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No closure

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No Closure

A Thesis

Presented To

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree

Masters of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

By

JP Vallières

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MASTER'S THESIS

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Climb the Highest Mountain

When I was on earth I was a pretty good kid. I only got drunk when I needed to get drunk. We'd have these big teenage parties in the woods. We'd stack dead logs on the fire and pass a bottle of Peppermint Schnapps around and tell stories about our lives. My life wasn't that exciting so I lied most of the time. I said I could bench press three-hundred and once told everyone I wasn't a virgin.

Now, here I am bagging groceries for people like me, people who thought somehow it'd be better to die than go through life with a broken heart. Truth is, as soon as I arrived I totally lost my love for Stacy Wagner. I'm not bragging or anything, there's just a realization that happens after you kill yourself. It's like all that teen-confusion evaporates and what you're left with is a solid understanding of the basics: Eat, drink, and find someone that loves you back. Not even sure what I saw in her in the first place. My sister warned me, she said, "Brother, Stacy Wagner will hurt you. Brother, she barely knows you're alive."

Well, maybe Stacy didn't know I was alive when I was alive, but she sure as hell noticed when I died. Because, get this, a little after I killed myself she did the same. She

must have sucked the end of her exhaust pipe because she was all blue and her eyes were glazed over.

I didn't recognize her at first. I was bagging canned goods, watching them fall through the holes in the bags. That was my job. I took the outdated beets and green beans and dropped them to the floor. No one bothered to tell me I wasn't doing it right because we were all defeated and when you've lost this bad there's no point in arguing.

Except Stacy Wagner. She said, "Hey, can't you find a bag without a hole?"

I looked up. "Stacy?" I said. "When did *you* get here?" This was the first time I felt self-conscious about the hole in my head. It's not an uncommon look here by any means, but Stacy was new to our land and probably a little grossed out.

"When I heard about you killing yourself I just couldn't go on," she said.

"Really?" I said. Sure, I was dead and way beyond ever caring about her anymore, but I was also flattered.

"Actually, no, that's *not* the truth," she said. "You just got so much attention. All those people at your funeral. No one even *looked* at me."

"We all make mistakes, Stacy," I said. There she was again, in my afterlife.

"I always thought I'd be murdered," she said, all wispy. "A crime of passion."

"Yeah, passion can really fuck you up," I said, scratching the edge of the hole in my head.

"Listen, I don't like this place. Everyone has bed bugs!"

I looked at the trail of bed bugs crawling up my arm. "You get used to it," I said.

"No," she said grabbing my arm. "I don't belong here."

I could tell she was desperate. It nearly restored my heart to its broken condition. It's true, I lost my love for Stacy Wagner, but there was something about seeing her in the afterlife, all blue and frantic, that made me consider giving her a second chance. Who knew, maybe she even needed me.

"Meet me at Burt's for dinner," I said. "We'll talk about it then."

#

So, there I was, in my apartment getting washed up for Stacy Wagner. Never in my wildest dead dreams did I imagine I'd be trying to impress her again. Of course, I had a lot to overcome. There's only sulfur water running through the faucet, and my roommate said he needed our best shirt. Roommates in the suicide afterlife have to *share clothes*. He said, "I'm going on a date with a wrist cutter."

"Damn," I said. I knew I had lost that battle. Fact is, the ones that slit their wrists are the most attractive. They can hide their scars and for some reason always seem to laugh and have a good time, as if the blood that drained also drained out the loneliness and torment.

"You can wear the tank top," he said and threw me an old ratty Bugle Boy sleeveless. The problem was the right shoulder strap had to be tied together.

"Whatever," I said. I put the shirt on and looked into the mirror. I got up close, in a place between the cracks, where I could really see the opening in my head. What a hole, I thought. I grabbed a flashlight and placed it where the bullet exited my skull. The light shined through, making me look like a bright shining star. I also felt the warmth of the light. It reminded me of the time my mother laid the family quilt on my sick feverish body.

#

When I got to Burt's it was buzzing with dead people and the air conditioner was making a rude guttural racket. Stacy Wagner wore a green frumpy sweater and a pair of corduroys that were too big for her. She used baling wire wrapped around her waist to keep them from falling down.

"*Why the fuck* am I wearing these hideous clothes?" she asked.

"You look great!" I said, thrilled to be near her.

"I'm not getting used to anything," she said, determined.

"Maybe we should order," I said.

I ordered breaded calamari and she ordered ravioli. The waiter, a guy with a swollen rope line around his neck, dumped a pile of frozen ravioli onto Stacy's plate and another pile of calamari on mine. Without thinking I dove in.

"What the hell is this?" she asked.

"Food," I said with a mouthful.

"They don't heat it?"

"Oh, sorry, forgot to mention. Impossible to start a flame down here. No fire available. You'll get used to that, too."

The night went on. She talked about all her old lovers, most of whom were my friends: Reardon, Bruins, Fuller, two of the five Worden brothers.

"I never knew," I said. "No one told me."

"You were always so sweet. Picking flowers for me on my birthdays and half-birthdays. Stealing beer for me and my friends. Wait! Wasn't it you I kissed that one time after Van Waldick's prom party?"

“No, that was Ramsey,” I said. Ramsey grew a full beard when he was thirteen.

“Oh,” she said. “He was cute.”

#

The jukebox at Burt’s only plays one song on loop: Kurt Cobain’s acoustic cover of *Somewhere Over the Rainbow*.

I didn’t have anything more to say and was getting more depressed about the way things had turned out for me. So I decided to just go ahead and ask Stacy if she would dance. There’s nothing to lose when you’ve already lost. And losing at this level means you’re one step away from being invisible.

She took a moment to look at the hole in my head. You could tell she was debating whether or not to touch me. “Okay, might as well.”

Her blue skin was loose and cold in my arms. I couldn’t get enough of it.

At some point when we were dancing I felt her relax. She laid her head on my shoulder as if she was accepting this strange new world. Of course, I wasn’t exactly sure if it was a sign of defeat or exhaustion.

Then she whispered in my ear, “Sorry we never kissed.”

“You don’t have to apologize,” I said. “Those days are over.”

“Why don’t you kiss me now?” she asked.

“Right now, in front of everybody?”

Before I knew it her lips were on mine. She was icy and full of fumes. With this kiss, sensations of the living realm flooded me: morning grass under my shoes, my father’s rusty Camaro in the driveway, hot sun reflecting off the lake, a fresh apple on a

tree, and telling lies around a fire with friends. Right then I wanted Stacy Wagner more than ever.

“Was that your first kiss?” she asked as she pulled away.

“How’d you know?”

“I always know.” Then she went on her tippy toes and put her lips over the hole in my head and blew into it. Her air was all cold and damp. The fumes stung the tender sections at the back. Then she put her fingers on it and said, “You poor, poor thing.”

“It’s nothing, really. Just a hole,” I said.

She took her pinky and slid it in. It felt good. I didn’t want her to take it out. It felt as if it was made to go in and stay there. “Should I tell you why I did it?” she asked.

“We don’t talk about why we’re here,” I said.

She kissed me again. The sweet fumes of exhaust enveloped me. The fumes filled my lungs and traveled up the length of my spine, making me shiver.

#

Over the next month I staggered through this gray cursed land. I couldn’t have been happier, really. I felt as if I were dreaming one of those sunny dreams. We didn’t make love, we didn’t kiss on the lips again, but she let me nuzzle her neck, buy her groceries, and pick the bed bugs off her back.

One day she said she wanted to move to the desert.

“I’ll move to the moon,” I said.

“You’d do that for me?”

“Just name it,” I said.

We spent the remainder of the day holding hands and walking alongside a thin canal.

“I can’t wait to get out of this humidity,” she said.

“All that space, maybe we could get us some roosters.”

“Roosters?”

The only chickens available are roosters.

“How do they procreate?” she asked.

“Beats me,” I said.

There was a towering apartment complex on the other side of the canal. While walking and talking about the desert I looked up, way up, and noticed a woman wearing a red head wrap. She was hanging her clothes to dry over the railing of her balcony. I’m not sure but I thought I saw her stop to watch us. Now there’s true love, she thought, or rather I imagined that’s what her thoughts would be. If I were her I’d know true love when I saw it.

There we were, me and my dead girl, so far below, walking together, touching each other, knowing there was nothing that could tear us apart. I felt myself wanting to be that woman looking down to find such a couple as us.

“All right, well, there is one more thing I want,” said Stacy, all smiles and cheer.

I waited, smiling back at her perfect blue lips.

“Do you think you could talk to the person in charge?”

“Person in charge?” I said.

“You know, the guy who makes the decisions. I heard he lives in the desert. Maybe you could convince him to, you know, put me where the murdered people go.”

“Murdered people?” I said. “You weren’t murdered, Stacy.”

“Of course I wasn’t murdered. That’s not really the point. I mean, we talked about this.”

“We talked?”

“Right, like, you know. I always thought I’d be murdered and that could have happened if I didn’t,” she said as she placed an imaginary exhaust pipe to her lips, her tongue slithering like a snake’s.

“I get it,” I said. “I don’t need the theatrics.”

“Don’t be mad,” she said, putting her arms around my waist and squeezing. “I just thought if there was anyone I could ask for help it’d be you.”

I sat down on a rotten chunk of wood. The *person in charge?*

#

That night I went out and bought a bottle of Canadian Club. The only booze available is Canadian Club. I was planning on drinking enough to forget about my disappointments.

But once again, I was out of luck. My roommate and his wrist cutter girlfriend hogged the couch. All they said to each other was, “No, you’re cuter.”

“No, I swear. *You’re way cuter.*”

I sat on the kitchen floor and listened to them.

“But you *are* cuter. It’s true!”

When I was tired enough I arranged myself on the floor and snuggled with Canadian Club.

I held the bottle and kissed the label. “You’re pretty cute for a bottle,” I said.
Truth is, I never even opened it.

#

The next morning I made some phone calls and learned about a guy, Russell Reed, who lived in the desert and had some weight with the authorities. He was a short man with an ax blade stuck into his bald head. He said it, the ax blade, was a metaphor or something about the way life used to be. He also wore socks with red stripes.

“Socks?” I said.

“It’s all I wear these days.”

I thought about what it meant to walk the desert in socks.

We approached a red boulder the size of a castle with a door and a golden handle.
The boulder was Russell Reed’s home.

“Let’s make this quick,” he said. “I’m not really supposed to help people out, but I heard you were a good grocery man.”

“Yes, *was*, but Stacy wanted to move to the desert.”

“She sounds like she wants more than the desert.”

“She wants you to move her up.”

“Up?”

“To where the murdered go.”

“Can’t do that, Captain.”

“I’ll make it worth your while.”

“Impossible,” he said.

“Then what can be done?”

He stood looking at the boulder, rubbing his chin. "You love her, don't you?"

I don't know why I hesitated. I did love her.

"I've never loved anyone but her," I said, feeling the weight hit my gut like lead.

"Tell me, is she the reason you're here?"

"You could say that."

"And now you're trying to get her to leave you?"

I didn't know what to say. Maybe she'd stay. If only I could show her the extent of my love, then she'd never leave.

"All right, this is what you can do," he said pointing to a sea to the east. "If you can swim through that sea and then climb that mountain and retrieve the summit journal and hand me the journal to sign and then swim back and climb to the top and place the journal *back* where you found it, then I will let her move to where the murdered go."

"A swim? A hike?"

"Salt water," he said, itching the ax wound on his bald head.

"Is it the deepest sea?"

"It is."

"Is it the highest mountain?"

"That's right."

Swim the deepest sea. Climb the highest mountain. I thought about doing it twice. Every muscle in me tightened, every nerve stood on tippy toes.

"I'm old and that's the last peak I haven't summited," said Russell Reed. "If I can just sign my name in the journal, then I will be able to join the club."

"Club?"

“The Alpinists. I’ll get free dirty martinis for a year.”

Without giving it another thought, I agreed.

#

Thick traces of salt lined the shore. There were piles of dead brine shrimp lying limp on the salt. It smelled like the departed were taking ten times longer to decompose. I was never a good swimmer so Russell Reed let me borrow an extra floaty. I wore goggles and a snorkel. I went to the old standby – the breaststroke, for most of the journey. The shrimp and some eels swam with me.

The salt burned the hole on my head, but the pain only made me smile. I was happy to prove my love for Stacy Wagner. She will know my suffering, I thought, and she will have no choice but to love me in return.

“Free dirty martinis,” I told the eels and brine shrimp as I swam.

The eels squealed and the brine shrimp blew bubbles in the water. They were telling me something about this world, the afterlife. Or at least that’s what I thought when I heard their strange noises, like words. Sometimes their bodies rubbed against my skin. The eels were long and slimy, but had a gentle friendly touch. The brine shrimp’s exoskeletons scratched the places on me that itched; how they knew I needed the relief, I have no clue. We travelled through the thick salty waters, and I was grateful for the floaty on my right arm. It helped me save strength for the climb ahead.

When we were close to completing the swim, the eels and brine shrimp tickled my toes, making me laugh and swallow throatfuls of sea.

“Stop!” I gurgled. “That tickles!”

#

When I got to the opposite shore I walked the shallows. The shore was salty and reeked of rot, but when I breathed deeply I sensed in myself a potential for success. I'd swum all that way. Now I must climb. I am full of love, I told myself, there is nothing that can stop me.

I looked back at my companions, the eels and brine shrimp. Their eyes were just above water, watching me.

"I'll return," I said, reassuring them. "I've barely begun."

#

At the base of the mountain I looked to see the summit. But most of the mountain was covered by a thick gray cloud. I started to climb, but the mountain was made mostly of sand and three steps up meant one step back.

