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Such a Lot of World

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Such a Lot of World

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. University of the Pacific, 2001
August 2007

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Abstract

Such a Lot of World is a collection of stories, essays, and vignettes that highlight various moments in the author's life when he was traipsing across this planet of ours. The majority of these moments occur in Spain—a sad realization for the author, for he has visited many countries and very much so wanted to appear better traveled than this collection of stories lets on. The reader will be left with the impression that the author spent his junior year of college in Spain, returned to Europe to backpack for five months, and then had a few other trips here and there. While actually very close to the truth, the author still hoped to appear better traveled.

Themes: relationship/friendship problems, coming of age, drinking too much, hero worship, harsh reality.

There is hardly any sex in this collection. Again, a sad commentary on the author's life.

My father and I aren't talking. He sits in the driver's seat, the wheel held in both hands. They're gnarled by decades of manual labor and an accident in his youth that the village doctor treated by partially amputating several fingers. He steers the truck around the bends of the hills with more deliberation than usual, as if he wants me to see something that I may have missed.

If there is something in the yellow, arid foothills and the deep, rocky ravines for me to recognize, something in the landscape to make me change my mind, then I choose to ignore it. Instead, I continue glancing at the green numbers that shine dully through the dust on the digital clock in the dashboard and think about what I could be doing instead of this. Occasionally, I look at the mirror, checking on the dog in the bed of the pick-up. It is my job to make sure that if the dog jumps out we don't drive too far without noticing his absence. For the most part, though, I look at the digital clock and sigh.

I should be packing. My father knows this. I have less than twenty hours before I leave for Spain and other parts of Europe and North Africa. I will be gone for a year. Recently, I imagined the packing would mark the beginning of a shedding process that would last the trip. As I packed my bag and decided what I would need for my year abroad – what was essential and what I could live without – I'd be who I have always been—someone who was too careful, too cautious, too quiet, too much in control. But after a year of travels I'd emerge a different person—someone who wore the tired and hardened marks of having passed through the world, the marks of someone who had lived. The change would be visible to all who knew me before.

But instead, I sit in the passenger side of the truck while we check on our cattle and sheep in the hills—the same hills my dad worked in as a shepherd when he moved to the United States

from Spain thirty years ago. He bought them – thousands of acres, parts of which frame one side of Interstate 5 for dozens of miles – nearly a decade ago.

Behind us, the dog darts back and forth from one side to the other. He looks over the edge, his tongue dangling from his mouth, takes in the view, and then runs over to the other side, looking over the edge for a few seconds before he's back where he started. Every time he approaches the edge it looks as if he will jump. The dog, a border-collie named Loco, earned his name by continually jumping out of moving vehicles.

The shepherd we picked Loco up from, a Peruvian who has come over here to earn money for family back home, compared me to the dog when I told him of my traveling plans today. He assumed that I'd be helping my father and him move some sheep tomorrow, and when he found out that I wouldn't be around to help, that I'd actually be gone for the next year, and had, just as Loco does, sat up one day and thought, I've got to get out of this here, said, "*Estas mas loco que Loco.*" My dad, I can imagine, wasn't amused by this.

He doesn't want me to go to Spain. Maybe he's nervous for me, or maybe he's afraid that if I go I won't come back. He, after all, came to the United States with the idea that he would work for three years as a shepherd and then return home with all of his earnings. But at the tail end of the three years he met my mother. Three years later they married, and after another three years I came along. He never returned home.

Maybe he thinks I will lose my academic momentum, drop out of school, and fall to the wayside just like so many other sons of men he knows. Maybe he feels that I am negating all that he accomplished. Why did he cross an ocean and a continent and work the majority of his life just so that I could take the same trip in reverse and return to Spain? I know he doesn't understand the value of a year abroad. I know he thinks I should be working, earning money,

considering career options, and not, as he considers it, wasting my time. But lately I've tired of myself and all the things that surround me. I've yearned for something new, a different way to approach life, a different identity.

It wasn't long ago that I broke down in front of my mother, telling her that I always wanted to be someone other than who I had become—a person unwilling to release his grip for even a second from whatever grounded him. I'd like to tell my dad about this, that I want to finally throw myself into whatever comes my way, that I want to get lost, that I want to go out there and maybe never return. But he won't understand.

There's something timeless and Biblical about this, about a son wanting to leave the path made by his father, of striking out on his own, and of the father struggling to keep his son close to him, of wanting to tell him, "I've been out there. I've made my mistakes, and this is what I've learned. Listen to me so that you don't waste any time." My father doesn't say anything though. He rarely does. The silence is one of the dynamics of our relationship. When I was younger, he'd come into my room and tell me a family secret, something dark, something he figured I was old enough to now know, and then leave once he unloaded the burden of the secret on to me. He'd shut the door behind him, leaving me alone to try to interpret this information, to reassemble my idea of my family and my place in it. Today, I am meant to decipher the significance of why he brought me out here when I should be preparing for my trip.

I look at him out the corner of my eye. He continues glaring at the road and the bends in it. Usually, the radio would be on. Something, the news or country music, usually comes out through the speakers while we drive around, but not today. He wants the silence to weigh on me. He wants me to break, to see that all we are driving through, and the sheep and cattle that dot the rolling horizon, he earned. That hard work and discipline can get you this. That if even he, an

immigrant who came to this country at the age of twenty with eighteen dollars in his pocket and even less English words under his command, can own all of this, then imagine what I would be capable of achieving and possessing. But I refuse to give in to the silence. I refuse to break. I refuse to acknowledge what he wants me to see.

He hits the brakes and I lurch forward. “Dammit!” he yells, looking into the rearview mirror. I turn around and see Loco kicking up dust as he tumbles away from the truck. He is a dusty, mangy black and white ball until he eventually settles on the dirt road. Motionless. I think he might be dead when I see him rise and shake the dirt from his coat. He glances to his right and left and then behind. He sees the truck, and for a moment I recognize a look of awareness. Then he starts running in the opposite direction. My dad opens the door. “Dammit,” he says again, while I continue watching the dog. “Let’s go get him.”

How to Run for Your Life

A Guide to Running with the Bulls of San Fermín

Realize this isn't so much running with the bulls as it is running with the tourists. When you first stepped into the street, you felt like something of a trespasser. Running with the bulls was supposed to be a cultural tradition, something that belonged to Spain and its people. Who were you to be transgressing upon this just to have another story to bring back home, just because you were here and so you *had* to do it?

You moved through the large crowd of men, most of them dressed in the traditional San Fermín attire – white shirt, white pants, red scarf tied around the neck, red sash around the waist – with your head down, hoping not to be found out. But now you see that you were being foolish, a touch paranoid. There don't seem to be any Spaniards or Basques in the street. Though many people are silent, those who are speaking are doing so in English. A few blonde-haired guys speak a language you don't understand, but it's too sing-song-y to be Spanish.

Where are the Spaniards?

See a couple of guys your own age who sit on a curb talking while a friend of theirs sleeps between them, his back against a souvenir shop. Only Spaniards would be that calm. But where are the others? Two gray-haired men hold rolled-up newspapers and talk casually to each other while younger people around them stretch their legs or stare silently down at their feet. These men also appear too composed to be foreign. Walk to them. Hold your breath as you near them. Hope that you'll hear them speaking Spanish. Why come all this way just to run with your own countrymen?

“Yeah,” one of them says to the other, “I saw Robert here yesterday. He wasn’t sure if he was going to be able to it today.”

Sigh loudly.

“Yeah,” the other says, “he’s got his wife with him this year.”

“Yeah.”

Think that you were foolish for ever assuming that the Spaniards would engage in something so unnecessary and dangerous to be a part of a culture to which they already belong. Fool.

Somebody bumps you as they push their way through the crowd, causing you to bump into one of the old men. Apologize.

“No worries,” the guy says.

“How you doing?” the other asks.

Play it cool. “Fine. You guys?”

They smile. “Fine.” “Doing great this morning.”

That’s right, morning. It feels like night, like only the sky’s changed. You are used to doing foolish things at night—hardly ever in the morning.

“Are you planning on starting here, too?” one of the men asks.

Put a hand on your hip and the other on your chin. “Yeah, well, I haven’t made up my mind. I was thinking about starting at Santo Domingo but, you know, it being the weekend it was pretty crowded so I came up here.” Look around as if this scene displeases you. “But this seems even worse.”

That seemed convincing. Feel your confidence finally coming back to you.

“How many times have you run?” one of them asks. Your confidence intrigues them.

Decide to lie. If you can convince these men that you've run before, perhaps you can even convince yourself. You'd be able to move through the crowded street with an air of authority. Think of the first time you were naked with a girl and how she asked you how many other girls you had been with and you said, "Five." No hesitation. Not because you wanted to fool her but because you hoped you could fool yourself and perform as if you had some experience. Decide that just as you told that girl "five" a few years ago you will now tell these two gray-haired men: "Five."

But hear yourself say, "This is my first time."

"First time?"

Damn. Counter this mistake by turning the question on them. "How many times have you guys run?"

They look at each other and smile.

"We really don't like to say," one says.

"You see," the other says, "we belong to something of a club. The members come here and run every year. I come most years. This is my eighteenth, and this is George's..."

"This is my twenty-second," George says.

"You fly over here just to run?"

"Some years. Others we bring the family and do some sightseeing, too."

"So this is where you're going to run?"

"We'll start here and then stop right before Dead Man's Curve."

"Dead Man's Curve?" you ask.

"It's that sharp turn right there. Lots of gorings happen there."

Look across the tops of the heads at Dead Man's Curve. It's no more than fifteen yards away. Look back at the two men who flew across the Atlantic Ocean just to run this short distance with the bulls. Think to yourself that they must be crazy, probably eccentric millionaires. Think that they would be the perfect people to take you under their wings. They have collectively survived forty years of running with the bulls. They will survive this one. If you are with them you will also survive. And if you do get injured they will most likely fork over the money for the hospital bill. But you won't get hurt. Not with these two guarding you. Think of how you can go home and say that not only did you run with the bulls, but you did it with a couple professionals. It sounds like a very romantic thing to say, more than you anticipated when you arrived in Pamplona. Decide that you will stick with these two men.

"How many times have you been doing this fiesta?" George asks you.

"I just got here today. Well, actually, last night, I suppose."

The two men look pained.

"You really shouldn't be here," George's running companion says.

You're taken aback. "Why not?"

They are both grave now.

"You need to watch this at least once before you run."

"I know, I'd tried, but there was no place to watch it. There were even people climbing lampposts trying to get a view of the—"

"Look, kid, this isn't a section for first time runners. You should start further ahead, at the very least past Dead Man's Curve."

"We don't own this street," George says, "but we'd really appreciate it if you didn't stay here."

With that they are both silent. They look at you. They wait for you to move. You don't say thanks or good luck. You just walk away towards Dead Man's Curve feeling their eyes on you. Look to your left at the clock on the tower. See that there are only four minutes before the bulls are released. Feel your confidence draining.

Turn Dead Man's Curve and see the scene before you. The narrow street is framed by apartment buildings about four or five floors high that are marked by dozens of balconies no more than eight feet long. Draped across the front of the balconies are either the green flags of Pamplona or the red, white, and green flags of the Basque Country. Hundreds of people, all dressed in white and red, stand on and over each balcony looking down at you and the thousands of others. The street has a slight slope to it. You can't see the end of it, but as far as it goes you see the white and red, the red and white that ends at the near horizon of the clear morning sky.

Look at the other runners. Wonder which one of them will be the sacrificial lamb to the bull. Ignore the awkwardness of such a metaphor. Someone must be gored. Look at the guy who is looking at you. Wonder if he is thinking the same thing.

Think about the bulls. They existed under the illusion of living in the wild, only to be corralled into a trailer and driven to the city where they will soon be released into a crowd of nervous, delirious, and desperate human beings. Thousands of people will watch from the fences and balconies. They will yell, wave handkerchiefs, take flash photographs. The bulls' immediate reaction will be to lash out, protect themselves. But once they feel like a part of the herd, after twenty seconds or so, they will stop attacking and enjoy the run.

You know now that this sense of calm lasts only until the bulls approach Dead Man's Curve. They take the turn without a decrease in velocity and slip on the slick cobblestone road

that was sprayed clean only a few hours before, sliding onto their sides and against the wooden barrier. They stand back up, momentarily separated from the others and, again, react violently.

Two more minutes.

As long as the run usually lasts.

Gather your bearings. Remember that a bull can turn around even after it passes you. Remember the fallen runners who pile in the street. One falls to the ground, another on top of him, then another and another and another. Everybody looking behind, nobody looking ahead. Remember that video clip from '77 when all those people were jammed at the bottom of the *Callejon*, the entrance leading into the *plaza de toros*, how there was a wall of people and how the bulls charged through this wall. Remember the desperate faces of the trapped before they were gored, wounded, killed.

Stretch your legs.

Decide that this is what it is like before a battle. And isn't this, too, one of the reasons why you and the others are in this street this morning? There is something inherent in the human condition, the male condition, that generations of civility and domesticity cannot breed out—the need to risk one's life for something, for something bigger than oneself. War has been a rite of passage into manhood for millions of young men. Your country no longer forces you to serve in the military, and you don't see any nobility in the military disputes that your country is involved in. But you still need that experience.

Hear a firecracker.

The two minutes are up.

Feel the rush of people. Run with them. Run past those who are not running, the ones who are looking behind you. Realize that these are the Spaniards. They look like they've gone

mad. Maybe you should stay with them and wait for the bulls. The Spaniards must know what they are doing.

But keep running.

Another firecracker. The last bull has left the pen and is now on the street.

Don't turn around. Fight your instincts. Don't look for the bulls. When other people do this, they fall down. Others fall over those people, forming mounds on the ground. The fallen curl up, protect their heads, and wait for the bulls to pass. A bull runs with its head down. If it sees a person arise from the ground it will attack.

Stay away from the doorways. You know that this is where people quickly pile up. The bull can easily pin you and attack you with its horns until it's had enough or until somebody rescues you by distracting it, luring it away.

Keep running.

Become one with the herd. Stay on your feet. When those near you run to the sides run with them.

The bulls are on their way.

Don't let anyone grab you. They want to use you as protection from the bulls. They want to beat you to the sides, leaving you exposed to the bull's horns. Stick close to everyone.

Watch from the side, momentarily frozen, as the bulls pass by. Somehow become aware of the animals' deep grunting through their wide, moist nostrils. A few people try to keep pace with the bulls. When the bulls pass, run like all hell behind them. Be aware that a bull can always reverse its course by turning around. But as long as this doesn't happen, the worst is over. Laugh with those around you. Watch the bulls part the crowd of runners ahead. Their large knees swing indiscriminately like wrecking balls, breaking bones, their hooves scrape away skin. A tooth

bounces in front of you as if it was fallen change. Watch the bulls trample those on the ground as they make some distance between you and them.

Then, realize that there are only three bulls in front of you. Do the math. This means three more are behind you. Somewhere. Run. Sprint. Don't look back. You will hear them. You will sense them.

Run.

The street slopes down. Just ahead is the entrance to the plaza. As you run down the *Callejon*, pick up speed. Give it all you've got. You just have to make it past the entrance, then you're safe. Don't get tripped. Stay on your feet. Keep your hands out. Hold on to others to keep yourself up. Run. Run—into the plaza.

Breathe. You've made it.

Hear someone yell. Feel the last bulls blow past you. See the doors close.

Look up. See all the people in the stands. The plaza is full. They are cheering—for you. Feel like a gladiator. Sure, there are hundreds of you in here, but you are all brothers and sisters now. You are one being. You share the same nervous system, wildly pumping adrenaline. You are no longer a shield of skin and bones to protect the others from a bull's horn. Before they would have tripped you and pushed you, possibly even shanked you, to get away from the bulls, but now, with the last bull corralled, that has been forgotten. It is irrelevant. You are all one. You hug to show this bond, this connection. You are all safe now.

But know this.

You are not safe.

It has just begun.

Yes, the bulls have been corralled, but now a young steer has been let loose and is running with the crowd. You weren't expecting this. You weren't sure why so many people gathered at one of the doors along the *barrera* – the perimeter of the bullring – why they knelt down on the ground and pounded on their chests, making demands of the uniformed men behind the *barrera*. You weren't even sure what was happening when the steer came out and smashed through these men. You wondered whether this was part of the ceremony or whether it was a freak accident that you'd be able to talk about until your dying day. "Yeah, I was there the day that steer got loose."

But nobody is doing anything to corral the loose steer. Instead you watch it tear through the crowd, sending some flying and knocking others to the ground.

The steer, a scrawny beast with an ill temper and horns that nature skewed and man blunted and corked, dashes past you as it lowers its head onto a man who has fallen. It hits the man repeatedly until others distract it by running in front of it and slapping its head. It rushes through the crowd once again.

Know this: you are not a mighty gladiator. You are a Christian in that same Roman epoch and you have just been thrown to the lions.

Move out of the way.

The steer narrowly misses you. Try to move your legs. They are twigs attached to cinder blocks. Move away from the *barrera*. Walk into the center of the plaza with the majority of the other runners. Feel that here in the middle of this crowd you are safe. The chance of the steer singling you out from the others is slim. Here you have the greatest range of mobility. You can run in any direction if the steer comes at you. Standing at the *barrera*, you were a prisoner against the wall. You may as well have been blindfolded with a cigarette dangling from your

lips. But in the center you can anticipate the direction that the steer will take by reading the crowd.

Trust the crowd. Run with them. Don't let them knock you down. Don't let them trip you. They are trying, but don't let them. These are not your brothers. You share nothing with them, only the anxious and nervous desire to survive.

But feel brave. You just survived six bulls. You can make it through one scrawny steer. You can make it through anything.

While people run away from the steer, stirring up dust from the sand in the plaza, you see it slam its twisted horns into a fallen runner. You run to help this man.

You are a soldier. This is why you ran with the bulls, remember? This is why you're approaching the steer. To risk something.

You hesitate and stand feet from it.

Get close to it. Closer.

The person on the ground needs help. He tries to protect his head with his hands but the steer continues to strike him. His nose and mouth bleed. A large cut above his eye opens wider and wider. He kicks at the steer but misses.

Hurry.

Shove the steer. It's dark brown hair is coarse and oily. The steer, you realize, is sweating. Another person comes to the man's rescue, as well. Shove the steer again. Don't grab its tail like the man beside you is doing, but keep shoving it.

Be surprised at how quickly a steer can turn around. Be surprised, even disappointed, at how easily the steer can confuse you for the asshole who was tugging on its tail.

Run.

Run.

Realize that for the last five seconds nothing has been chasing you. Laugh nervously with the others around you. Then feel your heart drop from your chest as the crowd parts to reveal the steer that is locked in on you. It hasn't forgotten about the tail.

Be distressed when those in the stands rise to their feet, yell, and cheer as the steer comes at you—only for them to sit back down with a collective, disappointed “Ah...” when the steer only clips your knee. Find this disconcerting. Realize that the people in the stands, like the steer, are out for your blood.

Rub your knee. Try to walk.

