

miniMAG

open windows an anthology

issue#126

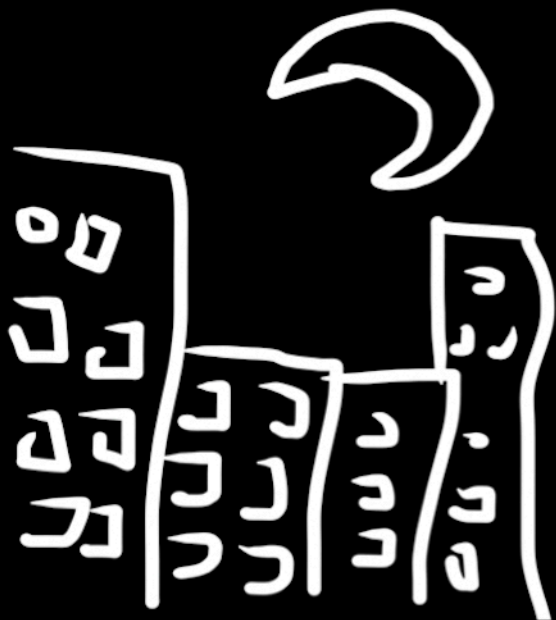
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miniMAG

ISSUE126

OPEN WINDOWS

**presented by
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#002

**edited by
Alex Prestia**

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Thanks for letting us take a peek inside,

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RALPH'S COFFEE

ALEX PRESTIA



Today I'm summoning coffee from an app. I could pretend I'm out of beans, or that my moka pot is dirty, but in reality I'm just feeling a bit lazy. I want something and I don't want to move for it. I have the holy power to call on objects from across the city with just my pointer finger and my tablet, they then arrive at my door within an hour. Mankind has never been so blessed, and I shan't ignore these blessings.

I, like everyone else, am a part of the religion that makes sundry summoning possible—Capitalism. There are two rules in this religion, 1) all blessings of capital shall eventually wind up at the feet of THE MAN—this is the Holy Law of Capital Flow, and 2) pious humans must endeavor to return this capital to the THE MAN indirectly, they should support small businesses and their fellow man over major corporations—this is the Trickle Down Doctrine. It is righteous of us to trickle our glory down, through the local shops, through our local-economy. These prayers—\$5 here, a 25% tip there—allow our blessings to fall into the pockets of our fellows. The capital will always make its way back to THE MAN, but a longer route enriches us all, amen.

When given the choice, one must avoid ordering directly from THE MAN: Starbucks, Tim Horton's, Cafe Amazon, all of these break the sacred Trickle Down Doctrine, they vacuum blessings up to THE MAN too quickly.

So I drift my finger through the app, a happy butterfly in Eden, looking for a little place, a small shrine to organic coffee beans. Preferably they import the beans in small orders that miss out completely on any economies of scale, they hopefully charge too much

per cup compared to THE MAN's competition, and they absolutely must struggle, monthly, to make rent payments in their newly gentrified neighborhood. This is where my blessing of capital will go the furthest; my religiosity can pay the strongest dividend in their hands. We all must do our part, right? And the holiest course of action is to be uneconomical.

My finger continues prancing through the well organized meadow, scrolling down further and further, past the Dunkin's and Luckin's, common seraphim that they are, until I alight on this homely little logo, a simple black and white stamp that says, "Ralph's Coffee." It's the sort of logo that one could make in Canva on their phone, I can feel the divinity, the unoptimized business model, and I am sure that ordering at Ralph's will be a proper bestowing of my favor. Now, rather than being a useless person that couldn't even be bothered to make his own coffee this morning, I can feel like I'm doing Ralph a favor. Now, I am "supporting small business" one of the highest commandments of Trickle-Downism.

30 minutes later, as decreed from my holy tablet, the coffee arrives. And the bag is adorable, high quality cardboard, printed (not just some sticker) with their large, cheap-looking logo; heralding "Ralph's Coffee."

Inside, an iced latte and an iced americano cased in standard plastic cups with cardboard rings and each individually double bagged in plastic in order to survive the chaotic motorcycle ride to my apartment. Next to the coffee is this little postcard, on the front is the coffee shop's name and slogan "Enjoy a Cup of

Ralph's Coffee" printed on a big mug of coffee sitting on a quaint little dish. Again, it looks like something anyone who spent half an hour on Canva or Photoshop could have made themselves, low production budget—and again, I think to myself, "Oh, how cute." and flip over the postcard. On the back—handwritten—

"Dear Mr. Alexander,

Thanks for choosing Ralph's Coffee.

Wish you a nice day!!!"

Signed,

Jarius"

How divine.

It is not until later in the day, as I'm moving the bag that the coffee was delivered in, that I peer inside and notice something strange printed on the inner wall. It's a logo: man on horseback with a polo club held high over his head. Familiar. And I think to myself, "Ralph, you really ought to be careful, I'm sure Polo is a fairly litigious company."

After taking the trash out that night, my gaze falls on the friendly postcard again, it's sitting alone on the kitchen counter. I've already assured myself that I'll throw it away tomorrow, but I like keeping little things like that around for a bit, it's the least I can do to repay Jarius for picking up a pen. But something at the bottom of the logo catches my eye. I hadn't really looked

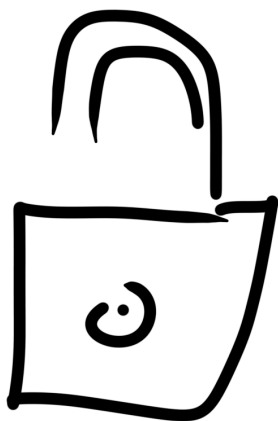
at it carefully, but the saucer underneath the coffee cup says, quite clearly, “Ralph Lauren.” It clicks.

There is a gaudy luxury mall near my apartment, visitors from all over Asia bring their mistresses to stay in the attached hotel while they treat government officials to fine dinners. Inside the mall is a luxurious Ralph Lauren store (not Polo, that’s different, it’s a Ralph Lauren store). Once when I walked by I catalogued that it even had an attached coffee shop, which I found queer but cute and didn’t think about again until now.

I’ve been deceived by THE MAN, it won’t be the first or last time, but I am disappointed that my capital prayer has returned to Him faster than I expected. I’ve failed in upholding the Trickle Down Doctrine. I thank THE MAN before I go to bed, for his deception has opened my eyes, and I dream of matching black suits, of briefcases, of mass market graphic T’s, of handwritten notes copy-pasted to the wall of a marketing exec’s office, of a parade of simple logos, and of a polo player astride his horse, running forever on a massive hamster wheel. Capital always flows to THE MAN.

HEY ALEXA, HOW BIG ARE PRISON CELLS?

DAVID THOMAS JENKINS



in here I let everything be possible
in here I knew the best would happen

in here we had a house in Florida

and a daughter named Dahlia

and in here
I let my emotion
and my nagging hope

step on the gas pedal

we create the multiverse

in every scenario

all of our insides are a prison

and the warden
is tampering with the evidence

to keep it all
in this tiny cell

full of every possible

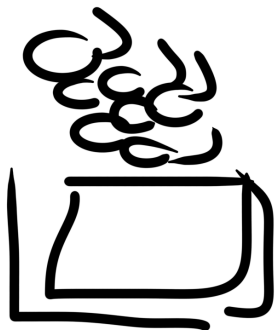
fucking possibility

and all crammed into a

6X8

**BERG-
AMOT
ABOVE
MY
APART-
MENT**

UMAIMA MUNIR



Wait, I tell him, *don't forget about the cucumbers and the tomatoes*. But he's already out the door, *foolish boy*, and my demands of cucumbers and tomatoes claw desperately at his back as he leaves. My stupid, foolish brother who has to knock on the door 2 minutes after leaving every time because he forgets his keys. Every time. I wait. The cat claws at my leg. There comes the knock. When I open the door for him he breezes towards the keys. *The cucumbers. The tomatoes*. They scramble after him once again, claws out. He's faster though, and out he goes again. It's just me and the cucumbers and the tomatoes. Foolish boy.

It's 3 pm and the couple upstairs have started throwing furniture at each other once again. It rained in the morning and the smell of wet earth clings to Kiki. She sits in the spot of sun on the balcony, lolling and giving me the look that says: *he's going to forget the cucumbers and the tomatoes and there's not going to be a salad with today's dinner so you might as well roll in the sun with me*.

The sound of glass shattering filters through the ceiling. The couple upstairs are getting angrier. I think of calling the police, but this is Istanbul and I never bothered to learn any of the emergency numbers since I came here. 155? 122? Something like that. *If I punch in enough combinations of numbers, one's bound to work*. I hold my breath like it will make me disappear into the walls, slip through a crack above and into their apartment. The layout would be the same. Vast expanse of room, some sofas pushed against the south wall, lots of sunlight streaming in. No Kiki though. Maybe some cucumbers and tomatoes somewhere in the kitchen.

Another glass shatters somewhere above me. I'm on the floor now and Kiki follows, gently nudging my head with her nose. *I thought today was about cucumbers and tomatoes. I guess not*, she says. As she curls her head against my chest, I close my eyes again. Hold my breath. Back through the cracks. Two glasses shattered somewhere on the floor. Careful not to step on them.

I know what he looks like. I've seen him in the elevator often. Whenever I enter and he's there, I hold my breath because he smells like paint and gasoline and sometimes a gentle tendril of bergamot. The last one's her I think, so I call her Bergamot. The hint of her is always gentle, like she accidentally brushed against him while he was leaving. The apartments in this building aren't lacking in space though. It can't be an accident. Does she gently touch him before he leaves, so gentle that traces of her only last on his jacket until the elevator gets to the ground floor? Does their rage last only for the few minutes everyday from 3 pm to 4:40 pm while I lie on the floor under where they probably stand? But the Bergamot on him doesn't last and when he leaves the elevator, he leaves as himself.

I can see him now. He threw the first glass, now he's fetching the broom and sweeping the glass because I follow the sound of his feet to and from the kitchen. She's lingering in a corner, Bergamot. When she threw the glass it was an answer to a question. Neither of them liked this answer so now their steps are hesitant and they orbit around each other cautiously. *Is this over, are we over, who is going to move out first? But first the glass.* Kiki paws at my chest and her

claws snag against skin and my eyes are open and the glass is probably swept away.

Keys loudly jingle against the door and he's back and there's no sight of cucumbers and tomatoes. Kiki gets off of her place and makes for the balcony again. It's 4:45 and there's sun to absorb, so I follow her. Footsteps follow me and he's tapping my elbow. *I'll remember tomorrow, okay?* I tap his elbow back. *It's okay, don't forget your keys next time.*

When I step into the elevator trying to balance the paper bags of groceries, it's only bergamot in the small enclosed space. Bergamot. She's coming from somewhere. She's not how I pictured, more of a Patchouli really. When I step in she offers a *good morning!* and a smile that's so hesitant it forces me to take her in in greater detail. A ratty band shirt, men's boxers, knee high socks, slippers. She's carrying cardboard boxes all folded up under her arm. She's moving out first then.

It takes approximately 37 seconds for the elevator to stop at our floor. After 10 seconds, I chance a glance at her and she's crying. It's quiet enough that I can hear my own breathing, but I don't hear her cry. I look back towards the front. 15 seconds. 20 seconds. Time's running out. *Do you need help?* She jumps a little at my voice but gently shakes her head. 25 seconds. *Can you take a plant for me?* Her voice is surprisingly cheery, despite the obvious gloom in her eyes. I nod in reply. *It's a spider plant, I don't want it to die.* I nod again. 35 seconds. I want to tell her she

should change her perfume too if she really wants to be rid of him. *I like your perfume, it's...* That's all I get out. The elevator door dings open and she waves a small goodbye to me.

As soon as I'm inside, the cucumbers and tomatoes are tossed on the kitchen counter. A tomato rolls off onto the floor, and Kiki jumps at it. I lie on the floor again. Closed eyes. Hold my breath. Through the crack.

It's only her up there. He's made himself scarce, or locked up in one of the other rooms that I can't hear. She's being quiet though, and he's usually at work during this time. So she's running. I don't want to call it that though. *Retreating? Escaping.* I wish so desperately I'd figured out the emergency number.

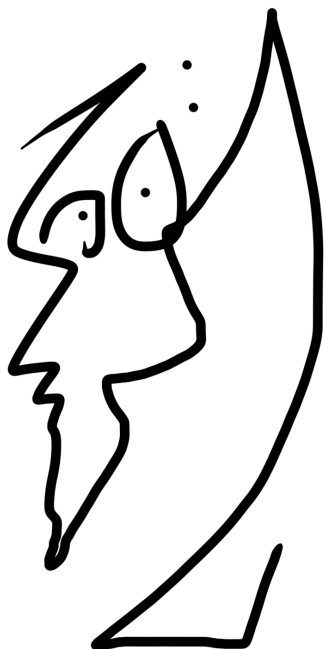
Bergamot makes quick work of her packing. She came with a plan, the boxes are done quickly, and I imagine she takes one last look (*does she look at the floor, does she close her eyes, hold her breath, imagine me? Does she too want to reach out and hope I can feel her fingers in mine?*) and she's out the door and I open my eyes and Kiki's rolled the rogue tomato all the way over to me. *You better pick this up, it's ripe and juicy and would make a tremendous pasta sauce,* she blinks at me.

Here's your damned tomatoes and cucumbers. What? When did you go out? Why didn't you text me to not get the groceries then? Jesus, whatever possessed you to get so many? We can't just eat nothing but salad for the next month. Someone left a plant and some perfume outside our door by the way. Did you order

something and forget about it? Oh, I didn't forget my keys this time, did you see?

SHIFT

THEODORE WALLBANGER



Ralph's halitosis-riddled gleek splash danced across the stoic cashier's eyeglass lens while she continued to zap scan Southern butter pecan gelato being drafted by an aggressive squadron of avocados. Any keen observer of conveyor belts could tell the squealing casters on this retired trampoline were being taxed.

Pumpkins, canteens of beans, and kitty litter-sized drums of vermin death pellets were sold by the pound at Sid's Grocery & Pest Control. Sid formed a business alliance with his thriving food store by merging harmonica lessons in the seventies, this enterprise faltered with the dawn of common sense.

Ralph redeemed seven four-leaf clover wishes before his grocery tally was broadcast to a mostly subdued audience. He had tried the three-clover quick exchange once before at the season opener of some mind-numbing summer baseball game when he misfired into a festive urine cake trough.

Ralph's acidic piss created liquid abstracts across a stranger's khaki cuffs. His three-clover wish failed to erase this disaster resulting in a cheek massage from an angry clenched fist for Ralph on that sunshine-filled afternoon.

The balance of clovers was fair when life vessels adhered to rigid codes. Operators wanted to infer some semblance of free will. Tribunals existed that vessels could navigate to contest four-leaf clover discrepancies. Judicial oversight drones cost twenty-five clovers

from the inception of a grievance to finalization of any matter.

It was best not to cheap out during the dispatch of wishing clovers. The awarding of clovers was preserved in caved spirit journals. If a vessel used one side of its mouth for everything, that vessel received one clover after 24 hours. A vessel could perform one additional task to procure one more magic clover. Each vessel would need to use the first opportunity and mute the use of an arm or leg all day.

Most failures were triggered at the ten-hour mark primarily due to mental synapses caused by genius-level engineering that brewed the foresight necessary to erect team-building convention halls first.

Vessels could not sell or trade their four-leaf clovers, but they were encouraged to smoke them in group enhancement ceremonies sponsored by Zig-Zag. The combined effort was the only practical way anyone could roll a magical flower puff wand. Gracefully, Zig-Zag donated slow burn packs to every grin face riding these crisscross shoulder-to-shoulder smoke trains.

Ralph became entangled with a smile face he met at his neighborhood bumper car park. Many vessels could not spare their clovers for exhalation celebrations. The Syndicate had to legally provide alternate solutions for tension release without gratuitous flesh-stacking vibes.

Ralph's genetically gifted companion preferred living by her pseudonym, which was Roxanne Slutanza. Roxanne was a spicy Peruvian who had just transplanted into Wellington, a quaint province on the charred outskirts of Beef.

Beef was the home of Shift's enforcement drones. Drastic penalties issued by Shift would include and be limited to four-leaf clover bans. There were 77 bumper car parks across 38 counties with dynamic expansion plans being kept confidential.

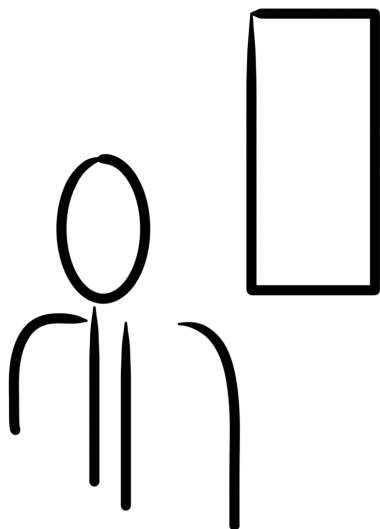
Ralph enlisted Roxanne as a member of his covert clone gang by presenting her with a companion contract.

They would mix madness with cloning for three years to create the first successful forgery of sparkle-green four-leaf clovers in existence.

Ralph was approached by Silly Sally who grew up "in the hole" or confines of prison for 47 years. Silly Sally believed in the power of the fake but in reality, was burnt out with bumper car spinouts. Fortunately, Silly Sally's four-banger passed on first attempt when she accidentally laughed pissed on Santa's lap at Beef's Calypso Carnival while immediately losing fourteen fake four-leafers without incident.

AN ORDINARY LIFE

JOHN RC POTTER



My earliest memory was my second birthday, sitting in my highchair in the kitchen of our family home. It was before the kitchen was renovated to include a large picture window. Previously, two long old-fashioned storm windows were on that wall, with a telephone sitting high in pride of place between them. You may ask how anyone can have a memory when only two years old. My own family has questioned it. However, I do remember that birthday and that day, and the memories evoked are in my mind's eye, almost like a film flickering from the past. My birthday is on February 23rd and my paternal grandfather's birthday was two days earlier, thus on that day in 1960 two birthdays were being celebrated. I particularly remember the scene because I was sitting near the end of the table beside my mother, whilst my grandfather was at the other end in his ever-present plaid shirt and suspenders. The day was particularly notable because my grandfather's brothers and their wives were also present; in a matter of a few years, my grandfather and two of his brothers would have departed this earth. I recall that my grandfather and his brothers looked so much alike, all balding with liver spots on the crown of their foreheads. Only the oldest brother, Uncle Will, was different in appearance; with a full head of white hair and a mustache (a few years later he would remind me of Colonel Sanders of KFC fame).

Another early memory is of wandering away after supper. I barely remember it. I was a toddler and always wanted to roam (which was an early indication of my need to roam even further afield than the farm and head off across oceans to other lands). My mother had been cooking supper and my dad would have been

in the barn; my older sisters were young too but no doubt playing in the house, the yard, or the barn. I was probably left in the care of my sisters, and they may have lost track of me. In any case, I headed off back to the laneway that led to the barn but extended past that known place into the more distant universe: back to the corn and wheat fields that stretched to the back of our farm and ended in a small forest of trees. However, just past the barn and to the left of the laneway that receded into the distance, there was the swamp; and further yet a small creek that meandered through our farm from north to south and then to the east where it met up with the concession line on which we lived.

When my mother went outside to check with my sisters as to my whereabouts, I was no longer on the back step playing. My mother was naturally very concerned: a farm is a place not only of discovery but also of danger. As I was later told, due to the sun setting and the evening proceeding on its daily path, my parents and our next-door neighbours set out in all directions to find the missing toddler. I can only imagine what went through my mother's mind that evening: had I tumbled into the crick, or wandered into the cow field and been trampled, or worse yet, had I been abducted from the front yard by a passing motorist with evil intentions?

All families have their legends and their lores, their memories, and myths. The episode of the wandering toddler who disappeared one evening around supper time was one in my life and in my family. For a few hours, it caused a sudden panic for my parents and great concern for our neighbours. However, it had a good ending, as we wish all such incidents did: it was my mother who found me late that evening in the

middle of the swampland, sitting on a log, illuminated by a full moon, and singing happily as if I were ensconced in the safest place on earth.

The roamer and wanderer that was a part and parcel of my nature as a child continued throughout my childhood. I was fascinated by travel documentaries, by National Geographic, and by any information about traveling via airplane, boat, train, or even car. My parents were never in an airplane, although my father had ridden in a helicopter. However, I began traveling by airplane as a young adult, and then after moving overseas as an international educator, I was always in the air. My thirst for knowledge about other lands, languages, cultures, and peoples has taken me to approximately fifty countries, and I have lived in five.

During these travels and journeys – the physical as well as the metaphysical – I have borne witness to defining incidents that have been like signposts on the journey of my life: more than one earthquake (Turkey and Indonesia), a political uprising (Indonesia), a tsunami (Bali, fortunately far from the epicentre), an aerial offensive (Israel), up to 50-degree heat (UAE), and found myself taking refuge in a church in the middle of a raging, white-out conditions snow storm (Canada). When I was born, I am certain that my parents had no idea where my life would take me; they would have thought it would take the natural course as theirs had done. It was assumed that I would take over the family farm, that I would settle down and have the same life and lifestyle as my parents, and my grandparents, and thus similar to each generation previously.

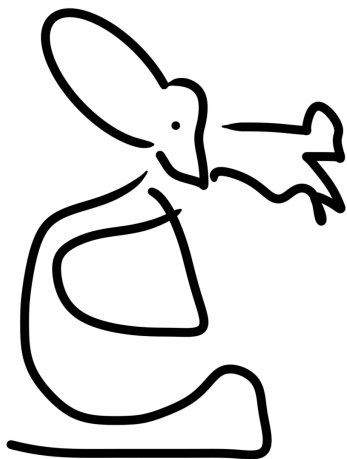
That did not happen. Like the settlers and explorers of generations earlier, deep inside me was the need to

uproot myself, to experience the unknown, to chart another course; in a fashion and manner similar, no doubt, to my forebears who departed from the British Isles (with branches from England, Scotland, and Ireland) in the early 1800s, heading for new horizons 'across the pond'. After sailing across the Atlantic Ocean in 1803, my ancestors ended up in Upper Canada (as the Province of Ontario was then known), in the richly fertile and heavily wooded areas of southwestern Ontario. It was a short distance from Lake Huron, another body of water that played a part in their lives. It would be another generation before the towns of Goderich and Bayfield, situated on the shores of Lake Huron - and the town of Clinton, near where the Potter family farm was located - would be established.

I have sometimes wondered why I was born with a need for wanderlust and a thirst for other cultures and countries. Perhaps I inherited this curiosity about other places from my ancestors. We had this in common, then, my ancestors and me: the ability to make a move across oceans with dreams of a new life. Like them, I was seeking a new life and new vistas; an ordinary life but one writ large.

ALIENS: AN ALTER- NATE EPILOGUE

ANDREW NICKERSON



Two weeks after departing LV-426, the *Sulaco* returned to Earth, saving the Colonial Marine Corps (CMC) Central Command further worry...until its greeting party found a greatly reduced presence aboard. Alarmed, CMC auditors checked the ship's flight logs, the contents of which, all meticulously compiled via both android Bishop during his time on the surface and automatically through the marines' vehicles/equipment, were so stunning they were promptly sent to the UN. Equally horrified, the UN Security Council ordered immediate countermeasures, which occurred in two phases.

Phase one was the immediate dispatch of CMC forces to LV-426 to ensure the "prompt annihilation of the vile species on the surface." Upon arrival, the CMC fleet found the planet's terraforming colony had been completely destroyed by the exploding reactor, so they immediately shifted to the crashed alien vessel behind the debacle. Thankfully, said blast had also completely gutted the ship, leaving only a few pieces of the upper hull intact. Nevertheless, no chances were taken: an all-out nuclear strike was conducted, annihilating all further traces of the ship and its contents. An extensive survey scan later confirmed nothing survived, and follow-up sweeps over all other nearby planets found the same. Afterward, the UN issued a decree banning all future travel to/colonization of LV-426, ostensibly in memoriam to all who'd perished there, but primarily because none were willing to take a chance on any of its former parasitic residents surviving. Ironically, such measures weren't even necessary, since the stigma attached to LV-426 when word of what'd happened became public made "taboo" look like nothing. Many considered the planet cursed, and

all future travel routes avoided it by a wide margin, even if it meant throwing deadlines off by weeks.

The second phase concerned Weyland-Yutani AKA “the Company”. An extensive investigation was conducted into their corporate offices, the results of which were equally horrifying. UN Inspectors found Company executives had had many great plans for the original creature that’d plagued the *Nostramo* 57 years earlier, including creating an elaborate biowarfare program; there’d even been talk of using condemned prisoners and mental patients as “breeders”, claiming “that way they’d finally fulfill some use.” When the ship vanished, those plans were shelved, but then dusted off around 35 years later by the newest executive generation, who’d planting the terraforming colony on LV-426 under the auspices of normal expansion, but secretly planned to use it to search for the crashed alien vessel once it’d been established. However, when Ellen Ripley returned, those same executives found the exact coordinates in the lifeboat’s flight recorder, along with an extensive record of what’d happened. Thus, they’d deliberately authored a false report on the recorder to destroy Ripley’s credibility and fired her, all while sending similar findings to the UN. This enabled Carter Burke to request the colony’s administrators search for the craft while the biowarfare plans were being dusted off...only to be stopped again by what’d occurred.

The response from the UN was swift and merciless. All Company assets were frozen, and every executive who’d been part of the conspiracy was arrested and charged with crimes against humanity. By the time their trials at the Hague finished, all but five men/women were sentenced to death, the remainder receiv-

ing life imprisonment. Fears that the private military contractors employed by the Company becoming hostile for doing so eventually proved baseless, for many refused to fight without pay, while the rest were so disgusted by their bosses they voluntarily cut all ties. Even those nations with whom the Company had had defense contracts voluntarily took severe financial penalties by doing the same. Ultimately, the Company went bankrupt, its assets were parceled out to other corporations, and two new pop culture terms were coined: “pulling a Weyland-Yutani”, defined as behaving with abject cruelty in the name of greed, and “LV-426”, defined as a place cursed by an evil presence that brought in a greater evil.

Everyone onboard the *Sulaco* was lauded as a hero. Declared the “Bug Stompers” (after the nose art on their initial dropship) by their fellow marines, all who’d been killed received a posthumous three-rank promotion and award of the CMC Medal of Honor, the Corps’ highest honor. Their families received a pension in honor of their loved ones’ sacrifice, and an entire wing dedicated to the ordeal on LV-426 was added to the official CMC museum. A further gesture of goodwill was said platoon’s unit badge being permanently changed to said “Bug Stompers” logo, and the prestige attached to all future members made it one of the CMC’s most sought-after assignments.

Bishop was repaired and ultimately served as an eyewitness to the Company trials at the Hague. Afterward, he was assigned to the CMC Commandant’s office, where he served the rest of his time in relative peace. He also maintained regular correspondence with the other survivors...and never stopped impress-

ing recruits with his knife skills, a huge selling point for all who met him.

Ellen Ripley became the star witness for the prosecution at the Hague, her testimony sealing the fate of most of the Company's worst offenders. Afterward, the CMC, impressed by her performance, invited her to become a civilian contractor at CMC Officer School, where she taught classes on advanced leadership, improvisation under pressure, and using terrain, along with lecturing on her experiences on both the *Nostromo* and LV-426. She also authored several books on those subjects, all of which became staples of the curriculum, although the latter subject perpetually remained the most popular. Her strength, willpower, and pure guts never ceased to impress continual generations of cadets, who dubbed her "the Titanium Woman", and ensured she was the most requested lecturer in the school's history. Her later insistence on demonstrating the school's LV-426-based combat course (with a similarly jury-rigged weapon) provided another significant bonus—one so beloved she gave a repeat performance every semester until she retired.

Rebecca "Newt" Jordan was adopted by Ripley while the Hague trials occurred, her eyewitness testimony providing a stark bit of realism and humanity to the judges. Afterward, she moved with Ripley to CMC Officer School, where she became incredibly popular with continual cadet classes. Excelling in her own schooling, she eventually started writing about her experiences as a way of handling the nightmares that plagued her for about three years afterward. After conquering her demons, she found writing so much to her liking she continued doing so throughout high

school, eventually selling a handful of stories prior to offering her “coping diary” to a publisher. That manuscript, dubbed *Nightmare Colony: Newt’s Journey*, became an intergalactic bestseller, earning her more money than she’d ever imagined possible. She soon went to college, where she met her husband, a student compiling a history of the CMC; the pair immediately became inseparable and went on to publish a ten-volume series on the Corps’ history, all while raising their three children in a home happier than she’d ever dreamed possible.

Corporal Dwayne Hicks was hospitalized following his return to base, ultimately remaining under for two days while recovering from his severe burns. He later awoke to learn he too had won the CMC Medal of Honor, as well as been promoted to First Lieutenant for his “magnificent leadership and courage.” He too testified before the Hague, his words providing an incredibly vivid account of the battle; the fact he was still weak from his ordeal gave a stunning level of authenticity. He was eventually assigned to CMC Officer School as well, where he and Ripley grew closer, deepening the bond they’d formed on LV-426 with ease. After a year of dating, they married, he also adopted Newt, and they became known as the “Survivor Trio”, something he went with due to his usual good humor. He proved a natural teacher, both to the cadets and the two children he and Ripley eventually had, emphasizing a combination of discipline, flexibility, and humanity that created far more effective generations of CMC leaders. His eventually helping design the LV-246 course—and insisted on running it with his wife year after year—added enough to his reputation to ultimately make him Headmaster, instituting a curriculum so efficient the CMC leadership became the best in the universe.

PARADISE PARANOID

BRADLEY DAVID WATERS



*This is about wrong hair in shared spaces.
That particular brand for particular vacations.
Grand foil tags on dime-a-dozen bracelets.
Resolving audits of refrigerator placements.*

So... soon we'll circumnavigate dreamscapes where
kisses & pecks make us feel beachy and local among
the ooze of repetitive housing, shrunken steel economies,
conspiracies of hushes & dedications. Vintage labor
interpretations on spotless marshy boardwalks.

Lush (rich) the way this wind sounds like palm fronds
against a fib. How it tickles my disbelief
that islands are forever and erosion is illusion.
And here it is now: the salt spray I needed to tease
this wispy hair and sand these expectant creases.

I've taken mouthwash and followed maps. Sputtering,
I've allowed the cold cocoon of this frothy endeavor. Shrink-
wrap around its juices. A balanced breakfast on a silver-
plated spoon... on a string, between two trees,

as a windchime holds a hummingbird, holding
a spiderweb, holding a sandfly, holds a scream.

You can beat down a bathroom door by closing it.
You can hold back and beat down the big push of love.
You won't give it room. You won't give it fresh air or big ideas.

One time I had a big idea and I'll put it here
till tomorrow tests it untenable. Tomorrow is a most
jam-packed nothing. A goddamn near-nothing almost.
That same nothing will kill my dog and I'll hate that place
forever.

How can loss be a dissolving lozenge that lets folks fly
to Tahiti or wherever untethered people let loose
their long-held bladders. Can I get a water? Can I stay home?
Is all this the jawy slug of overbearing parenting?

The smear—a dark or waning stroke of work & luck or money.
Oh g-d, it's beautiful! Oh now that's love in a brash sunset.
Serving need & resentment. Deserving delamination & urge.
Mastery & masters. Deserving the urge for mastery. Serving

delamination in double-hour intervals. Flamboyant
exhibitions testing lofty pillows; doled out lozenges.
Still, time is going to kill my night dog. Leave me tenting
in Yosemite with a solar backpack brewing thin coffee.
I sold off my flatware so I could sleep on the whole point.
This is what nothing (less) can't do to me, and what it can.

Show up somewhere for everyone, then nothing. Look
how much time is spent getting shelf liners to lie flat.
You can love me and scare me with that kind of curling
freedom. Hugs like a soup can side-eying a campfire.

