. In his eyes. Dave set his hands down at his sides, his nose twisted, bleeding, his eyes glistening with tears.

“It’s not your fault,” said Dave.

Caleb nodded. “Yeah, it is. I’m older. I should have taken care of him.”

Dave looked down. Caleb held out his hand to pull Dave up off the floor. Once he was standing, Dave opened his hand so Caleb could let go of it, but Caleb held onto it for a long moment, and said, “I love that fucking kid so much.”

Picture Books of Injured Children

Now. Slivers of shit rested at the bottom of the bowl, one slug of shit wrapping around the other, like the tangled bodies of lovers in a warm bed on a winter morning. Frank grimaced, and flushed the toilet; the dark slugs whirled apart and disappeared into the open mouth on the porcelain floor.

Frank said, “Goddamn.”

He strolled out of the bathroom and stared at Bob, who was sitting up in bed with a quaint smile stuck on his face, not looking at all guilty. Frank liked to call Bob, “Jellohead.”

“Your brain works for shit,” said Frank, “but your bowels are tip-top, dude.” Bob’s face was ruddy and wrinkled, the deep grooves running across his forehead and around his eyes were bloodless cuts that wouldn’t heal, Frank thought, cuts from time, markings that made us all uniform in our ugliness if we lasted long enough. Frank sat in a chair at the edge of the bed and pulled a tiny bottle of Malibu rum out of his pocket. “Can I have your Coke?”

Bob was silent and so Frank reached out and took the can of soda from the nightstand and poured his little bottle of rum into it. He looked at Bob and he was smiling. “I like you,” Frank said. “I mean, I don’t know if you understand one goddamn word I’m saying, but I like how you look at people. At me. With so much sweetness in your eyes—if that isn’t too gay of me to say.” Then he put the can of soda and booze to his lips and drank.

“You know what you are, Jellohead?” asked Frank. “You and me both, I think. You and me are locust shells. I mean, I don’t know how to say it in an elegant manner. It’s an all-encompassing type of thing... It’s at the gut of it. Of this life. We are not special. Right? I’m talking about everyone here. I’m talking about this desire to be something unique or valuable—less indispensable than countless other suckers. And how do we attain this...uh, specialness? We believe in the right savior? Or we have big tits or enormous genitals? We have some musical ability. We can shoot hoops or shake our ass real good, make it look like we’re humping ghosts. Huh? The truth, however, is far less appealing. We’re all the same. We’re all uniquely indistinguishable.” Frank laughed. “We’re all fucked, you know? And even if we had something, some little spark of creativity, of life—it’s passed now. We’re the thing it shed.”

Bob said, “Hmmm,” his lips strapped tight across his teeth, his head moving forward and back, forward and back. He reached his hand out.

“What?” asked Frank. “You want your soda back? You really that selfish?”

“Hmmm,” Bob continued, his hand open wide, trembling.

“Forget it,” Frank said and then took a swig from the soda can.

Bob’s hand crept closer and the humming grew louder.

“Oh, for Christ’s sake, I’ll get ya another Coke, you prick.”

Then. “I hate babies,” Eva said.

Frank looked down at Eva, lying in a kiddie pool, her legs hanging over the sides, wearing little white shorts, which had become translucent in the water, revealing her black bikini bottoms. Her top was also black, tight, and barely covered her breasts. She watched him watching them. The pool was blue and plastic, its bottom covered with little orange

fish, frozen in mid-swim. The fish had gigantic eyes and charming smiles.

“Why do you hate babies?” Frank asked.

“Cause they’re always the most important thing in the room. They haven’t become unlikable yet. They will, of course. At some point. They’ll be as putrid as anybody.”

Frank could see himself in the reflection of the sliding glass door and he was skinny and tan. He was shirtless, his nipples little brown ovals, like two melted chocolate chips. His shorts hung low, almost to his crotch, a little streak of black fur running from the top of his shorts to his belly button, the hairs spewing out in countless directions, like the erratic flickering of flames.

“Get in the pool with me,” she said.

“Okay.”

“Take your shorts off first.”

Frank smiled. “You’re a little slut, aren’t you?”

“I don’t like people calling me that,” she said. “I mean, it’s true, but still.”

Frank slid off his shorts, leaving him naked except for his little white underwear.

He put one foot into the pool.

“Underwear, too,” she said.

Frank paused, looked down and then scanned the yard before stripping his underwear off. He was quick to sit in the water, his legs spreading apart, lying over her legs as he leaned back. He liked the touch of her skin. He liked the fact that she was older than him, nearly eighteen, though, in truth, it seemed like an enormous chasm of time separating the two, and he wanted to reach out and cover the distant, seek out the understanding she must have attained in those years. He was desperate not to lag behind.

“I can see your taint,” she said.

He told her, “On a girl it’s called a chin rest.”

“It’s amazing how creative we are. You know, people...when it comes to naming and describing our genitals and assholes and the spaces in between.”

Frank nodded. “I guess you’re right about that.”

“You have really big balls.”

“You think?”

“Yeah, it looks like you have a peach between your legs.”

He giggled and she seemed to like that.

Eva asked, “Do you wanna get inside me?”

“What, like, screw you?”

“Yeah. Have you ever done that?”

“I’m fifteen,” he said, like the question was ludicrous.

“So? You haven’t, have you?”

Frank looked down, thinking, before saying, “I didn’t think you liked me that much.”

“I don’t. I’m bored.”

It was summer and the heat stuck to their skin like cling wrap. She stood, took his hand, and began pulling him up.

Now. Eva was standing in the lobby of Bright Gardens, in front of the double doors where the morning light flooded in and clung to the linoleum floor, a yellowish glow radiating under her feet. She looked like she was waiting for someone, her arms crossed, staring at the ground. At a distance, Frank was watching Eva from behind the reception

desk, a cup of coffee in his hand, pretending to listen to the receptionist, Heather, “the happy hillbilly,” was smiling big, her little teeth showing, babbling about some new buffet restaurant she had visited the night before.

“They got steak, too,” Heather said, “and okra.”

“I like okra,” Frank managed.

“Oh, honey, I’m like a black when it comes to okra,” she said.

Frank looked at Heather for a moment, his eyes squinting, shaking his head before returning his gaze to Eva. He was amazed that it was her. She looked older now, maybe pushing thirty, though the remnants of her little girl face were still present, fading a little, chipping away. Maybe she felt his stare then because she looked up and found his eyes, and there was recognition.

She moved closer before asking, “Frankie?”

“Yeah,” he said.

“Jesus Christ. What? You work here?”

“Yeah. W-What are you doing here?”

“My Dad’s in this place.”

“Oh. I didn’t know that.”

“Yeah,” she said and then paused. “I’ve never been to see him, though. Since he’s been...sick—or progressed so much, I guess. More accurately.”

“What’s your daddy’s name, sweetie?” Heather asked.

“Robert Bilson.”

Heather looked down at a list of names, whispering “Bilson.”

“He’s in 430,” said Frank. “I know Bob.”

Then. Frank sat in a chair, a towel wrapped tightly around his waist, still slick with pool water, and he was shining in the light from a lamp, little tremors of cold running through his limbs. Eva was smiling, sitting across from him on the edge of a waterbed, one leg over the other, her body subtly bobbing.

“You look nervous,” she said.

He shook his head. “No. Cold.”

After a lengthy pause, Eva offered, “Mr. Worland smokes pot.”

“How do you know that?”

“My mom said. She used to drink bourbon slushes with Mrs. Worland.”

“I thought your mom left?” Frank asked.

Eva looked away for a moment, then asked, “Is your dick hard?”

Frank looked down, as if to check. He crossed his arms and rubbed his triceps for a moment, and then asked, “What if Mrs. Worland comes home?”

“She never comes home before five and Pothead comes home even later.”

“Oh.”

Eva stood and walked out of the room. Frank looked at the bed, which was covered in a blue comforter; the design of a dolphin bursting out of the ocean in the center, the dolphin’s gray-blue body arched, rivulets of sea spilling off its tail, and little white drops of painted water splattered across the left edge of the bed. He glanced up at a fan whirling above and then down to a photograph hanging on the wall of the Worland family: Pothead, Mrs. Worland and little baby Worland in his mother’s arms, smiling with his hands up. In his mind, he could hear the infant cooing.

Eva reappeared and tossed a condom on Frank’s towel-covered lap, saying, “Here.

We can't be too loud, okay? I don't wanna wake that stupid baby up."

Frank looked up at her as she moved her fingers through her hair, placing thick strands of black behind her right ear. He glanced down at the condom, picking it up and then looked at her again. She smiled and said, "You put it on your dick."

Frank smiled, too. "Thanks, asshole."

"Would it help to see my tits?" she asked.

He nodded sheepishly. Eva reached around her back and undid the clasp of her bra. The bra slipped down and she pulled it off slowly, like peeling the last bit of shell off of a hardboiled egg, exposing her pale breasts, little lines of blue weaving under the skin with faded red nipples that were large and low on each breast, as if the nipples were slowing crawling downward and soon they would simply drop off and soundlessly hit the floor.

She looked down at herself. "I need a tan."

"Can I see the rest of you?" he asked, quickly, like it was urgent.

She nodded, moving her hands down over her belly, and then her fingers slithered into her panties, dragging them down over her thighs. After the panties shimmied to her feet, she kicked them off and waited a moment before asking, "Do you think I'm pretty?"

