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## Forlorn Days

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Forlorn Days

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts  
In  
Film, Theatre, and Communication Arts  
Creative Writing

By

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B.A. Binghamton University, 2005

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## ABSTRACT

The characters of *Forlorn Days* have been beaten down, be it personally or professionally. These stories are meant to present these characters as they struggle in their own indecisions and adversities. Some are more successful than others, while some come to the realization that it is nearly impossible to escape their flaws. The worlds they occupy are filled with a sense of disillusionment, whether it be soul crushing jobs, fractured relationships, or a lack of communicating with those around them. The characters that populate these stories are looking for a connection of any kind to break out of the fates that await them. In this yearning to break out of their disillusionment, they find that it's more difficult than they thought. Life continues to go around regardless of the decisions they have made.

Keywords: forlorn, Upstate New York, radicals, Grateful Dead

## Goin' Down the Road Feeling Bad

The radio glimmers but it doesn't play anymore. It hasn't been touched since August, when everything I really knew in the world faded away. Now it's September going on October. All I know is that the weather's getting colder, rainier, and the baseball season's winding down. Summer's officially over when the Orioles are out of contention. I used to spend my summers out on the road with Chris. Since Jerry died, we haven't left Baltimore.

The nature of our friendship was based on one commonality; The Grateful Dead tied us together, and without them, I'm beginning to hate his guts. We spend our days smoking, talking about shows, and thinking about the good old days. Days which aren't even that freaking old. The last ones happened only months ago, but with each passing toke they become something that's quietly returning to the ether. It's like they never happened to Chris, but I can still remember those shows. They weren't the greatest; Jerry's voice was pretty bad, and the increasing sketchiness of the whole scene began to put me off. Knowing what happened later on, it shouldn't come as a great surprise to the Deadheads that had been around the block, if you know what I mean. Once hard drugs show up, innocent fun becomes big trouble. Still, his death came as a shock because it meant our whole way of life was gone in a flash. One day we knew who we were and where we stood in this rotten life; and the next, we're two lost souls stuck in Baltimore with nothing better to do than realize what a miserable thing the death of your idol is. It makes you feel weak and vulnerable. It's a cold wind ripping at your naked skin. There's no protection from the

real world anymore. Now responsibility and stability are howling in my face, and I have no plan to take shelter.

There's nowhere in the real world where selling glass pipes and grilled cheese sandwiches will get you very far. Chris at least has his parent's money to fall back on. I'm stuck with no education, no job skills outside of a part time gig in a bookstore, and a girlfriend who knows it's time to grow up. Zoë has expectations now that all of this is over. Trading tie dye in for four years of school, a shirt and tie job, and a Volvo in the suburbs depresses me. Even the inevitable grasp of middle age scares the hell out of me, but every day it gets closer. By sequestering ourselves in this apartment, surrounded by wafts of smoke and bullshit, I hope to keep it at bay.

It's close to five by the time Zoë walks in. She places her bag on the cheap oak dining table on the way to the kitchen. Lauren, her friend from work, trails behind. She's blonde, fairly tall, a runner's physique. Someone that is always that peppy as she is has to be. Zoë ignores us, but Lauren looks at us with a flirtatious eye.

"Busy day, huh?" she jokes as Zoë comes back and hands her a magazine. She quickly flips through it, trying to look as disgusted as possible, but deep down, I think she gets comedy out of situations like this. "It must be a tough job to sit on your ass."

"Better than any of that public relations shit you two do," Chris replies, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes.

"Well I wish I could," Zoe interjects. "But I don't have Mommy and Daddy to leach off of."

"She's just needling you," Lauren says. She tosses the magazine in our direction. The cover is some business big shot that the both of them are working with. I toss it back, it just skimming over the top of her head. Zoë grabs her out of the chair, pulling her away.

“Don’t start,” she says as they both head towards the kitchen. “Lauren is staying for dinner. Chris, I’m guessing you’re staying too. When don’t you stay?”

He glares at me through his sleepy, red eyes. “Why does she have to make me look like a moron all the time?” he asks as he finishes the last of the beer he started drinking at lunch.

“Probably because it’s easy.”

\* \* \*

After dinner, the two of them talk about work while Chris and I finish the bottle of wine. Around the time the fogginess from the wine takes it full effect, the topic of conversation turns to our summer.

“I never known any Deadheads,” Lauren begins. “They always seemed so strange to me. You guys seem normal though.” I figured it was meant to be a compliment but it still sounded condescending. Thanks for not being smelly hippies.

“Thanks for finding us normal,” I reply.

“I just mean, that, you know, that you guys don’t look like weirdoes.”

“Whew,” Chris replies with a giddy laugh. “It’s good to know I’m not a weirdo. Lauren and his eyes lock, and not in a threatening way. Zoë notices it. I notice it. We give each other a ‘What is happening?’ look.

“When I was at Cornell,” Zoë pipes in, “I knew some Hippie types there, and I swore I would never have anything to do with them. You know patchouli, dreadlocks, all that other stuff. Of course, then I met Wes.” Finishing her wine, she flashes an approving look of the ‘you-know-I’m-just-kidding-about-the-whole-patchouli-thing’ variety. “I never did go to any shows though. I let those two do their thing.”

“What were Grateful Dead shows like?” Lauren bubbly inquires.

This is Chris's opportunity to take over the conversation. The wine gone and thoroughly buzzed, he purses his thin, feminine lips as he was thinking over a discourse on existentialism.

"You see," he begins a little more excitedly than he needed to be, "the great thing about the Dead was each show was its own event, you know what I'm saying? Every show was its own entity, its own being." A gesture of the hands for dramatic effect. "That second show at RFK in June, there was just something in the air, like a cosmic energy that came in and just swept me up into it and turned that show into something more than just another concert. Like you and the band and everyone around you were all of one mind."

"Yeah, they're called drugs," Zoë interrupts, It gets get a laugh out of Lauren, who has been sitting there at least feigning an interest in Chris's speech. Seeing those two sitting there, in their fashionable clothes, flashing their pearly white smiles, enjoying Chris's eccentricities, I couldn't help but think how we ended up here.

"No," says Chris a bit indignantly. "Everybody thinks it's always about the drugs, but there are some nights where you really connect with what's going on around you. And it has to do with everything: the music, the people around you, the sky, and yes, even the drugs. I'm just trying to say that it was an experience that the Dead offered that you couldn't find anywhere else."

There is some truth to what he's saying here, but there's no way to explain this to someone without having been there. There were nights where there was a spark or something in the sky, and this note, or this word, meant something more than just music or lyrics. You could tell it from the faces of those around you. They understood it also. Listening to Chris, it came across as goofy, pseudo-mystical nonsense. It never lends itself well to explanation.

"Right, Wes?" He always needs my input to validate his theories.

"Sure. We always had a great time, but why don't we talk about something else?"



Chris stares at the table for a few seconds, regrouping his thoughts. “Did I tell you the story of when I found out Jerry died? It’s completely mind-blowing.”

“No, Chris, go ahead,” Zoë responds with piercing sarcasm. In the state he’s in, it rolled right off of him.

“Oh man, it’s completely messed up. I was in Florida with my family; we were on vacation at our house in West Palm. I get up one morning, and on the TV I see a picture of Jerry on, and this is the national news, the Today Show, or something, so I say to my brother, turn up the volume on that thing, they’re talking about Jerry, I want to hear what they’re saying, and these newscasters, with their perfect hair, nobody’s hair should be able to look that good that early in the morning, and they’re sipping their coffee and talking about how Jerry Garcia died last night in northern California of a heart attack, and I am in total shock, you know, I don’t know what to make of the situation, it feels like the wind has been knocked out of me, you know, really hard to breathe, and I want a better explanation but they don’t say much else, they cut to a picture of some people mourning in San Francisco, and they’re interviewing somebody, it might have been Phil, it might have been Bobby, I really can’t remember, mostly because I’m trying to remember to breathe, and it also feels like I’m weighed down onto the chair, like a sandbag, and for a minute I feel like I’m going to be stuck in this stupid chair for the rest of my life, perpetually eating Lucky Charms and drooling at the TV., and my brother says isn’t that that guy you like, and I tell him to shut his mouth, ‘cause all he’s doing is pissing me off, you know, and then the show goes on to a different subject and I’m left hanging, and I still don’t believe it, so I call this guy up and ask him, hey did you hear the fucking news, they say Jerry died, and he says yeah man, it’s true, and I know he’s not lying because he sounds really down, and I know when Wes is down something is really wrong, so I hang up the phone and say fuck under my breath, cause I’m mad at everything you know, God, the universe, Buddha, whatever, it doesn’t really matter at that point, I just needed something to vent my rage at, and I just sit there for a little bit while my family’s getting ready to go to the beach or country club or wherever we were going to go that day, and I remember it was a bright sunny day out, which summer mornings in

Florida always are, and I wish it was cloudy or rainy or anything else because the last thing I wanted right at that moment was for the fucking sun to be shining, you know what I'm saying, so anyway I'm sitting there and everyone else is getting ready to have a great day while it's the worst day of my entire life, and I kept thinking I was going to cry, you know, Jerry and the Dead meant that much to me, and now that he's gone, now what am I going to do, to which I start thinking about Wes back up here in Baltimore, and I know he's taking it really hard because that's the way he is, over-thinking everything and making a big deal over it, but at least Zoë will be understanding to the situation (raises his almost empty glass in her direction in a overdramatic fashion to which she gives a courteous smile) while what I am going to do, tell my parents, no way in Hell, they're lucky I even agreed to go on the stupid vacation, and I start thinking about all the great times we had together over the years, all the places we've gone to see shows, Washington, New York, Philadelphia, even Las Vegas in '94 for our 21<sup>st</sup> birthday, and I think of that last show in D.C. and 'Wharf Rat' from that night and how it seemed like Jerry's notes were swirling through the air, and coming through me and making me feel alive, as if saying to me this is why life is worth living, to be able to experience moments like this, and all the great times are mixing together, which just makes me feel a hundred times worse, and my mom calls to me, why aren't you getting ready to go, and what I should have said was I'm not fucking going anywhere, but I chickened out, so I begrudgingly headed out with them and we spent the day and the weather was perfect, and then it hit me, I'm supposed to be enjoying myself, in our ritzy beach house, and the worst thing in the world just happened to me, like it completely blew my mind, and I wished that Wes was with me at that moment because he would have truly gotten the irony of the situation, but I had to tell someone so I told my brother, and he didn't have a fucking clue, which I expected, and it gnawing at me as the week went on, all I really wanted to do was smoke a big bowl but I knew I couldn't smoke in the beach house or my parents would kill me, besides the fact that I didn't know anyone who was holding in West Palm, so I call this guy and get him to call me to make up an emergency, an appendicitis or something, that can get me on the first flight back to Baltimore and out of that hell hole."

The girls look at each other with raised eyebrows and back at Chris, who has been left exhausted by the jumble of emotions his words had just released.

“That’s quite a story, Chris,” Lauren says as respectfully as possible, “but I don’t think I got the point of it.”

“It’s just that, well-it was really a bummer and I’m at the sunny beach on vacation. It was just these explosions of two different worlds.” He glances down at the table, his excitement drained. Zoë gives me a sardonic smile.

“I think it’s time to get these dinner dishes taken care of,” she says.

“I’ll help,” I answer, following her, collecting plates.

In the kitchen, it’s the silent treatment from her. I collect the dishes. She rinses them off and puts them in the dishwasher. Each plate, glass, and fork lands into the dishwasher with a crashing ring, water splashing up all around us. Her bangs are flying over to one side of her face, sticking to her cheek, covering her eye and part of her nose. She never lets me see her looking that disheveled. I imagined her at that moment as some feudal servant, toiling away unfailingly for some boorish man hidden away that she could no longer stand, who I guess, you could make the case, was myself. Something was needed to diffuse the situation, to at best keep her from breaking the thirty dollar wine glasses I gave her for her birthday last year.

“The wine went pretty well with dinner tonight,” I say, weakly.

“Yeah,” she responds as she throws butter knives like darts into the caddy.

“You’re going to break something if you continue to do that.”

Turning back up to face me, she blows her bangs back into position. The door of the dishwasher slams shut with one final rattle. I can feel the floor shake a bit beneath me.

“How many times does *he* have to come over here and make a complete jackass of himself...and you?”

“He’s my best friend, what do you want me to do? Stop being friends?” I pause for a moment to find my best defense. “Some of what he says can be ridiculous at times, but it’s all harmless. He’s harmless.”

“Wes, you said that when you moved in, you were going to change some things, most of all this bullshit of following around the Grateful Dead, and spending so much time with him,” she says with a clenched jaw as if the two out in the dining room could hear. What sounded like laughter came trickling in from out there.

“You were wasting your life then, and now that it’s over, you’re still doing it,” she continues. “And it’s mostly because of that moron in there.”

“You treat him like a moron, and yet he still is perfectly respectful to you.” My voice is trembling, shocked by the venom in her voice. “No matter what you think of him, he deserves better. We aren’t all a bunch of losers---”

“I don’t really want to talk about this right now,” she interrupts. “We still have guests.”

We stand silently, each afraid to make the next movement. A thunderous crash echoes through the apartment that breaks us out of our stalemate, causing both of us to race back out into the dining room. Maybe it was the combination of this shock with the dishes, but the noise lingered all around me. I could feel it run through the floor, and for a split second, I thought it would give out and all of us would soon be tumbling towards our deaths.

What we find instead is the cackling, almost sickening joyful laughter of Lauren and Chris, who is sprawled out on the floor. He is red-faced, barely able to breathe from the combination of falling to the floor and uncontrollable laughter. Lauren is doubled over in her chair, clutching her stomach.

“Sorry,” she spurts out through pockets of high-pitched, near squealing laughter, “we were telling some stories,” pause for more laughter, “and must have gotten carried away.”

From the floor, Chris adds, “I was just tilting back in the chair and then KABOOM, down I went.” The laughter was of the intensity that it could become infectious, and I was fighting with all my resolve not to join them.

I look over to see Zoë, with a hand over her chest, clearly relieved that it was only Chris being a moron.

“Well, does anybody want coffee and dessert?” she asks, noticeably flustered.

As we sit here drinking our coffee, Chris, Lauren, and surprisingly Zoë, all involved in conversation of some kind, I think about what Zoë had said earlier in the kitchen. If I had not been wasting my life, I had at least been putting off dealing with certain responsibilities. It had allowed me an escape from making any big decisions. The Dead always were my first priority. Now that it’s gone, I’ve got to actually make decisions. Chris has the luxury of living off his parents to avoid any decision making. Perhaps I had already made some small changes. I had made an agreement to back off this summer. No selling stuff, no extraordinary travel. If I was in a boat, I was slowly making progress away from land. Now with Jerry dead, I’m in the middle of the ocean without a paddle. The only path to safety is to get into Zoë’s boat, to agree to her conditions. There is no safe land to go back to.

“Wes,” Lauren says, “Chris said you guys went to over 35 Grateful Dead shows. I can’t imagine going to see one band that many times.” I know out of the corner of my eye Zoë’s flashing me that look of ‘talk about anything but’ but,

“Yeah, I guess it’s kind of the norm, you know. Everybody goes to so many shows; it’s like a badge of honor to say I went to this one or that one.” The words came out tired. I was tired of always having to explain.

“Yeah, like this one show at the Cap Centre in ‘93”, Chris begins, “we were trippin’ so hard,”

“Can we please talk about something else?” I ask, rubbing my temples.

“Sure Wes, no problem”, he says somewhat sheepishly. “Anybody go to any Orioles games this summer?” That’s my cue. I let the silence fill the room. I’m just going to finish my coffee.

\* \* \*

The weather this Christmas is worse than normal for Baltimore. It rarely snows in any substantial quantities around here, but this year there has been at least two or three inches that have perpetually stuck around. The temperatures have been so cold, and the wind so unbearable, that it will no doubt give us a white Christmas. I like it better this way anyway. The snow gave the season a little more authenticity, seeing that I’ve always been disappointed when there haven’t been white Christmases like the ones growing up in the shadow of the Catskills. No amount of snow can keep this year from being completely miserable.

Zoë has been in a complete funk since Lauren left around Thanksgiving. The reason I was told was that Lauren was taking a new job in her hometown of Dover, Delaware. Everything hadn’t been quite right between them since that night that she hit it off with Chris at dinner. Zoë has gotten it into her head that the two were fast becoming more than friendly. I’m sure the thought of her best friend starting to date her boyfriend’s best friend was the last thing she wanted to happen. She didn’t dare say any of this face to face with me, but there is always a fine line with us between saying what we mean and showing it. What she did say was that Chris wasn’t welcome to any of our plans for the holidays. Her family from New York was coming to visit, and engaging in an extended, intelligent conversation with her Ivy League educated, highly cultured, pretentious family would be yet another way to show how I was wasting my life.

Chris calls me on the morning of the 23<sup>rd</sup>, says he wants me to come over. One thing that I have learned over the years when dealing with him is that if Chris is inviting me over to meet him, something is up. As I walk up to the old row house his parents were paying for him to stay in, I notice that the door was ajar and that a number of boxes line the steps. They're large, labeled with 100% USDA BEEF and various beers, remnants from the various restaurants in the neighborhood. I wasn't that stupid to know their real purpose in situations like this.

"You could have just told me you're moving over the phone," I joke even though the bitterness in my voice is evident.

"I don't like doing things over the phone," he says. He drops a box from inside and places it next to the others, all the time not making eye contact with me. "I wanted to tell you I'm moving back in with my parents. It's really a spur of the moment type thing, mostly my parents refusing to pay for the house." He forced out a laugh after but it didn't disguise his resentment either.

