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THE NATIONAL
VIRGINITY PLEDGE
short stories and other lies

by Barry Graham

Cover art by Ryan Scott

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for

Mom. Kim. Stacy. Joe. Kelly. Angela. Alyssa. Samantha.
Brandon. Jasmine. Zachary. Jenna. Va'nek. Billy. Hayden.

you are my angels

everything trails off into confusion
so i just try to have witnesses everywhere
everyone should have tapes and mirrors and documents
everyone should travel in company

Robert Hershon

Everybody and Everything

So in these moments you become acutely aware of yourself,
every hour that has passed before you, your exact age and
the perfection of this moment that is doomed to end and
will never happen again and you'll look back on fondly until
you die.

Michelle Orange

The Sicily Papers

And I guess that's why they call it the blues
Time on my hands could be time spent with you
Laughing like children, living like lovers
Rolling like thunder under the covers
And I guess that's why they call it the blues

Elton John

I Guess That's Why They Call It the Blues

THE NATIONAL VIRGINITY PLEDGE

short stories and other lies

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On The Edge

I CAN'T REMEMBER if it was before or after I pissed off the side of the Grand Canyon, but there was a man standing along the road holding a camera and the car in front of me swerved to avoid hitting a squirrel and ran over the man taking pictures of the sun setting behind the canyon. I did nothing until I got to Las Vegas where I stopped at a Del Taco for a spicy chicken burrito, then at the car wash to scrub the dried blood off the side of my car.

The Del Taco register girl was Mexican and her nose was pierced and she was wearing a blue shirt with the top two buttons unbuttoned. She rubbed her hand against her chest to wipe off the sweat then did the same to her forehead which would have been sexy if she wasn't touching my food with her dirty hands.

It only took forty-eight seconds for the burrito to work its magic and there were muddy boot prints and random puddles of pissy water all over the floor in the bathroom stall, so I took my shorts and boxers off and set them in a dry spot on the floor before I sat down. The toilet was grimy and sat too close to the wall and flushed automatically every time I wiggled. It made my ass all wet and toilet paper doesn't work on wet ass. I hobbled out of the stall to get some paper towels from the dispenser. I tore a piece off and ran it between my ass cheeks and the door opened up and a middle-aged man came in holding his toddler's hand. He nodded his head then apologized, then walked back out the door. I stopped wiping and left a ripped off piece stuck between my cheeks, picked my pants up off the floor, put them back on, and headed out the door without washing my hands. I couldn't find the man and his son so I had no chance to offer them a soda or invite them to lunch, so I bought another burrito from the sweaty register girl and made sure I touched her hand and wrist when I gave her the money because payback's a bitch.

The handle was hot when I opened the car door and I put all the windows down. *Tiny Dancer* was playing on the radio and I saw the middle-aged man and his son walking out of the restaurant next door, so I honked the horn and waved before pulling away.

I drove past Binion's, past Fremont St., past the wedding chapels, bail bonds, buffet specials, three for ten dollars t-shirt stands, and divorce attorneys. I drove right through town, where you're better off walking or taking a bus and everybody smells different, except the locals who smell dead; past the homeless sitting along the sidewalk walls holding cardboard signs, past the street rappers hustling cd's and the migrant workers handing out business cards for call girls. I kept driving through the strip, past the M&M store, past the Statue of Liberty, past all the signs promising a free fifty dollars in slot play if you sign up for a players card, past the largest bronze statue in the western hemisphere, towards my hotel on Paradise.

The outside pool was empty and there was a Korean woman at the front desk demanding a partial refund because of it. It was a Friday night and the line behind her was long and the restaurant was closed but the bar was open and the hotel manager checked the woman out of her room and sent someone to remove her things. I walked into the bar, set my backpack down beside my stool, looked at the daily specials sign hanging on the door of the restaurant and wished they would open back up to make me a cheese steak hoagie. The bartender tapped me on the arm, handed me a half-eaten container of sweet and sour chicken with rice, and I started eating with my fingers before she had time to tell me there were no clean forks.

"Where's yours?"

"It's over there beside the register."

"Can I use it?"

"I already did, you want me to spray it off?"

"Why, do you have some funky mouth disease?"

"You never know, my mouth has been everywhere."

"I'll take my chances, just hand it here, you don't violate my rule."

"What rule?"

"I won't eat after anyone I wouldn't put my mouth on."

"Are you sure about that?"

I wanted to think for a few seconds before I answered but a tall, skinny, teenage girl with long red hair and emerald green nail

polish asked to swap her dollar for quarters to play the jukebox. The bartender asked to see her I.D. and the teenage girl told her to go fuck herself because she only wanted quarters not a shot of fucking Jack Daniels. The bartender wouldn't give her dollar back, she threw it in her tip jar and the redhead snatched the jar off the counter and ran for the back door but the bartender caught her, pulled her hair, and shoved her face into a Wheel of Fortune penny slot machine. There was blood coming out of Little Red's nose. The guy she was with came around the corner and kicked the bartender in her stomach and she fell to the ground. He went over to the counter, took all four tip jars, helped the teenage girl to her feet and they left out the back door. I walked to the other side of the bar, grabbed two longnecks from the cooler and headed back to my room.

I turned the air conditioner on low and turned on TNT to catch the last few minutes of Detroit's embarrassing loss to LeBron's Cavaliers. After the game I turned to local news. There was a brown haired woman with glasses asking anyone if they had any information about a hit and run that happened earlier that morning in northern Nevada, eight miles from the Arizona border. She told viewers to be on the lookout for a red Pontiac with the Michigan license plate number ZK1-FU4. I watched my license plate number flash across the bottom of the TV screen and I couldn't breathe. I sat on the edge of the bed, then got up, walked over to the sink, splashed cold water on the top of my head and my face and my arms, looked in the mirror, opened my eyes really wide and blinked a few times really fast, then walked back to the bed and sat down again. I looked on the floor for my backpack and there was a knock at the door. The hotel manager asked me to come to the front desk to answer questions. I wanted to slam the door in his face or knee him in the nuts and run away, or pull him in to the room and pretend the toilet didn't flush then get behind him and snap his neck ninja style and leave him in the bathtub and hope nobody found him until I got out of Nevada, but I slipped my sandals on and followed him into a little room behind the front check-in counter. There was a police officer in the room waiting to ask me questions.

“What do you know about this incident?”

“What incident, I don’t even know why I’m here.”

“How long have you been in town?”

“I don’t remember?”

“What time did you come into the bar?”

“Look, it wasn’t me, alright.”

“I know it wasn’t you, I just want to find out what you saw.”

“If you know it wasn’t me, why is my license plate number all over the news?”

“What the hell are you talking about son? I just need to know what that guy looked like who knocked out the bartender earlier, you were here weren’t you?”

“Yeah, right, the guy who knocked out the bartender. He was kind of tall, short brown hair. I think he was wearing a UNLV jersey. His eyebrow was pierced and he had a wizard tattoo on his arm.”

“What about the girl? Did you see the girl?”

“Yeah, she was a redhead, that’s all I remember.”

“Now, what about your license plate, what the hell are you talking about?”

“Nothing, some guy was throwing shit at my car and I filed a report. I thought you may have heard something.”

“Why would that be on the news? How much have you had to drink son?”

“Maybe a little too much, I’m just tired, I need to get to bed.”

“You go get some sleep and if I need anything else, I’ll be back.”

I walked back to the room, turned the news on and waited for updates. I thought about turning myself in to the police, explaining the situation. Maybe they would check my car and see there were no dents, no scratches, no broken glass, no blood or hair or teeth. No, I’ve watched Gil too many times on *CSI*, they would spray my car down with blue stuff and look at it under special black lights and find traces of blood I tried scrubbing away at the car wash after I ate my spicy chicken burrito. Maybe I could have my car painted. Maybe I could sell it to one of those ghetto body shops for a few hundred dollars over in North Vegas. I looked on the stand beside

the bed but couldn't find a phone book. It was in the bottom dresser drawer and I searched the yellow pages for body shops and called the first one.

"You guys buy cars?"

"What kind of car?"

"A red four-door. Grand Am."

"What's wrong with it?"

"Nothing, I just don't want it anymore."

"Bullshit, is it hot?"

"No, it's not stolen man, I just don't want it."

"Are you some fucking junkie? Spent all your money at the casino?"

"Yeah, I blew it all shooting craps. The car runs fine man, I just need the money. Do you want it or not?"

"I'll take a look, where you at?"

I was waiting in the parking lot in front of the car when two Indians pulled up in a red, white, and blue tow truck.

"Is this the car? I can only give you four hundred for it."

"Yeah that's fine, here's the keys. I need to get all the papers out of the glove box and take off the license plate before you get going."

"What about the title?"

"It's in Michigan."

"So, how's three hundred looking?"

"Fine, just get it out of here."

I got in the room and turned the air conditioner back off. I took my clothes off, sat on the edge of the bed and turned the news station off, then turned the air conditioner back on and bit my thumbnails down until they bled. I made a pot of coffee and dumped it out because the package said decaf, then filled the bathtub up, sat on the edge of the tub and soaked my feet, then dried them off and put my clothes back on. I put the insurance papers and registration in the sink, set them on fire with matches, and rinsed the ashes down the drain. I put the license plate in the little trash can under the bathroom sink, took the bag out, and walked it to the dumpster at the far end of the parking lot, past the empty pool, past the laundry room and ice machine, and lifted two bags out of the dumpster,

then threw my little bag in, put the other two garbage bags back on top, and closed the lid before walking away. There was a guy standing on the third floor balcony watching me, but he was wearing his headphones and drinking a 22 oz. Corona. I bought a bootleg City Boyz cd off him before I checked into my room and he didn't look like the kind of guy to dig through dumpsters or wonder why somebody else would, so I nodded to him and told him the cd he sold me was hard as hell and I went back into my room.

I looked on the floor for my backpack then remembered I left it beside the stool. I went back over to the bar. The beat-up bartender was gone and so was my bag, but there was a dollar special on domestic drafts so I decided to stay. A little after three a.m. I was shooting pool with the new lady serving drinks, a chubby Mexican girl with perfectly straight, white teeth and one arm four inches shorter than the other. She moved to Vegas from Albuquerque to be with her husband who's now in prison for strong-armed robbery, his second offense. There were three other people in the bar, an older woman and her husband splitting two for one Jack and Coke drink specials and their son losing twenty after twenty in the video poker machine. I drank about eight drafts before I started playing pool and at least four more at the table.

A little after four a.m. I was lying on my back in an unmade bed with my shorts around my ankles negotiating prices with a forty-year-old hooker with dirty blonde hair and Hell's Angel's wings tattooed across her tits and she kept them pressed against my dick while we negotiated. She started at eighty. I started at ten.

"Come on sixty dollars, I gotta pay my rent."

"Twenty."

"Forty."

"Thirty."

"Thirty-five."

"Thirty-two."

"Alright, thirty-two, but that's for head, you can't fuck me for less than sixty bucks."

"I can't even play with it?"

"No, but if your hands are clean you can rub on my titties."

She smelled like pineapples and her body was soft, not dry and bumpy like you'd expect a whore's to be. I was drunk and the root beer flavored condom was a brand I didn't recognize and I was finished in less than three minutes. She got out of bed before I did, slipped her panties on, and turned on the light. I went into the bathroom and took the condom off. There were already four of them, used, floating around in the toilet so I dropped mine in and pissed all over them and all over the seat and a little on the floor and left the bathroom without flushing. There were at least a dozen pairs of shoes scattered across the room, most of them heels and I tripped over one before finding the door. She walked back to the bar and I walked back to my room, left the lights off, and fell on top of the bed without getting undressed or taking off my shoes or pulling the covers back.

I woke up around noon and had a late breakfast at the hotel restaurant. I had the Denver omelet with diced ham, bacon, green peppers, onions, mushrooms, and shredded colby jack and a side of fried potatoes and wheat toast and all the food tasted like it should. I asked for a refill on my orange juice and checked the lobby for a newspaper. The hit and run story was on the second page and they identified the car and the driver responsible for the accident. It was a thirty-four year old woman from Nebraska with a broken foot and her cast got stuck under the gas pedal and she bent down to loosen it and swerved off the road and killed the man with the camera and they were only looking for me as an eyewitness. I drank one more orange juice and walked to the counter to pay the bill but there was no money in any of my pockets. The man at the counter was short and thick with yellow teeth and no hair and I told him my backpack came up missing from the bar last night and I had money in my pants pocket but it was stolen by the prostitute who stays on the second floor all the way in the back and he laughed and wiped his hands on his apron and told me he'd cover it if I gave him my watch so I did.

It was a half an hour past checkout so I dropped my key card off at the front desk, walked outside, and sat on the white metal bench in front of the hotel where the shuttle picks you up when you need

a ride to the airport. The van arrived on schedule and the driver sat there for a minute or two.

“Well, what the fuck buddy? Are you gonna get in or are you gonna sit there staring at me like a dipshit?”

Cats and Dogs; Like Rain

“I DON’T KNOW. Woman all seem to get more selfish the older they get. It’s like fucking a high school girl. When they’re young they aim to please. They go all out so you’ll fuck them again. Not with older women. They know who really has the upper hand. It’s all about them.”

“How long did it take you to pull that out of your ass?”

“No time at all, this stuff just comes to me, like a goddam epiphany.”

I don’t think I actually knew what he meant, or if I did I pretended not to. That’s what I do, pretend. But not my father, he was full of practical advice and filled you up with it whether you let him or not. He violated your space, breathed your air, consumed you, until there was nothing left but him, and then he was gone and there was just nothing left.

There were cats everywhere.

There was a short, chunky, red-headed boy walking down the side of the road kicking a rock. His t-shirt was blue and his hair was long and the rock got away from him. He ran into the middle of the road to kick it again. The car was gray and going too fast and didn’t see the boy until the last minute when the driver swerved and hit a weeping willow tree head on. The boy hid behind a house then ran home and still doesn’t know if the people inside the car died or lived with needles and tubes sticking out of their bodies, hooked to a ventilator, broken vertebrae, broken lives. Or maybe their seatbelt saved them and they bruised their chests or cut their foreheads but still made it home in time for ham and string beans and potatoes with little red skins. The boy still doesn’t know. The boy still isn’t sure if he wants to know. But I know, because I was in the black car behind the gray one and I hit the brakes in time to live. The man driving the car and his two daughters in the back seat did not. But I opened the back door and there were two little kittens purring peacefully on one of the dead girl’s laps. So I took them back to my father’s house and fed them. They were long-haired calico kittens,

bloody, dirty. Two turned to more than fifty in three years and now there were cats everywhere.

“I don’t know what I’ll do with these damn cats when you move outta here?”

“Who said I was moving out?”

“They’re not loyal, that’s the problem. See those two dogs back there? They’ll never forget who feeds them. Cats just fuck their brothers and sisters and shit on your lawn.”