Know that you can't and that it's alright. You will have a bruise and you will be able to show it off to everybody you meet for the next few weeks, telling them proudly, “A bull did this.” You are entitled to embellish the facts a bit. Say nothing of the steer.

Know that there were others, many, in fact, who are now running around in the plaza who never even saw the bulls in the streets, who started at the end of the run—actually walked into the plaza. Let them run around with this steer now. Stand on the other side of the *barrera*. Join the others in watching them run around with the steer. Laugh as they get beat up and tossed about. Give yourself a break. A pat on the back.

Watch the steer get corralled for the last time. See the doors open. Finally. Walk outside with the others. Feel tired, more tired than you've ever felt before, yet still somewhat anxious. Go to a bar, order a drink. Calm the nerves. Then go to a park. Find an open spot on the grass away from the trees, and try to fall asleep.

Bigbi may easily be the best fruit stand in all of Rio de Janeiro. For one, it's convenient, less than ten doors down from Mike's apartment, and the first of its kind that any of us, save Mike, has been to. My friends and I herald it as the finest that the country has to offer. Fruit stands in Brazil are as ubiquitous as coffee shops and fast food restaurants back home, but despite the countless options on the street corners of Rio we stay loyal to Bigbi.

The fruit offered at Bigbi is stacked along four shelves on the rear display. I recognize much of the same fruit stocked at my grocery store back home. But the fruit here, it's more tropical looking, brighter in color, and sweeter in taste. Fluorescent pomelos and papayas, avocados as big as watermelons, watermelons as big as meteorites, and coconuts that splinter open with three thwacks of a machete. Bigbi's specialty, the thing that I believe sets them apart from every other fruit stand I've passed, are their fruit smoothies and the myriad flavors offered on their menu, twenty-eight to be exact.

And because my friends and I are grandly adventurous people, because we have been fortunate in life, but more so in birth, because we *can* travel, and because we do not have a war to fight (at least one that we believe in), or large social or human wrongs to single-handedly right, or positions of leadership that history and circumstance has thrown us into we apply this unconquerable youthful energy to the minute and the mundane. We create opportunity.

So we decide one night, after returning from the Sambadrome, where one of the most colorful and glorious displays of flesh and paper-mache were on parade, that we will drink all twenty-eight smoothies.

But why? one of us, a possible dissenter, asks.

For it to be done, we answer. So the tired men working the graveyard shift there can see something new, so they can have a story to tell, because fruit is good for you. For no viable reason at all. Take your pick. The reason doesn't matter. It's congruent with the spirit of the trip: anything that takes hold of us should be followed through.

When we get to Bigbi the man who takes our order doesn't understand what we want. He calls over another man.

Which of the twenty-eight do you want? he asks in Portuguese.

Not just one, we say, all of them.

All of them?

With a broad sweep of our hand over the menu, Yes, all of them.

They call over another man and again the conversation is repeated. We're excited by their confusion. They've never seen this before.

Then they begin making our smoothies and start laughing—amongst themselves, with us, with anybody else who comes up just then to place an order.

But the human body, we soon learn, cannot process such large and sudden quantities of fruit. Throughout the night as we clutch our stomachs outside Mike's bathroom, waiting, we swear that we will never do anything like this again. However, the body is resilient, as is the spirit, and the next morning we are back at the fruit stand debating with ourselves and our better judgment whether we should give the morning crew the same show that we gave to the night.

It's my twenty-fifth birthday and I am in Kathmandu. Mike, his host brother, and I are coming from the cinema and need to cross the canal in order to hail a taxi. Mike's host brother says that he knows of a bridge just down the road, but when we get there we see that the bridge is actually twenty scattered stones that span the ledge of a thirty yard-wide canal. In order to cross the canal you must hop from stone to stone. If a hop is miscalculated or a stone is too slick and you fall to your right, you fall into the canal. The city's sewage pollutes the canal. If you fall to the left, you fall about eight feet into the garbage and filth that's collected at the bottom of the drop.

Mike and I look at one another and back at the bridge. "No," we tell the host brother. He is momentarily taken aback, but says that he knows of another one further down the road. We follow him and come to another bridge made of stones. Again, we shake our heads at the host brother. He is amazed at our apprehension. "Look," he says, to prove to us how easy and practical this bridge is, "I show you." He climbs down the embankment and then, in a matter of seconds, as if the stones were a speedy conveyor belt, he is on the other side. He waves us over. "Come, come."

"That doesn't look that hard," I tell Mike, who, obviously aware of something that I am not, remains silent and on the embankment. I leave him, climb down, and look out at the canal. Dark clumps bob in the still, murky water. "It smells worse down here," I tell him. I look back at the canal, at the slick stones set one wide step apart from each other. I hesitate but then think, I can do this. Just focus on the stones, not what separates them. I hear something behind me. A line is beginning to grow. A woman holding a child in her arms wants to cross but is waiting for me. A woman with a child? Come now, I can do this. I step on the first rock, balance myself and

then step onto the next one. I realize that it is better not to balance on each stone but to just take one rock and the next and the next. Soon I am flying. I'm hardly on one stone before I'm on the next one ahead of it.

Halfway across the bridge I think, I am crossing a canal of shit. If I slip and fall then I will be covered with the filth of Kathmandu. With this, I lose my momentum, though my forward motion is still carrying me onward, toward the next stone. "Come, come," Mike's host brother says, trying to urge me on, but I lose my balance. My foot begins to slip. Just a few feet away, I see a rock that can save me. In slow motion I put my foot out to step on this rock, while from the other side of the canal Mike's host brother yells, "No!!!!!" The excessive exclamation points, I swear I can hear them, ring in my ears just as I notice that the rock isn't a rock at all but a collected pile of filth. My foot goes through it. I catch my breath, expecting to go under entirely. But my foot quickly hits the bottom of the ledge. My right leg, up to my knee, is in the river.

In a moment, one I can not remember, I am back on the side from which I started and have climbed up the embankment. Mike is laughing. Behind me the lady with the child in her arms takes the stones one long stride after another with something that I can only accept as grace.

Mike's host brother crosses back over and pats me on the back, apologizing. He seems very concerned. I wave him off and try to make him feel better. I smile, shrug my shoulders, and wave my hands in front of me. I try to make it seem as if things like this happen to me every day.

"Do you realize how lucky you are," Mike asks. "I bet you were only inches from going under completely."

I can think of better definitions of luck, but I know he's right. The shelf was probably no more than two feet wide.

Since we can't take the bridge, we walk the half-mile down to the end of the canal. Both shoes are soaked through. A squishing sound turns my stomach with each step I take. Fetid water squeezes out of my shoes.

"How're you holding up?" Mike asks.

"I just want to get to that taxi."

"Let's first hope that he lets you in."

I didn't consider that.

We come up with an elaborate plan of diversions, smoke and mirrors, but we don't need it. The taxi driver doesn't pay any attention to us when we enter the taxi, and he doesn't mind or notice the terrible smell coming from my shoes. I sit in the seat behind him and try not to look at my shoes and the dark wetness of my pant's right leg, but I can't help it. I imagine the worms and the parasites that were in that canal and how they probably took advantage of my foot being in there, how they burrowed into my skin, maybe got in through an open cut I didn't know I had, and how they are probably working their way through the inside of my body, attaching themselves to my organs, eating away at my brain.

We return to our apartment, and I tip the taxi driver far more than he expects. Once he drives off, I tear off my shoes and pants. After a long and thorough shower, I go back outside and spray down my pants and shoes. The pants I can easily replace, but I like my shoes. They're new, stylish, and extremely comfortable. But they can't be cleaned. I soak them in a bucket of soapy water overnight. Come the morning, even after I spray them down again, the shoes are still filthy.

"They look fine to me," Mike says.

"Are you kidding me?" I ask. "There's shit all over them."

“You’re losing it,” Mike says, picking one up and eyeing it. “They’re as clean as the day you bought them.”

I realize I may be suffering from the same insanity that plagued Lady Macbeth, but I can’t be too safe. In the afternoon, we put the shoes into a bag and take a taxi to the Bodhnath Stupa. Tibetan Buddhists circle the stupa, sometimes on their hands and knees, in the mornings and evenings to complete their daily circuit. But all day long beggars sit against the stupa and stretch out their hands to those who pass by. I have yet to give them anything, but that is about to change.

I spot him as we approach Bodhnath.

“That’s the one,” I tell Mike.

He is lean, practically emaciated, and has hands that have been twisted into stiff claws. I approach with the bag. He recognizes my intentions and smiles a toothless smile. I glance down at his ravaged, bare feet as I hand him the bag. The shoes will be a little big on him, but he’ll be comfortable.

Mike and I continue walking, never looking back to see his reaction when he opens the bag and discovers the shoes. I feel bad for giving them to him. I should have thrown them away or back into the river, but Mike assures me that the beggar will appreciate them. Then we both laugh, thinking how the Buddhists and tourists who visit Bodhnath are going to be surprised to see a beggar reaching out for spare change while wearing such modern and stylish shoes.

Absinthe

A Story Told in Thirteen Parts

I.

Up the Elevator and Into My Apartment

My good friend Mitchell J. Pickett buzzed on my apartment intercom to be let in. Once inside he moved past me, a brown bag in his hand. He was excited, breathing heavily.

“Did you take the stairs?” I asked.

“No,” he said, moving to the kitchen. I followed. “I’ve got it, man,” he said, putting his hand into the brown bag. “I’ve got it.”

“What do you have?”

From the bag he pulled out a bottle of alcohol. I’d never seen the alcohol before— it was emerald colored.

“What is that?”

Turning the bottle so I could read the label he said, “Absinthe.”

II.

Mitchell

I liked Mitchell, the little I knew of him at the time. Reckless and careless and often inappropriate, people excused his offenses because of the sweetness to his fervor and the wild and naïve thrill for what lay just beyond him, just out of his reach.

Like me, Mitchell was lean and athletic and came from the West Coast. Along with the plaid flannel shirts he always wore and the lines that prematurely creased the skin on his

forehead and the outer edges of his eyes, he walked along the streets of Spain with the sort of swagger of someone who thought that if he stepped into traffic cars would crumple against him. I wanted to have wrinkles and scars, to be that confident and excited, to have life make its mark on me.

III.

How Everything Seems Better

Like many people, my introduction to absinthe came in the pages of Ernest Hemingway. The particular scene was in *The Sun Also Rises* when, Jake Barnes and his friend Bill, weary and exhausted from the fiestas of San Fermín, that “wonderful nightmare,” go to a bar and order absinthe. “The absinthe made everything seem better,” Barnes said.

I was twenty years old when I read this and a relative newcomer to the idea that alcohol could act as a temporary bandage to my relationship troubles and increasing disquietude.

I had just ended a relationship with a girl from my hometown that had consumed the last several years of my life. Before the break-up, I spent my nights on the phone with her. When the weekend came, I packed my clothes and returned to my hometown where she still lived with her mother. Resistant to abandoning my ties to my pre-college life, I cheated myself of experience. I didn't realize this until I opened *The Sun Also Rises* and read about characters who experienced life in a way that, though it was sad and seemingly hopeless, at the same time appeared alluring and romantic. “The absinthe made everything seem better.” Yes, life could not actually *be* better, but absinthe could surely make things *seem* better. I identified with the disfigured Jake Barnes and his romantic timidity, his eagerness to know the world, and how he found solace in the

bottle. As well, I was drawn to the Lost Generation, the community of writers, painters, and thinkers displaced by World War I who shared his sense of alienation and adventure.

I felt I missed a part of my social development. While I watched movies and played board games at my girlfriend's house, I imagined that others my age found and existed in their own circle of friends who behaved much as Hemingway and his fellow artists did in Paris in the mid-1920s.

Halfway through the book I decided that I would not return to college for my junior year of studies. Instead, I'd travel to Spain and France where I would work as a journalist, fish during the weekends, drink constantly, and meet up with other like-minded expatriates, forming our own Lost Generation. I was home for summer break, so I went out into the living room where my mother and father were watching television.

"I'm dropping out of school," I told them, maybe I had a hand on my hip and a finger in the air. "I'm going to go to Europe to work as a journalist."

"Bah," my father scoffed, grabbing the remote control from my mother and turning the volume up.

At the age of eighteen, Hemingway disobeyed his father's orders and enlisted in the Red Cross where he'd serve on the Italian front during World War I. In Hemingway lore, this is the first significant act of his adult life. The idea of such defiance thrilled me. Every element of it demanded respect: World War I, the fate of the world hanging in the balance, the very real and near possibility of death, adventure, and an overbearing father threatening to disown his son. My parents and place in time did not give me as much to work with. The worst I had was that my parents didn't take me seriously.

“It’s the truth,” I yelled. “I’m finished with school. From now on life will be my classroom.”

In the end my mother compromised with me. She and my father would support my decision and help finance my trip to Europe as long as I continued my education. I found a program in Spain, and within two months of my introduction to Hemingway, I flew to San Sebastian, the city in which Jake Barnes finds emotional respite after the fiestas of San Fermin. I was going to the source. I would retrace Hemingway’s footsteps, recreating his life with a copy of *The Sun Also Rises* in my back pocket as my how-to.

The only problem is that I went at this literally. Someone frozen in ice since 1925 would have seemed less archaic. At the bar while my fellow students loudly boasted, “Shit, I’m fucked up!” I went around casually mentioning to people, “I feel quite tight.” Fortunately, the growing pains didn’t last long. I adapted quickly and modernized my vernacular, but I was still fascinated by all things Hemingway. I convinced myself that he left behind clues in his writings, clues that, when put together, would teach me how to write, how to *be* a writer. Sipping his preferred liquors at an outdoor café while working on a short story highly derivative of his laconic style, I thought it very possible that the world would one day praise me for what I was doing.

IV.

Back at the Apartment

I took the bottle from Mitchell and turned it in my hands. “Where’d you find it?”

We had searched every bar in town, the liquor cabinets of our Spanish friends, and the memories of the oldest bartenders for this rare elixir, but we couldn’t find it anywhere.

“In a bodega by my apartment,” Mitchell said. “I was walking along the beach and I saw this store. It was a hole-in-the-wall sort of place. I went in to look around, and saw this bottle covered in dust.”

“I thought it was illegal to sell.”

“I thought so, too.”

We both looked at it in a spiritual sort of reverence. “Well, let’s get two glasses,” Mitchell said. “I’m pretty sure I remember how to do this.”

Months ago, Mitchell had gone on a camping trip in the Pyrenees Mountains with several friends. There they met a couple whose place of residence was a tent nearly the size of a yurt that seemed to have been transported to the Pyrenees from the Burning Man festival along with its inhabitants. The road-weary couple owned an extensive and eclectic collection of alcohols. In exchange for some marijuana they invited Mitchell and his friends in for a drink. While examining the bottles Mitchell asked what green liquid was contained in the vintage, unlabelled one.

“That, mate,” he said, “is *La Fee Verte*—absinthe.”

“I’ll take it!”

“It’s nasty stuff, man.”

“I don’t care.”

“It’ll knock you on your ass. It does nasty things to people.”

Mitchell figured that the man didn’t want to part with a few ounces of the green gold. “I’m fine with that.”

After the couple handed everyone their drinks the man unzipped a bag and pulled out the instruments he needed to prepare the absinthe.

“I’m pretty sure I remember how he did it,” Mitchell now said, pulling open the drawers in the kitchen. “He had a cube of sugar on the screen, and…” Mitchell trailed off, scouring the foggy banks of his memory for something concrete. “He dipped it in the absinthe and caught it on fire and let it drip into the absinthe. Then he stirred it around. I think that was it.”

We searched the kitchen for something that would serve as a mesh screen, but, in the end, after remembering a passage from Hemingway’s *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, we settled on a spoon. We also lacked sugar cubes so instead we dug the spoon into a bag of hardened sugar, then dipped the sugar into a glassful of absinthe and placed the spoon atop the lip of the glass. I followed this process with one of my own. Using Mitchell’s lighter, we lit the alcohol-saturated sugar on fire. A small flame rose up like a blue teepee.

“What’s that supposed to do?” I asked.

“We’re waiting for the sugar to caramelize,” Mitchell said.

The fire burned in the alcohol but it didn’t seem to do anything to the sugar. We continued to wait.

“Maybe you should just stir it in,” I said.

“I think it’s supposed to drip in there somehow.”

Mitchell tilted the spoon so the sugar would slowly slide into the alcohol but unfortunately the fire followed it and quickly spread across the surface of the absinthe. “Fuck it,” Mitchell said. He blew the flame out, stirred the remaining sugar into the glass, then took a sip. “Not bad,” he said. I braced myself. Absinthe had a reputation for having a harsh and bitter taste, but when I drank it I was surprised by its pleasant flavor.

“It tastes like licorice,” I said. Deep down, I was proud of myself and my fortitude. I had come a long way in my few months here.

We each had another sip and this time I tasted something that somehow eluded me the time before—all the alcohol. When Van Gogh had exhausted his supply of absinthe he turned to turpentine as a substitute. Coughing after my second sip, I understood the connection.

“That’s horrible,” I said.

“Yeah.”

Like two amateur bakers, we wondered if the drink needed more sugar. Instead, we cut it with water. We were both amazed by the transformation of the absinthe. A cloud blossomed within it, much like when adding cream to coffee, changing the color of it to a milky green.

Despite our best efforts and dilution of the absinthe with water, we couldn’t reach any advanced state of mind—a slight buzz, but nothing compared to the visions that haunted Van Gogh and Hemingway. We sipped at the absinthe without desired results.

Though we were discouraged, we continued drinking the absinthe, but after two more nights of choked sips we came upon an unspoken agreement that we wouldn’t buy another bottle. The empty one would sit on the shelf, allowing us to relate our experience with absinthe to anybody who noticed it—glorifying where need be and embellishing on all points.

V.

Decisions

Decisions

Decisions

During the end of our senior year in college back in the states, Mitchell and I had an instant messaging conversation that went something like this:

MITCHELL: I'm tired of school. Can't wait to graduate.

ME: Me, too.

MITCHELL: What plans do you have after graduation?

ME: I've got no idea what I'm going to do. Everyone keeps asking me, but I've got no idea.

MITCHELL: I was thinking about going back to Spain for a while. Want to go?

ME: Sounds great. What exactly do you have in mind?

MITCHELL: Dunno. We'll figure it out when we get there.

ME: I'm in.

To finance the trip, Mitchell took a job as a waiter in his hometown while I worked as a lab technician and then a yard supervisor at a tomato packing plant outside of my hometown. After five months of saving up money, we met up in the Minneapolis-St. Paul airport and headed back to Spain. I had sent an English-language newspaper in the coastal city of Alicante samples of my writing, and after a few long-distance phone conversations with the editor-in-chief I managed to secure a position with the paper.

I was excited to once again be hot on Hemingway's trail. At the age of twenty-three, he worked in Europe as a correspondent for the *Toronto Star*, but here I was *twenty-two* and about to begin a career in journalism in Europe. Though Alicante was not Paris, it did at least have a beach.

