

Brave, He Died of His Wounds  
and Other Stories

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A Thesis  
in  
The Department  
of  
English

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts (English) at  
Concordia University  
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

January 2018

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**CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY School of Graduate Studies**

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## ABSTRACT

### Brave, He Died of His Wounds and Other Stories

David Fleming

*Brave, He Died of His Wounds and Other Stories* is a collection of short fiction that examines some of the pieties of contemporary American culture. Among those pieties are the sanctity of life, the sanctity of marriage, and the sanctity of US militarism. It is firmly rooted in the fifteen years before and after September 11, 2001, and the characters in these stories struggle to carve out ethical positions in relation to marriage, reproductive futurity, democracy, individualism, and global imperialism. While those discourses are important to the stories that follow, my primary goal is to turn my own ruminations about them into compelling plots, characters, and images.

## Acknowledgements

Thanks to Kate Sterns, my supervisor, for her extensive efforts on my behalf; her insights into my stories have been invaluable. I also want to thank Terence Byrnes, not only for his useful feedback, but also for supervising my independent study of post-9/11 war short stories; his generosity made it possible for me to read short fiction while fulfilling academic seminar requirements. I wish to thank Dr. Mary Esteve for her willingness to serve as examiner of this thesis, and for her continued interest in the work I have done in this department. Additional thanks to Dr. Stephen Ross for serving as examiner of this thesis.

Thanks to classmates and teachers in workshops at Concordia, Dalhousie, and St. Mary's, who read most of these stories in their early stages. Dr. Alexander MacLeod deserves special mention for his extensive influence, and Sandy Martin deserves praise for his steadfast friendship and comradery during periods when this work was most difficult.

I want to express my deep affection and gratitude for my mother, Denise Fleming, my sister, Sarah Taylor, and my brother Bryan Fleming. They have each provided me much comfort, wisdom, and joy.

Love and thanks to my children Eliot, Grace, Lua, and Kennis; the time spent reading authors like Dr. Seuss and Lemony Snicket with them has shown me what makes a great story. Their curiosity has been a constant reminder that every word counts.

Greatest thanks to my wife, Lindsay Fleming, for her countless hours spent reading my work, listening to and enlightening me; and for bearing together all the incoherent events of life.

Finally, I dedicate this thesis to my Dad, Kenneth David Fleming, M.D., who passed away in 2009. He fueled my interest in reading and writing, at bookstores and on battlefields, and modelled a version of fatherhood that works to break old habits. He is my enduring influence.

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## Rearing

I generally want them dead, my four kids. To keep my murderousness hypothetical, I sent them to this Vacation Bible School for the first two weeks of summer, hoping I'd have the patience, once it's over, to correct course, to undo their indoctrination. Charles, the man next to me in the church basement is practically cooing in my ear about how great they are. He's what, at least fifty and he has a five-year old?

"You must be such a great father," he says while his daughter smiles euphorically as Iris and Amy push her back and forth. "My Emily really loves them." Charles is ephemerally gentle. Two kids," he says. "Wow."

He speaks wistfully, sleepily, but not like an exhausted parent. He speaks like someone for whom everything goes according to plan.

The church is stone. It's, what, Anglican? Gorgeous. These people are bougie as fuck, but they look too liberal to be Catholic. Or Mormon for that matter. I don't know.

He's staring at the three of them—my two daughters, his own daughter the pinball between them—when fat little Isaac comes lumbering up. He holds out a stubby thumb, pokes Iris's back as she hip checks this guy's daughter. Iris swats fast behind her.

"Touched ya!" Isaac slobbers.

"Quit!" Iris yells.

"You quit!"

"Daddy!"

"Oh," Charles whimpers, extending a hand to *my* daughter.

"DADDY!" Isaac wails, falling at my feet.

I breathe through my nose, sure that if I open my mouth I will say atrocious things, and upset these people who dress as if they know politicians.

"It's three kids, then?" Charles says.

Isaac wraps his hands around my calves, his little fingernails starting to break the skin. His sneakered feet press slowly into my shins, I brace myself against the stone vestibule wall to keep from tipping over.

It's not that I want them dead. I just hope I outlive them.

"Mean," Isaac blubbers, the pressure on my legs becoming pain.

“Oh, aren’t I rude?” Charles says. “Of course you can’t chat now.”

His words are still moist on his lips, when our oldest kid, Emerson, walks up and blurts out, “Who are you?” His pointer finger extended from a supine palm, he grimaces. Gestures that make him look accusatory, yet disinterested: confused, but not that worried about it.

Charles gasps. A hand on his chest, he raises both eyebrows. He waits, excited for me to say something like, *Oh yes, a four pack!* Or maybe, he hopes, there are even more of them.

The following Friday, I avoid him. I try to sneak into the hall where dozens of kids will perform church songs to a soundtrack, imperfectly executing hand motions that vaguely correspond to the lyrics about being strong in the Truth, standing tall for God, being a good neighbor.

But Charles spots me when I walk in, seated in the third makeshift row of old pew benches. He slides down and says, “Welcome back!”

When I remove my backpack, I can feel the thick straps of sweat on my tee shirt, leading down my shoulders to the reservoir on my back.

Charles introduces me to his wife, Cindy, who is possibly older than he is. And they have a five-year old. Cindy wears silver bangles which jangle when she clasps my hand, and asks me how we found the Vacation Bible School, at this, their church—Anglican? It could even be a United Church, but these folks look too Wonderbread for that. I don’t know the answer to Cindy’s question, exactly, and I bullshit something to avoid telling her that my wife found it, in desperation, knowing her husband might harm himself—or at least, the children—if he were to stay home with them for the entire ten weeks of summer.

“It’s so convenient, right?” Cindy says. “Right downtown, and all?”

I wonder if Cindy has been on a cruise, has spent time in the Mediterranean this year. She and Charles both have immaculate suntans and it is only the beginning of summer.

“Yes,” I say, worried they will invite us to church on Sunday. “Right downtown.”

I look at the clock above the door and see that it is ten minutes after 3 PM, the time my wife told me the concert would start. I am fairly certain she lied to make sure I wouldn’t be late, and because I am stuck with Cindy and Charles, and because, bless them, they are trying to talk to me, I volunteer personal information.

"My wife and I are both at the University, so..."

Charles raises his eyebrows and tilts forward. Cindy smiles and slides a hand down his arm, telling me that Charles, too, is *at the University*.

I swig from my water bottle and ask, “Oh? What do you do there?”

“Administration!” he says with a shrug. “Director of Planning,” as if he’s surprised, himself, to hear his title.

I imagine this kindly administrator— who directs the university’s planning, who has been doing so maybe for longer than I have been alive— picking people like me and my wife out of his teeth before he brushes them at night. Meanwhile Cindy watches the show that she recorded on her Tivo, or whatever old people use these days; the reality show she missed while the couple attended a Gala or something.

Charles returns my question, “And you?”

I think he must know already. An overweight bearded and bespectacled millennial who has a pile of kids is at best sessional faculty in the humanities. He must not be surprised when I tell him I’m a graduate student in English.

He asks if I know a friend of his, an English faculty member who just retired last spring.

“No,” I say, crinkling my eyes like I’m trying real hard to remember that I’ve heard about this person.

“I love to read the classics,” Charles says, “and he’s always giving me this obscure contemporary stuff to read.” He shrugs some more. “I just want to be sure something’s going to reward my time, you know?”

“Sure,” I say, knowing that two years ago this would have prompted me to overturn the pew and drive him from my presence. He asks me what my dissertation is on, and I lie, “HD.” He waits several seconds for me to complete my response, then nods in confusion when he realizes I already have.

After the Bible songs, and the sea of confused hand motions, and the certificates handed out along with a speech by the junior counselors about each individual kid, I am overrun in the hallway by dozens of them. I have Isaac hanging on my hip. Cradling his bum in both hands, I watch Iris and Amy disappear down a set of stairs. I wonder where the hell Emerson went, faintly hoping he’s gone to find our backpacks.

I look up at the ceiling and breathe, resign myself to waiting. Eventually, the girls come



back. They hand me a business card with a link to [playdate.com](http://playdate.com), a secret code, and a note that says, “My name is *Emily*. Can we make a playdate?” When Iris hands it to me and Amy says, “Can we Daddy, please?” I look around, see Charles and Cindy nodding aggressively, and give them a thumbs-up.

Outside, it is raining. I am standing under the large awning where the elderly and disabled are delivered to church services. Charles and Cindy find us, and while Iris and Amy smoosh Emily between them, they explain how great [playdate.com](http://playdate.com) is, how Emily just loves to organize her own social life, and how the secret code keeps it all secure. Isaac meanwhile is whimpering on my shoulder that he’s hungry. Charles and Cindy, sweet as they are, don’t seem to understand how little I care at this moment about Emily’s social life.

Isaac’s whimpering becomes weeping. He wails in my ear, “DADDY I WANT TO GO TO A RESTAURANT!”

Charles flinches at the unpleasant sound, and finally shuts up, while Cindy smiles and puts a hand on Isaac’s back. Amy, meanwhile, lights up and closes her hands together. “Daddy!” she shouts, “Can we go out for dinner?”

“Yes!” Iris seconds. “We haven’t gone out for dinner in weeks.”

I lose my balance under the physical force of Isaac’s continued wails. “Girls, let’s just...” I trail off, unable to say in front of Charles and Cindy that we are too poor to eat out. Emerson, like a merciful executioner, intervenes.

“Sorry kids,” he says, with a flick of his wrist. “No money for that.”

Isaac straightens his body so he slides down my side, sobbing in exhaustion at my feet. Iris pouts a little. Amy says, “Daddy? I love you.”

Realizing my utter capacity for embarrassment, I put on my brightest face and smile at Charles. Cindy puts a hand on my sore shoulder.

“I know,” she whispers, her voice husky and inches from my ear. “Why don’t you come to our house?”

“Great idea, hon,” Charles says.

Iris and Amy drop jaws and widen their crazed eyes in suspense. Isaac curls his back, his ears perking up like a sinner awaiting pardon.

“Of course,” I say, nodding at the girls. “That would be wonderful.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Emerson adds.

After Charles takes my number and texts his address, saying, “We’re just ten minutes up the road,” we wait in the circular drive for my wife. In the minutes that pass, I keep thinking of something Charles had said about how it would be nice to hear from us about what it’s like “elsewhere” in the university.

When Julie shows up, and I tell her, she’s furious. “I’ve been *working* all day!” she says, invoking, in contrast, my daily routine of sleeping until noon, opening and reviewing research notes on my desktop, then giving up, and listening to a series of guided meditations and positive affirmations.

“It’ll be a meal you don’t have to cook,” I offer. “Or pay for.”

She rubs her eyes, and relents.

“Besides,” I suggest. “It might be good for my situation to have an administrator in my corner.”

The “ten minutes up the road” Charles insisted upon was clearly estimated *driving* time. The closest bus only runs every half hour and would drop us ten minutes’ walk from Charles and Cindy’s house. Charles and Cindy live in a neighborhood up a large hill of mansions. Here, people do not take transit. Here, people only walk their show dogs. When I ask Julie how she’d like to get there, she rolls her eyes, clear that she will not mitigate the folly of my own twisted decision-making apparatus. I hoist Isaac, koala-like, and we start stomping uphill from downtown.

Iris and Amy hold Julie’s hand, singing “a-hiking we will go,” until their mother can’t stand their swinging arms anymore. I stop intermittently to check my directions, and make sure we are on track. I sweat in the late afternoon heat. Emerson keeps trying to link with me somehow—his hand in my shorts pocket, or looped around my elbow as I support Isaac’s heft.

Doggedly striding, I think about how I am not writing a dissertation on H.D. I am not, in truth, writing a dissertation after all, having recently learned, by letter, that after two years in a PhD program it had been decided that I would have the summer to complete a “satisfactory Research Paper” and receive a “terminal MA.” Considering my aspirational area of specialization—the influence of literary transcendentalism on the development of the Lost Cause during Reconstruction—the grappling of my son *Emerson* is a particular strain on my uphill climb to Charles and Cindy’s house.

I delay for a moment or two at a stop sign when I realize that we have gone too far without turning. Julie takes out the kids' water bottles for them. It begins to rain again and under the fat droplets, my screen does not respond to my touch.

"I could call a cab," Julie says. "From here we could be home in ten minutes."

Iris and Amy turn their faces up to her. The rain dramatizes their distorted pouting.

My supervisor in the English department has stopped responding to my pleas for help. The Department Chair can never remember my name. It's a long shot—I don't really know what "Director of Planning" means—but perhaps he has some influence, perhaps with this friend in the department, perhaps there is a way out of this.

"Julie," I say, "I think we should go to dinner."

"Fine," she says, sliding the water bottles away. "But I am going under protest."

Charles texts me *On your way?* and *I'm going to start up the grill...hope the rain doesn't come back!* and *Lost?* I respond *Took us a little while to get going!* and *Sorry, bud!* and *Almost there!*

The house is large and shaped around the hill in such a way that we cannot tell which entrance is available to us: the entrance atop the staircase, the ornately windowed door leading out of the garage, or even a slate walkway to the back lined with ivy.

I look at Julie. Her smile large and insincere. "Ask your friend!" she chirps.

I put Isaac down, and corral him between my knees, but before I start texting, loudly flip-flopping footsteps bound down the slate walk. Emily appears in the driveway wearing a rainbow striped bathing suit, a pink feather boa, and glimmering sunglasses. She has a small toy camera in her hand, and without saying a word, hands it off to Amy who says, "strike a pose," and "hello gorgeous!" and "give it to me girl!" while Emily and Iris vogue.

"Back here!" Charles calls. Wearing an apron and wielding a large metal spatula, he waves us into the yard. Charles introduces himself and shows Julie into the kitchen through the patio door. The girls disappear into the house and I shoo Isaac in after them. Emerson scans the yard, as if he's scoping it for surveillance equipment. Really, he's checking out the variety of plants in the garden. "Mint," he says, "Not bad, not bad."

Charles walks me over to a stainless steel barbecue the size of a small car. He opens the large lid, turns the bacon wrapped beef filets, which line the right half, and turns down the heat

on the other side where a series of small metal baskets of vegetables are suspended from the lid. He closes it, lays down the spatula. “Excuse me there,” he says, reaching for a door on the near side of this impressive machine. When it opens I feel the air cool around my legs, hear a light clank. He withdraws two brown bottles. “Too early for a beer?” he asks.

“Oh,” I say, unable to contain my shock that he has a beer fridge built into his barbecue. “Sure,” I say with some hesitation.

“Sure that’s a good idea, Dad?” Emerson asks from behind, having completed his sweep of the area.

I try to laugh him away, and before I have to explain myself to my son, Charles says “How rude of me!” and returns to the fridge to offer “Root beer? Cream soda? Strawberries ’n’ Cream?”

Emerson gets on his knees, reading the label of each soda bottle before making his choice. He seems too surprised at the selection to comment. Perhaps my poor children will be so carried off by the perfect excesses of Charles and Cindy and their little girl, Emily that they will not embarrass us; perhaps they will help us to even fit in with these people!

In the kitchen, Emerson pulls a stool out at the counter, and says, “Cindy, nice place here!”

“Why thank you! Such a sweet young man, you are.”

Julie glances at my beer, gives me her *what the fuck?* look. I respond by clinking my bottle against the martini glass she cradles in her hand, as if congratulating her for raising such a polite child, and she doubles down, expression-wise, as if to say *this is not okay!*

I know I ought to have passed on the beer. We have a standing agreement that I will abstain, given how I’ve been, but I think it will ease my interactions with Charles, help me ingratiate myself to him and Cindy. I drink a few beers with him tonight and maybe get a lunch with him next week. We’re both at the university, of course. Before long, I can call him to my cause, assuming I figure out exactly what he does, and what pull he’d have with the Office of Graduate Studies.

While the kids roam the house together, Julie and I perform the “couple friends” act for Charles and Cindy: we offer to help, we make the cliché jokes about having young kids, and Julie relates just the right details about her job in the psych department to make it sound *very* interesting to our hosts. I remember when we had more couple friends, how good we were at it

when we still had the energy, how natural the act feels.

Then comes the question, while we all set the table, *How did you two meet?* and we take turns cobbling together the outline: how she was finishing grad school herself, and I was doing *absolutely nothing*, “and I couldn’t resist him anyway!” she says.

Now, once another couple has shown an interest— especially an older couple engaged in some weird nostalgia trip with a younger couple— it’s hard not to tell the whole damn story. First the accidental pregnancy, and the romantic resolve, then the planned pregnancy, and the way children just *sort of happen* for a couple apparently quite fertile, *hahaha*, when every method of birth control has *some* margin of error.

*How fun that is!* when we tell it here, although more than once, intimates have asked us— always separately—if we had ever considered terminating the pregnancy. Though I don’t say it now, I always feel the compulsion to explain that once we were already parenting, abortion didn’t seem like a truly *live* option (*haha* in the *Jamesian* sense, *hahaha*). While I don’t say it now, I cannot help drawing the parallel between carrying a pregnancy to term and trudging through a graduate degree because, well, I’ve already started.

Whatever we say, Charles and Cindy receive it warmly. Standing at the counter, I wrap my arm around Julie’s waist and she leaves it there. Charles slides out the backdoor to pile the food from his mobile patio kitchen onto a large platter. I follow Cindy and Julie as they search for the children.

The cavernous dining room nevertheless feels crowded once everyone is at the table. Emerson cuts into his meet, scraping his plate, and says, “Just the right amount of pink.” I finish my second beer. Isaac in my lap, I lean over to cut up his food, try to coax him to eat it. For a few minutes, this one-on-one ratio (plus our somehow refined eldest son) seems as luxurious as our surroundings. Charles and Cindy ask the girls all sorts of questions. Iris just nods, shakes, and shrugs, occasionally standing up to try a dance move I can tell she’s choreographing while her inquisitors probe. Amy, meanwhile, perches on her knees in her seat, and rises gradually over the table telling wildly exaggerated stories about her everyday life. Charles—beaming—nods along, while his own daughter, still in between Iris and Amy, eats quietly, and actually *cringes* a little while observing how her new friends fail to demonstrate proper dinner etiquette. Julie eats, perfectly at ease, yet here I am struggling with Isaac—*would you please fucking eat?*—and

reminding Iris and Amy at every hop to stay in their seats, *for the love of god you're making us look like animals don't you see this little girl judging you?* And every time I try to eat, Isaac slaps at my face, or gamely intercepts my mouth-bound fork. I look at Julie like *could you help me out here?* She smiles and reaches for her martini, as if to say *this dinner is your doing, so I'm going to at least enjoy it.* Isaac fingers and takes single bites out of my potatoes, my eggplant, and my beets, holding them in his mouth for a moment, removing them for visual inspections, and replacing them on his tongue. "Dude," I say in my progressive, public-dad voice, "you've got your own right there."

"Doesn't he like it?" Cindy asks.

"You got peanut butter?" Isaac asks.

Cindy, tan and blonde and unflustered, looks at him a long time, as if a wave of recognition and understanding, that she is in the presence of a difficult child, has just hit her and she wants to let it drip off her clothes before responding.

"Of course!" she says.

Julie follows her into the kitchen, while I lure Isaac to his seat by separating the bacon from his beef. "See?" I say, holding it out in front of him on my fork. He wiggles down from my lap, takes my fork and chews the fatty end of the curled strip. Cindy and Julie return. Cindy brings a small plastic plate loaded with peanut butter-smeared saltines. And because Cindy knows who she's dealing with now, she places it in front of Isaac, and in the affectation of a butler, announces to him, "Your dinner...is served, monsieur." Isaac looks up and laughs, his mouth still closed on the fat of his bacon, grease on his chin and crumbled bits in his dimple. "Very well, then!" Cindy responds with a bow that leaves Isaac in squeals and spitting his bacon back on his plate. Emily watches, despondent, ashamed now of her own mother, and I am really beginning to dislike her for it.

"Mommy? I'm finished. May I take Iris and Amy to the basement to watch a movie?" After Cindy says yes, the girl looks over to Amy, who's been monopolizing Charles, and says, "If you've had enough, that is." Amy's plate is almost full. She stuffs her mouth rapidly enough that Emily says, "Don't choke yourself, please."

Isaac is separating the crackers, tearing the bacon, and placing it on the peanut butter, marginally classing up his meal. I finally start mine. The three girls disappear, and the evening seems about to crest into a more leisurely pace. But on my third bite of food, Isaac holds a

cracker to my face. “Try this,” he says pointedly.

“No, no,” I say quietly, through my mouthful of food.

“I’m sharing,” he insists.

I shake my head.

“Try it,” he says. “You’ll like it.”

He repeats himself, “Try it, you’ll like it.” A bully’s chant.

I chew a thick piece of beef, a fatty tangle of bacon caught in my back molars. Isaac pulls himself onto my lap, breaking the cracker against my pants, smearing peanut butter on my shirt. The large chunk of meat is not quite small enough to swallow easily. I evade my five-year old’s stinking fingers. Losing air, I cough and strain and croak. Saliva and gravity winning out, the food scrapes down my throat. Isaac pulls my cheek, cheerful and coaxing. My head is spinning and I feel like I might topple over. He puts his forehead against mine. I can feel him blink.

“Come on, Daddy!” he demands maniacally.

I can’t take him anymore.

“Fuck off!” I shout.

Gasps around the table. My son collapses, drops the cracker, ducking his head in my lap at first, then sliding to the floor. Lips aquiver, he moans, “Momma,” and Julie lifts him to her.

Cindy and Julie confer, disappear with Isaac. I hear a loud ringing. I am alone. Charles appears, places a large glass of water in front of me, takes Isaac’s seat. I squeeze my eyes, throw back my head, bring the glass to my lips so that a steady stream fills my mouth and cools my throat. I drink most of the glass. Charles folds his hands, looking at the fake fruit in the center of the table. My face is hot but my chest shivers. My hearing returns. The rain pelts the skylight above.

“You’re crawling with them,” Charles affirms, leans back. I am exhausted by this man, his quiet observations to nobody in particular. “Tough being such a young parent,” he says.

