TUNNEL AND OTHER STORIES

by

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ABSTRACT

PAUL KURZEJA. A collection of short stories under the title *Tunnel and Other Stories* that are influenced by realism, surrealism and the personal essay (Under the direction of PROFFESSOR BRYN CHANCELLOR).

There are seven short stories in this collection. “Tunnel” is the story of a young man who must face the suicidal thoughts of his girlfriend. In “To Relieve the Pain,” a son must make a life and death decision for his dying mother. “Beached” looks at the life of a young girl with a bleak present who must dream of a better future. In “Desiree,” a recovering alcoholic struggles with the apparition of his temptation to drink. “Found” examines a man’s desire to repress his feelings and the resulting irrepressible flood of the subconscious. In “The Final Theory,” a widower wrestles with an existential crises through a study of the universe. Finally, in “Nineteen,” a son comes to a new understanding of his father’s life.

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CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

For this thesis I have chosen to include a series of seven short stories titled *Tunnel and Other Stories.* As I have completed my works I have frequently been asked, in a somewhat accusatory manner, by friends and fellow students alike, "Why short stories? Why not a novel?" They inquire as if I had announced my intention to run twenty-five miles and foresworn the extra mile required for a marathon for no apparent reason. Their disappointment in my seeming lack of effort is palpable. However, there are good reasons for my choosing the short story: first, a simple enjoyment of the form, and second, as a learning tool for the craft of creative writing, there is no substitute.

The Roman poet and satirist Horace said that the purpose of literature is to "delight and instruct" (2); the best, most memorable, short stories do both in complex and surprising ways. "Instruct," of course, should not be thought of in the didactic way of a children's morality tale or religious sermon, though certainly many worthy short stories contain elements of both, but as instruction on the human condition. The short story should evoke empathy, understanding, new perspectives and all the things that expands one's understanding of the world. For me, since I was very young, short stories have been doing just that.

Like many early-teens boys (at least early-teens boys of the 1980s) who developed a love of reading, my first memory of the form was *Call of the Wild* by Jack London. These were stories that fired the imagination, tales of adventure and far away times and places that widened my suburban horizons. His characters were rough and tumble, worldly and exotic, and often outsiders finding their place in society or rejecting it altogether.

In my late teens, the stories of Kurt Vonnegut, Ernest Hemingway and Joseph Conrad took hold. Their works explored a deeper level, providing social commentary and psychological complexity. They questioned society and challenged the status quo just as my young self was starting to do the same. Finally, in adulthood the stories and authors diversified: James Baldwin, Flannery O'Connor, Joyce Carol Oates, Gabriel García Marquez and a long list of others have expanded and recreated the genre for me. Through these authors I came to understand the endless possibilities of the short story: romantic, modern, gothic, realist, surreal—every genre and style can be incorporated and experimented with in a form that averages twenty pages. The ability to generate such a wide array of visions and ideas and bring your reader to a new emotion or understanding of the world in a compact form is a wonderous way to accomplish Horace's goals of "delight and instruct." With that in mind, I am excited to pursue the short story, however short of a marathon others may find it.

The second, more practical reason, for choosing the short story form for my thesis is the ability to develop craft. The short story displays the essential elements of storytelling— plot, character, setting, style, point of view, theme—in a compact and obtainable form. As a journeyman writer, these are skills I am attempting to develop, internalize, and make an integral to my writing. The thought of taking a year to write a three-hundred-page novel only to discover it fails to have a consistent theme or needs a different point of view which requires a complete re-write (or to simply be placed in a dark drawer) is just too depressing to think about. However, a failed short story takes a fraction of the time to write and is infinitely easier rewrite or banish to a drawer. This disposability allows me to learn the craft more easily, to rapidly experiment with form,

style, voice and character, and to freely take risks that I would never attempt in novel form. The cost of failure is not a year, but a few weeks. In brief, the short story not only delights and instructs readers, but also the writer.

With this love of the genre and understanding of its use as a learning tool, I have chosen to assemble a collection of short stories for my thesis. With the freedom to experiment in mind, the stories I have chosen for this collection are influenced by variety of genre and focus on different elements of craft. “Tunnel,” “To Relieve the Pain,” and “Beached” are primarily influenced by realism, while “Desiree” and “Found” have a definitive surrealist bent. “The Final Theory” and “Nineteen,” while purely fictional, borrow heavily from elements of the personal and lyric essay. Additionally, while the stories certainly attempt all the elements of craft, in this particular set of stories I tended to focus on developing theme, setting, and character.

Genre

Jules-François Champfleury, one of the founders of literary realist theory, defined realism as “showing the everyday, quotidian activities and life, primarily among the middle or lower class society, without romantic idealization or dramatization” (West 43). The American Realists, like Henry James, John Steinbeck, and Upton Sinclair, took this concept and created mimetic stories of life in America; stories that frequently depicted difficult lives and did not lend themselves to simple, happy endings. It was these American writers that influenced the style and themes of the first three stories in this collection. In “Tunnel,” the protagonist must face the suicidal thoughts of his girlfriend, while in “To Relieve the Pain” a son must make a life and death decision for his dying mother. Finally, in “Beached,” a young girl with a bleak present must dream of a better

future. Each of these stories presents characters who are ordinary people facing real, everyday problems.

The surrealist stories take a different path. Surrealism can be described as the bridging of reality and imagination, often exploring the line between the conscious and unconscious mind. My vision of surrealism is shaped by writers such as John Cheever, Gabriel García Marquez, and Italo Calvino. Their stories use dreamlike imagery, abstract structures and uncertain timelines to force the reader to question the nature of reality and consider the deeper, subconscious meanings of the story. In my surrealist stories I attempt to use unreal imagery and imagined occurrences to explore the character's repressed thoughts and unconscious desires. In "Desiree" a recovering alcoholic struggles with the apparition of his temptation to drink, while in "Found" a man's desire to repress his feelings and memories results in an irrepressible flood of the subconscious. Both stories wander in the world between reality and the imagination.

Finally, the last stories in the collection are influenced by the personal and lyric essay. The essay form is non-fiction. Deborah Tall describes the personal essay as a way to explore the personal and the true in a way that gives "primacy to artfulness over the conveying of information. They forsake narrative line, discursive logic and the art of persuasion in favor of idiosyncratic mediation" (7). While "The Final Theory" and "Nineteen" are not personal or lyric essays in that they are fiction and invoke a more definitive plot, it was with an eye on the essay works of Susan Mitchell, Jacob Paul and Allegra Hyde that they were written. In the "The Final Theory" a widower wrestles with an existential crises through a study of the universe, while in "Nineteen" a son compares his life to that of his father to come to a new understanding of their relationship. "The

Final Theory" uses the techniques of a braided essay to weave back and forth between narrator's personal life and scientific readings, while "Nineteen" borrows from the form and rhythm of a lyric essay, which borrows from the prose poem. In both stories the narrator's inner struggle takes precedent over plot or resolution.

Craft

In this story series I have experimented not only with the genres of realism, surrealism and essay, but tried also to focus on different aspects of craft. While each story certainly makes use of plot, style, point of view and other elements, I have attempted to pay particular attention to theme, setting and character. As discussed, the short story is a wonderful tool for practicing craft, and in this series these three elements are ones that I have attempted to develop the most.

One of the most important aspects of story writing, of course, is setting. When the average reader thinks of setting, they might think of furniture, carpets, and dress—the surface of the world that characters inhabit. In *The Story and Its Writer,* Ann Charters describes setting as "the place and time of the story. To set the scene and suggest a mood or atmosphere for the events to follow, the writer attempts to create in the reader's visual imagination the illusion of a solid world in which the story takes place" (1050). However, this is a rather flat description of the potential for setting. Janet Burroway in *Imaginative Writing: Elements of Craft* takes it a step further: "Setting is not merely scenery against which the significant takes place; it is part and parcel of the significant; it is heritage and culture; it is identity or exile, and the writer's choice of detail directs our understanding and our experience of it" (133). This captures some of the potential richness of setting

and suggests the idea of setting as a character within a story; however, to me it still falls short. Setting can be taken even further.

As discussed earlier, some of the stories in the collection have been influenced by the style and tone of the personal essay. One form of essay that has influenced my view of setting is the essay about place. Essays that focus on place by writers such as David Sedaris, Blaine Harden, and Allegra Hyde turn setting into the central focus and main driver of the writing. In Blaine Harden's, "A History in Concrete," the reader is introduced to a place, the Grand Coulee Dam. The "place" of Harden's story is not just a dam and its nearby town, though; it encompasses the people, the physical and intellectual history of the area, and the social environment that shapes it all. Harden uses a first-person narrator that guides the reader not only through the landscape of the story, but also through the underlying personal and social issues that the place contains. Importantly, the places provide a story arc of the narrator's own self-discovery. The setting becomes not just a location, but a primary character, the driving force behind the narrators understanding of the world and his emotions. In *Writing Places,* Paula Mathieu notes that "to write about place means to write about yourself, which means tapping into your emotions to ultimately generate writing that is meaningful to you. Writing about place can serve as a vehicle for you to describe, research, narrate, and understand topics that are important to you, and to inform, entertain, move and persuade readers" (3).

This idea of place has become influential in my view of setting and is reflected in this story collection. For example, in "Tunnel," the Metropolitan Museum of Art is the setting for much of the story. I have used the MET as more than just a backdrop: the art is an integral part of the story, the people who quietly wander the halls are an important part

of the mood, and the protagonist's mental state is reflected as he searches the galleries for his girlfriend. This use of setting as a fully integrated force within the story is a technique that was brought into focus for me in my reading of essays about place.

Another area of focus in some of the stories is the creation of a strong theme. Theme, of course, is an amorphous concept that asks the reader to look beyond the basic subject or plot of a story and consider what it is trying to say. For me, theme is often the element that holds a story together; it "is the implied meaning of all the details of a story" (Charters 1058). Theme is not explicitly defined or stated; it is a subtle process infused throughout the story.

In "To Relieve the Pain," the story is about a son's struggle with a dying mother. The theme, however, is focused on societal norms and judgments of morality and guilt. I try and convey this theme through some of the details in the story: a mother who rejects a son-in-law because he does not meet her societal expectations; the shadow of a church in the background of a picture to suggest a looming religious morality; and a TV lawyer in closing arguments implying the societal judgment of the law. These diverse elements come together to help create the story's theme. And in each story, I have attempted to do the same, to create a meaning out of diverse scenes, characters, and descriptions that make the story reach beyond simply plot.

Finally, each story focuses on character. Character is the center of almost any literary fiction. The experiences, struggles, actions and psychological drives of characters make them whole, well rounded, and believable. Without providing a reader with a sense of these aspects of the characters, the story often fails. Of particular importance to creating characters is to understand their underlying drives and desires.