"Uh-huh."

She immediately said, "No, you don't."

"I do," Frank said, standing, unwrapping himself from the towel. He stepped closer and reached out to touch her face. She wasn't looking at him when his lips slowly docked with her open mouth, his upper lip squishing against her front teeth.

She stepped back, sat on the water bed, her hand holding his as she pulled him down to her.

Now. “You want company?” Frank asked.

“No,” Eva said. “But I don’t want to be alone.”

She took his hand and moved into her father’s room. Bob was sitting in bed, a Coke on the nightstand, and as was his custom, he was grinning. Bob wore a tight T-shirt, faded white with the word, “Jell-O” in bright red letters running across his sagging breasts. Frank regretted giving the shirt to Bob then, feeling Eva’s small hand in his, tight, like their two hands had been soldered together, her hand trembling, and he wanted so badly to hold onto to it forever, just to give it cover, keep it warm, like a baby.

“Hi, Daddy,” she said.

Bob was quiet.

“He doesn’t talk,” Frank offered.

“Can he?”

“I don’t know. Never heard him.”

Eva’s hand slipped from his and she went to her father and kissed his cheek. “Can you say, hi?”

Bob hummed, smiled.

“Hi,” she said again.

Frank stepped away from the bed, meandering towards the window, looking down at the streets outside, the cars scurrying in multiple directions, like ants after the mound’s been kicked open.

“The last time I heard him talk,” she said, “was at the library by his old place and he asked the girl behind the desk if they had any picture books of injured children.”

Frank smiled, not facing her.

She whispered, "He looks like an infant, huh? In his eyes."

He turned to her. She was holding her father's hand now, studying his face.

"I guess," he said.

"Is he gentle?"

"Yeah."

"That's funny, you know? He was so hard most of the time. Even before my mother left." She was quiet for a moment before saying, "he never looked at me like this." She gazed at Frank then, like he was a witness to something miraculous, her eyes gleaming in the light, sheathed in tears. "It's really something, isn't it?"

Frank nodded and swallowed. "It is."

She didn't speak, like she expected him to say something more, but Frank looked down, checked his watch, wanting to go home and sleep. Well, masturbate maybe and then sleep.

"I'm off now," he said. "I mean, I started last night at eleven."

"You must be tired."

"I guess, yeah. You don't live around here anymore, huh?"

She shook her head. "Asheville. I'm staying at some shit hole by the interstate and driving back tomorrow."

Frank nodded. "Do you know where the Big Blue Bar is?"

"Uh...yeah, I think so."

"I don't work tonight so I'll be there, you know, if you're bored."

She said, "Oh."

Then. Everything was so soft, he thought, his face pressing into her right breast and

she was giggling. He looked at her, all nostrils and an open mouth from his vantage point, her eyelids nearly closed. He returned his gaze to the skin before him, which became blurry as he painted her nipple with his spit-lathered tongue. He moved inside of her then, his ass tightening, one of her hands firmly stuck to one of the clenched muscles. She made a noise, a soft moan that trailed off into silence before returning into something louder and shriller, sounds of encouragement, he thought, code for “fuck me as hard as you can muster. Fuck me until every bead of sweat pours out of your skin and your mouth loses every drop of spit and your eyes sink into your head and you become so tired you fall off the bed and slip into a deep coma, your dick all shriveled and withered between your legs, all sticky with jizz.”

“Frank,” she spit from her lips in a hush and the sound was sweet in his ears.

His response was an exaggerated groan. Her arms fell back behind her head, and Frank kissed the tip of her nose, which made her smile. The waterbed jiggled like Jell-O, and the dolphin sprang from the side of her naked body. Frank could only hear breathing, the sound of skin hitting skin, the sloshing of water in plastic, and a dull ringing in his ears, but those noises were suddenly replaced by the sound of a distant cry; a violent, awful, piercing shriek. He stopped and stared at the closed bedroom door.

“No,” said Eva. “Don’t stop.”

Frank said, “That’s the baby.”

“It probably shit itself. It does that.” Her palm gently touched his cheek and she steered his head back towards her. “I don’t want you to stop.”

Frank kissed her then, his tongue sneaking into her mouth, his hand holding a breast. But the wailing continued and grew more persistent, like one screech generated several sparks of sound, scream over scream, like the jets of light bursting from a roman candle.

Frank sighed and said, “Shit, I can’t,” and rolled off of her, bouncing a little on the ripples of the bed.

“Do you wanna do this or not?”

“Yeah, but I—”

“Forget the goddamn baby then. I mean, Jesus Christ.”

Frank glared at her. “What is wrong with you?”

“What’s wrong with you?” she mocked. “You want me to get the goddamn baby, Frank? ’cause I’ll get the goddamn baby.”

She stood up and moved towards the door.

Now. “Sometimes I wish I was uncircumcised,” said Frank.

Eva squinted and muttered, “Why?”

“Well, that way my cock would be as creepy looking as my face.”

Frank grinned. The Big Blue Bar was littered with regulars; Clovis was leaning on the bar, looking over at Frank, his eyebrows raised, his smile enormous, and the waitress, Hope, was bending down at the table behind Eva, her tits nearly breaking free of her top as she handed a fat man a Michelob.

“You’re weird,” said Eva.

“And you’re married, huh?” asked Frank.

Eva looked at the ring on her finger like she was finding a wound from an injury she couldn’t remember sustaining. “Oh, the ring. Yeah, I am. I have a child, too.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, a little girl. Alyssa.”

Frank said, “Shit,” and took a sip of Irish whiskey.

“You know, I never dreamed I do to someone else what they did to me.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know. Nothing, I guess. I just—I don’t think I’m a very good mother.” She took a swig of her Corona. “I’m not malicious or anything, I just wonder sometimes if the very act of childbirth isn’t an act of cruelty. I’m sure I heard that somewhere. I don’t know. Maybe nobody’s really good at it.”

“Who’d you marry?”

“Ted...Decker. You remember him? He was a year or two ahead of you in school.”

“No.”

“He played some football in college and he had a great big dick, which was really impressive at the time. Now I don’t give a shit about either.”

Frank nodded, his eyes down, gazing at the small flame on the table, the black wick deep in an opaque jar, the blue bottom of the blaze dancing on a sea of liquid wax. The glow from this flame trembled on her skin and flickered in the blueness of her eyes.

“I look like shit, don’t I?” she asked.

Frank shook his head. “I was thinking the opposite, actually.”

“I’m not even thirty and I’m plucking gray hairs out of my head. I look loose, too. My underbelly. My whole body.”

“Yeah, well, when I think of body—the word itself—I don’t think of something attractive, like beauty or form. I usually think of death. Like it’s a dead thing. It seems like it means that more often than something alive. This body was found, you know, or this body was all bloated and purple. It’s like we fully understand and accept that we’re trapped in this dying thing.”

She pursed her lips and a heavy spurt of air rushed from her nostrils, faintly whistling. “You’re quite philosophical. Is that your way of saying I should be okay with it?”

“Maybe.”

Before a pause could settle in after his words, she quickly said, “Do me a favor.”

Then. The perfect roundness of the infant’s head and his flawless, white skin impressed Frank immediately. The baby’s mouth was open wide, his red tongue perched over the pink strip that ran along the bottom of the orifice. His eyes appeared sealed shut with little strings of tears trickling down over his swollen cheeks, and the sound emanating from the boy was deafening, a veritable knife to the eardrums. The baby seemed to be vibrating as Eva held him up, a hand under each armpit, her thumbs covering his tiny pink nipples.

She was saying, “Shut the fuck up! Shut the fuck up!”

Frank pleaded, “Give him here.” He held his open hands towards Eva, his fingers splayed out like the beams of light from a child’s drawing of the sun.

Eva began shaking the baby, saying, “It’s not about you. Everything is not about you, you little cocksucker.” It was then that she spit in the infant’s face. The clear fluid launched from her puckered lips splattered on the baby’s tiny nose, on his closed eyelids, on his dimpled chin and in his open mouth. The spit was full of bubbles and dripped thickly from the end of the baby’s nose.

Frank took the boy then, turning as he pulled the infant from her grasp, like he was stripping a football, pulling the baby close to his chest, his arms wrapped tightly around him as the boy shook and wailed. Eva pulled the crib over, making loud guttural noises and

Frank turned to watch her stomp on the wooden frame with her bare feet, two slats of wood splitting apart under the force of her skinny, nude body.

She looked at Frank then and she was crying, her arms wrapping around her belly, her mouth hanging open, glistening with spit.

She said, “You won’t fuck me now, right?”

Now. Bob was a man of routine and being roused from sleep at one in the morning was a break in normalcy. His face was contorted in confusion as he stared at his daughter.

Eva asked, “Do you think I can hurt him?”

Frank smiled, hoping she was kidding. She looked at Frank coolly, pushing strands of her hair behind her ear with two fingers. She sat on the bed with Bob, who was still wearing his Jell-O T-shirt as well as a pair of white boxer shorts that were decorated with yellowish-brown stains, Rorschach blots of dried piss.

“I don’t think I could let you do that,” said Frank, leaning against the closed door of the room.

“I won’t leave marks,” she said, like they were negotiating.

“Why would you even want to?”

“Is that really important to you?”

“Yeah, maybe a little. But it’s not my point.”

She seemed annoyed and shook her head. “What does that mean?”