I wanted to tell him that his dogs would do the same thing if he didn’t keep them chained up beside the porch. If he let them off for one day, one minute, they’d be ten miles toward the next county, eating rotten scalloped potatoes from other people’s trash and trying to stick their dicks in any old golden retriever. Instead I asked him if he wanted another beer and tossed him one before he answered. I started drinking when I was thirteen, at my father’s request. It was a Sunday. Donovan McNabb gained twenty-six yards on a quarter back sneak, then we high-fived and he handed me an Old Milwaukee.

“Don’t just look at the goddam thing. Crack it open. It helps you see things the way God intended. That’s why Jesus turned everything into wine even though water could have easily quenched his thirst.”

He killed the first dog I ever owned. I came home from school and the dog was dead in the back yard still hooked to his chain, shot through the brain with a twelve gauge buck shot. He mumbled something about getting what you deserve when you bite the hand that feeds you and I cried. The next week I came home from school and there were two little dogs waiting for me in a cardboard box on my bedroom floor. Both mutts, both snowflake white with black blobs like a cow, husky-shepherd mix.

“So you’re not moving outta here anytime soon?”

“Not until summer’s over, then I think I’m heading up to Lansing. I got my acceptance letter in the mail last week. Remember we talked—”

“College? What the hell you gonna do in college? I thought you signed the papers the other day when I took you over to the recruiter’s office.”

“I was going to but I—”

“I thought maybe you had it in you, but I guess not. You have to be a man to join the United States Army. They need mental and physical toughness, not a bunch of college boy pussies.”

“I guess you’re right Pops.”

I wanted to tell him that I found a shoebox with all his old papers he left at his mother’s house behind stacked boxes of forgotten family photos in the basement. I wanted to tell him that I knew he was dishonorably discharged seven and a half weeks after basic training for continual undisclosed acts of insubordination. Instead I grabbed another beer and went out back to the pole barn where he kept the cat food and filled up two giant buckets full of liver and onion flavor and dumped them on the side of the barn. The same spot I set out the first bowl of food and water for the long-haired calico kittens.

Dickey Dew

ONE OF MY FATHER'S FRIENDS never had a name so everyone called him Dickey Dew because he said that's what everyone called him after he got his balls shot off in Vietnam. I used to sit on his lap while they played five card draw and he would pretend not to see me sipping from his can of Pabst Blue Ribbon.

My mother walked into the kitchen as I set the beer back down on the table, and I got scared and spilled it all over my lap and down my pant leg. My father always laughed when people got scared. Some of the beer spilled on Dickey Dew's pants. He told me to play his hand while he tried to convince my mother to clean him up. I had four to a flush and a pair of tens. I dumped one of the tens, missed my flush and watched my father rake in the pot.

"You're a brave little son of a bitch."

I knew I wasn't. It's just easier to fuck up when the cards you're holding don't belong to you. Besides, if it was my money I would have kept the other ten and beat my father's sad pair of sixes.

Dickey Dew came back to the table and realized I just cost him forty dollars.

"You dumb little bastard, you play just as stupid as your old man."

He picked up a knife lying on the table, held it level with my eyes, then leaned down and thrust it in the side of his own leg. My father laughed, and I cried as I reached under the table and felt piss running slowly down my other leg and mixing with the puddle of beer still underneath my chair. Then Dickey Dew started laughing too, as he pulled the knife out and cut a straight line down his jeans and folded them back to show me his wooden leg—one more thing that got shot off over in the jungle.

My father was the only one who made a dime playing poker at his table. He probably would have won even if he didn't teach me signals so I could let him know what everyone else was holding every hand. He kissed me on the cheek, and sent me to bed with my ten dollar cut.

Cheap Motel Talk

SHE WAS EATING a sandwich and dropped the top piece of bread on the floor but didn't pick it up because she thought someone might walk by and see a piece of bread on the floor and think it was interesting. Her hair was long and orange and full of static and her lips were pink and puffy and blemished like she'd been smoking generic cigarettes in cheap motels for forty years. I've never felt them, never touched them, never ran my fingertips or my tongue overtop of them, but I would, and that's really the only point of all this sandwich and cheap motel talk. I was walking beside her, told her she was ridiculous, and picked the bread up off the floor and ate it and handed her my last Kool. "Don't you think so, don't you think someone will see the bread and wonder how it got there, wonder what the story was, the insinuation?" It's just a piece of fucking bread, I told her, remembering before I handed her my lighter that she doesn't even smoke, even though her hair and her lips suggest otherwise.

All His Chips (a love story)

I MET MEGAN two years ago at a New Year's Eve party in Swan Creek. Her hair was short and brown and pulled up off of her neck. She wore dark blue denim jeans that fit snug around her thick hips and hung low enough to show off her purple lace panties. Her t-shirt was black and barely covered her large chest and it clung to her skin and I could see the shapes of both nipples and the indentation of her navel. She was sitting with her legs crossed on the far end of the sofa, next to the entertainment center. There was a Tupac video on and three girls were dancing in front of the television and Megan looked bored, even though she was smiling and the blunt she was holding had already been passed to her four times. I chose her to talk to because it was New Year's Eve and she looked to be the most likely to get drunk and let me fuck her.

"Hey, what's going on?"

She ignored me for twenty minutes before answering.

"So how did you end up here?" She broke the silence.

"I work with Keith and I told him I'd stop by. What about you?"

"Wow, McDonalds, that's impressive."

"Yeah it is, they're gonna teach me how to make Big Macs next week, maybe move on to Double Quarter Pounders if I show progress. You need a job."

"No, my dad takes care of me."

"How old are you again?"

She ignored me for another twenty minutes.

"So you're staying here tonight?" I broke the silence this time.

"No, a bunch of us are going back to my place, and it sucks because I don't have any furniture."

"Well let's go, I'll take you furniture shopping."

"There isn't anything open tonight. Besides, you don't have any money; you already told me where you work."

"What about Monday? Can I take you shopping Monday?"

"Yeah sure, just pick me up at noon, we'll get lunch first, then we can pick out my new sofa and love seat."

“Sounds good, I’ll need your address or phone number or something.”

“Do you work tomorrow?”

“Yeah, 11-7.”

“I’ll come see you around six.”

She left ten minutes after the ball dropped. I moved on to one of the dancing girls, Dawn. She was a part-time counselor at Planned Parenthood and majored in social work at Wayne State and liked to shoot Bacardi 151 and do lots of nasty things with more than one person at a time. Megan never showed up the next day at six.

It was four months before Megan came to see me at McDonalds. I was in the lobby wiping Dr. Pepper off the counter in front of the drink station and throwing away some slob’s sandwich wrapper and straw paper even though the trash can was only two feet away. I didn’t know she was standing behind me until I felt her lips against the back of my neck and heard her mumble something about furniture and working hard.

“I haven’t seen you in awhile.”

“Come on now, I’ve been trying to get ahold of you, but you never call me back.”

“Look, I’m not dumb, if you offer to take a woman shopping and she won’t go, that means she’s not interested.”

“You don’t think I’m interested?”

“What do you want?”

“Maybe I’m hungry.”

“For what? I’ll get it for you.”

“What if I want a job?”

“I thought your daddy took care of you?”

“Not anymore. I told him I dropped my classes this semester and he cut me off.”

“I see. Well fill out an application, you never know.”

“Alright, I’ll call you.”

“When, in four months?”

It took her three weeks to get back to me. I set up an interview. She never showed.

I was eating a ten piece chicken nugget with sweet and sour sauce and ranch and trying to count the drawers and enter my deposit total into the computer when she called again. Keith walked by, threw the cordless phone at my shoulder and watched it bounce off and knock over my triple thick chocolate banana shake.

“Sorry I didn’t make it to the interview. Can you squeeze me in tomorrow?”

“Why didn’t you show up?”

“I had to take my kitty to the vet.”

“And is your kitty ok now?”

“I hope so. Can I come up tomorrow at three?”

“I don’t come in until four.”

“Four is good.”

“Well I’m so glad it suits you.”

“Oh, stop it. You know you can’t wait to see me.”

“Yeah, I can’t wait.”

She showed up on time for the four o’clock interview and I gave her the job. She spent the first three days sweeping and mopping the dining room floor, picking up cigarette butts and half-eaten hamburgers from the parking lot, washing greasy grill dishes, and scrubbing shit streaked toilets and pissy urinals with bloody snot wads on the fresheners. After day one she had blisters on both hands. They bled on day two. They looked infected by day three. She called off on day four and day five, so I called her at home, but she wouldn’t answer the phone. I left work early and drove to Tim Horton’s for chicken soup and a baguette. The woman in the drive-thru window had red hair and tobacco-stained teeth. Her fingernails were dirty and there was a blob of dried up chicken salad on the side of her thumb when she handed me the bag. I took the soup over to Megan, but her roommate answered the door in a blue University of Michigan sweatshirt and yellow cotton panties and told me that Megan wasn’t home and she wasn’t really sick, but I could leave the soup in the fridge if I felt like it.

Megan returned to work the next day with a doctor's note from her psychiatrist excusing her from work for problems relating to social anxiety.

"Hey Mr. Manager Man, you forgot my spoon."

"What?"

"Why would you bring me chicken soup without a spoon?"

"Yeah, the lady didn't put one in the bag, but her hands were filthy and I didn't want her touching anything you were gonna put in your mouth."

"Why do you care who puts what into my mouth. And how long are you gonna keep making me do the bullshit jobs?"

"What would you like to do?"

"Let me take orders in drive-thru."

"Alright, tell Chrissy she has to go back in the grill."

"Thank you. You wanna come see me tonight after work?"

"No, let's go out. I know a place."

We went to Wilderness Park in Dundee, in the center of town beside the bridge, across from the Old Mill Museum. River Raisin cuts through the park and it's dammed off and forms a waterfall. Along the bank, beside the gazebo, there is a small patch of grass between two oak trees. We took two blankets out of my backseat and slept together in the park. The sky was starless and the traffic was light and the river was rushing over the waterfall. If you listened closely you could hear the water hitting the rocks at the bottom of the fall. You could hear it bubbling and turning to foam if you listened even closer. The mosquitoes were vicious and the air smelled faintly of dead carp. I woke up before she did and walked to the car for the bag of stale hamburger buns I grabbed from work before we left. I broke them apart and spread the crumbs all over the grass. I waited for the ducks to surround the blanket then woke her up. She screamed and they all scurried off.

"You wanna get some breakfast?"

"I wanna get naked and soak in a hot tub. And speaking of naked, why didn't you try taking my clothes off last night?"

"Maybe I'm not just trying to fuck you."

“Or maybe you have a girlfriend, or maybe your dick is too small and you can’t get it up.”

“Or maybe I don’t fuck whores.” She slapped me in the face below my left eye and stood up to put her shoes on.

“You’re right, I’m sorry. I should have tried fucking you.”

“That’s not what I meant. Take me to get some breakfast.”

“Do you still wanna get in the hot tub?”

“Where?”

“Right down the road, there’s a nice hotel.”

“We’re gonna spend all day in a hotel?”

“No, we’ll just walk in the side door with our stuff, and get some free breakfast, and relax in the hot tub for awhile.”

“I ain’t doing that shit.”

“Well I am. Should I call you a cab, or are you gonna wait out in the car?”

“We don’t have bathing suits.”

“Just keep your t-shirt on and take off your pants.”

We stood by the side door and waited for someone to let us in. It was a tall, thin man with scruffy brown hair and a faded blue Corinthian cross jailhouse tattoo on his right wrist and the letters D.R. on his left. We walked down the hall to the dining area and split a large glass of apple juice and a raspberry bagel. Her half was toasted with butter and strawberry jelly. I covered mine with cream cheese and finished three bites then ate two bowls of Golden Grahams. Megan had Lucky Charms, and both of us drank the milk from our styrofoam bowls after the cereal was gone.

The pool and hot tub were both empty after we finished eating breakfast. No one swims in hotel pools in the morning during the week. I grabbed two towels from the rack; they were white with blue stripes and smelled like dryer sheets. I took off my sweatshirt and jeans and set them on top of the little white table closest to the hot tub. Megan took off her black *From the Muddy Banks of Wishkah* Nirvana t-shirt and her blue jean skirt with bleached handprints on each ass cheek. She was wearing a black sports bra and lime green panties and the water was hot and her chest and cheeks turned red when they touched the water. I was wearing light

blue Fruit of the Loom boxers and my pubes were sticking out of the front slit. She leaned forward to get her hair wet, then leaned back, closed her eyes, and rested her head on the side of the hot tub and lifted her legs and put her feet on my lap. Her toenails were painted the same color green as her panties and I lifted her left foot from the water and put three of her toes in my mouth and sucked and licked them until she laughed and pulled them back out.

“I told you this wouldn’t be so bad.”

“What made you decide to sneak into hotels and eat breakfast and go for a swim?”

“This is actually my first time.”

“Yet you seem like such a pro.”

“I used to live in Dundee. A bunch of kids from school used to do it. Plus I stay here every weekend, up there in the suite where the balcony is.”

“You used to live everywhere. Why move around so much?”

“We moved around a lot when I was a kid because we were broke, and I guess it’s hard to pick and choose where you wanna live when you have no money and really shitty credit.”

“So why do you do it now? You make pretty good money.”

“I like moving around. Staying on the go. Plus I’m about eighty-five grand in the hole.”

“You owe eighty-five thousand dollars?” How?”

“Student loans, car repossessions, credit cards, utility bills, hospital bills, bank loans, gambling debts, all kinds of different shit.”

“So you just borrow money and never pay it back. That’s disgusting. You steal money from people who are trying to help you out. I think I’m actually sick to my stomach.”

“Yeah, I guess I’d have good credit too if my dad paid all of the bills that I couldn’t. It must be real tough.”

“Hey fuck you. You think because your parents were poor that you had it so bad. My father worked and saved his entire life for what he has. You try staying in one place for thirty years without running when things get fucked up. You don’t move around because

it's romantic or adventurous. You do it because you're a pussy who can't hack it in one place."

"What bitch, you took Psych 101 at Washtenaw Community College and you have everyone and everything figured out now? Remember, it's your dad that worked hard and saved, you don't have shit. You're twenty-eight years old begging me for a job at McDonalds. Fuck you."

"Why do you have to say shit like that? You work there too."

I grabbed her by the ankles and pulled her towards me, but she turned her back when I got too close. I wrapped my arms around her from behind and held her tight against my lap and ran my fingers up through her hair, starting underneath at the bottom of her neck, and I put my mouth on her shoulder and I could feel goose bumps against my lips and taste the chlorine on her skin.

"So you really don't think I'm a whore?"

"Would I be here if I did?"

"I don't know. I like talking to you and I'm always afraid I'll say something stupid."

"It's ok to say stupid things. Don't you listen to half the shit that comes out of my mouth?"

"Ok then. Do you wanna move to California?"

"See what I mean. It is okay to say stupid things."

"It's not stupid, my cousin lives there. I know a way we can make a lot of money."

"What, selling crack in L.A.?"

"No, we can smuggle illegals across the border."