Novelist Robert Olen Butler note in an interview that “We Yearn. We are the yearning creatures of this planet . . . Yearning is always part of fictional characters” (Burroway 88-89). Each of the characters in this collection have a different yearning; whether it is to escape from an abusive father, recover from a tragic accident or understand the meaning of loss, that yearning creates the character’s central conflict and drives the story forward. Desires, of course, should not simply be invented and arbitrarily imposed upon a character to create a motivation for action; some psychological or physical need must underlie such desire. This need comes from another important aspect of creating character, their past.

A character’s past not only allows for experiences that may explain their underlying desires, but humanizes them, gives them depth and creates an illusion of reality. A character without a past is a flat and uninteresting character. What all the stories in this collection have in common, what makes this this series of stories work together, are characters who are struggling. They struggle with loneliness, guilt, exclusion and a need for redemption, from themselves as much as others. “Desiree,” “Tunnel” and “The Final Theory” examine the inescapable phycological effects of traumatic experiences that mar their pasts. “Nineteen” delves into how a parent’s history can have a profound effect on a relationship. “Beached,” “To Relieve the Pain” and “Found” each touch upon the inescapability of the past and hope for the future. Together the stories recognize that everyone struggles with a past, whether it is an alcoholic parent, a broken relationship, or a life-altering mistake, and everyone must carry that past and, at some point, try to face it. It can weigh down not only those who carry it, but those around them. In each of the stories the protagonist is dealing with the baggage of the past,

whether it is their own, that of another, or both. For these characters the past haunts the present and seems to define their future. As in life, the problem is not always resolved, but always it is faced. In facing it there is hope.

Of the three elements of craft I have focused upon, theme, setting and character, character is probably most important. It is the center of literary storytelling, and a clear motivating desire generated by a well-established past can bring a character, and therefore the story, to life. Of course, without a compelling setting and unifying theme, it will be a very lonely character.

Through this collection, I have tried to experiment in the different genres of realism, surrealism and essay, and explore the elements of craft with a focus on theme, setting and character. In each story I have tried to use these genres and elements to open a small window onto the human condition. Hopefully, I have met Horace's goals to instruct and delight.

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TUNNEL

I stand before a naked Galatea, her curving figure transforming from ivory to supple flesh for the first time, skin pale and aglow in its newness. She bends at the waist from her pedestal toward the outstretched arms of Pygmalion, her sculptor, to accept a waiting kiss. He strains on tip-toe to reach her.

Jussie wanders across my view, her three-dimensional figure coming between me and Jean-Leon Gerome's painting of the mythical tale. Her auburn hair swings behind her as she glances up at the canvas. She considers Galatea's full, Greek inspired body with a critical eye, then glances down to compare it to her own thin, sprite-like figure. She throws me a suspicious smirk which implies I am entranced by the painting for purely prurient reasons. I hang out my tongue and widen my eyes in imitation of cartoonish lust. She laughs and moves on. Her laugh remains with me a moment; she is having a good day.

We had left work early, Jussie from her job at the state park where she is Ranger Justina to the children, and me from the music store where I am Owen in Orchestra Instruments. The woods would survive a half-day without her to guide children through the trees, and the store could sell a few cellos and violins without me. I had picked her up at her house at the end of a suburban cul-de-sac. The drab split-level always reminds me of the one my sister and I grew up in on the other side of the state. Jussie had changed from her green ranger uniform to matching white jeans and jacket. I had driven us from the leafy world of Vernon, New Jersey toward New York City and the MET. Jussie refuses to drive — unless she is driving alone.

Jussie fell silent as we worked our way through mid-afternoon traffic and into the Lincoln Tunnel to burrow deep under the dark waters of the Hudson. The pale lights of the tunnel ceiling flickered across her face like spectral thoughts.

"A lot of people died building this tunnel," she said, and gave me a sideways glance. "One of the worst disasters killed over twenty men." She looked out her window at the wall as it rushed past in a blur. She told me how in the eighteen-hundreds there had been an accident one-hundred feet down in the claustrophobic confines of a pressurized compartment. The men were inside digging into the muddy river bottom. With a sudden blast the water broke through a crack in the chamber walls. Was it a stray blow from a worker's pick axe, a missed safety check, an unattended valve? Some poor soul had made a tragic mistake. Maybe he had not slept enough the night before, maybe he was distracted by thoughts of his wife, or maybe he was just thinking of lunch. Whatever his thoughts, the iron walls, under tremendous pressure at such depths, fractured. Muddied water gushed in like cold lava through a fissure in the earth.

Jussie told me that in desperation the men tried to pack the gash with pieces of wood, rock, their clothes, anything; all instantly ejected. The pumps that pushed air to the chamber screamed in an effort to preserve pressure and hold back the water. But the flow was too much, and the chamber filled. They must have felt a paralyzing panic as the weight of the water rose around their shoulders and began to squeeze them; then a last scrambling struggle against the crushing depths as their heads banged against the chamber roof and then submerged. As they fought in their last moments, they must have realized the hopelessness of it all, far below the world, beyond rescue or resuscitation. A deep breath of water and it was over. For the distracted worker who had thought of sleep

or love or lunch, Jussie wondered if there might have been a relief in that final, liquid breath. A welcome release from the struggle, the guilt; maybe a last thought of those who loved him to give him comfort on his way.

Jussie often thought such things.

When we emerged from the tunnel, the glaring sunlight reflected off the high glass of skyscrapers and the windows of honking cars. I shielded my eyes as the city flooded us, a world of life and frantic energy that for a moment seemed foreign.

Jussie wanders away from me into the soft light of the gallery. We've been together almost a year, and this is one of our first trips into the city. Normally we stay close to home – hiking, biking or a quiet dinner. Jussie loves the silent isolation of the woods and is not much for crowds. Even now she gives wide berth to a museum tour group gathering around a Manet, their headsets branding them as a herd. I again focus on Pygmalion reaching up to the woman he brought to life. In the painting's background, almost lost among the shadows of Pygmalion's studio, a statue of Aphrodite draped in flowing robes watches the new lovers. Nearby, a painted Cherub balances on a tufted cloud, an arrow notched in his tiny bow.

I remember Jussie when we met, a girl frozen on a stump. I was biking the twisting trails in the hills near town. The afternoon sun hung low and the shadows started to stretch their arms. I was pedaling steadily, shifting gears to match the ups and downs of the terrain and ducking the low branches that jutted over the path. I found Jussie at the bottom of a gulley where the path dropped sharply to cross the trickle of a stream choked with sticks. She was standing still atop the clean-cut stump of a felled oak, her Trek bike

heaped below her. She stared up the steep slope that rose on the other side of the stream. A breeze moved through the tree leaves, sighing like shadowy whispers. The swaying branches made the fading sun flicker across her face; one moment her skin a pale ivory in the light, the next darkened in leafy shadows. She didn't notice me until I touched her shoulder and asked if she was alright.

Her eyes struggled into focus, as if her thoughts were returning from a long way off. She looked at me with quiet surprise. "I'm stuck in a single gear," she said. Coming to life, she threw a kick toward her prostrate bike. "Something's wrong with the derailleur so I can't drop into low gear. I have to struggle up every shitty little hill. I can't even get up this one." She gripped her temples in frustration. "I've tried, but I can't fix it."

I couldn't really fix it either. I used my modest repair skills to force the chain into a lower gear so she could at least struggle up the slopes. We rode back together, her limping bike next to mine, her eyes meeting mine, and talked. She had moved to Vernon with her father a few years ago. Like my History degree, which culminated in a job at my uncle's music store, her Environmental degree had not netted a high paying job, so she lived at home. I didn't know why, but I could see she was sad, a melancholy that gave her a thoughtful air that most people seem to lack.

The woods slowly thinned into an open field, shrouded in dusk. We bumped along among the high grass and low shrubs. She asked about my family.

"My parents live near Philly, but I rarely see them," I said.

"Oh," she said, her voice cautious having detected a sore point. "Any siblings?"

I looked across the field. In the distance I could see lights flicker on in the trailhead parking lot. “I had a sister.”

The tour group moves on with many knowing nods and hushed observations. Jussie stands with her hands stuffed in her back pockets and considers a painting of a shipwreck. The ship’s wooden hull is pierced by two sharp gray rocks and surrounded by a roiling sea. The tangled masts jut into a grim sky of black clouds and swirling rain. Sailors can be seen along the ship’s rails which are under the furious assault of waves and foam. Each man’s face is painted with clear emotion. Some look on with hopeless horror, some cast their eyes toward heaven in a final prayer, others, with a desperate determination, can be seen struggling to lower a life-boat into the maelstrom. But the helmsman stands calm and alone by the ships now useless wheel with a look of tranquil acceptance, ready to accept his penance. Jussie rocks back and forth on her heels for a few moments as if absorbing the waves.

She finally told me one morning after she began to inexplicably cry over breakfast at a local diner.

“A car accident,” she said. “A bad one. A very, very bad one.”

“Were you hurt?”

She paused and looked down at her open hands pressed flat onto the table, “Yes. And no.”

The waitress placed our eggs before us, pulled napkins from her apron and, noticing Jussie’s tears, gave me an accusatory look before retreating.

"I probably should have told you a while ago," Jussie said. "It happened when I was in college." She continued to stare at her hands and told me how the day before graduation from Mothberg College, she awoke early in the campus apartment she shared with her friends, Corey and Ashley. Jussie's college boyfriend, Sean, was there as well. They had spent the night celebrating, party hopping around the grassy college campus tucked into the hills of Pennsylvania. They had stumbled back to the apartment in the early hours, the place cluttered with the half-packed bags of the three girls. When Sean awoke, still half drunk, he convinced Jussie that they should all get breakfast one last time at the Athens Diner on Highway 7. They piled into Sean's Prius, happily hungover. Corey and Ashley huddled into the back seat and sang a painful rendition of a Lady Gaga song while Sean begged them to stop. They pulled away from campus and began to turn onto the highway, groggy but happy in their last moments together.

The impact blasted through the car, the deafening noise and jolting violence throwing Jussie into blackness. She next found herself standing outside the car, somehow having crawled out and staggered to her feet. The smell of smoldering engines, blown airbags and burnt tires filled her nostrils. She remembers the odd decoration on the side of the truck's cab, one of those strange details seared into the mind in the midst of horror. It was a python head, painted like a billboard onto the cab's side: yellow eyes staring; red mouth gaping; teeth dripping venom.

She looked into the horror of the crushed car. The two front wheels of the massive truck were sunk into the middle of the Prius, like two fangs plunged into its victim. When the windows shattered and the roof collapsed it seems Sean took the brunt of the first impact, head smashing into the steel of the car's frame; gone in an instant. Her

roommates were not as fortunate. Trapped in the back seat they were crushed into place as the semi-tuck's front wheels rolled onto the car. Their chests were crushed into their legs like a collapsed folding chair. Jussie could see a glimpse of their hair in the tangle of car and wheels. She could hear the cough of blood with every impossible breath the girls struggled to take. Moments later they were gone.