"If this is about Lauren, let me talk to Zoë about it." All this time I was trying to avoid letting the facts slip out, to which now it was unavoidable. "I know she said something to you about it, and she overreacted like always. Just give it some time. I'm sure we can resolve all this."

"No, this isn't about that," he answers. "There was nothing that serious going on." He pauses for few seconds. "Since Jerry died, I get the feeling it's time to move on to something else. Go back to school. Get a real job. Make my parents happy. So I'm going to go home for a little bit and figure some stuff out."

He continues to move boxes like it was all no big deal, just another decision to be made. His selfish words built up within me, reaching a boiling point.

"That's it?"

“Yeah Wes, that’s it. It’s just not fun anymore. Since Jerry died, you’ve been sulking around, not wanting to talk about it, like everything that before never happened to you. I just don’t want to be around you and all your negative energy. And your girlfriend’s.”

“If this is about Zoë, like I said, I can talk to her and…”

“You don’t even know the whole story with Zoë and Lauren.”

“And what was that?”

“Lauren told me she left because Zoë told her not to get involved with me. If she did, Zoë said they couldn’t be friends anymore. Really nice girlfriend you got there.”

“I’m sure she wasn’t that serious-” I stammer.

“Whatever you say man. You can go back home now,” he says, the door slamming behind him, leaving me alone in the brisk wind.

The reality of the situation didn’t begin to fully hit me until I was driving back home, down through the Inner Harbor back to our trendy neighborhood. Without the tourist traffic, I can fly down Pratt Street. What Chris said about Lauren didn’t bother me that much at the moment; she wasn’t around anyway. What got to me was that Zoë was never going to say anything about it. We were going to continue to go on enjoying our lives while out there, there were two people, people who we were once close, perhaps still close, that we had wounded. There was no doubt that we had wrecked their lives. Maybe someday down the line, when the world is more perfect, Zoë and I will get what’s coming to us, and those two worlds will come together.

What Chris was saying about us was probably true, even if there was still a part of me that didn’t want to acknowledge it. I had lost my way, and part of that I did attribute to Zoë’s influence. I didn’t mean for it to have as much of an impact on him. Chris has the ability to live outside of the buttoned



down world we both have spent so much time mocking. I'm the one that is supposed to go back to school and settle down. He's the one that should be crazy and reckless, to live with the passion and exuberance of youth as long as he can. To know I drained the joy out of it for him as well made me sick.

When I arrive back to the apartment, Zoë's family is already there, creating a buzzing that explodes out as soon as I open the door. It instantly gives me a headache. Embraces and exclamations come at me from all angles, sucking me into the apartment as well as the family's vortex.

After things have calmed down a bit, Zoë asks "Where have you been?"

"Chris wanted to see me. He's moving back in with his parents for a while."

"Well hopefully, he may finally figure out what to do with his life now that your ridiculous hobby has passed." Everything she said was in such a sugary cuteness, it left a sour feeling in my stomach.

"You want a drink?" she asks as she heads out to the kitchen.

"Maker's Mark Manhattan," I respond. She comes back a few minutes later with a glass. I take a significant swallow. It's too sweet and the alcohol's fire make my eyes water. It couldn't have tasted much worse.

Noticing my miserable state, she gives me a quick kiss on the cheek.

"You should have shaved," she states.

"I know. I was lazy."

"Did you remember to get my brother a gift?"

"I left it in the car," I say, standing to go get it.

"Stay here," she responds. "I'll get it. You need to have some fun."

She leaves and I head back to the table functioning as our bar for the holidays. I grab the Maker's bottle. As I commence a generous pour, I look around the room. This is Christmas from now on.

## The Big Parade

Jimmy didn't say a word as the train left the skyscrapers of Chicago behind. He sat quietly, letting the rumbling of the train fill the car. Out of the corner of his eye he could see the figure sitting rigid as a cigar store Indian, almost as if he wasn't alive. Jimmy averted his gaze from the diminishing city to the floor that separated the two. The man's shoes were spotless, so shiny that Jimmy could make out the passing trees and houses flying by as if looking in a mirror. Jimmy shifted in his seat uncomfortably. He pulled at the cuffs of his worn suit coat which was now too small for his muscular physique. The shortcomings in his wardrobe compared to this man were noticeable.

The man moved slightly only to adjust the hat that was resting on his knee. He was skinny, his legs symmetrical, with a sharp crease in each leg of his trousers. His bony fingers rearranged the hat so it tilted away from him. From underneath it he pulled out an envelope sized package, butcher paper wrapped with twine. He picked it up with his bony fingers and put the hat back to balance on the knee.

"Jimmy, this is for you latest accomplishment. Congratulations are in order."

The man outstretched his arm into the space between them. Jimmy reached out and took the package, his focus returning to the man's shoes. A sharp edge of sunlight reflected in their

shine. They were nothing like his own dusty, scuffed shoes. Embarrassed, he pulled them back close to his chair and moved his attention to the package, which he quickly tucked into his coat.

“Now don’t spend that all right away,” the man said only half-jokingly. A red handkerchief came out of his breast pocket, which he used to casually brush his lap. “Count it,” he said, “it’s all what was promised to you.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” Jimmy mumbled. Again he shifted nervously in his seat. His head felt like a hundred nails were being driven into it. He raised his hand to examine the tender mound of flesh on his right eyebrow. It would be about four days until it would begin to subside. It used to be that the money would ease some of the aches and pains. Now no amount appeared to be worth it. The envelope felt like a brick in his coat, weighing him down, tethering to this seat in this train. It kept him here with this man he had never met.

“You’re a man of few words, aren’t you Jimmy?” the man asked casually, a faint grin on his bony face. “That’s alright though. You let your fists do the talking for you. That’s the way it should be with fighters.”

The rhythmic shuffle of the train on the tracks engulfed them again as they left behind the chaos of the city. Even for a large man, Chicago always felt dangerous to Jimmy. Smaller houses with their quaint, well kept yards had always appealed to him. Peace and quiet was easier to obtain out in Joliet. The man smoothly took two cigarettes out of a chrome case. He passed one across, to which Jimmy accepted. Out next came a matching chrome lighter. With a quick flick of the thumb, the top flipped open and a flame emerged to light the cigarettes. Jimmy took a long drag, letting the smoke sit in his lungs a moment. It escaped from him with a pronounced breath. He sat back as the smoke curled towards the window.

“Usually Billy Quinn gives me my money,” Jimmy said quickly.

“Yes, but this is unlike those other situations,” the man said adjusting his hat again.

“When a fighter begins to show some promise, Mr. Boylan asks for my direct involvement.”

“And I’ve done that?” Jimmy asked.

“Of course you have. We got you a fight with Jimmy Bivins next. You beat Bivins and there’s the possibility of a title shot with Louis. No Boylan fighters have been able to stake a claim to that achievement.”

“Yeah, I knew all that,” said Jimmy, a little more loosely.

“At a time when you’re career is really beginning to take off, we want to make sure that you recognize how loyal Mr. Boylan has been to you,” the man stated. He was studying Jimmy like someone watching a jungle cat at the zoo, amazed in the exoticness, the fierceness in the creature before him. “We want to be sure you recognize how beneficial your loyalty has been, and will be. We want you to be prepared for whatever Mr. Boylan asks of you.”

“Sure,” Jimmy said, stubbing out his cigarette in the ashtray. “Can I go use the can?”

“Whatever you want,” the man replied.

A sharp pain shocked Jimmy from his hips to his neck as he began to stand. It was a common malady after a fight anymore. Pain had become just as familiar to him as one of his wife’s pies or a winter snowstorm. Even still, it could cripple Jimmy’s two hundred pound frame. He gingerly walked to the compartment door, sliding it open using only his wrist. In the hallway he turned back to catch one more glimpse of the man unnaturally still in his seat. He gave Jimmy the same half-hearted grin. From this distance Jimmy saw how patronizing it was, how haughty everything about this man was. At least Billy Quinn would take him out to get a few beers. Billy wanted to be his friend. There was something behind this man’s grin that made Jimmy nervous about his true motive.

“Take your time,” the man stated as Jimmy closed the door behind him. Alone, the man took his neglected cigarette out of the holder and stubbed it out in the ashtray. He took out the red handkerchief again, disdainfully wiping his fingers with it.

\* \* \*

The humidity in the gym was enough for even the strongest, most in-shape man to keel over. Jimmy liked it that way. Doors and windows remained closed even in the stifling summer heat. Sweat rolled down every exposed section of Jimmy’s body. He could feel the sting when it hit his eyes, the saltiness as it trickled into his mouth. The exertion gave Jimmy a rush that kept him going. Today it was only he and Ralph in the gym. Ralph took out a rag from a bucket of ice water, and wrung it out over his head. Jimmy hit the large bag, each shot from his powerful hands producing a loud *thwack* that echoed throughout the gym. The two of them knew that Ralph was rarely needed at this point. It was Jimmy’s intense loyalty that he continued to sweat out the summer here in Joliet with Ralph than train with Boylan’s other fighters in Chicago. He probably would be better off personally and financially in Chicago. The incident on the train a few weeks ago had reinforced the idea that the relative isolation of Joliet was best for him. No distractions could be found out here.

“That’s enough,” Ralph rasped as Jimmy lumbered towards the bucket. Ralph took the towel from out of the bucket, and tossed it over his head as Jimmy collapsed on a stool. His glove came off with a quick yank. What draft was in the building cooled his throbbing hands as Ralph cut his wrapped hands. Every time it reminded Jimmy of when his father would help take off his mittens after spending the day playing in the snow. Every time Jimmy emitted that same sense of naivety, of an absolute trust in Ralph, that he gave his father all those years ago before

he died. By now he had known Ralph longer than his own father. A grin emerged from Jimmy's face as Ralph worked through the thickest section right above his knuckles.

"Throw your hands in that bucket," Ralph muttered. "You were hitting that thing too hard, gonna get your hands all swolled up."

Jimmy plunged his hands into the water as Ralph dropped a fresh batch of ice into the bucket. At first, the shock of the coldness caused Jimmy's arms to lock up. Ralph began to massage his shoulders. The combination of cold water and repetitive kneading broke Jimmy out of his heightened state. Fatigue had begun to settle in.

"You got to remember to keep them hands low against Bivins," Ralph said. "He's a little guy, can sneak right up underneath you if you're not careful."

"I feel like I can't get any power behind my punches when I keep them that low." Jimmy answered as he took his hands out of the bath.

Grabbing Jimmy's right, Ralph said, "There's more power in this than you know what to do with. You keep your hands low; you can get him in the body. You make him weak in the body, then you can let 'er rip. You got me?"

"Yeah," Jimmy replied.

"If you listen to me, you'll cream Bivins and then you'll get your chance at Joe. And he ain't what he used to be. You keep focused and you're gonna be World Champion. I never have seen anybody that can hit like you."

"You think so?" Jimmy asked.

"I'm sure," Ralph replied. "You beat Louis and Joliet will throw you the biggest parade anyone around here's ever seen."

Jimmy remembered the parades. Joliet seemed to put them on for numerous holidays, but there were some that were for specific accomplishments. Three years ago, they threw the biggest one anyone could remember for the boys coming back from Europe and Japan. Jimmy and his wife went, as did much of the city. He felt ashamed seeing all those men, younger than him, probably braver than him, that had volunteered and sacrificed for their country. Jimmy was 25 when it started, perhaps a little too old. He had wanted to enlist, but Mr. Boylan had set him up with a comfortable assignment in the National Guard watching over the armory in Joliet. Fighting in the ring was more important than fighting overseas, Boylan used to say. Seeing those uniformed men as they proudly marched down the street made something rise within Jimmy. Seeing those in attendance, the feeling of pride and relief in their faces made an impression. He had missed out on the defending his country, but he was going to do something that would make the people of Joliet look at him the same way they looked upon those soldiers.

As the two sat there, the door to the gym cracked open, and in walked a thin figure in a suit. The door closed behind him in a creaky groan. The brief breeze that had been allowed in chilled the sweat on Jimmy's face. As the figure grew nearer, Jimmy could tell that it was the same man that had rode with him on the train from Chicago weeks before. Each step from his still spotless shoes snapped off the floor like shots fired from a kid's toy gun. As he reached the two of them he removed his hat, and flashed the same devious smile.

"Jimmy, Mr. Czapp, how are you today? It certainly is muggy in here isn't it?" The pair looked at him skeptically as he pulled the red handkerchief out of his breast pocket to dab at the small beads of sweat forming on his forehead.

"How can we help you?" Ralph asked curtly. Gathering his gloves, Jimmy wished to head to the showers, unwilling to listen to this immaculately dressed little rat.



“Jimmy, I think you should stay and listen,” the man said, the arrogance in his voice now replaced with a twinge of threat. “I have some important news from Mr. Boylan.”

“And you are?” Ralph asked confidently, unperturbed by the man’s change in tone.

“My name is David Webb. Mr. Boylan hired me to look after his most promising fighters. I’ve had the good fortune of meeting Jimmy here already.” At this, he took a seat in the same stool Jimmy had just vacated, but not before placing a towel over it. Once settled, he took the same posture as on the train, hat teetering on his protruded knee.

“You don’t look like you know much about the fight game,” said Ralph.

“I don’t,” Webb replied. “But I do find it fascinating. What would possess another man, outside of the money of course, to consent to savagely beat, and be beat, by another man? It’s beyond my realm of expertise, I admit, but I’m really just here to make sure the money goes where it’s supposed to.”

He motioned for the two of them to come closer, which they did after some hesitation. Ralph stood defiantly in front of Webb while Jimmy sat on the apron on the ring, almost completely behind him. Webb positioned his stool so that he sat in between the two of them, able to glance back and forth from each of them.

“Anyway, I have some news to relay to the both of you. It could be good or bad depending on how you look at it. As you know Jimmy is a prohibitive favorite going into this fight with Jimmy Bivins. So prohibitive in fact that betting on this Jimmy is practically a losing proposition for Mr. Boylan.”

“What’s that mean for us?” Ralph asked.

“How much are you getting for this fight?” Webb asked as he wiped his brow again, looking at his handkerchief forlornly.

“Ten grand.”

“Jimmy, Mr. Czapp,” Webb stated flatly, “Mr. Boylan will promise you \$75,000 to lose the fight.”

Ralph shot back immediately. “We’re not going to do it.”

“I believe you are misunderstanding me,” Webb answered. “We’re not asking you to throw the fight, we’re telling you to throw the fight.”

Jimmy looked at the floor not saying anything. Hurling the towel into the ground, Ralph glared in Webb’s direction. Webb stood up, a look of worry creeping into his bony face.

“In all the years I’ve been training Kenneth Boylan’s fighters, he has never once come down here to dictate how a fight is going to go,” he started, the rage and spittle flying from his lips. “I was told this was an up and up operation, and now you tell me my best fighter has to throw away a chance at the world title?”

“Unfortunately yes,” Webb replied, turning to leave. “There is quite an advantageous wagering situation out there that would financially benefit all parties involved.”

“At the expense of ruining his career?” Ralph shouted, motioning towards Jimmy.

“I’ve talked to Jimmy previously. At that time he assured me of his loyalty to Mr. Boylan and the operation he’s running. Isn’t that right Jimmy?”

Jimmy didn’t say anything only to look longingly at Ralph, as if to get them out of this predicament.

“We’re not gonna do it.” Ralph said as he flipped the water bucket in Webb’s direction. He jumped back, but not before his shoes and the cuffs of his pants received a thorough dousing.

“We’ll talk about this some more when rationality prevails,” he said, staring disconsolately at his waterlogged Oxfords. Placing his hat on his head and briskly exited the gym.

After he was gone, Jimmy asked “Ralph, what are we going to do?”

He got in Jimmy’s face, eyes locked on his. “Don’t listen to anything those no good bastards say. You’re going to win this fight.”

\* \* \*

A few days later, as his wife Alice placed dinner on the table, the phone rang. Jimmy answered, and on the other end was Billy Quinn. He sounded nervous. When Billy got nervous, he talked quietly. Jimmy pressed the receiver as close to his ear as possible to decipher.

“Billy, you got to speak up.”

“Jim, the big guy wants you to come back to Chicago. Meet with him personally.”

“When?”

“Friday,” Billy answered. “What did you do Jim? Boylan don’t sound too happy with you.”

“It’s nothing Billy. Tell him I’ll be there.”

“Who was that?” Alice asked as Jimmy sat down at the table. He dug into the pile of mashed potatoes in front of him. A mound clung itself to Jimmy’s fork, which he promptly shoved into his mouth.

“Billy Quinn,” Jimmy responded, his mouth still full. “I’m wanted in Chicago on Friday. Mr. Boylan himself wants to see me.”

“It’s about fixing the fight, isn’t it?” Alice asked as a concerned look came across her face. She picked at a small bit of food and attempted to bite, but the look that came out of her was as if it had all suddenly turned sour.

“No doubt,” Jimmy said.

Alice threw her fork down. “Jim, don’t go. You got the chance you wanted. Don’t throw it away.” In each word her agitation grew. “We’ll leave and head to my Uncle Tim’s cabin in Wisconsin. They’ll never find us until the fight. You-”

“Stop it!” Jimmy shouted as he threw his fork into the mound on his plate. “I’m not going to run away like a coward. I wouldn’t even be in this situation if it wasn’t for Mr. Boylan’s help. He knows how Ralph and I feel. I’m gonna go talk to him and that’s final.”

The two sat quietly as the last rays of the late summer sunlight shone through the windows. Jimmy could hear Alice’s tears hit the plate in front of her, a tiny ping as each one ran down.