"Right, and your cousin has this moving company and we can drive them over in the trucks."

"No, it's a lot easier than that. We'll bring kids over in a mini-van. I'll dress up like a sexy soccer mom bitch, and we'll drive right across the border in a Ford Windstar. I'll wear little low-cut shirts and smile real pretty for border patrol."

"And what, the dirty face little Mexican kids will all be sitting down in the back rows with seat belts on?"

"No. We'll bring them across two at a time in the little storage compartments under the seats."

“And how long did it take you to come up with this idea?”

“I don’t know. The ideas just come to me.”

“Well, let’s come up with a new one.”

“What about blackmail?”

“Why do you need all this money so bad?”

“I just need it. Are you in or not?”

“I’m listening.”

“Well, look at that guy up there on the balcony. He’s perfect.”

The initial plan was reasonable. She would go to an upscale lounge where they served frozen fruity cocktails named after cities too expensive to live in, and hit on sleazy married guys named Stephen, whose wives stopped having sex after three children and deep purple stretch marks and sixty-eight extra pounds on their hips and stomachs.

“We’ll catch them on camera and threaten to tell their wives if they don’t pay us.”

“What will they be doing on camera? Were you planning on fucking them or just giving them blow jobs?”

“Why do you care? You won’t have sex with me.”

“I’m not watching you have sex with other guys so you’re gonna have to find someone else.”

“I won’t actually sleep with them. We just have to be naked together.”

“You can’t blackmail them if there’s no sex.”

“You must not know women. If you are married it doesn’t matter, sex or no sex, if you are naked on the bed with another woman, it’s over. All we need is a few minutes of footage with us both naked at the same time.”

“You’re forgetting something. If you are together in a hotel room and he is expecting sex, how do you plan on getting out of the room without actually doing it? You can’t just say ‘ok, get out, I changed my mind.’”

“What if you come out of the closet with a gun?”

“I’m not pulling out a gun. If he has one too I’ll have to kill him, and I’m not going to prison for this shit.”

“You wouldn’t go to prison for me?”

“You want me to watch you fuck married men and then go to prison for you. No, I’ll have to pass.”

“Why not, I don’t love them. I don’t want to be with them. I want to be with you.”

“Do you understand how stupid you sound right now? I can’t do this. If you just want to get off by having me watch you with someone else there are easier ways to go about it.”

“No, I want to make some real money and I want us to do this together. What if we waited fifteen minutes and then you pulled the fire alarm? I can keep a guy going for fifteen minutes without having sex.”

“You want me to set my camera in the closet and leave you in the room naked with some guy, then wait in the hallway for fifteen minutes and pull the fire alarm?”

“Yeah, why not?”

“Then what, after the fire alarm goes off you’ll just tell him you’re not in the mood?”

“Yeah, that’s good. That way I can get his phone number and promise we’ll do it again. I’ll have him meet me in a little restaurant and you can show up with the camera and tell him he’s caught and we have his name, address, and phone number, and he has to come up on ten thousand dollars if he wants the DVD.”

“But we won’t have his address. What if he thinks we’re lying?”

“You’re a poker player, just bluff.”

I let her work in the drive-thru for the next five weeks. On her days off she came to see me on my breaks and brought me fried chicken, or pork chops, or meatloaf, or kielbasa and sauerkraut. After work we could never decide whose apartment to go to, so we ended up sleeping in her car in the back of the parking lot along the fence line. I always woke up with her head on my chest, and strands of sweaty hair in my mouth because the windows were rolled up to stop the mosquitoes and the sun would beam in off the glass.

She cried the first time I asked her to take orders on front counter. She cried when I asked her to remake a McFlurry because she put Reese’s on it instead of Oreos. She cried when I caught her stealing

money out of the register to fund her drug habit. She cried when I told her she had to tell customers we weren't accepting credit cards even though we were. She cried when I found out she was fucking two of the guys on night shift. She quit when I told her the reason I wouldn't have sex with her. I was married and I could only cheat on my wife with women I didn't care about. I quit two days after she did. I had won my first poker tournament—\$87,650, and I didn't see Megan for seven more months.

II

At least the raspberry bagels were bigger than store bought brands, though not as soft. And the little packets of Phillip Morris Philadelphia cream cheese were free. But still, when you stay in an overpriced Executive Suite with a private balcony overlooking the indoor swimming pool and jacuzzi, you sort of expect steak and eggs to be included with the complimentary continental breakfast.

On the balcony there were two little white chairs pushed into a little white table. Sitting on top was a *USA Today* special edition, highlighting the Colts-Bears Super Bowl extravaganza, and discussing the key match-ups and the social significance of both Head Coaches being African American.

A mother and her daughter walked over to the pool. Both blonde-headed, pale-skinned, lightly freckled, with tiny breasts and asses too small for their bathing suits. The daughter was in a blue two-piece with yellow flowers and pale green leaves and stems. Her mother was wearing hot pink and she dipped her foot in the water and kicked it up onto the girl's stomach then grabbed her and splashed her again before she had a chance to run away. I imagined the girl was seventeen and the skin between her legs was soft and hairless. I imagined her mother rubbed her bare skin when no one else was home. The girl struggled to free herself and they both giggled before falling into the water. The plastic chair was cold against my skin as I leaned back and closed my eyes then opened them when I heard someone knocking on the door. Evidently, the hotel staff was illiterate—hanging the Do Not Disturb tag on the outside door handle was completely fucking pointless.

It was Megan.

“I want to do it.”

“Do what?”

“The blackmail. The video camera. Tonight.”

“Fuck Megan. I don’t know. We need to talk.”

“We will tonight. Is 10:30 ok?”

She kissed me on my cheek and her lips were soft and slippery from the strawberry lip gloss and I closed the door without letting her in. I forgot how good her mouth felt against my skin.

I walked over to the bed and pulled the blankets back and grabbed my laptop off the side table. The sheets were beige and the comforter was dark brown with orange and yellow leaves falling strategically from an oak tree to form a festive fall pattern. I logged into Full Tilt Poker.com. My screen name was Jim Smiley and my icon was a big green frog that smiled wide and showed all of its teeth. No one but me ever thought that was clever. I registered for a Texas hold ‘em tournament. The buy-in was one hundred dollars and there were 1,867 entrants, making the first-place prize \$126,750. Doyle Brunson said the beauty of no-limit hold ‘em was forcing a man to make a decision for all his chips. Megan read all of his books.

Online tournaments are harder than casino tournaments because most of the players are no good, making their decisions harder to predict. Hand one: K♥–Q♥. Normally I would play this hand, but not on the first go-round of an online tourney. MAKEITLOOKEZ, with an A–3 off-suit, pushed all-in, and six of the nine players followed. InIt2WinIt, with J♣–10♣, made his straight and six people exited early, leaving behind their hundred dollar donations. I would have won with a king-high flush. I folded my first eleven hands. Megan, PayMe2PlayMe69, would have called every bet and finished her tournament in ten minutes.

In an online tournament with that many players you need at least ninety thousand in chips to make the final table. I was sitting on eighty-two thousand, waiting for one hundred twelve more people to raise too much when they should have folded, or fold

when they should have bet all their chips. 10♦–10♥, I called. GetInWhereYaFitIn raised three times the big blind. I called his raise for twelve grand. Flop: 3♦, 3♣, 5♠. GetInWhereYaFitIn checked. I bet another twelve thousand. He went over the top, all-in. I had to think. He raised before the flop—pocket pair? A–5 suited? A check-raise bluff? If he was holding trip threes he would have just called, I watched him make that move before. I looked him up. He turned over A♣–5♣. An 8♣ came on the turn. He needed an ace, a five, or any club to get lucky, but he didn't. I hit for one hundred and sixty-eight thousand, clicked the Sit Out button, walked over to the little refrigerator under the sink, and grabbed a can of Cherry Coke. I poured some into a little plastic cup and reached into the bucket for ice, but it was melted. I took a sip and walked over to the balcony. The two blondes were gone, but there were three fat guys with long black hair and hairy chests sitting together in the jacuzzi. One of them was eating a ham sandwich.

I walked over to the dresser, opened the top drawer, and took out my digital camcorder. It was black and gray and Megan gave it to me as a birthday gift. I removed the lens cap and made sure it was ready to go. I walked back to the balcony and recorded the men in the jacuzzi then played it back. Fat guy number three just finished eating his sandwich and there was a banana pepper tangled in his chest hair and he was licking the extra mayonnaise off his fingers. It was only 9:30, so I still had time to clear my shirts and shoes from the closet and set them under the bed. I placed the camera on the top shelf and recorded for a few seconds just to make sure I could film the bed from that angle. I cleared a space on the floor for my laptop in case I was still in the tournament at 10:30.

Dan Harrington said the desire to be brilliantly clever has undone many a poker player. There aren't enough players who study Dan Harrington. I started playing poker when I was six years old. My father sat me on his lap and taught me to play five card draw by laying our cards face up on the table and knocking me on the side of the head whenever I did something he thought was foolish, like dumping a pair of tens to fish for the flush. I started playing poker

online during the Texas hold 'em explosion of 2003 after Chris Moneymaker won a million dollars at the World Series of Poker. Many people thought Moneymaker's win was a fluke, but it wasn't. I watched the 4 AM reruns hundreds of times on ESPN 2. He was dealt pocket three's. The flop came A♣, 8♠, Q♥. Moneymaker made a standard continuation bet of three times the big blind and his opponent raised all-in. I would have folded. Old Doyle Brunson would have folded. Johnny-fucking-Chan would have folded. Moneymaker got out of his seat, removed his sunglasses, and paced back and forth, right hand on hip. He took two deep breaths, sat back down, and made the biggest call in poker history. I'm not sure if he was more intuitive than any other player in that particular tournament, or stupider with better luck. Every time I'm dealt a pocket pair I feel my father's fist against my cheekbone. Every time Megan is dealt a pocket pair she covers the top of her cards with her left hand and blushes.

It was 10:15 and I was still sitting out of my tournament. Sitting out with a large chip stack frustrates other opponents because your chips are there, imposing, but you aren't. There is no way for them to gain strategic information from your play, or take away your chips. Megan said 10:30, but I wasn't expecting her. She's said 10:30 before.

10:30, no Megan. 11:30, no Megan. 11:51, I made it to the final table of my tournament. I sat out over eight rounds, so I had to sacrifice forty-four thousand in chips for the blinds, leaving one hundred twenty-four thousand for me to make my run. 11:52, no Megan.

The phone rang at six minutes after midnight and Megan's speech was slurred and she was out of breath and I think she was crying. I could hear a man talking beside her and his voice was low and raspy and close enough to the telephone for me to hear it, so his mouth was close enough to hers to make my stomach hurt. Dwight Yoakum's *You're the One* was playing and she might have said she'd be here in fifteen minutes, but she was mumbling and the man

beside her kept raising his voice and the phone went dead before I had a chance to tell her I changed my mind.

It was 12:34 when she knocked on the door. Her eyes were bloodshot and her mascara was running and I smelled knock-off bathroom cologne on her low-cut turquoise t-shirt, and tequila on her breath. She leaned forward to kiss me and fell into my chest and I held on to her waist and helped her over to the bed, where she tried to take a seat but fell backwards.

“You have to get out of here. He’s coming.”

“Are you out of your fucking mind? I’m not letting you do this.”

“Get the camera ready, he’s coming.”

“The camera’s already in the closet, but it doesn’t matter, you’re too drunk.”

“And why do you give a damn what I do? You won’t be nice to me, you won’t touch me, you won’t even talk to me. What did I do? What the hell did I ever do to you?”

“I loved you, I believed in all those things we used to talk about at work. We would be happy. We were destined to be great. We were destined to be great, together. And then you start spreading your legs for all the guys at work and you show up here with some piece of trash husband whose wife thinks he’s working overtime to pay for their kid’s college fund. Fuck you.”

“And what about you. You won’t sleep with me because you have a wife and kids four hundred miles away in Pennsylvania. You sweet talk me and get my hopes up then tell me ‘sorry, it can’t work out right now, I’m married.’ So, fuck you.”

There was a knock at the door. I grabbed a can of Cherry Coke and my laptop and headed into the closet and shut the door before Megan hollered for him to come in.

“I wasn’t sure if you would actually be here.” His voice was dry, smoky.

“Shut up and come over here.”

She took her t-shirt off and threw it on the floor beside the bed and unzipped her black leather hooker boots and kicked them off one at a time and they both hit the closet door. She was wearing the same blue jean skirt with the bleached handprints on the ass cheeks

that she wore the first time we came here together. She pulled it up over her waist and she wasn't wearing any panties. He unbuttoned his shirt and threw it on top of hers beside the bed. He tried to climb on top but she shoved him in the chest and pointed at the light-brown wooden chair with the green cushion at the bottom of the bed beside the dresser. He sat down.

There were four players left. 8♦-7♦, I raised three times the big blind and Kali4nyaKid called. Q♦, 2♣, J♣ came on the flop. I checked. Kali4nyaKid checked. The turn: 10♦, I checked. Kali4nyaKid checked. The river: 4♦, I checked. Kali4nyaKid bet one hundred and eleven thousand; all his chips. I called immediately. Kali4nyaKid made his straight, A♠-K♥. Phil Ivey said that nothing in poker is free and if the other players want to see another card, you better make damn sure they pay to see it. When Kali4nyaKid watched me turn over the flush I wonder if he felt anyone's fist on the side of his cheek.

I looked out at Megan and her head was lying flat on the pillow and she would have been looking up if her eyes were open and I could hear her breathing getting heavier. She had one hand between her legs and she was rubbing her clit with her thumb and two of her fingers were sticky and wet and I could hear them getting wetter every time she moved them in and out of her. Her other hand was rubbing her chest and she brought her fingers to her mouth and licked them and reached for her left nipple and squeezed it until she winced. The man stood up from the chair and undid his belt and unzipped his khakis and his Ralph Lauren boxer-briefs were red with horizontal black stripes. He walked to the bottom of the bed and Megan's hands were still busy and her eyes were still closed.

There were three players left. I folded the next four hands and watched Mr. Lauren rub the outside of his boxer-briefs. The flop came, K♠, 9♠, 9♣. Str8Ballin checked. BlastYoAzz bet thirty-six thousand. Str8Ballin called. 4th street: 6♥, Str8Ballin checked. BlastYoAzz bet seventy-two thousand. Str8Ballin called. The river: 3♣, Str8Ballin checked. BlastYoAzz bet another seventy-two thousand. Str8Ballin raised all-in. BlastYoAzz called: K♥-10♣. Str8Ballin had pocket sixes. A full house always beats two pairs.