I must feed the chickens now—that salvaged rooster is unbearable
by eight. For him I hold back the air of challenged neighbors who
think roosters can solve the collagen problem. Life, then,
is a straight-lined series of feathered coincidence. Borderlands
of tucks & sifting. Riparian zones, rocks in sockets. Eyeballs
spooned from nature's craftwork.

It's all so beautiful anyway. Attempts at holding on, resentment;
and how its branching twins its rooting. We, beautiful creases
of our reenactments. There's no way to place it here, and I
won't ask to. I'll fight some, but I won't ask to. For example:

The dog is unwell and pausing the revolution. She and the sunrise
burned off the triflings. Everything I resisted, relented, attempted—
see it ashing down on every upswing? I can't stop it;
won't even ask to. Seems like every day I solve it all
and hand it right over.

FRENCH PRESS

MEGAN NICHOLSON



asked for this reality, of living on my own, alone. Being alone means you are solely responsible for your quality of life, with no one else to rely on, and goddamn, I really need to clean these dishes. They've been sitting there for a week, and god knows there's plenty more around this damn apartment that needs to be washed. I did the first half of the dishes yesterday; now I need this second half done so I can clean out Pepper's litter tray. The poor thing's open bathroom is filled with interwoven fur and hay and pellets. There's so much to get done, and there's still four hours before I need to get to bed and wake up for work tomorrow.

Shards of wet glass, lost and forgotten, laid at the bottom of the sink. I looked at my drying rack, then in my cupboards. No, no, nothing broken. I don't remember washing any glasses. Did it fall from my ceiling? Stranger things and rubble have found its way to the grounds here in the basement.

Grounds.

I eyed the one glass object that could have birthed the strange glass pieces. No, french presses don't easily break, and this is one that should have stayed frozen to time. I mean, it's IKEA-grade. That's supposed to be of decent quality for the rest of my life, and I would've been fine with heating my coffee grounds in a press with your smudged fingerprint still pressed into the side, like the permanent water stains that've etched themselves into each new pot brewed.

It's not like I haven't marred your memory before. One time, I was boiling water for another pot, this time for a dinner date. Or I guess it was more of a lunch date? It could've been somewhere in between. I wasn't thinking in between texting back and forth with her, making sure she had the right address, that I did

actually have five minutes until she arrived, that the pasta had been properly heated up, that everything was perfect, that my brick walls and barely-played record player catered to the aesthetic of a cozy city apartment. I wasn't paying attention to the way the plastic top rolled just close enough to the burner, not until there was a smooth indent into the black cover. I deemed this did not make the french press unusable, but just a little less efficient. It still made coffee, and that's all I needed it to do.

I remember the discourse around the two of us even being in an IKEA, shopping around for house supplies together. My friends were confused - who were you, and why were we moving in together so fast? Didn't I want to stop and take a minute to think through this? And then I eased their worries, that no, we were not moving in together, that we were just shopping for your new apartment that I had already planned to help move you into. You didn't have much to bring over from your long-term Airbnb, and I was just eager for more time with you. So of course I was there, fantasizing our alternate reality lives through the room set-ups while you suggested this golden plant rack, this metal-bar bed frame, these wooden cutting boards would hang up so nice near a sink like this, right? They would, in our black-paneled cupboard kitchen, darkened by our emerald walls in this high-rise in New York City, even though you hate New York. They would, against the stark white television stand, in between decorative books about your music and my lawyerly materials while we lounge in the pale daylight streaming through the window. They would, in the warmly-lit bedroom, the translucent canopy above our maroon-and-gold bed gently drawn open.

I didn't need anything from the IKEA store, and I certainly didn't have room for anything in that studio apartment; I was just there to be with you. But you insisted. I had to get *something* while we were here. I had a shitty red Keurig to make some crappy coffee before I left each morning, which was enough to hold me off before the monotony of writing and typing and clacking up a storm of a case brief on a keyboard until lunch, for second coffee. But I always, always preferred the way you made coffee for us each morning.

It was always the morning after I spent the night, far enough from you where we weren't touching, as you preferred, but close enough where I could see the crinkles in your smile for a silent "good morning." Sometimes it was snowing, and the beige walls seemed paler. But you would make sure we both had coffee before you had to teach and I would be sent home, as I could not listen to you coach someone through your flute lessons, even though I loved to hear you play, even the silly made-up song you'd play to warm your throat up. You'd step outside of your room, while I listened to your footsteps pad down to the mini-kitchen on the porch, until I couldn't hear you. I would watch the snow fall and think of you. You'd shuffle back with two cups of coffee, with steamed milk and cinnamon dusted on top. You didn't have to make me *fancy* coffee, I would protest lightly, you didn't even have to make me anything at all. But you did, and you wanted me to try this pumpkin oat milk you'd just gotten, and you steamed it because you said you wanted to show me that I deserved nice things. You would tell me how you made it, even though it was the same process every time. And I loved you all

the more for showing me how you loved me without ever saying it.

You had picked up the french press, and pressed it into me, along with a flimsy milk frother. Now, you said, you can make your fancy coffee at your house, too. I took it to the self-checkout while you went to the regular checkout. I'd learn how to make your frothed milk for the day you woke up next to me, and I could make you something fancy and frothed, because I wanted to show you that you deserve nice things too.

Now I don't even live in that studio anymore. Now I've spent thousands of dollars at the one coffee place a few blocks from me, where the baristas have taught me how to craft everything from a cortado to a swan-shaped foam picture on the tops of my lattes, since once I learned how to make your coffee, you decided I was better off on my own and you'd teach someone else. Now, I don't know where or how or who you spend your time with, and you made sure of that.

I remember ghosts of a warmer you fluttering through the same months that we used to share, haunting my happiness. April now sparks dread each year, for fear that, once again, you'll leave me in the park, shuddering in the grass, thinking that someone who wanted to show me I deserve nice things just showed me that I wasn't alone in her world of worlds. Suddenly, those two other men deserve nice things, too, and a ritual that was individually sacred to me turned out to be part of a cult following. Nice things like the touch of your hand on my face as I teetered towards the dirt were countless slaps across my soul.

For the past few years, I have tried to both erase and memorialize you in places I didn't see all the time. I hid the Polaroid photo of the day I told you how I felt

because in that, I see your black felt sneakers. I kept the yellow gag socks you gave me as a last-minute Christmas present even as the miles of walking, running, sprinting from you have worn the soles thin threadbare. I kept a coffee press that wasn't the best, but was enough for me and whoever I brought home next because at least I could still have you in my life. Maybe some mug could bring you back to life, drink your essence and make a faceless body you again.

Now the french press, which I was supposed to carry with me throughout the rest of my life, to my new apartment, to my next relationship, to my next life that was supposed to be without you, is broken. Now it can't hold anything. Its only purpose is to fill my trash bag, maybe maliciously cut open the side and make the moldy fruit spill onto the hardwood.

I feel strange. I always imagined I'd be devastated when I lost some further connection to you. Something to remind me that while you fragmented me in ways irreparable, that if I just held onto this little speck of your soul here, crushed the fragments back into something, then I'd win the battle against time, and someday I would have you whole again. Yet, it feels like a breath I have been holding in, exhaled.

I gently plucked the shards out from the sink's metal bottom, pressed my foot to the trash can opening, and dropped empty glass. I finished my dishes, stacking cups into cupboards that aren't black, but preferably, cream. It is mundane, but at least I don't have to put away that french press anymore. That's one less thing for me to have to move and find space for. I empty Pepper's litter tray, empty my vacuum into the trash bag.

I saved the actual press for last. I don't know why, when I was going to throw it out anyway. There's no use for it. I can't hold on to something broken anymore. I viewed it. Well, the handle's still good? No. No. I deserve nice things. I carried it separately to the trash bin outside, in the alleyway of the apartment buildings. I don't need this anymore. I don't want to hold onto it anymore. I can get a new coffee press. New, shining, the same kind of model, but not this one. I tossed in the press first, hearing the crash of broken glass against the bottom of the bin. Well, my landlord probably won't be thrilled with that. I tossed the bag over my shoulder, covering the scene of a tenant's petty crime. Another task done.

There are now three hours left before I sleep and wake up without a mug of fancy coffee brewed. But there is one invisible red string left coiled outside, and while I may have lost yet another chain to you, I am not sure being tethered to a false reality is worth a rather crappy french press.

ALONE IN THE STORM'S WHISPERS

JULIA VELLUCCI



There I was, so small and helpless, in a desert consumed by the storm that never leaves.

I often forget what it's like to see so clearly, what it's like to not have dust and sand flying around in my face as I glide in the wind of the storm sucking me up whole, never truly understanding or even remembering what it is like to sit on a chair in the desert and feel the grains of sand brush between my toes.

Sadly, nobody really noticed this but me. To others, I had a smile painted on my face, everything figured out, the answer to every problem and was full of confidence.

To them I was always there to ask if they were okay, double check even if they claimed to be as a smile and an "I'm fine," can only hide so much, I know that from experience.

But where were they when I needed them?

Nobody witnessed my ever consuming storm or if they did, they were content with their life, glanced at the storm and walked away without a care in the world, not thinking about examining it or reaching to grab my hand to help me escape it.

The wind would pick me up and swirl me around with the sand and dust until I felt sick to my stomach and trapped as my system is overtaken by the storm, the only friend that is always there.

People I used to call friends found someone "better" so they left or at times I found myself forced to cut them off as they are bringing me anything but up, anything but peace, joy, love and happiness.

Those I thought were my friends lied to me, treated me like an object, made me feel I was too much, not enough or anything but lovable and the list can go on.

Maybe that's why the storm always followed me and got larger as I grew up and there were more things around me to inflict pain in my life.

Maybe the storm was trying to help me, not hurt me.

Maybe it wanted to protect me.

I was there to help anyone I saw who needed help because I know what it's like to feel as if you're all alone in a room full of people.

Yet where were they when I needed to be checked up on, when I needed company to feel more myself, when I was left questioning my place in the world, my purpose of existence, the point of waking up each and every day, feeling more pathetic than the day before?

Were they in storms of their own?

Did they too just want to be helped, want to be protected?

Maybe.

Or they're possibly in a land far away from here, where all that matters is their happiness, their needs, everything in their own life.

I picture this land being really far away from here, far from wherever I lie in the twists and turns of the tornado my life is becoming because to me, I've always placed others before me, not the other way around and maybe that's where I failed.

Nice people always finish last.

This is a thought that enters my mind constantly as I don't want it to be true but it feels like that may be the case.

I was brought up to be kind to one another, treat others the way I want to be treated, two beliefs I'll never change or let go of.

But when you treat others like gold and you constantly feel like you're going through life as the gum at the bottom of their shoe, it's tough to believe that you'll truly get what you deserve in life by being true to yourself, being kind and genuine.

I witness the most cruel, rotten, terrible people having partners who worship them, big groups of friends, their dream job and the list just goes on.

Then I take a deep breathe, cough up some sand and dust and exit the storm for just a minute, take a look around at where I'm so small in comparison to all around me, like a cube in the middle of an empty desert that isn't as empty as I once thought.

I take up an area in this desert. It may not be a large area but if I shift, a dent is left in the spot that was mine and a trail of prints follow me as I make my way in exploration around a world that doesn't belong to anyone other than its creator.

Storms were placed in this desert to make everything less dry and much stronger.

We need water to survive.

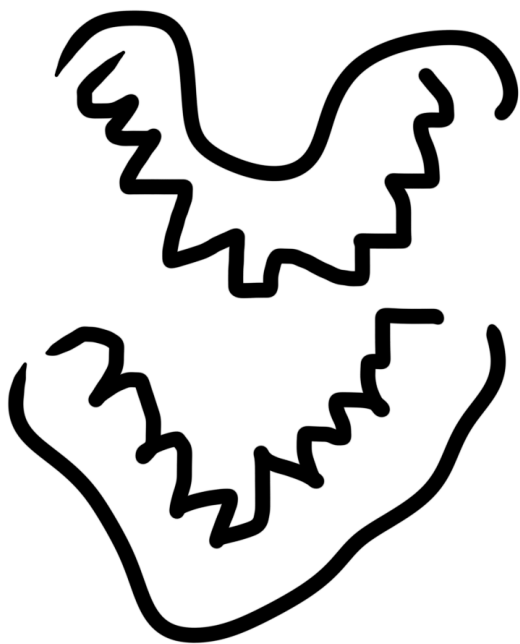
Although it is often that others aren't drowning in the same rain water I am, I'll manage to stay above water long enough to help them swim in theirs and not sink like I am.

I've come to realize that in whatever storm I'm in, I'll be okay and slowly manage to not only swim but do summer saults in my water.

After all, I have known myself the longest and the best, will always come to my rescue and never let myself down.

FANKS

KALLISTE HARDY



The morning Nene died I got my first toothache. It was a perfect and divine correlation. By the afternoon, I begged for time off work to identify the silent hurt, imagining that I had a porous cavity, slowly dissolving in the stern of my mouth like a sugar cube.

Nene collected only two things during her life: women and teeth. Both varied in shape and temperament. Molars, canines, animalistic, rogue wisdoms, some still covered in blood. They occupied every possible shelf in her house; little mouth-bone soldiers in glass jars that clink in fear when someone stomped up the stairs.

What do you need them for?

Child, not everything needs such deep purpose. Do you ask God the same questions?

I suppose I did not.

But where do you find them all?

12 Interpretations in Dream-Casting About Your Teeth Falling Out.

The most common interpretation signifies a deep personal loss. For plenty of ancient cultures, oral health was associated with vigour and attractiveness – in other words, your smile could tell everyone what they needed to know about your class standing. In Hindu folklore and some indigenous cultures, skeletal remains of the mouth, whether human or animal, symbolize surrender, devotion, and communication with ancestry. But beware - in Catholic orthodoxy, dreams of toothaches and cavities imply shame, loss of words, embarrassment to speak, the withholding of secrets, or

a duplicitous self-image. Don't be afraid to make sense of your symbolic dreams in the comment section.

Watch out, Dreamers!

While I was at the dentist, the hotel where I cleaned rooms caught on fire –part tragedy and part prophecy– the rooftop suites sneezing glass, ash, and smoke across entire floors. I swallowed bile and said nothing.

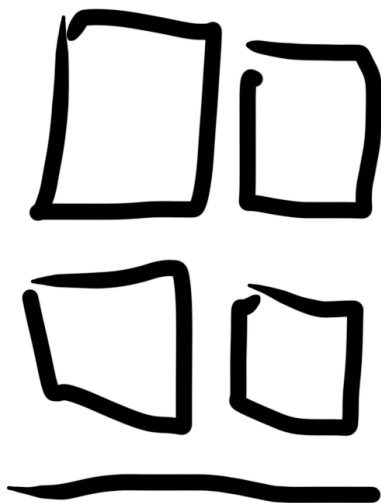
The dentist didn't have an assistant. He probed around my mouth, a lone Giacomo, with multiple instruments that I could only imagine were called *forceps* or *excavators*. I did not understand the origin of these weapons. What creature would forge such a tool? His gloves shone with a wet, filmy coat. *I can tell you're nervous*, he whispered. His smile was Cheshire-esque. I ask him if he has ever had dreams about losing teeth. He says something that rhymes with *just try to relax*, and I do try, counting the flowers and fruits in season in Nene's birthplace during the summer: smoke bush, redcurrant, cherries, sweet peas, tiger lilies, squash blossom.

Sorry—I think you missed a bit? I tongued the chamber in my gum, perturbed by the sweetness I tasted there. I woke to a flurry of new characters plus my loyal dentist, huddled like penguins over a sterile silver workbench. *Congratulations*, a new female voice said, swivelling in her chair to hand me a thumb-sized glass vessel, containing a single tooth. I was going to tell her to keep it, as a token, something for her troubles, I have no use for it – but she looked something

like Nene from the old photographs, so I gave her my *fanks*, took my beast, and fled.

I DON'T KNOW WHO I AM

SARAH R. NEW



i am twenty nine. it is an age i never thought I would be.

i didn't think i would live past twenty seven. i could never have given you a reason, but i could feel it. i didn't expect to make it past twenty. nineteen was difficult, and i lost myself in that year to a haze of grief and pain and suicidality, and then when twenty arrived something clicked deep inside me, and i fought to stay, not for me, but for those around me. but twenty seven? twenty seven was different. twenty seven was the end of my natural lifespan, i knew it. there was no reason, no sudden resurgence of the suicidal feelings that plagued my university days. but twenty seven was the end. i could not see myself going further. i could feel it in my bones. twenty seven was the end, and i lay down the night before my twenty eighth birthday and i close my eyes and-

-and suddenly i open my eyes and i'm not twenty seven and resigned to my fate anymore, but i'm twenty eight, and the air is lighter. i feel something settle in my chest. it is acceptance. it is maturity. it is excitement. twenty seven was loud, and brash. twenty seven came hurtling this way at the end.

do not pass go, do not collect £200.

twenty eight was slow, but then urgent all at once. the year spiraled around me like a whirlwind, and i was manic in my happiness and pride and excitement and then my birthday approached and then twenty nine! twenty nine.

i wake up at twenty nine and the hand of my anxiety disorder reaches up over my chest and grabs me by the throat. it steals my breath and curls up on my chest, and as it looks up at me and sweetly pats my face it tells me i'm nothing like how i was supposed to be at this point in life. that i know. we survived until twenty seven. that was our expiration date. we thrived through twenty eight, that extra year of life that we gave ourselves. but now, here, at twenty nine, we have to grow up and shape our life and become the person we were always meant to be and we are too late we are too late we are too late. the anxiety disorder shapes itself into a vague little person formed out of a type of wet clay, their shape constantly changing but their laugh remaining shrill and constant. that laugh and their words rebound throughout my mind, over and over and over.

i drag myself out of the bed and bring myself to my feet. my feet click and twist into place as weight is placed on them, and my joints scream in pain. the pain is worse now. i don't think it will never get better. i wonder sometimes if the expiry date had been later, if i hadn't decided on a date i would never open my eyes again, then the disease would have slowed or maybe never started at all, and this pain, usually reserved for those in years of twilight and old age, would have been put off for me. perhaps that deadline, so close for so long, caused my body to hurry up with all that aging, cause it might not get a chance to otherwise.

i see those signs of aging on my face. there are more lines than there used to be. under my eyes the skin is delicate and patchy and purplish. redness blights my cheeks and nose like a permanent blush, too red toned

for my sickly looking skin. i age like tepid milk, but i suppose that's to be expected. i don't know if that's me or the ever changing clay figure in the corner saying that. if i gaze into my face too hardly, i see all these little imperfections which don't seem to add up to my face. the nose is too short. the jowls hang lower than they used to. i don't recognise those eyes.

my gaze falls down. this body... this body does not seem like my body. it doesn't seem like a body at all, in fact, simply a vessel to pull me along the timelines, racing to the inevitable end. in my late teens, i used to imagine an adult body as being something of desire, but this, this ...thing in the mirror before me, that is not a thing of desire. the breasts hang lower than they should, and the stomach is larger than ideal, and the bones and joints click and click and click. i am supposed to eat oily fish for the benefit of the disease, but i do not eat oily fish, i eat chocolate cornflake cakes.

this vessel is not what i thought i would navigate life in. i imagined in my twenties i would be beautiful. i didn't imagine i would be chronically ill. sometimes i wish i were invisible. i imagine it would be easier.

this vessel gets me through life but i don't live through it. i break it down into pieces and medicalise it. i problematise it. what's wrong today? my shoulder? my knee? my hip? i wonder what body part will cause a problem next. what if my appendix ruptures? what if there is a tumour in my breast? what if my leg has to be amputated? and i imagine the answer is to cut and cut and cut and to be shaped into something new, with or without my consent. this body isn't mine, and i don't get to make the decisions about it, it does. it's

not how you expect to think about your body, but this wasn't the body i thought i'd end up with. i thought i'd be pretty, and blossom into my self as if i were a butterfly from the social anxiety nervousness cocoon of my teenage years.

i suppose i'm not the person this body believed they might end up with.

i thought i thought i thought

you thought, the anxiety sneers, shaping itself into an idealised version of myself. taller, thinner, fitter. desirable. not ill. i didn't realise how much that last one would hurt. i try to shake the anxiety's remarks off, but the words worm their way into my brain and burrow themselves there, to reverberate over and over and over until i am driven entirely mad.

dying had always been my plan but i didn't realise how exciting it could be to live.

but i live in a world and in a body than makes no sense to me. i stare at that person in the mirror and i realise that i do not recognise or know her at all. is she a she? do we even know. i never really considered a gender before. it was never really an option before now - well, it never really seemed to be an option for me - but twenty nine allows me a new lease of life and a new relaxation of old rules. i may have always had to stay in that regimented thinking before, but now? now there is no limit, i think. i don't think there are limits. i look at the person in the mirror, the person who i recognise as me and yet don't seem to know at all. are

you she? are you they? i ask, but the figure in the mirror doesn't answer me. i try out words, rolling them around and tasting them in my mouth. they. them. she. her. non-binary. woman. agender. do i even know. is there an answer? am i actually agender, or non-binary, or a woman at all? how do i know what being a woman feels like, if this is always what i have been? and if i don't know, how would anyone else know? i'm not entirely sure that i am a woman, but i'm also not entirely sure i'm not. none of these labels seem entirely right.

i don't make a decision. they all feel like they could fit or not fit. i decide that maybe there isn't a decision to be made in that moment, and i place it aside. i feel no clarity, no moment of inspiration, just a moment of waiting, of 'not quite yet', but the anxiety never leaves me.

'you were never interesting enough to be a they/them' the anxiety mutters behind me, but they seem smaller now, their clay body disintegrating, their worlds quieter. 'that doesn't even make sense' i mutter back, knowing that it is not listening.

it is still there, still lurking. it switches quickly between forms; long and thin, imposing, cold and flat and wide, but it is still there.

i stare into the mirror again, at that troublesome middling section of my body. the abdomen. i often look down at my stomach in the middle of those long sleepless nights that you think will never end, wondering what will go wrong. what integral piece of biological

machinery will go loose, or fail, or go into overdrive. so much is hidden under layers of flesh and skin, so many working parts, so easy to betray you. i never imagined more for this part of the body. thinking your expiration date is twenty seven, you don't imagine life after that. i don't want children, i thought to myself, over and over for years. i wouldn't be a good parent, i rationalised to myself. i am inherently selfish, and i am mean, and i am impatient and i would be scared of them. i would be scared of them. would they know that?

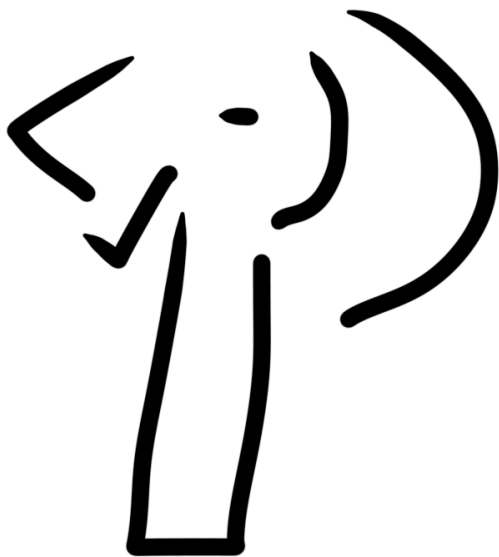
and i couldn't even imagine the impact creating a person from scratch would have on my own body, this place where i reside. scientific evidence implies that the fetus make it's bones from the parents, and this body cannot afford to lose more marrow and cartilage than it is already rapidly losing. i remain still in this body, heart pounding instead of beating, as i imagine the hormonal differences, the lump underneath my skin growing rapidly and uncontrollably, the feeling of kicks and hits from inside you. it must be terrifying. the thought of it terrifies me. my blood runs cold, and my breath disappears from my lungs and to me it is the stuff of horror films, of possession films, of invasion films. but in the night, in those long nights when i am plagued by fits and starts of sleep, i imagine and dream of a universe where i can carry a child within my body with no fear of my body breaking or of passing my disease to a small child that has not even breathed yet, and i imagine holding them, and watching them grow and i imagine that perhaps, maybe one day, maybe in another universe, i could be happy with that possibility...

and i am lonely. i am so lonely. we drove them all away, the anxiety disorder and i, not wanting to get close, not wanting to break our own heart over and over. but maybe things are different now, and maybe i haven't changed but maybe in some ways i have and i might not want to have sex with them but i might want to hold them in the dark of the night and fight against the world together and want to live with them, happily and not happily but together throughout it all. i think i want to live.

i survived twenty seven. i thrived at twenty eight. and now, at twenty nine, it is time to begin anew. the anxiety disorder in the corner nods at me, before jumping onto my back, its newfound tentacles encircling my body, holding on for dear life, but not as tightly and all encompassing as before because i think i have decided now. i think i want to live. it is time to live now.

THE BAR- BARIANS

MICHAEL TYLER



At midnight I approach the club with a somewhat vague desire to do harm to every second person in line, fortunately the bouncer waves me past all the young men with tattoos that reek of drunken nights, the young women with boyfriends discovered pillow side that morning and with a 'Good Evening Sir' bids me welcome.

Drum and bass rise as I slowly descend the stairwell, welcoming the darkness, the shade that hides imperfection, that separates the good from the great. The left side of my face is a faded yellow from a beating one week past and I wonder as I slide between bodies how to best present this.

I approach the bar and squeezed between mini skirted muse and pool hall tottie I struggle to make myself heard. The suspiciously young bartender denies himself eyeball orgy barely long enough to take my order and with eyes returned to the cleavage delight either side he blindly yet expertly pours the drinks. His hand reaches in my direction, palm up, begging ...

"No," I shake my head, "I'll be over there," pointing to a booth in the far corner, away from the grope fest but close enough to observe.

"Wha?" He cups his hand to his ear, as if this simple courtesy is too much for a man who tends bar. His eyes are now firmly locked with mine.

A moment passes.

I turn and make way toward the booth. Within a few steps I hear him shuffling behind, I slow my pace, he overtakes and serves the drinks just as I arrive.

I pay, I sit, I stare.

Within seconds I am drawn to a Lolita in white shoulder-less blouse, her eyes are fixed on a vision for

her and her alone and though her dimples intimate innocence her demeanor tells quite another tale ... 'smile at me, buy me a drink, fuck me sideways, memories are for saps'. Weighed down with offers from all directions she nonchalantly follows each sip of a cocktail with suggestive lick of her lips.

"She's so damn cute you can't help but want to grab her and bend her over a kitchen table." With this James slides into the booth.

James drifts from hour to passing hour.

James believes social niceties to be an affront.

"I'll grab you and hold you still, and once you're caught I'll enjoy you my girl." Eyes fixed on Lolita he continues, *"and this big thing, large and stiff as a lyre, I'll bury up to your seventh rib, or higher."*

"Beautiful, though hardly subtle." I reply.

"That is a classical composition on the Greek God Priapus my good man, he of the enormous member ... so who are we to argue?"

James pictures himself a scholar.

"With her make-up dripping off her cheeks, she is rutting openly, she breaks the mattress, and with it the whole four poster bed ..." James is interrupted by a vocal scuffle a few feet behind.

"What do you think I am? Just a cheap fuck?"

I turn to spy Dylan waving away the accusation as if clearing smoke. "I never claimed you were cheap," he responds "and I'm not sure if all that ..." a pause, "... qualifies as fucking."

With this he turns his back and James and I alone observe the girls retreat. Dylan sits without word or greeting.

Dylan is tall and blonde and lean and generally disagreeable. There is a magnetism about the sly bastard however, something I appreciate when he negotiates his way into some forbidden den.

“Who was that?”

“Susie or Susan ... Karen I think ...” With this he rubs the back of his neck, pauses, reaches for a drink, “ ... I can’t rightly recall. All I remember ... her apartment was pink, all pink. Pink walls, pink shades, pink bed, pink fucken everything. Also ... her first words once we got in the door were, ‘you know, you can do me in any hole you want’ ... after that it’s all a horrid pink blur.”

Lolita slides her hips, silent grind with all who gaze in her direction.

“Good Lord,” I hear myself mutter.

No one says anything for a moment delicately drawn out.

“Put it aside man,” from James.

“I wouldn’t concern myself,” I add, and with this Lolita steps back into shadow and the evening can now begin.

And it’s nights like this I feel the slight strain of guilt that accompanies the realization that my father is paying for this, all of this. This year of tits and ass and smoke and snort and apparent epiphany and to him it’s money well spent and so the checks keep coming, classes are attended and further and further I glide toward respectability, toward the life of the educated man.

My mother and I sat before my father on the night of my college graduation and, in desperate measure to fill the gaps in stilted conversation, I found myself prattling on about the sanctity of the written word and so with undue haste was enrolled at Chesterton. In two years time I am scheduled to emerge a man of letters.

My father couldn't be happier, and so I proceed, although to be honest a passing grade is all I desire, enough to keep the checks coming, the life flowing, enough to turn today into tomorrow. All I desire is time to proceed.

And so I arrive where I am expected and take notes when notes need to be taken and nod when required and so far have managed to shuffle through the first year of classes and tutorials and exams and essays with fair results.

Manageable.

Acceptable.

And so here I sit, Saturday night, buzzed but not drunk, tweaked but not high, James and Dylan either side.

James is a Classics major, big, solid, handsome despite post pubescent acne – though this could be the steroids – the kind of guy who'll tip his hat to an old lady before laying into a drunk on the sidewalk.

Dylan lies at the other end of the physical spectrum. Lean in a way that makes girls wet, Dylan's morning workout consists of rolling off or over someone or other and reaching for a morning cigarette. Dylan is the consummate Lothario, effortlessly fucking each and every beautiful body he encounters without so much as a nod or wave of the hand. Dylan is a poet at large and has no time for flirtation and so draws all who come near.

Dylan is handsome, Dylan is disinterested, and therefore Dylan is irresistible to woman and as such Dylan is destined to be hated by men, but for now James and I put up with Dylan as Dylan is entertaining and Dylan always has weed and Dylan is Dylan.

“Fuck, if only I were gay,” sighs Dylan.

“Strike that,” he continues while thumbing a cigarette into an ashtray before instantly lighting another. “If only I were capable of celibacy, sweet, sweet celibacy. Fuck these balls, they hold me captive.”

“Little less of the melodrama,” I urge.

“Life is melodrama my friend,” offers Dylan. “Life is melodrama and angst and despair and pussy, and it’s the latter that’s always getting in the way.”

“You might have something there,” contributes James. “Last semester I came across a letter to Aristotle from an elderly friend. The old man writes to Aristotle to decry the loss of his libido now that he’s aged ... and yet his final line is ‘Thank the Gods, finally I can begin my work.’ And it hit me, here’s this guy, he’s lived his whole life with this ... this pussy-fog clouding his every thought, and when it clears what does he think?”

James pauses, takes a giant swig of beer and pointing in exclamation to no-one in particular continues, “He thinks, ‘Thank the Gods! Finally I can begin my work!’ So I say to you Dylan, you may be onto something. Maybe a quick castration is all you need to focus the mind.”

“So what’s your point?” I ask, bored of the conversation, already aware of its destination, eager to simply progress.

“My point, my point ... my point is that ...” James pauses, burps, pauses, burps once more, “my point is ... perhaps women are indeed the enemy. Maybe for all their agreed upon loveliness, for all their bangs and whistles and barely hidden delights, maybe they’re simply the devil that distracts from a higher purpose.”

“Take Dylan here,” James continues in upswing, his voice taking on the tone of a Southern preacher in full revival tent glory, “this man, this young man, this talented young man,” with this he waves a hand in Dylan’s direction, “who desires nothing less than a life of dedication to the written word. A life of study, a life of contemplation, a yearning to contribute to times within which he is blessed to be a part,” eyes alight, a hint of slight Southern drawl, “and yet my friend, what is his sentence? What is his charge? To daily battle the urge to fuck whomever takes his fancy. Each day he rises with fresh dreams of literary glory, and each day he is faced with tits and ass and ass and tits and smiles and waves and signs and signals and temptation, distraction, degradation and by nightfall what has his mind accomplished? Little else but ‘What would she like?’, ‘How does she this?’ ‘Why does she that?’ Nothing more than the mindless drivel of a cum-driven maniac. If only his balls were disconnected from his brain ...” James’ voice rises as if awaiting response from an audience unseen, “only then would he be able to proceed down the path of righteousness!”