The accident is three years ago this weekend. She is at the other end of the gallery now. Dressed in her white jeans and jacket she is like a ghost maneuvering through a group of darkly dressed teenagers tapping at their cell phones. For a moment this reminds me of the last I saw of my sister, dressed in white, slipping away in the night.

Two art students crouch on a bench in front of a Van Gogh, oversized notebooks in their hands. They sketch copies of the painting. It is of a house and garden, painted in short, fluid brush-strokes that make the greens and browns and yellows of the landscape appear to flow like a smooth river. The ephemeral scene is domestic and tranquil, but fragile, as if a single touch would radiate waves and shatter it like a stone in a lake. Jussie stands behind the students, arms crossed, rubbing her chin as if considering a purchase. I smile and turn to take a last look at Gerome's painting. Then, in the background of the painting, I notice the masks.

Shrouded in shadow, they lay like two severed heads dropped on a table below the floating Cherub with his notched arrow. Their distorted faces are the gray and green of decay. Their mouths are gaping as if in the final screams of horror from a violent death at the end of an ax or drowned in a violent storm, or at the bottom of a river. The Cherub and the fetid faces of death in such close proximity seem to both promise and warn in a single visual breath.

I turn to find Jussie, but she is gone.

Over time, Jussie told me about the aftermath: the therapy; the hospital stays; the PTSD; the medications. But after our breakfast at the diner she never mentioned the crash again, except now and then as a point of reference in time – *Before Accident* and *After Accident*. Before Accident she could drive a car with others in it. Before Accident she wanted to live in Colorado. Before Accident she could sleep through the night. After Accident she drove alone, moved in with her father, and tried to isolate herself from the past.

A few weeks after I learned about the accident, my curiosity overcame me; it felt like a betrayal, as if I were checking her story or fulfilling some morbid curiosity. But with a few simple search terms – *Mothburg students, car accident, three dead* – I found an article about the accident. It mostly described what I knew, but at an unimaginable distance from Jussie's perspective. The curt, business-like article touched on the facts: *highway accident, truck crushes Prius, expectant graduates killed*. There were pictures of the truck, its green snakehead hovering over the scene. The distraught truck driver was quoted from his hospital bed: *pulled right in front, couldn't stop in time, just couldn't, God forgive me.* Mercifully, there were no pictures of crushed roommates or broken boyfriends. But as I read the article one line, inserted almost as an afterthought, struck me like the sudden strike of snake. *Miraculously, the driver of the car walked away unhurt*.

The driver.

I wander through the galleries in the direction I hope Jussie went. I pass Miro's squiggly lines doing a Freudian dance across a white canvas, roughly painted forms that

may be triangles, or distorted eyes, or phallic; they alternate between whimsical and threatening. Wriggling ribbons of blue and red move through the shapes like thoughts circling in the mind. A Rorschach test for the viewer. I think I see Galatea in the tumult, or maybe a mermaid or a ghost? Nearby, Warhol's achromatic and repetitive images of Mao and Marilyn Monroe stare silently at me from the gallery walls. I turn away and continue my search.

Once, when I was ten, my parents were fighting late into the night. Mom's accusing screams bled through my bedroom walls and Dad's booming retorts rattled the participation trophies that cluttered my dresser. Fights between them were common back then, before they fell into the permanent silence of indifference that has bound them together ever since. But this was different. Usually by bedtime they had spent their anger, like a single burning log in a fireplace, it smolders and burns for a short time then sputters out, leaving only a black scar on the wood. Through a blur of tears, I saw the red fluorescent glow of my bedside clock turn two when the sound hit a crescendo, and it did so with a slap. Even at the age of ten, the frightening crack of hand on flesh was unmistakable. An even more frightening silence followed. In panic, I bolted from bed, ran from my room and froze. In the dim hallway I stared at the blank brown wood of my parents closed bedroom door. I heard the labored breath of my mother and father and the shuffling of feet in opposite directions, as if both were retreating to their corners. I knew no refuge was in there for me.

I crept across the hall to my sister's bedroom and eased open her door. Kelly was sitting bolt upright in her bed, eyes wide and red rimmed in the glow of the Little Mermaid lamp she had begged for in grade school and now hated. In public, around her

friends, she often dismissed me as an annoyance and general embarrassment, but that night she saw the panic in my face and the wetness on my cheeks. “Come on Owee,” she whispered, then wiped her eyes, shifted to one side of the bed and opened the covers. I slid into the sheets and stuffed my face into her shoulder. She held me until morning.

I try to text Jussie, but we made a point of turning our phones off when we had entered the MET, so I don’t hold out much hope. I move from one gallery to the next, passing couples and families, brothers and sisters, lovers and friends, all in various states of attention and disinterest. A large, square canvas equally divided into two colors draws my eye. The top half is painted a bleak black that suggests the emptiness of a lightless sky; the bottom half is a thin, ghostly gray. The simple painting emits a morbid heaviness, a deep loneliness, that invades the space around it. The museum label reads that it was Mark Rothko’s last work, just before his suicide. He said the work was about death. I believe him.

The first attempt occurred a week after college. The pills were easy to find, her mother’s sedatives, prescribed long-ago when her mother was ill, left with the bathroom medications all these years. Jussie washed down the remains of the bottle with Diet Coke. The guilt, the loss, the self-loathing was too much for her; maybe too much for anybody. Her father found her unconscious, lying in vomit. The only thing that saved her was the expiration date. The prescription was over ten years old, so it had lost much of its strength, taking Jussie to the edge of death, but leaving her pale shell in the hospital instead.

The last time I saw my sister she was a wraith. It was Halloween and she had wrapped her thin body in flowing white gauze, applied a pale makeup and colored her long, black hair, which she often streaked with purple or red, a uniform white. She was twenty and on her way to party. She always seemed to be on her way to a party, but she never seemed to be particularly happy about it. She no longer lived home, but had stopped by the house to pick up her old, white-canvas sneakers to match her outfit. She had texted to meet her at the back door so she wouldn't have to deal with mom and dad. After she had dropped out of college, no meeting with them ended without a fight.

So, when she appeared at the house in her ghostly costume, I had not seen her in weeks. She lived in Patterson with a boyfriend, I was not sure which one at this point – Devon or Roark or Bobby. She had been through a series of them. But they all looked the same, skinny guys in their late-twenties that she met at the bar where she worked. Whenever I met them they were quiet and anxious, with beards a bit too scruffy to be hipsters and clothes a bit too tattered to be stylish. Even at fifteen I knew she used drugs and partied too much, you could see it in her complexion and eyes. And that night, as she slipped through the back door into the den, she looked lost. Her eyes were rimmed in red, her pale make-up was barely necessary and her hands had a slight quiver.

As I passed her the sneakers I asked if she was OK and told her she didn't look so good.

Her eyes darted around the room nervously before she focused on my face. She forced a little smile and said, "I'm fine Owen, got a Halloween party to hit."

She looked bad enough that I tried to convince her to stay. As she moved across the room toward the parent's liquor cabinet I said, "I'm going to Steven's for a party in a bit. You used to hang with his older sister Kay, she should be there."

"I'm not going to some high-school party, even if boring little Kay is there," she said as she grabbed a bottle of Smirnoff. "Besides, Bobby is outside waiting for me."

"Oh, come on," I pleaded, "you can bring Bobby."

She turned to me and paused when she saw the concern in my face. She put her arms on my shoulders. "Owee," she said in a soft voice I had not heard in years, "don't worry, I'll be fine. Just been a bit strung out at work lately." She gave me a hug, the vodka and sneakers in her hands bumping against my back, then silently slipped through the door and into the dark. I should have stopped her. I should have called out to my parents, held her down, tried to beat the shit out of Bobby. Anything.

I should have followed her into the dark and dragged her back. But I didn't.

I leave Rothko behind and with a growing sense of urgency and rush though the galleries in search of Jussie. My text is still unanswered. I come to a map in a hallway showing the complex mix of rooms and galleries that make up the five stories of the MET. Galleries labeled Medieval, Greek, Roman, African and Egyptian, each designated in separate territories. Clear lines delineating one time and place from the other, as if one place and moment, one act, can be walled off from all the others and never touch.

The second attempt occurred six months after the first. Some of her friends had been sympathetic to the accident, sending messages of condolence and forgiveness. But Instagram, Facebook and Twitter were not so kind. Posts of blame and hate became

common. “Don’t Drink and Drive” campaign adds inundated her accounts, forwarded by those who blamed her and could not forgive, or those who were simply cruel. She had not been drunk at the accident, the police had checked. But once social media had declared it so it was a fact. To Jussie, drunk or not, she was guilty. She was the driver. She never saw the truck. She never even remembered looking. And her friends were dead.

She disconnected from social media, and then tried to disconnect from life. This time she took a more dramatic route and walked onto Highway 7 late one night in hopes of dying like her friends, under the wheels of a truck. The driver saw her, swerved and then screeched to a stop, leaving a burn of rubber twenty yards long. Jussie fell to the road crying, a car honked and swerved around her with barely a pause, as if she was a stalled car instead of a girl lying prostrate in the street. The trucker ran back to her, arms waving off traffic, and picked her up. He sat her on the patchy grass next to the highway among discarded beer cans and fast food wrappers. When the police arrived, she looked up through her tangled hair and told them she was sorry, it’s not fair to the driver.

In the European Gallery I finally spot Jussie. Her back is to me and she stands on the other side of a long narrow hall lined with paintings and sculptures. I rush past three docents huddled together at the gallery entrance who glower at my speed like hall monitors. I slow down, smile and nod. Along the sides of the gallery people drift among the art, their quiet whispers barely audible. One couple breaks the silent etiquette, speaking in normal tones as if in their home. They stand before a painting of a king and queen draped in dark robes and sitting upon ebony thrones. Their voices echo around the hall. They don’t discuss European art or medieval monarchy, but traffic patterns for leaving the city.

I walk toward Jussie. She stands entranced before a sculpture. Her hands hanging at her side, eyes glazed and far away. She looks as she did the day we met on the stump in the woods. The sculpture's label reads: *Auguste Rodin – Orpheus and Eurydice*. I remember the story of Orpheus, the greatest of Greek musicians, who fell in love with the wood-nymph Eurydice. The day before their wedding as Eurydice danced in the woods she was bitten by a snake and died. She fell into the Underworld ruled by Hades and Persephone. But Orpheus loved Eurydice and followed her into the depths to plead for her return. He played a song of love and lamentation that moved all the Underworld to tears. Even Hades cried out in empathy and granted Orpheus permission to lead Eurydice back to the world of the living. But there was one fateful condition. As Orpheus ascended to the light he could not glance back at his love. If he did she would fall back into the Underworld forever.

Two days after Halloween, my sister was dead. Some combination of alcohol and amphetamines had come together to drag her away. Bobby found her sprawled across the couch in her dingy Patterson apartment, an empty bottle of Smirnoff on the end-table.