“That’s not your father. Is that not obvious to you?” Frank paused, waiting for an answer that didn’t come. “That is a thing. A thing that smiles and hums and craps that happens to look like your father.”

She shook her head, eyes down, and stood up, moving towards the window. Bob

stared at Frank then, his small eyes narrowly open, a curtain of flesh drooping over each gray eye, and his eyebrows were slanted upwards, thick like two furry caterpillars.

“You’re no doctor, Frank. I mean forgive me, but you wipe ass for a living.”

He glanced at her back as she stood in front of the window, looking out into the night. She placed one hand on the glass, and the circular glow of a street lamp was hovering over her head, making her look like an angel.

Frank swallowed. “So?”

“So you really don’t know. Maybe somewhere in that damaged brain of his, he knows exactly who I am.”

“Even so,” said Frank. “He’s fucking defenseless.”

She turned to face him. “And who isn’t?”

His eyes shifted and focused on Bob’s right hand, which seemed massive and strong. His fingernails were terribly thick and yellow, outgrown, almost like talons. Silver hairs sprouted out from his tough, leathery skin, and the warm light of the bedside lamp adhered to the silvery strands in scattered spots, radiating bright white, like snow falling out of the night sky.

It was an aged hand now, nearly useless, but over the years, it was doubtless the giver of both pleasure and pain. It was the hand that slipped under some girl’s skirt, and it was the hand that balled up and collided with some boy’s mouth, tearing open flesh, extracting blood from body. It was the hand that held unto countless tits, his own rigid cock, and it was the hand that slapped his wife’s face and tickled her underarms, playfully spanked her ass. It was the hand that delivered immeasurable glasses of Kentucky bourbon to an anxious, open mouth. It was the hand that Eva held onto to as a little girl, the hand that

completely swallowed her hand, sweaty and warm, an absolute tether to protection.

“Maybe if you hit him on the side of the skull,” Frank said. “I don’t think you’d see a mark there.”

Without a word, Eva moved toward them. Her slender fingers curled into her palm, then her thumb wrapped across the fingers to complete the fist, and she swung the ball of blood and bone until it crashed into the side of her father’s skull. Bob’s head jerked to the side and his hands sprung from his lap and covered his ears and temples. Bob whined and pleaded with his eyes.

Frank watched Eva step back, breathing loudly, and decided that her commitment to hurting Bob was undeniably weak. Bob looked as if he might cry. Her hand fell to her side and it was no longer a fist, but something pliable and delicate.

She turned to Frank. “Can I go home with you?”

Frank paused before saying, “You’re married. You have a kid. Christ, I’m not that big of an asshole.”

She whispered, “I think it’s obvious that you are.”

Now then. Maybe she was hollowed out, just past the opening of her slit, and if he penetrated deep enough, he’d feel the cool air of emptiness inside of her, and if he slammed his flesh into her flesh hard enough, he’d hear an echo reverberating in her belly. Maybe if his body collided with her body, his shell crashed into her shell with enough force, enough momentum, the two bodies would simply break apart, shatter into bits of body, into ash. His face was on her face, his nose bending on her cheek, and he felt wetness and pulled back to see a tear smeared on her skin. A second tear quickly passed over it, spilling off the side of her face.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, in between heavy breaths.

Eva said, “Nothing,” and smiled. “You’re perfect. So am I. Can’t you tell?”

Old Monkey

Frank held onto his erection as he walked towards the toilet. As a rule, he didn't like to walk nude, but he couldn't find his underwear and he was desperate to piss. It was still dark, but morning was closing in on him, ready to burst through the window with a determined blade of light slicing through the center crack of the curtains. A fat girl was breathing loudly behind him, on her side, one tit stacked on the other, her nipples big and brown, real dark brown, like overcooked pancakes. His piss shot out in heavy streams, stopping and starting until his erection slumped forward like a dead rose.

He shook his penis until the last drops of piss were flung off the tip of it, forming little yellow spheres that hurtled towards the golden-tinged sea, splashing into it, becoming a part of it, blending in and becoming unrecognizable. He flushed the toilet and turned to see if the noise would wake her, but she was steady in her breathing, her mouth open wide, her eyes closed, her nose pointed up, small and perfect.

He took in her nakedness. Her body was rolling hills with the side of her ass being the pinnacle, and Frank wished he was small enough to climb it, lie flat upon it and then roll down the fleshy incline like he did as child on a grassy mound. It would be stupid and blissful.

Then he turned and found himself in the mirror, in the shadows, in the low light. His body looked strong, but his face looked undeniably odd to him. He moved his head closer to the mirror as a little voice in his brain whispered, "Old Monkey." He examined

the cracks in his skin, the deep grooves in his forehead, the oversized pores in his cheeks that looked like little open mouths begging to be fed, and the eyes, which were blue and beautiful, seemed sad to be so completely surrounded by ugliness. His thick nose had nostrils that were enormous, flared holes that one might suspect had the ability to sniff a flea's bowel movement. His lips were plump things, so overstated that Frank carried the moniker of "Pickle Lips" through years of school. In a few years, Frank would be thirty. In time, he thought, he would be even uglier.

Frank closed his eyes, standing idle for a moment, tightening his stomach muscles, trying to decipher whether or not he needed to take a shit.

"What are you doing here?" Missy asked.

"Suffering," said Frank and smiled.

"Do you wanna suffer alone or can I join you?"

Frank held his hand out, palm up, gesturing for her to sit and so she did.

"I didn't think I'd run into anybody I know here," she said.

"Sorry."

She smiled. "I'm not complaining about it. What are you drinking?"

"I'm drinking whiskey. From Canada."

"Is it good?"

"Not so much, no. But I am drunk."

"So you're recommending it?"

Frank nodded. "Absolutely."

Missy grinned big and Frank found her unusually attractive in the soft, blue light

that shrouded her. The place was appropriately called the Big Blue Bar as the lights seemed to stain everything blue; the waitresses all wore tight, cobalt shirts and had flat tummies and great big tits, and blue lips that shimmered like little diamonds were embedded into them. Frank figured that kissing those lips must be like kissing the night sky.

“It’s weird seeing somebody outside of work, huh?” she managed.

“I don’t know. This is my first time, so we’ll see.”

“I’ve never asked you if you like it there?”

“Bright Gardens?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

“No. Do you?”

She shrugged. “Sometimes I think it’s worthwhile, but sometimes I feel like it’s awful, you know? Being around all of that impending death.”

A large shadow swept over Missy’s face and the waitress was speaking before Frank could even look up at her.

“Can I get ya something?”

“Uh, I’m gonna try the whiskey he’s got,” said Missy, pointing at Frank.

“VO,” Frank told the waitress, eyeing her breasts.

“Alrighty,” said the waitress, smiling as broadly as her mouth would allow before turning away and moving towards the bar.

Frank focused on the word, “allrighty,” and recorded it in his mind, installing it in his brain so he could replay it later, when he was alone in the dark, and when his left hand was all slathered and slick with lotion. Frank would ask the darkness, “Will you please suck my cock, please?” and a voice emanating from the black would chime, “Allrighty.”

“Would you please bend over so I can ram you from behind without a rubber?” Again the voice would happily reply, “Alrighty.” “Do you think I could tattoo the words ‘If you’re not Frank, you’re not touching’ right above your snatch?” And the voice, steady and sincere, sweet and musical, would say again, “Alrighty.”

“She’s pretty, huh?” Missy asked.

Frank’s bottom lip extended out as he nodded and Missy smiled. Her teeth looked clean and straight and it seemed odd now that she once had the nickname of “Cuntmouth” around work because of the stink of her breath and the perceived bad blood between her and other members of staff. At that time, she also had a very noticeable black splotch on her front teeth, like she had driven on the highway with her head out of the window, mouth open, and a flying bug had collided against her pearly whites and somehow became embedded into the enamel, permanently affixed in its splattered deadness. A good dentist, a real goddamn magician, Frank thought, had changed all of that. She wasn’t beautiful, but she had shaken off ugliness and settled for something plain, yet undeniably elegant in its simplicity. Her hair was dark, straight, maybe a little too limp, usually pulled back, and her eyes were big and green with a wide, yet not “piggish” nose acting as the centerpiece of her face. Her lips were pink and fat and they glistened in the blue light like she had just finished sucking on a lollipop coated in Vaseline.

“I took a girl home from here last night,” said Frank, immediately regretting having said as much.

Missy paused, her eyebrows quickly climbing the face of her forehead. “Oh, yeah? Was she attractive?”

“No,” he said. “She was willing.”

Missy laughed, as if Frank were charming.

“What was her name?” she asked.

“Uh, Tina. Tania. Or Fatty. I don’t know.”

“Fatty? She was a big girl?”

“Yeah. She was sizeable. Sometimes I think I’d like to be fat, though. I mean, if I was fat, I’d have a sense of humor about it, you know? I’d go to a see a band in concert wearing a T-shirt that said, ‘Hey, I’m your biggest fan.’”

The waitress sauntered up then, setting a glass of whiskey in front of Missy with a polite, “There you are, sweetie.” She turned to Frank, setting a glass in front of him as well. “Figured you could use another.”

“You figured right,” said Frank.

The waitress smiled and then went away.

Missy put the whiskey to her mouth, letting a little of the liquid slide over her tongue. Her eyes closed and her lips pursed, and a sudden rush of breath came spurting out of her, almost like she was blowing a kiss.