Sand slipped through the holes in my shoes. Soon I realized that shoes were no use, so I took them off and went barefoot. As I hiked higher I thought about Stacy, the way she danced in my arms. Her lips over the hole in my head, that cold air pressing through, and that kiss. There's no way she's gonna leave me, I thought. She will know for certain that there is no one on earth or in the afterlife that will climb higher, swim farther. With every step I felt my lungs expand to breathe in the high air. It was slow going, but when you're in love you have access to unseen energies. I began to remember the days of my life, when I had to go to summer school for math. I rode the bus all the way to Watertown, the big town. There was a teacher, teaching in the summer, trying to make us understand algebra. We, the unsuccessful ones, sat there, listening, doing our best to get it, but knowing there was nothing we could do about our past failures.

"*Now* do you understand?" asked Summer Teacher.

“Do you understand, *now?*” said Summer Teacher again and again and again.

We were different than the other kids. We could only think about being liked.

There was no room for anything else.

#

When the rain came it fell straight down, making the mountain a heap of mud. I was completely soaked. The floaty on my arm lost all its air. My shirt weighed me down, my pants were caked in sludge.

I took off the floaty and my shirt. I dropped my pants. Underwear isn't for sale in the afterlife so I was naked, the water sliding down my body, cleansing me. I felt it gather in my ears and lifted my head to catch rain in my mouth. The taste was cool and restorative.

However, the higher I climbed the colder the air became. It began snowing. The snow was light at first, almost pleasant. But soon it came down heavy and stinging. I caught a flake in my hand. The pattern on the flake resembled what I thought Stacy Wagner's body might look like if I could ever see her naked: curved, mysterious, and its outer edges lined in blue.

As the sky darkened I searched for a resting place. I found an opening in the sand, like a small shallow cave. I tried to sleep, but the wind kept sneaking in, reminding me of my nakedness.

#

In morning light I stood in a dark cloud. I turned around, trying to see where I was, trying to find the peak. The cloud disorientated me. When I stepped forward I wasn't sure if I was stepping up or back down. Even stepping felt strange to my foot, as if

I were not just surrounded by the cloud, but *in it*, and that it had carried me off somewhere else. I touched the hole in my head. There was cloud in the hole. I touched my eyes. I put my fingers in my ears. My breaths were heavy and wet. I decided to sit and squeeze my cold knees.

The cloud was damp and cold like Stacy Wagner's breath.

I sat, shivered, and waited for the cloud to release me.

#

Maybe it took an hour, maybe it took a day and a night, maybe the cloud never left me, but instead became transparent. I really don't know for sure, but eventually I was able to see it. I found the peak, way up high, covered in snow.

I walked as if I were walking to my grave for the second time. It wasn't a depressing thought, it was a thought about fulfillment. I wanted to do it over again, life. I wanted to live.

Before I knew it I was walking in deep snow, up to my knees. When I looked down I saw a black bird soaring. It is rare to see a bird in this afterlife, but there it was, below me, flying with ease, as if it had nothing better to do. I was feeling good because I knew I would make it. The snow was up to my waist and there were times I had to dig with my hands to make it through, but there was the summit, just ahead, a small wooden structure. I was sure it had the journal.

The structure was a lean-to, built on a big boulder. I climbed the boulder and entered the shelter. There was a bench to sit on. I sat. I looked out over the mountain. I saw other mountains. I thought I could see this world's rounded edge. I wondered what was way out there, out there, past the place I couldn't see.

The journal was in a plastic Ziploc bag. It was at the end of the bench. I took out the journal and found the names of past climbers. There were three names: Willi Unsold, Mugs Stump, and Nanda Devi. I had a hunch they were famous mountaineers. Those names could mean nothing else.

I placed the book back in the bag and carried it down the mountain.

I swam across the salt sea, the bag held in my clenched teeth.

#

“You look like hell,” said Russell Reed as he signed his name. He was left-handed and his letters were loopy and effeminate.

I did feel like hell, blisters covered my feet, and the ends of my fingers and toes were black with frostbite. A few of them had fallen right off. When? I hadn’t even noticed. But I was certain I would complete the journey, no matter what. I’d do anything for Stacy Wagner. “Where’s Stacy?” I asked.

“Taking a nap,” said Russell Reed with a grin. “She’s real tuckered out.”

“Tuckered out?”

Russell Reed closed the journal and handed it to me. “Don’t worry about Stacy,” he said. “She’s in good hands. Ha!” And then slapped me on the back and gave a shove. “Go get em, and make sure you put that journal back where it belongs.”

#

As I trudged up the mountain for the second time all I heard was Russell Reed’s greedy voice saying, *She’s in good hands. Ha!*

Good? Hands? I kept asking myself. *Ha?*

#

After two more days of suffering on the mountain, I succeeded in returning the journal to the summit and fulfilling my end of the deal. I looked at my hands and feet. Along the way I had lost more fingers. My big toes on both feet were completely black and wooden. My limbs were numb. I never was one who could grow facial hair, but I noticed stubble growing on my neck.

I rubbed the new growth on my Adam's apple as I gazed out over the great salted sea.

Now all there was to do was swim back.

I collapsed in the water and floated on my back. I was nothing, the adventure was over. I would fail. Like ninth grade algebra, I would once again fail. I let the thick salt collect in the hole in my head. I was already dead, but I thought, no I hoped, maybe it was possible to die again.

When I tried to conjure the voice of Stacy Wagner all I could hear was, "Put me where the murdered people go."

"Where the *murdered people go*."

I decided to give in. To not return. To not swim back to the other side. But the suicide gods would not have it. They must have awakened the eels and instructed them to come to my aid, because they wrapped their tails around my wrists and yanked me all the way to the opposite shore.

#

Face down on the salt, I breathed the briny stench. I could see Stacy's hair in the distance blowing sideways in the wind. Blue vapor steamed off her head. I crawled breathless towards her, imagining her embrace, her accepting me and never letting go.

How could she leave me now, now that I'd twice swum the deepest sea and climbed the highest mountain?

She hadn't left! She was waiting, standing next to Russell Reed. I felt myself enliven once more. I stood and walked towards them, unashamed of my nakedness.

I noticed Russell Reed's arm around her waist. They were smiling, smiling as if no one could ever do them harm. I also noticed that Stacy only wore socks on her feet. Socks with red stripes.

"Socks?" I said, exhausted.

"Russell has turned me on to them!" she said as she rubbed his bald head.

"She really knows how to take off her boots!" laughed Russell.

"Looks like someone else lost his boots!" laughed Stacy, pointing at my private parts.

They kept laughing. They hunched over and slapped each other's butts.

What are they saying? I thought. There they were, together, one hand on the other and one hand pointing at me.

Once the laughter subsided, she stood straight and forced herself to act respectful. She said, "I knew I could count on you." Then she gave me a peck on the cheek. "I just couldn't leave without saying goodbye."

"Looks like you're all packed," I said pointing at her suitcase, there was a bra strap sticking out of the zipper.

"I'll never forget what you've done for me," she said.

We stood there. I tried not to look at her. Even though I knew it hurt like hell, I wanted to put a bullet crossways through my temple.

“What if I came with you?” I said.

“Well, oh. Baby, no. I don’t think so. No one ever thought to murder *you*. I mean, you were made for this place. Right here.”

“You don’t want me, do you?”

She gave me a light hug. I could tell she didn’t want to touch me. She patted my bare back two times, her fingers cold and dry.

Stacy Wagner picked up her luggage. “Don’t worry about what I want. Just know you will be remembered,” she said.

#

A big blue bus arrived. The driver wore a cowboy hat and waved at me as he pulled away. There was something about that driver that made me want to hop a ride and take everyone hostage. I’d make him my personal chauffeur, and he’d do everything I asked him to do. If I asked him to follow Stacy Wagner into the next world, he’d oblige without question. As he drove away he looked into his long side mirror. It seemed to me he was taking a moment to regard me. There he was and there I was. I don’t know if there are different rules in the afterlife but I felt like I was seeing myself through the bus driver’s eyes—like I was the bus driver, pulling away. Like I was looking back, and considering this naked, foolish boy, the old me, still on his knees. There he is, the old me, shrinking as I shift the gears higher, he’s dripping wet, scratching at that deep dark hole in his head. What a pitiful child! I was once a child, too. There are times I can still remember the old days of my past. But this one, back there, now almost too small to see, I’ll never even know his name.

#

When the naked boy has vanished from view you adjust your cowboy hat and focus on the road ahead. Every so often you check on the passengers, all safe and seated. You look into the mirror hanging above the windshield. All those silent people, moving over the land together. You notice the older ones as they sleep or give that look out the window as if there were no more mysteries left in the universe. You see young people. There's a pretty girl with blue skin, and blond hair. She's looking at you. Every time you look, there she is staring right back. After the twenty-seventh time of catching her gaze you find yourself knowing she is not the one. You are looking for the one, but she, the blue girl, is not the one. You will find her, soon, or relatively soon. The One. You have all of eternity to search. When you give her one last chance you see her eyes are blue, too. There's just too much of the same color you decide. You want someone you can trust. Someone that will not spend so much time staring at a stranger wearing a cowboy hat and driving a bus.

Model 646

Eve was scrubbing a pot when her dress tore at the seam on her right breast. It was an old dress, falling below the knees, but the material was said to last for centuries. Her legs were thin and white like the rest of her pretty body. Her blonde hair was pulled back in a bun. Her face, stunning. Her eyes, blue.

Adam was reading the paper in his recliner. The two sons were playing trains on the living room floor. Eve washed dishes and sang or hummed various church songs: *It is Well With My Soul*, *Amazing Grace*, and *Oh, Our Lovely God*.

“Dear?” she called to her husband.

“Yes, my love?”

“Will you take out the yolks?”

“Of course, dear. But let me finish this article. Did you know chickens now outnumber us?”

“That’s good news.” She smiled at him, her lips red with lipstick.

“It says it right here. The D.O.T’s are producing more farms. Isn’t it wonderful?”

When Adam finished the article he stood and gathered the bowl of swimming

yolks.

“Careful not to spill. I just shampooed the carpet.”

“Oh, Eve. You know me.”

Outside, the snow was deep. He trudged through until he was far enough into the woods. The yolks slid out of the bowl and disappeared into the first layer of snow. He waited for what was left to separate completely from the bowl. He took his hand and wiped out the last of the gooey remains. He cleaned his hand in the snow and walked back to the house.

The boys were on the floor with their trains.

“Thank you, dear,” she said as she put her arms on his shoulders, reaching on her tippy toes to give him a peck on the lips.

“For you my dear, the world.” Then he turned to his sons and said, “Boys! Time to get some fresh air. It’s good for the lungs!”

The boys stood. The oldest son had a streak of black hair, parted on the left side, every strand perfectly placed. He looked up at Adam and said, “Great idea, Dad!”

“Yay, let’s go!” said the younger boy who had straight blonde hair that flopped loosely around his head.

“That’s my boys!” said Adam. “Go out and have yourselves a battle! One for the ages! Go in the woods and find sticks and pretend you’re fighting the communists!”

The boys ran through snow. They went into the woods and broke branches off trees and began swinging them around. The younger boy twirled his stick before thrashing the nearest pine. The stick snapped on impact, sending the broken section into the air, striking his brother hard in the face. They both stopped and cocked their heads

looking at each other. There was a still moment. Nothing stirred, no wind to speak of.

Both brothers shin deep in snow.

Finally the older brother said, "Let's pretend *you're* a communist."

The younger brother stood still waiting to connect the information.

"You're a communist!" the older boy said, then raised his heavy branch and struck hard the head of his little brother. The boy shifted with the blow and then stood straight looking again at his older brother.

He was hit again on the ear, and the blow this time sent him to his knees.

"You're a damn commie! Ha ha! I killed a commie!" the older boy said as he kept on thrashing. Again and again the branch hit hard on his brother's blonde head.

When he was finished, he looked at the body lying in the snow; how the legs curled and how the hand shielded his face. He took the hand away and found an eye dislodged, connected only by a small tight spring. The other eye was open wide, looking to the trees.

The older son walked away from his brother's body and went inside, back to his trains. Adam was working on a crossword puzzle. Eve was on her knees wrapping the vacuum's cord. When she straightened herself to stand, the rip above her right breast tore, further exposing a portion of her breast. She looked down at the rip and touched her uncovered flesh. It was soft and white, something that belonged to her.

Eve kept her hand on her breast until her husband said, "My love, can you tell me a three letter word that starts with H and has a relation to pig?"

"Oh, Adam," she said, now standing up. "You know I don't trouble myself with such nonsense. There's work to be done." She went over and patted his shoulder and then

rolled the vacuum into the closet.

“I killed a commie! I killed a commie!” said the son making the trains crash together.

“Son, go and fetch your brother,” she said. “We’ll be eating soon.”

“Father, tell Mother I killed a commie.”

Eve and Adam looked at each other. Their heads tilted. They headed for the back door. When they found the younger son lying in the snow they stared down at him. They examined the body for some time. The snow gathered in the boy’s blonde hair. Eve squatted down to touch the spring that attached the eye. She touched the boy’s opened eye. It was blue like her own.

It was getting late. They went in and Eve prepared the meal. She cracked the eggs into the bowl and divided the shells on the plates. Five shells per plate. Then they sat and Adam blessed the meal, “Dear heavenly father, we thank you for your many blessings. We are grateful for what you have given us. Please bless this meal unto our bodies. Amen.”

“Amen,” said Eve.

“Amen,” said the boy.

The egg shells went into their mouths cleanly. They were crunched down until there was nothing left. The dinner conversation was polite and not too quiet.