When my parents heard they wept separately; Mom in the bedroom, Dad in the den. The mix of guilt and mutual recriminations seemed to push them into a final silence; the fights forever ended between them, along with everything else. I lay awake on Kelly's bed all that night, the glow of the Little Mermaid lamp throwing shadows around the room.

A few days later I stood in the rain as she was lowered into a hole in the ground. I again wanted to follow her into the dark and drag her back.

I slide next to Jussie. The sculpture depicts Orpheus and Eurydice emerging from a block of rough marble as if climbing out of the earth itself. Orpheus shields his eyes with a hand to help resist a look back. Eurydice is close behind him, her painfully innocent face uplifted toward the sky, ethereal and peaceful, her thin form floating between life and death. Her eyes are closed, but there is a tension in the eyelids, a tension suggesting that they are about to open as if awakening from a dream. But even in the carven stillness of the sculpture, the hand that covers Orpheus's eyes seems to be lifting from his face as he wonders if Eurydice is truly there. His body is twisting in contemplation of that inevitable, fatal glance back.

In a whisper, I tell Jussie of the impending eternal sadness for them both. Eurydice swept back to Hades for eternity and Orpheus to forever live with the regret of his failure.

Jussie answers, her voice directed at the statue of the two lovers, "He shouldn't regret. He loved her so much he almost brought her back from death. What more could she ask for. Just knowing you had been loved would make the end that much easier."

As we enter the Lincoln Tunnel, I look at Jussie's face, the tunnel lights flicker across her like strobe lights, her face lit a pale white one moment then plunged into shadows the next. As the road levels along the river's bottom I watch out the window for the dividing line between New York and New Jersey, the line and words painted in red and white on the tunnel wall to demark the departure from one state and entrance into another. In a flash it passes by and we begin our ascent. I continue to look toward the wall, grimy with the exhaust of all those who have passed before. Ahead I see the dim

glow of the tunnel exit. It becomes larger and larger as we approach. As it is about to encompass us, I feel Jussie shifting in her seat. I am afraid to look at her.

TO RELIEVE THE PAIN

I give her five drops to relieve the pain. Each drop falls between parched, paper-thin lips. A tickle of water and a dab of lip balm follow.

"We can only keep her comfortable now," the hospice nurse had told me two weeks and a life time ago. The cancer unit had come to the end of its abilities and sent her home. "Give her the medicines and what food and water she can take." She pressed a dropper bottle of morphine into my palm. "This is for the pain. Just five drops will let her rest," she said. She locked eyes with me to convey the importance of her words. "More could put her under too deeply. She could just fade away."

I gave a dull nod, still numb from news.

After that, we gave my mother the morphine every four hours, along with oral syringes of nausea and anti-inflammatory medicine, water, and when possible, food paste. This became the rhythm of life.

Mom was only semi-conscious when she was rolled through the front door on a rattling gurney. The assistants were professional as they set up the bedroom with brisk efficiency; working in whispers and wearing a facade of concern that reminded me of an undertaker at a wake. They deposited Mom onto the electric bed which had replaced the faux-oak one that had dominated the center of the room since my childhood. For a few days she teetered between confused awareness and near comatose – at times able to speak and even hold short, disoriented conversations; at others staring silently at the roof. But soon she stopped responding altogether. Her stomach, liver, and other organs began to follow.

She had loved food: manicotti and cannelloni, scallops and lobster tails, waffles and cinnamon buns. “Food is the stuff of life,” she would say as she pulled steaming lasagna from the oven or stirred a bubbling clam chowder. In the evenings, as I grew up, we usually gathered around the kitchen table to feast on her creations.

Chemo took her taste buds quickly, possibly the most devastating side effect for her, and certainly one that hastened the weight loss. Once the taste buds left, so did her desire to eat. Now, bitter pastes squeezed into her mouth were all that was left.

I look at the skeletal figure that lies in the bed, bones pushed against paper-thin skin as if trying to break through. Each labored breath, aided by the oxygen line under her nose, brings a soft gurgle from her lungs. The sickly-sweet smell of medicine and decay permeate the room. I hardly recognize the forceful figure who had raised me, scolded me, encouraged me. After two weeks of watching her waste away, I thought I had shed every tear.

Finishing the dose, I place the morphine on the nightstand next to a picture of my college graduation. I am young and stand in cap and gown with Mom, plump and beaming. She is squeezed between me, Dad and my sister, arms around each other, broad smiles. In the background, the college chapel looms over our shoulders, its gothic arches and watchful steeple casting a shadow that falls over us.

With the eight o’clock routine done and nothing further needed until midnight, I head down the darkening hallway to the living room. The television flickers, illuminating Orie asleep on the couch. The oversized blue cushions seem to swallow her and make her look small and vulnerable, like the little sister of my childhood. Her long hair is splayed

out in an arc over the cushion by her head. Gray strands mix with the black, a process that has accelerated in recent weeks.

When we were children, Mom would sometimes take us to the beach while Dad was at the office. She would sit in an aluminum folding chair, cigarette smoldering in one hand and a paperback in the other. Usually a brawny, bare-chested man holding a voluptuous woman with flowing hair would gaze out suggestively from the book's cover. I would wade into the surf holding little Orie by the hand. If a wave tumbled toward us that threatened to engulf her, I was just strong enough to raise her up out of harm's way, my arms straining and shaking. Mom would barely look up, assuming Orie was safe with me. As I grew so did my Mom's reliance on me. Dad was worked a lot and when home could be indecisive in the wake of Mom's personality. So, I was often tasked to watch out for the family. Whether Orie was in the water, around the neighborhood or in school, I was expected to lift her out of troubles. If a door hinge swung loose, a faucet leaked or the bushes needed trimming, in the absence of Dad, I was always the handyman responsible for fixing the families problems.

My sister stirs from her sleep and opens her eyes, puffy and bloodshot. On the end table by her head sits an empty wine glass, a few drops of red wine dried to its side like tears. Orie is usually not much of a drinker, but after a few days of watching Mom wither away, a drink is always at hand.

"Has Barry called?" she asks, her voice drowsy.

Her husband is a thousand miles away in Phoenix. Like my wife, he is at home with the kids. Orie misses them terribly, but kids aren't ready for this stuff. They never will be.

"Not yet," I say.

"Do you think Mom ever started to like him?"

I look away.

"Sure," I say.

"Bullshit," she mumbles into the couch.

She's right. Orie met Barry while he was working at Dad's accounting firm. "Orie can do better," Mom would regularly declare. She had never been clear on why Barry fell short, but I'd always imagined that skinny accountants never graced the covers of her beach books. How she married Dad, who seemed an older Barry, I will never know. After Orie married, a silence fell between Mom and Orie. When the grandkids arrived, I managed to broker a peace, convincing Mom that even if she was disappointed, the grandkids needed her. But by then Orie was in Phoenix.

And now it is too late.

"She always *loved* Megan though," Orie says, stretching out the *loved* to emphasize it. "Her little Kevin could do no wrong." She rolls onto her side, closes her eyes, and presses deeper into the couch.

Orie was teasing me with the truth. Mom fawned over Megan from the start. A college swimmer and marketing executive, Megan seemed to fit some unspoken expectation. The first time she met my parent's it was the day before Thanksgiving. Orie, who was dating Barry at the time, was there without Barry. We sat in my parents living room on the floral-patterned couches around a bottle of wine and a dish of shrimp and clams my mother had prepared. I had told Megan about my mother and Barry so she had come prepared; dressed to impress and gregarious.

"She is such a sharp dresser," Mom said as soon as Megan had left. She lifted her wine glass toward her lips and looked at me over the rim, "and quite the figure." I could almost see her mind flipping through romance novel covers on which to place Megan and coming up with titles – "Professional Passions" or "Swimmer Soirée." As she lowered her glass she smiled to Orie and said in a low tone of motherly advice, "Maybe she could give Barry some advice."

Orie's slow breath tells me she has fallen back asleep. I sit on the end of the couch and stare absently at the television on the wall. A late-night preacher in a dark suit and white-collared shirt drones on with a practiced sincerity. His sermon drifts around me. Right and wrong. Heaven and Hell.

I find the remote and flick through the channels, half in a daze. My fingers tire out on a law firm drama. It tumbles along toward the usual conclusion for such shows, the lawyers earnestly presenting their closing arguments about guilt or innocence— always so simple, so clear. I haul myself up from the couch to look for coffee.

In the kitchen, Dad sits at the Formica table, head bowed as if in prayer. A half-empty bowl of vegetable soup sits at his elbow, and the faint glow of the setting summer sun emanates from the window behind him. He looks up and nods a greeting; the skin under his chin, loose from age and recent weight loss, shaking along with his head. Drops of red soup decorate his white golf shirt. Over the last few months his hands have begun to shake, so his clothes often evidence his latest meal. The doctor told him he was suffering from stress and fatigue, that he should get more rest. An easy prescription to give—a hard one to fill.

Although I have been living with Mom's impending death for weeks, Dad has been living with it for over a year. That's how long it has been since the cancer spread to her lymph nodes and blood. Painful, debilitating and humiliating treatments followed. Dad was there for her through it all, day and night, in and out of the hospital, every moment of the slow decline. But it is being this bitter end which seems to drain him most.

"How's she doing?" he asks, always his first question.

"Sleeping comfortably," I say. All she can do now.

"Do you think we'll hear from her again before . . ." his voice cracks and trails off.

"I don't think we will," I say. "Better she sleeps, anyway."

He nods and looks down again. It has been a week since her last foggy words. Nothing profound or romantic, just confusion. "Daren," she said to my Dad, "turn the stove off, will you?"

My dad pushes away his soup bowl. "I'm sorry you and your sister have to go through this. It would have killed your mother to see us all like this."

He pushes himself up from the table. Always a slight man with sloping shoulders and bent back developed from years at a desk, his sagging figure appears shorter than usual. He staggers for a step before catching himself on the back of the chair. "Thanks for being here. I couldn't make it through this alone." He gives a thin grin as he touches my shoulder, "I still might not."

He shuffles toward the guest bedroom, which had once been Orie's, where he now sleeps. Normally a man capable of annoying levels of energy and optimism, he is now a thinning shell.

I give up on coffee and clean up the remains of his dinner, then retreat to my bedroom to lay down. And it is still my bedroom, or at least adolescent me. Unlike Orie's room, which was turned into a guest bedroom, Mom has left mine largely undisturbed. Even after ten years, football trophies and college books clutter the shelves while Green Day and Red Hot Chile Peppers posters are plastered on the walls. I fall onto the bed and breathe a sigh that releases some of my anxiety, like water released from an overburdened dam. With my eyes closed, I can feel the weight of the house around me, pressing and dark. I can faintly hear the droning voices on the television; whether it is the talking head preaching of good and bad or the lawyers debating guilt or innocence, I can no longer tell. As I fade into sleep, I think I can feel my sister, torn and lonely on the couch; my father, confused and lost, dragging himself toward the inevitable end; and my mother, frightened in the darkness of her broken body, waiting.