“Yes friends,” the voice now a whisper, “pussy is the enemy, an enemy we must face anew each day. I see the Devil and Clitoris be her name.”

Throughout the performance, no-one, save Dylan and I, has paid any attention whatsoever. To all others James is simply another wild man in a corner booth, but to Dylan and I a mood is definitely awash. James has accomplished something with this little diatribe, of what I am unsure, but something indeed.

James takes a breath and the night proceeds.

“Fuck this place, how about the Twister?” Suggests Dylan.

“The Twister?” I repeat with eyebrows raised.

The very idea is dismissed immediately. The Twister is hip, happening, a place to be and as such will never do. The trick is to find somewhere on the edge, on the verge of hip and arrive at the tipping point. Grindhouse is decided upon and as one we step onward and outward and make way toward.

And as we exit there is observed a definite tension in the air, time has passed, those waiting behind the velvet rope have grown more resolute as to their place in the larger scheme of things.

The natives are getting restless.

And as we amble toward Grindhouse a chalk pavement statement catches the eye, ‘Please forgive me Georgie’ in bright yellow script.

I stop and stare and light a cigarette, peruse the area for a ‘Georgie’. There are many viable suspects.

Dylan admires the craftsmanship of the pavement artist. James leans against a lamppost and nonchalantly removes an eyedropper from his pocket, lolls his head back and drops a couple of beads onto his

tongue. His face wretches, his eyes water, blinking wildly he aims the dropper in my direction.

“Strychnine” he offers, “great for kick-starting the metabolism. You feel a little like you’re on a Ferris Wheel, but otherwise she’s all good.”

‘Why not?’ I think, and with this I tease a couple of droplets onto my tongue, grimace and gurn and relax into the night ... Dylan nods in admiration of the pavement artist’s intent, James mutter’s a few words regarding original sin and as we stroll we observe city as circus as buskers, drunks, bouncers, stragglers, late night strollers and the odd homeless perform a one-night-only-step-right-up production of epic proportion, a singing, dancing, shouting, screaming extravaganza and all is well as we all move this way and that in perfect formation and Dylan is weaving and I am sliding and James is swerving and bustling and edging and bumping and now staring and cussing and eyes are narrow slits and face is red and oh God what the fuck and with this I stand and simply observe as James grabs a stranger by the throat while others stare and mouth ‘oh my God’ and James looks, simply measures the guy, simply shares a moment, as if to say ‘you and I know what’s going on and you and I know that I am champion and King of all and if you want you can leave and walk away and all is done and forgiven and resolved’ and the guy simply looks at James for a moment before seceding and James releases his grip and they part ways and all is calm once more but not really as we make way toward our destination.

And as we waltz along I spy another message, another call to 'Georgie', this time 'Please, please, pretty please' and the mind wonders as to what has been done to Georgie to warrant such lament.

And now James is staggering slightly and this draws attention to the almost effortless glide that Dylan displays as we parade, a simple slide through the night as we zig and zag and weave and wave at passersby. The air is sweet, the evening offers embrace, there is shimmer to every surface and I realize of course that the Ferris Wheel has arrived and swept me along but I relax and release and surrender all the while ...

On the pavement outside Grindhouse lies one final plea – 'You're my one and only Georgie Girl' – and atop this scrawled appeal lie the feet of the many and the desperate, the lost and the loaded defer to a red velvet rope.

James is in no mood to wait, fortunately the girl at the door recognizes Dylan, actually waves him forward and we three stumble past the throng of pissed off punters in narrow line. Dylan raises an eyebrow at the girl as we pass, a look of recognition perhaps, and we are inside.

Music blares, bass blasts, lights strobe left, right, and centre and all is cacophony and mass confusion. As James makes way to the bar, "Absinthe, absinthe, absinthe," he echoes, I zero in on a brown leather booth in distant corner.

Settled in my seat I accept that Dylan is nowhere to be seen, lost in the multitude he is no doubt deep in a corner somewhere, notebook out, scribbling, lost to us all. James arrives sooner than expected, the crowd has parted as he makes way to the booth – there is an al-

most inexplicable air about James at this point, a whiff of atavism perhaps and so he proceeds unaccosted while others scrape shoulder to shoulder – three shot glasses in one hand, full green bottle in the other.

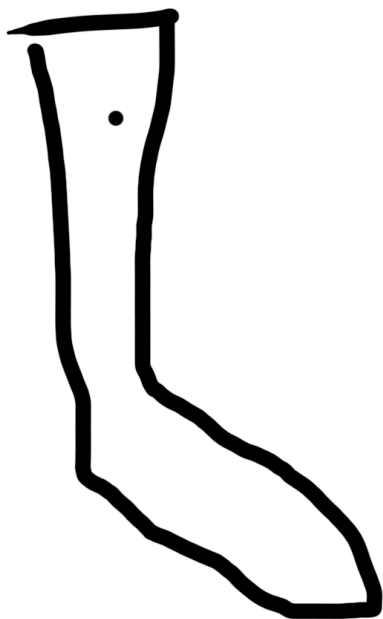
“Dylan’s off and about?” he asks, although we both know the answer. Dylan will be gone for now and will most likely return at some point, or not. It is to be expected.

James places the glasses, tips the bottle and fills with a grin, *“Night is here but the barbarians have not come, and now what shall become of us without any barbarians? Those people were some kind of solution.”*

And before I respond the moment has passed and I drink and he drinks and the hours pass and the music turns to melody and girls drift to shape and fleeting fancy and as I stumble into the morning’s light I recall that I am but an educated man and that I am yet waiting for the barbarians.

ORPHAN SOCKS

KATHY STEPHANIDES



“Sometimes I wonder, that one missing sock after doing laundry, is the smart one. After being unhappy for so long, it finally walks away from a frayed, worn-out relationship.”

— Anthony Liccione

In my house after enthusiastically adopting the role of laundress, I began noticing an accumulation of single, unmatched socks. I began referring to them as orphans. With the quantity mounting, I found it necessary to house them in a plastic aqua-colored tub. I took an inventory of sorts of the style, length, and color of each sock before putting them into the bin, where hopefully they would be reunited with their mate at some point.

Today as I look at the sock orphanage, I note seven distinct occupants: two corgi themed socks, one on a white background and one on black; a medley of four crew socks with different heel and body colors; and one black trouser sock with a white heel and toe. In my world of laundry, I, the laundry supervisor, must locate matches that may be hidden in fitted sheets or various nooks and crannies around the house. Six months is the maximum residency of these disparate socks as I attempt to locate an exact or similar mate. I am glad that these sock orphans do not share the same feelings as human orphans do when they are left behind, so I don't feel guilty leaving them on their own or sending them on their way to the landfill.

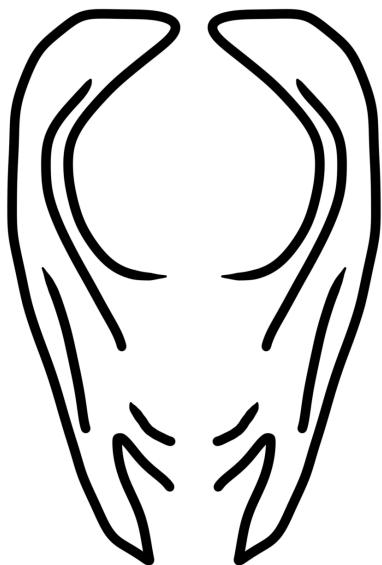
My husband and older daughter prefer their socks to match, while my younger one does not need hers to be a precise match. In elementary school, she sported two

unmatched socks as her unique fashion statement. When my children were small, I created hand puppets with some of the single socks. It delights me to find that socks have assumed a life of their own and that I have contributed to their reincarnation when I do this. Even as my vision declined, I still could feel for holes at the socks' heels and toes.

I've always been open to refining my laundry techniques. Fifteen years ago, my friend Lin taught me how to cuff socks together to keep them paired. Laundry in all its stages provides me with a sense of purpose and accomplishment. Despite my vision loss, I draw upon cues such as a brightly colored heel, toe, or calf ribbing.

HOTHAM RIVER ANGEL

LEWIS WOOLSTON



Her name was Cameron Woods.

When she was about thirteen she went through a phase of telling people that she'd been named after Cameron Diaz. The story she told was that about a month or so before she had been born her parents went to the cinema to see the newly released Jim Carey movie *The Mask*. Her father, she claimed, had been rather taken with the on screen presence of Cameron Diaz and had decided to name his daughter after her.

It was of course a total figment of her imagination, a story concocted in the fertile mind of a thirteen year old girl who felt a need to belong and wanted to feel a little bit special.

The only thing true about the story was that she was born roughly a month after *The Mask* was released in 1994 and her parents had seen the movie.

Her parents were already, at the time of her birth, on a downward spiral. The casual drinking of their younger years had increased and then soured into the use of harder drugs. Cameron's conception was unplanned and not really wanted and although she never knew it she came very close to being an abortion, only the residual guilt of her father's Catholic upbringing saved her life. For a brief time it seemed like she might save her parents. They cleaned up their act for a while after finding out they were expecting, for the first year or so of her young life they were almost normal, responsible parents.

But the gutter is a powerful magnet to people fated that way. They started drinking again, a little bit of weed began to be smoked here and there, then some powders made their entrance into their lives again and

before they knew it they were skinny, sketchy drug addicts unfit to raise their own daughter.

Cameron had no memory of it but she was taken away by social services a few times in her babyhood and toddler years. Once or twice placed with foster parents for a few months, once or twice given to her grandparents to take care of, each time her parents temporarily cleaned up their act and were given approval to take her back.

The final straw was also Cameron's only memory of her parents.

She was nearly five when it happened. She had been told to get out of the house and stay out by her parents. She went next door and played with the neighbour's kid's. She was scruffy, dirty, slightly underfed and shoeless and she should really have been removed from her parent's custody again but they'd managed to fly under the radar for a while.

They were living in one of the housing commission ghetto suburbs of Perth at the time. Dismal streets of fibro houses with badly maintained lawns and a distinct lack of hope in the air. Cameron played with the neighbour's kids on their poor excuse for a front lawn for several hours until their mother called them in for dinner. Cameron stood on the front lawn and wondered what to do now. Her parents had told her not to come back home until they said it was okay. It was getting dark and all the other kids were inside.

'Cameron sweetie isn't it time you went home?' The mother of the children she'd been playing with was slightly concerned at the sight of this poor child just stood there on her front lawn.

'Mum and Dad said not to go inside until they said it was okay.'

Something about this reply bothered the neighbour and she was just debating if she should stick her nose in and demand they take proper care of this girl when it happened.

The amateur amphetamine lab Cameron's parents had been running in their bathroom exploded and killed them both.

Years later remembering it as an adult certain details stuck in Cameron's mind. For starters there was no big window shattering, knock you to the ground, type explosion like you see in movies. She remembered a sound like a firecracker and the windows sort of collapsing in little fragments as though they'd been terribly fragile all along and then a single tongue of flame that briefly punched its way out the window like a dragon's fart. Then the smoke and the stink of toxic chemicals started.

The neighbour woman quickly dragged Cameron inside and sat her down with her own kids at the dinner table while she rang triple zero in a state half terror and half excitement.

Years later Cameron remembered sitting at the table with the other kids eating a small portion of tinned spaghetti and toast while fire engines, police and ambulances dealt with the disaster next door.

There was no saving Cameron's parents. They'd been killed more or less instantly. Their charred corpses were discreetly removed from the scene while Cameron watched TV with the kids next door. A Police Officer took the responsibility of contacting social services and a temporary foster home was arranged for Cameron. All her clothes and what little worldly possessions she had were in the now burnt out house, she had not put on shoes when she'd gone to play with the

kids next door, she was literally a shoeless orphan with only the clothes on her back.

Her grandparents on her father's side were contacted by social services and they were eager to take her in, it was arranged with a minimum of fuss.

They were decent people, they lived in the small town of Boddington about two hours south of Perth and had done so for most of their lives. They were the sort of traditional country people who don't really fit in with the modern world and prefer to stay in their little town away from all the fuss.

They had raised their son as best they could, imparted to him the values they believed in, church, family and community, taken pains with his education and upbringing. So it was a mystery and a source of deep despair to them that he'd ended up the way he had. They quietly resolved to do better with their granddaughter, to make right whatever mistakes they had made with their son by doing better with her.

They took her in and she began to thrive. Her grandmother was a great cook and she soon weighed what a five year old girl is supposed to weigh. Both grandparents adored her and showered her with love and attention. Cameron had been denied both of these things from her addict parents, too often she'd been shoved in front of a TV or left to play outside while her parents had spent their time destroying themselves in chemical dreams. To have her grandparents read her a story, take her to the park and just generally pay proper attention to her was a luxury she thrived on.

Her grandparents were active in the local community of Boddington, they were faithful attendees at the local Catholic Church, her grandfather was also part of the Lions club and her grandmother a member of the

CWA. They included her in all their activities and soon everyone in town knew “young Cameron, the Woods’ girl” as they put it.

She began school, Boddington had a small school that was perfectly fine for the local population although city people might have looked at it and thought it too tiny. She made friends with the other kids and took part in school sports with the encouragement of her grandparents. She discovered she was fairly good at Netball and played for the school team.

Her life was very happy and she began to really thrive in the normal way of a young, healthy, country girl. She had school during the week, friends and sport on a Saturday, Church with her grandparents on Sunday morning and plenty of good food, fresh air, exercise and activity. It seemed the perfect recipe for raising a healthy and happy young person but her grandparents had quiet, nagging doubts, they had raised their son in much the same way and he had gone so badly wrong. What would happen when Cameron got older? The thought of her going down the same path as their son was a nightmare to them. But what could they do to prevent it?

Every so often they took Cameron to the little cemetery on the outskirts of Boddington to put a few flowers on her father’s grave. Her mother’s body had been claimed by her family, a large extended tribe of Polish immigrants based around the Midland area, so she couldn’t visit her grave. Instead they visited this little bush cemetery and the simple grave of her father.

Her grandparents debated how to explain her parent’s death to her. It was fairly simple when she was five to say that there had been a bad accident and her mummy and daddy had gone to heaven but that

wouldn't wash as she got older. But how to explain the concept of an amphetamine lab explosion to a child?

In the end they waited until she was nearly thirteen before they told her the full story in all its squalid detail. They knew she'd done a drug education class at school so that she would understand the basic concept of addiction.

They had the conversation one Sunday after church, after the service they had got some fish and chips from the local takeaway place and driven to the cemetery. They ate in the car and her grandparents, carefully and compassionately told her the full story of her parent's addiction, death and neglect of her. She absorbed it all in silence as she ate chips and drank Fanta in the back seat of the car.

They finished their explanation and asked if there was anything she wanted to know.

'Am I a crack baby?'

For a few seconds the question stunned them into silence.

'Where did you hear that term?' her shocked grandmother asked.

'We saw a video in health class about pregnancies and how what the mother does affects the baby, they showed all the crack babies in America, how they're born retarded because their mums smoke crack while they're pregnant. Did my mum smoke crack while she was pregnant with me?'

They rushed to assure her that nothing could be further from the truth.

'Your parents cleaned up their act when they found out they were going to have you. Your mother didn't touch drugs while she was pregnant, you were born normal and healthy darling.'

Cameron pondered this for a few moments.

‘So I’m not a crack baby?’

‘Absolutely not sweetheart, you’re a perfectly healthy normal girl.’

Cameron went silent for a few minutes again, she thoughtfully ate the last of her chips and drank some Fanta before asking another question.

‘If they stopped when my Mum was pregnant with me why didn’t they stay stopped? I mean, if you can do it for nine months why not do it for life?’

Her Grandfather sighed, he had often wondered the same thing himself, he thought his son should have known better in the first place but he reasoned that perhaps it was an almost excusable piece of youthful foolishness. But to go back to it after having stopped for a while? To return to a path you knew was without a future when you’ve just had a child? What was his son thinking?

It was a mystery to him. This simple, decent, country man just couldn’t understand how or why his own son had gone so wrong. He looked at his granddaughter with love and thought to himself that he could never abandon this child no matter what. Why hadn’t his son felt the same? Why hadn’t he held little Cameron in his arms when she was born and decided then and there to walk the straight and narrow path in order that she might have a proper upbringing?

He gave Cameron the best answer he was capable of.

‘Addiction is a powerful thing sweetheart, nobody really understands it completely but it seems that once it’s got its hooks in a person they just aren’t entirely themselves and they don’t make good decisions. I

wish it was some other way sweetheart but we all have our cross to bear.'

Cameron said nothing in response to this. They finished their lunch and got out of the car to lay flowers on her father's grave as they did every few weeks.

Cameron felt something different this day. She stood there with her grandparents and looked at the simple inscribed stone marking her father's final resting place. A hollowing sense of loss and numb anger began to build inside her. The life she might have had if her parents had got their shit together played in her mind. The possibilities that were now denied to her and the extra burdens placed on her because of her father's degenerate stupidity weighed down on her as an intolerable and undeserved punishment for a choice she hadn't made.

A dam broke inside her heart.

She kicked the simple stone in a fit of rage and succeeded only in stubbing her toe. She changed tack and began to stomp down on it bring her weight to bear as if the blunt force of her heel on the stone could punish her father.

'Cameron stop that! Have some respect for the dead!' Her grandparents were horrified.

She continued to stomp on the stone and began to scream at it.

'I HATE HIM! I HATE HIM! Why'd he do it? Why couldn't he stop for me?'

Her grandfather wrapped his arms around her, restraining her to the best of his ability and moving her away from the stone as she began to cry.

They stopped taking her to lay flowers on her father's grave after that. When they felt the need to do so they did it while she was at school or off with her

friends. A ritual that had been for all three of them became a thing for the two of them only.

Cameron kept growing and the normal developments of a girl's life happened to her as she got older. She took an interest in boys and when she was almost fifteen and a half had her first boyfriend and first love.

His name was Richard Kennett and his father was the shire clerk and well known and respected in the district. Cameron's grandparents knew him and his family well and quietly approved of the young romance. They thought Richard a good boy from a good family and although not a church goer like themselves they believed him to have been raised right and likely to observe the decencies of behaviour around their granddaughter.

The two lovebirds spent every minute they could together although they were prevented from consummating their relationship by the vigilant eyes of the respective families. They would hang out in Richard's room at his house and Richard's little brother would always prevent them from being entirely alone while the rule of Cameron's grandparents was that the bedroom door would remain fully open at all times while they were in there together.

Nonetheless their love blossomed and deepened to the point where they were thought of as the "serious couple" by all the other teenagers and even some of the teachers at school. Many people quietly thought that they would be the couple to stick together through school and into adult life, some quietly predicted a wedding and a family in a few years once they had finished school, they seemed that serious.

They told each things in their quiet moments together. Cameron told him about her parents and the

cold, hollow sense of loss she felt at being an orphan. Richard told her about how he hated Boddington and his dull little family and longed to go and make something of himself in the city. They pledged their love to each other, they promised to stick with each other through thick and thin and build a better life together one day.

At the end of year 10 Cameron was offered an apprenticeship with the only hairdresser in Boddington. The owner was a friend of her grandparents and Cameron didn't take long to decide to accept it. She did well right from the start and was well thought of by her boss and the customers. It also made her feel a bit more adult. She now had a bank account and a tax file number and a regular, if small, wage coming in. She went into Narrogin for TAFE once a week and worked the rest of the week.

Richard continued with school, his sights set on University and leaving Boddington for the city. He began to focus on what degree he wanted to do. He started talking about studying medicine at UWA an ambitious goal for sure, but one he felt he could attain. His father was overjoyed at the thought of his eldest son becoming a doctor, 'Dr Kennett will see you now' he'd joke when Cameron came around to visit, Cameron thought it was mildly funny the first time but was sick of it within a month. Richard told her all about his plans.

'UWA is the place to go Cammie, all the best people go there, it's got the best facilities and everything, great scene too, all sorts of bands and theatre and comedy and things like that. It's the happening place to be. I can't wait to get the fuck out of Boddington Cammie, I'm so sick of this place and nothing ever

happening. If I thought I was going to live here forever I'd shoot myself now.'

Cameron wasn't entirely comfortable this talk but wasn't sure what to say to it. She was quite fond of Boddington herself although she had very little to compare it with.

Richard looked to see if his little brother or his parents were hovering near the door to the bedroom before speaking again.

'So um, you know Mike from school right? Well his family is going to Margaret River for a week and I've talked him into giving me a spare key to his house we just have to clean up after we're done and not let anyone else know.'

It took Cameron a second or two to realise what he was asking her.

'Clean after what? ...oh...'

The look on her face as the penny dropped made Richard chuckle to himself.

'I'm not sure Richard...'

He held her hand in his and drew her close to him, the way he always had, the way that made her feel safe and loved.

'Babe it's okay, we love each other don't we? We've wanted to do it for ages we just never had a private place, well now we have a place.'

Cameron still had her doubts.

'I dunno babe, I can't get pregnant, it would break my grandparent's hearts and ruin everything. You can't get me pregnant Richard, I mean that, I'm not taking any stupid risks.'

Sensing that she had agreed, in principle at least, to having sex with him Richard rushed to reassure her.

‘It’s okay, I’m not an idiot, I’m being responsible Cammie.’

He pulled open his bedside drawer, the bottom one, and underneath his socks he pulled out a packet of condoms, still wrapped in plastic, and showed them to her like a spy showing a fellow spy a secret file.

‘I’ll look after you Cammie,’ he spoke as he hid them away again, ‘it’ll be special, just you and me, just love.’

Cameron loved him then, the feeling of being wanted and needed, of having this young man utterly devoted to her, was intoxicating. The hollow sense of loss she felt whenever she thought about her parents was a million miles away right now. Replaced by belonging, by a union, Cameron and Richard, Richard and Cameron, Woods and Kennett, Kennett and Woods. Boddington’s own perfect love story for the ages, like Romeo and Juliet but without all the murders and drama.

‘Ok then, just you and me, just love.’

‘Just love’ Richard echoed.

Mike’s family left for Margaret River on a Friday. They decided to wait until Saturday afternoon. In a small town like Boddington sport is a huge thing. That particular Saturday both the local footy team and the local Netball team had home games. Most of the town would be involved in and around the games and the aftermath. The streets would be almost deserted, no eyes to see them go into a house that wasn’t theirs, no neighbours to report.

They met up in the main street and walked the short distance to Mike’s house. Richard let them in the front door after looking around to make sure nobody was

watching. They walked in and locked the door behind them.

For a few moments they stood there in the lounge room unsure what to do next. They'd been in Mike's house once or twice before but it was always with Mike doing something social. To be here alone, illicitly, felt plain strange.

They silently walked from room to room, assessing the situation, they looked through the kitchen first, opened the fridge and the freezer to see what there was, took note of the microwave ready meals stacked in the freezer, moved on to Mike's bedroom which seemed basically the same as Richard's bedroom to Cameron, the same teenage boy funk and disorder. They looked in Mike's sister's room with its girly touches and moved on to Mike's parent's room.

The sight of the big double bed sobered them and brought to the front what they were here for.

'So are we going to...you know...in here?' Cameron tentatively asked.

'Yeah, it's okay, we'll just remake the bed afterwards, it'll be fine.' Richard tried to sound confident but even in his voice the nervousness was showing, it was his first time as much as Cameron's and he had no more experience than her. They were both scared and eager in equal parts.

'You brought the things right?' Cameron asked, she felt that if she focused on something practical the nervousness might die down a bit.

'Yeah, of course, got them here.' Richard pulled the little box out of his back pocket and held it in front of him like a treasure map.

Cameron took the little box with it's corporate logo and held it in her hands a moment or two. She broke

the plastic seal and opened it as if to satisfy herself that they were actually in there. Seemingly happy with the contents she put it down on the bed and turned to Richard who was gazing at her with all the love in his heart.

Without needing words they each took off their jumpers almost in perfect unison, they kept pace with each other, removing each item of clothing together so that neither one of them was ever more naked than the other. Eventually they stood as Adam and Eve no more than a foot or two apart.

‘I love you Cammie’ Richard spoke softly and sincerely.

‘I love you Richard’ Cameron replied equally heartfelt.

They joined together on the bed, there was a brief moment where Richard struggled to get the condom on but other than that the operation went smoothly. Cameron felt a little pain on her first time but not as much as she’d expected or been led to believe by older girls at school. Richard was able to focus and managed not to cum too quickly despite it being his first time. In the end, with a plaintive cry of “my Cammie, oh Cammie” their relationship was finally fully consummated and they were no longer virgins.

They lay for a while afterwards in Mike’s parent’s bed and said nothing, they held each other and gazed into each other’s eyes with love and post-coital bliss.

‘How long can we stay here?’ Cameron eventually asked.

‘Well they’re away a whole week but the neighbours might notice if there are lights on after dark.’

‘I’m really hungry, I didn’t eat much in the way of breakfast this morning, can we eat something here?’

‘Well we could help ourselves to some of those microwave ready meals, just got to remember to replace them before they get back, should be alright.’

‘Why do they have so many stacked in the freezer? Don’t they cook?’

‘Mike’s mum works late sometimes and Mike’s dad can’t be arsed cooking, they either get takeaway or ready meal on those nights, Mike hates it.’

They decided they were hungry enough for ready meals and reluctantly got out of the bed and got dressed. They looked through the pile of boxes in the freezer and eventually Cameron decided to take a chance on the roast chicken with potato and veggies while Richard accepted bangers and mash as a vaguely edible option. Richard was shocked to discover that Cameron had never eaten one of these things before.

‘What? Never? Your grandparents never have a night off cooking?’

‘Well if they do we get something from the takeaway shop or we eat dinner at one of their friends places, if we’re home Grandma cooks, it’s never been any other way.’

‘Well I’d say you’re in for a treat but I’d be lying.’

Richard got the microwaving process underway putting Cameron’s meal in first, while they waited and listened to the hum of the microwave they held each other and kissed standing barefoot in the kitchen. Cameron thought this must be what marriage was like, leisurely sex followed by a meal and warm affection. For a moment the deep empty hole inside her that had opened up when she became an orphan felt like it could be filled.

The microwave beeped and Richard extracted her steaming ready meal from it before putting his own in,

Cameron let it sit on the bench while she waited for him, not wanting to eat without him. She went into the loungeroom and idly flicked on the TV, there was a WAFL game on, East Fremantle Vs Swan Districts, she accepted it as the best there was likely to be. Richard's meal was done so they sat down together on the couch, tea towels on their laps underneath the steaming heat of their ready meals.

Cameron discovered that she hadn't missed anything by never eating a ready meal before. Nonetheless she was absurdly happy and filled with a warmth and love more intense than she had ever known. They slowly ate their crappy food and leaned on each as they half-watched the footy on TV, it felt like a honeymoon to them both.

Cameron finished her food and put it aside, Richard already given up on his, she reached her arms around Richard and nestled her head into his chest closing her eyes to better feel his warmth and hear his heartbeat just as the fourth quarter of footy began on TV. Richard reciprocated her affection and stroked her hair and held her close to him as Swan Districts took the lead with three goals in rapid succession. By some unspoken mutual consensus they got up off the couch and went hand in hand back to the bedroom just as East Fremantle were mounting a credible fightback in the middle of the quarter.

Without words being necessary they took off their clothes again and got back on Mike's parent's bed. They were more relaxed and confident this time, the sense of urgency was gone as was the fear of getting it wrong, they took their time and were warm and loving to each other.

Afterwards, although Cameron wanted to lie there next to him forever, the question of when to leave had to be faced. Richard was adamant that they should get out before it got dark, lights on would give them away to the neighbours instantly, he said, we need to be out of here before we need to turn on lights.

Reluctantly Cameron agreed and they started to get moving, Cameron made the bed while Richard sorted out the bins, disposing of the two used condoms and the two empty ready meal boxes.

Cameron stopped and looked at the bed she'd restored to something resembling its previous condition. You couldn't tell from a casual glance that anything had happened here today, she thought, Mike's parents probably would never know. But something had happened in here today, she assured herself, she had an overwhelming desire to tell herself that she was a woman now but worried that it would sound silly she restrained the urge. Then she heard the back door open as Richard went to put the rubbish in the wheelie bin and she decided to indulge her first impulse.

'Cameron Woods, today you became a woman.' She spoke to the empty bedroom and the bed she had just remade. An image came into her mind of herself as that five year old shoeless orphan being taken into care by a social worker as the Police sorted out the charred corpses of her parents. Then, despite her best efforts to stop it, the empty hollow inside her made itself felt, forcefully displacing the warmth and love she'd felt today with Richard.

She didn't hear him come back inside so absorbed was she in her own feelings, it wasn't until he put his arms around her that she snapped out of it. She melted

into him, grateful for his temporarily casting out the darkness.

‘We’d best get a wiggle on.’

She nodded agreement and let him lead the way.

They exited the house carefully, Richard trying to see if the neighbours were watching, as soon as they were out on the street they saw that they needn’t have worried. Boddington was as quiet as the grave. Most people were probably still at the footy or whatever BBQ or piss up was scheduled for after the game. They walked hand in hand unbothered by the world.

They came to the point where they would have to separate and go home. They stopped and held each other on the side of the street.

‘I love you Cammie’

‘I love you Richard’

They kissed and like tectonic plates, they separated.

Cameron walked home feeling more alive than she ever had. The air felt different and there was something electric at the back of everything she saw, something vivid and full of life.

When she got home her Grandma was getting dinner ready.

‘Cameron sweetie, how’s your day been? Done anything interesting?’

‘Just been hanging out with Richard.’

The lie came naturally to her and didn’t trouble her conscience at all.

‘Oh that’s nice dear, would you be a sweetie and help me with the veggies? I’ve got to keep an eye on this meat or it’ll burn on me.’

Nobody suspected anything. Richard and Cameron went back to Mike’s house twice that week and no-

body seemed to notice. The last time they went Richard brought a bunch of ready meals from the supermarket to replace the ones they'd eaten. When Mike's family came back from Margaret River they said nothing so it seemed they had gotten away with it.

A week or so later Cameron was working at the hairdressing salon. It was time for lunch and she decided to go to the café for a pastie and an iced coffee. As she was getting her food Richard's dad Frank was behind her.

'Young Cameron! How's it going darling? Mind if I join you for lunch?'

Cameron said it was fine and sat down. Frank joined her once he'd got his food.

'Good news young Cameron, I've got nothing but good news today, you see this bloke who came in with me? Old mate up there at the counter?'

Cameron hadn't paid any attention to him until now but nodded anyway.

'Well he's a big deal with the State Government up in Perth, Department of Local Government, in tight with the Premier and everything. Anyway he's come down here to approve a shitload of funding for the Shire. Roadworks, tourism development, sporting facilities upgrades, all sorts of things. Yep, the Shire of Boddington is going ahead, believe you me!'

The idea of the Shire of Boddington "going ahead" seemed strange to Cameron but she smiled politely for Frank's sake. They were joined at the table by the man in question a few seconds later.

'Now Bill, this lovely young lady is Cameron Woods, she is not only the top gun hairdressing apprentice in all of Boddington but she also happens to be the sweetheart to my eldest son Richard. They are a

pair of absolute lovebirds and I am quietly confident that one day in the near future there will be wedding bells and baby seats.'

Cameron almost spat out her iced coffee in surprise and embarrassment but Bill seemed to roll with the joke in that blokey way older men had.

'Pleased to meet you Cameron, now why would you marry into such a down at heel family as the Kennett's? Surely even Boddington has better to offer?'

Frank Kennett laughed sycophantically at his wisecrack.

'Ah well Bill, no doubt young Cameron could do better and is marrying beneath herself but this is real, honest-to-goodness true love we're talking about here. You should see the two of them together, flowers bloom and birds sing, the whole deal. My only hope is that the grandchildren they give me will be gorgeous like her side of the family.'