#

In the morning Eve went out, brushing the snow off the station wagon with her hands, before driving to the grocery store. She parked in unison with ninety-nine other station wagons. All of the Eves proceeded to the front doors, filing in one by one. They

grabbed their carts and filled them each with twenty-five cartons of eggs. When picking up a stack of egg cartons, Eve sensed that the rip on her breast was tearing further. Now half of her breast was revealed. The Eve next to her paused and looked at her breast; she pointed her finger at it but did not utter a word.

When Eve got home she carried in the cartons of eggs. She had to make multiple trips. On her last trip in, snow from the roof toppled and fell on her head. She stood quite still for a moment not wiping off the snow. She then decided to set the cartons of eggs on a nearby snowbank and brushed the snow from her head. She wiped the snow out of her eyes. When she opened her eyes the world around her was bright. The brightness caused her to narrow her eyes, shielding the light, attempting to make sense of her surroundings. The snow covered the landscape. The trees were white. She looked in front of her, at her house and noticed, for the very first time, a plaque bolted on the siding, right next to the front door. She stopped to look at it. There were letters in gold against a black slate.

She opened the door and said, “Oh darling, could you come over here?”

“Eve, give me one moment. I think I’m on to something here.”

“Dear, please put down the crossword and come out here.”

He looked up. His head shifted and then shifted back to the other side. He looked at her as if not knowing what he was seeing. Then he stood and walked to her.

“Now dear,” she said. “Please read this to me.”

Adam read Eve what was inscribed on the plaque.

Mid-20th Century Family. Model 646.

Meet Adam and Eve!

In this quaint home you will experience the life of a Mid-20th century family. Including children! They eat, speak and even say grace together. Notice their interactions. Let your imaginations wander to the astonishments of the past.

Eve stood staring at the plaque.

She said, “Adam, dear, who wrote this?”

Adam stared at the plaque. He read it again out loud and then looked at it some more. After some time he read it out loud for the third time. Eve watched him read.

“That’s what it says, dear.”

Eve looked at the plaque and tilted her head. Adam also looked at the plaque, reading the last four words over and over again: astonishments of the past. Astonishments of the past. Astonishments of the past.

They went in. She stuffed the refrigerator with the egg cartons, then began dusting off the furniture and bookshelf. While she was reaching high on the shelf her hair fell out of its bun. Now it was a loose, blonde end to her pretty head. She reached back and felt its slackness. She swayed her head so her hair swooped back and forth. She left it that way.

#

“Adam, can you take out the yolks?”

“Is it time already?”

The older son played with the trains. But instead of running the train in a circle he made a ramp using some old books. He took the track and placed it over the books so the train would have to climb uphill. “Over the hill she goes,” said the son as he guided the train up the track.

Adam walked the bowl of yolks out to the woods. He nearly tripped over the foot

of his youngest son. It was sticking up out of the snow. He set the bowl down and wiped the snow off the boy's face. There he was. The son. The floppy blonde hair was frozen stiff. He looked at his good eye, directly into it. The eye looked back at him. Adam touched the eye of his son with each of his fingers as if he was playing one note five times on the piano. Then he stood with his bowl of yolks and dumped them, making sure the contents would not spill on his son. He used his hand to wipe the bowl clean and then looked at his hand. The slimy translucence of the egg whites connected his fingers. He put the tips of his fingers in his mouth, sucking off what was left.

When he went back into the house Eve was setting the table. He watched her. He saw the way she moved from one task to another. He set the bowl down on the table.

“Dear,” she said. “You know that is not where we put the bowl.”

He approached her, gazing at her partially exposed breast. He reached for her and grabbed hold of the ripped material and tore it further so the breast was completely bare. She stood with her head cocked looking at him. He looked at the breast's round shape and delicately poked it to make it shift from side to side. Then he placed both hands there and leaned closer to see. The skin was all white, smooth and blank as a palm or the sole of his foot, pointy at the end and unmarked as the unbroken tip of an egg. He looked in Eve's eyes and again at her breast. Both of them were looking now, tilting their heads, as quiet as the night.

#

In the middle of the night, Adam stood from his recliner. He had never once sat on the couch. It was a long soft looking couch, without blemish. He walked to it and sat. He kicked off his loafers and propped one foot onto the couch. He pressed his foot into

the cushion and watched as the indentation grew with more force applied. He then turned himself and placed both feet on the couch. He looked at his feet. Feet. He watched Eve clean the dishes. There she was, now with a breast exposed. He watched her for a very long time. He looked down at the newspaper on the floor. He watched his son with the trains. He looked back at Eve cleaning dishes. Her hair was down. The end of her dress shifted as she scrubbed. Eve stopped doing dishes. She turned the water off and turned to see Adam on the couch, socked-feet resting on the cushion. She looked at him and saw him looking at her. She reached down and pulled her dress up to her knees. She watched his eyes, watching her knees and pulled further so that her thigh was revealed. She looked at her own thigh. She touched her thigh. It was soft, but not as soft as her breast. She touched her breast. Adam lay rigid on the couch.

Eve left the dirty dishes in the sink. She joined Adam on the couch – Adam had to move his feet to accommodate her and they sat looking at each other.

“Speak?” said Eve.

“Speak?” said Adam.

They looked at each other and tilted their heads. Adam stood up. Eve watched him. He scooped toward Eve, closer, their knees now touching. Eve reached out and placed her index finger on Adam’s lips. He opened his mouth slightly and felt her finger go in, smooth. Adam then took his finger and put it into Eve’s mouth. They let their fingers linger until Eve began moving her finger all along the inside of Adam’s mouth. Then Adam moved his finger all along the inside of Eve’s mouth.

When the sun began to rise Eve noticed the light on Adam’s face. She took her finger out of his mouth and stood up. She looked at him and then grabbed him by the ear

and pulled so that he would also stand. She led him to the front door, opened it and then they stood looking out to the rising sun. The light brightened the snow and the snow sparkled. Eve took her hand off Adam's ear and reached for his hand.

They stood and waited for the day to pass. It was a full day and at the end of the day the sun lowered itself as it always had. They did not remove themselves from the doorway. Once the moon was high in the night sky it softened the glow of the world. The snow was almost blue at night. They watched on as the night turned back to day. The sun rose and the day was slightly longer. And the next day was longer than the last, but only a moment longer. On this day the snow began to melt. They watched as the snow became water. The water was motionless at first but then began to sway as if it was one large body. When the night came, the waters rose, filling the house. They now were under water. They waited for the sun. This was the fourth day. With the rising of the sun, the waters emptied and soon the land was soft with puddles on the road. The earth relaxed and breathed and made the ground green. The sun sank and then rose and the two of them stood and looked out and held hands. The older son, in the living room, looked down at his trains. He put his palm on his head. He rubbed his head in circles. He slapped his head. Then he made a fist and began beating down hard on his head. On the tenth blow he stopped and turned and looked up to find his mother and father. He did find them, outside in front of the house and went to stand by them. He looked down at their clasped hands. Then he too looked out at the day turning to night and then the day and then the night. When it was night he saw the stars above, flashes of them everywhere, multiplying in the darkness.

On the last day, as the three were looking out, they felt something behind them.

They turned together to find that the old Douglas fir had just fallen through the roof on the dining room table. Splintered pieces of wood scattered over the carpet and some slid over to the kitchen's tiled floors. The branches of the great tree reached out toward them as if it could grab and shake them. Adam, Eve, and their son backed away from the fallen tree. Eve let go of Adam's hand. She began walking to the woods, her feet sinking into the mucky spring ground. Adam and the son followed. When she found her youngest son's foot sticking out of the mud, she grabbed hold but could not pull him completely out of the earth. Adam and their oldest son reached and took hold of the blonde boy and with their combined strength slipped his filthy body out of the muck. They carried him from the woods, out into the openness of the empty road. Eve wiped his face clean with the water from a puddle. She rubbed his good eye until she could see the blue in it. His hair was caked with mud. Her white body was now dirty too, all of it. She brought the boy's face to her breast. She looked down at him and tilted her head. She waited.

Brown Eyed Girl

After Uncle crawled out of his grave all he ever talked about was the Virgin Mary. “Oh, you wouldn’t believe how beautiful she is,” he said. “You should hear her sing,” he said. It’s fine being his niece and all—I didn’t really think about him all that much when he was alive. Now I have no choice but to think about him. Everyone asks me, “Where’s your uncle?” “Can we say hi to him?” They like him so much, mostly because of his bones, which is pretty much all that’s left of him. That and a strand of red nylon hanging off his ribs. He lives down at the old abandoned church, the one with the bell at the tower. It’s a big dilapidated church. Uncle lives there because he needs a roof over his skull and he says it’s really the only thing that suits him. His needs are few. He likes to ring the bell every morning and on special occasions, like on Canada Day and Fourth of July and our rabbit’s birthday and the day the librarian died. He’s been painting too, refurbishing the old building. “The place is a bit drafty. I got plans for this old girl,” he says.

On Sunday morning we go to his church. We never used to go to church, but my dad says we have to support Uncle. “Who knows how long he’ll be with us this time around,” says Father; “Life is short,” says Mother. I don’t mind the service. Uncle looks

down at the bible but sort of makes up his own stories that sound similar to scripture. There's one about a shepherdess that falls into a well and another about a boy and his talking goat. Afterward, Uncle breaks out the guitar and plays the only song he knows, *Brown Eyed Girl*. We end up singing it over and over again. Then we walk out of the sanctuary and some people place old crummy change in the offering dish. Uncle shakes hands with his flock as they walk out the door and gives me a cold bony hug. It doesn't really creep me out like you'd think.

One night Uncle came over to sit around the fire in our backyard. Dad had S'mores going and Uncle brought his guitar. He didn't play it this time but instead held it on his lap. The wind blew smoke in his face, smoke and some sparks traveling through his eye holes and in the open space beneath his clavicle, but he didn't seem to mind. We could hear his red nylon strand flapping in the breeze. I asked him, "What's heaven like?" He told me it's full of people who were never really accepted on earth. "Those regulars you've seen at the laundromat. They all got in."

"What do you do in heaven?" I asked.

"Mostly we jump on trampolines and shout 'Hallelujah! Hallelujah!'" he said. "Sometimes," he said, "We go on nature walks. We do everything together. The food is really something. And the Virgin Mary," he said, and paused and tilted his head toward the moon. I wanted to know what he was thinking, but I could tell he was done talking about heaven.

No one knows why Uncle came back to earth. It's confusing, I mean, earth, what does this place have to offer the dead? What does this place have to offer the living? I don't know. I mostly repeat what I hear my parents say. Actually, I don't have it too bad.

We live in this small town where there's a thin creek that runs behind our house. I'm always at the creek. There's just something about the running water that makes me hysterical. I know it sounds stupid. Most of my friends want to play video games, but all I wanna do is sit next to the creek and watch it flow. There are some baby trout that swim through. I get a kick out of them too. What I'm saying is that I don't do a whole lot but still, this earth, it seems okay to me. Good enough anyhow, and so I really understand why a guy like Uncle would make a second go of life, even if he's only a skeleton.

#

I'm not sure when, but Uncle started going on walks with me by the creek. We liked to hold hands and look at the water. Sometimes we talked. He told me about his plans with the church, how he wants to get some new stained glass windows, ones with Jesus on the cross and the Virgin Mary crying at his bloody feet, but the difference is, he wants all the characters to be in what he calls, "The skeletal state." I told him it would be bad for publicity but he just shrugged and whistled an eerie tune through his long white teeth.

We started taking a canoe with us. It's too big for the creek, but Uncle carried it out to where the creek connects with other streams, where it broadens by the railroad tracks. I'm not really allowed to go there, but I figure if I'm with Uncle, my parents don't have to know. We set the canoe in the water. He paddled us out beyond our village where the river meets the lake, further away from the mountain that looms over us all. This is when Uncle was happiest. He sang *Brown Eyed Girl*, and he once told me about how there are thirteen rooms in heaven. "Everyone is allowed in twelve of the rooms," he said, "but no one is supposed to open the thirteenth door." "What are the twelve doors like?" I

asked. "I have all the keys," said Uncle, "but the only one anyone cared about was room thirteen." Turns out Uncle never entered any of the rooms. He said he was too fixated on the Virgin Mary. She would hold him and whisper stories until he fell asleep. "I slept for weeks in her arms."

It's hard to put my finger on exactly what the problem was. All I can say is that Uncle started acting strange in subtle ways. One time he said we'd only go as far as Gull's Island, but in complete silence he took us out beyond a point where no one on land could see us. I got home late that night. My parents were extremely worried. I could see the horror on their aging faces. "Where the hell were you?" they asked. I told them I was at a friend's house and we got carried away on the Nintendo. I do not like being forced to lie to my parents. They deserve better, but I felt I had no choice. When I told Uncle how my parents responded he laughed and shrugged it off. "My big brother always was a party pooper."

The last time I went out on the canoe with Uncle he made me paddle. All the while he practiced his tap dance routine. He had gotten into clicking his bones and making a sort of music with the rhythmic clankings. I didn't mind doing the hard work, but I was never very strong in my arms and couldn't row us far.

Uncle was angry with me. "What's in a child?" he asked as he looked over the water. "Don't they know they're pathetic, too?"

#

I found more and more excuses not to go out with Uncle until he stopped asking me altogether.

After a while I lost touch with him. We still went to church but I didn't pay much

attention. When Uncle looked at me as I walked out I made sure to not look back. I didn't want to see him.

In spite of my own diminishing interest, the church grew. People from all over were marching in to hear his bible-like stories and to sing *Brown Eyed Girl*. The congregation, as one, rose to their feet as Uncle strummed the chords. When he arrived at the bridge, every member, even me, sang "Do you remember when" and we all did, we remembered whatever it was that came to us, mostly our triumphs. The "sha la la la la" came out like praise, like the Brown Eyed girl was the Virgin herself.