When I awake, my mind and the house are quiet. The voices from the living room, silent. I look at the glowing red numbers of the clock on the dresser— just before midnight. The next round of medicine is due.

I go into the bathroom, splash my face, and wash my hands. I walk through the house. In the living room my sister is still sprawled across the couch asleep. I press my ear to the guest bedroom; the sound of slow breathing confirms my father's slumbering presence.

Finally, I think, he can get some rest.

I walk to my mother's room; she lies as I left her: gurgling quietly at each breath. I pick up the morphine and give her five drops. I look again at my graduation picture, the

smiling family embraced before the chapel. Then I give her five more drops to relieve the pain.

BEACHED

The noise of the night before had subsided: the slurred yells, the blaring television, the pounding on tables just beyond her locked, bedroom door. From the bed Pamela stared across the room, over the pile of her Goodwill clothes and past the pressboard dresser, sagging under the weight of middle-school books, to the bedroom corner where her rocket shaped escape stood. It pointed toward the ceiling as if ready for take-off. In cautious silence, she changed into her suit.

On the beach the sun hung low over the waves; the air still cool and the wind gusting. Pam loved to be here in the morning when the sands were empty and the sun slowly climbed the sky heading towards its full power of the hot afternoon. She held her surfboard in the crook of her arm and watched the breaking surf, looking for the perfect time to launch. A wave crashed and its water flattened and fanned up the beach until it touched Pam's toes. Its energy spent, the water rolled back into the Atlantic and, seeing her moment, Pam followed. She sprinted through the sand, surfboard in both hands, and leapt out over the retreating water. For a moment her thin body soared above the surf, then it landed with a rush of speed on top of the bright white board. The momentum sent her gliding through the rough water out toward the breakers. With deft strokes she accelerated, trying to escape the shifting wash of water before a wave could catch her and toss her back.

She paddled furiously, muscling through the rushing remains of broken waves or duck diving under those that threatened to crash on top of her. With a last heave of effort,

she passed the final breakers. The pull of currents and tumble of shattered waves subsided. She was free, away from the beach and floating in the gentle rolls of the ocean.

Pam remembered when she could barely paddle through even the still waters of a slack tide and struggled to balance her awkward body on even the most stable of surfboards; face down on the board, her limbs dangling in the water, scrawny ten-year old arms flailing. She had felt like a capsized turtle, vulnerable and defenseless. But her cousin Christy had taken her under wing. Christy was only thirteen then, but she could surf. She was sleek and tan, with short blond hair that dropped in loose curls about her shoulders when her hair was dry – which wasn't very often. On their small Carolina beach, Christy was the best Pam had ever seen; better than everyone from their run-down school, better even than the rich kids who visited in the summers. Bottom turns and cutbacks, snaps and tail slides; she could do them all with a gliding grace that left Pam awestruck. Christy's teachers called her a *Mermaid, our little goddess of the sea* and treated as such.

As Pam caught her breath after pulling through the breakers, she thought of her escape from the house - past her father, face-down on the couch; past the wobbly kitchen table, covered with empty beer cans, a bottle of Southern Comfort and the remains of a small plastic baggie; then out through the trailer's screen door and down the dirt lane toward the ocean. There was a time when Pam did not need to escape; when her father worked long hours but was rarely drunk; when he never came home with smelly, scruffy men or loud, crude women to drink until dawn; when she didn't feel the need to lock her bedroom door.

She pressed her legs into the surfboard and arched her back to raise her head high above the waves. Her limbs were no longer thin, but taught and wiry from years of struggling though the surf and building strength. She looked away from the beach and thoughts of her battered home to the open water. She scanned the sea in hopes of a perfect wave; one big enough to carry her away, far and fast, and high enough to lift her above the tumbling surf that she had fought through to get here. But she could see only row upon row of the choppy swells repeating themselves into the distance, like a chaotic jumble of barren, shifting hills that offered no relief. She squinted her eyes to try and see further in hopes that there was more. Then the wind shifted and swept across the water to cast a gentle mist onto her face - as if promising a change. She smiled at the cleansing taste of brine. She closed her eyes, lay her head on the board, and drifted. Then thoughts of her mother began to float into her mind.

When Pam was twelve her mother didn't come home from work one Friday. As the sun fell and the house grew dark her mother texted that she was out with girlfriends. When Pam's mom was *out with girlfriends* she sometimes didn't come home at all that night; usually her father would take-off in the pickup around mid-night to hunt her down. Maybe he was too angry, maybe too tired, maybe just too worn down, but this time he didn't go. He said he had to crew a shrimping boat before sunrise and wasn't going to chase her. He slammed his bedroom door and went to bed. Nights like this usually ended in a day of screaming fights between Pam's parents, then days of silence, followed by a slow return to a sullen normalcy. There was no fight the next day though; only a pre-dawn call from the police. Pam's mom drowned during a drunken midnight swim. Her

sandals and car keys were found on the beach; she was found floating face down in the surf.

At the wake Pam lashed out in anger, smashing a vase of lilies onto her mother's casket and screaming *how could you drown, we live on the fucking Ocean, you should be able to swim.* She then turned to her father and blamed him for not heading out to save her. He stood there, broken lilies at his feet, in solemn silence nodding his head and staring blankly though red-rimmed eyes. After that day it was her father who started to come apart, started to come home late and stumbling with strangers, started to yell and threaten, started to make escape necessary.

Pam roused herself on her board. The sun was now solidly above the horizon and the waves seemed to flicker and dance in the light. Back on the beach a few fishermen cast lines into the surf and the early morning beach combers walked the sands searching for pretty shells. Pam noticed she had drifted further out than she wanted, too far from where the swells broke to catch a wave. She began to paddle back toward the shore, her arms strong and sure; she could swim for miles. Christy's first lessons were to teach Pam to swim; not the flailing strokes Pam had learned at the YMCA, but the smooth strokes of true swimmer. *You have to learn to swim before you can surf* Christy had told her.

Soon after the wake, Christy left for college in California. Most of the kids in Pam's school didn't go to college, except maybe part time at the community college. Pam remembered going to Christy's little ranch house, to see her off; trying to hold back the tears as she said goodbye, but finally bursting as Christy hugged her. *Next year you should come out to California for school with me*. *They have killer waves.* Pam watched

she drive away in her little VW Bug, the tires sliding in the sandy road as she headed west, west out of their small town toward California.

When Pam raised her head again she saw it. There among the moving hills, a mountain. A smooth swell standing far above the rest, taller than herself, taller than her father. She turned her board to run before the wave and paddled hard to try and match its speed. As it came under her, its motion and incline thrust her forward and she and the board began to drop down the face of the wave; she no longer needed to paddle now, the board moved effortlessly with the mountain. In one graceful motion she popped to her feet, and she and the moving mountain became one, a single, powerful force. With slight shifts of her feet she carved back and forth, the water and speed allowing her to ride the wave from crest to trough and back again. She no longer thought of her trailer or the half-mile trek down the dirt road to cross the freeway, or of the rows of rich, rental homes that looked down on her as she passed to reach the beach; she no longer thought of her broken father or bolting her bedroom door; she only thought of the of the moving mountain and all it was and all it could be. Its power and energy propelled her far from herself. At its crest she could rise, rise above the broken waves and her dusty, dead-end road; rise above even the clouds themselves and look west to the world beyond, one where she was a goddess riding the slopes of the solar winds: powerful, invincible – untouchable.

Then, as she knew it would because they always do, the mountain began to collapse. As it reached the shallows and its lofty height became too great to support, it curled and started its thunderous crash. At the last moment she leapt from the board over the breaking mountain and into the calmer waters just behind it. The momentum of the water carried her and the board forward and up onto the beach. As she threw back her

hair and brushed salt-water from her eyes she saw standing on the sand the red-eyed, disheveled figure of her father. She could see the apology forming on his lips. She wanted to take her board and launch back into the sea, but knew the waves would only wash her back again.

DESIREE

I met Desiree last night in the damp, barren basement of a church. She sat beside me on a white, plastic lawn-chair in the group circle of my AA meeting. She slouched forward, tangled hair hanging down both sides of her face. Only the glint of blue eyes could be seen in the recesses of her hair, as if peering out from a dark cave.

It was Sharing Time. The group leader went around the circle of attendees for confessions or news. Some slouched, forlorn, in their chairs while others sat on edge, kneading their hands over a bouncing knee. Each shared a slip-up, touted a success or vetted the usual complaints about the difficulties of dating, friendship or any semblance of a normal social life when so much of it revolves around a drink.

Finally, the group leader turned to me. “Richard,” he said, “how was your week?” I shuddered at being called Richard, such a formal, distancing name. My wife, Maria, had called me Rick or Richie, and sometimes Babe or Honey. She only used Richard when she was angry. Now, she always calls me Richard.

I had no confessions to share, instead I had a few bits of good news; last week was one year without a drink, and today I was able to see my eight-year-old son, Toby. I put on a smile as I told the group of seeing him for the first time in almost two years. How he had held his mother’s hand tightly as he hobbled up to me with his odd little walk, the leg brace clicking at each step. Desiree’s eyes watched me from her cave as I spoke, as if she could see my smile was empty.

The group leader skipped Desiree, went right by her as if she wasn’t even there. Partly to help and partly out of curiosity, I leaned toward her and whispered, "If this is your first meeting and you want to tell them about yourself just speak up."

She stared at me for a moment. "I'm not here for me," she said, her voice raspy as if she had not spoken in a while. "I came for someone else."

I nodded. "That's how I first started coming. In my case, the someone else I came for was the judge who ordered it."

When the meeting broke up everyone filed up the basement stairs to the exit. Small talk is minimal for evening meetings, people are anxious to go home to families or friends. As I opened the church door I saw Desiree outside, leaning on a white column, looking toward the distant city lights where people were probably out, meeting over dinner or music. And drinks. She was outlined by the city's glow, the silhouette of her thin body and untamed hair made her look feral and erotic. I watched her for a while; she had a familiar shape, like seeing the shadow of someone you know well. I thought of approaching her, but something in me warned not to disturb her. I slipped out the door and headed toward my car.

I glanced back and was surprised find her fall in step beside me, head bent forward and hands clasped before her, as if leaving mass instead of AA.

After a few silent steps, I said, "The first meeting is awkward, you’re not sure what to say."

She looked toward me, her features still veiled, "I never said it was my first meeting, I’ve been to lots of meetings."

"I thought you were here for someone else?” I said. “Do you make a hobby of attending for others?"

She raised her head and stood up straight, the hair fell back like a curtain drawn open, revealing a sly smile upon a thin, bony face. "Sometimes."

"That's an odd hobby."