\* \* \*

The skyscrapers began as far off vague spires but with each passing minute they gained more definition, more immensity. As the train lumbered closer to the city, they felt as they were right on top of Jimmy, attempting to intimidate him. He imagined himself in the middle of these monsters on Michigan Avenue, in a nice car, a Packard or something similar, and all those people cheering for him. He imagined after beating Joe Louis that the city would be his. Those people in those towers, unknown to him now, would know him however. They would toss their office-made confetti and cheer on the new champion as one of their own. Jimmy would be just as tall as those buildings, and feeling nearly as invincible.

\* \* \*

Jimmy waited for what seemed like an eternity before a head popped out from the doorway saying Mr. Boylan was ready for him. Jimmy followed the unfamiliar man through what appeared to be an outer office before eventually they stopped in front of a set of heavy oak doors. This man flung them open with an elaborated gesture. Seated in front of them was Boylan.

“Jimmy, come in, sit down.”

As Jimmy entered cautiously, a trunk of an arm came up in front of him. Boylan was an imposing figure even for someone with his size and build. He raised his own hand to meet Boylan’s, which was promptly swallowed up in the grasp. Boylan himself had been a fighter some time back. Even now, it appeared he could give Joe Louis a run for his money. The two sat down. Boylan lit a cigarette and offered one in Jimmy’s direction, but Jimmy shook his head in refusal. He didn’t want Boylan to see his hands shaking.

“Let’s get right down to business. Dave Webb says you and Ralph are unhappy with the decision being made.” The big man threw his head back and the way he looked with the cigarette reminded Jimmy of a brawny, Irish President Roosevelt.

“Mr. Boylan, I earned this fight,” Jimmy said nervously. “If I beat Jimmy Bivins, I could get a title shot.”

“We’re all aware of that.”

Jimmy continued, wringing his hands in his lap in any attempt to calm them. “This is a big moment, and what I feel you’re making me do is quite unfair.”

“Didn’t we help you get this far?” Boylan asked.

“Yes you did,” Jimmy replied. “I appreciate all the support you’ve given me over the years.”

“And with Webb after your last fight, didn’t you restate your loyalty to us?” the man asked.

“Yes” Jimmy responded sheepishly.

“This is what I’m asking you to do. It’s going to make you a very wealthy man. You can retire from fighting, do whatever you want. There’s a great joy in not getting pummeled for a living, believe you me. It’ll be easy living for the rest of your life.”

“I don’t want to do anything else Mr. Boylan. I just want to be a boxer.”

Boylan swirled a glass with a thin amount of whiskey in it, entranced by its contents rhythmic swaying. “What made you become a fighter Jimmy?” he finally asked.

“Well, when I was ten my dad went to Soldier Field to see the Dempsey-Tunney fight. I remember him coming home and it was all he could talk about. How Jack Dempsey was robbed, that Gene Tunney should have been counted out. How Jack Dempsey was the true champion, a legend. He was the only person that my father ever had nice words for.”

Boylan smiled and finished off the glass. “So you felt the only way to win your father’s affection was to become as great as Jack Dempsey.”

“Yeah, I guess so,” Jimmy said.

“Where’s your father now Jimmy?”

“He’s been dead thirteen years,” Jimmy answered.

Boylan got up, and approached Jimmy. “Then you’re fighting to please a dead man. Doesn’t sound that rewarding to me.” He placed his imposing hand on Jimmy’s shoulder so firm that it shook him. “You have nothing left to prove to that sonofabitch. We pulled you out of that crummy ice factory. We gave you a nice life, a nice house. You met a nice girl. We are the

ones that really care about you Jimmy. We gave you all this, and we're giving you a chance not to worry about any of it all again. All you have to do is what we ask of you."

"And if I don't?"

Boylan removed his hand, and went back and sat behind the immense desk. He put out the cigarette as if its smoke was suddenly an annoyance to him.

"Just remember this," he said. "You may think that you can ignore me. You can beat Jimmy Bivins and who knows, you may be heavyweight champ some day." Now any friendliness that was present in the man was gone. His eyes grew big and black. He threw his shoulders forward, leaning over the desk. His lips became tightly pursed together, his face red. "But some day well after that, we will come to get you. And it won't be just you. It will be Alice. It will be Ralph. It will be your children if you happen to have any. No matter where you go, we'll track you down and you'll pay for your poor decision. That I'll make sure of."

After a moment of two or silence, Boylan pushed a button on his desk. Into it he said, "Mr. Williams, get this man out of my office." The same man as before came in pick up a dumbstruck Jimmy, pushing him in the direction of the big doors. On his way out he could hear Boylan call out to him.

"We hope you make the correct choice," Boylan said cheerfully.

Below Boylan's office sat a nightclub, in the middle of preparations for that night's activities. Jimmy sat paralyzed in a giant leather booth as the club's staff rushed past with a variety of chairs, tablecloths, and glasses. A short, round figure approached Jimmy. He was frantically waving in an attempt to make his appearance known.

"Geez, Jim, I can't believe Boylan's making you throw the fight," Billy Quinn spoke, taking up a seat in the booth. They called him Billy the Owl on account that his head looked as

if it sat directly on top of his shoulders. Well, that and he never stopped asking questions. “Are you gonna do it?”

“I don’t know Billy,” Jimmy grumbled, his head in his hands. Billy slid a bottle of whiskey in front of him only to have Jimmy push it back.

“How much is the boss gonna give you if you lay down?” Billy asked.

“75 grand.”

“I know Boylan is cheap with his fighters,” Billy laughed. “But I didn’t think he was that cheap. Only 75 grand to give up a chance at the title. If you were to be champ, you could make twice that much.”

“You think I shouldn’t throw the fight?” Jimmy asked, wondering if Billy was trying to tell him something.

“You could definitely beat Bivins,” Billy answered. “With Joe, who knows what could happen. But, geez Jim, it’d be you against that guy upstairs. I wouldn’t take my chances going against him. You know Monte Reiss?”

“Yeah,” Jimmy said. Reiss was a low level loan shark and bookmaker that made himself known at the fights around town. He was a sleazy character not to be trusted.

“Apparently,” Billy began, his voice so soft as to be difficult to hear over the commotion in the room. “He weaseled out of paying Mickey O’Brien his money from your last fight.” O’Brien was another sleaze, but happened to be a Boylan associate. “They shot him up a few days ago and dumped his body in Lake Michigan. You know for how much? A measly grand. These guys don’t screw around when it comes to getting their money. You anger Boylan, who knows what could happen?”



\* \* \*

After eight rounds, Jimmy is battered. Bivins has weaved his way around all Jimmy's wayward powerful hooks and jabs, sneaking in after each miss. Jimmy may have the power in his fists, but he knows that he can't use them. He has to keep up appearances though, make everything look on the up and up. Another missed jab and Bivins delivers his best punch of the night, a shot right to Jimmy's right temple. Everything goes blurry. Jimmy rolled back on his heels, unsure of whether this was the right place to go down. Something metallic chimed, and the referee stepped in. He pushed Jimmy back to his corner. Jimmy took giant gulps of air as he dropped onto the stool.

"You gotta move, escape those punches!" Ralph yelled. "Don't just stand there. You're making it easy for him. Keep low and try and go for the body."

Ralph threw an ice pack over Jimmy's swollen right eye, a cotton ball up his broken nose. His head ached, pulsing with pain. With each breath, a dagger plunged into his chest. He is in a cocoon of pain. Ralph's words roll right through him with no recognition.

With the ice pack removed, the brightness of the arena lights jerk Jimmy back to the situation at hand. Clouds of cigar and cigarette smoke weaved through the lights, creating ghostly shadows that would rise in balls only to trail off into wispy tails. Jimmy looked out into the crowd, but could distinguish no faces. The crowd was simply a mash of blurry colors. The only sound was a constant buzz that sounded as if someone had left the radio on an empty frequency.

"Get your head in this!" Ralph yelled as he slapped the side of his head. Jimmy winced, partly from pain, part from embarrassment. "Go out there and do what I told ya. Land some jabs and work into a solid combination."

As the cobwebs cleared Jimmy could make out Boylan, sitting in the front row directly across from him. He chewed on an unlit cigar with a content look on his face, as if to say “Great job son. And now?”

Ralph saw this, pushed himself closer into Jimmy so that he could see nothing but his bulbous nose and sagging jowls. “You’re not of thinking of anything but winning this fight.”

“Yes sir,” Jimmy responded.

“You win this, you get a title shot. That sonofabitch would be an idiot to do anything to us after that. Just go out there and win. All you need is one punch. Go out there and knock the bastard out.”

The bell rang and Jimmy rose, laboring towards the center of the ring. Bivins jumped towards his left and attempted to land a jab to his side. Jimmy blocked it, turned towards the smaller man and landed a cross that rang into the side of Bivin’s head. He stumbled backwards, crab-legged. Jimmy, suddenly full of life, hopped towards him. He got himself low, hunching over so that his fists were level with the reeling Bivins. It was the perfect opportunity.

Jimmy set his feet and uncorked a straight-ahead jab that could have toppled Gene Tunney. It missed, whirring past the side of Bivin’s head, causing Jimmy to stumble towards the ropes unprotected.

The smaller fighter danced to his right, the side with the bad eye. Bivins landed a combination to Jimmy’s ribs that felt like someone had hit him with a fencepost. He let out a gasp through his clenched teeth, his breath escaping like a leaky balloon. This was the point of no return. An uppercut rushed right up from underneath Jimmy, catching him squarely under the jaw.

The buzzing of the arena halted for the moment. Jimmy hit the canvas with a thud, followed by the gasps from the crowd. The shadowy outline of the referee huddled above him, an unintelligible honk being directed down at him. Finally the clang of the bell was heard. The fight was over. He was finished.

Afterwards in the locker room, no one spoke. Jimmy dabbed at his tender eye. Ralph sat on a chair opposite him, a look of pure confusion on his face. Alice looked longingly at him as she clung to his lifeless arm. A sharp click was heard from outside the hallway. The door opened and Webb appeared, dressed immaculately as always. He approached, pulling out another envelope, as thick as Jimmy had ever seen. Webb placed it on the table in front of everyone.

“Mr. Boylan appreciates your cooperation,” he said, this time without a trace of disdain. “This is just a down payment. You’ll receive the rest shortly.” At that, he turned and left.

Ralph’s look of confusion turned to pure disgust. Shooting out up of his chair, he stomped over to the door. It slammed behind him with such force that it caused both Alice and Jimmy to jump. Jimmy reached around to bring her in closer, desperately hoping she wouldn’t leave him also.

\* \* \*

That night he dreamed he saw himself in a car passing through a canyon of buildings. People were stacked shoulder to shoulder, children on their parents’ shoulders. All around him were cheering, smiling, waving admirers. A shower of confetti and paper fell from the open windows above. He saw Alice at his side beaming, holding tenderly onto his arm as the car continued on. He saw Ralph nodding, yelling to him “I told you kid.” He saw Boylan, Webb, and Billy Quinn clapping, nodding their heads, knowing they were wrong. He saw his father as

he looked in 1927, as excited as the moment he saw Jack Dempsey outside of Soldier Field after that great fight. He followed the car every step of the way, excitedly bounding through the crowd. He waved his hat in the air, desperately attempting to get Jimmy's attention. Jimmy smiled and waved back. The sun shone, the wind blew warm, and the people cheered all up and down Michigan Avenue. He wished he would never wake up.

## Dearth of a Ladies Man

On the outside Teddy appeared less than enthused. Inside, however, was a different story. His hands gripped the arms of the chair as if letting go would cause him to be swallowed in the sea of carpet below. His mouth went dry, all the moisture migrating to his hands. His heart worked itself into an uncontrollable fluttering animal, ready to burst in anticipation of the reason he was called into the office. No matter what physical pressures were placed on him, the key to Teddy was to make it appear that it was nothing that spectacular. He turned slightly to catch a glance at the attractive young women sitting just to the side of him. She definitely looked less than enthused.

“Teddy, Madison, I think you probably know why I called you in here,” said the woman at the desk in front of them. “As you know, gossip in this place spreads pretty fast and I thought it’s better to let you know, so...it’s out there.”

She paused for a moment, picking at a salad in front of her. As head of Sales, Sandra often held meetings at her desk during lunch. Teddy could never figure out why. It appeared to be a power play; if Sandra was to work through lunch, it was expected of those below her. If that

was her intent, it never worked on Teddy. It was incredibly unappealing watching her eat, crass even.

“Madison has been chosen by the Regional Broadcasters Association as one of the top salespersons in the northeast,” Sandra continued. “She is going to be honored at their annual convention in Syracuse next Tuesday.”

Whatever dressing was on that salad was definitely strong. Teddy thought it was something Asian as sesame oil was predominant, garlic and ginger also. Whatever it was, it hung over everything in the room. Sandra continued to take occasional stabs at the salad, but never put any in her mouth. Deep breaths would help keep Teddy’s own lunch at bay, except each breath would draw the sickening scents even more into his range. Holding his breath would only exacerbate the anxiety. It was a real Catch-22 situation.

“This isn’t just a party for you though,” Sandra said gesturing towards Madison. “This is also about business. You need to go there with some numbers, what you’re goals are for the coming year. That’s where Teddy comes in.” She gave him a courteous smile. “He’s good with all that and he can get some projections, demographics, you know the usual.”

Wow, she looks really pretty, Teddy thought. It was the hair today. She must have dyed the blonde out of it, making it a dark brown, walnut or whatever embellishment they place on those boxes of Nice & Easy. Or maybe it was the blonde she was dyeing *into* her hair and this brown was actually her natural color. Either way, Teddy thought the brown suited her, made her look more mature. She was awfully young to be the top sales earner at the station. Seeing that her competition were crusty, constantly complaining old men, he could see why she was appealing to clients.

“It probably couldn’t hurt to get together for a little bit beforehand,” Sandra went on, in between a forkful of salad. “Go over the figures and get a nice presentation together. There are a lot of good connections to be made at an event of this type. Plus, it would make us look good. Madison, go get some Teddy some of last year’s figures. I’m sure you can get started on them right away, right Teddy?”

“Yeah, sure,” he said.

“Great, get to it.”

Teddy left the room first, stiffly, his lingering anxiety hindering his desire to not be ill. As he entered the hallway he could overhear the women with their own private conversation. Besides his inclination for numbers, he was also a fairly good eavesdropper.

“It’s just for a weekend,” Andrea garbled, her mouth obviously stuffed with salad. “What’s wrong with it?”

“Nothing really,” Madison replied. “He just seems a little...weird?” She had the habit of many girls just out of college to make every statement sound like a question.

“He’s perfectly harmless. You should be glad he’s here. He does half your job and at no commission. He’s a nice kid, just quiet. You’ll be fine.”

Their speech was replaced by the sharp clacking that Madison’s heels emitted every time she walked. Teddy prepared himself to be in position for when the door opened. Making it seem like he forgot something was the perfect cover. Living vicariously through others, Teddy had enough experience to know that being there while not being there was the key. He took a few steps back to set up the timing. The moment the door opened, he was far enough away to make

it appear the perfect happy accident. Madison emerged into the hallway, and his presence caught her off-guard for just a moment as she took a step back towards Sandra's office.

"I think I might have forgotten something in the office," he mumbled, his cheeks blushing, the façade showing the first signs of cracking.

She stepped out into the hallway, and took a quick glance at him. Out here it was clear how much smaller she was than him. She was very short with strong, but not too stocky legs. Teddy has always thought she had been a gymnast when she was younger. It must be interesting how she ended up in radio sales.

"I'll get those figures to you this afternoon," she said as she headed down the hallway towards the exit, surely on her way to lunch. It looked like she had been blushing also.

Teddy had been at The Wolf for seven years. They called it The Wolf even though the station's call letters didn't really spell that. WSLF. Close but not quite. The Wolf was a classic rock station, and one of the most listened to in the area. In a town where everything seemed about ten years behind what was supposedly happening, what was big yesterday fit into the fiber of the city. Musical tastes and most everything else didn't veer too far from the tried and true. Let New York have their people with the pulse of the culture on their fingertips. Binghamton wasn't a destination for the vanguard. What it did offer Teddy was a sense of comfort. No matter what The Wolf lacked in Teddy's own musical tastes, it offered a sense of routine. He was allowed to do his work in peace. To not be bothered was the job's greatest attribute.

Taking his time going back to his desk, Teddy caught a listen of what was currently on the air. "Black Dog." Typical. Spending seven years in classic rock radio, especially the world of corporate radio, he got used to hearing the same songs over and over. What a lot of people



might not know is that radio your parents knew is long gone. Instead of DJs, The Wolf received most of their programming from the corporate offices in Texas. Pre-packaged tunes and banter programmed for the broadest appeal. Led Zeppelin and Pink Floyd had been completely ruined for him, even though Teddy had never particularly cared for either one. Besides its daily rotation, The Wolf had an hour every night called “Get the Led Out”, where Zeppelin’s catalog was scoured from top to bottom. Robert Plant’s wail had morphed into a death rattle. Jon Bonham’s drums became lead weights pounding into his skull. Lately, the programming had added Bon Jovi, Motley Crüe, and Def Leppard to its old standbys. That really stretched the term “classic rock” Teddy thought to himself.

“Give me Bob Dylan or Leonard Cohen to any of this junk,” he said under his breath as he reached his desk. Cohen especially. There was something sensual, romantic, a yearning in his music that let Teddy live through it. Those songs were everything Teddy thought himself not to be: verbose, funny, and above all else romantic. He always thought about Leonard Cohen after running into Madison.

He took his seat in his secluded cubby. It was a corner carved out of the sales area that contained only his desk, on which sat a computer, some stray papers, and his trusty iPod. As was his routine, he placed the round white buds into his ear, plugging into the shell that kept him from everyone else.