'Hopefully they'll be smart like her side of the family too.'

The two of them cracked up laughing at their own Dad-joke wit. Cameron wasn't sure if she wanted to blush or roll her eyes.

The two older men settled down and began to talk about the various shire projects that were getting funding. Cameron was mildly interested but kept mostly quiet, eventually she finished her pastie and iced coffee and went to leave.

'Got to get back into it aye Cameron? Well you have a great day and keep that son of mine on his toes alright? Mark my words put him under the thumb now and you'll have less problems later on.'

'Speaking from experience there Frank? Spent a lot of time under the thumb have you?'

The two men laughed at each other's wit again and Cameron left them to it. When she got back to the salon she told her boss Jenny all about it and relayed the conversation they'd had.

'That Frank Kennett is a bit of drip at times but I have to admit he does his job at the Shire pretty well and he works hard getting things for the town, good on him for making the wankers in Perth cough up some money. God knows the place needs it. I wouldn't take any of the shit they talked to heart Cameron love, that's men in suits big noting themselves, nothing more. Frank's quite fond of you I think, he probably really hopes you will marry his Richard and give him Grandkids, I don't think he meant any harm love.'

Cameron shook her head.

'No, I know he likes me and everything, I just find it weird the way men talk to each other, the stupid jokes and everything. Maybe if I'd had brothers I would understand it a bit better.'

'There's nothing to understand about men Cameron, they think with their dicks and their stomachs, everything else flows from that.'

The conversation went sideways after that.

Cameron and Richard stuck together through the next year. When they could get privacy they had sex, when they couldn't they had to do without but they loved each other no matter what. Everyone in town thought of them as a serious couple, both Richard's parents and Cameron's grandparents fully expected to attend their wedding in the near future and see babies born, hopefully in that order.

Cameron continued with her hairdressing apprenticeship while Richard was focused on his studies and getting a place at UWA. As he got closer to exams he

enlisted her help in studying, the two of them sat on the couch at his house and she asked him questions from his text books and he tried to answer. His parents watched this from the kitchen with benevolence. They were happy their son had his head screwed on, they were happy Cameron had her head screwed on as well, the future looked bright.

One evening they she had helped him study and was staying at the Kennett house for dinner. They were sitting around the table after dinner and Richard and his brother got up to help their mother with the dishes leaving Cameron with Frank. A thought popped into her head and before she could stop herself she asked the question.

‘Frank, did you know my father back in the day?’

There was a moment, barely a second, when she wondered if she had gone too far but Frank took the question in good faith.

‘Oh yes, he was, let me think, a year? No, two years below me at school. Funny lad, always had a laugh and a joke, got to be a bit of a loose unit as he got older though, sad how he ended up of course.’

‘What did he...I mean...did he have like, dreams or plans for the future or anything when he was young?’

Frank stopped and thought about it for a minute before replying.

‘I can’t recall anything specific young Cameron but I do remember he always talked about getting out of Boddington and going to the city. Seems to be a common thread with the young ones who come to bad ends, always desperate to get to the city, never happy in a little town, me personally, I love our little town, community is worth a lot more than money if you ask me.’

‘So you never wanted to leave Frank?’

‘Well I went off to University but I always planned on coming back. Got my first job at the City of South Perth, that gave me experience with local government, but I always kept my ear to the ground for anything going back home, eventually a position opened up and I came back. Best thing I did too, better lifestyle down here.’

He stopped and looked at his son helping his mother in the kitchen, Cameron could almost see the wheels turning in his head and he frowned in Richard’s general direction.

‘Keep a tight reign on this one young Cameron, he’s likely to go chasing silly ideas in the city if he doesn’t have a good woman to keep him in line.’

Richard realised they were talking about him and turned to catch the conversation while he was drying the dishes. Cameron winked at him.

‘Oh don’t you worry Frank I’ve got him well trained’ she smiled and made a whip cracking sound in Richard’s direction which made Frank laugh while Richard just looked like he’d missed the joke.

Richard did his exams and ended up being Dux of the school, he got accepted into medicine at UWA just like he wanted, his parents were overjoyed. Cameron already had her licence but now she used her savings to get a basic but reliable car so she could visit Richard in the city on the weekends. Richard had organised a sharehouse with some other students about half an hour’s drive from the campus. The first weekend Cameron drove up was like a honeymoon for them both.

Cameron met his housemates on the Friday evening when she arrived. There was a girl with a pixie cut and

a Sonic Youth T-shirt named Tasha, an Asian kid with glasses who was introduced to her as Charles and an older lad with a goatee called Tom who told her and Richard all about some movie he wanted to see which had won prizes at the Berlin International Film Festival.

Cameron politely extracted them from the conversation about arthouse films and more or less dragged Richard into his bedroom.

‘Come here College boy!’ she joked as she pulled at his shirt.

They made love with abandon and intensity, for the first time ever they didn’t need to hide or sneak around and could have a good, honest fuck without fear of parental discovery. It felt like they were adults finally.

Afterwards as Cameron lay with her head on Richard’s sweaty chest she took a good look at the room.

‘What’s that poster?’ She asked.

‘Tilda Swinton, it’s from one of her really early films, “Cycling the Frame” it’s really good, Tom turned me onto it, he’s totally in the know about cinema, he’s turned me onto so much cool stuff already.’

‘We should go see a movie while I’m in the city, make a night of it, maybe go have dinner somewhere as well.’

‘We can do that if you want, or we could just stay in bed until you have to leave.’

They melted into each other again.

They settled into a rhythm over the next few months, Cameron would come up most weekends and stay with Richard, they’d make love, go into the city and see what it had to offer, enjoy themselves. Richard began to take her out to things he was interested in,

arthouse films, indie bands, parties with various people he'd met on campus.

Cameron began to notice things, Richard talked less and less about his medical studies, he no longer asked her to quiz him from his textbooks, he talked more and more about the music scene and the film scene around campus. She also noticed how the parties and events he took her to were big drinking events, she saw people casually smoking weed or sniffing a bit of powder at these scenes and it disturbed her. The terrifying sense of insecurity half remembered from her childhood made itself felt again like a crow at a funeral.

The thought that Richard might be drifting away from her made itself felt one Sunday afternoon as she drove back to Boddington. It stood there, cold, terrifying and monolithic in her mind, as she tried to focus on the road. She struggled to process the idea that one day she might not have him anymore. It was like a void on the map of her imagined future, an empty space, cold and nullifying.

She focused on the road and made it home but the horrible, haunting fear of loss, fuelled by the memories of the great loss of her past, wouldn't quite go away. She did a load of washing and helped her grandmother with dinner but felt it like an ice-filled horizon dooming her future. She slept uneasily that night and was still troubled when she left for work in the morning.

Things eventually came to a head a few months later. Richard took her out to a party to celebrate some fellow student's film which had recently been released to an adoring audience of about a hundred people at most. Cameron was halfway through her second wine and not loving the party, she didn't feel right with

these people, didn't understand them at all and didn't like the vibe. Plus Richard kept disappearing on her.

She decided to find him and tell him she wanted to leave. The party was sprawling and messy but she eventually found at a table in the backyard doing lines of coke with the filmmaker in question. Richard and the filmmaker were both talking at or over each other at considerable speed, evidently it was very good coke.

'Richard I want to leave, let's go home.'

Richard dismissed her with a casual wave and continued his off-tap conversation.

'Yeah but if you think about it, like, everything since the French New Wave has been living in its shadow and we really haven't made an authentic cinema since then, not in the sense of...'

Cameron stormed out, she called a taxi and headed back to Richard's place, got her things and drove off to find a motel to stay in. Richard didn't notice she was gone until the party was over and he had no ride home. As the alcohol and drugs slowly faded from his system he began to realise what he'd done and how badly he'd fucked up. He remembered Cameron telling him about her parents and how abandoned she had felt, he remembered promising her that he would never do that to her. The haunting fear that he might lose her sobered him up somewhat.

He called her as he got home, it was already daylight and he felt fucked but he knew if he didn't call her now her might not ever be able to fix it.

'Cammie, babe, I'm so sorry, I just...I got a bit carried away and forgot about you, I'm so sorry, it won't happen again.'

Cameron was silent. Richard felt her anger as an almost physical force down the phone. He was genuinely frightened at how badly he'd fucked up. After what felt like a thousand years she spoke.

'You can't do this to me Richard, not now, not ever, you know why, I've told you what happened to my parents and why I'm an orphan. I won't get hurt by a loss like that ever again. If you want to do drugs with idiots you can do so without me in your life. There is no wiggle room on this, there is no exceptions, do you understand me Richard?'

Richard grovelingly accepted her terms and promised to do better in the future. Cameron told him she would be driving back to Boddington without seeing him again and that he should think long and hard about their future together before he came back home for the holidays. She hung up and left him to stew in it.

Richard came home to Boddington for the two-week term break. Cameron met him after work, he waited for her outside the hairdresser's and she glared at him straight up as if daring him to do anything stupid.

'I'm sorry Cammie, I really am.'

Cameron remained silent making him squirm some more.

'I know I fucked up; I'd never want to hurt you Cameron, I've gone off the rails, I admit it, but I'm getting back on track now, this is a big wake up call, I'm flying right from now on.'

Cameron reluctantly accepted this and ceased her silent torment of him.

'You can't do that shit if you want us to be together Richard, you know this, first and last time I'm ever

letting this go past the keeper, you do that shit again and we're done, understood?'

Richard put his hands up in unequivocal surrender.

'I know Cammie, believe me, I know, I've well and truly fucked up since I moved to Perth. I've failed my exams and I have to re-do the last semester, my parents don't know yet and I'm going to have to think about how I break it to them.'

Cameron was shocked, this was news to her as well.

'What the fuck have you been doing up there for the last six months?'

Richard shrugged and mumbled something non-committal, he saw immediately that Cameron wasn't satisfied with the answer so he braced himself and explained properly.

'Look Cameron...' He paused; on some level he knew how pissweak his excuses were going to sound but he sensed that he had no option but to tell her the truth.

'Cameron, it's just...look I always thought of university as a gateway to something else you know? Like I know I said I wanted to do Medicine but really I've always wanted to get into something creative, you know, like the film scene or the music scene or something like that. University was just a good place to make the right connections I thought.'

'So you never had any intention of finishing a medical degree and becoming a doctor? Is that what you're telling me? If you wanted to do something creative why didn't you just do an arts degree?'

Richard got huffy and impatient, rolling his shoulders against the question.

'Because my parents were never going to fund me doing an arts degree! My Dad literally can't see any-

thing in life other than get an education, get a sensible white-collar job and settle down to a boring family life. That's his entire outlook on the world. I've had it rammed down my throat my whole life and all I want to do is escape that shit. There's a whole world out there where interesting people are doing amazing, creative things and all my Dad can see is a steady career and settling down with a good woman in some little town. I want so much more out of life than that, I want to create, I want to be something more than a dull middle-class wanker.'

He stopped and breathed out as though the expression of this emotion had cost him great physical effort. He looked happily deflated, as though this speech was something he'd needed to say for years, as though he was relieved to finally get it off his chest.

Cameron had the awful feeling that this was how Richard had felt about things for years. If so then a lot of things he had said to her, a lot of the pictures he had painted of their possible future life together, were lies or at least not things he was not seriously committed to.

The great hollow at the centre of her life made itself felt again. That vast, irreversible loss that she had experienced so long ago crept forward and with ice-cold tendrils laid claim to her life again. Once again she was that five year old girl, shoeless and orphaned, standing on the front lawn of the neighbours house, wondering what was to become of her.

She took hold of herself and turned her anger onto Richard.

'And where do I figure into these plans of yours? Am I supposed to come along with you while you do all these things? What future do we have together in

all this? Has it occurred to you Richard that maybe the ideals your father pushes you towards are also what I might want? Do you understand what security and family means to an orphan? Do you understand what a steady job and a stable life means to someone like me? Have you given the slightest bit of thought to that?

It was clear from Richard's blank and defeated face that he hadn't really thought it through. Cameron's anger grew and despite the terror she had of losing what little love she'd experienced in life she felt certain what her next step must be.

'Go home Richard, work out what you're going to tell your parents and then think about what direction you want to go in life. If you decide to keep partying with idiots then don't bother calling me again. If you want a future with me then you know what you have to do. Ball's in your court.'

She stormed off leaving Richard standing there out the front of the hairdresser's looking like the last soldier to surrender after the war has been lost. Cameron went home and ate her dinner in silence, her grandparents could tell something was up but wisely decided to let sleeping dogs lie.

For a full week Cameron wondered what Richard's decision was going to be, she wondered if he would come crawling back to her and say that he was prepared to fly right from now on, she was more than willing to take him back if he did. As the week went on with no word from him she began to suspect what his decision was. It was a two-week term break and when a week and a half had passed without her hearing from him she knew the path he had chosen.

This was confirmed a few days later when Cameron walked past the pub after work and saw him in the

front bar, visibly pissed and laughing it up with a bunch of lads from the mine. She stopped and looked at him as he laughed and drank, she felt a great sense of loss, total and irreversible, like observing a baby sink beneath the waves after a shipwreck and being unable to stop it. She walked home, shut herself in her room and cried quietly.

A few weeks later she was in the café for lunch again and bumped into Frank.

‘Young Cameron, how’s things? How are you holding up?’

‘Not too bad Frank, how about you?’

‘I’d be fine if that idiot son of mine would get his act together, you know all about it I suppose?’

‘Yeah, he told me when he came down, I told him to call me when he decided to get back on the straight and narrow, haven’t heard from him since.’

‘You did the right thing Cameron, that boy needs a short, sharp shock to wake him up to himself. God knows I’ve tried Cameron, he’s got one more chance with Uni and if he blows that he can join the Army, that’s my final word to him. I’ve laid down the law I have.’

The thought of Richard in the Army was so ridiculous that Cameron almost laughed.

‘Do you think he’ll wise up Frank?’

Frank sighed and shook his head.

‘I really don’t know young Cameron, I just don’t know.’

Cameron finished her sausage roll and went back to work.

Now that she wasn’t going up to Perth on the weekends Cameron found herself getting bored. She decid-

ed to play netball again for the local team. There was training on a Thursday night and a game on Saturday followed by a BBQ and social drinks. Cameron found that it filled a social void in her life and got her out of herself for a few hours every week. She was still deeply sad about the loss of the only boyfriend she'd ever had and running around a netball court helped distract from that.

It was towards the end of the season that she met Dennis Chapman.

He worked at the mine, there had been a gold mine in the hills near Boddington for a few years now and it was a boon to the town, there had been a social distinction between locals and mine people for a while but time and more importantly money had blurred the boundaries.

Dennis was ten years older than Cameron and did something technical and managerial at the mine which Cameron didn't pretend to understand. He was mature and sensible, the exact opposite of Richard, and that was probably the appeal of him.

Cameron chatted to him a few times at the post-game social dos and then he came into the hairdresser's for a haircut. It was clear he was interested in her, his attempts at small talk in the chair were better than most of the men who came in, Cameron found herself warming to him. Pretty soon they were an item.

As they spent more and more time together and got to know each other better Cameron reflected that there was a world of difference between dating a man and dating a boy. She had begun to see her relationship with Richard as a childish thing, not serious and not important. Whereas this new relationship with Dennis was a grown-up thing that actually might go some-

where. Dennis had a job, an actual career, had a level head on his shoulders, didn't drink excessively or do drugs, he didn't have stupid conversations about obscure arthouse films over lines of blow at a party. He owned a house in Perth and went on real holidays. When they eventually slept together Cameron discovered he was much more experienced and competent with a woman's body. All in all he seemed like a winner.

Eventually Cameron decided to open up and told him about her parents and what their deaths had meant to her. He listened respectfully and sympathetically.

'Do you understand that this means I can't ever be with anyone who does drugs? I can't and I won't go through that loss ever again, do you understand that?'

Dennis assured her that he understood and that he wasn't that sort of person anyway. He promised to not let her down, not now, not ever.

Cameron's Grandparents approved of Dennis, he was invited around the house for dinner several times and always made a good impression. They were getting older and frailer and they wanted more than anything to see Cameron settled down and happy.

Cameron and her grandpa were sitting outside one morning having a cup of tea and watching the birds attack the apricot tree.

'You think you'll marry Dennis?'

Cameron was momentarily thrown by the directness of the question.

'Maybe, yeah I think so, it's getting pretty serious and he's a good sort. Maybe it's nearly time.'

'I won't be around much longer, neither will your grandma.'

'You've got a few more years surely?'

‘No, the doctor says my heart is failing, I am on my last lap I suspect, your grandmother isn’t much better, we’re not long for this world.’

Cameron felt that cold, deep pit open up again, the loss of the past threatening to spread like a cancer into the losses of the future.

‘Is there nothing they can do about it?’

‘People get old and they die Cameron, it’s the natural order of things, I’ve had my run and I’m ready to go to God, the only thing that bothers me is getting you settled down into a life of your own.’

He paused and sighed with the burden of all the long years of his life.

‘I only regret that I couldn’t save your father Cameron, I did my best I really did, I don’t know why he went wrong, we didn’t raise him to be a druggie. As far as I know your mother’s family were decent people as well, I don’t know why the pair of them turned out the way they did. It’s a mystery to me.’

He stopped talking, the hurt still red raw after all these years, he reached out for Cameron’s hand and held it tenderly. The birds mounted another assault on the apricot tree as they sat there contemplating their lives and losses.

Cameron finished her apprenticeship and became a fully qualified hairdresser. About the same time Dennis was offered a promotion with the mining company, it would be mainly based at the office in Perth with occasional trips to sites out bush. Cameron’s grandparent’s health continued to decline and it was obvious they were soon to leave this world. The combination of these circumstances led to the decision of Cameron and Dennis to get married.

The wedding was held at the little Catholic church in Boddington which Cameron had attended with her Grandparents all her life. For their honeymoon Dennis took Cameron to a resort on the Whitsunday islands. It was Cameron's first trip outside the state and her first time on a plane.

Cameron embarrassed herself at the Brisbane airport. She'd gone to get an iced coffee from the little shop and couldn't find her normal brand, in fact she didn't recognise any of the brands they had. Dennis saw her confusion and asked if she was okay.

'They have different iced coffees interstate?' she replied, rather thrown out by the whole thing.

Dennis laughed but then realised how serious she was.

'Love, they have different ones in each state, didn't you know that?'

She shook her head.

'It's my first-time interstate remember.'

'Oh my poor country girl.'

When they got to the resort in the Whitsundays Cameron didn't know what to say. She struggled to take it all in. She had never thought she would see such a place. They spent two weeks there swimming, lazing on the beach and making love. It was bliss.

On their last day there Dennis was asleep on the deck chair at the front of their cabin. Cameron wandered down the beach to the less crowded, wilder looking end of the island. She found a spot where she couldn't see the cabins of the resort anymore and she waded out into the water until she was waist deep. The sand was of a white so bright it almost hurt your eyes when the sun reflected off it, the water was so clear

you could see small fish twenty metres away with perfect clarity.

She stood waist deep in the water and looked to the horizon, her eyes looking for something in the immensity of the Pacific Ocean that she couldn't entirely explain. For a moment she saw the vastness of it all, the ocean making a mockery of her tiny little life with its small, almost rustic, concerns and sufferings. No matter how she lived the rest of her life, whatever happened to her in years to come, it would be swallowed up by eternity the way a raindrop gets swallowed up by the Pacific Ocean. She might suffer intensely, the loss and hurt of her parents death might never heal, it wouldn't matter to the world in the same way the death of a seagull didn't matter to the Pacific Ocean. Or she might have many good years of love and happiness in her new life with Dennis, again, she thought, the world would be unmoved just as the Pacific Ocean is unmoved at the prosperity of a single fish. As she stood and stared at the empty blue horizon she understood how deeply alone and insignificant she was in grand scheme of things.

She felt almost equal now to the burden she knew she would bear for the rest of her life. She felt strong enough to carry the loss and carve out a new life at the same time.

She got out of the water and walked back to see if Dennis was awake yet.

After their honeymoon they moved to Perth and began their married life. Dennis had a house in a suburb called Ocean Reef which looked exactly the same as all the other suburbs in the vast northern suburban conglomeration of Perth's urban sprawl. Cameron found a job with a local Hairdressing salon and her

social life was mostly spent with Dennis and his friends.

Nearly everyone Dennis knew worked in the mining industry. They went to suburban barbeques where the men stood around the BBQ nursing beers and discussing the state of the industry with occasional conversational forays into politics and sport while the women sat around separately and talked home renovations, schools and consumption of luxury products.

The first time Cameron experienced this she was somewhat thrown aback by it. One of Dennis' friend's wives was holding forth in the little women's circle on the patio and explaining her recent and very expensive decision to renovate her kitchen.

'I just had to do something with it, every time I looked at it the bloody thing bothered me, that kitchen just wasn't us anymore.'

Cameron had never heard anyone get this emotionally involved with a kitchen before. She didn't think there was this much to think about with kitchens. Her grandparents had never renovated their kitchen in all the time they'd had it. She'd never heard of anyone in Boddington renovating their kitchen and she most certainly had never heard anyone complain that their kitchen "wasn't us" anymore.

She asked Dennis about it afterwards and tried to understand the mentality. Dennis had lived most of his life around these people and thought it was more or less normal.

'That's just how people in the city are love, they take these sorts of things a bit more seriously than people in Boddington I suppose. Plus there's a lot more money up here, Greg is running the Salt Hill project up in the Pilbara so he's on good coin, good

enough to not worry about kitchen renovations when his wife decides she wants them anyway.'

Cameron pondered this for a second before asking a question.

'So the men dig big holes in the desert and make loads of money and the women stay in the city and spend the money? That's how it works?'

Dennis laughed at such a crystal-clear diagnosis of the situation.

'That's the Australian economy in a nutshell my love, just don't rock the boat, too many people have a vested interest in keeping it going.'

Cameron adjusted to her new environment and the new people. She was happy with Dennis, married life suited her, and the thought of many good years to come helped keep her hollow darkness at bay for long periods of time. Her job at the Hairdressers was fine, the boss was okay and the customers were agreeable enough. She got used to the women in Dennis' social circle and made friends with a few of them. She was, as she discovered quite by accident one day, very happy and content with her new life.

They had been married for almost a year when Cameron told Dennis she was ready to start a family. She stopped taking her birth control and decided to let nature take its course.

Just as she was planning this future her grandfather died.

She had been going back to Boddington once a month and every time it seemed both her grandparents were weaker and frailer. They loved hearing from her and expressed deep satisfaction that she was building a happy new life with Dennis in the city.

Now she was returning to Boddington for the funeral.

It was a sad affair; it rained all day and everyone crammed into the little Catholic church and smelt like wet dogs. The priest said his words, they filed out, the hole in the ground at the little country cemetery was next to his son, Cameron's father, and there was a few centimetres of water in the bottom because of all the rain. They buried him and went back to the house Cameron was raised in for tea and biscuits.

Cameron struggled to find the right words for her grandmother. It was clear she was very frail herself and wouldn't be too long in joining her husband. This is what the end of a life looks like, thought Cameron, frailty, an old house full of old things and a hole in the ground reserved for you right next to your husband and son in a peaceful country cemetery.

They stayed for as long as they could, offered what comfort they could, before they had to go back to Perth.

A few weeks later Cameron was pregnant. A few weeks after that her grandmother died and they returned to Boddington for another funeral.

Rather predictably her grandmother had left all her worldly possessions to Cameron. There was the house and all its contents plus a respectable amount in a savings account. Cameron was unsure what to do with the house and contents and asked Dennis for advice.

'Well the mine down there is still going and will be for a few years yet, you'd probably get a good price for it. I mean, it's old but it's clearly been looked after. Or if you want to keep it you could rent it out, get a little bit of income from that.'

Cameron thought about it, she thought about what sort of future she wanted for their unborn child, she raised the idea of selling the house and putting the money into some sort of trust fund to pay for a private school education for their child. Dennis thought this was an excellent idea.

They went down to Boddington and went through all the things in the old house. Cameron kept some things like photo albums and other sentimental pieces. They contacted all her grandparent's friends and asked them if they wanted anything. A few asked for small items with sentiment attached. Most just wanted to chat to Cameron about her pregnancy. They sold most of the furniture online via the local marketplace. In the end the house was empty.

Cameron walked through the echoing house and thought of how much of her life had been spent here. The room she'd slept in had been her father's when he was a boy as had the bed and the wardrobe. She remembered finding twenty year old porno magazines hidden behind a loose panel in that huge old wardrobe. She could only assume they had been her father's when he'd been a teenage boy. She remembered all the nights in the dining room when they'd eaten her grandmother's home cooked food for dinner and chatted happily amongst themselves. She remembered years of happiness slightly tainted by the dark shadow of her great loss.

It was all over now, she thought, a life, several lives, gone by and done with, never to be again. From dust thou art and to dust thou shalt return, she thought, remembering the lines from Church. She walked to the front door, looked back once and then shut and locked it. She went and gave the keys to the real estate agent

that was selling the place and then drove back with Dennis to Perth and her life.

The house sold fairly quickly and for a decent price. As planned they squirreled the money away in a trust fund so that their unborn child could attend a good school. Cameron tried to think only of the future and, at times, its brightness was enough to make the deep sadness of the past go away.

Cameron grew too large with child to keep working at the hairdresser's. She could no longer manoeuvre around the chairs. She was faced with some enforced idleness until the baby was born. During this time she inevitably thought about the past and it occurred to her that her mother's family must still be living in Perth, she remembered what her grandparents had told her about them, a large Polish family based around Midland, she decided to try and find them.

In the end it was remarkably easy, her mother's surname was distinctive and not very common at all, a couple messages to people on social media and she found Maria, her mother's sister. They agreed to meet the next weekend.

Cameron did what research she could, she looked up the address Maria had given her on Google street view, she showed the results to Dennis.

'Jesus, it's a proper old school wog mansion isn't it? I haven't seen one of them in years, I thought they all got redeveloped or pulled down.'

'Why do you call it a wog mansion? What does that mean?'

Dennis looked at her curiously before realising.

'Sorry I forgot, you haven't seen anything of the world other than Boddington, not many wogs down there is there?' Well it's kind of a style or aesthetic I

suppose. The old school immigrants, once they started making money, they built houses in this style, lots of concrete, vegie patch with tomatoes and whatnot, the big arches and the fake roman statues, go inside and they'll be fake tiger skins on the wall, plastic covers to protect the couch, maybe a little bar or something as well. Almost certainly a back patio with grape vines growing up the pillars. It's the style the old ones liked I suppose. Don't see many of them anymore because the oldies died off or went into retirement homes and the young folk don't like that sort of thing anymore.'

Cameron absorbed this information and stared at the picture on the laptop screen.

'So your mother, she was Polish yeah?'

'Well she was born in Australia but her family were Polish yeah.'

'And what's your dad's family origins?'

'Irish Catholic but been in Australia at least a hundred years or so.'

'So you're half Irish and half Polish, it's a wonder you're not depressed and alcoholic.'

Cameron went to the house on the weekend by herself, she told Dennis that this was something she wanted to do alone. She parked the car in front of the house and looked at it. It was even more distinctive in real life than it had been on Google. Dennis's explanation had ruined it for her, all she could see now was a wog mansion, the idea of her mother growing up in this house was hard to imagine. She wondered how her mother had gone wrong, had her father led her mother astray or vice-versa? Or was it mutual? Were they both drawn to the gutter by some sort of grimy magnet in their souls?

She got out of the car and went and knocked on the door.

Maria answered, Cameron noted the surprise on her face, the shocked recognition and small moment of hurt as Maria looked at her face. I must look a lot like my mother, Cameron thought, she's seen a ghost.

'Oh you must be Cameron, I'm your auntie Maria, come on in and meet everyone, oh look at your baby belly! When are you due? Oh you're positively glowing!'

Cameron let herself be fussed over and led into the house.

The interior of the house was exactly as Dennis had predicted. Cameron was introduced to another woman named Racheal who she was informed was also her auntie.

'This is your grandfather.' Maria said and gestured to an old man with a hard and unsmiling face. Cameron looked at him and found him frightening, he reminded her of those Yugoslavian generals who were convicted of atrocious war crimes after the wars of the 1990's. His face was like a granite slab betraying no emotion, cold and able to bear the most terrible suffering, contemptuous of weakness in any form.

He grunted when Cameron tried to introduce herself. Maria averted any social awkwardness by sitting Cameron down and plying her with a cup of tea and endless questions.

Cameron found herself explaining almost her entire life to these people. How she'd been raised by her grandparents in Boddington, how she'd met Dennis and gotten married and when the baby was due, she felt some obscure need to justify herself to them, to prove that her mother's life had not been in vain be-

cause it had led to her life. As if one life well lived could make up for another life poorly lived and cut short.

Maria and Racheal began to get out various photo albums and memorabilia of her mother. They showed these to Cameron and explained things to her. Cameron found herself feeling slightly less awkward and almost warming to these people. They just want to reclaim some small piece of their sister, she thought, they mean well and are trying their best to bring me in to the family.

Her grandfather said nothing during this entire process. He sat and stared at Cameron like her existence personally aggrieved him.

Maria showed her something from her mother's school days. A newspaper clipping from a now defunct local Midland newspaper reporting on a school play which had been performed to much local acclaim at the Midland town hall.

Cameron began to read aloud the caption under the photograph.

'Midland High School drama students performing Macbeth L to R: Toby Mullane, David Peterson, Esther Czedj....Czedjiic...Cz..'

Cameron vainly tried to pronounce the unfamiliar surname, she realised, with mounting panic, that she'd never actually pronounced it out loud before. She'd read it from scribbles on the backs of old photos but never had cause to say it aloud in front of people before. She began to get flustered and panicky.

Maria, as kindly as she could, corrected her and told her the proper pronunciation.

'She can't even say her own mother's name properly.'

The first words her grandfather had spoken to her.

Wounded and embarrassed, Cameron made excuses and got out of there as quickly as she decently could. As she drove home to Ocean Reef she made up her mind she wasn't going to stay in touch with them.

The day came for her to give birth. Dennis had forked out for private health insurance so she went to a very nice maternity ward and got the best of care. The birth was neither very hard nor very easy but about average for a woman her age and condition.

It was a little girl and they briefly argued about the name. Cameron had always enjoyed the music of The Cranberries and wanted to name their daughter "Dolores" after the lead singer, Dolores O'Riordan, but Dennis argued that it was far too old fashioned a name. They eventually settled on "Dorothy" as a compromise position and Dorothy Chapman was duly given a birth certificate by the State of Western Australia.

Cameron enjoyed being a new mum and being fussed over. Dennis's parents helped out and were in love with their new granddaughter from the start. Dennis loved being a father and doted on his little girl with a tenderness that made Cameron's heart warm.

Cameron began to believe that she'd made it. She'd found the little slice of happiness that she'd always wanted. The vast emptiness and loss she'd known as a young girl could be, if not defeated, at least contained and prevented from expanding, or so it seemed.

Her life as a new mum suited her. She went to play-groups and socialised with the other mums, she took Dorothy to her doctor's appointments and quizzed the doctor about her health, her baby and her husband filled the horizon of her life and she was happy.

When Dorothy was nearly two years old she was invited to a lunch date with some of her friends she'd made through the playgroup. The lunch was at a restaurant in the Hillary's harbour complex. A family friendly place that was ideal for a small group of mums with prams and kids. Cameron felt a deep sense of happiness as she parked the car, got Dorothy out and put her in the pram. The sun was shining, her baby was happy and healthy, they were going to have a nice lunch with friends, you really can't ask for much more, she thought.

They got a table near the play area and the mums all dumped their kids into the play area without ceremony and then sat down and started chatting before deciding what to eat. The children immediately began to run riot inside the small play area but unless one of them cried out in pain they were largely left to their own devices. The mums chatted happily and caught up on each other's gossip.

The food arrived, the children were retrieved from the play area and induced to nibble on chicken nuggets and tomato sauce before they insisted on going back to the play area and their disrupted games. The mums ate and talked some more.