When we arrived by bus in Alicante, we were disappointed to discover very few things Spanish or European about the city. Perhaps there was once something charming about this seaside city, but all charm had now been replaced by greedy developers, vacationing Northern Europeans, and loitering Moroccans.

“I don’t think we worked our asses off so we could travel across the Atlantic and spend five months in a city we could find in any country that has a coast,” I said.

“I was thinking the same thing.”

“And if I do work for the paper then I’m probably going to be directing all my stories at these tourists. I’d be contributing to the problem.”

That night, at our hostel, we looked over a map of Europe and considered our options. The whole continent was there for the taking. We decided that we would live in a city for a few months and then backpack through the rest of Europe for our three remaining months. We narrowed our choice of cities to Sevilla, Florence, Stockholm, and Prague, but in the end decided on Sevilla so we could continue practicing our Spanish.

I phoned the newspaper, told them of my change of plans, thanked them for the opportunity, and then took off.

Mitchell and I managed to find a cramped one-room apartment to rent near the Puente de Calle Reyes, perpendicular to Calle Betis—Sevilla’s Bourbon Street. During the days, I’d find a bench in the park across from the Plaza España and write for several hours, working on short stories about Americans hanging out in bars, drinking exotic drinks, and getting along with locals. I wrote of characters whose lives mirrored Hemingway’s, lives I hoped to live during the next five months.

In the evenings, Mitchell cooked dinner, I washed the dishes, and then we stepped out our door and into the party. We were operating under a fairly simple system when it came to the purchasing of groceries and the owing of monies. Whenever one of us bought something for the apartment, that person would write the amount down on a piece of paper taped to the side of the

fridge. At the end of the month, we'd tally up the amount that we had individually spent, and whoever spent more would be compensated by the other person.

VI.

The Return of Absinthe

Mitchell set a newly purchased bottle of absinthe on the table and went to the fridge to add the amount to his monthly total. I knew I'd have to drink it again. Even though it'd been two years since I'd last seen the emerald-colored alcohol, I knew that not enough time had passed. I didn't want to drink it. In fact, I didn't even bother to ask Mitchell where he happened to find it. I was on a very tight budget and couldn't justify spending any money on something that I could not put to use. Though the memory of its taste still repulsed me, I couldn't let those ten euros go to waste.

What's more, I knew that Mitchell wouldn't allow me not to drink the absinthe. As he was sometimes apt to do, he'd pull out my copy of *The Sun Also Rises*, put the back cover picture of Hemingway to my face and ask, "What would this man do, Jules? Huh? What would he do?" He didn't believe that Hemingway's way was the model we should follow. He just liked to play to my weaknesses.

Together we each prepared a glass of absinthe. I watched with trepidation as the sugar boiled in the fire. After his first sip, Mitchell leaned back in his seat, and, exhaling loudly, pounded on his chest. "Yeah, that's it."

If *it* was a mouthful of Hell's sewage then this was definitely it.

Sipping the drink we reminisced upon the time before that we tried absinthe and Mitchell recounted his story of drinking it in the Pyrenees. “I don’t remember a thing from that night anymore.”

After struggling through a third of my drink, I pushed it away in disgust. “This is horrible, I can’t take it anymore.”

“Cut it with water.”

“It’s still going to taste horrible.”

“Well, we’ll go out. After a few drinks you’ll be able to get some more down.”

“Maybe.”

VII.

How (Not) to Drink Absinthe

What we didn’t know, despite our fascination with the tortured lives of the absinthe artists, was the actual process by which they prepared and consumed absinthe. The proper and traditional method calls for pouring two ounces of absinthe into a glass. Place a sugar cube on a perforated spoon. The spoon should sit on the lip of the glass. Pour ice-cold water from a carafe onto the sugar. The sugar drizzles through the perforations into the absinthe, along with the water. Eventually there should be ten ounces of water poured in with the absinthe. When adding water, the milky color change that occurs is known as *louche*. The purpose of the water is to dilute the strong taste of anise and bring out the flavors of the other herbs.

Since absinthe is seventy-five percent alcohol, people almost never drink it without water. But, holding it in such high esteem, we would have thought it something on the level of sacrilege to cut it with water. Having done it once before, we felt we cheated. In the Czech

Republic, a few bars touch a flame to the absinthe-saturated sugar, but this is a process performed primarily for the tourists. The true absinthe connoisseurs look down on this practice.

While Mitchell continued violating each of these rules, I rinsed out my glass and filled it with rum. We drank for several hours and watched our favorite television game shows, finding this to be more enjoyable than going to the store across the street to purchase our groceries for dinner.

VIII.

The Green Beast Within

That night, dressed for the occasion, we tried to gain entrance into a dance club whose reputation for supplying beautiful, friendly women with a dance floor to move their Mediterranean curves on had intrigued us for quite some time, but whose strict standards for their clientele we did not meet. Mitchell wasn't pleased with this, and began arguing with the bouncers.

“Who the fuck do you think you are to tell me I can't get into your fucking shitdive of a place.”

For the last hour, Mitchell had been aggressive in all manners. Hostile during conversation, unapologetic to those he bumped into on the sidewalk, relentless in his approach to the world as if it and all things in it were subjects in need of a master, backwards people desperately wanting to be conquered.

“You've got the eyes of Columbus,” I told him earlier when he intentionally walked into a picture that was being taken of a group of tourists. “What's the matter with you?”

Standing in front of the bouncers and arguing with them, Mitchell seamlessly shifted from English to what his absinthe-soaked mind must have figured to be a far more regal and

commanding language: Italian, a language with which he had little familiarity. Tired and out of patience, the bouncers forcefully removed Mitchell from the front of the line. As Mitchell valiantly flailed against them I intervened and pulled him away as he yelled Italian swear words – the only Italian he actually knew – at the bouncers.

When we made some distance from the club, Mitchell returned to his mother tongue. “Can you believe those fuckers, Jules? Can you believe them? An Italian—they wouldn’t even let an Italian in.”

“What’s the matter with you?” I said, turning to make sure none of the bouncers followed us. “Why’re you being such an asshole? We’re lucky we didn’t get hurt back there.”

“We could’ve taken them.”

“We couldn’t have, and that’s not the point.”

“What’s the point then, huh?” he turned and looked at me as if for the first time. He clenched his fists. “Huh, tell me, what’s the point? What’s the motherfucking point?” There had been a change, somewhere behind us, when Mitchell became a conduit for the ferocious beast of absinthe, a host that the green parasite had possessed and was now manipulating. Behind the angry, furrowed brow and the red, cloudy eyes was my good friend Mitchell but for the moment he was lost to me, and would remain so as long as the absinthe moved through his blood. “Huh, what’s your fucking point?”

I was no longer certain what my point was but I knew it didn’t matter to Mitchell.

“Forget about it,” I said and continued walking.

IX.

A Generation that is Lost

We ended up going to our favorite watering hole on Calle Betis. Despite the frequency with which we went to the bars in Sevilla, we only felt like regulars at this one. The bar was very basic and that night, dressed in our best clothes, we stood out. We ordered drinks and Mitchell complained at first about the bouncers but then more abstract injustices.

Several Spaniards, somehow knowing that we were Americans, approached us. One of them wore an Osama bin Laden Halloween mask. He pointed at it, laughing, “Osama bin Laden, Osama bin Laden.” He did not do it in the manner that a sports fan yells “We’re number one!” but only to bring our attention to his wearing an Osama bin Laden mask and that we should be upset by this—as if the image of Osama bin Laden aggravated Americans just as much as the color red did to bulls.

I didn’t want to cause any problems, nor did I want to give the bar the reputation of being a place where drunk, patriotic Americans fought the locals, but Mitchell had different ideas. “What the fuck’s your problem, fucker?” he said, turning to face them. I tried to step in between him and the man wearing the mask, but the man, seeing that Mitchell was taking his bait, moved closer to Mitchell’s face, still pointing at the mask, continuing to bring to Mitchell’s attention the obvious. “Osama bin Laden. Osama bin Laden.”

“*Si*,” I said, “Osama bin Laden. *Un mal hombre*.”

With that I turned away from the Spaniards, getting Mitchell to do the same. They stood behind us while I waited for a punch to the back of the head or for Mitchell to erupt, but soon they retreated to the end of the bar. The one with the mask took it off but continued trying to provoke us by pointing to it. We ignored him.

Several drinks later, when we met a guy from Chicago named Paul, Osama and his friends were nowhere to be found.

Paul was our age and had been backpacking around Europe for the last month. After some small talk, we told him of our conflict with the Spaniards.

“That’s fucked up,” Paul said.

We agreed.

“No, man, I mean that’s really fucked up.”

“Yeah,” I said. “It’s pretty inconsiderate.”

“No, that is *fucked up*,” Paul said. “Where are those fuckers?”

We scanned the bar. “They must have split. I don’t see them.”

“You sure they didn’t just take the mask off?”

“Yeah, I don’t see them anywhere.”

“Man, that’s fucked up. I’ve got a friend who lives just ten blocks from the World Trade Center. Even visited him not too long ago.”

“Really.”

“You know what gets me almost as much as the fucker with the mask is the rest of the pussies in here. All these fucking bastards see that the man is wearing a bin Laden mask—why don’t they say something to him? No, man, these Spaniards haven’t impressed me at all. I was just in Madrid—I might as well have been in fucking France. Rude ass motherfuckers.”

Something told me that if we were in a subway or a museum Paul would be talking just as loud.

“The Spanish, for the most part, don’t like conflict,” I said. “Besides, maybe someone already told the guy something. That’s probably why we don’t see him.”

“Fucking doubt it. Not with the likes of these fucking pussies.”

“There’s a good chance some of them understand English.”

“Even if they did,” he said, taking a long drink, “what are they gonna do?”

I know what I wanted to do, but Mitchell seemed to share a bond with Paul. Their unprovoked aggression bound them together. Whatever happened to one of them that night would happen to the two of them.

When we finished our drinks, Paul said, “Let’s go search the bars around here. He couldn’t have gone far.” Then, with a smile, “Let’s smoke the fucker out.”

Under this pretense, for the three thousand lives lost in the attacks, for his friend who lived just ten blocks from the site of the World Trade Center, and for the uncertain future, we did a bar hop down Calle Betis drunkenly searching the crowds for Osama bin Laden and his friends. At every place, we fanned out looking for them but eventually ended up at the bar, where we had a drink and shared traveling stories.

By the time we reached the end of Calle Betis, we were ridiculously drunk. Intoxicated as we were, Mitchell, having built his inebriation on a shaky foundation of absinthe, was something of a social liability. An interaction with anyone outside of our core group of three could easily become dramatic. Even Paul, who, given the chance, would have taken on the three bouncers to hang the U.S. flag outside of the club, seemed slightly uncomfortable with Mitchell’s unpredictable and bellicose behavior.

“Whoa, whoa, Mitchell,” he said, as if trying to rein in a wild horse. “Those people aren’t trying to call you out, they’re just curious as to why you’re emptying the trash can onto this car.” Then, after a pause. “So why are ya?”

Since we were close to our apartment, we invited Paul back to our place for some absinthe.

“Absinthe?” he exclaimed. “You guys got absinthe? That was one of the things I told myself I had to try while I was over here. Smoke pot in Amsterdam, eat pizza in Rome, and drink some absinthe in Spain.”

We offered the absinthe without much thought but as we walked back to our place, I tried to find an excuse to get out of giving some to Paul. Though I had pretty much written absinthe off, I still felt that it was something that deserved respect and should not come easy.

“Why don’t we just go downtown instead, we can look for bin Laden over there,” I offered. “If we go to our place then we’re bound to wake up the neighbors.”

“Don’t worry, Jules,” Mitchell said, “we’re going to find that fucker, but before we do we’re going to need some help.”

“So what’s it like?” Paul asked, “The absinthe, that is. Do you trip out? Do you see hallucinations and shit?”

“It’s like tasting gasoline that’s been pushed through three hundred year old cheese,” I said. “Honestly, I don’t know why we’re going back to our place. We should be going downtown.”

But other than body-checking Paul into the river or having the *Guardia Civil* follow the trail of upturned trash cans and disgruntled pedestrians to Mitchell, nothing could deter us.

At the apartment, while I cleaned out three teacups for us, Paul headed straight for our bookshelf and slid out my copy of *The Sun Also Rises*. How did he manage to find it so quickly? “Isn’t this book great?” he said, showing it to Mitchell and me. He thumbed through it while he swayed. “Without Hemingway I doubt I’d be here.” Throughout the night my tolerance for Paul had risen and fallen like a small ship on tumultuous waters. He had several great stories from his trip, and I admired him for this, but he was juvenile, vulgar for vulgarity’s sake, stupid, and

unbendably American. Yet he and I had several things in common, including drink of choice, favorite bands, and aspirations to be writers.

“She was built with curves like the hull of a racing yacht and you missed none of it with that wool sweater,” he said, quoting a passage from the book, I assumed. “One true sentence, man, that’s all I’m trying to fucking get down. I’ve been doing a lot of writing on the trains. I’m going to mail the stories out once I get home. No doubt a few of them’ll get published.”

I doubted anything I wrote would get published. There wasn’t one word I felt confident about. Termites of self-doubt ate away at the insides of all of my sentences, until they rang false and hollow. Hemingway published his first short story at the age of twenty two. *I* was twenty-two. *Paul* was twenty-two. Maybe his stories *would* be published. He seemed to think so, and this was more than I had going for me.

“Yeah,” he said, putting the book down on the kitchen table, “when I was in high school I read *A Farewell to Arms* and I thought, That’s it, I’m joining the Red Cross. But then I realized that I wouldn’t be in Italy but instead I’d probably get sent to some fucking shithole like—”

During this time Mitchell had sat down and turned on the television to the channel that broadcast public television. The programming consisted of a live feed from a local whorehouse where big-bellied men wearing Carnival masks to hide their identity had sex with the same, tired South American prostitute—the only regular on the show. From time to time an attractive host would stick a microphone into their faces and ask questions over the loud music.

“—Uganda where some fuckin’— Holy shit, look at her taking that! That fat fucker’s giving it to her.”

He couldn’t believe that we were getting this for free and that anybody who owned a television in Sevilla was able to watch this.

I set the three teacups on the table and moved my copy of *The Sun Also Rises* back to the shelf, lest anybody use it as a coaster. I wondered if my fascination with Hemingway was as superficial as Paul's. Did the world, if it bothered to look my way at all, think me just as naïve for believing that anything would come of my amateur scribblings? I filled the three teacups with two thumbs-full of absinthe.

“Okay, so how do we do this?” Paul asked. “Isn't there some kinda way that this is prepared?”

We showed him. Dipping a spoonful of sugar into the absinthe and then setting it on fire. After he took his first sip he coughed, “Fuck, that's strong.”

We both nodded. I was glad that he was suffering.

“The taste is part of the experience,” Mitchell said with false authority.

“Got to be a soldier,” Paul said to himself and took another painful drink.

Soon we were making too much noise and our neighbor pounded on the wall. We took a few quick shots of absinthe and then headed back out into the streets.

X.

The Night and Absinthe Do Crazy Things Inside a Man, part I

(My Crazy Thing)

Sometime in the night Mitchell and I split ways with Paul and eventually with each other. I stumbled back to our apartment in the early hours of the morning—most likely around three or four. Mitchell had yet to return to the apartment, but I figured he wasn't very far behind, seeing as how the bars would soon close, and I doubted that any club would let him in in his condition.

The last I remembered seeing of him, he had just fallen on the ground after trying to kick a stationary loaf of bread down a street.

I sat down and turned on the television. A gray-haired man with skin and muscles that hung from his bones gripped the back of the prostitute's waist while she bent over a workout bench. I turned the television off and tossed the remote. I wanted to sleep, but I also wanted to learn what happened to Mitchell. During the years we'd known each other, I had seen him mad and irresponsible, but never quite like this. I figured he was lost and wouldn't be home for a while, as, sober, he was capable of losing his way even with the aid of a compass, map, and a Sherpa.

To keep awake, I took out *The Sun Also Rises* from the shelf and tried to read it, but the words were a blur and my eyes couldn't focus on any of them without making me nauseous and constricting my throat. I set the book down on the table next to the absinthe bottle. About ten ounces of absinthe looked out at me through the glass container. There was no purpose to what I did next and for this reason I did it. Hemingway, nor any of his characters had ever done it, nor did I know of any of the other absinthe artists who had either. It didn't make sense, but I placed the bottle to my lips, tipped it back, and started drinking. I was tired of chasing Hemingway's ghost, of being one of thousands of young Americans in Europe that very moment seeking to emulate him, tired of doing things because Hemingway had done it, and so my actions did not—God! This stuff was horrible! I spat out what I had left in my mouth and coughed and gagged. I looked at the bottle. Only a few ounces remained. My stomach did vicious turns and the wall in front of me rushed up and slammed into my head. I fell back onto the couch and looked up at the ceiling. Nothing stayed still.

I stumbled to the bathroom and stood over the toilet with this pathetic thought burning in me, bringing me joy: Hemingway never did this. Hemingway never did this. I wretched but nothing came out. I sank to the floor and gripped the toilet with both hands when I heard something clink against the porcelain bowl. I lifted my right hand and saw that I still held the bottle. I looked at it for a while and then tipped it over and watched as the absinthe poured into the toilet. Shaking out the last drops, I peered over the rim of the toilet and watched the *louche*. I waited, made sure I was okay, and then went to bed.

XI.

The Night and Absinthe Do Crazy Things Inside a Man, part II

(Mitchell's Crazy Thing, as told to me)

Mitchell ended up in a bar across the river with several Spaniards. At around four the bartender pulled the metal door down. As the hours passed and the city woke up, only a little sunlight crept in from outside.

For reasons that Mitchell can still not remember, the bouncer, after taking several shots, stumbled into the back room, and returned moments later with a stun gun. He then proceeded to stun himself with it for a second or two. After yelling in pain and shaking the remnants of the electricity out of his arm, he handed the stun gun to the man closest to him. The men understood that they would have a competition to see who could stun themselves the longest. The man who received the stun gun downed the rest of his drink and, after slapping himself across the face, stunned himself in the arm, though he only managed a mere second or two as well.

One by one the men passed the stun gun around the bar, everyone trying to stun themselves for longer than the people before them. Nobody could hold the gun to himself for any

more than a few seconds. Until it came to Mitchell. In an act of theatrical machismo that any bullfighter would have been proud of, Mitchell stunned himself for ten seconds. The Spaniards yelped and cheered, slamming their fists onto the bar as Mitchell, with gritted teeth, pushed the prongs of the stun gun harder against his forearm. When he finished, he nonchalantly handed it back to the bouncer and returned without a word to his drink. The Spaniards couldn't contain themselves. They slapped him on the back, poured more drinks, and each took turns inspecting his arm. His basic motor skills having failed him long before, the only reasoning Mitchell could offer his stunned audience for his superhuman tolerance to pain was, "Americano. Americano." Then, to serve as a good encore, he stunned himself twice more, each time beating his previous mark. The bartender eventually took the stun gun from him and stashed it for the remainder of the night.