Teddy’s actual job description was sales assistant. Everyone knew that he was basically a glorified accountant. The job consisted of pouring over the salespersons’ numbers, expense reports, and commissions to make sure everything stayed within budget. It was work that he actually enjoyed for the most part, numbers being much easier to read than people. The numbers

didn't make jokes about him like the some of the sales guys did. Teddy could always decipher what the numbers meant. Occasionally with a big client, he would be called in to work directly with some of the salespeople. All he had to do was spout a figure when needed and they would let him go back to his corner. Sandra had never asked him to go on a trip before, especially with someone as attractive as Madison. The realization of just what the situation entailed allowed the anxiety to swim back into his stomach. He would be spending the weekend with Madison.

She was completely out of place at The Wolf. She seemed nicer than the rest of them, occasionally acknowledging his existence. Teddy would say hello back. Once or twice, they had a longer conversation, all work related, nothing beyond. Since everyone else in the building had been so successful in ignoring him, the interactions with Madison had struck something within him. A fondness had morphed into attraction. The situation near Sandra's office was a technique he employed often. Luckily Madison hadn't seemed to catch on to him yet. Now Sandra had given him an opportunity that he could never have dreamed of. All he had to do was break through his wall of timidity. He cycled through his iPod thinking of how to break the ice. Going through Leonard Cohen, he started up "Ain't No Cure for Love." A little too literal for the situation at hand, Teddy thought, but he couldn't resist the saxophone opening.

She came by later that afternoon, acting hurriedly yet still friendly. She had a manila envelope under her arm, and after a quick greeting, placed the envelope to the side of his keyboard. She hesitated for just a moment, as if she didn't want to part with the envelope. To keep his composure, all his movements slowed down. It's no big deal, he thought to himself, as he placed his ear buds down on his desk. Unsure of what to do next, he picked up the envelope, held it out in front of him, and gave an approving nod.

“Thanks,” he spoke, barely audible to even himself. “I’ll start working on it tonight.”

“That’s not really necessary,” she replied. “I mean, you still have a few days. You don’t have to do too much work.” It came out as a nervous blurb. She flung that striking brown hair behind her ears. Teddy made a point to maintain eye contact with her, remembering he had a tendency to not do so during conversation. She was wearing a bit too much mascara or eye shadow, giving her raccoon eyes. She had small, delicate features which he felt makeup didn’t enhance. He was sweating quite a bit more now.

“What are you listening to?” she asked. It was made more out of pleasantry than interest, but he always had trouble distinguishing between the two.

“The Shaky Hands. They’re newish, from Portland. You get a little tired with the same old stuff getting played around here.”

“Oh, I know. It can drive you crazy. I just tune it out at this point. I’ve never heard of The Shaky Heads though.”

They’re a little bit of a hippie-meets-indie vibe, folk-rockish with a bit of R&B and jangle pop thrown in. That’s what Teddy wanted to say. Instead all that he could find was:

“They’re pretty good.” The tightening in his vocal chords made the words come out in a reedy croak. The words he wanted to say couldn’t push their way through his paralysis.

“Well, the other sales guys say you’ve done a real good job with these types of things in the past.”

Teddy nodded again while silence filled the void.

“I should go,” Madison said, clearly uncomfortable. “I have a call with an important client in a few minutes.”

Teddy didn't think it that was true, but he figured it was the easiest way to extract herself from the situation. She turned backed to her own desk. He watched her go knowing he had blown the opportunity. He placed his ear buds back in, took the papers out of the envelope and went to work.

A few moments later, Stefano, one of the other sales representatives, came over and tapped Teddy on the shoulder. This startled him; normally, Stefano wouldn't give him the time of day. Now, here he is with a mischievous smile on his face. Teddy turned around and removed his ear buds.

“Hey Teddy, I hear you're getting to go with Madison to Syracuse.”

“How do you know that already?”

“You know how information travels around this place.”

Stefano always had that grin. For clients, for Andrea, even for Teddy. Add that to his height and his striking appearance, it made him the perfect salesman. When Stefano appeared, Teddy always thought of Johnny Fontaine in *The Godfather*: olive oil voice and guinea charm. The very fact that he was willfully seeking him out for some reason other than to mock him gave Teddy some confidence.

“Yeah, so what it's to you?” Teddy asked.

“I got some stuff you might like to know, seeing as you follow her around the office all day.”

He got right down in front of Teddy's face with a sly, knowing smile. Teddy's eyes darted to the carpet below. He didn't say anything. Stefano placed his hand on his shoulder in a re-affirming way.

"It's alright Teddy. If I were you, I would do the same thing."

Teddy looked up and asked, "You think she notices?"

"Maybe, but she may think you're too nice and harmless to be creepy. Either way, I think you should hear this." He arched his eyebrows as he began, pushing for Teddy's acceptance.

"Go ahead."

"A couple weeks ago, Adam and I were out at Maxine's right?" Adam was Stefano's friend. All three had all gone to community college together. They were in the same classes, but no one would have confused them with being friends. Stefano had ignored him then as much as he did now. Why he was sharing this Teddy was unsure. Whatever the reason, he looked intently at Stefano to continue.

"So, he's there and he sees Madison out with a group of friends. And she's getting *hammered*. I mean loud and crazy, all that shit. Alex, having a few himself, decides to head over to join the party. I know Madison isn't that fond of me so I stayed away. So Alex and Madison are tearing it up on the floor. You know what that means right?"

"Yeah," Teddy responded, intrigued by what he's hearing. He had a fairly good idea where the conversation was going now.

“Well, they hook up, and Alex says she’s crazy in bed, moaning and screaming and all that.”

Teddy blushed, not knowing what the proper way to respond to this type of insight.

“Why are you telling me this?”

“They got an open bar at these things don’t they?” asked Stefano.

“Yeah.”

“Well, you like her, don’t you?”

Teddy didn’t answer for a moment. Stefano still had that wolfish grin on his face.

“You’re saying that if I get her drunk, I’ll be able to sleep with her.”

“I’m not saying that,” Stefano replied. “I’m just giving you information you might want to know.”

With that, he stood up and walked away from the desk. The papers in front of Teddy became a jumbled blur. His heart began racing again.

All weekend, the pending trip, and the images from what Stefano told him mixed in his mind. Everything about it thrilled him on one level yet horrified him on another. He wondered if he could stoop to the level Stefano was talking about, if his attraction to Madison meant more than some callous act. It kept him up both nights with what could go wrong. Just make it mostly about work, he thought to himself, don’t push anything. Don’t get over your head. The nerves still got to him. He spent the night before vomiting.

He met Madison after work on Tuesday, as ready as he could be. He brought with him a weathered duffle bag he had used for all of his overnight trips since he was in the Boy Scouts. His presentation was in his hands ready to give to Madison. It was not as in-depth as he would have liked, his mind being somewhere else all weekend. It would have to do.

“Packing a bit much?” she asked him as they walked to the car. “It’s only for two days.”

Teddy raised the bag up, as if to inspect for himself that perhaps it wasn’t what he thought it was.

“I think it’s always better to over prepare than to forget something.”

She gave him a sympathetic smile as he placed the duffle bag in the trunk. He could feel the sweat gathering under his armpits, the mouth getting dry. He rushed to the passenger seat, fumbling to get the seat belt fastened. She watched all this, amused.

Even her car smells good, he thought as they pulled out of the parking lot. Neither said anything as they approached the Interstate for the sixty mile drive north. He kept his hands on his lap and his eyes on his hands.

“Nervous?” she asked, glancing over at him.

Teddy froze. He began to blush and racked his brain for anything to say.

“No, not really”, he stammered. “I’m just not very good at starting a conversation and all that.”

“Don’t worry about it.” She gave him an understanding smile. The affection in her gaze was what one would have for an adorable puppy. Teddy, beginning to relax, looked out the window. Madison focused back on the road.

Madison, at least willing to take some action in breaking the silence, turned up what was playing on her stereo. He picked up the pounding nature of the beat, techno-ish but with a bit more melody. It sounded recognizable. She noticed his straining in finding familiarity with the music started in.

“When I saw you with the headphones on, I know exactly how you feel. I can’t stand the music the station plays. That band you were listening to, The Shaky Hands, I looked them up. They’re not bad.”

It was Lady Gaga. Teddy wasn’t surprised.

“You probably don’t listen to Lady Gaga, do you?” she said with a playful grin. “I figured it was just the thing to get you to say something.”

“Some of her songs are catchy,” Teddy responded. “But I do find her image to be trying too hard.”

“What do you mean?”

“She adopts these Warhol Factory and downtown New York art culture qualities but has no ideas behind any of it. It’s another pre-fabrication, all surface. If it makes her successful, than they keep milking it.” She laughed and he instantly felt embarrassed. “I didn’t mean that to be as mean as it sounded.”



“No,” she replied. “I don’t really know what you’re talking about, but at least you have an opinion. I knew you had interests outside of work.”

A more comfortable feeling set in between the two of them. She took out the Lady Gaga disc and placed in another one. From the first few seconds, he could tell it was The Shaky Hands. She looked over at him. He nodded his acceptance. She skipped ahead to a song. He recognized it immediately. It was a song called “Allison and the Ancient Eyes.”

“This is my favorite song of theirs,” she said to him over the propulsive guitar.

“It’s probably my favorite too,” he replied.

“It sounds kinda like Elvis Costello doesn’t it,” she said, “And it even has Allison in the title.”

Perhaps this was the moment he needed. He thought about anything to say, but nothing sounded right in his head, his inabilities once again handcuffing him. He looked over at her. She seemed content to let the music do the talking. They rode the rest of the way to Syracuse not saying much else.

Once they were in their rooms, Teddy attempted to discuss what he had for the presentation. She flipped the through the pages briskly, closed it and looked at him.

“Teddy, it’s really good. You put a lot of work into it.”

“Really?” he asked. “I could have spent a bunch more time on it but I got a little distracted over the weekend.” It was the first direct compliment that he could remember getting from a salesperson. He forgot what feeling acknowledged actually did to a person’s confidence. It was a great feeling. Then the doubt began to creep back in.

“Wait, you barely looked through any of it. There’s a lot there that I feel is important—”

She cut him off. “Teddy, I really do appreciate the work you put in. But there are only so many figures and numbers clients want to hear. I’ve found that the most important aspect in making a sale is establishing a personal connection. Clients need to trust you, not just numbers on a piece of paper, you know?”

“Sure.”

Recognizing his dejection, she interjected quickly. “What you do is important; I don’t want to belittle that. But to make sales, those clients need to see you’re not just a calculator.” She gave a brief touch of his arm. “See you downstairs at seven, o.k.?”

He stood in the hallway looking over his pages. He slid it under her door and went back to his room.

They met downstairs at seven. She looked as stunning as he expected, in a teal dress, hair done up, just enough makeup. He looked as presentable as he could manage: a crisp black shirt with white stripes, gold tie, black pants, and black shoes. His standard business formal dress.

“Don’t you look nice,” she said playfully, again touching his forearm. “And you even combed that mess on your head.”

The first part of the evening was spent talking to various people from this station or this company. Madison did most of the talking, but at moments when he was needed, she let him do the numbers. Usually at functions like these, it was Sandra or someone like Stefano who appropriated his work for their own. Every time she needed an amount or a projection, she let him speak. They came out of him effortlessly; with none of the self-awareness that public

speaking normally gave him. Occasionally, he would catch her glancing at him proudly. He would smile back and go on. The sweat and the fluttering heart were gone.

After what already felt like a fairly successful evening, they sat down to dinner.

“Teddy, I’m going to get a drink. Do you want anything?”

Everything that Stefano had said days earlier went rushing back into his head. This wasn’t the type of event that she would act like that, he thought. What if she did have a little too much to drink? There’s no possibility he would take advantage of her in that state. But what if she initiates it? He had no answers.

“Teddy?”

“Um, I guess a rum & coke.”

He didn’t drink. Usually it took only two or three drinks for him to get violently sick from it. The circumstances of the evening had managed to erase his recollection of this. She returned with the drinks. He gingerly took a sip of his. She had something pink in a martini glass. She took quite a big sip, more like a gulp.

“Good?” she asked.

“It’s not too bad.” He continued to nurse it with small nips.

He had a few more with dinner, each one tasting better than the last. Any residual anxiety he had began to melt away. He began to match her drink for drink. The possibilities of where the night could go leapt into his mind.

The plates went away so the awards could start. Names were called, accomplishments announced. They came and went. Eventually Madison's name boomed through the speaker. Teddy didn't even realize that she had left her chair when she went to collect her award. Near the end of her speech, he heard his name come bursting through the speakers. His foggy brain couldn't figure it out if it was real or not. She looked otherworldly up there, standing above everyone with her raccoon eyes and great, big smile.

There was applause as Madison appeared back at her seat. She looked radiant. Even in his fantasizing, Teddy never wanted her like he did now.

"Did you thank me in your speech?" he asked. He awkwardly attempted to get a hold of her hand. The only thing he successfully achieved was knocking over a water glass in front of her. She jumped back. Teddy nearly toppled face first onto the floor in front of her. Only someone else's strategically placed hand had saved him from belly flopping into the carpet.

"You deserved it," she replied in attempt to diffuse the situation. Her smile turned to a look of concern. "Are you feeling alright?"

"I think it's just something that I ate." He continued to fumble around her in an attempt to grab a hold of her. The alcohol was beginning to turn. Gone was the warmth. He had entered the danger zone. The room was sloshing around him, as waves crashing up on a beach. The tumult had spread from his head to his stomach by this time. "I should probably head upstairs."

Leaving the table, the sickness overtook his body. His limbs quivered and waves of nausea flowed through his stomach. He staggered up to his room and the bed. Ripping off his necktie, he threw himself on the bed. The waves continued to crash.

After a few minutes there was a soft knock. He righted himself up, and went in the direction the knocking was coming from. When the door opened, the look of disapproval on her face was noticeable.

“What is going on?” she asked.

“I guess I don’t hold my booze very well,” he said, attempting a laugh.

“Are you trying to embarrass me?” Anger had overridden concern in her voice. “What were you trying to do down there?”

“You looked so pretty and...and I just wanted to congratulate you. I want to say that-”

Before he could say anything else, the rush hit. He made the bathroom just in time.

She didn’t leave. She actually helped him clean up, even leading him to bed. If she was willing to go this far with him, she must really care for him. Even though the contents of his stomach had left him, his drunken stupor didn’t.

“Madison, I was going to use this trip to ask you if you wanted to go out sometime,” he mumbled as he flopped back onto the bed. The lack of response sunk every last inch of confidence that he might have had left in him. She seemed far off now, a grey figure heading towards the door, away from him forever. He sunk his face in his pillow to stop the trashing in his head.

“Get some sleep,” she said as she got up and closed the door behind her.

The next morning Teddy wished he could take it all back. They ran into each other in the lobby around 8:30. She gave him a concerned glance. Before she could turn away he blurted out, "I'm sorry for last night. I feel really bad about you having to deal with all that."

"Did you really mean what you said last night?" she asked pointedly.

"Yes."

"Teddy," she said touching his arm again, "You're so sweet guy, but I don't think that would be a good idea."

"Oh. I was just thinking that you were so nice to me that maybe there was something there."

She looked at him sweetly, almost motherly, desperately trying not to hurt his feelings.

"You've talked more this weekend than I've heard in two years at The Wolf. You're not the person I thought you were at all. You're a great guy that does great work. We worked well together. Let's just leave it at that."

"Sure," Teddy replied. He picked up his bag, and they both headed out towards her car.

On the ride back to Binghamton, little was said again. Another indistinct modern pop voice played throughout the car. In his bag Teddy remembered that he had packed *Songs From a Room* with him on the off chance that Madison would be open to more of his musical input. Pulling the bag from the back seat, he rummaged through his crumpled clothes of the night before until he found it stuffed in a corner.

"Do you know Leonard Cohen?" he asked.

“No. Does he work at The Wolf?” she asked back, barely paying attention.

He dropped the disc bag into the bag, and set everything back on the seat behind him.

They rode in silence back to Binghamton.

## Back to the Garden

Between Hancock and Calicoon the sun began to shine. The rain that punctuates so many August days in Upstate New York had lifted and the humidity was breaking. A light haze of fog drifted off of the roadway in front of them. Even with the improving weather, Ben drove cautiously through the ever increasing bends in the road as they went further into the Catskills. “Suite: Judy Blue Eyes” was playing on the CD player. Next to him, his son Peter was mouthing the words while looking out the window, following the rushing water of the spring that ran parallel to the road. Ben looked over and smiled briefly, careful not to show too much external emotion to his teenage son. Peter was at that age where it seemed to pain him to acknowledge that he had parents or that he cared about them. Any look in Peter’s direction could bring out a look with the right mix of condescension and embarrassment that only a teenager could master. Ben focused back on the road ahead of him as the ethereal harmonies washed out into the surrounding forest.

“You excited for today?” Ben asked, careful not to probe too deeply only to eventually have Peter shut down for the remainder of the trip.

“Yeah,” he replied, not averting his gaze from the passenger side window. Outward enthusiasm wasn’t Peter’s strong suit.



“I think it’ll be a lot of fun. I mean it’s not the biggest names from Woodstock, but there’s still going to be quite a few acts there. David Crosby, for example-”

“Dad, I know who’s going to be there,” Peter interrupted. “Can I just listen to the stereo right now?”

“Sure.” Ben gunned the car up a steep hill, and as it broke over its top, the sunlight hit the car straight on. The warmth filled up the car fast as Ben and Pete nodded to the majestic harmonies.