'That chef is keen on you Cameron.'

Cameron found herself thrown out by this unexpected input from her friend.

'What?' She asked confusedly and felt somewhat horrified, being the object of any man's affection aside from her husband's didn't feel right to her anymore. She'd settled into married life and closed the door on other possibilities.

'He's been staring at you from the kitchen ever since you sat down. I think you've got an admirer.'

She laughed and Cameron blushed out of embarrassment. Her friend rushed to reassure her.

‘Oh don’t stress about it Cameron, of course you’re not going to do anything about it, don’t be silly, but a little attention is nice sometimes, flattering, helps with body confidence.’

Cameron shook her head and tried to change the subject but her friend insisted she take a sneaky look at the chef. She tried to turn her head slowly and make it look casual. She felt slightly foolish, like a high school girl trying to see if a boy she liked had noticed her. She looked over and saw him.

It was Richard.

Her heart stopped when she recognised him. It must have shown on her face because her friend immediately asked if she was okay.

‘Yeah, I just...I recognise him...I went to school with him. Just a shock seeing him again is all.’

‘Are you going to say hello?’

‘Oh no, I wouldn’t know what to say to him, it’s been years, it’s always awkward bumping into school friends again isn’t it? I never know what to say.’

This prompted her friends to start talking about various times they’d bumped into old school friends and the awkwardness that had resulted. The conversation flowed and everyone was safely distracted from the issue of the chef staring at Cameron.

She tried not to look in the direction of the kitchen for the rest of the time. Eventually all the mums gathered up their kids and began to head out to the carpark. Cameron tried to leave as unobtrusively as possible, hoping against hope that Richard would just let her go, that he wouldn’t try and follow her out and talk to her.

She rushed through the process of getting Dorothy strapped into her baby seat, getting the pram into the boot, she was just fumbling through her bag for her keys when she heard the voice behind her.

‘Cammie?’

Her heart simultaneously sank and leapt as she heard his voice.

She turned and looked at him. He was thinner and looked more worn from life than she remembered. He was wearing a chef’s uniform spattered with the grease and sauces of various meals he’d cooked. He had a plaintive look in his eyes, like a child neglected and abused by an alcoholic parent who nonetheless hopes that this time daddy is really going to stop drinking and be a proper father.

It hurt Cameron’s heart to look at him but she couldn’t look away.

‘Hello Richard, long time no see.’

There was a pause, neither of them was sure of what to say next. Richard broke the silence after a minute.

‘You’ve had a baby.’

‘Yes, look I need to get home, she’s going to need a nap and I’ve got things to do around the house and..’

‘Just take this.’ Richard interrupted her and forced a piece of paper into her hand. She took it almost against her will, looked and saw a phone number scribbled in blue pen.

‘I get Mondays and Tuesdays off, we could go for a coffee or something, bring your baby if you want, I just want to see you again, that’s all.’

He disengaged and walked back to the restaurant before she could object. She was left standing next to

her car with a piece of paper in her hand. For a brief second she considered tearing it up or throwing it in the bin but something restrained her. She stuffed it into her purse and got in the car.

She said nothing and did nothing for a week.

It was a Monday morning when she finally gave in and called him. What harm can it do? She thought, we'll have a cuppa and a chat and catch up and that will be that. There's nothing there anymore, she reassured herself, it's all ancient history.

She rang the number.

'Hello Cammie'

'How'd you know it was me?'

'Nobody calls me except work and my parole officer, unknown number can only be you.'

'I see.' She wanted to ask about the parole officer bit but felt it might be a little too direct just yet.

'Um, look if you want to catch up and have a cuppa or whatever we can do it today but it has to someplace family friendly because I have my daughter.'

'Well the conditions of my parole say I'm only allowed a few places anyway. On my days off I usually go to the public library at Whitfords and then to the big shopping centre next door for lunch. Does that suit you?'

Cameron thought for a moment.

'Do they still do the story time thing at that library? I went once or twice with my friend and her kids.'

'Yes I've seen all the mums and bubs doing their thing in the kid's section. I think that happens around ten-thirty or thereabouts. Shall we aim for that?'

'Ok see you then.'

She got off the phone and felt like she'd crossed some Rubicon. It wasn't a question of being unfaithful for her husband, it was neither practical nor possible to fuck Richard while she had Dorothy with her even if she wanted to fuck him which she didn't. It was more a sense of being unfaithful to the new life she'd built with Dennis, she'd got her slice of happiness and now she was looking backwards. She remembered the old Bible stories she'd learned in Church as a child, how the children of Israel had been freed from slavery in Egypt and almost immediately began complaining that they weren't fed as well as they had been in captivity. Perhaps that was her, she thought, she was freed from that great loss and darkness of her early life, she'd got everything she wanted and now she was missing the food in Egypt.

She told Dennis nothing about all of this.

Monday came and she found herself parking out the front of the Whitfords Public Library. She unpacked the pram and put Dorothy in it before looking around to try and spot Richard.

'Hello Cammie.'

The cheerful call across the carpark startled her. Richard was striding over towards her with a small backpack slung over his shoulder. She looked at him carefully, he was definitely skinnier than she remembered, there was a distinct pallor to his skin that hadn't been there before. He looked like he'd been living an unhealthy life for quite some time.

'Hello Richard.'

She didn't know what else to say so they stood there rather awkwardly for a few seconds before Richard bent down to look at Dorothy.

'And what's your name little miss?'

Dorothy gave no answer but merely chewed on her softy toy while staring at this stranger.

‘Her name’s Dorothy, she’s nearly two years old.’ Cameron added helpfully.

‘Well aren’t you just the spitting image of your mother little lady, such a pretty girl.’

Dorothy took this compliment as no more than her due and continued to chew on her toy with casual unconcern.

‘Shall we go in? They should be starting the story time shortly.’

They walked into the entrance of the library and Richard veered off to the checkout machine pulling books out of his backpack.

‘This is the highlight of my week you know, taking my old books back and getting new ones, about as exciting as my life gets these days. You go on with your little one to the kid’s section while I find something new for the week. I’ll join you shortly.’

Cameron accepted this and trundled over to the kid’s section of the library where there was already a gathering of mums and children ready for the story time activity. She pulled Dorothy out of her pram and let her crawl around with the other kids. The story time began as the librarian sat down in front of the kids and engaged them with enthusiasm.

Cameron felt a terrible and unsettling sense of confusion for a moment. It felt as if two separate timelines had crossed over and upset everything.

She watched Richard from across the library. He was in the fiction section choosing books with an intent look on his face, evidently the picking of library books was a serious matter to him. She wondered about his life, he’d said he had a parole officer so what

had he been in prison for? What had happened to medical school?

She felt fairly confident speculating about what had happened but she felt a need to hear it from his mouth. She needed to hear him say it.

Story time ended, the mums stayed and chatted with each other for a while before leaving in a slow trickle with their kids. Richard, seeing that Cameron was now mostly alone, came and sat next to her.

‘Did your little one enjoy that?’

‘Yeah, she’s probably a bit too little to really understand the stories but she likes being with the other kids and playing on the rug.’

‘Wholesome times.’

Cameron looked at him unsure if he was being sarcastic or not. His face betrayed no mockery and appeared to be genuine. She let it go.

‘So what did you get?’

He showed her the books on his lap, there was the new Tim Winton, an old Nevil Shute novel and a book about the Vietnam War.

‘Enough to keep me occupied during the evenings.’

‘So I’m dying to hear about your life since I saw you last. You gonna keep me waiting and guessing or spill your guts?’

He looked awkward and sheepish for a moment, like he’d been caught doing something disreputable by his mother, he shrugged and smiled an uncomfortable smile.

‘Simple answer is I went wrong and it blew up.’

He looked at Cameron as if hoping this would satisfy her. She stared at him unmoved. He realized he was going to have to tell her everything.

‘After I saw you last I flunked out of University, my parents cut off my money in disgust but by then I’d already started dealing a little to support my own use and it just expanded from there. I kept telling myself it was only temporary and that I was going to study again but it just became an all-consuming thing, the drug world will swallow you up if you let it. I started moving more serious amounts and using a bit too. In the end I got caught with a trafficable quantity plus a bunch of dodgy credit cards and various things. The detectives on my case just kept digging and finding things, charge after charge it ended up being. I got a solid whack of time. It was a rude shock I can tell you. Anyway I played the game in prison and was a model prisoner, got a job in the kitchen, they put me on this training course, I ended up getting my certificate 3 in commercial cookery. They gave me day release to work at that place for about six months, I did everything they asked of me and now I’m on parole and living in a halfway house. It’s not total freedom, I still have a lot of restrictions on me, but if I keep on the straight and narrow for another twelve months I’ll be home free.’

He shrugged as if to say “that’s me” and sat in silence waiting for Cameron to respond.

Cameron pondered this tale of woe quietly. It was about what she had expected to happen after the dubious choices she’d seen Richard taking years ago. She felt a certain satisfaction that her prophecies had been proven true. Like the laws of the universe had agreed with her and validated her judgement.

Now where to go from here? Cameron felt unsure what she should say in response to his honesty. For a second or two she had an almost puerile urge to say “I

told you so!” in his face and watch the hurt that resulted. But then another part of her, deep in her heart, felt a tenderness towards Richard like a knot that couldn't be untangled.

For a solid minute or so these two separate impulses wrestled within her, contending against each other like the proverbial two wolves. In the end tenderness and the lingering remnants of the love they'd once shared won out.

‘We should go over to the shopping centre and have something to eat, talk a bit more.’

Richard nodded, quietly relived and feeling like he'd won a small but significant victory. Cameron gathered up Dorothy in the pram and off they went. The first time they'd eaten together in years.

Cameron told Dennis nothing about all this, in the weeks that passed she saw Richard several more times, always at the Whitfords library on a Monday, always going for lunch at the shopping centre afterwards. No further intimacy took place, there was no place they could go and have sex even if they'd wanted to and with Dorothy in tow it wasn't really an option. But a deeper thing was happening, a plan had been suggested by Richard. At first Cameron had said nothing, but she hadn't outright refused, then Cameron asked how possible it actually was, but didn't commit to anything, then gradually she seemed to accept the idea.

She demanded Richard spell it all out to her again.

‘So I was smarter than most when I was dealing. I stashed a lot of my money. Not burying it in the bush like a lot of these idiots do but in offshore accounts in countries that don't give a fuck about warrants from Australian police. I've got enough put away to live

comfortably for a couple of years or we could use it to set up a business or something. I'm still on parole for another year but I know a guy who does excellent quality fraudulent New Zealand passports. They're the best for getting out of the country easily, they don't check them as much as some other countries, if you have to leave the country under the radar always go a New Zealand or maybe Canadian passport.'

'Same guy can get us all the ID we'd need to completely hide our lives. We could be different people over in New Zealand and they'd never be able to find us. We could start again, clean slate, I'd raise your Dorothy and love her as my own because to me if she's part of you then she's got my heart. We could have a child together in a few years if you want. We could have the life and the love that we were always supposed to have Cammie. We could set things right, the way they were supposed to be before I fucked it up. This is our second chance Cameron, not many people get one but we do, let's not waste it.'

Cameron sat across from him in a quiet corner of the food court at the Whitfords shopping centre and took it all in.

It seemed to her that she was at some crucial fork in the road. That her whole future could be decided here and now in the food court.

She reached her hand over to tenderly touch Richard's hand.

'Okay'

She didn't need to say anything more. They went to a photo place in the mall and got passport photos for all three of them. Richard assured her he would have it sorted by the next week.

She met Richard the next week in the same place but instead of going into the library for story time Richard got in her car and they drove to the airport.

As they passed through the city Richard was overcome with a wave of nostalgia.

‘This is the last time I’ll see this city Cammie, can’t come back once we’ve gone. Big part of my life this place for good and bad. Lot of memories in the city by the Swan.’

‘What about Boddington?’

‘Couldn’t give a shit, worthless little bumpkin town full of people with such limited vision they can’t see past the hills around their town.’

They drove over the bridge and towards the airport.

They parked in short term parking because, as Richard said, it didn’t matter as they were never coming back for the car anyway.

They gathered themselves together and headed towards international departures.

‘I’ve booked us into a hotel in Auckland under our new names. We’ll stay there for a few days while we get sorted out. Our new lives are just beginning Cammie.’

Richard was joyous and bursting with life. Cameron watched as he practically bounced as he walked. This was his dream coming true.

They went to where they had to check in. Richard was just in the process of producing the fraudulent New Zealand passports when they pounced.

‘Come with me Mrs Chapman.’

The female Federal Police Officer gently ushered Cameron away just as planned. Richard turned to see

what was happening and three large male Federal Police Officers cornered him.

‘Mr Kennett you are under arrest.’

Cameron turned back to see the hope and life fall out of Richard’s face. He knew he was done, he knew Cameron had been the one who’d done him, all hope was gone for him.

‘That’s for breaking my heart years ago.’

Cameron whispered knowing he couldn’t hear her but also knowing that he knew what she was saying.

She turned her back on the drama just as Richard decided to hopelessly try and fight the now dozen or so Federal Police who’d surrounded him. The shouting faded in her ears as the female officer led her and Dorothy into a room, sat them both down and offered them refreshments.

A short while later a senior officer came in to speak to her.

‘Well it’s done, we’ve got him on the fraudulent passports and documents, plus the breach of parole and now assaulting several officers. He’ll be going back to prison for a long time yet. With the recording you took at the food court we can easily prove conspiracy. I really can’t thank you enough Mrs Chapman. You’ve helped us immensely.’

‘That’s alright officer, I just wanted him out of my life that’s all. He’s not going to be free for a while is he?’

‘No, he won’t see daylight for some time yet Mrs Chapman.’

Cameron nodded happily.

‘Well can I go home now? This little one is going to need a nap soon, too much excitement for one day. You don’t need me for anything else do you?’

‘No Mrs Chapman, I think this is a wrap, we’ve got enough evidence and you’ve done more than enough. On behalf of the Australian Federal Police I want to thank you again for coming to us with this and helping us. You’ve done the community a great service.’

Cameron smiled weakly and gathered Dorothy and her pram and left.

The drive home was long and soothing. Dorothy fell asleep in her baby seat and Cameron listened to a golden oldies station as she passed through the city and on into the northern suburbs.

She got home and was able to make dinner for Dennis as though nothing had happened. When he asked her about her day she told him she’d taken Dorothy to the Whitfords library for the story time activities and then had lunch in the mall. He accepted this without fuss and played with Dorothy lovingly.

Weeks passed. Cameron followed the outcome of the trial. Richard pleaded guilty to all charges but still copped a lengthy sentence. It seemed that since 9/11 the laws about fraudulent passports had been made rather fearsome and that, added to the other charges, meant a lengthy stay in prison for Richard.

She felt a deep satisfaction about the whole thing. Richard had been paid back for breaking her heart and would not bother her shiny new life again. The past had been buried and the dirt brushed over so that nobody could see that there was ever a grave there. She could live henceforth unbothered by the past and enjoy the slice of happiness she had carved out for herself against all odds.

Several weeks later she woke one Sunday morning before Dennis or Dorothy. She slipped out of the bedroom without waking Dennis, checked in on Dorothy and left them both to sleep. It was still absurdly early and the sun had not yet risen. She wondered why on earth she was waking up so early but decided to just roll with it.

As quietly as she could she made herself a cuppa and sat on the patio furniture outside. She could see no lights nor hear any noises from any of the other houses in the neighbourhood so she assumed that the rest of Ocean Reef was still asleep.

She sipped her tea and thought. Her and Dennis had decided to try for another baby a few weeks ago and they'd made love again last night. She wondered if she'd managed to conceive yet. If there was a life growing inside her right now. She imagined what the future would be like for this child, a happy life here in Ocean Reef, a good school, loving parents, the world would open its arms for this child and life would be a sweet and beautiful thing.

She thought of her own life, the great loss and sadness that still plagued her thoughts in quiet moments like these. She thought of her parents, druggie fuck ups killed by their own stupidity and the world mourned not their loss. She thought of her grandparents, decent, godly people who struggled and strived to maintain goodness and decency against the tide of the world, now dead and buried in a little country cemetery.

She thought of all the loss and death in the world and how little any individual life mattered to the world.

The sun began to rise very faintly, she finished her cup of tea and listened carefully, she could just make out that faint background hum of traffic that you always hear in the city if you listen carefully. When she'd first moved up from the country it had been really noticeable and had at times bothered her. Now it was background noise, barely noticed unless she listened for it.

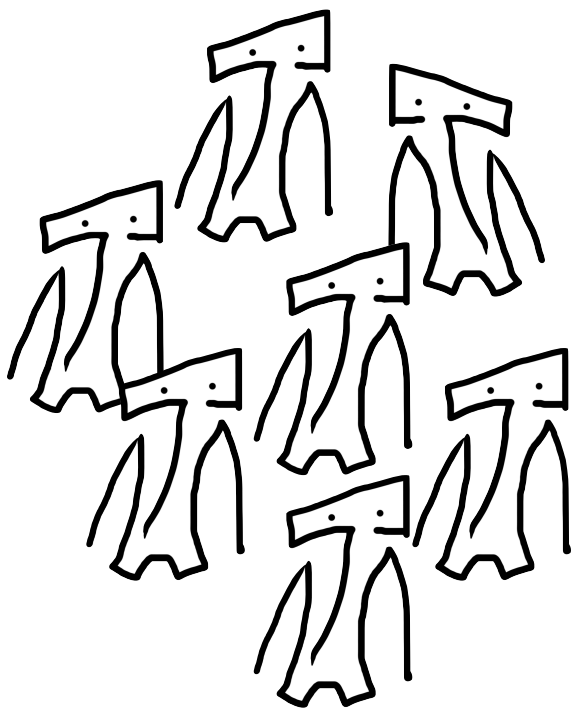
She heard it now as the house containing her husband and daughter was silent. The sound of people getting up to do whatever it was they had to do with the day, the sound of people going to or from work, the sound of people driving home after nights out, the sound of life being lived.

She decided to make another cup of tea and then if Dorothy stayed asleep she was going to wake Dennis and have sex. She wanted to conceive again. She wanted another baby. She wanted to love and live as much as she could for as long as she could.

There was nothing else, she decided, other than love and life so grab as much as you can.

SAME OLD SAME OLD

BEN MACNAIR



Int: An otherwise empty train carriage.
Two men in worn out suits are facing each other.

GARETH

Ah, it was just another of those business fights.

DARREN

Like always?

GARETH

Yes, like always.

DARREN

Gets a bit boring, after a while, doesn't it?

GARETH

Yes, very boring.

DARREN

A bit like us.

GARETH

A cliché of characters and situations.

DARREN

I wouldn't go that far.

GARETH

I would.

DARREN

Really? Why?

GARETH

Look at us. What have we done with our lives? I mean, really done. What will be the whole reason for us when we slip this mortal coil?

DARREN

Steady on there mate. You had a bad meeting with logistics, there's no need to get all maudlin on us. This is a conversation on a train, not a Samuel Beckett play.

GARETH

That is how they start though.

DARREN

Samuel Beckett plays?

GARETH

No conversations.

DARREN

Oh, not all of them start like this.

GARETH

They do. Someone says something, someone else says something, than someone else will say something, and around and around it goes. Until someone says something wrong

DARREN

or off-colour

GARETH

or offensive

DARREN

and the whole thing grinds to

GARETH

a complete stop. And then someone says something either

DARREN

an apology

GARETH

or something in support of the remark,

DARREN

and away we go

GARETH

again.

DARREN

We sounded like a married couple then.

GARETH

No, there was less eye-brow raising,

DARREN

and fewer passive aggressive sighs.

GARETH

Your Maureen still complaining about the Patio?

DARREN

Yes.

GARETH

Have you tried explaining to her it is not your fault?

DARREN

Yes.

GARETH

She still doesn't believe you?

DARREN

No. The bodies were found, but they have been there for twenty seven years.

GARETH

How long have you lived there?

DARREN

Five years.

GARETH

And she still suspects you?

DARREN

Yes. I didn't want the patio touched because it didn't need to be done.

GARETH

And she thinks it is because you murdered someone, and left them under the patio of a house you moved into five years ago?

DARREN

The Police haven't asked anything, they are looking into who it might be, and why they have not been found yet.

GARETH

So, do you know who the murderer might be?

DARREN

I have a few ideas.

GARETH

Oh, who?

DARREN

Mr Jones the Lighthouse Keeper, and Mr Smith the School care-taker.

GARETH

Just them?

DARREN

Yes, at the moment, just then.

GARETH

Have the Police got anything to go on?

DARREN

Not yet. But neither have the kids next door. Well there are three teenagers, a very large dog, and an older man who can't shave properly.

GARETH

Are they doing anything really bad?

DARREN

No, I think that they just have a podcast.

GARETH

Like everyone these days then?

DARREN

Yeah, pretty much so.

GARETH

Did you see the game last night?

DARREN

Nah. Maureen and I were out.

GARETH

Where?

DARREN

Our classes in mindful passive aggression and eyebrow raising.

GARETH

It was a good game.

DARREN

Ok. Is this your stop?

GARETH

Yes, it is.

DARREN

Ok. see you tomorrow.

GARETH

For more of the same?

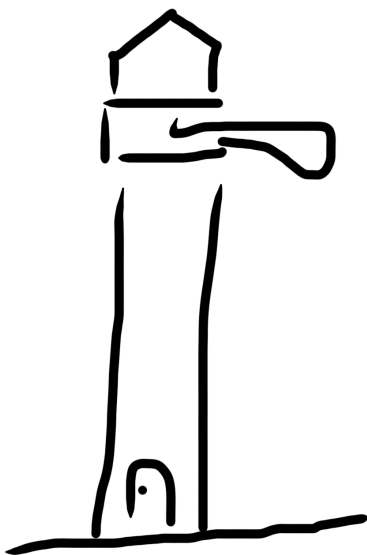
DARREN

And less of anything else.

(Scene ends)

ZIPPOS BY THE SCORE

THOMAS M. McDADE



I knew Heidi before the English class. That is, by her name tag and a tad more. I was living in a cellar apartment. My work was thirty-six minutes away. A couple of times a week, I'd leave early and have breakfast at Cash Tyler's Pancake Stop where she waitressed in a milk chocolate colored uniform, the joint's name in calligraphy across her white apron. Her dark eyes shined behind wire-rimmed glasses. Some called her white orthopedics, space shoes. A teen told his mom they were from another galaxy. Despite their size, she moved around the room gracefully. On her wrist was a bracelet with different colored horses dangling. Her hair, deep black was bundled in a net. A postal worker said it looked like a bag of eels. Her uncovered ears lobes displayed silver studs. A loud city laborer who waved a flag for road crews blurted out that Heidi was in the right place, flat as a pancake. I calculated perfect silver buck stacks that fit her slim, tall body just fine. No visible reaction from Heidi. I imagined her dropping a thermal pot on the breast critic's head or at least emptying one in her lap. I was on a raisin toast kick and twice she gave me an extra slice for no additional charge. She didn't say "boo" but did venture a thin smile. I fantasized chunky raisins between my fingertips then taut for my tongue.

I did a double take the first time I saw her in class. She'd missed the first session. Her hair was free, draped over her left shoulder onto her beige all-weather coat and shaded one eye. Her uniform peeked out the bottom a couple or so inches. I'd never seen her wearing lipstick before. The shade smacked of boysenberry syrup a favorite of mine that Tyler's didn't offer. She plunked down at the desk next to me and

winked, some of the fruit glazed her teeth. No glasses. Why did she wear them at Tyler's? We'd been given a note at registration to choose any piece in the text and write three loose-leaf pages about it, single-spaced, with no margins. Nearly everyone followed that instruction for the first meeting. Miss Hogan asked for volunteers to read just the first page. I was the first to speak up. I'd written about Nathaniel Hawthorn's "Young Goodman Brown." I concentrated on the serpent-like staff and the Catechism. I included my childhood experiences with garter and green snakes and the *Baltimore Catechism*. The nun who taught me in fifth grade who some kids called a witch was a match for Brown's Catechism teacher, Goody.

At Heidi's debut, Miss Hogan was standing at the door passing back our work. It was as if she'd started to slit her wrists then thought better of it there were so many red comments and corrections on pages. She noted that my grammar was poor and there are typewriters available at the library. Heidi raised her hand. "I apologize for missing the first class, I had to work late," she said." That puzzled me. "I did complete the assignment," she added.

"You are forgiven, Miss Lawrence." I'd browsed the text table of contents and skimmed a story by a D.H. *Lawrence*. She walked over to Heidi's desk and held out her hand for the theme that was in a purple folder then briskly scanned the pages. She removed the outline, waved it as if a tabloid for sale and gave praise. I wrote mine after I finished the writing. "Barns aren't built without blueprints. You may read toward the end of class, Heidi," She said, then recommended a writing guide, *The Elements of Style*.

Heidi didn't orate sitting down. I thought she would have wanted a rest after being on her feet all day. At least her maroon flats looked comfortable. She read about her dream of riding quarter horses at Pike's Peak Meadows and called a race as a track announcer would. Holy shit, one of the horses was named Reason Traps and the D.H. story was about horseracing! I saw her charging through the stretch winning a race by a nose. She included a stable fire scene to go with the story, "Barn Burning" which made sense of the outline remark. Heidi's finale was pulling out a Zippo and flicking an inch of flame. She got away with reading her entire composition. "We need more about Faulkner's characters and less about you," suggested Miss Hogan. I considered raising my hand to ask if the barn in the story was built from an outline or instinct but I backed down. I didn't want to establish myself as the class wiseass. Miss Hogan wished us a good night. I thought she might hold Heidi back for a word or two but it didn't happen. Heidi hurried out. I was on her tail. The forest-green Corvette waiting for her was a convertible. The top was the color of a gooey, lightly cooked pancake. I canceled my silly notion of asking her out. I felt like a fool thinking that two free pieces of toast meant anything more than that. I quit Tyler's and switched to pumpernickel. Heidi never asked about my breakfast absence in class. The waitress at the Fence & Rail Diner was grandmotherly and wore sneakers. Her glasses dangled off her neck on a pink cord. She only used them when figuring a check. She added "mother of 5" under "Suzy."

Miss Hogan looked Irish as her name and somewhat like a student-teacher I had a crush on in high school. This version usually wore a faint smile or one was on the cusp when she greeted our non-degree English 100 Class. This was my first use of the G.I. Bill. I'd done three years in the Navy. Sometimes I thought she might be about to laugh at us and our chances of ever earning a sheepskin. Her opening remarks made it clear that Conrad and Faulkner were her favorite writers. "I hope they'll become yours." She was a classy dresser, wore scarves that were probably silk. I'd measure her at 5-10. Her skirts fell well below her knees, always pumps with low heels. She was bustier than Heidi. Her blouses were often as colorful as a jelly-bean assortment. I worked at Joyce's Supermarket on Broadway Street. I couldn't resist breaking open a bag occasionally when I was sweeping aisles to pick at through the day. My usual job was bagging groceries. My former shipmates on the USS Rampla (DD-810) would have gotten a laugh out of my petty larceny before realizing we'd filched jellied candy from lifeboat sea rations. Yeah, they would have howled at my bagboy status. If the toothpick chewing manager, Claude Pence caught me I'd have been fired on the spot. He was as hard as jellybeans were soft. The treats were risky since I had applications in at IBM, Dow Chemical and Coors Brewery for janitorial work. Miss Hogan's hair was brown and curly, often tied back. A couple of times I thought I saw streaks vaguely red. Her engagement ring was impressive. When she was making points with that hand, I'd watch for it grabbing light to sparkle. Working the gem slowly, she could have hypnotized me. A ruby-red jewel hooked each lobe. I liked her best in tweed and that's what

she was wearing the night of the Gotham incident. A cat-scan couldn't have detected a speck of cheer. Her face and slightly freckled cutely turned up nose went marble firm. The student behind all this, Clive Benson, worked at IBM. I thought employees there needed degrees. Maybe he had a very low level job like the one I was after. His paper criticizing Boulder would have to be rewritten she said, voice cracking withholding rage, "UNACCEPTABLE." After she ripped it into symmetrical squares, he flashed his usual shit-eating Big Apple grin and agreed to resubmit. He never told anyone what he'd written. I imagined her losing sleep over the assault on her precious city although her eyes weren't bloodshot as far as I could see. They *were* misty. Miss Hogan never had problems with any other student work. I think she used up all her emotions set aside for our class on Benson and she'd mentally thrown up her hands and accepted us as a one-ring anything goes circus. I hoped no big shot administrator would ever sit in on a class and make her clamp down or replace her. Maybe one was present, undercover. I kept to myself, rarely even hi to classmates except a nod to Heidi. I learned about them when they read the allotted page. Most of which were forgettable and I'm sure mine were also. Never any standing ovations! It wasn't always the first page, one, two or three might be written thickly on the blackboard as if she'd used the whole side of the chalk. Heidi was the only student who'd read all three pages of a theme. My take on a satiric essay by James Thurber on soap operas got me my only "A." I'd worried about the lack of her two main authors. I based it on the hackneyed sayings of used car dealerships. "Pretty Mitty, Mr. Petit," she said after I read the second page. "Wally," I responded but

she paid no attention. I hadn't saved enough cash to experience an auto purchase in Boulder. I walked, hitchhiked and took buses. I needed wheels if one of the "big three" hired me.

Eloise Erle, the woman who sat next to me wanted to be a Brahma bull rider. She squeezed in Faulkner's use of the doppelganger. There *were* twins in Faulkner's fire story. She knew a rider with that German name who'd been injured by a bull. I wondered if Miss Hogan made a written comment about Rodeo animal abuse under the mark. I thought the always present peace symbol pin suggested she had many axes to grind and it seemed out of sync with the big rock on her finger. Eloise oozed confidence. I imagined bruises from spills that I wouldn't have minded soothing with healing lotions. My hazel eyes met her pale blues at her first unexpected "hello." Her complexion was flawless. I thought she was too dainty to be bucking around on the backs of bulls. Her neck length hair was auburn. Musk perfume trailed her. There was a genuine cowboy in the class named Craig who aspired to be an FBI agent. I don't know how many gallons his hat would rate. His face was small. His boots carried in earth and more. A deep breath could bring a mix of musk and manure. He scored points with Miss Hogan because he'd done extra reading and mentioned Faulkner's "Spotted Horses," in his page three presentation. He'd held up a cookie. "The Texan in the story loved gingersnaps," he announced before popping it into his mouth. Miss Hogan told him to find synonyms for "excite." He'd used it three times. Mike Mallory was from Massachusetts. He'd driven to Boulder to be with his girlfriend Mary. He wrote about losing his

ambulance driving job for running a red light while taking an overdose victim to the hospital. That dismissal sounded either far-fetched or criminal. He currently drove a garbage truck. He went sentimental about Mary sticking with him and wasn't embarrassed about his gig. "There was no Faulkner, Hawthorn, Fitzgerald, Thurber or Conrad or anyone from the textbook heading for the ER in that ambulance was there?" Miss Hogan asked. She looked pleased with her comment.

Mike reddened but responded, "Hemingway drove an ambulance in the Great War." Miss Hogan surprised me by saying "touché." In the hall before a class I overheard stooped shouldered Carson Miller who looked like he'd skipped shaving for a week or more joking. "Mary must be desperate to stick with a smelly trash man." I pictured Miller on all fours sniffing the floor like a slave owner's bloodhound. He snickered and slapped himself on the thigh. I knew Mike came to class straight from work. My nose never picked up an aroma of swill. The musk and ranch shit must have provided camouflage. Miss Hogan did twitch her nose more than once but she never resorted to potpourri or incense. Miller loved German cars especially BMWs. "They leave Audis, Peugeots, Alfa Romeos and Porsches in their deluxe dust. As for American heaps, better off with Billy Faulkner's Abner the arsonist's wagon," he said trying to grin like the man from New York I suspected. Could my eyes have tricked Miss Hogan's lips into miming "horse shit?" What brand of car did Miller drive, a VW?" It wasn't long before I found out. He was walking toward a bus stop but did a U-turn when he saw me.