When the new stained glass windows arrived, I thought they didn't look as creepy as I'd expected. Many people commented on the artistry of the scenes depicted. I could tell Uncle was proud of himself. Dad and Mom were taking everything in stride but seemed to be concerned with things not meant for young people's ears. At least that's how it appeared to me, which was frustrating because I was starting to think of myself as a girl who was truly coming into her own. I didn't feel so young anymore. I was thirteen.

#

Soon the summer ended, and I was back at school. I drifted through the hallways, finding myself wondering what Uncle was up to. The church had a new paint job. The bell only rang at nine a.m. sharp, every morning. There was something different about the way it resounded over the village: it lacked that deafening tone, the enthusiasm it had when Uncle first purchased the old church. I became slightly sad at the sound until like everyone else I decided to just ignore it altogether. It became that familiar something in the air, like the birds in the trees and the wind.

This was about the same time I noticed the boys looking at me differently like I

had something about me that impressed them. At first I didn't take it very seriously, I thought it was my new haircut, but there was something in the glow of the school hallways, and how the light lowered around me that seemed to signify a new form of classmate.

One boy was especially persistent. His name was Peter. Everyone called him Pete. I liked Pete, though I don't know exactly what it was about him I liked. Perhaps he seemed to be the right boy to begin talking with. I showed him the creek behind my house and we walked beside it. At first we didn't say a whole lot. I could think of nothing to converse about and sometimes feared I was a complete bore. But after some time together we were talking and eventually holding hands and nudging each other. He once pretended to throw me into the creek. I loved the idea but fought him off. I would playfully hit him, and he would laugh, and when he grabbed my wrists I kicked him in his shins. He pretended he was seriously injured while I laughed, making fun of a boy getting beat up by a girl.

Once when we were roughhousing with each other he pushed me too hard and I stepped back awkwardly, my heel landing on a rock. I heard a soft *pop* and then hit the ground. Pete immediately joined me on the grass and took off my shoe, I think because he had no idea what else to do. I could tell he was frightened, and as soon as my sock came off, my ankle burned inside the skin, and swelled, right in front of our eyes, to the size of an orange. "I'll have to carry you," he said, and without discussing the matter I was off in Pete's arms. He was not a strong boy, most of them weren't at this point in our lives, but he was determined to bring me safely to my house. Although I was a very small girl I could tell he was struggling against my weight. He was sweaty, and I could hear his

chest pounding with blood.

When we came to my house my parents were on the front porch. Pete handled it well. He told them about the accident, even apologized for his careless behavior. My father was impressed with the young man and proved it by giving him a slap on the shoulder.

#

“For you, my dear,” my uncle said, when he came to visit me in the hospital with a woman who looked younger than my mother, and scantily clad. He handed me a bouquet of flowers. Looking at Pete, he said, “And I hear you are quite the young man. First hurting a little girl and then carrying her to safety. One fine gentleman.” The lady with him laughed nervously and tugged at the nylon strand hanging off his ribs, obviously signaling for them to leave. Once again I felt that Uncle was changing and wherever he was headed I did not want to follow.

“Nice to meet you,” said Pete, reaching out to shake hands. “I’ve heard so much about you.”

“Nice? What does *nice* have to do with anything? Ha!” said Uncle, and reached out and gave Pete’s hand a hard high five. It must have hurt Pete, but he didn’t show it.

“I hope you recover soon,” said the lady. “Although, we should be going, don’t you think dear?”

Uncle stuck his pointer finger through his eye socket and said, “I don’t think! Ha! I can’t even *feel*.”

#

When I stopped going to church, my parents didn't mind all that much. They seemed to enjoy watching me mature and make sensible decisions. So on Sunday mornings I had the house to myself. Pete stopped by one Sunday morning and sat with me on the back porch. He boiled water and poured each of us a mug of instant coffee. We loaded it with sugar and cream. There was something about the caffeine, the porch, and the two of us alone in my house that made us feel like we were much older. I was still mostly chair-bound from the torn ligaments so Pete would fetch me whatever I asked for. I noticed he kept checking his watch. Maybe he wanted to dash before my parents returned. I don't know what they'd think if they found us on the back porch drinking coffee and holding hands.

Before Pete left he cleaned the mugs and dried them and placed them back in the cabinet. I think it was this detail that made me believe Pete was up to something, something more than just spending time with me. I believe it was around this period in our friendship that he wanted more than anything to kiss me. Of course I thought of kissing him too, but not in the same way Pete was thinking. He seemed controlled by the possibility. How I know this I cannot say, but for certain he wanted it more than I did.

When my parents returned from church Pete was gone. He did not kiss me that day. My parents however looked distressed.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Your uncle," said Dad. "He's worrying me."

"What's the problem now?"

"I don't think he sleeps."

"I didn't know he needed to sleep. Do the dead need sleep?"

Before Uncle died he was a travelling salesman with a small company. He did well for himself, selling mainly to independent businesses. But then he started showing up to service his stores drunk. The customers liked him but things progressed, and the longer he lived the drunker he got. Most of the managers let it go until one day Uncle made a pass at a lady, meaning he slapped her on the behind, which might have been okay, except it happened to be a manager's wife. "It's nothing for a man to get drunk," Uncle used to say, sweeping the long blond locks out of his eyes. "All it takes is a decision. One lousy decision. And then another and another and another. Soon enough you're happy and the woman you always wanted to touch, well, all of a sudden you're touching her. It's so easy to make a decision."

Uncle died drunk. My father said he saw it coming. He felt responsible for his brother's behavior. He felt he could have helped him. Maybe he should have spent more time with Uncle. That's the sort of thinking Father has done ever since Uncle died. Now that Uncle is back with us Father thinks he has a second chance to be that brother he should have been. But anyone can see it's wearing him down, probably like it did when Uncle was alive. The dead should probably stay dead. I heard this once, and well, I guess it makes sense.

"If only I could have a sip of your Manhattan," said Uncle to my mother. We were sitting in our backyard around a camp fire.

"Why don't you try," said mother handing the glass over. "Maybe if your bones absorbed the whiskey you'll be able to get drunk one more time." Uncle snatched the glass, a dull *ching* rang out, bone against glass, and then he looked at the drink real close. When he poured the liquid spilled down his ribs and dripped off his red nylon strip. He

threw the glass into the fire, which startled us all.

“If I had it over again,” said Uncle, “I’d take that old canoe out and never come back to this dump.” He stood and walked away from us, into the shadows of the neighborhood, back to his church.

I got up too, and went into the house. I found myself desperately thirsty and sipped straight from the faucet. I thought about what it’d be like if Pete kissed me. I wanted him to. I was looking forward to it. I looked over and saw my mother’s bottle of whiskey. I opened the cap and sniffed the contents. Without wondering about it any longer I placed it on my lips as if it was Pete’s face and tipped it back. The burn hit the back of my throat. I thought I was choking. I coughed and then heard my parent’s laughter. When I turned around I saw them watching me. They almost looked proud of their daughter.

“First time for everything,” said Dad.

“It’s not so bad, is it?” said Mother.

“Awful,” I said. “How do you drink this stuff?”

“When you get older,” said Mother, “life has a way of gravitating towards the bottle. You don’t believe it’ll ever happen but it does, to nearly everyone. It’s about life.”

“Maggie,” said Father, “she needs her sleep. And don’t believe everything your uncle says and not *everyone* needs to drink. It’s just that most find it helpful.”

I slept well that night and dreamed about riding out on the canoe with Uncle. Just me and him. But he was only half alive, one half of his body was skeleton, the other, his normal living-self with that long blonde hair. We sang some songs together as we paddled towards the horizon. Uncle was also drinking and passing me the bottle, every

time I went to take a sip the bottle turned in to a floppy fish. One of those bottom suckers with thick fish lips. I'd throw the fish into the water, disgusted, but still dreadfully thirsty. I know dreams mean nothing and some even say they serve no purpose whatsoever, but I tend to think this was another dream about frustration.

#

Over the next month my ankle healed, and one afternoon, after a long school day, I walked down to the creek. I noticed it was unusually low. The smooth white rocks lined the outside of the stream, dry and thirsty. I didn't like seeing the creek in that condition. I preferred it to be a flow of heavy waters moving along. It was happiest that way. When it got low it made me sad, like when you see one of those sick lonely farm animals quarantined, away from the others. I walked the creek alone. If Pete knew I did this he might have been hurt. He always wanted to be with me. I wanted to be with him too, but I also needed to be alone with the creek. This helped me deal with the noise of the school's hallways, classrooms, and the cafeteria. It always seemed someone was doing something loud and then others got loud in return, until everything boxed in those walls was the giant voice shouting the one word it didn't mean.

One day, thinking about school I found myself walking all the way to the lake. Not that it was that far from my house, but the days were getting shorter, and I needed to be back before dark. Instead of turning around though I had a strange new urge I couldn't shake. I wanted to swim naked. No one was around and the water was free of boats. The houses were mostly behind trees and the ones that weren't were only occupied in the summer months. It wasn't a cold day. Without giving it further thought I shed my clothes until I was standing in my underwear. The air felt so good on my skin I couldn't help but

take it further, becoming completely naked. It isn't so difficult after you make the choice. I did this as fast as I could. But not so fast that I didn't have to think about how I was heavier in the places a women is supposed to be heavier. When did this happen, this new body of mine? I don't remember the exact day. I simply woke up, and there I was. Not fully grown. Not even close. When my mother slipped me new clothes, I figured she was being nice, but at this moment by the lake I realized she knew. She knew I needed to throw out my old clothes. I remembered looking for my favorite purple shirt that day, and not being able to find it. I pictured her dropping it off at the Goodwill for some other little girl to wear, and then I pictured that little girl, who was so much like me, turning into this newly developed older girl and then handing the shirt off to her little sister. I wondered how many little girls like me would touch my favorite purple shirt.

The water was cold. I covered myself to my shoulders, the ends of my hair soaked. Right when I was about to take the plunge I felt a presence behind me. I can't say I heard anything but when someone is behind you, even if that someone is silent, you know he is there. I turned slowly and saw Pete staring at me with eyes unlike any I'd ever seen. I didn't know what to do, so to fill the space between us I laughed out loud and said, "God! You scared me Pete!"

"I was looking for you after school and uh..." Pete was now looking down at the sand muttering nervously, "and I couldn't find you and I wanted to tell you something."

"Sorry Pete, I wasn't planning on being here, it just happened," I said. I wanted all my garments to supernaturally spring up and attach themselves to me. I looked over to the pile and noticed my black bra sprawled elegantly on the edge of the shore, the water lapping, inching its way closer to it. That's where Pete's eyes were fixed.

Honestly, neither of us knew what to do. For a minute we were silent, I watched the war waging between his mind and body. I knew he wanted nothing more than to see me naked but I could also tell that he was terrified at the thought of joining me in the water.

“Pete, could you do me a favor?”

“Sure, sure, of course.”

“Could you turn around while I get dried and dressed?”

“Of course, no problem, I didn’t see anything, not really anyway, I was a ways *away* when I noticed you, but really I didn’t notice you were like, like you are now.” He turned, his arms crossed. I used the bottoms of my jeans as a towel. Of course it wasn’t enough so I put my clothes on a mostly wet body.

Pete and I walked back to my house as if nothing extraordinary had happened. We talked about some classmates and how terrible the lunch food was. When we got to my house, my uncle was sitting with my parents at the dining room table. My mother’s Manhattan was half full, and they seemed in serious conversation. The atmosphere in the house was heavy as if a grim fog had rolled in. When my father saw us he quickly walked over and pulled out his wallet and told us to get dinner at Gram’s Diner, only a walk away. Pete and I couldn’t have been more satisfied. Obviously there was something of grown-up proportions happening around that table, but I didn’t care what it was all about.

I was the first to reach for Pete’s hand as we walked into the diner together, where we ordered a basket of fries and a milkshake to share, sipping from separate straws. When he made a joke I laughed harder than ever.

#

Before going into my house for the night Pete kissed me under a birch tree. It wasn't a peck either, it was real kissing, like what I always dreamed it would be. I was shocked that Hollywood got something so right. Upon leaving each other for the night we both tried to play it off as if it was nothing, as if we knew all it along it would feel that good. But we couldn't disguise our bright smiles. I am certain we were in love.

I entered my house exhilarated, looking for my parents but finding only my mother's Manhattan resting alone and silent on the table. I went to the glass with purpose, picked it up, investigating the amber fluid. The blood in my veins was surging with such force (ecstasy? Ecstatic force?) I launched that drink into my mouth without thinking, thankful for the sweet vermouth covering the heat of the liquor. I chewed the cherry to shreds and nearly threw the glass on the floor with the flare and joy of victory that comes with your first kiss.

I called out to my parents but they were elsewhere. I walked to the back window and noticed the fire reaching higher than I'd ever seen it in the pit. I could see my father and my mother halfway in the ground. They had shovels and they were digging. Great loads of dirt were being flung on top of a large mound. Uncle was illuminated by the fire and was dancing around the flames. I opened the window slightly so I could hear their voices—my uncle and my parents singing, *Brown Eyed Girl*. I walked out to see what was up, although I didn't really care about them. When Uncle saw me he rushed over and kissed me with his jawbone.

“This is it!” said Uncle, “I'll never cry again.”

“What's happening?” I said.

“She wants me back! Mary wants to hold me again. She says she misses me! Can you believe it? Can you believe our Virgin Mary wants to hold me? *Me?*” Uncle did not have the ability to cry but I knew that he was, in that very moment, crying as if he was a little boy once more. I gathered his bones to me in a hug. My parents were busy digging the grave.