“Yeah?” I say, petulant and hoarse. “You certainly waited until you were comfortably advanced.”

From elsewhere in the house I hear laughter and rapid footsteps: Isaac’s.

“Yeah,” Charles responds. “You know, Emily’s actually our granddaughter.”

I look him over, lower my brow.

“You notice she calls me Papa?”

I had not. Papa. Father, or grandfather. Could go either way.

Charles returns my glare, breaks it and stands when Julie and Cindy return to the room. Passing behind me to reclaim his seat at the head of the table, he says, “Mommy’s away, for now.” This time he is speaking distinctly to me, making it clear he’ll take no questions. But what does that mean? A list of possibilities rattles in my skull. Charles and Cindy have a grown daughter. Dead? Murdered by Daddy? No, he said away *for now*. Mummy has murdered Daddy, is in prison. Or has she simply left?

Julie and Cindy hold glasses of white wine, and I look from Cindy to Charles and back. Cindy is resolute in her stillness. Are they, after all, the saddest family on earth? I look up at the skylight window, the evening light stamped out by storm clouds, and ignore Julie’s hand on my knee under the table. No, there was never any chance of becoming pals with Charles. Best to let this one go. We are a one-night charity case, for him. At the same university, but in different universes. Julie comes closer, feigning an intimate nuzzle, brings her lips to my ear. “Would you snap out of it?” she asks. “There are people here. There are people looking right at you.”



## Of the Caucus Down in Peopleville

In Peopleville, our dear Democratic God reaps his harvest every four years. Every fourth autumn, I have the privilege of taking a day off from my US History and Government courses, in which I educate our youngsters in the workings of our own local government. With varying degrees of enthusiasm and interest, the students hear about the mayoral debate and election from my lips. I tell them how unique Peopleville is. No other town holds a debate and elects a mayor by caucus in a single evening. I suffer the inevitable minority of those sighing, pouting and snoring in class, to further inspire the highly motivated future Franklins, Jeffersons, and Madisons of Peopleville High.

This election, I have the special honor of imparting my knowledge of the process to my son, Bartel, who is in my senior US Government course. Bartel is, I suppose, a sincere, generally good-natured person, but Debbie and I share a great concern over his recent antics. Truthfully, he's been a bit of a prick. I was humiliated to learn from a colleague at school that Bartel has been skipping her class. Imagine my embarrassment! When I asked him why, he shrugged and said, "anh?" Anh! He stays in his room much of the time, and when he comes out, he's hardly the pride and joy he once was. One of his great pastimes, for some reason, is filling Magnissimus condoms—the ones in the large shiny wrappers—with *honey*. Tying them off, he leaves them in public parks, near shops, or in front of urinals in public restrooms. To what end, who knows?

Several times, I have trailed him on these expeditions. Each time, he places the prophylactic then positions himself nearby to watch people step around it. Each time, my boy, from an intermediate distance, often leaning against a wall, or slouching on a bench, watches with eyes narrowed, brow wrinkled for several minutes, and then leaves. *Is this all?* I cry within. *You watch and then turn away?*

At any rate, Debbie suggested yesterday that I take Bartel to the pre-debate picnic for some bonding time. So here we are, walking into Peopleville Park outside the school where the debate and caucus are held. The spirit of democracy swells within me and I feel better about my relationship with Bartel already. We get in line for food behind Susan, an old friend of Debbie's.

"Hello, Susan!" I greet her.

"Hello, Glenn!" she says. "Nice to see you, Bartel. I hardly ever see you out anymore."

"Yeah," he says.

“My boy came out tonight for his first caucus. Wouldn’t miss this, now, would you, Champ?”

“I guess not.”

Susan tells me about the day her daughter has had, driving back from college so she could caucus for the first time tonight herself. As we talk and move forward in line to heap our paper plates with hotdogs, potato salad, and ambrosia I discover that Bartel has left my side. I turn my head, owl-like, in every direction, and I see him at the far end of the park, near the trees that line the street. Oh God, please don’t let that boy drop any Magnissimmus tonight!

He climbs up on the large iron see-saw over there, and spreads his legs. Placing a foot on each see-saw-seat, he balances carefully, almost elegantly in the air, shifting his weight from one leg to the other and back. I am impressed at the athleticism of the act and reminded of a time when he was a toddler.

I had him here on a Saturday morning while Debbie was doing some errands. He must have only been 18 months, because he was in the little umbrella stroller and I pushed him on the walking path to the historic site just past the park. This is where the original resident of Peopleville lived.

Ah, yes. Sad Gustav Pilferfrausen. He lived entirely alone in a hole dug out of the earth and covered with a large slab of shale. The hole is filled in now, but the slab is preserved and marked with an informative sign, a memorial of sorts to the man who died alone before the other settlers got here and built the town around his unmarked domestic grave.

On that day, almost seventeen years ago, I placed Bartel’s little stroller on top of the slabs that rested unevenly on the mound of earth. I stood on one end of the slab so the stroller rolled slowly toward me, then I jumped to the other end and the stroller began to roll backwards. I hopped back and forth so that little Bartel was in constant motion on the slab. My boy laughed and drooled and squealed with delight as I said his name, “Bartel, Bartel, Bartel” to coincide with each direction-changing landing. This went on for some many minutes. Oh Great Democratic God, steer my boy away from the solitary life of sad Gustav Pilferfrausen!

I keep an eye on Bartel as I sit down to eat with Susan’s family, and her daughter tells me all about her day driving back from college to participate in her first Peopleville caucus. Bartel is moseying now along the rows of tables set up closer to the school. At one, Lisa sells her famous mini-pies. At another, there is a kissing booth to raise money for charity. A dollar per kiss, and

Elsie Marie sits there. Oh dear, when Elsie and I were eighteen, I kissed her in the kissing booth and after her shift was over she kissed me again and again, free of charge, behind the school. Dear Democratic God, keep my son and his honey-filled penis-bags away from poor Elsie Marie!

“Bartel, come on. Eat something. It’s almost time for the debate.”

Bartel comes over and shovels down his plate of food. When he is finished, he watches old Tom in his muscle suit slamming a sledge-hammer on a scale to ring a bell and win a prize. Bartel’s expression is unchanging.

“Hey Bartel,” Susan’s daughter says when she notices my boy sitting there.

“Hi,” he says. His face has awakened. His eyes gleam. He smiles, for God’s sake!

“Okay, Slugger,” I interrupt. “Why don’t we head in to get our seats?”

“Okay.”

In the newly renovated auditorium of Peopleville High, our magician, Pagliacci, performs. He is juggling large conical, flaming objects and somehow remains unharmed. People are scattered about the first few rows watching Pagliacci. Just in front of the stage, I see my best friend, Baz Bickford, in a tall chair at a tall table studying his blue index cards. Amidst a smattering of applause for Pagliacci, I drag Bartel to the pit to say hello to Baz. To get the attention of my well-attired friend, I sing his name.

“Baz Baz Baz-Baz, Baz-Baz Baz Baz-Baz.”

He spins around in his tall chair with finger-guns drawn and responds.

“I wanna be *debated!*” That is my Bazzy-boy. Every four years he moderates the debate and invigilates the caucus. Each election season, he prepares to thoroughly present the People of Peopleville with their choices for Mayor.

“Hiya, Glenn,” he says with a smile meant to show his composure and command of the coming proceedings. “Is that your little man hiding behind you?”

“Oh, yes, Baz. You know I’ve been waiting for this day a long time.”

“Bartel, my man. This day belongs to you as much as anyone else, you know.”

“Yes, son,” I say placing a hand on Bartel’s shoulder. “That is the way our democracy works. Everyone is equal here and you must decide which candidate you will stand with.”

“With a civically-minded family like yours, I’m sure you’ve already given a lot of thought to who you’ll vote for.”

“Yeah,” Bartel answers Baz. “I guess.”

I gulp with embarrassment as I realize I’ve been so mad at the little prick’s dick-bag slicking and class skipping and who knows what else, that I haven’t even talked to him about the candidates, just the process of the caucus and debate. We leave Baz to finish his preparations as Pagliacci is sawing apart his body and leaving large puddles of fake blood all over the stage.

When we find our seats, I ask Bartel who he will caucus with.

“I don’t know,” he says. “Does it really matter?”

I gasp. “Of course it does!”

“Doesn’t Mayor Barry always win anyway?”

Well. With that, I give him all the facts available about Mayor Barry and his constant antagonist, Dick Girard. Yes, Mayor Barry has won four consecutive terms, and Dick Girard has unsuccessfully opposed him each time. But in any given year the tide could change. The will of the People of Peopleville could shift ever so slightly, and the majority may decide Dick Girard, or some other candidate, is right for the job.

Mayor Barry is a fine example of the power of the incumbent, I tell Bartel. Now, as I always say in class, the incumbent has the advantage. He is a known commodity. An incumbent congressman, for instance, has established committee positions. He is likely to be appointed by his party to more senior positions, thereby giving his constituents a stronger voice in the legislative body. Voters have already seen an incumbent working. They know what to expect. People like that.

I keep gabbing to Bartel, really in my element here.

“All is right in Peopleville since Mayor Barry was elected. The economy has been relatively stable, and that often matters most to people. All the shops downtown have been successful, and many new businesses have opened. As you know, Peopleville was named the Coolest Small Town in America last year. See, Bartel, Girard is a competent man. He’s wealthy and has an excellent political pedigree. But Mayor Barry has always made the People feel good about themselves, so Dick Girard’s challenges have never amounted to much. This is not likely to change today, son. Still, any of us are empowered to Caucus with Dick. I *do* think it’s good if a number of people choose to. Like I always say in class, I don’t care who you Caucus with as

long as you Caucus with somebody. Democracy is the blessing our ancestors have bestowed upon us all, and it is important to participate in that blessing, and to maintain it for the future People of Peopleville.”

Bartel isn’t even looking at me anymore. He feigns attention with a little lean in my direction, but the prick is really just watching Pagliacci yank, or pretend to yank, a chain of gag-sausage links from his throat. Applause along with bodies of the People fill the auditorium. Debbie has arrived, and sits next to me. She gives my knee a little squeeze and asks, “How was the picnic, boys?”

“Just fine,” I say curtly. She leans forward and gives Bartel a little wave.

“Hi Honey.”

“Hey Mom,” my boy says.

I I can’t expect a picnic and a little lesson on local politics from old Dad to suddenly transform my son. But I do trust, Dear Democratic God, that the Caucus will move my Bartie-Bart. The People murmur and find seats in the auditorium. The house lights dim and Baz swivels in his high-backed chair. He holds a thin, gameshow host microphone and a single blue card. The People are silent. The candidates appear on stage, take their places half-standing at high-backed chairs. Up, you spotlights! Baz begins.

“People of Peopleville, I’m Baz Bickford. It is with great joy that I welcome you to the Caucus of Peopleville. Once again, our Dear Democratic God, our forefathers, and our descendants call upon us all to exercise our franchise. Once again, we take part in the Democratic tradition of our town. Before the Caucus of the People, we hold the traditional debate. We will begin with the opening statements of our two candidates and proceed to the substance round, followed by the performance round. Then the debate will end with the time-honored tradition: the Consultation of the People. At that time, if anyone thinks neither of these candidates is worthy to hold the office of the Mayor of Peopleville, let that person present *himself* as a candidate. After the conclusion of the debate, I will lead the procession of the People down the corridor to the Peopleville Gymnasium for the Caucus. Then I will assign each candidate a corner of the gymnasium, and the People will show their support for their preferred candidate by joining him in his corner.”

Ah yes, Dear Democratic God. The Caucus. I do love it. How in our freedom we boldly cast our votes not upon ballots, but with our bodies. I am boiling over with the pride I feel. I lean

over to my son and whisper, “Bartel, dear boy, you will see why this matters. You just wait.” Debbie gives my knee another squeeze as Baz continues.

“People of Peopleville, it is time for the Opening Statements. Mayor Barry, as incumbent, the first statement is yours.”

Mayor Barry holds his own microphone and nods. The Mayor is tall and lean. At 41, he is still fresh-faced and healthy looking after sixteen years in office. His smile is confident and easy. “Thank you Baz,” he says to my Bazzy-boy, “and thank *you*, People of Peopleville.”

Applause of the People. Mayor Barry proceeds, as is his habit, with a gracious, autobiographical opening.

“For sixteen years now you have given me the privilege of serving you as mayor. You took a 25-year-old ex-jock who thought he might make an okay lawyer and turned him into the most popular small-town mayor in this state. For that, I will always be grateful. I know that it’s together—as a community—that we have made Peopleville into America’s Coolest Small Town!”

More applause over the coolness of Peopleville.

“I am delighted that you’ve given me this job, and I look forward to another four years.”

Thunder of the People. Debbie and I applaud vigorously. Bartel just looks on.

“Thank you, Mayor Barry,” Baz continues. “Now Mr. Girard, your statement please.”

Dick Girard steps forward and raises his microphone to his lips. How joyful this meeting of men! How comfortable I am, knowing that Dick Girard will make his own gracious autobiographical statement, touting his business acumen in an admirable attempt to position himself as a more attractive candidate than Mayor Barry.

“Thank you, Baz. Thank you, Mayor Barry. And thank you people of Peopleville. It has been my honor to live here for most of my life. As you all know, I come from a proud family who strives to serve the people of this town. Here in Peopleville, I’ve helped put local businesses in the international marketplace with my frequent travel to burgeoning consumer nations. I have proudly participated in these campaigns in the past to give you a viable alternative to Mayor Barry. But this year, People of Peopleville, I present myself as more than a viable *alternative*. I humbly present myself to you as the only good choice for Mayor. I look forward to bringing a new vision to the office of Mayor for *you*, the People of Peopleville.”

Joyous approbation of the People of Peopleville. I cheer the challenger. Debbie cheers. Bartel watches. Baz, with gleaming smile, as composed as ever, continues his expert moderation.

“Thank you, Mr. Girard. Now for the Substance Round. Each candidate will have two minutes to make a statement, followed by two minutes of Rebuttal. Mr. Girard, as the challenger, you will begin. Your two minutes start now.”

Bartel is right, in a way. It matters little what Dick Girard actually says during the debate. Each Caucus, he tries hard to call attention to some pressing matter: unmarked crosswalks, potholes, shoplifting sprees. Still, it matters that he says something, and that the People listen, that we carry on with our Democratic process. I lean forward, eager to hear Girard’s statement.

“Thank you, Baz. I would like to address a growing concern of the People of Peopleville: recreational drug use. Recent studies suggest that 1 in every 2 adult Americans has smoked cannabis at least once. And what is more worrisome, at least one of every two adult Americans who has smoked cannabis at least once, has *liked* it. Some states have moved to make the medicinal *and* recreational use of cannabis perfectly legal. There is even a rattling from our own capital that our state could be next.”

Ah, by Madison, he’s gone with the small-town, drug-fear mongering. As Girard gains rhetorical momentum, the affable Mayor slouches his shoulders enough so that the People notice, and heaves a large sigh. Light laughter from the People. Girard continues.

“But we must be leaders in our state, and show that the fears of yesterday, the fear of reefer madness, may still very much be a reasonable, safe, and reliable fear.”

*Yes, yes, Girard, I think. We get your point.* I’m sure he has not done enough to take my vote from the incumbent Mayor.

Exasperated by the challenger’s challenges, Mayor Barry removes his jacket, rolls up his sleeves, and begins doing push-ups stage left.

Conscious that Mayor Barry has taken away the attention of the People, Girard struggles to regain control. “Uh, I’d like to remind the People of Peopleville, we have not yet reached the Performance Round, but are still very much in the Substance Round.” Girard continues talking, but cannot take his eyes off the physically fit Mayor. Neither can I for that matter. By Jackson! Even Bartel leans forward, transfixed. Dear Democratic God, something is working on my boy.

“Of all the timings of Reefer Badness we can only fear to fear fear...” Girard loses control of his speech. He can no longer resist the physical challenge the mayor has posed in his pre-emption of the Performance Round. Dick Girard begins doing push-ups with his hands in the shape of a diamond. Mayor Barry puts one arm behind his back and continues his own push-ups. Girard responds by clapping his hands at the apex of each movement. He sweats, his face bright red, and the People cheer heartily for the efforts of both candidates.

Mayor Barry stands now, and two regulation basketball nets are rolled onstage. Someone feeds him a ball and he dunks to the delight of the People. Girard calls for the ball and drains a jumper from the other side of the stage. The People are wild. Standing. Hollering. Clapping. Even Bartel stands up, if only so he can see the action. Mayor Barry hustles to the stairs on the side of the stage, and begins running up and down repeatedly. Girard follows suit, but shows his exhaustion. Tomato face. Heavy sweat. Mayor Barry strips to his tank top. Skin dripping, his muscles moving in the shadows cast by the stage light. He comes over to Baz, seizes his microphone, and leaps to the stage. Girard is visibly dogged, panting.

“Okay, Dick. It’s time. You. Me. Dance Off. NOW!”

Girard falls to his knees, his arms raised in surrender. The People rage for the loss of the dance-off, yet revel in the victory of their Mayor. Noise, noise, noise! Mayor Barry spikes the microphone to the ground. Someone returns it to Baz, who eventually silences the People. We all sit.

“People of Peopleville,” Baz says. “We certainly have had a magnificent debate tonight. Still, we must consult the People. This is a two-minute Rebuttal, traditionally a period of silence, for the People of Peopleville. If any person believes neither candidate is worthy of the mayoralty of Peopleville, such a person may speak now.”

Oh Washington, this is always the hardest part. The silence. Debbie squirms uncomfortably. I scratch my knees in anxiety. Bartel stares, entranced by the presentation of Bazzy boy. Yet we settle. We all settle once the silence has landed upon us individually. It is like we enter into a meditation of pure Democratic Being, the persons of the People fill the room, unrestrained by the strictures of activity. Until someone gasps.

I can see from my seat a short, heavy-set man with dark hair, skin oily beneath bright lights approaching Baz Bickford. Where has he come from? Where is his seat? Baz is startled by his presence.



“Sir! Do you not see either of these men fit to serve as Mayor of Peopleville?” The question is more sincere than formal.

“I do not,” the man answers. A dreadful pause.

“Do you wish to present yourself as a candidate for Mayor of Peopleville?”

“I do.” The strange man’s voice is nasal and muffled.

“Well then,” Baz concedes, “the time is yours.”

The round man mounts the stage. Blinks at the audience. He is a grown man, at least thirty, but his greasy skin looks like a teenager’s beneath the bright lights. Silent, he seems to have shuffled, deformed, from some solitary shelter far gone on the electoral frontier. He produces an apple.

“Fat guy’s gonna eat?” someone asks.

The shushing of the People.

What is he doing?

The man opens his mouth wide and leans his head back. He sticks out his tongue, and rests the apple on it. He gapes wider, and with his left hand pulls down hard on his lower jaw. The apple is half out of sight. A second time, he pulls on his jaw. Someone in the front row moans. Only the round shoulder of the apple visible to us. The man rubs the hinge of his jaw, which expands until it appears his skin will tear. Then, the apple disappears. It slides down the man’s throat, its shape visible through the skin of his neck. Its form presses against the man’s esophagus. From without, I see it in relief. It is like a shadow. Down, down the man’s throat. The impression of the apple is gone. The silence of the People.

Debbie’s forehead has fallen into her hands as if she has taken to prayer. Bartel’s brow hangs over his eyes, as if set with age. Dear Democratic God! Who is this man? What does he mean? Is this a stump speech? An entire campaign? Surely, that apple is lodged in his intestines. The better part will disintegrate, but will the core remain intact? Surely, something will grow from the apple and harm the man. Does he not know? Will he not speak?

“People of Peopleville,” Baz returns slowly, with solemn voice, to our ears. “This has been... the Consultation of the People.” Baz is stunned. He struggles to speak. “It is now time for the Procession... to the Gymnasium... where we Caucus.” He looks down at his blue card. He is not prepared for this. Baz has written no instructions for how to prompt the People upon the appearance of a strange, greasy-skinned, dark-haired, apple-swallowing third candidate. He

clears his throat. "If the...*three*...candidates for Mayor would march in file beside me. Please. People of Peopleville. Follow us through the corridor."

As we leave the auditorium, no one speaks. What could anyone say? In the gym, Baz points each of the three candidates towards his own corner. As I enter with Debbie and Bartel, I watch the third candidate waddle to his designated position. Is he unhappy with the Mayor? Is something so wrong with the will of the People of Peopleville? Surely he can find something to like about either Barry *or* Dick. What has he seen that I have not? By Franklin, what has this dark-horse done?

Debbie takes my hand. We always Caucus with Barry. Together. Dick Girard's family stands in the far corner. A few people join them. *Good. Good*, I think. After all. This matters. We deserve a real choice. Perhaps there should be a third candidate. Yes. This is Democracy. It is not so simple. It has never come easy. It is hard-earned.

The majority of the People who have entered the gymnasium walk toward Mayor Barry's corner. He is standing in his tank top, still smiling, sweat drying. I lower my head. It is a sacred, solemn act. I intend to honor the Caucus. I walk toward Barry, but I feel Debbie's hand resist my pull.

"Glenn!" she says. "Look!"

I look up. There is Bartel. My little condom-dropping imbecile, standing at center court. His back is to me, and his gaze directed at the stranger, the third candidate. O Jackson! What is he doing?

The people are flowing in. A few dozen more to Dick, the mass to Barry. It doesn't matter now. "Son," I say approaching him at center court. "What are you doing?"

"I'm not sure, Dad," he says, still staring at the man. "This is all very new."

"Yes, Son. It is an exciting thing, the Caucus. Didn't you enjoy the debate?"

He doesn't answer me, but turns his head, and looks right in my eyes.

"Bartel!" I beg. "Think of Gustav!"

My boy looks again at the strange, fat, greasy apple-eater.

"Glenn," Debbie says pulling at my hand. "It's okay."

"But Debbie," I say. What can I say?