“Jesus Christ, huh?” she managed.

“Too strong?”

“You’re not messing around, are you?”

“I’m way past messing around.”

Missy nodded. “Okay. I can drink to that.” She raised her glass and then put it to her mouth, her head jerking back as she downed the whiskey in one gulp.

“No one is ever gonna love you as much as you want them to.” Frank paused,

snorted, looked at her. “I know that. I feel that in the fucking heart of me...in my goddamn bowels, too. Everywhere in me. And that’s a burden, really. That’s an impossibility to make sense out of... You’re just left hurting with it and I’m not—I mean, some people seem to be okay with it, you know? I see these smiley cocksuckers and I wonder what do they have? And why can’t I manage it? I mean, why wasn’t I built like that? And I’m not talking about being buff or having a big dick. Did you think that’s what I was talking about?”

Missy smiled. “No.”

“Good, ’cause I’m not. I mean, I have a decent body and a penis on the high side of average.”

“Okay,” she said.

“What I’m talking about is an internal structure.”

“Like a soul, you mean?”

“No. Not that,” he said, shaking his head and picking up his whisky glass. “Soul is when black people sing. What I’m talking about is different. To be honest, I don’t know what I’m talking about for certain.” The glass came to his lips, the chunks of ice tumbling over each other, clanging against the glass as the liquid spilled into him, burning his throat a little as it flowed down into some empty spot.

“Considering all of the VO’s you’ve had, who could fault you, really?”

“Don’t do that, huh? Don’t just write this off as the ramblings of a drunk. Some weirdo in some shitty bar.”

“I like this bar,” she said, turning her head a little. “The view from here.”

Frank followed her eyes, finding himself staring out of an enormous window,

glimpsing for himself the glowing city across the water. In the blackness of night, the river, which often times looked brown in the sunlight, was now stained in a multitude of blues, golds, and reds that swelled and shrank on the ripples and blurred together into something undeniably lovely.

“Look at that,” he said. “From the outside it looks beautiful, right? It looks like some accomplishment of ingenuity...of what people can design and build. It’s kinda amazing, really, but somewhere—inside there—someone’s pissing on the street or beating their kid. It’s awful. The imperfection of everything. Right down to the littlest things...like even semen.”

She looked at him then. “What?”

“Well, why doesn’t it harden like candle wax, you know, when it hits the skin? Like when hot wax splats on the skin and cools and hardens? And why doesn’t it taste like donut glaze if God’s so perfect?”

She smiled. “What’s with you?”

He was quiet for a moment, his mouth hanging open like he was waiting for the words to crawl out and splatter on the table.

“I’m drunk,” he said and he felt like he might cry.

Maybe she could see that, and that’s why she took his hand then and whispered, “I’m drunk, too.”

“Do you think my breasts are small?” Missy asked.

Frank studied her chest, reaching out with one hand and holding a breast, his fingers sinking down into the softness, like a foot lowering into wet sand. The nipple was

deep crimson and he imagined peeling the nipple off, slipping it into his mouth and chewing on it. It would be gummy and taste like cherries.

“I think these are the absolute right size. I think I like these.”

Frank smiled, and like an imitating baby, Missy mimicked his mouth movements. She pulled off her jeans and bit down on her lip as she slipped off her panties. Frank looked down at her dark fuzz, which was precisely shaped like a downward-pointing arrow. Perhaps it was an obvious guide to some exceptionally incompetent lover, but Frank was quite elated to see it there, preferring a little hair to the completely shaven look.

Frank undressed, too, and his penis sprang up and down like a diving board as the elastic of his boxers slid down over his erection. “High side of average, right?” he said, smiling.

She laughed and replied, “I’m no expert.”

He looked down at it, not liking that it curved to the side a little, like a palm tree in heavy wind. “Well, it works, anyway.”

“Okay,” she said sweetly and kissed his lips.

They lay like stones in Frank’s bed. He moved his hand over his sweat-glazed chest, and then glanced down at his penis, which was a veiny, little thing crinkled up and passed out on his lower belly. Missy was lying next to him with her eyes closed.

“You know anybody who killed themselves?” he asked.

“Why would you ask that?”

“Is that off-putting? That question?”

“I just don’t know why you’d ask that. Why would anybody wanna talk about

that?”

“I don’t know. I guess sometimes I wonder why I haven’t.”

Frank turned his head, looking at her, waiting for her to open her eyes.

“I don’t understand thinking like that. It seems like bullshit pity to me,” she said.

“That’s not true,” he said, sitting up and moving his legs off the side of the bed.

“You say that because that’s what you’ve been told. You’ve been overrun with this strange...ridiculous morality. This idea that life is something sacred when really we’re just the result of some shithead’s hard-on. And I know why I haven’t followed through with it and it’s so goddamn laughable.”

She was silent for a long moment before asking, “Why?”

He felt Missy’s fingertips on his lower back. “It’s that balancing of whether your presence...your existence is any better than the perceived emptiness you’d leave behind. If you understand what I mean.”

He felt the bed shake as her body moved.

She yawned before saying, “You think too much.”

“Yeah, huh?”

“You know I was thinking about a minute ago?”

“What?”

“I was thinking about...that cum tasting like donut glaze thing. And I was thinking I’d prefer if it tasted like crème liqueur.”

A burst of air surged from his flared nostrils. “Yeah,” he said, “I guess I’d suck a dick or two if it tasted like that.”

Frank studied his arms, the veins thick and bulging out as his biceps contracted, forming a hard hump as he brought the free weights close to his shoulders. An enormous mirror ran the length of the wall and he watched himself in it. They all did. An older man stood next to him in a tattered tank top, his old nipples peeking out from the sides of the shirt, his arms rising up and down, like he was hoping to take flight. Two young guys in A-shirts and baggy shorts were doing squats nearby. One was consistently grunting while the other stood behind the grunter, giving encouragement and holding his hands near the barbell for any needed assistance.

The spotter repeated, "Come on. Come on."

Frank watched how they squatted in unison, how sometimes the spotter's hands touched the grunter's skin. He imagined the spotter saying, "Come on. Come on my face," and that made Frank smile, but there was envy in him, too. He went to the gym alone. He set the weights down and yawned. It was early.

Peeps had a long face and enormous ears. Ironically, he was nearly deaf. His eyebrows were thick, white cables that jetted out from behind the tops of his glasses in a multitude of directions as if the hairs were in some extraordinary state of confusion, much like the old man himself. Frank looked at the aged face and it seemed so improbably mangled, like a face made of clay that was so overcooked that it was cracking apart and atrociously malformed.

Peeps was tall and slender, wearing a flannel shirt and suspenders. He spoke of Indiana as if it were Heaven. He wished he was there now with his wife, but she was long dead and Frank was too busy to listen to his shit.

“I don’t care,” said Frank.

“What?”

“Are you gonna eat this?”

Peeps turned his head a little so one of his giant ears could catch Frank’s words.

“ARE YOU GONNA EAT THIS?”

“Naahh,” Peeps said, looking down at the bowl of soup in front of him. “It’s too thick.”

Frank looked down at the bowl and rolled his eyes. “That’s funny, you know, ’cause I heard your wife liked it thick.”

“What?”

Frank grinned. “YOU WANT MASHED POTATOES?”

Peeps nodded. “Yeah.”

“Get some teeth, will you?”

“What?”

Frank picked up the soup, walked out of the room into a long hallway. It was a clogging artery of a hallway, needlessly narrow with hot lights burning overhead, leaving little golden spheres glowing on the linoleum below. Frank strolled along, passing numerous wooden doors, each one marked with a name, except for one or two doors, which were blank because their occupants were freshly in the ground.

Standing in one of the doorways was Helen. She was a new resident to Bright Gardens and she was always desperate to talk, to ensnare one in her web of words, hoping that common politeness would make one stick, helpless to listen. She was smiling now. The light from the window behind her made her face look dark, but the hair on her head

was blazing white in the sunlight. She said, “Jesus came through for us again, Frank.”

“Did he?”

Frank didn’t want to stop, but her hand was reaching out, her thin, long fingers looking like iguana claws. The blue veins in her hands seemed massive.

She touched his arm and her hand was cold. She looked at him with wet eyes. “He didn’t take my grandson, Frank. Did you know my grandson was sick?”

“No.”

“He was. He was real sick, and those silly doctors say they can’t explain it, Frank, but I can. It was Jesus.”

“Okay.”

“They’re smart—those doctors with degrees and things, but they’re bewildered by it.” She shook her head. “But not this harebrained old lady, Frank. I know.”

He studied her face in that moment and it did seem that she knew something he didn’t. There was this undeniable certainty she possessed and he was jealous of her for owning it.

“I’m glad he’ll be okay,” Frank said.

“It’s a blessing,” she said, still smiling as he walked away from her.

Frank turned a corner and began moving down another slender hallway when Missy came out from one of the wooden doors, wearing pink pants and a white golf shirt, the words “Bright Gardens” stenciled just above her right breast.

“Hey,” she said.

Frank looked at the name on the door and whispered, “Shit herself again?”

“Yeah. It’s awful.”

They continued down the corridor, Frank saying, “And it’s not enough we get it from them, you know? I walk into the staff bathroom this morning—a little after fat ass Stevie was in there and that jackal left a log as big as a python in the toilet. Then I thought maybe he tried to flush it and it just wouldn’t go down— ”

“Frank, are you under the impression that I wanna hear about this?”