Str8Ballin had one million six hundred and forty-four thousand in chips. I had three hundred and twelve thousand. Megan opened her eyes and saw the man standing at the bottom of the bed. She turned her head towards the closet. We agreed on fifteen minutes, but it was twenty-seven minutes and I was in the closet playing poker, not in the hallway next to the fire alarm. She opened her eyes wider and she was still staring at the closet door. I watched the man climb on top of her and pull his boxer-briefs down to his knees and put his hand on her left breast and run his fingertips over it lightly, then twist the nipple between his two fingers. His mouth was on the right one and he licked it until it was swollen, then bit down and pulled the tip with his teeth. She reached both arms around his shoulders and dug her fingernails into the center of his back at the same time he stuck it in and started fucking her. She never took her eyes off the closet door and I watched her cry a little more every time he bit down harder and rammed his dick inside her a little faster, but I was playing heads up for \$126,750. I was dealt pocket queens and Str8Ballin just made a bet for all his chips.

Parable of the Dead Rolling Snowball

I'M OUTSIDE my father's house, looking through the window, he won't let me in. The door is locked when I turn the handle. I knock on the door. I knock on the door. It wasn't cold this morning, but it's getting there. My coat and hat and gloves are inside. I look through the window and my father and mother are reliving the only day they ever loved each other. Him, sitting at the table, shirtless, beer belly, singing Conway Twitty tunes along with the record player. My mother, sitting beside him, enamored. My little brother on her lap, stealing sips from her can of Pabst. Laughing, telling jokes about the time I almost died because the babysitter left a half-cup of train oil on the floor beside the model track and I drank it. And another one about the time my oldest sister super-glued my eyes shut. Meatloaf and mashed potatoes sitting out on top of the stove, applesauce sprinkled with cinnamon. My father sees me looking, closes the curtains. The laughing gets louder. The air outside gets colder. I knock on the window. I knock on the window. He opens the curtain back up. All three of them pointing at me. Laughing. Laughing, like the time my mother was pregnant and fell down a hill and rolled like a snowball. My father may already be dead and this may or may not actually be a parable.

Late October

IT WAS LATE OCTOBER and they were dead. Bodies broken and bloody and bloated scattered up and down the interstate. Losing themselves in patches of tall grass. Piles of red and purple leaves, dry and crackling and dead. There was a car, a black car, Jaguar, X-Class sitting. Flashing four-way lights and a busted front windshield. He drove by, slowly. He couldn't decide if he wanted Burger King or Arby's. Well, she couldn't decide. He wanted a double Whopper with cheese and no tomatoes. She thought she wanted a Big Beef 'n Cheddar and curly fries.

"Aren't you gonna help?"

"Everything looks pretty fucked up. What do you want me to do?"

"Stop. Do something. Offer your phone. A ride. Call 911."

"Why? Look at all that blood. If he ain't dead, he'll wish he was by morning."

"You're a dick."

"I'm a hungry dick. What's it gonna be?"

"Go get your goddam Whopper. I lost my appetite."

Everything was a mess, sticky and hot and wet. Everyone was in a hurry. Everything was panic. Even the people in blue uniforms who you'd expect to know better, to act better, authoritative, forceful in our greatest time of need. But none of that matters. His Whopper was still a mess. Ketchup and mayonnaise gushing off the bun. Pickles clumped together, one on top of the other. It was the lack of equal distribution, the lack of concern that got to him.

"What could I have done? He was dead."

"Fuck off."

"Let's go back. I'll go back."

Traffic hadn't moved for an hour. Two men got out of an old red truck and pissed on their own tires. They were smiling and some of the piss splashed back onto their legs and overalls and the rest ran down the highway, under Jake's car. He was flipping through radio stations, *it's the remix to ignition, hot and fresh out the kitchen, momma rolling that body...I got me a Chrysler, it seats about twenty,*

so hurry up and bring your...a worn out tape of Chris Leddux, lonely women and bad booze, seem to be the only friends I've left at all...

“Knock it off. Find one station and leave it.”

“Why do you give a fuck? It's my car, my radio.”

“What's wrong with you today?”

“Nothing that isn't wrong every day.”

She opened the door and walked away. She passed the old red truck, twenty-seven cars, twenty-four trucks, twelve SUV's, four mini-vans, and a small group of motorcycles or choppers she didn't know which to call what. She didn't know the man driving the Jaguar was alive, taken to the hospital before Jake got his first refill of Cherry Pepsi. Fractured ulna, two broken ribs, and four staples in his forehead. She walked another half-mile. There was a pumpkin patch on the right hand side and a young boy with a brown hat and brown gloves and no coat was running through the rows, pointing at every third or fourth one, until he stopped running and clapped his hands and that's the one his mother bought, the one they would carve a scary face into and dig out the pumpkin seeds and bake and eat with lots of salt. There was a scarecrow in the middle of the patch with black birds perched on each shoulder. She didn't know if they were crows. She didn't know if it mattered to her if they were crows but she thought maybe it did.

Traffic was moving again. She looked down and saw the broken glass, the pool of blood; she even saw the stain it would leave in the morning. Then she saw the bodies. Two of them. The female was in the grass, out of the way, hiding beneath leaves and weeds and sky until she was forgotten, ready to decompose and become useful. But the male was strong, reckless, he barreled onto the hood and kicked through the windshield and his razor sharp hooves barely missed the jugular. He fought hard, but the car hit a sign and a large piece of glass fell from the frame and sliced through his throat. Then he rolled off and he was there, eyes open looking into hers. She bent down beside him and stroked the top of his head, touched his antlers, all twelve points, then took off her purple hooded sweatshirt and covered his face. She looked up and traffic was stopped again, she kept staring, watching them watch her, but

eventually they all passed, one by one, twenty-seven cars, twenty-four trucks, twelve SUV's, four mini-vans, and the small group of motorcycles or choppers, she wasn't any closer to knowing. Then Jake. If he saw her she didn't know. He drove by slowly, rolled down his window, and threw the rest of his Cherry Pepsi onto the grass.

The Next Table

SHE WAS SHORT and scrawny with jet black hair and a snaggle tooth and she was unbearably sexy. She straddled my lap, unfastened her black bra, kissed me on the neck and asked me to buy her a drink. She smelled like all strippers do, like sparkling white wine and baby powder. The lights were purple and green and flashed too fast and she was grinding her bony ass back and forth on my lap to an old Def Leppard song and I couldn't take my eyes off her pierced nipples. There was an empty Coors Lite bottle beside us on the round black table top and the waitress picked it up as she walked by.

“Can I get you another drink sweetie?”

“No, that's the last one for me, my pockets are empty.”

The girl got off of my lap, ran her finger through the sweat on her chest, wiped it across my cheek then kissed it and followed the waitress to the next table.

Nine Eleven

I DRANK TWO MORE Keystone Lights and ate a half dozen buffalo chicken strips waiting for her to get off work. She'd been working at the Wal-Mart across the street for six months and she was fucking the pantry supervisor after the first week, even though I got her the goddam job. She denied it at first, but one time I brought her a cheeseburger and fries on her lunch break and I saw them walking out of the men's dressing room, together. I went back out to my car and ate the burger and threw the fries out the window for the birds. I waited for her to get done and she came out ten minutes late. She waved and walked towards the car and I drove away. She came over to see me the next day when it was time for her to go to work so I took her. Well, I made her feel guilty until she apologized and gave me a blow job, then I took her.

She was supposed to get off at eight, but it was nine and she still hadn't come out, so I parked in the handicap spot closest to the door and went in to find her. I grabbed a cart and filled it with random groceries: sharp cheddar cheese from the deli, frozen pepperoni pizzas, chocolate ice cream, butter beans, toilet paper, fish sticks, sour cream, barbeque sauce, and a four pound package of beef cubes. I walked around for another twenty minutes then took my cart through checkout and pretended I forgot my wallet.

"I'm sorry. I left it in my car. I'll be right back."

"That's okay, I'll keep everything here for you if your just gonna be a second."

"Hey, I was wondering, did Jennifer work tonight?"

"Which one?"

"She's a short girl, reddish-brown hair, wears glasses."

"Yeah, but she went home early."

"Thanks, and never mind about the groceries, I forgot I went shopping this morning."

I drove the back roads for awhile and smoked two joints back to back then ordered some chocolate ice cream in a waffle cone from Frosty Boy. I licked it twice, then watched it melt and drip onto my hand, my wrist, my arm, then I looked at my nose in the rear-

view mirror and licked it again. Jennifer's sister Kayle worked at Frosty Boy and she asked me to give her a ride home, so I waited. Five minutes, forty-five minutes, two more joints, two more cones. Kayle got in the car and grabbed one of her sister's sweatshirts off the backseat and asked if she could put it on. She took off her pink Frosty Boy t-shirt and her bra was pink. It was one cup size smaller than her sister's and her nipples were smaller and felt better in my mouth.

Kayle's friend Zeek got off work the same time she did and climbed in the car with us and we matched dime bags and rolled the weed up in a piece of that waxy paper you wrap around the bottom of the ice cream cones. It was harsh, but still not as bad as the time the cops pulled me over and I shoved my baggie into a jug of anti-freeze. A little bit leaked in, but I couldn't let it go. I let it dry out and lit it up. I had the worst headache of my life for three straight days, not like a hammer pounding on my brain, more like two hijacked planes exploding and shattering the inside of my skull. I was so goddam high I thought my fingers were french fries and nibbled on them until I bit into a piece of skin and bled. I told a couple guys on the baseball team and they all tried it. We called it the 9-11.

The three of us ended up at Kayle's house. I made a bologna sandwich with mustard and old pumpernickel bread and played *Zelda* on the Gamecube even though Zeek wanted to watch *Law and Order* reruns. He went with Kayle into the bathroom and shut the door. She came out a minute later, alone, in her pink bra and pink Pooh Bear panties. She picked up the laundry basket beside the door and went outside. She came back in with a pair of jeans and four towels, all of them white with black stripes on either end, all of them said Holiday Inn Express.

"I'll be done in fifteen minutes. If anyone knocks let them in."

"What about the phone?"

Nobody knocked. Nobody called.

I went outside and pissed on somebody's scooter in the driveway. I got in my car and went back to the diner and drank four more Keystone Lights and went home and fell asleep on the couch. I

woke up thirsty and didn't want to move even though I had to piss and my mouth was dry and tasted like ass and ashtray. I rolled over and unzipped my pants and pissed off the side of the couch onto an old Sports Illustrated and fell back asleep for three more hours.

"Wake up. I thought you were gonna take me to work." Jennifer was standing over me, shaking my arm, making me hit myself in the face.

"What time is it?"

"I'm already late, get up."

"What time are you off? You need a ride home?"

"Yeah, but if you're gonna pick me up, make sure you're there at eight."

All Together

SHE SAID THERE'D BE power tools, but there weren't; just an old Ford Thunderbird her dad talked about restoring and a rusty yellow refrigerator for beer, so we entered the house through the door inside the garage and headed to her parents' bedroom for the jewelry. There were a few gold necklaces and a little diamond ring, so we took them, and the vacuum cleaner, the DVD player, a two-liter of Mountain Dew, her little brother's piggy bank, and the remote control to the TV just for something to laugh at later when we got high.

All together, we got thirty dollars from the pawn shop, used ten of it for gas, ten for a dime bag, and bought eight soft shelled tacos and a nacho belle grande. It wasn't the best weed we ever smoked, but it got me high as a goddam redwood. Nobody had papers so we dumped out the two-liter, poked holes in the side, and smoked off the bottle, even after it melted and we were just taking hits of ash and plastic.

She said her parents would never find out but they did, they dressed up nice and washed their car and drove to court and testified, all together.

Mountains

HE SHOULD HAVE stopped for gas in Pittsburgh. There was a run-down trailer next to an empty creek at the bottom of the mountains a hundred yards or so off the turnpike. It was hidden by trees. There was a gray-haired woman taking towels off a clothesline and a man underneath his truck changing the oil. She took the towels into the house and brought the man some iced tea in a mason jar. There was a dirt path leading down the mountain beside the trailer. It ran parallel with the creek for a mile or so then stopped. If this were a painting, crystal-clear water would have flowed freely down the stream, a trout fisherman, wadding, flicking his fly. There would have been two cougars drinking peacefully along the bank. The dirt path would have meant something. But it wasn't. There were traces of oil on the man's hands and the mason jar slipped when the gray-haired woman handed it to him. It shattered in the driveway and sliced the woman's finger when she picked it up. Four months later she would lose her finger.

The next gas station was in Youngstown. He filled up, parked his car, and went inside to piss. The rest area was big and busy. Three women in Ohio State jackets were looking at the map, pointing at Cincinnati. Two of them were thin, twins, brunettes. The other was a friend, blonde headed, frumpy. Her tits were small even though she was fat. She was eating onion rings and twisting the knob on the bubble gum machine. She bent down to get her gum and dropped two onion rings and a truck driver came out of the bathroom and stepped on them. She looked at his ass when he walked by. Jordan stood beside the twins and pretended to study the map then got a piece of gum from the machine and spit it out before he got back in his car.

She was standing along the road with blood on her hands and cheeks when he pulled over and offered her a ride. Her eyes were hazel and sharp like a cheetah. Her sweatshirt was white and zipped in the front but she wore it open. There was no blood on her white jacket, only dirt and animal hair. She smelled wild, carnivorous.

“Were you in an accident, are you ok?”

“I’m fine thanks. Where you headed?”

“Nowhere in particular. I’m just driving. Do you need to go to a hospital?”

“No. I said I’m fine. Where are you going?”

“Where do you want to go?”

“Quit playing games or I can get back out and walk. I asked a simple fucking question.”

“I’m giving you a simple answer lady. Calm down.” She reached for the door handle but he locked it.

“What are you doing? Are you some creepy fucking pervert? Unlock the door.”

“Listen. I’m not crazy. Let’s start over. I’m Jordan. I left D.C. a few hours ago. I’m not sure where I’m going yet, I’m just driving, clearing my head. Tell me where you need to go and I’ll take you.”

“You drive straight through three states because you need to clear your head? And I thought I had problems.”

“What’s up with all the blood?”

“Oh that. It’s from the last guy who picked me up. I chopped his dick off and threw it along side the road.”

“Do you still have the knife?”

“No. I got rid of it. I have to make a phone call and get cleaned up. Can we stop somewhere?”

“Want me to stop and get a room for the night?”

“Why? You think you’re gonna get some pussy?”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Yes it is. I need a ride. I don’t have any money. You figure I’ll just give you some pussy. I owe it to you right?”

“Wow, you do got problems. I just thought you might want a shower and some food and a good night’s sleep.”

“Look, all I want to do right now is go home.”

“Where’s home?”

“Michigan. Let me guess, you were headed that way.”

“Michigan? Let’s do it. I’ll pull over at the next rest area and let you get cleaned up and do whatever you gotta do, then we’ll drive straight through.”

“Where are you from again?”

“D.C.”

They stopped thirty-six miles ahead. She came out of the bathroom and there was no more blood on her cheeks, but she couldn't get it out from underneath her fingernails even though she scrubbed hard with foamy pink soap. She took her sweatshirt off and her t-shirt was beige or tan and there was a spot of blood above her belly button that smeared when she got it wet and tried to rub it off.