Bartel walks over to the third candidate and stands beside him. He looks back at me and I see the rest of the People have all Caucused. They await my move. The numbers are clear. Mayor Barry has won again. My choice should not matter. But it does. So many eyes. Upon me.

## Gloria

Who knew Gloria would escape a second time?

The young guard, Bill sure hadn't seen it coming.

Joan, the charge nurse, came running from the B wing of the state hospital with an attendant trailing her. She burst through the double doors at 7 AM, only seconds after entering the female dorm to wake the patients for breakfast and med administration, and blurted out, "Gloria's missing!" Not frantic: clinical. The needle-sharp bark. "Missing!"

At the sound of her voice, Bill, closing the wide ellipse of his night beat, was startled mid-stride. Shaken awake, he bolted into B Wing, boots stomping. The nurse, Joan, *did* yell this time. "She's not there!" and he stopped himself in an embarrassing, cartoon cop-slide, the floor screeching when he did.

"Which way?" he asked her.

"I don't know," she barked. "I just got here!"

He hustled out the double front doors of the dormitory and ran, full-flight, across the field toward Dr. Paulson's house. Half-way there, he stopped. *What would Paulson do at this point?* He tried to recall his limited training, any directions from his supervisor, Buck, or the outdated training manuals the man had placed casually before Bill on his first day. Nothing came to mind. *Search first*, he decided.

First, the barn, where hay was once piled and tobacco hung, back when there were still patients here who could be trained to work a meager farm. Across the field, it was the first place the guard could think to check. As he ran, Bill felt the dry August ache in the dirt under knee-high grass. Through the barn doors. Dark and empty. Mold curled on the planks, and lines of sun intruded between each upright board. A rotted sheet of hay on the barn floor exhaled summer steam which sparkled where it intersected with the diagonal sun beams.

No one there.

He ran out, but halted. *Where else?* Quiet, but quick, he walked to the big farm house where the aging doctor lived. He walked a perimeter of about a hundred yards around the house. He wanted to make sure Gloria wasn't just laughing and leaning against the stucco, or asleep against the chimney stones, but he also didn't want to be seen. Didn't want to startle Mrs. Paulson on the chance that she was up and starting coffee and making the doctor's eggs.

Gloria wasn't there.

Bill ran again. This time back to the main building.

By the time he had circled the pinwheel-shaped building he was beat. He put his hands up on the back of his head, his shoulders stiff, breathing long, labored breaths. *We'll just have to call the police*, he thought. This job had seemed to Bill like it would be no big deal for a recent high school graduate. He never thought it would lead to this terrible sense of fear and failure. There was no telling, this time, how far away she was, or what she would do without the minute-to-minute care and supervision of hospital staff.

Now Bill was walking out to the state highway. When he got there, he stopped and dropped his arms, then rested his hands on his hips.

*Where could she have gone?* he wondered. *How far?*

Where is Gloria?

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Only three months earlier, Bill had met Gloria on his first day of work.

"Hhiieeee," the patient said with a little bow of her head. When Bill didn't notice her, she repeated herself. "Hhiieeee," her voice like a slide whistle playing a kazoo.

The young guard was not sure she was talking to him. He had not been confident of *anything* when he started working in the state hospital at the beginning of summer to earn money for college. "There's not much to it at this point," Buck had said on the day of his orientation. The chubby supervisor seemed so casual about it all that Bill could imagine him falling asleep, leaning back on a chair, snoring and whistling, and getting his keys stolen. "Just have a few cups of coffee and give this a look," the man had said, flopping a large binder down on the table in the staff room. "Some of it will help and we can check you off. You'll pick things up pretty easy on the job, though."

Bill had flipped through a three-ring binder with yellowed pages. Despite his boss's lack of insistence, the young man read the manual slowly. The yellowed pages outlined procedures for intervening in a violent episode, protocols for documenting injuries sustained on the job, and rules for apprehending an escaped patient. Buck came back only an hour later with a sheet of paper, and with a loud knock on the opened door, asked "How's she comin'?" Before Bill could reply, he continued. "We're just gonna sign this off and then take you into the women's side for a tour."

“Oh?” Bill said. “I’m not done reading, though.” He looked up at Buck, a man in his mid-forties.

“Don’t worry,” he insisted. “It’s really just a formality.”

Buck closed the binder and moved it to the other side of the table, placing the paperwork down in front of him, and making an “x” next to the line for Bill to sign and verify that he’d been properly trained in duties the document listed. As a new hire, Bill felt uncomfortable, but with his lack of work experience, he followed his supervisor’s easy command. He didn’t know any different.

“The men’s side is still pretty violent,” Buck explained. “If you come back next summer, it might be worth training you there. But the ladies are so calm now. Once you see them, you’ll see.”

Looking in at the docile patients in the women’s Day Room, he *could* see.

When Gloria had greeted him and Bill didn’t respond, the woman persisted.

“Hhiieeee.”

“Excuse me?” he said from the door frame.

“G’mea!” said the woman, sitting high at a small table, her back straight. “G’mea!” she repeated, smiling and waving her outstretched hand toward herself. “G’mea!” her thumb pinned tight against her wide fingers like she was holding a paper fan.

“Gloria just wants your attention,” said the attendant. Ken, the thin attendant, with his neat black hair, sat at a table on the other side of the room, and held another woman’s hand over a pen. Hand-over-hand, they were drawing letters on a large sheet of blank paper that covered the table top.

“Hello,” Bill said. “How are you?”

“G’mea!” she said louder, almost laughing.

Bill took a few steps toward the woman and repeated himself.

“Hello.” When he was closer, he saw her face. Pale scars pocked both her cheeks, one of which was strikingly concave under a bulbous cheekbone. She was missing some of her teeth. Her nose, a large hook, protruded from her face, and her green eyes examined the man from deep sockets beneath a thick, fleshy brow.

“Nem?” she asked.

Bill looked up at the attendant.

“She wants to know your name.”

“Nem,” she affirmed.

“Bill,” he said. “I’m Bill.”

As he looked down at the woman’s face, a long-forgotten spring of tenderness awoke somewhere inside him. *The Johnsons*, he thought, remembering the family that had once lived next door to his. He wasn’t old enough for school then. He was playing in the yard, throwing a baseball up in the air and catching it in his gloved hand. The Johnsons’ car pulled into their driveway, past the mailbox with its blue and white balloons, ribbons curled around the post. Mr. Johnson got out and carried a suitcase inside, as Mrs. Johnson stepped out with a pile of blankets. Bill could remember how his curiosity fluttered when he heard his own mother talk about the new baby boy.

“When will he be old enough to play catch with me?” he had asked.

Mrs. Johnson smiled, and said, “Oh Billy, it won’t be for some time.” She regarded first Mr. Johnson, then her little boy. “I’ll be sure to send him outside as soon as he’s ready to play.”

The year went by and Billy always asked, “Is he ready?” each time one of the Johnsons walked by. If his own mother were there, she would say, “Now, now Billy.” Once his dad had been barbequing in the yard during the eager questioning, and he scolded him. “Knock it off, Bill.” Still, one day the next spring he was so eager for the season to begin that he knocked right on the Johnson’s back door. Mrs. Johnson looked out the window at him, a little startled. “What’s the matter Billy?” she asked the boy. It had been a long winter, and the inquiry had not been made in months.

“Can he play yet? Can he play yet?” Billy nearly hollered this, he was so excited.

But the woman’s expression of concern for Billy collapsed on itself, turning into something else the boy could not decipher, and she said, “No Billy, he can’t play yet.” Without another word, she stepped backward and closed the door.

A few minutes later, Mr. Johnson opened the back door with a loud crackle. He was walking quickly when Billy saw him. He took a big deep breath and his shoulders heaved like he was knowingly taking poisoned air into his lungs. Slower then, he approached Billy and took a knee in front of him.

“Listen, kid. Our son is never going to play ball. Please. Stop asking for him, okay? Just play with the other boys down the street.” After that, for some reason, Billy’s dad started offering to throw the ball around for a few minutes every day before dinner.

Later that summer Mrs. Johnson was pregnant again. Billy would see her afternoons, her belly like a moon, wearing a bonnet of patterned cotton, pushing a large carriage down the sidewalk. But he never looked at the boy and he never said anything when she passed. He wanted to—he was more curious than ever—but Mr. Johnson could be gruff sometimes, enough to make Billy a little afraid.

The summer after *that*, Billy saw Mrs. Johnson pushing a *different* carriage with the *new* baby, but the other boy had gone away. Every Saturday morning at 10:30, Mrs. Johnson’s mother came over to stay with the new baby. Mr. and Mrs. Johnson drove away together and came back just about when Billy was eating his lunch.

“Bi-ill! Bi-ill!”

“Lower your voice, Gloria,” the attendant said.

Bill crouched down, his elbows, folded on the table, and looked in Gloria’s face.

“Gloria.”

“Bi-ill,” she said, splitting his name in two.

“Coffee Bi-ill!”

“Coffee?” Bill looked to the nodding attendant. “Yes,” he said. “I like coffee.”

“Gloria,” the attendant said. “Gloria, look at me.”

He waited until she turned her gaze from Bill.

“You had your coffee this morning. This man is just here to do his job. Leave him alone now.”

The woman stared blankly at the attendant. Ken broke the silence, speaking to Bill. “Hey buddy, don’t lean in on her like that, okay? She seems nice, but sometimes she takes a swing at you. She’s faster than she looks. Stronger too.” Bill pulled his face away from the woman, more out of surprise than fear. “You don’t need to be afraid, just careful. They’ll test you, at first. She’s done some damage to staff before,” he nodded in the woman’s direction, “not to mention herself.”

“Okay,” Bill said. He stood, and stepped back to the frame of the open door of the Day Room. He felt uncomfortable, just standing with his hands folded in front of him, the way he did



when he was around extended family, or friends of his parents. He tried to focus only on his job, which was really just to stand there scanning the room. On the floor on the opposite side of the room, a woman sat cross-legged, chewing on a towel, eyes raised to the ceiling. Not far from her, a woman in a wheelchair watched the attendant writing with the woman at the table. Still another woman sat in a small plastic chair, near Gloria, with her arms folded. She looked at Bill, rocking slightly, and smiled with abandon. Bill's gaze shifted from the smiling woman back to Gloria, who had put her face down, forehead to table, arms hanging at her side.

He stifled his childish longing to reach into the Johnson's carriage and hold the swaddled infant to his chest.

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"Coffee Bi-ill!" Gloria crooned at the guard. She grinned and pointed to the plastic mug in her right hand. Thirteen hours into his first double-shift, Bill stood, hands in his pockets, near the entranceway to the Women's Dining Room that, just like the dormitory, had much more space than six people required.

"Coffee Bi-ill!"

"Yes, Gloria," the young man answered dully. "Stop talking, now. Just drink it."

In his first month, Bill had learned to ignore Gloria. It was an unwritten rule that he had learned from his coworkers. But his first weeks of full-time work were wearing him down. His weary brain pulsed, and every new noise bothered him. He stared at his shoes while Ken sat at a table, feeding two of the women. Joan, the young nurse, sat at another long table and fed one of the women there. Gloria, and the other woman who could feed herself, sat at the table closest to Bill, their empty plates in front of them, coffee steaming into their mouths.

"Ha-Ha!" Gloria laughed before taking a long, loud gulp. A bead of brown liquid dripped a brief narrow course down the side of her mouth where her cheek hollowed next to her lips. She drank several large gulps at a time, stopping to exhale, catch her breath, and then begin again. When her cup was empty she sighed, her mouth wide open. Coffee stained the left side of her jaw. She looked around the dining room.

"Bi-ill. Coffee," she said, trying to show him the empty mug. "Bi-ill?"

In his exhaustion, Bill had no difficulty detaching himself from Gloria's request.

"Jooannnn," she said, hoping in vain for the nurse's sympathy.

"Coffee!" she blurted, not bothering to ask Ken by name.

She sat in silence for several moments. Her eyes watered, looking at the back of the attendant who was still feeding the two women at his table. Gloria bowed her head slightly. Her mouth hung open in an O shape, and her lower lip quivered.

*Clonk, clonk, clonk.*

She tapped the bottom of her tan melamine mug on her cleared plastic plate three times. She paused, an irregular interval passing between each series of taps.

*Clonk, clonk, clonk.*

“One cup,” Ken said quietly.

But the tapping continued.

“You only ever get one cup. Every day the same, Gloria.”

“Why don’t you just ignore her?” Joan said.

Bill shifted his weight and winced, each tap detonating an explosion in his skull. He certainly wished there was a way to make her stop, recalling his early teenage annoyance with his little brother’s behavior. Over time, he understood how someone could flip out over these little things.

“Quit!” Ken yelled.

Gloria flinched at the volume of the man’s voice. She closed her eyes. The skin around her mouth sagged, and her head lowered so her face pointed to her lap. Bill, watching her, thought she had fallen asleep, or perhaps was pretending to sleep, as if to emphasize her need for more coffee.

Then the tapping came again. Bill wished her little drama would stop, and then he heard a metal fork clatter on plastic, as Ken stood and walked over to Gloria.

“Enough,” he said.

Ken reached for the cup. When he grasped the top of it, Gloria jerked her hand away and Ken lost his grip.

“Give it,” Ken said.

“No!” she replied, with quiet resolve. He grabbed onto it, but Gloria swung her arm hard in the opposite direction, then bent her elbow toward the man’s groin. He slapped his hand down, fingers spread wide, clutching her forearm before she could strike him.

“Fut you!” she snarled.

She continued to struggle, but Ken wrested the plastic mug from her right hand.

“Fut you!” she screamed when he had taken it from her. She folded her arms on the table top and threw her face down into the crook of an elbow and began weeping.

“You have more tomorrow.”

The man picked up her plate and silverware, walked over to the window to the large galley kitchen, and slammed the plate down. He returned to his table, lowering himself onto the bench. Bill heard one of Ken’s knees crack, and then, another sound.

Gloria slapped her hands on the table and sprung up. She took several blundering steps toward the door, paused and gave Bill a firm, unexpected shove, away from the only exit from the dining room, and ran out. Bill caught himself, his hands holding onto the counter that jutted out from the kitchen window. He looked around for a second, as if unsure as to what had just happened. He had understood that the staff generally accommodated or ignored the women’s stranger habits, and he had come to see his function as vestigial. He was not expecting anything like this of Gloria. He took off in pursuit of her. Into the long corridor, his shoes squeaking, he saw Gloria fling open the doors at the opposite end, continuing her flight into the foyer, the center of the pinwheel. By the time Bill was at the main entrance, Gloria was not there. The front door ajar, he continued his chase outside.

He scanned the horizon from the main entrance. Three features: the doctor’s house, an old unused building, and the state road. No Gloria. He turned and ran around the building, knowing she would not have had enough time to get out of sight in any given direction.

On the backside of the building, he saw her running barnward. It was a bright morning, and she was out in the open. He ran straightaway to Gloria. Kicking hard, he started to worry about how the woman would fare in the heat. *Sunburn*, he thought.

She was fast. *How old is she?* he wondered. It took longer than he would have admitted to anyone—he was not a strong runner—but he closed the gap. He told himself *I will reach her in four seconds*, and he pushed, and he did. As he closed in, though, she didn’t give up. He could hear her distressed wheezing. When he got close enough, he reached a hand forward, closing his fingers onto the back of her plain white shirt. He turned just enough to divert his momentum, and planted his feet. He and Gloria spun several times, in concert, like a pair of figure skaters. They fell to the ground, fabric from her shirt balled up in his fist. She curled up and, in the way Bill lay on the ground, one arm out and his legs spread, they looked like a children’s book illustration of a man clutching a large balloon and floating away to heaven.

Joan, having followed Bill, arrived soon after the pair collapsed. She helped Gloria to her feet. Bill followed the women, thinking how he had never worked before this, had never really worked hard in his whole life. His experience delivering papers and mowing lawns in previous summers were distant memories.

The attendant was waiting for them in the foyer with Dr. Paulson. Bill's head throbbed, and he sat in one of the waiting chairs near the entrance. He saw Joan with an arm bracing Gloria, who leaned into her. He heard the doctor and the attendant speak quietly. Joan used the word "provoked." Then the doctor said something about stairs.

Bill watched Ken move toward the stairwell just off the foyer, which had been built for access to the upper three floors of the main building, floors that Buck had told him had been vacant for several years. *What on earth is this about?* Bill wondered.

Ken disappeared into the stairwell. Joan had let go of Gloria. The doctor now guided her, a firm hand on her back, to the stairwell. Bill saw Joan put her hands on her hips and shake her head disapprovingly at the doctor. The young man stood and moved to stand next to the nurse. He could hear more clearly now.

"Run," he heard the doctor say. "You wanted to run Gloria. Go ahead. This is your time to run." Bill saw no reason for this kind of punishment, but did not think it was his place to speak up.

"I will document this," the nurse said to Paulson, who ignored her. "The state will read about everything you do now."

Sweat dripped down Gloria's neck. A dark oval stained her back, small lines of it near her armpits. Slowly, at first, she climbed the steps. She got halfway up the first staircase then she picked up speed. When she reached the landing and turned around to descend, Bill thought he saw a faint smile on her dried lips. She came down the stairs so quickly, he worried she would fall on her face. By the time she reached the bottom again, she *was* smiling. She ran back up the stairs, nearly as fast as she had been running to the barn.

At the bottom for the second time, she stopped and guffawed at the doctor. She turned back toward the steps and resumed her flight to the top, pumping her arms. It echoed up the empty stairwell. Laughter. Bill could hear the woman laughing. She came to the bottom again, and stopped in her tracks, grinning in the doctor's face.

"What's funny, Gloria?" he asked her. "What are you laughing at?"

“Faster!” she said.

“Faster?” he asked her.

“Run!” she said at him, then mimed her own movements, pumping her arms, swinging her head back and forth.

“Next time!” she shouted with joy.

“Faster!” She turned and put her head down.

“Next time faster!” She climbed the stairs again.

“Next time faster!” she slowed a little at the top, and began a jaunty descent.

“Next time faster!” She laughed more and more, though she was clearly tiring.

She stopped at the bottom.

Bill listened to all of this as he slipped into the nearby staff room and poured two paper cups full of water. He drank one, then appeared in the stairwell with the other.

“What are you doing, Gloria?” the doctor asked.

She stared at him with her jaw open.

“I didn’t tell you to stop.”

She looked straight at him, no longer amused, no longer able to gather enough air to laugh.

“You don’t want to keep running, Gloria?” the doctor asked.

“No,” she wheezed. “I done.” She nodded at the doctor and bent over, holding her back with two hands. “I done.”

Bill came forward with the cup of water.

“Here, Gloria,” he said.

“No!” Dr. Paulson said.

Bill looked at the doctor’s face. He was still fixed on Gloria.

“Don’t let her have it, young man.”

Bill went to give it to her anyway. The doctor put out his hand.

“You give it to her and you no longer have a job here.”

“You’re not going to give her water, now?” Joan asked in disbelief.

Bill did not want to take sides. His job had been very simple up to this point. The doctor was the person with authority. Bill stared at the cup in his hand, too stunned by the dilemma to

act in defiance, wishing he were not there, that he had stumbled into some other way to save for school.

Gloria looked at the old man.

“Fut you,” she said trembling. Barely enough moisture on her tongue for the sound to crackle out of her mouth. “Fut you.” A hoarse whisper. A curse.

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“Yes,” Dr. Paulson said.

He had been waiting for Bill.

“Come have a seat.”

When Bill walked through the door of the doctor’s office, he was surprised to see Ken sitting in a chair to the right of the doctor’s large oaken desk.

“You know Ken, of course.”

“Yes, Dr. Paulson,” Bill said. “I do.”

“I just asked Ken to join us in here, today, because I want to make something very clear to you.”

“Yes, sir. “Bill had no idea what to expect. He had returned home the evening before and gone straight to sleep. Ten hours solid. Yet today he felt like a man entombed in plaster. It was only 9 AM, just after breakfast, but he was sweaty in his uniform, which already had the itch of old bedsheets.

“Ken, how long ago did you come here?”

“Nineteen sixty-four,” said the thin man. For the first time, Bill saw how placid the man’s eyes were, and heard a tone of resignation in his voice. “Twenty-three years, Dr. Paulson.”

“And do you remember how long ago Gloria came here?”

Dr. Paulson was talking to Ken, but looking at Bill. He sat up straight, and his hands were folded on the leather pad that covered the surface of his desk. His voice was calm, and he appeared reserved.

“Yes,” the attendant said. “She came here a little over ten years ago.”

The doctor looked down at his desk. The clinical stability of his gaze dispersed into the grains of leather beneath his hands.

“I’ve been here 41 years, now,” he said.

There was a long silence. Bill had nothing of value to add, but he knew his place and wanted to show his humility.

“Many years, sir.”

The doctor blinked a few times then looked up at Bill.

“You know this hospital used to be very crowded.”

Bill gulped.

“Very crowded,” the doctor repeated. “There was a time when we had more people in this institution than beds. I had to spend much of my days in the dining hall force-feeding people mush because we were grossly understaffed and barely funded.”

Bill had no idea where this was going.

“Young man, there are now twenty men on the other side of this building, the side where you *don't* work. Some of them are very violent. I believe most of them will die here.”

The doctor paused, studied Bill's face. The guard nodded in discomfort. It was a strain to feign comprehension.

“Every six months, a social worker from the state comes and spends a week here.”

The doctor leaned forward now.

“He reviews files, observes, and identifies which patients may be ready to leave here. Do you understand?”

Bill nodded slowly, but the doctor must have known how confused he was.

“There are six women left here, Bill. Six women. And I don't think they really need to be here. I'm sure if they could spend a day in a home, with a family, or a pretend family, they would not *want* to be here.”

This, Bill understood.

“I completely agree, sir,” he said, failing to sound at all collegial.

“So you can see why I'd like to get some of them out of here.”

“Yes.”

Paulson looked directly at him.

“Ken, go ahead.”

The attendant stood from his chair, a file folder in his right hand, and came around to where Bill sat. From the folder he produced a photograph. A photograph of Ken, Bill assumed, but could hardly say for sure. The face in the picture bore a large bruise that began on the man's

forehead and terminated on the right side of his chin. He was puffy around his right eye. There were three scratch marks on his left cheek.