Ben figured it was his best shot. Thirty years ago, half a million young people descended on quiet farmland belonging to Max Yasgur in Bethel, New York to attend the Woodstock Music & Arts Festival. Ben and his girlfriend, who would eventually be his wife and Peter’s mother, were two of those half a million. Now a local developer had taken over Yasgur’s farm and was putting on an anniversary concert, the first significant one that Ben could remember. This lineup wasn’t exactly the cream of the initial bill: death and the simple passage of time made that a complete impossibility. There would be no Jimi Hendrix, no Janis Joplin, no Who, no Creedence Clearwater Revival. Those who would be present had their moments in the sun decades ago, and now were mostly forgotten. Richie Havens, Melanie, Mountain, Arlo Guthrie, Country Joe McDonald; names only baby boomers and nostalgic refugees like Ben would have any interest in. And Peter.

In the months since Ben and his mother got divorced, Peter had shown little interest in anything outside of music and the Woodstock festival in particular. The kid had always had an interest in the family record collection, but now it occupied all of Peter’s time. He watched the concert film nearly once a week. He listened to the expanded box set of the festival Ben had

given him on his birthday. He read anything he could on the event, often dragging Ben to the library on their weekends to scour the shelves for any piece of music journalism that discussed Woodstock. If Ben wanted some obscure fact of trivia (such as “Who was the second act to perform after Richie Havens?” Peter’s answer: “Sweetwater, a folk group that because of a serious car accident to its lead singer, disbanded just days after their appearance.”) Peter would know it. Ben thought it as nothing more than an intellectual curiosity in Peter mitigated by a pair of unique factors. One was that the festival was practically in their backyard, less than 100 miles away, about ninety minutes through these winding rural highways. Another was that both of Peter’s parents had attended the festival, even though Peter had never asked Ben about his particular experiences. For a kid who wanted to know everything, it felt strange.

He also found it strange that he was called into the school psychologist’s office at the end of the school year to discuss Peter. There had never been any problems with Peter in school before. He never even knew that there was a psychologist present in the high school. When Ben arrived to meet this man, he had a deep look of concern on his face, all furrowed brows and squinting eyes, like it pained him to have this discussion.

“Is this disciplinary?” Ben asked as he took a seat in a chair. Instead of sitting behind the desk, the psychologist sat in the adjoining chair, taking the extra step to express the casualness of this conversation.

“Heavens no,” the man quickly replied. “My name is Dr. Laing by the way.” He stuck out his hand and Ben shook it briefly. “No,” Laing continued, “Peter is not in any trouble.” He paused, a concerned furrow etching across his brow. “But I do have concerns with Peter’s performance in class recently.”

“How so?” Ben questioned.

“Peter’s grades have been slipping for the entire fourth quarter. In everything. Talking to him, he seems completely disinterested in school work. Now he won’t tell me anything about what’s going on at home, but I have a feeling there’s been an upsetting event in Peter’s life that would explain this unusual change. It’s usually the case with students with no track record of difficulties.”

Ben shifted nervously in the chair. “What exactly has he told you?”

“Practically nothing,” Laing said. “He only says that nothing’s wrong when I ask him directly. From my experience, I have the feeling he’s hiding something.”

Ben thought of himself as forward-thinking. He wanted to be helpful to this man who seemed to have a genuine interest in his son’s well-being, to show that he had nothing to hide. He couldn’t help but be truthful in the presence of this tweedy, overly earnest man.

“Peter’s mother and I are going through a divorce.”

A bolt of relief appeared to run through Laing as the words left Ben’s mouth. The furrows and wrinkles dissolved from his face. The tightness in his body slackened, and the serious cloud over the room felt to have lifted as he got up and took the customary seat behind his desk.

“Have you discussed this with Peter?”

“We have.”

“And has Peter told you how he feels about this?”

“I’ve gotten as much out of him as you have,” Ben replied. “He’s always been a somewhat quiet boy. He rarely tells me anything.” Ben was shocked how easily the truth was leaving him. It actually felt cathartic. The thought popped into his head that maybe he might need a psychologist.

“Have you noticed any changes in Peter’s behavior since you told him of the divorce?” Laing said this as he rummaged through a pile of papers in a folder on his desk and pulled out a thin card with dots on it. It looked to Ben as what schools today used for tests.

“No.” Though it was accurate, Ben knew it wasn’t the truth. Peter had been staying with his mother since the announcement had been made. In the past few months, Peter had spent only three or four weekends with his father. Peter always gravitated towards his mother. She was the one that could handle the outward affection. Ben knew the only reason he was here was that his ex-wife could not leave her job to have this talk.

“Mr. Adams, Peter’s history teacher, passes along an interesting story,” Laing said as the card flopped back and forth in his hand. “Apparently, Mr. Adams occasionally plays music during these tests he gives. It’s usually older stuff, what we all grew up listening to.” Ben was surprised over this, given that Laing looked at most thirty five.

“What exactly?” Ben asked.

“You know, Bob Dylan, Neil Young, Joan Baez, Sixties songs mostly. Anyway, Mr. Adams usually asks one or two bonus questions based on what he is playing during a certain test. According to him, these are questions that very few kids know the answer to. This past test, Adam scored a thirty six on the actual test, but he answered the bonus questions correct as well

as another question that Mr. Adams asked him later. These were all questions based on the Woodstock festival.”

There was a pause while Laing waited to see if Ben wanted to say anything. Ben told what he knew. “He has been very interested in that the past few months. What were the questions?”

“One was ‘Who was playing in only their second live performance at the festival?’”

“Crosby, Stills & Nash,” Ben answered. “You can learn that watching the movie.”

“It seems to me,” Laing interjected, “that Peter has somewhat retreated into this certain area of expertise in order to escape any negative feelings he’s been having about the divorce. That in turn is also having a negative effect on his schoolwork. Besides the bad grades, there is a feeling, and this isn’t just myself speaking, that Peter has become emotionally detached and disinterested in interacting with others.”

“The problem is that he seems to want nothing to do with me at the moment,” Ben responded.

“Perhaps try to find some common ground in this new passion?”

Route 17B ran from Calicoon right to Yasgur’s Farm. Back on that August weekend in 1969 it was certainly one of the busiest roads in America. What Ben remembered as wall to wall traffic and confusion was now transformed. Green farmland, lush from the recent rain, surrounded the car as they continued on. It seemed nothing like how Ben remembered it. The tranquility of the pastoral landscape felt reassuring. The Band was now playing to match the

setting. Ben couldn't help but think this is the Woodstock that the group inhabited, before all the mythologizing. Tranquility in its purest, most immediate sense.

Not far from their final destination, Ben spotted a white clapboard farmhouse back off the highway about fifty yards, surrounded by open pastures. A dozen or so cows dotted the landscape. Even though its white exterior revealed years of abuse to the elements, Ben recognized it immediately. He pulled the car off to the shoulder and faced Peter.

“This is as far as your mother and I got back in 1969,” Ben exclaimed. “We were stuck here about four hours and didn't move maybe twenty feet. We finally abandoned the car in that field and walked the rest of the way.”

For the first time in many miles, Peter appeared to show some interest in what his father was saying. He got up out of the car, and picked out the camera that was in the pocket of his shorts. He quickly began taking pictures of the house and its fields.

“So were there like cars parked all over these fields?” The sudden surge of interest in Peter's asking infused Ben with some excitement.

“Cars and people as far as you can see. We're still about five to ten miles away from the site. The larger traffic jams were coming from the east, from the Thruway, but there were still more than enough people finding their way down this direction. People had given up and parked their cars here, started walking. We just followed everybody else.”

Peter crossed the road and began to walk into one of the fields that separated the farmhouse from the road.

“How did the people in the house react to having cars all over the place?” Peter asked.

“I never remember seeing anyone,” Ben recalled, a bit winded from attempting to catch up. “I never really thought about it. We did leave our car on these people’s property for four days. It must have been a shock, all these long haired hippies descending on their land.”

Ben looked back at the weather beaten house. Time had taken its toll on both of them. Thirty years ago, Ben stood here, awash in young love and rebellion. The love was mostly his and the rebellion mostly hers. On one of their first dates, she had made mention of attending a big festival happening downstate. Ben had no real serious interest in rock music, but he was serious about her and willing to adapt. He bought a ticket, and convinced her to ditch her friends to head out together. Being here again, he could feel wave of nostalgia begin to creep in. Everything seemed perfect then.

There were differences. She was always into helping people, that’s why she got the job at the hospital. It wasn’t long before the hospital came before Ben. He kept it all to himself, and tried to make the best out of the situation. Ben waited ten years to propose, hoping her zeal would slow. Peter came and nothing really changed. They had stayed together for his sake, but after thirty years Ben finally admitted he had been beat. His stomach turned sour knowing that this house still stood while his marriage couldn’t.

“Dad, get a picture,” Peter said as he handed Ben the camera.

“One, but make it quick.”

Ben snapped the picture, tossed the camera back to Pete, and briskly walked back to the car. His wife had taken pictures back years ago. The camera had become lost in the miasma of mud and trash left behind by half a million people. Ben remembered posing for one as the sea of humanity sat behind him. It was apt; he was there, but still apart from everyone else.

Less than ten minutes later, it appeared right off the highway. A state trooper motioned the car over to an area just off the asphalt that was serving as a temporary parking lot. They parked and began to secure their belongings. Peter marched forward excitedly while Ben was somewhat bewildered. Nothing looked like it did that weekend long ago. Where they stood now was pretty much the outer reaches of where that massive crowd congregated. Where once sat long-haired kids eager to drink from the cup that said that music would bring about change and revolution now walked their graying, complacent older selves. There were still a few who seemed to never have left the Sixties: tie-dye, the long hair and beards still intact, just gray with age. Most looked like any suburban parents: khaki shorts, polo shirts, Capri pants, casual sandals, sunglasses, lawn chairs. Ben found it funny they how they had managed to become a square like him. For them, this trip wasn't about defining a generation. It was simple nostalgia, and while there's nothing wrong with that, something about it felt awkward to Ben. Rebellion was long gone. Maybe it was the Mercedes and BMWs in the parking lot.

Ben hurriedly grabbed a blanket from the trunk and followed after Peter. They followed the others through a makeshift village of tried and true hippies selling whatever crafts they had to offer. There were tie-dye dresses for the ladies, shirts for the men, hemp jewelry, Indian and Native American crafts and books, local produce, honey, and herbs. One stall had some smoking paraphernalia for a certain type of herb. Peter stopped at one who was selling photographs of performers from the original weekend. Ben stayed off to the side while Peter looked through the photographs. He watched as Peter pulled one out of a stack and handed the woman behind the table some money. He took the change and walked back over to Ben. It was the first time he had seen a smile on his son's face in as long as he could remember.

"The Band," Peter said, handing him the photograph. "It's from the Big Pink house."



“Your favorite, huh?” Ben said examining it. “Just as I remember.” He handed the picture back as the two went with the crowd.

The two walked until the pastures of Yasgur’s farm turned into a majestic, natural bowl. It was perhaps the most perfect natural amphitheater one could imagine for a festival the size of Woodstock. It lent itself to a fantastic reveal as the two hit the point where the earth begins to gently slide towards the stage at the base of the bowl. The stage was expectedly in the same spot as it was in 1969. Ben marveled at the beauty of the rolling hills that dotted the horizon beyond the stage. Without the throngs of people and acres of mud, the beauty of the setting could really be appreciated.

“Is it about how you remembered it?” Peter asked.

Ben thought about this for a moment. In terms of some of the physical landmarks, it all looked the same. Less people for sure, but the land he walked on thirty years ago hadn’t changed. It was all there, and yet it wasn’t there. These memories brought upon a certain nostalgia, a certain past that had all so recently crashed around him. He thought about his ex-wife and that she shared this past with him. None of it could be seen without her in his mind now. It pained him knowing it couldn’t be escaped. At least Peter didn’t have that baggage.

“Pretty much,” Ben replied as he placed his arm around his son’s shoulders. “Definitely less people though.” Peter smiled somewhat bashfully, and for the first time in months, Ben saw something in his son that had been missing: simple happiness.

The two found an empty spot off stage right back away from the mass in the center. The intense summer sunshine had broken free of the last remnants of the morning’s clouds. Peter was busily snapping pictures at the stage and the surrounding crowd.

“You’re by far the youngest person here Pete.”

“You’re probably right,” Pete said. “It’s funny though. In some strange way I feel like I’m closer to the Woodstock generation than people my age. I don’t know...this feels like a place I needed to see. Not like that disaster in Rome that just happened to be called Woodstock.”

“I always knew you were an old man trapped in a young man’s body,” Ben responded, a little laugh afterwards. “You found something that you really have a particular interest in. Who cares who it belongs to? I or any of these dinosaurs don’t own this event, land, or music. It’s not just for your father’s generation you know. You like it? Enjoy it.” Ben knew he was talking too much, but he just wanted Peter to feel like this was something that he could belong to. Let the kid be an idealist.

The music began soon afterward and the afternoon gently passed. Ben didn’t really pay close attention to much of it, but he did like hearing “Mississippi Queen” and Country Joe McDonald break out the “F-U-C-K” chant even if it had lost most of the relevance it once had. Peter was particularly enraptured by Rick Danko. The Band, Pete’s favorite. He sang quietly along to everything. Ben recognized most of the songs because of Peter, and thought Rick still sounded pretty good.

“Let’s go for a walk,” Ben said after the set.

The two of them walked out towards a far corner of the field towards a point almost parallel stage right where groups of people had amassed all day. The two of them weaved through lawn chairs and blankets until they cleared the crowd.

“Been a nice day, huh?” Ben asked.

“Yeah, the music’s been really good,” Peter replied.

“Sounds better than thirty years ago.”

“Really?” Peter asked.

“To tell you the truth Pete,” Ben started. “I really didn’t have that great of a time the first time round. Of course the weather was lousy. We got here so late on Friday that we were so far back we couldn’t hear or see much of anything. Your mother and I were stuck in two soggy, muddy sleeping bags for three days with hardly any food or room to move. It wasn’t exactly my idea of a great weekend. It was entirely your mother’s idea to go. She has that love of music that was obviously passed on to you.”

“Pete, I know you and your mom are close,” Ben said. “And I know that these past few months have been difficult for all of us but particularly you. I’m sorry that I haven’t been around more. That’s all my fault. I simply didn’t want to deal with you mother.”

“You know she’s always at the hospital,” Peter responded with a hint of accusation. “You know there has been plenty of time we could have spent together.”

“I’m sorry for that,” Ben said. “I thought this concert would be a place to make a new start. It’s not my idea of a great time, but it could at least be a good time for you.”

“So you took the time to take me to something you have no real fondness for only because you knew I would enjoy it?” Peter asked.

“Pretty much,” Ben replied. “Being back here is showing me how far apart your mother and I really were. I’m sure the two of you would have much more to talk about. I’m just trying to do one thing right.”

“You know you were the one that left?” Peter asked. “And that this one little trip isn’t going to make up for all that.”

“I know I’ve got a long way to go. Just give me the opportunity.”

As the sun began to set, the two of them reached the area that had been drawing a crowd. In front of them was a concrete block and sculpted into that stone was a memorial. It said ‘This is the Original Site of the Woodstock Music and Arts Fair Held on Aug. 15, 16, 17, 1969’. Above it rested a white bird perched on a guitar, the festival’s logo. Peace through music.

“You want a picture dad?” Peter asked. “Just you?”

“Sure.”

He rushed around the back of the stone, and stood with a weak smile as Peter took the picture. In him he saw his ex-wife taking his picture thirty years before.

He understood some of it now. Seeing Peter enjoying himself made him realize that it’s the connection that really matters. The traffic, the mud, the people they had become doesn’t hold any weight for someone like Peter. It could never be the true experience for him, but perhaps for someone like Peter, that was for the best. Nostalgia tends to bring out the best in everyone.

“Did you enjoy yourself today?” Ben asked as Peter trailed behind.

Peter stopped, and turned to look back at the remnants of the crowd. “I know it’s not the same as 1969, but it sure was to cool just to see this place, to know what happened here.”

Ben turned back to walk with his son. He put his arm around him. Peter didn’t attempt to back away or deflect this show of affection. There was so much more of his mother in him

than himself, there was no denying that. Ben, again, just went along for the ride. They both had a joy for this place that Ben couldn't really fathom. Instead of attempting to deconstruct the moment, he just let Peter's happiness spread to him. It wasn't so bad a place now.

## Free Radicals

I stood looking out the window as the car bringing Alex from prison slowly moved down the street. At least I had the good sense to be candid about it, standing behind our curtains. The neighbors were less so, out on their front lawns gawking. It was typical behavior for the neighborhood. Their fascination with the situation hadn't waned in the preceding years. After the car had come to a stop in the driveway, there was a good thirty seconds or so until a door opened.

Mr. and Mrs. Pearce emerged out of the vehicle first, guardedly. Mr. Pearce made eye contact with Mr. Vrabel, who was observing from his front deck across the street and one house down. The two glowered but no words were exchanged. Mr. Vrabel was and still is a real reactionary, one of the vaunted yet still somehow threatened class of middle-class white men who get all their political viewpoints from talk radio and Fox News. He had led a drive to get the Pearce's removed from the street after the bombing with a policy that consisted of verbal harassment. He kept saying that their daughter was un-American, so therefore the whole family was un-American. It seems to me that to attempt to force a family to up and move to somewhere else against their will is pretty un-American also. Even long after the trial was over and Alex was in jail, Mr. Vrabel kept up his crusade to remind everyone how terrible parents the Pearce's were for what their daughter did. The neighborhood had learned to ignore him. He stood

defiantly, his obsolete mustache jutting out in front of his face, arms folded over the paunch that he often hid in Hawaiian shirts. The two stared at each other for a few more moments while Mr. Pearce began to help the open the door for the figure in the back.