“Well, not necessarily.”

“I wonder if you shouldn’t take some of that negative energy of yours and run around the block about ninety times.”

“And I wonder why in such an advanced society, we can’t have two separate bathrooms—one for shitting and one for pissing. That way I don’t have to walk into a commode just to take a squirt and have to smell somebody’s disgusting ass.”

“I don’t care about this,” she said. She turned to him, took his arm and the soup bowl quivered in his hand and some of the fluid slipped over the top of the bowl, little orange tears streaking down onto his fingers before plummeting to the linoleum below. Frank stopped and looked at her. She said, “I don’t know how to say this to you. It’s bad, I guess, so I’ll just say it real quick.”

“Okay.”

“But I may be out of place saying it.”

“I don’t—”

“I don’t know if you even have an interest in seeing me outside of this place again.”

“Oh. No, I do, yeah.”

“Okay, then.” She paused and slid her tongue over her bottom lip. “My mother shot herself in the heart some time ago—over three years ago, actually, and I didn’t want to

make a thing of it the other night, but if that's what you are or what you want...I mean, if misery is what you're about, then I can't—I really don't have an interest in being around somebody—”

“Hey, asshole,” he said. “You know, I'm just trying to get this soup back. To the kitchen. I just—I wanna get this soup back to the kitchen, okay? And get some goddamn mashed potatoes for that old fuck 'cause he's probably pretty fucking hungry.”

“Your father's getting bed sores again,” she said.

“What did I tell you about that?”

“What?”

“Don't let him lay in bed all goddamn day.”

“I'm not hearing that language, Frank. Anyway, you're father does what he wants. I can't tell him anything.”

Frank leaned back into the couch. His mother sat across from him with an enormous cat in her lap, her hand moving over the cat's belly, his head lolled back, eyes closed, like he had just taken a big hit of pot. The living room was littered with old photographs and several little rooster figurines. In a frame, set in the middle of one wall was a drawing, which his mother had done of her dead sister. The face was crudely drawn; the eyes were mammoth orbs that practically came bulging through the glass covering, making the dead woman look insane, or maybe she was pleading to be let back into the world of the living. After all, she hadn't wanted to be dead.

“I think maybe he needs something to occupy his mind,” she said. “I was thinking he and I could have a little side business.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. I thought about designing hubcaps.”

“You two are gonna design hubcaps?”

“That was one idea I had.”

“It’s an odd idea, isn’t it?”

“Everyone needs hubcaps, Frank.”

Frank nodded. “Yeah, that’s true.”

His mother took a sip of her wine before saying, “I started smoking again. I know I shouldn’t, but your father smokes so much.”

“I’ve always hated the look of a woman smoking,” he said.

“Me, too, actually. It’s such an awful habit.”

The cat turned over and she began vigorously scratching the cat’s back, near his tail.

“Mouser loves this,” she said and Mouser’s ass rose up as her frantic fingers moved over his fur. “That’s momma’s little guy,” she crooned.

Frank looked at the wall again. Next to his sketched aunt was a picture of Frank as a boy. He was wearing tiny, blue shorts and a white shirt. His upper lip looked enormous, like a flattened rose petal kept under clear plastic in a photo album. He was Young Monkey then. He was smiling with his hands held together, bending forward at the waist, hands between his legs, and he seemed as unfamiliar and odd as the strange illustration of the dead just to the side of him. That little boy was gone.

“Did you see that thing on the news about sperm donors?” she asked.

“What?”

“It’s really kinda scary. This sperm donating. ’Cause lets say you were sperm-doned and you met some girl and she was sperm-doned, too, you know, by the same man. And without any knowledge of it, the two of you have a child. You see what could happen, Frank? This technology that everyone’s so sure is gong to save everything could also make you have a baby with your sister. They found twelve children all living within a 100-mile radius of each other all donated from the same man’s business.”

Frank stared at her for a moment and determined that she was genuinely concerned.

“What’s the point of this?” he asked.

“What?”

“Nothing ever changes. You two sit in this place and just—I don’t know, rot. You in this constant state of worry, fussing with that goddamn cat and him in that bed. I mean, how do you not just lose your mind with it? It’s seems like you just—”

“What are you talking about?”

“Occupy the same space, but you...” Frank began moving his hand over his face, as he snorted. “It’s not happiness, though. Is it?” He looked around. “And what the fuck is with all these roosters? Every time I come over—”

“I grew up on a farm, Frank.”

“I know. I just— Did you have a rooster you were particularly fond of or what?”

“No, Daddy hated birds.”

Frank shook his head and looked down, breathing deep through his nostrils. He could hear his father in the bedroom, the television muttering words and music and his father laughing. Frank always felt strange telling people that a truck had fallen on his father, but it was the truth. Sometimes trucks fall on people.

“Do you wanna stay for dinner?” she asked.

“I’m not hungry.”

“You look thin. I don’t know what you’re eating.”

“I don’t really like to eat.”

“You remember that girl down the street? Tall girl with brown hair? She barely ate a thing. When you kids were growing up her mother would force-feed her oatmeal.”

“So what happened to her?”

“She’s a massage therapist.”

Frank smiled. “What’s the point of that story?”

“I-I’m just saying, is all. And I certainly wouldn’t let a woman touch me like that. That massaging business—It’s gross.”

Frank rolled his eyes and said, “You remember that time you found out dad was going to those body scrub parlors and getting hand jobs?”

Frank’s eyes narrowed as he glared at her, and she was quiet. Only the distant sound of Frank’s father laughing broke the silence.

The Big Blue Bar was quiet and so was Clovis. Frank looked at Clovis’ face, at his eyes, which seemed overwhelmingly yellow, like someone had scooped out his brain and placed a lit candle into his skull.

“You know what I said?” asked Frank.

“Hmmm,” Clovis managed.

“I said, ‘Just give me one good reason not to kill myself,’ and so she says, ‘Cause I love you’ and I said, ‘No, no, Mom, give me a valid reason.’”

Frank smiled.

Clovis shook his head. “You’re pitiful, man.”

“You think I’m pitiful?”

“The very definition. You’re narrow in your thinking,” said Clovis, tapping his temple with one finger. Then he reached into his pocket and pulled out a scrap of paper, unfolded it, revealing the words, carotid artery dissection, which was written in Clovis’ own handwriting.

“You know what this is?” asked Clovis.

“No.”

“This is like God reaching down and flicking the side of your goddamn head. My cousin—man’s thirty-three, stroked out and trying to brush his goddamn teeth with a comb. Can’t even talk, just grunting shit, and you think your life is something to be ungrateful for. You need to be kissing that fucker’s ass.”

Frank nodded. “I find you quite philosophical.”

“I’ll give you wisdom, brother.”

Clovis put a bottle of Heineken to his lips. Frank looked down into his whiskey glass, finding his face on the surface of the fluid, his nostrils stretching out to ridiculous proportions, his eyes black and nearly indistinguishable. The waitress approached and her shirt, which was tighter than ever, had a deep slit cut into the neck of it so more of her breasts were showing, and her skin was covered in little glittering flecks of light, like she had been dusted in tiny bits of stars.

“You guys good?” she asked.

“Good as it gets, baby,” said Clovis

“Alrighty,” she said, passing by them, her tits bobbing.

“You remember Nita?” Frank asked.

“We play pool with her?”

“Once, I think.”

“Vaguely. I mean, I seen her around.”

“Seen her ‘round?” asked Frank, “Shit, you can’t miss that girl, she’s three hundred pounds. Married that queer—Teddy. And she was the only person in town that didn’t know Teddy would take a mouth full of cock over a dive into muff any day of the week. And quite honestly, she’s the only woman I ever knew who had an interest in gay porn, but something about one guy eating another guy’s butt turned her on. Everybody down at the porn shop used to call her Duchess. But I tell ya that girl looked like she was gonna cry herself to death the day Teddy left—and no joke, she looked surprised as shit to find out he was a homo. And everybody blamed her, called her a ‘stupid bitch’ and all...and I just felt so goddamn sorry for her ‘cause that big heart of her’s is just as fragile as anybody’s. I mean, we create this world we live in, don’t we? We can choose to believe in whatever we wanna, even if it’s all total bullshit.”

“What’s your point?”

“I wanna believe that. I wanna believe that you can love somebody so much that you miss the most obvious flaws—that you can’t even see the most blatant thing that will destroy the love you have...I bet you anything—any fucking thing in the world that she still loves him. I bet you she can still smell him. That she can still imagine feeling his body at some odd hour of the night, or remember in exacting detail the taste of his lips or the freckle patterns on his shoulders. I bet when she’s dead and she’s in her heaven—or in

whatever place you go when you're dead— that he'll be there, you know, but as young as he is now and he won't find anyone else even remotely sexual. His love for her will be unflinching.”

Frank was in his black underwear, sprawled out on the bed with a glass of wine in his hand. Speakers close to the bed emanated the sound of a sorrowful, gentle voice singing over a mournful piano melody. His stomach hurt and he imagined that his body was a mass of bile, his veins thick with booze, his brain all dried out inside his skull, small and hard as an apple. He was full of spit and shit and piss and cum and snot. His skin was covered in sweat and hair and scars, oils, dick cheese and stink. It's a nauseating thing to be human, he thought.

When a knock at his door came, he was slow in getting off the bed, stumbling a little as he walked to it. He opened the door and Missy was standing there.