Uncle’s last words to me were, “After they bury me, I’ll never die again.”

I was young, remember. I was young and to tell a true story, I have to be honest. Right then, as I was walking back into the house – away from Uncle for the last time – I didn’t care about him, or about the Virgin Mary, or about my parents losing a brother and friend. Instead of joining them I went inside to the bottle of V0 and poured a small amount into a shot glass. I was feeling so good. From the kiss? The alcohol? Maybe, it was something only someone watching me could figure out. Anyway, without giving it another thought, I threw back the shot. It wasn’t so bad. I was beginning to understand this business of drinks. I felt *mature*. I poured another. I threw it back as if I was proving something to God. “Ha, ha!” I laughed and staggered. I was happy, why would anyone ever in the history of the world be sad?

I poured another.

The room began to shift a little, things going slightly off kilter. I leaned against the counter top. I needed to sit down. Maybe another shot? I poured. How easy it is to pour. How easy it is to make a decision. I drank. The drink did not help me, instead it made all things, living and dead, way *way* worse. I tried to think about the kiss but it didn’t help. I wasn’t feeling like myself. *Where did I go? Where is I? What is I? I? I? I?*

When I stood, the linoleum was spinning, I needed to puke, I wanted to puke, I

hate puking but I had to puke. Get the poison out. There was nothing else to think about, there was that kiss but it didn't matter anymore. I stumbled to the toilet and stuck my middle finger to the back of my throat. Diner smidgens came hurling out of me, some spluttering through my nostrils.

When it was over I leaned against the tub, my breath shallow. I vowed to myself to never drink again. Then I heard what sounded like a final sad song. Were those bagpipes? Uncle was going back to heaven or whatever there is in the afterlife. Who has time to understand all that? I was slumped over the edge of the tub, limp and exhausted, my eyes were closed, but the beginning of a smile emerged on the edge of my lips. I felt as though I was barely emerging out of the nightmare. I wasn't there yet, I wasn't quite alive, but I knew I was well on my way.

No Closure

“Will you dance with me?” I asked. She was sitting on the gym’s bleachers, her long red hair covering freckled shoulders.

“I can’t,” she said, avoiding my eyes.

“You can’t?”

“I’m waiting for a friend,” she said, and gave a real fake smile.

I walked back to Ronnie. He’d been watching the whole thing.

“That was painful,” Ronnie said. “You made *me* suffer. God!”

Celine Dion’s *My Heart Will Go On* seemed to unify the dancing couples. Girls’ heads rested on boys’ shoulders, all eyes closed, as if they were drifting beneath the Titanic, to an infinite sleep. I felt tired, too, I wanted a blanket to die under.

“Wake up Slim! I have to show you something,” said Ronnie. “I should have showed you earlier. It may have given you a better outlook on your situation.” Ronnie dug in his pocket and produced a plastic case that held a piece of bark the size of a fingernail.

“Bark,” I said.

“Nope. This here is a genuine piece of petrified wood.”

“Wood?”

“Wood. Or wood turned to rock by the process of *the natural order of planet earth!* Pay attention man, it takes a bazillion years for this to happen,” Ronnie was excited. The strobe lights flashed white making the tiny piece of wood pulsate like a violent beating heart. “Listen, nerd. This is not just any piece of wood. This is not even just any piece of petrified wood. It gives advice. The wisdom of the centuries. This thing tells the truth.”

I yawned. I wanted to play Mortal Kombat. “Ronnie,” I said. “Call your mom and tell her to come pick us up.”

“Never!” said Ronnie. “Our luck with these babes is gonna change. And change starts now.” He put the piece of wood to his ear and looked to the rafters. “Wood, how can we get babes to dance?” He waited, then nodded, “Uh, huh. Yup. Makes sense to me.”

I looked around and found the red-haired girl dancing with Buckley Booker. What really got me was that Buckley was a friggin’ loser. He wore two watches on one wrist. When he thought something was funny he looked straight at you and asked, “Funny? *Funny?*”

I dropped my head, defeated.

“Just as I suspected,” said Ronnie. “Wood, says your nose is too big for your face.”

I didn’t respond. What a cruel piece of petrified wood.

“Did you hear me?” asked Ronnie.

“What am I supposed to do?” I said. “Make my face bigger?”

“No, man. Wood says, ‘Start lifting weights.’”

The truth always sounds easy spoken aloud. Girls like guys with muscles.

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll lift. What about you?”

“Wood says, ‘Ronnie, you don’t need muscles.’ Wood says, ‘You have what it takes, Ronnie. Babes just don’t know it yet.’”

#

I bench pressed during the winter months, starting with the bar, soon adding tens, then twenty-fives. By the end of the year I was pumping forty-fives. People noticed. My nose didn’t shrink but my biceps bulged by way of focus and discipline: pec deck, calf raises, parallel squats, bench press, tricep curls. Old baggy shirts now stretched to accommodate my bulk.

When I mowed the lawn in spring I tore off my shirt and pushed the roaring metal like a warrior moves his cannon. I focused. That girl with the red hair who refused to dance with me gave me her number, “Call me,” she said, squeezing my arm.

I called her, but while we were talking a different girl called, a hotter girl. Without hesitation I dropped Red-head.

Me and Hotter-girl talked about getting our licenses.

“You can drive me,” said Hotter-girl.

“We can go to the movies and mate,” I said.

She laughed.

When you have muscles and you don’t waste time on video games, you can say whatever you want to girls. I said the worst things that came to mind.

She said, “You’re so funny.”

I said, “Meet me in the Cage.”

She said, “Why not?”

The floor of the Cage is covered in wrestling mats. It’s in the basement of South Jefferson Central School. After 5:30, no one is there, and as long as you remember to bring a blanket and stay on top of it, you’re safe from ring worm. All you have to do is keep the door propped. I used a quarter.

#

I rotated three girls in the Cage. Mondays with Marcy, she had a rack the size of a rack. Wednesday with a chick named Barcelona, dark curly hair and small feet. Fridays with Callista, a girl perfect for Fridays.

I propped the stop watch against the wall for easy viewing: two minutes chit chat, four minutes kissing, five minutes fondling outside of clothes, ten minutes hand under bra. This regimen allowed plenty of time to make the bus home.

#

It can be helpful to write out a weekly schedule to stay motivated:

Monday: Chest. Shoulders. Triceps. Squats. (Cage - Marcy)

Tuesday: Lats. Biceps. Traps. Calves. (Cage – Opening available)

Wednesday: Chest. Shoulders. Triceps. Power Cleans. (Cage – Barcelona)

Thursday: Lats. Biceps. Forearms. Hamstrings. (Cage – Opening available)

Friday: Chest. Shoulders. Triceps. (Cage – Callista)

#

That spring I joined South Jeff’s Dance team. Yes, that’s right, I became a dancer. A real dancer. Or rather a guy with muscles who lifted girls wearing black Lyrca. Modern

dance. It wasn't my idea. They asked me. Marcy, Barcelona and Callista all begged me to be their partner at the same moment. It was pizza Friday.

“Please, *please*,” they said. “Choose me.”

I made them roshambo. Marcy won in the final round by covering Barcelona's rock with paper. Our instructor, the spitting image of Elaine Benis, instructed me to lift Marcy by the butt and sometimes even the upper-inner thigh. I have always accepted instructions from authority figures.

Everything was aces until this one practice where I fumbled Marcy, which caused a devastating injury to her tailbone.

Like a champ, I recovered and dedicated myself to the art of lifting girls in tights. I developed my skill and became the only guy to have two partners, none other than Barcelona and Callista. In one number, to the song, *Man, I feel like a Woman* by Shania Twain, I had my girls on each shoulder. I spun us around like the strong point of a spinning top.

After the show Buckley Booker shook my hand and said, “Dance? *Dance?*”

It was agreed that we had won the hearts of the students and faculty. As for Marcy she was still game for Monday's Cage session. “I wouldn't miss it for the world,” she said.

It took some intricate rope work, but I managed to rig a pulley system that suspended her in an advantageous position. There was no risk of further injury and Marcy, slung in a harness, found my effort to be sweet and sensible.

#

But there was this funny girl. Her name was Tanya. Ronnie once said Tanya was worth a bazillion. Tanya was a cheerleader. She mocked me.

“You’re always checking yourself out,” she said and laughed.

“What?” I said.

“When you see your reflection, you flex,” she said. “We laugh at you.”

“Who laughs at me?”

“I do, mostly.”

When I passed Tanya in the halls I imagined carrying her books and taking her to Denny’s after school. We could share a plate of corned beef hash. I could watch her drop little creamers into her coffee. I thought of all the smart things we could discuss, like Monica Lewinsky and *The Smashing Pumpkins*. Tanya was tall, flat-chested, wore glasses, and when she cheered, she sang. Or at least that’s what I heard.

#

I called Tanya on a Thursday night. “Hi, I’m getting my driver’s license tomorrow,” I said.

“Who is this?”

“Me,” I said. “Just an FYI, there’s an opening for Tuesday’s and Thursday’s in the Cage.”

“You’re interrupting X.”

“X?”

“The X Files.” She said it like she meant it.

“Well, that’s great,” I said, possibly too enthusiastically. “I love a girl with hobbies. Anyway, I was wondering what your mid-week schedule looked like?”

“Seriously, who am I speaking to?” she said, in a very intimidating voice.

“Muscles,” I muttered.

She laughed. She couldn’t stop laughing. I think she dropped the phone and fell over and was still laughing. Her laugh was loud but started to fade. I tried to listen.

“Funny?” I said. “*Funny?*” I tightened the phone to my ear, but all I heard was the sound of her laughter becoming more and more distant.

#

The next morning I woke early and went for a run. I ran to Mercer’s, bought a Powerade and ran back home. I was never one for running. I have short powerful legs made for squat thrusts and lunges. After throwing back the Powerade I ran to the DMV to take my driver’s test.

“You thought we provided you with a vehicle?” said DMV lady. She was eating a ham sandwich with lettuce sticking out the middle.

“That is exactly what I thought,” I said, astonished.

#

I ran to Ronnie’s house thinking he could let me borrow his dad’s car, but an old woman I’d never seen before answered the door.

“What you selling punk?” she asked, her hair tight with curlers. I spotted her spotted scalp.

“I was looking for Ronnie,” I said.

“Who the double hockey is Ronnie? Hey, shouldn’t you be in school?”

I ran away, down her steps. I thought about the last time I’d talked to Ronnie. I remembered him telling me about Tanya, “She’s a bazillion peaches, man.” But wow,

that was some time ago. It had been months. Did Ronnie move? We hadn't played Mortal Kombat in so long. I needed to find Ronnie. He knew me. If anyone knew me it was my old buddy Ronnie. Ron Bon. Ron a Don Ronnie. Not to mention Ronnie's dad owned a car. My dad had a Supra with an underbelly that glowed phosphorescent green. He buffed on Saturday. Waxed on Wednesday. He said there's a right way and a wrong way. He said I'd be ready to *ride in it* when I had "proven to be a responsible young man."

#

Did I forget where Ronnie lived? I ran down South Park Street. I ran and then I jumped and then I leaped. There was a progression. The leap was a dance move I learned from Marcy called a *terja tay*.

What to say about the *terja tay*? The *terja tay* will showcase a ballerina's grace and athleticism. It also serves as a ninja defense against two bad guys, kick right, then roundhouse left, all in one fluid motion. I looked into the windows of the houses, my reflections in the glass like the blurred frolickings of the many Me's and You's.

While I was running (prancing?) I remembered Marcy Monday. Two days later, Barcelona and then a day of rest before Callista. Callista, with her golden locks and cute braces. One time Barcelona cut her hair too short but I said it looked fine, "Real pretty," I said. Marcy is loud and tickles me when my hands are too cold. Marcy. Barcelona. Callista. I ran and leaped, looking for Ronnie. Mostly, I was thinking about Tanya, her voice stuck in my brain like braids, "You're interrupting X...You're *interrupting* X."

I ran around the block three more times. My final *terja tay* nearly tagged Caleb's mom in the chin. She was bolting around the corner as I was in flight. Caleb's mom was the senior national champion in power walking.

Power? I thought. Walking? I thought. “Sorry Mrs. Richter!”

She acted as if I wasn’t there.

When I arrived at my house I sat on the front steps. The squirrels were out.

Squirrels everywhere. Some were up in a tree looking down at me and chittering like squirrels. Others sat and chewed the nuts of the village. A car drove past, then a tractor. The clouds rolled away, threatening our town. Dammit! I thought. Sun! I thought. I wanted a key to a car. I wanted to step on the gas and burn this street black. I wanted to rage and skid and burn the engine down. I wanted Tanya in my car, her head resting on my shoulder. I wanted to drive her to the big screen in the A.B. cornfield to watch *The X Files* and eat the food cheerleaders like to eat, Skittles and crunchy things. Happy foods. It’s very simple, I told myself, I will only go under her bra if she *asks* me to go under her bra.

#

While I was thinking about Tanya’s bra, the mailman walked up to my porch. “I’ll take it,” I said.

“Better safe than sorry,” he said as he skirted past me, real superior-like, to put it in the mail-box.

There was a little package sticking out. It was addressed to me. Ronnie’s handwriting. I opened the box and found that little plastic case with a piece of petrified wood in it, and a folded up note. I read the note.

Yo, Man-Ho! It’s been a while. Here’s a slice of an old wise rock. You need it. It told me you need it more than me.

Anyway, my dad got another job and we’re here in Belleville. Don’t fret, it ain’t

far.