She, unlike her parents, moved briskly. As soon as her father gripped the door handle, she flung it open, nearing thrusting it fully into solar plexus. She emerged from the car in something like a crouch, her eyes and head down to the pavement, her long blonde hair hanging down to obscure her face. It was the same way she walked when the TV cameras followed her to the courthouse every day during the trial. She looked a bit thinner than before, but then again, she was always skinny. She rushed past her parents, who tried to embrace her, and rushed up to the front door. She pushed on the door with something approaching mild panic. I could see her throwing herself into it, yearning to be out of the prying eyes that she knew were watching her. She continued this way until her father placed the key into the lock. It was at this brief moment that she stood upright, and turned around long enough that I finally could get a look at her face. I noticed how different her eyes looked now. They seemed to be dark and small, filled with a fright and a worry that seemed to know the whole street was watching her. She knew what most thought of her. The defiance I had known had been broken down in all that time away. As her father pushed the door open, he attempted again to comfort her, placing a hand to her shoulder. She twisted away as a toddler would a disciplinary hand. He backed off and opened the door. She pushed in ahead of them. Mrs. Pearce gingerly closed the door following them. Mr. Vrael, still defiant in his silent, square-jawed fury, watched it all and finally went back inside his front door with a demonstrative slam. The oversized American flag on his front porch rustled in the wind.

The awkward silence of dinner was replaced that night with the news of the hour. My parents were the ones doing most of the talking. I ate as quickly I could, not saying anything.

“Did you see Alex come home?” my mother asked.

“Yeah.”

“Did she look all right?”

“I guess so.”

“Don’t mumble to your mother,” my father said. “Dr. Mueller said when you talk to somebody you make eye contact, don’t mumble. Speak clearly and louder.”

“I wasn’t mumbling!” I exclaimed. All three of us fell silent.

“Do you think you’ll go over there to see her?” my mother asked again. She always played the good cop to my father’s bad cop. “Now that she’s back home, she would probably like someone to talk to.”

“I don’t know.”

“If she’s anything like Pete and Cynthia, she won’t talk to us anymore,” my father interrupted. “After the way they’ve treated us, they don’t deserve to hear from any of us.”

“Will, let Ryan make his own decision on this.” My mother looked at me softly. She spoke as gently as possible. “None of us are forcing you to do anything. It’s been rough for the both of you these past years, but I think it would be good for both of you to get back together. You were always so close.”



“I’ll think about it.” I finished the last remnants of rice on my plate, took it to the kitchen, and headed upstairs to my room to be alone. At the top of the stairs I strained to pick out the loose ends of conversation at the table.

“Will, don’t push him into any position on this. Things have been going much better with Dr. Mueller lately; I don’t want him to regress. Let him process all this and get through it his way.”

“I did nothing of the sort. After all the help we offered them, only to have them completely turn their backs on us, I didn’t want to him to have his feelings hurt. That girl is no good for him.”

Later that evening, I searched for the newspaper article that was still in my desk after all this time. It was yellow and brittle as age began to work against it. It was the original story, from the *Ithaca Journal*, and this story would eventually be augmented and abridged into almost every major newspaper in the country. Her mug shot sat staring back, defiant and irritable, the way she could often be. This picture was the last time I would see her looking like this.

#### Pair Arrested In Recruiting Office Bombing

By Gregory Howard

Ithaca – Ithaca Police, New York State Troopers, and the FBI announced the arrest of a local woman and a Virginia Man in the bombing of the Armed Forces recruiting station on Triphammer Road last Monday that left an Ithaca Policeman seriously injured.

Agent Barry Lawson of the Federal Bureau of Investigation identified the pair as Alexandra M. Pearce, 21, of Lansing and Joshua Joplin, 24, of Falls Church, Virginia. The two were apprehended Thursday evening in New York City by members of the FBI and New York State Troopers.

The pair is accused of planting an explosive device in the main office of the U.S. Armed Forces Recruiting Station on the night of Monday September 15. Ithaca Police were informed by an anonymous caller of a break-in at the premises and were investigating when the explosion occurred. Ithaca Police Officer Oscar Talmadge was injured in the blast and is still in Intensive Care at Upstate Medical Center in Syracuse.

Agent Lawson wouldn't give specifics of motive at yesterday's press conference only to say that anti-war sentiment was a strong possibility-----

Dr. Mueller said it isn't beneficial for me to keep dwelling on those events. The last two or three years had been easier on me, but the events of the past week have carried me back into the muck. Shoving the brittle clipping back into its resting place, I attempt to keep my mind off of it. If Alex wants to see me, surely she'll call; my number hasn't changed. I'll give her at least a couple of days to get settled and hopefully, she'll call. Alex is usually the first one to make a move. Closure would be good for all of us.

\* \* \*

That night I dreamt of the summers I spent around the pool at her house. Becoming friends seemed pre-ordained; our fathers had been colleagues, friends, and rival professors at Cornell years before we even came along. It just sort of happened that the Pearce's moved in when a house came up for sale across from ours, and that a year after I was born, Alexandra followed. I dreamt not of our younger years, which saw the relationship function as how a brother and sister would, but the summer of 2001, the best of times before times got bad.

She had just returned from her freshmen year at the University of Pennsylvania. I had stayed at home to go the filmmaking program at Ithaca College. It was our first day seeing each other. I was in the pool, cooling off from the abnormally warm June afternoon. She sat on the deck, in a light blue bikini that matched the color of her eyes. Everybody may have seen us as on the level as brother and sister, but for years the fraternal bond between us had been growing

more complex, especially for me. Physical attraction battled and overtook my view of her. Her blond hair was tied back tight, accentuating her slightly pointed nose and highlighting her slim figure. She looked as desirous as she ever had, and for the first time, there seemed to be more than friendly affection in her body language, a flirtatiousness I had only seen on others.

We were discussing the merits of a flat tax, or more correctly, the flat tax's lack of merits. Politics had become a fixation over the past couple of years for both of us.

"It's the most unfair policy I've ever heard of," I said. "Everyone has to pay the same rate of tax regardless of how much they make."

"So," she responded, "Those with lower incomes have to pay more to make up for what the rich are supposed to be paying. And Republicans still claim the not taxing them will benefit the poor."

"It's the typical trickle down bullshit."

She laughed at that in between drinks of the rum and Coke by her side, the alcohol perused out of the Pearce's liquor cabinet. She now slid into the crisp water, taking a big gasp before diving under the surface. She continued all the way the opposite end of the pool. At the far end she sprang up in a burst, went back under, and made the return trip, not coming up for breath until she was directly in front of me. She emerged with another gasp and put her arms around my neck, playfully but not completely innocent.

"Ryan, are you still a virgin?"

"Why?" I mumbled, shifting my gaze to the pebble-looking liner of the pool.

“I’ve never seen you hang out with any other girls. I just wanted to know if you hooked up with someone at school.”

“No. No, not really,” I replied. I felt my face becoming flush with embarrassment. “You should know by now by know that’s not really the type of person I am.”

“I thought so.” She got out of the pool, wrapped a towel around herself and laid down in the sunlight.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked, also on my way out of the pool. I took the seat next to her, yanking the towel away from her to dry myself off.

“Well, first of all, you don’t even go away to school. Then, knowing you, instead of going out and partying and meeting people, you’ve spent the entire year watching those boring foreign movies. One of the best things about college is going out and having fun. Experiment. Go talk to some girls.”

This was complicated by the fact that I had never gotten up the confidence to tell her that I wanted her more than any random girls.

“Getting with girls is all about being confident,” she said, pouring another healthy portion of rum into her cup. “They eat that up.”

That was our last lazy summer. It may be cliché, but things really were never the same after that.

\* \* \*

Even though I'd taken my anxiety medication, I still had a near crippling tightness in my chest as I ventured across the street. I started to take short, controlled breaths at first, and then let them get progressively longer, just as Dr. Mueller had instructed. The attacks in general had reduced greatly in number over the last few months, but it seems any change in routine allows the opportunity for them to come back. I stood at the end of the Pearce's driveway gathering myself, eyes closed, recalling what I had all planned to say. I took a few steps up the drive, but before I even reached the stairs, Mr. Pearce had emerged from the front door, closing it behind him to meet me halfway.

He had on a mauve golf shirt with pleated chinos, always primed to head out and play 18 holes. His salt and pepper hair contained a bit more salt since the last time I had seen him up close. His glasses hung low over his sharp nose. It was always obvious where Alex got her nose from.

"Ryan, nice to see you. It's been quite a while," he said, outstretching his hand. The combination of the gesture with the warmness of his tone caught me by surprise. It helped ease some of the tightness.

"Yeah." Remember eye contact, talk clearly.

"I guess you know Alex is home by now. You probably want to see her, don't you?"

"If you'll allow me."

"It's not our decision," he responded. "It's up to her. She seems unwilling to see visitors at this point, but I'll go ask." He turned to head up the stone walkway to the front door. I

followed behind, cautiously, the dread creeping in with each step. He turned back to me as he reached the door.

“I think you better wait here,” he said, emphasizing it with an outstretched palm.

I nodded. It could have only been a minute or two before he re-emerged. Now it was he that seemed a bit agitated, as he re-arranged his glasses, taking his time with the answer.

“Alex says she doesn’t want to see anybody outside of the family at this moment. The situation here is still a little sensitive at this time. I hope you understand.”

“Of course.” Turning to head back across, he called out to me.

“Give her some time Ryan. I think she’ll be willing to see you soon.”

\* \* \*

“The only way these army pigs are going to understand we’re serious is to show it. If that means something violent, so be it. Forget about Bush and everyone in Washington at this point. The key is to start something on a direct, local level. You put a bomb in the army recruiting center, that takes the building out of commission. That keeps them from signing anybody up for a while. You get them to think long and hard about reopening the place. The less kids that sign up, the less there are to fight. The less there are to fight, the faster we’re out of Iraq.” It came roaring out of this Josh’s mouth, pounding on the table for just the right amount of emphasis. I couldn’t decide if he was trying to intimidate me or browbeat me.

“You’re planning on bombing the army recruiter’s here in Ithaca?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Alex responded. “We need some other local help. I thought you might be willing to participate.”

“We’ve got the same thing planned for New Haven, Rochester, Richmond, and Norfolk,” Josh continued. “If we are going to learn anything from history, we know a warmongering administration isn’t going to pay attention to marches and all that other non-violent shit.”

He was quite tall, barrel-chested, with unkempt hair and an impressive beard. He had a habit of talking down at you, literally. There was an intensity in all his actions that made agreeing with him the preferable thing to do. It also could have been the threat of violence to yourself if you didn’t agree. Alex appeared to pick up some of his mannerisms, especially the eyes. Hers were smaller and darker yet there was something behind them, an infection that only violent action could cure.

“We’re not going to kill anybody, Ryan,” she responded softly, yet still with intensity. “It’s going to go off after the office is closed for the night. We’re not going to resort to killing. That’s their game. We just want to show we’re not the traditional peaceniks.”

“What you’re doing isn’t any different from what the Weather Underground did,” I interjected. “Their actions didn’t exactly end the Vietnam War.”

The two of them scowled at me. I guess history hadn’t figured much into this plan.

“What you don’t understand about the Weather Underground is that they went too broad,” Josh started in again full of fire. “They were bombing everything: government buildings, police stations, universities. We are focused on one thing only, the ones that are

recruiting kids to fight in Iraq. We want the war to end. We're going after military targets only. It's completely different."

"No. It sounds exactly like what the Weather Underground did."

"Ryan, don't be ignorant," Alex countered. "We all know simple protesting isn't going to change anything. We have to take drastic action if we want change. How many more people are going to die, American and Iraqi, if somebody doesn't do something to make it stop?"

As 2003 went into 2004, I didn't hear from her at all. Sometime in July she came home with Josh. They moved into an old house out near Cornell, but I don't think I saw them more than once that entire summer. When the fall semester came, she didn't return to Penn. I could never bring myself to go over there. Whatever was in Josh had taken hold of her and filled her with irrational ideas. It was finally her that brought me back. Returning from school one night, my mother told me she had called, that she sounded frantic. Concern overrode all of my better judgment at that instance. I should have known nothing good was to come of it.

When I finally went to see her, it was just her and I in the cavernous house. It was creaky and drafty, thick with the residue of pot and beer. I stood waiting for an embrace, anything that would indicate it had been a while.

"I'm not going to help you do anything," I began.

She stiffened and looked away, fighting back tears.

"What is wrong with you?" she asked.

"What's wrong with me? You can't be serious with this stuff?"



“Dead serious.” She started to choke back sobs.

“Do you have any idea how stupid this is? What are you trying to prove? Who does this guy think he is?”

“You want this war to end too. Why not do something about it?”

“This will accomplish nothing. Do the both of you know anything about history? This is the same misguided shit that only hurts legitimate protest efforts. That Josh has brainwashed you into thinking of this-”

“I knew that was underneath all this,” she said between more pronounced sobs. “You’re mad because I’m fucking Josh.”

“What does that have to do with anything?” I asked. Even though I knew it was true, it hurt a lot more to actually hear it come out of her mouth.

“I think it has everything to do with this. That’s why you’ve haven’t been talking to me.”

Perhaps because I didn’t want to deal with the truth at that moment, I let her have whatever feelings she wanted at the moment. Like so many times before, the resolve I had built up to tell her how I really felt about her washed away by the time it was due. There was no way I could pull her out of the devotion to this task that had so deeply burrowed into her. She sat down on the rattan couch, wiping her eyes with the sleeve of her sweatshirt. I thought the crying was an act, meant to manipulate me into helping out. Looking back on it later, it might have been a cry for help. Alex had gotten herself so far into something that its real danger only came to her when it was too late to get out of it. Out of fear, she turned to the only one that she knew could get her away from it all. Blinded by my own conflicts, I never saw it then.

“You’ve been the one that hasn’t called or been seen in months, Alex,” I said as I sat down next to her. “Until you showed back up in Ithaca, I didn’t even know where you were.” It was the first time since in the pool a few summers ago that I wanted to sit down to really tell how I felt. Now it was sitting there, in a vulnerable moment between the two of us, one where I could swoop in and save the day and maybe for once get the girl. Like always, I let her take over.

“We need to keep a low profile. Josh didn’t want me to get you involved, but I persisted. I really need you to help me out.”

“When is this going to happen?” I asked.

“Monday.”

She embraced me and I could feel some of the tension release out of her body. She sniffled and wiped her nose with her sleeve. The breaths wheezed out of her chest. As she regained some of her composure, a switch was flicked. She got closer, right up into my chest. I could feel a sharp prickling move up my spine. Her features and actions became slinky, sensual, all clearly forced.

“Please do this for me?” she murmured as she ran the back of her hand down my face. I gingerly moved away from the couch as if I had come across a poisonous snake in the wild.

She backed away also, terrified. Some of it was because of what she had just done. Mostly it was the terror of what my reaction signified. I was now the weak link in the chain. She knew it and began frantically to come to realize what my unwillingness meant to the operation.

“I’m gonna go,” I said heading towards the door.

She grabbed by arm. The fear was fighting to spring forth from her. The hole was dug and it was too deep to climb out of.

“Ryan, *please, please* don’t tell anyone about this. Not the police, not my parents, not your parents. *Please.*” She kissed my cheek. Taking a step back, I could see the little girl come out of her. When we were little and it was time for one of us to go home, she would put up the same pleading, sad-eyed look. *Please don’t go.*

I turned, walking out the door as quickly as I could. It was too late to get a bus, so I walked down the hill back towards the Commons in a cold, persistent rain. That was the last time we spoke.

\* \* \*

They were caught in Grand Central Station attempting to board a train to Montreal. Alex pleaded guilty, agreeing to testify against Josh. Because of her cooperation, she only got two years. On account of Officer Talmadge being present when the bomb went off, it added years to Josh’s sentence. I think he got something around 25. My sentence was also just beginning. The guilt over Officer Talmadge’s injuries haunted over me. The anxiety attacks grew longer and stronger. I had to drop out of school. I tried not to think about her in prison. I tried not thinking about any of it. Dr. Mueller and time have mended some of my problems so that I’m at least able to hold down a job. I hate it, the pay’s so lousy, and I have to still live with my parents. Alex got out a few months early. Now she’s home and it’s clear that time hasn’t mended everything.

\* \* \*

A few days later I crossed the street again. The anxiety doesn't come like I thought it would. I rang the doorbell, and after a brief wait, Mr. Pearce came to the door.

"Ryan, I don't think Alex wants to see you right now."

"I know, Mr. Pearce." Where I thought the words would stumble out of me, they emerged succinct, knowing that it all had to be said. "Can you let Alex know I'm sorry. I'm sorry for calling the police. I only wanted them to get caught before they could get the bomb in there. That police officer wasn't supposed to get hurt. I'm sorry to you too Mr. Pearce. I just made the entire situation worse. If you could just tell her that. I really don't need to see her."

"I don't think you have anything to apologize for. But...I'll let her know how you feel."

I turned and headed back home. Halfway across the street, I noticed Mr. Vrabel on his deck, staring, arms folded, smirking.

"Go back inside asshole!" I yelled. Mr. Vrabel only turned and entered his home, the door crashing closed behind him. My own door swung open and there stood my father, grinding his teeth, ready to explode.

\* \* \*

As I came home from work one evening a few days later, my mother greeted me giddily.

"Alex is here," she whispered.

Again, the anxiety didn't come.

"She's in the family room."

After taking off my coat and shoes, she led me to her, as if I couldn't find my own way there.