“Is this a bad time?” she asked.

“Anytime is usually a bad time,” he said, smiling.

She smiled, too. “One really has to admire your consistency.”

“Come in,” he said. She stepped inside and he closed the door behind her.

Missy looked around and asked, “What are you up to?”

Frank moved into the kitchen and sat on the counter. “Just relaxing...Drinking a little. Thinking,” he said.

“About what?”

Frank bit his upper lip. “Uh, I don't know. Just how things don't get easier...they don't get better, they just get a little more remote. The pain, I think.”

“I don’t get you,” she said. She was smiling and shaking her head. “What possible good comes from that?”

“What?”

“Dwelling on it— taking things out to their most awful conclusions. Letting all of that shit lay in your gut like concrete. I’ve done it, Frank, and it doesn’t do any good.”

Frank’s tongue crawled out from his mouth and coated his bottom lip with spit.

“What do you want?”

“Nothing. I don’t want anything.” She moved to the refrigerator and opened the door. “Except maybe something to drink?”

“I think there’s some caramel crème liquor in there.”

“Mmmm,” she said, bringing it out. She had her hair pulled back and her skin was glowing gold in the solitary light burning above the oven. The low light created shadows, which had an unusual way of illuminating beauty. Hard light would destroy it. He wanted to be the shadow that hung down from her nose and lingered over her lips.

“Why are you here?” he asked.

“Cause you’re too much of a dumb prick to come to me.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. You’re too scared to admit what you’re really afraid of—of what you really want and I won’t make you say it.”

Frank looked down for a moment and said, “Huh. I don’t think I like you very much.”

She smiled. “I know.”

He took a swallow of wine. “Do you wanna stay over?”

She nodded. "I do."

"Okay."

Her hand moved over his arm and then down to his belly. She rubbed it and kissed his ear. She was behind him, both of them lying on their sides, Frank's eyes closed. He could feel her warmth on his back, that touch of softness on his skin. It was something like sweetness.

"This is nice, huh?" she whispered.

"Yeah," he said, "Maybe in the morning you could go down on me...and then we could have eggs."

Epilogue

“Did you know a baby in the womb can inhale its own feces and block its own airway? I mean, talk about getting started off on the wrong foot,” said Frank. He laughed and stared into the old man’s face. “It’s apparently incredibly rare, but on occasion, they even die. Choking on their own shit.”

“Ah, Frank,” said the old man, smirking, “we’re all choking on our own shit here.” His name was Hampton Bliss, and he drank VO. As a young man, he worked at The State Department, even briefing Kennedy once, and as a hobby, he took black and white photographs of naked women as he traveled the globe. Hampton once told Frank, “photographing a woman is a splendid aphrodisiac. And please allow me to be uncouth for a moment, but the only thing tastier than a Japanese plum is Japanese pussy.”

Frank looked at himself in the mirror behind the bar. Over his shoulder, in the distance, he could see Shay, a chubby, black girl who was holding her bare breasts in her hands, pushing the orbs together, making them look like two enormous Lindt chocolate balls kissing each other. She was quite affectionate with Hampton, who often spent his afternoons staring at her breasts as if he were in some intense negotiation with them. In truth, Hampton was stoned on Loritabs, which he often shared with Shay, and the two of them would slowly and painlessly move through time. She would dance around Hampton, revolve around his planet head with her malleable moons, her soft sacks of fat colliding with his old skull and she’d say, “Suck that nipple off,” pressing a brown peak into his open

mouth. Frank hoped maybe one day Hampton would actually do it, and the nipple with literally detach, pop right off her tit as he sucked it in, and the nipple would get lodged in the old man's throat. Then maybe Hampton would spring to his feet, and in the low light and the wordless, pulsing music, Shay might mistakenly believe Hampton had taken to dancing. She would smile big and turn and shake her gigantic, round ass at him, bobbing it up and down until the old man crumbled to the floor as limp and rubbery as an unfilled balloon.

Frank squeezed his nose with his fingers and felt his left bicep involuntary twitch. He turned to the old man, who looked smug in his white beret cap and oversized eyeglasses, the tops of which were buried in his menacing eyebrows.

"I'd take that, though," Frank said.

"Take what?" asked the old man.

"The knowing it choked to death on feces over the not knowing."

"I'm afraid I don't follow you, Frank."

Frank said, "When my wife had our little dead baby."

"Stillbirth, they call it," Hampton noted quickly as if he had been waiting to pounce on the mistake, like a cat lunging and sinking a claw into the back of a lizard.

Frank said, "The doctors couldn't explain it. They said sometimes babies are just born dead and we don't always know why. Even after cutting it open and looking at its little insides. It's some unexplainable mystery. Can you imagine that? After all of this science and they can't look at this small animal, this tiny human machine and tell you why its parts aren't working. It's simply God's little 'fuck you.' And that not knowing, for me, was nearly as awful as burying It." Frank closed his eyes and said, "Then I think, maybe he

knew better than to actually be born.”

Hampton said, “Dark, Frank. Much too dark. You’re being lurid.”

When Frank opened his eyes he was immediately drawn to Shay in the mirror, still distant, atop the stage with her wildly writhing arms outstretched, the fleshy pockets hanging from the backs of her arms swiftly swinging back and forth, filled hammocks of flab. Frank knew Shay was some child’s mother. Shay was even a mother when she turned to the nearly non-existent crowd and spread open her butt so people could take a gander at her anus. Look, Mom’s asshole.

The bartender, a fuzzy-headed grinner, moved towards Frank and the old man. He was thin and tall and young. His mother was a black woman who sang about the wonder working power in the blood of the Lamb and his father was a white man who hung himself in a hotel room in Atlanta on Christmas years before. The bartender wore a dark shirt with strange, orange letters running across the chest that read, “Vampire Weekend.” He looked Hispanic, and he even spoke Spanish, though he confessed one night that he only learned the language with the specific intention of meeting Brazilian men in Miami. The bartender once told Frank, “There’s just something about an uncut cock, you know? They look fatter, and you pull that skin back and the head pops out at you--reminds me of playing peek-a-boo with a baby.”

The bartender pointed at them and smiled. “You guys doing all right?”

“Oh, I’m remarkably well,” said Hampton. “However, Frank here is a tad dour.”

The old man frowned dramatically, like a mime, like a real asshole, Frank thought.

“No. I mean, drinkwise.” said the bartender, his smile growing wider, his hand reaching up and digging into his hair, which looked like caramel-colored globs of dryer lint

clinging to his head.

“Fine,” the old man said slowly, his lips tight and puckered, like he was trying to slow the word down as it spilled out of his mouth.

Frank nodded in concurrence. The bartender moved away them, into the shadows at the end of the bar. Hampton leaned into Frank then, his stinky breath slithering into Frank’s nostrils as he whispered, “Shay told me he was a ‘powerbottom.’ Do you know what that is?” Hampton looked genuinely confused, his massive eyebrows arcing up.

Frank smirked, and thought about it. “Well, I suppose in the cosmic sense, we’re all powerbottoms. We’re all being thoroughly, deeply, and furiously slammed in the butt.” Frank giggled. “He’s just fortunate enough to enjoy it.”

Hampton leaned back. “Well, it sounds perfectly dreadful to me.” He crossed his legs, and put his veiny hands in his lap, looking rather dainty.

“Do you know the difference between an atheist and an agnostic?” asked Frank.

Hampton shook his head. “Is this a joke?”

Frank sipped his wine, which was dry and oaky. “Agnostics still have a little bit of an imagination..,” he said. “Plus, I always thought, who could be so definitive? About anything? These atheists. But I remember, looking down at that small dead thing and just letting go of God. In an instant. In a burst. Like coming all over my tummy.”

Hampton cringed. “Too lurid to too vivid, Frank. Impressive.”

“Missy’s the opposite,” Frank said. Missy was his wife. She was fit and shapely and ate yogurt. “She’s tangled up in this weird religion,” he said. “Metaphysical research, they call it. God’s name is Yahweh, and somehow this is important. And she’s in this support group for parents who’ve had stillborns. If you can imagine such a sick, depraved act as

getting together with other sad-sack assholes and crying over dead babies? And you just know everybody's baby was gonna be this perfect, splendid thing."

Hampton pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and then peeled his eyeglasses off of his head. "You are depressing me tonight, I must admit," the old man said, polishing the lenses.

In the mirror, like a glowing apparition in the harsh spotlight, Shay was bending over, showing her behind and her baby exit simultaneously. Frank remembered looking closely at her naked skin one night, a massive constellation of dark zits spread across a galaxy of ass. "I'm depressing me, too," Frank said.

The old man put his glasses back over his eyes and licked his lips, which looked as wrinkled as old grapes and said, "They expect it to rain tomorrow."

"I need distractions in my life, I think," said Frank. "Hobbies. Like you. You're artistic. You take pictures."

Hampton quickly brandished a finger, pointing it sternly. "Make photographs, Frank. Anybody can take a picture. Like anybody can have sex, but it doesn't necessarily mean they should appear in pornography. It's pre-visualization, it's the hours in the darkroom, discards, and tiny, nearly imperceptible variations. Did you know photography literally means drawing with light? Though I much prefer painting with light -- pristinely painting, let's hope. The term, painting, is so much closer to the truth."

Frank made a noise, a grunt, a "Hmm" sound that burst out of his nostrils instead of his mouth. He asked, "You know what I think?"