“That was nine years ago,” Ken said. “Gloria did that.”

Bill looked from the photo up to the man’s face, his eyebrows lowered, and his head pulled back, in disbelief.

“This is what she looked like that day.”

In the other photo: Gloria, recognizable because the gash in her cheek was unmistakably the wound that left the permanent concavity on the side of her face. There were large abrasions on her forehead, a gash above one eye that seemed to have removed her eyebrow entirely.

“What happened?” Bill asked.

“She got upset,” Ken said with a shrug. “She started screaming and struck another patient. When I got in the way, she threw me to the ground, slammed my head on the concrete. The guard came and grabbed her from behind, but she threw herself into the wall a bunch of times. That’s how she hurt her forehead. I helped the guard restrain her. But we couldn’t do anything when she started chewing up her cheek.” The man paused and looked down at the photo of Gloria. “It was an awful feeling,” he said. “We were completely helpless. We just held her until she was still, listening to the sound of Gloria crunching away on her cheek like she had a mouth full of cereal. There was so much blood. This photo is actually after she was cleaned and treated.”

The doctor’s elbows were on the table. He looked down, his jaw against a balled fist. When Dr. Paulson looked up at the guard, Bill’s heart beat rapidly.

“We’re not trying to scare you,” he said. “What I want you to know is that we care about Gloria. It will be a good day if she can leave here and go live in a group home. But she’ll never get to do that if she runs off when she can’t have coffee. The world won’t take her like that. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Dr. Paulson,” he said.

“I prescribed new medication for her yesterday. I’m hoping it will calm her down. But son, you cannot defy me like that,” the doctor said. “Don’t think you know a thing I don’t. There is nothing new here. There are things you can learn, but they are only about a problem that is very, very old.”

He paused. Bill stared into the desk, only raising his head when the doctor spoke again.



“Are we clear?”

“Yes, sir,” Bill said. “Perfectly clear.”

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Several weeks passed. Bill saw the medication overcome Gloria. In the mornings, and in the afternoons, she was virtually absent. At meals, or in the Day Room, she tended to stare at a single point for several minutes before flinching, looking around to take stock of her surroundings, and then returning to the original point of interest. Often in the evenings, her eyes narrowed, and Bill could see her twirling her tongue around in her mouth continually. Sometimes she would talk. A more subdued version of her sliding voice: “Hieeee,” or “Jooooan,” but not the energetic “G’mere!” Bill had heard on his first day.

One evening, when he came on at 7 p.m. for the night shift, Bill was making a pot of coffee in the staff room, just behind the nurse’s station. He watched Joan, sitting at the desk in a rolling chair, writing notes. The woman was in her early thirties, and since she was the closest person to his own age, Bill had tried to talk to her several times. She never wanted to chat with him, and he worried she had thought his several attempts at idle conversation were something more. He had meant nothing like that, though he admired her for the scorn she had expressed to Dr. Paulson.

As he waited for the coffee to come down, he leaned into the door frame, but said nothing to the woman. But then he saw her put down her pen, reach into her pocket, and pull out a pink, ovular pill. She laid it on the table in front of her, wrote something down, then discarded the pill in a red waste basket at her feet.

Bill cleared his throat.

Joan looked up, startled.

“What?” she asked.

“What are you doing?”

Bill was not sure if he was just being curious, or if some situation had arisen that required his diligence and scrutiny. Or even his participation.

“Med inventory,” Joan replied.

“That all?” he asked.

She turned to face him now.

“Is there something I can help you with?”

Bill was uncertain what to make of her posture, her tone. Was she continuing her customary dismissal of his attempts to socialize, or trying to get him out of the room for other purposes? She had removed a pill from her pocket, had she not? And thrown it away? Maybe, Bill thought, she is disrupting Dr. Paulson's numbing of patients, conspiring heroically. He wanted, in a way, to be included in that. But as he looked away from Joan's silent, confrontational stare, he knew that no invitation would be forthcoming. And besides, maybe she was just removing a twist of foil left from her chewing gum, a scrap of paper, or a bit of pocket lint. Working nights in a state hospital, he was bound to start seeing things sometime. He moved back to the coffee pot.

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Bill hiked out to the barn, over to the Paulson's home, out to the back fields of the property. He stopped and called, "Gloria! Gloria!" aloud, waving his arms, as if Gloria might be passing overhead in a plane. "It's me, Gloria! It's me! Bi-ill!"

He went out and stood in the middle of the state road. It was untraveled, and he could see far in each direction. Gloria was nowhere. Bill went to the other side of the highway, down a steep incline and onto a path in the woods. There was a decades-old aluminum sign that said, in a typeface from the 1950s, *State Mental Hospital Area: Play At Your Own Risk and With Adult Supervision.*

When Bill came back to the main building, Joan was waiting at the entrance.

"Nowhere," he said, panting. "She's nowhere."

"Call the police," she ordered him. "I'll go look."

"Joan, she's not on the property. I'm sure."

"Well how did she get out, Bill?"

Before she exited the building the pair exchanged a glare that affirmed a new feeling of mutual disdain.

"Call the police!" she repeated.

When Joan returned there was no sign of the police, although Bill had called. The nurse called them again and said it was urgent. "I am on medical staff here," she said. "I will be blunt: this patient may be dangerous!"

Within minutes there were eight police cars, a dozen men in brown uniforms, and four dogs scouring the grounds. Two more cars drove up and down the state road stopping any motorists, showing them a recent picture of Gloria, and asking if they'd seen her.

Bill finally went home after lunch when Ken shook his head and told him, "Nothing to do now but wait." Exhausted, he slept fitfully through the afternoon, sweating and dreaming that, walking along a stream near his home, he finds a body that looks at first like two black rocks in the shallow water. Turning the body over, he notices a bone protruding from the right leg. He sees Gloria's face, her skin grey.

He woke up. Gloria—he could sense it—was dead.

Having received no word, and unable to rest, he drove back to the hospital around supper time. In the car, he wondered how far she had made it. Had she at some point turned around and embraced the hard hope that she might be able to find her way back?

He knew that, either that night or the next day, the police, or a hiker, or school children would find Gloria's corpse. The shock settled over him as he drove, considering his responsibility in it all.

He could see himself standing on the back of the property, where he'd noticed before the few tattered markers in the field where the hospital had buried its dead since it opened a century ago. He had such a clear vision of the service: Dr. and Mrs. Paulson, Bill, Joan, and Ken, gathered in the evening, after a pine box had been lowered into the grave and covered with soil. High pitched sobs coming from Mrs. Paulson, and tears streaming down the doctor's face. Joan's face, stern. Ken's eyes crinkled, as if the sun were too bright, staring at a point toward the top of the dirt rectangle. Finally, Bill could hear the minister's voice deliver the eulogy. It would only take a few minutes: the mansion in glory, the ashes to the ashes, and the dust.

It was only a short drive to the hospital. When Bill arrived, he was surprised that there were no police cars. A few extra staff lingered in the foyer as he entered, proceeding to the staff lounge. Ken told him the news. "Found her," he said. She had made her way into a diner, and sat at the counter and demanded a slice of pie. The manager fed her all she wanted and kept her comfortable until the police arrived.

Bill was shocked anew at this news. Ken explained that it was uncertain what would happen with Gloria. "It's been years since an escape like this happened," he said grimly. It would

be embarrassing for Dr. Paulson, a liability in the eyes of the state. “Only nine of these places left, but,” Ken surmised, “Gloria will be going somewhere tougher.”

Bill’s heart descended as he walked toward the day room, uncertain now whether he was happy to see Gloria alive. Standing in the doorway, much like he had on his first day, he saw her at the table, cradling her plastic mug in both hands. *She’s exhausted*, Bill thought. Gloria turned her eyes to him without raising her head.

“Hiee,” she said, grinning like she had gotten away with something.

## Her Own Tenacity

Jessica met with Dr. Schick at the SturtzenMedical® office in Milford, Pennsylvania on April 1st. She had driven the hour from her home in New City, New York, found the old white house in the one-road town, and checked in with the receptionist. She filled out a form, drank water from a cooler in a conical paper cup, and was escorted to an exam room by a middle-aged technician who took her blood pressure, weighed her, and asked her a few questions about her lifestyle.

“What is your age?” the technician asked.

“29.”

“Marital status?”

“Single.”

“How many hours do you work each week?”

“35-40.”

“Annual income?”

“Around \$40,000.”

“Any medical conditions?”

“No.”

“Allergies?”

“No.”

“Do you drink?”

“Not often,” answered Jessica.

“How many drinks per month?”

“Oh, maybe three. But it’s all at once.”

“So you’re a binge-drinker?”

“Well, no. It’s just that I don’t drink often.”

“Okay,” the technician said. She scribbled and looked up out of the corner of her eye at Jessica, who shifted her body weight from left to right until she felt comfortable on the exam table. “Follow me.”

She led Jessica to another waiting room. Jessica opened a magazine and looked at it without reading. She listened to the clock on the wall. A man entered the room: necktie,

cardigan, lab coat. He was tall and robust. Bald. He lifted egg-shaped reading glasses to his face, and held a manila folder with Jessica's name on it in front of him. He resembled an upright, cartoon bull.

"Jessica?"

"Hello," she said, standing and extending her hand in a gesture of what she hoped look like confidence.

The man glanced down at her hand momentarily and then took it in his long, thick fingers. Jessica shivered. "Yes, Jessica. I am Dr. Schick." He dropped her hand and turned around to lead her down the hall to his office. The big man sat at the desk in a large room: degrees framed on the wall, books in flimsy-looking shelves, and several awards on his desk from a number of institutions.

"So Jessica, why are you here?" She detected his mild German accent as he spoke more.

"Insomnia," she answered.

"Insomnia?" he asked.

"Yes."

"How long?"

"About a year."

"Why?"

"Why?"

"Yes. Of course, *you* think *I* will tell *you* this," he said smiling widely, head angled to ceiling. "But I want you to tell me why first."

"Can't you just read my chart?"

"Yes, dear, but I want *you* to explain things."

"Well, I've had several months of awful sleep. It started with dreams. Difficult dreams. Sometimes horrifying, other times just discomfiting."

"Go on," he said nodding.

"I'd wake up and have trouble falling back to sleep. Then it became a matter of falling asleep in the first place. I'd lie in bed for hours. Hours and hours. So I went to Dr. McCormand."

"Yes," he said glancing down at the chart in his hand.

"She's a psychiatrist. So she gave me pills."

"Did they work?"

“No.”

“Why not?”

“She said it was my *sleep hygiene*. How much water I drink, how much caffeine I consume, what time I eat dinner, when I go to bed, if I turn off the lights right away, things like this.”

“And what was the result of her investigation into your sleep hygiene?”

“She said I was inconsistent. I wasn’t giving the meds a chance to work. Insomniac anxiety made it harder to be consistent in anything, most of all *sleep hygiene*.”

“In other words, you grew *tired* of it?” he said grinning.

“Yes,” she said.

“Then, Dr...” he looked down at the chart, “Goldsmith.”

“Yes,”

“The psychologist.”

“Yes. Psychologists are for talking. I talked to him.”

“And?”

“No good. I told him my dreams and everything came down to rejecting my mother in favor of my father or my father in favor of my mother. I am stuck in between. *The Womb or the Phallus*, he said over and over again.”

“Oh my,” said Dr. Schick wearing a theatrically sympathetic expression.

“That didn’t last very long.”

“And how did you end up here?”

“I finally went back to my GP.”

“Dr. Friedrich.”

“Yes.”

“Good lady.”

“The best.”

“And she sent you to me. Her old friend.”

“Yes.”

“As a desperate measure.”

“A last resort.”

“Indeed,” Dr Schick nodded. “I hate to pain you with the psychoanalytic shtick again, but...this all started because you were waking up from bad dreams, yes?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, well tell me about the dreams. What were they?”

“First, I’m walking across the bridge in the town where I went to college. It connected the half of the city where I lived to the campus. It’s only a few meters up, but I’m always kneeling down to tie my shoe and I see under the railing beside the walking lane. It’s only a sliver, but the water below looks endless in that little crack. I wake up panting.”

“Hm.”

“The second one is ridiculous. I’m at the top of the Empire State Building and King Kong—”

“Uh-HAHAHAHAHA,” Dr. Schick burst forth.

“—”

“I’m sorry Jessica, continue.”

“Well—”

“It’s just such a cliché dear, what happens next, fighter planes start swarming the monkey like bees?”

“—”

“Oh, okay. That’s it.”

“Yes.”

“I’m sorry, dear. These images can be inexplicably disturbing. Tell me what it is like when you wake up.”

“When I wake up? I’m wet and stinking. Sometimes from sweat. A few times from pee. Sometimes it smells like feminine odor.”

“Okay,” he says writing, his huge bull-hand looking disfigured around his pen. After writing he asked, “Are there any more dreams that recur often?”

“Oh yeah, the worst one.”

“So?”

She let out a breath.

“I’m in a fancy building, a skyscraper from one of those future-now cities in the Middle East. The sky around is black with minute green lights. Twinkling, so you can imagine a million



little beeps pulsing from the buildings. It is storming. Wildly. So much wind that the windows shatter. The building twists around itself. I panic. I jump out.”

Dr. Schick looked at Jessica. “Dear, did Dr. Friedrich tell you what we do here?”

“No.”

“Come with me.”

He led her to a conference room and turned on a rattling projector with a touch of his hand. He turned off the lights and put black horn-rimmed glasses on, and began narrating a series of slides.

“SturtzenMedical® was founded in 2002 by my late colleague, Bud Tinkerton, and myself with the goal of developing treatments for anxiety, depression, insomnia, attention deficit, and various other so-called mental illnesses, that would be more effective than the outmoded psychiatry of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.” *New Millennium Calls For New Medicine-Men* read a newspaper headline in the slideshow. “We began researching non-pharmaceutical techniques for disrupting the traumas and troubles of the afflicted. We tried everything: electromagnetics, electronics, hydrotechnics, animal therapy, recreational therapy, nature therapy, percussion therapy, thermotics, and plain old cuddling.” He paused and blinked to the rattling of the projector. Jessica blinked back.

“What we found is that, of course, each individual is just that—an individual, and therapies must be adjusted to meet the needs of each person. Yet we also made a magnificent discovery which has been highly praised in the anti-pharmaceutical healthcare community. Our discovery has spawned endless research outside of SturtzenMedical®, but at present the key component of our treatment is not entirely understood. We seek the mystery, but the mystery remains. It is the allergy shot of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It works, but we do not know why. It is, in short, a Voodoo.”

Jessica sat perfectly upright at an egg-shaped table that filled most of the conference room. Her head was fixed in position, but her eyes moved rapidly between the screen and Dr. Schick.

“Jessica, it is my pleasure to show to you, The Lowering.”

The projector clicked. Several shots revealed a fully-inflated Bouncy Tower, hemmed in by a green Exoskeleton, in a field squared off by oak trees and maple. Jessica pressed her forearms into the table. She squinted as she watched the slides: the Tower tall and full. the Tower

not so tall. The Tower halving its height, the Exoskeleton folding in on itself like a side-standing accordion wall. The Tower in its cage, its circus tent fabric flopping unevenly to the ground. Then a succession of portraits. Faces smiling, serene, or exuberant.

The show came to an end. The whirring of the projector slowed and silenced. Dr. Schick bowed his head and held his bull-hands behind his back. Jessica was still squinting at the screen. The doctor let out a chest-full of air, turned the lights back on, and sat at the opposite end of the table. “What are you thinking Jessica, I am here to answer your questions.”

Jessica smiled and tilted her forehead. “This is a joke, right?”

“No joke.”

“You put people on a giant bouncy castle and—”

“Please, Jessica. Bouncy Tower.”

“So you just—lower them to the ground?”

“And we cure them in the process.”

“But how?”

“Well, I mentioned the blend of therapies tailored to the needs of the individual. The Lowering is the common need, but we have a variety of options for each person’s Lowering. Some people paint, some people meditate, many people have sex.”

“Sex?”

“Yes. I’m afraid this is where the psychoanalysis mumble jumble comes in. See dear, it turns out many of these struggles are related to death and sex. Our knowledge is tenuous—also a Voodoo—but many people find success in achieving orgasm in a simulated freefall. It may be that these dreams of trembling from various heights that keep you from sleep might be exorcised in this way. But there are other options too.” He directed her attention to a large folder in front of her with multiple cardboard inserts. She scanned several pages describing different treatment packages. The Party Package with balloons and a group of *funsters* hired to simulate a childhood birthday party during The Lowering. The Meditation Package, where a genuine Indian Yogi guides you on a spiritual journey for the weeks leading up to the Lowering and accompanies you on the Lowering itself. And the Orgasm Package, where you can work with a sex therapist and a carefully chosen Sex Care Support Staff—a good-looking person who has sex with the patient on the Bouncy Tower. The Orgasm and the Care-free Fall. The brush with death and the momentary release from the compression of sentience. The thing of just Being.

After a moment, Jessica looked up and asked, “How much is this?”

Dr. Schick looked down at her chart and said, “It will be covered almost entirely by your insurance.”

“Insurance covers this?”

“Yes. For the first decade, it did not. We served only the wealthiest. But now that our methods have been so widely effective, most insurances cover at least a portion of it.”

“How many people have done this?”

“We’ve treated 4,000 people nationwide.” Dr. Schick’s voice slipped back into presentation mode as he listed the locations of the SturtzenMedical® Resorts. “We have treatment centers all over. A Resort outside of New York, a Resort outside of Tampa, a Resort between Baltimore and Washington. A Resort outside of Omaha, a Resort outside of Chicago, a Resort in Iowa City, a Resort near St Louis, a Resort in Ann Arbor, a Resort in Fargo. A Resort outside Boston, a Resort in Galveston, a Resort outside of Austin—two in that big state! A Resort in Scottsdale, a Resort in Reno, a Resort in Butte, a Resort in Tacoma, a Resort in Portland. A Resort in Burbank, San Diego, San Bernardino, San Jose, Santa Barbara, and Salinas. Many treatment Resorts in that big BIG state!” He was speaking rapidly, bursts of spittle spraying from his mouth.

“Many practitioners have begun recommending our treatment because of the individual attention we give each patient. Examine the materials when you have the chance, Jessica. During your three week stay at the resort you have therapy sessions, a variety of meal plans, numerous recreation options, the close attention of staff who help you select the treatment plan that is right for you. You can have sex, you can do drugs, you can play with water balloons. You can package it how you like. You can face north south east west. The Delaware River, the Pocono Mountains, the town close by, or the cornfields that buffer the Resort from the highway noise. You can have your Lowering at sunrise or sunset. This costs extra and is not covered by insurance providers. You can have any time of day otherwise. A hundred years ago, we were sending people to Sanatoria, putting them through humiliating analysis or harmful experiments. Now you still get the vacation to deal with your anxiety, dear, but it is on your own terms.”

“But Dr. Schick, does it really work?”

“For 98% of patients.”

“But this tower. Is it safe?”

“100%. Inspected before each use by Army Engineers.”

“Are you a quack?”

“No.”

“Are you a terrorist?”

“No.”

“Are you a Nazi?”

“Jessica, what are you really concerned with? My background, or your own foreground? If you want to talk about *me*, I am happy to do that. But you are here to get on with your life.”

Four months. Application processing. Waitlist.

Jessica arrived at the Delaware Water Gap Area Resort in still-hot end of August. Still sleep-deprived, she charged the additional \$1200 to her credit card to book a Sunset Lowering Package for September fifteenth. She wanted full, quiet nights by the autumn. A SturtzenMedical® limousine shuttled her from New City to the Resort outside of Milford, PA. The driver turned onto a long asphalt drive that led to the wellness center. Dr. Schick stood outside in his lab coat, with an assistant, awaiting her arrival. The driver opened her door.

“Welcome, Jessica, Welcome,” Dr. Schick greeted her with a grasp of his long, fat hands.

“Hello, Doctor.”

Dr. Schick led Jessica through the front doors of the yellow stucco building. He showed her a fitness room, the three dining areas, and the medical facilities. He walked her down a hallway with several offices and group meeting rooms where therapy sessions were held. Jessica saw the free fall simulating Wind-room, and the multi-axis trainer. She saw the small movie theatre, the music therapy center, the art room, and the prayer room. When she saw the small outdoor pool, the hot-tub, and the ping-pong tables on the patio, she questioned Dr. Schick.

“So, this is camp. For grownups.”

“Yes, Jessica. You could say that.”

“And this will cure me?”

“Yes. Because it is space camp. But instead of flying up, you fly down. You do not explore outer space, but inner space. I am sure you will leave here a new woman.”

They walked out to the Lowering Site. Dr. Schick made some brief comments about the structure before an assistant escorted Jessica to her cabin. It was evening. The bungalow was

furnished with white wicker. There was a sitting room with a sofa, a television, and a small desk. The bedroom had two white wicker dressers, a mushroom chair, and a queen-sized bed. She put her clothes away and brushed her teeth, before laying in the bed on large white pillows. There was a painting of a basket on a nook full of dried flowers. She stared at it by dim lamp-light. She could hear people chatting outside, but she stayed in. It rained.

That night when she fell asleep, she dreamed a giant clitoris was sitting in the mushroom chair. When she awoke, she was stinking and twisted in the soft white sheets. There was no giant clitoris in the room, but she did not fall back to sleep.

The next morning, she watched her first Lowering. She was with the doctor, who introduced her to some other patients: a young man, ten years younger than Jessica, a couple in their forties who had already selected the Orgasm Package, and an older woman in a track suit who was accompanied by a Sturtzen fitness specialist. A few families from Milford came out to watch the Lowering: people with small children, blankets, a dog, and soccer balls that they kicked around in the burning brittle grass under the open blue sky.