"I'll leave you too alone," she said, making her way upstairs with some laundry.

Everything about her was darker. Her blue eyes were faded, almost gray. Her hair had turned into the dirtiest blonde. Her skin was paler than I've ever seen it. Even what she wore was dark. A baggy black sweatshirt hung almost down to her knees. I sat opposite her, each of us hesitant to make eye contact. Like always, I waited for her to begin the conversation.

"I'm moving away," she began. "I'm actually leaving tomorrow. I think it's best for everyone that I go."

It all came blurring out of me. "I just wanted to keep you from doing something stupid, that nobody would get hurt. I made things worse for everybody."

She let out a deep sigh as way of cutting me off. "I've learned that you shouldn't dwell on the past," she said, her voice a bit wobbly. "It will only eat you alive. I know you're sorry. I know you did it because you thought it was the right thing to do."

Hearing the word 'sorry' triggered something within me. What I clearly knew as anger began to build up inside of me. I could feel it surge up breaking up my guilt and anxiety, making my heart beat fast, my palms sweat. What came out now what was I really wanted to say to her, what she needed to hear.

"Sorry. You know what you did was incredibly stupid, right. There's a police officer out there who can't walk because of you. What did you think this was going to change? Nothing about the war obviously. It carried on despite your grand ideas. The only things you

changed were all of our lives. You ended up in jail. I'm the one that has to live with sending someone there to get maimed. I have consequences to live with also. If somebody should be sorry, it's you."

She was crying now, sniffing, and wiping her eyes and nose with the tattered sleeve of her sweatshirt.

"I wish none of it ever happened," she said between sobs. "I'm sorry. For all of it. I know you were in love with me and I tried to take advantage of that. I shouldn't have done any of it."

Hearing her crying, my mother emerged into the room with a handful of tissues. She sat next to Alex, wrapping her up in an embrace. The anger drained out of me, I now felt remorseful over some of what I just said. This must have been why she had waited so long to talk to me. She must have known it would have ended up with her like this. I left the room to give her space, but also because I would join her if I stayed.

I came back a few moments later to find her collected on the couch. My mother still sat patiently by her side.

"You're mom says you dropped out of college a while ago," she started. "I'm moving to Charlottesville, Virginia to join a friend from Penn. She's going to try to help me get into UVA. You should go back to school Ryan. Be a filmmaker. Get out of Ithaca, get away from all these bad memories."

"You're still telling me what to do," I responded flatly.

Where once she would have laughed now drew nothing. She stood, clearly ready to go. We all went out to the hallway.

“I didn’t mean anything by that,” I called after her.

“I know,” she said flatly. “We should keep in touch. Are you on Facebook?”

“No.”

“Typical you,” she said half-jokingly. She kissed me on the cheek. It felt warm and comforting, but those feeling quickly floated away with a yearning for more. That it was all I was ever going to get ran through my head as she opened the door. For once it was I that had the look of not wanting to see the other go. She must have noticed it also, as she came back to give me a quick embrace.

“There are plenty of other girls out there for you Ryan,” she whispered while letting go. She went over to my mother and gave her a hug, thanking her for everything. On the way out, she gave us another wave of appreciation.

I watched her go from the same window that I watched that car come driving past a few days earlier. As I watched her blonde hair flutter in the wind, I felt my mother’s hand on my shoulder. One hand became two, which became two arms wrapped around my chest. Tears started to form. She squeezed me tighter as the tears began to hit her forearms.

## Captain Rick's Jungle Adventure

One hand on the steering wheel, the other on his pounding head, Rick watched them board the boat. There was a clear difference between the children and the parents. The children giddily dashed on board, eager to climb towards a seat that bordered the water. Their parents didn't show such enthusiasm. Beaten down by the boiling July sun and the constant need to keep up with their over stimulated children, they shuffled on with sleeping infants and bag after bag stamped with the Florida Fun Land logo on it. Rick always felt a certain camaraderie with the fathers, squinting in the blazing sun, looking like they just wanted the day to be over. They were suffering from the family vacation hangover. Rick's hangover was of the more traditional kind.

They continued to board while Rick rubbed his temples, wishing he could wear a pair of sunglasses or at least a hat. Jesus, a hat would be so welcome right now. The Florida sun was searing his poor balding head. His shirt was soaked from sweat. He could smell the booze oozing out of him onto his yellowed captain's shirt. Rick took a few steps back from the oncoming traffic to keep his boozy scent at bay.

Drinking wasn't uncommon for him, but drinking during the day had only become a habit since coming to Florida Fun Land three months ago. It was about the only way to deal with becoming Captain Rick, a glorified carnie, taking weary families on a trip to the wilds of Africa.



Drinking is what had did him in New York, missing auditions or not getting parts on account of getting shitfaced the night before. The wife begged him to quit, threatened to leave, take the kids with her, the whole melodrama. Surely she wasn't serious about that. When there's no paycheck coming in, that decision becomes a bit easier to make. They left when Rick was out on an audition one afternoon. He came back to their midtown apartment with a note left behind. How thoughtful. It only took a few months to get kicked out of the apartment. He scrounged up just enough to board a stinking Greyhound back to Florida to live with mom in the condo with the damn cats. So yeah, he drank. It was needed to get by.

When the boat was filled, he took his seat in the cracked leather chair that served as the captain's chair, and hit the button that pushed the boat down its motorized track.

“Hi, my name is Rick and I'll be your captain today.”

Rick turned to face the crowd cramped in his boat. The children gave him a look of excitement, anticipation. The parents looked relieved to be off their feet for a few minutes. Most everybody seemed to be eating something. The common denominator through all the people that has passed through Florida Fun Land was the ability to shove any and everything into their mouths. Theme parks appeared to give people license to an unlimited appetite that no five dollar hot dogs can cure. One girl was painting her face with her rapidly melting ice cream cone. A man bordering on being morbidly obese sat in the back in near romantic engagement with one of those grotesque turkey legs that were sold throughout the park. He watched the man attack the thing with gigantic bites, tearing into its greasy meat. Rick turned to face the front of the boat so he wouldn't become sick.

“Ladies and gentleman, welcome to the fantastic Jungle Adventure. As I said, my name is Rick and I will be your guide as we travel down the Mazeki River. Just a quick word, that

Florida Fun Land's Jungle Adventure is in no way based on any properties of the Walt Disney Company or its associated theme parks. Let's begin our journey."

No laugh on the Disney line. Either the adults weren't aware of what a second-class rip off that this ride was, or were too full of self-loathing at being on a second-class rip-off to want to even acknowledge it.

The boat idled up the shallow bed of water that functioned as the Mazeki towards a village that ran up on the left hand side. When the crowd's attention began to shift to the village, Rick quickly removed a flask that he had positioned underneath his chair. He had stitched a leather pocket making for easy concealment. He took a quick nip and shoved it back, all the while making it look like he dropped something.

"According to records, Sir John Taylor discovered the Mazeki in 1885 while looking for a passage through the Congo. The first village that Taylor came upon was what is up ahead on your right. It was the chief village of the Yoando, later to be renamed Prudencetown. You can see it is pretty much empty today. The Yoando weren't too responsive to Taylor's methods so they were unfortunately mostly eliminated from Prudencetown. But they did leave behind remnants of their civilization."

The village was essentially some palm and cypress trees with a few small weathered thatched huts. There was nothing outside of the huts that resembled a village other than some random "artifacts" thrown about. One of the maintenance guys said they had just gone to a junkyard and told to get anything to fill in the village. In between a cluster of trees sat one distinct landmark. It was a stone tower with a series of faces etched on it, stacked one on top of another.

“That tower with the faces was called Bawan to the natives. How it got here isn’t known. The Yoando weren’t believed to be particularly artistic. It is quite impressive however.”

The tower was heavily leaning towards a clearing where the trees didn’t quite maintain the illusion of the Mazeki. A golf cart could be seen sitting idly in the open space, in clear view of Rick and everyone in the boat. A few children began pointing and asking what it was to their parents.

“I see a few of you noticing the interesting vehicle behind Bawan. It seems the Yoando mastered golf cart technology before the Western World even knew about it. When John Taylor returned to England to tell the King about it, he laughed and said no such thing existed or shall exist. That’s why, if you’ve ever been to the U.K, you’ll notice that they don’t have carts on their golf courses.”

A few of the parents on the boat let out a little chuckle. The man in the back, now finished with his turkey leg, looked up from his snack to give Rick a disapproving scowl.

“Up ahead you will be able to see Martha Falls, named after John Taylor’s wife who died when he was making his journey up the Mazeki. It was after he learned of this tragic news that he named them in her honor. The falls are colored in that green because of a special form of plant life that only grows in its waters. Now we are going to get real close to the falls, but I recommend that no one stick out their hands or attempt to drink any water of the falls. Florida Fun Land is not responsible for any illness caused by doing so.”

That was the cue for some of the children to dip their hands into the algae ridden water. The more engaged parents stuck out their own to reign in their children. Rick thought of his own children. They’re a little old for a ride of this type now, but he knew they would have hated it even when they were younger. It would have been a chore to have Donnie, the older one, sit still

for the entire journey. That one could never concentrate on anything for any amount of time. It's why they had to put him in a special school, the teachers at his old one were so fed up with having to deal with him. Rick wondered if his wife had found any school in Scranton like that. Kyle, he would've wondered why he couldn't go off and explore the wonders of Prudencetown. That's not how the rides work buddy, you got to be a passenger, trust the captain. He would have thrown a tantrum until he or his wife bought something to shut him up. Guess he doesn't have to deal with headaches like that anymore. Then again, he hasn't seen his kids in six months. They haven't even called in the last two. All you got to do is call boys.

“If you look up further ahead as we begin to make our first turn, you can see the vast fields of Asphaltia. It is one of the vast stretches of uninhabited plains in the Mazeki region. No life has been seen in the fields in the last two decades.”

“Isn't that just a parking lot?” an older child asked of one of his parents.

“At one time it may have been,” Rick shot back, “but now, they are great barren plains never to see the sight of humanity again...And here we have some elephants.”

Two elephants sat in a clearing of trees. Like all the animals, they were crudely constructed out of plaster and had no ability to move. Out of one's upturned snout shot a continuous stream of water that pelted the side of the boat. It splashed up and hit some children, raising their excitement level to a few squeals and laughing.

“Why don't the elephants move?” Another child, another question, this time directed at Rick. The innocence in his eyes made Rick a bit apprehensive in giving another smartass reply. Who's a jerk to a child? he thought. He decided on the stock answer all the captains gave in this situation.

“They're sleeping,” he answered in a soft voice, pulling a finger to his lips.

“Then why is that one still spraying water?”

“Elephants do a lot when they’re sleeping. They sleep standing up and…” Rick was fumbling here, “It’s almost a reflex, like sleepwalking.”

The child seemed satisfied enough that he stopped asking questions. His father sat bemusedly smiling out the side of the boat. It said to Rick that he’s your problem now. The fat man in the back, arms crossed, let out a flustered sigh.

Passing the elephants, the boat came to a great big rock, a mound of plaster four feet taller than the boat. The grey exterior had begun to chip and flake, its wire frame beginning to show in spots from underneath its plaster casing.

“This is Mitchell’s rock, named after John Taylor’s son. It’s imposing shape hides just as imposing an animal: a pack of lions.”

“Pride,” the fat man in the back shouted out.

“What was that?” Rick said.

“They’re called a pride of lions,” the man said.

“Very well sir. A pride of lions live in Mitchell’s rock. And if everyone is very still, hopefully we will be able to see one of them.”

As the boat glided past the stone, a solitary lion came into view. It sat under a tree, facing the passing vessel. It was far enough away that most couldn’t see that the nose of the lion was missing, and that a hole was in its back that housed a nest of starlings. Built into the rock, a roar was piped in through a speaker, more feeble than ferocious. It could barely be heard from the boat. The boat captain was supposed to enhance the lion’s roar but Rick felt that any guttural noises would increase the likelihood of losing his liquid breakfast.

“I think I hear it getting angry at us. Let’s see if we can speed this boat up and get out of here.”

Rick pushed another button and the boat sped up, leaving the tattered lion behind. Some of the children, their interest stirred for the first time, let out a disappointed moan at the lack of an exciting resolution. The boat continued on until it hit another cluster of palm trees. At this, it began to slow down until they encountered what looked like a group of rocks sitting in the water.

Rick played it quiet to gain the kids’ attention again, to give a sense of danger. “We have emerged from the lion’s den only to emerge into the dangerous lair of the hippopotamus.” The little girl that was earlier eating the ice cream now sat crouched under the boat’s sides, cautiously peeking over the edges. Some of the other children hastily turned from side to side to get a better look.

“These hippos have been known to attack these boats,” Rick whispered through the microphone as he pulled a gun out from a compartment near the control panel. “A captain always has to be prepared.”

A creaking noise started and one of the brown rocks began to move. A mechanical hippo’s head rose out of the water. Its mouth was wide open, as if it was attempting to swallow the boat whole. Shrieks came out of some of the children. Others clung to their parents. Most looked on with bemusement. One father was asleep as his young son clutched his arm.

“Stand back.” A canned roar sounded out of a speaker in the hippo’s mouth followed by another loud clang. Rick fired two shots on cue as the hippo roared. The noises ceased, but the hippo was frozen with its mouth open. It was supposed to recede back into the water after the shots.

“Did you kill it?” a little boy asked.

“I’m pretty sure I missed, but I think I scared it stiff. I hope we can get out of here before it tries again. Uh...hippos freeze when they get scared.” Rick turned and placed the gun down. He reflexively reached for the flask and only stopped when he realized someone may be looking at him.

“Sonofabitch,” he said under his breath.

The boat took its final turn and headed towards a brick building with stark white columns in front of it.

“Now that we’re past the hippos, it’s clear sailing until we get to Port Winston, the center of power in the Mazeki delta. Port Winston was built in 1887. It’s imposing structure and large columns stand as a stark reminder to the riches gained by the exploitation of the surrounding land and people.”

Hardly anyone was paying attention now, except for that man in the back. His face scrunched up as he began muttering to no one in particular. The exasperation was building into a series of huffs. The tapping of his foot could be heard rattling off the metal bottom of the boat, ticking rhythmically.

About 200 yards from Port Winston and the end of Jungle Adventure, the boat stopped with a sudden jolt. It threw Rick off his chair into the aisle separating his rows of passengers. Rick slowly got to his feet, attempting to steady himself on his console. His face was flush with sunlight and embarrassment. He began to repeatedly press the button to get the boat moving. Nothing.

“What the fuck else is going to go wrong today?” Not realizing he was that close to the microphone, it rang out for all the boat to hear it. Gasps followed, and after a few moments of excited chatter, the fat man’s voice could be heard fighting through.

“There are children here you know.”

Rick looked at the man’s scorching red face. The tea kettle had burst. He appeared to be accompanied by no one else on the boat. Rick thought that a bit strange.

“What’s your problem buddy?” Rick shouted back. “You want to be the captain or something? You certainly had no problem correcting me earlier.”

“Because you’re doing a terrible job. You’re supposed to be adding to an experience, crafting a world for the children. Instead, you’re making fun of it, trying to be a smart guy.”

“Where the hell do you think we are?” Rick asked. “This is just some crappy ride at a crappy amusement park. If you want some whitewashed fantasy, go to Orlando.”

Back in New York, just before getting evicted from his apartment, Tom Yates told him go back to Florida. All those theme parks in Orlando were always looking for failed actors, Tom said. Why the hell isn’t Tom down here then? He’s so full of shit. Needing the paycheck, Rick had no other options. He got an interview at Disney. They turned him down, saying his “background didn’t match what we were going for.” Rick knew they could smell the booze on him. He had almost forgotten about the thing entirely, arriving just in time, haggard and hung over. Mom was the one that remembered Florida Fun Land. The place was a dump when he was a kid, a traveling carnival that had set up shop in a dried up swamp. It hadn’t changed much since. The pay was enough to pay the child support and fuel his nights out. There was nothing happy about this place.

The attention of the boat had now turned to the two men. Rick walked down the narrow aisle separating the two rows and got right in front of the fat man who was now also standing.

“You got to come here and stick your two cents in.” Rick was pointing at him now. I don’t need any help from some fat slob gagging down a turkey leg. Now sit down and shut up.”



The man pushed aside Rick's finger, got right into his face. "I knew it," he said. "I can smell the booze on you. I knew you had been drinking. I'm going to notify park management."

At this Rick grabbed the man by his thick neck in an attempt to physically put him back in his seat. The man grabbed Rick around his waist and the two stood there grappling, grabbing at each other, their breaths becoming labored. Feeling the man begin to sway, Rick kicked at his legs in an attempt to get the man off balance enough to get out of his embrace. The man's leg buckled and he stumbled backwards. His excess weight worked much the way an avalanche would, pulling the man's entire body along with it. He tumbled over the side, and landed into the Mazeki in a full belly flop.

The man sat up in the shallow water, screaming "Help!" and "Security!" to anyone that would listen. The children became the most excited they had been the entire journey. They were laughing and pointing at the most interesting stop on the tour so far. The parents that had not been bothering to pay attention were now, and confused, whether this was part of the ride or not. Rick backpedaled, sat back down, and wiped his brow with the sleeve of his shirt. Sweat was running from his bald scalp all the way down the back. He could not even find the radio needed to call in the mechanical problem.

After perhaps only another thirty seconds of immobility, the boat finally found its life, and began its way again towards Port Winston. The children on the boat were still giggling as the man in the water stayed behind.

"He looks like one of the hippos," a boy said.