“I'm thirsty. Can you grab me an iced tea?”

“Anything else?”

“Can you pop the trunk? I wanna throw my sweatshirt back there and take my shoes off.”

“I think there's a pillow and blanket back there if you wanna take a nap. I know how to get to Michigan. Here's the keys. I gotta piss.”

“Sounds good. Thanks a lot. I really appreciate this.”

There were wadded up paper towels clogging all four urinals so he went inside a stall. There was an ongoing conversation written in blue marker on the toilet paper dispenser. He pissed a little on the seat and wiped it off with toilet paper then flushed with his foot. The car was gone when he went outside. She left his pillow and blanket in a pile on the sidewalk, along with his clothes, cell phone, and wallet.

To The Short Thick Student With Big Tits And Auburn Hair That Sits Two Rows In Front Of My Desk In My 11:00 AM History Class

YOU MIGHT HAVE thought I was looking at your tits but I wasn't. There were red and black checkers on your backpack beside your feet on the floor. I noticed them. I looked at your white shoes with black stripes down both sides, and thought about taking them off and putting your toes in my mouth one by one. I thought about me sucking, then chewing on your toenails, and your hips and ass squirming around in your seat. I ran my tongue up the back of your calf. I licked the soft crevice behind your knee until your thighs were covered in goose bumps. I licked it again. I thought about you lifting your leg and me going up, then up. I thought about cutting open an orange pixie stick and dumping it into your belly button and slurping the sugar back into my mouth and letting it stick to my teeth, and you arching your back into your chair and me going up, then up. You were wearing a low cut black blouse and you bent to get a pen from the backpack. The top of your chest was tan and bumpy like your neck and cheeks. I looked at your low cut black blouse, then heard someone say that history made sense because once something's done than it's done and there ain't a fucking thing anyone can do but talk about it. I heard what he said, considered its implications. I was somewhere else, somewhere ancient, being stoned to death alongside Montezuma. You lifted your head from underneath the desk, pen in hand, and looked into my eyes, watching me watch you. You looked down into your low cut black blouse, pulled the collar up, then zipped your black hooded sweatshirt. You might have thought I was looking at your tits but I wasn't.

Bad Beat

I WAS PLAYING pot limit Hold 'em on one of the new electronic tables at the Taj in Atlantic City. I was dealt pocket threes and made my four of a kind on the turn. Six other players stayed in, raising and re-raising until the pot was well over two grand. I figured there were a few flushes in the mix, maybe a full house or two if I was lucky, but I'm not. I never was, not since Little League when our team lost 9-8 because I overthrew the ball to first base and the runner from third scored and our coach still took the team for ice cream but my father wouldn't let me go along.

All seven of us were still in when the last card was turned over, a five of spades. I looked down waiting for my screen to light up and the \$2,446 to be added to my stack, but there was a long haired man with black sunglasses sitting two seats to my left and he beat my four of a kind with a straight flush. He picked up his lucky Nolan Ryan rookie card and kissed it and I called him a dumb redneck motherfucker. I picked up my Captain and Coke and tried to stand up, but there was a hand on my shoulder pressing me back into my seat.

"Get your fucking hand off me man, what the fuck's your problem?"

"Calm down for a minute sir. You've just won our Bad Beat Bonus."

"It's about fucking time you give some money to a good player. How much?"

"You win \$18,000, and you get to be a guest judge for tonight's Best on the Boardwalk Bikini Showdown."

"Is Trump gonna be one of the judges?"

"No, just four more bad beat losers."

Two security officers from the casino walked me out the Pacific Ave. exit. I walked across the street to my hotel room without checking for oncoming traffic. I called my wife and told her about the money.

"You have to stop this Derek. I can't take any more. You lose and lose and lose, now one win is supposed to make it better?"

“I have ten grand baby, everything is okay. I’ll be home tomorrow night.”

She hung the phone up without saying goodbye and I called back but she wouldn’t answer. I took a shower and went downstairs to the lobby to pay for one more night. I told the clerk about the bikini contest and he told me I was full of shit until I showed him the judge’s pass and he offered me two hundred dollars for it, which I refused.

What I really wanted was the lunch buffet at the Sands casino but it was closed for renovation, so I ordered a chicken salad sub and fries at the Taj and blew three hundred dollars in the slot machines before the food came. I was wearing the bikini contest pass around my neck and one of the waitresses asked me if I was really one of the judges for the contest.

“No, I just like wearing this around my neck. Why?”

“Well, I’m one of the contestants, I was only curious.”

She was a slender brunette with dark brown eyes and puffy lips. She wasn’t much through the hips, but her chest could easily fill out a bathing suit top. The sandwich came and the roll was toasted and the cheese was melted into the chicken salad even though I ordered it cold, so I left it on the plate and wrote down the name of my hotel and the room number on a fifty dollar bill and set it on the table. If she didn’t show there were always hookers and I could afford to pass up the cheap ones in front of the Taj and find a better looking girl further down Pacific by the Tropicana, one with all her teeth and no needle marks on her arms. One who wouldn’t let me stick it in her ass for less than three hundred dollars.

I went searching for a hot dog or a slice of pizza or one of those sausages with peppers and onions that fall out of the bun every time you bite it. In late September most of the action on the boardwalk is gone, but you can still find that one guy asking you to throw darts at balloons or shoot a basket for your choice of prizes. His jean jacket is always dirty, his hair is never combed.

“Come on over, one basket wins your choice.”

“These things are all fucking rigged. I’m not wasting my money.”

“Come here, I’ll show you how to do it. Just lean in like this...”
He made the shot, they always make the shot.

“I can’t man, I’m broke.”

“Me too, come on. I need a pack of cigarettes and something to eat. I haven’t made a dime all day.”

“Tell ya what. I’ll buy one. How much do you need?”

“I’ll give you one for twenty.”

“Alright, I’ll take that Cookie Monster.”

I found some pretty good pizza and dropped him off a few slices before I walked down to the beach. There were cardboard boxes and blankets and bowls full of cat food under the boardwalk and a woman and her daughter were just climbing out from underneath. I offered the Cookie Monster to the little girl and she took it. I took my shoes off and laid down close to the water on top of broken seashells and looked out past the lighthouse into the ocean and thought about the first Europeans to arrive in the New World in search of gold, and their wives and children at home, alone, sleeping side by side to keep warm.

I woke up and the bottom of my pants were wet and my shoes and socks were gone and the pass was wrapped around my ear, but still around my neck. I went back to the hotel and checked for messages at the front desk before I showered and changed into dry pants. My wife called twice.

“Where you been all day, I needed to talk to you?”

“The Sands restaurant was closed. I had to look around for somewhere else to eat.”

“And that takes all day?”

“Then I took a nap. What did you need?”

“Jenna wanted to talk to you. She misses her daddy.”

“Put her on the phone.”

“Okay, hang on...”

“Hey baby girl, how you doing?”

“My tooth came out this morning when I was eating cereal, the one on the bottom that used to be loose, do you remember?”

“Of course I do. Put it under your pillow and the tooth fairy will come and trade it for some money.”

“I don’t want to. I want to wait until you get home so you can see it first, okay?”

“That’s okay sweetie. I love you and I miss you and I’ll see you tomorrow. Let me talk to your momma now.”

I hung up the phone after another five minutes of *you’re always out fucking off* and *why are you too damn stupid to get a job*. The contest didn’t start for two and a half more hours so I went to the Showboat to grab a drink and catch a few minutes of the Penn State-Michigan game. I ate a hot dog with mustard and sauerkraut and drank two beers and bet two thousand on Michigan by ten and another two thousand on Philly over New York in the Sunday night game.

There were three women sitting at a table on the other side of the bar. Two of them were pointing at me and the other one waved me over to the table. I waved back but didn’t get out of my seat. The woman in the middle walked over and stood behind me. She was short with sandy blonde hair and brown eyes and open-toed sandals. She leaned her tits into my back and asked me if I was waiting for somebody.

“Why? Are you in that contest tonight?”

“Oh my God, how did you know?”

“You know I’m a judge, you see the pass around my neck. What do you want?”

“You wanna come have a drink with us?”

“Does it have to be all three of you?”

“You gonna vote for me tonight?”

“You gonna come back to my room so we can talk about it?”

“What should I tell them? They’ll know what I’m doing?”

“If you wanna win, you’ll figure it out.”

“Okay, give me one minute.”

She told me her name was Nikki and we left through the boardwalk exit holding hands and walked towards the stairs leading to the beach.

“I thought we were going to your room.”

“I changed my mind. I thought the water might be nice.”

She took her clothes off and there was a four leaf clover tattooed on her left hip and *Lucky You* on the right and she sat in the sand cross-legged. She told me how excited she was about the contest and how winning would lead to bigger contests with bigger cash prizes out west, maybe Vegas or L.A., she had people in L.A. and I was such a nice guy for helping to make her dreams come true. I was looking out at the ocean imagining I was the first European to climb off the ship, not knowing I will not survive the brutal winter and my family back home is still there and still waiting.

I unbuttoned and unzipped far enough for her to do the rest. She put my dick in her mouth until it got hard then turned her back to me and got on all fours. The sex was awkward and quick and we both got dressed and walked separately to the Taj. I took my seat beside the stage and ordered a screwdriver and looked up at the big screen and watched Penn State lose by a field goal.

The contest started a half an hour late and the first woman on stage was the waitress who brought me the shitty chicken salad. She was wearing an orange and yellow bikini that hung low off her hips and her ass was rounder than I remembered and she didn't bother to look down at any of the judges. All twenty of them looked about the same. Half of the women had dyed blonde hair, three natural, five brunettes, and two redheads. All of them had nice enough bodies and big enough tits to justify squeezing them into a bikini. I liked one of the redheads. She had hazel eyes and freckles and thick hips and her lips were big and soft and perfect. They all answered ridiculous questions about what it means to them to be a Boardwalk Bikini Showdown champion. The chicken salad waitress talked about being a role model to her daughter and niece. My blonde friend Nikki said this contest was a stepping stone to fulfilling her destiny. The redhead said she was going to use the money to open her own massage studio so that's who I voted for. The winner wore a chocolate brown bathing suit to compliment her dark brown hair and eyes and she believed winning the contest would help promote a realistic feminist agenda of independence and equal opportunity.

After the show I ordered boneless barbeque wings and another screwdriver and Nikki sat down next to me and I offered to buy her a drink. She ordered a double shot of Jim Beam and ate two of my wings.

“You didn’t even vote for me did you?”

“Of course I did, why wouldn’t I?”

“I didn’t win, what am I gonna do?” She wrapped her arms around my neck and cried.

“It was close. The guy next to me voted for you too.”

“I can’t go back home. I told my sister I’d have some money for her. If I come back broke, she’ll throw me out for good.”

“I’m not leaving town until tomorrow. You can stay with me for now and I’ll pay the room up for a month before I go. Is that enough time for you to straighten things out?”

“You don’t have to do that. If you want to have sex again I’ll stay the night. You don’t have to be nice to me.”

“It’s no big deal, really. You want another drink?”

She ordered six more double shots and security cut her off after she fell into a craps table trying to get to the bathroom. We left out the front exit and I helped her cross the street and climb the stairs in the hotel. I laid her on the bed and took her clothes off and ran some warm water in the sink. The washcloth was blue even though the towels were white. I got it wet and washed her hands and face and arms and legs and covered her up, turned the light off and went back to the bar until morning. There were six games scheduled to kick off at noon and I bet twenty-five hundred on each game.

I got back to the room a little after eight and she was in the shower. I brushed my teeth and made a pot of coffee and she came out of the bathroom naked, kissed me on the cheek, and poured herself some and drank it black.

“Some woman called this morning.”

“You answered the phone?”

“Your name is Derek?”

“Who was it?”

“I don’t know. Some woman called and asked for Derek and I told her she had the wrong room. She called back two more times but I didn’t answer. Is that your wife?”

“You want some breakfast?”

“Have you been to sleep yet?”

“No, but I’ll live. Let’s go get some pancakes.”

“Let’s go to sleep. We can eat later.”

I kissed her on the forehead and we fell asleep facing each other and woke up eight hours later with our mouths together, tasting each other’s breath.

“You still want to get some pancakes?”

“Did you really vote for me last night?”

“I voted for the redhead.”

“I know. We looked at the judge’s scorecards backstage.” I tried to look at her but couldn’t.

“I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, me too.”

She took her clothes from the bathroom and came out to get dressed beside the bed. I waited for Nikki to finish and I left out the front door and waited for her to come out and she did. I told her I already paid the room up for a month and asked her to join me for dinner. She did not.

I went back to the Showboat for a well done steak and a baked potato with extra butter and sour cream and melted cheddar cheese. One of the four o’ clock games was on and all the noon games were over and I lost four of the six. I lost sixteen thousand of the bad beat bonus and I would have busted, but Tom Brady came through one more time and Indianapolis over Houston was a no-brainer. After I paid the bill I had four hundred dollars left. The drive across the Walt Whitman Bridge back over to Philly would cost a couple bucks. It was time to go.

There was construction on the bridge and the toll went up thirty more cents and traffic was already heavy because the Phillies had a home game against the Mets. I’ve always loved the Phillies. My father and I went to Veterans Stadium every year on my birthday. The first time we went he gave me a black and brown baseball glove.

The next year I got a stuffed animal Philly Phanatic and he let me pick the teams he bet on. He won eleven hundred dollars and gave me a hundred dollar bill. He bet every sport, every season, every race, every card game; if he lost he bet more. On my eighteenth birthday, the same year Joe Carter's home run crushed the spirits of every man, woman, and child in Philadelphia, he bet me that my mother would leave him by the end of the year. He put three hundred dollars on December. Everybody lost that Christmas.

I got home after sundown but nobody was there. I grabbed a beer from the refrigerator and read the note on the kitchen table:

Derek,

I know there's no money left. There never is. Jenna tried to wait for you but she couldn't stop wiggling the tooth. It came out last night and she wouldn't stop crying, so I packed our stuff up and we left. I'll be at my sister's in Lancaster until you find somewhere to go. I'm sorry this is happening. I don't want it to, but we're tired of you putting us last. I know I don't need you anymore and I'm not even sure if I still love you, but I do know you're not worth the gamble, and that's too bad. Every time you're gone I think about the day we met, the day we got married, the day Jenna was born and I try to see you as the person you really are. I try to think of you as someone loving and caring and terrific, but you're not, unless you feel like it, and those moments are far too few to keep us here any more. I sincerely hope that one of these days you finally win enough to make you happy.

Take care of yourself,
Lindy and Jenna

I finished the rest of my beer in one gulp and grabbed another one. I sat down on the couch and tried to cry but I couldn't. I never could. The Sunday night game was at half-time and the Eagles were comfortably ahead. They stayed ahead for the rest of the game and my slip was good for \$7,500 and I set it down on the table beside the note and went upstairs to pack my things.

I left the slip on the table for Lindya when I closed the front door and locked it. I wasn't sure where I was supposed to go, so I headed towards the turnpike and hoped something would hit me the longer I drove.