All watched with reverence the upward expansion of the Exoskeleton and the colorful billowing of the inflating Bouncy Tower. The Sturtzen fitness specialist observed Jessica's quiet astonishment and remarked, "I always like seeing new patients watch the Lowering for the first time." Everyone smiled, wordlessly nodding their affirmation of Jessica's wonderment at the Tower. The Lowering lasted only 90 seconds. Jessica crossed her thick forearms, rubbing the backs of them where thin hairs flowed. Her sweat chilled her skin in the sun. Brown hair fuzzed the edges of her forehead.

Her three weeks passed. Delight during the day, and terror at night.

She met with Dr. Schick nearly every day. Several times they walked around the Resort not saying much of anything. Often he would start sessions by asking a series of unimportant questions. "What is your favorite color, Jessica?" or "Have you always kept your hair shoulder-length?" or "Do you like water sports?"

She had told him all about the material conditions of her life in New City. Singleness. Two-bedroom apartment, in case anyone visited. Nine-to-Five low-level desk-job in a mid-sized financial company. A 30-minute commute twice a day. Happy hour most Fridays with co-workers. Shopping trip, or coffee, with her sister, every month or so. Babysitting her toddling

nephew, every month or so. Sometimes nearly adopting an abused dog. Sometimes talking to men on online dating sites. Sometimes gardening in the early morning, or running alone.

For all his sympathy towards Jessica's resistance to psychoanalysis, Dr. Schick inevitably asked her about her past, her inner life. The bullish German man finally asked, as delicately as he could, "Jessica, where do you come from?"

"New City," she said.

"Let me rephrase. *Who* do you come from?"

"\_\_"

"You tell me about your sister, but where are your parents?"

"Dead."

"Yes?" asked Dr. Schick, leaning forward sympathetically in his seat. He let Jessica's silence fill the white-lit conference room where they talked. After watching her pull her hair back into a ponytail, he asked, "Both of them? How?"

Jessica went to speak but only a dry smacking sound came out. She rose and walked clumsily to the water cooler in the corner, bumping several noisy chairs as she went. She poured and drank two paper cups of water before leaning her back against the wall and speaking.

"After my high school graduation, I went to a friend's shore house with a few other girls. We spent the evening on the boardwalk, went to a party a few blocks away, and got in late. Three or four in the morning. I slept until early afternoon and when I got up to use the bathroom, my phone buzzed. It was my mom. 'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I've been trying to call for hours,' she said. 'Daddy passed away,' she said. He had a heart attack in the middle of the night. My mom dragged him to the floor, cracking the back of his head on the nightstand. She did CPR, pressed on his chest and cracked at the breastplate until the paramedics got there. He was already dead."

"Mm..." The doctor leaned forward in his chair, an elbow on each knee, his fingers crossed in front of him. "And your mother?"

"Esophageal cancer. She was diagnosed when I was twenty-three. On November 30<sup>th</sup>. She died on February sixteenth."

"Did she live in New City as well?"

"Yes. But she died in a cancer center in Manhattan."

That night, a new dream. She was swaddled in a hammock flying over the grey Atlantic, her legs dangling dangerously. She looked up and a giant stork carried the hammock in its beak. The stork's wings shadowed her when they were spread but left her open to cold, white vapor when they folded inward. The bird came within sight of the beach and opened its beak, emitting a squawk. The bundle that was Jessica descended quickly, thudding onto the wet sand in the receding surf.

The couple staying in the cabin next door came running when they heard her shrieking. They turned on the light switch. Fearing an intruder, the man pulled the large lamp from the desk out of the wall. Jessica was sitting up with her eyes closed, her mouth open wide, screaming. "Jessica," the woman said, sitting next to her and wrapping her arms around her shoulders. "Jessica," she said again. "Jessica. Jessica. Jessica."

The next day Jessica went hiking with the couple to the Delaware River. The Sturtzen driver took them to a trailhead a mile from the resort. The three of them, carrying only water, tread a dust-dirt path pocked with tree roots and stones that lay buried in the ground. They walked until they got to the river and sat on a large, flat sheet of rock on the muddy banks. Jessica took off her shoes and sludged into the river. She waded out until the water rushed passed her bare knees. The man and woman watched her from the rock. The late afternoon sunlight slanted yellow, the river crackled blue and gold beneath it.

At night, the heat and cicadas of late August filled the trees that rung the cabins. Jessica lay awake and saw the flickering of heat lightning in her windows. She found herself rubbing her groin as she tossed and turned. Not for pleasure, but nervously. The way she had rubbed her arms like it was cold when she first saw the Bouncy Tower, or how she sometimes cupped her hands, blowing into them, when conversation lulled with the other patients.

It was one of those heavy summer storms that leaves ponds of water on the ground that miraculously dry up by the morning heat. The pounding of the storm put Jessica to sleep. She dreamt she was in an elevator ascending the Control Tower. There was a window to the right so she could see the other patients, the families from Milford with their dogs and children, and the Sturtzen limo waiting to take her home. When the elevator opened, she stepped onto a landing, then out onto the surface of the Bouncy Tower. She wobbled over the rolls of air, beneath the

pavilion of inflated PVC on top of the ten story Tower. She went to the netting in between the two air-filled columns that faced the highway. She looked through the netting that enclosed her, and saw the panels where the Bouncy Tower latched to the Exoskeleton. “Jessica?” her knees buckled at the sound of a voice behind her. She turned around and saw the giant clitoris had followed her to the top of the Tower. “Hello,” it said.

A week before her Lowering, Dr. Schick had to finalize Jessica’s plans. “Your Lowering. What is your plan?”

“I don’t know yet.”

“But it is only a week away.”

“I haven’t decided,” she insisted.

“Well, Jessica, you have been here for over two weeks. You have tried all our recreation therapy, you have consulted with planning staff, you have been exercising with the others, you’ve talked with me every day. But of course, the day time is not your problem. Your nights are wretched.”

Jessica looked away.

“Jessica, I will tell you what I know. You live in near isolation. You have been single for three years, essentially celibate. You have little family contact. You have experienced incredible loss and your dreams remind you of this every night. They remind you of your spiritual and physical aloneness. I have told you before, sexuality is often the way we deal with the spiritual sensation of aloneness that death brings. When we orgasm, we empty ourselves. We become alone, yet present in a way that we imagine is like dying. Yet by being attached to another living thing, we transcend the state of singularity. I know the psycho jibber-jabber is tiresome, but is there something to it? Is it possible you *need* someone?”

“No.”

“But Jessica, to have dreams of enlarged female genitals following you around?”

“I only started having those dreams after I looked at your pamphlet.”

“So?”

“So I don’t want to, Dr. Schick. I don’t care how many good-looking people are here for it. I don’t want to have sex with strangers, I don’t want to get humped on a giant bouncy castle, I don’t want a free-falling orgasm.”



“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you,” the man said in his avuncular German baritone.

“Well, you have.”

“Okay, listen. You decide how you will take your cure. You take your pills with water, or apple juice, or yogurt for all I care. I know it will work.”

The morning of September fifteenth, Jessica lay late in bed. There were several other Lowerings throughout the day, but she did not want to see them. She was nervous, lying down, trying to breathe deeply. She got up at noon and packed her bags. Later a Resort staff picked them up and took them to the limo which would drive her home that evening. She sat outside at the picnic tables reading in the afternoon, and then went for a swim in the pool. The patients she had befriended had already Lowered, and had all gone home that week. She had not bothered to reach out to any others. She ate one last meal, alone, and went to meet with Dr. Schick.

“How do you feel today, Jessica?”

“I am well. I am feeling calm now.”

“This is good.”

“Actually, I’m nervous.”

“This is good also. Shall we?” the doctor said.

They walked out of the wellness center, passed the ping-pong tables, the outdoor pool, around the cabins, and out to the Lowering Site. Other patients had gathered, and a quiet, supportive cheer went up when they saw Jessica approach. Because it was the sunset Lowering, more spectators than usual had come from town.

Dr. Schick held open the door of the red-brick Control Tower, the only building at the Resort that Jessica had not seen from the inside. The entranceway was unspectacular, and would not have excited Jessica at all if it had not been for the large, shiny grey elevator doors. Dr. Schick pressed the Up arrow and the doors opened instantly for Jessica. The pair entered and the Doctor hit the button for the tenth floor, the top floor. The blood flowed forcefully to Jessica’s chest, her groin, her knees, and her feet, as the elevator car climbed. She looked out the glass-window side of the elevator and gasped at how small the people in the burnt grass appeared as she neared the top of the tower.

Ding.

Dr. Schick escorted Jessica out to the small landing between the Control Tower and the Bouncy Tower. He reminded her briefly of the procedure that would unfold over the next several minutes as the Lowering Manager initiated the deflation of the Bouncy Tower. She nodded and took his hands, her breath fast, saying, "Thank you. Thank you, Dr. Schick."

"You are welcome, Jessica. And good luck. I believe in you, dear." She squeezed his large hands and said goodbye. Dr. Schick disappeared into the Control Room and Jessica stepped onto the canopied surface of the Bouncy Tower, her legs wobbling on the inflated columns of the floor. She ambled toward the netting to her left, looked out over the trees, still bearing green leaves full of summer. She looked beyond to the Delaware. She looked down at the people, and again, gasped. Ten floors up. Her knees shook.

"Jessica!" the doctor's voice came cheerily through the speakers affixed to the side of the Control Tower. "Jessica, can you hear me?" Jessica gave a thumbs-up to the doctor, who watched her from some 30 feet away, through the large window on the side of the Tower. "Jessica, the engineer on the ground is inspecting the Exoskeleton. When we receive word that everything is in order, the Lowering Manager will initiate deflation!"

"Okay!" Jessica shouted, waving.

Several seconds passed. Then the doctor's voice returned.

"We have received confirmation from the engineer, Jessica. Everything is in order."

A few more seconds.

"The Lowering Manager will initiate the Lowering in five seconds."

It was silent on the top of the Bouncy Tower until Jessica heard that now familiar sighing of air as it seeped through the porous surface of the Bouncy Tower.

"Jessica!" Dr. Schick's voice exuberant. "The Lowering Manager has turned off the fan to the first story of the Bouncy Tower and you are now Lowering to the ground! Your descent has begun!" Jessica heard a disquieting tinge of madness in the German doctor's voice. She squeezed her eyes shut, for a moment, and forced whatever doubt lingered about Dr. Schick from her mind.

Jessica, in the center of the Bouncy Tower surface, bent her knees slightly. She moved her feet slowly, flexion and extension, and began to bounce. Her heart beat faster. She began to trust the structure that held her so high in the air. She began to trust the engineer, the Doctor, the

Lowering Manager. She jumped up and down on the surface of the Bouncy Tower, opening her mouth and filling her lungs at the zenith of each leap.

“Jessica, you are now seven floors from the ground!” the doctor said.

Jessica laughed. “How lovely! How strange!” she said loudly as she jumped around the pavilion atop the deflating Tower. She went to one corner where a pillar, a turret, stood in apparent fixity, and threw herself into it. It bent, but thrust back at her, and sent her falling over her feet laughing into the center. She pushed herself up, her fingers in place on a yellow column as she balanced her feet on the floor. She began flexing and extending her feet again until she leapt higher and threw herself into another turret which threw her back into the center. But she stayed on her feet this time and went running into the netting opposite. For a moment, her face was pressed against the round gaps in the fabric and she could imagine what it was like to leap from the tower, entirely unaided by SturtzenMedical®. She laughed and whooped as she fell back toward the center of the surface of the Bouncy Tower. But then it stopped.

She heard a loud industrial clang, followed by a click. click. click. and she pressed herself down into the space between two inflated columns on the floor. She pressed as hard as she could and felt the hard foam foundation that she knew underlay each layer of the Bouncy Tower. She was panting and the PA speaker squeaked.

“Jessica! Jessica! There has been a minor malfunction. Are you alright?”

She hesitated, then yelled back to the microphoned wall, “Yes! I think I’m fine.”

“The Engineer and the Lowering Manager are investigating the malfunction, dear. We should resume shortly.”

“Okay!” Jessica shouted back. She stood up slowly. She could feel her lungs throbbing. She shuffled over the inflated columns to the east side of the Bouncy Tower. She looked out and saw all the people in the field. She was close enough that she could tell they were looking up at her. Hands shading their eyes. Wondering what was wrong.

“Hi!” she screamed down to them. Mostly strangers below. They cheered for her, and she could see them wave their arms. It was still.

“Jessica!” Dr. Schick’s voice came again. “Can you hear me clearly, dear?”

“Yes, I can!” she said, with a resolve close to joy.

“Jessica, they have located the problem. There is a malfunction in the fan that fills the third layer of the Bouncy Tower. You are only thirty feet from the ground now. Our emergency

procedure—not that there is any need for alarm, dear—but our emergency procedure at this height is to cut power to the other fans. You will Lower faster than you have descended so far. But it will only take a few seconds, and you will be perfectly safe. Do you understand, Jessica?”

The woman hesitated, and her knees began to buckle beneath her. She remembered the momentary sense of falling from the tower she had when she pressed against the netting. She wrapped her arms around her stomach, and threw herself to the center of the floor.

“Jessica! Did you hear me?”

“Yes. Yes,” she said. She rolled onto her back and repeated herself. “Yes. Yes. Go ahead, then.”

Another loud clang and a heavy sigh from the Tower. She heard people yelping on the ground now. The tower was unsteady, but the Exoskeleton stabilized it. She looked over and noticed for the first time during her Lowering the top of the sage green lattice structure that guided her rapid descent to the ground. Faster, faster. She felt her own skeleton jumping out of her skin, and let out a yell of exuberant fear. Then it was over.

She lay there. Everything was quiet. The top of the Bouncy Tower was now just a little room, nearly to the ground, on top of uneven folds of circus tent colored PVC fabric. Slowly, dizzily, she rolled onto her knees. She got up into a crouch, her hands still on the columned floor. Then she pushed herself up. The people saw her and cheered. They clapped and whooped and called her name.

“Jessica! Jessica you’ve done it!” Dr. Schick said through the PA speaker. “Goodbye, Jessica!”

“Goodbye, Dr. Schick! Goodbye!”

Jessica went to the small set of moveable stairs positioned on the side of the collapsed Exoskeleton. Her short arms and legs were shaking as she took a long step to the stairs, down to the ground on the outside of the Exoskeleton. The pre-Lowering patients, the Resort Staff, and the townsfolk on hand applauded Jessica. She took big breaths. Her shirt was full of sweat.

Jessica walked from the Bouncy Tower to the limo nearby, where the Sturtzen driver waited with her things to take her home. As the limo passed through the winding river roadway, into the town of Milford, onto PA206, to I-84 and through southern New York state to New City, Jessica stared out the window. She leaned back into the comfortable leather headrest, mouth open, eyes turned on the glass. She was neither happy nor sad. Vacant body. Vacant mind.

At home Jessica went straight to her bed. She lay on her stomach, palms down, the side of her face to the pillow. In her dream, she climbed a steep trail to the top of a cliff overlooking the Delaware. She stood at the edge and sneered down at the rocky shore beneath her. She retreated to the tree line, then ran in five short strides to the cliff's edge. Without stopping, she propelled herself with her own thick thighs, and extended out into the sky. Jessica soared. She saw herself, a fledgling dragon: wings red, black, white, and green. She rose. Flying or falling? She flitted in zero wind over the river, red under the sinking evening sun. She looked down and tipped sideways, dipping ten feet. Regaining her composure, she extended, gracefully, her body to the trees on the other side, as if some nest awaited her in the canopy. She mouthed, silently, her name. Jessica. Jessica.

Jessica was in a deep, deep sleep. Drool on her pillow. Arms and legs akimbo.

## Behold the Man

Look at you.

Flying in such quiet from Jalalabad. A custom Black Hawk designed for the mission and given to DEVGRU by the Army's Night Stalkers. The stealthiest aircraft on the planet. You've been rehearsing this operation for three weeks. You left Bagram with Red Squad, landed in Oceana, were briefed by an operator suited in black and white, redirected to Harvey's Point and then a secret spot in Nevada. On both sites, identical white compounds. Three floors and a guesthouse. A kitchen garden, and a trellis covered in grape vines. You and your team learned the dance moves. Repeated them endlessly. Slowed them down. Relearned in the dark. Sped them up. Rehearsed every combination of alternatives. When you are prepared for everything to go wrong, when you know how to adjust, nothing will ever really go wrong. You returned to Virginia for one night, left Oceana on a C-17, some serious brass along for the ride. Refueled at Ramstein, and back in your second home, Camp Alpha, Bagram, until another operator— this one bearded and filthy— briefed you again. This time, the specs: the location, the target, the stakes.

You moved out for two days of horseshoes and Guitar Hero in a hangar, in Jalalabad. And now you are here. Flying.

You curl up on the floor, into the curved hull of the helo. The Night Stalkers removed the standard seating to compensate for the extra weight of the stealth technology. A few guys brought folding chairs. A few guys press buds into their ear canals and sway their necks in even circles like high-priced ballers waiting nonchalantly for tip-off. Some lean back, eyes closed, and sleep. One, sitting cross-legged somehow, is talking to Jesus.

You have a slant-view, past the .50 gunner, of the lookout platform. The Spin Ghar mountains below, open into the dark green midnight of Lumbghar Valley. You can't help but wonder how they got the helo so quiet. There is no kah-kah-kah-kah-kah furiously punctuating the air. Only a fridge-buzz smoothed over by the sound of the sky splitting into cone around the chopper. Only ninety minutes to Abbottabad.

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You went home for two weeks after Basic. The previous summer you went to ROTC camp, where they put you through the dirt mill, and then matriculated you to a large state school

where you did PT three dawn's each week. Every Wednesday, you spent three hours in a classroom, where the instructor began to teach you how to be an army officer. But after two months of hearing phrases like global front, the new age of war, and transcendent threat, you went to the registrar, dropped out and visited the recruiters, who told you the Navy had the quickest intake, and could put you in Norfolk, "In weeks, not months."

When you came home in fatigues with a seabag after Basic, everyone looked at you differently. You could see it in your parents' faces when they picked you up at the airport, could tell that the smiles and clichés didn't match their terrified eyes. When your sister came over to see you, you were leaning against your parent's kitchen counter, slurping from a bowl of cereal. Her eyes crinkled and her cheeks balled in an overdone show of off-white teeth, but it didn't disguise the fact that she was holding back her tears. You even saw it when your cross-the-street neighbor, paused at the curb while retrieving his trash cans, raised his arm in a marionette wave, folding his lips together and lowering his eyes in reverence and shame and knowledge. Premature grief.

Now look at her.

You ran into Alex Keller at the drugstore. A year, some muscle, and a fresh haircut. You looked like a man to her. You could tell by her long inspection you had changed in her eyes. People in basic talked about how girls would see you and know "he's gonna die," or "he's going to kill someone," and they'd like it.

"So you enlisted?" she asked.

"Yeah."

"How long are you home for?"

"Just two weeks."

"Well, call me before you go, okay?"

When she spoke, her voice grated and wobbled, and when her words descended into "oh" and "ah" sounds they rattled out, like she had some inner store of strength that she would only hold onto for so long. You remembered how each fall in high school, when you were running warm ups at the beginning of practice around the athletic fields, you'd see her playing field hockey. Flat-chest. Sweaty hair. Knee pads.

The first time you picked her up you drove her to the air field. Earlier in the day, wearing your fatigues, you had bought a bottle of vodka. You lay a big fleece blanket on the ground under a line of pine trees. The moon was out, and you sat with your hand nearly touching hers. You each had a couple of sips, and you spent hours talking: all they made you do in basic, all she did in college. Before long she was holding your hand, then patting your arm, then holding her face close to yours. She undid your belt and straddled you, only a silhouette with the lit-up sky above her. When it was over you held her. That's what it's like, you thought. This is sex. This, perhaps, is love. Alex meant more to you than you had expected.

When you saw her again the next day, when you said goodbye, she said she wanted to keep in touch.

"Yes," you said, without hesitating.

"Be careful," she said. "I want to see you soon."

You went back to Norfolk thinking about her, and started your year in the fleet. Crewing a destroyer where every sailor you knew appeared cruel and foul, but at bottom had a heart as big as the Arabian Sea. You left that destroyer, regretting you'd never see it again. Now though, you think of it as preschool. You were just a baby, weeping and giggling, before you were accepted to BUDS. Before you reported to SEAL training and endured the days of sleep deprivation, carrying logs on your head for 5 miles in the surf, and then getting sprung with the mandatory PT tests. Swimming across Glorietta Bay at night in full battle gear. Your hands tied behind your back. Your kit filled with bricks tethered to your shoulders. You remember what your instructors said when they dropped the asshole act. Teaching you, almost tender. "You think we're crazy making you do this. You think that now. But wait until you get over there. We'd be crazy if we didn't make you do this."

You understood that when you first joined your unit in Korengal, Afghanistan's Valley of Death. It lay on the border with Pakistan's Northwestern Frontier Province, on a route connecting the two countries, and which both the U.S. and the Taliban were willing to lose all their men to hold. They sent your squad there for six weeks to support the infantry, who had set up forward operating posts and named them after the first of their buddies to die. High Jake Hill, Bolden's Bluff, and Restrepo, the base you went to, named for the medic who got killed the very first hour his company had showed up in the valley. They had fucked everything up with the



locals, and the Hajis were just lining up to kill them. So you blended into their patrols to learn the terrain.

When people picture Afghanistan, they think of sand cities with tan buildings, terrorists running obstacle courses in the desert. But look out at the Korengal and you could be in Denver, the mountains are so green and grey. You heard your instructors on the crumbling rocks that made your feet bleed, the trails that were so steep it was hard to tell if you were upright or lying down. The infantry went on their usual visits to the villages to meet the locals face-to-face. The locals told them where they could find militants, and then your unit went on night raids to places they hadn't mentioned.