"What's that?"

"I think you need to get your cock pristinely painted by Shay's big ole tongue."

The old man's bushy brows rose, but his voice did not. "I'm sorry?"

"You're an arrogant cunt," Frank said, "and you're preoccupied with yourself. You're not listening to me talk about inconceivable loss."

Hampton nodded. "Do you know why you're doing that?"

"Why?"

"Because you're drunk."

Frank agreed. "I am" He slipped his right hand into the front of his pants, maneuvering his fingers into his underpants and peeling his testicles off of his warm thigh, the scrotum clinging to his thigh like a cooking egg on an ungreased skillet. He leaned his head back and closed his eyes and bit down on his bottom lip.

Hampton said, "I think you've had enough."

Frank said, "You ain't kidding." Then he turned to see Shay walking off stage and a disfigured man named Mickey standing for her, clapping his enormous hands. Mickey's nickname was "Bulletbrains" because Mickey had once, as a young man, shot himself in the head. He placed the gun under his chin and the bullet ripped through his mouth and exited at top of his forehead. He lost an eye and there was a quarter-sized indentation at the top of his head, a hole covered over by skin, as fragile, perhaps, as thawing ice over a riverbed. Frank wanted to pierce the skin stretched snugly over the void to see if Mickey's head would suddenly hiss and slowly deflate. Mickey was smiling big, his mouth a pit of darkness with a mere two or three dagger-shaped teeth poking out of the black. He began laughing and his laughs were expelled with a cough. A smoker's laugh, Shay had called it. Frank wondered what was so goddamn funny.

The lights in the bar became brighter and Frank turned to the old man. "I heard a

rumor.”

“Oh,” Hampton managed, not returning his stare.

“I heard you had Shay over to your house. And you paid her to play with herself on your bed while you watched. I heard you sat in a chair and draped a smock over yourself so, I guess, she wouldn’t have to look at you. At what, I must imagine, is something like staring at a zombie. And then you did your little creepy business. And despite the whole thing making me want to never stop puking, I also thought it was strangely kind of you. It was considerate. And I guess I was looking for you to be that kind to me now.”

Hampton stood and pulled a twenty dollar bill out of his pocket and put it on the bar. For a moment, he put his hand on Frank’s shoulder and Frank flinched, like the old man was touching his bare skin with cold fingers. “When she left,” he said, “I wanted to die.”

Hampton moved toward the exit. He always walked swiftly, like he was a baited hook being zealously reeled in by an impatient fisherman. The old man stepped out into the breezy darkness and disappeared. Frank shook his head with regret. So many of his conversations seemed to be ending with a terse exit, like the smash cut to black employed at the end of so many arthouse movies. He thought of the conversation he had with his wife in the morning. She had eyed him with same type of burning resentment. He remembered staring at her as she slept, just mere moments before she woke, and thinking that she was lovely, but wholly unrecognizable. She had not been charred in some furious fire or mangled in an awful, blood-splattered wreck, and she had not yet become old or fat or chopped her hair too short or capped any of her imperfect teeth. She had not stopped wearing make-up or smelling of clean laundry. She simply had, in time, become someone

else. She was very warm and soft in bed, her breaths quiet and even, like the breath of a baby expelled from delicate, little lungs, and he would watch her in this state of sweet vulnerability and wonder who she was and how she had come to be splayed out on in front of him.

She stirred then, and snaked out the warm sheets, moving toward the bathroom and he noticed that her panties had become wedged deep into her ass, like the cotton had fused itself to her supple skin. She found her face in the bathroom mirror and studied it, collecting eye boogers with her pinky and then tilting her head up to look into her tiny nostrils.

Frank asked, “Are you going to see Rick today?” Rick was her therapist. Frank knew her therapist was a vegan and imagined him to be a frail, tall man with a skid of black hair above his upper lip and a head full of short, frizzy hair that sometimes captures direct light like a spider’s web tenuously collects beads of rain.

Missy eyed Frank suspiciously. “Yes.”

Frank was in a puffy chair next to the bed, drinking a glass of orange juice. “Do you think he finds you attractive?”

She smirked then and began arranging her hair. “Everybody finds me attractive.”

The tiny, gray kitten they had gotten shortly after the baby died scurried across the floor like a roach discovered in a burst of light. Frank had only referred to the cat as “it.” “It loves hugs,” Frank would say in a shrill voice, squeezing the cat until it squirmed away from him, free and fast, disappearing under something. Frank would snatch it up and stare into the cat’s big, open eyes and say in a high-pitched squeal, “Let Frankie beat you.” Missy called the cat, Candice, or “dear heart.” Candice was wrapping herself around

Frank's foot, enthusiastically gnawing on his big toe, but with a sustained delicacy, sneaking an occasional lick into her foot-fighting repertoire.

"Rick recommended someone for you," Missy said, walking out of the bathroom, looking at Frank.

"Why would he do that I wonder?"

"He just thought, based on what I've told him, that you might wanna see someone."

"He'd be wrong."

Missy nodded. "Whatever." She pulled the cat from Frank's foot and lay in the bed with her, cradling the writhing thing in her arms. Its fuzzy face was snug to her left breast.

"Has he talked to you about meds?" asked Frank.

"Not everybody's a pillhead, you know? Plus, Rick's not a doctor."

"What?"

She repeated him. "What?"

"He's not a doctor?"

"No, he's a counselor."

Frank laughed. "That's surprising."

"Why? If he helps, he helps. What's the difference?"

"The difference is enormous. It's the difference between being the manager of a Wal-mart or being the paraplegic who greets you when you walk in the door."

She opened her arms and the cat sprung loose in a quick jolt of movement.

"You know what? I'm really not interested in hearing your insults about a person who's been really good for me, Frank." She stood then and moved out of the room while Frank scratched the back of his neck, his fingernails scrapping two ballooning zits that

itched him. He was pressing the pimples with two fingers when the bartender came and leaned forward on the countertop; his body impossibly thin, like he had been wholly constructed of twigs instead of bones, and his clothing was as snug fitting as a shell is to a tender egg. He looked like a boy on the verge of puberty, but simply unwilling to jump into the cold chasm of accountable manhood. “Hampton looked pissed,” he said, half-smiling, and his big, brown eyes were planets of kindness.

“I rate pretty high on the asshole meter,” said Frank.

The bartender smiled with genuine amusement. His nose was long and his grin was wide and flawless. He could sell toothpaste. He stared at Frank, like he was waiting for him to say something more, and so Frank mustered, “You gonna vote this year?”

The bartender nodded. “definitely.”

“My wife says we shouldn’t put so much faith in a one man.”

“What does that mean exactly?”

Frank waved his hand. “Who knows?”

An eruption of red light bathed the bar as Joan, a broad-shouldered, pale girl, walked onto the stage behind Frank. Frank glanced over the bartender’s shoulder, seeing the sparse crowd in the mirror and an exuberant Mickey standing, clapping heartily, like a frenzied contestant on *The Price is Right*. Two or three men, in unison, bellowed, “Joan.” The men exaggerated the word, dragging it out on the hot air of the club, like a child drags his sneakers across the sidewalk to slow down a careening bicycle. “Jooooaaan.” It was like a watchword between the men. And Joan smiled slyly, held her arms out and then pivoted her thin hips to the pulsing techno beat. One of the men had bigger breasts than Joan did.

“I’ll tell ya,” said the bartender, “I really hate that proposition against gay marriage. It’s just so insulting. You know what I mean?”

Frank nodded. The bartender had the annoying habit of frequently using the phrase, “You know what I mean?” as if his thoughts were so complex, so utterly confounding that Frank might need clarification.

Frank agreed. “It’s as arbitrary as banning two alcoholics from getting together. In fact, that would make more sense.” He held up his glass, like he was toasting, and then took a swallow of wine. “When will America get its head out of its ass?” said Frank, “And make some room for some cock.”

Judah looked like a half-stuffed scarecrow with his big, fat head and bulbous gut precariously perched on two impossibly thin legs. He was a troll on stilts. His head was mostly bald with gray spikes running around the base of his skull and around the tops of his ears. He was shaven, but little islands of fuzz were scattered across the sea of skin that rippled under his chin. He wore a black jacket with bold, red letters reading, Drakkar Noir, stretched across the back of it. Frank walked up and sat next to him at the bar.

“Hello, Frank,” said Judah. His words, like his eyes, were perpetually sleepy.

“What’s the good word?” asked Frank.

Judah’s wide, wet mouth opened. “I’ve always liked the word, conundrum,” he said.

Frank nodded, glancing at Judah’s hairy hand. It looked like a hand made of half-risen dough, an Omega watch strapped tightly around the wrist and a gold band with a flurry of diamonds prettifying the pinky.

“I heard you went to Vegas,” said Judah.

“Grand Canyon, too. Which is a hell of a ride from Vegas, but it was our compromise. I wanted to go somewhere fun and she wanted to stare at a big, goddamn pit.” To Frank, the Grand Canyon looked like an old, dug grave waiting to be filled. If he had his dead baby with him, he would have simply tossed the infant into it, watching the baby skip like a stone against the wall of serrated rocks that stretched down to its awful depths. The canyon, like God himself must be, was beautiful and treacherous, awe-inspiring and inadvertently lethal.

Driving east, away from the casinos and towards the new morning sun, Frank listened to his wife chewing vociferously on Swedish fish. The gummy candy was red and chewy and her busy mouth was making a repetitive sucking, slapping, wet noise.