Guess what? First day in, I got myself a lady! She showed me how to milk a goat and play Halo. You'd love it. Beats Mortal all day! Sorry I bailed without telling you, but I thought it was something no one else could pull off, but me! I call it No Closure.

Peace,

Ronnie

I walked onto my front lawn and opened the plastic case and took out the old rock. In the light of the sun the rock in my palm looked dead. Worse than dead. Like a dead man who died again. It weighed nothing, like holding a chunk of air. I threw it up and caught it. Sometimes it's fun to play catch all by your lonesome. I tossed it again, but this time it didn't fall. It kept rising, there was nothing to stop it. There was physics and maybe something else, something not yet discovered that encouraged the ascension. I watched its rising, a rock falling in reverse. There was an otherness in the atmosphere that allowed me to see it all the way.

The sun, everywhere, I thought. Tanya, Tanya! I thought.

I thought about Tanya squeezing my arm, wearing black Lycra, driving me to Denny's... I looked directly into the sun until the rock became one with the light. I realized then I was covered in sun. Gold particles raining down. I looked through the golden dust to my house, searching for my reflection in the front window. I wanted to flex. How had my right bicep developed? But the only thing looking back was my wire-haired Dachshund, Sneakers. He was growling, scratching the window, showing his white teeth. Sneakers was a good dog. Sneakers would never be in rage. He even liked

the mailman. “What’s the matter Sneaky boy?” I said, troubled by those wild-eyes.

“What are you looking for, what do you see?”

Heaven

I was terrible at everything. I never understood the point of sports or math or appropriate hygiene. My wife was embarrassed. When we'd take the kids into town they'd all walk ten paces in front so it didn't look like I was with them. It got old. Of course I really didn't mind my line of work. I mean, it didn't pay like a job but there was something about it that made sense. Almost as if I was created for it. I know this all sounds stupid, and I wouldn't blame you if you thought of me as a real pathetic guy but I have to admit being a Sunglass Salesman was completely satisfying. Someone's got to do it. And to be clear, I'm talking about affordable sunglasses, the ones you see at gas stations, the ones you sit on or lose and have to buy all over again. I loved seeing people try on the various styles: Sport, Bling, Polarized, Cat Eye, Aviator. They seemed so hopeful, looking into the mirror. Hopeful that my sunglass rack held the exact fit and style their face was created for. I felt I had something to do with it when they found the one that fit—made me feel connected, sort of touched my heart.

I know everything I say is like total loser mode, but I guess that is sort of the point. I mean if I wasn't such a bum on earth I wouldn't be here in the upper realm of heaven with the rest of these bozos. You should see this crew. All those regulars at the

laundromat, those guys got in! We are all really close. We love taking nature walks and when we bounce on the trampoline we laugh and shout, Hallelujah! Hallelujah! We do everything together. We eat what we want and only sin when we feel like it. What's great is when you do sin in heaven it is immediately forgiven. No one holds anything against you.

#

Sometimes Jesus joins us for a game of ping pong. He says he models his game after Forrest Gump. We laugh. But truth be told, he's pretty good. Maybe the one thing I could do better than most on earth was play ping pong. I don't know what it was, I just kept winning. I don't think I was the most talented, but I could get into the psyche of the other player, especially if he was ahead toward the end of the match. "Looks like you got this game in the bag," I'd say and smile. "Man, am I gonna lose." There was something in the way I said it that made them think deeper, until the depth of thought turned to paranoia or straight over-confidence, which would inevitably be followed by defeat.

But it's not easy getting under Jesus' skin. You can't be bothered if you don't care if you win or lose. When Jesus does lose, he gets mad and all, but seems to be ready to make up for his loss by challenging Saint Peter to a sprint. Saint Peter is slow, always was, always will be.

When my wife died she went to heaven, sure, but to a lower realm of heaven. A fine place, I'm sure, but lacking the perks of our upper tier. I'm not bragging or anything, I'm just saying she wasn't half bad on earth. I was terrible, and got to the upper tier. She wasn't so lucky. She was a good mother and a respected member of the community. When I caught wind of her death I walked to where I could see her. I can't technically

cross over to her side, it's all roped off with those long maroon sagging sausages you find at movie theatres, but we can still converse and maybe even steal a kiss.

"How are you?" she asked. She looked good, like she did when she told me she was pregnant.

"Great," I said, because I was great.

She told me she missed me. She told me she wished she could have done it all over again.

"Regrets?" I asked.

"Well," she said. "You know, I wasn't appreciative. You were a wonderful lover."

I forgot about that part of life. You know, the sex part. I forgot what it was all about. It's true, I could hold my own in the sack. But what was there to do now, being roped off and all?

#

I walked away feeling good. What feels better than your old lover's regrets? What satisfies more than hearing someone admit they were wrong about you? While I was walking, the gang met me and asked if I was interested in sinning. It had been awhile, and it seemed to them that it was our time to come up with something. I was feeling pretty good so I agreed.

We walked over to Jesus and asked him what he thought of the idea. We like to include as many as possible when we're sinning. We're not exclusive about it. He said he was tired from all the ping pong and foosball, and that he had some business to take care of, something the Holy Ghost had to speak with him about. We didn't pry, we wanted to,

believe me we love good gossip, but we also understood that Jesus was sometimes a real private guy, one that doesn't just tell you all the secrets.

So we congregated at my place. I built a fire in the fireplace and we ate some apple pie and croissants. We sat in a circle and told stories. Then I said, "Well, how should we sin?" Everyone seemed sort of exhausted at the thought. We wanted to sin, we did, but we also wanted to relax and laugh and warm ourselves near the fire. Then we heard a knock at the door. Three solid knocks. I got up and answered the door. Sure enough it was Jesus with a bundt cake and a vegetable platter. Everyone cheered. We ate.

Jesus said, "So have you figured out a way to sin?"

"We got into other things," said a woman with bangs.

"It's not as easy as it seems," said a friend.

"I want to," I said.

"I want to, too!" said another.

"Me too!"

"Me too!"

But then I broke out the wine, vintage Shiraz. The wine in heaven is wonderful. We drank and drank and drank. Jesus out-drank everyone, like always. He was laughing and we were laughing and then I thought of a sin. I remembered all the murder of the world.

"How about murder?" I said.

"What about it?" said a friend.

"Murder...to kill," I said. "Remember?"

Everyone went silent. They were thinking of what it meant to remember.

Jesus left the room and came back with a serrated sword. He held it up and said, “Who’s first?”

I said I was. Truth be told I was a little drunk. He handed me the blade. I looked at it wondering what I should do next.

Jesus said, “I don’t have all night.”

Without another word I sliced off his head. His body fell. We laughed at the severed head on the ground. It sat there, eyes blinking rapid fire.

“No fair!” they said, and each one took their turns slicing off parts of Jesus: limbs first, then other parts like ears and nose and pinky toes.

When we finished with our sin we took the leftovers of Jesus and stuffed them into a grocery cart. Everyone here has at least one grocery cart. They come in handy and sometimes we sit in them and race down steep hills. I wheeled the cart over to the river, everyone was singing some drunken song,

Sin! Sin! Sin! Who doesn't love to sin?

If you don't love to sin, then be sure to step right in!

If you don't dare to share, then be prepared to care!

These weren’t the true lyrics to the song, but like I said, we were drunk and when you have just killed Jesus you don’t always remember words to hit songs.

When we got to the river we dumped his parts in. Rainbow trout rose and chewed on his flesh. They seemed grateful. Their scales sparkled every color of heaven.

Oh, what a sin! we thought. We were so proud to come up with something. But what an exhausting night. A night we didn’t care to repeat for at least another month.

The next morning we gathered at my place for Bloody Mary’s to relieve our

hangovers. When we felt almost back to normal we walked over to the trampolines and leap and yelled, Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Then we took a long nature walk. We talked about our night of sin. It was a wonderful sin, we all agreed. As we walked out of the woods I remembered my children. Wondered when they would die. Part of me hoped they were as useless in life as I was, so they could enjoy the upper realm of heaven. But deep down I knew they were better, they probably followed the example of others, people who knew how to achieve the things beyond a Sunglass Salesman. Like, maybe they figured out how to rise above their circumstances. I laughed at the ambitious twentysomethings. I laughed and sang a little tune I learned, a tune only known by those of us who have achieved the highest place of eternity.

We, me and my friends, held hands and skipped over to the game room to play ping pong. When we got there we found Jesus, nearly put back together. We laughed because he wasn't quite right, not yet: his nose was his eye, his ears were his feet, his fingers were his teeth, his heart was his head. But I knew, by the look of him, the way he was holding his paddle by the armpit that he was looking for a rematch.

This World Ain't No Place

When it was time for the boy to be born Claudia went out to her garden and gathered snakes. She picked them up and said, "Little ones, what a glorious child you will become." She tied the snakes together so they were one long line that travelled the length of the garden. The snake at the very end looked at Claudia and hissed and wiggled its split tongue. Claudia stuck her fat finger in the snake's mouth and said, "Looks like this child will be one of *rebellion*. Indeed, it will be a boy."

A drop of blood fell into the garden as Claudia pulled her finger from the snake's mouth. She dug a hole with her hands until the hole was three-feet wide and three-feet deep, coiled the snakes in a circle at the bottom of the hole, and filled it back in with dirt. She went to the well and filled a bucket of water and poured three buckets over the filled-in hole. Then she gathered a few apples that had fallen from the tree and placed them on top.

That night she peered into the dark closet of her house and spoke to the bats, "Arise, my beauties. Go and protect the burial." The bats flew out of the closet, out of the house and circled around the buried snakes.

"More children!" cried the bats.

When the bats were hungry they tore into the apples.

“Apples, apples!” cried the bats.

The following morning Claudia went to see how the crop was doing. There were other children being born. The apples were gone, even the cores had been eaten. In place of each was a stalk, not unlike an asparagus plant, sticking out of the earth. There were scattered stalks here and there lining the garden.

“A bountiful harvest,” whispered Claudia.

The next day she went out and noticed the stems had sprouted tiny arms, but arms without hands. Claudia gathered more water and poured it on the arms. When she poured the water on the rebellious boy the arm twitched and shuddered, almost, it seemed to Claudia, in righteous fury.

“Oh Savior,” she whispered. “Why should you have me raise this boy? I would rather drown it so as not to bring more suffering to your people.”

#

After more water and many nights with the bats, the arm grew a small hand. At first it was a blood-stained hand. Claudia had never seen anything quite like it. As the arm grew and the hand reached further to the sky, the blood dripped down the arm and mixed with the mud. When the rains came, the mud thickened, and the blood sank deep into the land. Soon the earth itself stirred, and in its groggy half-awake state, yawned deeply and groaned, sending a slight rumble everywhere, startling birds, awakening sleeping predators. “But I am so tired,” said the earth. “I am so old and I am so tired.”

#

After three more days, the boy was born. He stood naked and cold. His head,

covered in grass needed to be watered so that hair would grow in.

“Ah,” said the boy.

“Some do make choices,” grumbled the earth. “But you are not like them.”

“How do’s my be?” said the boy, not knowing how to use words correctly.

But the earth knew the boy’s heart. “What a blessed child,” said the earth.

“My’s not of trials?” asked the boy.

“You are like me,” said the earth. “Do you not know, when I laugh out of great joy, rivers change course, wrecking villages? This is why I try to sleep.”

The boy questioned everything. Belief is a luxury of the aged. He didn’t know names. However, he could sense the nature of things.

#

The hills were green. Flowers bloomed themselves, because they could. Bees swarmed the garden. Claudia’s thick hand tap tapped her stick to the earth as she gathered the little children, “Come, come, little ones,” she said. “The men are on their way. No time now.”

The little children went into the house and looked out the large window. They beheld the green hills and waited for the men. “Fill your minds, children,” said Claudia. “Think of our Savior. It won’t be long now.” Claudia prodded each child with her stick, gently on the shoulder, for comfort.

The green hills darkened at dusk. The children gnawed on their knuckles. Drool rolled off their little white chins.

“Here they come,” said a frightened little boy.

Over the green hills men were charging toward them. Thirty bare-chested men

carrying white fat babies, each man with a baby in his right arm. The babies sat face-forward, the folds of their skin jiggling, their teeth bared.

The children in the house began to cry. Some sat and put their dirty toes in their mouths.

“They’re here!” screamed a little girl.

Claudia was in the kitchen stirring the water she gathered from the deep puddle that sat muddied beside the garden. She was singing an old song, until she broke off to yell at the little ones, “Children, children, don’t mind the men!”

“But Ma!” said a little girl. “The babies. What will they do with the babies?”

“Oh,” said Claudia, “Let them do as they please.” She stirred, she hummed and prayed, “Dear Savior, do come quick.”

The little children gazed out with hunger. The men holding the babies were in the garden savagely pulling up vegetables. Some picked up the foul tomatoes in the soil. Rotten juice ran down the fur of their chests.

They tore through the berry bushes. The babies sucked greedily from fistfuls of raspberries. The liquid splattered their bodies red.

A little boy watched as a man used his free hand to open the top of the beehive. A furious mob of bees swarmed, but the men paid no mind. The babies too licked the honey off each frame. There was no crying, only feasting as the sun moved further below the world.

#

Soon the only light came from the flame of the oil lamp. The children, sitting around the table, wouldn’t slurp their puddle soup.

“Little ones,” said Claudia, “Look at your mother.”

The children’s eyes were dull, grim and protruded like dead light bulbs. They looked in Claudia’s direction, however all they could see in their minds was the men with the babies. The men were still outside gorging themselves and sloshing at the well. They sounded like water beasts breaking the surface, gurgling and snorting. The children searched for the sounds of babies but could hear only the men.