Seals don't stay in any one place for very long, and Restrepo taught you the things that BUDS didn't. Seals hunt the bad guys, but infantry were bait, set up in the valley so the bad guys would come out of the caves and fight. Spend an entire tour sitting and waiting for a handful of militants to try and kill you, and it's easy to start hating. You hate every tunic-wearing, bearded old man you see, and you celebrate when you kill them. One day, in the first week you were there, the watch called out "HAJI RATS CLIMBING! NORTHWEST WALL!" and the infantry whooped and came out of their little shanties in whatever state of dress they were in, and grabbed whatever weapons they had. A couple of .50 gunners were stationed at the perimeter nearby, and you saw a few guys running over with AR-15s and M4s. So you ran to your kit, stuck your helmet on, and grabbed a custom M72 LAW. You loved the little bazooka because it could hang on your back and if you dropped your assault rifle in a hot spot where your sidearm was worthless, you only had to fire one round and no small haji band would come near you. The fire only lasted a few minutes, but the grunts' antics were a bigger spectacle than any enemy attack. A skinhead firing grenades stood against the wall naked, only his helmet covering his head, launching grenades and shouting in between, "WOOOOOH! DIE YOU DONKEY FUCKERS!" Another guy in PT gear shouted "AYYEEEEEE! DEATH TO ALLAH!" before spraying downhill without pause, loading clip after clip, until he scurried to the rear to beg for more bullets. The sergeant behind you didn't even watch his men, but paced and chanted "STFA! STFA!" Later you asked what it meant, and someone told you. Shoot the Fucking Arabs. You learned this quickly, like you learned to say DFA to refer to the Dumb Fucking Arabs that lived in the villages below. The field language grew out of you over the course of six weeks, like the trees grew sideways out of the mountains. You only had to open your mouth to

find yourself ranting about hajis, towel-clingers, towel-heads, diaper heads, mohammed's, ahmed's, and camel-fuckers. Someone would report a scene of confusion, saying "All I did was fire-into-the brown," and you spit and say desert nigger, sand nigger, cave nigger, mountain nigger, and muji. After the firefights, sometimes you'd go down to count the dead. All of you looking around, wondering, *Who got 'im, me? You? Him?* But as frenzied as you all got, you never could tell. But you learned to hate them all, eager to shoot any that came toward you.

You didn't get enough sleep in a place like Korengal to have real dreams. Instead half conscious, delirious fantasies appeared before you, as you became fixated on the idea of climbing the Jihadi hierarchies with your custom weapons strapped to your body until you reached the top. You wanted to kill them all, but you knew most of them were just caught in the crossfire and trying to survive. So you wanted most to kill the ones with power, with voices. With digital watches on waving hands, and artificial backdrops in grainy videos. With orders, and promises, threats and panache.

You found yourself whispering *Geronimo, Geronimo, Geronimo.*

Each time back home, you would see Alex Keller. Take her out for dinner. She wore a jean jacket and a sun dress, and she'd never ask you much, so you didn't tell her. You were relieved you didn't have to explain the things you saw. She was an escape. She told you about student teaching and her first classroom, her first real job. After dinners, you'd walk along the docks, you'd get ice-cream and hold hands, and she would take you to her place. *Where do you see us in a year?* she'd ask. *What will you be doing when you get out?*

You couldn't answer. You couldn't tell her when you would get out. *Sorry*, she said. *I can't do this anymore, too much uncertainty. I don't want that life.*

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Flying. Your image of Alex fades when you see the .50 gunner in the stealth helo. A fist wrapped on the left-hand grip, dangling his legs over the lookout platform, and holding his fingers out in the wind.

*Where will we be in a year*, you want to ask him. *When do you think we'll be done?* You watch the .50 gunner's hand *foosh* in the wind stream. You see beyond him the shadow-mountains that have rippled seamlessly for tens of thousands of years without names, without nationalities, and without states to exert sovereignty. Peel the map from the mountain

and see no name. See rock and forest and blood. *Fly from Jalalabad to the FATA and never know, you think. These names are not inscribed in the mountains, they are not carved in hearts on the trees, they are not obscured by the darkness of a moonless night.*

A meditation in your brain does not interrupt your motion. Into Pakistan. Onto Abbottabad.

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In the bars near Norfolk, women decades older than you patrolled for young sailors who missed home. *Suzy Rottencrotch*, the older men called them. These old dolls, in their sequined tops and miniskirts, their bangles and chandelier earrings, fake tans, and hair dye. “They started out as men,” you were told, “but stuck their cocks in so many dirty places they turned black and rotted off into cunt. So now they come after us.” You ignored the Suzies, at first. You waited for your next trip home. After Alex called it off, you considered your options, called one of the girls you grew up with, or even one who was still in high school. You stopped at the liquor store, knocked on their front doors in uniform, shook hands with their parents who’d say, *Can’t thank you enough for what you’re doin’ there, and Have a good time, you two.* But just before your first trip to Iraq, you had a harder time telling how old anyone was. You lost sight of the body markers that differentiated groups of women.

A square table at the Blue Streak, three days before deployment. She came over and threw down her whiskey glass. It made a noise like the toppling of a single bowling pin. “Ahoy there,” she said in a voice that sounded like a smokehouse, scraping the chair next to you across the dive floor and slouching into it. She looked into her clutch, pulled out a hand—spangled with brown and red sunspots, tipped with metallic purple nails—and waved a small piece of plastic near your face. You raised your eyebrows, a warning.

“Hey, I got a light, but I need a smoke,” she growled.

“I don’t smoke.”

“I didn’t ask you to smoke, I only need you to give me something that’ll make my throat burn, see?”

You shrugged, looking the other way as if to say, *That’s the best you’ve got?* She adjusted the wrinkled piece of fabric that held her skimpy halter dress to her neck, and asked, “What’s the story, here? You queer?”

“No.”

“Got a pusher back home, then?”

“A what?”

“A pusher. A sweetheart. A young girl. Waiting by the phone. Driving around in a Cabrio with a pink license plate that says, ‘I love my sailor.’ She won’t lay off you. Gets nervous about where you are. She questions you about everything, and before long you’re gonna have to push her around to keep her in line. A pusher.”

You let her take you outside and stand you between the brick wall of the bar and the dumpster right behind it. You closed your eyes and listened to her mouth popping and puffing, dome to shaft. But then she stopped working, holding onto one spot. You looked down to see your dick in between her top teeth and bottom teeth. She was grinning, her lips wide and rectangular, like a talking horse, to show how she was turning the skin on your shaft without moving the meat. You noticed the part in her hair, where her scalp was sunburned, cracked and peeling. She looked right up at your eyes, like she wanted you to scratch her behind the ears.

You gripped her armpits, pulling her off the ground. You pushed her to the wall, lifted her up, and she crossed her ankles behind you, her exposed back scraping at the red brick. With each thrust she grunted, not a pleasure-groan, but a hunh...hunh...hunh, like half-interested laughter. Her heels rattled against the dumpster behind you.

---

Your teachers had officially walked out in August, so summer practices were cancelled. The gym teacher lied to the team and said you couldn’t use the track, or any other school facilities.

“I really don’t think that’s true,” you muttered, shaking your head, hands on hips.

“That’s bullshit,” someone said, and spit. “Public property, right?”

The handful of seniors on the team, who hoped to be elected captains, started organizing practices that were scantily attended, and only sometimes demanding. They started forming alliances among themselves, organizing conflicting practices, and telling the underclassmen that they better choose who they ran with carefully.

The morning it happened, your mom drove you to practice. On the radio, you heard that a commuter plane had crashed into one of the Twin Towers. *An apparent accident*, they reported. Your mom wore her bathrobe and sweatpants and held a ceramic mug in one hand while she drove you and the two guys who lived in your neighborhood to the park. You stretched and

yawned at the trailhead for a half hour, but no one else showed up. *Do we have the right place?* you asked each other. *Who told us it was here?*, you tried to remember together, *You? Him? Me?*

“Fuck it,” you said. “Let’s just run home.”

“What is that, seven miles?”

“Yeah. Maybe a little more.”

“Whatever. You got a watch? Let’s just do it at race pace.”

“Yeah, pretend coach Dickface is following us in his SUV.”

You started out hard, but stopped caring fast. If the teachers couldn’t agree on coming back to school, why should you care? When you got to the school, one of you yelled at the circle of picketing teachers. “FUCK!... you guys.” The fuck spoken as an imperative

When you got home you weren’t even sweating. Your mom hadn’t gone to work. She was just sitting on the couch, still in her robe, still holding her coffee. You saw the TV. NYC UNDER ATTACK. You heard Tom Brokaw explaining, “We can be certain...this is an act of war against the United States.” Your friends left quietly, then your mom went to work. When your sister woke up she wouldn’t stop crying. Until lunchtime, when she asked if you wanted to drive to Dunkin Donuts. When she drove past the school, the teachers were gone.

One night, months later, you are laying on the couch after a twenty-mile run. Your dad turns off the TV, flexes his legs to close his recliner, and stands up. “You know,” he says on his way to bed, “One of these days I’m going to turn on the TV after work and hear that we got him.”

---

Thirty minutes to Abbottabad. You are flying over darkness in Pakistan when the helo takes a wind kick. Sudden altitude drop. You see your .50 gunner, legs dangling, clutch the sidebar with both fists. *Hold on*, you think. The pilot recovers. Everyone is wide awake, breathing from down in their bellies, looking like a blank page. Someone reminds you that everyone in Red Squad has survived Blackhawk crashes, so it’d be a pretty big piss off if you all died in one the army boys customized for you.

The lights of isolated towns start to show, and the chopper descends steadily as it comes out of the mountains. The CIA Operator told you he was more worried about the Paki military picking you up than he was about any ground fire you might take passing through the FATA. The Joint Chiefs worried about what would happen if the Paki government got wind of the

operation. No way they could be trusted. You have to fly low enough to avoid detection by radar, but high enough to avoid alerting anyone on the ground. You look down and see things becoming clearer. You are squatting and enjoy the familiar feeling of your body resisting descent, the pull of the sky. It wants to keep you high above.

The SEALs start securing the white folding chairs in the stowage nets, jamming their earbuds deep in their lapel pockets.

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They scaled things back in Afghanistan and sent Red Squad to hunt low-level targets in southern Iraq: neighborhood thug insurgents, or potential insurgents who fit the signature. It was dangerous, but it almost felt like a kind of field trip, at first. You made your way from Basra, snaking along with the Tigris, in the birthplace of civilization. As a kind of travel game, you started telling each other Bible stories, only you'd insert cuss words, blend them with stories of the founding of the United States, or change the characters' names to those of superheroes and villains from comic books. But morale got low when someone took a shot to the spine in a raid. He was okay, he lived. He was sent to Ramstein, though, and they told you he'd never be back in theatre again.

It was just a few weeks later when you were passing a village on the west bank of the river. The sun was low and everything was yellow and brown. You saw a wedding party ahead. It was important to honor the people in country when you could, to consider their varied lives, to disrupt them as little as possible. It was preferable to be good, after all. So when something like this happened, you approached with respect. Uday, the guide who had been with you for two months, went ahead to greet the wedding party, to offer his congratulations. To ask for permission to pass between them and the river. He approached quietly, and spoke with several people individually before someone led him to an elder. He had his back to you for several minutes. Then he turned back and waved. The elder stepped forward and walked, smiling, in our direction with his arms open. "Yes!" he said joyfully. "Yes, Americans, please! Yes, please! Come!"

You walked in loose formation, shook hands with the smiling man when you passed, and, waved to the two people in the center of the celebration. The rest of the squad made similar greetings and gestures as they proceeded by, still leaving some distance, walking steadily by the reeds that lined the river. You were looking ahead, but then you turned and walked backwards so

you could see the wedding party.

*Could be Alex, you thought. Could be anyone, could be her.*

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Look at you.

You fall-in with the others, and prepare to drop onto the roof of the compound. The steps are all stored in your muscles. *One-two. Moving. Cover. Clear. Moving.* As the helo flies in low, so you can see the walls, you feel it again. The pull of the sky on your body, wanting to suspend you in the air. This time, though, the whole chopper thrashes, slashing down at the nose, the tail lifting, the craft posing as one line of an “X”. The nose hits hard into the top of the wall, bumps high, dives into the ground and skids onto its belly in the yard. You are all in a pile, sliding to the front of the aircraft. A quick check. Everyone is okay, and you move out.

You are one of the twelve who enter the main house first. While the other twelve cover you with fire on the roof, you line the front of the house. Lay the charge, all clear, and go. The door blows. Next is the flashbang, the non-lethal grenade that fills the room with overpowering light and noise, disorienting the enemy. You carry the war where you go, and fear precedes you. You hear the same sounds coming from the guest house. More cover fire coming from the yard.

“Clear?”

“Clear.”

“Move.”

“Moving.”

Through the entrance. No motion. No noise. Six of you up the stairs. Three peel left, three peel right. Calling commands. *Clear. Cover. Move.* You’re second in line. You hear the suppressed sound of two shots fired from an M4 downstairs. A yell. Three more shots. Nothing more. Toward the main bedroom. Flash. BANG! The point-man walks through the doorway. You follow behind.

Your eyes.

You can see in the darkness of the fearful house like it is desert daylight.

You know who is watching the video feed. The tube on your helmet projecting your vision to Jalalabad, Bagram, and Washington. You know who is looking through your eyes, who is watching the deadnight war from inside your brain. Who is really in command? What will you

show him? An empty room, or the end of the war in a pile of flesh?

A woman appears in the middle of the room. She raises her arms and moves, shrieking, toward the man in front of you. He tackles her to the ground holding her down to the left of the door. Another woman lays on the floor, flat on her face, her hands spread over her head. You see the bed in the center of the room. You see the form, hidden under layers of cloth. It turns slowly. You hear creaking. The bed or the body? The body emerges: bearded, turbaned-head; thin, wolfish face. It reaches for a cane that is propped against the wall by the bed. Kill or capture, you remember, kill or capture. A long-fingered hand on the cane. The body swivels in your direction. A faint, high-pitched wheeze from the back of the throat. The feet, the toes, not quite free of the bed sheets. Patting the floor. Searching the stone surface. You see. The body is now self-supporting, but undoubtedly fixed to the bed. A slight hulking of shoulders, a puffing of the chest. Merely breathing now a form of resistance. A rocking forward on the feet, a low lean of the head. A slow, unbalanced bob backward. You hear the exhale, the low throated huff. The shoulders slump. He raises his eyes to you.

In the next room, you know, they are directing the women and children, in Arabic. Middle of the floor, but trying to keep them calm, shhhhhh, to the children. Lapsing into English, it's okay, it's okay.

There he is.

But you can't help thinking of a wedding at sunset by the Tigris.

*Geronimo.*

You think of a schoolteacher back home.

Look: the man behind the gun and the man in front of it.



## What She Sees

It's nearly ten o'clock when I give up and call her.

"Hey."

"Hey," she says, surprised. "What are you up to?"

"Watching a game," I tell her. "Home alone."

"Oh, yeah," she remembers. "Melissa took the kids overnight, right?"

"Yeah. What about you?"

"Just reading. Old spinster, here."

I breathe through all the eerie prickliness in my empty home, and I ask her quickly. "You wanna go for a walk?"

"A walk, Darren? Right now?"

"Sure."

"What, exactly, are you thinking?"

"Not thinking," I admit. This is not about thinking.

She is silent. Then I hear her exhale in that way she does that's almost like laughter.

"So you are a cheater," she says. Not even raising her voice in pitch. Not asking, but concluding.

\*\*\*

I could see her over the top of my cubicle. A long, tanned forearm sliding out of the bunched sleeve of a black dress speckled with copper-colored blots. Some the size of pennies, some the size of pins. I smelled the hot thick leaves on the oak trees in the courtyard through the open windows near my desk, and I knew. I had to leave.

I rose to go, slid my bag over my shoulder. I followed a wide beam of early evening sun that unrolled like a sick whale's tongue on the grey carpet of the office. I was almost in the clear, when Gerald from HR called me back.

"Darren," he said. "Wait. Come meet Natasha before you head out."

Shit.

I turned around, eyes aloof. As if I hadn't seen the middle-aged administrator walk in with a new girl. A hot new girl.

“Hello,” I said. “I’m Darren.”

“Hi,” she said. “Natasha.”

Natasha. Eye contact. Smiling. Extending that arm. Her long hand nesting, for a moment, in mine.

“Natasha’s the new medical technologist we’ve hired to join the inspections team.”

I heard it like a bad traffic report.

“I was actually just going to head home a little early,” I told Gerald. “Slow day.”

Gerald folded his hands in front of him and grinned.

“Darren’s got a couple of little ones he’s always in a hurry to get home to, so we let him flex his time on his days in the office.”

“It’s a good job,” I admitted.

Natasha smiled the way some people do at the mention of children. “Oh, how old are your kids?” she asked.

“Our son just turned four,” I told her, “and our daughter is only three months.”

I understood what the brief downward movement of her eyes meant when I saw it. The ill-concealed glance to my left hand. The completed inspection of the ring-finger. She looked back to my face. I was already noticing her too much.

“We won’t keep you, Darren,” Gerald said. “You’ll be spending plenty of time together in the next few weeks as Natasha joins the rotation.”

“Okay,” I said, nodding slightly. “Okay.”

“Nice to meet you, Natasha,” I said. “Glad to have you here.”

\* \* \*

On my walk home, I stopped at the grocery store. We were out of coffee, so I got medium roast, Melissa’s preference. I thought to buy the flavored creamer, the expensive one in the black and bronze bottle, because she sometimes has that as a treat.

They tell you a coat of paint will last five years, but every single day I scan the long wooden boards of my home for signs of wear, fade, rot. I had painted the grey-shuttered wooden exterior green weeks after we moved into our mid-century, four-bedroom last summer. Whenever Melissa catches me looking too hard at the house, she questions me. Five years, she says. Can’t you just enjoy it until then?

I come home most nights to a hot meal, a curious toddler, a happy baby. Melissa is on maternity leave this year. Despite the exhaustion, and the erosion beyond exhaustion, this is the dream. The little boy, the baby girl, the post-war house.

I walked in the front door, telling myself not to mention Natasha.

After dinner, while Melissa read to William, I bathed Amelia in the little plastic tub on the bathroom counter. When she was clean and cold, I dried and dressed her. I handed her off to Melissa, who disappeared to nurse the baby to sleep. The usual bedtime routine. I went to William's room, and the boy was playing on the floor.

"Ceiling?" he said, pointing up.

"Yup," I said, picking him up with both hands and swinging him onto his bed. I lay next to him like always. Our nightly ritual is a kind of stalling tactic, an attempt to wring a little more from the day, or else, a simple meditation. I pointed at the ceiling and said, "our house."

He pointed and said, "Me."

I pointed to another spot. "Park."

He pointed and said, "Slide."

I pointed again, and said, "Gramma's."

He said, "Kitty cat."

I pointed and said, "School."

He said, "Teacher."

I pointed and said, "Work."

He said, "Daddy."

\*\*\*

First I washed the plates. Front. Back. Rinse. Rack. Then the silverware. Cups, pot, frying pan, salad bowl, casserole. Melissa had her yoga mat unrolled on the living room floor. Her ass round and high in the air. Hands and feet planted firm on the mat. Curved from her butt to her shoulders like a cello. When I looked again, her shoulders and her face were turned toward me, an arm stretching to the ceiling, fingers spread like a fan. She breathed slowly, her chest expanding her tank top, her upper ribs visible near her collarbone. When I heard her rise from the mat, I took two glasses and filled them with water. "It looks like you're really getting the hang of that, honey," I said as she drank.

“Thanks,” she said. “It feels really good.”

“It looks really good,” I said.

She finished a long gulp of water.

“It’s not for you,” she said, looking right at me. “I’m not doing it for you.”

“I know,” nodding to assure her. “I know.”

A moment passed.

“How was work today?” she asked, breaking the silence.

“Good, I guess. Slow.”

And then I said it.

“New girl.”

Fuck.

“What?” she asked.

“They hired a new technologist.”

“Yeah?” Melissa turned her head a little to the side. “She good?”

“I don’t know, yet. I just met her on my way out.”

I took another sip of water.

“Watch it. We can’t go through that shit again.”

“What? What do you mean?”

“You know exactly what I mean. I’m not putting up with it anymore.”

I lowered my face, looking at my hands, while Melissa drank her last few gulps of water, and put the glass noisily back on the marble countertop.

“Well,” she said, hands on hips. “I’m gonna go shower. See you upstairs.”

She turned on her heels and left the room.

\*\*\*

The next week, I followed Natasha out of an elevator. She moved quickly, shoes clicking on the floor, like she was chief of medicine. She was several yards ahead of me when a nurse pointed her to the empty side room where two dialysis stations were setup. She made eye contact with me, to be sure I was following, and continued inside.

She opened the cabinet from the front and cleaned around the edges, check. Felt in the grooves around the dialyzer, check, counted and recorded the number of movements, up and down, of each hydraulic pump over the course of ten seconds, check,

closed the cabinet and held the power button in for three seconds until the machine beeped to indicate the scanner was active, check, watched the small red, digital screen until three lights flashed to indicate the hardware was functioning, check, signed and dated a blue sticker, check, placed it on the machine, check, signed her inspection form, check, and handed it to me.

“Did you time me?” she asked, grinning as I filled out the form certifying she had performed an inspection of a dialysis machine.

“No,” I answered, looking down and smiling. “Not a race.”

“No?” squinting her eyes, like I had uttered an insult.

“Nope.”

“I don’t believe you, Darren. There’s always some kind of competition.” She said it like a gangster in a bad movie.

“Yeah?” I went with it. “Maybe there is. But I always win.”

Natasha, free hand on her hip, exhaled through clenched teeth, slouching her shoulders in bemused exasperation.

\*\*\*

“So Darren,” she said at lunch.

“So Natasha.” We sat at a picnic table under an oak tree just outside our office.

“You’ve got two kids, right?”

“Yep,” I said, looking down at the sandwich in my hands. “Two.”

“More on the way?” she asked. She scooped her yogurt with a white, plastic spoon. Out of the cup, into her mouth.

“I don’t know yet. Maybe.”

When the yogurt was finished, she completely removed the brown and yellow skin from her banana. She held the fruit with two fingers in the middle, then broke off short chunks to chew and swallow.

“Did you start having babies right after you got married?”

“Yeah, pretty much.”

“That’s what I wanna do. Get those babes swimming out of me as soon as possible.”