Finally, a little after ten, the bartender pulled up the metal door and let Mitchell out into the unsuspecting world. The brilliant sunshine of the spring Sevillian morning blinded him. People went about their Sunday business, some returning from church, others meeting up with friends at any of the numerous bars and cafes, but all were put off by the presence of this relic from the night before who reminded them that the night didn't have to end just because the sun was up. I imagine it must have been just as unsettling for those who thought they had buried Lazarus to find him showing up at his own wake—his skin flaking off of his face, earthworms and other insects crawling from his hair, his whole being reeking of the feculence of death. "Hey guys," he'd say, moving through the crowd, "boy, it's great to see you all again. Ooh, is that onion dip?"

Mitchell tried to get a drink at a few bars, but nobody would serve him. Soon he gave up and started for our apartment. Struggling with each step, leaning forward, head bent down,

Mitchell walked into an invisible hurricane, fighting against it all the way home. With fresh electricity burns on his arms, he took off his silk dress shirt and dragged it behind him, crossing the bridge to our apartment.

When Mitchell finally made it back to our place, he threw open the bedroom door. The harsh, unfamiliar morning sunlight coming in through the kitchen window woke me up. Mitchell stood in the doorway, gripping a wall to keep himself up. Along with the realization that I was painfully hung-over, I wondered what physical harm may have come to him and the night.

He mumbled a few unintelligible words to me and then tried to walk around my bed to get to his. But, despite his long and arduous journey to our apartment, or perhaps because of it, he tripped and fell to the ground a couple feet from his destination. He growled in pain but was soon silent. With my head hovering just inches over my pillow I waited to see if he would stand back up. When he didn't, I went back to sleep.

XII.

Sitting on a Park Bench

With the hangover in its final retreat, I got out of bed. Mitchell still slept on the floor. With a tender and caring nudge of my foot, I got him to wake and get into his bed.

I cleaned off a spoon and finished off the last of our peanut butter, then walked around the city with my notebook in hand, finally making it to the Maria Luisa Park. I sat down on a bench with a view of the pond and looked over a story that had been taking me a painstakingly long time to finish. I thought about chucking the whole thing into the wastebasket but instead decided to continue working on it. I would let my own voice come through. It was, after all, more in the spirit of Hemingway. He never would have leaned so heavily on another writer's

style. I didn't care though. Paul and all the other imitators could have him. I wanted to tell my own stories now. I had to.

I crossed out the last two pages in my notebook and began writing of how the locals in the bar turn on the narrator and his best friend. The locals kick them out of the bar and run them out of town. I wrote without pause, surprised at how easy the words came.

When I returned to the apartment that evening, Mitchell was still asleep. After grocery shopping and a dinner of tuna and pasta, I woke him up.

"What time is it?" he asked, looking at the night sky through the window.

"Eight o'clock."

"In the morning," he said, trying to understand why I'd wake him up so early.

"No, at night."

Confused, he propped himself up on his elbow and looked at the window for several long seconds then slowly drawled, "Holy shit."

XIII.

Passing a Bar, Feeling Better About Us

Two days after his long walk home, Mitchell pointed out the bar where he pumped at least thirty seconds of electricity into his forearm. For the rest of our time in Sevilla, whenever we passed it, those working there would look at Mitchell with a combination of apprehension and respect that one reserves for a newly released asylum patient and the knight that slay the village dragon, respectively.

Granted, it wasn't the sort of respect Hemingway had earned for himself among the bar owners of Spain. If we returned years from now, I doubted anybody there would remember us. Nobody would come from around the bar to take their picture with us so they could frame it and hang it on the wall. They wouldn't wonder which stools we sat on. Aspiring writers wouldn't come to the bar with a notebook in hand ordering a bourbon and soda, waiting for the inspiration to come. Nobody would lean over the bar and whisper to their friend, "Do you think that's it? Is that the stun gun that Mitchell J. Pickett used to mutilate himself? What a tortured young man, what a tortured genius." And there wouldn't be a philosophical bartender who would look at them while he wiped out the inside of a mug, smirking, thinking to himself, "These crazy tourists. They're all the same, all looking for something, something that's not really there. But they keep on trying." Sure, it wasn't this and it never would be. But, I've come to learn, it was something.

The sign is colored a deep, earthy brown. A yellow trim borders it. In the middle: a white silhouette of a jaguar. Above the jaguar: a yellow box with a red exclamation point.

The sign pokes out of dense foliage like a clown from a jack in the box. As if it had once sprung on an unsuspecting traveler, scared the hell out of him, but was never pushed back down.

Only now, looking at it, do I recall some warnings about the jaguars. A story about how a child, walking with his parents, was snagged from the footpath by a jaguar and taken into the forest. The parents chased after the jaguar, fruitlessly following the cries of their child until they eventually ceased.

Passing the sign, I also remember casually passing over a bit of advice in my guidebook: *Don't walk through the forest alone. And: Talk loudly with your companions.* Jaguars, unless desperate and starved, avoid humans. Plural. I'm alone. Hundreds of visitors cross through the forest each day to reach the various lookout points of the Iguassu Falls. Unfortunately, there are none in front of me. I turn around—none there either.

Usually, such warnings and signs heeding caution don't concern me, but I'm suddenly at unease. A primal protein of self-preservation hibernating in my DNA for millennia has jumped awake as if doused with water and rushes blood to my ears. My saliva tastes like thin metal. There is something much larger and fiercer than me in this dense forest. I can't see it, but I know it's there. I sense it. It's watching me.

The footpath goes on for another hundred yards. There's nearly an equal amount behind me. I think of running, but the jaguar will most likely give chase. And if it is all only in my head, then it will be impossible to outrun that, as well.

The Iguassu Falls are one of the largest waterfalls in the world—the force they produce is three times greater than Niagara’s. I am still some distance from the falls, but the sound of the crashing water surrounds the forest. It’s a deafening, droning, constant noise. Despite this, I hear the distinct sound of a large paw pushing into the earth and snapping branches. I stop, catching my breath. There is a quick rustle of bushes and then another heavy step.

I anticipate the forest opening like theater curtains, to have one final moment of clarity, to understand, to be able to say, “Ah, so this is it,” before the jaguar tackles me, presses its weight and teeth into me, and collapses my jugular.

I keep walking, slowly, as if this is key, with the delusion of an ostrich with its head in the ground hoping to disappear. The footsteps follow me. Branches, bark, and leaves crunch under its mass.

How long will it wait before it attacks?

The opening to the footpath is still seventy yards away. A bridge awaits me if I can reach it. The jaguar won’t pursue me then. But I’m still so far away.

From the corner of my eyes I look to my right and through the slits of the trees I catch a glimpse of a large spotted shoulder before it disappears behind the dull brownish-gray bark of one thin trunk blending into another.

The footsteps, massive and nearing, quicken.

So this it.

The anticipation of the attack keeps me from appreciating these final moments of everything that was once mine. The biology of my body. The immediate world around me. The memories of places and people I’ve carried with me. Instead, just as I always am when I’m certain that turbulence will bring my flight down, I wonder why I am here. Why did I choose to

jeopardize my life by leaving my home? I was happy there. Not entirely content, but happy. Many people know much worse. So why risk it? What did I expect to find when I arrived wherever I was headed?

With the turbulence, the fear was always in my head. But here it is outside, yards from me, breathing, starving, hunting me.

I look ahead at the widening doorway of light, the opening of the footpath. Thirty yards away, at most.

I think of yelling. Maybe people will come running. Maybe it might scare the jaguar, or maybe it will excite it. If I start talking to myself will it think there is more than one person on this path? Will it not believe its eyes? What would it think then?

“Yes, what then?” I say, closing my eyes, expecting this moment to be my last. But my feet carry me forward, the ambient roar of the waterfalls continues to fill my ears, the footsteps stay by my side. “Well, I don’t know,” I say, in a different voice, this one higher-pitched and more nervous, “I suppose he would leave you alone. That,” the first voice now says, “would be nice.” I swallow hard and clear my throat to speak in a lower register. “I don’t want to die.” And then, “I think it’s working.” The footsteps stop. I quicken my pace, imagining the jaguar crouching to the ground, readying to pounce. The fear grips my temples and the back of my head. The pressure is intense, nearly crippling. The opening is only fifteen yards away. I concentrate. No sound comes from the right of me. Ten yards. I stop myself from thinking that I have a chance, fearful that such thoughts will attract the jaguar. The forest is silent. Five more yards. Three. I look over my shoulder. Nothing.

Relief.

Then I stand at the opening of the footpath. The rushing sound of the waterfall comes at me as if blown by a strong wind. Only now do I realize that the trees muffled the sound. The green canopy of the forest rolls in front of me on wavy hills. A heavy mist from the waterfalls billows over the forest, and I think, Yes, this is why I'm here. Then I take my first step onto the bridge.

Of Things Unsaid

I follow Abbey as she leaves the World's End. She doesn't ask me to follow her but I do anyway, saying goodnight to my friends on the way out. They wonder why I'm leaving so soon, but then they see the door closing behind Abbey and they understand.

Outside, she walks towards the main street. I run to catch up to her but then she stops. "Dammit," she screams, and she kicks the outside of the bar. I look down the street. Nobody is coming. "Dammit, goddammit!" She kicks the wall again and again. The bottom of her high heel scrapes against the bar's exterior. "Why does he have to make it so difficult? Why does he have to be so fucking difficult!" She screams. The music is loud inside so I don't worry about anybody hearing her. I'm almost certain she doesn't know that I'm here with her, just off to the side. She is focused on the wall, screaming at Ian, who is inside the World's End, kicking it, hoping to knock the whole thing down with Ian inside of it.

She kicks and screams and swings. Then, all of a sudden, the fight leaves her, and she crumples as if several vertebrae have been removed from her body. She leans against the wall, her forehead pressed against it, and sighs. "It's just that he gets me so upset," she says, her eyes closed. "That's what angers me. He still has a hold on me, no matter how much I deny it. Why can't he fucking just leave me alone and let me get on with my life?"

The skin that was creased into an anxious v between her eyebrows relaxes. She looks tired.

She turns her head and looks at me. "I'm not going home with you."

"That's alright," I say, "I didn't think that you would."

"So you might as well go back in and join your friends."

“I’m tired of being around them.”

“Then you’re just going home?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, I’m not going home with you.”

The World’s End, the English pub that Abbey and Ian own, is just outside the old part of town, across from where the Urumea River opens into the Bay of Biscay. It wraps around the corner of Salamanca and Aldamar, and is one of the largest bars in San Sebastian. Along the walls and shelves is a hodge-podge of the sorts of dusty faux-antiques, common to every Irish and English pub across the world: rusty lunchboxes, witty advertisements for businesses long defunct, parts to vintage bicycles. Ian and Abbey acquired the wall adornments at several yard sales and second-hand stores during a trip back to England while they finalized the paperwork to purchase the building they would turn into the World’s End.

Since neither one of them had much money, certainly not enough to open a bar, Abbey’s parents put up most of the capital. They took out a second mortgage on their house and pulled from their pensions to do this. Like most any business venture, it was a risk, but they were certain their investment would turn a profit. Abbey was the only one among them who had specific doubts, but she kept these to herself. Even though she wanted to get as far away from Ian as she could she signed her name next to his on every paper that was handed to her. For the last five years of their relationship, Ian beat her, and nobody, not even her parents or sister or closest friends, knew this.

“It’s too cold to walk home,” she says. “I can’t feel my face.”

We hail a taxi a block from the World's End. Because Salamanca is a one-way street, we have to pass the bar again. Outside, several college girls are saying goodbye to each other. They have their arms crossed over their chests, trying to keep warm from the freezing wind that's been coming in off the Bay for the last week. I wonder what a relationship with one of them would be like. I imagine it'd be simple, perhaps superficial and slight, but simple.

I don't mind the commotion that surrounds Abbey though—because I love her. I haven't told her this yet. I want to, but I know that once I do we will be forced to acknowledge the state of our relationship, and we will break up. And because I don't want to be without her, because anything, even a relationship where we move around in a darkened room filled with things unsaid, is better than being without her, I don't tell her what I want to tell her.

I see her now, only a crescent of her profile because she's looking out towards the water, and I think she's beautiful. If I had a block of marble or some bronze or clay I'd make a statue of her looking out this taxi window because it does take a certain strength to look away. But lately I've just been waiting for her to fall to the floor and shatter. Maybe I'd make it out of glass.

Though I let on that I'm clueless, I'm not. An instinctual knowledge that she has met someone else grips me. I know she can't be alone. Loneliness scares her. Since she can't leave San Sebastian, she creates the illusion of escape by moving from one man to another. But I want to be more to her than just a temporary remedy against loneliness.

I know she wants to tell me about this other person, and that it's all very confusing. But she doesn't feel bad for leading me on. This is all a part of life, and I'm still young. If it wasn't her putting me through this, then it'd be somebody else. She has responsibilities that can easily drown her. This other man, the one she's leaving me for, is twice my age and has the financial resources to save her.

She'd like to tell me this and then say goodbye, but she doesn't. I don't say anything either, and so we sit in the back of the taxi, rehearsing the monologues in our head.

Finally, just for the sake of conversation, I ask her about Ian, about how much longer he'll be in San Sebastian.

"How the hell do I know," she says, frustrated—at Ian, not at me. "I don't even know what he's doing here *now*."

I could've easily brought up the weather (it's cold as all hell outside, we can both agree on that) but lately there's not much that I can say to rouse her out of her gloom. Talking about Ian animates her and brings us closer together. Since they broke up, and she began seeing me, he's been traveling back and forth between southern London and San Sebastian, trying to get psychological help and control over his rage, the part of his character that pushed her away for good. He's been struggling with himself, calling her one day to apologize for all the hurt he caused her only to call the next to say she ruined his life and that soon she'll suffer. He's become suicidal. I fear, just as Abbey does, that he will take her life moments before he takes his. He has an uncommon ability to play the victim, the sadist, the repenter, the friend and so on, interchanging between one and the other with disturbing ease. Tonight, though, he has been playing the role most familiar to him, that of the bully.

"Why can't he just leave me alone?" she says in an accusatory tone, as if I were Ian's representative. She closes her eyes and buries her fingers in her curly auburn hair. Even now, I can't take my eyes off her. "I'm sorry." She puts a hand on my knee and smiles. "I suppose we're being rude to the taxi driver." She leans forward and asks him in Spanish how he's doing.

He shifts slightly in his seat. "You speak Spanish?"

"Yes," we both answer.

“Your Spanish is good—the accent,” he tells Abbey.

“It should be. I’ve been living here for a while.”

“In San Sebastian?”

“Yes, but before that Pamplona.”

“Are you two English?” he asks.

“Yes,” I say, though I’m American. The Spanish think that anybody who speaks English is from England, and that anybody speaking a European tongue that’s not derived from the Romantics is German. After studying for nearly a year in San Sebastian, I’ve decided it’s easier just to let them think so.

“I gave a ride to somebody else from England just the other day,” the taxi driver says. “He told a joke I’ve been retelling ever since. It’s a little dirty.” He turns to look at Abbey. He wants permission to tell us the joke.

“That’s alright,” Abbey says, “I work in a bar. I’m sure I’ve heard worse.”

“I can’t do the accent like he did – maybe something is changed in translation – but there’s this young tourist who goes to a bar in Scotland and he orders a drink. When he gets it, an old man approaches him and says, ‘*Aupa, jovelin*, do you see that barn over there? I built it with the sweat from my back and the blood from my hands’...”

The punchline is that the crotchety Scotsman is bitter because, with all his accomplishments, the only thing people remember him for is having sex with a goat.

We both laugh though we’ve heard the joke before. The taxi driver laughs, as well, and looks at us in the rearview mirror to see how much we enjoyed it.

“By chance,” Abbey asks, “did the person who told the joke have a guitar with him?”

“Yes, in a black case. Do you know him?”

“Stuart.”

“Yes, Stuart,” the taxi driver says, remembering his name.

“He’s a friend of ours. He plays music in the bar I work at.”

“Oh,” the driver says, suddenly disappointed. “Then you’ve heard the joke before.”

“No, no,” she says, giving my leg a squeeze.

This is another thing we have, I want to tell her, another thing that we share. Our friends. The way we view each of them. Right now you’re thinking about Stuart, the caricature of him: the dozens of bad jokes he tells that never get a laugh. But then you think about the night that we first really began to get to know each other, how Stuart was there, and how it was just the three of us in a crowded bar. It was exciting and awkward because you and I were both interested in each other, and maybe we were both too eager, but thankfully we had Stuart there, our common ground. That night, strolling along the river, he and I walked you back to your apartment, and I didn’t know at the time, but Ian was still waiting up for you.

“What was the address again?” the taxi driver asks.

“You might as well be dropped off first,” Abbey says to me in English.

“No, that’s alright.”

“But you’re closer. It doesn’t make any sense to come back this way.” In Spanish, she gives the directions to the taxi driver.

“Am I taking both of you there?” he asks.

There’s a pause, only a slight one, and I’m about to answer for her but then she says, “Yes, both of us.”

There was somebody else before me. Abbey once showed me a picture of him in a wetsuit standing on a large rock.

“It’s funny,” she said, “how much the two of you look alike. I never thought I had a type, but I suppose I do.”

His name was Neal, and he was from Canada. Ian was away in England visiting his mother when Neal and his friends came through San Sebastian. They enjoyed going to the World’s End. Abbey took to them. One night while at a restaurant, she noticed the attention that Neal gave her. They began talking away from the others, and when every bar closed and the others went home, Abbey and Neal went back to the World’s End and continued drinking and talking. Though she had only known him for a few days and would never see him again after a few more, and because she was ready, finally ready to open up, she told him about the abuse she’d suffered by Ian over the last five years, and how she struggled to keep this a secret from everyone.

She hadn’t necessarily become familiar to the violence, to the force of the punches, but the pain did pass. It was the moments of clarity afterwards – the violation being seen in a stark and sobering morning light – that she dreaded most of all. She was not leaving as she promised herself she would, and Ian was not changing. Nothing was changing. With every bruise and cut she concealed and every time somebody – her mother, sister, friend, customer, anybody – asked her how she was and she told them that she was fine, she moved further and further away from the spot where she had last been herself.

Several days later, Abbey left the bar in care of the managing bartender and went with Neal to the Canary Islands for a vacation. The day they returned to San Sebastian Neal and his friends left for Madrid, where they would catch their flight to Canada. Abbey saw them off at the

train station. Several days later Ian would be back, but she was ready. She was strong enough to leave. She knew it wouldn't be easy, that there would probably be new cuts and bruises, but she wouldn't have to hide them any longer.

In the elevator up to my apartment, we both look into the mirror and say nothing. Because I'm surprised that she is here with me, I keep silent, fearful that the wrong word will cause her to reconsider being here. It's been less than a week since the last time we rode up this elevator together, but so much has happened between us since then, or rather so little, that I didn't think this would be happening again, at least not anytime soon.

Abbey's staring into the mirror, lost in thoughts. She notices me looking at her, and I smile. She returns the smile then looks back into her own eyes. I look at my reflection. There's hope for us, I think as I run my fingers through my hair. The hair comes down to my nose. I'll be bald in five years, seven at best. I need to start taking more pictures of myself. In ten years, nobody will believe I had this much hair.