This Story Is Not About Ham And Cheese Sandwiches

I WOKE UP because my lips were dry. I knew I had to get a drink before my top lip split down the middle like it always does when I click the heat on for the first time every year. No, that's not why. I woke up because someone rang the door bell. They must have opened the screen door. It wasn't latched. The wind caught it. I could hear it banging back and forth against the white chair on the front porch. I sat up at the bottom of the bed, rubbed my forehead, eyes, cheeks. Everything seemed suspicious. I fell asleep playing Ms. Pac-Man. The game was paused but the red ghost was still moving, still trying to catch me and eat my soul. The kitchen light was on and somebody must have snuck in, made a ham and cheese sandwich and ate the rest of my pretzels. I didn't know until I stood up and tripped on a dirty pile of clothes, hit my nose on the closet door, and headed for the freezer to get some ice and the doorbell rang again. This story is not about Ms. Pac-Man or ham and cheese sandwiches.

"Why are you here? Do you know what time it is?"

"Were you sleeping?"

"I was playing a game."

"I made you a sandwich."

"You ate all my pretzels."

"You don't even like pretzels. Can I come in?"

"What kind of ham did you use?"

"What game were you playing?"

"Zelda."

"Hickory smoked maple, what happened to your face?"

The bottoms of her pants were wet. There were leaves and grass stuck to her shoes. I ran my eyes the rest of the way up her body and stopped at her lips. They're safer to talk to than her eyes and all of this took thirty seconds or ten minutes or two and a half years.

"You can come in, but you owe me for the pretzels."

"What do you got to drink?"

"Want a beer?"

“Make me a rum and Coke?”

Her socks were pink and so was her t-shirt. Her sweatpants were gray and folded twice to hang loose off her hips. She took them off and her panties were plain and white and raggedy. I liked them a lot. I filled her glass with Coke, pretended there was rum in it, and watched her drink it fast, then lay down on the couch and stretch her legs out. She said nothing. I said nothing. I grabbed one of the pokey feather pillows off my bed, threw it at the back of her head, and told her there were blankets in the closet.

“I only see sheets. Do you want me to freeze?”

“I turned the heat up, you’ll be fine.”

“What if I get cold?”

“Drink some more rum.”

The next morning she made scrambled eggs and toast but I let them get cold and ate a bowl of Cookie Crisp.

“Do you know where I put my sweatpants?”

“They looked dirty. I put them in the washer.”

“Was there something wrong with the eggs?”

“My stomach can’t handle eggs this early in the morning. You forgot already?”

“Yeah, just like you forgot to...never mind. Do you mind if I take a shower before I go?”

“Go ahead. The towels are in the closet.”

“I know, right beside the sheets. I saw them in there right after you threw your pillow at me.”

“So, you stayed warm?”

“No, I looked for the rum but you don’t have any.”

“Oh yeah, that’s right. Let me know next time you’re coming, I’ll buy some.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. Can I shower now?”

She pulled her t-shirt off then slid her panties down and kicked them at me, but I moved and they landed on the coffee table beside the eggs. She walked into the bathroom and kept the door open while she pissed and brushed her teeth with my toothbrush. Her legs were hairy. There were two bruises on her back and one on the

bottom of her right ass cheek. I grabbed the panties off the table and put them in my dresser drawer and brought her a towel.

“Where do you want me to put this towel?”

“I’ll be done in two minutes, just wait here.”

“Come on, I got shit to do.”

“I’m using your razor... and it’s Sunday. What do you got going on?”

I stood there for ten minutes until she shut the water off, opened the curtain, grabbed the towel, and told me to get out and close the door. After ten more minutes the door opened. She walked over and sat down beside me on the couch, still naked.

“How long until my pants are dry?”

“Twenty minutes. How’d you get those bruises on your back?”

“How’d you get those bruises on your face?”

“Are you gonna sit here without clothes on for twenty minutes?”

“Is that okay?”

“Do I have a choice?”

She flopped her legs onto my lap, and leaned back into the pillow.

“Rub my feet.”

I did. She closed her eyes and ran the tips of her fingers over her tits and I stopped rubbing. She grabbed my hand, kept hers on top, and ran both of our hands down between her legs until my dick got hard. I took my free hand and tickled the insides of her thighs until she spread them apart, but the dryer buzzed and I pushed her legs off my lap and got up to get her sweatpants without looking at her on the couch, watching her watch me.

“Your pants are dry.”

“You’ll have to put them on me.”

I threw them at the back of her head and walked in the bedroom, closed the door, pulled her panties out of the dresser drawer, and held them until I heard the door close and the screen door bang back and forth against the white chair on the front porch.

Runaway

THREE WEEKS AGO, the day Willy escaped, we were sitting together on the living room floor, watching *Malcolm in the Middle*, popping extra buttery popcorn in the microwave. We dumped all the popcorn into a plastic bowl and mixed in two packs of plain M&M's.

“Come on dad, let Willy have some. He likes popcorn.”

“We ain't giving that hamster any popcorn, what if he chokes?”

“Let's get him out of the cage. Let him run around for a little while.”

I reached my hand in and the little son of a bitch bit my finger and I squeezed his head too hard and slung him onto the couch. The kids were screaming and my oldest girl got up to catch him and she kicked over the popcorn and dove onto the couch but he got away. He hopped down and scrambled under the loveseat. My youngest girl was laughing and throwing popcorn at Malcolm and picking the M&M's off the carpet and tossing them into her mouth, brown ones first, then yellow, and nobody has seen Willy since.

I picked up the loveseat, the couch, the recliner, the coffee table, and both end tables, but he was gone. I could tell the last few times I cleaned out his cage and gave him fresh food and water that he was waiting for the perfect time, scheming, plotting his escape like the two brothers who drowned in the San Francisco Bay trying to flee Alcatraz. We made some more popcorn and I ran down to the corner store for two more bags of M&M's. After Malcolm, we watched *Foster's Home for Imaginary Friends* and the youngest fell asleep in front of the TV and I carried her to bed and kissed her on the cheek and told her I loved her.

“I love you too, Willy.”

Just To Get Here

I WAS SLEEPING on the cement with my head too close to some country boy's ass. He was there for three days and still hadn't showered. You can tell how long a man's been in the county jail by how much stuff he's got piled up around him. Me and Cedrick shared most of our commissary; chips, cookies, envelopes, juice, but some stuff we didn't. I won't use soap after it's been on someone else's balls. Maybe that's why country boy hadn't showered. Nobody cared enough to bring him money for soap. Not a momma or a sister or a thick little country girl with freckles and big tits. And it might not have been his ass that stank. There were four of us in the holding cell and only one toilet. One broken toilet with three days worth of shit floating around, breaking down, turning to mush. And Cedrick threw up when he tried to brush his teeth. Instead of spitting in the toilet he puked his fucking guts out.

The other guy was a foreigner, from one of those countries in the Middle East that pretends to hate America. He spent four days in a sewage drain in the Czech Republic to get here, then another four in a basement underneath a warehouse in Nova Scotia where they process coal or make fabric softener. I don't remember what all bullshit the guard told us. From there he boarded a 737 and flew into Metro Airport. The stupid sonofabitch who thought up that plan should have been in jail right along with him. You can't get through Metro even if you are American without someone asking you a million questions or putting on a glove and trying to stick their finger in your ass, the cheap latex kind with white chalky powder that gives you a rash and rips when you least expect it. That night we had sloppy joes and fruit cocktail. He stuck his nose in the bun and looked around. I looked his way and picked mine up and took a bite. He watched me, then did the same. He ate his sandwich so fast we all stopped and laughed until he was done then he wiped his mouth onto his sleeve and laughed too. He scooped his fruit cocktail up in one hand and crammed it in his mouth and two pears and a grape missed and rolled down his shirt onto the dirty floor and he picked them up and ate them. None of

us could stop laughing until a guard came by and told us to shut the fuck up.

I went to court that morning and pleaded no contest to a misdemeanor and was waiting to be released on my own personal recognizance until sentencing. They let me go right before Alex Trebek read the final jeopardy question; American History. *What was the primary cause of our nation's budget deficit in 1803?* I changed back into the clothes I wore to court, khakis and a black button down. They handed me a manila envelope containing all my personal property, then made me sign a paper stating everything was returned. I took out my court papers and put them in my back pocket. I put on my watch and there was thirty-seven dollars missing from my wallet.

“Hey. Where’s my money? I had forty bucks in here.”

“I didn’t see any money. Hang on. Hey, Clark, you see any money in this guy’s wallet?”

“Nope.”

“Yeah, me neither. Hey, sorry man, looks like nobody saw any money.”

“That’s messed up. You people are a bunch of fucking thieves.”

“You better calm down. You’re the thief. That’s why your ass is here in the first place.”

“Well, I’m outta here now. It’s the Louisiana Purchase.”

“What did you just say to me? You better watch yourself.”

“1803. The Louisiana Purchase.”

The Cigarette Story

CHRISSEY HAD BEEN sleeping for two hours. She was raised on Mexican and Chinese takeout, and the last thing she cooked was a microwaveable green chili and jalapeño burrito. Her mother was born in Guadalupe de Bravo, Mexico and made a living buying packs of cigarettes for \$.75 and smuggling them into Texas and selling them for \$3.50. She was killed in a bar in El Paso. One of the gentlemen wanted more than tobacco for his \$3.50 and forced her to her knees in a puddle of piss in front of the toilet in the back of a dirty stall in the men's room and slit her throat with a Buck knife after she refused to lick the tip of his dick while he played with it.

“Wake up Chrissy, let's go get something to eat.”

“What time is it?”

“Midnight.”

“Why'd you let me sleep that long? You know I wanted to watch that preacher show.”

“Sorry baby, I forgot, I don't know why you watch that shit anyway, it's all fake.”

Billy Basil? For some reason I can't trust my salvation to a man named after a common herb. Once a month he sponsors a week-long jubilee where two hundred of his closest friends gather together for a spirit-filled televised event. Hands are placed on foreheads to remove demons from upper-middle class Hispanic men in light brown suits; plain, oily-skinned white women with white blouses and long blue jean skirts square dance with balding black men in khakis and burgundy sweater vests; invalids jump out of their wheelchairs and break dance like Grand Master Flash. Sometime during the festivities the audience is invited to purchase prayer cloths for twenty dollars. Anytime you want God to answer your prayers you simply mail the prayer cloth back to Reverend Basil, along with an additional twenty dollar love donation and he will anoint it and send it back to you fully energized with God's great spirit. The Reverend calls this sewing resurrection seeds to ensure your name will not be erased from the Book of Life. Bill Gates calls this Business @ the Speed of Thought. Adam Smith called

this capitalism. Chrissy has purchased enough resurrection seeds to replant the Garden of Eden, and to refurnish the Reverend's condo in South Beach.

"Let's go get spaghetti."

"Wait a few minutes. I want to see if the preacher show is coming back on."

"It's already over baby, let's go."

"Hang on, sometimes they show reruns, and you must have me confused with your little girlfriend. You know I don't like spaghetti."

"Yeah, you're right. She does like spaghetti and I bet she's hungry right now."

Chrissy picked up the glass ashtray she stole from the Holiday Inn Express last Valentine's Day. I ran into the bathroom and locked the door just in time to hear it shatter against the knob. A few minutes later I heard her beating on the door and yelling, but my head was under the water and I was scrubbing Head and Shoulders into my hair and Irish Spring shower gel on my balls. It never hurts to have the luck of the Irish.

I wrapped myself in a blue and white beach towel, and walked out of the bathroom and stepped on a piece of glass. Chrissy was on her knees in front of the television rubbing her prayer cloth against the sixty inch plasma screen and whispering something about eating spaghetti in the cold, or smoking weed from a bowl. I picked up the remote control off the side table and put the volume on mute.

"Oh my God, where's all that blood coming from?"

"It's coming from my foot, baby, I stepped on the broken glass."

"Why didn't you rinse it off? You're dripping it all across the carpet."

"I didn't think it was that bad. Do we have any band-aids?"

"Sit down over there and let me check. Do you want me to try and dig the glass out?"

"With your fingernails?"

"No, with tweezers. Do you want me to run you to the emergency room?"

"For a piece of glass in my foot?"

I could feel the glass crunch against the tweezers and the shard drove deeper into my heel. She dug in a second time and grabbed hold of the glass and pulled it out. I soaked my foot in peroxide hoping the little broken bits of glass would just bubble out on their own. They did and my foot stayed sore but stopped bleeding. I walked into the kitchen for the broom and dustpan and swept up the glass so I wouldn't step on it again, then went in the bedroom and finished getting dressed. All my boxers were dirty so I picked a few pairs up off the floor and smelled each one carefully to make sure I was putting on the cleanest dirty pair; unfortunately, the ones that smell the cleanest always have a strange shitty stain down one of the legs or a crusted wad of cum somewhere by the ass cheek. I chose looks over smell and took them into the bathroom and flipped them inside out and sprinkled lavender scented baby powder all over them and shook the excess into the sink. I flipped them the other way and spritzed Cool Water cologne on the outside. My father taught me this trick before I left for sixth grade camp. His father taught it to him before he left for the Army. He was dishonorably discharged eleven days into basic training after biting off a piece of someone's nose during a practice drill. I bit a piece of skin off Chrissy's neck because she likes me to choke her and scratch and bite while I'm banging her in the shower. She only has sex in the shower, with or without the water running.

My foot was still sore in the morning so I planned on asking our pediatrician if she could write me out a prescription for an inexpensive antibiotic, Tetracycline maybe. We had to take the baby back in to see the doctor. Her breathing had gotten worse and she'd been coughing up her chocolate pudding instead of swallowing it.

"Good morning Dr. Slater."

"Good morning. Sit down and make yourselves comfortable. The test results are in and I have some troubling news for you. I'm sorry." Chrissy started crying then stood up and faced the blue and yellow digestive system chart next to the food group pyramid poster.

“It’s Down’s Syndrome isn’t it? St. Peter warned me about this in a dream last week.” She was talking to the 2% milk and yogurt on the poster.

“No honey. It’s Tay-Sachs Disease.”

“What is that? Will she be okay?”

“Tay-Sachs Disease is a rare genetic disorder that attacks the nervous system. Infants with Tay-Sachs have difficulty breathing and swallowing.”

“Well that’s not so bad is it doctor? We can put her on breathing treatments and give her medicine to help her swallow, right?”

“For now, but that’s only temporary. She will lose her sight and her ability to breathe completely without artificial assistance. Seizures will become constant and full mental retardation will occur. I’m sorry.”

Chrissy cried harder but never looked away from the dairy foods. “What caused this? How does this happen? I’m being punished. What did I do?” She reached a finger around to point at me. “What did you do?”

“Ma’m I doubt if you’re being punished. Tay-Sachs is caused by a defective gene that renders a person unable to produce the enzyme necessary to break down fatty substances that build up in the nerve cells of the brain. Without that enzyme the fatty substances continue to build up until they kill off all the healthy brain cells.”