No doubt any lemon among those “heaps” was tons better than my 1953 Buick that shimmied at exactly forty-six MPH but made it to Boulder where it died. I was taking a scenic haphazard route to California pretending I was in a novel. Clark Mathis a sailor on the Ramply from Alaska lent me *On the Road* to read in a five inch fifty-four magazine during gunnery exercises. He once told me, “Learn what books to read. Read them and you’re set for life.” That was what put me in Miss Hogan’s non-degree class. I took no college prep classes in high school. Mathis dropped a seventy pound projectile on his foot. I’ll never forget the look of raw hurt on his face when it hit. His gapped front teeth that he was always trying to hide were on full display. The injury got him off the ship. I don’t know if the accident was planned. He didn’t return. I kept the book that contained two of his poems, one written on the blank inside of each cover. I thought they were pretty good, for all I knew about poetry. One was about a laundry converted into a nightclub.

“Everyone here,
a time or another
a blues howling stray.
But never again
in fluorescence dim
as alleys of sleep
where memories hang
like polyester blouses
and shirts made silky
through miracles
of St. Vincent de Paul.
Hooks, clasps and buttons fly

undone and espresso is free.”

The other was a driving poem.

“I was longing for more
company than my off-key singing.
I’d picked up a hitchhiker in PA
and promptly scared the living shit
out of him with some risky driving.
Maybe the word had leaked
and travelers wrapped fingers around thumbs
buried fists in pockets at my approach.
I palm pounded the radio in Ames, Iowa
and the static that kicked in
was music for my songs.”

Did Mike Mallory write poems about Mary? I’d seen them downtown on Pearl Street on a Saturday. Her hair was braided. Once in a while he’d pat her on the ass. They were a good looking couple. She had a fine figure, he had an athletic build. His arm was locked in hers. She was carrying a long stemmed rose.

Carolyn Moore had a gummy smile and medium length off-blonde frizzy hair that was unruly to say the least. I bet she’d been called “cute” many times. She announced right quick that she worked for a house cleaning outfit called “Simply Immaculate.” She took a sharp look around the room for an expression knocking her job. She roomed with three other women in a beat-up poorly renovated barn. She nicknamed it “Windburn” because she thought the wind sounded like raging fire and apropos of one in Faulkner’s Yok-

napatawpha County. Her dream was to be a cheerleader for the CU football team and she included sexual content in her work no matter what. She could tell the dimensions of a date's manhood by the size of his shoes. When she was a virgin, she judged the potency of a date by throwing her panties against the wall to test for stick-to-itiveness. She managed to work in Zelda Fitzgerald's affair with an aviator and Gertrude Stein's lesbianism. She never wore a bra and was likely to give her C-cup breasts (she'd shared the size) a boost by crossing her arms under them while puckering her full lips. Miss Hogan rolled her eyes but did not chastise. She offered a writing tip: avoid the use of "There was." Carolyn snapped her fingers and said "I will abide."

During a lecture on Conrad's "Heart of Darkness," Miss Hogan stated almost angrily that British imperialism was equal to the Holocaust. I wondered where U.S. slavery ranked on her atrocity list. Would she have focused on the nine times in "Barn Burning" that Faulkner used a racial slur if a black student had been in the class? Would she have substituted "Negro" or "black?" How did the equality of horror sit with Leslie Fox in the back row? She'd mentioned her Bat Mitzvah and the Torah Ceremony in one of her readings and to stay on track with literature, she revealed that Faulkner was an anti-Semite. Leslie had an extremely slim waist to go with her very large breasts. When Miss Hogan was expounding on "Heart of Darkness," half glances at Leslie's chest distracted me from my mind's image of the gush from the speared deckhand's wound that filled Marlowe's shoes. I couldn't shake it. Did Miss Hogan find out that Benson was Jewish and

her comparison was revenge? The paper he wrote in place of the censored piece did praise Alan Ginsberg's recent reading at the University. He gave Miss Hogan a smug look after mentioning Faulkner's jimsonweed reference in *The Sound and the Fury*. He never expressed a car preference. Hearing of that natural hallucinogen, Spence Pearson, a tall hippie with blond hair touching his shoulder blades stood up, applauded and yelled "far out." Miss Hogan shot him a peace sign as she asked him to "cool it." Leslie lasted just four classes, Craig too, but of course. I'd seen them at the bottom of Observatory Hill. She wore his cowboy hat. He sported her colorful yarmulke. He kissed her and the western lid fell to the ground.

I first noticed tape covering busybody Carson's knuckles when he was telling Heidi in the hall that he was law and order minded and was mighty sorry that cowboy Craig had departed because he carried a pistol in an ankle holster. "A student needs protection in a class like this." She frowned and quickly showed him her back. He raised two fingers into a reverse peace sign. I wondered if he was a boxer. Not a heavyweight that's for sure, not even middle. A Mutual of Omaha salesman named Avery with a distinctive voice wrote about selling a policy to F. Scott Fitzgerald. He claimed that Fitzgerald and Faulkner collaborated on a Hollywood screenplay, *Three Comrades*.

"Faulkner had nothing to do with that film," corrected perturbed Miss Hogan.

"It's about Nazis," butted in Benson. Avery shrugged. He tried to sell me some term life. Besides Leslie and Craig two additional students failed to last. They'd never handed in papers and offered lame excuses: Sid,

a cook judging from the whites he wore favored mirror sunglasses and looked like he was constantly snapping his fingers but was just rubbing them together and a skittish woman named Cheryl who I saw chatting with Carolyn and then hugging her on what proved to be her last class. She had high cheekbones and long eyelashes danced for her bright eyes. Her hair was frosted. She put the tip of her right index finger across her lower lip when listening to Miss Hogan lecture.

I figured and feared Miss Hogan would visit Joyce's sooner or later and sooner won. She wore hiking boots, jeans, and a red and black flannel shirt. Her hair was topped by a Greek fisherman's cap. I sacked her groceries, wild rice, avocados, Quaker Oats and trail mix fixings, no jellybeans. We made no eye contact. Did she frown on mixing the classroom with real life? She asked Donna, the dimpled cashier if someone would carry her bag for her. I trailed behind, dropped it on the passenger seat of her gray Ford Taurus as she instructed. She thanked me, smiled to my left and handed me fifty-cents. Was she joking to herself about a student old enough to be through with college doing work usually reserved for high school kids? Would she bring me up in a roundabout way in class? A guy named Smith I worked with on a weeklong job waxing floors in a University dorm told me Henry Ford was openly anti-Semitic. Claude Pence was waiting with his arms folded when I returned. He pointed to one of the "No-Tipping," signs then walked me to the *March of Dimes* coin holder. I gave up one of the quarters, kept the other as a good luck charm. Spence Pearson was the next English 100 visitor. He saluted me twenty

times alternating hands. He counted them off as if he were in boot camp and being punished by an officer for some silly infraction. I expected him to drop to the floor for pushups. Man, he was soaring. I thought of a line from a Kingston Trio song, "Higher than a kite can fly." He asked where the men's room was and I pointed but he ran down the bakery aisle. About five minutes later he flew by me and out the door, no forehead chops. Claude summoned me to the customer service area. "I hope he's no friend of yours," he said. "Hell, no," I answered.

He spit his toothpick into the wastebasket, ordered me to clean the restroom. I hustled. There was a Hostess Cupcake wrapper on the floor that I quickly pocketed. Christ, Claude would have called the cops in a hurry if he'd found it. Worse than that, he might have blamed me for lifting the sweets. They were my favorite and he'd clerked the sale himself once when I'd bought a pack for lunch. Would Spence confess to Miss Hogan and the class? He'd get everyone smiling for certain. Would his delivery be as dramatic as his eye-rolling and head scratching performance when comparing Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* to Parker's Pastry Shop near Joyce's where I stopped once in a while? "The prune jelly donuts contain narcotics" he'd said deepening his voice and pausing between each word. "They were popular in Faulkner's dazzling hometown of Oxblood, Tennessee."

"Oxford, Mississippi," corrected Miss Hogan.

I have to say that the highlight of the semester was provided by Carolyn. After a self-abortion in one of the dorms, she did a demo to go with her reading that mentioned Faulkner's novel about abortion, *Sanctu-*

ary. She demonstrated how to put on a condom using the top of a broomstick for a penis. When she rolled it off she blew it up. Then she pulled a pin out of her belt and popped it. Spence shouted out, "Failed the Breathalyzer!" Miss Hogan gave Carolyn thumbs up. Would Spence ever light up a marijuana stick in class? I wondered what stunt Carolyn would pull with Joyce's for a stage. I'd welcome any of my classmates except Miller or Benson. Yeah, I imagined Heidi walking down the pancake mix aisle, ha.

I got a letter from Dow offering an interview. I took a bus there and I felt good about the way I'd answered the volleys of questions the personnel officer threw at me and I was very confident about the written test. In the back of my silly mind, Miss Hogan was coaching me. If I got hired I'd try to secure a loan from GAC Finance after a couple weeks to buy a car.

A week later I got a telegram, first one in my life. The landlord's wife was in the yard when I got home from work. She seemed as happy as I was about my news. I gave Claude notice. "Not required, I'll make out a check for what you have barely earned," he said smiling. I thought such a dismissal broke the law but I was mostly happy to have gotten the boot. I hustled to the bank to cash the check and deposit a few bucks. I noticed a new security guard, no longer nervous but armed Cheryl. She stood solid as a statue and didn't give me a glance.

I wrote a paper about Claude and his market, said he had a "Heart of Darkness." I raised my voice for the double-bagging, "Only if the customer requests it."

Miss Hogan of course had. She bit her lip, slowly shook her head and finally smiled. It was our last class and I had another paper with me so I could take her up on her extra credit offer. No one else raised a hand.

“You may read all three pages, Tom.”

Wonderful, Heidi and I were the only students to be granted that privilege. It was about a Ramply sailor named from Augusta, Maine named Lars who started to light a Lucky during a darken ship exercise. An officer lectured that during wartime his flame could draw a Kamikaze. He confiscated the Zippo. Lars ate the cigarette. I threw in a childhood memory about a model pirate ship I'd built that a bully put a match to when I was watching a guy reel in a pickerel. The little Jolly Roger flag was the only survivor. Miss Hogan looked at Heidi. “Do you have any special effects?” She fired up her Zippo. I treasured that gesture.

Spence yelled out, “Hot Damn, Call for the bucket brigade.”

I bought a bike at The Salvation Amy that made a job loading bricks on flatbeds possible, a penny per, cash at the end of the day. It was a girl's model. The plastic streamers that fluttered off the handlebar grips pleased me and I sometimes handled them and thought of Heidi's hair even though they were pink. A fellow worker, Jake Malden whose fists matched the blistering and cramping cuboids owned a motorcycle and didn't let me forget the gender of my wheels. I day-dreamed of taking his Harley for a joyride and safely jumping off before it crashed down into a ravine. Jake probably had plans to stomp my wheels to death. I tried to keep my mitts work-ready by doing some simple exercises. Slowly moving my fingers up and

down, I fantasized Carolyn as my piano. What a fickle fellow I'd become. I dropped bricks on my feet enough to give me a temporary limp but the pain was nothing like Clark's projectile injury. I still winced when thinking of that. Did he work it into a poem? My mark came in the mail, a "B" and I was thrilled! How could I get non-degree credits switched to degree? Maybe Miss Hogan would help.

My first Dow Chemical day I waited for a bus but one never came. I was close to panicking when I stuck out my thumb. The third car was the charm. I was the hitchhiker in the Mathis's poem but this Oldsmobile Cutlass's radio worked and my chauffeur was slow, steady and very careful at the wheel. He was smoking a cigar and the music was country. He sang along with "Pop the Top" and continued after switching to local news.

"Pop a top again

I think I'll have another round

Another one my friend

Then I'll be gone and you can let some other fool sit down"

He apologized for not taking me to the gate. Getting out I glanced in the back seat, a foot or so of empty Coors cans. I walked about a half mile. There was a line of protesters, carrying signs denouncing Dow for manufacturing chemicals used in Vietnam. There were men, woman, blacks, Asians and Latinos and to my amazement, Spence, Miss Hogan and Carolyn. It was as if a spell had been cast. Carolyn ran to me. I accepted the sign she offered. It said "DOWse DOAN."

Employment was no longer important. I swung my placard, flipped and spun it. The crowd's frenzy was contagious. The police broke us up. They threatened with nightsticks but never used them. She wasn't Miss Hogan anymore. She was Terri.

Terri drove us to the Faucet Bar. She was not the classroom or supermarket Miss Hogan. Spence and Carolyn had serious moments but always some goofy relief. There were so many changes; so many sides to these people. There would be more and more I was certain. I felt like a flat spare tire until Steve brought beers to the table: "A scholarly man of honor and courage," he said, shaking my hand. Terri and Carolyn leaned to kiss my cheeks. Carolyn blew in my ear. Terri reached into her cleavage to pull out the engagement ring and slipped it on, lucky rock. I confessed that I wasn't at Dow to protest but to go to work but no regrets. "Don't sweat it," said, Spence, "You're now a landscaper at Juniper Jack's Organics." I knew the place and was relieved. "Who's Doan?" I asked. I got the rundown on Dow's president. I heard about Immanuel Kant, Linus Pauling and Martin Luther King, Jr. I'd never experienced such passion. Hands flew, fingers danced, and I thought of puppets, shouts dropped to whispers. "What do you think? Tom," asked Terri. I felt myself reddening.

"I really don't have anything to offer, but this is a start. I'm at square one." They applauded. Carolyn told me to get a library card and then related a motorcycle story. She recently met Spence in the history stacks. He asked if she wanted to take a bike ride. "We went to Estes Park. What a trip, huh Spence?" she purred. He fanned himself with his hand. "Don't you

know he stole the son-of-a-bitch, left it at the library like it was a book he'd borrowed?"

"Spence, keep your ass out of jail, please. We need you," warned Terri.

"I worked with a guy named Jake who is a biker but I couldn't see him near a book," I said.

"Huge fists?" asked Spence.

"Massive."

"He's a Hell's Angels reject. He's a badass talker, that's it."

I asked where Heidi stood politically. I got quizzical looks and silence until Carolyn said, "She's often prone under Cash Tyler and that's all that matters. I saw her driving his Stinger just the other day. I hear he's convinced her he has contacts that'll get her into the horseracing game but I bet he's just interested in getting into her lingerie, probably monogramed." Later I learned that Heidi's mother was an O. Henry fan and cherished her collection of his complete stories. Since his middle name was Porter, it became Heidi's too. Was the "HLP" across the front or back? Tom Petit was all I had. I liked the NMN the Navy used for me. We went to a store at the Shop-Way Center and took our photos in a do-it-yourself kiosk. "Some advance mug shots," Spence quipped. My head was spinning Heidi sorrow when I got home but it was the memory of Carolyn's purring at Spence that echoed me to sleep.

I biked out to Juniper's. Spence was waiting for me. He introduced me to Jack, a tall man with graying sideburns who walked with a limp. I filled out the tax form and a very short application and then joined Spence in a dump truck full of evergreens to be plant-

ed at the Olympic ski coach's house in the Flatirons. I broke the unfamiliar Spence silence. "Hey, why in the hell does Beattie need more trees?" Spence rolled down the window and spit. "They're Norway Spruces. He wants to pretend he's in the Alps. Oh, the way you were looking at Carolyn I bet you were wishing you could get into her forest." I sipped the coffee he'd poured me earlier from a Thermos. It was spiked. "I cannot tell a lie," I said and regretted being so obvious.

We worked well together regardless of the alcohol or weed buzz. According to our calculations we set Colorado tree planting and Japanese garden building records. We shoveled dirt, gravel and peat moss, dug up and balled trees for travel. "Imagine screwing a tree," said Spence.

"That's a knotty predicament."

"Damn good one," he said, slapping my back.

We planted roses that we renamed Carolyn and Terri. I christened a pink one Heidi and a mustard one Eloise. I kept those handles to myself. One day when I was carrying a cement birdbath to a customer's car with Spence following, a bag of mulch over his shoulder, I spotted Claude out of the corner of my eye. He dashed into the sales area but wasn't there when we returned. Jack's office couldn't contain the screaming. "I don't care if you are my brother-in-law. You are not going to tell me who the hell to hire or fire." The door flew open and Claude nearly tripped out. His toothpick stayed put. More than one I'd say, to the thickness of a wooden match. He never raised his eyes from the ground as he hurried off. The woman we'd helped gave us each a buck tip.

One night there was knocking on the window of my cellar room just as I was going to bed. I got my flashlight and shined it at the glass and there was Carolyn's smushed face. I nudged the wobbly lock and she slid in. She kissed me. I could taste some pane dirt. I turned on the light. She surveyed my room disapprovingly. "Well, at least you have a radio," she said tuning in a classical music station and when I thought the night was about to glow, she said. "Oh, hell, let's go to the Pithy Pines. This place could be a monk's cell."

"Take my bicycle?" I joked. "I couldn't see how a motel room could be any better.

"Ha, I got wheels my darling." I didn't ask who owned the late model Pontiac. Spence "borrowed" motorcycles. Did she do cars, ever a Vette? She drove as if our destination was life or death away. She wanted to get there before the Debussy concert finished. She did some risky driving and I silently recited Mathis's poem. I waited while she checked in. Carry me over the threshold Sailor Boy. Count yourself number thirty-nine." She had a tough time with the clock radio. "I dig Monsieur Claude when I do my variations. He makes me feel the sea, every ripple.

"Claude Pence was my boss at Joyce's."

"He's the no double-bagging guy!"

"It's nice that you remembered." She tapped the top of her head.

"I got me a steel trap. Say did you have a girl in every port?"

She gave me no chance to answer. "You'll find I'm all those ports in one." She pulled two, Reservoir End, Lubricated Trojans out of her windbreaker pocket. "I'm rating you a doubleheader, Sweetie." She quickly

stripped then undressed me ever so slowly. Her triangle was a “forest” as Spence said. “Like my rain forest, honey,” she said.

“It’s a marvel to behold.”

“You’ll be holding on for dear life!”

Not true, she was gentle, patient and full of hints and tips. She made ocean sounds to match the music. I lived up to her prediction. She demonstrated some of her cheerleading moves. We showered together. “You shook my heart,” she said before trading Debussy for TV. The audio was dead. I recognized the movie after a couple of scenes. *Laurel and Hardy Join the Foreign Legion*. “I wanted one of those Legion hats with the neck flap when I was a kid,” I confessed.

“Christmas,” she said, seriously.

She liked *Three Stooges* comedy best. She imitated some of their hand motions and goofy sounds expertly. We sat on the bed, backs buffered from the walls by cheesy pillows. We held hands. “I’m going to tell you things that will amaze you,” she said. “First, Miss Hogan is a plant. She’s working with the Anti Defamation League. The Neo-Nazi movement is gaining strength here. Faulkner was an anti-Semite like Leslie Fox said and Conrad fits her purpose because his “Heart of Darkness” story has to do with British colonization. That was necessary to launch the comparison with the Holocaust. She did her MA on John Steinbeck.” Carolyn swung out of bed, got a notebook out of her back jean pocket and standing, she quoted him. “*The Grapes of Wrath* can be Jewish propaganda, but then, I have heard it called communist propaganda also. It happens that I am not Jewish and have no Jewish blood, but it only happens that way. I find that I do not experience any pride that it is so.” I’d not read the

book but seen the movie. I loved the part where Tom Joad is walking along a deserted highway lined with telephone poles. The “Red River Valley” music playing in the background contributed in making the scene unforgettable for me. Maybe somewhere along my education trail I would learn about the propaganda angle. I wished I had a bunch of grapes to feed Goddess Carolyn. “Miss Hogan isn’t Jewish is she?” I asked.

“No she’s as Irish as Molly Bloom. Her future husband is Jewish, a lawyer. His grandmother perished at Auschwitz. Terri has a sympathy forearm tattoo of her I.D. number.”

“Who is Molly Bloom,” I asked.

“She’s in a James Joyce novel. I hope Miss Hogan gets to his short story on page 290 of the text, ‘The Dead.’ It would probably fit her purposes. He’s been labeled an anti-Semite and some Irish folks rooted for Germany in WW II.” I wondered if there was a Joyce’s Market in Dublin.

“I hope Molly wasn’t one of them.”

“She was pre-war. She was more interested in being well-fucked and so am I, Nyuk, Nyuk, and Nyuk.” She pulled rubber three from her windbreaker pocket.” After another variation she explained and mouthed some Molly lines, sexual of course. Was Carolyn a plant like Miss Hogan? She sure seemed to know a lot more about literature than one would expect of a non-degree student. She instructed me to nibble on her small nipples. “They need that stimulation but will never beat Heidi no matter how many kids I produce.” I sure liked that information. How did she get the view?

We could hear arguing as we were leaving the Pithy. Carolyn drove slowly. She kept her hand on my thigh. She took a peppermint Life Saver I offered. "Lifesaving is what it's all about," she said. At my place, we kissed as if one of us were going off to war. As I was getting out of the car, she said, "You are my friend. You walk soft as a weaving on the wind. You backlight my dreams." Didn't that make me feel good? Was she a poet? I slept the sleep of the content and fulfilled but I dreamed of Heidi not of Carolyn. Even though I'd pushed her off my horizon I made a stop at Cash Tyler's. I'd had enough of Fence & Rail pumpnickel. I sat at her station but the waitress was not Heidi she was short and buxom. There was a square blue stone on what was probably a high school graduation ring. Her voice was squeaky. After ordering coffee, oatmeal and raisin toast I asked if Heidi had the day off. "She disappeared a week ago." My toast was white but I didn't want to cause trouble. Sid the cook came rushing in, must have been late for work. He waved. The Heidi news didn't cast a pall on my Pithy lust time with Carolyn.

I did a couple of wheelies in Jack's parking lot. "Just like my little brother," teased Spence. "And I bet I can tell you what that showing off is all about."

I gave my shoulders a quick heft. "Say it, Big Bro."

"Carolyn gave you a dean's list rating."

I didn't know what the hell to say. I finally stammered, "She's a poet right? 'Soft as a weaving of the wind' one of her lines?"

"She might be but that's not hers. She stole that from Brautigan. Footnotes are not her forte. I should have waited to goof on you but don't worry about a thing.

You're part of the crew." Sticking to our openings, he added, "We're free-wheelers."

At a colonial on Walnut Street a gruff woman with curlers in her white hair at one p.m. wouldn't give an inch. She wanted the two cherry trees where she wanted them, Amen, one where a big rock lived. The pick handle broke. We maneuvered our shovels every-which-way without success. She carried a crowbar the length of Carolyn's broom "dick" one-handed from the garage. "Try the Archimedes effect, boys." She emphasized "boys." The lever triumphed! She brought out a couple of tall Budweiser cans on a tray. She sashayed like a cocktail waitress. How about some dessert with your brew?" she asked.

"Of course," Spence said. She carried back four Hostess Cupcakes on a colorful plate.

"Our favorites," I said. "You read our minds."

"I've been accused of that many times," she said and hummed *Twilight Zone* music.

I sat on the rock, Spence laid down on the grass. "You like Heidi, don't you?" he asked.

"Yes, but she wouldn't have anything to do with me."

"Not many would have anything to do with her these days," he said. "Tyler reneged on the promise to get her a job as a workout rider at the track. He added insult by courting another waitress. She was doing a lot of coffee spilling. He fired her. She's in a bad way, working at a McDonald's. She spotted me and took a break. We sat at a picnic table outside. She asked if I could get her some pills, ups and downs. She did not look good, ghoulish eyes, sickly pale. She'd wrapped herself tightly in her arms. She was shaking as if she were standing on an Arctic iceberg. I had some pills

but didn't want to be responsible. I did give her a couple of joints. She tried to pay but I let her slide. I don't know where the hell she's living. Here's the plan. Carolyn's three roommates moved out. She wants to stay there but could never cover the barn rent alone. She loves the dump. How about us moving in; I'm sick of the ratty trailer where I'm staying. What do you say?"

"Of course but that adds up to three. Will we be able to handle it money-wise?"

"We'll rescue Heidi and chip in for her piece of rent until she's right."

"Perfect."

There was no trouble leaving my cellar room. The landlord told me he had a waiting list.

An upfront security deposit hadn't been required. I lost just one day of my latest rent payment.

Carolyn knew the manager of the MacDonald's. He was on the verge of canning Heidi. Carolyn drove us in Terri's Ford. Heidi was sitting at a table even though the lines were long. She nursed a coffee, and chewed on her fingernails, looking as down and out as Spence had noted. We sat with her. She burst out crying. I felt like sobbing. Carolyn gave her a couple of Kleenexes and laid down the law. "You're not working here anymore, Heidi. You're not living wherever you're living anymore. We're adopting you. When you get straight, we get straight. We have plans for you, for us." Heidi had the horse bracelet on. She worked it around her wrist maybe escaping to a childhood ride on a carousel. She took a deep breath.

"Okay, but stop by the Pithy so I can grab what's left." I shut my eyes when we pulled into the parking lot and

kept them closed. I didn't want to know if Carolyn and I had been in the room next to hers.

Spence and Carolyn had the loft. Heidi and I had rooms on either side of the "uncommon area" as Carolyn called the space left in the barn that served as a kitchen, living and dining area, basic bathrooms up and down. A poorly installed bay window invited weather. Cracks in caulking welcomed bugs. The table was wobbly. The pilot light on the stove was always dying. The couch was in pretty good shape, a bright plaid but the two easy chairs, brown and blue corduroy were hurting. The area rug had bison and wheat designs. Heidi took to her room as soon as we arrived. In the night she'd moan, scream or tremble but never tried to make a break. We took turns sitting on an armless rocker comforting her and helping with sips of water. She couldn't hold a cup. I got used to the mouse skittering across the floor three times a night and I thought of Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, talk of it in *On the Road*. She must have been mighty dehydrated because she never asked to be walked to the bathroom on my watch anyway. No one ever said she'd wet herself. Mike and Mary were part of the rotation. Mary was pregnant.

"So much for my broomstick lesson," Carolyn said. "I'll do the delivery. You supply the milk."

"Sure. If it's a girl I'll name her after you. A boy will have Carroll in the middle."

"Good deal," agreed Carolyn patting Mary's belly.

A couple of times I held Heidi's hand. One evening I spotted her Zippo on the dresser. I recalled the "special effects" to go with Faulkner's barn story. On the way out I rolled the wheel. It was out of fluid and flint. I

removed the wick as if it wouldn't be in the same location on a store shelf as the other essentials. Sometimes Carolyn sang. Once "Scarlet Ribbons" filled the barn. I don't know why that was so meaningful to me. Maybe Mary and Mikes' baby and Carolyn as midwife clicked it. She had a beautiful voice and her folk songs fit the rustic setting and our situations.

Terri pitched in. She visited each day while we were working. She read inspirational stuff from Steinbeck's work. Heidi would later get four of his words tattooed in the same place on her arm as Terri had the I.D. number, "Nothing good gets away." An evening while we were eating supper, pizza from scratch by Spence, Carolyn who was without a shirt or bra as she often was, said, "Believe it or not my dear friends. It won't be long before we're in business." She had a lead on a dump truck. "I'm sick of cleaning houses. I'm going to be a landscaper like you guys. We'll rival Juniper Jack." That's when she started hitting Chrome's Gym. She didn't think she was fit for manual labor. She'd had trouble doing 10 pushups. I thought the housecleaning kept her in shape. "I'm tired of busting my ass for peanuts."

"And a fine bottom it is," I said.

"I sort of recall you being shy, Tommy Boy."

"That's an ass, my friend," corrected Spence.

Carolyn broke wind.

Carson Miller frequented Chrome's. He monopolized the speed bag. The knuckle bandages weren't lying. Did the skin ever heal? The first time he'd seen Carolyn, he pointed, growled but ignored her after that. Occasionally he chatted with an old guy named Ty

who was a former middleweight fighter who grew up in Harlem. He'd sparred with Sugar Ray Robinson three times. Carolyn took Ty aside when Miller went to the restroom. Miller's knuckles were tattooed, LEFT and RITE but on the wrong hands. "He gets mixed up in the ring that way too," laughed Ty. "His buddy is a bench pressing freak, Benson is his name. I shook his hand. How could a man who can handle all those pounds have such a weak grip?" Ty went on to say he could feel hostility in that paw nonetheless. "If Benson had his knuckles tattooed it would be HATE and ETC." Benson occasionally frowned at Carolyn. Disgust filled his face when she'd given Ty a thank you kiss on the lips. Those characters had been on Carolyn's mind since Heidi showed her two "care of" letters she'd received at McDonald's. The letters were cut out of magazines like a ransom or warning note in a movie. One read LITE MY FIRE. Heidi didn't want to repeat what was in the other that looked like it had been written by a calligrapher. Both notes were too obvious to be true, Miller's knuckles and the Cash's Pancake Stop stitching on Heidi's apron.

I talked to Spence about the Zippo and the story connection. "Worry about nothing," he said. "She'll be back to earth before we know it. She's just dangerous to herself right now." I didn't tell him I'd tampered with the Zippo. He talked about Heidi like he'd known her from childhood. I was a rank outsider. I certainly wasn't aware of Heidi miscarrying Tyler's child or that he'd wanted her to have an abortion and she'd refused. "All for the best," Spence ruled. Carolyn got the ancient but functioning dump truck from a Student for Democratic Society member named Vince who had a

beard like an Amish farmer, no mustache. He'd inherited the GMC from an uncle who'd once been a member of the Industrial Workers of the World Labor Union. The uncle had IWW tattooed on his arm that Vince photographed at his wake. The mortician wasn't happy. Vince laminated the snapshot to keep in his wallet. Spence had pointed him out to me at the protest. I was the first to jump in when Carolyn skidded to a halt nearly hitting the barn. There were two used rubbers on the passenger side floor. We put wedges behind all the tires. In the middle of the "uncommon area" she invited us to feel her muscles and stripped to show off her newly toned body. Hell, it had only been two weeks at the gym. She did fifty pushups and clapped her hands on the way up on some of them. Spence passed around a joint. "Exercise sure does improve a toke," said Carolyn.

"No job too small. You name we game." Spence called our company "The Land-Smiths Four" even though Heidi wasn't actually a sure thing to join us. Spence and Carolyn talked with Juniper Jack and he was okay with our venture. He'd even agreed to sub out work to Land-Smiths.

A week and a half later, looking unsure, Heidi was ready. She wore jeans, a hooded sweatshirt and combat boots. "What planet's that footwear from?" I teased.

"The laces are from Mars, soles from Jupiter and eyelets from Saturn. I'll let you count them sometime." She hesitated. "I get it, my pancake orthopedics?"

"If they ever turn up, I'll count their lace holes too."

"They sure were comfy."

“No eyelets in your jockey boots,” I said.

“You may shine those!”

“My pleasure,” I returned. I was happy as a kid who one morning woke up on Jellybean Mountain.

Spence dropped Heidi and me off with plants and tools and a bunch of junipers at a two story brick house that had a big swimming pool. “Spence said gin comes from their berries,” I said.

“I don’t need any of that but I do feel like I need a lift, a facelift; how about that, Tom?”

“All you need hoisted are your spirits,” I offered.

“That headband looks great!” She patted my arm and thanked me. It was maroon with thin black zigzags that complimented her hair.

“Carolyn said she got it at a Navajo store on a Tallahassee reservation.”

“She sure gets around,” I said. My remark didn’t incite a travelogue. We didn’t see much of Carolyn during work hours. She concentrated on drumming up work. I guessed the Chrome Gym was primarily for surveillance. What wheels rolled under her is anyone’s guess.

“I need this Tom,” Heidi said the one time I tried to take over digging through crusty earth that was giving her trouble. I wondered if the shrubs would take in the bad dirt. We had to carry water from a spigot on the side of the garage. She struggled but never spilled a drop. We talked about our childhoods. She was from Maryland. Her father often took her to Laurel Race Course. He knew a Billy Passmore, a leading jockey. “A great last name for a rider,” she said.