“Now, hear me,” said Claudia, “Our Savior told me He would come and take us to eternity.”

“When! when!” cried the children.

“Soon, soon,” said Claudia.

“But it’s been so long,” said a boy who picked at a scab endlessly. Blood trickled down his elbow.

“We can still hear them in the darkness,” cried a little girl. “When will they leave us alone?”

“I can hear them scratching at the walls,” cried another.

“Don’t fret,” said Claudia. “All we can do is pray.” She bowed her head and began to pray. “Dear Savior, save us from this wretched world. Strike down the Evil One. Keep us safe. Keep us from sinning. Savior, please come soon to gather your children.”

The children opened their eyes.

“It’s not pretty,” whispered the little rebellious boy looking down at his bowl of soup. He looked at Claudia. “Is anyone listening? I said, it’s not pretty.”

Every child looked at the boy.

“All of God’s creation is beautiful.”

The boy took a spoonful of soup. A blade of brown weed floated like a corpse in his spoon.

“No, Ma,” he said, “You’re wrong.” He dropped the spoon in his bowl and stood, walking to the window. He tried to see what was outside but there was nothing to be seen in the darkness. He raked his long fingernails down the glass.

“Come back, son,” said Claudia calmly. “Come finish your soup.”

The boy returned obediently to his cold soup.

The children slurped the bland dinner without pausing to speak. Claudia looked over them with her liquid eyes; she watched them shiver in their chairs. The glory of the Savior was above each one. She let her eyes wash over them and bless them. After all, *these are mine, these are children of God.*

“In this life, my dears,” said Claudia. “You will have trouble.” She was smiling. “We are to suffer for our Savior. Listen to me. Look into my eyes.” She waited for each child to make eye-contact. “You are not meant for this world.”

When they finished eating their soup Claudia gave them their buckets. They took their buckets and sat in a circle on the floor, in front of a fireplace, open and cold, only a heap of white ash in its center. Claudia had the oil lamp in the kitchen to aid her as she stacked the dishes. Other than that, the room was dark.

“Sing children,” yelled Claudia from the kitchen. “Sing to our Savior.”

The children began to sing weakly a song called, “Savior, I need You.”

Savior, I need You

I need You

Oh, how I need You

Every hour I need You

In the middle of the song a boy vomited into his bucket. When he finished he lay down on the cold wood floor, his body limp and pale as the grave. The bile reek rose and hovered like thick fog, but no child complained.

All was quiet save for the scratching of the men at the walls. Claudia reached for the oil lamp on the shelf. She set it on a table in the kitchen. "Oh, sweet light," she whispered as she rubbed the wick between her fat fingers. "And be," she said, taking her hand off the wick. A single white light sprouted and grew until it was a fully formed flame. She carried the light to the children.

"Do they eat their babies?" asked a little girl. "They don't always bring babies."

"There is all sorts of evil," said Claudia holding the oil lamp. The sudden illumination made dark splotches and shadows show on her face. She placed the light in the middle of the circle. The flame wriggled for an instant before straightening out. The children's attention was on the light.

A bat circled the children three times before returning to the closet that stored the old coats.

"Who let the bats in the house?" asked a boy.

"Bats are fascinating creations!" said Claudia with a grin. "Did you know, children, a bat can collapse its bones to fit in to the tiniest crevice? Bats only need the slightest of cracks to move through," she indicated a small space between her chubby thumb and forefinger, revealing how small a space a bat really needed. "Bats are as sly as our sins. All there needs to be in your soul is a slight crack, and like that," she snapped her fingers, "*sin* enters."

The children's breathing was shallow as they thought about the bats.

"Can't we kill the bats?" asked the rebellious boy.

"Boy, we wait on our Savior. He will guide us. He gives and *He* takes away."

"I'm so cold," said the rebellious boy. "Can't we start a fire?"

Claudia narrowed her eyes and leaned towards the boy. "Who do you think you are?"

"I just don't understand, Ma," complained the boy. "It's so cold."

Claudia straightened herself and sighed. "Son, haven't you heard? Don't you know? Our Savior will light the fire when He comes. Have faith."

"But they have fire," said a girl pointing out the window. The children looked to see flickers of red light on the glass. They could hear the men singing, or were they laughing? The children didn't know.

"I'm so thirsty," said the rebellious boy. "The well is full, Ma. I looked down into it this morning. All I want is some water."

"Oh, disobedient son, when will you learn? You know water is for the garden."

"Even the little crawling bugs drink water," said the boy.

"I won't have another word," said Claudia.

They sat in silence in the cold of the room. The reeking cloud from the stale vomit sat over the children. There were more bats weaving through the shadows of the house. The men outside began beating a dull drum at odd rhythms. The window brightened like a splatter of blood. The boy with the scab moaned as he itched.

Soon it was time to lie down. Claudia closed the flame on the oil lamp and stood. "It's time, my little ones. Time to rest." She grabbed her stick with her thick hand and

circled the children, softly patting them with the end of the stick, "Sleep my small doves, time to sleep." The children draped their limbs over each other in exhaustion and slept.

#

Claudia was restless. She kept circling the sleeping children, tapping the stick to the floor in front of her. The darkness had centered in the house like a hole. The children took turns crying out. Claudia calmed their night terrors with shushes and calm whispers of the Savior's promise. "Rest my little ones. Soon, soon. Our Savior will come, soon."

The men had gone back over to the other side of the green hills. That much, she was sure of. Their fire was dying out, only a flutter of light now. Bats came and went. The bats pleased Claudia. Creatures that could see through the dark without sight! Imagine, she thought, if I could see my way in the dark. She smiled, her heavy steps creaking the floor below.

#

With the morning light Claudia stirred the children with her stick. She prodded them tenderly in the ribs, "Come, come, my little doves. Time to do your chores."

The children stood dazed with dread, buckets in hand. They were each hunched over, holding their sick, protruding bellies. Their greasy thin hair covered their eyes. As they proceeded outside, stooped now in the light, they felt the sun fall over the backs of their heads. They dragged themselves to the well to fetch the water. When they filled their buckets it took great effort to carry them to the garden. Claudia watched. She watched the rebellious boy, especially, as a raven watches its prey, making sure he didn't dare dip his sick hand in the bucket. She wanted nothing to spoil the water.

The children covered the garden with water. They stood around the shining plot.

This was what they liked best. The vegetables, a thousand miracles, sprouting out of the earth at once, all in an instant! The miracle! The children never tired of seeing the Savior's miracle: the sacred food given from above. The raspberry bush, like the vegetables, sprang forth, plump and heavy, and filled with sweetness. There it was, all their questions answered. The Savior loved them dearly.

Claudia smiled and said, "See children, do you see how the Savior loves us?"

The children smiled back at her, brushing the hair out of their eyes. It was still so early. The men wouldn't be charging over the hills until much later, at dusk. Claudia felt the pleasure of the Savior. If it wasn't for pleasing Him she knew this life would all be for nothing. A warmth that only comes from obedient submission filled her desperate soul. My Savior is pleased with me, she thought. As she looked over the blessed land a great joy enlivened her. She was in the middle of creation: the green hills, the wild flowers in full bloom, a well of living waters, the everlasting garden, all the children of God, and that smoldering pit of fire, left by the men, out there in the open field.

#

The rebellious boy saw the satisfaction on Claudia's fat face. He rubbed his nose with the back of his dry hand and looked out over the hills. There was the forest. He thought maybe there was a river or a creek not far away. He dropped his bucket on the green grass. What did the boy want to do? What did the boy know? He imagined submerging his whole body in water. To go under the water completely, his head and his face fully wet. What would it be like to get wet? The tip of his finger dipped itself in the water. He sucked on the finger and tasted the sweetness from the well. Claudia was not looking at him for once. Two more fingers went in, three, all the way; he pulled them out

and sucked the wonderful water. There was something inside him healing, like a sore on the inner wall of his stomach. As he went to reach into the bucket for a third time a great thunder rang in his ears. He dropped to the ground, spilling the water, and held his ears tight so as not to hear the thunder again.

“Boy!” shouted Claudia, her right palm in the air, ready to strike a second time.

“What have you done?”

The boy was confused. He looked at the cloudless sky. He let go of his ears and listened to the world around him. There was no thunder. The bucket was tipped, the water pooling in a dipped section of grass.

“Ma,” said the boy. “Ma.”

“Shut up,” said Claudia. “Shut your mouth and stand.”

The boy slowly came to his feet. Any healing in his gut was overtaken by sickness once more.

“There is no room here for the unrighteous,” said Claudia. “You must go.” She pointed her stick to the hills.

“But Ma!” cried the boy. “The men, Ma. The men are out there. You know I can’t go out there alone. I’ve never left you.”

She only closed her eyes and repeated herself. “There is no room for the unrighteous, or for the wicked.”

The boy dropped his head. He was so tired. He took a step toward the hills. He forced another step, and then another after that. His mind emptied itself with every step onward. What was ahead he could not possibly guess, for he knew nothing of the world.

Though the boy did not know the world, the further he went from Claudia the more he felt himself mysteriously attaching meaning to words. Maybe it was the desperation. Maybe it was the fact that he was born out of the earth and the earth can choose to give wisdom however and whenever it wants. The earth can teach words. All around, the boy felt words crawl into his ears, almost as if they were carried on the backs of the creeping things in the grass.

He spotted something moving in the blades of grass. The grass swayed in a thin line. The boy stopped to see what it was.

“Snake,” he said. “You are a *snake* and you are *slithering* in the *grass*.”

Without thinking, he reached down and snatched the snake right below the head. The long body hung long, its mouth wide, a split tongue straight out, trembling. The boy stopped to look at the fangs.

“And *fangs*,” said the boy. “Fangs like a bat.” How wonderful it was to say words.

He was confident in the way he was holding the snake that it could not harm him. Soon the snake’s mouth settled, its eyes narrowing on the path ahead. The boy held tight to the snake’s neck, not harming it but not letting his grip loosen.

The boy and snake travelled over the hills and further to the forest.

The boy whispered more words. “*Blood, legs, food*.”

#

The forest was colored with the many shades of earth. Birds sang different songs, like a legion of prophets all saying the same things in different tongues. The boy walked towards a clearing and found himself in what appeared to be a section of the earth meant

for the dead. However, instead of gravestones there were babies arms sticking out, one arm per grave. The boy slapped at one hand and the hand retaliated by grabbing the boy by the ankle. The boy took his snake and whipped the hand until he heard laughter from above. He looked up and found little bare-chested men with big furry bellies pointing and laughing at him. He recognized them as the same men who carried the babies over the hills to Claudia's garden. But they were so tiny, like little monkeys in the trees.

"*Monkeys live in trees!*" said the boy.

"Monkeys are monkeys!" said the men.

"What did you do with the babies?" said the boy.

"Wouldn't you like to know," said the men.

"We didn't know you were so small."

"We didn't know! We didn't know!" mocked the men.

The boy walked on. What else was there to do? He heard the harmless little men laughing and mocking him, *We didn't know! We didn't know!*

"Laughing men," said the boy. "The men like to *laugh*."

The further into the forest the boy went, the deeper his breathing became. He breathed in the scent of the world. The snake he held looked at him and seemed on the verge of speaking. But what the boy heard came from somewhere else.

"Whatcha got there, son?"

He'd nearly stumbled over a man wearing a crooked dirty hat, sitting against a tree. Startled, the boy couldn't believe he hadn't seen him before. "Where'd you come from?" asked the boy. "I didn't see you."

"I've never left," said the man. He was smiling. "Now tell me son. What you

holding that snake for?"

The boy hadn't thought about why he held a snake. He just did.

"My son, you never can tell with snakes."

The boy was hungry and confused.

"What is a snake for? Good? Evil?" said the man.

"Our Savior created them."

"Ha!" laughed the man. "Sounds like you got it all figured out." He inhaled and leaned his head against the tree and covered his face with his hat. "There's just nothing I can teach a boy like you."

The boy wanted to ask the man if he'd teach him more words. The boy couldn't move his feet.

"Don't you see I'm trying to get some shut eye?" The man pulled his hat up and peeked at the boy. "But since you're here. Can I tell you one thing I know?"

"I'd like that."

"I seen you coming into my woods. I seen you holding that snake. You think you come to feel something you've never felt before? You come to put some fat over those scrawny ribs? Let me tell you son, where you're headed there ain't no turning back."

"I was told I was full of wickedness."

"Yeah son, don't you got it all figured out. Now you and that snake need to hurry on and let me get my shut eye," he said as he covered his face once more with his hat. "If truth be told, this world ain't *no place*."

The boy began to walk on but the man spoke once more, "Boy! Wait just a second. I nearly forgot." He put his hat on right and stood and then bent down to

rummage through his sack. He pulled out a shirt that had buttons on it. “This will keep you warm. It’s meant for a man but you’ll fill it out soon enough.”

The man helped him with the shirt. He buttoned the little buttons and rolled up the sleeves. The shirt sagged almost to the boy’s knees.

“Now that’s better.” The man searched again in his sack and pulled out a sheet of paper. “One last thing, I promise,” said the man as he began excitedly folding the paper. “You have to do me a favor. I gave you a shirt now you have to do me a favor.” He put the folded piece of paper into the boy’s shirt pocket. “Please give this to our Virgin Mary.”

“The Virgin Mary? Will I see her?”

“Oh yes, she’s not far off your path.”

“How will I know it’s her?”

“You’ll know. Now promise me you won’t read this little note. Promise me.”

The boy nodded. He didn’t know how to read.

“If you read this little note curses will be on your life. One evil after another will befall you. Your entire purpose on this earth will be to curse those who walk in your path.”

“I promise,” said the boy. “But why don’t you deliver it yourself?”