"What are you thinking about?" Abbey asks.

"Nothing," I say. "My hair."

"Oh." She looks at it and then pulls on her own. "I'm thinking of getting mine cut."

"Don't do that."

"My sister cut hers recently and sent some pictures. It looks really good. I'd like to try something like that. Maybe even change the color."

The elevator stops on my floor. We step out, and I unlock my door. Abbey walks ahead of me to my room. There's still hope, I think. Why would we break up? We get along so well. We fit together perfectly in the bed and on the floor and in the shower and on the balcony and in

the midnight shadows of a quiet street. We've never argued. Her life interests me, and mine hers. Until recently, we've been inseparable. Many nights we never got around to falling asleep, instead talking and making love until the rising sun could be seen through the window. We've made plans for next week and the following month and the coming summer. Life has never been so exciting. There's no reason, other than this growing silence, why we should stop seeing each other.

Abbey flips through a magazine. My room is a mess, but I know she doesn't mind this. She likes the unmade bed, the clothes and hangers on the floor, the disorganized desk. She likes that everything is not where it's supposed to be. It reminds her of her own time back in college. Coming up from behind her, I put my arms around her waist and start kissing her neck.

I wanted to tell her I love her, but now I'm certain this is the end. She came up here to break up with me, but she can not say the words, can not turn to face me and say, "I'm sorry, but you just happened to get in the way." There will be tonight, and tomorrow we will talk. Or maybe we won't, maybe we'll just keep drifting apart. But it will be over. Kissing her now, I feel nothing from her

She turns around and kisses me on the lips. "I'm going to go to the bathroom."

"Okay."

The bathroom is part of the routine we've established over the last three months. She'll come back, take a shirt of mine from off the ground and put it on. I'll turn off the light and turn on the lamp by the bed, and then I'll get under the covers with her. The routine will carry us through the night.

But Abbey is now standing in the doorway.

"I'm going to go home."

“What?”

“I don’t even know why I’m here. I told you I wasn’t going to come over. I had no intention of being here. But then Ian got me upset and I, I—I suppose just had a moment of weakness.”

I know she’s right, but I don’t want her to leave. “But maybe this is what you really want. Maybe—”

“I’ll just see you tomorrow,” she says. “Maybe we can get lunch or something.”

“Well,” I say, “I suppose I’ll walk you downstairs.”

Before we get in the elevator, she calls a taxi. It’s freezing outside, colder than I ever remember it being in the city, so we wait in the foyer. She leans against the wall, keeping an eye out for the taxi, while I stand against the other wall.

“I wonder if you’ll get the same driver,” I say.

“God, I hope not. He’ll think that we had a big row, or maybe he’ll just think that I’m nuts.”

I smile.

But I really want to scream. If this is the end then let’s say it’s the end. Let’s say something.

The taxi pulls in front of the apartment building. The driver is much older than the other one and has a thick grey beard that he pulls on as he looks at us, waiting.

“Goodnight,” she says, kissing me quickly on the lips, and then walks out. A gust of cold air comes into the foyer and sends warm blood rushing to my cheeks. Abbey is giving directions to the driver as they pull away from the curb and drive down the street. She doesn’t look at me or wave goodbye.

Half a block down at the intersection the taxi stops, and pauses there, just long enough for me to think that Abbey is going to get out and run through the cold back to my apartment and into my arms, and we'll talk, finally, saying everything that's been on our minds, both of us speaking at the same time, but then the taxi signals with its blinker, turns the corner, and is gone.

You have to go. Badly. You are in search of an internet café. You will relieve yourself once you get there. The rain continues to soak you, making a soggy joke out of what was advertised as a water-resistant jacket. Your clothes, heavy with rain, weigh on you and your full bladder. To your side, rain drops bounce off the surface of the murky canal, one of the hundreds that cut through and divide the city. Water surrounds you. It presses on you.

Sure, you can sneak into a bar or a café and use their restroom facilities, but you don't on the off-chance of getting caught. It is important to you to be a good ambassador for your country—the United States of America, a country which had a terrible reputation abroad until the recent attacks in New York and D.C. After which, the rest of the world gave you its pity and sympathy. But already you can feel things slipping. With rumblings of military retribution and with the polarizing rhetoric of your president, you have begun to sense the distrust in others when you tell them that you're American. You want to calm them, to prove to them that not every American is ugly, that, in fact, you and your countrypeople are good humans who wish the best for everybody, who understand that the world is neither a scary place nor for the taking.

This is why you continue to hold it even while the dark sky, the living, rising canal, the puddles and the pounding rain torment you. Because you are merely a guest here. The city does not owe you anything.

Take out your map again. Try to keep it dry from the rain. Turn it. Where is that internet café? Once there and after you relieve yourself, you'll write to friends and family, emulating the prose of your favorite travel writers, those who could visit a city and at once become an authority

on it. You will shape your report from Venice so it encourages envy in those included in your mass e-mail, so that they wish they were you. Or, at the very least, with you.

Your traveling partner on the other hand has refused to come out with you. Tired of the rain that's been a loyal but unwelcome companion during your travels through Europe, he's chosen to keep dry at the bar by the hostel rather than get wet and see the city. Feel disappointed with his decision. Feel superior to him. You are, and you've known this, the better traveler of the two of you. He allows even the most minor inconveniences (a sleepless night in an uncomfortable couchette on an overnight train or recurring gastro-intestinal problems as a result of local food) to darken his mood. You, on the other hand, relish these bumps in the road. They color the reports you send back home. They help mold the persona of the hardened traveler—a modern day Shackleton, Marco Polo, Magellan. You survived the worst that moving through the world threw at you. The inconveniences – perhaps even moreso than standing in front of the Eiffel Tower or the Coliseum or the Mediterranean Sea – tell you that you are traveling. Life is a sterile thing back home, devoid of impediments and obstacles. In its stead are routine and tedium. You have broken free from this. You are living. When, at home, would you ever spend so much time in the rain? You wouldn't.

Celebrate the rain.

Now only if you didn't have to pee...

Turn a corner. The street before you, a narrow thing framed on both sides by apartment buildings, appears to lead to nowhere. Consult your map. Yes, you are on the right street.

Notice the complete lack of pedestrians. You, a solitary figure in a tan jacket with the hood pulled over your head, are the only person on the street. How easy it would be to discreetly relieve yourself on a wall. The rain would wash all evidence of your crime into the canal. Look

up at the windows. You do not see any curious neighbors—only red potted flowers on balconies that protrude less than two feet from the buildings. Look up and down the street. Nobody. Approach an apartment building. Pretend to look at the names of those that live there while you unzip your pants. Feign concentration as you search for a name of someone you know who lives here. Perhaps an old professor, a mentor, someone who taught you Dante and Latin. Better yet, a mistress. An older woman named Valentina whose husband is always away on business, something to do with plastics—you never ask for specifics. Look up and down the street again. Unzip your pants. Nobody. Then feel the overwhelming, orgasmic sensation of release. Your toes tingle.

Hear someone approaching. A middle-aged woman on a cell phone.

Pinch it. Put yourself back into your pants. Pretend to buzz for Valentina. She mustn't be home. Nod to the woman as she passes.

When she turns the corner pull open your boxer shorts. Stop. Zip up. Two old ladies shuffle up the street. They stop at an apartment building near you but do not go inside. They do not mind the rain. In fact, they prefer to have their conversation in it. It is impossible to wait them out. Pretend to buzz once more and then walk away.

Now you really have to go. The rain drenches you. Soaks you. Would it be bad if you just went in your pants? It's not like you could get any wetter. It would be as if you were peeing in the ocean, wouldn't it? Eventually the rain would wash out your clothes.

Attempt this. Stand still. Close your eyes. Take a deep breath. Relax.

Who are you kidding? You can't do it.

Look at the map again. You're not far from the internet café. You can make it. Just ahead is the opening to a major street. Once there, all you have to do is walk over a few bridges and then you'll be there.

Start walking. The street narrows and then opens onto a wide pedestrian street filled with bustling Venetians holding chic, black and grey-colored umbrellas. A wide, choppy river is on the other side of the street. Large boats speed by, carrying people.

You step into the street and immediately the crowd carries you with it. Blank, anonymous faces under the umbrellas. Somber backs. Quick, efficient footsteps. What are all these people doing out in the rain? They look like extras on a movie set.

You are only allotted a small space in the crowd, and you must move quickly within it to maintain that space.

Keep an eye out for the internet café. Look up. Did you pass it already? Glance back. Did you see it? Pay attention to the street names. Do you recognize any of them? Take out the map. Try to read it. You can't. The crowd is moving too quickly.

Just ahead you see the entrance to an alley. Work your way to the side of the street. Nudge past people. Apologize. Try not to step on too many feet. Jump out of the crowd. The alley is a small cramped space with a ceiling only a foot above your head. Moss grows on it and water drips from it. The rain, at least for you in this small alley that dead ends no more than fifteen yards away, has stopped.

Breathe, but not too deep or you may wet yourself.

Look at the map. Try to orient yourself. Look at the street names. No, you haven't passed the internet café. Fold the map back up and go back into the—wait a second...Look back down at the end of the alley. It is dank and obscured by darkness. Then look at the people in the street.

Their heads are down. Their thoughts concerned with practical matters. Not a single person looks your way.

Tuck the map under your arm. Walk to the end of the alley. Glance back. Nobody is paying any attention to you. Fumble with your zipper. Now that you are finally about to go you can no longer hold it. You get yourself out just in time.

Yes!

Tilt your head back. What relief! Relish this. Groan. It has never felt this sweet before. Exhale again. Louder this time. And again. Ah, yes. You continue peeing on the wall. The capacity of your bladder surprises you. How did it contain all of this? Amazing. Look at the mark you make on the wall. It is large. It is impressive. Then tilt your head. Is that a door handle? Look closer. The door handle is flecked with droplets of piss. The door to which it belongs receives the majority of the contents of your bladder.

Hurry. Finish. Stuff yourself back into your pants. Don't waste time shaking. Zip up.

Stop.

What's that noise?

It can't be.

Watch the door handle turn. Quick. Unfold the map. Hold it up to your face. Now lower it just as the door opens. Try your best to appear puzzled, lost. A middle-aged man emerges from behind the door. Your presence surprises him, but then he sees the map, and, but, yes, of course, a tourist would be inept enough to walk down a dead-end alley and be surprised to find a dead end.

Smile at him. Look apologetic for being so dim. Look perplexed. Let this confirm something he always thought about tourists.

It's working.

Turn away from him. Hold up the map again and study it. Start walking. Casually.

Maybe a little quicker.

Hear him close the door. Take a quick glance back. He has both hands on his hips. He's looking at the door.

Stay calm.

Hear him yell.

Run.

Enter the crowd and push your way through it. Duck under umbrellas and sidestep the automatic pedestrians. Look behind you. He is doing the same. Hear him yell again. Run over a bridge. Don't turn off the main street. It would just be you and him if you did. Pretend that you do though. Try to throw him off. Turn back. You haven't fooled him. He manages to keep pace with you. He is fast. Run faster. Duck. Take off your hood and your jacket. Hear him yell again. Have you lost him? Run with your head down. Move diagonally from one side of the street to the other. Look behind. He's there, further now, but still giving chase.

Realize that he knows these streets. At any second this street can either splinter into a dozen smaller streets or leave you with your back against the wall. You have to get off this street. You have to duck into a shop or a café. Look up. Look at your options. See right there, five feet away from you, the internet café. Go to it. Open the door just a crack. Slip inside. Watch from the window as the people and umbrellas continue by. Look for your pursuer. You can't find him in the crowd. You lost him.

Turn and see that a few foreigners, mostly backpackers, have looked away from their computer screen and are eyeing you. Smile at them. Walk to the cute working behind the desk. Breathe easy. Smile at her, too. She smiles back. You may have a chance with her.

Hear the bell on the door behind you chime. Turn around. See the man. He rushes at you but stops inches from your face, then starts yelling—all of it in Italian. Spit hits you in the face. Notice that everybody watches you. Do any of them know what he is saying to you? Surely, the cute girl working here does. Italian, usually a very romantic language, has never sounded so ugly to you.

The man spits again. Feel an overwhelming urge to shove him. To yell, “You know what, I tried. Okay? I tried. And that should count for something. I could have easily just spent the day in the bar and have seen nothing of your fucking city. I could have taken the easy way out. But instead I went out. I got soaked. I probably caught a cold. I tried to be a responsible tourist. I tried to be a good representative for the U.S. Okay? I tried. Now fuck off!” Restrain yourself. This won’t help.

Instead, just mouth, “Fuck off,” and then turn away from him. Yes, that’s good. That really riled him up. Say to the cute girl, “I’d like to use a computer.”

She still watches the yelling man behind you. Say it again. Just as cool and composed as before. “I’d like to use a computer.”

She points to a free one. Walk past the man – he still yells at you – and sit down at the computer.

The man says one final thing, something vicious and pointed, spits in your direction, and then leaves. Everyone follows him out with their eyes and then looks at you, the person who set him off. The tourist who crossed the line. Try to ignore them. Ignore the humiliation. Blood rushes to your cheeks.

Log in to your email account. You've received five new messages from friends. Open the first one. Your friend responds to your most recent group email, saying how jealous she is that you managed to see the Pope twice in—Hear the bell chime again. The man is back.

He stands at the doorway, and, using hand gestures you assume mean something vile in Italian, he yells at you some more. You watch him with a cold face devoid of any emotion. Look condescending, as if you almost pity him and his inability to get over it. Then turn your back on him and reply to your friend's message.

"Venice," you begin, "does not disappoint."

Postcard from Baden Baden, Germany

April 18, 2002

At two in the morning we arrive at the train station outside Baden Baden. I have the conductor hold the train while I throw my bag off, then Mitchell's, and then his shoes and socks. All the while Mitchell is trying to force his head through the mid-section of his shirt. I grab him, throw one of his arms over my shoulders, and help him off the train.

His heavy breath reeks of booze.

A powerful Bavarian storm beats down on us while the train pulls away. Mitchell hops on one foot to put on his socks and shoes. The unforgiving wind pulls at the rain so it comes down sideways, making the thin, well-intentioned strip of ceiling above us a pointless piece of metal.

"Fuck, it's cold out here," he says.

"Yeah."

We take our bags to the platform where our train will arrive in four hours to take us to Munich. Mitchell sticks out his hand to catch some rain—a pointless gesture since the rain is hitting us from all sides.

"When will this goddamn rain stop?"

We only have a limited time to see as much of Europe as we can, but for the last month, the rain has confined us to places with four walls and a ceiling, keeping us from seeing all that we had intended to when we originally planned this trip nearly a year ago. The rain has not let up.

"Goddamn, it's cold," Mitchell says.

We both sit on the bench and shiver. Mitchell takes the weather personally. "This is fucking bullshit, man." I have four more hours of this.

Mitchell's convinced that a rain cloud two city blocks wide follows us from city to city, that just three blocks away the sun shines, children skip rope, and birds chirp.

The train station is empty. Ahead of us, through the rain, are the city lights to what we assume is Baden Baden, a quaint German town where everyone is dry and tucked into a warm bed and where even the insomniacs find comfort in the sounds of the rain beating against their homes.

Mitchell opens his bag and puts on all of his clothes, save for a few socks and his extra underwear. He lies down behind the bench and falls asleep. I take out my book, *The Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, and continue reading from it, knowing that one of us has to stay awake to keep an eye on our belongings. From time to time a cargo train roars by, slicing against the rain.

After about an hour I look up from the book to see Mitchell with his arms inside his shirt. His loose sleeves dangle and sway side to side as he does a little shuffle, trying to keep warm.

"I'm leaving," he tells me.

"What?"

"I'm leaving. I'm going home."

I look at my watch. "It's three-thirty in the morning."

"I don't care. I'm done with this. I'm finished with traveling. I'm ready to go home, to get started on life. I mean, what are we even doing here? Huh? What are we doing?"

I shrug my shoulders. "We're, you know, moving and, like, seeing stuff."

"We're putting up with rain. We're living like the homeless and putting up with the rain. That's all. We're not making a single contribution to anything. We're just getting wet."

"Yeah, but we're traveling. It's not supposed to be easy."

“I don’t care, man. I have friends and family back home that miss me. I could be with them right now instead of getting dumped on out here. I’m leaving.”

“How?”

“I’m going into town and getting the first ticket out of here.”

“By the time the travel agency opens our train will be halfway to Munich.”

“I don’t care. I’m done. I’m finished. Let’s just shake hands and say our goodbyes and be done with it. We’re still friends. I’m just done with traveling and this rain.”

Mitchell slides his arms through his shirt sleeves and then rummages through his backpack, looking for his passport. He picks up his money belt and searches through its pockets, then crumples it up and spikes it on the ground. He throws his head back, opens his arms to the sky, and screams, “Why have you forsaken me!” Then, louder, “WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME!”

The answer comes as the wind picks up and howls through the station. The wind takes Mitchell with it and he sprints across the platform and down the stairs.

Then I’m alone.

I look at our bags and then in the direction that Mitchell disappeared.

“Mitchell?”

I walk down the steps and through the corridor. “Mitchell?” I go up to the platform to check on our bags when I see him already a great distance from the station, sprinting towards the city lights.

“Mitchell!” I yell.

He stops and turns to face the station.

“What the hell are you doing? You’ll get soaked out there waiting. Get back here!”

I don't expect him to be able to hear me or follow my orders, but he continues standing in the pouring rain and, after considering a few things, comes back to the station. By the time he returns to the platform, there isn't a thread of his clothing that isn't soaked through.

"I mean what I said, Jules," he says between breaths. "Tomorrow I'm buying my ticket home."

"Do what you feel you have to do."

But when the train for Munich comes, the sky clears, the morning sun pokes above the horizon, and we board the train together.

Then we're treated to our first day of uninterrupted sunshine in more than a month.

Concerning the World's End

The three of us had been sitting at a table near the window in the Calidonian so we could keep an eye on Karl's dog Odín, a stray tied outside to a tree next to Karl's chained-up bike, when Magnus finished his beer, stood up, and said so matter-of-factly that at first I thought he was saying goodnight, "I'm going to kill Ian."

When what he said finally registered I knew that he was serious, that this wasn't just talk from a drunk and frustrated person. Lately, murder had been in the air—especially for those, like Magnus, who worked at the English pub the World's End.

Karl and I tried to talk him out of it, but he was determined. Neither of us doubted he would do it. Despite his Swedish nationality, Magnus had a violent history. Aside from the schoolyard and barroom fights he sought out until only recently, he trained as a sniper during his mandatory service with the Swedish military, a training the military never employed. After completing his service, he trained as a boxer while continuing his studies at Gothenburg University, excelling in the sport until a few years ago when he studied abroad in San Sebastian, Spain. He never returned to the ring or Sweden.