Rick looked towards the dock, and saw that people began to congregate at the point where the ride ended. He pulled the flask out of its little compartment. When a cluster of overgrown ferns approached his side of the boat, he tossed the bottle into the gathering.

After the commotion at Port Winston had settled, Rick was called into the manager of Florida Fun Land's office. Even though the office was air conditioned, Rick was still a hot, sweaty mess. The manager, whose name Rick couldn't remember, as well as a tall man in a suit stood in front of him.

"Because of today's incident, we're going to have to let you go," the manager said firmly but with a hint of disappointment in his voice. "On top of physically attacking a customer, you've also opened up the park to a lawsuit which this man has vowed to file."

"I'm sorry sir," Rick responded. "The man was verbally confrontational, and with all the problems occurring on the boat I lost my cool. There's not any defense for my actions. But I really need this job. I've got child support payments to make. I can't see my kids if I don't make the payments."

"This is not negotiable. Besides, there are also allegations made by this man, along with some others, that you had been drinking while operating the ride. This is a family environment. We have a zero tolerance policy for this sort of thing. We'll give you time to collect your things, but we want you gone within the hour."

Rick desperately wanted to make this man change his mind. Remembering his name would be a good start. As words and statements rattled around his head, nothing coherent formed. Come on, you're an actor, figure something out. Give these morons an impassioned speech to win this job back.

He placed his employee badge on the desk, and headed out the door.

"We will need to get a hold of you if and when a lawsuit arises," the manager said as Rick was heading out.

"Sure."

Walking across the vast expanses of Asphaltia, he could see the boats leaving for their trek down the Mazeki. The unbearable summer sun basted him in sweat as he reached Mom's car. Rick immediately got in the roasting car, and got out of the lot as fast as he could. Down the road, he pulled out a bottle of vodka he had stashed in the glove compartment. Taking it to his lips, it went down as warm as coffee. It caused him to pause. No more of this. Get your life together, Rick. Make your kids want to come see you. Today is a blessing. I'm going to be a new man from now on.

Okay, but I'm going to finish this bottle first.

## Most Days... I'm a Rambling Man

There was something about the smell of gasoline that pushed Shawn a little closer to the edge. Not full blown insanity, more the kind where you just walk around and ramble about the evil mites in you eyebrows that are commanding their message of apocalypse to be told to all. Nothing major. The cars sped past Shawn on the Arroyo parkway, streaks of various colors and noise, horns blaring. Cusses and various obscene gestures were tossed in his direction as he straddled the thin white line between safely trying to thumb a ride and being totally obliterated by these motorists. One thing Shawn could always count on during this daily trek was the ever-present smell of gasoline that wafted through the swarm of traffic. It always burned his nostrils at first, making him cough. Soon after the headaches would start, followed by the disorientation. Then those feelings would start. They came just about every day he was out here.

Each passing vehicle felt as if it was getting closer to him, ready to mow him down. Shawn continued to walk briskly, scraping the concrete barriers that bordered the shoulder. A red sports car came racing up from behind, weaving through slower traffic, intent on coming after him. Now in the passing lane, it hurdled towards him in a blur. Out of the driver side window, a figure emerged, ghoulish, laughing maniacally. The beast swung a rusty machete in the air, ready to strike. Shawn knew he couldn't get out of its way, not at this speed. As a last

defense, he ducked low, hands over his head, hoping this figure would miss. The car zipped past and merged into another lane. Relieved, Shawn stood up to find that the bloodthirsty monster was no longer hanging out of the car.

Traffic began to get snarled on the Arroyo this morning. No car could go faster than 35 now. The rush of cars became a steady line of vehicles progressing in three lanes. The horns and shouts began to get less prevalent. The reprieve wouldn't last long. He had to get back home before that smell came back.

A bit farther down the parkway was the Pasadena Self-Storage, a compact looking concrete building that Shawn called home. Living in the storage facilities was supposedly forbidden, but if you gave Jorge the night manager a little incentive to look the other way, it was no problem. During the day it was a different story. You had to deal with Jeanine, who said she didn't allow any homeless scumbags to live in the self-storage, even though she was blind to the fact that there were actually three others doing so. Shawn had found that there were only two factors in dealing with her. All you have to do is be fast and not get caught.

As he approached the rectangular behemoth, he casually looked into the window to see if Jeanine was manning the desk. The desk was empty at the moment. There wouldn't have to be a lot of waiting around this time. It would only take seconds to get past the desk to the stairs. Getting past Jeanine wasn't any more difficult than getting past those idiot orderlies at the hospital. They never even noticed that Shawn had stopped taking his medication. Not being drugged up made it easy to slip past their less than watchful eyes.

A couple of steps and he was to the stairs. Jeanine's voice could be heard talking on her cell phone from somewhere, loudly and profanely. More than likely it had to do with someone

not paying their monthly fee on time. There had been many times that she had threatened to bring in the storage scavengers if she didn't get her payments. Shawn always made sure that he paid Jorge obviously. Even with those arrangements, the situation had become dicey in the past weeks. Sandy, another "tenant" of the complex, thought it would be a good idea to cook inside the shed one evening. Sandy, never one known to be in complete control of his faculties, had allowed a small fire to start. Only Jorge's fast action along with some lies about it being an electrical fire had kept Jeanine at bay. Since that incident, the others had become keenly aware that their tenure on Arroyo could be short.

Shawn was moving very carefully along the edge of the hallway that led to home. He sidled along, keeping his arms and back flat against the rough concrete walls of the building. He dragged his feet along for the fear that footsteps would make just enough noise that it would bring some attention. Her voice was getting louder, closer. It would be better to turn back and try again, but the incident this morning on the Arroyo made Shawn desperate for the shelter. He continued on his deliberate pace until he heard footsteps coming behind him. He saw her turn the corner. They both froze. Her voice went silent, and after slowly putting her phone in her pocket, began to run. Her blocky persona was thundering straight towards him. She came after him as fast as the red car this morning. Her arms swung a manner that Shawn felt were clubs ready to rain down on his body. Fire was shooting out of her eyes. Her breathing took on a sharp rasp. Each exhale filled the hall with the smell of sulfur. In the place of Jeanine stood another creature ripe with bloodlust, with burning skin and fangs dripping with acid. It grew in size with each resulting step.

"You! Stop! Stop right there!" The words growled out of the creature, so loud that they rattled the corrugated metal doors of the sheds.

The decision had to be made right then what to do. Shawn could try to outrun her to his shed, but he would have to stop to unlock it, get in, and lock it back up before this beast got there. She would no doubt be able to come crashing right through anyway with arms as massive as that. No, the best decision was to likely make a mad dash away from the self-storage and head back out to the parkway. The cars were nothing compared to having to deal with this blood-thirsty creature. Shawn ran as fast as he could to the far stairway. As he ran, the walls began to burst into the flames. The flames began to singe his clothes. The heat continued to intensify as he headed down the stairs, clearing two or three at a time. He continued running until the world turned back into buildings and sunshine. His skin and clothes were drenched in sweat, but showed no signs of burns. His running had taken him as far as the small convenience store almost a half a mile away. Peering into the window and seeing the wall of cool drinks in the back, thirst overwhelmed him.

\* \* \*

“I don’t believe for one second anything about what you just said,” said Pete as the cash register chimed, and he placed the tattered bills in their corresponding slot.

“Well, I know what I’ve seen,” replied Shawn in between long chugs of Dr. Pepper. “I thought that was going to be it for me.”

Pete began to laugh and Shawn asked, “What’s funny about that?”

“Man, you come in here at least once a week and tell the craziest stories that no one would ever believe. Has anybody every told you you’re totally nuts?”

Shawn had been told many times. It was the main reason he had been put in the hospital. It was the reason the doctors kept him in a drugged up stupor. It was the reason for the electroshock treatments, which had wiped away a good chunk of his memory. He would rather deal with the world the way it is, monsters and all, than go back there.

“What do you think?” he asked.

Pete shrugged. “I don’t really know man. You talk and act kind of crazy. Maybe you should go get some help.”

“I’ve done that before. You know what they do to you there?” responded Shawn.

Pete suddenly became hesitant to prolong the conversation. The implication of where the conversation was headed was clear to him now.

“Are you going to buy anything else?” was all Peter could get out.

“Just this,” replied Shawn as he put a candy bar and two more crumpled bills on the counter. Pete gave him his change, and he headed out through the automatic doors into the sun-drenched afternoon.

\* \* \*

The ground now felt as if sparks were shooting out of it, giving some kind of weird energy. A fiery premonition began to flow through Shawn’s thoughts. Something big was going to happen today. The feelings started to come back, seemingly out of nowhere. The sweat on his forehead felt like acid running down his face, stinging as it got near his eyes. A high-pitched chattering grew louder and louder, overwhelming Shawn from everywhere. All sense of direction disappeared. He needed to find a place to sit for a minute.



As he approached the shady spot on the sidewalk, the sense of commotion spread all around him. There were numerous workers going in all directions, carrying tools, putting up bleachers and towers. A surge of hammering and sawing could be heard, these noises clearly not being dreamed up by him. The realization that it was almost New Year's dawned on him. All of this was preparation for the Tournament of Roses parade. Somehow he had ended up on Colorado Boulevard even though he had no intention of going that far. He paused for a little longer to fully compose himself, reached into the little paper bag at his side, and pulled out his soda for a drink or two.

Two men in their early twenties were approaching, each of them carrying a couple sections of wooden plank. The two looked down at him and back at each other before setting their boards down.

"Hey man, you're in the way. We got to set up some bleachers here for the parade," one of them said followed by an irritated sigh from the other.

Shawn looked up at the two, noticing that the one that sighed had tattoos running up his right arm. The familiar twinge started up in him. The little stars that dotted his arm he began to pulse and swirl out of his arm into the air, enveloping the space surrounding the three of them. Shawn scrambled to his feet, beginning to back away.

"You feeling alright?" the one without the tattoos asked. "You don't look very good. You want some water?"

"Nah," he said, attempting to keep his composure. "Would you know if South Daisy Avenue is nearby? I know someone that lives there. If I could get there, I'd be fine."

“I don’t think it’s too far down that way,” one of them answered as he pointed east.

“Thanks.” Shawn reached for his bag, careful not to make eye contact. The one with the tattoos, being courteous, had already picked it up. The spinning stars emerged again, faster than before. It began to make him dizzy.

“I don’t need it,” Shawn blurted out, knocking the bag out of the man’s hand. The remnants of the soda hissed as it emptied onto the sidewalk. The dark liquid almost instantly created a crater in the ground, growing larger by the second. Shawn raced across Colorado Boulevard and kept going all the way to South Daisy without stopping.

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Good, the car was in the driveway, Shawn thought to himself as he approached the cream colored stucco house. It must have been her day off of work. He wiped the sweat from off his brow while taking deep breaths. Nothing out of the ordinary seemed to be occurring around here. No menacing objects flying out of the sky, no voices ringing around his head. Hopefully things would stay somewhat normal for a while.

He rang the doorbell twice, out of habit, and there was a small waiting period before a woman opened the door. She had on a pair of old gray sweatpants and a green t-shirt. Her dark hair was tied back into a ponytail, allowing her dark, saucer-like eyes to be shown. Shawn gravitated to those eyes; they drew him in, their darkness standing out so much from her pale complexion. She looked Shawn up and down with one hand on her hip and the other running through her hair.

“Hi, Elizabeth,” he said. “I didn’t know if you’d be home or not, but I saw your car, so...”

“What do you need now Shawn?” she asked in a nervous yet weary tone. Her face scrunched up after she finished speaking, as if it pained her to say those words. Shawn realized this was not a situation she wanted to deal with at the moment.

“I just need to come in to rest for a little bit. I’ve had rough day.”

Elizabeth coughed, and stared down at her feet for a few seconds before offering a response.

“Aren’t you supposed to be in the hospital?”

Shawn didn’t really want to answer, but she was one of the few people that he felt he could trust. “I left. You don’t know how bad that place is.”

“Come in.” The hiccup in her voice made it seem like she was going to cry. Shawn could tell just by looking at her. Those eyes grew darker, giving it away.

Once inside, he sat down on the couch gingerly, balancing on the edge of the cushions. Knowing what his state of cleanliness was, he felt guilty about getting anything dirty. Being out of the sun was making a big difference. The edge was going out of him.

“I’ll get you some water,” Elizabeth said as she headed towards the kitchen.

Shawn looked around. Everything that he remembered about the house was pretty much the same. Everything was so neat and orderly, from the pictures on the wall to the stack of magazines on the coffee table in front of him. He thumbed through one quickly, but placed it back in its place hearing her approach.

She came back with a glass of water and a cigarette. She set the glass on a rubber coaster on the table, and picked up the lighter that was nearby. Her hands were shaking slightly. It took a few bumbling attempts to light it. Once she did, she took a deep drag and let it out slowly.

“You’re smoking?” Shawn asked as he lifted the glass to his mouth. The coolness of the water felt comforting against the fiery feeling in his throat.

“You’re the reason I started again,” Elizabeth answered back. There was a streak of nuisance in her voice that took Shawn aback. He rarely heard Elizabeth talk in such a way to him. She noticed the uneasiness that had sprung up in him. “So, you’re seeing things again?” she asked in as soothing a voice as she could muster.

“This time is really bad,” Shawn began. “Everything is coming after me. And I just have this feeling that something bad is going to happen, I don’t know what, but I can sense it or something.”

He took another drink and looked around the living room. The furniture still looked brand new even if it must be three or four years old by now. He noticed all the photographs that sat on the coffee table and hung on the wall, pictures of Shawn and Elizabeth at various places. They were of a time that Shawn barely could remember now, after the treatments had wiped most of it away. The house itself was familiar, but nothing that the house contained held any significance in his mind. He picked up a photo that looked like the two posing in front of the Grand Canyon. He had no recollection of that trip. They both looked younger than they did now. Judging from the smiles on both their faces, it must have been before Shawn had really gotten bad. It felt discouraging to him to see a part of his self that was never going to come back. He held the picture in hopes of willing some sort of memory out of it.

Elizabeth had moved on to her second cigarette. She took the picture out of his hands, and gazed at it through the clouds of smoke she was exhaling. She placed it back on the table delicately.

“That was our engagement picture. You proposed to me a couple of minutes before. We asked another couple to take our picture. We got right to the edge of the canyon so we could get as much of it in the background as possible. I felt like I was going to fall. You held on to me to make me feel safe.”

He glanced at the picture again. There he was, perhaps happier than he had ever been. He had his arm around Elizabeth’s waist, and she had her arms flung around his neck with a gregarious smile on her face. Again, no memory of any of it came back. He wanted to spend days ambling around Elizabeth’s house, staring at the photos, learning again what they all meant. The pain of not comprehending his past kept him out on the streets, away from the hospital. It had already cost him enough.

“I can’t really remember anything about it,” he said. “But we must have had a good time.”

Elizabeth put out the cigarette with one hand while putting the other up to her mouth. The sobbing was starting, first small and quiet, but gradually getting more intense. Shawn looked at her eyes, overflowing tears gently streaming down her cheeks. The mix of embarrassment and confusion were too much, making him incapable of consoling the crying figure before him.

Through the tears and sobs, Elizabeth asked, “When are you going to let someone help you? You can’t go around like this. You’re bound to end up hurting yourself again or end up dead.”

The voices slowly began to bubble up within Shawn. The feeling came back; whatever was going to happen was coming soon, and it was big. His vision began to shake, then his body, and then the couch. Only this wasn’t entirely just inside Shawn. Everything in front of him was shaking also. Photographs were falling off the wall. The couch began to push into the coffee table, causing the glass to tumble over and shatter as it hit the rumbling floor.

“Earthquake!” he yelled out. “We’ve got to get under a doorway!” He rushed up to grab Elizabeth, who was too overwhelmed to react quickly enough. He took her arm and dragged her under the archway between the living room and the kitchen area. The rumbling continued to grow. What sounded like a crashing tidal wave swept throughout the house. Shawn wrapped his arms around her as hard as he could, protecting her the only way he could at the moment. As the ground continued to shake, he thought to himself this must be the big one people around here always joke about.

After what was in reality only about twenty seconds, but to them an eternity, the ground ceased its seizure. The two of them stayed intertwined in the archway a few moments more. There was broken glass all over the ground and various objects strewn around them. Structurally, the house didn’t look to be in serious trouble. The worst damage was the result of the photographs, sending shards of glass all over when they tumbled off the mantle. The damage felt fairly appropriate to the situation, all the broken memories.

The two cleaned up in stunned silence. The trauma of the moments before the earthquake hadn't left Elizabeth completely. What had happened to him was torturous, but the greater torture was seeing her this way. He could survive at the Arroyo self-storage, dodging Jeanine and her vicious fangs. What wasn't certain was whether he could survive knowing he had made Elizabeth this way.

"I will get help," he finally said, "but I'm not going back to the hospital."

Her appearance instantly brightened. She embraced him. Another strange feeling came over him, this one without any of the menace that accompanied the ones on the Arroyo. This one was something that he hadn't really experienced since things went bad: compassion.

"There's someone I found in Santa Cruz that can make all this manageable," she said. "There's a new medication out that where the side effects aren't that bad. You have to promise to stay on this though." It came out of here like it had been prepared for months. "You can stay here also. We never should have put you in that hospital."

"Whatever you want," he answered.

For the first time in a while, calmness completely overtook Shawn. He looked once more at the photograph of the two of them at the Grand Canyon. He gingerly put it back on the table, and helped Elizabeth pick up the remaining glass.

## Vita

Anthony Kane was born, raised, and currently resides in Binghamton, New York. He received his Bachelor's Degree in English from Binghamton University in 2006. He obtained his MFA in Creative Writing from the University of New Orleans in 2014.