“Yes doctor I understand what it means, but how does this happen? What causes someone to get it?”

“Basically it’s genetic. Tay-Sachs is caused by a double recessive negative gene. Exactly the same as blue eyes. Both parents must have the negative gene and pass it on.”

“So we gave our baby bad genes?”

“Well I wanted to talk to you about that. One of the recessive genes came from you, the mother, but the male sample I took did not contain the recessive gene. This gentleman is not the baby’s father.”

She stopped crying. “So tell me Dr. Slater, is there a cure? Will she get better? How long does my baby have to live?”

“Right now there is no cure for Tay-Sachs. Babies with the disease have lived until the age of four, but they were—”

“How long?”

“Not even six months. I’m sorry.”

I left the office before the appointment ended, before I got my prescription for Tetracycline, before I asked Chrissy who else was fucking her in our shower. I walked from St. Joe’s Hospital down to Keith’s house in Swan Creek. It was cold and I didn’t wear a coat and car after car passed without offering a ride. Keith was standing on the porch watching me walk up the driveway.

“Is it alright if I stay here for a few days?”

“Why what’s going on bro? Where’s Chrissy?”

“It’s a long messed up story, man. Can I stay?”

“Yeah, of course, but my sister still stays here sometimes, won’t Chrissy get pissed? She better not come over here beating on the door waking me up all fucking night like she usually does.”

“Not this time bro, trust me.”

II

The Greyhound trip to El Paso took two and a half days. I sat by myself until Morgantown. A tall man with a scruffy beard and tobacco stained teeth stuffed an empty iced tea bottle between both of our thighs and used it to spit out his snuff. Every time he reached for the bottle he brushed his knuckles against my leg, which made me cringe the first few times until I embraced it and let the thought of his fingers against my thighs make me wet. I leaned closer to him to feel the warmth of his body against my arm and breast, and closed my eyes and imagined him brushing his fingers against other places. He was wearing a black hat with a rebel flag logo and his t-shirt was dark blue and the words across his chest encouraged us to support Ohio steel mills.

“Yeah, that sonofabitch Bush lets all those goddamn Chinamen dump foreign steel over here.”

My fantasizing stopped. I scooted away from him into the window. We changed buses in Nashville where only Indians got on. They all looked sweaty and smelled like corn oil. I closed my eyes

and imagined what it would feel like to have sex with an Indian, war paint, eagle feathers, tomahawk in hand. The sharp steel slicing pieces of skin off my back while I'm bent over might feel sexy, but being fucked, then scalped would not. St. Peter told me if I didn't want any more children I didn't need birth control. I only needed to have sex in the bathtub where the water could be anointed and made strong enough to keep me safe. The blood from the tomahawk would mix with the holy water from my bathtub and interfere with my blessing. That meant sex with Indians was impossible.

We dropped half of the Indians off in Albuquerque. The other half got off with me in El Paso. El Paso, Texas—May 23rd, flashed across the bottom of the screen last time Reverend Basil was on television. I mailed my prayer cloth to him along with my prayer request. Six days later he called my house.

The Lord's going to perform a miracle for you, all glory unto him that returned sight to the blind and raised Lazarus from the dead, Amen."

"How? When?"

"Soon my child. I prayed about this very deeply and the Lord told me that all miracles are possible if we sew enough seeds. Ask and ye shall receive, knock and it shall be opened unto you."

"How many seeds Reverend? How many seeds will it take to heal my baby?"

"Three thousand, my child. Three thousand seeds will remove all demons, praise God."

"Thank you Reverend. When can we do this?"

"Send me your prayer cloth along with the love donation the Lord has required and mountains will move right in front of our eyes, Hallelujah."

"I want to be there. I want to watch you perform this miracle."

"Then praise God, child. How fast can you make it to El Paso?"

I bought my ticket for a hundred and twenty-nine dollars at the bus station in Ann Arbor. I called Keith's house to find out where Chris was but he lied and said he didn't know.

"Well leave him this message for me please. I have to go to Texas and I need him to watch the baby."

“I told you he ain’t here.”

“Well I’m leaving and the baby’s at the house by herself. I’m desperate; this is the only way to help her get better. Please Keith, is he there? Is he at work? Please.”

“Hang on, I’ll get him.”

“Thank you.”

“Hey baby, how have you been? How’s the baby? I was thinking, maybe Dr. Slater was wrong. Can we go get a DNA test?”

“Sure, but we need to talk. I need you to watch the baby for a few days. There’s a way to save her.”

“How? This is great. You found a specialist?”

“No, Reverend Bas—”

“Oh.”

“Please Chris, I know how you feel about that kind of stuff, but I need you right now...I love you.”

“Ok, how can the Reverend help us? Wait...tell me, how much money does he need before he can help us?”

“Three thousand dollars.”

“Well... Jesus Christ.”

“I know it’s a lot of money, just come over here. I’ll start our bathwater.”

I had to be at the bus station the next morning by 6 AM, which meant I needed three thousand dollars by 6 AM, but I cashed my check and bought my bus ticket, five instant lottery tickets, diapers, and a cheeseburger without onions or pickles. I still needed twenty-seven hundred dollars.

I wrapped my prayer cloth around the water faucet in the bathtub and let the water filter through it while it ran. I unbuttoned my jeans and took them off and kept my shirt on while I brushed my teeth, then I pulled my shirt off over my head, unhooked my bra, and got on my knees beside the bathtub and waited for Chris to find me bent over in black satin panties pretending to check the water temperature.

I plugged the stereo in before I took my clothes off. I turned it up loud enough so I wouldn’t be able to hear Chris’s footsteps when he climbed the stairs and pushed the bathroom door open and walked

in and stood behind me and waited for the perfect time to pull my panties the rest of the way down and run his mouth the rest of the way back up my spine, until he found my neck and wrapped his hand around it and turned me around to face him.

“Three thousand dollars, baby. We don’t have three thousand dollars.”

“That’s too hard Chris, I can’t breathe.”

“We don’t have three thousand dollars.”

“Chris let go, I can’t fucking breathe.”

“I wanna take the DNA test.”

“If we don’t come up with three thousand dollars we won’t need the DNA test.”

His grip loosened on my throat and I climbed into the water. I leaned over the edge and unbuttoned his pants and pulled them down to his knees.

“Chris, we need this money.”

“Baby I’m sorry, I don’t know where to get it.”

“What about your mom, she’ll let you borrow it.”

“She said we can’t borrow any more money until we pay her back what we already owe.”

“Tell her it’s for the baby. I know she’ll give it to us.”

“Maybe if it was for treatment or medications, but not for this.”

“I have one more idea.”

“What?”

“When you go in to work tonight, take it from the safe.”

“Are you crazy, I’ll get caught. There’s video cameras everywhere. I’m already on probation, they’ll put me in prison.”

“Ask Keith to help you, maybe he can switch something around in the paperwork.”

“There is no paperwork. Everything is computerized now. Each register is linked to the computer and tells it exactly how much money is supposed to be there.”

I stood up and stepped one foot over the edge of the bathtub.

“You have to figure something out. We have to do this or our baby is gonna die.”

“So you think it’s our baby? How do you know?”

“Of course it’s our baby. We don’t need a DNA test to see that. She looks just like you.”

“I know how to get the money. But I can’t take it from my work. I’ll go to a place where nobody knows my name”

“What are you gonna do?”

“It’s something me and Keith talked about a long time ago. He said his friend used to rob restaurants like this all the time. I know it can work.” He told me to stand up, and I did. He told me to turn around and face the wall, and I did. He told me to step back out of the bathtub and kneel down the same way he found me when he walked in, and I did.

III

I sat in one of the booths close enough to the front counter registers to see who was taking orders and to monitor how often the manager came out from the back to check on the store. The girl taking orders had blonde hair and big beautiful gypsy eyes and giggled too much like Brooke Taylor from *Cathouse*. The manager only came out of the office to re-stuff his box of chicken strips and refill his Dr. Pepper. I waited for the girl to walk around the front counter and head for the ladies’ room. I waited for thirty seconds then followed her in and slipped a note inside the stall while she was pissing.

Dear Register Person:

Please remain silent, I have a gun. It is not my intention to harm you but I will if you don’t stay quiet and cooperate. When you walk back out to your register, I need you to ring up orders on the two registers you are not using. Very carefully take out all the money from both registers then shove it all into your pockets. After you do this a man will approach your register and order two apple pies to go. When he does you will grab a C bag and put the money from your pockets into it. When he pays you with a five dollar bill you will give him back all the tens, twenties, fifties, and hundreds as change. Next you will place the apple pies on top of the money inside the bag, fold it twice, and hand it to him. You will thank him and tell him to have a nice day. There is another

man sitting in the lobby who also has a gun. He will remain seated for an hour to make sure you do not tell anyone. If your manager comes up to question you at any time you will blame yourself for trying to steal the money and you will accept any consequences. If you do not cooperate with me fully you and your family will be dead by morning.

Sincerely,
Robber

I walked back out of the bathroom before she pulled her pants up and sat at the booth directly in front of the register and waited for her to follow directions, and she did. She rang up double cheeseburgers on the first two registers and put the money into her pockets. I got out of my seat and ordered two apple pies, and without looking up, she rang up the order, grabbed a C bag, put the money from her pockets inside, cashed out my five dollar bill, and gave me all the money in the register as change except the fives and ones.

“Thank you sir, have a good day.”

The registers are always full on Friday nights, especially if the manager is a three-hundred pound fat ass that cares more about the clever sauce combinations he can make for his nuggets than skimming the excess cash out of the registers in case they get robbed. I went back to the house and handed Chrissy three-thousand eighty-seven dollars and went to sleep. She was standing by the door with a black backpack over her shoulder looking out the window when Keith pulled into the driveway and flashed his high-beams. There were three changes of clothes, two prayer cloths, and over three thousand dollars in her backpack and she looked at me and left without saying a word.

The sun was just starting to rise when I first saw the flashing lights. The blue and red swirls mixed with the soft pink and orange sky above the horizon and I would have walked onto the porch and taken a photo if the surreal color scheme hadn't meant I was being arrested. I never took the note back from the register girl and the fingerprints found on the corner of the paper matched

my fingerprints in the system. The officer let me get dressed before I left and the baby was placed in the custody of Child Protective Services.

IV

I got off the bus in El Paso and sat in one of the little blue chairs beside the vending machines inside the terminal. I picked the seat on the end next to two Mexicans. The cab driver said he couldn't be there for another twenty minutes. I called the house but nobody answered. I called Keith's house to find out where Chris was but he lied and said he didn't know. I walked into the ladies' room but there were cockroaches on the floor and little spots of dried blood all over the seat. I walked back out and called the house again. A cop answered the phone, told me what happened, asked me too many questions, and told me to return home immediately. I sat back down beside the Mexicans.

"Are you from Mexico?" Nothing.

"Are you going over to Mexico?" Nothing.

"How far is it to Guadalupe de Bravo?" Nothing.

"Guadalupe de Bravo?" I pointed at my chest and repeated the name.

My cab still hadn't shown up and the Mexicans got out of their chairs and walked towards the crowd of people getting off the bus. I followed behind them until they found who they were looking for.

"Guadalupe de Bravo" I repeated and pointed at my chest again.

"You are going to Guadalupe de Bravo?" His English was poor but efficient.

"Is it far from here? I need a ride."

"You want us to take you to Guadalupe de Bravo?"

"Yes. Please. I can give you money." I unzipped my backpack and showed him a hundred dollar bill.

"You have money. We can give you a ride." They all spoke to each other in Spanish and one of the men pointed at the vending machines.

“My friend is thirsty. He needs a drink.” I nodded and walked towards the vending machines and they all followed. They stood behind me as I pushed the Coke button and bent down to pick it up. One of the men wrapped his hand around my mouth and they shoved me the extra five feet into one of the bathrooms. They forced me to my knees in a puddle of piss in front of the toilet in the back of a dirty little stall in the men’s room.

Sherman Alexie and Monica Lewinsky Fistfight in Heaven

WE WERE PLAYING euchre with my sister and her new husband. Clubs was flipped down and everyone passed. I was eating summer sausage with chunks of cheddar cheese and club crackers and casually called spades once it got back around. Then we made the deal. Actually the new guy brought it up, I knew better. I knew it would cause two a.m. arguments, and at some point I would be sleeping alone on the couch, jerking off to *Girls Gone Wild* infomercials, but the new fucker, he was a drunk, and I doubt he would have known better even if he wasn't.

"Okay" he said, "If you could have sex with one famous person, who would it be?" My girlfriend said Adam Sandler, a little too quickly maybe, like she'd been waiting for someone to ask her that question her entire life. I already knew because she said it every fucking time we watched *Billy Madison*. My sister smiled and shook her head, maybe in agreement, maybe not, it meant something different to all of us.

"Okay then, this is the deal. You get one famous person, and if the chance ever comes up for you to have sex with them, you can and nobody can hold it against you." Even though he just finished the last bottle in the twelve pack, we all stopped smiling like it was Sunday and the preacher just confirmed our names had been erased from the Book of Life, we all agreed. We almost all agreed.

"Wait" she said, "you never told us who your celebrity is." And instead of doing what I should have done and said the first name that popped into my head, someone safe like Kate Hudson or Christina Ricci, I paused; examined the possibilities, the likelihoods, the odds, all the far-out scenarios that could end with my faced buried between some famous woman's thighs with a few of her pubes lodged in my throat.

"I'll have to think about it." My sister and the husband laughed, but not Ashley. I threw out my next ace, clubs, but no one else followed. They were watching my lips, waiting, there was no way out.

“You never answered the question bro.” He was drunk and stupid.

“It’s a dumb fucking question.”

“Come on. It’s all fun.”

“Alright, Monica Lewinsky.”

He laughed, my sister did another one of her nods, Ashley said she expected someone dirty like me to pick a cock-sucking whore like Monica Lewinsky.

“Yeah I know, I like cock-sucking whores.”

The game was over.

She never brought the conversation up, not for seven months, but I knew she thought about it. She used to lick my dick until it was sopping wet then climbed on top and slid down because she knew that was my favorite. But now that Monica’s in the picture she just lays there. Until yesterday; she came home from work two and a half hours early, speeding in the driveway and slamming on the brakes. She left the engine running and came busting through the front door. I was sitting in front of the TV, playing NFL Blitz 95 and she threw her purse at the back of my head, causing Aikman to overthrow Irvin by a foot or so, causing me to lose by a touchdown.

“The deal’s off. I know what you’re up to.”

“What deal? What the fuck are you talking about?”

“You know what deal. You think I’m gonna let you fuck Monica Lewinsky?”

“Are you out of your mind? You left work early because you think I’m here trying to have sex with Monica Lewinsky? You’re a goddam lunatic.”

“I know what you’re up to. I was checking around online. Monica’s one of those smart bitches. She has two college degrees. You think that after you become famous, she’s going to come to one of your readings and you two are gonna hook up.” The harder I laughed the louder she got.