“It’s one way to do it,” I shrugged. I had already noticed the ring on her finger.  
“You’re married?”

“Engaged.” She raised a bottle of water and tilted her head back slightly to take a drink. “My fiancé’s doing a fellowship in San Francisco until next summer. It’ll probably be another two years before we get married. I don’t wanna be here doing all the planning myself, like I’m pining away until he comes back. I just gotta live, right?”

“Understandable,” I said.

“Oh. You understand?”

“Yeah.”

“You think you understand me now, Darren?” She leaned back a little and wrinkled her brow.

“Yeah,” I laughed, “I think I do.”

I most certainly did.

“Okay, good,” the new inspector said, nodding in approval. She reached for her clipboard, signed her initials in big, swooping, cursive letters on a blue inspection sticker and leaned across the table, patting the sticker onto my chest.

“There,” she said. “That’ll do. You’ll be good for another year, at least.”

\*\*\*

Night by night by night. After dinner, I bathed Amelia in the little plastic tub on the bathroom counter. A dot of shampoo in her thin black hair, foaming, scrubbing and rinsing with one hand. Holding the other hand close to her head in case she should wriggle and slip. When her hair was clean, I used a thin wash cloth printed with ducklings to clean the area around her eyes, to scrub her toothless gums, remove the milk crust from the corners of her frequently puckered mouth. I took her chin in one hand and lifted it high. Amelia tightened her small abdomen, straightened her arms, and clenched her fists. She was silent and still, in this position, while I removed the semicircle of black grime from the crease in her neck. I took another wash cloth and frothed soap all over it. I ran the cloth back and forth four times over each arm, armpit, her chest and back. I cleaned the creases in her groin, her thighs, knees, and all the way down to her feet. I leaned her forward and pulled her slightly up so she resembled a frog mid-leap; I scrubbed her bottom that had turned red in the bath water.

When she was clean and cold, I dried and dressed her. I took her to the rocking chair in her bedroom, and fed her the bottle of milk Melissa had pumped before dinner so she could do yoga while I got the kids to sleep.

By the time William and I had ordered our part of the universe on his ceiling, I was nearly asleep myself, or in some kind of trance. When I came back downstairs to do the dishes, Melissa wasn't there. At the front bay window, the late evening sun still bled through the narrow space between the curtains. I heard the water spurt on in the shower upstairs. The days last forever this time of year, I thought.

Propelled by a mysterious force the turns some wheel in me several times a year, I put on gym clothes and laced up my sneakers, stepping nimbly out the front door, onto the sidewalk. It felt good, to stretch my legs wide. Bounding on my toes, my strides too long. I could hear, then, my college roommate's voice, his late adolescent performance of authority. "You're running like a sprinter," he'd tell me on occasions when I'd join him on his daily 5k. "You'll fuck your hamstrings," he'd say, shaking his head. "It feels good for a few minutes, but you won't last." In defiance, I'd accelerate ahead for several seconds, tempting him to do the same. I'd slow again as if resetting my pace, and then burst forward again. "Look," he'd say tired of my antics. "I know your little league coach told you to run like that, but this is about endurance. You gotta make your steps smaller. I know it doesn't make sense, but you gotta cover the same distance with more steps. Trust me," he'd say. "You'll last longer that way."

\*\*\*

Natasha is rigorous, precise, efficient. She can do the job in her sleep. There is an elegance in the tedium of our work. We have our checklists and we move, side-by-side, room-to-room. Installing, interviewing, inspecting. Each beeping machine, each swooping initial, a tiny thrill. Like partners in a rigid, linear cotillion, we adjust our movements to each other, keeping our distance, mostly.

Until earlier this week.

We had two days of inspections at a rural hospital two hours from home. We took a rental car in the morning, spent the day in and out of hospital rooms.

At 6, she walked into the hotel bar. Everyone looked up from their meals. She was in a sleeveless red dress, its ruched collar ringing her neck. She had straightened her hair. Black clutch, black belt, black heels. She was dressed in a common language.

Around 8, after food, and beers, and banter, a drunk, grey, bearded man sat next to Natasha. He pointed a stubby thumb in my direction.

“Baby,” he said slowly. “What are you doing with this clown?”

“Excuse me?” she answered. She leaned forward, fierce with booze.

“This guy,” the man repeated. “He’s a clown, what’re ya doin’ with him?” He winked at me when he said it, as if to say just a joke, bud. Let’s be friends.

Natasha leaned against the back of her chair, lengthening her torso. Her face, tight and icy. Blurry from beer, it was far from my capabilities to anticipate her response here.

“Papa,” she said. “If I told you what I was doing with him, you wouldn’t be able to walk home tonight.” She paused, glaring. “Move on,” she ordered. “Now.”

There was genuine disdain in her voice, in the hardening of her gaze. The grey guy widened his eyes at me and backed out, scraping the legs of his chair along the hard floor. This was not his hour to make friends with strangers, he now understood. He gave me a pat on the arm, saying, “Have fun with that one, pal!” and pattered away.

“The people in this town,” she said through a great exhalation. She stood, grabbed her clutch. “I’m gonna go settle up for us,” she insisted.

I watched her walk to the bar and pay our check. She looked over at me and smiled, raising her eyebrows, and tipped her head in the direction of the exit. I followed her out. We got to my door first. I swiped the key and the light turned green. I opened the door and Natasha went strutting in like it was nothing.

She spun in place, her skirt billowing just enough to see midway up her thighs. She stopped gently on a heel, and flopped onto the queen bed. I laid down next to her, propped on my elbow. I slid my hand along her ribcage, and she was looking right at me. Her dark brown eyes. Her long hair, all over the bed.

Then, the phone. A clamoring, rotary bell. I sat up. The tan hotel phone on the nightstand. Ringing and ringing loud. I picked it up, held it to my ear.

“Hello?”

“Hi.” Melissa.



“Hey, how’s it going?”

“Okay. What are you doing?”

“Just lying in bed. In the hotel room.”

“I know,” she said. “I called your room. You wouldn’t answer your cell phone.”

“Oh? Sorry,” I stammered. “I must have dozed off. I had beer with dinner.”

“Okay.”

Seconds. Long seconds.

“Well, I need you to talk to William. He won’t go to sleep. I don’t do the ceiling thing right.”

“Sure,” I said. “Put him on.” I picked the phone up from the table, and walked over to the bureau, facing the mirror next to the television. I heard William breathing into the phone. “Hey, buddy,” I said. “How’s it going?”

“Just calling to say goodnight!” He said it loud, like someone who believes he will never need to sleep again.

In the mirror, I saw Natasha stand slowly from the bed. She squeezed my arm twice, and walked to the door. She opened the door, so quiet, and slipped out.

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After Amelia’s bath, after the ceiling thing with William, after the dishes, when we were sure the kids were both sound asleep, I brought a chair from the dining room table to the bathroom and sat in front of the large mirror. Melissa took out the comb, scissors, and clippers she uses to cut my hair. She bought the kit before we got married, saying she would save us millions in barbering costs. She attached the number 2, plugged in the small machine, and faded my sideburns, around my ears, the back of my head. She paused to clear chunks of fluff out of the attachment, to make sure everything was evenly blended, and then used the scissors to de-bulk the top of my head. When it was done, she rubbed her palms all over. A cloud of small, bristling hairs rose and fell onto my shoulders, some of it down into my shirt. Melissa wrapped her arms around my neck, bending over at the waist. She kissed my cheek, and held her face next to mine. Looking into the mirror, she said, “Handsome guy.”

I reached behind to give her an awkward hug.

“You remember I’m taking the kids with me to Patty’s overnight tomorrow, right?”

Once or twice each year, Melissa visits a childhood friend who lives a few hours away. She takes the kids, spends the night.

“It’ll be pizza and beer for you, I guess,” she says. “That’ll be a nice night off.”

I understood. These were instructions.

Yeah,” I said. “That’ll be nice. That’ll be a great Friday night.”

“This is a lot of work,” Melissa said, her arms still around my neck, looking right at me in the mirror. Her eyes on my reflection felt like a pair of suns burning me skinless.

“It’s worth it to me though, honey. I’m happy being married to you. Do you know that? I want this life with you more than anything.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Of course. Of course I do.”

Okay,” she said standing up and patting my shoulders. “My part is done. You’ll clean up?”

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Closing in. I stop and buy a six-pack of beer on the way home from work for a quiet evening alone. Fall has come, and it’s cold out, so I take a hot shower when I get home. After a few minutes, I plug the drain and let the tub fill up. I lay there a long time. What kind of pizza? Extra cheese. Pepperoni. Bacon. Mushroom. Any kind I want. I keep repeating it. A quiet evening with pizza and beer.

I get out of the bathtub when the water turns cold. The drain is slow, and I can hear the scraping suction of the pipes from the bedroom as I put on jeans and a sweatshirt. The sound quickens in the moments before it stops completely, and I picture myself falling into a black hole. Not headlong, but sliding into its grooves and circling slowly. Then faster. Then faster. Then dropping. A quiet evening with pizza and beer. I sit down on the bed, and thumb through the phone; I jam it into my pocket.

In the basement, I open a beer and watch the evening news. When enough time passes, I order the pizza. Give us forty-five minutes, they say. I hang-up, thumb at my phone while the man on the television reads me the world.

I open another beer and it’s time for baseball. The Phillies and the Cardinals, in prime time. Roy Halladay on the mound. The first pitch. The pizza arrives. I open the box

on the basement floor, placing it at my feet. I lean forward where I sit, holding each slice so the grease drips onto the cardboard. No mess. A quiet night of pizza and beer.

Three innings in, and it's 2-1 Cardinals. Roy Halladay, the Phillies' Ace of Aces, just doesn't have it tonight. A veteran, conscious of his limits, does what he can with them. The result is a dramatic performance no one cares to see. Ugly innings. Rising pitch-count. But he manages to keep the lid on things. How does he do it?

I uncap a beer, take the hard first gulp. I hold my phone in front of me. Strange. Nothing from Melissa. Nothing from Natasha either. I lay back on the couch. Look up at the ceiling. Nothing there. I prop my head on the arm of the sofa so I can drink. I hold the phone against my leg, so I can feel if it vibrates. This is what a quiet evening, with beer and pizza, looks like.

I lose track of the game, and I call her.

"So you are a cheater," she says.

I say nothing.

"Meet me at Franklin Square," she says flatly. "It's not far from me."

I remember Melissa's instructions, her warning. I remember, also, when we were first married and we went to Bermuda. Lying on my back in the water, looking up at the sky, Melissa called out to me, "Darren. Darren." She pointed at something in the water. "What is that?" she asked.

I stood and saw the seahorse floating placidly in the water next to me. I cupped my hands around the creature, cradling it so it was still submerged in seawater. I held it out to her. "Look," I said.

"Seahorse," she answered with wonder.

Seahorses are weird. Just a ridged tail with a snout and eyeballs. They curl and unfurl with inexplicable grace. If I hadn't held a live seahorse in my hands, I could be convinced that they are imaginary.

We later learned they mate for life. "You better put him back," she said.

I think of our seahorse bobbing away in the waves, that day. I think of our little boy, our baby girl. Everything we've made together. All of it. All of it should keep me from floating away. But it doesn't.

My face is warm against the cool air. My legs move like they are automated. My whole life hanging here, but I keep going. Past the grocery store on Quinpool, onto Market Street. I hear my shoes plod heavy on the sidewalk as I go. But they feel light, like I could step up and amble on the air.

Natasha waits in the center of Franklin Square.

“Well I don’t think you’ll pass anyone’s drunk test tonight, sir,” she says. My gait looks crooked, I guess, though it feels perfectly straight to me.

“Who me?” I respond aloud. “I’m fine!”

“Whatever you say,” she answers. “I’m glad you called.” She slides her hand under my arm, then into the pocket of her coat, linking us together, and we walk. Contact. I am electric with pleasure. “I thought I lost my chance at the hotel,” she says.

“What do you mean?”

We walk across the square and cross the street.

“I knew you wanted me, but I thought when your wife called you’d be scared out of it.”

“I guess you don’t know me like you think,” I say.

“No,” she says, nodding her head. “I know you. I know who you are. I don’t understand your wife, though. I’m surprised she lets you out of her sight.”

I think to check my phone, to see if Melissa has called. But when I reach into my pocket, I realize I left it behind.

“How long till your boyfriend comes back now?”

“Ten months.”

She says it sadly, but with no trace of guilt.

“Okay,” I say, looking at the street pass under my shoes as she guides my steps.

“Ten months. That’s not so long.” She jerks her head in my direction.

“Long enough,” she says. “It’s long enough for me.”

We turn up King Street, through the west side of town, where bronze-bulbed street lamps glare down on the tops of cars parked outside townhouses, exposing the cold that forms little beads of precipitation on the reflective plastic roofs and the glass windows. We come to Natasha’s street, and she stops beneath an oak tree whose dim red

leaves glow beneath a street light. She pivots toward me, comes close, and turns her mouth upward.

I suddenly remember when I was twelve, a girl hugging me and digging a knee into my crotch. I had no idea what it meant then. I still have no idea. I study Natasha's face in the shadow of the tree. I look up at the leaves. Natasha turns back to see what has taken my attention.

"Pretty leaves," she says. "It almost looks like they're burning." Her breath is coming out in regular puffs that wisp into the branches. The leaves ablaze in lamplight. The black patches of sky behind. Her breath rising up.

"Nope," I say softly.

"No?" she asks.

"No," I insist. "The leaves. They don't always look like that."

I step back to view the totality of the tree. Natasha looks at me in consternation, her hands in her pockets. She narrows her eyes and shakes her head.

"No, they don't," she says. "Of course they don't."

The beer, or the chilly air, or the startling contrast of the colors of the tree. For some reason, I cannot speak. And now, I am the man stammering in the street. Somebody's husband, somebody's father. Standing before somebody's fiancé. It is unexpectedly terrifying to realize that my will alone is relevant.

I start to speak, but trail off. I lower my head and scuff my foot at the sidewalk.

"I'm gonna go."

"Excuse me?" she replies.

"I'm gonna go home now."

"You are going home?"

"Yeah," I say nodding over and over again so that my body affirms my words.

"Fuck off, Darren," she snaps. "You called me!"

"I know," I mutter. "Tash, I'm sorry."

She glares at me. Turns to her right, casting a wide-eyed glance down the street.

"What is with you assholes?" she shouts. It startles me. A hurt in her life I have not known, have not even thought to ask about.

"I don't know." It's all I can muster. "I wish I knew."

“Enough,” she says backing away. “That’s enough. We just work together now.”

Her gaze steady, she takes a few more steps backward, turns and makes for her door. I hear it slam, and then, alone in the street, I recognize the sound of electric wires buzzing overhead. Something screams in my body. Something grinds in my lungs like the forced teeth of a jammed zipper. My throat, my tongue, tear like skin stretched across broken pilgrim’s ribs. All scorched inside. These are impulses endured. She’s right. I am a cheater. I know it. Melissa knows it too. Any day my world may unwind because of it. But tonight, I am walking away from Natasha. Back across town. Home. Each step heavy. Each breath like a day’s work.

## Brave, He Died of His Wounds

Paul Wilburn emerged from his covert lunch-hour vasectomy at the urology clinic of Lancaster General Hospital and waddled to the main entrance, only to be met by the sight of his wife, Pat, saddled with the baby in the carrier, and the toddler at her flank. He stopped dead, his freshly swollen gonads pressed painfully against his thighs.

Pat confronted him. "You thought you would get away with this?"

"But, but...how did you...?" Paul stammered, stunned that his secret plan had been foiled. He looked around in confusion for his best (work) friend Cory. Cory, who had driven him, was nowhere in sight! Paul Wilburn swallowed his sandpaper dry tongue. Heat rose from his inflamed scrotum to his ruddy cheeks as he blinked away his post-operational confusion. Behind Pat, was a tall, thin figure: Cory.

"I can't *believe* you would do something like this!" shouted Pat. Paul Wilburn glanced at Cory, then back at Pat, and then again at Cory.

"What the hell?" he asked his (work) friend, who merely shrugged. Scoundrel!

"Pat," Paul said, embattled, trying to muster strength, "let's just go home?"

"I don't think so," she said. "You don't *just go home* when your wife discovers you've *castrated* yourself without so much as consulting her."

"*Castrated*?" Paul asked.

"I think you mean vasectomized," Cory offered.

"I *know* what I mean!" Pat shouted, giving the men a mean glare each. She righted herself and pressed her lips together as if preparing to strike her husband. "I have taken a lover!" she declared, unbuckling the straps from the baby carrier and removing the infant from her chest. "It is Cory!" she said.

"It is?" Cory said.

"What?" Paul said as his wife dropped the baby in his arms. "Pat, you can't be serious."

"Oh, no? Sometimes a person just...*makes a decision*, Paul."

A janitor emptying a nearby garbage can shook his head.

"We decamp this weekend—" she paused, whether in her own confusion or for dramatic effect, Paul could not tell, "—to Gettysburg!" she announced.

"You wouldn't," Paul charged, distraught and sweating.

“Watch me,” Pat said, turning away in fury. She gave their toddler, who had been wheeling around her, a shove toward Paul.

“You’ll at least drive us home,” Paul said. “Surely you’re not that cruel?”

“You seem to be perfectly adept at making your *own* arrangements.”

She grabbed her husband’s ex-best (work) friend by the hand, strode through the automatic double-doors, and left Paul Wilburn staggering in severe pain to a hard metal bench.

Paul was a low-level corporate employee, *QuickBooks* devotee, and Civil War hobbyist from Lancaster, Pennsylvania, who had realized shortly after his thirtieth birthday that previous spring that he did not *want* to fulfill his wife Pat’s plans to have a third child. It was Paul, after all, who handled the budget, paid their student loans (sometimes,) and knew that his salary would not support a family of five in the lower-middle-class lifestyle to which they’d become accustomed, modest though it seemed with its two, pre-owned vehicles, and its brutally pre-owned starter home. Pat had informed him, while they were registering for wedding gifts at Target just a few years before, that they’d be having three children. “I don’t know about that,” he had said. But she just rubbed his back, smiled, and that was all.

So when he decided to take the matter into his own hands, he had elected to plot his reproductive undoing with only Cory as co-conspirator. The slightly younger man was a fellow associate manager at the outlet mall. He had noted sympathetically Paul’s apparent exhaustion in the first months of life with two kids, and though they had never actually spent time together outside of work, he had seemed a good enough friend. Paul could not have told Pat about his decision, any more than he had managed to tell her that he had recently subscribed to *Civil War Times*. Pat, of course, found out as soon as the first issues arrived. She checked the mail every day, one of several opportunities which she had built into her daily routine in order to momentarily step away from the children.

“What’s wrong with it?” he barked when she brought it up.

“Nothing,” she said. “It’s *your* money,” she said. “Although it’s a little boring if you ask me,” she said.

Nonetheless, it was Pat who had told Paul about a notice she saw at the library. And Pat who suggested they go as a family to where several dozen men would be swarming the great-lawn at President James Buchanan’s Wheatland Estate in order to pitch camp (thereby offering



the public “a genuine immersive experience”) before moving onto the Burning of the Wrightsville Bridge, and the sweltering march to Gettysburg where they were to rendezvous with thousands of their kind for the largest Civil War reenactment in the United States, which recurred July 1-3 annually.

Pat and Paul and the kids had fought for parking, walked to the great-lawn of Buchanan’s mansion, shared a pair of ice cream cones (vanilla), and entered the orderly camp, split into Federal and Confederate halves. When Pat excused herself to find a comfortable spot to nurse the baby, Paul Wilburn was left to take Emma around, nodding to the women on the outskirts who mended uniforms, hurrying her past a drunken ambulance crew pretending to amputate an officer’s leg with a saw, passing three large tents occupied by men who were dressed as Generals, and a final tent with a desk out front, where a gaunt man with mustard-smeared white stubble asked Emma to enlist in the fight for the Union. He wrote down Emma’s name, age, and hometown (“My house!” she had squeaked, thrilled at the urgency of the man’s questions) before rolling, tying, and handing the three-year-old her three-year enlistment papers. When Pat and Paul and the kids returned to the car shortly thereafter (Emma smacking the baby several times and saying “Fight!”) Paul bit his lip hopefully, as if to say to Pat, “Kinda fun, right?” But she was in the midst of the snarling, ape-yawn common to parents of young kids and did not notice.

And now, a week later, with his marriage in peril, Paul Wilburn balanced the baby on his knee, and wincing, called a taxi. Pain from his testicles radiated south to his knees and north to his nipples. He thought of the re-enactors, and how they’d just now be reaching Gettysburg. He gritted his teeth, inches from the baby’s face, and determined, “We will go there!” He declared to his children, “We will pursue them to Gettysburg! And I will win her back!”

As he loaded the car the next morning with a garbage bag he had filled with diapers and the contents of the kids’ bureau drawers, Paul Wilburn was well aware that he had no business driving the two hours to Gettysburg the morning after a vasectomy. He was still groggy from the night’s hard codeine sleep, but taking his morning dose would surely hazard the journey. And while the kids were clamorously pleasant in the back seat for the duration, he suffered mightily, his testicles seeming to have fused into a single entity, like solid canon shot, rolling in each direction as the car’s motion required. His scrotum felt as if it had been scratched all about by cats’ claws, and he detected each small fiber of his white briefs as if in flames. Surely he should

have heeded the warning to only drive short distances, lest he invite infection. At least he had a cooler at his side, with a dozen bags of frozen vegetables, which he intermittently placed in his shorts, and that conveniently kept the bags of frozen breast milk from thawing too fast.

When he reached Gettysburg, traffic crawling along Steinwehr Avenue, he heard a sun-smacked silence, followed by the slow breathing of drowsy children in the back. He drove down Baltimore Pike, wending his way through the packed lots of the new Visitor's Center, hoping to glimpse his wife, and Cory. He wanted to finish his quest quickly, so that he could lie down to recover, as his surgeon had ordered. He soon gave up, however, and drove another forty minutes into Maryland where the closest motel with vacancies charged an arm and a leg, an eyeball, both ears, and some teeth for the night. He cursed under his breath when the woman at the desk knelt to Emma and said, "Wait till you see our outdoor pool, honey!"