"I have lots of them." Now that I could see her she did not appear as foreboding as she had at the meeting or as wild as she had moments earlier. She looked drawn and pale, as if she had not been in sunlight in a while, yet somehow held for me some half-remembered allure.

"In fact, one of them is eating," she continued, "and I'm starving." She looked me up and down. "If you take me to dinner you can tell me more about AA, and maybe I will show you my other hobbies."

I was surprised by such a proposal and even a bit suspicious. But after seeing my son today, I felt the need to be around someone and the urge to indulge. I had not been out to a dinner that did not involve a greasy paper-bag in a long time and certainly hadn't been out with a woman - even a pale, bony one - in far longer. So, hoping to impress, I took her to my old stomping ground, The Brown Derby.

We rode in my less than impressive, worn down BMW, left over from better days. As we rattled along she retreated into silence, periodically giving me an anxious glance as if she was hungry and I was not driving fast enough. This unnerved me, so I filled the void by rambling on about my past life as a partner at a law firm and how a series of DWIs had ended it. Since I was driving I did not mention my son or the crash that had put a period on that part of my life. "Now I work at Kinko's, selling copy services to the law firms I used to work with," I told her with an ironic grin.

She stared ahead, watching the red tail lights of the cars ahead punctuating the darkness of the evening. "Sounds familiar."

I remembered the evening I didn't see those tail lights. I was driving home from a baseball game, a beer in one hand, steering wheel in the other. Toby was asleep in the back of my wife's SUV, a new ballcap askew on his lolling head and a giant foam mitt hanging from his hand. It was his first game, so I had gone all out. I stuffed him with hot dogs and cotton candy that fueled him to tear about the minor league stadium with six-year-old energy and then melt into tears and sleep by the seventh inning stretch. I had promised my wife, Maria, that I wouldn't drink. The habit was already stressing our marriage, a recent DWI accentuating the issue. But the warm summer afternoon, the cries of beer venders, and my own weakness resulted in a beer by the end of the first inning. Others soon followed. I had just bought a seventh inning beer when the meltdown occurred and it was time to leave. I snuck the drink out of the stadium under the foam mitt.

I had struggled to wrestle Toby's sleepy form into his child seat, his flopping limbs and rolling head adding to the confusion of strapping him in, like trying to tie down an octopus. A few miles from the stadium I glanced back to check his sleeping form. A peaceful look was on his face; a look that only a child who knows he is loved and possesses utter trust in his protectors can have. In that moment I made a resolution and dropped my beer can into the cup holder.

I didn't see the street light turn red; I didn't see the tail lights flash out their warning, I didn't see anything until it was too late. Then I heard the deafening sound of crunching metal and the shotgun blast of airbags; I saw the shattering of windshield glass, like a burst of pelting ice, and I felt the thump of something soft strike the back of my seat.

The restaurant was warm and woody, decorated like a 1940's dinner club with caricatures of period celebrities covering the walls. The patrons wore sport coats or carried logo emblazoned purses. I felt out of place in my worn kakis and scruffy Kinko's golf shirt. I had not been here in years.

But once, I was a regular. Client dinners and cocktails, office parties and after-hours nightcaps were a part the job. I had known all the bartenders behind the heavy oaken bar, and they would set up my drink before I even sat in a stool. A scotch or wine could sooth my jagged edges and winnow my insecurities and allow me to win a client or cement a relationship.

But now the maître-d' was a stranger, and he led me to a small table near the bar with barely enough room for two. He dropped down a single menu. Above the table hovered a caricature of W.C. Fields, his nose bulbous and red as he raised a silver hip flask to his lips.

Desiree sat across from me, silently playing with the flame of a small red votive that burned on the table. I ordered an appetizer, and soon the sweet, spicy smell of fried calamari enveloped us. Between bites Desiree popped open a wine menu. "Richard," she said, "I think I'll have a glass of wine with dinner." She peering at me over the top of the leather-bound menu, beckoning me to join her.

I smiled and shook my head, "First, call me Rick. And second, are you sure you've been to a lot of AA meetings? If so, you seem to be missing a key point."

She lowered the menu and playfully pursed her lips like a child denied a favorite toy. "What's the point of having a good meal without a nice glass of wine to go with it?" she said. "Besides, wine is one of my hobbies."

"Probably not the best hobby for you."

She ignored my comment and insisted I call the waiter over. When I protested, she leaned across the table and gently touched my hand. Her warmth traveled my arm. *How long had it been since a woman, or anyone, had touched me*? "Just one glass of Pinot. I promise. You don't have to have any, no harm," she said.

When the wine arrived, the waiter placed it in front of me. Desiree, gave me a devilish look, "Well, are you going to at least taste it?" She reached over and swirled the wine with a few skilled rotations of the glass and raised it toward my nose. The old familiar smell rushed through my nostrils and awakened the old hunger.

"Come on," she said, "it's not like we have to get smashed, just a civilized drink with dinner." Her eyes glowed with the promise of the nights I used to love; boisterous dinners with friends, refined cocktails with co-workers and, best of all, intimate dinners with Maria. We took a sip. The Pinot Grigio filled my mouth with its light, mineral taste, while its dryness left me thirsty for more. Over a year had passed since I had allowed wine to wash across my tongue and, like a touch, I had almost forgotten how warm and filling it could be. We took turns sipping it while finishing the calamari.

Desiree smiled as she ate and drank, her skin losing some of its paleness, her eyes losing some of their edge. She again seemed familiar, not just her shadow this time, but the curve of neck, the sound of her voice. She leaned back in her chair, spread her arms and stretched, like a cat awakening. Although she was thin, I had begun to notice she had shape, and my eyes lingered where her breasts pressed against her black blouse.

"So, you were a lawyer," she said as she finished her stretch. "Tell me more. Wife, kids?"

"The marriage license left soon after the law license. Maria got tired of my coming home drunk. And then I had a car accident and that was the final straw." I skipped the details of Toby, his booster seat not properly secured, unconscious in the back of the crunched SUV; or the paramedics extracting his trapped leg from the tangled back seat; or the police cuffing me as I knelt screaming Toby's name while the ambulance took him away. I took a gulp of wine.

Our glass now empty, Desiree picked out a Sauvignon Blanc from the wine list. I gave her a disapproving stare. "We need something to drink with our meal," she said with a dismissive wave of her hand.

The bottle arrived with my salad. The waiter took the empty Pinot glass and replaced it a fresh one for the new wine. He placed the glass before me without even a glance at Desiree. We smiled at each other and continued to share the wine.

As dinner progressed and the bottle emptied, Desiree came to life. She knew all about wines, which Beaujolais went with pork, why Bordeaux is best with lamb and the correct Rioja for spiced goat. When I attempted to order a final glass of Riesling with desert she laughed and had me order a Port instead. "As an alcoholic ex-lawyer, you should know a lot more about wines," she teased. I did not tell her that I once collected wines or how much I try not to think about them now.

I began to absorb her enthusiasm and feel the warmth of her company. "You know, if I stay out of trouble for a few years I might be able to get my law license back," I said sitting back in my chair, swirling my wine. "Couldn't exactly pick up where I left off, but I could start over and probably get things back together pretty quick." As I took a

taste of the Port, the optimism infused me further. "Maybe even afford to have a nice dinner more often."

"Would you bring me?" she asked, wiggling her shoulders and batting her eyes in mock flirtation.

I grinned, "Of course. All the time."

After dinner, on the way to the car, Desiree did a little Rumba to the 1940's music piping from the restaurant. I watched her body sway and her hair, now pulled back behind her shoulders, flow across her back. She no longer seemed pale and thin, but flush and healthy.

In the car I said, "I guess I should take you back to the church?"

"Oh, don’t end the party yet. I'm not ready to call it an evening. What about going back to your place for a nightcap first?"

I laughed, "This may come as a surprise to you, but I don't have anything to drink at my house."

"That's OK, there's a liquor store just down the street. If we head straight over we can catch them before they close." I told her the liquor store was a bad idea and that we should call it night. She pushed out her lower lip and gave me a pouty look, a look like Toby used to give me when he wanted more candy or another slice of cake. I thought about Toby, about the red tail lights, about the court giving Maria sole custody. I thought about seeing him today, how he had grown, how he still limped and always would, and what he had said, what he had called me.

I started the car and drove to the liquor store.

When we walked into my small, empty kitchen, Desiree opened the bottle of Oban I had purchased. She grabbed a dusty whiskey tumbler from the back of the cabinet and poured a splash of the caramel colored liquor. She added ice and held up the glass in a toast, "Here's to your starting over." She paused and looked at the glass, a smile touching her lips, "To our starting over." I drained the glass in one swig. The liquor burned pleasantly, leaving the old familiar taste of peat and smoke that I so missed.

Desiree refilled my glass and I stepped from the kitchen to the living room, the rooms distinguished from one another only by the change from tile to carpet. On a shelf, next to the radio, was a picture of Toby. Not a picture of the eight-year old Toby I saw today, the one that approached me slowly like I was a stranger, but the five-year-old Toby who smiled and called me Daddy. The shelf held that Toby – but that Toby was gone. The new Toby was the one who came up to me earlier that day, tightly gripping the hand of his mother whose piercing blue eyes gave me a disapproving stare. He had grown, he limped and he didn't call me Daddy. He looked up at me with big, nervous eyes and said, "Hello, Richard."

I turned on the radio. A reggae song played, singing of red, red wine and I forced myself to turn from the picture of Toby. Desiree came over and wrapped her arms around me, the cold of the glass in her hand penetrating the back of my head. She slowly resumed her Rumba dance, rubbing against me and infecting me with the music and motion. I pushed back her hair, her face was tanned with a warm glow. She moved closer and our lips met. She tasted of minerals and smoke and peat, and I knew her. I ran my hands over her body, her skin cool, smooth and sleek, like glass. She responded and took hold of me; took control of me; releasing me from my thoughts.

Later, in the bedroom, I remember waking during the night to see Desiree standing naked by the bed, head forward over a pale bony body, hair obscuring her face, blue eyes shining out, penetrating me. Near her, on the nightstand, sat the part empty bottle of Oban. I felt sick and my head screamed through a thick haze, like a car horn blasting in the fog.

I sat up and mumbled, "Go to sleep."

She leaned over the bed, handed me a glass with a few drops of scotch still left, kissed me with cold thin lips, then turned and walked away. I emptied the glass into my dry mouth and fell back.

I woke up face down tangled in sheets, my head and one arm hanging from the bed. My hand, asleep and numb, somehow still held the empty glass. I did not look around, but could feel she was gone.

I sat up and small, sharp pains shot up and down my arm as it awoke. I almost enjoyed the feeling, because, like acupuncture, it distracted me from greater pains. I looked down at the Kinko's shirt I still wore; spots of dried vomit littered the front. The room sat empty and quiet. I shivered at the sight of the scotch bottle still on the dresser.

"She's gone," I croaked. "Thank God."