“You can only meet our Virgin Mary once in a lifetime. I’ve already met her.”

“What’s she like?”

The man sat against the tree. He looked as if he had just expelled a great deal of energy, but also like he was focusing on an image that pleased and satisfied his soul. His eyes were closing. He covered his face once more with his dirty hat. A soft snore began.

His chest rose and fell.

The boy looked at the snake but now it appeared more like a long straight branch. He grabbed the head and prodded the earth. It was stiff and strong. As he walked he felt comforted by the walking stick and warmed by the big shirt with buttons.

“Buttons,” whispered the boy. “Buttons and walking sticks.

#

When he got to the door of our Virgin Mary’s cabin he knocked with his staff.

A one-legged boy opened the door with a smile. “Tell me, how can I help you?” His right pant leg was cinched where the thigh normally would be. Brown cloth hung loosely below.

“Does our Virgin Mary live here?”

“She’s busy cooking, come back another time.” The boy with one leg began shutting the door.

Desperately the boy used his staff to stop the door from closing. “I’ve always dreamed of speaking to our Virgin Mary.”

“What do you mean, ‘our’?”

The boy could smell a sweet aroma. He was starving. He pleaded, “I haven’t eaten in so long.”

“Do you know how to paint?” asked the one-legged boy.

“Paint?” said the boy. “I think I would like paint.”

“Wait here,” said the one-legged boy. He shut the door.

The boy felt in his shirt pocket and pulled out the note the man had given him. He unfolded the note and without remembering the curse or the fact that he didn’t know how

to read, he began reading. It was a short note. A love letter, thought the boy. A man in love with a woman. Men write letters to women. Women read letters. “Letters,” said the boy. “Letters and love and men and women.”

The one-legged boy returned, his face glowing like winter on a sunny day, and holding a brush and a bucket full of what appeared to be blood. “Paint this door completely and then you may dine with Mother.” He shut the door once more and left the boy to do his work.

When the boy leaned his staff against the house it flopped to the earth, returning to its original serpent-form. The snake looked up at the boy, a face as concerned as any parent, then slithered under the cabin. As the snake moved in the darkness, it began to forget about the boy. He did once like the child, but now under our Virgin Mary’s home, he thought he could satisfy his hunger. With his eyes adjusted to the dark, and this newfound appetite, he slid to the place of the mouse family. He found them, all of them, Josephine and her singing children, their faces transfixed by the evil glowing eyes. The fear in the mice froze them and when they were all gathered in the belly of the snake they sang no more. For their lives on this earth were over.

#

Our Virgin Mary’s door had deep vertical grooves. The painted-on blood ran down the grooves and dripped to the ground making dark puddles in the dirt. Smells of stewing meat inside seeped through the cracks around the door. The boy breathed them greedily and listened to the soft singing of a woman’s voice.

“Stew and singing,” said the boy. He wanted to know what stew tasted like. He wanted to hear the woman’s words of song.

When he was finished painting it was nearly dark. Bats replaced the birds. He looked above and watched the flying creatures of the night flutter jaggedly like drunken phantoms between the trees. He sat and gazed into the bucket. Thirst overtook him. The blood reminded him of the water he'd always craved. He raised the brim to his lips and took a small, safe sip. The blood tasted bitter in his mouth but as it went down he could feel the nourishment in his insides.

He took a second sip. This time the taste was strange. The boy longed for the words to describe the taste but there were no words for it.

After a moment of restraint he sipped again, for the third time, and didn't stop gulping until he heard the door behind him open. Before getting caught he set the bucket down and wiped his mouth with his shirtsleeve.

"Time to eat!" proclaimed the one-legged boy with great cheer.

Inside the cabin it was bright, but the boy could not figure out where the light was coming from. He searched for an oil lamp like Claudia's, but found none. There was a fire in the fireplace, but that would not provide enough brightness to light the entire cabin. The boy watched the flames in wonder. The flames were flames. He inhaled deeply.

"Fire and stew," he said.

The Virgin Mary came into the room carrying a pitcher full of wine. "Come sit, my boy, don't be shy."

"Wine?" asked the boy.

"You've never tasted anything so perfect," said our Virgin Mary.

She was a slight woman with long gray hair. The boy looked at her face and

didn't remember ever seeing anything so beautiful. She was Beauty. The boy thought she may have been the source that brightened the room. He thought then of Claudia. Heavy Claudia with her thick fingers and that pointy stick. How opposite two women can be.

"Don't be distressed," said the woman. "Sit, sit. You need a good meal."

The boy sat across from this woman. The one-legged boy added more wood to the fire and then walked out the door as if he had a phantom leg that he could use to steady his strides.

"Where is he going?" said the boy. "Why doesn't he eat?"

"He comes, and he goes," said the woman. She ladled the boy three large scoops of stew. The boy counted every chunk of red meat he could see. Fifteen.

They ate in silence. The woman watched the boy. She smiled and said, "My boy, how does it taste?" Like all mothers, she was eager to know what the boy thought of her stew.

"I've never had anything quite like it," said the boy. "It's perfect! I feel like it is all for me! With every bite I become more cheerful!" He took a large greedy mouthful and moaned in pleasure. The boy could not restrain his joy.

"Ha, ha," said the woman. "It's true. Isn't it?"

"What's true?" said the boy with a mouthful of flesh.

"When you have a son as good as this you only eat him one limb at a time," she said. After saying this, with her wondrous eyes, like two bolts of fire, she penetrated the boy's eyes.

The boy stopped mid chew. Everything in him wanted to keep eating.

"My boy, keep eating. There's no need to stop. All is well in this house."

Fatigue suddenly overcame him. He asked if he could lie down for a little, by the fire. The woman set out a pillow on the floor with a blanket. The fire raged. The boy lay beside it and gazed into the flames. There was no more hunger. Hunger, he thought. She covered his skinny body with the blanket. Before the cabin grew dim she sang him a lovely song. He closed his eyes, and listened until he fell asleep.

#

The following morning the boy opened his eyes and stretched his arms. As he stretched he felt his arms lengthen until they filled the shirt the man had given him. Now his hands were not hidden in the sleeves. He stretched his legs and they too grew long. He stood. The room was all lit in light from the fire, which burned steadily in the fireplace. Because his head was higher in the house it caused him to look down at everything: table, chairs, and the wood burning. There was a pair of red pants draped over a chair. Pants?

“Ahhh,” said the boy. “Pants!”

Since the pants had two legs the boy figured they were for him and not for the one-legged boy. One leg in and then the other, he never imagined such a thing as pants. He picked them up. Underneath the pants were two large bones. They looked like they belonged to the leg of the one-legged son. First he slid the red pants on. He squatted and then stood. He rubbed his hands all over his covered legs. Red legs, he thought. Red pants.

Then he picked up the bones. He tossed one in the air and caught it. Two big bones for me, he thought. These bones will be mine.

The house was silent and well lit. The wood burning made sounds like leg bones breaking, sounds very pleasing to the boy. He was not hungry or thirsty. He walked out of our Virgin Mary's home and felt the morning air. The sky was awake, too. The birds, the trees. He raised the bones to the morning air. He drummed the bones on his red covered thighs. He went over to a tree and began thumping the bones against the tree. It was wonderful having two bones to thrash around with; it was a joy to be clothed and to be as big as a man.

Something caught his attention, up in the tree—an unnatural sight. There was a basket lodged in the branches. Basket?

Baskets can be useful. Baskets are made for carrying things.

The boy shoved the bones into his back pockets and climbed the tree. He thought about his red pants as he climbed, and decided that he liked the way they felt on his skin. The shirt was very comfortable and to be clothed was to feel sure of himself in a new way. He doubted he could ever climb a tree naked.

There was a lid on the basket. You could fit three rabbits in this basket. He lifted the lid and looked inside, but there no rabbits. Instead, there was a girl. A small pretty girl with golden hair. She smiled at him.

The boy kept his eyes on her.

The girl covered her mouth and laughed.

The boy smiled back at her.

“You don't know me,” said the girl.

“Who knows you?” asked the boy.

“Nobody knows,” said the girl. “I’m Wickedness,” she said and then laughed a sweet little laugh.

The boy put the lid back on the basket and carried it down the tree. He felt grateful for Wickedness, for she was pretty, a youthful version of our Virgin Mary, and she could fit perfectly in a basket and the basket fit perfectly in his arms. He believed she was his for the taking. Why else would he have found her?

Once he was all the way down, he opened the lid again.

“I’m looking for a house,” said Wickedness. “Do you have a house?”

“A house?” he said. The boy looked back at our Virgin Mary’s house. The red door was closed tight. He had already been in that house. He looked back up the path he’d followed here. It was narrow and dark. There was another house. Claudia’s house. *House?* thought the boy. *Letter?* thought the boy.

The boy felt in his shirt pocket and took out the letter. He opened the lid and dropped the letter in the basket. He did not want to carry it in his pocket anymore.

#

As he walked back to Claudia’s carrying the basket, he was followed by creatures of the forest drawn to the sound of Wickedness’s laughter. They could not be seen or heard.

“Hee, hee,” she giggled. “Oh, what houses!”

The creatures followed the boy. The boy was very tall. The more he walked, the taller he became until all the creatures were convinced that he looked noble and strong. They were certain he was worth following. They passed the place where the man was

sitting against a tree. The man was not there but his hat was. The boy picked up the hat and put it on his head.

“I have a hat!” said the boy.

#

The boy was strong. He had two bones sticking out of his pants. He was carrying a basket with Wickedness inside. A hat was on his head. Wickedness sang and sang. Songs about trees and baskets and bones and blood.

The boy tripped and fell and the basket’s lid fell off and Wickedness tumbled out.

“Ouchy!” yelled Wickedness.

The boy looked at what he’d tripped on. It was the arm of a baby sticking out of the ground. He’d forgotten about the men and the babies.

“Don’t mind the monkeys in the trees or the babies in the dirt!” screamed the little men.

“It’s you again!” said the boy.

“It’s you again! It’s you again!” mocked the men in the trees.

Wickedness was being tickled by one of the baby’s arms. “Ha! HA! All these little fellas sleeping underground!” yelled Wickedness. “Have you ever seen such cute little things?”

The boy stood and took the leg bones out of his pockets. The baby hands reached for them and the men in the trees climbed down the trees to have a better look. “Bones, bones!” they whispered. “Bones, and more bones!”

As they gathered around the boy he noticed again how small they were. Even smaller than he'd thought before. They barely came up to his waist. The boy patted their heads. "Oh, little ones. We thought you were terrible creatures."

"At dusk! We are hungry at dusk!"

"Why don't you follow me? You can get an early supper?"

"We'll follow those two bones!" they cried.

With this Wickedness leaped back in her basket to fetch the letter.

"My basket is not my home," she said as she jumped onto the boy's shoulders.

She waved the letter to the little men.

"Read!" they cried. "Read us the curse!"

"Everyone listen!" said Wickedness. "I will now read the words!"

"Yippee! The words, the words!"

Dear My Love,

Everyone, including the boy, laughed wildly at these words.

"My love! My love!" they jeered.

"Dearest Dear!" laughed the boy.

Wickedness then stuffed the letter into her mouth and chewed. "Now!" she said.

"The words are all mine! I love the taste of a curse!"

Everyone cheered!

The little laughing men dug their babies out of the earth and began to follow the boy who carried Wickedness on his shoulders. They held hands and skipped all the way to Claudia's house. As they skipped they sang songs about bones and blood and the coming feast.

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The little men stopped holding hands and began to gather dead wood as they walked. The babies were now toddlers and walked most of the way. The toddlers gathered small sticks to burn too. When the boy at last saw Claudia's house he began to run. The running tickled Wickedness and she laughed all the more. There were the sick children gathering water at the well. There was the garden and there was Claudia circling the garden with her straight stick.

The boy took out his bones and pointed them at Claudia. As he ran his appetite became known to him and also to Wickedness.

“You've tasted the flesh!” shouted everyone. “And now we want more!”

“She is so fat!” cried the boy. “She will feed us all!”

The boy handed one of the bones to Wickedness. She held it high. The little men followed with their dead wood.

The children were not expecting visitors and had no idea this would be an afternoon worth remembering.

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Before Claudia could turn around to thwart him with the end of her stick, he, the boy, clobbered her on the head with a bone, and watched her fall to the earth. She was there, her entire body, next to the garden. The little men and toddlers made a large pile of dead wood and sticks. The sick children did not believe Claudia could die. They thought she was sleeping, until the toddlers took their hands and guided them to the garden. As the children ate they began to stand straight. Their eyes opened fully. There was no reason for them not to eat. The blessing was theirs. All blessings were theirs.

The boy, Wickedness, and the little men all grabbed a section of Claudia and dragged her next to the pile of wood. She lay silently, still holding to her stick. Bats emerged from the chimney of the house. They circled Claudia's dead body, their tears falling onto her dead skin.

A little girl, sick no more, fetched a big black pot from the kitchen. Another little boy brought out a blade he found in a drawer.

They handed the pot and knife to the boy. The boy began with the fat toes and then the knees and then lopped off her legs at the hip joint. Nothing went to waste.

By the time the little men finally got the fire burning, the pieces of Claudia's meat were in the pot, swimming in water from the well and savory herbs picked from around the garden and the juice of twelve lemons. As the pot heated in the flames the sweet aroma lifted and spread over the forest. The scent travelled even to our Virgin Mary's home, where she was gathering berries with her one-legged son.

"You smell that?" asked the one-legged son.

"Someone's cooking a fine stew."

"Let's go and see!"

And with this our Virgin Mary and the son walked to meet at the feasting place, carrying two baskets of fine fresh berries to share with the sons and with the daughters.

VITA

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