Climbing the exterior stairs to their room, carrying the children, Paul Wilburn imagined the thinking, feeling agent within him caught in the strained and twisted nerves that linked his blazing testicles to his midsection, and remembered the story he'd read in *Civil War Times*. Captain Sturgill Sampson, US Army Balloon Corps, had been crushed to death during his failed first ascent in a reconnaissance vessel the day before Chancellorsville. Paul's scrotum, indeed, now hung like that upturned balloon in the moment before it crashed. He collapsed on the bed and sobbed when he realized there was no crib, as requested, in the room. He took a codeine, cradled his daughters, after first showing Emma how to hold the bottle of breast milk he'd microwaved so the baby could suckle. Emma, sweet thing, sang a broken rendition of "You Are My Sunshine," whether to him or the infant, he could not tell, for it put them both to sleep.

Paul Wilburn woke like a shot three hours later, from a pang in his body. Sitting upright, he found Emma on the floor nearby, supporting the baby while watching the 24-hour news. He felt the medicine-dulled ache in his gut. The garbage bag had been opened, garments spread around the room, and the baby was wearing long-sleeves and a doll's bonnet. "Poopee!" Emma reported, and he saw the onesie the baby had worn with a smear of feces on the floor nearby. He began to reconnoiter, gathering the clothes, while not bending too far down, before sitting on the floor next to the girls, opening the baby's new outfit to find shit smeared from her back to her belly. Enlisting Emma to retrieve the box of wipes and the diapers, he slowly cleaned the mess, grimacing with every minor twist he had not previously realized diaper-changing involved.

It was 3 p.m. by the time they were back on Baltimore Pike, back to battle. While he was dismayed to be so long on his errand, Paul Wilburn thought of Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, the Lion of the Union, and then Colonel of the 20th Maine, who had marched his regiment, the heroes of Little Round Top, at about that same hour on that same day in 1863 into Gettysburg, and forthwith was ordered by Pennsylvania's own Colonel Strong Vincent, his last great act, to secure and hold the curiously unoccupied height. They had climbed the thickly wooded hillside, taken positions behind a rocky ledge overlooking the other side, which had been clear-cut for lumber the autumn prior, and awaited glory as the rebels under Oates attacked the extreme left flank of the Federal line. Thus, the hour of Paul Wilburn's arrival seemed to him a favorable omen, and he began to whistle and forget his pain.

He pulled over near the National Cemetery and dialed Pat's phone. He called it and called it and called it again. She did not answer. The last time it went straight to voicemail, and so Paul Wilburn decided to try his ex-best (work) friend Cory.

"Yessuh," he answered in a disgraceful drawl.

"Cory, it's me. Is she with you?"

"Suh, this is Lieutenant Bragged Bobbish, courier to General Ewell, 2nd Corps, Army of Northern Virginia. How may I be of service to you, Suh?"

"Cory, where is Pat?"

A man's voice broke through in the background. "You ain't talkin' on the phone, is you?"

"Uh, just a second, sir...Suh..." Cory was struggling to follow the rules of the role to which he'd apparently agreed.

"Where are you now, Cory?"

"Ex-scuuuse uh-me?" he demanded.

"Where are you now...Lieutenant Bobbish."

"Suh, as stated, I am with Ewell's staff, currently headquartered on Culp's Hill." He struggled with the word. "Cops Hill...uh, Corpse Hill...naw," and surrendered to his natural voice. "We're at Culp's Hill, Paul."

Paul Wilburn hung up promptly, and opened the National Parks Service Battlefield Map he'd found in a stand at the Motel. In minutes he'd found the location, but the tour road through the park was lined for as far as he could see with parked cars. Re-enactors were fanning out,

feigning heroics all over the field, and tourists intermingled freely. The town, it seemed, was as incongruous a fit for the number of people it attracted today as it was when Meade's and Lee's armies had collided there. Paul, with the kids getting sick of their car seats, drove the loop through the park twice, before he found a vacant spot, and then walked through 98-degree heat to Culp's Hill. He reached Culp's Hill, his clothing soaked with sweat, his face red as hot rebel blood, and a bag of once-frozen vegetables steaming and sliding out of his shorts. He could see in the distance, behind a battle line, several large tents where re-enactors and civilians mixed, and he assumed that was his destination. An uphill hike with Emma koala-clasped to his torso was a hard march, but he steeled himself and, his pulse throbbing in his groin, turned the umbrella stroller backwards, tipped it on its back wheels, the baby laughing as she reclined, and like a horse pulling an artillery limber, put his head down and gallantly took the hill.

Paul Wilburn was panting when he came upon his wife and his ex-best (work) friend. Cory was outfitted in a crisp, grey officer's uniform. To his chagrin, Paul, noticed that he did look fine. He scanned the horizon for Pat, and almost failed to recognize her in a black, corseted, lace-collared nineteenth century dress. She wept silently, tears smudging mascara onto her cheeks. "Oh, my love," she moaned into a handkerchief. "My love!"

"I found her in Maryland," Cory said solemnly. "A bereaved widow of a Yankee private."

Cory mashed his mouth around words with "r," so that "her," "Maryland," "bereaved," and "sergeant," sounded absurd. A man nearby in a general's uniform pulled him aside and said plainly, "Hey, if you can't do the accent, don't bother. It's not a big deal."

Emma walked wide-eyed about the large the tent, seemingly taken with the variety of accoutrements, a notable upgrade from the Wheatland encampment she'd toured a week before.

"Pat," Paul Wilburn said, his words feeble, his clothes drenched.

"Oh!" Pat continued, though she did not look at Paul. "Oh, my poor martyred husband!" She rocked faster as she wailed. "How bittersweet that this dashing disunionist should tend me in my grief! But why shouldn't I find succor with him, seeing as my dead husband's last word was reported to me by a secesh field hospital *WHORE!*" She shouted this directly at Paul, the first acknowledgement she had offered her husband.

"Pat, come on, now," Paul pleaded.

“It’s called *period rush*,” Cory explained, covering his mouth, so as not to disrupt Pat’s flow. “These people get so carried away with the act that they forget they *aren’t actually in the 1700s!*” Several people glared at Cory, who looked gallant in grey nonetheless.

“Yes, and I had to hear from her lips that he had asked *her* to sing ‘John Brown’s Body,’ and she just *had* to oblige, though quietly, so as not to appear traitorous. She leaned in close to his ear, and the last hot breath on his living flesh was *hers*.” Her bosom heaved and she threw her head back crying, “And now, eternal, he wreaks of *her!*”

“Mommy!” Emma shouted, just now realizing the widow was Pat. She ran and jumped in her lap. The baby began to cry, twisting herself around in the strap of her stroller seat, reaching in the direction of her mother’s voice.

Pat’s expression broke and with that the widow had passed. She sobbed sincerely, now. Paul and Cory watched as large dark leaks spread across the fabric around her breasts.

“Hettie!” she called, re-establishing her posture. “You’ll assist me with my corset, won’t you?” Another woman appeared as Pat stooped to the baby, and unbuckled her.

Cory regained his poise.

“Ma’am,” he said. “Do allow me to show escort you to my tent.”

Cory led Hettie, Emma, and Pat, who carried the baby, to a smaller adjacent tent. Aloof, Cory stood guard, and Paul Wilburn lay down in the shade of the tent, grunting as dropped to his ass and lay on the brittle grass. By and by, Hettie came out with the baby, Emma skipping alongside, and delivered her to Paul.

“The baby’s mother will see you tomorrow,” she said. “At the height of the battle.” And she left Paul Wilburn alone with the milk-drunk babe, and his giddy three-year-old. The spurned and beleaguered Paul hiked back to his car, drove back into Maryland, ordered pizza and fell asleep right alongside his daughters.

The second day’s action had ended.

Paul Wilburn woke with the kids on July the Third, painfully attempted (and failed) to evacuate his bowels, fed his children, went for an excruciating walk around the perimeter of the outdoor pool with Emma on his back and the baby screaming in his arms, and round about noon left for Gettysburg. Sitting in the car, his testicles still moving like a single mass, he noticed both the constipating effect of the codeine, and the diarrhetic effect of the coffee he had guzzled (to

counteract the drowsiness of the codeine), and the curious combination of those sensations made him feel like he had swallowed a burning cotton house whole.

Today, he thought, Pat would surely forgive him and come on home. For her, he had flouted all the doctor's orders, driving great distances only to get out and carry small children around a national park. He was beginning to worry that there might be something wrong, since the swelling had yet to subside and his scrotum was a different shade each time he looked at it. Quite a fix he'd gotten himself into. He found a spot to park that was not quite so far from Culp's Hill as yesterday's.

"Again?" Emma asked, tiring of the campaign.

The baby began to fuss when Paul removed her from the car seat and by the time he was leaning her back in the stroller and slogging up the hill, she was wailing.

But when he reached the tents where Pat and Cory— and the rest of Ewell's staff—had been the day before, he found them quite empty. The baby was shrieking, and red from the heat as he dragged her through a field where a larger tent contained dozens of men laying around in their dirty grey rags. It was a field hospital! He panted, thinking he was truly in rougher shape than any of these rebs. Indeed, two different surgeons even expressed concern as he looked around for his wife, one giving him tincture of laudanum and the other a swig of Dad's Hat.

Eventually he came across Hettie, and said, "Oh, thank God. You remember me? Is Pat nearby?"

"Naw suh," she said. "Ms. Pat's joined Lieutenant Bobbish on the line of battle. Marse Robert's massed the army in a long line to conquer the enemy once for all!"

The baby, perhaps associating Hettie's voice with her mother, tired from her wailing, yet still very much in want, let out a curdled cry. Without blinking, Hettie bent down and unbuckled the baby and took her up in arms. "What are we to do with this Daddy uh your'n?" she asked her sweetly, and then looked Paul Wilburn up and down. "Yes, well it seems like Momma outta give 'im a chance to make amends. Let's see if he'll beg for it." The baby looked at Hettie's face, twisted up her mouth. Then the woman turned to Paul. "Suh, the line ain't near as long as it was the first time," she said, referring to the two-mile Confederate formation that had marched out to meet the Federals that day in 1863. "Everybody's with Pickett's" she said. "Everyone wants to end up dead at the Bloody Angle, don't they?" She hushed the baby and waved Emma over to her. "So, head down there. You'll find her."

Paul Wilburn was woozy with codeine and coffee and laudanum and whiskey and some strange stink spreading in these hospital tents. He blinked, rubbed his eyes and furrowed his brow, then moved closer to Hettie.

“Ma’am,” he said with a trace of her drawl. “I can’t leave my children with you. With all due respect, you’re a stranger.”

Someone nearby let out a groan.

Hettie smirked and said “You think you can really take *care* of these girls? The condition *you’re* in?”

“I’ve left the diaper bag in the car. The cooler...the milk.”

As if she’d understood the word, the baby shuddered and launched into screams of hunger. Hettie clucked her tongue, her cries became softer, and the woman called out, “Greta, you gonna wanna come over here.”

A large-busted woman appeared and said, “Yes’m?”

“With a nod to the baby, her eyebrows raised high, she said. “Now’s your time to shine.”

To Paul Wilburn’s absolute horror, Greta reached into the pocket of her skirts and pulled out a tin of shoe black and a compact mirror. Dabbing the black with cotton, she began applying it to her very own face!

“Excuse me!” Paul Wilburn called out.

“Yessuh?” the woman smiled.

“This is not...you people really...I just don’t think...”

Confused, he looked to Hettie, who held up a hand for him to stop, and said, “Everyone’s got their thing, dear.”

“Well I...” There was surely some righteous diatribe to level here, but each time he started to launch his assault, his gut throbbed and his vision blurred.

Then the woman, now fully blacked up, exposed the *largest* right breast Paul Wilburn had ever seen in person, smiled at him, and motioned to Hettie for the baby.

As his infant latched on, guzzling and exhaling a sweet little whimper of relief as the milk of this stranger filled her, Paul Wilburn decided that this was not his battle, and yes, perhaps these people weren’t *so* misguided, and if there were slaves with the Army in 1863, well then, was this so wrong? But yes! Of course it was wrong! However, he did not exactly hold any

moral high ground here and became ever more sure of that when Hettie's voice redirected his attention away from Greta's tremendous tit.

"Hello?" Hettie said, giving her fingers a snap. "You just think hard about what you're gonna say to her, dear. You owe that woman one hell of an apology."

"Yes Ma'am," Paul said, wobbling slowly backward, holding his hand over his heart like he was doffing a hat, and nearly tripping over a tent stake. He caught himself on the line, avoided falling, and began galloping down the hill.

After a moment of exhilarating flight, Paul Wilburn felt a sharp twinge, and slowed. Nearing the appointed hour of the charge, he could see the line of blue on cemetery ridge, and as he marched across the tour road, he could even see men in grey a-rustle in the trees awaiting impatiently their orders. The blanks' boom resounded from several canon the few artillery crews were working. The moment had its drama, and heeding Hettie's words, he began to mull over what he might say to Pat.

As a cry came from the woods and the order to march was being relayed down the rebel line, Paul Wilburn searched his conscience. At first, all he felt was righteous indignation. His body was his own; he had been well within his natural rights to halt the flow of life from his loins. He pictured Pat's pomposity all those years ago, insisting that they'd have three kids without so much as deliberating it. Were they not a couple? Two people who must consider each other's perspectives? But no! Pat had seemed invested in a domestic vision where she, the matriarch, managed all things within the home. It struck Paul as a terrible relic of suburban development, this notion that they must have another child. He remembered what he read in the book he had bought at the visitor's center the day before: *The Race to Reunion: Reconciliation and Collective Memory*. In the introduction, the author claimed memory was knowledge *from* the past but not necessarily *about* the past, and that idea had struck Paul. Pat's unilateral family planning seemed to him an unfortunate vestige from generations of Americans who had held up family as the highest goal.

Paul loved his children, certainly. But, as the line of soldiers rolled at the double-quick toward the bloody angle, he realized it wasn't so much the lack of money that worried him, but the fact that Pat and Paul as a couple had all but ceased to exist after Emma was born. He stopped, as if gutshot, and chewed on that. He called up his own memories of his first weeks and months as a father. He was good at it, by all accounts; he made a point of changing every diaper,



woke each time she cried in the night, brought Pat water and snacks while she nursed, and took Emma for walks in the morning so Pat could sleep. He took pictures of Pat and Emma non-stop, and thinking that over, couldn't help but realize that he had been documenting his own bereavement. The suggestion that they should have *another child*? Why, that was like Pat laughing into the great reservoir of his loss.

As hundreds of re-enactors drew closer, Paul raged to hear their mighty din. It occurred to him that Cory was the great betrayer in this. Had he not taken it upon himself to ruin Paul's plan, Paul would be resting up with his man-flu back in Lancaster, Pat caring for him in an idyllic scene that might have flowed from her own maternal fantasies. Yes, Paul knew that he must have a reckoning with Cory on the field, that day. Memory is what people make of the past, and Paul Wilburn determined to wield a heavy hand in the remaking of his marriage on this day. And he would wield it on Cory, whose treachery had initiated this crisis.

Paul Wilburn's stride became wider and more athletic, his righteous anger flooding out his excruciating pain. He approached the federal line from behind, was near enough to join its ranks as the army of traitors assailed the wall with blunted steel attached to the end of their muskets. Hettie had been right: the several hundred people in uniform had broken ranks to awkwardly grapple with their foes at the high-water mark of the Confederacy. The fighting, it turned out, was rather clumsy. The men on both sides not actually intending any harm on their opposites, they appeared like adolescents trying to learn how to participate in the theater of professional wrestling. The notion that this was all an act somehow weakened Paul's resolve.

He looked over the heads of the Union actors, scanning the grounds for Cory, who until this moment he had planned on knocking to the earth in vengeance. When his eyes found him, his imperfect friend, he was looking around, confused in the melee. Though he wore the uniform handsomely, he hadn't procured a pistol or sword. An officer without a command, he looked truly lost.

A ragged looking rebel bumped into him and spit on his shoe, while another swept passed shouting "FARB!"

"Farb?" Cory asked, confused. "I don't know what that order means!" he called to the comrades he longed to join as they streamed past him to grapple with their adversaries in front of Paul. Paul knew from the magazines that FARB meant Fast and Researchless Buy, a special invective for re-enactors with half-assed gear made from modern materials. Paul Wilburn's heart

swelled with pity for the young man, who now sat down in the burnt grass, tucked his head into his lap, and hugged his knees. Paul had been a FARB too, in his own way. Paul had bought into Pat's vision of their future without question—until it was too late. Then he had foolishly planned this secret procedure—like he could actually get away with that—and unfairly dragged Cory into his own mess.

Paul Wilburn's hearing faded in and out, the fog of war threatening to overcome him. He pined for Pat, walking up and down the federal line searching for her on the other side. He noticed other civilians: Dad's like him in cargo shorts and white sneakers, and down the line, a group of students from the college, young men passing around bottles while the women with them wore bikinis and lay in the sun.

Finally, he found her. Pat. In her black lace-collared mourning dress, her dull blonde hair frizzy, dirt on her face. She hugged her belly, not in anger, but in sickness, confusion.

"Pat," he muttered weakly. "Pat."

Paul Wilburn was dehydrated, and by this point, though he had blocked out the pain, was surely in the throes of a testicular infection that he would soon be unable to ignore any longer. Yet the sight of his wife, disoriented amid a great conflict, filled him with regret and compassion and a sense of duty.

He climbed over the bodies of blue men who were playing dead, pushed aside a pair of re-enactors entangled at the stone wall, skipped over the rocks, and tumbled to the ground not far from her. He reached out to her. "Pat," he said again. This time she heard him. "Pat." Her expression changed, her vision focused, and her eyebrows lowered.

Paul Wilburn could not get up, he was in such pain. So he crawled to her, the woman he had wronged, begging for her forgiveness.

"Pat, I'm sorry," he said. "I'm so, so sorry."

Her lip curled and she showed her teeth to the pathetic man at her feet.

"How can I forgive you, what you've done?" she said.

"I don't know," Paul said. "Please. Patricia."

Paul had called her that when they were first dating. Her name tag at the ice cream stand where she worked back then had her full name on it, and he did not realize until later that everyone called her Pat. She softened, saw how serious his pain was, and realized that he was in danger.

“Well,” she said looking around her. “Paul Wilburn, I don’t relish the pain you’ve put yourself in.”

He was practically weeping.

“But I do say you deserve it.”

“I know,” he gasped. “Patricia, please!”

She bent down and put her arms around him.

“Jesus,” she said. “Your skin is clammy.”

“Do you have water?”

She looked around, raised an arm, and yelled, “Ambulance! Ambulance!”

Two men in blue brought a stretcher rigged with a woolen blanket on wooden poles. They loaded him on and jogged up over the stone wall, back into Union controlled ground, Pat following along. They loaded him in a wagon out behind the artillery, and wouldn’t you know, there was a strong little mule, shitting a big pile at the head of it, but ready to transport Paul Wilburn and the other men who were waiting in the wagon. Pat rode along, in pain, across several fields, onto county roads, to Gettysburg Hospital, which was full of men in Union blue and Confederate grey, mostly suffering heat stroke, though a great many were suffering life-threatening diarrhea because of their hardcore efforts to live like Civil War soldiers.

When Paul was seen by the triage nurse, she shook her head in disbelief and asked him to tell her again what he had done in the days after a vasectomy. When the first doctor to examine him heard the story, he looked at Pat and said, “Is this a joke?” The final doctor to see him muttered, “You dumbass. You real dumbass.” When he called Paul’s surgeon, the man demanded to speak with him, and Pat seemed gratified to overhear the profanities visited upon Paul. Yet her manner toward him changed gradually, and she blessed him with small acts of caring: sharing the snacks she’d bought in a vending machine, holding a large cup of water to his lips. Paul even thought it a kindness when she told him Hettie and Greta’s wet nurse act was something *she* had cooked up with them. “I really wanna fuck with him,” she had said to them.

Pat’s sister made the drive to Gettysburg that evening to pick up the girls, and take them back to Lancaster, giving poor Cory a ride along. They came to the hospital first so Emma could ask, “Daddy, did you die in the war?” and so Pat’s sister could click her tongue and shake her head at Paul Wilburn. Paul accepted the humiliation, knowing it had to happen to ensure the longevity of the union he had forged with Patricia.

That was the last Civil War re-enactment that Paul and Pat Wilburn ever participated in. But the experience stayed with them. They both took to reading vast volumes about the great struggle. And when, a year later, Paul was offered a meager promotion, they jumped at the chance to relocate to Hopewell, Virginia, the site of a sprawling outlet mall named after Ulysses S. Grant, who had headquartered in the area during the siege of Petersburg.

Paul took secret pleasure, as he suffered from sporadic testicular pain for years because of his misadventures, in likening himself to that hero of Gettysburg, Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain. For early in the months long campaign at Petersburg, the Lion of the Union had been wounded gravely, a miné ball piercing one hip and exiting through the other, but not before bisecting his bladder, and separating it from his urethra. He was surely doomed. But, not wanting to drain his regiment of its considerable élan and valor, he had planted his sabre in the turf, and held himself erect, hurrah-ing their advance. When they had passed, Grant with his own eyes saw Chamberlain fall and, moved by his bravery, promoted Chamberlain to major general right then and there. Chamberlain's boys were rebuffed after heavy fighting, but—miraculously—he lived to accept the surrender of the Army of Northern Virginia at Appomattox just over nine months later. Yet the deed was not without cost: though he lasted another fifty years, he suffered the rest of his life. Never healing, his wounds were agony sitting or standing or lying down. He suffered through many surgeries, dying from the last of hundreds of infections to his urinary tract in 1914, finally making the ultimate sacrifice for his country.

Paul Wilburn often daydreamed of himself standing at attention alongside Chamberlain as the defeated Confederates stacked their muskets and pistols and sabres. As for the Wilburns, their union, though it did not flourish, endured.