I stumbled to the bathroom to wash myself and look in the mirror; my eyes were red and sunken in their puffy sockets. The lonely silence of the apartment pressed in on me. The clock on the sink glowed red like a brake light. My mind wandered to peat moss and minerals. I lowered my head into my hands, "She'll be back. She always comes back."

FOUND

One morning as I dragged myself up from a sleepless night of restless thoughts, I found a crumpled negligée under the sheets, stuffed into a forgotten corner of the bed. It was a small frilly number, the kind not intended for sleep. It belonged to my wife, Hallie, and how it got there I could not imagine. She had left weeks ago after an argument where ugly and unfortunate things were said. She told me she needed "time to think," then packed her SUV and drove off into a cold November day, the dry leaves rattling and swirling after her down our tree-lined Asheville street. In my anger, I took a different tack from thinking and, vowing to forget and move on, buried myself in work and prepared for the cold Appalachian winter to come.

I held the silky negligée between my hands, the morning sun touching it through the bedroom window gave it a ghostly look; its featherweight sheerness made it seem unreal, like a trick of light and memory. I looked toward the window as a Sparrow fluttered onto the sill. It glanced at me with a chirp then flew away. In the window's reflection my upraised hands seemed empty; but when I looked back the negligée was there. I recalled when Hallie first wore it, reclined across the bed with a glass of wine in hand, her long dark hair and soft curves calling me. I defensively pushed the thought aside, as I had all such things since she left, and tossed the wispy, silk memory into a dresser drawer.

Downstairs, I busied myself over the hiss of frying eggs and considered the almost barren trees of the woods outside, the last few leaves of fall clinging to their branches. As I slid the eggs from the pan onto a plate I spotted a familiar, misshapen coffee mug on the cold stone of the kitchen island. It was mottled blue with a squished

body and uneven lip that sagged to one side as if forged by Salvador Dali. Hallie had made it in the college pottery class where we met. The surrealist design was not intentional. We both took the class to fulfill our arts requirements and were complete failures. We connected over our mutual inability to shape anything on the madly spinning wheels or prevent even the most basic of shapes from cracking in the kiln. We tossed bits of clay at each other and laughed, spinning a bond that would outlast all our pottery with the exception of the blue mug. I traced a finger over its rough surface, covered with bumps and pits of imperfection. I thought she had taken it with her; yet here it was, like my memories of the long-ago pottery class. Grease in the empty frying pan popped on the hot stove. I pulled myself from my reverie and thrust the tilted piece of clay into the back of a cupboard.

To distract myself further, I went to work. I commuted up the stairs to my home office, a study tucked into a corner of the old house. The peeling window-sills and creaky oak floors stood in stark contrast to the collection of humming computers which filled the little room. I settled into my swivel-chair and took refuge in my work.

My recent clients had hired me to review their websites and delete “inappropriate” consumer posts, which generally meant angry comments or, worse, bad product reviews. Like Orwell’s Ministry of Truth, I tried to repress anything that might not fit the company’s present narrative. I lost myself in the task of scanning entries on all the accoutrements of life, from furniture and sports equipment to clothing and jewelry. I forgot the negligée and the mug.

When the day started to end the sun came low through my office window, and my eyes and mind became tired. A small glitter of light caught my attention, reflected from the windowsill corner. I reached over the desk and picked up this bit of reflection, a set of earrings. Their intertwined, golden hoops bobbled back and forth, playing in the light. They felt like nothing in my hand. Hallie had dubbed them her *dancing earrings*. At parties the wine and music would spin us onto the dance floor like tops, the hoops dancing about her ears as she danced and swirled about me – like the swirling leaves in the trail of Hallie's packed SUV.

I thought the earrings had gone with her, along with the negligée and mug? Traces seemed to still remain.

I shook my head and squeezed my temples trying to clear mind, blurred by work and lack of sleep. I couldn't, wouldn't have these constant reminders floating about the house, signifiers of a lost life. I marched to the kitchen, opened the cupboard, grabbed the surrealist mug and tossed the dancing earrings into it. The hoops rattled around the mug bottom as I collected the negligée from the bedroom, then headed for the empty bedroom.

When Hallie and I bought the house four years earlier we found more than enough space in the rambling old place for our needs and decided to leave a small bedroom at the top of the stairs empty. Without much discussion, we both knew that one day, when we were ready, we would use it. In the meantime, we simply fell into calling it the spare room. And when I stomped into it, carrying my mementos of Hallie, it was still empty, now as a testament to our new future and a perfect place to dump relics of the past. I left my burden on the floor and slammed the wood-panel door on the way out.

That evening, after a dinner shared only with a bottle of Pinot, I fell into soft cushions of the living room couch to distract myself with a show. Earrings and underwear began to fade from my mind.

Then I saw the iPad.

It rested on the end table, the glass screen facing up, black, reflective and surprisingly whole. The last time I saw the tablet it was dented and shattered on the floor, the screen a web of cracks and chips after its trip across the living room. The evening before Hallie left, I was perusing Facebook, people's memories, past and present, flowed by in a neat column of entries. They contained the usual collection of smiling vacation pictures, playful puppies and successful children; carefully chosen moments that made lives seem organized, happy and perfect.

A post from an old college friend caught my eye. In the photo a group of students sat around a kitchen table that was piled high with beer cans and liquor bottles. The entry read, "Memories." The kitchen was familiar; it was Hallie's senior housing unit that she shared with three other girls. Her roommates and their boyfriends were gathered around the kitchen table giving big cheesy smiles and holding up shot glasses in preparation for a toast. In the background, just behind the toasting figures, in the shadows by the door, I could make out Hallie sitting in my lap, an arm draped casually across my shoulder. We had been dating for two years at that time. I didn't remember the party, but there were so many I was not surprised. I took a closer look to see if anything would jog my memory and then noticed that the guy acting as Hallie's chair was not me! It was Peter, her old boyfriend from freshman year.

Hallie came into the living room upon hearing the iPad thud against the dining room wall. The argument that followed was long and ugly. She said nothing happened, they were just friends; and I thought and said the worst. Maybe I went too far. After a night on the couch I awoke to find her packing. She said it was a matter of trust, a sentiment with which I heartily agreed at the time; and the argument continued, only ending as she drove away. Other than a text that she was at her sister's I had not heard from her since. I stewed in my angry isolation.

The iPad again thudded against a wall, this time of the spare bedroom.

That night I tossed for hours on the edge of sleep. I tried not to think of Hallie and instead thought of my day erasing unwanted posts and angry comments. With a few taps on my keypad I could make anything go away, though I knew that somewhere, floating in the cloud or on some company server, the entries still existed, invisible but not lost. I finally fell asleep and into a fitful dream of a massive blizzard lashing the house. In the dream, I ran from room to room closing up the house as the storm tried to force its way inside. The windows rattled and the doors shook, and the snow started to push through, finding ways around frames and thresholds and seeping through cracks that began to appear in the walls. I frantically tried to seal the leaks, pressing towels and blankets around the doors and windows and, when I could find nothing else, stuffing clothes into the cracks in the walls. For a moment, the house was calm, the storm held back by my makeshift patches. Then the winds rose to a new, frantic pitch and threw my efforts aside in a flurry of cloth; the snows swirled back into the house, swooping through the hallways in a blinding tumult that covered everything in a cold, empty white.

I awoke in a disoriented panic. Still shivering from my dream, I looked toward the windows expecting to see a swirling mass of white, but instead saw the swaying shadows of the bare trees backlit by the rising sun. I lay back for a moment relieved, then swung my legs out of bed and felt my feet fall upon a jumble of cloth. I looked down to find the floor covered in clothes. Hallie's clothes.

They were tumbled together in a chaotic mix as if a great wind had carried them into the room and dumped them in scattered, colorful drifts that piled up along the dresser and in the corners. I waded across the floor, ankle deep in faded jeans and bright dresses, tank tops and silk blouses, yoga pants and wool scarves; and shoes, so many shoes. I recognized it all, even though I had not seen some of it in years. There was the sweatshirt she wore years ago in college, the suit for her first interview and the slinky black dress from last New Year's, the one that went well with the dancing earrings. The memories swirled around me, slipping into the cracks of my consciousness, buffeting me with reminders of what I needed to forget.

I broke free of my thoughts, threw the clothes into piles and hauled them to the spare room. Several additional trips were required for the shoes, but soon all was safely shut behind the door. Still disoriented from a nightmare-filled sleep followed by an even stranger awakening, I dragged myself downstairs to fix coffee and sift through my confused thoughts.

A few minutes later, coffee in hand, I headed to the living room with visions of resting on the couch, but the living room was no longer as I remembered. Crammed between the cushioned chairs, straight-backed sofa and end tables that normally populated the room was a collection of old, tattered furniture: a stained ottoman, sagging

futon couch, worn pleather recliner and dilapidated IKEA coffee table. I put my cup down and studied these sudden additions. I knew these worn furnishings, like old acquaintances; they were from our first apartment. Long ago I had piled them into a Goodwill truck and, I thought, forgot them. I looked down at the futon, torn in spots, and remembered the friends that sat there, the parties that stained it and all the mess and excitement of a young couple starting a life together. I grinned at the things Hallie and I had done on that futon, that recliner, and, for that matter, the ottoman; and I longed to do them all again. As I looked around a cold stab of regret began to penetrate my stomach.

This would not do; I could not live in a house crowded with the furniture of my past, reminding me of what was lost. Panicked, and with great effort, I carried, heaved, slid and cajoled the old apartment furniture up the stairs and into the spare room, piling it half-hazard atop the clothes that covered the floor. After the last piece was safely stored away I closed the door on the now cluttered room.

Over the next few days the phenomena continued. I found our old margarita blender in the bathroom, our old bicycles in the foyer, a CD player in the refrigerator, washed away beach towels and chairs in the basement, and an endless host of other misplaced, discarded and almost forgotten items scattered in every corner of the house. Each find was tied to a memory that pushed its way into my thoughts. I crammed it all into the ever more crowded spare room.

Eventually a jumbled pile filled the room, scraping the ceiling and pressing against the walls. However, more came, a Frisbee tossed in the college quad, a checkerboard from the night we lost power, a candle from an anniversary dinner. Somehow, I kept stuffing things in until the room became so full I had to force the door

closed with my shoulder. The door began to bulge outward, as if made of rubber, threatening to burst open and flood the house with the room's contents. I braced the door with anything I could find. The television, the computers, a bookshelf, even the liquor cabinet was used against the growing threat; but the door groaned and swelled ominously. I pushed and shoved to hold it back, planting my feet and bracing my back against the bulging pile.

Then the door shattered and the room's contents flooded over me, knocking me from my feet and dragging me with them, under them, through them, as if an avalanche long held back had finally released. It swirled about me, tumbling me in all directions; I rolled in the onslaught and felt the rough fabric of the futon slam across my back, the crash of a bicycle wheel on my shin, a blinding flurry of clothes across my face and the soft touch of a negligee on my neck. I was lost, carried away in the storm of memories and longing.