“Are you enjoying those?” asked Frank.

Missy had her hair pulled back tight into a ponytail, her head crowned with a pink ball cap, and red-colored sunglasses covered her eyes. “Huh?”

“What? You can’t hear me over your fucking chewing?”

Missy shook her head and crinkled her nose. “What are you talking about?”

Frank snatched the bag of candy fish from her hand and then opened the driver-side window, stretching his arm out of it, the bag fluttering and crackling like a dead leaf, the red fish spilling out, darting like minnows in the stream of rushing air.

“What is your problem?” asked Missy calmly and Frank glared at her, noticed her mouth ajar, her tongue curling up and digging into her back molars to undoubtedly excise sweet, sticky fish remnants. He turned his eyes back to the road, which seemed endless.

The bartender approached Frank with his smile in tow, his shirt snug as skin, with a

belt of illustrated piano keys wrapping around his teeny waist and skin-tight jeans that seemed to be either restraining an impressively huge penis or a rolled-up sock.

“Franklin,” the bartender said jovially. “You hitting the wine or what?”

“Port, yeah. Something sweet.”

“Like me.”

Frank involuntarily blushed and the bartender winked as he moved down the bar, away from Frank and Judah and towards the wine.

“Why would they let a queer work at a titty bar?” Judah asked.

“Bit of a conundrum,” Frank said, “but the girls love him.”

Judah smiled. “You wanna hear a real conundrum?”

“Hmmm?”

“As you know, I’ve been adjudicated one hundred percent disabled.”

“You’ve mentioned it,” said Frank, smirking. Judah was bipolar and obsessive-compulsive. At 53, Judah enrolled into a graduate program with an online university, and despite his inability to use a computer or write in coherent sentences, he thrived.

“Well, I’ve hit the max you can get in Stafford loans, which is, like, \$139,000. And I’ve had some ‘derogatories’ on my credit report, but they’ve all recently dropped off and I’m suddenly eligible for Graduate PLUS loans.” He tapped a furry finger on the bar top. “Here’s the conundrum. They can’t discriminate against me because of my disability, and I don’t ever have to pay the money back because I am adjudicated one hundred percent disabled.” He grinned, reveling in his own clever deceitfulness. Judah was a man who ate lunch at the homeless coalition and ate breakfast at hotels along the beach that offered free continental breakfast. Though he was Jewish, he went to a Pentecostal church because they

served complimentary coffee. He turned his loan money liquid, taking it out in cash or traveler's checks and keeping much of it locked up in a safe deposit box. He vacationed in the Dominican Republic, a place he hated, because the girls were cheap and aggressive and the "brown beauties" had, as he put it, "the world's best cinnamon buns."

The bartender brought Frank his wine, lingered for a moment, like he had been dazed in a prizefight, grinning vacantly. Frank sipped the wine and nodded an approval. The boy meandered down the bar to a man and woman whose bodies were amorously entangled.

"So how was it?" Judah asked.

"What? Vegas?"

"Yeah."

"It was almost like a task, really. It was something her therapist thought we should do. You know, spend time together." Frank slipped his index finger into his mouth and bit off a sliver of fingernail. The fragment stuck to his tongue, and he stretched his tongue out, and collected the shard, then flicked it off over the bar top. "When we were at the canyon," Frank said, "we were at this lodge, in the lobby area, and this big, Russian woman came barreling into the place, screaming and shaking and she couldn't speak much English, but it was obvious that she had been separated from her daughter while they were down in the canyon. And the more they tried to calm her, the wilder she got. She started shaking this little, blonde chick that worked at the lodge, like it was some big conspiracy, you know? Like they knew where the girl was, but were keeping it a secret from her. And the woman would run outside, just shrieking and calling for the kid, and then she'd run back in, spit out a word or two in Russian and then bolt back out. And everybody just sorta looked at

her 'cause she was so pitiful and scared. It was like her fear was contagious and nobody wanted to get near her. And her face was as red as my wine. I mean, practically glowing. And dripping wet.”

“Did they find the girl?” Judah asked.

“I don’t know. The park police came and then an ambulance and they gave her shot to take her down a notch. You know, people die at the canyon every year. They get lost and found, too, but sometimes they die. It’s kind of strange that we never checked on it later--on the computer or something.” Frank paused to think about it. “I guess it’s not like the movies. In real life, you usually don’t know how people’s story end.”

Judah nodded his concurrence. “That’s true,” he said. “Though in this case, it’d probably make a better story if she died.”

“That’s Tomiko,” said Hampton. “She’s quite proud of her Kimono.”

The old man held a black and white photograph of a lovely Asian girl, her lips parted slightly, her mouth as sweet and slender as licorice rope. Tiny freckles of light were spread around the black pools that were eyes, and her nose was a small nub, a little mound of flesh and cartilage, surely so mass-produced by God that it was unquestionably ordinary. A swath of light was caught in the deep darkness of her hair. She looked straight into the camera, and there was a touchable kindness in her gaze.

“She’s also quite proud of what’s under the kimono,” said Hampton and slid a nude photograph of Tomiko over the one highlighting her heavily patterned dress. Her breasts were small and pointed, and her tummy was a cushion of skin and tender fat. A blossom of pubic hair was spread out above the shadow stem formed when her thighs were pressed

snugly together. “You can see the difference in her face. The exhilaration that comes in being completely uncovered in front of the camera. She quite literally transforms from a sweet girl to a full-fledged, sexual being,” he said.

Frank nodded. “She is beautiful.”

“She is, yes. I can tell you that she and I spent a lot of time in an ofuro, which is a Japanese bath. And the only thing better than a dry Tomiko, is a wet one.”

Frank giggled with the old man who was displaying his rotting teeth. Their friendship had seemingly grown deeper after Frank apologized profusely for his previous outburst, his venomous display of ugliness, which was a habit he was beginning to cultivate more and more with his wife. The night before, Frank and Missy had gone to his parents’ home for dinner. Frank’s parents, as they grew older, looked more and more like cartoon characters. His mother had gotten new glasses, which were oversized and thick and exaggerated her eyeballs. And she had started drawing on her eyebrows and dying her hair an unnatural orange color. His father’s neck had ballooned out until it seemed that he had no chin at all. His mouth was also missing, covered over by an abundant mustache, and his eyebrows were wild weeds growing out at the edge of the cracked pavement that was his forehead.

“Are you worried about your job?” His mother asked.

For dinner, she had prepared cheese ravioli with spinach and a bland tomato sauce. The ravioli felt like it was sticking to the walls of Frank’s throat as he swallowed, like a land slug slipping on the sloped cap of a mushroom. Missy was seated next his mother, stirring her sauce around with her fork, looking bored. He ceased chewing, his mouth mostly full as he said, “Well, more and more mail is sorted by machines.”

“Oh, it’s all becoming automation,” his father said, sucking on the back of his front teeth. It was a strange, kissing sound.

“I hate it,” his mother said. “This system is so hard on people, anyway. And then you start slowly taking all of the humanity out of it.”

“And if it ain’t the goddamn machines replacing you,” his father said, “It’s the Indians or the Chinese.”

“Well, it’s people in general,” Frank said. “People are like a red tide. Collectively we’re a toxic bloom. And you never hear these politicians talk about that. Nothing else will matter until we start seriously talking about population control. And stop celebrating these assholes who have sextuplets or twelve children in twelve years.”

Missy’s fork dropped to the plate, then rattled. “What does that mean?”

“Nothing,” his mother said, her big eyes blinking wildly. “He’s a hothead. Just like Billy.”

Missy glared at Frank and his father sucked on his teeth again. It was a shrill stab of a sound, a lipless smooch.

Frank said, “It means enough with the fucking babies already.”

“Oh, Frank,” his mother said. “What a way to talk to your wife.”

Hampton spoke then, something about a commission and a thirteen year old girl. Frank craned his neck to look around the bar. Mickey, Bulletbrains himself, was prancing around, joyously intoxicated. He was holding the hand of a dancer named Shell, drawing her in close, then spinning her away from him, her breasts dropping down like the jowls of a bloodhound. Her ass was big and amiable, hugging the thigh of man as she sat down on him, arching backward, her arms reaching behind her so she could tickle the back of the

man's neck. Then Frank noticed Joan dancing for two men in uniform. They were big boys, but boys nevertheless. And Frank knew them vaguely. They were overgrown children on their way to the Middle East.

The bartender was there as well, chatting up a young man at the bar, leaning in so close they must have been eating each other's breath.

The club dimmed to near-darkness when a beam of light shot out of a black corner and broke into a little specks of lights which splattered across the room when the beam collided with a spiraling mirror ball. Frank stared into the shimmering orb and without the encumbrance of sobriety, Frank knew that there was a God and that the big bang was the moment that God blew his own brains out. Alone and in the dark, in a moment of acute weakness, God simply could not or would not stare down eternity. And with that pop, his head burst apart into tiny bits of glowing brain matter, hurtling out into darkness, spreading out as it drifted further and further into infinite space. This was known as the expansion of the universe. And the universe and everything in it was God's mess, his scrambled brain, his fractured skull, his pristine, twirling spheres of blood. But the notion of space as infinite was categorically false, Frank thought, ironic in its total near-sightedness. We are, all of us, without a doubt or a sliver of hope to the contrary, just mere moments from hitting the fucking wall.