"*Por favor, hombre, no,*" Karl said in his heavy German-accented Spanish. His long, filthy hair hung in front of his thin face. "*No. Y por que?*" He dragged the back of his thumb across his neck then held his hands open. "*Por que?*"

Like the stray dog he had taken in, Karl was loyal, dependable, and practically homeless. He would have been entirely destitute had it not been for the kindness Magnus showed him when he walked into the World's End one day. He was filthy, tired, and in need of a drink. Along with the drink, what Magnus eventually gave Karl was friendship and a place to stay—a friend's

garage where he could sleep and keep dry from San Sebastian's wet spring. Looking at Karl, I knew that it pained him to see his benefactor decide to do something that was so permanent and damning.

Karl now looked like an over-sentimental idiot, but I hoped something he said reached Magnus. It didn't. Magnus looked past us, out the window. "Okay," he said, "I'm going."

"Magnus," I said, "don't do this. I'm going to be the first person they come after. A whole barroom full of people saw me fight him two days ago."

"Then stay here," he said, not caring whether I did or didn't. "You'll be covered."

"It's not always going to be like this, you know," I said. "Just because you hate him, because he's a fucking waste, because he—"

"Listen, Jules, I'm not looking for you to help me or talk me out of it. My mind's made up. I just wanted to tell somebody before I did it. That's all. I know that I can tell you because you want him dead, too. And I know I can trust Karl because he's Karl. And, no, this isn't about what he did to Abbey or anything like that. Some people just deserve to die."

And with that, Magnus left the bar. He patted Karl's dog on the head and then walked out of view. Karl and I looked at each other, both of us wondering why we did nothing to stop him.

It was time I was honest with myself. Were the questions and concerns I gave to Magnus my sincere attempt to persuade him not to go through with it, or was I looking to be convinced, to be calmed and assured? Had I not been hoping for something like this to happen?

I stood up from the table.

Karl looked at me. "Dondé vas?"

"To get some drinks," I said.

As I walked to the bar, I unintentionally bumped shoulders with a man on his way out. He turned back to look at me, but I let on as if I didn't see him. I pushed up to the bar and tried to get the bartender's attention.

Several months earlier, Abbey lay on my bed, naked underneath the sheets and comforter. The rain continued beating on the window outside, just as it had for the past week. The heavy blanket wasn't necessary as it was no longer very cold in the city. Just as it did every night, the comforter would eventually end up on the floor by the foot of the bed. But until then, it was pleasant being under so much weight at the end of the day, especially while our wet clothes lay crumpled on the floor.

"What a day," Abbey said, separating each word with a kiss on the lips. "What a day." She stretched, her palms pushing against the wall behind us while her toes pointed to the rain-battered window, before turning her back to me and curling up like a cat to rest. I put a hand on her waist and kissed the back of her neck.

"That feels good," she said. "But what I could really go for is a massage."

Abbey was from Newcastle, the Jordy region of northern England, giving her a pleasant British accent that borrowed the lighter lifts of the northern English and southern Scottish accents without any of their thicker brogues. But she didn't talk much and this, along with her icy and unquestionable beauty, made her seem cold and unapproachable to the many people who frequented the World's End.

"What was it like before I showed up?" I asked, brushing her curly auburn hair over her right shoulder and massaging the back of her neck with my thumbs.

"There's a group of students doing a two-week thing here."

“American?”

“There were a few, but I think they were from all over. I’d just sent Magnus home when they showed up. There were at least thirty of them that showed up. It was their first night in San Sebastian.”

“That’s good for business,” I said, moving my hands down her back.

“Yeah, but it was just Phil and me there. We were running around the bar and down into the kitchen for over two hours. The last ones left just before you showed up.”

“I never noticed it before, but you have incredible back muscles.”

“Do I?” she asked, turning her head to try and see.

“Yeah, it’s your lats.”

“Really?” she asked. “It must be from the crates of bottles I carry up and down the stairs all day long.”

“Must be,” I said, looking at the tight knots of muscles in her back as I massaged them with my hands. “What’s this?” I stopped on a thin, white scar around three inches in length.

“How’d you get this?”

She stopped smiling and turned away from me. “How do you think?”

“Ian?”

She didn’t say anything. I continued looking at her back, seeing other similar scars that I hadn’t noticed before. “He did all of these?”

“Over the years, yeah.”

At least six discolored lines marked her back.

“The worst one,” she said, “was the one right by my spine. Is it still there?”

I traced her spine with a finger until I found a faint scar in the middle of her back. “This one?”

“Yeah, that should be it. He sent me over the table. A glass shattered under my back. I wanted to go to the hospital but he was scared, so he wouldn’t take me. This was probably three or four years ago. It was much bigger then. He was crying, saying how sorry he was, and I was crying because I was in so much fucking pain. I’m sure we looked quite the couple”

I didn’t know what to say so I kissed every scar and then hugged her. Even though the beatings had occurred over the span of five years, and Ian and Abbey had been separated for nearly six months there were still very few people who knew that she had suffered the way she had. Since I saw the last beating and knew her secret she confided in me the darker moments of her past.

She turned away from the wall to face me. “A lot of times there weren’t bad cuts but there were always bruises. I tried to hide them, but sometimes they were so bad I couldn’t even go outside unless I wore a long-collared shirt and jeans, sometimes not even then.” She smiled. “It’s silly, but that wouldn’t upset me as much as the times that I couldn’t go to the beach. It’d be a beautiful day, I’d be sure everybody was at the beach, and there’d I be stuck inside the flat.”

I pulled her in close. She put her arm over me and rested her head on my chest. “I’ve been having this recurring dream lately,” I said, and then began to tell her. In the dream I was fighting Ian. Most times I had him by the shirt with my left hand while I slammed my right fist into his face—exploding his nose with the first punch, then with every following punch further mutilating him until the back of his skull was a bowl that had in it soft flesh, blood-matted hair, and red, splintered bones. But even then I wouldn’t stop. I was charged with rage, eventually sending punches into a clump of bloody ground beef, not stopping until I awoke and realized

where I was, and that the violence was just a dream. Still, my insatiable rage scared me, and I'd nuzzle next to Abbey and be comforted by the warmth of her body, that same one that Ian had scarred and bruised over the years.

But in other dreams, my fists moved at a frustratingly slow speed—they were heavy weights that I could hardly lift, let alone swing. And every time I tried to punch Ian he'd elude and taunt me. I wanted to make him feel what she felt, but I couldn't.

"Honey," Abbey said, putting a hand on my cheek, "please don't let it bother you that much. It's in the past. There's nothing we can do about it now."

"Still," I said, "I'd like to fight him. I'd like to show him that he can't do that to other people, that there are consequences to those sorts of things."

"You don't think he knows that?"

"No, I don't."

"He's lost everything he ever had. He's lost his girl, he's lost his bar, he's lost everything that once made up his world. And it was all his fault. He has to live with that—that's suffering. He's seeing a counselor. He's trying to change. He's aware of the mistakes he's made. If you fought him then it would just stir a lot of old things up, it would cause a lot of trouble for me, and it would take a long time before things settled back down to the way they are now." She kissed me. "And I like the way things are. So please promise me that you won't fight him."

"I can't."

"Well then lie to me so that I don't have to worry about it." She kissed me again. "Can you promise me that you won't fight him?"

I smiled. Despite the terrible things she had been through, she was still compassionate, warm, and tender. "Okay," I said, "I promise."

“*Aupa, hombre, que vas a tomar?*” the bartender asked impatiently. I hadn’t noticed him looking at me.

“*Dos cañas,*” I said.

The bartender poured the two beers, and when I reached into my pocket for the money, my hand brushed against the folding knife I’d been carrying with me since Ian and I had fought, carrying it in case I encountered him again—for self-defense.

I paid for the drinks. “*Gracias,*” I said, giving him a tip, hoping he’d remember me when the time came for him to verify my whereabouts.

I took the beers to the table. Karl stood up and patted me on the arm. “*Yo voy,*” he said. I go.

“But I just bought these.”

He put his hands together and rested his head on them. “*Cansado,*” he said. Tired.

“But first one more.” I handed him the beer. I knew what he wanted to do. Stop Magnus, get to him before he reached the World’s End.

Karl put the beer on the table and shook his head. “*Demasiado cansado.*”

“*Por favor,*” I said, “I don’t want to have to drink alone.”

“*Lo siento.*”

I couldn’t stop him, but I hoped to stall him, so by the time he reached the World’s End Ian would be dead, and Karl could do nothing but help Magnus carry the body across the street and throw it into the river or whatever Magnus had planned for the body. Recalling once again the scars on Abbey’s body, I heard Magnus’ words: Some people deserve to die.

“*Por favor,*” I said, handing him the beer once again and sitting down, encouraging him to do the same. I wasn’t being fair. I knew Karl couldn’t refuse a free drink. He sighed. He looked at the beer and then looked outside at his bike and dog then sat down. “*Bueno,*” I said. “*Gracias.*”

We drank in silence. Karl shifted in his seat and looked out the window. Several men left the bar. Outside they swayed over Odín, talking to him and then, realizing that he was friendly, petting him. Karl eyed them in a distrustful manner. He was used to drunks petting his dog, but he was on edge, charged with a nervous energy, and at this point suspected the worst out of everybody. I sat still, trying to appear calm, hoping this would sedate Karl, when I was anything but calm. I was conflicted and knew that every second counted, that my inaction would actually indict me in Ian’s murder—this thrilled and scared me.

The men outside patted Karl’s dog on the head one last time and then walked away. Karl turned back towards me.

“How did you find Odín?” I asked him, hoping to start a conversation.

He hesitated, then in broken Spanish and English began to tell me—but I was distracted by the sudden image in my mind’s eye of Magnus crossing the bridge to get to the World’s End. I imagined him looking at the low water in the mouth of the river that the ocean pulled into it, and then at the facades of the apartment buildings on Paseo de Salamanca and the streetlamps, the necklace of lights, that curved with the street and disappeared. Just beyond that curve was the World’s End. I saw that there were only a few minutes left.

Karl must have been thinking the same thing because he stood up and said, “*Yo voy a la cama.*” I’m going to bed.

I wasn't sure if he had finished his story or, noticing that I wasn't paying attention, just stopped it. I tried to keep him, but by the time I stood up to protest, he was already at the door. "*Hasta manana*," he said. I sat back down and watched through the window as he unchained his bike and, fumbling, began untying Odín.

Several days after Abbey and I broke up, I went into the World's End to have a drink and to see how she was doing. I'd heard that Ian was back in town, and though he had been in counseling for more than three months, Abbey had reason to be concerned with his presence. Several times before our break-up, he called her while drunk and told her how much he hated her, how she was a "slut" and a "whore," how he couldn't stand living knowing that she was with someone else, and how he was going to kill himself, or her, or me, or all of us.

The only people in the bar sat around a small table upstairs, drinking and joking with one another, most likely on their lunch break. Abbey stood behind the bar.

"How're you doing?" I asked.

She forced a weak smile. "Thirsty?" she asked.

"I'll just have a *caña*," I said. Abbey usually had her hair tied up in the back, but that day it was down. "Trying something new with your hair?" I asked.

She set my beer down then pulled her hair back to show me the deep, purple marks on both sides of her neck.

"What happened?" I asked.

"Ian's been putting cushions on the stools," she said. I looked at the stools and saw that they each had a burgundy-colored cushion nailed on them.

"Okay..."

“He’s been working on them the last several mornings before we’ve opened. I wasn’t going to be alone with him so Christine’s been here with me. But this morning I had her go to the bakery down the street to pick up some breakfast for us. The second she left Ian was at my side, saying, ‘I need to talk to you.’ I told him I had nothing to say to him. We were right over there by the stairs,” she said, pointing. “Anyway, I tried to walk past him, but he grabbed me by the arm and said, ‘I need to talk to you.’ I told him to get out of the bar, and do you know what he said? He said, ‘Leave my bar? I built this bar. I own this bar.’ His bar? It’s my parents and me who put up most of the money for it.” Her voice began to crack.

“So then what happened?” I asked.

“He still had the nail gun in his hand, and he said that he was going to kill me. I pulled out of his grip and started to run, but he beat me to the entrance. I had been mopping the floor, and I still had the bucket full of water in my hands. I threw it at him. I don’t know why. I didn’t do anything but make him angrier. He knocked me down and started choking me and punching me.”

She lifted up her skirt to show me the bruises already forming on her thighs.

“I thought my eyes were going to burst,” she said. “I couldn’t breathe. He had the gun to my head, pressing it against my skull as hard as he could, and yelling, screaming, saying he was going to pull the trigger.” She shook her head and dabbed at the corners of her eyes. “I don’t know how I didn’t black out. But Christine – I owe my life to her – she ran in just then and screamed at him, even hit him.”

“What did he do?”

“He left. He just dropped the nail gun, called us both bitches or sluts or some such thing and left.”

“Where is he now?” I wanted to find him—I wanted to do to him what he had done to her.

“His flight left earlier today. He’s probably already back home.”

“Have you gone to the police?”

She shook her head.

“Abbey, please, I know you don’t want to but you have to report this. You have to press charges.”

“No,” she said, “I’m going to resolve this my own way.” There was something ambiguous to her tone. The moments during her story when she almost broke down now behind her she seemed cold and distant, detached from even herself.

“What do you mean?”

She looked at me and hesitated. I could see that she was considering whether she should tell me something or not.

“I’ve made some phone calls today,” she said. “My cousin knows a guy in Ireland who can take care of Ian for seven hundred pounds.”

“What do you mean ‘take care’?”

“Take care of him,” she said, putting emphasis on the first two words.

“So what did you tell your cousin?”

“Nothing yet. I told her I’d think about it and get back to her in a few hours. To think,” Abbey said, more to herself than to me, “all my problems will be solved, and it’ll only cost me seven hundred pounds. Seven hundred pounds. That’s it, after all this time.”

I couldn’t believe what she was telling me. “So you’re actually thinking about doing it?”

She looked at me as if she had misjudged me, as if she shouldn't have told me about this. "This guy's a professional. The money will go through so many hands that it could never be traced back to me. Besides, it'll happen back in England. What could I possibly have to do with a murder in England?"

"It's not the getting caught that worries me. Have you really thought about what this would do to you?"

"Nothing more than what Ian would."

"I'm not so sure. I'm not saying that Ian will change, because I don't think he will, but these problems aren't going to be in your life forever. But if you do this, it will stick with you, there's no getting away from it. Trust me, I want him dead, too. I really do. But I don't want you to be the one to do it. You're not the type of person to do something like this. Right now it's fresh and you're furious but please, if for nothing else than for me, don't decide today. Sleep on this. Then decide."

"Do me a favor." She was angry.

"Sure."

"Don't say anything more about it."

"Okay." She walked to the other end of the bar and lined up clean glasses along the wall. She didn't look over at me once. I finished my beer and left the money on the bar.

Several days later I went to the World's End with some friends. The bar was packed, and Abbey was busy pouring drinks. Ever since we last spoke, I was curious to know what she had decided, but I couldn't get Abbey's attention. Even when I tried, she ignored me. But later in the night she came up behind me and said, "I'm not going to do it."

I turned around. "What?"

“I decided not to do it.” She didn’t explain why but just went back behind the bar and continued pouring drinks.

Karl waved at me through the window as he rode off on his bike with his dog running beside him on a leash. I raised my hand to say goodbye, then looked at it. Several fingers were fractured from my fight with Ian, and my pinky was broken. My face didn’t have a mark. He never landed a punch. Then I thought about Abbey’s face and the new bruises he had given her several days before he and I fought. Back once again, he found her, beat her, and then spent the next several nights in the old part of the city drinking and picking fights with strangers.

Karl disappeared from view, and I drank from my beer, deciding that I would count from ten to one before I left the bar. I took another sip and began the slow descent to one. Ten. Why was I willing to blow my alibis? Nine. If Magnus already killed Ian and I left then where would I be when the police came around with questions? Eight. And who was I really going to stop? If I came upon Karl first, would I change my mind and try to stop him from trying to stop Magnus? Seven. And what if Magnus refused to be dissuaded? Could I convince him to sleep on it? Even then would he change his mind? Six. But I couldn’t let him kill Ian. Five. Though Ian deserved to die, it didn’t mean that anybody had to carry out the sentence. Four. Why am I counting? Every second counts. Three, two, one.

I ran out the door and started for The World’s End, choosing to not run down Zurriola Avenue, fearing I’d cross paths with someone on a late-night walk. Instead I ran down Calle Zabaleta, a street that was parallel to the water but several blocks from it. Where the street opened to show the ocean, I glanced down it to see whether I could see Karl. But he was not

down Ramon y Cajal, nor down Miguel Imaz, nor Peña y Goni. Surely I couldn't be that far behind him.

I reached the end of the street and came to the Urumea River. The water was low and being tugged out to the Bay. I walked along the river towards the bridge with my hands on the back of my head, trying to catch my breath. I wanted to appear as inconspicuous as I could, but I knew the price to be paid for my anonymity would be arriving late to the World's End. So I ran. I knew that I couldn't let Magnus do it. I sprinted as fast as I could to the bridge and then across it, briefly glancing out to the water to see whether I could make out a shape drifting on it. The large, ornamental street lamps along the bridge limited my depth of view.

When I crossed the bridge I looked down Paseo de Salamanca. I couldn't see Magnus or Karl, and I knew then that I was too late. Still, I avoided running down Salamanca, fearful that someone in a bar or a hotel lobby would see me. Instead I took the slightly longer route running down the next street. Ahead of me, five blocks away, I could see the World's End. But it was still so far away. My legs were too heavy to lift. My lungs felt on the verge of collapse. Three blocks from the World's End, I slowed down to a jog, and a block later I stopped completely, heaving, with my hands on my knees. I tried to regain my breath, to regain my strength in case I might need it.

I crossed the street so I could approach the World's End without anybody inside noticing me.

The lights in the bar were off. The World's End wrapped around the corner of Salamanca and Aldaman. The window that faced Aldaman revealed the back of the bar, obscuring my view, so I turned the corner and went to the window on the other side. The window was made of a smokey, etched glass. A person could only see inside through the etched design: a drawing of the

globe bordered by filigree. The words THE WORLD'S END arched over the globe, while in the bottom corners peony flowers with swooping stems and leaves curled underneath it. It was a pleasant etching – even the globe looked cartoonish – and in no way representative of the constant turmoil that occurred behind it. Closer to the truth was a black wall with red trimming approximately fifteen yards away that also belonged to the bar which read. “Within these walls lies the end of the World!”

I looked down the street. It was empty. No Magnus, no Karl. There wasn't a single light on in the apartments above the bar or along the street. Hesitantly, I peered through the etching of the globe to look inside. The inside of the bar looked as it should. Nothing seemed off-kilter. The stools were placed seat down on the bar. The floor had been swept. Everything seemed to be in order. I turned and looked behind me across the street. Nobody was there, only the parked cars and the sounds of the water. I peered back into the bar, my hands cupped by the sides of my face to block out the peripheral light, squinting as I scanned inside once more. Nothing. I began to feel relieved. Maybe Magnus had come to the bar only to find that Ian had already left. Perhaps he began his walk back home and ran into Karl, telling him that he didn't have anything to worry about, that Ian wasn't there. They probably went back to a bar for a nightcap. Maybe we just missed each other on the way.