Then I felt a hand take hold of mine and begin to pull me from the tumult. As her hand held me steady the avalanche swept past, down the stairs and flowed out the open front door. The hand pulled me up from the hallway floor where I lay in front of the spare room. As I rose to my feet I looked into Hallie's gentle face. "I came back baby, I missed you," she said. My head still spinning from the avalanche, I wrapped my arms around her and held tight.

"Please," I whispered "don't go into the room."

"Why?" she asked, a puzzled smile on her face.

I didn't say anything, but held onto her and looked into the empty room that was waiting to be filled.

THE FINAL THEORY

Aquarius

I recently started reading about the history of astronomy. Over the last few weeks I have often sat alone on my porch pouring over universal musings of Hawking and Sagan and Gamov, trying to absorb what knowledge and wisdom they have to impart. My solitary studies run into the summer evenings when the stars come out and hover over my house in Maine. It is strange to see the stars there, so sharp and real, after reading about them in their distant and abstract form in the pages of my books. Though they provide a soft glow in the evening chill, they are yet to provide any warmth.

My sister called last week as I sat contemplating the sky. I revealed to her my new-found interest in astronomy. She lives in California and in recent years had begun to lose touch outside the usual family holiday routine. But since the funeral she calls every few days, though we sometimes struggle to have much to discuss. Therefore, when I mentioned to her my latest readings she became surprisingly enthused for a woman whose readings lean more toward romance novels and spirituality guides than the technical workings of science. With genuine excitement she told me she had been following the topic for years. “Hang on,” she said and I heard her tapping at her computer. I held my cellphone and looked up at the unblinking stars. When she returned she noted that she was an Aquarius but that I was a Gemini. She told me, “It says here that *the time was ripe for Gemini’s to learn new things*.” I clarified that I was reading about astronomy, not astrology.

There was an awkward silence. “Well” she said, “they both look to the same place for answers.”

Taurus

Around 150 B.C.E., a young Greek named Ptolemy created a carefully calculated map whereby the sun and moon and planets revolved around the earth. There is a picture in one of my books of a machine in which hard bronze balls, representing the celestial system, revolve around a cold metal center, representing the earth. There is nothing beyond this lonely system, only what Ptolemy called the "ether", an empty, unknown, void. This model endured for centuries. During that time mankind (with a particular emphasis on man in those days) thought the universe was created for them; therefore, it was logical that everything revolved them as well. The possibility of other solar systems, planets or alien peoples never even occurred to them.

In college I was a finance major with the goal to work on Wall Street. My father, who as I grew up I sometimes glimpsed on weekends, worked for a hedge fund, and I wanted to follow. At Boston College, I briefly had a girlfriend who was an art major. She always seemed to have some dab of dye or stray streak of paint tucked behind an ear or running through her long black hair. She regularly sat on my dorm room bed and read aloud my horoscope. Usually it would be happily inane – *The conjunction of Gemini indicates that opposites attract*; *A Sun and Neptune meeting means happiness to your romantic landscape; The rising of Leo brings the love of your life*. I often ignored her as I studied monetary exchange rates or micro-economics. A few months into our relationship, as I worked with my back to her creating a computer pie chart, my horoscope changed. *You will be very lonely*, she read. When I did not pause in my work, she got up and left.

Pisces

In 1543 Copernicus published *De revolutionibus* and the world changed. His book evidenced, with an accuracy that still impresses, that the earth revolves around the sun. He also found that the earth was not alone in this, other orbs circled with it; Jupiter and Saturn, Venus and Mars. In my books, Ptolemy's cold metallic machine was replaced by a painting of the planets slowly dancing around a fiery orb labeled *sol*. This revelation upset the very foundation of civilization's understanding of itself. If the earth was not the center of the universe then maybe neither was mankind. Ptolemy was dead.

After graduate school, I packed for New York to work for Goldman Sachs. Fourteen hours a day, every day. I worked on the trading floor, a single room with a three-story ceiling. It was filled with open cubicles and computers as far as the eye could see. Self-proclaimed masters of the universe dashed from desk to desk like frantic falling stars; televisions and computer screens hung above the bustle running a ticker of stock prices and headlines in a constant feed, like the Kuiper Belt circling the solar system.

I was an analyst, the lowest of the low, and worked for a Managing Director in bond research on the outskirts of the floor. I was a minor meteor, revolving around a comet, spinning at the edges of the solar system. I worked with Sharon, also new, who revolved around the same comet in the same lonely section of the floor. Sometimes, we would work until midnight and then go to a bar and bitch about our boss. Sometimes, we would go to dinner and discuss friends we once knew and now never saw. Then sometimes, we would drink Martinis in Midtown and start to make-out and, in the morning, I would hurry home to change my clothes. Slowly we stopped revolving around

the comet of the trading floor and began revolving around each other. At work we tried to keep this gravitational force between us unnoticeable. However, like all gravity, though the force is invisible it is easily detectible to those around it. The subtle looks, the lingering touches, the soft tones passing between us were like Newton's apple bouncing off his head. One day our Managing Director pulled us each aside individually to provide a lecture on the workplace policies related to relationships, policies we were blatantly and blissfully violating. But the forces that drew us together were strong, and the forces that kept us at Goldman we could barely recall. One Friday night our comet commanded us both to zoom off and pick-up dinner for the team. We spun out of our orbits and never came back.

Virgo

After Copernicus the earth happily spun about the sun for centuries. There were of course findings about the Universe beyond the solar system; the discovery of galaxies and red dwarfs; revelations about light speed and relativity; and telescopes that detected clouds of distant dense gas. But largely the earth continued on its path, revolving around its warm, glowing companion.

But then there was the Big Bang.

Two radio astronomers researching microwaves accidentally heard the remnants of radiation from the very beginnings of the Universe. They had heard the faint echoes of the Big Bang. This led to the understanding that the Universe was formed in a single instant of cosmic violence and transformation; one that took a spec of space time, an anomaly in the multi-dimensional ether, so small it would be invisible to the human eye

and in an instant expanded it into an area of space millions of light years wide. This occurrence was completely random.

Now, not only was mankind no longer the center of a stable solar system, they were not even part of a stable Universe. They were a tiny collection of cognizant atoms floating in an ever-expanding multi-dimension cosmos, as likely to exist as not. Accidents in a blip of space time. Copernicus' warm glowing central sun was gone, everything is speeding away from the Big Bang, moving on a cold and unpredictable path into the ever-expanding, vast emptiness of space.

After Goldman, Sharon and I wanted a change. She got a marketing job in Portland, Maine and I followed, soon finding a job at a small bank. First, we moved to the growing heart of Portland where the clear waters of its harbor lapped against the bustling breweries and bars of the town; then, after the wedding, we moved to a house on the quiet outskirts of the city. With our newly discovered free time Sharon took up painting and yoga; I dabbled in sailing and celestial navigation; and we started to prepare the house for a family.

The noise was so thunderous it could be heard half a mile away. The speed of the crash was more than anyone could bear, Sharon was gone before the ambulance arrived. The truck that T-boned her Honda never even braked. In an instant, my orbit was shattered and I was spun off into space.

Gemini

Einstein suggested the theory, but quantum physicists picked up the challenge and began the search for the Final Theory. While astronomy studies the celestial movements

of planets, moons and stars, quantum physics studies the subatomic, the quotidian movements of electrons, neutrons and quarks. The Theory posits that even the smallest of occurrences must have some connection and follow the same laws as the larger movements of planets. An electron circles its nucleus like a planet circles its sun; a neutron is attracted to a proton like a magnet is attracted to iron – there must be a reason for this symmetry; for all of it. The problem for theorists is the Uncertainty Principle, which notes that quantum particles often lack a proper regard for the laws of physics so carefully constructed by Man. Quantum particles move from place to place instantly and at random, or come in and out of existence unpredictably. If there was a universal police force to uphold the laws of physics they would constantly be writing citations. But the Final Theory would solve this cosmic mystery and bring a logic, an understanding, to it all. And a Mankind that has lost its geocentric and heliocentric stability needs it. I need it.

My sister called again the other night. From my chair under the Maine sky I said I had finished Hawking's latest book. She asked if it had cleared things up. I told her it hadn't. I told her I was sorry not to have kept in touch more over the years. I told her I would come visit. I told her how much I missed Sharon. She asked if I was OK.

I looked up at the stars and tried to see them anew, not as scattered matter traveling aimlessly into an empty eternity, but as comets and planets and stars trying to pull themselves together through the unseen forces of gravity to create something more; trying to form warm and glowing solar systems and galaxies; trying to form clusters and constellations that look like lions and bears and twins.

I asked if she would read my horoscope.

NINETEEN

I'm nineteen, I cringe as my father tells my friends a joke about a bar and a nun. He pops open a can while giving a wide-eyed, extravagant grin that is more suggestive of discovering gold than cheap beer. My friends hide their guffaws during this embellished behavior. I console myself with the knowledge that tomorrow I leave for college.

He's nineteen, he hacks and saws at a Banyan tree with his bladed combat knife. The main field is dug out by back hoes, but the edges, too rocky for heavy equipment, are cleared by hand. Two-hundred Army Air Corp beat away at the Philippine jungle, hands bleeding and arms aching, to create an airbase in the short hours before a counterattack.

At college, I guzzle imported pilsner and drink shots flecked with tiny specks of gold. I get laughs with stories of my father's sleepwalking. At one in the morning, I fall into bed with my girlfriend. It is hurried because her roommate will soon be back.

At the airbase, it is just after midnight and he tumbles into a shallow foxhole, dug out by his tiny, foldable shovel. Zeros cut his tent mate in half and drop explosives that gouge holes and toss bodies in the air. When the planes leave, he unfolds his shovel, drags off the bodies and fills the holes so the Mustangs that defend the base can land.

At the library, I sequester myself into a corner to cram for mid-terms. My phone buzzes on the desk like an insistent mosquito. It's my father, calling to again wish me luck or pass on some sage advice. I don't answer.

On sentry duty, he squats in the dark by the perimeter wire. In the nearby hills the sporadic echo of gunfire is punctuated by explosions that vibrate the ground. His hands shake as he checks his rifle. He wants to talk to the corporal a few yards away but can't, it may draw fire.

I'm 21, I cross the crowded stage, tassel swaying in my eyes, to collect a rolled degree from a robed professor. As she shakes my hand, the polite applause is disturbed by the loud hoots of my father.

He's 21, he receives his papers, boards a rumbling transport plane and flies from his besieged base through enemy guns. Ack ack blasts shake his lungs. Shrapnel punctures the heavy body bags that fill the plane's hold, another image he decides to never discuss. When he lands, he is handed a beer which he drinks like gold.

At home, he greets me at the door, then pops open a can while wearing his extravagant grin. It's years before I understand why.