“I’m not trying to be famous. I picked Monica because I like thick women with big tits. I didn’t do a background search.”

“You think you’re some college boy, some hot shit poet, and I’m just a poor dumb waitress who gives good blow jobs and—”

“Let’s not get carried away, they’re decent blow jobs.”

“See, fuck you. And what about all your friends who write books? They’re famous.” Still laughing.

“Poets aren’t famous. Nobody knows they’re alive until they’re dead. You can’t name five.”

“That crazy guy who wrote the poem about the talking bird.”

“What?”

“Knocking at my door, forevermore—”

“Poe?”

“Whatever. Mr. College Boy who forgets he’s from west Philly.”

“I haven’t forgotten anything, that’s why I went to college. Not that any of that has anything to do with you.”

“If it don’t than what am I doing here?”

“Right now you’re trying to name five poets, one down, four left.”

“Shakespeare. William fucking Shakespeare. You know what, I don’t have to do this. Why am I doing this with you?”

“Three more. But you see this is my point, was my point. I had a goddam point. Both of those guys are dead. Name one poet who’s alive right now.”

“What about that Indian guy we saw last week? He’s famous.”

“What guy? Sherman Alexie? He’s not a poet, he’s a self-righteous fucking sell-out, and he’s only a big deal to writers and to people who read.”

“That’s what I been trying to say. Monica is smart. I read her bio. She loves poetry and she goes to readings and she’s a dirty whore. I bet she’d give Sherman Alexie a blowjob.”

I walked outside and shut the car off.

“Leave it running. I’m going back to work.”

“What time you coming home?”

“Five-thirty or six. Why? Where are you going?”

“My sister called. She wants to know if we want to come over and play some cards.”

“That’s fine. Tell her we’ll be there at eight.”

The National Virginity Pledge

I WAS SHOPPING at Wal-Mart. The cashier looked at me suspiciously as she rang up a jumbo pack of diapers, two Spongebob DVDs, a twelve pack of Miller High Life, lubricated condoms, a two-pack of pacifiers, and a pair of satin panties. She held the panties in the air for a moment, before placing them in the bag.

“Nice, who’d you get those for?”

“For you, how do you like them?”

“They’re not as nice as the other panties customers bought for me this morning.”

“I wouldn’t expect them to be. Do you think they’ll fit?”

“You don’t want to know what I think.”

“It’s like that?”

“How do you think it should be?”

“I think you should come over to my place tonight and try them on for me.”

“Yeah, let me find the other two customers first, we can all go over to your house and watch me get naked.”

“What time are you coming?”

“Really? Are you out of your fucking mind? I got customers coming, sit down over there, I’m off in ten minutes.”

“I’m just supposed to wait for you?”

She didn’t reply, but she was pointing at the little metal bench along the wall in front of the bathrooms, below the big billboard that displays how charitable Wal-Mart is to the local community. I decided to sit. Wal-Mart gave \$2,000 to Blissfield Community Schools to help fund their annual Miss River Raisin pageant. The winner was a seventeen-year-old girl with dark brown hair and a flat chest. She was a guard on the varsity basketball team, held a 4.0 gpa, volunteered her time twice a month to the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, helping to trace the migration pattern of the Eastern Gray squirrel through the Great Lakes region. She took the National Virginity Pledge when she was a sophomore but still gave blow jobs to her mother’s latest boyfriend, a Wal-Mart

regional director. They were all three standing together, smiling for the photo, one big happy family.

“I thought you said ten minutes.”

“Nobody asked you to wait.”

“You want me to take you home?”

“You never told me who the panties were for?”

“Yes I did.”

“Look, my ride’s here, I ain’t got time for this shit.”

Some dickhead pulled up in a red truck. He flunked out of college his freshmen year after he was cut from the baseball team for trying to score performance enhancing drugs from an undercover. The coach never bothered to petition on his behalf. He was wearing a Jim Thome jersey and blue sunglasses even though it was 11 PM. I followed her over to the truck and opened the passenger side door to let her in.

“Who the hell is this guy?” Thome asked.

“He works here, I asked him to follow me out because it’s dark.”

“Well why the hell is he still standing there...Hey, why are you holding my truck door open asshole?”

I reached behind the passenger side seat and grabbed the aluminum bat.

“Put my fucking bat down.”

I started beating on the hood of the truck then smashed out both headlights. I snagged my hand on one of the busted headlights and sliced it open when I pulled it out. There was blood all over my hand, running down my wrist, onto my Patrick Ewing jersey, the gray throwback from Georgetown. I kept swinging then threw the bat at the back windshield, picked the diapers and panties up from the parking lot and walked over to my car.

I got back to my apartment and threw the bags on the floor, walked to the kitchen, searched the cupboards for something to eat, and found a pack of ramen noodles with mushrooms and broccoli on the wrapper. I let the water boil on the stove while I washed off some of the blood. I let it run all over my dishes in the sink then pulled out a brown plastic bowl and poured my soup into it. Comedy Central was advertising a cartoon marathon. Chef was

telling Cartman to lick his chocolate balls. This somehow made my noodles more appetizing. It also made me miss Papa Smurf. Then the phone rang.

“You can’t keep coming up to my work, pulling this shit.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You know what I’m talking about, the glass from the back windshield cut the back of my head open.”

“That wasn’t my intention.”

“It’s never your intention, you just keep fucking up.”

“I said I’m sorry, what else do you want me to do?”

“I want you to leave me alone.”

“Why don’t you come over so we can talk about this, I picked up some diapers and a couple binkies for Angela.”

“You didn’t have to do that, I told you we don’t want nothing from you.”

“What about the panties, don’t you want your panties, they’re black and satin with little pink roses on each ass cheek, just like the ones you wore our first night together.”

“I know, I remember.”

“Come on, come over and get this stuff I bought you. Let’s talk about this.”

“I can’t, it’s late, Angela’s already sleeping.”

“Wake her up, I got these Spongebob movies, and I got some extra money if you need it.”

“I can’t, she hasn’t been feeling good all day.”

“She’ll be ok, come try these panties on, I know you like the satin when it rubs against you, when it gets warm and soggy between your legs.”

“Fuck you, you make me sick.”

“Whatever then bitch, have fun with your flunky college boy.”

“At least he isn’t a—”

I hung the phone up, finished the soup and went through the closets and cupboards searching for things to shop for tomorrow and sat down and made my list.

She Never Asked

I RODE WITH Grizzly everyday to the restaurant, Backwoods Bar and Grill. He put in a jukebox, hung old concert posters of Bob Dylan and John Lennon and autographed photos of Jeff Foxworthy and Frank Sinatra over top of scenic wall paper meant to resemble a ghost town from the Wild West. One of those fake flopping fish hung above the door and sung songs from Smoky and the Bandit to all the customers on their way out. Instead of booths along the walls there were wooden picnic tables and drinks were served in mason jars. All the waitresses were college dropouts back home after a year of binge drinking and showing off their tits at the lake over spring break because they couldn't afford Ft. Lauderdale. They lure male customers in over lunch hours and after 9 PM when drunk men outnumber drunk women five to one and the waitress whores are there to give losers hope. We caught a break after the second week. One of the girls, a tall redhead with long legs and scabbed-up, knobby knees, and broken brown eyes that never look at you, left in a beat up Ford Ranger with two local boys and gave them blow jobs for a ride home. Business after 9 PM tripled.

It was drizzling outside and Grizzly rolled down the window and handed me a joint. It was brown and smelled like dead tree bark and burned deep in the back of my throat and raindrops tickled my nose every time I turned towards the window to exhale. Garth Brooks was singing the live version of *Friends in Low Places*, the one where he gets drunk and tells his ex to kiss his ass. "One more hit and we gotta put that shit out," I said. "I don't want Carrie smelling it in the truck."

"Are you serious? She's really fucking with your head."

"She's pregnant. I don't want her bitching and stressing out right now."

"Pregnant? Are you sure? Did you see the test? Make sure she shows you the test. Women do that shit all the time."

"No, it's the real deal. She has an appointment Thursday. I'm gonna need the day off."

“No problem. Let’s get this guy hired in and get him trained.”

KC had pale skin and dirty blonde hair. He was skinnier than I thought someone who worked in a restaurant should be. He seemed passive, reliable, it was in his voice. His wrists were bony and his watch was gold with a brown wristband and he wore it on his left arm. His fingernails were clipped and polished with a silver sparkle clear coat and his knuckles were hairless. His eyes were bloodshot behind his glasses and he smelled like spray-can deodorant and menthol cigarettes. He showed up with a resume. I liked him immediately. I gave him a copy of the menu to look over and showed him around the store.

“I can’t believe how clean everything is here. Every other place I worked in was a mess.”

“That’s rule number one here. Everything has to stay spotless, all the time. It needs to be so clean that the Virgin Mary could give birth right here on the goddam floor.” He smiled, but wouldn’t laugh. I really liked the kid. I gave him the password to the safe, opened it, and handed him three hundred dollars.

“Here, get yourself some good button down shirts. They have to be blue. Pants have to be black. If they’re ever dirty or wrinkled don’t show up. You’ll be fired on the spot. Slip-proof shoes, a couple ties, they don’t have to be plain but don’t get nothing stupid. If you wear a belt it has to be black. You have any questions?”

“When do I get my first check?”

“Payday’s every Thursday.” I handed him the keys. “Same thing with the keys, if you lose them, don’t bother—“

“Showing up for work. I’ll be fired on the spot. Got it.” I waited around for another half an hour while he filled out his application and a W-2 form. There were other papers too, authorization forms to let us do a credit check, criminal check, all that shit. We never did any checks. If a man can cook food and count out cash registers I don’t give a shit if he kidnapped his neighbor’s kids or fucked a fourteen year old when he was twenty. The scabby, red-headed girl was wiping off one of the picnic tables. She kneeled in a puddle of ketchup to grab a chewed up chicken strip off the seat and I peeked inside her shirt and she caught me looking when she stood back

up. I didn't bother to look away. Her bra was pink and padded and there was a mole on her chest between her tits. I grabbed a handful of napkins and took them over to her.

"You could've used a broom. Take these napkins."

"I don't have time. Can you get it for me?" I wiped the ketchup from her knee. It smeared into my fingers and she grabbed my hand and licked it off. "Can you give me a ride. I'm off in five minutes?"

She walked in the back towards the bathroom. I finished talking to KC, gathered up his paperwork, and put it all in a manila file folder in the office. Grizzly was watching the surveillance cameras. A man was sitting alone at a picnic table, glancing at a newspaper, wearing headphones, eating a chicken gyro with buffalo sauce and feta cheese, and swirling the ice around in his glass with a straw. I told the redhead we'd give her a ride home, then grabbed half a ham and cheese sandwich and two six packs of Pabst. It was still raining when we left.

Grizzly was in back with the redhead. Her shirt was off and the padded pink bra was pushed down around her waist. He grabbed a bottle of Pabst, shook it, opened it, and poured it between her tits. The foam was everywhere. A small stream of beer ran down the center of her chest, overtop of the mole, underneath the bra, and parted around her belly button like the Red Sea, like Grizzly was the modern day Moses, leading lost gentiles out of darkness, into the Promised Land. She took her panties off and dropped them on my lap. They matched the pink bra and smelled like four-day old clam chowder left sitting on top of the stove long enough to attract flies. I cracked the window halfway and tried tossing them into the ditch with the dead leaves, but the wind caught them and they ended up on the shoulder of the left lane beside a half-empty two-liter of Faygo Rock & Rye and a bloody, mutilated raccoon corpse. I found a half-joint in the ash tray, lit it, toked it twice, and passed it to Grizzly. I couldn't find his fingers in the dark and burned his forearm three times before he took a hit and handed it back. The redhead straddled Grizzly's lap, backwards like a bull rider, leaned forward, pressed her tits flat against my seat, and yanked the top

of my hair with her right hand while he fucked her. I relit the joint and held it to her lips. She kissed the back of my head, inhaled, then exhaled into my ear. I wanted to pull off onto a dirt road, flash the four-way lights, switch places with Grizzly, and stick it in little red's ass, but I smoked the last tiny piece of the roach and dropped her off out in the country in front of a big blue house with white shutters and freshly mowed grass. There was a small cement porch with two plants in gray pots on the top step. She never asked about the panties and Carrie was sound asleep when I got home, snoring into the pillow.

Hard

THREE WEEKS AGO, we were lying together in bed; she was naked except for the silky blue pajama top I picked out a month ago at an overpriced boutique in Tahoe. She was undoing the last button. I was still in my boxers, spreading cheese onto a cracker with that little red stick, and watching the New York Mets lose the pennant and their self-respect.

“Did you hear that? There’s something in the closet.”

“The only thing in that closet is your goddam clothes, now keep it down, the game’s almost over.”

“Oh my God! It’s right there, it’s crawling around! Get it! Smash it!”

I turned on the light and she was crying and screaming and jumping on the bed and the kids came into the room and jumped on the bed with their mother and cried and screamed too.

“Look dad, it’s Willy!”

“Where? Where’s Willy? I don’t see him.”

“Get him dad, get him!”

Both girls jumped off the bed, dove into the closet, and banged their heads together. The youngest one bled. I grabbed a pillow, threw it at Willy, and trapped him in the corner. I reached in and he bit down into the soft skin between my thumb and pointer finger. I pulled my hand out and pressed hard on the pillow and tried to suffocate the little fucker. My oldest girl was pulling my arms away and the youngest started punching me in the back and she wrapped her arms around my neck, choking me from behind and bit the top of my shoulder. I stopped, we all stopped. We all went back to bed. The Mets were finished and I left Willy in the corner until morning.

About the Author

BARRY GRAHAM, born and raised in the heart of Pennsylvania Dutch Country, is a four-time *National Tic-Tac-Toe Association* (NTTTA) champion (1988, 1994, 2004, 2006). He graduated from Eastern Michigan University with an MA in Creative Writing. While at EMU, he served as co-editor of their annual graduate student anthology, *50/50*, and was an assistant editor for *Bathhouse Magazine*. Barry teaches writing at Monroe County Community College and spends the off-season in the poker room at the Trump Taj Mahal in Atlantic City. He also teaches creative writing workshops through *Dzanc's* WIRP. His fiction and poetry has appeared in the following publications: *Storyglossia*, *Hobart*, *Pindeldyboz*, *Wigleaf*, *Elimae*, *Smokelong Quarterly*, *Frigg*, *Prick of the Spindle*, *Cella's Round Trip*, *Temenos*, and others. Barry Graham is the 2008 recipient of the Jumpmettle Award for excellence in fiction and was recently nominated for a Pushcart. He is also the editor of *DOGZPLOT*.

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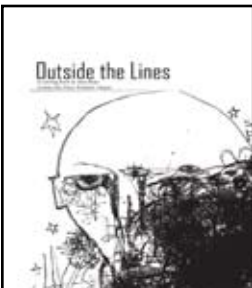
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