Just as I was about to turn away from the window, something caught my eye—the wispy movements of a rising thread of cigarette smoke, and my eyes focused on what was directly in front of me. Inches away, separated by only the etched glass, sat Ian, his back to me, as he smoked a cigarette in the dark. If the glass were not between us he would be able to feel my breath on the back of his neck—and this, too, only if I was breathing.

Slowly, I removed my hands from the window and backed away until I bumped against a parked car across the street. I crept around it and crouched down, peering through the passenger window at the corner of the building. I took out the knife from my pocket and pulled open the blade, hearing it click and lock into place. The entrance to the World's End was on the other side of the building. Sure that Ian saw me, I waited for him. Instead, it was Karl who came around the corner. He rode his bike, while his dog trailed behind him.

"Karl," I whispered, getting his attention and waving him over. He set the bike against the car and crouched down next to me. "Ian is inside," I said.

"Magnus?"

I shrugged my shoulders. Karl saw the knife in my hand and shook his head.

"It's just in case," I assured him.

We both waited.

"Where did you go?" I asked.

He made a long arc with his finger.

"Me, too," I said.

"Mira," Karl pointed down the street. Magnus walked up it, towards the bar. He walked casually and with a slightly drunk step. Nobody would think that this was a man with murder on his mind. And because it was unbelievable and captivating, Karl and I did nothing to reveal ourselves. Instead we continued crouching behind the car and watched Magnus approach the World's End and turn the corner. Then we heard the vertically-sliding metal door move rivet by rivet as Magnus slowly slid it open. It was a sinister noise. Having helped Abbey open and close the bar many times, I was used to the loud, metallic banging of the door sliding and rolling up into the canister, or of it rolling out as it crashed to the floor to be locked shut for the night. But

this slow click-click-click announced the intentions of the person opening it. Through the window I saw Ian turn his head to see who was at the door. I wondered if he, like a trapped animal, could sense the danger he was in. Ian stood up, and we watched his silhouette disappear from view.

Karl didn't make a move, nor did I. I kept looking through the windows of the parked car. They were spotty from the spray of the salt-water that crashed against the rocks during high tide. I concentrated on the bar, waiting for any sound of distress to come through its thin walls. I felt as useless as I had in those dreams where my fists slowly moved through the thickest air, where I was witness to my own powerlessness.

"Que esta pasando?" Karl said. What is happening? *"Que esta pasando?"*

"No sé," I whispered. I don't know.

"Que esta pasando?" Karl said, louder this time. I shushed him but he continued asking the question, becoming more frantic. *"Que esta pasando?"*

A silhouette floated across the window. I wasn't sure that I actually saw it. His movements were so ghostlike that I would have doubted my eyes had Karl not poked me and pointed to the window. *"Quien es?"*

"No sé," I said. And just then another silhouette, this one quicker and more direct in its movements, passed across the window. *"Magnus,"* I said.

Karl made a noise and stood up. In the same motion he grabbed the knife from my hand and threw it underneath the parked car, then ran to the bar.

"What are you doing?"

I fell to my stomach and reached underneath the car for the knife. It was just out of reach. I could touch it with my fingertips but couldn't grasp it. I squeezed in further under the car,

scraping my back against it. I grasped the blade between two fingers and pulled it to me. I jumped up to run to the bar, but Magnus and Karl were already coming around the corner, both calm and unconcerned. I folded the knife and put it in my pocket.

Karl came to the car to get Odín and his bike.

“What happened?” I was breathing hard.

He smiled and shook his head. He was relieved. “*Nada, señor, nada.*” And then the weight that had been on the two of us lifted and I smiled with Karl.

“Nothing? Well, very good.”

We caught up to Magnus, who was already a block away. He didn’t seem surprised to see me.

“Yeah, Jules,” he said. “I decided not to do it.”

“That’s good, Magnus.”

“I was going to, I really was, but when I went in there, I took one look at him and realized that he’s already a dead man. He’s got the mark on him. I think even he realizes it. Somebody’s going to kill him soon. He’ll probably even end up doing it himself. So why should I be the one who has to worry about getting caught?”

We continued down the street. There was a lightness in my step—I was tempted to skip. But I knew that this mess with Ian wasn’t really over, that tomorrow night it could easily get worse.

The street was quiet, and the city was asleep. The night was still. We moved quietly through it all—tired, exhilarated, exhausted. We walked past the Be-Bop Bar, the bar where Ian and I had fought several nights before. Karl and Magnus were with me that night, along with two other friends, one a former friend of Ian’s, and the other the managing bartender of the World’s

End. Ian was with Thomas, a friend of his and an amiable acquaintance to the rest of us. They were leaving the bar when I stepped in front of Ian and said, “If you can beat Abbey, why don’t you try beating me?”

He smiled and asked me to repeat myself. “I said, if you can beat Abbey then why don’t you try beating me?”

“Let’s go, fucker.”

We both went outside and as I turned around to face him he swung at me. Somehow I moved out of the way and came back with several punches that went unanswered by him. When my friends finally broke us apart, I yelled at Thomas, asking him how he could be friends with Ian after he had beaten Abbey all these years. Thomas was taken aback. He had been unsure why we were fighting, but now that he knew Ian had a secret I saw him withdraw from Ian and move closer to Magnus and the others. Ian saw this, too. Those in the street had once been his friends, they’d once been his employees, but now they all resented him. And so he charged at me and in one smooth motion I had him against the hood of a car and punched him repeatedly in the face and on the head as he did nothing to stop me. Nothing to stop me from splitting open the skin along his cheekbones and above his eyes, nothing to stop the blood from running down his face, nothing to stop the beating from continuing.

“No,” Magnus now said as we crossed back over the bridge, lost in his own thoughts as I was mine. “Tonight’s not the night. But it will be soon.” I looked out at the retreating water and at the row of street lamps along Paseo de Salamanca disappear around the turn where just beyond Ian was sitting in the dark, smoking a cigarette, waiting for someone to come finish him.

Postcard four hours north of Tangier, Morocco

December 7, 1999

The bus continues on the lonely road towards northern Spain. Aside from a few, scattered lights near the front of the bus, all is dark, and it is easy to see the Andalucian terrain through the window. There isn't much to see—the flat, desert landscape quickly blends into the darkness of the night. Still, it's pleasant just looking outside and knowing that with every mile of road the bus eats up, we are just that much further away from Tangier.

And so, content with this, I lean my head against the cool window and sit staring out of it, letting my thoughts wander. Several minutes later, I turn around in my seat.

“Hey, Tor,” I whisper, “you awake?”

“Yeah,” he mumbles.

“I've got a story for you.”

Tor, usually an endless well of energy, tilts his head back only slightly so he can see me from underneath his cap. “What is it?”

“You'll be able to figure it out pretty quickly,” I say.

The bus hits a bumpy patch of road, rattling the items overhead and bouncing us in our seats. I look across the aisle at Terry and Chris. Both continue to sleep through the disturbance—Chris has an arm over his eyes, while Terry is contorted into a gangly mess of arms, elbows, and knees across two seats.

“So what's it about?” Tor asks.

“There's this man who's alone in his apartment. He has the barrel of a shotgun in his mouth. But just as he is about to pull the trigger and put an end to his miserable life he thinks,

What if there is a Hell? What if there are eternal consequences to my actions? If there were, he'd be forever damned for taking his own life, right? Is this worth it? But just as he lifts his teeth off the barrel he thinks, No, the pain is too much. Damn the consequences! He pulls the trigger. Then, all is black."

I pause for dramatic effect.

"But slowly," I continue, "light begins to emerge from the darkness and, ever so gradually, it becomes this overwhelming bright white. His eyes adjust, and he can see the blurred outline of figures ahead of him. He becomes aware that he is walking towards them. Slowly, his vision begins to sharpen. He is not sure where he is. He feels a bobbing sensation, as if he is not completely on solid ground. He looks at his own body. He is wearing days-old clothes, and on his back is strapped a traveler's pack. He looks behind him. He sees a ferry docked to a port. He suddenly realizes that he is walking down a corridor. He is someplace unfamiliar, and, for the first time, he is feeling afraid. The figures ahead of him are men, northern Africans. They wait for him. There is a hungry look in their eyes—they are restless. Where am I? he wonders. And just then he sees a sign above him in Arabic. He doesn't understand it, but below the Arabic characters there are a few words in English. They say, Welcome to Tangiers."

I wait for Tor to say something, but he is quiet. Only the low rumbling of the bus along the road fills the silence. But then he lowers the cap back over his eyes and says, "Yeah, that sounds about right."

A Sexless Marriage

This is what I call it. Mitchell doesn't like the sound of it, as it implies that we are somehow involved in a non-sexual homosexual relationship. I could easily stop saying it. There's no real need to tell people that our traveling together for the last five months has turned our friendship into a sort of sexless marriage, but I keep it up because it bothers Mitchell so much. There's a petty joy to sensing his frustration when I tell people this—especially when it's a pair of girls who, like us, have been traveling for so long now, but who are still sharp enough to see the simple arithmetic demanded by our numbers.

Still, we fail.

“I wish you'd quit saying that,” Mitchell says, for the first time directly addressing the phrase. We've just left the girls in the bar and are walking down one of the streets in San Sebastian's labyrinthine *parte vieja*. Mitchell walks, without intending it, with one foot crossing over the other, trying to stay on his feet, while I maintain a reasonably straight path. We look like a comedy team—the jester and the straight man.

“What difference does it make?” I say. “We didn't have a chance with them anyway.”

“Not if you're saying shit like that.”

“Yeah, *that's* what did it. It had nothing to do with you slipping on your ass and nearly pulling one of them down with you. That they found charming.”

Having been raised in a land where divorce is a natural progression of marriage, it's amazing that Mitchell and I have managed to stay together for so long. The soothsayer tells Antony and Caesar, “Make space between you,” and in five months we have yet to do this. The air around us has become claustrophobic. We have woken up together, sometimes slept together

when an alternative didn't exist, and come to agreement on how we were going to fill every moment of every day.

The only thing we had to do with our days was visit the tourist attractions, try the local foods, sit on trains and buses, wait at stations, stare at girls, and, occasionally, when brave enough, ask one of them for directions to a place where we could get a drink. Then we'd fail, overly politely, at getting the girl and possibly some of her friends to come along with us. This has also caused some resentment between us. How is it that we have not managed to succeed sexually with any of the locals or our fellow backpackers? Was one of us not good looking enough? An awkward dancer? In need of a haircut? Appearing lascivious? Too eager? Not eager enough? Who was the anchor dragging the other down?

We walk across the Zurriola Bridge and enter the Gros section of the city in the direction of a bar we happened upon five months ago. It was a popular student hangout then, and so when we turn a corner, we expect to hear loud, bumping music and to see young people coming in and out of the bar, falling over each other. Instead, the bar is closed.

It's amazing how this, that we walked for ten minutes and expected to arrive at a boisterous bar only to find it closed, is both my fault and Mitchell's. The fault is actually no one's and is insignificant to such a degree that we should both be ashamed, but the mind is capable of extraordinary leaps of reasoning when it comes to attributing blame.

"I figured it wouldn't be open," I say.

"How so?"

"Just did."

"Well, you didn't tell me anything about it."

"I suppose we've got to walk back to the *parte vieja* now."

“Fuck man.” We start walking. “We could’ve still been in that bar, you know, talking to those girls if you hadn’t tried to be funny.”

“That had nothing to do with it. One of them smiled. She thought it was clever. I’m sure she understood the feeling.”

“It doesn’t even make sense.”

“What are you talking about? It makes perfect sense. We do everything together. Where are we going to eat? What are we going to see? How much money should we spend today? The only things we don’t worry about are kids and good schools.”

“It makes us sound like fags.”

“Well quit being such a drunkass and learn how to pace yourself, then maybe girls’d feel comfortable talking to us.”

We began our trip through Europe in San Sebastian—the same city in which we studied abroad for a year, fell in love with traveling, met each other, and became great friends. Now, after circumnavigating the continent, we’re back in the same city to celebrate the culmination of our trip. However, neither of us is in a particularly celebratory mood. I’m reminded of those trips couples on the brink of divorce take to a place of emotional significance to rekindle their relationship, to remember the qualities in each other that they originally admired. Most often than not, the union can’t be salvaged. Both people are no longer who they once were. They’ve changed, and the change has an effect on the place they visit, which, in turn, makes their collapse even more apparent.

So, too, do the differences between Mitchell and me seem obvious and sad. It could be worse. I’m aware of that. Mitchell has the temperament of a leaf on a current, while I’m the sort of person who, with no prior interest in botany, when learning that there is an impressive

botanical garden in Lisbon, suddenly must see it. Mitchell always indulges me, wrongly assuming that I've read up on every city we're about to visit and that I know the things *you have to see while you're there* from the complete wastes-of-time. These contradictory characteristics have made things easy on us these last several months.

We've witnessed first hand the collapse of several traveling partnerships. And always after the argument, the rest of us there, the majority being teams of two, would exchange looks of raised eyebrows, wide eyes, and lips pursed to make a whistle. However, a visible nervous tension gripped most there. We knew a similar scene awaited us in a station further down the tracks. Many times Mitchell and I have seen a backpacker sitting alone in a corner, be it hostel common area, bar, train compartment, or station, with the clear marks of a fresh fight, of the sudden freedom of not having to compromise or consider somebody else's desires, of the brief divorcer's euphoria before the loneliness sets in.

It could have been worse. In fact, Mitchell and I managing this five-month trip together with no real fight, only this low hum of discontent, is a remarkable feat.

If Mitchell and I were a couple at the altar, those present at the wedding would be too busy whispering in each other's ears, "I give it two months," to notice any of the ceremony. People have always been surprised that we are friends. This is usually expressed during one of Mitchell's intoxicated moments of outrageousness when the offended person turns to me and says with contempt, "How could *you* be friends with *him*?" I just shrug my shoulders, *what you gonna do*, but what I really want to say is, "Look at him. How can a person not be his friend? He has a largeness to him that I am incapable of. Right now he's not just dancing, he's attacking the dance floor with his feet. Why? Who knows? It could be something glorious and epiphanical—

maybe he's projected death onto the dance floor and is flogging it for its insubordinations.

Maybe he's just drunk and thinks he looks good.

"You see, I'm quiet, cautious, unassuming, in constant consideration of the well-being of those around me. Mitchell is brash, voluminous, and shows no hesitation rushing into whatever is ahead of him, be it bed of flowers or brick wall. And you should've seen him earlier tonight eating pizza. He wasn't just eating it as you or I would, he was biting at it as if it was a live thing trying to escape, tearing at it as a lion would the flesh from a zebra. I've never eaten a meal like that."

But lately, the poetic rage has been losing its charm. I no longer see a person who is larger than life and determined to beat it. Instead, I see what I'm suspecting was always there, a careless drinker whose intoxicated antics I mistook for urgency, brazenness, and vivacity.

We return to the *parte vieja* and Mitchell enters the first bar we come to, though it's nothing spectacular.

"This has never been a good bar," I tell him, but he's already inside and within seconds he's ordered, paid for, and drinking a double Rum and Coke. I loathe the doubles. Only when Mitchell is drunk, ready to kick his memory out of the car that he's speeding around in, does he switch from singles to doubles. Then, with one hand on the steering wheel, he reaches over the seat, opens the door, and delivers a back heel to his memory, sending it tumbling out of the car, unaware or unconcerned that it's tied to his conscience, which is holding hands with his self-control, which is knotted up with his coordination, which has a tight grip on his better judgment. He goes on tearing through the night, tires squealing, eating up asphalt, grinding against guard rails and parked cars. Meanwhile, I'm following after him, picking up whatever's been overturned, apologizing to all those he's troubled, while he, oblivious to all, continues ordering

doubles, pumping gas into the tank, until he eventually crashes—remembering none of it in the morning, experiencing no guilt or regret, allowing himself to do it all over again the next night.

I order a beer and before I'm halfway through with it, Mitchell orders another double. There are two Spanish girls on the dance floor who have already rebuked advances from several men in the short time we've been in the bar. They laugh at themselves and about the fun they're having, dancing close to one another, and obviously in need of no other company—yet Mitchell thinks he has a chance. He approaches the girls, dances around them, and attempts to lure their attention with his primitive courting moves. He arches his back and sticks out his pelvis, drawing attention to it by keeping his waist still. The rest of him still sways. The girls laugh at him. He laughs, too, mistaking the laughter for a jovial spirit that's blanketed the three of them. Mitchell takes one of their hands and tries to lead a sort salsa-esque twirl, but the girl pulls her hand back, and the girls move away from him. He takes this as a teasing game of cat-and-mouse. It's embarrassing.

I want the girls to look my way so I can give them a pathetic smile that says, "I'm sorry. I really am. He's drunk. Just humor him for a few more minutes. He'll get the point soon. Sorry about all of this." He goes for another hand, and again the girl jerks out of his grip. The girls move to another corner of the dance floor. This dance continues for a few more moves before Mitchell comes back to the bar angry. "Let's get out of this place."

"I still haven't finished my beer."

"I'm leaving."

"I'll see you outside."

Mitchell walks past the girls and out of the bar. I take my time with my beer, hoping that something will carry him away: a hurricane, possibly even the police. No luck. When I step outside, he's finishing a cigarette and eyeing a group of girls who are walking down the street.

"Ready?" I ask.

Mitchell swings his head around to look at me. He squints, trying to focus on my features, figuring out my association to him.

"I'm hungry," he says. "Where's that food place? This way?"

"No, it's behind us."

"Sure?"

"Yeah, here, follow me." We start walking through the *parte vieja* again. The two doubles are having their effect on Mitchell.

"Fuckin' [indecipherable] [indecipherable] always have to be thun t' [indecipherable]?" he says.

"I don't know, man," I say.

It's difficult not to think of other relationships I've stayed in despite their obvious ends. The staying seemed innocent at the time. It was easy biting my tongue and silently suffering through the relationship because I knew the end was near. But as the weeks continued and I was unwilling to let the relationship end, I eventually sacrificed many aspects of my character, unknowingly setting the stage for who I would be in a relationship and what I was willing to tolerate from the other person.

Mitchell stumbles down the street, confident that he can do no great harm to himself because I'm looking after him. I think, "Is this what I want to put up with from my next traveling partner, or, if it should ever happen again, my next romantic partner?" Though it's difficult

imagining falling for a girl who would lean against a wall, as Mitchell is now doing, and say, “Keep an eye out for me” as her urine splashed back up her leg.

Mitchell turns to me still hanging out of his pants. “Where’s the food place?”

It’s now or never. Pick up where this one leaves off or start a new path, require something better of my next traveling partner.

“Where’s the *food* place?” he asks.

“Jeronimo’s?”

“Yeah.”

We’re at a two-way intersection in the *parte vieja*. Just down one street is Jeronimo’s, while down the other is the new path.

“Is it over here?” Mitchell asks, following me.

“No.” I point in the direction of Jeronimo’s. “It’s just down there.”