“Or a quarterback,” I said.

“I’ll stick with the track.” She followed him in the sports pages. One outfit he rode for had silks the green of our labors. Her father set up a saddle on a sawhorse where she practiced her poise and dreams after school. When she was 12 she started riding at the Equipoise Stables. Everyone thought she was a natural. She rode a few retired thoroughbreds at a Laurel half mile training track.

“Impressive,” I said.

“I’ll get back to it, believe you me, she said fervently. “There’s a lot of discrimination against female riders but I’ll make the grade.”

“My father saw Whirlaway run but never mentioned any colors but his grey hide.”

“Whirly, Mr. Longtail, what a horse and racing is in your DNA!”

“That’s sure good news.”

“I found the Zippo by the finish line at Laurel. I don’t light it much except for a medicinal smoke or “special effects,” she said clucking with her tongue. “It’s a votive piece. Sometimes I fire it up and I’m back in Maryland with my dad watching Passmore bring a horse home. It’s not functioning at the moment.” I didn’t rat myself out about pinching the wick.

After graduation, she trailed her college bound high school sweetheart to Arizona. He told her she’d have to start pursuing a degree for them to go on. She hadn’t done well in school and scored poorly on the SATs. Taking non-degree courses did not sit well with the smartass. She hitchhiked to Boulder after a friend at a smorgasbord restaurant where she was washing dishes told her about Green Meadows Riding Ranch

where they always needed help. An old couple in a black Cadillac took her most of the way. They talked to her as if a daughter and regularly reminded her of hitchhiking dangers with graphic descriptions they'd read in newspapers. At rest stops they shared food packed in coolers for the trip. Bill and Marge were traveling to visit their pastor of thirty years who'd been transferred.

"Green Meadows was closed for renovations so I ended up a waitress like a struggling actress in NYC, ha." SATs had never entered my mind.

With all our yakking, we never slowed down, didn't take breaks except for lunch. At an aerating job on Walnut, it was my turn but Heidi insisted on going to the Shop-Way. My brick foot was acting up so I didn't argue. She returned with ham salad sandwiches that we washed down with Pepsis. When we finished, she told me to close my eyes. At the three of her count, I opened wide. In each palm was an oatmeal raisin cookie. "Better than toast?" she asked.

"These are the equal of many, many gourmet loaves." She'd grown stronger and happier. Man, she was wheeling barrows of gravel and loam and dumping them like they were filled with Styrofoam packing. Her face had tanned up. I finally found the nerve to ask her for a date and dammit, I stuttered.

"I thought I was going to have to ask you," she said.

"How about taking in *A Thousand Clowns* at the U Cinema?" I'd heard Carolyn and Spence praise it.

"I wouldn't miss it for the Kentucky Derby." I hoped she'd wear boysenberry lipstick.

Spence dropped us off a short walk away from the Cinema. Man, that old truck was noisy. "I thought he'd hijack a motorcycle with a couple of sidecars," Heidi said as she took my hand and swung our arms as if in doing a happy march. There wasn't much of an audience. We sat two rows from the screen. Avery stood in the aisle before backing off holding his briefcase to his chest.

"That's a strange specimen," commented Heidi."

"Hope they don't lock the doors and make us stay for an insurance seminar."

"His wife would be collecting on his."

We shared popcorn and held hands, a "thousand" times better than holding her hand while sitting in the rocker. She squeezed mine when she heard: "Well, Murray, um, to sort of return to reality for a moment."

"I'll only go as a tourist," returned Murray.

Heidi whispered that she would add that to her film quotes collection. She was impressed by Sandra the social worker. Outside of the Cinema she shared a favorite Groucho Marx and Margaret Dumont exchange. She asked him while dancing to hold her closer. He said "If I hold you any closer I'll be in back of you." She took me in her arms and said, "Show me!" I did and when she moved her lips to mine it was boysenberry I swear. "Let's see how this pans out, Tom," wide smile and eyebrows raised and I wondered if "cakes" came to her mind like they flipped in mine.

We were a successful team no matter what task. We never discussed her bad times. We joked and laughed but the hugs were no match for the one outside the U Cinema. Her lips were fleeting. She had a competitive

streak and often gently pushed me aside if she thought she could do better. Once she fell on top of me when we were setting a post. It seemed to be accidentally on purpose. Her legs closed around one of mine. She jumped up as if a smoke alarm had sounded. A week later she told me about the horse trainer named Chuck Webb at Pike's Peak she was seeing. He had a promising 2-year-old named Top Explosion. Carolyn knew someone who trained racehorses and I suspected she was just helping with Heidi's horsy dream. She worked horses on weekend mornings to show her stuff. "Carolyn's a politician," said Spence. "I see her in Congress someday. She's using the horse angle to better Heidi's life, not selfishly like Tyler."

I had sad visions of losing Heidi to the saddle and I did. After a month she moved to an apartment closer to the track. When she returned supposedly to look for a pair of sunglasses she'd left behind she seemed happy that I was the only one there. She wore a blue dress and it was the first time I'd seen her carry a purse. We hugged.

"Smell my hand," she said.

"English Leather, a couple of guys on the Ramply used it. I never tried it."

"The hell with the Ramply, think of me," she said, pointing to the saddle on the label.

She tweaked my chin. "Just be patient I've got a feeling."

"Here's to hoping, I said," Maybe this bottle will work like Aladdin's Lamp."

"Keep an open mind, like Sesame;" she added extending the "S" sound. "By the way the title of the Groucho film was *A Day at the Races*."

“I should have known. Get me the dunce cap.”

I peeked out the window. She took sunglasses from her purse to put on before getting into a Lincoln Continental that was an ugly brown. It was cloudy.

Spence and Carolyn hired a new Land-Smiths employee named Brewer who had a psychology degree. Once I almost called him Heidi, cut it off halfway. “Well, hi,” he said, ” puzzled. There wasn’t much chatter between us. When I smoked a joint sitting on a rock near the Powwow Grounds, I thought he might request a hit but all he did was ask if I knew anything about Carlos Castaneda. I did not. We were doing so well landscaping that Heidi’s room stayed vacant except for the times Carolyn led me there to exorcise any demons that might have sneaked in. We cleared that room and all the chambers of hell. That night as I was all set to question Spence about Carlos the door flew open and Carolyn burst in. “Heidi is in big trouble. I went to visit and she was being led out of her apartment house in handcuffs. She tried to look my way but a woman cop pulled her head back as if a chiropractor.”

Spence went bonkers. He wanted to storm the jail, break her out using the dump truck like a WWII tank. Carolyn calmed him down and explained why Heidi had been arrested. The half-done addition to Cash Tyler’s Pancake Stop and a garage attached to his mother’s house nearby burned down. She was in the hospital suffering from smoke inhalation. Cowboy Craig had rescued her. Heidi had been so proud of her first Freshman English paper that scored an “A” that she read it to Tyler and demonstrated how she’d used

the Zippo for a prop. One was found at the scene with her initials carved in it.

Terri showed up. She'd been to visit Heidi in jail. "She's strong, defiant and ready for any fight."

"Wait a minute," I piped in. "I worried about the Zippo when I visited Heidi when she was recovering. I checked it. There were no initials, no fluid or flint. I removed the wick."

"Shit, you did tell me that," said Spence.

"She lost her Zippo while working out a horse. She kept it as a lucky piece nothing else," said Terri.

I interrupted. "She found it at Laurel Race Course in Maryland." I was ignored. Terri continued.

"She'd lost it another time, in Tyler's Stingray. He'd returned it after lighting candles for a romantic interlude. He'd suggested she should have a heart engraved with their initials like lovers do on the bark of a tree. That was in the garage of his mother's house. They used a cot. His mother has dementia. Of course, no more hearts after Heidi refused to agree to an abortion."

Terri's intended would be defending Heidi. She shared what he thought would be sufficient evidence to put Heidi's guilt in doubt. She read from notes on a legal pad. "On a page in the Benson paper rewrite not read in class he'd mimicked Terri on the Holocaust vs. Colonialism. He mentioned death camps but spelled their names wrong and no capital letters."

"Did anyone consider Carson Miller and his big love of German cars especially BMWs?" I asked.

“Yes,” said Terri. “Page two on a page one day, he stated that he despised Corvette Stingrays most of all.”

“Tyler picked up Heidi after class in one. Miller must have seen it,” I said.

Terri went on to say that she’d done some Tyler research over the phone with the Mormon Family Research Center. She showed filled pad pages. “His father is Scottish. His mother is Jewish and that makes him a Jew.” Madman Dean Moriarty from *On the Road* was born in Utah. Kerouac wrote lovingly of St. George.

“So” asked Carolyn “is Benson a Neo-Nazi? Does he track down Jews using IBM computers?”

“Should we throw Eloise the bull rider into the mix because she used the German doppelganger word?” I asked.

“Possibilities,” said Terri, placing the pad into her briefcase.

“I can’t see a lout like Miller starting the fire over American auto hate or because Heidi snubbed him,” said Spence. “But I’d like to interrogate him with a baseball bat and Benson too.” He entwined his fingers, stretched his hands palms out to produce the loudest knuckle cracks I’d ever heard. I threw the insurance angle into the mix.

“Heidi told me Tyler played the horses,” responded Terri. “I’ll be checking his finances.” She sure was thorough. She looked at her watch and rushed out the door. She’d never once praised Craig.

After Kraft Mac and Cheese and cheap wine, Spence left to visit his thinking hill. We hoped he didn’t have a Louisville Slugger stashed there. Carolyn and I went to Heidi’s room. She ran her fingers through her hair

and some clumps stood up nearly straight. "I have a head full of snakes," she declared then explained Medusa.

"I heard Heidi has eels."

"I'll have to research that one," she said, flattening her vipers.

After stripping, she did a split and a tumble into bed. My entrance was traditional. Her legs were around me like pythons dueling. As she was climaxing, she spit out my tongue and shouted "doppelganger." "We need another Tyler enemy, another fire."

"How's that going to work?" I asked as if I didn't know.

"A couple of phantoms appear in the night, my dear."

She grabbed her jacket that was on the armless rocker by the bed. She took a Zippo out of a pocket. Her plan was to set the seats in Tyler's Stingray on fire and leave the Zippo behind. I volunteered. "We'll flip a coin," she said. I fished my lucky Terri tip quarter from my jeans. I won. Two nights later after a canned beef stew supper, she told me she'd be back at eleven. "Don't tell Spence," she warned.

She showed up in a black Dodge Monaco. Who the hell owned this one? She gave me a Joyce's shopping bag that contained a balaclava, golfing gloves and a black hoodie. Also a switchblade to slice the roof and a large can of Zippo fluid, nearly full. Rain started to fall as soon as we pulled out. She parked about fifty yards from the Vette and I set out on my mission. Dammit, all the tires were flat, competition. Before using the knife on the top I tried the passenger door that was unlocked. I dowsed the seats, emptied every drop. I wiped off the Zippo and can with a rag from

my back pocket, raised a flame and tossed them, poof. I walked casually to the getaway Dodge. I wasn't scared. I felt like I was in a movie. Carolyn reached over and unlocked the door. She drove for a mile or so then pulled over. "I like to do more right than wrong, Tom but sometimes you gotta mix them up."

"And we've provided a blender's worth and yippee for us!"

She wanted to hear the wail of sirens. When she did, we shook hands and then we rocked the car. "How crazy can we get?" I asked.

"The boundaries are on the far side of moon." More stolen verse I wondered. She dropped me off at the barn.

It was as if the Vette burning was a catalyst for a series of unimaginable events. A fire broke out at the Fence & Rail Diner and a Zippo was left behind. A number of small explosions stunned Dow Chemical and IBM, more Zippos. Swastikas and peace symbols were painted on the windows of Joyce's circling a big "Z" that might have stood for Zorro or Zucchini. Ha! Claude let me put sale posters in the windows just once. One for lima beans tilted slightly to the right so never again. The sidewalks looked like kindergarten classes were given free chalk rein.

Heidi's horseman lover showed up with a Zippo that he claimed had been damaged by a horse hoof. He swore Heidi told him she'd lost her lucky charm working a fractious roan that almost bucked her off.

"I told her I'd buy her a pot of shamrocks."

The law released Heidi but told her not to leave town any time soon. It was a good thing she didn't need a

mouthpiece. Terri and her lawyer disappeared which surprised us to no end. What happened to the Boulder love, just “plant” infatuation? Spence and Carolyn relocated to a commune in Montana. Were there cheerleader and cannabis farmer openings? The dump truck was gone but that wouldn’t have taken them more than fifteen or twenty miles before breaking down. They must have appropriated a car or motorcycle. She left me a note that contained a quote. “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.” She gave credit to Yeats. A postscript reported, “Heidi did get a tattoo of the Steinbeck quote with a J.S. hint at authorship. She’ll be going to Texas with her horseman. It takes less time to get a jockey’s license there.” Would she ever ride at Golden Gate Fields in California where Sal Paradise spent an *On the Road* afternoon?

Tyler got religion and took his mother’s maiden name. He gave up on the addition, rehabbed her garage instead. She went into a rest home. He had new menus and signs: “Minsk’s Pancake Stop,” no “Cash.” There were kosher selections. One lunch hour when I was skimming the *Boulder Camera* on the way to the crossword puzzle page I spotted a photo of new Dow employees. One was Mike. Did he get my almost job? Would Carolyn arrive in a black Dodge to deliver the baby? Was the naming still in force?

What would become of the barn? I didn’t want to be found there and held responsible for rent or utility bills, probably an exaggeration since I’d signed nothing. I packed my meager belongings that fit in my seabag and the overnight sack I’d picked up at The

Salvation Army. I hid them in the woods then rode my bike to a telephone booth. I called my former landlord. My furnished cellar room was unoccupied. I phoned Buffalo Cab and rushed back. A big Chrysler arrived soon after I'd moved my luggage to the side of the road. Each front door wore a faded range roamer image.

Bernie was a talker. "I worked one summer on a farm in Longmont; the barn was just like this one."

"I bet its walls couldn't tell the tales this one could."

"They could recite a novel or two, kid." I liked him.

He told me he'd been on the swimming team at the Colorado School of Mines. He'd lettered his sophomore and junior years. His specialty was the individual medley. "No, the pool wasn't underground, ha, but that was the "gold" in my life, kid. Scrap iron since." He added he'd like to bowl a 300 duck pin game before he croaked. My bike just did fit in the back seat. He opened the trunk and I heaved in my luggage.

It took a while to adjust to living alone again. I continued to work at Jack's. He gave me an inside job. That's where Eloise the doppelganger bull rider recognized me. I rang up the spider plant she was buying for the waiting room at a plastic surgeon's office where she was the receptionist. No musk about her, just faint citrus. "I thought you worked at Joyce's," she said.

"I stepped up in class. I thought you were with a rodeo."

"No, never even seen a cowboy ride a Brahma. I got all the bull riding stuff from an old diary I found at Goodwill. Eventually, I'll peddle it at an antique shop.

Oh, I got the doppelganger business off a matchbook I found at the Faucet Bar. The Faulkner connection came from a research librarian. How's your auto hunting going?" I walked her to the door, opened it and pointed out my bicycle. "Not well." I said.

"I'm a hiker but I have my boss's car when needed," she said. "I'm close to most places I care to be."

I made a nostalgic visit to Minsk's on a Sunday morning. I was surprised to see Eloise sitting at a corner table. I approached. "Join me web man" she said.

"Ha and how's the spider doing?" As I sat I saw Minsk step out of the kitchen. He shot a look at us then quickly walked backward through the swinging door. Who freaked him, me, Eloise or both of us? Did he see me my arson night? I half listened for sirens.

"Thriving, some tiny white flowers have shown up and offshoots that actually look like spiders."

"Strangely enough they're called pups." I'd heard a woman telling that to her tot. "How's the plastic surgery game?"

The waitress interrupted. No hairnet like Heidi used to wear or sci-fi shoes. We ordered a pot of coffee and buckwheat pancakes for me, blueberry for Eloise.

"Business is flourishing. I don't look up from my desk much. People seem embarrassed being there. Sometimes I sneak a peek when all is said and done. I'll never go that route."

"As far as I can see, you'll never need to." Her complexion and eyes that I'd noticed in class struck me now as photo or canvas worthy. She briefly put her hands behind her head and pushed her chest forward enough to lift and open her jacket that was the dark green of the Corvette. No room for pancake remarks.

There was more than I'd noticed in class. I wondered if the plastic surgeon had given her a bonus expansion. "Aren't you sweet to the high heavens," she said. "I bet you say that to all the girls, especially Heidi, poor Heidi."

"No. Heidi and I were finally friends, just friends. She's off chasing her horseracing ambitions." Eloise's auburn hair was pulled back. She wore no ear jewelry. I couldn't make out any piercing.

"Did you see yourself in the *Mountain Free Press*?"

"Yup, at the Dow demonstration; how the heck did you find miniscule me?"

"I used a magnifying glass. Don't take this the wrong way but I thought you looked a little like Anthony Perkins."

"That's the guy in the horror flick!"

"Yes, but you are sane up close."

"Thanks, I guess."

"I would have burned down Bates Hotel if I were you."

"You ain't."

"I saw you and Heidi at that lame movie the other night. The clown's brother got pushed down the stairs at the Bates Hotel."

"That was as scary as the shower scene."

"No way, any more visits to Dow?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"That's what I figured. One-hit wonders. Hogan looked the type, big jeweled peace symbol with fancy clothes and the ring with the 'I'm wonderful' rock. The broomstick girl and the weedy stud need audiences." I'd wondered myself why there were no repeat

sign waving events. If she knew about the Terri's counter-espionage there was no hint.

"They treated me in ways that boosted my self-esteem."

"I bet."

"Could we change the subject?"

"One more thing, I'm working against the war but quietly. Dr. Fisk is in on it. You'll keep this to yourself, right?"

"Of course, I will." She moved her leg. Her calf leaned on mine.

"I find men who want to outwit the draft and some that want to plain and simple disappear. Dr. Fisk gives them a new look and there's a Vietnam Vet who has connections to do the paperwork. I've helped many and don't think for a minute they are cowards." Spence whispered into my memory. "Nope, I wouldn't want to die for the military industrial complex, either."

"Was that Navy stuff you had in your papers true?"

"Yup, USS Ramply (DD-810) was the ship."

"Ever kill anyone?"

"Not to my knowledge. A depressed cook committed suicide, jumped into the Atlantic. I'd never given much thought to the war before sitting at that Faucet Bar table with Miss Hogan, Carolyn and Spence after the protest. My mind and eyes opened but not enough to make me an activist."

"Gobs are seafood on the hoof. Did Carolyn ever mention that?" While I was figuring out a snappy way to respond, I heard her shoe drop and her foot was in my lap, heel nudging my legs apart. The waitress brought the check. The foot fell. Eloise insisted on paying. Outside, she shook my hand, winked and was gone. I

didn't know what the hell to make of her. Why did she trust me with the draft evasion and plastic surgery? What was with the foot come on? For that matter, why did Terri and company share all the Neo-Nazi info with me? I felt like a walking safe deposit box. I remembered a childhood friend asking me if I wanted to get in on a boxcar robbery. It was full of cookies. I agreed but the ringleader looked me over, counted me out. "He'd crack within minutes if the cops ever caught and questioned him." No Sunshine Biscuits for me, reform school for them.

For a while at work I looked at some faces and wondered if they were masked by Fisk, especially when I sold chameleon plants. It was close to a month before I made another Sunday visit to Minsk's. About a hundred yards from the door, Eloise fell in step with me. "You swabs don't march do you?" "I did some in boot camp, klutzy though."

"I could show you some boot camp, kiddo but for the time being, come to my apartment. I'll make you pancakes that will warm your heart."

"A sticky warm," I responded.

"Oh, la, la," she moaned.

She was wearing jeans, a loose fitting sweatshirt, tan work boots and a khaki ball cap. "At ease," she said, six blocks later. She took my hand and led me up steep stairs. The door opened to the living room. "Wait here and do enjoy the fish, seadog." There were photos of soldiers, sailors and marines on the wall with the dates and locations of their deaths in Vietnam. One reminded me of SDS Vince but reduced to a goatee. I guessed draft card burning would be right up Eloise's alley.

There was no info below that one. Long live Vince. Some were women. No Carolyn or Heidi look-alikes. The couch was grey/black and velvety. The rocking chair was occupied by a calico cat that gauged me. A bowl on the coffee table was full of peanuts. I caught her aquatic drift. The aquarium on a stand at the wall where you'd expect a TV to be was ten gallons I estimated. Did the cat ever paw at fish? I was mesmerized by the neons darting around. I'd had some when I was a kid. The guy at the pet shop called them nightclub fish. A castle with a turret broken off was the largest decoration. In a rear corner next to a pirate's chest and mermaid an algae tinted corner of a Zippo stuck out of the gravel. The hinge gave it away. Was that for my benefit? Making off with it crossed my mind but how would I explain a drenched arm or a spill? The neon posse dodged the aerator bubbles. Other residents were zebras, guppies, one angel and a catfish. "Git in here Tommy," sang Eloise. She was at the stove and the edge of a pancake she'd flipped nearly brushed the ceiling. "Ta-da," She exclaimed. She took a bottle of syrup warming in a pan on the stove that was boysenberry. There were seven or eight raisins in each pancake. I thought of toast and cookies. "You better tell me these flapjacks are the best you ever had," she said. "A threat of death couldn't make me deny it." I had three. Eloise ate one.

"What's it like being out at sea, Tom?"

"Nice when it's calm. If I picked up and tilted your aquarium back and forth that mermaid would be as unsettled as I've been in a storm."

"That's pretty kinky."

"Would you find kinks in an ocean sky full of stars?"

“Yup and when I go on a cruise, the ship is going to be as big as an aircraft carrier. No seasick for me. Did you ever puke over the side?”

“Nope, Saltines settled my craw. By the way, ever hear of a guy named Debussy?”

“No but reminds me of something else.”

“May I make a head call?”

“Head call, huh, nice? Ha, you sure may and you are blushing.”

“I doubt it, just saving face.” She gave me a thumb up.

The naked picture of her I spotted to the left of the bathroom door didn't make me blush either. She had a breast held up to her mouth. Next to it was a lobby poster for *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. A vanilla candle burned on the toilet tank. A box of Tampons and a perfect for puncturing Michelins ice pick sat next to it. Two toothbrushes were in a holder. I washed my hands with soap that smelled like pine. The towel had a sea-horse on each corner. I carefully put the seat down. I failed to find Norman Bates in the mirror. When I got back, she had a finger on each temple, eyes shut.

“I've felt the ship heat in my sleep,” she said before going on about the Titanic. The usual trivia, deck chairs and dancing, but she added being rescued and sitting before a blazing fireplace in a castle.

“Was it the one in the aquarium?” I asked.

“It expands,” she returned.

“I'm sure,” I said. She stuck out her tongue. She could probably touch her nose with it. I gazed at a box of Diamond Kitchen Matches on the counter. Were they around in “Barn Burning” time? No, a candle lit from the fireplace but the wood had to be kindled, probably

done like I'd seen in a *Boy Scout Manual*. I'd tried and failed. Certainly boxes on that doomed ship were lost. Did Claude ever try to light a birthday candle with a toothpick? She led me in a waltz without music back and forth in the tight kitchen space before exiting us into the living room. I stepped on her foot, just a touch really.

"Sea legs gone?" she asked.

"Pancake drunk," I answered. I blew in her ear. She did the same adding her tongue tool while leading me to the door. The last words I heard through the cracked open door were bizarre.

"Dr. Fisk could turn me into Heidi. You know what I mean, doppelgangers."

"That would be as dramatic as an ocean liner sinking."

"Standby, mate."

Heidi's comment about a facelift among the junipers boomeranged.

My Jack's Organic's job continued to go smoothly. I picked up plant savvy listening to him and his wife handle questions. I bothered them less and less for assistance. I got raises and I was well on my way to having the cash to buy a decent used car. I signed up for a real Freshman English course at Arapahoe Junior College. To my surprise they accepted my non-degree course and I was enrolled in the second serving. Not a soul from Miss Hogan's class was present. The professor was from Colombia. Miss Barrera's smiles were winners. She had hair as long as country singer Crystal Gayle. She never asked anyone to read a paper out loud so my fellow students remained strangers to me. I glanced at faces hoping for one to shoot back to Miss Hogan's crew but nothing familiar. No names in the

roll sounded Jewish or German but there was one that came close to a “Barn Burning” character, “Sarton.” I watched the “not-Sartoris” light a cigarette but no Zippo or kitchen match, just a common “close cover before striking.” Did he spot a foreign word? Was I going out of my mind? My God wasn’t “Heidi” a German name. I heard a moniker familiar to me from *On the Road* but I had no clue whether it was “Cas-sady” like Neal or Cassidy.” No textbook was required. I figure Miss Barrera didn’t want to add a financial burden to our lives. She passed out mimeographed stories and poems. Her favorite writers were Flannery O’Connor and Ray Bradbury. I never sold Bibles door to door but my favorite O’Connor story was “Good Country Folk.” I had pushed many doorbells selling magazine subscriptions for a grammar school fundraiser. There was mention of a champion on foot Encyclopedia salesman named Sinah in *On the Road*. Bradbury’s *The Illustrated Man* led me to the Hogan and Heidi tattoos. Miss Barrera awarded me an “A” for a paper that linked outer space and Georgia farmland where good hearted aliens rebuilt barns in the night. I tried to sneak in my cliché paper from Miss Hogan’s class using motorcycles instead of cars. I had a shady Spence-like character steal a Harley from a federal prison parking lot. My mark matched the first letter in cheating.”

A woman who sat directly in front of Miss Barrera’s podium came into Juniper’s one afternoon just before closing. Rebecca Jones was looking for a Bonsai plant for her mom’s birthday. I reeled off Bonsai facts and thought I’d impressed her. All she said about the class is that O’Connor is weird and she’d never want to

meet her. She lingered outside her white Triumph sports car in the parking lot. She rested an elbow in one hand and used the other to move a cigarette to and from her mouth. She saw me peddle off on my bicycle. I guess that did in my chances. She almost walked past me twice outside of class but altered her route, Rebecca of Snobbybrook Farms. How I wished for another Carolyn. I thought the bird that bonked my room window might be a sign but I wrote it off as too much O'Connor and Bradbury. Miss Barrera favored two poets, Diane di Prima and Richard Brautigan. They won me over. I did have a taste of the second one from Carolyn's plagiarism. I kept the poems Miss Barrera mimeographed in the Miss Hogan text and I impressed the Senorita by reciting the Carolyn lines off the top of my head. I memorized Diane's tribute to her grandfather

"I stand
a ways off listening to you as I pour out soup
young men with light in their faces
at my table, talking love, talking revolution
which is love spelled backwards"

and several of Brautigan's of a "pithy" length. I saw Heidi and the eels insult in a stanza of "A Mid-February Sky Dance:"

"and I will dance toward you
as if I were darkness
with bats piled upon my head"

I shoplifted a collection of each poet's work from the University Bookstore. It was as easy as jellybeans at

Joyce's Supermarket. Smoking a stick of Spence's departing gift weed earlier made me do it, ha. He'd given me three generously packed numbers mixed in with a hard pack of Marlboro civilians. With all the flame and Zippos I realized that I didn't know many who smoked normal cigarettes. Jake was a major Camel puffer. How many packs a day for Rebecca? Spence liked a Marlboro with his coffee in the morning, a habit he claimed he'd never been able to break. I kicked tobacco the year before I got out of the Navy. I could quit pot anytime.

When Miss Barrera assigned a poem I tried and tried to mimic Brautigan and di Prima but I failed. I finally scrapped that tactic and plunged head first into my life. After rummaging through sex, navy, landscaping and other jobs, childhood and bike riding, I found the words while picturing Eloise's living room. Getting them into a readable order was a labor. I wished Miss Hogan were around so I could show it off to her since arson played a part.

Utility

The fish an inch at best
Wear stripes of neon blue
Running gill to fin
As if in league with eels
Promoting electricity
Darting household tanks
As though famed embers
From a storybook blaze
They spark in and out

Of ceramic castles
Like dreamy arsonists
As guppies blessed
With spectrum tails
Loll and wave in
Flimsy praise like
Squads of second
String cheerleaders

I was happy to be personally able to vouch for Carolyn's first, sublime and ultimate string status, Miss Leaps and Bounds. Now, didn't that sound like a wrestler? I could see Carolyn body slamming an opponent or was she the daughter of circus performers?

I typed out 10 copies on a library Smith Corona. I had the Ramply poet, Clark Mathis's Fairbanks address. I would sure as hell send him a copy. A week after the Eloise pancakes I hoofed it out to Minsk's again. There was a "For Lease" sign. I continued to Eloise's apartment. "Vacant" had replaced her name on the mailbox. I went into a nearby drugstore where I searched for Dr. Fisk in a phone book. He did not exist, neither did Simply Immaculate. What the hell had she really been doing? I looked at the comic books. There was a *Lois Lane* issue. Was Fisk Eloise's Superman who'd plucked her away? I added that to a notebook I'd begun after Miss Hogan's class ended about all the chaos I'd witnessed with some lies and guesses. Maybe the law was breathing down Fisk's neck and he took Eloise to a tropical island by a coral reef, an aquarium upgrade for her. I figured I might eventually build other poems better than "Utility." I

went off on tangents about roses I'd sold at Juniper's. American Beauty launched a revolution and the Ram- ply was Old Ironsides painted red. Conrad's darkness brightened by Zippo fire. Empty an aquarium on a stove grease blaze. Old timers lighting kitchen matches on each other's corduroys or with long thumbnails stored in Levi watch pockets. Zippos are wind resistant but some work as microphones. Mike told me once that his dream car was a Porsche but after hearing Miller he'd lust American. A Porsche was found in a dumpster. Eloise talked Fisk into letting her perform a nose fix on a British diplomat. She kinked it hard right. I blamed her for the tire deflation and not just Minsk's car but city buses and passenger jets. I had Ty beating the crap out of Miller and Benson and Mein Kampf falling out of Avery's briefcase when he was trying to sell a policy to the mayor's wife.

I biked to Joyce's. All of the hate graffiti had been cleared. Why was it targeted, Jewish owned? I looked at the photos on a wall near Customer Service. There was no Claude. I recognized no clerks but the manager of the meat department with no beard or goatee still bore a strong resemblance to Vince the SDS man, a Dr. Fisk touchup? I went to the Library to research Zippos. The inventor was of British descent. Did Miss Hogan have a grudge against his imperialist ass? I failed to find any info on Joyce ownership. Why hadn't "Windburn" gone up in flames? I had to escape Boulder and pronto.

When I knocked on Juniper Jack's door to give a week's notice, the beautiful intern from the University answered the door. "No big deal. We're reorganizing.

How about this? I'll cut a check for that week and you may leave now."

"That sounds great to me." She looked like Janet Leigh, short blonde hair. Would she end up buried in a peat moss pit out back? There was no hint that she paired me with Norman Bates. I didn't have the \$700 I'd planned on for a car buy and getaway cash but I'd sacrifice and would manage. I went to the bank and closed my account. I bought Traveler's Checks. Cheryl was wearing sunglasses. Her arms were crossed.

Justin Ward the tall broad-shouldered salesman and owner of Just-In-Case Motors had a deep voice. The large warehouse and retail/wholesale parts store attached was his also. Palm up, he moved his outstretched arm slowly as if he were bragging about a Utopian village and not a couple of acres of used cars. "Before we walk around," he said. "I've got a beauty to show that might save us both steps." He lit a cigarillo with a cylindrical gold lighter that could pass for a tube of lipstick, nice Zippo switch. We watched from the office window as a foreign car backed out of a bay.

"All this Swedish baby needs is a tune-up," he said. I imagined a drill being used to spin back the mileage. The Saab was red and its bathtub appearance roused Porsche, Mike and Carson Miller. "This sucker will run circles around a Porsche," he said with great resolve; a man with an ESP gift? Six mechanics took turns glancing at us. Did they have a wager on Justin selling the it? Another never took his head from under a hood.

"I'll stick with American made," I said. Halfway down the first row a '55 Plymouth Belvedere jumped

out at me even though Dean Moriarty wrote them off as effeminate. I'd stayed in a Baltimore hotel by that name when I was in the Navy. The aqua paint was a cloudy version of the neon fish. \$350 was soaped on the windshield. He took me for a mile test drive. I drove back and it was smooth sailing. A financial sob story got him down to \$310. He didn't mind Traveler's Checks. One of the benefits of dealing with Just-In-Case Motors was that the registration and plates were taken care of for you free of charge. No compulsory insurance in Colorado so I could hold off on that. Mounting my bike and pushing off, I heard a round of applause as I passed a Dodge that was the same model that Carolyn drove when I killed the Stingray. I guessed Justin would be paying up. In the distance I saw a dump truck and it was the IWW model. How much did Justin pay Carolyn for it? What did Vince think of his memorabilia in Justin's hands?

The next day I knocked on the landlord's door. He didn't answer. A wide fellow chewing on an unlit cigar and wearing a three piece suit with the vest buttons undone introduced himself as the new property owner. He had Hitchcock's baggy eyes. He was going to renovate, create three luxury apartments. He surprised me by returning what was left of the month's rent I'd paid in advance. "You're doing me a favor, can't wait to get started." Sure I could stay the night. I slept fitfully wondering where my next home would be. I thought of Carolyn, our Pithy Pines romp. Would I land in a dump like that? Heidi probably thought she never would. I worried about the Plymouth. Well, the Buick that landed me here was a lemon. If the Belvedere was a flop, I hoped it would die in a place as interesting

without quite the Heidi drama. I turned on my transistor to a local artsy station. Debussy's "Sunken Cathedral" was playing. I imagined Carolyn had called in the request. I thought of Eloise's aquarium and getting off a mid-watch on the Ramply. The waters calm and a guarantee of late sleepers. I awoke to war news. I had to wait for the engineering student who lived across the way to finish in the bathroom. Fortunately, it was my two weeks for the community refrigerator. I had my last orange juice and sainted Raisin Bran. There was just enough milk. I boiled water on the hot plate that had belonged to the last tenant and drank instant Maxwell. The shower water was tepid. I dressed and packed all but one of my poems in my Miss Hogan text. I biked to the P.O. where I bought a stamped envelope. I mailed "Utility" to Mathis.

I called Bernie from a payphone in Jones' Drugstore. Back in the monk's cell I realized I'd failed to pack my two sheets and stolen Navy blanket. I still regretted failing to score a foul weather jacket when I left the Ramply. I worked them into my seabag and overnight sack. I'd have to hit a Laundromat soon. They weren't the only soiled items. Christ, what a slob. A boot camp Company Commander would have me carrying a rifle over my head while running in circles until I dropped. Bernie's Chrysler cab arrived in less than the fifteen minutes he'd promised. He finessed my bike into the trunk to drop off at Goodwill. It was closer than Salvation. He handled my seabag and overnighter this time, put them in the backseat. "Is that your name?" he asked seeing the stencil.

"That's me, Seaman Tom Petit."

“I was in the Navy,” he said as he slowly inched into the driver’s seat and adjusted a cushion behind his back, “a radioman on the USS Intrepid. I must have said a million times I should have stayed in for 20. You still have time kid.”

“It’s my plan B through Z.” He got a kick out of that. He’d purchased a reliable De Soto at Just-In-Case. He knew a guy who bought a lemon VW and tried to burn the place down. Man, more fire. The woman at Goodwill asked if I wanted a receipt for tax time. I laughed. “Does priceless fit in the box?” I asked.

“I might just make that baby my own off that clue,” she said and winked.

Bernie pulled up at Justin’s office, got out, removed my bags, stood propped next to them and saluted. I paid the fare but he wouldn’t take my tip.

“Easy sailing, Tom; do everything I would have done.”

Justin was busy trying to sell the Saab to a kid about 16 or 17 I’d say. Her mom looked on approvingly. Justin threw me my keys. They bounced off my shin. As I walked toward my car he called me back. “At the moment, I don’t have anyone free but your radio needs this.” He handed me a silver cube that caught the sun and I thought of course, Zippo. “If you want to come back in a couple of days, I’ll have it taken care of. If not I can give you five bucks for your trouble.”

“I’ll be gone later today,” I said. I had to give the fiver a little tug to make it mine. Leaving, I glanced at the rearview mirror. American car hating Carson Miller was standing outside a bay with his arms folded across his chest. Where did a Saab sit in his foreign car par-

liament? Did he tell Justin about my car dealer paper? Was there a time bomb under the hood or was the shiny cube the killer?

I thought I'd regret skipping a goodbye visit to Windburn so better safe than sorry I drove there. Would Bernie stop by regularly to be swept back to pages in *his* walls? I figured a bunch of college kids would have rented it by now but there were no cars in the parking spots. I stuck my hands in my jean pockets thinking that would make me look like an off-the-beaten-path stroller and not a thief or worse than that, an arsonist. Moving closer I saw that the door was slightly ajar. I pushed with my foot. The hinges yawned. I heard a rhythmic creaking that sometimes lulled me to sleep during Heidi's recovery. That armless rocker I'd logged so many miles on was facing the sad bay window and occupied. I cleared my throat. The chair scrunched around. A Zippo flamed. Despite boy-short hair and swollen face I recognized Heidi. It was a ghostly scene, ear studs sparkling like attendant fireflies. "Eels" partially hiding one eye like in Hogan's class would have helped. "Heidi, what happened? What are you doing here?"

"Just a coincidence," she said frantically like someone trying to pull an excuse from the air. "The hay truck I hid in to escape stopped down the street. I'm like the scarecrow. I need brains too." She pulled a piece from behind an ear, stuck it in her mouth and lit it like a cigarette. "Do you remember Carolyn singing?" she asked.

"Yes, especially "Scarlet Ribbons," I hummed. There was also the sorrowful "Green Fields." I reasoned adding that one would not be welcome.

“I sang it to myself over and over while in the straw, my baby in a manger. I thought of rolls in the hay and the bad they’ve done me.”

“Remember scattering hay for new lawns?”

“Yes, the grackles watching and waiting.”

Why would hay be hauled from Texas to Denver? Maybe she hitched first and that was her last ride. I’d leave it at that. I was starting to feel like a DA.

“You’ve bounced back before.”

“I’m helpless, broken.”

“I’m leaving town,” I said. “My car isn’t much but more comfortable than your last ride. Come with me. We’ll go to Seattle, wave to the people leaving on cruises like in our movie. It’s a trek all right. From there we could catch a ferry to Alaska, visit my Navy poet buddy Clark Mathis.”

“May we sort of return to some reality for a moment, Tom.”

“I know that line but it was “Murray.”

“Webb beat me up after I told him I was pregnant. When I was unconscious, he cut off my hair. I burned down his barn. Nothing alive in it, just tack, oats, hay and the dope he uses on horses. He won’t involve me. I know too much. The greedy bastard will be happy with the insurance money. I thought about igniting this place too. Eliminate another chunk of my past. I dream faces, laughing and smirking, our class, and every customer who ever ordered a pancake. Gamblers who’d curse at you because they’d bet the horse that tossed you. So what if you broke a leg, or your spine. High school yearbook pages and movie mug shots haunt me but not you.” I still had my Shop-Way photo Spence had criminalized.

“Your nightmares were just fate bidding time to get to now.”

“I like that,” she said. “This is all I own, Tom, ratty, smelly clothes.” She flicked the Zippo, moved it around for me to see and she was right. I took a deep breath. No twitch in my nose like Miss Hogan experienced. I lightly kissed her lips and face. Her breath was fresh. Maybe a tube of toothpaste left behind in one of the bathrooms or a Life Saver in my room, case closed.

“I think we should send Zippo white rafting in Boulder Creek. It’s sure as hell used its last luck and besides, it’s evidence. Let’s scam, find a place to eat. After a couple of hundred miles we’ll get a room and rest up for our journey.” I considered bringing the rocker with us but I had no rope to tie it down on top of the Plymouth. What a ridiculous idea anyway. I made a quick trip to the car and back. “Here’s a better disguise than the Pancake Stop specs.” I gave her my hooded arson-wear.”

“Good thinking,” she said and not the Pithy Pines Motel type,” she said. She nearly laughed, must have hurt.

“Never,” I said with conviction. I rescued from falls twice walking to the car. Her damaged face stood out more in the daylight. Shithead DA again heard Carolyn describing Miller at the gym speed bag and Hercules Benson who could have carried her while sprinting. In the passenger she wrestled her arm free to show her tattoo: “Nothing good gets away.” The “good” was bruised yellow. I couldn’t locate the J.S. She reached over and squeezed my thigh.

“That’s you, Tom.”

“I say you.”

Sweatshirt hood snug on her head, she said in an elderly voice. "I'm Sister Mary Heidi."

"Bless us and save us!"

We stopped at a Shoney's for burgers, fries and onion rings that we ate in the car. After we finished I whispered, "You aren't the only arsonist," I torched the Stingray."

"I'll be damned," she said.

"No you won't and neither will I."

At Boulder Creek she side armed the Zippo like a major league pitcher. I helped her take off her jockey boots. "Best way this," she said, stripping to her bra and panties. I saw no monogram. She nearly toppled. There were more bruises on her legs and back. Jeez, when Eloise read about Brahma bull riding I'd imagined rubbing salve on *her* bruises! I got a half used bar of Irish Spring, an unclean towel, jeans, socks and chambray shirt from my seabag. She did her laundry, included her underwear. She stood in shallow water and gave herself a good soaping.

She dove, stood on her hands. As she emerged, I looked at the ground. A passing kayak nearly tipped. "Look at me, Tom. I'm yours for the taking." Her breasts were unscathed and firm, nipples as dark as raisins and the size of some super capsules Spence had in his drug arsenal. He'd offered me one but I'd chickened out. She slowly put on my clothes. I ran back to the car for a belt. No way that my jeans would work. She rolled up the shirtsleeves. She tugged her boots on. "Ever ride a horse, Tom?"

"Does a merry-go-round, count?"

“Nope, we’ve got to get your feet in irons sometime, galloping beside me.” Thoughts of shackles and chains while being led to court swept over me.

“How about just putting a donkey under me? I am a Democrat.” This was Lourdes all right. She put a foot on her knee and joined her hands over her head.

“Hee-haw,” she yelled through a hearty laugh. She wrapped her clothes in the towel and put them on the backseat floor. On the road again, we were silent five minutes or so. I timed it by the dashboard clock. Heidi kick started us. “I feel great Tom. That was a baptism.”

“Miraculous and Amen,” I said.

“Are you sure you want to go through with this? Nothing’s ever been easy for me. I don’t want to jinx you.” Did the Faulkner story jinx her?

“We’ll take it easy and easier.” I said. I felt my words were awkward and escaped by suggesting that she open the glove compartment and take out the paper folded in half, my poem. She read it aloud, slowly.

“Perfect, I love it.” She kissed me on the cheek. “Arson, arson everywhere and a trout likely ate my Zippo.” Did she expect something like Carolyn’s stolen line, “You backlight my dreams?” I wished I had a poem about her on a horse to give instead of one based on Eloise’s aquarium.

“Your trout use snags a Brautigan book title.

“You sure can link things, Tom.” Then she exclaimed, “I lost the baby in the truck.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have to be.

“I want to be, honestly.” Just the bottom word of her tattoo was showing, “Away.” A big shame on me for

letting, “awry” slip into my mind. She pulled my shirt out of my jeans and shot her hand up to my heart. “I believe,” she said. She took a nipple rubbed it between two fingers for a moment like one might a lucky charm or a combination knob on a safe. She made a cross with a finger before exiting.

“I’m gonna make your heart shake, Tom.”

“Do it in a gentle, gentle, way.” Was Carolyn her romance consultant?

“We’ll see. I’m going to poem you.”

I told her about Miss Barrera’s class: di Prima and Brautigan. I confessed my bookstore thievery.

”Petty crime,” she joked and tickled me. “We’ll read them aloud tonight.”

“I still have the text from the class,” I said. “We’ll cover it our way.”

“Ya know what, Tom? Screw phony Hogan. She’s a cliché. There are a bunch of them lurking. Well, can’t include Carolyn, Spence, Mike and Mary.” Eloise didn’t make the cut. Why had she turned on Hogan after she’d aided in her recovery and prompted the tattoo? Did Heidi get the cliché word from the page I’d read?

“It occurred to me as I was coming back from the dead that she was just there to pick my mind, to make certain I wasn’t mixed up in the Nazi plot. I think she was hoping I’d talk in my sleep. Carolyn had her fiancée and he’s not even circumcised! I bet her tattoo is reapplied every morning. I bet that rock of hers wouldn’t carve a heart with our names in it in a window pane. I don’t think we know the half of what’s happening, Tom. We should just let it go.” That trans-

parenthood beat the hell out of initials in the bark of a maple.

“Did Spence sleep with her?”

“Yup, she took him to the Travelodge, never turned on the light. Just took off her panties. She was shaved, itchy bitch. He pleased me too,” she confessed. “He’s after Casanova’s record of a hundred thirty bouts of intercourse. Spence could be porn star.”

“Those are some humbling and intimidating words for a guy to hear.”

“You’ll do fine with a capital ‘F.’” She lightly punched my arm.

“I’ve been with Carolyn,” I admitted. Was Carolyn shooting for a record and that’s why she numbered me thirty-nine?

“So I’ve heard. You earned honors. Are we all square now?”

“Like a square peg in a square hole.”

“Not quite the story,” she said and winked.

“Say, probably none of my business, but why did you need glasses at the Pancake Stop but not in class or landscaping?”

“Everything is your business. It was a dumb idea of a disguise for a Halloween of a job. Men are lucky they can grow beards. You’d look good with one,” she said stroking my face.” I needed a shave.

“How come you never wrote about the horseracing story in the text by the guy who might be your kin?”

“Ha, easy, the UK connection, didn’t want to get on her bad side, next.”

“I gotta tell you I had breakfast with Eloise at the Fence & Nail twice. We went to her apartment on another occasion. Brunch and the “Utility” poem were

all that came of it. She flipped pancakes and expressed concern for you.”

“No problem, we weren’t an item then. Now we are an ITEM!”

“The whole box and genuine,” I added. She buried right thumb in her fist then snapped it out. “Pow,” she said. “Eloise has a big heart but she’s someone who wouldn’t be happy with a regular GP. A plastic surgeon has more zip. And by the way, he’s got her by fifteen years. She’s a big Audrey Hepburn fan. Maybe Fisk will twin her.”

“Do you know about the anti-war work she does with Fisk?”

“Yes, and she talks too much. No, make that brags. I know she did in the tires. Fisk nose jobbed one of Tyler-now-Minsk’s women or he actually let Eloise perform the surgery and the snout got out of joint. The whoremaster wouldn’t pay up, threatened to sue if any harassment.”

“Did she do the fire?” I asked. I’d have to show her my notebook entries sometime.

“I can’t visualize that but she did con one of Fisk’s loopy patients out of a valuable antique diary.” How did she know all this? Was Heidi a doppelganger, one in Texas, one in Boulder?

Our flight hit an asphalt snag on I-25, one lane open. I couldn’t determine if the flag waver was from the Pancake Stop due to a bandana to fight off dust. Dump trucks were taking turns hauling off piles of demolished highway. “Heaps of mileage,” I said. She brought up Miss Hogan again, something she’d said that I’d forgotten. It was funny how we weren’t calling her Terri.

“Remember Hogan boasting about being in Big Sur during mud slides and seeing hills disappear and a road became weirdly and entirely visible, seven layers of it, dirt, gravel, brick and stuff she probably made up. Well, check this out.” She held up a hand horizontally, back of it to me. “Each finger is a layer. Your four with me, Pancake Stop, Freshman English, my breakdown and Land-Smiths Four.” She rubbed her thumb slowly back and forth over her index finger. “That’s us now but we’ll keep moving.” She put her other hand on top of the layers to make more. “Call it five to go. No, call it sky’s the limit.”

“You got me dizzy,” I said. She licked her thumb that ended up in my belly button. Her fingers moved under my belt, shades of *On the Road*: Marylou sitting between Sal and Dean and “handling” them. Heidi had some Carolyn going on. I was quick. Carefully removing her hand, she expertly tossed the bulk of my load out the window, pulled a Shoney’s napkin out of her pocket to deal with the rest. I let go of the wheel and applauded. Heidi threw kisses both hands, Hollywood style.

“We’ll pick up a corked bottle of wine and drink to celebrate us,” I said. Hogan wouldn’t go away. That road gang got me thinking of slave labor in a death camp. I’m sure she would have substituted a British colony.

The car ran beautifully, just one blowout that was loud. I almost swerved into a guardrail. “I thought we were being shot at,” said Heidi. When we got out, she squatted to look at the expired tire. “Yup, flat as a pancake,” she said, her face in a parody of a grin. Before she stood up, I ran my hand across her breasts. I

fetches the spare, scissor jack, and four-way out of the trunk. Heidi stood back, hands on hips. We took turns with the wrench but no lug budged. Were they welded on? Finally, I had to hold the wrench level and Heidi stood on an end. The creaking was like a horror movie door. The spare had some nice threads and we stopped at a K-Mart to buy some up textile traction for Heidi. "I'll pay you back, Tom."

"You already have," I said. She picked up a pink travel bag and dropped in three colorful blouses, a skirt and a pair of black jeans and some sexy underwear two bandanas and \$3.99 pearl ear studs. "I need a break from the silver. You might be calling me lettuce ears when these toys turn mossy," she warned.

"I like bunny better," I said. My mother gave me a defective pearl tie tack from a costume jewelry factory where she worked for a year. I straightened the crooked pin with pliers. What would she think of Heidi?

"Ha, I'm a centerfold!"

"Of the year," I said. She spun her eyes.

In the parking lot of the Double Suds she skillfully fashioned the red bandana so that it covered her head, secured it in the back. "I got tossed out of the convent."

"Welcome home."

I filled a couple of pillow cases. I took a pair of clean jeans and a t-shirt. Heidi carried in the new black jeans and blouse. I wore a pair of PF Flyers, Heidi my shower shoes. There was a unisex rest room. We took turns and exited wearing what we'd with carried in, fatter pillowcases. While we were quizzing each other from a Reader's *Digest* "Word Power" section a cou-

ple of kids approached. The girl was maybe five or six. She had Carolyn's hair and Eloise's eyes. Her dress was a blue polka dot. "I'm Jane, this is my brother Mark." He wore or all things a fireman's helmet that was too big so I couldn't look for any Spence similarities. He carried a very small dump truck, no IWW markings, ha. His khaki pants were high waters.

"We're pleased to meet you," said Heidi." This fellow's Tom

"Did a bunch of bees sting your face?" Mark made buzzing sounds.

"That's exactly what happened. You are very smart. Maybe you'll be a doctor."

"I'd fix your face in a jiffy. I do have a toy kit, stethoscope and all." Eloise's eyes all right.

"I want to be a fireman," said Mark. Jane tapped on his helmet

"You guys ever hear of Pooh Bear?"

"Not yet," said Jane.

"Here you go."

She was great. I thought she'd break up thinking of her two lost children. The woman who'd been folding clothes was finished. She came over. "I hope they were no bother.

"They were a delight," said Heidi. Jane and Mark waved goodbyes all the way to the door "Someday I'll entertain our own like that." I nodded and touched her bee stings with the back of my fingers.

"Pooh is in *On the Road*, you know."

"I do, I do."

"Efficacious," I said taking up where we'd left off.

We had lasagna at Joe's Venetian. Heidi loved the pepperoncini in the salad. At her request I over tipped the waitress whose shoes were in bad shape. She spoke broken English. There was a black ribbon pinned to her uniform next to her name tag that read Philomena. Heidi wondered if she'd lost a child and hugged her. Leaving the parking lot a '49 or '50 Ford sped by. Its paint was grey primer. There were flames painted on the front door and the hood. "Like a bat out of hell," I observed.

"Like us, Tom." We passed barns with Mail Pouch Tobacco advertising painted on them.

No escaping them.

"Did you ever chew or is it chew?" asked Heidi.

"The second one best but no, but guys on the Ramply who worked in places you couldn't smoke did. They spit the overflow into Dixie Cups. There was this one guy. No too gross to tell."

"Did someone drink a combine cocktail on a bet?"

"Yes, indeed."

"Yes, gross is the word."

At the Road Crest Motel Heidi waited outside while I took in our luggage. She insisted I carry her over the threshold. What would she have said or done if I'd divulged I'd done the same with Carolyn at the Pithy? I startled myself once more with an insane notion of Benson carrying Heidi into the barn. She insisted we shower alone but we towed each other off. She put on her new clothes. "Do I look cheap, Tom?"

"You know I'm thinking of the tired old 'million dollar' response."

"That's not green and wrinkled, is it?"

“It’s fresh government issue. Hell, let’s leave it at spectacular!” She bent forward, palm up, then dropping it slowly.

I shocked her to tears by taking out her English Leather gift from my seabag.” We scented each other as she put it.

“You get dressed too,” She said, and gave a light squeeze and said “nice.” We played a whimsical strip game with poems. If one of us didn’t announce perfectly a piece of clothing had to be removed! She was the judge. I was naked in a hurry. She didn’t accuse me of fumbling on purpose. She read like a pro, as if auditioning for a part in a play as she’d done with “Utility” in the car. It got eerie when she sounded like Carolyn, Miss Hogan or Eloise, even Spence. She didn’t look at me for a response so I kept my mouth shut. She found an ultra-sexy trio by Brautigan. A “Vagina” reference finished our sport. She undressed like an exotic dancer would. I tangled my feet in my jean legs, nearly fell. Finished laughing, she pulled her lips taut and pushed out the tip of her tongue and spit-tle dropped off. “Think of a number from 1 to 70,” she challenged.

“Would you accept a temperature a degree below 70 Fahrenheit?”

“It’s going to get much hotter than that.” She puffed her lips.

“Next on the agenda,” she said, after we kissed away our juices and I finished licking her collarbone and tracing figure eights around her breasts. I braced myself. She mounted me and mimicked race riding, her “variations.” I was happy she didn’t have a crop. She

coached me along while I tried to do the same atop her. "Yes, a donkey," I said.

"We got where we were going."

"A first class saddle "I said. She'd slipped past Carolyn erotically.

"That's a beautiful way to put it, lover."

She got out of bed. "Here I am at Boulder Creek."

"Ah yes," She did what she'd explained then was the yoga tree pose. Falling back into bed, her opened arms welcomed me. Raised up on my elbows, she locked me in her eyes and read a poem off the top of her head. I'd never seen her write anything down.

Charm Tom

Naked I stood
On my hands
In the creek
Where the lighter
I'd hurled after
You swore
Its lucky charm
Duty was done
But no not so
Bolt upright
It lurked on
A fire red rock
And as I reached
A trout saw
I was kin
All my bruises aping
His prism scales

Gobbled it up
Like a glitzy lure
And flashing off
Saved us twice
One flipping
Over the kayak
Rippled waters
Breathless
I landed
Under you

We made love again and I thought of Carolyn's number three and the trio of women connected by water in my life. "Gift enough, dear one?"

"I believe the plural is in order." A Heidi original, I'd bet my life on it.

Carolyn would have called us on the carpet for failing birth control but Heidi said she was sick of control of any kind. She turned on the small TV. The volume was low. We paid no attention and talked well into the night. I told her about how I landed in Boulder and my notion of following Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* route.

I got the novel out of my bag and read parts to her. She loved Sal Paradise's affair with Teresa. "Fortunately she's a Terry and not Terri," I said.

"Maybe we'll end up in the fields with migrant workers."

"My back is aching just thinking of it." I hadn't given much thought to the money angle.

"Don't worry; I still have my Texas Jockey license that I earned at Manor Downs. There's a track about

20 miles from Seattle called Longacre. You'll be my agent, my secret agent man."

I went out for java and egg sandwiches early the next morning. Before going into the Coffee Plus parking lot, I decided to fiddle with the radio. I found a rusty screwdriver and pliers in the trunk. I managed to remove it from the dashboard. I took the silver cube from the glove compartment and slipped it into place like I knew what the hell I was doing. I had to hit the radio face with the heel of my hand a few times before I heard it click home. That Mathis poem struck again. I worked the tuning knob but nothing interrupted the static.

"What's going on here?" asked a cop wearing mirror sunglasses.

"I'm trying to get the damn radio working."

"They are tricky," he said. I showed him my license and registration and that was it.

"Enjoy the finest scenery in the nation, young man," he said after tapping the hood for some reason. I kept checking the rearview mirror to make sure he wasn't following me. I had a hunch Heidi would require mucho explaining.

A big sun was rising when I got back to Heidi. She was reading *On the Road*. "Dean Moriarty could talk the horseshoes off a Clydesdale, Tom. His lines are good agent training."

"He could con the clothes off a dozen women at once and walk around like Groucho while doing it. Spence is a bit like him."

"You made up the Groucho part to fit with our date," she said, ignoring my comparison.

“The heck I did. Keep reading. You’ll find him.”

“Dean is good for the book but he’s a shit, Tom.”

“I agree, Sal’s the man...most of the time.”

“If I ever write a book, I’ll call it *Barnstorming*,” she announced.

“You are uniquely qualified,” I said, hoping it was an appropriate response and it was.

“Profoundly,” she said. I imagined her wearing her old clear goggles and taking them off to say that word. She undressed me and we showered like Moriarty was coaching us. Her swellings were shrinking, bruises fading. We downed the cold coffee and gobbled our sandwiches as if Vince’s IWW uncle and his cohorts coming off a hunger strike.

The radio buzzing like a grown up, long winded fireman Mark didn’t interfere with Heidi’s *On the Road* reading. She said it went well with the rolling tire music. I imagined a “Pop the Top” surprise but it was a news show in Idaho that broke the monotony. There was an unsolved bank robbery, where Cheryl was a guard. Boulder truckers were protesting over road conditions. A 67-year-old trucker died of a heart attack after a pothole hit knocked bales of hay off his truck and he tried to put them back. Heidi closed the book and for a couple of seconds covered her mouth and chin with a hand. “I guess characters telling their stories in Kerouac’s book could have been lying but so what. That radio’s lying but doesn’t know any better and so what there too.”

“Okay, but we’ll probably hear it again, can’t turn the radio off or change the station. It would be dangerous to put my fingers in my ears.”

“I have to be honest with you, Tom.”

“Whatever you’ve done is water over the Hoover and under the Tappan Zee.”

“We’ll see. While I was hitchhiking I saw the hay truck parked at a rest stop. I climbed on and found a gap between bales. I don’t know if it was a pothole or a deer in the middle of the road but he slammed on the brakes and nearly went off the road. I was thrown off with the three bales that cushioned and saved me. He got out of the truck cussing away. I was sitting up. “A scare-boy gift,” he shouted. He grabbed for my crotch. I got up and ran into the woods. He followed until he collapsed. “Tom, he thought I was a boy!”

“Well, chopped hair and all.”

“I know I’m acting like some preppy college girl. I’m half-sorry the guy died but he would have raped me or killed me after he found out I was a woman. I think he scared the baby out of me. It happened in the woods. I could see the planet Venus and half a moon.”

“You’ve failed again to run me off.” I reached over, pulled up her blouse, licked my thumb, put it in her belly button and moved my fingers under her belt and down.

“You’re all woman,” I said. She grinned. It took but a minute or two. We licked my finger.

A half hour later, more Boulder news blasted from the radio about an explosion and fire at the Just-In-Case warehouse. Hogan had once gone on and on about figuratively vs. literally. I felt the tremor. A disgraced supermarket manager, Claude Pence, was the arsonist. He’d been fired for sexually harassing a clerk.

“I bet it was Dimpled Donna, devout Christian,” I said.

His wife threw him out. He was living with his sister. How did that sit with Juniper Jack? She bought a Saab

for her daughter that turned out to be a lemon. Claude swore revenge. That was the tip of the iceberg. Police discovered a trove of large wooden boxes. Inside were dozens of counterfeit Zippo lighters packed in straw. Each lighter had a swastika engraved on it.

“Not my hay,” shouted Heidi.

Claude was picked up nearby with a big box of Diamond Kitchen Matches lighting one at a time and putting them out on his arms. He was committed. Was Eloise involved somehow?

As a result of Claude’s lunacy and an FBI investigation a Neo-Nazi attempt to set up Western operations was thwarted. Justin Ward, Carson Miller and Clive Benson were arrested.

“I guess Claude is an unintentional hero,” Heidi gathered. “I say a new Rolls Royce for the Man from Joyce.”

“No, I am.”

“What?” she asked brow wrinkled.

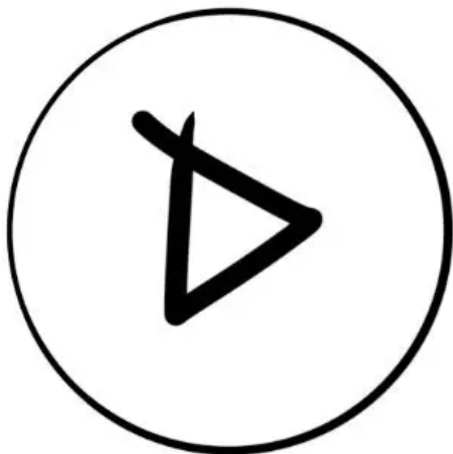
“Justin tried to sell me that Saab. If I’d have fallen for his pitch, Claude wouldn’t have had any reason to act as he did.”

“Let’s just say, Hogan failed. The Tom & Claude team did not.”

The radio retreated to static. We picked up roast beef sandwiches, fries and a six pack of Bud.

We stayed the night at the Golden Digs Motel in Caldwell, Idaho. We were beat. I took the Marlboro pack out of the glove compartment and Christ if that cop had ever done a search! We watched the news on TV and smoked the last gift joint, tossed the companion Marlboros. Heidi took out the inside aluminum

foil to salvage any flecks of weed. We ate them and the tobacco dross too, a la Ramply Lars. Heidi ripped the pack apart. Two, one hundred dollar bills rolled as tiny as could be fell out. Undone, they felt new. Ah, Cheryl hugging Carolyn. There was a note. "They were closing in, treat her right, C & S+M&M" We didn't dwell on the "they" of it or why Mike and Mary were included. Heidi put her head on my chest and drifted off first. I didn't want to disturb her so I left the TV on. I saw us as couple of defendants that had just heard a not-guilty verdict read by a judge. As my eyes were closing, Heidi put her fingers on my lips and flicked her thumb a few times as if she'd found the teeth of a Zippo flint wheel in my three-day growth. She mumbled, "Why just two?" The Franklins had to be somehow marked. Would Irish Spring do the laundering? An Italian mouse puppet danced on the TV screen, played with our darkness and an idea for the poem I owed Heidi skittered across my mind.



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“HEY ALEXA, HOW BIG ARE PRISON
CELLS ”

by David Thomas Jenkins

Insta: @poetryfromthefire

Book: Lola’s Haunter (Amazon, 2023)

Website: <https://jneira.com/>

“Bergamot Above My Apartment”

by Umaima Munir

Twitter: @umansfr

“SHIFT” by Theodore Wallbanger

Twitter: @sangriabeard

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“An Ordinary Life” by John RC Potter

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“Aliens: An Alternative Epilogue”

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“Paradise Paranoid” by Bradley David Waters

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“French Press” by Megan Nicholson

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“I Don’t Know Who I Am” by Sarah R. New

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Website: <https://sarahrnew.wordpress.com/>

Book: Amissis Liberis (Alien Buddha Press, 2024)

“The Barbarians” by Michael Tyler

“Orphan Socks” by Kathy Stephanides

Website: [https://medium.com/@tk-
steph85_98794](https://medium.com/@tk-steph85_98794)

“Hotham River Angel” by Lewis Woolston

Book: Remembering the Dead and Other Stories

“Same Old Same Old” by Ben Macnair

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“Zippos by the Score” by Thomas M. McDade

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