I no longer have any uncertainty whether I should leave or not. Even the moon above is urging me on. “I’m lighting your way,” it says. “His back is turned. Go! Go! Go!”

I run. Sprinting, pushing harder and harder off the concrete with each long step, huffing, my arms bent at my sides moving rapidly like pistons. I hear Mitchell yell behind me. I turn a corner and another corner, dodge some people, jump over a broken bottle, run faster. And then, within seconds, I’m at the other end of the *parte vieja*, looking out at the Urumea River. I turn to see if Mitchell has followed me. He hasn’t.

I walk along the river and catch my breath, opening up my arms to the night and laughing. I’m a little delirious and try to restrain my laughter as I cross paths with two tourists, but I can’t hold it in. I am free. Mitchell no longer burdens me. From now on, I’m the only one I have to worry about.

I order a drink at the first bar I come to.

“*Ron y Coke*,” I tell the bartender. Then add, “*Doble*.”

I reach into my pocket to pay for the drink when I feel the keys to our *pension*. There are three doors that Mitchell and I have to open to get to our beds: the front door to the apartment complex, the door to our hostel, and the door to our room. The proprietor of the *pensión* only gave us one set of keys. I took them from his outstretched hands, knowing that Mitchell would lose them or barter them for a drink. I pause for a moment, worrying about how Mitchell will be able to get into the *pensión*, but then think, Fuck it. It’s not my responsibility. He’s an adult and more than capable to figure out how to get into a room.

I pay for my drink and within minutes I’m drunk, manic, and ordering my next drink while I’m still working on my current one. I should slow down, but it’s all too much. For the first time in five months I can drink without worrying about Mitchell, about the trouble he may be causing. The freedom, the space between Mitchell and me, is intoxicating. The Rum and Cokes are intoxicating.

I’m out the door stumbling into the next bar, then a few drinks later I’m outside again and on the same walk I took hundreds of times while I studied in San Sebastian. I cross the Zurriola Bridge and walk in the direction of my old apartment. It’d be easy to fool myself into believing that I still live in the city, that soon I’ll be putting these keys into my old apartment complex door, climbing those carpeted stairs with my hand on the gilded handrail to support myself and waiting for the elevator. I walk along Zurriola Beach and listen to the small waves crash onto the soaked shore and let my mind drift, recalling fond memories of the year that I spent in this city, of the year that meant so much to me. This is how I wanted to see the city, pleasantly surrounded by the ghosts of the past, not as a sort of handler to Mitchell. I laugh again. Had I known it would

feel this good to be away from Mitchell I would've run away from him a long time ago. In Venice, or Budapest, or Berlin—hell, I should've done it five months ago when we first landed in Spain.

I continue walking, buy a pack of Oreo cookies from a vending machine, and eventually reach Mount Ulia and the outer edge of the city. From the top of the mountain, on a good day, it's possible to see France. Mitchell's old apartment complex is built into the mountain. I stop at it and open the pack of Oreos. With my back to the building, I look out at the city, at Kursaal and the Jesus statue atop Mount Igueldo and Zurriola Beach and the *parte vieja* and Gros and the thousands of lights that bring a certain life to the city. I think about Mitchell and how, for a year, this view was his. Standing from his balcony at age twenty, it was easy to imagine himself a king looking out upon his kingdom. "All of this," he'd say, "all of this is mine." Drunk, yes, but justified nonetheless, I think how it feels good to be looking at this view, knowing that I've somehow overthrown the king. Foolish, yes, but—"Fuck you, buddy," I say with a mouthful of Oreos. "Fuck you."

"Pear-dohn?" somebody says in a terrible attempt at a Spanish accent.

I turn away from the view to see two girls walking towards me. They are both in their early twenties, blonde, curly-haired, and, like me, they've been drinking.

"Pear-dohn?" one of the girls, the taller of the two, asks again.

I swallow the last of a cookie. "Yeah?"

She tries to ask me something, stuttering on the word *habla* until I interrupt her.

"I speak English," I say.

"Oh, you do? Thank God. Where are you from?"

"California."

“Oh, nice.” She has a peculiar British accent that I can’t place.

“You?”

“We’re from Liverpool.”

“Cool,” I say, “like The Beatles.”

“Yeah,” she says, having heard it before, most likely thousands of times, I suddenly realize.

“So what are you guys doing around here?” I ask.

“We’re lost,” the shorter one pipes up. She wraps an arm around a lamppost to keep from falling.

“How lost? Where are you trying to—”

“You’re cute,” the shorter one says, squinting in my direction. “Isn’t he cute, Jemma?”

I’m not sure if she’s looking for agreement or just unsure. Jemma, the taller one, the one I find I’m very interested in, smiles and says, “Yeah, he is.”

“Oreo?” I offer.

They both decline, then tell me that they’re trying to find their hostel, have been wandering around lost for the last hour, have no idea where it is, and are considering sleeping on the beach.

“Where’s the hostel?” I ask.

“In the old part of the city.”

“Really? That’s just right there.” I point to the *parte vieja*.

“That’s it?”

“I told you, Jemma,” the shorter one says.

“We’ve been everywhere but there.”

“Do you know the street the hostel’s on?” I ask.

“Yeah,” Jemma says, digging a piece of paper out of her back pocket, “I’ve got it written down right here.”

I look at the paper. “Oh, yeah, no problem. I’ll have you guys there in ten minutes.”

“Oh, thank God!”

We start walking to the *parte vieja* and I decide that if I don’t marry Jemma then it will have to be another Liverpoolian, preferably someone from her neighborhood or high school class, or an older sister, just so long as the accent is similar to hers. As we walk I smile at her and she returns the smile, blinking slowly. We bump into each other from time to time and I can feel her fingers brush against my leg. Her friend trails behind us. I almost wish Mitchell was here so he could keep the friend company, keep her distracted.

“So how long have you guys been traveling?” I ask Jemma.

“Oh, about three weeks now.”

“Where’ve you been?”

“We just came from Barcelona. But before that: Madrid, Seville, Lisbon, Porto, Granada. How about you? How long?”

“Five months.”

“Five months?” She’s impressed. “You must have gone everywhere.”

“It feels like it.”

“Have you been by yourself?”

I consider lying about Mitchell, about revising the past so that we never met but figure that she’s just probably wondering if I’ve been traveling with a girlfriend. “No, I’ve been with a buddy.”

“For the entire time? How’s that been?”

“Like a sexless marriage,” I say, expecting a reaction, but she just points up at the large, underlit statue of Jesus Christ atop Mount Igueldo. “Isn’t it creepy,” she says, “having Jesus watch over us like this?”

“You sound like you’re guilty of something,” I say.

She smiles, and a naughty butterfly of anticipation flutters through me.

“Did you know,” I say, “that in the North Pole they’ve got a similar statue, but it’s of Santa Claus. It’s the whole always-watching-over-you sort of thing.”

“Really?”

“No.” I smile. “You sure you don’t want an Oreo?”

“No, thanks,” she says, laughing.

“I wish I had bought three more packs. I’m starving. I haven’t had Oreos in years. I’m not sure why I stayed away for so long.”

She turns to me to smile but then stops. And suddenly the flirtatious rapport between us seems to have been blunted. I had hoped at the least for a goodnight kiss, but now I’m not sure. Jemma waits for her friend to catch up, and they lock arms and walk side-by-side, giggling with one another.

“We almost there?” her friend asks me.

I think of taking them around the *parte vieja* for a while, at least until I regain whatever ground I somehow lost with Jemma, but I figure it’s late and I might as well call it quits. I haven’t had any luck during this entire trip. Why should I expect anything different tonight?

“Just a few steps away,” I say, putting the last Oreo in my mouth.

“You staying there, too?” she asks. It’s not an invitation.

“No, I’m further down.”

“How do you know your way around here so well?”

“I used to live here,” I say.

“Really?” Jemma asks, and suddenly she seems interested again. But we’re now standing in front of their hostel. Her friend puts the key into the door. “Well,” Jemma says, “thanks for getting us back here.”

“No problem.” Should I lean in for a kiss? Just go for it? I have nothing to lose.

“Jemma,” her friend says. “I can’t get this door open.”

“Here, let me try,” she says. “Remember you have to work it.”

“Work it?” her friend giggles.

“Yeah, you know, work it.” She jiggles the key in the lock and eventually it turns.

“Thanks once again,” she says to me. They both step inside and shut the door.

“No problem.” I wave. “Goodnight.”

I rest my head against the wall and replay the conversation with Jemma, the knowing looks she gave me, the fingers against my leg, her enticing accent. How’d I screw it up? And, was there anything to screw up? I’m drunk. The Oreos did nothing to dull the effect of the alcohol.

After a short walk I’m inside my hostel’s apartment building, opening the hostel door and walking down the hallway to our room. Still thinking about the two girls and how they agreed I was cute, my only thought of Mitchell is a distant one: that I managed to screw it up without him. I open the door to our room and close it behind me. I turn on the lights and walk into the bathroom. There, laying on the floor with a colorful orange and bright green blanket over him is

Mitchell, fast asleep. He's far from the toilet. It appears as if he just pulled the blanket off the bed and found what he thought to be the most comfortable place in the room.

I look past him to the mirror on the wall and discover what was most likely so off-putting to Jemma. Chocolate is smeared around my lips and chin. How was I eating those Oreos? It looks as if a child tried to fingerpaint with them using my face as a canvas. It doesn't make sense.

Mitchell groans. Turning to face me, he opens his eyes. "Hey," he says.

"Hey."

"What happened to you?" he asks.

"I don't know," I say. "I think we split ways somewhere back there. You were chasing after a girl."

"No, I mean your face."

"Oh." I step over him and go to the sink. "Oreos."

"You got any more?"

I shake my head. He sinks farther into the floor, pulling the blanket over him. I think of Jemma and how she must be lying down in her hostel bed right now. Would I have had a chance to lie next to her had I not been such a messy eater?

"Was the girl good looking?"

"What?" I ask, fearful that I was thinking out loud.

"The girl I was after."

"Oh. Not really," I say. "How'd you get in?" I ask.

"I fell asleep outside the door. The landlord let me in."

"Oh." I study my face at different angles. "What's up with the blanket?"

He looks at it as if for the first time. “Don’t know. Suppose I was cold.”

Before washing the chocolate from my face, I look at my reflection in the mirror and Mitchell on the floor behind me, at what the night did to the two of us, and laugh. Together or apart, we still manage to fall on our faces. Rarely has common, unintentional buffoonery been a great foundation for a marriage, but for a friendship there are few things sturdier on which to stand. It’s impossible to look at our reflections and not think back on the past five months. There have been so many times we found ourselves together on the ground, knocked from our lofty pretenses and expectations—though usually Mitchell was there first to break my fall. I wash my face and step over him.

“Goin’ t’ bed?” he mumbles, half-asleep.

“Yeah. Goodnight, buddy.”

“G’night.”

I turn off the lights.

“I’ll see you in the morning.” I get into bed and look up at the ceiling. Mitchell’s snoring begins a few minutes later, soft and uneven. Turning to look at the empty bed I realize that it’s been nearly a half a year since I’ve had a room to myself. There’s only one wall that separates Mitchell and me, but it’s all the space I need.

Sitting on the beach in Monterosso, Mitchell and I look out at the water and the afternoon sun that dangles above the horizon. We hiked two hours from Portovanere to visit the five small fishing villages collectively known as Cinque Terra. The villages, each and every one of them remarkably scenic, were smaller than we thought they would be. We set aside three days in our travel itinerary for Cinque Terra, assuming that it would take us that much time to visit, see, and digest its five villages, but after only a few hours we ended up on the beach in Monterosso, the last of the five villages, running this thought over in our heads: Did we miss something?

How had we managed to see all five villages in as much time as it took us to hike to them? We walked down the narrowest streets that they had to offer, stood at the edges of cliffs and contemplated the view, looked at the churches, popped in, did a quick once over of the altars, the stained glass, the chipped and faded statues, and then popped out, off to the next thing that said to us, "You are in Europe, you are in Italy." And now we were on the beach, wondering, Is that all?

After several months of traveling, we've become adept hurricane tourists, zipping across Europe by train. We're a blur to all those living in the cities we visit. We're the Flash, a transient streak of colors and the faint trace of a figure before we're gone for good. By our speed we manage to warp time, melt the days, and disintegrate boundaries. This style of traveling isn't the best one out there - we hadn't originally intended on seeing Europe in this manner - but because we have a finite time in the continent and a near endless list of places we want to see, we have to be swift, efficient, and ruthlessly superficial. I'm not sure what we're accomplishing, if anything at all, but it's how we've become accustomed to moving. Also, there's the money

problem. Neither of us has much of it. Certainly there are plenty of activities to occupy our time in Cinque Terra, but they will cost us. And so we sit on the beach, watching the water.

After a while Mitchell says, “Well, should we head on back?”

“It’s sad that we came all this way and we’re already through with Cinque Terra.”

“Eh,” Mitchell shrugs his shoulders, “we did what we could do.” Tomorrow we’d be off, be in a different city, in front of something new, something three times as old as our own country, and we’d be amazed by this fact, as we always are.

We stand up and start walking towards the foot path that leads back to Portovanere—that’s when we see it. A stick, actually a branch, probably from some nearby tree. It’s a little over a yard in length and about as wide as a broom handle. The beach, we suddenly realize, is littered with small rocks.

“This’ll be perfect,” I say.

Mitchell takes the branch from me and studies it. “Oh yeah,” he says, looking down the length of it, “you couldn’t ask for anything better.”

We establish the rules before the first pitch: anything that goes into the ocean is a homerun; if you swing and miss it’s an out; if you hit a pebble and it goes behind you it’s a foul ball—it doesn’t count for you, it doesn’t count against you; three outs and then the next person is up; after seven innings, whoever has the most homeruns is the winner and gets to hold it above the other’s head for as long as we both live.

We play rock-paper-scissors to decide who goes first. I win, and Mitchell pitches to me. At first his pitches are too fast and a little out of reach. You can tell that he’s trying to get me out.

“The point isn’t to strike me out,” I say. “Just lob them in. If I can’t do anything with them then that’s my problem.”

I hit four rocks into the ocean before he gets me out for the first time. He starts pitching the rocks just out of reach again. I wait for something more in my wheelhouse, and I hit three more into the water in the top half of the first inning.

Mitchell is overly aggressive at the plate (a large chunk of Styrofoam we found on the beach) and swings ahead of the first two rocks I pitch to him. He manages to only hit one into the Mediterranean behind me. The second inning is as kind to me as the first, and I'm up twelve to three before Mitchell finds his groove. His swing becomes effortless and the rocks soar into the water one after the other. In one half-inning he hits fourteen homeruns. The score is seventeen to fifteen, his lead. His recent surge gets him smug.

"I'd be able to hit that many too if I had me pitching to me," I tell him. "Now try to actually give me something to hit."

Mitchell is highly competitive and a sore loser, one of the worst I've ever met, but it's usually his frustration and fear of losing that causes most of his defeats rather than lack of physical talent or intelligence. So when I take the lead again, making some real distance between our totals this time, his frustration has a negative effect on his game. He tries to make up his deficit in one swing and he ends up only getting one homerun in the fourth inning.

The game seems to be in the bag, but in the fifth things change. The sun is now coming down on the water, shining through the mist of the crashing waves. The shadows from the cliffs that surround the beach stretch across the sand, inching their way towards the village. Everything, the shadows included, is cast in a golden light and there, looking at it all while Mitchell, one of my best friends, pitches me rocks, I think about how proud me at eleven would be of myself right now. I think of how little things have changed, how the imagination can shape a piece of Styrofoam into home plate, a branch into a bat, rocks into baseballs, the shore of an

Italian beach into a baseball stadium, and the Mediterranean Sea into its bleachers. And I think of how uncomplicated this fun is. Fun like this should be expensive, should cost us twenty euros apiece, at least as much as it costs to get into the Coliseum—but it's free and it's simple and it's glorious. What are the other American tourists doing at this moment in Cinque Terra? Staring up at a stained glass window? Sitting down to an overpriced meal? We're the only two who have it figured out.

These reflections have an impact on my game, and I swing at the first three rocks Mitchell pitches to me with childlike abandon, missing them all. When Mitchell steps up to the plate, he says, "God, this is beautiful. Did you see what the sun is doing right now? Come over here and look at this."

"Yeah, I saw it," I say, bending down to pick up some rocks.

"This is great, isn't it," Mitchell says, talking about the homerun derby.

"Yeah."

"Today's been a good day."

"Yeah."

"Cinque Terra's beautiful. I'm glad we came, but there's not much to do except look at it."

"You ready?"

Mitchell then sends every rock I pitch him screaming into the sea behind me. He's not missing a single one. Once, he hits one that lands on the shore, missing an ebbing wave by inches. I argue that it's an out; he says it's a homerun. We settle on a do-over. He ties the score at twenty-seven apiece before his first out. The second out is just as difficult to get. He has a lead

on me by seven by the time he swings and misses at the second pitch. But then, on a foul ball, a terrible thing happens. The bat breaks in half.

At first both of us are saddened greatly. We're so despondent that someone watching from the village would think that we'd just spread our friend's ashes into the water. Then Mitchell realizes that victory is his by default. He is triumphant. His arms are up in the air.

"We still have another inning," I say. "The game's not over."

"Give it up, Jules. The game's over. I win."

"There's still another inning. There's got to be another branch somewhere on this beach. Help me find one."

But he doesn't. "The game's over, Jules. Accept it."

I don't, but I can't find another branch anywhere either. "Fine," I say, "the game's over, but you didn't win. We'll just call it a draw."

"A draw? How do you call thirty four to twenty seven a draw?"

We start walking off the beach, though I'm hoping that we'll come across another branch. "Easy. We settled on seven innings, we only got through six."

"You were on your way out anyways; you didn't even get a foul ball that last inning."

"I've always been a clutch player. I get the hits when I need them."

"Apparently not."

"We'll just have to continue it the next time we're on a beach."

"You lost. Why is it so hard for you to understand this?"

"And what if the bat broke and I had the lead?"

"Then you'd win."

"There's no way you'd be saying that if you were losing."

We argue about the results the two hours it takes to hike back to Portovanere.

Back at our place, we discuss what we'll see in Pisa. The day after that, we'll be in Florence, several days later Switzerland. And on and on we go.

Vita

Julian Zabalbeascoa was born in Los Banos, California in May 1979. He graduated from the University of Pacific with a B.A. in English in May 2001—a date that really doesn't seem that long ago, but if he really thinks about it he supposes that it is. This makes him sad.

He is a singer/songwriter and member of the bands The Debbietaunts and Thank God for Jesus. When it comes to his music, he receives minor encouragement from friends and family. He's traveled a bit. He has worked as a substitute teacher for grades K-12, a tomato lab technician, Jeff Bridge's personal assistant, a movie theater usher, a cleaner and fixer of almond bins, Penelope Cruz's dad's translator, the last person who gave the sheep a final push before they met their end in the slaughterhouse, a ranch hand, and an assistant for the director of a study abroad program in Spain.

He is currently unemployed.